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CHARLES REX

BY ETHEL M. DELL

AUTHOR OF THE TOP OF THE WORLD, THE LAMP IN THE DESERT, THE HUNDREDTH CHANCE, Etc.

1922

I Dedicate This Book To G. T. S. In Remembrance of A Winter Day

"When half-gods go, the gods arrive."

R. W. Emerson

Not with the clash of trumpets
And clangour of gates thrown wide,
As when the eager crowds press round
To see the half-gods ride;
But like a bird at even
Silently winging home,
A message came from the darkness
To say that the gods had come.

And the half-gods scoffed in the temple
Which custom had bid them hold—
Sin and Success and Pleasure
And the hideous Image of Gold.
Who and what are these strangers?
Bid them worship before the shrine
Where we, the gods of the new world,
Sit o'er the cards and wine!

So they derided the strangers—
Those gods whom the old folk call
Courage and Honour and Faithfulness
And Love which is greater than all.
But when the night was over
And the new day pierced within,
The half-gods were gone from the temple,
And the gods had entered in.

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CHARLES REX

PART I

CHAPTER I

ENNUI

"I shall go to sea to-morrow," said Saltash, with sudden decision. "I'm tired of this place, Larpent,—fed up on repletion."

"Then by all means let us go, my lord!" said Larpent, with the faint glimmer of a smile behind his beard, which was the only expression of humour he ever permitted himself.

"Believe you're fed up too," said Saltash, flashing a critical look upon him.

Captain Larpent said nothing, deeming speech unnecessary. All time spent ashore was wasted in his opinion.

Saltash turned and surveyed the sky-line over the yacht's rail with obvious discontent on his ugly face. His eyes were odd, one black, one grey, giving a curiously unstable appearance to a countenance which otherwise might have claimed to possess some strength. His brows were black and deeply marked. He had a trick of moving them in conjunction with his thoughts so that his face was seldom in absolute repose. It was said that there was a strain of royal blood in Saltash, and in the days before he had succeeded to the title when he had been merely Charles Burchester, he had borne the nickname of "the merry monarch." Certain wild deeds in a youth that had not been beyond reproach had seemed to warrant this, but of later years a friend had bestowed a more gracious title upon him, and to all who could claim intimacy with him he had become "Charles Rex." The name fitted him like a garment. A certain arrogance, a certain royalty of bearing, both utterly unconscious and wholly unfeigned, characterized him. Whatever he did, and his actions were often far from praiseworthy, this careless distinction of mien always marked him. He received an almost involuntary respect where he went.

Captain Larpent who commanded his yacht *The Night Moth*—most morose and unresponsive of men—paid him the homage of absolute acquiescence. Whatever his private opinions might be, he never expressed them unless invited to do so by his employer. He never criticized by word or look. Saltash

was wont to say that if he decided to turn pirate he believed that Larpent would continue at his post without the smallest change of front. To raise a protest of any sort would have been absolutely foreign to his nature. He was made to go straight ahead, to do his duty without question and with perfect self-reliance.

On the present occasion, having cruised from port to port in the Mediterranean for nearly six weeks, it was certainly no ill news to him to hear that Saltash had at last had enough. The weather was perfect, too perfect for a man of his bull-dog instincts. He was thoroughly tired of the endless spring sunshine and of the chattering, fashionable crowds that Saltash was wont to assemble on the yacht. He was waiting with an iron patience for the word that should send them forth over the great Atlantic rollers, with the ocean spray bursting over their bows and the sting of the ocean wind in their faces. That was the sort of life that appealed to him. He had no use for civilization; the froth of society had no attraction for him. He preferred a deeper draught.

Saltash was thoroughly cosmopolitan in his tastes; he liked amusement, but he abhorred boredom. He declared that for him it was the root of all evil. He was never really wicked unless he was bored. And then—*que voulez-vous?* He did not guide the star of destiny.

"Yes," he said, after a thoughtful silence, "we will certainly put to sea to-morrow—unless—" he turned his head and threw a merry grin at his companion—"unless Fortune has any tricks up her sleeve for me, for I am going ashore for one more fling to-night."

Larpent smoked on immovably, his blue-grey eyes staring out to the vivid sky-line, his sunburnt face quite imperturbable.

"We shall be ready to start as soon as you come aboard, my lord," he said.

"Good!" said Saltash lightly. "I may be late, or—more probably—very early. Leave the gangway for me! I'll let you know when I'm aboard."

He got up as if he moved on springs and leaned against the rail, looking down quizzically at the man who sat stolidly smoking in the deck-chair. No two people could have formed a stronger contrast—the yacht's captain, fair-bearded, with the features of a Viking—the yacht's owner, dark, alert, with a certain French finesse about him that gave a strange charm to a personality that otherwise might have been merely fantastic.

Suddenly he laughed. "Do you know, Larpent, I often think to myself what odd tricks Fate plays? You for instance—you, the captain of a private yacht when you ought to be roving the high seas in a Flying Dutchman! You probably were a few generations ago."

"Ah!" Larpent said, through a cloud of smoke. "Life isn't what it was."

"It's an infernal fraud, most of it," said Saltash. "Always promising and seldom fulfilling!"

"No good expecting too much," said Larpent.

"True!" said Saltash. "On the other hand it isn't always wise to be too easily satisfied." His look became suddenly speculative. "Have you ever been in love, Larpent?"

The big man in the deck-chair made a sharp movement and spilt some cigar-ash on his coat. He sat up deliberately and brushed it off. Saltash watched him with mischievous eyes.

"Well?" he said.

Larpent leaned back again, puffing forth a thick cloud of smoke. "Once," he said briefly.

"Only once?" gibed Saltash. "Man alive! Why, I've had the disease scores of times, and you are half a generation older than I am!"

"I know," Larpent's eyes dwelt unblinking upon the sparkling blue of the water beyond the rail. "You've had it so often that you take it lightly."

Saltash laughed. "You apparently took it like the plague."

"I didn't die of it," said Larpent grimly.

"Perhaps the lady did!" suggested Saltash.

"No. She didn't die either." Larpent's eyes came slowly upwards to the mocking eyes above them. "For all I know she may be living now," he said.

Saltash's grin became a grimace. "Oh, heavens, Larpent! And you've had indigestion ever since? How long ago is it? Twenty years?"

"About that," said Larpent.

"Heavens!" said Saltash again. "I should like to see the woman who could hold me after twenty years!"

"So should I," said Larpent dryly.

Saltash snapped his fingers. "She doesn't exist, my good fellow! But if she did—by Jove, what a world it would be!"

Larpent grunted sardonically. "It wouldn't be large enough to hold you, my lord."

Saltash stretched his arms wide. "Well, I'm going ashore to-night. Who knows what the gods may send? Wish me luck!"

Larpent surveyed the restless figure with a sort of stony humour. "I wish you a safe return," he said.

Saltash laughed and went away along the deck with a monkey-like spring that was curiously characteristic of him. There was nothing of the sailor's steady poise about him.

The little Italian town that clung to the slopes that rose so steeply from the sea shone among its terraced gardens like a many-coloured jewel in the burning sunset. The dome of its Casino gleamed opalescent in its centre—a place for wonder—a place for dreams. Yet Saltash's expression as he landed on the quay was one of whimsical discontent. He had come nearly a fortnight ago to be amused, but somehow the old pleasures had lost their relish and he was only bored.

"I'm getting old," he said to himself with a grimace of disgust.

But he was not old. He was barely six-and-thirty. He had had the world at his feet too long, that was all.

There was to be a water-side *fête* that night at Valrosa, and the promenade and bandstand were wreathed with flowers and fairy-lights. It was getting late in the season, and it would probably be the last. Saltash surveyed the preparations with very perfunctory interest as he sauntered up to the hotel next to the Casino where he proposed to dine.

A few people he knew were staying there, and he looked forward to a more or less social evening. At least he could count on a welcome and a rubber of bridge if he felt so inclined. Or there was the Casino itself if the gambling mood should take him. But he did not feel much like gambling. He wanted something new. None of the old stale amusements appealed to him tonight. He was feeling very ancient and rather dilapidated.

He went up the steps under the cypress-trees that led from terrace to terrace, pausing at each landing-place to look out over the wonderful sea that was changing every moment with the changing glow of the sunset. Yes, it was certainly a place for dreams. Even old Larpent felt the charm—Larpent who had fallen in love twenty years ago for the first and last time!

An irrepressible chuckle escaped him. Funny old Larpent! The wine of the gods had evidently been too strong a brew for him. It was obvious that he had no desire to repeat the dose.

At his last halting-place he stood longer to drink in the beauty of the evening before entering the hotel. The sea had the pearly tint shot with rose of the inside of an oyster-shell. The sky-line was receding, fading into an immense calm. The shadows were beginning to gather. The sun had dipped out of sight.

The tinkle of a lute rose from one of the hidden gardens below him. He stood and listened with sentimental eyes and quizzically twitching mouth. Everything in this wonder-world was ultra-sweet to-night. And yet—and yet—

Suddenly another sound broke through the stillness, and in a moment he had sprung to alertness. It was a cry—a sharp, wrung cry from the garden close to him, the garden of the hotel, and instantly following it a flood of angry speech in a man's voice and the sound of blows.

"Damnation!" said Saltash, and sprang for a narrow wooden door in the stone wall a few yards higher up.

It opened to his imperious hand, and he found himself in a dark little shrubbery behind an arbour that

looked out to the sea. It was in this arbour that the scuffle was taking place, and in a second he had forced his way through the intervening shrubs and was at the entrance.

"Damnation!" he burst forth again furiously. "What are you doing? Leave that boy alone!"

A man in evening-dress was gripping a fair-haired lad, who wore the hotel-livery, by the back of his neck and raining merciless blows upon his uncovered head. He turned, sharply straightening himself, at Saltash's tempestuous entrance, and revealed to the newcomer the deeply-suffused countenance of the hotel-manager.

Their recognition was mutual. He flung the boy into a corner and faced his patron, breathing hard, his black eyes still fiercely gleaming.

"Ah! It is milord!" he said, in jerky English, and bowed punctiliously though he was still shaking with rage. "What can I do for you, milord?"

"What the devil is the matter?" said Saltash, sweeping aside all ceremony. "What are you hammering that unfortunate boy for? Can't you find a man your own size to hammer?"

The Italian flung a fierce glance over his shoulder at his crouching victim. "He is worthless!" he declared. "I give him a trial—*bueno*, but he is worthless. Milord will pardon me, he is—English. And the English are—no good for work—no good at all."

"Oh, rotten to the core!" agreed Saltash, with a humorous lift of the brows. "But you needn't murder him for that, Antonio. It's his misfortune—not his fault."

"Milord, I have not murdered him," the manager protested with nervous vehemence. "I have only punished him. I have not hurt him. I have done him good."

"Oh!" said Saltash, and looked down at the small, trembling figure in the corner. "It's medicine, is it? But a bit strong for a child of that size. I should try a milder dose next time."

Antonio laughed harshly. "The next time, milord, I shall take him—so—and wring his neck!" His laugh became a snarl as he turned. "Get up now, you—you son of a pig, and go back to your work!"

"Easy! Easy!" said Saltash, with a smile. "We don't talk to the English like that, Antonio,—not even the smallest and weakest of them. Let's have a look at this specimen—with your permission!" He bent over the huddled figure. "Hold up your head, boy! Let me see you!"

There was no movement to obey, and he laid a hand upon the quivering shoulder and felt it shrink away convulsively.

"I believe you've damaged him," he said, bending lower. "Here, Tommy! Hold up your head! Don't be afraid! It's a friend."

But the narrow figure only sank down a little lower under his hand.

"His name is Toby," said Antonio with acidity. "A dog's name, milord, and it fits him well. He is what you would call a lazy hound."

Saltash paid not the slightest attention to him. He was bending low, his dark face in shadow.

"Don't be afraid!" he said again. "No one is going to hurt you. Come along! Let's look at you!"

His hold tightened upon the shrinking form. He began to lift it up.

And then suddenly there came a sharp struggle between his hands as lacking in science as the fight of a wild animal for freedom, and as effectual. With a gasping effort the boy wrenched himself free and was gone. He went like a streak of lightning, and the two men were left facing one another.

"What a slippery little devil!" commented Saltash.

"Yes," said Antonio vindictively, "a devil indeed, milord! And I will have no more of him. I will have no more. I hope he will starve!"

"How awfully nice of you, Antonio!" said Saltash lightly. "Being the end of the season, he probably will."

Antonio smacked his red lips with relish. "Ah, probably! Probably!" he said.

CHAPTER II

ADIEU

It was growing late and the *fête* was in full swing when Saltash sauntered down again under the cypress-trees to the water's edge. The sea was breaking with a murmurous splashing; it was a night for dreams.

In the flower-decked bandstand an orchestra of stringed instruments was playing very softly—fairy-music that seemed to fill the world with magic to the brim. It was like a drug to the senses, alluring, intoxicating, maddeningly sweet.

Saltash wandered along with his face to the water on which a myriad coloured lights rocked and swam. And still his features wore that monkeyish look of unrest, of discontent and quizzical irony oddly mingled. He felt the lure, but it was not strong enough. Its influence had lost its potency.

He need not have been alone. He had left the hotel with friends, but he had drifted away from them in the crowd. One of them—a girl—had sought somewhat palpably to keep him near her, and he had responded with some show of ardour for a time, and then something about her had struck a note of discord within him and the glamour had faded.

"Little fool!" he murmured to himself. "She'd give me her heart to break if I'd have it."

And then he laughed in sheer ridicule of his own jaded senses. He recognized the indifference of satiety. An easy conquest no longer attracted him.

He began to stroll towards the quay, loitering here and there as if to give to Fates a chance to keep him if they would. Yes, Sheila Melrose was a little idiot. Why couldn't she realize that she was but one of the hundreds with whom he flirted day by day? She was nothing to him but a pastime—a toy to amuse his wayward mood. He had outgrown his earlier propensity to break his toys when he had done with them. The sight of a broken toy revolted him now.

He was impatiently aware that the girl was watching him from the midst of the shifting crowd. What did she expect, he asked himself irritably? She knew him. She knew his reputation. Did she imagine herself the sort of woman to hold a man of his stamp for more than the passing moment? Save for his title and estates, was he worth the holding?

A group of laughing Italian girls with kerchiefs on their heads surrounded him suddenly and he became the centre of a shower—a storm—of *confetti*. His mood changed in a second. He would show her what to expect! Without an instant's pause he turned upon his assailants, caught the one nearest to him, snatching her off her feet; and, gripping her without mercy, he kissed her fiercely and shamelessly till she gasped with delicious fright; then dropped her and seized another.

The girls of Valrosa spoke of the ugly Englishman with bated breath and shining eyes long after Saltash had gone his unheeding way, for the blood was hot in his veins before the game was over. If the magic had been slow to work, its spell was all the more compelling when it gripped him. Characteristically, he tossed aside all considerations beyond the gratification of the moment's desire. The sinking fire of youth blazed up afresh. He would get the utmost out of this last night of revelry. Wherever he went, a spirit of wild daring, of fevered gaiety, surrounded him. He was no longer alone, whichever way he turned. Once in his mad progress he met Sheila Melrose face to face, and she drew back from him in open disgust. He laughed at her maliciously, mockingly, as his royal forefather might have laughed long ago, and passed on with the throng.

Hours later, when the *fête* was over and the shore quite silent under the stars, he came alone along the quay, moving with his own peculiar arrogance of bearing, a cigarette between his lips, a deep gleam in his eyes. It had been an amusing night after all.

Crossing the gangway to his yacht—*The Night Moth*—that rocked softly on the glimmering ripples, he paused for a moment and turned his face as if in farewell towards the little town that lay sleeping among its cypress-trees. So standing, he heard again the tinkle of a lute from some hidden garden of delight. It was as if the magic were still calling to him, luring him, reaching out white arms to hold him. He made a brief bow towards the sound.

"*Adieu*, most exquisite and most wicked!" he said. "I return—no more!"

The cigarette fell from his lips into the dark water and there came a faint sound like the hiss of a

serpent in the stillness. He laughed as he heard it, and pursued his way aboard the yacht.

He found a young sailor, evidently posted to await his coming, snoring in a corner, and shook him awake.

The man blundered up with a confused apology, and Saltash laughed at him derisively.

"Wasting the magic hours in sleep, Parker? Well, I suppose dreams are better than nothing. Were they—good dreams?"

"I don't know, my lord," said Parker, grinning foolishly.

Saltash clapped him on the shoulder and turned away. "Well, I'm ready for the open sea now," he said. "We'll leave our dreams behind."

He was always on easy terms with his sailors who worshipped him to a man.

He whistled a careless air as he went below. The magic of Valrosa had loosed its hold, and he was thinking of the wide ocean and buffeting waves that awaited him. He turned on the lights of the saloon and stopped there for another cigarette and a drink, first walking to and fro, finally flinging himself on a crimson velvet settee and surrendering himself luxuriously to a repose for which he had not felt the need until that moment.

So lying, he heard the stir and tramp of feet above him, the voices of men, the lifting of the gangway; and presently the yacht began to throb as though suddenly endowed with life. He felt the heave of the sea as she left her moorings, and the rush of water pouring past her keel as she drew away from the quay.

He stretched himself with lazy enjoyment. It was good to come and go as he listed, good to have no ties to bind him. He supposed he would always be a wanderer on the face of the earth, and after all wandering suited him best. True, there were occasions on which the thought of home allured him. The idea of marriage with some woman who loved him would spring like a beacon out of the night in moments of depression. Other men found a permanent abiding-place and were content therewith; why not he? But he only played with the notion. It did not seriously attract him. He was not a marrying man, and, as he had said to Larpent, the woman did not exist who could hold him. The bare thought of Sheila Melrose sent a mocking smile to his lips. Did she think—did she really think—that she possessed the necessary qualifications to capture a man of his experience? He dismissed her with a snap of the fingers. Sheila had practically everything in life to learn, and he did not propose to be her teacher.

His cigarette was finished and he got up. The yacht was speeding like a winged thing on her way. There was never any fuss of departure when Larpent was in command. He stood for a few seconds in indecision, contemplating going up on to the bridge for a word with his captain and a glance round. But some fantastic scruple deterred him. He had made his farewell. He did not wish to see Valrosa again. He turned instead and went to his cabin.

All the appointments of the yacht were of the most luxurious order. She possessed every imaginable contrivance for the comfort of those who voyaged in her. Her state-cabins were a miracle of elegance and ease.

Saltash never took a valet when he went for a voyage. The steward attended to his clothes, and he waited on himself. He liked as much space as he could get both on deck and below.

He pushed open the door of his cabin and felt for the switch of the electric light. But he did not press it when he found it. Something made him change his mind. The faint light of stars upon rippling water came to him through the open porthole, and he shut himself in and stepped forward to the couch beneath it to look forth.

But as he moved, another influence caught him, and he stopped short.

"Is anyone here?" he said.

Through the wash of the water he thought he heard a light movement, and he felt a presence as of some small animal in the space before him.

Swiftly he stepped back and in a moment his hand was on the switch. The light flashed on, and in a moment he stood staring—at a fair-haired, white-faced lad in a brown livery with brass buttons who stood staring back at him with wide, scared eyes.

CHAPTER III

THE GIFT

Saltash was the first to recover himself; he was seldom disconcerted, never for long.

"Hullo!" he said, with a quizzical twist of the eyebrows. "You, is it? And what have you come for?"

The intruder lowered his gaze abruptly, flushing to the roots of his fair hair. "I came," he said, in a very low voice, "to—to ask you something."

"Then you've come some distance to do it," said Saltash lightly, "for I never turn back. Perhaps that was your idea, was it?"

"No—no!" With a vehement shake of the head he made answer. "I didn't think you would start so soon. I thought—I would be able to ask you first."

"Oh, indeed!" said Saltash. And then unexpectedly he laid a hand upon one narrow shoulder and turned the downcast face upwards. "Ah! I thought he'd marked you, the swine! What was he drubbing you for? Tell me that!"

A great purple bruise just above one eye testified to the severity of the drubbing; the small, boyish countenance quivered sensitively under his look. With sudden impulse two trembling hands closed tightly upon his arm.

"Well?" said Saltash.

"Oh, please, sir—please, my lord, I mean—" with great earnestness the words came—"let me stay with you! I'll earn my keep somehow, and I shan't take up much room!"

"Oh, that's the idea, is it?" said Saltash.

"Yes—yes!" The boy's eyes implored him,—blue eyes with short black lashes that imparted an oddly childish look to a face that was otherwise thin and sharp with anxiety. "I can do anything. I don't want to live on charity. I can work. I'd love to work—for you."

"You're a rum little devil, aren't you?" said Saltash.

"I'm honest, sir! Really I'm honest!" Desperately the bony hands clung. "You won't be sorry if you take me. I swear you'll never be sorry!"

"What about you?" said Saltash. He was looking down into the upraised face with a semi-quizzical compassion in his own. "Think you'd never be sorry either?"

A sudden smile gleamed across the drawn face. "Of course I shouldn't! You're English."

"Ah!" said Saltash, with a faintly wry expression. "Not necessarily white on that account, my friend, so don't run away with that idea, I beg! I'm quite capable of giving you a worse drubbing than the good Antonio, for instance, if you qualified for it. I can be a terrifically wild beast upon occasion. Look here, you imp! Are you starved or what? Do you want something to eat?"

The wiry fingers tightened on his arm. "No, sir—no, my lord—not really. I often don't eat. I'm used to it."

"But why the devil not?" demanded Saltash. "Didn't they feed you over there?"

"Yes—oh, yes. But I didn't want it. I was—too miserable." The blue eyes blinked rapidly under his look as if half-afraid of him.

"You little ass!" said Saltash in a voice that somehow reassured. "Sit down there! Curl up if you like, and don't move till I come back!"

He indicated the sofa, and quite gently but with decision freed his arm from the nervously gripping hands.

"You won't send me back?" the boy urged with quivering supplication.

"No, I won't do that," said Saltash as he went away.

He swore once or twice with considerable energy ere he returned, cursing the absent Antonio in language that would have outmatched the Italian's own. Then, having relieved his feelings, he abruptly laughed to himself and pursued his errand with business-like briskness.

Returning, he found his *protégé* in a small heap on the sofa, with his head deep in the cushion as though he sought escape from the light. Again the feeling of harbouring some small animal in pain came to him, and he frowned. The mute misery of that huddled form held a more poignant appeal than any words.

"Look here,—Toby!" he said. "I've brought you something to eat, and when you've had it you'd better get a sleep. You can tell me all about it—if you want to—in the morning."

The boy started upright at his coming. He looked at Saltash in his quick, startled way. It was almost as if he expected a kick at any moment. Then he looked at the tray he carried and suddenly his face crumpled; he hid it in his hands.

"Oh, dash it!" said Saltash. "Let's have a little sense!"

He set down the tray and flicked the fair head admonishingly, with his thumb, still frowning. "Come! Be a sport!" he said.

After a brief pause with a tremendous effort the boy pulled himself together and sat up, but he did not raise his eyes to Saltash again. He kept them fixed upon his hands which were tightly clasped in front of him.

"I'll do—whatever you tell me," he said, in a low voice. "No one has ever been so—decent to me before."

"Have one of those rolls!" said Saltash practically. "You'll talk better with something inside you."

He seated himself on the edge of his bunk and lit another cigarette, his attitude one of royal indifference, but his odd eyes flashing to and fro with a monkey-like shrewdness that missed nothing of his desolate companion's forlorn state.

"You've been doing this starvation business for some time, haven't you?" he asked presently. "No wonder you didn't feel like work."

The boy's pinched face smiled, a small wistful smile. "I can work," he said. "I can do anything—women's work as well as men's. I can cook and clean boots and knives and sew on buttons and iron trousers and wash shirts and wait on tables and make beds and sweep and—"

"For heaven's sake, stop!" said Saltash. "You make me giddy. Tell me the things you can't do instead! It would take less time."

Toby considered for a few moments. "I can't drive cars," he said at length. "But I can clean 'em, and I'd love to learn."

Saltash laughed. "That's the sole exception, is it? You seem to have picked up a good deal in a short time. Did they teach you all that over there?"

Toby shook his head. "I've knocked about a good lot," he said.

"And know everything evidently," said Saltash. "What made you think of coming on board this yacht?"

The boy's eyes gave him a shining look. "Because she belongs to you," he said.

"Oh!" Saltash puffed at his cigarette for a few seconds. "You'd made up your mind to throw in your fortunes with mine, had you?"

Toby nodded. "I wanted to—if you'd have me."

"Seems I haven't much choice," remarked Saltash. "And what are you going to do when you're tired of me? Fling yourself at someone else's head, I suppose?"

Again he saw the hot colour flood the thin face, but the boyish eyes did not flinch from his. "No, I shan't do that," said Toby, after brief reflection. "I'll just go right under next time."

"Oh, will you?" said Saltash. "And so remain—a blot on my escutcheon for all time. Well now, look here! You say you're honest?"

"Yes, sir," said Toby with breathless assurance, and sprang up and stood before him with the words, as though challenging criticism.

Saltash poked at him with his foot, as he sat. "Make me a promise?" he asked casually.

"Anything you wish, my lord," said Toby promptly.

Saltash grinned at him. "Be careful! I see you are of a rash and impulsive disposition, and I like my slaves to have a little discretion. The promise I want is that whatever happens to you,—however much I kick you or bash you or generally ill-use you—you'll never jump overboard or do anything silly of that kind. Is it done?"

Toby was standing before him, facing him with straight, candid eyes. He did not seem surprised at the suggestion so coolly made. Saltash noted that it certainly did not shock him.

"All right, sir," he said, after a moment.

"It's a promise, is it?" said Saltash.

Toby nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Good!" said Saltash. He stretched out a hand and took him by one skinny arm. "Better now?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord." Toby's eyes smiling into his.

"Very well. I'll keep you," Saltash said. "Did anyone see you come aboard?"

"No, my lord."

"Then you came with me, see? I brought you—if anyone wants to know."

"Very good, my lord. Thank you, my lord."

Saltash made a humorous grimace. "You can call me 'sir' if you like," he said. "It makes no difference."

"Thank you, sir," said Toby with a responsive grin.

"And your name is Toby, is it? Toby what?"

"Toby Wright, sir." Very promptly the answer came.

Saltash's eyes scrutinized him with half derisive amusement. "I hope it's a good fit," he remarked. "Well, look here, Toby, you must go to bed. Did you bring any luggage on board?"

"No, sir. 'Fraid not, sir. Very sorry, sir. I came away in a hurry," explained Toby rather nervously.

"And stole the hotel livery," said Saltash.

"No, sir. Borrowed it," said Toby.

"Ho! You're going to pay for it, are you?" questioned Saltash.

"Yes, sir, some day. First money I get, sir. Don't want to have anything belonging to that damn' Italian cur," said Toby, with much emphasis.

"Naughty! Naughty!" said Saltash, pinching his arm. "Well, come along, and I'll show you where you can sleep. There's a small cabin out of my dressing-room you can have for the present. I haven't got my valet on board."

"Very good, sir, thank you. What time shall I call you, sir?" said Toby brightly.

"You needn't call me," said Saltash. "You can just lie quiet and take care of that black eye of yours. I'll let you know when I want you."

"Very good, sir," said Toby, looking crestfallen.

Saltash stood up. "And you'll do as you're told—see?—always! That's understood, is it?"

Toby smiled again, eagerly, gratefully. "Yes, sir. Always, sir!" he said promptly. "Shall I take off your boots before I go, sir?"

"No. Look after yourself for the present!" said Saltash. "And don't get up to mischief! There's a strict captain in command of this boat, so you'd better mind how you go."

The boy looked up at him with eyes of twinkling comprehension. He had plainly forgotten the despair that had so nearly overwhelmed him.

"Oh, I'll be very good, sir," he promised. "I won't get you into trouble anyhow, sir."

"You—imp!" said Saltash, pulling his ear. "Think I'll put up with your impudence, do you? You'll play that game once too often if you're not careful."

Toby hastened to adjust his features to a becoming expression of gravity. "I won't, sir. No, I won't. I'll be a good servant to you—the best you've ever had. I'll never forget your goodness to me, and I'll pay back somehow—that I will, sir."

His boyish voice suddenly throbbed with emotion, and he stopped. Again for a moment he had the forlorn look of a small animal astray from its own.

Saltash patted his shoulder kindly. "All right. That'll do. Don't be tragic about it! Come along to your burrow and have a good square sleep!"

He led him away without further words, and Toby went, gratefully and submissively.

A few minutes later Saltash came back with a smile on his ugly face, half-quizzical, and half-compassionate.

"Rum little devil!" he commented again as he began to undress. "So the gods had a gift for me after all! Wonder what I shall do with it!"

And then abruptly the smile became a mocking grimace that banished all the kindness from his face. He snapped his fingers and laughed as he had laughed a little earlier when his cigarette had fallen into the water with a sound like the hiss of a serpent.

"I—wonder!" he said again.

CHAPTER IV

TOBY

It was contrary to Captain Larpent's habit to show surprise at any time, whatever the caprices of his patron, but he did look at Saltash somewhat harder than usual when the latter informed him in his breezy fashion of the unexpected addition to the yacht's company. He also frowned a little and smoothed his beard as though momentarily puzzled.

"You won't want to be bothered with him," he said after brief reflection. "Better let him sleep in the forecabin."

"Not for the present," said Saltash. "I am going to train him, and I'll keep him under my own eye. The little beggar has had a pretty rough time of it to judge by appearances. I've a fancy for looking after him myself."

"What are you going to make of him?" asked Larpent.

Saltash laughed carelessly, flicking the ash from his cigarette. "I'll tell you that when I can show you the finished article. I'm keeping him below for the present. He's got a prize-fighter's eye which is not exactly an ornament. Like to have a look at him? You're ship's doctor."

Larpent shrugged his shoulders. "P'raps I'd better. I'm not over-keen on sudden importations. You never know what they may bring aboard with them."

Saltash's eyes gleamed mischievously. "Better inoculate the whole crew at once! He's more like a stray spaniel than anything else."

"A King Charles!" suggested Larpent, with the flicker of an eyelid.

"Well, my lord, let's have a look at your latest find!"

They went below, Saltash whistling a careless air. He was usually in high spirits when not suffering from boredom.

Someone else was whistling in the vicinity of his cabin, but it was not from the valet's cabin that the cheery sounds proceeded. They found him in the bathroom with an oily rag, rubbing up the taps.

He desisted immediately at their entrance and stood smartly at attention. His eye was badly swollen and discoloured, he looked wretchedly ill, but he managed to smile at Saltash, who took him by the shoulder and made him face the light.

"What are you doing in here, you—scaramouch? Didn't I tell you to lie still? Here he is, Larpent! What do you think of him? A poor sort of specimen, eh?"

"What's his name?" said Larpent.

"Toby Barnes, sir," supplied the boy promptly.

"And there's nothing under the sun he can't do except drive cars," put in Saltash, "and obey orders."

Toby winced a little. "I'm sorry, sir. Only wanted to be useful, sir. I'll go back to bed if you say so."

"What do you say, Captain?" said Saltash.

Larpent bent and looked closely at the injured eye. "The sooner the better," he said after a brief examination. "Stay in bed for a week, and then I'll look at you again!"

"Oh, not a week!" exclaimed Toby, aghast, and then clapped a hand to his mouth and was silent.

But his look implored Saltash who laughed and pinched the shoulder under his hand. "All right. We'll see how you get on. If we meet any weather you'll probably be only too thankful to stay there."

Toby smiled somewhat woefully, and said nothing.

Larpent stood up. "I'll fetch some stuff to dress it with. Better have it bandaged. Pretty painful, isn't it?"

"No, sir," lied Toby valiantly. "Don't feel it at all."

But he shrank with a quick gasp of pain when Larpent unexpectedly touched the injury.

"Don't hurt the child!" said Saltash sharply.

Larpent smiled his faint, sardonic smile, and turned away.

Toby laid his cheek with a winning, boyish gesture against the hand that held him. "Don't make me go to bed, sir!" he pleaded. "I'll be miserable in bed."

Saltash looked down at him with eyebrows comically working. "It is rather a hole—that cabin of yours," he conceded. "You can lie on the couch in my stateroom if you like. Don't get up to mischief, that's all! I'm responsible for you, remember."

Toby thanked him humbly, swearing obedience and good behaviour. The couch in Saltash's cabin was immediately under a porthole, and the fresh sea-air blew straight in. He stretched his meagre person upon it with a sigh of contentment, and Saltash smiled down upon him. "That's right. You'll do there. Let's see! What did you say your name was?"

"Toby, sir."

"Toby Barnes or Toby Wright?" said Saltash.

The boy started, turned very red, then very white, opened his mouth to speak, shut it tightly, and said nothing.

Saltash took out his cigarette-case and opened it with great leisureliness. The smile still played about his ugly features as he chose a cigarette. Finally he snapped the lid and looked down again at his *protégé*.

"Or Toby nothing?" he said.

Toby's eyes came up to his, though the effort to raise them drew his face painfully.

"Whatever you like, my lord," he said faintly. "I'll answer to anything."

Saltash's own face was curiously softened. He looked down at Toby for some seconds in silence, idly tapping the cigarette he held against the case. Then: "How old are you?" he asked suddenly.

"Sixteen, sir." Toby's eyes with their dumb pleading were still anxiously raised to his.

Saltash bent abruptly and put his hand very lightly over them. "All right. Don't hurt yourself!" he said kindly. "You're young enough to chuck the past and start again."

Toby's claw-like hands came up and closed upon his wrist. "Wish I could, sir," he whispered with lips that quivered. "Haven't had much of a chance—so far, sir."

"All right," Saltash said again. "It's up to you. I shan't interfere. Don't expect too much of me; that's all I ask! I'm not considered exactly a suitable companion for young things like you."

He drew his hand away and lighted his cigarette. Toby turned his face into the cushion and lay very still.

Larpent, returning, wondered what his patron had been saying to make the boy's eyes wet with tears, but betrayed no curiosity on the subject.

"Are you going to let him stay in here?" he asked, as he bound a lotion-soaked pad over the damaged eye.

"For the present," said Saltash. "Any objection?"

"Not the smallest." Larpent's tone was absolutely noncommittal. "Make him lie quiet, that's all!"

"He'll do that," said Saltash with confidence.

"Good!" said Larpent. "We're in for a blow before we reach Gib or I'm much mistaken."

"Do us all good," said Saltash with satisfaction.

Larpent looked grim and said no more.

"Frightened?" asked Saltash of Toby when he was gone.

Toby chuckled at the thought. "Not a bit, sir."

"Good sailor by any chance?" questioned Saltash.

"No, sir; rotten, sir." Quite undaunted came the reply.

"Well, shut your eyes and go to sleep!" commanded Saltash, and spread a rug over the small, curled-up figure.

Toby murmured his thanks and relaxed with a big sigh of content.

Some hours later, when the blow that Larpent had prophesied had arrived in earnest and the yacht was pitching on a wild sea in the light of a lurid sunset, Saltash came below to change.

He was met by Toby, ghastly of face but still desperately smiling, who sprang from his couch to wait upon him, and collapsed at his feet.

"Little ass!" said Saltash, barely preventing himself from tumbling over him headlong.

He lifted the light, trembling figure and put it down again upon the couch. Then he poured out a dose of brandy and water and, holding the boy's head on his arm while the yacht lifted and tossed, compelled him to drink it.

"Now you lie quiet!" he commanded. "Don't stir an eyelid till I give you leave!"

The porthole was shut, and the atmosphere close and stuffy. Toby put forth an appealing hand and clung to his protector's sleeve.

"Mayn't I come on deck, sir?" he murmured anxiously. "Please, sir!"

"No," said Saltash.

Toby said no more, but his fingers fastened like a bird's claw on the man's arm, and he shivered.

"You're frightened!" said Saltash.

"No, sir! No, sir!" he protested.

"Yes, you are. You needn't bother to lie to me. I always know." Saltash's voice held an odd note of comradeship. "Beastly sensation, isn't it? Have some more brandy!"

Then, as Toby refused, he sat down abruptly on the edge of the couch and thrust an arm out to him. Toby crept to him then like a nervous dog and trembled against his side.

"Little ass!" said Saltash again. "Been lying here sweating with terror, have you? There's nothing whatever to sweat about. She's as safe as houses."

"Yes, sir. I know, sir," whispered Toby apologetically.

Saltash's arm surrounded him with a comforting closeness. "You miserable little shrimp!" he said. "How's the head?"

"Better, sir. Thank you, sir," muttered Toby.

"Why not tell the truth for once and say it hurts like hell?" suggested Saltash.

Toby was silent.

"Do you know what I'm going to do with you?" said Saltash.

"No, sir." Toby stirred uneasily.

The vessel pitched to a sudden slant and Saltash braced himself, protecting the fair head from a blow against the woodwork behind him. "I'm going to put you to bed in my bunk here," he said. "You've got to have a decent night's rest. Did Murray look you out any spare slops? I told him to."

"Oh, yes, sir. Thank you, sir. But I couldn't sleep in your bunk, sir,—please, sir—indeed, sir!" Toby, still held by the sheltering arm, waxed incoherent, almost tearful.

Saltash pulled him up short. "You'll do as I tell you—now and always," he said, with royal finality. "You've put yourself in my hands, and you'll have to put up with the consequences. Got that?"

"Yes, sir," said Toby meekly.

"Then don't forget it!" said Saltash.

Toby subsided without further protest. Perhaps the brandy helped to make him quiescent, or perhaps it was only the realization of his utter weakness and dependence; but from that moment he was as submissive as if he had been indeed the small captive animal to which his new owner had likened him. At Saltash's behest and with his help, he presently crept back to his own cabin to divest himself of his hotel-livery and don the very roomy suit of pajamas that Murray the steward had served out to him.

Then, barefooted, stumbling, and shivering, he returned to where Saltash leaned smoking in the narrow dressing-room, awaiting him.

Saltash's dark face wore a certain look of grimness. He bent without words and lifted the shrinking figure in his arms.

Ten seconds later Toby sank down in a berth as luxurious as any ever carried by private yacht.

He was still shivering though a grateful warmth came about him as Saltash tucked him in. He tried to murmur thanks, but ended with a quivering chin and silence.

"Go to sleep, you little ass!" commanded Saltash.

And so at last Toby slept, the deep, unstimulating sleep of exhaustion, utterly unconscious of his surroundings, unaware of the man who came in and out watching that unchanging repose, sublimely oblivious of all observation, sunk in a slumber so remote that it might have been the last long rest of all.

Saltash spent the night on the velvet couch under the closed porthole, dozing occasionally and always

awakening with a jerk as the roll of the vessel threatened to pitch him on to the floor of the cabin. It was not a comfortable means of resting but he endured it in commendable silence with now and then a grimace which said more than words.

And the little waif that the gods had flung to him slept in his bunk all through the long hours as peacefully as an effigy upon a tomb.

CHAPTER V

DISCIPLINE

The storm spent itself before they reached Gibraltar, and Toby emerged smiling from his captivity below. He still wore the brown and gold hotel-livery as there was nothing else on board to fit him, but from Gibraltar a small packet of notes was dispatched to Antonio by Saltash in settlement of the loan.

"Now I've bought you—body and soul," he said to Toby, whose shining look showed naught but satisfaction at the announcement.

The vivid colours of his injured eye had faded to a uniform dull yellow, and he no longer wore a bandage. When they put to sea again he was no longer an invalid. He followed Saltash wherever he went, attended scrupulously to his comfort, and when not needed was content to sit curled up like a dog close to him, dumb in his devotion but always ready to serve him.

Saltash treated him with a careless generosity that veiled a good deal of consideration. He never questioned him with regard to his past, taking him for granted in a fashion that set Toby completely at ease. No one else had much to do with him. Larpent ignored him, and Murray the steward regarded him with a deep suspicion that did not make for intimacy.

And Toby was happy. Day after day his cheery whistle arose over his work while he polished Saltash's boots and brushed his clothes, or swept and dusted the state-cabin in which he slept. He himself had returned to his own small den that led out of Saltash's dressing-room, but the intervening doors were kept open by Saltash's command. They were always within hail of each other.

They went into perfect summer weather, and for a blissful week they voyaged through blue seas with a cloudless sky overhead. Toby's white skin began to tan. The sharp lines went out of his face. His laugh was frequent and wholly care-free. He even developed a certain impudence in his attitude towards his master to which Saltash extended the same tolerance that he might have shown for the frolics of a favourite dog. He accepted Toby's services, but he never treated him wholly as a servant.

It was an odd companionship which only the isolated life they led during those few days could have developed along those particular lines. When Saltash was bored he amused himself with his protegee, teaching him picquet and chess, and finding in him an apt and eager pupil. There was a good deal of the gambler's spirit in Toby, and Saltash idly fostered it because it gave him sport. He laughed at his opponent's keenness, supplied stakes for the game, even good-naturedly let himself be beaten.

And then one day he detected Toby cheating. It was an end that he might have foreseen. He had encouraged the fever, he had practically sown the seeds; but, strangely, he was amazed, more disconcerted than he had been for years by the consequences. For it was not his way to disturb himself over anything. His principles were easy to laxness. But that Toby—the urchin he had sheltered and nursed like a sick puppy—should have done this thing somehow cut clean through his complacency.

"I'm going to give you a licking for that," he said, black brows drawn to a stern line. "You can go below and wait for it."

Toby went like an arrow, and Saltash spent the next half-hour pacing the deck, cursing himself, the youngster, and the insane and ridiculous Fate that had linked them together.

Then he went below to administer judicial corporal punishment to a human being for the first time in his life. As he himself whimsically expressed it, he had received ample correction during his own chequered career; but he had never been in a position to correct anyone else.

He found Toby waiting for him in his shirt-sleeves, rather white but quite composed, his riding-switch all ready to his hand.

"Ever been flogged before?" he asked him curtly as he picked it up.

"No, sir," said Toby, with downcast eyes.

"Why not?" There was a gibing note in Saltash's voice. "Never qualified before?"

Toby shot him a swift and nervous glance that was like a flash of blue flame. "No, sir. Never been caught before," he said.

Saltash's eyes flickered humour, but he steeled himself. "Well, you're caught this time—fairly caught. I may not be a specially fit person to punish you for it, but you won't be let off on that account."

"Go ahead, sir!" said Toby, with his hands twisted into a bony knot in front of him.

And Saltash went ahead. His heart was not in the business, and as he smote the narrow bent back it cried shame on him. Toby made no sound, but at the third stroke he winced, and Saltash with a terrific oath in French hurled his switch violently at the opposite wall.

"There! Don't do it again!" he said, and swung him round to face him.
"Sorry? What?"

Then he saw that Toby was crying, and abruptly let him go, striding out through the dining-saloon and up the companion-way, swearing strange oaths in varied languages as he went.

He was openly rude to Larpent when the latter sauntered up for a word with him a little later, but Larpent, knowing him, merely hunched his shoulders as his custom was and sauntered away again.

When Saltash went down to dress for dinner, he found his clothes laid out as usual, but no Toby in attendance. His first impulse was to look for him, but he checked it and dressed in solitude. This thing must be conducted in the approved judicial manner at all costs.

Larpent was stolidly awaiting him in the saloon, and they sat down together. Usually Toby stood behind his master's chair, and the vacant place oppressed Saltash. He talked jerkily, with uneasy intervals of silence.

Larpent talked not at all beyond the demands of ordinary courtesy. He ate well, drank sparingly, and when not listening to Saltash's somewhat spasmodic conversation appeared immersed in thought. When the meal was over, he refused coffee, and rose to go on deck.

Then, abruptly, Saltash stayed him. "Larpent, wait a minute—unless you're in a hurry! Have a cigar with me!"

Larpent paused, looking across at the dark, restless face with the air of a man making a minute calculation. "Shall we smoke on deck, my lord?" he said at length.

Saltash sprang up as though he moved on wires. "Yes, all right. Get the cigars, Murray!" he commanded the steward; and to Larpent as the man went to obey, "That's decent of you. Thought you were going to refuse. I was damned offensive a while back. Accept my apologies! Fact is—I'm fed up with this show. Sorry if I disappoint you, but I'm going home."

"You never disappoint me, my lord," said Larpent, with his enigmatical smile.

Saltash gave him a keen look and uttered a laugh that was also not without its edge. "I like you, Larpent," he said. "You always tell the truth. Well, let's go! We shan't make Jamaica this trip, but it doesn't matter. In any case, it's a shame to miss the spring in England."

"Or the Spring Meetings?" suggested Larpent, as he chose his cigar.

"Quite so," said Saltash, almost with relief. "My old trainer—the man who bought my racing-stud—always looks for me about now. You ought to meet him by the way. He is another speaker of cruel truths."

He thrust a hand through his captain's arm as they left the saloon, and they went on deck together. Though Larpent never made any sign of resentment, yet was Saltash never wholly at his ease when he knew that he had taxed his forbearance until he had made amends. He took the trouble to make himself unusually agreeable as they settled down to their smoke.

It was a night of glorious stars, the sea one vast stretch of silver ripples, through which the yacht ran smoothly, leaving a wide white trail behind her. Saltash lay in a deck-chair with his face to the sky, but

his attitude was utterly lacking in the solid repose that characterized his companion. He smoked his cigar badly, with impatient pulls. When it was half gone, he suddenly swore and flung it overboard.

"Larpen," he said, breaking a silence, "if you were a damned rotter—like me—what should you do with yourself?"

Larpen turned his head and quietly surveyed him. "I shouldn't run a home for waifs and strays," he said deliberately.

Saltash made a sharp movement. "Then I suppose you'd leave 'em in the gutter to starve," he said, with suppressed vehemence.

"No, I shouldn't. I'd pay someone else—someone who wasn't what you called yourself just now—to look after 'em." Larpen's voice was eminently practical if somewhat devoid of sympathy. "Gutter-snipes are damned quick to pick up—things they ought not," he observed dryly.

Saltash stirred uncomfortably in his chair as though something pricked him. "Think I'm a contaminating influence?" he said.

Larpen shrugged his shoulders. "It's not for me to say. All diseases are not catching—any more than they are incurable."

"Ho!" Saltash laughed suddenly and rather bitterly. "Are you suggesting—a cure?"

Larpen turned his head back again and puffed a cloud of smoke upwards. "There's a cure for most things," he observed.

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin?" gibed Saltash.

Larpen was silent for a space. Then: "A painful process no doubt!" he said. "But more wonderful things have happened."

"Pshaw!" said Saltash.

Nevertheless when Larpen rose a little later and bade him good-night, he reached up a couple of fingers in careless comradeship.

"Good-night, old fellow! Thanks for putting up with me! Sure you don't want to kick me?"

"Not when you're kicking yourself," said Larpen with a grim hint of humour.

He took the extended fingers and received a wiry handclasp that caused him faint surprise. But then, he reflected as he went away, he had always known Saltash to be a queer devil, oddly balanced, curiously impulsive, strangely irresponsible, possessing through all a charm which seldom failed to hold its own. He realized by instinct that Saltash was wrestling with himself that night, but, though he knew him better than did many, he would not have staked anything on the result. There were two selves in Saltash and, in Larpen's opinion, one was as strong as the other.

It was nearly an hour later that Saltash, prowling to and fro in the starlight, became suddenly aware of a figure, small and slight, with gleaming brass buttons, standing behind his vacant chair. He turned sharply to look at it, some inexplicable emotion twitching his dark face. Then abruptly he moved towards it, stood for a second as one in doubt, then turned and sat down in silence.

But as he settled himself he stretched forth an arm with a snap of the fingers, and in a flash Toby was kneeling by his side. The arm closed around him like a spring, and Toby uttered a low, tense sob and hid his face.

Thereafter for a while there was no sound beside the throb of engines and wash of water. Saltash sat absolutely motionless with eyes half-closed. Save for the vitality of his hold, he might have been on the verge of slumber. And Toby, crouched with his head in his hands, was as a carved image, neither stirring nor seeming to breathe.

The man moved at length, flicking his eyes open as though some unseen force had prodded him into action. He spoke with a brevity that might have denoted some sternness but for the close grip of his arm.

"Have you been sulking all this time?"

Toby started at his voice and burrowed a little deeper. "No, sir."

"Well, why didn't you come before?" said Saltash.

"I was—afraid," whispered Toby piteously.

"Afraid! Why on earth?" Saltash's hand suddenly found and fondled the fair head. His speech was no longer curt, but gentle, with a half-quizzical tenderness. "Aren't you rather an ass, boy? What was there to be afraid of?"

Toby could not tell him. He only, after a moment, slipped down in a sitting position by Saltash's side and rested with more assurance against the encircling arm.

"Come! I didn't hurt you much," said Saltash.

"No, sir. You didn't hurt me—at all." Toby stammered a little. "You—you—you meant—not to hurt me, didn't you?"

"I must hit harder next time evidently," observed Saltash, with a squeeze of the narrow shoulders.

"No, sir—no, sir! There shan't be—a next time!" Toby assured him with nervous vehemence. "I only did it just to see—just to see—I'll never do it again, sir."

"Just to see what?" asked Saltash curiously.

But again Toby could not explain himself, and he did not press him.

"Well, you didn't do it at all well," he remarked. "I shouldn't certainly make a profession of it if I were you. It's plainly not your *métier*."

He paused, but with the air of having something more to say. Toby waited silently.

It came with a jerk and a grimace, as if some inner force compelled. "I can't talk pi-jaw—on this subject or any other. You see—I'm a rotter myself."

"You, sir!" Toby lifted his head suddenly and stared at him with eyes that blazed passionately blue in the starlight. "Don't believe it!" he said. "It isn't true."

Saltash grinned a little. His face had the dreary look of something lost that a monkey's sometimes wears. "You needn't believe it, son, if you don't want to," he said. "But it's true all the same. That's why I gave you that licking, see? Just to emphasize the difference between us."

"It isn't true!" Toby asserted again almost fiercely. "I'd kill anyone else that said so."

"Oh, you needn't do that!" said Saltash, with kindly derision. "Thanks all the same, my turkey-cock! If I ever need your protection I'll be sure to ask for it." He flicked the young face with his finger. "But you're not to follow my example, mind. You've got to run straight. You're young enough to make it worth while, and—I'll see you have a chance."

"But you'll keep me with you, sir," said Toby swiftly. "You'll keep me—always—with you!"

"Ah!" Saltash's brows twisted oddly for a second. He seemed to ponder the matter. "I can't say off-hand what I'm going to do with you," he said. "You're—a bit of a problem, you know, Toby."

"Yes, sir. I know. I know." Toby's voice was quick with agitation. "But you won't send me away from you! Promise you won't send me away!"

"Can't promise anything," said Saltash. "Look here! I think there's been enough of this. You'd better go to bed."

But Toby was clinging fast to his hand. He spoke between quivering lips. "Please, sir, you said you'd bought me body and soul. You can't mean to chuck me away—after that! Please, sir, I'll do anything—anything under the sun—for you. And you—you can kick me—do anything to me—and I'll never say a word. I'm just yours—for as long as I live. Please, sir—please, sir—don't send me away! I—I'd rather die than that."

He laid his head suddenly down upon the hand he held so tenaciously and began to sob, fighting desperately to stifle all sound.

Saltash sat for a few moments in utter silence and immobility. Then, abruptly, in a tense whisper, he spoke:

"Toby, you little fool, stop it—stop it, do you hear?—and go below!"

The words held a queer urgency. He raised himself as he uttered them, seeking to free his hand though with all gentleness from the clinging clasp.

"Get up, boy!" he said. "Get up and go to bed! What? Oh, don't cry! Pull yourself together! Toby, do you hear?"

Toby lifted a white, strained face. His eyes looked enormous in the dim light. "Yes, sir. All right, sir," he jerked out, and stumbled trembling to his feet. "I know I'm a fool, sir. I'm sorry. I can't help it. No one was ever decent to me—till you came. I—shall just go under now, sir."

"Oh, stop it!" Saltash spoke almost violently. "Can't you see—that's just what I want to prevent? You don't want to go to the devil, I suppose?"

Toby made a passionate gesture that was curiously unboylike. "I'd go to hell and stay there for ever—if you were there!" he said.

"Good God!" said Saltash.

He got up in his sudden fashion and moved away, went to the rail and stood there for a space with his face to the rippling sheen of water. Finally he turned and looked at the silent figure waiting beside his chair, and a very strange smile came over his dark features. He came back, not without a certain arrogance, and tapped Toby on the shoulder.

"All right," he said. "Stay with me and be damned if you want to! I daresay it would come to the same thing in the end."

Toby drew himself together with a swift movement. "That means you'll keep me, sir?"

His eyes, alight and eager, looked up to Saltash with something that was not far removed from adoration in their shining earnestness.

The strange smile still hovered about Saltash's face; a smile in which cynicism and some vagrant, half-stifled emotion were oddly mingled.

"Yes, I'll keep you," he said, and paused, looking at him oddly.

Toby's eyes, very wide open, intensely bright, looked straight back. "For good, sir?" he said anxiously.

And Saltash laughed, a brief, mocking laugh. "For better, for worse, my Toby!" he said. "Now—go!"

He smote him a light friendly blow on the shoulder and flung round on his heel.

Toby went, very swiftly, without looking back.

CHAPTER VI

THE ABYSS

They sighted the English shore a few days later on an evening of mist and rain. The sea was grey and dim, the atmosphere cold and inhospitable.

"Just like England!" said Saltash. "She never gushes over her prodigals."

He was dining alone in the saloon with Toby behind his chair, Larpent being absent on the bridge.

"Don't you like England, sir?" said Toby.

"I adore her," said Saltash with his most hideous grimace. "But I don't go to her for amusement."

Toby came forward to fill his glass with liqueur. "Too strait-laced, sir?" he suggested with the suspicion of a smile.

Saltash nodded with a sidelong glance at the young face bent over the decanter. "Too limited in many ways, my Toby," he said. "But at the same time useful in certain emergencies. A stern mother perhaps,

but a wise one on the whole. You, for instance—she will be the making of you."

A slight tremor went through Toby. He set down the decanter and stepped back. "Of me, sir?" he said.

Saltash nodded again. He was fingering the stem of his glass, his queer eyes dancing a little. "We've got to make a respectable citizen of you—somehow," he said.

"Do you think that matters, sir?" said Toby.

Saltash raised his glass. "You won't always be a boy of sixteen, you know, Toby," he said lightly. "We've got to think of the future—whether we want to or not."

"I don't see why, sir," said Toby.

"You see, you're young," said Saltash, and drank with the air of one who drinks a toast.

Suddenly he turned in his chair, the glass still in his hand.

"Our last night on board!" he said, with a royal gesture of invitation. "You shall drink with me."

Toby's face flushed burningly. He hung back. "Not—not—from your glass, sir!" he said. "Not—liqueur!"

"Why not? Afraid?" mocked Saltash.

Toby was silent. His hand closed involuntarily upon the back of his master's chair. The flush died out of his face.

Saltash sat and looked at him for a few seconds, still with that dancing gleam in his eyes. Then abruptly he moved, rose with one knee upon the chair, lifted the glass to Toby's lips.

"Afraid?" he said again, speaking softly as one speaks to a frightened child.

Toby raised a hand that sought to take the glass but closed instead nervously upon Saltash's wrist. He drank in response to Saltash's unspoken insistence, looking straight at him the while.

Then oddly he smiled. "No, not afraid, sir," he said. "Only—lest I might not bring you luck."

"Oh, don't fret yourself on that account!" said Saltash. "I'm not used to any luck."

Toby's eyes widened. "I thought you had—everything, sir," he said.

Saltash laughed and set down the empty glass. "*Au contraire, mon cher*," he said. "I am no richer than you are. Like Tantalus, I can never quench my thirst. Like many a better man than I, I see the stars, but I never reach them."

"Does anybody?" said Toby in the tone of one not expecting an answer.

Saltash laughed briefly, enigmatically. "I believe some people soar. But they generally come down hard in the end. Whereas those who always crawl on the earth haven't far to fall. Now look here, Toby, you and I have got to have a talk."

"Yes, sir," said Toby, blinking rather rapidly.

Saltash was watching him with a faint smile in his eyes, half-derisive and half-tender. "What are you going to be, Toby?" he said. "It all turns on that."

Toby's hand still gripped the back of his chair. He stood up very straight, facing him. "That is for you to decide, sir," he said.

"Is it?" said Saltash, and again his eyes gleamed a little. "Is it for me to decide?"

"Yes, sir. For you alone." There was no flinching in Toby's look now. His eyes were wide and very steady.

Saltash's mouth twitched as if he repressed some passing emotion. "You mean—just that?" he asked, after a moment.

"Just that, sir," said Toby, with a slight quickening of the breath. "I mean I am—at your disposal alone."

Saltash took him suddenly by the shoulder and looked at him closely. "Toby!" he said. "Aren't you making—rather a fool of yourself?"

"No, sir!" Swiftly, with unexpected vehemence, Toby made answer. "I'm doing—the only thing possible. But if you—if you—if you—"

"Well?" Saltash said. "If I what?"

"If you want to get rid of me—at any time," Toby said, commanding himself with fierce effort, "I'll go, sir—I'll go!"

"And where to?" Saltash's eyes were no longer derisive; they held something that very few had ever seen there.

Toby made a quick gesture of the hands, and dropped them flat at his sides. "I'll get rid of myself—then, sir," he said, with sudden chill pride. "That won't be very difficult. And I'll do it—so that you won't even know."

Saltash stood up abruptly. "Toby, you are quite unique!" he said. "Superb too in your funny little way. Your only excuse is that you're young. Does it never occur to you that you've attached yourself to the wrong person?"

"No, sir," breathed Toby.

"You're not afraid to stake all you've got on a bad card?" pursued Saltash, still curiously watching him.

"No, sir," he said again; and added with his faint, unboyish smile, "I haven't much to lose anyway."

Saltash's hand tightened upon him. He was smiling also, but the gleam in his eyes had turned to leaping, fitful flame. "Well," he said slowly, "I have never yet refused—a gift from the gods."

And there he stopped, for suddenly, drowning all speech, there arose a din that seemed to set the whole world rocking; and in a moment there came a frightful shock that pitched them both headlong to the floor.

Saltash fell as a monkey falls, catching at one thing after another to save himself, landing eventually on his knees in pitch darkness with one hand still gripped upon Toby's thin young arm. But Toby had struck his head against a locker and had gone down stunned and helpless.

The din of a siren above them filled the world with hideous clamour as Saltash recovered himself. "Damn them!" he ejaculated savagely. "Do they want to deafen us as well as send us to perdition?"

Then very suddenly it stopped, leaving a void that was instantly filled with lesser sounds. There arose a confusion of voices, of running feet, a hubbub of escaping steam, and a great rush of water.

Saltash dragged himself up in the darkness, sought to drag Toby also, found him a dead weight, stooped and lifted him with wiry strength. He trod among broken glass and plates as he straightened himself. The noise above them was increasing. He flung the limp form over his shoulder and began desperately to claw his way up a steep slant towards the saloon-door and the companion-way. Sound and instinct guided him, for the darkness was complete. But he was not the man to die like a trapped animal while the most slender way of escape remained. Hampered as he was, he made for the open with set teeth and terrible foreign oaths of which he was utterly unconscious.

Whether that fierce struggle for freedom could ever have ended in success single-handed, however, was a point which he was not destined to decide, for after a space of desperate effort which no time could measure, there suddenly shone the gleam of an electric torch in front of him, and he saw the opening but a few feet away.

"Saltash!" cried a voice, piercing the outer din, "Saltash!"

"Here!" yelled back Saltash, still fighting for foothold and finding it against the leg of the table, "That you, Larpent? How long have we got?"

"Seconds only!" said Larpent briefly. "Give me the child!"

"No! Just give me a hand, that's all! Hang on tight! It'll be a pull."

Saltash flung himself forward again, his free hand outstretched, slipped and nearly fell on his face, then was caught by a vice-like grip that drew him upward with grim strength. In a moment he was

braced against the frame of the door, almost standing on it, the saloon gaping below him—a black pit of destruction. Larpent's torch showed the companion stairs practically perpendicular above them.

"Go on!" said Larpent. "Better give me the child. It's you that matters."

"Get out, damn you!" said Saltash, and actually grinned as he began to climb with his burden still hanging upon his shoulder.

Larpent came behind him, holding his torch to light the way. They climbed up into a pandemonium indescribable, a wild torrent of sound.

There was light here that shone in a great flare through billows of fog, showing the monster form of a great vessel towering above them with only a few yards of mist-wreathed water between. The deck on which they stood sloped upwards at an acute angle, and still from below there came the clamour of escaping steam accompanied by a spasmodic throbbing that was like the futile beating of giant wings against Titanic bars.

A knot of men were struggling to lower a boat by the ghostly glare that lit the night about them, clambering and slipping against the rails, while a voice from beyond the fog-curtain yelled through a megaphone unintelligible commands.

All these things were registered upon Saltash's brain, his quick perception leaping from point to point with a mental agility that was wholly outside all conscious volition on his part. He was driven by circumstance as a bird is driven by storm, and he went before it undismayed, missing no chance of refuge.

A life-buoy hanging beside the hatch caught his eye as he glanced swiftly around and in a second he pounced upon it. Toby slipped from his shoulder as he bent, and slipping awoke. But he only lay and stared with dazed eyes at the man frantically unlashng the rope, as one who looked on from afar.

Then Larpent was with them again. He dragged Toby to his feet, and in a flash Saltash turned, the life-buoy on his arm.

"What the devil are you doing?"

Larpent pointed. "They've got the boat free. Go—while you can!"

But Saltash barely glanced across. He put the life-buoy over Toby's head and shoulders, and began to wind the rope around him. It did not need a glance to know that the boat would never get away.

At his action Toby gasped, and sudden understanding awoke in his eyes. He dragged one arm free, and made as if he would cling to Saltash.

"Keep me with you, sir!" he cried out wildly. "Don't make me go alone!"

Saltash gripped the clutching hand, dropping the end of rope. It trailed down, and Larpent caught it, flung it round Saltash's body, and knotted it while he was lifting Toby over the rail.

Then for a second Saltash hung, one hand still gripping Toby's, the other holding to the rail of his sinking yacht, the two of them poised side by side above the abyss.

"You'll save yourself, Larpent!" he cried. "I shall want you."

And with that he turned suddenly to his shivering companion and actually smiled into the terrified eyes. "Come on, Toby!" he said. "We go—together!"

He flung his leg over with the words, and leapt straight downwards.

Toby's shriek sounded through the tumult as they went into the grey depths.

CHAPTER VII

The sinking of *The Night Moth* after being in collision with the liner, *Corfe Castle*, bound for Brazil, was an event of sufficient importance to be given a leading place in the newspapers of the following day. Lord Saltash was well-known as a private yachtsman, and the first account which reported him amongst the drowned was received with widespread regret throughout that circle in which he was a familiar figure. Then at a later hour came its contradiction, and his friends smiled and remarked that he had the facility of an eel for getting out of tight corners, and that they would never believe him dead till they had been to his funeral.

Long before the publication of the second report, Saltash was seated in the captain's cabin on board the *Corfe Castle*, with a strong brandy and soda before him, giving a brief and vigorous account of himself and his company. Yes, he was Charles Burchester, Viscount Saltash, owner of the private yacht, *The Night Moth*. He was returning from Valrosa alone with his captain and his crew. They had been cruising in the Atlantic with the idea of going south, but he had recently changed his mind and decided to go home. He had not expected such damnable luck as to be run down in home waters, but he supposed that Fate was against him. He only asked now to be put ashore as soon as possible, being for the moment heartily sick of sea-travel. This with his most rueful grimace which Captain Beaumont of the *Corfe Castle* received with gravely official sympathy.

"Well, I hope you don't blame us for your bad luck," he said. "We might have been sunk ourselves."

"I never blame anyone but the devil for that," said Saltash generously. "And as you managed to pick us all up I am glad on the whole that you weren't."

And then he turned sharply at a knock on the door behind him to see a lean, lank man enter who peered at him curiously through screwed-up eyes as though he had never seen anything like him before.

Captain Beaumont introduced him. "This is Dr. Hurst. He has come to report. Well, doctor? I hope you bring good news."

Dr. Hurst came forward to the table, still looking very attentively at Saltash.

The latter's odd eyes challenged him with royal self-assurance. "Well? What is the news?" he questioned. "Fished for a sprat and caught a whale—or is it t'other way round?"

The doctor cleared his throat and turned to the captain. "Yes, my report is good on the whole," he said. "None of the men are seriously injured, thanks to your prompt rescue measures. Captain Larpent is still unconscious; he is suffering from concussion. But I believe he will recover. And—and—" he hesitated, looking again at Saltash—"the—the person whose life you saved—"

Saltash leaned back in his chair, grinning mischievously. "To be sure! The person—whose life I saved! What of that person, Dr. Hurst?"

"Had you a passenger?" interrupted the captain. "I understood you saved a cabin-boy."

"Pray continue!" he said lightly. "What of the cabin-boy? None the worse, I hope?"

The doctor's lank figure drew together with a stiff movement of distaste. "I see," he said, "that you are aware of a certain fact which I must admit has given me a somewhat unpleasant surprise."

Saltash turned abruptly to the captain. "You ask me if I had a passenger," he said, speaking briefly, with a hint of hauteur. "Before you also begin to be unpleasantly surprised, let me explain that I had a child on board who did not belong to the ship's company."

"A child?" Captain Beaumont looked at him in astonishment. "I thought—I understood—Do you mean the boy?"

"Not a boy, no,—a girl!" Saltash's voice was suddenly very suave; he was smiling still, but there was something rather formidable about his smile. "A young girl, Captain Beaumont, but amply protected, I assure you. It was our last night on board. She was masquerading in the state-cabin in a page's livery when you struck us. But for Larpent we should have been trapped there like rats when the yacht went down. He came and hauled us out, and we saved the child between us." He turned again to the doctor, his teeth gleaming fox-like between his smiling lips. "Really, I am sorry to disappoint you," he said. "But the truth is seldom as highly-coloured as our unpleasant imaginings. The child is—Larpent's daughter." He rose with the words, still suavely smiling. "And now, if she is well enough, I am going to ask you to take me to her. It will be better for her to hear about her father from me than from a stranger."

Though courteously uttered, his words contained a distinct command. The doctor looked at him with the hostility born of discomfiture, but he raised no protest. Somehow Saltash was invincible at that moment.

"Certainly you can see her if you wish," he said stiffly. "In fact, she has been asking for you."

"Ah!" said Saltash, and turned with ceremony to the captain. "Have I your permission to go, sir?"

"Of course—of course!" the captain said. "I shall hope to see you again later, Lord Saltash."

"Thank you," said Saltash, and relaxed into his sudden grin. "I should have thought you would be glad to get rid of me before my bad luck spreads any further."

The *Corfe Castle*, herself slightly damaged, was putting back to Southampton to land the victims of the disaster, and to obtain some necessary repairs. The weather was thickening, and progress was slow, but they expected to arrive before mid-day. Saltash, carelessly sauntering in the doctor's wake, found himself the object of considerable interest on the part of those passengers who were already up in the murk of the early morning. He was stopped by several to receive congratulations upon his escape, but he refused to be detained for long. He had business below, he said, and the doctor was waiting. And so at last he came to a cabin at the end of a long passage, at the door of which a kind-faced stewardess met them and exchanged a few words with his guide.

"Can I go in?" said Saltash, growing impatient.

The woman looked at him with wonder and compassion in her eyes. "The poor little thing is very upset," she said. "She lies and trembles, and has hardly spoken at all except to ask for you."

"Well, let me in!" said Saltash, suddenly imperious. "I've got something to tell her."

He had his way, for there was something about him that compelled just then. He entered the cabin as a king might enter the apartment of a slave, and he shut the door with decision upon those without.

Then for a second—just for a second—he hesitated. "Toby!" he said.

A meagre form sprang upright in the bunk at the sound of his voice. Two bare, skinny arms reached out to him. Then with a single stride Saltash was beside the bunk and was holding tightly to him a small, whimpering creature that hid its face very deeply against his breast and clutched at him piteously whenever he sought to raise it.

Saltash bent his dark head over the fair one and spoke very gently, yet with authority. "It's all right, child. I know. I've known all along! Don't fret yourself! There's no need. I've got you under my protection. You're safe."

"You—know!" whispered the muffled voice—Toby's voice, but strangely devoid of Toby's confidence. "What must you—think?"

"I!" Saltash laughed a little. "I never think. I give everyone—always—the benefit of the doubt; which is considerably more than anyone ever gives me."

"And—you saved my life!" gasped Toby "Why did you? Why did you?"

"I wanted it," said Saltash promptly. "Now listen a moment! We've done with this show. It's played out. We'll ring up on another. You've got to change your name again. I'm telling everyone you're Larpent's daughter."

That brought the fair head upwards very swiftly. The blue eyes with their short black lashes looked straight up to his. "But—but—Captain Larpent—"

"Oh, never mind Larpent! I'll square him." Saltash's look flashed over the pale, tear-stained face. His hold, though close, no longer compelled. "Leave it all to me! Don't you fret! I'll square Larpent. I'll square everybody. You lie low till they put us ashore! After that—do you think you can—trust me?"

He spoke with comically twisted eyebrows and a smile half-kindly and half-quizzical. And the forlorn little creature in his arms turned with a swooping, passionate movement, caught one of his hands and pressed it to quivering lips.

"I'll live—or die—for your sake!" the trembling voice told him. "I'm just—yours."

Saltash stopped abruptly and laid his face for a moment against the shorn, golden head. Just for that

moment a hint of emotion showed in his strange eyes, but it was gone instantly.

He raised himself again with a grimace of self-ridicule. "Well, look here! Don't forget to play the game! Larpent—your daddy—is knocked out, remember. He is unconscious for the present, but the doctor chap seems to think he'll be all right. A nasty suspicious person that doctor, so watch out! And let me see! What is Toby short for? I'd better know."

"Antoinette," whispered the lips that still caressed his hand.

"Antoinette!" Saltash's hand closed softly upon the pointed chin, softly lifted it. "I think *Mignonette* would suit you better," he said, in his quick, caressing way. "It's time I chose a name for you, *ma chère*. I shall call you that."

"Or just Nonette of Nowhere," breathed the red lips, piteously smiling.
"That would suit me—best of all."

"No—no!" said Saltash, and gently relinquished his hold. "Don't forget that you are a favourite of the gods! That counts for something, my Toby. They don't take up with everybody."

"They haven't done much for me so far," said Toby, suddenly rebellious.

"Hush!" said Saltash, with semi-comic warning. "You are too young to say that."

"I am—older than you think, sir," said Toby, colouring painfully and turning from his look.

"No, you're not!" Swiftly, with a certain arrogance, Saltash made answer. "I know—how old you are, child. It is written in your eyes. They have always told me—all I need to know." Then, very tenderly, as Toby's hands covered them from his look: "*Mais, Mignonette*, they have never told me anything that you could wish me not to know."

He slipped his arm again about the slender shoulders and pressed them closely for a moment. Then he stood up and turned to go.

He was smiling as he passed out—the smile of the gambler who knows that he holds a winning card.

PART II

CHAPTER I

JAKE BOLTON

It was a week after the sinking of *The Night Moth* that Saltash, very immaculately dressed, with field-glasses slung over his shoulder, made his first appearance since the disaster at a meeting on the Graydown Race-course, a few miles from his ancient castle of Burchester. He was looking very well pleased with himself and certainly none the worse for the adventure as he sauntered among his friends, of whom a good many were present. His ugly face and wiry figure were well-known at Graydown, and he seemed sure of his welcome wherever he went.

There had been a time years before when he had kept his own stud, and racing had been his hobby. It had not held him for long. He was not the man to pursue any one object for any length of time. With characteristic volatility he had thrown up this amusement to follow others, but he had never wholly abandoned his interest in the stud which had once been his.

It was owned by one, Jake Bolton, a man of rugged exterior whose integrity had become a proverb on the Turf. This man was Saltash's erstwhile trainer, and a very curious bond existed between them. Utterly unlike in every respect, the one as subtle as the other was simple, yet the two men were friends. How it had come about neither of them quite knew. When Saltash had been his employer, Jake Bolton had distrusted and despised him, but by some means this attitude of his had become very materially modified. He greeted Saltash now with the hand of friendship which Saltash on his part was

always ready to accept with a baffling smile that was not wholly without irony. He was wont to say that any man could make an enemy of him, but no man could keep him as such. Perhaps it was that very volatility of his which made anything of the nature of prolonged enmity an impossibility. He possessed also that maddening sense of humour that laughs at deadly things. A good many people had tried to take him seriously and had failed. He was never serious. As he used to say with his mocking laugh, life was difficult enough without complications of that sort. All he ever asked of it was a certain mead of enjoyment. It was utterly unreasonable to expect anything else. Happiness! What was it. A bursting bubble, no more. No lasting joy had ever come his way, and he was fain to believe that such a thing did not exist outside the covers of a book.

Jake Bolton could have told him otherwise, but he and Saltash never spoke of abstract things. Saltash might have seen the deep content in the man's eyes, but if he had, he would probably have scoffed at it. In any case there was certainly no denying that he and Bolton had been cast in different moulds, and that which gave life-long satisfaction to the latter would have held the former for possibly but a very brief period. As a woman friend who knew him well had once said of him, Charles Rex was too rapid a traveller to gather much upon the way. For though keen for pleasure, he was too restless for its enjoyment when attained. But even that friend had not fathomed all the possibilities of that strange personality. Perhaps there was only one woman in the world who would ever do that.

It was a showery spring day, and the turf of the race-course shone with a fresh greenness. Saltash strolled through the paddock to find Jake Bolton, whistling a careless air as he went. Several stable-boys saluted him as he passed, and finally a man he knew, Sam Vickers, Bolton's right-hand man, came up and accosted him.

"Are you looking for Mr. Bolton, my lord? He's round by the boxes with Sir Bernard Brian. We've got our best two-year-old round there—Prince Charlie his name is. He's by the old Hundredth Chance and Queen of the Earth. Your lordship ought to see him. He is a royalty and no mistake; tame as a dog too, and that knowing—well, there, you'd hardly believe it, but we have to talk in French sometimes so as he shan't know what we say!"

Saltash chuckled. "You must let me hear you, Sam. All right. I'll go round. Ah! Here is Sir Bernard! Hullo, Bunny, my boy! You, is it? Where's the boss?"

A black-haired, black-eyed lad of about three-and-twenty, handsome, spare, and very upright, had come suddenly round the corner of a building. He greeted Saltash with enthusiasm.

"Why, Charlie! I'm awfully pleased to see you! We all thought you were done for. How are you, I say? It was rotten luck for you to lose the poor old *Night Moth* like that. Hope she was decently insured. And you're none the worse?"

"Not a mite!" laughed Saltash. "How are you? As skimpy a bag of bones as ever?"

"Oh, dash it! I've grown!" protested Bunny. "I'm as tall as you are anyway."

"Oh, you're long enough," chaffed Saltash. "But you're too damn slim! I should think Maud could get you through her wedding-ring if she tried."

"Shut up!" growled Bunny who was somewhat sensitive on the point of physical shortcomings. "I'm well enough, so what does it matter? Are you coming round to see Maud when this show is over?"

"Depends," grinned Saltash.

"What's it depend on?" Bunny linked an arm in his and drew him forward; they were friends of many years' standing.

Saltash looked at him with his odd eyes that always seemed to be speculating like a monkey's, as to how far his next jump would carry him. "Depends upon Jake of course. Your good brother-in-law doesn't always invite the wolf into the fold, *mon cher*."

"As if you needed an invitation!" ejaculated Bunny impatiently. "Well, I invite you anyway. I know Maud will be awfully disappointed if you don't come and tell her all about your adventure. We were talking about you only this morning."

"Really!" said Saltash. "Would it be rude to ask what you were saying?"

Bunny's thin face flushed. "You're welcome to know so far as I'm concerned," he said bluntly. "I always stick up for you, Charlie."

"Do you? *Mais vraiment!*" protested Saltash. "I am touched beyond words."

And what says Brother Jake to that?"

"Oh, Jake says I'm an ass, but he's quite decent about you, Charlie,—rather fond of you in fact. Don't run away with that idea!" begged Bunny, turning still redder. "Only people jaw a lot about you, you know. No one ever can be content to mind their own business."

"He'd be a fool who was," said Saltash. "There's no such thing as independent action in this world. We all hang to each other like swarming bees. So you've been sticking up for me, have you? And what says Sister Maud?"

Bunny broke into a sudden laugh. "Oh, she's decided to reserve judgment. You'll have to come and see her. You really must. And the kids too—four of 'em now. The eldest is a darling."

"Eileen! Oh, I know Eileen," said Saltash. "I was actually allowed to have her to tea once at the Castle. I am not supposed to have such a venomous effect upon quite small girls as upon young men of two or three and twenty."

"Oh, shut up!" Bunny growled again. "There's Jake, look! Come and speak to him!"

There was nothing ornamental about Jake Bolton. Short, thick-set, powerful as a bull and with something of a bull's unswerving contempt for all obstacles in his path, with red-brown eyes that were absolutely level in their regard and mercilessly keen, such was the man who had married Maud Brian eight years before, practically in the teeth of Saltash who had wooed her in her girlhood. There was no feud between them. Their enmity was long since dead and buried. Saltash could be intolerably malicious and even vindictive when the mood took him, but his moods never lasted. And as for Bolton, since he had won and still possessed his heart's desire, he could afford to be generous.

His greeting was generous now, but it was not wholly without reserve. He gave Saltash a square hand-grip before he uttered a word.

Then: "Glad you're safe and sound, my lord," he said, in a voice that was curiously soft and deliberate.

"That's uncommon kind of you, Jake," laughed Saltash, with his royal air of graciousness. "I share the sentiment. I know you would all have been heart-broken if I hadn't turned up again. How is Maud?"

"Very well—if she doesn't work too hard. I have to keep her in order in that respect," said Jake Bolton with a sudden smile that swept all the somewhat dominant lines from his face.

Saltash grinned in sympathy. "You always were a bully, but I'll bet she gets her own way all the same. So you've got a boy at last! Hope it's a good one!"

"He'd better be, hadn't he, Jake?" struck in Bunny. "The imp is six months old now and goes for a canter on The Hundredth Chance every day when I'm at home. You actually haven't seen him yet, Charlie? What a rotter you were to be away all the winter!"

"Well, I'm home now anyway," said Saltash, with a comical glance at Jake. "Am I to be allowed to call and view the latest acquisition?"

Jake was looking straight at him. "Are you—alone at the Castle, my lord?" he asked after a moment.

Saltash began to laugh. "Of course I'm alone! What did you expect? Ah, I see!" His glance flashed to Bunny. "Yes, I am quite alone—most conspicuously and virtuously unaccompanied. Come and see for yourself! Search the Castle from turret-chamber to dungeon! You will find nothing but the most monastic emptiness. I've turned into a hermit. Haven't they made that discovery yet? My recent deliverance from what I must admit was a decidedly awkward predicament in the Channel has sobered me to such an extent that on my life I begin to doubt if I shall ever be anything but a dull dog again. Yes, that's the truth, Jake. You can take it or leave it. But I'm coming to see Maud in any case. When is my presence least likely to cause you inconvenience?"

"Oh, damn it, Jake!" broke in Bunny with sudden heat. "You know Maud said you were to ask him to dine if he turned up."

"You shut up, my son!" commanded Jake with absolute serenity. "It's not any business of yours anyway. We'll send you to bed before dinner if you aren't mighty careful."

Bunny laughed at the threat, but his sallow boyish face coloured sensitively notwithstanding.

Saltash laughed also. "Oh, you needn't do that, Jake. I'm as harmless as any sucking dove, I assure you. You'll have to put up with me now. When shall I come?"

"Come tonight!" said Jake with quiet decision. "Eight o'clock if that suits you. Afraid I must go now. Bunny, take his lordship to see Prince Charlie!"

He lifted a hand in salute and turned away—a man of no pretensions either social or intellectual, yet who knew how to hold his own with high and low alike.

"Keeps you in order still, does he?" gibed Saltash, as he watched him go. "You're getting too old to be on a leading-string, *mon cher*."

Bunny frowned at the careless words. "You don't know him. He's not that sort of ass. We're pals, Jake and I, and I'm proud of it."

"Of course you are!" said Saltash comfortably. "Didn't I tell you long ago that he was a gentleman? It's the way he's made. Hewn out of raw material, but the real thing and no mistake. You must never quarrel with him on my account, Bunny, my lad. It would be very poor economy on your part."

"I shan't do that," said Bunny. "But he's got to do you justice. Maud says the same."

Saltash laughed aloud. "But, my dear chap, nobody ever does that! I don't myself!"

Bunny looked at him with affection. "You always have tried to make yourself out a worse rotter than you really are, haven't you, Charlie? I always tell Jake so."

"No, it's not my doing," said Saltash lightly. "That's the rest of the world, *mon ami*. They like their pictures highly coloured. So—*pourquoi pas?*"

He snapped his fingers and laughed, and they passed on together with careless jesting and friendly chaff. Saltash had always been kind to young Bernard Brian. The boy had been a helpless cripple in his childhood, and he had developed a keen appreciation for all kindness during those days which nothing could now efface. Whatever Saltash's morals, he was a friend, and as such Bunny never failed to treat him. They spent the rest of the afternoon together in and out of the enclosure, and when amidst wild enthusiasm Prince Charlie won his maiden race, the two were waiting side by side to congratulate Jake as he led the victor in. Saltash departed soon afterwards and motored back to Burchester Castle to dress. And then Bunny, half-laughing, half-apologetic, turned to his brother-in-law.

"I can't help being decent to Charlie, Jake. I don't care a damn what they say."

Jake gave him a straight look from under his rough red brows. "I'm not blaming you," he said.

CHAPTER II

MAUD BOLTON

Someone was singing a baby lullaby very softly in the beautiful room with the bay window that looked straight over the rolling down. It was a very sweet voice that sang, and sometimes the low notes were a little tremulous as though some tender emotion thrilled through the song. The singer was lying back in a rocking-chair close to the bay-window with her baby in her arms.

Beyond the long, undulating slope there stretched a silver line of sea that gleamed with a still radiance in the light of the dying day. And Maud Bolton, who once had been that proud and desolate girl Maud Brian, gazed out upon it with happy, dreaming eyes. It had been a hot spring day and she was tired, but it was a pleasant weariness, and the little body that nestled on her breast brought sheer rapture to her woman's heart. It was the baby boy for whom for years she had longed in vain.

There came a slight sound at an open door behind her that led to another room. She turned her head with a quick smile.

"Jake!"

He came, treading softly, and stood beside her. The failing light on his rugged face showed it strangely softened, almost transformed.

He stooped after a moment and kissed her. "Why isn't the little 'un in bed?" he said, with his eyes on the sleeping baby-face.

The smile still lingered about her lips. "I thought he and I would both of us have a little treat tonight. Do you know he is six months old today?"

Jake's square fingers caressed the baby's placid forehead. "Yes, I know," he said.

Maud uttered a faint sigh. "And so—according to the law of the Medes and Persians—he is not going to sleep with his mother any longer. He is to be banished to the nursery. But I thought I would put him to sleep first."

Jake's look came to her face. "There's no law that I know of," he said in his slow way. "Keep him in here if you want to!"

She lifted her eyes to his—beautiful eyes, deeply violet. "Thank you, Jake. But it's all settled, and he won't mind."

"He doesn't matter so much," said Jake.

She smiled and laid her cheek against his arm. "No, it's all right. Nurse understands him. I won't have him again unless he's ill. I should have to then."

"Of course," said Jake. He bent down. "Let me have him! I'll take him to the nursery."

"Ah, don't wake him!" she said.

Jake's arms encompassed the little bundle and lifted it from her. The baby made a small noise that sounded like a protest, but he did not open his eyes.

"Don't you come!" said Jake. "I'll fix him."

And with light tread he bore his son away. Maud looked after him with a touch of wistfulness, but she did not move, and in a few minutes he came back to her, knelt beside her, and gathered her strongly into his arms.

"My girl!" he said softly. "My own girl!"

She clasped him round the neck, laying her head against him without words.

"Tired?" he said.

"No—no—not really! Too happy to complain anyway." She spoke in a whisper as if unwilling to break her silence.

"You want more help," he said.

She lifted her face and kissed his neck. "No, Jake dear. I don't want the children taken out of my hands entirely. Whatever should I do without them?"

"Look after me for a change," suggested Jake.

She laughed a muffled laugh with her lips raised to his. "Do I neglect you, Jake?"

"No," he said. "You're the best wife a man ever had. I believe I'm first with you—even now."

"Always—always first," she whispered against the lips that pressed her own.

He held her very closely to him for a space in silence. He had loved her with a fiery worship from the first moment of their meeting, but the wealth of her answering love still filled his soul with wonder. Over and over again he would tell himself that he was not her sort, but when he held her thus throbbing against his heart, he knew beyond all questioning that they were one.

"You haven't told me a single thing about today's meeting," she murmured presently.

Jake began to smile. "On my soul I had forgotten all about it. Prince Charlie has gained his first laurels. He won by two and a half lengths."

"Oh, Jake, how splendid! How proud you must be! I'm tremendously glad. And what about Charlie? Was he there to see his namesake carry all before him?"

"Saltash, do you mean? Yes, he was there." Jake's tone was somewhat dry.

Maud drew back a little to look at him. "I hope you asked him to dine," she said.

"Oh yes," said Jake, with a touch of grimness. "Bunny saw to that on your behalf. He considers—and with reason—that you have a right to ask whoever you like to your own house."

"Jake!" Maud suddenly sat upright, her eyes burning like stars. "If Bunny said that—"

"He didn't," said Jake.

"Or hinted it even—it was perfectly hateful of him! I shall go and tell him so!"

Maud made as if she would release herself from his hold, but he restrained her.

"No—no, my girl! You keep calm! I can hold my own with Bunny, and he didn't mean any harm. I asked Saltash all right, and he's coming."

"Against your will," said Maud.

"No. Against my judgment, maybe. Not against my will. I've no objection to entertaining him if you wish it. You and I don't quarrel over trifles like Saltash."

Jake's tone was humorously tender. He patted her flushed cheek in a conciliatory fashion. She turned very swiftly and kissed his hand.

"Thank you, Jake—darling. But—you are master in this house, remember. No one enters it without your consent."

"Not even Saltash?" smiled Jake.

"Not even—Bunny!" said Maud, still breathing resentment.

He took her gently by the shoulder. "Look here, my girl! I won't have you say a word to the boy about this, see? I didn't know you'd flare up like that or I shouldn't have spoken. He didn't mean it that way. If he had, I'd have punched his head. And after all," his eyes smiled suddenly into hers, "I do live on my wife's bounty, don't I? Wouldn't I be driving cows on the other side of the Atlantic without it?"

"No," Maud said. "You'd be owning your own ranch by this time, and—and—and generally licking creation, Jake, as only you know how."

"Oh, shucks!" said Jake softly, and kissed her again upon the lips. "I'd sooner be here anyway. Well, Saltash is coming, so we've got to make the best of it. I shouldn't care a cuss if it weren't for young Bunny. But he's always been keener on his lordship's company than I've thought advisable."

"Oh, Jake," she said, colouring a little, "I don't believe Charlie would do him any harm."

"Not intentionally perhaps," said Jake. "I've no ill feeling for him, heaven knows, but I can't say I think his society likely to have a very improving effect upon anyone."

"I don't think you quite understand him," Maud said thoughtfully.

Whereat Jake laughed so suddenly that she looked at him with raised brows. He got to his feet, still laughing.

"Very likely not. We've had a good many misunderstandings, he and I, from the day I cowhided him for a scoundrel to the day I nearly shot him for a blackguard."

"Oh, but that was all so long ago," Maud said quickly. "He wasn't much more than a boy in those days. He has grown a lot since then."

Jake grunted. "Which way, think you? Well, I must dress. He may be here before we're ready for him."

He turned to go back to his own room, but Maud stayed him for a moment. "Jake," she said almost wistfully, "you know—with all his faults—he always had—possibilities."

"I know," Jake said, looking down at her. "He's made the most of 'em too."

Her face quivered. "Don't," she said. "It— isn't it rather ungenerous to condemn a man unheard?"

Jake made a faint sound of contempt or scepticism, but no reply in words.

She drew herself up out of her chair by his arm. "Jake, I want you to do something for me."

"Well?" said Jake uncompromisingly.

She met his look unswervingly. "Let me be a friend to him tonight! Let me be alone with him and find out—if he will tell me—whether there is any truth in this rumour that there was a woman on board the yacht."

"And when you've found out?" said Jake.

She made a little gesture of appeal. "Will you leave that to me? I have sometimes felt that I might be—a help to him if ever there came an opportunity. Jake, you don't mind my trying to help him? I have a feeling that I understand him better than most people do."

"I think it's a wasted sentiment," Jake said. "But—do what seems good to you, my girl! I shan't interfere."

"And you won't be vexed?" she pleaded.

He smiled his sudden, illumining smile. "No, I reckon you'll never vex me any that way again," he said.

She went close to him. "Indeed—no, Jake! But—don't you understand? I hate to go against your wishes—your prejudices—in anything."

He put out a hand to her. "You needn't be afraid of that either," he said. "If you do it—it's right."

She clasped the strong hand tightly in both her own. "That's the best thing you've ever said to me," she said. "Are you quite sure you mean it?"

"Sure," said Jake, and pulled her to him to kiss her once again.

CHAPTER III

BUNNY

When Saltash arrived that evening he found Bunny and Jake sauntering together in the sunset glow along the gravelled terrace in front of the house. He shot towards them in his car with that characteristic suddenness of his, swerving and coming to a stand before the porch with the confident ease of an alighting bird. And here, seated in the porch and screened by white clematis, he found Maud.

She rose to greet him, her eyes alight with pleasure. "Oh, Charlie," she said, "I have wanted to shake hands with you ever since I heard of your escape."

He bent and kissed the hand she gave him. "Gracious as ever!" he commented lightly. "Had you begun to wear mourning for me, I wonder? It was a very cold bath, I assure you. We didn't enjoy it, any of us."

"I am sure you didn't." Her eyes still dwelt upon the dark face with its half-mocking smile with a species of maternal tenderness. "And you lost your yacht too! That was desperately unlucky."

He made a comic grimace. "I am past the age for crying over spilt milk, Maud of the Roses." He uttered his old name for her with daring assurance. "I have had worse losses than that in my time."

"And still you smile," she said.

He bowed. "A smile can conceal so much." He turned to his host as he came up behind him. "Well, Jake, I've taken you at your word, you see, and intruded into your virtuous household. How are Eileen and Molly and Betty and—last but not least—the son and heir?"

Maud laughed softly. "Well done, Charlie! How clever of you to remember them all!"

"Oh yes, I am quite clever," said Saltash, as again his hand met Jake's. "Too clever sometimes. I needn't ask if all goes well with you, Jake. Your prosperity is obvious, but don't wax fat on it. Bunny now—he's as lean as a giraffe. Can't you do something to him? He looks as if he'd melt into thin air at a touch."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" protested Bunny. "I'm as strong as a horse anyway. Jake, tell him not to be an ass!"

"No good, I'm afraid," said Jake, with his sudden smile. "Come inside, my lord! The children are all flourishing, but in bed at the present moment. The baby—"

"Oh, I must see the baby!" declared Saltash, turning back to Maud.

She laid a hand on his arm. "I will take you to see him after dinner."

"Will you?" He smiled into her eyes. "I shall like that. But I shall probably want to shoot Jake when I come down again. Think it's safe?"

She smiled back at him with confidence. "Yes, I think so. Anyhow, I'm not afraid."

"Come and feed!" said Jake.

They sat down in the pretty oak-panelled dining-room with its windows opening upon the terrace and the long dim line of down. Saltash talked freely of Valrosa, of his subsequent voyaging, of the wreck of *The Night Moth*, but no word did he utter of the gift that had been flung to him on that night of stars in the Mediterranean. He was always completely at his ease in Jake's household, but it was not his way to touch at any time in Maud's presence upon any matter that could not be openly discussed before her. Their intimacy was not without its reservations.

Maud in her quiet happiness detected no hint of restraint in his manner. But he had always been elusive, often subtle. She did not look for candour from Charles Rex—unless she asked for it.

Watching him on that spring evening in the soft glow of the candles, marking the restless play of feature, the agile readiness of his wit, she asked herself, not for the first time, what manner of soul he had behind the mask. Somehow she did not wholly believe in that entity which so often looked jibing forth. Though she could ascribe no reason for it, she had a strong suspicion that the real self that was Saltash was of a different fibre altogether—a thing that had often suffered violence it might be, but nevertheless possessed of that gift of the resurrection which no violence can destroy.

"Why are you dissecting me tonight?" he asked her once and laughed and changed the subject before she could reply.

When dinner was over and she rose, he sprang to open the door for her with that royal *bonhomie* of his which somehow gave him the right to enter where others waited for permission.

"Take Bunny with you!" he murmured. "I want to talk to Jake."

She lifted her eyes with a flash of surprise. He bent towards her.

"And afterwards to you, Queen Rose. I shall not forget to claim my privileges in that respect."

She laughed a little, but she obeyed his behest as a matter of course. "Come for a turn in the garden with me, Bunny!" she said. "I've hardly seen you today."

The boy got up, passing Jake with a careless slap on the shoulder that testified to the excellent good fellowship that existed between them.

Saltash turned back into the room, and threw himself down by his host.

"That's right," he said as the door closed upon the brother and sister.

"Now we can talk."

Jake pushed a box of cigars to him. His keen eyes took Saltash in with the attention of the man accustomed to probe beneath the surface. There were not many who could hide from Jake Bolton anything he desired to know.

Saltash flicked an eyelid under his direct scrutiny as he chose his cigar. He was never more baffling than in his moments of candour.

"There are several things I've come to consult you about, Jake," he said easily, as Jake leaned across with a match.

"I'm listening," said Jake.

Saltash sent him a quizzical glance as his cigar kindled. "Prepared to turn me down at all points?" he suggested.

Jake's mouth relaxed a little. "Prepared to listen anyway," he said. "It's to do with young Bunny, I take it."

Saltash leaned back in his chair with a laugh. "Very smart of you! Bunny certainly is my first proposition. What are you going to do with him?"

Jake also leaned back, and smoked for several seconds in silence. Saltash watched him with semi-comic curiosity.

"Something of a problem, eh?" he said, after a pause.

Jake's eyes came to him and remained upon him with steady insistence. "He's not going to turn into a fancy-dress loafer, my lord," he said at length in his soft, deliberate voice. "I'll see to that anyway."

"Don't be nasty, Jake!" protested Saltash with a smile. "I'm not proposing to adopt him. But I can give him employment, if that's what he's wanting. What do you want to make of him?"

Jake's steady look remained upon him. "Just an honest man, I reckon," he said.

"Ah! Quite so!" Open mockery gleamed back at him from Saltash's half-closed eyes. "All contaminating influences to be kept away. Is that it?"

Jake was silent.

Saltash sent a cloud of smoke upwards before he spoke again. Then: "I agree with you, Jake," he said. "We mustn't spoil the boy. He shan't learn any naughty ways from me. Come! That's a promise. And I'm not such a blackguard as I used to be."

"Sure?" said Jake.

Again Saltash's smile flashed across at him. "Quite sure, my worthy philosopher," he made light reply. "I don't set up for a model of virtue of course, but at least—now-a-days—I never take what I can't pay for."

"That so?" said Jake. He considered the matter for a few moments, then slowly took the cigar from between his lips and spoke. "It's certainly true; Bunny is a problem. He's not strong; and though he's got grit, he hasn't got what I call punching power. He's been ordered an out-door life, and he wants to join me in running the stud. I could do with him of course, but I've a strong feeling against it, anyway till he's older. It's not the right atmosphere for him, and it doesn't bring him in contact with the right people. He ought to be in the Army, but he wasn't strong enough. It's a big grievance with him for there's nothing radically wrong; just weak tendencies that he may outgrow if he leads a healthy life and doesn't strain himself. We're just marking time at present, so if you have anything to suggest—well, I've no doubt he'll be something more than grateful."

"And you?" questioned Saltash, with a grimace at the ceiling.

"I too," said Jake, "if it's for the boy's good."

"You needn't hold a pistol at my head," protested Saltash. "I shan't put him in the way of any short cuts to the devil. All I have to offer him is the post of bailiff at Burchester Castle, as old Bishop has got beyond his job. I can't turn the old beggar out, but I want a young man to take the burden off his shoulders. Do you think that sort of thing would be beneath Bunny's dignity, or likely to upset his morals?"

"He'd probably jump at the chance," said Jake.

"Which is more than his worthy brother-in-law does on his behalf," grinned Saltash.

"No," Jake's steady eyes met the gibe unfaltering. "I know it's a chance that doesn't come every day, and I know you mean well by him. I shan't put any hindrance in the way."

"Then it's done," said Saltash. "Bunny's fate is sealed."

"I hope not." Jake still gravely watched him, but not as if he sought for anything in the baffling, mobile countenance. "What do you want him for anyway?"

Saltash flicked the ash from his cigar. "Perhaps I'm turning philanthropist, Jake. Do you know the symptoms? I've been anxious about myself several times lately."

"Come on rather suddenly, hasn't it?" suggested Jake.

Saltash nodded. "It's old age, I fancy. Anyhow I've a notion for doing Bunny a good turn. The boy can have play as well as work. He can join the polo-club at Fairharbour. I'll introduce him."

"And where will he live?" asked Jake.

"With the old Bishops of course. He'll be safe enough with them and within reach of you and Maud at the same time. It's time you eased the leading string a bit, you know. He'll start kicking if you don't."

"I don't think so," said Jake. "He goes his own way already quite as much as is good for him. I don't need to hold him in very tight either. He's not the bolting sort."

"You mean you've trained him well," laughed Saltash. "I congratulate you. You've a genius for that sort of thing, Jake. The boy will probably answer to your lightest touch and never even know he does it."

"What was the other thing you wanted to say to me?" said Jake.

"Oh that!" Saltash's eyes fell suddenly to his empty wine glass. He fingered the stem of it for a few seconds with a curiously irresolute air. "Do you know I think I'll put it to Maud first!" he said at length, with a smile that was faintly shamefaced.

"It'll come to the same thing," said Jake.

Saltash's eyes flashed upwards. He met Jake's look almost with defiance. "Doubtless you are master in your own house, Jake," he said. "Far be it from me to question it."

"I didn't mean that," said Jake. "What I meant was," the red-brown eyes began to smile, "that Maud and I are friends—and we generally want the same thing."

Saltash nodded. "Not so bad after eight years," he said.

"No. It's pretty great," said Jake. "You'd think we were an ill-matched pair, wouldn't you? But we've learnt to plough as straight a furrow as anyone."

"No, I don't think you ill-matched," said Saltash unexpectedly. "You've always been about the same height and breadth, my friend. I saw that a long time ago. The luckiest day that ever dawned for Maud was the one on which you cut me out."

"Think so?" said Jake. "Well, it wasn't a very lucky one for you, I'm afraid."

"I got over it," said Saltash lightly. "I'm too great a rotter, you know, Jake, to take things much to heart. I've loved heaps of women since—even some good ones. But they never take me seriously; so I presume I shall continue to rot."

"Thought you'd turned sober," suggested Jake.

Again Saltash's look dwelt upon the ruby drain in his wine-glass. For a moment the restlessness of his face deepened to something very nearly approaching melancholy.

"I'm tired, Jake," he said abruptly. "I've run through the whole gamut of amusements, and I'm bored to the soul. I want to do a good turn to somebody—just for a change—to see what it feels like. Perhaps—who knows—it may take the taste of rottenness out of my mouth. You fellows who lead a decent, orderly life don't know what it is when the wine turns to vinegar and all the sweets of life to gall."

"Sounds pretty damnable," said Jake.

Saltash grimaced like a weary monkey. "It's dust and ashes, my good Jake. But we won't discuss it. Let's come to business! You know Larpent—my captain—quite one of the best?"

Jake nodded. "I've met him—yes."

Saltash flung himself back in his chair smoking rapidly. "He was damaged when the yacht went down. He's in a nursing home in town, getting better. He's got a daughter—a girl called Antoinette. She's been at school in France, and Larpent was bringing her home in the yacht when we went down. She's nineteen—a jolly little thing—half French. Larpent doesn't know what to do with her. He has no people. She—quite properly—wants to earn her own living. But she's too young yet to fight the world. Larpent's a rover, he'll never settle on land. She's never had any home life, poor kid. And she wants it. You'll say it's like my damned cheek to come to you, but on my life you and Maud are the only people I can think of. There's my old friend Lady Jo—Mrs. Green as she prefers to be called—but she isn't very strong just now. I can't bother her. Besides she hasn't got a home like yours. She's up in town."

The jerky utterance came to an end. Saltash turned his head towards Jake, watching him half furtively through the smoke.

There followed a silence of some duration. Jake's brows were slightly drawn. He spoke at last, slowly and softly as his manner was. "Are you suggesting that—Captain Larpent's daughter—should come to us?"

"She'd be useful enough," said Saltash in his quick, vehement way. "She'd help Maud with the children. There's nothing she wouldn't do. It would be a kindness on your part, and you wouldn't regret it. She's a taking little thing. I'd like you to have her for a month, and if you don't want to keep her after that—well—shunt her back on to Larpent. He'll be well by that time. If he isn't—I'll look after her till he is."

"Who's looking after her now?" said Jake. "Where is she?"

Saltash pushed back his chair with a movement of impatience. "Did you think I'd bring her to Burchester for all the county to blab about? She's under my protection—and she's safe." He spoke with a certain fierceness, and in a moment was pacing the room, his face arrogantly lifted. "I know very well the sort of story that's going round, but if you're a white man you'll help me to give it the lie. I know I'm a blackguard, Jake,—never pretended to be anything else. But I hope I'm a gentleman as well—at least where women are concerned. That child is none the worse in mind or body for being thrown on my hands. You've got to believe that."

"All right," said Jake.

Saltash paced jerkily on, his hands behind him. "I want you to have her because you're straight, and she'll come to no harm with you. You never even parley with the devil, do you, Jake? Remember that time—it's ten years ago, more—when a man tried to tempt you to tamper with one of your horses and you horsewhipped him for his baseness."

"I prefer not to remember it, my lord," said Jake.

Saltash stopped suddenly by his chair and gripped his shoulder with a wiry hand. "I've liked you ever since," he said. "Look here, Jake! I'm not tempting you to do anything wrong now. I'm asking you to do something that doesn't appeal to you; but if you do it, it'll be one of the most decent actions of your life. That child is quite alone just now—except for me. Will you take her—like a good chap—till something else safe turns up?"

Jake sat slowly forward. "I'll have to talk it over with Maud," he said.

Saltash's grip shifted impatiently. "You know very well what Maud will say. Don't be an ass about it! Say No—if you mean to say No—at once!"

There came the quiet tread of approaching feet on the gravelled terrace and the sound of low voices talking together. Jake lifted his head. His face was grim. He looked Saltash straight in the eyes.

"You've told me the plain truth about her. You swear it?"

Saltash's swarthy countenance was in shadow, but those strange eyes of his gleamed oddly, with the sort of fitful shining that comes from a coat of mail in an uncertain light. They did not flinch from Jake's straight regard, neither did they wholly meet it.

"Is my oath really more valuable than my word, Jake?" he said, with a wry twist of the lips. "Most people don't find it so."

Jake stood up, a figure square and forceful. For a moment he faced Saltash with a level scrutiny that—possibly—pierced the coat of mail. Then abruptly he smiled. "I will take your word, my lord," he said.

"And the child?" said Saltash.

Jake nodded. "The child too—if Maud agrees."

"Thanks," said Saltash, and smiled back at Jake—the smile that gave his ugly face so great a charm. "I am obliged to you, Jake. I think Maud will agree."

"Shall we go to her?" said Jake.

CHAPTER IV

SALTASH

They joined the two on the terrace, and presently they were all laughing together at Saltash's drolleries. He knew how to bring effervescence to the very quietest waters. They sat for a space on a seat in the soft spring starlight, while below them on the down there thrilled the unspeakable music of nightingales singing far and near. Then after a while Jake strolled away for his nightly inspection of the stables, taking Bunny with him, and Saltash and Maud were left alone.

He moved close to her at once, his arm stretched behind her along the back of the seat. At their feet lay an old red setter, Chops, who had belonged to Jake before his marriage and had devoted himself to Maud ever since.

"By Jove, this is peaceful!" said Saltash, and stopped to caress the old dog with a gentle hand. "Do you know, Maud, it's a good thing you never married me if this sort of thing makes you happy."

She smiled her quiet, contented smile. "I think it is a good thing too, Charlie. It certainly would never have satisfied you."

"Nothing does," he declared restlessly. "I'm a wanderer on the face of the earth, and I don't pick up much as I go along. I'm getting old, you know. Life isn't what it was."

Maud was silent for a few moments, the starlight in her eyes. "I sometimes wonder," she said at length, "if you have ever really lived yet."

He laughed on a mocking note. "My dear girl, I—who have done everything!"

She shook her head. "No, not everything, Charlie."

"Everything that's bad," he suggested recklessly.

She put out a hand to him that went into his quick hold and lay there with perfect confidence. "I don't think you're really old," she said. "I think you're just beginning to grow up. No, don't laugh! I am quite serious. You are just beginning to discriminate between the things that are worth while and those that are not."

"Is anything worth while?" said Saltash.

"Yes, yes. Heaps of things. But not the things you care for,—not just the wild pleasures of life. Charlie, I'm not good at expressing things, and I'm afraid—just a little—of trespassing, even though we are such old friends."

Her voice had a wistful note. He carried her hand to his lips. "*Ma belle reine*, is it possible? You?"

Her fingers closed upon his. "I hate you to be world-tired and lonely. But I would rather have you that than feeding on husks."

"I'm not doing that at the present moment," he said. "I'm living like a beastly hermit—except that I cut my nails and brush my hair occasionally. You've heard about the woman on the yacht, of course?"

Her silence answered him, and he laughed again.

"A lie, *chère reine*! There was no woman."

"Oh, Charlie!" she said impulsively. "Forgive me for believing it!"

He made a royal gesture. "I forgive you. Moreover, the lie was not without foundation. There was a child on board of the female species,—very small and badly frightened. We saved her between us, Larpent and I. She belongs to Larpent—not to me."

"You mean she is his daughter?" questioned Maud.

"That is exactly what I mean. Dull explanation, isn't it? Larpent was badly damaged. He is undergoing repairs in a nursing home, and the child—well, I've got to look after the child. *Figurez-vous, ma chère*! I—a protector of infants! *Un peu comique, n'est-ce pas?*"

"Ah!" Maud said, with compassion. "The poor little thing must come to us."

I will take care of her. When will you bring her?"

"You think her present plight is not to be endured for another moment?" laughed Saltash. "*Bien!* I will send her to you tomorrow."

"Ah! I don't mean she is not in safe keeping," protested Maud. "How old is she? Older than Eileen?"

"A little older than that," said Saltash. "She's nineteen."

"Oh!" said Maud.

"Perhaps you do mean it now!" gibed Saltash, getting up in his sudden fashion.

Maud rose also, facing him in the starlight. "No, Charlie I don't! Because I know that the big things are in you and always have been, I would trust you—with my most precious possession."

He laughed again. "But when I gave it back to you, you would look all round it to make sure it hadn't been broken and stuck together again, wouldn't you, Maud of the Roses?"

"No," she said. "I wouldn't. I know—Charles Rex—better than that."

He made her a sweeping bow. "Most fair and gracious lady, do not forget that my crest is a fox's head and the motto thereupon, '*Sans vertu!*'"

She smiled, looking at him with steadfast eyes. "I will give you another motto, Charlie," she said. "Those we love—we trust."

He made an abrupt movement. It was almost a protest. "For how long? Do you really love me, Maud of the Roses?"

She gave him both her hands without drawing any nearer. Her eyes were shining as stars that shine through mist. "Yes, I love you, Charlie," she said, "so much that I can't go on being happy till I know that you are too."

He bent very low, so that his dark face was wholly hidden from her. "I've never been—really happy—since the day I lost you," he said.

Her hands clasped his very tightly. There was a brief silence before—with a touch of shyness—she spoke again. "You have never been—really happy—all your life. You don't know the meaning of the word—yet."

"Don't I?" He stood up, still holding her hands. "I thought I'd sampled everything."

"No," she said. "No. There is—one thing left."

"What is that?" he said.

She stood again in silence, looking at him. Then, slowly, "You have never yet touched the joy of loving someone better—far better—than you love yourself," she said. "I think that is the greatest joy that God can send."

He bent towards her with a certain eagerness. "Maud, I could have loved you like that—once."

She shook her head and her smile was sad. "No, my dear, believe me! I couldn't have inspired it in you. I was too selfish myself in those days. Some other woman will teach you that now."

"I wonder," said Charles Rex, half-mocking and half-touched.

She slipped her hand through his arm, turning from the subject with a faint sigh. "Well, come and see the baby! He's very lovely."

"From your point of view or Jake's?" questioned Saltash.

She laughed. "From mine of course. He is going to be just like Jake."

"Heavens above! I pity you!" ejaculated Saltash. "You'll never cope with two of 'em! They'll crush you flat."

She drew him from the terrace into the quiet house. "Don't be absurd, Charlie! This boy of ours is to be the prop of our old age."

He went with her jesting, but when they entered the silent nursery in which the two youngest

children lay sleeping, his trifling ceased and he trod with reverence.

They stood together in the dim light beside the baby's cot, and Saltash looked down upon the flushed baby face with a faintly rueful smile upon his own.

"There is something in being married and done for after all," he said.

Over the old baby, Betty, now two years old, he stooped and lightly touched the fair silken hair, but he did not kiss her though the child was sleeping deeply.

Later he went alone into the adjoining room where slept the two elder children, Eileen aged five, and Molly who was not yet four. Maud did not follow him, and presently he came back, treading softly, the flickering night-light throwing odd shadows on his ugly face, and they left the room together.

In the passage he turned to her abruptly. "Then I may send that child to you tomorrow?" he said.

"Why not bring her?" said Maud smiling.

He shook his head. "No. I'll come over one day—on Sunday perhaps—and see you all again. I won't—handicap her—by bringing her."

She understood him, and gave him her hand, but the fervour with which he received and kissed it surprised her into drawing it away more quickly than she had intended.

He laughed at the action. "I am only saluting motherhood," he explained.

But she shook her head and passed on. There were moments when even she who knew him so well was not wholly sure of him.

They descended again and Saltash turned towards the drawing-room.

"Let's have some music!" he said, and dropped down before Maud's piano. "You are tired, *ma chère*. You shall listen."

He began to play an old French *chanson* that once they had sung together, and Maud leaned back on a deep settee near him and dreamily surrendered herself to its charm.

Charlie's touch had always been a sheer delight to her. It held her now with the old sweet spell. His spirit spoke to hers with an intimacy which ordinary converse had never attained. It was by his music that he first had spoken to her soul. In music they were always in complete accord.

She was half-asleep in her corner with the old dog lying at her feet when Jake and Bunny came in, and Saltash very swiftly, with muffled chords, brought his performance to an end.

He sprang to his feet. "I've been making love to your wife, Jake," he said, "and she has been heroically but quite ineffectually trying to keep me at a distance. I'd better go before I'm kicked out, eh?"

"Don't go on my account!" said Jake.

Saltash's brows twitched comically. "Generous as ever! But I'm a rotten villain, Jake. I never could keep it up, and your virtuous presence is the last straw. Good-bye—and many thanks!"

He held Maud's hand in his right and stretched his left to Jake with a smile half whimsical and half derisive.

"There's nothing like banking on the hundredth chance," he said. "I shall try it myself one of these days."

"Say!" said Jake in his soft drawl. "I wish you luck!"

Saltash laughed and turned away, to be instantly seized upon by Bunny.

"I say you are a good chap! The boss has been telling me. You're going to put me up to a job."

"If you'll take it," said Saltash.

Bunny thrust a hand through his arm and squeezed it impulsively. "I'll take anything from you, Charlie. Hope I shall be man enough for you, that's all."

"Oh, you're man enough," said Saltash kindly. "Just the sort I want. Look here, I can't stop now. But

I'll come over on Sunday and talk things over—if Jake permits."

"Any day," said Jake.

Saltash nodded. "Good. I'll ring you up tomorrow, Maud. You're sure you mean tomorrow?"

"Quite sure," she said with a smile.

He swept her a bow and went out with Bunny.

Maud turned instantly to her husband. "Jake, I've got something to tell you—to consult you about."

He stopped her with that smile of his that was so good to see. "Oh, I guess not. You've fixed it all up without my help. But his lordship for once had the diplomacy to ask me first."

"Oh, did he?" She looked confused for a moment. "Jake, you don't mind, do you? I did the only thing possible."

He put his arm around her and led her to the door. "I'll tell whether I mind a week from now. You're looking worn out, my girl. You go to bed!"

She leaned against him. "Jake, I'm—horribly sorry for Charlie."

"Wasted sentiment!" said Jake.

"No, it isn't—it isn't—because he is just beginning—to be sorry for himself. Jake, it haunts me."

"Well, you're not to lie awake over it," said Jake unsympathetically.

"I shall know if you do, and I shall keep you in bed tomorrow. Got that?"
He looked at her with determination glittering in his eyes.

"You're very horrid," she said.

"Yes, I know. Somebody's got to be. It's a world of contrasts, and we can't all be kings and queens. Go to bed now! I'll say good night to Bunny for you."

But Maud lingered still. "What is Charlie going to do for him?"

Jake led her with firmness into the hall. "It's the Agency. He's going to help old Bishop. I think the life will be good for him—if there isn't too much Saltash about it."

"Oh, how good of Charlie!" Maud said.

"Yes, he means well this time." Jake's arm impelled her up the shallow stairs. "Hope he'll keep it up, but it won't surprise me any if he doesn't. He's never been a stayer, and he's not the sort to begin now."

"You really don't understand him," Maud said.

"Maybe not," Jake's tone was faintly grim. It indicated that he had no intention of arguing the matter further.

Maud abandoned it and they mounted the stairs together in silence. At the door of her room she turned without words and put her arms around his neck.

He held her closely still supporting her. "Shall I come and put you to bed, my girl?"

She answered him softly. "No, darling, no! Don't be late yourself, that's all! And—Jake—thank you for all your goodness to me!"

"Oh, shucks—shucks!" he said.

She raised her hands, holding the bronze head between them, gazing straight into the free, dominant eyes with all her soul laid open to their look. "There is no one like you in all the world," she said. "You are greater than kings."

"That's just your way of putting it," said Jake. "You're not exactly an impartial judge, I reckon. Barring the fact that I'm your mate, I'm a very ordinary sinner. Moreover, Saltash tells me I'm getting fat."

"How dare he?" said Maud.

He laughed in her indignant face. "Now I'm getting my own back! There! Don't get excited! No doubt he meant well! And I certainly ride heavier than I did. Shall you love me when I'm fat, Maud?"

She drew the laughing, sunburnt face to hers. "Don't be—absurd!" she said.

Her lips met his and were caught in a long, long kiss.

"Guess you're just as moon-struck as I am," said Jake softly.

And, "I guess I am," she whispered back.

CHAPTER V

THE VISITOR

Jake carried out his threat the following day, and Maud remained in bed. A violent headache deprived her of the power to protest, and she lay in her darkened room too battered to think, while with characteristic decision he assumed the direction of the household, provoking unwilling admiration from Mrs. Lovelace, the housekeeper, who was somewhat given to disparage men as "poor things who never did a hand's turn for 'emselves if they could get the women to do it for 'em."

He took up a breakfast tray himself to his wife's room, sternly removing his two small daughters Molly and Betty, whom he found tussling like kittens on her bed, and installing Eileen the eldest, who crept down like a bright-eyed mouse from the big chair by the pillow at his coming, as her mother's keeper. Eileen was his darling; a shy child, gentle but curiously determined, protective in her attitude towards Maud, reserved towards himself. Jake was wont to say with a laugh that he was by no means sure that his eldest daughter approved of him, but he knew in his heart that her love for him was the strongest force in her small being. Bunny was wont to be impatient with her because she was afraid of the horses, with the result that she would never go near them in his company, but she would follow her father wherever he went among them without a question. It was very rarely that she confided in him, but she always liked to hold his hand.

She stood beside him now in silence while he waited upon Maud, and presently, while Maud drank the strong tea he had brought her, her small hand found its way into his. He looked down at her, squeezing it kindly. "We must take care of the mother today, little 'un. She's been working too hard."

"I'll take care of her, Daddy," said Eileen.

"And keep out Molly and Betty," pursued Jake.

"Yes, Daddy, I'll do that."

Maud smiled from her pillows. "My little policeman!" she said.

"I believe she'd keep her daddy out too if she thought it advisable," laughed Jake.

Eileen's fingers tightened about his, but she did not contradict him. Only the violet eyes so like her mother's looked up at him very pleadingly, and he stooped in a moment and kissed her.

"All right. Daddy understands."

And Eileen smiled a shy, pleased smile without words.

The sound of the telephone-bell in the hall made Maud start with a swift contradiction of the brows.

"That's probably Charlie, Jake, I ought to answer him."

"Don't you worry yourself!" said Jake, turning to the door. "I'll answer him myself."

He was gone before she could say anything further, moving without haste but with a decision there was no gainsaying, and Maud heaved a sigh and relaxed against her pillows. It was certainly a relief to leave it to him.

He returned a few minutes later, faintly smiling, sat down by her side and drew Eileen between his knees.

"Well," he said. "I guess it's all fixed up. We're going to give you a nursery governess, Innocence. I

hope you'll treat her with respect."

"Oh, but, Jake—" protested Maud.

He turned to her. "Yes, she's going to make herself useful. I don't believe in anyone living in idleness. We'll begin as we mean to go on, and she's got to help. I told his lordship so. If she doesn't suit,—well, I guess she'll go back where she came from. I told him that too."

"What did he say?" questioned Maud.

"He agreed of course." Jake's tone was ironical. "Said she was nothing but a child herself. He was very emphatic on that point."

"Don't you believe him?" asked Maud with a hint of sharpness.

"Not as a rule," said Jake. "Mostly never—when he's emphatic. However, time will prove. She will be here to lunch, and I've told Bunny to meet her with the dog-cart."

"Are we going to have lessons?" asked Eileen.

He looked into the soft eyes and the irony went out of his smile. "I don't know if I can bear to have you taught anything, Innocence," he said. "You're just right as you are."

It was his own especial name for her and he always uttered it with tenderness. Eileen smiled up at him, and pressed against his knee.

"I would like to learn some lessons, Daddy," she said. "I'm sure I'm big enough, and I'm growing too."

"Maybe you are," said Jake. "But don't grow too fast, little 'un! Don't get so big that you look down on your poor old daddy!"

"She'll never do that!" said Maud quickly. "No child of mine will ever do that, Jake."

He smiled at her whimsically. "Oh, I guess I'll hold my own among 'em whatever they do. Now you go to sleep, my girl, and put all worries out of your head! I must be moving, but I'll look in presently to see how you are. So long!"

He bent and laid his cheek for a moment against her hand, then turned and softly left her.

Maud watched the door close behind him, then spoke to the child beside her. "Eileen darling, always remember that your daddy is the best and dearest man who ever lived!"

"Yes, Mummy, I know," said Eileen, with earnest shining eyes.

Jake went out to the stables and immersed himself in the day's work. He had always been a busy man, and time passed swiftly with him. He and his right-hand man, Sam Vickers, had brought the stud to a pitch of perfection that had earned for his animals a high place in the opinion of the racing community. He had, moreover, a reputation for straightness so unimpeachable that it had become almost a proverb up and down the country. Men said of Jake Bolton that his honour was such that it could stand by itself. Certainly no one ever questioned it.

One of his horses was running at Graydown that afternoon, and at the end of the morning he returned to the house for a hasty lunch before leaving for the race-course. All memory of Saltash's *protégé* had left him, but it returned to his mind as he saw the extra place laid at the table. He looked at his watch and realized that she ought to have arrived half an hour before. Bunny was also absent, presumably waiting for her.

He paid Maud a brief visit before departing, and found her better. She was half dressed and lying on a couch in her room. He extracted a promise from her that she would not go down before tea, though she demurred somewhat on the score of the expected visitor.

"Leave her to Bunny!" said Jake. "He's quite capable of looking after her for an hour or two."

"I think Bunny meant to go to the races," she said.

Jake frowned. "Well, he can't for once. Don't you fret now! She'll be all right."

"Well, tell them to bring her straight up to see me when she arrives!" Maud begged him. "I shan't be asleep, and really I am much better."

"All right," he conceded. "I'll do that."

He went out and there fell the deep shining peace of a spring afternoon. Somewhere in the distance a cuckoo was calling softly, monotonously, seductively. A thrush was warbling in the terraced garden, and from her window Maud could see old Chops the setter curled up in a warm corner asleep. The children were all out on the downs, and the house was very quiet.

Her thoughts turned dreamily to Saltash. What a pity he did not find some nice girl to marry! Her faith in him, often shaken and as often renewed, had somehow taken deeper root since their talk of the night before. Charlie was beginning to tire of his riotous living. He was beginning to want the better things. But in his present mood she saw a danger. He had come to a critical point in his career, and he would either go up or down. There would be no middle course with him. Knowing him as she did, she realized that a very little pressure would incline him either way. She felt as if his very life hung in the balance. It depended so vitally—upon whence the pressure came.

"If only some decent woman would fall in love with him!" she sighed, and then found herself smiling wistfully at the thought that Saltash's heart would not be an easy thing to capture. He was far too accustomed to adulation, wherever he went. "Besides, he's such a flirt," she reflected. "One never knows whether he is in earnest till the mischief is done."

The cuckoo's soft persistence began somehow to seem like a penance. "When he has said it just like that four hundred and fifty times he'll be absolved and allowed to change his tune," was her thought. "I wonder if poor Charles Rex has said the same thing as often as that, and if that is why he is tired."

A mist began to rise in her brain, making vague the cuckoo's call, blurring even the clear sweet notes of the thrush. A delicious drowsiness crept over her. She gave herself to it with conscious delight. It was so exquisite to feel the grim band that had bound her brow with such cruel tightness relax at last and fall away. Very blissfully she drifted into slumber.

It was nearly two hours later that she became somewhat suddenly aware of feet sauntering under her window and young voices talking together.

"Hullo!" said one abruptly, it was Bunny's speaking with careless friendliness. "Stand still a minute! There's an immense green caterpillar waving to me from your hat-brim."

A voice that was like a boy's, dear, bell-like, made instant response. "Oh hell! Do take it off!"

Maud started wide awake with involuntary shrinking.

There came a chuckle from Bunny and, after a pause and the eloquent crunch of a heel on the gravel, his voice on a note of laughter. "I didn't say it!"

"Great Scott!" ejaculated the clear boyish tones. "Do you mean you're shocked?"

"Not at all," said Bunny courteously.

"Well then, what does it matter who said it?" demanded the other.

"It doesn't matter," said Bunny, still suppressing merriment. "Except that it isn't said in this house."

"Oh damn!" said the newcomer disconsolately. "Then I shall soon be sent back in disgrace."

"Cheer up!" said Bunny. "We don't convict on a first offence as a rule in this country."

"But I shall never remember!" groaned the other, and for the first time the words held a note that was not wholly boyish, it sounded wistful, even rather piteous. "People's ways are all so different. It's rather infernal—trying to please everybody, you know, Bunny."

"Never mind!" said Bunny, in a brotherly tone. "I'll kick you every time I see it coming if you like."

"Will you really? That would be jolly decent of you." The wistfulness vanished in a laugh that was quick and musical, wholly spontaneous.

"You bet I will!" said Bunny.

"Right O! Mind you do! Now get out of the way and see me jump that rose tree!"

There followed the light scamper of feet, and Maud raised herself swiftly and leaned forth in time to see an athletic little figure in navy blue wearing a jaunty Panama hat, skim like a bird over a sweeping Dorothy Perkins just coming into bloom and alight on one leg with the perfect poise of a winged

Mercury on the other side.

CHAPTER VI

HOW TO MANAGE MEN

Bunny's lanky form followed and also cleared the rose-tree with infinitely less grace, and again the girl laughed, her wide blue eyes alight with mirth.

"What an antic! I thought you were going to pull up the rose bush with your heels! What are you doing that for?"

Bunny's hands were on her shoulders. He was plainly enjoying himself thoroughly. "I'm feeling for the wings," he explained. "I'll swear you never jumped it. Where do you keep 'em?"

She drew herself away from his touch. "No, I haven't got any. They don't grow on people like me. Don't let's stay here! I feel as if we're being watched."

It was then that Maud spoke from her window in her quiet gentle voice that yet held a certain authority.

"Bunny, bring our visitor up to see me!"

Both Bunny and his companion started and looked up, and Maud saw the girl's face fully for the first time—a nervous little face with haunting wide blue eyes made more intense by the short thick black lashes that surrounded them, eyes that seemed to plead for kindness. There was charm about the pointed chin and a good deal of sweetness about the moulding of the mouth. But it was the eyes that held Maud's attention. They were the eyes of a creature who has known the wild agony of fear and is not easily reassured. Yet the face was the face of a child.

She leaned out a little further on her sill and addressed the stranger. "Come up and speak to me!" she said very kindly. "Bunny will show you the way."

A shy flickering smile answered her. She cast a questioning look at Bunny.

"Yes, that's Maud—my sister," said Bunny. "Come along! This way!"

They entered the house by a French window, and Maud drew back into her room. What was there in that childish face that appealed so tremendously to her womanhood—wholly banishing her first involuntary sense of recoil? She could not have said, she was only conscious of the woman in her throbbing with a deep compassion. She stood and waited for the child's coming with a strangely poignant expectation.

She heard Bunny's voice talking cheerily on the stairs, but his words provoked no response. She went to the door and opened it.

Bunny was leading the way; in fact his companion seemed to be lagging very considerably in the rear.

Maud moved out into the passage, and Bunny stood to one side with a courteous gesture. "Mademoiselle Antoinette Larpent!" he announced.

The small figure in blue drew itself together with a certain bravado and came forward.

Maud held out her hands. "My dear child," she said, "I expected you long ago."

The hands she clasped were very small and cold. They did not cling to her as she had half expected. The blue eyes flashed her a single nervous glance and fell.

"I'm sorry I'm late, madam," said the visitor in a low, punctilious voice.

Maud felt amused and chilled in the same moment. "Come and sit down!" she said. "We will have some tea upstairs. Bunny, go and order it, will you?"

"With pleasure," said Bunny. "And may I return?"

She smiled at him as she passed an arm about the girl's narrow shoulders. "Yes, you can come back when it's ready. Come in here, dear! You will like to take off your things. How long have you been here?"

"Only five minutes," came the murmured answer; she thought it had a deprecating sound.

"You must be tired," she said kindly. "You came from town? How is it you are so late? Did you miss your train?"

"No, madam." Very nervously came the reply. The contrast between this and the boyish freedom of manner on the terrace a few seconds before would have been ludicrous if it had not been somehow pathetic.

She passed on, too considerate to press for details. "Take off your hat and coat, won't you? When we have had some tea I will take you to your room."

She was pleased to see that Charlie's *protégé* was garbed with extreme simplicity. Her fair hair, which had been closely shorn, was beginning to curl at the ends. She liked the delicate contrasting line of the black brows above the deep blue of the eyes. She noticed that the veins on the white temples showed with great distinctness.

"Sit down!" she said. "And now you must tell me what to call you. Your name is Antoinette, isn't it?"

"I'm generally called Toby," said the visitor in a very shy voice. "But you will call me—what you like."

"Would you like me to call you Toby?" Maud asked.

"Yes, please," said Toby with unexpected briskness.

Maud smiled. "Very well, my dear. Then that is settled. We are not going to be strangers, you and I. I expect you know that Lord Saltash and I are great friends—though I have never met your father."

Toby's pale young face flushed suddenly. She was silent for a moment. Then: "Lord Saltash has been very good to me," she said in her shy voice. "He—saved me from drowning. Wasn't it—wasn't it nice of him to—take the trouble?"

"Quite nice of him," Maud agreed. "You must have been very frightened, weren't you?"

Toby suppressed a shudder. "I was rather. And the water was dreadfully cold. I thought we should never come up again. It was like—it was like—" She stopped herself. "He said I was never to talk about it—or think about it—so I won't, if you don't mind."

"Tell me about your father!" said Maud sympathetically.

For the second time the blue eyes flashed towards her. "Oh, he is still ill in a nursing home and not allowed to see anyone." There was a hint of recklessness in her voice. "They say he'll get well again, but—I don't know."

"You are anxious about him," Maud said.

"No, I'm not." Recklessness became something akin to defiance. "I don't like him much. He's so surly."

"My dear!" said Maud, momentarily disconcerted.

"Well, it's no good pretending I do when I don't, is it?" said Toby, and suddenly smiled at her with winning gracelessness. "It isn't my fault We're not friends—never have been. Why," she made a little gesture of the hands, "we hardly know each other. I'd never been on *The Night Moth* before."

"And you'll never go again," commented Bunny, entering at the moment, "Maud, do you know I took—Miss Larpent—" he turned deliberately to Toby who snapped her fingers in airy acknowledgment—"to see the races instead of coming straight back—according to the boss's instructions."

"Oh! So that's where you've been!" said Maud.

"Exactly so." Bunny pulled up a chair and disposed his long legs astride it. "We saw several events, and made a bit. Then Forest Fire let us down badly and we lost the lot. After that we went into the paddock to cool ourselves and met the boss, who at once—somewhat rudely—ordered us home. I have

an impression he's feeling waxy with me for some reason," Bunny ended, stroking his chin reflectively. "Daresay I shall get over it, however."

"What a pity you went!" said Maud.

"Not at all," said Bunny. "We enjoyed it. It's fun doing naughty things sometimes, isn't it,—er—Miss Larpent?"

"Don't be an ass!" said Toby tersely.

Maud raised her brows, but Bunny grinned with delight. "Thank you Toby! I take the hint. There shall be no more ceremony between us. Ah! There come the children along the path by the summerhouse!" he sprang to the window and sent forth a yell, turning back almost instantly to say, "Sorry, Maud! I'm afraid I forgot your head. How is it?"

He did not wait for her reply, but leaned out again immediately to address the advancing children with noisy gayety.

Toby looked up at Maud, hesitated, and rose. "Let us go and have tea with the children!" she said. "It will be quieter for you."

Maud put out a gentle hand to her. "No, dear. You stay with me. Bunny may if he likes!"

This time Toby's fingers closed tightly upon her own. "Sure?" said Toby.

"Quite sure," said Maud, smiling at her.

Toby turned sharply and pinched Bunny's elbow as he leaned from the window. He drew himself in and stared at her.

"You're making too much noise," she told him curtly. "You go and racket downstairs!"

Bunny's eyes widened for a second in indignant amazement, then abruptly he threw up his chin and laughed. "I like you!" he declared. "You're the cockiest thing in girls I've ever seen!"

Toby pulled at his elbow like a small, persistent dog. "Go on!" she commanded. "Go down to them! Mrs. Bolton and I want to have our tea alone. I'll come and play with you presently—if you're good."

It was spoken wholly without coquetry, much as an elder brother might speak to a younger. It was plain that she meant to have her way, though Maud, who knew that there was a very strong mixture of stubbornness in Bunny, wondered much if she would get it. Amusement, however, kept the upper hand with him. Toby's treatment evidently appealed strongly to his sense of humour. Perhaps her determination also made its impression upon him, for after a little more chaff on his part and brisk insistence on hers he departed, laughing, to join the children.

Toby saw him to the door and returned calm and triumphant.

"Well done!" said Maud. "You know how to deal with spoilt children evidently."

Toby looked at her sharply as she sat down, almost as if she expected a double meaning to the words.

"Do you mean men?" she said, and for an instant her childish face wore a look of contempt. "Oh, anyone can manage men—given a fair chance. There's not much cleverness needed for that."

She spoke with the decision of one who knew, and in spite of the difference of years between them Maud could not question her confidence. She had a curious feeling that—either by experience or intuition—this girl knew more than she.

She made no comment therefore, and after a moment Toby spoke her last word on the subject with characteristic brevity.

"There's only one rule to follow with men—that is, if you want any peace at all. Make up your mind and stick to it! If they don't like it, let 'em go to—" She checked suddenly, and coloured deeply under Maud's eyes—"I mean, let 'em do the other thing," she ended, on a note that somehow seemed to ask for pardon.

"I see," said Maud gently, in a tone that conveyed it.

Toby threw her a little smile, half-grateful and half-mischievous; and curiously in that moment a bond was formed between them which was destined to endure.

CHAPTER VII

THE PROMISE

There was undoubtedly a frown on Jake's usually serene countenance when he walked up the great stable-yard a little later that evening and came upon Bunny lounging in a doorway with his hands in his pockets talking to one of the men.

"Look here, young feller, I want a word with you," he said, with his customary directness, and laid a somewhat peremptory hand upon the boy's shoulder.

Bunny, with a cigarette between his lips, turned and laughed at him without a hint of discomfiture. "All right, boss. I'll come," he said, and linked his arm in Jake's with boyish friendliness.

He was half-a-head taller than Jake, but the look of power that was so apparent in the older man was wholly absent in him. He moved his long limbs with a loose swing that lacked energy though it seemed to denote a certain restlessness.

"Wonder what you'll do without me here when I go to Charlie," he remarked, as Jake did not immediately speak.

"I should say the sooner you go the better," said Jake rather brutally, "if I were only sure you were going to the right place."

"Have a smoke!" said Bunny with unruffled amiability, proffering his case.

Jake pushed it from him with a curt sound of dissatisfaction.

"All right. Don't!" said Bunny, with instant haughtiness, and returned it to his pocket.

He would have withdrawn his hand from his brother-in-law's arm, but Jake retained it there forcibly, steering for his own private office at the end of the stable-yard.

Bunny submitted, but his face grew ominously dark as they passed in silence between the long rows of loose-boxes in the soft spring twilight. As they neared Jake's room he drew himself together with the action of a man who braces his muscles for a sudden strain, and in a moment he was older, less defiant, more dignified.

"That's better," Jake said, making him enter first. "There are times, Sir Bernard Brian, when I want to lick you, as you never—unfortunately—were licked in your early youth. Other times—like the present—when the breed gets the better of me, and I can only stand outside—and admire."

"Oh, don't be a blithering idiot, Jake!" said Bunny in hot discomfiture. Jake's hand grasped his shoulder. "Sit down, and bring yourself to my level for a minute! Maybe I am a blithering idiot, maybe I'm not. But I could take you by the heels and dip you in the horse-pond round the corner if I felt that way. So you'd better keep as civil as possible. It won't make a mite of difference to me, but it may to you."

Bunny sat down, breathing hard. His cigarette fell to the ground and he stooped for it, but Jake, still holding his shoulder, stooped also, picked it up and flung it straight out of the window.

"You smoke too many of 'em," he said, as he did it.

"Damn you!" said Bunny in a voice of concentrated fury.

He would have sprung to his feet, but Jake's hands were upon him like iron clamps and kept him seated.

He spoke, his voice soft, unhurried, even humorous. "I'm only a beastly groom, you know, Bunny. You don't expect good manners from me, do you?"

Bunny shrank a little, as if something in the words pierced him. Jake's eyes, very bright but wholly free from anger looked straight into his. For some reason he ceased to strain against the compelling hands and sat passive.

There followed a somewhat tense silence before he said, "Well, go on! I knew you wanted to row me about something. What's it all about?"

His voice was sullen but his attitude was no longer hostile. He looked ashamed.

Jake sat down suddenly on the edge of the writing-table. "Say, Bunny!" he said gently. "Do you know you're the only man in the world that can send me to perdition and not have his teeth knocked down his throat for his officiousness?"

Bunny looked up at him, and in a moment, like the flash of sunshine from behind a cloud, he was smiling. "Oh, get out, Jake. I suppose you're going to wipe the floor with me now. I didn't mean it and I'm sorry. Let's get on from there!"

His hand gripped Jake's hard. There was something very winning about him at the moment, something that appealed strongly to the older man though he did not instantly reply. He kept the boy's hand in his for a moment, and his eyes were very kindly as he looked into the thin young face.

"Guess you know I'm pretty fond of you, my son," he said at length, "but I don't figure to let you go to the devil unhindered on that account."

Bunny whistled. "Who's going? Oh, don't be an ass, Jake, will you?"

"No, I won't," said Jake, "at least not the soft variety. Reckon I've been too soft with you, Bunny, as long as I've known you."

Bunny stirred restlessly in his chair. "Think so?" he said. "Well, it's a good fault, old chap. I can't stand bullying from anyone—makes me see red at once."

"I know," Jake said. "I've never bullied you anyway. But I'm on the war-path now, and you've got to take your physic whether you like it or not. Say, Bunny, how much money did you drop at the races this afternoon?"

"What's that to you?" said Bunny.

Jake's face hardened a little. "Well, I expected that," he said. "Afraid to tell me, eh?"

"Not in the least afraid," said Bunny. "I dispute your right to know, that's all."

"I see." Jake regarded him with a very direct scrutiny. "I'm to be kept in my place, is that it?"

Bunny coloured. "That's the fourth time you've called me a bounder since we came in. What do you mean by it, Jake?"

"What do I mean?" Jake spoke rather sadly. "Well, maybe that's just what I do mean, Bunny. You're beginning to bound."

"Rot!" said Bunny, though he coloured more deeply than before. "You know there isn't another fellow anywhere that I respect as I respect you. But—dash it, Jake!—you must let me grow."

"I want you to," said Jake. "But for the Lord's sake, grow straight!" He reached out and took Bunny by the shoulder. "I'm going to ask a big thing of you, sonny, but I guess I shall know by the way you take it how much your respect for me is worth."

"What is it?" said Bunny.

"Just this." Jake leaned forward; there was speculation in his look. "I want you to chuck racing—altogether—for a year. There!"

"Chuck racing!" Bunny sat up very straight. "Jake! Why on earth should I?"

Jake's hand closed upon him. He was smiling a little but there was something relentless behind his smile. "Oh, just to please me," he said. "That's all."

Bunny stared at him. "Chuck racing!" he said again. "Jake, you're mad!"

"No, I guess not," said Jake imperturbably. "I'm not arguing any against racing. Played straight, it's the best game in the world. I'm just asking a personal favour of you. There's nothing to be hurt about in that."

There was an ominous gleam in Bunny's eyes. He looked as if he were on the verge of open rebellion, but with his last words Jake's steady arm suddenly went round his shoulders and gave him a hard, brotherly squeeze.

"Don't do it if you're going to hate me for it!" he said. "Reckon I can't afford that. I knew it was a gamble when I started. If I can't win, I'll back out right now."

"Jake!" Quick feeling sounded in Bunny's voice. He turned sharply, and for an instant his cheek was against the kindly hand with the old boyish gesture of affection. Then he looked Jake full in the eyes and laughed. "Jake, I say, don't be a beast! You know I'll do anything under the sun to please you."

"You'll do this?" said Jake.

"Tell me why first!" said Bunny.

"Because I want to know if you've got the grit for one thing. And for another—that girl who has just come here is a gambler to the backbone, and I won't have her encouraged."

"How on earth do you know that?" said Bunny. "Did Charlie tell you?"

"No." Jake's voice was grim. "You don't suppose I'd take his word for anything, do you? I saw it in her face this afternoon. I know that gambling fever, and she—well, I'm inclined to think she's had it in one form or another all her life."

"She's quite a nice kid," said Bunny condescendingly.

Jake smiled, but the firmness remained. "She's not your sort, Sir Bernard Brian," he remarked. "And I rather guess she could teach you more than you could teach her."

"What do you mean?" said Bunny.

Jake turned aside to shut the window in preparation for departure. "Well, sonny," he said in a marked drawl, "I guess I mean just that. If you aren't sharp enough to draw your own conclusions, that's none of my business." He turned round and looked at Bunny with absolute directness. "And that other proposition of mine,—did I understand you to fall in with it?"

"Chuck racing for a year, you mean?" Bunny got up. His face was still red, but it showed no resentment. "It's rather much, isn't it, Jake?"

"Too much?" questioned Jake.

Bunny hesitated. "Well, a year! Make it three months!" he said coaxingly.

Jake came to him, square and resolute. "I'll make it six months, Bunny," he said, "if you can tell me you didn't drop more than fifty pounds this afternoon."

Bunny turned crimson. "This afternoon was an exception," he said hastily.

"I thought so," said Jake dryly.

"But—damn it!—it's rather a heavy penalty to pay," protested Bunny. He thrust out an impulsive hand. "I say, let me off, old feller! I won't do it again."

Jake's fingers closed and held. He said nothing, merely waited.

And very suddenly—after his own headlong fashion—Bunny made unconditional surrender. "Oh, get out, you beastly groom!" he said, and wrung Jake's hand with all the force he could muster. "All right! It's done!"

Jake made an odd movement as of tension relaxed though none had been apparent in his bearing. He struck Bunny on the shoulder the blow of a friend.

"That's the biggest thing you've ever done for me, pard," he said with a smile. "Reckon I shan't forget it. Take it out of me next time!"

"You bet I will!" said Bunny.

He linked his arm through Jake's and gripped it hard. His eyes were shining as they passed out together into the gathering dusk. He had made a considerable sacrifice, but Jake had the gift of making him realize that it was worth while.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ALLY

A squeal of childish laughter echoed down the long passage that led from the nurseries, followed by a shuffling sound along the floor.

"Hold tight!" cried a voice, a gay, boyish voice, "I'm going to gallop!"

There followed a tremendous scrambling along the corridor and shrieks of delight from three excited children. Jake, who had just mounted the stairs, paused in his progress; but in a moment there came a dramatic sound indicative of collapse, and immediately there arose cries of dismay. He turned an intervening corner and came upon the newly-arrived guest quite prone upon the floor with his three little girls scuffling in delighted agitation over her inert body.

He hesitated to interrupt the game, but in an instant Betty the youngest had spied him and uttered a shrill cry of welcome. The heap upon the floor swiftly resolved itself into four separate beings, and the newcomer sprang up with the liteness of a squirrel and met him with a free grace that was not without a suggestion of defiance.

He held out his hand to her. He understood the defiance and replied to it with characteristic directness.

"Guess you thought me a rough sort of animal when we met in the paddock this afternoon," he said. "I'm sorry. It was Bunny I was up against—not you."

"Not me?" said Toby, her wide eyes lifted quite openly to his. "Sure?"

He pinched the slim young hand without ceremony. Somehow she took him by storm—this girl with the open brow and curiously pathetic face. "Well, not so much you," he said. "Bunny knows that gambling on a big scale is against the law for children of his age."

"Oh, I see," said Toby. She smiled and slipped her hand free. "Well, I'm years older than he is, so that doesn't apply to me. Bunny wasn't doing any gambling either."

"I gathered that," said Jake.

She stopped and lifted Molly the second child, partially veiling her own face with the little girl's soft curls. "Then you are up against me," she said.

"No, I'm not," Jake's voice held a queer, compassionate note. "We won't quarrel till we know each other better anyway. I see you're pretty intimate with the youngsters already."

"Oh, that's easy, isn't it?" said Toby. "Babies always take you at your face value. They are never prejudiced beforehand. There's never any handicap of that sort with babies."

Betty was clamouring at her knees. She bent and lifted her also, bracing her slight form to a double burden of which Jake instantly relieved her, gathering both children into his own strong arms.

"You're not to do that ever again," he said, with the authority of the man accustomed to obedience. "Understand?"

"Why not?" said Toby.

He turned to carry the two babies to the nursery. "Because I say it," he said briefly.

"Oh, but that's no reason," said Toby, with light assurance.

Eileen at her side looked up in shocked amazement. "Not if Daddy says so?" she questioned.

Toby stooped and swung her up to her shoulder. "You little featherweight! Daddy's only a man!" she said.

"Quite true," said Jake deliberately. "The sort of man who means what he says—always, and sees that he gets it."

"What a frightful undertaking!" laughed Toby. "Then if you told me to go to blazes you'd see that I went?"

There was a pause. Eileen's little hands locked themselves nervously under Toby's chin. Perhaps she was aware of a certain electricity in the atmosphere. She was plainly not at her ease.

Jake's voice sounded, very quiet and distinct, from the nursery door as he entered. "I reckon that's just one of the things I've learnt not to say."

"Oh glory!" said Toby, "There goes the odd trick!"

It was several minutes later, after a wild final romp that they left the room together. There was certainly no ceremony left between them. They came out as comrades, laughing at the same joke, their brief passage-at-arms apparently forgotten.

Toby, however, reverted to it very suddenly as they walked along the passage. "Mr. Bolton, I'm sorry I got Bunny into hot water this afternoon. It was all my fault. And I'm sorry I said blazes in front of the babies just now. You'll have to kick me when I do these things, and then I'll remember."

Jake paused and looked at her. "Say! Are you a boy or a girl?" he said.

She smiled, a faintly dubious smile, but her reply was prompt. "Mostly boy, sir. That's what makes it so difficult."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "Look here! Call me Jake, see? Are you keen on horses?"

Toby's eyes shone. "Like mad," she said.

"I'll see you ride tomorrow," said Jake.

Toby whooped with delight. "But I'll have to borrow some breeches from someone. You don't want me to ride in a skirt do you?"

"Not specially," said Jake. "What do you generally ride in?"

"Tights," said Toby, and then suddenly clapped her hand to her mouth in dismay. "There! Now I've done it! You won't tell—you'll never tell, will you? Promise!"

"Sure!" said Jake. He was smiling a little, but there was compassion in his eyes.

And Toby's hand came out to him in sudden confidence. "I like you," she said. "You're a friend."

Jake's grasp was strong and kindly. "I guess I shan't let you down," he said.

Toby nodded. "You've been a cow-boy, haven't you? I knew that directly I saw you."

"I've been a good many things," said Jake.

She nodded again. "And always the right sort. I wish—" She broke off abruptly.

"What?" said Jake.

"Oh, nothing," said Toby, with a rather wistful little laugh.

"Let's have it!" said Jake.

Her hand lay in his, and this time she left it there. Her blue eyes met his courageously. "Only that I'd met you before," she said.

"Before when?" said Jake. "Before you met Saltash?"

"Oh no!" Very swiftly, she answered him. "Oh no! Lord Saltash is among the kings. I'd have been dead by now but for him!" Her eyes kindled as with a sudden glowing memory, she flushed like an eager child. "You know him?" she said. "Isn't he— isn't he—fine?"

She spoke with reverence, even with a certain awe. The man's face changed a little, hardening almost imperceptibly.

"Guess he's no great hero of mine," he said. "But maybe he has his points."

"He has!" Toby assured him with fervor. "You don't know him like I do. He's a—he's a masterpiece."

"That so?" said Jake.

Perhaps Toby felt a lack of sympathy in his tone; she quitted the subject abruptly. "No, that wasn't what I meant. I only wish I'd met you long ago—years and years ago—when you were a cow-boy."

"You were a babe in arms then," said Jake.

She shook her head, quaintly smiling. "I wasn't ever that. I think I must have been born old—began at the wrong end somehow. Some people do, you know."

"I know," said Jake. "When that happens, there's only one thing to be done."

"What?" queried Toby.

His eyes were watching her intently, but there was nothing alarming in their scrutiny. He made reply with absolute gentleness. "Begin again."

"Ah!" A little sound that was more than a sigh escaped her, and then quite suddenly her other hand came out to him; she lifted a quivering face. "You going to help me?" she said.

The action touched him. He took her by the shoulders as he might have taken a boy. "I'll help you," he said.

"You'll be good to me?" Her voice was quivering also, it had a sound of tears.

"Sure!" said Jake, laconic and forceful.

"Keep me straight and pull me up when I go wrong?" pursued Toby tremulously.

"Yes, I'll do that," he said.

"And you won't—you won't—you won't—talk to anybody about me?" she pleaded.

"No," said Jake briefly.

"Not to Lord Saltash? Not to anyone?"

"No," he said again, a hint of sternness in the curt word.

Toby gulped down her distress, was silent for a moment or two, then suddenly smiled upon him—a sunny inconsequent smile. "Guess I've got you on my side now," she said with satisfaction. "You're nice and solid, Mr. Jake Bolton. When you've been picked up from the very bottom of the sea, it's good to have someone big and safe to hold on to."

"That so?" said Jake.

"Yes, I know now why Lord Saltash sent me here—just because you're big—and safe."

"Oh, quite safe," said Jake with his sudden smile.

It came to him—as it had come to Saltash—that there was something piteously like a small animal, storm-driven and seeking refuge, about her. Even in her merriest moments she seemed to plead for kindness.

He patted her shoulder reassuringly as he let her go. "I'll look after you," he said, "if you play the game."

"What game?" said Toby unexpectedly.

He looked her squarely in the eyes. "The only game worth playing," he said. "The straight game."

"Oh, I see," said Toby with much meekness. "Not cheat, you mean? Lord Saltash doesn't allow cheating either."

"Good land!" said Jake in open astonishment.

"You don't know him," said Toby again with conviction.

And Jake laughed, good-humoured but sceptical. "Maybe I've something to learn yet," he said tolerantly. "But it's my impression that for sheer mischief and double-dealing he could knock spots off any other human being on this earth."

"Oh, if that's all you know about him," said Toby, "you've never even met him—never once."

"Have you?" questioned Jake abruptly.

She coloured up to the soft fair hair that clustered about her blue-veined temples, and turned from him with an odd little indrawn breath. "Yes!" she said. "Yes!"—paused an instant as if about to say more; then again in a whisper, "Yes!" she said, and went lightly away as if the subject were too sacred for further discussion.

"Good land!" said Jake again, and departed to his own room in grim amazement.

Saltash the sinner was well known to him and by no means uncongenial; but Saltash the saint, not only beloved, but revered and enshrined as such, as something beyond his comprehension! How on earth had he managed to achieve his sainthood?

CHAPTER IX

THE IDOL

"Well?" said Saltash with quizzical interest. "Where is she? And how is she getting on?"

It was the Sunday afternoon of his promised visit, a day soft with spring showers and fleeting sunshine. Maud sat in a basket-chair on the verandah and regarded him with puzzled eyes. She passed his questions by.

"Charlie," she said, "where does she come from?"

He raised his shoulders expressively. "Where do all women come from—and why, *chère reine*? It would be such a peaceful planet without them."

He was in a baffling mood, and she knew better than to pursue the subject under those conditions. She abandoned her effort with a sigh.

"She is not a woman; she is a child, very charming but utterly irresponsible. She is in the training field just now with Jake and Bunny. She is a positive delight to Jake. She can do anything with the horses."

"But not such a delight to you?" suggested Saltash shrewdly.

Maud hesitated momentarily. "I love her of course," she said then. "But—though I have tried to make her feel at ease—I think she is a little afraid of me—afraid anyhow to be quite natural in my presence."

"But are we any of us that?" protested Saltash. "Are we not all on our best behaviour in the audience-chamber?"

Maud sighed again. "They are all great pals," she said irrelevantly. "She and Bunny are terribly reckless. I hope they won't break their necks before they have done."

"Or their hearts?" suggested Saltash, looking mischievous.

She smiled. "I don't think there is much danger of that, anyhow at present. She is a positive child, Charlie,—as young as Eileen in many ways, or perhaps younger. Shall we walk down to the field and look at them?"

"Your servant, madam!" said Saltash readily.

He was on his feet in an instant, and she realized that he had been chafing to go since the moment of his arrival.

"You take a great interest in her," she remarked, as they walked along the terrace.

He made his most appalling grimace. "I have never had an infant to look after before," he said "And—I have to make my report to Larpent."

"Ah! How is he?" questioned Maud.

He shot her a swift glance. "Is the child anxious?"

"Not in the least. I don't believe she ever thinks about him. She told me on the first day that she hardly knows him."

Saltash laughed. "How honest of her! Well, he's getting better, but he won't be well yet. May I leave her in your charge, a while longer?"

"Of course!" Maud said warmly. "I love to have her, and she is a great help to me too. The children simply worship her, and she is splendid with them. I believe Eileen will very soon get over her dread of riding."

"Toby can ride?" asked Saltash.

"Oh yes, like a cow-boy. She is amazingly fearless, and never minds a tumble in the least. She can do the most extraordinary things exactly like a boy. I am always afraid of her coming to grief, but she never does."

"Funny little beggar!" said Saltash.

"I am quite sure of one thing," pursued Maud. "She never learnt these things at any school. She tells me she has been to a good many."

"I believe that's true," said Saltash. "I imagine she is fairly quick to pick up anything, but I haven't known her myself for long."

"She must have picked up a good deal on *The Night Moth*," observed Maud unexpectedly.

He glanced at her again. "Why do you say that? She was under my protection—and Larpent's—on *The Night Moth*."

"I know. She idolizes you," Maud smiled at him somewhat dubiously. "But she must have mixed fairly freely with the crew to have picked up the really amazing language she sometimes uses."

Saltash's brows worked whimsically. "Some of us have a gift that way," he remarked. "Your worthy Jake, for instance—"

"Oh, Jake is a reformed character," she interrupted. "He hardly ever lets himself go now-a-days. And he won't allow it from Bunny. But Toby—Toby never seems to know the good from the bad."

"Has Jake taken her in hand?" asked Saltash with a chuckle.

"Oh yes. He checks her at every turn. I must say she takes it very sweetly, even offered to take her meals in her room yesterday when he was rather down on her. It absolutely disarmed Jake of course. What could he say?"

"Yes, she's a disarming monkey certainly," agreed Saltash. "But I never was great on the management and discipline of children. So she knocks under to the great Jake, does she?"

"Oh, not entirely." Maud laughed a little. "Only this morning they had a battle. I don't know how it is going to end yet. But—she can be very firm."

"She never tried any battles with me," said Saltash, with some complacency.

"No. But then your sense of duty is more elastic than Jake's. You never—probably—asked her to do anything she didn't want to do."

"Can't remember," said Saltash. "What did Jake want?"

Maud's smile lingered. "You'll laugh of course. But Jake is quite right, whatever you do. He wanted her to go to church with little Eileen and me this morning. She's only a child, you know, and he naturally took it for granted that she was going. We both did. But just at the last moment she absolutely refused, told him quite frankly that she was—an atheist."

Saltash's laugh had a sound half-mocking, half-exultant. "What said the worthy Jake to that? Stop! I know what he said. He said. 'You can call yourself by any fool name you please, but you've got to go to Church like a respectable citizen if I say so.' Wasn't that it?"

"Something like it," Maud admitted. "How did you know?"

"Oh, I know Jake," said Saltash dryly. "And what happened then? She refused?"

"Yes, she refused. She was frightened, but she refused. She looked as if she were going to run away,

but in the end Jake went off with her to the stables saying they would go to-night. They were quite friends when I saw them again, but she had been crying, poor little thing. I wish I could help her, but somehow I can't get near enough. Jake seems to understand her best."

"Wonder if she will give in?" said Saltash.

They were passing through a shrubbery that led to the training-field, and there came the quick thud of hoofs galloping on short turf as they approached.

"I don't think there is much doubt about that," Maud said.

Saltash laughed again mockingly. "Oh, we all know Jake is invincible, virtuous rectitude incarnate. But you can't hammer a girl into submission like a boy and I rather fancy that Toby is not wholly ignorant of the art of getting her own way."

"Jake never hammered Bunny," Maud said quietly, "But he manages him notwithstanding."

They rounded a curve and came upon the gate that led into the field. The galloping hoofs were close to them. As they reached the corner two riders flashed past at full speed. One of them—Bunny—lay on his horse's neck, yelling wild encouragement to his mount. The other,—a slight, childish figure—was kneeling on the saddle like a small, crouching creature, perfectly poised and wholly unafraid. As the horse that carried her dropped to a canter on the hill, she got to her feet with absolute ease, and stood, arms out and swaying to the animal's motion, till, as they rounded another curve, she dropped to the saddle again, and passed from sight, following in Bunny's tracks.

"Quite a pretty exhibition!" remarked Saltash. "Where is Jake?"

Jake himself appeared at the moment riding soberly, mounted on his favourite horse, The Hundredth Chance. He greeted Saltash with a smile and jumped to the ground to join them at the gate.

"They'll be round again directly. Just riding off their spirits," he explained in his easy drawl. "You motored over, my lord?"

Saltash nodded with a touch of impatience. He was watching with restless eyes for the reappearance of the girl on horseback. She had not seen him at the gate, yet somehow his arrogance rebelled at the fact that she had passed him by.

Jake stood with The Hundredth Chance nuzzling against him. He did not trouble himself to make conversation; that was not his way. He also waited for the reappearance of the riders.

They came, riding side by side and jesting with careless *camaraderie*. Toby's face was delicately flushed. The fair head had no covering. She was dressed and looked exactly like a boy.

At sight of Saltash standing by the gate her whole attitude changed. She uttered a queer sound, half-whoop, half-sob, and flung herself out of the saddle. In a moment she had reached him, was hanging to his arm in mute greeting, everything else in the world forgotten. It was pathetically like the re-union of a lost dog to its master.

Saltash's ugly face softened miraculously at her action. The jest died on his lips. "Why, Nonette!" he said. "Nonette!"

She strangled another sob. Her face was burning, quivering, appealing, no longer the face of a boy. "I thought you'd forgotten to come," she said.

"What? Was I expected to lunch?" said Saltash. "Ah! Was that why you wouldn't go to church?"

Toby looked up, desperately smiling. "It may have been—partly. But I never do go. Do you?"

"Not often," said Saltash. "I might if I stayed here. There's no knowing. You'll be pleased to hear your daddy is better. He's coming down to the Castle to convalesce. And when he's done that, I'm going to have a party—a coming-out party—for you."

"For me!" Toby gasped, staring at him with scared blue eyes. "I hope you won't, sir," she said.

He laughed back at her, his brows working mischievously. "*Mais pourquoi pas, mignonne?* You are old enough. Maud will come and be hostess, won't you, Maud? You shall have Jake too for a watch-dog, if you want him. After that, you shall be presented at Court, when you've learnt to curtsy prettily instead of turning somersaults. You must let your hair grow, Nonette, and leave off wearing breeks. You've got to be a credit to me."

"Oh, damn!" said Toby in dismay. "I mean—oh, bother!"

"Yes, it's a good thing you mean only that, isn't it?" laughed Saltash. "If you go on wearing those masculine things much longer, you'll have Jake punching your head for little slips of that kind. He's getting mighty particular, I'm told."

"Not afraid of Jake!" said Toby, casting a swift look at her host.

Jake was lighting his pipe. His face wore a faint smile. He was holding Toby's animal as well as his own. "Aren't you going to ride again?" he said.

"No," said Toby.

"Oh, come on!" Bunny pushed his horse forward without dismounting. "Glad to see you, Charlie, but we must have one more gallop. Come on, Toby! Be a sport!"

But Toby, still holding Saltash's sleeve, would not so much as look at him. "Not coming," she said tersely.

Saltash laughed. Bunny coloured suddenly and hotly. "Oh, all right!" he said, and, wheeling his horse, rode away.

"Now you've hurt his little feelings," observed Saltash.

"Who cares?" said Toby, and nestled closer, till with his sudden reckless grin he thrust an arm about her shoulders.

"I'll tell you what it is, Nonette. You're getting spoiled all round. Something will have to be done. Shall I take her away, Jake?"

"And bring me back when I'm good?" put in Toby eagerly.

He laughed and pinched her ear. "I shall want to keep you myself—when you're good. I haven't yet found anyone to sew on buttons like you do. No, *ma chère*, you'll have to stay and be caned for your sins. Jake is a better schoolmaster than I am, being so eminently virtuous himself. I hope you do cane her, Jake. I'm sure she needs it."

"No," Jake said, preparing to mount again. "I haven't tried that at present."

Toby watched him a little wistfully as he moved away, leading her horse. "I am trying to be good," she said. "He knows that."

"Yes, she's trying hard," Maud said very kindly. "Jake and I are going to be proud of her some day."

Saltash's brows twisted humorously. "I wonder," he said. And then again lightly he laughed. "Don't get too good, Nonette! I can't rise to it."

She turned swiftly, looking up into the derisive face above her with open adoration in her own. "You!" she said. "You!"

"Well, what about me?" he said.

She coloured very deeply. "Nothing, sir, nothing! Only—you're so great!"

He flicked her cheek, grimacing hideously. "Is that your pretty way of telling me I'm the biggest rotter you ever met?"

"Oh, no!" said Toby quickly and earnestly. "Oh no! I think you are—a king. If—if anyone could make me believe in God, you could."

She spoke with a sincerity that held a hint of passion. The grimace flicked out of Saltash's face like a picture from a screen. For a moment he had the blank look of a man who has been hit, he knows not where. Then with lightning swiftness, his eyes went to Maud. "You hear that?" he said, almost on a note of challenge. "Why don't you laugh?"

She met his look with absolute steadfastness. There was a certain pity in her own. "Because," she said with great gentleness, "I believe that it is true."

In the silence that followed she waited for his own laugh of mockery and did not hear it. The odd eyes comprehended her, and passed her by, fell abruptly to Toby and dwelt upon her with a whimsical

tenderness.

"I always said you were a little ass, didn't I, Toby?" he said.

And Toby turned with an apologetic murmur and softly kissed his hand.

CHAPTER X

RESOLUTIONS

Toby went to church that Sunday evening with great propriety, Saltash having departed, taking Bunny with him to spend the evening at Burchester. Her behaviour was a model of decorum throughout, but returning she begged Jake for a cigarette as a reward of virtue.

"It'll keep me good for hours," she assured him.

And Jake, who yearned for a smoke himself, could not find it in his heart to refuse.

"Don't overdo it, that's all!" he said. "Young Bunny is always at it, and it's very bad for him."

"Oh, I've got heaps more sense than Bunny," said Toby, with lofty assurance.

She smoked the cigarette with delicate appreciation though Jake's tobacco was by no means suited to a feminine palate, and they returned at peace with all the world.

Maud, who had been watching for them somewhat anxiously, saw with relief that her fears were groundless. Toby's serene countenance told her that all was well. No, she had not hated it so very badly after all. It was nothing to make a fuss about anyhow. She would go again if Jake liked.

She seemed in fact mildly amused by the idea that he could be so easily pleased, and asked him later with her chin in the air if there were any other odd jobs he would like her to perform.

But when Maud presently went to the piano, she came and sat on a low chair near her and listened in absolute stillness while she played. They were alone, and Maud played on and on, almost forgetful of her silent companion, suffering her fingers to wander in unison with her thoughts. All her life music had been her great joy and solace. She was not a brilliant musician as was Saltash, but she had the gift of so steeping herself in music that she could at times thereby express that which otherwise would have been unutterable—the hidden emotions of her soul.

Nearly an hour had passed thus before she remembered the silent little figure behind her, and then it was with a swift sense of compunction that she took her hands from the keys and turned.

"Toby dear, how boring this must be for you! Are you asleep? Why, child, what is it?"

With a start she saw that Toby's fair head was bowed upon her arms in an attitude of the most hopeless, the most bitter, despair.

She made a convulsive movement at the sound of Maud's voice, and in a moment lifted a white, strained face. "I am just a little tired, that's all," she said in a voice that quivered in spite of her. "Please go on playing! I like it."

Maud got up with quiet decision and went to her, but Toby was on her feet before she reached her. She stood with that look of a small, frightened animal so characteristic of her, her two hands nervously locked together.

Maud took her gently by the arm. "Shall we sit down and talk?" she said.

Toby yielded as it were involuntarily to the quiet touch. In her plain white blouse with the sailor collar she looked a mere child—a piteous, shy child.

Maud drew her down upon the sofa. All the mother in her went out to the forlorn little creature, yet for the moment she hesitated, as one afraid to strike a wrong note.

Toby was trembling a little and that fact decided her. She put a comforting arm about her.

"Do you know I am wondering how to make you happy?" she said.

Toby choked back a sob. "You are very kind, and I am stupid—stupid. I will try to be happy. I will really."

Maud began to draw her gently nearer, but Toby surprised her by a sudden passionate movement and slipped down on to the floor, hiding her face against her.

"I'm not fit—to speak to you!" she said in a vehement, strangled whisper. "I'm so bad—so bad. And I do—so—want to be good."

"My dear, dear child!" Maud said very tenderly.

Toby fought with herself for a space, her thin arms tightly clasping Maud's knees. At last, forcing back her distress she lifted her head.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry. Don't let it upset you! Don't—tell Jake!"

"You are quite safe with me, dear," Maud assured her. "But can't I help you?"

She knew even as she asked the question that Toby was not prepared to give her full confidence, and her own reserve shrank from asking for it.

Toby looked up at her with quivering lips. "Oh, you are good!" she said. "I want to be good—like you. But—I don't feel as if I ever shall be."

Maud laid a very gentle hand upon the blue-veined forehead. "I think goodness is only comparative at the best of times, dear," she said. "I don't feel that I am specially good. If I seem so to you, it is probably because my life holds very few temptations to be anything else."

"Ah!" Toby said, with a quick sigh. "And do you think people ought to be made to suffer for—for things they can't help?"

Maud shook her head. "I am afraid it often happens, dear."

"And yet you believe in God," Toby said.

"Yes, I believe in God." With quiet reverence Maud made answer. "And I am quite sure, Toby—quite, quite sure—that He never holds people responsible for the things they can't help."

"Then why—" began Toby restlessly.

Maud interrupted her. "No, no. Don't ask why! The world is as God made it. 'We are His workmanship.' Let Him do with us as He will!"

Toby's hands clenched. A frown that was curiously unchildlike drew the wide forehead. "Are we to be quite passive then? Just—slaves?"

"No," Maud said. "Servants—not slaves. There is a big difference. And every one of us—every one of us—has God's work to do in the world."

"And you think that bad people,—like me—can do anything?" said Toby.

Maud smiled a little. "Toby dear, I am quite sure that your work is waiting for you."

"Don't know where I'm going to begin," said Toby, with another sigh.

"My dear, you have begun." Maud's hand smoothed the fair hair. "Do you think I don't know how hard you try?"

Toby's eyes filled with quick tears. "But is it any good trying? Shall I ever get away from—from—" She broke off with a nervous, upward glance. "Shall I ever do more than begin?" she substituted rather piteously.

"My dear, yes." Very quietly, with absolute decision, Maud made answer. "You are young—too young to be hampered by anything that is past. You have your life before you, and—to a very great extent—you can make of it what you will. There is no need—believe me, there is no need—to look back. There is only time enough for the present. Just keep on trying! Make the very best you can of it! And you will find the future will come out all right."

"Will it?" said Toby rather dubiously.

Maud bent and kissed her. "Certainly it will, dear. Never doubt it! It may not be the future we plan for ourselves, but it will be the very best possible if we keep on doing our best with the present."

"Thank you," Toby murmured gratefully. "And you really think—you do really think—the past doesn't matter?"

Maud was silent for a few moments. The thought of Saltash was in her mind, his jesting evasions, his air of careless proprietorship. What was the thing in this child's past that she desired so earnestly to put away? She wondered if she ought to ask, but she could not.

A slight terror ran through the small, supplicating figure at her knee, and quick pity banished doubt. "I think it is entirely in our own hands, dear," she said gently. "The past can always be left behind if we work hard enough."

"Oh, thank you," Toby said again, and gathering Maud's hands impulsively into her own she kissed them. "I'm going to work very hard," she said. "You'll help me, I know. I've got to—to leave off turning somersaults—and learn to—curtsey."

She sent a shy smile into Maud's face, and almost in spite of herself Maud answered it. There was something oddly appealing, irresistibly attractive, about the child. She was so young and ardent, yet so pathetically anxious to please.

"Of course I will help you," she said. "I will always help you, my dear."

And Toby, emboldened, thrust warm arms about her neck, and held her close.

CHAPTER XI

THE BUTTERFLY

The perfect rose of a June sunset was slanting through the fir-woods of Burchester Park, making the red trunks glow. At the end of a long grass ride the new moon dipped to the west, a silver boat uptilted in a green transparent sea. A very great stillness lay upon all things—the eventide quiet of a summer day.

The dull thudding of a horse's hoofs along the ride scarcely seemed to break that magic silence. A frightened rabbit scurrying to cover made no sound at all. Somewhere a long way off a cuckoo was calling, tenderly, persistently. Somewhere near at hand a blackbird was warbling to his mate. But it all went into the enchanted silence, blending with the hush of the coming night. The man who rode the horse was conscious only of the peace of his surroundings. He doffed his cap to the moon in mock reverence, and carried it in his hand.

He came to the end of the ride and checked his animal on the brow of a steep descent. The park lay below him wrapped in mystery. On another slope a full mile away stood the Castle, ancient battlemented, starkly splendid, one westward-facing window burning as with fire. He sat motionless for a space, gazing across at it, his face a curious mask of conjecture and regret.

Finally, with great suddenness, he lifted his hand and smote his horse sharply on the flank. In a moment he was being precipitated at a headlong gallop down the hill. He went like the wind, and the enchanted wood was left behind.

Riding up the further slope to the Castle a few minutes later, he was hailed from behind and reined in to look back. A long-legged figure detached itself from a clump of trees that shadowed the bailiff's house and came racing in pursuit.

"Hi! Charlie! Don't be in such a deuce of a hurry! I'm going your way."

Saltash waited, not too patiently. "My good chap, you're dressed and I'm not! I shall be late for my guests."

"What's it matter?" scoffed Bunny breathlessly, reaching his side. "Maud and Jake don't count, and Toby is only a kid. I don't suppose she's ever been out to dine before."

"She's old enough to begin," remarked Saltash, pushing on at a walk.

"Well, she is beginning," said Bunny, with a grin as he strode beside him. "You haven't seen her for some weeks, have you? You'll see a difference, and so will her father."

"How?" said Saltash briefly.

Bunny's grin became more pronounced. "Oh, it's chiefly clothes. Maud is rather clever in that line, you know. I haven't seen a great deal of her lately. She's generally scampering round on horseback with Jake. But once or twice—with Maud—I've seen her look quite demure. She's really getting almost good-looking," he added dispassionately.

Saltash flung a swift look downwards. "Don't you approve?"

Bunny shrugged his shoulders. "I don't see enough of her to care either way. She's still a kid, you know,—quite a kid."

Saltash dropped the subject abruptly. "You're liking your job all right?"

"Rather!" Bunny made instant and enthusiastic reply. "It's just the sort of thing I was made for. Old Bishop's a brick. We're getting quite fond of one another."

"Sort of life you enjoy?" questioned Saltash.

"Oh, rather! I've always thought I'd like to manage a big estate. Wish I'd got one of my own."

"All right. I'll adopt you," laughed Saltash. "You shall be the son of my old age."

"Oh, don't be an ass!" protested Bunny. "Why on earth don't you get married?"

Saltash's brows twisted wryly. "Afraid I've lived too long, *mon cher*. If I had married your sister in the long ago, things might have been vastly different. As it is, I see no prospect of changing my state. Think it matters?"

"Well, it's rather a shame to let a good name die out," maintained Bunny. "And of course it's rot to talk like that about Maud. You can't pretend to have stayed in love with her all these years. There must have been heaps of others since then."

"No, I'm not pretending," said Saltash. "As you say, there have been—heaps of others." He made an odd gesture towards the western sky behind him. "There are always—heaps of stars, Bunny; but there's never more than one moon."

"Rot!" said Bunny.

"It is, isn't it?" said Saltash, and laughed with brief derision. "Well, I must get on. You can do the receiving if I'm late. Tell them I've been in town and only got back at mid-day! You needn't bother about Larpent. I'll see to him."

He flicked his horse's neck and was off with the words.

Bunny, striding after, watched him ride swiftly up the slope till the fir-trees of the avenue hid him from view.

"Queer fish!" he murmured to himself. "Very queer fish!"

He entered the Castle a little later by the great stone hall and found it lighted from end to end as if in preparation for a reception. He had known the place for years, but it always struck him afresh with its magnificence. It looked like a palace of kings. There were some beautiful pieces of statuary both in marble and bronze, and upon each of these a shaded light shone.

At the end of the hall a wide oak staircase that branched mid-way led to an oak gallery that ran round three sides of the hall, and where it divided a high door stood open, showing a lighted room beyond. Bunny left his coat with the silent-stepping butler and went straight up the shallow stairs.

He entered the stately apartment at the top expecting to find it empty. It was the drawing-room—a vast and lofty chamber with satin-covered walls, superbly furnished with old French furniture in royal blue velvet and gilt. There was a further room beyond, but Bunny did not pursue his way thither, for a man in evening-dress turned suddenly from one of the great southward-facing windows and moved to

meet him.

He was a gaunt man with a trim beard and the eyes of the sea-farer, and he walked with a slight roll as if accustomed to pitching decks.

"Sir Bernard Brian?" he said.

Bunny held out his hand. "You're Captain Larpent, of course. I wonder we've never met before. I've heard of you often enough. Sorry you had such bad luck with *The Night Moth*."

"Oh, damnable luck!" said the sailor gloomily.

"Still you came out of it alive," said Bunny consolingly. "And your daughter too. Things might have been worse."

Larpent grunted. "Think so?"

"She does anyway," said Bunny, with a grin.

Larpent grunted again. "Shipboard is not the place for a girl," he remarked.

"Toby seems more at home on horseback than anywhere else," said Bunny.

Larpent gave him a keen look. "Oh, she still goes by that name, does she?" he said.

"What do you call her?" said Bunny.

Larpent snapped his fingers curtly.

"Does she come for that?" asked Bunny.

"Usually," said Larpent.

"Then she's more docile than I thought she was," commented Bunny.

Larpent said nothing. He propped himself against the high mantelpiece and stared morosely out before him to the pine-clad slopes of the park.

"How you must hate being ashore!" said Bunny.

"Why do you say that?" Larpent scarcely removed his moody gaze.

"You look as if you did." There was a hint of chaff in Bunny's voice. He surveyed the gaunt man with humorous interest, seated on one of the gilt chairs with his hands clasped round his knee. "I suppose Saltash will buy another yacht, won't he?"

Larpent's eyes came definitely down to him, grimly contemptuous. "Do you also suppose that would be the same thing?" he said.

Bunny flushed a little, but he accepted the rebuff with a good grace. "I don't know, sir. You see, I've never been the captain of a yacht."

Larpent's hard visage relaxed a little. He resumed his contemplation of the distant pine-woods in silence.

Bunny got up whistling and began to stroll about the room. He was never still for long. He was not very familiar with the state reception-rooms of Burchester Castle and he found plenty to interest him.

Several minutes passed, and he had almost forgotten the silent man who leaned against the fire-place, when suddenly Larpent came out of his melancholy reverie and spoke.

"How long has the child been with these Boltons?"

Bunny paused at the further end of the room. "Let's see! It must be some time now—practically ever since the wreck. It must be about six weeks. Yes; she came just before I left to take on this job—the week of the Graydown Meetings." Bunny's eyes kindled at the memory. "We had some sport the day she came, I remember; quite a little flutter. In fact we soared so high that I thought we were going to create a sensation, and then"—Bunny whistled dramatically—"down we came with a rush, and I was broke!" He began to laugh. "It's rather a shame to tell you, isn't it? But you won't give me away? We've never done it since."

"I shan't give anyone away," said Larpent grimly.

"Good! You're a sport, I can see."

The genuine appreciation in Bunny's voice brought an icy glimmer of amusement to the elder man's eyes, but he made no verbal comment.

Again a silence fell, and Bunny came strolling back, a smile on his handsome boyish face.

"Fine place this," he remarked presently. "It's a pity Saltash is here so little. He only comes about three times a year, and then only for a couple of nights at a time. There's heaps of game in the woods and no one to shoot it."

"He probably knows his own business best," remarked Larpent.

"Oh, probably. But the place is wasted on him for all that." Bunny spoke with a frown. "Why on earth he doesn't marry and settle down I can't think. Can't you persuade him to?"

"No," said Larpent quite definitely.

Bunny glanced at him. "I don't know why not. I know he's considered to have gone the pace a bit, but after all he's no worse than a hundred others. Why the devil shouldn't he marry?"

Larpent shrugged his shoulders. "Don't ask me!" he said.

"Well, he ought to," maintained Bunny. "If you have any influence with him, you ought to persuade him to."

"I haven't," said Larpent.

Bunny flung away impatiently. "It's a confounded shame—a gorgeous family place like this and no one but servants to live in it!"

"It is, isn't it?" giped Saltash, unexpectedly entering from the further door. "Large enough for fifty wives, eh, Bunny? Well, as I said before, you get married and I'll adopt you. It'll save me a lot of trouble. You're so keen on recommending the marriage medicine to other people. Try it yourself, and see how you like it!"

He walked straight down the long room with the words, passing both Larpent and Bunny on his way, pausing by neither. "I like to hear you two discussing my case," he jested. "You, Bunny, who have never had the great disease, and Larpent who has never got over it!"

He approached the open door that led out upon the great staircase, the jest still on his lips and the laughter in his eyes. He reached it and stretched out both hands with a fine gesture of greeting.

"Welcome to my poor hovel!" he said. "Madam, I kneel at your feet."

A clear high laugh answered him from below, and both of his companions turned sharply at the sound.

A figure in white, girlish, fresh as the morning, sprang suddenly into view. Her eager face had the delicate flush of a wild rose. The hair clustered about her temples in tender ringlets of gold. Her eyes, blue and shining, gave her the look of a child just awakened from happy sleep—a child that expects to be lifted up and kissed.

"By—Jove!" murmured Bunny under his breath, staring openly. "By—Jove!"

And these words failed him. He had never been so astounded in his life. This girl—this funny little Toby with the sharp features and pointed chin, the girl-urchin with whom he had chaffed and played—was actually a beauty, and till that amazing moment he had not realized the fact.

As he went forward to greet her, he saw that Larpent was staring also, and he chuckled inwardly at the sight. Decidedly it must be a worse shock for Larpent than it was for himself, he reflected. For at least he had seen her in the chrysalis stage, though most certainly he had never expected this wonderful butterfly to emerge.

Maud, of course, was the witch who had worked the marvellous transformation, Maud with her tender mother-wisdom that divined so much. He looked at her now, and wondered as he met her smile if she fully realized what she had done.

Across the wonder came Saltash's quizzing voice—"Mais, Nonette, Nonette, you are a vision for the gods!"

And a curious hot pang that was like a physical stab went through Bunny. How dared Charlie use that caressing tone to her—as though she were a mere ordinary woman to be trifled with and cajoled? He had never disapproved of Saltash before, but for that moment he almost hated him. She was too young, too sweet, too—different—to be treated thus.

And then he was standing close to her, and Saltash, laughing, pushed him forward. "Do you know this fellow, *ma chère*?"

The wide blue eyes came up to his with a pleased smile of comradeship. "Why, it's Bunny!" the clear voice said. "I'm so glad you're here too—in this ogre's castle."

Her hand gave his a little confiding squeeze, and Bunny's fingers gripped in answer. He realized suddenly that she was nervous, and all the ready chivalry of his nature rose up to protect her. For a moment or two he kept her hand close in his own.

Then Saltash airily took it from him. "Come!" he said lightly. "Here is someone else you ought to know!"

He wheeled her round with the words. She came face to face with Larpent. There was an instant of dead silence, then Toby uttered a little quivering laugh.

"Hullo—Captain!" she said

"Hullo!" said Larpent, paused a moment, then abruptly took her by the chin, and, stooping, touched the wide brow with his lips. "All right?" he asked gruffly.

Toby gave a little gasp; she seemed to be trembling. But in a second she laughed again, with more assurance. "Yes, all right, captain," she said. "I—I—I'm glad to see you again. You all right too?"

Bunny, looking on, made the abrupt discovery that Larpent also was embarrassed. It was Saltash who answered for him, covering the moment's awkwardness with the innate ease of manner which never seemed to desert him.

"Of course he's all right. Don't you worry about him! We're going to buy him another boat as soon as the insurance Company have done talking. Maud, this is my captain, the finest yachtsman you've ever met and my very good friend."

He threw his merry, dare-devil glance at Larpent as he made the introduction, and turned immediately to Jake.

"You two ought to get on all right. He disapproves of me almost as strongly as you do, and—like you—he endures me, he knows not wherefore!"

Jake's red-brown eyes held a smile that made his rugged face look kindly as he made reply. "Maybe we both have the sense to spot a winner when we see one, my lord."

Saltash's brows went up derisively. "And maybe you'll both lose good money on the gamble before you've done."

"I think not," said Jake, in his steady drawl. "I've known many a worse starter than you get home on the straight."

Saltash laughed aloud, and Toby turned with flushed cheeks and lifted eyes, alight and ardent, to her hero's face.

Saltash's glance flashed round to her, the monkeyish grin still about his mouth, and from her to Bunny who stood behind. He did not speak for a moment. Then: "No; you've never known a worse starter, Jake," he said; "and if I do get home on the straight it will be thanks to you."

Very curiously from that moment Bunny found his brief resentment dead.

CHAPTER XII

"Let's go out into the garden!" said Bunny urgently.

Dinner was over, and Maud and Saltash were at the piano at the far end of the great room. Jake and Larpent were smoking in silent companionship at a comfortable distance. Toby, who had been very quiet the whole evening, sat silently apart in a low chair with her hands clasped about her knees. Bunny alone was restless.

She lifted her eyes to him as he prowled near her, and they held a hint of mischief. At his murmured words she rose.

"You'd like to?" he questioned.

She nodded. "Of course; love it. You know the way. You lead!"

Bunny needed no second bidding. He went straight to the tall door and held it open for her. Toby, very slim and girlish in her white raiment, cocked her chin and walked out in state. But the moment they were alone she turned upon him a face brimful of laughter.

"Oh, now we can enjoy ourselves! I've been feeling so proper all the evening. Quick! Where shall we go?"

"Into the garden," said Bunny. "Or wait! Come up on to the battlements! It's ripping up there."

She thrust her hand eagerly into his. "I shall love that. Which way do we go?"

"Through the music-room," said Bunny.

He caught and held her hand. They ran up one of the wide stairways that branched north and south to the Gallery. Saltash's music followed them from the drawing-room as they went. He was playing a haunting Spanish love-song, and Toby shivered and quickened her pace.

They reached another oak door which Bunny opened, drawing her impetuously forward. "This is Charlie's own particular sanctum. Rather a ripping place, isn't it? He's got a secret den that leads somewhere out of it, but no one knows how to get in."

He led her over a polished oak floor into a long, almost empty apartment with turreted windows at each end, and a grand piano near one of them that shone darkly in the shaded lamplight. Underfoot were Persian rugs, exquisite of tint and rich of texture. Two or three deep divans completed the furniture of the room giving it a look of Eastern magnificence that strangely lured the senses.

"Rather like a harem I always think," said Bunny, pausing to look round. "There's an Arabian Nights sort of flavour about it that rather gets hold of one. Why? You're shivering! Surely you're not cold!"

"No, I'm not cold," said Toby. "But I don't like this place. It's creepy. Let's go!"

But Bunny lingered. "What's the matter with it? It's luxurious enough. I've always rather liked coming in here."

Toby made a small but vehement gesture of protest. "Then you like horrid things," she said. "There's no air in here;—only—only—scent."

Bunny sniffed. "Well, it's quite subtle anyhow; not enough to upset anybody. Rather a seductive perfume, what?"

She surprised him by stamping in sudden fury upon the bare floor. "It's beastly! It's hateful! How can you like it? It—it—it's bad! It's—damnable!"

Bunny stared at her. "Well, Charlie designed it anyway. It's the one corner in the whole Castle that is individually his. What on earth is there that you don't like about it?"

"Everything—everything!" declared Toby passionately. "I don't want to stay here another minute. Show me the way out!"

She spoke with such imperiousness that Bunny judged it best to comply. He showed her a door in the eastern wall that was draped by a heavy red curtain.

"You can get up on to the ramparts that way. But wait a minute while I find the switch! What are you

running away from? There isn't a bogey-man anywhere."

Toby drew in her breath sharply with a nervous glance over her shoulder. "I think it's a dreadful place," she said. "I want to get out into the air."

Bunny opened the door, and a dark passage gaped before them. "This looks much more eerie," he observed, feeling about for a switch. "Do you really like this better?"

"Much better," said Toby, going boldly into the darkness.

"Don't believe there is a switch," said Bunny, striking a match. "No, there isn't! How beastly medieval! Look here! Wait while I go and get an electric torch!"

"No, no! Let's feel our way! I'm sure we can," urged Toby. "Come on! It'll be fun. Shut the door!"

The spirit of adventure seized upon Bunny. He let the door swing closed and caught her hand again.

Toby's delighted chuckle told him that she had fully recovered her equilibrium. Her fingers twined closely about his own.

"Now we shall have some fun!" she said.

They went forward together for a few yards in total darkness. Then, from somewhere high above them a faint light filtered through.

"That's on the stairs," said Bunny. "One of those window-slits through which in the old hospitable days all comers were potted at. Look out how you go!"

The words were scarcely uttered when they both kicked against the lowest stair and blundered forward. A squeal of laughter came from Toby. Bunny said "Damn!" with much heartiness and then laughed also.

"I knew it would be fun," said Toby. "Are you hurt?"

He raised her with a strong young arm. "No, I'm all right. Are you?"

"Yes. I'm loving it. What happens next? Do the stairs wind round and round till we get to the top?"

"Yes. There are about six hundred of 'em. Feel equal to it?"

"Equal to anything," said Toby promptly. "Let me go first!"

"Why don't I go and get a light?" said Bunny.

"Because you're not to. Because it's heaps more fun without. Besides, there's lots of light up there. Now then? Are you ready? Come on! Let's go!"

Indomitable resolution sounded in Toby's voice. She drew herself free from Bunny's hold, and began to mount.

"You know it's haunted, don't you?" said Bunny cheerily. "A beautiful lady was once captured and imprisoned in this turret in the dear old days when everyone did those things. She had to choose between throwing herself from the battlements and marrying her wicked captor—an ancestor of Charlie's, by the way. She did the latter and then died of a broken heart. They always did, you know. Her poor little ghost has wandered up and down this stair ever since."

"Idiot!" said Toby tersely.

"Who?" said Bunny. "And why?"

"The woman. Why didn't she throw herself over? It would have been much easier."

"Perhaps she didn't find it so," said Bunny. "And she'd doubtless have done the haunting stunt even if she had."

"Well, then, why didn't she marry the brute and—and—give him hell?" said Toby tensely.

Bunny uttered a shout of laughter that echoed and re-echoed up and down the winding stair.

"Is that what you would have done?"

"I'd have done one or the other," said Toby.

"By Jove, how bloodthirsty you sound!" ejaculated Bunny. "Are you in earnest by any chance?"

"Yes, I am in earnest." There was a note of bitter challenge in Toby's reply. "If a woman hasn't the spunk to defend herself, she's better dead."

"I agree with you there," said Bunny with decision. "But I don't know how you come to know it."

"Oh, I know a lot of things," said Toby's voice in the darkness, and this time it sounded oddly cold and desolate as if the stone walls around them had somehow deadened it.

He put out a hand and touched her, for she seemed in some fashion to have withdrawn from him, to have become remote as the echoes about them. "There are heaps of things you don't know anyway," he said. "You're only a kid after all."

"Think so?" said Toby.

She evaded his hand, flitting up before him towards that grim slit in the wall through which the dim half-light of the summer night vaguely entered. Her light figure became visible to him as she reached it. There came to him a swift memory of the butterfly-beauty that had so astounded him earlier in the evening.

"No, I don't," he said. "You're past that stage. What on earth has Maud been doing to you? Do you know when you first came into the drawing-room tonight I hardly knew you?"

Toby's light laugh came back to him. She was like a white butterfly flitting before him in the twilight. "I wondered what you'd say. I've given up jumping rosebushes, and I'm learning to be respectable. It's rather fun sometimes. Maud is very good to me—and I love Jake, don't you?"

"Yes, he's a brick; always was," said Bunny enthusiastically. "I'd back him every time. But, I say. Don't get too respectable, will you? Somehow it doesn't suit you."

Again he heard her laugh in the darkness—a quick, rather breathless laugh. "I don't think I'll ever be that," she said. "Do you?"

"I don't know," said Bunny. "But you looked scared to death when you came in—as if you were mounted on a horse that was much too high for you. I believe you were afraid of that old daddy of yours."

"I am rather," said Toby. "You see, I don't know him very well. And I'm not sure he likes me."

"Of course he likes you," said Bunny.

"Why? I don't know why he should."

"Everyone does," said Bunny, with assurance.

"Don't be silly!" said Toby.

They were past the slit in the wall, and were winding upwards now towards another. Bunny postponed argument, finding he needed all his breath for the climb. The steps had become narrower and more steeply spiral than before. His companion mounted so swiftly that he found it difficult to keep close to her. The ascent seemed endless.

Again they passed a window-slit, and Bunny suddenly awoke to the fact that the flying figure in front was trying to out-distance him. It came to him in a flash of intuition. She was daring him, she was fooling him. Some imp of mischief had entered into her. She was luring him to pursuit; and like the whirling of a torch in a dark place, the knowledge first dazzled, and then drew him. All his pulses beat in a swift crescendo. There was a considerable mixture of Irish deviltry in Bunny Brian's veins, and anything in the nature of a challenge fired him. He uttered a wild whoop that filled the eerie place with fearful echoes, and gave chase.

It was the maddest race he had ever run. Toby fled before him like the wind, up and up, round and round the winding stair, fleet-footed, almost as though on wings, leaving him behind. He followed, fiercely determined, putting forth his utmost strength, sometimes stumbling on the uneven stairs, yet always leaping onward, urged to wilder effort by the butterfly elusiveness of his quarry. Once he actually had her within his reach, and then he stumbled and she was gone. He heard her maddening laughter as she fled.

The ascent seemed endless. His heart was pumping, but he would not slacken. She should never triumph over him, this mocking imp, this butterfly-girl, who from the first had held him with a fascination he could not fathom. He would make her pay for her audacity. He would teach her that he was more than a mere butt for her drollery. He would show her—

A door suddenly banged high above him. He realized that she had reached the top of the turret and burst out upon the ramparts. A very curious sensation went through him. It was almost a feeling of fear. She was such a wild little creature, and her mood was at its maddest. The chill of the place seemed to wrap him round. He felt as if icy fingers had clutched his heart.

It was all a joke of course—only a joke! But jokes sometimes ended disastrously, and Toby—Toby was not an ordinary person. She was either a featherbrain or a genius. He did not know which. Perhaps there was no very clear dividing line between the two. She was certainly extraordinary. He wished he had not accepted her challenge. If he had refused to follow, she would soon have abandoned her absurd flight through the darkness.

It was absurd. They had both been absurd to come to this eerie place without a light. Somehow her disappearance, the clanging of that door, had sobered him very effectually. He cursed himself for a fool as he groped his way upwards. The game had gone too far. He ought to have foreseen.

And then suddenly he blundered into an iron-clamped door and swore again. Yes, this thing was beyond a joke.

The door resisted him, and he wrestled with it furiously as though it had been a living thing obstructing his passage.

He had begun to think that she must have bolted it on the outside when abruptly it yielded to his very forcible persuasion, and he stumbled headlong forth into the open starlight. He was out upon the ramparts, and dim wooded park-lands stretched away to the sea before his dazzled eyes.

The first thing that struck him was the emptiness of the place. It seemed to catch him by the throat. There was something terrible about it.

Behind him the door clanged, and the sound seemed the only sound in all that wonderful June night. It had a fateful effect in the silence—like the tolling of a bell. Something echoed to it in his own heart, and he knew that he was afraid.

Desperately he flung his fear aside and moved forward to the parapet. The wall was thick, but between the battlements it was only the height of his knee. Below was depth—sheer depth—stark emptiness.

He looked over and saw the stone terrace dimly lit by the stars far below him. The gardens were a blur of darkness out of which he vaguely discerned the glimmer of the lake among its trees.

His heart was beating suffocatingly; he struggled to subdue his panting breath. She was somewhere close to him of course—of course. But the zest of the chase had left him. He felt dizzy, frightened, sick. He tried to raise his voice to call her, and then realized with a start of self-ridicule that it had failed him. He leaned against the parapet and resolutely pulled himself together.

Then he went forward and found himself in a stone passage, actually on the castle wall, between two parapets; the one on his left towering above the inner portion of the castle with its odd, uneven roofs of stone, the one on his right still sheer above the terrace—a drop of a hundred feet or more.

The emptiness and the silence seemed to strike at him with a nebulous hostility as he went. He had a vague sense of intrusion, of being in a forbidden place. The blood was no longer hot in his veins. He even shivered in the warmth of the summer night as he followed the winding walk between the battlements.

But he was his own master now, and as he moved forward through the glimmering starlight he called to her:

"Toby! Toby, I say! Come out! I'm not playing."

He felt as if the silence mocked him, and again that icy construction about the heart made him catch his breath. He put up a hand to his brow and found it wet.

"Toby!" he cried again, and this time he did not attempt to keep the urgency out of his voice. "The game's up. Come back!"

She did not answer him, neither did she come; but he had a strong conviction that she heard. A throb of anger went through him. He strode forward with decision. He knew that the battlement walk ended on the north side of the Castle in a blank wall, built centuries before as a final defence from an invading enemy. Only by scaling this wall could the eastern portion be approached. He would find her here. She could not possibly escape. Something of confidence came back to him as he remembered this. She could not elude him much longer.

He quickened his stride. His face was grim. She had carried the thing too far, and he would let her know it. He rounded the curve of the castle wall. He must be close to her now. And then suddenly he stopped dead. For he heard her mocking laughter, and it came from behind him, from the turret through which he had gained the ramparts.

He wheeled round with something like violence and began to retrace his steps. He had never been so baffled before, and he was angry,—hotly angry.

He rounded the curve once more, and approached the turret. His eyes were accustomed to the dim half-light, but still he could not see her. Fuming, he went back the whole distance along the ramparts till he came to the iron-clamped door that had banged behind him. He put forth an impatient hand to open it, for it was obvious that she must have eluded him by hiding behind it, and now she was probably on the stair. And then, very suddenly, from far behind him, in the direction of the northern wall, he heard her laugh again.

He swung about in a fury, almost too incensed to be amazed. She had the wings of a Mercury, it was evident; but he would catch her—he would catch her now, or perish in the attempt. Once more he traversed the stony promenade between the double line of battlements, searching each embrasure as he went.

All the way back to the wall on the north side he pursued his way with fierce intention, inwardly raging, outwardly calm. He reached the obstructing wall, and found nothing. The emptiness came all about him again. The ghostly quiet of the place clung like a tangible veil. She had evaded him again. He was powerless.

But at that point his wrath suddenly burst into flame, the hotter and the fiercer for its long restraint. He wheeled in his tracks with furious finality and abandoned his quest.

His intention was to go straight down by the way he had come and leave her to play her will-o'-the-wisp game in solitude. It would soon pall upon her, he was assured; but in any case he would no longer dance to her piping. She had fooled him to the verge of frenzy.

Again he rounded the curve of the wall and came to the door of the turret. A great bastion of stone rose beside this, and as he reached it a small white figure darted forward from its shadow with dainty, butterfly movements, pulled at the heavy oak door and held it open with an elaborate gesture for him to pass.

It was a piece of exquisite daring, and with an older man it would have taken effect. Saltash would have laughed his quizzing, cynical laugh and accepted his defeat with royal grace. But Bunny was young and vehement of impulse, and the flame of his anger still scorched his soul with a heat intolerable. She had baffled him, astounded him, humiliated him, and his was not a nature to endure such treatment tamely.

He hung on his stride for a single moment, then hotly he turned and snatched her into his arms.

CHAPTER XIII

THE END OF THE GAME

She cried out sharply as he caught her, and then she struggled and fought like a mad creature for freedom. But Bunny held her fast. He had been hard pressed, and now that the strain was over, all the pent passion of that long stress had escaped beyond control. He held her,—at first as a boy might hold a comrade who had provoked him to exasperation; then, as desperately she resisted him, a new element suddenly rushed like fire through his veins, and he realized burningly, overwhelmingly, that for the first time in his life he held a woman in his arms.

It came to him like a blinding revelation, and forth-with it seemed to him that he stepped into a new world. She had tried him too far, had thrown him off his balance. He was unfit for this further and infinitely greater provocation. His senses swam. The touch of her intoxicated him as though he had drunk a potent draught from some goblet of the gods. He heard himself laugh passionately at her puny effort to resist him and the next moment she was at his mercy. He was pressing fevered kisses upon her gasping, quivering lips.

But she fought against him still. Though he kissed her, she would have none of it. She struck at him, battering him frantically with her hands, stamping wildly with her feet, till he literally swung her off the ground, holding her slender body against his breast.

"You little madcap!" he said, with his hot lips against her throat. "How dare you? Do you think I'd let you go—now?"

The quick passion of his voice or the fiery possession of his hold arrested her. She suddenly ceased to battle with him, and stiffened in his grasp as if turned to stone.

"Let me go!" she said tensely.

"I will not," said Bunny.

He was mad with the fever of youth; he held her with a fierce exultation. There could be no returning now, nor did he wish to return.

"You little wild butterfly!" he said, and kissed the throbbing white throat again. "I've caught you now and you can't escape."

"You've—had your revenge," Toby flung back gaspingly. "You—you—you're a skunk if you take any more."

Oddly that sobered him as any protest more feminine would have failed to do. He set her on her feet, but he held her still.

"I haven't done with you," he said, with a certain doggedness.

"Oh, I know that," she returned very bitterly. "You're like all the men. You can't play fair. Men don't know how."

That stung him. "Fair or unfair, you've done all the playing so far," he said. "If you thought I was such a tame fool as to put up with it—well, that's not my fault."

"No, it's never your fault," said Toby. She made a little vehement movement to extricate herself, but finding him obdurate, abandoned the attempt. "You're not a fool, Bunny Brian. You're a beast and a coward,—there!"

"Be careful!" warned Bunny, his dark eyes gleaming ominously.

But she uttered a laugh of high defiance. "Oh, I'm not afraid of you. You're not full-grown yet. You're ashamed of yourself already."

He coloured deeply at the taunt, but he maintained his hold upon her.

"All right," he said. "Say I did it all! It doesn't matter how you put it. The fact remains."

"What fact?" said Toby swiftly.

He clasped her a little closer. "Well,—do you think I'm going to let you go—after this?"

She caught her breath sharply. "What do you mean? I—I—I don't know what you mean!"

There was quick agitation in her voice. Again she sought to free herself, and again he frustrated her. But the violence had gone out of his hold. There was even a touch of dignity about him as he made reply.

"I mean, you little wild butterfly, that now I've got you, I'm going to keep you. You'll have to marry me and make the best of me."

"Marry you!" said Toby as one incredulous.

"Yes. What's the matter with the idea? Don't you want to?" Bunny's good-looking young face came close to hers. He was laughing, but there was a half-coaxing note in his voice as well.

Toby was silent for a moment. Then: "You're mad!" she said tersely.

"I'm not!" said Bunny. "I'm perfectly serious. Don't you understand that when this kind of thing gets hold of you, there's no getting away from it? We can't possibly go back to where we were before—behave as if nothing had happened. You wouldn't want to, would you?"

There was a hint of pleading in his tone now. Toby made a curious little gesture that seemed to express a measure of reassurance. But, "I don't know," she said somewhat dubiously.

"You aren't angry, are you?" said Bunny softly.

She hesitated. "I was."

"Yes, but not now—when you've begun to realize what a jolly thing life together would be. It isn't as if we'd never met before. We're pals already."

"Yes; we're pals," said Toby, but still her voice was dubious.

"I say, be a sport!" the boy urged suddenly. "You said you weren't afraid of me. Don't chuck the best thing in life for want of a little ordinary courage!"

"What is—the best thing in life?" said Toby.

His hold grew close again, but it remained gentle. "You marry me," he said, "and I'll show you!"

There was something sublime rather than ridiculous in his assurance. Toby caught her breath again as if about to laugh, and then quite suddenly, wholly unexpectedly, she began to cry.

"You poor little darling!" said Bunny.

She leaned her head upon his shoulder, fighting great sobs that threatened to overwhelm her. It was not often that Toby cried, and this was no mere child's distress. Indeed there was about it something that filled her companion with a curious kind of awe. He held her closely and comfortingly, but for some reason he could not speak to her, could not even attempt to seek the cause of her trouble. As his sister had done before him, though almost unconsciously, he sensed a barrier that he might not pass.

Toby regained her self-command at last, stood for a space in silence, her face still hidden, then abruptly raised it and uttered a little quivering laugh.

"You great big silly!" she said. "I'm not going to marry you, so there! Now let me go!"

Her tone and action put him instantly at his ease. This was the Toby he knew.

"Yes, you are going to marry me. And I shan't let you go," he said. "So there!"

She looked him straight in the face. "No, Bunny!" she said, with a little catch in her breath. "You're a dear to think of it, but it won't do."

"Why not?" demanded Bunny.

She hesitated.

He squeezed her shoulders. "Tell me why not!"

"I don't want to tell you," said Toby.

"You've got to," he said with decision.

In the dimness his eyes looked into hers. A little shiver went through Toby. "I don't want to," she said again.

"Go on!" commanded Bunny, autocratically.

She turned suddenly and set her hands against his breast. "Well then, because I'm years and years older than you are—"

"Rot!" interjected Bunny.

"And—I'm not good enough for you!" finished Toby rather tremulously.

"Rats!" said Bunny.

"No, it isn't rats." She contradicted him rather piteously. "You've turned a silly game into deadly earnest, and you shouldn't—you shouldn't. I wouldn't have done it if I'd known. It's such a mistake—it's always such a great mistake—to do that. You say we can't go back to where we were before, but we can—we can. Let's try—anyway!"

"We can't," said Bunny with decision. "And there's no reason why we should. Look here! You don't want to marry anyone else, do you?"

"I don't want to marry at all," said Toby.

He laughed at that. "Darling, of course you'll marry. Come! You might as well have me first as last. You won't get any other fellow to suit you half as well. What? Say you'll have me! Come, you've got to. You don't hate me, do you?"

Again the pleading note was in his voice. She responded to it almost involuntarily. Her hands slipped upwards to his shoulders.

"But—I'm not good enough," she said again, catching back a sob.

His arms enfolded her, closely and tenderly. "Oh, skip that!" he said. "I won't listen."

"You—you—you're very silly," murmured Toby, with her head against his neck.

"No. I'm not. I'm very sensible. Look here, we're engaged now, aren't we?" said Bunny.

"No—no—we're not!" Her voice came muffled against his coat. "You're not to think of such a thing for ages and ages and ages."

"Oh, rot!" he said again with impatience. "I hate a waiting game—especially when there's nothing to wait for. You're not going to give me the go-by now."

His face was close to her again. She put her hand against his chin and softly pushed it away. "Bunny!" she said.

"Well, dear?" He stood, not yielding, but suffering her check.

"Bunny!" she said again, speaking with obvious effort. "I've got to say something. You must listen—just for a minute. Jake,—Jake won't want you to be engaged to me."

"What?" Bunny started a little, as one who suddenly remembers a thing forgotten. "Jake!" Then hotly. "What the devil has it got to do with Jake?"

"Stop!" said Toby. "Jake's quite right. He knows. He—he's older than you are. You—you—you'd better ask him."

"Ask Jake!" Bunny's wrath exploded. "I'm my own master. I can marry whom I like. What on earth should I ask Jake for?"

Toby uttered a little sigh. "You needn't if you don't want to. But if you're wise, you will. He understands. You wouldn't. You see, I've been to a lot of different schools, Bunny—foreign ones—and I've learnt a heap of—rather funny things. That's why I'm so much older than you are. That's why I don't want to get married—as most girls do. I never ought to marry. I know too much."

"But you'll marry me?" he said swiftly.

"I don't know," she said. "Not anyway yet. If—if you can stick to me for six months—I—p'raps I'll think about it. But I think you'll come to your senses long before then, Bunny." A desolate little note of humour sounded in her voice. "And if you do, you'll be so glad not to have to throw me over."

"You're talking rot," he interposed.

"No, I'm not. I'm talking sense—ordinary common sense. I wouldn't get engaged to any man on the strength of what happened to-night. You hadn't even thought of me in that way when we came up here."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Bunny. "Anyway, the mischief is done now. And you needn't be afraid I shall throw you over because—" an unexpected throb came into his voice—"I know now I've simply got to have you."

Toby sighed again. "But if—if I'm not worth waiting for, I'm not worth having," she said.

"But why wait?" argued Bunny.

"For a hundred reasons. You're not really in love with me for one thing." Toby spoke with conviction.

"Yes, I am." Stubbornly he contradicted her.

"No, you're not. Listen, Bunny! Love isn't just a passion-flower that blooms in a single night and then fades. You're too young really to understand, but I know—I know. Love is more like a vine. It takes a long while to ripen and come to perfection, and it has a lot to go through first."

Again a sense of strangeness came to Bunny. Surely this was a grown woman speaking! This was not the wild little creature he knew. But—perhaps it was from perversity—her warning only served to strengthen his determination.

"You can go on arguing till midnight," he said, "you won't convince me. But look here, if you don't want anyone to know, we'll keep it to ourselves for a little while. Will that satisfy you? We'll meet and have some jolly times together in private. Will that make you any happier?"

"We shan't be engaged?" questioned Toby.

"Not if you'll kiss me without," said Bunny generously.

"Oh, I don't mind kissing you—" she lifted her lips at once, "if it doesn't mean anything."

He stooped swiftly and met them with his own. His kiss was close and lingering, it held tenderness; and in a moment her arms crept round his neck and she clung to him as she returned it. He felt a sob run through her slight frame as he held her though she shed no tears and made no sound, and he was stirred to a deeper chivalry than he had ever known before.

"It does mean one thing, darling," he said softly. "It means that we love each other, doesn't it?"

She did not answer him for a moment; then: "It may mean that," she whispered back. "I don't know—very much about—love. No one ever—really—loved me before."

"I love you," he said. "I love you."

"Thank you," she murmured.

He held her still. "You'll never run away from me again? Promise!"

She shook her head promptly with a faint echo of the elfin laughter that had so maddened him a little earlier. "No, I won't promise. But I'll show you where I was hiding if you like. Shall I?"

"All right. Show me!" he said.

She freed herself from him with a little spring, and turned to the stone buttress against which he had found her. He followed her closely, half afraid of losing her again, but she did not attempt to elude him.

"See!" she said, with a funny little chuckle. "I found this ledge."

The ledge she indicated was on a level with the parapet and not more than six inches wide. It ran square with the buttress, which on the outer side dropped sheer to the terrace.

Bunny looked and turned sick. "You never went along there!" he said.

She laughed again. "Yes, I did. It's quite easy if you slide your feet. I'll show you."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" He grabbed her fiercely. "What in heaven's name were you thinking of? How did you learn to do these things?"

She did not answer him. "I wanted to tease you," she said lightly. "And I did it too, didn't I? I pretended I was Andromeda when I got round the corner, but no Perseus came to save me. Only an angry dragon ramped about behind."

Bunny stared at her as if he thought her bewitched. "But you were over by that north wall once. I'll swear you were over there."

"Oh, don't swear!" she said demurely. "It's so wrong. I wasn't there really. I only sent my voice that way to frighten you."

"Good heavens!" gasped Bunny.

She laughed again with gay *insouciance*. "Haven't I given you a splendid evening's entertainment? Well, it's all over now, and the curtain's down. Let's go!"

She turned with her hand in his and led him back to the turret-door.

Reaching it, he sought to detain her. "You'll never do it again? Promise—promise!"

"I won't promise anything," she said lightly.

"Ah, but you must!" he insisted. "Toby, you might have killed yourself."

Her laugh suddenly had a mocking sound. "Oh, no! I shall never kill myself on Lord Saltash's premises," she said.

"Why do you say that?" questioned Bunny.

"Because—*que voulez-vous?*—he would want me neither dead nor alive," she made reckless answer.

"A good thing too!" declared Bunny stoutly.

The echoes of Toby's laughter as she went down the chill, dark stairway had an eerie quality that sent an odd shiver through his heart. Somehow it made him think of the unquiet spirit that was said to haunt the place—a spirit that wandered alone—always alone—in the utter desolation.

PART III

CHAPTER I

THE VIRTUOUS HERO

"How long is this absurd farce to go on?" said Larpent.

"Aren't you enjoying yourself?" grinned Saltash.

Larpent looked sardonic.

Saltash took up the whisky decanter. "My worthy buccaneer, you don't know when you're lucky. If I had a reputation like yours—" He broke off, still grinning. "Well, it's no use crying over spilt milk, is it? Let's spill some whisky instead! Say when!"

Larpent watched him, frowning. "Thanks! That's enough. I should like an answer to my question if you've no objection. How long is this practical joke going to last?"

Saltash turned and looked upon him with a calculating eye. "I really don't know what's troubling you," he remarked. "You've got everything in your favour. I'd change places with you with all the pleasure in the world if circumstances permitted."

"That isn't the point, is it?" said Larpent.

"No? What is the point?" Saltash turned again to the whisky decanter.

"Well, you've got me into a damn' hole, and I want to know how you're going to get me out again." Larpent's voice was gruff and surly; he stared into his tumbler without drinking.

Saltash chuckled to himself with mischievous amusement. "My dear chap, I can't get you out. That's just it. I want you to stay there."

Larpent muttered deeply and inarticulately, and began to drink.

Saltash turned round, glass in hand, and sat down on the edge of the high, cushioned fender. "I really don't think you are greatly to be pitied," he remarked lightly. "The child will soon be married and off your hands."

"Oh, that's the idea, is it?" said Larpent. "Who's going to marry her? Young Brian?"

"Don't you approve?" said Saltash.

"I don't think it'll come off," said Larpent with decision.

"Why not?" An odd light flickered in the younger man's eyes for an instant. "Are you going to refuse your consent?"

"I?" Larpent shrugged his shoulders. "Are you going to give yours?"

Saltash made an elaborate gesture. "I shall bestow my blessing with both hands."

Larpent looked at him fixedly for a few seconds. "You're a very wonderful man, my lord," he remarked drily at length.

Saltash laughed. "Have you only just discovered that?"

Larpent drained his tumbler gravely and put it down. "All the same, I don't believe it will come off," he said.

Saltash moved impatiently. "You always were an unbeliever. But anyone can see they were made for each other. Of course it will come off."

"You want it to come off?" asked Larpent.

"It is my intention that it shall," said Saltash royally.

"You're playing providence in the girl's interest. Is that it?" Again Larpent's eyes, shrewd and far-seeing, were fixed upon him. They held a glint of humour. "It's a tricky job, my lord. You'll wish you hadn't before you've done."

"Think so?" said Saltash.

"If you haven't begun to already," said Larpent.

Saltash looked down at him with a comical twist of the eyebrows. "You're very analytical to-night. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Larpent bluntly. "Except that you're making a mistake."

"Indeed?" For a moment Saltash's look was haughty; then he began to smile again. "I see you're burning to give your advice," he said tolerantly. "Fire away, if it does you any good!"

Larpent's eyes, very steady under their fair, bushy brows, were still unwaveringly upon him. "No, I don't presume to give you advice," he said. "But I'll tell you something which you may or may not know. That young woman you have so kindly bestowed upon me as a daughter worships the ground you tread on, and—that being the case—she isn't very likely to make a dazzling success of it if she marries young Bernard Brian."

He ceased to speak, and simultaneously Saltash jerked himself to his feet with a short French oath that sounded like the snarl of an angry animal. He went across to the windows that were thrown wide to the summer night and stood before one of them with his head flung back in the attitude of one who challenges the universe.

Larpent lay back in his chair with the air of a man who has said his say. He did not even glance towards his companion, and there followed a considerable pause before either of them spoke again.

Abruptly at length Saltash wheeled.

"Larpent!" There was something of a whip-lash quality about his voice; it seemed to cut the silence. "Why the devil do you tell me this? Can't you see that it's the very thing I'm guarding against? Young Bunny is the best remedy she could take for a disease of that kind. And after all,—she's only a child."

"Do you say that for your own benefit or for mine?" said Larpent, without turning his head.

"What do you mean?" Savagely Saltash flung the question, but the man in the chair remained unmoved.

"You know quite well what I mean," he said. "You know that it isn't true."

"What isn't true?" Saltash came swiftly back across the room, moving as if goaded. He took his tumbler from the mantel-piece and drank the contents almost at a gulp. "Go on!" he said, with his back to Larpent. "May as well finish now you've begun. What isn't true?"

Larpent lounged in his chair and watched him, absolutely unmoved.

"When a thing is actually in existence—an accomplished fact—it's rather futile to talk of guarding against it," he said, in his brief, unsympathetic voice. "You've been extraordinarily generous to the imp, and it isn't surprising that she should be extraordinarily grateful. She wouldn't be human if she weren't. But when it comes to handing her on to another fellow—well, she may consent, but it won't be because she wants to, but because it's the only thing left. She knows well enough by this time that what she really wants is out of her reach."

Again Saltash made a fierce movement, but he did not turn or speak.

Larpent took out his pipe and began to fill it. "You've been too good a friend to her," he went on somewhat grimly, "and you're not made of the right stuff for that sort of thing. I'm sorry for the kid because she's a bit of a pagan too, and it's hard to have to embrace respectability whether you want to or not."

"Oh, damn!" Saltash exclaimed, suddenly and violently. "What more could any man have done? What the devil are you driving at?"

He turned upon Larpent almost menacingly, and found the steady eyes, still with that icy glint of humour in them, unflinchingly awaiting his challenge.

"You want to get married," the sailor said imperturbably. "Why in the name of all the stars of destiny don't you marry her? She may not have the blue blood in her veins, but blood isn't everything, and you've got enough for two. And it's my opinion you'd find her considerably easier to please than some—less strict in her views too, which is always an advantage to a man of your varying moods."

Saltash's laugh had a curious jarring sound as of something broken. "Oh, you think that would be a suitable arrangement, do you? And how long do you think I should stick to her? How long would it be before she ran away?"

"I never speculate so far as you are concerned," said Larpent, shaking the tobacco back into his pouch with care.

"You think it wouldn't matter, perhaps?" gibed Saltash. "My royal house is so inured to scandal that no one would expect anything else?"

"I don't think she is the sort to run away," said Larpent quietly. "And I'm pretty sure of one thing. You could hold her if you tried."

"An ideal arrangement!" sneered Saltash. "And I should then settle down to a godly, righteous, and sober life, I suppose? Is that the idea?"

"You said it," observed Larpent, pushing his pipe into his mouth.

Saltash lodged one foot on the high fender, and stared at it. The sneer died out of his face and the old look, half mischievous, half melancholy, took its pace. "I haven't—seriously—contemplated marriage for eight years," he said, his mouth twitching a little as with a smile suppressed. "Not since the day I tried to steal Maud Brian away from Jake—and failed—rather signally. I don't think I've ever done anything quite so low down since."

Larpent lighted his pipe with grave attention. "A good thing for you both that you did fail!" he observed.

"Think so?" Saltash glanced at him. "Why?"

"She isn't the woman for you." Larpent spoke with the absolute conviction of one who knows. "She has too many ideals. Now this sprat you caught at Valrosa—has none."

"Not so sure of that," said Saltash.

"Well, no illusions anyway." There was a hint of compassion in Larpent's voice. "It wasn't because she trusted you that she put herself under your protection. She didn't trust you. She simply chucked herself at you with her eyes open. Like Jonah's whale, you were the only shelter within reach. I'd wager a substantial sum that she's never had any illusions about you. But if you held up your little finger she'd come to you. She's your property, and it isn't in her to do anything else, let her down as often as you will."

Saltash made an excruciating grimace. "My good fellow, spare me! That's just where the shoe pinches. I've broken faith with her already. But—damnation!—what else could I do? I didn't choose the part of virtuous hero. It was thrust upon me. The gods are making sport of me. I am lost in a labyrinth of virtue, and horribly—most horribly—sick of it. I nearly broke through once, but the wreck pulled me up, and when I recovered from that, I was more hopelessly lost than before."

"So you are not enjoying it either!" remarked Larpent, with the glimmer of a smile. "But you don't seem to have let her down very far."

Saltash brought his foot down with a bang. "I swore I'd keep her with me. I meant—oh, God knows what I meant to do. I didn't do it anyway. I broke my oath and I made her go, and she never uttered a word of reproach—not one word! Do you think I'll let her ruin herself by marrying me after that? Like Jonah's whale I've managed to throw her up on to dry land, and if she gets swamped again, it won't be my fault."

He began to laugh again suddenly and cynically—the bitter laugh of a man who hides his soul; and Larpent leaned back in his chair again, as if he recognized that the discussion was over.

"I don't suppose anyone will blame you for it," he said.

"No one will have the chance," said Saltash.

CHAPTER II

THE COMPACT

The polo-ground at Fairharbour was reckoned as one of the greatest attractions the town possessed. Because of it, and the Graydown race-course an ever-increasing stream of visitors poured yearly into the town and its neighbourhood, and very fashionable crowds were wont to gather during the summer season at the various hotels which had sprung up during recent years for their accommodation.

The old Anchor Hotel facing the shore had been bought by a syndicate and rebuilt and was now a very modern erection indeed. It boasted a large lounge, palm-decked and glass-covered, in which a string band played for several hours of the day, and the constant swing of its doors testified to the great popularity to which it had attained since its renovation.

To Bunny, who had known the place under very different circumstances in his boyhood, it was always a source of amusement to drop in and mark progress. The polo-ground was only a few yards away, and he had become an ardent member of the Club to which he almost invariably devoted two afternoons of the week.

He was a promising player, and his keenness made him a favourite. He rode Lord Saltash's ponies, Saltash himself very seldom putting in an appearance. He was wont to declare that he had no time for games, and his frequent absences made it impossible for him to take a very active part in the proceedings of the Club which he had himself inaugurated in an idle hour. He dropped in occasionally to watch a game, and he took interest in Bunny's progress; but he was very rarely moved to play himself. He was too restless, too volatile, to maintain any lasting enthusiasm for any pastime. All that was generally seen of him when staying at Burchester was a lightning glimpse as he tore by in his car, or else galloped furiously over the downs and along the hard sands in the early morning.

He was a good deal in town as a rule during the season, but with the general exodus in July he was invariably the first to go, driven by a fever that gave him no rest. Even his most intimate friends seldom knew where he was to be found or whither his wild fancy would take him next. No one was sure of him at any time. He would accept an engagement and throw it up again without scruple if it did not accord with his mood. Yet wherever he went he could always command a welcome—at least from the feminine

portion of the community who declared that Charles Rex could not be judged by ordinary standards; he was a law unto himself.

Even Bunny did not know where he was on that hot afternoon in mid-July when all Fairharbour gathered to watch a match between the regular team and the visitors. It bid fair to be an exciting event, and he was in high spirits at being one of those chosen to play. Maud had promised to bring Toby down to see the game at his special request. He had seen very little of Toby since that night at the Castle, though he was forced to admit to himself that if she avoided him of set purpose she did it in a fashion that baffled detection. She seemed to have settled down as a regular inmate of Jake's household, and with the exception of her early rides with Jake she gave herself up almost exclusively to helping Maud with the children. She had eased his sister's burden in a wonderful fashion, and the children loved her dearly. Her readiness and her sweet temper never seemed to fail. She was but a child herself, but Bunny had an uneasy feeling that she was changing. She had stipulated for six months, but he sometimes wondered if by the end of that time she would not have contrived to put herself out of his reach. It was that suspicion that kept him hotly determined to pursue her untiringly till he captured her. Even at a distance that odd charm of hers lured him strongly, and he knew instinctively that if once she were launched in society his chances of victory would be very greatly reduced. He wished he could have seen more of Captain Larpent and possibly have enlisted his sympathy, but he had left the Castle with Saltash, and even Toby herself professed ignorance of his whereabouts. It was evident that they had never seen much of one another, and Bunny realized that he would look in vain for help in that quarter.

He doggedly maintained his resolve to win her none the less, and his visits to his sister's house were frequent. He spoke no word on the subject either to Maud or Jake. Toby should not feel that he had in any sense taken a mean advantage. But he never looked at her without the quick longing to take her in his arms rising in his heart, and though the longing was never satisfied he believed that she was aware of it. She was always friendly with him and never embarrassed in his presence. Yet he had a strong feeling that by some subtle means she was holding him off. He bided his time with what patience he could muster, but he was determined it should not be for long.

The work on Saltash's estate had done him good. He was keen to prove himself, and the vigorous, out-door life suited him. Jake saw with satisfaction that he was developing a self-reliance and resourcefulness that had not characterized him formerly. He had given up racing according to his promise, and the life he now led was after Jake's own heart, an existence of wholesome activity that was making of him exactly the type of man that he desired him to become. The boy was a gentleman and there was fine stuff in him. Jake gloried in the fact. There had always been in Bunny qualities that appealed to him very strongly, and it was in a large measure due to his influence that those qualities had ripened as they had.

He did not accompany Maud and Toby down to Fairharbour, for business kept him at the Stables. "Bring him back with you!" he said to his wife at parting, and she smiled and promised. Bunny was never difficult to persuade.

But when they reached the polo-ground he was in the midst of a crowd of visitors from the hotel, and it seemed at first as if he would have no time to spare for them. He very speedily detached himself, however, at sight of them and came up with an eager greeting.

"So awfully glad you've come. There are some people here you used to know, Maud, in the old days. Friends of Charlie's too. The Melroses—you remember them, don't you?"

The name came upon Maud with a curious shock. Yes, she remembered the Melroses. They belonged to the long, long ago before her marriage—to that strange epoch in her early girlhood when Charlie Burchester had filled her world. How far away it seemed! They had all been in the same set, they and the Cressadys who had been responsible for the scandal that had so wrung her proud heart. Lady Cressady had been dead for years. She wondered if Charlie had ever regretted her. It had been but a passing fancy, and she suspected that he had forgotten her long since. He had never really taken her seriously; of that she was convinced now. Life had been merely a game with him in those days. It was only recently that it had begun to be anything else.

She felt no keen desire to resume the long-forgotten acquaintance with the Melroses, but Bunny evidently expected it of her, had already told them about her, and she had no choice.

She followed him therefore, Toby very sedate and upright behind her. Toby was looking wonderfully pretty that day. She varied as a landscape varies on a windy day, but that afternoon she was at her best. Her blue eyes looked forth upon the crowd with a hint of audacity, and her *piquante* little face was full of charm.

Bunny's look dwelt upon her as he drew aside for his sister to pass him at the pavilion. He pinched her elbow with a sudden smile.

"You don't want to go and talk to those people. Come with me and see the ponies!"

She responded with characteristic eagerness to the invitation. "Shall I? But won't Maud mind? Do you think I ought?"

"Of course you ought," he rejoined with decision. "Maud won't care. I'll bring you back to her before the play begins."

He drew her away through the crowd, and she went with him without further demur. Bunny was tall and bore himself with distinction. There was, moreover, something rather compelling about him just then, and Toby felt the attraction. She suffered the hand that grasped her own.

"Look here!" he said abruptly, as they drew apart from the throng. "I've got to see more of you somehow. Have you been dodging me all this time?"

"I?" said Toby.

She met his eyes with a funny little chuckle. There was spontaneous mischief in his own.

He gave her hand an admonitory squeeze. "I'm not laughing. You're not playing the game. What's the good of my coming to the house to see you if we never meet?"

"Don't understand," said Toby briefly.

"Yes, you do. Or you can if you try. You never seem to have any liberty now-a-days. Is it Maud's doing or your own?"

Toby laughed again lightly and bafflingly. "I can do anything I want to do," she said.

"Oh, can you?" Bunny pounced. "Then you've got to meet me sometimes away from the rest. See? Come! That's only fair."

Toby made a face at him. "Suppose I don't want to?" she said.

He laughed into her eyes. "Don't tell me that! When and where?"

She laughed back. He was hard to resist. "I don't know. I'm too busy."

"Rot!" said Bunny.

"You're very rude," she remarked.

"I'll be ruder when I get the chance," he laughed. "Listen, I want to see you alone very badly. You're not going to let me down."

"I don't know what I'm going to do yet," said Toby.

But she could not look with severity into the handsome young face that was bent to hers. It was not in her to repulse a friendly influence. She had to respond.

"I'll tell you what you're going to do," said Bunny, marking her weakening with cheery assurance. "You'll take Chops for a walk to-morrow evening through the Burchester Woods. You know that gate by the larch copse? It's barely a mile across the down. Be there at seven, and perhaps—who knows?—perhaps—Chops may meet somebody he's rather fond of."

"And again perhaps he mayn't," said Toby, suppressing a dimple.

"Oh, I say, that's shabby! You'll give him the chance anyhow?"

The pleading note sounded in Bunny's voice. Toby suddenly dropped her eyes. She looked as if she were bracing herself to refuse.

Bunny saw and quickly grappled with the danger. "Give him the chance!" he urged softly into her ear. "You won't be sorry—afterwards."

She did not lift her eyes, but somehow the enchantment held. By a bold stroke he had entered her defences, and she could not for the moment drive him out. She was silent.

"You'll come?" whispered Bunny.

They were nearing a little group of ponies that were being held in readiness at the end of the field. Toby quickened her pace.

He kept beside her, but he did not speak again. And perhaps his silence moved her more than speech, for she gave a little impulsive turn towards him and threw him her sudden, boyish smile.

"All right. We'll come," she said.

"Hooray!" crowed Bunny softly.

"But I shan't stay long," she warned him. "And if I don't like it, I shall never come again."

"You will like it," said Bunny with confidence.

"I wonder," said Toby with her chin in the air.

CHAPTER III

L'OISEAU BLEU

Bunny surpassed himself that afternoon. Wherever he went, success seemed to follow, and shouts of applause reached him from all quarters.

"That young fellow is a positive genius," commented General Melrose, who had a keen eye for the game. "He ought to be in the Service. Why isn't he, Mrs. Bolton?"

"He wasn't considered strong enough," Maud said. "It was a great disappointment to him. You see, he spent the whole of his childhood on his back with spine trouble. And when that was put right he outgrew his strength."

"Ah! I remember now. You used to wheel the poor little beggar about in a long chair. Well, he's rather different now from what he was in those days. Not much the matter with him, is there?"

"Nothing now," Maud said.

"What does he do with himself?" asked the General, surveying the distant figure at that moment galloping in a far corner of the field.

"He is agent on Lord Saltash's estate at Burchester," his daughter said, suddenly entering the conversation. "He was telling me about it at luncheon. He and Lord Saltash are friends."

"Ah! To be sure!" General Melrose's look suddenly came to Maud and she felt herself colour a little.

"He is an old friend of the family," she said. "We live not far from the Castle. My husband owns the Graydown Stables."

"Oh, I know that," the General said courteously. "I know your husband, Mrs. Bolton, and I am proud to know him. What I did not know until to-day was that he was your husband. I never heard of your marriage."

"We have been married for eight years," she said with a smile.

"It must be at least ten since I saw you last," he said. "This girl of mine—Sheila—must have been at school in those days. You never met her?"

Maud turned to the girl. "I don't think we have ever met before," she said. "Is this your first visit to Fairharbour?"

"My first visit, yes." Sheila leaned forward. She was a pretty girl of two-and-twenty with a quantity of soft dark hair and grey eyes that held a friendly smile. "We don't go to the sea much in the summer as a rule. We get so much of it in the winter. Dad always winters in the South. It only seems a few weeks since we came back from Valrosa."

Maud was conscious of an abrupt jerk from Toby on her other side, and she laid a hand on her arm with the kindly intention of drawing her into the conversation. But the next instant feeling tension

under her hand, she turned to look at her, and was surprised to see that Toby was staring out across the field with wide, strained eyes. She looked so white that Maud had a moment of sharp anxiety.

"Is anything the matter, dear?" she whispered.

An odd little tremor went through Toby. She spoke with an effort. "I thought he was off his pony that time, didn't you?"

She kept her eyes upon Bunny who was coming back triumphant.

Maud smiled. "Oh, I don't think there is much danger of that. Miss Melrose was talking about Valrosa. You were there too last winter, weren't you?"

The colour mounted in Toby's face. She turned almost defiantly. "Just for a day or two. I was at school at Geneva. I went there to join my father."

"I was at school at Geneva a few years ago," said Sheila Melrose. "You didn't go to Mademoiselle Denise, I suppose?"

"No," said Toby briefly. "Madame Beaumonde."

"I never heard of her," said Sheila. "It must have been after I left."

Toby nodded. "I wasn't there long. I've never been anywhere long. But I've left school now, and I'm going to do as I like."

"A very wise resolution!" commented a laughing voice behind her. "It's one of the guiding principles of my life."

All the party turned, Toby with a quick exclamation muffled at birth. Saltash, attired in a white yachting suit and looking more than usually distinguished in his own fantastic fashion, stood with his hand on the back of Toby's chair.

"Quite a gathering of old friends!" he declared, smiling impartially upon all.

General Melrose stretched a welcoming hand to him. "Hullo, Saltash! Where on earth have you sprung from? Or are you fallen straight out of the skies?"

"Like Lucifer, son of the morning!" laughed Saltash. "Well, I haven't sprung and I haven't fallen. I have simply arrived."

Toby was on her feet. "Come and sit down!" she said in a low voice.

He shook his head. "No, no, *ma chérie*. I will stand behind you. Miss Melrose, my humble regards to you. Is the black mark still against my name?"

Sheila looked at him with a touch of *hauteur* that somehow melted into a smile. She had learnt her lesson at Valrosa, and there was nothing to add thereto. This man was never in earnest, and he had never intended her to think him so.

"I banned you as bold and bad long ago," she said. "I don't remember that you have done anything to change the impression."

He laughed lightly, enigmatically. "Nothing in your presence, I fear. The Fates have always been sportive so far as I was concerned. But really I'm not such a bad sort now-a-days, am I, Mrs. Bolton?"

Maud smiled upon him. "Not so bad, I think. But please don't ask me to be your sponsor! I really couldn't play the part."

"Ask me!" said Toby suddenly, with flushed face up-raised. "He saved my life when *The Night Moth* went down, when most men would only have bothered to save their own."

"What a libel!" laughed Saltash. "Don't you know I only hung on to you because you had a life-belt on!"

"Oh, naturally!" said the General. "That would be your motive. I was sorry to hear about *The Night Moth*, but you had a lucky escape."

"I always escape somehow," remarked Saltash complacently. "*The Night Moth* wanted new engines too, that's one consolation. I've just bought another," he added, suddenly touching Toby's shoulder. "Your daddy is quite pleased with her. We've just come round from London in her."

"Oh, have you?" Eagerly Toby's eyes came up to his, "What is she like? What are you going to call her?"

"She isn't christened yet. I'm going to hold a reception on board, and Maud shall perform the ceremony. I'm calling her *The Blue Moon*—unless you can suggest something better." Saltash's restless look went to Maud. "I wanted to call her after you," he said lightly, "But I was afraid Jake might object."

"I think *The Blue Moon* is much more suitable," she answered. "Is she as rare as she sounds?"

"She's rather a fine article," he made answer. "You must come and see her—come and cruise in her if you will. She's only just off the slips. I was lucky to get her. She skims along like a bird."

"Why not call her *The Blue Bird*?" suggested Sheila.

He shook his head with his odd grimace. "That is a thing I can never hope to possess, Miss Melrose. The blue moon may occur once in my life if I am exceptionally virtuous, but the blue bird never. I have ceased to hope for it." His glance flashed beyond her. "Young Bunny is distinguishing himself to-day. That was a fine effort."

Everyone was clapping except Toby who was staring before her with her hands in her lap. Her blue eyes were very wide open, but they did not seem to be watching the game.

"It will fly to you, *chérie*," suddenly whispered a voice in her ear. "It is already upon the wing."

A little tremor went through her, but she did not turn her head. Only after a moment she slipped a hand behind her through the back of her chair.

Wiry fingers closed upon it, gripped it, let it go. "When it comes to you, hold it fast!" came the rapid whisper. "*Il ne vient pas deux fois—l'oiseau bleu.*"

Toby's lip trembled. She bit it desperately. Her look was strained. She did not attempt to speak.

"It is the gift of the gods, *chérie*." The words came softly at her shoulder, but they pierced her. "We do not cast their gifts away. They come—too seldom."

She made a quick movement; it was almost convulsive, like the start of one suddenly awakened. A hard breath went through her, and then she was laughing, laughing and clapping with the rest, her eyes upon the boyish, triumphant figure in front of her. When the applause died away, Saltash had departed, abruptly as was his wont. And though they saw him in the distance several times, he did not return that afternoon.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRAP

It was an evening of golden silence, and the larch copse in its stillness was like an enchanted wood. Now and then something moved in the undergrowth with a swift rustle or a blackbird raised a long ripple of alarm. But for the most part all was still. No breeze came up the hillside, and in the west a long black line of cloud lay like a barrier across the sun, so that great rays slanted out over land and sea, transforming all things with their radiance.

A soft low whistle broke the stillness or mingled with it. A snatch of melody came like the strains of a fairy pipe from the edge of the larch wood. Again there came a sharp movement in some long grass near the gate that led from the open down into the Burchester estate. It sounded as if some small imprisoned creature were fighting for freedom. Then in another moment there came the rush and snuffle of a questing dog, and old Chops the setter came bursting through the hedge that bordered the wood.

He flung himself through the long grass with an agility that belied his advancing years, and in an instant there arose a cry that seemed to thrill the whole wood with horror. The enchanted silence broke upon it like the shivering of a crystal ball, for as Chops pounced another cry rang clear and commanding from the other side of the hedge.

"Chops! Back! Back! Do you hear, Chops? Come back."

Chops did not come back, but he paused above his quarry, and looked round with open jaws and lolling tongue. If it had been his master who thus called him, he would have obeyed on the instant. But Toby was a different matter, and the frantic, struggling thing in front of him was a sore temptation.

His brief hesitation, however, lost him the game. Her light feet raced through the grass with the speed of wings, and she threw herself over the gate and upon him before he could make good his claim. He found himself thrust back, and the long habit of obedience had conquered instinct before it could reassert itself. She dropped upon her knees beside the thing in the grass and discovered a young hare caught in a snare.

It was a very ordinary poacher's contrivance fashioned of wire. The little animal was fairly caught round the body, and the cruel tension of the gin testified to his anguished and futile struggles for freedom. The wire had cut into his shoulder, and his bolting eyes were wild with terror. It was no easy task to loosen the trap, and there was blood on Toby's hands as she strove to release the straining, frenzied creature.

She was far too deeply engrossed in the matter to heed any sound of approaching feet, and when the thud of a horse's hoofs suddenly fell on the turf close to her she did not raise her head. But she did look up startled when two hands swooped down from above her and gripped the hare with a vice-like strength that stilled all struggling.

"He will claw you to pieces," said Bunny bluntly. "Shall I kill him? He's damaged. Or do you want to let him go?"

"Oh, let him go—of course!" cried Toby, dragging reckless at the wire. "See, it's coming now! Hold him tight while I slip it off!"

The wire slipped at last. She forced it loose, and the victim was free. Bunny turned to lay him in the grass, and Toby sprang upon Chops and held him fast. She was crying, fiercely, angrily.

"How dare they set that cruel thing? How dare they? He isn't dead, is he? Why doesn't he run away?"

"He's hurt," said Bunny. "Let me kill him! Let Chops finish him!"

"No, no, no, no!" Vehemently Toby flung her protest. "He may be hurt, but he'll get over it. Anyway, give him his chance! There! He's moving! It wouldn't be fair not to give him his chance."

"It would be kinder to kill him," said Bunny.

"I hate you!" she cried back, weeping over Chops who stood strained against her. "If—if—if you touch him—I'll never, never speak to you again!"

Bunny came to her, took Chops by the collar, and fastened him with his whip to the gate. Then he stooped over Toby, his young face sternly set.

"Stop crying!" he said. "Let me have your hands!"

They were a mass of scratches from the hare's pounding feet. He began to look at them, but Toby thrust them behind her back. She choked back her tears like a boy, and looked up at him with eyes of burning indignation, sitting back on her heels in the long grass.

"Bunny, it's a damn' shame to trap a thing like that. Did you do it?"

"I? No. I'm not a poacher." Grimly Bunny made reply. That flare of anger made her somehow beautiful, but he knew if he yielded to the temptation to take her in his arms at that moment she would never forgive him. "Don't be unreasonable!" he said. "You'll have to come and bathe your hands. They can't be left in that state."

"Oh, what does it matter?" she said impatiently. "I've had much worse things than that to bear. Bunny, you believe in God I know. Why does He let things be trapped? It isn't fair. It isn't right. It—it—it hurts so."

"Lots of things hurt," said Bunny.

"Yes, but there's nothing so mean and so horrible as a trap. I—I could kill the man who set it. I'm glad it wasn't you." Toby spoke passionately.

"So am I," said Bunny.

He crumpled the wire gin in his hand, and dragged it up from the ground.

Toby watched him still kneeling in the grass. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Destroy it," he said promptly.

She smiled at him, the tears still on her cheeks. "That's fine of you. Bunny, I haven't got a handkerchief."

He gave her his, still looking grim. She dried her eyes and got up. The hare, recovering somewhat, gave her a frightened stare and slipped away into the undergrowth. She looked up at Bunny.

"I'm sorry I was angry," she said. "Are you cross with me?"

He relaxed a little. "Not particularly."

"Don't be!" she said tremulously. "I couldn't help it. He suffered so horribly, and I know—I know so well what it felt like."

"How do you know?" said Bunny.

Her look fell before his. She made an odd movement of shrinking. He put his arm swiftly round her.

"Never mind the wretched hare! He's got away this time anyway. And I'm not at all sure you didn't have the worst of it. Feeling better now?"

She nodded. "Yes, much better. I like you, Bunny, but I can't help thinking you're rather cruel. You didn't want to kill the poor thing?"

"I think it was rather prolonging the agony to let him live," said Bunny. "Let me see your hands!"

She tried to hide them, but he was insistent, and at length impulsively she yielded.

"You must come down to old Bishop's and bathe them," he said.

She shook her head instantly. "No, Bunny, I'm not going to. I'll run down to the lake if you like. There's sure not to be anyone there."

"All right," said Bunny, but he lingered still with his arm about her. "Will you kiss me, Toby?" he said suddenly.

"No," she said, and swiftly averted her face.

His arm tightened for a second, then he felt her brace herself against him and let her go. "All right," he said again. "We'll go down to the lake."

She threw him a swift glance of surprise, but he turned away to release Chops and unfasten his horse without further discussion.

Their way lay along a grass ride that ran beside the larch wood. Bunny walked gravely along, leading his horse. Toby moved lightly beside him.

Behind them the silence closed like the soft folds of a curtain, but it was not a silence devoid of life. As they drew away from the place, a man stepped out from the larches and stood motionless, watching them. A whimsical smile that was not without bitterness hovered about his mouth. As they passed from sight, he turned back into the trees and walked swiftly and silently away.

It was nearly a mile across the park to the lake in the hollow, and the boy and girl tramped it steadily with scarcely a word. Chops walked sedately by Toby's side, occasionally poking his nose under her hand. Bunny's face was stern. He had the look of a man who moved with a definite goal in view.

They came to the beechwood that surrounded the lake. The Castle from its height looked down over the terraced gardens upon one end of the water. It was a spot in fairyland.

They came to a path that led steeply downwards, and Bunny stopped. "I'll leave my animal here," he said.

Toby did not wait. She plunged straight down the steep descent. When he rejoined her, she was at

the water's edge. She knelt upon a bed of moss and thrust her hands into the clear water. He stood above her for a moment or two, then knelt beside her and took the wet wrists very gently into a firm hold. She made a faint resistance, but finally yielded. He looked down at the hands nervously clenched in his grasp. He was older in that moment, more manly, than she had ever seen him.

"What's the matter, little girl?" he said softly. "What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing," said Toby instantly, and threw up her chin in the old dauntless way.

He looked at her closely. "Sure?"

The blue eyes met his with defiance. "Of course I'm sure. That horrid trap upset me, that's all."

He continued to look at her steadily. "That isn't why you won't have anything to say to me," he said.

Her colour rose under his gaze, but she would not avoid it. "Does it matter why?" she said.

"It does when I want to know," he answered. Again his look went to her hands. "How the little brute scored you! So much for gratitude!"

"You don't expect gratitude from a creature wild with fright," said Toby.

She spoke rather breathlessly, and he saw that she was on the verge of tears again. He got up and drew her to her feet.

"Let's walk for a bit!" he said.

She stood as one in doubt and he felt that she was trembling.

"I say—don't!" he said suddenly and winningly. "I won't do anything you don't like, I swear. You shan't be bothered. Can't you trust me?"

She made a little movement towards him, and he put his arm round her shoulders. They turned along the greensward side by side.

"It was awfully nice of you to come," Bunny said in that new gentle voice of his. "I didn't mean you to get there first, but old Bishop is so long-winded I couldn't get away."

"It didn't matter," said Toby with a nervous little smile.

"It did to me," said Bunny. "It would have saved you that anyway."

"But you'd have killed the hare," she said.

"Not if he hadn't been damaged," he said. "I'm not a brute. I don't kill for the sake of killing."

She looked incredulous. "Most men do. Don't you hunt? Don't you shoot?"

"Oh, you're talking of sport!" said Bunny.

"Yes, it's called sport," said Toby, an odd little vibration in her voice. "It's just a name for killing things, isn't it?"

Bunny considered the matter. "No, that's not fair," he decided. "Sport is sport. But I prefer to walk up my game and I never countenance digging out a fox. That's sport."

"There are very few sportsmen in the world," said Toby.

"Oh, I don't know. Anyway, I hope I'm one of 'em. I try to be," said Bunny.

She gave him a quick look. "I think you are. And so is Jake."

"Oh, Jake! Jake's magnificent. He's taught me all I know in that line. I used to be a horrid little bounder before I met Jake. He simply made me—body and soul." Bunny spoke with a simple candour.

"P'raps he had good stuff to work on," suggested Toby.

Bunny's arm drew her almost imperceptibly. "I don't think he had. My father was a wild Irishman, and my mother—well, she's dead too—but she wasn't anything to be specially proud of."

"Oh, was your mother a rotter?" said Toby, with sudden interest.

He nodded. "We don't talk about her much, Maud and I. She married a second time—a brute of a man who used to run the Anchor Hotel. They went to Canada, and she died."

"The Anchor Hotel!" said Toby. "That place at Fairharbour down by the shore?"

"Yes, Maud and I were there too at first. I was a cripple in those days, couldn't even walk. We had a fiendish time there—till Jake came."

"Ah!" Toby's blue eyes suddenly gleamed. "Did Maud marry Jake to get away?" she asked.

Bunny nodded again and began to smile. "Yes. We were in a beastly hole, she and I. Something had to be done."

"She didn't love him then?" questioned Toby, almost with eagerness.

"Oh no, not then. Not till long after. Jake and I were the pals. He was always keen enough on her, poor chap. But Charlie complicated matters rather in those days. You see, Charlie came first—before she ever met Jake."

"Charlie?" said Toby quickly.

"Lord Saltash. You knew he was an old friend, didn't you?"

"I didn't know—that he—and Maud—ever loved each other." Toby halted over the words as if they were somehow difficult to utter.

Bunny enlightened her with a boy's careless assurance. "Oh, that's a very old story. They were very fond of each other in their youth. In fact they were practically engaged. Then Charlie, who has always been a bit giddy, went a bit too far with Lady Cressady who was also a somewhat gay young person, and Sir Philip Cressady, who was a brute, tried to divorce her. He didn't succeed. The case fell through. But it set everyone by the ears, and Maud threw Charlie over. He pretends he didn't care, but he did—pretty badly, and he's never married in consequence."

"Oh, is that why?" said Toby.

"That's why. He's gone the pace fairly rapidly ever since. But he's a good chap at heart. Even Jake acknowledges that now, and he knows him as well as anyone."

"And—Maud?" said Toby, in a low voice. She was not looking at Bunny, but staring out over the still waters of the lake with a rather piteous intentness.

"Maud has always kept a soft place in her heart for him. She couldn't help it. Women can't."

"I see," said Toby. "And doesn't—Jake—mind?"

"Jake? No, not a bit. He's sure of her now. She thinks there's no one like him in the world. And she's quite right. There's not." Bunny spoke with warm enthusiasm.

Toby's brows were drawn a little. "Then—she isn't in love with Lord Saltash?" she said.

"No, not now. She just takes a motherly interest in him, tries to persuade him to settle down and be good—that sort of thing. I believe she feels rather responsible for him. He certainly bolted very thoroughly after she gave him up. It's all years ago of course. But he's never settled—never will."

"I see," said Toby.

A slight shiver went through her, and she looked up at Bunny with a small, pinched smile. "Fancy—Maud—giving him up!" she said.

"Well, she always had her share of pride, and he certainly didn't treat her with great consideration. He might have known she'd never stand it," said Bunny. "He only had himself to thank."

Toby's look was puzzled, oddly pathetic. "But he's such a king," she said. "I don't suppose he'd ever think of that."

Again Bunny's arm tightened about the narrow shoulders. There was something about her that appealed to him very deeply, something he sensed rather than saw.

"Haven't we talked about other people's affairs long enough now?" he suggested. "Don't you think we might turn our attention to our own?"

She coloured up to her blue-veined forehead. "If you like," she said rather faintly.

"Don't you think I deserve that kiss?" urged Bunny softly. "I've been awfully patient."

She lifted her lips with a gesture of submission, saying no word.

"Oh, not like that!" he said gently. "Not if you'd rather not, dear."

She caught her breath sharply; it was almost a sob. Then she opened her eyes wide and laughed.

"Oh, you great big silly!" she said. "You're easier to draw than anyone I ever met!"

His arms clasped her. He drew her close. "My own little butterfly girl!" he said, and kissed her very tenderly. "I've caught you at last—at last."

She laid her head against his neck, and stood so, quivering a little and silent.

"You're tired," he said. "I'll give you a lift towards home. Folly will carry you all right."

She uttered a tremulous laugh, and lifting her face she kissed him of her own accord.

"You're—awful good to me, Bunny dear," she said. "P'raps—p'raps I'll be engaged to you soon."

"You darling!" said Bunny fervently.

CHAPTER V

THE CONFIDENCE

A letter with the crest of a fox's head and the motto, *Sans Vertu*, upon the back lay beside Maud's plate on the following morning. She took it up with a smile at Jake who had just entered the room.

"From Charlie—probably about the new yacht. He told me the other day that he wanted me to perform the christening ceremony."

"You have my permission," said Jake. "What does he propose to call her?"

"*The Blue Moon*, I believe. But he was in a freakish mood. He may have changed his mind by this time."

Jake glanced round. "Where's the kid?"

"Who? Toby? I thought she went out early. Hasn't she been riding with you?"

"No, she dodged me," said Jake. "Went off on her own on one of those raw colts. I shall have to talk to her when she comes in."

"I hope she's all right," said Maud, with a touch of anxiety.

"She's all right," said Jake.

"But why did she dodge you? Have you been quarrelling?" Maud paused in the act of opening her letter and looked at him with a grave questioning that brought a gleam of humour into Jake's eyes.

"We have not," he said. "I've scarcely seen her since yesterday morning. I can't tell you why she dodged me. I only know she did it."

"How odd of her!" said Maud.

He sat down and took up the paper; his face was grim. "I shall know why presently. Read your letter. I'm in no hurry."

Maud opened the letter from Saltash and there fell a brief silence.

It was broken by the sound of light feet outside the door, and Toby, still wearing riding-dress, her face flushed and laughing, swung into the room. "I'm so sorry I'm late," she said. "The little fiend ran

away with us, and we had a gigantic tussle. Do you mind if I sit down in these things?"

She went round to Maud to kiss her, and stopped as Maud's arm came about her.

"Do you mind?" she said again.

"My dear," Maud said very gently, "Jake is going to scold you for riding that half-broken colt by yourself. It was very risky. Why did you do it?"

"Oh, is Jake cross?" said Toby. She looked across at him with an imp of mischief in her eyes. Then, as he still studied his paper, abruptly she left Maud and went round to him.

"Cheer up, Jake!" she said. "Don't throw a cloud on the proceedings!"

Her voice was half impudent, half wheedling. Jake looked up, his eyes very direct and somewhat stern.

"You sit down and have some breakfast!" he said. "I'll talk to you afterwards."

She obeyed him with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "P'raps I shan't stay to be talked to," she remarked, as she did so. "I've promised to take Eileen and Molly out as soon as I've had my tub, so if it's going to be a lengthy wiggling, you'd better begin now."

Jake did not begin. He turned deliberately from the bravado of her look, and began to take the covers off the breakfast dishes.

Toby leaned back provocatively in her chair, and whistled under her breath. She was plainly in a dare-devil mood, but it was not her custom to dare Jake.

"What have you done to your hands?" he said, as she reached out for the plate he offered her.

She coloured deeply. "Nothing—I mean—nothing serious. I often get my hands scratched."

"Why don't you tell me the truth?" said Jake.

Maud looked up from her letter. "It is as I thought. Charlie wants us to go down to Fairharbour tomorrow. He is getting together a luncheon party on board the yacht. The Melroses will be there and some of the polo people staying at The Anchor. Jake, you will come and support me, won't you?"

Jake shook his head. "Bunny can do that job, my girl. I've got to get ready for Goodwood. Forest Fire is going to make his mark there."

"Oh, bother Forest Fire!" said Maud. "I want you."

"What for?" said Jake.

"Well, General Melrose knows you. He was talking of you down at the Club the other afternoon. And I want him to meet you—with me. Please come, Jake!" Maud spoke persuasively.

"All right," said Jake.

"You will?"

"I will," he said, smiling a little. "You don't often interfere with my liberty. I remember old Melrose, met him years ago at Doncaster. He's always been keen on the Turf, and he stood by me once when—someone—was trying to queer my pitch."

"Oh!" said Maud. "You mean the time that Charlie let you down! Poor Charlie! He was horribly ashamed of himself afterwards."

Toby looked up sharply, and again the colour came into her face, mounting swiftly to her forehead. She appeared to be on the verge of hot speech, but no words came.

It was Jake who spoke in his soft, easy drawl. "Oh, I guess he's grown a bit since then. Anyway, whatever his intentions, he never managed to do me any harm. And I rather think his malice is dead now."

"It died long ago," said Maud quietly. "He owes you a great deal, Jake. You've taught him to be a man."

"I?" said Jake. "My dear, your partiality runs away with your judgment."

Have some ham!"

He dismissed the matter in his own calm fashion, and began to talk of his animals. Breakfast proceeded, but Toby scarcely spoke and ate very little.

"It's so hot to-day," she said when presently Maud remonstrated with her. "I can't eat when it's hot—really." She pushed her plate away and rose from the table. "Do you mind if I go?"

"Yes, I mind," said Jake. "Go and sit in that arm-chair and smoke a cigarette! I shall be ready when you've finished."

He held out his case to her, and, though she made a face at him, she yielded. She threw herself down in the chair he indicated and smoked in silence.

Chops came and laid his head upon her knee, and she fondled his silken ears with an understanding touch. But her eyes were fixed before her with something of hardness in their look.

Maud finished her breakfast and got up. "I am going up to the nursery," she said. "Don't hurry, Toby dear! The children can run in the garden till you are ready."

"I shan't keep her long," Jake said.

Toby turned in her chair with a sudden flare of defiance. "I'd like to see any man who would keep me anywhere against my will!" she said.

Jake nodded. "All right. You can see him now if you want to. Why did you go and ride that little devil Knuckle-Duster when I told you not?"

"I don't take orders from you!" said Toby hotly.

"Oh yes, you do—sometimes." The door closed softly behind Maud and Jake turned squarely to face the girl on his hearth. "Say now," he said in his slow direct way, "it was a fool thing to do. You may as well admit it as not."

Toby was on her feet. She stood stiffly braced, but the colour had gone out of her face. It was white and strained.

"All right," she said, speaking quickly and nervously. "But what of it? I brought him back quite sound and none the worse."

"I wasn't thinking of the horse," said Jake. "He's a savage brute and I doubt if we ever do much with him. He'll certainly never be fit for a lady to ride. But that's not the point either. The point is, you did it against my orders. And you dodged me to do it. Isn't that so?"

"I didn't dodge you for that reason," said Toby. "I'd have done it whether you'd been there or not."

"I think not," Jake said. "Anyway, you'll give me your word of honour that you'll never ride that animal again."

"My what?" said Toby, and suddenly she broke into a laugh. "Oh, don't be funny, Jake! Bunny rides him. Why shouldn't I?"

"That's quite a different thing," Jake said. "Bunny has a man's strength. You haven't. It's too dangerous a game for you, see? And I won't have it."

"All right," said Toby, picking up her riding-whip and turning to go.

He stretched out a hand to detain her. "You'll give me that promise," he said.

She paused for a second, and met the unswerving determination of his eyes. Then a sudden gleam of blue fire lit her own. She made a swift movement, and struck the outstretched hand lightly with the switch she carried.

It was a gesture of supreme insolence, but there was conscious daring in her look. Jake's hand leapt like an angry dog upon the switch and gripped it.

"That was a mistake," he said, and the words, though slow, had a cutting quality that was somehow more imposing than open wrath.

Toby faced him with unabated courage, but she had begun to quiver. She spoke no word.

Jake's hand fell. He turned from her, and pulled out his pipe. There was dignity in the action—the dignity of strength that refuses to assert itself.

And Toby suddenly crumpled. She sprang after him like a contrite child, and caught his arm. "Oh, Jake, forgive me! Do please forgive me! I'm a beast—a beast!" she cried tremulously.

Jake looked at her, the hint of a smile about his rugged mouth. "I guess not," he said. "You're just—young."

She shook her head vehemently. "I'm not! It wasn't that, Jake! I didn't—hurt you?"

"Shucks, no!" he said.

She clung to his arm still. "I'll never disobey you again. I won't do anything you don't like. Jake, I mean it! Why are you laughing?"

"I'm not," said Jake. He put his pipe away again, and patted her shoulder. "All right. Don't say any more!" he said.

Toby gulped down some obstruction in the throat. "I must. I've got to ask you something. You're so awfully decent. I can't—I won't—do things you don't like."

"What do you want to know?" said Jake.

Her other hand came up and fastened tightly upon his arm. "I don't know how to tell you," she said. "I—I had a rotten night last night. That's why I went out alone this morning. And I took Knuckle-Duster because the devil tempted me."

"I see," said Jake. His red-brown eyes were very kindly in their directness. "What did you have a bad night about?"

Her hold upon him tightened. Something of entreaty made itself felt in her grasp. There was fear in the wide blue eyes so resolutely lifted to his.

"I don't know how to tell you," she said again.

"Maybe I can guess," said Jake.

"Ah!" she said, and laid her face down quickly on his sleeve.

He laid his free hand on her head. "It's Bunny, is it?" he said.

She answered him quiveringly. "Yes, it's—it's Bunny."

"Well?" said Jake gently.

She spoke with her face still hidden. "You don't want me to marry him, do you? I won't do it either—without your permission."

"Mine!" said Jake.

"Yes." Her words came rapidly. "You love Bunny. You know what's best for him. You want him to have the best."

Jake's hand caressed her bent head. "Well," he said, after a moment. "I guess that's so. But—I've come to love you in the same way. I'd like you to have the best too."

She lifted her head and looked at him. "You'd like me to have Bunny? Do you mean that?"

"If it's going to make you both happy," said Jake.

"Ah!" she caught her breath sharply. "But no one can be sure of that, can they? I mean, marriage is such a speculation, isn't it? I expect Bunny will soon get tired of me."

"Why do you say that?" said Jake.

A little quiver went through her. "I don't know. Men are like that, aren't they? Not men like you of course, but you're the big exception to almost every rule."

Jake was frowning a little. "I guess I'm as human as the rest of 'em," he said. "But what makes you think Bunny isn't a stayer?"

"He's so young," said Toby.

"That all?" said Jake, beginning to smile.

She looked at him rather wistfully. "Yes, but it counts, Jake. He'll be a man some day, but he isn't yet—at least only in streaks."

"Well, there's no hurry, is there?" said Jake. "People shouldn't marry in haste."

Toby's eyes flashed sudden accusation. "You did!"

"I!" Jake looked momentarily disconcerted. "Well, I had some excuse. What do you know about it anyway?"

"I know what Bunny told me. Maud didn't love you when she married you. It didn't come on till afterwards. She loved Lord Saltash, and he loved her." Toby spoke with a certain hardness, as if challenging contradiction. "She'd have married him—but for you."

Jake met the challenge squarely. "Quite possibly she would. Think she'd have been any happier?"

Toby shook her head. "No. I think you were always meant to be her man. But it—it was rather hard on him." Her voice trembled a little. "Bunny says that was why he never married."

"He's not the marrying sort," said Jake. "I don't mind your marrying Bunny, but nothing on this earth would persuade me to let you marry him."

An odd little smile twitched the corners of Toby's mouth. "No? Well, I shouldn't consult you about that," she said. "Sure you don't mind my marrying Bunny?"

Jake looked at her. "Not if you're sure you want to," he said.

Her eyes grew bright and baffling. She drew away from him, but in a moment with a boyish gesture, she held out her hand to him. "Thank you, Jake. You're a brick. Whatever I do, I'll do it—straight, and you'll stand by?"

"Sure!" said Jake, and gave her a close grip.

CHAPTER VI

THE SACRED FIRE

The party that gathered on the quay at Fairharbour on the hot July day when Saltash's new yacht, *The Blue Moon* lay awaiting her christening was of a very gay description. The yacht herself was decked with flags, and the hotel facing the quay, The Anchor, was also decorated with bunting. All the visitors in the town were congregated about the shore, or were rowing in pleasure boats near the centre of attraction.

The yacht lay moored to the quay on which by Saltash's orders a long strip of red carpet had been laid leading to the gangway which was decorated with trails of flowers. The day was glorious and cloudless, the sea of that intense blue that melts to the horizon without any dividing line—like the blue of a smoked pearl.

Saltash's idea was to take his guests for a cruise across the bay after the ceremony, and he planned to complete the celebrations with a *fête* on the water at night. Everything was in readiness, and by two o'clock he was already receiving his guests.

Maud and Jake stood with him, and little Eileen, very intent and serious, held Toby's hand and looked on from the background. Captain Larpent was on the bridge, looking very forbidding, even contemptuous. He had never had any liking for the gay crowds with which it was Saltash's pleasure to surround himself. He had the air of a magnificent Viking, above the frivolities with which he was surrounded. There was nothing of the ornamental about his rugged exterior, but his very aloofness made him imposing. He looked straight over the heads of the buzzing throng that poured on to the deck.

General Melrose and his daughter were among the last to arrive, and with them came Bunny, very merry and handsome, his dark eyes singling out Toby in a flash as she stood with her small charge. She had just lifted the child to stand on a ledge where she might overlook the proceedings when he joined them.

"Hullo!" he said eagerly. "I'm later than I meant to be. I've been lunching with General Melrose. Ye gods, what a crush! Where do they all come from? Well, sweetheart!" He bent to the child. "Enjoying your precious little self?"

The soft violet eyes met his with a deep contentment as she lifted her face for his kiss. "I think it's lovely," she said earnestly.

He stood up and looked again with swift appreciation at Toby. The girl was dressed very simply in white, her vivid face shadowed by a broad straw hat. She met his look with a grimace of boyish dissatisfaction.

"Bunny! What a ghastly gathering! For goodness' sake, don't look at me like that! I feel like a painted marionette!"

"Are you painted?" said Bunny. "You don't look it."

She made a vehement gesture of disgust. "As soon as this show it over, I shall get into riding things and go like the—like the—"

"Like the dish when it ran away with the spoon," suggested Bunny with a grin, as she paused. "Well, if you'll be the spoon, I'll be the dish, and we'll show 'em all a clean pair of heels. Shall we?"

"I certainly won't be the spoon," said Toby with decision. "You can find someone else to play that part. Try Miss Melrose! She doesn't look as if she'd object."

"She's a very pretty girl," said Bunny rather aggressively.

"Of course she's a pretty girl. It's what she's for." Toby's chin went up. "She couldn't be anything else."

Bunny laughed. "Well, cheer up! She's not the only one on board. Do you know any of these people?"

Toby shook her head promptly. "And don't want! Aren't they awful? Oh, here's Jake! Wonder how much he's enjoying himself."

Whether Jake were enjoying himself or not was not apparent in his manner as he came up and shook hands with Bunny, then turned to lift his little girl on to his shoulder.

"Hold tight, Innocence! What do you think of it all?"

"I think it's lovely, Daddy," she answered, clasping him closely. "Does Mummy like it too?"

He smiled at the anxiety in her question. "Guess she'll come through it all right. She's not exactly keen on this sort of thing. But we're here, eh, Innocence? That ought to make a difference."

Old General Melrose turned sharply at the sound of the soft voice. He had not noticed Jake until that moment.

"Why, Bolton!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

Jake moved forward deliberately. "Well," he said, "I guess I'm here in support of my wife who has undertaken the chief part in the ceremony about to take place."

The old soldier looked at him from under beetling brows. "Ah! Your wife! That's Maud Brian, isn't it? Somehow I always think of her as Maud Brian. So she still keeps up the old friendship with Saltash! I wonder you allow that."

Jake's red-brown eyes held a smile. "She pleases herself, sir," he said, "and—she pleases me."

"That a child of yours?" asked the General abruptly. "But I needn't ask. She's got Maud's eyes. Sheila, come and see this kiddie of Maud's!"

He spoke imperiously over his shoulder, and Sheila turned in answer. Her soft eyes kindled.

"Oh, what a darling! How do you do, Mr. Bolton? I know you well by name. And this is your little girl? What is her name?"

"Eileen," whispered the child, clinging rather nervously to Jake's shoulder.

"Innocence!" said Jake.

"Ah! How sweet!" the girl said. "I must get your mummy to bring you to see me. Would you like to, I wonder?"

"I think so," said Eileen shyly.

"Maybe you'll come and see her first," said Jake. "I should like you to see the stud, sir. We've got some stock that I think would interest you."

"That would be delightful," Sheila said, in her gracious way. "We are here for another fortnight. I had no idea it was such a lovely place."

"Have you seen Burchester?" asked Bunny.

She turned to him. "Never. I want to see it. Lord Saltash said something about it the other day, so I am hoping there is a chance of doing so. You are very fond of it, Sir Bernard?"

"Yes. It's my job just now. I'm head keeper," laughed Bunny. "Miss Larpent thinks I'm very inefficient, but I do my best."

"I never said so," said Toby.

She flushed at his obvious intention of drawing her into the group; but Sheila Melrose at once held out a welcoming hand.

"Miss Larpent, do you know I can't help feeling that I've seen you somewhere before. Yet I can't quite remember where. Could it have been at Valrosa?"

"Oh, no," said Toby. "It couldn't possibly have been there."

"And yet I can't help thinking it must have been," said Sheila, looking at her with knitted brows. "Were you at that fancy-dress affair at the Casino Hotel? I have a feeling I have seen you—somewhere—in fancy dress."

"Never!" said Toby with decision. "You must be thinking of someone else."

Sheila still looked at her with puzzled eyes. "Wait!" she said. "I shall remember in a moment. It was someone exactly like you. I know—someone dressed as a boy."

Toby made a sudden sharp movement and clapped her hands excitedly. "Look! Look! There goes the bottle! I hope she'll manage to break it!"

Sheila's attention was instantly diverted. The crowd surged forward. Maud, with Saltash on her right and Larpent on her left, stood by the rail. She held up a bottle that gleamed golden in the sun.

Saltash was laughing. He stood bareheaded, his dark face alight. Toby's eyes went to him in a single flashing glance and remained fixed. Bunny, looking at her, was for the moment curiously moved. It was as if he looked from afar upon some sacred fire that had suddenly sprung into ardent flame before a distant shrine. Then came Maud's voice, sweet and clear, speaking the name of the yacht, and like a golden flame the bottle curved through the pearl-like ether and crashed upon the bows.

A murmur went up and then a shout. The bottle had broken and the wine rushed in a sparkling cascade to the water.

Something impelled Bunny. He gripped Toby by the elbow. He almost shook her. "Hooray!" he yelled. "It's done! She's off!"

Toby looked at him with the eyes of a dreamer—eyes in which a latent fear underlay the reverence. Then, meeting his eyes, she seemed to awake. Her features contracted for a moment, but she controlled them swiftly, and laughed. Laughing, she drew him away.

The yacht had throbbed into movement. The ropes were being flung aboard. They were steaming away, and a great blast went up from the siren as they drew from the quay.

Everywhere was tumult, rejoicing. People were shouting, talking, laughing, waving hats and

handkerchiefs. The whole world seemed a buzz of merriment, and out of the very thick of it, Toby's voice, small and tense, spoke into Bunny's ear.

"Let's get away! Let's go to Lord Saltash, and—and—and congratulate."

Her hand was on his arm. She pulled at it urgently, insistently. And Bunny went with her, moved again—he knew not wherefore—by that feeling that something had frightened her.

He grasped her hand and made a way for her through the crowd. They went to the laughing group in the bows. Saltash was standing close to Maud. He was making some careless jest to her, when suddenly he turned and found the boy and girl hand in hand behind him.

His swift look flashed over them, and then in his sudden way he put a hand on the shoulder of each. It was a lightning touch, and he laughed oddly as he did it, as a man laughs who covers some hidden hurt.

"We came to congratulate," said Bunny. "Good luck to her!"

And Saltash, with his royal air of graciousness, made light reply.

"I thank you for your congratulations, my children; but may the luck be yours! I see it coming."

And with that lightly he moved away among his guests, leaving a trail of merriment wherever he went, save where the boy and girl stood together in the bows in a silence that neither seemed able to break.

CHAPTER VII

SURRENDER

That night Fairharbour Bay looked like a velvet bed on which glittered many jewels. *The Blue Moon*, lighted from bows to stern lay in the centre, and from her deck there went up showers of coloured rockets that fell like burning rain upon the sea. There was a string band on board, and the strains floated across the water as echoes from another world—a wonder-world of soft melodies and laughing voices and lightly splashing oars.

Toby sat in the stern of a boat with a single rower in front of her, and trailed her fingers through the magic water. She was bare-headed, and the breeze of the summer night stirred tenderly the golden ringlets that clustered about her bow. Her face, seen now and then in the flare of the rockets, had a strange look, almost a look of dread. Her blue eyes were very wide open, like the eyes of a startled child.

She spoke scarcely at all, and Bunny did not urge her. Only as he rowed, he watched her with grave determination on his boyish face. He had claimed her as his partner early in the evening, and she had made no attempt to thwart him; but something in that half scared silence of hers moved him very deeply. His own was protective, resolutely reassuring.

Once, when she started nervously at an unexpectedly loud report from one of the rockets, he spoke to her as he would have spoken to a small, frightened animal.

"It's all right. I'll pull out a bit, shall I? These things make such a beastly row."

She thanked him in an undertone, and he began to row steadily away from the yacht and the thronging boats.

"You tell me when I've gone far enough!" he said.

But she did not tell him, and he rowed on and on through the dark water with only the rhythmic splashing of the oars to fill the silence between them.

They left the laughter and the noise behind, and began to draw towards the far corner of the bay. The shore rose steeply from the water here, and there came to them the soft breaking of the waves against the cliff as they neared it.

Toby came out of her silence with a jerk. "Bunny, do you really think it would answer?"

"Sure!" said Bunny promptly.

He drew in his oars with the words, and they drifted on the summer tide.

Toby was looking at him in the starlight with a dumb and piteous irresolution in her eyes.

Bunny leaned to her as he sat, with outstretched hands. "You poor little frightened mouse!" he said. "What is it that's troubling you? Do you think I wouldn't make you happy?"

"I think you'd try," she said dubiously.

For a few seconds she hung back, hesitating; then swiftly, almost with the gesture of one who casts aside a burden, she threw out her trembling hands and thrust them into his. He took them and held them fast, drawing them gently to him till he had them against his heart. "I would try, sweetheart," he said softly.

"Would you?" whispered Toby. "Would you?"

She went nearer to him; he could feel her trembling from head to foot.

"You think I wouldn't succeed?" he asked her tenderly. "You think I'd make you sorry?"

"I don't know," she answered quiveringly. "I—I'm thinking most of you."

"Wondering whether it would be good for me to have my heart's desire?" jested Bunny softly. "Think it would be too much for me; what, darling?"

"No,—no!" said Toby. "Not that! Only wondering if you are wanting the right thing—wondering if the thing you call your heart's desire will bring you happiness. It—it doesn't always, you know, Bunny. Life is like that."

Her voice sank a little.

"What do you know about life?" he said.

She shook her head, her face downcast. "Oh, too much—too much!" she said.

Bunny sat motionless for a moment or two, but his hold was strong and comforting. At length very gently he began to draw her nearer.

He almost expected her to resist him, but she did not. As he drew her, she yielded, till with a sob she suffered herself to be drawn close into his arms. He had her on the thwart beside him, her face hidden against his shoulder. He laid his cheek down upon her hair and sat silent.

Toby was sobbing a little, and he patted her shoulder soothingly, but he did not speak until with a quivering sigh she relaxed against him and was still.

Then, in a whisper, "Toby mavourneen," he said, "I'm going to tell you something that's come to me lately—something I've guessed. You needn't answer me. I don't want you to answer me—only to know that I know. There's another fellow in your heart, and he's got a bigger place than I have—at present. No, don't tremble, darling! It's all right. I know—I know. He's the sort that women simply can't keep out. He's a fine chap too, and I'm fond of him—always have been. But look here, mavourneen, you're not going to break your precious little heart over him; you know quite well it's no use, don't you? You know—well, anyhow to a certain extent—you know what he is, don't you?"

He paused for an answer, but Toby quivered in his arms and was silent.

He put up a hand and pressed her head closer to his breast. "He'll never marry," he said. "He doesn't mean to. He almost told me so the other day. But—Toby—he takes a friendly interest in you and me. He'd like us to have each other. Don't you think"—his voice had a hint of humour—"don't you think we might fix it up just to please him? P'raps—someday—we may find that we're pleased ourselves as well."

"Oh, my dear!" Toby whispered.

Her arm crept round his neck, but she did not lift her head. He clasped her more closely and went on very softly. "I love you enough to think of your happiness first, my darling. You're not happy now. I know that all right. But you will be—I swear you shall be—if you will marry me. You like me just a bit, don't you? And you wouldn't be afraid to trust yourself to me?"

"No," murmured Toby, with an effort. "I wouldn't be—afraid."

"Then you'll give me my chance?" he urged gently. "You'll put your dear little hand into mine and trust me? Will you darling? Will you?"

But Toby was silent.

"Won't you?" he said in a whisper.

Her arm tightened about his neck. She was breathing quickly, nervously. From across the water came the sounds of laughter and cheering, the softened strains of the band that played on the deck of *The Blue Moon*. Close at hand was only the low wash of the waves as they lapped against the cliff. They floated quite alone over the dark depths, rising and falling with the slow heave of the tide, but making no headway.

"Won't you?" Bunny said again, after a long silence.

And suddenly Toby raised her head and spoke. "I will do—whatever you wish," she said.

There was a slight break in her voice, but it held no indecision. Her eyes looked straight into his in the starlight. He saw them shining and knew that they were big with tears. But she did not flinch from his look or start as his lips came to hers. She slipped her other arm about his neck and clasped him close.

"You'll be good to me, Bunny?" she said in a whisper.

And he answered her deeply, his lips against her own. "I will be good to you, my darling, so help me, God!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAGICIAN'S WAND

"I can't think where I have seen that girl before," said Sheila thoughtfully, drumming her fingers on the white rail, her soft eyes fixed upon the jewelled bay. "She has an arresting face."

"You have never seen her," said Saltash carelessly, flicking cigarette-ash overboard. "She has the sort of face that the old Italians worshipped and some of the moderns too. You have seen it in their pictures."

Sheila's brows were drawn. "I have seen her—somehow—dressed as a boy," she said. "Could it have been a picture?"

"Yes. One of Spentoli's. I've got a print somewhere. It's called, 'The Victim'—a lad with a face like Larpent's daughter, fighting a leopard."

Saltash spoke with easy conviction, his restless eyes flashing to and fro, often glancing but never resting upon the girl beside him. "That's what you're thinking of. It's an unsatisfactory sort of picture. One wonders which is 'The Victim.' But that is Spentoli all over. He always leaves one wondering."

"I know the thing you mean." Sheila nodded meditatively. "Yes, she is—rather like that. The boy was 'The Victim' of course." She turned towards him suddenly with the words. "You can't possibly doubt that. The brute's teeth are almost in his throat. I think it's a horrible picture myself."

Saltash laughed. "A deliverer arrives sometimes," he remarked, "even in the last, most awful moment of all. Have you never said to yourself how seldom the thing we really expect comes to pass?"

Sheila's lips parted with a touch of scorn. "Perhaps it is safer not to expect," she said.

"Perhaps," agreed Saltash, with his quick grimace. "I learnt that lesson a long time ago. There are so many slips—especially when the cup is full." He added inconsequently, "And even if it gets there, the wine is sour as often as not when you come to drink."

"I can quite believe it," said the girl, and looked out once more over the wreathing flowers to the rippling waters of the bay.

Her mouth took a firm line, and Saltash, glancing at her, began to laugh. "Do you know, Miss Melrose, it's rather curious, but you remind me of Spentoli too in some ways? I don't know if you and Miss Larpent possess the same characteristics, but I imagine you might develop them, given the same conditions."

Sheila stiffened at the words. "I am sure you are quite wrong," she said coldly. "Captain Larpent's daughter is quite obviously a child of impulse. I—am not."

"I think you would be impulsive enough to fight the leopard if he came your way," contended Saltash with idle insistence. "Or perhaps you would charm him. I imagine that might be more in your line."

Again the girl's lip curled. She said nothing for a moment, then deliberately, for the first time in her life, she snubbed him. "No, I should never try to charm—a beast, Lord Saltash."

"You prefer them savage?" countered Saltash.

She made a careless gesture with one hand, without replying. She did not even look towards him. "I think Miss Larpent might be quite clever in that respect," she said. "She is—a born charmer."

"By Jove!" he said. "What a cruel compliment!"

Sheila said nothing. She was watching a small boat rowing steadily towards them through the dark water, with eyes that were grave and fixed.

Saltash's look followed hers, and he grimaced to himself, oddly, wryly, as a man who accomplishes a task for which he has no liking. Then in a moment he turned the conversation. "Did you ever meet Rozelle Daubeni, the enchantress?"

Sheila's soft eyes came to him at the sudden question. "No. I have heard of her. I have never met her. I don't want to meet her. Why?"

He threw her a daring glance. "It would do you good to meet her. She is a born charmer if you like. She charms women as well as men—and beasts."

"An adventuress!" said Sheila.

"Yes, an adventuress. One of the most wonderful, I should say, who ever lived. She is in Paris just now. When she comes to England—" again his look dared her—"I will take you to see her. It will be—an education for you."

"Thank you," Sheila said.

He laughed aloud, and suddenly stretched his hand to her with a movement of good fellowship. "I'm only teasing. Don't be cross! I wouldn't take you to see her for all the gold of Ophir. She is rotten—too rotten even for me, which is saying much."

Sheila hesitated momentarily before she gave her hand.

"Why did you speak of her? What brought her to your mind?"

He glanced again towards the little boat now drawing near to the yacht, but he did not answer her question till her hand met his.

"I have—a somewhat elastic mind," he said then, and smiled his most baffling smile. "It was your talk of charmers that did it. I was trying to think of all I had met."

"All the Rozelles and the Tobies!" said Sheila, with a hard little laugh.

He gripped her hand and released it. "I have never met more than one of each," he said. "Which may be the secret of their charm. Don't class them together in your mind for a moment! Larpent's daughter may be a born charmer. Young Bunny Brian seems to think so at any rate. But she is not—and never will be—an adventuress."

"Is Bunny Brian fond of her—really fond of her?" asked Sheila.

Saltash nodded. "Sure thing—as Jake would say! And he's a sound chap too. I hope he'll get her."

"She is not very likely to refuse," said Sheila, turning from the rail.

The little boat had passed out of sight under the lee of the yacht. A great rocket whistled skywards, and broke in a violet flare that lighted sea and shore. The *fête* was over, and people were crowding on

board. The band was playing a selection from a comic opera, and a few voices were singing the careless, sentimental words.

Saltash turned with his companion. "And now we are going to supper at The Anchor. I must get Mrs. Bolton to lead the way. Poor Jake is bored to the soul, but he's facing it like a man. Fine fellow—Jake."

"Oh, is he a friend of yours?" Sheila asked. "A very particular friend, I mean?"

Saltash grimaced to the stars. "No, I don't think so. Ask Jake! He knows me better than some, that's all. And I know him."

They left the yacht's rail and joined the on-coming throng. It was like a scene out of a fairy tale—the gaudy Chinese lanterns bobbing to and fro, the gaily-coloured crowd, the shining white yacht rocking gently on the noiseless swell. Everyone was laughing. Some were singing. There was not a serious face to be seen in all the crowd that poured over the red-carpeted gangway from the quay.

"Where is Toby?" said Maud.

She was standing with Jake in the many-hued glow of the lanterns, and she asked the question with a momentary anxiety, for she had looked in vain for Toby for some time.

"She's with Bunny. She's safe enough," said Jake.

"But they haven't come on board yet, and they've been gone so long," Maud said. "It's curious how little Captain Larpent seems to interest himself in her doings."

"Mighty curious," agreed Jake.

For Larpent had kept to the bridge morosely, almost throughout the evening. He was standing there now, looking down upon the shifting, chattering crowd. He had no idea how long it would be before Saltash tired of the game and gave orders to set sail. He waited in dumb endurance—as he would wait from day to day until the longed-for moment arrived. It had happened often before, Saltash's caprice had sometimes driven him to the verge of rebellion, but no one—not even Saltash himself—ever suspected it. Silent, phlegmatic, inexpressive, Larpent held on his undeviating course.

Maud's attention did not linger upon him. No one—save perhaps Saltash—ever paid much attention to Larpent. She turned back to watch the now empty gangway, and in a moment she gave an exclamation of relief.

"Ah! Here they come at last!"

A laughing voice spoke behind her. "Enter Cinderella and the Prince!"

She started and saw Saltash's swarthy face close to her. His odd eyes looked into hers with a flash of mischief.

"See how all my plans bear fruit!" he said. "I wave my wand, and you behold the result."

She turned from him to look again upon the advancing couple. They were crossing the gangway alone. Toby, slim, girlish, her wide blue eyes shining like the eyes of an awakened child, Bunny close behind her, touching her, his hand actually on her shoulder, possession and protection in every line of him. He was murmuring into her ear as they came, and his face was alight with the glory which no earthly lamp can kindle.

"Behold!" Saltash said again, and moved forward in his sudden fashion to receive them.

He met them as they stepped on board, and in a moment they were the centre of observation. The buzz of talk died down as the general attention focussed upon them. Maud was aware of Jake standing squarely behind her, and she put out a hand to him which he grasped and held.

Saltash was laughing, but they could not hear what he said. Only in a moment he had taken a hand of Bunny's and a hand of Toby's and joined them together. Toby's eyes were lifted to his face. She was smiling with lips that trembled, and Maud's heart gave a great throb of pity, she could not have said wherefore. She had a deep longing to go and gather the child into her arms and comfort her.

Then Toby too was laughing, and she heard Saltash's voice. "These things only happen properly once in a blue moon, *ma chère*. I give you both my blessing for the second time to-day. I wish you better luck than has ever come my way."

He threw a gay malicious glance towards the bridge, where Larpent stood like a grim Viking looking

down upon the scene.

"Come!" he said. "We had better go and tell your daddy next!"

He led them lightly forward, and the crowd opened out with jests and laughter to let them pass.

Toby walked between the two men, very pale but still smiling—a smile that was curiously like the smile of a child that is trying not to cry.

"Oh, poor little thing!" Maud whispered suddenly and drew back beside Jake as if she could not bear to look.

"She'll be all right," said Jake stoutly. "Don't you fret any! Bunny's sound."

"Oh, yes, I know—I know! But she's so young." All the yearning of motherhood was in Maud's voice. "Does she love him? Does she?"

Jake's hand gripped hers more closely. He looked into her face with a smile in his red-brown eyes. "Maybe not as we know love," he said. "It doesn't come all at once—that sort."

She smiled back at him, for she could not help it, even as she shook her head in misgiving. "Sometimes—it doesn't come at all!" she said.

CHAPTER IX

THE WARNING

It seemed to Maud that in the days that followed her engagement Toby developed with the swiftness of an opening flower. There was no talk of her leaving them. She fitted into the establishment as though she had always been a part of it, and she took upon herself responsibilities which Maud would never have laid upon her.

Watching her anxiously, it seemed to her that Toby was becoming more settled, more at rest, than she had ever been before. The look of fear was dormant in her eyes now, and her sudden flares of anger had wholly ceased. She made no attempt to probe below the surface, realizing the inadvisability of such a course, realizing that the first days of an engagement are seldom days of expansion, being full of emotions too varied for analysis. That Toby should turn to her or to Jake if she needed a confident she did not for a moment doubt, but unless the need arose she resolved to leave the girl undisturbed. She had, moreover, great faith in Bunny's powers. As Jake had said, Bunny was sound, and she knew him well enough to be convinced that he would find a means of calming any misgivings that might exist in Toby's mind.

It appeared as if he had already done so in fact, for Toby was never nervous in his presence. She greeted him with pleasure and went with him gladly whenever he came to seek her. They met every day, usually in the evening when Bunny was free, and the children gone to bed. Maud would watch them wander out together into the summer solitudes, Chops walking sedately behind, and would smile to herself very tenderly at the sight. She believed that Toby was winning to happiness and she prayed with all her soul that it might last.

Saltash came no more during these summer days. He had departed in his abrupt way for his first pleasure cruise in *The Blue Moon*, taking no friend, save the ever-present Larpent, to relieve the monotony. No one knew whither they were bound, or if the voyage were to be long or short. He dropped out of his circle as a monkey drops from a tree, and beyond a passing wonder at his movements no one questioned either motive or intention. Probably he had neither in any appreciable degree. It was only the caprice of the moment that ever moved him. So his friends said. He evidently found his new toy attractive, and he would not return until he wearied of it.

Meantime, the summer crowds came and went at Fairharbour. The Anchor Hotel was crowded with visitors, and Sheila and her father began to talk of departure for Scotland.

Jake had gone to an important race-meeting in the North, and it seemed that Bunny's suggestion to show them the stud had been forgotten. But on an afternoon in late August, after a hotly-contested polo match, as he stood with a fizzling drink in his hand, talking to Sheila, she abruptly reminded him of it.

"It's quite a fortnight since you promised to show me the horses," she said.

He started. "Is it? I'm awfully sorry. I hadn't forgotten, but somehow I've had a lot to think about lately. You must come and have tea with Maud. When will you come?"

Sheila laughed a little. "Hadn't you better ask Maud first?"

"Good gracious, no!" said Bunny. "That'll be all right. She and Toby are always at home just now, and of course she will be pleased to see you any time. When can you come?"

"Well, we are leaving the day after to-morrow," Sheila said.

"To-morrow then!" said Bunny promptly.

"Your sister may not want us at such short notice," she said, hesitating.

"Oh, rats!" said Bunny, with a grin. "Of course she will! Have you seen the Castle yet?"

"Yes. We lunched there with Lord Saltash before he left. It's a horribly grim place. I didn't like it much."

"It's a magnificent place!" said Bunny stoutly. "It's completely thrown away on Charlie of course, but I love every stone of it."

"What a pity it doesn't belong to you!" commented Sheila. "I wonder where you will live when you are married."

Bunny flushed a little. "We're not marrying at present, but I'm hoping to stick to my job when we do."

"Oh, are you? Does Miss Larpent like that idea?" Faint surprise sounded in Sheila's tone.

"I don't know why she shouldn't," said Bunny, quick to detect it. "She's keen on the country, keen on riding and so on. She'd hate to live in town."

"Would she?" said Sheila, with a hint of incredulity.

Bunny turned on her. "Why do you say that? She's very young, hardly more than a kid. She doesn't care for people and towns. Why should she?"

He put the question almost indignantly, and Sheila smiled at him pacifically. "I don't know in the least why she should. I only had a sort of idea that she might. She is very pretty, isn't she? And pretty girls don't generally care to be buried before they have had their fling—not always then."

"Oh, you think she doesn't get any fun!" said Bunny, still somewhat resentful.

"No—no, of course I don't! You know best what she likes. I only wonder that Maud didn't think of giving her just one season in town. It would be rather good for her, don't you think?"

"I don't know," said Bunny rather shortly. "Maud isn't keen on town. I think she's better where she is."

Sheila laughed. "You're afraid she'd slip through your fingers if she saw too much of the world?"

"No, I'm not!" declared Bunny, frowning. "I hadn't thought about it. But I'd hate her to get old and sophisticated. Her great charm is in being—just what she is."

"Oh, she has plenty of charm," Sheila admitted, and her own brows drew a little in thought. "I wish I could remember who it is she reminds me of. That is the worst of having such a large circle."

"She isn't like anyone I've ever met," declared Bunny, and gulped down his drink abruptly. "Well, I must be going. You'll come up to-morrow then, you and the General. I shall be there, and I'll tell Maud you're coming."

"You are sure we had better come?" Sheila said, as she gave him her hand.

He gripped it. "Of course! Maud will be delighted. I'm sorry you weren't asked before. About three then—if that suits you! Good-bye!"

He smiled his pleasant, boyish smile, and departed.

But as he raced back from Fairharbour in his little two-seater car to meet his young *fiancée* on the

downs, the memory of Sheila's word came back to him and he frowned again. It was true that they were not thinking of marriage for the next few months, and their plans were still somewhat vague, but the idea of waiting while Toby had her fling for a whole season in town revolted him. He could not have said definitely wherefore, save that he wanted to keep her just as she was in his eyes—fresh and young and innocent. He was angry with Sheila for having suggested it, and he wanted to thrust the matter from his mind.

Yet when he found himself alone with Toby, walking along the brow of the furze-strewn down, he attacked the subject with characteristic directness.

"Sheila Melrose thinks you ought to have a season in town before we get married. Would you like to do that?"

Toby looked up at him with her clear eyes wide with surprise. "What the—blazes has it to do with Sheila Melrose?" she said.

He laughed briefly. "Nothing, of course. Less than nothing. It's just a point of view. She thinks you're too pretty to be buried before you've had your fling—rot of that sort."

"My—fling!" said Toby, and with a sudden gesture that was almost of shrinking drew his arm more closely round her shoulders. "I should loathe it and you know it," she said with simplicity.

He held her to him. "Of course you would. I should myself. I hate the smart set. But, you know, you are—awfully pretty; I don't want to do anything unfair."

"Rats!" said Toby.

He bent his face to hers. "Are you beginning to care for me—just a little—by any chance?"

She laughed and flushed, twining her fingers in his without replying.

Bunny pursued his point. "You'd sooner marry me out of hand than go hunting London for someone more to your liking? Would you?"

"Oh, much," said Toby. "But, you see, I hate London."

"And you don't hate me?" persisted Bunny, his dark eyes very persuasive.

She dropped her own before them, and was silent.

"Say it, sweetheart!" he urged.

She shook her head. "Let's talk about something else!" she said.

"All right," said Bunny boldly. "Let's talk of getting married! It's high time we began."

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" said Toby quickly.

He laughed at her softly. "Of course you didn't! But you were thinking about it all the same. Do you know old Bishop is going to clear out and go and live in Fairharbour? I shall be left alone then. It's rather beastly living alone, you know, darling."

"You haven't tried it yet," said Toby.

"No. But I know what it'll feel like. I shall hate it." Bunny spoke with gloomy conviction.

Toby suddenly laughed. "No one to grouse to! It would be rather dull certainly. Why didn't you fall in love with Sheila Melrose?"

"Sheila Melrose! Why on earth should I?" Bunny spoke with some sharpness.

Toby lifted mischievous eyes. "She's pretty and graceful and accomplished. She'd make a charming Lady Brian, and she has an estate of her own for you to manage. It—it would be—a highly suitable arrangement for you both."

"Don't talk rot!" broke in Bunny with sudden heat.

His hold tightened upon her, and she made a quick, instinctive movement as though to free herself. "I'm not! You know I'm not! You know—quite well—that if—if—if it hadn't been for me—because you chanced to meet me first—you certainly would have—have fallen in love with her!"

Toby spoke breathlessly, stammering a little as her habit was when agitated. Her face was averted, and she was trying very, very hard to resist the closer drawing of his arms.

But there were times when Bunny would not endure resistance, and this was one of them. He simply ignored it, till abruptly she yielded to his mastery. And then in a moment he was tender again.

"Why did you say that?" he said, bending low to look into her downcast face. "Tell me why you said it! Are you—jealous—by any chance?"

"Oh, no!" declared Toby with vehemence. "No—no—no!"

"Then why?" he persisted. Then with sudden intuition: "You don't like her, do you?"

Toby's face was burning. "It—it's she that doesn't like me," she said.

"Oh, that's a mistake," said Bunny, decidedly. "Everyone likes you."

She shook her head. "She doesn't. She thinks I'm bad form, and I daresay she's right. She also thinks—" she lifted her face suddenly, challenging him—"she also thinks that I set out to catch you—and succeeded."

"She doesn't!" declared Bunny. "That's rot—damn' rot! You are not to say it. She's a very nice girl and ready to be friendly with you if you'll let her."

Toby made a rude face. "I knew you were getting fond of her! She's pretty and stylish and—and much more in your line than I am. Why don't you go and ask her to marry you? She wouldn't say No."

She flung the words with a little quivering laugh. She was trembling in his hold.

Bunny's eyes had flashed to sudden anger. He had taken her by the shoulders almost as if he would shake her.

"Toby, be quiet!" he commanded. "Do you hear? You're going too far! What do you mean by talking in this strain? What has she done to you?"

"Nothing!" gasped back Toby, backing away from him in a vain effort to escape. "She hardly knows me even. It's just instinct with her and she can't help it. But she likes you well enough not to want you to marry me. You don't suppose—you don't suppose—" the words came breathlessly, jerkily—"you—you really don't suppose, do you, that—that she made that suggestion about a season in town for my sake?"

"What other reason could she have had?" demanded Bunny sternly.

Toby was laughing, but her laughter had a desperate sound. "How green you are! Must I really tell you that?"

"Yes. Go on! Tell me!" His voice was hard. Hard also was the grip of his hands. He knew that in the moment he released her she would turn and flee like a fleeing hare.

There was fear in the blue eyes that looked up to his, but they held a glare of defiance as well. Her small white teeth showed clenched between her laughing lips.

"Go on! Tell me!" he reiterated. "You shan't go—I swear—until you tell me."

"Think I'm—think I'm afraid of you?" challenged Toby, with boyish bravado.

"I think you'll answer me," he said, and abruptly his tone fell level, dead level. He looked her straight in the eyes without anger, without mercy. "And you'll answer me now, too. What other reason could Miss Melrose have for making that suggestion if it was not intended for your benefit? Now answer me!"

His face was pale, but he was master of himself. Perhaps he had learned from Jake that fundamental lesson that those who would control others must first control themselves. He still held her before him, but there was no violence in his hold. Neither was there any tenderness. It was rather of a judicial nature.

And oddly at that moment a sudden gleam of appreciation shot up in Toby's eyes. She stood up very straight and faced him unflinching.

"I don't mind answering you," she said. "Why should I? Someone will tell you sooner or later if I don't. She said that because she knew—and she wanted you to know—that I am not the sort of girl that men want to—marry."

She was quite white as she spoke the words, but she maintained her tense erectness. Her eyes never stirred from his.

Bunny stood motionless, staring at her. He looked as if he had been struck a blinding blow.

"What—on earth—do you mean?" he asked slowly at last.

The tension went out of Toby. She broke into her funny little laugh. "Oh, I won't tell you any more! I won't! She thinks I'm too attractive, that's all. I can't imagine why; can you? You never found me so, did you, Bunny?"

The old provocative sweetness flashed back into her face. She went within the circle of his arms with a quick nestling movement as of a small animal that takes refuge after strenuous flight. She was still panting a little as she leaned against him.

And Bunny relaxed, conscious of a vast relief that outweighed every other consideration. "You—monkey!" he said, folding her close. "You're playing with me! How dare you torment me like this? You shall pay for it to the last least farthing. I will never have any mercy on you again."

He kissed her with all the renewed extravagance of love momentarily denied, and the colour flooded back into Toby's face as the dread receded from her heart. She gave him more that day than she had ever given him before, and in the rapture of possession he forgot the ordeal that she had made him face.

Only later did he remember it—her strange reticence, her odd stumbling words of warning, her curious attitude of self-defence. And he felt as if—in spite of his utmost resolution—she had somehow succeeded in baffling him after all.

CHAPTER X

THE MYSTERY

It was late that evening that Bunny strolled forth alone to smoke a reminiscent pipe along his favourite glade of larches in Burchester Park. He went slowly through the summer dusk, his hands behind him, his eyes fixed ahead. He had had his way with Toby. She had promised to marry him as soon as old Bishop's retirement left the house in the hollow at his disposal. But somehow, though he had gained his end, he was not conscious of elation. Sheila Melrose's words had disturbed him no less than Toby's own peculiar interpretation of them. There was a very strong instinct of fair play in Bunny Brian, and, now that he had won his point, he was assailed by a grave doubt as to whether he were acting fairly towards the girl. She was young, but then many girls marry young. It was not really her youth that mattered; neither, when he came to sift the matter, was it the fact that she had had so little opportunity of seeing the world. But it was something in Toby's eyes, something in Sheila's manner, that gave him pause. He asked himself, scarcely knowing why, if it would not be fairer after all to wait.

He wished that he could have consulted Jake, but yet it would have been difficult to put his misgivings into definite words. Jake was a brick and understood most things, but he was away for another week at least.

The thought of the girl's father crossed his mind, only to be instantly dismissed. Even if he had been within reach, Captain Larpent's sternly unapproachable exterior would have held him back. He was inclined to like the man, but he could not feel that Toby's welfare was, or ever had been, of paramount importance to him. He had thoughts only for his yacht.

Bunny began to reflect moodily that life was a more complicated affair than he had ever before imagined, and, reaching this point, he also reached the gate by the copse and became aware of cigar-smoke dominating the atmosphere above the scent of his own now burnt-out pipe.

He removed the pipe from his mouth and looked around him.

"Hullo!" said a voice he knew. "Do I intrude?"

Saltash stepped suddenly out of the shadow of the larches and met him with outstretched hand.

"Hullo!" said Bunny, with a start.

A quick smile of welcome lighted his face, and Saltash's eyes flashed in answer. He gripped the boy's hand with fingers that closed like springs.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"Just what I was going to ask you," said Bunny. "I often come here in the evening. It's my favourite look-out. But you—"

"I do the same for the same reason," said Saltash.

"I thought you were far away on the high seas," said Bunny.

Saltash laughed. "Well, I was. But I don't stay there, my good Bunny. *The Blue Moon* developed engine trouble—nothing very serious, but we brought her back to recuperate. You can never tell what you may be in for on a first voyage. Also, I was curious to see how affairs here were progressing. How goes it, *mon ami*? Is all well?"

"Well enough," said Bunny.

Saltash linked a friendly hand in his arm. "Have you and Nonette settled when to get married yet?"

Bunny stiffened momentarily, as if his instinct were to resent the kindly enquiry. But the next instant he relaxed again with impulsive confidence. "Well, it is more or less settled," he said. "But I'm wondering—you know, Charlie, she's rather young to be married, isn't she? She hasn't seen much of the world so far. You don't think it's shabby, do you, to marry her before she's had the same sort of chances as other girls?"

"Good heavens, no!" said Saltash. He gave Bunny an odd look from under brows that were slightly twisted. "What made you think of that?" he asked.

Bunny's face was red. He leaned his arms on the gate and looked out across the valley. "Sheila Melrose put it to me this afternoon," he said, "though I must admit it had crossed my mind before. She hasn't met many people, you know, Charlie. And—as I said—she's young. I don't want to take an unfair advantage."

"Life is too short to think of these things," said Saltash abruptly. "Marry her while you can get her and don't be an ass about it! If I had done the same thing in my youth, I should have been better off than I am at present."

Bunny smiled a little. "You would probably have been wishing you'd done the other thing by this time."

"Much you know about it!" returned Saltash with a whimsical frown. "Now look here! What I've really come back for is to see you married. All this preliminary messing about is nothing but a weariness to the flesh. Get it over, man! There's nothing on earth to wait for. Larpent's willing enough. In fact, he agrees with me—the sooner the better."

"He would!" said Bunny with a touch of bitterness.

"Well, you can't ask for anything better," maintained Saltash. "He's got his job, and he's not what you could call a family man. He's not a waster either, so you needn't put on any damned airs, *mon vieux*."

"I didn't!" said Bunny hotly.

Saltash laughed, and clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Look here! I'm talking for the good of your soul. Don't take any more advice—certainly not Sheila Melrose's! You go straight ahead and marry her! You've got money, I know, but I hope you won't chuck your job on that account. Stick to it, and you shall have the Dower House to live in while I yet cumber the ground, and Burchester Castle as soon as I'm under it!"

"What?" said Bunny. He turned almost fiercely. "Charlie! Stop it! You're talking rot. You always do. I don't want your beastly castle. You've got to marry and get an heir of your own. I'm damned if I'm going to be adopted by you!"

Saltash was laughing carelessly, mockingly, yet there was about him at the moment a certain royal self-assurance that made itself felt. "You'll do as you're told, *mon ami*. And you'll take what the gods send without any cavilling. As for me, I go my own way. I shall never marry. I shall never have an heir of my own blood. Burchester means more to you than it does to me. Therefore Burchester will pass to

you at my death. Think you and Toby will be happy here?"

"Damn it!" said Bunny, still fiercely disconcerted. "You talk as if you were going to die to-morrow."

"Oh, probably not," said Saltash airily. "But I doubt if I live to a rakish old age. I'm a man that likes taking chances, and those who dice with the high gods are bound to throw a blank some day." For a moment the mockery died down in his eyes, and he looked more nearly serious than Bunny had ever seen him. He patted the shoulder under his hand. "Life is rather a rotten old show when you've tried everything and come to the end," he said. "And you know for a damn' certainty that you'll never taste any good fruit again. But you will never know what that feels like, *mon ami*. You've had the sense to play a straight game, and you'll find it pays in the long run. Jake taught you that, eh? You may thank your own particular lucky star that you had him for a brother-in-law instead of me."

"Don't talk rot!" said Bunny gruffly.

Saltash stretched up his arms with a laugh. "No, we'll talk sense—good square sense. I take it you'll continue to manage the estate for the present? If you get bored, we'll find an agent, but I'm satisfied with things as they are. We'll go round and have a look at the old Dower House to-morrow. It has a fairly decent position, you know,—overlooks Graydown. That ought to please you both."

Bunny turned upon him. "Oh, confound it, Charlie!" he said. "I can't talk about this. I couldn't possibly take it. You're too damned generous. I've never done anything to deserve it."

"Oh yes, you have!" said Saltash unexpectedly, "you've done a good many things for me. You have always been the *bon ami* whatever I did—from your childhood upwards." His dark face laughed with friendly warmth into the boy's troubled eyes. "Always stuck up for me, haven't you, Bunny?" he said.

"Oh, but that's rot," objected Bunny. "A man is bound to stick up for his pals."

"Even though he knows they're not worth it?" laughed Saltash. "Yes, that's just what I like about you. It's the one point on which we touch. But I'm not sure that even you would stick up for me if you knew precisely what sort of rotter you were sticking up for."

"Oh, shut up!" said Bunny.

"*Bien, mon cher!* We return to your affairs. Have you put up the banns yet? I presume you will allow me to be best man? Get it over soon, I beseech you! I can't stay here indefinitely. As a matter of fact, I'm due in Scotland at the present moment. Can't you fix it up immediately? And you can have the little car and leave of absence till you've got over it. Old Bishop can run this show till the winter. Maud can fit up the Dower House for you. And I shall feel at liberty to roam the desert once more—unencumbered."

"You're jolly decent to me!" said Bunny.

"Think so?" Saltash's brows twitched humorously. "I seem to be developing a taste for worthy deeds. But there's no reason on earth why you two shouldn't get married and done for as soon as possible. I'll see Larpent to-night and tell him, and you can go and see the parson about it to-morrow. You'll find Nonette won't put any obstacles in the way. She's a good child and does as she's told."

"No, Toby won't mind," Bunny said, with a sudden memory of her quick surrender flooding his soul. "By Jove, Charlie! You are a good sort to help me like this. There's no one else that can get things moving as you can."

"Oh, you can count on me for that," laughed Saltash. "I never was a drifter. Life is too short. We'll meet again to-morrow then. Come and dine if you like, and tell me what you've arranged! Good night!" He turned in his sudden fashion. "Good luck to you!"

He was gone upon the words, vanishing into the larches almost noiselessly as he had come, and Bunny was left alone.

He stood motionless at the gate for some time longer gazing out over the quiet, night-wrapt down. There was no elation in his attitude, only a deep thoughtfulness. He had never understood Charlie though oddly enough he had always believed in him. But to-night for the first time a curious doubt pierced his mind—a doubt that recurred again and again, banishing all sense of exultation. Why had Charlie returned like this? Why was he so eager to meddle in this affair? Why so recklessly generous? He had a strong feeling that there was something behind it all, some motive unrealized, some spur goading him, of which he, Bunny, might not approve if he came to know of it. He wished he could fathom the matter. It was unlike Saltash to take so much trouble over anything. He felt as if in some inexplicable fashion he were being tricked.

He put the thought from him, but he could not drive it away. Just as he had felt himself baffled a little earlier by Toby, so now he felt the same inability to comprehend Saltash. He seemed to be groping at a locked door, feeling and feeling for a key, that always eluded him. And again he wished that Jake was within reach.

He turned homewards at length, dissatisfied and ill at ease, yet calling himself a fool for scenting a mystery that did not exist.

CHAPTER XI

SUSPICION

The Graydown Stables were always a model of well-ordered efficiency, and it had ever been Bunny's pride to show them to his friends. But he awaited General Melrose and his daughter on the following afternoon in a mood of some impatience. He had arrived early in the hope of finding Toby at liberty, but his young *fiancé* was nowhere to be found. She had gone out riding, Maud said, immediately after luncheon, and he realized with some disgust that he had forgotten to tell her on the previous day of his coming.

"She will be in to tea, dear," Maud said, and he was obliged to content himself with the prospect of seeing her and acquainting her with Saltash's energetic interest on their behalf after the visitors had gone. He had never felt less in the mood for entertaining casual friends than he felt on that sunny afternoon in September as he lounged in the wide stable-yard and waited for them. He had always liked Sheila Melrose, they had a good deal in common. But curiously enough it was that very fact that made him strangely reluctant to meet her now. In some inexplicable fashion, he found her simple directness disconcerting. Toby's words stuck obstinately in his mind, refusing to be dislodged. "She likes you well enough not to want you to marry me." He realized beyond question that those words had not been without some significance. It might be just instinct with her, as Toby had declared, but that Sheila regarded his engagement as a mistake he was fairly convinced. That she herself had any feeling for him beyond that of friendship he did not for a moment imagine. Bunny had no vanity in that direction. There was too much of the boy, too much of the frank comrade, in his disposition for that. They were pals, and the idea of anything deeper than palship on either side had never seriously crossed his mind. He was honest in all his ways, and his love for Toby—that wild and wonderful flower of first love—filled all his conscious thoughts to the exclusion of aught beside. The odd, sweet beauty of her had him in thrall. She was so totally different from everyone else he had ever encountered. He felt the lure of her more and more with every meeting, the wonder and the charm.

But Sheila did not want him to marry her, and a very natural feeling of irritation against her possessed him in consequence. Doubtless Sheila had a perfect right to her opinions, but she might keep them to herself. Between Saltash's headlong resolve to help and Sheila's veiled desire to hinder, he felt that his course was becoming too complicated, as if in spite of his utmost efforts to guide his own craft there were contrary currents at work that he was powerless to avoid.

He had an urgent desire for Toby that afternoon, and he was inclined somewhat unreasonably to resent her absence. But when at length the hoot of the General's car warned him of his visitors' advent as they turned in at the gate, he was suddenly conscious of a feeling of relief that he was alone. Toby was not at her ease with them. She fancied they disapproved of her, and whether the fancy were justified or not he was glad that she was not there to meet them. He determined to get the business over as quickly as possible.

Sheila in her dainty summer attire was looking even prettier than usual, and almost against his will Bunny noted the fact. Against his will also, his barely-acknowledged feeling of resentment vanished before he had been five minutes in her company. Sheila's charms went beyond mere prettiness. She had the tact and ready ease of manner which experience of the world alone can impart. She was sympathetic and quick of understanding. Without flattering, she possessed the happy knack of setting those about her at their ease. It was very rarely that she was roused to indignation; perhaps only Saltash knew how deep her indignation could be. And he was not the man to impart the knowledge to anyone else.

So on that warm September afternoon in her gracious way she restored Bunny's good humour and reinstated their friendship without effort, without apparent consciousness of any strain upon it. They

went through the stables, and Bunny displayed his favourites with an enthusiasm of which he had not believed himself capable a little earlier. The stud had always been his great delight from boyhood, and both the General and his daughter took a keen interest in all they saw.

The time passed with astounding rapidity, and the chiming of the great stable-clock awoke Bunny at length to the fact that the afternoon was practically over.

"Maud will think we are never going in to tea," he said, with a laugh, turning back from the gate into the training field where they had been inspecting some of the colts. "You'll come round to the house, won't you? She is expecting you—said I was to be sure to bring you in."

Sheila smiled and accepted the invitation. "We were hoping to see Mrs. Bolton to say good-bye," she said. "Is Miss Larpent not here to-day?"

"Yes, she's out riding," Bunny said. "She may be in any moment. It's a pity Jake is away. He is expected back some time next week."

"Yes, I'm sorry to have missed him," said the General. "Tell him that I've enjoyed seeing the animals, and I think he has a very fine show! I never could understand how Saltash could bring himself to part with the stud."

"He's so seldom at home," said Bunny. "Yachting is much more in his line—though as a matter of fact he is at the Castle just now, came back yesterday."

"Is he indeed? Are you sure of that?" Sheila spoke with surprise. "I thought he meant to be away much longer."

"His intentions never last more than a couple of days," remarked the General with a touch of acidity. "Nothing he does ever surprises me."

"He's a very good chap," began Bunny. "He's been no end decent to me. Why,—" he broke off suddenly—"Hullo! There he is! And—Toby!"

Two figures had come suddenly round the corner of some stables, walking side by side. Both were in riding-dress, but the day being hot, the girl had discarded her long coat and was carrying it without ceremony over her arm. Her silk shirt was open at the neck, her soft hat pushed jauntily down on the side of her head. She was laughing as she came, and she looked like a merry little cow-boy straight from the prairies.

The man who moved beside her was laughing also. There was no grace about him, only that strange unstudied kingliness that had earned for him the title of "Rex." He was swift to see the advancing visitors and swept the hat from his head with a royal gesture of greeting.

Toby's face flushed deeply; she looked for the moment inclined to run away. Then with an impulse half-defiant, she restrained herself and caught back the smile that had so nearly vanished. She slapped the switch against her gaitered leg with boyish swagger and advanced.

A quick frown drew Bunny's forehead as he observed her attitude. He spoke impetuously, almost before they met.

"You look like a girl out of a comic opera. Why don't you put your coat on?"

Toby made a face at him. "Because it's cooler off. You can carry it if you like." She threw it to him nonchalantly with the words, and turned forthwith to Sheila. "Have you just been round the Stables? Grilling, isn't it? I've been exercising one of the youngsters. He nearly pulled my arms off. We've been practising some jumps."

"Then you shouldn't," put in Bunny. "The ground's too hard for jumping."

Toby turned upon him with a flash of temper. "No one asked for your opinion. I know a safe jump when I see one. Are you coming in to tea, Miss Melrose? I should think you're wanting it. Yes? What's the matter?"

She flung the two questions in a different tone, sharply, as though startled. Sheila was looking at her oddly, very intently, a species of puzzled recognition in her eyes.

Toby backed away from her, half-laughing, yet with something that was not laughter on her face. "What can be the matter?" she said. "Is it—is it my riding breeches? Here, Bunny! Let me have my coat!" She turned swiftly with extended arms. "Quick! Before Miss Melrose faints! I've given her the shock of her life."

"No! No!" protested Sheila, recovering. "Don't be absurd! You reminded me so vividly of someone, that's all. I don't quite know who even yet."

Bunny helped Toby into the coat without a word. There was grim displeasure on his face. The General and Saltash were talking together and for the moment they three stood there alone.

Toby turned round laughing. "How ridiculous you are!" she said to Bunny. "You've seen me in this get-up heaps of times before—and will again. Miss Melrose, I forgot you hadn't. I'm horribly sorry to have shocked you. Shall we go in for tea now?"

The puzzled look was still in Sheila's eyes though she smiled in answer. "I am not shocked—of course," she said. "But—but—"

"Yes?" said Toby.

She spoke in the same brief, staccato note; the word was like a challenge. Saltash turned suddenly round.

"I have just been complimenting Miss Larpent on the excellence of her get-up," he said lightly. "We met at the gate on the downs, and I have been witnessing some very pretty horsemanship. Miss Melrose, I hear you are leaving tomorrow, and am quite desolated in consequence. It is always my luck to be left behind."

The hard little smile that only he could ever provoke was on Sheila's lips as she turned to him.

"For such a rapid rider, you are indeed unfortunate," she said.

He laughed with careless effrontery. "Yes, the devil usually takes the hindmost,—so I've been told. Miss Larpent anyway is quite safe, for she will always be an easy first."

"There is such a thing as going too fast," commented Bunny.

"There is such a thing as getting away altogether," flung back Toby with spirit.

Bunny's eyes flashed into sudden, ominous flame. He could not have said why the contrast between the two girls—the one in her dainty summer attire and the other in her boyish riding-kit—had such an effect upon him, but for the moment it almost infuriated him.

Toby saw it, and her own eyes lit in response. She stood waiting for his rejoinder—the spirit of mischief incarnate, wary, alert, daring him.

But Bunny did not speak in answer. He drew in a hard breath through teeth that gripped his lower lip, and restrained himself. The next instant he had turned away.

"Oh, damn!" said Toby, and swung upon her heel.

Saltash and the General walked beside her, rallying her. But Bunny and Sheila came behind in silence.

CHAPTER XII

THE ALLY

They found Maud awaiting them in the long low room that overlooked her favourite view of the down. Saltash entered as one who had the right, and she greeted him with momentary surprise but evident pleasure.

"I couldn't spend twenty-four hours at Burchester without calling upon you," he said.

"You know you are always welcome," she made answer, with the smile which only her intimate friends ever saw.

They sat down by one of the wide French windows and General Melrose began to occupy his hostess's

attention. Sheila took a chair that Bunny pushed forward, and Saltash glanced round for Toby. She was sitting on the end of a couch, playing with the silky ears of the old red setter. Her hat was flung down beside her; her pretty face downcast. He crossed to her deliberately and bent also to fondle the dog.

She started slightly at his coming, and a faint flush rose in her cheeks; but she neither glanced at him nor spoke.

For the moment they were alone, unobserved by the laughing group at the window. Saltash bent suddenly lower. His quick whisper came down to her:

"Go and put on the most girlish thing you've got!"

She looked up at him then, her blue eyes seeking his. A rapid flash of understanding passed between them. Then, without a word she rose.

When Maud looked round for her a few seconds later, Saltash was lounging alone against the sofa-head pulling Chops absently by the ear while he stared before him out of the window in a fit of abstraction that seemed to her unusual.

She called to him to join them at the tea-table, and he jerked himself to his feet and came across to her with the monkeyish grin on his face that she had learned long since to regard as the shield wherewith he masked his soul.

He sat down by her side, devoting himself to her with the gallantry that always characterized him when with her. No one seemed to notice that Toby had disappeared. They talked about the horses, about Jake and his recent victories, about the season at Fairharbour, about the Melroses' plans for the winter.

When questioned by the General on this subject, Saltash declared airily that he never made any.

"If I do, I never stick to them, so what's the use?" he said.

"How weak of you!" said Maud.

And he threw her the old half-tender, half-audacious look, and tossed the subject banteringly away.

He was the first to make a move when the careless meal was over, but not to go. He sauntered forth and lounged against the door-post smoking, while Bunny and Sheila talked of tennis and golf, and Maud listened with well-disguised patience to the old General's oft-repeated French reminiscences.

And then when the tea was cold and forgotten and Sheila was beginning to awake to the fact that it was growing late, there came a sudden, ringing laugh across the lawn and Toby scampered into view with little Molly on her shoulder and Eileen running by her side. She was dressed in white, and she looked no more than a child herself as she danced across the grass, executing a fairy-like step as she came. The tiny girl's tinkling laughter mingled with hers. Her little hands were fondly clasped about the girl's neck; she looked down into her face with babyish adoration while Eileen, the elder child, gazed upward with a more serious devotion.

General Melrose interrupted his narrative to look at the advancing trio.

"My Jove, Mrs. Bolton," he said, "but that's a pretty sight!"

Sheila also ceased very suddenly to converse with Bunny, while Saltash made a scarcely perceptible movement as though he braced and restrained himself in the same instant.

"The prettiest picture I've seen for years!" vowed the General. "How that little Larpent girl changes! She is like a piece of quicksilver. There's no getting hold of her. How old is she?"

"She is nearly twenty," said Bunny with the swiftness of ownership.

"Nearly twenty! You don't say so! She might be fourteen at the present moment. Look at that! Look at it!" For Toby was suddenly whizzing like a butterfly across the lawn in a giddy flight that seemed scarcely to touch the ground, the little girl still upon her shoulder, the elder child standing apart and clapping her hands in delighted admiration.

"Yes, she is rather like fourteen," Maud said, with her tender smile. "Do you know what she did the other day? It was madness of course, and my husband was very angry with her. I was frightened myself though I have more faith in her than he has. She climbs like a cat, you know, and she actually took both those children up to a high bough of the old beech tree; I don't know in the least how she did it. None of the party seemed to think there was any cause for alarm till Jake came on the scene. He fetched them down with a ladder—all but Toby who went higher and pelted him with beech nuts till he

retreated—at my urgent request."

"And what happened after that?" questioned Saltash, with his eyes still upon the dancing figure. "From what I have observed of Jake, I should say that an ignominious retreat is by no means in his line."

Maud laughed a little. "Oh, Jake can be generous when he likes. He had it out with her of course, but he wasn't too severe. Ah, look! She is going to jump the sun dial!"

Sheila turned to her. "Surely you are nervous! If she fell, the little one might be terribly hurt."

"She won't fall," Maud said with confidence.

And even as she spoke, Toby leapt the sun dial, leaving the ground as a bird leaves it, without effort or any sort of strain, and alighting again as a bird alights from a curving flight with absolute freedom and a natural adroitness of movement indescribably pleasant to watch.

"A very pretty circus trick!" declared the General, and even Bunny's clouded brow cleared a little though he said nothing.

"A circus trick indeed!" said Sheila, as if speaking to herself. "How on earth did she do it?"

"She is like a boy in many ways," said Maud.

Sheila looked at her. "Yes. She is just like a boy, or at least—" Her look went further, reached Saltash who lounged on Maud's other side, and fell abruptly away.

As Toby came up with the two children, all of them flushed and laughing, Toby herself in her white frock looking like a child just out of school, she rose and turned to Bunny.

"We ought to go now," she said. "I am going to fetch the car round for Dad."

"I'll do it," he said.

But she went with him as he had known she would. They left the group at the window and moved away side by side in silence as they had walked that afternoon.

Saltash stood up and addressed Maud. "I'm going too. Bunny is dining with me tonight. I suppose you won't come?"

She gave him her hand, smiling. "I can't thank you. Ask me another day! You and Bunny will really get on much better without me."

"Impossible!" he declared gallantly, but he did not press her.

He turned to the General and took his leave.

Toby and the two children walked the length of the terrace with him, all chattering at once. She seemed to be in a daring, madcap mood and Saltash laughed and jested with her as though she had been indeed the child she looked. Only at parting, when she would have danced away, he suddenly stopped her with a word.

"Nonette!"

She stood still as if at a word of command; there had been something of compulsion in his tone.

He did not look at her, and the smile he wore was wholly alien to the words he spoke.

"Be careful how you go! And don't see Bunny again—till I have seen him!"

A hard breath went through Toby. She stood like a statue, the two children clasping her hands. Her blue eyes gazed at him with a wide questioning. Her face was white.

"Why? Why?" she whispered at length.

His look flashed before her vision like the grim play of a sword. "That girl remembers you. She will give you away. She's probably at it now. I'll see him—tell him the truth if necessary. Anyhow—leave him to me!"

"Tell him—the truth?" The words came from her like a cry. There was a sudden terror in her eyes. He

made a swift gesture of dismissal. "Go, child! Go! Whatever I do will make it all right for you. I'm standing by. Don't be afraid! Just—go!"

It was a definite command. She turned to obey, the little girls still clinging to her. The next moment she was running lightly back with them, and Saltash turned in the opposite direction and passed out of sight round the corner of the house on his way to the stable-yard.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRUTH

He went with careless tread as his fashion was, whistling the gay air to which all England was dancing that season. His swarthy countenance wore the half-mischievous, half-amused expression with which it was his custom to confront—and baffle—the world at large. No one knew what lay behind that facile mask. Only the very few suspected that it hid aught beyond a genial wickedness of a curiously attractive type.

His spurs rang upon the white stones, and Sheila Melrose, standing beside her father's car in the shadow of some buildings, turned sharply and saw him. Her face was pale; it had a strained expression. But it changed at sight of him. She regarded him with that look of frozen scorn which once she had flung him when they had met in the garish crowd at Valrosa.

Bunny was stooping over the car, but he became aware of Saltash almost in the same moment, and stood up straight to face him. Sheila was pale, but he was perfectly white, and there were heavy drops of perspiration on his forehead. He looked full at Saltash with eyes of blazing accusation.

Saltash's face never changed as he came up to the car. He ceased to whistle, but the old whimsical look remained. He seemed unaware of any tension.

"Car all right?" he asked smoothly. "Can I lend a hand? The general is beginning to move."

Sheila turned without a word and got into the car.

Bunny neither moved nor spoke. He stood like a man paralysed. It was Saltash who, with that royal air of amusing himself, stooped to the handle and started the engine.

The girl at the wheel did not even thank him. She looked beyond. Only as he stood aside and the car slid forward, she turned stiffly to Bunny.

"Good-bye!" she said.

He made a jerky movement. Their eyes met for a single second. "You will write?" he said.

His throat was working spasmodically, the words seemed to come with gigantic effort. She bent her head in answer and passed between them through the white gate into the drive that led round to the house.

Saltash turned with a lightning movement to Bunny. "Walk back with me and we can talk!" he said.

Bunny drew sharply back. The movement was one of instinctive recoil. But still no words came. He stood staring at Saltash, and he was trembling from head to foot.

"Don't be an ass now!" Saltash said, and his voice was oddly gentle, even compassionate. "You've stumbled on a mare's nest. It's all right. I can explain."

Bunny controlled himself with a jerk. His face was like death, but he found his voice. "You can keep your damned lies to yourself," he said. "I've no use for them."

The prod of a riding-switch against his shoulder made him start as a spirited animal starts at the touch of a spur. But Saltash only laughed.

"You'll fight me for that!" he said.

"I wouldn't touch you!" flung back Bunny.

"Oh, wouldn't you?" The odd eyes mocked him openly. "Then you withdraw the insult—with apologies?"

"Apologise—to you!" said Bunny.

"Or fight!" said Saltash. "I think that would do you more good than the other, but you shall decide."

"I will do neither," said Bunny, and turned his back with the words. "I've—done with you."

"You're wrong!" said Saltash. "You've got to face it, and you won't get the truth from anyone but me. That girl knows nothing, Bunny!" His voice was suddenly curt, with that in it which very few ever heard. "Turn around! Do you hear? Turn round—damn you! I'll kick you if you don't!"

Bunny turned. It was inevitable. They stood face to face. Then Saltash, the mockery gone from his eyes, reached out abruptly and gripped him by the arm. His touch was electric. For that moment—only for that moment—he was dangerous. There was something of the spring of a tiger in his action.

"You damn fool!" he said, and he spoke between his teeth. "Do you suppose even I would play such a blackguard's game as that?"

"Let me go!" Bunny said through white lips. "Facts are facts."

Saltash's hold did not slacken. "Where's Jake?" he said.

"Jake's away."

"Confound him! Just when he's wanted!" The ferocity died out of Saltash like the glow from cinders blown from a furnace. "Well, listen! I swear to you by all that is sacred that you're making a mistake. Sheila has told you a certain thing that is true, so far as it goes. But you've let your imagination run away with you. The rest is false."

He spoke with an emphasis that carried weight, and Bunny was moved in spite of himself. His own fire died down.

Saltash saw his advantage and pressed it. "If Jake were here, he'd tell you I was speaking the truth, and you'd believe him. You're on a wrong scent. So far as I'm concerned, you're welcome to follow it to blazes. I'm used to pleasantries of that sort from my friends. But I'm damned if I'll let that child be tripped for nothing. Do you hear, Bunny?" He shook the arm he gripped impatiently. "I'll see you in hell first!"

Bunny's mouth twisted with a painful effort to smile. "I'm in hell now," he said.

"Why the devil did you listen?" said Saltash. "Look here! We've got to have this thing out. Send a man along with my horse and walk across the park with me!"

He had gained his point by sheer insistence, and he knew it. Bunny knew it also and cursed himself for a weak fool as he moved to comply. With Saltash's blade through his heart, he yet could somehow find it possible to endure him.

He went with him in silence, hating the magnetism he found it impossible to resist. They passed through the shrubberies that skirted the house, and so to the open down.

Then in his sudden fashion, crudely and vehemently, Saltash began his defence.

"It's not my way," he said, "to give an answer to any man who questions; but you haven't stooped to question. So I tell you the truth. Sheila saw Toby working as a page at the Casino Hotel at Valrosa. That right? I thought so. It's the whole matter in a nutshell. I must have seen her too, but never noticed her till my last night in the place. Then I found Antonio hammering the poor little beggar out in the garden, and I stopped it. You'd have done the same. Afterwards, late that night, I went on board the yacht and found her down in the saloon—a stowaway. The yacht had started. I could have put back. I didn't. You wouldn't have done either. She took refuge with me. I sheltered her. She came to me as a boy. I treated her as such."

"You knew?" flung in Bunny.

Saltash's grin flashed across his dark features like a meteor through a cloudy sky and was gone. "I—suspected, *mon ami*. But—I did not even tell myself." That part of him that was French—a species of volatile sentimentality—sounded in the words like the echo of a laugh in a minor key. "I made a valet of her. I suffered her to clean my boots and brush my clothes. I kept her in order—with this—upon

occasion."

He held up the switch he carried.

"I don't believe it," said Bunny bluntly.

Saltash's shoulders went up. "You please yourself, *mon cher*. I am telling you the truth. I treated her like a puppy. I was kind to her, but never extravagantly kind. But I decided—eventually I decided—that it was time to turn home. No game can last forever. So we returned, and on our last night at sea we were rammed and sunk. Naturally that spoilt—or shall I say somewhat precipitated?—my plans. We were saved, the two of us together. And then was started that scandalous report of the woman on the yacht." Again the laughter sounded in his voice. "You see, *mon ami*, how small a spark can start a conflagration. In self-defence I had to invent something, and I invented it quickly. I said she was Larpent's daughter. I wonder if you would have thought of that. You'd have done it if you had, I'll wager."

He turned upon the boy who strode in silence by his side with a gleam of triumph in his eyes, but there was no answering gleam in Bunny's. He moved heavily, staring straight before him, his face drawn in hard lines of misery.

"Well," Saltash said, "that's all I have done. You now know the truth, simple and unadorned, as Sheila Melrose in her simplicity does not know it and probably would not comprehend it if she did."

"Leave her out of it!" said Bunny, in a strangled voice. "It was—the obvious conclusion."

"Oh, the obvious!" Cynicism undisguised caught up the word. "Only the young and innocent can ever really say with any conviction what is the obvious way of blackguards. You don't know it—neither do I. A single decent impulse on the part of a blackguard can upset all the calculations of the virtuous. Oh, Bunny, you fool, what do you want to wreck things for at this stage? Can't you see you've got a gift from the gods? Take it, man, and be thankful that you're considered worthy of it!"

Bunny made a sharp movement of protest. Saltash was looking at him with half-humorous compassion as one looks at a child with a damaged toy, and he was keenly conscious of being at a disadvantage. But though checked, he was not defeated. Saltash had made out a case for himself. He had in a measure vindicated Toby. But that was not the end of the matter.

He stopped and faced him. "Why were you so anxious for me to marry her?" he said. "I've got to know that."

He was instantly aware that Saltash eluded him, even though he seemed to meet his look as he made reply. "You are quite welcome to know it, *mon ami*. I chance to take a fatherly interest in you both."

Bunny flinched a little. Something in the light reply had pierced him though he could not have said how. "That's all?" he asked rather thickly.

"That is quite all," said Saltash, and faintly smiled—the smile of the practised swordsman behind the blade.

Bunny stood for some moments regarding him, his boyish face stern and troubled. Up to that point, against his will, he had believed him; from it, he believed him no longer. But—he faced the truth however it might gall him—he was pitted against a skilled fencer, and he was powerless. Experience could baffle him at every turn.

"Do you tell me you have never realized that she cared for you?" he blurted forth abruptly, and there was something akin to agony in his utterance of the words. He knew that he was baring his breast for the stroke as he forced them out.

But Saltash did not strike. Just for an instant he showed surprise. Then—quite suddenly he lowered his weapon. He faced Bunny with a smile of comradeship.

"Quite honestly, Bunny," he said, "if I had realized it, it wouldn't have made any difference. I have no use for sentimental devotion at my age. She has never been more to me than—a puppy that plays with your hand."

"Ah," Bunny said, and swung away from him with the words. "I suppose that is how you treat them all. Women and dogs—they're very much alike."

"Not in every respect," said Saltash. "I should say that Toby is an exception anyway. She knows play from earnest."

"Does she?" said Bunny. He paused a moment, as if trying to concentrate his forces; then he turned to Saltash again. "I'm going back now. I can't dine with you—though I've no desire to quarrel. But you see—you must understand—that I can never—accept anything from you again. I'm sorry—but I can't."

"What are you going to do?" said Saltash.

Bunny hesitated, his boyish face a white mask of misery.

Saltash reached out a second time and touched him lightly, almost caressingly, with the point of his switch. "What's the matter with you, Bunny?" he said. "Think I've lied to you?"

Bunny met his look. "I don't want to quarrel with you," he said. "It isn't—somehow it isn't—worth it."

"Thanks!" said Saltash, and briefly laughed. "You place my friendship at a pretty high figure then. Tell me what you're going to do!"

"What is it to you what I do?" A quick gleam shone for an instant in Bunny's eyes, dispelling the look of stricken misery. "I'm not asking you to help me."

"I've grasped that," said Saltash. "But even so, I may be able to lend a hand. As you say, there is not much point in our quarrelling. There's nothing to quarrel about that I can see—except that you've called me a liar for no particular good reason!"

"Do you object to that?" said Bunny.

Saltash made a careless gesture. "Perhaps—as you say—it isn't worth it. All the same, I've a certain right to know what you propose to do, since, I gather, I have not managed to satisfy you."

"A right!" flashed Bunny.

"Yes, a right." Saltash's voice was suddenly and suavely confident. "You may forget—or possibly you may remember—that I gave my protection to Nonette on the day she came to me for it, and I have never withdrawn it since. What matters to her—matters to me."

"I see." Bunny stood stiffly facing him. "I am responsible to you, am I?"

"That is what I am trying to convey," said Saltash.

The fire in Bunny's eyes leapt high for a moment or two, then died down again. Had Jake been his opponent, he would have flung an open challenge, but somehow Saltash, with whom he had never before striven in his life, was less easy to resist. In some subtle fashion he seemed able to evade resistance and yet to gain his point.

He gained his point on this occasion. Almost before he knew it, Bunny had yielded.

"I am going to her," he said, "to ask her for the whole truth—about her past."

"Is any woman capable of telling the truth to that extent?" questioned Saltash.

"I shall know if she doesn't," said Bunny doggedly.

"And will that help?" The note of mockery that was never long absent from his voice sounded again. "Isn't it possible—sometime—to try to know too much? There is such a thing as looking too closely, *mon ami*. And then we pay the price."

"Do you imagine I could ever be satisfied not knowing?" said Bunny.

Saltash shrugged his shoulders. "I merely suggested that you are going the wrong way to satisfy yourself. But that is your affair, not mine. The gods have sent you a gift, and because you don't know what it is made of, you are going to pull it to pieces to find out. And presently you will fling it away because you cannot fit it together again. You don't realize—you never will realize—that the best things in life are the things we never see and only dimly understand."

A vein of sincerity mingled with the banter in his voice, and Bunny was aware of a curious quality of reverence, of something sacred in a waste place.

It affected him oddly. Convinced though he was that in one point at least Saltash had sought to deceive him it yet influenced him very strongly in Saltash's favour. Against his judgment, against his will even, he saw him as a friend.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, speaking slowly, his eyes upon the swarthy, baffling countenance, "that you have never even tried to know where she came from—what she is?"

Saltash made a quick gesture as of remonstrance. "*Mon ami*, the last I have always known. The first I have never needed to know."

"Then," Bunny spoke with difficulty, but his look never wavered, "tell me—as before God—tell me what you believe her to be!"

"What I know her to be," corrected Saltash, "I will tell you—certainly. She is a child who has looked into hell, but she is still—a child."

"What do you mean?" questioned Bunny.

Saltash's eyes, one black, one grey, suddenly flashed a direct challenge into his own. "I mean," he said, "that the flame has scorched her, but it has never actually touched her."

"You know that?" Bunny's voice was hoarse. There was torture in his eyes. "Man—for God's sake—the truth!"

"It is the truth," Saltash said.

"How do you know it? You've no proof. How can you be sure?" He could not help the anguish of his voice. The words fell harsh and strained.

"How do I know it?" Saltash echoed the words sharply. "What proof? Bunny, you fool, do you know so little of the world—of women—as that? What proof do you need? Just—look into her eyes!"

A queer note of passion sounded in his own voice, and it told Bunny very clearly that he was grappling with the naked truth at last. It arrested him in a moment. He suddenly found that he could go no further. There was no need.

Impulsively, with an inarticulate word of apology, he thrust out his hand. Saltash's came to meet it in a swift, hard grip.

"Enough?" he asked, with that odd, smiling grimace of his that revealed so little.

And, "Yes, enough!" Bunny said, looking him straight in the face.

They parted almost without words a few minutes later. There was no more to be said.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST CARD

Saltash dined alone that night. He was in a restless mood and preoccupied, scarcely noticing what was put before him, pushing away the wine untasted. In the end he rose from the table almost with a gesture of disgust.

"I'm going to smoke on the ramparts," he said to the decorous butler who waited upon him. "If anyone should call to see me, let them wait in the music-room!"

"Very good, my lord! And where would you like to take coffee?" enquired the man sedately.

Saltash laughed. "Not on the ramparts—emphatically. I'll have mercy on you to that extent. Put it on the spirit-lamp in the music-room, and leave it! You needn't sit up, any of you. I'll put out the lights."

"Very good, my lord."

The man withdrew, and Saltash chose a cigar. An odd grimace drew his features as he lighted it. He had the look of a man who surveys his last card and knows himself a loser. Though he went out of the room and up the great staircase to the music-room with his head up and complete indifference in his carriage, his eyelids were slightly drawn. He did not look as if he had enjoyed the game.

A single red lamp lighted the music-room, and the long apartment looked dim and ghostly. He stood

for a moment as he entered it and looked round, then with a scarcely perceptible lift of the shoulders he passed straight through to the curtain that hung before the door leading to the turret. The darkness of the place gaped before him, and he turned back with a muttered word and recrossed the room. There were Persian rugs upon the floor, and his feet made no sound. He went to the mantel-piece and, feeling along it, found a small electric torch. The light of it flared before him as he returned. The door yielded to his touch and swung shut behind him. He passed into vault-like silence.

The stone steps gave back the sound of his tread as he mounted, with eerie, wandering echoes. The grey walls glimmered with a ghostly desolation around him. Halfway up, he stopped to flick the ash from his cigar, and laughed aloud. But the echoes of his laughter sounded like voices crying in the darkness. He went on more swiftly, like a phantom imprisoned and seeking escape. The echoes met him and fell away behind him. The loneliness was like a curse. The very air felt dead.

He reached the top of the turret at last, and the heavy door that gave upon the ramparts. With a sound that was almost a gasp, he pushed it open, and passed out into the open air.

A full moon was shining, and his acres lay below him—a wonderful picture in black and silver. He came to the first gap in the battlements, mounted the parapet, and stood there with a hand resting on each side.

The wash of the sea came murmuringly through the September silence. His restless eyes flashed hither and thither over the quiet scene, taking in every detail, lingering nowhere. The pine trees stirred in the distance below him, seeming to whisper together, and an owl hooted with a weird persistence down by the lake. It was like the calling of a human voice—almost like a cry of distress. Then it ceased, and the trees were still again.

The spell of the silence fell like the falling of a curtain. The loneliness crept about his heart.

He took the cigar from his mouth and spoke, ironically, grimly.

"There is your kingdom, Charles Rex!" he said.

He turned with the words and leaped down upon the narrow walk between the battlements. The owl began to call again, but the desolation remained. He paced forward with his hands behind him, his head bent. No one could see him here. The garment of mockery could be flung aside. He was like a prisoner tramping the stone walls from which he could never escape.

He paused once to toss away his cigar, but he did not look out again over the fair prospect of his lands. He was looking at other things, seeing the vast emptiness of a life that had never been worth while stretching behind and before him. Like a solitary traveller pausing in the heart of the desert, he stood to view the barrenness around him.

He had travelled far, had pursued many a quest with ardour; but the ardour had all gone out of him now. Only the empty solitude remained. He had lived a life of fevered variety, he had drunk deep of many waters; but he had never been satisfied. And now it seemed to him that all he had ever looked upon, all he had ever achieved, was mirage. Nothing of all that he had ever striven for was left. The fruit had turned to ashes in his mouth, and no spring remained whereat to quench his thirst.

Perhaps few men have ever realized the utter waste of wickedness as Charles Rex realized it that night. He met it whichever way he turned. To gratify the moment's whim had ever been his easy habit. If a generous impulse had moved him, he had gratified that also. But it had never been his way to sacrifice himself—until a certain night when a child had come to him, wide-eyed and palpitating like a driven bird, and had sought shelter and protection at his hands.

That, very curiously, had been the beginning of a new era in his life. It had appealed to him as nothing had ever appealed before. He had never tasted—or even desired—the Dead Sea fruit again. Something had entered his being on that night which he had never been able to cast out, and all other things had been dwarfed to insignificance.

He faced the fact as he paced his castle walls. The relish had gone out of his life. He was gathering what he had sown, and the harvest was barren indeed.

Time passed; he walked unheeding. If he spent the whole night on the ramparts, there was no one to know or care. It was better than tossing sleepless under a roof. He felt as if a roof would suffocate him. But sheer physical weariness began to oppress even his elastic frame at last. He awoke to the fact that he was dead tired.

He sat down in an embrasure between the battlements, and drifted into the numb state between

waking and sleeping in which visions are born. For a space nothing happened, then quite suddenly, rising as it were out of a void, a presence entered his consciousness, reached and touched his spirit. Intangibly, but quite unmistakably, he was aware of the summons, of a voice that spoke within his soul.

He lifted his head and looked about him. Emptiness, stark emptiness, was all he saw. Yet, in a moment, as though a hand had beckoned, he arose. Without a backward glance he traversed the distance that lay between him and the turret-door. He went through it into utter darkness, and in utter darkness began the descent.

A shaft of moonlight smote through a slit in the stone wall as he rounded the corner of the stair. It lay like a shining sword across his path, and for a second he paused. Then he passed over it, sure-footed and confident, and plunged again into darkness. When he reached the end of the descent, he was breathing heavily, and his eyes were alight with a strange fire. He pulled upon the door and put aside the thick curtain with the swift movements of a man who can brook no delay. He passed into the long, dim room beyond with its single red lamp burning at the far end. He prepared to pass on to the door that led out upon the gallery and so to the grand staircase. But before he had gone half-a-dozen paces he stopped. It was no sound that arrested, no visible circumstance of any sort. Yet, as if at a word of command, he halted. His quick look swept around the room like the gleam of a rapier, and suddenly he swung upon his heel, facing that still, red light.

Seconds passed before he moved again. Then swiftly and silently he walked up the room. Close to the lamp was a deep settee on which the spots of a leopard skin showed in weird relief. At one end of the settee, against the leopard skin, something gold was shining. Saltash's look was fixed upon it as he drew near.

He reached the settee treading noiselessly. He stood beside it, looking down. And over his dark face with its weary lines and cynical mouth, its melancholy and its bitterness, there came a light such as neither man nor woman had ever seen upon it before. For there before him, curled up like a tired puppy, her tumbled, golden hair lying in ringlets over the leopard skin, was Toby, asleep in the dim, red lamplight.

For minutes he stood and gazed upon her before she awoke. For minutes that strange glory came and went over his watching face. He did not stir, did not seem even to breathe. But the fact of his presence must have pierced her consciousness at last, for in the end quite quietly, supremely naturally, the blue eyes opened and fixed upon him.

"Hullo!" said Toby sleepily. "Time to get up?"

And then, in a moment, she had sprung upright on the couch, swift dismay on her face.

"I—I thought we were on the yacht! I—I—I never meant to go to sleep here! I came to speak to you, sir. I wanted to see you."

He put a restraining hand upon her thin young shoulder, and his touch vibrated as with some unknown force controlled.

"All right, Nonette!" he said, and his voice had the same quality; it was reassuring but oddly unsteady. "Sorry I kept you waiting."

She looked at him. Her face was quivering. "I've had—a hell of a time," she said pathetically. "Been here hours—thought you'd never come. Your man—your man said I wasn't to disturb you."

"Damn the fool!" said Saltash.

She broke into a breathless laugh. "That's—that's just what I said. But I thought—I thought perhaps—you'd rather—rather I waited." She shivered suddenly. "I don't like this place. Can you take me somewhere else?"

He bent lower, put his hand under her elbow and helped her to her feet. She came up from the couch with a spring, and stood before him, half-daring and half-shy.

Saltash kept his hold upon her arm, and turned her towards the wall beside the tall mantel-piece. She went with him readily enough, watching, eager-eyed, as he stretched his free hand up to the oak panelling.

"Now I'm going to find out all your secrets!" she said boyishly.

"Not quite all," said Saltash.

There came the click of a spring and the panel slid to one side, leaving a long, narrow opening before them. Toby glanced up at him and, with a small, nestling movement, slipped within the circle of his arm. It tightened upon her in an instant, and she laughed again, a quivering, exultant laugh.

"I'm glad you've come," she said.

They paused on the edge of darkness, but there was no hesitation about Toby. She was all a thrill with expectancy. Then in a flash the room before them was illuminated, and they entered.

It was a strange chamber, panelled, built in the shape of a cone. A glass dome formed its roof, and there was no window besides. The lights were cunningly concealed behind a weirdly coloured fresco of Oriental figures. But one lamp alone on a small table burned with a still red glow. This lamp was supported on the stuffed skin of a hooded cobra.

Toby's eyes were instantly drawn towards it. They shone with excitement. Again she glanced up at the man beside her.

"What a wonderful place!"

"Better than the music-room?" suggested Saltash.

"Oh, yes, far better." Her shining eyes sought his. "It might be your cabin on the yacht."

He stretched a hand behind him and again the spring clicked. Then he drew her forward. They trod on tiger skins. Everywhere were tiger skins, on the floor and on a deep low settee by the table which was the only other furniture the room possessed. Toby was clinging to the arm that held her, clinging very closely. There was unspoken entreaty in her hold. For there was something about Saltash at the moment, something unfamiliar and unfathomable that frightened her. His careless drollery, his two-edged ironies, were nought to her; but his silence was a barrier unknown that she could not pass. She could only cling voicelessly to the support he had not denied her.

He brought her to the settee and stood still. His face was strangely grim.

"Well—Toby?" he said.

She twisted in his hold and faced him, but she kept his arm wound close about her, her hand tight gripped on his. "Are you—angry with me for coming?" she asked him quiveringly. "I—had to come."

He looked down into her eyes. "*Bien, petite!* Then you need—a friend," he said.

Her answering look was piteous. "I need—you," she said.

One of the old gay smiles flashed across his face. He seemed to challenge her to lightness. The grimness went out of his eyes like a shadow.

"And so you have come, *ma mignonette*, at the dead of night—at the risk of your reputation—and mine—"

Toby made an excruciating grimace, and broke impulsively in upon him. "It wasn't the dead of night when I started. I've been waiting hours—hours. But it doesn't matter. I've found you—at last. And you can't send me away now—like you did before—because—because—well, I've no one to go to. You might have done it if you'd come down earlier. But you can't do it—now." Her voice thrilled on a high note of triumph. "You've got to keep me—now. I've come—to stay."

"What?" said Saltash. He bent towards her, looking closely into her face. "Got to keep you, have I? What's that mean? Has Bunny been a brute to you? I could have sworn I'd made him understand."

She laughed in answer. "Bunny! I didn't wait to see him!"

"What?" Saltash said again.

She reached up a quick, nervous hand and laid it against his breast. Her eyes, wide and steadfast, never flinched from his. "I've come—to stay," she repeated. And then, after a moment, "It's all right. I left a note behind for Bunny. I told him I wasn't going back."

He caught her hand tightly into his. His hold was drawing her, and she yielded herself to it still with that quivering laughter that was somehow more eloquent than words, more piteous than tears.

Saltash spoke, below his breath. "What am I going to do with you?" he said.

Her arms reached up to him suddenly. Perhaps it was that for which she had waited. "You're going—"

to keep me—this time," she told him tremulously. "Oh, why did you ever send me away—when I belonged to you—and to no one else? You meant to give me my chance? What chance have I of anything but hell and damnation away from you? No, listen! Let me speak! Hear me first!" She uttered the words with passionate insistence. "I'm not asking anything of you—only to be with you. I'll be to you whatever you choose me to be—always—always. I will be your valet, your slave, your—plaything. I will be—the dust under your feet. But I must be with you. You understand me. No one else does. No one else ever can."

"Are you sure you understand yourself?" Saltash said.

His arms had closed about her. He was holding her in a vital clasp. But his restless look did not dwell upon her. It seemed rather to be seeking something beyond.

Toby's hands met and gripped each other behind his neck. She clung to him with an almost frenzied closeness.

"You can't send me away!" she told him brokenly. "If you do, I shall die. And I'm asking such a little—such a very little."

"You don't know what you're asking, child," he said, and though he held her fast pressed to him his voice had the sombre ring of a man who battles with misgiving. "You have never known. That's the hell of it."

"I do know!" she flung back almost fiercely. "I know—all I need to know—of most things. I know—very well—" her breath came quickly, but still her eyes remained upraised—"what would have happened—what was bound to happen—if the yacht had never gone down. I wasn't afraid then. I'm not now. You're the only man on this earth that I'd say it to. I hate men—most men! But to you—to you—" a sudden sob caught her voice, she paused to steady it—"to you I just want to be whatever you're needing most in life. And when I can't be that to you any longer—I'll just drop out—as I promised—and you—you shall never know a thing about it. That I swear."

His look came swiftly to her. The blue eyes were swimming in tears. He made a sudden gesture as of capitulation, and the strain went out of his look. His arms tightened like springs about her. He spoke lightly, jestingly.

"*Bien!* Shall I tell what you shall be to me, *mignonne?*" he said, and smiled down at her with his royal air of confidence.

She trembled a little and was silent, realizing that he had suddenly leapt to a decision, fearing desperately what that decision might be. His old baffling mask of banter had wholly replaced the sombreness, but she was aware of a force behind it that gripped her irresistibly. She could not speak in answer.

"I will tell you," he said, and his dark, face laughed into hers with a merriment half-mischievous, half-kindly. "I am treading the path of virtue, *mignonne*, and uncommon lonely I'm finding it. You shall relieve the monotony. We will be virtuous together—for a while. You shall be—my wife!"

He stooped with the words and ere she knew it his lips were on her own. But his kiss, though tender, was as baffling as his smile. It was not the kiss of a lover.

She gasped and shrank away. "Your—wife! You—you—you're joking! How could I—I—be your wife?"

"You and none other!" he declared gaily. "Egad, it's the very thing for us! Why did I never think of it before? I will order the state-coach at once. We will go to town—elope and be married before the world begins to buzz. What are you frightened at, sweetheart? Why this alarm? Wouldn't you rather be my wife than—the dust beneath my feet?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Toby, and hid her face from the dancing raillery in his eyes.

His hold was close and sheltering, but he laughed at her without mercy. "Does the prospect make you giddy? You will soon get over that. You will take the world by storm, *mignonne*. You will be the talk of the town."

"Oh, no!" breathed Toby. "No, I couldn't!"

"What?" he jested. "You are going to refuse my suit?"

She turned and clung to him with a passionate, even fierce intensity, but she did not lift her face again to his. Her voice came muffled against his breast. "I could never refuse you—anything."

"*Eh, bien!* Then all is well!" he declared. "My bride will hold her own wherever she goes, save with her husband. And to him she will yield her wifely submission at all times. Do you know what they will say—all of them—when they hear that Charles Rex is married at last?"

"What?" whispered Toby apprehensively.

He bent his head, still laughing. "Shall I tell you? Can't you guess?"

"No. Tell me!" she said.

He touched the soft ringlets of her hair with his lips. "They will say, 'God help his wife!' *mignonne*. And I—I shall answer 'Amen'."

She lifted her face suddenly and defiantly, her eyes afire. "Do you know what I shall say if they do?" she said.

"What?" said Saltash, his own eyes gleaming oddly.

"I shall tell them," said Toby tensely, "to—to—to go to blazes!"

He grimaced his appreciation. "Then they will begin to pity the husband, *chérie*."

She held up her lips to his, childishly, lovingly. "I will be good," she said. "I will be good. I will never say such things again."

He kissed the trembling lips again, lightly, caressingly. "Oh, don't be too good!" he said. "I couldn't live up to it. You shall say what you like—do what you like. And—you shall be my queen!"

She caught back another sob. Her clinging arms tightened. "And you will be—what you have always been," she said—"my king—my king—my king!"

In the silence that followed the passionate words, Charles Rex very gently loosened the clinging arms, and set her free.

PART IV

CHAPTER I

THE WINNING POST

"I never thought it would be like this," said Toby.

She spoke aloud, though she was alone. She stood at an immense window on the first floor of a busy Paris hotel and stared down into the teeming courtyard below. Her fair face wore a whimsical expression that was half of amusement and half of discontent. She looked absurdly young, almost childish; but her blue eyes were unmistakably wistful.

Below her seethed a crowd of vehicles of every description and the babel that came up to her was as the roar of a great torrent. It seemed to sweep away all coherent thought, for she smiled as she gazed downwards and her look held interest in the busy scene even though the hint of melancholy lingered. There was certainly plenty to occupy her, and it was not in her nature to be bored.

But yet at the opening of a door in the room behind her, she turned very swiftly, and in a moment her face was alight with ardent welcome.

"Ah! Here you are!" she said.

He came forward in his quick, springy fashion, his odd eyes laughing their gay, unstable greeting into hers. He took the hands she held out to him, and bending, lightly kissed them.

"Have you been bored? *Mais non!* I have not been so long gone. Why are you not still resting, *chérie*, as I told you?"

She looked at him, and still—though her eyes laughed their gladness—the wistfulness remained. "I am—quite rested, *monseigneur*. And the tiredness—quite gone. And now you are going to take me to see the sights of Paris?"

"Those of them you don't know?" suggested Saltash.

She nodded. "I don't know very many. I never went very far. I was afraid."

He twisted his hand through her arm, and his fingers closed upon her wrist. "You are not afraid—with me?" he questioned.

Her eyes answered him before her voice. "Never, *monseigneur*."

"Why do you call me that?" said Saltash.

She coloured at the abrupt question. "It suits you."

He made his monkeyish grimace, and suddenly dropped his eyes to the blue-veined wrist in his grasp. "Are you happy, *mignonne*?" he asked her, still obviously in jesting mood.

Toby's eyes dropped also. She mutely nodded.

"The truth, Nonette?" His look flashed over her; his tone was imperious.

She nodded again. "I always tell you—the truth."

He began to laugh. "*Mais vraiment!* I had not thought that likely. Then you do not want to leave me—yet?"

"Leave you!" Her eyes came up to his in wide amazement. "I!"

"We have been married three days," he reminded her, with comically working brows. "And I—have I not already begun to leave you—to neglect you?"

"I—I—I never expected—anything else," stammered Toby, suddenly averting her face.

He patted her cheek with careless kindness. "How wise of you, my dear! How wise! Then you are not yet—sufficiently *ennuyée* to desire to leave me?"

"Why—why do you ask?" questioned Toby.

There was a species of malicious humour about him that made her uneasy. Saltash in a mischievous mood was not always easy to restrain. He did not immediately reply to her question, and she turned with a hint of panic and tightly clasped his arm.

"It is—you who are—*ennuyé!*" she said, with piteous eyes upraised.

He flicked her cheek with his thumb, his odd eyes gleaming. "Not so, *Miladi* Saltash! For me—the game is just begun. But—should you desire to leave me—the opportunity is yours. A knight has arrived to the rescue—a very puissant knight!"

"A knight!" gasped Toby, trembling. "Ah! Tell me what you mean!"

His look was openly mocking. "A knight in gaiters!" he told her lightly. "A knight who bears—or should bear—a horsewhip in place of a sword—that is, if I know him aright!"

"Jake!" she gasped incredulously.

He laughed afresh. "Even so! Jake! Most worthy—and most obtrusive! What shall we do with him, lady mine? Slay him—or give him a feed and send him home?"

She stared at him, aghast. "You—you—you are joking!" she stammered.

"I always joke when I am most serious," Saltash assured her.

"Oh, don't!" She clung closer to his arm. "What shall we do? He—he can't do anything, can he? We—we—we really are married, aren't we?"

Saltash's most appalling grimace fled like a hunted goblin across his face. "Married? Heavens, child!

What more do you want? Haven't you seen it—actually seen it—in our greatest London daily? And can a London daily lie? You may have dreamed the wedding, but that paragraph—that paragraph—it takes a genius of the first literary degree to dream a paragraph, though it may only need quite an ordinary fool to write it! Why, what is the matter? What is it? Did you see something? Not a mouse? Not a beetle? I prithee, not a beetle!"

For Toby had suddenly hidden her face against his shoulder and there was actual panic in the clinging of her arms. He laid a hand upon her head, and patted it lightly, admonishingly.

She did not speak for a second or two, only gulped with desperate effort at self-restraint. Then, at length, in a muffled voice, "Don't let him take me away!" she besought him shakily. "You—you—you've promised to keep me—now."

"But, of course I'm keeping you," said Saltash. "It's what I did it for. It's the very essence of the game. Cheer up, Nonette! I'm not parting with any of my goods, worldly or otherwise, this journey."

"You are sure?" whispered Toby. "Sure?"

"Sure of what?" He bent swiftly, and for a second, only a second, his lips touched her hair.

"Sure you—don't—want to?" came in a gasp from Toby, as she burrowed a little deeper.

"Oh, that!" Saltash stood up again, and his face was sardonic, for the moment almost grim. "Yes, quite sure of that, my dear. Moreover,—it will amuse me to meet the virtuous Jake on his own ground for once. A new sensation, Nonette! Will you help me to face him? Or do you prefer the more early-Victorian *rôle* of the lady who retires till the combat is over and then emerges to reward the winner?"

She lifted her head at that, and uttered a scoffing little laugh, withdrawing herself abruptly from his support. Her pointed chin went up with a hint of defiance. All signs of agitation were gone. "I'll stay and help you," she said.

He made her an elaborate bow. "Then we will ring up the curtain. I congratulate you, madam, upon your spirit. I trust the interview will not try your fortitude too far. Remember, should your feminine ears be shocked by anything that may pass between us, it is up to you to retire at any moment."

Toby's blue eyes caught sudden fire. She broke into an unexpected chuckle. "I do not think I am likely to retire for that reason, *monseigneur*," she said. "Where is he? How did you know he was coming?"

"Because he is already here," said Saltash. "I passed him at the office, making enquiries. He had his back to me, but there is no mistaking that bull-neck of his. Ah!" He turned his head sharply. "I hear a step outside! Sit down, *mignonne*! Sit down and be dignified!"

But Toby's idea of dignity was to sit on the corner of the table and swing one leg. If any apprehension lingered in her mind, she concealed it most successfully. She looked like an alert and mischievous boy.

There came a knock at the door, and for a moment her eyes sought Saltash. He grinned back derisively, and pulled out his cigarette-case. "*Entrez!*" he called.

The door opened with a flourish. A waiter entered with a card.

Saltash barely looked at him. His eyes flashed beyond to the open doorway. "You can come in," he remarked affably. "We've been expecting you for some time."

Jake entered. His square frame seemed to fill the space between the door-posts. He was empty-handed, but there was purpose—grim purpose—in every line of him.

Saltash dismissed the waiter with a jerk of the eyebrows. He was utterly unabashed, amazingly self-assured. He met Jake's stern eyes with cheery effrontery.

"Quite like old times!" he commented. "The only difference being, my good Jake, that on this occasion I have reached the winning-post first."

Jake's look went beyond him to the slight figure by the table. Toby was on her feet. Her face was flushed, but her eyes were wide and defiant. He regarded her steadily for several seconds before, very deliberately, he transferred his attention to Saltash, who nonchalantly awaited his turn, tapping the cigarette on the lid of his case with supreme indifference.

Jake spoke, his voice soft as a woman's, yet strangely dominating. "I should like two minutes alone with you—if you can spare them."

Saltash was smiling. His glance shot towards Toby, and came back to Jake with a certain royal arrogance that held its own without effort. "In other words, you wish—Lady Saltash—to leave us?" he questioned easily.

"I'm not going," said Toby quickly, with nervous decision.

Her hands were tightly clasped in front of her. She stood as one strung to the utmost limit of resistance.

Jake did not again look at her. His eyes were upon Saltash, and they never wavered. "Alone with you," he repeated, with grim insistence.

Saltash regarded him curiously. His mouth twitched mockingly as he put the cigarette between his lips. He held out the case to Jake in mute invitation.

Jake's look remained fixed. He ignored the action, and the case snapped shut in Saltash's hand with a sharp sound that seemed to denote a momentary exasperation. But Saltash's face still retained the monkey-like expression of calculated mischief habitual to it.

"Bunny with you?" he enquired casually, producing a match-box.

"No." Very quietly came Jake's answer. "I have come to see you—alone."

Saltash lighted his cigarette, and blew a careless cloud of smoke. "Are you proposing to shoot me?" he asked, after a pause.

"No," said Jake grimly. "Shooting's too good for you—men like you."

Saltash laughed, and blew another cloud of smoke. "That may be why I have survived so long," he remarked. "I don't see the horsewhip either. Jake, my friend, you are not rising to the occasion with becoming enthusiasm. Any good offering you a drink to stimulate your energies?"

"None whatever," said Jake, still very quietly. "I don't go—till I have what I came for—that's all. Neither do you!"

"I—see!" said Saltash.

An odd little gleam that was almost furtive shone for a second in his eyes and was gone. He turned and crossed the room to Toby.

"My dear," he said, "I think this business will be more quickly settled if you leave us."

She looked at him piteously. He took her lightly by the arm, and led her to a door leading to an adjoining room. "By the time you have smoked one cigarette," he said, "I shall be with you again."

She turned with an impulsive attempt to cling to him. "You'll—keep me?" she said, through trembling lips.

He made a royal gesture that frustrated her with perfect courtesy. "Are you not my wife?" he said.

He opened the door for her, and she had no choice but to go through. She went swiftly, without another glance, and Saltash closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER II

THE VILLAIN SCORES

"Now, sir!" said Saltash, and turned. His tone was brief; the smile had gone from his face. He came to Jake with a certain haughtiness, and stood before him.

Jake squared his shoulders. "So—you've married her!" he said.

"I have." There was a note of challenge in the curt rejoinder. Saltash's brows were drawn.

"I should like to see—proof of that," Jake said, after a moment.

"The devil you would!" Again the hot gleam shone in the odd eyes. Saltash stood for a second in the attitude of a man on the verge of violence. Then, contemptuously, he relaxed.

He lounged back against the mantel-piece and smoked his cigarette. "The devil you would, Jake!" he said again, in a tone so different that the words might have been uttered in another language. "And why—if one be permitted to ask?"

"I think you know why," Jake said.

"Oh, do I? You virtuous people are always the first to suspect evil." Saltash spoke with deliberate cynicism. "And suppose the marriage is not genuine—as you so politely hint—what then, my worthy Jake? What then?"

Jake faced him unwaveringly. "If not," he said, "she goes back with me."

Saltash's eyes suddenly flashed to his, but he did not alter his position. "Sure of that?" he asked casually.

"Sure!" said Jake.

"And if I refuse to part with her? If she refuses to go?"

"Either way," said Jake immovably.

"And why?" Saltash straightened suddenly. "Tell me why! What in hell has it got to do with you?"

"This," said Jake. "Just the fact that she's a girl needing protection and that I—can give it."

"Are you so sure of that?" gibed Saltash. "I think you forget, don't you, that I was her first protector? No one—not even Bunny—could have got near her without my consent."

"She was your find right enough," Jake admitted. "I always knew that—knew from the first you'd faked up a lie about her. But I hoped—I even believed—that you were doing it for her sake—not your own."

"Well?" flung Saltash. "And if I was?"

"And if you were," said Jake, "it was a thing worth doing—worth sticking to. Bunny is a respectable citizen. He'd have married her—made her happy."

Saltash's mouth twisted. "Bunny had his chance—missed it," he said. "He'll know better next time. I'm not troubling about Bunny. He didn't deserve to win."

"And so you decided to play him a damn trick and cut him out?" said Jake.

Saltash snapped his fingers. "I did my best for him, but I couldn't push him through against his will. Why didn't he come after her when he found she had gone? Didn't he know where to look?"

"Just because he knew," said Jake.

Saltash moved abruptly. "Damnation! You shall have what you've come for. If seeing is believing—then you shall believe—that even Charles Burchester can protect a girl at a pinch from the snares of the virtuous!" He pulled an envelope from an inner pocket, and flung it with a passionate gesture upon the table in front of Jake.

Jake's eyes, red-brown and steady, marked the action and contemplated him thereafter for several silent seconds. Then, at length, very slowly. "Maybe—after all—I don't need to see, my lord," he said. "Maybe—I've made a mistake."

He spoke with the utmost quietness, but his manner had undergone a change. It held a hint of deference. He made no move to touch the envelope upon the table.

Saltash's brows went up. "Satisfied?" he questioned curtly.

"On that point, yes." Jake continued to look at him with a close and searching regard.

"Not on all points?" Saltash flicked the ash from his cigarette with a movement of exasperation.

Jake turned and slowly walked to the window. There fell a silence between them. He stood staring down upon the scene that Toby had gazed upon a little earlier, but he saw nothing of it. The hardness had gone out of his face, and a deep compassion had taken its place.

Saltash continued to smoke for several restless seconds. Finally, he dropped the end of his cigarette into a tray and spoke.

"Anything more I can do for you?"

Jake wheeled in his massive way, and came back. "Say!" he said slowly. "I'm kind of sorry for that little girl."

Saltash made an abrupt movement that passed unexplained. "Well?" he said.

Jake faced him squarely. "If I'd been at home," he said, "this would never have happened. Or if it had happened—if it had happened—" He paused.

"You'd have made a point of coming to the wedding?" suggested Saltash.

Jake passed the suggestion by. "I'd have known how to deal with it, anyway. Now, it seems, it's too late."

Saltash took up the envelope from the table, and returned it to his pocket. "I believe you'd have been better pleased if I hadn't married her," he observed.

Jake shook his head. "I'd be better pleased—maybe—if I knew for certain what you did it for."

"My good Jake. I don't go in for aims and motives," protested Saltash. "Call it a marriage of convenience if you feel that way! It's all the same to me."

Jake's brows contracted. "I'd give a good deal not to call it that," he said.

Saltash laughed. "Call it what you like—a whim—a fancy—the craze of the moment! You needn't waste any sentiment over it. I'm sorry about Bunny, but, if he hadn't been an ass, it wouldn't have happened. You can't blame me for that anyhow. You did the same thing yourself."

"I!" The red-brown eyes suddenly shone. "I don't follow you," said Jake deliberately.

"You married your wife to deliver her from—a fate you deemed unsuitable." Saltash's teeth showed for a moment in answer to the gleam in Jake's eyes. "You did it in an almighty hurry too."

"But—damn it—she needed protection!" Jake said. "And—at least—I loved her!"

Saltash bowed. "Hence your motive was an entirely selfish one. My wife—*au contraire*—is quite unhampered by a husband's devotion. I have never made love to her—yet. I have only—protected her."

He paused, and suddenly the old monkey-like look of mischief flashed back into his face.

"I lay claim to the higher virtue, Jake," he said. "Heaven alone knows how long it will last. I've never scored over you before, but on this occasion—" He stopped with a careless wave of the hand.

"Yes," Jake said. "On this occasion—you've got me beat. But—I didn't fight for my own sake, nor yet for the off chance of downing you, which I own would have given me considerable pleasure once. It was for the child's sake." An unwonted note of entreaty suddenly sounded in his voice. "I don't know what your game is, my lord; but she's yours now—to make—or break. For God's sake—be decent to her—if you can!"

"If I can!" Saltash clapped a sudden hand upon Jake's shoulder, but though the action was obviously a kindly one, it held restraint as well. "Do you think I don't know how to make a woman happy, Jake? Think I haven't studied the subject hard enough? Think I'm a fool at the game?"

Jake looked him straight in the face. "No. I don't think you a fool, my lord," he said. "But I reckon there's one or two things that even you may have to learn. You've never yet made any woman permanently happy. There's only one way of doing that. Bunny would have done it—and won out too. But you—I'm not so sure of you."

"Oh, Bunny would have won out, would he?" Saltash's hand closed like a trap upon Jake's shoulder. There was a challenging quality in his smile.

Jake nodded. "Yes. Bunny's got the real stuff in him. Bunny would have put her happiness before his own always. He would have given her the love that lasts. It's the only thing worth having, after all."

"Well?" The challenge became more marked upon the swarthy face. The smile had vanished. "And you think I am incapable of that?"

"I haven't said so," Jake said sombrely.

"But it's up to me to prove it?" There was a certain insistence in Saltash's tone, albeit a mocking spirit looked out of his eyes.

Jake faced it unwaveringly for several seconds. Then: "Yes. I reckon it is up to you," he said, and turned deliberately away. "I'm going now."

"All right." Saltash's hand fell. "I give you credit for one thing, Jake," he said. "You haven't offered to take her off my hands. For that piece of forbearance I congratulate you. Do you want to see her before you go?"

"Not specially," said Jake.

Saltash's eyes followed him with a look half-malicious, half-curious. "Nor to send her a message?" he questioned.

"No." Jake's tone was brief.

"You're not wanting to offer her a safe harbour when her present anchorage fails her?" jested Saltash.

Jake turned at the door as one goaded. "When that happens," he said very deliberately. "I guess she'll be past any help from me, poor kid!"

Saltash's black brows descended. He scowled hideously for a moment. Then, "I congratulate you again," he said coolly. "You are just beginning to see things—as they are."

Jake made a brief sound that might have indicated contempt and opened the door. He went out with finality, and Saltash listened to the tread of his retreating feet with a grin of sheer cynical triumph.

"So," he said lightly, "the villain scores at last!"

But as he turned towards the other room, the cynicism passed from his face. He stood for a moment or two motionless at the door; then broke into a careless whistle and opened it.

CHAPTER III

A WIFE IS DIFFERENT

"Has he gone?" said Toby eagerly. She came into the room with a swift glance around. "What did he say? What did he do? Was he angry?"

"I really don't know," Saltash said, supremely unconcerned. "He went. That's the main thing."

Toby looked at him critically. "You were so quiet, both of you. Was there a row?"

"Were you listening?" said Saltash.

She coloured, and smiled disarmingly. "Part of the time—no, all the time. But I didn't hear anything—at least not much. Nothing that mattered. Are you angry?"

He frowned upon her, but his eyes reassured. "I told you to smoke a cigarette."

"I'm sorry," said Toby meekly. "Shall I smoke one now?"

He pinched her ear. "No. We'll go out. You've got to shop. First though, I've got something for you. I'm not sure you deserve it, but that's a detail. Few of us ever do get our deserts in this naughty world."

"What is it?" said Toby.

Her bright eyes questioned him. She looked more than ever like an eager boy. He pulled a leather case out of his pocket and held it out to her.

"Oh, what is it?" she said, and coloured more deeply. "You haven't—haven't—been buying me things?"

"Open it!" said Saltash, with regal peremptoriness.

But still she hesitated, till he suddenly laid his hands on hers and compelled her. She saw a single string of pearls on a bed of blue velvet. Her eyes came up to his in quick distress.

"Oh, I ought not to take them!" she said.

"And why not?" said Saltash.

She bit her lip, almost as if she would burst into tears. "Monseigneur—"

"Call me Charles!" he commanded.

His hands still held hers. She dropped her eyes to them, and suddenly, very suddenly, she bent her head and kissed them.

He started slightly, and in a moment he set her free, leaving the case in her hold. "*Eh bien!*" he said lightly. "That is understood. You like my pearls, *chérie?*"

"I love—anything—that comes from you," she made low reply. "But these—but these—I ought not to take these."

"But why not?" he questioned. "May I not make you a present? Are you not—my wife?"

"Yes." More faintly came Toby's answer. "But—but—but—a wife is different. A wife—does not need—presents."

"*Mais vraiment!*" protested Saltash. "So a wife is different! How—different, *mignonne?*"

He tried to look into the downcast eyes, but she would not raise them. She was trembling a little. "Such things as these," she said, under her breath, "are what a man would give to—to—to the woman he loves."

"And so you think they are unsuitable for—my wife?" questioned Saltash, with a whimsical look on his dark face.

She did not answer him, only mutely held out the case, still without looking at him.

He stood for a second or two, watching her, an odd flame coming and going in his eyes; then abruptly he moved, picked up the pearls from their case, straightened them dexterously, and clasped them about her neck.

She lifted her face then, quivering and irresolute, to his. "And I can give you—nothing," she said.

He took her lightly by the shoulders, as one who caresses a child. "*Ma chérie*, you have given me already much more than you realize. But we will not go into that now. We will go to the shops. Afterwards, we will go out to Fontainebleau and picnic in the forest. You will like that?"

"Oh, so much!" she said, with enthusiasm.

Yet there was a puzzled look of pain in her eyes as she turned away, and though she wore his pearls, she made no further reference to them.

They went forth into the streets of Paris and Toby shopped. At first she was shy, halting here and hesitating there, till Saltash, looking on, careless and debonair, made it abundantly evident that whatever she desired she was to have, and then like a child on a holiday she flung aside all indecision and became eager and animated. So absorbed was she that she took no note of the passage of time and was horrified when at length he called her attention to the fact that it was close upon the luncheon-hour.

"And you must be so tired of it all!" she said, with compunction.

"Not in the least," he assured her airily between puffs of his cigarette. "It has been—a new experience for me."

Her eyes challenged him for a moment, and he laughed.

"*Mais oui, madame!* I protest—a new experience. I feel I am doing my duty."

"And it doesn't bore you?" questioned Toby, with a tilt of the chin.

His look kindled a little. "If we were on board the old *Night Moth*, you'd have had a cuff for that," he remarked.

"I wish we were!" she said daringly.

He flicked his fingers. "You're very young, Nonette."

She shook her head with vehemence. "I'm not! I'm not! I'm only pretending. Can't you see?"

He laughed jestingly. "You have never deceived me yet, *ma chère*,—not once, from the moment I found you shivering in my cabin up to the present. You couldn't if you tried."

Toby's blue eyes suddenly shone with a hot light. "So sure of that?" she said quickly. "You read me—so easily?"

"Like a book," said Saltash, with an arrogance but half-assumed.

"I cheated you—once," she said, breathing sharply.

"And I caught you," said Saltash.

"Only—only because—I meant you to," said Toby, under her breath.

He raised his brows in momentary surprise, and in a flash she laughed and clapped her hands. "I had you there, King Charles! You see, you are but a man after all."

He gave her a swift and piercing glance. "And what are you?" he said.

Her eyes fell swiftly before his look; she made no reply.

They returned to the hotel and lunched together. The incident of the morning seemed to be forgotten. Jake's name was not once mentioned between them. Toby was full of gaiety. The prospect of the run to Fontainebleau evidently filled her with delight.

She joined Saltash in the vestibule after the meal, clad in a light blue wrap they had purchased that morning.

He went to meet her, a quick gleam in his eyes; and a man to whom he had been talking—a slim, foreign-looking man with black moustache and imperial—turned sharply and gave her a hard stare.

Toby's chin went up. She looked exclusively at Saltash. Her bearing at that moment was that of a princess.

"The car is ready?" she questioned. "Shall we go?"

"By all means," said Saltash.

He nodded a careless farewell to the other man, and followed her, a smile twitching at his lips, the gleam still in his eyes.

"That man is Spentoli the sculptor," he said, as he handed her into the car. "A genius, Nonette! I should have presented him to you if you had not been so haughty."

"I hate geniuses," said Toby briefly.

He laughed at her. "*Mais vraiment!* How many have you known?"

She considered for a moment, and finally decided that the question did not require an answer.

Saltash took the wheel and spun the little car round with considerable dexterity. "Yes, a genius!" he said. "One of the most wonderful of the age. His work is amazing—scarcely human. He paints too. All Paris raves over his work—with reason. His picture, 'The Victim'—" he looked at her suddenly—"What is the matter, *chérie*? Is the sun too strong for you?"

Toby's hand was shielding her eyes. Her lips were trembling. "Don't wait!" she murmured. "Don't wait! Let's get away! I am all right—just a little giddy, that's all."

He took her at her word, and sent the car swiftly forward. They passed out into the crowded thoroughfare, and in a moment or two Toby leaned back, gazing before her with a white, set face.

Saltash asked no question. He did not even look at her, concentrating all his attention upon the task of extricating himself as swiftly as possible from the crush of vehicles around them.

It was a day of perfect autumn, and Paris lay basking in sunshine; but Saltash was a rapid traveller at all times, and it was not long before Paris was left behind. But even when free from the traffic, he did not speak or turn towards his companion, merely gave himself to the task of covering the ground as quickly as possible.

In the end it was Toby who spoke, abruptly, boyishly. "By jingo! You can drive!"

Saltash's face showed its own elastic grin. "You like this?"

"Rather!" said Toby with enthusiasm.

She threw off her silence and plunged forthwith into careless chatter—a mood to which he responded with the utmost readiness. When at length they ran into the shade of the forest, they were both in the highest spirits.

They had their tea in a mossy glade out of sight of the road. The sun was beginning to slant. Its rays fell in splashes of golden green all about them.

"Just the place for a duel!" said Saltash appreciatively.

"Have you ever fought a duel?" Toby looked at him over the picnic-basket with eyes of sparkling interest.

She had thrown aside her hat, and her fair hair gleamed as if it gave forth light. Saltash leaned his shoulders against a tree and watched her.

"I have never fought to kill," he said. "Honour is too easily satisfied in this country—though after all—" his smile was suddenly provocative—"there are very few things worth fighting for, Nonette."

Her eyes flashed their ready challenge. "Life being too short already?" she suggested.

"Even so," said Charles Rex coolly.

Toby abruptly bent her head and muttered something into the picnic-basket.

"What?" said Saltash.

She pulled out a parcel of cakes and tossed them on to the ground. "Nothing!" she said.

He leaned forward unexpectedly as she foraged for more, and gripped the small brown hand.

"Tell me what you said!" he commanded.

She flung him a look half-frightened, half-daring. "I said there was only one cup."

She would have released her hand with the words, but his fingers tightened like a spring. "*Pardonnez-moi!* That was not what you said!"

She became passive in his hold, but she said nothing.

"Tell me what you said!" Saltash said again.

A little tremor went through Toby. "Can we do—with only one cup?" she asked, not looking at him, her eyelids flickering nervously.

"Going to answer me?" said Saltash.

She shook her head and was silent.

He waited for perhaps ten seconds, and in that time a variety of different expressions showed and vanished on his ugly face. Then, just as Toby was beginning to tremble in real trepidation, he suddenly set her free.

"We have drunk out of the same glass before now," he said. "We can do it again."

She looked at him then, relief and doubt struggling together in her eyes. "Are you angry?" she said.

His answering look baffled her. "No," he said.

She laid a conciliatory hand upon his arm. "You are! I'm sure you are!"

"I am not," said Saltash.

"Then why aren't you?" demanded Toby, with sudden spirit.

The monkeyish grin leapt into his face. "Because I know what you said," he told her coolly. "It is not easy—you will never find it easy—to deceive me."

She snatched her hand away. Her face was on fire. "I said you did not make the most of life," she flung at him. "And it's true! You don't! You don't!"

"How do you know that?" said Saltash.

She did not answer him. Her head was bent over the basket. She threw out one thing after another with nervous rapidity, and once, as he watched her, there came a faint sound that was like a hastily suppressed sob.

Saltash got to his feet with disconcerting suddenness and walked away.

When he returned some minutes later with a half-smoked cigarette between his lips, she was sitting demurely awaiting him, the picnic ready spread.

He scarcely looked at her but he flicked her cheek as he sat down, and in a moment she turned and smiled at him.

"I have found another cup," she said.

"So I see," said Saltash, and before she could realize his mood he picked it up and flung it at the trunk of a tree some yards away. It shivered in fragments on the moss, and Toby gasped and stared at him wide-eyed.

He laughed in his careless fashion at her amazement. "Now we shall drink out of one cup!" he said.

"Was that—was that—why you did it?" she stammered breathlessly.

He blew a cloud of smoke into the air with a gesture of royal indifference. "Even so,—*madame!*" he said. "One does these things—with a wife. You see, a wife—is different."

"I—I see," said Toby.

CHAPTER IV

THE IDOL OF PARIS

It was dark when they returned to the hotel, but Paris shone with a million lights. The hotel itself had a festive air. There were flowers in all directions, and a red carpet had been laid upon the steps.

"Rozelle Daubeni is expected," said Saltash.

"Who?" Toby stopped short in the act of descending. Her face shone white in the glare. A moment before she had been laughing but the laugh went into her question with a little choked sound. "Who did you say?" she questioned more coherently.

"Mademoiselle Daubeni—the idol of Paris. Never heard of her?" Saltash handed her lightly down. "She is coming to a dance in the great *salon* tonight. You shall see her. She is—a thing to remember."

Toby gave a quick shiver. "Yes, I have heard of her too much—too much—I don't want to see her. Shall we dine upstairs?"

"Oh, I think not," said Saltash with decision. "You are too retiring, *ma chère*. It doesn't become—a lady of your position."

He followed her towards the lift. The vestibule was full of people, laughing and talking, awaiting the coming of the favourite. But as the girl in her blue cloak went through, a sudden hush fell. Women lifted glasses to look at her, and men turned to watch.

Saltash sauntered behind her in his regal way, looking neither to right nor left, yet fully aware of all he passed. No one accosted him. There were times when even those who knew him well would have hesitated to do so. He could surround himself with an atmosphere so suavely impersonal as to be quite impenetrable to all.

It surrounded him now. He walked like a king through a crowd of courtiers, and the buzz of talk did not spring up again till he was out of sight.

"So you do not want to see *le premiere danseuse du siècle!*" he commented, as he entered the sitting-room of their suite behind Toby.

She turned, blue eyes wide with protest in her white face. "Do you wish me to see her, my lord? That—woman!"

He frowned upon her suddenly. "Call me Charles! Do you hear? We will play this game according to rule—or not at all."

"You are angry," Toby said, and turned still whiter.

He came to her, thrust a quick arm about her. "I am not angry, *mignonne*, at least not with you. But you must take your proper place. I can't keep you in hiding here. Those gaping fools downstairs—they have got to understand. You are not my latest whim, but a permanent institution. You are—my wife."

She shivered in his hold, but she clung to him. "I don't feel like—a permanent institution," she told him rather piteously. "And when you are angry—"

"I am not angry," said Saltash, and tweaked her ear as though she had been a boy. "But—whether you feel like it or not—you are my wife, and you have got to play the part. *C'est entendu, n'est-ce-pas?*"

"Whatever you wish," said Toby faintly.

He set her free. "You must look your best tonight. Wear blue! It is your colour. I shall present Spentoli to you. And tomorrow he will want to paint you."

Toby stiffened. "That—*canaille!*" she said.

He looked at her in surprise. "What is the matter with you tonight, Nonette? You are hating all the world."

Her blue eyes blazed. "I don't want to meet Spentoli," she said. "He has an evil eye. You—you—I look to you to—to—to protect me."

"My good child!" said Saltash.

He turned aside to light a cigarette, and there was a pause. But Toby still stood rigid, as it were on guard. He spoke again after a moment, and his voice was kind though it had a certain dominant quality also.

"Nonette, you need not be afraid when you are with me. I shall protect you. Now go and dress! When you are ready, come to me for inspection! And remember! You are to look your best tonight."

He turned with the last words and looked at her. His brows went up as he realized her attitude—the tense resistance of the slight figure withstanding him.

But it was only for a moment or two that the girl maintained her stand. At sight of the look that leaped to his eyes, her own were swiftly lowered. She drew back from him.

"I will do—whatever you wish," she said again nervously. "You know that."

"Yes, I know that," said Saltash with his quick grimace. "You have my sympathy, Nonette. Now go, *ma chère*, go!"

She went from his presence like a small hunted animal.

Saltash shrugged his shoulders and sauntered down again to the vestibule. The crowd had grown. They were watching the great entrance-door expectantly for the coming of the celebrated dancer. Saltash called for a drink, and mingled with the throng.

The Italian, Spentoli, came up presently and joined him. "I am hoping," he said, "that you will presently give me the great honour of presenting me to your bride."

Saltash looked at him. Spentoli was one of the very few men for whom he entertained respect. The Italian's work had always held an immense attraction for his artistic soul, and he had never troubled to disguise the fact.

"My wife is young and shy," he said, after a moment. "I will present you—some day, Spentoli, but it may not be yet."

"This is her first visit to Paris?" questioned Spentoli.

"Not her first. But she does not know Paris well." Saltash spoke carelessly. "I am not showing her everything at once. I think that is a mistake."

"That is true," agreed Spentoli. "The freshness of youth is gone all too soon. But she will be superbly beautiful in a few years' time. Will you permit me to congratulate you on the excellence of your choice?"

Saltash grimaced. "Do we ever choose?" he said. "Do we not rather receive such gifts as the gods send us in more or less of a grudging spirit?"

Spentoli smiled. "I did not think you would marry one so young," he said. "She has the athletic look of a boy. She reminds me—"

"Of a picture called 'The Victim' by one—Spentoli!" Saltash's voice was suave. "A cruel picture, *mon ami*, but of an amazing merit. I have seen the likeness also. Where did you get it?"

The Italian was still smiling, but his eyes were wary.

"From a little circus-rider in California," he said. "A child—an imp of a child—astonishingly clever—a wisp of inspiration. Yes, a girl of course; but she had all the lines of a boy—the perfect limbs of an athlete. I took her from her circus. I should have paid her well had she remained with me. But before the picture was finished, she was tired. She was a little serpent—wily and wicked. One day we had a small discussion in my studio—oh, quite a small discussion. And she stuck her poison-fang into me—and fled." Spentoli's teeth gleamed through his black moustache. "I do not like these serpent-women," he said. "When I meet her again—it will be my turn to strike."

"Our turn so seldom comes," said Saltash lazily, his eyes wandering to the door. "Mademoiselle Rozelle for instance would hold her own against any of us."

"Ah! Rozelle!" Spentoli's face changed magically. "But she is beautiful—and without venom—a rose without a thorn!"

Saltash's mouth twitched mockingly. "And without a heart also?" he suggested.

"She is all heart!" cried Spentoli, with flashing eyes.

Saltash laughed aloud. "That also is sometimes a drawback, *mon ami*. I gather she is the attraction who has drawn you here."

"She draws all the world," said Spentoli.

And with that he sprang to his feet, for there was a general stir in the vestibule, such as might herald the coming of a queen. In a moment the buzz of voices died down, and a great silence fell. Saltash remained seated, a certain arrogance in his pose, though his eyes also watched the door.

There came the sound of a laugh—a clear, ringing laugh, childishly, irresistibly gay—and a figure in blue came in through the marble pillars. As a queen they had prepared for her, and as a queen she entered—a being so exquisite, so goddess-like, that every breath was drawn in wonder.

She looked around her with eyes that shone like sapphires. Her red lips were parted. She had the expectant look of girlhood, yet her beauty had a quality unknown to youth. And it was to that quality, almost unknown to himself, that Saltash did homage as he rose.

Her look flashed across to him, comprehended his action, and laughed open triumph. Then with a suddenness almost too swift to follow, she turned to a man who had entered behind her and softly spoke.

Saltash's eyes went to the man, and he drew a low whistle between his teeth. It was well known that Rozelle Daubeni never travelled without an escort; but this man—this man—He was tall and broad, and

he carried himself with a supreme contempt for his fellow-men. He did not look at Saltash, did not apparently even see the hushed crowd that hung upon every movement of that wonderful woman-creature who took the world by storm wherever she went.

He was superbly indifferent to his surroundings, gazing straight before him with the eyes of a Viking who searches the far horizon. He walked with the free swing of a pirate. And as the woman turned her dazzling face towards him, it was plain to all that she saw none but him in that vast and crowded place.

He was by her side as they moved forward, and they saw her lightly touch his arm, with an intimate gesture, as though they were alone. Then the whole throng broke into acclamations, and the spell was broken. She saw them all again, and laughed her gracious thanks. The great hall rang with their greeting as she passed through, but no one sought to detain her and she did not pause.

Later, she would give them all they desired, but her moment had not arrived. So she went on to the great curving staircase, side by side with her fair-bearded Viking, still laughing like a happy child who looks for the morrow.

As she rounded the curve of the stair, she snatched a red rose from her breast and threw it down to her worshippers below. It was aimed at Saltash, but it fell before Spentoli, and he caught and held it with wild adoration leaping in his eyes. As he pressed it to his lips, he was sobbing.

"*Mon ami*," said Saltash's voice behind him, maliciously humorous, "you have stolen my property. But—since I have no use for it—you may keep it."

Spentoli looked at him with burning eyes. "Ah! You may laugh!" he said, in a fierce undertone. "You are—without a soul."

"Isn't it better to laugh?" queried Saltash. "Did you expect a blow in the face?"

Spentoli glared for a moment, and recovered himself. "Do you know what they are saying of her?" he said. "They say that she is dying. But it is not true—not true! Such beauty as that—such loveliness—could never die!"

The cynical lines in Saltash's face deepened very perceptibly. He shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"Who is the man with her?" demanded Spentoli. "I have never seen him before—the man with the face of a Dane. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I know him," said Saltash.

"Then who is he? Some new lover?" There was suppressed eagerness in the question. Spentoli's eyes were smouldering again.

Saltash was looking supremely ironical. "Perhaps new," he said. "More likely—very old. His name is Larpent, and he is the captain of my yacht."

CHAPTER V

THE DANCE OF DEATH

"We will watch from the gallery," said Saltash.

Toby looked up at him with quick gratitude. "There won't be so many people there," she said.

He frowned at her, but his look was quizzical. "But everyone will know that Lady Saltash is present—with her husband," he said.

She slipped a persuasive hand on to his arm. "King Charles," she said, "let us leave Paris!"

"Bored?" said Saltash.

Her face was slightly drawn. "No—no! Only—" she paused; then suddenly flashed him her swift smile—"let it be as you wish!" she said.

He flicked her cheek in his careless, caressing way. "Shall I tell you something, *mignonne*? We are going—very soon."

Her eyes shone, more blue than the frock she wore. She stooped impulsively and touched his hand with her lips, then, as though she feared to anger him, drew quickly away.

"Shall we go on the yacht?" she asked, eagerness half-suppressed in her voice.

"Yes," said Saltash, and he spoke with finality, even with a certain grimness.

Toby's face lighted up for a second, and then clouded again. She glanced at him doubtfully. "If Paris amuses you—" she ventured.

"Paris does not amuse me," said Saltash emphatically. "Have a cigarette, *ma chère*, while I go and dress."

"Can I help you dress?" said Toby, with a touch of wistfulness. "I have put everything ready."

His odd eyes flashed her a smile. "Not here, *chérie*, not now. Perhaps—when we get on a yacht again—"

He was gone, leaving the sentence unfinished, leaving Toby looking after him with the wide eyes of one who sees at last a vision long desired. She stretched out both her arms as the door closed upon him and her lips repeated very softly the words that he had last uttered.

"Perhaps—when we got on a yacht again—"

When they went down to the great *salle-à-manger* a little later, her face was flushed and her smile ready, though she glanced about her in a shy, half-furtive fashion as they entered. They found a secluded table reserved for them in a corner, and her eyes expressed relief. She shrank into it as if she would make herself as small as possible. Again no one accosted them though a good many looked in their direction. Saltash was far too well known a figure to pass unnoticed in any fashionable crowd. But the general attention did not centre upon them. That was absorbed by a far greater attraction that night.

She sat at the end of the room like a queen holding her court, and beside her sat the Viking, stern-faced and remote of mien, as supremely isolated as though he sat with her on a desert island. He spoke but seldom, and then to her exclusively. But when he spoke, she turned to him the radiant face of the woman who holds within her grasp her heart's desire.

She was superbly dressed in many-shaded blue, and jewels sparkled with every breath she drew. Above her forehead, there nestled in the gold of her hair a single splendid diamond that burned like a multi-coloured flame. She was at the acme of her triumph that night. Of all who knew her, there was not one who had seen her thus. They watched her almost with bated breath. She was like a being from another world. She transcended every expectation of her.

The band played only dance-music, by her desire, it was said; but such music as wrought irresistibly upon the senses and emotions. She was preparing her audience for what should follow. Throughout the meal, excitement was steadily rising. There was almost a feeling of delirium in the air.

Before the bulk of diners had finished, she rose to go. Her cavalier rose with her, flinging her gauzy wrap of blue and gold over his arm. It was the signal for a demonstration. In a moment a youth with eyes ablaze with adoration sprang on to a table in the centre of the vast room with a glass of red wine held high.

"A Rozelle! A Rozelle!"

The cry went up to the domed roof in a great crescendo of sound, and instantly the place was a pandemonium of shouting, excited figures. They crowded towards the table at which the *danseuse* still stood. And just for a second—one fleeting second—her eyes showed a curious fear. She stood almost as one at a loss. Then in a flash her irresolution was gone. Her beautiful face smiled its own inimitable smile. The music of her laughter rang silvery through the tumult. She made a dainty gesture of acceptance, of acknowledgment, of friendly appreciation; then lightly she turned to go.

Her companion made a path for her. He looked as if he could have hewn his way through a wall of rock at that moment, and his uncompromising bearing gained him respect. No one attempted to gainsay him.

They were gone almost before they realized that their idol had not spoken a word to them. The

moment was past, and the excitement died down to a buzz of talk.

"An amazing woman!" said Saltash.

Toby glanced at him, and said nothing. She had watched the whole episode from her corner with eyes that missed nothing; but she had not spoken a word.

He bent suddenly towards her. "Drink some wine, *chérie!* You are pale."

She started a little at the quick peremptoriness of his speech. She lifted her glass to drink, and splashed some of the wine over. He leaned farther forward, screening her from observation.

"Go on! Drink!" he said, with insistence, and in a moment his hand closed upon hers, guiding the wine to her lips.

She drank obediently, not meeting his look, and he took the glass from her, and set it down.

"Now we will go. Are you ready?"

She rose, and he stood aside for her. As she passed him, his hand closed for an instant upon her bare arm in a grasp that was close and vital. She threw him a quick, upward glance; but still she said no word.

They passed out through the throng of diners almost unobserved, but in the corridor Spentoli leaned against a pillar smoking a long, black cigar. He made no movement to intercept them, but his eyes with their restless fire dwelt upon the girl in a fashion that drew her own irresistibly. She saw him and slightly paused.

It was the pause of the hunted animal that sees its retreat cut off, but in an instant Saltash's voice, very cool, arrogantly self-assured, checked the impulse to panic.

"Straight on to the lift, *ma chère!* See! It is there in front of you. There will be no one in the gallery. Go straight on!"

She obeyed him instinctively as her habit was, but in the lift she trembled so much that he made her sit down. He stood beside her in silence, but once lightly his hand touched her cheek. She moved then swiftly, convulsively, and caught it in both her own. But the next moment he had gently drawn it free.

The gallery that ran round three sides of the great *salon* was deserted. There was only one point at the far end whence a view of the stage that had been erected for the dancer could be obtained. Towards this Saltash turned.

"We shall see her from here," he said.

The place was but dimly illumined by the flare of the many lights below—two great crystal candelabra that hung at each end being left unlighted. Under one of these was a settee which Saltash drew forward to the balcony.

"No one will disturb us here," he said. "We can smoke in peace."

He offered her his cigarette-case, but she refused it nervously, sitting down in a corner of the settee in the crouched attitude of a frightened creature seeking cover. The band was playing in the *salon* now, and people were beginning to crowd in.

Saltash leaned back in his corner and smoked. His eyes went to and fro ceaselessly, yet the girl beside him was aware of a scrutiny as persistent as if they never left her. She sat in silence, clasping and unclasping her hands, staring downwards at the shining stage.

Very soon the *salon* was full of people, and the lights were lowered there while on the stage only a single shaft of blinding violet light remained, shooting downwards from the centre. Toby's eyes became fixed upon that shaft of light. She seemed to have forgotten to breathe.

The band had ceased to play. There fell a potent silence. The multitude below sat motionless, as if beneath a spell. And then she came.

No one saw her coming. She arrived quite suddenly as though she had slid down that shaft of light. And she was there before them dancing, dancing, like a winged thing in the violet radiance. Not a sound broke the stillness save a single, wandering thread of melody that might have come from the throat of a bird, soft, fitful, but half-awake in the dawning.

The violet light was merging imperceptibly into rose—the unutterable rose of the early morning. It caught the dancing figure, and she lifted her beautiful face to it and laughed. The gauzy scarf streamed out from her shoulders like a flame, curving, mounting, sinking, now enveloping the white arms, now flung wide in a circle of glittering splendour.

A vast breath went up from the audience. She held them as by magic—all save one who leaned back in his corner with no quickening of the pulses and watched the girl beside him sitting motionless with her blue eyes wide and fixed as though they gazed upon some horror from which there was no escape.

The rose light deepened to crimson. She was dancing now in giddy circles like a many-coloured moth dazzled by the dawn. The melody was growing. Other bird-voices were swelling into sound—a wild and flute-like music of cadences that came and went—elusive as the laughter of wood-nymphs in an enchanted glade. And every one of that silent crowd of watchers saw the red light of dawn breaking through the trees of a dream-forest that no human foot had ever trod.

Slowly the crimson lightened. The day was coming, and the silent-flitting moth of night was turning into a butterfly of purest gold. The scarf still floated about her like a gold-edged cloud. The giddy whirl was over. She came to rest, poised, quivering in the light of the newly-risen sun, every line of her exquisite body in the accord of a perfect symmetry. Yes, she was amazing; she was unique. Wherever she went, the spell still held. But to-night she was as one inspired. She did not see her spellbound audience. She was dancing for one alone. She was as a woman who waits for her lover.

In some fashion this fact communicated itself to her worshippers. They guessed that somewhere near that dazzling figure the stranger whom no one knew was watching. Insensibly, through the medium of the dancer, his presence made itself felt. When that wonderful dance of the dawn was over and the thunder of applause had died away, they looked around, asking who and where he was. But no one knew, and though curiosity was rife it seemed unlikely that it would be satisfied that night.

Up in the gallery Toby drew a deep breath as of one coming out of a trance, and turned towards the man beside her. The light had been turned on in the *salon* below, and it struck upwards on her face, showing it white and weary.

"So she has found another victim!" she said.

"It seems so," said Saltash.

She looked at him in the dimness. "Did you know that—that Captain Larpent was with her?"

"No," said Saltash. He leaned forward abruptly, meeting her look with a sudden challenge. "Did you?"

She drew back sharply. "Of course not! Of course not! What—what should I know about her?"

He leaned back again without comment, and lighted another cigarette.

At the end of several seconds of silence, Toby spoke again, her locked fingers pulling against each other nervously.

"I wonder—do you mind—if I go soon? I—I am rather tired."

The lights went out as she spoke, and Saltash's face became invisible. He spoke quite kindly, but with decision, out of the darkness.

"After this dance, *ma chère*—if you desire it."

The music began—weird and mournful—and a murmur went round among the eager watchers. It was her most famous dance—the dance of Death, the most gruesome spectacle, so it was said, that any dancer had ever conceived. She came on to the stage like the flash of an arrow, dressed in black that glittered and scintillated with every amazing movement. And then it began—that most wonderful dance of hers that all the world was mad to see.

It was almost too rapid for the eye to follow in its first stages—a fever of movement—a delirium indescribable—a fantasy painful to watch, but from which no watcher could turn away. Even Saltash, who had taken small interest in the previous dance, leaned forward and gave his full attention to this, as it were in spite of himself. The very horror of it was magnetic. They seemed to look upon a death-struggle—the wild fight of a creature endowed with a fiery vitality against an enemy unseen but wholly ruthless and from the first invincible.

Those who saw that dance of Rozelle Daubeni never forgot it, and there was hardly a woman in the

audience who was not destined to shudder whenever the memory of it arose. It was arresting, revolting, terrible; it must have compelled in any case. A good many began to sob with the sheer nervous horror of it, yearning for the end upon which they were forced to look, though with a dread that made the blood run cold.

But the end was such as no one in that assembly looked for. Just as the awful ecstasy of the dance was at its height, just as the dreaded crisis approached, and they saw with a gasping horror the inevitable final clutch of the unseen enemy upon his vanquished victim; just as she lifted her face in the last anguish of supplication, yielding the last hope, sinking in nerveless surrender before the implacable destroyer, there came a sudden flare of light in the *salon*, and the great crystal candelabra that hung over the end of the gallery where the man and the girl were seated watching became a dazzling sparkle of overwhelming light.

Everyone turned towards it instinctively, and Toby, hardly knowing what she did, but with the instinct to escape strong upon her, leapt to her feet.

In that moment—as she stood in the full light—the dancer's eyes also shot upwards and saw the sum young figure. It was only for a moment, but instantly a wild cry rang through the great *salon*—a cry of agony so piercing that women shrieked and trembled, hiding their faces from what they knew not what.

In the flash of a second the light was gone, the gallery again in darkness. But on the stage a woman's voice cried thrice: "Toinette! Toinette! Toinette!" in the anguished accents of a mother who cries for her dead child, and then fell into a tragic silence more poignant than any sound—a silence that was as the silence of Death.

And in that silence a man's figure, moving with the free, athletic swing of a sailor, crossed the stage to where the dancer lay huddled in the dimness like a broken thing, lifted her—bore her away.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW LOVER

Very late that night when all the crowds who had assembled to watch Rozelle Daubeni had dispersed with awe-struck whisperings, two men came down the great staircase into the empty vestibule and paused at the foot.

"You are leaving Paris again?" said Saltash.

The other nodded, his face perfectly emotionless, his eyes the eyes of a sailor who searches the far horizon. "There is nothing to keep me here," he said, and absently accepted a cigarette from the case that Saltash proffered. "I have always hated towns. I only came—" He stopped, considered a moment, and said no more.

Saltash's eyes were upon him, alert, speculative, but wholly without malice. "You came—because you were sent for," he said.

Larpent nodded twice thoughtfully, more as if in answer to some mental suggestion than as if the words had been actually uttered. He struck a match and held it for Saltash. Then, as he deliberately lighted his own cigarette, between slow puffs he spoke: "There was only—one reason on earth—that would have brought me."

"Yes?" said Saltash. He dropped into a chair with the air of a man who has limitless leisure at his disposal, but his tone was casual. He did not ask for confidence.

Larpent stood still gazing before him through the smoke with keen, unwavering eyes.

"Only one reason," he said again, and still he seemed to speak as one who communes with his inner soul. "She was dying—and she wanted me." He paused a moment, and an odd tremor went through him. "After twenty years," he said, as if in wonder at himself.

Saltash's look came swiftly upwards. "I've heard that before," he said. "Those she caught she kept—always. No other woman was ever worth while after Rozelle."

Larpent's hand clenched instinctively, but he said nothing.

Saltash went on in the same casual tone. "She never caught me, *mon ami*. I met her too late in life—when I was beginning to get fastidious." His monkey-like grin showed for a moment. "I appreciated her charm, but—it left me cold."

"You never saw her in her first youth," said Larpent, and into his fixed eyes there came a curious glow—the look of a man who sees a vision.

"What was she like then?" said Saltash.

Slowly the sailor answered him, word by word as one spelling out a strange language. "She was like a butterfly that plays among the flowers in the early morning. She had the look of a boy—the wide-open eyes, the fearless way, the freedom, the daring. Her innocence—her loveliness—" Something rose unexpectedly in his throat. He stopped and swallowed hard. "My God! How lovely she was!" he said, in a strangled voice.

Saltash got up in his sudden, elastic fashion. "Look here! You want a drink. Sit down while I get you one!"

He was gone with the words, not waiting for the half-uttered remonstrance that the other man sent after him.

Larpent stood staring heavily before him for a space, then turned with a mechanical movement and dropped into a chair. He was sitting so, bent forward, his hands clasped in front of him when Saltash returned. He had the worn, grey look of a man tired out with hard travel.

Saltash poured out a drink and held it down to him. "Here's the stuff! Drink, man! It'll put new life into you."

Larpent drank, still in that slow, mechanical fashion. But as he drained the glass his eyes met Saltash's alert look and a faint, grim smile crossed his haggard features.

"Don't let me spoil your holiday, my lord!" he said.

"Don't be a damn' fool!" said Saltash.

Larpent sat in silence for several seconds. Then in a more normal tone he spoke again. "I had to come to her. God knows what made her want me after all these years. But I couldn't refuse to come. I had her message two days ago. She said she was alone—dying. So I came." He paused and wiped his forehead. "I thought she had tricked me. You saw her as she was to-night. She was like that—full of life, superb. But—I had come to her, and I found I couldn't leave her. She wanted me—she wanted me—to take her back." He got up, but not with any agitation, and began to pace to and fro as though he paced a deck. "You will think me mad of course. You never came under the spell. But I, I was first with her; and perhaps it was fitting that I should be the last. Had she lived—after to-night—I would have taken her away. She would never have danced again. I would have taken her out of this damnable world that had dragged her down. I'd have saved her somehow."

"You wouldn't," said Saltash. "It's like a recurrent fever. You'd never have held her."

"I say I would." Larpent spoke deeply, but still without emotion. "I could have done it—and no one else on earth. I tell you I was first with her, and a woman doesn't forget the first. I had a power that no other man ever possessed, or ever could possess. I was—her husband."

"What?" said Saltash.

Larpent paced on with bent head. "I was her husband. But I was at sea and she was on shore. And so I lost her. She was not made to stand against temptation. It came to her when I was on the other side of the world. When I got back, she was gone. And I—I never followed her. The thing was hopeless. She was that sort, you understand. It was first one and then another with her. I dropped her out of my life, and let her go. I didn't realize then—what I know now—that the power to rescue and to hold her was mine. If I had, I might have gone after her. I can't say. But I was too bitter at the time to feel it was worth while. I went back to the sea and left her to work out her own damnation."

"And yet you loved her?" Saltash said, with a queer twist of the features that was not of mirth.

"I loved her, yes. If I hadn't loved her I would never have come to her when she called. That is love—the thing that doesn't die." A sudden throb sounded in Larpent's voice. He paused for a moment in his walk, then paced on. "You may laugh at it—call it what you will—but there is a power on the earth that

is stronger than anything else, and when that power speaks we have got to obey. I didn't want to come. You think me a damn fool for coming. But I had to. That's all there is to it."

"I don't think you any sort of a fool," Saltash threw in briefly. "You did the only thing possible."

"Yes, the only thing. I came to her. If I hadn't come, she'd have died—alone. But that alone wasn't why she sent for me—it was the primary reason, but not the only one. There was another." Larpent ceased his pacing and deliberately faced the man who stood listening. "You know what happened to-night," he said. "That child—the scaramouch you picked out of the gutter at Valrosa—Toby—do you realize—have you grasped—the meaning of that yet?"

Saltash flung up his head with an arrogant gesture. "There is one thing about her you have not grasped," he said. "But go on! I may as well hear it."

Larpent went on steadily. "When I came to her yesterday she told me of a child that had been born to her—a child she had loved but had been unable to protect. It was a long story. Spentoli the Italian artist knows it from beginning to end. You know Spentoli?"

"I know him," said Saltash.

"Spentoli is a blackguard," Larpent said, "the sort that is born, not made afterwards. He has painted Rozelle over and over again. He raves about her. He may be a genius. He is certainly mad. He wanted the child for a model, and Rozelle could not prevent it. So she told me. I believe she was dependent upon him at the time. She had been ill. She has been ill for years with heart trouble. And so he had the child, but only for a time. The girl had a will of her own and broke away, joined a circus in California. He tracked her down, captured her again, tried to make a slave of her. But she was like a wild creature. She stabbed him one night and fled. That was Rozelle's trouble. She had never been able to hear of her again. She begged me to find—and save her. I promised to do my best. But—there was no need to search very far. To-night Spentoli pulled the wires again. It was he who switched on that light. It was he who killed Rozelle. The girl in the gallery with you—Toby—was her daughter—and mine. You heard Rozelle cry out when she saw her. She never spoke again."

Larpent ceased to speak. He was no longer looking at Saltash. The far vision seemed to have caught his gaze again. He stared beyond.

Saltash watched him with working brows. "Are you wanting to lay claim to the girl?" he asked abruptly.

Larpent's face was grim. "I make no claim, my lord," he said. "But I have sworn to do my best for her. I shall keep that oath of mine."

"Meaning?" said Saltash.

The sailor's look met his squarely. "You know what I mean," he said.

Saltash began to grin. "A fight to a finish, what? I'm sorry, *mon ami*. But I've got you beaten at the start. Shall I tell you how you can best keep that somewhat rash oath of yours?"

"Well?" The word fell brief and uncompromising. Larpent's face was as carved granite.

Saltash thrust forth a sudden hand and took him by the shoulder. "Just by effacing yourself, *mon vieux*," he said lightly. "Go back to *The Blue Moon*, take her to Fairharbour, and await my orders there!"

It was carelessly, even jestingly, spoken, but a certain authority lurked behind the words. Charles Rex knew how to assert his kingship upon occasion, knew also how to temper it with the touch of friendship.

Larpent's look did not waver, but some of the grimness went from it. Neither anger nor indignation had any place here. He continued to look Saltash straight in the face.

"And that would be keeping my oath?" he said.

"Even so," said Saltash.

"You mean," Larpent spoke with slow emphasis, "that to leave her where she now is, is to leave her in safe and honourable keeping?"

The old mocking smile gleamed in Saltash's eyes. "Yes, I mean that," he said. "Do you believe me,

Larpent?"

"Believe you, my lord?" Larpent seemed to hesitate.

The hand that held him moved with a hint of impatience. "I am asking," said Saltash royally, "if you consider that my protection is adequate for—my wife."

"Your—wife!" Larpent started in sharp surprise. "Your wife, did you say?"

Saltash broke into a chuckle and dropped his hand from his captain's shoulder. "Yes, just that," he said. "You are behind the times, my friend. Are you going to congratulate me? We were married four days ago."

Larpent's hand came out to him abruptly. "It's the best thing you've ever done, my lord," he said. "And you will never regret it."

"What makes you say that?" said Saltash curiously.

Their hands gripped and fell apart. Larpent answered him in the brief fashion of the man whose words are few. "Mainly because you loved her enough to marry her when you could have had her without."

Saltash's laugh had the old derisive ring but there was no corresponding gleam of mockery in his eyes as he turned carelessly aside. "What is this thing called love?" he said.

CHAPTER VII

THE REFUGEE

It was by no means characteristic of Jake to linger on a quest which had already proved fruitless but he was a man who possessed acquaintances in almost all parts of the world, and Paris was no exception. For the rest of the day after leaving Saltash he was philosophically occupied in seeking out old friends. Eventually he dined at a restaurant and betook himself to the station to catch the night train to Calais. It was all one to Jake whether he travelled by night or by day, so wholly accustomed was he to adapt himself to circumstances. Maud was wont to say with a smile that the luxuries of decent living were utterly thrown away upon him. He was a man who scarcely noticed physical discomfort. He could sleep under practically any conditions.

Walking solidly down the platform, carrying his own baggage, his thoughts were completely astray from his surroundings. They had reverted to the memory of the girlish figure he had seen that morning seated on a table, swinging one leg in studied nonchalance while every line was instinct with defiance. Yes, she had defied him, but deep in her heart she had feared—how she had feared!—that Saltash would fail to hold her against him. Again, a deep compassion came over Jake, stirring the very depths of him. Poor little girl, flung to and fro as flotsam in the cruel surf of life's breakers! He had done his best to deliver her, but Fate had been against him. Fate had ordained that she should be the victim of this man's caprice, the slave of impulses which might or might not be her destruction. It was as if he watched her trying to walk on a quicksand. And he was powerless to help her. Saltash had defeated him, and he had no insight into his motives. Unstable, baffling, irresponsible as a monkey that swings from tree to tree, he had snatched his prize, and even Jake, who knew him better than most, could only speculate as to whether he would carry it high above disaster or tire and idly fling it away. Some vagrant sense of honour seemed to have actuated him so far, but never yet had he known such a motive to last for long. The man's face was beyond him, too fantastic for comprehension. He recognized that he was capable of greatness, but very few were the occasions on which he had achieved it. If the motive power were lacking in this instance, Toby's chances were indeed small.

He found an empty carriage and threw his belongings on to a seat. The train was not a favourite one, and there would be no crowd. He had some minutes to wait, and he lighted his pipe and began to pace the platform unencumbered. A few travellers straggling by eyed him with some interest. He was not a man to be passed unnoticed. The massive, thick-set shoulders had a bull-dog strength that must have marked him in any crowd. His height was unremarkable, but there was power in every dominant line of him. He had the free carriage of one accustomed to the wide places of the earth.

He took small note of his fellow-travellers, being engrossed in his own thoughts. He wondered how Maud would regard the situation, and half wished she had been with him to deal with it. For Maud possessed undoubted influence over Saltash. He reflected that she was probably the only person in the world who did.

He had strolled almost to the barrier and was in the act of turning back when something—some impulse for which he could never afterwards account—induced him to pause and take stock of the passengers passing through. The train was almost due to start, and there was some slight confusion and a quickening of feet on the platform. He realized that he ought to be going back to his own carriage, but something stayed him. He stood still, his keen eyes searching the hastening figures.

And so standing, in a moment his attention was focussed upon a girl in a blue cloak who came towards him at a run evidently intent upon catching the train. She passed him swiftly without seeing him, almost brushed against him. And behind her came a dark man with black moustache and imperial, following her closely with an air of proprietorship.

Jake wheeled in his tracks, for a second amazed out of all composure. But an instant later he was in pursuit. He had had but a fleeting glimpse of her face, and the blue cloak was quite unfamiliar to him; but there was no mistaking the boyish freedom of her gait, the athletic swing of her as she turned and leaped into a compartment that her companion opened for her.

The black-browed Italian was in the act of following when Jake arrived. The realization of another hand upon the door was the first intimation that reached him of the Englishman's presence. He turned and looked into a pair of red-brown eyes that regarded him with the utmost steadiness as a quiet voice made slightly drawling explanation.

"This lady is a friend of mine," said Jake Bolton. "I should like a word with her."

The Italian looked murderous for a moment, but he gave ground almost in spite of himself. Perhaps the calm insistence of the other man's bearing warned him at the outset of the futility of attempting any other course of action; Jake was actually in the carriage before he could jerk out a word of protest.

"*Sapristi!* You go too far!" he blustered then. But Jake was already confronting the girl who had started up at his coming, and stood facing him white and shaken. He spoke, still quite quietly, even gently, but in the tone that no delinquent ever heard unmoved.

"Say," he said, "are you playing the game?"

She put up a hand to her throat. His sudden coming had unnerved her, and she had no words. But her quivering face and tragic eyes were more than sufficient answer for Jake. He had dealt with sudden emergencies before, and he treated this one with characteristic decision.

"You've no business here," he said, "and you know it. If you can't stick to the man you've married, come home with me to Maud!"

She made a sharp gesture toward him, as if on the verge of falling, and as sharply recovered herself. "Oh, I wish—how I wish I could!" she breathed.

Jake's hand, perfectly steady, full of sustaining strength, closed with authority upon her arm. "That's settled then," he said. "Come now!"

But at this point the Italian burst furiously in upon them with a flood of unintelligible language that made all further speech impossible.

Jake glanced momentarily over his shoulder as if disturbed by the buzzing of some insect, then with unruffled composure turned back to the girl. His eyes looked straight into hers for perhaps ten seconds, then in the same purposeful fashion he set her free and deliberately turned upon the man who raged behind him.

As he did so, there came a shouting and banging of doors along the platform, and the train began to move. Jake's massive shoulders braced themselves. Without words he seized the raving Italian in a grip there was no resisting, swept him, as a sudden gale sweeps a leaf, across the compartment, sent him with a neat twist buzzing forth upon the platform, and very calmly shut the door and came back.

Then there came a wild shriek of laughter from Toby, and she doubled up in her corner with hysterical mirth, gasping and gasping for breath, till he sat squarely down beside her and pulled her into the circle of his arm.

"Easy, my girl! Easy!" he said. "We're not going to have an exhibition at this stage. You keep a stiff

upper lip till you feel better!"

But the stiff upper lip was rather painfully lacking on that occasion. She very soon ceased to laugh, but for a long time thereafter she lay sobbing and shuddering like a little terrified animal against his breast while the train rushed on through the night.

He was very gentle with her. Jake's stock of patience was practically limitless, and he and Toby had always had a certain comradeship between them. But when she grew calmer at last he began to talk in the quiet, direct fashion habitual to him.

"Say now! You've had a bit of a facer over this. But you needn't be frightened. You're safe enough from that damned Italian anyway. And you'll find me a better refuge than he is—if that's what you're wanting."

She shivered and pressed closer. "You—don't know—what you're in for," she whispered piteously.

"That so?" said Jake, unmoved. "Well, maybe you'd like to enlighten me."

But Toby shook her head with a sob. "I couldn't! I just couldn't, Jake. Do you mind?"

Jake considered the point with slightly drawn brows. "I guess there's no hurry," he decided at length. "We'll get home first anyway. That's the main point. You won't be sorry to get back to Maud, I take it?"

She answered him with a swift and passionate fervour that spoke more clearly than any words of the anguish of her soul. "Oh, Jake, I wish I'd died—I wish I'd died—before I left her!"

Jake's brows contracted more decidedly, but he said nothing further on the subject. Only after a moment or two he patted her shoulder reassuringly. "I'll take care of you," he said. "You go to sleep!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE TURNING-POINT

"You've brought her back!" said Bunny in amazement. "You've actually brought her back! Here, Jake? Not here?"

"It was the only thing to do." said Jake between puffs at his pipe. "I'm sorry on your account, but—well, you can keep out of her way."

Bunny's face was flushed. He stood on the hearth and stared down at Jake with a troubled countenance. "But you won't be able to keep her," he protested after a moment. "Charlie will come and get her away again—as soon as he knows. He's such a wily devil."

"He does know," said Jake.

"He knows? Who told him?"

"I told him," said Jake.

"You told him! What the devil for? I don't understand you, Jake." Bunny's tone had a touch of fierceness in it, almost of challenge.

Jake's eyes came up to him with absolute steadiness. "I told him," he said deliberately, "because he is the one person who has a right to know. He is her husband."

"I don't believe it!" said Bunny violently. "He'd never marry her! It was a damn trick if he pretended to."

"No," Jake said, "it was not a trick. He has married her, and it's up to him to make the next move."

"But what on earth for?" demanded Bunny. "What made him do such a thing?"

"God knows," said Jake, with a certain sombreness. "He did it. That's all I know."

Bunny stamped round in a sudden fury and began to pace the room. "I suppose he did it to defeat me! Did he actually think I should want her after—after—"

"Bunny!" Swift and sharp as a whip-lash Jake's voice cut across the words. "Stop that! Pull up and sit down!"

Bunny wheeled and came back in silence. His face was deadly pale, but he sat down on the edge of the table by Jake's side.

Jake reached out a leisurely hand and gripped him by the knee. "Between you and me, my son," he said, "I don't think you came into the reckoning at all. I can't tell you exactly what happened, because I don't know, but I'm pretty sure that Saltash married her from a somewhat stronger motive than just to put you out of the running. As you say, he could have done that without taking all that trouble. He's treated you damn badly, I admit, but it's just possible he couldn't help himself, and anyway I don't think he's hurt you seriously—except in the place where you keep your pride."

"You think I didn't love her!" broke in Bunny, moving restlessly under his hand.

Jake's eyes had the glimmer of a smile as he met the boy's hot look. "I think you don't love her now anyway, Bunny," he said.

"You're quite right," said Bunny shortly. "I don't. I never want to see her again—now I know what she is."

"You don't know," said Jake. "She has always been an unknown quantity to you. That's why I've always felt doubtful about you. Guess you never loved her quite enough, boy. That was your trouble."

"Didn't love her!" ejaculated Bunny.

Jake nodded. "Or you'd have understood her better—stood by her better."

"I'd have loved her fast enough if she'd loved me," protested Bunny. "But that scoundrel always came first with her. I never had a chance."

"Oh yes, you had." Again the faint smile showed for an instant in the elder man's eyes. "Not much of one, perhaps, but you had a chance. If she'd been quite sure of you, she wouldn't have run away."

"Wouldn't she? Then she can't be very sure of Saltash either." Bunny spoke with a certain gloomy triumph.

Jake blew forth a cloud of smoke and watched it rise thoughtfully. "I'm waiting for Saltash," he said. "I've got him on test."

"You believe in him?" questioned Bunny contemptuously.

Jake's eyes remained fixed. "I believe," he said slowly, "that there comes a turning-point in every man's life—whatever he's been—when he either makes good or throws in his hand altogether. I've been through it myself, and I know what it means. It's Saltash's turn now."

"Oh, rot, Jake!" Bunny turned on him with the old boyish admiration shining in his eyes. "You—why, you've made good every time—just about as often as Charlie has done the other thing."

"No." Jake spoke without elation. "I did make good, but I went through hell first, and I very nearly failed. It may be the same with him. If so—well, poor devil, he has my sympathy."

"You can't be sorry for a hound like Saltash!" remonstrated Bunny.

Jake turned squarely and faced him. "Well, there you're wrong, Bunny," he said. "I reckon I'm sorrier for him than I am for you. You've got a clean record, and you'll win out and marry Sheila Melrose. But Saltash—well, he's got a damn heavy handicap, and if he pulls off this, it'll be one of the biggest events I've ever seen. Say, what's the matter?"

Bunny had sprung to his feet. He stood looking at Jake with an expression half-startled and half-indignant. "Jake—you beast! What made you say that?" he demanded.

"What?" said Jake, and began to smile openly. "Well, guess it's pretty near the mark, isn't it? I saw which way the wind was trying to blow some time ago. Mean to say you didn't?"

Bunny swung upon his heel. "Confound you!" he said, and was silent for several seconds.

Jake smoked imperturbably on. He knew all the workings of Bunny's mind with the sure intuition of

long intimacy. When finally the boy spoke again without turning he almost knew what he would say.

"Think I'm—very despicable, Jake?"

The question had a shamed and sullen ring. Bunny's head was bent. He was examining a little china figure on the mantelpiece with nervous concentration.

Jake arose without fuss or preliminary, and pushed a brotherly arm round the bent shoulders. "Guess you've never been that, sonny," he said very kindly. "But—you take an old man's advice and go a bit slow! She'll think all the better of you for it."

"She'll never look at me," muttered Bunny, gripping the hand that pressed his shoulder without raising his eyes.

"Ho, won't she?" said Jake. "I've seen her look at you more than once—and the old General too. Reckon they both thought you were throwing yourself away on Toby, and maybe they had some reason to think so. Anyway, she never was your sort. I seem to remember telling you so once."

"I was a fool," said Bunny, and then in a moment straightened himself and looked Jake in the eyes. "It wasn't Toby's fault," he said with abrupt generosity. "She didn't want to get engaged to me. I made her. I knew—all along—she wasn't very keen. But I thought I loved her enough to make it all right. I was wrong. I didn't."

"Beginning to know better?" suggested Jake, with a smile.

"Beginning to realize what a fool I've been," said Bunny ruefully. "You don't think I've done for myself then? Think I've still got a chance?"

"Sure thing!" said Jake. "But go carefully. You've got a fence or two to clear before you get home." He paused a moment, then gave him a kindly hand-grip. "Say, Bunny," he said, "there's nothing despicable about making a mistake. It's only when things go wrong and we don't play the game that there's anything to be ashamed of. I've always been ready to stake my last dollar that you'd never do that."

"Oh, man," Bunny said, in swift embarrassment, "that shows how much you know about me!"

Jake stooped to knock out the ashes of his pipe in the fender. "What I don't know about you, my son," he said, "ain't worth a donkey's bray, I reckon, so you can shut your mouth on that! I'm going back to Maud now. Any messages?"

"Yes." Bunny was standing up very straight; his eyes were shining. "Love to Maud of course. I shan't come round at present. But tell Toby that when I do, she needn't be worried over anything. We're all square. Tell her that!"

"I will," said Jake. He turned to the door, then paused, looking back. "And say!" he said. "Don't you butt in with Saltash! Just leave him to manage his own fate! He's riding a bucking horse, but I've a notion he'll yet make good—if he can."

"He's a rum devil," said Bunny. "All right. I shan't interfere."

After Jake had gone, he sat down and pulled a letter from his pocket. All the lines of perplexity smoothed out of his boyish face as he read it. It was the letter of a woman who had written because she wanted to write, not because she had anything to say, and Bunny's eyes were very tender as he came to the end. He sat for a space gazing down at the signature, and at length with a gesture half-shamefaced he put it to his lips.

"Yes, I've been a fool, Sheila," he said softly. "But, thank heaven, I was pulled up in time. And I shan't—ever—make that mistake again."

Which was perhaps exactly what the writer had meant him to say.

CHAPTER IX

"Shall we dig a deep, deep hole for you to lie in?" asked Eileen with serious violet eyes upraised.

"And then cover you right up to your head so as you won't catch cold?" chimed in Molly.

"Betty dig too! Betty dig too!" cried the youngest of the party with zest. "Zite up over Auntie Toy's head!"

"What an excellent idea!" said Toby with resignation.

She sat down in the golden afternoon sunshine that flooded the beach, the three children buzzing happily about her, and rested her chin on her hands. The blue eyes that dwelt upon the misty horizon were very tired. They had the heavy look of unshed tears, and all the delicate colour was gone from her face. Her slight figure drooped pathetically. She sat very still. All the elasticity of youth seemed to have gone out of her. Once or twice a sharp sigh caught her that was almost like a sob.

Betty's shrill voice at her side recalled her from her dreams. "Betty tired now, Auntie Toy. Betty tummin' to sit down."

She turned and took the child upon her lap with a fondling touch and tender words. Betty pillowed a downy head against her neck and almost immediately fell asleep. Eileen and Molly laboured on at their self-imposed task in the autumn sunshine, and Toby returned to her dreams.

Perhaps she also had begun to doze, for the day was warm and sound sleep had forsaken her of late; when the falling of a shadow aroused her very swiftly to the consciousness of someone near at hand whose approach she had not heard. She controlled her quick start before it could awaken the sleeping child, but her eyes as they flashed upwards had the strained, panic-stricken look of a hunted animal. She made an almost involuntary movement of shrinking and the blood went out of her lips, but she spoke no word.

A man in a navy-blue yachting-suit stood looking down at her with blue-grey eyes that tried to be impersonal but failed at that slight gesture of hers.

"You needn't be afraid of me, heaven knows," he said.

"I'm not," said Toby promptly, and flung him her old boyish smile. "I wasn't expecting just you at that moment, that's all. Sit down and talk, Captain—if that's what you've come for!"

Apparently it was. He lowered himself to the sand beside her. But at once—as by irresistible habit—his eyes sought the horizon, and he sat and contemplated it in utter silence.

Toby endured the situation for a few difficult seconds, then took brisk command. "Why don't you have a smoke?" she said. "You'd find it a help."

He put his hand mechanically into his pocket and took out his cigarette-case. His eyes came back out of space as he did so, and rested upon the fair-haired child in the girl's arms.

"So you've come back to the old job!" he said.

Toby nodded. "Yes. Jake's doing. I'm waiting to—to—to be divorced."

He made a slight movement of surprise, but his face remained inscrutable. "You'll have to wait some time for that," he said.

Toby tilted her chin with a reckless gesture that was somehow belied by the weariness of her eyes. "That wasn't what you came to talk about then?" she suggested after a pause.

"No." Larpent's voice had a curious, almost deprecating quality. "I came to bring you a message."

"A message!" She started slightly, and in a moment the defiance went out of her attitude. She turned towards him. "Who—who is it from?"

Larpent's far-seeing eyes came gravely to meet her own. "From Rozelle Daubeni," he said.

"Ah!" A quick shiver went through Toby. She averted her look. "I don't want to hear it," she said.

"I've got to deliver it," said Larpent, with a hint of doggedness. "And you've got to listen. But you needn't be afraid. It isn't going to make any difference to you. The time has gone for that."

He paused, but Toby sat in silence, her face bent over Betty's fair head. When he spoke again, his eyes had gone back to the quiet sea and the far horizon. There was a hint of pathos about him, albeit

his face was grim.

"It may have surprised you to see me in Paris with her," he said. "I'm not the sort of man that runs after—that type of woman. But I went to Rozelle because she was dying, and because once—long ago—she was my wife."

A faint sound came from Toby, but still she did not speak or lift her face.

Larpent went on steadily, unemotionally. "She went wrong—ran away—while I was at sea. She was too young to be left alone. Afterwards—too late—a child was born. She told me the night before she died that the child was mine."

"Good God!" said Toby under her breath.

He went on, grimly monotonous. "I never knew of the child's existence. If I had known, it might have made a difference. But it's too late now. She wanted me to find and protect the child. I promised to do my best. And when I found her, I was to tell her one thing. Rozelle prayed for her child's forgiveness every day."

He ceased to speak, and there fell a silence, long and painful. The tide was turning, and the soft wash of tiny breakers came up the sand. Sea and sky mingled together, opalescent in the misty sunlight. The man's eyes gazed without seeing. Toby's were full of tears.

He turned at last and looked at her, then, moved by what he saw, laid an awkward hand upon her arm.

"I'm not asking anything from you," he said. "But I'd like you to know I'd have done more—if I'd known."

She threw him a quick look, choking back her tears. "It—it—it's rather funny, isn't it?" she said, with a little crack of humour in her voice. "I'm—I'm very sorry. Captain Larpent."

"Sorry?" he said.

"For you," said Toby, with another piteous choke. "I've been foisted on to you so often. And you—you've hated it so."

"That's the tragic part of it," said Larpent.

She brushed away her tears and tried to smile. "I wonder you bothered to tell me," she said.

His hand closed almost unconsciously upon her arm. "I had to tell you," he said. "It's a thing you ought to know." He hesitated a moment, then concluded with obvious effort. "And I wanted to offer you my help."

"Thank you," whispered Toby. "You—you—that's very—generous of you." She gulped again, and recovered herself. "What do you want to do about it?" she said.

"Do? Well, what can I do?" He seemed momentarily disconcerted by the question.

Toby became brisk and business-like. "Well, you don't want to retire and live in a cottage with me, do you? We shouldn't either of us like that, should we?"

"There's no question of that now," said Larpent quietly. "Your home is with your husband, not with me."

Toby flinched a little. "My home isn't anywhere then," she said. "When I left him, it was—for good."

"Why did you leave him?" said Larpent.

Toby's lips set in a firm line, and she made no answer.

Larpent waited a few moments; then: "It's no matter for my interference," he said. "But it seems to me you've made a mistake in one particular. You don't realize why he married you."

Toby made a small passionate movement of protest. "He ought not to have done it," she said, in a low voice. "I ought not to have let him. I thought I could play the part. I know now I can't. And—he knows it too."

"I think you'll have to play the part," Larpent said.

"No!" She spoke with vehemence. "It's quite impossible. He has been far too good—far too generous. But it shan't go on. He's got to set me free. If he doesn't—" she stopped abruptly.

"Well? If he doesn't?" Larpent's voice was unwontedly gentle, and there was compassion in his look.

Toby's eyes avoided his. "I'll find—a way for myself," she said almost inarticulately.

Larpent's fingers tightened again upon the thin young arm. "It's no good fighting Fate," he said. "Why has it become impossible? Just because he knows all about you? Do you suppose that—or anything else—is going to make any difference at this stage? Do you imagine he would let you go—for that?"

Toby's arm strained against him. "He'll have to," she declared stubbornly. "He doesn't know all about me either—any more than you do. And—and—and—he's never going to know."

Her voice shook stormily. She glanced about her desperately as if in search of refuge. The child in her arms stirred and woke.

Larpent got up as if the conversation were ended. He stood for a moment irresolute, then walked across to the two little girls digging busily a few yards away.

Eileen greeted him with her usual shy courtesy. "Won't you wait a little longer?" she said. "We've very nearly finished."

"Nearly finished," echoed Molly. "Isn't it a booful big hole?"

"What's it for?" asked Larpent.

Toby's voice answered him. She had risen and followed him. It had an odd break in it—the sound of laughter that is mingled with tears. "They're digging a hole to bury me in. Isn't it a great idea?"

He wheeled and looked at her. There was no sign of tears in the wide blue eyes that met his own. Yet he put his hand on her shoulder with the gesture of one who comforts a child.

"Before I go," he said, "I want to tell you something—something no one has told me, but that I've found out for myself. There is only one thing on this earth worth having—only one thing that counts. It isn't rank or wealth or even happiness. It swamps the lot, just because it's the only thing in God's creation that lasts. And you've got it. In heaven's name, don't throw it away!"

He spoke with the simplicity and strength of a man who never wastes his words, and having spoken, he released her without farewell and turned away.

Toby stood quite motionless for several seconds, watching him; then, as he did not look round, hurriedly she addressed the eldest child.

"Take care of Betty a moment, Eileen darling! I shall be back directly." And with the words she was gone, like an arrow, in pursuit.

He must have heard her feet upon the sand, but he did not turn. Perhaps his thoughts were elsewhere, for when at the quick pressure of her hand on his arm he paused to look at her, she saw that his eyes were very sad.

"Well?" he said, with the glimmer of a smile. "Well,—Toinette?"

She clasped her two hands upon his arm, holding it very tightly, her face uplifted. "Please—I want to thank you," she said breathlessly. "You have been—so very good."

He shook his head. "I have done—nothing," he said. "Don't thank me!"

She went on with nervous haste. "And it does make a difference to me. I—I—I'm glad I know, though it must have been—a great shock to you."

"It would have been a much worse shock if it had been anyone else," he said.

"Would it? How nice of you!" Her lip trembled. "Well then, I'm glad it wasn't." She began to walk on with him. "Do you mind telling me—did you—did you—forgive her?"

"Yes," he said very quietly.

A quick shiver went through her. "Then I must too," she said. "At least—I must try. She—she—I loved her once, you know, before I began to understand."

"Everyone loved her," he said.

"But life is very difficult, isn't it?" she urged rather tremulously.

"Your life has been," he said.

She nodded. "One can't help—can't help—making mistakes—even bad ones—sometimes."

"You've just made one," he said.

She faced him valiantly. "Ah, but you don't understand. You—you can't throw away—what you've never had, can you—can you?"

"What you've got," he corrected gravely. "Yes, you can."

She flung out her hands with a wide gesture. "But I haven't got it! I never had it! He took me out of pity. He never—pretended to love me."

"No," said Larpent, with grim certitude. "He isn't pretending this time."

She stared at him, wide-eyed, motionless. "Not pretending? What do you mean? Please—what do you mean?"

He held out his hand. "Good-bye!" he said abruptly. "I mean—just that."

Her lips were parted to say more, but something in his face or action checked her. She put her hand into his. "Good-bye!" she said.

He held her hand for a moment, then, moved by some hint of forlornness in the clear eyes, he bent, as he had bent at the Castle on that summer evening weeks before, and lightly touched her forehead with his lips.

"Oh, that's nice of you," said Toby quickly. "Thank you for that."

"Don't thank me for anything!" said Larpent. "Play a straight game, that's all!"

And with the words he left her finally, striding away over the sand with that careless sailor's gait of his, gazing always far ahead of him out to the dim horizon. Perhaps as long as he lived his look would never again dwell upon anything nearer.

CHAPTER X

IN THE NAME OF LOVE

"It's been—a funny game," said Saltash, with a wry grimace. "We've both of us been so damned subtle that it seems to me we've ended up in much the same sort of hole that we started in."

"But you're not going to stay in it," said Maud.

He turned and looked down at her, one eyebrow cocked at a comic angle. "*Ma belle reine*, if you can help us to climb out, you will earn my undying gratitude."

She met his look with her steadfast eyes. "Charlie, do you know that night after night she cries as if her poor little heart were broken?"

Saltash's eyebrow descended again. He scowled hideously. "*Mais pourquoi?* I have not broken it. I have never even made love to her."

Maud's face was very compassionate. "Perhaps that is why. She is so young—so forlorn—and so miserable. Is it quite impossible for you to forgive her?"

"Forgive her!" said Saltash. "Does she want to be forgiven?"

"She is fretting herself ill over it," Maud said. "I can't bear to see her. No, she has told me nothing—except that she is waiting for you to throw her off—to divorce her. Charlie, you wouldn't do that even if

you could!"

Saltash was silent; the scowl still upon his face.

"Tell me you wouldn't!" she urged.

His odd eyes met hers with a shifting gleam of malice. "There is only one reason for which I would do that, *ma chère*," he said. "So she has not told you why she ran away with my friend Spentoli?"

Maud shook her head. "She does not speak of it at all. I only know that she was unspeakably thankful to Jake for protecting her from him."

"Ah!" Saltash's teeth showed for an instant. "I also am grateful to Jake for that. He seems to have taken a masterly grip of the situation. Is he aware that he broke Spentoli's arm, I wonder? It was in the papers, alongside the tragic death of Rozelle. 'Fall of a Famous Sculptor from a Train.' It will keep him quiet for some time, I hear, and has saved me the trouble of calling him out. I went to see him in hospital."

"You went to see him!" Maud exclaimed.

Saltash nodded, the derisive light still in his eyes. "And conveyed my own condolences. You may tell *la petite* from me that I do not propose to set her free on his account. He is not what I should describe as a good and sufficient cause."

"Thank heaven for that!" Maud ejaculated with relief.

"Amen!" said Saltash piously, and took out his cigarette-case.

She watched him with puzzled eyes till the cigarette was alight and he smiled at her through the smoke, his swarthy face full of mocking humour.

"Now tell me!" she said then, "how can I help you?"

He made a wide gesture. "I leave that entirely to your discretion, madam. As you may perceive, I have wholly ceased to attempt to help myself."

"You are not angry with her?" she hazarded.

"I am furious," said Charles Rex royally.

She shook her head at him. "You're not in earnest—and it wouldn't help you if you were. Besides, you couldn't be angry with the poor little thing. Charlie, you love her, don't you? You—you want her back?"

He shifted his position slightly so that the smoke of his cigarette did not float in her direction. His smile had a whimsical twist. "Do I want her back?" he said. "On my oath, it's hard to tell."

"Oh, surely!" Maud said. She rose impulsively and stood beside him. "Charlie," she said, "why do you wear a mask with me? Do you think I don't know that she is all the world to you?"

He looked at her, and the twisted smile went from his face. "There is no woman on this earth that I can't do without," he said. "I learnt that—when I lost you."

"Ah!" Maud's voice was very pitiful. Her hand came to his. "But this—this is different. Why should you do without her? You know she loves you?"

His fingers closed spring-like about her own. A certain hardness was in his look. "If she loves me," he said, "she can come back to me of her own accord."

"But if she is afraid?" Maud pleaded.

"She has no reason to be," he said. "I have claimed nothing from her. I have never spoken a harsh word to her. Why is she afraid?"

"Have you understood her?" Maud asked very gently.

He made an abrupt movement as though the question, notwithstanding the absolute kindness of its utterance, had somehow an edge for him. The next moment he began to laugh.

"Why ask these impossible riddles? Has any man ever understood a woman? Let us dismiss the subject! And since you are here, *ma belle reine*,—you of all people—let us celebrate the occasion with a drink!—even if it be only tea!"

His eyes laughed into hers. The western light was streaming in across the music-room. They stood together in the turret beyond Saltash's piano, where she had found him pouring out wild music that made her warm heart ache for him.

She had come to him with the earnest desire to help, but he baffled her at every turn, this man to whom once in the days of her youth she had been so near. She could not follow the complex workings of his mind. He was too quick to cover his feelings. His inner soul had long been hidden from her.

Yet the conviction persisted that if any could pass that closed door that he kept so persistently against all comers, it would be herself. She had once possessed the key, and she could not believe that it was no longer in her power to turn it. He would surely yield to her though he barred out all beside.

Perhaps he read her thoughts, for the laugh died out of his eyes, melting into the old tender raillery that she remembered so well.

"Will you drink with me?" he said. "You have actually stooped to enter my stronghold without your bodyguard. Will you not honour me still further—partake of my hospitality?"

She smiled at him. "Of course I will have tea with you with pleasure, Charlie. Didn't you realize I was waiting to be asked?"

"You are very gracious," he said, and crossed the room to ring a bell.

She remained in the western turret, looking out over the beech woods that blazed golden in the sun to the darker pine-woods beyond.

"What a paradise this is!" she said, when he joined her again.

His restless eyes followed hers without satisfaction. A certain moodiness had come upon him. He made no answer to her words.

"Why doesn't Bunny come up to see me?" he asked suddenly. "He knows I am here."

She looked at him in surprise. "Are you expecting him?"

He nodded with a touch of arrogance. "Yes. Tell him to come! I shan't quarrel with him or he with me. Is he still thirsting for my blood? He's welcome to it if he wants it."

"Charlie!" she protested.

He turned from her and sat down at the piano. His fingers began to caress the keys, and then in a moment the old sweet melody that he had played to her in the long ago days came softly through the room. Her lips formed the words as he played, but she made no sound.

"There has fallen a splendid tear
From the passion-flower at the gate.
She is coming, my dove, my dear;
She is coming, my life, my fate.
The red rose cries, 'She is near, she is near!'
And the white rose weeps, 'She is late!'
The larkspur listens, 'I hear, I hear!'
And the lily whispers, 'I wait!'"

"She is certainly very late," commented Charles Rex quizzically from the piano. "And the lily is more patient than I am. Why don't you sing, Maud of the roses?"

She started a little at his voice, but she did not answer. She could not tell him that her throat was dumb with tears.

He played softly on for a space, then as the old butler entered with a tea-tray, he abruptly left the piano to wait upon her. He made her sit in the window-seat and presently sat down himself and talked of indifferent things. She did not attempt to bring him back to the matter in hand. She knew him too well for that. If he chose to be elusive, no power on earth could capture him.

But she had a strong feeling that he would not seek to elude her wholly. He might seem to trifle, as a monkey swinging idly from bough to bough, but he had an end in view, and ultimately he would reach that end, however circuitous the route.

He surprised her eventually by the suddenness with which he pounced upon it. He had turned the talk upon the subject of his new yacht, and very abruptly he announced his intention of going round the

world in her.

"Not alone?" she said, and then would have checked the words lest they should seem to ask too much.

But he answered her without a pause. "Yes, alone. And if I don't come back, Bunny can marry Toby and reign here in my stead. That is, if he isn't an infernal fool. If he is, then Toby can reign here alone—with you and Jake to take care of her."

"But, Charlie, why—why?" The words leapt from Maud in spite of her.

He frowned at her whimsically. "They've always cared for one another. Don't you know it? It's true she put me in a shrine and worshipped me for a time, but I couldn't live up to it. *Figurez-vous, ma chère!* Myself—a marble saint!"

"You never understood her," Maud said.

He shrugged his shoulders and went lightly on. "Oh, she was ready enough to offer me human sacrifice, but that wasn't enough for me. Besides, I didn't want sacrifice. I have stood between her and the world. I have given her protection. But it was a free gift. I don't take anything in exchange for that." An odd note sounded in his voice, as of some emotion suppressed. He leaned back against the window-frame, his hands behind his head. "That wasn't what I married her for. I tried to prove that to her. I actually thought—" the old derisive grin leapt across his face—"that I could win her trust like any ordinary man. I failed of course—failed hideously. She never expected decent treatment from me. She never even began to trust me. I was far too heavily handicapped for that. And so—as soon as the wind changed—the boat capsized."

"What made the wind change?" Maud asked gently.

He looked across at her, the baffling smile still in his eyes. "The gods played a jest with us," he said. "It was only a small jest, but it turned the scale. She fled. That was how I came to realize I couldn't hold her. I had travelled too fast as usual, and she couldn't keep up. Well," he unlocked his hands and straightened himself, "it's up to Bunny now. I'll let her go—to him."

"My dear!" Maud said.

He laughed at her with the old half-caressing ridicule. "That shocks you? But why—if they love each other? Haven't I heard you preach the gospel of love as the greatest thing on earth? Didn't you once tell me that I had yet to learn the joy—" his smile twisted again—"the overwhelming joy—of setting the happiness of another before one's own? This thing can be done quite simply and easily—as I suggested to you long ago. She has only to go away with him, and I do the rest. A moral crime—no more. Yes, it is against your code of course. But consider! I only stand to lose that which I have never possessed. For the first time in my life, I commit a crime in the name of—love!"

He laughed over the word; yet even through the scoffing sound there came a ring of pain. His face had a drawn look—the wistfulness of the monkey that has seen its prize irrevocably snatched away.

Maud rose quickly. There was something in his attitude or expression that she could not bear. "Oh, you are wrong! You are wrong!" she said. "You have the power to make her love you. And you love her. Charlie, this thing has not been given you to throw away. You can't! You can't!"

He made a sharp gesture that checked her. "My dear Maud," he said, "there are a good many things I can't do, and one of them is this. I can't hold any woman against her will—no, not if she were my wife ten times over. I wouldn't have let her go to Spentoli. But Bunny is a different matter. I have Jake's word for it that he will make her a better husband than I shall. If Bunny wants to know all about her past—her parentage—he can come to me and I can satisfy him. Tell him that! But if he really loves her—he won't care a damn—any more than I do."

"Ah!" Maud said.

She stood a moment, looking at him, and in her eyes was that mother-look of a love that understands. She held out her hand to him.

"Thank you for telling me, Charlie," she said. "Good-bye!"

He held her hand. "What have I told you?" he asked abruptly.

She shook her head. "Never mind now! You have just made me understand, that's all. I will give your message to Bunny—to them both. Good-bye!"

He stooped in his free, gallant way to kiss her hand. "After all," he said, "I return to my old allegiance.

It was you, *chère reine*, who taught me how to love."

She gently freed her hand and turned to go. "No," she said. "I think it was God who taught you that."

For the second time Charles Rex failed to utter the scoffing laugh she half-expected. The odd eyes looked after her with a kind of melancholy irony.

"To what purpose?" he said.

CHAPTER XI

THE GIFT OF THE GODS

A chill wind blew across the ramparts bringing with it the scent and the sound of the sea. There was no moon in the sky tonight, only the clouds flying over the stars, obscuring and revealing them alternately, making their light weirdly vague and fitful. Across the park an owl called persistently, its eerie hoot curiously like the cry of a human voice through the rustling night. The trees were murmuring together down by the lake as though some mysterious news were passing to and fro among them. And once more, alone on his castle walls, Saltash paced restlessly up and down.

It was his last night at Burchester, so he told himself, for many a year to come. The fever for change was upon him. He had played his last card and lost. It was characteristic of the man to turn his back upon his losses and be gone. His soul had begun to yearn for the wide spaces, and it was in answer to the yearning that he had come up to this eagle's eyrie a second time. He could not be still, and the feeling of walls around him was somehow unbearable. But he expected no vision tonight. He walked in darkness.

Down in the harbour his yacht was waiting, and he wondered cynically what whim kept him from joining her. Why was he staying to drain the cup to the dregs—he who had the whole world to choose from? He had sent his message, he had made his sacrifice—at what a cost not even Maud would ever know. It was the first voluntary sacrifice he had ever made, he reflected ironically, and he marvelled at himself to find that he cared so much. For, after all, what was it he had sacrificed? Nothing worth having, so he told himself. He had possessed her childish adoration, but her love—never! And, very curiously, it was her love that he had wanted. Actually, for the first time in his life, no lesser thing had appealed to him. Jaded and weary with long experience, he owned now to a longing for that at which all his life long he had scoffed. The longing was not to be satisfied. He was to go empty away. But yet the very fact that he had known it had in some inexplicable fashion purified him from earthly desires. He had as it were reached up and touched the spiritual, and that which was not spiritual had crumbled away below him. He looked back upon the desert through which all his life he had travelled, and saw only sand.

The sound of the turret-door banging behind him recalled him to his surroundings. He awoke to the fact that the wind was chill, and that a drift of rain was coming in from the sea. With an impatient shrug he turned. Why was he lingering here like a drunken reveller at a table of spilt wine? He would go down to his yacht and find Larpent—Larpent who had also loved and lost. They would go out on the turn of the tide—the two losers in the game of life—and leave the spilt wine behind them.

Impulsively he strode back along the ramparts. The game was over, and he would never play again; but at least he would face the issue like a man. No one, not even Larpent, should ever see him flinch. So he reached the turret-door, and came abruptly to a halt.

It was no vision that showed her to him, standing there in her slender fairness, wrapt in a cloak that glimmered vaguely blue in the glimmering starlight. Her face was very pale, and he saw her frightened eyes as she stood before him. Her hands were tightly clasped together, and she spoke no word at all.

The door was shut behind her, and he saw that she was trembling from head to foot.

He stood motionless, within reach of her, but not touching her. "Well?" he said.

She made a curious gesture with her clasped hands, standing before him as she had stood on board his yacht on that night in the Mediterranean when she had come to him for refuge.

"I've come," she said, in a voice that quivered uncontrollably, "to tell you something."

Saltash did not stir. His face was in shadow, but there was a suggestion of tension about his attitude that was not reassuring. "Well?" he said again.

She wrung her hands together with a desperate effort to subdue her agitation, and began again, "I've come—to tell you something."

"Something I don't know?" he questioned cynically.

She nodded. "Some—some—something you don't want to know. It—it was Maud made me come."

That moved him a little. That piteous stammer of hers had always touched his compassion. "Don't fret yourself, *ma chère!*" he said. "I know all there is to know—all about Rozelle—all about Larpent—all about Spentoli."

"You—you don't know this," said Toby. "You—you—you don't know—why I ran away from you—in Paris!"

"Don't I?" he said, and she heard the irony of his voice. "I have an agile brain, my child. I can generally jump the gaps pretty successfully."

She shook her head with vehemence. "And how do you know about Spentoli?" she demanded suddenly. "Who told you that?"

"The man himself," said Saltash.

"Ah! And what did he tell you?" A note of fierceness sounded in her voice. She seemed to gather herself together like a cornered animal preparing to make a wild dash for freedom.

Saltash made her a queer, abrupt bow, and in so doing he blocked the way before her so that she could only flee by the way she had come. "He told me nothing that I did not know before," he said, "nothing that your own eyes had not told me long ago."

"What do you mean?" breathed Toby, pressing her clasped hands tightly to her breast. Her eyes were still upraised to his; they glittered in the dimness.

Saltash answered her more gently than was his wont. "I mean that I know the sort of inferno your life had been—a perpetual struggle against odds that were always overwhelming you. If it hadn't been so, you would never have come to me for shelter. Do you think I ever flattered myself that that was anything but a last resource—the final surrender to circumstance? If I had failed you—"

"Wait!" Toby broke in tensely. "You're right in some things. You're wrong there. It's true I was always running away—as soon as I was old enough to realize the rottenness of life. Spentoli tried to ruin me, but I dodged him, and then—when he trapped me—the hell-hound—I did my best—to murder him!" The breath suddenly whistled through her teeth. "I tried to stab him to the heart. God knows I tried! But—I suppose it wasn't in the right place, for I didn't get there. I left him for dead—I thought he was dead—till that day in Paris. And ever since—it's been just a nightmare fight for life—and safety. I'd have tried some other dodge if you hadn't found me. I was not quite down and out. But you—you made all the difference. I had to go to you."

"And why?" said Charles Rex.

She rushed on regardless of question. The flood-gates were open; she was hiding nothing from him now.

"You came. If you'd been an angel from heaven, you couldn't have been more wonderful. You helped me—believed in me—gave me always—the benefit of the doubt—made a way of escape for me—made life possible—even—even—beautiful!" She choked a little over the word. "I offered you just everything. I couldn't help it. You were the only man in the world to me. How could I help worshipping you? You—you—you were always so splendid—so—so great. You made me—you made me realize—that life was worth having. You made me—believe in God." She broke into sudden wild tears. "And you didn't love me enough even to take the little I had to give! I didn't want you to marry me. I never dreamt of such a thing. I had kept myself from harm, but I knew very well I wasn't fit to be your wife. Only—I loved you so. And when I knew that Bunny was turning against me—would never believe in me—I just couldn't help turning to you again. And then—and then—you went and married me!" She wrung her hands tragically. "I ought not to have let you. God will never forgive me for it. I don't deserve to be forgiven. But I loved you—I loved you!"

She covered her face and sobbed.

Saltash reached out a hand and took her by the shoulder. "Nonette! Nonette!" he said, in a voice that was strangely uncertain. "Don't cry, child! Don't cry!"

She drew herself away from him. "Don't—don't! I don't want you to. I just came to tell you—that's all—in case you should think I ever—cared for—Bunny. Maud says—you ought to know that. We only—only—played together. We never—really—loved each other. I wasn't his sort—or he mine. He doesn't want me back. I wouldn't go if he did. I ran away—with that damn cur Spentoli—to give you a chance—to drop me. I couldn't face you after you knew everything. You'd never loved me, and I'd tricked you too badly. I knew you'd want to get free. Why didn't you start in and get a divorce? Why didn't you? Why didn't you?"

She suddenly lifted her face, storming the words, electrified as it were by the wild force of her passion. Again he reached a hand towards her, but she eluded him with a desperate gesture.

"No! No! Don't touch me! Don't touch me! I can't bear it! I'm going now! I'm going right away. You'll never see me again—never hear of me. And you'll be free! Do you understand? You'll be quite free. I'll keep that promise I made to you. It won't be difficult. No one shall ever know how—and only you—you who never even pretended to love me—will be able to guess why."

She turned about with the words, and wrenched furiously at the door behind her. In another moment she would have been gone. But in that moment Saltash moved, perhaps more swiftly than he had ever moved in his life before, and in a flash he had her in his arms.

She fought for her freedom then like a terrified animal, twisting this way and that, straining with frenzied effort to escape. And when, his hold encompassing her, he broke down her resistance, pressing her indomitably closer and closer till she lay powerless and palpitating against his breast, she burst into agonized tears, beseeching him, imploring him, to set her free.

"Why should I?" he said, still holding her. "Don't you know yet that it's the very last thing I mean to do?"

"You must! Oh, you must!" she cried back. "You can't—you—you can't—hold me—against my will!"

"That's true," said Saltash, as if struck by something. "And are you capable of leaving me—against mine?" His hold relaxed with the words, and instantly she sprang away from him—sprang like a fleeing bird upon the low parapet beside them, and in a second was sliding out upon the narrow ledge that surrounded the great stone buttress of the turret.

"Hell!" ejaculated Saltash, and gave a great leap as if he would pursue her, then with abrupt effort checked himself.

He stood with one foot on the parapet, and watched her, and in the vague starlight his eyes burned with the old mocking devilry behind which he had so long sheltered his soul.

"So you think you'll get away from me that way, do you?" he said, and laughed his gibing laugh. "Well, you may try. Either stay there till you've had enough—or throw yourself over! I'll get you in any case."

She came to a stand, her hands spread out on each side of her, her eyes turning back to him across the awful space that yawned between. Sheer depth was below her, but she did not seem aware of it.

"I will throw myself over," she said with tense purpose, "unless you promise—unless you swear—to let me go."

He laughed again, but there was no mirth in the glittering eyes that looked back at her, neither mirth nor dismay, only the most arrogant and absolute mastery that she had ever encountered.

"I promise nothing," he said, "except that one way or the other I'm going to have you. You can take your choice. You can sink or swim. But you won't get away. There is a bond between us that you can't break, however hard you try. Fling yourself over if you think it's worth it? And before you get to the bottom I shall be with you. I'll chase you through the gates of Hades. I've travelled alone far enough. For the future—we go together. That I swear to God!"

Across the abyss he flung his tremendous challenge, the laugh still on his lips and in his eyes the blazing derision that mocks at fate.

And as she heard it, the girl's heart suddenly failed her. She began to tremble. Yet, even so, she made

a last desperate bid for pride and freedom.

She clutched at the cold stones on each side of her with nerveless, quivering fingers. "There is—no bond between us!" she gasped forth piteously. "There never—never has been!"

He flung back the words like a missile, unerring, blindingly direct. "No bond between us! Good God! Would I follow you through death if there were not?" And then suddenly, with an amazing change to tenderness that leapt the void and enchained her where she stood:—"Toby—Toby, you little ass—don't you know I've loved you from the moment *The Night Moth* struck?"

There was no questioning the truth of those words. A great sob broke from Toby, and the tension went out of her attitude. She stood for a few seconds with her head raised, and on her face the unutterable rapture of one who sees a vision. Then, with sharp anguish, "I can't come back!" she cried like a frightened child. "I'm going to fall!"

Saltash straightened himself. His forehead was wet, but he did not pause for a moment. "I'm coming to you," he said. "Keep as you are and I'll give you a hand to hold!"

She obeyed him as one dazed into submission. Blindly she waited, till with a monkey-like agility, he also had traversed that giddy ledge to where she stood. His fingers met and gripped her own.

"Now," he said, "come with me and you are safe! You can't fall. My love is holding you up."

She heard the laugh in his voice, and her panic died. Mutely she yielded herself to him. By the strength of his will alone, she left the abyss behind. But when he lifted her from the parapet back to safety, she cried out as one whom fear catches by the throat, and fainted in his arms.

* * * * *

Out of a great darkness, the light dawned again for Toby. She opened her eyes gasping to find that the scene had changed. She was lying upon tiger-skins in Saltash's conical chamber, and he, the king of all her dreams, was kneeling by her side.

That was the first thing that occurred to her—that he should kneel.

"Oh, don't! Oh, don't!" she said quickly. "I am not—not Maud."

He regarded her humorously, but the old derisive lines were wholly gone from his dark face. His eyes held something that was unfamiliar, something that made her quiver with a quick agitation that was not distress.

"So I am only allowed to kneel to Maud!" he said.

She tried to meet his look and, failing, hid her face. "I—I know you have always loved her," she murmured rather incoherently. "You couldn't—you couldn't—pretend to—to—to really love anyone else—after Maud!"

There fell a brief silence, and she thought the beating of her heart would choke her. Then there came the touch of his hand upon her head, and its wild throbbing grew calmer.

"No," he said, and in his voice was a new deep note unknown to her. "I am not pretending, Nonette."

The light touch drew her as it were magnetically. With a swift, impulsive movement she raised herself, gave herself to him, hiding her face still more deeply against his breast.

"But you—you—you couldn't really love me!" she whispered like an incredulous child. "You sure you do?"

His arms went round her, holding her fast. He made no other answer. Saltash, the glib of tongue and ready of gibe, was for once speechless in the presence of that which has no words.

She nestled closer to him as a little furry animal that has found its home. Her incredulity was gone, but she kept her face hidden. "But why didn't you tell me before?" she said.

He bent his black head till his lips reached and rested against her hair. "Nonette," he said, "you told me that I had made you believe in God."

"Yes?" she whispered back rather breathlessly. "Yes?"

"That's why," he said. "You got me clean through my armour there. Egad, it made me a believer too. If I'd failed you after that—well, He'd have been justified in damning me, body and soul!"

"But you couldn't!" she protested. "You couldn't fail me!"

His dark face twisted with the old wry grimace. "I've failed a good many in my time, Nonette. But—no one ever trusted me to that extent. You practically forced me—to prove myself."

A little gasp of relief came from Toby. She spoke with more assurance. "Oh, was that it? You were just trying—to be good?"

"Just—trying!" said Saltash.

"You still trying?" asked Toby, a little curious note of laughter in her voice.

"I shan't keep on much longer," he returned, "unless I get what I want."

"There'd be a blue moon if you did!" remarked Toby impudently.

Saltash raised his head abruptly. "By Jupiter! There is one!" he said. "Let's go to her!"

Toby's face shot upwards in a moment. "Where?"

Her eyes sought the skylight above them and the dim mysterious blue of the night. His came down to her in a flash, dwelt upon her, caressed her, drew her.

She turned sharply and looked at him. "Charles Rex!" she said reproachfully.

He took her pointed chin and laughed down at her. His eyes, one black, one grey, shone with a great tenderness, holding hers till they widened and shone back with a quick blue flame in answer.

Then: "As I was saying," remarked Charles Rex royally "when I was interrupted some six months ago—I have never yet refused—a gift from the gods."

"But you've taken your time over accepting it, haven't you?" said Toby, with a chuckle.

He bent to her. "Let's go!" he said again.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CHARLES REX ***

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