Title: Afterwards

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Release date: June 19, 2007 [eBook #21867]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Clarke, Mary Meehan and the Online
Distributed Proofreading Team at http://www.pgdp.net

Afterwards

By Kathlyn Rhodes

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LONDON: HUTCHINSON & CO.
PATERNOSTER ROW

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
BRUNSWICK ST., STAMFORD ST., S. E. 1,
AND BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

I

"Dr. Anstice"—the girl spoke slowly, and her voice was curiously flat—"how much longer have we—before dawn?"

Without replying, the man glanced at his watch; and when he spoke his voice, too, was oddly devoid of tone.

"I think—only an hour now."

"Only an hour." In the gloom of the hut the girl's face grew very pale. "And then——" She broke off, shuddering.

"Miss Ryder, don't think of it. After all, we need not give up hope yet. An hour—why, heaps of things may happen in an hour."

A wan little smile touched the girl's lips, and she came a step nearer her companion.

"Don't let us buoy ourselves up with false hopes," she said quietly. "In your heart you know quite well that nothing on earth can save us now. When the sun rises"—in spite of herself she shivered—"we shall die."

The man said nothing for a moment. In his heart he knew she spoke the truth; yet being a man he tried once more to reassure her.

"Miss Ryder, I won't allow that." Taking her hand he led her once more to the rude bench on which she had spent the night. "There *is* a chance—a faint one, I admit, but still an undeniable chance."

"You mean——?" Although she tried to speak calmly he heard the tiny thrill of hope in her voice, and in his soul he wondered whether, after all, he were not acting cruelly in speaking thus.

"I mean our absence must have been noticed long ago. When we did not return in time for the picnic lunch or tea, someone must have wondered where we were; and it is quite possible we were seen to enter the Temple earlier in the day."

"That awful Temple!" The horror in her eyes made his heart beat pitifully over her. "If only I had not been so foolish as to insist on entering! You didn't know how dangerous it was to go in, but I did—at least, I knew something of the danger—and I would go ... and then—the uncanny silence, the sudden knowledge that we were not alone ... that something, *someone* malignant, hateful, was watching us—and then those awful men who seized us ... oh!" The agony of remembrance was too much for her, and she sank back, half-fainting, against the wall.

"Miss Ryder, don't go over it all again!" Although it seemed certain that they had only an hour to live, Anstice could not bear to see her suffer now. "Don't let us think of what has happened—let us try to imagine that we are saved—as indeed we may be yet!" But he stole a glance out of the empty window-space as he spoke, and his heart sank to note the lightening of the Indian night's soft dusk.

"I think not." Her tone was calm, almost indifferent, but her apprehensive eyes belied her voice. "Dr. Anstice, you have not forgotten your promise? If ... if it comes to the worst, you—you won't let me fall into—*their* hands?"

And then he knew that in spite of her endeavours to be brave, to face the impending fate heroically, she too had had her doubts throughout the long hours of their imprisonment—doubts as to whether death would indeed come to her with the merciful swiftness of a fanatic's bullet....

And because he shared her doubt, because he, too, had wondered whether he alone would be shot at dawn, while she, his companion in this horrible nightmare, were reserved for some far more ghastly fate, because of his wonder and his doubt Anstice rejoiced in the fact that he had it in his power to save her from the worst that could happen.

He had not given his promise-lightly; yet having given it he would fulfil it, if the God who seemed to have deserted them in their need should see fit to nerve him to the deed.

She was looking at him wistfully, with something of horror behind the wistfulness; and he could not bear to keep her waiting any longer for the assurance she craved.

"Yes," he said gently, and there was a tender note in his voice. "I will keep my word. You shall not fall into their hands. I promise you that."

She sighed faintly, and made room for him beside her on the rough seat.

"That is settled, then. And now, just for this last half-hour, let us pretend that we are in no danger, that we are waiting for our friends, the friends we ran away from at the picnic—yesterday."

Something in her own words startled her, and she broke off abruptly.

"Well?" He smiled at her. "Let us pretend. How shall we begin?"

"Was it only yesterday?" Her accent thrilled him through and through. "Did we really start out from my uncle's bungalow yesterday morning? How gay we were, weren't we—all the twenty of us ... you and I leading because our horses were the best and I knew the way...."

"Yes—and all the smart young officers looking daggers at me because I had carried you off!" His tone was admirably light.

"Nonsense!" Hilda Ryder actually laughed, and in the dim and gloomy hut her laughter sounded almost uncanny. "I'm sure no one was in the least envious! You see, we were new friends—and it is such a treat to meet someone new out here!"

"Yes. By Jove, we'd only met twice, hadn't we? Somehow I was thinking we were quite old friends, you and I! But as you say, I was a new-comer, this was my first visit to the East. Rather a change, India and the snows, from a slum in Shoreditch!"

"Shoreditch? Did you really live in a slum?"

"Rather—and quite enjoyed it!" He laughed at her incredulous face. "It was experience, you see—disease flourishes in many and divers forms down there, and although I couldn't contemplate staying there for ever, the time wasn't wasted."

"And then—you left your slum?"

"Yes. I wanted more time to myself." He threw back his head as he talked, and swept the curly black hair off his brow with an impatient hand. "You see I had visions—oh, purely futile ones, I daresay—but I had a great idea of finding a cure for a certain disease generally considered incurable——" He broke off suddenly.

"Well? You have found it?" Her tone was eager.

"Not yet—but I shall!" In his enthusiasm he had forgotten the present, forgotten the horror which was coming nearer with great strides as the morning brightened in the sky. He saw only the future—not the immediate future—death, with his back against the wall of the courtyard, his face turned to the rising sun; but the splendid, strenuous future, when after good years of toil, of experience, even of suffering, he should make the great discovery which should free mankind from one of its most grievous foes, and add a precious treasure to the scientific storehouse of the world....

"It's a difficult task—almost superhumanly difficult!" His black eyes snapped at the thought of the difficulties in the way. "But thank God I'm young and full of hope—the hope that belongs to youth—and with luck I believe I'll win through in the end...."

A sudden shaft of rosy light, striking slantwise through the windowless aperture in the wall, brought him to a standstill.

"Sunrise! My God—I—I'd forgotten!" In an instant the youth and enthusiasm were wiped out of his face as by a ruthless hand, and he started to his feet. "Miss Ryder, forgive me! I've been talking like a fool, and you sit there listening like an angel, while all the time——"

"Hush, please!" She laid her hand on his arm, and through the sleeve of his thin riding-suit he felt the chill of her slender fingers. "It isn't time—yet. Let us pretend until the last minute. You know—you haven't asked me what I intend—intended"—for a second she faltered—"to make of *my* life!"

Inwardly cursing his own folly, Anstice sat down again beside her and took her hand in his as a brother might have done.

"Well, what is ... was...." He, too, bungled over the tense, but she pretended not to notice his confusion. "What are you going to be—or do? I hope your dreams are as wild as mine!"

"Not quite!" Her tone robbed the words of all offence. "Mine are very humble dreams, I'm afraid! You see"—for a second her voice shook, but she steadied it and continued to speak—"there's a man in Egypt whom I am—was—oh, what can I say?—whom I was to marry—some day."

"Really? You're engaged?" A fresh pang of pity shot through his heart.

"Yes. He's an engineer—in the Irrigation Department—and the best man in all the world!" For a moment love triumphed over death, and its glory illuminated the gloom of that fatal place of imprisonment with a hint of immortality. "That's *my* ambition, Dr. Anstice—to love him and marry him, and be a true and faithful wife—and perhaps"—her voice sank a note—"perhaps in time to bear his children. That"—said Hilda Ryder, and now her eyes were full of dreams—"would be to me the most glorious destiny in the world!"

Her soft voice trembled into silence, and for the space of twenty heart-beats the two sat motionless, only their hands seeking the mutual comfort which their warm contact might well bring.

Then, with a sudden movement, Hilda Ryder sprang to her feet and crossed the mud floor to the aperture in the wall.

"Dr. Anstice, the sun is rising. I suppose—now—we have only a few minutes more to live."

He followed her across the floor and together they watched the dawning of the day which was to be the herald of death. With the inexorable swiftness of the East the sun was rushing into the sky in all his glory of scarlet and pearl, and in spite of the significance of his triumphal rising the two who watched him caught their breath at the rosy magnificence of his entry.

But Hilda's words must not go unanswered; and with a resolute squaring of his shoulders Anstice turned from the gorgeous world outside to the dimness of the hut.

"Yes," he said, rather slowly and deliberately. "I am afraid we have only a few minutes left—now."

Curiously, she cavilled at his choice of words.

"Why do you say—afraid?" He could not understand her tone. "You are not afraid to die—it's I who am such a pitiful coward that I daren't face death—out there in the sunlight."

"You're not a coward, Miss Ryder!" Impulsively he patted her shoulder, and in spite of everything his action thrilled her with a sense of comfort. "Why, all through this dreadful night you've behaved like a heroine, and if your courage fails you a little now—which I hardly believe—well, that's excusable, at any rate!"

"Have I been brave?" She looked at him with wide blue eyes like the eyes of a child. "I am glad of that, seeing it was I who led us into this by profaning—and making you profane—their Temple. I was afraid I had been dreadfully cowardly. I—I didn't feel brave, you know!"

"You poor little girl!" She was nearly as tall as he, a stately young woman, in truth, but suddenly he saw her as a frightened child. "You've been braver—much braver than I—and I wish to God I could have got you safely out of this! What do you say? Shall we break open the door and make a dash for it? We might win through—if the guards were taken by surprise——"

"Have you forgotten the high wall of the courtyard—and the great gates which can only be opened by three men?" He *had* forgotten, and her reminder seemed to close the last avenue of escape. "No, Dr. Anstice, that's not the way out. But——" A sudden noise outside made her start, and her voice grew hoarse suddenly and broke. "Oh, you won't fail me, will you? You have my revolver safe?"

"Yes." It lay safely hidden in an inner pocket, its tiny size alone having prevented its discovery by alien hands. "I have it in my pocket. There's only one cartridge, but that will be enough if—if we have need of it."

"Thank you, Dr. Anstice." To his surprise and admiration she had regained her courage, the threatened collapse of the previous moment gone for ever. "Then I can wait quite calmly. But"—her blue eyes met his very fully—"you won't delay too long? The moment they come you will—do what you have promised?"

"Yes, dear." In that second he forgot that their acquaintance was barely a week old, forgot that Hilda Ryder was the promised bride of another man. In this moment all external circumstances were forgotten, and nothing remained but the fact that they were called upon to face death together, and that to him alone could the girl look for comfort and help in the bitter hour which faced them. And he knew that his hand must be steady to do her service; that he must guide her footsteps unfalteringly to the gate through which she must pass in all her radiant youth; must support and strengthen her with hand and voice so that she might look the dark angel fearlessly in the face and pass that frowning portal with unflinching step and dauntless mien.

In the hour of death he must help her to be true to herself, so that no craven fear should sully her proud soul, and with this high resolve he turned to her with the little word of endearment on his lips, and laid his hand on her arm with a touch of real affection.

"I will do what I have promised when the moment comes." He felt a little shiver run over her body and his hand tightened on her arm. "Dear, it will soon be over. Really you need not be afraid."

"Tell me"—she turned to him, and the look in her eyes thrilled him through and through—"does it *hurt*—death when it comes like—that?"

"No." He spoke firmly. "You must not think of that. It is all over in a second—and you know"—he hesitated—"after all, this life is not everything."

"No." A new light touched her eyes for a moment, a light brighter than that of the rising sun. "There is a life beyond, isn't there? My mother died three years ago, and I have missed her sorely," said Hilda Ryder simply. "Surely she will greet me—there. But"—for a moment a great human yearning shook her soul—"it's hard to leave this dear life behind ... the world is so wonderful, so lovely—I'm sure no other world can ever be half so beautiful as this."

A sudden clamour in the courtyard outside drove the colour from her cheeks, and instinctively she clung to him.

"Dr. Anstice, they're coming, aren't they? Is this—really—the end?"

For a second he listened, the blood running icily in his veins. Then he turned to her with a smile on his lips.

"Yes. I think they are coming—now. But"—his voice changed—"after all, there might be a chance—for you!"

Instead of reassuring her his words drove her to a white-lipped terror.

"You're not going to fail me now? Dr. Anstice, for the love of God, do as you promised—I will be brave, I will indeed—only don't let them take me—oh, don't!"

"It's all right, dear." He slipped his arm round her and drew her closely to him. "I won't fail you. I thought for a moment there might be a chance, but after all this is the better way."

"I knew you could be brave—for me," she said, very softly; and then, as a native voice outside the hut called an order, he felt her tremble in his arms. "They are coming—Dr. Anstice, let us say good-bye—or"—she actually smiled—"shall it be *au revoir*?"

"That, I think," he said steadily, holding the little revolver hidden in his hand as he spoke. "Dear, I'm going to do it now ... close your eyes, and then you will know nothing till you open them to see your mother's face."

A long sigh shook her from head to foot. Then she closed her eyes obediently.

"Thank you." They were the last words he heard her say as he raised the revolver; and the next moment the merciful deed was done, and Hilda Ryder was safe for ever from the vengeance of the fanatics whom she had all unwittingly enraged.

Then, as the door opened at last, and two grave-faced Indians entered and motioned to Anstice to accompany them into the courtyard, he went out unflinchingly into the sunlight to meet his fate.

II

Late that night two British officers sat on the verandah of a bungalow in the hills, discussing the tragedy which had happened at dawn.

"It's an appalling affair altogether," said the elder man, as he threw away his half-smoked cigar. "If we had been five minutes earlier we should have saved the girl, and the man would have been spared a lifetime's regret."

"Yes." The other officer, who was young and very human, spoke slowly, and his eyes were thoughtful. "It is a good deal worse for the man than the woman, after all. Shall you ever forgot his face when he realized that he was saved? And by Jove it was a near thing for him, too."

"Too near to be pleasant," rejoined his companion grimly. "Of course, no one but a lunatic would have allowed the girl to enter that Temple. Don't you remember that affair a couple of years ago, when two American fellows only just got out in time?"

"Yes." Young Payton's voice was dubious. "But you must remember, sir, Anstice was a new-comer, and didn't know the yarn—and it is just possible Miss Ryder didn't know it either. Or she may have over-persuaded him."

"Well, she's paid for her folly, poor girl." Colonel Godfrey rose. "Her uncle's off his head about it, and what the fellow she was to marry will say remains to be seen. I suppose he'll want an explanation from Anstice."

"Why, you don't mean he'll blame the man for doing what he did?" The young officer spoke boyishly. "After all, it was the only thing to do. Fancy, if the girl had fallen into the hands of those fanatics! Shooting would have been a merciful death compared to the life she might have had to endure."

"Of course, of course!" Colonel Godfrey rose and moved to the steps of the verandah, where he

stood looking absently out over the moonlit world. "It was the only thing to do—and yet, what a tragedy it has all been! By the way, where is Anstice? I've not seen him since we came in."

"He's in hospital. Got a nasty swipe across the shoulder in the rough-and-tumble before we got away, and it gave Dr. Morris an excuse to shove morphia into him to keep him quiet a bit. Of course when he comes round I expect he'll be pretty sick about it all, but at least the poor devil has got a few hours' respite."

"That's a blessing, anyway. Wonder what he'll do after this. Sort of thing to ruin a man's nerve, what?"

"Probably take to drink—or drugs," said Payton succinctly. "Some chaps would put a bullet through their brains, but I don't fancy Anstice is the sort to do that."

"Don't you?" For a second Colonel Godfrey hesitated, still looking out over the garden to where the line of the eternal snows glimmered white and passionless in the splendid moonlight. "Yet you know, my boy, one could hardly blame a man for blowing out his brains after a tragedy of this sort. No." With a last glance at the mystery of the snows he turned back to the lighted verandah and took out his cigar-case. "I think one could not blame this fellow Anstice if he chose that way out." He selected a cigar with care. "After all, he must feel as though he had murdered the girl, and though I fully agree with you that there was nothing else to be done, still one can imagine how the memory of the deed will haunt the poor chap all his life."

"Yes." Rex Payton lifted his cap from the table and prepared to take his leave. "Well, good-night, sir. I think I'll just step across and see how he's getting on. By Jove, what a magnificent night. It's as bright as day out here."

"Yes. Let me know in the morning how things are going."

"Right you are, sir." With another hasty good-night Rex turned and strode away across the compound in search of the doctor.

"Still asleep, thank God," was Morris' report. "Give you my word I dread his awakening."

"Seems a pity he's got to wake at all," said Payton moodily. "Couldn't you have given him a double dose while you were about it, and put the poor devil out of his misery?"

"That's not the way we work," returned the other dryly. "There's been one—miscalculation—to-day, and we can't afford any more. If he likes to do it himself, when he comes round, that's a different matter. I don't think he will, somehow. He doesn't strike me as that sort. He'll face it out, I believe, though it will go hard with him in the doing."

"When will he be himself again?"

"I don't know. I shall keep him under as long as I dare. After all"—the doctor, who prided himself on his lack of emotion, for once betrayed a glimpse of the real humanity beneath the rather grim exterior—"he'll have to serve a life-sentence in the way of regret, and one can't grudge the poor wretch an hour or two's Nirvana."

And:

"By God, sir, I agree with you," was all Rex Payton could find to say.

III

One evening three weeks later Anstice sat in the smoke-room of a well-known hotel in Bombay waiting for the arrival of the one person in the world whom he might have been expected to avoid.

The P. and O. boat had docked that afternoon; and among the passengers was the man to whom Hilda Ryder had been engaged—the man to whom Anstice must answer for the deed done as the sun rose on that fatal morning twenty-one dawns ago.

The news of the girl's death had been cabled to the young engineer in Cairo immediately, followed by a letter from Colonel Godfrey relating so much of the affair as he himself knew; and in response had come a laconic message to the effect that Bruce Cheniston had sought and obtained leave, and would be in India at the first possible moment. He had been delayed by one or two accidents, but now he had really arrived; and Anstice had come down to meet him, knowing that before he himself could leave this fatal country there must be an explanation between the man who had loved Hilda Ryder, and the one who had been too hasty in carrying out a promise.

To say that he shrank from this interview would hardly be true. As a matter of fact, in the weeks which had elapsed since that fatal morning Anstice had wandered in a world of shadows. Nothing seemed real, acute, not even the memory of the thing he had done. Everything was mercifully blurred, unreal. He was like a man stunned, who sees things without realizing them; or a man suffering from some form of poison—from indulgence in *hashish*, for instance, when time and space lose all significance, and the thing which was and that which is become strangely and

unaccountably interchangeable.

That there must be a reckoning between himself and Cheniston, Anstice vaguely knew. Yet he felt no dread, and very little curiosity as to the manner of their meeting; and although he recognized the fact that the man to whom Hilda Ryder had been engaged might well look on him with horror, inasmuch as his hand had sent her to her death, Anstice felt little interest in the matter as it concerned himself.

Possibly he was still feeling the effects of that morning's happening, although unaware of it. He had received a nasty wound—even now his shoulder was stiff and painful—and since he had discontinued the use of opiates he had had little or no sleep; but he was a man of good physique, and only an unaccustomed pallor and a few finely-drawn lines round his mouth betrayed the fact that he had suffered—was suffering still.

One or two men glanced at him curiously as he sat in a corner, gazing ahead of him with an unseeing stare; but only one man, a young officer called Trent, recognized him as the hero of the tragedy which had shaken the district of Alostan a few weeks earlier.

Being a talkative person he could not refrain from pointing Anstice out to his companion.

"See that chap over there—the tall fellow in grey?" Trent had been one of the picnic party which had ended in disaster; and although a good-hearted boy was thrilled with the importance of his own position. "Know who it is? Well, it's that chap Anstice—you remember, the fellow who shot that girl up in the hills when they were in a tight place."

"Oh! That the man?" The other, who was a portly civilian, looked at the unconscious Anstice with open interest. "Shocking affair, what? If he'd held his hand five minutes they would both have been rescued. Wasn't that it?"

"Yes. Looks a bit sick about it, doesn't he?"

"Um ... yes. Good-looking fellow, in a hard-bitten sort of way." The civilian looked Anstice over, approving the thin, well-cut face, the tall, loosely-built figure, the long hands lying idly on the arms of his chair. "Rather foreign-looking, with that black hair and those dark eyes, isn't he?"

"Yes. Looks years older than he did before it happened," said Trent, speaking the truth. "I expect, though, it *is* the sort of thing to age one."

"Yes. What's he doing here? Going home?"

"Yes, but I fancy he's got an appointment with Cheniston first," explained the younger man importantly. "Boat got in this afternoon, and I expect Cheniston wants to hear the affair at first-hand."

"Daresay. Rather rough on the poor devil." The civilian, beneath his pompous exterior, had a kind heart. "Bad enough to have to shoot the girl first, without explaining it all afterwards. Hope to goodness the other chap lets him down lightly."

"Oh, well, he can't say much." Trent broke off abruptly. "Here is Cheniston ... by Jove, I wouldn't like to be Anstice at this moment."

Unconscious of the interest he was arousing, a young man had just entered the room. He was of medium height, broad-shouldered and bronzed, with a good-looking, square face and a resolute chin. Just now he was pale beneath his tan, and his eyes, which were narrow in shape and of a rather hard blue, were strained and anxious.

Inside the room, he looked uncertainly round; and the next moment Anstice rose slowly to his feet.

"You are Mr. Cheniston?" They might have been alone in a desert for all the notice he took of any onlookers. "I think you are looking for me. My name is Anstice."

Bruce Cheniston nodded abruptly.

"Yes. I'm Cheniston. We can't talk here. Will you come up to my room?"

"Thanks." He moved forward, and Cheniston turned to the door.

"This way. I'm some floors up—we'll take the lift."

In silence they made the ascent; and now to his own unwelcome surprise Anstice felt himself awaking from the merciful stupor in which he had been sunk for so many unnoticed days.

Suddenly he began to realize what this interview must mean to Cheniston; and the knowledge that he must tear the knife from his own wound in order to plunge it into the heart of the young man opposite him made him feel as though he were already inwardly bleeding to death.

From being vague and blurred his senses now became preternaturally acute. His surroundings were no longer dim and formless, rather everything grew inhumanly sharp and vivid. To the end of his life he would preserve an extraordinarily faithful recollection of the room into which Cheniston presently ushered him—the usual hotel bedroom in India, with high green walls, mosquito curtains, and an entire absence of all superfluities in the way of furniture or adornment.

On the floor lay a Gladstone bag, half open as the owner had carelessly left it; and Anstice found himself idly speculating as to whether the white and purple striped glory which protruded from it was a shirt or a pair of pyjamas....

His wandering thoughts were suddenly recalled to the affair of the moment; and the minor things of life were forgotten in the onrush of the vital things, the things which matter....

"Now, Dr. Anstice"—Anstice's professional instinct, so long in abeyance, warned him that the man's self-control was only, so to speak, skin-deep; and a quite unexpected and inexplicable rush of pity overwhelmed him as the cold voice went on speaking—"I think you will realize that I should like to hear your account of—of the affair that took place in that accursed Temple."

"I quite realize that." Anstice spoke slowly. "And I am ready to answer any questions you may like to ask."

"I—I think——" For a second Cheniston wavered, then spoke more humanly. "Won't you sit down? I should like, if I may, to hear the whole story from the beginning."

"I see. Well, you are quite within your rights in wishing to hear the story. No, I won't sit down, thanks. It won't take very long to tell."

Cheniston moved a step backwards and sat down on the edge of the bed, pushing the mosquito curtain impatiently aside. Then he took out his cigarette case, and, still with his steel-blue eyes on the other man's face, selected a cigarette which he held, unlighted, as he listened.

Standing in the middle of the floor, his hands in the pockets of his coat, Anstice began his story, and in spite of the fact that this man had robbed him of all that he held dear in life, Cheniston was forced to admit that at least he was proving himself no coward.

"When we set off on that fatal picnic"—Anstice took it for granted that his hearer knew the details of the occasion—"Miss Ryder and I went on ahead. We were both well mounted, and she was, as you know, a fearless horsewoman. We very soon out-distanced the others, and had gone a good way when Miss Ryder suggested we should visit a certain Temple of which it seems she had heard a great deal from a native servant. Had I known then, as I know now, the reputation of the place, and the intense hatred which the priests felt for any of the white races since that unlucky American affair"—he realized suddenly that he appeared to be excusing himself, and his manner hardened—"well, I can only regret that I allowed Miss Ryder to set foot in the place."

"You went?"

"Yes. It was only a few miles off the track, and we were so far ahead of the party that we should easily have had time to get to our original destination for lunch. Well, we went on, found the Temple, apparently deserted——"

"Apparently?" The question shot out like steel. "There was someone there?"

"Yes. We both realized at the same moment that we were not alone. You must understand that the place is half in ruins—it's a clever subterfuge of the priests to keep out intruders by pretending there is nothing there of interest. Most people turn back after a perfunctory look round; but in reality if one penetrates through one or two passages one comes to the Temple proper, where Heaven knows what rites go on."

"You reached it?"

"Yes. Thinking the place was merely a ruin I went on quite comfortably ... and suddenly we found ourselves in a sort of Holy of Holies ... a queer, pillared place with an enormous idol in a kind of recess—an altar, I suppose." His voice was tense. "It was at that moment we both realized someone was watching us, malignantly, from some unseen vantage-point. I turned to Miss Ryder to suggest, as quietly as possible, that we should retrace our steps, and found her, very pale, staring ahead of her with horror in her face."

"She had seen—something?"

"Yes. Afterwards she told me it was the glitter of the man's eyes ... he was looking through a kind of hole in the embroidered drapery behind the idol ... that had attracted her attention; and she was only too ready to fall in with my suggestion."

"You were—prevented?"

"Yes. As we turned towards the opening we found we were too late. Three tall fellows—priests, I suppose they were—had come up behind us, and as we moved they seized us ... two men held my arms—the third——" His voice broke.

"He—held Miss Ryder?"

"Yes. He wasn't rough with her." The words, which happened to be untrue, sounded painfully inadequate in his own ears. "They gave us no time to explain anything, but took us before the Chief Priest, or someone of the kind, and stated that we had been found desecrating the Temple by our unhallowed presence."

"You explained that you had done it in ignorance?"

"Of course. But"—he smiled rather cynically—"they had evidently heard that before. You know

the Americans who got into trouble there had really laid a plot to carry away some memento of their visit, and they thought we were after loot of some kind, too, I suppose."

"They wouldn't listen?"

"Oh, yes, they listened all right while I tried, with Miss Ryder's help, to explain. She knew a few words of their tongue, and somehow a situation of that sort sharpens one's wits to the extent of helping one to understand a strange lingo. The upshot was we were blindfolded"—he saw Cheniston wince at the thought of the indignity to the girl he had loved—"and led away. Later we were placed in a conveyance of some sort, a bullock cart, I imagine, and driven for hours over some of the worst ground I've ever struck."

"Well?" The interest of the story was gripping the other man through all his horror, and his tone had lost its hostility for the moment. "And then?"

"Finally we were released, led into a small hut, our eyes were unbandaged, and we were informed that our fate was being deliberated, and the result would be made known to us at sunset."

"And at sunset——"

"At sunset we were sent for to the presence of a still more important personage, another High Priest, I suppose. We were taken into a kind of presence chamber, across the large courtyard, and found our friends of the morning, kow-towing to this still higher potentate. He didn't waste words on us. Through the miserable creature who had interpreted for us earlier, he made us understand that the penalty for setting foot in their holy place was death—by strangulation as a general rule——"

Cheniston's lips turned white, and his cigarette dropped to the floor; but though Anstice saw his agitation he paid no attention.

"But in consideration of the fact that we were English and one of us was a woman"—Cheniston uttered an involuntary exclamation—"our sentence was that we should be shot in the courtyard at sunrise."

"One moment." Cheniston's voice was harsh, and he moistened his lips before he spoke. "Weren't you armed? Couldn't you have—have made a fight for it?"

For the first time Anstice lost control of himself. The dark blood rushed to his brow and his eyes flashed with anger.

"Good God, man, do you suppose if I'd been armed we should have submitted tamely? As a matter of fact, the brutes who attacked us in the first place seized my revolver before I had a chance to draw it ... and though I'm pretty tough, when it came to a struggle with those Indian devils they were like steel—iron—anything you choose to compare them with."

"I know—their muscles are marvellous—especially the Hill-men." His tone held a note of apology. "Of course, if you had had half a chance—but"—suddenly his voice changed, grew suspicious—"you had a revolver, in the end?"

"Yes. Miss Ryder's. They did not suspect her of carrying a weapon, you see, and it was a tiny one her uncle had given her, more as a toy than as a serious protection."

"She couldn't get at it to use it?"

"No. We were bound as well as blindfolded, you know." He spoke grimly. "Luckily Miss Ryder had the presence of mind to say nothing about it till we were alone in the hut, our hands untied. Then she gave it to me, and we found to our dismay that there was only one cartridge left."

"How was that?" He spoke quickly, but there was no suspicion in his tone now.

"Miss Ryder explained that she had been practising shooting with her uncle and had forgotten to reload. But"—he paused—"even had it been fully charged, I'm afraid our fate would have been unchanged."

Cheniston rose suddenly, took a few aimless steps across the floor, and then sank down on the bed again almost in his former position. In front of him Anstice stood motionless, his hands, clenched now, still in his pockets, his eyes the only live feature in the grey pallor of his face.

"Well!" Suddenly he threw back his head with a restless gesture, as though the strain of the interview was beginning to tell on him. "After hearing our sentence we were taken back to our hut, there to await the moment of sunrise—of our death."

"They gave you no food?" The question was almost futile in its triviality; but Anstice answered it quite naturally.

"Oh, yes, we were given food of a sort. Luckily I had a little flask of brandy, and once—at midnight—I persuaded Miss Ryder to take a few drops. She was splendidly brave throughout."

There was a short silence. Both men felt that the crux of the interview was at hand; and each, in his way, was preparing himself for it.

"Well?" It was Cheniston who spoke first. "The night wore on, I suppose, and you saw no hope of

escape? But didn't you guess your absence would be remarked upon?"

"Of course. And we hoped against hope that someone would remember the Temple."

"They did—in the end?"

"Yes, and made all possible speed to reach it. But by that time we had been taken away, there was no one to be seen, and of course all traces of us had absolutely disappeared."

"Then how did they find you in the end?"

"The native servant who had talked of the wonders of the Temple to Miss Ryder was aghast when he found what harm his talk had done. It seems she had cured his little boy of some childish illness, and he simply worshipped her in consequence. So he was wild to rescue her, and after dispatching parties of searchers in every likely direction he suddenly recollected hearing of some mysterious High Priest in a tiny village in the hills, which was so securely hidden from observation that very few people knew of its existence."

"Colonel Godfrey said he would never have reached it without the guidance of some native," said Cheniston thoughtfully. "Would that be the man himself?"

"Yes. It seemed his father had known the way and had told him in direst secrecy how to reach the village; and when the officers were ready to start he went with them, and by some stroke of luck hit the right road at once, although the directions were fearfully complicated."

"If only you had known——"

"Do you think I don't say that to myself day after day?" Anstice's brow was pearled with sweat. "If I had had the faintest idea there was any chance of a rescue——"

"I know, I know!" The other man moved restlessly. "Good God, man, I'm not condemning you"—Anstice flushed hotly—"I'm only saying what a pitiful mistake the whole thing was ... the tragedy might have been averted if only——"

"It's no use talking now." Anstice's tone was icy. "The thing's happened, the mistake is made and can't be unmade. Only, if you think *you* could have let her fall into the hands of those fanatics—well, I couldn't, that's all."

"She ... she asked you to ... to save her from that?" He hung on the other man's answer as though his own life depended upon it.

"Yes. I shouldn't have ventured to shoot her without her permission, you know!" In a moment he repented of the ghastly pleasantry into which exasperation had led him. "Forgive me, Cheniston—the thing's got on my nerves ... I hardly know what I'm saying...."

Cheniston, who had turned a sickly white beneath his bronze, looked at him fiercely.

"I'm making all allowances for you," he said between his teeth, "but I can't stand much of that sort of thing, you know. Suppose you tell me, without more ado, the nature of the—the bargain between you."

Without more ado Anstice complied.

"Miss Ryder made me promise that if the sun should rise before any help came to us I would shoot her with my own hand so that she should not have to face death—or worse—at the hands of our enemies."

"You thought it might be—worse?"

"Yes. My father was a doctor in China at the time of the Boxer rising," said Anstice with apparent irrelevance. "And as a boy I heard stories of—of atrocities to women—which haunted me for years. On my soul, Cheniston"—he spoke with a sincerity which the other man could not question—"I was ready—no, glad, to do Miss Ryder the service she asked me."

Twice Cheniston tried to speak, and twice his dry lips refused their office. At last he conquered his weakness.

"You waited till the sun rose ... and then ... you were sure ... you did not doubt that the moment had come?"

"No. I waited as long as I dared ... the sun had risen and we heard the clamour in the courtyard outside...."

"And so——" Again his parched lips would not obey his bidding.

"When the men were at the very door of the hut I carried out my promise," said Anstice steadily. "She closed her eyes ... I told her to, so that she should not be afraid to see death coming ... and then ..." at the recollection of that last poignant moment a slow shudder shook him from head to foot, "... it was all over in a second. She did not suffer—of that, at least, you may be certain."

Cheniston's hand was over his eyes; and for a space the room was very still.

Then:

"And you—you went out, as you thought, to meet your own death?"

"Yes—and I wish to God I'd met it," said Anstice with an uncontrollable outburst of bitterness. "I endured the shame, the horror of it all in vain. You know what happened ... how just as the men were about to fire the rescuers burst into the courtyard.... My God, why were they so late! Or, being late, why did they come at all!"

Cheniston's blue eyes, which had been full of a natural human anguish, grew suddenly hard.

"You are not particularly grateful to your rescuers," he said. "Yet if they had been a few minutes later, you too would have been beyond their help."

Anstice was quick to notice the renewed hostility in the young man's tone.

"Just so." His manner, too, had changed. "But can you expect me to feel a very vivid gratitude to the men who restored my life to me, seeing with what memories that life must always be haunted?"

"Need you endure the haunting of those memories?"

The question, spoken quietly, yet with an obvious significance, took Anstice aback. For a moment he frowned, his dazed mind fumbling after the speaker's meaning.

"*Need* I?" Suddenly he knew what Cheniston had meant to imply. "Ah—you mean a man may always determine the length of his days?"

Cheniston nodded, never taking his eyes off the other's face.

"I see. Well, suicide would be a way out, of course. But"—for a second his eyes hardened, grew stern—"I don't mean to take that way—unless life grows too much for me. A second—mistake"—he spoke slowly—"would not annul the first."

"No." Cheniston's face had lost all its boyishness; it looked haggard, unhappy, old. "Possibly not. But when one has made a mistake of so tragic a nature I should have thought one would have been only too ready to pay the price of one's miscalculation."

For a second Anstice stared at him silently.

"Just so," he said at last, very quietly, taking his hands out of his pockets for the first time. "The question is, What is the price? And do you really think that to repudiate a debt by running away from one's creditor, so to speak, is as satisfactory a settlement as to pay it coin by coin, each coin drawn from one's own heart's blood?"

This time it was Cheniston who stared at him in non-comprehension. Presently he said slowly:

"I think I understand. You mean the strongest man is the one who can stand up to any situation with which life confronts him; can pay a debt to the uttermost farthing though it may make him bankrupt in the doing. That is what you mean?"

"Yes," said Anstice steadily. "That is what I mean. God only knows what the price may be, and whether I shall have the coin in my treasury when I'm called on to pay ... if I am so called upon. And by the way"—his face hardened—"do I understand you to mean that I'm your debtor—that it is to you that the price may—one day—be paid?"

Cheniston made no reply. The hostility had suddenly died out of his eyes; and for a moment Anstice caught a glimpse of the man Hilda Ryder had loved.

"You know"—his square fingers played absently with his cigarette case—"I have loved Hilda Ryder all my life. We were brought up together as children; I was a few years older than she ... by the way, how old are you?"

Surprised, Anstice owned to his twenty-nine years.

"And I am twenty-six. Hilda was twenty-four last year. Well, all my life she has been the one—the only—woman in the world for me. We've been engaged four years; her people wouldn't sanction it till she was twenty, but we always knew we were made for one another, and Hilda used to say she would rather be my wife than marry the richest, the most famous man on earth!"

Suddenly Anstice heard her soft voice in his ear.

"To marry him ... perhaps in time to bear his children, would be to me the most glorious destiny in the world...."

A spasm of uncontrollable anguish convulsed his features for a moment; but Cheniston was too intent on his own self-revelation to notice.

"Life—without—Hilda seems impossible somehow." He laughed drearily. "We have always been so happy together ... I can't imagine going on without her."

He paused, but Anstice said nothing. He did not know what to say.

"I wonder—can I go on? Is it really required of me that I should continue to hang on to an existence which is absolutely devoid of all attraction, of all meaning?" He fixed his blue eyes on the other's face. "You're a doctor, aren't you?"

Anstice nodded.

"Yes."

"Well, I daresay it has happened in your experience that some poor devil doomed to a lifetime of torture, condemned, perhaps, to bear the burden of the sins of his ancestors, has begged you to furnish him with the means of escape ... there must be cases in which death is infinitely preferable to life, and a doctor must know plenty of safe ways of setting free the poor imprisoned wretch as one would free a miserable caged bird. Tell me, has such an experience ever come your way?" He spoke almost irritably now.

"Well," said Anstice, "and if it has? What then?"

"How have you answered such entreaties, I wonder? Even you can't pretend that life is always a sacred thing; that a man isn't sometimes justified in turning his back on the existence he never desired and yet has to endure." He paused, and his eyes held a queer blue glitter. "Well, have you nothing to say?"

"No," said Anstice resolutely, moving a step forward as he spoke. "On such a subject I have nothing to say—to you. If, as seems possible, you are suggesting that I should furnish either you or myself with an easy solution of the problem of our respective lives, I fear I must decline the suggestion. I'm a doctor, not a murderer, although"—suddenly he bit his lip and his face turned grey—"you, of all men, may be pardoned for thinking me ready to act as one."

The passing softness which had given him back his youth faded out of Cheniston's face; and when he spoke even his voice sounded years older.

"Well, it's no use talking, I suppose. After all"—his lip curled—"no man is dependent on another's good offices if he decides to cut short his sojourn on this delightful planet. Though it strikes me that if, as you say, you feel you owe me a debt, you might perhaps allow me to fix the method of payment."

He stopped short, taken aback by Anstice's imperious gesture.

"Look here, Cheniston." He spoke curtly, his eyes ablaze. "Life has given us both—me as well as you—a terrible jar. But you won't make things better by resenting what has happened. You have lost the woman you loved, but I have lost a good deal more. With the best intentions"—he smiled ironically at his own phrase—"I have ruined your life; and my own. I am ready to admit I owe you some reparation for the wrong I have quite innocently done you; and I am ready, also, to pay you any price in reason which you may ask, either now or in the future. But the price must be one which may decently be paid."

"I see." Cheniston spoke slowly. "I think, after all, we may shelve the question of payment between you and me. Personally I hope—you will forgive my frankness—that we may never be called upon to meet again. You see"—his voice broke, but he cleared his throat angrily and went on—"I can't help remembering that if you had waited Miss Ryder would still be alive."

Anstice was stung to a last impulse of self-defence.

"If I had waited—and the rescuers had not come, it is possible death would have been a merciful alternative to Miss Ryder's fate," he said. "I have tried to explain that what I did was done—as Miss Ryder would be the first to admit—for the best. But I see you are determined to look upon me as a criminal; and as I don't intend to excuse myself further, well, I will echo your hope that we may never meet again."

And without any further attempt at farewell Anstice turned on his heel and walked out of the room; leaving Bruce Cheniston staring after him with an expression of amazement not untinged with shame in his narrow blue eyes.

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

"If you please, sir, a telephone message has come for you from Cherry Orchard just now."

Anstice put down the paper he had been idly studying and looked at the maid.

"Cherry Orchard? That's the big house on the Littlefield Road, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. It has just been reopened, cook tells me."

"Oh. And I am wanted there?"

"Yes, sir. At once, the message was."

"Very good. Tell Andrews to bring round the car immediately. And put dinner back a bit, Alice, please."

"Yes, sir." The trim maid hurried away, and Anstice rose to obey the summons, congratulating himself on the fact that the night was fine, and the Littlefield Road good going.

Ten minutes later he was on his way; and in due course arrived at his destination, a pretty old gabled house standing in a large and old-fashioned garden, from whose famous cherry trees the place derived its quaint name.

Six months earlier Anstice had bought a practice in the Midlands, on the death of its former owner; but this was the first time he had visited Cherry Orchard; and as he waited for his ring to be answered he remembered the maid's remark as to the recent reopening of the house with a slight feeling of curiosity as to its tenant.

He was not kept waiting long. An elderly manservant speedily appeared; and his face, which wore a worried expression, lightened as he saw Anstice standing on the steps.

"Thank God you've come, sir." The gratitude was so obviously sincere that Anstice felt glad he had not delayed his coming. "If you'll kindly go upstairs, sir—the housekeeper is waiting for you, I believe."

He relieved Anstice of his hat and coat with hands which shook; and at the same moment a swarthy, foreign-looking woman hurried forward with unmistakable eagerness.

"You are the doctor, sir? Then will you come up at once? My mistress is upstairs, and the sooner you see her the better."

Without wasting time in questioning her, Anstice motioned to the speaker to lead the way; which she did accordingly, hurrying up the black oak staircase at a surprising pace; and giving Anstice no time to do more than glance at the artistic treasures which were in evidence on every side.

She led him a few steps down a broad gallery, lighted by large and finely-designed windows; and paused outside a door, turning to him with an expression of appeal—he could call it nothing else—in her small but intensely bright eyes.

"You'll be very gentle with the poor lady, sir? You won't—won't fluster her?" She broke off suddenly, appeared as though about to say something more, then closed her lips as though she had thought better of the impulse, and opening the door invited Anstice to enter.

Somehow her last words had given Anstice a queer, but possibly justifiable, suspicion that he was about to encounter a *malade imaginaire*; and just for a second he felt a spasm of irritation at the stress which had been laid on the urgent need for haste.

All such thoughts fled, however, as his eyes fell on the face of the patient he had come to see; for here was no neurotic invalid, no hysterical sufferer who craved sympathy for quite imaginary woes.

On the bed drawn up in front of one of the big casement windows lay a young woman with closed eyes; and as he approached her side Anstice saw that it was not sleep but unconsciousness which claimed her at that moment.

"How long has she been like this?" He spoke sharply, one hand on the slender wrist.

"It's two hours since she was seized, sir." The woman's voice shook. "No sooner was my mistress in the house—she came home only to-day—than she fainted clean away. We brought her round, the maids and me, and she was better for a bit ... then up she would get to look after Miss Cherry, and off she went again. It's nearly half an hour ago ... and we got so anxious that Hagyard telephoned for you ... we thought it was the right thing to do."

"Quite the right thing." He was too intent on his patient to pay much attention to the woman's speech; but she was quite content to stand silent as he tried one means of restoration after another; and when, finally, his efforts were successful, both Anstice and the housekeeper breathed more freely.

"Your mistress ... her name, by the way...."

"Mrs. Carstairs, sir." She spoke with a tinge of reluctance, and even in the stress of the moment Anstice wondered why.

"Oh. Well, Mrs. Carstairs is coming round now, she will be herself in a moment or two. By the way, just go and fill a hot-water bottle, will you? It is chilly to-night, and Mrs. Carstairs will probably feel cold."

With a last look at her mistress the woman turned to obey; and Anstice moved back to the bed to find his patient's eyes open and fixed upon him with something of perplexity in their depths.

"Don't try to move just yet," he counselled her quickly. "You've had a bad faint, and must lie still for a little while. Do you feel better?"

"Much better, thank you." Her voice, though it sounded weak, was oddly deep in tone. "I suppose I fainted. Did they send for you?"

"Yes. Your servants were getting alarmed." He smiled. "But there is no need for alarm now. What you want is a long rest. You have been overtiring yourself, perhaps?"

A peculiar smile, which was mocking and yet sad, curved her lips for a moment. Then she said quietly:

"Perhaps I have overtired myself a little lately. But it was quite unavoidable."

"I see." Something about this speech puzzled Anstice, and for a moment he was rather at a loss to know what to say in reply.

She did not wait for him, however.

"Do you think I shall faint again? These faints are so unpleasant—really I don't think"—she paused, and when she resumed her voice sounded still deeper, with a true contralto note—"I don't think even death itself can be much more horrible. The sensation of falling, of sinking through the earth——"

She broke off, and he hastened to reply.

"I don't think you need anticipate any further trouble to-night. I suppose you have had your heart sounded?"

Again she smiled; and once more he could have sworn there was mockery in her smile.

"Yes. But I don't think my heart is wrong. It—it is due to other causes——"

She stopped abruptly as the door opened, and the woman came in, carrying the hot-water bottle for which she had been sent.

"That you, Tochatti?" She seemed to welcome the interruption. "Thank you so much." She let the servant fuss over her for a moment, then turned to Anstice. "You see," she said, "I am well looked after."

"I am glad you are," he rejoined promptly. "You know you are really in need of a little care at present. If you will allow me, I should like to sound your heart myself."

She acquiesced rather wearily; and having satisfied himself that the state in which he found her was due rather to weakness than to any specific disease, he turned to the strangely named woman, whom he now guessed to be a foreigner, and gave her a few directions for the night.

"I'll see to it, sir," she said quietly; and Anstice knew his orders would be faithfully carried out.

"Well, I can't do you any good by staying," he said, bending over the bed and holding out his hand. "But send for me if you want me, won't you? And I'll look in to-morrow to see how you are."

"One moment." Her hand in his felt strangely alive in spite of her recent unconsciousness. "Put on a little more light, please, Tochatti. I should like to see"—she spoke without any embarrassment—"to what sort of person I am indebted this evening."

When, the next instant, the room was flooded with light, Anstice had no scruples in looking at his patient with an interest which, though less openly expressed, was quite as strong as that with which she evidently intended to scrutinize him.

The first thing he noticed was that Mrs. Carstairs was young—probably not more than twenty-five. The next, that she looked as though she had recently gone through some nerve-racking experience; and the last, which came upon him with a shock of unjustifiable surprise, that she was more than commonly good-looking.

Her features, as he saw for the first time, were classical in outline, and the silky black hair which lay in heavy waves on her forehead shaded a brow which in contour was almost purely Greek. Her skin was of so thin and transparent a whiteness that her black eyebrows traced two inky lines across her face; and the almond shape of her sapphire blue eyes gave them a somewhat Oriental look, in spite of their eminently Western colouring.

When, in response to his stare, she vouchsafed a faint smile, he saw that the mouth which was sad in repose was fascinating when she smiled; and the white teeth which the smile displayed were perfect in shape and colour.

"Well?" Her deep voice took him so much aback that he absolutely started. "You've seen me—haggard wreck that I am—and I've seen you. So now we may consider our acquaintance inaugurated and say good-night."

"Certainly." He looked at her closely; and noted her extreme pallor. "I hope you will sleep—you look shockingly tired."

"I told you I was a wreck," she said, still with that inscrutable smile. "But if you will take me in hand I have no doubt I shall soon recover my ordinary rude health."

"I hope so." His tone was absent—he was wondering whether he had ever seen this woman before; and coming, finally, to the conclusion that he had not. "Well, I will leave you now, and hope to find you a great deal better in the morning."

"Thanks." She spoke wearily. "I'm sorry to have troubled you. Good-night."

In the hall the manservant waited, and Anstice, pitying his evident anxiety, spoke reassuringly to him as he took his coat. "Your mistress is much better now—with a little care she will soon be all

right, I hope."

"Thank you, sir." The man's voice quivered with feeling. "We—we are all very anxious when our lady is not well."

"Of course." Anstice took the hat the servant held and moved to the door. "Is that nine striking? I didn't know it was so late."

Yet in spite of the lateness of the hour Anstice did not drive home at a particularly rapid pace. Something in the episode just closed had intrigued him, piqued his curiosity as well as stimulated his interest; and he was wondering, as he drove, what there was about his patient which suggested a mystery—something, at least, unusual unexpected, in her character or surroundings.

"She's uncommonly handsome—but so are heaps of women. Nice house, plenty of money, I should say, and of course she herself is well bred. Yet there is something odd about her—about her manner, rather. Looks at one queerly—almost quizzically—and yet when she smiled she looked extraordinarily sad." He turned a corner rather carelessly and a surprised motor-cyclist sounded his horn reproachfully. "I wonder—is she a widow? There was no sign of a husband, though I believe the servant said something about a child. Anyhow"—he had reached his own house now and slowed down before the gate—"I will see her to-morrow and perhaps learn a little more about her—if there is anything to learn. If not—well, women love to appear mysterious. There never was a woman yet who didn't long to rival the Sphinx and appear an enigma in the eyes of wondering men!"

And he went in to his belated dinner with a rather cynical smile on his lips.

CHAPTER II

Just as Anstice was starting out next morning an urgent telephone message came through, requesting his help at a suddenly imperative operation at a country house some miles distant.

Although he had been in the district only a few months, Anstice was already known to his professional brothers as a daring and skilful surgeon; and one man—the one who now called upon his services—was in the habit of wondering openly why so brilliant a man was content to bury himself in the country instead of seeking fame and fortune in some one of the big cities of the world.

There were those who could have given a very good guess at the reasons which led Anstice to shun notoriety and welcome the obscurity of Littlefield; but in the meantime Dr. Willows was left to wonder in vain; though his wonder was leavened with a genuine admiration for his colleague's skill, and a fervent gratitude for the other man's unwearying willingness to give his aid.

On receiving the message Anstice frowned.

"That you, Willows? Is it an urgent case? Oh—of course I'll come ... I must make a few arrangements first ... yes ... yes ... I'll be with you in half an hour, if that will do."

He hung up the receiver, and now his manner was alert and keen. There was about him none of the weariness, the indifference which too often characterized his demeanour, and led some of his patients to complain that he took no interest in them or in their sufferings. This was the man who before that fatal day in India had stood, so it was whispered, upon the threshold of a brilliant career—the man who, young, resourceful, scientific, had taken a very real and deep interest in every detail of his profession, and had led even the most cautious of his teachers to prophesy for him a life of unvarying success.

He even looked younger as he consulted his notebook this morning; and the shoulders which had begun to stoop ever so little were squared, the head held erect as he scanned the pages before him with quick, resolute eyes.

Luckily there was nothing very important on the morning list, no visits that could not be safely postponed till the afternoon; and one or two telephone messages soon put things straight and left him free to keep his appointment with Dr. Willows.

He had a moment's indecision over the case of his new patient at Cherry Orchard, but reflecting that if necessary they would probably ring him up, he judged it safe to put off his visit to Mrs. Carstairs till his return; and finally went out to his motor with an easy mind.

Returning home, fatigued but jubilant, at two o'clock, he applied himself to his lunch; and then attacked his afternoon's work with an energy engendered by the excellent results of the operation which he, in company with his friend, had performed that morning.

Being delayed on various pretexts, it was five o'clock before he found himself at the pretty house in its fragrant garden; and he rang the bell rather hastily, with an absurd feeling that the servants would look reproachfully on his tardy arrival.

The man seemed, however, to welcome him as he had done the previous night; and when, a second later, the queerly named Tochatti arrived, her face wrinkled into a discreet smile.

"Mrs. Carstairs up to-day?"

"She is in her room, sir. Will you come up, if you please?"

He followed her up the broad, shallow stairs, which this afternoon she took at a more moderate pace; and then she ushered him into the room he had visited before, falling back so that he went in alone.

Mrs. Carstairs was lying on a deep couch by one of the open windows, her white gown set off by vivid blue cushions; and as he advanced Anstice noticed that she looked even younger than he had judged her on the preceding night. Her air of utter exhaustion had vanished; and there was more colour in her lips, though her cheeks still retained their ivory transparency.

By her side was a little table bearing a tea-tray, and as Anstice shook hands, congratulating her at the same time on her restored appearance, she drew his attention to the teacups.

"I was just going to have some tea. Be nice and have some with me. Will you?"

"Thanks very much." He accepted promptly. "I've been busy all day and should enjoy a cup of tea. But first—are you really better this afternoon?"

"Yes, really." She spoke indifferently, as though the subject failed to interest her. "I should have gone out, I daresay, but I felt tired, or lazy, and succumbed to the charms of this delightful couch."

"You did quite right." He took the cup she held out to him and sat down in a chair beside the deep Chesterfield. "You know I think you must make up your mind to take care of yourself for a week or two."

"I can quite easily do that," Chloe Carstairs answered quietly. "I hardly think I shall find it difficult to do what the new-woman novels used to call 'living one's own life'—down here."

"Certainly there isn't much going on." Anstice was puzzled by her manner. "Do I understand that you 'belong' here, as the country folks say?"

She put down her cup rather suddenly, and faced him squarely, her blue eyes full of a resolution which added several years to her age.

"Dr. Anstice." Her deep voice had lost its richness and sounded hard. "I should like to tell you something of myself. Oh"—she laughed rather cynically—"I'm not going to bore you with a rhapsody intended to convey to you that I am a much misunderstood woman and all the rest of it. Only, if you are to see me again, I think I should like you to know just who and what I am."

Mystified, Anstice bowed.

"Whatever you tell me I shall be proud to hear—and keep to myself," he said.

"Thanks." Her manner had lost its slight animation and was once more weary, indifferent. "Well, first of all, have you ever seen me before?"

"No. Though I confess that something in your face seemed familiar to me last night."

"Oh." She did not seem much impressed. "Well, to put it differently, have you ever heard of me?"

"No," said Anstice. "To the best of my belief I have never heard your name before."

"I see. Well, I will tell you who I am, and what I am supposed to have done." No further warmth enlivened her manner, which throughout was cold, almost, one would have said, absent. "When I was eighteen I married Major Carstairs, a soldier a good many years older than myself. Presently I went out to India with him, and lived there for four years, coming home when our child was three years old."

She paused.

"I came here—this was my husband's old home—and settled down with Cherry. And when I had been in the parish a year or so, there was a scandal in Littlefield."

She stopped, and her mouth quivered into a faint smile.

"Oh, I was not the chief character—at first! It was a case in which the Vicar's wife won an unenviable notoriety. It seemed there had been a secret in her life, years before when she was a pretty, silly girl, which was known to very few besides her husband and, I presume, her own people. Now you would not think I was a sympathetic person—one in whom a sentimental, rather neurotic woman would confide. Would you?"

And looking at her, with her air of cold indifference, of complete detachment from the world around her, Anstice agreed that he would not expect her to be the confidante of such a woman.

"Yet within a month of our meeting Laura Ogden had confided her secret to me—and a silly, futile story it was." Her pale face looked disdain at the remembrance. "No harm, of course, was done. I kept her secret and advised her not to repeat what she had told me to anyone else in Littlefield."

"She followed your advice?" Anstice had no idea what was coming, but an interest to which he had long been a stranger was waking slowly in his heart.

"*Chi lo so?*" She shrugged her shoulders. "Afterwards she swore she had told no one but me. You see it appeared she very soon regretted having given me her confidence. It happened that shortly after she had told me her story we had—not a quarrel, because to tell you the truth I wasn't sufficiently interested in her to quarrel with her—but there was a slight coolness between us, and for some time we were not on good terms. Then—well, to cut a long story short, one day anonymous letters and post cards began to fly about the parish, bearing scurrilous comments on that unhappy woman's past history. At first the Vicar tried to hush up the matter, but as you may imagine"—her voice rang with delicate scorn—"everyone else thoroughly enjoyed talking things over and wondering and discussing—with the result that the Bishop of the Diocese heard the tale and came down to hold a private inquiry into the matter."

She stopped short and held out her hand for his cup.

"More tea? I haven't finished yet."

"No more, thank you." He rose, placed his cup on the tray and sat down again in silence.

"The Bishop suggested it was a matter for the police. The writer of those vile communications must be discovered and punished at all costs, he said. So not only the authorities but all the amateur detectives of both sexes in the neighbourhood went to work to find the culprit. And *I* was the culprit they found."

"You?" For once in his life Anstice was startled out of his usual self-control.

"Yes. They fixed upon me as the anonymous writer of those loathsome scrawls; and the district was provided with a sensation after its own heart."

"But the idea's absurd—monstrous!" Looking at her as she leaned back among her cushions, with her air of delicate distinction, Anstice could hardly believe the story she was telling him.

"So I thought at first." Her blue eyes narrowed. "But in some marvellous manner they brought the charge home to me. I was the only one, they said, who knew the story. I had wormed it out of the silly woman, they alleged, and had then, owing to the subsequent coolness between us, traded upon my knowledge in order to drive her out of the place."

"But others must have known the story?"

"Yes. But I was the only one in Littlefield who knew it."

"So they said. But in reality——"

"In reality, of course, it was known to someone else. But that person took care to keep in the background. When once I had been suggested as the culprit a quantity of evidence was forthcoming to clinch the matter, so to speak. I was never particularly popular here, and people were quite ready to believe me capable of the deed." She smiled faintly. "I confess one or two things looked black for me—the letters were written on the kind of paper I used, and though of course the handwriting was disguised, there was, in one or two letters, an undeniable similarity to some of my writing."

"But your word—wasn't that sufficient?"

The apathy of her manner relaxed for one moment into a kind of cold amusement.

"Oh, I gave my word—at first—quite freely. Knowing nothing of the letters, of course I said so; but I was not believed. I confess everything was against me. Most of the letters were posted in the pillar box not a hundred yards from this house—but on one occasion when I had gone down to Brighton for a couple of days, one of those vile things bore the Brighton postmark."

"But——"

"Oh, I've nearly done." She glanced at the clock. "I am detaining you—you're in a hurry? Don't mind saying so—this delightful story can be continued in our next."

"Please go on." Anstice would not willingly have foregone the rest of the recital.

"Well, after various suspicious happenings, which I won't inflict upon you now, and after being interviewed by the Bishop, by detectives, by a hundred and one individuals who revelled in the case, I was accused, tried, and found guilty."

"Found guilty? Impossible!" He sprang up, quite unable to sit still another moment. Somehow he had not expected this climax.

"Yes. I was found guilty." Her voice held little expression. "And sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment. The judge who sentenced me informed me—and the world at large—that he deemed it expedient to 'make an example' of me—only he put it more legally—as an educated young woman, of apparent refinement, who had committed a crime connected generally with illiterate and ignorant persons of degenerate tendencies."

"But you—you never served the sentence—such a vindictive sentence, too!"

"Yes, I did." For the first time her face changed, a hint of tragedy appeared in her studiously passionless eyes. "You look surprised, but I assure you it is true. I served my sentence, and came out of prison exactly eight weeks ago."

"Eight weeks? But you have only just come here?"

"Yes. First I went down into Kent to stay with an old family friend who had taken charge of Cherry—my little girl—while I was"—she hesitated, then spoke with a directness he felt to be brutal—"in prison. I only came here yesterday, and I suppose the shock of finding myself back in my happy home"—he was sure she was speaking ironically now—"was too much for my—nerves."

"But, Mrs. Carstairs"—he looked down at her with perplexity in his face—"do I understand you to mean you have deliberately come back to live in the place which has treated you so shamefully?"

"Why not?" Her long, blue eyes were inscrutable. "I'm not ashamed of coming back. You see, I really don't care in the very least what these people say about me. I don't even bear them malice. Prison life is supposed to make one bitter, isn't it? You hear a lot about the 'prison taint,' whatever that may be. Well, I don't feel conscious of having sustained any taint. I have suffered a great wrong"—her contralto voice was quite unmoved as she made the assertion—"a very grievous injustice has been done to me; but now that the physical unpleasantness of the ordeal is over I don't feel as though I—my ego, my soul, if you like—had undergone any particular degradation."

"I suppose"—the question was forced from him by his interest in the human document she was spreading before his eyes—"I suppose what you call the physical unpleasantness is really hard to bear?"

He was sorry he had put the question as he saw the slow shudder which for a moment convulsed her immobility.

"Yes." For a second her voice was almost passionate. "I don't think I could make you understand the horror of that side of imprisonment. Most prison reformers, as I say, prate of the injury done to the soul of the prisoner. For my part—it if were worth while, which it isn't—I would always refuse to forgive those enemies who subjected my body to such indignities."

Her vehemence, so much at variance with her usual manner, made Anstice uneasy about her.

"See here, Mrs. Carstairs." He sat down on the couch beside her, and spoke persuasively. "You must promise me not to let your mind dwell on your terrible experience. Honestly, do you think it wise to stay here? Won't it be painful for you to live among the people who know you? Wouldn't it be better to go away for a short time, travel a little? There are plenty of places off the beaten track where you would be able to rest and get back your health and your spirits."

She turned to him with a hint of a kindlier manner than she had hitherto displayed.

"Dr. Anstice, to tell you the truth I don't want to travel. I shall be happier here, in my own home, with my old servants round me, able to do exactly as I choose from morning to night."

She hesitated a moment; then resumed in her former indifferent tone:

"You see, my husband, although he refuses to believe in my innocence, has handed over this house to me; and under my marriage settlement I have quite a large income——"

He interrupted her abruptly—

"Mrs. Carstairs, forgive me—did you say your husband refused to believe you innocent?"

"Yes. My husband—like the majority of the world—believes me guilty," said Chloe Carstairs.

CHAPTER III

The story he had heard on the occasion of his second visit to Cherry Orchard haunted Anstice for days. There was something so incongruous in the notion of this woman having served a sentence of imprisonment for an offence which, of all others, might well be supposed the most impossible for any decent person to commit; yet Anstice knew instinctively that Mrs. Carstairs had spoken the truth; and although for the last few years he had been far too much occupied with his own private grudge against Fate to spare any pity for the woes of others, he did feel a surprising sympathy for the young and apparently lonely woman whom the world had treated so cruelly.

That she was innocent of the crime with which she was charged, Anstice never doubted. Since the catastrophe which had altered his whole outlook on life, he had been inclined to be cynical regarding the good faith of mankind in general; but Mrs. Carstairs' manner had carried conviction by its very lack of emphasis. She had not protested her innocence—indeed, he could barely remember in what words she had given him to understand that she was not guilty of the loathsome deed; yet her very quietness, the very indifference of her manner as she told her story carried more weight than an avalanche of protestation would have done.

As a medical man Anstice was something of a student of physiognomy; and although Mrs. Carstairs' face was not one to be easily read, the shape of her brow and the classical outline of her features seemed to Anstice to preclude any possibility of the morbid and degenerate taint which must have inspired the communications of whose authorship she had been accused.

The very fact that she did not appear to care whether or no he believed in her strengthened Anstice's belief that she was an innocent and much-wronged woman; and in his mind he linked her with himself as one of the victims of an unfavourable and ruthless destiny.

After attending her for a week Anstice declared her to be in no further need of his services; and she acquiesced with the same air of half-weary graciousness with which she had welcomed his visits.

He noticed that she was rarely to be seen in the village or small town of Littlefield. Occasionally she would pass him on the road in a beautiful motor with which he supposed her husband to have endowed her, and at these times she had generally her small daughter, wrapped in furs, on the seat beside her.

Anstice's introduction to the latter took place about a fortnight after his last visit to Cherry Orchard in a professional capacity. It chanced that he was interested in a small Convalescent Home for Children which had recently been opened in the neighbourhood, and on one or two days had cut short his visit to Mrs. Carstairs on the grounds that his presence was required at the Home. Rather to his disappointment Mrs. Carstairs had not evinced the slightest interest in the scheme, and his surprise was proportionately great when, on one fine spring morning, he received a large bunch of beautiful daffodils from Cherry Orchard, with a rather carelessly worded request that he would give them to the Home if they were likely to be welcome there.

Anstice took the flowers with him on his morning visit, and the pleasure they gave and the gratitude with which they were received led him to snatch a moment on his way home to call upon the donor and thank her in person for her kindly gift.

As he turned his car in at the gate he hoard sounds of laughter, and a few words in a child's high-pitched voice; and when he was half-way up the drive he discovered from whence the merriment issued.

Just ahead of him was a motor-cycle, driven, it would appear, by a girl in a trim motoring-suit, while perched on the carrier at the back, in a fashion which made Anstice's blood run chill, was a small child whom he recognized as the daughter of the house, Cherry Carstairs, aged something less than six years.

The two were chattering and laughing, the driver sounding her horn in a delightfully irresponsible fashion, and both were much too intent on their progress and on the noise they were making to realize that a car was coming up the drive immediately behind them.

Instinctively Anstice slowed up, wishing the lively pair at Jericho; but luckily they had nearly reached the front door, and in another minute the motor-cycle had come to a standstill and the riders dismounted in safety.

"There—we've not come to grief, this time, have we, Cherry Ripe!" The elder girl spoke gaily. "And now we'll see what Mother has to say—oh!"

At that moment she beheld the car, which was coming to a standstill, and she looked at the man who drove it with a frankness which was curiously unselfconscious. At the same minute Mrs. Carstairs came slowly forward onto the steps, and Anstice, dismounting, approached her without doing more than glance at the girl-motorist.

"Good morning, Mrs. Carstairs. I have come to thank you for your lovely flowers." They shook hands as he spoke. "The Matron at the Home made me promise to come and convey her thanks to you at the first possible moment. That's my excuse for calling now!"

He had spoken more impulsively than usual, with a genuine desire to show his gratitude for her kindness; but there was no answering warmth in her voice, and, not for the first time, he felt chilled by her lack of response.

"I'm glad they liked them." Her tone was perfunctory. "But I'm afraid the gratitude is not due to me. It was my small daughter who was fired to enthusiasm by something Tochatti told her, and insisted on cutting the daffodils herself."

"I see." In spite of himself Anstice felt repulsed by her manner, which, made his warmly spoken gratitude appear superfluous. "Well, in any case the result is the same—delight in the wards and something beautiful and fragrant to lighten the children's sufferings."

"Pray tell Cherry—she will be pleased." Possibly Mrs. Carstairs had noted the stiffness of his speech, and in her languid way desired to soothe his feelings. "I forget if you have seen my little daughter. I must introduce you to her—and——" she turned to the young girl who stood by and laid a hand on her arm—"to her friend—and mine."

Anstice glanced towards the two who still stood, hand-in-hand, on the top step, and Mrs. Carstairs performed the ceremony of introduction in the deep, rich voice which was somehow part of her personality.

"Iris, let me introduce Dr. Anstice ... Miss Wayne."

Anstice bowed, but the girl held out her hand with a youthful friendliness which was attractive.

"How d'you do? I'm glad I didn't know your car was behind me as we came up the avenue. I don't mind what I meet, but I always hate things coming up behind my cycle," she said pleasantly.

"If you are in the habit of giving such youthful passengers rides I don't wonder you're nervous," he replied; and the girl opened her grey eyes widely.

"Nervous! I'm not!" She spoke indignantly. "But when your allowance is strictly limited, and you have to pay for repairs yourself, you don't want people running into you from the back and perhaps smashing up your pet Douglas!"

"I see." He smiled discreetly, and Mrs. Carstairs claimed his attention once more.

"And this"—she drew the child forward—"is Cherry."

"How are you?" Anstice, who was always polite to children, shook hands, and the child looked at him with a pair of very clear brown eyes.

"Quite well, thank you, my dear," she responded gravely, and Iris Wayne was secretly much diverted by the expression of astonishment which this form of address evoked in the face of the hearer.

"You like motoring?" Anstice felt constrained to keep up the conversation, and Cherry nodded calmly.

"Very much, my dear. Do you?"

"Yes...." Anstice experienced an overwhelming desire to repeat her endearing term, but luckily refrained. "This is my car—will you come for a ride with me one day?"

For a second Cherry regarded him with a pensive courtesy which was almost embarrassing. Then:

"With pleasure, my dear," she replied, and Iris laughed outright.

"You fickle child! And you have always declared you liked my motor better than any car that ever was seen!"

"So I do." Cherry looked up at her with unsmiling gravity. "But——"

"But now you must all come in and have lunch." Mrs. Carstairs turned to Anstice. "Dr. Anstice, you can spare us a little time, can't you? Lunch is quite ready, and Cherry, I'm sure, endorses my invitation!"

He hesitated, torn between a desire to accept and an uncomfortable suspicion that he could not afford the time.

"You will have to lunch somewhere, you know!" Her manner was a trifle warmer than usual. "And it will really save time to do it here!"

"My lunch is a very hurried affair as a rule," he said, smiling. "But if I may run away as soon as I've finished I'll be delighted to stay."

He felt a small hand slip into his as he spoke, and looked down, to meet Cherry's clear eyes.

"Do stay, my dear!" Her tone was a quaint imitation of her mother's, and before the twofold invitation Anstice's scruples were put to flight.

"I'll stay with pleasure," he said, patting the kind little hand; and with an air of satisfaction Cherry led him into the hall, her mother and Miss Wayne following their lead.

Once seated at the pretty round table, sweet with the fragrance of hyacinths in a big Swansea bowl, and bright with silver and glass, Anstice owned inwardly to a feeling of pleasure at his position. Although as a rule he loved his solitude, welcomed the silence of the old panelled house he had taken in Littlefield, and shunned those of his kind who had no direct need of his services, there were times when his self-sought loneliness weighed heavily upon his spirit, when the ghosts of the past, whose shrouded forms were ever present to remind him that he had made a fatal mistake on that bygone morning in India, were but poor company.

At first, during that first haunted year, when Hilda Ryder's face was ever before his eyes, her sad and tender accents in his ear, he had sought many and dubious ways of laying those same ghosts. It had seemed to him, during those dreadful days, that although some instinct within him forbade him to end his own life, none could doubt his right to alleviate his mental suffering by any means he knew; and when temporary oblivion, a blessed forgetfulness, could be purchased at the price of a pinprick, it seemed not only overscrupulous but foolish to forgo that Nirvana.

But that indulgence, too, had nearly ended in disaster; and for the last two years his only use for the alluring drug had been to alleviate the pain of others. Yet the struggle was a hard one; and he wondered sometimes, rather hopelessly, if he would have the strength to continue it to the bitter end.

But to-day, sitting in the pretty room, with the sun pouring in through the casement windows, widely opened to the green garden beyond, Anstice owned that for once life seemed to be in harmony with the beautiful spring world around.

As for Iris Wayne, he told himself presently that he had rarely seen a prettier girl! Although at present his admiration was quite impersonal, it was none the less sincere; and his approval of her

grey eyes, set widely apart beneath her crown of sunny hair, of the delicately rounded face, the frank mouth, which disclosed teeth as white as milk, was enhanced by the fact that every line, every tint spoke of flawless health and a mind attuned to the simple, gracious things of life rather than those which are complex and hard to comprehend.

Looking from Iris, bright-eyed and alert, to Chloe, sitting at the head of her table in a white cloth gown which somehow looked elaborate in spite of its utter simplicity, Anstice was struck by the contrast between them. Although the difference in their actual ages was not great, they might well have been at different stages of life. For all her youth, all her grace, her black and white distinction, Chloe was a woman, and no one looking at her would have doubted that to her had come some of the most vital moments of a woman's life. But Iris Wayne was only a girl, an untried warrior in the battle of existence. The glance of her large and radiant eyes was far more akin to that of the child Cherry's brown orbs than to the serious, rather cynical regard which habitually dwelt in Mrs. Carstairs' sapphire-blue eyes; and in every look, every word, was the delicious freshness of a joyous youth. Yet he fancied there was something in the curve of her lips, in the shape of her head, which betokened strength of character as well as lightness of heart. He fancied that her mouth could be tender as well as gay, that her eyes might one day look into the eyes of a man with a promise in their depths of strong and steadfast womanhood.

It chanced presently that Anstice was offered some strawberries, floating in a delicious-looking syrup; and a glance at his hostess betrayed his half-humorous perplexity.

"I know it isn't the right season for strawberries," said Mrs. Carstairs with a smile. "But these are some of our own, bottled by a famous method of Tochatti's. Do try them and give us your opinion."

Anstice complied; and found them excellent.

"They are delicious," he said, "and bring summer very close. Don't you like them?" he asked Cherry, who was demurely nibbling a macaroon.

"No thank you, my dear," replied Cherry gravely. "They give me a pain in my head."

"Oh, do they?" Anstice was nonplussed by this extraordinary assertion, the grounds for which were not borne out by such medical skill as he possessed; but chancing to look across the table at Iris Wayne he found her dimpling deliciously at his perplexity.

"You look puzzled, Dr. Anstice!" She laughed outright. "You see you don't understand how it happens that a pain in the head is connected with strawberries!"

"I don't," he said, "but if you will kindly explain——"

"May I, Cherry?" She looked at the child with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, and Cherry nodded.

"If you like, my dear. But *I* think it's rather a silly story."

Notwithstanding this expression of opinion Iris entered forthwith into an explanation.

"You see, Dr. Anstice, Cherry came to stay with me last summer when the strawberries were ripe; and seeing the bed covered with netting—to keep off the birds"—she smiled—"she thought it very hard that the poor little things should not have their share."

"You had heaps and heaps for yourself," came a reproachful voice from the bottom of the table where Cherry sat in state.

"Certainly—until you came on the scene, Cherry Ripe! Well, Dr. Anstice, to cut a long story short, Cherry thought us so selfish and cruel to prevent the poor birds sharing our fruit that she slipped into the kitchen garden one very hot morning, and devoted a good hour to taking up the netting—with the result that the stooping down with the sun beating on her head gave her a touch of sunstroke."

"You forget I had eaten a few strawberries—just to encourage the birdies." Evidently Cherry liked accuracy in any statement, even when it militated against herself.

"Well, whether it was the sun or the strawberries, the fact remains Cherry was in bed for three days, and since then strawberries are *tabu*. Isn't it so, Mrs. Carstairs?"

"Yes, Iris." Chloe's voice was more weary than usual, as though the subject did not interest her; and suddenly Anstice remembered that during the previous summer she had been shut away from the beautiful world of sun and strawberries and roses red and white....

A moment later Chloe rose from the table; and Anstice stole a look at his watch as they passed into the hall.

As though she divined his action Chloe turned to him.

"You will spare time for a cup of coffee? We have not lingered over our lunch."

Anstice hesitated, and Cherry again added her entreaties to the invitation.

"Do stay a little longer, my dear. Iris will have to go in a minute, but I want her to sing me a song first."

"Do you sing, Miss Wayne?" Looking at her firm round throat and deep chest he thought it possible she sang well.

"Yes." She shook her head at Cherry. "But how can I sing after meringues and strawberries, you bad child?"

"You always say that," returned Cherry placidly. "And then you sing most bee-autifully!"

Iris coloured at this obviously genuine compliment and Anstice laughed outright.

"After that testimonial, Miss Wayne, I hope you don't expect me to run away without hearing you!" He turned to his hostess. "I will stay for a cup of coffee with pleasure, Mrs. Carstairs, and you will persuade Miss Wayne to sing, won't you?"

"Certainly." They were in the cool, hyacinth-scented drawing-room by now, and Chloe drew the girl towards the grand piano which stood by one of the big latticed windows. "Sing to us at once, Iris, before you have your coffee. Will you?"

"Of course I will." She seated herself as she spoke. "What shall it be? Cherry, you know all my songs. What do you want to-day?"

After due consideration Cherry gave her verdict for "the song about the lady in the wood;" and although both Mrs. Carstairs and Iris rallied her on the mournfulness of her choice, Cherry stuck to her guns; and to judge from the rapt expression in her big brown eyes as the singer prophesied the lonely and tragic fate of poor unhappy Mélisande, the idea of that fate proved exquisitely soothing to the youthful listener.

Anstice's supposition had been correct. Iris Wayne could sing well. Her voice, a clear mezzo-soprano, had been excellently trained, and in its purity and flexibility gave promise of something exceptional when it should have attained its full maturity. She accompanied herself perfectly, in nowise hampered by the lack of any music; and when she had brought the song to a close, Anstice was sincere in his request for another.

"I've just got some new songs," said Iris, twisting round on the stool to face her hostess. "A book of Indian love-lyrics. Shall I sing you one of those?"

And without waiting for an answer she turned back and began to play an accompaniment which subtly suggested the atmosphere of the East, accentuated by the sound of the bells of some wayside Temple pealing through the dusty, sun-baked land.

"The Temple bells are ringing——"

With the first line of the song Anstice was back in the hideous past, back in the fatal Temple which had proved the antechamber to the halls of Death ... he heard again the chatter of native voices, smelt the odd, indescribable perfume of the East, felt the dread, the impotent horror of that bygone adventure in the ruined Temple of Alostan....

The drawing-room in which he sat, bright with chintz, sweet with the fragrance of hyacinths, faded away; and he saw again the dimly lighted hut in which he and Hilda Ryder had spent that last dreadful night. He heard her voice imploring him to kill her before the men should rush in upon them, saw the anguish in her eyes as she understood that no help was forthcoming from the world without; and he knew again the great and unavailing remorse which had filled his soul when he realized that Hilda Ryder had died too soon....

When the song ended he rose abruptly, and Chloe was startled by the change in his manner.

"I must really say good-bye, Mrs. Carstairs." He had not touched his coffee. "Many thanks for your hospitality." He shook hands with her and turned to Iris with something of an effort. "And many thanks for your songs, Miss Wayne." He tried to smile as they exchanged a handshake, but the attempt was a failure.

"I'll come to the steps with you, my dear," volunteered Cherry politely, and without further leave-taking Anstice went out into the hall, seized his hat, and stumbled towards the door, half-blinded by the pain of that terribly acute inward vision.

He took leave of Cherry with a hasty courtesy which would have hurt some children, but was not displeasing to the stately Cherry; and three minutes later he was driving down the avenue at a furious pace, in a vain endeavour to outstrip the phantoms which a girl's careless song had evoked from their place in the background of his thoughts.

After his abrupt departure Iris turned impulsively to her hostess.

"Mrs. Carstairs"—her voice was disturbed—"what was wrong with Dr. Anstice just now? Did my singing displease him? He got up and went so—so unexpectedly."

For a moment Chloe said nothing. Then:

"Don't you think you are rather too imaginative, Iris? Probably Dr. Anstice remembered some urgent case, and thought he ought to go at once."

"No. I don't think that was it." Iris sank down on to the cushioned window-seat and gazed thoughtfully ahead. "I think——I wonder if that last song could have any associations for him? Has he been in India?"

"I don't know." Chloe smiled faintly. "You must ask him, Iris. I suppose your father would send for him if he were ill, wouldn't he, now that Dr. Meade is really gone?"

"I suppose so." Iris spoke rather dreamily. "At first I thought he was quite old—at least forty," said the schoolgirl. "And then, when he talked to Cherry I was not really sure. I guessed he might be worried about professional things and look older than he was. And now——"

She broke off, and for a moment Chloe Carstairs made no rejoinder, though her blue, almond-shaped eyes held a slightly quizzical expression.

"And now"—she said at length—"what is your opinion now?"

"Now"—Iris spoke very slowly, and in her eyes was something of the womanly tenderness and strength whose possibility Anstice had divined—"I think he has the very saddest face I have ever seen in my life."

CHAPTER IV

Anstice was destined to renew his acquaintance with Iris Wayne sooner than he had anticipated.

On the Sunday afternoon following the little luncheon party at Cherry Orchard, he was tramping, pipe in mouth, over the golf-links when he saw her ahead of him, in company with an elderly gentleman whom he guessed must be her father.

She had just holed her ball by a deft stroke, and as he approached Anstice heard her utter an exultant exclamation.

"Very good, my dear." Her companion patted her arm. "A little more care and you will make quite a fair player."

"Fair player indeed!" Iris tossed her curly head disdainfully. "I'd have you know I can beat *you* anyway, Daddy!"

As she spoke she recognized the approaching figure and her frank smile flashed out.

"Dr. Anstice—are you playing too?"

"No, Miss Wayne." He advanced and shook hands. "I'm taking my Sunday afternoon tramp. It's the only chance I get of walking in the week."

"Daddy, this is Dr. Anstice." Iris turned to the elderly man. "My father," she explained casually to Anstice, and Sir Richard Wayne held out his hand with a smile.

"You're not a golfer, Dr. Anstice?" Sir Richard was keen on the game.

"No, sir. I used to be a footballer in my hospital days, but"—for a second he hesitated—"I have had no time lately for any kind of game——"

"Well, golf's a grand game for an old buffer like me"—Sir Richard was a hale and well-set-up man who could afford to make such speeches—"but I daresay you younger men like something a bit more strenuous. My daughter here only plays with me now and then as a concession—she prefers tennis, or flying about on that precious motor-cycle of hers."

"Well, judging from what I have seen of Miss Wayne's riding I should say she is a very expert motor-cyclist," said Anstice; and Sir Richard nodded.

"Oh, she rides all right," he owned, "and she bothered me to such an extent that I simply had to give in to her. But it wasn't until she had been 'run in' for exceeding the speed limit in one of my cars and I'd had to sentence her from the Bench in my magisterial capacity that I did give in and buy her a Douglas."

"He fined me twenty shillings and costs!" Iris spoke with mock indignation. "How's that for meanness to your only daughter?"

"And paid the fine out of my own pocket—don't forget that!" Sir Richard chuckled. "Well, Dr. Anstice, if you're not in a hurry, walk round with us, will you? You aren't busy on a Sunday afternoon, I suppose?"

"Well, not very." In spite of himself Anstice felt a strange reluctance to part from his new friends. "I was going for a walk, as you see, and if I may come with you——"

So it fell out that for the first Sunday since he had arrived in Littlefield Anstice's walk was no solitary stroll, companioned only by his own moody or rebellious thoughts, but a pleasant interlude in a life which in spite of incessant and often engrossing work, was on the whole a joyless one.

This afternoon Iris Wayne looked little more than a schoolgirl in her short skirt and brightly coloured jersey, a cap pulled well down over her curls, which nevertheless rioted over her forehead in entrancing confusion. It was very evident that she and her father were on the best of terms; and if, as seemed probable, Sir Richard was proud of his pretty daughter, it was no less certain that she, on her side, thought her father the most wonderful of men.

The trio chatted pleasantly as they crossed the sunny golf links, and Sir Richard told himself that his impressions of this man, gathered from hasty visions of him about the village, or from the chatter of the countryside, impressions which had labelled him as a morose, sullen kind of fellow, had certainly been fallacious.

Reserved he might be; but although his manner was quiet and his smile a trifle sad, there was nothing morose about him to-day; and if his conversation was not particularly brilliant Sir Richard thought none the worse of him for that.

So pleased, indeed, was he with his new acquaintance that when they reached the Club House on the return journey he pressed the young man to accompany them home for a cup of tea.

"I'm sure your patients must cease from troubling on a Sunday afternoon at any rate," he said genially, "and you haven't anyone waiting for you at home, have you?"

With a rather melancholy smile Anstice admitted that there was no one waiting for him at home; and since Iris seconded her father's invitation with a kind little entreaty on her own account, he accepted their joint hospitality without further demur.

Greengates, the home of the Waynes, was a stately old house, more dignified, though perhaps less charming, than the fascinating Cherry Orchard; but its very dignity gave charm; and it formed a by no means incongruous background for this youngest and prettiest of its daughters. For all her youth and high spirits, Iris seemed to fit into the place as one born to it; and when she tossed aside her cap and sat down behind the massive silver tea-tray, her gold-brown curls shone against the oak panelling of the walls as the wild daffodils gleam golden against the massive brown trunks of the trees in whose shade they grow.

Lady Wayne had been dead for many years; and although Anstice gathered, from casual conversation between father and daughter, that a certain Aunt Laura made her home with them as a rule, it appeared that she was at present travelling in Switzerland, leaving Iris mistress of Greengates in her absence.

"I confess Iris and I rather enjoy a week or two to ourselves!" Sir Richard's eyes twinkled. "My sister is a thoroughly good sort, but she loves to manage people; and Iris and I are both of us constitutionally averse to being managed!"

"I manage Daddy without him knowing it," said Iris loftily; and Anstice could not refrain from an impulse to tease her a little.

"That is very clever of you, Miss Wayne," he said gravely, "and I'm sure your management must be most tactful. But—if you'll excuse me suggesting it—wouldn't it be cleverer still of you if you refrained from hinting as much to your father?"

"You mean the really clever women never let the men know they're doing it?" Her grey eyes laughed into his. "You are quite right, of course—but then I don't pretend to be clever. I don't think clever people—clever women, anyway—are ever happy."

"Don't you?" Somehow Anstice felt extraordinarily interested in the views of this very youthful woman. "May I be allowed to know what has driven you to that conclusion?"

"Oh, it's not exactly my own." Iris' eyes were honest as well as gay. "It was something Mrs. Carstairs said to me one day. *She* is clever, you know—but her life has been made very unhappy."

Anstice, who had already wondered how much of Chloe Carstairs' history was known to the Waynes, glanced involuntarily at Sir Richard as Iris spoke the last words; and in the elder man's eyes he thought he saw a hint of trouble.

"I should judge Mrs. Carstairs to be a well-read woman," he said, endeavouring to change the subject while ostensibly pursuing it. "She has a good many books about her, though of course nothing like your collection here."

He glanced at the walls as he spoke, and Sir Richard took up the new topic easily.

"I don't know whether you are a reader, Dr. Anstice," he said, "but if so, and you're short of reading matter, don't hesitate to borrow some of our books. We've all sorts, eh, Iris?"

"Thanks very much. I'm not a great reader—haven't time; but your books look rather alluring," said Anstice, with a smile.

"We'll have a look round after tea," returned his host. "In the meantime pass your cup—this weather makes one thirsty."

After tea he rose and invited the younger man to scrutinize the shelves. Somewhat to his surprise Anstice found that the Greengates collection of books was a most comprehensive one, whole sections being devoted to science, biography, travel and so on; and he was fortunate enough to discover two recent biological works, which, owing to their somewhat prohibitive price, he had

hitherto been unable to obtain.

"Like to borrow those tomes?" Sir Richard had noted the expression in his guest's face as he handled the volumes. "Well, take them, and anything else you like. No, I confess I don't care much about books myself. Most of these were my father's choice—he was a bit of a student in his later years, and my sister likes to keep up with the times and lets the booksellers send down books as they used to do. But you're welcome to any of 'em, I assure you."

He led his guest round the room, pointing out one or two favourites of his own; and while they were thus engaged, Iris, who had been feeding three lively Airedales with scraps of cake, came up to Anstice with outstretched hand.

"Will you excuse me, Dr. Anstice? I must go and get ready for church—we have service early here, you know."

Immediately Anstice attempted to take his own departure, fearing he had outstayed his welcome; but Sir Richard positively refused to let him go.

"No, no, don't hurry away. Stay and keep me company for a little while—my man can easily run you over in the car presently."

So it came about that after watching Iris' departure the two men turned back into the house, where Sir Richard led his visitor to his own cosy smoking-room and handed him a cigar.

"Light up," he said genially, "and try that chair. Dr. Anstice, now that my little girl has left us, I want to say something to you—to ask you a question, in fact."

Rather taken aback, Anstice expressed his willingness to answer any questions his host thought fit to ask; and Sir Richard plunged at once into the heart of the matter.

"I understand from Iris that you have been attending the lady living at Cherry Orchard. Oh!"—as Anstice's eyebrows rose—"I'm not asking you to violate professional secrecy. I only wished to be sure that you knew the true position of Mrs. Carstairs in this neighbourhood."

A moment's reflection showed Anstice that this man would hardly be likely to permit his young daughter to visit Cherry Orchard unless his opinion of Mrs. Carstairs were favourable; and his voice was non-committal as he answered.

"I have heard Mrs. Carstairs' story from her own lips, Sir Richard. She was good enough to relate it to me at an early stage of our acquaintance," he said; and this time it was the other man's eyebrows which betokened surprise.

"Indeed! I didn't expect that, or I would not have spoken. I thought you had probably heard a garbled account of the whole horrible affair from some of the Pharisees down here; and since I and my daughter are honoured by Mrs. Carstairs' friendship I wanted to be sure you didn't allow the weight of local opinion to prejudice you in any way."

"It's awfully good of you." For once Anstice spoke spontaneously, as he might have spoken before that fatal day which had changed him into another and a less impulsive person. "I may take it, then, that you and Miss Wayne believe in Mrs. Carstairs?"

"I believe in her as I'd believe in my own girl," returned Sir Richard emphatically. "Mind you, Chloe Carstairs isn't perfect—we none of us are. She has her faults—now. She's cynical and cold, a bit of a *poseuse*—that marble manner of hers is artificial, I verily believe—but I'm prepared to swear she had nothing to do with those vile letters."

"You have known her long?"

"Since she was a child. Her father was one of my best friends, and I knew Chloe when she was a tiny baby girl all tied up with blue ribbons. Carstairs met her first at my people's place in Surrey, and I was really pleased when he married the girl and brought her here."

"They lived here after their marriage?"

"Yes, for a short time only. Then they were off to India, and there they remained till her child was born, and she was faced with the old problem of the woman who marries a soldier."

"You mean—wife *versus* mother?"

"Yes. Upon my soul, Anstice, I can't understand how a woman ever decides between the two claims. To hand over her baby to relations, or even strangers, must be like tearing the heart out of her bosom, and yet a woman wants her husband too—wants him especially when she is young—as Chloe was."

"Mrs. Carstairs decided for her child?"

"Yes. They kept her in India as long as they dared—longer than some people thought prudent—and then Chloe brought her home to the old place. Iris was at school then, but Chloe used to come in to see my sister and me frequently, and we congratulated ourselves that we'd got such a pleasant neighbour. You know Cherry Orchard is really the nearest house as the crow flies."

"I suppose it is; though I hadn't realized it. And then—the crash came?"

"Yes. When first those horrible letters began to fly about the parish they were put down as the work of some spiteful servant, dismissed for dishonesty, perhaps. But little by little Mrs. Carstairs' name began to be whispered in connection with them—no one knew how the rumour started, though I have always held the belief that the Vicar's wife herself was the first to suggest it."

"But Mrs. Carstairs and the woman were friends?"

"They had been—and in the first burst of friendship the foolish woman had poured out all her silly, sordid secrets to Chloe Carstairs, and then, possibly, repented having done so. They fell out, you see, and I suppose Mrs. Ogden, being a woman of a small and petty character herself, was only too ready to suspect her former friend. She swore, you know, that no one but Chloe could have known some of the details which were mentioned in the letters. I can't tell you how vile the whole thing was—and it was quite evidently the intention of the anonymous writer to drive Mrs. Ogden out of the parish by those libellous documents."

"But the matter was thoroughly sifted? And there could be no evidence against Mrs. Carstairs?"

"Well, when things had gone on for some time in a desultory kind of fashion—a letter here, another there, and then an interval of a few weeks—there came a perfect avalanche of the things, and the Vicar, although he had really wished to hush the matter up, was advised to take steps to find out the culprit."

"Even then I don't see how Mrs. Carstairs could be suspected——"

"Well, in a matter of this kind, when once a woman's name has been mentioned, it is very hard for her to clear herself. At first, guided, I confess, by me, she refused to take any notice of the affair. In the end, of course, she had to come forward to clear herself of a specific charge."

"But what weight had the evidence against her?"

"Well, certain curious things happened. It was found that the letters were all written on a particular kind of paper affected by Mrs. Carstairs for scribbling unimportant notes—household orders and so on—not by any means an uncommon paper, but still she was the only person in the village who bought it regularly. Then the handwriting, though it was scratchy and common-looking, did bear, in some words, a faint, very faint resemblance to hers; and once, when Chloe was away on a visit to Brighton, a letter came to the owner of Carr Hall, in the valley yonder, which had been posted at Hove. Then, as she may have told you, a trap was laid for her by some of the damned authorities"—he spoke heatedly—"she was supplied with marked paper; and sure enough the next letter which arrived was written on one of those identical sheets."

"But the servants—her servants would have had access to her paper?"

"Quite so; and that point was made much of by the defence. But when all the household was examined, it didn't seem a feasible theory that any of them was to blame."

"How many servants were there in the house?" Unconsciously Anstice's manner was that of a doctor interrogating a patient, and Sir Richard noted the fact with a quickly suppressed flicker of amusement.

"Four only. During Major Carstairs' absence Mrs. Carstairs wished to live quietly; and her staff consisted of a cook—a young Frenchman whose life Major Carstairs had once saved in a drunken brawl in Soho——"

"A Frenchman, eh?" Anstice habitually distrusted foreigners. "Mightn't he have been the guilty person?"

"He only knew enough English to discuss the *menu* with his mistress," answered Sir Richard. "Chloe used to make us laugh by relating his mistakes; and even if he had wished to write the letters he could not possibly have done it. Besides, he returned to France for his military training in the very middle of all this, so he really can't be suspected."

"Well." In fairness Anstice could not condemn the Frenchman. "Who else was in the house?"

"A middle-aged housemaid who had lived with the Carstairs' all her life, and whose character was quite above suspicion. As a matter of course her writing was compared with that of the letters and was proved to have none of the characteristics of the anonymous handwriting. For another thing her sight was bad, and she couldn't write straight to save her life."

"I see. And what of the other two?"

"One was a pretty young girl who acted as maid to Mrs. Carstairs herself; and I admit at first it seemed that she was the most likely person to have been mixed up in the affair; for she was a flighty minx who wasn't too particular about her behaviour, and was generally engaged to two or three young men at once."

"Well?" From Sir Richard's manner Anstice gathered that there was no case against the pretty young minx; and the next words confirmed his supposition.

"Sad to say the poor girl caught a chill and died of pneumonia after only five days' illness, during which time the letter-writer was particularly active; and as the communications continued after her death, she must be counted out."

"Well," said Anstice, "that accounts for three of them. What about the fourth?"

"The fourth was an old servant of the other side of the family—Chloe's family—the woman they call Tochatti, who lives there still. She's half Italian, though she's lived the greater part of her life in England. Chloe's mother picked her up on her honeymoon, and she was Chloe's nurse. She has been a most devoted servant all the time, and I would almost as soon suspect Chloe herself as suspect the poor woman of working any harm to her adored young mistress."

Remembering the woman's solicitude on the occasion of his first visit to Cherry Orchard, Anstice was compelled to admit it was unlikely she was the culprit; and his impression was deepened by Sir Richard's next speech.

"As a matter of fact, it came out that the poor old thing couldn't even write her name. The other woman, Janet, was what she called a 'poor scollard', but Tochatti went one better, for she could neither write nor read. It appeared they had often teased her about it, and she had frequently flown into a rage when the other servants poked fun at her; but she certainly scored in the end!"

"Well, that disposes of the household," said Anstice rather regretfully. "But what about outdoor workers—gardeners and so forth?"

"There was only one gardener—and a boy—and neither could possibly have had access to Chloe's writing-table; added to which they both left Cherry Orchard during the critical time and took situations in different parts of the county. So they too had to be counted out."

"All this came out in court?"

"Yes. You see, had the matter rested between the party libelled and the libeller—if there is such a term—an action in the Civil Courts to recover damages would have met the case. But owing to the fact that practically everyone in the neighbourhood was victimized, and warnings, almost amounting to threats, issued to the Ogden woman's friends to have nothing more to do with her, the public were, so to speak, directly affected; and it was in the interests of the public that, finally, criminal proceedings were instituted."

"And in the end an intelligent jury brought in a verdict of guilty?"

"Yes. The case came on at Ripstone, five miles away, and of course excited no end of interest locally. To give them their due, the jury were very reluctant to bring in that verdict—but I assure you"—he spoke weightily—"when I heard the other side marshalling their facts, each one making the case look still blacker and more damning, I began to be afraid. Yes, I confess it, I began to feel very much afraid."

"And they brought her in guilty?"

"Yes, and the Judge sentenced her. I don't like to accuse one of His Majesty's judges of allowing his judgment to be prejudiced by personal feeling," said Sir Richard slowly; "but it has always seemed to me that Chloe's manner—her peculiarly detached, indifferent manner, as though the case did not interest her vitally—was in some subtle fashion an affront to the man. His remarks to her seemed to me unnecessarily severe, and he certainly did not err on the side of leniency."

"I should think not! Twelve months—why, it's an Eternity!"

"What must it have seemed to that poor girl!" Sir Richard spoke pitifully. "I used to fancy she would die in prison—I could not imagine how she could support the life in there, in those degrading surroundings. You know, not only had she been lapped in luxury, as they say, all her life, but, more important still, she had been used to boundless love and affection from all around her."

"You find her much altered?"

"Yes. I can't say exactly in what the alteration consists," returned Sir Richard thoughtfully. "It's not merely a surface thing—the change goes deeper than that. I called her *posée* just now. Well, I don't know if that's the right word. Sometimes I think that frozen manner of hers isn't a pose after all, it's natural to her nowadays. She seems to be literally turned to stone by all she's gone through. Where she used to be all sympathy, all ardour, all life, now she's cold, frigid, passionless. The girl's barely twenty-five, but upon my soul she might be a woman of fifty for all the youth there is about her—except in her looks, and there I believe she's handsomer than ever!"

Anstice's cigar was smoked out; but there was one question he must ask before he took his leave.

"And her husband—Major Carstairs? He—I gather he was inclined to agree with the verdict?"

Sir Richard hesitated, and when he spoke there was a note of pain in his voice.

"I am sorry to say Carstairs could not bring himself to believe in his wife's innocence. He was in India at the time, you know, and only got home—on special leave—when the case was coming on. Heaven knows on what grounds he bases his doubts of her. One would have thought it impossible for a man to live with a woman like Chloe and not know her incapable of the deed. But human nature is a strange thing——" He broke off.

"I understand they do not contemplate keeping house together for the future?" Anstice hoped he was not appearing unduly curious, but Sir Richard's manner invited interest.

"No—though mind you, Carstairs has not left his wife because she was unfortunate enough to be convicted and sent to prison. He's not that sort. If he could have believed her innocent he would have stuck to her through thick and thin. As it is he gives her the house, a large allowance, which permits motor-cars and things of that kind, and since he is known to be in India a good many people don't know they are really living apart in a double sense."

"Yet he can't believe in her?"

"No—and that's why he will not live with her. In his own rather peculiar way he has a remarkably high code of honour, and since he genuinely believes her to be guilty it would doubtless be quite impossible for him to live with her again."

"I am rather surprised—seeing she must know his opinion of her—that she condescends to live in his house and take his money," said Anstice, voicing a question which had caused him a very real and acute wonder.

"I'm glad you have raised that point," said Sir Richard quickly. "She does it for the sake of the child, so that Cherry may have all the advantages of wealth. Chloe herself has nothing and Carstairs is a rich man; so it is an eminently proper arrangement, and in my opinion Chloe behaved like a sensible woman in agreeing to it."

He threw away his cigar, which had gone out as he talked.

"No—what I wonder at is that Chloe should deliberately choose to come back here where the whole story is known. It's not bravado, of that I'm certain, but it beats me altogether how she can do it, for as you know women can be uncommonly cruel sometimes, and these creatures here aren't by any means charitably disposed towards her."

"You allow Miss Wayne to visit her?"

"Yes—and I welcome her to my house on the rare occasions she honours me by entering it," said Sir Richard with evident sincerity; and Anstice felt oddly gratified by the other man's speech.

A clock striking seven brought him to his feet in genuine dismay.

"Seven o'clock! I'd no idea it was so late! Pray excuse me inflicting myself on you all this time."

"Must you go?" Sir Richard rose too, and stood regarding the tall, loosely built figure with something like admiration. "Well, you're a busy man, I know; and if you really must go I'll not detain you. But you'll come in again, won't you? Come to dinner—Iris shall send you a note—and drop in for a smoke any evening you're at liberty."

The invitation so heartily given was accepted with a pleasure to which Anstice had long been a stranger; and then he said good-bye to his kind host and left Greengates feeling that he had found two unexpectedly congenial friends in Iris Wayne and her father.

He had been deeply, genuinely interested in Sir Richard's story, that unhappy story in which Chloe Carstairs figured so tragically; yet as he made his way homewards between the blossoming hedgerows his mind dwelt upon another woman, a younger, happier woman than the pale mistress of Cherry Orchard. And the face which floated before his eyes in the starlit spring dusk was the laughing, grey-eyed face of Iris Wayne.

CHAPTER V

As the weeks passed Anstice's acquaintance with the Waynes ripened into something which he found strangely pleasant.

Although he had long ago decided that for him the simple human things of life, friendship, social intercourse with the world of men and women, were, since that bygone Indian morning, forbidden, even his acquired misanthropy was not proof against the kindly advances made to him by Sir Richard and his daughter.

Busy as he was, he still found time to accept some of their invitations to Greengates, and he and Sir Richard enjoyed a quiet chat over their cigars now and again when by chance he had an evening to himself.

On their side the Waynes found him, each in his and her own degree, an agreeable companion. Sir Richard approved of his quiet and reserved manner, and was not inclined to quarrel with his occasional fits of moodiness—for there were times when the ghosts which haunted him refused to be exorcised, and Anstice felt himself unfit, by reason of the handicap which Fate had imposed upon him, to mingle with the happy, the careless, the innocent ones of the earth.

To Sir Richard, kind-hearted, uncritical, undiscerning, such fits of silence, even of gloom, were natural enough in a man whose life was spent largely in the service of the sick and suffering among humanity. He was probably worried over some difficult case, Sir Richard concluded, when he found the younger man's conversation halting, his manner absent, or, on rare occasions, morose; and it must be noted that as a rule Anstice had too much respect for his friends to inflict these moods upon them. As for Iris, quicker of discernment than her father, of a more analytical

turn of mind, she guessed that the changing moods which characterized her new acquaintance were not induced by any external or professional worries, but were the marks of a trouble far more serious, far more vital to the man himself. Of the nature of this trouble Iris had naturally no very clear idea, though now and again she considered the probability of him having been what she called, rather school-girlishly, crossed in love. But though her phraseology might be childish there was something purely womanly in the compassion with which she thought of Anstice; and on one occasion when a fit of melancholy had overcome him unexpectedly in her presence, he was startled, not to say dismayed, to notice something of this half-tender, half-impersonal pity in the soft, brooding glance of her eyes as they rested on him for a moment.

It was not with the Waynes alone that he grew more intimate as the days went by. A short time after his introduction to Greengates Anstice received a summons to Cherry Orchard, and on repairing thither found that his patient on this occasion was Cherry Carstairs. With all her demure dignity Cherry was at times possessed of a very spirit of perversity; and being, although of such tender years, absolutely devoid of fear, she had tried conclusions in secret with a shaggy pony in a field close by her home, with the result that, owing to the pony's stubborn refusal to allow her to climb upon his back, Cherry received a kick, more in sorrow than in anger, which snapped the bone in her tiny forearm, and sent her stumbling home, very pale and shaky, her dignity sadly in abeyance, to seek her mother.

Anstice, on arrival, soon had the small arm set and comfortably bandaged; and once safely in bed, although more upset than she wished anyone to imagine, Cherry regained her usual half-affectionate half-patronizing manner, and insisted upon Anstice sitting down beside her "for at least five minutes, my dear!"

With a smile, Anstice sat down as requested; and Cherry instantly began to question him on the subject of Greengates.

"Isn't it a fassynating house, my dear?" Cherry never employed a short word when she thought a long one fairly appropriate. "Have you seen Iris' bedroom?—all done in white and purple and green—and irises everywhere—on the walls and the curtains—just like a gorjus purple iris what grows in the garden?"

"No, I've not seen Miss Wayne's bedroom," owned Anstice rather hastily. "But it couldn't be prettier than this—why, those bunches of cherries on the wall are so life-like that I wonder the birds don't come in to make a meal of them!"

"Do you like them?" Cherry was openly gratified by his approval. "But I wish you could see Iris' room. She always takes me there to wash my hands and face, and the basin is all over irises too."

"Fassynating" as these details of Miss Wayne's domestic arrangements might be, Anstice judged it safer to switch his small patient on to another topic; and in an animated discussion as to the proper age at which a young lady might begin to ride a motor-bicycle—Cherry inclining to seven, Anstice to seventeen years—the promised five minutes flew swiftly away.

"You'll come again, my dear?" Cherry's anxiety to ensure his attendance was flattering, and he laughed and assured her he would visit her every day if she desired it.

As a matter of fact he did visit her with some regularity; for she managed, with a perversity known only to imps of a like nature, to catch a severe chill which puzzled her attendants, none of them knowing of a certain feverishly delightful ten minutes spent in hanging out of the window holding an interesting conversation with the gardener's boy below on the subject of broken bones. In any case, Anstice found it necessary to call at Cherry Orchard on several consecutive days; and during the child's illness and subsequent convalescence he was perforce obliged to come into contact with Mrs. Carstairs herself.

As a physiological study Chloe interested him strongly. Although she appeared genuinely fond of her little daughter and waited on her night and day with a solicitude which never varied, there was nothing in her manner to denote passionate affection, nor did the child appear to desire it. Even to Cherry her voice, rich and deep as it was, never softened; and she rarely used an endearing term. Yet Cherry appeared to be quite satisfied; and Anstice came to the conclusion that the child's fine instinct was able to pierce behind this apparent coldness to the warm human love which doubtless lay beneath.

One fact about Mrs. Carstairs he was not slow in discovering. With the exception of Iris Wayne and her father, Chloe appeared to be absolutely devoid of friends, even of casual acquaintances. The Littlefield people, who had been first surprised, then outraged, by her reappearance among them, had long since decided that for them Cherry Orchard was *tabu*; and although the Vicar, Mr. Carey, successor to the man whose wife had raised the storm in which Chloe Carstairs' barque had come to shipwreck, had called upon her, and endeavoured, in his gentle, courtly fashion, to make her welcome, his parishioners had no intention of following his example.

That Mrs. Carstairs felt her isolation in a social sense Anstice did not believe; but that she must feel very lonely at times, find the days very long and empty, he felt pretty well assured. She was not an accomplished woman in the usual sense of the word. He never found her playing the piano, or painting water-colour pictures as did so many of the women ha visited. She did not appear to care for needlework, and in spite of the books scattered about the house, he rarely saw her reading; yet all the while he had a feeling that had she desired to shine in any or all of the arts peculiar to women she would have no difficulty in doing so.

That she ordered her household excellently he knew from the glimpses he had obtained of her domestic life; but there again she was assisted by a staff of superior servants who all, from her personal attendant, the devoted Tochatti, down to the boy who cleaned the knives, worshipped their mistress with a wholehearted affection which held about it a touch of something almost resembling fanaticism.

One day Anstice did find her with a book in her hand; and on venturing to inquire into its contents was informed it was a well-known *Treatise on Chess*.

"Do you play?" he asked, rather astonished, for in common with many men he imagined chess to be almost purely a masculine pastime.

"Yes—at least I used to play once," she admitted slowly. "I can't very well indulge in a game nowadays. Even the grownup Cherry declines to play, though I hope in time I may incite her to learn!"

"I used to play—indifferently—once," Anstice said meditatively; and Chloe looked at him with a faint smile.

"Did you? Some day when you are not too busy will you drop in to tea and play a game with me?"

"I'd like to immensely." His tone was sincere, and Chloe's manner warmed ever so little.

"Can you stay now?" The hour was just on five; and Cherry, who had that day been promoted to tea downstairs, seconded the invitation as usual from her nest on the big Chesterfield.

"Do stay, my dear, and I'll help you to move all the funny little men and the castles!"

Anstice could not refuse this double invitation; and after a hasty cup of tea he and his hostess sat down to the board and set out the ancient ivory chessmen which were so well suited to the pretty, old-fashioned room in which the players sat.

To Anstice's quite unjustifiable surprise Chloe Carstairs played an admirable game. Her moves were clearly reasoned out, and she displayed a quickness of thought, a brilliance of man[oe]uvre, which soon convinced Anstice he was outplayed.

At the end of fifteen minutes Chloe had vanquished him completely; and while most of his men were reposing in the carved box at her elbow, the ranks of her army were scarcely thinned.

"I give in, Mrs. Carstairs!" He laughed and rose. "You won't think me unsporting if I run away now? I'm beat hollow, and I know it, but if you will condescend to play with me another day——"

"I shall look forward to another game," she said serenely; and Anstice departed, feeling he had been permitted to obtain another sidelight on her somewhat complex character.

Two days later he made another and rather disconcerting discovery, which set him wondering afresh as to the real nature of the woman who, like himself, had been the victim of a strangely vindictive fate.

The day was Sunday, and Cherry had been permitted the indulgence of breakfast in bed; so that Anstice interviewed his young patient in her own pink-and-white nest, where, attended by the faithful Tochatti, she gave herself innumerable airs and graces, but finally allowed him to examine her small arm, which was now practically healed.

"Mrs. Carstairs not up yet?" It was ten o'clock—but there was no sign of Cherry's mother.

"Yes, sir." Tochatti spoke slowly, her foreign accent more strongly marked than usual. "My mistress has a slight headache and is in her own room. She would like to see you before you go."

Accordingly, after a prolonged parting from Cherry, who shamelessly importuned him to neglect his other and less important patients, Anstice accompanied Tochatti to Mrs. Carstairs' sitting-room where its owner presumably awaited him.

The room itself was in its way as uncommon as its occupant, being furnished entirely in black and white. The walls were white, the carpet black. The chairs and couches were upholstered in black-and-white chintz, with a profusion of cushions of both hues, and the pictures on the white walls were etchings in black oak frames. On the mantelpiece was a collection of carved ivory toys of all kinds, with here and there an ebony elephant from Ceylon or Assam. The paint on doors and windows was black, yet in spite of the sombreness of the general scheme there was nothing depressing, nothing sinister in the finished effect.

Possibly because Chloe Carstairs was an artist—or a wise woman who knew the value of relief—one note of colour was struck in the presence of a huge china bowl filled with tulips of every conceivable shade of flame and orange and yellow and red; but with that exception black and white predominated, and when Chloe Carstairs rose from her low chair near the window and advanced towards him, she, too, carried out the subtle suggestion of the whole room.

Dressed in white, her silky black hair and blue eyes the only bits of colour about her, she looked paler than usual, and Anstice jumped to the conclusion she had sent for him to prescribe for her.

"Good morning, Dr. Anstice." Anstice, who hated shaking hands with most people, always liked her firm, cool handshake. "How is Cherry? You find her better?"

"Yes, she is really quite herself again, and her arm has healed most satisfactorily." He stood in front of her as he spoke, and studied her face carefully. "But you don't look very fit, Mrs. Carstairs. Can I do anything for you now that your little daughter has finished with me?"

She looked at him with a smile which was more melancholy than usual.

"I think not," she said slowly. "You see, I am not ill, only a little tired—tired with remembering days that are gone."

"Isn't that rather a fatal thing to do?" His own bitter memories gave him the clue to her state of mind. "No good ever comes of remembering sad things. I think the perfect memory would be one which would only retain the happiness of life. You know the old motto found on many sundials: 'I only record sunny hours.'"

"I don't agree with you," she said quietly. "It's the shadows which give value to the high lights, isn't it? And sometimes to remember dreadful things is a happiness in itself, knowing they are gone for ever. I can quite well bear to remember that horrible prison"—as always when speaking of it, her lips whitened—"because no power on earth can ever put me back there again."

"I don't think it can do you any good to dwell on such memories," he persisted. "If you are wise you will forget them. No wonder your head aches if you dwell on such unpleasant things."

She looked at him more fully, and in her eyes he read something which baffled him.

"You are quite right—and delightfully sane and sensible," she said. "But as a matter of fact, I wasn't really thinking of the prison to-day. You see, this is the anniversary of my wedding day, and my thoughts were not altogether sad ones."

He looked at her, nonplussed for the moment, and suddenly Chloe's face softened.

"Dr. Anstice, forgive me. The fact is, I had a bad night, and am all on edge this morning."

"Why do you sit in here?" asked Anstice abruptly. "It is a lovely morning—the sun is warm and there's no wind. Why not go out into your charming garden? Lie in a low chair and sleep—or read some amusing book. Is this a particularly engrossing one?"

He picked up the volume she had laid down at his entrance, and she watched him with a faint hint of mockery in her blue eyes. His face changed as he read the title.

"De Quincey's *Confessions*! Mrs. Carstairs, you're not interested in this sort of thing?"

"Why not?" Her manner was ever so slightly antagonistic. "The subject is a fascinating one, isn't it? I confess I've often felt inclined to try opium—morphia or something of the sort, myself."

"Morphia?" His voice startled her by its harshness. "Don't make a joke of it, Mrs. Carstairs. If I thought you really meant that——"

"But I do—or did." She spoke coolly. "I even went so far as to purchase the means of indulging my fancy."

"You did? But—forgive me—why?"

"Don't we all sigh for oblivion now and then?" She put the question calmly, looking him squarely in the face the while. "I have always understood that morphia is one of the roads into Paradise—a Fool's Paradise, no doubt, but we poor wretches can't always choose our heavens."

"Nor our hells!" He still spoke vehemently. "Yes, there are times in all our lives when oblivion, forgetfulness, seems very desirable, very alluring. But let me entreat you, Mrs. Carstairs, not to seek to enter Paradise by that devil's key!"

Her almond-shaped eyes grew still more narrow as she looked at him.

"I wonder why you speak so impressively," she said slowly. "As a doctor doubtless you are *au fait* in the subject, yet your vehemence seems to imply——" She paused.

"As a doctor I've seen enough of the havoc the opium fiend plays in the lives of men—and women," he said steadily, "to realize the danger that lies in the insidious habit. I have seen women—women like you"—he had no idea of sparing her—"young, of good position and all the rest of it, who have slid into the deadly thing on the flimsiest of pretexts—and then, too late, have realized they are bound—for life—with fetters which cannot be broken."

"Yet the deadly thing is fascinating, isn't it? Else why do so many fall under its sway?"

"Fascinating?" With an inward shudder Anstice recalled those months after Hilda Ryder's death—those horrible, chaotic months when, in a vain endeavour to stifle thought, to deaden remorse, he had invoked the aid of the poppy, and by so doing had almost precipitated a moral catastrophe which should have been more overwhelming than the first. "For God's sake, Mrs. Carstairs, don't become obsessed by that idea. The morphia habit is one degrading slavery of mind and body, and only the miserable victims know how delusive are its promises, how unsatisfactory its rewards. What can you expect from a cult whose highest reward—the only thing, indeed, it has to offer you, is—oblivion?"

Chloe Carstairs did not reply. Instead, she turned away and moved across the room to a small

black escritoire which stood against the white wall. Bending down she opened it, and after pressing a spring, released what appeared to be a secret drawer. From this she lifted out a little packet wrapped in white paper and sealed with red wax, and holding it in her hand she came slowly back to where Anstice stood, made vaguely uncomfortable by her curious, almost secretive manner.

"Dr. Anstice"—she held out the packet—"will you take charge of this for me? It is the key—what you called the devil's key just now—to the Paradise I have never had the courage to enter."

Anstice took the little parcel from her with something of sternness in his face.

"Yes, Mrs. Carstairs. But what, exactly, is this thing?"

"An hypodermic syringe and a supply of morphia," she informed him tranquilly. Then, as he pursed his lips into an involuntary whistle, she went on, with more than a hint of mockery in her manner: "Oh, I came by it quite honestly, I assure you! I didn't steal it from a doctor's surgery—I bought it at a chemist's shop in London."

"You did?"

"Yes, and I made the young man show me how to use it." She smiled rather ironically. "Naturally I was ignorant in the matter, and I didn't want to make a blunder in its use."

"Really? Well, Mrs. Carstairs, this is your property, but I wish I might persuade you to leave it in my keeping for the present."

"You think it would be safer there?" She looked at him as though considering the matter. "Well, I wonder?"

"You wonder—what?" He spoke dryly.

"Whether it *is* safer with you. Of course, as a doctor you can get plenty of your own——"

"I shan't be tempted to steal yours for my private use," said Anstice a trifle grimly; and the Fates who rule the lives of men probably smiled to themselves over the fatuity of mankind.

"Well, I gave it to you myself, so you may as well keep it," said Chloe indifferently, as though already tired of the subject; and without more ado Anstice slipped the little white packet into his pocket, and took leave of its former owner before she had opportunity to change her mind on the subject.

He could not dismiss the figure of Chloe Carstairs from his thoughts as he went about his day's work. Intuitively he knew that she was a bitterly unhappy woman, that her life, like his own, had been rent in two by a cataclysm of appalling magnitude, such as visits very few human beings, and he told himself that this woman, too, had been down in the depths even as he had been. And no man, no woman, who has once known the blackness of the abyss, that "outer darkness" in which the soul sits apart in a horror of loneliness, can ever view the world again with quite the clear-eyed vision of the normal human being to whom, fortunately for the sanity of the race, such appalling experiences are mercifully unknown.

On a morning a week later Anstice received a note from Mrs. Carstairs.

> "Dear Dr. Anstice,"
>
> "My brother has unexpectedly written to offer himself for a couple of nights, and I shall be pleased if you will come to dinner this evening at half-past seven to meet him. I have invited Miss Wayne, so please complete our quartette if you can."
>
> "Sincerely,"
>
> "Chloe Carstairs."

For some moments Anstice sat inwardly debating the question, the note in his hand.

He had no engagement for the evening. The people of Littlefield, puzzled, perhaps a little piqued, by the aloofness of his manner, rarely invited him to their houses in anything but his professional capacity, though they called upon his services in and out of season; and Sir Richard Wayne and Mr. Carey, the gentle, courtly Vicar of the parish, were the only two men with whom he ever enjoyed an hour's quiet chat over a soothing pipe or cigar.

So that there was no reason why he should hesitate to accept Chloe Carstairs' invitation for that particular evening, yet hesitate he did, unaccountably; and when, after fifteen minutes indecision, he suddenly scribbled and dispatched an acceptance, the messenger had barely gone from his presence before he felt an unreasoning impulse to recall the letter.

What lay at the bottom of his strange reluctance to enjoy Chloe's hospitality he had not the faintest notion. He had no special aversion to meeting her brother, nor was he in any way reluctant to improve his acquaintance with Iris Wayne.... Did his heart, indeed, beat just a shade faster at the thought of meeting her? Yet something seemed to whisper that this invitation was disastrous, that it would set in train events which might be overwhelming in their sequence.

He tried, vainly, to banish the faint premonition of evil which had fallen upon him when he realized it was too late to recall his acceptance. Throughout the day it persisted, and when at

length he went to his room to dress for the evening, he felt a strong inclination to excuse himself over the telephone on the plea of an urgent call to whose importance he could not turn a deaf ear.

Such an excuse would, he knew, pass muster well enough. A doctor can rarely be depended upon, socially, and when he was dressed he went downstairs with the intention of ringing up Cherry Orchard and regretting his inability to make a fourth at Mrs. Carstairs' dinner-table that night.

Yet at the last moment Fate, or that other Higher Power of which we know too little to speak with any familiarity, intervened to restrain his impulse, and with a muttered imprecation at his own unusual vacillation he turned away from the telephone and went out to his waiting car impatiently.

Arriving at Cherry Orchard, the elderly manservant relieved him of his coat with a deferential smile.

"I think I'm a little late, Hagyard." Anstice glanced at the grandfather clock in the corner. "Or perhaps your clock's a bit forward."

"I daresay it is, sir." Hagyard accepted the suggestion with well-trained alacrity. "Miss Wayne has only been here a moment or two."

He threw open the door as he spoke and Anstice entered the drawing-room with a sudden unwelcome return of his premonition strong upon him.

Yet the room, with its shaded lamps, small wood-fire, and latticed windows open to the sweet spring twilight, looked peaceful enough. As usual there were masses of flowers about, tulips, narcissi, anemones; and the atmosphere was fragrant as Anstice went forward to greet his hostess, who stood by one of the casements with her guests beside her.

She came towards him with her usual slow step, which never, for all its deliberation, suggested the languor of ill-health; and as he began to apologize for his late arrival she smiled away his apologies.

"You're not really late, Dr. Anstice, and in any case we should have given you a few minutes' grace."

She stood aside for him to greet Iris, and as he shook hands with the girl Anstice's heart gave a sudden throb of pleasure, which, for the moment, almost succeeded in banishing that uncanny premonition of evil which had come with him to the very gates of Cherry Orchard.

She was very simply dressed in a frock of filmy grey-green chiffon whose colour reminded him of the spiky leaves of a carnation; but he had never seen her look prettier than on that mild spring night; and his eyes unconsciously softened as they dwelt upon her face for one fleeting moment.

Then as Chloe's soft, deep voice, introducing her brother, stole on his ear, he turned to greet the other man; and instantly he realized, too late, the meaning of that presentiment of ill which had haunted him all day; understood why the inner, spiritual part of him had bidden him refuse Chloe Carstairs' invitation to Cherry Orchard that night.

For the man who turned leisurely from the window to greet the new-comer was the man whom he had last seen in a green-walled bedroom in an Indian hotel, the man whom, by a tragic error, he had robbed of the woman he loved, from whom he had parted with a mutual hope that their paths in life might never cross again.

Mrs. Carstairs' brother was the man whom Hilda Ryder had loved, Bruce Cheniston himself.

CHAPTER VI

As a rule the psychological moments of life come and go so quietly that their passing attracts little notice. Quite minor happenings give rise to demonstrations of excitement, of joy, of loudly voiced approbation or disappointment. But the moments which really matter in a life, which mark an epoch or destroy a dream, pass as a rule so quietly that only those whose dreams are shattered, or whose lives have been touched with the glory of the immortal, know that for a brief instant Time has become interchangeable with Eternity; that in the space of sixty fleeting seconds whole cycles of life have been lived through, and a vast and yawning gulf, in thought, in feeling, in spiritual growth or mental outlook, has opened to divide this moment from the one which directly preceded it.

Such a moment was this one in which the two men who were bound together by so tragic a link came face to face in Chloe Carstairs' drawing-room.

Each had been quite sincere in his dread of any future meeting; but whereas Bruce Cheniston had been the victim of as cruel a circumstance as ever deprived lover of his beloved, Anstice was the more to be pitied, inasmuch as to his own burden of regret must be added the knowledge that

through his premature action he had given another man the right to execrate his name so long as they both should live.

For a second Anstice wondered, growing cold whether Cheniston would refuse to shake hands with him. In his heart he knew quite well, had always known, that he had not been to blame in that bygone episode; that although he had done a thing which must haunt him for the rest of his life by reason of its tragic uselessness, as a man in whom a woman had trusted he had had no alternative but to act as he had acted.

Yet of all men on earth Cheniston might well question the necessity of his action; and Anstice told himself with a fast-beating heart that he would have no right to resentment should the other refuse to take his hand, to sit at meat with the man who had deprived Hilda Ryder of her share in the gracious inheritance of life in the world she had called so beautiful.

For a second, indeed, Cheniston himself hesitated, checked in the friendly greeting he had been about to bestow on his sister's visitor. He had arrived late that evening, and had been dismissed to dress with the hasty information that two guests were expected to dinner, but he had had no idea of the last arrival's identity; and to him, too, the meeting brought back with horrible poignancy that last bitter interview in the haunted East.

Then, for Bruce Cheniston was sufficiently just to acquit Anstice of any share in this untoward situation, he held out his hand with a cold courtesy which plainly betokened no intention of alluding to any former meeting.

"Good evening." Their hands touched, then fell apart. "You are a new-comer to Littlefield, I understand. Like the place?"

"Yes—in moderation," rejoined Anstice with equally frigid courtesy. "The country has its charms—at this season of the year."

"It has charms at all seasons, Dr. Anstice." Iris' light voice challenged him, even while her grey eyes noted the strange expression in his face. "I'm afraid you're not a real country lover if you qualify your affection by picking out a particular season!"

"You remind one of those people who love dogs—'in their proper place.'" Chloe's tone was delicately quizzical. "On inquiry you find their proper place is outside—in some kennel or inclosure as far away from the speaker as it is possible to get!"

"You can't be charged with that particular kind of affection, Chloe." There was an assertive note in Cheniston's voice when he spoke to his sister which was new to her. "You think a dog's proper place is the best armchair or the downiest bed in the house!"

For a second Chloe did not reply; and without waiting Bruce went on speaking.

"By the way, where are your dogs? I've not seen hide or hair of one since I arrived."

Again there was a short, but quite perceptible silence. Then Chloe said tranquilly:

"No wonder you haven't seen any dogs, Bruce. There aren't any to see."

"No dogs?" Bruce was frankly astonished. "Why, in the old days you used to declare you couldn't live without them!"

Just for a second a quiver of emotion convulsed Chloe's usually impassive face. Then she laughed, and Anstice thought her laugh almost painful in its artificiality.

"My dear Bruce," she said, "please remember the old days are as dead as—as Queen Anne. When I was young enough and foolish enough to believe in disinterested affection, and in the right of every creature to be happy, I adored dogs—or thought I did. Now I am wiser, and know that life is not all bones and playtime, so to speak. Besides, they always die when one is fond of them, and I quite agree with Kipling that with so much unavoidable discomfort to put up with, it's the height of folly to 'give one's heart to a dog to tear.' In future I yield no fraction of my heart to any living creature—not even a dog."

Certainly Chloe's drawing-room was a battlefield of conflicting emotions this evening. Just for a moment she had been shaken out of her usual poise, had spoken warmly, as a normal woman might have done; yet both Iris who loved her, and Anstice who had studied her, knew that this warmer manner, this apparent freedom of speech, was in reality the outward sign of some inward disturbance; and both guessed, vaguely, that the meeting with her brother, who had not been in England for several years, was the cause of her unusual animation.

Fortunately as she finished speaking the gong which summoned them to dinner began to sound; and a moment later Bruce offered his arm to Iris and led her into the dining-room, followed by Anstice and his hostess.

Not appearing to notice his proffered arm, Chloe walked beside him in a sudden pensive silence which Anstice found oddly appealing after her impetuous speech; and for a moment he forgot his own equivocal position in a desire to help her through what he guessed to be a trying moment.

Once seated at the pretty round table things became easier. The room was softly lit by innumerable candles—a fancy of Chloe's—and in their tender light both women looked their best. As usual Mrs. Carstairs wore white, the fittest setting, Anstice thought, for her pale and tragic

grace; but to-night she had thrown a wonderful Chinese scarf round her shoulders, and the deep blue ground, embroidered with black and green birds and flowers, gave an unusually distinctive note to her elusive personality. Opposite to her Iris, in her filmy grey-green frock, a big bunch of violets at her breast, wore the look of a nymph, some woodland creature whose fragrant charm and youthful freshness were in striking contrast to Chloe's more finished beauty.

The conversation, once started, ran easily enough. Although he never mentioned India, Cheniston was ready enough to talk of Egypt, where for some years he had made his home; and Iris, to whose young imagination the very name of that mysterious land was a charm, listened entranced to his description of a trip he had lately taken up the Nile.

"You are an engineer, Mr. Cheniston?" Anstice interpolated a polite question and Cheniston answered in the same tone.

"Yes. And engineering in the land of the Pharaohs is no joke. You must remember that we, as engineers, are only now where they were thousands of years ago. I mean that our present-day feats, the Dam at Assouan, wonderful as it is, and the rest, are mere child's play compared with the marvels they constructed in their day."

"So I have been told before." Only Anstice knew how hard it was to sit there conversing as though he and this man shared no tragic memory in common. "But if Egyptologists are to be believed there is hardly any invention, any scientific discovery—so called—which wasn't known to the Egyptians many thousands of years before the birth of Christ."

"They even possessed aeroplanes, didn't they?" asked Iris, smiling; and Bruce Cheniston turned to her with an involuntary softening in his rather harsh voice.

"So it is stated, I believe," he said, with an answering smile. "And it is generally believed that in the lost Continent of Atlantis——"

He went on talking, not monopolizing the conversation, but keeping it going so skilfully that Iris, at least, did not recognize the fact that both Mrs. Carstairs and Anstice were more than ordinarily silent as the meal progressed.

When the short but perfect dinner was finished Chloe rose.

"We will have coffee in the drawing-room, Bruce," she said as she moved slowly to the door. "If you are not too long over your cigarettes I daresay Miss Wayne will sing for us."

"With that inducement we shall soon follow you," said Cheniston gravely; and as Iris passed through the door which Anstice held open for her she gave him a friendly little smile which somehow nerved him for the ordeal which he foresaw to be at hand.

Closing the door he came back again to the table, but did not yet sit down. Bruce had already reseated himself and was pouring out a glass of port, an operation he interrupted with a perfunctory apology.

"Forgive me—pray help yourself." He pushed the decanter across the table, but Anstice shook his head.

"No, thanks." He hesitated a moment, then plunged into the subject which must surely be uppermost in both their minds. "See here, Cheniston, I should like you to understand that when I accepted Mrs. Carstairs' kind hospitality to-night I had no idea you were the brother I was to meet."

For a second Cheniston said nothing, his brown hand playing absently with a pair of nutcrackers beside him. Then he raised his head and looked Anstice squarely in the face.

"I am quite ready to believe that," he said slowly. "I can hardly conceive any circumstances in which you would care to run the risk of a meeting with me."

"Quite so." Something in Cheniston's manner made Anstice suddenly angry. "Though I would ask you, in common fairness, to believe that my distaste for such a meeting rises rather from my reluctance to remind you of the past than from any acknowledgment that you have a right to resent my presence."

Again Bruce Cheniston looked him in the face; and this time there was a genuine surprise in his blue eyes.

"I don't think I have given you reason to suppose I resent meeting you," he said with a new note in his voice, a note of something more definitely like hostility than he had hitherto permitted himself to show. "Since you have started the subject I may say that as a rule one doesn't greet as a brother the man who has robbed one of one's most treasured possession—I'm speaking metaphorically, of course—but I think you can hardly find fault with my—hesitation just now."

"Oh, you have been politeness itself," said Anstice, rather bitterly. "And in return for your forbearance I will relieve you of my unwelcome presence immediately. Luckily my profession makes it easy for me to behave with what, in another man, would appear discourtesy."

He turned towards the door; but Bruce's voice arrested him midway.

"One moment, Dr. Anstice." His tone was less openly hostile. "Don't go yet, please. There are still

one or two things to be said between us. Will you do me the favour of sitting down again and letting us talk a little?"

"I don't see what good will come of it, but I'll stay if you wish." Anstice returned to the table, and drawing out a chair—the one which Iris had occupied during the meal—he sat down and lighted a cigarette with a slightly defiant air.

"To begin with"—Cheniston spoke abruptly—"I gather you know my sister's story—know the bitter injustice that has been done to her in this damned place?"

Rather taken aback Anstice hesitated before replying, and Cheniston continued without waiting for him to speak:

"I say you know it, because my sister has a code of honour which forbids her welcoming to her house anyone who is ignorant of that horrible chapter in her history. And since I find you here, not only as a doctor, but as a friend, I gather you believe she was innocent of the charge against her."

"Most certainly I believe in Mrs. Carstairs' innocence." He spoke warmly now.

"For that, at least, I am grateful to you." His tone did not betray overwhelming gratitude, yet Anstice felt a sudden lightening of his spirit. "To me, of course, it is absolutely inconceivable how anyone could believe my sister guilty of such a degrading crime—or series of crimes—but doubtless I am biassed in her favour. Still, you are a new acquaintance, and don't know her as I do; so that I am grateful to you for your clear-sightedness in the matter."

He broke off for a moment to drink some wine. Then:

"I should like to ask you one question. Does my sister know of that episode in India? I mean, of course, of your share in the affair?"

"No. And," said Anstice, "it has been puzzling me for the last couple of hours to understand how it is that she has not connected my name with you. Didn't she know it at the time?"

"I daresay. But you must remember that my sister has gone through a great deal since that day, three years ago. Very soon after that she became involved in that terrible chain of events which led to her public humiliation; and I haven't a shadow of doubt that the names of the actors in the tragedy which broke up my life vanished completely from her memory. As you may have noticed, Chloe is a self-centred woman. Her sympathies are not deep, nor her interests wide. Her own life is a good deal more interesting to her than the lives of other people—it is generally so with strong characters, I believe—and after all, her own tragedy has been so appalling that she may be excused if she has not a very keen curiosity for those of others."

"I quite agree with you. But"—it was Anstice's turn to look Cheniston fully in the face—"do I understand you wish me to tell your sister of our former—acquaintance?"

After his question there fell a silence, during which Anstice had time to study the other man more fully than he had hitherto done.

Like himself, Cheniston had altered since that day in India. Although still sunburned and florid, a typical young Englishman in his square-shouldered build and general air of clean fitness, there was something in his face which had not been there before, which warred oddly with the youth which still lurked in the blue eyes and round the clean-shaven mouth. The boyishness had vanished from his features, taking with it all hint of softness; and in its place was a hard, assertive look, the look of one who, having been once worsted in a bout with Fate, through no fault of his own, was determined for the future to keep a sharp lookout for his own interests and well-being.

That it was a stronger face there was no denying, but it was also a far less attractive one than that which Bruce Cheniston, the boy, had presented to the world.

At another moment Anstice would have found occasion for interested speculation in the question as to whether or no this new man were the real Bruce Cheniston—the Cheniston who would eventually have come to the surface no matter how his life had been ordained; and as a psychologist he would have found pleasure in debating the subject in all its aspects. But as things were he was too miserably conscious that to him, indirectly, this change from boy to man was due to take any interest in the subtler question as to whether, after all, the alteration was only the logical outcome of the man's true character, uninfluenced by external happenings.

"No." Cheniston spoke so suddenly that Anstice started. "On the whole I see no reason why my sister need be told the truth. Of course, one day the similarity of name may flash upon her, and then, naturally, she must be told."

"Quite so." Anstice played with an empty glass for a moment. "As a matter of fact I should really prefer Mrs. Carstairs to know the truth. Of course the decision rests with you; but if you see your way to telling her the story, pray don't be held back from doing so by any scruples on my account. Besides——"

Suddenly, so suddenly that he broke off involuntarily in his sentence, the notes of the piano rang out from the room across the hall, and without thinking what he did he rose hastily to his feet.

"Miss Wayne is going to sing." Cheniston followed his lead politely. "Shall we go and listen to the concert, Anstice?"

"As you like. Forgive my abruptness, Cheniston." He had realized he had acted unconventionally. "Miss Wayne's singing is a treat one doesn't want to lose."

With a queer little smile Cheniston led the way across the hall, and they entered the drawing-room, Iris bringing her prelude to a close as the door opened to admit them.

"Come and sit down, Dr. Anstice." Chloe indicated a deep chair beside the piano, and nothing loth, Anstice sat down as directed, while Cheniston, his face a little in shadow, stood by one of the widely-opened casements, through which the scents of the sleeping garden stole softly, like a benison from the heart of the pitiful earth.

A moment later Iris began to sing, and once again her rich, soft tones seemed to cast a spell over Anstice's troubled, bitter spirit.

From his low seat he had an unimpeded view of the singer. Her profile, shaded by her soft, fair hair, looked unusually pure and delicate in the candlelight, and as she sang the rise and fall of her breast in its fold of filmy chiffon, the motion of her hands over the ivory keys, the sweet seriousness of her expression, gave her an appearance of radiant, tender youth which held an appeal as potent as it was unconscious.

When she had finished her song, the last notes dying away into silence, Cheniston came forward quickly.

"Miss Wayne, you sing beautifully. May we ask for another song? You're not tired, are you?"

He bent over her as he spoke, and something in his manner, something subtly protective, made Anstice's heart beat with a sudden fierce jealousy which he knew to be quite unjustifiable.

"No, I'm not in the least tired." Iris lifted her grey eyes frankly to Cheniston's face, and again Anstice, watching, felt a pang of whose nature he could have no doubt. He rose from his chair, with a half-formed intention of adding his entreaties to those of Cheniston, but sank back again as he realized the favour was already won.

"I will sing with pleasure." Iris turned on the music-stool to glance at her hostess, and Anstice saw her face, pearly and luminous in the soft candlelight. "Mrs. Carstairs, you like Dvorak. Shall I sing you one of his gipsy songs?"

"Please, Iris." Few words of endearment ever passed between the two, yet each felt something like real affection for the other, and Chloe's deep voice was always gentle when she spoke to Iris.

The next moment Cheniston stepped back and took up his former position on the far side of the piano; and Iris began the simple little melody which Dvorak acquired from the gipsies of his native land.

> "Songs my mother taught me
> In the days long vanished!"

So far Anstice heard the pure, soft voice; and suddenly he felt a half-shy, half-reverential wonder as to what manner of woman she had been who had brought this adorable girl into the world. Surely Fate had been cruel to this unknown woman, inasmuch as Death had been permitted to snatch her away before her eyes had been gladdened by the vision of her child grown into this priceless, this wonderful youth, which held a hint of a yet more gracious, yet more desirable womanhood....

And then the second verse stole softly on the quiet air....

> "Now I teach my children
> Each melodious measure...."

Again did one, at least, of Iris' hearers lose the remaining lines. For to Anstice these words brought another vision—a vision in which Iris, this fair-haired girl who looked so adorably young and sweet, bent over a little child whose rose-leaf face was a baby replica of her own....

And suddenly Anstice knew, knew irrevocably, beyond shadow of doubt, that he wanted Iris Wayne for himself, that she was the one woman in all the world he desired to make his wife....

With a wild throb of his heart he looked up—to find Bruce Cheniston's eyes fixed upon his face with a half-mocking smile in their blue depths, of whose hostile meaning there could be no question.

An hour or so later, when the guests had departed, and Cheniston had finished a solitary pipe downstairs, he went up, yawning, to bed. Passing his sister's open door he heard her call him, and after a second's indecision he answered the summons, wondering why she were not already

asleep.

Chloe was sitting by the open window, wearing a thin grey wrapper which made her look curiously pale and ethereal. Her thick hair hung in two heavy plaits over her shoulders, and in the dim light her face showed indistinctly in its silky black frame.

"Chloe, why aren't you in bed?" Bruce paused half-way across the room.

"I'm not sleepy," she said indifferently. "I often sit here half the night. Bruce"—her voice grew more alert—"have you and Dr. Anstice met before?"

"Yes," he said, "we have. But why do you ask?"

"I thought there was something rather curious about your meeting," she answered slowly. "At first I could not understand it, and then it dawned upon me that you had met—and distrusted one another—before."

"Distrusted?" He stared at her. "That isn't the right word, Chloe. We *have* met before—in India. I almost wonder you yourself didn't realize that fact, but I suppose you were not sufficiently interested——"

She interrupted him without ceremony.

"I? But how should I realize ... unless"—suddenly her intuition serving her as it serves so many women, she grasped the truth with a quickness which surprised even her brother—"was that the name of the man who—you don't mean it was Dr. Anstice who ... who...."

He nodded.

"Yes. I see you've grasped the truth. Anstice is an uncommon name, and I'm surprised you did not recognize it earlier."

"I had forgotten it." She stared at him, her blue eyes narrowing as her mind worked quickly. "I see now. Dr. Anstice is the man——"

"Who shot Hilda Ryder." Cheniston finished her sentence for her calmly, but she saw him whiten beneath his tan. "Yes. He is the man all right. We met, once, in Bombay—afterwards. And now you know why our meeting to-night was not calculated to give either of us any great pleasure."

"Yes. I know now." She spoke slowly, almost meditatively. "And I know, too, why he always looks so sad. Bruce, from the bottom of my heart I pity that man."

"You do?" Bruce's eyebrows rose. "I confess I don't see why you should waste your pity on him. I think you might bestow a little more of it on me—though it is rather late for pity now."

"On you?" Slowly her blue gaze rested on his face. "Bruce, you don't compare your position with his? Surely even you can understand that he is a thousand times more to be pitied than you? I always thought there was a tragedy in Dr. Anstice's life. But I never dreamed it was quite so piteous as this."

Bruce uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"I didn't expect such sentimentality from you, Chloe. I gathered from your conversation before dinner that you were pretty well disillusioned by this time, and it rather surprises me to hear you pouring out your compassion on a man like Anstice, who certainly doesn't strike me as requiring any outside sympathy."

For a moment there was silence, while Chloe played absently with a bracelet she had just discarded. Then she said tranquilly:

"You never were overburdened with brains, Bruce, though I grant you do well in your own profession. But, if you fail to see the reason why Dr. Anstice is deserving of more compassion than you I'm afraid it's hopeless to expect anything very brilliant from you in the future."

Cheniston's eyes darkened and his jaw set itself aggressively. For a moment his sister found him an unfamiliar personality, and in her own indifferent way asked herself whether after all she had ever known her brother thoroughly.

Then as she was considering the problem, and finding it mildly attractive, Bruce turned on his heel and strode sulkily to the door.

"Good night," he said angrily as he reached it. "You're in one of your aggravating moods to-night, and it's no use me staying to talk to you."

"Not a bit of use," she assented serenely; and her brother went out, nearly falling over Tochatti, who was evidently about to seek admission to her mistress's room.

"Why on earth aren't you in bed, Tochatti?" His inward annoyance made him speak harshly; but Tochatti apparently bore no resentment.

She murmured something to which he paid scant attention; and then, standing aside for him to pass her, she quietly entered the room he had just quitted, and proceeded with her final duties for the night.

CHAPTER VII

For two or three weeks after his meeting with Mrs. Carstairs' brother, Anstice avoided both Cherry Orchard and Greengates.

From a chance word in the village he had learned that Bruce Cheniston was prolonging his visit to his sister; and that new and totally unreasoning jealousy which had assailed Anstice as he saw Cheniston bending over Iris Wayne at the piano told him with a horrid certainty that to the girl herself belonged the responsibility for this change in the young man's plans.

In his calmer moments Anstice could not help admitting the suitability of a friendship, at least, between the two. Although he had lost much of his attractive boyishness Cheniston was a good-looking fellow enough; and there was no denying the fact that he and Miss Wayne were a well-matched pair so far as youth and vitality and general good looks went; and yet Anstice could not visualize the pair together without a fierce, wild pang of jealousy which pierced his heart with an almost intolerable anguish.

For he wanted Iris Wayne for himself. He loved her; and therein lay tragedy; for he told himself miserably that he had no right to ask her to couple her radiant young life with his, already overshadowed by that past happening in India.

Not only that, but he was already over thirty, she but eighteen; and Sir Richard Wayne's daughter was only too well provided with this world's goods, while he, with all his training, all his toil, was even yet a comparatively poor man, with nothing to offer the girl in exchange for the luxurious home from which he would fain take her.

On every count he knew himself to be ineligible; and in the same flash of insight he saw Bruce Cheniston, young, good-looking, distinguished in his profession, in the receipt of a large salary; and owned to himself, with that clarity of vision which rarely failed him, that Cheniston, rather than he, was a fit suitor for Iris Wayne.

On several occasions during those weeks of May he saw the two together; and each time this happened he felt as though the sun had vanished from the sky, as though the soft breezes of early summer were turned to the cold and hopeless blast of an icy north-easter.

Cheniston had a motor-bicycle on which he intended to explore the district; and on finding a kindred spirit in Miss Wayne he had inaugurated a series of expeditions in which she was his companion; while Chloe Carstairs and Cherry would motor forth in the same direction and share a picnic lunch at some wayside hostelry—an arrangement which afforded unbounded pleasure to some members, at least, of the quartette.

That Cheniston was strongly attracted by Iris, Anstice did not doubt. On one unlucky Sunday he had received an invitation from Greengates, which, delivered as it was in person by Sir Richard himself, could not have been refused without discourtesy; and in the middle of the evening Cheniston had dropped in casually with a message from his sister, and had stayed on with an easy certainty of welcome which betokened a rapid growth in favour with both father and daughter.

What Iris' feelings towards the new-comer might be Anstice had no means of discovering. Her manner towards him was delightfully girlish and simple, and it was plain to see that she was fascinated by his accounts of life in the wonderful Egypt which holds always so strong an attraction for the romantic temperament; but with all her young *insouciance* Iris Wayne was not one to wear her heart upon her sleeve; and her friendliness never lost that touch of reticence, of unconscious dignity which constituted, to Anstice, one of her greatest charms.

Towards himself, as an older man and one whose life naturally ran on contrasting lines, her manner was a little less assured, as though she were not quite certain of her right to treat him as one on a level with herself; but the tinge of girlish deference to which, as he guessed, his profession entitled him in her eyes, was now and then coloured with something else, with a hint of gentleness, not unlike compassion, which was oddly, dangerously sweet to his sore and lonely heart.

Somehow the idea of marriage had never previously entered his head. Before the day which had, so to speak, cut his life in two, with a line of cleavage dividing the careless past from the ever-haunted future, he had been too busy, too much occupied in preparation for the brilliant career which he felt would one day be his, to allow thoughts of marriage to distract him from his chosen work. And since that fatal day, although his old enthusiasm, his old belief in himself and his capabilities, had long ago receded into the dim background, he had never consciously thought of any amelioration of the loneliness, the bitter, regretful solitude in which he now had his being.

Yet the thought of Iris Wayne was oddly, uncomfortably distracting; and in those weeks of May, during which he deliberately denied himself the sight of her, Anstice's face grew haggard, his eyes more sunken beneath their straight black brows.

Yet Fate ordained that he should meet her, more, do her service; and the meeting, with its subsequent conversation, was one which Iris at least was destined never to forget.

One grey and cloudy morning when the sun had forgotten to shine, and the air was warm and moist, Anstice was driving his car along a country road when he espied her sitting by the wayside with a rather woe-begone face.

Her motor-bicycle was beside her and she was engaged in tying a knot, with the fingers of her left hand aided by her teeth, in a roughly-improvised bandage which hid her right wrist.

On seeing his car she looked up; and something in the rather piteous expression of her grey eyes made him slow down beside her.

"What's wrong, Miss Wayne? Had a spill?"

She answered him ruefully.

"Yes. At least my motor skidded and landed me in the road. And I cut my wrist on a sharp stone—look!"

She held up a cruelly-jagged flint; and Anstice sprang out of his car and approached her.

"I say, what a horrid-looking thing! Let me see your wrist, may I? I think you'd better let me bind it up for you."

"Will you?" She held out her wrist obediently, and taking off the handkerchief which bound it he saw that it was really badly cut, the blood still dripping from the wound.

"Ah, quite a nasty gash—it would really do with a stitch or two." He hesitated, looking at her thoughtfully. "Miss Wayne, what's to be done? You can't ride home like that, and yet we can hardly leave your motor-bike on the roadside."

He paused a second, his wits at work. Then his face cleared.

"I know what we'll do," he said. "Round this corner is a cottage where a patient of mine lives. We'll go in there, dispatch her son to look after the bike till I patch you up, and then if you can't manage to ride home we'll think of some other arrangement."

Iris rose, gladly, from her lowly seat.

"That's splendid, Dr. Anstice. I'm sure I can ride home if you will stop this stupid bleeding."

"Good." He liked her pluck. "Jump into my car and we'll go and interview Mrs. Treble."

"What an odd name!"

"Yes, isn't it? And by a strange coincidence her maiden name was Bass!"

Iris laughed, and a little colour came into her pale cheeks as they sped swiftly round the corner in search of the oddly-named lady's abode.

Mrs. Treble, who was engaged in hanging out the weekly washing in the small garden, was all sympathy at the sight of the young lady's wounded wrist, and invited them into the parlour and provided the basin of water and other accessories for which Anstice asked with a cheerful bustle which took no account of any trouble involved.

When she had dispatched her son, an overgrown lad who had just left school, to keep watch over the motor-cycle, Mrs. Treble requested the doctor's leave to continue her work; and nothing loth, Anstice shut the door upon her and gave his attention to his pale patient.

He had brought in a small leather case from his car, and after cleansing the wound he selected a needle and some fine wire in order to put in the necessary stitches, watched the while by a pair of interested, if somewhat apprehensive eyes.

"I won't hurt you, Miss Wayne." Somehow he felt oddly reluctant to inflict even a pinprick of pain on this particular patient. "I'm awfully sorry, but I'm afraid I really must put in a couple of stitches. I'll be as gentle as I can."

Iris laughed, rather shamefacedly.

"You think I am a coward," she said, "and you're quite right. I openly confess I dread bearing pain, probably because I've never known anything worse than toothache in my life!"

"Toothache can be the very—er—deuce," he said. "I once had it myself, and ever since then I've had the liveliest sympathy for any poor victim!"

"But there are so many other pains, so much worse, that it seems absurd to talk of mere toothache as a real pain," she objected, and Anstice laughed.

"Quite so, but you must remember that the other 'real pains' have alleviations which are denied to mere toothache. One's friends do at least take the other things seriously, and offer sympathy as freely as more potent remedies; while the sight of a swollen face is apt to cause one's relations a quite heartless amusement!"

"Well, it must be a consolation to be taken seriously," she said, "and I do think sympathy is wonderfully cheering. Are all doctors as sympathetic as you, Dr. Anstice?"

For a moment Anstice suspected her of mockery. He was well aware that for all his real sympathy

with acute suffering he was not remarkable for patience in cases of less reality; and he knew that the people whose ailments belonged to the latter category were apt to find his manner abrupt and unsympathetic.

But a glance at Iris' face showed him she had spoken in good faith; and he answered her in the same spirit.

"There are a good many men in the world who are far more sympathetic with suffering humanity than I, Miss Wayne." For a moment his face clouded, and Iris noticed the change wonderingly. "I'm afraid my manner isn't all it might be. It isn't that I'm not genuinely sorry for people who are, or think themselves, ill; but ..." for a second he hesitated, then a quite unusual impulse drove him into speech, "... the fact is, I once had a knock-down blow myself; and curiously enough it seemed to dull my capacity for entering into the sufferings of others."

She took him up with unexpected comprehension.

"I think I can understand that. It has always seemed to me that it is not the people who have suffered who sympathize ... they understand, if you know what I mean, but they aren't just sorry like the people who haven't had any sorrows of their own to spend their pity on...."

She broke off abruptly, and with equal abruptness Anstice suspended operations to ask, with a solicitude which belied his earlier speech, whether he were hurting her very badly.

"No ... not at all ... at least, hardly at all," she answered honestly. "I was just wishing I could explain myself better. Now take Mrs. Carstairs, for instance." Iris knew that Chloe had told Anstice her story. "She has suffered as very few people like her have to do, but I don't think it has made her exactly what you call sympathetic."

"That is just what I mean," said Anstice. "Somehow I think suffering is apt to destroy one's nerve of sympathy for others. It atrophies, withers away in the blast of one's personal tragedy; and although Mrs. Carstairs might be able to enter into the feelings of another unhappy woman more fully than—well, than you could do, I think you would be more likely to feel what we call 'sorry for' that woman than she would be."

"I'm glad you agree with me," said Iris slowly. "Dr. Anstice, would you think me very—impertinent—if I say I'm sorry you have been—unhappy—too? I—somehow I always thought you"—she stopped, flushed, but continued bravely—"you looked so sad sometimes I used to wonder if you too had suffered, like poor Mrs. Carstairs."

For a moment Anstice's fingers faltered in their task, and the girl's heart missed a beat as she wondered whether she had said too much.

Then:

"Miss Wayne"—Anstice's voice reassured her even while it filled her with a kind of wondering foreboding—"I should never find any impertinence in any interest *you* might be kind enough to express. I have suffered—bitterly—and the worst of my suffering lies in the fact that others—one other at least besides myself—were involved in the ill I unwittingly wrought."

Again her answer surprised him by the depth of comprehension it conveyed.

"That, too, I can understand," said Iris gently. "I have often tried to imagine how one must feel when one has unknowingly harmed another person; and it has always seemed to me that one would feel as one does when one has spoken unkindly, or impatiently, at least, to a child."

For a second Anstice busied himself in bandaging the slim wrist he held. Then, without looking up, he said:

"You have thought more deeply than many girls of your age, Miss Wayne. I wonder if you would extend your pity to me if you knew the nature of my particular tragedy."

A sudden spatter of rain against the window-pane made them both look up in surprise; and in a lighter tone Anstice said:

"A sharp shower, I see. I've finished my work, you'll be glad to hear, but I think it will be wiser to wait here till the rain's over. Will your cycle take any harm?"

"Oh, no, it can be dried at home," said Iris rather absently; and both of them were too much preoccupied to expend any of their talked-of sympathy on the overgrown youth patiently guarding the motor by the roadside.

"Come and try an easier chair, won't you?" Anstice pushed forward a capacious rocking-chair and Iris took it obediently, while Anstice leaned against the table regarding her rather curiously.

"Miss Wayne." Suddenly he felt a quite overwhelming desire to admit this girl into his jealously-guarded confidence. "From something you said just now I gathered that you had been good enough to spare a thought for me now and then. Does that mean that your kindness would extend so far as to allow you to listen to a very short story in which I, unfortunately, am the principal character?"

"I am ready to listen to anything you care to tell me," she said gently; and looking into her steadfast grey eyes Anstice told himself that a man could desire no sweeter, more trustworthy

confidante.

"Well"—he sighed—"here is the story. Once, in India, I found myself in a tight place, with a woman, a girl, who was almost a perfect stranger to me. We had unwittingly trespassed into a native Temple, and the penalty for such trespass was—death."

He paused a second, wondering whether she had heard Bruce Cheniston's story; but although there was deep interest there was no recognition in her quiet attention; and he hurried on.

"She—the girl—made me promise not to allow her to fall into the hands of the natives. Whether she was correct in her fears of what might happen to her I don't know; but I confess I shared them at the time. Anyhow I promised that if help did not come before dawn—we were to die at sunrise—I would shoot her with my own hand."

Again he paused; and the horror in Iris' grey eyes deepened.

"Well, help did come—ten minutes too late. I was standing with my back against the wall, the guns were levelled at my heart, when the rescuers burst into the courtyard and the natives fled. But I had shot the girl ten minutes earlier...."

Anstice's brow was wet with drops of sweat as he finished, his whole being convulsed with reminiscent agony; and he turned aside lest he should read shrinking, or worse, condemnation in the grey eyes which had never left his face.

There was a silence in which to the man who waited the whole world seemed to halt upon its axis, as though aghast at the brief recital which was almost Greek in its sense of inevitable tragedy; and for a wild, hateful moment Anstice told himself that for all her boasted comprehension Iris had not the power to understand the full force of the situation.

Then, suddenly, he found her beside him. She had left her chair, noiselessly, as he turned away, and now she was standing close to him, her hand on his arm, her grey eyes, full of the sweetest, most divine compassion, seeking his ravaged face.

"Oh, you poor thing!" The pity in her voice made it sound like the softest music. "What a dreadfully sad story; and how you must have suffered. But"—her kind little hand tightened on his arm—"why should you reproach yourself so bitterly? You did the only thing it was possible for you to do. No man living could have done anything else."

He turned to her now, and he had recaptured his self-control.

"It is sweet—and kind—of you to say just that." Even now his voice was not quite steady. "And if I could believe it—but all the time I tell myself if I had only waited ... there would perhaps have been a chance ... I was too quick, too ready to obey her request, to carry out my promise...."

"No, Dr. Anstice." In Iris' voice was a womanliness which showed his story had reached the depths of her being. "I'm quite certain that's the wrong way to look at it. As things were, there was nothing else to be done, *nothing*. If I had been the girl," said Iris quietly, "I should have thought you very cruel if you had broken your promise to me."

"Ah, yes," he said, slowly; "but you see there is another factor in the case which I haven't told you—yet. She was engaged to be married—and by acting prematurely I destroyed the hopes of the man who loved her—whom she loved to the last second of her life."

This time Iris was silent so long that he went on speaking with an attempt at a lighter tone.

"Well, that's the story—and a pretty gloomy one, isn't it? But I have no right to inflict my private sorrows on you, and so——"

She interrupted him as though she had not heard his last words.

"Dr. Anstice, when you realized what had happened, what did you do? I mean, when you came back to England? I suppose you did come back, after that?"

"Yes. I had an interview with the man—the girl's *fiancé* and came home." He shrugged his shoulders, a bitter memory chasing away the softer emotions of the preceding moment. "What did I do? Well, I did what a dozen other fellows might have done in my place. I sought forgetfulness of the past by various means, tried to drown the thought of what had happened in every way I could, and merely succeeded in delivering myself over to a bondage a hundred times more terrible than that from which I was trying to escape."

For the first time Iris looked perplexed.

"I don't think I understand," she said, and again Anstice's face changed.

"No," he said, and his voice was gentle, "of course you don't. And there's no reason why you should. Let us leave the matter at that, Miss Wayne. I am grateful to you for listening so patiently to my story."

"Ah," she said, and her eyes were wistful, "but I should like to know what you meant just now. Won't you tell me? Or do you think I am too stupid to understand?"

"No. But I think you are too young," he said; and the girl coloured.

"Of course if you would rather not——"

Something in her manner made him suddenly change his mind.

"There is no reason why I should make a mystery of it," he said. "I hesitated about telling you because—well, for various reasons; but after all you might as well know the truth. I tried to win forgetfulness by the aid of drugs—morphia, to be exact."

He had startled her now.

"You took morphia——?" Her voice was dismayed.

"Yes, for nearly six months I gave myself up to it. I told myself there was no real danger for me—I knew the peril of it so well. I wasn't like the people who go in ignorantly for the thing; and find themselves bound hand and foot, their lives in ruins round them. That is what I thought, in my folly." He sighed, and his face looked careworn. "Well, I soon found out that I was just like other people after all. I went into the thing, thinking I should find a way out of my troubles. And I was wrong."

"You gave it up?" Her voice was suddenly anxious.

"Yes. In the nick of time I came across an old friend—a friend of my student days, who had been looking for me, unknown to me, for months. He wanted me to do some research work for him—work that necessitated visiting hospitals in Paris and Berlin and Vienna—and I accepted the commission only too gladly."

"And—you gave up the terrible thing?"

"Yes. The new interest saved me, you know. I came back, after some months of hard work, and found my friend on the eve of starting with an expedition for Central Africa, to study tropical diseases; and had there been a place for me I would have gone too. But there wasn't; and I was a bit fagged, so after doing locum work for another friend for some time I looked about for a practice, bought this one—and here I am."

"Dr. Anstice "—she spoke shyly, though her eyes met his bravely—"you won't ever take that dreadful stuff again, will you? I am quite sure," said Iris Wayne, "that *that* is not the way out."

"No," he answered steadily, "you are quite right. It isn't. But I haven't found the way out yet." He paused a moment; then held out his hand, and she put her uninjured left hand into it rather wonderingly. "Still, I will not seek that way out again. I will promise—no, I won't promise, for I'm only human and I couldn't bear to break a promise to *you*—but I will do my best to avoid the deadly thing for the rest of my life."

He pressed her hand gently, then dropped it as a sudden loud knock sounded on the door.

"Come in." They turned to see who the visitor might be; and to the surprise of both in walked Bruce Cheniston, an unmistakable frown on his face.

"Hullo! It is you, after all, Iris!" Anstice noted the use of her Christian name, and in the same moment remembered there was a long-standing friendship between the families. "I thought it was your motor-cycle I found by the roadside, with a lanky yokel mounting guard over it; and he said something about an accident——"

"Nothing very serious." Iris smiled at him in friendly fashion, and his face cleared. "I skidded—or the bicycle did—and I fell off and cut my wrist."

"I found Miss Wayne sitting by the roadside binding up her wound," interposed Anstice rather coldly, "and persuaded her to come in here and have it properly seen to. If it had not been for the rain she would have been on her way home by now."

"I see. It was lucky you passed." Evidently Iris' presence prevented any display of hostility. "Well, the rain is over now, but"—he glanced at Iris' bandaged wrist—"you oughtn't to ride home if you're disabled. What do you say, Dr. Anstice?"

"I think, seeing it is the right wrist, it would be neither wise nor easy for Miss Wayne to ride," said Anstice professionally, and Cheniston nodded.

"Well, we will leave the cycle here, and send one of the men for it presently," he said. "Luckily I have got Chloe's car, and I can soon run you over, Iris. I suppose that is your motor outside?" he added, turning to Anstice with sudden briskness.

"Yes." Anstice glanced towards the window. "It is fine now, and I must be off, at any rate."

He packed the things he had used back into their little case, and turned towards the door.

"Good morning, Miss Wayne. I hope your wrist won't give you any further pain."

"Good-bye, Dr. Anstice." She held out her left hand with a smile. "Ever so many thanks. I don't know what I should have done if you had not passed just then!"

The trio went out together, after a word to the mistress of the cottage; and Bruce helped Iris into the car with an air of proprietorship which did not escape the notice of the other man.

"Hadn't you better start first, Dr. Anstice?" Cheniston spoke with cool courtesy. "Your time is

more valuable than ours, no doubt!"

"Thanks. Yes, I haven't time to waste." His tone was equally cool. "Good morning, Miss Wayne. 'Morning, Cheniston."

A moment later he had started his engine; and in yet another moment his car was out of sight round the corner of the road.

CHAPTER VIII

After the episode in the wayside cottage on that showery morning of May Anstice made no further attempt to avoid Iris Wayne.

The way in which she had received his story had lifted a weight off his mind. She had not shrunk from him, as in his morbid distrust he had fancied possible. Rather she had shown him only the sweetest, kindest pity; and it seemed to him that on the occasion of their next meeting she had greeted him with a new warmth in her manner which was surely intended to convey to him the fact that she had appreciated the confidence he had bestowed upon her.

Besides—like the rest of us Anstice was a sophist at heart—the kindness with which Sir Richard Wayne had consistently treated him was surely deserving of gratitude at least.

It would be discourteous, if nothing more, to refuse his invitations save when the press of work precluded their acceptance; and so it came about that Anstice once more entered the hospitable doors which guarded Greengates, incidentally making the acquaintance of Lady Laura Wells, Sir Richard's widowed sister, who kept house for him with admirable skill, if at times with rather overbearing imperiousness.

Sir Richard, for all his years, was hale and hearty and loved a game of tennis; so that when once Iris' wrist was healed there were many keenly contested games during the long, light evenings—games in which Iris, partnered either by Cheniston or Anstice, darted about the court like a young Diana in her short white skirt and blouse open at the neck to display the firm, round throat which was one of her greatest charms.

The antagonism between Anstice and Bruce Cheniston deepened steadily during these golden summer days. Had they met in different circumstances, had there been no question, however vague and undefined, of rivalry between them, it is possible there would have been no positive hostility in their mutual attitude. Any genuine friendship was naturally debarred, seeing the nature of the memory they shared in common; but it would have been conceivably possible for them to have met and recognized one another's existence with a neutrality which would have covered a real but harmless distaste for each other's society.

Having been forced, by an unkind Fate, into a position in which each saw in the other a possible rival, any neutrality was out of the question. It had not taken Anstice long to discover that Cheniston had so far recovered from the loss of Hilda Ryder as to consider the possibility of making another woman his wife; nor had Cheniston's eyes been less keen.

He had very quickly discovered that Anstice was in love with pretty Iris; and instantly a fire of opposition sprang into fierce flame in his heart; and to himself he said that this man, having once deprived him of his chosen woman, should not again be permitted to come between him and his desire.

True, he did not profess to love Iris Wayne as he had loved Hilda Ryder; for no other woman in the world could ever fill the place in his life left vacant by that untimely shot in the dawn of an Indian day.

Until the hour in which he learned of Miss Ryder's tragic death Bruce Cheniston had been an ordinary easy-going youth, cleverer in some ways than the average man, on a level with most as regarded his outlook on life and its possibilities. He had never been very deeply moved over anything. Things had always gone smoothly with him, and he had passed through school and college with quite passable success and complete satisfaction in himself and his surroundings. His love for Hilda Ryder was the best and highest thing in his whole life; and in his attempt to become what she believed him to be he rose to a higher mental and moral stature than he had ever before attained.

And then had come the tragedy which had deprived him at once of the girl he had loved and the incentive to a better, worthier manhood which her love had supplied. For her sake he could have done much, could have vanquished all the petty failings, the selfish weaknesses which marred his not otherwise unattractive character; but when Hilda Ryder vanished from his life he lost something which he never regained.

He grew older, harder, more cynical. His sunny boyishness, which had effectually masked the cold determination beneath, dropped from him as a discarded garment; and the real man, the man whose possibilities Hilda Ryder had dimly presaged and had resolved to conquer, came to the surface.

He felt, perhaps naturally, that he had a grudge against Fate; and the immediate result was to

eliminate all softness from his character, and replace such amiable weakness by a harsh determination to shape his life henceforth to his own design, if indeed strength of purpose and a relentless lack of consideration for any other living being could compass such an end.

Fate had beaten him once. He was determined such victory should be final; and during the last few years Bruce Cheniston had been known as a man who invariably achieved his object in whatever direction such achievement lay—a man of whom his friends prophesied that he would surely go far; while his enemies, a small number, certainly, for on the whole he was popular, labelled him ruthless in the pursuit of his particular aims.

Perhaps he was not to blame for the metamorphosis which followed Hilda Ryder's death. For the first time he had loved a human being better than himself; so that the reaction which fell upon his spirit when he realized that his love was no longer needed was in its very nature severe.

Never again would he rise to the height of greatness to which his love for Hilda Ryder had raised him; and whatever the quality of any affection he might in future bestow upon a woman, the spark of immortality, of selflessness, which had undoubtedly inspired his first and truest love, would never again be kindled in his heart.

Yet in his way Bruce was attracted to Iris Wayne. On their last meeting she had been a little schoolgirl, a pretty creature, certainly, but not to be compared with the beautiful and gracious Hilda, to whom he was newly betrothed. Yet now, on meeting her again, he was bound to confess that Iris was wonderfully attractive; and in a strangely short period of time he came, by imperceptible degrees, to look upon her as a possible successor to the woman he had lost.

The fact that Anstice too found her desirable was stimulating. One of Cheniston's newly-acquired characteristics was a tendency to covet any object on which another had set his heart; and although in matters of business this trait was possibly excusable enough, in this instance it seemed likely to prove fatal to Anstice's happiness.

Which of the two men Iris herself preferred it would have taken a magician to understand.

With Bruce she was always her gayest self, plying him with eager questions concerning his life in Egypt; and she was quite evidently flattered by the pains he took to charm and interest her with his picturesque narratives of experiences in the land of the Nile. He was, moreover, at her service at all times, always ready to take her motor-cycling, or to play tennis or golf with her; and although Iris was as free from vanity as any girl could possibly be, it was not unpleasing to her youthful self-esteem to find a man like Cheniston over ready at her beck and call.

With Anstice she was quieter, shyer, more serious; yet Sir Richard, who watched the trio, as it were from afar, had a suspicion sometimes that the Iris whom Anstice knew was a more real, more genuine person than the gay and frivolous girl who laughed through the sunny hours with the younger man.

So the days passed on; and if Anstice was once more living in a fools' Paradise, this time the key which unlocked the Gate of Dreams was made of purest gold.

In the middle of July Iris was to celebrate the eighteenth anniversary of her birth; and rather to Anstice's dismay he found that the event was to be marked by a large and festive merry-making—nothing less, in fact, than a dinner-party, followed by a dance to be held in the rarely-used ballroom for which Greengates had been once famous.

"You'll come, of course, Dr. Anstice?" Iris asked the question one sunny afternoon as she prepared an iced drink for her visitor, after a strenuous game of tennis. "You do dance, don't you? For my part I could dance for ever."

"I do dance, yes," he said, taking the tumbler she held out to him, with a word of thanks. "But I don't think a ball is exactly in my line nowadays."

"It's not a ball," she said gaily. "Aunt Laura doesn't approve of oven a dance, seeing I'm not really 'out' till I've been presented next year—but Dad has been a perfect dear and says we can dance as long as we like down here where none of our London relations can see us!"

"Well, dance or ball, I suppose it will be a large affair?" He smiled at her, and she told herself that he grew younger every day.

"About a hundred and fifty, I suppose," she said lightly. "The room holds two hundred, but a crowded room is hateful—though an empty one would be almost worse. Anyhow, you are invited, first of all. Dinner is at seven, because we want to start dancing at nine. Will you come?"

Just for a second he hesitated. Then:

"Of course I'll come," he said recklessly. "But you must promise me at least three dances, or I shall plead an urgent telephone call and fly in the middle!"

"Three!" Her grey eyes laughed into his. "That's rather greedy! Well—I'll give you two, and—

perhaps—an extra."

"That's a promise," he said, and taking out a small notebook he made an entry therein. "And now, in view of coming frivolities, I must go and continue my day's work."

He rose and looked round the lovely old garden rather regretfully.

"How lucky you are to be able to spend the summer days in such a cool, shady spot as this! I wish you could see some of the stuffy cottages I go into round here—windows hermetically sealed, and even the fireplaces, when there are any, blocked up!"

She looked at him rather strangely.

"Do you know. Dr. Anstice," she said, irrelevantly, it seemed, "I don't believe you ought to be a doctor. Oh, I don't mean you aren't very clever—and kind—but somehow I don't believe you were meant to spend your days going in and out of stuffy cottages and attending to little village children with measles and whooping-cough!"

"Don't you?" Anstice leaned against the trunk of the big cedar under which she sat, and apparently forgot the need for haste. "To tell you the truth I sometimes wonder to find myself here. When I was younger, you know, I never intended to go in for general practice. I had dreams, wild dreams of specializing. I was ambitious, and intended making some marvellous discovery which should revolutionize medical science...."

He broke off abruptly, and when he spoke again his voice held the old bitter note which she had not heard of late.

"Well, that's all over. I lost ambition when I lost everything else, and now I suppose I shall go on to the end of the chapter as a general practitioner, attending old women in stuffy cottages, and children with measles and whooping-cough!"

He laughed; but Iris' face was grave.

"But, Dr. Anstice"—she spoke rather slowly—"isn't it possible for you to go back to those dreams and ambitions? Suppose you were to start again—to try once more to make the discovery you speak of. Mightn't it ..." her voice faltered a moment, but her grey eyes were steady, "... mightn't that be the way out—for you?"

There was a sudden silence, broken only by the cooing of a wood-pigeon in a tall tree close at hand. Then Anstice said thoughtfully:

"I wonder? Supposing that were the way out, after all?"

Ha gazed at her with a long and steady gaze which was yet oddly impersonal, and she met his eyes bravely, though the carnation flush deepened in her cheeks. Just as she opened her lips to reply a new voice broke upon their ears.

"Good afternoon, Iris. Am I too late for a game of tennis?"

Bruce Cheniston, racquet in hand, had come round the corner of the shrubbery, and as she heard his voice Iris turned to him swiftly.

"Oh, good afternoon! You are late, aren't you? We waited for you ever so long, then as you did not come Dr. Anstice and I played a single."

"Oh." He looked rather curiously at the other man. "Which was the victor? You?"

"Oh, Dr. Anstice always beats me!" Iris laughed. "You and I are more evenly matched, Bruce—though I confess you generally win."

"Well, come and have a sett before the light goes." He glanced again at Anstice. "Unless Anstice is giving you your revenge?"

"No, I'm off." Anstice straightened himself and held out his hand. "Good-bye, Miss Wayne. Thanks so much for our game."

"Good-bye." She smiled at him with a hint of mischief in her eyes. "You won't forget the fifteenth? I shan't believe any excuses about urgent cases!"

He smiled too.

"I shan't tax your credulity," he said, "and I hope you won't forget your promise!"

Their mutual smile, and the hint of an understanding between them which Anstice's last words, perhaps intentionally, conveyed, brought a frown to Cheniston's bronzed forehead.

"Oh, by the way, Anstice"—he spoke very deliberately, looking the other man full in the face the while—"I want to have a chat with you—on a matter of some little importance to us both. When are you likely to be at liberty?"

The brightness died from Anstice's face; and when he answered his voice was devoid of any note of youth.

"I am generally at liberty late in the evening," he said coolly. "If the matter is important I can see you at nine o clock to-night. You'll come to my place?"

"Thanks." Bruce took out his cigarette case and having selected a cigarette handed the case to the other. "Then, if convenient to you, I will be round at nine this evening."

"Very good." Anstice declined a cigarette rather curtly. "If I should be unavoidably detained elsewhere I will ring you up."

"Right." Bruce picked up his racquet and turned to Iris as though to say the subject was closed. "Are you ready, Iris? You like this side best, I know."

And, with a sudden premonition of evil at his heart, Anstice turned away and left them together in the sunny garden.

CHAPTER IX

"Well, Dr. Anstice, I have come, as you see."

Cheniston entered the room on the stroke of nine, and Anstice turned from the window with an oddly reluctant movement.

The golden day was dying, slowly, in the west. In the clear green sky one or two silver stars shone steadily, and in the little garden beyond the house the white moths circled eagerly round the tall yellow evening primroses which reared arrogant heads among their sleeping brother and sister flowers.

Anstice's room was lighted only by a couple of candles, placed on the writing-table; but neither man desired a brilliant light to-night—Anstice because he realized that this interview was a fateful one, Cheniston because, although he had come here with the intention of making havoc of a man's life, he was not particularly anxious to watch that man's face during the process.

"Yes. I see you have come." Anstice pointed to a chair. "Sit down, won't you? And will you have a drink?"

"No, thanks." Somehow Anstice's manner made Cheniston feel uncomfortable; and it was suddenly impossible to accept hospitality of any kind from his rival.

"Well?" As Cheniston made no attempt to seat himself, Anstice, too, stood upright, and the two faced one another with the lighted candles between them.

"I wonder——" Cheniston drew out his cigarette case and selected a cigarette, which he proceeded to light with extreme care. "I wonder if you have any idea what I have come to say?"

On his side Anstice took a cigarette from an open box before him, but he did not light it, yet.

"I was never very good at guessing conundrums," he said coolly. "Suppose you tell me, without more ado, why you have—honoured me to-night?"

His tone, the deliberate pause before he uttered the word, showed Cheniston plainly that his motive was suspected, and his manner hardened.

"I will tell you, as you wish, without more ado," he said. "Only—it is always a little awkward to introduce a lady's name."

"Awkward, yes; and sometimes unnecessary." Anstice's eyes, stern beneath their level brows, met the other man's in a definitely hostile gaze. "Are you quite sure it is necessary now?"

"I think so." His tone was every whit as hostile. "The lady to whom I refer is, as you have doubtless guessed by now, Miss Wayne."

"I gathered as much from your manner." Anstice spoke coldly. "Well? I really don't see why Miss Wayne's name should be mentioned between us, but——"

"Don't you?" Cheniston's blue eyes gleamed in his brown face. "I think you do. Look here, Anstice. There is nothing to be gained by hedging. Let us fight fair and square, gloves off, if you like, and acknowledge that we both admire and respect Miss Wayne very deeply."

"I quite agree with that." Anstice's eyes, too, began to glitter. "And—having said so much, what then?"

"Well, having cleared the ground so far, suppose we go a little further. I think—you will correct me if I am wrong in my surmise—I think I am right in saying that we both cherish a dream in regard to Miss Wayne."

His unexpected phraseology made Anstice pause before he replied. There was a touch of pathos, an unlooked-for poetry about the words which seemed to intimate that whatever his attitude towards the world in general, Cheniston's regard for Iris Wayne was no light thing; and when he replied Anstice's voice had lost a little of its hostility.

"As to your dreams I can say nothing," he said quietly. "For mine—well, a man's dreams are surely his own."

"Certainly, when they interfere with no other man's visions." Bruce hesitated a moment. "But in this case—look here, Anstice, once before you shattered a dream of mine, broke it into a thousand fragments; and by so doing took something from my life which can never be replaced. I think you understand my meaning?"

White to the lips Anstice answered him:

"Yes. I do understand. And if ever a man regretted the breaking of a dream I have regretted it. But——"

"Wait." Cheniston interrupted him ruthlessly. "Hear me out. It is three years since that day in India when the woman I loved died by your hand. Oh"—Anstice had made an involuntary movement—"I am not here to heap blame upon you. I have since recognized that you could have done nothing else——"

"For that, at least, I thank you," said Anstice bitterly.

"But you can't deny you did me an ill turn on that fatal morning. And"—Cheniston threw away his cigarette impatiently—"are you prepared to make amends—now—or not?"

For a second Anstice's heart seemed to stop beating. Then it throbbed fiercely on again, for he knew he had guessed Bruce Cheniston's meaning.

"Make amends?" He spoke slowly to gain time. "Will you explain just what you mean?"

"Certainly." Yet for all his ready reply Cheniston hesitated. "I mean—we're both of us in love with Iris Wayne. Oh"—Anstice had muttered something—"let's be honest, anyway. As to which—if either—of us she prefers, I'm as much in the dark as you. But"—his voice was cold and hard as iron—"having robbed me of one chance of happiness, are you going to rob me—try to rob me—of another?"

In the silence which followed his last words a big brown moth, attracted by the yellow candlelight, blundered into the room, and began to flutter madly round the unresponsive flame; and in the poignant hush the beating of his foolish wings sounded loudly, insistently.

Then Anstice spoke very quietly.

"You mean I am to stand aside and let you have a fair field with the lady?" He could not bring himself to mention her name.

"Yes. That's just what I do mean." Cheniston spoke defiantly—or so it seemed to the man who listened.

Again the silence fell, and again the only sound to be heard was the soft flutter of the brown wings as the moth circled vainly round the candle flame which would inevitably prove fatal to him by and by.

"I see." Anstice's face was very pale now. "At least you do me the honour of looking upon me in the light of a possible rival."

"I do—and I'll go further," said Cheniston suddenly. "I have an uncomfortable notion that if you tried you could cut me out. Oh—I'm not sure"—he regretted the admission as soon as it was made—"after all, Miss Wayne and I are excellent friends, and upon my soul I sometimes dare to think I have a chance. But she has a great regard for you, I know, and if you really set out to win her——"

"I'm afraid you overrate my capabilities," said Anstice rather cynically. "Miss Wayne has certainly never given me the slightest reason to suppose she would be ready to listen to me, did I overstep the bounds of friendship."

"Of course not!" Cheniston smiled grimly. "Miss Wayne is not the sort of girl to give any man encouragement. But as a man of honour, Anstice"—again his voice cut like steel—"don't you think I have the prior right to the first innings, so to speak?"

"You mean I am to stand aside, efface myself, and let you chip in before me?" His colloquial speech accorded badly with his formal tone. "I quite see your point of view; and no doubt you think yourself justified in your demand; but still——"

"I do think I'm justified, yes," broke in Cheniston coolly. "After all, if one man has a precious stone, a diamond, let us say, and another man manages to lose it, well in the unlikely event of the two of them discovering another stone, which of them has the best right to the new one?"

"That's a pretty ingenious simile," said Anstice slowly. "But it's a false premise all the same. The diamond would naturally have no voice in the matter of its ownership. But the woman in the case might reasonably be expected to have the power of choice."

"But that's just what I'm anxious to avoid." So much in earnest was the speaker that he did not realize the fatuity of his words till they were out of his mouth. Then he uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Oh, hang it all, don't let's stand here arguing. You see the point, that's enough. I honestly feel that since it was through you that I lost Hilda Ryder"—even though he was prepared to woo another woman his voice softened over the name—"it will be doubly hard if you are to come

between me and the only other girl I've ever put in Miss Ryder's place."

"I see the point, as I said before," returned Anstice deliberately. "But what I don't see is the justice of it. You've admitted I was not to blame in doing what I did that day; yet in the same breath in which you acquit me of the crime you expect me to pay the penalty!"

For a second this logical argument took Cheniston aback. Then, for his heart was set on winning Iris Wayne, he condescended to plead.

"Yes. I admit all that—and I can see I haven't a leg to stand on. But—morally—or in a spiritual sense so to speak, don't you think yourself that I have just the shadow of a right to ask you to stand aside?"

"Yes." His assent was unflinching, though his lips were white. "You have that right, and that's why I'm listening to you to-night. But—don't you think we are both taking a wrong view of the matter? What faintest grounds have we for supposing Miss Wayne will listen to either of us?"

"Oh, that's not an insurmountable obstacle." Cheniston saw the victory was won, and in an instant he was awake to the expediency of clinching the matter finally. "We don't know, of course, that she will listen either to me or to you. But for my part I am ready to take my chance. And"—at the last moment the inherent honesty of the man came to the surface through all the unscrupulous bargain he was driving—"my chance is a hundred times better if you withdraw from the contest."

"I see." With an effort Anstice crushed down the tide of revolt which swept over his heart. "As you say, I owe you something for that evil turn I did you, unwittingly, in India. And if you fix this as the price of my debt I suppose, as an honourable man, there is nothing for me to do but to pay that price."

Bruce Cheniston looked away quickly. Somehow he did not care to meet the other man's eyes at that moment.

"One thing only I would like to ask of you." Anstice's manner was not that of a man asking a favour. "If Miss Wayne remains impervious to your entreaties"—Cheniston coloured angrily, suspecting sarcasm—"will you be good enough to let me know?"

"Certainly." Cheniston was suddenly anxious to leave the house, to quit the presence of this man who spoke so quietly even while his black eyes flamed in his haggard face. "I will try my luck at once—within the next week or two. See here, Miss Wayne's birthday dance comes off shortly. If, after that, I have not won her consent, I will quit the field. Is that fair?"

"Quite fair." Suddenly Anstice laughed harshly. "And you think I can then step forward and try my luck. Why, you fool, can't you see that for both of us this is the psychological moment—that the man who hangs back now is lost? I am to wait in the background while you go forward and seize the golden minute? Well"—his voice had a bitter ring—"I've agreed, and you've got your way; but for God's sake go before I repent of the bargain."

Cheniston, startled by his manner, moved backward suddenly; and a chair went over with a crash which set the nerves of both men jarring.

"When you've quite done smashing my furniture"—Anstice's jocularity was savage—"perhaps you'll be good enough to clear out. I won't pretend I'm anxious for more of your company to-night!"

Cheniston picked up the chair, and placed it against the table with quite meticulous care.

"I'll go." He suddenly felt as though the man who stood opposite, the flame from the candles flickering over his face with an odd effect of light and shadow, had after all come off the best in this horrible interview. "I—I suppose it's no use saying any more, Anstice. You know, after all"—in spite of his words he felt an irresistible inclination to justify himself—"you do owe me something ——"

"Well? Have I denied it?" Now his tone was coldly dangerous. "I have promised to pay a debt which after all was incurred quite blamelessly; but if you expect me to enter into further details of the transaction, you are out in your reckoning."

"I see." Suddenly the resentment which Cheniston had felt for this man since their first meeting flamed into active hatred. "Well, I have your word, and that's enough. As you say, this is a business transaction, and the less said the better. Good night."

He turned abruptly away and plunged through the shadowy room towards the door. As he reached it, Anstice spoke again.

"Cheniston." There was a note in his voice which no other man of Anstice's acquaintance had ever heard. "In proposing this bargain, this payment of a debt, I think you show yourself a hard and a pitiless creditor. But if, in these circumstances, you fail to win Miss Wayne, I shall think you are a fool—a damned fool—as well. That's all. Good night."

Without, another word Cheniston opened the door and went out, letting it fall to behind him with a bang. And Anstice, left alone, extinguished both candles impatiently, as though he could not bear even their feeble light; and going to the open window stood gazing out over the starlit garden with eyes which saw nothing of the green peacefulness without.

And on the table, the big brown moth, scorched to death by his adored flame in the very moment of his most passionate delight, fluttered his burnt wings feebly and lay still.

CHAPTER X

Having given Cheniston his word, Anstice set himself to carry out his share of the bargain with a thoroughness which did not preclude a very bitter regret that he had made this fatal promise.

As he had been of late in the habit of spending a good deal of time in the society of Iris Wayne, it was only natural that his absence should cause comment at Greengates; but while Lady Laura openly labelled Anstice as capricious and inclined to rate his own value too highly, Sir Richard more charitably supposed that the poor fellow was overworked; and Iris, after a day or two spent in futile conjecture as to the sudden cessation of his visits, accepted the fact of Anstice's defection with a composure which was a little hurt.

She had thought they were such friends. Once or twice she had even fancied he was beginning to like her—even to herself Iris would not admit the possibility of any return of liking on her side; and on the occasion of their meeting in the wayside cottage, when he had bandaged her wrist, he had spoken to her in a more confidential, more really intimate manner than he had ever before displayed.

In the weeks that followed that sudden leap into intimacy, they had been such good comrades, had enjoyed so many half-playful, half-serious conversations, had played so many thrilling tennis matches, that it was small wonder she had begun to look upon him as one of her most genuine friends; and his sudden absence hurt her pride, and made her wonder whether, after all, his friendliness had been merely a pretence.

Once or twice he met her in the village, but he only saluted her and hurried on his way; while the invitations which the ever-hospitable Sir Richard insisted on sending him were refused with excuses so shallow that even the good-natured host of Greengates refrained from comment.

The contrast between this ungracious behaviour and Bruce Cheniston's open delight in her society was strongly marked; and the friendliness of the younger man brought balm to Iris' sore heart, sore with the first rebuff of her budding womanhood. When Anstice failed her, refused her invitations, and appeared indifferent to her smiles, it was undoubtedly soothing to feel that in Cheniston she had a friend who asked nothing better than to be in her company at all hours, to do her bidding, and to pay her that half-laughing, half-earnest homage which was so delicate and sincere a tribute to her charms.

Anstice had spoken truly when he said the psychological moment was at hand. Until the day when his visits to Greengates ceased abruptly Iris had been inclined, ever so unconsciously, to look upon Anstice with a slightly deeper, more genuine regard than that which she gave to the other man; and had Anstice been able to seize the moment, to follow up the impression he had made upon her, it is possible she, would have listened to him with favour, and the tiny seed of affection which undoubtedly lay in her heart would have burst into a lovely and precious blossom which would have beautified and made fragrant the rest of their lives.

But Anstice might not seize the moment; and although Bruce Cheniston had hitherto taken the second place in Iris' esteem, when once she realized that Anstice had apparently no intention of renewing their late friendship she gently put the thought of him out of her heart and turned for relief to the man who had not failed her.

So matters stood on the morning of Iris' birthday, a glorious day in mid-July, when the gardens of Greengates were all ablaze with roses and sweet-peas, with tall white lilies whose golden hearts flung sweetest incense on the soft air, with great masses of Canterbury bells and giant phlox making gorgeous splashes of colour, mauve and red and white and palest pink, against their background of velvet lawns and dark-green cedar trees.

This was the day on which Bruce Cheniston had decided to put his fortune to the test; and as he looked out of his window at Cherry Orchard and noted the misty blue haze which foretold a day of real summer heat, he told himself that on such a day as this there could be no need to fear a reverse in his present luck.

He whistled as he dressed, and when the breakfast-bell rang he went downstairs feeling at peace with himself and all the world.

"'Morning, Chloe. What a day!" He stooped and kissed his sister as he passed behind her chair, and she looked faintly amused at the unusual salutation.

"Yes. A beautiful day." Her deep voice expressed little pleasure in the morning's beauty. "Are you going anywhere particular that the fine weather fills you with such joy?"

"No—only over to Greengates." He was so accustomed to making this reply that it came out almost automatically and certainly caused Chloe no surprise.

"It's Iris' birthday, isn't it, Bruce?" Cherry flatly refused to endow her uncle with the title which rightly belonged to him. "What are you going to give her?"

"Give her? Well, come round here, and you shall see."

Nothing loth, Cherry obeyed, and stood beside him attentively while he opened a small leather case and took out a pair of earrings each consisting of a tiny, pear-shaped moonstone dangling at the end of a thin platinum chain.

"Earrings! But Iris hasn't any holes in her ears, my dear!" Cherry's consternation was genuine.

"I know that, you little goose! But these don't want holes—see, you screw them on like this."

He took one of her little pink ears in his fingers and screwed on the earring deftly.

"There, run and look at yourself," he commanded, and she trotted away to an oval glass which hung on the wall between the long windows. As she moved, Cheniston passed the remaining earring to his sister.

"What do you say, Chloe—is it a suitable present for her ladyship!"

Chloe took up the little trinket with a rather dubious air.

"Somehow I don't think I can fancy Iris wearing earrings," she said; and Bruce, who had a respect for his sister's opinion which she herself did not suspect, looked rueful.

"But, Chloe, why not? You always wear them?"

"Certainly I do." As a matter of fact she did, and the pearls or sapphires which she affected were as much a part of her personality as her black hair or her narrow blue eyes. "But then Iris is a different sort of person. She is younger, more natural, more unsophisticated; and I'm not quite sure whether these pretty things will suit her charming face."

"Oh!" Bruce's own face fell, and for once Chloe felt an impulse of compassion with another's disappointment.

"At any rate they are very dainty and girlish," she said, handing back the case. "I congratulate you on your taste, Bruce. You might very easily have got more elaborate ones—like some of mine—which would have been very inappropriate to a girl."

"Why do you always speak of yourself as though you were a middle-aged woman, Chloe?" asked her brother with a sudden curiosity. "You seem to forget you are younger than I—why, you are only twenty-six now."

"Am I?" Her smile was baffling. "In actual years I believe I am. But in thought, in feeling, in everything, I am a hundred years older than you, Bruce."

Cherry's return to her uncle's side with a request to him to take out "the dangly thing what tickles my ear" cut short Bruce's reply, and breakfast proceeded tranquilly, while the sun shone gaily and the roses for which Cherry Orchard was famous scented the soft, warm air which floated in through the widely-opened windows.

Meanwhile Anstice was in a quandary on this beautiful summer morning.

Before he had pledged his word to Cheniston to stand aside and leave the field open to his rival, he had gladly accepted Iris' invitation to her birthday dinner and dance; but the thought of the dances she had promised him had changed from a source of anticipatory delight to one of the sheerest torment.

It had not been easy to avoid her. There had been hours in which he had had to restrain himself by every means in his power from rushing over to Greengates to implore her pardon for his discourtesy, and to beg her to receive him back into her most desirable favour. It had cost him an effort whose magnitude had left him cold and sick to greet her distantly on the rare occasions of their meeting; and many times he had been ready to throw his promise to the winds, to repudiate the horrible bargain he had struck, and to tell her plainly in so many words that he loved her and wanted her for his wife.

But he never yielded to the temptation. He had pledged his word, and somehow the thought that he was paying the price, now, for Hilda Ryder's untimely death, brought, ever and again, a fleeting sense of comfort as though the sacrifice of his own chance of happiness was an offering laid at her feet in expiation of the wrong he had all unwittingly wrought her.

But his heart sank at the idea of facing Iris once more, and the thought of her as she would surely be, the centre and queen of all the evening's gaiety, was almost unendurable.

At times he told himself that he could not go to Greengates that night. He was only human, and the sight of her, dressed, as she would surely be, in some shimmering airy thing which would enhance all her beauty, would break down his steadfast resolve. He could not be with her in the warm summer night, hold her in his arms in the dance, while the music of the violins throbbed in his ears, the perfume of a thousand roses intoxicated all his senses, and not cry out his love, implore her to be kind as she was fair, to readmit him to her friendship, and grant him, presently, the privileges of a lover....

And then, in the next moment he told himself he could not bear to miss the meeting with her. He must go, must see her once more, see the wide grey eyes beneath their crown of sunny hair, hear her sweet, kind voice, touch her hand....

And then yet another thought beset him. What guarantee had he that Iris Wayne would welcome him to her birthday feast? He had thrown her kindness back into her face, had first accepted and then carelessly repudiated her friendship; and it was only too probable she had written him down as a casual and discourteous trifler with whom, in future, she desired to hold no intercourse.

The sunshiny day which the rest of the world found so beautiful was one long torment to Anstice. Restless, undecided, unhappy, he went about his work with set lips and a haggard face, and those of his patients who had lately found him improved to a new and attractive sociability revised their later impressions of him in favour of their first and less pleasing ones.

At five o'clock, acting on sudden impulse, he rang up Greengates and asked for Miss Wayne.

After a short delay she came, and as he heard her soft voice over the wire Anstice's face grew grim with controlled emotion.

"Is that you, Dr. Anstice?"

"Yes, Miss Wayne. I wanted to say—but first, may I wish you—many happy returns of your birthday?"

"Thanks very much." Straining his ears to catch every inflection in her voice, Anstice thought he detected a note of coldness. "By the way, were those beautiful sweet-peas from you—the ones that came at twelve o'clock to-day?"

"I sent them, yes." So much, at least, he had permitted himself to do.

"They were lovely—thank you so much for them." Iris spoke with a trifle more warmth, and for a moment Anstice faltered in his purpose. "You are coming to dinner presently, aren't you? Seven o'clock, because of the dance."

"Miss Wayne, I'm sorry ..." the lie almost choked him, but he hurried on, "... I can't get over to Greengates in time for dinner. I—I have a call—into the country—and can't get back before eight or nine."

"Oh!" For a moment Iris was silent, and to the man at the other end of the wire it seemed an eternity before she spoke again. Then: "I'm sorry," said Iris gently. "But you will come to the dance afterwards?"

For a second Anstice wavered. It would be wiser to refuse, to allege uncertainty, at least, to leave himself a loophole of escape did he find it impossible to trust himself sufficiently to go. He opened his lips to tell her he feared it might be difficult to get away, to prepare her for his probable absence; and then:

"Of course I will come to the dance," he said steadily. "I would not miss it for anything in the world!"

And he rang off hastily, fearing what he might be tempted to say if the conversation were allowed to continue another moment.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Anstice entered the hall of Greengates that night; and by that time dancing was in full swing.

By an irony of Fate he had been called out when just on the point of starting, and had obeyed the summons reluctantly enough.

The fact that his importunate patient was a tiny girl who was gasping her baby life away in convulsions changed his reluctance into an energetic desire to save the pretty little creature's life at any cost; but all his skill was of no avail, and an hour after he entered the house the child died.

Even then he could not find it in his heart to hurry away. The baby's parents, who were young and sociable people, had been, like himself, invited to the dance at Greengates—had, indeed, been ready to start when the child was taken ill; and the contrast between the young mother's frantic grief and her glittering ball-gown and jewels struck Anstice as an almost unendurable irony.

When at last he was able to leave the stricken house, having done all in his power to lighten the horror of the dreary hour, he was in no mood for gaiety, and for a few moments he meditated sending a message to say he was, after all, unable to be present at the dance.

Then the vision of Iris rose again before his eyes, and immediately everything else faded from his world, and he hastened to Greengates, arriving just as the clock struck eleven.

He saw her the moment he entered the room after greeting Sir Richard and Lady Laura in the hall. She was dancing with Cheniston, and Anstice had never seen her look more radiant.

She was wearing the very shimmering white frock in which he had pictured her, a filmy chiffon

thing which set off her youthful beauty to its highest perfection; and the pearls which lay on her milky throat, the satin slippers which cased her slender feet, the bunch of lilies-of-the valley at her breast, were details in so charming a picture that others besides Anstice found her distractingly pretty to-night.

And as he noted her happy look, the air of serene content with which she yielded her slim form to her partner's guidance, the light in the grey eyes which smiled into Cheniston's face, Anstice's heart gave one bitter throb and then lay heavy as a stone in his breast.

He hardly doubted that she was won already; and in Cheniston's proud and assured bearing he thought he read the story of that winning.

As he stood against the wall, unconscious of the curious glances directed towards him, the music ceased, and the dancers came pouring out of the ballroom to seek the fresher air without.

Passing him on her partner's arm, Iris suddenly withdrew her hand and turned to greet the late comer.

"Dr. Anstice!" It seemed as though her inward happiness must needs find an outlet, so radiant was the smile with which she greeted him. "You have really come! I thought you had failed us after all."

"No—I was sent for, at the last moment." Something in his strained tone seemed to startle the girl, for her eyes dilated, and with an effort Anstice spoke more lightly. "I couldn't get away, Miss Wayne, but you won't visit my misfortunes on my head, will you? You promised me some dances ——"

"One has had to go." She looked down at her card. "I kept the fifth for you, but you may have the next if you like. I did not engage myself for that, thinking"—she paused, then smiled at him frankly—"thinking you might come after all."

Scarcely knowing what he did Anstice made some rejoinder; and then Cheniston, who had turned away for a moment, appeared to observe Anstice for the first time, and giving him a nod said rather curtly:

"Evening, Anstice; you've got here then, after all? Well, Iris, shall we go and get cool after that energetic waltz?"

They drifted out into the hall; and watching them go Anstice told himself again that Cheniston had won the day.

"Shall we sit out, Dr. Anstice?" He thought Iris looked at him rather strangely. "I ... I am rather tired—and hot—but still——"

"Let us sit out by all means, Miss Wayne. Shall we go into the conservatory? It is quite cool there —and quiet."

She agreed at once; and two minutes later he found her a seat in a corner beneath a big overshadowing palm.

Now that she was beside him he felt his self-control failing him. She was so pretty in her white gown with the pearls on her neck and the delicate moonstones dangling in her little ears....

"Dr. Anstice"—it was the girl who broke the silence—"do you know you have treated us very badly of late? You have never been near us for weeks, and our tennis match has not been decided after all!"

"I know I've behaved disgracefully"—his voice shook, and she half regretted her impulsive words —"but—well, I'm not exactly a free agent, Miss Wayne."

"No, I suppose a doctor rarely is," she answered thoughtfully; and he did not correct her misapprehension of his meaning.

"But I don't want you to think me ungrateful for your kindness." So much, at least, he might say. "If I have appeared discourteous, please believe that in my heart I have always fully appreciated your goodness—and that of your father."

She said nothing for a moment, looking down at her satin slippers absently; and he did not attempt to interrupt her reverie.

Then, with rather startling irrelevance, she said slowly:

"Dr. Anstice, have you ever been in Egypt? I know you have travelled a lot, and I thought perhaps ——"

"No." Suddenly at this apparently innocent question a foreboding of evil fell on Anstice's soul with a crushing weight. "As you say, I have travelled a good deal; but somehow I have never visited Egypt. Why do you ask?"

"Because——" For yet another moment Iris hesitated, as though uncertain whether or no to

proceed. And then, suddenly, she turned to face him with something in her eyes which Anstice could not fathom. "I asked because it is possible I may go to live in Egypt some day."

"I see," said Anstice very quietly. "You mean—Miss Wayne, I won't pretend to misunderstand you—you mean that Cheniston has asked you to marry him, and you have said yes."

Now the rosy colour flooded the girl's face until even her ears were pink; but her grey eyes met his frankly, and when she spoke her voice rang happily.

"You've guessed my secret very quickly," she said, relieved unconsciously by his calm manner and friendly tone. "Yes. Mr. Cheniston asked me to marry him an hour ago, and I agreed. And so, as he wants to be married almost at once, I shall have to prepare myself to live in Egypt, for a time at least."

"I don't think you need dread the prospect," he said, and his voice was creditably steady, though the world seemed to be crashing down in ruins around him. "Egypt must be a wonderfully fascinating country, and nowadays one doesn't look upon it as a land of exile. When do you think you will be going, Miss Wayne?"

"Well, Bruce has to be back in November," she said, "so if we are really to be married first"—again the rosy colour flooded her face—"it doesn't give me much time to get ready."

"No. I suppose I ought to congratulate you." He was beginning to feel he could not bear this torture much longer. "At least—it is Cheniston who is to be congratulated. But you—I can only wish you all possible happiness. I *do* wish it—from the bottom of my heart."

He held out his hand and she put her slender fingers into it. For just the fraction of a second longer than convention required he held them in his clasp; then he laid her hand down gently on her filmy chiffon knee.

"Miss Wayne"—he spoke rather hoarsely—"I wonder if you will think me a bear if I run away after this dance? I would not have missed these few minutes with you for anything the world might offer me; but somehow I am not in tune with gaiety to-night."

She shot a quick glance at his haggard face; and even in the midst of her own happy excitement she felt a vivid impulse of sympathy.

"Dr. Anstice, I'm so sorry." Just for an instant she laid her fingers gently on his arm; and the light touch made him wince. "You said when you came in that you had been detained, and you looked so serious I thought it must have been something dreadful which had kept you. I don't wonder you find all this"—she waved her small white fan comprehensively round—"jars upon you—now."

"Yes," he said, snatching at the opening she gave him, and longing only for the moment when he might say good-bye and leave her adorable, maddening presence. "It jars, as you say—not because it isn't all delightful and inspiring in itself, but because"—suddenly he felt an inexplicably savage desire to hurt her, as a man in pain may seek to wound his tenderest nurse—"because not many miles away from here there's a poor mother weeping, like Rachel, for her child, and refusing to be comforted."

She turned pale, and he felt like a murderer as he watched the light die out of her big grey eyes.

"A child—the child you went to see—it died?"

"Yes. She was just a year old—and their only child."

Now, to his remorse, he saw that she was crying; and instantly the cruel impulse died out of his heart and a wild desire to comfort her took its place.

"Miss Wayne, for God's sake don't cry! I had no right to tell you—it was brutal, unpardonable of me to cloud your happiness at such a moment as this. I ... I've no excuse to offer—none, at least, that you could understand—but it makes me feel the meanest criminal alive to see you cry!"

No woman could have withstood the genuine remorse in his tone; and Iris dabbed her eyes with a little lacy handkerchief and smiled forgiveness rather tremulously.

"Don't reproach yourself, Dr. Anstice. I ... I think I'm rather foolish to-night. And at any rate"—perhaps after all she had divined the soreness which lay beneath his spoken congratulations—"I'm sure of one thing—you did your best to comfort the poor mother."

"Thank you for that, at least," he said; and then, in a different key: "You won't think me rude if I leave after this?"

"Of course not." Suddenly Iris rose, and Anstice, surprised, followed her example. "Dr. Anstice, if you don't mind I'll ask you to take me back now. I think"—she smiled rather shyly—"I think I must just go and bathe my eyes. I don't want any one to ask inconvenient questions!"

Filled with anger against himself Anstice acquiesced at once; and in the hall they parted, Iris speeding upstairs to her room in search of water and Eau de Cologne with which to repair the ravages his heartless speech had caused.

At the last came a consolatory moment.

"Dr. Anstice." She held out her hand once more. "You are the only person—except my father—

who knows what has happened to-night. Somehow I wanted to tell you because"—she coloured faintly, and her eyes dropped for a second—"because I think you and I are—really—friends in spite of everything."

"Thank you, Miss Wayne." His tone was so low she could barely catch the words. "Believe me, I value your friendship above everything else in the world."

He wrung her hand hard; and as she left him with a last fleeting smile he turned and found himself face to face with Bruce Cheniston.

At that moment the hall was empty; and before the other man could speak Anstice said quickly:

"So you've won the day, Cheniston. Well, congratulations—though God knows I wish with all my heart that you had failed."

"Thanks." Cheniston ignored the latter half of the sentence with a smile Anstice felt to be insolent. "So Miss Wayne told you? I had hoped to be the first to give you the information."

"Miss Wayne told me, yes," said Anstice, taking his hat and coat from the chair where he had thrown them on his late entrance, and turning towards the door. "And I don't know that there is anything more to be said between us. Oh, yes, there is, though. One word, Cheniston." The other man had followed him to the door and now stood on the steps looking out into the fragrant July night. "I think that in all fairness you will now agree that I have paid my debt to you; wiped it out to the uttermost farthing. In future"—turning on the lowest stop he faced the man who stood above him, and in his face was a look which no other human being had ever seen there—"in future we are quits, you and I. The debt is paid in full."

And before Bruce Cheniston could frame any reply to his words Anstice turned away and was lost in the soft summer darkness.

CHAPTER XI

On the day before that fixed for Iris Wayne's wedding a large garden party was held at Greengates; and fortunately the late September afternoon was all that could be desired in regard to sunshine and soft breezes.

The wedding itself was to be a comparatively quiet affair, only a score or two of intimate friends and relations being invited to the house after the ceremony; but Lady Laura had ordained that on the previous day half the countryside was to be entertained; and although there were some people who did not altogether approve of the match—for Bruce Cheniston was, after all, the brother of the notorious Mrs. Carstairs—the majority were only too ready to follow Sir Richard Wayne's lead and extend a hand of friendship to Miss Wayne's prospective bridegroom.

Anstice had received an invitation to both ceremonies, and had accepted, provisionally, for each; but in his heart he knew that no power on earth could induce him to see Iris Wayne married to another man; and although he duly appeared at Greengates while the garden party was in full swing he only remained there a brief half-hour.

As he was bidding Lady Laura good-bye, Iris, with whom he had as yet only exchanged a couple of words, came up to him with a friendly little smile on her lips.

"Are you leaving us already, Dr. Anstice? I don't believe you've even had a cup of tea—or what Daddy calls a peg. Have you?"

"Yes, thanks, Miss Wayne." He lied so convincingly that the girl believed him. "I'm just off again—you must excuse me, but you know my time is not my own."

"No." He thought she looked a little pale this afternoon. "I quite understand, and I think it is very nice of you to come at all. You are coming to-morrow?"

"I hope so." Again he lied, and something in the frank eyes which were raised to his made him ashamed of his mendacity. "Of course—it's possible I may be prevented, but in any case, Miss Wayne, please remember my best wishes will be yours all day."

As though reminded of something she spoke impulsively.

"Dr. Anstice, I've never thanked you—except in a note—for your lovely present. It is really quite the most uncommon one I have had, and I shall value it immensely."

"I am glad you like it," he said. He had sent her a pair of ancient Chinese vases which his father had received many years ago from the grateful wife of a mandarin to whom he had once rendered a service. "I hardly knew what to send you, and then I remembered you once said you liked curios."

"I do—and these are so lovely." As she stood talking to him in the sunlight Anstice told himself that this was really his farewell to the girl he had known and loved, and his eyes could hardly leave her adorable face. The next time they met—if Fate ordained that they should meet again—she would be Bruce Cheniston's wife; and believing as he did that this would be their last

meeting as man and maid, Anstice took the hand she held out to him with a very sore heart.

"Good-bye, Miss Wayne." Just for a moment he hesitated, feeling that he could not bear to let her go like this; and the girl, puzzled by his manner, waited rather uneasily, her hand in his. Then he gave her fingers a last clasp, wringing them unconsciously hard, and let them go.

"Good-bye, Dr. Anstice." Standing as she did on the threshold of a new life, face to face with a mystery she dreaded, yet was prepared, to fathom, perhaps Iris' perceptions were a little quickened. All at once she saw that this man looked upon her with different eyes from the other men she knew; and the memory of her strange fancy earlier in the summer gave her the key suddenly to his rather curious manner of bidding her farewell.

With a foolish, but purely womanly, impulse of compassion, she spoke again, laying her hand for a second on his arm with a friendliness which no man could have misunderstood.

"No, Dr. Anstice. Not good-bye. We shall meet again to-morrow, at any rate; so let us just say—*au revoir!*"

The kind little hand, the friendly words, almost broke down Anstice's self-control.

With a huge effort he kept his voice steady; but his face was grey as he answered her.

"If you wish, Miss Wayne—from the bottom of my heart let it be—only—*au revoir!*"

And Fate, who foresaw in what wise their next meeting should take place, probably chuckled to herself, like the malignant lady she can be, at this parting between the two who might have been lovers but for a miscalculated shot in the days gone by.

When Anstice had finished his day's work it was barely seven o'clock. Fortunately for him he had no very serious cases on his hands just now, and there was no need, save in the event of an urgent call, for him to go out again when he had eaten his solitary dinner.

He was thankful for the respite, for the strain of the last few weeks, the weeks of Iris' engagement, had been severe; and mind and body were alike overtasked and weary. For several days he had suffered from a severe neuralgic headache, and to-night the torture in head and eyes threatened to overwhelm him.

For three or four nights he had hardly slept; and on more than one occasion he had thought, with a queer, detached interest, of the relief which morphia might bring to his tormented nerves; but with the thought came another—the picture of Iris Wayne who had bidden him remember that this was not the way out of the tragic muddle into which his life had been plunged by his own action.

She had believed him when he told her he would not again deliver himself into bondage to the fatal drug, and although he had not given her his promise—foreseeing even then the possibility of this black hour—he had meant, at the moment, to turn his back for ever on the seductive thing which whispers such sweet, such deliriously fatal promises to the man in the clutch of any agony he does not know how to bear.

So, although on the last two or three occasions he had not won the victory without a struggle, Anstice had managed to win through without lowering his flag; but to-night he began to wonder whether after all it were worth while waging the unequal war any longer.

He had parted from Iris Wayne, as he thought, for ever. As the wife of Bruce Cheniston he must henceforward regard her; and although he was no saint, to covet his neighbour's wife was not compatible with Anstice's code of decency.

He might love her still—at this moment he thought he knew that he would love her always—but for all practical purposes their friendship, with all its privileges and its obligations, was at an end. And this being so, why should he hesitate to gain, if he might, relief from this agony of mind and body by the help of the drug he had hitherto forsworn?

It is always hard on a man when to physical anguish is added agony of mind, since in that dual partnership of pain no help may be rendered either by its complementary part; and it does not need a physician to know that such help given by the one to the other is frequently a ruling factor in the recovery of the sick body or mind. And to-night Anstice was enduring a physical and mental suffering which taxed mind and body to their utmost limits, and absolutely precluded the possibility of any helpful reaction one upon the other.

His eyeballs felt as though they were being pierced by red-hot needles; while the stabbing pain in his head increased every moment. Had he witnessed such suffering in another he would instantly have set about alleviating it so far as his skill might allow; but he told himself that there was only one effectual remedy for him and that was forbidden him by his implied promise to Iris Wayne. And so he sat on in a corner of the couch in his dim and shadowy room, and endured the excruciating pain as best he might.

The house was very quiet, and suddenly he remembered that the servants were out, witnessing the fireworks which Sir Richard had provided in the park of Greengates for the entertainment of the village on the eve of his daughter's wedding.

They had asked permission to go, and he had granted it readily enough; and now he was grateful for the peace and tranquillity which their absence engendered in the dark and quiet house.

Dimmer and more gloomy grew the room in which he sat—his consulting-room, chosen to-night for its long window open to the garden without. More and more thickly clustered the shadows round him as he sat half-sunk in a corner of the big leather couch. Once an owl hooted in the tall trees outside the house, and the strange, melancholy note seemed a fit accompaniment to the eerie stillness of the night.

Worse and ever more hard to bear grew the fierce throbbing in his head and eyes, but his wretchedness of mind ran a good race with his bodily suffering; and had he been asked, suddenly, the nature of the pain which tormented him he would have found it hard to answer immediately.

Only as the quiet hours wore on he began to feel that the limit of his endurance was almost reached. He told himself that even Iris herself would not willingly sanction such suffering as his had now become. In all the world he desired only one boon—oblivion, unconsciousness, rest from this state of being which was surely unendurable; and as a more exquisitely painful throb of anguish shot through his head he plunged his hand into his breast-pocket in search of a certain little case which was generally to be found there during his day's round.

But he remembered, with a sudden keen disappointment, that he had changed his coat on returning home to dinner, and the means of alleviation which he sought were not at hand.

He half rose, intending to go in search of the thing he wanted; but the effort of moving was too much, and he sank back again with an irritable groan and prepared to endure still more of this misery.

Next he thought he would try the effect of a cigarette, but the matches were not on the table before him. That obstacle, however, need not be insurmountable, for in a drawer at his elbow he kept a supply, and moving cautiously, for every movement set his nerves jangling, he turned on the couch and opened the drawer to seek the matches which should be there.

He found them immediately, and was in the act of taking one from the box when his eye fell on a small package which somehow roused a strange feeling of interest in his pain-shrouded mind.

It seemed familiar—at least he thought he remembered handling it before, and by a queer twist of memory he thought of Mrs. Carstairs as he took up the mysterious little parcel and turned it about in his hands.

Yet his throbbing brain would not allow him to feel certain what was really inside the packet, and with a sudden access of nervous irritation he broke the seal which held its contents a mystery, and tore off the enwrapping papers.

And as he realized what it was that the paper had hidden he uttered an exclamation in which surprise and dismay and relief were oddly blended.

In his hand he held a box containing a hypodermic syringe and a supply of morphia, and now he remembered how Mrs. Carstairs had told him of her purchase of the same, and her subsequent decision to let the insidious thing alone. She had given him the packet without apparent reluctance, and as his own words, "I shan't be tempted to steal yours for my private use," came flashing back to his memory he smiled, rather cynically, to himself.

"If I believed in signs and omens I should take this as an unmistakable invitation to me to hesitate no longer." He fingered the syringe thoughtfully. "And upon my soul I don't see why I shouldn't accept it as a sign. In any case"—all the pent-up bitterness of his soul found vent in the words —"in future what I do can have no interest for Iris Cheniston!"

As if the sound of the name, premature as it was, had put the finishing touch to his reckless cynicism, he hesitated no longer.

With an almost savage gesture he struck a match and lighted a candle on his writing-table; and as the little yellow flame sprang up, and strove, vainly, to enlighten the encompassing gloom, he set about his preparations with a sudden energy in striking contrast with his previous lethargy.

When all was ready there came a last second of hesitation. With the syringe in his hand, his arm bared, he paused, and for a last poignant moment Iris' face rose before him in the flickering light. But now her eyes had no power to move him from his purpose. Rather they maddened him with their steadfast radiance, and with a muttered oath he looked aside from that appealing vision and turned the key, recklessly, in the door which led to the Paradise of Fools.

Nearly an hour later the telephone bell rang, sharply, insistently in the hall. It went on ringing, again and again, a curiously vital sound in the quiet house; but Anstice did not hear it, and at length the ringing ceased.

It was nearly half an hour later when another bell rang, this time the bell of the front door; but again no answer came to the imperative summons. And now the bell rang on, so continuously, so persistently, that at last its sound penetrated the dulled hearing of the man who huddled in a corner of the big couch, mind and body alike dazed and incapable of making any effort to understand the meaning of this oddly insistent noise.

He was only conscious of a desire for it to cease; of a longing, not sufficiently vivid to be acute, but the strongest emotion of which he was at the moment capable, for a return to the silence which had hitherto prevailed; and although the noise disturbed and angered him it never occurred to him that to answer the summons would be the best way of ending the irritating sound.

So that bell too went unanswered; and in due course it also ceased to ring.

But that was not to be the end.

Dimly he heard the sound of voices, of footsteps in the hall, of the striking of a match and the hissing of the gas. Then there was a confused noise which was like and yet unlike a rapping on the panels of the door of the room in which he sat; but he felt no inclination whatever to move or make any response; and even when at length the door itself opened, slowly and tentatively, he merely looked up with languid curiosity to see what these phenomena might imply.

And in the doorway stood Iris Wayne, her face very pale, one hand holding a flimsy scarf about her, with Bruce Cheniston by her side.

CHAPTER XII

Chloe Carstairs had not been among the guests at Greengates that afternoon. In vain had Sir Richard and Lady Laura invited her, in vain had Iris added her entreaties. On this point Chloe was adamant, and although her brother argued with her for an hour or more on the advisability of making her reappearance in Littlefield society under the aegis of the Waynes, she merely shook her head with an inscrutable smile.

"If I cared to re-enter Littlefield society," she said calmly, "I should have done so long ago. But I am really so indifferent to those people that I have no desire to meet them, even as a guest at Greengates."

"I didn't suppose you wanted to meet them—for your own sake," retorted her brother, "for a duller and more stupid set of people were never born; but as Iris is to be your sister-in-law I think you might stretch a point and go with me to Greengates this afternoon."

But Chloe shook her head.

"No, Bruce. I am sorry to disappoint you, but it cannot be done. As you know, I am fond of Iris"—knowing his sister Bruce was quite satisfied with this moderate expression of her affection—"but I won't go to Greengates to-day, nor to the wedding to-morrow. If you like to bring Iris down to say good-bye this evening when all the people are gone I shall like to see her."

"All right." Bruce gave up the contest. "I'm staying on—quietly—to dinner; but I'll bring her down for half an hour afterwards."

"Very well." Chloe rose from the breakfast-table as she spoke, and sauntered to the window, from whence she looked over the pretty garden with appreciative eyes. "It is lucky the weather is so beautiful—Greengates will look at its best on a day like this."

And Bruce agreed heartily as he stepped on to the lawn to enjoy his after-breakfast pipe.

True to his promise Bruce motored his *fiancée* over to Cherry Orchard in the gloaming of the September evening, after a somewhat protracted argument with Lady Laura, whose sense of propriety was, so she averred, outraged by the project.

Sir Richard, however, to whom the loss of his only daughter was a deep though hidden grief, gave his consent readily enough when he saw that Iris really wished to bid her friend good-bye; and making Bruce promise to bring her back in good time he himself went to the door to pack them safely into the motor.

"Take care of her, Bruce—she is very precious to me!" He laid his hand on the young man's arm, and his voice held an appeal which Bruce involuntarily answered.

"Trust me, sir!" There was a note of rather unusual feeling in his tone. "She can't be more precious to you than she is to me!"

And with the words he got his car in motion and glided away down the dusky, scented avenue beneath the tall trees which had not, as yet, put off their summer tints for their autumn livery of scarlet and gold.

Somehow they did not talk much as they sped on through the cool, perfumed night. Both, indeed, felt a sense of shyness in each other's company on this last evening; and it was with something like relief that they realized they were at Cherry Orchard in less time than they generally allowed for the little journey.

The hall door, as usual, stood hospitably open; but there was no sign of Chloe, waiting for them with her gracious welcome; and as they crossed the threshold both felt instinctively that something was wrong.

A moment later their suspicions were confirmed, for Hagyard, the manservant, who adored both his mistress and her small daughter, came forward to meet them with an air of relief which did not conceal the anxiety in his whole bearing.

"Mr. Cheniston—sir—there's been an accident—Miss Cherry—she's burnt——"

"Burnt!" Iris and Bruce echoed the word simultaneously; and the man hurried on.

"Yes, sir, yes, miss—Miss Cherry got playing with matches—Tochatti left her alone for a moment when she did not ought to have done"—in his distress his usual correctness of speech and deportment fell away from Hagyard, leaving him a mere human man—"and Miss Cherry's dress—a little flimsy bit of muslin it was, caught fire, and before it was put out she'd got burned——"

"Where is Mrs. Carstairs?"

"Upstairs with Miss Cherry, sir. We've been ringing up the doctor—but we can't get no answer ——"

Bruce cut him short without ceremony.

"Come, Iris, let's see what's to be done. We can go ourselves and fetch the doctor, anyway."

Together they ran up the broad staircase, and Bruce led the way to Cherry's little room, where, as he guessed, the child was lying.

As they entered Chloe Carstairs looked round; and her eyes appeared almost black, so dilated were the pupils.

"Bruce!" Her deep voice held a note of relief. "You have come at last—now perhaps we can do something for the child."

"Is she badly burnt?" Iris approached softly and stood looking down at the moaning little figure in the bed.

"Yes." Chloe's manner was impressive by reason of its very quietness. "She is—very badly burnt, and until the doctor comes we can do so little...."

"You have done *something* for her?"

"Oh, yes—Tochatti and I have done all we can, but"—for a second Chloe's face quivered—"we can't do anything more, and I'm afraid if something isn't done soon——"

The child on the bed gave a sudden convulsive cry, and Chloe's white face grew still paler.

"You see—she's in horrible pain, and—oh, why doesn't the doctor come? We've rung up again and again, and they've never answered!"

"Shall we go and fetch him, Chloe? The car's here, and we'll bring him back in no time!" He turned to Iris. "You'll come?"

She hesitated.

"Won't you go—and I'll stay here?"

Chloe looked up at that.

"No, Iris. I don't want you to stay—yet. Go with Bruce, and when you come back you shall stay—if you will."

"Very well." Iris deemed it best to do as she was requested. "We will go—immediately—we shall soon be back."

They ran downstairs together as swiftly as they had run up a few minutes earlier; and in an incredibly short space of time the car was flying through the sweet night air once more.

Arriving at the Gables they could win no response to their ringing; but it was imperative they should gain an entrance; and so it came about that the first time Iris entered Anstice's house she entered it unheralded, and unwelcomed by any friendly greeting.

So, too, it came about that when Anstice at last awoke to the fact that there were other human beings in the house beside himself he realized, with a pang of consternation and amazement sufficiently sharp to pierce even through the fog which clouded his spirit, that one of his

uninvited guests was the girl from whom, a few short hours earlier, he had parted, as he thought, for ever.

He half rose from the couch on which he crouched, and stared at the advancing figures with haunted eyes.

"I ... I ..." His voice, husky, uncertain, brought both his visitors to a halt; and for a wild moment he fancied that after all they were no real beings, only more than usually vivid shadows, projected visions from the whirling phantasmagoria of his brain. The light behind them, streaming in through the open door, confused him, made him feel as though this were all a trick of the nerves, a kind of chaotic nightmare; and with a muttered curse at his own folly in imagining for one moment that Iris Wayne herself stood before him, he fell back on the couch and closed his aching eyes wearily.

"Anstice—I say, you're wanted—badly—at Cherry Orchard." Surely that was Bruce Cheniston's voice which beat upon his ears until it reached his inner sense. Yet what was that he was saying ... something about an accident ... to Cherry ... but the time of cherries was over ... surely now the summer was dead ... he was cold, bitterly cold, the fire must be out, his teeth were chattering ... there was a mist before his eyes....

"Dr. Anstice, is anything the matter? Are you ill?"

That voice belonged to no one on earth but Iris Wayne, yet that insubstantial grey shadow which seemed to speak was only another ghost, a figment of his overwrought brain. He wished—how he wished—that these ghosts would leave him, would return to the haunted place whence they came and allow him to sink once more into the blessed oblivion from which they called him with their thin, far-away voices....

"It's no use, Iris!" Cheniston spoke abruptly, puzzled by the other man's strange behaviour, to which as yet he could assign no cause. "The man's asleep—or dazed—or—or"—suddenly a suspicion swept into his brain—"or perhaps there's a less creditable cause for this extraordinary behaviour."

"What do you mean, Bruce?" Iris' grey eyes dilated and her face blanched. "Is he—ill—or——"

"I am not—ill, Miss Wayne." Somehow he had caught her words, her dear voice had penetrated through the fog which enveloped his senses. "Don't, please, be afraid.... I ... I am only ..."

"Anyway you're not fit to speak to a lady," cut in Cheniston incisively. "We came to fetch you to Cherry Orchard; there's been on accident, my little niece is badly hurt and Mrs. Carstairs wanted you—but it's evident you're not in a fit state to come...."

Once more the fog lifted for a moment; and although he felt everything to be whirling round him Anstice rose unsteadily to his feet and faced his accuser.

Through the open door the light streamed on to his haggard face; and as she saw the ravages which suffering had wrought in him Iris uttered an exclamation.

"Don't be afraid, Miss Wayne." He could only, it seemed, repeat himself. "I ... I didn't expect any one coming here." He spoke slowly, a pause between each word. "I ... if there's anything—I can do——"

"There isn't—unless you can pull yourself together sufficiently to come to Cherry Orchard," said Cheniston coldly. "And judging from your appearance you can't do that."

The contempt in his voice stung Anstice momentarily into self-defence.

"What are you implying?" He spoke a little more clearly now, "I ... I believe after all I'm ill—but ——"

At that moment Bruce's eyes, roving here and there, caught sight of a small decanter of brandy which stood on the table at his elbow. As a matter of fact it had been brought there for a patient whose nerves had failed him, earlier in the day, on hearing what practically amounted to a sentence of death; but to Cheniston the innocent object appeared as the confirmation of his suspicions, and his lip curled.

"Come along, Iris." His disdain was cruel. "We must go and find some one else—some one who hasn't fuddled his wits like our friend here."

Iris' eyes, following his, had seen the brandy; and in a flash of insight she knew what he meant. But before she could speak, could utter the denial which trembled on her lips, Anstice himself interposed.

"You are mistaken, Cheniston." He still spoke haltingly, but his eyes looked less dim than they had done a moment ago. "That"—he pointed to the decanter—"is not my particular vice. I confess I am not myself to-night; and I fear I'm not capable of attending any one for the present; but it is not brandy which is responsible, I assure you of that."

He stopped, feeling suddenly that the effort of speech was too much for him. A terrible dizziness was overwhelming him ... he had only one desire on earth, that Iris Wayne would leave him, that he might sink down on to the couch again, and let the fathomless sea which was surging round him drown his soul and senses in its rolling flood....

Yet by a great effort he stood upright, steadying himself by the edge of the table; and through all his mental and physical misery he saw Iris' grey eyes fixed upon his face with a great pity in their depths.

"Dr. Anstice"—regardless of Bruce's presence she took up the hypodermic syringe which lay on the table, gleaming in a strong beam of light which streamed through the open door—"you have been trying *this* way out—again?"

Her voice, which held no condemnation, only an overwhelming compassion, drove back for a moment those cruel waves which surged around him; and when he answered her his voice was almost steady.

"Yes, Miss Wayne. I ... I could find no other way, and so—I took this one."

Iris placed the syringe down gently on the table, and her eyes were full of tears.

"Dr. Anstice, I'm sorry," she said in a low tone; and the pity in her voice nearly broke his heart.

"Miss Wayne—I——"

What he would have said she never knew; for Bruce Cheniston broke in angrily, annoyed by a scene to which he held no key.

"Look here, Iris, we mustn't waste time. Cherry's badly hurt, and since Dr. Anstice can't come someone else must be found. Come along, we'll be off and find another doctor—one who can be relied upon."

The mists were closing in on Anstice once more, the hungry sea which billowed round him threatened to engulf him body and soul. Yet he thought he heard Iris striving to silence Cheniston's cruel words, he could have sworn he saw her eyes, big with tears, shining through the mist which kept him from her; and with a mental effort which turned him cold he spoke once more to her before she left him.

"Miss Wayne ... please don't condemn me altogether ... I did not give in at once ... but this seemed—before God, I thought it was the only way out—to-night...."

And then the miracle happened. Regardless of the man who stood fuming by her side, Iris laid her soft hand on Anstice's arm and spoke one last gentle word.

"Dr. Anstice, I believe you—and good-bye! But—oh, do, do remember—for my sake let me ask you to remember that this is *not* the true way out!"

And then, as Cheniston took her arm impatiently to lead her away, she smiled through the tears which threatened to blind her, and went out from his presence without one reproachful word.

When she had gone he stood gazing after her for a long moment, and the look in his face would have broken the heart of a woman who had loved him. Then, with a despairing feeling that now nothing mattered in all the world, he sank down again on the couch and let the flood overwhelm him as it would.

CHAPTER XIII

As the clocks were striking ten on the following morning, the morning of Iris Wayne's wedding day, Anstice came slowly down the garden to where his car waited by the gate.

It was a glorious September morning, the whole world bathed in a flood of golden sunshine, and the soft, warm air was heavy with the scent of sweet-peas, of stocks, of the hundred and one fragrant flowers which deck the late summer days. Away over the fields hung an enchanting blue haze which promised yet greater heat when it too should have dissolved before the mellow rays of the sun; and if there be any truth in the old saw that happy is the portion of the bride on whom the sun shall shine, then truly the lot of Iris Wayne should be a happy one.

But in Anstice's face there was no reflected sunshine on this auspicious morning. Rather did he look incredibly haggard and worn, and his colourless lips and purple-shadowed eyes were in strangest contrast to the smiling face of Nature.

It was only by a very strong effort of will that Anstice had driven himself forth to embark upon his day's work. The horrible night through which he had passed had left traces on both body and soul; and the thought of that which was to happen to-day, the thought of the ceremony in the little flower-decked church by which the girl he adored would be given as wife to another man was nothing short of torture to this man who loved her.

He would have given half he possessed to be able to blot out this day from his calendar—to pass the whole of it in a state of oblivion, of forgetfulness, to cheat life of its fiercest suffering for a few hours at least; but Iris herself blocked the way to that last indulgence. She had bidden him

remember—for her sake—that the way he had taken was not in truth the way out; and although every nerve in his body cried out for relief, nothing in the world could have persuaded him to mar Iris' wedding-day by an act whose commission would have grieved her had she known of it.

And since to sit at home, brooding over the dimly-remembered events of the preceding night, would be fatal, there was nothing for it but to go out and strive to forget his own mental agony in an attempt to alleviate the physical suffering of those who trusted him to relieve their bodily woes at least.

He was about to enter his car when he heard the hoot of a motor-horn behind him; and turning round, one foot on the step, saw his friendly rival, Dr. Willows, driving up to intercept him.

"Hallo, Anstice, glad you're not out. I wanted to see you."

Anstice moved forward to meet him, but Dr. Willows, an agile little man of middle age, hopped out of his car, and taking Anstice's arm moved with him out of ear-shot of the waiting chauffeur.

"Well?" Anstice's voice was not inviting.

"It's about that affair at Cherry Orchard." Involuntarily Anstice's arm stiffened, and the other man dropped it as he went on speaking. "I was called in last night, and hearing you were ill—by the way, are you better now?" He broke off abruptly and peered into Anstice's face with disconcerting keenness.

"Quite, thanks. It was only a temporary indisposition," returned Anstice coldly; and Dr. Willows relaxed his gaze.

"Glad to hear it—though you look pretty seedy this morning. You know you really work too hard, Anstice. I assure you your predecessor didn't take half the trouble with his patients that you do ——"

"You'll excuse me reminding you that I have not begun my round yet." Anstice interrupted him impatiently. "You were saying you were called in to Cherry Orchard——"

"Yes. The little girl was badly burnt—owing to some carelessness on the part of the servants—and since you were not available——"

"Who told you I was not available?" His tone was grim.

"Why, Miss Wayne, of course. You know she and Mr. Cheniston came on to see me after finding you weren't able to go owing to being seedy yourself"—even Anstice's sore spirit could not doubt the little man's absolute ignorance of the nature of his supposed illness—"and they asked me to go in your place. So as it was an urgent case of course I did not hesitate to go."

"Of course not." Anstice strove to speak naturally. "Well, you went?"

"Yes, and treated the child. As you know, she is only a kiddie, and the shock has been as bad as the actual burns, though they are severe enough."

"Have you been there to-day?"

"No—that's what I came to see you about. I stayed pretty late last night, and left the child asleep; but now, of course, you will take over the case. Mrs. Carstairs understood I was only filling your place, you know."

"Do you think"—Anstice hesitated oddly, and Dr. Willows told himself the man looked shockingly ill—"do you think Mrs. Carstairs would prefer you to continue the case?"

"Good Lord, no!" Dr. Willows stared. "Why, what bee have you got in your bonnet now? I told you Mrs. Carstairs knew I was only representing you because you were ill, and couldn't come, and I told her I would run over first thing this morning and see if you were able to take on the case yourself."

"What did Mrs. Carstairs say to that?"

"She agreed, of course. And if I were you"—Dr. Willows felt vaguely uncomfortable as he stood there in the morning sunshine—"I'd go round pretty soon." He looked at his watch ostentatiously. "By Jove, it's after ten—I must get on. Then you'll go round to Cherry Orchard this morning?"

"Yes." Anstice accepted the inevitable. "I'll go round almost immediately. Thanks very much for coming, Willows. I ... I'm grateful to you."

"Oh, that's all right!" Dr. Willows, relieved by the change in Anstice's manner, waved his hand airily and returned to his car; and as soon as he was out of sight Anstice entered his own motor and turned in the direction of Cherry Orchard.

After all, he said to himself as the car glided swiftly over the hard white road, there was no reason why Mrs. Carstairs should find anything suspicious in his inability to visit Cherry Orchard on the previous evening. Doctors were only human after all—prone to the same ills to which other men are subject; and although the exigencies of one of the most exacting professions in the world would seem to inspire a corresponding endurance in its members, there are moments in which even the physician must pause in his ministrations to the world, in order, as it were, to tune up his own bodily frame to meet the demands upon it.

Of course it was possible that Cheniston had divulged to his sister the true reason of Anstice's non-arrival; but Anstice did not think it likely; for although there was, and always must be, a strong antagonism between the two men, Cheniston was an honourable man; and the secret upon which he had stumbled was one which a man of honour would instinctively keep to himself.

That his secret was safe with Iris, Anstice knew beyond any question; and as his car swept up the drive to the jasmine-covered door of Cherry Orchard he told himself that it was only his conscience which made him feel as though his absence on the previous evening must have looked odd, unusual, even—he could not help the word—suspicious.

The door was opened to him by Hagyard, and there was no doubting the sincerity of his welcome.

"Good morning, sir. I was looking out for you.... Miss Cherry's awakened, they say, and is in a sad state."

His unusual loquacity was a proof of his mental disturbance, and Anstice spoke sharply.

"Where is she? Shall I go upstairs?"

"If you please, sir. Here is Tochatti come for you, sir." And he stood aside to allow the woman to approach.

"Will you come this way, signor?" Her foreign accent was more marked than usual; and looking at her worn and sallow countenance Anstice guessed she had not slept.

He followed her without asking any questions, and in another moment was in Cherry's bedroom, the little white and pink room whose wall papers and chintzes were stamped with the life-like bunches of cherries on which he had once remarked admiringly, to the little owner's gratification.

In the small white bed lay Cherry, her head swathed in bandages, one little arm bandaged likewise; and beside her knelt Chloe Carstairs, her face like marble, her silky black hair dishevelled on her brow, as though she, too, had passed a sleepless night. Cherry's brown eyes were widely opened with an expression of half-wondering pain in their usually limpid depths, and from time to time she uttered little moans which sounded doubly piteous coming from so self-controlled a child as she.

"Dr. Anstice—at last!" Chloe rose swiftly from her knees and came to meet him with both hands outstretched. "I thought you were never coming—that Dr. Willows had forgotten to tell you——"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Carstairs." He knew at once, with a relief which would not be repressed, that Cheniston had kept his miserable secret. "I only saw Dr. Willows half an hour ago, and came at once. How is Cherry this morning—did she have any sleep?"

"Yes, thank God." Listening to her low voice, Anstice wondered why he had ever thought her lacking in affection for her child. "Dr. Willows was most kind—he stayed half the night with us and Cherry slept for some hours after he left. But now she is awake, as you see, and I'm afraid she is suffering horribly."

"Let me see what I can do for her, will you?"

He approached the bed and sat down quietly by it, while Cherry ceased for a second to moan, and her brown eyes besought him, more eloquently than speech, to give her relief from this quite unusual state of affairs. At first he was not certain that the child recognized him; but presently her uninjured hand came gropingly towards him; and as he took the tiny fingers in his own Anstice felt a sudden revival of the energies which had seemed so dead, so burnt-out within him on this beautiful September morning.

"Well, Cherry, this is bad luck, isn't it?" He spoke very gently, studying her little face the while. "But don't lose heart—this pain won't last long, it will soon run away. Is it *very* bad?"

"It's *rather* bad, thank you, my dear." Even in the midst of her tribulation Cherry strove heroically for her own gracious tone, and the familiar term of endearment sounded strangely pathetic to-day. "But you'll send it quite 'way, won't you?"

"Yes. I send away all pains," returned Anstice, lying nobly. "But first of all you must let me see just what sort of pain this one is, and then I shall know how to get rid of it. You don't mind me touching you, do you?"

"N-not much, my dear." Cherry's lips quivered, and Chloe Carstairs turned away as though unable to bear the sight of her little daughter's suffering any longer.

Quickly and tenderly Anstice made his examination without disturbing more of the dressings than was absolutely necessary; and by dint of questioning Mrs. Carstairs found that the child's brow had been badly scorched where her brown curls had caught fire, and that one little arm had suffered a grievous burn. These were the only outward signs of the accident, but the child had undergone a severe shock; and Anstice felt a sudden misgiving as he looked at the pinched little face, and noted the renewal of the pitiful moans which even Cherry's fortitude could not altogether repress.

The woman Tochatti had hovered in the background while he bent over the bed; and now, at a sign from him, she came forward silently.

"Just look after the child a moment or two, will you?" he said. "Mrs. Carstairs, may I have a word with you? Oh, don't be alarmed—I only want to hear a little more about the affair."

Tochatti shot a quick look at him from her beady black eyes; and Anstice was momentarily puzzled by her curious expression. She looked almost as though she resented his presence—and yet she should have welcomed him, seeing that he was there to do his best for the child she adored. But as she moved to the side of the bed, and took Cherry's unhurt hand in her own brown fingers with a touch of almost maternal tenderness, he told himself impatiently that he was fanciful; and turned to Mrs. Carstairs with a resolute movement.

"Will you come into my room, Dr. Anstice?" Chloe's spacious bedroom led out of her little daughter's pink and white nest; and as Anstice followed her she pulled the door to with a nervous action curiously unlike herself.

"Dr. Anstice, will she die?" Her lips were ashy, and in her white face only the sapphire eyes seemed alive. "If she dies, I will never forgive Tochatti—never!"

"Tochatti?" Anstice was surprised. "Was she to blame for this?"

"Not altogether." Chloe could be just, it seemed, even in the midst of her sorrow. "I will tell you what happened. As perhaps you know, Cherry was to have been one of Iris Wayne's bridesmaids, and at her own request Tochatti had made her dress, a flimsy little thing all muslin and lace. She had spent days over it—she embroiders wonderfully, and when it was done it was perfectly exquisite. She finished it last evening, and Cherry insisted on a dress rehearsal. She was to pay me a surprise visit in the drawing-room just before dinner, and it seems that when she was quite ready Tochatti slipped downstairs to find Hagyard and admit him to a private view, leaving Cherry alone in the room—against all rules—with two candles burning on the dressing-table."

She paused.

"I think I understand," said Anstice quietly. "Cherry took up a candle to get a better view of her pretty frock, and——"

"Not exactly," Chloe interrupted him. "She leaned forward, it seems, in order to look at herself more closely in the glass—you know children are fond of seeing themselves in pretty clothes—and, as you might imagine, she leaned too close to the candle and her sleeve caught fire."

"She cried out?"

"Yes—luckily we all heard her." Through all her marble pallor Chloe flushed at the remembrance of that poignant moment. "We rushed in and found her shrieking, and Tochatti beat out the flames with her hands."

"With her hands? Is she burnt, too, then?"

"Yes—I believe so." Chloe's tone expressed no pity. "She tied up her hand—the left one—herself, and says it is nothing much."

"I see." Privately Anstice determined to investigate the woman's hurt before he left the house. "Well—and what then?"

"When we got the flames under we found that Cherry had fainted, and we telephoned at once for you." She stopped short, taken aback by the strange expression on his face.

"Yes—and I wish to God I'd heard your call!" Anstice bit his lip savagely; and Chloe, uncomprehending but compassionate, hastened on with her story.

"You couldn't help being ill! Iris told me how your maids were all in the Park watching the fireworks—and then when my brother and Iris came down you were too ill to come. Are you better now?"

"So they went for Willows and brought him back with them?" He disregarded her question—possibly did not hear it.

"Yes, and as I have told you he was most kind. But of course Cherry did not know him, and she kept on crying for you——"

Chloe, who had intended the last words kindly, thinking to please him by this proof of the child's affection for him, was aghast at the result of her speech.

"Mrs. Carstairs, for God's sake don't tell me that!" Anstice's voice almost frightened her, so bitter, so full of remorse was it. "It only wanted *that* to make the horror complete—the knowledge that I failed a little child in her need!"

"The horror?" She stared at him. "I don't understand."

"No, and there's no reason why you should." With a great effort he resumed his ordinary tone. "Mrs. Carstairs, forgive me. I ... as you know—I was—ill—last night, and I'm not quite myself this morning. But"—he turned the subject resolutely—"what I want to say is this. Cherry will need very careful nursing for some days, and I think it will be well for me to send you a nurse."

Chloe received the suggestion rather dubiously.

"Do you think it is really necessary?" she said at length. "I'm as strong as a horse, and as for Tochatti, I'm afraid she wouldn't like to feel herself superseded. She is devoted to Cherry, you know, and she is a very jealous woman."

"Yes," he said, "but even although you and Tochatti are ready to give yourselves up to the child, in a case of this sort skill is wanted as well as affection." He smiled to soften the harshness of his words, and Chloe inconsequently thought that he looked very weary this morning.

"Of course, and if we don't prove competent you are at liberty to send us a nurse. But"—she spoke rather wistfully—"mayn't we try, Tochatti and I? I would a thousand times sooner nurse Cherry myself than let a stranger be with her."

Touched by something in her voice, remembering also the peculiar position in which this woman stood—a wife without a husband, with no one in the world, apparently, to care for her save her child—Anstice yielded the point for the moment.

"Very well, then. We will try this arrangement first, and if Cherry goes on well there will be no need to call in other help. Now I should like to see Tochatti, and give you both instructions."

Without a word Chloe led him back to the smaller bedroom where Cherry lay uneasily dozing; and Anstice beckoned to Tochatti to approach the window.

She came forward rather sullenly; and Anstice, irritated by her manner, spoke in rather a peremptory tone.

"Let me see your hands, please. I understand you were burnt last night."

Unwillingly the woman held out her left hand, which was wrapped round with a roughly constructed bandage; and as Anstice took it and began to unwind the folds he heard her draw in her breath with an odd little hiss.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, surprised, and the woman answered stolidly.

"No, thank you, sir. You did not hurt me at all."

Her manner struck him as peculiar; it almost seemed as though she resented his efforts on her behalf; and as he unwrapped the last of the bandage Anstice told himself she was by no means an attractive patient.

But when he saw her hand he forgave her all her peculiarities; for she must have suffered untold pain during the hours which had elapsed since the accident.

"I say—why didn't you show your hand to the doctor last night?" He spoke impetuously, really shocked to see the extent of her burns. "You have given yourself a lot of unnecessary pain, and it will take much longer to heal. You must let me dress the place at once."

Assisted by Chloe, who fetched and carried for him deftly, he dressed and bound up the burnt hand; and though the woman never flinched, there was a look in her eyes which showed him she was enduring great pain.

"There." He finished his work and looked at her closely. "That will feel easier soon. But you know you should lie down and try to sleep for an hour or two—and that hand will be quite useless for some days. Really, Mrs. Carstairs"—he turned to Chloe—"I think you will have to let me send for a nurse, after all. You can't do everything, and Tochatti is more or less disabled——"

He was surprised by the effect of his words. Tochatti turned to her mistress eagerly, and began pouring out a stream of Italian which was quite incomprehensible to Anstice, who was no better at modern languages than the average public school and University product. And Chloe replied in the same tongue, though without the wealth of gesture employed by the other woman; while Anstice waited, silently, until the colloquy was concluded.

Finally Chloe turned, apologetically, to him and explained the subject of the woman's entreaties.

"Tochatti is so terribly upset at the idea of a strange woman coming to nurse Cherry that I have promised to try to persuade you to reverse your verdict," she said. "Do you mind? Of course if we can't manage you must do as you think fit—but——"

"We will try, by all means." In spite of himself, he was touched by the woman's fierce devotion to her charge. "And now I'll tell you exactly what I want you to do until I come again this afternoon."

He proceeded to give them full instructions how to look after the child, and when he had assured himself that they understood exactly what was to be done, he took his leave, promising to call again in the course of a few hours.

As he drove away he mused for a moment on the Italian woman's peculiar manner towards him.

"Seems as if she hated me to speak to her ... she's never been like that before—indeed, when Cherry broke her arm she used to welcome me quite demonstratively." He smiled, then grew grave again. "Of course the woman was in pain to-day—she was a queer colour, too—looked downright ill. I expect the affair has been a shock to her as well as to the child."

And with that conclusion he dismissed Tochatti from his mind for the time being, his thoughts reverting to the one subject which filled his mental horizon to-day.

All through the bright September afternoon he sat alone in his rarely-used drawing-room. The consulting-room was haunted ground to him since the episode of the previous evening, and he could not bear to go out into the village lest he might perhaps behold some signs of the great event which was agitating peaceful Littlefield to-day.

But his imagination, unmercifully awakened from the stupor which had temporarily lulled it to repose, showed him many visions on that golden September afternoon.

He saw the old grey church decked with flowers, saw the sunlight filtering through the famous Burne-Jones window in a splash of gorgeous blue and crimson, staining the white petals of the big lilies in the chancel ... he heard the peals of the organ as the choristers broke out into the hymn which heralded the bride ... saw the bride herself, a little pale, a little serious, in her white robes, in her eyes the grave and tender look whose possibility he had long ago divined....

Oh, he was a fool to let his imagination torment him so ... and he sprang to his feet, determined to put an end to these maddening visions which only unfitted him for the stern and hopeless battle which was all that he could look forward to henceforth....

As he moved impatiently towards the door a sudden peal of bells rang out gaily, exultantly on the soft and balmy air; and his face turned grey as he realized that this was the signal which betokened that Iris was now the wife of Bruce Cheniston, his to have and to hold, irrevocably his until death should intervene to end their dual existence....

With a muttered oath he strode out of the house, and making his way round to the garage ordered his car to be brought forth immediately.

When it came he flung himself into the steering seat and drove away at such a pace that Andrews, his outdoor man and general factotum, looked after him anxiously.

"Looks like getting his licence endorsed," he observed to the pretty housemaid, Alice, who was watching her master's departure from a convenient window. "Never saw him drive so reckless—he's generally what you might call a very considerate driver."

"Considerate? What of?" asked Alice ungrammatically. "The dogs and chickens in the road, d'you mean?"

"Dogs and chickens! Good Lord, no!" Andrews was a born mechanician, and it was a constant source of regret to him that Anstice generally drove the car himself. "They're nothing but a nuisance anyway. No, I meant he considered the car—but he don't look much like it to-day."

"Oh, the car!" Alice was openly scornful. "Well, from the pace he went off just now, I should think he'll smash up your precious old car before he goes far. And no loss either," said Alice, who was engaged to a soldier in a cavalry regiment, and therefore disdained all purely mechanical means of locomotion.

But once out on the road Anstice moderated his pace somewhat, since to run over an unwary pedestrian would only add to the general hopelessness of the situation; and he reached Cherry Orchard without any such mishap as his servants had prophesied for him.

Here he found things less satisfactory than he had hoped. Cherry was no better; indeed, to his experienced eye, the child was worse, and although Mrs. Carstairs showed no signs of fatigue, and was apparently prepared to nurse her little daughter indefinitely, it was evident that the woman Tochatti was worn out with pain, anxiety, and, possibly, remorse.

Although she pulled herself together sufficiently to answer Anstice's questions intelligibly, it was plain to see that she was in reality half dazed by the shock she had experienced and by want of sleep, and Anstice realized that if Cherry were to be properly nursed some other help must be obtained at once.

"See here, Mrs. Carstairs." His face was grave as he examined the child's condition. "I'm not going to beat about the bush—I'm going to send you a nurse to help you with Cherry."

"A nurse? But—can't Tochatti and I——?"

"You're all right," he said shortly. "You look good for any amount of nursing, though I can't imagine how you do it, seeing you had no sleep last night. But Tochatti is no use at present." He judged it best to speak frankly. "It is evident she is in pain with that hand of hers, and she will be fit for nothing to-night, at any rate."

Chloe did not contest the point further.

"Very well, Dr. Anstice. You know best; and if you think it necessary, will you find us someone at once?"

"Yes. I think I know just the person for you." He turned to Tochatti, who was standing by, her face full of smouldering resentment. "I'm sure you want me to do the best thing for Miss Cherry, don't you?"

She did not answer; and he repeated his question rather sharply.

This time she answered him.

"*Si, signor.*" She spoke sulkily, and a flash of something like actual hatred shot from her black eyes as he watched her; but he had no time to spare for her vagaries, and turned back to Chloe Carstairs forthwith.

"Then I will try to find Nurse Trevor and bring her along. She will sit up to-night, and then you can both get some rest." He spoke kindly, including Tochatti in his smile; but the woman merely glowered, and he felt a spasm of sudden annoyance at her ungracious behaviour.

Luckily Nurse Trevor was at hand and disengaged; and Anstice had the satisfaction of finding her safely installed and apparently completely at home in her new surroundings when he paid his last visit to Cherry Orchard late that night.

She was a pretty girl of twenty-seven, who had had a good deal of experience in nursing children, and although poor little Cherry was by this time too ill to pay much attention to any of the people around her, it really seemed as though Margaret Trevor's soft voice, with its cooing, dove-like notes, had a soothing influence on the suffering child.

Anstice stayed some time in Cherry's room, doing all his skill could suggest for the alleviation of his little patient's pain, and when at length he took his departure Chloe herself came downstairs with him.

"What a lovely night!" She had opened the big hall door quietly while he sought his hat. "The moon must be nearly at the full, I think."

Together they stood on the steps looking out over the dew-drenched garden. The white stars of the jasmine which clustered thickly round the house sent out a delicious fragrance, and there were a dozen other scents on the soft and balmy air, as though the sleeping stocks and carnations and mignonette breathed sweetly in their sleep.

A big white owl flow, hooting, across the path, and Chloe shivered.

"I hate owls—I always think them unlucky, harbingers of evil," she said, and her face, as she spoke, was quite pale.

In an ordinary way Anstice would have deemed it his duty to scoff at such superstition; but to-night, his nerves unstrung, by the happenings of the last few days, his bodily vigour at a low ebb, his mind a chaos of miserable, hopeless memories and fears, Chloe's words woke a quite unexpected response in his soul.

"Don't say that, Mrs. Carstairs!" He spoke sharply. "Don't let us talk of bad luck—to-night of all nights!"

In the moonlight her narrow blue eyes studied his face with sudden keenness, and she felt an unusual desire to bring comfort to the soul which she felt with instinctive certainty stood in need of some help.

As a rule Chloe Carstairs, like Anstice himself, was too much preoccupied with the thought of her own private grudge against fate to have any sympathy to spare for others who might have known that Deity's frown; but to-night, owing possibly to some softening of her mental fibres induced by the sight of her child's suffering, she felt oddly pitiful towards this man, and her inward emotion found vent in words which surprised her as much as they startled the man to whom they were addressed.

"Why to-night, Dr. Anstice? Has this day been to you what it has been to me—a day of the bitterest suffering I have ever known?"

The tone of her deep voice, so oddly gentle, the compassionate expression in her usually cold blue eyes, were too much for Anstice, whose endurance was nearly at the breaking point; and he turned to her with a look in his face which dismayed her, so tragic was it.

"Mrs. Carstairs, this day I have been in—*hell*!" The word sounded cruelly out of place in the quiet moonlit night. "Once before I fancied I had reached the point at which a man may turn his back on life and its horrors without thinking himself a pitiful coward. I suffered then—my God, how I suffered!—but the torture I have endured to-day makes me feel as though I have never known what suffering is until now."

Her answer came quickly.

"But you know now that no man can turn his back on life and yet escape the allegation of cowardice!" It was an assertion rather than a question. "Dr. Anstice, I don't ask to know what your suffering has been—I don't want you to tell me—but one thing I do know, that you, and men

like you, are not the ones who give up the battle when the fight is fiercest."

He delayed his answer so long that Chloe had time to feel curiously frightened by his silence. And when his reply came it was hardly reassuring.

"I thought you were too wise a woman to indulge in generalities, Mrs. Carstairs." His tired voice robbed the words of offence. "And don't you know that it is never safe to prophesy what a man will do in a battle? The bravest may turn coward beneath a hail of fire—the man who is afraid may perform some deed which will entitle him—and rightly—to the coveted Victoria Cross."

"Yes." She spoke steadily, her eyes on his face. "But that's the battlefield of the world, Dr. Anstice, the material, earthly battlefield. It's the battlefield of the soul I was thinking of just now; and if I may use a quotation which has been battered out of nearly all its original fine shape by careless usage, to me the truly brave man is he who remains to the end the—'captain of his soul!'"

Her voice sank on the last words; but Anstice had caught her meaning, and he turned to her with a new light in his tired eyes.

"Mrs. Carstairs, thank you for what you've just said. Captain of his soul—yes, I've heard it often enough, but never stopped to ponder its meaning. And as the captain mustn't lose his ship if mortal man can prevent the loss, so a man must bring the ship of his soul safely into port. Is that what you meant just now?"

She smiled faintly in the moonlight, and for once there was no mockery in her smile.

"We have wandered from our original metaphor of a battlefield," she said gently, "but I like your simile of a ship better. Yes, I suppose that is what I was trying to convey—in a confused fashion, I'm afraid. We each have our voyage to complete, our ship to bring into harbour; and even though sometimes it seems about to founder"—he knew she alluded to the catastrophe of her own life—"we must not let it sink if we can keep it afloat."

For a moment there was silence between them; and again they heard the melancholy hoot of the owl, flying homewards now.

Then Anstice said slowly:

"You are right, of course. But"—at last his pent-up bitterness burst its bounds and overflowed in quick, vehement speech—"it's easy enough for a man to handle his ship carefully when he has some precious thing on board—or even when he knows some welcoming voice will greet him as he enters—at last—into his haven. But the man whose ship is empty, who has no right to expect even one greeting word—is there no excuse for him if he navigate the seas carelessly?"

"No." In the moonlight she faced him, and her eyes looked oddly luminous. "For a derelict's the greatest danger a boat can encounter on the high seas ... all our boats cross and recross the paths of others, you know, and no man has the right to place another's ship in peril by his own—carelessness."

"By God, you're right," he said vehemently; and she did not resent his hasty speech. "Mrs. Carstairs, you've done more for me to-night than you know—and if I can repay you I will, though it cost me all I have in the world."

"You can repay me very easily," she said, holding out her hand, all the motherhood in her coming to the surface. "Save Cherry—she is all *I* have—now—in the world; and her little barque, at least, was meant to dance over summer seas."

"God helping me, I will save her," he said, taking her hand in a quick, earnest clasp; and then he entered his waiting car and drove away without another word, a new courage in his heart.

And as Chloe gently closed the heavy door on the peaceful, fragrant world without and returned to the little room where Cherry lay in an uneasy slumber, she knew that a faint suspicion which had crossed her mind earlier in the summer had been verified to-night.

"He too loved Iris," she said to herself, with a rather sad little smile. "And I thought—once—that she was ready to love him in return. But, I suppose she preferred Bruce. Only"—Chloe had no illusions on the subject of her brother—"I believe Dr. Anstice would have made her a happier woman than Bruce will ever be able to do. And if he"—she did not refer to Cheniston now—"has lost his chance of happiness to-day, no wonder he feels that he has been in hell. For there is no hell so terrible as the one in which a soul who loves wanders alone, without its beloved," said the woman whose husband had left her because of a cruel doubt. "From the bottom of my heart I pity that man to-night!"

And then, re-entering Cherry's little room, pathetic now in its very brightness of colouring, Chloe forgot all else in the world save the child who slept, in the narrow bed, watched by Margaret Trevor's soft, brooding eyes.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

On a cold and frosty morning in November Anstice was sitting over his solitary breakfast when the telephone-bell rang; and he left his coffee to grow cold while he answered the summons.

It was Sir Richard who was speaking; and even over the wire Anstice thought he detected an unusual note in the older man's voice.

"That you, Anstice? Are you busy, or can you spare me a few minutes this morning?"

"I'll come to Greengates, of course, if you want me, Sir Richard," said Anstice immediately. "But I hope you are not ill—nor Lady Laura?"

"No, my sister's all right—so am I." There was a pause. "But I—well, I'm rather worried, and I want to see you."

"Very well, sir. I'll be round at eleven. Will that suit you?"

"Yes, eleven will do well. *Au revoir* till then," and Sir Richard rang off with a promptitude which forbade further discussion for the moment.

As he went back to his cooling coffee Anstice wondered vaguely what Sir Richard could have to say; but since speculation was mere idle waste of time he dismissed the matter from his mind and finished his breakfast in haste.

It was nearly noon when he drove his car up to the great hall door of Greengates; but the words of apology for his tardy arrival died on his lips when he caught sight of Sir Richard's face.

"I say, I'm afraid you're ill, after all!" Anstice was genuinely concerned; and Sir Richard's strained features relaxed into a smile.

"No, I'm perfectly well. Only, as I told you, I have been upset this morning; and—well, I'll explain and you will see there *is* something to worry about."

Without more ado he walked over to his substantial roll-top desk, and unlocking a drawer took from thence an envelope which he handled gingerly as though it were unpleasing to him.

From the envelope he drew a sheet of thin paper; and Anstice, watching him closely, felt still more mystified by his distasteful expression.

For a moment Sir Richard hesitated, still holding the sheet by the tips of his fingers. Then, as though he had taken a sudden resolve, he turned to Anstice abruptly.

"Look here, Anstice, this abominable thing reached me this morning. Now of course I don't need you to tell me that the proper place for it is the fire, and if it had not been for one circumstance connected with it, it would have been in the flames by now. But as things are"—he broke off suddenly and held the thin sheet out to the other man—"well, read it, and then tell me what you think is the best course to pursue."

With a premonition of evil for which he could not account, Anstice took the paper from Sir Richard and, turning to the window so that the pale autumn sunlight might fall upon the letter, he read the few lines scrawled in the middle of the sheet.

> "Dr. Anstice is a murderer he killed a woman in India by shooting her because she was in the way when he wanted to escape."

That was all. There was no heading, no signature, not even the cynical assurance of well-wishing which is the hall-mark, so to speak, of the typical anonymous letter; and as Anstice read the ill-written words his first sensation was of wonder as to who his secret enemy might be.

When he had finished he turned the sheet over in his hands to see if perchance the writer might have more to say; but the other side of the paper was blank; and he looked at Sir Richard with an expression of utter bewilderment.

"Well?" Sir Richard interrogated him with interest. "Pretty sort of document, eh? I suppose the writing conveys nothing to your mind?"

"Nothing at all." Holding the paper to the light, Anstice examined the ill-formed characters more closely. "It does not resemble any handwriting I know. But I suppose"—he smiled rather grimly—"the test of a successful anonymous correspondent is to disguise his writing efficiently."

"Yes." Sir Richard stretched out his hand for the paper and Anstice yielded it to him without regret. "Well, it is pretty evident that someone has—to put it vulgarly—got his knife into you. The question is, who can it be?"

"Well, it's a question I'm not clever enough to answer," returned Anstice, with assumed lightness. "All men have enemies, I suppose, and I won't swear I've never made any in my life. But I can't at

the moment recall one who would stoop to fight with such dirty weapons as these."

"Dirty—that's just the word for it," said Sir Richard disgustedly. "But you know, Anstice, this sort of thing can't be allowed to go on. For your own sake, and for the sake of others"—he paused, then repeated himself deliberately—"for the sake of others it must be stopped—at once."

"I quite agree with you that it must be stopped," said Anstice slowly, "though I hardly see how the matter affects anyone except myself. Of course"—he looked Sir Richard squarely in the face as he spoke—"it is no use denying there is a certain amount of truth in this accusation against me. I wonder if you have the patience to listen to a story—the story of a great mistake made, unfortunately, by me some years ago."

For a moment Sir Richard seemed about to speak; yet no word crossed his lips. Then he said, with a very kindly inflection in his voice:

"Don't trouble to tell me the story, Anstice. I think I know it already."

"You do?" Anstice stared at him. "But who told it to you? Was it—Cheniston?"

"No, no." Sir Richard spoke hurriedly. "Cheniston never mentioned the affair to me. As a matter of fact I heard it, at the time, from his uncle, a contemporary of mine; but I confess I did not, at first, associate you with the man who was brave enough—and unfortunate enough—to carry out that poor girl's wish——"

"On my honour, sir, I could not have done anything else." Anstice's voice was full of pain, and Sir Richard put his hand kindly on the younger man's shoulder.

"Of course you couldn't—no one but a fool could imagine that for a moment! But as I say, at first I did not connect your name with that of the hero of the story. It was only on seeing you and Cheniston together on one or two occasions that I guessed you might, after all, be the man."

"Yes—to my everlasting remorse I am the man," said Anstice rather bitterly. "But since you know the facts of the case, and yet are good enough to welcome me to your house, I gather this wretched letter carried no weight with you, Sir Richard. And if that is so, why not tear it up, and make an end of the thing?"

"Wait a moment, Anstice. As you say, I know the facts of the case and even if I were ignorant of them this contemptible *canard*"—he flicked the paper angrily—"wouldn't rouse my curiosity to the extent of setting me searching for some crime in your past." He smiled, but the smile cost him an effort. "But you see the mischief may not rest here. It is quite possible other people may have been—victimized—by this morning's post."

"By Jove, I hadn't thought of that." Anstice stood biting his lip and staring thoughtfully ahead of him; and the old man watched the thin, fine-drawn face with a regard which was full of anxiety. "Naturally a story of this sort is not calculated to enhance one's popularity; and one's patients might quite well look askance at a doctor who was reputed to be a murderer!"

He paused; then threw back his head impetuously.

"After all, if they are weak-minded enough to believe an anonymous statement, they aren't worth bothering with. As it is, I've been thinking for some time that I've had enough of general practice. I never intended to go in for it, you know; and if I had a quiet year or two for research——"

He broke off suddenly, for Sir Richard had raised his hand almost entreatingly.

"Anstice, don't speak of giving up your practice here—not at this juncture, anyway. You see this vile story may spread; and to quit Littlefield now would look almost like"—he hesitated—"like cowardice."

For a second Anstice stared at him, a flash of anger on his brow. Then, as though dismayed by the effect of his words, Sir Richard spoke again.

"Besides, there is another aspect of the matter which has evidently not yet struck you. It is very natural for you to look on this letter as a loathsome, but quite unimportant, act of spite, on the part of some secret enemy; and I understand your desire to assume that it does not matter in the least. But"—his eyes sought the younger man's face anxiously—"there is another person in this neighbourhood who might be affected by a fresh flood of anonymous communications. You know to whom I refer?"

Suddenly Anstice saw, with a most unwelcome clarity of vision, what Sir Richard intended to convey; and his eyes grew hard as he replied:

"You mean——"

"I mean that once again that unfortunate girl at Cherry Orchard might be suspected of having recourse to this most degrading, most underhand form of crime. And for her sake the matter must not be allowed to rest here."

"Sir Richard"—Anstice came a step nearer his host, and Sir Richard heard, with satisfaction, the ring of steel in his voice—"you are right. I did not see, at first, how peculiarly fatal this coincidence might be. I mean that should these letters, as you suggest, be circulated through the district, the old scandal would be revived. And though no sane person could ever believe Mrs.

Carstairs guilty of such a vile action, I suppose there *are* a good many lunatics about who would put these atrocious things down to her."

"Well, you know what people are," said Sir Richard deprecatingly, "and naturally a woman who has once been convicted, by whatever unfair means, of the same offence, is liable to be looked on with suspicion. And I shouldn't like"—for a second Sir Richard, who loved Chloe Carstairs as though she had been his daughter, faltered, and cleared his throat rather huskily—"I shouldn't like that poor, pretty creature over yonder to suffer any further indignity."

"Of course not!" Anstice's eyes flashed, and he pulled himself together resolutely. "And if I can help it, she shan't suffer! Just look here, Sir Richard, the first thing to do is to find out if anyone else has been, as you say, victimized."

"Yes." Sir Richard spoke rather dubiously. "And it will be rather hard to find out that, I fear. You see, naturally a decent man wouldn't spread the fact abroad; and we can hardly go about making open inquiries."

"I suppose not." For a second Anstice was nonplussed, then his face cleared. "But after all, if anyone—one of my patients, for instance, has received one of these charming letters, don't you think I shall find it out? You see, although the average 'decent man,' as you call him, holds firmly to the theory that the place for an anonymous communication is the fire, I'm afraid nine out of ten people can't help wondering, even while they burn it, how much truth there was in the accusation!"

"Just so—but even then——"

"Well, something of that rather uncomfortable wonder, not to say suspicion, is pretty sure to show itself in the manner of the man who's read the letter. Seriously, Sir Richard, if anyone beside yourself has received a testimonial to my character" He spoke ironically now—"I'll guarantee to discover the fact in the course of ten minutes' conversation with him!"

"You may be right, Anstice." Sir Richard did not speak with much conviction. "But for all our sakes I wish we could make certain of the facts either way. You see, should this lie be circulated through the district by means of letters or postcards it is inevitable that the old scandal should be raked up. And in that case Mrs. Carstairs *will* suffer."

A thought struck Anstice suddenly and he gave it utterance forthwith.

"Sir Richard, I suppose you don't remember whether the handwriting in any of those other letters resembled this in any way? It is not likely, so long afterwards, but still——"

Sir Richard uttered an impatient exclamation.

"By Gad, what an old fool I am! I've got one of the original letters locked away in that desk now—one of the half-dozen or so which reached me when the scandal was at its height. I don't know why I kept it—God knows I hated the sight of it—but somehow I could never bring myself to destroy the thing, hoping against hope that it might some day afford a clue to the identity of the writer."

He busied himself with a bunch of keys for a moment, and finally selected one, with which he unlocked a small drawer at the back of his desk. At first his eagerness prevented him finding what he sought, but presently he brought to light another and rather worn sheet of paper, which he handed to Anstice triumphantly.

"Yes, read it, read it!" He had marked Anstice's hesitation. "The affair's been public property too long for any secrecy now. And that, after all, was a fairly innocuous screed."

Thus encouraged, Anstice ran his eye over the sheet of paper, and there read a veiled, but none the less malignant, attack on the character of Mrs. Ogden, the wife of the man who had held the living of Littlefield at the time the letter was written. In his anxiety to compare the handwriting of the two epistles Anstice barely stopped to take in the meaning of what he read; and when, in answer to his request, Sir Richard handed him the second letter he carried them both eagerly to the window and examined them carefully in the stronger light.

"Well?" Sir Richard's tone was full of sympathetic interest.

"One moment—I've got a pocket magnifying glass somewhere." He put the letters down and plunged his hand into various pockets in eager search. "Ah—here it is—and we'll jolly soon see if the game hand has been at work in both."

Watching him as he pored over the two papers Sir Richard told himself that with this man for her champion Chloe Carstairs need not fear further condemnation at the hands of a censorious or jealous world. He knew instinctively that what made Anstice so suddenly keen on discovering the authorship of the letters was not a selfish desire to rid himself of the annoyance such letters might bring upon him, but rather a determination to prove Chloe Carstairs innocent in the first instance by bringing home the guilt for both letters—or series of letters—to the right quarter.

Sir Richard made no mistake in his estimation of Anstice's chivalrous desire to right the wrong which had been done to Mrs. Carstairs. He knew quite well that to Anstice the righting of the wrong appeared in the light of a duty to the woman whom he called his friend; and that no warmer emotion animated him in regard to Chloe Carstairs than that same chivalry.

For Iris' father had not been blind to the significance of the events of the summer. Although Anstice had never betrayed his secret by word or look the other man had all along had a suspicion that Cheniston was not alone in his love for his pretty daughter; and although naturally he was ignorant of the compact entered into by the two younger men he had sometimes wondered, with just the least possible tinge of regret, why Anstice had apparently been content to leave the field to his rival.

Although he admitted to himself that he had absolutely no grounds for believing that Anstice had been in love with Iris he could never rid himself of the notion; and in any case he felt quite certain that Anstice had no warmer feeling for Mrs. Carstairs than a very genuine and chivalrous friendliness.

Watching the younger man as he stood with bent head examining the papers Sir Richard was struck by the change in Anstice's face during the last few months. Always thin, it was now positively haggard, and the black hair which clustered round his brow was touched, here and there, with grey. Yet the effect was not one of age. He could hardly be said to look older than his years; but there was a look of something more painful than a premature ageing would have been —a look of suffering, of bitter experience impatiently borne, of a mental conflict which had drawn lines round the fine lips, and given an air of hopeless weariness to the deep-set eyes.

And Sir Richard, watching, wondered again—this time uneasily—whether the marriage of his beloved little daughter to Bruce Cheniston had proved yet another trouble for this man's already burdened spirit to bear.

Sir Richard had, of course, no idea of the remorse with which Anstice remembered that terrible scene on the eve of Iris' wedding day, when Cheniston and the girl he was to marry on the morrow had come to him for help; and had found him in no fit state to render aid to any human being.

That fact alone, the fact that, as he had said bitterly to Chloe Carstairs, he had failed a child in her need, would have been sufficient to fill Anstice with a very real and deep regret for his own most lamentable failure; but added to that was the other and still more deplorable fact that it had been Iris Wayne who had seen his condition; and although she had uttered no word of reproach he told himself hopelessly that now he must have fallen very low in her estimation. And the idea that Iris must scorn him in her heart, however charitably she might strive to think of him, was a terrible one to the man who had fought so heroically for her sake to overcome his weakness, and had failed only when it had seemed to him that his failure—now—could mean nothing to the girl he loved.

As Sir Richard watched him, rather uneasily, Anstice turned to him suddenly.

"I say, Sir Richard, I'm pretty sure these letters are both written by one hand! Look, these two 'a's are identical, and the capital 'D' is absolutely similar in both."

Oddly thrilled, Sir Richard bent over the papers; and saw that Anstice had spoken the obvious truth.

"By Gad, Anstice, you're right!" For a moment he did not know whether to be disturbed or relieved by the discovery. "It looks uncommonly as though the same hand were at work again; and in that case——"

"In that case the mischief-maker shall be brought to book." A new look of resolution drove away the weary lines from the speaker's face. "I hope with all my heart it *is* the same person who's at the old game—and I'll find out who it is if it costs me every penny I've got!"

"Quite right, quite the right spirit," said Sir Richard, watching him keenly the while. "It's damnably unfair that a story of that sort should be circulated about you—and the blackguard who's responsible deserves a heavy punishment for the lie."

In an instant the vivacity died out of Anstice's face; and again its hopeless expression struck Sir Richard with a sense of pain.

"Of course the thing is not exactly a lie," he said. "I mean, I did act too hastily, though God knows I did it for the best. But if the whole story is to be raked up again—by Jove, I believe after all it would be better to let sleeping dogs lie!"

"You forget—this is not the first letter which has fallen like a bombshell into Littlefield," Sir Richard reminded him quietly; and Anstice flushed a dull red.

"Of course not ... what a fool I am! Thinking of the past, of that horrible morning, I forgot Mrs. Carstairs. But"—he squared his shoulders aggressively—"I shall not forgot again. This thing is going to be sifted now, and the mystery solved. May I take these letters with me?"

"Certainly." Sir Richard felt Anstice had the better right to the documents. "You will take care of them, of course; and if you follow my advice you will not show them to anyone—yet."

"Quite so." Anstice put the two letters carefully away in his pocket-book. "Now I must go, Sir Richard; but please believe I am grateful for your kindness in this matter."

He shook hands with Sir Richard, and hurried away to his waiting car; and as he drove from the house his lips were firmly set together, and the look in his eyes betokened no good to the wretched creature who had penned this latest communication.

And Sir Richard, watching him from a side window, felt a sharp pang of regret that this man, whom he liked and trusted, had not managed, apparently, to win his daughter's affection.

"Damme if I wouldn't rather have had him for a son-in-law than the other," he said to himself presently. "Cheniston's a decent fellow enough, brainy and a thoroughly steady sort of chap, but there is something about this man that I rather admire. It may be his pluck, or his quiet tenacity of purpose—I'm hanged if I know what it is; but on my soul I'm inclined to wish I'd been called upon to give my little girl into his keeping. As for that affair in India, it's not every man who would have had the pluck to shoot the girl, and precious few men would have lived it down as he has done. I believe I'd have put a bullet through my brain if it had been me," said Sir Richard honestly, "but I can quite realize that it's a long sight finer to see the thing through. And if there's to be fresh trouble over these confounded anonymous scrawls, well, I'll stick to the fellow through thick and thin!"

And with this meritorious resolve Sir Richard went back to his comfortable fire and the paper which he had not, as yet, had the heart to peruse.

CHAPTER II

On the day following Sir Richard's interview with Anstice the latter received an unexpected call from the Vicar of Littlefield parish.

The two men were on fairly intimate terms. For the clergyman, as a scholar and a gentleman, Anstice had a real respect, though the religious side of Mr. Carey's office, as expressed in his spiritual ministrations, could hardly be expected to appeal to the man who could never rid himself of the feeling that God had deliberately failed him at a critical moment.

Mr. Carey, on his side, had a genuine liking for Anstice, whose skill he admired with the impersonal admiration which a specialist in one profession accords to an expert in another vocation. But mingled with his admiration was an uneasy suspicion that all was not well with the spiritual health of this most indifferent of his parishioners, and he was grieved, with the charity of a large and generous nature, by the gloom, the melancholy, which at times were written only too plainly on the other's face.

The two men were brought into contact now and again by the very nature of their respective callings. Soul and body are after all so closely related that the health of the one depends largely on that of the other; and at times both priest and physician must take their share in the gracious task of healing. And on the occasions when their work brought them together the mutual liking and respect between the two was sensibly strengthened.

So that it did not cause Anstice more than a passing sensation of surprise when on this cold and raw November evening the Reverend Fraser Carey was announced as a visitor.

"Mr. Carey here? Where have you taken him, Alice?"

"Into the drawing-room, sir. The fire's not lighted, but I can put a match to it in a moment."

"No, don't do that." Anstice hated the little-used drawing-room. "Take Mr. Carey into my room, and bring up some coffee directly, will you?"

"Yes, sir." The maid, who in common with the rest of the household regarded Anstice with an admiration not unmixed with awe, withdrew to carry out her instructions; and hastily finishing an important letter, Anstice went in search of his rare visitor.

"Hallo, Carey—jolly good of you to look me up on a beastly night like this." He poked the fire into a brighter blaze, and drew forward a capacious leather chair. "Sit down and light up. We'll have some coffee presently—I know you don't care for anything stronger."

"Thanks, Anstice." Mr. Carey sank down into the big chair and held his transparent-looking hands to the flames. "It is a bad night, as you say, and this fire is uncommonly cosy."

Fraser Carey was a man of middle age who, through constitutional delicacy, looked older than his years. His features, well-cut in themselves, were marred by the excessive thinness and pallor of his face; and his eyes, beneath their heavy lids, told a story of unrestful nights spent in wrestling with some mental or physical pain which forbade the refreshment of sleep. He had never consulted Anstice professionally, though he had called upon his services on behalf of a little niece who sometimes visited him; and Anstice wondered now and then what scruple it was which prevented his friend making use of such skill as he might reasonably claim to possess.

To-night Carey looked even more tired, more fragile than ever; and Anstice refrained from speech until he had poured out two cups of deliciously fragrant coffee and had seen that Carey's pipe was in full blast.

Then: "It is quite a time since you dropped in for a chat," he said cheerfully. "Yet this isn't a specially busy season of the year for you parsons, is it? *We* are run off our legs with influenza and all the rest of it, thanks to the weather, but you——"

"We parsons are generally busy, you know," returned Carey with a smile. "Human nature being what it is there is no close-time for sin—nor for goodness either, God be thanked," he added hastily.

"I suppose not." Having satisfactorily loaded his pipe Anstice lay back and puffed luxuriously. "In any case I'm glad you've found time to drop in. By the way, there is a woman down in Blue Row about whom I wanted to see you. I think you know the family—the man is a blacksmith, Richards by name."

He outlined the needs of the case, and Carey took a few notes in the little book he carried for the purpose. After that the conversation ranged desultorily over various local matters mildly interesting to both; and then there fell a sudden pause which Anstice at least felt to be significant.

It was broken, abruptly, by the clergyman, who sat upright in his chair, and, laying his empty pipe down on the table, turned to face his host more fully.

"Anstice." His thin, rather musical voice held a new and arresting note. "My visit to you to-night was not of, a purely social nature. I came because—I may have been wrong—because I felt it to be both an obligation and an act of friendship to come here to discuss with you a peculiar situation which has arisen within the last day or two in Littlefield."

Instantly Anstice guessed what was to follow; and he knocked the ashes out of his pipe with a rather impatient gesture which was not lost on the other man.

"If you will listen to me for one moment," said Carey hastily, "you may then refuse to discuss the subject if you wish. But I think it will really be better if you can bring yourself to listen to me first."

Even Anstice's annoyance was not proof against the other man's moderation; and he spoke with creditable mildness.

"I think I know what you want to say, Carey. Is it—this interesting subject—concerned with certain statements which are being made about me—anonymously—in the parish?"

Carey's face lost a little of its uneasiness.

"Yes," he said, "since you appear to be already acquainted with the fact there is no use in denying it. Indeed, I don't wish to do so, seeing that is what I came to say to you."

"You have received such a letter yourself?"

"Yes. I received a letter this morning."

"I see." For a moment Anstice sat in silence, his lips set firmly together; and the other man, watching, was struck, as Sir Richard had been on the previous day, by the look of suffering in his face. "Well, Carey, is it asking you too much to let me know exactly what form the accusation against me took? Or have you the letter with you?"

"No. I burnt the letter immediately," Carey answered. "Naturally such communications are best destroyed—and forgotten—at once. But"—he hesitated—"the fact is I have since discovered that I am not the only person to be addressed by the unknown correspondent."

"Indeed?" Anstice's eyes flashed. "Is it permissible to ask who else has been thus—honoured?"

The clergyman paused a moment before replying, and it was evident a conflict was taking place in his mind. The struggle was, however, soon terminated, and he answered Anstice's question resolutely.

"Yes, it is quite permissible. Indeed, I had already gained the consent of the other—victim"—he smiled deprecatingly—"to tell you, if necessary, what was being said behind your back."

"Well?" Anstice's tone was peremptory, but his friend did not resent it.

"The other anonymous letter—the only other one of which I have any knowledge—was addressed to the wife of your colleague—I don't think he's your rival—Dr. Willows."

"Oh!" Anstice opened his eyes; he had not expected this revelation. "Poor little woman! What a shame to victimize her!"

"Yes—as you know, she's quite a girl, they've only been married three months; and the letter worried her considerably—so much so, in fact, that as Willows is away on a week's holiday she sent for me to advise her in the matter."

"What advice did you give her?"

"Well, in the first flush of indignation she was all for sending the horrid thing on to you—a pretty sure sign that any accusation against you had missed its mark," said Carey with a smile. "However, her heart failed her at the critical moment and she sent for me instead. She was at

school with some young cousins of mine and we are on quite friendly terms; so she confided her perplexity to me at once."

"I see." Anstice was thinking hard. "And I suppose you returned her confidence by giving her yours?"

"Yes." Carey looked at him frankly. "I requested her to keep my confidence as I would keep hers—save to you—and I am sure she will do so. But"—he spoke gravely now—"I am afraid, Anstice, there is someone in the neighbourhood who wishes to work you ill."

"By the way"—Anstice was not listening very closely—"you have not yet told me the nature of the accusation. I presume it was the same in both cases?"

"Practically, yes. It was a statement, made very plainly and directly, that you—you——"

He broke off, his thin cheeks flushing; and Anstice smiled rather dryly.

"Don't let it distress you," he said, with an attempt at jocularity. "Suppose I save you the trouble of repeating the contents of the letters. I daresay the writer stated that I once, in order to get myself out of a tight place in India, wantonly sacrificed the woman who was my companion?"

"Yes," said Carey slowly, "that was the substance of both communications. The idea was, I gather, to prevent the recipients having confidence in you by pointing to you as one who would save himself at the expense of a woman. Of course"—he spoke more fluently now—"no one who knew you would dream of attaching any weight whatever to that sort of cruel and senseless lie; and as I told Mrs. Willows, such a baseless slander is better left to die for want of notice. She quite agreed with me," he added hastily, and Anstice's face cleared.

"Thanks, Carey." He held out his hand, and Carey's transparent, fingers clasped it with a strength which would have been surprising to one who did not know the indomitable spirit which dwelt in the wasted frame. "You are a true friend, and your friendship deserves some return. Unfortunately the only return I can make is to tell you the miserable story which is perverted by the anonymous writer into something less creditable than—I hope—you will judge it to be."

He sprang up suddenly and leaned against the mantelpiece, hands in pockets as usual; and in that position, looking down on his friend as he sat in his capacious chair, he outlined once again the happenings of that bygone Indian dawn.

He related the affair shortly—it was not a subject on which he cared to dwell; and the clergyman listened thoughtfully, his sunken eyes fixed on the pale face beneath the clustering black hair with an intentness of regard which would have disturbed anyone less engrossed than the narrator of the sad little story.

When he had finished Anstice moved abruptly.

"Well, that's the truth—and now you see that those statements made about me are the most insidious form of lying—with a good foundation of half-truths. That's what makes it so infernally hard to refute them."

"I see." Carey loaned forward thoughtfully, shielding his face from the flames with his thin hands. "It is a pitiful story, Anstice; and if you will allow me to say so I admire and respect a man who can live down the memory of a tragedy as you have done."

"I have lived it down—yes," said Anstice, rather grimly. "But it's been jolly hard at times not to throw up the sponge. Several people have suggested—discreetly—that suicide is quite justifiable in cases of this sort, but——"

"Suicide is *never* justifiable." The clergyman's delicate features stiffened. "From the days of Judas Iscariot—the most notorious suicide in the history of the world, I suppose—it has been the refuge of the coward, the ingrate, the weak-minded. People talk of the pluck required to enable a man to take his own life. What pluck is there in deliberately turning one's back on the problems one hasn't the courage, or the patience, to solve? Believe me, suicide—self-murder—is an unthinkable resource to a really brave man."

He stopped; but Anstice made no reply, though a rather cynical smile played about his lips; and presently Carey went on speaking.

"It always seems to me such sheer folly, such egregious lunacy, to precipitate one's self into the unknown, seeing that one can hardly expect the Giver of Life to welcome the soul He has not called. And I have often wondered what depths of misery, of shame, must overwhelm the uninvited soul in what someone has called 'the first five minutes after Death.'"

His voice sank to a whisper on the last words; and for a moment the room was very still. Then Carey leaned forward and laid one hand on the other's arm with a rather deprecating smile.

"Forgive me, Anstice! The subject we were discussing is one on which I find it difficult to hold my peace. But knowing you, I know that suicide is not, would never be, the way out to one of your disposition."

Anstice moved restlessly.

"Odd you should use that expression," he said quickly. "Others have employed it in connection

with this miserable story of mine. No, suicide is not the way out—nor is another expedient to which I have had recourse. But"—suddenly his face lost its quietness and grew keen, alert—"this slander has got to be stopped. You see this is not the first time the neighborhood has been infested with this plague."

"You refer to the unhappy circumstances connected with my predecessor's wife?"

"Yes. You know the story, of course?"

"Yes. I am also acquainted—but very slightly—with Mrs. Carstairs."

"Then you know a much-maligned woman," said Anstice. "And it is in order to save her from further unhappiness that I intend to sift this matter to the bottom."

"I am delighted to hear you say so," said Carey earnestly. "And if I can help you in any way my services are yours. First of all, how do you propose starting on the sifting process?"

"I have already made a start," rejoined Anstice. "Through the good offices of Sir Richard Wayne, who has also been pestered with a letter, I have discovered that the writing of those communications and of those earlier ones you mentioned just now is in many respects identical."

Carey sat upright, his face alight with interest.

"Really? You think the writer of both is the same?"

"Yes. Of course until I have studied the two letters in my possession a little more closely I can't be positively certain on the point; but I intend to submit them both to an expert at the first opportunity."

"I can help you there," said Carey quite eagerly. "I mean, if you do not know of a reliable expert I can give you the name of the cleverest man in England."

"Can you?" Anstice's notebook was out in a second. "Thanks very much—I will write to him to-morrow. But in my own mind I have not a shadow of doubt that the same person wrote them both."

"By the way"—Carey spoke slowly—"how many people about here would be likely to know the story you have told me to-night? Out in India, of course, there might be some who would remember such a tragic episode. But it's a far cry from Alostan to Littlefield."

"The only people in the neighbourhood who have heard the true story are, so far as I know, Sir Richard Wayne and"—he hesitated—"and his daughter, who is now Mrs. Cheniston."

"I see." Fraser Carey's eyes had noted the change of tone as Anstice spoke the last name; and his quick humanism was stirred by the pitiful idea which crossed his mind. "Sir Richard's daughter knew the story? And—may we conclude that her husband would naturally share her knowledge?"

"Naturally—yes." He emphasized the word. "You see I omitted to tell you that the girl I—the girl who was with me in the hut was engaged to this very man, Bruce Cheniston, whom Miss Wayne eventually married."

"Was she, indeed?" Carey was really surprised. "What a strange coincidence that you should meet again—as I suppose you met—in Littlefield."

"We met, yes," said Anstice, his eyes growing fierce at the remembrance of their meeting. "But—well, as you will readily see, none of those persons is in the least likely to have anything to do with the letters we are discussing. I daresay Mrs. Carstairs may possibly know the story—if her brother saw fit to hand it on to her. But so far as I know they are the only people who do know it, and naturally we can write all of them off the list of suspects at once."

"Quite so. I wonder"—Carey rose as he spoke—"I wonder if anyone else has received one of those shameful letters? Of course should the matter go no further there is not much real harm done, though of course——"

"Whether there are other letters or not the matter is going to be thoroughly investigated," said Anstice resolutely; and Carey experienced a disturbing and quite unusual pang of regret for his own vanished youth and strength as he heard the ring of determination in the other man's voice, noted the firm set of his lips and the proud and dauntless gesture with which he threw back his head, his black eyes sparkling.

"Well, I shall follow the course of events with deep interest," he said, striving as he spoke to fight down that unworthy sensation of envy of another's superior equipment for the battle of life. "Of course I will keep my own counsel; and in a few days at latest you should know whether your enemy intends to strike again."

"It is very good of you to take an interest in the horrible affair." Anstice was really grateful. "Must you go? You haven't given me much of your company to-night."

"I must go—yes." His smile robbed the words of any discourtesy. "But don't forget to call upon me if you want any help. And for the sake of all concerned, but especially, if I may say so, for the sake of the poor lady at Cherry Orchard, I trust you may be able to clear the matter up for all the world to see."

"It is chiefly for Mrs. Carstairs' sake that I intend to do so," returned Anstice briefly. "Personally I don't care what may be said about me; but I don't mean Mrs. Carstairs to be victimized further. And if it costs me every penny I've got in the world the writer of these letters shall be brought to book!"

And Fraser Carey agreed, mentally, with Sir Richard's estimation of Mrs. Carstairs' new champion. But he went further than Sir Richard, in that he found occasion to wonder whether after all this unexpected and unwelcome repetition of the former anonymous campaign which had convulsed Littlefield might not in the end prove the salvation of the man against whom it was presumably directed.

Unlike Sir Richard, Carey was an observer of men, a student of human nature, and he had not failed to notice the increased alertness which had characterized Anstice this evening as he discussed the situation. The rather bitter, indifferent look which generally clouded his face had lifted, giving way to a brighter, more open expression; and the half melancholy cynicism which Carey had deplored had vanished before the eager determination to see an innocent and wronged woman righted in the eyes of the world.

"The man has brooded so long over what he considers to be an injustice of God that he has lost, temporarily, his sense of proportion," said Carey to himself as he trudged, rather wearily, homeward. "But if he devotes himself, as he seems anxious to do, to the service of a woman who has suffered an equal injustice, though at the hands of man this time, possibly he will forgot his own bitterness in the contemplation of her marred life. And God, who is the God of Justice, whatever scoffers may say, will bring the truth to light in His own good time. So the two tragedies may react on one another; for the lives of all of us are bound together by mysterious and undreamed-of links; and in the effort to free the soul of a woman from its bondage his own soul may well find its freedom."

But Fraser Carey was a mystic; and since the materialistic world looks with suspicion on mysticism, it is probable that even Anstice, who knew and respected him, would have heard his last speech with a passing wonder that a man should hold so unpractical and untenable a view of existence as the words would seem to imply.

CHAPTER III

Before he went to bed on the night of Carey's visit to him Anstice wrote a letter to the expert recommended by his friend, inquiring whether an appointment could be made for the following Friday afternoon; and on Thursday night a laconic telegram arrived fixing three o'clock on Friday for the suggested interview.

It had seemed to Anstice that a personal interview with the expert would be far more satisfactory than a prolonged correspondence; and he hurried through his work on Friday morning and caught the noon express to London with a minute to spare.

He had the carriage to himself; and during the quick journey to town he pored over the two specimens of handwriting which he was taking up for examination until he was more than ever convinced that both were written by the same hand.

Mr. Clive, the noted handwriting expert, had a flat in Lincoln's Inn; and thither Anstice hastened in a taxi, arriving just as the clocks of London were striking three; a feat in punctuality which possibly accounted for the pleasant smile with which Mr. Clive greeted his visitor.

The expert was a tall and thin person, with deep-set and brilliant eyes hidden more or less by a pair of rimless eyeglasses; and Anstice was suddenly and humorously reminded of the popular idea of a detective as exemplified in Sherlock Holmes and his accomplished brethren.

When he smiled Mr. Clive lost his somewhat austere expression; and as Anstice obeyed his invitation to enter his sitting-room the latter felt that he had come to the right person with whom to discuss the problem of these annoying letters.

"Now, Dr. Anstice." Clive pushed forward a chair for his visitor and sank into another one himself, leaning back and joining his finger-tips in a manner which again reminded Anstice involuntarily of the super-detective. "I expect your time is as valuable as mine—probably more so—and we won't waste it in preliminaries. I gather you have some specimens of handwriting to submit to me?"

"Yes. I have two letters to show you." He drew them carefully from his notebook. "What I want to know is, whether they were both written by the same hand or not."

Mr. Clive unlaced his finger-tips and took the papers carefully from his visitor; after which, rather to Anstice's amusement, he removed his eyeglasses and proceeded to study the letters without their aid.

For several minutes he pored over them in silence, the letters spread out on the table before him; and Anstice, watching, could make nothing of the inscrutable expression on his face. Presently he rose, went to a little cabinet at the end of the room, and took from it a small magnifying glass,

with whose aid he made a further study of the two documents; after which he resumed his eyeglasses and turned to Anstice with a smile.

"Your little problem is quite simple, Dr. Anstice," he said amiably. "As soon as I looked at these letters I guessed them to be the work of one hand. With the help of my glass I know my guess to be correct."

For a moment Anstice could not tell whether he were relieved or disappointed by this confirmation of his own suspicions; but the expert did not wait for his comments.

"If you will look through the glass you will see that the similarities in many of the letters are so striking that there is really no possible question as to their being written by one hand." He pushed the papers and glass across to Anstice, who obediently bent over the table and studied the letters as they lay before him. "For instance"—Clive moved to Anstice's side and, leaning over his shoulder, pointed with a slim finger—"that 'I' in India is identical with the one with which this letter opens; and that 's' with its curly tail could not possibly have been traced by any hand save that which wrote this one. There are other points of resemblance—the spaces between the words, for instance—which prove conclusively, to my mind at least, that the letters are the work of one person; but I expect you have already formed an opinion of your own on the subject."

"Yes," said Anstice. "To be frank, I have. I was quite sure in my own mind that they were written by one person; but I wanted an expert opinion. And now the only thing to be discovered is—who is that person?"

Clive smiled.

"That is a different problem—and a more difficult one," he said quietly. "These anonymous letters are very often exceedingly hard nuts to crack. But probably you have someone in your mind's eye already."

"No," said Anstice quickly, moved by a sudden desire to enlist this man's sympathy and possible help. "I'm completely in the dark. But I intend to find out who wrote these things. I suppose"—for a second he hesitated—"I suppose it isn't in your province to give me any possible clue as to the identity of the writer?"

The other laughed rather dryly.

"I'm not a clairvoyant," he said, "and I can't tell from handling a letter who wrote it, as the psychometrists profess to be able to do. But I will tell you one or two points I have noted in connection with these things." He flicked them rather disdainfully with his finger. "They are written by a woman—and I should not wonder if that woman were a foreigner."

"A foreigner?" Anstice was genuinely surprised. "I say, what makes you think that? The writing is not foreign."

"No. You are right there inasmuch as the regulation writing of a foreigner, French, Italian, Spanish, is fine and pointed in character, while this is more round, more sprawling and clumsy. But"—he frowned thoughtfully, and Anstice thought he looked more like Sherlock Holmes than ever—"there is one point in connection with this last letter which has evidently not struck you. Suppose you read it through carefully once more, and see if you can discover something in it which appears a trifle un-English, so to speak."

Anstice took the second letter as desired, and read it through carefully, while Clive watched him with an interest which was not feigned. Although Anstice had no suspicion of the fact, Clive, who had travelled in India, had in the light of that letter identified his visitor directly with the central figure in that bygone tragedy in Alostan; and although, owing to his absence from England, Clive had not been one of the experts consulted in the Carstairs case, it was not hard for him to place the first letter as belonging to that notorious series of anonymous scrawls which had roused so much interest in the Press a couple of years before this date.

Just where the connection between the two cases came Clive could not discover, but he had always felt a curiously strong sympathy with the unknown man who had carried out a woman's wish just ten minutes too soon, and he would willingly have helped Anstice to solve this problem if he could have seen his way to find the solution.

Presently Anstice looked up rather apologetically.

"I'm awfully stupid, but I don't see what you mean about a foreigner...."

Clive smiled.

"Don't you? Well, I'll explain. And after all I may be wrong, you know. However, here goes." He bent down again and pointed to the word India, which for some reason was set in inverted commas. "Don't you notice any peculiarities about these commas? Think of the usual manner in which an English writer uses them—and note the difference here."

Anstice studied the word with suddenly keen attention, and instantly noted the peculiarity of which Clive had spoken.

"The first double comma, so to speak, is set below the line, and the other one above. But English writers and printers use both above the line. Isn't that so?"

"Yes. Whereas in the majority of French or Italian printing the commas are set as they are here—a trick which, to my mind, points to the strong probability, at least, of the writer of this letter being a foreigner of sorts."

"Italian! Why——" Suddenly a vision of the woman with the Italian name, Tochatti, Mrs. Carstairs' personal attendant, flashed into Anstice's mind, and Clive's eyes grew still keener in expression as he noted the eager tone in his visitor's voice.

"Well?" As Anstice paused the expert spoke quickly. "Does the suggestion convey anything to your mind?"

"Yes," said Anstice. "It does. But the only Italian—or half-Italian—person I know, a woman, by the way, is absolutely the last one I could suspect in the matter."

"Really?" As he spoke Clive removed his eyeglasses once more and stared with his brilliant eyes at the other man's face. "Don't forget that in cases like these it is generally the last person to be suspected who turns out to be the one responsible. Of course I don't know the facts of the case, and my suggestions are therefore of little practical value. At the same time the very fact that you are able at once to identify an Italian in the case——"

"She is not altogether Italian," said Anstice slowly. "She's a half-breed, so to speak—and I really can't in fairness suspect her, devoted as she is to Mrs. Carstairs——"

He broke off abruptly, annoyed with himself for having betrayed so much; but Clive's manner suddenly became more animated.

"See here, Dr. Anstice." He sat down again, and handed his cigarette case to his visitor. "May I be frank with you?"

"Certainly." He accepted a cigarette and Clive resumed immediately.

"I think I am correct in assuming that the first letter is one of those supposed—by some people—to have been written by Mrs. Carstairs, wife of Major Carstairs of the Indian Army?"

"Yes." It would have been folly to deny the correctness of the assumption.

"Well, I was not professionally interested in the case, but all along I have had very grave doubts as to the course of justice in that unhappy affair. And I have always thought the sentence was unjustifiably severe."

Anstice's face cleared, and his manner lost its first stiffness.

"I am glad to hear you say so," he said heartily. "For my own part I am perfectly convinced Mrs. Carstairs was absolutely innocent in the matter. You see, I have the privilege of her acquaintance, and it would be quite impossible for her to stoop to so low and degrading an action."

"Just so." For a second the expert wondered whether Dr. Anstice's interest in Mrs. Carstairs arose from a purely personal dislike to see an innocent woman unjustly accused or from some warmer feeling; but after all it was no concern of his, and he dismissed that aspect of the case from his mind for the present. "But I should like to ask you to explain one thing to me. Would it have been possible for this Italian woman of whom you speak to have written those former letters? I gather that it is not altogether impossible, though I daresay improbable, for her to be connected with this last one; but of course, if she must be acquitted of any hand in the first, the clue drops to the ground at once."

"Well"—for a second Anstice hesitated, then resolved to speak plainly. "To tell you the truth, it would have been quite possible for her to be mixed up in both affairs—save for one thing. The woman, is a servant in the household of Mrs. Carstairs; but she's not only absolutely devoted to her mistress, but is also unable to write even her name."

"What proof have you of that?" The question shot out so abruptly that Anstice was genuinely startled.

"Proof? Well, the woman herself admits it, and certainly she has never been seen to write so much as a word——"

"That does not prove she could not write quite well if she wished to," said Clive quietly. "People do strange things in this queer world of ours, Dr. Anstice, as I expect you know considerably better than I do. Have you never had an hysterical patient who declared she could not walk and after being carried about for months has been discovered dancing a fandango in her bedroom on the sly?"

He laughed and threw away his cigarette.

"Perhaps that's not quite a typical case, but you must have known of many people who declare they have lost the use of one or more of their faculties—possibly in order to gain sympathy from their friends?"

"Quite so." Anstice could not but admit the fact. "But as you say, in these cases there is generally some definite object to be gained, even if it is only the desire for sympathy. In this case, however, the motive appears to be lacking, for I gather that long before the anonymous letters began to

arrive this woman had admitted her inability to handle pen or pencil."

"Really? That complicates matters a little," said Clive thoughtfully. "Though, of course, if the woman were a schemer it is possible she might prepare the way, so to speak, for some time beforehand. In any case it is an interesting problem. But I don't quite see why this woman—supposing it to be she—? should start another campaign, directed, this time, against you. Surely she can't want her mistress, to whom you say she is devoted, to be suspected once more?"

"I don't know—I confess it is a problem beyond my powers to solve," said Anstice rather hopelessly; and Clive answered at once, with a kind note in his voice.

"Don't say that, Dr. Anstice. All sorts of mysteries have come to light sooner or later, you know, and it is quite on the cards this one may be easier to solve than you think at present. At any rate, if I may give you a word of advice, keep your eye on the Italian woman. I'll swear those inverted commas are of foreign origin, and as a doctor you ought to be able to find some way of penetrating through any imposition in the way of pretence."

"Thanks," said Anstice, rather amused at this tribute to his powers. "I'll do my best. Anyway, you have given me valuable help, and I'll follow up this clue at once."

"Do—and let me know the result." Clive followed his visitor to the door. "I really am genuinely interested in the case, and I shall be pleased to hear from you how things progress."

They parted on mutually cordial terms, and an Anstice walked away he began to feel as though, after all, this mystery might yet be solved; though he was bound to confess that at present the introduction of Tochatti's name merely complicated matters.

He had a couple of hours to fill in before repairing to the station, and feeling in the mood for exercise, he set out for a brisk walk, careless of whither his steps led him while he pondered over his recent interview with Clive.

After the quiet and pastoral solitude of Littlefield London seemed unpleasantly crowded and noisy. The reek of petrol was a poor substitute for the clean country air, and the hoot of innumerable motors and 'buses struck on his ear with new and singularly disagreeable force as he took his way along Piccadilly.

Suddenly a noise considerably louder and more ominous than the rest penetrated his hearing, and looking hastily round he saw that a collision had taken place between a taxi-cab and a motor-van bearing the name of a well-known firm in Oxford Street—with apparently tragic results to the taxi-cab, which lurched in the road like a drunken man vainly attempting to steer a straight course, and eventually toppled half over on to the pavement, where it struck a lamp-post with a terrific crash as it came to rest.

With the rapidity peculiar to the life of cities a crowd instantly began to assemble; and as a burly policeman, notebook in hand, pushed through the people, a middle-aged gentleman stepped, with some difficulty, out of the wrecked cab, and stumbled forward on to the kerb, almost into the arms of Anstice, who reached the spot at the same moment and caught him as he staggered and seemed about to fall.

"Hold up, sir!" Anstice involuntarily gripped the gentleman's shoulder to support him; and his friendly tone and prompt help apparently assured the other man, who pulled himself together pluckily.

"Thanks, thanks!" He was white, and evidently had been somewhat upset, for the taxi had swerved half across the road to the discomfort of its occupant. "You are most kind. I am really not hurt, only a little shaken. The driver of the van was entirely to blame—I hope, constable, you will make all possible inquiries into the matter."

As a first step towards doing so the policeman stolidly requested the speaker's name and address, and these having been furnished he proceeded to interrogate the van-driver and the taxi-man, both of whom were only too ready to pour out voluble explanations, each accusing the other of carelessness with a freedom of language only known, apparently, to those who have intimate acquaintance with the dark ways of motors and their accompanying vices.

In the meantime the middle-aged gentleman turned to Anstice with a word of gratitude for his timely support.

"You're sure you're not hurt?" Anstice thought the other man looked oddly white. "I'm a doctor—and if I can do anything for you——"

"No, I'm really all right, thanks." He relinquished Anstice's arm, which he had been unconsciously holding, and looked round him. "By good luck I'm opposite my club, and if this fellow has finished with me I'll go in and sit down."

The constable intimated that he had no further need of him for the moment; and having asserted his readiness to appear in court in connection with the case he turned back to Anstice.

"Will you come in and have a peg with me?" His invitation was cordial. "I'm all alone—just back from India, and if you can spare five minutes, I'll be glad of your company."

"Thanks." Anstice was curiously attracted towards the man. "I'm killing time, waiting for a train, and I'll come with pleasure."

They went up the steps of the building outside which the accident had occurred; and five minutes later his new friend, brushed and tidied, every speck of dust removed from his well-cut suit, led him to a comfortable corner of the smoking-room and invited him to take a seat, calling to a waiter as they sat down.

"What will you drink—whisky-and-soda? Right—I'll have the same—a large whisky for me," he said, as the man moved away. "I really feel as though I want a stiff drink," he added, rather apologetically, to Anstice.

"I expect you do—your taxi came a fearful bump on the kerb," said Anstice, "You were lucky not to get shoved through the window."

"Yes—it was down, fortunately, or I might have got in quite a nasty mess with cut glass." He hesitated a moment. "By the way, shall we exchange cards? Here's mine, at any rate."

He laughed and pushed the slip of pasteboard over to Anstice, who returned the courtesy before picking it up. But as the latter glanced at it perfunctorily, with no premonition of the surprise in store for him, the name he read thereon sent a sudden thrill through his veins; and he uttered a quite involuntary exclamation which caused his companion to look up in amazement.

For by one of those strange coincidences which happen every day, yet never lose their strangeness, the man who sat opposite to Anstice on this murky November afternoon was Chloe Carstairs' husband, Major Carstairs.

CHAPTER IV

For a moment his *vis-à-vis* regarded him with a very natural surprise. Then:

"You seem a little astonished," he said, with a hint of stiffness in his manner. "May I ask if my name is familiar to you? I don't think I remember yours—though"—he stole another glance at the card, and his brows drew together a little thoughtfully—"Now that I come to look at it I do seem to have heard it before."

"I daresay you have, if you have lived in India. Unfortunately, my name was pretty well known in that country once, for the proverbial nine days." His voice was a little savage. "But don't trouble about *my* name—let me admit at once that yours is perfectly familiar to me."

He broke off as the waiter approached with their glasses; and until he had vanished Anstice said no more. Then he continued steadily:

"You see I am living at present in Littlefield; and I have the honour of being acquainted with a lady bearing the same name as yourself."

"You mean my wife?" He spoke calmly; and Anstice found himself admiring the other's composure. "Then you will be able to give me the latest news of her and of my little daughter. Has she—Cherry, I mean—quite recovered from that serious burning accident in September?"

"Quite, I think." For a second Anstice's heart was sick within him as he remembered the night on which that accident had taken place; but he stifled the memory and continued steadily. "She got over it splendidly, and she is not marked by even the tiniest scar."

"That's a good thing." Major Carstairs took a drink from the contents of his glass, and then, setting it down, looked Anstice squarely in the face. "See here, Dr. Anstice, by a strange coincidence you and I have been brought together this afternoon, and I should be very much obliged if you will be kind enough to answer me one or two questions."

"I am quite ready to answer any questions you may care to ask, Major Carstairs." Anstice sat upright and pushed aside his glass, and Major Carstairs began at once.

"First of all, how long have you been in Littlefield?"

"A little over twelve months. I went there, to be exact, in September of last year."

"I see. And you have been acquainted with Mrs. Carstairs during the whole of that time?"

"Not quite. I first met Mrs. Carstairs in the spring, when I was called in to attend her professionally."

"I see. As a doctor you will naturally be acquainted with many people in the neighbourhood; and that being so"—Major Carstairs moistened his lips and went heroically on—"you are of course familiar with my wife's story—you know all about those damned anonymous letters—and their sequel?"

"Yes." Anstice met his gaze fully. "I know the story, and I am glad of this opportunity to assure you of my unswerving belief in Mrs. Carstairs' innocence of the charge brought against her. I hope you don't consider my assertion uncalled-for," he added hastily.

For a long moment Major Carstairs said nothing, gazing ahead of him thoughtfully, and Anstice studied the face of Chloe Carstairs' husband with deep interest.

He said to himself that this man was a gentlemen and a man of honour. There was something about him, something dignified, reserved, a little sad, which won Anstice's usually jealously-withheld sympathy at once; and although he had hitherto pictured Major Carstairs as harsh, unforgiving, narrow-minded, inasmuch as he could not bring himself to believe his wife innocent of a degrading charge, now that he saw the man himself, traced the lines in his face which spoke of tragedy, noted the sadness in his eyes, and heard the gentle note in his voice as he spoke of Chloe, Anstice was ready to swear that this man had not lightly disbelieved his wife.

If he had left her, it had not been done easily. He had surely acted in accordance with his lights, which would permit no compromise in a matter of honour; and as he now sat opposite to Major Carstairs, Anstice felt a strange new respect springing up in his heart for the man who had had the courage to stand by his inward convictions, however terribly, tragically mistaken those convictions might have been.

When at length that long pause ended, Anstice was surprised by the manner of its ending.

Major Carstairs leaned across the little table and laid his square-fingered hand, brown with the suns of India, on Anstice's arm.

"From the bottom of my heart I thank you for those words," he said earnestly. "I am glad to know my wife has one friend, at least, in Littlefield, who is able to believe in her innocence."

"She has more than one, sir," returned Anstice significantly, as Carstairs withdrew his hand. "Sir Richard Wayne is as firmly convinced as I that Mrs. Carstairs has been the victim of a cruel injustice. And——"

"Sir Richard? Ah, yes, he was always a true friend to Chloe." He spoke absently and for a second said no more. Then he suddenly bent forward resolutely. "Dr. Anstice, I see you are to be trusted. Well, you have doubtless heard that I left my wife because I could not bring myself to acquit her of the charge brought against her. I don't know how much you may have learned, but I give you my word the evidence against her was—or appeared to be—overwhelming."

"So I have heard." Anstice's tone was strictly non-committal, and after a glance at his impassive face Carstairs went on speaking.

"You must forgive me for reminding you that Mrs. Carstairs never categorically denied the charges made. That is to say, she implied that any such denial was, or should be, unnecessary; and it seemed as though her pride forbade her realizing how unsatisfactory her silence was—to others."

"Forgive me, Major Carstairs." Anstice took advantage of a momentary pause. "May I not just suggest that a categorical denial was unnecessary? Surely to anyone who knew her, Mrs. Carstairs' silence must have been sufficient refutation of the charge?"

He was almost sorry for his impulsive words when he noted their effect. Major Carstairs' naturally florid complexion turned grey; and his whole face grew suddenly aged. In that moment Anstice felt that his speech, with its implied rebuke, had been both impertinent and unjust; yet he hardly knew how to repair his error without committing still another breach of good taste.

Accordingly he said nothing; and after a moment had passed Major Carstairs spoke with something of an effort.

"I am glad to see my wife has found a champion in you," he said, with a smile which Anstice felt to be forced. "And even although as a partisan of hers you naturally think me cruel and unjust, may I ask you to believe that I would give years—literally years—of my life to be able to think myself mistaken in my first judgment of that unhappy affair!"

The note of passion in the last words moved Anstice powerfully; and he forgot his own delicate position in a sudden quite unusual desire to justify himself.

"Major Carstairs, forgive me if I seem to you impertinent, meddlesome. I know quite well that this is no business of mine, but—but I know Mrs. Carstairs, and I know she has been made bitterly unhappy by this wretched misunderstanding. And I am sure, as sure as I am that you and I sit here to-day, that she never wrote one word of all those beastly letters—why, I can almost prove it to you, if you really care for such proof—and then——"

He stopped short, arrested by the change in Carstairs' face. His eyes suddenly blazed with a new and startling fire; and the hand which had been idly playing with a glass clenched itself into a determined fist.

"My God, man, what are you saying? If you can prove my wife to be innocent, why in God's name do you let me sit here in Purgatory?"

"I ... I said almost——" Anstice positively stammered, so taken by surprise was he.

"Well, that's enough to be going on with." Carstairs spoke resolutely. "Look here, I'll tell you something I meant to keep to myself. For the last two months—ever since I received my wife's short and formal letter telling me of Cherry's accident—I've been haunted by the thought that perhaps after all I was mistaken—frightfully, appallingly mistaken, in the conclusion I came to at the time of the trial. At first I was convinced, as you know, that the verdict was the only possible one; and, although it nearly killed me, I could do nothing but leave her and return to India alone.

But in the last few weeks I have asked myself whether after all I have not made a terrible mistake. Supposing my wife were innocent, that her silence were the only possible course open to a proud and honourable woman ... supposing that a grievous wrong had been done, and the real writer of those letters allowed to escape scot-free. Oh, there were endless suppositions once I began to dwell on the possibility of my wife's absolute ignorance of the vile things ... and when at last I was able to sail for England I came home with the full determination to go into the matter once more, to rake up, if necessary, the whole sad affair from the beginning, and see whether there were not some other solution to the mystery than the one I was forced to accept at the time of the trial."

"You mean that, sir?" Anstice spoke eagerly, and the other man nodded. "Then I'm bound to say I think it is something more than coincidence that has brought us together to-day. I'm not a religious fellow, and I always feel that if there be a God He went back on me years ago in a way I had not deserved, but I do think that there is something more than chance in our meeting; and if good comes out of it, and the truth is brought to light, well"—he laughed with a sudden gaiety that surprised himself—"I'll forget my old grudge against the Almighty and admit there is justice in the world after all!"

"Dr. Anstice," said Carstairs, "I don't understand you. Would you mind explaining a little more clearly just what you mean? Why should a meeting between you and me be anything more than the prelude—as I hope it may be—to a very pleasant friendship? I honour your belief in my wife, but when you speak of proof——"

"Look here, Major Carstairs." With a sudden resolve Anstice pulled his note-case out of his pocket and extracted two sheets of thin paper therefrom. "You will probably be surprised when I tell you that those infernal letters have started again, and this time I am the person honoured by the writer's malicious accusations."

"The letters have started again? And you are the victim? But——"

"Well, look at this charming epistle sent to a certain gentleman in Littlefield a day or two ago." Anstice handed across the letter he had received from Sir Richard Wayne, and Major Carstairs took the sheet gingerly, as though afraid of soiling his fingers by mere contact with the paper.

He read the letter through, and then looked at Anstice with a new expression in his eyes, which were so oddly reminiscent of Cherry's brown orbs.

"Dr. Anstice, were you the hero of that unfortunate episode in the hills a few years ago?"

Anstice nodded.

"I was the hero, if you put it so. Personally I should say I feel more like the villain of the piece. That, anyway, is how the writer of this letter regards me."

"Oh, that's nonsense." He spoke authoritatively. "You could have done nothing else, and I think myself you showed any amount of pluck in carrying out the girl's request. You and I, who have been in India, know what strange and terrible things happen out there; and I tell you plainly that if I had been that unfortunate girl's brother, or father, I should have thanked you from the bottom of my heart for having the courage to do as you did."

Now it was Anstice's turn to change colour. These words, so heartily spoken, spoken, moreover, by a man who knew the world, whose commendation carried weight by reason of the speaker's position, fell with an indescribably soothing touch on the sore places in Anstice's soul, and in that moment his inward wound received its first impetus towards healing.

He threw back his head with something of the old proud gesture which was now so rarely seen, and his voice, as he replied, held a new note of confidence.

"Thanks awfully, sir." His manner was almost boyish. "You have no idea what it means to me to hear you say that. Of course I acted as I did, meaning it for the best, but things turned out so tragically wrong——"

"That was not your fault." Major Carstairs' reply was decisive. "And anyone who ventures to criticize your action proclaims himself a fool. As for the stupid accusations in this letter, well, I should say no one would give them a second's credence."

"Well, I did venture to hope that my few friends would not believe it," returned Anstice, smiling. "And if I had only myself to consider I should not bother my head about it. But you see there is someone else——"

"You mean Mrs. Carstairs?" His manner was suddenly brisk. "Quite so. Of course a second series of letters would remind the neighbourhood of the first. Well, if you can bring yourself to allow me to have that letter I will submit it to one of those handwriting fellows——"

Anstice interrupted him abruptly.

"I've already done so. And the report of the expert I consulted—a well-known man of the name of Clive—is that both these letters were written by the same hand."

"Ah! And did the expert utter any further authoritative dicta on the matter?"

"He gave me two—possible—clues." Anstice spoke slowly. "The letters are, he says, probably

written by a woman, and there is a strong presumption in favour of that woman being a foreigner—for instance"—he paused—"an Italian."

"An Italian?" For a second Major Carstairs looked blank. Then a ray of light illumined his mental horizon. "I say, you're not thinking of my wife's maid, old Tochatti, are you?"

"Well"—he spoke deliberately—"to tell you the truth, ever since Clive suggested a foreigner, I *have* been wondering whether the woman Tochatti could have anything to do with the letters."

"But old Tochatti! Why, she is absolutely devoted to my wife—been with her for years, ever since she was a child. No, believe me, Dr. Anstice, you must write Tochatti off the list."

"Very well." Anstice mentally reserved the right to his own opinion. "As you say, the woman certainly appears devoted both to Mrs. Carstairs and the child. But I'm sure you will agree it is wise to leave no clue uninvestigated in so serious a matter?"

"Quite so. And you may rest assured the matter shall be thoroughly investigated. By the way, you said something about a train. Are you returning to Littlefield to-night?"

"Yes. And it's time I was moving on," said Anstice, glancing at his watch. "Shall I have the pleasure of your company on the journey?"

"Not to-night. I have one or two matters to attend to in town, and I must write and prepare Mrs. Carstairs for my visit. But I shall certainly be down shortly, and I hope I may have the pleasure of meeting you again before very long."

"I hope we may meet soon," said Anstice heartily, and Major Carstairs escorted his guest to the steps of the Club, where he took a cordial farewell of him and stood watching the tall figure swing along Piccadilly with the stride of an athlete.

"So that's the fellow there was all the '*gup*' about." Major Carstairs had heard the story of Hilda Ryder's death discussed a good many times during his sojourn in India. "A thoroughly decent chap, I should say, and it's deuced hard luck on him to go through life with a memory of that sort rankling in his soul. Ah, well, we all have our private memories—ghosts which haunt us and will not be laid; and at least there is no disgrace in that story of his. At the worst it could only be called a miscalculation—a mistake. But what if my mistake has been a more grievous one—what if Chloe is innocent and I have misjudged her cruelly? If that should be so," said Major Carstairs, "then my ghost will never be laid. The man who shot Hilda Ryder will be forgiven for his too hasty deed. But for a mistake such as mine there could be no forgiveness."

And as he turned to re-enter the club his face looked suddenly haggard and old.

CHAPTER V

The more Anstice pondered over the matter of the anonymous letters, the more inclined he was to believe that the woman Tochatti was one of the prime movers, if not the sole participator, in the affair.

Leaving the subject of motive out of the question for the moment, it was evident that Tochatti, of all the household, would have the most free access to her mistress' writing-table or bureau; and Anstice knew, through a chance word, that on the occasion of Mrs. Carstairs' fatal visit to Brighton, she had been accompanied by her maid.

True, the woman was supposed, by those around her, to be incapable of writing, even to the extent of signing her name; but, as the export had pointed out in the course of the interview, it was not unknown for a person to deny the possession of some faculty, either from a desire to gain sympathy or from some other and less creditable reason.

The question of motive, however, was a more complicated one. Why should this woman seek to injure her mistress in the first place, and having done her an irrevocable wrong—always supposing Tochatti to be the culprit—why should she seek now to bring dishonour on a man who had never, to his knowledge, done her any harm?

The thing seemed, on the face of it, absurd; yet somehow Anstice could not relinquish his very strong notion that Tochatti was in reality at the bottom of the business, and on the Sunday following his visit to Mr. Clive he walked over to Greengates to discuss the matter with Sir Richard Wayne.

Sir Richard was almost pathetically pleased to see his visitor, for he missed his pretty daughter sorely, and he welcomed Anstice cordially on this foggy November afternoon.

Over their cigars in Sir Richard's cosy sanctum Anstice gave him an outline of his visit to the handwriting expert and the conclusions to be drawn therefrom—a narrative to which Sir Richard listened with close attention; and when Anstice had finished his story the older man took up the subject briskly.

"You really think this woman may be implicated? Of course, as you say, she would have opportunities for tampering with Mrs. Carstairs' belongings; but still—the question of motive——"

"I quite realize that difficulty, Sir Richard. But I confess to a very strong feeling of distrust for the woman since visiting Clive. He suggested almost at once that the writer was a foreigner, and Tochatti is about the only foreign, or half-foreign, person in Littlefield, I should say."

"Quite so." Sir Richard leaned back in his chair and placed his finger-tips together in a judicial attitude. "Well, let us consider the question of motive a little more fully. If the writer really were Tochatti, we must suppose her to be actuated by some strong feeling. The question is, what feeling would be sufficiently strong to drive her to a deed of this nature?"

He paused; but Anstice, having no suggestion to make, kept silence, and Sir Richard went on with his speech.

"Generally speaking, in the character of a woman of a Southern nature, we find one or two strongly-marked attributes. One is a capacity for love, equalled only by a capacity for hatred. Of course Tochatti is only half Italian, but personally I distrust what we may call half-breeds even more than the real thing. You know the old proverb, 'An Englishman Italianate He is a devil incarnate'—and I believe there is some truth in the words."

"I share your distrust for half-breeds," said Anstice fervently. "And in this case, although she speaks excellent English as a rule, it always seems to me that Tochatti is more than half Italian. Do you agree with me?"

"I do—and that's why I distrust her," returned Sir Richard grimly. "I confess I don't like the women of the Latin races—those of the lower classes, anyway. A woman of that sort who is supplanted by a rival is about the most dangerous being on the face of the earth. She sticks at nothing—carries a knife in her garter, a phial of poison in her handbag, and will quite cheerfully sacrifice her own life if she may mutilate or destroy the aforesaid hated rival."

"So I have always understood. But in this case, if you will excuse me pointing it out, there is no possibility of love entering into it. To begin with, Tochatti is a middle-aged woman; and of course there could not be any question of rivalry between her and her mistress."

"Oh, of course not. I was speaking generally," Sir Richard reminded him. "But there are other reasons for jealousy besides the primary reason, love. You know, in the case of these last letters, which are certainly actuated by some very real spite against you ... why, what's the matter now?" For Anstice had uttered an exclamation which sounded almost exultant.

"By Jove, sir, I believe I've got it—the reason why the woman should feel spiteful towards me!" In his excitement he threw away his cigar, half-smoked, and Sir Richard, noting the action, guessed that an important revelation was at hand.

"You've got it, eh?" Sir Richard sat upright in his chair. "Well, may I hear it? It's no secret, I suppose?"

"Secret? Heavens, no—but how intensely stupid I've been not to think of it before!"

"Go on—you're rousing my curiosity," said Sir Richard as Anstice came to a sudden stop. "Tell me how on earth you have managed to rouse the woman's spite. Personally, seeing how cleverly you pulled her adored Cherry through that illness of hers, I should have thought she would have extended her devotion to you."

"That's just how the trouble began," rejoined Anstice quickly. "You remember how the child set herself on fire one night in September?"

"Yes—on the night before Iris' wedding day." In spite of himself Anstice winced, and the other man noted the fact and wondered. "Set fire to herself with a candle, didn't she?"

"Yes—and Tochatti put out the flames somehow, burning one of her hands in the process."

"Did she? I had forgotten that."

"Yes—with the result that she was not able to take her fair share of nursing the child, and I accordingly installed a nurse."

"Yes, I remember—a bonny girl, with a voice as soft as the coo of a wood-pigeon."

"Just so. Well, I—or rather Mrs. Carstairs—had a pitched battle with Tochatti before she would consent to Nurse Trevor being engaged; and the girl herself told me that the woman did her very best to make her life unbearable while she was at Cherry Orchard."

"The deuce she did! But if she were really incapacitated——"

"She was; but with the unreasonableness of women—some women," he corrected himself hastily, "she resented her enforced helplessness, and looking back I can recall very well how she used to scowl at me when I visited Cherry."

"Really! You're not imagining it?"

"I'm not an imaginative person," returned Anstice dryly. "I assure you it was no fancy of mine. She used to answer any questions I put to her with a most irritating sullenness; and once or twice even Mrs. Carstairs reproved her—before me—for her unpleasant manner."

"You think that would be sufficient to account for the animus against you displayed in these

letters?"

"Honestly, I do. You see, luckily or unluckily, the child took a great fancy to Nurse Trevor; and being ill and consequently rather spoilt, she behaved capriciously towards her former beloved Tochatti—with the result that the woman hated the nurse—and hated me the more for having introduced her into the household."

Sir Richard nodded meditatively.

"Yes. I see. It hangs together, certainly, and it is quite a feasible explanation. But what about the nurse? She would be the one against whom Tochatti might be expected to wreak her spite——"

"Yes, but you see Nurse Trevor was only a bird of passage, so to speak. She had come down here from a private nursing home in Birmingham, and had just finished nursing a case when I wanted her; and after Cherry was better she returned to Birmingham; so that the woman would probably have had a good deal of trouble in getting on her track."

"Quite so. You, being at hand, were a more likely victim. Upon my soul, it almost looks as though you were right. Still, even this does not explain why she should ruin Chloe's life."

"No, I admit that. But don't you think if we could bring this last crime—for it is a crime—home to the Italian woman we could wring a confession out of her concerning the first series of letters?"

"Yes, that is quite possible. The question is, How are we going to bring it home to her? At present we have no clue beyond the specialist's opinion that the writer is a foreigner."

"No, and it's going to be a hard nut to crack," said Anstice thoughtfully. "But it shall be cracked all the same. What do you say to taking Mrs. Carstairs into our confidence, Sir Richard? Of course the idea will be a shock to her at first; but if the matter could be cleared up, think what a difference it would make to her!"

"Yes, indeed!" Sir Richard agreed heartily. "And to her husband as well. You know, Major Carstairs is a man with a rather peculiar code of honour; and you must not run away with the idea that because he refuses to believe in his wife's innocence he is necessarily a narrow-minded or—or callous person."

"I don't," said Anstice quickly. "By the way I've not told you all that happened the day I was in town. By a curious coincidence I met Major Carstairs——"

"What, is he in England again?"

"Yes." Anstice related the particulars of the meeting between them, and repeated, so far as he could remember it, the substance of the subsequent conversation in the club. "So you see, Sir Richard, Major Carstairs is not only ready, but longing, to be convinced of his wife's innocence in the matter."

"Good! That's capital!" Sir Richard beamed. "If once Chloe can be led to understand that her husband will believe in her one day she will be ready to help us to prove her innocence. You know I have sometimes thought that if she had taken up a rather more human, more feminine attitude, had relinquished the pride which forbade her to protest loudly against the injustice which was done her, she might have been better off in the end. It is very hard fighting for a woman who won't fight for herself; and that idea of hers that if her own personal character were not enough to prove her blameless of so vile a charge nothing else was worth trying—well, it was the attitude of conscious innocence, no doubt, but it was certainly above the heads of a conscientious, but particularly unintelligent jury!"

He put down the stump of his cigar, which unlike Anstice he had smoked to the end, and looked at the other man with a kindly eye.

"Look here, Anstice, why shouldn't we go—you and I—to visit Mrs. Carstairs now?"

"Now?" Anstice was somewhat taken aback at the proposal.

"Yes. Why not? There's no time like the present. It is barely six o'clock, and she will certainly be at home."

"But—won't she be at church?" Anstice felt suddenly unwilling to go into the matter with the mistress of Cherry Orchard.

"Not she! Don't you know Chloe only goes to church once in a blue moon?" Sir Richard laughed breezily. "I don't blame her—I expect she feels she owes Providence a grudge—but anyway she will be at home to-night. And—another inducement—Tochatti will almost certainly be at *her* church. Those Catholics are a queer lot," said Sir Richard, who was a Protestant of the old school. "They will cheat you and lie to you—aye, and half murder you, on a Saturday night—and turn up at Mass without fail on Sunday morning!"

"Yes, I know Tochatti does go to the Roman Catholic chapel at night," owned Anstice rather reluctantly. "Well, sir, if you really think the moment is propitious let us go by all means. After all, it is just possible Mrs. Carstairs may have had suspicions of Tochatti herself."

"Yes. I remember Iris often used to say she distrusted the woman—don't know why. I never paid much attention to her caprices," said Sir Richard with a smile; and Anstice made haste to seize

the opportunity thus offered.

"Ah—by the way, what news have you of your daughter?" He could not call her by the name he hated. "She is still in Egypt, I suppose?"

"Yes. She and Bruce are somewhere in the Fayoum at present—he has been engaged on some irrigation job for a rich Egyptian of sorts, and he and Iris have been camping out in the desert—quite a picnic they seem to have had."

"Really?" For the life of him he could not speak naturally; but Sir Richard was merciful and ignored his strained tone.

"They sent me some photographs—snapshots—last week," said Sir Richard. "Would you care to see them? I have them here somewhere."

He opened a drawer as he spoke, and after rummaging in the contents for a few moments drew out half a dozen small prints which he handed to Anstice, saying:

"Amateur, of course—but quite good, all the same. Oh, by the way"—he spoke with elaborate carelessness—"how did you come? Are you walking, or have you the car?"

"The car? No, I walked—wanted exercise," said Anstice rather vaguely; and Sir Richard nodded.

"Then we'll have out the little car, and you shall drive us over if you will. And if you'll excuse me for a moment I'll just go and order it round."

He waited for no reply, but bustled out of the room as though in sudden haste; and left to himself Anstice turned over the little photographs he held and studied them with eager eyes.

Four of them were of Iris—happy little studies of her in delightfully natural poses. In one she was standing bare-headed beneath a tall date-palm, shading her eyes with her hand as though looking for someone across the expanse of sunny sand before her. In another she stood by the edge of the Nile, in converse with a native woman who bore a *balass* on her head; and even the tiny picture was sufficiently large to bring out the contrast between the slim, fair English girl in her white gown and Panama hat and the dusky Egyptian, whose dark skin and closely-swathed robes gave her the look of some Old Testament character, a look borne out by the surroundings of reed-fringed river and plumy, tufted palms. In the third photograph Iris was on horseback; but it was the fourth and last which brought the blood to Anstice's brow, made his heart beat quickly with an emotion in which delight, regret, wild happiness and over-mastering sorrow fought for the predominance.

It was a photograph of Iris' head, nothing more; but it brought out every separate charm with an art which seemed to bring the living girl before the man who pored over the print with greedy eyes.

She was looking straight out from the photograph and in her face was that look of half-laughing, half-wistful tenderness which Anstice knew so well. Her lips were ever so slightly parted; and in her whole expression was something so vital as to be almost startling, as though some tinge of the sitter's personality had indeed been caught by the camera and imprisoned for ever in the picture. It was Iris as Anstice knew—and loved—her best: youth personified, yet with a womanliness, a gracious femininity, which seemed to promise a more than commonly attractive maturity.

And as he looked at the little picture, the presentment of the girl he loved caught and imprisoned by the magic of the sun, Anstice felt the full bitterness of his hopeless love surge over his soul in a flood whose onrush no philosophy could stem. To him Iris would always be the one desired woman in the world. No other woman, be she a hundred times more beautiful, could ever fill the place held in his heart by this grey-eyed girl. With her, life would have been a perpetual feast, a lingering sacrament. Her companionship would have been sufficient to turn the dull fare of ordinary life into the mysterious Bread and Wine which only lovers know; and with her beside him there had been no heights to which he might not have attained, no splendour of achievement, of renown, even of renunciation, which might not have been reached before the closing cadence which is death had ended, irrevocably, the symphony of life.

But not for him was this one supreme glory, the glory of an existence spent with her. She had chosen otherwise—for one fiercely rebellious moment he told himself he had been a fool, and worse, to enter on that infamous bargain with Bruce Cheniston—and henceforth he must put away all thoughts of her, must banish his dreams to that mysterious region where our lost hopes lie—never, so far as we can see, to come to fruition; unless, as some have thought, there shall be in another world a great and marvellous country where lost causes shall be retrieved, forlorn hopes justified, and the thousand and one pitiful mistakes we make in our earthly blindness rectified at last.

The door opened suddenly, and Sir Richard's voice smote cheerily on his ears.

"I've got the car, Anstice, and if you are ready——"

Anstice hastily replaced the photographs, face downwards on the table, and turned to Sir Richard

with a trace of confusion in his manner.

"The car there? Oh, yes, I'm ready. You would like me to drive?"

"If you will—then Fletcher can stop at home. You'll come back to dinner with me, of course."

With some haste Anstice excused himself; and after a courteous repetition of the invitation Sir Richard did not press the matter.

Mrs. Carstairs was at home, and alone; and in a moment the two men were ushered into her pretty drawing-room, where she sat, book in hand, over a dancing wood-fire.

She looked up in some surprise as the door opened to admit visitors; but on seeing Sir Richard she rose with a welcoming smile.

"Sir Richard! How good of you to take pity on me on a day like this!" She greeted the old man with almost daughterly affection; and then turned to Anstice with a rather forced expression of cordiality.

"You, too, Dr. Anstice! How sorry Cherry will be to have missed you!"

"Is she in bed, then?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say she was a naughty girl and was put to bed immediately after tea!" She laughed a little, and Anstice asked, smiling, what had been the extent of Cherry's latest misdemeanour.

"Oh, nothing very serious," said Chloe lightly. "It was really to soothe Tochatti's wounded feelings that I had to banish the poor child. It seems that one day last week, while out walking with Tochatti, Cherry noticed a house in the village with all its blinds down; and on inquiring the reason Tochatti informed her that someone was dead in the house; further entering, so I gather, into full details as to the manner in which Catholics decorate the death-chamber."

"Oh?" Anstice looked rather blank. "But I don't see——"

"Well, it seems the idea fired Cherry's imagination; and this morning, when Tochatti returned from High Mass about noon, she found the blinds pulled down in all the front windows of the house!"

"The little monkey!" Sir Richard laughed. "I'll wager the woman got a fright!"

"She certainly did, and matters were not improved by Cherry coming to meet her with her face quite wet with tears—you know Cherry is a born actress—and begging her, between sobs, to come upstairs softly as someone was dead!"

"Someone? She did not specify who it was?"

"No—or if she did Tochatti did not understand; but when she got into the nursery she found an elaborately conceived representation of a Catholic death-bed—flowers, bits of candle, and so on; and Cherry's very biggest doll—the one you gave her, by the way, Dr. Anstice—enacting the part of the corpse!"

Even Anstice's mood was not proof against the humour of the small child's pantomime; and both he and Sir Richard laughed heartily.

"And Tochatti took it amiss?" Sir Richard put the question amid his laughter.

"Yes. It seems she had really had a bad fright; and on finding Cherry in tears she never doubted that some tragedy had occurred!"

"So you had to punish the poor mite for her realism!"

"Yes. Tochatti waited for me to return—I was out motoring—and then hauled the culprit before me; and although I really didn't see much harm in poor little Cherry's joke I was obliged, in order to pacify Tochatti, to sentence her to go to bed early—a special punishment on Sunday, when, as a rule, she sits up quite late!"

"I almost wonder," said Anstice slowly, "that Tochatti, devoted as she is to Cherry, could bring herself to give the child away. One would have expected her to hush up any small misdeeds, not dwell upon them to the powers that be."

Chloe looked at him with a hint of cynicism in her eyes.

"Even Tochatti is human," she said, "and when one has had a fright one's natural impulse, on being reassured, is to scold somebody. Besides, Tochatti, in her way, is implacable. She never forgives what she really considers an injury."

These words, fitting in so curiously with their conversation a little earlier, caused the men to glance surreptitiously at one another; but Chloe, whose eyes were as sharp as her wits, intercepted the look.

"Sir Richard, why do you and Dr. Anstice look at one another?" She put the question directly, with her usual frankness; and Sir Richard met candour with candour.

"I will tell you in a moment, Chloe. First of all, I will admit that our visit here to-night was made with a purpose. We came here to ask you one or two questions which I feel sure you will answer as fully as possible."

"Certainly I will." Her manner had lost its animation and once more she wore the marble mask which as a rule hid the real woman from the world's gaze. "But won't you sit down? And if a cigarette will help you in your cross-examination——"

She sat down herself as she spoke, and Sir Richard followed her example; but Anstice remained standing on one side of the fireplace; and after a glance at his face Chloe did not repeat her invitation.

Rather to Sir Richard's surprise Chloe did not wait for him to begin questioning her; but put a question to him on her own account.

"Sir Richard, has your visit anything to do with certain letters received lately by several people in Littlefield?"

Both the men, genuinely taken aback, stared at her in silence; and with a faint smile she proceeded quietly.

"Well, *I* have heard of those letters, anyway. In fact"—she paused dramatically before making her *coup*—"I've received one myself!"

"You have?" Anstice's voice was full of dismay.

"Yes. And I gather, from a short conversation I had with Mr. Carey last evening, that there have been several more of the things flying about this week."

"Well"—Sir Richard looked rather helplessly at Anstice—"in that case there is no need to make a mystery of it. Yes, Chloe, we did call here to-night to talk over those abominable letters, and to see if you can possibly help us to follow up a rather extraordinary clue."

"A clue!" Chloe's eyes suddenly blazed.

"Yes. That is to say—possible clue." Sir Richard hedged a little. "But Anstice can tell you the story better than I can."

"Will you, please, tell me, Dr. Anstice?" She turned to him, grave again now; and he complied at once, giving her a full account of his visit to Clive, and relating at length the expert's opinion on the letters.

She heard him out in silence; her almond-shaped eyes on his face; and Anstice omitted nothing of the happenings of that day in town, save his unexpected meeting with her husband in Piccadilly.

When he had finished Chloe sat quite still for a moment, saying nothing; and neither of the men dreamed of hurrying her.

At last:

"But, Dr. Anstice—*Tochatti*! Why, she has been with me for years—ever since I was a child like Cherry!"

Her voice was so full of incredulity that for a moment both her hearers wondered suddenly how they could have accepted the possibility of Tochatti's guilt so readily. But Anstice's common sense reasserted itself immediately; and he knew that the mere fact of Mrs. Carstairs' unbelief did not really materially alter the main issue. It was natural she should be surprised, unwilling to believe evil of the woman who, whatever her faults, had served her faithfully; but this was no time for sentimentality; and he replied to Chloe's last speech rather uncompromisingly.

"Even the fact that she has been with you for years does not preclude the possibility of her doing this thing," he said. "Of course I can understand you would hesitate to believe her capable of such wickedness, but——"

"But why should Tochatti wish to work me harm?" Her blue eyes were full of a kind of hurt wonder. "And these last letters directed against you, Dr. Anstice—why on earth should she have any spite against you?"

"Dr. Anstice tells me she much resented the presence of the hospital nurse in the house," chimed in Sir Richard. "Of course she has always been absurdly jealous of any claim to Cherry's affection—even Iris noticed that and used to say she hardly dared to pet the child before Tochatti."

"Yes." Chloe assented reluctantly. "That is quite true. She has always been jealous; and I confess I once or twice saw her look at Dr. Anstice with a—well, rather malignant expression. But I thought it was only a passing jealousy; and judged it best to take no notice."

"Of course all this is very largely conjectural," said Anstice slowly. "Such evidence as we have is purely circumstantial; and wouldn't hang a cat. But I admit that Mr. Clive's suggestion carries weight with me; and it is certainly odd that he should have mentioned an Italian as the possible author of the letters when there is a person of that nationality—more or less—in the house."

"Yes. I can see that for myself." Chloe's voice was low. "But to be quite candid, I don't see how it would be possible to bring the letters home to Tochatti. To begin with, she can't write."

"Or pretends she can't. You must remember, Mrs. Carstairs, we have only the woman's own word for that."

"I certainly never remember seeing her with a pen in her hand," said Chloe, "though of course that's no real proof. But if this horrible idea is correct how are you going to prove it? You don't intend to tackle Tochatti herself, I suppose?"

"Not for the world," said Anstice hastily. "That would be a fatal mistake. A woman who is clever enough to carry on an intrigue of this kind without incurring suspicion is sufficiently clever to answer any direct questioning satisfactorily. No. If Tochatti is the culprit—mind you I only say if —she must be caught with guile, made to commit herself somehow, or be taken red-handed in the act——" He broke off suddenly; and the other two looked at him in surprise.

"Well, Anstice, what's struck you now?" Sir Richard's tone was eager.

"Only this. Is your writing-table always open to access, Mrs. Carstairs? I mean, you don't lock up your ink and pens, and so on?"

"No," she said, catching the drift of his questions at once. "Anyone in the house could sit down here to write and be sure of finding everything at hand."

"Just so—and unless the person who wrote was considerate enough to use the blotting-paper you would not know anyone had touched your things."

"No—unless they were left strewn untidily about."

"Which they would not be. Now, Mrs. Carstairs, to speak quite plainly, what is there to prevent Tochatti, or any other member of your household, creeping downstairs at the dead of night and making use of those pens and sheets of paper which you so obligingly leave about for anyone to play with?"

"Nothing," she said with a smile. "But unless you propose that I should sit up behind the curtains all night to see if some mysterious person does creep down——"

"That's just what I was going to propose," he said coolly. "At least I wasn't suggesting that you should be the person; but you might allow someone else to sit there on your behalf. You see, if Tochatti is really the mysterious writer she would not like to run the risk of keeping pens and ink in her own room where some prying eyes might light upon them sooner or later. It would be much less incriminating to use another person's tools, and it is quite possible many, if not all, of those beastly letters were written at this very table!"

The conviction in his tone brought forth a protest from Chloe.

"Dr. Anstice, have you really made up your mind that my poor Tochatti is the criminal? It seems to me that your evidence is very flimsy—after all some uneducated person might quite easily put those inverted commas wrong without being a foreigner; and I still disbelieve in Tochatti's power to write. Besides"—she paused a moment—"she has always served me with so much devotion. She is not perfect, I know, but none of us is that; and I have never, never seen anything in her manner which would lead me to suppose her to be the hypocrite, the ungrateful, heartless creature you seem to imply she is."

Listening to Chloe's words, watching the clear colour flood the marble whiteness of her cheeks, Anstice was struck by the curious contrast between this generous championship of a woman who had served her and her utter indifference and lack of all protest when it was her own innocence which was in question. In defence of her servant she spoke warmly, vehemently, unwilling apparently, to allow even mere acquaintances to look upon the woman as unworthy; yet she had rarely expressed in words her own entire innocence of the disgraceful charge which had been made against her; and had suffered the cruel injustice meted out to her without allowing its iron to enter into her soul.

And as he watched and listened Anstice told himself that there was something of nobility in this reluctance to accept her own acquittal at the cost of another's condemnation; yet his determination to see her righted never wavered; and he answered her impassioned speech in a cool and measured tone.

"Mrs. Carstairs, I think you will agree with me that the person who was capable of carrying out such a gigantic piece of deceit, carrying it through to the extent of allowing an innocent person to be found guilty for her offence, must be capable of a good deal more in the way of hypocrisy. I don't say for certain that your maid has written these letters; I don't yet know enough to convict her, or anyone else; but I do say that if it were she who stood by and allowed you to suffer for her wickedness, well, she is fully capable of living with you on terms of apparently, the most respectful devotion—and hating you in her heart all the while."

"But why should she hate me?" Chloe's tone expressed an almost childish wonder; and Sir Richard, who had been watching her uneasily, rose from his seat and patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"There, there, don't distress yourself, my dear!" His tone was fatherly. "After all, we only want to

clear up this mystery for your sake. I daresay Anstice would be quite willing to let the matter drop if he alone were concerned——"

"Ah! I had forgotten that!" She turned to him with contrition in her blue eyes. "Dr. Anstice, please forgive me! In my selfishness I was quite forgetting that you were a victim of this unknown person's spite! Of course the matter must be sifted to the very bottom; and if Tochatti is indeed guilty she must be punished."

"I think you are quite right, Chloe." Sir Richard spoke with unexpected decision. "For all our sakes the matter must be cleared up. You see"—he hesitated—"there are others to be considered besides ourselves."

"My husband, for one," said Chloe unexpectedly. "I heard from him this morning—he is back in England again now."

"Mrs. Carstairs"—Anstice, feeling desperately uncomfortable, broke into the conversation abruptly—"may I go upstairs and say good-night to Cherry? You know I got into serious trouble for not going up the last time I was here."

She turned to him, smiling.

"Of course you may, Dr. Anstice. I know Cherry would be heart-broken to hear you had gone without seeing her. You know the way?"

"Yes, thanks." He had grown familiar with the house during the weeks of Cherry's illness. "I won't stay long—and I'll not wake her if she's asleep."

She was not asleep, however; and her face lighted with pleasure as Anstice stole quietly in.

"Oh, do come in, my dear!" She sat up in bed, a quaint little figure with two thick brown plaits, tied with cherry-coloured ribbons, over her shoulders. "I'm just about fed up with this stupid old bed!"

She thumped her pillows resentfully; and Anstice, coming up, sat down beside her, and beat up the offending pillows with the mock professional touch which Cherry adored.

"That better, eh?"

"Rather!" She leaned back luxuriously. "Wasn't it a shame sending me to bed to-day? And I hadn't really done nothing!" The intensity of the speech called for the double negation.

"Well, I don't know what you call nothing," returned Anstice, smiling. "Apparently you'd given poor Tochatti a terrible fright——"

"Serve her right," said Cherry placidly. "She shouldn't have been so silly as to think any *real* person was dead. She might have known all the servants would have been howling on the doorstep *then*!"

The tone in which she made this remarkable statement was too much for Anstice's gravity; and he gave way to a fit of unrestrained laughter which mightily offended his small friend.

"I don't see anything to laugh at," she observed icily. "Seems to me people being dead ought to make you cry 'stead of laugh."

"Quite so, Cherry," returned Anstice, wiping his eyes ostentatiously. "But you see in this case there wasn't anybody dead—at least, so I understood from Mrs. Carstairs."

"Yes, there was, then," returned Cherry, still unforgiving. "I'd gone and killed my best-b'loved Lady Daimler"—christened from her mother's car—"on purpose to make a pretty death-bed for Tochatti—and then she simply flew into a temper—oh, a most *dreadful* temper, my dear!" At the thought of Tochatti's anger she forgave Anstice's lesser offence, and took him once more into her favour.

"That was too bad, especially as I'm sure Tochatti doesn't, often lose her temper with you," said Anstice with some guile; and Cherry looked at him gravely, without speaking.

"Not with me," she announced presently. "But Tochatti gets awful cross sometimes. She used to be fearful angry with Nurse Marg'ret. Where's Nurse Marg'ret now, my dear?"

"Don't know, Cherry. I suppose she is nursing someone else by this time. Why do you want to know?"

"'Cos I like Nurse Marg'ret," said Cherry seriously. "Tochatti didn't. She made a wax dollie of her once, and she only does that when she doesn't like peoples."

"A wax dollie?" Anstice was honestly puzzled. "My dear child, what do you mean?"

"She did," said Cherry stoutly. "She maded an image like what they have in their churches, because I saw her do it—out of a candle, and then she got a great long pin and stuck it in the gas and runned it into the little dollie." As Cherry grew excited her speech became slightly unintelligible. "And I know it was Nurse Marg'ret 'cos she wrote a great big 'M' on a bit of paper and pinned it on to show who it was meant for."

Her words made an instant and very unexpected impression on her hearer; not alone as a

revelation of Tochatti's mediæval fashion of revenging herself upon an unconscious rival—though this method of revenge was amazing in the twentieth century—but as a strangely apt confirmation of those doubts and suspicions which had been gathering round the Italian woman in Anstice's mind during the last few days.

If Cherry had spoken truly—and there was no reason to think the child was lying—then Tochatti's supposed inability to write was an error; and once that fact were proved it should not, surely, be difficult to unravel the mystery which had already caused so much unhappiness.

But first he must make sure.

"Tell me, Cherry"—he spoke lightly—"how did you see all this? Surely Tochatti didn't show you what she was doing?"

"No." For a second Cherry looked abashed; then her spirit returned to her and she spoke boldly. "It was one night when Nurse Marg'ret had gone to bed—she was awful tired, and Tochatti said she'd sit up with me ... and I was cross, 'cos I didn't want her, I wanted Nurse Marg'ret," said Cherry honestly, "so I wouldn't speak to her, though she tried ever so hard to make me, and she thought I'd gone to sleep, and I heard her say something in 'talian.... I 'spect it was something naughty, 'cos she sort of hissed it, like a nasty snake once did at me when I was a teeny baby in Injia," said Cherry lucidly, "and then she looked up to be sure I was asleep, so I shutted my eyes ever so tight, and then she made the wax dollie and I watched her do it." Wicked Cherry chuckled gleefully at the remembrance.

"But the letter 'M'—how do you know she wrote that?" Anstice put the question very quietly.

"'Cos she couldn't find nothin' to write with, so she crept into Nurse Marg'ret's room next through mine and came back with her pen—one of those things what has little ink-bottles inside them," said Cherry, referring, probably, to the nurse's beloved "Swan." "And I watched her ever so close, 'cos I wanted to see what she was going to do, and she wrote a big 'M' on a bit of paper and pinned it into the dollie——"

"Into?" For a moment Anstice was puzzled.

"Yes, 'cos you see the dollie was all soft and squeezy," explained Cherry obligingly, "and it hadn't got no clothes on to pin it to, so it had to go into the soft part of the dollie."

"I see. But"—Anstice was still puzzled—"why do you say the dollie was meant for Nurse Margaret? Mightn't it have been somebody else?"

"No—'cos when Tochatti hates anyone she makes wax dollies end sticks pins into them," returned Cherry calmly. "I know, 'cos she once told me about a girl she knew what wanted somebody to die, and she did that and the person died."

"Oh, my dear little Cherry, what nonsense!" Anstice, whose mother had been an Irishwoman, had heard of the superstition before, had even known an old crone in a little Irish cabin high up in the mountains who had, so it was said, practised the rite with success; but to hear the unholy gospel from Cherry's innocent lips was distinctly distasteful; and instinctively he tried to shake her faith in Tochatti's teaching.

"'Tisn't nonsense—at least I don't think so," said Cherry, rather dubiously. "Of course Nurse Marg'ret didn't die.... I don't think she even got ill—but p'raps Tochatti didn't stick the pins in far 'nuff."

"Well, I'm quite sure if she stuck in all the pins out of your cherry-tree pincushion it wouldn't affect Nurse Margaret or anybody else," said Anstice, putting his arm round her shoulders as he spoke. "And you really mustn't get such silly notions into your head, Cherry Ripe!"

"That's what Iris used to call me," said Cherry, burrowing her head contentedly into his neck. "I wish she was back, don't you, my dear? Somehow things don't seem half such fun without Iris—I can't think what she wanted to go and marry Uncle Bruce for, can you?"

"There are many things I can't understand, little Cherry," said Anstice with a smile whose sadness was hidden from the child. "But I agree with you that it was much nicer when Iris"—he might venture here to use the beloved little name—"was at home. But we can't always have the people we like with us, can we?"

"No—or I'd always have you, my dear," said Cherry with unexpected though rather sleepy affection; and as Anstice, touched by the words, kissed her upturned little face, her pretty brown eyes closed irresistibly.

"Good-night, Cherry! Pleasant dreams!" He laid her back deftly on her pillows and the child was asleep almost before he had time to reach the door.

But as he went back to the drawing-room, eager to tell Mrs. Carstairs and Sir Richard of the revelations so innocently made by Cherry, he wondered whether at last the mystery were really within reach of a solution.

Cherry's story, although fragmentary and confused, was sufficiently coherent to rank as evidence; and although he could hardly credit Tochatti with a genuine belief in the old superstition of the wax image he reminded himself she was half a Southerner; and that in some of the mediæval Italian towns and cities superstitions still thrive, in spite of the teaching of the

modern world.

And if Cherry's story were true——

"Out of the mouths of babes"—he murmured to himself as he went down the shallow oak stairs—"strange if, after all, the child should be the one to clear up the whole mysterious affair! At any rate, we are a step further on the way to elucidation; and from the bottom of my heart I hope Mrs. Carstairs may be righted at last!"

And with this aspiration on his lips he entered the drawing-room and related the substance of his unexpectedly profitable interview with the unsuspicious Cherry to an interested and enthralled audience of two.

CHAPTER VI

It did not take Anstice long to discover that the accusation against him—an accusation all the more difficult to refute because of the half-truth on which it was based—had been disseminated throughout Littlefield with a thoroughness which implied a determination on the part of the anonymous writer to leave no prominent resident in the neighbourhood in ignorance of Anstice's supposed cowardice on that bygone day in India.

He could not help noticing as he went here and there on his daily business that some of his patients looked askance at him, although they did their best to hide their new and rather disconcerting interest in him. So far as he knew, none of his patients forsook him for another and less notorious doctor, but he was keenly alive to the altered manner of some of those whom he attended, and although at present it was evident that he was not yet condemned—after all, no fair-minded person condemns another solely on the evidence of a tale-bearer who is ashamed to put his name to the stories he relates—yet Anstice felt with a quick galling of his pride that he was on probation, as it were, that those with whom he came in contact were considering what verdict they should pass upon him. And although his indifference to that verdict equalled Mrs. Carstairs' former indifference to the opinion of these same neighbours, his soul was seared with the thought that his unhappy story—or rather a garbled version of it—was common property among those men and women whom he had served faithfully to the best of his ability during the eighteen months he had spent in Littlefield.

On one thing he was fully determined. So soon as this mystery should be solved—and he fancied a solution was no longer impossible—he would leave the place, resign the position which had become tedious, unbearably tedious in its cramped monotony, and seek some other place, in England or abroad, where he might have leisure to pursue those studies in research which had been so ruthlessly cut short by his own most unhappy miscalculation.

True, he no longer cared for fame. The possibility of some renown crowning his toil no longer danced before his eyes with alluring promises. The part of him which had craved success, recognition, the youthful, vital part of him was dead, slain by the same bullet which had ended poor Hilda Ryder's happy life; and although he was beginning to look forward to a new and less cramped career than this which now shackled him, the joyous, optimistic anticipation of youth was sadly missing.

It was impossible that once at work the old interest in his subject might awake; but now he would work for the work's sake only, for the sake of the distraction it might afford him; and though through all his troubles he had preserved, at bottom, the quick humanity which had led him to choose medicine as his career, he was thinking less now of his old ambition to find a means of alleviation for one of the greatest ills of mankind than of the zest which the renewed study of the subject might restore to his own overshadowed life.

Yet although he was determined to turn his back as soon as he decently might on Littlefield and its people, with the perversity of mankind he was equally determined to see them brought to confusion before he left them—see them impelled to admit that in the case of Mrs. Carstairs they had been unjust, prejudiced, and, most galling of all, misled; and the question of his own vindication was only a secondary matter after all.

One day he heard, casually, that Major Carstairs was expected at Cherry Orchard, and when he entered his house at lunch-time he found a note from Chloe asking him to call upon her between tea and dinner and remain, if possible, for the latter meal. In any case she asked him to come for half an hour, at least, and he rang her up at once and fixed six o'clock for the time of his call upon her.

At six accordingly he entered the drawing-room, and found Major Carstairs in possession, as it were, standing on the hearth-rug with the air of a man at home in his own house. Before Anstice had time to wonder how this situation had arisen Chloe advanced, smiling, and held out her hand.

"Good-evening, Dr. Anstice. I think you and my husband have met already."

In these words she announced her cognizance of that meeting in Piccadilly a few days earlier, and Anstice acknowledged the supposition to be correct, relieved to see by her smile that she did not grudge his former secrecy.

"Yes, by Jove! Dr. Anstice came to the rescue or I'd have had a nasty fall on the pavement," said Major Carstairs genially. "And by the way, I declare I'm quite jealous of your supremacy with Cherry! She does nothing but talk of you, and I hear she infinitely prefers your car to her mother's!"

"Yes, Cherry and I are very good friends," said Anstice with a smile. "We had a slight difference last week because I wouldn't allow her to drive that same car; but Cherry is always amenable to reason, and when I pointed out to her that she had no licence, and might possibly be reported by some interfering police-constable and get us both into trouble she gave in like a lamb. By the way, Mrs. Carstairs, where is she to-night? Not in disgrace again, I hope?"

"No, she's as good as gold to-day because she is to sit up to dinner to-night," said Chloe, smiling —Anstice thought her smiles came more readily than usual this evening. "I believe she is making an elaborate toilette upstairs just now; and I admit I was glad to have her occupied, for I wanted, if you and my husband agree, to talk over the matters of the letters—and Tochatti."

For a second Anstice felt uncomfortable, but Major Carstairs probably noted his discomfort, for he turned to him with a sincerity there was no doubting.

"Look here, Dr. Anstice, you have been—luckily for us, if I may say so—mixed up in this most unsavoury affair, and from what my wife tells me I believe you are going to be the means of clearing it up—a consummation most devoutly to be wished."

Anstice's embarrassment vanished before the soldier's frankness.

"I only hope you may be right, Major Carstairs," he said, looking the other man squarely in the face. "Personally, since I intended to leave Littlefield before long in any case, these wretched slanders don't affect me much. The few friends I have made in this place are not likely to give credence to the rumour which has been spread broadcast in the last week or two—and for the rest——"

"I understand your indifference to the opinion of 'the rest,'" said Major Carstairs, smiling, "but I think it will be more satisfactory for all of us when the affair is really cleared up. But won't you sit down? Chloe tells me it is too late for tea—but you'll have a peg?"

"Not for me, thanks." Anstice was too intent on the matter in hand to turn to side issues. "If you don't mind giving me your opinion on the subject—do you think it possible that the woman Tochatti is the one to blame?"

"Well——" Major Carstairs sat down as he spoke, and since Chloe had already taken her accustomed seat in a corner of the big couch, Anstice followed their joint example. "Personally I have never been able to conquer a dislike, which I always put down as absolutely unjust and uncharitable, for the woman. I know she has served my wife faithfully, and her devotion to our little daughter has been beyond praise. But"—he smiled rather deprecatingly—"even ten years in India haven't apparently cured me of British insularity, and I have never liked foreigners—especially half-breeds such as Tochatti, Italian on one side, English on the other."

"Then you think it possible, at least, that she may be the culprit?"

"I do, quite possible. And I thank God from the bottom of my heart for the bare possibility," returned Major Carstairs deliberately, and his words and manner both served to assure Anstice that at last this man had been brought to believe, wholeheartedly, in his wife's innocence.

Anstice never knew, either then or afterwards, exactly how the miracle had come about. Indeed, so subtle are the workings of a man's heart, so complex and incomprehensible the thoughts and motives which touch a soul to finer issues, that it is quite possible Major Carstairs himself could not have told how or when he first began to realize that his judgment might well be at fault, that his own stern honesty and unflinching integrity, which would not permit him to subscribe outwardly to a belief which inwardly he did not hold, might after all have been stumbling-blocks in the way of true understanding rather than the righteous bulwarks which he had fancied them.

Probably the conviction that he had misjudged his wife had been stealing imperceptibly into Major Carstairs' mind during many lonely days spent on the Indian Frontier; and though he could never have stated with any degree of certainty the exact moment in which he understood, at last, that his wife, the woman he had married, the mother of his child, was incapable of the action which a censorious and unkind world had been ready to attribute to her, when once that conviction entered his honest, logical, if somewhat stubborn mind, it had found a home there for ever.

His chance meeting with Anstice, whose belief in Mrs. Carstairs was too genuine to be doubted for an instant, had come at an opportune moment, setting, as it were, the seal on his own changed judgment; and being essentially a man of honour, upright and just to a fault, he deemed it not only a duty but a privilege to come directly to his wife, and while asking her pardon for his unjustifiable suspicions, assure her of his firm determination to see her innocence made manifest before all the world.

Something of this Anstice guessed as he watched the interchange of glances between husband

and wife on this bitter November evening, and he told himself that few women would have accepted their husband's tardy reparation as this woman had done. It did not need a magician to know that husband and wife were truly reunited, and though some might have been inclined to label Chloe Carstairs poor-spirited in that she had apparently forgiven her husband's mistrust so easily, Anstice told himself that Chloe was a woman in a thousand, that this very forgiveness and lack of any natural resentment showed the unalloyed fineness, the pure gold of her character, as nothing else could have done.

It was Chloe who broke the silence which followed Major Carstairs' last words, and as he looked at her Anstice was struck suddenly by the change in her appearance this evening. Where she had hitherto been cold, impassive, indifferent, now she was warm, glowing, responsive. In her pale cheeks was a most unusual wild-rose colour and her blue, almond-shaped eyes held a light which made them look like two beautiful sapphires shining in the sun.

When she spoke her rich, deep voice lost its undertone of melancholy, and rang joyously, with the soft beauty of a 'cello's lower notes.

"You see, Dr. Anstice, your faith in me—for which I have never attempted to thank you—is at last within measure of being justified!" She smiled happily. "And although Tochatti has served me faithfully she cannot be allowed to go on with this thing—if she be the one responsible. The question is, How is it to be brought home to her?"

Thus encouraged Anstice again outlined the plan he had formerly suggested—that a watch should be set during the night; but, as he had half expected, Chloe did not give it her unqualified approval.

"No, Dr. Anstice." She spoke too gently to cause him offence. "I don't think, honestly, I like the idea. Can't I speak openly, ask her quite plainly why she has done this thing—what perverted notion of—well, resentment she has against me which would lead her to act in this manner?"

To Anstice's relief Major Carstairs vetoed this plan, unhesitatingly.

"No, Chloe, that is an absolutely impossible suggestion! As Dr. Anstice says, guile must be met with guile, and the only way to catch this woman is to take her absolutely red-handed. And if, as you seem to think, she is likely to creep down in the night—well, it could do no harm to set a watch."

"There is one reason against that delightfully simple plan of yours," objected Chloe. "Tochatti would not be likely to write any more of these letters with you in the house, Leo. You see, it would be very serious for her if *you* encountered her at my writing-table in the night!"

Before Carstairs could reply Anstice spoke rather diffidently.

"I have just one suggestion to make, Major Carstairs. Am I right in supposing you are staying down here to-night?"

A fleeting embarrassment was visible on the faces of both Major Carstairs and his wife; but the former answered resolutely:

"Yes. I am certainly hoping to stay here."

"Well, if I might just make a suggestion, why not give out that you are returning to town to-night and coming down to stay to-morrow or the next day? Tochatti would probably, thinking this her last opportunity, make haste to seize it and write another letter or two—possibly the last—to-night."

"You mean give out that I am returning to town to-night; start, in fact, in reality, and come back later, when the house is quiet?"

"Yes," said Anstice, wondering what the soldier thought of his amateur strategy. "Then you—and anyone else you choose—could sit up here and wait events."

"I admire the simplicity of your plan, Dr. Anstice," returned Carstairs with an irrepressible laugh. "I've been called upon to exercise diplomacy at times myself, but I don't think I ever hit on anything more telling in the way of a plan than this charmingly simple one of yours!"

"You approve of it, then?" Anstice was in no wise offended by the other's mirth.

"Highly—it's just the plan to appeal to me," said Carstairs, still smiling infectiously; and Chloe rose from her couch and coming to his chair seated herself on the arm and rested her hand on his shoulder.

"I know why the plan appeals to you, Leo! It recalls your schoolboy days, when you pretended to go to bed and then stole out to skate by moonlight!"

"Hush, hush, Chloe! Never tell tales out of school," commanded the Major in mock alarm; but Anstice noticed how the man's brown fingers closed round his wife's hand, and suddenly he felt as though this spectacle of their reunion was too tantalizing to be pleasant to a sore heart like his own.

He rose rather abruptly, and both the others looked at him with a little surprise.

"You're not going, Anstice? Surely you'll stay to dinner? My little daughter will be sorely disappointed if you run away now!"

"Do stay, Dr. Anstice!" Chloe rose too, and her eyes, like two beautiful blue jewels, shone kindly into his. "Our scheme will have to be discussed further, won't it? We mustn't take the field with an ill-prepared plan, must we, Leo?"

"Indeed we must not," returned her husband quickly. "Especially as I was going to ask a very big favour of you. Dr. Anstice! Seeing how more than good you have been in interesting yourself in this affair, I have been wondering whether you wouldn't conceivably like to be in at the death, so to speak. In plain words, I was going to ask you if you would care to be my fellow-conspirator in this nefarious plot we have hatched between us!"

"You mean—will I sit up with you to-night?" Anstice spoke eagerly, and Chloe smiled.

"Well, you're not annoyed by the suggestion, anyway! I needn't say I should appreciate your company—though after all, it is a big thing to ask a man of your calling to sacrifice the rest he must need pretty badly!" He spoke rather dubiously.

"Oh, not a bit of it, Major Carstairs!" Anstice's eyes brightened at the thought of the adventure. "In a matter of this kind two witnesses are better than one; and there is always a chance that even a woman may turn nasty when she finds herself cornered—especially one who is half a foreigner," he added with a smile.

"Then you'll come? It's awfully good of you——"

"Not at all, sir. You forget I'm an interested party," said Anstice quickly. "It is as much to my interest to clear the matter up as to yours, now. Well, what about details? Where—and how—shall we meet, and how do we get into the house without anyone knowing?"

"Ah, yes. That requires thought."

Major Carstairs rubbed his hands together gaily, and Chloe burst out laughing.

"You two are nothing but schoolboys," she said joyously. "I believe you are both looking forward to this midnight adventure! You'd be quite disappointed if there were no need for your masterly plot after all!"

Anstice and Major Carstairs looked rather shamefacedly at one another; but Chloe was merciful and restrained further mockery for the time.

"Well, now I will make my suggestion," she said. "Leave the house in the usual way, by the front door; and come back, at whatever hour you agree upon, to the window here. I will let you in myself, and not a soul need know you have re-entered the house."

"Very well," Carstairs nodded. "One suggestion though. Leave the window open—no one will see behind those curtains, and go to bed as usual yourself. Depend upon it, if Tochatti is really the culprit, she will take all means of satisfying herself that you are safely in bed before she begins her work, and it would not do for her to find your room empty at midnight."

Chloe paled a little, and when she spoke her voice was uneasy.

"Leo, do you really think Tochatti is so—so malicious? I can't bear to think of her being with Cherry—she is with her almost night and day, you know—if she is so dreadful, so dangerous a character——"

"You need not be afraid, Mrs. Carstairs." It was Anstice who spoke, reassuringly. "The little one is quite safe with her, I am sure of that. If it really does turn out that Tochatti has been to blame, I feel convinced that we shall find she is not altogether responsible for her actions——"

"But that's worse still!" Chloe's voice was really alarmed. "If she is mad—a lunatic——"

"I did not mean quite that," said Anstice. "I meant—well, it is rather a difficult subject to enter into at a moment's notice; but—have you ever heard of a dual personality?"

"A dual personality?" She repeated the words, her white brow wrinkling with the effort of concentration. "I think I know what you mean—a person with two sides to his character, so to speak—of which first one is in the ascendant and then the other?"

"Kind of Jekyll and Hyde business, what?" Major Carstairs knew his Stevenson, and Anstice nodded.

"Well, something like that, though not so pronounced. There really are such people, you know—it is not only a fantastic tale that a man may lead a kind of double life, speaking in a spiritual and not a physical sense. You don't call such people lunatics, nor are they, save in extreme cases, criminals. But it is quite possible for a woman like Tochatti to devote one half of herself to your service—and serve you admirably!—and lead what seems in all respects an open and above-board existence; and yet, through some kink in her character, stoop to an action one would expect to find only in a woman of a thoroughly debased nature."

He paused, but neither of his hearers spoke.

"It is as if a lower spirit entered into these people at times, driving them to do things which in a normal state they would be quite incapable of doing. You know the old Biblical theory of possession? Well, the same thing, under another name, is to be met with to-day; and for my part, when I come across the case of a person whose present behaviour contradicts all the actions of his previous life, upsets all the data, so to speak, which I have been able to gather of his conduct in the past, well, I put it down, mentally, to that peculiar theory of 'possession' with which the Easterns in the time of Christ were apparently perfectly familiar."

"As they are to-day," said Major Carstairs unexpectedly; and Anstice looked gratified at the corroboration. "It is a strange theory, I own, but after what I have seen in India I confess I find it perfectly feasible."

"And you think my poor Tochatti may be a victim to this old form of demonism?" Chloe addressed the question to Anstice, and he answered it after a momentary hesitation.

"Well, it is too soon to make any sweeping statement of that kind, Mrs. Carstairs, but I must acknowledge it is hard to reconcile the woman's general behaviour with an action of this kind without some such theory. However"—he glanced at the clock—"if you will excuse me I must really get home. There will be all sorts of complaints from my surgery patients if they are kept waiting!"

"One moment, Anstice! I take it you will come back to-night? Though really it is a jolly big thing to ask...." Major Carstairs tone was apologetic.

"Of course, and we must settle where we meet. But first, shouldn't we let Tochatti know that you are not staying here to-night?"

"Why, yes." Chloe moved towards the boll. "I'll send for Cherry—that will bring Tochatti—and you can allude to your departure then."

Three minutes later Tochatti appeared, in charge of the excited Cherry, who flew at Anstice, and, quite regardless of her immaculately frilled muslin dress, flung herself into his arms and kissed him demonstratively.

"Oh, my dear, what *ages* since I've seen you!" Her tone was a faithful copy of the parlourmaid's greeting to a recent visitor to the kitchen. "Are you going to stay to dinner? I do hope so, 'cos I'm going to sit up and there's lovely things—lots of roasted pheasants and meringues all filled with squelchy cream!"

"Alas, Cherry, I can't stop!" Anstice's comically regretful tone made Chloe smile. "I shall have to go home and see my patients. And if I get a chop——"

"*And* a chipped potato, my dear," prompted Cherry.

"*And* a chipped potato," concurred Anstice obediently, "I shall think myself lucky! But I wish you hadn't told me there were to be lots of pheasants!"

"They're for Daddy, speshully," said Cherry, "'cos he's got sick of chickens in Injia—but I like the bready sauce and the little brown crumbs best!"

"And that reminds me," said Major Carstairs, looking at his watch rather ostentatiously, "I should be glad if you could put forward dinner a little, Chloe. I must catch the nine-thirty to town."

"Oh, Daddy, you're not going to-night!" Cherry forsook Anstice for the moment and clambered on to her father's knee. "You said you were going to stop and you'd come and tell me stories in bed!"

"I did, and I don't like breaking my word to a lady," said Major Carstairs seriously, "but I really must go back to town to-night, and I'll come down to-morrow or the next day, and stay a long, long time!"

"You might tell Hagyard Major Carstairs will not be staying to-night, Tochatti," said Chloe, turning to the woman, and Anstice's quick eyes caught the look of relief compounded with something like surprise which flashed across Tochatti's swarthy countenance.

"*Bene, Signora.*" With a strange look at Anstice, a look which did not escape the notice of the person at whom it was levelled, Tochatti withdrew, and since further conversation was impossible in Cherry's presence, Anstice made his farewells and went out to the car, escorted by his host, who seized the opportunity to fix the details of the evening's later meeting.

"You will leave the house about a quarter to nine, I suppose?" asked Anstice. "Well, look here, why not come round to my place to fill in the time until we can go back? We shall be alone, and unless I'm called out—which I trust won't happen—we can have a quiet chat and a smoke."

"Right. I'll be at your place about nine, and if you're busy I can read the paper, you know. Till then, *au revoir*!"

Anstice nodded and mounted to the steering seat, and Major Carstairs went back into the house, wondering why the younger man's face wore so sad an expression in repose.

"Of course that Indian affair was rather a facer, but the story's some years old by now and one would think he'd have got over it. As decent a fellow as I've ever met. But he seems altogether too old for his age, and even when he smiles or jokes with the child he doesn't look happy. I

wonder if Chloe knows any reason for his melancholy air?"

And with the question still uppermost in his mind he went back to the drawing-room in search of his wife and child.

CHAPTER VII

It was very dark in the window-recess, shut off from the room by the heavy blue curtains which fell to the floor in thick folds. The room itself was not in complete darkness, for the fire, built up by Chloe with assumed extravagance before she went to bed, had burned down to a steady red glow, now and then illumined by a dancing gleam of light as a tiny flame of gas sputtered from some specially charged coal; and as Anstice peeped cautiously through a carefully arranged chink in the curtains he could see the pretty room with fair distinctness. The chairs were standing about with the peculiarly uncanny effect known to all who enter a room after it has been finally deserted for the night—an effect as of waiting for some ghostly visitors to fill their pathetic emptiness and hold high revel or stately converse in the place lately peopled by mere human beings.

On a little table by the fire stood a chess-board, the old carved red and white pieces standing on it in jumbled disarray; for Chloe and her husband, both inveterate chess-lovers, had begun a game which they were unable, through lack of time, to finish; and as his eyes fell on the board Anstice had a queer fancy that if he and Major Carstairs were not present two ghostly chess-players would issue softly from the shadows and rearrange the pieces for another and perhaps more strenuously-contested duel.

As the fantastic thought crossed his mind Anstice sat up decisively, telling himself he was growing imaginative; and Major Carstairs turned to him with a whispered word.

"Getting fidgety, eh? I know the feeling—used to get it when I was sitting in a straw hut in the marshes waiting for the duck to appear——"

He broke off suddenly; for a sound had shattered the silence; but though he and Anstice pulled themselves together in readiness for anything which might happen, both realized at the same moment that it was only the whirr of the grandfather clock which always prefaced the striking of the hour; and in another second the hour itself struck, with one deep, sonorous note which reverberated through the quiet room.

"One o'clock, and no result," Major Carstairs stretched himself cautiously. "How long is the sitting to continue, eh? It's all right for me, but I'm afraid if you have a heavy day's work in prospect——"

"Oh, I don't mind," said Anstice indifferently. "I'm used to having my sleep cut short—one's patients seem to think one can exist quite comfortably without it, though they make a tremendous fuss if they lose a night's sleep for any reason!"

"Well, if nothing happens shortly—and I'm inclined to think nothing will——" began Major Carstairs, but he got no further, for with the extraordinary aptness of conjunction which we are wont to call coincidence, though another word might more fitly be employed, the door opened almost noiselessly and a hooded figure crept on soundless feet into the room.

Anstice and his companion fairly held their breath as the shrouded form glided softly forward, the light of the dying fire doing little, now, to illumine the scene; and neither of the men could have sworn with any certainty to the identity of the person who shared their occupation of the silent room.

In the middle of the floor the figure halted suddenly; and for one wild moment Anstice fancied that some sixth sense had warned the new-comer of their presence; but realizing the danger of attracting that new-comer's thought towards him by any intensity of his own mind—for one thought will draw another as a magnet the steel—Anstice switched off the current of his thoughts, so to speak, and waited with as blank a mind as he could compass for the thing which must surely happen soon.

After that involuntary halt the figure moved slowly forward in the direction of the writing-table; and Anstice would have given a great deal to have been able to see the face of this midnight scribe; but as yet the firelit gloom remained undisturbed; and it was impossible to do more than hazard a guess as to this strange visitor's personality.

There were candles on the writing-table, and for a moment Anstice fancied that the mysterious figure would seek their aid to carry through the task confronting her—he was convinced it was a woman who sat at the table—but he was wrong, for no match was struck, no candle-flame lighted the soft dusk. Instead a small beam of light shot suddenly across the table; and Anstice and Major Carstairs both grasped at the same moment the significance of the ray.

It was a pocket electric torch, of a kind familiar to thousands nowadays, whose aid the letter-writer had evoked; and since this particular one was fitted with a bulb which enabled it to cast a continuous light without finger-pressure, it was quite effective for the purpose to which it was

now being put.

Having placed the torch on the table in such a position that the ray of light fell directly across the blotting-pad, the figure made search for a sheet of paper which suited its mind; and after a moment, a sheet having been chosen, a pen was selected, dipped into Chloe's own silver inkstand and a few lines of writing inscribed slowly, and with many pauses, upon the otherwise unsullied paper.

His heart throbbing wildly, with an excitement quite foreign to his nature, Anstice watched the performance eagerly through the just-parted curtains; and so sure was he now of the identity of his quarry that he was ready to leap from his hiding-place and confront the anonymous letter-writer without further loss of time, had not a gentle pressure on his arm restrained him at the critical moment.

It was not safe to speak, since even a whisper might betray their presence; but Anstice realized Major Carstairs' intention and held himself in check, though he quivered like a greyhound straining at the leash, who fears his quarry may escape him if he be not slipped forthwith.

After what seemed like an hour, but was probably five minutes, the letter, whatever its nature, was judged complete; and with the same stealthy but unhurried movements the writer sought and obtained an envelope from the many which lay ready to hand and slipped the missive in with deft fingers. An address added, the abominable thing was complete; and having quietly put everything in order, so that even the most acute eyes could discover nothing amiss, the writer rose softly from the chair, and taking up the electric torch extinguished its beam preparatory to making her exit from the room, which was now in almost complete darkness.

This was the moment for which Major Carstairs had been waiting.

With a whispered word in Anstice's ear: "The light—quick!" he dashed aside the curtains and darted out into the room, while Anstice, hastily obeying orders, rushed to the wall and turned on the electric switch to such good purpose that the room sprang instantly into brilliant light.

There was a scream from the hooded figure in the middle of the floor—a scream of mingled anger, defiance and terror which rang in Anstice's ears for hours afterwards, and following the scream a mad, wild rush for the door—a blundering, stumbling rush in which the very garment, the long, loose cloak which was intended for a disguise, proved itself a handicap and effectually prevented its wearer making good her escape. By the time she had torn herself free of the encumbering folds which threatened to trip her up at every step Anstice had reached the door; and now he stood before it with something in his face which warned the panting creature in front of him that the way of escape was effectually barred.

Still hiding her face in the folds of her garment she turned round as though to rush towards the window and seek egress thereby; but facing her stood Major Carstairs, and the wretched culprit realized, too late, that she was trapped.

Yet as a cornered hare will turn and give battle, desperately, to her eager foes, the woman made a frantic rush as though to pass the avenging figure which stood in her path; and as she did so Major Carstairs moved forward and plucked the black hood with no gentle hand from the face it had so far partially concealed.

And as with wildly beating pulses Anstice bent forward to catch a glimpse of the mysterious visitor he knew that his surmise, unlikely as it had seemed, had been correct; that by a stroke of luck the expert, Clive, had been able to point unerringly to the clue which was to solve the mystery of those vile letters and restore to an innocent woman the fair name which had been so unjustly smirched.

For the hooded figure was none other than Tochatti.

"My God! Then it *was* you!" Major Carstairs' tone was so full of disgust, of loathing, of the just indignation of a righteously angry man that even Tochatti cowered in his grip; and as Anstice came forward the other man turned to him with an expression of wrath which quite transfigured his face. "Look at her, Anstice, the miserable, degraded creature! To think that she has been with my wife all these years—hanging over Cherry night and day—and all the time plotting this infamous thing ... by the way, where is that letter?"

He broke off suddenly and Anstice came a step nearer the two.

"I see it, sir!" He had caught sight of it in the woman's clenched hand, and with a smart and unexpected blow on her wrist forced her fingers to open and release that which they held. "Here it is—will you take it? I can look after her all right."

"No—but just see what the address is, will you?" Major Carstairs had regained his self-control, and now stood quiet, alert, cool, as though on parade. "May as well know who was her chosen victim this time."

"Oh, my old friend Carey—you know, the Vicar of Littlefield." Anstice tossed the envelope on to a chair out of reach. "He was the first one honoured, I believe, and possibly was to have been the last!"

All this time the woman had stood silent, her black eyes snapping, her breast heaving stormily. Now she turned on Anstice fiercely and poured out a stream of vituperative Italian which conveyed little or nothing to his mind. Seeing that she made no impression she redoubled her efforts, and finally her voice rose to a scream.

"I say, better shut her up, sir, or Mrs. Carstairs will hear!" Anstice glanced anxiously towards the door and Major Carstairs nodded.

"Yes. We don't want the whole house about our ears." He turned to the woman who now stood sullenly silent in his grasp; though if looks could kill there would certainly have been a practice for sale in Littlefield on the morrow. "Now see here, Tochatti, you've been fairly cornered—caught—and you will have to pay the penalty. In the meantime I shall lock you in your room until the morning, and I warn you it is useless trying to escape."

A noise in the doorway cut him short; and turning hastily round Anstice beheld Chloe Carstairs standing there, the light of the candle she carried casting queer flickering shadows across her pale face, in which the blue eyes gleamed more brightly than ever before.

"Chloe!" In his surprise Major Carstairs released the woman; and with a bound she was across the room, pouring out another wild flood of protestations, in which the words "*il dottore*" and "*la bambina*" occurred over and over again. Higher and higher rose her voice, more shrill and hysterical her outpourings, and Anstice's professional instinct warned him that such abnormal excitement must end in disaster—though of the nature of that ending he had at the moment no conception.

Seeing, however, that the woman, while exhausting herself, was also distressing her mistress, he moved forward with the intention of warning Tochatti she was endangering her own health; but his word of caution was never uttered, for as he approached her she spun round with a last fierce torrent of words, and, stooping down, with incredible swiftness plucked a sharp dagger from some secret hiding-place, and lunged at Anstice with all her maddened might.

Luckily for him her excitement impeded her aim; and while she doubtless intended stabbing him to the heart she merely inflicted a flesh wound on the upper part of the arm which he had raised to defend himself.

The next moment Chloe, with a quite unlooked-for strength, had wrested the weapon from the woman's grasp; and then ensued a scene which even Anstice could hardly bear to look back upon in after days.

Whether or no his theory of possession were justified, the woman was for the time being beside herself. Seeing the dagger in Chloe's hand she threw herself upon her mistress and struggled wildly to regain her property, inflicting a series of cuts on her own hand before Chloe could get free to hurl the deadly thing into a corner of the room; and even when Anstice and Carstairs had overpowered her with their superior might she fought for freedom like a mad woman. But this abnormal strength could not continue. Suddenly, as Anstice had foreseen, the inevitable collapse occurred. Nature could stand no more, and with a last wild writhe the woman slipped through the hands which held her, and uttering a sharp cry fell to the floor in a state of unconsciousness.

Half an hour later Anstice came downstairs and re-entered the room where Major Carstairs sat alone over the now brightly burning fire.

"Well!" The soldier's voice was anxious. "How is the woman? Oh, and what about your arm? Was it badly hurt?"

"No—only a very slight flesh wound, and Mrs. Carstairs has kindly bound it up for me." He relinquished the subject of his own injury abruptly. "The woman is asleep now—she grew excited again, so I've given her some bromide, and she will be quiet enough for the rest of the night."

"My wife is with her?"

"Yes. Mrs. Carstairs insists on staying there for the present."

Anstice took a cigarette from the case his host held out, and Major Carstairs made a gesture towards the tantalus on the table.

"Have a peg—I'm sure you want it!"

"Well, I think I do," returned Anstice with a smile. "We had rather a tough time of it upstairs just now." He mixed himself a drink as he spoke. "Once a Southerner lets herself go the result is apt to be disastrous."

"Will she be quieter in the morning?"

"I expect so." He stood by the mantelpiece, glass in hand; and in spite of his evident fatigue it was easy to see he was quietly jubilant over the events of the night. "The Latin races have a peculiar elasticity, you know. An Englishwoman who had passed through this sort of violent brain-storm would be absolutely exhausted, worn out for days after it; but an Italian doesn't seem to feel things in the same way. They are so naturally excitable, I suppose, that a scene like this is

merely an episode in the day's work; and they recover their mental poise much more rapidly than persons of a more phlegmatic temperament would be likely to do."

"Then you think she may be—more or less—normal in the morning?"

"I daresay—a bit dazed, perhaps, but I don't think you need fear a repetition of to-night's scene. Of course she ought not to be left alone—in case she tries to scoot; but if you are staying in the house——" He paused interrogatively.

"I am staying," returned Major Carstairs quietly. "Thanks to you the cloud has lifted from our home; and since my wife is generous enough to forgive me for my unwarrantable doubt of her ——"

He broke off, for Anstice was moving forward with outstretched hand; and he guessed that the younger man was rendered uncomfortable by the turn the conversation had taken.

"You're going?" He wrung Anstice's hand with fervent gratitude. "Well, it's late, of course—but won't you stay here for the rest of the night? We can give you a bed in five minutes, and I'm sure my wife will be distressed if you turn out now."

"Thanks very much, but I must go." The decision in his tone was unmistakable.

"Well, I'll get out the car and run you over——"

"No, thanks. I'd really rather walk." He picked up hat and coat from the window-seat and turned to the door with an air of finality. "It's a fine night and I shall enjoy it. I'll be round early in the morning—but I don't think Tochatti will give you any trouble for a good many hours yet."

"As soon as she is able to explain matters there will be a good deal to be done," said Major Carstairs rather grimly, as they went through the hall together. "Thank God, we have that last letter as a proof of her duplicity, and by its aid we can doubtless get a full confession out of her."

"Yes." Anstice paused a second on the doorstep before plunging into the darkness of the night. "It will be interesting to hear the whole story. The events are plain enough—but the question of motive is still a puzzling one."

"Quite so. And yet the affair will probably turn out simple, after all. Well, I mustn't keep you if you want to be off. Good night again—and"—the sincerity in his voice was pleasant to hear—"a thousand thanks for the part you have played in the unravelling of this tangle."

"Good-night. Don't let Mrs. Carstairs exhaust herself looking after the woman, will you? She is splendid, I know, but——"

"I'll go and join her in a moment," returned Carstairs quietly. "I'm an old campaigner, you know, and I'll see to it that she is properly fortified for the vigil—if she insists upon it."

And as he looked into the soldier's square-featured face, the honest eyes agleam with love for the woman he had been fool enough to doubt, Anstice felt instinctively that Chloe Carstairs' ship had come at last to a safe anchorage, that the barque which had so narrowly escaped complete shipwreck on the rock of a terrible catastrophe was now safely at rest in the haven where it would be.

CHAPTER VIII

"Well, Chloe, you have discovered the truth at last?"

It was evening again—early evening this time; and Major Carstairs and Anstice were sitting in Chloe's black-and-white room eagerly waiting for the promised elucidation of the mystery which had so nearly ruined two lives.

Chloe herself, sitting in a corner of the chintz-covered couch, looked, in spite of the strenuous hours through which she had passed, the embodiment of youth and radiant happiness.

In all his life Anstice had never seen so striking a testimony to the power of soul over body as in this rejuvenation, this new birth, as it were, which had taken place under his eyes.

The whole woman was transformed. The classic features had lost their slight austerity of outline, the sapphire-blue eyes were no longer cold and indifferent, but danced bewitchingly in the softly-tinted face. The lips whose corners had been prone to droop were now curved into the tenderest, gayest smiles; and as Anstice looked at her he was reminded of the old story of the marble statue, whose frozen rigidity was warmed into life by the magic of the sculptor's kiss.

And as he gazed, secretly, on this miracle which had been performed before his eyes Anstice realized a truth which hitherto he had not suspected. Although her manner in speaking of her husband had never held the faintest tinge of resentment, nor the least hint of rancour, neither had it betrayed any touch of a warmer feeling than a half-compassionate friendliness; and Anstice had never suspected the world of feeling which apparently lay locked in her heart. He had thought her cold, self-contained, genuinely cynical. He saw her now, impulsive, gay, radiant; and he knew to what this striking, this indescribably happy change was due.

Chloe Carstairs was in love, overwhelmingly, irresistibly in love with her husband; and now Anstice was able to gauge something of the bitterness of the life she had led for the last few months. Where he had thought her cold she had been indeed suffering. Her assumed cynicism, her weary indifference had been the cloak of a sharp and almost hopeless misery; and at the thought of her heroic acceptance of her husband's unbelief, an unbelief which must have been almost unbearably galling, Anstice paid her in his heart a higher tribute than he had hitherto bestowed on any woman.

That the cloud of which Major Carstairs had spoken had indeed lifted was evident in the glances which passed shyly between the two; and as Chloe answered her husband's eager question her blue eyes rested almost tenderly on his face.

"Yes. I think the truth has come to light at last."

"You mean the woman has confessed?" It was Anstice who spoke, and she turned to him at once with an animation of look and manner very different from her former languor.

"Well, as to confession I hardly know. But she has told me the whole story; and if you are both prepared to listen I will pass it on to you at once."

Sitting a little forward, her hands locked on the knee of her white gown, her blue eyes extraordinarily vivid in her softly-coloured face, she began her tale; and both men listened to her with rapt attention as her deep voice rang through the quiet room.

"It seems that years ago when Tochatti was a girl, living in a village close to Naples, she was betrothed to a handsome young Sicilian, a fisherman from Palermo. The story, as Tochatti told it, is a long and rather involved affair; but it is sufficient to say that there was another girl enamoured of Tochatti's lover; and matters were complicated still further by the fact that this girl was engaged to someone else. Well, Luigi, Tochatti's sweetheart, had evidently encouraged the second girl behind Tochatti's back; and when Tochatti found out she was so inflamed with rage and jealousy that, overhearing of an appointment between Bella and Luigi, she wrote a note in a handwriting roughly resembling that of Bella to the latter's sweetheart, a certain José, bidding him meet her at the same time and place as that arranged by the other two. Well, José went, expecting to meet his beloved—and found her in Luigi's arms. Tragedy followed, of course. José first tore the girl away and then stabbed her to the heart, afterwards turning on Luigi. They struggled—on the edge of the cliff; and Luigi proving the stronger, José was hurled over the edge into the sea below."

"A tragedy indeed," commented Major Carstairs as the speaker paused. "What was the next act? Did Luigi and Tochatti become reconciled and walk off arm-in-arm?"

"No." Chloe's voice sank a little. "It seems that when Tochatti, horror-struck by the result of her interference, rushed on to the scene, Luigi turned upon her, guessing somehow that she was responsible, and taxed her with having lured José to the spot that night. She owned up to it, and instead of imploring forgiveness appeared to glory in her treachery, whereupon Luigi, throwing the fatal letter into her face, burst into a torrent of rage, telling her he had never cared for her, that Bella was the only girl he had ever loved, and finished up by stabbing himself before her eyes rather than endure a life from which his adored one had vanished for ever."

"I say! What a tale—quite a Shakespearean ending, stage fairly littered with corpses," struck in Major Carstairs. "I wonder Tochatti didn't put the finishing touch by stabbing herself as well!"

"She did think of it, I believe," owned Chloe, "but the sound of quarrelling had brought other people on the scene, and Tochatti was of course arrested and the whole story investigated with more or less thoroughness. Being a pretty common story, however—for the Sicilians are a hot-blooded race—it was quite easy for the authorities to reconstruct the scene; and since Tochatti was innocent of any actual crime she was eventually released; only to fall ill with some affection of the brain which finally landed her in an asylum."

"An asylum!" Anstice whistled. "Yet one would have hesitated to call her insane——"

"Yes, now, but you must remember this is very many years ago. She recovered at length, and the only reminiscence of the tragedy was a marked aversion to using pen or pencil. She seemed to think that having wrought so much harm by her one attempt at letter-writing she would be wiser to avoid such things in future."

"Pity she didn't keep her resolve," commented Major Carstairs dryly; and Chloe nodded.

"Yes. We should all have been spared a good deal of trouble. Well, as you know, she entered my mother's service during her honeymoon in Italy, and was my nurse as a child. Now I come to the second half of the story. Tochatti chose to adore me from my early youth"—she smiled faintly—"and she always bore a grudge against anyone who did not fall down and worship me too. And this peculiar attitude of hers has a bearing on the affair of the letters. When Mrs. Ogden chose to quarrel with me, or at least evince a decided coldness, Tochatti's ready hatred flared up; and after the unlucky day when Mrs. Ogden cut me dead before half the county at a Flower Show, she determined to show the woman she could not be allowed to insult me with impunity."

"It certainly was a piece of unpardonable rudeness," said Major Carstairs warmly; and Chloe smiled.

"Yes—and at the moment I resented it very bitterly. But if Tochatti herself had not been there, in charge of Cherry, the matter would have dropped—and it was really unfortunate she should have seen the 'cut.' Well, it seems that Tochatti brooded over the affair, wondering how best to get even with the person who dared to act insolently towards me." Chloe's voice held just a tinge of mockery. "Twenty odd years of residence in England had taught her that one can't use daggers and knives with impunity, and I believe at first she was genuinely puzzled to know how to act. I suppose the thought of weapons turned her mind back to that Sicilian affair; and suddenly it flashed upon her that letters, after all, could be trusted to do a good deal of injury."

"So she wrote an anonymous letter calculated to do harm to the unlucky subject thereof?"

"Yes, and sent it to Sir Richard Wayne. Well, once having started she apparently couldn't leave off. Her venom grew, so to speak, by being fed in this manner; and she wrote one letter after another—you know her mother was English, and she was well versed in our tongue—until practically everyone in the parish knew a garbled version of Mrs. Ogden's sordid little story."

"One moment, Chloe." Major Carstairs had a soldier's mind for detail. "How did the woman know that story? I thought no one ever owned to having heard it?"

"No one ever did," said Chloe rather bitterly. "But the explanation is simple after all. Mrs. Ogden had, before I made my appearance on the scene, repeated the tale to another woman in the parish—the young wife of a solicitor whom she had 'taken up' with great fervour on her first arrival in Littlefield; and this woman had repeated the story to her French maid. The latter, being a stranger in England was pleased to make Tochatti's acquaintance; and one day told her the story, of course in strictest confidence. Well, the woman, the solicitor's wife, died, almost immediately after that, as the result of a motor accident; and her maid returned to her home somewhere in the valley of the Loire, without having, so far as one can conjecture, passed on the tale to anyone else."

"Yes," said Anstice thoughtfully, as Chloe came to a stop. "Quite a simple explanation, as you say, yet one which might never have come to light."

"There is still a point puzzling me," said Carstairs meditatively. "I can understand Tochatti writing the letters, and thus seeking to injure a woman whom she considered to be the enemy of her mistress. But how did she ever bring herself to allow you to be suspected, Chloe?"

"Ah, that is where the mystery really comes in, and where, possibly, Dr. Anstice's theory of the double personality may be considered." Chloe looked at them both rather dubiously. "I confess I can't understand that part of the story myself. Tochatti has assured me that she never for an instant dreamed I should be suspected—the slight similarity in some of the writing to some of mine was more or less accidental, though she admits she had tried to model her script on mine because she admired it ... as she admired all my poor faculties," said Chloe, with a little shrug of her shoulders. "I really believe she used my pens and paper without any idea of the harm she was doing me—in fact, if such a supposition could be entertained for a moment, I don't believe she had any very clear idea what she was doing beyond a fixed intention to work harm to the woman she detested."

"You mean that the idea of this Mrs. Ogden filled her mental horizon to the exclusion of any other thought?" It was Anstice who put the question.

"Yes. Honestly I believe she was incapable of looking, as one might say, all round the subject. You see"—Chloe hesitated, not sure how far the suggestion was permissible—"she had once been in an asylum, and possibly her brain had never worked quite normally since that tragedy on the cliffs."

"No, it is possible she was the victim of a sort of monomania," conceded Anstice. "In which case no other person would be connected in her mind with the affair save the one against whom the campaign was directed. It is a pretty lame explanation, I own, but then the workings of the human mind are so extraordinarily incomprehensible sometimes that I, for my part, have very nearly ceased being surprised at anything a man or woman may be disposed to do!"

"Tochatti tells me she grew very uneasy when things began to look really black," continued Chloe. "She had not understood when she started that letters of this kind rendered one liable to imprisonment sometimes; and she was horrified when she discovered that fact. I believe she would willingly have undone the harm she had done if it had been possible; for she couldn't help seeing, as the days went on, that I was in grave danger of incurring the penalty of her fault. Once, at least, I am sure she nerved herself to tell the whole truth——"

"Her good intentions evidently went to pave a place which shall be nameless," said Major Carstairs dryly. "After all, her affection for you seems to have been a very pinchbeck affair, Chloe, if she could calmly stand by and see you suffer for her wickedness. And for my part I don't see how you can be expected to forgive her."

For a second Chloe sat silently in her corner of the couch; and in her face were the traces of the conflicting emotions which made for a moment a battlefield of her soul.

After all Chloe Carstairs was a very human woman; and it is not in human nature to suffer a great wrong and feel no resentment against those who have inflicted that wrong. Had she been able to forgive Tochatti immediately, to condone her wickedness, to restore the woman to her old place in her esteem, Chloe had been something less—or more—than human; and that she was after all

only mortal was proved by her answer to Carstairs' last speech.

"I don't think I have forgiven her—yet——" she said very quietly. "At the same time I don't care to doubt the genuineness of her affection for me. I would rather think that she turned coward at the notion of suffering punishment, and let me endure it in her place through a selfish terror which forbade her to own up and take the blame herself."

"Well—if you look at it like that——" Major Carstairs was evidently not satisfied; and Chloe, possibly feeling unable, or reluctant, to make any further excuse for Tochatti, hurried on with her tale.

"Another factor in Tochatti's determination not to suffer herself is to be found in her dread of a prison as a sort of asylum like that in which she had been confined abroad. I don't know what kind of institution that had been, but she evidently retains to this day a very vivid recollection of the horrors she then endured; and her heart failed her at the bare thought of returning to such a frightful existence as she had then experienced. At any rate"—she suddenly abandoned her apologia—"she could not face it; and so she allowed me to take the blame; and by reiterating the fact that she could not write—a theory which the other servants held, in common with me——"

"But had you never seen her write? It seems odd, all the years she had been in your service!"

"No, I had never seen her write, for the simple reason that she never did write. It seems that the result of that fatal letter of hers had imprinted a horror of writing on her mind; and I really believe that until the day on which she penned the first anonymous letter she had never taken a pen or pencil in her hand...."

"Well, it's admitted she wrote those letters, and hoodwinked the world," said Carstairs briskly. "And though I confess I don't understand how she could reconcile her actions with her affection for you we will let that point pass. But now—what about those last letters? Is Dr. Anstice's supposition that she was jealous of him correct?"

"Quite." Chloe looked at Anstice rather apologetically. "You know Tochatti is of a horribly jealous disposition; and she could not bear to see Cherry growing fonder of you day by day. That unlucky accident was the crowning point, of course; and the fact that you appeared to slight her powers of looking after the child—you must forgive me for putting it like that—was too much for her. With the arrival of Nurse Trevor Tochatti seemed to lose all sense of decent behaviour; and her idea was to repeat her former experience and circularize the neighbourhood with a scandalous story which she hoped, as she has since owned to me, might succeed in driving you away."

"A very pretty plot," said Anstice quietly, "and one which deserved to succeed. But, Mrs. Carstairs, if you will allow me to repeat your husband's question—how did she learn my unhappy story?"

"I expected you to ask that," returned Chloe steadily, "and I made it my business to find out for you. Well, like the other explanation, it is very simple. While I was away"—in her new-born happiness Chloe would not distress her husband by speaking more plainly—"Tochatti took Cherry down to my old home, where my mother still lives, and of course it was only natural that she should there hear some version of the story as it affected my brother Bruce. She acknowledges she would never have connected you with the affair save for the unlucky fact that on the night you and Bruce met here he came to my room afterwards to tell me how and in what circumstances you had met before; and most unfortunately Tochatti, who was in an adjoining room, heard his explanation. She didn't think much of it at the time, but stored it up in her mind; and when, later, she wished to injure you, there was the means ready to hand."

"Like the proverbial Corsican who will carry a stone in his pocket for seven years, turn it, and carry it for another seven on the chance of being able to sling it at his enemy in the end," commented Carstairs. "Well, thank God, the whole story is cleared up now; and the next thing to do is to set about making the matter public and seeing justice done at last."

"Quite so—and it should be easy now," concurred Anstice heartily. "With the letter you hold as evidence and the woman's full confession you should not have much trouble with the case."

Looking at Chloe as he spoke he saw a strange expression flit across her face. The next instant she rose and going across to her husband's chair stood looking down upon him with unfathomable blue eyes.

"Leo"—her voice was very low—"is it really necessary that the matter should be made public? So long as you know the truth—and Dr. Anstice—and my dear friends Sir Richard and Iris, can't we let the subject drop? You know I don't care in the least for the opinion of the world, and it would mean so much trouble, so much raking up of things best forgotten. Couldn't we"—she hesitated—"couldn't we leave things alone, and just be thankful that *we* know the truth at last?"

Major Carstairs looked up at his wife as she stood before him; and his voice was very gentle as he answered her.

"But, Chloe, what of Tochatti herself? She must not be allowed to go unpunished. Besides, there is another aspect of the case. You know these abominable letters have been scattered broadcast in the land, and it is only fair to Dr. Anstice that their authorship should be published and their lies refuted."

"Yes. I had forgotten that." She turned to Anstice, who had risen and was standing leaning against the mantelpiece, looking desperately uncomfortable. "Forgive me, please, Dr. Anstice! For the second time I had forgotten that you were the victim of this latest outrage of Tochatti's ——"

"Mrs. Carstairs—please!" In his haste to explain himself Anstice spoke rather incoherently. "If you are willing to let this matter drop—why, so am I. For your own sake I think, while you are behaving nobly, you are making a mistake—a most generous, chivalrous mistake—in not proving your entire innocence before all the world, but if you are really resolved on it, do let me make you understand that personally I am only too ready to let the whole thing slide into the oblivion it deserves!"

"My dear fellow"—Major Carstairs spoke warmly—"this is all very well, very Quixotic, very—well, what you call noble, chivalrous—but what about the moral side of the affair? Justice should be tempered with mercy, certainly; but it doesn't do to defraud justice altogether of her dues. The woman has committed a crime—I repeat it, a crime against society, against you, against my wife; and to let her go unpunished is to put a premium on wickedness; and leave both you and my wife to lie under a most undeserved, most cruel stigma."

For a moment Anstice hesitated; and before he could frame a reply Chloe spoke very quietly, yet with a decision there was no mistaking.

"Leo, I see your point of view plainly—a good deal more plainly, I think, than you see mine. Of course as a man you want your wife's name cleared; and if you insist on making the affair public, why then"—said Chloe with a little smile—"I suppose I must submit as a good wife should. But"—she was serious now—"if you knew how I dread the publicity of it all—the reports in the papers, the gossip, the talk—oh, it makes me shudder even to think of it! And if you imagine me revengeful enough to find satisfaction in the idea of Tochatti's punishment—well, I think you must have a quite mistaken notion of me after all!"

Major Carstairs hesitated, looking from his wife to Anstice in manifest perplexity.

"Well, really, Chloe, I don't know what to say. Of course you and Dr. Anstice are the people chiefly concerned; and if you are both of you sufficiently superhuman to forego your legitimate revenge—well, I suppose it is not for me to interfere!"

"Suppose you think it over, sir." Anstice felt a sudden desire to get away, to be alone, to think over the revelation of the past half-hour. "For my part I really must go about my work—I'd no idea it was so late. By the way, who will take charge of Tochatti to-night? She is asleep now"—he had seen to that—"but later on she will want a little looking after. She has not borne out my theory," he added, turning to the soldier. "I thought that last night's excitement would have vanished entirely to-day; but I'm bound to admit she is in a queer state; and if she is no better to-morrow you will have to let me send someone to look after her."

"The housekeeper and I will be able to do that at present," said Chloe quietly. "You know poor Tochatti's hatred of professional nurses was directly responsible for that last burst of letter-writing, so we had better not try her too far!"

"By the way, where's the dagger she produced with such lightning sleight-of-hand last night?" Anstice put the question casually as he turned towards the door. "It would not be wise to leave it about, in case she felt like using it again!"

"It is hidden, at present, in my dressing-case," said Chloe. "I picked it up last night and flung it in there lest anyone should see it. But I agree it would be safer locked up; and I will give it to you, Leo, when I go upstairs."

"Yes, it will be better in my keeping," said Carstairs briskly. "Though I hope the madness which induced her to try to use it will have passed before long."

"We'll see how she is in the morning," said Anstice as he shook hands with Chloe. "I'll come round directly after breakfast, shall I? Quite possibly she will be herself again after a long sleep."

"Dr. Anstice"—Chloe retained his hand for a moment—"are you quite sure you don't regret agreeing with me over the possible hushing up of the affair? I'm afraid, after all, I made it rather hard for you to do anything but acquiesce just now. But if, after thinking it over, you decide that the story should be made public, well, I am quite ready to abide by your decision."

"No, Mrs. Carstairs." Anstice's tone was too sincere for her to doubt his genuineness. "For my own part I am more than ready to stand by my former verdict; and the final decision rests entirely with you. Only—perhaps I may be permitted to express my thankfulness that the problem has been solved—and my hope that you—and your husband—may find the future sufficiently bright to atone for the darkness of the past."

"Thank you," she said gently, and her eyes looked very soft. "At least my husband and I will never forget that we owe our happiness to you."

And with the words, cordially endorsed by Major Carstairs, ringing in his ears Anstice left Cherry Orchard and fared forth once more into the gloomy November night.

As he drove away he told himself that he was truly glad the mystery was elucidated at last. Yet even as he did so he knew that his own share in the matter gave him little satisfaction. He felt no

elation at the turn of events. He told himself impatiently that he ought by rights to be jubilant, since it was owing to his efforts that Tochatti had been unmasked; but in spite of his honest endeavour to spur his flagging emotions his heart felt heavy in his breast, and there was no elation in his soul.

After all, he told himself wearily, the discovery of the truth meant very little to him. With Mrs. Carstairs the case was widely different; and he did rejoice, sincerely, in her happiness; but for himself, having lost Iris Wayne, all lesser events were of very little importance after all.

"I wonder how Mrs. Carstairs will decide," he said to himself as he drove homewards. "Whatever her decision I suppose I must abide by it; but for myself I sincerely hope she will stick to her first view of the matter."

And then he dismissed the subject from his thoughts for the moment, little dreaming of the awful and tragic manner in which the decision was to be taken out of Chloe Carstairs' hands in the course of the next few hours.

He was just thinking of going to bed that night when the telephone bell rang sharply; and with one of those strange premonitions to which all highly-strung people are at times liable, he connected the call instantly with the affair at Cherry Orchard.

"Yes ... I'm Dr. Anstice ... who is it?"

"Carstairs," came the answer over the wire. "I say, Anstice, can you come at once? Something appalling has happened—Tochatti—she—she's——"

"She has killed herself." The words were more of an assertion than a question.

"Yes ... with that beastly dagger ... found it somehow and stabbed herself ... what? ... yes ... quite dead ... I'm sure of it...."

"I'll come round at once. Does Mrs. Carstairs know?"

"Yes ... what? ... yes, a dreadful shock, but she's quite calm ... you'll come ... the sooner the better ... many thanks...."

Anstice hung up the receiver and turned away, feeling almost stunned by the news he had received. The woman's death, coming on the top of the events of the preceding twenty-four hours, was in itself sufficient to shake even his nerve; but he lost no time in obeying the summons and arrived at Cherry Orchard just as the clock struck twelve.

He found the entire household up, the tragic news having circulated with the rapidity peculiar to such catastrophic tidings; and preceded by Major Carstairs, who met him in the hall, he hurried upstairs to the room where Tochatti lay in her last sleep.

It was quite true, as Major Carstairs had said, that she was dead. She had only too evidently been aware of the dagger's hiding-place, probably through familiarity with Chloe's movements in normal times; and had seized a moment when the housekeeper, thinking her asleep, had left her to procure a fresh stock of candles for the night's vigil, to slip into Chloe's room in search of the weapon.

Once in possession of the dagger the rest was easy; and whatever might be the nature of the emotions which drove her to the deed, whether remorse, dread of punishment, or some half-crazed fear of what the future might hold, the result was certain—and fatal.

She had made no mistake this time. The dagger had been plunged squarely in her breast; and when the housekeeper stole in again, expecting to find her charge still asleep, her horrified eyes were met by the sight of Tochatti's life-blood ebbing over the white sheets, her ears assailed by the choking gurgle with which the misguided woman yielded up her life....

"Yes, she is quite dead, poor thing." Anstice replaced the bedclothes and stood looking down on the dead woman with a steady gaze. "Perhaps, knowing her former brain weakness, I ought to have expected this. But in any case, Mrs. Carstairs"—he turned to Chloe, who stood, white and rigid, by his side—"the decision has been taken out of your—of our hands now. The matter is bound to come to light, after all."

"You mean there must be an inquest—an inquiry into this affair?" It was Major Carstairs who spoke.

"I'm afraid so—you see a thing like this can't very well be hushed up," said Anstice rather reluctantly. "And though I can't help feeling thankful that Mrs. Carstairs will have justice done to her at last, I'm sure we all feel we would have borne a good deal sooner than let this dreadful thing happen."

"Dr. Anstice"—Chloe turned to him almost appealingly—"are we really to blame? If we hadn't plotted, set a trap to catch my poor Tochatti, this would not have come to pass; and I shall always

feel that by leaving the dagger in my dressing-case I was the means of bringing this dreadful tragedy about."

"Come, Mrs. Carstairs, you mustn't talk nonsense of that kind!" His tone was bracing. "You were not in the least to blame. If anyone was, I should be the person, seeing I did not warn you of this possibility. But you know the poor soul was a very determined woman; and if she had set her mind on self-destruction she would have carried out her intention somehow."

"Well, at least there will be no object in keeping the authorship of those confounded letters a secret now," said Major Carstairs, putting his hand kindly on his wife's arm. "After all poor Tochatti has done us a service by her death which will go far towards wiping out the injury of her life. And now it is one o'clock, and we none of us had much sleep last night——"

"You're right," said Anstice quickly, "and Mrs. Carstairs looks worn out. Can't you persuade her to go to bed, Major Carstairs? There is really no need for her to stay here harrowing her feelings another moment."

"I'll go," she said at once. "Good-night again, Dr. Anstice. It will comfort me to know that you don't think me entirely to blame—for this."

"I think you are as innocent in this matter as in that other one we discussed to-night," he said quietly. "And this poor woman here, if, as we may surely believe, she has regained by now the sanity she may have temporarily lost, would be the last to think any but kindly thoughts of you in the light of her fuller humanity."

"Thank you," she said again, as she had said it earlier in the evening; and once more they exchanged the firm and cordial handshake by which those who are truly friends seal their parting.

When he had closed the door behind her he came back to the bedside where Major Carstairs still stood, looking down on the dead woman with an unfathomable expression in his eyes.

"Anstice, from the bottom of my heart I regret the manner of this poor soul's passing," he said, and his voice was genuinely moved. "But even so I can't altogether regret that she took this way of cutting the knot. For now my wife and I may at least hope for the ordinary happiness which other human beings know. We have been in the shadow a long time, Chloe and I"—he spoke half to himself—"but now we may surely pray for sunshine for the rest of our earthly pilgrimage together."

"Amen to that," said Anstice solemnly; and as the two men shook hands silently each rejoiced, in his individual fashion, that Chloe Carstairs had come into her own at last.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

Anstice stood on the deck of the P. and O. boat *Moldavia*, looking out over the blue seas to where Port Said lay white and shining in the rays of the March sun.

He had seen the port before, on his way to and from India, but he had never landed there, and looked forward with some keenness of anticipation to setting foot in the place which enjoys, rightly or wrongly, one of the most unsavoury reputations in the world.

Not that his stay would be long—a night at most—for he purposed journeying on to Cairo without loss of time, and as the boat drew nearer and nearer to the quay, whereon a crowd of gesticulating natives raised the unholy din which every traveller associates with this particular landing, Anstice turned about and swung down the companion to take a last look round his dismantled cabin.

It was now nearly eight weeks since he had quitted Littlefield. Having disposed of his practice in the nick of time to a college friend who wished to settle in the country, and having also received an unexpected windfall in the shape of a small legacy from a distant relation, he had decided, after a short stay in London, to take a holiday before starting to work once more.

His choice of a destination had not been unaffected by the fact of Iris Cheniston's residence in the land of Egypt. Although he had no expectation of meeting her—for she and her husband were still somewhere in the desert, a couple of days' journey from Cairo—there was an odd fascination in the bare idea of inhabiting, even for a few weeks, the land which held the girl he still loved. For although he had long since determined that he must avoid Bruce Cheniston's wife if he wished to keep his secret inviolate, and incidentally attempt, by starving his passion of its natural food, to keep his love unsullied by any hint of envy, any emotion of desire—well, all men are sophists at heart, and in spite of all his self-assurances that he could visit Egypt without seeking to gain even a glimpse of Iris, ever in the background of his thoughts lay a delicious, barely

formulated hope that possibly Fate might vouchsafe to him one fleeting vision on which his hungry heart might feed in the empty days which must needs ensue.

There had been changes in Littlefield since that November evening on which the truth concerning the anonymous letters had come to light. After Tochatti's death it had naturally proved impossible altogether to hush up the tragedy and its immediate results, and although Anstice had done his best to mitigate the position for Major Carstairs and his wife, the inquest had proved a trying affair for all of them.

Since the woman was dead there was no need to keep the authorship of those letters a secret, and before he left Littlefield Anstice had the satisfaction of knowing that Mrs. Carstairs' name had been effectually cleared from the slur placed upon it by a censorious and ignorant world.

When once this was accomplished Major Carstairs insisted on carrying off his wife and Cherry for a long holiday in the south of France, and although Cherry wept bitterly at the thought of parting from her beloved Anstice, he was able to console her by a recital of the wonderful things she would behold by the shores of the azure Mediterranean.

He was surprised to find, when the real parting came, how hard it was to say good-bye to his friends. Although he considered himself unsociable, independent of the claims of friendship, forced, so to speak, into misanthropy by the circumstances of his life, he had grown to have a real esteem for Chloe Carstairs, and the spectacle of her new-born vitality, her radiant happiness, was one which gave him a very deep and genuine pleasure. As for Cherry, that quaint child had long since twined herself round his heart-strings, and although Major Carstairs was, comparatively speaking, a new acquaintance, Anstice respected the soldier as an honest man and a gentleman.

A week after their departure another blow befell Anstice in the sudden death of his friend Fraser Carey, and when at last he was summoned in haste to Carey's aid he found that the latter had suffered for years from a painful internal disease.

"But why not have submitted to an operation years ago?" Anstice asked him gently as he sat, impotent to help, by his friend's side in the light of the dying day. "It might have been successful"—he dare not say more—"and you would have been spared years of agonizing suffering."

The other man smiled, and his eyes for a moment lost their look of pain.

"Quite so," he said gently, "but at the same time I might—probably should—have died. I took the best advice, nearly ruined myself with visiting specialists"—he smiled very faintly—"and none could give me any assurance that I should live through it. And I could not afford—then—to die."

"Not afford?" Anstice stared at him in amazement.

"No. You see"—his voice was a mere thread—"you see I had a wife, Anstice—oh, no one knows, and my secret is safe with you—and although I could not live with her ... she was not what the world calls a good woman, and her ideal of life was not one which I, as a clergyman, could assist her to realize—well, I could not let her sink altogether for want of money to keep some sort of home together."

"You sent her money?"

"Yes. I sent what I could from my stipend—it wasn't much—God's ministers are supposed to be content with the promises of treasure in heaven," said Carey, with a hint of humour in his weak tone. "I made a little, too, by writing for the reviews. But it was precarious, Anstice, precarious; and I dared not risk dying, and leaving her in want."

"And now?" Anstice had noted the tense in which he spoke of his wife, and he guessed the answer before the other spoke.

"She is dead—she died three weeks ago," said Carey quietly. "And now I can give up the struggle myself——"

"I wish to God you had told me earlier," said Anstice vehemently. "At least I might have done something for you——"

"Oh, I had alleviations," said Carey slowly. "When the pain grew unendurable I had remedies which gave me some relief. But I knew that if I told you you would seek to persuade me to a course I really could not have adopted. You mustn't mind me saying it, Anstice. Perhaps I have been wrong all through." His voice was wistful. "But I did what I thought was right—and luckily for us poor men God judges us by our intentions, so to speak, and not by the results."

The words returned to Anstice's mind three days later as he stood by the graveside of his friend, and in his heart he wondered whether it were indeed true that what men called failure might, in the eyes of God, spell a great and glorious success.

The next person to leave Littlefield was Sir Richard Wayne. For since his daughter's wedding he had been finding life without her almost unbearable, and at length he avowed that the English climate in winter was altogether more than any sensible man could be expected to endure—a

somewhat surprising statement from a former M.F.H.—and declared his intention of paying a visit to Iris and her husband in Egypt forthwith.

It was of Sir Richard Wayne that Anstice was thinking half an hour later when the *Moldavia* had come to her berth at the quay and he was about to leave the ship on which the short and prosperous voyage had been made.

However much the theory of the astral body of man may be denied or ridiculed, there is no doubt that an unusually vivid thought-presentment of a friend frequently precedes the appearance of that friend in the flesh, and it is certain that the mental image of Sir Richard Wayne had been, for some reason, so strongly before Anstice's mind that in a tall, grey-clad figure pushing his way vigorously through the crowd of natives he was inclined to see a striking resemblance to the object of his thoughts.

He told himself, rather impatiently, that the notion was absurd. He had been dwelling for so long on the vision of Sir Richard's daughter that he had lost, for the moment, his sense of reality, and he turned aside to reclaim his baggage from the vociferous Arabs who wished, so it appeared, to appropriate both it and him, without casting another glance in the direction of Sir Richard's double.

Yet the hallucination persisted. He could have sworn he heard Sir Richard's voice raised in protest as the crowding natives impeded his progress towards the gangway of the boat; and at last Anstice turned fully round, with half-ashamed curiosity, to see what manner of man this was who wore the semblance and spoke in the tongue of Sir Richard Wayne.

As his black eyes roved over the intervening faces they were caught and held by another pair of eyes—grey eyes these, in whose clear and frank depths was a strong resemblance to those other wide grey eyes he loved, and in the next moment Anstice realized that a miracle had happened, and that the first person to give him greeting in this land of mystery was none other than Sir Richard Wayne himself.

About the gladness of the other's greeting there could be no two opinions. Utterly disregarding the touts and porters who swarmed round him Sir Richard came forward with outstretched hand, and his eyes fairly shone with joy and with something that looked like relief.

"Anstice! By all that's wonderful!" He wrung the younger man's hand heartily as he spoke. "How came you here—and are you landing for good, or just taking a look round this God-forsaken old iniquity of a town?"

"I'm leaving the ship for good. Want to have a look at Cairo ... interesting place, I've always heard." For a second Anstice faltered, feeling as though his friend must see through his pretence, and guess that it was because this land enshrined the one woman in the world that he was here. But Sir Richard gave no sign of disbelief, and Anstice was emboldened to proceed. "But you—what are you doing here? I thought you were somewhere in the desert with—your daughter."

"So I was, so I was." Sir Richard hesitated, then spoke rapidly. "Anstice, are you alone—and disengaged? I mean—could your stay in Cairo be postponed for a few days? I want—I came down here to look for a doctor—never thinking I'd have the luck to find you——"

"A doctor?" Beneath the spur of his quick mind Anstice grew pale. "Is someone ill? Not—not your daughter?"

"No, not Iris." Unconsciously Anstice breathed a sigh of relief and the older man glanced at him curiously. "It is Bruce—my son-in-law—who's ill; and I've come down here to find a doctor. Couldn't get one in Cairo—it seems the pilgrims have just returned from Mecca bringing their pet cholera along with them, and the city's got a scare—so I came down here to meet the boat, meaning to bribe the ship's surgeon to come back into the desert with me. If he wouldn't respond to *bakshish* I should have tried kidnapping," finished Sir Richard grimly, and Anstice smiled.

"No need to do that, sir. I'm here, and I'm ready and willing to do all you require. But first, hadn't I better put in a claim to my belongings? It seems to me these rascals would think precious little of making off with all the lot!"

"Yes—better let me see to it for you," said Sir Richard quickly. "We've not too much time for the train to Cairo as it is. If you will go and bespeak an *arabeah* I'll get your baggage."

And as Anstice moved to obey, a very tumult in his heart, Sir Richard turned back to the wildly-shouting crowd and succeeded in reclaiming Anstice's portmanteau and Gladstone bag from the clutches of the blue-robed fiends who fought one another for its possession.

When they were clear of the quay, driving behind the two long-tailed little horses along the glaring streets, beneath the thinly-leaved and dusty trees, Anstice turned to Sir Richard interrogatively.

"Now, sir, can you tell me what's wrong? Mr. Cheniston is ill, you say. Do you know the nature of his illness?"

"Enteric, I'm afraid," Sir Richard informed him gravely. "He went on a shooting expedition a week or two ago with the rich Egyptian for whom he has been carrying through a big irrigation job, and one day, when, through a miscalculation, the wine and provisions did not turn up, the party lunched at a mud-village on eggs and coffee. Being particularly thirsty Bruce indulged in a

small glass of water with slices of citron, and although the host's servants swore by the Beard of the Prophet and so on through all their most sacred oaths that they had boiled the water first, the odds are that they had not, and that it came straight from the river or some indescribably polluted well. It seems that the pilgrims had passed that way, and owing to their pleasing habit of dropping a little of their precious 'holy' water into the wells they meet, some of those wells are absolute hotbeds of infection, so to speak."

"Whew!" Anstice whistled to express his consternation. "And then, of course, Mr. Cheniston came home and sickened for this illness."

"Yes. At first he made light of it, said the expedition had been fatiguing, he had a touch of the sun, and so on. But at last the disease manifested itself unmistakably, and three days ago I set out for Cairo to try to get some medical help."

"There is no doctor out there?"

"No. You see it is only a tiny village—hardly that—a settlement in the midst of a little colony of Bedouins. Iris was first persuaded to go there by a woman she met in Cairo, a Padre's wife who had gone out—at least the Padre had—to try the effect of the climate on weak lungs. They have one kiddie, a child of seven or eight, and they were so pleased with the place that they stayed on, and were the only white people in the village, with the exception of a young Australian who had lost his money and went out there to try to grow vegetables, and a rather eccentric French artist who set up his studio in a sort of disused fort built on a high rocky plateau about a mile above the little settlement. He has gone back to France now, taking with him some really marvellous studies of the desert, so they say."

"How far is the place from Cairo?"

"About a day and a half's journey on horseback. Of course, if it had been possible to bring Bruce in to Cairo that would have been the best thing. But we daren't take the risk. Mrs. Wood, the Padre's wife, is a first-class nurse, and she and Iris are doing their very best for the poor fellow. But still"—Sir Richard shook his head—"there's no doubt the illness has got a fast grip of him, and I'm afraid of the result, Anstice, I confess I am afraid."

He broke off for a moment, then resumed in a brisker tone:

"Well, here is the station, and now we may expect another uproar over your precious baggage. The best thing to do is to single out one fellow and promise him good *bakshish* if he gets rid of the others; and here is Mahomed, who is a first-class fellow for the job!"

He beckoned to a tall, pock-marked Arab in a dusty fez and faded blue djibbeh, and by dint of lavish promises secured his noisy but efficient services, with the result that in an incredibly short space of time the luggage was safely tumbled into the train and Anstice and Sir Richard faced each other, exhausted but triumphant, in an otherwise empty carriage.

"By Jove, but those beggars make me hot!" Anstice threw himself back into his corner and drew a long breath. "It's always a mystery to me how people who live in hot climates are so beastly energetic! They seem to have quicksilver in their veins, not blood."

"Yet they are lethargic enough at times," returned Sir Richard, pointing to a recumbent form lying unconcernedly on the platform a few feet from their open window. "Look at that fellow sleeping there—he doesn't care in the least what goes on around him—and many times in the street one has to move off the pavement to avoid stepping on some idle beggar who's drawn the hood of his garment over his head and gone to sleep, literally among the feet of the passers-by!"

As the train proceeded on its way Sir Richard outlined the situation a little more fully to his keenly-interested companion.

"When I left, Mrs. Wood had pretty well taken up her abode with Iris," he said. "Their servants—native, of course—behaved badly, as those mongrel Arabs often do, and promptly deserted us soon as they found there was likely to be trouble ahead. All but one, a very decent chap called Hassan, who is really fond of Iris and would do a lot for her."

"The other people in the village—Bedouins, I think you said?—how do they get on with their white neighbours?"

Sir Richard's forehead suddenly puckered into a worried frown.

"Not too well," he said slowly. "The fact is, I believe they resented the European people settling there at all. As I told you, it is a tiny settlement—just thirty or so Bedouins who cultivate the land and grow vegetables, which they hawk to other villages a day's march away. They daren't openly complain, of course, but I believe they would like to drive the white folks out; especially young Garnett, who is really beating them at their own game as a clever agriculturist."

"There is never any trouble, I suppose?" Somehow Anstice felt a vague uneasiness at the thought of Iris Cheniston shut up in a desert colony among sullenly hostile neighbours.

"Oh, no, the Bedouins know the English Government won't allow any hanky-panky." Sir Richard voiced the assertion so emphatically that a tiny seed of doubt sprang up in his hearer's heart. "I confess I should rather like to see Iris and Bruce settle down to civilized life again, but this is only a holiday, and they won't be there long. Unless——" He paused and Anstice guessed only too

surely the ominous nature of the pause.

With an instinctive desire to reassure the other man he spoke quickly.

"Perhaps when Cheniston is better they will fall in with your advice. No doubt he will require a change after this illness, and very often, you know, a man who has been ill takes a dislike to his surroundings, and is only too ready to exchange them for others."

"Quite so." Sir Richard spoke absently, looking out of the window the while, and since he was apparently disinclined for conversation, Anstice followed his example, seeing plenty to interest him in the panorama spread before his eyes in this strange and fascinating land, this living frieze of pictures which might have been transplanted bodily from the pages of the Old Testament itself.

Once, when the train came to a standstill at Ismailia, Sir Richard roused himself to speech.

"Of course, should the Bedouins ever rise against the strangers in their midst," he said, repelling with a gesture the attentions of a tall water-seller who thrust a brass saucer containing a doubtful-looking liquid through the carriage window, "things might be serious. True, there are not more than a couple of score of them, and so far, with the exception of a *fracas* with Garnett over some vegetables they stole from him, they have been peaceable enough."

"I see. And, as you say, they know quite well that the British Government is behind this handful of English people, and knowing that reprisals would be certain to follow any lawlessness, I should say they are too wise to put themselves in the wrong. After all, too, these people are not doing them any harm by living in their midst."

"You are right, Anstice, and I'm a silly old fool for letting my imagination run riot in this way." Sir Richard sat upright and gazed out at the world of sun and sand through which they were passing. "As you say, they would not dare—and in any case as soon as Bruce can travel we will bring them back to civilization."

"By the way, how soon can we start?" The bare thought of meeting Iris sent the blood humming wildly through Anstice's veins; and he awaited Sir Richard's reply with barely-concealed impatience.

"Well, we shall reach Cairo—if this confounded train doesn't break down *en route*—about dinner-time. It would be no use attempting to start to-night—the horses must be ordered for to-morrow morning, as early as you like. And no doubt you will want to take one or two things with you."

Anstice nodded.

"Yes—but they won't take long to procure. As for baggage—we travel light?"

"Yes—just what we can carry. I have plenty of things out there—can give you all you need," said Sir Richard more briskly. "And if all goes well we need not anticipate a long stay. Now, how about a cup of tea? This beastly sand has gone down my throat in bushels."

He called the Soudanese attendant and gave him an order, and over the indifferent tea and Huntley and Palmer biscuits which were presently brought to them, he and Anstice discussed Littlefield and other matters widely removed from the subject of their former conversation.

It was seven o'clock when the train finally ran into the station at Cairo, humming like a beehive with its crowded native life, and ten minutes later the two men were driving through the busy streets beneath the clear green evening sky on the way to the hotel chosen by Sir Richard.

"The Angleterre—it's quieter than Shepheard's," he said, "and anyhow it is only for one night. After dinner we'll go and make arrangements for an early start. That will suit you all right?"

"The earlier the better," returned Anstice promptly, and as their carriage drew up before the hotel he sprang out with an eagerness which seemed to betoken a readiness to start forthwith.

By ten o'clock that night all arrangements were made, horses bespoken, baggage packed, and all necessaries purchased, and shortly afterwards the two men exchanged cordial good-nights and retired to their respective rooms to seek the refreshment of sleep in preparation for the morrow's early start.

But though Sir Richard, his mind relieved by his meeting with Anstice, fell into a sound slumber ten minutes after he laid his head down on his pillow, Anstice lay awake all night between the white walls of his mosquito curtains.

For there was that in his thoughts which effectually banished sleep.

CHAPTER II

Anstice never forgot that first day's ride over the desert sand. They had started early, very shortly, indeed, after daybreak, and by the time the sun was fully risen they were already some miles on their way.

It was a heavenly morning, the dry and glittering air full of that peculiar, crisp sparkle which

mounts to one's head like champagne. The sand shone and twinkled in the yellow sunshine with an almost dazzling effect, and the pale blue sky had not yet taken on the pitiless ultramarine hue which comes with the brazen noon.

The horses, too, seemed alive to the exhilarating quality of the air. They curvetted and danced over the sand, tossing their arched necks and lifting their feet daintily as though they were conscious of the beauty and fitness of their own motion.

"By Jove, Sir Richard, life is worth living on a morning like this!" Anstice threw back his head and inhaled large draughts of the intoxicating, sun-warmed air. "Why on earth do we herd in cities when there are glorious tracts of desert land where one might pitch one's tent! I declare I wish I were a nomad myself!"

"You feel like that?" Sir Richard looked a trifle wistfully at the younger man, envying him his superior youth and more robust physique. "For my part I confess to a distrust of the desert. It seems to me as though there were a blight on these huge tracts of sand, as though the Creator had regretted their creation, yet was too perfect a Worker to try, by altering the original purpose of His handiwork, to turn them into something for which they were not intended."

He paused, pulling up his horse and turning in his saddle to survey the yellow and brown waste over which they had come.

"I suppose, as an Englishman whose forbears have always clung to the soil, I find more pleasure in beholding an English landscape," he said, with a smile which was half apologetic. "The ideal of making two blades of grass spring where there was but one before may not be a very exalted one, but I confess I see more beauty in a field of grain waving under the August sun, than in these acres of yellow sand, and the thought of a perpetual summer, with never the soft grey tones of an autumn sky or the crisp frostiness of a winter's morning—well, it doesn't appeal to my John Bull soul!"

He laughed, ashamed of his vehemence, and the horses sprang gaily forward, glad to be moving again after even so brief a halt.

All through the morning they rode, resting for an hour or two at noon; and in the late afternoon they remounted their horses and fared forth once more in search of the camping-place Sir Richard had in mind.

By dint of compasses and an unusually accurate sense of location, the older man had staked their course with admirable directness, and as the moon rose they drew rein at the appointed destination, a wild and rocky valley whose caves offered a natural protection from the chill night breeze which blew with disconcerting freshness over the loose, salt-impregnated sand.

Here, thanks to the ever-useful thermos flask, they enjoyed a sufficient meal of hot soup, followed by a multitude of sandwiches of divers kinds; and when, after a pull at their respective flasks, the two lit their pipes and stretched their limbs, cramped by the day's exertions, Anstice, at least, felt more at peace with the world than he had felt for years.

To be hastening towards Iris Cheniston, to be sure of meeting her within twenty-four hours, sure of seeing the kind friendliness of her wide grey eyes, of hearing the soft cooing notes of her voice, was enough to make a man content with his lot; and the fact that he was journeying towards her in order to do his best to save the life of the one human being who stood between him and his happiness lost all its irony when he remembered that it was in reality Iris herself for whom this service was undertaken.

The next morning found them early astir; and as their horses danced over the sand, literally throwing the miles behind them, Sir Richard's spirits, which had been somewhat fluctuating, rose with a bound. He whistled gaily as they rode, ever and anon breaking off to conjecture on the nature of the welcome they might reasonably expect to receive; and when he spoke, as he did frequently, of his son-in-law, his prognostications, in striking contrast with his former pessimism, were couched in the most hopeful language.

Strange to say, as his spirits rose, so did those of Anstice sink. An odd foreboding, a premonition for which he could not account, displaced the gladness from his heart; and as they rode on and ever onwards he told himself that they were surely riding towards tragedy.

Possibly it was the Celtic strain in him which rendered him liable to these strange and perverse forebodings of evil. On sundry other occasions in his earlier youth he had fallen with appalling swiftness from the heights of glad anticipation to the depths of a certain and most unwelcome gloom; and now, quite suddenly, he found himself involved in a black and rayless melancholy which seemed to fortell some catastrophic happening at hand.

It was with more and more difficulty that he replied to Sir Richard's hopeful prophecies; and so strong upon him was the premonition of disaster that when he learned at last that they were within an hour or two's ride of their destination he spurred on his still willing steed in a sudden desire to know the worst which was to befall.

As he stared ahead of him, his eyes beginning to adjust themselves now to the peculiar conditions of the desert atmosphere, he caught sight of a speck upon the sand which, unlike the majority of desert objects, the scanty tamarisk bushes, the low humpbacked hills which here and there formed an apparently endless chain, appeared to move, to grow almost imperceptibly larger as

the distance between them diminished.

During their ride over the desert they had met no other human beings. Once or twice they had seen, to right or left of their track, a collection of mud huts, overshadowed by the plumy tufts of tall date-palms, betokening the presence of a handful of *fellaheen* scratching a livelihood from the unfriendly sand. Again they had twice beheld in the far distance a caravan winding its leisurely way upon some mysterious errand to an unknown destination; but these last had been too far away for their component parts of horses, camels, merchandise, to be distinguished; and after a brief glance towards the long snaky lines as they wound their way through the sand, Sir Richard and Anstice had wisely refused to strain their eyesight further.

But this solitary unit on the vast face of the desert was a different matter; and Anstice gazed steadily ahead in an as yet fruitless attempt to make out what this thing which appeared to move towards them might be.

At first he said nothing, thinking that his eyes might quite conceivably be playing him tricks, that this apparently moving figure might possibly be a figment of his brain, or one of those delusive sprites which are said to haunt the unwary traveller in the desert; but at length, as the distance between the object and himself diminished more and more rapidly, until he could have sworn he caught the flutter of a blue robe, Anstice felt it time to point out the vision or whatever it might be to his as yet unseeing companion.

"Sir Richard," he said, so suddenly that Sir Richard, who had been jogging along sunk in reverie, started in surprise. "Do you see anyone coming towards us over the sand?"

Sir Richard, thus appealed to, sat up more erectly in his saddle; and gazed with his keen old eyes in the direction of Anstice's pointing hand; and Anstice watched him with an anxiety which was surely out of place.

After a moment's fruitless search Sir Richard unslung the field-glasses which he carried, and applied them to his eyes; and in another moment, having adjusted the focus, he uttered an exclamation.

"By Gad, Anstice, you're right! It's a native of sorts, and he is coming directly towards us. He is too far off for me to distinguish his features—you look and see what you can make of him."

He handed the glasses to Anstice, who raised them to his eyes; and after adjusting the lenses to suit his younger, keener sight, he swept them round in an attempt to focus the distant object.

First an apparently illimitable expanse of sky and sand swam slowly into view, each insignificant landmark in the desert magnified almost incredibly by the powerful glasses; and at last the blue-robed native appeared suddenly as though only a stone's throw away from the man who searched for him.

The glass revealed him as an Arab of an ordinary type clad in a faded blue djibbeh, over which he wore the short grey coat so inexplicably beloved of the native. On his head was a scarlet fez; and his blue robe was gathered up in such a way as to leave bare his brown and sinewy legs as he paddled ruthlessly and unhesitatingly over the burning sand.

As he lowered the glasses Anstice gave a short description of the advancing native to Sir Richard, adding:

"He seems to be in something of a hurry—he's covering the ground in a most energetic fashion—and he really does appear to be making straight for us!"

All at once Sir Richard's lately-born optimism fell from him like an ill-fitting garment. Taking the glasses back he adjusted them once more with fingers that absolutely trembled; and when after a long and steady stare he lowered them and turned to his companion his face was very serious.

"Anstice, I hope to God I'm mistaken, but that fellow looks uncommonly like Hassan—and from the haste he's making I should say he had been sent out to meet us. And that can only mean disaster—either Bruce is worse, or——" He broke off suddenly, his fine old face suddenly grey.

"Oh, it won't be so bad as that, sir!" Unconsciously Anstice replied to the unspoken suggestion. "Possibly your daughter has sent this chap to relieve your mind—Cheniston may have taken a turn for the better—heaps of things may have happened."

"Quite so." Sir Richard was replacing his glasses in their case with oddly fumbling movements. "But I wish to God we were safely back ... we can't even see the village for these confounded palm trees!"

As though the horses understood and sympathized with the mental tension of their riders they sprang forward with renewed energy; and some hard riding brought the two men within hailing distance of the approaching native.

"It is Hassan all right," said Sir Richard with a rather painful attempt at composure. "Let us hurry on and find out what is amiss at the village."

As the native drew nearer it was easy to see that he was the bearer of important news. His coffee-coloured face was shining with drops of perspiration, and his breath came in pitiful gasps as he hurried up to Sir Richard and began pouring out his story in a flood of mixed Arabic and English which was quite unintelligible to Anstice.

"Speak slower, man, slower!" Sir Richard spoke emphatically, and for a space the native obeyed; but it was evident from the look of mingled consternation and rage in his hearer's face that the story was one of dire import.

When, presently, the Arab ceased, his tongue positively lolling out of his mouth like that of a thirsty dog, Sir Richard turned to Anstice with an air of determination.

"Things have been moving, with a vengeance, in our absence," he said grimly. "It seems that yesterday morning early young Garnett found a couple of Bedouins prowling about his place and helping themselves to his choicest produce; and being a hotheaded young fool he let fly at them with his revolver, the result being that by a most unlucky chance he winged one of the rascals and the other assisted him off, vowing vengeance on the whole little English colony of eight souls. It was not an empty threat either; for when Hassan, feeling uneasy at the idea of harm coming to Iris, slunk into the village to find out, if possible, what mischief was afoot, he ran slick into a conclave of the brutes, and hiding behind a rock heard their plans."

"They were pretty deadly, I suppose?"

"They merely embraced the wholesale massacre, under cover of night, of the English men and women who had been fools enough to trust their good faith," returned Sir Richard shortly. "Well, Hassan, whose wits are as sharp as his ears are long, lost no time in going back to his mistress with the information; and between them they evolved a plan which might, with the most marvellous luck, be successful."

"And that plan, sir?" Anstice's tone was tense.

"Aided by Hassan, at the approach of night the whole little group of white people crept safely into the Fort of which I told you; and when, a couple of hours later, the Bedouins came forth intent on reprisals, they found the houses of the English empty, and realized, too late, that the Fort was quite a different nut to crack."

"It is a fairly safe building?"

"Well, it has certain natural advantages, I grant." Sir Richard spoke rather dubiously. "We went over it one day, in a spirit of curiosity; and I have a pretty clear recollection of the place. To begin with, as I told you the Bedouin encampment is a sort of oasis in a valley at the foot of some quite respectably high rocks. You know the desert is not, as some people imagine, merely a flat expanse of sand. Here and there are ranges of hills, limestone, and so on—and now and then one comes across quite a chain of rocky places which in another country would be looked upon as precipices."

He paused; and Anstice waited eagerly for him to continue.

"Well, this Fort is, very luckily, built on a plateau overlooking the valley. On one side the ground slopes gently down to the little colony, but on the other the Fort overlooks a high precipice of rock which of course affords no means of transit from the ground below; so that on that side the place is absolutely impregnable."

"I see." Anstice's tone held a note of relief. "Well, that sounds fairly promising—as I suppose it means there are only three sides to defend instead of four."

"Well, it is a circular building," Sir Richard explained, "and there are only slits in the walls on two sides; and also, fortunately for us, only one means of entrance or exit, in the shape of a massive door which could hardly be forced without a charge of dynamite. It was the stronghold, so I gather, of a kind of robber chief in the old days, and doubtless was built to resist possible assaults from lawless tribesmen. But there is one weak spot in the building—one or rather two places which are a decided menace to any defence."

"And those——"

"Well, it seems this French artist, Massenet by name, sought and obtained permission from the authorities who leased him the building to throw out a couple of windows in the upper floor which enabled him to convert the place into a very passable studio. He was a rich man—son of a well-known Paris banker, and the cost did not intimidate him. But the result is that those two big windows, which only boast the flimsiest of sand-shutters, are, without a doubt, capable of being made into means of entry, provided, of course, that the defenders within are short of ammunition or are unable to construct efficient barricades."

"I see. I suppose they are a fair height from the ground?"

"Yes—but there are such things as ladders," said Sir Richard dryly. "Of course a mere handful of men, given a sufficiency of ammunition, might keep an attacking party at bay almost indefinitely. But I'm afraid our supply of munitions is somewhat scanty, and with women—and children—to defend——" He broke off suddenly as the native began to speak.

"You go a-back, bring help, bring many gentlemens. Me and the Effendi take care of ladees ... but you go quick—bring the soldiermans...." He stopped, as though at the end of his suggestions.

"Yes." Sir Richard's face lighted up. "I see what he means. Anstice, you or I must make all speed back to Cairo and fetch out some soldiers. The barracks swarm with them, and if I know them they'll jump at the chance of a little scrap like this. With luck you'd be back in three days—less, if

you pushed your horses—and by God I believe we could hold the Fort till then!"

As he finished the native nodded his head as though in approval of the plan; but suddenly his expressive features lengthened, and he said something in a lower tone to Sir Richard in which the words "*El Hakim*" occurred more than once.

Sir Richard listened restively, and uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

"Well, well, there's no need to repeat it so often! Anstice, this fellow points out that after all I had better be the one to go for help, as he says your aid is urgently required at the Fort. Besides Cheniston, who seems, from what I can gather, to be in about the same state as before, Garnett got wounded last night when the besiegers tried to force an entrance, and I suppose the sooner you get to them the better."

"Well, there's something in that," conceded Anstice, reluctant to deepen the disappointment in Sir Richard's face. "You see, sir, the sooner I fix up Cheniston the better—but why shouldn't this fellow go and fetch help instead of you?"

Sir Richard's eyes brightened, but after another colloquy with the Arab his former air of dejection returned.

"He says—confound him—that the authorities in Cairo would pay more attention to me than to him—and I suppose he's not far wrong. Also he points out that with his knowledge of the land and of the language he would be of more use to the garrison"—he used the word half ashamedly—"than I, who know little of either. His plan is for me to return immediately with all possible speed to fetch help, while you and he seek, under cover of night, to enter the Fort, a task which I gather," said Sir Richard grimly, "is not altogether devoid of risk."

Anstice said nothing, but his mouth was set in a hard line which betokened ill for anyone who attempted to bar his way into that same Fort, and with a half-strangled sigh Sir Richard continued his speech.

"It seems on the whole the best plan, though God knows it's hard to turn round and leave my only daughter in this damned hole. Still, I see the logic of the thing, and if you are willing to go forward, why, there's nothing left for me but to turn back."

"I'll go forward all right," replied Anstice quietly. "And if you will trust me, I will do my best to carry on until you arrive with reinforcements."

"In that case I'll go at once," said Sir Richard more briskly. "Which is the better horse? Yours, I think—and if so I'll take it and hurry back to Cairo. But first let's have a look at the provisions—I'm a tough old fellow and can do without a lot of stuff, but I daren't risk failing on the way. Luckily we are lavishly provided."

Hearing this speech the Arab smiled gleefully and produced from some mysterious recess in his robe a square package, tied with string, and handed it, still smiling, to Sir Richard, who took it with a rather mystified expression.

"It's food—what you call grub," explained Hassan proudly. "The ladees make it—say it carry the Effendi back to *le Caire*"—in common with many Arabs he gave the city its French name—"and it *good* grub too!"

Sir Richard slipped the packet into his pocket with a rather uncertain smile, and turned to the matter of transit without loss of time.

Anstice's horse was the fresher of the two, and it was decided that Sir Richard should start at once, and when at a safe distance dismount and rest until moonrise, after which the night hours might profitably be spent in journeying onwards, since night-riding in the desert is infinitely preferable to riding by day.

"With luck you should make Cairo very early on the day after to-morrow," said Anstice, who had been making a calculation. "And if you could get started again without loss of time you could be here in just under three days. But that would mean hard riding, I'm afraid——"

"I'm pretty tough," said Sir Richard again. "And after all you'll have the harder part. I suppose"—he turned to Hassan—"I suppose there is no possibility of getting help nearer than Cairo—no village or settlement to which I might apply?"

No, Hassan opined, it was of no use seeking help elsewhere. The one or two native villages within call were quite inadequate to render assistance, and to apply to them would be a loss of time which would have no practical result.

When once Sir Richard was assured of the impossibility of procuring help nearer than Cairo he wasted no further time in discussion, but mounted his horse with a businesslike air and proceeded to take leave of Anstice with a heartiness which but thinly disguised his real and gnawing anxiety.

"I will make all possible speed," he said, as he settled himself sturdily in his saddle. "And with luck three days should see me back. In the meantime"—for a moment his voice faltered, but he pulled himself together pluckily—"I leave my girl in your care. And I know"—Sir Richard spoke very slowly—"I know you will guard her, if need be, with your life...."

"Thank you for your trust, Sir Richard." In Anstice's hand-grip Sir Richard read the measure of his resolve. "I will not fail you—nor your daughter—so long as I am alive."

Sir Richard wrung his hand, tried to speak, and failed, utterly, to articulate a syllable. But the look which the two men exchanged spoke more eloquently than words, and Sir Richard, as he rode away on his mission, knew that so far as mortal man might compass success his daughter's safety was assured at this man's hands.

When Sir Richard had ridden away, sitting squarely in his saddle, with never a backward look, Anstice turned to Hassan.

"Now," he said, "how do we proceed? I mean"—he remembered that the man understood little English—"do we go straight back to the village—and what do we do with this horse?"

Hassan's explanation was necessarily somewhat unintelligible, being couched in a polyglot mixture of French and English, with a few words of Arabic thrown in, but by dint of patient inquiry Anstice presently made out the drift of his involved speech. Briefly, his plan was as follows.

It would be useless, so Hassan asserted, to attempt to return to the village and enter the Fort until darkness covered the land. The Bedouins, it seemed, already surrounded the place so that Hassan's escape had been a matter of some difficulty, and it would be necessary to proceed cautiously, with careful strategy, in order to re-enter the place in safety.

When once it was comparatively dark—if possible before the moon rose—the attempt must be made; and in the meantime Hassan considered the wisest thing to do was to shelter somewhere and rest in preparation for the evening's adventures.

The horse, he decided, must be turned loose outside the village. The Bedouins, as he pointed out, would be likely to snap up readily a horse of such good appearance, and in any case Hassan was plainly of the opinion that a horse's existence was of very little importance when graver matters were at stake.

Although, as an Englishman, Anstice was inclined to rate the horse's value as a living creature more highly than the Arab was disposed to do, he saw the reason of the plan, and agreed to follow Hassan's advice in every particular.

Having come to this wise resolve, he invited Hassan to choose a place where the time of waiting might be passed, and the native deciding on a little sandy hollow between two low, round-backed hills, he proceeded to ensconce himself more or less comfortably on the loose and drifting sand, and prepared to endure the waiting-time with what patience he might.

CHAPTER III

"Dr. Anstice! Is it really—*you*?"

Iris stood opposite to him with an expression of wondering surprise in her wide grey eyes, and as he held her hand in his Anstice noted the beating of a little blue vein in her temple—a sure sign, with this girl, of some inward agitation which could not be altogether concealed.

"Yes. It is really I." Although he spoke calmly he was to the full as agitated as she, and he could not keep his eager eyes from studying her face, in which he found a dozen new beauties for which their separation had not prepared him. She was a little thinner than he remembered her, but the African sun had kissed her fine skin so warmly that any pallor which might well distinguish her in these troublous days was effectually disguised.

With an effort he relinquished her hand and spoke with well-simulated indifference.

"It was by the merest chance that Sir Richard and I met in Port Said," he said. "I was taking a holiday—the first I've had for years"—he smiled—"and was only too glad to see a familiar face in a strange land."

"And you have given up your holiday to come to our help," she said in a low voice. "You don't know how thankful I am to see you—but for your own sake I wish you had not come."

"That's rather unkind," he said, with a smile. "Here have I been flattering myself that you would welcome me—well, warmly—and you as good as tell me I am not wanted!"

"Indeed I did not mean that." She too smiled, but quickly grew grave again. "If you only knew *how* glad I am to see you. We—we are in rather a bad way here, you know, Dr. Anstice, and—and your help will be valuable in more ways than one."

"I hope it may prove so," he said. Anstice and Hassan had made a perilous, but successful, entry into the little Fort, pursued, it is true, by a shower of bullets, for the Bedouins were armed with a strange collection of weapons, ranging from antique long-barrelled guns to modern rifles. "May I

see him at once? The sooner the better, as I am here at last."

"Yes. I want you to see him as soon as possible." Iris hesitated, and in her eyes was the shadow of a haunting dread. "You will find him very ill, I am afraid. We have done what we could—Mrs. Wood has been splendid—but he doesn't seem to get any better. Of course in ordinary circumstances we should not have dared to move him, but we had to do it, and I am sure it has been very bad for him."

"Well, we must see what we can do now," said Anstice in as reassuring a tone as he could muster. "Where is he? On this floor, I suppose?"

"Yes. Next door. One of the rooms which the artist used is furnished, more or less, as a bedroom, and it is fairly comfortable. The other rooms—this and the ones downstairs—are almost empty except for a few chairs and a kind of bench we use for a table."

"I see." Anstice looked round the room, noting the rough stone walls, the ancient, uneven floor, uncovered by so much as a piece of matting; and then his glance returned to the large modern window which looked so incongruous in its mediæval setting.

The room into which a moment later Iris showed him was of the same shape and size as the one they had just quitted; and boasted the second of the windows which might, were help too long delayed, prove the undoing of the little garrison. It was, however, roughly furnished, though it was evident that the Frenchman, for all his reputed wealth, had been no Sybarite by inclination. The bed was of a common pattern, and the few other things scattered about on the scantily matted floor were of the most primitive description.

As a room for an invalid the apartment certainly left much to be desired; but Anstice did not waste time over his surroundings. He moved quickly towards the bed; and stood looking down upon the man who lay thereon in silence.

And as he looked at the wreck of the once gallant Bruce Cheniston, his heart sank within him; for if ever Death had printed his sign-manual on a living man's face, it was written here too legibly for even an untrained eye to miss its significance.

Cheniston was wasted to a shadow by fever and suffering. From his haggard face his sunken eyes looked out with an expression of anguish which was surely mental as well as physical; and though he evidently recognized his visitor, he was too weak to do more than move one fleshless hand an inch or two towards Anstice by way of greeting.

Hiding the shock Cheniston's appearance had given him as well as he might, Anstice sat down beside the bed and took the painfully thin hand in his own.

"Cheniston, I'm sorry to see you in such a bad way." He spoke very gently, his eyes on the other's face the while. "It was hard luck falling ill out here—but I've brought up several things from Cairo that will give you relief in no time."

Over Cheniston's face flitted the ghost of a smile; and his voice, when he replied, gave Anstice a fresh shock, so thready and devoid of all tone was it.

"Thanks—very much—Anstice." He spoke slowly, with spaces between the words. "I'm very ill—I know—I think I'm going—to peg out—but I can't bear—to think—of Iris."

He stopped, quite exhausted by the effort of speech; and Anstice, more moved than he cared to show, laid the thin hand back on the bed, and took his patient's temperature, his heart sinking still lower as he read the thermometer's unimpeachable testimony.

Strive as he might, he could not rid himself of a fear that Bruce Cheniston's earthly race was ran; and catching sight of Iris' face as she stood on the opposite side of the bed, he felt, with a quick certainty, that she too realized that only by a miracle could her husband be restored to the health and vigour to which his young manhood surely entitled him.

"Come, Cheniston," he said presently, in answer to Bruce's last words, "you mustn't talk of pegging out. You have been bad, I can see that, but you know dozens of travellers in Egypt enjoy a taste of enteric and come through it as good as new. You got this through drinking polluted water, I understand?"

"Yes." Bruce smiled, haggardly, once more. "Too bad, wasn't it, that after playing with water ever since I came out here it should turn on me in the end. Serves me right—for—trusting an Arab—I suppose."

His voice died weakly away; and Anstice gently bade him keep quiet for a while.

"No use talking and exciting yourself," he said, for he could see the other's stock of strength was lamentably small. "Lie still and allow me to talk over affairs with Mrs. Cheniston—we will put our heads together and evolve some plan for your benefit." He hardly knew what he said, so filled was his heart with a pity in which now there was no faintest tinge of resentment for the unfair bargain which this man had once driven with him.

With a sigh Cheniston closed his eyes, and appeared to relapse once more into a kind of stupor; and when, in obedience to a silent gesture, Iris withdrew to the window, Anstice joined her there immediately.

Such remedies as yet remained to be tried Anstice determined to employ; but though he told himself fiercely that if mortal man could save Bruce Cheniston from the grave he should assuredly be saved, he experienced that hopeless feeling which all who gaze in the very face of death know only too well; and he did not dare to meet Iris' eyes as he conversed with her in a carefully-lowered tone.

"I'll sit up to-night, Mrs. Cheniston, and you must try to get some sleep. I suppose"—he broke off suddenly, remembering the position in which they stood—"I suppose some of you watch—for the enemy"—he laughed with something of an effort—"every night?"

"Yes. I don't think we any of us slept last night," said Iris quietly. "You see we are so short-handed—only Mr. Wood and Mr. Garnett and Hassan know anything about fire-arms; and Mrs. Wood and I, and Rosa, Mrs. Wood's nurse, have been busy looking after Bruce and little Molly Wood."

"Of course. Well, I think the first thing to do, after I have given Mr. Cheniston this"—he had been mixing something in a little glass as he spoke—"is to meet and hold a council of war, with a view to the most useful disposition of our forces. After all"—he spoke more lightly, so keen was his desire to see her look less anxious—"we are not by any means a force to be despised. We have four able-bodied men among us; and this place, from what I can gather, looks pretty impregnable, on one side at least."

"Yes. Even Mr. Garnett admits that the Bedouins could hardly swarm up that rocky wall," said Iris, with a slightly more cheerful air. "And of course, too, we have not got to hold out indefinitely; for if my father reaches Cairo in good time we may have the relieving force here in less than three days."

"Of course we may!" His tone was resolutely optimistic. "Now, as soon as Mr. Cheniston drinks this we'll set to work."

He approached the bed, and having with some difficulty roused Cheniston from his stupor, administered the dose deftly; after which he turned to Iris once more.

"You spoke of a nurse just now. Who is she?"

"Oh, she is only a children's nurse, and rather a broken reed at the best of times," said Iris ruefully. "She had hysterics all last night, but she's a bit more sensible to-day."

"Hysterics or no, she can keep watch for half an hour," said Anstice rather grimly. "Suppose you find her and send her to me. Would you mind?"

"I'll go at once." Iris turned towards the door, and Anstice noted with a pang at his heart that she was certainly thinner and moved with less buoyancy than of old. "You—you won't be too severe with her, Dr. Anstice? After all, she is only a young girl, and she has gone through quite a lot since yesterday morning!"

"Oh, I won't bite her head off," said Anstice, with a short laugh of genuine amusement. "But we have no use for hysterical young women here; and no doubt when she understands that she will amend her ways."

"Very well. I will go and find her." With a last look towards the bed Iris vanished; and for a brief moment Anstice was left alone, to wonder at the strange and unexpected situation in which he now found himself, shut up in this lonely building in the heart of the desert with a handful of souls for whose safety he could not but feel himself largely responsible.

He did not attempt to disguise from himself that the outlook was decidedly unpromising. Even though Sir Richard reached Cairo without mishap, some time must necessarily elapse before he could gather together what Iris had called the relieving force; and although Anstice had no reason to doubt the staunchness and courage of his fellow-defenders, he could not fail to realize that as a fighting unit they were altogether outmatched by the two or three score of enemies who were by now, apparently, thirsting savagely for their blood.

Then, too, the shadow of death already hovered over the little garrison; and as Anstice turned once more to survey the pale and wasted features of the man who had supplanted him in the one supreme desire of his life, he told himself that it would be a miracle if Bruce Cheniston lived long enough to see the arrival of the help on which so much depended.

"If I had got here a week—three days ago, I might have done something," he told himself rather hopelessly. "But now I'm very much afraid it is too late. He is going to die, I'm pretty sure of that, though I hope to God I may be mistaken; and heaven only knows what will happen in the course of the next three days."

As he reached this point in his meditations a voice in his ear made him start; and turning, he beheld a pale and distraught-looking young woman who might in happier circumstances have laid claim to a certain uninspired prettiness. At this moment, however, her eyes red-rimmed with lack of sleep, her ashy-coloured hair limp and dishevelled round her unintellectual forehead, she was rather a piteous object; and in spite of his resolve to speak bracingly to her Anstice's voice was quite gentle as he replied to her murmured question.

"Yes, I am Dr. Anstice, and I want you to be good enough to sit here and look after Mr. Cheniston while I talk over matters with the other gentlemen."

"Yes, sir." She cast a swift look at the bed, and then hastily averted her pale-brown eyes. "Mr. Cheniston—he—he won't die, will he, sir? I mean, not immediate, like?"

"No, he will not die immediately," said Anstice reassuringly. "All you have to do is to sit here, beside the bed"—he had noticed how she kept her distance from the aforesaid bed, and placed her in the chair he had vacated with a firm pressure there was no resisting—"and watch Mr. Cheniston carefully. If he shows signs of waking come for me. But don't disturb him in any way. You understand?"

The girl said, rather whimperingly, that she did; and with a last glance at Cheniston, who still lay sunk in a dreary stupor, Anstice went quietly from the room in search of his comrades in misfortune.

He found them in the room in which he had first seen Iris; and he joined the conclave without loss of time.

"Oh, here you are!" Iris broke off in the middle of a sentence and came forward. "Mrs. Wood, this is Dr. Anstice; and this"—she turned to a tall, clean-shaven man dressed, rather unconventionally, in the clothes of a clergyman—"is Mr. Wood. Here is Mr. Garnett, and that is all, with the exception of Molly."

She drew forward a child of about Cherry Carstairs' age, a pale, fragile child in whose face Anstice read plainly the querulousness of an inherited delicacy of constitution.

"She ought really to be asleep," said Mrs. Wood, a short, rather good-looking woman of a florid type, whose subdued voice and air were at variance with the cheerful outline of her features. "But somehow night and day have got mixed up at present—in fact, my watch has stopped, and I don't know what time it is."

"It is just ten o'clock, Mrs. Wood." It was Roger Garnett who volunteered the information; and as Anstice turned to discover what manner of man the speaker might be he was relieved to find that the young Australian wore an unmistakably militant air. He was of average height, with powerful shoulders; and in his blue eyes burned a lust for battle which was in no way diminished by the fact that his left arm was bound up just below the elbow.

"Brute dotted me one there," he explained casually as he saw Anstice's glance fall on the bandage. "Thought at first he'd broken a bone, but he hadn't. It was only a flesh wound, and Mrs. Wood did it up in the most approved St. John style!"

"I'll look at it for you presently, if you like," said Anstice, "though it appears to be most scientifically bandaged. Now, what I should like to know is this. Did these fellows attack you last night? They did? At what time—and in what force did they come?"

"It was just before dawn—the recognized time for a night attack, eh?" Garnett's blue eyes twinkled. "They thought it was going to be a soft job, I believe; but they had apparently forgotten that the door was pretty well impregnable, thanks to the jolly old bandit, or whatever he was, who used to retire here with his doubtless ill-gotten gains! And as they had forgotten to provide themselves with any means of reaching these windows the attack failed, so to speak."

"I gather you were looking out? Any casualties?" Anstice put the question coolly; and young Garnett grinned.

"Yes, siree—one for which by the grace of God I may consider myself responsible. They were all arguing in the courtyard below when I gave them a kind of salute from up here, and by gosh, you should have seen the beggars scatter! One of them got it in the thigh, at least so I deduce from the fact that he had to be assisted away, groaning!"

"They didn't return?"

"No. Clambered over the wall and made tracks for home, sweet home instanter."

"To tell you the truth, Dr. Anstice"—it was Mr. Wood who spoke, and Anstice turned quickly towards him—"I do not myself believe that they will attack us again at present. They have now found it impossible to force an entrance unseen; and I should not be surprised if their plan of campaign included waiting, and trying to starve us out. A policy of masterly inaction, so to speak."

"Do you know, I rather agree with the Padre," said Garnett thoughtfully. "Of course they have not a notion that we have sent for help; and though they saw Dr. Anstice arrive with Hassan, it is quite possible that in the dusk they thought it was one of us who had made a futile sortie with the Arab."

"I daresay you are right," said Anstice thoughtfully. "But I suppose you do not propose we should relax our vigilance on that account?"

"No." Mr. Wood looked keenly at the speaker, and appeared reassured by something he read in the other's face. "Last night we watched both this window and that of the other room—the one where Mr. Cheniston is lying——"

"It is unfortunate that he should be in one of the rooms where there is a possibility of trouble," said Anstice, rather worried by the notion. "I suppose the others are really uninhabitable?"

"Well, there is no possibility of admitting sufficient air," said Mrs. Wood practically. "There is a little hole where we snatch a moment's rest now and then, but for a man with fever——"

"No, I suppose he must stay where he is." Anstice genuinely regretted the necessity. "The only thing to do is to try to draw the enemy's fire to the other window, if occasion arises. Now, how do we divide our forces? Mrs. Cheniston"—he spoke the name firmly now—"you, I suppose, will watch your husband, and if I may suggest that I take the window in that room under my charge—Hassan might be at hand to take my place when I'm occupied with Mr. Cheniston——"

"Then Mr. Garnett and I will be responsible for the watch in this room," said the clergyman quietly. "The others—my wife and Rosa—can take it in turn to relieve Mrs. Cheniston. How does that plan strike you, Dr. Anstice?" By common consent they began to look on Anstice as their leader.

"A very sensible plan," said Mrs. Wood quickly, "But I positively insist upon Mrs. Cheniston having some sleep. She was up all night and has not rested a moment to-day."

"What about me, Mummy?" A rather fretful little voice interrupted the speaker, as Molly pressed closely to her side. "What's me and Rosa going to do? There isn't any beds and the bench is so hard!"

"Poor kiddie!" Anstice's heart was touched by this lamentable wail. "Suppose you let me see what I can do to make you a bed, Molly! I'm a doctor, you know, and doctors know more about making beds than ordinary people!"

The child regarded him with lack-lustre eyes which were quite devoid of any childish gaiety; and for a moment she appeared to revolve the question in her mind. Finally she decided that he was to be trusted, for she nodded her weary little head and put her thin, hot hand into the one he extended to her.

"The room opposite to this is our bedroom," said Iris, with a faint smile. "Shall I come too, Molly, and show Dr. Anstice where to find the things?"

"Yes. You come too." The other moist hand sought Iris' cooler one; and between them they led the poor child into the room Iris indicated.

Here, with a little ingenuity, a bed was made up of chairs and cushions, which Molly was too worn out to resist; and having seen her sink at once into an uneasy slumber, the two returned to the larger room, where the others still held whispered conclave.

"Dr. Anstice"—Iris laid her hand on his arm, her voice full of the sweetest contrition—"you have had nothing to eat and you must be famished."

"I'm not hungry," he assured her truthfully; but she refused to listen to his protests; and calling Mrs. Wood to her assistance she soon had a meal ready for him. Although the resources of the establishment were limited to tinned food and coffee boiled over a little spirit stove, Anstice was in no mood to criticize anything which Iris set before him. Indeed he could hardly take his eyes from her as she ministered to him; and the food he ate might have been manna for anything he knew to the contrary.

Having finished his hasty meal and assured his kind hostesses that he felt a hundred per cent better thereby, Anstice turned to Mr. Wood with a new seriousness.

"It is nearly eleven o'clock," he said, "and I suppose we should be thinking of taking up our positions? If you and Mr. Garnett are ready, I'll call Hassan to take charge of the other window for a little while, and have a look at my patient yonder."

The other men agreed; and Anstice left them stationing themselves at their posts while he entered the next room and relieved the frightened Rosa from her task of watching the invalid.

As he approached Cheniston's side he saw that as yet no fatal change had occurred. Bruce still lay in a kind of stupor, half-sleep, half-unconsciousness; but his pulse was not perceptibly weaker, and for a wild moment Anstice considered the possibility of his patient's recovery—a possibility which, however, he dared hardly entertain as he looked at the haggard face, the sunken eyes, the peeling lips.

When Iris entered a minute or two later Anstice gave her a few directions, bidding her call him immediately should Bruce awaken; and as she acquiesced and sat down on the hard chair lately vacated by the maid, Anstice looked at her with a feeling of rather helpless compassion.

"Mrs. Cheniston, I'm so awfully sorry to have to ask you to sit up. You're worn out, I know, and I wish you could get some sleep."

"Oh, don't bother about me!" She smiled up at him, and his heart contracted within him at the look of fatigue in her face. "I'm immensely strong, you know—and I can sleep to-morrow. Only"—the smile faded out of her eyes, leaving them very sad—"do you think there is any possibility of Bruce being better in the morning?"

"Yes—he is no worse than when I saw him an hour or two ago," Anstice assured her. "And in a bad case like this even a negative boon of that kind is something to be thankful for."

She looked at him again, rather wistfully this time; but he did not meet her eyes; and presently he

withdrew, leaving her to her lonely watch; while he went to take up his vigil at the window in preparation for any possible attack.

But that night passed without adventure of any kind.

CHAPTER IV

It was on the afternoon of the following day that a new and serious complication arose.

The night had passed without incident of any kind; and shortly after sunrise the little party met to compare notes of their respective vigils.

All through the night Anstice had come and gone by Cheniston's bedside; but although there was no improvement in his patient's condition, neither did he seem to have progressed any further into the grim Valley of the Shadow; and although this extreme weakness and prostration were ominous enough, Anstice still cherished that very faint, very timid hope which had been born on the previous night.

He had never wished so fervently for the power to save a life as in this particular case. Gone was all remembrance of the former ill-feeling between them, of the unfair and cruel bargain which this man had forced upon him to the utter destruction of his life's happiness. He forgot that Bruce Cheniston had been unjust, callous, a very Shylock in his eager grasping of his pound of flesh; and he remembered only that this man had won Iris' love, and thereby established his claim to any service which the man who had also loved Iris might reasonably bestow.

The fact that Iris must needs be adversely affected by her husband's death was sufficient in itself to rouse his wish to save Cheniston's life if that life could be saved; and during the day, when the vigil of the little garrison might be relaxed, he was assiduous in his care of the man who lay so desperately ill in the quiet room overlooking the sun-baked desert.

Only once Cheniston roused himself sufficiently to hold a few minutes' laboured conversation with Anstice; and afterwards the latter was not perfectly certain of Bruce's complete understanding of the words he used.

"Iris—how is she?" His voice was so weak that Anstice could barely hear it; but he guessed what it was that the other man wished to ask; and answered at once:

"Mrs. Cheniston is quite well—only a little tired. She is lying down for an hour, but if you want her I'll go and call her."

"No. Don't disturb her," said Bruce feebly; and then, after a pause, he uttered the words which, later, seemed to Anstice a reflection on his perfect mental poise at the moment. "Poor little Iris—it wasn't fair to marry her—I wish to God I'd left her—to you."

For a minute Anstice sat silent, absolutely stunned by this extraordinary statement; and before he could speak the weak voice began again.

"You loved her—so did I—in a way—but I've never really loved anyone—but—Hilda Ryder." The unconscious pathos in his tone robbed the words of all offence. "But she's a dear little soul—Iris—and I only wish I'd not been beast enough—to marry her—to spite you——" The thin voice trailed away into a whisper and Anstice spoke resolutely.

"See here, Cheniston, you're ill and you don't know what you're saying. Don't talk any more, there's a good chap. You only tire yourself out to no purpose."

But with the perversity of fever Cheniston would not be gainsaid.

"I'm all—right." His hollow voice and laboured breath gave the lie to his assertion. "But—if I die—and the rest of you get out alive—you—you'll look after Iris, won't you? I wish you'd—marry her—you'd be good to her—and she would soon—be fond—of you——"

Somehow Anstice could bear no more. With a hasty movement he sprang up, and in his voice was a decision against which Cheniston in his weakness could not hope to prevail.

"See here, Cheniston, you've just got to lie still and keep quiet. You know"—his manner softened—"you're really not fit to talk. Do try to get a little sleep—you'll feel so much stronger if you do."

"I feel—very weak." He spoke with an evident effort, and Anstice repented him of his vehemence. With a gentleness Iris herself could not have surpassed he did all in his power to make Cheniston as easy as possible; and when, presently, the latter relapsed into the stupor which passed with him for sleep, Anstice left him, to go in search of Mrs. Wood, who had promised to take charge of him for an hour or two.

A few minutes later he encountered Garnett, walking moodily along the uneven passage-way; and a new seriousness in the Australian's expressive face gave Anstice pause.

"What's up, eh? You look mighty solemn all of a sudden!"

"I feel it, too." The younger man turned round and his eyes looked grim. "Do you know what those

damned Bedouins have been up to now? I believe, and so does Hassan, that they've been poisoning the well out there"—he pointed through the slit in the wall to the courtyard beneath —"and if so we've not got a drop of water we can drink."

"I don't believe it." Honestly he did not. Although he had no cause to love the Oriental race he was loth to believe even an uncivilized foe capable of such barbarity.

"As sure as God made little apples, it's true." Garnett was in no wise offended by Anstice's uncompromising rejoinder. "Hassan and I both thought we saw a fellow sneaking in the courtyard last night—just before dawn—when it was too mighty dark to see much; but as he sheered off we didn't give the alarm. But it seems Hassan is pretty well acquainted with their charming tricks, and he was suspicious from the first."

"But was this beggar prowling round by the well?"

"We couldn't see much, but this morning Hassan investigated and found footmarks on the sand leading directly to and from the well; and he is convinced that is what the brute was doing."

"How much water have we left?"

"Well, that's the very devil of it," said Garnett ruefully "It seems we had a fair quantity—you know it all has to be brought from that same old well—but that silly little Rosa thought this morning that she'd like a bath, so without asking permission she tipped it all into a kind of tin tub there was on the premises and performed her ablutions therein."

"Well, I confess I don't blame her," said Anstice rather dryly. "I feel as if I'd give a fiver for a bath myself—this damned sand makes one so infernally gritty."

"Just so—and the tin basin we wash in—in turns—isn't exactly luxurious!" Garnett's eyes twinkled. "All the same, things look pretty serious on the water question. We must have water—unfortunately the desert thirst is no fancy picture—I'm like a lime-kiln myself at this moment—but if the well is poisoned, and Hassan seems convinced it is, we can't drink the water, can we?"

"Certainly not." Anstice hoped his voice did not betray his dismay at this disclosure. "Where's the nearest well—outside of here?"

"Over in the village—or rather, there's one outside the village which would be less public." Garnett laughed a little. "But I don't quite see how we're going to fetch water from it. You know the beggars are keeping a pretty smart lookout—and if they caught sight of one of us sallying forth we'd be potted as sure as a gun. And every available man is wanted here."

"I suppose"—Anstice had been thinking—"I suppose it would be quite impossible to get out by the rocky side? I mean could one possibly climb down? The Bedouins don't seem to guard that side, and one would be in the desert, well away from their band."

"Yes—but I doubt if it would be feasible. Unless—what about a rope? I saw a great coil of rope in one of the dungeons downstairs this morning." A new alertness leaped into his bright eyes. "I say, let's go and reconnoitre, shall we? It would be great to outwit the beasts after all!"

"Right! Where shall we go and scout?"

"Place opposite—the only one with a decent-sized hole in the wall—have to find a place one could squeeze through, I suppose—and I'm such an infernally broad chap, too!"

Anstice laughed.

"Well, I'm pretty long," he said, still smiling. "Lead on, will you—oh, this is the place, is it?"

They had entered a small circular chamber which had evidently been used for the purpose of scanning the desert far below in search of possible foes; for the aperture in the wall which corresponded to a modern window was much larger than any of the other slits in the building; and Anstice and the Australian were able, by a little man[oe]uvring, to lean out side by side and view the prospect beneath.

"Pretty fair drop, eh?" From his tone Garnett was in no wise daunted by the sight.

"Yes—want a steady head. But it could be done," said Anstice judicially. "A long rope—a precious long one, too—fastened to something up here, and one could clamber down all right. And once down it should be easy to skirt round to the well you mentioned. That's settled, then, and since you're disabled"—he glanced at the other's bandaged arm—"this is going to be my job."

"Oh, I say, that's not fair!" The other's tone of indignation amused Anstice even at that critical moment. "It was my suggestion, wasn't it? Oh, I believe you did say something about it too ... but I think I ought to be the one to go."

"But your arm——"

"Oh, damn my arm!" Garnett spoke vehemently. "It won't hurt it a scrap—and honestly, I'd simply *love* the job!"

"I know you would—but really you'll have to let me do it." Anstice spoke firmly, though he was sorry for the other man's disappointment. "You see that arm of yours is badly hurt, though you won't own up to it; and it might easily go back on you when you started using it. And if you got

stuck down there, we'd have no water, and be a man short here as well."

For another minute the Australian held out, arguing the point with a kind of fiery eloquence which showed how keenly he desired to undertake the adventure; but in the end he gave way, though he was too unsophisticated entirely to hide his chagrin.

"Then that's settled." Anstice dared not betray his sympathy any further. "Now it remains to settle the details; and by the way, wouldn't it be wise to keep it as quiet as possible? We don't want to alarm the women."

"Quite so." Garnett squared his shoulders and plunged pluckily into the discussion. "I should suggest you go fairly early, as soon as the moon's up—so that with luck you'd be back before the enemy start prowling round. The well is a mile away, in a westerly direction." He pointed as he spoke. "And there is not much cover when once you get fairly out ... though I don't think there is a very great risk of the brutes spotting you."

"How long should it take me to get there and back?"

"Well, walking over sand is not like walking on macadam," said Garnett practically, "and I don't suppose you could do the job under an hour or two. Besides, you may have to dodge the brutes now and then," he added regretfully; and again Anstice could not refrain from smiling.

"Well, that's settled, then. The moon rises about seven, doesn't it? And if I get off soon after that ——"

"That would do tophole. And we can easily spin a yarn to the rest," said Garnett more cheerfully. "In the meantime let's go and get something to eat. I'm famished."

The suggestion meeting with Anstice's approval they adjourned in search of food; and found Iris coming to look for them with tidings of a meal. When they had taken their seats at the improvised table, Iris quietly withdrew; and Anstice guessed she had returned to her place by the side of her husband—a place she had relinquished for an hour only during the whole of the strenuous day.

When, a little later, he went to see Cheniston again, he was dismayed to find an ominous change in his patient.

Bruce had indeed the air of a man at the point of death; and as he looked at the wasted features, the sunken eyes, the grey shadows which lay over the whole face, transforming it into a mere mask, Anstice told himself bitterly that all his care had been in vain; that before morning broke there would be one soul the less in their pitiful little company.

He bent over the bed and spoke gently; but Cheniston was too ill to pay any heed; and with a sigh Anstice stood upright and turned to Iris rather helplessly.

"Mrs. Cheniston"—he forced himself to speak truthfully—"I am afraid your husband is no better. In fact"—he hesitated, hardly knowing how to put his fears into words—"I think—perhaps—you must be prepared for the worst."

"You mean he will die?" She spoke steadily, though her eyes looked suddenly afraid. "Dr. Anstice, is there no hope? Can *you* do nothing more for him?"

"There is so little to be done," he said. "Believe me, I have tried every means in my power, but you know my resources here are so limited, and in those surroundings—if I had been here a week earlier, I might have done something; but as things are——"

"Oh, I know—I know you have done all you could!" She feared her words had sounded ungracious. "Only—Bruce is so young—he has never been ill before——"

"Ah, yes, but everything has been against him—the climate for one thing—and of course the forced removal was about the last thing he should have had to endure." Anstice longed to comfort her as she stood before him, looking oddly young and wistful in her distress, but honesty forbade him to utter words of hope, knowing as he did what might well take place during the coming night.

"You think he will die—to-night?" Her eyes, tearless as they were, demanded the truth; and after a secondary hesitation Anstice replied candidly:

"I am very much afraid he may." He turned aside when he had spoken, that he might not see her face; and for a long moment there was a silence between them which Anstice, for one, could not have broken.

Then Iris sighed very faintly.

"If that is so, you—you won't leave us, will you? I think—I could bear it better if you were here."

Anstice's vehement promise to stay with her was suddenly cut short as he remembered the venture which was planned for the early hours of the coming night; and Iris' quick wits showed her that some project was afoot which would prevent him comforting her by his constant presence. Yet so sore was her need of him, so ardently did she desire the solace which he alone could bring her, that she was moved to a wistful entreaty that was strangely unlike herself.

"Dr. Anstice, you—you will stay? If—if anything happens to Bruce, I shall be so—so lonely——"

Never had Anstice so rebelled against the fate which had given her to another man as in this moment when she stood before him, her face pale with dread, her wide eyes filled with something not unlike absolute terror as she faced the coming shadow which was to engulf her life. He would have given the world to have the right to take her in his arms, to kiss the colour back to those white cheeks, the security to the quivering mouth. This was the first favour she had ever asked at his hands, the first time she had thrown herself, as it were, on his mercy; and he must refuse her even the meagre boon she asked of him.

But Anstice was only mortal; and he could not refuse without giving her the true reason of his refusal, although he and Garnett had agreed that the undertaking of the night should be kept a secret lest the rest of the little party be rendered nervous and uncomfortable by his absence. The feelings of the other women were nothing to him, compared with those of the girl he still loved with all the strength of his soul and heart; and he could not have borne to let her think him callous, regardless of her fears, content to leave her to pass through what must be one of the darkest hours of her life alone.

Very gently he told her of the discovery Garnett and Hassan had made; with the subsequent unhappy certainty of a water famine; and Iris had been in Egypt long enough to know that in this desert waste of sun and sand the lack of water and its attendant evil, thirst, were the most fruitful sources of tragedy in the Egyptian land.

"You mean there is no water left?" She spoke very quietly, and he answered her in the same tone.

"No—at least barely a bottleful. The rest was used for making coffee for us all just now. And this remaining drop must be reserved for your husband, in case he calls for it. Besides, there is to-morrow——" He stopped short, with a tragic foreboding that there would be no morrow on earth for the man who lay dying beneath their eyes.

"Yes. As you say, there is to-morrow. And"—her voice was low—"I suppose there is no hope of rescue before to-morrow night at earliest?"

"I am afraid not before the following dawn." Somehow he could not lie to Iris. "And since we must have water it is plain one of us must go and get it."

"Go? Outside the Fort?" Her face blanched still further. "But it—would be madness to venture out—you would be seen—and shot—at once...."

"Ah, but you haven't heard the plan Garnett and I have evolved!" He spoke more lightly, though his voice was still low. "Listen, and tell me if you approve of our strategy!"

He rapidly outlined their plan of campaign, making as light of the perils of the undertaking as possible; and Iris listened breathlessly, her eyes on his face the while.

When he had finished she spoke very quietly.

"Dr. Anstice, I think it is a terribly reckless thing to attempt, and if I thought only of myself—or of you—I should beg you not to go. But as you say, there are the others—the child for one—and if help should be delayed the lack of water would be—serious."

"So you approve the plan?" He felt unreasonably glad that she did not altogether condemn the idea, since, as go he must, he would certainly go more happily with her approval.

"I shall be terribly anxious all the while," she said simply, "but you are a brave man. Dr. Anstice, and I do not believe God will let you suffer for your courage."

"Then I am to go? You will not mind being left alone?"

"No. I think—perhaps—I shall be a little—afraid—if Bruce dies while you are gone"—a shiver passed through her as she spoke the fatal words—"but I will try to be brave."

"Mrs. Wood will come and sit here with you," said Anstice quickly; but Iris shook her head.

"No, she is asleep just now, and I won't awaken her. You know she has been so anxious about poor little Molly to-day." The child had indeed been feverish and ailing of late. "But after all, we may be alarming ourselves unnecessarily, mayn't we? You—you're not *certain* that Bruce will die?"

And because he could not bear to see the terror in her face, hear the quiver of dread in her voice, Anstice lied at last.

"No—I may be wrong after all," he said. "In any case I am not going yet. I will stay here till the last possible moment. Look—his eyes are open—come and sit here, where he can see you without moving his head."

And as she obeyed without a word Anstice took up his own position opposite to her where he could watch every change in the grey face of the man who had once been his enemy, but was now only a fellow-creature in the grip of the mightiest enemy of all.

It was nearly ten o'clock before Anstice started on his perilous adventure.

Shortly before the time fixed for his departure little Molly Wood had been taken alarmingly ill, with severe pains in her head and a high temperature, and Anstice had spent an anxious hour beside her improvised bed before he had the satisfaction of seeing her sink into a quiet sleep beneath the remedies he employed, and when, leaving the distracted mother to watch her slumbers, he had crept into Cheniston's room, he had found Bruce still desperately ill, and Iris paler and yet more wan beneath the stress of the position in which she found herself.

It was only the imperative need of water which nerved Anstice to leave her alone, but he knew perfectly well that it would be impossible to procure any water in daylight, and though Mr. Wood would certainly have volunteered to make the attempt in his place, had he known the circumstances, Anstice had discovered, by a casual word let drop by his wife, that the clergyman suffered from a long-standing weakness of the heart which would have prevented him carrying through the project successfully.

Plainly he must be the one to go, for Hassan, whom they had been forced, through stress of circumstance, to take into their confidence, had absolutely refused to brave the perils of the journey and the dangling rope, and since he must be back at his post as soon after midnight as possible, Anstice steeled his heart and bade Iris good-bye with a stoical calm which did not deceive her in the least.

"Keep up your courage, Mrs. Cheniston." He laid his hand gently on her arm. "I'll be back in an hour or so—and in the meantime, if there should be any change, you will do exactly as I have told you." He had already given her full directions. "Remember, no one but Mr. Garnett and Hassan knows of my absence, so don't be surprised if I'm supposed to be asleep somewhere."

"No. But"—she put her own right hand over his as he gently clasped her arm—"you're sure there is no one but you to go? Is Mr. Wood too old?"

"No—but his heart is affected, and the climb would be dangerous. And Hassan, though he's behaved like a brick up to now, funks the climb." His tone was good-naturedly contemptuous. "As for Garnett, he's longing to go—can't quite forgive me for shoving him out—but his arm won't stand it; so plainly I am the one to go."

"Then go—and God be with you," she said very gently, and in her eyes Anstice saw once again the look of mingled strength and tenderness whose possibility he had divined long ago on the occasion of their first meeting on that sunlit morning on the steps of Cherry Orchard.

And with the words ringing in his ears he set forth upon his quest.

CHAPTER V

It was a perfect moonlight night, and as he swung himself out over the rocky precipice, which was surely more formidable at close quarters than it had appeared from above, Anstice was conscious of a sudden wild exhilaration which sent the blood coursing like quicksilver through his veins.

He knew very well that he was embarking upon a perilous adventure which might easily end in disaster, for he had no delusions on the subject of his probable fate did he fall into the hands of the vengeful Bedouins. But somehow, as he swung between earth and heaven, the rope slipping with almost uncomfortable rapidity through his fingers, he felt no fear, only a joyous thrill which strongly resembled the boyish glee with which, in his school-days, he had taken part in many midnight adventures strictly hidden from the notice of the authorities.

His former proficiency in gymnastics and his natural love of climbing stood him in good stead. He had never been addicted to nerves, had never known what it was to experience any vertigo or attacks of giddiness when exploring some dizzy height or negotiating some mountain ledge, and he swung down the rope which was his only support as coolly as though he were practising in a gymnasium, with no risk, did he fall, of being dashed to death against the unfriendly rocks below.

In an incredibly short space of time he reached the ground, and after giving three gentle tugs upon the rope—the preconceived signal that all was well with him—he looked cautiously round him to take his bearings before proceeding on his journey.

He stood now in a kind of rocky valley, ringed round with caves—whether tombs or not he could not pretend to judge—but beyond the valley lay the desert over which he must pass, and he lost no time in clambering over the rooks and setting foot on the firm brown sand without.

By the aid of his small compass he located the direction in which the well lay, and then, restoring it to his pocket and making certain that the goat-skin water-bottle was firmly slung over his shoulder, he set off at a brisk pace which should, if possible, shorten the time of his absence from the Fort by a few precious moments at least.

He had never before been alone in the desert at night, and the strangeness of it gripped him by

the throat as he strode steadily onwards. He could not believe, at first, that he was really alone. It seemed incredible that in all that huge expanse of sand he should be the only moving, living being, yet, though he knew that there *were* living creatures in the desert—jackals and other prowling things, and a whole host of bats and tiny insects—they gave no sign of their presence, and it seemed to him that he was the only live thing in a dead world....

Yet the air, as it blew gently round him, was soft and sweet. A group of palm trees rustled deliciously as he passed by; and above his head the big silver stars seemed to look down on him with a friendly, benignant gaze as though they knew and approved the errand which brought him out there, alone in the moonlit desert.

When once he had conquered the instinctive feeling of something like nervousness which made him look now and again half fearfully over his shoulder as he walked, he began to enjoy this uncommon pilgrimage.

His spirits rose, he felt a wild inclination to sing and shout with glee—an inclination hastily checked by the remembrance that after all the Bedouin village was not far away, though hidden for the moment by the merciful palm trees—and he told himself exultantly that the devilish revenge of the Bedouins who had poisoned the well in the courtyard of the Fort was only an empty menace after all.

Only when he thought of Bruce Cheniston, dying in that barely-furnished room, far away from any of the luxuries and ease-bringing contrivances with which civilization smooths the path of her children to the grave, did his leaping exultation die down in his heart, and he walked more soberly as he told himself that it was probable he would not see Bruce Cheniston alive again.

It was in the moment in which he realized this fact that another thought struck Anstice for the first time, and the sheer blinding radiance of that thought made him catch his breath and stand still in the desert, absolutely oblivious to any risks which he might run from Bedouins or other prowling marauders were he to be observed.

He had suddenly realized that were Cheniston to die Iris would once more be free—free to marry another man did she so desire; and the very idea of that freedom set his heart knocking against his ribs in a positive fury of wild and tumultuous feeling.

Never—he was thankful to remember it now—never had the thought so much as crossed his mind as he ministered to Cheniston, doing all in his power to defeat the grim foe who held the young man so firmly in his clutches. He had spared no pains, had given himself up body and soul to the task of saving Bruce Cheniston's life, were it possible for that life to be saved, and he was glad to know, looking back, that he had never for one second contemplated the possibility of any benefit accruing to himself through the other man's death. Even should he find, on his return, that Cheniston had indeed slipped into another world during his absence, he could always assure himself that he had not sullied the last strenuous hours in which he had fought for his patient's life with all his might by so much as one underhand or dishonourable thought.

And then, by a natural corollary, his thoughts reverted to Hilda Ryder; and for the first time since her death he began to feel that now, after all these years, he might surely be considered to have atoned for his too hasty carrying-out of the promise he had made her in that rose-coloured dawn of a bygone Indian morning.

Never had man regretted an impulsive deed more than he had regretted the thing which had been done that day. The years which had elapsed since then had been indeed years of penance—a penance more cruel and far more hard to bear than any penalty inflicted by man could possibly have been.

He had been a prisoner indeed, bound fast in the captivity of his own remorse; but now it seemed to him as though the long black night of his imprisonment were breaking, as though a light, as yet very far off and faint, showed upon some distant horizon with a promise of another and more radiant day which should surely dawn ere long.

Whence came this blessed lightening of his gloom? He could not say. Was it perhaps due to the fact that even now he was risking his life in the service of another woman—it is to be feared he forgot all but Iris in this strangely exalted moment—that to him her life had been confided by the father who adored her, and that to him and to him alone could she look for comfort and for help in the bitter hour which he foresaw was even now at hand for the girl who loved Bruce Cheniston—and must see him die....

And as his thoughts played, lightning-wise, round the figure of the beloved woman, his footsteps led him on, more and more blithely as his spirit rose, ph[oe]nix-like, above the ashes of his burnt-out tragedy, and in an incredibly short space of time he approached the well whence he might draw the precious water for lack of which the little garrison he had left must perish and die.

It was a peaceful spot, this well. Just such a place as that to which Rachel and the daughters of Jacob must, long ago, have come to fill their pitchers—a quiet, palm-guarded spot where doubtless, in days gone by, the village women had congregated in search of water and of news—the chattered gossip of the East, punctuated by the tinkling of native bangles as the beautifully-moulded arms raised the pitchers to the finely-carried heads.

The well was deserted now, but the water was as clear and pure as ever, and with a sigh of relief Anstice set about filling his goat-skin water-bottle, and then, anxious to lose no time, he retraced his steps over the moonlit desert without delay.

He marched blithely on and on, ever companioned by that new and thrice welcome sense of freedom which had come to him, as though at each step he took the fetters with which a great regret had for so long shackled his soul grew looser and less binding, until it seemed that they might presently fall off altogether, and allow him once more to face the world as a free man, and not the captive of a cruel and unjust fate.

He had reached the outskirts of the village before the necessity for caution reasserted itself; but just as he was passing, as softly as possible, the little group of palm trees which he had noted earlier, he caught a glimpse of a man prowling, as it seemed, round the trunks of those same trees; and in another second he knew that by an unlucky chance the man was between him and the only place in which he might have taken cover.

There was no time to be lost. At any moment the Bedouin might look up and see him—an unfortunately conspicuous figure in the moonlight; and although the Fort was not more than a quarter of a mile away, should it come to a race the odds might well be in favour of the desert-bred man.

True, he was armed—for in spite of his protests Garnett had insisted on him carrying one of the few revolvers owned by the little defending force; but he did not wish to fire, save in the last extremity, since a shot would certainly rouse the village and cut off his one chance of regaining the shelter of the Fort.

There was just a possibility that the man might not see him, so intent was he at the moment in his scrutiny of the village; and in a second Anstice had taken his resolve—a desperate resolve enough, but the only one he could formulate at the moment.

He began, instantly, to run, and so noiseless was his progress that no sound reached the ears of the prowling Bedouin; and had the native's other senses been less keen, it is possible Anstice would have escaped notice altogether.

Unfortunately the man turned himself about, and saw the flying figure, which stood out only too plainly in that empty expanse of moonlit sand; and after a second's hesitation, as though he could barely believe the evidence of his eyes, the native left his hiding-place and began to run with quick, loping gait after the fugitive, calling out something in a high, piercing voice as he ran.

In his college days Anstice had been somewhat of an athlete; and although he had long since relinquished any sporting ambitions which he might once have cherished, he had reason to bless his own turn of speed, which, being a natural and not an acquired gift, did not fail him now.

But never in his life had he run as he was running to-night. Apart from any consideration of his own personal safety he was running for the safety of others—of one in particular; for he knew only too well how pitifully small was the force which held the beleaguered Fort; and though in itself his life might be of little value, as a bulwark between Iris Cheniston and her enemies it had a value all its own; and must not be relinquished without a fierce and determined struggle.

On and on he ran, the blood drumming in his ears, the goat-skin pounding maddeningly about his shoulders. But even could he have brought himself to fling away the precious water for which he had cheerfully risked his life, he could not spare time to unfasten the skin slung across his back; and he raced swiftly onward, cursing the loose sand which now and again threatened to trip him up, not daring to look back until he had lessened the distance to the Fort by a considerable amount.

Then, casting a sharp glance over his shoulder, he saw that the Bedouin was gaining upon him, his long, tireless stride, which resembled that of a greyhound, swallowing the ground with little apparent effort; and Anstice's quick mind realized that, fine runner as he knew himself to be, he was outclassed by this native athlete.

"All right, Dorando," he muttered grimly, half-aloud, as he checked himself for a second in his race. "I can't outrun you, but I'm damned if I don't put a bullet through you all the same."

And pulling out his revolver he whisked about, so quickly that the other had no time to realize his intention; and taking definite aim at the man's thigh he fired once, twice—with satisfactory results, inasmuch as the other uttered a sharp cry, spun round once or twice and fell in a heap on the sand, incapable of further movement.

For a second Anstice paused, innate humanity forbidding him to leave the man alone in his agony; but the thought of Iris drove away such weakness, and realizing that the noise of the shots must incite his foes to immediate investigation, he hastily restored his revolver to its place and ran, faster than ever, in the direction of the Fort.

Suddenly the air behind him was rent with shrill clamour, and he knew the village was aroused at last; but he cared little now, for he was close to his desired haven; and a last spurt over the rocks at the entrance to the valley landed him, spent and breathless, at the foot of the Fort, beneath the

window from which dangled the precious rope which should carry him to safety.

Regardless now of precaution, he lifted such voice as remained to him in a would-be lusty hail; and as an answering shout came from above he wasted no further time, but seized the rope and began—painfully now, for he was exhausted—to haul himself slowly up, cheered on by Garnett's hearty congratulations from above.

"By Jove, that was a close call!" Once safely inside the building, the dangling rope pulled through the window after him, Anstice collapsed on the rough stone floor and mopped his brow feebly.

"I should say so!" The resourceful Australian had already produced a tiny flask of brandy. "Here, take a pull at this, and you'll feel better in a second. And when you've recovered, if you'll explain the meaning of the shooting-match, I'll be thankful to you."

Between his gasps Anstice described the chase and its subsequent ending; and Garnett's eyes shone with an unholy lust for battle as he listened.

"Good on you!" He clapped the other man on the shoulder with a heartiness which was almost painful. "Well, we'll have the hornet's nest about our ears in no time now; but at least we've got you back safe and sound, and with a bit of luck we'll hold out grandly till the reinforcements come!"

"How is Cheniston?" Anstice rose as he spoke and slipped the goat-skin from off his shoulders. "Anything happened since I've been away?"

"Not that I know of—but I believe he was pretty bad a while ago." Garnett's face clouded. "Jolly rough luck on his wife, isn't it? She's so young, and so plucky, and I see you expect the poor chap to peg out."

"I think I'll go and see him," said Anstice slowly, the exhilaration dying from his manner; and as Garnett pulled aside the rough curtain which covered the doorway he stepped on to the uneven stone floor without.

And then he came to a pause; for Iris was coming towards him; and her face wore a curiously stricken look which made his heart miss a beat.

"Mrs. Cheniston—you want me? Is your husband worse?"

For a moment she did not reply. Then:

"He is dead, Dr. Anstice," she said quietly. "He died ten minutes ago—just after I heard those two shots——"

"Dead?" Although he had half expected the news, Anstice found it hard to believe. "Mrs. Cheniston, are you *sure*? May I come and see? You might—possibly—be mistaken."

"I am not mistaken," she said, and for a second a pitiful little smile touched her white lips. "Bruce is dead—but come and see for yourself. I ... I am glad you are safely back, Dr. Anstice."

"Thank you," he said quietly; and then without more ado they moved side by side towards the room in which Bruce Cheniston had yielded up his life.

Mrs. Wood rose from her seat as they entered, and glided softly away, beckoning to her husband, who stood by the window, to join her; and when they were alone Anstice and the girl so lately widowed moved forward until they stood beside the bed on which Bruce Cheniston lay in all the white majesty of Death.

A very brief examination satisfied Anstice that Iris had not been mistaken. Cheniston was dead; and as he stood looking down on the quiet face, which, by virtue of Death's magic alchemy, had regained in the last hour something of its former youth, Anstice knew a sincere and unfeigned pity for the young life so ruthlessly cut short by a cruel disease.

"Yes, Mrs. Cheniston." He covered the dead white face gently. "I am sorry to say you are right. Were you with him when he died?"

"Yes. We were alone," she said, and again that oddly stricken look made his heart yearn pitifully over her.

"He was conscious before the end?"

"I—I think so—at least, partly." Her tone was indefinable, desolation and a strange, half-hurt wonder sounding in its low note. "He did not speak much—only a few words—at the end I don't think he knew me...."

"I am sorry you were left alone," he said, and he ventured to lay his hand for a second gently on her arm. "I wish I could have been back earlier. I am afraid it has been a shock to you."

"Death is always a shock," she said quietly, and again a wintry little smile touched her lips. "But—don't think me unkind, Dr. Anstice—I am glad I was alone with him—at the end."

In spite of himself a great amazement shook him at her words. Although her meaning was a

mystery to him, there was no doubt she had spoken in perfect sincerity; and in the midst of his inward turmoil Anstice found time to wonder exactly what she meant by this curious speech. Somehow he could not help connecting the odd look which her face still held with the strange words she had used; and he wondered what had been the manner of Cheniston's passing.

"Mrs. Cheniston"—Iris started as his voice fell on her ears—"you will come away—now? There is nothing for you to do here. And you should try to sleep——"

"Sleep?" She glanced up at him with an indescribably dreary look in her eyes. "I could not sleep, Dr. Anstice. If you will let me stay with you"—her voice shook a little—"I should be glad. I—I don't want to be alone—just yet."

"Of course you don't." He spoke promptly. "And you shall certainly stay with me, if you will. But—will it trouble you to make me a cup of coffee, Mrs. Cheniston? I'm awfully sorry to bother you, but I've had nothing to eat for some time——"

At another moment she might have seen through his subterfuge; but now, her wits dulled, her mind clouded by the scene through which she had lately passed, she accepted his petition as genuine.

"Of course I will get you some coffee—at once." She moved towards the door as she spoke. "I—I am so sorry I did not think of it before."

When she had gone he went quickly in search of Garnett, and explained what service he required of the stalwart Australian.

"Of course—we'll carry him, bed and all, into another room," said Garnett readily. "That window must be guarded, and we can't ask the poor girl to enter the room with her husband lying dead there. Let's hustle, while she's busy—the little room 'way across there will do."

Accordingly when Iris re-entered the room, rather shrinkingly, to acquaint Anstice with the fact that a meal awaited him, she found an empty space where the bed had stood; and although her eyes widened she said nothing on the subject—an omission for which Anstice was thankful, for the night's work had been a strain on him also; and he was in no humour for further discussion at the moment.

He found the rest of the little garrison even more subdued than usual. The death of one of their number had naturally cast a general gloom; and when he had made a pretence of despatching his supper Anstice easily persuaded Mrs. Wood to take a few hours' rest by the side of her little girl, who was now, fortunately, well on the way to recovery from her sudden illness.

The incapable Rosa was also dismissed to seek what slumber was possible; and then the four men took up their positions as before—Mr. Wood and Garnett keeping watch from the window of the room in which Cheniston had died, while Anstice and Hassan stationed themselves at the second window; Iris leaning against the wall, very pale, but apparently quite composed, on a pile of rugs which Anstice had arranged for her well out of range of a possible stray shot.

She had promised him to try to rest; but as the hours of the short night wore away and the critical moment of dawn approached, he knew that although she sat in silence with closed eyes she did not sleep; and again he wondered, vainly, insistently, what had passed between husband and wife before Death cut short their mutual life.

He felt he would have given much to know what reason Iris had to be thankful that she and her husband had been alone in the hour of his death; and although he had no intention of pursuing the subject he could not quite stifle his curiosity as to her meaning.

But Sir Richard Wayne's daughter was the soul of loyalty; and although a day was to come in which she and Anstice had few secrets from one another, he was destined never to know that Bruce Cheniston had died with Hilda Ryder's name upon his lips.

And so the short night passed; and with the dawn the long-expected attack came at last.

CHAPTER VI

"Dr. Anstice"—Iris' voice was very low—"shall I disturb you if I come and sit beside you for a little while? I—I feel rather—lonely—sitting over there."

Anstice had turned round sharply as she began to speak and his heart yearned over her pitifully as he noted the pallor of her cheeks, the forlorn look in her grey eyes.

"Of course you won't disturb me." He dared not speak so emphatically as he wished. "I shall be only too glad if you will come and sit here"—he arranged the pile of rugs by him as he spoke

—"only, if danger arises, you will keep out of harm's way, won't you?"

"Yes." She said no more for a moment; but her assent satisfied him, and he turned back to the window with a sudden feeling of joy at her proximity which would not be repressed.

Presently he heard her low voice once more.

"Dr. Anstice, when you told me your story—long ago—why didn't you tell me the name of the man to whom that poor girl was engaged? Didn't you want me to know she was to have married—Bruce?" Her voice sank on the last word.

For an instant Anstice kept silence, uncertain how to answer her. Then, seeing she was waiting for his reply, he made an effort and spoke.

"Mrs. Cheniston, to be honest, I don't know why I did not tell you. But"—he seized the opportunity for a question on his own account—"will you tell me how you know, now? Did—did your husband tell you?"

"No." Her eyes met his frankly and he knew she was speaking the truth. "I learned the fact for certain by accident three days ago, when Bruce was delirious. Of course I had wondered—sometimes"—said Iris honestly—"but I never liked to ask. And after all it made no difference."

"No." He sighed. "It made no difference. But I am glad you know—now."

Again a silence fell between them; and then a sudden impulse drove Anstice into speech.

"Mrs. Cheniston," he said, very quietly, "may I tell you something else—something I have long wanted you to know?"

Startled, she assented; and he continued slowly.

"You remember that night—the night before your wedding day"—he saw her wince, and went on more quickly—"the night, I mean, when Cherry Carstairs set herself on fire and you came for me to my house——"

"Yes." Her eyes were sad. "I remember. I don't think I shall ever be able to forget that night."

"Ah, don't say that!" His voice was eager. "Mrs. Cheniston, don't, please, believe I gave in without a struggle. I didn't. God knows I fought the horrible thing—for your sake, because you had been good enough, kind enough—to ask me to give up trying that way out. I did try. Oh, I know you can hardly believe me—you who saw me in the very hour of my failure—but it's true. Although I gave in at the last, beaten by the twin enemies of bodily pain and mental suffering——"

"You were—in pain—that day?"

"Yes. I had endured torture—oh, I don't want to excuse myself, but please understand I was really ill, really suffering, and morphia, as you know, does bring a blessed relief. And I was wretched, too—it seemed to me that life was over for me that day——"

He stopped short, biting his lips at his self-betrayal; but Iris' grey eyes did not turn away from his face.

"And so, thinking I could endure no more agony of body and mind, I had recourse to the one relief I knew; but before God, if I had known that you would be a witness to my failure——"

"Dr. Anstice"—the gentleness in her voice fell like balm upon his sore spirit—"please don't say any more. We are only human, you and I; and one failure does not minimize a long-continued success."

"You mean——"

"I mean that I know—I can't tell you how, but I *do* know it—you have never again tried that way out of your troubles. I think," said Iris, "you have found the *real* way out—at last."

Her words perplexed, even while they relieved him; and he sought the meaning of them.

"The *real* way, Mrs. Cheniston? I wonder what you mean by that?"

"I mean," she said very softly, "you must have found the way out of your own troubles by the very act of pointing out the way to others. You have brought Chloe Carstairs back to life—oh, I know it was through you that the mystery was cleared up at last—and that alone must make you feel that whatever mistake you may once have made you have atoned for it a hundredfold. And"—for an instant Iris' voice shook—"what are you doing now but atoning for that mistake—if further atonement were necessary?"

"You mean——"

"I mean that you are here, waiting for the Bedouins to attack us at any moment, waiting to fight for us women, ready, if need be, to die on our behalf." The words fell very softly on the quiet air. "And though I pray that God will send us help so that no life may be sacrificed I know"—Iris' eyes shone, and her voice rang suddenly like a clarion call—"I know that I—that we are safer with you than with any other man in the world...."

Carried away by her trust in him Anstice turned to her impulsively.

"Mrs. Cheniston, I can't thank you enough for those words. God knows I would willingly, gladly die to shield you from any harm; and if help should not come in time, and I should lose my life, well, please believe two things—firstly, that since that dreadful night I have never—failed—in that way again; and secondly, that to die in your service"—so much he might surely say in this poignant hour—"would be a death which any man might envy me."

She did not reply in words; but her eyes answered for her and for a moment there was silence between them. Then, as though half afraid he might have angered her by his last impetuous speech, Anstice spoke abruptly in another tone.

"Odd, isn't it, how an action carried through in a moment may have such tremendous consequences? I mean if I had stayed my hand long ago in that Indian hut you and I would not be here now, faced with this rather—difficult—situation. It makes one realize that one should never act too hastily—without looking all round the subject, so to speak."

"Yes. And yet—sometimes—if one stopped to think of the consequences one would be afraid to act, and let the vital moment slip," she said rather dreamily. "Of course there is always the afterwards——"

"Do you know of what that reminds me?" He spoke quickly. "Once, long ago when I was a student, I picked up a book of old plays at a bookstall in the Charing Cross Road. And in one of the plays I came across this sentence: 'The deed itself may be the work of a moment; but there is always the long, long *afterwards* with which to reckon.'"

His voice died away; but she said nothing, though her eyes betokened her interest; and presently he resumed.

"Well, that sentence has haunted me pretty frequently of late—it has run through the years like the saying of some avenging angel. I have known what the reckoning with the *afterwards* may be—sometimes, indeed, I have feared that reckoning will never be paid."

"Dr. Anstice," she said quietly, "you are wrong. The reckoning *is* paid; the atonement *is* made; and I am quite sure that the future—for you—will be rid for ever of the haunting shadow of the past. And"—her cheeks blanched suddenly as a clamour arose in the courtyard outside—"I think the future is beginning—with trouble and danger—now."

"I believe you are right." Turning impetuously to the window, which for a moment he had neglected, he found Hassan, his eyeballs rolling horribly in his dusky face, leaning out excitedly; and as he too craned into the lifting darkness Anstice saw that the moment of attack was at hand.

Without warning save that given by their exultant shouts the Bedouins were swarming over the wall, clambering over like great cats, dropping with sundry thuds on to the sandy ground beneath; and in another moment Anstice saw that they carried roughly fashioned scaling ladders, with which they evidently intended to force an entrance, should that be possible in the face of the defenders' fire.

"See here, Mrs. Cheniston." Anstice spoke almost curtly. "Will you go into the other room now? You are safer there, and out of harm's way for the time, at least."

"No, Dr. Anstice." She spoke determinedly. "I am going to stay here. You have spare revolvers, haven't you? Then I can load for you and for Hassan, at any rate, even if I can't be of other use."

"You know how?" He was surprised.

"Yes. My father taught me long ago. And"—for a second her voice faltered—"I—I feel safer here. Please let me stay."

"Very well." He could not bear to send her away. "But you must promise to keep as far as possible out of range. We can't afford any casualties, you know."

"I promise," she said very quietly; and he knew she would obey his injunctions implicitly.

The next moment Garnett rushed into the room, his blue eyes alight with a most warrior-like flame.

"See what's up, Anstice? Good—I guessed you'd not be caught napping. I'll get back now—there's going to be a gorgeous scrap in a minute. Mrs. Cheniston, are you all right there?"

"Quite, thanks." Her calm voice reassured him; and he dashed out of the room without further parley, while Anstice and Hassan waited, tensely, their revolvers in readiness, for the moment to open their defence.

It was not yet day; and in the grey gloom it was difficult to distinguish the nature of any object which was not close at hand; but Anstice made out that the approaching Bedouins intended to scramble up to the windows by use of their scaling ladders; and his face wore an unusually grim expression as the flying moments passed.

Ah! The first tribesman to reach the level of the window gave an exultant yell, as though he saw his foe already within his grasp; and on that shout of triumph his desert-born soul was sped to whatever haven awaited it. For Anstice's revolver had spoken; and the swarthy Bedouin fell headlong to the earth, shot, unerringly, through the heart.

Anstice heard Iris give a faint gasp at his side; but now his blood was up and he had no time to reassure even the one beloved woman. Something strange, unexpected, had happened to him. Suddenly he too was primitive man, even as these desert men were magnificently primitive. Gone was all the veneer of civilization, the humanity which bids a man respect a fellow-creature's life. He was no longer the educated, travelled man of the world, who earned his living in honourable and decorous ways. He was the cave-dweller, the man of another and more barbaric age, who defended his stronghold because it held his woman, the woman for whom he would fight to the very end, and count his life well spent if it were yielded up in her service. But he did not mean to die. He meant to live—and since that implied the death of these savages who clamoured without, then let red death stalk between them, and decide to whom he would award the blood-dripping sword of the victor.

Another fierce face at the window—a pair of hawk-like eyes flashing haughty challenge, a sinewy hand raising a revolver in deliberate aim—and Hassan's shot rang out, so swiftly that this man too fell back, disabled, his face disappearing from the window as one runs a film off a reel of pictures.

But there were others—many others—to take his place. Up and up they came till there was a whole phalanx of enemy faces, eyes flashing, white teeth gleaming in horrid snarls ... shot after shot rang out, but by marvellous luck none touched the defenders, who on their side emptied their revolvers as fast as Iris' fingers could make them ready.

Suddenly a gigantic man half sprang over the sill and without attempting to fire seized Anstice by the wrist in a grip of iron, whose marks disfigured him for weeks to come. His intention was obvious—by holding Anstice a prisoner he hoped to make opportunity for others to force an entrance; and as Anstice had involuntarily dropped the revolver as the steel-like fingers crushed his wrist, the fate of the little garrison hung, for a second, in the balance.

"Iris—shoot—quick!" Quite unconscious of the name he used Anstice raised his voice in a desperate shout; and the girl heard and obeyed in the same breath.

Lifting the revolver she had just loaded she fired once, twice, with fingers which did not even tremble; and the next moment with a loud gurgle the Bedouin released his hold and fell back through the window, dislodging the men who were clambering up the ladder behind him, so that they fell together in a confused mass into the courtyard below.

For a second there was a breathing-space; and Anstice turned to Iris with gleaming eyes.

"My God, you have a nerve!" His breath was coming in quick pants. "Mrs. Cheniston, I can't thank you—I never dreamed that even you would be so plucky."

"It wasn't pluck—it was just—obedience," she said, and though her face was very pale she smiled bravely up at him. "Dr. Anstice, are there—many more to come? You have disabled a good many, haven't you?"

"Between us, yes." He was cool again now, and picked up his revolver as he spoke. "They seem to be hanging back a bit—and to judge by the row Garnett's making I should say he's doing pretty well too."

Bang! A bullet whizzed suddenly by Iris' head; and Anstice pulled her hastily into a safer place.

"Here they come back again!" His tone was almost boyishly gleeful. "Well, we're ready for 'em—eh, Hassan?"

The Arab, who was firing as steadily as though at a pigeon-shooting match, nodded, his white teeth flashing out in a merry grin; and as the Bedouins, taking heart, recommenced their attack, the two men, native and Englishman, turned back to their task with renewed vigour.

Neither Iris nor Anstice ever had a very clear recollection of the next ten minutes. It was an inferno, a babel, a confusion of shots and yells and angry clamour; but beyond a slight, flesh wound sustained by Hassan neither of the defenders sustained any casualties; and had their ammunition been as plentiful as their courage was high there would have been no doubt as to the ultimate issue.

Suddenly Anstice turned to Iris with a question on his lips; and her face paled as she replied:

"Not much, now. I think—only enough for three more rounds." She spoke steadily.

"I see. And then——" He broke off, handing her the empty revolver he held.

"And then?" She breathed the question softly; but there was no fear in her face.

"And then—I am not quite clear what happens then." He looked at her more searchingly. "Mrs. Cheniston, what do you say—then? I'm ready, as you know, to die for you, but"—he paused, then resumed in a rather hoarse tone—"if I die what will become of you? I suppose"—he faltered, and his lips were dry, but some inward impulse drove him on—"I suppose you would not wish me to—save—a last cartridge...."

"For me?" Her smile, as she faced him, was splendid. "No, Dr. Anstice, I'm not afraid to die, if I must, at the hands of our enemies. But I will not accept death—from *you*."

He knew—irrevocably—what she meant. She was determined at least to spare him a recurrence

of the tragedy which had ruined so many of what should have been the best years of his life; and although he knew he could have faced even that risk courageously in her service, none the less did he rejoice that he was not called upon to do this thing a second time.

"Then—if the worst should happen—if we are not relieved in time——"

"We can all die—together," she said very simply; and in her face he read something which, told him that for all her youth this girl would know how to die.

But further speech was suddenly cut short The Bedouins, who had been hanging back for a moment's parley, had evidently rallied their forces for another effort; for with a yell destined to strike terror into the hearts of their foes they literally swarmed up the ladder until the whole window-space was filled with a horrid nightmare of bearded, swarthy faces, of sinewy, grasping hands, of tossing spears and flourished fire-arms.

Suddenly, with an exclamation of pain, Hassan dropped his revolver and clapped his hand to his side; and Anstice felt, with a wild thrill of dismay in all his veins, that the fight was practically over for them now. The odds were too great—one well-directed bullet and he too would be disabled, powerless to protect the girl for whose sake he longed so ardently to win the day.

"My God, Iris, we're beaten!" Even as he spoke he was firing into the midst of the mass of packed faces at the window; and he heard her words, spoken in a passionate whisper as one hears strange, whispered sentences in a dream:

"No—no!" Iris had been listening to another sound—the sound of hope, of renewed life—and now, in the moment of his discouragement, she whispered the glorious truth. "Listen—they're here—the men have come in time—oh, don't you hear them shouting to us to hold on—for a minute——"

The next moment a wild cry from Hassan rent the air; and as the crowd of fierce faces seemed, suddenly, to recede as a wave washes backwards on the shore, Anstice knew, with a great uplifting of his spirit, that help had indeed come—miraculously—in time to save the day....

Answering shouts from the desert, the drumming of horses' hoofs, the clamour of voices upraised in cries of encouragement—these were the sounds which Anstice, almost unbelieving, heard at last; and as the desert men began to retreat, tumbling over themselves and each other in their haste to flee before this new enemy was upon them, Anstice turned to Iris with a laugh of purest happiness.

"They have come—you're safe now, thank God!"

"We're all safe, thanks to you," she answered him with shining eyes; and as he threw his empty revolver aside she held out both her hands to him and he clasped them joyfully.

"They have come—and so soon! I never dared to hope they would be here before to-night at earliest!"

"Nor I—but they are here!" He released her hands and turned to greet the rest of the little garrison, who, having heard the clamour, had realized they were saved, and came pouring in to hear the story of the night's encounter.

At the same moment a fierce hubbub arose in the courtyard as the Bedouins realized that they were verily in a trap. Some of them, gathering their robes about them in undignified haste, managed to scramble over the wall in the confusion and so make good their escape, for the time at least; but the majority were neatly cornered; and though they fought magnificently, as was their wont, they realized only too soon that they were outnumbered; and in a comparatively short space of time the fight was over.

Just as the rising sun flooded the desert with superb pink brilliance the whole party, rescuers and besieged, met in the courtyard.

Both Anstice and Garnett had been in the thick of the last affray; and the soldier who was apparently in command of the expedition took advantage of the breathing-space to congratulate the defenders on the splendid defiance they had offered to their foes.

"We heard the row quite a long way off," he said, "and hurried for all we were worth, thinking we'd be too late if we didn't hustle. But from the vigour of your defence it seems to me we might have taken it easy."

"Good job for us you didn't," returned Anstice rather grimly. "We'd got down to our last round—another five minutes and we'd have been wiped out."

"Whew!" The other man whistled. "Pretty close call, what? Lucky for you we *did* hustle, I see."

"Yes—but can you explain how it is you're here so soon? We hadn't dared to look for you till to-night or to-morrow morning."

"Oh, that's easily explained. We fell in with your messenger—Sir Richard Wayne, isn't it?—on our way back to Cairo. We were returning from a little punitive expedition"—he smiled pleasantly—"and were only too glad to set out on another jaunt. We get fed-up lounging about barracks, and these affairs come as quite a God-send in the wilderness."

"By the way, where is Sir Richard?" Anstice had been scanning the company, but could catch no glimpse of his friend. "His daughter, Mrs. Cheniston, is here, you know, and she will be anxious——"

"Ah, yes—I have a message for her. Is she here—can you take me to her?"

"She is here," said Anstice quietly, as Iris, hearing her name, approached. "Mrs. Cheniston, this gentleman has a message for you—from your father——"

"I'm Lane—Captain Lane, Mrs. Cheniston." He saluted her hastily. "And your father asked me to tell you he was quite well, only a little tired with his double journey. He wanted very much to return with us, but he really was not fit to turn back immediately; and knowing how a lame duck"—he coughed and looked suddenly embarrassed—"I mean—how one man may delay a squadron, so to speak, he very sensibly agreed to stay at our camp for a few hours' rest. We shall pick him up as we go back," he added, and Iris smiled rather wearily as she answered:

"Thank you very much, Captain Lane. You are *sure* my father is all right?"

"Certain—only a bit fagged, and no wonder, for he'd ridden hard. Ah—and he told me to say you were to ask Dr. Anston—Anstice, is it?—to help you in any matter in which you wanted a little help."

"I will certainly do that," said Iris quietly; and as the other men pressed round the little group, eagerly questioning the defenders of the besieged Fort, Iris slipped away from the excited crowd so unobtrusively that no eyes save those of Anstice witnessed her departure.

Three minutes later Anstice, leaving the rest planning the return journey over the desert, went quietly in search of Iris.

He found her, as he had half expected, standing by the window of the room in which Bruce Cheniston had died; and in her eyes was a forlorn look which showed him the measure of her desolation in this sunrise hour.

Quietly as he had entered she had heard him come, and turned to face him with a rather tremulous smile.

"Mrs. Cheniston, I came to look for you." He approached as he spoke; and in spite of herself she felt comforted by the mere fact of his presence. "You are not worrying because your father very wisely let those fellows come on ahead of him?"

"N-no," she said, with a queer little catch in her breath. "Only—I had so wanted—so hoped—to see my father—*soon*."

"I know," he said quietly, "and you *will* see him—very soon. We shall start this afternoon, when the horses are rested; and then it will not be many hours before you and your father meet again."

"Yes." She looked at him with something of appeal in her eyes. "Dr. Anstice, my father said you would help me ... you will, won't you? You know," said Iris simply, "you are the only person I can turn to—now."

More moved by her words than he cared to show, Anstice answered her, not impetuously, but with something in his manner which would have inspired confidence in any woman.

"Mrs. Cheniston, I will do all I can—and God knows I am grateful to Him for allowing me the chance of helping you—now. If you will trust yourself to me I will not relinquish my trust until I give you safely into your father's keeping. You *will* trust me?"

"Yes, Dr. Anstice." She held out her hands to him as she spoke in token of sincerity. "I would trust you—to the end of the world!"

And as he took her hands in his and vowed himself afresh to her service Anstice knew, with a great lightening of his spirit, that during the night march over the desert, that which he had almost dared to hope might happen, had indeed come to pass; that the chains with which his own action had shackled his soul had fallen from him for ever, and that full atonement for Hilda Ryder's death had been made at last.

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