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PETER AND JANE

OR THE MISSING HEIR

BY

S. MACNAUGHTAN

[Transcriber's note: Macnaughtan's given name is "Sarah".]

**AUTHOR OF
'THE FORTUNE OF CHRISTINA M'NAB'**

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TO
CATHERINE

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PETER AND JANE

CHAPTER I

Mrs. Ogilvie, red-haired according to the exact shade then in fashion, and dressed by Paquin, sat in her drawing-room reading the *Court Journal*. She was a woman who thought on the lines of Aristotle, despised most other women except Charlotte Corday, Judith, Joan of Arc, and a few more, and she dyed her hair and read the *Court Journal*. People who did not know her sometimes alluded to her as an overdressed woman with a wig. Those who had met her even but once admitted the power of her personality. Perhaps if any one had known her very well he or she would have been bewildered by the many-sided complexities of her character, and would have failed to discover any sort of unity behind its surprising differences. But then, as a matter of fact, no one did know her well.

Those who cared to remember such an old story used to tell how, as a girl of eighteen, she had been deeply in love with a cousin of hers, Greville Monsen by name, and how almost on the eve of her marriage she had thrown him over and had married Colonel Ogilvie the explorer, a man twenty years older than herself, with an enormous fortune, and accounted something of a hero at the time.

Colonel Ogilvie married late in life, and his brother's wife had long ago decided that it would

be better if he should never marry at all. Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie was an ambitious woman with a fine family of sons and daughters to whom Colonel Ogilvie's large estates and immense fortune would have been wholly appropriate. She had always been civil to her brother-in-law, although the estates and the money were entailed upon his brother, and she weighed in the balance the disinterested affection which she showed him against her feeling of satisfaction in the fact that he was a daring and indefatigable traveller; one, moreover, who was seldom quite happy unless he was in danger, and who never thoroughly enjoyed a journey if any other white man had trodden the ground before he himself visited it.

Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie was indignant at the news of Colonel Ogilvie's marriage. Being a very wise woman she would probably in time have controlled her temper, and by a little judicious management she might have secured a considerable fortune for herself and her children. But, alas! there was a necessity within her of exploding to some one when, as in this instance, her heart was hot and her head not quite cool. And so, with some sense of justice, venting her spleen upon the cause of it, Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie said certain very unwise and unkind things about her brother-in-law's fiancée and her cousin, Greville Monsen. Of course the heated and uncontrolled words of the disappointed woman were repeated, and there was a terrible and stormy interview between the two brothers, who parted that same day and never spoke to each other again.

Mrs. Francis Ogilvie bore the character of being a cold and dispassionate woman. And this was the more remarkable because on the distaff-side she was of Spanish descent, and might reasonably have been supposed to have inherited the instincts of that passionate and hot-tempered nation. She never quarrelled as the brothers had done, but her eyes narrowed for an instant with a trick that was characteristic of her when she heard Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie's tale. And when, in the quieter moments that followed her husband's outburst of anger, he asked her with a tone of question in his voice whether Lionel and that odious wife of his could possibly expect to be forgiven, Mrs. Ogilvie raised her eyebrows and said simply, 'I do not know what forgiveness means.' She paid no attention to the vulgar gossip which her sister-in-law tried to attach to her name, and Greville Monsen had either got over his disappointment, or was sufficiently attached to his former fiancée to forgive her her treatment of him. He came to the house on terms of intimate friendship, and continued to do so even after Mrs. Lionel Ogilvie's busy tongue had spoken.

Mrs. Ogilvie was not affected by gossip, nor moved by public opinion. To have altered her conduct, even by a hair's-breadth, because it was not generally approved would have seemed to her an absurdity; but those who offended her were not given the opportunity of doing so twice. To have had small quarrels followed by reconciliations would have been impossible to her. Very few things were worth quarrelling about at all, still fewer worth forgiving! Mrs. Ogilvie was cynically indifferent to transgressions against herself; but when she sat in judgment she always gave a life-sentence.

When Lionel died the feud between the brothers would probably have been forgotten had it not been for the lamentable fact that his eldest son, who had grown up into a faithful likeness of his worldly and commonplace mother, took it into his head at the time of his father's death to write to his uncle in a way which showed as much greed as ill-breeding. The foolish young man's letter might have been put into the fire and forgotten, for Colonel Ogilvie had loved his brother long ago, and his death affected him deeply; but young Lionel made a mistake when he referred to the fact that Colonel and Mrs. Ogilvie were childless, and alluded to his own prospects. This put an end for ever to all friendly intercourse between the uncle and nephew; Mrs. Ogilvie, on her part, lifted her eyebrows again and said, 'The commercial mind is very droll!' But just for one moment she locked her hands together with an impulsive movement that had a whole life's tragedy and disappointment in it.

It meant all the world to her and her husband that they should have children. But Fate, who had prospered them in every other respect, had denied them what they most desired. A son and heir, who was born a year after the marriage, had died the same day. Two years later a little girl was born who lived a few weeks, and then she also died. Since then there had been no children. Many women would have claimed sympathy for their sorrow, most women would at least have accepted it. Mrs. Ogilvie, with her health somewhat impaired, came back to the world and assumed her place in it without any expressions of regret for her disappointment. Probably not even her husband knew whether she felt her loss deeply or not. No one else was ever permitted to speak of it. Colonel Ogilvie's own disappointment was never expressed. He had too much tenderness for his wife to say anything about it.

'If ever I am to be a mother again,' Mrs. Ogilvie said once, 'my child shall be born out of reach of kind inquiries or deep sympathy. If he lives, let those rejoice with me who will. But pity is always offensive, and is generally meant to be so.'

As the years came and went Colonel Ogilvie lost interest in his property, and handed over the care of the greater part of it to agents and stewards, and came very near to hating the lands which some day would go to his nephew. A queer restlessness was upon him, and his wife watched him and said nothing; until one day, seeing him reading a certain paragraph in a newspaper, she said to him, smiling slightly, as they stood together on the broad stone terrace at Bowshott, 'Why don't you go with them on this exploring expedition?'

Colonel Ogilvie protested. He was a married man, he said, and his travelling days were over.

It is probable, however, that never was a suggestion more welcome. The past years, in spite of his deep love for his wife, had been full of fret and shadowed by disappointment, and he longed, with a traveller's intensity of longing, for the wild untroubled places of the world, the primitive life, and if possible some dangers on the road. An exploring party sent out by the British Government to discover a lost missionary and to punish a warlike tribe was exactly the thing to suit his adventurous disposition. In spirit he was already in the dangerous places of Central Africa, far from human habitation, and with very often his own right hand the sole thing between him and a barbarous death. Even while he protested with conscientious emphasis against his wife's proposal, he already saw the dim forests of Africa, the line of bearers on the difficult march, the tents struck at nightfall, and all the paraphernalia of an interesting campaign.

He was away for eighteen months, beyond the reach of letters and telegrams for the greater part of the time; and during his absence Mrs. Ogilvie, whose health for some months had been feeble, went to her native land of Spain for warmth and sunshine, travelling by sea to Lisbon for the sake of the voyage. From her Spanish mother she had inherited a property at Granada, and it was from there that she was able to write and tell her husband that she was the mother of a son. Colonel Ogilvie was in an inaccessible region when that event happened, and it was not until he was on his return journey home that he heard the good news. Two years later another child, Peter, was born; and, ardently as her firstborn had been desired, Mrs. Ogilvie showered by far the greater part of her affection upon the younger child. Everything had to give way to Peter, and she resented that even such baby privileges as a child of tender years can receive were bestowed upon the elder son and heir. Her health gave cause for anxiety for some time after Peter was born, and her mental state and the condition of her nerves accounted for the partiality which she showed for her younger child.

The colonel, however, was always a little jealous for the fair-haired boy who had come to his mother while he was far away; and by his will, which he made at this time, he secured an almost extravagant provision for Edward. He could well-nigh forgive his nephews now for their obtrusive existence in the world, and he settled down to enjoy his property with the happy knowledge that he had two fine sturdy boys to whom to leave it. He was still in the prime of life, and not all the dangers and privations which he had suffered seemed to have undermined his splendid constitution. But a drive home in an open dogcart, after; speaking in an overheated hall at a political meeting, brought on a chill and pneumonia of which very suddenly he died. His loss was sincerely and deeply regretted in a neighbourhood where he was both admired and loved for his many good qualities, and a monument in Culversham parish church tells of his excellence as a landlord and his intrepid courage as an explorer.

Mrs. Ogilvie's health being still precarious, she went abroad for the winter after her husband's death to look into some matters concerning her own property, and to try to court health in the sunny vine-growing country. And there, in a little remote Spanish village by the sea which she loved to visit, little Edward Ogilvie, the elder of the two children, died; and not until six years later did Mrs. Ogilvie return to England. To all outward seeming she was as emotionless and reserved as she had ever been, and she spoke no word of her double sorrow and her irreparable loss. Her love for her remaining child never showed itself in caresses, and was not even discernible in her speech; but in spite of her reserve there was an undefined feeling in most people's minds that Mrs. Ogilvie idolized her son. Of the two who were dead no one ever heard her speak. Whatever she thought of them seemed to be buried in her heart as deeply as though that heart had been their graves. And there remained only cheery, popular Peter Ogilvie, with his mind as open as the day, and not a secret upon his soul, and with as much reserve as a schoolboy, to inherit the fortune which a prince might have envied, and a property which was unique in a county rich in beautiful houses.

The gardens of Bowshott were the admiration of the countryside, and Mrs. Ogilvie rarely entered them. The picture gallery was visited by foreigners from every part of the world. Mrs. Ogilvie frequently showed the works of the great masters herself, strolling along the polished floor of the gallery, and telling the story of this picture and that with the inimitable grace of manner which was vaguely resented by her country neighbours, delighting the distinguished foreigners who came to see the pictures. She herself hardly ever glanced at the old masters for her own pleasure; although full of technical knowledge on the subject she had no love of art. It used to weary her when she had to listen to enthusiasm, generally only half-sincere, about her Botticellis or her Raphaels. Music never stirred her, and she regarded the society of the country neighbourhood where she lived with a sense of uncomprehension which she sometimes found difficult to conceal.

'Why were such people born?' she used to say to herself at the sight of some rural gathering. On the rare occasions when she went to a party she was always the first to leave; boredom seemed to overtake her before she had been anywhere very long. Entertainments, so-called, were horribly wearisome to her, and she never for an instant believed those people who professed to have enjoyed a pleasant party. Parties were all stupid, she thought; just as most people were stupid, and most food was badly cooked. Therefore, why meet in somebody else's most probably hideous room, and eat impossible dishes and talk to impossible people? Her own chef had been famous even in Paris, and every evening, according to the custom of the house, an extravagant *menu* was prepared, at which, when she was alone, she hardly glanced.

Mrs. Ogilvie discussed all things in heaven or earth with a baffling lightness, turned philosophy into a witty jest and made a sort of slang of classical terminology. Amongst a clever

set in London she reigned supreme when she chose; but a false note or a pose offended her immediately, and the poseur or the insincere person would generally receive one of her exquisite snubs which cut like acid into tender skins. The pretentiousness of the so-called cultured set was a vulgarism in the eyes of this woman who could be rude with the air of a princess, and could give a snub as some people offer a compliment. Inferior persons sometimes wondered how she had a friend left. To be popular, they argued, one had to be civil, whereas Mrs. Ogilvie was often daringly disagreeable. There was indeed something almost fine in her splendid disdain of the civility of the so-called popular person. She could wound; but she did it with the grace of a duellist of old days, who wiped his rapier with a handkerchief of cambric and lace when he had killed his opponent, and would probably expect a man to die as he himself would die, with a jest on his lips and a light laugh at the flowing blood. Mrs. Ogilvie slew exquisitely, and she never hated her opponent. She smiled at enthusiasm and thought it bizarre and rather delightful; but towards vulgarity, especially in its pompous form, she presented her poniard-point sharply tipped and deadly. 'Why should people take themselves seriously?' she would say, with a shrug of her shoulders. 'Surely, we are a common enough species!' And then the green-grey eyes would narrow themselves in their shortsighted way, and Mrs. Ogilvie's voice, charmingly refined and well-bred, would with a few words lightly prick the falsely sentimental and self-inflated wind-bag of oratory that had presented its unprotected surface to her shaft.

Towards religion her attitude was the well-bred one. She took off her hat to it, as a gentleman removes his hat in church whatever his creed may be. Her own beliefs were as daring and as nearly as possible uninfluenced by outward opinion or by the accepted systems as it is possible for a creed to be. She never tried to force them upon any one else; possibly she did not believe in them herself sufficiently to wish to do so; but like her queer gowns and her dyed red hair her creed suited Mrs. Ogilvie. There was a congruous incongruity about her which set many people puzzling to find out her real character. Pompous persons and snobs detested her. Stupid or vapid people saw nothing in her, or saw merely that she dyed her hair and was dressed by Paquin. Narrow-minded people disapproved of her, and clever people considered her one of the most striking, if not one of the most agreeable personalities of the day. Women hardly ever understood her; but they respected any one who dressed as well as she did, and they had an undeclared admiration for a woman who could hold so lightly possessions which they believed to be all-important, and which Mrs. Ogilvie seemed to find so trivial.

The house and its gardens were open once a week to visitors, and the country neighbours brought their guests and strangers to see it, their pleasure in showing off Mrs. Ogilvie's possessions being somewhat tempered by timidity; while those who came to pay a call on the chance of finding her at home would sometimes say with an air of courage and independence to a friend, 'Mrs. Ogilvie is considered rather alarming, you know, but it really is only her manner.' She played her part as country neighbour conscientiously. Once a year she gave a sumptuous garden-party, all other garden-parties in the neighbourhood being dated by it. And when Peter was a little boy there were children asked to the house to play games with him, and later there were dances and balls.

Peter accepted his mother, his property, and his position on what he himself would probably have called their most cheery side. He valued Bowshott because there was excellent hunting to be got there; just as he loved his place in Scotland because of the stalking and the fishing and the shooting, but that they were magnificent or enviable never entered his head. Fate had dealt very kindly with him, and its kindliness had provoked a charming geniality in the character of the young man whom it had treated with such lavish good fortune. Taking it all round, Peter considered this world an excellent one, and most of the people in it very good sorts indeed. He accepted his mother as he accepted everything else, with a simple-heartedness which never looked below the surface nor concerned itself with motives; and if any one had suggested to him that she was inexplicable he would have considered such a judgment quite unintelligible. He enjoyed a visit to her more than almost anything else in the world. She had always been devoted to him ever since he was a boy, and for the life of him he could not see that she was difficult to understand.

It was the fashion to say that Mrs. Ogilvie had altered greatly since the death of Colonel Ogilvie and the little boy. People who remembered all the circumstances of that sad time thought always that in her own way Mrs. Ogilvie was the victim of remorse for not having loved her dead child better. But, after all, there was nothing that a child of three or four years old could have felt seriously in his mother's conduct, and his father's affection must have consoled him for any coldness on her part. After the colonel's death there were those who said it would have been better if Mrs. Ogilvie had married again, or even if she had had a daughter—some one who would have been always at home, and who, to use the common phrase, might have taken Mrs. Ogilvie out of herself. Peter was too much away from home to be a real companion to his mother, and there were never guests at Bowshott unless he was there. It would surely have been in reason if the widow had taken a fancy to some nice girl and had had her to live in the house. But Mrs. Ogilvie did not take fancies to nice girls. She loved Jane Erskine, but disguised the feeling under a sort of whimsical indifference. And the friendship seemed incongruous enough if one came to think of it. Jane, with her wholesome love of outdoor life, her fresh beauty, her heedlessness of learning and ignorance of books—what had Jane in common with Mrs. Ogilvie in her Parisian gowns and with her dyed hair, sitting in the vast drawing-room at Bowshott reading the *Court Journal* and thinking on the lines of the speculative philosophers?

And even to Jane Erskine her manner was cold. Her chilling philosophy would soon have quenched a less happy and impulsive nature. No one but Jane would have bothered her head about Mrs. Ogilvie, the kindly neighbours said, envying, nevertheless, the girl's intimacy at the great house. But as a matter of fact Jane expended a wealth of honest affection on Mrs. Ogilvie, and not only thought her the cleverest woman she had ever met, but had even been heard to affirm that her hair was not dyed. She called her 'such a really good sort'; and the words were as inappropriate as the words of Peter Ogilvie and Jane Erskine usually were.

CHAPTER II

Jane Erskine was at the present time at that interesting period when her friends and relatives, having just discovered the unexpected fact that she was grown up, subjected her to mildly severe criticism, while believing that to have reached womanhood at all showed a considerable amount of talent on her part. They were, they said, under no misapprehension about Jane; in moments of extreme candour, touched with responsibility, they had even been known to say that in one or two respects she was not absolutely perfect. Miss Abingdon, for instance, who always conscientiously encouraged these moods, and censured the General for spoiling Jane, would frequently compare her niece with herself, as she remembered that dim figure of girlhood, and never failed to find cause for unfavourable comparison between the two. From the portraits which she drew it was generally believed that Miss Abingdon must have been born rather a strait-laced spinster of thirty, and have increased in wisdom until her hair was touched with grey; when she would seem to have become the mellow, severe, dignified, loving, and critical lady who at this moment was looking out of her drawing-room window, and trying to show her impartiality for her orphan niece by subjecting her to lawful and unbiased criticism.

'The day of the incomprehensible woman is past and gone,' said Miss Abingdon, and she sighed a little.

Jane Erskine was painting a rabbit-hutch on the lawn. Her attitude showed the keen workman, but disguised the woman of grace. Miss Erskine, in fact, was lying full-length on the greensward of her aunt's lawn absorbed in the engrossing occupation of putting the right dabs of green paint upon a portion of the inside of the rabbit-hutch which was awkward to get at.

'They are all alike,' sighed Miss Abingdon. She alluded to the girlhood of the present day as it presented itself to her regretful and disapproving eye. 'They wear shoes two sizes too large for them, they don't require to be taken care of, they buy their own horses, and they are never ill. They call young men by their Christian names! I don't think they even have headaches.' Miss Abingdon sighed again over this lost art of womanhood. 'There is my niece Jane Erskine; she might be a graceful and elegant young woman, whereas she is sunburned, and—it is a dreadful word of course—but I can only call her leggy. Perhaps it is the fault of those narrow skirts. Women have never been so much respected since crinolines went out of fashion. I believe the independence of the modern girl is no longer assumed; it is not even a regrettable passing fashion; the time has come when I am afraid they really are independent. Jane would think me insane if I were to go out and sit with her in the garden when Peter comes to call, and I don't believe she has ever done a piece of fancy-work in her life!' said Miss Abingdon.

She looked round her pretty drawing-room in which, with a spinster's instinct for preserving old family treasures, she had gathered and garnered antique pieces of furniture, ill-drawn family portraits, and chairs covered with the worsted-work and beadwork of fifty or sixty years ago. She looked regretfully at the piano and the old, neatly bound folios of music with 'M. A.' upon the covers, and she wondered how it was that no one cared to hear her 'pieces' now. She went over to the music-stand and fingered them in a contemplative way. How industriously she used to practise 'Woodland Warblings,' 'My Pretty Bird,' 'La Sympathie, Valse Sentimentale pour le Piano,' and 'Quant' è piu bella,' fingered and arranged with variations.

On Sunday afternoons when her guests 'were having a look at the mokes' Miss Abingdon still played through her book of sacred pieces; and it was on Sunday afternoons, too, that she always stirred the jars of potpourri upon the cabinets, so that their pungent, faint odour might exhale through the room. The old pieces of music and the scent of the dried rose-leaves together always brought back to Miss Abingdon's mind fragrant memories of long ago.

'We used to take a roll of music with us when we were asked out to dinner,' she reflected, 'and it was all-important to us who should turn over our leaves for us, and we generally blushed and hesitated before we sat down to the piano at all. Last night Jane almost fought with Peter for the larger portion of the keyboard of the piano; and they played music without any tune in it, to my way of thinking, and there is no seriousness at all about any of them.'

'I wonder if they'—Miss Abingdon again referred to that distressing body of young women of the present day—'I wonder if they have ever kissed a lover's letter, or have slept with his picture underneath their pillows at night? Or have they ever lain sleepless for an hour because of a loved

one's absence, or because of a cold word from him? Do they write verses, or exchange valentines, or even give each other flowers?'

Miss Abingdon recalled in her own mind the days when she and her sister used to walk together in the park, with mamma leaning upon papa's arm and pacing sedately behind; and how, when they used to sit down on one of the lawns, it had always been in a group of four. Ah! those were the days when one went home and wept because the dear one—the handsome hero who filled half a girl's thoughts and was the object of more than half her worship—had not seen, one across the crowd; or he had seen, perhaps, but girlish modest eyes were forbidden to give the signal of approach. It was more maidenly then to be oblivious of a young man's presence. 'Now,' said, Miss Abingdon, 'when they see a young man whom they know—a pal I believe they call him—girls will wave their parasols or even shout. I have known them rise from their own chairs and go and speak to a man. The whole thing is extraordinary to me.'

It was a relief to Miss Abingdon's sombre reflections when her friend, the vicar's wife, came in for a morning call. She thought that Mrs. Wrottesley's brown merino dress and bonnet, and constraining mantle which rendered all movements of the arms impossible, looked very decorous and womanly compared with the soles of a pair of brown leather shoes, and the foreshortened figure of five feet eight of slender young womanhood stretched in strenuous devotion to her strange occupation on the lawn.

When Mrs. Wrottesley seated herself opposite the window Miss Abingdon resisted an impulse to pull down the blind.

'Yesterday,' said Miss Abingdon, glancing at her niece, 'she was trying to copy a feat which she had seen at the hippodrome, and was riding one pony and driving another tandem in front of her over some hurdles in the field.'

Mrs. Wrottesley smiled with the rather provoking indulgence with which our friends regard the follies of our relations.

'She is so young,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'and she is very beautiful.'

'No,' said Miss Abingdon, with inward pride at her own unwavering impartiality, 'I honestly believe that if we were to consider Jane without prejudice we should find that she is simply healthy.'

'It is a great charm,' said Mrs. Wrottesley.

'No, no,' corrected Miss Abingdon quickly, 'the charm of womanhood consists in its mysteriousness. Now, the girl of to-day is simply a good fellow. She doesn't require to be understood, and she doesn't drive men crazy; she shoves her own bicycle up hills and fights for the larger half of the keyboard of the piano.' She sighed again.

'She is a moral influence,' said Mrs. Wrottesley. Mrs. Wrottesley also alluded to the girl of the period; and Miss Abingdon thought that to refer to her as 'she' or a type, instead of 'they,' had a flavour of culture about it, but she did not mean to give in.

'Yes, yes,' she said impatiently, her love of contradicting Mrs. Wrottesley and at the same time holding her own in the discussion inclining her to undue severity, 'she is as straight as any other good fellow, and she pays up if she has lost at bridge, and would as soon think of picking a pocket as of cheating at croquet; but she is not mysterious—she is absolutely comprehensible.'

'Probably,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'Jane's shortcomings in this respect are due to the fact that she is lamentably unaffected. Affectation, in the case of girls who ride straight and don't know what it is to have a headache, very often takes the form of boyishness. Let us console ourselves with the fact that, being perfectly natural, Jane has escaped masculinity.'

'Jane is a lady,' said Miss Abingdon severely, and with the faint suggestion of administering a snub. 'But,' she added, with that touch of superiority in her manner which obtruded itself in most of her conversation with the vicar's wife, 'there are certain accepted traditions of womanhood such as conventionality approves, and it was not called artificial to conform to them when I was a girl.'

'I remember,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'that we honestly thought that we were interesting when we ate very little, and I myself often used to aspire to an attractive display of timidity when inwardly I had no sensation of fear.'

As the wife of the vicar of the parish Mrs. Wrottesley wore brown merino and a mantle, but these hid a great soul securely held in check and narrowed down by a strict adherence to the small conventions and paralysing rules which society seems to have prescribed for vicars and their wives in the rural parishes of England. She prayed every morning of her life for more faith, and meant by that a narrower creed. Mrs. Wrottesley was an inarticulate woman, and had gained for herself the character of being reserved.

Her own view of things differed in all essentials from the opinions which were held by those about her, and were even inwardly opposed to theories which her husband, with such

gentlemanly eloquence, expounded every Sunday morning. People thought themselves charitable when they merely said that they did not understand Mrs. Wrottesley.

'The modern girl has a good effect upon society,' she continued; 'and she is not a cat.'

'Ah, yes,' allowed Miss Abingdon, conceding a point, but prepared with unanswerable argument; 'but will she ever be loved as the old eternal feminine was loved?'

'Many people believe,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'that you can't be a man's divinity and surround yourself with a golden halo, and be his pal at the same time.'

'I remember,' said Miss Abingdon reminiscently, and feeling that she was still scoring heavily against her friend—'I remember we used to come down to breakfast in light gloves to match our gowns, and we drew them on when the meal was over and only removed them in the morning-room when we had taken out our embroidery to work at it.'

'And when embroidery bored us,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'we thought we were in love.'

'A Miss Sherard stayed here last summer,' said Miss Abingdon, 'a friend of Jane's, and she smoked cigarettes in her bedroom. I know that, for I saw the ashes in her pin-tray.'

Miss Abingdon rather enjoyed making little excursions through her guest's bedrooms of an afternoon, when she had the house to herself; and, without deigning to touch or disturb anything, she knew pretty well, for instance, whose complexion was real and whose was false, who wore powder and who did not.

Mrs. Wrottesley glanced at her own figure in the drawing-room mirror; her mantle disguised the fact that she had either a waist or a pair of arms, and she gave a little dry smile as she reflected that she had accepted a dolman cloak with all the other outward conventions of orthodoxy as understood by society in rural England.

'My cousin, Peter Ogilvie, comes here every day,' said Miss Abingdon; 'he is crossing the lawn now. In former days these two young people would have been talked about. (Peter is my cousin, you know, on my father's side of the house—he is not related to Jane.) But neither will probably mind in the least what is said about them, and for my own part I am positively unable to say whether they care for each other or not. Had I been Jane I would have sat in the arbour this morning, with a pretty, cool white dress on, reading poetry or some light romance, or working at my embroidery till my lover came, instead of being found covered with paint and with the footman's baize apron on.'

The two ladies moved closer to the window and watched the young man crossing the lawn. He was well-built and not many inches above Jane's own height; and perhaps when one has said that he was fair with that Saxon fairness which suggests an almost immaculate cleanliness, and looked like a gentleman, there is not much more to be stated about his external appearance.

Jane rose from her recumbent position on the turf and shook off some blades of short grass from her apron, and waved a brush filled with green paint in the air.

'Don't touch it, Peter!' she cried. 'Isn't it lovely?'

'Good morning, Jane,' said Peter, lifting his cap. Whatever else might be said of them, it would have to be admitted that there was a fundamental sense of courtesy and good-breeding underlying the regrettably frank manner of these young people. 'If you wave your brush about in that triumphant way you 'll splash me with green paint.'

'I have sacrificed two dresses already,' answered Jane; 'but real Art is worth that!'

'The hutch looks ripping,' said Peter; 'but I should feel safer if you would put down that brush.'

'I couldn't resist painting the inside,' said Jane, surveying her work ecstatically. 'Do you think the rabbits will lick on the paint and be sick, Peter?'

'Probably,' said Peter.

'Of course we don't know,' said Jane gravely, 'that it isn't their favourite food. Rabbits may flourish on green paint just as we flourish on roast mutton.'

'It would be beastly to have a green inside!' said Peter.

'I wonder what they are talking about,' said Miss Abingdon, glancing with an apprehensive eye from the drawing-room window. 'Perhaps, after all, they are making love to each other; and if they are, I certainly ought to go out and sit with them.'

Miss Abingdon had antiquated notions of a chaperon's duties.

'I suppose there would be no objection to the match if they do care for each other,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, in a manner that was often called brusque and had served to make her unpopular.

'Jane is rich——'

'Jane has money,' corrected Miss Abingdon, who saw a well-defined difference between the two statements. 'She is a ward in Chancery, you know, and she will not come of age until she is twenty-five. Peter, of course, has a very large fortune. Still, one would not like to be responsible for a marriage, even if it is suitable, and I should not like the Erskines to think I had not looked after Jane properly.'

That nothing should happen always seemed to Miss Abingdon the height of safety and of peace. She mistrusted events of any kind, and had probably remained single owing to her inability to make up her mind to such a momentous decision as is necessarily involved by matrimony. She had never been out of England, and now could seldom be got to leave home; whenever she quitted her own house something was sure to happen, and Miss Abingdon disapproved of happenings. She believed in the essential respectability of monotony, and loved routine. But alas for routine and respectability and a peaceful and serene existence! Even elderly ladies, who dress in black satin and pay their bills weekly, and whose most stimulating and exciting morning is the one spent in scolding the gardener, may be touched with sorrows for which they are not responsible, and shaken by tragedies such as they never dreamed would come near them.

The young couple on the lawn left the unfinished rabbit-hutch and paint-pots and strolled towards a garden-seat. All the gates and seats on Miss Abingdon's small property were painted white once a year, and their trim spotlessness gave an air of homely opulence to the place. The bench which her young relatives sought was placed beneath a beneficent cedar tree that stretched out long, kindly branches, and looked as though it were wrought of stitch-work in deep blue satin. Jane wiped her fingers upon the baize apron, and Peter lighted a cigarette.

'Have you seen Toffy's new motor-car yet?' he asked.

Had any one demanded of Peter or Jane what they meant by the art of conversation, they would probably have replied that it had something to do with Ollendorf's method.

'How 's Toffy going to afford a motor?' said Jane, with interest. 'Is it going to be "the cheapest thing in the end," like all Toffy's extravagances?'

Finance, one of the forbidden topics of 1850, was discussed to-day with a frankness which Miss Abingdon thought positively indelicate.

'He says he 'll save railway fares,' said Peter, 'and as they are the only thing for which Toffy has paid ready money for years, I suppose there is something to be said for the motor.'

'Is he going to drive it himself?'

'He says so, and the motor is to be run on the strictest lines of economy. I am not sure that he is not going to water the petrol to make it go farther.'

'I don't quite see Toffy steering anything,' said Jane, laughing with great enjoyment at the recollection of Toffy's mad riding; 'he can never take his horse through a gate without scraping his leg against it.'

'So Toffy generally goes over the gates,' said Peter, laughing also; 'and probably he 'll try the same sort of thing with the motor-car.'

'Toffy *is* an ass!' said Jane affectionately.

'I am sure it is time I should go and mount guard,' said Miss Abingdon anxiously, from her post by the window. 'Why should they sit together under the cedar tree like that unless they are making love?' She stepped out on to the lawn with a garden-hat placed above her cap and a sun-umbrella held over her head.

'Aunt Mary,' said Jane, 'Toffy's got a new motor! Isn't it fearfully exciting! We are going for a serpentine run with him, and our next-of-kin are going to divide Peter's and my insurance between them if we never come back again. Be sure you claim all you can get if I depart in pieces!'

Miss Abingdon laughed. She knew she was weak even where she disapproved of her niece. Jane never kept anything from her, and she would tell her aunt ridiculous items of sporting intelligence which were as Greek to that excellent lady, and would talk to her as to any other really good friend. Miss Abingdon was conscious of the charm of this treatment, but the disciplining of youth was important, and Jane required both training and guidance.

'I can't think why,' she said severely, 'you should call a young man Toffy. It is a name I should hardly liked to have called a dog when I was a girl.'

Peter raised his fair eyebrows and looked distressed. 'I don't see what else you could call a man named Christopherson,' he said. 'You couldn't call him Nigel—that's Toffy's front name—and I 'm afraid he hasn't got any other. I believe fathers and mothers think you must be going to die

young when they give you a name like that, and that it will look well on a tombstone.'

'You shouldn't joke about death, Peter,' said Miss Abingdon. She felt almost as though she saw an ally approaching when she perceived the Reverend Canon Wrottesley come up the drive to call for his wife on the way to the vicarage. Miss Abingdon had long ago accepted with thankfulness St. Paul's recommendation to use the Church as a final court of appeal.

'How-do-you-do, Peter, how-do-you-do?' said the canon cordially, as Peter went across the lawn to meet him. 'Got leave again, have you? I don't believe you know what hard work is!' The vicar had pottered about a small parish for thirty years and had given his five sons an excellent education on the handsome fortune which his wife had brought him. This helped to convince him that he had borne the burden and heat of the day, and very naturally he regarded idleness as the root of all evil.

'Mrs. Wrottesley is looking over the guild work in the morning-room,' said Miss Abingdon conscientiously. She loved a chat with the vicar, and thought him more genial and charming when his wife was not present. 'Shall I tell her you are here?'

'She likes taking a look at the things the girls have made,' said the canon indulgently.

The Vicar of Culversham and Honorary Canon of Sedgwick-in-the-Marsh was a genial and delightful man. He always spoke kindly of his wife's work, and he could even pardon fussing on the part of a woman. He was a universal favourite and was no doubt aware of the fact, which gave him a very legitimate and wholly pardonable sense of pleasure. It is doubtful if any man was ever more happily placed than was Canon Wrottesley in the considerable village of which he was the esteemed vicar. In a larger place he might have been overlooked, in spite of his many excellent qualities; and in a smaller one he would not have had so many social advantages nor so many opportunities for usefulness. His vicarage was large and well-furnished, his sons were well-grown and well-educated, and he himself had many friends. The part of the country where he found himself was known to house-agents as being a good neighbourhood; and it was not so far away from London that the canon felt himself cut off from the intellectual life of his day. Canon Wrottesley belonged to the London Library and liked to converse on books, even when he had read only a portion of the volumes which he discussed. He often fingered them with true scholarly affection as they lay on his library table, and he discussed erudite points of learning with a light touch which his hearers, in a parish not renowned for its culture, found truly impressive. Even his vanity was of the refined and dignified order of things, and seemed to accord pleasantly with his handsome, clean-shaven, aristocratic features. Perhaps his one weakness was to be the centre of every group which he adorned. And he held this position skilfully, not only by a well-bred display of tact, such as he showed upon all occasions, but by a certain gift which he possessed of appearing in different roles at different times, according to his mood. Still, in spite of a tendency to a self-convincing form of masquerading, one is fain to admit that the village of Culversham would have lacked one of its most pleasing figures had Canon Wrottesley been removed from it. He bore an untarnished name, he had always a pleasant, if pompous greeting for every one, and he preached and lived like a gentleman. He was well-dressed and amiable, and his only display of temper or touchiness took the rather curious form of adopting some impersonation not in accordance with the circumstances in which for the moment he found himself.

Mrs. Wrottesley appeared from the house, still clad in her black mantle which had evidently not been removed while she looked over the guild work, for it bore traces thereof upon it in morsels of cotton and the fluff of unbleached calico.

'Come and sit beside me, love,' said her husband, indicating one of Miss Abingdon's garden-seats in close proximity to his own cushioned chair, 'and I will take care of you.'

Miss Abingdon smiled and looked admiringly at him. Conscience frequently protested against her giving way to the thought, but in her heart Miss Abingdon was convinced that Mrs. Wrottesley was not quite worthy of her husband.

'I think I must go back to the house and finish the guild work,' said Mrs. Wrottesley. 'I have been very slow over it this morning, but I have got a little headache, and I have been counting up everything wrong, which is very stupid of me.'

'How often have I told you not to work when you are tired?' said the canon, shaking his finger reprovingly at her.

'I 'll finish the guild work,' exclaimed Jane, 'and I 'll make Peter come and help me.'

Miss Erskine, who had been sitting upon one of her feet and swinging the other, rose impulsively from the garden-seat and covered the lawn in a series of hops, until her shoe, which had become hopelessly entangled in the laces of her petticoat, released itself with a rending sound. Then she removed her hand from Peter's shoulder, upon which she had been supporting herself, and together they went into the house.

'And this,' thought Miss Abingdon ruefully, 'is courtship as it is understood in the present day!'

CHAPTER III

The following morning Miss Erskine was awakened at the unusual hour of five a.m. by having her window broken by a large pebble. 'I tried small ones first, but it was not a bit of good,' said Peter later, with compunction.

Jane stirred sleepily, and flung her heavy brown hair upon the pillow. This was probably some nonsense on the part of a young Wrottesley, and Jane was not going to be taken in by it.

Next, the point of a fishing-rod was tapped against the pane; it was, therefore, probably that particular Wrottesley boy whose passion for fishing in the early hours of the morning was well known. Jane rubbed the sleep from her drowsy eyes, and called out that she knew quite well who it was, and that Cyprian was to go away at once.

'Jane,' said Peter's voice, 'I wish you would wake up and come down. Toffy's had a horrid smash. He says he 's all right, and he won't go to the doctor, but his hand is badly cut and he has had a nasty knock on his head.'

'Oh, Toffy!' said Jane, 'you 've been in the wars again!' She had descended from her bedroom, and had now unbarred the windows of her own sitting-room and stepped out on to the dewy grass in the clothes which she had hastily put on, her heavy brown hair, tied loosely with a ribbon, falling down her back. The windows of her boudoir were protected by green wooden jalousies and were considered a safeguard against thieves.

'This is awfully kind of you, Jane,' said Toffy. 'I don't think there is really much the matter with me.'

He came inside the sitting-room and Peter made him lie down on the sofa. There was a bruise on one side of his head, and his hand was bound up with a pocket-handkerchief drenched with blood.

'Don't look at it,' said Jane. 'Just stretch out your hand like that, and I 'll bathe it.' She had the simple remedies which Miss Abingdon kept in the house—boracic lint and plaster. Nigel Christopherson lay on the sofa and looked up at the ceiling, because, as Jane had somehow divined, he hated the sight of blood; and he discoursed gravely on his misfortunes while she dressed the ugly wound and bound and slung his hand.

'Talk of sick-nurses!' muttered Peter, and wondered how it was that Jane was able to do everything better than other people could; although, indeed, the bandaging showed more tenderness than skill, and there was something almost pathetically youthful and inconsequent in the manner of both patient and nurse.

The room itself was indicative of the youthful and unlearned character of its owner. A box of chocolates occupied an important position on the writing-table, some envelopes stuffed with dress patterns lay upon a chair. There was a large collection of novels which Jane did not often read, and a much larger collection of illustrated books and papers which she and Peter thoroughly enjoyed. A favourite parrot, who never could be induced to talk, sulked in a cage and had a great deal of affection expended upon him. The remains of the guild work which Mrs. Wrottesley had not finished occupied the greater part of the sofa, and Jane meant to ask her maid to run up all the little blouses and petticoats, as she herself was too frightfully busy to undertake them. An immense number of photographs ornamented the mantelpiece and were mixed up, without attempt at classification, with curious odds and ends which Peter had sent home from South Africa during the war time. Some riding-whips hung on a rack on the wall, side by side with a few strange sketches in oil-colours of Jane's favourite hunters, painted by herself. Peter thought the sketches were among the best he had ever seen, and even Jane was rather pleased with them.

'I 'll take the guild work off the sofa,' she said, 'and that will give you more room.' She settled his head comfortably upon the pillows and turned to Peter for an explanation or an account of the accident.

'I don't know much about it,' said Peter, giving his head a shake. 'The Wrottesley boy and I were going out fishing early, and we found Toffy sitting in the middle of the road with a motor-car hung in a tree.'

'You see,' said Toffy, in his grave, low voice, 'I have made up my mind for some time past to travel by night because it saves hotel bills.'

'But it doesn't cost you much to sleep in your own bed, Toffy,' protested Jane.

'No,' said the young man, looking at her with admiration; 'I hadn't thought of that. I have

dismissed my chauffeur,' he went on, 'because he was always wanting things. I said to him, "My good man, get anything you want if you can get tick for it." He was a maniac about ready money. I got on all right for the first forty miles or so after leaving London, and I was going on splendidly when my motor, to gain some private end, went mad. How do these things happen? Thank 'e, Jane,' as Jane fastened a silk handkerchief to serve as a sling for the wounded arm.

'Providentially the thing broke down at the Carstairs's very gates,' he went on. The loss of blood was making him sick, but if he went on talking he would probably not faint. 'And it was then three o'clock in the morning, so I coaxed it up the drive and shoved it into the coach-house, and took their motor, which is rather a nice one.'

'Then it wasn't your own machine that you smashed up?' said Peter.

'No, praise be!' replied Toffy.

'When will the fraud be discovered?' asked Jane. 'Gilbert Carstairs is quite a good sort, but his wife has very little sense of humour.'

'Oh, I left a note all right in the coach-house,' answered Toffy, 'and I pointed out to Gilbert that he had no right to encourage burglaries by having inefficient locks on his coach-house doors. I added that I thought he ought to be very thankful that it was an honest man who had stolen his motor-car.'

'Also, I hope you said that he might have the loan of your disabled one till he had had it thoroughly repaired?' said Peter.

'I said something of that sort,' Toffy replied. 'And I should think Gilbert would do the right thing by the motor. I am only afraid Mrs. Carstairs may misunderstand the whole thing.'

'One is liable to be misunderstood by even the best people,' said Peter.

At breakfast-time it appeared that nothing had been done to prepare Miss Abingdon for the news that one of her best spare bedrooms was at this moment occupied by a man with a broken head, for she appeared at the door of the breakfast-room in a serene frame of mind, and was kissed by Peter, who announced that here he was, you know, and hoped she was not much surprised to see him so early.

'I am never surprised,' said Miss Abingdon, with intention.

'I have been thinking,' said the young man presently, in the peculiarly genial voice which was characteristic of him and helped to make him so likeable, 'that, suppose a policeman should come sniffing about here this morning, you had better tell him that there is no such thing as a motor-car in the place, and that there has never been one.'

'That is hardly true, Peter,' said Miss Abingdon, in the severe manner which she cultivated, 'considering how often Sir Nigel is here with his.'

'As a matter of fact,' said Peter steadily, 'Toffy is here now. He is—he is in bed, in fact.'

'Something has happened!' exclaimed Miss Abingdon apprehensively. Why was it that youth could never be contented without incidents? To be young seemed to involve action, while acquaintanceship with Jane and Peter seemed to bring one, however unwillingly, into a series of events.

'There was a little accident early this morning,' explained Peter. 'Toffy was travelling at night—to save hotel bills, you know—and there was a breakdown because he didn't quite understand the Carstairs's machine, which he had borrowed; so poor Toffy came off second best; but Jane patched him up most beautifully, and Martin said he had better have the blue room.'

'Do I understand that Sir Nigel Christopherson stole Captain Carstairs's motor-car in the middle of the night and left his own damaged one in its place?' said Miss Abingdon, 'and that he regards this matter quite lightly?'

'Toffy is a cheery soul,' said Peter.

'You are all cheery souls!' said Miss Abingdon hopelessly. She summoned the butler and sent for the village doctor, and made Peter telegraph to Captain Carstairs.

'You always seem to think of everything, Cousin Mary,' said Peter admiringly.

'Some one has to,' said Miss Abingdon, with a strong touch of superiority in her manner; and then she walked round the breakfast-table to where her niece was sitting and kissed her, because a few minutes ago she had looked at her severely, and what would happen if Jane were ever to prefer the Erskines' house to hers? What if Jane were to prolong the six months which it had been stipulated she should spend with her father's relations in London? Jane loved General Erskine too well already. Miss Abingdon felt weak as she said, 'Don't worry any more about it, Jane,' for Jane did not look worried. 'And now,' she said, 'I must go and see how Sir Nigel is.'

Miss Abingdon still used a key-basket and hoped, please God, she would never be called upon to give up this womanly appendage, whatever the world might come to. The jingling of the keys was a harmonious accompaniment to her whenever she walked about. She bent her steps now down the cool wide passages of her charming house to visit her disabled guest, who, she heard, was awake. It was part of her creed that sick persons should be visited, whether they themselves desired it or not. In her young days nurses were unknown, and one proved one's Christianity by the length of time one remained in overheated sick-rooms. Still, Miss Abingdon was not accustomed to the presence of a sick man in her house, and she paused on the door-mat before entering the room, and said to herself, 'I feel very awkward.' Then she timidly tapped at the door and went in.

Sir Nigel Christopherson was lying in bed reading the Bible. When he was not getting into debt, or riding races, or playing polo, or loving Mrs. Avory, Toffy generally employed his spare moments in reading the Bible. He was a preternaturally grave young man, with large eyes and long eyelashes of which he was properly ashamed, being inclined to class them in his own mind with such physical disadvantages as red lips or curling hair. Miss Abingdon thought that he was generally misunderstood. It impressed her very favourably to find him employed in reading Holy Scripture, and she turned away her eyes from the book, which Toffy laid frankly on the outside of the counterpane, feeling that the subject was too sacred to comment upon.

'How do you feel?' she said gently. 'You look very white.'

'Oh, I 'm as fit as a fiddle, thanks, Miss Abingdon,' said Toffy.

'You don't look it,' said Miss Abingdon, with a return to her severe manner.

'I 'm really a very strong chap,' said Toffy. He had been delicate ever since he was a little boy. School games had often been an agony to him. He had ridden races and had lain awake all night afterwards, unable, through sheer exhaustion, to sleep; he had played polo under burning suns, and had concealed the fact (as though it had been a crime) that he had fainted in the pavilion afterwards. He very seldom had a good night's sleep, and habitual bad luck or the effort to conceal his constitutional delicacy had given him a curious gravity of manner, combined with a certain gentleness, which contrasted oddly with his whimsically absurd utterances. No one ever looked more wise than this young man, no one ever acted with more conspicuous foolishness, and no one ever received a larger measure of ill-luck than he. If Toffy hunted, his horse fell or went lame. If he rode in a steeplechase, some accident, the condition of the ground, or the position of the jumps, made the course unusually difficult for the particular horse he was riding. Did he play polo, his most brilliant hits just failed to make the goal. His gravity and his gentleness increased in proportion with his ill-luck. No one ever backed Toffy, and no one believed in his best efforts. But they borrowed his horses and his money, and lived for months as his guests at the huge ugly house which was his home; and Toffy accepted it all, and philosophized about it in his grave way, and read his Bible, and loved Mrs. Avory. No one but Toffy would have loved her; she was quite plain and she was separated from her husband—a truculent gentleman who employed his leisure moments in making his wife miserable. And she had a daughter of ten years old towards whose maintenance Mrs. Avory made blouses and trimmed parasols for which her friends hardly ever paid her.

The world, with its ever-ready explanation of conduct and its facility in finding motives, ascribed Sir Nigel's chronic impecuniosity to the fact that he contributed to the support of Mrs. Avory and her little girl. Mrs. Avory, who knew quite well what was said of her, ate her cold mutton for supper, and economized in coals in the winter, and paid her little weekly bills, and wondered sometimes what was the use of trying to be good when so few people believed in goodness.

Toffy came to see her every Sunday when he was in London; or, if he did not do so, Mrs. Avory wrote him long letters in very indistinct handwriting, and told him that it was all right, and that she really hoped he would marry and be as happy as he deserved to be. And the letters were generally blotted and blistered with tears.

Miss Abingdon put her key-basket upon the dressing-table and sat down in an armchair on the farther side of the room. It upset her very much to see Sir Nigel looking so ill, and she believed that to read the Bible at odd hours was a sign of approaching death.

'You must have some beef-tea at eleven,' Miss Abingdon said, and felt glad that she was able to do something in a crisis.

'I think I was brought up on beef-tea,' said Toffy. He had accepted, with his usual philosophy, the fact that whether you broke your back or your heart a woman's unfailing remedy was a cup of beef-tea.

'And I am sure you would like your own servant,' said Miss Abingdon; 'I suppose you have some one over at Hulworth for whom you could send?'

'My man is an awful thief,' said Toffy, 'which is why I keep him. Otherwise, I don't think there is a single thing he can do, except put studs in my shirts. Hopwood will only steal Peter's things,' he added reassuringly. 'He tells me my things are generally stolen and that I never have anything

to wear, and so he borrows all he can from Peter. It is an extraordinary thing,' said Sir Nigel, beginning his sentence with his usual formula—the formula of the profound philosopher who has learned to accept most things as strange and all things as inexplicable—'It is an extraordinary thing the way all your possessions disappear. You try having duplicates, but, you know, Miss Abingdon, that's not a bit of use. The first man who comes along helps himself just because you 've two of a thing, so you 're not a bit better off than you were before, are you?'

The young man turned his blue eyes with their long lashes on Miss Abingdon with a look of mute inquiry, and threw one arm in its striped pyjama suit up on the pillow.

Miss Abingdon told herself that she was an old woman, and suggested, with outward boldness but with inward diffidence, that Sir Nigel required a wife to look after him.

The young man smiled gratefully at her. 'I think so too,' he said simply; 'but then, you see, she won't have me.'

They were all so amazingly frank! Jane's friend, Kitty Sherard, the girl who smoked cigarettes in her bedroom, had actually told a funny story one day about a flirtation of her father's, and had made everybody except Miss Abingdon laugh at it.

'Perhaps,' she said, 'the lady may change her mind.'

'I don't think she will,' said Toffy slowly. 'You see, she's married already.'

Miss Abingdon did not discuss such subjects. She glanced at her key-basket and moved uneasily in her chair.

'I 'm going to revise the marriage service when I 'm in power,' said the gentle, lagging voice from under the heavy canopy of old-fashioned chintz with which Miss Abingdon, who disapproved of draughts, hung all the beds in her house. 'You see, it's like this,' he went on; 'girls, when they are about eighteen or twenty, would generally like to improve on their parents a bit, and to have meals at different hours to those which they have grown tired of in their own homes; also, they have an idea that if they haven't a romance some time or other they will be rather out of it, don't you know, so they say "yes" to some fellow who proposes to them—you have done it yourself hundreds of times, I dare say, Miss Abingdon—but if you haven't the luck to get out of it, you are jolly well tied for the term of your natural life.'

'There are some very sad cases, of course,' said Miss Abingdon, drawing down her upper lip.

'And it's so often the good ones,' said Toffy, from the depths of his profound experience of life, 'who have the hardest lines. And that makes it all the more unfair, doesn't it?'

Afterwards, when Miss Abingdon used to hear a great deal about Sir Nigel and Mrs. Avory, and when many regrettable things were said concerning two people to whom, at the best of times, life was a little bit difficult, she would seem to see the young man, with his delicate face and his head bound up with white linen, lying on the frilled pillow of the great canopied bed, and the recollection would come back to her of the tones in which he had said, 'It's so often the good ones that have the hardest lines,' and Miss Abingdon never failed in loyalty to Toffy, and believed in him to the very end.

She rose now and bade him good-bye, and then she glanced at the open Bible on the counterpane and decided once more that young people were inexplicable, and she clung to her key-basket with a feeling of security, and, holding it carefully in her hand, went downstairs again.

CHAPTER IV

Jane, meanwhile, had walked over to Bowshott to see Mrs. Ogilvie and to tell her the news of Toffy's motor-car accident, and to explain why Peter was delayed. She came into the drawing-room, with its long mirrors in their gilded frames, its satin couches and heaped-up flowering plants, and huge windows looking on to the scrupulous gardens and park. She walked in the shortest dress that a merciful fashion allows, a loose shirt hung boy-like on her slender figure, and a motor-cap, with the brim well pulled down over her eyes, covered her head. She shook hands and regretted inwardly that Mrs. Ogilvie did not like being kissed, although disclaiming even to herself that her distaste in this respect had anything to do with rouge and powder. She sat down on a low chair by the window with the fearlessness of one whose complexion is not a matter of anxiety, and she told Mrs. Ogilvie the story of the disaster.

'Toffy's so awfully unlucky,' said Jane, with genuine sympathy showing in her eyes and voice; 'and the doctor says his hand will be bad for a week at least.'

'Is there such a thing as bad luck?' said Mrs. Ogilvie, shrugging her shoulders.

'You can't say Toffy gets his deserts!' pleaded Jane. 'He is always in debt, and his horses always come to grief, and there ought to be a syndicate formed to buy up all the shares that Toffy sells, because it is certain to mean that the market is going up. I think he must have been born under an unlucky star.'

'I used to get a lot of amusement from reading the *Iliad* of Homer,' said Mrs. Ogilvie. 'I know you cannot read or write, Jane, so I will tell you about it. It is a tale of men "warring against folk for their women's sake," and hindered often by the unscrupulous gods. Let us win when we can. Fate, without intelligence, orders the things which we do not order for ourselves, and it is very little use, but only a trifle absurd to feel sorry for the opponent who is beaten.'

'I am always sorry for the man who is down,' said Jane.

Mrs. Ogilvie smiled and rang for tea.

'You are one of those who can say, "I am sorry." Now, I am never sorry, and I consider that what is called repentance is the function of an idiot. If I do a thing, I intend to do it. Regret is the most weak-minded of all human emotions.'

'I 'm always regretting things,' said Jane, looking handsome and delightful, and treating even penitence from a fresh, open-air standpoint. 'But then I believe that as often as not I do the wrong thing, which is a great bore at times!'

'Right and wrong,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, with a shrug, 'loving and not loving, believing and not believing—only very young people ever make use of such ridiculous terms. There is only one law, and it is the law of expediency.'

Jane began to laugh, and exclaimed, 'That's quite beyond me! I know I 'm hopelessly stupid; but whenever people begin to talk about whys and wherefores, and if it is any good saying their prayers, and whether love is the real thing or not, I get fogged directly, and I always want to go for a ride or a walk, or to see the horses, or even to descend to the kitchen and make jam, to get rid of the feeling.'

'If you were in the fashion, Jane,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, smiling, 'you would know not only with which portion of grey matter you say your prayers, but you would also be able to show, scientifically, with which ventricle of your heart you love and hate, or whether indeed love and hate are things not of the heart at all but merely a microbial disease. Will you have some tea?'

'Yes, please,' said Jane, 'and several lumps of sugar.'

'I like people,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, 'who still go to church and take sugar in their tea. They are very refreshing.'

'I must go back now,' said Jane presently, 'for I promised not to be long. By the by, we want to keep Peter to dinner. May we? Or will you mind being alone?'

'I am alone say three hundred and thirty nights in the year,' said Mrs. Ogilvie dryly.

'I wish we hadn't asked Peter to stay and amuse Toffy!' said Jane, with compunction. There was a tired white look on Mrs. Ogilvie's face, and an appearance of fatigue in her movements which neither her supreme art of dressing nor the careful manipulation of light in the room wholly concealed.

'Ah, now you are beginning to repent!' said Mrs. Ogilvie. Only her good manners prevented her remark having a sneer in it. 'That will spoil your evening, you foolish child, and it will not make mine more amusing.'

'But I am thinking of you,' said Jane.

'Do not think of me,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, laying her hand for a moment lightly upon the girl's shoulder.

Jane walked down the hillside and stopped at the edge of the wood to see the young pheasants, and then went on again, swinging a crooked walking-stick and singing in a voice clear and sweet, but somewhat out of tune, snatches of songs which she had picked up from Peter, humming the ridiculous words in a sort of unconscious happiness. She walked with a raking grace which became her as wings become a bird or a long swinging stride a racer. The twilit woods held no fears for her: imagination never peopled Jane's world with bogies. The perfect poise of her figure showed a latent energy and physical strength in spite of her slender build, and her clear complexion and abundant brown hair and white, even teeth lent an appearance of something essentially wholesome to a face that at all times looked handsome and well-bred.

She called good night to the lodge-keeper as she passed through the gates and found her way back to the high road, until, by a short-cut down the hill, she reached her aunt's charming gardens, and the wide, low house with its air of repose and comfort, and the long French windows opening on to the quiet, smooth-shaven lawns.

Peter was waiting for her on the doorstep and was endeavouring not to fuss; if only he had

known by which path Jane would return he would have liked to go and meet her, and the fact of having missed a walk with her made him impatient. 'I thought you must be lost,' he said; 'what kept you, Jane? Why did you stay so long?'

When Jane Erskine was away people were apt to ask on her return why she had stayed so long. Miss Abingdon and General Erskine, who divided her time between them, were jealous if even a day of their fair share of Jane was deducted by one or the other. There had been times when Miss Abingdon had unscrupulously pleaded illness as a means of keeping the girl a little longer with her, and she would doubtless have continued her deceptions had not General Erskine adopted the plan of faithfully paying himself back all the days that were owed to him by his niece.

'My mother says she is going to give a ball,' announced Peter at dinner.

'When?' said Jane, breathless with interest. 'Peter, we 'll have both houses as full as they can be, and I 'll ask Aunt Mary to stay here, and you shall ask your mother to stay at Bowshott for it.'

'Jane,' said Miss Abingdon, 'you are very absurd, and just at present you are making the most extraordinary grimaces.'

'I got caught in the rain to-day,' said Jane, 'and had to walk with it in my face. I 'm quite sure rain must be a skin-tightener like those things you see in advertisements.'

'It's given you an awfully jolly colour,' said Peter.

'Has it?' said Jane.

Perhaps a compliment had been given and received, Miss Abingdon did not know. Beauty itself was almost at a discount nowadays. Even feminine vanity, so long accepted as the mainspring of feminine action, had lost its force. Pale cheeks were not in vogue, and frankness had superseded sentiment.

'What souvenir would they give each other if they had to part?' thought Miss Abingdon—'a terrier dog, or a gun, or a walking-stick, most likely!' Faded flowers were quite out of the fashion, and old letters no longer had the scent of dried rose leaves about them. Was perfect healthiness ever very interesting, and must sentiment always be connected with an embroidery frame, a narrow chest, and round shoulders?

Jane obliterated the *menu* from the porcelain tablet in front of her by rubbing it with a damask table-napkin, and, having moistened a pencil, she began to write a list of names of those people who were to be asked to stay for the dance. 'Kitty Sherard certainly,' she said, and put the name down on the tablet.

'She 's some one's niece, isn't she?' said Peter.

'She 's every one's niece, I think,' replied Jane.

'Rather rough luck on Miss Sherard,' said Peter.

'It's a fact, though,' Jane went on. 'Really and truly, Aunt Mary, each of her relations married about ten times, and then the next generation married each other. And they send problems to the puzzle column of newspapers to find out how they are related to each other. Kitty's father is his own great-grandmother, or something complicated of that sort!'

'It must give one an immense respect for oneself,' said Peter, 'to discover such a relationship. One would always be taking care of oneself, and not allowing one's feet to get wet, and thinking what one owed to one's position, and whether one were being treated with respect.'

'There are fillets of beef coming, and ducks,' interpolated Miss Abingdon. 'I let you know this, Peter, as Jane seems to have erased our only *menu*. What will Sir Nigel have, do you think?' she went on. 'I don't think he is at all well; he was reading his Bible in bed, and I 'm not sure that we ought not to send for some of his people.'

'Poor Toffy never had any people,' said Peter. 'They were all just as unlucky as he is, and most of them died violent deaths when they were young; and one of them, I know, founded some sort of queer religion, so perhaps Toffy takes after him in his Biblical researches.'

At this moment Sir Nigel Christopherson walked into the room looking as white as any ghost.

'Toffy, you lunatic!' said Peter, 'why can't you lie still?'

Sir Nigel apologized for being late and declined to have anything brought back for him.

'How are the Amalekites and Hittites and Girgashites?' said Peter, making room for his friend at the table.

'I don't like the Bible joked about,' said Miss Abingdon severely.

'Toffy should have been a parson,' said Peter; 'even at Eton he was always wondering why

Cain was afraid that all men should kill him when he had only a father and mother and perhaps two or three little brothers and sisters in the world. And he used to fret himself into a fever wondering if the sun really stood still in Ajalon and what Selah meant in the Psalms.'

'I think,' said Miss Abingdon, 'that such discussions are best left for Sundays.'

'We will go on with our dance-list,' said Jane; 'Mrs. Wrottesley can let us have several rooms at the vicarage, or, if the worst comes to the worst, we might have tents in the garden.'

'The canon is always so good-natured!' said Miss Abingdon, who believed that a man's house belonged to himself, and whose mind always reverted with a sense of peaceful orthodoxy to thoughts of the vicar. She decided mentally that he must not be asked to receive any of the guests for the Bowshott ball, believing that visitors must always be more or less disturbing to a host. She accepted as part of her gentle creed that a man's writing-table must never be disturbed, that his dinner must never be kept waiting, and that his special armchair must not be appropriated by any one else. Canon Wrottesley always read the morning paper before any other person in the house had seen it, and then imparted pieces of intelligence to his relations with a certain air of self-congratulation, as though conveying news which could only possibly be known to himself; and it was in this way that Miss Abingdon loved to have the items of interest retailed to her with instructive comments upon politics.

CHAPTER V

Mrs. Wrottesley had a theory, which she never asked nor expected any one to share with her, that most men's mental development ceased at the age of twelve years. She had watched five sons grow up with, in their young boyhood, the hardly concealed conviction that each one of them was destined to be a genius, and that each one would make his mark in the world. But her sons, as they attained to the fatal age of twelve years, seemed predestined to disappoint their mother's hopes. Most of the men whom she knew, and whom her sons brought to the house, were delightful boys, whatever their ages might be. She liked them, but she wished sometimes that it were possible to meet a man with a mature mind. The male interest, she determined, after giving much study to the subject, centred almost too exclusively round playing with a ball. She had heard men extolled as grand cricketers and magnificent putters with an enthusiasm which could hardly have been greater if they had saved their country or had died for a cause. And she admitted to herself that the mind of a woman was deficient when she failed to do justice to these performances.

Her reflections on these and kindred subjects this morning had been induced by hearing of the determination of Canon Wrottesley to light the rubbish-heap in the garden. The rubbish-heap had grown high and Canon Wrottesley had determined to put a match to it. Mrs. Wrottesley had been married too long not to know that whatever at the moment engaged her husband's mind required an audience. Her sons also had expected her to watch and applaud them did they in infancy so much as jump a small ditch, and she knew that it was the maternal duty, and admitted, also, that it was the maternal pleasure to watch and applaud until such time as the several wives of her five sons should take her place.

The whole of the vicarage household was in requisition as soon as their reverend master had conceived the happy notion of firing the canonical rubbish-heap in the far corner of the kitchen garden. Canon Wrottesley engaged the attention of every one with a frank belief in his own powers as an organiser. He found himself almost regretting that he could not make the matter an occasion for a little gathering of friends. He loved society, especially ladies' society, and he purposely kept various small objects about his own room, which—to use his own expression—might make a little bit of fun. There was a mask half concealed behind a screen, which, if it did not provoke a start and a scream from some fair visitor, had attention drawn to it by the playful question, 'Who is that behind you?' There was a funny pair of spectacles on the mantelshelf, which Canon Wrottesley would playfully place upon his handsome nose, and to small visitors he would accompany the action by a frolicsome 'wowf-wowf.' He loved juvenile parties when he could wear a coloured paper cap on his head or tie a paper apron round his waist, and probably his canonry had come to him through what he himself called his social gifts rather than by his reputation as a minister of religion. Perhaps he was at his best at a christening party; he had won much affection from his parishioners by his felicitous remarks upon these occasions. When the gravity of the christening of the infant was over Canon Wrottesley always deliberately relaxed. He chaffed the proud father, told the mother that the baby was the finest in the parish, and wanted to know whose health he was to drink where every one appeared so blooming.

'Now, mamma,' the canon said busily, 'let us have plenty of nice dry wood to start the blaze, and then you must come down to the field and watch us put a match to the pile. Cyprian, my boy, where are the old newspapers kept? Fetch them, like a good son, and then you shall carry a little camp-stool down for mamma to sit upon. Now my coat,'—this to his butler—'and, Cyprian, tell Mary to find papa's old gloves.'

Mrs. Wrottesley left her morning's work to go to the meadow, and Canon Wrottesley looked down the road once or twice to see if by a happy chance some friend or neighbour might be passing to whom he could proclaim his boyish jaunt. The 'Well I never, sir,' even of a rural parishioner did in some sort minister to his vanity. An audience was a necessity to him. He regretted that his cloth forbade him to indulge in private theatricals, but he encouraged Shakespearean readings and often 'dressed up to please the children.' Sometimes of an evening he would perform upon the piano, indulging in a series of broken chords which he called improvisation, and upon these occasions he felt that he was a kind and thoughtful master when he set the drawing-room door open so that the servants might hear; and as his servants thought so too it was all eminently satisfactory.

This morning, the beauty of the weather having inspired him to the part of a schoolboy, he avoided a gate and leaped a small fence into the meadow, and he waged boyish fun upon grave-faced Cyprian, who longed to be fishing. He greeted his two gardeners with an air of holiday, and, having waved his stick to them, he called out some hearty remarks about the weather.

Alas! when the corner of the meadow was reached it was found that the rubbish-heap had already been fired, and nothing of it was left but the smouldering ashes. The canon wondered why people could not leave things alone, and was inclined to blame mamma. She surely might have known how much he enjoyed this sort of thing, and have asked the gardeners to leave it to him.

His boyishness, however, could hardly be repressed this morning; and, speaking to his fourteen-year-old son as though his age might be five or six summers, he clapped him on the back and bade him 'Never mind; we will go for a merry jaunt to the ruins instead, and have a regular big affair, and you shall boil a kettle, and we 'll have tea.—What do you say, mamma?' Mrs. Wrottesley replied with the enthusiasm that was expected of her, and the canon, with a 'here we are, and here we go' sort of jollity, conducted her indoors to write notes of invitation to friends to join the picnic. The canon dictated the notes himself, and generally finished with a playful word or two suitable to each recipient; when he failed at first to hit off the perfectly happy phrase Mrs. Wrottesley had to write the note over again.

Foiled of his morning's occupation the canon walked up to Bowshott himself with Mrs. Ogilvie's card of invitation. Mrs. Ogilvie frankly and without a moment's hesitation refused to be one of the party; a picnic was in her eyes one of those barbarous, not to say indecorous things which she classed with bathing in the open sea or trying on a hat in a shop. Why should one sit on the ground and eat indifferent food out of one's lap? Mrs. Ogilvie was too sorry, but it was impossible; she had friends coming, or letters to write, or something—at any rate she was quite sure she was engaged. Mrs. Ogilvie's manner always became doubly polite and charming when she ignored the customary formalities of society or purposely travestied them. No one could infringe social conventions with more perfect good manners. Peter would go, of course, she said. Peter enjoyed eating luncheon in snatches while he hopped about and waited on people; but Mrs. Ogilvie preferred her meals at home.

The canon was disappointed; he loved getting the right people together, and he knew that Mrs. Ogilvie's rare appearance in the neighbourhood always made her a centre of interest at a party. He protested playfully against her decision until a certain lifting of Mrs. Ogilvie's eyebrows made his desire for her presence sound importunate, and put an end to his hospitable pleadings.

'A charming woman,' protested the canon to himself as he walked down the long avenue of Spanish chestnuts. 'A charming woman,' he repeated, for one part of Canon Wrottesley always felt snubbed when he had been talking to Mrs. Ogilvie, while the part of him called the man of the world recognized something in her which this country neighbourhood could not produce. His boyishness was quenched for a moment, but it revived at the sight of Peter riding up to the gates of the park. An invitation to the proposed merry-making was given to Peter, who was ever so much obliged, but thought Canon Wrottesley had forgotten that the 24th was the day of the races.

The Sedgwick Races, although perhaps not important from a sportsman's point of view, were attended by many visitors, and had been so long established and so generally approved by every one in the county that they had come to have a certain local status. They were patronized by clergy and laity alike, to whom the occasion was a sort of yearly picnic. The racecourse itself was not large, but its surroundings were in every way attractive. The short moorland grass made excellent going for the horses, and a wood of beech trees, quite close to the modest grand stand, had by right of prescription been tacitly assigned to various county families who brought their lunches and teas there, and whose long trestle tables, numbered and allotted by the stewards of the course, were a favourite meeting-place for the whole neighbourhood. Canon Wrottesley could hardly pardon himself for having forgotten the date of such a notable occasion, and, alluding to himself as a 'winged messenger,' he hastened to pay a number of morning calls such as he enjoyed, and to cancel his invitation for a picnic in favour of lunch or tea at the racecourse. Peter said that he was going to drive the coach over, and hoped that Canon Wrottesley would perch there when he felt so disposed, and that his mother, not being inclined to spend the whole day at Sedgwick, would join them at tea-time. Miss Abingdon and Jane were going to be kind enough to take her place and act as hostesses at lunch.

Canon Wrottesley felt that he could not do better than see Miss Abingdon in person and

explain the change of plans, and he arrived, in his friendly way, just as she and some guests who were staying with her were going in to luncheon.

Miss Abingdon occasionally reminded herself that she had not met the vicar until long after his marriage, and she still more frequently assured herself that her feeling for him was one of pure admiration untouched by sentiment such as would have been foolish at her age, and at any age would have been wrong. But there were times like the present—when the canon came in, unasked, in a friendly way, and hung up his clerical hat in the hall—which, without going so far as to give the matter a personal bearing, made it easy for Miss Abingdon to understand why women married. She ordered another place to be laid, and asked him to say grace almost with a feeling of proprietorship; and she ordered up the particular brand of claret which the canon had more than once assured her would be all the better for being drunk.

Jane came in presently from her morning ride, handsome and charming in a dark habit and a bowler hat; and Toffy appeared looking white and thin, and protesting that he was perfectly well; and Kitty Sherard came in late, as usual, and hoped that something had been kept hot for her.

Kitty Sherard was a decorative young woman, with a face like one of Greuze's pictures and a passion for wearing rose-colour. Her father was that rather famous personage, Lord Sherard, one of the last of the dandies, and probably one of the few men in England in the present day who had fought a duel. He was still thought irresistible by women, and perhaps the only sincere love of his life was that for his daughter Kitty, to whom he told his most *risqué* stories, and whom he found better company than any one else in the world.

Miss Sherard was in a wilful mood this morning—a mood which, let it be said at once, was one to which she was often subject, but it had been more than usually apparent in her for the last few days. She began by hoping, in the politest way, after she had sat about five minutes at the luncheon-table, that Miss Abingdon did not mind the window being opened, although it was a well-known fact that Miss Abingdon held the old-fashioned theory that only the furniture should enjoy fresh air, and that windows should be opened when rooms were unoccupied. So many people rose to do Miss Sherard's bidding that Miss Abingdon, of course, found it quite hopeless to try to assert herself. Kitty, further, had a ridiculous way of eating, which Miss Abingdon could not approve. She ate mere morsels of everything and talked the whole time, very often with the air of a gourmet; and she would lay down her knife and fork, after a meal such as a healthy blackbird might have enjoyed, as though she had finished some aldermanic feast. She accepted a glass of Miss Abingdon's very special claret and never even touched it; and later, in one of the pauses of her elaborate trifling at luncheon, she told a funny story which made every one laugh, and caused even Canon Wrottesley to attempt to conceal the fact that he saw the point of the story.

The worst of it was that Toffy encouraged her in everything she said and did. These two had met in London this year, and had stayed at the same house for Ascot, and it must be admitted by a faithful historian that in her own particular wilful and provoking way Kitty had flirted outrageously with Toffy. To-day she offered to cut up his food for him because his right hand was still in a sling; and when Miss Abingdon suggested, with deliberate emphasis in her voice, that a footman should do it for him, Kitty pretended that the wounded man could not possibly feed himself, and gave him pineapple to eat on the end of her fork.

When she sat in the veranda drinking coffee after lunch, she showed Canon Wrottesley how to blow wedding-rings with the smoke of her own favourite cigarettes; and she talked to him as though his early youth might have been spent in a racing stable, and with the air of one expert to another.

'I hear,' said Canon Wrottesley, when Miss Sherard had begun to play a left-handed game of croquet with the crippled young man, 'that Sir Nigel is going to ride at the Sedgwick Races. I was a fearless horseman myself at one time, so I cannot quarrel with him for his decision, but I only hope that his hand will be healed by the 24th.'

'He has a good mount,' said Peter, 'and I don't think it is much good trying to persuade Toffy not to ride.'

'Kitty Sherard says she has laid the whole of her fortune on him,' said Jane, 'so let 's hope that will bring him luck.'

'I believe,' said the canon, in a manner distinctly beatific towards the subject of his remarks, 'that I enjoy that little race-meeting at Sedgwick as much as anything in the year. We must all have our little outings once in a way.'

There is no doubt that the canon took his little outings, as often as he could get them, with a healthy, boyish pleasure.

On the day of the races, for reasons no doubt known to himself but hidden from the rest of the world, the vicar masqueraded in the character of a patriarch. His characters were frequently inconsistent with his circumstances; often his boyishness would obtrude itself quite unexpectedly at board meetings or on the parish council, while at other times the mantle of the seer or prophet descended upon him on the most inauspicious occasions. Had Mrs. Wrottesley spoken her mind,

which she never did, she might have thrown light upon the subject, but she was not a convincing woman at the best of times. All her life she had kept inviolate the woman's secret whether or not her husband was a disappointment to her. No one knew from his wife if the little god of a somewhat small and feminine community had feet of clay or no.

Arrived at the very delightful beech wood which formed a pleasant place of encampment for tea-parties, Canon Wrottesley could only smile absently at the picnic-baskets, and appear wrapped in thought when addressed; he might have been mentally preparing his next Sunday's sermon. Miss Abingdon thought that he was doing so and respected him for it; she even tried to attune her mind to his, and endeavoured to see vanity of vanities in this informal gathering of friends.

'We do not think enough of serious things,' she said.

The inhabitants of Sedgwick put on sporting airs and curiously cut overcoats on two days in each year. The weather for the occasion is nearly always cloudless, and the townsfolk have begun to think that either they are very clever in arranging the date of their local function, or that the clerk of the weather is deeply interested in Sedgwick Races.

On this particular day the sun flickered as usual through the clean leaves and boughs of the beech wood, doing its best to lend an air of picturesqueness to lobster salads and aspics, and shone brilliantly on servants, with their coats off, unpacking hampers at rows of long tables, and on people busily engaged in the inartistic business of eating.

In the paddock there was an unusual number of horses being led round and round in a ring, and some well-known bookies—not often seen at the little provincial meeting—were present with their raucous cries and their money-bags.

Kitty Sherard carried a pair of field-glasses on a long strap, and consulted from time to time a little gold-bound pocket-book in which she added up figures with a business-like air. She believed in Ormiston, which Sir Nigel Christopherson was riding, and she had something on Lamplighter as well. She knew every bookmaker on the course by sight, and had as much knowledge of the field as any one in the ring. And she looked exactly like some very beautiful child, and carried a parasol of rose-coloured chiffon beneath which her complexion and eyes appeared to great advantage. She smiled whether winning or losing, and ate a tiny luncheon with an epicurean air.

At four o'clock in the afternoon it is an accepted custom at Sedgwick Races for every one to have tea before the last event, and then horses are put to in coaches and carriages, and those who have attended the meeting whether for business or pleasure drive back to their own homes, or go slowly downhill in a long string to the little railway station where, for two days at least in the year, the local station-master is a person of importance.

Mrs. Ogilvie arrived at the racecourse, as she had promised to do, about tea-time. She hardly ever cared to watch the races; but she stood amongst her friends for a while in the pleasant shade of the wood, and looked on at the little gathering with that air of detached and hardly concealed weariness which she always felt on such occasions. She congratulated Peter, who had won a rather closely finished race earlier in the day; but her voice betrayed little interest in the event, and an onlooker might have been surprised at the almost distant way in which she spoke to him. She was sumptuously dressed, as usual, and wore her clothes with extravagant carelessness. She found herself at tea-time sitting next Canon Wrottesley, whose patriarchal mood seemed to her unnecessarily affected, and she requested him to ask Miss Sherard to come and speak to her. 'Kitty amuses me,' she said, with one of her characteristic shrugs, 'and most people are so dull, are they not?'

Canon Wrottesley felt that mixed sensation which association with Mrs. Ogilvie always gave him—a feeling of resentment combined with a desire to please. He rather hastily let the mantle of the seer drop from him, and said, 'I wish our little party were not so much dispersed. Mr. Lawrence from Frisby brought two charming friends with him, and they much hoped to have been here to meet you. Falconer is their name—Sir John and Lady Falconer. He has just been made Minister at Buenos Ayres, as I dare say you know, and he told me they once had the pleasure of meeting you in Spain, years and years ago.'

'I never remember people whom I have met years and years ago,' said Mrs. Ogilvie. Her near-sighted eyes, with their trick of contracting slightly when she looked fixedly at anything, narrowed as she spoke, and the heavy lids closed lazily upon them.

Lady Falconer, meanwhile, had arrived at the tea-table and greeted Mrs. Ogilvie with evident pleasure. 'I am afraid you will hardly remember me, as it is a very long time since we met,' she said; 'but my husband and I always remember how good you were to me when I was ill at Juarez.'

Mrs. Ogilvie rose and shook hands with a cordiality that was charmingly expressed. Her eyes were no longer half-closed, and her colour never varied. 'You were ill, were you not?' she said, in a manner that was a little vague but polite and sympathetic.

'Yes,' said Sir John, 'and you let your maid come and nurse her. My wife always said she would have died if it had not been for you.'

'The climate was abominable,' said Mrs. Ogilvie; 'every one felt ill there. Why does one go to these out-of-the-way places?'

'It is very absurd,' said Lady Falconer, in a friendly way, 'to be surprised at people growing up; yet I can hardly realize that Captain Ogilvie, whom we met to-day, is the little boy who was with you at Juarez. How time flies!'

'It more often crawls, I think,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, smiling, with her mouth a little twisted to one side. And then she rose to go because she never stayed long at any party, and not even the fact that Nigel Christopherson was going to ride in the last race altered her decision. At parting she was too glad to have met Lady Falconer, trusted that if ever she cared to see a collection of tiresome pictures she would come to Bowshott, and hoped that if the gardens would be of any interest to her she would drive over some afternoon when it was not too hot, and have tea with her—any afternoon would do. Had Mrs. Ogilvie been giving an invitation to tea in a barn it is probable that her manner would have been as distant, as casual, and as superb as when she suggested, with a queer sort of diffidence, that people might care to see the famous galleries and gardens of her magnificent house.

'How very interesting,' said Canon Wrottesley to Lady Falconer when the carriage had driven away, 'your meeting like this!' The vicar's acquaintance was not extensive, and that people should re-encounter each other or have mutual friends always struck him in the light of a strange coincidence.

'She has not altered much,' said Sir John Falconer, 'and yet it must be many years since we met: I suppose she never was good-looking. Somehow one seems unaware of it when one is speaking to her.'

'I could do nothing but look at her dress,' said Lady Falconer good-naturedly. 'How is it that everything she wears seems to be in such perfect taste?'

'Mrs. Ogilvie is a rich woman,' said Canon Wrottesley, enjoying a proprietary way of talking of his neighbour, 'and she is able to gratify her love of beautiful raiment. I do not understand these things myself,' he went on, with a masculine air, 'but the ladies tell me that her dresses are all that they should be.'

'I don't know what we should have done without her at Juarez,' said Lady Falconer, in her peculiarly kind manner. 'Sir John and I were on our honeymoon, and, like many other newly married people, we wanted to be alone.'

'Dudley, the artist, told us about Juarez, I remember,' interpolated Sir John, 'otherwise I do not suppose we should ever have heard of the place. Dudley had been sketching there.'

'I had not a maid with me,' went on Lady Falconer, in her pleasant voice, 'and Mrs. Ogilvie in the kindest way allowed a Spanish woman she had with her to do everything for me.'

'Mrs. Ogilvie is always devoted to everything Spanish,' said Mrs. Wrottesley. 'Her mother was Spanish, and I dare say you know she made her home in Spain for six years after the eldest boy's death.'

'I did not even know that she had lost a son,' said Lady Falconer. 'How very sad!'

The crowds of gaily-dressed people about them, the shouts of the bookmakers, and the pleasant sense of being on an enjoyable picnic contrasted oddly with any reference to such banished topics as death and sorrow.

'I consider that Mrs. Ogilvie is one of the most reserved women I ever met,' said the canon, proceeding to give an epitome of a character which he thought he—and perhaps only he—understood. 'She is impulsive yet cautious, clever yet light-minded; for a woman her intelligence is quite above the ordinary run, and yet she is often hopelessly difficult to convince.' He leaned forward on the table looking handsome and dignified, and his clean-shaven face had an appearance more clever than was quite justified by his attainments.

'I am sure that Mrs. Ogilvie is a woman of deep affections,' said Lady Falconer, whose tongue seemed framed for nothing but kind speeches.

'I remember,' said Sir John, 'how struck my wife and I were, that year we met her in Spain, by her devotion to her son. It seemed to us to have almost a touch of tragedy in it; but that, of course, is now explained by hearing that she had just lost her only other child.'

'Poor Mrs. Ogilvie!' said Mrs. Wrottesley.

The words seemed incongruous. Mrs. Ogilvie, with her contempt for pity, her sumptuous manner of living and of dressing, was hardly an object for compassion; and Canon Wrottesley felt that his wife's commiseration was out of place, although he was far too kind to say so in public.

There was a lull suddenly in the noise of the race-course; the bookmakers' harsh shouts ceased, and even conversation stopped for a moment, for the last race had begun.

The last race was an interesting event. It was a steeplechase for gentleman riders only, and friends of the riders were standing up, with field-glasses to their eyes, watching with absorbed attention the horses, which were still a great distance off on the other side of the course. Jane was standing by Peter. Kitty Sherard was quite near; she was not looking through field-glasses as the others were doing, but stood leaning lightly on the balcony of the stand with her two hands clasped on the wooden rail in front of her.

'Can you see who is leading?' said Jane, and received no answer to her question, and then she saw that Miss Sherard was not looking at the racecourse at all. Her face was white, and her hands, which were clasped on the wooden rail before her, had a strained look about them, and showed patches of white where the slender fingers were tightly pressed on the delicate skin.

The last race involved some big fences, it is true; but then Kitty of all people in the world was the last to be afraid of a stiff course. It was not like her to keep her eyes turned away from the horses until some one quite close to her said, 'Well, they 're over the water-jump anyway,' when she suddenly raised her field-glasses, with hands that were trembling a little, and kept her eyes fixed on the race. It was going to be a close finish, most people thought, and as the horses came round the farther corner you could, as the saying goes, have spread a tablecloth over them. Toffy's horse closely hugged the rails and was kept well in hand; while, of the two in front of him, one was showing signs of the pace and the other had not much running left in him. These two soon tailed off, when the favourite (dark green and yellow hoops) came through the other horses and rode neck to neck with Toffy's. It became a race between these two, and it was evident that the finish was going to be a close one.

'Toffy's not fit to ride,' said the voice of a young man who would have liked Toffy to win the race, although he knew better than to back him. 'He is as mad as ten hatters to have ridden to-day.'

'His weight is right enough,' said another manly voice, with a laugh; 'it's extraordinary how a man of his height can ride so light. Christopherson 's a regular bag of bones.'

'I wish to goodness they wouldn't talk!' said Kitty suddenly under her breath.

The two horses came on neck to neck to the last fence but one.

'By gad, he knows how to ride!' went on the masculine voice, 'but Spinach-and-Eggs is on the better horse of the two.'

The ground was in splendid going condition and the two horses raced over it. They could see Christopherson's face now, and Toffy was smiling slightly, while the other man's teeth were firmly set. Their two stirrups clanged together as their horses rose to the rails and galloped on to the last fence.

And there, of course, Toffy's horse fell. It was not his fault; there was a bit of soft ground just where he landed, his horse blundered and fell, and the favourite rode past the winning-post, an easy winner.

The spectators in the grand stand could see Christopherson pick himself up a moment later and lead his horse home; but there was one moment, when the rider behind him took the last jump, in which for a fraction of time it seemed more than possible that he might land on the top of Sir Nigel. For a breathless space there was that dramatic silence which may be felt when a concourse of people literally hold their breath. Miss Abingdon covered her face for a moment, and Jane heard Peter say 'Good God!'

The next moment the danger was over, and Jane was surreptitiously handing Miss Sherard a handkerchief drenched in eau-de-Cologne, for Kitty had sat down suddenly and her face was white. She did not speak, but she looked up into Jane's face for a moment, and the look said as plainly as possible, 'I can't help it—don't tell any one.'

'It was a horribly near thing,' Jane said, in order to explain Kitty's pallor to herself, 'and I 'm afraid it has given you rather a turn.'

Miss Sherard's feeling of faintness was only momentary, and already the bright colour was in her cheeks again and she laughed and said, 'It was not the jump, really, Jane; but I am a horrible gambler, and I put my very last shilling on Toffy.'

CHAPTER VI

Mrs. Ogilvie's ball, according to an old-established custom, followed closely on the race. The proximity of the two events had helped to gain for the quiet countryside the reputation of a gay neighbourhood. Country houses were filled with visitors, and the ballroom and the famous

picture-gallery at Bowshott received an even larger number of guests than usual. There was something impressive in the great space and width of the ballroom, with its polished floor. The palm-houses had been emptied to form an avenue of green up the middle of the picture-gallery, at whose extreme end an altarpiece, representing a scene from the Book of Revelation, showed a company of the heavenly host as a background to a buffet-table crowded with refreshments. The constant movements and the brilliant lights provided a fitting air of gaiety to the scene. It was Mrs. Ogilvie's whim to have her rooms illuminated in a manner as nearly as possible to represent the effect of tempered sunlight. 'No woman cares to see,' she used to say, 'she wants to be seen.' And so the lights at Bowshott were always arranged in such a way that the beauty of women should be enhanced by them. Plain faces softened under the warm glow which had no hard shadows in it, and beautiful faces were lighted up in a manner that was almost extravagantly becoming.

'It is only on such an occasion as this,' said Miss Abingdon, 'that one really seems to think that Bowshott is put to its proper use.'

She was talking to a young man who called old furniture delicious and Spanish brocade sweetly pretty. 'The modern Englishman,' said Mr. Lawrence, 'was made to live in barracks or in a stable. Probably he is only in his right place when he is on a horse. Could any one but he live at Bowshott and dress in shabby shooting clothes, and smoke cigarettes in a room where Charles I. made love, and wear hobnailed boots to go up and down a grand staircase?'

Miss Abingdon sat on a convenient large couch, where a chaperon might close her eyes for a moment towards the end of a long evening without being accused of drowsiness. She was the recipient of many wise nods and hints and questions.

'How well they look together!' said a lady, as Peter Ogilvie and Jane came down the line of palms, and she left a blank at the end of her speech, to be filled in, if possible, by Miss Abingdon.

'Jane makes Peter look rather short,' said another.

'She should have chosen some one taller.'

'I suppose it really will be settled some day,' said Mr. Lawrence.

'They went for a ride this morning,' said Miss Abingdon dryly, 'and they were positively disappointed because Sir Nigel Christopherson could not go with them. I do not profess to understand love-affairs of the present day.'

Mr. Lawrence was a portly, red-faced young man, with a high-pitched voice. He throve on scandal, and gossiped like a housekeeper. Miss Abingdon liked and thoroughly approved him; his views were sound, his opinions orthodox, and he always took her in to supper at any dance where they met.

Mr. Lawrence's manner towards elderly ladies was a mixture of deference and familiarity which never failed to give satisfaction; he could even discuss Miss Abingdon's relatives with her without offence, and he gave advice on domestic matters. People in want of a cook or of a good housemaid generally wrote to Mr. Lawrence to ask if he knew of any one suitable for the post, and he recommended houses and health-resorts, and knew to a fraction what every one's income was. He was a useful member of society in a neighbourhood like that of Culversham, and was considered an interesting caller. It was his ambition to be first with every piece of intelligence, and he enjoyed telling news, even of a harassing description. Mr. Lawrence believed that Miss Abingdon's niece was already engaged to Peter Ogilvie, and he began by a series of deft questions to try to abstract the definite information that he required from her.

'Young people nowadays,' said Miss Abingdon, ascribing a riper age to Mr. Lawrence than he altogether approved—'young people nowadays think that everything that concerns themselves is what they call their own business. They talk as though they lived in some desert cave instead of in the midst of the world. I am on thorns sometimes when the servants are in the room; after all, a man may be only a footman, and yet is not necessarily a deaf-mute.'

Peter and Jane, meanwhile, had strolled into the picture-gallery, with its softly shaded lights and long vistas of flowering plants and palms. There was about them to-night something which seemed to set them apart. Few persons cared to disturb them, even by a greeting, as they sat side by side in the corridor or walked together down the long gallery. Jane Erskine had put off that air, which suited her so admirably, of seeming to be always under an open sky; she had left it behind with her short skirt and the motor-cap which she loved to pull down over her eyes. This evening in shimmering white satin, and with a string of pearls round her throat, she looked what she was—a very beautiful and very distinguished young woman. The tempered light of the room seemed to deepen the colour in her cheeks and to bring out the bright tints of her hair; her lips parted in a smile, and her eyes had radiance in them.

She and Peter mingled with the throng of dancers again, and then, not waiting until the music had finished, they left the ballroom by the farther door where Mrs. Ogilvie was standing.

Peter stopped when he saw her, and looked at her a little anxiously. 'You should not be standing, should you?' he said, in his kindly way; 'you look tired.'

Mrs. Ogilvie gave one of her enigmatic smiles. 'Who would not be tired?' she said. 'Was there ever such an extraordinary way of amusing oneself as to stand in a draughty doorway in the middle of the night, shaking hands with some hundreds of people whom one doesn't want to see!'

She sat down on a sofa and watched the two figures as they passed down the long corridor. The mechanical smile of welcome with which she had greeted half the county this evening had not died away from her face; she sat upright on the satin-covered sofa. There was about her an air of strength, of eminence almost, which seemed to place her genuine ugliness above criticism. Her dress was of some heavy purple stuff which few women would have had the courage to wear, and the diamonds in her hair, with their sharp points of radiating light, accentuated something that was magnificent and almost defiant about Mrs. Ogilvie to-night. Her short-sighted eyes contracted in their usual fashion as she watched the couple disappear down the vista of the corridor. 'If only it could be soon! If only their marriage could be soon!' she murmured to herself, her lips moving in an inward cry that in another woman might have been a prayer.

'How do you think she is looking?' said Peter, as, without conscious intention, he and Jane drifted away from the dancers into a more distant part of the house. 'Surely she gets tired too easily? I wish she would see a doctor; but she hates being fussed over, and one can never persuade her to take care of herself.'

'What is one to do with so wilful a woman?' said Jane.

They paused and looked at the dim crowd of dancers through one of the entrances to the ballroom, and passed down the corridor where misty figures sat on sofas and chairs enjoying the cool. Every one looked to them misty and far away to-night, almost as though they had not sufficiently materialized to be perfectly distinct.

With definite intention Peter led his partner towards a little room, hung with miniatures and plaques, at the farther end of the long corridor. Here they found Nigel Christopherson in conversation with Miss Sherard. Kitty was talking as lightly as usual, deliberately misunderstanding everything that was said to her, and being as provoking as she ever was; and Toffy was so much in earnest that he did not see Peter and Jane, but continued to talk to the girl beside him. So the two intruders never entered the room at all; but, as they pursued their way still farther, Peter was thinking about Mrs. Avory, and wishing to goodness that Toffy had never met her.

The big house seemed too full of people for his taste to-night. Every room and corridor was occupied, and Peter said, 'Let's go to my mother's sitting-room. Do you mind, Jane? We can get cool on the bridge.'

Bowshott is a very old house, so old that, if it had not been for archaeologists, who came there sometimes and read the grey stones as though they had been printed paper, no one would ever have known when the earliest part of it was built. Antiquaries agreed that it dated from Norman days; but the only portion of the building of that period which was standing now was a tower at the eastward end of the house. It had been almost in ruins at one time, but Colonel Ogilvie's father had restored it, and, with a considerable amount of skill, had connected it with the more modern part of the house by a stone bridge on a single arch. The whole thing was excellently contrived; the archway lent a frame to one of the most beautiful parts of the garden; and the tower, which was entered by a strong oak door from the bridge, now contained three curious, romantic-looking rooms, with quaint, uneven walls six feet thick, deep, narrow windows, and heavy oak ceilings. The largest of the rooms to which admittance was gained by the oak door was Mrs. Ogilvie's sitting-room. She had a curious love of being alone for hours at a time, and she enjoyed the sense of isolation which was afforded her by being cut off from the rest of the building by the stone bridge on its high arch. Here she would spend whole days by herself, reading or writing. Above this room, which was full of her own particular possessions, was a smaller apartment containing a valuable library of philosophical works. Here were muniment-chests, and the large writing-table where she wrote all the business letters relating to the estate; and here it was that she was wont to see her steward and her agent from time to time. No one but Mrs. Ogilvie and her son ever entered the room without some special reason, and it was too far away from the rest of the house for casual visitors to intrude themselves. The short passage, within the more modern house, which led to the bridge was reached by a door hung with a leather curtain securely arranged to prevent draughts, and no one ever lifted this curtain except those who had a right to the rooms beyond.

To-night, however, the house was open to all comers, and it afforded no surprise to Captain Ogilvie and his companion, when they had quitted the corridor and the reception-rooms, and had left the guests and servants behind them, to find a man's figure before them in the short passage leading to the leather-covered door.

'Who 's that, do you know?' said Peter, when they had passed under the curtain and were crossing the bridge.

'I have no idea,' said Jane; 'some stranger, I suppose, whom some one has brought.'

'They don't seem to be looking after him very well,' said Peter, 'leaving him to prowl about alone and get lost in a great barrack like this. I don't suppose I ought to have asked him if he

wanted partners, or anything of that sort? Some one is sure to look after him.'

'Oh, sure to!' said Jane, and they passed over the bridge together and went into Mrs. Ogilvie's morning-room.

Having arrived there and secured two comfortable chairs, the power of speech seemed suddenly to have deserted two persons whose conversation was never brilliant, but who at least were seldom at a loss for anything to say. It appeared as though Peter Ogilvie had brought Miss Erskine to this distant room for no other purpose than to say to her, in an absent-minded way, 'Is every one enjoying themselves, do you think?'

'I think every one is quite happy,' said Jane, and added, with characteristic frankness, 'I know I am!'

Peter gave her a quick glance, turning his eyes full upon her for a moment as though to read something in the face beside him; then he began with absorbed attention to twist the silk string of his ball programme round and round his finger. The room where they sat was singularly unlike those rose-shaded bowers which are considered suitable to the needs of dancers who pause and rest in them. Its austere furnishing had something almost solemn and mysterious about it; and the stone walls hung with tapestry, on which quaint figures moved restlessly with the draught from an open window, would have given an eerie feeling to a man, for instance, sitting alone there at twelve o'clock at night. But in the gloom and austerity of the still and distant chamber sat Jane in white satin with pearls about her neck, and the room was illumined by her.

'So you are enjoying yourself,' said Peter at last—Peter who never made fatuous conversational remarks of this sort. The words, for no reason in themselves, fell oddly, and were followed by a silence which was disturbing and made for sudden self-consciousness wholly to be condemned, and to be banished, if possible, directly. Jane, who did not fidget aimlessly with things, began diligently to pluck a long white feather out of her fan, and said in a voice that was deliberately commonplace, 'We ought to go back now, oughtn't we? Let me see who your next partner is, Peter, that I may send you back to dance with her.' She stretched out her hand for the young man's programme.

But Peter sat absorbed, twisting its silk cord round his finger. 'Don't let's go yet,' he said, and the constrained silence fell between them again. 'I want to ask you something, Jane.'

'Yes,' said Jane. Her hands lay idle now in her lap, and she no longer tried to extract the white ostrich feather from her fan.

'I want to know if you think you can care for me a little?'

Probably when a man feels most deeply his utterances are the most commonplace, and an Englishman is proverbially incapable of expressing his feelings. In the supreme moments of their lives, it is true, a few men, and those not always the most sincere, may speak eloquently; but for the most part a proposal of marriage from an Englishman is—as it should be—a clumsy thing. Peter Ogilvie could only speak in such limited language as he always used. Yet the world seemed to stand still for him just then, for he knew that everything in his heaven or upon earth depended on what Jane's answer would be.

'Don't let me bother you,' he said at last, 'or rush you into giving an answer now if you would rather wait.'

Perhaps a declaration of love from an old comrade is the most dear as well as the most embarrassing of all such avowals. A heart which has already given itself in loyalty and affection to another finds that it is not a deepening of this loyalty and affection that is asked, but a complete re-ordering of things. The lover's petition, therefore, either comes to the woman as a revelation, betraying to her in a flash that she has loved always, and has merely been calling the thing by another name, or else it finds her impatient at the disturbance of an old comradeship, a cherished friendship, which nothing but this foolish, exacting thing called love could ever shake.

Peter was not versed in introspective questions or hair-splittings; he loved with his whole heart, and he had tried to say so without very much success. Just then he would have given anything he possessed to be endowed with a little more eloquence, though deep down in his heart he had a lingering hope that perhaps Jane would understand. 'It's neck or nothing,' he was saying to himself, in the homely jargon in which he usually formed his thoughts. 'God knows I may have been a fool to speak.'

'Peter,' began Jane shyly. And Peter ceased twisting the silk cord of the programme round his finger, and they turned and looked at each other.

'Is it true?' he said at last, with a queer kind of wonder in his voice.

'Let us go into the garden,' he said. His instincts remained primitive, and just then this room was too narrow for all he felt, and it seemed to him that the large things of the night and the distant glory of the stars were the only environment that he could bear.

Passers-by, had they been mean enough to pause and listen outside the sheltering yew-hedge

near which they sat, might have questioned the poetry of their love-making, and have condemned an avowal of devotion punctuated by barbarous slang; but the silence that fell between them was full of tenderness and more easily understood than speech, and perhaps the moon—an inquisitive person at the best of times—as she peeped over the grey turrets of the house saw the dawn of a love as single-hearted and as genuine as many sentiments which have been more carefully analysed and described.

These were two happy, light-hearted persons, without very much to recommend them except a certain straightforwardness of vision which abhorred, as by a natural instinct, circuitous or crooked things, a transparent honesty, and a simple acceptance of those obligations which race and good-breeding demand.

At the present moment, out in the garden on the stone seat set in the embrasure of the high yew-hedge, they were oblivious of everything in the world except each other and the absorbing discovery of love.

They were the last to hear the cry of 'Fire!' which rang out from the house, and they were still sitting undisturbed while men ran with hose and buckets, and a clamour arose in the stable-yard for more water, and a clatter of horses' hoofs could be heard as a groom galloped off for the nearest fire-engine. The yew-hedged garden where they sat was distant a long way from the house, and it was not until a heavy cloud of smoke rose up against the sky that Peter's attention was attracted, and he realized that the Norman tower was on fire.

He started up and ran to the place where grooms and helpers, gardeners and strangers' coachmen, and waiters and guests were standing, with hose and buckets, pouring a ridiculous little stream of water against the burning pile. The fire had begun in the roof, and the smoke was pouring from the narrow windows in the tower. No flames had shot up yet, and the fire-engine from Sedgwick, prompt and well-served as it always was, might be here any minute. The oak roof would burn slowly and the walls were secure, but the tapestry in the lower room was dry and old, and would fire like a bundle of shavings. An effort was made by a body of men to force an entrance into the lower room and save what they could; but they were beaten back by the smoke which came in volumes down the turret staircase and by the flames which now began to shoot up here and there against the darkness of the night. There was nothing for it but to safeguard the main building. The wind was setting towards it from the tower, and a party of men were up on the roof treading out burning sparks and playing water where slates were hottest or ashes might burst into flames.

Mrs. Ogilvie stood on the terrace in her magnificent purple gown, her red hair with flashing diamonds in it, and her long-handled glasses held up to her near-sighted eyes.

'So that goes!' she said, shrugging her shoulders. 'Well, it will give me a good deal of trouble. Or is it fate, I wonder?'

Peter was directing a body of men to play water on the bridge; garden and stable hoses were turned full upon it by relays of helpers, and some long ladders were placed against the windows to see if it were possible in that way to effect an entrance and save some of the valuables in the room. The guests—women in light ball dresses and bare shoulders, and men in evening clothes—had surged out on to the terrace, and were watching with that curious mixture of fascination and regret which comes to the eyes of those who see destruction going on and know that they are powerless to prevent it. Every ear was strained to catch the first sound of the fire-engine on the road from Sedgwick, and some twenty or thirty couples, more impatient than the rest, had run to a distant knoll, from whence the road was visible, to peer through the darkness and to see if anything was coming. The stars shone serenely overhead, and the moon was turning the water in the fountains to cascades of silver, while from turret and roof the volumes of grey smoke belched forth, and the ineffectual fire appliances played upon the house.

It was just then that what seemed almost like an apparition appeared upon the bridge. A man, not above medium height, with a cloak hastily thrown about his head to protect him from the smoke, dashed across the bridge, was drenched by the fall of water, and entered the turret room. People asked each other fearfully whose this strange figure could be. Many, strangely enough, had not seen it; the sudden dash through the smoke had not occupied a moment of time, and most eyes were directed towards the roof of the building, while others were turned towards the Sedgwick road. Those who had seen cast amazed eyes upon each other, women clutched the persons nearest them, and Jane Erskine, seeking half wildly for some one in the crowd, found Peter and said to him, 'What is it? Who went in there just now? Oh, Peter, for a moment I thought it was you!'

There was a shout of warning, but it was too late for the man, whoever he was, to turn back. He was inside the tower now, and no shouting could hold him. Some prayed as they stood there, murmuring half mechanically, 'Save him! save him!' as instinctively men and women will pray even when the life for which they plead may carry with it such sorrow as they never dreamed of.

Suddenly some young men who had climbed to the top of the knoll gave a shout, and the fire-engine from Sedgwick turned the corner of the road with a fine dash, for Tom Ellis, a good whip, was driving, and the white horse on the near side knew as well as any Christian how to save an inch of the road. The fire-engine, all gleaming with brass fittings and flaming red paint, clattered

to the door, and pulled up with admirable precision on the spot from which a hose could be played. Eight men in helmets leaped from their seats and got their gear in order with the coolness of blue-jackets in a storm. But for its quietness and its controlled, workmanlike effect, the whole scene had distinctly a dramatic touch about it. Possibly the firemen would have shouted louder had they been upon the boards, and fainting women, it is generally assumed, give a realistic touch to well-staged melodrama. No doubt the crowd on the terrace at Bowshott would have disappointed an Adelphi audience. But the old white horse stood to attention like a soldier on a field day; and Tom Ellis, wiping his brow as though he himself had run in the shafts all the way from Sedgwick, lent a touch of stage realism to the scene. Nothing could save the interior of the tower—that was past praying for; but a shout went up that there was a man inside, and the firemen threw their ladders against the walls and prepared their scaling-irons and life-saving apparatus. The smoke rolled out in dense volumes now, and through the gloom a voice shouted, 'It 's all right! He 's crossed the bridge again!'

'Oh, are you sure? are you sure?' said Jane, her fear almost amounting to a panic, and it haunted her for long afterwards that perhaps the man had not actually escaped the fire. For nothing was heard of him again, and it was only after Peter had ordered a fruitless search to be made amongst the debris in the tower that she felt satisfied of the stranger's safety.

A newspaper reporter tried to prove that a gallant attempt had been made to save some valuables in the tower, and went so far as to head one of his paragraphs, 'A Gallant Act.' But there was nothing of value in the tower rooms except the old furniture and books and the tapestry on the walls, and these had all been destroyed.

The ruined interior of the tower smouldered the whole of the next day; though the walls still stood, gaunt and grim, windowless and gutted by the fire. But the building was covered by insurance, and even the loss of the tapestries seemed more than compensated by the fact that an absorbing topic of general interest had been provided in a quiet and uneventful neighbourhood.

CHAPTER VII

It was a matter of necessity with Mrs. Ogilvie to purchase a new dress for the wedding. Wherefore, in the week following the night of the ball, she went to London for the day, while builders and carpenters were already at work repairing the ruined tower.

'It will be inconvenient,' she said, 'to go up and see my dressmaker later when the house is full. Is it absolutely incumbent upon me, as the mother of the bridegroom, to dress in grey satin, or have I sufficiently scandalized my neighbours all my life to be able to wear what I like?'

Usually her maid accompanied her when Mrs. Ogilvie went up to London; but, in her wilful way, she had decided to-day that maids were useless, and that her present maid had round eyes that stared at her from the opposite side of the carriage when they travelled together. In short, Mrs. Ogilvie intended to go to London alone.

She departed with some sort of idea of enjoying the expedition; the purchase of clothes was a real aesthetic pleasure to her, and even the feel of the pavements in the world-forsaken London of September had something friendly about it that spoke to her with an intimacy and a kindliness such as she never experienced among country sights and sounds. A morning at Paquin's revived her as sea breezes revive other women. Lunch followed in a room pleasantly shaded from the sun and decorated with a fair amount of taste. But the food was uneatable, of course; Mrs. Ogilvie could never get a thing to eat that she liked.

It was nearly four o'clock before the brougham which had met her at the station in the morning drew up before a door in deserted Harley Street. An elderly man-servant showed her into the doctor's waiting-room, and Mrs. Ogilvie sat down and began turning over with interest the pages of a fashion magazine.

'I think I know the worst,' she said to the famous surgeon whom she had come to consult, when he led her into his room. 'What I want to know is, can you put off this tiresome business until after my son's wedding?'

He asked her quietly her reason for the delay. Few people argued with Mrs. Ogilvie; there was an inflexibility about her which made protest impossible. He knew that the case was a hopeless one, but life might certainly be prolonged if she would submit to treatment without delay.

'Why should you put it off?' he said; 'even five or six weeks may make an enormous difference.'

'I always put off disagreeable things,' said Mrs. Ogilvie lightly.

A London doctor probably knows many cases of delicate and sensitive women who will fret over a crumpled rose-leaf and die with the calm courage of a martyr; but the woman who would deliberately throw away her chances of life was unfamiliar to the famous specialist. He looked keenly at his patient for a moment out of his deep eyes.

'I have never known a case of this sort in which there was not an immediate effort at concealment,' he said to himself; 'and women conceal most of their sicknesses as if they were crimes.' Aloud he asked her what was the earliest date at which she could put herself into his hands.

'It is a great bore coming at all,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, with that sort of superb impertinence which distinguished her and was hardly ever offensive; 'but let us say in a month's time. The wedding was not to have been till late in November; but my son and Miss Erskine are quite absurdly in love with each other, and it will not be difficult to persuade them to alter that date for an earlier one.'

'If you have positively decided to postpone treatment,' said the surgeon, 'I can say nothing more except to tell you that you are minimizing your chances of recovery.'

'I don't feel in the least like dying yet,' she said.

'Were you to put yourself into my hands at once,' he urged, 'it is possible that you might be sufficiently recovered to go to the wedding in November.'

'No one is to know anything about it,' said Mrs. Ogilvie quickly and decisively. 'If my son is married in October I can come up to town, as I always do in November, and go into one of your nursing-homes. Probably the wall-papers will offend me, but at least I shall not have the whole of a countryside discussing my helplessness and the various stages of my illness. Ye gods! they would like to ask for details from one's very footman at the hall door!'

It was useless to say more. The surgeon recommended diet, and made out a prescription.

'Everything is talked about in these days, I admit,' he said, 'and I think no one regrets the decline of reserve more than we doctors do; but you are carrying a desire for concealment too far.'

Mrs. Ogilvie was drawing on her gloves and buttoning them with an air much more grave and intent than she had bestowed upon her doctor during the discussion of her health. 'Even an animal,' she said lightly, 'is allowed to creep away into the denseness of a thicket and nurse its wounds unseen; but we superior human beings are like the beggars who expose a mutilated arm to the pitiful, and would fain show their wounds to every passer-by.'

'Perhaps you will allow me to write to your son?' said the surgeon.

Mrs. Ogilvie replied by a quick and unequivocal answer in the negative; then, relaxing a little, she said more lightly, but with intent, 'I have always triumphed over difficulties all my life—I have always overcome.'

'That is quite possible,' said the physician gravely.

Mrs. Ogilvie stood up and began to arrange her veil before the mirror which hung above the mantel-piece; and, as she did so, she glanced critically at her face under her large, fashionable-looking hat, with its bizarre trimmings.

'I am very plain,' she said, with a sort of sensuous enjoyment in her frankness, 'and yet I have passed successfully for a beautiful woman most of my life. I am also what is ridiculously called a power in society, and I owe everything to my own will. I detest unsuccess!'

'You are talking of the success which lies in the hands of every clever woman,' said the doctor, 'but your health is another matter.'

'I believe in my good luck; it has never failed me,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, as she shook hands and said good-bye.

When she reached home she dressed in one of her sumptuous gowns, for a score of country neighbours were coming to meet Jane Erskine as the fiancée of her son. Her maid bore the brunt of my lady's sarcasm during the time of dressing, and was given a curt notice of dismissal before the toilet was complete. The woman's big round eyes, which were so obnoxious to her mistress, filled with tears as she accepted her discharge. And Mrs. Ogilvie, descending the broad staircase of the house with her air of magnificence, her jewels, and her red hair, rapped her fan suddenly and sharply on the palm of her hand, so that the delicate tortoise-shell sticks were broken. 'Why does she look at me like that?' she said fiercely below her breath. 'I am glad I dismissed her, and I am glad she cried! Why should not some one else suffer as well as I?'

'You are not really tiresome, Jane,' she said after dinner, as the two sat together on a couch. 'I have never known another engaged young lady whom I did not avoid; but you are distressing yourself quite unnecessarily about me. When I look tired, for instance, you may take it as a sure

sign that I am bored; nothing ever really makes me feel ill except dullness.'

'Still,' urged Jane, 'Peter and I want it so much. We think if you were to get advice from a doctor it would make us feel so much happier about you.'

'I never allow any one to discuss my health with me,' said Mrs. Ogilvie coldly; 'it is only a polite way of pointing out to one that one is looking plain.'

Jane took one of her hands in hers with an impulsive gesture, and printed a kiss upon it.

'Do sit upon me when I begin to bore you or to say the wrong thing! I believe, for a woman, I am quite unpardonably clumsy and tactless.'

'Have you ever discovered,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, 'that tact is becoming a little overdone, and that it generally succeeds in accentuating a difficult situation, or in making it impossible? Women are horribly tactful as a rule, and that is why men's society is preferable to theirs. If you tread on a man's foot he will no doubt forgive you, while admitting that the blow was painful; but a woman smiles and tries to look as though she really enjoyed it.'

'Promise never to endure me in silence,' said Jane, laughing, 'even when I am most tactless!'

'Silent endurance is hardly my character,' said Mrs. Ogilvie, screwing up her eyes. 'I dismissed Forder before dinner because she annoyed me.'

'Please take Forder to your heart again tomorrow morning,' said Jane; 'she keeps Martin in such a good temper.'

'No,' said Mrs. Ogilvie; 'I shall get a new maid when I go up to London in November. Forder has had round eyes for such a long time, and she is hopelessly stupid about doing my hair.'

Mrs. Ogilvie always spoke about her hair with a touch of defiance in her voice. It was so undisguisedly auburn that probably only Jane Erskine and Peter ever believed that it was not dyed.

'What were we talking about?' she said presently. 'Oh yes, I was saying that you were not tiresome although you are engaged to be married. You are not even quite uninteresting, although you are healthy and happy! All the same, I am going to try and persuade you and Peter to have the wedding sooner than you intended.'

'Why?' said Jane simply.

'I am sick of Bowshott,' said Mrs. Ogilvie lightly. 'By the by, I believe I am going to make it over to you and Peter when you marry. Why should I act as custodian to a lot of grimy pictures, which don't amuse me the least bit in the world, or walk in these formal gardens, where I don't even meet a gardener after ten o'clock? A prison life would really be a pleasant change! I shall go to London when you are married; it is the only place—except Paris—where one lives. I must have the house in Berkeley Square painted. And, oh! there are heaps of things I want to do; must I really go into them all?

'When is the wedding to be?' asked old Lord Sherard, sinking on to the sofa beside Miss Erskine, when he and the other gentlemen returned from the dining-room.

'Jane and I have just been deciding that the wedding is to take place in the middle of October,' replied Mrs. Ogilvie in her cool, decisive voice.

Jane laughed and caught Peter's eye, and he drew her aside when he could, and asked for further confirmation of a change of plans of which he thoroughly approved.

There was no reason for delay; the building and repairing of the tower would hardly interfere with the other parts of the vast house. Jane, like Peter, was quite satisfied that their wedding should be at an earlier date than was at first suggested. They had known each other all their lives; why postpone the happy time when they should be married?

So wedding invitations were written and despatched, and wedding gowns were ordered, and wedding presents came in. Tenants presented silver bowls and trays, and servants gave clocks and illuminated addresses, and the Ogilvie family lawyer came down with his clerk to stay, and was hidden away somewhere in the big house, where he wrote busily all day, and made wills and transferred deeds, and wanted signatures for this thing and for that through half the autumn mornings.

'I see nothing for it,' said Jane, 'but to postpone getting my trousseau until after I am married. If I succeed in getting a wedding dress and something to go away in by the twenty-sixth, I shall consider myself lucky!'

Miss Abingdon, to whose Early Victorian mind a wedding was still an occasion for tears, sighed over her niece's engagement because Jane never came to her room at night to water her couch with tears, nor had doubts or presentiments or misgivings.

'She seems to have so little sense of responsibility,' she sighed to Mrs. Wrottesley, whose visits at this trying time were a cause of nothing but comfort to her.

'I know,' said Mrs. Wrottesley—in the hesitating manner of the woman who might have been 'advanced' had she not married a clergyman—'I know it may seem to you irreverent to say so, but I sometimes think that marriage is not undertaken lightly and unadvisedly enough. It seems to me that nowadays the tendency is to consider the matter almost too seriously, and that a certain light-hearted impulse is really what is required before taking what is called the plunge.'

Miss Abingdon—not by any means for the first time—felt regret that Canon Wrottesley's influence upon his wife had not made her a more orthodox thinker. A woman who criticized the Prayer Book was surely not fitted to be the wife of a clergyman. Miss Abingdon liked to lean on a spiritual guide, and she thought that this was the graceful and becoming attitude for all women.

'I am afraid we must not tamper with the Prayer Book,' she said reprovingly; and Mrs. Wrottesley, who for twenty years had been silent under reproof, relapsed into silence again.

Jane, meanwhile, was saying good-bye to every tenant on Miss Abingdon's small estate. To her hunters she confided the good news that they were going with her when she married, and that they would hunt with her as before. And the stable cat, whom she took up in her arms and kissed affectionately, was told that he really must not mind saying good-bye, for that she, Jane, would only be two miles off, so that the stable cat needn't look quite so disconsolate. The proverbial old nurse in the village had to be visited, and the school-children asked to tea, and tenants and gardeners to dinner; and every one was in a highly nervous state of preparation, and in a still more delightful state of anticipation.

Miss Abingdon enjoyed the dear fussiness of the wedding preparations, and thought in her secret heart that Mrs. Ogilvie missed all the pleasure of the thing by giving a few brief, emphatic orders to her steward, instead of personally superintending every detail of the servants' ball and the tenants' dinner.

Mrs. Ogilvie's directions were probably made in less than an hour, and transmitted to Mr. Miller's capacious pocket-book when he came to her boudoir to receive instructions one autumn morning. When he had left, Mrs. Ogilvie quitted her writing-table, by which she had been sitting, and walked to the window of her room and stood idly by it, her graceful figure outlined against the pane. Before her stretched the great gardens in an aching formality of borders and devices. Viewed from a height, and with her near-sighted eyes, they presented an appearance of a piece of elaborate stitchwork on a green worsted ground. The fountains, with their punctual fall of spray, might have been a device in shells and beads in the centre of each design. Beyond the gardens there was a mass of woods, all dim greens and bright golds; but even the woods were touched with formality, and the foresters of the place had lopped away every unsightly branch from the beeches and oaks. Probably there may have been homely corners in the gardens and grounds which Peter had discovered as a child; but Mrs. Ogilvie, when she walked, kept to the prim paths of the terrace and the garden, where every pebble seemed to have its proper place, in full view of the windows of the house.

'It has always been a prison to me—always,' she murmured to herself, oblivious of the fact that no one more than she would have missed a luxurious environment and a stately setting to her own personality. Mrs. Ogilvie often imagined that she would have liked a small house; but there is no doubt that she would have quitted it in disgust the first time that the odour of dinner came up the back stairs. She believed that a large staff of servants was merely a burden; but she would have felt at a loss had she been obliged to wait on herself even for an hour. As she looked now at the gardens in front of her, and away to the woods beyond, and to the great stretches of greenhouses and conservatories to southward, she thought how irksome they were, how unnecessary, and how little pleasure they gave.

'Magnificence is always dull,' she thought, 'and yet people are impressed by it! They not only value themselves by what they have; they actually value others according to their possessions, and respect a man for his ownership of things of which they cannot even hope to rob him.'

She supposed that the tenants and servants would have to be fed on the occasion of a marriage. She believed it was their one idea of enjoying themselves; but she begged her steward not to bother her with details when he had gone into the question of roasting an ox whole. Having dismissed him with a few brief orders Mrs. Ogilvie went to her writing-table. 'I may as well get over all the disagreeable and odious things in one morning,' she said to herself.

Her writing-table was placed against a wall on which hung a mirror, and she sat down opposite it. According to a custom she had, she directed the envelopes first, before beginning to write her letters. Her writing-table was always littered with addressed envelopes of notes which she meant to write some day when she felt in the mood for writing.

She paused now when she had written the words: 'To be given to my son at my death;' and, screwing up her face into her twisted smile, she said to herself, 'How absurd and melodramatic it sounds!' Then she took a sheet of notepaper and began to write. The first few lines flowed easily enough, and then Mrs. Ogilvie's pen traced the letters more slowly on the page. Once she paused altogether, and said aloud to her image in the mirror opposite her escritoire, 'What a fool I am!'

and then stooped again over her task. The sprawling writing had hardly covered half a sheet of notepaper when the red-gold head with its crown of plaits was raised again, and the woman in the mirror looked at her with a face that was suddenly livid. Her lips were white and were drawn back somewhat from her teeth; and Mrs. Ogilvie, in the midst of pain, recognized first of all how hideous she looked.

The pen dropped from her fingers, and she pushed her chair back from the writing-table and went over to the fireplace and lay down on the sofa. The day was cold, and Mrs. Ogilvie shivered and drew a cover over her feet. 'When this is over,' she thought, 'I will ring and have the fire lighted.'

She looked at the clock on the mantelpiece and calculated deliberately how long the paroxysm would probably last. She had always regarded pain as an animate thing which had to be fought with, and she had never failed in courage when she met it, nor moaned when, as now for the first time, she was beaten by it. The clock seemed to tick more leisurely to-day, and the time passed very slowly; there is a loneliness about suffering which makes the hours drag heavily. Once she buried her face for a moment in the sofa cushions, and her bands clenched the cover and crumpled the delicate satin between her fingers. Her head sank lower, like a wounded bird that ruffles up the dust; she moved convulsively amongst the cushions. It was a grim fight with pain that she was making; she did not give in easily, but the odds were unequal. Mrs. Ogilvie was in the hands of an unsparing foe. She was conquered, but afterwards, when she lay quite still, there was a look of defiance in her attitude.

Her maid, coming in and finding her sleeping, glanced at the blinds and wondered if she dared lower them, for the sun was shining brilliantly into the room now, and its beams were resting full and strong on the figure on the sofa.

It was something about the position of the auburn head—something twisted and unnatural in the attitude of the recumbent form—that caused the woman to cry out suddenly and sharply, with a vibrating cry that seemed to set everything in the room jingling. No one heard her at first, and she opened the window and called aloud for help; for there was a sound of horses' hoofs upon the gravel, and Peter rode up with Jane to the door.

'Mrs. Ogilvie must have been dead an hour,' the village doctor said when he came; and then he sent the weeping girl and poor, white-faced, broken-hearted Peter out of the room. Neither of them could believe the horrible news; they turned to each other, taking hands, as children do in their grief, and Jane went back and with a sob stooped down and imprinted a long kiss on the dead woman's brow.

'She must have died just as she was writing her morning letters,' said Peter, as he glanced at the writing-table with its litter of notes and papers.

'Perhaps it would be as well to lock up anything that is lying about,' said the doctor; 'it is customary to do so. Or your lawyer—who, I understand, is in the house—could come in, I suppose, and put away jewels, etc.' He handed Peter the litter of notes and papers on the writing-table.

'Thank you,' said Peter. 'I don't suppose there is anything very important, but I will look through them presently.' He glanced at the topmost addresses of the notes, and decided that they were probably belated wedding invitations to people who had been forgotten, and he put an indiarubber band about them and thrust them into his pocket.

The guests in the house departed hurriedly within two hours of Mrs. Ogilvie's death, amidst all the confusion of hasty packing, and carriages ordered for this person and for that, and footmen hastening downstairs with luggage, and luncheon prepared hurriedly and eaten almost surreptitiously by those who wished to catch an early train. There was a horrible stir in the house under the hush and awe that death brings. No one wished to intrude upon Peter; yet a dozen friends wanted to see him, to hear, if possible, more details of his mother's sudden end. Others, with a sort of animal instinct of forsaking at once the place where death reigned, betrayed an almost contemptible haste in quitting the house; but they, too, must know all that could be told. They had never noticed that Mrs. Ogilvie did not seem well, or they had remarked that of late she had spent much time in her room, or 'she had seemed so bright and cheerful'; and, again, 'they had noticed how tired she had been at night sometimes.'

To no one had Peter any special news to give. Some one had heard, he believed, that she had been to see Sir Edward Croft, the great surgeon in London, and to-day they had telegraphed to him. Peter himself had not really been anxious about his mother, although he had imagined for some time past that she did not look well. He gave what attention he could to his guests, bade them a conventional good-bye, and displayed that reserve which an Englishman is supposed to be able to maintain in times of sorrow. But it is not too much to say that, warm-hearted, deeply affectionate man that he was, his grief for his mother's death had something bewildering in it. He had loved her faithfully and admired her loyally during the whole of his life; there had never been a quarrel between them, and, if he had not received many outward marks of affection from her, there was no single occasion in his life that he could remember in which she had failed him. He had come first always; he realized this with the sinking of heart which even the most dutiful son may feel when he sees with absolute clearness, perhaps for the first time, that he must have

accepted, almost unknowingly, many sacrifices from his mother. He hoped, with a boyish remorse and a boyish simple-heartedness, that she understood everything now, and that somewhere, not very far off, she would be able to see into his heart and know positively how much he had loved her. He had always accepted in simple faithfulness the statement that those who were gone 'knew now,' as the phrase runs; and it comforted him to think that all he might have said to her when she was alive was clearly understood by his mother at last.

By two o'clock the big house was empty of guests and given over to silence, or to the sound of hushed footsteps about the stairs, or to the weeping of maids as they assembled in little groups in the corridors and spoke with sobs of the mistress whom they had served faithfully. Each room that had lately given up its tenant showed a disordered interior, with paper strewn here and there. Or some maid left behind to pack her mistress's heavier luggage could be seen kneeling before open trunks and deftly arranging their contents.

A grey-haired butler approached his master when the last of the carriages had driven away, and begged him to eat some luncheon, and informed him that Miss Erskine was still in the library.

'Send something there,' said Peter briefly.

For a moment Jane could only weep, and they clung to each other, saying, with the helplessness of the suddenly bereaved, 'Isn't it awful?' Then, as they began to grow calmer, Peter administered what comfort he could, and tried in his kindly way to induce the girl to eat something.

'You must eat, you know,' he said, 'and it will do you good. It has been a terrible time for you. And then I think you ought to go back and lie down for a bit.'

If it is true that a woman suggests beef-tea as a universal panacea for all ills, it is certain, on the other hand, that a man believes that a woman always feels better for lying down.

'I should like to wait,' Jane said, 'until Sir Edward arrives, and to hear what he has to say.'

A footman came in to clear away lunch, and then the two lovers went and sat together on the library sofa, and looked out on the long stretches of gardens with their cold precision and want of sympathy. A luggage-cart, piled high with dress-baskets and portmanteaux, passed down the drive towards the station gates, and a motor-car returned from a neighbouring house for something that had been forgotten. After that there was silence both within and without the house; even the maids had gone downstairs to sit together and whisper. It was one of those grey days in early autumn which have an almost weird sense of stillness about them. Hardly a leaf stirred, and even the flight of the birds was noiseless and touched with the universal feeling of hush. The begonias and dahlias and flaming autumn flowers in the broad border below the southern terrace wall had lost half their colour in the grey afternoon, and a robin alighted softly on the window-sill and, putting his head on one side, looked into the library at the pair sitting on the sofa.

Neither had spoken for a time. To-morrow there would probably be lawyers to see and the funeral to arrange for, and a hundred things to do; but to-day there was a lull in which time itself seemed to have stood still. Years had passed since this morning, and yet the clocks marked only a few hours on their dials. Mrs. Ogilvie had died at twelve o'clock, and the very flowers which she had placed by her table still bloomed freshly, and a book she had been reading lay open where she had left it.

Yet it seemed a lifetime since she had died.

During the interminable afternoon, and in the stillness of the big library, with its ordered rows of books and solemn-looking, carved cupboards, Peter and Jane Erskine sat together feeling oppressively this great lapse of time that had passed. Their understanding of one another had always been a strong bond between them; and now they felt not like the lovers of yesterday, but like those whose lives have been linked for years, and for whom loyalty and faith have grown deeper and stronger as troubles and storms came. They looked across to the ruined tower, where not very long ago, as we count time, they had told their love to each other; and, so looking, had drawn closer by their common sorrow. It seemed to them, in the hush of the library, that this time of grief and dependence had something arresting in it. Life had not demanded very much of them so far. To-day there was a strange sense that its demands, perhaps even for them, would not always be small.

The doctor and the lawyer summoned Peter presently, and afterwards he and Jane were told particulars of Mrs. Ogilvie's fatal illness.

'But she must have suffered—she must have suffered so!' said Jane, with all the resentfulness that youth feels towards pain. 'Why did she tell none of us? Why did none of us know?'

'I ought to have guessed something,' said Peter miserably. 'I must have been a fool not to see that something was wrong.' And together they wondered what would have happened if this had

been done or that, and were inclined to reproach themselves for much in which they were in no measure to blame. They walked back through the dim, still woods; and at the white gates of Jane's pleasant home Peter left her, and she went on alone to meet Miss Abingdon.

It was late that night before the two sorrowful women went to bed; and hardly was breakfast over in the morning before, with the restlessness born of recent grief, Miss Abingdon was seeking anxiously to know what she could do or what ought to be done.

'If,' she said, 'I felt that I could even be of use by going up to town and choosing the servants' mourning, I should feel that I was doing something.'

There were piles of patterns of black stuffs, which Miss Abingdon had telegraphed for on the previous evening, lying in neat bundles on the breakfast-table, and stamped with their several prices and the width of the materials. Such things have often kept a woman sane in the first despair of grief.

'How would it do?' she said, 'to have a little crape on the body and not on the skirt?'

Jane replied that she thought it would do very nicely.

Poor Jane! her eyes were big with weeping, and she had lain awake the greater part of the night mourning for her friend who was gone. Now, as she tried to give her attention to her aunt and to the vexed question of the propriety of crape on the body, she thought, with girlish ingenuousness, that she wanted Peter more than she had ever wanted him before, and that she could do nothing until she had seen him. And across her grief came one great flash of joy as she realized that in all her troubles and sorrows she would have him with her.

'There he is now,' said Miss Abingdon, 'coming up the drive! Jane, my dear, how awfully ill Peter looks. Oh, my dear, you should have told me how ill he looks!'

Jane went out to the hall door without speaking. 'What is wrong?' she said briefly. 'Come into my sitting-room, Peter, and tell me what is wrong.'

'I 'd rather be outside, if you don't mind,' said Peter, the primitive man strong in him again.

There had been a storm in the night, after the unusual stillness of the afternoon, accompanied by heavy rain. Now the sun shone fitfully, and the disordered gardens and lawns were strewn with branches and countless leaves which chased each other, bowling along on their edges and dancing in mad eddies and circles.

'Let's get out of sight of the house,' said Peter; and they went into the high-walled garden and sat down on one of Miss Abingdon's cheerful-looking white seats.

There were long borders of dripping, storm-dashed flowers in front of them, and mignonette run to seed, and dahlias filled with moisture to their brims. Some gardeners were busy tying up saplings which had been detached from their stakes, and the beech trees on the other side of the high walls of the garden tossed their branches together and sighed a little.

Peter waited for a minute or two until the gardeners had moved out of hearing, and then said abruptly and with difficulty: 'You know those papers that the doctor gave me yesterday?'

'Those notes and things which were on her writing-table?' Jane asked.

Peter nodded his head, and then with an effort began again—this time with an attempt at formality—'I 'm sorry to have to tell you that there is something in one of them that I shall have to speak to you about.'

'Something in one of your mother's notes?' asked Jane, her level eyes turned questioningly upon him.

'I 'm telling it all wrong,' said Peter distractedly, 'and making it worse for you.'

'Are you quite sure that you need tell me anything at all?' asked Jane, and she laid her hand in his.

'I am quite sure,' he said; and then a very surprising thing happened, for he put Jane's hand aside and stood up before her.

'I 'm not even going to take your hand,' he said, 'until I have told you all about it. You see, there was a letter addressed to me amongst those on her writing-table yesterday. I 've shown it to the lawyer, but neither he nor I can make anything of it. It is directed to me to be given to me at her death; but she must have died while she was writing it. It leaves off in the middle of a sentence.'

'I think,' said Jane slowly, 'that nothing matters in the whole world so long as we have each other.'

'Ah, my dear!' said Peter, and he sat down on the bench and took her hand again. 'I 'll show

you the letter,' he said suddenly, and brought the sheet of notepaper out of his pocket.

'May I read it?' said Jane.

'Yes, if you will,' he replied.

Afterwards they could tell every word of the unfinished letter by heart; but at the first reading the words seemed merely to puzzle Jane Erskine, and conveyed very little sense to her.

'When you get this letter I shall be dead,' wrote the woman who had meant to live for many years, 'and before I die I think there is something which I had better tell you. I am not haunted by remorse nor indulging in a deathbed repentance, and I shall merely ask you not to hate me more than you can help when you have finished reading this letter. You must often have heard of your elder brother who died when I was in Spain, the year after your father's death. He did not die ——'

'There must be something more,' said Jane. She turned the page this way and that, as though to read some writing not decipherable by other eyes.

'I 've looked everywhere,' said Peter; 'there 's nothing more. Besides, you see, she stops in the middle of a sheet of notepaper. Why should she have written anything else on another piece?'

They read the letter again together, scanning the words line by line.

'What can it mean?' she said at last.

'I have evidently got an elder brother,' said Peter briefly, 'to whom everything belongs. Most people remember that my mother took a curious antipathy to the other little chap when I was born. I can't make it out in any possible way—no one can, of course. But it seems pretty plain that no will can be proved, nor can I touch anything, until my brother is known to be either dead or alive.'

'What can we do?' said Jane. Their two hands were locked together, and the trouble was the trouble of both.

'I can go out to Spain, where he is supposed to have died,' said Peter, 'and make inquiries.'

'I want to ask you something,' said Jane, after a pause. 'Let us be married quietly, first of all, and then we can do everything together.'

'I 'm probably a pauper,' he said simply, 'without the right to a single stone of Bowshott. I went fully into my father's will with the lawyer last night, and he leaves nearly everything to the eldest son.'

'Dear Peter!' protested Jane, accepting Peter's statement, but brushing aside its purport.

They talked on far into the morning, at one time half distrusting the evidence of their eyes which read the letter, at another looking far into the future to try to pierce the veil of darkness that at present shrouded it. Then, for there were many things to do, the young man turned his face homeward again, and Jane sat on alone in the garden, looking with eyes that hardly were conscious of seeing what they rested on, while the wet branches of the beech trees rocked themselves together, and the tearful autumn sunshine flickered on the disordered beds of mignonette. She sat there until the stable clock struck one, then rose and went indoors. One important decision had been made. They would be married quietly on the day Mrs. Ogilvie had fixed for the wedding; and then together they would seek the brother who, if he were still alive, would be brother to them both.

But the Court of Chancery took that reasonable view of the case which, as it frequently happens, is directly opposed to the view-sentimental. The Court of Chancery, in fact, refused to sanction the marriage of a minor with a man without settled prospects, and one whose position in the world was not confirmed by the possession either of money or of lands. At the age of twenty-five Miss Erskine might do as she liked; until then the Court of Chancery decided that she should divide her time each year between her two guardians, with whom she had always lived. No protests were of any avail, and wise relations and friends were agreed in thinking that it was better to postpone the marriage, at least for a time.

The autumn passed miserably. Peter went to Juarez first of all, and proved to be substantially true what at first he had supposed might have been the disordered fancy of a sick woman's mind. There was no record of the death of Edward Ogilvie, nor did any entry in registers show the name of an English child in the year when he was supposed to have died. No little grave in the cemetery marked his resting-place. One fact, at least, seemed established, and that was that Peter's elder brother had not died in infancy at Juarez.

Not much more than this could be proved, and Peter returned home to find that for the present nothing was legally his. Pending inquiries Bowshott was closed. Those who were in ignorance of the real state of affairs talked glibly of enormous death-duties which had crippled, for a time, even the immense Ogilvie estates, and had rendered it necessary for Peter to shut up

the house and live economically. The countryside, which called itself gay, met at many little parties and talked charitably of the woman who was gone, saying, with an unconscious sense of patronage, that they had always liked Mrs. Ogilvie in spite of her faults. Death, the great leveller, had brought their unapproachable neighbour nearer to them; they were not afraid of her now. It was strange to think that she was really less than one of themselves in the cold isolation and the pathetic impotence of the grave. They could hardly picture her yet as a powerless thing—the keen, narrowing eyes closed, the sharp-edged poniard of her speech for ever sheathed.

Meanwhile, papers were examined, and every box and chest which contained written matter was searched for a clue to the missing child. Peter was engaged in long consultations with detectives, and lawyers were running up goodly bills, and British Consuls were making investigations abroad. A whole train of inquiries was set in motion, and pens and tongues were busy. The powerful hand of the law stretched itself out in secret to this country and to that, only to be met with a baffling failure to hold or to discover anything. Money was spent lavishly, and great brains tried to solve the mystery; and Mrs. Ogilvie lay in her grave in a silence that could not be broken, her hand, which had traced the few lines on one sheet of notepaper, cold and still for ever.

CHAPTER VIII

When Peter came back from Spain he came to an empty house. The big reception rooms at Bowshott were swathed in brown holland and dust-sheets, pictures were covered and carpets rolled up, giving an air of desolation to the place. The flowers in the formal gardens had all been dug up, and the carefully tended designs—so like a stitchwork pattern—had lost their mosaic of colour, leaving merely a careful drawing of brown upon green. The banks of flowering exotics, which his mother had loved to have in her drawing-rooms, had been removed to the greenhouses and conservatories. The sight of the gardeners mowing, for the last time in the season, the hundred-year-old turf of the lawn conveyed a suggestion of regret with it; the old pony harnessed to the mowing machine stepped sedately and quietly in his boots on the close, fine grass. Everything about Bowshott looked stately and beautiful in the clean, sharp air of the morning, when Peter drove up to the entrance after a long night journey and ascended the flight of steps leading to the hall door.

His return to the inheritance which had been indisputably his since he was a little boy had a horrible feeling of unreality about it. Half a dozen times in the course of the morning he had to check himself when he found his thoughts wandering to alterations or improvements, and to tell himself, with a bewildered feeling, that perhaps he had not a right to a flower in the garden or a chair in the house.

'I can't believe it's not mine,' he said aloud, as he drove up the long avenue from the station in his dog-cart, with one of the famous Bowshott hackneys in the shafts. 'I can't believe it's not mine!' Many people might have found in the singular unhomeliness of the big house a just cause for withholding their affection from it, but Peter had always loved it. Every corner of the place was full of memories to him. Here was the wall of the terrace off which, as a little boy, he used to jump, making horrible heelmarks in the turf where he alighted; and there was the stone summer-house, built after the fashion of a small Greek temple, but only interesting to Peter Ogilvie from the fact that he used to keep his wheelbarrow and garden tools there. He remembered the first day when it had suddenly struck him that the geometrically shaped flower-beds were designed after a pattern, and he had counted, with his nurse, the loops and circles in the design. There, again, were the fountains with their silver spray, in whose basins, by the inexorable but utterly unintelligible law of the nursery, he had never been allowed to play. Here was the clock on the tower which used to boom out every hour as it passed, but of whose strokes he was never conscious except when he heard it at night. Passing inside the house was the hall, with its big round tables by the fire, and beyond that was the library and his mother's drawing-room; while in the older wings of the house were the ballroom where Charles I. had banqueted, and the Sèvres sitting-room, so called from the china plaques let into the mantelpiece, where he had made love.

'I hope, if my brother is alive, that he is a good sort of chap,' said Peter.

He breakfasted in the tapestried room which he had ordered to be kept open for him, and then went into the library to write his letters. He had a hundred things to do. At lunch-time he interviewed his steward, his agent, his stud-groom, and the other heads of departments of a large estate. The horses were to be sold with the exception of a few favourites. The gardens were to be kept up as usual.

Some dogs of his mother's would be cared for, his bankers would pay the usual subscriptions to local charities, and the almshouses in the village were to be maintained as they had always been maintained.

After lunch Mr. Semple, the lawyer, arrived. He was a pleasant man and a keen botanist. The

gardens at Bowshott were a delight to him, and Peter had often found him good company over a cigar in the evenings. Mr. Semple was one of those who had throughout urged secrecy and caution in the matter of the late Mrs. Ogilvie's communication. 'In the first place,' he said, 'it may still be proved to have been an hallucination of her mind, attendant upon her state of health; and, in the second place, anything like publicity might bring a host of aspirants and adventurers whose claims would take months of investigation to dispose of.' He advised that everything about the house should remain in its present state for a year, until a proper legal inquiry into the disappearance of the elder son could be instituted.

'He may have died as a child, although he wasn't buried at Juarez,' said Peter.

Jane had departed to spend her usual six months of the year with General Erskine, but she had written to say, positively, that she knew it would come all right; and whenever Peter was downhearted he always thought of her letter, believing, in all simplicity, that Jane was never wrong. If only she were at Miss Abingdon's now, instead of in her uncle's house in Grosvenor Place!

'She 'll miss the hunting, I 'm afraid,' he thought miserably, contrasting their present separation with all the joy and happiness that they had so fully intended should be theirs this winter.

Mr. Semple had a shrewdness acquired from many years' experience in legal matters, and he shook his head when Peter made the suggestion that probably his brother had died in infancy. 'The conclusion I have arrived at, after years of legal work,' he said, 'is that the undesirable person lives, while the useful or much wanted one dies. Those who encumber the ground remain longest upon it, and the person in receipt of a large annuity or pension is proverbially long-lived. However, we have so far not found a single trace of the existence of Edward Ogilvie, though you must remember we have not yet ascertained in which different parts of Spain your mother lived during those two years which she spent there.'

'I don't see who on earth is to tell us!' ejaculated Peter. 'She generally had foreign maids about her, and I think I always had French nurses. I never heard of any old servant who went with her on her travels; and although, of course, money was paid to her by her bank, and letters were forwarded to her by the bankers, the actual addresses to which they were sent have not been kept after an interval of twenty-five years. One of the old clerks at Coutts's remembers, in an indefinite sort of way, that he forwarded packages for a long time to Madrid, and afterwards, he thinks, to Toledo, and then farther south, and at one time to Cintra; but my mother's headquarters seem always to have been in Granada, and the clerk says that he can give me no dates nor indeed any exact information.'

'I did not know she had been at Cintra or Toledo,' said Mr. Semple thoughtfully.

'I won't swear that she had,' said Peter. 'The Peninsula wasn't so generally known twenty-five years ago as it is now. Travelling was difficult then, and people in England, who have not themselves travelled much, are very liable to get confused about the names of foreign places.'

'Still,' said the lawyer, 'Cintra and Toledo are places that every one knows.'

'You mean,' said Peter, 'that in a well-known place, with English people living in it, there would be more likelihood of getting the information which we want?'

'I mean,' said Mr. Semple, 'that, as there is no evidence of your brother ever having been seen at Juarez, the next thing is to find out in what place there is evidence of his appearance.'

It was late afternoon, and as all clerical work for the day was now finished, Peter suggested and Mr. Semple readily agreed to a walk in the gardens. There was nothing left in the flower-beds, but the conservatories and the orchid-house were a real feast of pleasure to the lawyer. He went into the outer hall to fetch his stick and coat, and then, turning back towards his host, he made a humorous signal to convey the intelligence that some callers had driven up to the door. Peter retreated precipitately; but Mr. Semple had already been seen and was hailed by Mr. Lawrence, who had, a few minutes before, drawn up to the entrance in his big red motor-car. Already Mr. Lawrence was in earnest conversation with the butler, and his feminine-like ejaculations could be heard now as he stood and conversed with the man at the hall door. He stood on the doorstep while his guests in the motor, who seemed to fear that they might be intrusive, looked as though they would prefer to hasten their departure.

'Ah, how-do-you-do, Mr. Semple,' said Mr. Lawrence in his high-pitched voice, advancing a few steps into the hall. 'It is a great piece of luck meeting you like this! I have just driven over with my friends, Sir John and Lady Falconer.—Lady Falconer, may I introduce my friend, Mr. Semple?—This is a very sad house to come to, Mr. Semple, is it not?' he said, and paused, hoping for a little gossip from the lawyer. 'I was just driving through the village, and I have been to see the church with my friends, and we thought we would run in and inquire how everything was going on.'

'Everything,' said the lawyer dryly, 'is going on as well as could be expected.'

'How is Peter?' said Mr. Lawrence, putting on an appropriate expression of woe, which sat

oddly on his big healthy red face. He was a kindly man at heart, but an idle existence and his inveterate love of gossip had made a poor creature of him. His healthy muscular frame did not know the sensation of that honest fatigue which follows a good day's work, and his mind travelled on lines of so little resistance that he may be said to have exercised it almost as infrequently as he exercised his body.

Mr. Semple replied that Peter seemed well; and Mr. Lawrence, taking him in an affectionate and familiar manner by the sleeve of his coat, said: 'I should so much like my friends to see the gardens; Peter would not mind, would he?'

Lady Falconer, the least intrusive of women, who had heard the whispered colloquy, here interposed and said that, as she was very cold, she would much prefer to go home; and Sir John added with simple directness that he thought that, as the place was more or less shut up at present, the gardens had better wait for a more fitting occasion.

Mr. Lawrence protested that a walk would do Lady Falconer good, and that, further, as they were leaving so soon, there would be no other chance of seeing the famous gardens. In fact Mr. Lawrence had the door of his motor-car open, and was helping Lady Falconer to alight almost before he had obtained Mr. Semple's permission to make a tour of the grounds.

'It's all right,' he said, in his fussy, dictatorial way, divesting himself of his heavy motor-coat, and preparing to act as cicerone. 'This place is thrown open once a week to the public; and although this isn't a visitors' day all sorts of people come to visit Bowshott on the other days of the week.'

Lady Falconer felt slightly ruffled by the way in which her wishes had been ignored in a small matter, and confined herself to talking to the lawyer; but Mr. Lawrence overtook them on the pretext of pointing out some special beauty of the design of the gardens, or of the fine view that could be obtained from the high position of the terraces, and the next moment he had plunged somewhat ruthlessly into the absorbing topic of Mrs. Ogilvie's sudden death.

'We were all shocked by it,' he said, emphasizing his words in his gushing way; 'and of course to our little circle,' he said, turning to Mr. Semple in an explanatory manner, 'it is more particularly painful and distressing, because Sir John and Lady Falconer had only just renewed a very old acquaintance with the deceased lady.'

'We knew Mrs. Ogilvie very well in Spain,' said Lady Falconer in her charming voice, still confining her remarks to Mr. Semple.

'Ah!' said the lawyer, 'you knew her in Spain?'

'Yes,' said Lady Falconer, 'and it was one of those friendships which I believe it was intended on both sides should be renewed when we should return to England; for, on my own and on my husband's part, it was a matter of real liking. But we have been on foreign service ever since we were married, and I never met Mrs. Ogilvie again till she drove over to the races at Sedgwick.'

Mr. Semple detached himself and his companion from the little group which Mr. Lawrence was showing round with so much assiduity, and, as they paced the broad walks of the terrace together, he said to her, with an air of frank confidence, 'You were with her, perhaps, before her elder child died?'

'No,' said Lady Falconer, 'and rather strangely I never knew till the other day that Mrs. Ogilvie had lost a child. There was only one boy with her when we knew her at Juarez; and, although she was in deep mourning at the time, we knew, of course, that she was in the first year of her widowhood. But we had no idea, as I was telling Mrs. Wrottesley the other day, that Mrs. Ogilvie had suffered a double loss.'

Mr. Semple led the way through the orchid-house and stopped to examine some of the blooms with absorbed attention. 'It is very chilly,' he said, as he stepped out into the cold air after that of the hot greenhouse; 'I hope you will not catch cold.' He locked his hands lightly behind his back as he walked, and continued to talk to the companion by his side. 'I wonder,' he said, 'if you could tell me exactly the year and the month when you first met Mrs. Ogilvie? There are various formalities to be gone through, in connection with Captain Ogilvie's accession to the property, which necessitate hunting up family records, and these have been very badly kept in the Ogilvie family. Also, may I say this to you in confidence? There was an idea in many people's minds that, about the time of Colonel Ogilvie's death and the early infancy of the second son, Peter, Mrs. Ogilvie's mind was slightly unhinged for a time. It may not have been so, but one cannot help wondering if the concealment which she has used to keep from her family the knowledge of the existence of this disease from which she has died may not have been something like a return of an old mental malady.'

Lady Falconer looked genuinely distressed, and protested that certainly when she knew Mrs. Ogilvie she was in all respects the most sane as well as one of the most charming of women. 'And as for giving you dates,' she said pleasantly, 'that is very easily done, for it was in the year and the month of my marriage that I first met her.'

'That would be?' said Mr. Semple, unlocking his clasped hands and touching his fingers

together in the characteristic manner of the confidential lawyer.

'That was in December 1885,' she said.

'Ah!' said Mr. Semple contemplatively, 'then it must have been after little Edward Ogilvie's death, of course.'

'I cannot tell you,' said Lady Falconer, 'because, as I say, Mrs. Ogilvie never spoke of her loss. Perhaps that does not seem to you very remarkable, as we only met her in a most casual manner in an out-of-the-way village in Spain; but we really were on terms of some intimacy together, and one can only explain her silence by the fact, which seems to be pretty generally known, that she was a woman of quite unusual reserve.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Semple; 'I believe no one ever knew Mrs. Ogilvie very well.'

Mr. Lawrence called to them from behind to suggest that the new row of greenhouses was an immense improvement, and that they had cost over a thousand pounds to build.

Lady Falconer politely turned to look back, and then found herself rather determinedly appropriated by the lawyer.

'I always understood,' he said, 'that Mrs. Ogilvie travelled considerably in Spain; and, of course, in those days when railways were fewer, this was considered rather unusual, especially for a lady travelling with no gentleman with her. How courageous she was!'

'Much more courageous than I was even with my husband with me!' said Lady Falconer. 'Mrs. Ogilvie had been in quite out-of-the-way parts of the country; but she spoke the language perfectly, and I believe I used to hear that she had Spanish blood in her veins.'

'Yes; she had property at Granada, and beyond where the railway now extends, in some of the more southern provinces,' hazarded Mr. Semple.

'I think if I remember aright,' said Lady Falconer, 'that she had just returned from Cintra when I met her.'

'I have always heard that Cintra is a most lovely place,' said Mr. Semple conversationally; 'and Mrs. Ogilvie had a peculiar love for beautiful things.'

'Cintra is beautiful, and Lisbon itself is a particularly fine town,' assented Lady Falconer.

'Mrs. Ogilvie was not there when you knew her?'

Lawyers are inquisitive by profession, and Mr. Semple made his inquiries with easy tact; his manner was kind and pleasant, and betrayed so much real feeling for his clients that Lady Falconer was tempted to continue the subject of conversation in which he seemed so deeply interested.

'I wish,' she said cordially, 'that I could remember more details that might be of interest or of use to you. My husband and I have spent a most varied life, in which many interesting experiences have, alas! been almost forgotten; but we were both considerably impressed by Mrs. Ogilvie's vivid personality and her very real charm. These made much more impression on me than anything that she told us about her journeys. She was fond of travelling by sea, I remember, and I perfectly well recollect her telling my husband and me that she had come by ship to Lisbon when she first came to travel in Spain for her health.'

'Yes, I remember hearing that,' said Mr. Semple. 'Indeed, I believe that we took her passage for her, and in going over her papers the other day we came across two letters which she had written home from the ship.'

'Talking of that,' said Lady Falconer, 'I wonder if the maid who was with her during the time I was there could be of service to you? I often think a maid must know her mistress with even a greater degree of intimacy than many of her friends, and I remember it was a particularly nice Spanish woman whose services she lent me when I was ill.'

Mr. Semple would like to know if Lady Falconer remembered whether the woman had come out from England with Mrs. Ogilvie.

'I am afraid I cannot,' said Lady Falconer. 'But stop! Yes, I can. The maid who came out from England with Mrs. Ogilvie left her because she objected to the sea-voyage. It seems that the poor thing was so ill that she never appeared the whole time, and as soon as the ship touched port she went straight back to England by land. I remember it quite well now, because that was a particularly stormy winter, with dreadful gales; and when my illness was at its worst it was another very stormy night, and this Spanish woman whom I mentioned just now told me the story, and was evidently full of sympathy for the English maid. She enlivened the whole of her watch during the night by lamentations over the danger of sea-voyages, interspersed with prayers to the Virgin. I shall never forget how it blew! The house shook with the violence of the gale, and this Spanish woman sat by my bed and told me stories of shipwreck and of bodies washed up on the beach. Mrs. Ogilvie, I understand, had but lately parted with friends. Ah, I see

now! I do not speak Spanish well, and I remember I had an idea at the time that this parting which the woman spoke of had something to do with friends who had left her. But, of course, what the Spanish woman must really have meant was that Mrs. Ogilvie had lately suffered a bereavement.'

'It is strange, then, is it not,' said the lawyer, 'that you should connect this parting in your own mind with the storm that was raging on the night of which you spoke?'

'That doesn't seem to me very strange,' said Lady Falconer, 'because, as I have said, I know so little Spanish. And yet I have an idea that this very emotional serving-woman seemed to predict some horrible catastrophe to the travellers.'

'How little self-control some of these people have!' commented Mr. Semple. 'I always wonder how it is that ladies choose foreign women to be their personal attendants. I suppose you don't happen to know if this maid remained long with Mrs. Ogilvie?'

'I do not indeed,' said Lady Falconer; 'but I am under the impression that Mrs. Ogilvie changed her maids frequently. This will coincide with your view that she was in a nervous, uncontrolled condition at the time, although in other respects I cannot honestly say that I ever noticed the least sign of an unhinged mind. One thought that she was too much alone; but, of course, her loss was a very recent one, and everybody knows that in grief there often comes a desire for solitude.'

'It was sad, therefore,' said Mr. Semple, 'that these friends of hers should be leaving her just then. Mrs. Ogilvie would have been all the better for having a few intimates about her. It would be useful if you could remember their names.'

'I do not even know that they were friends,' protested Lady Falconer; 'and, as I told you, the Spanish maid may well have been alluding to a recent death. But indeed the incident made very little impression on my mind; even if I were able to give you information about these unknown friends I do not know how it could in any way help you to solve the sad question of her mental state at the time.'

'You think these friends of hers whom you speak of would not be able to do so either?'

'Ah!' cried Lady Falconer, 'you are accepting my vague recollections almost as if they were legal evidence, whereas I really cannot tell you whether the Spanish maid alluded to friends or to the death of Mrs. Ogilvie's husband and her little boy. I can only say that the impression that remains with me is that Mrs. Ogilvie had been seeing some friends off on a voyage.'

'It would be important to know who those friends were,' said Mr. Semple.

'I wish I could help you!' said Lady Falconer.

They made a longer *détour* in the gardens than Lady Falconer would have cared to make had she not been interested in the man by her side, whose inquisitiveness was based upon friendship, and whose most persistent interrogations had been touched with a quiet and sober tact which contrasted pleasantly with Mr. Lawrence's dictatorial manner. That genial and rubicund person was now seen approaching with Sir John, and suggested that they 'ought to draw Peter for tea.'

Lady Falconer declined the refreshment with considerable emphasis. This visit to the closed house so recently shadowed by death seemed to her in doubtful taste, and she would now have preferred to return home; but Peter had seen them from the house, and being the least churlish of men he came out on to the terrace and invited the party to come in. He disliked Mr. Lawrence as much as it was in his uncritical nature to dislike any one; but it is more than possible that he would have resented a word said in his disfavour. 'Lawrence is a good fellow,' he used to say charitably, 'only he is so beastly domestic.'

Mr. Lawrence's conversation was indeed principally of the intimate order of things, and was concerned with details of births, deaths, and marriages, such as the feminine rather than the male mind is more generally supposed to indulge in. He drank several cups of tea, and was deeply interested in the fact that the tea-service was not the one in common use at Bowshott, and that, therefore, probably the bulk of the silver had been sent to the bank. He would have liked to make a tour of the rooms to see if there were any other changes noticeable anywhere, and he more than once remarked to his friends as they drove home in the motor-car that he could not understand why the drawing-rooms were swathed in brown holland unless Peter meant to go away again. If so, when was the marriage to be? Why should it be postponed for more than a brief period of mourning? And why did the rooms which he had seen through the windows wear such a shut-up and dismantled appearance? He found food for speculation during the whole afternoon call, and in his inquisitive way gave his mind to finding out as much as possible about his neighbour's doings.

Lady Falconer sat by the fire of logs, while Mr. Lawrence's garrulous conversation went on uninterruptedly. Peter found her quiet manner attractive, and began to feel grateful to Mr. Lawrence for his intrusiveness, without which he would not have enjoyed a conversation with this pleasant, gentle-mannered woman seated thoughtfully by the fire.

'May I ask a favour?' said Mr. Lawrence gushingly, laying his hand upon Peter's shoulder. 'I want awfully to see that new heating apparatus you have had put in downstairs. I was recommending it the other day to Carstairs; but I want to know something more about it, and then I shall be able to explain it better. How much coal, for instance, do you find it consumes?'

When the two had sought the lower regions Mr. Semple took Peter's vacant chair by the fire. Lady Falconer held her muff between her and the blaze, and her face was in shadow. The lawyer said briefly, 'We are in great perplexity, and I think you can help us, and I feel sure'—he looked at her with admiration—'that whatever I say to you will be received in confidence.'

'It shall be in confidence,' said Lady Falconer.

'At the same time,' said Mr. Semple, 'I must tell you that I mean to ask you a great many questions, and tell you very little in return—at least for the present. In the first place, it is all-important that we should know when Mrs. Ogilvie's elder boy died.'

'And I,' said Lady Falconer hopelessly, 'did not even know until the other day that she had had another boy.'

'And yet,' said the lawyer, 'however slight the chain of evidence is, we must follow it closely. You are probably the person who saw Mrs. Ogilvie first after the death of the child.'

'That I can hardly believe,' protested Lady Falconer. 'It seems to me that, however reserved a woman might be, she would still let another woman know about so intimate a trouble.'

'Mrs. Ogilvie was a very unusual woman,' said Mr. Semple.

'But even so——' began Lady Falconer.

'Even so,' repeated the lawyer, 'my friend Peter and his talkative neighbour will soon be back again, and I must examine my witness before they return.'

'But a witness,' exclaimed Lady Falconer, 'whose evidence is based on the only-half-intelligible gossip of a Spanish serving-woman made twenty-five years ago, and a week spent in an out-of-the-way mountain-village where she was ill nearly the whole time!'

Mr. Semple waved aside protests. 'Do forgive me for bothering you,' he said, 'and try to remember positively if there were any friends or neighbours who came about the house of whom we could perhaps ask tidings?'

'I am sure there were none,' said Lady Falconer. 'The charm of the place to Mrs. Ogilvie was, I know, its solitude, just as was its charm for us also.'

'No English people?'

'None, I am quite sure.'

'You have no idea who those friends were to whom Mrs. Ogilvie had lately said good-bye, and who were starting on a voyage?'

'I think,' said Lady Falconer slowly, 'it was because the storm blew so loudly that we spoke of them; and, yes, I am sure the woman crossed herself and prayed for those at sea.'

She hesitated, and Mr. Semple giving her a quick glance said, 'I am only asking for a woman's impression.'

'And at this length of time I cannot even tell you how I came to have this impression,' she replied, 'and yet the picture remains in my mind that these people, whoever they were, were sailing from Lisbon. The maid who waited upon me had evidently been engaged in Lisbon.'

Peter and Mr. Lawrence were heard in the hall outside, and the motor-car was at the door.

'Thank you very much,' said the lawyer, as the door opened.

Mr. Semple left the following morning, and did not return until the end of the week. He was a contented man, and made an excellent companion, and Peter enjoyed seeing him again and having his companionship at dinner on the night of his return. He was always interested in something, and quite disposed to take a book and remain quiet when his client was busy or disinclined for conversation. He and Peter smoked in silence for a considerable time after the servants had left the room, and even when an adjournment had been made to the library the lawyer, who was possibly tired after his journey, sat quietly in a leather armchair by the fire without saying anything.

Peter began to talk about the small items of news of the neighbourhood. 'The Falconers have left,' he said. 'I wonder what they found to amuse them at Lawrence's place?'

'Lawrence himself, perhaps,' said Mr. Semple dryly.

'But Lady Falconer does not even laugh at people,' replied Peter. 'I thought her a very charming woman.'

'She is a very charming woman,' replied Mr. Semple, 'and she used to know your mother long ago in Spain.'

Peter took his cigar out of his mouth, and turned interrogatively towards the lawyer. 'I don't suppose she was able to tell you anything?' he said, with a sharp note of interest in his voice.

'She was able to tell me nothing,' said Mr. Semple, 'except a woman's impression of a conversation she had with a Spanish serving-woman.'

'I should like to hear all she had to say,' said Peter briefly.

'Ships sailing for Argentine stop at Lisbon and take up passengers there,' said Mr. Semple. 'I have been to Lisbon since I last saw you. Mrs. Ogilvie paid the passage-money for a married couple and a child who sailed from that place in December of the year in which your brother is said to have died.'

CHAPTER IX

'I think I 'll go over and see Toffy,' said Peter to himself one day in the following week. Mr. Semple had been down to Bowshott again, bringing a mass of correspondence with him, and had left that morning. Nigel Christopherson was ill at Hulworth with one of his usual appalling colds, which brought him as nearly as possible to the grave every time they attacked him. Peter once again read through the letters and papers which he and the family lawyer had pored over until the small hours of this morning, and then he ordered his horse and rode over to see his friend.

No one ever arrived at Hulworth without remarking on the almost grotesque ugliness of the house. It was a flat-faced, barrack-like residence, with a stuccoed front and rows of ill-designed windows. A grim-looking flight of stone stairs with iron railings led to the front door, and beyond that were large and hideous rooms filled with treasures of art incongruously hung on lamentable wall-papers or pendent over pieces of furniture which would have made a connoisseur's eyes ache. The house and its furnishings were a strange mixture; the owner of the grim pile, be it said, had a mind which presented a blank to the dictates of art, and it puzzled him sorely to determine which of his possessions was beautiful and which was not. He had heard people become enthusiastic over his pictures, which he thought hideous, while they had frankly abused his furniture, which he was inclined to think was everything that was desirable.

'There 's only one way,' he used to say hopelessly, 'in which a fellow can know whether a thing is ugly or the reverse, and that is by fixing a price to it. If only some one would be kind enough to stick on a lot of labels telling me what the things are worth I should know what to admire and what to shudder at; but, as it is, the things which I personally like are always the things which other people abuse.'

And, alas for Sir Nigel and his lightly held treasures of art! his pictures and the vases ranged in great glass cases in the hall were heirlooms, and Toffy in his most impecunious days would often look at them sadly and shake his head, murmuring to himself, 'I 'd take five hundred pounds for the lot, and be glad to get rid of them.' There were days when in a gentle, philosophical way he felt a positive sense of injury in thinking of the vases behind the big glass doors, and he would then go into intricate and complicated sums in arithmetic whereby he could tell what it cost him per annum to look at the contents of the cases and the old portraits in their dim frames.

This afternoon he was lying on a florid and uncomfortable-looking sofa in a very large drawing-room, in front of a fireplace of white marble in scroll patterns and with a fender of polished steel. It was probably the ugliest as well as the least comfortable room in the house, but it happened to be the only one in which there was a good fire that afternoon; and Toffy, descending from his bedroom, weak and ill with influenza, had come in there at two o'clock, and was now lying down with a railway-rug placed across his feet, and his head uncomfortably supported by a hard roller-cushion and an ornamentation in mahogany which gracefully finished off the pattern of the sofa-frame. Many men when they are ill take the precaution of making their wills; Sir Nigel's preparation for a possible early demise always took the form of elaborately and sadly adding up his accounts. He had a large ledger beside him on the sofa, and slips of paper covered with intricate figures which neither he nor any one else could decipher.

His faithful valet Hopwood had been dispatched to London in order to learn chauffeur's work; for Toffy had decided, after working the matter out to a fraction, that a considerable saving could be effected in this way. His debts to the garage were being duly entered amongst Toffy's liabilities at this moment as he lay on the sofa in the vast cold drawing-room.

The drawing-room was not often used now. But it was the custom of his housekeeper to air

the rooms once a week; and, this being Wednesday, she had lighted a fire there, while Lydia, a young housemaid and general factotum, had allowed all other fires to go out. There was a palpable sense of chilliness about the room, and in one corner of it the green-and-gold wall-paper showed stains of damp. Long gilded mirrors between tall windows occupied one side of the room, and had marble shelves beneath them upon which were placed ornate Bohemian glass vases and ormolu clocks and candlesticks. Some uncovered and highly polished mahogany tables imparted a hard and somewhat undraped look to the apartment. The windows, with their aching lines of plate-glass, were draped with rep curtains of vivid green, while the floor was covered with an Aubusson carpet exquisite in its colour and design. And between the green woollen bell-ropes on each side of the fireplace and above the cold hideousness of the marble mantelpiece hung a portrait by Romney of a lady as beautiful as a flower.

Sir Nigel had endeavoured to eat for lunch part of a chicken which his housekeeper had warmed up with a little grey sauce; and he was now wondering as he lay on the sofa whether any one would come if he were to tug at the green bell-rope over his head, or whether he could make his own way upstairs to his bedroom and get some fresh pocket-handkerchiefs. He had had a temperature for the greater part of the week, and he was now feeling as if his legs did not altogether belong to him; while, to make up for their feebleness and lightness, his head was most insistently there, and felt horribly hot and heavy.

He had just decided that he had better mount the long stairs to his room, for not only was there the consideration of handkerchiefs; there was medicine too which the doctor had told him to take, but which he always forgot at the right moment. He thought the journey had better be made now, and he could do the two things at one and the same time. He walked with uneven steps to the window and looked out upon some stretches of field which were euphemistically termed the Park, and watched a flock of sheep huddled together to protect themselves from the first sharp touch of frost, when he heard the sound of hoofs and saw Peter ride up to the door.

'It's an extraordinary thing,' he said to himself as he saw his friend dismount, 'Peter always seems to come when you want him. I believe he has got some sort of instinct which tells him when his friends are down on their luck!'

Peter would, of course, fetch the medicine from upstairs, and the pocket-handkerchiefs. Toffy wondered if he had ever felt ill in his life, and thought to himself, gazing without envy at the neat, athletic figure on the horse, what a good fellow he was. He crept back to the sofa again, and extending his thin hand to Peter as he entered, said, 'You see here the wreck of my former self! Sit down, Peter, and ring for tea; there isn't the smallest chance of your getting any!'

'Why didn't you come to Bowshott, you ass, if you are ill?' said Peter sternly. 'You will kill yourself some day coming down to this half-warmed barn in the winter-time.'

'It isn't half warmed,' said Toffy. 'I wish it were! This room is all right, isn't it? I aired another sofa by sleeping on it last night.'

'What on earth for?' demanded Peter, still in a tone of remonstrance. Toffy had been his fag at Eton, and Peter had got into the habit of taking care of him. He knew his friend's constitution better than most people did, and he expended much affection upon him, and endeavoured without any success to make him take care of himself. 'Why didn't you sleep in your bed like a Christian?' he demanded sternly. 'You will kill yourself if you go on playing the fool with your health!'

'The sheets seemed a bit damp in my bed, I thought,' said Toffy simply.

'Then why didn't your idiot of a housekeeper air them?'

'The duty of airing sheets is invested in the person of one Lydia, the niece of the above-mentioned housekeeper,' said Toffy. 'I asked her in the morning if my sheets had been aired, and she said that they had not. She further explained that she had taken the precaution of feeling them, and that they had not seemed very wet!'

'Oh, hang Mrs. Avory!' said Peter inwardly. 'Why has not Toffy got a good wife to look after him? Look here,' he said decisively, 'I am going to sleep over here to-night, and see that you go to bed, and I'm going to get your sheets now and warm 'em.'

'You 'll get a beastly dinner if you stay,' said Toffy through his nose.

Peter brought the sheets down in a bundle, and placing a row of hideous walnut-wood chairs with their legs in the fender, he proceeded to tinge the fine linen sheets a deep brown.

'They are warmed through,' he said grimly, when the smell of scorched linen became intrusive.

Peter made tea in the drawing-room and spilt a good deal of boiling water on the steel fender, and then he drew the green rep curtains across the cold windows, and made up a roaring fire, and pulled a screen round the sofa. He fetched his friend's forgotten medicine from his bedroom and administered it, and told him with a lame attempt at jocosity that he should have a penny if he took it like a lamb! Peter was full of small jokes this afternoon, and full, too, of a certain

restlessness which had not expended itself when he had warmed sheets and made up fires and brewed tea to the destruction of the Hulworth steel fenders. He talked cheerfully on a dozen topics of conversation current in the neighbourhood, and on Toffy's invitation he sent a servant over to Bowshott to give notice that he would stay the night, and to bring back his things.

'I have been doing up my accounts,' said Toffy, 'and I believe the saddest book I ever read is my bank-book! A man has been down from the British Museum to look at those vases in the hall, and he says that one of them alone is worth four thousands pounds!—four thousand pounds, Peter! for a vase that's eating its head off in a glass case, and might be broken any day by a housemaid, while I perish with hunger!'

'If it's money,' began Peter easily, 'you 're an idiot if you don't let me know what you want.'

And then the whole realization of his uncertain position smote him sharply and cruelly for a moment as he remembered that he did not know how he stood with the world as regards money, and that probably he was not in the position to lend a five-pound note to any one. He had accumulated through sheer laziness a certain number of large debts, the payment of which had never troubled himself or his creditors, who were only too glad to keep his name on their books; but now it seemed that if he were to have merely a younger son's portion he might even find himself in debt to his brother's estate. He had gone thoroughly with the lawyer into the will of his father, and found that everything which it was possible to tie up on the elder son had been willed to him. His own share of the patrimony if his brother were still alive would be but a small one.

He got up from his chair and walked to the window, and pulling aside the curtain looked out on the frosty garden.

'It's going to be a bitter cold night,' he said. 'I think I will just look in at your room again, and see if they have made up the fire properly.'

He returned to the drawing-room and took up two or three newspapers in turn and laid them down again, while Toffy watched him gravely.

'I 've had a bit of a jar lately,' he said at last, taking up his stand with his back to the fire near the sofa.

'Have some dinner first,' said Toffy, 'and then we 'll go into the matter, as I always do with my creditors. You see, if one has a cook like Mrs. Cosby, there is an element of chance in the matter of getting dinner at all; and another thing is it may be so bad you won't survive it; so it's not much use being miserable before dinner, is it, when perhaps you may be buried comfortably and respectably afterwards?'

The presence of Lydia, who listened open-mouthed to all that was said, made conversation impossible, until at last, in an ecstasy of importance at having broken a dessert dish, she placed the wine upon the table and withdrew. Toffy carried the decanters into the drawing-room, where he believed he and Peter would be more comfortable, and having placed them on the table by the fire he congratulated his friend that they had both survived the ordeal of dinner, and then he suggested that Peter should tell him what was up.

'Rather a beastly thing has happened,' said Peter. He rose from the chair where he was sitting and went and stood by the marble mantelpiece. The black tie which he wore seemed to accentuate his fairness, and it was a boyish, unheroic figure which leaned against the whiteness of the marble mantelpiece as he began his puzzling tale. It did not take very long in the telling, and until he had finished Toffy did not speak. Indeed, there was silence for some time in the room after Peter had done, and then, there being no necessity for much speech or protestation between the two, Toffy said merely, 'What are you going to do?'

'I am going to the Argentine next week,' said Peter. 'It seems proved beyond any manner of doubt that my mother paid the passage of a woman and a little boy to go there in the very month and in the year that my brother was supposed to have died, and Cintra or Lisbon are the last places where there is even the vaguest evidence of her having been seen with two boys.'

Toffy lay on the sofa thinking, his arm thrown above his head in the attitude that was characteristic of him during the many weeks of illness that he usually had in the year.

'I can't think why,' he said, 'you should go yourself. There must be plenty of lawyers in Buenos Ayres who would undertake to see the thing through for you.'

'Well, come,' said Peter, 'if my brother has been done out of the place for twenty-five years, and if he is a good chap, and all that, I suppose the least one could do would be to try and look as if one didn't grudge giving him back his own.'

Probably there is an element of fairness about English men and women which obtrudes itself from time to time to their disadvantage; and Peter already found himself occupying, in his own mind at least, the position of the younger son.

'We will brave the terrors of the vasty deep together,' said Toffy; 'it's no use your going alone.'

'You ain't up to it,' said Peter gruffly, 'thanks all the same, old chap.'

'I must fly somewhere,' said Toffy, 'it doesn't much matter where.'

'Has the usual acute financial crisis come?' Peter said, looking affectionately at the long, thin figure on the sofa. 'You can't the least deceive me into thinking you had better go into Argentine to hunt for a man who has been missing for twenty-five years. It isn't good enough!'

'I shall have to get a lot of boots,' said Toffy thoughtfully; 'it seems the right sort of thing to do when one is starting on an expedition, and I would rather like to get some of those knives that fellows seem to buy when they go out to South America.'

'You see,' objected Peter, allowing the question of boots and hunting-knives to lapse, 'the place is right enough, I have no doubt, but it's pretty big, and I don't a bit know what is in front of me. I 'll tell you what I will do, though, I 'll send for you as soon as I get there if I find it's a white man's country at all, and then we will jog round together.'

'I suppose we couldn't go in a yacht?' said Toffy, inspired with a sudden suggestion, and sitting up on the sofa full of grave interest. 'There 'd be much less chance of being copped on the pier than if one travelled on a liner. Another thing, I 'm not at all sure that a yacht wouldn't be a good investment; it really is the only way to live economically and keep out of the reach of duns at the same time. A nice little eighty-tonner now, for instance, with Just two or three hands and a boy on board. What could be cheaper than that? And you could live the simple life to any extent that you liked! But of course something larger would be wanted for Argentine, and she couldn't be fitted out in time. No, Peter, I think I 'll risk having the heavy hand of the law laid upon me at starting, and we 'll just have to lump it and go in a mail steamer.'

Peter laughed. 'My bold buccaneer!' he said.

They sat silent for a time in the drawing-room with its crude colours and priceless china, while the big fire in the burnished steel grate roared with a jolly sound up the big chimney, and the air was frosty and cold outside. The room despite its hideousness was full of pleasant recollections to them both, for when Hulworth was not let Toffy had often assembled bachelor parties there, and it had always been a second home to Peter, where he had been wont to keep a couple of guns and some of his 'things.'

The actual journey to Argentine was not a matter demanding any courage on the part of either of the young men, but the result of the journey might have a grave effect on the fortune of Peter Ogilvie. Tomorrow was to have been his wedding-day; and this fact being persistently present to both men, they left the subject to the last. It was with an effort that Peter said, before they parted for the night, 'Whatever happens, we mean to try to be married when I come back. Jane is awfully plucky about it, but this confounded Court of Chancery does not seem to regard me with much favour at present.'

'It's only for a year,' said Toffy hopefully. 'Let's make a solemn covenant that we shall meet in this very room on the 25th of October 1911, with the wedding-day fixed for to-morrow again.'

'Where is your Bible?' said Peter. 'If you haven't one in your pocket or under your pillow, will it do if I kiss your account-book?'

'The whole thing can be just as we intended it to be,' said Toffy cheerfully. 'And this time next year Jane will be staying with Miss Abingdon, and old Wrot will be ironing out his surplice—at least Mrs. Wrot will, and he 'll look on and think he 's doing it. And I 'll be here, probably with a cold in my head as usual, and thereto I plight thee my troth!'

He fingered in his pocket the wedding-ring which Peter had given him for safe custody, and the care of which had seriously disturbed his slumbers at night. 'I 'll keep the ring until then, Peter, and place it on the third finger of Jane's left hand. No, no, you do that, by the way; and I shall have to wait until I get a wife of my own.'

'Here 's to her good health!' said Peter. And they endeavoured to be lively, as befits the subject of weddings; but Peter was thinking that perhaps his own wedding-day might be five years hence, and however they might plan that it should be the same as they had first intended, it was a long time to wait. And Toffy was wondering how long Horace Avory meant to live, and if Carrie would mind very much his going to Argentine, and whether she would write him one of those long tear-blistered letters in her indistinct handwriting, which he found so hard to read, and, suppose Horace Avory never died (as seemed quite likely), what would be the end of it all? Also, he wondered whether Carrie and Miss Sherard would get on well together if they were to meet, and he hoped with manly stupidity that they might be friends. But what he wondered more than anything else at present was whether Kitty Sherard would allow him to go and say good-bye to her. Toffy was feeling ill, and his vitality was low; in his weakness he thought with an insistence that was almost homesick in its intensity how beautiful it would be to see her in this ugly old house of his, in one of her rose-coloured gowns, and with her brown curls and her hopelessly baffling and bewildering manner of speech.

And each of the two young men, being absorbed in quite other subjects, talked cheerfully of the voyage, and speculated on what sort of sport they might incidentally get; and they discussed

much more seriously the fishing flies and guns they should take with them than the possible finding of Peter's brother or Peter's own change of fortune.

Lydia, listening at the door before she went to bed, for no particular reason except that her aunt had forbidden it, decided that her master and Captain Ogilvie were planning a sporting expedition together—'which means dullness and aunt for me for a few months to come,' said Lydia, with a sniff.

CHAPTER X

So Peter went to London to collect his kit and to say good-bye to Jane Erskine, and Nigel Christopherson ordered a great many new boots of various designs, and some warlike weapons, and then there came the time when he had to write to Mrs. Avory to say that he was going away, and when in the solitude of his life at Hulworth he had time to sit down and wonder what she would think about it. He was not long left in doubt. A telegram came first, and then a letter. 'Dearest, dearest,' this ran, 'I cannot let you go away.' It was a horribly compromising letter, but it came from a poor little woman who had fought long odds, and who was often very tired, and who sat for the greater part of the day making blouses for which she was seldom paid. Mrs. Avory was not a strong woman, nor in any way a great-minded woman, but she was one who, in spite of weakness and a good deal of silliness, clung almost fiercely to the fact that she must be good, and who kept faithfully the promises she had made to a wholly unworthy person in the village church at home twelve years ago. Every word of the letter was an appeal to her dear, dear Nigel to stay in England and not leave her alone. She had so few friends and so little to look forward to except his Sunday visits. And then this poor tear-blotched letter which was neither very grammatical nor legibly written changed its tone suddenly, and Mrs. Avory said that perhaps it was better that he should go. Everything was very difficult, and it seemed that although his society was the one thing that she loved in the world, perhaps the fact of seeing him made things almost more difficult. Her husband, she heard, had been watching her movements lately; they said he wanted to marry some one else, so really and truly Nigel had better go, and if possible forget all about her for ever.

Toffy finished reading the letter and groaned. 'Was she never to have a good time!' he wondered, thinking of the dull room and the half-finished blouses upon the table, the economical gas jets in the fireplace in lieu of the glow of a bright fire, and the dingy paper on the walls. The whole thing was too hard on her, he thought, and everything in the world seemed to be against her.

Long ago, when he was little more than a boy, he had met Horace Avory and his wife in an out-of-the-way fishing village in Wales. Avory's treatment of the small timid woman had roused pity and resentment in Toffy's mind. A student of character would have seen directly that a woman with more power and strength of mind—a woman with a bit of the bully in herself—who could have taken the upper hand with the big red-faced tyrant, might have made a very fairly good imitation of a gentleman, and perhaps even of a good husband, of Avory. But his wife—timid, and all too gentle—could only wince under the things he said, or let her big eyes suddenly brim over with tears. Toffy began to writhe under the cruel speeches which Avory made to her; he never saw for an instant that there was a fault anywhere save with the husband. She was one of those women who invariably inspire sweeping and contradictory criticisms on the whole of her sex, one man finding in her a proof that all women are angels, and the next discovering as certainly that all women are fools.

Presently Avory left the fishing village on the plea of business and went back to London, leaving his wife and child in the little hotel by the sea. There had followed a whole beautiful sunlit month of peace and quiet for Mrs. Avory, while her little girl played on the sands and she worked and read, or walked and fished with Nigel, and the colour came back to her cheeks, and the vague look of terror left her eyes. And Toffy determined that Mrs. Avory should have a good time for once.

The years between boyhood and manhood had been bridged over by a sense that some one needed his care, and that he was a protection to a little woman who was weak and unhappy. And, whether it was love or not, the thing was honourable and straightforward as an English boy can make it. And then one night by the late post had come a letter from Horace Avory of a kind particularly calculated to wound. Mrs. Avory brought it to Toffy to read out on the sands; and she broke down suddenly and sobbed as though her heart would break; and Toffy to comfort her had told her that he loved her, and meant every word he said, and asked what on earth he could do for her, and said that she must really try not to cry or it would make her ill. He put his arm round the trembling form,—and Mrs. Avory took his hand in hers and clung to it; and then, comforted, she had dried her eyes at last, and gone back to the little hotel again. Toffy saw the whole scene quite plainly before him now. The little whitewashed inn with the hill behind it, the moonlit water of the bay, and the tide coming rolling in across the wet sands. When they met on the following day he told her with boyish chivalry that he would wait for her for years if need were, and that

some day they should be happy together.

That had all happened long ago now, and during the years between they had hoped quite openly and candidly that it would all come right some day, although hardly saying even to themselves that the coming right was dependent upon Horace Avory's death.

Meanwhile Mrs. Avory worked hard at her unremunerative tasks, and trimmed parasols and cut out blouses, and worked hopefully, because she knew that it would all come right some day, and because Nigel had said that he loved her. And Nigel wrote regularly to her, and always went to see her on Sunday when he was in London. And every night of his life of late he had dreamed of a girl dressed in rose colour, who had given him her photograph to put on his writing-table.

He read Mrs. Avory's letter again (she wrote probably the worst hand in Christendom), and when he had spelt the ill-formed words once more, he discovered that the blotched and scrawled writing contained a postscript which he had not at first noticed. 'After all, you had better not come here,' it said, 'but I will run down and see you to-morrow. It is far the best and wisest plan, and I must say good-bye. Please expect me by the three o'clock train.' The letter, as usual, had not been posted in time to reach him in the morning, and Toffy realized almost with a sense of disaster that to-morrow was now to-day, and that it was too late to write and expostulate or to suggest to Mrs. Avory how unwise her visit would be. There was nothing for it but to order the motor-car and go to the station to meet her, and afterwards to give her tea in the library, and say to her all the comforting and consoling things he could think of.

Mrs. Avory appeared more than usually worn and thin this afternoon; and her eyes, so ready to brim with tears, looked pathetically large in her sallow little face. She had been sitting up late for many nights to finish her work, and there had been 'bothers' in her little household which she took to heart and worried over. Her dress looked worn and shabby, and her gloves were darned. The nervousness in her manner was increased by ill-health, and she reiterated that she knew she had done the best thing in running down here quietly for an hour, and that she had quite meant to bring her child and the governess; but Dorothy had not been well, and she did not like either to bring her or to leave her alone.

'I didn't know until the last minute that they couldn't come,' she reiterated nervously. Perhaps—who knows?—even she, poor soul, was dimly conscious that she had done a not very wise deed. But Toffy was all that was comforting and tender towards her, told her without flinching that of course she had done the right thing, and that it was awfully plucky of her to have come. He took off the damp tweed cape which she wore and led her to the fire. They had tea together in the big cold drawing-room, and then came the time to say good-bye, and Mrs. Avory pleaded to walk to the station for the sake of one last talk together, and her watch—which never kept scrupulous time—deceiving her as to the hour, she missed the last train at the little branch station at Hulworth, and then wondered tearfully, and with an access of nervousness which rendered her almost hysterical, what she should do.

Toffy had a Bradshaw twelve months old which he promised to consult if Mrs. Avory would walk back with him across the fields again to the house. He consoled her as best he could, and assured her that it would be all right. And Mrs. Cosby, who was really a great woman at a crisis, suggested suddenly and with brilliance that there was a train from the main station ten miles off at eight o'clock, and that the motor, if it did not break down, might take them there in half an hour. She provided warm wraps for the lady, and Nigel found rugs for her; and when all had been arranged, and she who got so little pleasure started for a moonlight drive in the cold crisp air, with Nigel taking care of her and wrapping her up warmly in rugs and furs, Mrs. Avory felt with a sudden rush of that joy of which she had so little experience that all had turned out happily and for the best.

It was not Toffy's fault upon this occasion that the motor-car came to grief. Mr. Lawrence's big Panhard ran into them when they were seven miles from home, and Mrs. Avory was taken back to Hulworth insensible and with a broken arm. Mr. Lawrence was himself bruised and shaken, but he helped to take Mrs. Avory home, where the housekeeper's greeting convinced him, if he had required convincing, that Mrs. Avory was staying at Hulworth. He said good-night when he had done everything that was useful and neighbourly, and had sent his chauffeur in his own car for the doctor, and had been helpful in getting remedies and suggesting cures. And the following day he had the pleasure of being first with the news of Mrs. Avory's escapade. Half his friends and neighbours heard all about it before lunch-time; his own bruises—rather obtrusively displayed—were proof of the truth of his story, if proof were needed. And Mr. Lawrence finished up his well-spent morning by lunching with Miss Abingdon, and by recounting to her in his high-pitched, gossiping voice his very latest piece of intelligence.

'I don't believe it,' said Miss Abingdon sharply.

Sometimes these ladies of a sterner period than ourselves say surprisingly rude things in the most natural and simple way.

'But it's a fact, really!' said Mr. Lawrence, with enjoyment. 'Why, the first thing the housekeeper said to her was, "So you 're back again!" No one had seen Toffy for ages. He said he had influenza.' Mr. Lawrence was going to add some jocular words to the effect that Toffy was a sly dog, but something in Miss Abingdon's face checked him, and he murmured only that it was

an awful pity.

And then Kitty Sherard came in; she was staying with Miss Abingdon for a few days to console her for Jane's absence. Miss Abingdon did not quite approve of her, but, alas for the frailty of humanity, a little lightness and amusement are sometimes lacking in our otherwise admirable English homes, and the man or woman who can provide them is readily forgiven and easily excused. Miss Sherard was amusing; no one could deny it. She told her *risqué* stories with the innocent look of a child, while her big eyes were raised almost with an air of questioning to her bearer's face. Also she was boundlessly affectionate, although she said such dreadful things, and in fine, where she was there were young men gathered together.

She came up the drive now. Canon Wrottesley's two elder sons with her and a sailor friend of theirs, and she was smiling at them all quite indiscriminately and doing considerable damage to their hearts without in the least intending it.

Miss Sherard had been shooting duck in the marshes below Bowshott, where Peter had given her leave to shoot when she liked; and she came towards the house now, a miniature gun over her shoulder, and clad in a brown shooting dress, with a knot of her favourite colour under her chin.

There was a certain jauntiness about Kitty which became her, where in almost any one else it might have seemed outrageous. Even Miss Abingdon always remembered that Kitty had lost her mother when she was four years old, and since then had been the playmate and boon companion of a man who had been accounted fast even in the go-ahead set in which he lived, and who had taken his daughter to every race meeting in England since the time when she could first sit beside him on the front seat of his coach. He had never allowed her to go to school, and he had dismissed half a dozen governesses in turn because they were trying to make a prim little miss of her, and because they always insisted on pouring out tea for him as if they expected him to marry them. When Kitty was sixteen he dismissed 'the whole bothering lot of old women' and finished her education himself. Lord Sherard spoke French like a native, and was one of the best riders and sportsmen of his day. He faithfully conveyed all that he knew to his daughter, with the result that Kitty had more knowledge of French literature than of English, and she and her father conversed but little with each other in their native tongue. But the result as far as Kitty was concerned was that she had turned out a beautiful and engaging young woman with eyes that looked frankly and charitably on the world. She loved you so much that she nearly always had her arm linked in yours when she told her absurd little stories; and she smiled so delightedly when you saw the joke of them, that even when you said, 'Well, really, Kitty!' you knew quite well that hers was a sort of innocence of daring, and you warned her severely that she must be very careful indeed to whom she said things like that, but that of course it didn't matter a bit as far as you yourself were concerned, because you understood her and loved her. And because everybody else said exactly the same sort of thing to her, and because no one would have ventured to crush that blithe and childlike nature by one word of real disapproval, there was not much hope that Kitty would ever reform and become sober-minded and well-behaved and satisfactory. The plague of it was that you couldn't help loving her whatever she did, and she loved you too, which was perfectly intoxicating when you came to think of it, except that you knew that she loved at least a hundred different people in exactly the same sort of way. She kept her real affection for her father and Jane Erskine, and lately she had fallen in love—which is a different thing—with Sir Nigel Christopherson.

Kitty stamped her feet in the hall, and then drew off her gloves and came forward to the drawing-room fire, with the big white sheepskin in front of it; and kneeling down before the blaze she told Mr. Lawrence and Miss Abingdon collectively that they had had very good sport in the marshes, and that she had brought back some duck for Miss Abingdon; and didn't everybody think it was too awfully cold, and what would their poor hunters do if a frost came?

Finally, having enunciated all these small remarks, Miss Kitty turned a radiant face on their visitor, who was stretched luxuriously in a big armchair by the fire, and bade him tell her the very latest news, for she expected all sorts of gossip and, if possible, some scandals from him.

Mr. Lawrence laughed delightedly; he was really proud of his reputation as a scandal-monger. 'Well,' he said, 'I believe I can supply you with the very latest thing of that description,' and then he told her the story.

Kitty had led a rough-and-tumble sort of life, and every one knew perfectly well that hers had been a liberal education at the hands of her father. Yet even Mr. Lawrence would not have blurted out his tale to Jane Erskine, for instance, as he had just done to Kitty. But bless you! every one knew that old Lord Sherard told his daughter his best scenes, and that she stayed with him in Continental hotels which some very particular mothers would not have allowed their daughters to enter. Mr. Lawrence wound up by saying, in a very charitable way, that he didn't blame the poor little woman, for she had a perfect beast of a husband.

Kitty was still kneeling on the white sheepskin rug and holding out her cold hands to the blaze when Mr. Lawrence had finished; and Miss Abingdon, who had tried once or twice without success to catch Mr. Lawrence's eye and to check his loquacity, shook her head as she realized that Kitty did not seem the least bit shocked.

When Mr. Lawrence had left, Kitty changed her shooting dress for a habit and announced to Miss Abingdon, who suggested that she should rest for the remainder of the afternoon, that she was going to exercise one of Jane's horses. She mounted the hunter and went off alone, blowing kisses to Miss Abingdon from the tips of her riding gloves, and so out of the white gates down the road to the left, and then into the open country. She set her horse at a fence and flew over it. Her small white teeth were pressed together, and her eyes, under level black eye-brows, had a fierce look in them. She pulled her hat more firmly down upon her brows and steered her hunter across country, as though following the quickest burst of hounds of the season. Kitty was a tireless rider, and Jane's hunter did not want exercise for some little time after this. The country round Bowshott is known as 'stiff' for hunting people, but Kitty had marked out a straight line for herself, and took everything that came in her way with a sort of foolhardiness which made a trifle of big hedges or yawning ditches, and all the time she was saying to herself, 'I will never forgive him, never!' She had given her whole heart to Nigel Christopherson, and believed that he had given his to her. And now he was at Hulworth with Mrs. Avory, and Mr. Lawrence was touring the country in his big red motor-car telling everybody about it.

Mrs. Wrottesley heard the story from her maid, who had it from Miss Abingdon's butler, and she told it to her mistress when they were counting charity blankets together in Mrs. Wrottesley's bedroom. The canon was away from home, and Mrs. Wrottesley was having a few uninterrupted days in which to do her work, without calls upon her to come and admire Canon Wrottesley. The story was received very quietly by her. She sat a full minute without saying anything at all, and then she finished counting the blankets. When that useful task was over Mrs. Wrottesley began to speak. This was a much more unusual event with her than with most people, and what made it more forcible was that she began to speak deliberately and with intention.

'I am going to stay at Hulworth,' said Mrs. Wrottesley. 'Pack my box, please, and order the carriage to be round in half an hour.'

She drove over to Hulworth, her plain and rather austere face showing very little expression upon it, and she reached the big ugly house to find Toffy sitting over a smouldering fire in the drawing-room, his hair rumpled up from his forehead and his head buried in his hands, and Mrs. Avory upstairs still suffering from slight concussion of the brain.

There are times when the strong arm of a man is the one needful and the one serviceable thing in the world; but there are times again when it is only a strong woman who is wanted, or who is capable of a certain sort of work.

'I don't know how you ever thought of coming,' said Toffy, looking at her with eyes which were about as full of perplexity and helplessness as a young man's could well be. 'I thought of writing to Peter, but after all this is his last time with Jane, and I have no relations myself, and I couldn't ask Lawrence not to say anything, because that would have given away the whole show.'

'I think I can settle everything satisfactorily with Mr. Lawrence,' said Mrs. Wrottesley. 'Mr. Lawrence is proverbially ill-natured in his own kind way, and it would not have been unlike him to omit the fact that I was staying with you during the time Mrs. Avory was here.'

'She came down yesterday afternoon to say good-bye to me,' said Toffy eagerly.

'And I arrived by the same train,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, 'which was very convenient.'

Toffy got up from his chair and crossed to the other side of the hearth and kissed Mrs. Wrottesley.

It was not an unusual thing for her to drive over to Hulworth to put housekeeping matters straight when they were at their most acute stages of discomfort, or when Toffy was more than common ill. She was quite at home in the house, and she now drew up a writing-table to the fire and penned a number of notes in her neat, precise hand, headed with the Hulworth address, telling her friends how sad she considered the accident of last night, how attentive Mr. Lawrence had been, and how, of course, she must give up her engagements at home for the next few days, as she would not dream of leaving until Mrs. Avory was able to leave also. The notes fell like a series of cold douches upon the warm interest and keen excitement prevalent at Culversham. Perhaps only Miss Abingdon was sincerely glad that conventionalities had been in force throughout.

'No one could be more delighted than I am that Mrs. Wrottesley was at Hulworth,' she said, 'though I doubt if it is a very wise thing for a married woman to pay visits without her husband. Still, no doubt Canon Wrottesley in his usual broad-minded way arranged that she should be there. He is always so thoughtful and self-sacrificing, and it's more than good of him to spare his wife to nurse Mrs. Avory. He is an example to us all.'

Canon Wrottesley had always been devoted to his wife. Her quiet dress and her mantle had ever seemed to him the essence of good womanhood, and he respected her for her considerable fortune as well as for her unimpeachable orthodoxy. His highest term of praise of her was to speak of her as the helpmeet for him.

The canon was now sitting in the very charming library of the house of his Bishop, where he was spending a few days, and was busy inditing a few lines to his wife to ask her if the latest

news from Culversham was true. He was warned by a curious presentiment that the information which he had received was in accordance with facts, and, being always ready with a word of counsel, Canon Wrottesley was writing to his wife to warn her that until the whole thing blew over it would be wiser for her not to see anything of Mrs. Avory. Considering his own and her position in the parish, he thought they could not be too careful.

When the second post arrived at the palace, bringing him the unexpected news that his wife was at that moment nursing Mrs. Avory at their neighbour's house, Canon Wrottesley felt one of those shocks which in all their painfulness can only be realized, perhaps, by those who hold a conspicuous position in a very small society. When the world is narrowed down to quite a little place its weight is felt more heavily than when its interests and its knowledge are dispersed over a wider area.

He believed that poor Henrietta had meant well when she had gone to Hulworth to look after Mrs. Avory; but her action proved to the canon what he had always known—that a woman requires guidance, and he meant to tell his wife kindly how much wiser it would have been if, before taking any action in this matter, she had wired to him for advice.

The thing was a real trouble to him, and helped to spoil his enjoyable stay at the palace. He knew himself to be popular there and that his visit had given real pleasure. He had been asked to improvise upon the piano every evening, and had even sung once, saying gracefully to the Bishop's daughter, when she had concluded her very indifferent accompaniment to the song, 'An accompanist is born, not made!' He had preached one of his favourite sermons on Sunday, which had not only swelled the offertory bag to an unusual size, but had obtained for the canon quite a sheaf of compliments which he looked forward to retailing to Henrietta at home. He left the pleasant ways of the Bishop's palace determined to face with a magnanimous mind the difficulties that awaited him. He did not like Henrietta's being 'mixed up in this affair' at all, and, as he sat in the first-class carriage of the train on his homeward journey, a rug about his knees and a footwarmer at his feet, he decided that the wisest and best thing he could do would be to shorten his journey by getting out at Hulworth station and going straight up to Sir Nigel's house. When he had time, and was able to see how Culversham viewed this affair of Mrs. Avory's, he could then decide whether his wife should call upon her or not. But for the present he saw quite plainly that inaction and patience were the best course.

He gave up his ticket at the railway station with a fine air of reserve, and bade his coachman drive to Hulworth in the same manner in which a statesman might impart a Cabinet secret to his secretary. The brougham drove on through the grim stone gates of Hulworth and deposited the canon before the flight of steps leading to the front door. He decided, if possible, not to partake of any food in the house, nor even to sit down if this could be avoided. He was not going to blame Sir Nigel yet, but, to say the least of it, he thought that he had been unwise. The canon stood with his back to the fire in the drawing-room, looking judicial and massive. Presently Mrs. Wrottesley came in and saluted her husband with that calm affection which twenty-five years of married life may engender.

He stooped and kissed her gravely. 'My love,' he said, 'this is not the place for you.'

It seemed to Mrs. Wrottesley to come very suddenly to her that almost for the first time in their married life there was going to be a real matter of difference between her husband and herself, in which neither meant to give in. She regretted in her quiet way that it should be so.

'Remember,' said Canon Wrottesley kindly, 'that I don't in any way blame Sir Nigel; I think he is foolish, and I think, considering Mrs. Avory's position, she has been more than foolish. A woman who is separated from her husband cannot be too careful.'

'I am afraid,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, with regret in her voice, and coming straight to the point at once in her graceful way, 'that I must stay here for the present.'

The canon, although he had not intended doing so, sat down abruptly on one of the drawing-room chairs.

It was a horrible time for both these affectionate elderly people who had always lived a peaceful, orderly, well-conducted life together, and whose home had been, in the mind of the canon at least, the model household of the neighbourhood. Also, it was a real shock to him to realize that Henrietta did not mean to yield in this matter. She spoke with regret, but she spoke firmly. It must always be a surprise—even to a prophet—when a dumb creature speaks, and in a certain sense Mrs. Wrottesley had always been dumb. And now, after years of silence and affectionate wifely submission, Mrs. Wrottesley was asserting herself.

'You must be reasonable, dear,' her husband said at last.

Mrs. Wrottesley replied, 'I want to be reasonable;' and she told him the whole story of how her presence might save from very serious consequences two people who were admittedly not very wise, but who were certainly nothing more than foolish, and might prevent a scandal which would damage them in the eyes of the world and result in all sorts of trouble for Mrs. Avory.

'The scandal cannot now be prevented,' said Canon Wrottesley. 'I heard myself from Mr. Lawrence this morning telling me the whole story. My love, you cannot touch pitch and not be

defiled; Mrs. Avory must send for her own relations, if she has any, to help her out of this regrettable business. I cannot allow you to appear in the matter at all.'

'I have had my letters addressed here for the last two days,' said Mrs. Wrottesley.

The canon rose from his chair and began to pace up and down the room. 'I don't know what people will say,' he said, his forehead knitted into a frown and his fingers impatiently letting off small pistol-shots against his palm. There had never been a better wife or mother, he admitted to himself, than Henrietta Wrottesley, but she was a child still in many ways. 'To-morrow is Sunday,' he went on, 'and we must appear in church together. In this way only can we shut people's mouths and prevent their talking, and although I don't like anything in the form of secrecy or underhand actions, no one need know that you have been staying here.'

'I am afraid,' said Mrs. Wrottesley, still in that unyielding tone of gentle regret, 'that it is too late to keep my movements secret. There is an account of the accident in the local paper in which it is stated that I was staying here at the time.'

Canon Wrottesley loved to see his name in print, and looked with interest at the cutting while Mrs. Wrottesley added, 'I sent the communication to the paper.'

The canon found himself wondering in a puzzled way what was the ultimatum that a man should impose upon a woman. What, in point of fact, was the force that could be brought to bear upon the case? In primitive days the matter would have been easily enough settled, but in modern times moral force is the only lever, and although most women, he admitted, were very easily influenced by moral force, it struck him painfully that upon this occasion his wife was not going to be moved by it.

A beneficent Providence who, I think we may allow, comes often to the assistance of persons whose storm rages in quite a small and narrow teacup so long as they are genuinely attached to each other, may have designed that at this moment Lydia of the heavy foot should enter with the second post's letters, and amongst those which had been sent on to Mrs. Wrottesley was one directed to her husband in dear Miss Abingdon's handwriting.

The canon opened it unheedingly. Miss Abingdon often sent him little notes, but never, perhaps, had she written one which spoke more genuinely out of a full heart than did this. She had written in the middle of the night, although she felt how disorderly and almost indecorous such a proceeding was. By so doing she had missed the evening post, but she sent the missive to the village early in the morning by the hand of a groom, and felt glad, as she did so, that there were no secrets in her life. A letter posted at an unaccustomed hour suggested intrigues, and Miss Abingdon wondered how people could live who had such things upon their consciences.

Her unusual behaviour accounts for the fact that her letter arrived by the second post at Hulworth; Canon Wrottesley was so much upset at the time that he read half-way through it before he quite realized what it was about.

'MY DEAR CANON,'—it ran—'you must allow me to say what I think of your splendid conduct in regard to poor little Mrs. Avory. I had heard the story, of course, of her very indiscreet behaviour, but it was not till this morning that I knew how splendidly you had thrown yourself into the breach by allowing Mrs. Wrottesley to go over to Hulworth to stay and nurse the poor thing. I must tell you that I hear on all sides nothing but the kindest things said about your action in the matter. I do not often write so unreservedly as at present, but I do feel strongly on the subject, and on occasions such as this I may be allowed to say that it takes a good man and a broad-minded one to act promptly and generously—would that there were more of them in the English Church!'

Miss Abingdon used to fear afterwards that perhaps she had said too much; but to her also, as to Mrs. Wrottesley, the relief of speaking her mind once in a way was irresistible.

Of course it weakened the canon's position to show the letter to his wife. He ought to have relented gracefully and with dignity, and to have consented as a personal favour, even against his proper judgment, to his wife's remaining where she was. But Miss Abingdon's letter was too full of kind remarks to be kept to himself. He handed it to Henrietta, and when she had read it he folded it up carefully and put it in his pocket.

'That,' he said, 'is one of the best women that ever lived, and perhaps, who knows, there may be others who see this matter in the right light also.' All that he had previously said passed completely out of his mind as he talked of the insight and the complete understanding that some good women evinced. He began to speak with manly kindliness of the poor little invalid upstairs, and when at last he bade good-bye to his wife he kissed her affectionately and bade her—in his usual formula—not do too much.

Miss Abingdon's letter had shown the canon to himself in his true light; before he reached home he had come to believe that it was he who had urged his wife to go to Hulworth. As was

usual with him when he felt strongly, he adopted a character rôle, and his handsome face wore a more than usually beneficent and great-minded expression upon it as he walked with his fine erect carriage through the village that night; while it would hardly have required a playbill of *dramatis personae* to indicate the fact that the canon was living the part of the Vicar of Wakefield in the supreme moment when he visits Olivia in prison. He had promised his wife before leaving to drive over often to see her during her stay at Hulworth; and the following Sunday he preached one of his most memorable sermons on the text—'And when they shall take up some deadly thing it shall not hurt them.'

CHAPTER XI

Mrs. Wrottesley remained at Hulworth until her patient was better, and then the good-hearted canon joined her there for a few days and was altogether charming to poor little Mrs. Avory, who liked him far better than she liked his wife. Toffy went up to London to join Peter Ogilvie and to take ship for Argentine, and Peter went to say good-bye to Jane Erskine.

These two last-named, cheerful people were in a state of acute unhappiness which each was doing his and her best to conceal. It required some pluck to be perfectly even-spirited and to show good mettle in those days. The world contained for them nothing but a sense of parting and uncertainty, and a horrible feeling of disappointment. Their lives were to be severed, perhaps for years, and over all the uncertainty and the thought of separation hung the mystery of Mrs. Ogilvie's half-finished message. The memory of her was clouded by the thought of how much she had suffered, and the conviction intruded itself painfully that, if they had but known more, something might have been done for her. The burden of a secret lies in the sense of loneliness which it brings. A unique experience, dissimilarity of thought or knowledge that is not shared by others, makes a solitude with which no bodily isolation can be compared. Only one person knew—only one person had ever known: that seemed the intolerable thing to the two persons left behind to wonder what the message could mean.

'I sometimes wish she had been a Catholic,' Peter once said. 'It might have been some sort of comfort to her.'

Mrs. Ogilvie was a woman who could remain silent always, and perhaps it was the supreme effort involved by breaking through a lifetime of reserve that, in its added strain upon her heart, had caused her death.

The last few days that the lovers had together were spent in a very loyal and affectionate endeavour to make each other as happy as possible. They made no professions of love or confidence, nor ever dreamed of promising to be true, because they never for a moment could admit the possibility of being anything else; and they did not even promise to write to each other, or to say their prayers at the same time every evening—the difficulty of calculating the difference between Greenwich and local time on a westward voyage put a stop to anything of that sort. Nor did they talk of remembering each other as they looked at the stars; but they spoke of the future and of all the good things it was going to bring, and they even laughed sometimes over imaginary portraits of the brother whom Peter was to seek, and they told each other ridiculous little tales of what he would be like and what he would say and do.

One afternoon Jane gave Peter a gold cigarette case as a parting gift, with his name scrawled in her big handwriting across it; while Peter presented his fiancée with a very handsome diamond ring, and forgot altogether that perhaps he could not pay for it, and went back and told the jeweller so. The jeweller, having known Captain Ogilvie all his life, and being aware that he had lately succeeded to an immense property, thought the young man was joking, and said it did not matter in the least.

Then came the day of parting—drizzly, wet, and depressing—just such a day as people always seem to choose on which to leave England; there was the usual routine of departure; the 'special' from Waterloo, the crowd at the station, the plethora of bags, chairs, and hold-alls; the good-byes, the children held up to the carriage-windows to wave hands, the 'last looks,' and the tears stopped in their flow by anxiety about luggage and missing bags. Then came Southampton, the embarkation, and a sort of enforced cheerfulness and admiration of the ship. Those who had journeyed down to see friends off adopted a congratulatory tone, as though the fact of their having already travelled so far in safety was a sort of assurance that there could be little to fear for the rest of the voyage.

At last the ship began to move slowly away, and finally swung round and got out of dock. It was just then that many of the voyagers wished that they might have had a few minutes longer of that dismal scene in the drizzling rain, of those dear hand-waving, smiling, or weeping figures on shore. But the engines had started their solemn beats, the pilot was on the bridge. The voyage had begun for good or ill, and the Lord watch over all!

Nigel Christopherson, being a man of feeling, said to a Scot who leaned over the rails with him, watching a group of female figures dressed in black on the quay, 'These good-byes are rather beastly, ain't they?'

To which the Scot replied, 'They make no difference to me whatever;' and the remark, Toffy thought, was an extraordinary check to any emotional feeling.

Jane got her first letter from Peter dated at Vigo, which peaceful port, with its rows of white houses built along the shore, and its green hill with the ruined castle behind, is a haven where many sea-sick passengers would be. They had had a bit of a tossing, Peter said, in the Bay, and Toffy had been very seedy but was better. The captain was a very good sort of fellow, and full of yarns; his cabin was profusely decorated with foxes' masks and brushes, and a few of his admirers believed that when he was at home he hunted. The unfeeling Scot, who had declined to sympathize with Toffy's sensibility to partings, had turned out to be a very interesting sort of man, and not unamusing. He helped to make the evenings on deck pass rather pleasantly with his stories. If Mr. Dunbar, as he was called, had not had such an amazing Scottish accent Peter would have said that probably the stories were not true. It was a letter such as a schoolboy might have written, but Jane treasured the ill-expressed sentiments as maidens of a bygone age may have treasured their lovers' shields; and although she left the letter lying about on her dressing-table, after the manner of modern young women, it was none the less the dearest possession of her life until the next one arrived.

Toffy sat up in his bunk with a horribly bad headache, and wrote a long letter to Mrs. Avory, which he posted at Vigo; and he wrote another letter, not nearly so long, but one which cost him much more time to compose, and addressed it to Miss Kitty Sherard. And this he carefully tore into little pieces one night when the decks were dark and there was no moon overhead; and he watched the small white bits of paper, as they floated away into the black depths of the water, and then he walked up and down the deck until the small hours of the morning, when Peter—one of whose worst qualities was that he always fussed over people he cared about—appeared in pyjamas and overcoat, and asked him sternly if he was trying to get another chill.

At Lisbon the intelligent Scot suggested to the two travellers that they should join him in a trip ashore. The three had made friends in the smoking-room, and Peter hailed Mr. Dunbar as a fellow-countryman, and enjoyed his rugged accent and his amazing penetration. He abounded in useful information about the country to which they were going, gave statistics on all points, and teemed with information. He was an ardent and indefatigable sightseer, and never visited a building without seeming to investigate it. The most complicated currency of a foreign country never disturbed him for an instant, and he would make little sums with extraordinary rapidity on the edge of any bill that was given to him. The difference of price, as stated in Spanish coinage, between a bottle of claret and a whisky-and-soda, might have puzzled some people; but Dunbar worked it out to a fraction in a second of time, and without a moment's hesitation laid his own share of the expense on the luncheon-table of the Braganza hotel. He spoke Spanish better than he spoke English, though he thought he had got rid of his Scottish accent; but he still said 'I mind' for 'I remember,' and differentiated in the matter of pronouncing 'court' and 'caught.'

At St. Vincent Peter wrote home again, and felt a certain sense of insecurity at leaving letters on the rocky island. It was four o'clock in the morning when the ship got into port, and the sun was rising over the hills eastward, while to the west the bare, rugged, mountainous land was a solemn, chilly grey colour. The water was smooth and dark beneath the hills, but nearer the ship it was touched by the clear pale light of the rising sun. The hills rose jagged and sharp against the sky without a scrap of verdure on them; but the kindly atmosphere turned those in the distance to a soft and tender blue. It smoothed away the rugged lines and effaced the cruel-looking scars that seamed their sides, and covered them with a misty peace. It seemed to the young man as he looked at them that things became easier when viewed from a distance. He had suffered very deeply during the last few weeks, and with him had suffered the girl whom he had loved and cared for always, and whom he would love and care for until the end of his life. Looking back at the distant misty hills on Cape Verde Island this voyage seemed to him, in spite of all its horrible sense of separation, to be something of a lull in the midst of quick-happening events. When first he left home he had been plagued with thoughts which he had fought with almost savage fierceness, and he had wrestled to expel them from his mind; but that there could be any mystery in his mother's life had necessarily awakened endless questionings in his mind.

Why, if this little brother of his had not died, had he disappeared? And what was the reason for his disappearance? 'He did not die,' said the half-finished letter which his mother's hand had traced; 'he did not die.' Once, in the middle of the night, as he said the wearisome sentence over to himself, a word had come suddenly before him in letters of flame, and Peter had turned away from it with a cry. A child who had been deprived of his life might be said in a sense not to have died, and there was the word of six letters in front of him in the dark. He turned on the electric light in his cabin, and for a moment he had half a mind to go in next door and wake Toffy. The burden of the suggestion was too horrible to bear alone. 'He did not die!' His mother's mental state might not have been perfectly sound at the time of her husband's death; and her preference for him, Peter, was a fact that had been remarked by all who knew her. Had she begun to write a confession to her son, and stopped short in the middle? 'Don't hate me too much,' the letter said. Why should he hate her? He did not know.

In the morning he was able to put aside utterly the thought which had tormented him, but he

lived in dread of being beset by it at night-time again. He began to fear going to bed, and would sit up talking to Toffy till the small hours of the morning, or playing picquet with Dunbar. Men began to say that he 'jawed' too much and would not let them go to bed, little knowing how he used to try to prolong a conversation so that he might not be left alone with a horrible fear always ready to pounce upon him when night fell, and when only the thud of the engines playing some maddening tune broke the silence.

He tried, with a baffling sense of impatience, to make his own memory act, and to recall the days when he was not quite three years old. But the thing was an impossibility, of course, and his brain refused to give up a single picture of that time.

It was only when the ship had left St. Vincent that a certain amount of peace came to establish itself in his heart, and the large and beautiful consolation of the sea began to make itself felt. The weather was calm and clear, and the monotonous slap and swish of the water against the ship's side was in itself soothing. The company on board were all strangers to him, and this helped to give him a feeling that he was starting anew in life. Also he was on his way to do the best he could to find his brother, if he were living, or to clear up the mystery of his death, if he were dead. There was no horrid feeling of having failed to do the best that was possible. He must find Edward Ogilvie, or discover the grave where he lay; and after that it would be time enough to think what would be the next thing to do.

When the ship steamed away from St. Vincent in the evening, and the lighthouse on Bird Rock made a luminous point in the gathering darkness, the sight of land and of the hills had done Peter good, and had restored him to the normal and natural man again. He turned to look back at the rugged island, with the one point of light high up in its lighthouse, and he thought that it was like some lamp which a woman sets in the window to guide her husband home. With that feeling came a deep sense of the love and the confidence which he and Jane had in each other; he knew that she would not fail him whether he were rich or poor, happy or unhappy, and that seemed the only thing in the world worth knowing for certain.

After leaving St. Vincent the weather became intensely hot, the wind was with the ship, and there was not a breath of air to be had. Dunbar never felt the heat at all; he had not an ounce of spare flesh on his body, and he always ate two chops and some curry for breakfast, because, he said, if you were paying for a thing you might as well have it. He played in bull tournaments, and had a habit, that was almost provoking, of doing everything better than any one else. His sharp-featured face, long keen nose, and eyes with an intelligent-looking pince-nez fixed in front of them, seemed to speak of a sleepless vigilance.

Peter, having a very small amount of information on any subject at his command, was impressed by Mr. Dunbar, and thought that he might make a fortune if he used his talents on the music-hall stage or at a bureau for the supply of general information. The man seemed able to answer any question that might be put to him.

'That is an extraordinary chap,' he said to Toffy. 'I wonder if he would be of any use to us in the way of finding out about my brother?' But eventually he decided that nothing ought to be done until they should see Sir John Falconer.

'We had rather a disappointment here,' he wrote from Rio, in one of his unliterary letters, 'because the yellow fever is so bad that we are not allowed to land. I don't suppose you have any idea how tiresome a day in port is if one does not go ashore. The heat is really terrific, and under the awnings it feels exactly like sitting in an oven.' In conclusion Peter wished he was at home again, and thought Toffy seemed rather down in his luck; and he remained Jane's ever-loving Peter.

'I will tell you a strange thing about Rio,' began Dunbar, as he walked up and down the ship that evening. 'If you make your fortune there, you always go back to England and say that by right you are a Castilian noble.'

'It would be a very large fortune that would tempt me to live in this beastly climate,' said Peter, who was in a grumbling mood.

'I believe,' said Toffy, 'that with luck one could make a lot of money in Argentine. I have got a scheme in my head now, which, if it comes off, should place me beyond the reach of want.'

Dunbar referred to the boom time, and gave an exhaustive statement of the fortunes which had been made in that glorious epoch and had been lost afterwards. 'I have known men without capital make a hundred thousand pounds in a few years,' he said; 'and when they lost it you simply could not find them.'

'People do seem to disappear in Argentine in a queer way,' said Peter with intention, and with a glance at Toffy. 'I know we had a gardener—one of the under-men—and he had a brother who disappeared altogether out there, so our man went to find him, and he, also, was never heard of again.'

'The reason for that is not very far to seek,' said Dunbar. 'The first thing you do when you come to Argentine is to leave off writing letters—at least if you are a camp man. You simply can't abide the sight of pen and ink.'

'But there must be some means of tracing a man who gets lost,' said Toffy. 'He can't disappear into space.'

'You'd wonder!' said the Scot laconically.

'Still, you know,' persisted Peter, 'if a man's alive at all, some one must know his whereabouts.'

'Obsairve,' said Dunbar, 'it doesn't require much imagination for a man to change his name as often as he likes; and I should like to know what police supervision there is over the Italian settlers, for instance, in some of the remoter estancias? Murderers are hardly ever caught out here, and murders used to be as common as a fight in a pulperia. Every man carries a knife, and if you go up-country you will find that half the peons are nearly covered with scars; and if once in a way the knife goes too deep it's just one of those things which cannot be helped, and the less said about it the better. Again,' he went on, 'suppose a man is murdered on his own estancia—a thing that used to be common enough—the peons are all in league, and they generally have had a hand in it. Their master has been giving them *carne flacca* (lean meat) to eat, and that is enough to upset the whole rickmatick of them.'

'I suppose they are not likely to turn on a revolution for our benefit,' said Toffy, in a tone of disappointment.

'I haven't got the fighting instinct in me,' said Dunbar literally. 'Whenever there has been fighting where I have been, I have always sat indoors until it was over.'

Peter, with a desire to lead the subject back to the case of men who disappeared, turned in the deck-chair where he was sitting enjoying a light breeze which had sprung up after dark, and said tentatively: 'I can't quite understand, you know, a man disappearing altogether and leaving no traces behind him.'

'I shall never,' said Dunbar, 'believe in the final disappearance or even in the death of any one until I have seen the doctor's certificate or the man's corpse. Men have got a queer way of turning up, and even the sea may give up secrets when you least expect it. Take the case of the *Rosana*,' he went on, 'and allow me to put the facts of the case before you. The *Rosana* was a ship that used to do good a bit of trading on the coast, and there was a man on board of her whom I used to know, and who had been once a little too well known in Argentine. Well, this ship foundered with all hands on board, and was never heard of again, although two of her life-belts were picked up, and one or two pieces of her deck-gear.'

'Any ship might founder at sea,' said Peter, 'and not be heard of again. Go on with your story, Dunbar.'

The electric lights on deck went out suddenly overhead, leaving only one burning; the breeze blew soft and cool, and six bells sounded sharply and emphatically in the quiet of the night.

'I wouldn't,' said Dunbar, 'give you the benefit of my speculations on the subject of the *Rosana* were it not that E. W. Smith was on board. E. W. Smith couldn't die; he wasn't fit for it. But it's a long story. I 'll not bother you with it.'

Dunbar looked doubtfully at his tobacco pouch, pinched it, and then contemplated his pipe. Peter handed him a cigar-case, and Dunbar accepted a cigar, and slipping it into an old envelope, he deposited it in his pocket. 'I don't believe I should have time to smoke it through now,' he said, and he continued filling his pipe.

'I suppose you come across a good many queer tales, travelling about as much as you do,' said Toffy.

Dunbar nodded without speaking. 'You'd wonder,' he said at last. He finished his pipe, knocked out its ashes, and put it into a little case lined with red velvet, and stowed it in his pocket; he looked at his watch and announced that there was still another half-hour before he intended turning in.

'We might have the end of your story,' said Peter.

'A story is as good a way as any other of wiling away the evening, and you are welcome to hear the rest of this one,' admitted Dunbar. He was a grand talker, according to his compatriots, and he chiefly loved the engineers' mess-room, where he could sit by a table covered in oil-cloth, and sip a little weak whisky and water, and revert to his broadest Doric in company with some engineers from the Clyde. 'The *Rosana*,' continued Dunbar, clearing his throat, 'only carried one boat on her last journey. I happen to know that for a fact, but the Lord only knows the reason for it! Now, this boat was found, half-burnt, lying on a lonely bit of coast a few weeks after the *Rosana* foundered. This is a thing which I may remark is not generally known; but I happen to have had ocular demonstration of it. The boat was a smart built one, with her name in gold leaf on the bows. Tranter was the captain of the *Rosana*, and he liked to have things nice. Now, why should this boat have been found half-burnt on the coast, but with a piece of her name in gold leaf still partially visible?'

'The boat probably drifted ashore,' said Peter, as if he were answering a question in a history class.

Dunbar hardly seemed to hear him, and went on with hardly a moment's interruption. 'I am a student,' he said, 'of the deductive method of reasoning, and I begin with the *a priori* assumption that E. W. Smith could not die. I should hold the same belief even if I believed in Purgatory.' (Dunbar pronounced the word with an incalculable number of r's in it, and it came from his throat like the rattle of musketry.) 'Presuming,' he went on, 'that the *Rosana* foundered, was E. W. Smith the man to go down in her, or was he not?'

'I suppose some of them took to the boat,' said Toffy. 'In an affair of that sort it is a case of *sauve qui peut*.'

'The whole crew would have swamped the boat,' said Dunbar, who liked giving small pieces of information at a time.

'Consequently——' said Peter.

'Consequently,' said Dunbar, 'I 'm just biding my time, and I 'll tell you more when there 's more to tell.'

'It's a queer story!' said Peter.

'It's queerer than you think!' said Dunbar.

'You can't believe,' said the other, 'that this man Smith went off in the boat by himself?'

'I don't,' said Dunbar, 'for E. W. Smith couldn't row, and with all his sea-going he was a landsman to his finger-tips.'

'So then,' said Peter, 'he must have had accomplices, and accomplices always tell tales.'

'There 's one very certain way of silencing men,' said the Scot.

Peter rose abruptly from his chair and threw his cigar end out over the water. 'It's a beastly suggestion,' he said briefly. His face was white, and he found himself hoping to God that this tale of Dunbar's would not bring back to him those horrible nights he had had at the beginning of the voyage.

'Tranter was the captain of the boat,' said Dunbar, 'and Tranter was about the worst sort of coward you are likely to meet on this side of Jordan. E. W. Smith, on the other hand, never lost his head.'

The story seemed finished, and Toffy got up and stretched himself lazily, and said he was going to turn in; but Peter still sat where he was in his deck-chair.

'There might be a hundred different endings to your tale, Dunbar,' he said, 'each one as likely as the other. The boat, for instance, might have capsized, with too many men crowded into her, and have drifted ashore and been burned accidentally or otherwise by the people who found her. Or the crew and captain of the *Rosana* may never have taken to the boat at all, and she may have foundered with all hands (as you say the newspaper reports had it at the time); or the *Rosana* may be sailing in another part of the world with her villainous captain and E. W. Smith and no end of swag on board. Or both men, again, may be sleeping very peacefully at the bottom of the sea at this moment; that, after all, seems to me the most likely ending to them. Of course,' he finished, 'I don't know what grounds you may have for making another suggestion about their probable fate.'

Dunbar looked at him keenly for a moment. 'I would not have made the suggestion,' he said quietly, 'only, you see, since the wreck of the *Rosana* I have seen E. W. Smith or his ghost, and that is why I do not believe in the final disappearance of a man till I have set eyes upon his corpse.'

CHAPTER XII

Peter sat on a cow's skull, bleached and white, at the Estancia Las Lomas, reading a letter from Jane Erskine. He had begun to think that the Royal Mail Steam Packet Service was run for the sole purpose of carrying correspondence between himself and her, and he felt pleased with its punctuality in delivering his letters.

'It feels a bit queer being here,' he said to himself, gazing round him as he spoke. It was the evening of a hot day, and there was a flame of crimson over to westward, where a few minutes ago the sun had sunk through great bars of flame. All round him was a vast, solitary land, but

nearer the estancia were pleasant homely sights and sounds. A cart yoked with five horses abreast stood by the galpon; a flock of geese walked with disdainful, important gait across the potrero; and the viscashos popped in and out of their holes with busy importance, like children keeping house. The farm horses, turned out for the night, cropped the short grass near where he stood. Peons, their day's work over, loitered in the patio, and the major-domo's children rode by, all three of them on one horse, their arms round each other's waists. The little estancia house stood, red-roofed and homelike, with green paraiso trees about it. In the veranda Toffy was stretched in a hammock, a pile of letters and newspapers from home beside him; Hopwood appeared round the corner carrying cans of water for baths; while Ross, their host, in a dress as nearly as possible resembling that of a gaucho, was that moment disappearing indoors to make the evening cocktail. He came to the door presently and shouted to the two men to come in, and pointed out to them—as he had pointed out every evening since they had arrived—his own skill in swizzling.

It was a curious coincidence that had led Peter and Christopherson to Las Lomas. When they reached Buenos Ayres a very pleasant and unexpected meeting occurred, for Peter met Chance, a man who had been with him at Eton, on his way down to the river to go home. Chance had lost his young wife a little while before, and was returning to England to see what the voyage and a change would do to cure him of an almost overwhelming grief, and his partner Ross was left behind to look after the estancia. Ross was at the hotel also, and proved an excellent fellow. And Chance suggested that Ogilvie and Christopherson should return to Las Lomas with him and see something of the life in Argentine, staying as long as they could, to keep Ross company until he himself should return.

The invitation was accepted without hesitation, and it seemed that the two travellers were in luck's way. The estancia was a snug little place, amply watered by a river lying some miles above the last port where the small river-steamer called. This port was nearer the estancia than the railway station at Taco, and the last stage of the journey, therefore, was made by steamer. The river was a wide, shallow stream, very difficult of navigation. Nearly ten miles broad in some parts, at its deepest it never gave soundings of more than five fathoms of water. In dry weather it was possible in some places to drive a cart across it, while in others the current was quick and dangerous. It was full of shallows and sand-banks, and for some miles the course of the little steamer was marked out by boughs of trees stuck into its muddy bottom.

The steamer was a well-found craft compared with any others that had navigated the river before, and was a new venture on the part of one Purvis by name, who had lately acquired considerable property on the river-bank. He was a gentle-mannered, nervous-looking individual, with weak, pale eyes that watered incessantly, and he had a curious habit unknown except to town dwellers in Argentine of dressing like a City clerk. All the men in camp wore breeches and wide felt hats and polo boots, but Purvis was habitually dressed in dark tweed clothes and a bowler hat. Even on the steamer, and in the heat of the midday sun, he wore the same kit, and walked up and down the deck with an umbrella held over his head. He spoke half a dozen languages, but seemed to think in Spanish, for whenever he spoke quickly or impulsively that was the tongue which he used.

The crew of the steamer was composed of a queer mixture of elements; and, whatever their moral qualities may have been, their appearance would not have been altogether reassuring to a man, for instance, travelling with a good many valuables about him. There was Grant the engineer, who never spoke at all, and who loved his engines with a personal love; Pedro, a man with big, melancholy eyes, half Basque and half Italian; an old Belgian stoker and a nigger from South Carolina; and, lastly, John Lewis (or Black John, as he was always called), who came from a Danish West Indian island, and who said he was an Irishman and had been a cabinetmaker.

The little steamer was not uncomfortable. She was a flat-bottomed river-boat, and carried cargoes of hides and other Saladero produce. There were some live pigs with immense tusks, and some tasajo in the hold, and a raft of pipes of tallow which a hawser towed behind. The boat was supposed to draw only two feet of water, but in her present overloaded state she dragged heavily against the mud in the shallower parts of the river.

Sir John Falconer, who had come down to the river to see the two travellers off, drew Peter Ogilvie aside and had a considerable talk with him before saying good-bye.

'Don't attempt amateur detective work yourself,' he urged, 'but stay with Ross until proper official inquiries can be made into the case. There is nothing for it but to remain inactive for the present, but gather information quietly where you can. The law out here is a clumsy mover, and you may have to wait months before you hear anything. Keep your eyes and your ears open; travel about the country a little, and get into conversation with as many people as possible. News in Argentine is not carried by the newspapers but by the men who ride from place to place, and more particularly by scamps who have no fixed address for very long. My advice to you would be to say as little as possible about the business which you have in hand, but get into conversation with men who have lived long in the country.'

'I tried that sort of thing on the steamer coming out,' said Peter; 'but we didn't get very much information. The whole thing, you see, is a very old story.'

'This man Purvis, whom you are travelling with,' said Sir John, 'is the sort of person who

might help you. He knows the country intimately, as far as I can gather, and depend upon it he hears more gossip on board his boat than is ever heard anywhere else in the whole country. Chance dislikes the man, but he may be useful.'

'He looks rather a worm,' said Peter.

'It is generally worms who turn king's evidence,' said Sir John, with a laugh at his own joke, and then added quickly, 'I don't speak personally, of course. Your captain is not exactly one's idea of an old sea-dog, but he is a gentle, intelligent little man.'

'Ross said something about there being trouble on his estancia,' said Peter. 'I don't know what it was all about.'

'He must have some difficult men to manage up there,' replied Sir John. 'There is always more or less trouble amongst these mixed nationalities out here. But that need not affect you, of course.'

'No,' said Peter. 'My cue seems to be to gossip like an old woman with every one I come across.'

'And to say as little as you can yourself,' concluded Sir John. 'The man who speaks very little and hears a great deal is always in a strong position.'

'Although an uninteresting beast to meet,' Peter remarked in parenthesis.

And then, as the voyage was about to begin, the two friends bade each other good-bye.

The steamer trip up the shallow river was thoroughly enjoyable, in spite of the amazing bad food which the travellers had to eat, and the ever-present smell of pigs and hides. The vegetation of the river-bank was beautiful in the extreme, and the smells on board the boat were often counteracted by the exquisite scents which were wafted from the shore. Mimosa-trees, air-plants, and every sort of creeper gave an almost tropical appearance to the low woods through which the river ran.

Purvis proved himself an agreeable companion in a timid, mild way. He pointed out his own estancia house by the river-bank, and invited Peter and Sir Nigel to come and stay with him some day.

The three passengers did not trouble to turn in when night fell, but lay on deck and leaned against bales of wool until the boat arrived at the little port of La Dorada at two o'clock in the morning. Moonlight and dawnlight lent an air of mystery and beauty to the solitary country; there was a sort of vast stillness over the land, as the boat glided to her moorings in the early morning. Nothing could be heard but the chirping of a bicho, or the desolate neigh of one of the horses that awaited them by the little quay. The stars shone and twinkled overhead, and the air was clear and cool and marvellously still. Black John woke the travellers up and told them it was time to disembark; and Purvis, to whom sleep seemed quite unnecessary, was awake and ready to give them a send-off.

'Anything I can do for you while you are out here,' he said to the two friends as he bade them good-bye, 'I will do most willingly. I am *passeando* now, but I hope to be at my own place shortly, and will ride over and see you. Ross has not been out here long, and perhaps does not know so much about the country as I do.'

The Englishmen thanked him and mounted their horses, while their luggage was put into a rough cart, and they then rode off in the mysterious dawn across the great silent country to the little estancia house amongst the paraiso trees.

Ross was a capital host, and as the only possible entertainment he could offer his guests was work upon the estancia he gave them plenty of it; and the out-of-door life, in spite of the heat and the want of newspapers, the mosquitoes, and other minor ills, was full of interest and touched with a sense of freedom and hardness.

Toffy was a man who could accommodate himself to every change of circumstance. His present life suited him, and he had seldom been in better health than in Argentine. He adopted Spanish phrases and spoke them glibly, threw the lasso with the air of a strong man, and tried to pick out a particular head of stock from the moving mass in the corral. He chatted with the peons, hunted wild mares in the monte, and drank cocktails as to the manner born. Ross had decided for an Argentine style of dress. He wore a beard, and his hands were hard from the strain of the lasso; but his old brown polo boots had been worn at Hurlingham and Ranelagh, and were shapelier than were generally seen in the corral. Ross was still at that enviable stage in life when to sleep out on the ground with one's head on a saddle is found preferable to a spring mattress and sheets. He enjoyed swimming rivers with his clothes on his head, and would have liked the sensation of fatigue described to him. Peter would probably always look like a cavalry officer, and would not have been easily mistaken for anything else, even if he had worn a garment of skins laced together with wire. He was burned a deep brown, some shades deeper than the colour of his moustache, and his eyes had come to have a certain fixed gravity in them which did not alter even when he laughed. His clothes, as Ross said, were still hopelessly clean

and well cut, but he rode better than any man on the estancia, and did as good a day's work as any of the rest.

When the day's work was over Hopwood could be relied on to provide baths. Ross, as has been said, considered himself an expert at swizzling cocktails, and all three men had a fancy for playing the banjo, which they could never get in tune.

In spite of many drawbacks our two friends enjoyed the return to the primitive conditions of life. To be uncivilized has indeed considerable charm when the blood is young and the muscles are strong and wiry. Peter was for getting some of his own sheep out here, and a few good horses. And Toffy had schemes for an immense shipping industry, which would carry cattle at so low a rate to England that beef might be sold there at fourpence a pound, which, as he remarked, would benefit all classes. Ross gave his two years' experience with a weight of wisdom. He had a share in the estancia, and having tried to live in London in a Government office on two hundred a year, found Argentine by contrast the only country in the world for a white man.

Peter himself, as he sat on the cow's skull near the door, and saw the pleasant, simple life of the place, the major-domo's children ambling along on their horse, the flock of geese, and the peons loitering by the patio, was inclined for the time being to put a very low price on civilization, and to wonder how Jane would like a trip out here.

'Who knows,' he said to himself, 'my brother and I may do a deal. I may find him a patriarchal sort of cove, living the simple life and tending his own flocks and herds. He will migrate with his wives and little ones to Bowshott, and Jane and I will annex the flocks and herds in Argentine. The place might have its attractions for Jane; and, anyway, there would not be this beastly separation.'

Toffy appeared at the wire door of the corridor and shouted to them that breakfast was ready, and Peter strolled towards the house. It was an absurdly small dwelling, one story high, but with a number of low buildings round it, covering a considerable amount of ground. And withal it was a trim place which a man had furnished and fitted and made ready for his bride, and the poor little garden, now devoid of flowers, was another evidence of his care. The dining-room was a small whitewashed hall hung with guns and rifles, and furnished with a table and a deal cupboard which held some bottles of the rough red wine of the country. The room next to it, called by courtesy the drawing-room, had been built for Mrs. Chance when the rest of the house had been made ready for her, and it still bore upon it the impress of a lady's taste. There was a shelf running round the room furnished with photographs, and a sofa covered with a guanaco rug. In one corner of the room stood a piano, and upon it was a copy of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, with music, for Mrs. Chance had been a parson's daughter at home, and she used to play to Chance and sing very sweetly on Sunday evenings.

The roughly built fireplace in the room was filled with logs, and a guitar always stood on a cretonne-covered box close by. It was on this little cretonne-covered box that Mrs. Chance had been wont to sit and play the guitar which Chance had purchased for her, and one of the peons had taught her to thrum Spanish airs upon it. It had been a pleasure to her during the brief year that she had spent in the estancia house, with its red roof and simple rooms, and the corridor that had been enclosed with wire-netting for her. It was she who had carved the blotter and paper-knife on the writing-table, and had made covers for the chairs. Mrs. Chance and her baby lie buried in the cemetery at Buenos Ayres, and the estancia house always has an unfinished look about it, for Chance likes to have it just as she left it.

Three or four sparsely furnished rooms opened out of the living-room, and the corridor made a cool resting-place for the wayfaring men who often rode up to the house at sundown, and for whose tired limbs a catre and a rug were sufficient for a night of dreamless slumber.

'All the same,' said Peter to himself, 'we don't seem to get much forrader in our search for the missing heir.'

Many weeks had gone by, and not a word had disturbed the impenetrable silence which surrounded the fate of Peter's brother. That the time had passed not unpleasantly did not alter the fact that no single thing had been done, nor a single clue discovered. Peter had ridden about, talked to all sorts and conditions of men, had taken one or two journeys, and was still as far as ever from any trace of his brother. Purvis had ridden over several times from his own estancia, bringing his little boy with him. His treatment of the boy was affectionate to the point of sentimentality. He looked after him with a woman's carefulness, was over-anxious about his health, and treated him as though he were much younger than his actual age.

Peter greeted Mr. Purvis's visits to Las Lomas with cordiality, induced by the feeling that even a chance word dropped by a man who knew the country and its people as intimately as Purvis did might throw some light on his quest. Added to this, the fair, mild-mannered man was an intelligent talker on the rare occasions when he spoke at any length; though for the most part he contented himself with regretting in his dismal way the existing state of commerce in South America, and asking naïve questions which exposed his ignorance on many subjects. The conversation of the three public-school men who knew the world of London, and still spoke its language and discussed its news, who knew moreover their friends' stories and jokes, and had stayed in a dozen country houses together, was widely different from Mr. Purvis's constant

melancholy comments upon the state of Argentine finance. Still, there was no doubt about it, the man might be useful; and, after consulting with Ross and Toffy, Peter Ogilvie had decided to give him a hint of the reason which had brought him to Argentine. Without definitely stating that he had anything to discover, he had allowed Purvis to know that if he could pick up information about a child who had been lost sight of twenty-five years ago it would be of considerable interest to himself and others to hear it.

Purvis thought inquiries might be set on foot, but that it would cost money to do so; and, without actually adopting the case professionally, he promised to keep his eyes open, and had already made a journey to investigate what at first sight seemed like a clue to traces of the missing man.

He and his son rode over very early to Las Lomas to-day; and, the boy having been sent into the house to rest and get cool, Purvis crossed the bare little garden, passed the stout rough paling of the corral, and went towards the group of paraiso trees where Peter was sitting. He wore his bowler hat and had the appearance of being a very delicate, overworked City clerk.

'Ross is not at home, I suppose?' he said, sitting down beside Peter in the shade and removing his hat. The hat always left a painful-looking red line on Mr. Purvis's forehead, and it was removed whenever he sat down. The surprising thing was that he should ever have worn such an uncomfortable headgear.

'Oh, good morning, Purvis!' said Peter. 'No, Ross is not about, I think. Did you want him?'

No, Mr. Purvis would not trouble Ross; it really did not matter—it was nothing. Probably Mr. Purvis did not want to see Ross, and had no business with him, and actually wanted to see some one else. It was one of the wretched things about the little man that his conversation was nearly always ambiguous, and that he never asked straight-forwardly for anything he wanted. And yet, look what a head he had for business! He had made one immense fortune out of nothing at all in the boom-time, and had lost it when the slump came. Now he seemed on the way to make a fortune again. His estancia lay on the river-bank, and was independent of the old heart-breaking system of railway service in Argentine for the conveyance of his alfalfa and wheat. He had been successful where other men had failed. There must be an immense amount of grit somewhere in that delicate frame! Perhaps his chronic bad health and pathetically white appearance and the perpetual tear in his pale eyes had a good deal to do with giving the impression that he must necessarily be inefficient. His dreamy gaze and soft voice heightened the suggestion, and it was needful at the outset to discount Mr. Purvis's appearance altogether before accepting the fact that his mental powers were above the average.

Purvis sat down, wiped his pale forehead with the bar of red across it, and returned his handkerchief to the pocket of his dark tweed coat. He produced a small bottle of tabloids, and shaking a couple of them into the palm of his hand he proceeded to swallow them with a backward throw of his head. Tabloids were Mr. Purvis's only personal indulgence. He had been recommended them for his nerves, and he had swallowed so many that had they not been perfectly innocuous he must have died long ago.

Peter put down an English newspaper that he was reading, stretched his legs on a deck-chair, lighted a cigarette, and, as Mr. Purvis did not seem inclined to move off, made up his mind to submit to a talk with him under conditions as comfortable as possible. As an agent Purvis was possible; but as a companion his melancholy, his indistinct, soft voice, and the platitudes which he uttered were boring to more vigorous-minded men.

Purvis took a small and uncomfortable chair near the one in which Peter was stretched luxuriously, turned his wide-open pale eyes upon the young man and said, 'I have been thinking a good deal about the story which you told me some time ago about the child who disappeared out here in Argentine some twenty-five years since, and has not been heard of again. It sounds like a romance.'

'Yes,' assented Peter, 'it's an odd tale.'

'I have lived in many parts of Argentine,' said Purvis, 'and one hears a good deal of gossip amongst all classes of persons, more particularly I should say amongst a class with whom you and our friend Mr. Ross are not intimately acquainted.'

Mr. Ogilvie put on an air of detachment, and said he supposed Mr. Purvis met all sorts and sizes.

'At first,' said Mr. Purvis, 'I did not pay much attention to the story except to make a few inquiries, such as I thought might be useful to you. But the other day, by rather an odd coincidence involving matters which I am not at liberty to divulge, I came across a curious case of a child who was brought out to Rosario many years ago.'

'What did you hear?' said Peter; he spoke quickly, and with an impetuous movement sat upright in the deck-chair, and flung away the end of his cigarette.

'I cannot tell you,' said Purvis, 'how I am hedged about with difficulties in this matter. For, in the first place, neither you nor your friend, although you seem interested in the case, have

entered into the matter very fully with me. With that, of course, I shall not quarrel,' said Mr. Purvis, spreading out his hands in a deprecatory fashion. 'I only mean to say that before taking any definite steps to trace this story to its source I must, if you will forgive me, ask certain questions about the child; and, further, these inquiries which I propose to make must be conducted with discretion, and are apt to entail a good deal of expense.'

He paused, and Peter said shortly, 'Of course all expenses will be paid.'

'It will require immense patience to prove anything about an unknown infant who came out here twenty-five years ago,' said Purvis.

'I always thought it was rather hopeless,' said Peter; 'but it seemed to me the right thing to do.'

'It seemed the right thing to do,' said Purvis like an echo. The dreamy look was in his lack-lustre, weak eyes again, and his soft voice was more than usually indistinct. 'I should like very much if you could tell me anything about the man's childhood,' he continued. 'It is important to know every detail you can possibly furnish for the clue.'

'I never even saw a picture or a photograph of him,' said Peter.

'It is perplexing,' said Purvis.

'Yes,' said Peter, 'it is rather annoying.'

'Old servants are proverbial for their long memories,' the clerkly visitor went on. 'Are there any such remaining in his old home who would know anything about the man? Even a birth-mark—although it is a thing most often connected with cheap romances nowadays—might help to establish a case.'

'Or disestablish it,' said Peter.

'Or disestablish it,' repeated the echo.

'As a matter of fact,' Peter said, relenting a little, 'the child was born abroad, and no evidence of that sort is forthcoming. The lawyers have followed every possible clue that could lead to information about him without any result whatever.'

'Singular!' said Purvis.

'Yes,' assented Peter, 'I suppose there are few cases in which a man has disappeared so completely, and left no trace behind him.'

'The property which is at stake is a large one, I understood you to say,' said Purvis.

'I don't think I said so,' Peter answered; 'but there is no harm in telling you that some money is involved.'

'I should certainly know if any considerable property had been willed away about here,' said Purvis quietly; 'and you see our richest men in camp have really not much else except landed property to leave. In Buenos Ayres, and Rosario too, a man of importance in the town dying and leaving money could easily be traced.'

'Well, I haven't exactly expectations from him,' said Peter, feeling that he was getting into a muddle. 'The fact is,' he said cordially, 'I shall be interested to hear news of the man if you can obtain any for me.'

So far he had always regarded his brother's existence as some remote and hardly possible contingency. Now he began to see plainly that the man might very possibly be alive, and not only so, but that it might also be possible to trace his whereabouts. The sudden realization of this staggered him for a moment; but he went on steadily, 'I want the man found, and I shall spare no trouble or expense in finding him. Even if he is dead I do not mind telling you that any definite information would be welcome to me; and if he is alive my object is to find him as soon as possible.'

Mr. Purvis took out his pocket-book. 'You will at least know whether the man was dark or fair?' he said.

'Fair, I suppose,' said Peter; 'all the portraits in the house are of fair men.'

'The man I spoke of is dark,' said Purvis, continuing his jottings in his notebook in a neat hand.

'Fair children often get dark as they grow older,' said Peter.

Purvis acquiesced. 'The singular thing about it all is,' he said, 'that no one now seems to be living who saw the boy when he was a baby.'

'No one can be traced,' said Peter.

'This affair of the child in Rosario is probably a mare's nest,' said Mr. Purvis in his hopeless way, as he closed his pocket-book and put a strap round it.

'Well, at least find out all you can about him,' said Peter, as Hopwood appeared with coffee, and Ross and Toffy joined them and sat down under the paraiso trees. There had been some heavy work on the estancia that morning, followed by a lazy afternoon.

'Can you tell me, Purvis,' said Toffy, breaking off an earnest conversation with Ross, 'why there should be such an enormous difficulty about getting a boiled shirt to wear? I suppose it really does cleanse one's linen to bang it with a stone in the river, but the appearance of greyness makes one doubtful.'

'You and Peter are both so beastly civilized!' said Ross, in a flannel shirt with baggy breeches and long boots. 'You don't even like killing cattle, and the way Hopwood polishes your boots makes them look much more fitted for St. James's Street than for the camp.'

'You ought to make friends with Juan Lara's wife,' said Purvis. 'She often washes Dick's little things for him, and does it very nicely.'

'I believe that Lara, on purely economical grounds, wears our shirts a week or two before he hands them over to his wife to wash,' said Ross, laughing.

'Ross,' said Peter, 'employs the gaucho's plan, and wears three shirts, and when the top one gets dirty he discloses the next one to view.'

'Remember, little man,' said Ross, stretching out a huge foot towards Peter's recumbent figure on the deck-chair, 'I 'm a head and shoulders taller than you are.'

'I 'm sure Mr. Ogilvie's remark was only in fun,' interposed Purvis. He rose and went to summon his boy to come and have coffee, and the three men left behind under the trees watched him disappearing into the house.

'If it were a matter of real necessity,' said Ross, 'I believe I could endure the loss of Purvis; he becomes a bore, and tears and tabloids combined are really very depressing.'

'Poor beast!' said Toffy charitably.

'I can't make out,' said Ross, 'what the trouble is at present on his estancia. I have only heard some native gossip, and I don't know what it is all about; but there seems to be an idea that Purvis is lying on the top of a mine which may "go off sudden."'

'I believe,' began Peter, 'that Purvis is going to be of use, as Sir John thought he might be. There is a very odd tale he was telling me just now.' He broke off suddenly as Purvis reappeared in his usual quiet, shadowy way. He brought a small saddle-bag with him when he travelled, which seemed to be filled for the most part with papers. His dark clothes were always neatly brushed and folded by himself, and he generally spent his days riding to and fro between the house and the nearest telegraph-office.

'You should take a holiday while you are here,' said Toffy, seeing Purvis sitting down immediately to write one of his interminable telegrams. 'It would do you good.'

'It's my nerves,' said Purvis hopelessly.

Ross laughed and said, 'If I lived on weak tea and tabloids as you do, Purvis, I should be in my grave in ten days.'

'I think,' said Purvis, 'that these new phospherine things are doing me some good. But I sleep so little now. I don't suppose there's an hour of the night when I 'm so sound asleep a whisper would not wake me.'

'It takes a good loud gong,' said Ross, 'to make me even realize that I am in bed.'

'At home,' said Peter, 'I once had an alarm-clock fixed above my bed to wake me, and at last I told the man who sold it to me that it never struck; and really I thought it did not until he showed me that it worked all right.'

'There is a beastly bell for the out-of-door servants at Hulworth,' said Toffy, 'which is beside my window, and——'

'I know that bell,' said Peter. 'I tie it up regularly every time I am at Hulworth.'

'Have you also got a country seat?' asked Mr. Purvis.

'Oh, Hulworth is a mouldy old barrack,' replied Toffy. '"Country seat" is too fine a name for it.'

'Is it quite near Bowshott?' asked Purvis.

'No, it's nine miles off,' said Peter, 'unless you ride across country.'

'I wish,' he said to Ross that evening as they sat together in the corridor, 'that I had any one else to help me in this affair except Purvis.'

Ross knew the whole story, and was as trustworthy and straightforward a man as ever breathed. 'I wish you had,' he said cordially; 'but in his own creepy fashion I believe Purvis is working for you as well as he can, and he has an extraordinary knowledge of this country and its language. You see, it is not as if you were looking for your brother amongst the most respectable English colonists in the land. You may have to hunt for him in some remarkably queer places, and it is there, it strikes me, that Purvis will help you.'

'I wish the thing were settled one way or another,' said Peter, 'so that I might know where I stand. You see, if my brother is alive—— Well?'

'Nothing, only I thought I heard something moving outside the wire-netting, and I hate the way Purvis creeps about.'

'Purvis is putting his little boy to bed and hearing him say his prayers,' said Toffy. 'He is a queer mixture.'

Rosa rose, and walking to the edge of the corridor peered out into the pitch-black night.

'It 's so dark,' he said, 'I cannot see a thing.'

'Never mind,' said Peter, 'there are no wild beasts to spring at you unawares. Do you remember poor Cranley, who was in Pitt's house at Eton? Did you ever hear how he was killed in his veranda in India by a tiger?'

'Yes,' said Ross absently, 'awfully sad thing. Do you know, Peter, I believe I must walk round to the other side of the house and see if that chap is really putting his child to bed.'

CHAPTER XIII

So much has been said and so much has been written on the subject of the man who works and the woman who weeps, the man who fares forth and the woman who waits at home, that it hardly seems necessary to begin a chapter with another dissertation upon this theme. Lovers are proverbially discontented in the adverse conditions of separation. Peter Ogilvie would have given much to be at home in the winter following his mother's death, and there is no doubt that Jane Erskine felt that things would have been many times easier away from home. But if these two persons had exchanged places their sentiments would doubtless have been exchanged also, thus proving what a difficult class of beings lovers are, and how impossible it is to satisfy or to console them.

Coming as it did in the middle of a long dull winter the change to Culversham was received by Jane with whole-hearted joy. Miss Abingdon's large staff of servants, all elderly and all overpaid, combined with their mistress to welcome Miss Erskine back. The familiar rooms had never looked more pleasant than on this bleak December afternoon. A big tea-table was set by the fire, and the massive silver upon it winked delightedly at the newly arrived guest. The fire (Miss Abingdon was famous for her good fires) roared joyfully up the chimney; the dogs knew Jane's voice long before she was out of the carriage, and proceeded to give an almost hysterical demonstration of their affection. And Miss Abingdon, whom emotion always made more than usually severe, snubbed her maid and scolded the butler, and, sitting down by the fire while Jane poured out tea, entered into so long and minute an account of the gardener's shortcomings that it would seem as though her niece had come from London for no other reason than to hear the recital of her wrongs.

'You must go to bed early,' said Miss Abingdon when she and Jane went to dress for dinner; and she kept her up talking until long after twelve o'clock. Mrs. Avory was established in a charming little cottage almost at the gate of the Vicarage, and was a sort of senior curate to Canon Wrottesley. Mrs. Avory, Miss Abingdon said, was really able to appreciate the canon, and in going so far the lady probably meant that Mrs. Avory wholly admired and perhaps came very near to accepting as her Pope the good-looking vicar. Mr. Lawrence was being most attentive and useful, as he always was, and had chosen a new tea-service for Miss Abingdon the last time he was in town—his taste was perfect in such matters. He had even arranged to have her baths painted with a special sort of white enamel, and Miss Abingdon could only hope the world would not censure her for confiding these intimate domestic details to a gentleman. Mrs. Wrottesley was still very far from well; her illness seemed to have brought out—so Miss Abingdon said—all the nobility of Canon Wrottesley's character. But—in justice, Miss Abingdon ought to say—Mrs.

Wrottesley had been equally self-forgetful, and had insisted on her husband's going into society a little. He was coming to them—according to old-established custom—to dinner on Christmas Day, and Miss Sherard was coming down for the week, and whom else would Jane like to ask for Christmas?

Miss Abingdon was a staunch upholder of familiar customs. There was a certain ritual to be observed during Christmas week, and Miss Abingdon observed it. She gave handsome presents to her household on Christmas morning, and she always wept in church on Christmas Day, out of respect to the memory of an elder sister who had died many years ago, and whom as a matter of fact Miss Abingdon had never known very intimately, for she had married and left home when Mary Abingdon was but a child. She gave tips to bell-ringers and carol-singers, and entertained Sunday-school children and 'mothers' in the laundry. These anniversaries, she was wont to remark conscientiously, mitigating the enjoyment of placing handsome presents beside her guests' breakfast plates—these anniversaries were full of sadness. And having suffered fewer bereavements than commonly fall to the lot of most women of her age, she dutifully thought of her elder sister, whom she vaguely remembered as an occasional guest at her father's house, and she could not have enjoyed a Christmas Day sermon in which there was not an allusion to empty chairs.

After morning service Miss Abingdon walked to the Vicarage and bestowed her yearly gifts upon the Wrottesley family. It was a matter of conscience with her to give a present of exactly the same value to Mrs. Wrottesley as to the canon, and this year she offered her little gifts with a good deal of compunction, remembering how difficult she had often found it to be quite fair in the distribution. For Mrs. Wrottesley was failing in health, and in her own plain, unostentatious way she had made up her mind that her time for quitting this world was not very far off. She wrote her will with scrupulous exactness and justness, and having done so she made no allusion whatever to what must have been occupying her thoughts to the exclusion of everything else, but continued to live the life in which care for herself had always been conspicuously absent.

She received Miss Abingdon and Jane on Christmas Day in her pleasant drawing-room which the wintry sunshine was flooding with warmth and joyousness, and she tendered her thanks for the presents which had been brought for her, assured her inquirers that she was very much better in health, and said that she had ordered no dinner at home, so that her husband and boys might be forced to accept Miss Abingdon's customary hospitality. Canon Wrottesley received his wife's statement as to the improvement of her health with ingenuous pleasure. He believed that she was really looking better, twitted her kindly on her pale cheeks, and with the optimism which declines to harbour fears and apprehensions he refused to believe that she was seriously ill. The canon himself had had a bad cold lately, and his evident wish to believe that his own malady was as serious as Mrs. Wrottesley's had something pathetic in it. If he could get rid of a heavy cold and feel quite himself by Christmas Day, his wife surely would pick up in health as soon as the warm weather should come. He believed he was doing right in making light of her ailments, and Mrs. Wrottesley saw all this quite plainly, and loved him none the less for it.

'How is your cold?' said Miss Abingdon, with sympathy in her voice, and the vicar threw back his handsome head and tapped his throat, which he said was a bit husky still, although it was no use giving way to illness. 'Master your health,' he said in a tone of muscular Christianity, 'and it won't master you—eh, mamma?' he added, with an encouraging glance at his wife's pale face on the sofa.

The Vicar of Wakefield, and even Mr. Pickwick himself, had never been more jovial at a Christmas party than were Miss Abingdon's guests. A silver bowl in the middle of the table suggested punch; Canon Wrottesley must brew a wassail bowl. A footman was sent for this thing and that, for lemons and boiling water—the water must boil, remember? And too much sugar would spoil the whole thing. The vicar stirred the ingredients with an air, and poured from time to time a spoonful of the punch into a wine-glass, and sampled its quality by rolling it in his mouth and screwing up his eyes.

The wassail bowl being now mixed to his satisfaction, he filled the glasses of the company, allotting to each lady the thimbleful which he believed to be a woman's share of any alcoholic beverage, and extracting compliments from every one. The wassail bowl was a triumph, and the candle of Mr. Pickwick was put out. Even Dickens' hero could not have given such an air of jollity to a festive occasion like this. He toasted every one in the good old-fashioned custom, requesting 'A glass of wine with you' on this side and on that. After dinner the presence of Dorothy Avory furnished the pretext for inaugurating a country dance in the hall. Canon Wrottesley pushed chairs aside and rolled rugs up, and before many minutes were over Sir Roger de Coverley was in full swing, and he was footing it with the indomitable energy of the man whose feet may be heavy but whose heart is aye young.

Miss Abingdon in grey satin was the vicar's partner, and attempted to go through the steps in the minuet style; the young Wrottesleys, on the other hand, were at an age when to be asked to dance Sir Roger de Coverley can only be construed as deadly insult. Fortunately for them, the vicar by some strategical movement always found himself in the enviable position of the dancer who ambles forward to make his bow.

The lady who was playing the piano at last stopped the music with a few solemn chords, faintly suggestive of an Amen, and Canon Wrottesley, who was proceeding with his fifth or sixth

sally into the middle of the figure, stopped breathless. Dorothy Avory looked over-heated when the dance was finished, and as she had furnished the excuse for a rather poor attempt at romping, her obvious fatigue was quite sufficient to give the canon an opportunity of a little quiet reading until all were rested. He put on his spectacles—which he always wore with an air of apology—and gave out the title of the story, *The Old Vicomte—A Christmas Episode*.

Doubtless the scene of the story was laid in France, but that fact hardly justified Canon Wrottesley in reading the whole of it in broken English. His knowledge of French had always been a matter of pride with him, and he enjoyed rolling out the foreign names with a perfect accent.

The number of listeners in the room had diminished considerably before the reading was finished. Good-nights were said on all sides, the Vicarage party drove away, and, the conscientious romping and jollity being over, it may have been felt by some of Miss Abingdon's guests that the duties of Christmas Day had not been altogether light, and that now perhaps enforced cheerfulness might be abandoned in favour of a more easy and natural frame of mind.

Kitty Sherard came into Jane's room in her dressing-gown, with her hair-brush in her hand, and deliberately relaxed after the fatigues of the evening. Most girls with such a profusion of curls as Kitty's would have been content to allow them to wander unrestrained over her shoulders; but Miss Sherard with her passion for decoration would have dressed beautifully on a desert island, if her trunks had been washed ashore with her; she had fastened a knot of rose-coloured ribbon in her hair, and wore it on one side just over her eye with an unstudied and perfectly successful effect.

'I suppose you know,' said Jane, 'that you are extraordinarily pretty, Kitty?'

'I spend a fortune on dresses which look cheap,' said Kitty, 'and so people think I am nice-looking.'

Jane thought such humility on the part of any one so pretty as Miss Sherard was a sign in her that she must be out of spirits; so she said, 'Oh, nonsense, Kitty!' in a very affectionate way, and begged that Miss Sherard would smoke a cigarette if she felt inclined.

'No,' said Kitty, 'I don't think I want to smoke.'

Jane drew her chair nearer the big chair on the hearth-rug, and, blowing out the candles, the two girls sat by the firelight.

Tenderness, as every one knows, is an ineradicable instinct of womanhood. Kitty Sherard might smoke cigarettes and drive in a very high dogcart, but just then her heart felt very nearly breaking, and she was so grateful to Jane for blowing out the lights and sitting near her that in defiance of her mood she began to laugh.

'What a moist party we were in church this morning!' she said, smiling broadly, and ignoring the fact that her eyes had tears in them. 'Miss Abingdon looked conscientiously tearful, and Mrs. Avory applied herself to her pocket-handkerchief as soon as the canon began his usual joyful Christmas message about empty chairs and absent friends.'

'Poor Mrs. Avory!' said Jane, 'weeping has become a sort of habit with her, and tears come very easily. If we had trimmed parasols and eaten tinned food for supper for a year or two, Kitty, I imagine we should become very tearful too.'

Miss Sherard unloosed the rose-coloured ribbon which bound her hair, and beginning to brush out her curls she said 'Yes,' slowly, and turned to other topics.

'Do you ever feel quite old, Jane?' she said at last. 'I do, especially during a long frost. I feel as if I had tried every single bit of pleasure that there is in the world and had come through it and out on the other side, and found that none of it was the least little bit of good.'

'Heaven send us a thaw soon!' exclaimed Jane.

'I quite adore my father,' said Kitty with emphasis, 'and I think he helps to keep me young; but it is rather pathetic, isn't it, that any one should think one so perfect as he thinks me?'

Jane rose ostentatiously from her place and opened the window and consulted a thermometer that hung outside.

'Still freezing hard,' she said, and returned to her seat again.

'You are rather a brick, Jane,' said Kitty.

'To-morrow,' said Jane, 'I shall certainly write to your father urging his immediate return before you begin to grow grey-haired.'

'You 've had a fairly odious Christmas Day,' said Kitty, not noticing the interruption. 'You 've had to dry Miss Abingdon's tears, and listen to Canon Wrottesley reading aloud, and you have had to be hearty to carol-singers and to waft holly-berries in the faces of mothers. Why don't you

throw something at me when I come to your room in the middle of the night as cross as a bear with a sore head, and begin to grumble at you?'

This remark Jane considered serious. 'The end of it will be, that you 'll get engaged to be married, Kitty,' she said, 'and then I shall jeer at you and recall to you every one of your past flirtations, and all your good resolutions about remaining single, and being happy ever after.'

'Is it really still Christmas Day?' said Kitty. 'I thought it began quite a week ago, and that we had had nights and nights of wassail bowls and old memories and Christmas-card cheerfulness.' She gathered up her hair-pins and brushes and gave a yawn. 'If it is nearly twelve o'clock I suppose I ought to go,' she said.

'I am not a bit sleepy,' quoth Jane.

'Apart from the fact of my winter being dull,' said Kitty, 'with my beloved parent in Rome, my temper is never proof against giving way when any one reads aloud to me. The story of the French vicomte is really answerable for my present horrible state of mind.'

'One always connects reading aloud with sick-beds and work-parties,' said Jane. 'When you are ill, Kitty, I intend to come and read good books to you.'

'Mrs. Avory encouraged the canon,' said Kitty. 'I found out afterwards that she had read the story before, and yet she gave a sort of surprised giggle at everything.'

'The Wrottesleys are being awfully good to her,' said Jane excusingly.

Kitty was still gazing into the fire; her tone when she spoke was that of a sensible person considering some subject only remotely interesting to her. 'I suppose,' she said steadily, but with a touch of curiosity, 'that Mrs. Avory will always continue to think that to be true for ever and ever to Toffy is the most noble and virtuous action in the world.'

'They have been very faithful to each other,' said Jane.

A most unexpected thing then happened, for Kitty kneeled down suddenly on the hearth-rug, while the firelight shone in her eyes and gave a fierce red look to them. 'Oh, what is the use of it all?' she cried, 'and what is to be the end of it? Mr. Avory is not going to die—he 's the strongest man I know, and he can't be much more than forty years old! How does she think it is all going to end? Don't you see how absurd the whole thing is? She's seven years older than Toffy, so that even if she could marry him it would not be the best thing for him. Oh, I know she has behaved well, and worked hard! I know she has eaten horrid food and trimmed parasols, and been faithful and good, but will she ever let him care for any one else?'

'Kitty!' said Jane; she took another step forward, and taking Kitty's face between her hands she turned it towards her. 'Kitty!'

'Isn't it ridiculous!' said Kitty. She swallowed down a sob in her throat and made a pretence of laughing while her hands played with her hair-brush, and her eyes, which endeavoured to blaze defiance, only succeeded in looking large and full of tears.

'I never knew—I never guessed——' began Jane helplessly.

'You were never meant to know,' said Kitty, and she turned away her face suddenly from Jane's encircling hands and buried it in the cushion of the chair. Her voice dropped ominously; she was still kneeling on the hearth-rug with the paraphernalia of her toilet about her—ribbons and gold-backed brushes, and a little enamel box for hair-pins. 'No one was ever meant to know!' she cried, 'and now I shall never be able to look you in the face again as long as we both do live! It's been going on so long, Jane, and you 've all been so sorry for Mrs. Avory, and so sorry for Toffy.'

'Does he know?' asked Jane, in a low voice.

Kitty raised her head and pretended to laugh again. 'I 've not proposed to him yet,' she said.

'But he cares,' said Jane, with conviction. 'He does care, Kitty!'

'Oh,' said Kitty, bursting into tears, 'isn't it all a frightful muddle!'

The conclusion, therefore, which may be arrived at on the vexed question as to which is preferable—the lot of the man who works or the lot of the woman who weeps, may be summed up in the convenient phrase, 'There is a great deal to be said on both sides.'

It is true that Kitty Sherard and Jane, left behind in comfortable and prosaic England, were spared the torment of flies and mosquitoes and other minor ills; they escaped most of the hard things of life, and enjoyed many of its pleasures and luxuries; and these mitigations seemed to them things of very little worth, and the life of action, when viewed from the safe security of their environment, appeared to be the only possible condition which might assuage pain or lessen the bitterness of separation.

Peter Ogilvie, meanwhile, and his friend, Nigel Christopherson, were in the midst of weather as hot as can be very well endured even by English people, who seem capable of resisting almost every sort of bad climate. The sun rose on the edge of the level plains every morning with horrible punctuality, and stared and blazed relentlessly until it had burned itself out in a beautiful rage and glory in the blood-red western sky.

'Dawn,' Ross said, 'is one of the things you are disposed to admire when you first come to Argentine, but when the hot weather begins you feel inclined to throw your boots at the sun when it rises.'

Now it was afternoon, and a heavy day's work in the corral was over. Peter was writing letters, while Ross and Toffy dozed in long cane chairs in the corridor. Purvis sat on the little cretonne-covered box beside the empty fireplace, and looked with lack-lustre eyes into space. He had been helping with some work on the estancia; but he had brought none of his own men with him, as some neighbours had done, and the ominous whisper grew that there was trouble down at his place. Ross treated the matter lightly, and explained it by saying that Purvis was making a fortune with his steamers, and was feeding his men on *carne flacca*. 'Purvis does his best, poor beast, and I believe he is worth a dozen detectives in this affair of yours, Peter.'

Peter himself, however, was inclined to draw back a little. 'He has put me on the wrong scent once or twice,' he said.

'After all, you haven't told him much,' said Ross.

And Peter agreed that this was so.

There was an undefined feeling in his mind that if he had to learn that his brother was alive he would like to hear of it through such legalized channels as Sir John Falconer was arranging. The detective spirit was not strong in Peter Ogilvie. He would have preferred to take the whole world into his confidence, and to ask them to speak out if they had anything to say. But Mr. Semple and Sir John had cautioned him against this procedure, and the inquiries he had been able to make had been conducted at one time with such surprising caution that no possible clue was given towards finding the child, while at others he had allowed more to be known than Mr. Semple, for instance, would have thought wise. He had lately become more reserved in his dealings with their neighbour at La Dorada, and began almost to try to discount the fact that he had ever consulted Purvis at all about his affairs. He lightly waved aside any information that was given him, and was always busy at the moment when Purvis wanted a few words with him. He advised Toffy to say, if he were asked, that Sir John Falconer was making inquiries, and that for the present they themselves were not going to move in the matter. Toffy and Ross both thought that they had gone too far to make such an attitude possible. 'What harm can it do to find out what he knows?' Ross said more than once.

But Peter still held back. 'I hate his confounded mysteries,' he said, 'and I don't attach much importance to things that are only known in a back-stairs sort of way.'

This afternoon in his letter to Jane he had given it as his opinion that the little man who they had thought might help them was proving to be rather a fraud. 'He is always starting ideas,' wrote Peter, 'and nothing comes of them. Why, bless me, you would think that Argentine was peopled with unclaimed babies and stiff with missing heirs.'

He felt better when he had unbosomed himself to Jane and had got rid of some of his impatience and ill-temper.

'I think I 'll ride to the post presently,' he said, getting up and stretching himself; 'it must get cooler soon.'

Purvis got up also from his little wooden seat by the fireplace. 'I 'll come with you,' he said. 'I am expecting letters which may want my immediate attention, and I can call at the telegraph office on my way. May I give you my company so far?' he asked. There was a touch of the lackey about Purvis, and his voice was humble sometimes to the verge of irritation.

'*Como no?*' said Peter lazily, in the formula of the country. His tone was not enthusiastic. Purvis was so prone to circumlocution that the fact that he had asked deliberately to accompany him on the ride towards the mail in the cool of the evening convinced him that the man could have nothing of importance to say.

They rode together over the short, tough turf of the camp a little way without speaking, and then Purvis began, in his smooth thin voice, riding a little nearer to his companion so as to make himself heard without undue exertion, 'I wanted to speak to you alone.'

'Say on,' said Peter.

When he was riding Purvis was perhaps at his worst. He had an ugly seat in the saddle, and his dark grey suit, made with trousers, was worn without riding-boots. He looked straight in front of him with his tired watery eyes with the perpetual tear in them, and said, 'I believe we are within measurable distance of finding the man you seek.'

Peter looked full at him, but the other did not turn his head; his horse cantered along lazily in the evening light as he sat loosely in the saddle, his pale, expressionless face turned towards the path by which they were travelling.

'The name of the man,' he said, 'is Edward Ogilvie.'

'Yes,' said Peter; 'my brother.' The thing was out now, and he could thank Heaven that he did not wear his heart on his sleeve.

'It is a very strange story!' said Purvis.

'May we have it?' asked Peter briefly. He might employ Purvis, but it galled him to think that his future lay in his hands.

'No,' said Purvis, in his hesitating, thin voice. 'You can't have it for the present. To begin with,' he continued, turning towards Peter for the first time, and raising pathetically large eyes towards him, 'I am not going to speak about it until I am sure, nor am I going to speak about it until I have asked you for some necessary details which will make a mischance or a case of mistaken identity impossible. I don't want to make a fool of myself, as you have trusted me so far.'

'Ask me anything you like,' said Peter laconically. His mind was pretty full just then, and there was a note of confidence in Purvis's voice which gave him the idea that their search was nearly over. He began to wonder how much money he had, and whether there was any chance of the Scottish place being his. Bowshott, of course, would pass away from him, and the beautiful house with its galleries and its gardens would be the property of some unknown man. Possibly the man had a wife, and where Jane was to have reigned as mistress there would be some woman, unused to great houses, and with manners perhaps not suited to her position. He wondered what his mother would have thought about it all, and whether she could in the least realize what the result of her unfinished letter to him might be. Whatever her faults she had been a great lady to her finger-tips. He remembered her, as he had been wont to see her, showing her pictures and gardens to the foreign royalties who came to see her, or receiving Her Majesty when she drove over from Windsor and called upon her. Only Jane could ever fill her place adequately; Jane with her short skirts and graceful, swinging walk, and her queer plain hats that so perfectly became her, and made country neighbours look overdressed. He loved to remember her in a hundred different ways—in white satin, with a string of pearls about her neck; at meets, on one of her sixteen-hand hunters; playing golf; painting the rabbit-hutch in the garden; binding up Toffy's hand that morning, ages ago, when he had had a spill out of his motor-car; playing with the school-children on the lawn; or, best of all, perhaps, dancing in the great ballroom at Bowshott, and sitting with him afterwards in the dimness of his mother's tapestried chamber, her great white feather fan laid upon her knees.

'Is the man married?' asked Peter, with a drawl.

'He is married,' Purvis said, as the two horses swung together in their easy stride.

'Wife alive?' Peter slowed down and lighted a cigarette with deliberation.

'That is a part of the story which I cannot at present divulge,' said Purvis.

'It sounds mysterious!' said Peter, sending his horse into a canter again.

'If it were written in a romance it would hardly be believed,' said the other.

'You were going to ask me some questions,' said Peter, as though to put an end to any dissertation on the romantic side of the story. 'It is a business matter,' he said, 'and we had better be businesslike about it. We can unfold the romance of it later.'

'That is my wish,' said Purvis gravely.

Peter began to tell himself that he was treating the man badly. He had nothing to gain beyond a little money for his services, and so far he had behaved well and with tact. He was obviously disinterested, although perhaps the bill for pursuing his investigations might be fairly high.

'I have reason to believe that the identity of the man can be proved,' said Purvis; 'but I am not going to risk finding a mare's nest, as I have told you.'

'I am not much help to you,' said Peter. 'I have never set eyes oh my brother since I was two years old.'

'This is his photograph,' said Purvis, producing a coloured photograph from his pocket.

Peter took it into his hands and looked long at it. It represented a little boy with fair curls seated in a photographer's arm-chair.

'Can you tell me if it resembles any of your family?' said Purvis.

'Well, 'pon my word I don't know,' said Peter. 'The photograph is a small one, you see, and evidently not a very good one, and to my mind all children of that age look exactly alike. He looks a good little chap,' he finished, with a touch of kindness in his voice. If his brother turned out to be a good fellow reparation would be made easier; and, heavens! how badly the man had been treated.

'The chief danger,' said Purvis, 'lies in the fact that even a strong chain of evidence is not likely to be accepted by those who would benefit by Edward Ogilvie's death.'

'I suppose one would play a fair game,' said Peter shortly. 'I should like to know where you have heard of the man?'

'I may tell you that much,' said Purvis. 'I heard of him at Rosario.'

'Any reason why he should not have communicated with his friends all these years?'

'Within the next few weeks,' said Purvis, 'I hope to be able to bring you face to face with your brother, and then you can put what inquiries you like to him. You must surely see that it is necessary to act with caution until the thing is decided. Even now I can't be quite sure if this man's claim is valid; but once the story is out a dozen claimants may arise, and it would cost you a fortune to sift all the evidence which they might bring.'

'Yes, I see that,' said Peter.

'I am disappointed that the photograph conveys nothing to you,' said Purvis. 'I looked upon it as an important link in the chain of evidence, thinking there might be another like it amongst the old servants, perhaps, at your home.'

Peter looked at it again. 'The trouble is,' he said, 'that there are no old servants who knew us as children. He was handing the photograph back to Purvis when an idea struck him. 'I tell you what, though,' he exclaimed, 'I believe the sash round the child's waist is made of Ogilvie tartan.'

A bare-legged boy on a lean pony was seen approaching them in a cloud of dust. The pony's short canter made his pace as easy as a rocking-chair; and Lara's son, who rode him, was half asleep in the heat. The post-bag dangled from his saddle, and the reins lay on the pony's neck.

'Any letters?' said Peter in Spanish, and the boy handed the bag to him. The mail-boat from England, which was run on purpose to carry Jane's weekly letter to him, had brought the big square envelope with its usual commendable punctuality. Peter chose it out from the rest of the letters, and, handing Purvis a packet which belonged to him, he gave the bag back to the boy, who cantered along with his bare legs swinging until he disappeared into the level glare of the setting sun.

Peter let his horse amble on slowly, and read his letter while he rode.

'I must push on, I think,' said the quiet voice of Purvis beside him. 'There are one or two things which, I gather from my letters, I must put straight at the estancia. I hope to have definite news to communicate to you before long.'

'Thanks!' said Peter, giving him a nod. 'You will let me hear from you as soon as you know anything?' He turned his horse homewards, and Purvis rode on alone.

'If he has found my brother,' quoth Peter, 'Purvis has done his job, and I can't complain; but he has got to settle the thing up without all this confounded mystery, or else he can leave it alone. There is one thing perfectly clear. Edward himself knows nothing about his parents or his prospects, or he would have claimed the property long ago. Now, how has Purvis found out about the man what he doesn't know himself? Where has he got his clue? One thing is pretty certain—that he doesn't want me to meet my brother yet, which looks very much as if our friend Purvis was going to make some sort of bargain with the heir, whoever he is, before he allows him to know the truth about himself. Well, the affair will be judged by English lawyers when we get home, and if it is a case of blackmail, for instance, English people are not very fond of that sort of thing, so Purvis may not be able to make such a good bargain as he thinks.

'Of course the chain of evidence may be perfectly simple. Purvis has probably got hold of the name of whoever it was that brought Edward here, and has traced him somewhere, and has got the whole story from him. My mother had always an unlimited supply of money; she could have settled a large sum on the people who looked after him, and of course it is evident that some money must have been paid, though the lawyers could find no trace of it amongst her papers. The only other hypothesis is that it is a case of some extraordinary aberration of memory, and that, the child she disliked having been removed, she forgot about him altogether. All my life I never remember hearing him mentioned; and as my mother did not return to Bowshott until I was nearly eight years old, very little may have been said to her that would recall the fact of the boy's death.

'It is the beastly uncertainty of it,' he continued, as he rode slowly home on the dusty track which was the apology for a road across the camp. 'If the estate pays me sufficient to live upon I

needn't grumble; but Purvis must give me an account of what he has been doing, and put me in possession of the facts of the case. One always distrusts the middleman, and wonders if he is making a good bargain on both sides. A small man like Purvis always tries to be important, and to make every one believe that he alone holds the key to mysteries, and that no one can get on without him. I don't at present see how he can defraud either me or my brother, even if he wants to; but I am not going to be content with hints or suggestions, as if I were living in a penny novelette.'

He rode slowly home through the heat that rose like a palpable gas from the scorched ground, until the little estancia house hove in sight again. He found that Toffy and Ross were still enjoying their afternoon siesta. There was not a bit of shade anywhere, and the heat seemed to burn through the roof until the very floor was hot to walk upon. His thoughts went back to Purvis in his tweed clothes and the bowler bat with the pugaree on it, and he wondered how he fared in the scorching heat. Probably the anaemic little man hardly knew what it was to be too hot. He used to ride over the camp when even the peons did not show their heads out of doors, and his hands were always cold and damp to the touch. Peter drank some tea and sat down at little Mrs. Chance's writing-table in the drawing-room, and wrote to Jane. There was a feeling of storm in the air, and he envied the two men sleeping luxuriously in the corridor.

'When you have been out here a year or two,' said the sleepy voice of Ross from the depths of a long cane chair, 'you will find that letters are not only impossible but unnecessary. No one expects to hear from one after the first month or two, and if one did write there would be nothing to say.'

'When my creditors get too troublesome,' said Toffy, also waking up, 'I shall emigrate here and lose my own address. With strict economy one might live very cheaply in Argentine.'

Lara's boy, who had come with the letters, had waited to ride back with the bag to the far distant post office; and the Englishmen at the estancia stood and watched him—a tiny figure on his tireless little Argentine pony—riding away eastward until once more a cloud of dust swallowed him up. The humble postman seemed to form a link with home, and in three weeks' time the letters which they had confided to him would be safely in the hands of those to whom they were written in England. The pony's unshod hoofs had made hardly any sound on the turf as he cantered off, and Lara's boy, in his loose shirt and shabby clothes, and his bare feet hanging stirrupless on each side of the pony, disappeared like a wraith. There was a week to wait before he would come with any more letters.

'I wish the storm would burst or blow over,' said Ross; 'the heat is worse than ever to-day, and it doesn't seem as though we were going to have a cool night.'

'Even the peons look curled up,' said Toffy, glancing at a group of men, picturesquely untidy, with loose shirts and scarlet boinas on their heads, who lounged against the *palo á pique* of the corral.

'What idle brutes they are, really!' said Ross; 'and they 're always ten times worse when Chance is away. Look at those bits of paper littering the place,' he went on fussily. 'Now I know that those men have been told thousands of times not to let things fly about like that. But it saves them trouble when they clean a room to sweep everything out of doors and then leave it lying about.'

Probably most men who own property have an inherent dislike to seeing scraps of paper lying about; the sight suggests trippers and visitors' days, and Peter stepped down from the raised corridor, and with his stick began poking the bits of paper into the powdery mud which was all that at present formed the estancia garden.

'I believe we might paper the whole house with Purvis's telegrams,' he said, laughing, as he shoved a bit of coloured paper under the ground.

'Salter,' he said to himself—'Salter. It sounds like the agony column at home. Well, Ross and I had better stop acting as scavengers for the household, or we may learn too much of Purvis's domestic affairs.'

He stopped poking with his stick; and, although he laughed, he was as much annoyed at having seen the name on the telegram as he would have been had he inadvertently overlooked another man's hand at cards.

The storm blew away in the night, and after the dawn the sky was a heavenly blue, so brilliant that it could not be overlooked. In the early morning the mimosa trees threw cool shadows to westward, and little parakeets, making their flights from bough to bough, screamed overhead. On the estancia work began early; some one had to lasso a novillo for the pot, and the rodeo looked like a seething, bubbling cauldron, with its moving mass of cattle. The easy paces of the horses on which all the work of the place was done made riding a matter not of exercise at all; and the only thing necessary was to duck heads to avoid the mimosa boughs, and to guide the horses round the holes and stumps in the ground at a gentle canter. The novillo was lassoed, and the sun began to be sultry when the three men rode back to breakfast, congratulating themselves that, as the day seemed likely to be as hot as usual, there was not a great deal of work to be

done, at least until the cool of the evening.

'Is that Purvis?' asked Toffy, as they approached the house and tethered their horses by the simple expedient of throwing their reins over their heads and letting them trail upon the ground. 'When, in the name of the Prophet, does that fellow sleep?' It was barely ten o'clock when they rode back to breakfast, and Purvis must have started on his ride almost at dawn.

'Hallo!' said Ross, greeting him with a certain kindliness which a very big man will show to one who is small and weak, even if he has growled at his appearance a moment before. 'Hallo, Purvis, where have you come from, and when do you get any sleep?'

'I don't think that sleep is very necessary to me,' said Purvis; 'and I generally find that I work just as well when I have only two or three hours' rest.'

'That's very odd,' said Toffy amicably.

'I came back about my little boy,' said Purvis; 'I have to go down to Buenos Ayres, and I want to know if I may leave him here with you.'

Ross assented, and Toffy remarked that he believed with training he himself might make a very fair nursery-maid.

'Things are a little bit disturbed at my place,' said Purvis. 'I have so many mixed nationalities down there, and they don't get on well together, and are difficult to manage. I would rather not leave Dick, if you could have him—Dick will be a good boy—no?' he said, speaking in the questioning negative so common in Argentine, and addressing the pale-faced little boy in a manner far too babyish for his years.

Dick made no promise; but feeling, boy-like, that he never quite knew what being good involved, he wriggled uneasily in his chair. His father laid one of his hands on the boy's dark hair and the other beneath the delicately pointed chin, and, turning up the little face towards him, he kissed it with womanish affection.

'When will you get the train?' said Ross presently, as they sat at breakfast in the hall. 'You can't catch the one to-night, and there's not another for two days. Your best plan would have been to send us a wire about the boy, and to have taken your own steamer down to Taco; it would have saved a long bit of riding.'

'I wanted to say good-bye to my little one,' said Purvis.

'Well,' said Ross hospitably, 'you are welcome here till your train starts.'

'I must be off to-night,' said Purvis. 'If I start at eight this evening I shall catch the train at one a.m. at Taco.'

'You will be dead, Purvis!' said Peter.

Chance had once asserted that Purvis was the only man he knew who had no sense of fatigue and no sense of fear. 'It's quite true,' he said, when there was a murmur of astonishment from his listeners; 'and, much as I dislike the man, I have never known him to be afraid of anything. It may, of course, be due to a lack of imagination on his part; but I myself believe that it is the result of having been so frequently in tight places. I don't believe he can even handle a gun; and yet if he were surrounded and mobbed he would probably only blink with his watery eyes or help himself to another tabloid.'

Purvis left his horse in the cool of the paraiso trees during the day, and a peon brought it to the door after he had eaten a frugal dinner, during which meal he attended far more to the wants of his child than to his own.

After dinner Peter cut some sandwiches for him, and gave him a flask of whisky, a piece of hospitality which in all probability he would have offered a man who was about to hang him. He had been nurse and guardian in one to Toffy at Eton, and his long care of the delicate boy had given him an odd sort of thoughtfulness which showed itself in small and homely acts like this.

'When I return from Buenos Ayres,' said Purvis, 'I hope to be able to put before you the facts which will identify Edward Ogilvie.'

'You are quite sure you have got them?' said Peter briefly.

'I am almost certain,' said Purvis.

'Of course,' went on Peter, 'you understand that all the evidence that you bring before me will have to be thoroughly investigated by lawyers?' He was half sorry that he had spoken sharply when Purvis replied with his usual quietness, 'That goes without saying.'

'I dislike anything sensational,' Peter said; 'and this is a case in which I much prefer that all information which you get shall be brought direct to me. To be suddenly confronted with my brother might be very interesting from the point of view of an Adelphi audience; but then, you

see, we are not in a theatre at present.'

'The facts in this case,' replied Purvis, 'are quite exceptional; you will allow this, I think, when you know them, and you will then appreciate the fact that it was necessary to get the whole of the evidence quite clearly established before making the final results known to you.'

'We have hardly time to argue the subject,' said Peter, 'seeing that your pony is at the door. The solicitor in Buenos Ayres, whom Sir John Falconer recommended to me, will meet you here any day you like to name, and we can go into the matter thoroughly with you together.'

'That would be the most satisfactory plan,' said Purvis, raising his weak eyes to Peter. 'Meanwhile,' he said, 'my expenses in this matter have been considerable; perhaps you would kindly look at my account before starting?'

'No,' said Peter shortly, 'I could not. I am not in the habit of looking over my accounts by moonlight in the garden.'

'A hundred pounds on account,' said Purvis, 'would enable me to bring this important matter to a conclusion. Without that, I fear, I am powerless.'

It ended in Toffy and Peter putting their available cash together and giving Purvis seventy pounds, and the clerkly man of ink produced a stamp and a stylographic pen from his pocket, and made out the receipt on the little dining-room table and handed it to Peter.

'Thank you,' said Peter, relenting a little. He was annoyed with himself for the irritation which Purvis produced in him. After all, he had asked him for his assistance, and he was giving it to the best of his ability. He went as far as the door with him, and said, 'If the claim is established, remember I should like to see Edward Ogilvie as soon as possible. Wire to me all particulars, and be so good as to convey to him that we are anxious to do the right thing by him. I should not like him to feel, for instance, that the fact of his existence was any cause of resentment with any of us.'

'It is he, perhaps, who will feel resentment,' said Purvis.

'Perhaps,' said Peter, resisting an inclination to speed Purvis's departure.

CHAPTER XIV

Toffy was hovering about the dining-room waiting for him as he turned and went into the house again, and said, 'All this is a bit rough on you, Peter.' And Peter assented with a nod.

The two men went into the little drawing-room to collect pillows for the long chairs in the corridor where they were going to sleep, and Peter went to a side table to turn low a lamp which was adding to the heat of the room. 'I say,' he said, 'didn't you mean these letters to go?'

'Haven't my letters gone?' said Toffy. 'How on earth were they forgotten?'

'Toffy,' said Peter, 'when I meet you acting as a sandwich-man in Piccadilly, without a rag to your back or a shilling to your name, I shall say nothing more encouraging to you than, "It was just what I expected!"'

'But Ross always told me to leave my letters here when I wanted them posted!' said Toffy, scratching his head.

'It's an extraordinary thing,' said Peter, 'that you ever have a pillow to lay your head on; and you don't get that unless I heave it at you and prevent other fellows grabbing it! Who 's got your motorcar at home now? Some one, I suppose, you 've lent it to, and from whom you won't a bit like to ask it back. Are you getting any rent at all for Hulworth?' he went on, his wrath increasing as he spoke, 'or are you letting it slide for a bit because your tenants are hard up? Would you have a picture, or a bit of cracked china, or a bottle of wine left, if they had not been all tied up by some cunning ancestor and looked after by his executors? What has become of your horses, and why are you always put to sleep in the billiard-room of an hotel, or in the pantry, when other fellows get a decent bed provided for them? Why do they give you a room over the stables when country houses are full, where the coachman's wife asks you if you would like a little hot water in the morning, and regrets that the chimney doesn't draw very well? You were born that way, I suppose,' finished Peter hopelessly. 'I don't believe you were ever allowed a cradle if your nurse wanted it for any one else!'

'I rub along all right!' said Toffy apologetically.

'Look here,' said Peter, 'I 'll ride with these letters after Purvis, and ask him to post them; he

'll get down to Taco in time to catch the mail, and I can easily overtake him on the *bayo*.'

The Englishmen had learned to call their horses after their different shades of colour, in the usual Argentine way; the one Peter spoke of was a dun-coloured brute, three-parts English-bred.

Toffy protested, but Peter was obstinate. He had been worried and unsettled all day, and he believed that it would be a good thing to let off steam by a ride over the camp; besides which, Toffy's letters had taken a good two hours to write, and Peter guessed they were important. He could easily overtake Purvis with them before he should reach La Dorada.

'I 'll sit up and trim the lamp like a faithful wife, until you return,' said Toffy.

'You 'll go to bed, you ass!' shouted Peter. He was outside the house fastening the girths of the *bayo* as he spoke, and now he swung himself into the saddle and sent his horse forward with the characteristic quick movement of a hunting man.

The long ride in the moonlight did him good. The intensity of the clear light had something strange and wonderful in it, touched with unearthliness. Night with its thousand secrets whispered about him, and he felt very small and insignificant riding alone under the great silvery dome of heaven, hushed with a sense of the far-away and with the mystery of its innumerable stars. Now and then he came across a herd of cattle standing feeding in the short grass of the camp, their shadows showing black beside them, or a frightened tropillo of horses would start at the sound of the *bayo's* hoofs. He took a short-cut through the mimosa woods, where the ground was uneven. His horse picked its way unfalteringly as it cantered forward, though Peter had to stoop very often to save his head from touching the low branches of the trees. Overhead some parakeets, disturbed in their slumbers, flew from bough to bough, their green wings and tiny red heads turning to strange colours in the moonlight. He got away through one of the rough gates of the estancia out into the open camp again, where the earth was full of a vast stillness about him, and the stars pulsated overhead to the unspeakable music of the night.

And now he began to expect every minute to overtake Purvis, and he strained his eyes eagerly for the solitary figure of the horseman. He knew he was riding a much better horse than the one Purvis was on, and still he failed to come up with him. The track on which he rode was clear enough, and his horse knew the way to La Dorada as well as any peon on the place. Peter took out his watch and looked at it in the moonlight. It was not a quarter to twelve, and he was already at the little settlement, close by the river, where some Italians and Spaniards lived. He recognized one of the ill-built small huts as the place where Juan Lara dwelt, and he drew up to ask whether Purvis was ahead of him or not, and whether his boy had started with his mail-bag for the train yet. A Spaniard with a dark face answered his knock, and told him that no one had passed that way to-night, also that his boy had left much earlier in the afternoon with the mail. He suggested that the traveller should come inside and wait until his friend should overtake him; and as there was plenty of time Peter resolved to rest his horse, and then to push on to La Dorada if Purvis should not turn up. Lara's wife came to beg him to enter. She was an old woman before her time, and had reared a large family in the tiny confines of this little hut. Peter took off his soft felt hat and, stooping below the little doorway, came inside. The use of the Spanish language was inherited from his mother, and he congratulated Lara's wife on her skill in washing shirts, and made some conversation with her.

The place which he had entered was poor enough; it was built on a mud floor, and was entirely devoid of furniture save for a ramshackle bedstead with spotless linen upon it, and a couple of chairs. There was a tiny shrine with an image of the Virgin in the corner of the room; before it burned a halfpenny night-light, and round it were ranged in a row a number of paper match-boxes with little coloured pictures upon them. They were French match-boxes, which opened with a spring formed of elastic, and underneath the pictures were jokes of a doubtful description. Neither Lara nor his wife knew anything of the French language; the empty paper match-boxes, with the horrible jokes upon them, were offered faithfully before Our Lady. They were the best they had to give, and they were the only decorations in the room.

The-woman dusted a chair for Peter, and set the other for her husband, and she herself sat down upon the edge of the bed. They were both glad of visitors at whatever hour they arrived, and in the solitary life of the camp a belated horseman may often ride up after dusk.

Peter explained that it was Señor Purvis, who owned the big estancia down at La Dorada, whom he was riding to overtake.

'He had better not ride about too much alone,' said the Spaniard. 'There are some long knives about, and the señor is a short man.'

'What is the trouble on the estate?' said Peter. But he could get no information from Lara. 'He had better take care,' the man said. 'Señor Purvis would be safer if he were to sail away in his steamer, and be gone for a month or two.'

'He has a mixed lot of men on his estancia, has he not?' Peter asked.

'Yes,' said the man; 'but they are mostly Spanish, and the señor, for all his Spanish tongue, has not got a heart that understands the people.'

'You don't think anything can have happened to him?' Peter asked.

He reflected that the road was an open one all the way, and that he must have seen if there had been anything like a disturbance; but in the end a certain apprehension for the safety of the man made him think that he had better push on and hear if there were any news of him at La Dorada. There might be some path or track to the river-side of which he knew nothing; and if that bypath existed Purvis would certainly take it, however circuitous it might be. There seemed to be some curious obliquity about him which made for crooked ways, and in any case Peter did not want to miss the mail with Toffy's letters. He said good night, and, hearing no news of the traveller at the quay, he rode on until he reached the small unfenced railway station at Taco, set down apparently promiscuously on the grey arid plain. There Lara's boy was waiting with his mail-bag, and after a time the sleepy station-master began to bestir himself, and a cart came in with five horses harnessed abreast carrying some freight. Still there was no sign of Purvis, and Peter had to give his letters to the guard when at last, with a shrill whistle, the train came into the station.

It was very odd, he reflected; and he began to wonder whether Purvis was in danger, and to be vaguely disturbed by what the people in the hut had said to him. Ross had told him many tales of how Englishmen had been murdered out here. There was the case of poor Wentworth, whose Spanish wife had held him down when he had tried to escape, and whose own major-domo had shot him at the door. Nobody knew anything of the matter, of course. The Spaniards keep their secrets well. Nobody was ever brought to justice; and the affair, which would have made a sensation at home, only horrified a few English neighbours near the estancia. But the feeling against Purvis seemed to be something much deeper than personal jealousy or mere greed for gold dollars. There was a storm brewing about him, and no one knew when it would burst.

'Purvis will have to look out,' reflected Peter; and he wondered where on earth the man had got to to-night. He wished he could give him some sort of warning; but he reflected that Purvis knew far more about the state of affairs than he, Peter, did. No one could tell Purvis much about Argentine that he did not know already. His vague feeling of suspicion against the man deepened, and he began to wonder what game Purvis was playing. Had the other man in Rosario paid him well to do his work for him, or was Purvis withholding information until a certain price was stipulated? Bowshott was worth a ransom, and Purvis might be playing a double game. Between the two men he might feather his nest very well.

The dawn was breaking as Peter rode slowly homewards, and a pale pink light was in the sky. His horse ambled gently along, never mistaking his way or making a false step on the rough, uneven ground, but swinging at an easy canter, and getting over an immense distance without much distress to himself. The moon, in a sort of hushed silence, was climbing down the arc of heaven as the sun rose to eastward. The pale light touched the surface of a *tajamar* as he rode past it, and the trees beside it threw still, sad, faint shadows into its quiet depth. Above the western monte a lordly eagle with hushed wings rose majestically overhead, and some viscashos popped in a noiseless way in and out of their holes. The air was cool and fresh now, and a tree or two began to rise up unexpectedly out of the ground in the grey light.

He began to get sleepy with the easy motion of the horse; the endless line of plain around him was wearying to the eye as the sun rose upon it. Well, he would get into camp before it became very hot; that idiot Toffy would probably be sitting up for him.

He laughed softly to himself as he saw a flicker of light in the window that looked towards the track, when at last he drew near the little estancia house. It was like Toffy to remember to put a lamp where he could see it! It was worth while taking a midnight ride for such a good fellow, although he had had a very fair notion of what was in one of the letters, and entirely disapproved its contents. The last mail had brought news that Horace Avory was ill, and Peter knew quite well that Toffy had written to Mrs. Avory. Of course she was not the wife for him; she was very delicate and no longer very young, and she had a plain little daughter who was ten years old. Still, Peter supposed that the marriage might turn out pretty well in spite of obvious drawbacks; and Heaven knew that Mrs. Avory, in her own sad, tearful way, had fought very bravely against poverty and loneliness and unhappiness, and that she loved Toffy with her whole heart. But why, now that things seemed to be arranging themselves in a satisfactory manner, should Toffy be in the blues, and lie awake during the greater part of the hot nights?

He drew up at the door of the house when the sun was becoming hot, and Toffy appeared in his pyjamas and prepared a cup of coffee on a stove of patent construction for which he claimed admiration every time it was used.

'Thanks, Peter!' he said briefly. 'I was writing to Mrs. Avory by this mail, and she would have been disappointed if she had not heard from me. Did you overtake Purvis?'

'No, I didn't,' said Peter; 'and what's more, he didn't go by the mail train to Buenos Ayres!'

'What a queer chap he is!' said Toffy. 'You never know where to have him! That can't be he coming back now?' he said, looking from the small window at two riders who came cantering up to the door.

'Is it? Yes! No, it isn't,' said Peter, going over to the window. 'But I 'll tell you who it is,

though! It's Dunbar, and he 's got a commissario of police with him! Now, what in the name of wonder do they want here?'

The two riders dismounted at the gate and came up the little path through the garden to the door. They walked stiffly, as though they had ridden for a long time, and their horses, tethered by the gate, looked used up and tired.

Dunbar hardly paused to shake hands. 'Look here,' he said, 'E. W. Smith is here, and he 's wanted!'

CHAPTER XV

'First of all,' said Peter, 'who is E. W. Smith, and why the dickens should you imagine he is here?'

Dunbar gave him a quick look. 'Is any one here?' he asked.

'No one but Ross and Christopherson and myself,' said Peter. 'Purvis was here, but he started for Buenos Ayres last night, and I have no idea where he is now. I saw the train start from the station at Taco, but he was not in it.'

'Purvis is in a tight place,' said Dunbar dryly.

Ross, hearing voices in the drawing-room, wakened up, and now appeared with ruffled hair and still clad in his sleeping-suit. He suggested refreshments, and sat down to hear what Dunbar had to say.

Peter's face had a queer set look upon it. Where another man might perhaps have asked questions he showed something of his mother's reserve, and was never more silent than when a moment of strain arrived. He began in a mechanical way to make two fresh cups of coffee, and poured the steaming mixture from the thin saucepan into the cups. 'The day of reckoning seems to have arrived for Purvis,' he said; and then lazily, 'poor brute, he had his points.' Purvis was a common adventurer after all! And he had got close upon two hundred pounds from him on the plea of having some knowledge of his brother, which was simply non-existent. He could see the whole thing now. This cock-and-bull story of the discovery of the missing man was really a very simple ruse for extorting money, and the last seventy pounds which he, Peter, had been fool enough to pay him had been wanted to help Purvis to get away.

'I must search the place thoroughly,' said Dunbar. He finished his coffee; but the ascertaining whether or not any one was concealed in the little house or in the outbuildings was a matter of only a few minutes.

'If he 's got away again,' said Dunbar, 'I 'll eat my hat!'

'Purvis is a slippery customer,' said Ross; 'but he has lived peaceably and openly for a considerable time. If he is wanted you have only to ride up to his door and arrest him.'

Dunbar cleared his throat. 'You mind,' he said, 'the story of the *Rosana*, which I told you on board the Royal Mail Packet, when we were in the River Plate coming up to Monte Video?'

'I remember,' said Peter briefly. And Ross nodded his head also; every one in Argentine knew the story of the wreck of the *Rosana*.

'I knew,' said Dunbar, 'that E. W. Smith could not die!'

'Smith being Purvis, I take it,' said Toffy.

'Yes,' said Dunbar, 'or any other alias you please. He is a fair man now with a beard, isn't he? Well, on board the *Rosana* he was a clean-shaven man with dark hair, but you cannot mistake E. W. Smith's eyes, though I hear his voice is altered.'

'Are you in the police out here?' Peter asked, with a glance at the commissario to whom he had just handed a cup of coffee.

'No, I 'm not,' answered Dunbar, with his usual economy of speech. 'I 'm from Scotland Yard, and I want E. W. Smith on another count. But I 'll come to that some other time. I 'll need to be off now.'

'Your horse is done,' protested Ross, 'and you are pretty well done yourself.'

'I 'm not that far through,' said Dunbar.

'Why not send a wire to Buenos Ayres and wait here until you can get a reply? Purvis may have got on board the train somewhere else, and be at Buenos Ayres now.'

'Yes, that will do,' said Dunbar. He dispatched his telegram by one of the peons, who rode off with it across the camp. In spite of fatigue, Dunbar, with his nervous energy unimpaired, looked as though he would like to have ridden with the telegram himself. Reflecting, however, that there was considerable work still before him, he submitted to stretching himself on a *catré* and after a short doze and a bath and some breakfast he took up again the thread of his story.

'I 'll not bother you with an account of E. W. Smith's life,' he remarked, 'although there is a good deal in it that would surprise you. I 'll keep to the story of the *Rosana* as time is short.'

Mr. Dunbar took his faithful friend—his short pipe—from its red-lined case, filled it with tobacco, and began to draw luxuriously.

'The *Rosana* sprang a leak after her first day out, on her run down the coast, and was lost in twenty fathoms of water. She only carried one boat, and that boat was seen by myself half-burned, but with a bit of her name in gold-leaf still visible on her bows. Tranter was the captain of the boat, and E. W. Smith was clerk and general manager. Every one knew he cheated the company who ran the boat, and cheated the captain too, when he could; and it generally suited him to make Tranter drunk when they were in port. Well, he reaped his profit, and I suppose a good bit of it lies at the bottom of the sea. He was a man who always kept large sums in hand in case of finding himself in a tight place. Did I mention,' said Dunbar, 'that he could not row, though, of course, Tranter could? But Tranter was wanted for steering.'

'I don't understand the story,' said Ross, leaning forward. 'You say that Tranter and this man Purvis, or Smith, escaped from the wreck, and that Purvis could not row?'

'I am coming to that,' said Dunbar, unmoved. 'Observe, the *Rosana* carried one boat. She had lost her other by an accident, it seems, and the one that remained was not a much bigger one than a dinghy such as men use to go to and from the shore when they are in harbour. Tranter was the first to discover that the *Rosana* was leaking badly; and the hold was half-flooded before any one knew anything about it, and the *Rosana* was settling by her head. Smith, it seems, and the captain were armed, or armed themselves as soon as the state of affairs was known; and before the rest of the crew were awake four men were ordered to man the boat and bring her alongside. The hatches were closed down with the rest of the crew still below, and if there was a scuffle two armed men were perfectly capable of keeping order. Smith and Tranter got into the boat, and were rowed ashore in safety. If the whole of the crew had tried to board her there is no doubt about it no one would have been saved, for there were a good many hands on the steamer, and the rush to the one boat would have swamped her. The men who manned the boat and pulled ashore were doubtless glad to save their lives at any price; but they might make it exceedingly unpleasant for the two survivors of the wreck did they make their story known. They were cross-bred natives, whose lives were of no great value to any one but themselves, and there was an easy way for two armed men to silence them on a lonely shore without a soul near.'

'It's a sickening story,' said Ross, getting up and walking towards the window; and unconsciously he clenched his big hand.

'Then how,' said Peter keenly, 'has the story leaked out?'

'Because,' said Dunbar, 'sometimes at a critical moment men do their work badly, or perhaps a native knows how to feign death before his life is actually extinct. Dead men tell no lies, but wounded men don't have their tongues tied in the same way.'

'So one of the men lived to tell tales!' said Peter, leaning forward in his chair; 'and Purvis, who has been here for some time past, is the hero of the story? It is a blackguardly tale, Dunbar, and, thank God, I believe it would have been impossible in England!'

'I don't pass judgment on my fellow-men,' said Dunbar. 'Life is sweet, perhaps, to some of us, and no doubt the whole crew would have swamped the boat, but——'

'But, all the same,' said Toffy, 'you don't mean to let Purvis-Smith get a very light time of it when you do get him.'

'No, I don't,' said Dunbar.

Ross passed out through the door of the little drawing-room to the corridor, and went to see about some work on the farm. The commissario drank his coffee, and Dunbar waited restlessly for his telegram.

After breakfast he and Peter slept for a time, for both were dog-tired, and the day was oppressively hot. In the afternoon a telegram came to say that no news had been heard of Purvis, and that he was believed to be still in the neighbourhood of La Dorada.

'If he is,' said Dunbar, folding up the telegram and putting it into his pocket, 'I think our future duties will not be heavy. The man who has come to light and told the story of the wreck of the *Rosana* is a native of that favoured spot where already our friend Purvis is not too popular.

God help the man if they get hold of him!'

'His little boy is here now,' said Toffy, starting up. 'Purvis came here to leave him in safety.'

Dunbar was writing another telegram to ask the whereabouts of the steamer.

'Then,' he said, 'the story is probably known, and Purvis is aware of it, and has gone north. He daren't show himself near his estancia after this.'

They began to put the story together, piecing it here and there, while Dunbar continued to send telegrams.

Ross strolled in presently to discuss the matter again. 'I don't believe,' he said, 'that Purvis is far off.'

'He is a brave man if he is anywhere near La Dorada,' said Dunbar.

'Purvis is a brave man,' said Ross quietly.

Peter was silent. Only last night he had had good reason to believe that the mystery of his brother's existence was going to be cleared up. But with Purvis gone the whole wearisome business would have to begin again. Why had he not detained the man last night, even if he had had to do it by force, until he had given him all the evidence he possessed? He could not exactly blame himself for not having done so. Purvis had declared that he was only going to Buenos Ayres for a couple of days, and it would have been absurd to delay him that he might give information which perhaps he did not fully possess. Still, the thing had been too cleverly worked out to be altogether a fraud, surely. His thought went back again to the belief that Purvis had got hold of his brother, and had extracted a great deal of information from him, and was only delaying to make him known to Peter until he had arranged the best bargain he could for himself. Looking back on all the talks they had had together there was something which convinced him that Purvis's close application to the search had not been made with a view only of extracting some hundreds of pounds from him, but that the man's game was deeper than that. Purvis was far too clever to waste his talents in dabbling in paltry matters, or in securing a small sum of money for himself. He was a man who worked in big figures, and it was evident that he meant to pull off a good thing.

That his dishonesty was proved was beyond all manner of doubt, and the only thing was to watch events and to see what would now happen. If Purvis gave them the slip what was to be done in the future?

'I believe he will try to save his steamer,' said Ross, after a long silence.

Every one was thinking of the same subject, and his abrupt exclamation needed no explanation.

'If he could trust his hands he might,' said the commissario in halting, broken English; 'but I doubt if they or the peons have been paid lately.'

'Besides, on the steamer,' said Toffy, 'he could be easily caught.'

'Yes,' said Dunbar, 'if he knows that we want to catch him, which he doesn't. He is afraid of the people at La Dorada now; but he is probably unaware of the warm welcome that awaits him in Buenos Ayres.'

Dunbar went to the door again to see if there was any sign of his messenger returning from the telegraph office. The sun was flaming to westward, and Hopwood had moved the dinner-table out into the patio, and was setting dinner there.

'He will do the unexpected thing,' said Ross at last. 'If Purvis ever says he is going to sit up late I know that is the one night of the week he will go to bed early.'

They went out into the patio, and Ross swizzled a cocktail, and they fell to eating dinner; but Dunbar was looking at his watch from time to time, and then turning his glance eastward to the track where his messenger might appear. It was an odd thing, and one of which they were all unaware, that even a slight noise made each man raise his head alertly for a moment as though he might expect an attack.

The sun went down, and still no messenger appeared. They sat down to play bridge in the little drawing-room, and pretended to be interested in the fall of the cards.

'That must be my telegram now,' said Dunbar, starting to his feet as a horse's hoofs were plainly heard in the stillness of the solitary camp. 'Well, I 'm damned,' he said. He held the flimsy paper close to his near-sighted eyes, and read the message to the other men sitting at the table:

'Smith, or Purvis, at present on board his own steamer in midstream opposite La Dorada. Fully armed and alone. Crew have left, and peons in revolt. A detachment of police proceeds by train to Taco to-night. Join them there and await instructions.'

'I thought he would stick to the steamer,' said Ross at last.

'And probably,' said Dunbar, 'he is as safe there as anywhere he can be. He can't work his boat without a crew, but if he is armed he will be able to defend himself even if he is attacked. I don't know how many boats there were at La Dorada, but I would lay my life that Purvis took the precaution of sending them adrift or wrecking them before he got away.'

'What is to be the next move?' said Peter.

'I suppose we shall have to ride down to Taco to-night,' said Dunbar. 'Yon man,' he finished, in his nonchalant voice, 'has given me a good bit of trouble in his time.'

'It seems to me,' said Ross, 'that you can't touch any business connected with Purvis without handling a pretty unsavoury thing.'

'Now, I 'll tell you an odd thing,' said Dunbar. 'I have had to make some pretty close inquiries about Purvis since I have been on his track, and you will probably not believe it if I tell you that by birth he is a gentleman.'

'He behaves like one,' said Ross shortly.

'If I had time,' said Dunbar, 'I could tell you the story, but I see the fresh horses coming round, and I and the commissario must get away to Taco.' He was in the saddle as he spoke, and rode off with the commissario.

'A boy,' said Hopwood, entering presently, 'rode over with this, this moment, sir.' He handed a note to Peter on a little tray, and waited in the detached manner of the well-trained servant while Peter opened the letter.

The writing was almost unintelligible, being written in pencil on a scrap of paper, and it had got crushed in the pocket of the man who brought it.

'It is for Dunbar, I expect,' said Peter, looking doubtfully at the name on the cover. He walked without haste to a table where a lamp stood, and looked more closely at the address. 'No, it's all right, it's for me,' he said.

At first it was the vulgar melodrama of the message which struck him most forcibly with a sense of distaste and disgust, and then he flicked the piece of paper impatiently and said, 'I don't believe a word of it!' His face was white, however, as he turned to the servant and said, 'Who brought this?'

'I will go and see, sir,' said Hopwood, and left the room.

Peter, with the scrap of paper in his hand, walked over to the bridge-table where the others were sitting, and laid the crumpled note in front of them. 'Another trick of our friend Purvis,' he said shortly.

The three men at the card-table bent their heads over the crumpled piece of note-paper spread out before them. Ross smoothed out its edges with his big hand, and the words became distinct enough; the very brevity of the message was touched with sensationalism. It ran: 'I am your brother. Save me!' and there was not another vestige of writing on the paper.

'Purvis has excelled himself,' said Ross quietly. 'It's your deal, Christopherson.'

Toffy mechanically shuffled the cards and looked up into his friend's face. 'Is there anything else?' he said, and Peter took up the dirty envelope and examined it more closely.

There was a scrap of folded paper in one corner, and on it was written in his mother's handwriting a note to her husband, enclosing the photograph of her eldest son in a white frock and tartan ribbons.

Peter flushed hotly as he read the letter. 'He has no business to bring my mother's name into it,' he said savagely; and then the full force of the thing smote him as he realised that perhaps his mother was the mother of this man Purvis too.

'Have a drink?' said Ross, with a pretence of gruffness. It was oppressively hot, and Peter had been riding all the previous night. Ross mentioned these facts in a kindly voice to account for his loss of colour. 'It's a ridiculous try on,' he said, with conviction; and then, seeking about for an excuse to leave the two friends together to discuss the matter, he gathered up the cards from the table, added the score in an elaborate manner, and announced his intention of going to bed.

Dunbar and the commissario had put a long distance between themselves and the estancia house now. The silence of the hot night settled down with its palpable mysterious weight upon the earth. The stars looked farther away than usual in the fathomless vault of heaven, and the world slumbered with a feeling of restlessness under the burden of the aching solitude of the night. Some insects chirped outside the illuminated window-pane, as though they would fain have left the large and solitary splendour without and sought company in the humble room. Time passed noiselessly, undisturbed even by the ticking of a clock. To have stirred in a chair would

have seemed to break some tangible spell. A dog would have been better company than a man at the moment, because less influenced by the mysterious night and the silence, and the intensity of thought which fixed itself relentlessly in some particular cells of the brain until they became fevered and ached horribly. A little puff of cooler air began to blow over the baked and withered camp; but the room where the lamp was burning had become intolerably hot, and the mosquitoes which had been contemplating the wall thoughtfully throughout the day began to buzz about and to sing in the ears of the two persons who sat there.

'Damn these mosquitoes!' said Peter, and his voice broke the silence of the lonely house oddly. He and Toffy had not spoken since Ross had left the room, and had not stirred from their chairs; but now the feeling of tension seemed to be broken. Toffy began to fidget with some things on a little table, and opened without thinking a carved cedar-wood work-box which had remained undisturbed until then. He found inside it a little knitted silk sock only half-finished, and with the knitting needles still in it, and he closed the lid of the box again softly.

Peter walked into the corridor and looked out at the silver night. There was a mist rising down by the river, and the feeling of coolness in the air increased. He leaned against the wooden framework of the wire-netting and laid his head on his hands for a moment; then he came back to the drawing-room. 'Do you believe it?' he said suddenly and sharply.

'I suppose it's true,' said Toffy. 'God help us, Peter, this is a queer world!'

'If it were any one else but Purvis!' said Peter with a groan. He had begun to walk restlessly up and down, making his tramp as long as possible by extending it into the corridor. 'And then there is this to be said, Toffy,' he added, beginning to speak at the point to which his thoughts had taken him—'there is this to be said: suppose one could get Purvis out of this hole, Dunbar is waiting for him at Taco. He will be tried for the affair of the *Rosana* and other things besides, and if he is not hanged he will spend the next few years of his life in prison. It is an intolerable business,' he said, 'and I am not going to move in the matter. One can stand most things, but not being mixed up in a murder case.'

He walked out into the corridor and sat down heavily in one of the deck-chairs there. There was a tumult of thought surging through his mind, and sometimes one thing was uppermost, sometimes another.

If it were possible to get down the river in a boat to the steamer, he thought, there would of course be a chance of bringing Purvis back before it was light; but if he did that he would have to start within the hour. The nights were short.

And then, again, he would be compounding a felony, though in the case of brothers such a law was generally put aside, whatever the results might be.

There was very little chance of an escape. Every one's hand was against Purvis now, and there was the vaguest possibility that he could get away to England. The heir to Bowshott would be doing his time in prison, and that, after all, was the right place for him—or he might be hanged.

And then he, Peter, was the next heir. That was the *crux* of the whole thing—he, Peter Ogilvie, was the next heir. If anything were to happen to his brother he would inherit everything.

But that, again, was an absurdity. A man in prison, for instance, would not be the inheritor of anything. No, his brother must take his chance down there on the steamer. He had been in tight places before now, and no one knew better how to get out of them. He had some money at his command. Let things take their chance. Yet if Purvis did not inherit, he, Peter, was the next heir.

That was the thought that knocked at him to the exclusion of nearly everything else: he would benefit by his brother's death. Bowshott would be his, and the place in the Highlands, and Jane and he could be married.

He paused for a moment in his feverish survey of events. To think of Jane was to have before one's mind a picture of something absolutely fair and straightforward. A high standard of honour was not difficult to her; it came as naturally as speaking in a well-bred manner, or walking with that air of grace and distinction which was characteristic of her. Such women do not need to preach, and seldom do so. Their lives suggest a torch held high above the common mirk of life. Peter had never imagined for a moment that he was in the least degree good enough for her; but, all the same, he meant to fight for all that he was worth for every single good thing that he could get for her.

... His brother even had a son. His nephew was in the house now. Peter laughed out loud. The boy had a Spanish mother; but if there ever had been a marriage between Purvis and her it could easily be set aside. Purvis had been married several times, or not at all. Dunbar thought that his real wife was an English woman at Rosario.

He reflected with a sense of disgust that, he and Purvis being both of them fair men, it might even be said that they resembled each other in appearance; and he wondered if he would ever hold up his head again now that he knew that the same blood ran in the veins of both, and that this murderer, with his bloodstained hands, was his brother.

And what in Heaven's name was the use of rescuing a man from one difficulty when he would fall into something much worse at the next opportunity?

Finally, there was nothing for it but to remain inactive and let Purvis escape if he could, but to do nothing to help him. Time was getting on now; another half-hour and it would be too late to start.

Perhaps the whole real difficulty resolved itself round Jane. Jane, as a matter of fact, had taken up her position quite close to Peter Ogilvie this evening in the dark of the tropical night. There were probably devils on either side of him, but Jane was certainly there. She looked perfectly beautiful, and there was not a line in her face which did not suggest something fair and honest and of good worth.

... But suppose the man turned out to be an impostor after all? Then Dunbar had better treat with him. The chain of evidence was pretty strong, but there might be a break in it.

... He could not go alone down the river; Ross and Toffy and Hopwood would have to come too, to man the four-oared boat, and some one would have to steer, because the river was dangerous of navigation and full of sandbanks and holes. Why should he involve his friends in such an expedition to save a man who had sneaked off from a boat and left a whole crew to perish, and who had shot in cold blood the men who rowed him to safety?

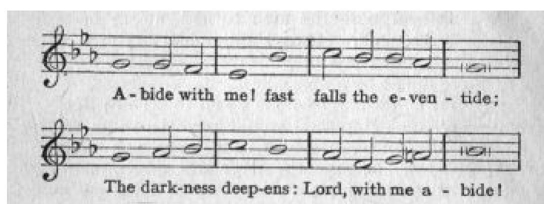
Before God he was not going to touch the man, nor have anything to do with him!

Half an hour had passed. In twenty minutes it would be too late to start.

Jane drew a little nearer, and just then Toffy laid down the book which he had been reading and strolled about the room. Perhaps he wanted to show Peter that he was still there and awake, and in some way to comfort him by his presence, for he sat down by Mrs. Chance's piano and picked out a tune with one of his fingers.

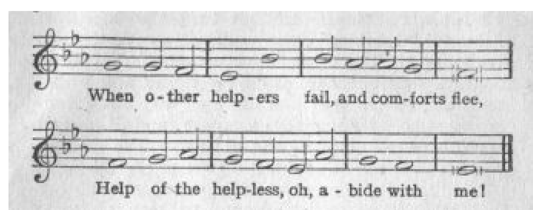
The devil beside Peter became more imperative and drew up closer, and told him that it was his own sense of honour that made him loathe his reputed brother and turn from him in disgust. He said that the note that had reached him was all part of Purvis's horrible sensationalism and his lies, and that no earthly notice should be taken of it; also, that it would be sheer madness to risk his own life and his friends' for this contemptible fellow. Jane, on the other side—possibly an angel, but to the ordinary mind merely a very handsome English girl—stood there saying nothing, but looking beautiful.

Toffy continued to pick out the tune with his forefinger from Mrs. Chance's book:



It all came before him in a flash: the village church, and the swinging oil-lamps above the pews; he and Jane together in Miss Abingdon's pew, and Mrs. Wrottesley playing the old hymn-tunes on the little organ. He could not remember ever attending very particularly to the evening service. He used to follow it in a very small Prayer Book, and it was quite sufficient for him that Jane was with him. He had never been a religious man in the ordinary sense of the word. He had wished with all his heart when his mother died that he had known more about sacred things, but they had never seemed a necessary part of his life. He knew the code of an English gentleman, and that code was a high one. The youngsters in the regiment knew quite well that he was 'as straight as they make 'em'; but he had never inflicted advice nor had a moment's serious conversation with one of them.

Another ten minutes had passed, and left only five minutes to spare; but Jane was smiling a little, and Toffy was fingering out quavering notes on the old piano:



Life seemed to get bigger as he listened. There were no such things as difficulties. You had just to know what you ought to do, and then to try to do it. You had not to pit yourself against a mean mind, and act meanly by it. Each man had his own work to do, and what other men did or

left undone was their own business. His brother was in a mess, and he had to help him out of it, whether he deserved it or no—not weighing his merit, but pardoning his offences and just helping him in his need. The glories of life might fade away, as the old hymn said, or they might last; but all that each man had to care about so long as he remained here was to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with his God.

The angel and the devil—if they existed at all—fled away and left one solitary man standing alone fighting for the sake of honour and clean hands.

The clock struck ten, and the time was up.

Peter went inside and laid his hand on Toffy's shoulder. 'Let's start,' he said, 'if you are ready.'

'All right,' said Toffy, shutting the piano. 'I 'll go and get Ross.'

They were in the boat now, slipping down the stream in the dark. The current in the river was strong here, and the boat slid rapidly between the banks. There was hardly any necessity for rowing. Christopherson sat in the stern with the tiller-ropes in his hands, and Peter reserved his strength for the moment when they should get to the broader part of the river where the stream did not race as it raced here. On their way back they would, of course, avoid the upper reaches of the river, and would land lower down when they had the man well away from his own place. Peter rowed stroke, and Hopwood and Ross rowed numbers one and two. The steering probably was the most difficult part of the business, especially in the present state of the river, and any moment they might go aground or get into some eddy which might turn the bow of the boat and land them in the bank. Rowing was still easy, and Peter was husbanding every ounce of his strength for the pull home. None of the men spoke as the boat slipped down between the banks of dry mud on either side of the river. Some reeds whispered by the shore, and a startled bird woke now and then and flew screaming away. The moon shone fitfully sometimes, but for the most part the night was dark, and the darkness increased towards midnight. Once or twice the breeze carried the intoxicating smell of flowers from the river-bank. It was difficult for Toffy, although he had been down the river many times, to know exactly his bearings. They passed a little settlement on their starboard hand, and saw a few lights burning in the houses.

'That must be Lara's house,' said Peter. 'We will land here on our way back, and get some horses, and ride over to the estancia in the morning.'

The settlement was the last place on the river where Purvis's steamer plied, and there was a small jetty piled with wheat waiting to be taken away. Here the river was broader and much shallower, with stakes of wood set in its bed to show the passage which the little steamer should take.

'We should not be far from La Dorada now,' said Toffy, steering between the lines of stakes; 'but I can't see any signs of the steamer in this blackness.'

In the daytime the river was a pale mud-colour and very thick and dirty-looking. The moon came out for a moment and showed it like a silver ribbon between the grey banks.

'Easy all!' said Toffy, sniffing the air. 'We must be near the canning-factory at La Dorada.'

The horrible smell of the slaughter-house was borne to them on the river, and there were some big corrals close by the water, and a small wharf.

'It reminds me,' thought Toffy, 'of the beastly beef-tea which I have had to drink all my life.'

'Good heavens!' cried Ross, 'they are firing the wharf! Purvis's chances are small if this is their game.'

There was not very much to burn; the wood of the wharf kindled easily, and the wheat burned sullenly and sent up grey volumes of smoke.

'Steer under the bank,' said Peter. 'We don't want to be seen.'

Toffy steered the boat as near the shore as the mud would allow, and as the wood of the wharf burned more brightly he could see some men running to and fro confusedly every few minutes, and then making off farther down the river.

'They 'll fire the steamer next!' said Peter, and then bent his back to the oar, and the boat swung away into the middle of the stream again.

The darkness seemed to increase in depth, as it does just before the dawn: it was baffling in its intensity, and seemed to press close.

'Way enough!' sang out Toffy, for quite unexpectedly the little steamer, tied to a stake in midstream, loomed up suddenly before them. The men shipped their oars with precision, and Toffy caught hold one of the fender-ropes.

'Are you there?' he called up to the deck from the impenetrable darkness.

As he spoke Purvis appeared at the top of the little gangway, dressed in his clerkly suit and stiff hat.

'You are just in time,' he said in his thin, high voice, without a trace of excitement in it. 'When the light dawns they will find their boats, and even now we may have to run for it.'

'Get on board,' said Ross roughly, 'and don't waste time.'

'I can't sink my steamer,' said Purvis quietly, 'in this shallow part of the river, and I haven't the means of blowing her up; but I shall now go below and overturn the lamp in my cabin, and the boat and all that is in it will not be very long in being consumed.'

'Stop that lunatic!' yelled Ross, as Purvis turned to descend into the cabin. 'There 's a boat coming up—I can hear the oars distinctly behind us. We 'll be overtaken if there 's a minute's delay!'

Peter, who was next the gangway, sprang on board the boat and stumbled down the companion in the dark.

'Purvis!' he shouted, 'you 'll be shot in cold blood yet if you don't look out.'

Purvis had collected a few things and laid them on a pile of shavings in the middle of the cabin, and the oil-lamp with which he was to ignite the pile was in his hand.

On the top of the pile Peter saw a large tin dispatch-case inscribed with his mother's name.

'Hallo!' he said quietly; 'I think I 'll take this!'

For a moment he imagined that Purvis's hand moved with suspicious suddenness towards his revolver-pocket. In the next Purvis had swung up the companion staircase and into the boat, and Peter jumped into his place as the sound of rowing and the splash of oars was heard behind him. Toffy rowed the bow-oar now, and Purvis, who knew every turn of the river, took the tiller-ropes.

'I can't row,' he said, in his plaintive voice, 'but I can steer better than any of you.'

The man's composed and unruffled serenity was still undisturbed although the rhythmic beat of oars behind them was growing nearer and nearer, and the creaking of the leather in the row-locks could be heard distinctly.

'I have a revolver,' said Purvis quietly; 'and dawn is not quite upon us yet.'

Their boat had still the start of the other, and the darkness helped them. Purvis knew every yard of the river, and could have steered in the darkness of a London fog. His pale eyes seemed to have something in them of the quality of a cat's as he peered through the dense gloom and guided the boat unerringly.

There came a faint light on the surface of the water; they could dimly see the stakes in the river, and could hear the beat of the oars in the other boat. It was a race for the Italian settlement, where they would be safe, and where the pursuing boat, seeing the lights from the houses, would probably fall behind.

Peter had rowed stroke in the Eton boat, but Toffy had always been too delicate to be a strong rower; the other men had splendid staying power, but no particular skill. Still, Ross knew Peter's stroke, and the steering was perfect. Not a yard of way was lost on the long chase, and as the four rowers warmed to their work the excitement of it prevailed over every other thought. Purvis himself and all his meannesses were forgotten. It was a race, and that was all, and four men's hearts leapt to it.

The other boat seemed to be drawing nearer. The morning was dawning mistily, and the pursuers appeared to be getting out of their course for a time.

Peter swung to his oar in perfect style, and Purvis with the tiller-ropes in his hands gave way to every leap of the boat, bending his short, spare body in time to the stroke of the oars as he sat in the stern.

'If we are overtaken we will make a fight for it,' he said.

'Naturally,' said Peter briefly, between the long strokes of his rowing.

'They 'll probably catch us up in the next hundred yards,' said Purvis. 'I should think that they are armed, and the day is breaking.'

He turned round in his seat as he spoke, for there was a broad straight piece of river before them; and as the boat came on he pointed his revolver uncertainly in the mist and fired. 'Confound you!' roared Peter, 'don't draw their fire yet! Probably our best chance is that they don't know for certain where we are.'

But Purvis had fired again. There were some uncertain shots in return, and one struck the gunwale of the boat by Peter's side.

'That was a near thing,' he said to himself under his breath. And then the old feeling of protection for the 'young un'—the delicate boy who had been his fag at Eton—stopped his grim smiling, and as another shot whizzed past them he yelled out suddenly, 'Lie down, Toffy! Get down into the bottom of the boat!'

And quite suddenly Toffy did as he was told.

Peter rowed then like two men, but the river ran more quickly now, and the shallows were more dangerous, and the steering was more difficult.

By Jove, how well Purvis knew the navigation of it! He had the tiller-ropes in his hands again. He made a feint to go under the bank as though to land, and then shot suddenly into midstream. The other boat followed in their wake. Purvis's knowledge of the currents was probably well known, and it was safe to follow his lead: the boat and the men in it were clear enough to see now.

But what in the name of Heaven was Purvis doing! It positively seemed as though he was trying to lose the little bit of way that they had gained in advance of the others, and for one moment a horrible sense of the man's unscrupulousness came over Peter Ogilvie, and he wondered even now, in the midst of the chase, whether it might not be that Purvis was playing them false.

'I 'll shoot him before he can sing out if he is!' thought Peter to himself as the boat was steered on to the very edge of a shallow again, and then made off into the middle of the stream. 'Look out what you are about!' he cried, seeing in the wake of the boat the uneven, circuitous route by which they had come. 'For God's sake steer straight if you can!'

And then he saw a smile on Purvis's face—the usual watery, mirthless smile, and the pale, wide-open blue eyes; and, looking back, Peter saw that the boat behind them was overturned in the stream, and that the men who had been in it were struggling to the bank, while the boat itself was being carried rapidly down with the current.

He eased his rowing then, and getting his breath he laughed out aloud. The spirit and excitement of the chase had been good, and it was successfully over.

'Look here, you can get up now, Toffy,' he said.

He turned round in his seat and shipped his oars with a jerk. '*You devil!*' he said slowly; '*you must have seen him hit!*'

He bent over the poor boy stretched out in the bottom of the boat and felt his heart and found that it still beat. He loosened his neckcloth and sprinkled water on his face, while the two other men fell to their oars again, and rowed the boat as the day dawned to the little Italian settlement. They carried Toffy into the house of the Argentine woman who burned candles to the Virgin and stuck French paper match-boxes round her shrine. They lifted him into the hut and laid him on the humble bed, and Peter dressed the wound as well as he knew how, while Hopwood in an agony hovered round them, and Ross was sending here and there to try to find a doctor.

No one knew what had become of Purvis, no one cared. Each was trying with all his might to save a life very dear to them which was slowly ebbing away.

The sun was up now, and the long hot day was beginning; but still Toffy had never spoken, and still Peter kneeled by his side on the mud floor of the hut, easing him as well as he could, giving him water to drink, or bathing his forehead. There was not much that he could do for him; but he felt that Toffy was conscious, and that he liked to have his old friend near him. He never altered his position as he kneeled, for his arm was under the dying man's head, and it seemed a more comfortable place for it than the poor Argentine woman's hard pillow.

Toffy lay with wide-open eyes, and there were great beads of perspiration on his forehead which Hopwood wiped away from time to time. He breathed with difficulty in short gasps, and still he never spoke. It came upon Peter with a horrible sinking of the heart that he might die before a doctor came, and without saying one word to him. All the compunction of a heart that was perhaps unusually womanly and tender was raging within him for not having taken better care of the boy. He wanted to say so much to Toffy, and to beg his forgiveness, and to ask if there was anything in the world he could do for him, and he hoped wildly and pitifully that he was not in pain. But the dying man's eyes were fixed on the bare walls of the hut and on the little shrine of the Virgin in the corner of the room, and it seemed now as if the mistiness of death were settling upon them, so that they saw nothing.

Ross went restlessly to and fro, now entering the room for a few minutes, and then going out again to scan the distant country to see if by any chance the camp doctor was coming.

When Toffy at last spoke he went and stood outside the hut, and an instinct caused him to bare his head for a moment.

Just at the end Toffy said something, and his voice sounded a great way off, and almost as though it came from another land. 'Is Kitty there?' he said.

'No; it is me, old man,' said Peter thickly.

He was holding the boy's head now, for his breathing was becoming more difficult, and he stooped and kissed him on the forehead. He felt the chill of it, and, startled, he called out, almost as one calls out a message to a friend departing on a journey, raising his voice a little, for Toffy already seemed a long way off, 'I never knew—I never knew, Toffy—that you had been hit, or I would have stopped.'

'I didn't want to spoil the race,' said Toffy. 'I don't often win a race,' he said, and with that he died.

CHAPTER XVI

They carried him home in the evening when the sun had set, and on the day following, according to the custom of the country, they buried him. Some peons dug the grave in a corner of the little estate, and sawed planks and made a railing round it, and Ross read the Burial Service over him from Toffy's own Prayer Book, and Peter kept the well-worn Bible for Kitty Sherard.

Peter sought solitude where he could. His grief was of the kind which can be borne only in solitude. The love of David and Jonathan had not been deeper than the affection he and his friend had had for one another. The small estancia house became intolerable, with its sense of void and the feeling that at any moment Toffy might appear, always with some new project in hand, always gravely hopeful about everything he undertook, always doing his best to risk his life in absurd ventures such as no one else would have attempted. It was only the other day that Peter had seen him trying to break a horse which even a gaucho felt shy of riding; and he loved to be in the thick of the mêlée attempting the difficult task of swinging a lasso above his head, with that air of imperturbable gravity always about him. Or Peter pictured him in the long chair, where during a feverish attack he had lain so often, ruffling up his hair and puzzling his head over problems of Hebrew theology. Every corner seemed to be full of him, and yet no one had ever appeared to have a less assertive personality than he, nor a lighter hold on his possessions. He thought of how he himself had always gone to Toffy's dressing-table to borrow anything he might require—the boy who was so much accustomed to have his things appropriated by other people! And then again he saw him in the big, ugly drawing-room at Hulworth, nursing one of his appalling colds, or looking with grave resentment at his priceless collection of vases in the glass cases in the hall. He remembered him riding in the steeplechase at Sedgwick, and quite suddenly he recollected how sick and faint Kitty Sherard had become when he fell at the last jump. He thought of a silver box Toffy had bought for her at Bahia, and he wondered how it was that he had been so blind as not to see how much these two had cared for each other. His feeling of loss amounted almost to an agony, and once when he had ridden alone far on to the camp he shouted his dead friend's name aloud many times, and felt baffled and disappointed when there was no response.

Good God! was it only two nights ago that he was picking out hymn-tunes with his finger on the piano! At dinner-time they had been teasing him about the Prophet Elijah, Toffy having calculated the exact distance that the old prophet must have run in front of Ahab's chariot. 'It was a fearful long sprint for an old man,' Toffy had said in a certain quaint way he had. And now Toffy lay in his long, narrow grave under the mimosa tree, and the world seemed to lack something which had formerly made it charitable and simple-hearted and even touched with beauty.

No one asked after Purvis, no one had seen him. He had disappeared in the mysterious way in which he usually came and went, but his little boy was still at the estancia, and his bitter crying for the friend who was dead had added to the unhappiness of the day. He was a child not easily given to tears, and his efforts at controlling his sobs were as pathetic as his weeping. Peter found him the morning after Toffy's death curled up behind some firewood in an outhouse, where he had gone so that his tears should not be seen. He comforted him as well as he knew how, and wished that Jane were there, and thought how well she could console the little fellow; and he said to himself with an upward stretch of his arms which relieved the ache of his heart for a moment, 'Oh, if women only knew how much a man wants them when he is down in his luck!' He thought that he could have told Jane everything and have talked to her about Toffy as to no one else, and he wished with all his heart that he could climb up there behind the stack of wood and give way to tears as this poor little chap had done. He wondered what they were to do with him suppose Purvis never came back again.

But Purvis came back. Men often said of him that he had a genius for doing the unlooked-for thing; but no one could have expected even of him that he would venture to a place so near to his own estate and to the men who had attempted his life. He travelled by night, of course. His cat-like eyes always seemed capable of seeing in the dark, and even his horse's footfalls had

something soft and feline about them.

The other men were sleeping as men do after two long wakeful nights and a day of stress and exertion. Even grief could not keep away the feeling of exhaustion, and Purvis could hear their deep breathing in the corridor, when, having tethered his horse to a distant paraiso tree, he stole softly up to the door.

His boy's room was at the back of the house, and Purvis crept round to it, and called him softly by name. Dick's short life had been full of adventure and surprises, and he never uttered a sound when his father's light touch awakened him from sleep, and his voice told him softly to get up. Purvis dressed him with something of a woman's skill, and then he bade him remain where he was while he crept softly into the drawing-room of the house.

He came back presently as noiselessly as he had left the room, and whispered, 'I am looking for a tin box; is it anywhere about?'

'They opened it to-day, and took some papers out,' said Dick.

Purvis drew one short, quick breath.

'Then let us be off at once,' he said.

He crossed the room once more in his stealthy fashion, and took from the mantelpiece a small bottle of nerve-tabloids which he had forgotten, and slipped them into his pocket, and then went out into the dark again. Once he paused at the entrance of the corridor and listened attentively, and then crept down the garden path and found the horses tethered to the paraiso trees. They led them softly through the monte, and there Dick paused.

'I am going to say good-bye to him,' he said. 'I don't care what you say!'

He went to the grave under the mimosa trees, and with a queer elfin gesture he stooped down and kissed the lately disturbed sods, and made the sign of the cross upon his narrow little chest as he had seen his Spanish mother do. The dignity of the action, with its unconscious touch of foreign grace, and the boy's pathetic attempt to keep back his tears as he lingered by the grave in the darkness at an hour when any other boy of his age would have been safely tucked up in bed, might well touch the heart of any one who stood beside the child.

'I didn't know he was hit!' said Purvis suddenly; and probably he spoke the truth for once in his life. Toffy was one of the few men who in many years had trusted him, and he had been a good friend to Dick. 'Well, the game's up!' said Purvis. And he and his son mounted their horses and rode off into the blackness of the night together.

Ross had rescued the black japanned box from the boat, and had kept it under his care until such time as he should have an opportunity of giving it to Peter. It was from a sense that it might provide some sort of distraction to a man almost dazed with grief that he brought it into the drawing-room on the evening of the day Toffy was buried, and suggested that perhaps Peter had better open it and see what was in it. The key was gone, of course, but they prised it open with some tools, and on the top of the box there was a letter which made Peter lay his hand over his pocket for a moment. It was as though by some magic the packet which lay there had been transferred to the interior of a black japanned box discovered upon a river steamer in the Argentine Republic. The writing on the cover was a duplicate of the one he himself held, and was addressed in his mother's writing: 'To my son, to be given to him at my death.'

Peter could not see quite straight for a moment. The finding of the packet seemed to establish conclusively his brother's identity; and he took out the folded sheets which lay inside the cover with hands that were not steady.

The very words in the opening sentences were the same as in his own letter, and written in the clear, strong handwriting which he knew so well.

'When you get this letter I shall be dead,' he read in the words which were already painfully familiar to him; 'and before I die there is something which I think I had better tell you. I am not haunted by remorse nor indulging in death-bed repentance, and I shall merely ask you not to hate me more than you can help when you have finished reading this letter.

'You must often have heard of your elder brother who died when I was in Spain, the year of your father's death. He did not die——' So far Peter knew the letter off by heart, but there seemed to be many pages of writing to follow. 'And as far as I am aware he may be living now.'

'If it is anything bad,' said Ross kindly, 'why not put it off until to-morrow? You are about used up to-day, Peter, and whatever there is in that box can wait.'

'I am all right, thanks,' said Peter, without looking up. And Ross went out to the patio and left him alone.

'I must go a long way back to make myself intelligible,' the letter went on. 'I suppose people of Spanish descent are generally credited with an unforgiving spirit. I have never forgiven my

sister-in-law. I did not at first attempt revenge, possibly because there was only one way in which I could deprive her and her children of their inheritance. That way was denied me. My eldest boy died at his birth, and the girl only lived a few weeks. After that I had no other children. I think the grief this caused entered into both our lives with a bitterness which is unusual, and which I shall not attempt to recall. I shall only say that we both mourned it, and that Lionel Ogilvie and his wife by their conduct made what might have been merely a sorrow a matter also of almost unbearable disappointment. I mention this regrettable emotional feeling in order to make my subsequent conduct intelligible to you. In the course of years, during which your father hardly attended to any matters concerning the property, because it would seem to be benefiting his legal successors, I urged him to go abroad on an exploring expedition such as he loved, hoping in some way to mitigate his disappointment or keep him from dwelling upon it. I have probably not conveyed to you how deep the quarrel was between him and his brother; but if I have not done so it is not of any great importance.

'When your father had sailed for Central Africa I went out to Spain to visit my property there, and I took a sea-voyage to Lisbon for the benefit of my health. There was a young couple in the steerage of the boat going out to settle in Argentine. They were people of the working class and very poor, and before we reached Lisbon, on the night of a storm, the woman gave birth to a child and died, and the father was left to start life in an unknown country with a helpless infant dependent upon him. Some kind-hearted people on board the steamer made up a subscription for him, with the English people's quaint notion that all grief can be assuaged with food or money; and one night when I was on deck alone the stewardess brought me the baby to see.

'When we got into Lisbon the following day I offered the man to adopt the child; and when my maid returned to England I got a Spanish woman for him, and took him with me to my own estate. He was greeted everywhere as my son, and allowing myself the luxury of the small deception, I pretended to myself that he really was mine; but weeks passed before I ever dreamed of deceiving anybody else on the subject. It was a letter which my sister-in-law wrote to me which decided me to stay out in Granada during my husband's two years' absence, and to announce, in course of time, that I was the mother of a son. The plan was quite stupidly easy, and everything lent itself to the deception. The child was fair, and not unlike the Ogilvies, and his father had given him up entirely to me, on the understanding that he was never to claim him again. It may seem strange to you, but it is a fact that after I returned to England there was not the vaguest suspicion in any one's mind that he was not my own child. When my husband returned from abroad I was convinced, if I had ever doubted it, that I had acted wisely. Under the circumstances I should act in the same way again.

'Of course events proved that I had made a mistake; but I had in the meantime made my husband perfectly happy and my sister-in-law perfectly miserable, and that was what I desired.

'You were born a year after your father's return home, and when the other child was three years old. To say that I then found myself in an intolerable position would not be to overstate the case. If your father had lived, my difficulties would have been greater than they actually were, and it was during his lifetime and after your birth that I suffered most. I suppose only a woman, and one, moreover, who has longed for children, would be able to realize what my feelings were, and I shall not urge your compassion by dwelling upon that time. I have never accepted pity, and I should prefer not to have it bestowed upon me when I am dead.

'It was only after your father's death that I saw a way of escape out of the intolerable position in which I had placed myself. I was in very bad health for a time, and my husband's affection for the alien child was more than I was able to bear. There is always a touch of the savage in motherhood, and I am naturally jealous.

'After my husband's death I went out to my own property in Spain, and by judiciously moving about there from one place to another, and changing my personal servants frequently, it was a comparatively easy matter to say that the child had died, without exactly specifying where his death had taken place.

'It was absolutely necessary that he should be got rid of. A pauper emigrant's boy was taking the place of my son in everything. The very tenants about the place treated him differently from the way in which they treated you. My husband had decided that the bilk of his property was to go to him; and all the time I knew that his father was from the class from which perhaps, navvies are drawn, and that his mother was some girl from Whitechapel or Mile End.

'He had to go, but I treated him fairly. I took him down to Lisbon myself and sent him back to his father with a trustworthy couple who were going out there. From my own private fortune I bestowed upon him a sum sufficient to educate him and to place him in the world.

'I think I never breathed freely or had one undisturbed moment from the time you were born until he had gone to Argentine.

'The people to whom I entrusted him both died of fever in Rosario, and from that day to this I have never heard of the boy who was called Edward Ogilvie. The money which I had bestowed upon him had proved too tempting to some one. The child disappeared, and so far as I am concerned he was never heard of again.

'For four years he had lived as my own son, and it was I who took him away from his father and his natural surroundings. I want you to find him if you can. If he has been brought up vilely or treated brutally by strangers, the fault, of course, lies with me; this will probably distress you, but I think it will be an incentive also to you to try to find the man.'

The letter was signed in Mrs. Ogilvie's name and it finished as abruptly as it had begun.

The first thing that roused Peter from the sense of bewilderment and almost of stupor which beset him was Dunbar's arrival at the estancia.

'Purvis has given us the slip again!' said the detective. 'The man has as many lives is he has names! He has disappeared more than once before, and he has even died, to my certain knowledge, two or three times, in order to get out of a tight place.'

'Oh, Purvis, yes!' said Peter absently; and then he pulled himself together and briefly told Dunbar the whole story.

'It doesn't alter the fact,' said Dunbar, 'that I have got to find him if I can.'

'No,' said Peter stupidly. 'No, I suppose it does not,' and he added, in a heavy voice, 'I believe Toffy would like me to look after the boy.'

'The mystery to me is,' said Dunbar, 'how Purvis, as you call him (to me, of course, he is E. W. Smith), could have got hold of this box of papers. It may be a fraud yet,' he said truculently, 'and it will require investigation.'

'I know my mother's writing,' said Peter, 'and Purvis was in the act of trying to burn the box before we took him off the steamer. It is the last thing in the world that it would suit him to have about him if he meant to establish his claim to be the heir.'

'That's so,' said Dunbar thoughtfully.

'The box could not have come out with him when he sailed to Argentine as a child,' said Peter, 'because the letter is dated long after that.'

'And you say you never saw the man until you met him out here?' Dunbar went on.

He brought out a notebook from his pocket and began to jot down Peter's replies.

'No,' said Peter, 'or, if I did, I can't recall where it was. At first when I saw him he reminded me of some one whom I had met; but afterwards, when it seemed pretty well established that he was my brother, both Christopherson and I thought that this vague recollection of the man, which I mentioned to him, might be based on the fact that there was some sort of likeness between him and some members of my family.'

Dunbar jotted this down also. 'And you positively have no recollection of having seen him?' he said, as he fastened a band of elastic round the book. 'If that is so he must have had accomplices in England who stole the box for him. I shall have to find out where these boxes were kept at your home, and, as nearly as possible, I must discover with whom Purvis was in communication in England. Or he may have gone there himself. I know that he went home in one of Lamport & Holt's boats only a few months ago—that was after the wreck of the *Rosana*, you understand—and it was while he was in England that I saw him, and knew for certain that he had not gone down in the wreck. My warrant against him is for a common hotel robbery. It was when he came back to Argentine that he began this river-trading, which was in the hands of a better man till he took it.'

'The plan will be for you and my lawyer to work together,' said Peter; 'but at present I can't furnish you with the smallest clue as to how these papers came into his possession. I know the look of the box quite well. There were several of them in my mother's writing-room, which was in the oldest part of the house. They were all destroyed one night last autumn when we had rather a serious fire there.'

Dunbar took out his notebook and began to write.

'*By Jove!*' exclaimed Peter, suddenly starting from his seat. He saw it all in a flash: the burning tower, with volumes of smoke rising from it; the line of men, with hose and buckets, pouring water on the connecting bridge of the tower; the groups of frightened guests on the terrace, and his mother standing unmoved amongst them in her sumptuous purple dress and the diamonds in her hair; the arrival of the fire-engine from Sedgwick; and then, just at the end, the figure of a man appearing on the bridge, with a cloak wound round his head, dashing into the doorway through which the smoke was issuing in great waves; his sudden flight across the bridge again; and then Jane, at his elbow, clasping his arm and saying, in a terrified tone, 'Oh, Peter! for a moment I thought it was you!'

Dunbar was scribbling rapidly in his notebook. 'It is as clear as mud!' he said at last. 'Purvis, after the *Rosana* incident, was missing for a considerable time, and it is believed that his English

wife at Rosario hid him somewhere. There he probably heard the story of his adoption, and determined to prove himself the eldest son.'

'I don't understand how he could have heard the story,' said Peter.

'He heard most things. But there are links in the chain that we shall never get a sight of; we see only the beginning and the end of it,' replied Dunbar.

The Scot was very seldom excited; but he got up from his chair and began to walk rapidly up and down the room, his under-lip stuck out, and his tough hair thrown back from his forehead. 'The whole thing depended upon his getting what direct information he could about the property, and he must have worked this thing well. The fire, I take it, was accidental?'

'Oh, the fire was accidental enough,' said Peter, 'and was found to be due to some electric lighting which was put into the tower.'

'Purvis's visit to England must have been to ascertain if Mrs. Ogilvie were still alive, and, in the first instance, he probably meant to levy blackmail upon her; he must have discovered where she kept her papers, and have tried to effect an entrance on the night of the ball when many strangers were about.'

'I believe,' exclaimed Peter, 'we saw him in one of the corridors of the house during the dance, and decided that he must be one of the guests unknown to us, who had come with some country neighbour, and that he had lost his way amongst the almost interminable passages of the place.' He saw himself and Jane making for the leather-covered door which led to the bridge, and the shrinking stranger, with his hopelessly timid manner, who had drawn back at their approach; and he thought he heard himself saying, 'Shall I get him some partners, or leave the people who brought him to the dance to look after him?' It was only a fleeting look that he had caught of the man's face, and he recalled it with difficulty now, but it was not a far-fetched conclusion to decide that the two were one and the same man.

Dunbar was in a sort of transport. 'It's the best case I ever had,' he said, 'and we only want the man himself to make the thing complete! Purvis has played some pretty clever and some pretty deep games in his time; but this is about the coolest thing he ever tried to pull off, and he has as nearly as possible won through with it.'

Mr. Dunbar always relapsed into a strong Scottish accent in moments of excitement, and he became almost unintelligible at last, as he rolled forth his r's and gave it as his opinion that the man was a worthless scoundrel.

'I can't think,' said Peter, 'why Purvis did not claim the inheritance sooner. He had the whole thing in his hands.'

'Yes; but Purvis did not know that!' exclaimed Dunbar. 'I 'll take my oath he 's been pumping you about how much old servants knew, and the like; and there are men working the case in England, judging by the number of telegrams he has had. He would have been over in London before many months were gone, or I am very much mistaken, and as soon as the train was laid; but it would have been a fatal thing for him to have attempted a case before he knew how much was known. Your arrival in Argentine probably precipitated the very thing he was working for.'

'He remarkably nearly succeeded,' said Peter.

'There ought to be a training home for criminals,' Dunbar exclaimed, 'to teach them once and for all to destroy all evidence, rather than retain that which incriminates alongside of that which may be useful. A man will sometimes keep a bundle of letters which will bring him to the gallows together with information which might make his fortune.'

Peter described how he had found the tin case on the top of a bundle of shavings in the cabin of the river steamer. 'He was in a tight place there, and must have known it,' said Peter. 'Why not have burned the letters before our boat got up?'

Dunbar laughed. 'You can't very well make a holocaust on a small steamer on a dark night without showing where you are, for one thing,' he replied, 'nor can you overturn a paraffin lamp on the top of a bundle of shavings without a possibility of burning yourself up at the same time. There was a love of sensationalism, too, about the man. He would like his steamer to flame away at the right moment, and disappoint the men who meant to board her; or, what is still more likely, there was a considerable amount of gunpowder on board the boat, and a boarding-party arriving at the right moment would have been blown sky-high.'

'He never showed mercy,' said Peter.

'The Lord will need to have mercy upon him if he gets into my hands,' quoth Dunbar, 'for I have none to spare for him.'

'But I,' said Peter, 'have got to remember that my mother charges me to befriend the man.'

'But then,' said Dunbar tersely, 'your mother never knew what sort of man you would have to

deal with.'

'God knows!' said Peter.

'Well, it's a hanging matter if we get him,' said Dunbar cheerfully. He and the commissario had their orders, and they would be obliged to execute them. The results must be left for a court of justice to decide.

They rode away the following morning, and there seemed nothing for it but to wait at the estancia until more news was forthcoming. For Peter the days were the saddest of his life, and left an impression upon him which nothing ever quite removed afterwards. He became older suddenly, and a certain boyishness, which was characteristic of him, was gone and never returned again. Life, which had once seemed so simple to him and so easily lived, so full of pleasures and of good times and of good comrades, had suddenly become complex and filled with difficulties, and made up of grave decisions and shadowed by a sorrow which would probably be felt as long as he lived. Ross would not let him stay indoors, and mercifully gave him a double share of work to do. The weather was cooler now, and the days could be filled with outdoor occupation from morning till night. There were no siestas in the afternoon or lazy dawdling over afternoon coffee in the heat of the day to remind him of long gossips with Toffy, and the evenings were shorter and not so difficult to fill.

'I 'm an awful bore, Ross!' said Peter, having sat silent from dinner-time until he went to bed one night; 'but I can't help it.'

'I know you can't,' said Ross kindly.

The big man, who was a poor player of cards at the best of times, became seized with a desire to learn picquet, and, strange as his method of consolation may have been, Peter knew what the good fellow meant by it, and taught him the game and got through the time somehow.

There was still no news of Purvis; the man seemed to have vanished in his own mysterious way, and nothing could be heard of him. It was ascertained that he was well supplied with money, and it was thought that, as his child would be incapable of any very long journeys or unusual hardships, the discovery of his whereabouts near home might lead to the discovery of the father. But the thing remained a mystery. Dunbar's long lean frame grew leaner than ever as he searched and journeyed and telegraphed without obtaining any results.

It was the boy who appeared first, and then without his father. Perhaps Purvis discovered that escape would be easier without the burden of the child, or it may have been that his queer affection for him had determined him to seek safety for the boy somewhere. But it was part of the man's extraordinary coolness that he should send him for Peter Ogilvie to look after.

The boy arrived at the estancia one night, a poor, tired little object, with a letter from his father in his pocket. The two had made their way as far as the province of Salta, and from there the boy had been sent to Taco, where, unaided, he had found a horse and had ridden over to the estancia. He was thin and weak-looking, and had evidently suffered a good deal from his many journeyings. Ross took him and looked after him, and gave him some light work on the farm to do, and there he remained while Dunbar journeyed to Salta, to find that Purvis had left the place long before he arrived. Only a woman at Rosario knew where he was, and this woman had learned not to tell. She had married Purvis years ago, soon after she arrived in Argentine to be governess to some English children. Her employers had not been kind to her, and in a country where comforts were few she had had less than her share of them. She was a girl of twenty then, and very pretty, and hers was a faithful heart; and, cynical as the expression may sound, she had had fidelity thrust upon her by the fact that she was utterly friendless in the world. When Purvis married her she went to him gladly. When he deserted her she even pretended to believe in him, for the pitiful reason that there was no one else in the whole of that strange land to whom she could turn. She was a woman to whom the easy excuse of business could always be used in the widest sense of the term, for she had been brought up to believe that that very comprehensive word signified something almost as mysterious as affairs of the spirit. It was not safe to assert of those who were engaged in business whence they came or whither they would go. Sometimes she did not see her husband for months, or even for a year at a time; he did not always share his abundant days with her, but he had nearly always come back to her when he was in trouble.

He arrived one night in Rosario without disguise of any sort, and knocked at her humble door in one of the meanest parts of the town. He was never beaten for long, and he announced to her that he wanted her help in a new scheme that he had planned. His fortune was to be made once more, but the scheme itself must remain hidden for a time. His wife, upon this occasion, was to help him by acting as cat's-paw.

'It's a big thing,' Purvis said, 'and will require all my strength;' and he announced his intention of remaining hidden in Rosario for a few weeks while he rested completely. But his chronic inability to sleep made rest impossible. He was calculating and adding up figures during the watches of the night, and his strange, light-coloured eyes, with the constant tear in them, became paler in colour and more suggestive of bad nerves. He began to find his calculations difficult to balance, and he even made some mistakes in his long rows of figures. The thing worried him and he began to wonder if his head were going. He had always overcome difficulties

and had fought dangers with an absolute belief in his own success. He was unscrupulous and cunning, but he had never been beaten yet. It was horrible that sleep was the thing that he could not command; but, alas! the exercise of will-power is not the force by which sleep can be induced, and a placid or submissive mind was unknown to Purvis. His wife watched him anxiously. She would go for long walks with him in the early dawn or after it was dark, hoping that the fresh air and the cooler weather might bring some sort of repose to the wide-open pale eyes; but no sleep came, and Purvis took to swallowing more tabloids, and setting out his rows of figures in a nervous way, while his hand trembled and his plaintive voice became irritable, and his eyes watered more than they were wont to do.

He had money in hand, and it was some sort of comfort to his wife to be able to purchase for him the nourishing food which he required. She had often been in sore straits for money herself, but she believed, with pathetic conviction, that a woman can do with fewer comforts than a man can, and she had never felt deprivations for herself so much as she would have felt them for her husband. She cooked tempting dishes for him, and enjoyed his companionship, and asked no questions. She even allowed herself the purchase of a few new clothes now that money was plentiful again, and these days, even with the anxiety of her husband's ill-health hanging over her, were not by any means the unhappiest of her life.

'I shan't be able to pull this business through,' said Purvis one night, 'unless I sleep, and I can't live unless I succeed with it.'

He made his wife write innumerable letters for him in her own handwriting, and signed with an entirely new name. But it was difficult to transact these business affairs through the medium of another person, and even his meek wife might some day ask questions!

If only he could pull himself together and get a firmer grasp of things than he had at present! The commercial instinct was strong within him, and he had a genius for figures, but insomnia and the state of his nerves seemed to have deprived him of half his powers. He envied his wife her gentle breathing and her deep sleep; and he would often wake her in the night when he was most restless, and demand something at her hands—a very weak cup of tea, or a little milk and hot water—in order to hear the restoring sound of a human voice.

Lately, however, he had purchased a new sort of tabloid which he used sparingly, according to the chemist's directions, but at which he often looked longingly, believing that a little sleep lay within the tiny glass bottle.

He had lain awake for hours this night, noting the ticking of his watch, counting the hours as they struck on the neighbouring clock, falling sometimes into an uneasy slumber which lasted only a few minutes, and then waking at the sound of his own voice calling aloud in his sleep. He tried every plan and contrivance, however childish, by which men have sometimes courted slumber.

He lay in bed very still to-night, his wide-staring eyes looking into the darkness. He heard every hour as it struck, and his active brain refused to be quiet for a moment. Difficult things looked gigantic in the darkness, and everything upon which his thoughts dwelt became hopelessly exaggerated in his mind. Brandy and other stimulants had never been a temptation to him; his life had too often depended upon his wits for him to risk a muddled brain. But he still believed in tabloids; and as the day dawned, and light crept through the window, he looked longingly at the little glass vial lying on the dressing-table. It was three o'clock, and if only he could get a couple of hours' deep rest before the noise of the city began, he might yet be able to pull himself together and arrange his affairs.

He rose from the bed and went with unfaltering steps to the dressing-table and shook the tiny discs into the palm of his hand; and then he counted them deliberately.

'It's kill or cure!' he said, with that queer courage which never deserted him, even if it were based entirely upon self-seeking and self-interest. He threw his head back with the characteristic action with which he always swallowed his medicine, and went back to bed again.

Purvis slept; and it may have been that he was glad to sleep on for ever, for he was tired through and through, and the only way to escape failure was by death.

His wife mourned for him deeply and sincerely, as many better men have not been mourned. There was only one thing she dreaded in the whole world, and that was loneliness. She had endured so much of it in her lifetime, and now that her husband was gone, whom as a matter of necessity she had believed in, she was quite alone. She knew nothing of business, and it never struck her as strange that there should be money amounting to a considerable little fortune in a box in the house. With the fear of want removed the poor creature blossomed into youthfulness again, and she married an engineer on a new railway line, who was very good to her. To him she ever held up the late lamented Purvis as one of the best of husbands, and one, too, who had left her well provided for.

CHAPTER XVII

Peter and Jane were married the following autumn with the ring which Toffy had kept wrapped up in a piece of tissue paper in his waistcoat pocket.

For a description of the general rejoicings the almost hysterical paragraphs in the Culversham local paper must be consulted. Columns of print were devoted to accounts of feastings and fireworks, tenants' dinners, and school-children's teas.

In order to understand and really appreciate the full interest of the occasion one would have had to be at Tetley Place on the morning of the 26th of October last year. Miss Abingdon was in her most bustling, her most uncompromising mood, and from an early hour of the morning she was so severe in her speech, and so absolutely radiant in her expression, that it was very difficult indeed to know how to treat her.

Canon Wrottesley, who still believed that his wife was only feeling the effects of the winter weather, the spring weather, the summer weather, or the autumn weather, was as gay and debonair as usual, and even at the wedding it was felt that he was in some sort the centre of things. He had his usual group of admirers about him, and was so gracious and charming, so patriarchal one moment and so boyish the next, that his popularity was not to be wondered at. The very school-children, as they threw their flowers, glanced upwards at the canon for his approval.

Mrs. Avory, dressed in black, went very quietly to the wedding with her little girl beside her. She wept sadly during the service, but she looked stronger now, and less suffering than she had been wont to do. A niche seemed to have been found for her in the village of Culversham, where she loved the poor people, and went about amongst the cottages, and read to sick folk, and was happier, perhaps, than she quite knew, in her own pathetic little way.

Kitty Sherard was bridesmaid and never cried at all. She wore rose-colour, and carried Jane's bouquet, and during the whole of the long day she smiled and was admired, and behaved as a bridesmaid in rose-colour should. It is a comforting supposition, which many people hold as a belief, that there are guardian angels, or spirits, which watch round the beds of those who weep. Such a spirit, keeping watch at Kitty Sherard's bed that night, and hearing her sobbing, may have known something of her sorrow. Soldiers—men tell us who have seen many battlefields—cover their faces when they are wounded, so that their comrades may not see their drawn features and their pain. And women wait until the lights are out before they begin to cry.

Perhaps a certain joy of living will come back to Kitty when hounds are running and a good horse carries her well. To-night in the dark she felt nothing but an intolerable sense of loss. Probably in a sorrow of this sort the ache of it consists in a curious longing to get up and go at once somewhere—anywhere—to the one who is loved, and the blankness and the pity of it all centres round the fact that this is impossible. The impotence of the feeling increases as means of communication in this life are made easier. It seems absurd that, whereas we may actually speak and hear the voice in reply of those who answer us while we are hundreds of miles apart, there yet should be an insuperable barrier between ourselves and those who, for aught we know, may be quite near us. It seems almost as though we must be under a spell which prevents the communication which we long for, and as though almost any day we may wake up to find how unreal the separation is, Kitty buried her face in the pillow and called Toffy's name, and—who knows?—perhaps he heard her.

Sometimes I think Mrs. Avory may marry again, for her husband is rapidly getting through his life in a laudable endeavour to live every day of it, and there are times when I wonder if, in years to come, I may see her established as the gentle and admiring wife of our handsome country vicar, doing good all her days in her timid faithful way.

But I cannot think of Kitty Sherard as caring for any one except the boy who, whatever his faults may have been, had never an unkind or ungentle thought of any man or woman, and who played the game as honourably as he knew it, and then laid down his life in the simple manner of a gentleman.

Peter will never forget him. When he has boys of his own he will call them after his dead friend's name, and will tell them absurd stories about him, for even when his name has become only a memory it will be surrounded with something lovably humorous. His old jokes and stories are much more a reality than his death. He often risked his life for a good sporting race; and he did not grudge giving it up during that last lap in the Argentine River when day was breaking. He was trying to help a friend to do the right sort of thing at considerable cost to them both, and, when all is said and done, none of us can do much better than that.

Well, good luck and long life to bride and bride-groom! They love each other in a manner refreshingly whole-hearted and delightful, and we will, if you please, ring down the curtain upon them in orthodox fashion to the sound of wedding-bells. Good luck to Kitty, who will never tell her mad little stories again, or enjoy herself as she used to do when she goes to race-meetings or drives her horses tandem through the lanes. Good luck to Mrs. Avory, with her pathetic brown

eyes, doing her daily work amongst the poor; and to the genial vicar and his wife. Good luck to all our friends in this book, and to you, dear reader, who have followed them so far.

And so, good-bye.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PETER AND JANE; OR, THE MISSING HEIR ***

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