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PATRICIA BRENT, SPINSTER

BY
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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Patricia Brent is a "paying guest" at the Galvin House Residential Hotel. One day she overhears two of her fellow "guests" pitying her because she "never has a nice young man to take her out."

In a thoughtless moment of anger she announced that on the following night she is dining at the Quadrant with her fiancé. When in due course she enters the grill-room, she finds some of Galvin Houseites there to watch her. Rendered reckless by the thought of the humiliation of being found out, she goes up to a young staff-officer, and asks him to help her by "playing up."

This is how she meets Lt.-Col. Lord Peter Bowen, D.S.O. The story is a comedy concerned with the complications that ensue from Patricia's thoughtless act.

PATRICIA BRENT, SPINSTER

CHAPTER I

PATRICIA'S INDISCRETION

"She never has anyone to take her out, and goes nowhere, and yet she can't be more than twenty-seven, and really she's not bad-looking."

"It's not looks that attract men," there was a note of finality in the voice; "it's something else." The speaker snapped off her words in a tone that marked extreme disapproval.

"What else?" enquired the other voice.

"Oh, it's—well, it's something not quite nice," replied the other voice darkly, "the French call it being *très femme*. However, she hasn't got it."

"Well, I feel very sorry for her and her loneliness. I am sure she would be much happier if she had a nice young man of her own class to take her about."

Patricia Brent listened with flaming cheeks. She felt as if someone had struck her. She recognised herself as the object of the speakers' comments. She could not laugh at the words, because they were true. She *was* lonely, she had no men friends to take her about, and yet, and yet——

"Twenty-seven," she muttered indignantly, "and I was only twenty-four last November."

She identified the two speakers as Miss Elizabeth Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe.

Miss Wangle was the great-niece of a bishop, and to have a bishop in heaven is a great social asset on earth. This ecclesiastical distinction seemed to give her the right of leadership at the Galvin House Residential Hotel. Whenever a new boarder arrived, the unfortunate bishop was disinterred and brandished before his eyes.

One facetious young man in the "commercial line" had dubbed her "the body-snatcher," and, being inordinately proud of his *jeu d'esprit*, he had worn it threadbare, and Miss Wangle had got to know of it. The result was the sudden departure of the wit. Miss Wangle had intimated to Mrs. Craske-Morton, the proprietress, that if he remained she would go. Mrs. Craske-Morton considered that Miss Wangle gave tone to Galvin House.

Miss Wangle was acid of speech and barren of pity. Scandal and "the dear bishop" were her chief preoccupations. She regularly read *The Morning Post*, which she bought, and *The Times*, which she borrowed. In her attitude towards royalty she was a Jacobite, and of the aristocracy she knew no wrong.

Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe was Miss Wangle's toady; but she wrapped her venom in Christian charity, thus making herself the more dangerous of the two.

At Galvin House none dare gainsay these two in their pronouncements. They were disliked; but more feared than hated. During the Zeppelin scare Mr. Bolton, who was the humorist of Galvin House, had fixed a notice to the drawing-room door, which read: "Zeppelin commanders are requested to confine their attentions to rooms 8 and 18." Rooms 8 and 18 were those occupied by Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. There had been a great fuss about this harmless and rather feeble joke; but fortunately for Mr. Bolton, he had taken care to pin his jest on the door when no one was looking, and he took the additional precaution of being foremost in his denunciation of the bad taste shown by the person responsible for the jest.

Patricia Brent was coming downstairs in response to the dinner-gong, when, through the partly open door of the lounge, she overheard the amiable remarks concerning herself. She passed quietly into the dining-room and took her seat at the table in silence, mechanically acknowledging the greetings of her fellow-guests.

At Galvin House the word "guest" was insisted upon. Mrs. Craske-Morton, in announcing the advent of a new arrival, reached the pinnacle of refinement. "We have another guest coming," she would say, "a most interesting man," or "a very cultured woman," as the case might be. When the man arrived without his interest, or the woman without her culture, no one was disappointed; for no one had expected anything. The conventions had been observed and that was all that mattered.

Dinner at Galvin House was rather a dismal affair. The separate tables heresy, advocated by a progressive-minded guest, had been once and for all discouraged by Miss Wangle, who announced that if separate tables were introduced she, for one, would not stay.

"I remember the dear bishop once saying to me," she remarked, "'My dear, if people can't say what they have to say at a large table and in the hearing of others, then let it for ever remain unsaid.'"

"But if someone's dress is awry, or their hair is not on straight, would you announce the fact to the whole table?" Patricia had questioned with an innocence that was a little overdone.

Miss Wangle had glared; for she wore the most obvious auburn wig, which failed to convince anyone, and served only to enhance the pallor of her sharp features.

In consequence of the table arrangements, conversation during meal-times was general—and dull. Mr. Bolton joked, Miss Wangle poured vinegar on oily waters, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe "dripped with the oil of forbearance." Mr. Cordal ate noisily, Miss Sikkum simpered and Mrs. Craske-Morton strove to appear a real hostess entertaining real guests without the damning prefix "paying."

The remaining guests, there were usually round about twenty-five, looked as they felt they ought to look, and never failed to show a befitting reverence for Miss Wangle's ecclesiastical relic; for it was Miss Wangle who issued the social birth certificates at Galvin House.

That evening Patricia was silent. Mr. Bolton endeavoured to draw her out, but failed. As a rule she was the first to laugh at his jokes in order "to encourage the poor little man," as she expressed it; "for a man who is fat and bald and a bachelor and thinks he's a humorist wants all the pity that the world can lavish upon him."

Patricia glanced round the table, from Miss Wangle, lean as a winter wolf, to Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, fair, chubby and faded, and on to Mr. Cordal, lantern-jawed and ravenous. "Were they not all lonely—the left of God?" Patricia asked herself; and yet two of these solitary souls had dared to pity her, Patricia Brent. At least she had something they did not possess—youth.

The more she thought of the words that had drifted to her through the half-closed door of the lounge, the more humiliating they appeared. Her day had been particularly trying and she was tired. She was in a mood to see a cyclone in a zephyr, and in a ripple a gigantic wave. She looked about her once more. What a fate to be cast among such people!

The table appointments seemed more than usually irritating that evening. The base metal that peeped slyly through the silver of the forks and spoons, the tapering knives, victims of much cleaning, with their yellow handles, the salt-cellars, the mustard, browning with three days' age (mustard was replenished on Sundays only), the anæmic ferns in "artistic" pots, every defect seemed emphasized.

How she hated it; but most of all the many-shaped and multi-coloured napkin-rings, at Galvin House known as "serviette-rings." Variety was necessary to ensure each guest's personal interest in one particular napkin. Did they ever get mixed? Patricia shuddered at the thought. At the end of the week, a "serviette" had become a sort of gastronomic diary. By Saturday evening (new "serviettes" were served out on Sunday at luncheon) the square of grey-white fabric had many things recorded upon it; but above all, like a monarch dominating his subjects, was the ineradicable aroma of Monday's kipper.

On this particular evening Galvin House seemed more than ever grey and depressing. Patricia found herself wondering if God had really made all these people in His own image. They seemed so petty, so ungodlike. The way they regarded their food, as it was handed to them, suggested that they were for ever engaged in a comparison of what they paid with what they received. Did God make people in His own image and then leave the rest to them? Was that where free will came in?

"——lonely!"

The word seemed to crash in upon her thoughts with explosive force. Someone had used it—whom she did not know, or in what relation. It brought her back to earth and Galvin House. "Lonely," that was at the root of her depression. She was an object of pity among her fellow-boarders. It was intolerable! She understood why girls "did things" to escape from such surroundings and such fox-pity.

Had she been a domestic servant she could have hired a soldier, that is before the war. Had she been a typist or a shop-girl—well, there were the park and tubes and things where gallant youth approached fair maiden. No, she was just a girl who could not do these things, and in consequence became the pitied of the Miss Wangles and the Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythes of Bayswater.

She was quite content to be manless, she did not like men, at least not the sort she had encountered. There were Boltons and Cordals in plenty. There were the "Haven't-we-met-before?" kind too, the hunters who seemed cheerfully to get out at the wrong station, or pay twopence on a bus for a penny fare in order to pursue some face that had attracted their roving eye.

She sighed involuntarily at the ugliness of it all, this cheapening of the things worthy of reverence and respect. She looked across at Miss Sikkum, whose short skirts and floppy hats had involved her in many unconventional adventures that one glance at her face had corrected as if by magic. A back view of Miss Sikkum was deceptive.

Suddenly Patricia made a resolve. Had she paused to think she would have seen the danger; but she was by nature impulsive, and the conversation she had overheard had angered and humiliated her.

Her resolve synchronised with the arrival of the sweet stage. Turning to Mrs. Craske-Morton she remarked casually, "I shall not be in to dinner to-morrow night, Mrs. Morton."

Mrs. Craske-Morton always liked her guests to tell her when they were not likely to be in to dinner. "It saves the servants laying an extra cover," she would explain. As a matter of fact it saved Mrs. Craske-Morton preparing for an extra mouth.

If Patricia had hurled a bomb into the middle of the dining-table, she could not have attracted to herself more attention than by her simple remark that she was not dining at Galvin House on the morrow.

Everybody stopped eating to stare at her. Miss Sikkum missed her aim with a trifle of apple charlotte, and spent the rest of the evening in endeavouring to remove the stain from a pale blue satin blouse, which in Brixton is known as "a Paris model." It was Miss Wangle who broke the silence.

"How interesting," she said. "We shall quite miss you, Miss Brent. I suppose you are working

late."

The whole table waited for Patricia's response with breathless expectancy.

"No!" she replied nonchalantly.

"I know," said Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, in her even tones, and wagging an admonitory finger at her. "You're going to a revue, or a music-hall."

"Or to sow her wild oats," added Mr. Bolton.

Then some devil took possession of Patricia. She would give them something to talk about for the next month. They should have a shock.

"No," she replied indifferently, attracting to herself the attention of the whole table by her deliberation. "No, I'm not going to a revue, a music-hall, or to sow my wild oats. As a matter of fact," she paused. They literally hung upon her words. "As a matter of fact I am dining with my fiancé."

The effect was electrical. Miss Sikkum stopped dabbing the front of her Brixton "Paris model." Miss Wangle dropped her pince-nez on the edge of her plate and broke the right-hand glass. Mr. Cordal, a heavy man who seldom spoke, but enjoyed his food with noisy gusto, actually exclaimed, "What?" Almost without exception the others repeated his exclamation.

"Your fiancé?" stuttered Miss Wangle.

"But, dear Miss Brent," said Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, "you never told us that you were engaged."

"Didn't I?" enquired Patricia indifferently.

"And you don't wear a ring," interposed Miss Sikkum eagerly.

"I hate badges of servitude," remarked Patricia with a laugh.

"But an engagement ring," insinuated Miss Sikkum with a self-conscious giggle.

"One is freer without a ring," replied Patricia.

Miss Wangle's jaw dropped.

"Marriages are——" she began.

"Made in heaven. I know," broke in Patricia, "but you try wearing Turkish slippers in London, Miss Wangle, and you'll soon want to go back to the English boots. It's silly to make things in one place to be worn in another; they never fit."

Mrs. Craske-Morton coughed portentously.

"Really, Miss Brent," she exclaimed.

Whenever conversation seemed likely to take an undesirable turn, or she foresaw a storm threatening, Mrs. Craske-Morton's "Really, Mr. So-and-so" invariably guided it back into a safe channel.

"But do they?" persisted Patricia. "Can you, Mrs. Morton, seriously regard marriage in this country as a success? It's all because marriages are made in heaven without taking into consideration our climatic conditions."

Miss Wangle had lost the power of speech. Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe was staring at Patricia as if she had been something strange and unclean upon which her eyes had never hitherto lighted. In the eyes of little Mrs. Hamilton, a delightfully French type of old lady, there was a gleam of amusement. Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe was the first to recover the power of speech.

"Is your fiancé in the army?"

"Yes," replied Patricia desperately. She had long since thrown over all caution.

"Oh, tell us his name," giggled Miss Sikkum.

"Brown," said Patricia.

"Is his knapsack number 99?" enquired Mr. Bolton.

"He doesn't wear one," said Patricia, now thoroughly enjoying herself.

"Oh, he's an officer, then," this from Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe.

"Is he a first or a second lieutenant?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"Major," responded Patricia laconically.

"What's he in?" was the next question.

"West Loamshires."

"What battalion?" enquired Miss Wangle, who had now regained the power of speech. "I have a cousin in the Fifth."

"I am sure I can't remember," said Patricia, "I never could remember numbers."

"Not remember the number of the battalion in which your fiancé is?" There was incredulous disapproval in Miss Wangle's voice.

"No! I'm awfully sorry," replied Patricia, "I suppose it's very horrid of me; but I'll go upstairs and look it up if you like."

"Oh please don't trouble," said Miss Wangle icily. "I remember the dear bishop once saying ——"

"And I suppose after dinner you'll go to a theatre," interrupted Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, for the first time in the memory of the oldest guest indifferent to the bishop and what he had said, thought, or done.

"Oh, no, it's war time," said Patricia, "we shall just dine quietly at the Quadrant Grill-room."

A meaning glance passed between Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe and Miss Wangle. Why she had fixed upon the Quadrant Grill-room Patricia could not have said.

"And now," said Patricia, "I must run upstairs and see that my best bib and tucker are in proper condition to be worn before my fiancé. I'll tell him what you say about the ring. Good night, everybody, if we don't meet again."

"Patricia Brent," admonished Patricia to her reflection in the looking-glass, as she brushed her hair that night, "you're a most unmitigated little liar. You've told those people the wickedest of wicked lies. You've engaged yourself to an unknown major in the British Army. You're going to dine with him to-morrow night, and heaven knows what will be the result of it all. A single lie leads to so many. Oh, Patricia, Patricia!" she nodded her head admonishingly at the reflection in the glass. "You're really a very wicked young woman." Then she burst out laughing. "At least, I have given them something to talk about, any old how. By now they've probably come to the conclusion that I'm a most awful rip."

Patricia never confessed it to herself, but she was extremely lonely. Instinctively shy of strangers, she endeavoured to cover up her self-consciousness by assuming an attitude of nonchalance, and the result was that people saw only the artificiality. She had been brought up in the school of "men are beasts," and she took no trouble to disguise her indifference to them. With women she was more popular. If anyone were ill at Galvin House, it was always Patricia Brent who ministered to them, sat and read to them, and cheered them through convalescence back to health.

Her acquaintance with men had been almost entirely limited to those she had found in the various boarding-houses, glorified in the name of residential hotels, at which she had stayed. Five years previously, on the death of her father, a lawyer in a small country town, she had come to London and obtained a post as secretary to a blossoming politician. There she had made herself invaluable, and there she had stayed, performing the same tasks day after day, seldom going out, since the war never at all, and living a life calculated to make an acid spinster of a Venus or a Juno.

"Oh, bother to-morrow!" said Patricia as she got into bed that night; "it's a long way off and perhaps something will happen before then," and with that she switched off the light.

CHAPTER II

THE BONSOR-TRIGGS' MENAGE

The next morning Patricia awakened with a feeling that something had occurred in her life. For a time she lay pondering as to what it could be. Suddenly memory came with a flash, and she smiled. That night she was dining out! As suddenly as it had come the smile faded from her lips and eyes, and she mentally apostrophised herself as a little idiot for what she had done. Then, remembering Miss Wangle's remark and the expression on Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe's face, the lines of her mouth hardened, and there was a determined air about the tilt of her chin. She

smiled again.

"Patricia Brent! No, that won't do," she broke off. Then springing out of bed she went over to the mirror, adjusted the dainty boudoir cap upon her head and, bowing elaborately to her reflection, said, "Patricia Brent, I invite you to dine with me this evening at the Quadrant Grill-room. I hope you'll be able to come. How delightful. We shall have a most charming time." Then she sat on the edge of the bed and pondered.

Of course she would have to come back radiantly happy, girls who have been out with their fiancé's always return radiantly happy. "That will mean two *crèmes de menthes* instead of one, that's another shilling, perhaps two," she murmured. Then she must have a good dinner or else the *crème de menthe* would get into her head, that would mean about seven shillings more. "Oh! Patricia, Patricia," she wailed, "you have let yourself in for an expense of at least ten shillings, the point being is a major in the British Army worth an expenditure of ten shillings? We shall——"

She was interrupted by the maid knocking at the door to inform her that it was her turn for the bath-room.

As Patricia walked across the Park that morning on her way to Eaton Square, where the politician lived who employed her as private secretary whilst he was in the process of rising, she pondered over her last night's announcement. She was convinced that she had acted foolishly, and in a way that would probably involve her in not only expense, but some trouble and inconvenience.

At the breakfast-table the conversation had been entirely devoted to herself, her fiancé, and the coming dinner together. Miss Wangle, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, and Miss Sikkum, supported by Mrs. Craske-Morton, had returned to the charge time after time. Patricia had taken refuge in her habitual breakfast silence and, finding that they could draw nothing from her her fellow-guests had proceeded to discuss the matter among themselves. It was with a feeling of relief that Patricia rose from the table.

There was an east wind blowing, and Patricia had always felt that an east wind made her a materialist. This morning she was depressed; there was in her heart a feeling that fate had not been altogether kind to her. Her childhood had been spent in a small town on the East Coast under the care of her father's sister who, when Mrs. Brent died, had come to keep house for Mr. John Brent and take care of his five-year-old daughter. In her aunt Patricia found a woman soured by life. What it was that had soured her Patricia could never gather; but Aunt Adelaide was for ever emphasizing the fact that men were beasts.

Later Patricia saw in her aunt a disappointed woman. She could remember as a child examining with great care her aunt's hard features and angular body, and wondering if she had ever been pretty, and if anyone had kissed her because they wanted to and not because it was expected of them.

The lack of sympathy between aunt and niece had driven Patricia more and more to seek her father's companionship. He was a silent man, little given to emotion or demonstration of affection. He loved Patricia, but lacked the faculty of conveying to her the knowledge of his love.

As she walked across the Park Patricia came to the conclusion that, for some reason or other, love, or the outward visible signs of love, had been denied her. Warm-hearted, impetuous, spontaneous, she had been chilled by the self-repression of her father, and the lack of affection of her aunt. She had been schooled to regard God as the God of punishment rather than the God of love. One of her most terrifying recollections was that of the Sundays spent under the paternal roof. To her father, religion counted for nothing; but to her aunt it counted for everything in the world; the hereafter was to be the compensation for renunciation in this world. Miss Brent's attitude towards prayer was that of one who regards it as a means by which she is able to convey to the Almighty what she expects of Him in the next world as a reward for what she has done, or rather not done, in this.

Patricia had once asked, in a childish moment of speculation, "But, Aunt Adelaide, suppose God doesn't make us happy in the next world, what shall we do then?"

"Oh! yes He will," was her aunt's reply, uttered with such grimness that Patricia, though only six years of age, had been satisfied that not even God would dare to disappoint Aunt Adelaide.

Patricia had been a lonely child. She had come to distrust spontaneity and, in consequence, became shy and self-conscious, with the inevitable result that other children, the few who were in Aunt Adelaide's opinion fit for her to associate with, made it obvious that she was one by herself. Patricia had fallen back on her father's library, where she had read many books that would have caused her aunt agonies of stormy anguish, had she known.

Patricia early learnt the necessity for dissimulation. She always carefully selected two books, one that she could ostensibly be reading if her aunt happened to come into the library, and the other that she herself wanted to read, and of which she knew her aunt would strongly disapprove.

Miss Brent regarded boarding-schools as "hotbeds of vice," and in consequence Patricia was

educated at home, educated in a way that she would never have been at any school; for Miss Brent was thorough in everything she undertook. The one thing for which Patricia had to be grateful to her aunt was her general knowledge, and the sane methods adopted with her education. But for this she would not have been in the position to accept a secretaryship to a politician.

When Patricia was twenty-one her father had died, and she inherited from her mother an annuity of a hundred pounds a year. Her aunt had suggested that they should live together; but Patricia had announced her intention of working, and with the money that she realised from the sale of her father's effects, particularly his library, she came to London and underwent a course of training in shorthand, typewriting, and general secretarial work. This was in March, 1914. Before she was ready to undertake a post, the war broke out upon Europe like a cataclysm, and a few months later Patricia had obtained a post as private secretary to Mr. Arthur Bonsor, M.P.

Mr. Bonsor was the victim of marriage. Destiny had ordained that he should spend his life in golf and gardening, or in breeding earless rabbits and stingless bees. He was bucolic and passive. Mrs. Bonsor, however, after a slight altercation with Destiny, had decided that Mr. Bonsor was to become a rising politician. Thus it came about that, pushed on from behind by Mrs. Bonsor and led by Patricia, whose general knowledge was of the greatest possible assistance to him, Mr. Bonsor was in the elaborate process of rising at the time when Patricia determined to have a fiancé.

Mr. Bonsor was a small, fair-haired man, prematurely bald, an indifferent speaker; but excellent in committee. Instinctively he was gentle and kind. Mrs. Bonsor disliked Patricia and Patricia was indifferent to Mrs. Bonsor. Mrs. Bonsor, however, recognised that in Patricia her husband had a remarkably good secretary, one whom it would be difficult to replace.

Mrs. Bonsor's attitude to everyone who was not in a superior position to herself was one of patronage. Patricia she looked upon as an upper servant, although she never dare show it. Patricia, on the other hand, showed very clearly that she had no intention of being treated other than as an equal by Mrs. Bonsor, and the result was a sort of armed neutrality. They seldom met; when by chance they encountered each other in the house Mrs. Bonsor would say, "Good morning, Miss Brent; I hope you walked across the Park." Patricia would reply, "Yes, most enjoyable; I invariably walk across the Park when I have time"; and with a forced smile Mrs. Bonsor would say, "That is very wise of you."

Never did Mrs. Bonsor speak to Patricia without enquiring if she had walked across the Park. One day Patricia anticipated Mrs. Bonsor's inevitable question by announcing, "I walked across the Park this morning, Mrs. Bonsor, it was most delightful," and Mrs. Bonsor had glared at her, but, remembering Patricia's value to her husband, had made a non-committal reply and passed on. Henceforth, Mrs. Bonsor dropped all reference to the Park.

On the first day of Patricia's entry into the Bonsor household, Mrs. Bonsor had remarked, "Of course you will stay to lunch," and Patricia had thanked her and said she would. But when she found that her luncheon was served on a tray in the library, where Mr. Bonsor did his work, she had decided that henceforth exercise in the middle of the day was necessary for her, and she lunched out.

Mr. Bonsor had married beneath him. His father, a land-poor squire in the north of England, had impressed upon all his sons that money was essential as a matrimonial asset, and Mr. Bonsor, not having sufficient individuality to starve for love, had determined to follow the parental decree. How he met Miss Triggs, the daughter of the prosperous Streatham builder and contractor, Samuel Triggs, nobody knew, but his father had congratulated him very cordially about having contrived to marry her. Miss Triggs's friends to a woman were of the firm conviction that it was Miss Triggs who had married Mr. Bonsor. "'Ettie's so ambitious." remarked her father soon after the wedding, "that it's almost a relief to get 'er married."

Mr. Bonsor was scarcely back from his honeymoon before he was in full possession of the fact that Mrs. Bonsor had determined that he should become famous. She had read how helpful many great men's wives had been in their career, and she determined to be the power behind the indeterminate Arthur Bonsor. Poor Mr. Bonsor, who desired nothing better than a peaceable life and had looked forward to a future of ease and prosperity when he married Miss Triggs, discovered when too late that he had married not so much Miss Triggs, as an abstract sense of ambition. Domestic peace was to be purchased only by an attitude of entire submission to Mrs. Bonsor's schemes. He was not without brains, but he lacked that impetus necessary to "getting on." Mrs. Bonsor, who was not lacking in shrewdness, observed this and determined that she herself would be the impetus.

Mr. Bonsor came to dread meal-times, that is meal-times *tête-à-tête*. During these symposiums he was subjected to an elaborate cross-examination as to what he was doing to achieve greatness. Mrs. Bonsor insisted upon his being present at every important function to which he could gain admittance, particularly the funerals of the illustrious great. Egged on by her he became an inveterate writer of letters to the newspapers, particularly *The Times*. Sometimes his letters appeared, which caused Mrs. Bonsor intense gratification: but editors soon became shy of a man who bombarded them with letters upon every conceivable subject, from the submarine menace to the question of "should women wear last year's frocks?"

Mr. Triggs had once described his daughter very happily: "'Ettie's one of them that ain't content with pressing a bell, but she must keep 'er thumb on the bell-push." That was Mrs. Bonsor all over; she lacked restraint, both physical and artistic, and she conceived that if you only make noise enough people will, sooner or later, begin to take notice.

Within three years of his marriage, Mr. Bonsor entered the House of Commons. He had first of all fought in a Radical constituency and been badly beaten; but the second time he had, by some curious juggling of chance, been successful in an almost equally strong Radical division, much to the delight of Mrs. Bonsor. The success had been largely due to her idea of flooding the constituency with pretty girl-canvassers; but she had been very careful to keep a watchful eye on Mr. Bonsor.

One of her reasons for engaging Patricia, for really Mrs. Bonsor was responsible for the engagement, had been that she had decided that Patricia was indifferent to men, and she decided that Mr. Bonsor might safely be trusted with Patricia Brent for long periods of secretarial communion.

Mr. Bonsor, although not lacking in susceptibility, was entirely devoid of that courage which subjugates the feminine heart. Once he had permitted his hand to rest upon Patricia's; but he never forgot the look she gave him and, for weeks after, he felt a most awful dog, and wondered if Patricia would tell Mrs. Bonsor.

When she married, Mrs. Bonsor saw that it would be necessary to drop her family, that is as far as practicable. It could not be done entirely, because her father was responsible for the allowance which made it possible for the Bonsors to live in Eaton Square. The old man was not lacking in shrewdness, and he had no intention of being thrown overboard by his ambitious daughter. It occasionally happened that Mr. Triggs would descend upon the Bonsor household and, although Mrs. Bonsor did her best to suppress him, that is without in any way showing she was ashamed of her parent, he managed to make Patricia's acquaintance and, from that time, made a practice of enquiring for and having a chat with her.

Mrs. Bonsor was grateful to providence for having removed her mother previous to her marriage. Mrs. Triggs had been a homely soul, with a marked inclination to be "friendly." She overflowed with good-humour, and was a woman who would always talk in an omnibus, or join a wedding crowd and compare notes with those about her. She addressed Mr. Triggs as "Pa," which caused her daughter a mental anguish of which Mrs. Triggs was entirely unaware. It was not until Miss Triggs was almost out of her teens that her mother was persuaded to cease calling her "Girlie."

In Mrs. Bonsor the reforming spirit was deeply ingrained; but she had long since despaired of being able to influence her father's taste in dress. She groaned in spirit each time she saw him, for his sartorial ideas were not those of Mayfair. He leaned towards checks, rather loud checks, trousers that were tight about the calf, and a coat that was a sporting conception of the morning coat, with a large flapped pocket on either side. He invariably wore a red tie and an enormous watch-chain across his prosperous-looking figure. His hat was a high felt, an affair that seemed to have set out in life with the ambition of being a top hat, but losing heart had compromised.

If Mrs. Bonsor dreaded her father's visits, Patricia welcomed them. She was genuinely fond of the old man. Mr. Triggs radiated happiness from the top of his shiny bald head, with its fringe of sandy-grey hair, to his square-toed boots that invariably emitted little squeaks of joy. He wore a fringe of whiskers round his chubby face, otherwise he was clean-shaven, holding that beards were "messy" things. He had what Patricia called "crinkly" eyes, that is to say each time he smiled there seemed to radiate from them hundreds of little lines.

He always addressed Patricia as "me dear," and not infrequently brought her a box of chocolates, to the scandal of Mrs. Bonsor, who had once expostulated with him that that was not the way to treat her husband's secretary.

"Tut, tut, 'Ettie," had been Mr. Triggs's response. "She's a fine gal. If I was a bit younger I shouldn't be surprised if there was a second Mrs. Triggs."

"Father!" Mrs. Bonsor had expostulated in horror. "Remember that she is Arthur's secretary."

Mr. Triggs had almost choked with laughter; mirth invariably seemed to interfere with his respiration and ended in violent and wheezy coughings and gaspings. Had Mrs. Bonsor known that he repeated the conversation to Patricia, she would have been mortified almost to the point of discharging her husband's secretary.

"You see, me dear," Mr. Triggs had once said to Patricia, "'Ettie's so busy bothering about aitches that she's got time for nothing else. She ain't exactly proud of her old father," he had added shrewdly, "but she finds 'is brass a bit useful." Mr. Triggs was under no delusion as to his daughter's attitude towards him.

One day he had asked Patricia rather suddenly, "Why don't you get married, me dear?"

Patricia had started and looked up at him quickly. "Married, me, Mr. Triggs? Oh! I suppose for one thing nobody wants me, and for another I'm not in love."

Mr. Triggs had pondered a little over this.

"That's right, me dear!" he said at length. "Never you marry except you feel you can't 'elp it, then you'll know it's the right one. Don't you marry a chap because he's got a lot of brass. You marry for the same reason that me and my missis married, because we felt we couldn't do without each other," and the old man's voice grew husky. "You wouldn't believe it, me dear, 'ow I miss 'er, though she's been dead eight years next May."

Patricia had been deeply touched and, not knowing what to say, had stretched out her hand to the old man, who took and held it for a moment in his. As she drew her hand away she felt a tear splash upon it, and it was not her own.

"Ever hear that song 'My Old Dutch'?" he asked after a lengthy silence.

Patricia nodded.

"I used to sing it to 'er—God bless my soul! what an old fool I'm gettin', talkin' to you in this way. Now I must be gettin' off. Lor! what would 'Ettie say if she knew?"

But Mrs. Bonsor did not know.

CHAPTER III

THE ADVENTURE AT THE QUADRANT GRILL-ROOM

That evening as Patricia looked in at the lounge on the way to her room, she found it unusually crowded. On a normal day her appearance would scarcely have been noticed; but this evening it was the signal for a sudden cessation in the buzz of conversation, and all eyes were upon her. For a moment she stood in the doorway and then, with a nod and a smile, she turned and proceeded upstairs, conscious of the whispering that broke out as soon as her back was turned.

As she stood before the mirror, wondering what she should wear for the night's adventure, she recalled a remark of Miss Wangle's that no really nice-minded woman ever dressed in black and white unless she had some ulterior motive. Upon the subject of sex-attraction Miss Wangle posed as an authority, and hinted darkly at things that thrilled Miss Sikkum to ecstatic giggles, and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe to pianissimo moans of anguish that such things could be.

With great deliberation Patricia selected a black charmeuse costume that Miss Wangle had already confided to the whole of Galvin House was at least two and a half inches too short; but as Patricia had explained to Mrs. Hamilton, if you possess exquisitely fitting patent boots that come high up the leg, it's a sin for the skirt to be too long. She selected a black velvet hat with a large white water-lily on the upper brim.

"You look bad enough for a vicar's daughter," she said, surveying herself in the glass as she fastened a bunch of red carnations in her belt. "White at the wrists and on the hat, yes, it looks most improper. I wonder what the major-man will think?"

Swift movements, deft touches, earnest scrutiny followed one another. Patricia was an artist in dress. Finally, when her gold wristlet watch had been fastened over a white glove she subjected herself to a final and exhaustive examination.

"Now, Patricia!"—it had become with her a habit to address her reflection in the mirror —"shall we carry an umbrella, or shall we not?" For a few moments she regarded herself quizzically, then finally announced, "No: we will not. An umbrella suggests a bus, or the tube, and when a girl goes out with a major in the British Army, she goes in a taxi. No, we will not carry an umbrella."

She still lingered in front of the mirror, looking at herself with obvious approval.

"Yes, Patricia! you are looking quite nice. Your eyes are violeter, your hair more sunsetty and your lips redder than usual, and, yes, your face generally looks happier."

When she entered the lounge it was twenty minutes to eight and, although dinner was at seven-thirty, the room was full. Everybody stared at her as with flushed cheeks she walked to the centre of the room. Then suddenly turning to Miss Wangle, she said, "Do you think I shall do, Miss Wangle, or do I look too wicked for a major?"

Miss Wangle merely stared. Mrs. Hamilton smiled and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe looked sympathetically at Miss Wangle. Mr. Bolton laughed.

"I wish I was a major, Miss Brent," he remarked, at which Patricia turned to him and made an elaborate curtsy.

"That girl will come to a bad end," remarked Miss Wangle with conviction to Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, as with a smile over her shoulder Patricia made a dramatic exit. She had noticed, however, that Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe were in hats and jackets. They, too, were apparently going out, although she had not heard them tell Mrs. Craske-Morton so. Mr. Bolton also had his hat in his hand. During the day Patricia had thought out very carefully the part she had set herself to play. If she were going to meet her fiancé back from the Front, she must appear radiantly happy, vide conventional opinion. But she had admonished her reflection in the mirror, "You mustn't overdo it. Women, especially tabbies, are very acute."

It had been Patricia's intention to go by bus but at the entrance of the lounge she saw Gustave who ingratiatingly enquired, "Taxi, mees?"

With a smile she nodded her head, and Gustave disappeared. "There goes another two shillings. Oh, bother Major Brown! Soldiers are costly luxuries," she muttered under her breath.

A moment after Gustave reappeared with the intimation that the taxi was at the door. A group of her fellow-guests gathered in the hall to see her off. Patricia thought their attitude more appropriate to a wedding than the fact that one of their fellow-boarders was going out to dinner. "It is clear," she thought, "that Patricia Brent, man-catcher, is a much more important person than is Patricia Brent, inveterate spinster."

She noticed that there was a second taxi at the door, and while her own driver was "winding-up" his machine, which took some little time, the other taxi got off in front. She had seen get into it Miss Wangle, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, and Mr. Bolton.

As the taxi sped eastward, Patricia began to speculate as to what she really intended doing. She had no appointment, she was in a taxi which would cost her two shillings at least, and she had given the address of the Quadrant Grill-room.

She was still considering what she should do when the taxi drew up. Fate and the taxi driver had decided the matter between them, and Patricia determined to go through with it and disappoint neither. Having paid the man and tipped him handsomely, she descended the stairs to the Grill-room. She had no idea of what it cost to dine at the Quadrant; but remembered with a comfortable feeling that she had some two pounds upon her. With moderation, she decided, it might be possible to get a meal for that sum without attracting the adverse criticism of the staff. It had not struck her that it might appear strange for a girl to dine alone at such a restaurant as the Quadrant, and that she was laying herself open to criticism. She was too excited at this new adventure into which she had been precipitated for careful reasoning.

As she descended the stairs she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. She started. Surely that could not be Patricia Brent, secretary to a rising politician, that stylish-looking girl in black, with a large bunch of carnations. That red-haired creature with sparkling eyes and a colour that seemed to have caught the reflection of the carnations in her belt!

She entered the lounge at the foot of the stairs with increased confidence, and she was conscious that several men turned to look at her with interest. Then suddenly the bottom fell out of her world. There, standing in the vestibule, were Miss Wangle, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, and Mr. Bolton. In a flash she saw it all. They had come to spy upon her. They would find her out, and the whole humiliating story would probably have to be told. Thoughts seemed to spurt through her mind. What was she to do? It was too late to retreat. Miss Wangle had already fixed her with a stony stare through her lorgnettes, which she carried only on special occasions.

Patricia was conscious of bowing and smiling sweetly. Some sub-conscious power seemed to take possession of her. Still wondering what she should do, she found herself walking head in the air and perfectly composed, in the direction of the Grill-room. She was conscious of being followed by Miss Wangle and her party. As Patricia rounded the glass screen a superintendent came up and enquired if she had a table. She heard a voice that seemed like and yet unlike her own answer, "Yes, thank you," and she passed on looking from right to left as if in search of someone, unconscious of the many glances cast in her direction.

When about half-way up the long room, just past the bandstand, the terrible thought came to her of a possible humiliating retreat. What was she to do? Why was she there? What were her plans? She looked about her, hoping that she did not appear so frightened as she felt. She was conscious of the gaze of a man seated at a table a few yards off. He was fair and in khaki. That was all she knew. Yes, he was looking at her intently.

"No, that table won't do! It is too near to the band." It was Miss Wangle's voice behind her. Without a moment's hesitation her sub-conscious self once more took possession of Patricia, and she marched straight up to the fair-haired man in khaki and in a voice loud enough for Miss Wangle and her party to hear cried:

"Hullo! so here you are, I thought I should never find you." Then as he rose she murmured under her breath, "Please play up to me, I'm in an awful hole. I'll explain presently."

Without a moment's hesitation the man replied, "You're very late. I waited for you a long time outside, then I gave you up."

With a look of gratitude and a sigh of content, Patricia sank down into the chair a waiter had placed for her. If there had been no chair, she would have fallen to the floor, her legs refusing further to support her body. She was trembling all over. Miss Wangle had selected the next table. Patricia was conscious of hoping that somewhere in the next world Miss Wangle's sufferings would transcend those of Dives as a hundred to one.

As she was pulling off her gloves her companion held a low-toned colloquy with the waiter. She stole a glance at him. What must he be thinking? How had he classified her? Her heart was pounding against her ribs as if determined to burst through.

Suddenly she remembered that the others were watching and, leaning upon the table, she said:

"Please pretend to be very pleased to see me. We must talk a lot. You know—you know—" then she turned aside in confusion; but with an effort she said, "You—you are supposed to be my fiancé, and you've just come back from France, and—and—— Oh! what are you thinking of me? Please—please——" she broke off.

Very gravely and with smiling eyes he replied, "I quite understand. Please don't worry. Something has happened, and if I can do anything to help, you have only to tell me. My name is Bowen, and I'm just back from France."

"Are you a major?" enquired Patricia, to whom stars and crowns meant nothing.

"I'm afraid I'm a lieutenant-colonel," he replied, "on the Staff."

"Oh! what a pity," said Patricia, "I said you were a major."

"Couldn't you say I've been promoted?"

Patricia clapped her hands. "Oh! how splendid! Of course! You see I said that you were Major Brown, I can easily tell them that they misunderstood and that it was Major Bowen. They are such awful cats, and if they found out I should have to leave. You see that's some of them at the next table there. That's Miss Wangle with the lorgnettes and the other woman is Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, who is her echo, and the man is Mr. Bolton. He's nothing in particular."

"I see," said Bowen.

"And—and—of course you've got to pretend to be most awfully glad to see me. You see we haven't met for a long time and—and—we're engaged."

"I quite understand," was the reply.

Then suddenly Patricia caught his eye and saw the smile in it.

"Oh, how dreadful!" she cried. "Of course you don't know anything about it. I'm talking like a schoolgirl. You see my name's Patricia, Patricia Brent," and then she plunged into the whole story, telling him frankly of her escapade. He was strangely easy to talk to.

"And—and—" she concluded, "what do you think of me?"

"I think I'd sooner not tell you just now," he smiled.

"Is it as bad as that," she enquired.

Then suddenly the smile faded from his face and he leaned across to her, saying:

"Miss Brent——"

"I'm afraid you must call me Patricia," she interrupted with a comical look, "in case they overhear. It seems rather sudden, doesn't it, and I shall have to call you——"

"Peter," he said. He had nice eyes Patricia decided.

"Er—er—Peter," she made a dash at the name.

Bowen sat back in his chair and laughed. Miss Wangle fixed upon him a stare through her lorgnettes, not an unfavourable stare, she was greatly impressed by his rank and red tabs.

After that the ice seemed broken and Patricia and her "fiancé" chatted merrily together, greatly impressing Patricia's fellow-boarders.

Bowen was a good talker and a sympathetic listener and, above all, his attitude had in it that deference which put Patricia entirely at her ease. She told him all there was to tell about herself and he, in return, explained that he came of an army family, and had been sent out to France soon after Mons. He was then a captain in the Yeomanry. He was wounded, promoted, and later

received the D.S.O. and M.C. He had now been brought back to England and attached to the General Staff.

"Now I think you know all that is necessary to know about your fiancé," he had concluded.

Patricia laughed. "Oh, by the way," she said, "you have never given me an engagement ring. Please don't forget that. They asked me where my ring was, and I told them I didn't care about rings, as they were badges of servitude. You see it is quite possible that Miss Wangle will come over to us presently. She's just that sort, and she might ask awkward questions, that is why I am telling you all about myself."

"I'll remember," said Bowen.

"I'm glad you're a D.S.O., though," she went on, half to herself, "that's sure to interest them, and it's nice to think you're more than a major. Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe are most worldly-minded. Of course it would have been nicer had you been a field-marshal; but I suppose you couldn't be promoted from a major to a field-marshal in the course of a few days, could you?"

"Well, it's not usual," he confessed.

When the meal was over Bowen looked at his watch.

"I'm afraid it's too late for a show, it's a quarter to ten."

"A quarter to ten!" cried Patricia. "How the time has flown. I shall have to be going home."

He noticed preparations for a move at the Wangle table.

"Oh, please, don't hurry! Let's go upstairs and sit and smoke for a little time."

"Do you think I ought," enquired Patricia critically, her head on one side.

"Well," replied Bowen, "I think that you might safely do so as we are engaged," and that settled it.

They went upstairs, and it was a quarter to eleven before Patricia finally decided that she must make a move.

"Do you know," she said as she rose, "I am afraid I have enjoyed this most awfully; but oh! to-morrow morning."

"Shall you be tired?" he enquired.

"Tired!" she queried, "I shall be hot with shame. I shall not dare to look at myself in the glass. I—I shall give myself a most awful time. For days I shall live in torture. You see I'm excited now and—and—you seem so nice, and you've been so awfully kind; but when I get alone, then I shall start wondering what was in your mind, what you have been thinking of me, and—and—oh! it will be awful. No; I'll come with you while you get your hat. I daren't be left alone. It might come on then and—and I should probably bolt. Of course I shall have to ask you to see me home, if you will, because—because——"

"I'm your fiancé," he smiled.

"Ummm," she nodded.

Both were silent as they sped along westward in the taxi, neither seeming to wish to break the spell.

"Thinking?" enquired Bowen at length, as they passed the Marble Arch.

"I was thinking how perfectly sweet you've been," replied Patricia gravely. "You have understood everything and—and—you see I was so much at your mercy. Shall I tell you what I was thinking?"

"Please do."

"It sounds horribly sentimental."

"Never mind," he replied.

"Well, I was thinking that your mother would like to know that you had done what you have done to-night. And now, please, tell me how much my dinner was."

"Your dinner!"

"Yes, *ple-e-e-e-ase*," she emphasised the "please."

"You insist?"

And then Patricia did a strange thing. She placed her hand upon Bowen's and pressed it.

"Please go on understanding," she said, and he told her how much the dinner was and took the money from her.

"May I pay for the taxi?" he enquired comically.

For a moment she paused and then replied, "Yes, I think you may do that, and now here we are," as the taxi drew up, "and thank you very much indeed, and good-bye." They were standing on the pavement outside Galvin House.

"Good-bye," he enquired. "Do you really mean it?"

"Yes, *ple-e-e-ase*," again she emphasised the "please."

"Patricia," he said in a serious tone, as the door flew open and Gustave appeared silhouetted against the light, "don't you think that sometimes we ought to think of the other fellow?"

"I shall always think of the other fellow," and with a pressure of the hand, Patricia ran up the steps and disappeared into the hall, the door closing behind her. Bowen turned slowly and re-entered the taxi.

"Where to, sir?" enquired the man.

"Oh, to hell!" burst out Bowen savagely.

"Yes, sir; but wot about my petrol?"

"Your petrol? Oh! I see," Bowen laughed. "Well! the Quadrant then."

In the hall Patricia hesitated. Should she go into the lounge, where she was sure Galvin House would be gathered in full force, or should she go straight to bed? Miss Wangle decided the matter by appearing at the door of the lounge.

"Oh! here you are, Miss Brent; we thought you had eloped."

"Wasn't it strange we should see you to-night?" lisped Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, who had followed Miss Wangle.

Patricia surveyed Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe with calculating calmness.

"If two people go to the same Grill-room at the same time on the same evening, it would be strange if they did not see each other. Don't you think so, Miss Wangle?"

"Did you say you were going there?" lisped Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, coming to Miss Wangle's assistance. "We forgot."

"Oh, do come in, Miss Brent!" It was Mrs. Craske-Morton who spoke.

Patricia entered the lounge and found, as she had anticipated, the whole establishment collected. Not one was missing. Even Gustave fluttered about from place to place, showing an unwonted desire to tidy up. Patricia was conscious that her advent had interrupted a conversation of absorbing interest, furthermore that she herself had been the subject of that conversation.

"Miss Wangle has been telling us all about your fiancé." It was Miss Sikkum who spoke. "Fancy your saying he was a major when he's a Staff lieutenant-colonel."

"Oh!" replied Patricia nonchalantly, as she pulled off her gloves, "they've been altering him. They always do that in the Army. You get engaged to a captain and you find you have to marry a general. It's so stupid. It's like buying a kitten and getting a kangaroo-pup sent home."

"But aren't you pleased?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton, at a loss to understand Patricia's mood.

"No!" snapped Patricia, who was already feeling the reaction. "It's like being engaged to a chameleon, or a quick-change artist. They've made him a 'R.S.O.' as well." Under her lashes Patricia saw, with keen appreciation, the quick glances that were exchanged.

"You mean a D.S.O., Distinguished Service Order," explained Mr. Bolton. "An R.S.O. is er—er —something you put on letters."

"Is it?" enquired Patricia innocently, "I'm so stupid at remembering such things."

"He was wearing the ribbon of the Military Cross, too," bubbled Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe.

"Was he?" Patricia was afraid of overdoing the pose of innocence she had adopted. "What a nuisance."

"A nuisance!" There was surprised impatience in Miss Wangle's voice.

Patricia turned to her sweetly. "Yes, Miss Wangle. It gives me such a lot to remember. Now let me see." She proceeded to tick off each word upon her fingers. "He's a Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Bowen, D.S.O., M.C. Is that right?"

"Bowen," almost shrieked Miss Wangle. "You said Brown."

"Did I? I'm awfully sorry. My memory's getting worse than ever." Then a wave of mischief took possession of her. "Do you know when I went up to him to-night I hadn't the remotest idea of what his Christian name was."

"Then what on earth do you call him then?" cried Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"Call him?" queried Patricia, as she rose and gathered up her gloves. "Oh!" indifferently, "I generally call him 'Old Thing,'" and with that she left the lounge, conscious that she had scored a tactical victory.

CHAPTER IV

THE MADNESS OF LORD PETER BOWEN

When Patricia awakened the next morning, it was with the feeling that she had suffered some terrible disappointment. As a child she remembered experiencing the same sensation on the morning after some tragedy that had resulted in her crying herself to sleep. She opened her eyes and was conscious that her lashes were wet with tears. Suddenly the memory of the previous night's adventure came back to her with a rush and, with an angry dab of the bedclothes, she wiped her eyes, just as the maid entered with the cup of early-morning tea she had specially ordered.

With inspiration she decided to breakfast in bed. She could not face a whole table of wide-eyed interrogation. "Oh, the cats!" she muttered under her breath. "I hate women!" Later she slipped out of the house unobserved, with what she described to herself as a "morning after the party" feeling. She was puzzled to account for the tears. What had she been dreaming of to make her cry?

Every time the thought of her adventure presented itself, she put it resolutely aside. She was angry with herself, angry with the world, angry with one Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Bowen. Why, she could not have explained.

"Oh, bother!" she exclaimed, as she made a fourth correction in the same letter. "Going out is evidently not good for you, Patricia."

She spent the day alternately in wondering what Bowen was thinking of her, and deciding that he was not thinking of her at all. Finally, with a feeling of hot shame, she remembered to what thoughts she had laid herself open. Her one consolation was that she would never see him again. Then, woman-like, she wondered whether he would make an effort to see her. Would he be content with his dismissal?

For the first time during their association, the rising politician was conscious that his secretary was anxious to get off sharp to time. At five minutes to five she resolutely put aside her notebook, and banged the cover on to her typewriter. Mr. Bonsor looked up at this unwonted energy and punctuality on Patricia's part, and with a tactful interest in the affairs of others that he was endeavouring to cultivate for political purposes, he enquired:

"Going out?"

"No," snapped Patricia, "I'm going home."

Mr. Bonsor raised his eyebrows in astonishment. He was a mild-mannered man who had learned the value of silence when faced by certain phases of feminine psychological phenomena. He therefore made no comment; but he watched his secretary curiously as she swiftly left the room.

Jabbing the pins into her hat and throwing herself into her coat, Patricia was walking down the steps of the rising politician's house in Eaton Square as the clock struck five. She walked quickly in the direction of Sloane Square Railway Station. Suddenly she slackened her speed. Why was she hurrying home? She felt herself blushing hotly, and became furiously angry as if discovered in some humiliating act. Then with one of those odd emotional changes characteristic of her, she smiled.

"Patricia Brent," she murmured, "I think a little walk won't do you any harm," and she strolled slowly up Sloane Street and across the Park to Bayswater.

Her hand trembled as she put the key in the door and opened it. She looked swiftly in the direction of the letter-rack; but her eyes were arrested by two boxes, one very large and obviously from a florist. A strange excitement seized her. "Were they——?"

At that moment Miss Sikkum came out of the lounge simpering.

"Oh, Miss Brent! have you seen your beautiful presents?"

Then Patricia knew, and she became angry with herself on finding how extremely happy she was. Glancing almost indifferently at the labels she proceeded to walk upstairs. Miss Sikkum looked at her in amazement.

"But aren't you going to open them?" she blurted out.

"Oh! presently," said Patricia in an off-hand way, "I had no idea it was so late," and she ran upstairs, leaving Miss Sikkum gazing after her in petrified astonishment.

That evening Patricia took more than usual pains with her toilette. Had she paused to ask herself why, she would have been angry.

When she came downstairs, the other boarders were seated at the table, all expectantly awaiting her entrance. On the table, in the front of her chair, were the two boxes.

"I had your presents brought in here, Miss Brent," explained Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"Oh! I had forgotten all about them," said Patricia indifferently, "I suppose I had better open them," which she proceeded to do.

The smaller box contained chocolates, as Mr. Bolton put it, "evidently bought by the hundred-weight." The larger of the boxes was filled with an enormous spray-bunch of white and red carnations, tied with green silk ribbon, and on the top of each box was a card, "With love from Peter."

Patricia's cheeks burned. She was angry, she told herself, yet there was a singing in her heart and a light in her eyes that oddly belied her. He had not forgotten! He had dared to disobey her injunction; for, she told herself, "good-bye" clearly forbade the sending of flowers and chocolates. She was unconscious that every eye was upon her, and the smile with which she regarded now the flowers, now the chocolates, was self-revelatory.

Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe glanced significantly at Miss Wangle, who, however, was too occupied in watching Patricia with hawk-like intentness to be conscious of anything but the quarry.

Suddenly Patricia remembered, and her face changed. The flowers faded, the chocolates lost their sweetness and the smile vanished. The parted lips set in a firm but mobile line. What had before been a tribute now became in her eyes an insult. Men sent chocolates and flowers to—to "those women"! If he respected her he would have done as she commanded him, instead of which he had sent her presents. Oh! it was intolerable.

"If I sent flowers and chocolates to a lady friend," said Mr. Bolton, "I should expect her to look happier than you do, Miss Brent."

With an effort Patricia gathered herself together and with a forced smile replied, "Ah! Mr. Bolton, but you are different," which seemed to please Mr. Bolton mightily.

She was conscious that everyone was looking at her in surprise not unmixed with disapproval. She was aware that her attitude was not the conventional pose of the happily-engaged girl. The situation was strange. Even Mr. Cordal was bestowing upon her a portion of his attention. It is true that he was eating curry with a spoon, which required less accuracy than something necessitating a knife and fork; still at meal times it was unusual of him to be conscious even of the existence of his fellow-boarders.

It was Gustave who relieved the situation by handing to Patricia a telegram on the little tray where the silver had long since given up the unequal struggle with the base metal beneath. Patricia with assumed indifference laid it beside her plate.

"The boy ees waiting, mees," insinuated Gustave.

Patricia tore open the envelope and read: "May I come and see you this evening dont say no peter."

Patricia was conscious of her flushed face and she felt irritated at her own weakness. With a murmured apology to Mrs. Morton she rose from the table and went into the lounge where she wrote the reply: "Regret impossible remember your promise," then she paused. She did not want to sign her full name, she could not sign her Christian name she decided, so she compromised by using initials only, "P.B." She took the telegram to the door herself, knowing that otherwise poor

Gustave's life would be a misery at the hands of Miss Wangle, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe and the others.

"Why had she given the boy sixpence?" she asked herself as she slowly returned to the dining-room. Telegraph boys were paid. It was ridiculous to tip them, especially when they brought undesirable messages. "Was the message undesirable?" someone within seemed to question. Of course it was, and she was very angry with Bowen for not doing as she had commanded him.

When Patricia returned to the table and proceeded with the meal, she was conscious of the atmosphere of expectancy around her. Everybody wanted to know what was in the telegram.

At last Miss Wangle enquired, "No bad news I hope, Miss Brent."

Patricia looked up and fixed Miss Wangle with a deliberate stare, which she meant to be rude.

"None, Miss Wangle, thank you," she replied coldly.

The dinner proceeded until the sweet was being served, when Gustave approached her once more.

"You are wanted, mees, on the telephone, please," he said.

Patricia was conscious once more of crimsoning as she turned to Gustave. "Please say that I'm engaged," she said.

Gustave left the dining-room. Everybody watched the door in a fever of expectancy.

Two minutes later Gustave reappeared and, walking softly up to Patricia's chair, whispered in a voice that could be clearly heard by everyone, "It ees Colonel Baun, mees. He wish to speak to you."

"Tell him I'm at dinner," replied Patricia calmly. She could literally hear the gasp that went round the table.

"But, Miss Brent," began Mrs. Craske-Morton.

Patricia turned and looked straight into Mrs. Craske-Morton's eyes interrogatingly. Gustave hesitated. Mrs. Craske-Morton collapsed. Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe exchanged meaning glances. Little Mrs. Hamilton looked concerned, almost a little sad. Patricia turned to Gustave.

"You heard, Gustave?"

"Yes, mees," replied Gustave and, turning reluctantly towards the door, he disappeared.

There was something in Patricia's demeanour that made it clear she would resent any comment on her action, and the meal continued in silence. Mr. Bolton made some feeble endeavours to lighten the atmosphere; but he was not successful.

In the lounge a quarter of an hour later, Gustave once more approached Patricia, this time with a note.

"The boy ees waiting, mees," he announced.

Patricia tore open the envelope and read:

"DEAR PATRICIA,

"Won't you let me see you? Please remember that even the under-dog has his rights.

"Yours ever, "PETER."

"There is no answer, Gustave," said Patricia, and Gustave left the room disconsolately.

Half an hour later Gustave returned once more.

On his tray were three telegrams. Patricia looked about her wildly. "Had the man suddenly gone mad?" she asked herself. "Tell the boy not to wait, Gustave," she said.

"There ees three boys, mees."

The atmosphere was electrical. Mr. Bolton laughed, then stopped suddenly. Miss Sikkum simpered.

Patricia turned to Gustave with a calmness that was not reflected in her cheeks.

"Tell the three boys not to wait, Gustave."

"Yes, mees!" Gustave slowly walked to the door. It was clear that he could not reconcile with his standard of ethics the allowing of three telegrams to remain unopened, and to dismiss three boys without knowing whether or no there really were replies. The same feeling was reflected in the faces of Patricia's fellow-boarders.

"Miss Brent must be losing a lot of relatives, or coming into a lot of fortunes," remarked Mr. Bolton to Mrs. Hamilton.

Patricia preserved an outward calm she was far from feeling. She rose and went up to her room to discover from the three orange envelopes what was the latest phase of Colonel Bowen's madness. Seated on her bed she opened the telegrams.

The first read:

"Will you go motoring with me on Sunday peter."

No, she would do nothing of the kind.

The second said:

"If I have done anything to offend you please tell me and forgive me peter."

Of course he had done nothing, and it was all very absurd. Why was he behaving like a schoolboy?

The third was longer. It ran:

"I so enjoyed last night it was the most delightful evening I have spent for many a day please do not be too hard upon me peter."

This was a tactical error. It brought back to Patricia the whole incident. It was utter folly to have placed herself in such an impossible position. Obviously Bowen knew nothing of women, or he would not have made such a blunder as to remind her of what took place on the previous night, unless—unless—— She hardly dare breathe the thought to herself. What if he thought her different from what she actually was? Could he confuse her with those—— It was impossible!

She was angry; angry with him, angry with herself, angry with the Quadrant Grill-room; but angriest of all with Galvin House, which had precipitated her into this adventure.

Why did silly women expect every girl to marry? Why was it assumed because a woman did not marry that no one wanted to marry her? Patricia regarded herself in the looking-glass. Was she really the sort of girl who might be taken for an inveterate old maid? Her hands and feet were small. Her ankles well-shaped. Her figure had been praised, even by women. Her hair was a natural red-auburn. Her features regular, her mouth mobile, well-shaped with very red lips. Her eyes a violet-blue with long dark lashes and eyebrows.

"You're not so bad, Patricia Brent," she remarked as she turned from the glass. "But you will probably be a secretary to the end of your days, drink cold weak tea, keep a cat and get hard and angular, skinny most likely. You're just the sort that runs to skin and bone."

She was interrupted in her meditations by a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called.

The door was softly opened and Mrs. Hamilton entered.

"May I come in, dear?" she enquired in an apologetic voice, as she stood on the threshold.

"Come in!" cried Patricia, "why of course you may, you dear. You can do anything you like with me."

Mrs. Hamilton was small and white and fragile, with a ray of sunlight in her soul. She invariably dressed in grey, or blue-grey. Everything she wore seemed to be as soft as her own expression.

"I—I came up—I—I—hope it is not bad news. I don't want to meddle in your affairs, my dear; but I am concerned. If there is anything I can do, you will tell me, won't you? You won't think me inquisitive, will you?"

"Why you dear, silly little thing, of course I don't. Still it's just like your sweet self to come up and enquire. It is only that ridiculous Colonel Bowen who is showering telegrams on me in this way, in order, I suppose, to benefit the revenue. I think he has gone mad. Perhaps it's shell-shock, poor thing. There will most likely be another shower before we go to bed. Now we will go downstairs and stop those old pussies talking."

"My dear!" expostulated Mrs. Hamilton.

Patricia laughed. "Yes, aren't I getting acid and spinsterish?"

As they walked downstairs Mrs. Hamilton said:

"I'm so anxious to see him, my dear. Miss Wangle says he is so distinguished-looking."

"Who?" enquired Patricia, with mock innocence.

"Colonel Bowen, dear."

"Oh! Yes, he's quite a decent-looking old thing, and he's given Galvin House something to talk about, hasn't he?"

In the lounge Patricia soon became the centre of a group anxious for information; but no one was daring enough to put direct questions to her. Mrs. Craske-Morton ventured a suggestion that Colonel Bowen might be coming to dine with Patricia, and that she hoped Miss Brent would let her know in good time, so that she might make special preparations.

Patricia replied without enthusiasm. None was better aware than she that had her fiancé turned out to be a private, Mrs. Craske-Morton would have been the last even to suggest that he should dine at Galvin House. There would have been no question of special preparations.

About ten o'clock Gustave entered and approached Patricia. She groaned in spirit.

"You are wanted on the telephone, mees."

Patricia thought she detected a note of reproach in his voice, as if he were conscious that a fellow-male was being badly treated.

"Will you say that I'm engaged?" replied Patricia.

"It's Colonel Baun, mees."

For a moment Patricia hesitated. She was conscious that Galvin House was against her to a woman. After all there were limits beyond which it would be unwise to go. Galvin House had its standards, which had already been sorely tried. Patricia felt rather than heard the whispered criticism passing between Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. Rising slowly with an air of reconciled martyrdom, Patricia went to the telephone at the end of the hall, followed by the smiling Gustave, who, like the rest of Galvin House, had found his sense of decorum sorely outraged by Patricia's conduct.

"Hullo!" cried Patricia into the mouthpiece of the telephone, her heart thumping ridiculously.

Gustave walked tactfully away.

"That you, Patricia?" came the reply.

Patricia was conscious that all her anger had vanished.

"Yes, who is speaking?"

"Peter."

"Yes."

"How are you?"

"Did you ring me up to ask after my health?"

There was a laugh at the other end.

"Well!" enquired Patricia, who knew she was behaving like a schoolgirl.

"Did you get my message?"

"I'm very angry."

"Why?"

"Because you've made me ridiculous with your telegrams, messenger-boys, and telephoning."

"May I call?"

"No."

"I'm coming to-morrow night."

"I shall be out."

"Then I'll wait until you return."

"Are you playing the game, do you think?"

"I must see you. Expect me about nine."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Please don't be angry, Patricia."

"Well! you mustn't come, then. Thank you for the chocolates and flowers."

"That's all right. Don't forget to-morrow at nine."

"I tell you I shall be out."

"Right-oh!"

"Good-bye!"

Without waiting for a reply, Patricia hung up the receiver.

When she returned to the lounge her cheeks were flushed, and she was feeling absurdly happy. Then a moment after she asked herself what it was to her whether he remembered or forgot her. He was an entire stranger—or at least he ought to be.

Just as she was going up to her room for the night, another telegram arrived. It contained three words: "Good night peter."

"Of all the ridiculous creatures!" she murmured, laughing in spite of herself.

CHAPTER V

PATRICIA'S REVENGE

Galvin House dined at seven-thirty. Miss Wangle had used all her arts in an endeavour to have the hour altered to eight-fifteen, or eight-thirty. "It would add tone to the establishment," she had explained to Mrs. Craske-Morton. "It is dreadfully suburban to dine at half-past seven." Conscious of the views of the other guests, Mrs. Craske-Morton had held out, necessitating the bringing up of Miss Wangle's heavy artillery, the bishop, whose actual views Miss Wangle shrouded in a mist of words. As far as could be gathered, the illustrious prelate held out very little hope of salvation for anyone who dined earlier than eight-thirty.

Just as Mrs. Craske-Morton was wavering, Mr. Bolton had floored Miss Wangle and her ecclesiastical relic with the simple question, "And who'll pay for the biscuits I shall have to eat to keep going until half-past eight?"

That had clinched the matter. Galvin House continued to dine at the unfashionable hour of seven-thirty. Miss Wangle had resigned herself to the inevitable, conscious that she had done her utmost for the social salvation of her fellow-guests, and mentally reproaching Providence for casting her lot with the Cordals and the Boltons, rather than with the De Veres and the Montmorencies.

Mr. Bolton confided to his fellow-boarders what he conceived to be the real cause of Mrs. Craske-Morton's decision.

"She's afraid of what Miss Wangle would eat if left unfed for an extra hour," he had said.

Miss Wangle's appetite was like Dominie Sampson's favourite adjective, "prodigious."

So it came about that on the Friday evening on which Colonel Peter Bowen had announced his intention of calling on Patricia, Galvin House, all unconscious of the event, sat down to its evening meal at its usual time, in its usual coats and blouses, with its usual vacuous smiles and small talk, and above all with its usual appetite—an appetite that had caused Mrs. Craske-Morton to bless the inauguration of food-control, and to pray devoutly to Providence for food-tickets.

Had anyone suggested to Patricia that she had dressed with more than usual care that evening, she would have denied it, she might even have been annoyed. Her simple evening frock of black voile, unrelieved by any colour save a ribbon of St. Patrick's green that bound her hair, showed up the paleness of her skin and the redness of her lips. At the last moment, as if under protest, she had pinned some of Bowen's carnations in her belt.

As she entered the dining-room, Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe exchanged significant glances. Woman-like they sensed something unusual. Galvin House did not usually dress for dinner.

"Going out?" enquired Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe sweetly.

"Probably," was Patricia's laconic reply.

Soup had not been disposed of (it was soup on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; fish on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, and neither on Sundays at Galvin House) before Gustave entered with an enormous bouquet of crimson carnations. It might almost be said that the carnations entered propelled by Gustave, as there was very little but Gustave's smiling face above and the ends of his legs below the screen of flowers. Instinctively everybody looked at Patricia.

"For you, mees, with Colonel Baun's compliments."

Gustave stood irresolute, the crimson blooms cascading before him.

"You've forgotten the conservatory, Gustave," laughed Mr. Bolton. It was always easy to identify the facetious from the serious Mr. Bolton; his jokes were always heralded by a laugh.

"Sir?" interrogated the literal-minded Gustave.

"Never mind, Gustave. Mr. Bolton was joking," said Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"Yes, madame." Gustave smiled a mechanical smile: he overflowed with tact.

"Where will you have the flowers, Miss Brent?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton. "They are exquisite."

"Try the bath," suggested Mr. Bolton.

"Sir?" from Gustave.

It was Alice, Gustave's assistant in the dining-room during meals, who created the diversion for which Patricia had been devoutly praying. An affected little laugh from Miss Sikkum called attention to Alice, standing just inside the door, with an enormous white and gold box tied with bright green ribbon.

Patricia regarded the girl in dismay.

"Put them in the lounge, please," she said.

"You are lucky, Miss Brent," giggled Miss Sikkum enviously. "I wonder what's in the box."

"A chest protector," Mr. Bolton's laugh rang out.

"Really, Mr. Bolton!" from Mrs. Craske-Morton.

Patricia wondered was she lucky? Why should she be made ridiculous in this fashion?

"I should say chocolates." The suggestion came from Mr. Cordal through a mouthful of roast beef and Brussels sprouts. Everyone turned to the speaker, whose gastronomic silence was one of the most cherished traditions of Galvin House.

"He must have plenty of money," remarked Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe to Miss Wangle in a whisper, audible to all. "Those flowers and chocolates must have cost a lot."

"Ten pounds." The remark met a large Brussels sprout that Mr. Cordal was conveying to his mouth and summarily ejected it.

As Mr. Cordal was something on the Stock Exchange (Mr. Bolton had once said he must be a "bear") he was, at Galvin House, the recognised authority upon all matters of finance.

"Really, Mr. Cordal!" expostulated Mrs. Craske-Morton, rather outraged at this open discussion of Patricia's affairs.

"Sure of it," was all Mr. Cordal vouchsafed as he shovelled in another mouthful.

"You've been a goer in your time, Mr. Cordal," said Mr. Bolton.

Mr. Cordal grunted, which may have meant anything, but in all probability meant nothing.

For a quarter of an hour the inane conversation so characteristic of meal-times at Galvin House continued without interruption. How Patricia hated it. Was this all that life held for her? Was she always to be a drudge to the Bonsors, a victim of the Wangles and a target for the Boltons of life? It was to escape such drab existences that girls went on the stage, or worse; and why not? She had only one life, so far as she knew, and here she was sacrificing it to the jungle people, as she called them. Was there no escape? What St. George would rescue her from this dragon of——?

"Colonel Baun, mees."

Patricia looked up with a start from the apple tart with which she was trifling. Gustave stood beside her, his face glowing in a way that hinted at a handsome tip. He was all-unconscious that he had answered a very difficult question in a manner entirely unsatisfactory to Patricia.

"I haf show him in the looaunge, mees. He will wait."

Patricia believed him. Was ever man so persistent? She saw through the move. He had come an hour earlier to be sure of catching her before she went out. Patricia was once more conscious of the ridiculous behaviour of her heart. It thumped and pounded against her ribs as if determined to compromise her with the rest of the boarders.

"Very well, Gustave, say we are at dinner."

"Yes, mees," and Gustave proceeded with his duties.

"He's clever," was Patricia's inward comment. "He's bought Gustave, and in an hour he'll have the whole blessed place against me."

If the effect upon Patricia of Gustave's announcement had been startling, that upon the rest of the company was galvanic. Each felt aggrieved that proper notice had not been given of so auspicious an event. There was a general feeling of resentment against Patricia for not having told them that she expected Bowen to call.

There were covert glances at their garments by the ladies, and among the men a consciousness that the clothes they were wearing were not those they had upstairs.

Miss Sikkum's playful fancy was with the Brixton "Paris model," which only that day she had taken to the cleaners; Miss Wangle was conscious that she had not hung herself with her full equipment of chains and accoutrements; Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe thought regretfully of the pale blue evening-gown upstairs, a garment that had followed the course of fashion for nearly a quarter of a century. Mr. Bolton had doubts about his collar and his boots, whilst Mr. Cordal, with the aid of his napkin and some water from a drinking glass, strove to remove from his waistcoat reminiscences of bygone repasts.

The other members of the company all had something to regret. Mr. Archibald Sefton, whose occupation was a secret between himself and Providence, was dubious about the creases in his trousers; Mrs. Barnes wondered if the gallant colonel would discover the ink she had that day applied to the seams of her dress. Everyone was constrained and anxious to get to his or to her room for repairs.

"Did you know Colonel Bowen was coming?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton, quite at her ease in the knowledge that "something had told her" to put on her best black silk and the large cameo pendant that made her look like a wine-steward at a fashionable restaurant.

"He said he might drop in; but he's so casual that I didn't think it worth mentioning," said Patricia, conscious that the reply was unanimously regarded as unconvincing.

Having finished her coffee Patricia rose in a leisurely manner. She was no sooner out of the door than a veritable stampede ensued. Every one intended "just to slip upstairs for a moment," and each glared at the other on discovering that all seemed inspired by the same idea.

Mrs. Craske-Morton went to her "boudoir" out of tactful consideration for the young lovers; Mrs. Hamilton went up to the drawing-room for the same reason.

Patricia paused for a moment outside the door of the lounge. She put her cool hands to her hot cheeks, wondering why her heart should show so little regard for her feelings. She felt an impulse to run away and lock herself in her own room and cry "Go away!" to anyone who might knock. She strove to work herself into a state of anger with Bowen for daring to come an hour before the time appointed.

As she entered the lounge, Bowen sprang up and came towards her. There was a spirit of boyish mischief lurking in his eyes.

"I suppose," said Patricia as they shook hands, "you think this is very clever."

"Please, Patricia, don't bully me."

Patricia laughed in spite of herself at the humility and appeal in his voice. She was conscious that she was not behaving as she ought, or had intended to behave.

"It seems an age since I saw you," he continued.

"Forty-eight hours, to be exact," commented Patricia, forgetful of all the reproachful things she had intended to say.

"You got the flowers?" as his eye fell on the carnations which Gustave had placed in a large bowl.

"Yes, thank you very much indeed, they're exquisite. They made Miss Sikkum quite envious."

"Who's Miss Sikkum?"

"Time, in all probability, will show," replied Patricia, seating herself on a settee. Bowen drew up a chair and sat opposite to her. She liked him for that. Had he sat beside her, she told herself, she would have hated him.

"You're not angry with me, Patricia, are you?" There was an anxious note in his voice.

"Do you appreciate that you've made me extremely ridiculous with your telegrams, messenger-boys, conservatories, and confectioner's-shops? Why did you do it?"

"I don't know," he confessed with unconscious gaucherie, "I simply couldn't get you out of my thoughts."

"Which shows that you tried," commented Patricia, the lightness of her words contradicted by the blush that accompanied them.

"The King's Regulations do not provide for Patricias," he replied, "and I had to try. That is how I knew."

"Do you think I'm a cormorant, as well as an abandoned person?" she demanded.

"A cormorant?" queried Bowen, ignoring the second question. "I don't understand."

"Within twenty-four hours you have sent me enough chocolates to last for a couple of months."

"Poor Patricia!" he laughed.

"You mustn't call me Patricia, Colonel Bowen," she said primly. "What will people think?"

"What would they think if they heard the man you're engaged to call you Miss Brent?"

"We are not engaged," said Patricia hotly.

"We are," his eyes smiled into hers. "I can bring all these people here to prove it on your own statement."

She bit her Up. "Are you going to be mean? Are you going to play the game?" She awaited his reply with an anxiety she strove to disguise.

Bowen looked straight into her eyes until they fell beneath his gaze.

"I'm afraid I've got to be mean, Patricia," he said quietly. "May we smoke?"

As she took a cigarette from his case and he lighted it for her, Patricia found herself experiencing a new sensation. Without apparent effort he had assumed control of the situation, and then with a masterfulness that she felt rather than acknowledged, had put the subject aside as if requiring no further comment. This was a side of Bowen's character that she had not yet seen. As she was debating with herself whether or no she liked it, the door opened, giving access to a stream of Galvin Houseites.

"Oh!" gasped Patricia hysterically, "they're all dressed up, and it's in your honour."

"What's that?" enquired Bowen, less mentally agile than Patricia, as he turned round to gaze at the string of paying guests that oozed into the room.

"They've put on their best bibs and tuckers for you," she cried. "Oh! please don't even smile, *ple-e-e-ase*!"

The first to enter was Miss Wangle. Although she had not changed her dress, it was obvious that she had taken considerable pains with her personal appearance. On her fingers were more than the usual weight of rings; round her neck were flung a few additional chains; on her arms hung an extra bracelet or two and, as a final touch, she had added a fan to her equipment. To Patricia's keen eyes it was clear that she had re-done her hair, and she carried her lorgnettes, things that in themselves betokened a ceremonial occasion.

Following Miss Wangle like an echo came Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. She had evidently taken her courage in both hands and donned the blue evening frock, to which she had added a pair of white gloves which reached barely to the elbow, although the frock ended just below her shoulders.

Miss Wangle bowed graciously to Patricia, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe followed suit. They moved over to the extreme end of the room. Mr. Cordal was the next arrival, closely followed by Mr. Bolton. At the sight of Mr. Cordal Patricia started and bit her lower lip. He had assumed a vivid blue tie, and had obviously changed his collar. From the darker spots on his waistcoat and coat it was evident that he had subjected his clothes to a vigorous process of cleaning.

Mr. Bolton, on the other hand, had followed Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe's lead, and made a clean sweep. He had assumed a black frock-coat; but had apparently not thought it worth while to change his brown tweed trousers, which hung about his boots in shapeless folds, as if conscious that they had no right there. He, too, had donned a clean collar and, by way of adding to his splendour, had assumed a white satin necktie threaded through a "diamond" ring. His thin dark hair was generously oiled and, as he passed over to the side of the room occupied by Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, he left behind him a strong odour of verbena.

Mrs. Barnes came next and, one by one, the other guests drifted in. All had assumed something in the nature of a wedding garment in honour of Patricia's fiancé. Miss Sikkum had selected a pea-green satin blouse, which caused Bowen to screw his eyeglass vigorously into his eye and gaze at her in wonder.

"Do you like them?" It was Patricia who broke the silence.

With a start Bowen turned to her. "Er—er—they seem an er—awfully decent crowd."

Patricia laughed. "Yes, aren't they? Dreadfully decent. How would you like to live among them all? Why they haven't the pluck to break a commandment among them."

Bowen looked at Patricia in surprise. "Really!" was the only remark he could think of.

"And now I've shocked you!" cried Patricia. "You must not think that I like people who break commandments. I don't know exactly what I do mean. Oh, here you are!" and she ran across as Mrs. Hamilton entered and drew her towards Bowen. "Now I know what I meant. This dear little creature has never broken a commandment, I wouldn't mind betting everything I have, and she has never been uncharitable to anyone who has. Isn't that so?" She turned to Mrs. Hamilton, who was regarding her in astonishment. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I'm quite mad to-night, you mustn't mind. You see Colonel Bowen's mad and he makes me mad."

Turning to Bowen she introduced him to Mrs. Hamilton. "This is my friend, Mrs. Hamilton." Then to Mrs. Hamilton. "You know all about Colonel Bowen, don't you, dear? He's the man who sends me conservatories and telegrams and boy-messengers and things."

Mrs. Hamilton smiled up sweetly at Bowen, and held out her hand.

Patricia glanced across at the group at the other end of the lounge. The scene reminded her of Napoleon on the *Bellerophon*.

Suddenly she had an idea. It synchronised with the entry of Gustave, who stood just inside the door smiling inanely.

"Call a taxi for Colonel Bowen, please, Gustave," she said coolly.

Gustave looked surprised, the group looked disappointed, Bowen looked at Patricia with a puzzled expression.

"I'm sorry you're in a hurry," said Patricia, holding out her hand to Bowen. "I'm busy also."

"But——" began Bowen.

"Oh! don't trouble." Patricia advanced, and he had perforce to retreat towards the door. "See you again sometime. Good-bye," and Bowen found himself in the hall.

"Damn!" he muttered.

"Sir?" interrogated Gustave anxiously.

As Bowen was replying to Gustave in coin, Mrs. Craske-Morton appeared at the head of the stairs on her way down to the lounge after her tactful absence. For a moment she hesitated in obvious surprise, then, with the air of a would-be traveller who hears the guard's whistle, she threw dignity aside and made for Bowen.

"Colonel Bowen?" she interrogated anxiously.

Bowen turned and bowed.

"I am Mrs. Craske-Morton. Miss Brent did not tell me that you were making so short a call, or I would——" Mrs. Craske-Morton's pause implied that nothing would have prevented her from hurrying down.

"You are very kind," murmured Bowen absently, not yet recovered from his unceremonious dismissal. He was brought back to realities by Mrs. Craske-Morton expressing a hope that he would give her the pleasure of dining at Galvin House one evening. "Shall we say Friday?" she continued without allowing Bowen time to reply, "and we will keep it as a delightful surprise for Miss Brent." Mrs. Craske-Morton exposed her teeth and felt romantic.

When Bowen left Galvin House that evening he was pledged to give Patricia "a delightful surprise" on the following Friday.

"That will teach them to pity me!" murmured Patricia that night as she brushed her hair with what seemed entirely unnecessary vigour. She was conscious that she was the best-hated girl in Bayswater, as she recalled the angry and reproachful looks directed towards her by her fellow-guests after Bowen's departure.

In an adjoining room Miss Wangle, a black cap upon her head, was also engaged in brushing her hair with a gentleness foreign to most of her actions.

"The cat!" she murmured as she lay it in its drawer, and then as she locked the drawer she repeated, "The cat!"

CHAPTER VI

THE INTERVENTION OF AUNT ADELAIDE

Sunday at Galvin House was a day of bodily rest but acute mental activity. The day of God seemed to draw out the worst in everybody; all were in their best clothes and on their worst behaviour. Mr. Cordal descended to breakfast in carpet slippers with fur tops. Miss Wangle regarded this as a mark of disrespect towards the grand-niece of a bishop. She would glare at Mr. Cordal's slippers as if convinced that the cloven hoof were inside.

Mr. Bolton sported a velvet smoking-jacket, white at the elbows, light grey trousers and a manner that seemed to say, "Ha! here's Sunday again, good!" After breakfast he added a fez and a British cigar to his equipment, and retired to the lounge to read *Lloyd's News*. Both the cigar and the newspaper lasted him throughout the day. Somewhere at the back of his mind was the conviction that in smoking a cigar, which he disliked, he was making a fitting distinction between the Sabbath and week-days. He went even further, for whereas on secular days he lit his inexpensive cigarettes with matches, on the Sabbath he used only fusees.

"I love the smell of fusees," Miss Sikkum would simper, regardless of the fact that a hundred times before she had taken Galvin House into her confidence on the subject. "I think they're so romantic."

Patricia wondered if Mr. Bolton's fusee were an offering to heaven or to Miss Sikkum.

On Sunday mornings Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe went to divine service at Westminster Abbey, and Mr. Cordal went to sleep in the lounge.

Mrs. Barnes wandered aimlessly about, making anxious enquiry of everyone she encountered. If it were cloudy, did they think it would rain? If it rained, did they think it would clear up? If it were fine, did they think it would last? Mrs. Barnes was always going to do something that was contingent upon the weather. Every Sunday she was going for a walk in the Park, or to church; but her constitutional indecision of character intervened.

Mr. Archibald Sefton, who showed the qualities of a landscape gardener in the way in which he arranged his thin fair hair to disguise the desert of baldness beneath, was always vigorous on Sundays. He descended to the dining-room rubbing his hands in a manner suggestive of a Dickens Christmas. After breakfast he walked in the Park, "to give the girls a treat," as Mr. Bolton had once expressed it, which had earned for him a stern rebuke from Miss Wangle. In the afternoon Mr. Sefton returned to the Park, and in the evening yet again.

Mr. Sefton had a secret that was slowly producing in him misanthropy. His nature was tropical and his courage arctic, which, coupled with his forty-five years, was a great obstacle to his happiness. In dress he was a dandy, at heart he was a craven and, never daring, he was consumed with his own fire.

The other guests at Galvin House drifted in and out, said the same things, wore the same clothes, with occasional additions, had the same thoughts; whilst over all, as if to compose the picture, brooded the reek of cooking.

The atmosphere of Galvin House was English, the cooking was English, and the lack of culinary imagination also was English. There were two and a half menus for the one o'clock Sunday dinner. Roast mutton, onion sauce, cabbage, potatoes, fruit pie, and custard; alternated for four weeks with roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, cauliflower, roast potatoes, and lemon pudding. Then came roast pork, apple sauce, potatoes, greens with stewed fruit and cheese afterwards.

The cuisine was in itself a calendar. If your first Sunday were a roast-pork Sunday, you knew without mental effort on every roast-pork Sunday exactly how many months you had been there. If for a moment you had forgotten the day, and found yourself toying with a herring at dinner, you knew it was a Tuesday, just as you knew it was Friday from the Scotch broth placed before you.

Nobody seemed to mind the dreary reiteration, because everybody was so occupied in keeping up appearances. Sunday was the day of reckoning and retrospection. "Were they getting full value for their money?" was the unuttered question. There were whisperings and grumblings, sometimes complaints. Then there was another aspect. Each guest had to enquire if the expenditure were justified by income. All these things, like the weekly mending, were kept for Sundays.

By tea-time the atmosphere was one of unrest. Mr. Sefton returned from the Park disappointed, Miss Sikkum from Sunday-school, breathless from her flight before some alleged admirer, Patricia from her walk, conscious of a dissatisfaction she could not define. Mr. Cordal awoke unrefreshed, Mrs. Craske-Morton emerged from her "boudoir," where she balanced the week's accounts, convinced that ruin stared her in the face owing to the tonic qualities of Bayswater air, and Mr. Bolton emerged from *Lloyd's News* facetious. Miss Wangle was acid, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe ultra-forbearing, whilst Mrs. Barnes found it impossible to decide between a heart-cake and a rusk. Only Mrs. Hamilton, at work upon her inevitable knitting, seemed human and content.

On returning to Galvin House Patricia had formed a habit of instinctively casting her eyes in the direction of the letter-rack, beneath which was the table on which parcels were placed that they might be picked up as the various guests entered on their way to their rooms. She took herself severely to task for this weakness, but in spite of her best efforts, her eyes would wander towards the table and letter-rack. At last she had to take stern measures with herself and deliberately walk along the hall with her face turned to the left, that is to the side opposite from that of the letter-rack table.

On the Sunday afternoon following her adventure at the Quadrant Grill-room, Patricia entered Galvin House, her head resolutely turned to the left, and ran into Gustave.

"Oh, mees!" he exclaimed, his gentle, cow-like face expressing pained surprise, rather than indignation.

Gustave was a Swiss, a French-Swiss, he was emphatic on this point. Patricia said he was Swiss wherever he wasn't French, and German wherever he wasn't Swiss and French.

"I am so sorry, Gustave," apologised Patricia. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

Gustave smiled amiably, Patricia was a great favourite of his. "There is a lady in the looaunge, Mees Brent, the same as you." Gustave smiled broadly as if he had discovered some subtle joke in the duplication of Patricia's name.

"Oh, bother!" muttered Patricia to herself. "Aunt Adelaide, imagine Aunt Adelaide on an afternoon like this."

She entered the lounge wearily, to find Miss Brent the centre of a group, the foremost in which were Mrs. Craske-Morton, Miss Wangle, and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. Patricia groaned in spirit; she knew exactly what had been taking place, and now she would have to explain everything. Could she explain? Had she for one moment paused to think of Aunt Adelaide, no amount of frenzy or excitement would have prompted her to such an adventure. Miss Brent would probe the mystery out of a ghost. Material, practical, levelheaded, victorious, she would strip romance from a legend, or glamour from a myth.

As she entered the lounge, Patricia saw by the movement of Miss Wangle's lips that she was saying "Ah! here she is." Miss Brent turned and regarded her niece with a long, non-committal stare. Patricia walked over to her.

"Hullo, Aunt Adelaide! Who would have thought of seeing you here."

Miss Brent looked up at her, received the frigid kiss upon one cheek and returned it upon the other.

"A peck for a peck," muttered Patricia to herself under her breath.

"We've been talking about you," said Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe ingratiatingly.

"How strange," announced Patricia indifferently. "Well, Aunt Adelaide," she continued, turning to Miss Brent, "this is an unexpected pleasure. How is it you are dissipating in town?"

"I want to speak to you, Patricia. Is there a quiet corner where we shall not be overheard?"

Miss Wangle started, Mrs. Craske-Morton rose hurriedly and made for the door. Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe looked uncomfortable. Miss Brent's directness was a thing dreaded by all who

knew her.

"You had better come up to my room, Aunt Adelaide," said Patricia.

As she reached the door, Mrs. Craske-Morton turned. "Oh! Miss Brent," she said, addressing Patricia, "would you not like to take your aunt into my boudoir? It is entirely at your disposal."

Mrs. Craske-Morton's "boudoir" was a small cupboard-like apartment in which she made up her accounts. It was as much like a boudoir as a starveling mongrel is like an aristocratic chow. Patricia smiled her thanks. One of Patricia's great points was that she could smile an acknowledgment in a way that was little less than inspiration.

When they reached the "boudoir," Miss Brent sat down with a suddenness and an air of aggression that left Patricia in no doubt as to the nature of the talk she desired to have with her.

Miss Brent was a tall, angular woman, with spinster shouting from every angle of her uncomely person. No matter what the fashion, she seemed to wear her clothes all bunched up about her hips. Her hair was dragged to the back of her head, and crowned by a hat known in the dim recesses of the Victorian past as a "boater." A veil clawed what remained of the hair and hat towards the rear, and accentuated the sharpness of her nose and the fleshlessness of her cheeks. Miss Brent looked like nothing so much as an aged hawk in whom the lust to prey still lingered, without the power of making the physical effort to capture it.

"Patricia," she demanded, "what is all this I hear?"

"If you've been talking to Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, Aunt Adelaide, heaven only knows what you've heard," replied Patricia calmly.

"Patricia." Miss Brent invariably began her remarks by uttering the name of the person whom she addressed. "Patricia, you know perfectly well what I mean."

"I should know better, if you would tell me," murmured Patricia with a patient sigh as she seated herself in the easiest of the uneasy chairs, and proceeded to pull off her gloves.

"Patricia, I refer to these stories about your being engaged."

"Yes, Aunt Adelaide?"

"Have you nothing to say?"

"Nothing in particular. People get engaged, you know. I suppose it is because they've got nothing else to do."

"Patricia, don't be frivolous."

"Frivolous! Me frivolous! Aunt Adelaide! If you were a secretary to a brainless politician, who is supposed to rise, but who won't rise, can't rise, and never will rise, from ten until five each day, for the magnificent salary of two and a half guineas a week, even you wouldn't be able to be frivolous."

"Patricia!" There was surprised disapproval in Miss Brent's voice. "Are you mad?"

"No, Aunt Adelaide, just bored, just bored stiff." Patricia emphasised the word "stiff" in a way that brought Miss Brent into an even more upright position.

"Patricia, I wish you would change your idiom. Your flagrant vulgarity would have deeply pained your poor, dear father."

Patricia made no response; she simply looked as she felt, unutterably bored. She was incapable even of invention. Supposing she told her aunt the whole story, at least she would have the joy of seeing the look of horror that would overspread her features.

"Patricia," continued Miss Brent, "I repeat, what is this I hear about your being engaged?"

"Oh!" replied Patricia indifferently, "I suppose you've heard the truth; I've got engaged."

"Without telling me a word about it."

"Oh, well! those are nasty things, you know, that one doesn't advertise."

"Patricia!"

"Well, aunt, you say that all men are beasts, and if you associate with beasts, you don't like the world to know about it."

"Patricia!" repeated Miss Brent.

"Aunt Adelaide!" cried Patricia, "you make me feel that I absolutely hate my name. I wish I'd been numbered. If you say 'Patricia' again I shall scream."

"Is it true that you are engaged to Lord Peter Bowen?"

"Good Lord, no." Patricia sat up in astonishment.

"Then that woman in the lounge is a liar."

There was uncompromising conviction in Miss Brent's tone.

Patricia leaned forward and smiled. "Aunt Adelaide, you are singularly discriminating to-day. She is a liar, and she also happens to be a cat."

Miss Brent appeared not to hear Patricia's remark. She was occupied with her own thoughts. She possessed a masculine habit of thinking before she spoke, and in consequence she was as devoid of impulse and spontaneity as a snail.

Patricia watched her aunt covertly, her mind working furiously. What could it mean? Lord Peter Bowen! Miss Wangle was not given to making mistakes in which the aristocracy were concerned. At Galvin House she was the recognised authority upon anything and everything concerned with royalty and the titled and landed gentry. County families were her hobbies and the peerage her obsession. It would be just like Peter, thought Patricia, to turn out a lord, just the ridiculous, inconsequent sort of thing he would delight in. She was unconscious of any incongruity in thinking of him as Peter. It seemed the natural thing to do.

She saw by the signs on her aunt's face that she was nearing a decision. Conscious that she must not burn her boats, Patricia burst in upon Miss Brent's thoughts with a suddenness that startled her.

"If Miss Wangle desires to discuss my friends with you in future, Aunt Adelaide, I think she should adopt the names by which they prefer to be known."

Patricia watched the surprised look upon her aunt's face, and with dignity met the keen hawk-like glance that flashed from her eyes.

"If, for reasons of his own," continued Patricia, "a man chooses to drop his title in favour of his rank in the army, that I think is a matter for him to decide, and not one that requires discussion at Miss Wangle's hands."

Miss Brent's stare convinced Patricia that she was carrying things off rather well.

"Patricia, where did you meet this Colonel Peter Bowen?"

The question came like a thunder-clap to Patricia's unprepared ears. All her self-complacency of a moment before now deserted her.

She felt her face crimsoning. How she envied girls who did not blush. What on earth could she tell her aunt? Why had an undiscriminating Providence given her an Aunt Adelaide at all? Why had it not bestowed this inestimable treasure upon someone more deserving? What could she say? As well think of lying to Rhadamanthus as to Miss Brent. Then Patricia had an inspiration. She would tell her aunt the truth, trusting to her not to believe it.

"Where did I meet him, Aunt Adelaide?" she remarked indifferently. "Oh! I picked him up in a restaurant; he looked nice."

"Patricia, how dare you say such a thing before me." A slight flush mantled Miss Brent's sallow cheeks. All the proprieties, all the chastities and all the moralities banked up behind her in moral support.

"You ought to feel ashamed of yourself, Patricia. London has done you no good. What would your poor dear father have said?"

"I'm sorry, Aunt Adelaide; but please remember I've had a very tiring week, trying to leaven an unleavenable politician. Shall we drop the subject of Colonel Bowen for the time being?"

"Certainly not," snapped Miss Brent. "It is my duty as your sole surviving relative," how Patricia deplored that word "surviving," why had her Aunt Adelaide survived? "As your sole surviving relative," repeated Miss Brent, "it is my duty to look after your welfare."

"But," protested Patricia, "I'm nearly twenty-five, and I am quite able to look after myself."

"Patricia, it is my duty to look after you." Miss Brent spoke as if she were about to walk over heated ploughshares rather than to satisfy a natural curiosity.

"I repeat," proceeded Miss Brent, "where did you meet Colonel Bowen?"

"I have told you, Aunt Adelaide, but you won't believe me."

"I want to know the truth, Patricia. Is he really Lord Peter?" persisted Miss Brent.

"To be quite candid, I've never asked him," replied Patricia.

Miss Brent stared at her niece. The obviously feminine thing was to express surprise; but Miss Brent never did the obvious thing. Instead of repeating, "Never asked him!" she remained silent for some moments while Patricia, with great intentness, proceeded to jerk her gloves into shape.

"Patricia, you are mad!" Miss Brent spoke with conviction.

Patricia glanced up from her occupation and smiled at her aunt as if entirely sharing her conviction.

"It's the price of spinsterhood with some women," was all she said.

Miss Brent glared at her; but there was more than a spice of curiosity in her look.

"Then you decline to tell me?" she enquired. There was in her voice a note that told of a mind made up.

Patricia knew from past experience that her aunt had made up her mind as to her course of action.

"Tell you what?" she enquired innocently.

"Whether or no the Colonel Bowen you are engaged to is Lord Peter Bowen."

Patricia determined to temporise in order to gain time. She knew Aunt Adelaide to be capable of anything, even to calling upon Lord Peter Bowen's family and enquiring if it were he to whom her niece was engaged. She was too bewildered to know how to act. It would be so like this absurd person to turn out to be a lord and make her still more ridiculous. If he were Lord Peter, why on earth had he not told her? Had he thought she would be dazzled?

Suddenly there flashed into Patricia's mind an explanation which caused her cheeks to flame and her eyes to flash. She strove to put the idea aside as unworthy of him; but it refused to leave her. She had heard of men giving false names to girls they met—in the way she and Bowen had met. He had, then, in spite of his protestations, mistaken her. In all probability he was not staying at the Quadrant at all. What a fool she had been. She had told all about herself, whereas he had told her nothing beyond the fact that his name was Peter Bowen. Oh, it was intolerable, humiliating!

The worst of it was that she seemed unable to extricate herself from the ever-increasing tangle arising out of her folly. Miss Wangle and Galvin House had been sufficiently serious factors, requiring all her watchfulness to circumvent them; but now Aunt Adelaide had thrown herself precipitately into the mêlée, and heaven alone knew what would be the outcome!

Had her aunt been a man or merely a woman, Patricia argued, she would not have been so dangerous; but she possessed the deliberate logic of the one and the quickness of perception of the other. With her feminine eye she could see, and with her man-like brain she could judge.

Patricia felt that the one thing to do was to get rid of her aunt for the day and then think things over quietly and decide as to her plan of campaign.

"Please, Aunt Adelaide," she said, "don't let's discuss it any more to-day, I've had such a worrying time at the Bonsors', and my head is so stupid. Come to tea to-morrow afternoon at half-past five and I will tell you all, as they say in the novelettes; but for heaven's sake don't get talking to those dreadful old tabbies. They have no affairs of their own, and at the present moment they simply live upon mine."

"Very well, Patricia," replied Miss Brent as she rose to go, "I will wait until to-morrow; but, understand me, I am your sole surviving relative and I have a duty to perform by you. That duty I shall perform whatever it costs me."

As Patricia looked into the hard, cold eyes of her aunt, she believed her. At that moment Miss Brent looked as if she represented all the aggressive virtues in Christendom.

"It's very sweet of you, Aunt Adelaide, and I very much appreciate your interest. I am all nervy to-day; but I shall be all right to-morrow. Don't forget, half-past five here. That will give me time to get back from the Bonsors'."

Miss Brent pecked Patricia's right cheek and moved towards the door. "Remember, Patricia," she said, as a final shot, "to-morrow I shall expect a full explanation. I am deeply concerned about you. I cannot conceive what your poor dear father would have said had he been alive."

With this parting shot Miss Brent moved down the staircase and left Galvin House. As she stalked to the temperance hotel in Bloomsbury, where she was staying, she was fully satisfied that she had done her duty as a woman and a Christian.

"Sole surviving relative," muttered Patricia as she turned back after seeing her aunt out. And then she remembered with a smile that her father had once said that "relatives were the very

devil." A softness came into her eyes at the thought of her father, and she remembered another saying of his, "When you lose your sense of humour and your courage at the same time, you have lost the game."

For a moment Patricia paused, deliberating what she would do. Finally, she walked to the telephone at the end of the hall. There was a grimness about her look indicative of a set purpose, taking down the receiver she called "Gerrard 60000."

There was a pause.

"That the Quadrant Hotel?" she enquired. "Is Lord Peter Bowen in?"

The clerk would enquire.

Patricia waited what seemed an age.

At last a voice cried, "Hullo!"

"Is that Lord Peter Bowen?"

"Is that you, Patricia?" came the reply from the other end of the wire.

"Oh, so it is true then!" said Patricia.

"What's true?" queried Bowen at the other end.

"What I've just said."

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"I must see you this evening," said Patricia in an even voice.

"That's most awfully good of you."

"It's nothing of the sort."

Bowen laughed. "Shall I come round?"

"No."

"Will you dine with me?"

"No."

"Well, where shall I see you?"

Patricia thought for a moment. "I will meet you at Lancaster Gate tube at twenty minutes to nine."

"All right, I'll be there. Shall I bring the car?"

For a moment Patricia hesitated. She did not want to go to a restaurant with him, she wanted merely to talk and see how she was to get out of the difficulty with Aunt Adelaide. The car seemed to offer a solution. They could drive out to some quiet place and then talk without a chance of being overheard.

"Yes, please, I think that will do admirably."

"Mind you bring a thick coat. Won't you let me pick you up? Please do, then you can bring a fur coat and all that sort of thing, you know."

Again Patricia hesitated for a moment. "Perhaps that would be the better way," she conceded grudgingly.

"Right-oh! Will half-past eight do?"

"Yes, I'll be ready."

"It's awfully kind of you; I'm frightfully bucked."

"You had better wait and see, I think," was Patricia's grim retort. "Good-bye."

"Au revoir."

Patricia put the receiver up with a jerk.

She returned to her room conscious that she was never able to do herself justice with Bowen. Her most righteous anger was always in danger of being dissipated when she spoke to him. His personality seemed to radiate good nature, and he always appeared so genuinely glad to see her, or hear her voice that it placed her at a disadvantage. She ought to be stronger and more

tenacious of purpose, she told herself. It was weak to be so easily influenced by someone else, especially a man who had treated her in the way that Bowen had treated her; for Patricia had now come to regard herself as extremely ill-used.

Nothing, she told herself, would have persuaded her to ring up Bowen in the way she had done, had it not been for Aunt Adelaide. In her heart she had to confess that she was very much afraid of Aunt Adelaide and what she might do.

Patricia dreaded dinner that evening. She knew instinctively that everybody would be full of Miss Wangle's discovery. She might have known that Miss Wangle would not be satisfied until she had discovered everything there was to be discovered about Bowen.

As Patricia walked along the hall to the staircase, Mrs. Hamilton came out of the lounge. Patricia put her arm round the fragile waist of the old lady and they walked upstairs together.

"Well," said Patricia gaily, "what are the old tabbies doing this afternoon?"

"My dear!" expostulated Mrs. Hamilton gently, "you mustn't call them that, they have so very little to interest them that—that——"

"Oh, you dear, funny little thing!" said Patricia, giving Mrs. Hamilton a squeeze which almost lifted her off her feet. "I think you would find an excuse for anyone, no matter how wicked. When I get very, very bad I shall come and ask you to explain me to myself. I think if you had your way you would prove every wolf a sheep underneath. Come into my room and have a pow-wow."

Inside her room Patricia lifted Mrs. Hamilton bodily on to the bed. "Now lie there, you dear little thing, and have a rest. Dad used to say that every woman ought to lie on her back for two hours each day. I don't know why. I suppose it was to keep her quiet and get her out of the way. In any case you have got to lie down there."

"But your bed, my dear," protested Mrs. Hamilton.

"Never mind my bed, you just do as you're told. Now what are the old cats—I beg your pardon, what have the—lambs been saying?"

Mrs. Hamilton smiled in spite of herself. "Well, of course, dear, we're all very interested to hear that you are engaged to—Lord Peter Bowen."

"How did they find out?" interrupted Patricia.

"Well, it appears that Miss Wangle has a friend who has a cousin in the War Office."

"Oh, dear!" groaned Patricia. "I believe Miss Wangle has a friend who has a cousin in every known place in the world, and a good many unknown places," she added. "She has got a bishop in heaven, innumerable connections in Mayfair, acquaintances at Court, cousins of friends at the War Office; the only place where she seems to have nobody who has anybody else is hell."

"My dear!" said Mrs. Hamilton in horror, "you mustn't talk like that."

"But isn't it true?" persisted Patricia. "Well, I'm sorry if I've shocked you. Tell me all about it."

"Well," began Mrs. Hamilton, "soon after you had gone out Miss Wangle's friend telephoned in reply to her letter of enquiry. She told her all about Lord Peter Bowen, how he had distinguished himself in France, won the Military Cross, the D.S.O., how he had been promoted to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and brought back to the War Office and given a position on the General Staff. He's a very clever young man, my dear."

Patricia laughed outright at Mrs. Hamilton's earnestness. "Why of course he's clever, otherwise he wouldn't have taken up with such a clever young woman."

"Well, my dear, I hope you'll be happy," said Mrs. Hamilton earnestly.

"I doubt it," said Patricia.

"Doubt it!" There was horror in Mrs. Hamilton's voice. She half raised herself on the bed. Patricia pushed her back again.

"Never mind, your remark reminds me of a story about a great-great-grandmother of mine. A granddaughter of hers had become engaged and there was a great family meeting to introduce the poor victim to his future "in-laws." The old lady was very deaf and had formed the habit of speaking aloud quite unconscious that others could hear her. The wretched young man was brought up and presented, and everybody was agog to hear the grandmotherly pronouncement, for the old lady was as shrewd as she was frank. She looked at the young man keenly and deliberately, whilst he stood the picture of discomfort, and turning to her granddaughter, said, "Well, my dear, I hope you'll be happy, I hope you'll be very happy," then to herself in an equally loud voice she added, "But he wouldn't have been my choice, he wouldn't have been my choice."

"Oh! the poor dear," said Mrs. Hamilton, seeing only the tragic side of the situation.

Patricia laughed. "How like you, you dear little grey lady," and she bent down and kissed the pale cheeks, bringing a slight rose flush to them.

It was half-past seven before Mrs. Hamilton left Patricia's room.

"Heigh-ho!" sighed Patricia as she undid her hair, "I suppose I shall have to run the gauntlet during dinner."

CHAPTER VII

LORD PETER PROMISES A SOLUTION

Sunday supper at Galvin House was a cold meal timed for eight o'clock; but allowed to remain upon the table until half-past nine for the convenience of church-goers.

Patricia had dawdled over her toilette, realising, however, to admit that she dreaded the ordeal before her in the dining-room. When at last she could find no excuse for remaining longer in her room, she descended the stairs slowly, conscious of a strange feeling of hesitancy about her knees.

Outside the dining-room door she paused. Her instinct was to bolt; but the pad-pad of Gustave's approaching footsteps cutting off her retreat decided her. As she entered the dining-room the hum of excited conversation ceased abruptly and, amidst a dead silence, Patricia walked to her seat conscious of a heightened colour and a hatred of her own species.

Looking round the table, and seeing how acutely self-conscious everyone seemed, her self-possession returned. She noticed a new deference in Gustave's manner as he placed before her a plate of cold shoulder of mutton and held the salad-bowl at her side. Having helped herself Patricia turned to Miss Wangle, and for a moment regarded her with an enigmatical smile that made her fidget.

"How clever of you, Miss Wangle," she said sweetly. "In future no one will ever dare to have a secret at Galvin House."

Miss Wangle reddened. Mr. Bolton's laugh rang out.

"Miss Wangle, Private Enquiry Agent," he cried, "I——"

"Really, Mr. Bolton!" protested Mrs. Craske-Morton, looking anxiously at Miss Wangle's indrawn lips and angry eyes.

Mr. Bolton subsided.

"We're so excited, dear Miss Brent," simpered Miss Sikkum. "You'll be Lady Bowen——"

"Lady Peter Bowen," corrected Mrs. Craske-Morton with superior knowledge.

"Lady Peter," gushed Miss Sikkum. "Oh how romantic, and I shall see your portrait in *The Mirror*. Oh! Miss Brent, aren't you happy?"

Patricia smiled across at Miss Sikkum, whose enthusiasm was too genuine to cause offence.

"And you'll have cars and all sorts of things," remarked Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, thinking of he solitary blue evening frock, "he's very rich."

"Worth ten thousand a year," almost shouted Mr. Cordal, striving to regain control over a piece of lettuce-leaf that fluttered from his lips, and having eventually to use his fingers.

"You'll forget all about us," said Miss Pilkington, who in her capacity as a post-office supervisor daily showed her contempt for the public whose servant she was.

"If you're nice to her," said Mr. Bolton, "she may buy her stamps at your place."

Again Mrs. Craske-Morton's "Really, Mr. Bolton!" eased the situation.

Patricia was for the most part silent. She was thinking of the coming talk with Bowen. In spite of herself she was excited at the prospect of seeing him again. Miss Wangle also said little. From time to time she glanced in Patricia's direction.

"The Wangle's off her feed," whispered Mr. Bolton to Miss Sikkum, producing from her a giggle and an "Oh! Mr. Bolton, you *are* dreadful."

Mrs. Barnes was worrying as to whether a lord should be addressed as "my lord" or "sir," and if you curtsied to him, and if so how you did it with rheumatism in the knee.

Patricia noticed with amusement the new deference with which everyone treated her. Mrs. Craske-Morton, in particular, was most solicitous that she should make a good meal. Miss Wangle's silence was in itself a tribute. Patricia nervously waited the moment when Bowen's presence should be announced.

When the time came Gustave rose to the occasion magnificently. Throwing open the dining-room door impressively and speaking with great distinctness he cried:

"Ees Lordship is 'ere, mees," and then after a moment's pause he added, "'E 'as brought 'is car, mees. It is at the door."

Patricia smiled in spite of herself at Gustave's earnestness.

"Very well, Gustave, say I will not be a moment," she replied and, with a muttered apology to Mrs. Craske-Morton, she left the table and the dining-room, conscious of the dramatic tension of the situation.

Patricia ran down the passage leading to the lounge, then, suddenly remembering that haste and happiness were not in keeping with anger and reproach, entered the lounge with a sedateness that even Aunt Adelaide could not have found lacking in maidenly decorum.

Bowen came across from the window and took both her hands.

"Why was she allowing him to do this?" she asked herself. "Why did she not reproach him, why did she thrill at his touch, why——?"

She withdrew her hands sharply, looked up at him and then for no reason at all laughed.

How absurd it all was. It was easy to be angry with him when he was at the Quadrant and she at Galvin House; but with him before her, looking down at her with eyes that were smilingly confident and gravely deferential by turn, she found her anger and good resolutions disappear.

"I know you are going to bully me, Patricia." Bowen's eyes smiled; but there was in his voice a note of enquiry.

"Oh! please let us escape before the others come in sight," said Patricia, looking over her shoulder anxiously. "They'll all be out in a moment. I left them straining at their leashes and swallowing scalding coffee so as to get a glimpse of a real, live lord at close quarters."

As she spoke Patricia stabbed on a toque.

"Shall I want anything warmer than this?" she enquired as Bowen helped her into a long fur-trimmed coat.

"I brought a big fur coat for you in case it gets cold," he replied, and he held open the door for her to pass.

"Quick," she whispered, "they're coming."

As she ran down the steps she nodded brightly to Gustave, who stood almost bowed down with the burden of his respect for an English lord.

As Bowen swung the car round, Patricia was conscious that at the drawing-room and lounge windows Galvin House was heavily massed. Unable to find a space, Miss Sikkum and Mr. Bolton had come out on to the doorstep and, as the car jerked forward, Miss Sikkum waved her pocket handkerchief.

Patricia shuddered.

For some time they were silent. Patricia was content to enjoy the unaccustomed sense of swift movement coupled with the feeling of the luxury of a Rolls Royce. From time to time Bowen glanced at her and smiled, and she was conscious of returning the smile, although in the light of what she intended to say she felt that smiles were not appropriate.

The car sped along the Bayswater Road, threaded its way through Hammersmith Broadway and passed over the bridge, across Barnes Common into Priory Lane, and finally into Richmond Park. Bowen had not mentioned where he intended to take her, and Patricia was glad. She was essentially feminine, and liked having things decided for her, the more so as she invariably had to decide for herself.

Half-way across the Park Bowen turned in the direction of Kingston Gate and, a minute later, drew up just off the roadway. Having stopped the engine he turned to her.

"Now, Patricia," he said with a smile, "I am at your mercy. There is no one within hail."

Bowen's voice recalled her from dreamland. She was thinking how different everything might have been, but for that unfortunate unconvention. With an effort she came down to earth to find Bowen smiling into her eyes.

It was an effort for her to assume the indignation she had previously felt. Bowen's presence seemed to dissipate her anger. Why had she not written to him instead of endeavouring to express verbally what she knew she would fail to convey?

"Please don't be too hard on me, Patricia," pleaded Bowen.

Patricia looked at him. She wished he would not smile at her in that way and assume an air of penitence. It was so disarming. It was unfair. He was taking a mean advantage. He was always taking a mean advantage of her, always putting her in the wrong.

By keeping her face carefully averted from his, she was able to tinge her voice with indignation as she demanded:

"Why did you not tell me who you were?"

"But I did," he protested.

"You said that you were Colonel Bowen, and you are not." Patricia was pleased to find her sense of outraged indignation increasing. "You have made me ridiculous in the eyes of everyone at Galvin House."

"But," protested Bowen.

"It's no good saying 'but,'" replied Patricia unreasonably, "you know I'm right."

"But I told you my name was Bowen," he said, "and later I told you that my rank was that of a lieutenant-colonel, both of which are quite correct."

"You are Lord Peter Bowen, and you've made me ridiculous," then conscious of the absurdity of her words, Patricia laughed; but there was no mirth in her laughter.

"Made you ridiculous," said Bowen, concern in his voice. "But how?"

"Oh, I am not referring to your boy-messengers and telegrams, florists' shops, confectioners' stocks," said Patricia, "but all the tabbies in Galvin House set themselves to work to find out who you were and—and—look what an absurd figure I cut! Then of course Aunt Adelaide must butt in."

"Aunt Adelaide!" repeated Bowen, knitting his brows. "Tabbies at Galvin House!"

"If you repeat my words like that I shall scream," said Patricia. "I wish you would try and be intelligent. Miss Wangle told Aunt Adelaide that I'm engaged to Lord Peter Bowen. Aunt Adelaide then asked me about my engagement, and I had to make up some sort of story about Colonel Bowen. She then enquired if it were true that I was engaged to Lord Peter Bowen. Of course I said 'No,' and that is where we are at present, and you've got to help me out. You got me into the mess."

"Might I enquire who Aunt Adelaide is, please, Patricia?"

Bowen's humility made him very difficult to talk to.

"Aunt Adelaide is my sole surviving relative, vide her own statement," said Patricia. "If I had my way she would be neither surviving nor a relative; but as it happens she is both, and to-morrow afternoon at half-past five she is coming to Galvin House to receive a full explanation of my conduct."

Bowen compressed his lips and wrinkled his forehead; but there was laughter in his eyes.

"It's difficult, isn't it, Patricia?" he said.

"It's absurd, and please don't call me Patricia."

"But we're engaged and——"

"We're nothing of the sort," she said.

"But we are," protested Bowen. "I can——"

"Never mind what you can do," she retorted. "What am I to tell Aunt Adelaide at half-past five to-morrow evening?"

"Why not tell her the truth?" said Bowen.

"Isn't that just like a man?" Patricia addressed the query to a deer that was eyeing the car curiously from some fifty yards distance. "Tell the truth," she repeated scornfully. "But how much

will that help us?"

"Well! let's tell a lie," protested Bowen, smiling.

And then Patricia did a weak and foolish thing, she laughed, and Bowen laughed. Finally they sat and looked at each other helplessly.

"However you got those," she nodded at the ribbons on his breast, "I don't know. It was certainly not for being intelligent."

For a minute Bowen did not reply. He was apparently lost in thought. Presently he turned to Patricia.

"Look here," he said, "by half-past five to-morrow afternoon I'll have found a solution. Now can't we talk about something pleasant?"

"There is nothing pleasant to talk about when Aunt Adelaide is looming on the horizon. She's about the most unpleasant thing next to chilblains that I know."

"I suppose," said Bowen tentatively, "you couldn't solve the difficulty by marrying me by special licence."

"Marry you by special licence!" cried Patricia in amazement.

"Yes, it would put everything right."

"I think you must be mad," said Patricia with decision; but conscious that her cheeks were very hot.

"I think I must be in love," was Bowen's quiet retort. "Will you?"

"Not even to escape Aunt Adelaide's interrogation would I marry you by special, or any other licence," said Patricia with decision.

Bowen turned away, a shadow falling across his face. Then a moment after, drawing his cigarette-case from his pocket, he enquired, "Shall we smoke?"

Patricia accepted the cigarette he offered her. She watched him as he lighted first hers, then his own. She saw the frown that had settled upon his usually happy face, and noted the staccatoed manner in which he smoked. Then she became conscious that she had been lacking in not only graciousness but common civility. Instinctively she put out her hand and touched his coat-sleeve.

"Please forgive me, I was rather a beast, wasn't I?" she said.

He looked round and smiled; but the smile did not reach his eyes.

"Please try and understand," she said, "and now will you drive me home?"

Bowen looked at her for a moment, then, getting out of the car, started the engine, and without a word climbed back to his seat.

The journey back was performed in silence. At Galvin House Gustave, who was on the look-out, threw open the door with a flourish.

In saying good night neither referred to the subject of their conversation.

As Patricia entered, the lounge seemed suddenly to empty its contents into the hall.

"I hope you enjoyed your ride," said Mr. Bolton.

"I hate motoring," said Patricia. Then she walked upstairs with a curt "Good night," leaving a group of surprised people speculating as to the cause of her mood, and deeply commiserating with Bowen.

CHAPTER VIII

LORD PETER'S S.O.S.

"The bath is ready, my lord."

Lord Peter Bowen opened his eyes as if reluctant to acknowledge that another day had

dawned. He stretched his limbs and yawned luxuriously. For the next few moments he lay watching his man, Peel, as he moved noiselessly about the room, idly speculating as to whether such precision and self-repression were natural or acquired.

To Bowen Peel was a source of never-ending interest. No matter at what hour Bowen had seen him, Peel always appeared as if he had just shaved. In his every action there was purpose, and every purpose was governed by one law—order. He was noiseless, wordless, selfless. Bowen was convinced that were he to die suddenly and someone chance to call, Peel would merely say: "His Lordship is not at home, sir."

Thin of face, small of stature, precise of movement, Peel possessed the individuality of negation. He looked nothing in particular, seemed nothing in particular, did everything to perfection. His face was a barrier to intimacy, his demeanour a gulf to the curious: he betrayed neither emotion nor confidence. In short he was the most perfect gentleman's servant in existence.

"What's the time, Peel?" enquired Bowen.

"Seven forty-three, my lord," replied the meticulous Peel, glancing at the clock on the mantel-piece.

"Have I any engagements to-day?" queried his master.

"No, my lord. You have refused to make any since last Thursday morning."

Then Bowen remembered. He had pleaded pressure at the War Office as an excuse for declining all invitations. He was determined that nothing should interfere with his seeing Patricia should she unbend. With the thought of Patricia returned the memory of the previous night's events. Bowen cursed himself for the mess he had made of things. Every act of his had seemed to result only in one thing, the angering of Patricia. Even then things might have gone well if it had not been for his wretched bad luck in being the son of a peer.

As he lay watching Peel, Bowen felt in a mood to condole with himself. Confound it! Surely it could not be urged against him as his fault that he had a wretched title. He had been given no say in the matter. As for telling Patricia, could he immediately on meeting her blurt out, "I'm a lord?" Supposing he had introduced himself as "Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Peter Bowen." How ridiculous it would have sounded. He had come to hate the very sound of the word "lord."

"It's ten minutes to eight, my lord."

It was Peel's voice that broke in upon his reflections.

"Oh, damn!" cried Bowen as he threw his legs out of bed and sat looking at Peel.

"I beg pardon, my lord?"

"I said damn!" replied Bowen.

"Yes, my lord."

Bowen regarded Peel narrowly. He was confoundedly irritating this morning. He seemed to be my-lording his master specially to annoy him. There was, however, no sign upon Peel's features or in his watery blue eyes indicating that he was other than in his normal frame of mind.

Why couldn't Patricia be sensible? Why must she take up this absurd attitude, contorting every action of his into a covert insult? Why above all things couldn't women be reasonable? Bowen rose, stretched himself and walked across to the bath-room. As he was about to enter he looked over his shoulder.

"If," he said, "you can arrange to remind me of my infernal title as little as possible during the next few days, Peel, I shall feel infinitely obliged."

"Yes, my lord," was the response.

Bowen banged the door savagely, and Peel rang to order breakfast.

During the meal Bowen pondered over the events of the previous evening, and in particular over Patricia's unreasonableness. His one source of comfort was that she had appealed to him to put things right about her aunt. That would involve his seeing her again. He did not, or would not, see that he was the only one to whom she could appeal.

Bowen always breakfasted in his own sitting-room; he disliked his fellow-men in the early morning. Looking up suddenly from the table he caught Peel's expressionless eye upon him.

"Peel."

"Yes, my lord."

"Why is it that we Englishmen dislike each other so at breakfast?"

Peel paused for a moment. "I've heard it said, my lord, that we're half an inch taller in the morning, perhaps our perceptions are more acute also."

Bowen looked at Peel curiously.

"You're a philosopher," he said, "and I'm afraid a bit of a cynic."

"I hope not, my lord," responded Peel.

Bowen pushed back his chair and rose, receiving from Peel his cap, cane, and gloves.

"By the way," he said, "I want you to ring up Lady Tanagra and ask her to lunch with me at half-past one. Tell her it's very important, and ask her not to fail me."

"Yes, my lord: it shall be attended to."

Bowen went out. Lady Tanagra was Bowen's only sister. As children they had been inseparable, forced into an alliance by the overbearing nature of their elder brother, the heir, Viscount Bowen, who would succeed to the title as the eighth Marquess of Meyfield. Bowen was five years older than his sister, who had just passed her twenty-third birthday and, as a frail sensitive child, she had instinctively looked to him for protection against her elder brother.

Their comradeship was that of mutual understanding. For one to say to the other, "Don't fail me," meant that any engagement, however pressing, would be put off. There was a tacit acknowledgment that their comradeship stood before all else. Each to the other was unique. Thus when Bowen sent the message to Lady Tanagra through Peel asking her not to fail him, he knew that she would keep the appointment. He knew equally well that it would involve her in the breaking of some other engagement, for there were few girls in London so popular as Lady Tanagra Bowen.

Whenever there was an important social function, Lady Tanagra Bowen was sure to be there, and it was equally certain that the photographers of the illustrated and society papers would so manoeuvre that she came into the particular group, or groups, they were taking.

The seventh Marquess of Meyfield was an enthusiastic collector of Tanagra figurines and, overruling his lady's protestations, he had determined to call his first and only daughter Tanagra. Lady Meyfield had begged for a second name; but the Marquess had been resolute. "Tanagra I will have her christened and Tanagra I will have her called," he had said with a smile that, if it mitigated the sternness of his expression, did not in my way undermine his determination. Lady Meyfield knew her lord, and also that her only chance of ruling him was by showing unfailing tact. She therefore bowed to his decision.

"Poor child!" she had remarked as she looked down at the frail little mite in the hollow of her arm, "you're certainly going to be made ridiculous; but I've done my best," and Lord Meyfield had come across the room and kissed his wife with the remark, "There you're wrong, my dear, it's going to help to make her a great success. Imagine, the Lady Tanagra Bowen; why it would make a celebrity of the most commonplace female," whereat they had both smiled.

As a child Lady Tanagra had been teased unmercifully about her name, so much so that she had almost hated it; but later when she had come to love the figurines that were so much part of her father's life, she had learned, not only to respect, but to be proud of the name.

To her friends and intimates she was always Tan, to the less intimate Lady Tan, and to the world at large Lady Tanagra Bowen.

She had once found the name extremely useful, when in process of being proposed to by an undesirable of the name of Black.

"It's no good," she had said, "I could never marry you, no matter what the state of my feelings. Think how ridiculous we should both be, everybody would call us Black and Tan. Ugh! it sounds like a whisky as well as a dog." Whereat Mr. Black had laughed and they remained friends, which was a great tribute to Lady Tanagra.

Exquisitely pretty, sympathetic, witty, human! Lady Tanagra Bowen was a favourite wherever she went. She seemed incapable of making enemies even amongst her own sex. Her taste in dress was as unerring as in literature and art. Everything she did or said was without effort. She had been proposed to by "half the eligibles and all the ineligibles in London," as Bowen phrased it; but she declared she would never marry until Peter married, and had thus got somebody else to mother him.

At a quarter-past one when Bowen left the War Office, he found Lady Tanagra waiting in her car outside.

"Hullo, Tan!" he cried, "what a brainy idea, picking up the poor, tired warrior."

"It'll save you a taxi, Peter. I'll tell you what to do with the shilling as we go along."

Lady Tanagra smiled up into her brother's face. She was always happy with Peter.

As she swung the car across Whitehall to get into the north-bound stream of traffic, Bowen looked down at his sister. She handled her big car with dexterity and ease. She was a dainty creature with regular features, violet-blue eyes and golden hair that seemed to defy all constraint. There was a tilt about her chin that showed determination, and that about her eyebrows which suggested something more than good judgment.

"I hope you weren't doing anything to-day, Tan," said Bowen as they came to a standstill at the top of Whitehall, waiting for the removal of a blue arm that barred their progress.

"I was lunching with the Bolsovers; but I'm not well enough, I'm afraid, to see them. It's measles, you know."

"Good heavens, Tan! what do you mean?"

"Well, I had to say something that would be regarded as a sufficient excuse for breaking a luncheon engagement of three weeks' standing. Quite a lot of people were invited to meet me."

"I'm awfully sorry," began Bowen apologetically.

"Oh, it's all right!" was the reply as the car jumped forward. "I shall be deluged with fruit and flowers now from all sorts of people, because the Bolsovers are sure to spread it round that I'm in extremis. To-morrow, however, I shall announce that it was a wrong diagnosis."

Lady Tanagra drew the car up to the curb outside Dent's. "I think," she said, indicating an old woman selling matches, "we'll give her the shilling for the taxi, Peter, shall we?"

Peter beckoned the old woman and handed her a shilling with a smile.

"Does it make you feel particularly virtuous to be charitable with another's money?" he enquired.

Lady Tanagra made a grimace.

Over lunch they talked upon general topics and about common friends. Lady Tanagra made no reference to the important matter that had caused her to be summoned to lunch, even at the expense of having measles as an excuse. That was characteristic of her. She had nothing of a woman's curiosity, at least she never showed it, particularly with Peter.

After lunch they went to the lounge for coffee. When they had been served and both were smoking, Bowen remarked casually, "Got any engagement for this afternoon, Tan?"

"Tea at the Carlton at half-past four, then I promised to run in to see the Grahams before dinner. I'm afraid it will mean more flowers and fruit. Oh!" she replied, "I suppose I must stick to measles. I shall have to buy some thanks for kind enquiries cards as I go home."

During lunch Bowen had been wondering how he could approach the subject of Patricia. He could not tell even Tanagra how he had met her—that was Patricia's secret. If she chose to tell, that was another matter; but he could not. As a rule he found it easy to talk to Tanagra and explain things; but this was a little unusual. Lady Tanagra watched him shrewdly for a minute or two.

"I think I should just say it as it comes, Peter," she remarked in a casual, matter-of-fact tone.

Bowen started and then laughed.

"What I want is a sponsor for an acquaintanceship between myself and a girl. I cannot tell you everything, Tan, she may decide to; but of course you know it's all right."

"Why, of course," broke in Lady Tanagra with an air of conviction which contained something of a reproach that he should have thought it necessary to mention such a thing.

"Well, you've got to do a bit of lying, too, I'm afraid."

"Oh! that will be all right. The natural consequence of a high temperature through measles." Lady Tanagra saw that Bowen was ill at ease, and sought by her lightness to simplify things for him.

"How long have I known her?" she proceeded.

"Oh! that you had better settle with her. All that is necessary is for you to have met her somewhere, or somehow, and to have introduced me to her."

"And who is to receive these explanations?" enquired Lady Tanagra.

"Her aunt, a gorgon."

"Does the girl know that you are—that I am to throw myself into the breach?"

"No," said Peter, "I didn't think to tell her. I said that I would arrange things. Her name's Patricia Brent. She's private secretary to Arthur Bonsor of 426 Eaton Square, and she lives at Galvin House Residential Hotel, to give it its full title, 8 Galvin Street, Bayswater. Her aunt is to be at Galvin House at half-past five this afternoon, when I have to be explained to her. Oh! it's most devilish awkward, Tan, because I can't tell you the facts of the case. I wish she were here."

"That's all right, Peter. I'll put things right. What time does she leave Eaton Square?"

"Five o'clock, I think."

"Good! leave it to me. By the way, where shall you be if I want to get at you?"

"When?"

"Say six o'clock."

"I'll be back here at six and wait until seven."

"That will do. Now I really must be going. I've got to telephone to these people about the measles. Shall I run you down to Whitehall?"

"No, thanks, I think I'll walk," and with that he saw her into her car and turned to walk back to Whitehall, thanking his stars for being possessed of such a sister and marvelling at her wisdom. He had not the most remote idea of how she would achieve her purpose; but achieve it he was convinced she would. It was notorious that Lady Tanagra never failed in anything she undertook.

While Bowen and his sister were lunching at the Quadrant, Patricia was endeavouring to concentrate her mind upon her work. "The egregious Arthur," as she called him to herself in her more impatient moments, had been very trying that morning. He had been in a particularly indeterminate mood, which involved the altering and changing of almost every sentence he dictated. In the usual way he was content to tell Patricia what he wanted to say, and let her clothe it in fitting words; but this morning he had insisted on dictating every letter, with the result that her notes had become hopelessly involved and she was experiencing great difficulty in reading them. Added to this was the fact that she could not keep her thoughts from straying to Aunt Adelaide. What would happen that afternoon? What was Bowen going to do to save the situation? He had promised to see her through; but how was he going to do it?

CHAPTER IX

LADY TANAGRA TAKES A HAND

At a quarter to five Patricia left the library to go upstairs to put on her hat and coat. In the hall she encountered Mrs. Bonsor.

"Finished?" interrogated that lady in a tone of voice that implied she was perfectly well aware of the fact that it wanted still a quarter of an hour to the time at which Patricia was supposed to be free.

"No; there is still some left; but I'm going home," said Patricia. There was something in her voice and appearance that prompted Mrs. Bonsor to smile her artificial smile and remark that she thought Patricia was quite right, the weather being very trying.

When she left the Bonsors' house, Patricia was too occupied with her own thoughts to notice the large grey car standing a few yards up the square with a girl at the steering-wheel. Patricia turned in the opposite direction from that in which the car stood, making her way towards Sloane Street to get her bus. She had not gone many steps when the big car slid silently up beside her, and she heard a voice say, "Can't I give you a lift to Galvin House?"

She turned round and saw a fair-haired girl smiling at her from the car.

"I—I——"

"Jump in, won't you?" said the girl.

"But—but I think you've made a mistake."

"You're Patricia Brent, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Patricia, smiling, "that's my name."

"Well then, jump in and I'll run you up to Galvin House. Don't delay or you'll be too late for

your aunt."

Patricia looked at the girl in mute astonishment, but proceeded to get into the car, there seemed nothing else to be done. As she did so, the fair-haired girl laughed brightly. "It's awfully mean of me to take such an advantage, but I couldn't resist it. I'm Peter's sister, Tanagra."

"Oh!" said Patricia, light dawning upon her and turning to Tanagra with a smile, "Then you're the solution?"

"Yes," said Lady Tanagra, "I'm going to see you two out of the mess you've somehow or other got into."

Suddenly Patricia stiffened. "Did he—did he—er—tell you?"

"Not he," said Lady Tanagra, shoving on the brake suddenly to avoid a crawling taxi that had swung round without any warning. "Peter doesn't talk."

"But then, how do you——?"

"Well," said Lady Tanagra, "he told me that I was to be the one who had introduced him to you and explain him to your aunt. It's all over London that I've got measles, and there will be simply piles of flowers and fruit arriving at Grosvenor Square by every possible conveyance."

"Measles!" cried Patricia uncomprehendingly.

"Yes, you see when Peter wants me I always have to throw up any sort of engagement, and he does the same for me. When he asked me to lunch with him to-day and said it was important, I had to give some reasonable excuse to three lots of people to whom I had pledged myself, and I thought measles would do quite nicely."

Patricia laughed in spite of herself.

"So you don't know anything except that you have got to——"

"Sponsor you," interrupted Lady Tanagra.

For some time Patricia was silent. She felt she could tell her story to this girl who was so trustful that everything was all right, and who was willing to do anything to help her brother.

"Can't we go slowly whilst I talk to you," said Patricia, as they turned into the Park.

"We'll do better than that," said Lady Tanagra, "we'll stop and sit down for five minutes." She pulled up the car near the Stanhope Gate and they found a quiet spot under a tree.

"I cannot allow you to enter into this affair," said Patricia, "without telling you the whole story. What you will think of me afterwards I don't know; but I've got myself into a most horrible mess."

She then proceeded to explain the whole situation, how it came about that she had come to know Bowen and the upshot of the meeting. Lady Tanagra listened without interruption and without betraying by her expression what were her thoughts.

"And now what do you think of me?" demanded Patricia when she had concluded.

For a moment Lady Tanagra rested her hand upon Patricia's. "I think, you goose, that had you known Peter better there would not have been so much need for you to worry; but there isn't much time and we've got to prepare. Now listen carefully. First of all you must call me Tan or Tanagra, and I must call you Patricia or Pat, or whatever you like. Secondly, as it would take too long to find out if we've got any friends in common, you went to the V.A.D. Depot in St. George's Crescent to see if you could do anything to help. There you met me. I'm quite a shining light there, by the way, and we palled up. This led to my introducing Peter and—well all the rest is quite easy."

"But—but there isn't any rest," said Patricia. "Don't you see how horribly awkward it is? I'm supposed to be engaged to him."

"Oh!" said Lady Tanagra quietly, "that's a matter for you and Peter to settle between you. I'm afraid I can't interfere there. All I can do is to explain how you and he came to know each other; and now we had better be getting on as your aunt will not be pleased if you keep her waiting. What I propose to do is to pick her up and take her up to the Quadrant where we shall find Peter."

"But," protested Patricia, "that's simply getting us more involved than ever."

"Well, I'm afraid it's got to be," said Lady Tanagra, smiling mischievously; "it's much better that they should meet at the Quadrant than at Galvin House, where you say everybody is so catty."

Patricia saw the force of Lady Tanagra's argument, and they were soon whirling on their way towards Galvin House. She wanted to pinch herself to be quite sure that she was not dreaming. Everything seemed to be happening with such rapidity that her brain refused to keep pace with events. Why had she not met these people in a conventional way so that she might preserve their friendship? It was hard luck, she told herself.

"Would you mind telling me what you propose doing?" enquired Patricia.

"I promised Peter to gather up the pieces," was the response. "All you've got to do is to remain quiet."

Lady Tanagra brought the car up in front of Galvin House with a magnificent sweep. Gustave, who had been on the watch, swung open the door in his most impressive manner.

As Patricia and Lady Tanagra entered the lounge, Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe were addressing pleasantries to a particularly grim Miss Brent.

"Oh, here you are!" Miss Brent's exclamation was uttered in such a voice as to pierce even the thick skin of Miss Wangle, who having instantly recognised Lady Tanagra, retired with Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe a few yards, where they carried on a whispered conversation, casting significant glances at Lady Tanagra, Miss Brent and Patricia.

"I told Patricia that it was time the families met," said Lady Tanagra, "and so I insisted on coming when I heard you were to be here."

"I think you are quite right."

Patricia was surprised at the change in her aunt. Much of her usual uncompromising downrightness had been shed, and she appeared almost gracious. For one thing she was greatly impressed at the thought that Patricia was to become Lady Peter Bowen. As the aunt of Lady Peter Bowen, Miss Brent saw that her own social position would be considerably improved. She saw herself taking precedence at Little Milstead and issuing its social life and death warrants. Apart from these considerations Miss Brent was not indifferent to Lady Tanagra's personal charm.

"Tan's parlour tricks," as Godfrey Elton called them, were notorious. Everyone was aware of their existence; yet everyone fell an instant victim. A compound of earnestness, deference, pleading, irresistible impertinence and dignity, they formed a dangerous weapon.

Lady Tanagra's position among her friends and acquaintance was unique. When difficulties and contentions arose, the parties' instinctive impulse was to endeavour to invest her interest. "Tanagra is so sensible," outraged parenthood would exclaim; "Tan's such a sport. She'll understand," cried rebellious youth. People not only asked Lady Tanagra's advice, but took it. The secret of her success, unknown to herself, was her knowledge of human nature. Even those against whom she gave her decisions bore her no ill-will.

Her manner towards Miss Brent was a mixture of laughter and seriousness, with deft little touches of deference.

"I've come to apologize for everybody and everything, Miss Brent," she cried; "but in particular for myself." Lady Tanagra chatted on gaily, "sparring for an opening," Elton called it.

"You mustn't blame Patricia," she bubbled in her soft musical voice, "it's all Peter's fault, and where it's not his fault it's mine," she proceeded illogically. "You won't be hard on us, will you?" She looked up at Miss Brent with the demureness of a child expecting severe rebuke for some naughtiness.

Miss Brent's eyes narrowed and the firm line of her lips widened. Patricia recognised this as the outward evidences of a smile.

"I confess, I am greatly puzzled," began Miss Brent.

"Of course you must be," continued Lady Tanagra, "and if you were not so kind you would be very cross, especially with me. Now," she continued, without giving Miss Brent a chance of replying, "I want you to do me a very great favour."

Lady Tanagra paused impressively, and gave Miss Brent her most pleading look.

Miss Brent looked at Lady Tanagra with just a tinge of suspicion in her pea-soup coloured eyes.

"May I ask what it is?" she enquired guardedly.

"I want you to let me carry you off to a quiet place where we can talk."

Miss Brent rose at once. She disliked Calvin House and the inquisitive glances of its inmates.

"I told Peter to be at the Quadrant until seven. He is very anxious to meet you," continued

Lady Tanagra as they moved towards the door. "I would not let him come here as I thought, from that Patricia has told me, that you would not care—to——" She paused.

"You are quite right, Lady Tanagra," said Miss Brent with decision. "I do not like boarding-houses. They are not the places for the discussion of family affairs."

Patricia descended the steps of Galvin House, not quite sure whether this were reality or a dream. She watched Miss Brent seat herself beside Lady Tanagra, whilst she herself entered the tonneau of the car. As the door clicked and the car sprang forward, she caught a glimpse of eager faces at the windows of Galvin House.

As they swung into the Park and hummed along the even road, Patricia endeavoured to bring herself to earth. She pinched herself until it hurt. What had happened? She felt like someone present at her own funeral. Her fate was being decided without anyone seeming to think it necessary to consult her.

"By half-past five to-morrow afternoon I shall have found a solution." Bowen's words came back to her. He was right. Lady Tanagra was indeed a solution. Patricia and Miss Brent were merely lay-figures. It must be wonderful to be able to make people do what you wished, she mused. She wondered what would have happened had Bowen possessed his sister's powers.

At the Quadrant Peel was waiting in the vestibule. With a bow that impressed Miss Brent, he conducted them to Bowen's suite. As they entered Bowen sprang up from a writing-table. Patricia noticed that there was no smell of tobacco smoke. The Bowens were a wonderful family, she decided, remembering her aunt's prejudices.

"I have only just heard you were in town," she heard Bowen explaining to Miss Brent. "I rang up Patricia this morning, but she could not remember your address."

Patricia gasped; but, seeing the effect of the "grey lie" (it was not quite innocent enough to be called a white lie, she told herself) she forgave it.

During tea Lady Tanagra and Bowen set to to "play themselves in," as Lady Tanagra afterwards expressed it.

"Poor Aunt Adelaide," Patricia murmured to herself, "they'll turn her giddy young head."

"And now," Lady Tanagra began when Bowen had taken Miss Brent's cup from her. "I must explain all about this little romance and how it came about."

Patricia caught Bowen's eye, and saw in it a look of eager interest.

"Patricia wanted to do war work in her spare time," continued Lady Tanagra, "so she applied to the V.A.D. at St. George's Crescent. I am on the committee and, by a happy chance," Lady Tanagra smiled across to Patricia, "she was sent to me. I saw she was not strong and dissuaded her."

Miss Brent nodded approval.

"I explained," continued Lady Tanagra, "that the work was very hard, and that it was not necessarily patriotic to overwork so as to get ill. Doctors have quite enough to do."

Again Miss Brent nodded agreement.

"I think we liked each other from the first," again Lady Tanagra smiled across at Patricia, "and I asked her to come and have tea with me, and we became friends. Finally, one day when we were enjoying a quiet talk here in the lounge, this big brother of mine comes along and spoils everything." Lady Tanagra regarded Bowen with reproachful eyes.

"Spoiled everything?" enquired Miss Brent.

"Yes; by falling in love with my friend, and in a most treacherous manner she must do the same." Lady Tanagra's tone was matter-of-fact enough to deceive a misanthropist.

Patricia's cheeks burned and her eyes fell beneath the gaze of the others. She felt as a man might who reads his own obituary notices.

"And why was I not told, her sole surviving relative?" Miss Brent rapped out the question with the air of a counsel for the prosecution.

"That was my fault," broke in Bowen.

Three pairs of eyes were instantly turned upon him. Miss Brent suspicious, Lady Tanagra admiring, Patricia wondering.

"And why, may I ask?" enquired Miss Brent.

"I wanted it to be a secret between Patricia and me," explained Bowen easily.

"But, Lady Tanagra——" There was a note in Miss Brent's voice that Patricia recognised as a soldier does the gas-gong.

"Oh!" replied Bowen, "she finds out everything; but I only told her at lunch to-day."

"And he told me as if I had not already discovered the fact for myself," laughed Lady Tanagra.

"Patricia wanted to tell you," continued Bowen. "She has often talked of you (Patricia felt sure Aunt Adelaide must hear her start of surprise); but I wanted to wait until we could go to you together and confess." Bowen smiled straight into his listener's eyes, a quiet, friendly smile that would have disarmed a gorgon.

For a few moments there was silence. Miss Brent was thinking, thinking as a judge thinks who is about to deliver sentence.

"And Lady Meyfield, does she know?" she enquired.

Without giving Bowen a chance to reply Lady Tanagra rushed in as if fearful that he might make a false move.

"That is another of Peter's follies, keeping it from mother. He argued that if the engagement were officially announced, the family would take up all Patricia's time, and he would see nothing of her. Oh! Peter's very selfish sometimes, I am to say; but," she added with inspiration, "every thing will have to come out now."

"Of course!" Patricia started at the decision in Miss Brent's tone. She looked across at Bowen, who was regarding Lady Tanagra with an admiration that amounted almost to reverence. As he looked up Patricia's eyes fell. What was happening to her? She was getting further into the net woven by her own folly. Lady Tanagra was getting them out of the tangle into which they had got themselves; but was she not involving them in a worse? Patricia knew her aunt, Lady Tanagra did not. Therein lay the key to the whole situation.

Miss Brent rose to go. Patricia saw that judgment was to be deferred. She shook hands with Lady Tanagra and Bowen and, finally, turning to Patricia said:

"I think, Patricia, that you have been very indiscreet in not taking me into your confidence, your sole surviving relative," and with that she went, having refused Lady Tanagra's offer to drive her to her hotel, pleading that she had another call to make.

When Bowen returned from seeing Miss Brent into a taxi, the three culprits regarded each other. All felt that they had come under the ban of Miss Brent's displeasure. It was Lady Tanagra who broke the silence.

"Well, we're all in it now up to the neck," she laughed.

Bowen smiled happily; but Patricia looked alarmed. Lady Tanagra went over to her and bending down kissed her lightly on the cheek. Patricia looked up, and Bowen saw that her eyes were suspiciously moist. With a murmured apology about a note he was expecting he left the room.

That night the three dined at the Quadrant, "to get to know each other," as Lady Tanagra said. When Patricia reached Galvin House, having refused to allow Bowen to see her home, she was conscious of having spent another happy evening.

"Up to the neck in it," she murmured as she tossed back her hair and began to brush it for the night, "over the top of our heads, I should say."

CHAPTER X

MISS BRENT'S STRATEGY

Having become reconciled to what she regarded as Patricia's matrimonial plans, although strongly disapproving of her deplorable flippancy, Miss Brent decided that her niece's position must be established in the eyes of her prospective relatives-in-law.

Miss Brent was proud of her family, but still prouder of the fact that the founder had come over with that extremely dubious collection of notables introduced into England by William of Normandy. To Miss Brent, William the Conqueror was what *The Mayflower* is to all ambitious Americans—a social jumping-off point. There were no army lists in 1066, or passengers' lists in 1620.

No one could say with any degree of certainty what it was that Geoffrey Brent did for, or knew about, his ducal master; but it was sufficiently important to gain for him a grant of lands, which he had no more right to occupy than the Norman had to bestow.

After careful thought Miss Brent had decided upon her line of operations. Geoffrey Brent was to be used as a corrective to Patricia's occupation. No family, Miss Brent argued, could be expected to welcome with open arms a girl who earned her living as the secretary of an unknown member of parliament. She foresaw complications, fierce opposition, possibly an attempt to break off the engagement. To defeat this Geoffrey Brent was to be disinterred and flung into the conflict, and Patricia was to owe to her aunt the happiness that was to be hers. Incidentally Miss Brent saw in this circumstance a very useful foundation upon which to build for herself a position in the future.

Miss Brent had made up her mind upon two points. One that she would call upon Lady Meyfield, the other that Patricia's engagement must be announced. Debrett told her all she wanted to know about the Bowens, and she strongly disapproved of what she termed "hole-in-the-corner engagements." The marriage of a Brent to a Bowen was to her an alliance, carrying with it certain social responsibilities, consequently Society must be advised of what was impending. Romance was a by-product that did not concern either Miss Brent or Society.

Purpose and decision were to Miss Brent what wings and tail are to the swallow: they propelled and directed her. Her mind once made up, to change it would have appeared to Miss Brent an unpardonable sign of weakness. Circumstances might alter, thrones totter, but Miss Brent's decisions would remain unshaken.

On the day following her meeting with Lady Tanagra and Bowen, Miss Brent did three things. She transferred to "The Mayfair Hotel" for one night, she prepared an announcement of the engagement for *The Morning Post*, and she set out to call upon Lady Meyfield in Grosvenor Square.

The transference to "The Mayfair Hotel" served a double purpose. It would impress the people at the newspaper office, and it would also show that Patricia's kinswoman was of some importance.

As Patricia was tapping out upon a typewriter the halting eloquence of Mr. Arthur Bonsor, Miss Brent was being whirled in a taxi first to the office of *The Morning Post* and then on to Grosvenor Square.

"I fully appreciate," tapped Patricia with wandering attention, "the national importance of pigs."

"Miss Brent!" announced Lady Meyfield's butler.

Miss Brent found herself gazing into a pair of violet eyes that were smiling a greeting out of a gentle face framed in white hair.

"How do you do!" Lady Meyfield was endeavouring to recall where she could have met her caller.

"I felt it was time the families met," announced Miss Brent.

Lady Meyfield smiled, that gentle reluctant smile so characteristic of her. She was puzzled; but too well-bred to show it.

"Won't you have some tea?" She looked about her, then fixing her eyes upon a dark man in khaki, with smouldering eyes, called to him, introduced him, and had just time to say:

"Godfrey, see that Miss Brent has some tea," when a rush of callers swept Miss Brent and Captain Godfrey Elton further into the room.

Miss Brent looked about her with interest. She had read of how Lady Meyfield had turned her houses, both town and country, into convalescent homes for soldiers; but she was surprised to see men in hospital garb mixing freely with the other guests. Elton saw her surprise.

"Lady Meyfield has her own ideas of what is best," he remarked as he handed her a cup of tea.

Miss Brent looked up interrogatingly.

"She had some difficulty at first," continued Elton; "but eventually she got her own way as she always does. Now the official hospitals send her their most puzzling cases and she cures them."

"How?" enquired Miss Brent with interest.

"Imagination," said Elton, bowing to a pretty brunette at the other side of the room. "She is too wise to try and fatten a canary on a dog biscuit."

"Does she keep canaries then?" enquired Miss Brent.

"I'm afraid that was only my clumsy effort at metaphor," responded Elton with a disarming smile. "She adopts human methods. They are generally successful."

Elton went on to describe something of the success that had attended Lady Meyfield's hostels, as she called them. They were famous throughout the Service. When war broke out someone had suggested that she should use her tact and knowledge of human nature in treating cases that defied the army M.O.'s. "A tyrant is the first victim of tact," Godfrey Elton had said of Lord Meyfield, and in his ready acquiescence in his lady's plans Lord Meyfield had tacitly concurred.

Lady Meyfield had conferred with her lord in respect to all her plans and arrangements, until he had come to regard the hostels as the children of his own brain, admirably controlled and conducted by his wife. He seldom appeared, keeping to the one place free from the flood of red, white, and blue—his library. Here with his books and terra-cottas he "grew old with a grace worthy of his rank," as Elton phrased it.

Lady Meyfield's "cases" were mostly those of shell-shock, or nervous troubles. She studied each patient's needs, and decided whether he required diversion or quiet: if diversion, he was sent to her town house; if quiet, he went to one of her country houses.

At first it had been thought that a woman could not discipline a number of men; but Lady Meyfield had settled this by allowing them to discipline themselves. All misdemeanours were reported to and judged by a committee of five elected by ballot from among the patients. Their decisions were referred to Lady Meyfield for ratification. The result was that in no military hospital, or convalescent home, in the country was the discipline so good.

Miss Brent listened perfunctorily to Elton's description of Lady Meyfield's success. She had not come to Grosvenor Square to hear about hostels, or the curing of shell-shocked soldiers, and her eyes roved restlessly about the room.

"You know Lord Peter?" she enquired at length.

"Intimately," Elton replied as he took her cup from her.

"Do you like him?" Miss Brent was always direct.

"Unquestionably." Elton's tone was that of a man who found nothing unusual either in the matter or method of interrogation.

"Is he steady?" was the next question.

"As a rock," responded Elton, beginning to enjoy a novel experience.

"Why doesn't he live here?" demanded Miss Brent.

"Who, Peter?"

Miss Brent nodded.

"No room. The soldiers, you know," he added.

"No room for her own son?" Miss Brent's tone was in itself an accusation against Lady Meyfield of unnaturalness.

"Oh! Peter understands," was Elton's explanation.

"Oh!" Miss Brent looked sharply at him. For a minute there was silence.

"You have been wounded?" Miss Brent indicated the blue band upon his arm. Her question arose, not from any interest she felt; but she required time in which to reorganise her attack.

"I am only waiting for my final medical board, as I hope," Elton replied.

"You know Lady Tanagra?" Miss Brent was feeling some annoyance with this extremely self-possessed young man.

"Yes," was Elton's reply. He wondered if the next question would deal with her steadiness.

"I suppose you are a friend of the family?" was Miss Brent's next question.

Elton bowed.

"Good afternoon, sir." The speaker was a soldier in hospital blue, a rugged little man known among his fellows as "Uncle."

"Hullo! Uncle, how are you?" said Elton, shaking hands.

Miss Brent noticed a warmth in Elton's tone that was in marked contrast to the even tone of courtesy with which he had answered her questions.

"Oh, just 'oppin' on to 'eaven, sir," replied Uncle. "Sort of sittin' up an' takin' notice."

Elton introduced Uncle to Miss Brent, an act that seemed to her quite unnecessary.

"And where were you wounded?" asked Miss Brent conventionally.

"Clean through the buttocks, mum," replied Uncle simply.

Miss Brent flushed and cast a swift glance at Elton, whose face showed no sign. She turned to Uncle and regarded him severely; but he was blissfully unaware of having offended.

"Can't sit down now, mum, without it 'urtin'," added Uncle, interpreting Miss Brent's steady gaze as betokening interest.

"Oh, Goddy! I've been trying to fight my way across to you for hours." The pretty brunette to whom Elton had bowed joined the group. "I've been giving you the glad eye all the afternoon and you merely bow. Well, Uncle, how's the wound?"

Miss Brent gasped. She was unaware that Uncle's wound was the standing joke among all Lady Meyfield's guests.

"Oh! I'm gettin' on, thank you," said Uncle cheerfully. "Mustn't complain."

"Isn't he a darling?" The girl addressed herself to Miss Brent, who merely stared.

"Do you refer to Uncle or to me?" enquired Elton.

"Why both, of course; but—" she paused and, screwing up her piquante little face in thought she added, "but I think Uncle's the darlinger though, don't you?"

Again she challenged Miss Brent.

"Good job my missis can't 'ear 'er," was Uncle's comment to Elton.

"There, you see!" cried the girl gaily, "Uncle talks about his wife when I make love to him, and as for Goddy," she turned and regarded Elton with a quizzical expression, "he treats my passion with a look that clearly says prunes and prisms."

Miss Brent's head was beginning to whirl. Somewhere at the back of her mind was the unuttered thought, What would Little Milstead think of such conversation? She was brought back to Lady Meyfield's drawing-room by hearing the brunette once more addressing her.

"They're the two most interesting men in the room. I call them the Dove and the Serpent. Uncle has the guilelessness of the dove, whilst Godfrey has all the wisdom of the serpent. The three of us together would make a most perfect Garden of Eden. Wouldn't we, Goddy?"

"You are getting a little confused, Peggy," said Elton. "This is not a fancy dress——"

"Stop him, someone!" cried the brunette, "he's going to say something naughty."

Elton smiled, Miss Brent continued to stare, whilst Uncle with a grin of admiration cried:

"Lor', don't she run on!"

"Now come along, Uncle!" cried the girl. "I've found some topping chocolates, a new kind. They're priceless," and she dragged Uncle off to the end of the table.

"Who was that?" demanded Miss Brent of Elton, disapproval in her look and tone.

"Lady Peggy Bristowe," replied Elton.

Miss Brent was impressed. The Bristowes traced their ancestry so far back as to make William the Norman's satellites look almost upstarts.

"She is a little overpowering at first, isn't she?" remarked Elton, smiling in spite of himself at the conflicting emotions depicted upon Miss Brent's face; but Lady Peggy gave her no time to reply. She was back again like a shaft of April sunshine.

"Here, open your mouth, Goddy," she cried, "they're delicious."

Elton did as he was bid, and Lady Peggy popped a chocolate in, then wiping her finger and thumb daintily upon a ridiculously small piece of cambric, she stood in front of Elton awaiting his verdict.

"Like it?" she demanded, her head on one side like a bird, and her whole attention concentrated upon Elton.

"Apart from a suggestion of furniture polish," began Elton, "it is——"

"Hun!" cried Lady Peggy as she whisked over to where she had left Uncle.

"Lady Peggy is rather spoiled," said Elton to Miss Brent. "I fear she trades upon having the prettiest ankles in London."

Miss Brent turned upon Elton one glance, then with head in air and lips tightly compressed, she stalked away. Elton watched her in surprise, unconscious that his casual reference to the ankles of the daughter of a peer had been to Miss Brent the last straw.

"Hate at the prow and virtue at the helm," he murmured as she disappeared.

Miss Brent was now convinced beyond all power of argument to the contrary that her call had landed her in the very midst of an ultra-fast set. She was unaware that Godfrey Elton was notorious among his friends for saying the wrong thing to the right people.

"You never know what Godfrey will say," his Aunt Caroline had remarked on one occasion when he had just confided to the vicar that all introspective women have thick ankles, "and the dear vicar is so sensitive."

It seemed that whenever Elton elected to emerge from the mantle of silence with which he habitually clothed himself, it was in the presence of either a sensitive vicar or someone who was sensitive without being a vicar.

Once when Lady Gilcray had rebuked him for openly admiring Jenny Adam's legs, which were displayed each night to an appreciative public at the Futility Theatre, Elton had replied, "A woman's legs are to me what they are to God," which had silenced her Ladyship, who was not quite sure whether it was rank blasphemy or a classical quotation; but she never forgave him.

Miss Brent made several efforts to approach Lady Meyfield to have a few minutes' talk with her about the subject of her call; but without success. She was always surrounded either by arriving or departing guests, and soldiers seemed perpetually hovering about ready to pounce upon her at the first opportunity.

At last Miss Brent succeeded in attracting her hostess' attention, and before she knew exactly what had happened, Lady Meyfield had shaken hands, thanked her for coming, hoped she would come again soon, and Miss Brent was walking downstairs her mission unaccomplished. Her only consolation was the knowledge that within the next day or two *The Morning Post* would put matters upon a correct footing.

A mile away Patricia was tapping out upon her typewriter that "pigs are the potential saviours of the Empire."

CHAPTER XI

THE DEFECTION OF MR. TRIGGS

"Well, me dear, how goes it?"

Patricia looked up from a Blue Book, from which she was laboriously extracting statistics. Mr. Triggs stood before her, florid and happy. He was wearing a new black and white check suit, a white waistcoat and a red tie, whilst in his hand he carried a white felt top-hat with a black band.

"It doesn't go at all well," said Patricia, smiling.

"What's the matter, me dear?" he enquired anxiously. "You look fagged out."

"Oh! I'm endeavouring to extract information about potatoes from stupid Blue Books," said Patricia, leaning back in her chair. "Why can't they let potatoes grow without writing about them?" she asked plaintively, screwing up her eyebrows.

"'E ain't much good, is 'e?" enquired Mr. Triggs.

"Who?" asked Patricia in surprise.

"A. B.," said Mr. Triggs, lowering his voice and looking round furtively, "Dull, 'e strikes me."

"Well, you see, Mr. Triggs, he's rising, and you can't rise and be risen at the same time, can you?"

Mr. Triggs shook his head doubtfully. "'E'll no more rise than your salary, me dear," he said.

"Oh! what a gloomy person you are to-day, Mr. Triggs, and you look like a ray of sunshine."

"D'you like it?" enquired Mr. Triggs, smiling happily as he stood back that Patricia might obtain a good view of his new clothes. She now saw that over his black boots he wore a pair of immaculate white spats.

"You look just like a duke. But where are you going, and why all this splendour?" asked Patricia.

Mr. Triggs beamed upon her. "I'm glad you like it, me dear. I was thinking about you when I ordered it."

Patricia looked up and smiled. There was something to her strangely lovable in this old man's simplicity.

"I come to take you to the Zoo," he announced.

"To the Zoo?" cried Patricia in unfeigned surprise.

Mr. Triggs nodded, hugely enjoying the effect of the announcement.

"Now run away and get your hat on."

"But I couldn't possibly go, I've got heaps of things to do," protested Patricia. "Why Mrs. Bonsor would be——"

"Never you mind about 'Ettie; I'll manage 'er. She'll——"

"I thought I heard your voice, father."

Both Patricia and Mr. Triggs started guiltily; they had not heard Mrs. Bonsor enter the room.

"'Ullo, 'Ettie!" said Mr. Triggs, recovering himself. "I just come to take this young lady to the Zoo."

"Do I look as bad as all that?" asked Patricia, conscious that her effort was a feeble one.

"Don't you worry about your looks, me dear," said Mr. Triggs, "I'll answer for them. Now go and get your 'at on."

"But I really couldn't, Mr. Triggs," protested Patricia.

"I'm afraid it's impossible for Miss Brent to go to-day, father," said Mrs. Bonsor evenly; but flashing a vindictive look at Patricia.

"Why?" enquired Mr. Triggs.

"I happen to know," continued Mrs. Bonsor, "that Arthur is very anxious for some work that Miss Brent is doing for him."

"What work?" enquired Mr. Triggs.

"Oh—er—something about——" Mrs. Bonsor looked appealingly at Patricia; but Patricia had no intention of helping her out.

"Well! if you can't remember what it is, it can't matter much, and I've set my mind on going to the Zoo this afternoon."

"Very well, father. If you will wait a few minutes I will go with you myself."

"You!" exclaimed Mr. Triggs in consternation. "You and me at the Zoo! Why you said once the smell made you sick."

"Father! how can you suggest such a thing?"

"But you did," persisted Mr. Triggs.

"I once remarked that I found the atmosphere a little trying."

"Won't you come into the morning-room, father, there's something I want to speak to you about."

"No, I won't," snapped Mr. Triggs like a spoilt child, "I'm going to take Miss Brent to the Zoo."

"But Arthur's work, father——" began Mrs. Bonsor.

"Very well then, 'Ettie," said Mr. Triggs, "you better tell A. B. that I'd like to 'ave a little talk with 'im to-morrow afternoon at Streatham, at three o'clock sharp. See? Don't forget!"

Mr. Triggs was angry, and Mrs. Bonsor realised that she had gone too far. Turning to Patricia she said:

"Do you think it would matter if you put off what you are doing until to-morrow, Miss Brent?" she enquired.

"I think I ought to do it now, Mrs. Bonsor," replied Patricia demurely, determined to land Mrs. Bonsor more deeply into the mire if possible.

"Well, if you'll run away and get your hat on, I will explain to Mr. Bonsor when he comes in."

Patricia looked up, Mrs. Bonsor smiled at her, a frosty movement of her lips, from which her eyes seemed to dissociate themselves.

During Patricia's absence Mr. Triggs made it abundantly clear to his daughter that he was displeased with her.

"Look 'ere, 'Ettie, if I 'ear any more of this nonsense," he said, "I'll take on Miss Brent as my own secretary, then I can take her to the Zoo every afternoon if I want to."

A look of fear came into Mrs. Bonsor's eyes. One of the terrors of her life was that some designing woman would get hold of her father and marry him. It did not require a very great effort of the imagination to foresee that the next step would be the cutting off of the allowance Mr. Triggs made his daughter. Suppose Patricia were to marry her father? What a scandal and what a humiliation to be the stepdaughter of her husband's ex-secretary. Mrs. Bonsor determined to capitulate.

"I'm very sorry, father; but if you had let us know we could have arranged differently. However, everything is all right now."

"No, it isn't," said Mr. Triggs peevishly. "You've tried to spoil my afternoon. Fancy you a-coming to the Zoo with me. You with your 'igh and mighty ways. The truth is you're ashamed of your old father, although you ain't ashamed of 'is money."

It was with a feeling of gratitude that Mrs. Bonsor heard Patricia enter the room.

"I'm ready, Mr. Triggs," she announced, smiling.

Mr. Triggs followed her out of the room without a word.

"You'll explain to Mr. Bonsor that I've been kidnapped, will you not?" said Patricia to Mrs. Bonsor, rather from the feeling that something should be said than from any particular desire that Mr. Bonsor should be placated.

"Certainly, Miss Brent," replied Mrs. Bonsor, with another unconvincing smile. "I hope you'll have a pleasant afternoon."

"Tried to spoil my afternoon, she did," mumbled Mr. Triggs in the tone of a child who has discovered that a playmate has endeavoured to rob him of his marbles.

Patricia laughed and, slipping her hand through his arm, said:

"Now, you mustn't be cross, or else you'll spoil my afternoon, and we're going to have such a jolly time together."

Instantly the shadow fell from Mr. Triggs's face and he turned upon Patricia and beamed, pressing her hand against his side. Then with another sudden change he said, "'Ettie annoys me when she's like that; but I've given 'er something to think about," he added, pleased at the recollection of his parting shot.

Patricia smiled at him, she never made any endeavour to probe into the domestic difficulties of the Triggs-Bonsor menage.

"Do you know what I told 'er?" enquired Mr. Triggs.

Patricia shook her head.

"I said that if she wasn't careful I'd engage you as my own secretary. That made 'er sit up." He chuckled at the thought of his master-stroke.

"But you've got nothing for me to secretary, Mr. Triggs," said Patricia, not quite understanding where the joke came.

"Ah! 'Ettie understands. 'Ettie knows that every man that ain't married marries 'is secretary, and she's dead afraid of me marrying."

"Am I to take that as a proposal, Mr. Triggs?" asked Patricia demurely.

Mr. Triggs chuckled.

"Now we'll forget about everything except that we are truants," cried Patricia. "I've earned a holiday, I think. On Sunday and Monday there was Aunt Adelaide, yesterday it was national importance of pigs and——"

"Hi! Hi! Taxi! Taxi!" Mr. Triggs yelled, dashing forward and dragging Patricia after him. A taxi was crossing a street about twenty yards distance. Mr. Triggs was impulsive in all things.

Having secured the taxi and handed Patricia in, he told the man to drive to the Zoo, and sank back with a sigh of pleasure.

"Now we're going to 'ave a very 'appy afternoon, me dear," he said. "Don't you worry about pigs."

Arrived at the Zoo, Mr. Triggs made direct for the monkey-house. Patricia, a little puzzled at his choice, followed obediently. Arrived there he walked round the cages, looking keenly at the animals. Finally selecting a little monkey with a blue face, he pointed it out to Patricia.

"They was just like that little chap," he said eagerly. "That one over there, see 'im eating a nut?"

"Yes, I see him," said Patricia; "but who was just like him?"

"I'll tell you when we get outside. Now come along."

Patricia followed Mr. Triggs, puzzled to account for his strange manner and sudden lack of interest in the monkey-house. They walked along for some minutes in silence, then, when they came to a quiet spot, Mr. Triggs turned to Patricia.

"You see, me dear," he said, "it was there that I asked her."

"That you asked who what?" enquired Patricia, utterly at a loss.

"You see we'd been walking out for nearly a year; I was a foreman then. I 'ad tickets given me for the Zoo one Sunday, so I took 'er. When we was in the monkey-house there was a couple of little chaps just like that blue-faced little beggar we saw just now." There was a note of affection in Mr. Triggs's voice as he spoke of the little blue-faced monkey. "And one of 'em 'ad 'is arm round the other and was a-making love to 'er as 'ard as ever 'e could go," continued Mr. Triggs. "And I says to Emily, just to see 'ow she'd take it, 'That might be you an' me, Emily,' and she blushed and looked down, and then of course I knew, and I asked 'er to marry me. I don't think either of us 'ad cause to regret it," added the old man huskily. "God knows I 'adn't."

Patricia felt that she wanted both to laugh and to cry. She could say nothing, words seemed so hopelessly inadequate.

"You see this is our wedding-day, that's why I wanted to come," continued Mr. Triggs, blinking his eyes, in which there was a suspicious moisture.

"Oh! thank you so much for bringing me," said Patricia, and she knew as she saw the bright smile with which Mr. Triggs looked at her that she had said the right thing.

"Thirty years and never a cross word," he murmured. "She'd 'ave liked you, me dear," he added; "she 'ad wonderful instinct, and everybody loved her. 'Ere, but look at me," he suddenly broke off, "spoilin' your afternoon, and you lookin' so tired. Come along," and Mr. Triggs trotted off in the direction of the seals, who were intimating clearly that they thought that something must be wrong with the official clock. They were quite ready for their meal.

For two hours Patricia and Mr. Triggs wandered about the Zoo, roving from one group of animals to another, behaving rather like two children who had at last escaped from the bondage of the school-room.

After tea they strolled through Regent's Park, watching the squirrels and talking about the thousand and one things that good comrades have to talk about. Mr. Triggs told something of his early struggles, how his wife had always believed in him and been his helpmate and loyal comrade, how he missed her, and how, when she had died, she had urged him to marry again.

"Sam," she had said, "you want a woman to look after you; you're nothing but a great, big baby."

"And she was right, me dear," said Mr. Triggs huskily, "she was right as she always was, only she didn't know that there couldn't ever be anyone after 'er."

Slowly and tactfully Patricia guided the old man's thoughts away from the sad subject of his wife's death, and soon had him laughing gaily at some stories she had heard the night previously from the Bowens. Mr. Triggs was as easily diverted from sadness to laughter as a child.

It was half-past seven when they left the Park gates, and Patricia, looking suddenly at her wristlet watch, cried out, "Oh! I shall be late for dinner, I must fly!"

"You're going to dine with me, me dear," announced Mr. Triggs.

"Oh, but I can't," said Patricia; "I—I——"

"Why can't you?"

"Well, I haven't told Mrs. Craske-Morton."

"Who's she?" enquired Mr. Triggs.

"Of course it doesn't matter, how stupid of me," said Patricia; "I should love to dine with you, Mr. Triggs, if you will let me."

"That's all right," said Mr. Triggs, heaving a sigh of relief.

They walked down Portland Place and Regent Street until they reached the Quadrant.

"We'll 'ave dinner in the Grill-room at the Quadrant," announced Mr. Triggs, with the air of a man who knows his way about town.

"Oh, no, not there, please!" cried Patricia, in a panic.

"Not there!" Mr. Triggs looked at her, surprise and disappointment in his voice. "Why not?"

"Oh! I'd sooner not go there if you don't mind. Couldn't we go somewhere else?"

For a moment Mr. Triggs did not reply.

"There's someone there I don't want to meet," said Patricia, then a moment afterwards she realised her mistake. Mr. Triggs looked down at his clothes.

"I suppose they are a bit out of it for the evening," he remarked in a hurt voice.

"Oh, Mr. Triggs, how could you?" said Patricia. "Now I shall insist on dining in the Quadrant Grill-room. If you won't come with me I'll go alone."

"Not if you don't want to go, me dear, it doesn't matter. Though I do like to 'ear the band. We can go anywhere."

"No, Quadrant or nothing," said Patricia, hoping that Bowen would be dining out.

"Are you sure, me dear?" said Mr. Triggs, hesitating on the threshold.

"Nothing will change me," announced Patricia, with decision. "Now you can see about getting a table while I go and powder my nose."

When Patricia rejoined Mr. Triggs in the vestibule of the Grill-room he was looking very unhappy and downcast.

"There ain't a table nowhere," he said.

"Oh, what a shame!" cried Patricia. "Whatever shall we do?"

"I don't know," said Mr. Triggs helplessly.

"Are you sure?" persisted Patricia.

"That red-'eaded fellow over there said there wasn't nothing to be 'ad."

"I am sorry," said Patricia, seeing Triggs's disappointment. "I suppose we shall have to go somewhere else after all."

"Won't you and your friend share my table, Patricia?"

Patricia turned round as if someone had hit her, her face flaming. "Oh!" she cried. "You?"

"I have a table booked, and if you will dine with me you will be conferring a real favour upon a lonely fellow-creature."

Bowen smiled from Patricia to Mr. Triggs, who was looking at him in surprise.

"Oh! where are my manners?" cried Patricia as she introduced the two men.

Mr. Triggs's eyes bulged at the mention of Bowen's title.

"Now, Mr. Triggs," said Bowen, "won't you add the weight of your persuasion to mine, and persuade Miss Brent that the only thing to do is for you both to dine with me and save me from boredom?"

"Well, it was to 'ave been my treat," said Mr. Triggs, not quite sure of his ground.

"But you can afford to be generous. Can't you share her with me, just for this evening?"

Mr. Triggs beamed and turned questioningly to Patricia, who, seeing that if she declined it would be a real disappointment to him, said:

"Well, I suppose we must under the circumstances."

"You're not very gracious, Patricia, are you?" said Bowen comically.

Patricia laughed. "Well, come along, I'm starving," she said.

Many heads were turned to look at the curious trio, headed by the obsequious maître d'hôtel, as they made their way towards Bowen's table.

"I wonder what 'Ettie would say," whispered Mr. Triggs to Patricia, "me dining with a lord, and 'im being a pal of yours, too."

Patricia smiled. She was wondering what trick Fate would play her next.

The meal was a gay one. Bowen and Mr. Triggs immediately became friends and pledged each other in champagne.

Mr. Triggs told of their visit to the Zoo and of the anniversary it celebrated.

"Then you are a believer in marriage, Mr. Triggs," said Bowen.

"A believer in it! I should just think I am," said Mr. Triggs. "I wish she'd get married," he added, nodding his head in the direction of Patricia.

"She's going to," said Bowen quietly.

Mr. Triggs sat up as if someone had hit him in the small of the back.

"Going to," he cried. "Who's the man?"

"You have just pledged him in Moet and Chandon," replied Bowen quietly.

"You going to marry 'er?" Unconsciously Mr. Triggs raised his voice in his surprise, and several people at adjacent tables turned and looked at the trio.

"Hush! Mr. Triggs," said Patricia, feeling her cheeks burn. Bowen merely smiled.

"Well I *am* glad," said Mr. Triggs heartily, and seizing Bowen's hand he shook it cordially. "God bless my soul!" he added, "and you never told me." He turned reproachful eyes upon Patricia.

"It—it——" she began.

"You see, it's only just been arranged," said Bowen.

Patricia flashed him a grateful look, he seemed always to be coming to her rescue.

"God bless my soul!" repeated Mr. Triggs. "But you'll be 'appy, both of you, I'll answer for that."

"Then I may take it that you're on my side, Mr. Triggs," said Bowen.

"On your side?" queried Mr. Triggs, not understanding.

"Yes," said Bowen, "you see Patricia believes in long engagements, whereas I believe in short ones. I want her to marry me at once; but she will not. She wants to wait until we are both too old to enjoy each other's society, and she is too deaf to hear me say how charming she is."

"If you love each other you'll never be too old to enjoy each other's company," said Mr. Triggs seriously. "Still, I'm with you," he added, "and I'll do all I can to persuade 'er to hurry on the day."

"Oh, Mr. Triggs!" cried Patricia reproachfully, "you have gone over to the enemy."

"I think he has merely placed himself on the side of the angels," said Bowen.

"And now," said Mr. Triggs, "you must both of you dine with me one night to celebrate the event. Oh Lor'!" he exclaimed. "What will 'Ettie say?" Then turning to Bowen he added oy way of explanation, "'Ettie's my daughter, rather stiff, she is. She looks down on Miss Brent because she's only A. B.'s secretary. 'Ettie's got to learn a lot about the world," he added oracularly. "My, this'll be a shock to 'er."

"I'm afraid I can't——" began Patricia.

"You're not going to say you can't both dine with me?" said Mr. Triggs, blankly disappointed.

"I think Patricia will reconsider her decision," said Bowen quietly. "She wouldn't be so selfish as to deny two men an evening's happiness."

"She's one of the best," said Mr. Triggs, with decision.

"Mr. Triggs, I think you and I have at least one thing in common," said Bowen.

CHAPTER XII

A BOMBSHELL

"Good morning, Miss Brent."

Patricia was surprised at the graciousness of Mrs. Bonsor's salutation, particularly after the episode of the Zoo on the previous afternoon.

"Good morning," she responded, and made to go upstairs to take off her hat and coat.

"I congratulate you," proceeded Mrs. Bonsor in honeyed tones; "but I'm just a little hurt that you did not confide in me." Mrs. Bonsor's tone was that of a trusted friend of many years' standing.

"Confide!" repeated Patricia in a matter-of-fact tone. "Confide what, Mrs. Bonsor?"

"Your engagement to Lord Peter Bowen. Such a surprise. You're a very lucky girl. I hope you'll bring Lord Peter to call."

Patricia listened mechanically to Mrs. Bonsor's inanities. Suddenly she realised their import. What had happened? How did she know? Had Mr. Triggs told her?

"How did you know?" Patricia enquired.

"Haven't you seen *The Morning Post*?" enquired Mrs. Bonsor.

"*The Morning Post*!" repeated Patricia, in consternation; "but—but I don't understand."

"Then isn't it true?" enquired Mrs. Bonsor, scenting a mystery.

"I—I——" began Patricia, then with inspiration added, "I must be getting on, I've got a lot to do to make up for yesterday."

"But isn't it true, Miss Brent?" persisted Mrs. Bonsor.

Then from half-way up the stairs Patricia turned and, in a spurt of mischief, cried, "If you see it in *The Morning Post* it is so, Mrs. Bonsor."

When Patricia entered the library Mr. Bonsor was fussing about with letters and papers, a habit he had when nervous.

"I'm so sorry about yesterday afternoon, Mr. Bonsor," said Patricia; "but Mrs. Bonsor seemed to wish me to——"

"Not at all, not at all, Miss Brent," said Mr. Bonsor nervously. "I—I——" then he paused.

"I know what you're going to say, Mr. Bonsor, but please don't say it."

Mr. Bonsor looked at her in surprise. "Not say it?" he said.

"Oh! everybody's congratulating me, and I'm tired. Shall we get on with the letters?"

Mr. Bonsor was disappointed. He had prepared a dainty little speech of congratulation, which he had intended to deliver as Patricia entered the room. Mr. Bonsor was always preparing speeches which he never delivered. There was not an important matter that had been before the House since he had represented Little Dollington upon which he had not prepared a speech. He had criticised every member of the Government and Opposition. He had prepared party speeches and anti-party speeches, patriotic speeches and speeches of protest. He had called upon the House of Commons to save the country, and upon the country to save the House of Commons. He had woven speeches of splendid optimism and speeches of gloomy foreboding. He had attacked ministers and defended ministers, seen himself attacked and had routed his enemies. He had prepared speeches to be delivered to his servants for domestic misdemeanour, speeches for Mr. Triggs, even for Mrs. Bonsor.

He had conceived speeches on pigs, speeches on potatoes, speeches on oil-cake, and speeches on officers' wives; in short, there was nothing in the world of his thoughts about which he had not prepared a speech. The one thing he did not do was to deliver these speeches. They were wonderful things of his imagination, which seemed to defy crystallization into words. So it was with the speech of congratulation that he had prepared for Patricia.

That morning Patricia was distraite. Her thoughts continued to wander to *The Morning Post* announcement, and she was anxious to get out to lunch in order to purchase a copy and see what was actually said. Then her thoughts ran on to who was responsible for such an outrage; for Patricia regarded it as an outrage. It was obviously Bowen who had done it in order to make her position still more ridiculous. It was mean, she was not sure that it was not contemptible.

Patricia was in the act of transcribing some particulars about infant mortality in England and Wales compared with that of Scotland, when the parlourmaid entered with a note. Mr. Bonsor stretched out his hand for it.

"It is for Miss Brent, sir," said the maid.

Patricia looked up in surprise. It was unusual for her to receive a note at the Bonsors'. She opened the envelope mechanically and read:—

"DEAREST,

"I have just seen *The Morning Post*. It is sweet of you to relent. You have made me very happy. Will you dine with me to-night and when may I take you to Grosvenor Square? My mother will want to see her new daughter-in-law.

"I so enjoyed last night. Surely the gods are on my side.

"PETER."

Patricia read and re-read the note. For a moment she felt ridiculously happy, then, with a swift change of mood she saw the humiliation of her situation. Bowen thought it was she who had inserted the notice of the engagement. What must he think of her? It looked as if she had done it to burn his boats behind him. Then suddenly she seized a pen and wrote:—

"DEAR LORD PETER,

"I know nothing whatever about the announcement in *The Morning Post*, and I only heard of it when I arrived here. I cannot dine with you to-night, and I am very angry and upset that anyone should have had the impertinence to interfere in my affairs. I shall take up the matter with *The Morning Post* people and insist on a contradiction immediately.

"Yours sincerely,
"PATRICIA BRENT."

With quick, decisive movements Patricia folded the note, addressed the envelope and handed it to the maid, then she turned to Mr. Bonsor.

"I am sorry to interrupt work, Mr. Bonsor; but that was rather an important note that I had to answer."

Mr. Bonsor smiled sympathetically.

At lunch-time Patricia purchased a copy of *The Morning Post*, and there saw in all its unblushing mendacity the announcement.

"A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Lord Peter Bowen, D.S.O., M.C., attached to the General Staff, son of the 7th Marquess of Meyfield, and Patricia Brent, daughter of the late John Brent, of Little Milstead."

"Why on earth must the ridiculous people put it at the top of the column?" she muttered aloud. A man occupying an adjoining table at the place where she was lunching turned and looked at her.

"And now I must go back to potatoes, pigs, and babies," said Patricia to herself as she paid her bill and rose. "Ugh!"

She had scarcely settled down to her afternoon's work when the maid entered and announced, "Lord Peter Bowen to see you, miss."

"Oh bother!" exclaimed Patricia. "Tell him I'm busy, will you please?"

The maid's jaw dropped; she was excellently trained, but no maid-servant could be expected to rise superior to such an extraordinary attitude on the part of a newly-engaged girl. Nothing short of a butler who had lived in the best families could have risen to such an occasion.

"But, Miss Brent——" began Mr. Bonsor.

Patricia turned and froze him with a look.

"Will you give him my message, please, Fellers?" she said, and Fellers walked out a disillusioned young woman.

Two minutes later Mrs. Bonsor entered the room, flushed and excited.

"Oh, Miss Brent, that silly girl has muddled up things somehow! Lord Peter Bowen is waiting for you in the morning-room. I have just been talking to him and saying that I hope you will both dine with us one day next week."

"The message was quite correct, Mrs. Bonsor. I am very busy with pigs, and babies, and potatoes. I really cannot add Lord Peter to my responsibilities at the moment."

Mrs. Bonsor looked at Patricia as if she had suddenly gone mad.

"But Miss Brent——-" began Mrs. Bonsor, scandalised.

"I suppose I shall have to see him," said Patricia, rising with the air of one who has to perform an unpleasant task. "I wish he'd stay at the War Office and leave me to do my work. I suppose I shall have to write to Lord Derby about it."

Mrs. Bonsor glanced at Mr. Bonsor, who, however, was busily engaged in preparing an appropriate speech upon War Office methods, suggested by Patricia's remark about Lord Derby.

As Patricia entered the morning-room, Bowen came forward.

"Oh, Patricia! why will you persist in being a cold douche? Why this morning I absolutely scandalised Peel by singing at the top of my voice whilst in my bath, and now. Look at me now!"

Patricia looked at him, then she was forced to laugh. He presented such a woebegone appearance.

"But what on earth have I to do with your singing in your bath?" she enquired.

"It was *The Morning Post* paragraph. I thought everything was going to be all right after last night, and now I'm a door-mat again."

"Who inserted that paragraph?" enquired Patricia.

"I rang up *The Morning Post* office and they told me that it was handed in by Miss Brent, who is staying at the Mayfair Hotel."

"Aunt Adelaide!" There was a depth of meaning in Patricia's tone as she uttered the two words, then turning to Bowen she enquired, "Did you tell them to contradict it?"

"They asked me whether it were correct," he said, refusing to meet Patricia's eyes.

"What did you say?"

"I said it was." He looked at her quizzically, like a boy who is expecting a severe scolding. Patricia had to bite her lips to prevent herself from laughing.

"You told *The Morning Post* people that it was correct when you knew that it was wrong?"

Bowen hung his head. "But it isn't wrong," he muttered.

"You know very well that it is wrong and that I am not engaged to you, and that no marriage has been arranged or ever will be arranged. Now I shall have to write to the editor and insist upon the statement being contradicted."

"Good Lord! Don't do that, Patricia," broke in Bowen. "They'll think we've all gone mad."

"And for once a newspaper editor will be right," was Patricia's comment.

"And will you dine to-night, Pat?"

Patricia looked up. This was the first time Bowen had used the diminutive of her name. Somehow it sounded very intimate.

"I am afraid I have an—an——"

The hesitation was her undoing.

"No; don't tell me fibs, please. You will dine with me and then, afterwards, we will go on and see the mater. She is dying to know you."

How boyish and lover-like Bowen was in spite of his twenty-eight years, and—and—how different everything might have been if—— Patricia was awakened from her thoughts by hearing Bowen say:

"Shall I pick you up here in the car?"

"No, I—I've just told you I am engaged," she said.

"And I've just told you that I won't allow you to be engaged to anyone but me," was Bowen's answer. "If you won't come and dine with me I'll come and play my hooter outside Galvin House until they send you out to get rid of me. You know, Patricia, I'm an awful fellow when I've set my mind on anything, and I'm simply determined to marry you whether you like it or not."

"Very well, I will dine with you to-night at half-past seven."

"I'll pick you up at Galvin House at a quarter-past seven with the car."

"Very well," said Patricia wearily. It seemed ridiculous to try and fight against her fate, and at the back of her mind she had a plan of action, which she meant to put into operation.

"Now I must get back to my work. Good-bye."

Bowen opened the door of the morning-room. Mrs. Bonsor was in the hall. Patricia walked over to the library, leaving Bowen in Mrs. Bonsor's clutches.

"Oh, Lord Peter!" Mrs. Bonsor gushed. "I hope you and Miss Brent will dine with us——"

Patricia shut the library door without waiting to hear Bowen's reply.

At five o'clock she gave up the unequal struggle with infant mortality statistics and walked listlessly across the Park to Galvin House. She was tired and dispirited. It was the weather, she told herself, London in June could be very trying, then there had been all that fuss over *The Morning Post* announcement. At Galvin House she knew the same ordeal was awaiting her that she had passed through at Eaton Square. Mrs. Craske-Morton would be effusive, Miss Wangle would unbend, Miss Sikkum would simper, Mr. Bolton would be facetious, and all the others would be exactly what they had been all their lives, only a little more so as a result of *The Morning Post* paragraph.

Only the fact of Miss Wangle taking breakfast in bed had saved Patricia from the ordeal at breakfast. Miss Wangle was the only resident at Galvin House who regularly took *The Morning Post*, it being "the dear bishop's favourite paper."

Arrived at Galvin House Patricia went straight to her room. Dashing past Gustave, who greeted her with "Oh, mees!" struggling at the same time to extract from his pocket a newspaper. Patricia felt that she should scream. Had everyone in Galvin House bought a copy of that day's *Morning Post*, and would they all bring it out of their pockets and point out the passage to her? She sighed wearily.

Suddenly she jumped up from the bed where she had thrown herself, seized her writing-case and proceeded to write feverishly. At the end of half an hour she read and addressed three letters, stamping two of them. The first was to the editor of *The Morning Post*, and ran:—

"DEAR SIR,

"In your issue of to-day's date you make an announcement regarding a marriage having been arranged between Lord Peter Bowen and myself, which is entirely inaccurate.

"I am given to understand that this announcement was inserted on the authority of my aunt, Miss Adelaide Brent, and I must leave you to take what action you choose in relation to her. As for myself, I will ask you to be so kind as to insert a contradiction of the statement in your next issue.

"I am,
"Yours faithfully,
"PATRICIA BRENT."

Patricia always prided herself on the business-like quality of her letters.

The second letter was to Miss Brent. It ran:—

"DEAR AUNT ADELAIDE,

"I have written to the editor of *The Morning Post* informing him that he must take such action as he sees fit against you for inserting your unauthorised statement that a marriage has been arranged between Lord Peter Bowen and me. It may interest you to know that the engagement has been broken off as a result of your impulsive and ill-advised action. Personally I think you have rather presumed on being my 'sole surviving relative.'

"Your affectionate niece,
"PATRICIA."

The third letter was to Bowen.

"DEAR LORD PETER,

"I have written to the editor of *The Morning Post*, asking him to contradict the inaccurate statement published in to-day's issue. I am consumed with humiliation that such a thing should have been sent to him by a relative of mine, more particularly by a 'sole surviving relative.' My aunt unfortunately epitomises in her personality all the least desirable characteristics to be found in relatives.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am about—oh, everything! If you really want to save me from feeling thoroughly ashamed of myself you will not only forget me, but also a certain incident.

"You have done me a great honour, I know, and you will add to it a great service if you will do as I ask and forget all about a folly that I have had cause bitterly to regret.

"Please forgive me for not dining with you to-night and for breaking my word; but I am feeling very unwell and tired and I have gone to bed.

"Yours sincerely,
"PATRICIA BRENT."

Patricia's plan was to post the letters to Aunt Adelaide and *The Morning Post*, and leave the other with Gustave to be given to Bowen when he called, she would then shut herself in her room and plead a headache as an excuse for not being disturbed. Thus she would escape Miss Wangle and her waves of interrogation.

As Patricia descended the stairs, Gustave was in the act of throwing open the door to Lady Tanagra. It was too late to retreat.

"Ah! there you are," exclaimed Lady Tanagra as she passed the respectful Gustave in the hall.

Patricia descended the remaining stairs slowly and with dragging steps. Lady Tanagra looked at her sharply.

"Aren't we a nuisance?" cried she. "There's nothing more persistent in nature than a Bowen. Bruce's spider is quite a parochial affair in comparison," and she laughed lightly.

Patricia smiled as she welcomed Lady Tanagra. For a moment she hesitated at the door of the lounge, then with a sudden movement she turned towards the stairs.

"Come up to my room," she said, "we can talk there."

There was no cordiality in her voice. Lady Tanagra noticed that she looked worn-out and ill. Once the bedroom door was closed she turned to Patricia.

"My poor Patricia! whatever is the matter? You look thoroughly done up. Now lie down on the bed like a good girl, and I will assume my best bedside manner."

Patricia shook her head wearily, and indicating a chair by the window, seated herself upon the bed.

"I'm afraid I am rather tired," she said. "I was just going to lock myself up for the night."

"Now I'm going to cheer you up," cried Lady Tanagra. "Was there ever a more tactless way of beginning, but I've got something to tell you that is so exquisitely funny that it would cheer up an oyster, or even a radical."

"First," said Patricia, "I think I should like you to read these letters." Slowly and wearily she ripped open the three letters and handed them to Lady Tanagra, who read them through slowly and deliberately. This done, she folded each carefully, returned it to its envelope and handed them to Patricia.

"Well!" said Patricia.

Lady Tanagra smiled. Reaching across to the dressing-table she took a cigarette from Patricia's box and proceeded to light it. Patricia watched her curiously.

"I think you must have been meant for a man, Tanagra," she said after a pause. "You have the gift of silence, and nothing is more provoking to a woman."

"What do you want me to say?" enquired Lady Tanagra. "I like these cigarettes," she added.

"If you are not careful, you'll make me scream in a minute," said Patricia, with a smile. "I showed you those letters and now you don't even so much as say 'thank you.'"

"Thank you very much indeed, Patricia," said Lady Tanagra meekly.

"You don't approve of them?" There was undisguised challenge in Patricia's voice.

"I think the one to Miss Brent is admirable, specially if you will add a postscript after what I tell you."

"But the other two," persisted Patricia.

"I do not think I am qualified to express an opinion, am I?" said Lady Tanagra calmly.

"Why not?"

"Well, you see, I am an interested party."

"You!" cried Patricia, then with a sudden change, "Oh, if you are not careful I shall come over and shake you!"

"I think that would be very good for both of us," was Lady Tanagra's reply.

"Tell me what you mean," persisted Patricia.

"Well, in the first place, the one to the editor of *The Morning Post* will make poor Peter ridiculous, and the other will hurt his feelings, and as I am very fond of Peter you cannot expect me to be enthusiastic with either of them, can you?"

Lady Tanagra rose and going over to Patricia put her arm round her and kissed her on the cheek, then Patricia did a very foolish thing. Without a word of warning she threw her arms around Lady Tanagra's neck and burst into tears.

"Oh, I'm so wretched, Tanagra! I know I'm a beast and I want to hurt everybody and every thing. I think I should like to hurt you even," she cried, her mood of crying passing as quickly as it had come.

"Don't you think we had better just talk the thing out? Now since you have asked my view," continued Lady Tanagra, "I will give it. Your letter to *The Morning Post* people will make poor Peter the laughing-stock of London. He has many enemies among ambitious mamas. Never have I known him to be attracted towards a girl until you came along. He's really paying you a very great compliment."

Patricia sniffed ominously.

"Then the letter to Peter would hurt him because—you must forgive me—it is rather brutal, isn't it?"

Patricia nodded her head vigorously.

"Well," continued Lady Tanagra, "what do you say if we destroy them both?"

"But—but—that would leave *The Morning Post* announcement and P-Peter——"

"Don't you think they might both be left, just for the moment? Later you can wipe the floor with them."

"But—but—you don't understand, Tanagra," began Patricia.

"Don't you think that half the troubles of the world are due to people wanting to understand?"

said Lady Tanagra calmly. "I never want to understand. There are certain things I know and these are sufficient for me. In this case I know that I have a very good brother and he wants to marry a very good girl; but for some reason she won't have anything to do either with him or with me." She looked up into Patricia's face with a smile so wholly disarming that Patricia was forced to laugh.

"If you knew Patricia's opinion of herself," she said to Lady Tanagra, "you would be almost shocked."

"Well, now, will you do something just to please me?" insinuated Lady Tanagra. "You see this big brother of mine has always been more or less my adopted child, and you have it in your power to hurt him more than I want to see him hurt." There was an unusually serious note in Lady Tanagra's voice. "Why not let things go on as they are for the present, then later the engagement can be broken off if you wish it. I'll speak to Peter and see that he is not tiresome."

"Oh, but he's never been that!" protested Patricia, then she stopped suddenly in confusion.

Lady Tanagra smiled to herself.

"Well, if he's never been tiresome I'm sure you wouldn't like to hurt him, would you?" She was speaking as if to a child.

"The only person I want to hurt is Aunt Adelaide," said Patricia with a laugh.

Lady Tanagra noticed with pleasure that the mood seemed to be dropping from her.

"Well, may I be the physician for to-day?" continued Lady Tanagra.

Patricia nodded her head.

"Very well, then, I prescribe a dinner this evening with one Tanagra Bowen, Peter Bowen and Godfrey Elton, on the principle of 'Eat thou and drink, to-morrow thou shalt die.'"

"Who is Godfrey Elton?" asked Patricia with interest.

"My dear Patricia, if I were to start endeavouring to describe Godfrey we should be at it for hours. You can't describe Godfrey, you can only absorb him. He is a sort of wise youth rapidly approaching childhood."

"What on earth do you mean?" cried Patricia, laughing.

"You will discover for yourself later. We are all dining at the Quadrant to-night at eight."

"Dining at the Quadrant?" repeated Patricia in amazement.

"Yes, and I have to get home to dress and you have to dress and I will pick you up in a taxi at a quarter to eight."

"But—but—Peter—your brother said that he was coming——"

"Peter has greater faith in his sister than in himself, he therefore took me into his confidence and I am his emissary."

"Oh, you Bowens, you Bowens!" moaned Patricia in mock despair.

"There is no avoiding us, I confess," said Lady Tanagra gaily. "Now I must tell you about your charming aunt. She called upon mother yesterday."

"What!" gasped Patricia.

"She called at Grosvenor Square and announced to poor, un-understanding mother that she thought the families ought to know one another. But she got rather badly shocked by Godfrey and one of the soldier boys, whom we call 'Uncle,' and left with the firm conviction that our circle is a pernicious one."

"It's—it's—perfectly scandalous!" cried Patricia.

"No, it's not as bad as that," said Lady Tanagra calmly.

"What?" began Patricia. "Oh! I mean Aunt Adelaide's conduct, it's humiliating, it's——"

"Wait until you hear," said Lady Tanagra with a smile. "When Peter ran in to see mother, she said that she had had a call from a Miss Brent and could he place her. So poor old Peter blurts out that he's going to marry Miss Brent. Poor mother nearly had a fit on the spot. She was too tactful to express her disapproval; but she showed it in her amazement. The result was that Peter was deeply hurt and left the room and the house. I am the only one who saw the exquisite humour of the joke. My poor darling mother had the impression that Peter has gone clean off his head and wanted to marry your most excellent Aunt Adelaide," and Lady Tanagra laughed gaily.

For a moment Patricia gazed at her blankly, then as she visualised Aunt Adelaide and Bowen side by side at the altar she laughed hysterically.

"I kept mother in suspense for quite a long time. Then I told her, and I also rang up Peter and told him. And now I must fly," cried Lady Tanagra. "I will be here at a quarter to eight, and if you are not ready I shall be angry; but if you have locked yourself in your room I shall batter down the door. We are going to have a very happy evening and you will enjoy yourself immensely. I think it quite likely that Godfrey will fall in love with you as well as Peter, which will still further increase your embarrassments." Then with a sudden change of mood she said, "Please cheer up, Patricia, happiness is not a thing to be taken lightly. You have been a little overwrought of late, and now, good-bye."

"One moment, please," said Patricia. "Don't you understand that nothing can possibly be built up on such a foundation as—as——?"

"Your picking up Peter in the Grill-room of the Quadrant," said Lady Tanagra calmly.

Patricia gasped. "Oh!" she cried.

"Let's call things by their right names," said Lady Tanagra. "At the present moment you're putting up rather a big fight against your own inclination, and you are causing yourself a lot of unnecessary unhappiness. Is it worth it?" she asked.

"One's self-respect is always worth any sacrifice," said Patricia.

"Except when you are in love, and then you take pride in trampling it under foot."

With this oracular utterance Lady Tanagra departed with a bright nod, a smile and an insistence that Patricia should not come downstairs.

CHAPTER XIII

A TACTICAL BLUNDER

"I often think," remarked Lady Tanagra as she helped herself a second time to hors d'oeuvres, "that if Godfrey could only be condensed or desiccated he would save the world from ennui."

Elton looked up from a sardine he was filleting with great interest and care; concentration was the foundation of Godfrey Elton's character.

"Does that mean that he is a food or a stimulant?" enquired Patricia, Elton having returned to his sardine.

Lady Tanagra regarded Elton with thoughtful brow.

"I think," she said deliberately, "I should call him a habit."

"Does that imply that he is a drug upon the market?" retorted Patricia.

Bowen laughed. Elton continued to fillet his sardine.

"You see," continued Lady Tanagra, "Godfrey has two qualities that to a woman are maddening. The first is the gift of silence, and the second is a perfect genius for making everyone else feel that they are in the wrong. Some day he'll fall in love, and then something will snap and —well, he will give up dissecting sardines as if they were the one thing in life worthy of a man's attention."

Elton looked up again straight into Lady Tanagra's eyes and smiled.

"Look at him now!" continued Lady Tanagra, "that very smile makes me feel like a naughty child."

The four were dining in Bowen's sitting-room at the Quadrant, Lady Tanagra having decided that this would be more pleasant than in the public dining-room.

"Can you," continued Lady Tanagra, who was in a wilful mood, "can you imagine Godfrey in love? I don't think any man ought to be allowed to fall in love until he has undergone an examination as to whether or no he can say the right thing the right way. No, it takes an Irishman to make love."

"But an Irishman says what he cannot possibly mean," said Patricia, with the air of one of

vast experience in such matters.

"And many Englishmen mean what they cannot possibly say," said Elton, looking at Lady Tanagra.

"Oh," cried Lady Tanagra, clapping her hands. "You have drawn him, Patricia. Now he will talk to us instead of concentrating himself upon his food. Ah!" she exclaimed suddenly, turning to Elton. "I promised that you should fall in love with Patricia, Godfrey."

"Now that Tanagra has come down to probabilities the atmosphere should lighten," Elton remarked.

"Isn't that Godfrey all over?" demanded Lady Tanagra of Bowen. "He will snub one woman and compliment another in a breath. Patricia," she continued, "I warn you against Godfrey. He is highly dangerous. He should always be preceded by a man with a red flag."

"But why?" asked Bowen.

"Because of his reticence. A man has no right t to be reticent; it piques a woman's curiosity, and with us curiosity is the first step to surrender."

"Why hesitate at the first step?" asked Elton.

"Think of it, Patricia," continued Lady Tanagra, ignoring Elton's remark. "Although Godfrey has seen *The Morning Post* he has not yet congratulated Peter."

"I did not know then that I had cause to congratulate him," said Elton quietly.

"What mental balance!" cried Lady Tanagra. "I'm sure he reads the deaths immediately after the births, and the divorces just after the marriages so as to preserve his sense of proportion."

Elton looked first at Lady Tanagra and then on to Patricia, and smiled.

"Can you not see Godfrey choosing a wife?" demanded Lady Tanagra, laughing. "Weighing the shape of her head with the size of her ankles, he's very fussy about ankles. He would dissect her as he would a sardine, demanding perfection, mental, moral, and physical, and in return he could give *himself*." Lady Tanagra emphasized the last word.

"Most men take less time to choose a wife than they would a trousering," said Elton quietly.

"I think Mr. Elton is right," said Patricia.

"Then you don't believe in love at first sight," said Bowen to Patricia.

"Miss Brent did not say that," interposed Elton. "She merely implied that a man who falls in love at first sight should choose trouserings at first sight. Is that not so?" He looked across at Patricia.

Patricia nodded.

"An impetuous man will be impetuous in all things," said Bowen.

"He who hesitates may lose a wife," said Lady Tanagra, "and——"

"And by analogy, go without trousers," said Elton quietly.

"That might explain a Greek; but scarcely a Scotsman," said Patricia.

"No one has ever been able to explain a Scotsman," said Elton. "We content ourselves with misunderstanding him."

"We were talking about love," broke in Lady Tanagra, "and I will not have the conversation diverted." Turning to Patricia she demanded, "Can you imagine Godfrey in love?"

"I think so," said Patricia quietly, looking across at Elton. "Only——"

"Only what?" cried Lady Tanagra with excited interest. "Oh, please, Patricia, explain Godfrey to me! No one has ever done so."

"Don't you think he is a little like the Scotsman we were talking about just now?" said Patricia. "Difficult to explain; but easy to misunderstand."

"Oh, Peter, Peter!" wailed Lady Tanagra, looking across at Bowen. "She's caught it."

"Caught what?" asked Bowen in surprise.

"The vagueness of generalities that is Godfrey," replied Lady Tanagra. "Now, Patricia, you must explain that 'only' at which you broke off. You say you can imagine Godfrey in love, only ——"

"I think he would place it on the same plane as honour and sportsmanship, probably a little above both."

Elton looked up from the bread he was crumbling, and gave Patricia a quick penetrating glance, beneath which her eyes fell.

Lady Tanagra looked at Patricia in surprise, but said nothing.

"Can you imagine Tan in love, Patricia?" enquired Bowen. "We Bowens are notoriously backward in matters of the heart," he added.

"I shall fall in love when the man comes along who—who——" Lady Tanagra paused.

"Will compel you," said Patricia, concluding the sentence.

Again Elton looked quickly across at her.

"What do you mean?" demanded Lady Tanagra.

"I think," said Patricia deliberately, "that you are too primitive to fall in love. You would have to be stormed, carried away by force, and wooed afterwards."

"It doesn't sound very respectable, does it?" said Lady Tanagra thoughtfully, then turning to Bowen she demanded, "Peter, would you allow me to be carried away by force, stormed, and wooed afterwards?"

"I think, Tanagra, you sometimes forget that your atmosphere is too exotic for most men," said Elton.

"Godfrey," said Lady Tanagra reproachfully, "I have had quite a lot of proposals, and I won't be denied my successes."

"We were talking about love, not offers of marriage," said Elton with a smile.

"Cynic," cried Lady Tanagra. "You imply that the men who have proposed to me wanted my money and not myself."

"Suppose, Tanagra, there were a right man," said Patricia, "and he was poor and honourable. What then?"

"I suppose I should have to ask him to marry me," said Lady Tanagra dubiously.

"But, Tan, we've just decided," said Bowen, "that you have to be carried away by force, and cannot love until force has been applied."

"I think I've had enough of this conversation," said Lady Tanagra. "You're trying to prove that I'm either going to lose my reputation, or die an old maid, and I'm not so sure that you're wrong, about the old maid, I mean," she added. "I shall depend upon you, Godfrey, then," she said, turning to Elton, "and we will hobble about the Park together on Sunday mornings, comparing notes upon rheumatism and gout. Ugh!" She looked deliberately round the table, from one to the other. "Has it ever struck you what we shall look like when we grow very old?" she asked.

"No one need ever grow old," said Patricia.

"How can you prevent it?" asked Bowen.

"There is morphia and the fountain of eternal youth," suggested Elton.

"Please don't let's be clever any more," said Lady Tanagra. "It's affecting my brain. Now we will play bridge for a little while and then all go home and get to bed early."

In spite of her protests Bowen insisted on seeing Patricia to Galvin House. For some time they did not speak. As the taxi turned into Oxford Street Bowen broke the silence.

"Patricia, my mother wants to know you," he said simply.

Patricia shivered. The words came as a shock. They recalled the incident of her meeting with Bowen. She seemed to see a grey-haired lady with Bowen's eyes and quiet manner, too well-bred to show the disapproval she felt on hearing the story of her son's first meeting with his fiancé. She shuddered again.

"Are you cold?" Bowen enquired solicitously, leaning forward to close the window nearest to him.

"No, I was thinking what Lady Meyfield will think when she hears how you made the acquaintance of—of—me," she finished lamely.

"There is no reason why she should know," said Bowen.

"Do you think I would marry——?" Patricia broke off suddenly in confusion.

"But why——?" began Bowen.

"If ever I meet Lady Meyfield I shall tell her exactly how I—I—met you," said Patricia with ecision.

"Well, tell her then," said Bowen good-humouredly. "She has a real sense of humour."

The moment Bowen had uttered the words he saw his mistake. Patricia drew herself up coldly.

"It was rather funny, wasn't it?" she said evenly; "but mothers do not encourage their sons to develop such acquaintances. Now shall we talk about something else?"

"But my mother wants to meet you," protested Bowen. "She——"

"Tell her the story of our acquaintance," replied Patricia coldly. "I think that will effectually overcome her wish to know me. Ah! here we are," she concluded as the taxi drew up at Galvin House. With a short "good night!" Patricia walked up the steps, leaving Bowen conscious that he had once more said the wrong thing.

That night, as Patricia prepared for bed, she mentally contrasted the Bowens' social sphere with that of Galvin House and she shuddered for the third time that evening.

"Patricia Brent," she apostrophised her reflection in the mirror. "You're a fool! and you have not even the saving grace of being an old fool. High Society has turned your giddy young head," and with a laugh that sounded hard even to her own ears, she got into bed and switched off the light.

CHAPTER XIV

GALVIN HOUSE MEETS A LORD

The effect of *The Morning Post* announcement upon Galvin House had been little short of sensational. Although all were aware of the engagement, to see the announcement in print seemed to arouse them to a point of enthusiasm. Everyone from the servants upwards possessed a copy of *The Morning Post*, with the single exception of Mrs. Barnes, who had mislaid hers and made everybody's life a misery by insisting on examining their copy to make quite sure that they had not taken hers by mistake.

Had not Patricia been so preoccupied, she could not have failed to notice the atmosphere of suppressed excitement at Galvin House. Many glances were directed at her, glances of superior knowledge, of which she was entirely unconscious. Woman-like she never paused to ask herself what she really felt or what she really meant. Her thoughts ran in a circle, coming back inevitably to the maddening question, "What does he really think of me?" Why had Fate been so unkind as to undermine a possible friendship with that damning introduction? After all, she would ask herself indifferently, what did it matter? Bowen was nothing to her. Then back again her thoughts would rush to the inevitable question, what did he really think?

Since the night of her adventure, Patricia had formed the habit of dressing for dinner. She made neither excuse nor explanation to herself as to why she did so. Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, however, had covertly remarked upon the fact; but Patricia had ignored them. She had reached that state in her psychological development when she neither explained nor denied things.

With delicacy and insight Providence has withheld from woman the uncomfortable quality of introspection. Had Patricia subjected her actions to the rigid test of reason, she would have found them strangely at variance with her determination. With a perversity characteristic of her sex, she forbade Bowen to see her, and then spent hours in speculating as to when and how he would disobey her. A parcel in the hall at Galvin House sent the colour flooding to her cheeks, whilst Gustave, entering the lounge, bearing his flamboyant nickle-plated apology for the conventional silver salver, set her heart thumping with expectation.

As the day on which Bowen was to dine at Galvin House drew near, the excitement became intense, developing into a panic when the day itself dawned. All were wondering how this or that garment would turn out when actually worn, and those who were not in difficulties with their clothes were troubled about their manners. At Galvin House manners were things that were worn, like a gardenia or a patent hook-and-eye. Patricia had once explained to an uncomprehending Aunt Adelaide that Galvin House had more manners than breeding.

On the Friday evening when Patricia returned to Galvin House, Gustave was in the hall.

"Oh, mees!" he involuntarily exclaimed.

Patricia waited for more; but after a moment of hesitation, Gustave disappeared along the hall as if there were nothing strange in his conduct, leaving Patricia staring after him in surprise.

At that moment Mrs. Craske-Morton bustled out of the lounge, full of an unwonted importance.

"Oh, Miss Brent!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad you've come. I have a few friends coming to dinner this evening and we are dressing." Without waiting for a reply Mrs. Craske-Morton turned and disappeared along the passage leading to the servants' regions.

At that moment Mr. Bolton appeared at the top of the stairs in his shirt sleeves; but at the sight of Patricia he turned and bolted precipitately out of sight.

Patricia walked slowly upstairs and along the corridor to her room, unconscious that each door she passed was closed upon a tragedy.

In one room Mrs. Barnes sat on her bed in an agony of indecision and a camisole, wondering how the seams of her only evening frock could be made black with the blue-black ink that had been given her at the stationer's shop in error.

Mr. James Harris, a little bearded man with long legs and a short body, stood in front of his glass, frankly baffled by the problem of how to keep the top of his trousers from showing above the opening of his low-cut evening waistcoat, an abandoned garment that seemed determined to show all that it was supposed to hide.

Miss Sikkum was engaged in a losing game with delicacy. On her lap lay the Brixton "Paris model blouse," which she had adorned with narrow black velvet ribbon. Should she or should she not enlarge the surface of exposure? If she did Miss Wangle might think her fast; if she did not Lord Peter might think her suburban.

Mr. Sefton was at work upon his back hair, striving to remove from his reflection in the glass a likeness to a sandy cockatoo.

Mr. Cordal was vainly struggling with a voluminous starched shirt, which as he bent seemed determined to give him the appearance of a pouter pigeon.

To each his tragedy and to all their anguish. Even Miss Wangle had her problem. Should she or should she not remove the lace from the modest V in her black silk evening gown. The thought of the bishop, however, proved too much for her, and her collar-bones continued to remain a mystery to Galvin House.

The dinner-gong found everyone anxious and unprepared. All had a vision of Bowen sitting in judgment upon them and mentally comparing Galvin House with Park Lane; for in Bayswater Park Lane is the pinnacle of culture and social splendour.

A few minutes after the last strain of the gong, sounded by Gustave in a manner worthy of the occasion, had subsided, Miss Sikkum crept out from her room feeling very "undressed." The sight of Mr. Sefton nearly drove her back precipitately to the maiden fastness of her chamber. "Was she really too undressed?" she asked herself.

Slowly the guests descended, each anxious to cede to others the pride of place, all absorbed with his or her particular tragedy. By the aid of pins Mr. Cordal had overcome his likeness to a pigeon, but he had not allowed for movement, which tore the pins from their hold, allowing his shirt-front to balloon out joyfully before him, for the rest of the evening obscuring his boots.

Miss Wangle looked at Miss Sikkum and mentally thanked Heaven and the bishop that she had restrained her abandoned impulse to remove the black lace from her own neck.

Mr. Bolton's attention was concentrated upon the centre stud of his shirt. The button-hole was too large, and the head of the stud insisted on disappearing in a most coquettish and embarrassing manner. Mr. Bolton was not sure that Bowen would approve of blue underwear, and consequently kept a finger and thumb upon his stud for the greater part of the evening.

As each entered the lounge, it was with a hurried glance round to see if the guest of the evening had arrived, followed by a sigh of relief on discovering that he had not. Mrs. Craske-Morton had taken the precaution of deferring the dinner until eight o'clock. She wished Bowen's entry to be dramatic.

Mrs. Craske-Morton had asked a few friends of her own to meet her distinguished guest; a Miss Plimsoll, who was composed in claret colour and royal blue trimming, and Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Ragbone. Mrs. Ragbone was a stout, jolly woman with a pronounced cockney accent. Mr. Ragbone was a man whose eyebrows seemed to rise higher with each year, and whose manner of patient suffering became more pathetically unreal with the passage of each season. Mrs. Craske-Morton always explained him as a solicitor. Morton, Gofrim and Bowett, of Lincoln's Inn, knew

him as their chief clerk.

The atmosphere of the lounge was one of nervous tension. All were listening for the bell which would announce the arrival of Bowen. When at last he came, everybody was taken by surprise, Mr. Bolton's stud eluded his grasp, Mr. Sefton felt his back hair, whilst Miss Sikkum blushed rosily at her own daring.

A dead silence spread over the company, broken by Gustave, who, throwing open the door with a flourish, announced "Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Peter Bowen, D.S.O." Bowen gave him a quick glance with widened eyes, then coming forward, shook hands with Mrs. Craske-Morton.

Miss Sikkum was disappointed to find that he was in khaki. She had a vague idea that the nobility adopted different evening clothes from the ordinary rank and file. It would have pleased her to see Bowen with velvet stripes down his trousers, a velvet collar and velvet cuffs. A coloured silk waistcoat would have convinced her.

Mrs. Craske-Morton was determined to do her work thoroughly. She had taken the precaution of telling Patricia that dinner would not be served until a few minutes after eight, that would give her time to introduce Bowen to all the guests. She proceeded to conduct him round to everyone in turn. In her flurry she quite forgot the careful schooling to which she had subjected herself for a week past, and she introduced Miss Wangle to Bowen.

"Lord Peter, allow me to introduce Miss Wangle. Miss Wangle, Lord Peter Bowen," and this was the form adopted with the rest of the company.

Bowen's sixth bow had just been interrupted by Mr. Cordal grasping him warmly by the hand, when Patricia entered. For a moment she looked about her regarding the strange toilettes, then she saw Bowen. She felt herself crimsoning as he slipped away from Mr. Cordal's grasp and came across to her. All the guests hung back as if this were the meeting between Wellington and Blücher.

"I've done six, there are about twenty more to do. If you save me, Patricia, I'll forgive you anything after we're married."

Patricia shook hands sedately.

Mrs. Craske-Morton bustled up to re-claim Bowen. "A little surprise, Miss Brent; I hope you will forgive me."

Patricia smiled at her in anything but a forgiving spirit.

"And now, Lord Peter, I want to introduce you to——"

"Deenair is served, madame." Gustave was certainly doing the thing in style.

At a sign from Mrs. Craske-Morton, Miss Wangle secured Mr. Samuel Ragbone and they started for the dining-room. The remainder of the guests paired off in accordance with Mrs. Craske-Morton's instructions, written and verbal, she left nothing to chance, and the procession was brought up by Mrs. Craske-Morton herself and Bowen. Patricia fell to the lot of Mr. Sefton.

As soon as the guests were seated a death-like stillness reigned. Bowen was looking round with interest as he unfolded his napkin into which had been deftly inserted a roll. Miss Sikkum, Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe and Mr. Bolton each lost their rolls, which were retrieved from underneath the table by Gustave and Alice.

Mr. Sefton, also unconscious of the secreted roll, opened his napkin with a debonair jerk to show that he was quite at his ease. The bread rose in the air. He made an unsuccessful clutch, touched but could not hold it, and watched with horror the errant roll hit Miss Wangle playfully on the side of the nose, just as she was beginning to tell Bowen about "the dear bishop."

Patricia bit her lip, Bowen bent solicitously over the angry Miss Wangle, whilst Mr. Bolton threatened to report Mr. Sefton to the Food Controller. Gustave created a diversion by arriving with the soup. His white cotton gloves, several sizes too large even for his hands, caused him great anxiety. Every spare moment during the evening he spent in clutching them at the wrists, just as they were on the point of slipping off. Nothing, however, could daunt his courage or mitigate his good-humour. For the first time in his life he was waiting upon a real lord, and from the circumstance he was extracting every ounce of satisfaction it possessed.

In serving Bowen his attitude was that of one self-convicted of unworthiness. Accustomed to the complaints and bickerings of a Bayswater boarding-house, Bowen's matter-of-fact motions of acceptance or refusal impressed him profoundly. So this was how lords behaved. Nothing so impressed him as the little incident of the champagne.

At Galvin House it was the custom for the guests to have their own drinks. Mr. Cordal, for instance, drank what the label on the bottle announced to be "Gumton's Superior Light Dinner Ale." Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe favoured Guinness's Stout, Miss Sikkum took hot water, whilst Miss Wangle satisfied herself with a claret bottle. There is refinement in claret, the dear bishop always

drank it, with water: but as claret costs money Miss Wangle made a bottle last for months.

The thought of the usual heterogeneous collection of bottles on the occasion of Lord Peter's visit had filled Mrs. Craske-Morton with horror, and she had decided to "spring" wine, as Mr. Bolton put it. In other words, she supplied for the whole company four bottles of one-and-eightpenny claret, the bottles rendered beautifully old by applied dust and cobwebs. To this she had added a bottle of grocer's champagne for Bowen. Gustave had been elaborately instructed that this was for the principal guest and the principal guest only, and Mrs. Craske-Morton had managed to convey to him in some subtle way that if he poured so much as a drop of the precious fluid into any other person's glass, the consequences would be too terrifying even to contemplate.

Whilst Galvin House was murmuring softly over its soup, Gustave approached Bowen with the champagne bottle swathed in a white napkin, and looking suspiciously like an infant in long clothes. Holding the end of the bottle's robes with the left hand so that it should not tickle Bowen's ear, Gustave bent anxiously to his task.

Bowen, however, threw a bomb-shell at the earnest servitor. He motioned that he did not desire champagne. Gustave hesitated and looked enquiringly at his mistress. Here was an unlooked-for development.

"You'll take champagne?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton ingratiatingly.

Gustave breathed again, and whilst Bowen's attention was distracted in explaining to Mrs. Craske-Morton that he preferred water, he had a delicate taste in wine, Gustave filled the glass happily. Of course, it was all right, he told himself, the lord merely wanted to be pressed. If he had really meant "no," he would have put his hand over his glass, as Miss Sikkum always did when she refused some of Mr. Cordal's "Light Dinner Ale."

Gustave retired victorious with the champagne bottle, which he placed upon the sideboard. At every interval in his manifold duties, Gustave returned with the white-clothed bottle, and strove to squeeze a few more drops into Bowen's untouched glass.

The terrifying constraint with which the meal had opened gradually wore off as the wine circulated. Following the path of least resistance, it mounted to Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe's head; but with Miss Sikkum it seemed to stop short at her nose. Mr. Cordal's shirt-front announced that he had temporarily given up Gumton in favour of the red, red wine of the smoking-concert baritone. Mrs. Barnes seemed on the point of tears, whilst Mr. Sefton's attentions to Patricia were a direct challenge to Bowen.

Conversation at Galvin House was usually general; but it now became particular. Every remark was directed either to or at Bowen, and each guest strove to hear what he said. Those who were fortunate enough to catch his replies told those who were not. A smile or a laugh from anyone who might be in conversation with Bowen rippled down the table. Mr. Cordal was less intent upon his food, and his inaccuracy of aim became more than ever noticeable.

"Oh, Lord Bowen!" simpered Miss Sikkum, "do tell us where you got the D.S.O."

Bowen screwed his glass into his eye and looked across at Miss Sikkum, at the redness of her nose and the artificial rose in her hair. Everyone was waiting anxiously for Bowen's reply. Mr. Cordal grunted approval.

"At Buckingham Palace," said Bowen, "from the King. They give you special leave, you know."

Patricia looked across at him and smiled. What was he thinking of Galvin House refinement? What did he think of her for being there? Well, he had brought it on himself and he deserved his punishment. At first Patricia had been amused: but as the meal dragged wearily on, amusement developed into torture. Would it never end? She glanced from Miss Wangle, all graciousness and smiles, to Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe, in her faded blue evening-frock, on to Miss Sikkum bare and abandoned. She heard Mr. Sefton's chatter, Mr. Bolton's laugh, Mr. Cordal's jaws and lips. She shuddered. Why did not she accept the opening of escape that now presented itself and marry Bowen? He could rescue her from all this and what it meant.

"And shall we all be asked to the wedding, Lord Bowen?"

It was again Miss Sikkum's thin voice that broke through the curtain of Patricia's thoughts.

"I hope all Miss Brent's friends will be there," replied Bowen diplomatically.

"And now we shall all have to fetch and carry for Miss Brent," laughed Mr. Bolton. "Am I your friend, Miss Brent?" he enquired.

"She always laughs at your jokes when nobody else can," snapped Miss Pilkington.

Everybody turned to the speaker, who during the whole meal had silently nursed her resentment at having been placed at the bottom of the table. Mr. Bolton looked crestfallen. Bowen looked across at Patricia and saw her smile sympathetically at Mr. Bolton.

"I think from what I have heard, Mr. Bolton," he said, "that you may regard yourself as one of

the elect."

Patricia flashed Bowen a grateful look. Mr. Bolton beamed and, turning to Miss Pilkington, said with his usual introductory laugh:

"Then I shall return good for evil, Miss Pilkington, and persuade Lady Peter to buy her stamps at your place."

Miss Pilkington flushed at this reference to her calling, a particularly threadbare joke of Mr. Bolton's.

"When is it to be, Lord Peter?" enquired Mrs. Craske-Morton.

Miss Sikkum looked down modestly at her plate, not quite certain whether or no this were a delicate question.

"That rests with Miss Brent," replied Bowen, smiling. "If you, her friends, can persuade her to make it soon, I shall be very grateful."

Miss Sikkum simpered and murmured under her breath, "How romantic."

"Now, Miss Brent," said Mr. Bolton, "it's up to you to name the happy day."

Patricia smiled, conscious that all eyes were upon her; but particularly conscious of Bowen's gaze.

"I believe in long engagements," she said, stealing a glance at Bowen and thrilling at the look of disappointment on his face. "Didn't Jacob serve seven years for Rachel?"

"Yes, and got the wrong girl then," broke in Mr. Bolton. "You'll have to be careful, Miss Brent, or Miss Sikkum will get ahead of you."

"Really, Mr. Bolton!" said Mrs. Craske-Morton, looking anxiously at Bowen.

Miss Sikkum's cheeks had assumed the same tint as her nose, and her eyes were riveted upon her plate. Miss Pilkington muttered something under her breath about Mr. Bolton's remark being outrageous.

"I think we'll take coffee in the lounge," said Mrs. Craske-Morton, rising. Turning to Bowen, she added, "We follow the American custom, Lord Peter, the gentlemen always leave the dining-room with the ladies."

There was a pushing back of chairs and a shuffling of feet and Galvin House rose from its repast.

"Coffee will not be served for half an hour, and if you and Miss Brent would like to—to——"

Mrs. Craske-Morton paused significantly. "My boudoir is at your service."

Bowen looked at her and then at Patricia. He saw the flush on her cheeks and the humiliation in her eyes.

"I think we should much prefer not to interrupt our pleasant conversation. What do you say, Patricia?" he enquired, turning to Patricia, who smiled her acquiescence.

They all trooped into the lounge, where everybody except Patricia, Bowen and Mrs. Craske-Morton stood about in awkward poses. The arrival of Gustave with coffee relieved the tension.

For the next hour each guest endeavoured to attract to himself or herself Bowen's attention, and each was disappointed when at length he rose to go and shook hands only with Mrs. Craske-Morton, including the others in a comprehensive bow. Still more were they disappointed and surprised when Patricia did not go out into the hall to see him off.

"Oh, Miss Brent!" simpered Miss Sikkum, "aren't you going to say good night to him?"

"Good night!" interrogated Patricia, "but I did."

"Yes; but I mean——" began Miss Sikkum.

"Oh, you know," she said with a simper, but Patricia had passed over to a chair, where she seated herself and began to read a newspaper upside down.

Miss Sikkum's romantic soul had received a shock.

CHAPTER XV

MR. TRIGGS TAKES TEA IN KENSINGTON GARDENS

I

"Well, me dear, 'ow goes it?"

Mr. Triggs flooded the room with his genial person, mopping his brow with a large bandana handkerchief, and blowing a cheerful protest against the excessive heat.

Patricia looked up from her work and greeted him with a tired smile, as he collapsed heavily upon a chair, which creaked ominously beneath his weight.

"When you're sixty-two in the shade it ain't like being twenty-five in the sun," he said, laughing happily at his joke.

"Now you must sit quiet and be good," admonished Patricia. "I'm busy with beetles."

"Busy with what?" demanded Mr. Triggs arresting the process of fanning himself with his handkerchief.

"The potato-beetle," explained Patricia. "There is no lack of variety in the life of an M.P.'s secretary: babies and beetles, pigs and potatoes, meat and margarine, they all have their allotted place."

"Arthur works you too 'ard, me dear, I'm afraid," said Mr. Triggs. "I must speak to 'im about it."

"Oh, Mr. Triggs! You mustn't do anything of the sort. He's most kind and considerate, and if I am here I must do what he wants."

"But beetles and babies and potatoes, me dear," said Mr. Triggs. "That's more than a joke."

"Oh! you don't know what a joke a beetle can be," said Patricia, looking up and laughing in spite of herself at the expression of anxiety on Mr. Triggs's face.

Mr. Triggs mumbled something to himself.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed a moment after. "'Ere am I, forgetting what I come about. I've seen *The Morning Post*, me dear."

Patricia pushed back her chair from the table and turned and faced Mr. Triggs.

"Mr. Triggs," she said, "if you mention the words *Morning Post* to me again I think I shall kill you."

Mr. Triggs's hands dropped to his side as he gazed at her in blank astonishment. "But, me dear——" he began.

"The engagement has been broken off," announced Patricia.

Mr. Triggs's jaw dropped, and he gazed at Patricia in amazement. "Broken off," he repeated. "Engagement broken off. Why, damn 'im, I'll punch 'is 'ead," and he made an effort to rise.

Patricia laughed, a little hysterically.

"You mustn't blame Lord Peter," she said. "It is I who have broken it off."

Mr. Triggs collapsed into the chair again. "You broke it off," he exclaimed. "You broke off the engagement with a nice young chap like 'im?"

Patricia nodded.

"Well, I'm blowed!" Mr. Triggs sat staring at Patricia as if she had suddenly become transformed into a dodo. After nearly a minute's contemplation of Patricia, a smile slowly spread itself over his features, like the sun breaking through a heavy cloud-laden sky.

"You been 'avin' a quarrel, that's what's the matter," he announced with a profound air of wisdom.

Patricia shook her head with an air of finality; but Mr. Triggs continued to nod his head wisely.

"That's what's the matter," he muttered. "Why," he added, "you'll never get another young chap like 'im. Took a great fancy to 'im, I did. Now all you've got to do is just to kiss and make it

up. Then you'll feel 'appier than ever afterwards."

Patricia realised the impossibility of conveying to Mr. Triggs that her decision was irrevocable. Furthermore she was anxious that he should go, as she had promised to get out certain statistics for Mr. Bonsor.

"Now you really must go, Mr. Triggs. You won't think me horrid, will you, but I had a half-holiday the other day, and now I must work and make up for it. That's only fair, isn't it?"

"Very well, me dear, I can't stay. I'll be off and get out of your way. Now don't forget. Make it up, kiss and be friends. That's my motto."

"It isn't a quarrel, Mr. Triggs; but it's no use trying to explain to anyone so sweet and nice as you. Anyhow, I have broken off the engagement, and Lord Peter is in no way to blame."

"Well, good-bye, me dear. I'll see you again soon," said Mr. Triggs, still nodding his head with genial conviction as to the rightness of his diagnosis. "And now I'll be trottin'. Don't forget," and with a final look over his shoulder and another nod of wisdom he floated out of the room, seeming to leave it cold and bare behind him.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered as he walked away from Eaton Square. Arrived at the corner of Eaton Place, he stood still as if uncertain what direction to take. Seeing a crawling taxi he suddenly seemed inspired with an idea.

"Hi! Hi! Taxi!" he shouted, waving his umbrella. Having secured the taxi and given the man instructions to drive to the Quadrant, he hauled himself in and sat down with a sigh of satisfaction.

It was a few minutes to one as he asked for Lord Peter Bowen at the enquiry-office of the Quadrant. Two minutes later Peel descended in the lift to inform him that his Lordship had not yet returned to lunch. Was Mr. Triggs expected?

"Well, no," confessed Mr. Triggs, looking at Peel a little uncertainly. "'E wasn't expecting me; but 'e asked me the other night if I'd call in when I was passing, and as I was passing I called in, see?"

For a moment Peel seemed to hesitate.

"His Lordship has a luncheon engagement, sir," he said; "but he could no doubt see you for two or three minutes if he asked you to call. Perhaps you will step this way."

Before Mr. Triggs had a chance of doing as was suggested, Peel had turned aside.

"No, my lady, his Lordship is not in yet; but he will not be more than a minute or two. This gentleman," he looked at the card, "Mr. Triggs, is——"

"Oh, Mr. Triggs, how do you do?" cried Lady Tanagra, extending her hand.

Mr. Triggs looked at the exquisite little vision before him in surprise and admiration. He took the proffered hand as if it had been a piece of priceless porcelain.

"I'm Lord Peter's sister, you know. I've heard all about you from Patricia. Do come up and let us have a chat before my brother comes."

Mr. Triggs followed Lady Tanagra into the lift, too surprised and bewildered to make any response to her greeting. As the lift slid upwards he mopped his brow vigorously with his handkerchief.

When they were seated in Bowen's sitting-room he at last found voice.

"I just been to see 'er," he said.

"Who, Patricia?" asked Lady Tanagra.

Mr. Triggs nodded, and there was a look in his eyes which implied that he was not at all satisfied with what he had seen.

"Quarrelled, 'aven't they?"' he asked.

"Well," began Lady Tanagra, not quite knowing how much Mr. Triggs actually knew of the circumstances of the case.

"Said she'd broken it off. I gave her a talking to, I did. She'll never get another young chap like 'im."

"Did you tell her so?" asked Lady Tanagra.

"Tell her so, I should think I did!" said Mr. Triggs, "and more than once too."

"Oh, you foolish, foolish man!" cried Lady Tanagra, wringing her hands in mock despair. A moment afterwards she burst out laughing at the comical look of dismay on Mr. Triggs's face.

"What 'ave I done?" he cried in genuine alarm.

"Why, don't you see that you have implied that all the luck is on her side, and that will make her simply furious?"

"But—but——" began Mr. Triggs helplessly, looking very much like a scolded child.

"Now sit down," ordered Lady Tanagra with an irresistible smile, "and I'll tell you. My brother wants to marry Patricia, and Patricia, for some reason best known to herself, says that it can't be done. Now I'm sure that she is fond of Peter; but he has been so impetuous that he has rather taken her breath away. I've never known him like it before," said Lady Tanagra plaintively.

"But 'e's an awfully lucky fellow if 'e gets 'er," broke in Mr. Triggs, as if feeling that something were required of him.

"Why, of course he is," said Lady Tanagra. "Now will you help us, Mr. Triggs?"

Lady Tanagra looked at him with an expression that would have extracted a promise of help from St. Anthony himself.

"Of course I will, me dear. I—I beg your pardon," stuttered Mr. Triggs.

"Never mind, let it stand at that," said Lady Tanagra gaily. "I'm sure we're going to be friends, Mr. Triggs."

"Knew it the moment I set eyes on you," said Mr. Triggs with conviction.

"Well, we've got to arrange this affair for these young people," said Lady Tanagra with a wise air. "First of all we've got to prove to Patricia that she is really in love with Peter. If she's not in love with him, then we've got to make her in love with him. Do you understand?"

Mr. Triggs nodded his head with an air that clearly said he was far from understanding.

"Well, now," said Lady Tanagra. "Patricia knows only three people that know Peter. There is you, Godfrey Elton, and myself. Now if she's in love with him she will want to hear about him, and ——"

"But ain't she going to see 'im?" demanded Mr. Triggs incredulously.

"No, she says that she doesn't want Peter ever to see her, write to her, telephone to her, or, as far as I can see, exist on the same planet with her."

"But—but——" began Mr. Triggs.

"It's no good reasoning with a woman, Mr. Triggs, we women are all as unreasonable as the Income Tax. Now if you'll do as you are told we will prove that Patricia is wrong."

"Very well, me dear," began Mr. Triggs.

"Now this is my plan," interrupted Lady Tanagra. "If Patricia really cares for Peter she will want to hear about him from friends. She will, very cleverly, as she thinks, lead up the conversation to him when she meets you, or when she meets Godfrey Elton, or when she meets me. Now what we have to do is just as carefully to avoid talking about him. Turn the conversation on to some other topic. Now we've all got to plot and scheme and plan like—like——"

"Germans," interrupted Mr. Triggs.

"Splendid!" cried Lady Tanagra, clapping her hands.

"But why has she changed her mind?" asked Mr. Triggs.

"You must never ask a woman why she changes her frock, or why she changes her mind, because she never really knows," said Lady Tanagra. "Probably she does it because she hasn't got anything else particular to do at the moment. Ah! here's Peter," she cried.

Bowen came forward and shook hands cordially with Mr. Triggs.

"This is splendid of you!" he said. "You'll lunch with us, of course."

"Oh no, no," said Mr. Triggs. "I just ran in to—to——"

"To get to know me," said Lady Tanagra with a smile.

"Of course! That's it," cried Mr. Triggs, beaming. "I can't stop to lunch though, I'm afraid. I must be going to——"

"Have you got a luncheon engagement?" asked Lady Tanagra.

"Er—well, yes."

"Please don't tell fibs, Mr. Triggs. You're not engaged to lunch with anybody, and you're going to lunch with us, so that's settled."

"Why, bless my soul!" blew Mr. Triggs helplessly as he mopped his head with his handkerchief. "Why, bless my soul!"

"It's no good, Mr. Triggs. When Tanagra wants anything she has it," said Bowen with a laugh. "It doesn't matter whether it's the largest pear or the nicest man!"

Lady Tanagra laughed. "Now we'll go down into the dining-room."

For an hour and a half they talked of Patricia, and at the end of the meal both Lady Tanagra and Bowen knew that they had a firm ally in Mr. Triggs.

"Don't forget, Mr. Triggs," cried Lady Tanagra as she bade him good-bye in the vestibule. "You're a match-maker now, and you must be very careful."

And Mr. Triggs lifted his hat and waved his umbrella as, wreathed in smiles, he trotted towards the revolving doors and out into the street.

After he had gone Lady Tanagra extracted from Bowen a grudging promise of implicit obedience. He must not see, telephone, write or telegraph to Patricia. He was to eliminate himself altogether.

"But for how long, Tan?" he enquired moodily.

"It may be for years and it may be for ever," cried Lady Tanagra gaily as she buttoned her gloves. "Anyhow, it's your only chance."

"Damn!" muttered Bowen under his breath as he watched her disappear; "but I'll give it a trial."

II

The next afternoon as Patricia walked down the steps of Number 426 Eaton Square and turned to the left, she was conscious that in spite of the summer sunshine the world was very grey about her. She had not gone a hundred yards before Lady Tanagra's grey car slid up beside her.

"Will you take pity on me, Patricia? I'm at a loose end," cried Lady Tanagra.

Patricia turned with a little cry of pleasure.

"Jump in," cried Lady Tanagra. "It's no good refusing a Bowen. Our epidermises are too thick, or should it be epidermi?"

Patricia shook her head and laughed as she seated herself beside Lady Tanagra.

The car crooned its way up Sloane Street and across into Knightsbridge, Lady Tanagra intent upon her driving.

"Is it indiscreet to ask where you are taking me?" enquired Patricia with elaborate humility.

Lady Tanagra laughed as she jammed on the brake to avoid running into the stern of a motor-omnibus.

"I feel like a pirate to-day. I want to run away with someone, or do something desperate. Have you ever felt like that?"

"A politician's secretary must not encourage such unrespectable instincts," she replied.

Lady Tanagra looked at her quickly, noting the flatness of her voice.

"A wise hen should never brood upon being a hen," she remarked oracularly.

Patricia laughed. "It is all very well for Dives to tell Lazarus that it is noble to withstand the pangs of hunger," she replied.

"Now let us go and get tea," said Lady Tanagra, as she turned the car into the road running between Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park.

"Tea!" cried Patricia, "why it's past five."

"Tea is a panacea for all ills and a liquid for all hours. You have only to visit a Government Department for proof of that," said Lady Tanagra, as she descended from the car and walked towards the umbrella-sheltered tea-tables dotted about beneath the trees. "And now I want to have a talk with you for a few minutes," she said as they seated themselves at an empty table.

"I feel in the mood for listening," said Patricia, "provided it is not to be good advice," she added.

"I've been having a serious talk with Peter," said Lady Tanagra.

Patricia looked up at her. Overhead white, fleecy clouds played a game of hide-and-seek with the sunshine. The trees rustled languidly in the breeze, and in the distance a peacock screamed ominously.

"I have told him," continued Lady Tanagra, "that I will not have you worried, and he has promised me not to see you, write to you, telephone to you, send you messenger-boys, chocolates, flowers or anything else in the world, in fact he's out of your way for ever and ever."

Patricia looked across at Lady Tanagra in surprise, but said nothing.

"I told him," continued Lady Tanagra evenly, "that I would not have my friendship with you spoiled through his impetuous blundering. I think I told him he was suburban. In fact I quite bullied the poor boy. So now," she added with the air of one who has earned a lifelong debt of gratitude, "you will be able to go your way without fear of the ubiquitous Peter."

Still Patricia said nothing as she sat looking down upon the empty plate before her.

"Now we will forget all about Peter and talk and think of other things. Ah! here he is," she cried suddenly.

Patricia looked round quickly; but at the sight of Godfrey Elton she was conscious of a feeling of disappointment that she would not, however, admit. Her greeting of Elton was a trifle forced.

Patricia was never frank with herself. If it had been suggested that for a moment she hoped that Lady Tanagra's remark referred to Bowen, she would instantly have denied it.

"No, Godfrey, don't look at me like that," cried Lady Tanagra. "I am not so gauche as to arrange a parti-à-trois. I've got someone very nice coming for Patricia."

Again Patricia felt herself thrill expectantly. Five minutes later Mr. Triggs was seen sailing along among the tables as if in search of someone. Again Patricia felt that sense of disappointment she had experienced on the arrival of Godfrey Elton.

Suddenly Mr. Triggs saw the party and streamed towards them, waving his red silk handkerchief in one hand and his umbrella in the other.

"He has found something better than the fountain of eternal youth," said Elton to Patricia.

"Whatever it is he is unconscious of possessing it," replied Patricia as she turned to greet Mr. Triggs.

"I'm late, I know," explained Mr. Triggs as he shook hands. "I 'ad to run in and see 'Ettie and tell 'er I was coming. It surprised 'er," and Mr. Triggs chuckled as if at some joke he could not share with the others.

"Now let us have tea," said Lady Tanagra. "I'm simply dying for it."

Mr. Triggs sank down heavily into a basket chair. He looked about anxiously, as it creaked beneath his weight, as if in doubt whether or no it would bear him.

"All we want now is——" Mr. Triggs stopped suddenly and looked apprehensively at Lady Tanagra.

"What is it you want, Mr. Triggs?" enquired Patricia quickly.

"Er—er—I—I forget, I—I forget," floundered Mr. Triggs, still looking anxiously at Lady Tanagra.

"When you're in the company of women, Mr. Triggs, you should never appear to want anything else. It makes an unfavourable impression upon us."

"God bless my soul, I don't!" cried Mr. Triggs earnestly. "I've been looking forward to this ever since I got your wire yesterday afternoon."

"Now he has given me away," cried Lady Tanagra. "How like a man!"

"Given you away, me dear!" cried Mr. Triggs anxiously. "What 'ave I done?"

"Why, you have told these two people here that made an assignation with you by telegram."

"Made a what, me dear?" enquired Mr. Triggs, his forehead corrugated with anxiety.

"Lady Tanagra is taking a mean advantage of the heat, Mr. Triggs," said Elton.

"Anyway, I'll forgive you anything, Mr. Triggs, as you have come," said Lady Tanagra.

Mr. Triggs's brow cleared and he smiled.

"Come! I should think I would come," he said.

Lady Tanagra then explained her meeting with Mr. Triggs and how he had striven to avoid her company at luncheon on the previous day. Mr. Triggs protested vigorously.

During the tea the conversation was entirely in the hands of Lady Tanagra, Elton and Mr. Triggs. Patricia sat silently listening to the others. Several times Lady Tanagra and Mr. Triggs exchanged meaning glances.

"Why ain't you talking, me dear?" Mr. Triggs once asked.

"I like to hear you all," said Patricia, smiling across at him. "You're all too clever for me," she added.

"Me clever!" cried Mr. Triggs, and then as if the humour of the thing had suddenly struck him he went off into gurgles of laughter. "You ought to tell 'Ettie that," he spluttered. "She thinks 'er old father's a fool. Me clever!" he repeated, and again he went off into ripples of mirth.

"What are your views on love, Mr. Triggs?" demanded Lady Tanagra suddenly.

Mr. Triggs gazed at her in surprise.

Then he looked from Patricia to Elton, as if not quite sure whether or no he were expected to be serious.

"If I were you I should decline to reply. Lady Tanagra treats serious subjects flippantly," said Elton. "Her attitude towards life is to prepare a pancake as if it were a soufflé."

"That proves the Celt in me," cried Lady Tanagra. "If I were English I should make a soufflé as if it were a pancake."

Mr. Triggs looked from one to the other in obvious bewilderment.

"I am perfectly serious in my question," said Lady Tanagra, without the vestige of a smile. "Mr. Triggs is elemental."

"To be elemental is to be either indelicate or overbearing," murmured Elton, "and Mr. Triggs is neither."

"Love, me dear?" said Mr. Triggs, not in the least understanding the trend of the conversation. "I don't think I've got any ideas about it."

"Surely you are not a cynic. Mr. Triggs," demanded Lady Tanagra.

"A what?" enquired Mr. Triggs.

"Surely you believe in love," said Lady Tanagra.

"Me and Mrs. Triggs lived together 'appily for over thirty years," he replied gravely, "and when a man an' woman 'ave lived together for all that time they get to believe in love. It's never been the same since she died." His voice became a little husky, and Elton looked at Lady Tanagra, who lowered her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Triggs. Will you tell us about—about——?" she broke off.

"Well, you see, me dear," said Mr. Triggs in an uncertain voice, "I was a foreman when I met 'er, and she was a servant; but—somehow or other it seemed that we were just made for each other. Once I knew 'er, I didn't seem to be able to see things without her. When I was at work—I was in the building trade, foreman-carpenter," he explained, "I used to be thinking of 'er all the time. If I went anywhere without 'er—she only had one night off a week and one day a month—I would always keep thinking of how she would like what I was seeing, or eating. It was a funny feeling," he added reminiscently as if entirely unable to explain it. "Somehow or other I always wanted to 'ave 'er with me, so that she might share what I was 'aving. It was a funny feeling," he repeated, and he looked from one to another with moist eyes. "Of course," he added, "I can't explain things like that. I'm not clever."

"I think, Mr. Triggs, that you've explained love in—in——" Lady Tanagra broke off and looked at Elton, who was unusually grave.

"Mr. Triggs has explained it," he replied, "in the only way in which it can be explained, and that is by being defined as unexplainable."

Mr. Triggs looked at Elton for a moment, then nodded his head violently.

"That's it, Mr. Elton, that's it. It's a feeling, not a thing that you can put into words."

Lady Tanagra looked at Patricia, who was apparently engrossed in the waving tops of the trees.

"I shall always remember your definition of love, Mr. Triggs," said Lady Tanagra with a far away look in her eyes. "I think you and Mrs. Triggs must have been very happy together."

"'Appy, me dear, that wasn't the word for it," said Mr. Triggs. "And when she was taken, I—I ——" he broke off huskily and blew his nose vigorously.

"Suppose you were very poor, Mr. Triggs," began Patricia.

"I was when I married," interrupted Mr. Triggs.

"Suppose you were very poor," continued Patricia, "and you loved someone very rich. What would you do?"

"God bless my soul! I never thought of that. You see Emily 'adn't anything. She only got sixteen pounds a year."

Lady Tanagra turned her head aside and blinked her eyes furiously.

"But suppose, Mr. Triggs," persisted Patricia, "suppose you loved someone who was very rich and you were very poor. What would you do? Would you tell them?"

For a moment Patricia allowed her eyes to glance in the direction of Elton, and saw that his gaze was fixed upon Mr. Triggs.

"But what 'as money got to do with it?" demanded Mr. Triggs, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Exactly!" said Patricia. "That's what I wanted to know."

"Money sometimes has quite a lot to do with life," remarked Elton to no one in particular.

"With life, Mr. Elton," said Mr. Triggs; "but not with love."

"You are an idealist," said Lady Tanagra.

"Am I?" said Mr. Triggs, with a smile.

"And he is also a dear," said Patricia.

Mr. Triggs looked at her and smiled.

Lady Tanagra and Elton drove off, Patricia saying that she wanted a walk. Mr. Triggs also declined Lady Tanagra's offer of a lift.

"She wanted me to bring 'er with me," announced Mr. Triggs as they strolled along by the Serpentine.

"Who did?"' enquired Patricia.

"'Ettie. Ran up to change 'er things and sent out for a taxi."

"And what did you say?" enquired Patricia.

"I didn't say anything; but when the taxi come I just slipped in and came along 'ere. Fancy 'Ettie and Lady Tanagra!" said Mr. Triggs. "No," he added a moment later. "It's no good trying to be what you ain't. If 'Ettie was to remember she's a builder's daughter, and not think she's a great lady, she'd be much 'appier," said Mr. Triggs with unconscious wisdom.

"Suppose I was to try and be like Mr. Elton," continued Mr. Triggs, "I'd look like a fool."

"We all love to have you just as you are, Mr. Triggs, and we won't allow you to change," said Patricia.

Mr. Triggs smiled happily. He was as susceptible to flattery as a young girl.

"Well, it ain't much good trying to be what you're not. I've been a working-man, and I'm not ashamed of it, and you and Lady Tanagra and Mr. Elton ain't ashamed of being seen with me. But 'Ettie, she'd no more be seen with 'er old father in Hyde Park than she'd be seen with 'im in a Turkish bath."

"We all have our weaknesses, don't you think?" said Patricia.

And Mr. Triggs agreed.

"You, for instance, have a weakness for High Society," continued Patricia.

"Me, me dear!" exclaimed Mr. Triggs in surprise.

"Yes," said Patricia, "it's no good denying it. Don't you like knowing Lord Peter and Lady Tanagra, Mr. Elton and all the rest of them?"

"It's not because they're in Society," began Mr. Triggs.

"Oh, yes it is! You imagine that you are now a very great personage. Soon you will be moving from Streatham into Park Lane, and then you will not know me."

"Oh, me dear!" said Mr. Triggs in distress.

"It's no good denying it," continued Patricia. "Look at the way you made friends with Lord Peter." Patricia was priding herself on the way in which she had led the conversation round to Bowen; but Mr. Triggs was not to be drawn.

"God bless my soul!" he cried, stopping still and removing his hat, mopping his brow vigorously. "I don't mind whether anyone has a title or not. It's just them I like. Now look at Lady Tanagra. No one would think she was a lady."

"Really, Mr. Triggs! I shall tell her if you take her character away in this manner. She's one of the most exquisitely bred people I have ever met."

Mr. Triggs looked reproachfully at Patricia.

"It's a bit 'ard on a young gal when she finds 'er father drops 'is aitches," he remarked, reverting to his daughter. "I often wonder whether I was right in giving 'Ettie such an education. She went to an 'Igh School at Eastmouth," he added. "It only made 'er dissatisfied. It was 'ard luck 'er 'aving me for a father," he concluded more to himself than to Patricia.

"I am perfectly willing to adopt you as a father, Mr. Triggs, if you are in want of adoption," said Patricia.

Mr. Triggs turned to her with a sunny smile.

"Ah! you're different, me dear. You see you're a lady born, same as Lady Tanagra; but 'Ettie ain't. That's what makes 'er sensitive like. It's a funny world," Mr. Triggs continued; "if you go about with one boot, and you 'appen to be a duke, people make a fuss of you because you're a character; but if you 'appen to be a builder and go about in the same way they call you mad."

That evening Patricia was particularly unresponsive to Mr. Bolton's attempts to engage her in conversation.

CHAPTER XVI

PATRICIA'S INCONSTANCY

Patricia's engagement and approaching marriage were the sole topics of conversation at Galvin House, at meal-times in particular. Bowen was discussed and admired from every angle and aspect. Questions rained upon Patricia. When was she likely to get married? Where was the wedding to take place? Would she go abroad for her honeymoon? Who was to provide the wedding-cake? Where did she propose to get her trousseau? Would the King and Queen be present at the wedding?

At first Patricia had endeavoured to answer coherently; but finding this useless, she soon drifted into the habit of replying at random, with the result that Galvin House received much curious information.

Miss Wangle's olive-branch was an announcement of how pleased the dear bishop would have been to marry Miss Brent and Lord Peter had he been alive.

Mr. Bolton joked as feebly as ever. Mr. Cordal masticated with his wonted vigour. Mr. Sefton became absorbed in the prospect of the raising of the military age limit, and strove to hearten himself by constant references to the time when he would be in khaki. Miss Sikkum continued to surround herself with an atmosphere of romance, and invariably returned in the evening breathless from her chaste endeavours to escape from some "awful man" who had pursued her. The reek of cooking seemed to become more obvious, and the dreariness of Sundays more

pronounced. Some times Patricia thought of leaving Galvin House for a place where she would be less notorious; but something seemed to bind her to the old associations.

As she returned each evening, her eyes instinctively wandered towards the table and the letter-rack. If there were a parcel, her heart would bound suddenly, only to resume its normal pace when she discovered that it was for someone else.

Of Lady Tanagra she saw little, news of Bowen she received none. Her most dexterous endeavours to cross-examine Mr. Triggs ended in failure. He seemed to have lost all interest in Bowen. Lady Tanagra never even mentioned his name.

Whatever the shortcomings of Lady Tanagra and Mr. Triggs in this direction, however, they were more than compensated for by Mrs. Bonsor. Her effusive friendliness Patricia found overwhelming, and her insistent hospitality, which took the form of a flood of invitations to Patricia and Bowen to lunch, dine or to do anything they chose in her house or elsewhere, was bewildering.

At last in self-defence Patricia had to tell Mrs. Bonsor that Bowen was too much occupied with his duties even to see her; but this seemed to increase rather than diminish Mrs. Bonsor's hospitable instincts, which included Lady Tanagra as well as her brother. Would not Miss Brent bring Lady Tanagra to tea or to luncheon one day? Perhaps they would take tea with Mrs. Bonsor at the Ritz one afternoon? Could they lunch at the Carlton? To all of these invitations Patricia replied with cold civility.

In her heart Mrs. Bonsor was raging against the "airs" of her husband's secretary; but she saw that Lady Tanagra and Lord Peter might be extremely useful to her and to her husband in his career. Consequently she did not by any overt sign show her pique.

One day when Patricia was taking down letters for Mr. Bonsor, Mr. Triggs burst into the library in a state of obvious excitement.

"Where's 'Ettie?" he demanded, after having saluted Patricia and Mr. Bonsor.

Mr. Bonsor looked at him reproachfully.

"'Ere, ring for 'Ettie, A. B., I've got something to show you all."

Mr. Bonsor pressed the bell. As he did so Mrs. Bonsor entered the room, having heard her father's voice.

With great empressement Mr. Triggs produced from the tail pocket of his coat a folded copy of the "Illustrated Universe". Flattening it out upon the table he moistened his thumb and finger and, with great deliberation, turned over several leaves, then indicating a page he demanded:

"What do you think of that?"

"That," was a full-page picture of Lady Tanagra walking in the Park with Mr. Triggs. The portrait of Lady Tanagra was a little indistinct; but that of Mr. Triggs was as clear as daylight, and a remarkable likeness. Underneath was printed "Lady Tanagra Bowen and a friend walking in the Park."

Mrs. Bonsor devoured the picture and then looked up at her father, a new respect in her eyes.

"What do you think of it, 'Ettie?" enquired Mr. Triggs again.

"It's a very good likeness, father," said Mrs. Bonsor weakly.

It was Patricia, however, who expressed what Mr. Triggs had anticipated.

"You're becoming a great personage, Mr. Triggs," she cried. "If you are not careful you will compromise Lady Tanagra."

Mr. Triggs chuckled with glee as he mopped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"I rang 'er up this morning," he said.

"Rang who up, father?" enquired Mrs. Bonsor.

"Lady Tan," said Mr. Triggs, watching his daughter to see the effect of the diminutive upon her.

"Was she annoyed?" enquired Mrs. Bonsor.

"Annoyed!" echoed Mr. Triggs. "Annoyed! She was that pleased she's asked me to lunch to-morrow. Why, she introduced me to a duchess last week, an' I'm goin' to 'er place to tea."

"I wish you would bring Lady Tanagra here one day, father," said Mrs. Bonsor. "Why not ask her to lunch here to-morrow?"

"Not me, 'Ettie," said Mr. Triggs wisely. "If you want the big fish, you've got to go out and catch 'em yourself."

There was a pause. Patricia hid a smile in her handkerchief. Mr. Bonsor was deep in a speech upon the question of rationing fish.

"Well, A. B., what 'ave you got to say?"

"Dear fish may mean revolution," murmured Mr. Bonsor.

Mr. Triggs looked at his son-in-law in amazement.

"What's that you say?" he demanded.

"I—I beg your pardon. I—I was thinking," apologised Mr. Bonsor.

"Now, father," said Mrs. Bonsor, "will you come into the morning-room? I want to talk to you, and I'm sure Arthur wants to get on with his work."

Mr. Triggs was reluctantly led away, leaving Patricia to continue the day's work.

Patricia now saw little of Mr. Triggs, in fact since Lady Tanagra had announced that Bowen would no longer trouble her, she found life had become singularly grey. Things that before had amused and interested her now seemed dull and tedious. Mr. Bolton's jokes were more obvious than ever, and Mr. Cordal's manners more detestable.

The constant interrogations levelled at her as to where Bowen was, and why he had not called to see her, she found difficult to answer. Several times she had gone alone to the theatre, or to a cinema, in order that it might be thought she was with Bowen. At last the strain became so intolerable that she spoke to Mrs. Craske-Morton, hinting that unless Galvin House took a little less interest in her affairs, she would have to leave.

The effect of her words was instantly manifest. Wherever she moved she seemed to interrupt whispering groups. When she entered the dining-room there would be a sudden cessation of conversation, and everyone would look up with an innocence that was too obvious to deceive even themselves. If she went into the lounge on her return from Eaton Square, the same effect was noticeable. When she was present the conversation was forced and artificial. Sentences would be begun and left unfinished, as if the speaker had suddenly remembered that the subject was taboo.

Patricia found herself wishing that they would speak out what was in their minds. Anything would be preferable to the air of mystery that seemed to pervade the whole place. She could not be unaware of the significant glances that were exchanged when it was thought she was not looking. Several times she had been asked if she were not feeling well, and her looking-glass reflected a face that was pale and drawn, with dark lines under the eyes.

One evening, when she had gone to her room directly after dinner, there was a gentle knock at her door. She opened it to find Mrs. Hamilton, looking as if it would take only a word to send her creeping away again.

"Come in, you dear little Grey Lady," cried Patricia, putting her arm affectionately round Mrs. Hamilton's small shoulders, and leading her over to a basket-chair by the window.

For some time they talked of nothing in particular. At last Mrs. Hamilton said:

"I—I hope you won't think me impertinent, my dear; but—but——"

"I should never think anything you said or did impertinent," said Patricia, smiling.

"You know——" began Mrs. Hamilton, and then broke off.

"Anyone would think you were thoroughly afraid of me," said Patricia with a smile.

"I don't like interfering," said Mrs. Hamilton, "but I am very worried."

She looked so pathetic in her anxiety that Patricia bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

"You dear little thing," she cried, "tell me what is on your mind, and I will do the best I can to help you."

"I am very—er—worried about you, my dear," began Mrs. Hamilton hesitatingly. "You are looking so pale and tired and worn. I—I fear you have something on your mind and—and——" she broke off, words failing her.

"It's the summer," replied Patricia, smiling. "I always find the hot weather trying, more trying even than Mr. Bolton's jokes," she smiled.

"Are you—are you sure it's nothing else?" said Mrs. Hamilton.

"Quite sure," said Patricia. "What else should it be?" She was conscious of her reddening cheeks.

"You ought to go out more," said Mrs. Hamilton gently. "After sitting indoors all day you want fresh air and exercise."

And with that Mrs. Hamilton had to rest content.

Patricia could not explain the absurd feeling she experienced that she might miss something if she left the house. It was all so vague, so intangible. All she was conscious of was some hidden force that seemed to bind her to the house, or, when by an effort of will she broke from its influence, seemed to draw her back again. She could not analyse the feeling, she was only conscious of its existence.

From Miss Brent she had received a characteristic reply to her letter.

"DEAR PATRICIA," she wrote,

"I have read with pain and surprise your letter. What your poor dear father would have thought I cannot conceive.

"What I did was done from the best motives, as I felt you were compromising yourself by a secret engagement.

"I am sorry to find that you have become exceedingly self-willed of late, and I fear London has done you no good.

"As your sole surviving relative, it is my duty to look after your welfare. This I promised your dear father on his death-bed.

"Gratitude I do not ask, nor do I expect it; but I am determined to do my duty by my brother's child. I cannot but deplore the tone in which you last wrote to me, and also the rather foolish threat that your letter contained.

"Your affectionate aunt,
"ADELAIDE BRENT.

"P.S.—I shall make a point of coming up to London soon. Even your rudeness will not prevent me from doing my duty by my brother's child.—A. B."

As she tore up the letter, Patricia remembered her father once saying, "Your aunt's sense of duty is the most offensive sense I have ever encountered."

One day as Patricia was endeavouring to sort out into some sort of coherence a sheaf of notes that Mr. Bonsor had made upon Botulism, Mr. Triggs entered the library. After his cheery "How goes it, me dear?" he stood for some moments gazing down at her solicitously.

"You ain't lookin' well, me dear," he said with conviction.

"That's a sure way to a woman's heart," replied Patricia gaily.

"'Ow's that, me dear?" he questioned.

"Why, telling her that she's looking plain," retorted Patricia.

Mr. Triggs protested.

"All I want is a holiday," went on Patricia. "There are only three weeks to wait and then——"

There was, however, no joy of anticipation in her voice.

"You're frettin'!"

Patricia turned angrily upon Mr. Triggs.

"Fretting! What on earth do you mean, Mr. Triggs?" she demanded.

Mr. Triggs sat down suddenly, overwhelmed by Patricia's indignation.

"Don't be cross with me, me dear." Mr. Triggs looked so like a child fearing rebuke that she was forced to smile.

"You must not say absurd things then," she retorted. "What have I got to fret about?"

Mr. Triggs quailed beneath her challenging glance. "I—I'm sorry, me dear," he said

contritely.

"Don't be sorry, Mr. Triggs," said Patricia severely; "be accurate."

"I'm sorry, me dear," repeated Mr. Triggs.

"But that doesn't answer my question," Patricia persisted. "What have I to fret about?"

Mr. Triggs mopped his brow vigorously. He invariably expressed his emotions with his handkerchief. He used it strategically, tactically, defensively, continuously. It was to him what the lines of Torres Vedras were to Wellington. He retired behind its sheltering folds, to emerge a moment later, his forces reorganised and re-arrayed. When at a loss what to say or do, it was his handkerchief upon which he fell back; if he required time in which to think, he did it behind its ample and protecting folds.

"You see, me dear," said Mr. Triggs at length, avoiding Patricia's relentless gaze, as he proceeded to stuff away the handkerchief in his tail pocket. "You see, me dear——" Again he paused. "You see, me dear," he began for a third time, "I thought you was frettin' over your work or something, when you ought to be enjoyin' yourself," he lied.

Patricia looked at him, her conscience smiting her. She smiled involuntarily.

"I never fret about anything except when you don't come to see me," she said gaily.

Mr. Triggs beamed with good-humour, his fears now quite dispelled.

"You're run down, me dear," he said with decision. "You want an 'oliday. I must speak to A. B. about it."

"If you do I shall be very angry," said Patricia; "Mr. Bonsor is always very kind and considerate."

"It—it isn't——" began Mr. Triggs, then paused.

"It isn't what?" Patricia smiled at his look of concern.

"If—if it is," began Mr. Triggs. Again he paused, then added with a gulp, "Couldn't I lend you some?"

For a moment Patricia failed to follow the drift of his remark, then when she appreciated that he was offering to lend her money she flushed. For a moment she did not reply, then seeing the anxiety stamped upon his kindly face, she said with great deliberation:

"I think you must be quite the nicest man in all the world. If ever I decide to borrow money I'll come to you first."

Mr. Triggs blushed like a schoolboy. He had fully anticipated being snubbed. He had found from experience that Patricia had of late become very uncertain in her moods.

They were interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Bonsor.

"'Ere, A. B.!" cried Mr. Triggs. "What do you mean by it?"

"Mean by what?" enquired Mr. Bonsor, busy with an imaginary speech upon street noises, suggested by a barrel-piano in the distance.

"You're working 'er too 'ard, A. B.," said Mr. Triggs with conviction.

"Working who too hard?" Mr. Bonsor looked helplessly at Patricia. He was always at a disadvantage with his father-in-law, whose bluntness of speech seemed to demoralise him.

"Mr. Triggs thinks that you are slowly killing me," laughed Patricia.

Mr. Bonsor looked uncertainly at Patricia, and Mr. Triggs gazed at Mr. Bonsor. He had no very high opinion of his daughter's husband.

"Well, mind you don't overwork 'er," said Mr. Triggs as he rose to go. A few minutes later Patricia was deep in the absorbing subject of the life history of the potato-beetle.

"Ugh!" she cried as the clock in the hall chimed five. "I hate beetles, and," she paused a moment to tuck away a stray strand of hair, "I never want to see a potato as long as I live."

That evening when she reached Galvin House she went to her room, and there subjected herself to a searching examination in the looking-glass, she was forced to confess to the paleness of her face and dark marks beneath her eyes. She explained them by summer in London, coupled with the dreariness of Arthur Bonsor, M.P., and his mania for statistics.

"You're human yeast, Patricia!" she murmured to her reflection; "at least you're paid two-and-a-half guineas a week to try to leaven the unleavenable, and you mustn't complain if sometimes

you get a little tired. Fretting!" There was indignation in her voice. "What have you got to fret about?"

With the passage of each day, however, she grew more listless and weary. She came to dread meal-times, with their irritating chatter and uninspiring array of faces that she had come almost to dislike. She was conscious of whisperings and significant looks among her fellow-boarders. She resented even Gustave's cow-like gaze of sympathetic anxiety as she declined the food he offered her.

Lady Tanagra and Mr. Triggs never asked her out. Everybody seemed suddenly to have deserted her. Sometimes she would catch a glimpse of them in the Park on Sunday morning Once she saw Bowen; but he did not see her. "The daily round and common task" took on a new and sinister meaning for her. Sometimes her thoughts would travel on a few years into the future. What did it hold for her? Instinctively she shuddered at the loneliness of it all.

One afternoon on her return to Galvin House, Gustave opened the door. He had evidently been on the watch. His kindly face was beaming with goodwill.

"Oh, mees!" he cried. "Mees Brent is here."

"Aunt Adelaide!" cried Patricia, her heart sinking. Then seeing the comical lock of indecision upon Gustave's face caused by her despairing exclamation she laughed.

When she entered the lounge, it was to find Miss Brent sitting upright upon the stiffest chair in the middle of the room. Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe were seated together in the extreme corner, Mrs. Barnes and two or three others were grouped by the window. The atmosphere was tense. Something had apparently happened. Patricia learned that from the grim set of Miss Brent's mouth.

"I want to talk to you, Patricia," Miss Brent announced after the customary greeting.

"Yes, Aunt Adelaide," said Patricia, sinking into a chair with a sigh of resignation.

"Somewhere private," said Miss Brent.

"There is no privacy at Galvin House," murmured Patricia, "except in the bathroom."

"Patricia, don't be indelicate," snapped Miss Brent.

"I'm not indelicate, Aunt Adelaide, I'm merely being accurate," said Patricia wearily.

"Cannot we go to your room?" enquired Miss Brent.

"Impossible!" announced Patricia. "It's like an oven by now. The sun is on it all the afternoon. Besides," continued Patricia, "my affairs are public property here. We are quite a commune. We have everything in common—except our toothbrushes," she added as an afterthought.

"Well! Let us get over there."

Miss Brent rose and made for the corner farthest from Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. Patricia followed her wearily.

"I've just snubbed those two women," announced Miss Brent, as she seated herself in a basket-chair that squeaked protestingly.

"There were indications of electricity in the air," remarked Patricia calmly.

"I want to have a serious talk with you, Patricia," said Miss Brent in her best it's-my-duty-cost-it-what-it-may manner.

"How can anyone be serious in this heat?" protested Patricia.

"I owe it to your poor dear father to——"

"This debtor and creditor business is killing romance," murmured Patricia.

"I have your welfare to consider," proceeded Miss Brent. "I——"

"Don't you think you've done enough mischief already, Aunt Adelaide?" enquired Patricia coolly.

"Mischief! I?" exclaimed Miss Brent in astonishment.

Patricia nodded.

"As your sole surviving relative it is my duty——"

"Don't you think," interrupted Patricia, "that just for once you could neglect your duty? Sin is wonderfully exhilarating."

"Patricia!" almost shrieked Miss Brent, horror in her eyes. "Are you mad?"

"No," replied Patricia, "only a little weary."

"You must have a tonic," announced Miss Brent.

Patricia shuddered. She still remembered her childish sufferings resulting from Miss Brent's interpretation and application of The Doctor at Home. She was convinced that she had swallowed every remedy the book contained, and been rubbed with every liniment its pages revealed.

"No, Aunt Adelaide," she said evenly. "All I require is that you should cease interfering in my affairs."

"How dare you! How——" Miss Brent paused wordless.

"I am prepared to accept you as an aunt," continued Patricia, outwardly calm; but almost stifled by the pounding of her heart. "It is God's will; but if you persist in assuming the mantle of Mrs. Grundy, combined with the Infallibility of the Pope, then I must protest."

"Protest!" repeated Miss Brent, repeating the word as if not fully comprehending its meaning.

"If I am able to earn my own living, then I am able to conduct my own love affairs."

"But——" began Miss Brent.

"I am sorry to appear rude, Aunt Adelaide, but it is much better to be frank. I am sure you mean well; but the fact of your being my sole surviving relative places me at a disadvantage. If there were two of you or three, you could quarrel about me, and thus preserve the balance. Now let us talk about something else."

For once in her life Miss Brent was nonplussed. She regarded her niece as if she had been a two-tailed giraffe, or a double-headed mastodon. Had she been American she would have known it to be brain-storm; as it was she decided that Patricia was sickening for some serious illness that had produced a temperature.

In all her experience of "the Family" never once had Miss Brent been openly defied in this way, and she had no reserves upon which to fall back. She held personal opinion and inclination must always take secondary place to "the Family." The individual must be sacrificed to the group, provided the individual were not herself. Births, deaths, marriages, christenings, funerals, weddings, were solemn functions that must be regarded as involving not the principals themselves so much as their relatives. Her doctrine was, although she would not have expressed it so philosophically, that the individual is mortal; but the family is immortal.

That anyone lived for himself or herself never seemed to occur to Miss Brent. If their actions were acceptable to the family and at the same time pleased the principals, then so much the better for the principals; if, on the other hand, the family disapproved, then the duty of the principals was clear.

This open flouting of her prides and her prejudices was to Miss Brent a great blow. It seemed to stun her. She was at a loss how to proceed; all she realised was that she must save "the Family" at any cost.

"Now tell me what happened when you came in," said Patricia sweetly.

"I must be going," said Miss Brent solemnly.

"Must you?" enquired Patricia politely; but rising lest her aunt should change her mind.

"Now remember," said Patricia as they walked along the hall, "you've lost me one matrimonial fish. If I get another nibble you must keep out of——"

But Miss Brent had fled.

"Well, that's that!" sighed Patricia as she walked slowly upstairs.

CHAPTER XVII

LADY PEGGY MAKES A FRIEND

One Sunday morning as Patricia was sitting in the Park watching the promenaders and feeling very lonely, she saw coming across the grass towards her Godfrey Elton accompanied by a pretty dark girl in an amber costume and a black hat. She bowed her acknowledgment of

Elton's salute, and watched the pair as they passed on in the direction of Marble Arch.

Suddenly the girl stopped and turned. For a moment Elton stood irresolute, then he also turned and they both walked in Patricia's direction.

"Lady Peggy insisted that we should break in upon your solitude," said Elton, having introduced the two girls.

"You will forgive me, won't you?" said Lady Peggy, "but I so wanted to know you. You see Peter has the reputation of being invulnerable. We're all quite breathless from our fruitless endeavours to entangle him, and I wanted to see what you were like."

"I'm afraid you'll find I'm quite common-place," said Patricia, smiling. It was impossible to be annoyed with Lady Peggy. Her frankness was disarming, and her curiosity that of a child.

"I always say," bubbled Lady Peggy, "that there are only two men in London worth marrying, and they neither of them will have me, although I've worked most terribly hard."

"Who are they?" enquired Patricia.

"Oh! Goddy's one," she said, indicating Elton with a nod, "and Peter's the other. They are both prepared to be brothers to me; but they're not sufficiently generous to save me from dying an old maid."

"I must apologise for inflicting Peggy upon you, Miss Brent," said Elton; "but when you get to know her you may even like her."

"I'm not going to wait until I know her," said Patricia.

"Bravo!" cried Lady Peggy, clapping her hands. "That's a snub for you, Goddy," she said, then turning again to Patricia, "I know we're going to be friends, and you can afford to be generous to a defeated rival."

"I must warn you against Lady Peggy," said Elton quietly. "She's a most dangerous young woman."

"And now, Patricia," said Lady Peggy, "I'm going to call you Patricia, and you must call me Peggy. I want you to do me a very great favour."

Patricia looked at the girl, rather bewildered and breathless by the precipitancy with which she made friends. "I'm sure I will if I possibly can," she replied.

"I want you to come and lunch with us," said Lady Peggy.

"It's very kind of you, I shall be delighted some day," replied Patricia conventionally.

"No, now!" said Lady Peggy. "This very day that ever is. I want you to meet Daddy. He's such a dear. Goddy will come, so you won't be lonely," she added.

"I'm afraid I've got——" began Patricia.

"Please don't be afraid you've got anything," pleaded Lady Peggy. "If you've got an engagement throw it over. Everybody throws over engagements for me."

"But——" began Patricia.

"Oh, please don't be tiresome," said Lady Peggy, screwing up her eyebrows. "I shall have all I can do to persuade Goddy to come, and it's so exhausting."

"I will come with pleasure," said Elton, "if only to protect Miss Brent from your overwhelming friendliness."

"Oh, you odious creature!" cried Lady Peggy, then turning to Patricia she added with mock tragedy in her voice, "Oh! the love I've languished on that man, the gladness of the eyes I have turned upon him, the pressures of the hand I've been willing to bestow on him, and this is how he treats me." Then with a sudden change she added, "But you will come, won't you? I do so want you to meet Daddy."

"If the truth must be told," said Elton, "Peggy merely wants to be able to exploit you, as everybody is wanting to know about you and what you are like. Now she will be a celebrity, and able to describe you in detail to all her many men friends and to her women enemies."

Lady Peggy deliberately turned her back upon Elton.

"Now we are going to have another little walk and then we'll go and get our nosebags on," she announced. "No, you're not going to walk between us"—this to Elton—"I want to be next to Patricia," she announced.

Patricia felt bewildered by the suddenness with which Lady Peggy had descended upon her.

She scarcely listened to the flow of small talk she kept up. She was conscious that Elton's hand was constantly at the salute, and that Lady Peggy seemed to be indulging in a series of continuous bows.

"Oh! do let's get away somewhere," cried Lady Peggy at length. "My neck aches, and I feel my mouth will set in a silly grin. Why on earth do we know so many people, Goddy? Do you know," she added mischievously, "I'd love to have a big megaphone and stand on a chair and cry out who you are. Then everybody would flock round, because they all want to know who it is that has captured Peter the Hermit, as we call him." She looked at Patricia appraisingly. "I think I can understand now," she said.

"Understand what?" said Patricia.

"What it is in you that attracts Peter."

Patricia gasped. "Really," she began.

"Yes, we girls have all been trying to make love to Peter and fuss over him, whereas you would rather snub him, and that's very good for Peter. It's just the sort of thing that would attract him." Then with another sudden change she turned to Elton and said, "Goddy, in future I'm going to snub you, then perhaps you'll love me."

Patricia laughed outright. She felt strongly drawn to this inconsequent child-girl. She found herself wondering what would be the impression she would create upon the Galvin House coterie, who would find all their social and moral virtues inverted by such directness of speech. She could see Miss Wangle's internal struggle, disapproval of Lady Peggy's personality mingling with respect for her rank.

"Oh, there's Tan!" Lady Peggy broke in upon Patricia's thoughts "Goddy, call to her, shout, wave your hat. Haven't you got a whistle?"

But Lady Tanagra had seen the party, and was coming towards them accompanied by Mr. Triggs.

Lady Peggy danced towards Lady Tanagra. "Oh, Tan, I've found her!" she cried, nodding to Mr. Triggs, whom she appeared to know.

"Found whom?" enquired Lady Tanagra.

"Patricia. The captor of St. Anthony, and we're going to be friends, and she's coming to lunch with me to meet Daddy, and Goddy's coming too, so don't you dare to carry him off. Oh, Mr. Triggs! isn't it a lovely day," she cried, turning to Mr. Triggs, who, hat in hand, was mopping his brow.

"Beautiful, me dear, beautiful," he exclaimed, beaming upon her and turning to shake hands with Patricia. "Well, me dear, how goes it?" he enquired. Then looking at her keenly he added, "Why, you're looking much better."

Patricia smiled, conscious that the improvement in her looks was not a little due to Lady Peggy and her bright chatter.

"You've become such a gad-about, Mr. Triggs, that you forget poor me," she said.

"Oh no, he doesn't!" broke in Lady Peggy, "he's always talking about you. Whenever I try to make love to him he always drags you in. I've really come to hate you, Patricia, because you seem to come between me and all my love affairs. Oh! I wish we could find Peter," cried Lady Peggy suddenly, "that would complete the party."

Patricia hoped fervently that they would not come across Bowen. She saw that it would make the situation extremely awkward.

"And now we must dash off for lunch," cried Lady Peggy, "or we shall be late and Daddy will be cross." She shook hands with Mr. Triggs, blew a kiss at Lady Tanagra and, before Patricia knew it, she was walking with Lady Peggy and Elton in the direction of Curzon Street.

Patricia was in some awe of meeting the Duke of Gayton. Hitherto she had encountered only the smaller political fry, friends and acquaintances of Mr. Bonsor, who had always treated her as a secretary. The Duke had been in the first Coalition Ministry, but had been forced to retire on account of a serious illness.

"Look whom I've caught!" cried Lady Peggy as she bubbled into the dining-room, where some twelve or fourteen guests were in process of seating themselves at the table. "Look whom I've caught! Daddy," she addressed herself to a small clean-shaven man, with beetling eyebrows and a broad, intellectual head. "It's the captor of Peter the Hermit."

The Duke smiled and shook hands with Patricia.

"You must come and sit by me," he said in particularly sweet and well-modulated voice, which

seemed to give the lie to the somewhat stern and searching appearance of his eyes. "Peter is a great friend of mine."

Patricia was conscious of flushed cheeks as she took her seat next to the Duke. Later she discovered that these Sunday luncheons were always strictly informal, no order of precedence being observed. Young and old were invited, grave and gay. The talk was sometimes frivolous, sometimes serious. Sunday was, in the Duke's eyes, a day of rest, and conversation must follow the path of least resistance.

Whilst the other guests were seating themselves, Patricia looked round the table with interest. She recognised a well-known Cabinet Minister and a bishop. Next to her on the other side was a man with hungry, searching eyes, whose fair hair was cropped so closely to his head as to be almost invisible. Later she learned that he was a Serbian patriot, who had prepared a wonderful map of New Serbia, which he always carried with him. Elton had described it as "the map that passeth all understanding."

It embraced Bulgaria, Roumania, Transylvania, Montenegro, Greece, Albania, Bessarabia, and portions of other countries.

"It's a sort of game," Lady Peggy explained later. "If you can escape without his having produced his map, then you've won," she added.

At first the Duke devoted himself to Patricia, obviously with the object of placing her at her ease. She was fascinated by his voice. He had the reputation of being a brilliant talker; but Patricia decided that even if he had possessed the most commonplace ideas, he would have invested them with a peculiar interest on account of the whimsical tones in which he expressed them. He was a man of remarkable dignity of bearing, and Patricia decided that she would be able to feel very much afraid of him.

In answer to a question Patricia explained that she had only met Lady Peggy that morning.

"And what do you think of Peggy's whirlwind methods?" asked the Duke with a smile.

"I think they are quite irresistible," replied Patricia.

"She makes friends quicker than anyone I ever met and keeps them longer," said the Duke.

Presently the conversation turned on the question of the re-afforestation of Great Britain, springing out of a remark made by the Cabinet Minister to the Duke. Soon the two, aided by a number of other guests, were deep in the intricacies of politics. During a lull in the conversation the Duke turned to Patricia.

"I am afraid this is all very dull for you, Miss Brent," he remarked pleasantly.

"On the contrary," said Patricia, "I am greatly interested."

"Interested in politics?" questioned the Duke with a tinge of surprise in his voice.

Gradually Patricia found herself drawn into the conversation. For the first time in her life she found her study of Blue Books and her knowledge of statistics of advantage and use. The Cabinet Minister leaned forward with interest. The other guests had ceased their local conversation to listen to what it was that was so clearly interesting their host and the Cabinet Minister. In Patricia's remarks there was the freshness of unconvention. The old political war-horses saw how things appeared to an intelligent contemporary who was not trammelled by tradition and parliamentary procedure.

Suddenly Patricia became aware that she had monopolised the conversation and that everyone was listening to her. She flushed and stopped.

"Please go on," said the Cabinet Minister; "don't stop, it's most interesting."

But Patricia had become self-conscious. However, the Duke with great tact picked up the thread, and soon the conversation became general.

As they rose from the table the Duke whispered to Patricia, "Don't hurry away, please, I want to have a chat with you after the others have gone."

As they went to the drawing-room, Lady Peggy came up to Patricia and linking her arm in hers, said:

"I'm dreadfully afraid of you now, Patricia. Why everybody was positively drinking in your words. Wherever did you learn so much?"

"You cannot be secretary to a rising politician," said Patricia with a smile, "without learning a lot of statistics. I have to read up all sorts of things about pigs and babies and beet-root and street-noises and all sorts of objectionable things."

"What do you think of her, Goddy?" cried Lady Peggy to Elton as he joined them.

"I'm afraid she has made me feel very ignorant," replied Elton. "Just as you, Peggy, always make me feel very wise."

In the drawing-room the Serbian attached himself to Patricia and produced his "map of obliteration," as the Duke had once called it, explaining to her at great length how nearly all the towns and cities in Europe were for the most part populated by Serbs.

It was obvious to her, from the respect with which she was treated, that her remarks at luncheon had made a great impression.

When most of the other guests had departed, the Duke walked over to her, and dismissing Peggy, entered into a long conversation on political and parliamentary matters. He was finally interrupted by Lady Peggy.

"Look here, Daddy, if you steal my friends I shall——" she paused, then turning to Elton she said, "What shall I do, Goddy?"

"Well, you might marry and leave him," suggested Elton helpfully.

"That's it. I will marry and leave you all alone, Daddy."

"Cannot we agree to share Miss Brent?" suggested the Duke, smiling at Patricia.

"Isn't he a dear?" enquired Lady Peggy of Patricia. "When other men propose to me, and quite a lot have," she added with almost childish simplicity, "I always mentally compare them with Daddy, and then of course I know I don't want them."

"That is my one reason, Peggy, for not proposing," said Elton. "I could never enter the lists with the Duke."

"You're a pair of ridiculous children," laughed the Duke.

In response to a murmur from Patricia that she must be going, Lady Peggy insisted that she should first come upstairs and see her den.

The "den" was a room of orderly disorder, which seemed to possess the freshness and charm of its owner. Lady Peggy looked at Patricia, a new respect in her eyes.

"You must be frightfully clever," she said with accustomed seriousness. "I wish I were like that. You see I should be more of a companion to Daddy if I were."

"I think you are an ideal companion for him you are," said Patricia.

"Oh! he's so wonderful," said Lady Peggy dreamily. "You know I'm not always such a fool I appear," she added quite seriously, "and I do sometimes think of other things than frills and flounces and chocolates." Then with a sudden change of mood she cried, "Wasn't it clever of me capturing you to-day? As soon as you're alone Daddy will tell me what he thinks of you, and I shall feel so self-important."

As Patricia looked about the room, charmed with its dainty freshness, her eyes lighted upon a large metal tea-tray. Lady Peggy following her gaze cried:

"Oh, the magic carpet!"

"The what?" enquired Patricia.

"That's the magic carpet. Come, I'll show you," and seizing it she preceded Patricia to the top of the stairs. "Now sit on it," she cried, "and toboggan down. It's priceless."

"But I couldn't."

"Yes you could. Everybody does," cried Lady Peggy.

Not quite knowing what she was doing Patricia found herself forced down upon the tea-tray, and the next thing she knew was she was speeding down the stairs at a terrific rate.

Just as she arrived in the hall with flushed cheeks and a flurry of skirts, the door of the library opened and the Duke and Elton came out.

Patricia gathered herself together, and with flaming cheeks and downcast eyes stood like a child expecting rebuke, instead of which the Duke merely smiled. Turning to Elton he remarked:

"So Miss Brent has received her birth certificate."

As he spoke the butler with sedate decorum picked up the tray and carried it into his pantry as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world for guests to toboggan down the front staircase.

"To ride on Peggy's 'magic carpet,' as she calls it," said the Duke, "is to be admitted to the household as a friend. Come again soon," he added as he shook hands in parting. "Any Sunday at

lunch you are always sure to catch us. We never give special invitations to the friends we want, do we, Peggy? and I want to have some more talks with you."

As Patricia and Elton walked towards the Park he explained that Lady Peggy's tea-tray had figured in many little comedies. Bishops, Cabinet Ministers, great generals and admirals had all descended the stairs in the way Patricia had.

"In fact," he added, "when the Duke was in the Cabinet, it was the youngest and brightest collection of Ministers in the history of the country. Every one of them was devoted to Peggy, and I think they would have made war or peace at her command."

When Patricia arrived at Galvin House, she was conscious of the world having changed since the morning. All her gloom had been dispelled, the drawn look had passed from her face, and she felt that a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE AIR RAID

"Miss Brent, please get up. There's an air raid."

Mechanically Patricia sat up in bed and listened. Outside a police-whistle was droning its raucous warning; within there was the sound of frightened whispers and the noise of the opening and shutting of doors. Suddenly there was a shriek, followed by a low murmur of several voices. The sound of the police-whistle continued, gradually dying away in the distance, and the noises within the house ceased.

Patricia strained her ears to catch the first sound of the defensive guns. She had no intention of getting up for a false alarm. For some minutes there was silence, then came a slight murmur, half sob, half sigh, as if London were breathing heavily in her sleep, another followed, then half a dozen in quick succession growing louder with every report. Suddenly came the scream of a "whiz-bang" and the thunder of a large gun. Soon the orchestra was in full swing.

Still Patricia listened. She was fascinated. Why did guns sound exactly as if large plank were being dropped? Why did the report seem as if something were bouncing? Suddenly a terrific report, a sound as if a giant plank had been dropped and had "bounced." A neighbouring gun had given tongue, another followed.

She jumped out of bed and proceeded to pull on her stockings. There was a gentle tapping at her door, not the peremptory summons that had awakened her and which, by the voice that had accompanied it, she recognised as that of Mrs. Craske-Morton.

"What is it?" she called out.

"It's me, mees." Patricia could scarcely recognise in the terrified accents the voice of Gustave. "It's a raid. Oh! mees, please come down."

"All right, Gustave. I shall be down in a minute," replied Patricia, and she heard a flurry of retreating footsteps. Gustave was descending to safety. There was about him nothing of the Roman sentry.

Patricia proceeded with her toilette, hastened, in spite of herself, by a tremendous crash which she recognised as a bomb.

At Galvin House "Raid Instructions" had been posted in each room. Guests were instructed to hasten with all possible speed downstairs to the basement-kitchen, where tea and coffee would be served and, if necessary, bandages and first-aid applied. Miss Sikkum had made a superficial study of Red Cross work from a shilling manual but as, according to her own confession, she fainted at the sight of blood, no very great reliance was placed in her ministrations.

As Patricia entered the kitchen her first inclination was to laugh at the amazing variety, not only of toilettes, but of expressions that met her eyes. Self-confident in the knowledge that she was fully dressed, she looked about her with interest.

"Oh, here you are, Miss Brent!" exclaimed Mrs. Craske-Morton, who was busily engaged in preparing the tea and coffee of the "Raid Instructions." "Gustave would insist on going up to call you a second time. We were——" Mrs. Craske-Morton broke off her sentence and dashed for the gas-stove, where the milk was boiling over.

"Oh, mees!" Patricia turned to Gustave. She bit her lip fiercely to restrain the laugh that bubbled up at the sight of the major-domo of Galvin House.

Above a pair of black trousers, tucked in the tops of unlaced boots, and from which the braces flapped aimlessly, was visible the upper part of a red flannel night-shirt. The remainder was bestowed beneath the upper part of the trousers, giving to his figure a curiously knobbly appearance. His face was leaden-coloured and his upstanding hair more erect than ever, whilst in his eyes was Fear.

He was trembling in every limb, and his jaw shook as he uttered his expression of relief at the sight of Patricia. She smiled at him, then suddenly remembering that, in spite of his terror, he had voluntarily gone up to the top of the house to call her, she felt something strangely uncomfortable at the back of her throat.

"Come along, Gustave!" she cried brightly. "Let us help get the tea. I'm so thirsty."

From that moment Gustave appeared to take himself in hand, and save for a violent start, at the more vigorous reports, seemed to have overcome his terror.

As Patricia proceeded to assist Mrs. Craske-Morton, a veritable heroine in a pink flannel wrapper, she took stock of her fellows. Miss Wangle was engaged in prayer and tears, her wig was awry, her face drawn and yellow and her clothes the garb of advanced maidenhood. On her feet were bed-socks, half thrust into felt slippers. From beneath a black quilted dressing-gown peeped with virtuous pride the longcloth of a nightdress of Victorian severity.

Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe was in curl-papers and a faded blue kimono that allowed no suggestion to escape of the form beneath. Miss Sikkum had seized a grey raincoat, above which a forest of curl papers looked strangely out of place. Her fingers moved restlessly. The two top buttons of the raincoat were missing, displaying a wealth of blue ribbon and openwork that none had suspected in her. The lateness at which the ribbon and openwork began gave an interesting demonstration in feminine bone structure.

Mr. Sefton was splendid in a purple dressing-gown with orange cord and tassels, and red and white striped pyjamas beneath. Mr. Sefton had chosen his raid-costume with elaborate care; but the suddenness of the alarm had not allowed of the arrangement of his hair, most of which hung down behind in a sandy cascade. His manner was the forced heroic. He was smoking a cigarette with a too obvious nonchalance to deceive. The heroes of Mr. Sefton's imagination always lit cigarettes when facing death. They were of the type that seizes a revolver when the ship is sinking and, with one foot placed negligently upon the capstan (Mr. Sefton had not the most remote idea of what a capstan was like) shouted, "Women and children first."

He walked about the kitchen with what he meant to be a smile upon his pale lips. The cigarette he found a nuisance. If he held it between his lips the smoke got in his eyes and made them stream with water; if, on the other hand, he held it between his fingers, it emphasized the shaking of his hand. He compromised by letting it go out between his lips, arguing that the effect was the same.

Mr. Bolton had donned his fez and velvet smoking-jacket above creased white pyjama trousers that refused to meet the tops of his felt slippers. Mr. Bolton continued to make "jokes," for the same reason that Mr. Sefton smoked a cigarette.

Mr. Cordal was negative in a big ulster with a hem of nightshirt beneath, leaving about eight inches of fleshless shin before his carpet slippers with the fur-tops were reached. He sat gazing with unseeing eyes at the cook huddled up opposite, moaning as she held her heart with a fat, dirty hand.

Mrs. Barnes, the victim of indecision, had leapt straight out of bed, gathered her clothes in her arms and had flown to safety. She walked about the kitchen aimlessly, dropping and retrieving various garments, which she stuffed back again into the bundle she carried under her arm.

Mrs. Craske-Morton was practical and courageous. Her one thought was to prepare the promised refreshments. Her staff, with the exception of Gustave, was useless, and she was grateful to Patricia for her assistance.

Outside pandemonium was raging, the noise of the barrage was diabolical, the "bouncing" of the heavy guns, the screams of the "whiz-bangs," the cackle of machine-guns from aeroplanes overhead; all seemed to tell of death and chaos.

Suddenly the puny sound of guns was drowned in one gigantic uproar. For a moment the place was plunged in darkness, then the electric light shuddered into being again. The glass flew from the windows, the house rocked as if uncertain whether or no it should collapse. Miss Wangle slipped on to her knees, her wig slipped on to her left ear.

"Oh, my God!" screamed the cook, as if to ensure exclusive rights to the Deity's attention.

Jenny, the housemaid, entirely unconscious that her nightdress was her sole garment, threw herself flat on her face. Mrs. Craske-Morton, who was pouring out tea, let the teapot slip from her hand, smashing the cup and pouring the contents on to the table. Gustave's knees refused their office and he sank down, grasping with both hands the edge of the table. Mrs. Barnes

dropped her clothes without troubling to retrieve them.

Suddenly there was a terrifying scream outside, then a motor-car drew up and the sound of men's voices was heard.

Still the guns thundered. Patricia felt herself trembling. For a moment a rush of blood seemed to suffocate her, then she found herself gazing at Miss Wangle, wondering whether she were praying to God or to the bishop. She laughed in a voice unrecognisable to herself. She looked about the kitchen. Mr. Sefton had sunk down upon a chair, the cigarette still attached to his bloodless lower lip, his arms hanging limply down beside him. Mr. Cordal was looking about him as if dazed, whilst Mr. Bolton was gazing at the glassless window-frames, as if expecting some apparition to appear.

"It's a bomb next door," gasped Mrs. Craske-Morton, then remembering her responsibilities, she caught Patricia's eye. There was appeal in her glance.

"Come along, Gustave," cried Patricia in a voice that she still found it difficult to recognise as her own.

Gustave, still on his knees, looked round and up at her with the eyes of a dumb animal that knows it is about to be tortured.

"Gustave, get up and help with the tea," said Patricia.

A look of wonder crept into Gustave's eyes at the unaccustomed tone of Patricia's voice. Slowly he dragged himself up, as if testing the capacity of each knee to support the weight of his body.

"There's brandy there," said Mrs. Craske-Morton, pointing to a spirit-case she had brought down with her. "Here's the key."

Patricia took the key from her trembling hand, noting that her own was shaking violently.

"Mrs. Morton," she whispered, "you are splendid."

Mrs. Morton smiled wanly, and Patricia felt that in that moment she had got to know the woman beneath the boarding-house keeper.

"Shall we put it in their tea?" enquired Patricia, holding the decanter of brandy.

Mrs. Craske-Morton nodded.

"Now, Gustave!" cried Patricia, "make everybody drink tea."

Gustave looked at his own hands, and then down at his knees as if in doubt as to whether he possessed the power of making them obey his wishes.

Miss Wangle was still on her knees, the cook was appealing to the Almighty with tiresome reiteration. Jenny had developed hysterics, and was seated on the ground drumming with her heels upon the floor, Miss Sikkum gazing at her as if she had been some phenomenon from another world. Mr. Bolton had valiantly pulled himself together and was endeavouring to persuade Mrs. Barnes to accept the various garments that he was picking up from the floor. Her only acknowledgment of his gallantry was to gaze at him with dull, unseeing eyes, and to wag her head from side to side as if in repudiation of the ownership of what he was striving to get her to take from him.

Mr. Sefton, valiant to the end, was with trembling fingers endeavouring to extract a cigarette from his case, apparently unconscious that one was still attached to his lip. Mrs. Craske-Morton, Patricia and Gustave set themselves to work to pour tea and brandy down the throats of the others. Mr. Sefton took his mechanically and put it to his lips, oblivious of the cigarette that still dangled there. Finding an obstruction he put up his hand and pulled the cigarette away and with it a portion of the skin of his lip. For the rest of the evening he was dabbing his mouth with his pocket-handkerchief.

Gustave had valiantly gone to the assistance of Jenny, and was endeavouring to pour tea through her closed teeth, with the result that it streamed down the neck of her nightdress. The effect was the same, however. As she felt the hot fluid on her chest she screamed, stopped drumming with her heels and looked about the kitchen.

"You've scalded me, you beast!" she cried, whereat Gustave, who was sitting on his heels, started and fell backwards, bringing Miss Sikkum down on top of him together with her cup of tea.

Mrs. Craske-Morton was ministering to Miss Wangle and Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe. Mr. Bolton and Mr. Cordal were both drinking neat brandy out of teacups.

Outside the guns still thundered and screamed.

Patricia went to the assistance of the cook; kneeling down she persuaded her to drink a cup of tea and brandy, which had the effect of silencing her appeals to the Almighty.

For an hour the "guests" of Galvin House waited, exactly what for no one knew. Then the noise of the firing began to die away in waves of sound. There would be a few minutes' silence but for the distant rumble of guns, then suddenly a spurt of firing as if the guns were reluctant to forget their former anger. Another period of silence would follow, then two or three isolated reports, like the snarl of dogs that had been dragged from their prey. Finally quiet.

For a further half-hour Galvin House waited, praying that the attack would not be renewed. There were little spurts of conversation. Mr. Sefton was slowly returning to the "foot on the Capstan" attitude, and actually had a cigarette alight. Mr. Bolton and Mr. Cordal were speculating as to where the bomb had fallen. Mrs. Craske-Morton was wondering if the Government would pay promptly for the damage to her glass.

Outside there were sounds of life and movement, cars were throbbing and passing to and fro, and men's voices could be heard. Suddenly there was a loud peal of the street-door bell. All looked at each other in consternation. Gustave looked about him as if he had lost a puppy. Mrs. Craske-Morton looked at Gustave.

"Gustave!" said Patricia, surprised at her own calm.

Gustave looked at her for a moment then, remembering his duties, went slowly to the door, listening the while as if expecting a further bombardment to break out. With the exception of Miss Wangle and the cook, everybody was on the qui vive of expectation.

"It's the police," suggested Mrs. Craske-Morton, with conviction.

"Or the ambulance," ventured Miss Sikkum in a trembling voice. "They're collecting the dead," she added optimistically.

All eyes were riveted upon the kitchen door. Steps were heard descending the stairs. A moment later the door was thrown open and Gustave in a voice strangely unlike his own announced:

"'Ees Lordship, madame."

Bowen entered the kitchen and cast a swift look about him. A light of relief passed over his face as he saw Patricia. Some instinct that she could neither explain nor control caused her to go over to him, and before she knew what was taking place both her hands were in his.

"Thank God!" he breathed. "I was afraid it was this house. I heard a bomb had dropped here. Oh, my dear! I've been in hell!"

There was something in his voice that thrilled her as she had never been thrilled before. She looked up at him smiling, then suddenly with a great content she remembered that she had dressed herself with care.

Bowen looked about him, and seeing Mrs. Craske-Morton, went over and shook hands.

"She's a regular heroine, Peter," said Patricia, unconscious that she had used his name. "She's been so splendid."

Mrs. Craske-Morton smiled at Patricia, again her human smile.

"Oh! go away, make him go away!" It was Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe who spoke. Her words had an electrifying effect upon everyone. Miss Wangle sat up and made feverish endeavours to straighten her wig. Jenny, the housemaid, looked round for cover that was nowhere available. The cook became aware of her lack of clothing. Miss Sikkum strove to minimise the exhibition of feminine bone-structure. Mrs. Barnes made a dive for Mr. Bolton, who was still holding various of her garments that he had retrieved. These she seized from him as if he had been a pickpocket, and thrust them under her arm.

"Oh, please go away!" moaned the cook.

"Come upstairs," said Patricia as she led the way out of the kitchen, to the relief of those whose reawakened modesty saw in Bowen's presence an outrage to decorum. Switching on the light in the lounge, Patricia threw herself into a chair. She was beginning to feel the reaction.

"Why did you come?" she asked.

"I heard that a bomb had fallen in this street and—-well, I had to come. I was never in such a funk in all my life."

"How did you get round here; did you bring the car?"

"No, I couldn't get the car out, I walked it," said Bowen briefly.

"That was very sweet of you," said Patricia gratefully, looking up at him in a way she had never looked at him before. "And now I think you must be going. We must all go to bed again."

"Yes, the 'All Clear' will sound soon, I think," replied Bowen.

They moved out into the hall. For a moment they stood looking at each other, then Bowen took both her hands in his. "I am so glad, Patricia," he said, gazing into her eyes, then suddenly he bent down and kissed her full on the lips.

Dropping her hands and without another word he picked up his cap and let himself out, leaving Patricia standing gazing in front of her. For a moment she stood, then turning as one in a dream, walked slowly upstairs to her room.

"I wonder why I let him do that?" she murmured as she stood in front of the mirror unpinning her hair.

CHAPTER XIX

GALVIN HOUSE AFTER THE RAID

The next day and for many days Galvin House abandoned itself to the raid. The air was full of rumours of the appalling casualties resulting from the bomb that had been dropped in the next street. No one knew anything, everyone had heard something. The horrors confided to each other by the residents at Galvin House would have kept the Grand Guignol in realism for a generation.

Silent herself, Patricia watched with interest the ferment around her. With the exception of Mrs. Craske-Morton, all seemed to desire most of all to emphasize their own attitude of splendid intellectual calm during the raid. They spoke scornfully of acquaintances who had flown from London because of the danger from bomb-dropping Gothas, they derided the Thames Valley aliens, they talked heroically and patriotically about "standing their bit of bombing." In short Galvin House had become a harbour of heroism.

Mrs. Craske-Morton, who had shown a calmness and courage that none of the others seemed to recognise, had nothing to say except about her broken glass; on this subject, however, she was eloquent. Miss Wangle managed to convey to those who would listen that her own safety, and in fact that of Galvin House, was directly due to the intercession of the bishop, who when alive was particularly noted for the power and sustained eloquence of his prayers.

Mr. Bolton was frankly sceptical. If the august prelate was out to save Galvin House, he suggested, it wasn't quite cricket to let them drop a bomb in the next street.

Everyone was extremely critical of everyone else. Mr. Bolton said things about Mrs. Barnes and her clothes that made Miss Sikkum blush, particularly about the nose, where, with her, emotion always first manifested itself. Mr. Sefton had permanently returned to the "women and children first" phase and, as two cigarettes were missing from his case, he was convinced that he had acquitted himself with that air of reckless bravado that endeared a man to women. He talked pityingly and tolerantly of Gustave's obvious terror.

Mr. Bolton saw in the adventure material for jokes for months to come. He laboured at the subject with such misguided industry that Patricia felt she almost hated him. Some of his allusions, particularly to the state of sartorial indecision in which the maids had sought cover, were "not quite nice," as Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe expressed it to Mrs. Hamilton, who returned from a visit the day following.

At breakfast everyone had talked, and in consequence everyone who worked was late for work; the general opinion being, what was the use of a raid unless you could be late for work? Punctuality on such occasions being regarded as the waste of an opportunity, and a direct rebuke to Providence who had placed it there.

Patricia did not take part in the general babel, beyond pointing out, when Gustave was coming under discussion, that it was he who had gone to the top of the house to call her. She looked meaningly at Mr. Bolton and Mr. Sefton, who had the grace to appear a little ashamed of themselves.

When Patricia returned in the evening, she found Lady Tanagra awaiting her in the lounge, literally bombarded with different accounts of what had happened—all narrated in the best "eye-witness" manner of the alarmist press. Following the precept of Charles Lamb, Galvin House had apparently striven to correct the bad impression made through lateness in beginning work by leaving early.

It was obvious that Lady Tanagra had made herself extremely popular. Everyone was striving

to gain her ear for his or her story of personal experiences.

"Ah, here you are!" cried Lady Tanagra as Patricia entered. "I hear you behaved like a heroine last night."

Mrs. Craske-Morton nodded her head with conviction.

"Mrs. Morton was the real heroine," said Patricia. "She was splendid!"

Mrs. Craske-Morton flushed. To be praised before so distinguished a caller was almost embarrassing, especially as no one had felt it necessary to comment upon her share in the evening's excitement.

"Come up with me while I take off my things," said Patricia, as she moved towards the door. She saw that any private talk between herself and Lady Tanagra would be impossible in the lounge with Galvin House in its present state of ferment.

In Patricia's room Lady Tanagra subsided into a chair with a sigh. "I feel as if I were a celebrity arriving at New York," she laughed.

"They're rather excited," smiled Patricia, "but then we live such a humdrum life here—the expression is Mrs. Mosscrop-Smythe's—and much should be forgiven them. A book could be written on the boarding-house mind, I think. It moves in a vicious circle. If someone would only break out and give the poor dears something to talk about."

"Didn't you do that?" enquired Lady Tanagra slily.

Patricia smiled wearily. "I take second place now to the raid. Think of living here for the next few weeks. They will think raid, read raid, talk raid and dream raid." She shuddered. "Thank heavens I'm off to-morrow."

"Off to-morrow?" Lady Tanagra raised her eyes in interrogation.

"Yes, to Eastbourne for a fortnight's holiday as provided for in the arrangement existing between one Patricia Brent and Arthur Bonsor, Esquire, M.P. It's part of the wages of the sin of secretaryship." Patricia sighed.

"I hope you'll enjoy——"

"Please don't be conventional," interrupted Patricia. "I shall not enjoy it in the least. Within twenty-four hours I shall long to be back again. I shall get up in the morning and I shall go to bed at night. In between I shall walk a bit, read a bit, get my nose red (thank heavens it doesn't peel) and become bored to extinction. One thing I won't do, that is wear openwork frocks. The sun shall not print cheap insertion kisses upon Patricia Brent."

"You're quite sure that it is a holiday," Lady Tanagra looked up quizzically at Patricia as she stood gazing out of the window.

"A holiday!" repeated Patricia, looking round.

"It sounded just a little depressing," said Lady Tanagra.

"It will be exactly what it sounds," Patricia retorted; "only depressing is not quite the right word, it's too polite. You don't know what it is to be lonely, Tanagra, and live at Galvin House, and try to haul or push a politician into a rising posture. It reminds me of Carlyle on the Dutch." There was a note of fierce protest in her voice. "You have all the things that I want, and I wonder I don't scratch your face and tear your hair out. We are all primitive in our instincts really." Then she laughed. "Well! I had to cry out to someone, and I shall feel better. It's rather a beastly world for some of us, you know; but I suppose I ought to be spanked for being ungrateful."

"Do you know why I've come?" enquired Lady Tanagra, thinking it wise to change the subject.

Patricia shook her head. "A more conceited person might have suggested that it was to see me," she said demurely.

"To apologise for Peter," said Lady Tanagra. "He disobeyed orders and I am very angry with him."

Patricia flushed at the memory of their good-night. For a few seconds she stood silent, looking out of the window.

"I think it was rather sweet of him," she said without looking round.

Lady Tanagra smiled slightly. "Then I may forgive him, you think?" she enquired.

Patricia turned and looked at her. Lady Tanagra met the gaze innocently.

"He wanted to write to you and send some flowers and chocolates; but I absolutely forbade it. We almost had our first quarrel," she added mendaciously.

For the space of a second Patricia hated Lady Tanagra. She would have liked to turn and rend her for interfering in a matter that could not possibly be regarded as any concern of hers. The feeling, however, was only momentary and, when Lady Tanagra rose to go, Patricia was as cordial as ever.

From Galvin House Lady Tanagra drove to the Quadrant.

"Peter!" she cried as she entered the room and threw herself into an easy chair, "if ever I again endeavour to divert true love from its normal——"

"How is she?"' interrupted Bowen.

"Now you've spoiled it," cried Lady Tanagra, "and it was——"

"Spoiled what?" demanded Bowen.

"My beautiful phrase about true love and its normal channel, and I have been saying it over to myself all the way from Galvin House." She looked reproachfully at her brother.

"How's Patricia?" demanded Bowen eagerly.

"Fair to moderately fair, rain later, I should describe her," replied Lady Tanagra, helping herself to a cigarette which Bowen lighted. "She's going away."

"Good heavens! Where?" cried Bowen.

"Eastbourne."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Damn!"

"My dear Peter," remarked Lady Tanagra lazily, "this primitive profanity ill becomes——"

"Please don't rot me, Tan," he pleaded. "I've had a rotten time lately."

There was helpless and hopeless pain in Bowen's voice that caused Lady Tanagra to spring up from her chair and go over to him.

"Carry on, old boy," she cried softly, as she caressed his coat-sleeve. "It's your only chance. You're going to win."

"I must see her!" blurted out Bowen.

"If you do you'll spoil everything," announced Lady Tanagra with conviction.

"But, last night," began Bowen and paused.

"Last night, I think," said Lady Tanagra, "was a master-stroke. She is touched; it's taken us forward at least a week."

"But look here, Tan," said Bowen gloomily, "you told me to leave it all in your hands and you make me treat her rottenly, then you say——"

"That you know about as much of how to make a woman like Patricia fall in love with you as an ostrich does of geology," said Lady Tanagra calmly.

"But what will she think?" demanded Bowen.

"At present she is thinking that Eastbourne will be a nightmare of loneliness."

"I'll run down and see her," announced Bowen.

"If you do, Peter!" There was a note of warning in Lady Tanagra's voice.

"All right," he conceded gloomily. "I'll give you another week, and then I'll go my own way."

"Peter, if you were smaller and I were bigger I think I should spank you," laughed Lady Tanagra. Then with great seriousness she said, "I want you to marry her, and I'm going the only way to work to make her let you. Do try and trust me, Peter."

Bowen looked down at her with a smile, touched by the look in her eyes. For a moment his arm rested across her shoulders. Then he pushed her towards the door. "Clear out, Tan. I'm not fit for a bear-pit to-night."

The Bowens were never demonstrative with one another.

For half an hour Bowen sat smoking one cigarette after another until he was interrupted by the entrance of Peel, who, after a comprehensive glance round the room, proceeded to administer here and there those deft touches that emphasize a patient and orderly mind. Bowen watched him as he moved about on the balls of his feet.

"Have you ever been to Eastbourne, Peel?" enquired Bowen presently. Just why he asked the question he could not have said.

"Only once, my lord," replied Peel as he replaced the full ash-tray on the table by Bowen with a clean one. There was a note in his voice implying that nothing would ever tempt him to go there again.

"You don't like it?" suggested Bowen.

"I dislike it intensely, my lord," replied Peel as he refolded a copy of *The Times*.

"Why?"

"It has unpleasant associations, my lord," was the reply.

Bowen smiled. After a moment's silence he continued:

"Been sowing wild oats there?"

"No, my lord, not exactly."

"Well, if it's not too private," said Bowen, "tell me what happened. At the moment I'm particularly interested in the place."

Peel gazed reproachfully at a copy of *The Sphere*, which had managed in some strange way to get its leaves dog-eared. As he proceeded to smooth them out he continued:

"It was when I was young, my lord. I was engaged to be married. I thought her a most excellent young woman, in every way suitable. She went down to Eastbourne for a holiday." He paused.

"Well, there doesn't seem much wrong in that," said Bowen.

"From Eastbourne she wrote, saying that she had changed her mind," proceeded Peel.

"The devil she did!" exclaimed Bowen. "And what did you do?"

"I went down to reason with her, my lord," said Peel.

"Does one reason with a woman, Peel?" enquired Bowen with a smile.

"I was very young then, my lord, not more than thirty-two." Peel's tone was apologetic. "I discovered that she had received an offer of marriage from another."

"Hard luck!" murmured Bowen.

"Not at all, my lord, really," said Peel philosophically. "I discovered that she had re-engaged herself to a butcher, a most offensive fellow. His language when I expostulated with him was incredibly coarse, and I am sure he used marrow for his hair."

"And what did you do?" enquired Bowen.

"I had taken a return ticket, my lord. I came back to London."

Bowen laughed. "I'm afraid you couldn't have been very badly hit, Peel, or you would not have been able to take it quite so philosophically."

"I have never allowed my private affairs to interfere with my professional duties, my lord," replied Peel unctuously.

For five minutes Bowen smoked in silence. "So you do not believe in marriage," he said at length.

"I would not say that, my lord; but I do not think it suitable for a man of temperament such as myself. I have known marriages quite successful where too much was not required of the contracting parties."

"But don't you believe in love?" enquired Bowen.

"Love, my lord, is like a disease. If you are on the look out for it you catch it, if you ignore it, it does not trouble you. I was once with a gentleman who was very nervous about microbes. He would never eat anything that had not been cooked, and he had everything about him disinfected. He even disinfected me," he added as if in proof of the extreme eccentricity of his late employer.

"So I suppose you despise me for having fallen in love and contemplating marriage," said Bowen with a smile.

"There are always exceptions, my lord," responded Peel tactfully. "I have prepared the bath."

"Peel," remarked Bowen as he rose and stretched himself, "disinfected or not disinfected, you are safe from the microbe of romance."

"I hope so, my lord," responded Peel as he opened the door.

"I wonder if history will repeat itself," murmured Bowen as he walked through his bedroom into the bathroom. "I, too, hate Eastbourne."

CHAPTER XX

A RACE WITH SPINSTERHOOD

Before she had been at Eastbourne twenty-four hours Patricia was convinced that she had made a mistake in going there. With no claims upon her time, the restlessness that had developed in London increased until it became almost unbearable. The hotel at which she was staying was little more than a glorified boarding-house, full of "the most jungly of jungle-people," as she expressed it to herself. Their well-meant and kindly efforts to engage her in their pursuits and pleasures she received with apathetic negation. At length her fellow-guests, seeing that she was determined not to respond to their overtures, left her severely alone. The men were the last to desist.

She came to dislike the pleasure-seekers about her and grew critical of everything she saw, the redness of the women's faces, the assumed youthfulness of the elderly men, the shapelessness of matrons who seemed to delight in bright open-work blouses and juvenile hats. She remembered Elton's remark that Fashion uncovers a multitude of shins. The shins exposed at Eastbourne were she decided, sufficient to undermine one's belief in the early chapters of Genesis.

At one time she would have been amused at the types around her, and their various conceptions of "one crowded hour of glorious life." As it was, everything seemed sordid and trivial. Why should people lose all sense of dignity and proportion at a set period of the year? It was, she decided, almost as bad as being a hare.

All she wanted was to be alone, she told herself; yet as soon as she had discovered some secluded spot and had settled herself down to read, the old restlessness attacked her, and fight against it as she might, she was forced back again to the haunts of men.

For the first few days she watched eagerly for letters. None came. She would return to the hotel several times a day, look at the letter-rack, then, to hide her disappointment, make a pretence of having returned for some other purpose. "Why had not Bowen written?" she asked herself, then a moment after she strove to convince herself that he had forgotten, or at least that she was only an episode in his life.

His sudden change from eagerness to indifference caused her to flush with humiliation; yet he had gone to Galvin House during the raid to assure himself of her safety. Why had he not written after what had occurred? Perhaps Aunt Adelaide was right about men after all.

Patricia wrote to Lady Tanagra, Mrs. Hamilton, Lady Peggy, Mr. Triggs, even to Miss Sikkum. In due course answers arrived; but in only Miss Sikkum's letter was there any reference to Bowen, a gush of sentiment about "how happy you must be, dear Miss Brent, with Lord Bowen running down to see you every other day. I know!" she added with maidenly prescience. Patricia laughed.

Mr. Triggs committed himself to nothing more than two and three-quarter pages, mainly about his daughter and "A. B.," Mr. Triggs was not at his best as a correspondent. Lady Tanagra ran to four pages; but as her handwriting was large, five lines filling a page, her letter was disappointing.

Lady Peggy was the most productive. In the course of twelve pages of spontaneity she told Patricia that the Duke and the Cabinet Minister had almost quarrelled about her, Patricia. "Peter has been to lunch with us and Daddy has told him how lucky he is, and how wonderful you are. If Peter is not very careful, I shall have you presented to me as a stepmother. Wouldn't it be priceless!" she wrote. "Oh! What am I writing?" She ended with the Duke's love, and an insistence that Patricia should lunch at Curzon Street the first Sunday after her return.

Patricia found Lady Peggy's letter charming. She was pleased to know that she had made a

good impression and was admired—by the right people. Twenty-four hours, however, found her once more thrown back into the trough of her own despondency. Instinctively she began to count the days until this "dire compulsion of infertile days" should end. She could not very well return to London and say that she was tired of holiday-making. Galvin House would put its own construction upon her action and words, and whatever that construction might be, it was safe to assume that it would be an unpleasant one.

There were moments when a slight uplifting of the veil enabled her to see herself as she must appear to others.

"Patricia!" she exclaimed one morning to her reflection in a rather dubious mirror. "You're a cumberer of the earth and, furthermore, you've got a beastly temper," and she jabbed a pin through her hat and partly into her head.

As the days passed she found herself wondering what was the earliest day she could return. If she made it the Friday night, would it arouse suspicion? She decided that it would, and settled to leave Eastbourne on the Saturday afternoon.

As the train steamed out of the station she made a grimace in the direction of the town, just as an inoffensive and prematurely bald little man opposite looked up from his paper. He gave Patricia one startled look through his gold-rimmed spectacles and, for the rest of the journey, buried himself behind his paper, fearful lest Patricia should "make another face at him," as he explained to his mother that evening.

"She's come home in a nice temper!" was Miss Wangle's diagnosis of the mood in which Patricia reached Galvin House.

Gustave regarded her with anxious concern.

The first dinner drove her almost mad. The raid, as a topic of conversation, was on the wane, although Mr. Bolton worked at it nobly, and Patricia found herself looked upon to supply the necessary material for the evening's amusement. What had she done? Where had she been? Had she bathed? Were the dresses pretty? How many times had Bowen been down? Had she met any nice people? Was it true that the costumes of the women were disgraceful?

At last, with a forced laugh, Patricia told them that she must have "notice" of such questions, and everybody had looked at her in surprise, until Mr. Bolton's laugh rang out, and he explained the parliamentary allusion.

When at last, under pretence of being tired, she was able to escape to her room, she felt that another five minutes would have turned her brain.

Sunday dawned, and with it the old panorama of iterations unfolded itself: Mr. Bolton's velvet coat and fez, Mr. Cordal's carpet slippers with the fur tops, Mrs. Barnes' indecision, Mr. Sefton's genial and romantic optimism, Miss Sikkum's sumptuary excesses; all presented themselves in due sequence just as they had done for—"was it centuries?" Patricia asked herself. To crown all it was a roast-pork Sunday, and the reek of onions preparing for the seasoning filled the house.

Patricia felt that the fates were fighting against her. In nerving herself for the usual human Sunday ordeal, she had forgotten the vegetable menace, in other words that it was "pork Sunday." Mr. Bolton was always more than usually trying on Sundays; but reinforced by onions he was almost unbearable. Patricia fled.

It was the Sunday before August Bank Holiday. Patricia shuddered at the remembrance. It meant that people were away. She did not pause to think that her world was at home, pursuing its various paths whereby to cultivate an appetite worthy of the pork that was even then sizzling in the Galvin House kitchen under the eagle eye of the cook, who prided herself on her "crackling," which Galvin House crunched with noisy gusto.

Patricia sank down upon a chair far back under the trees opposite the Stanhope Gate. Here she remained in a vague way watching the people, yet unconscious of their presence. From time to time some snatch of meaningless conversation would reach her. "You know Betty's such a sport?" one man said to another. Patricia found herself wondering what Betty was like and what, to the speaker's mind, constituted being a sport. Was Betty pretty? She must be, Patricia decided; no one cared whether or no a plain girl were a sport. She found herself wanting to know Betty. What were the lives of all these people, these shadows, that were moving to and fro in front of her, each intent upon something that seemed of vital importance? Were they——?

"I doubt if Cassandra could have looked more gloomily prophetic."

She turned with a start and saw Geoffrey Elton smiling down upon her.

"Did I look as bad as that?" she enquired, as he took a seat beside her.

"You looked as if you were gratuitously settling the destinies of the world," he replied.

"In a way I suppose I was," she said musingly. "You see they all mean something," indicating

the paraders with a nod of her head, "tragedy, comedy, farce, sometimes all three. If you only stop to think about life, it all seems so hopeless. I feel sometimes that I could run away from it all."

"That in the Middle Ages would have been diagnosed as the monastic spirit," said Elton. "It arose, and no doubt continues in most cases to arise from a sluggish liver."

"How dreadful!" laughed Patricia. "The inference is obvious."

"The world's greatest achievements and greatest tragedies could no doubt be traced directly to rebellious livers: Waterloo and 'Hamlet' are instances."

"Are you serious?" enquired Patricia. She was never quite certain of Elton.

"In a way I suppose I am," he replied. "If I were a pathologist I should write a book upon *The Influence of Disease upon the Destinies of the World*. The supreme monarch is the microbe. The Germans have shown that they recognise this."

"Ugh!" Patricia shuddered.

"Of course you have to make some personal sacrifice in the matter of self-respect first," continued Elton, "but after that the rest becomes easy."

"I suppose that is what a German victory would mean," said Patricia.

"Yes; we should give up lead and nickel and T.N.T., and invent germ distributors. Essen would become a great centre of germ-culture, and——"

"Oh! please let us talk about something else," cried Patricia. "It's horrible!"

"Well!" said Elton with a smile, "shall we continue our talk over lunch, if you have no engagement?"

"Lady Peggy asked me——" began Patricia.

"They're away in Somerset," said Elton, "so now I claim you as my victim. It is your destiny to save me from my own thoughts."

"And yours to save me from roast pork and apple sauce," said Patricia, rising. As they walked towards Hyde Park Corner she explained the Galvin House cuisine.

They lunched at the Ritz and, to her surprise Patricia found herself eating with enjoyment, a thing she had not done for weeks past. She decided that it must be a revulsion of feeling after the menace of roast pork. Elton was a good talker, with a large experience of life and a considerable fund of general information.

"I should like to travel," said Patricia as she sipped her coffee in the lounge.

"Why?" Elton held a match to her cigarette.

"Oh! I suppose because it is enjoyable," replied Patricia; "besides, it educates," she added.

"That is too conventional to be worthy of you," said Elton.

"How?" queried Patricia.

"Most of the dull people I know ascribe their dullness to lack of opportunities for travel. They seem to think that a voyage round the world will make brilliant talkers of the toughest bores."

"Am I as tedious as that?" enquired Patricia, looking up with a smile.

"Your friend, Mr. Triggs, for instance," continued Elton, passing over Patricia's remark. "He has not travelled, and he is always interesting. Why?"

"I suppose because he is Mr. Triggs," said Patricia half to herself.

"Exactly," said Elton. "If you were really yourself you would not be——"

"So dull," broke in Patricia with a laugh.

"So lonely," continued Elton, ignoring the interruption.

"Why do you say that?" demanded Patricia. "It's not exactly a compliment."

"Intellectual loneliness may be the lot of the greatest social success."

"But why do you think I am lonely?" persisted Patricia.

"Let us take Mr. Triggs as an illustration. He is direct, unversed in diplomacy, golden-

hearted, with a great capacity for friendship and sentiment. When he is hurt he shows it as plainly as a child, therefore we none of us hurt him."

"He's a dear!" murmured Patricia half to herself.

"If he were in love he would never permit pride to disguise it."

Patricia glanced up at Elton: but he was engaged in examining the end of his cigarette.

"He would credit the other person with the same sincerity as himself," continued Elton. "The biggest rogue respects an honest man, that is why we, who are always trying to disguise our emotions, admire Mr. Triggs, who would just as soon wear a red beard and false eyebrows as seek to convey a false impression."

Patricia found herself wondering why Elton had selected this topic. She was conscious that it was not due to chance.

"Is it worth it?" Elton's remark, half command, half question, seemed to stab through her thoughts.

She looked up at him, her eyes a little widened with surprise.

"Is what worth what?" she enquired.

"I was just wondering," said Elton, "if the Triggses are not very wise in eating onions and not bothering about what the world will think."

"Eating onions!" cried Patricia.

"My medical board is on Tuesday up North," said Elton, "and I shall hope to get back to France. You see things in a truer perspective when you're leaving town under such conditions."

Patricia was silent for some time. Elton's remarks sometimes wanted thinking out.

"You think we should take happiness where we can find it?" she asked.

"Well! I think we are too much inclined to render unto Cæsar the things which are God's," he replied gravely.

"Do you appreciate that you are talking in parables?" said Patricia.

"That is because I do not possess Mr. Triggs's golden gift of directness."

Suddenly Patricia glanced at her watch. "Why, it's five minutes to three!" she cried. "I had no idea it was so late."

"I promised to run round to say good-bye to Peter at three," Elton remarked casually, as he passed through the lounge.

"Good-bye!" cried Patricia in surprise.

"He is throwing up his staff appointment, and has applied to rejoin his regiment in France."

For a moment Patricia stopped dead, then with a great effort she passed through the revolving door into the sunlight. Her knees seemed strangely shaky, and she felt thankful when she saw the porter hail a taxi. Elton handed her in and closed the door.

"Galvin House?" he interrogated.

"When does he go?" asked Patricia in a voice that she could not keep even in tone.

"As soon as the War Office approves," said Elton.

"Does Lady Tanagra know?" she asked.

"No, Peter will not tell her until everything is settled," he replied.

As the taxi sped westwards Patricia was conscious that some strange change had come over her. She had the feeling that follows a long bout of weeping. Peter was going away! Suddenly everything was changed! Everything was explained! She must see him! Prevent him from going back to France! He was going because of her! He would be killed and it would be her fault!

Arrived at Galvin House she went straight to her room. For two hours she lay on her bed, her mind in a turmoil, her head feeling as if it were being compressed into a mould too small for it. No matter how she strove to control them, her thoughts inevitably returned to the phrase, "Peter is going to France."

Unknown to herself, she was fighting a great fight with her pride. She must see him, but how? If she telephoned it would be an unconditional surrender. She could never respect herself

again. "When you are in love you take pleasure in trampling your pride underfoot." The phrase persisted in obtruding itself. Where had she heard it? What was pride? she asked herself. One might be very lonely with pride as one's sole companion. What would Mr. Triggs say? She could see his forehead corrugated with trying to understand what pride had to do with love. Even Elton, self-restrained, almost self-sufficient, admitted that Mr. Triggs was right.

If she let Peter go? A year hence, a month perhaps, she might have lost him. Of what use would her pride be then? She had not known before; but now she knew how much Peter meant to her. Since he had come into her life everything had changed, and she had grown discontented with the things that, hitherto, she had tacitly accepted as her portion.

"You're fretting, me dear!" Mr. Triggs's remark came back to her. She recalled how indignant she had been. Why? Because it was true. She had been cross. She remembered the old man's anxiety lest he had offended her. She almost smiled as she recalled his clumsy effort to explain away his remark.

She had heard someone knock gently at her door, once, twice, three times. She made no response. Then Gustave's voice whispered, "Tea is served in the looaunge, mees." She heard him creep away with clumsy stealth. There was a sweet-natured creature. He could never disguise an emotion. He had come upstairs during the raid, though in obvious terror, in order to save her. Mr. Triggs, Gustave, Elton, all were against her. She knew that in some subtle way they were working to fight *her* pride.

For some time longer she lay, then suddenly she sprang up. First she bathed her face, then undid her hair, finally she changed her frock and powdered her nose.

"Hurry up, Patricia! or you may think better of it," she cried to her reflection in the glass. "This is a race with spinsterhood."

Going downstairs quietly she went to the telephone.

"Gerrard 60000," she called, conscious that both her voice and her knees were unsteady.

After what seemed an age there came the reply, "Quadrant Hotel."

"Is Lord Peter Bowen in?" she enquired. "Thank you," she added in response to the clerk's promise to enquire.

Her hand was shaking. She almost dropped the receiver. He must be out, she told herself, after what seemed to her an age of waiting. If he were in they would have found him. Perhaps he had already started for——

"Who is that?" It was Bowen's voice.

Patricia felt she could sing. So he had not gone! Would her knees play her false and cheat her?

"It's—it's me," she said, regardless of grammar.

"That's delightful; but who is me?" came the response.

No wonder woman liked him if he spoke like that to them, she decided.

Suddenly she realised that even she herself could not recognise as her own the voice with which she was speaking.

"Patricia," she said.

"Patricia!" There was astonishment, almost incredulity in his voice. So Elton had said nothing. "Where are you? Can I see you?"

Patricia felt her cheeks burn at the eagerness of his tone.

"I'm—I'm going out. I—I'll call for you if you like," she stammered.

"I say, how ripping of you. Come in a taxi or shall I come and fetch you?"

"No, I—I'm coming now, I'm——" then she put up the receiver. What was she going to do or say? For a moment she swayed. Was she going to faint? A momentary deadly sickness seemed to overcome her. She fought it back fiercely. She must get to the Quadrant. "I shall have to be a sort of reincarnation of Mrs. Triggs, I think," she murmured as she staggered past the astonished Gustave, who was just coming from the lounge, and out of the front door, where she secured a taxi.

CHAPTER XXI

THE GREATEST INDISCRETION

I

In the vestibule of the Quadrant stood Peel, looking a veritable colossus of negation. As Patricia approached he bowed and led the way to the lift. As it slid upwards Patricia wondered if Peel could hear the thumping of her heart, and if so, what he thought of it. She followed him along the carpeted corridor conscious of a mad desire to turn and fly. What would Peel do? she wondered. Possibly in the madness of the moment his mantle of discretion might fall from him, and he would dash after her. What a sensation for the Quadrant! A girl tearing along as if for her life pursued by a gentleman's servant. It would look just like the poster of "Charley's Aunt."

Peel opened the door of Bowen's sitting-room, and Patricia entered with the smile still on her lips that the thought of "Charley's Aunt" had aroused. Something seemed to spring towards her from inside the room, and she found herself caught in a pair of arms and kissed. She remembered wondering if Peel were behind, or if he had closed the door, then she abandoned herself to Bowen's embrace.

Everything seemed somehow changed. It was as if someone had suddenly shouldered her responsibilities, and she would never have to think again for herself. Her lips, her eyes, her hair, were kissed in turn. She was being crushed; yet she was conscious only of a feeling of complete content.

Suddenly the realisation of what was happening dawned upon her, and she strove to free herself. With all her force she pushed Bowen from her. He released her. She stood back looking at him with crimson cheeks and unseeing eyes. She was conscious that something unusual was happening to her, something in which she appeared to have no voice. Perhaps it was all a dream. She swayed a little. The same sensation she had fought back at the telephone was overcoming her. Was she going to faint? It would be ridiculous to faint in Bowen's rooms. Why did people faint? Was it really, as Aunt Adelaide had told her, because the heart missed a beat? One beat——

She felt Bowen's arm round her, she seemed to sway towards a chair. Was the chair really moving away from her? Then the mist seemed to clear. Someone was kneeling beside her.

Bowen gazed at her anxiously. Her face was now colourless, and her eyes closed wearily. She sighed as a tired child sighs before falling asleep.

"Patricia! what is the matter?" cried Bowen In alarm. "You haven't fainted, have you?"

She was conscious of the absurdity of the question. She opened her eyes with a curious fluttering movement of the lids, as if they were uncertain how long they could remain unclosed. A slow, tired smile played across her face, like a passing shaft of sunshine, then the lids closed again and the life seemed to go out of her body.

Bowen gently withdrew his arm and, rising, strode across to a table on which was a decanter of whisky and syphon of soda. With unsteady hands, he poured whisky and soda into a glass and, returning to Patricia, he passed his arm gently behind her head, placing the glass against her lips. She drank a little and then, with a shudder, turned her head aside. A moment later her eyes opened again. She looked round the room, then fixed her gaze on Bowen as if trying to explain to herself his presence. Gradually the colour returned to her cheeks and she sighed deeply. She shook her head as Bowen put the glass against her lips.

"I nearly fainted," she whispered, sighing again. "I've never done such a thing." Then after a pause she added, "I wonder what has happened. My head feels so funny."

"It's all my fault," said Bowen penitently. "I've waited so long, and I seemed to go mad. You will forgive me, dearest, won't you?" his voice was full of concern.

Patricia smiled. "Have I been here long?" she asked. "It seems ages since I came."

"No; only about five minutes. Oh, Patricia! you won't do it again, will you?" Bowen drew her nearer to him and upset the glass containing the remains of the whisky and soda that he had placed on the floor beside him.

"I didn't quite faint, really," she said earnestly, as if defending herself from a reproach.

"I mean throw me over," explained Bowen. "It's been hell!"

"Please go and sit down," she said, moving restlessly. "I'm all right now. I—I want to talk and I can't talk like this." Again she smiled, and Bowen lifted her hand and kissed it gently. Rising he drew a chair near her and sat down.

"You see all this comes of trying to be a Mrs. Triggs," she said regretfully.

"Mrs. Triggs!" Bowen looked at her anxiously.

Slowly and a little wearily Patricia explained her conversation with Elton. "Didn't he tell you he had seen me?"

"No," replied Bowen, relieved at the explanation; "Godfrey is a perfect dome of silence on occasion."

"Why did you suddenly leave me all alone, Peter?" Patricia enquired presently. "I couldn't understand. It hurt me terribly. I didn't realise"—she paused—"oh, everything, until I heard you were going away. Oh, my dear!" she cried in a low voice, "be gentle with me. I'm all bruises."

Bowen bent across to her. "I'm a brute," he said, "but——"

She shook her head. "Not that sort," she said. "It's my pride I've bruised. I seem to have turned everything upside down. You'll have to be very gentle with me at first, please." She looked up at him with a flicker of a smile.

"Not only at first, dear, but always," said Bowen gently as he rose and seated himself beside her. "Patricia, when did you—care?" he blurted out the last word hurriedly.

"I don't know," she replied dreamily. "You see," she continued after a pause, "I've not been like other girls. Do you know, Peter," she looked up at him shyly, "you're the first man who has ever kissed me, except my father. Isn't it absurd?"

"It's nothing of the sort," Bowen declared, tilting up her chin and gazing down into her eyes. "But you haven't answered my question."

"Well!" continued Patricia, speaking slowly, "when you sent me flowers and messengers and telegraph-boys and things I was angry, and then when you didn't I——" she paused.

"Wanted them," he suggested.

"U-m-m-m!" she nodded her head. "I suppose so," she conceded. "But," she added with a sudden change of mood, "I shall always be dreadfully afraid of Peel. He seems so perfect."

Bowen laughed. "I'll try and balance matters," he said.

"But you haven't told me," said Patricia, "why you left me alone all at once. Why did you?" She looked up enquiringly at him.

During the next half an hour Patricia slowly drew from Bowen the whole story of the plot engineered by Lady Tanagra.

"But why," questioned Patricia, "were you going away if you knew that—that everything would come all right?"

"I had given up hope, and I couldn't break my promise to Tan. I convinced myself that you didn't care."

Patricia held out her hand with a smile. Bowen bent and kissed it.

"I wonder what you are thinking of me?" She looked up at him anxiously. "I'm very much at your mercy now, Peter, aren't I? You won't let me ever regret it, will you?"

"Do you regret it?" he whispered, bending towards her, conscious of the fragrance of her hair.

"It's such an unconditional surrender," she complained. "All my pride is bruised and trampled underfoot. You have me at such a disadvantage."

"So long as I've got you I don't care," he laughed.

"Peter," said Patricia after a few minutes of silence, "I want you to ring up Tanagra and Godfrey Elton and ask them to dine here this evening. They must put off any other engagement. Tell them I say so."

"But can't we——?" began Bowen.

"There, you are making me regret already," she said with a flash of her old vivacity.

Bowen flew to the telephone. By a lucky chance Elton was calling at Grosvenor Square, and Bowen was able to get them both with one call. He was a little disappointed, however, at not having Patricia to himself that evening.

"When shall we get married?" Bowen asked eagerly, as Patricia rose and announced that she must go and repair damages to her face and garments.

"I will tell you after dinner," she said as she walked towards the door.

II

"It is only the impecunious who are constrained to be modest," remarked Elton as the four sat smoking in Bowen's room after dinner.

"Is that an apology, or merely a statement of fact?" asked Lady Tanagra.

"I think," remarked Patricia quietly, "that it is an apology."

Elton looked across at her with one of those quick movements of his eyes that showed how alert his mind was, in spite of the languid ease of his manner.

"And now," continued Patricia, "I have something very important to say to you all."

"Oh!" groaned Lady Tanagra, "spare me from the self-importance of the newly-engaged girl."

"It has come to my knowledge, Tanagra," proceeded Patricia, "that you and Mr. Elton did deliberately and wittingly conspire together against my peace of mind and happiness. There!" she added, "that's almost legal in its ambiguity, isn't it?"

Lady Tanagra and Elton exchanged glances.

"What do you mean?" demanded Lady Tanagra gaily.

Patricia explained that she had extracted from Bowen the whole story. Lady Tanagra looked reproachfully at her brother. Then turning to Patricia she said with unwonted seriousness:

"I saw that was the only way to—to—well get you for a sister-in-law and," she paused a moment uncertainly. "I knew you were the only girl for that silly old thing there, who was blundering up the whole business."

"Your mania for interfering in other people's affairs will be your ruin, Tanagra," said Patricia as she turned to Elton, her look clearly enquiring if he had any excuse to offer.

"The old Garden of Eden answer," he said. "A woman tempted me."

"Then we will apply the old Garden of Eden punishment," announced Patricia.

Elton, who was the first to grasp her meaning, looked anxiously at Lady Tanagra, who with knitted brows was endeavouring to penetrate to Patricia's meaning. Bowen was obviously at sea. Suddenly Lady Tanagra's face flamed and her eyes dropped. Elton stroked the back of his head, a habit he had when preoccupied—he was never nervous.

"You two," continued Patricia, now thoroughly enjoying herself, "have precipitated yourselves into my most private affairs, and in return I am going to take a hand in yours. Peter has asked me when I will marry him. I said I would tell him after dinner this evening."

Bowen looked across at her eagerly, Elton lit another cigarette, Lady Tanagra toyed nervously with her amber cigarette-holder.

"I will marry Peter," announced Patricia, "when you, Tanagra," she paused slightly, "marry Godfrey Elton."

Lady Tanagra looked up with a startled cry. Her eyes were wide with something that seemed almost fear, then without warning she turned and buried her head in a cushion and burst into uncontrollable sobbing.

Bowen started up. With a swift movement Patricia went over to his side and, before he knew what was happening, he was in the corridor stuttering his astonishment to Patricia.

For an hour the two sat in the lounge below, talking and listening to the band. Patricia explained to Bowen how from the first she had known that Elton and Tanagra were in love.

"But we've known him all our lives!" expostulated Bowen.

"The very thing that blinded you all to a most obvious fact."

"But why didn't he——?" began Bowen.

"Because of her money," explained Patricia. "Anyhow," she continued gaily, "I had lost my own tail, and I wasn't going to see Tanagra wagging hers before my eyes. Now let's go up and see what has happened."

Just as Bowen's hand was on the handle of the sitting-room door, Patricia cried out that she

had dropped a ring. When they entered the room Elton and Lady Tanagra were standing facing the door. One glance at their faces, told Patricia all she wanted to know. Without a word Elton came forward and bending low, kissed her hand. There was something so touching in his act of deference that Patricia felt her throat contract.

She went across to Lady Tanagra and put her arm round her.

"You darling!" whispered Lady Tanagra. "How clever of you to know."

"I knew the first time I saw you together," whispered Patricia.

Lady Tanagra hugged her.

"And now we must all run round to Grosvenor Square. Poor Mother—what a surprise for her!"

III

Elton's medical board took a more serious view of his state of health than was anticipated, and he was temporarily given an appointment in the Intelligence Department. Bowen's application to be allowed to rejoin his regiment was refused, and thus the way was cleared for the double wedding that took place at St. Margaret's, Westminster.

Patricia was given away by the Duke of Gayton. Lady Peggy declared that it would rank as the most heroic act he had ever performed. Mr. Triggs reached the highest sartorial pinnacle of his career in a light grey, almost white frock-coated suit with a high hat to match, a white waistcoat, and a white satin tie. As Elton expressed it, he looked like a musical-comedy conception of a bookmaker turned philanthropist.

Galvin House was there in force. Even Gustave obtained an hour off and, with a large white rose in his button-hole, beamed on everyone and everything with the utmost impartiality. Miss Brent, like Achilles, sulked in her tent.

"The only two men I ever loved," wailed Lady Peggy to a friend, "and both gone at one shot."

"She's a lucky girl," said an old dowager, "and only a secretary."

"Some girl. What!" muttered an embryo field-marshal to a one-pip strategist in the uniform of the Irish Guards, who concurred with an emphatic, "Lucky devil!"

At Galvin House for the rest of the chapter they talked, dreamed and lived the Bowen-Brent marriage. It was the one ineffaceable sunspot in the greyness of their lives.

A DAUGHTER IN REVOLT	JOHN GOODWIN
THE BARTERED BRIDE	MRS. PATRICK MACGILL
A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS	P. G. WODEHOUSE
HIS OTHER WIFE	ROY VICKERS
THE COMPULSORY WIFE	JOHN GLYDER
THE WINNING CLUE	JAMES HAY, Jun.
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ISAACS	JOSEPH GEE
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MOLESKIN JOE	PATRICK MACGILL
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