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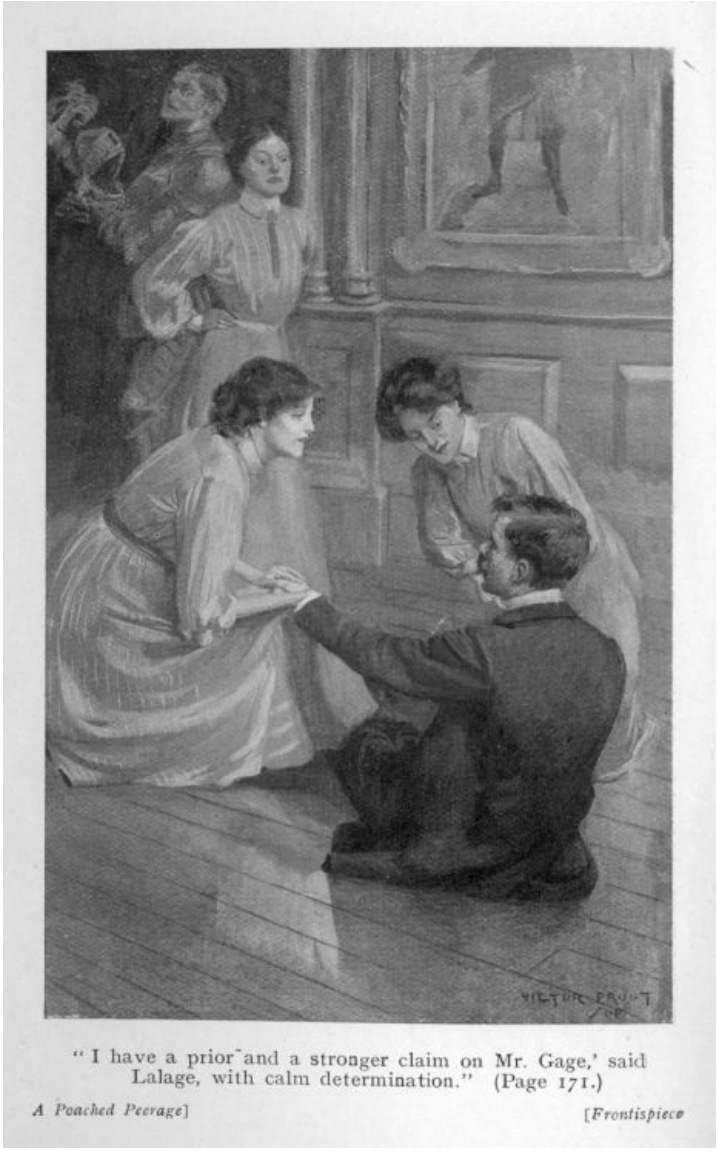

"I have a prior and a stronger claim on Mr. Gage,' said Lalage, with calm determination." (Page 171.)

A Poached Peerage] [*Frontispiece*

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A POACHED PEERAGE

BY

SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY, BART.

AUTHOR OF
"FAUCONBERG," "THE RED CHANCELLOR,"
"A PRINCE OF LOVERS," ETC.

"There is a third party to all our bargains"

ILLUSTRATED

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CHAPTER I

A pretty girl looked out of the low-silled coffee-room window of the *Quorn Arms* at Great Bunbury, and threw a glance of roguish invitation at a watchful young man who was pretending to be busy in the courtyard. Then she disappeared. The young man lost no time in throwing down his broom, and, with a manifestly assumed air of indifference, approached the window. He looked in warily, then glanced round behind him, and next moment had thrown his leg over the sill and was in the room. The girl, with her back to the window, was polishing a brass candlestick with a vigour which suggested that the occupation left no room for less material thoughts. Also that she was, for a smart young woman, strangely unobservant of the fact that a man had entered by the window, until an arm round her waist brought the fact to her notice. Even then she did not start or cry out, merely disengaging herself from the expected caress by a self-possessed and apparently well practised twist.

"I can't stop a moment, Tom," she remarked coolly; "only I saw you outside. Father's in the bar."

"And I've been hanging about a good half-hour to see you, Mercy," her swain declared impressively. "I say, as time's short, don't let's waste it. Give us a kiss."

For answer Miss Mercy Popkiss turned her head aside at a right angle as though suddenly attracted by something in the street. An attitude of preoccupation does not, however, necessarily imply refusal; under certain circumstances it even stands for an invitation. As such Mr. Thomas Sparrow unhesitatingly regarded it.

"One more," he pleaded coaxingly, as Miss Popkiss bent away from his somewhat ravenous embrace.

"Wait a bit," she said. "I've something to tell you. I'm going to leave here."

"What, leave the *Quorn Arms*?" exclaimed Mr. Sparrow blankly.

"Yes, truly. I'm going to be still-room maid at the Towers. You see," she went on to explain cheerfully, "father doesn't like my being here, having to wait on the riff-raff as well as the gentry. He says it is not the best training for a young lady; and when father says a thing, that thing's settled. They are all swells at the Towers; lords and ladies and toffs from London. It will be fine."

But Mr. Sparrow was far from sharing her jubilation. "The Towers!" he exclaimed disconsolately. "Why, they be four mile off, or more. You'll forget me, Mercy, among all them fine folk; lords, flunkeys and valets and butlers and swells like that, with their dashin' London ways."

"Oh, don't you look so silly," the girl remonstrated archly. "Noblemen and butlers and all that sort aren't anything particular to me. If you'd smarten yourself up a bit instead of looking like a ploughman, you might get a place there too. Especially now the new Lord Quorn is coming home and Colonel Hemyock will have to turn out."

Mr. Sparrow perked up a little. "Ah," he observed with an air of indifferentism to the warmer subject, "Lord Quorn; he that has been found in Australy. I suppose when her ladyship turns out you'll be off to London with her."

"Time enough to think about that when she goes," Miss Popkiss returned evasively. "Lordship or no lordship, he can't turn her out before her time's up. And then it might suit me to stay on with him. I wonder what he'll be like," she added, with a significant touch of feminine interest.

Mr. Sparrow's prosaic face grew dark. "Oh, Mercy," he cried, gloomily wrathful, "if I was to see another man, lord or lout, making love to you, I'd smash him."

Her words having produced what was precisely the desired effect, Miss Popkiss proceeded to

tone it down with a provocative smile. "You can think of smashing when you see it, Tom. And, I say——"

"Yes, dear?" said Tom, inwardly despising himself for being so easily mollified.

"I—I hear father in the bar," she suggested significantly.

Mr. Sparrow took the hint and another kiss. Perhaps his ruffled feelings were responsible for its being a louder osculation than prudence dictated. Anyhow an approaching voice croaked—

"Mercy! Mercy! What are you after?"

"Quick, Tom," the girl directed in a hurried whisper, "slip out of the window."

Mr. Sparrow was already there, with a foot over the sill. Its passage to the ground was, however, prevented by the substantial back of some one who was crouching outside the window. The disconcerted Philander swiftly drew his leg back again as though it had been stung, and made a slinking rush for the table under which he crept just as Popkiss *père*, his rotund face coruscating with suspicion, filled the doorway.

"What are you up to, I ask you?" he demanded of his daughter with what seemed unnecessary vehemence as his small eyes roved in puffy cunning round the room.

"Polishing the candlesticks, father," she answered coolly. "Is there anything else you would prefer me to do?"

Not being ready with a suggestion, Mr. Popkiss merely fell back upon a snort of sagacity, and turned his portly person preparatory to waddling back to the bar. "Come here, I want you," he commanded vaguely by an after-thought, in the hope that by the time he had reached his beery citadel a task might suggest itself to his sluggish invention.

"All right, father," Miss Popkiss replied cheerily, as with more clatter than was absolutely necessary, she replaced the candlestick on its shelf. Then she took a round-about route to the door, preferring it possibly on account of the variety its closer view of the courtyard afforded. As she was about to pause at the window the man crouching outside suddenly raised himself and looked in with a knowing grin. Miss Popkiss, suppressing a start, deftly changed the amorous look she had prepared into one of haughty displeasure, and swept in a fine carriage of scorn from the room. Whereupon the man surmounted the sill and entered.

He was a curiously nondescript sort of person, with a short, round face, a short nose, short hair, short beard, short arms, short fingers and short legs. His manner also was short, even jerky. He looked round the room with a sharpness and vigilance which seemed quite thrown away upon its commonplace and unsuspicious contents, and absolutely futile in that they failed to detect Mr. Sparrow who lay snug underneath the table. But then self-constituted keenness is usually ignorant of what is going on under its nose.

"No stranger about," the man muttered. Then he took a telegram from the side pocket of his light overcoat, where it had lain as though ready to his hand for consultation. "My wire from the Yard is explicit. Yet," he mused, as he methodically folded the telegram and dropped it back into his pocket, "if he left the train at Faxfleet he ought to be here by this. It might take him an hour and a half, or two hours. I must find out." He walked softly towards the door. "Better not let old Popkiss see me," he murmured, "he talks too much. But," he chuckled knowingly, "there's the pretty daughter, if I can catch her that's the dodge; I don't know what Sarah would say, but it's all in the way of business." From which observation it is plain that æsthetic shortcomings do not necessarily prevent a man from fancying himself irresistible.

Peeping cautiously through the doorway he saw Miss Mercy alone in the bar, perfunctorily at work upon a task of supererogation which the paternal wisdom had set her.

"Hist!" he signalled, and when she looked up in disdain he beckoned mysteriously and withdrew.

Miss Popkiss, in no amiable humour, was forced as a matter of business to follow him. "What is your order, sir?" she inquired, with a toss of the head. But the man signed to her to come nearer still with such an air of mysterious importance that she was forced to drop something of her haughty manner. "I did not see you come in, sir," she remarked casually, as a first step toward affability.

For reply the man gave a knowing jerk of the head and indicated the window with his thumb. "Hope you are well this morning, my dear," he observed inconsequentially. "It is quite a pleasure to see any one looking so pretty and blooming."

Ignoring the incongruity between the guest's mysterious prelude and his crudely outspoken appreciation of her charms, Miss Popkiss was not above accepting the tribute to her good looks. "Oh, sir," she said with a touch of protest just sufficient to maintain her propriety; and so waited for the order to which the compliment would have been a natural preamble.

The guest pursed his lips and kept his small eyes on her with business-like admiration. "Very busy, eh?" he suggested, absurdly enough, since he appeared to be the only customer in the house. "Any one fresh staying here?" he asked with an obvious affectation of indifference.

"No, we've had no one fresh to-day, sir," Miss Popkiss answered, beginning to lose interest in the colloquy.

"Oh," said the man, blinking his eyes suspiciously. "Are you quite sure? No one been here to-day?"

His manner was so exaggerated in its significance that Miss Popkiss, with Mr. Sparrow's clandestine visit fresh in her mind, grew uneasy under it. "No, sir," she answered, a trifle unconvincingly. "Who should there have been?"

A triumphant gleam shot through her questioner's eyes. He dropped his cross-examiner's manner and said confidentially, "I thought I saw some one come in just now."

So it was Tom. Miss Popkiss flushed a little guiltily.

"By the door?" she suggested evasively.

"Or by the window," he hazarded, with noncommittal sagacity.

Miss Popkiss concluded that further equivocation was futile.

"Well, sir, and if you did, what about it?" she demanded defiantly.

Her cross-examiner saw that he had made a lucky hit. "Oh," he answered, assuming a careless manner "I only looked in to warn you, in case he has been making up to you, that he is a bad lot, a wrong 'un altogether; so don't you have anything to do with him."

Had the speaker's searching little eyes not been attracted elsewhere they must have noticed a peculiar agitation of the table-cloth greater than the draught would account for.

"Why, you don't mean to say he makes love to any one else," Miss Popkiss asked, between wrath and jealousy.

"Dozens, dozens," the visitor replied cheerfully. "Every girl he meets. All that sort do."

"Two can play at that game," the lady commented resentfully.

"Yes," he agreed waggishly: "it takes two to play it properly. Now, look here, my dear," he added with an abrupt return to business; "I'll talk to him. You just tell me where he is."

"Oh, no, sir," Miss Popkiss returned resolutely; "you just leave him to me. I'll do the talking."

But her interviewer did not seem content, for reasons of his own, that the matter should be taken out of his hands.

"Now just let me see him, there's a dear," he urged coaxingly. "Do, there's a little darling," he pleaded, becoming somewhat unreasonably affectionate. "I'll put some salt on his tail."

"Please, no; I'd rather you didn't, sir," returned Miss Popkiss with decision, as though feeling quite competent to perform the condimentary operation herself.

"All in the way of business," the visitor persisted, rubbing his stubby hands together with anticipatory gusto. Then, before the young lady could realize it, one of the stumpy arms had stolen round her waist. "Give me a kiss and tell me where to find him, and I'll knock the stuffing out of the rascal," he whispered insinuatingly.

But Miss Popkiss was not so easily got round. "Don't, sir! What would father say?" she protested with a vigour which was likewise included in the action with which she released herself; an action performed with such adroitness as to give the impression that this was owed to its being frequently called for.

"Where is he, my sweetie?" persisted the curious one, in no wise abashed by his repulse.

Next moment the question was answered by a crash, as the table was overturned, and there rose, struggling with the hampering folds of its cover, the irate form of Mr. Thomas Sparrow.

CHAPTER II

With a vicious kick at the encumbering and undignified table-cover, Mr. Sparrow, green with passion, advanced upon his supposed traducer, who backed away in a composite attitude of protest, authority, and apprehension.

"Oh, Tom!" cried Miss Popkiss ruefully, but Mr. Sparrow had no eyes for her just then.

"Scoundrel, am I? Rascal, am I?" he hissed at the retreating stranger. "I'll show you. I'll give you——"

The other man had backed, by an oversight, into the corner and stood at bay, with an ugly look in his eyes and a thick-set hand stretched out in front of him. "Don't you touch me," he exclaimed warningly, "an officer of the law in the execution of his duty."

The words had a certain effect on Mr. Sparrow, since his threatening fist remained in the air. "What do you want wi' me?" he demanded, with a quiver in his voice which was, perhaps, not altogether the result of righteous anger.

"You are Percy Peckover?" the man suggested.

"You are a liar!" was the ready retort. "I am Thomas Sparrow."

"Yes," corroborated Miss Popkiss, with a remorseful sob; "he is my Tom Sparrow."

The other man began to look doubtful; then he pulled the telegram from his pocket and unfolded it with legal deliberation. "Stop a bit," he said brusquely. "Five foot seven," he glanced up uncompromisingly at the ruffled Sparrow—"You're five foot nine——"

"And a half," put in the person under review.

The other took no notice of the correction, but proceeded with his comparison. "Pale—you are brick-dust; oval face—yours is round enough; dark moustache"; he moved his head quizzingly from side to side as though looking for something not easily distinguishable: "yours is sandy—what there is of it——"

Miss Popkiss gave an hysterical giggle, and Mr. Sparrow, words evidently failing him, merely gurgled and showed his teeth in a discomfited grin.

"Flash dress," read on the detective, outwardly ignoring the effect of his blunt differentiation, "yours is agricultural and shabby."

"Shabby?" Sparrow cried furiously. It was early closing day, and he had been at pains to smarten himself up in his best; added to which he would at any time have deprecated personal criticism in the presence of Miss Popkiss.

But all the apology he got from his tormentor was the terse summing up, as the telegram was refolded, "Description don't tally. You can go."

Gathering that it was no half-forgotten peccadillo that had risen against him, Mr. Sparrow resumed his boldness and eased the curb upon his wrath. "Go?" he cried witheringly. "How about the stuffing? I'll go for you!"

He proceeded to do so in such unmistakable fashion that the arm of the law (being in this case one that was at a disadvantage in the essential of reach) found itself inadequate for its own protection, and was fain to invoke lay assistance which forthwith appeared in the portly form of Host Popkiss.

"Hullo! hullo!" cried that worthy, his high-pitched croak sounding above the scuffle. "What's the matter? I won't have no row on my licensed premises," he protested in fussy indignation, proceeding to separate the combatants with a vigour which made up in authority what it lacked in physique. "Why, Mr. Doutfire!" he exclaimed in horrified amazement as he recognised Sparrow's victim.

"Yes, me, Mr. Popkiss," gasped that gentleman, keeping a vicious eye on his late assailant. "Will you deal with this party, or shall I?" As he spoke he produced and exhibited with a significance which was not lost upon Mr. Sparrow, a pair of highly-polished handcuffs, of a more elegant make than the usual vulgar "darbies" which festoon the blankness of a police-station wall; in effect these were of a pattern *de luxe*. None the less had they the immediate effect of calming the aggressive Sparrow; to whom, with the severity of the outraged licensee of a highly respectable house of entertainment, Mr. Popkiss now addressed himself.

"What have you come in here for? In my coffee-room?"

"I did not come for to be insulted," answered Mr. Sparrow sullenly, as preferring a negative handling of an awkward question.

But Mr. Popkiss held on to the positive. "I ask you what you did come for," he insisted, his severe eye suggesting how much more weight his tone might have carried had his bones carried less.

"He was under the table." Mr. Doutfire made the statement without heat, as though content to let the bare and damning fact speak for itself.

"Most irregular," said Popkiss weakly, at a loss exactly what to do, and wishing, but for the slur on his house, that the law's representative would take the matter out of his hands. "Look here," he went on, with an ill-timed and coldly received wink at the detective, "if you want to play under the table, stop at home and play under your own; if I catch you under mine or anywhere on my premises where there is no call for you to be, I'll pull your wing feathers out, Mr. Sparrow. Now, hop off."

Under other circumstances Mr. Sparrow might have been ready with a more or less pertinent rejoinder to the stout inn-keeper's *brutum fulmen*; as it was, with the glittering symbols of durance dangling before his fascinated eyes, he was glad enough to find himself in a position to depart even with his repartee unspoken.

"Mercy," commanded her father, dropping the jocular element in his severity; "go into the bar, I'll talk to you presently."

And Miss Popkiss, with the uneasy conviction that she had made a fool of herself, was glad to obey.

"Now, Mr. D., what gives us the pleasure of seeing you here to-day?" inquired the host, lapsing without an effort into affability. "I didn't notice you come in."

"No," replied Doutfire, as he dropped the minatory tokens of his office into his pocket; "I made free of the window—just in the way of business, you understand. Fact is," he continued in a more confidential tone and with a quite unnecessary repetition of his trick of glancing round the room in search of impossible eavesdroppers, "I've had a wire from town. You are likely to have a queer customer to-day."

The fat face of Mr. Popkiss showed no tangible sign of the effect the news had on him. "What, coming here, to this house?" he asked futilely. "For Bunbury Races to-morrow, I suppose?"

"Maybe," Mr. Doutfire agreed, in the tone of one who could say more if he chose, "young swell-mob, I reckon. Travelled by nine-thirty train from Waterloo, alighted at Faxfleet and inquired the way here. I was ten minutes late at the station and got a lift on here, calculating to overtake him. He must have gone by the fields."

"What has he done, Mr. D.?" Popkiss inquired huskily.

"Serious case; counterfeit coin," Mr. Doutfire answered with importance. "One of a flash gang. Now look here," he said with a touch of authority, "The party I want is sure to turn up soon. Don't you allow yourself to do anything calculated to rouse that party's suspicions: serve him with what he calls for, and leave the rest to me."

"I'd better leave the bill to you as he pays in wrong money, eh?" suggested Mr. Popkiss, with true trade waggishness, and becoming purple with enjoyment of his own joke.

Mr. Doutfire permitted himself no more than a faint smile. "Treasury won't see you out of pocket, Mr. Popkiss," he declared with importance, as one fully competent to answer for the liberality of that notoriously niggardly office. Then, as having settled the point, he thrust his hand into his trouser pockets and strutted complacently to the window. "I hope to make a neat job of it this time," he announced.

"Ah, you're a cute one, you are, Mr. D.," said Popkiss knowingly.

"Well," assented Doutfire, still looking out of the window and rattling the money in his pockets, "I flatter myself I have done a few pretty things in my time. Yes," he continued introspectively, "I've got a good bit of the fox in me—natural and acquired in the profession"—he turned suddenly on his heel, confronting Mr. Popkiss—"only in the way of business, mind you."

The sudden *volte face* so startled the worthy host that all he could put forward by way of comment was the trite formula, "You'll have a glass of me, Mr. D.?"

Possibly Mr. Doutfire took the offer as a tribute to his professional sagacity; all the same, he declined it. "No, thank you. Must keep my head clear. Can't drink."

"What, not in the way of business?" chuckled Mr. Popkiss with another sub-apoplectic seizure. "One glass," he urged, perhaps wishing, in the ticklish position of proprietor of licensed premises to stand well with the representatives of the law.

"Well, just a small one," Mr. Doutfire consented, in a tone which suggested that the blandishments of all the publicans in England should not persuade him to exceed his modicum or his duty.

As they turned towards the bar, Mercy met them. "Father," she said breathlessly, "the carriage from the Towers has just driven into the yard. Colonel Hemyock is asking for you."

"Eh? All right," exclaimed Popkiss, turning down his cuffs in a flurry. "Here, Mercy,"—he ran back—"draw Mr. Doutfire a glass of anything he fancies." And so he bustled out, a quivering jelly of importance and servility, into the courtyard.

CHAPTER III

Colonel Hemyock, the temporary tenant of Staplewick Towers, was a somewhat blatant specimen of a retired military man with an unbounded sense of his personal dignity and importance, which sense he derived from an aristocratic wife. Never in this world was there anybody more starchily dignified than the gallant Colonel looked as he sat bolt upright in his phaeton; a tall, thin, thread-paper of a man, with his sharp aquiline nose, and brushed out white whiskers, whiskers of which not a hair was ever seen out of line. But that was all. For the rest he might have been a figure from Madame Tussaud's with a phonograph inside.

As behind the horseman is said to be invariably seated Black Care, so behind the gallant driver of that phaeton were sitting the Colonel's two-fold cares, his two daughters. People who affected to know everything—and such are occasionally met with in the country—asserted that it was with a view to getting her daughters off that the scheming Lady Agatha Hemyock had insisted on the family's taking up its abode at the missing Lord Quorn's somewhat derelict place. And the policy had not been entirely without result.

But now with the discovery of the new peer the tenancy came to an end. It was simply left for the Hemyocks to close it pleasantly, and, some critics said, designingly, by entertaining the new owner for a few days, introducing him to his property, such as it was, and the Misses Ethel and Dagmar Hemyock, such as they were, and then leaving him to his own devices, and the result of theirs.

"Ah—ah, Popkiss," Colonel Hemyock said in his high, thin voice, acknowledging the bustling innkeeper's salute with a limited flourish of his whip. "I just looked in to say that—ah—Lord Quorn" (he spoke the name with absurd emphasis, shaping his mouth into an O twice as he pronounced it) "is expected to arrive here this afternoon."

So impressed was Mr. Popkiss by the stiff and immaculate Colonel's pomposity that all he could ejaculate was, "Dear me, Colonel! Lord Quorn?"

"Yes," responded the Colonel freezingly, as he stared straight in front of him over his horses' ears; "his lordship has just arrived from Australia."

"I have heard something of it, Colonel," said Mr. Popkiss, regaining his composure; perhaps because his noble visitor suggested by his attitude that he admitted him to no more human fellowship than the mounting block in the yard. "The late peer's cousin, is he not, Colonel? I trust you will not be giving up the Towers?" he added hypocritically, since the Hemyock establishment could hardly be said to bring two-and-sixpence per annum into the coffers of the *Quorn Arms Hotel*.

"I—ah, don't know," the buckram personage answered, still staring foolishly over his horses' heads. "Anyhow, his lordship will stay at the Towers for some time as my guest."

"Curious; in his own house, Colonel," fatuously remarked Mr. Popkiss, as feeling called to make some comment on the situation.

"It is my place as long as I pay for it," snapped the Colonel loftily.

"Certainly, Colonel; no doubt, Colonel; I beg pardon, Colonel," Popkiss protested abjectly.

A few heavy drops suddenly came pattering down on the glass roof of the yard.

"It is going to rain," Colonel Hemyock observed in a tone of irritated surprise at the outrage. "We shan't get over to Babbleton this afternoon." This to his daughters, who looked, in anticipation of harm to their finery, more discontented, if possible, than before. "We had better put up till Quorn arrives. You can wait here and I will look in at the club."

There was a waiting-room adjoining the archway for the accommodation of the county people who put up their carriages at the *Quorn Arms* while they shopped in the town. Shown in, with much obsequiousness, by Host Popkiss, the Misses Ethel and Dagmar Hemyock here proposed to spend a tedious and highly uninteresting half-hour. The prospect did not tend to lessen the grievance they entertained against the world in general and certain unappreciative persons of the male sex in particular.

"I wonder," observed Ethel, taking up and throwing down again the current number of the *Bunbury Bulletin*, "if father finds Sharnbrook at the club, whether he will have the sense to let

him know we are here."

"It strikes me ignorance is bliss in Sharnbrook's case," replied Dagmar cuttingly, as she stood at the window, peevishly regarding the rain.

"Oh, shut up, Dagmar," her sister returned, with a surprising lack of dignity in one so highly born. "If it clears up we might take him over to Babbleton with us."

"If he'll come," said Dagmar sarcastically.

"He must come," Ethel declared emphatically.

"He has fought shy of us since he proposed to you," Dagmar remarked maliciously.

"And was accepted," put in Ethel decisively.

"Trust you," sneered her sister. "He has the bad taste to put down the proposal to the champagne. Mrs. Wyrley-Byrde told mother so."

"All right," snapped Ethel. "Not even father's champagne ever made any man propose to you."

"A man," retorted Dagmar pointedly, "requires to be in his sober senses to appreciate me. And if he proposed under the influence of Heidsieck, I should not accept him."

"Oh, wouldn't you?" returned Ethel with somewhat over-emphasized incredulity. "Anyhow, I am not going to let John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook slip through my fingers."

"Trust you," Dagmar laughed scornfully. "You'll hold him as tight as he was when he proposed to you."

"As he says he was," Ethel corrected.

"As he must have been," Dagmar maintained unfeelingly. "After all," the amiable young lady continued, with a yawn, "who is John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook that he should be exempt from matrimony? Better men than he have submitted to it. Julius Caesar was married—and——"

"And Alexander the Great," Ethel supplied as her sister paused for another notable victim of the marriage tie.

"Yes, I think he was," pursued Dagmar indifferently.

"If he wasn't, he——" she yawned again. "And Maryborough, and Edward the Black Prince were married men."

"So was Henry the Eighth," observed Ethel sententiously.

"Certainly. And Napoleon, and pretty well everybody worth mentioning, and heaps not worth it. And who, pray, is John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook that he should cry off and plead Mumm? Nobody!"

"He has four thousand a year," Ethel remarked in mitigation of her recalcitrant suitor's total extinction.

"And a pretty taste in fox terriers," supplemented Dagmar, with an air of making every possible point in the unhappy Sharnbrook's favour. "If he jilts you——"

"Impossible," Ethel cried heroically.

"Fish have been known to wriggle back into the water after they were hooked, played and landed," Dagmar observed sagaciously. She turned to the window. "Here he comes," she remarked coolly. "I advise you to fling him a little farther from the bank." She raised her voice to greet the half-hearted Philander. "Here we are, Mr. Sharnbrook. Come in!"

Mr. Sharnbrook thereupon came in, somewhat with an air of looking as though he would much rather not. He was a florid young man, of no strikingly apparent intellectual powers: he had straw-coloured hair parted in the middle, and a downy moustache to match. Apart from an aggressive riding suit his appearance was diffident to the verge of chronic apology.

"Left off raining," he remarked, in a vain desire to meet his enemies in the open.

"Has it?" replied Dagmar, indifferently doubtful. "Fancy your finding us here," she added disingenuously.

"Quite a surprise," he observed, with equal dissimulation.

"A pleasant surprise, I should hope. Aren't you going to speak to Ethel?"

Thus prompted, Mr. Sharnbrook was fain to advance and greet the lady whom for the last

week he had been dodging. "How do you do?" he said with timid cordiality.

"How awfully gushing," laughed the voluble Miss Dagmar. "Of course, I'm in the way," she added significantly. "All right; I'll look out of the window."

"Oh, not at all," protested the miserable Sharnbrook. "Please don't."

"Oh, but I shall," she insisted. "I am interested in that delightful old market woman who has just driven in. Tell me when I may turn round."

"Now," said Sharnbrook, desperately bold.

"Dagmar, don't be absurd," protested her sister, with a provocative glance at her jibbing lover.

"I can't see behind me," Dagmar observed casually.

"None of your tricks, Dagmar," said Ethel, facing the wretched young man, and then turning her head as though to look at her sister, which manoeuvre had the intended effect of giving John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook a magnificent oscillatory opportunity.

But though the way was plain the will was absent. "No, no," protested the gentleman, hanging off; "I'm up to her game. You won't catch me, Miss Dagmar. She has only got to turn her head," he pointed out confidentially to Ethel.

"Oh, she won't—just yet," the lady murmured softly. "She had better not," she added, with a meaning smile.

"We had better not," suggested the harried Sharnbrook at his wits' end, desperately determined not to compromise himself before a witness.

"Oh, just as you please," returned Miss Ethel, with a disgusted toss of her head. "If you are so frightened."

"Oh, well," he urged feebly; "I don't want to make a fool of myself."

"Oh, it is not necessary," the disappointed maiden returned with scorn. "You may look, Dagmar."

"I didn't see anything," remarked that lady, with a malicious twinkle in her sharp eyes.

"No," said Sharnbrook, manifestly relieved; "I don't see how you could. So the new Lord Quorn is coming down to the Towers," he added, eager to change the subject.

"Yes," replied Dagmar glibly, wickedly rejoicing at Ethel's discomfiture. "We are expecting him now. Of course we haven't an idea what he is like. Frightfully colonial, no doubt."

"We've heard nothing of Lady Quorn," remarked Ethel, determined not to be behindhand in chatter, and so show her indifference to the love passage that did not come off.

Sharnbrook gave a smile of superior knowledge.

"There is no Lady Quorn," he said.

The effect of his announcement was startling. "No Lady Quorn?" the eager sisters cried in chorus, their expressions indicating design tempered with incredulity.

"Quorn's a bachelor," Sharnbrook maintained, beginning to see light behind the dark cloud which for the past fortnight had hung over him.

Miss Ethel turned to her sister with indignant reproach. "Dagmar! You said he was married."

"I—I understood father to say he was," that disingenuous young lady replied unblushingly.

Ethel, well acquainted with her sister's resourcefulness, turned from her in evident disgust. "Are you quite sure, Mr. Sharnbrook?" she inquired with purposeful determination to clutch the truth.

"I saw it in the paper," the now brightening youth answered. "There certainly was a report that he was married, or engaged, or something of that sort; but it turns out to be a mistake. He's a young chap, about thirty."

"How interesting!" Ethel murmured.

"Is he good-looking?" Dagmar inquired, with a suggestion of appropriating the new-found peer if he should be fortunate enough to touch her standard of beauty.

"Can't say," Sharnbrook smirked. "Sure to be if he's a lord," he added, with cheap sarcasm.

Dagmar crossed to Ethel and slapped her on the shoulder. "My chance, my dear; you're booked," she said in a determined undertone.

Ethel gave a repudiatory "Pooh!" and pushed her away. Dagmar walked serenely to the window. "I wonder if that is his lordship coming up the street?" she exclaimed suddenly.

Ethel ran to the window. "Where? Which?"

There was no one in view at the moment who could be supposed by any stretch of imagination to come up to even an unconventional idea of a peer of the realm, nevertheless the sanguine Dagmar pushed her sister away. The first sight of the waiting coronet was for her alone. "Never you mind, Ethel," she said roughly, "I am quite competent to look out for him. You amuse yourself with Mr. Sharnbrook."

Mr. Sharnbrook meanwhile was experiencing some difficulty in arranging a decent veil over his satisfaction. "By Jove, they've jumped at Quorn," he told himself gleefully. "If only—I say, Ethel," he said with sudden affection, to test the new phase of the situation.

Ethel pushed away the arm which had recklessly found its way round her, until lately inviting, waist.

"Don't be absurd, Mr. Sharnbrook," she protested snappishly.

"I shouldn't have been absurd just now," he retorted pointedly.

"You didn't take your chance, and you've lost it." The fact that she turned haughtily away prevented her seeing an uncomplimentary look of joyful relief in her recalcitrant lover's face. If only this Lord Quorn were a decent fellow and would back him up.

"What a time father is at that stupid club," Dagmar exclaimed impatiently. "And we have got to go to Babbleton. We've no excuse for not going now the rain has so provokingly stopped."

"Let's go and rout father out, and get back soon," Ethel suggested, not a whit behind her in eagerness.

"Come along, then, dear," said Dagmar, giving a preparatory look at herself in the glass. "Aren't you going to take your young man with us?" she added with a view to her sister's annoyance.

"Oh, you don't want to come, do you, Mr. Sharnbrook?" Ethel said with a somewhat obvious lack of cordiality.

"To Babbleton? Not exactly," replied the wary Sharnbrook with so much fervour that Dagmar laughed unpleasantly. His principal desire now was to get into the middle of a ten-acre field and sing a pæan.

"Come on, then, Dagmar," his *soi-disante fiancée* said with a toss of the head.

Dagmar drew back, however. "Say good-bye to your dear Jack," she suggested with ill-timed humour. "I won't look."

Ethel's face, under the fun, made Sharnbrook rejoice more than ever at the chance which, properly worked, might obviate any claim on his part to that ungratifying physiognomy. "Dagmar! How absurd you are; Mr. Sharnbrook does not appreciate the joke."

"Indeed!" her sister retorted in a voice which might, without violating the fitness of things, have been pitched somewhat lower. "I thought he was the only person who tried to see a joke in your engagement."

"Ethel!" He called her back mischievously, secure in his good fortune. "I was going to Carter's about a ring."

"Oh," she replied with a not very gracious nod, "that can wait. Catch me," she said to herself as she hurried after Dagmar, "catch me wearing an engagement ring while there is a bachelor peer in the house."

"Quorn's the man to save me," Sharnbrook murmured jubilantly as he strolled into the yard to see the designing fair ones off.

Mercy ran in to have a sight of her new mistresses from the window. A groom with a gold band round a weather-beaten hat, who looked as though he occasionally sought distraction from the monotony of stable-work in the more Arcadian occupation of gardening, came by, touching his hat to the ladies, then signing more familiarly to the landlord's daughter that he had a communication for her.

"Oh, Miss Popkiss," he said, as she opened the window. "Mrs. Dixon will be glad if you will come to the Towers to-morrow, as the other young lady is leaving to-night. One of our chaps will be in town and he'll drive you over."

"Very well, Mr. Tootal," she said archly. "I'll be ready."

Mr. Tootal glanced round and dropped from an official to a confidential tone. "I think you'll like us," he ventured to predict. "Our people are rather frauds, and stiff as boot-tops, but Lord Quorn is coming to stay, and we've hopes we shall wake up. Well, I mustn't keep old Wax-work waiting. O revoire." With a wink and an amorous flourish suggestive of future blandishments, Mr. Tootal ran off, while Miss Popkiss turned to the glass and contemplated her charms with much satisfaction. The magnificent possibilities of a life in a novel sphere were before her, and she meant to make the most of her chances. And, after all, as she told herself with her head held critically on one side, there is no knowing what a pretty girl may do if only she sets her mind to it.

So engrossed was she in the contemplation of her face and its probable effect upon the denizens of Staplewick Towers that she did not hear her father's approach.

"Do you hear, Mercy?" he cried in a tone of testy importance. "We are to have a distinguished visitor?"

"A distinguished visitor?" she repeated rather disdainfully. "Mr. Gillions, the big commercial, I suppose. It is about his time."

So far as an expansively fat face can express anything, that of Host Popkiss indicated withering scorn at such a suggestion. "Gillions! Commercial!" he repeated, in croaking contempt of even that potentate of the road. "I tell you the new Lord Quorn is going to stop here on his way to the Towers."

Miss Popkiss at once became interested. "When is he coming?" she asked with all the animation her father could desire.

"To-day," he spluttered,—"any minute. So just get things a bit smart, and let's show his lordship our best face," and he bustled off.

"Lord Quorn! Our best face!" Miss Popkiss, with the nearest approach to a flutter of which her free and easy nature was capable, yet found time for another glance in the mirror. The result was clearly encouraging. "It's the only one I've got," she observed knowingly; "but I guess it will do."

Not being, however, quite satisfied in her mind as to the rival effects of pink ribbons in her cap, or blue, she ran off to her room to institute a comparison, thereby just failing to notice the entrance of a strange guest.

CHAPTER IV

The man who, avoiding the bar, made his way straight into the coffee-room, entered with an air in which jauntiness and limpness were curiously combined. His get-up showed that curious caricature of the prevailing fashion which dressy young men of depraved, or at least untutored, judgment are prone to affect, and was, from his patent leather boots to his aggressive diamond tie-pin, in singular contrast to his dusty and rather forlorn appearance. His clothes, in spite of their over-smart cut, had the stale, creased look of garments that have been worn for several days continuously. They were, indeed, in keeping with the wearer's hunted look, resembling in character the coat of a fox after a stiff run.

With a half yawn, half sigh of exhaustion, the man dropped into a wooden armchair, and flicked with his partridge cane a bell on the table by him.

"Heigho! My last fling. Now for a good one," he muttered.

Miss Popkiss, more than usually on the alert, and postponing for the moment the respective claims of blue and pink, lost no time in presenting herself.

"Well, my dear, what have you got in the house?" the man inquired, pulling himself together and speaking jauntily, partly from policy, partly from the natural instinct ever roused by the propinquity of a pretty girl.

"Nice cold sirloin, sir," Mercy answered mechanically, regarding the new guest with expectant eyes.

"Beef? Is that the best you can do?" he asked, with a dissatisfied laugh.

"Fowl, sir," Miss Popkiss suggested in a preoccupied tone, trying to adjust the customer's appearance and manner with her preconceived ideas of the peerage.

"Fowl; that's better. No game?"

"Game's not in season, sir."

He gave a loud mirthless laugh to cover his mistake. "No, I suppose not in the country," he retorted with cockney wit. "Now, look here, my dear," he went on, impressively tapping her arm with the crook of his stick; "to cut it short, I want the best dinner you can serve me; regardless of expense, several courses—as many as you like—you understand? Tell cook to do her best, and to hurry up with it."

"Yes, sir," responded Miss Popkiss, having now little doubt as to the guest's identity. "Will you take anything to drink, sir?" she asked, lingeringly, calculating the social advantage to be derived from being the first in the place to see the long-lost and newly-found Lord Quorn.

"Will I take anything to drink?" He whistled scornfully at the suggestion of a doubt in the matter. "Where's your wine-list?"

Miss Popkiss roused herself from her contemplation, and brought it.

The guest ran his fingers quickly down the column devoted not to the brands but to their prices. "Look here. A bottle of number eleven and a bottle of twenty-four pop."

The oldest port-wine and the most expensive champagne. The order settled any lingering doubt in Miss Popkiss' mind. "Anything else, sir?" she asked with an excess of assiduity as she took back the list.

The half-admiring attention with which she was observing him could not fail by this to have its effect upon the visitor. "Well," he answered, with a leer, which was evidently intended to be killing. "I shouldn't mind a sip of something—just to keep me going."

If his words were equivocal, his manner left their meaning unmistakable. Nevertheless Miss Popkiss made a spirited attempt to ignore it. "I suppose you mean a bitters, sir?" she suggested disingenuously.

The guest went through an exaggerated pantomime of scrutinizing the lady's tempting lips. "No; they look anything but bitter," he returned, waggishly amorous.

"A glass of dry sherry, sir? What number would you like?" Miss Popkiss hastily ran to where she had replaced the wine-list, and with the same movement took the opportunity of looking out of the window. Mr. Thomas Sparrow was not in evidence: in fact, the yard seemed empty. Satisfied of this she took the list demurely to the still leering guest.

"Number four," he said, with a world of cheap blandishment in his winking eyes.

"Number four?" Miss Popkiss nearly succeeded in a look of mystification. "Number four is a claret, sir."

"That's more like the colour," he replied significantly. "Here!" He took a step to her, disregarding her feeble attempt to hold the wine-list as a barrier between them. "Don't you know what make four?"

"What, sir?" she asked with a giggle now; preferring his working out of the arithmetical problem as likely to be more racy than her own.

"Why"—taking the obnoxious wine-list with one hand, and slipping the other round her waist —"four is two and two together, like this." And he followed up the proposition by oscular demonstration.

"Oh, my lord! Don't do so, my lord!" Miss Popkiss affected to protest, without, however, raising her voice to a pitch that would reach the bar, or making more than the most perfunctory efforts to release herself from the encircling arm.

"That's a good sample," he grinned amorously. "I should like a dozen."

There was no doubt about him, Miss Popkiss concluded, the episode entirely falling in with her preconception of aristocratic ways. "Oh," she giggled, "you are a naughty nobleman." Then, releasing herself, this time by a business-like effort, she ran off, doubtless with the idea, after the manner of her kind, of doling out her favours and spreading the lordly caresses over as long a period as circumstances permitted.

Perhaps it was as well; for, scarcely had she turned her back on the dusty Philander when the lips which had just been pressed to hers opened wide in a very unromantic yawn. Then their owner threw himself wearily back into the chair and laughed languidly. "Nobleman!" he murmured, with a puff of amused scorn at the provincial greenness. "And she called me my lord when I kissed her." The idea seemed to tickle him in spite of his weariness. "She knows their ways," he commented languidly as he took out a silver cigarette-case, flashily enamelled with a spirited representation of men's three popular vices in combination, and lighted up. "Is it my appearance, or the swagger dinner I have ordered, or both?" he murmured, dropping now to a rueful tone. Opposite to him, filling up the space between the windows, was a long mirror. With what was evidently characteristic conceit, the young man put himself into a photographic

attitude, with the cigarette held effectively after the fashion he had noted in certain royal and theatrical portraits, and regarded himself with rueful complacency. "Percy Peckover, my boy," he murmured, "you are going to deprive the world of an ornament. There is plenty of fun in the world, but not for you; so the sooner you are out of it the better. Ah!" he continued with a shudder, "that young woman little thinks that the warm lips just pressed to hers will soon be cold." With a quick, almost despairing action, he put the cigarette in his mouth and then drew a small phial from his pocket. "Yes," he said under his breath; "this will do the business in a jiffy." He shivered, and, as though to pull himself together, puffed vigorously at the cigarette. "By George, I should hope so," he muttered grimly. "Ekin would not play me a trick. Yes," he rambled on reminiscently, "I said—didn't I?—now, mind, no pain, Ekin, old man. None of your strychnines or antimonies. You've got the whole shop to choose from; let me just go off to sleep and wake no more. Yes, there were tears in poor old Tom's eyes; he was so upset he could hardly give me the bottle, telling me to rely on his professional skill. Let's see; he said, 'mix it in a glass of anything you like, and you'll drop off as comfortable as an Archbishop.'" He took out the stopper and sniffed at the phial. "It smells like Westminster Abbey," he said with the irrepressible jocularity of his type. "Well, it's better than——" he shuddered at the unspoken alternative. "It only wants a little courage; just five seconds' pluck," he told himself, as he slipped the phial back into his waistcoat pocket. "The champagne will give me that. 'Ang the future, let me fair enjoy myself for the few moments that are left me."

He lighted a fresh cigarette, got up and stood admiringly before the mirror, pulled down his soiled cuffs, settled his necktie, setting the diamond pin straight, smoothed his hair with a hand that seemed to tremble, then turned away with an exclamation of impatience, and stood looking vacantly out of the window. The feeble humours of the inn-yard seemed to amuse him: anyhow, he did not notice Mr. and Miss Popkiss who had come to the door and stayed there regarding him with intense curiosity and satisfaction.

CHAPTER V

"There he is, father; I'm sure it is Lord Quorn."

Perhaps it was the recollection of the procedure which had led her to that conclusion that surprised her into the laugh, not so low but that it reached the object of their attention.

He turned quickly, suspiciously, and, seeing the two interested faces, in an instant had assumed his air of jaunty swagger. "Well, landlord; is my dinner coming to-day, or are you waiting for the chicken to hatch?"

Popkiss advanced, purple and radiant, laughing his best laugh at the lordly joke. Mr. Popkiss, as became an innkeeper who knew his business, had a series of nicely graduated tokens of appreciation, from the superior half smile with which he discounted the poor wit of the yokel who was good but for a pint of small beer and took a whole evening to discuss it, through the qualified guffaw with which he stamped with his approval the heavy jokes of his regular market-day customers, up to the apoplectic and wheezy roar with which he would greet the sallies of a really important guest, whose bill bade fair to overrun the shilling column. Twice in one short hour had he, Samuel Popkiss, been on speaking terms with different members of the upper classes; small wonder was it that all thought of Mr. Doutfire's expected "party" had been centrifugally dispersed by the whirl in which he found his brain.

"Ha! ha!" he chuckled, rubbing his hands as he advanced with his best reception manner. "No, sir, that is to say, my lord, dinner is just ready, and I think we shall please you," he suggested unctuously. "You will want something to keep you up for the last part of your journey here."

The words sounded full of ominous significance; Mr. Peckover went a shade paler, while his swagger for an instant sagged visibly, as he wondered whether his host could have seen him sniffing at the euthanasia now lying snug in his waistcoat pocket.

Miss Popkiss was busy laying the cloth in a style most effective both as to the decoration of the table and the showing off of certain personal graces. For that young lady's methods of laying a table when alone and when being—as she hoped—watched during the operation were widely contrasted.

"After so much buffetting about, as I may say," observed Popkiss genially, as he panted round the table, laying unnecessary forks in places where their usefulness was not obvious, "you will be glad to settle down comfortable yonder."

He pointed with a fat hand vaguely and tentatively in the direction of Staplewick Towers, being perhaps anxious to put beyond doubt the question of his guest's identity. Peckover, with, doubtless, the idea of a somewhat different stronghold in his mind looked quickly towards the

point indicated. His glance, however, travelled no farther than the church tower; anyhow, it could hardly have reached the other landmark which was five miles off.

But the church which shut in his view was enough. The cigarette slipped from the lips that parted convulsively with the dropping jaw. The churchyard! "Glad he has arranged it," he muttered shakily.

"And you may be sure of a warm welcome from the old gentleman," Popkiss added, stopping to beam upon his guest in the midst of his superfluous bustle.

"The devil!" Peckover exclaimed aghast, scrutinizing the expansive face for a sign of "kidding."

"Oh, yes," maintained Popkiss, proud of the office of herald of welcome between two august personages; "he has been here already to look for you, and very anxious he is to carry you off to the place which, begging pardon, is yours by rights."

This was too much for Peckover, who stood staring at his obese tormentor utterly bereft of speech.

"Of course," continued Popkiss with a mitigating chuckle, "he can't help showing the cloven hoof sometimes, they say; but he's not so black as he is painted."

"Come, I'm glad of that," ejaculated Peckover, wide-eyed and staggered.

"But," the landlord observed, as rounding off the subject, "we must, as I always say, give the devil his due; and as you are going so soon to make his acquaintance, you will be able to judge for yourself."

Peckover turned away from what he could only consider as a corpulent and highly objectionable jester, and passed a shaking hand across his clammy brow. "I must stop these funniments," he told himself, "if I want any appetite for my last dinner." With a supreme effort he pulled himself together, and faced the fatuously grinning host with a dash of his native impudence. "Don't let me keep you, landlord," he said with a wave of condescension. "Nothing suits me so well as a pretty girl waiting on me. That's the relish for this customer, it beats all your Worcesters and Harveys."

Popkiss rubbed his puffy hands appreciatively. "My daughter, sir, that is, my lord; she shall look after your lordship." Then in a tone of deferential confidence, he added, "She will follow later on where you are going to."

"The deuce she will!" cried the guest, now fairly bewildered. "What has she been up to?"

The rotund landlord, not quite seeing the appropriateness of the inquiry, and perhaps feeling that it was a form of snubbing for undue familiarity, abruptly changed the subject. "I hope you'll like your dinner, my lord," he said with unctuous confidence as he waddled towards the door. "I know one thing," he chuckled.

"What's that?" Peckover asked half apprehensively.

"Your lordship won't want any supper." With which parting and equivocal witticism the expansive joker vanished.

"Whew! There he goes again," gasped Peckover, dropping limply into the nearest chair. "He has made me tremble all over." He gave a wild glance at the grey church tower looming—frowning, it seemed—cold and depressing. "George! I've a good mind to stop alive and risk it."

The entrance of Miss Popkiss with an array of dishes which might have elucidated the landlord's parting remark, and with a new bow in her hair, brought the guest up to attention again. Hungry, tired and especially thirsty, he lost no time in falling to, and so intent was he upon the good cheer before him that for a time the Hebe became aggrieved at the thought that the extra attention to her personal appearance had been thrown away, and the aid of curling tongs and smart ribbon been invoked to no purpose. However, with the second glass of champagne, the guest manifestly began to take more interest in things in general and of the expectant handmaiden in particular.

"Ah!" he exclaimed with a lengthy expiration of quasi-content, as Miss Popkiss deftly and with a flourish of the bangle on the wrist that was more in evidence, removed the fish and set the fowl before him. "I'm beginning to feel better." He tossed off another glass of champagne. "I say, my dear, your father is a cheerful person. His conversation is enough to make a boiled cod-fish shiver."

"Yes, sir—my lord," responded Miss Popkiss, abandoning the discussion of the parental characteristics in favour of a subject of more immediate interest, namely, herself; "it is a bit dullish here. That's why I am leaving."

"Oh, you are leaving?" remarked Peckover, taking as polite an interest in the statement as was consistent with having his mouth full.

"Yes," she informed him. "I am going to the place you are bound for."

The bubbling glass was half-way to his eager lips, but he set it down again. "The devil you are?" he exclaimed.

"It must at least be as lively as this," Miss Popkiss hazarded, with a pretty affectation of ennui.

"A good deal more so," the guest declared, pausing in his eating to stare blankly in front of him in utter mystification. The result of his hazy cogitation was that if the people of the inn were labouring under some absurd delusion it would be as well not to disturb it. "Well, there's no accounting for tastes," he remarked, falling back on that non-committal, if unoriginal aphorism, and redirecting his attention to the roast chicken.

"Some folks," gossiped Miss Popkiss, by way of a running conversational accompaniment to the dinner, "who don't fancy the place, would say it was out of the frying pan into the fire."

Number twenty-four had steadied the guest's nerves. "Yes," he agreed grimly, "most people would say that. Now," he muttered, "she's at it. What's that?" he inquired, pointing with his knife to a side dish.

"Curry, sir—my lord," the waitress answered, moving the dish towards him. "Curried goose, my lord."

He gave her a suspicious glance, and then pushed the dish away. There seemed too much of the personal and anticipatory element in the pungent dainty.

"Oh, it's not very hot," she protested, with the ready word for the credit of the cuisine. "Nothing like what you may find it elsewhere."

These jokes, it seemed to the guest, if jokes they were, grew monotonous, while their bad taste was undeniable. As a cockney sybarite in a cheap way, he liked to have a good-looking waitress to chatter to while dining, as he liked to chaff a barmaid over a "small scotch and polly", or a gin and ginger beer; but this was not the sort of thing the occasion seemed to call for. Accordingly he proceeded to eat and drink in silence. After all, the one solid tangible fact—presumably the last—that the world held for him, was the first-class dinner he was recklessly enjoying.

Piqued by her failure to maintain the interest she had so auspiciously begun to excite in the distinguished guest, Miss Popkiss turned in a huff to the window, and affected a melancholy interest in the heavy shower which had come on, to be roused suddenly from her air of indifference to things in general and the preoccupied gourmandizer in particular by catching sight of the adventurous Mr. Thomas Sparrow sheltering under a lean-to a few feet from the window. Evidently on the watch, he came quickly to the window, heedless of the downpour. Miss Popkiss, with a guilty conscience, received him graciously; put her finger to her lip and pointed with an air of importance to the still voracious Peckover. Sparrow looked, and his damp face clouded with jealous doubt. "Lord Quorn," whispered Miss Popkiss behind her hand. Even if Mr. Sparrow had seen that affectionate passage he could scarcely expect his sweetheart to withhold an occasional kiss from a real, if newly discovered, peer of the realm.

Whatever attraction a noble *bon-vivant* might have had for Mr. Sparrow at any other time, he was just then in too close proximity to a gutter-spout and a tempting pair of lips to devote more than a critical glance and a nod of surprised comprehension to the person indicated. Then, eager to catch the fleeting opportunity, he put forth a moist hand, pulled Miss Popkiss a thought nearer to him, and so steadying her for the operation and obviating a possible retreat, he kissed her.

Whether caused by the unusual electricity in the air or the eager hurry with which it was performed, the osculation created more noise than is considered desirable by well-bred lovers. Peckover, dining steadily, silently, jumped round, uncertain for the moment whether the report was that of a drawn cork, or some trick of the neglected waitress to attract his attention. He was alert enough and man of the world enough to comprehend the situation; indeed, had he been aware that a man was so near it would never have been in question. As it was he turned just in time to see Mr. Sparrow's gratified countenance drawing back into the unsympathetic rain. The sight gave him an uneasy thrill.

"Hullo!" he cried sharply. "Who was that?"

"Only a friend of mine," answered Miss Popkiss, with an air of showing herself not dependent for amatory attentions upon casual customers.

Her manner scarcely reassured the visitor. "It wasn't—I mean—" he stammered uneasily, "he looked like a policeman."

"Oh, no, sir; how could you think so, sir!" Miss Popkiss protested with a touch of offended dignity.

"I thought I heard a kiss," Peckover suggested, still unsatisfied.

"Other people can kiss besides the police," Miss Popkiss declared, with a toss of the head, too exasperated by the banal suggestion to deny the act.

Peckover began to think it was all right. "So they can, my poppet, so they can," he exclaimed more cheerfully, regarding the young lady with a leer which owed much of its *empressement* to the champagne. As it occurred to him that a little philandering might form a not unpleasing diversion between the courses, he rose with the leer intensified and approached Miss Popkiss with the recognizable intent of sharing with Mr. Sparrow the charmer's osculatory liberality.

But the young lady was astute enough to realize the unseasonableness of what at another time she would have welcomed. Accordingly she retreated before Peckover's advance, taking care to keep to that side of the room least visible from the window. "Oh, sir, no, sir; I'd rather you didn't, my lord," she protested, in quite a virtuous fluster.

But Peckover's knowledge of human character did not incline him to believe in the coyness that will sometimes try to stiffen the market for notoriously cheap kisses. He manoeuvred Miss Popkiss into a corner and then pounced upon her.

Whether it was that Mr. Thomas Sparrow, waiting discontentedly in the rain, had had his suspicions aroused as to the real sentiments existing at the moment between his lady-love and the noble customer, or whether he was merely anxious, now that the intervening attraction was removed, to take a more curious and leisurely survey of the interesting addition to the peerage, anyhow, he again, in a lull of the storm, sidled to the window and looked in. Not seeing the guest where he expected to find him, he boldly put his head in the window and glanced round the room. To observe in a corner, Miss Popkiss, coyly—or as it seemed to him, invitingly—protestant, at bay before Peckover, who was making a playful feint attack upon her with his serviette preparatory to getting to close quarters.

Whatever effect the sight had upon Mr. Sparrow, words utterly failed him to give adequate expression to it. All he could emit was a choked half-cry, half-growl of rage and warning. At the sound Peckover gave a great jump and for the moment stood scared and paralysed. Miss Popkiss, profiting by the respite, gave a scream just loud enough to justify herself and preserve her character for fidelity without arousing her father, and fled from the room, possibly to avoid awkward explanations. Peckover stood, staring blankly at the wrathful Sparrow, who, emboldened by his rival's limp attitude, shook his fist at him viciously.

"All right, my lord! Wait till I get at you, my lord!" he foamed.

His air was so menacing that when Peckover found his voice the first use he put it to was to call, "Landlord!"

Throughout the vocabulary he could not have chosen a word which would have had a more immediate and electric effect on the qualified aggressiveness of Mr. Sparrow. That love-sick functionary seemed instantly to collapse and recede from the window which had been the frame round a picture of rustic fury. Only with his retreat, certain words, like Parthian arrows, floated in from the storm to Peckover's hypersensitized ears.

"Wait till you come outside, my noble lord. I'll teach you to dance."

"You'll be very clever if you do," their object commented grimly as with a sigh of relief he turned to the smilingly inquisitive face of the landlord who had now appeared.

CHAPTER VI

"Did you call, my lord?" was, considering the tone of the summons, Host Popkiss' unnecessary enquiry.

"My lord!" repeated Peckover irritably. "How you country fellows do a joke to death. Yes; I did call. Who was that absurd person intruding through the window?"

Mr. Popkiss went to the window with what promptness his bulk would allow and looked blankly out into the rain-swept courtyard. "I don't see any one," he said.

"I can't eat my dinner with a Jack-in-the-box fooling behind me," Peckover complained suspiciously.

"No, certainly not," the host agreed with professional severity. "It must have been Doutfire." Satisfied with the conjecture he went up confidentially to his guest. "I'll tell you, my lord. It might have been Mr. Doutfire, our detective from Long Rixon."

Peckover with an effort arrested his jaw in the act of falling, and snapped it to with a rattle of

the teeth.

"De—detective?"

"Yes," Popkiss explained, with a touch of importance, as one who, in his responsible calling, is permitted to share the Treasury secrets; "he is expecting a chap down here that is wanted by the London police. He missed him at Faxfleet railway station, and has now gone back to Rixon, but if he don't hear of him there he is coming back here again. He is a clever man, is our Mr. Doutfire," he proceeded, warming with local pride and at the same time justifying any eccentric methods to which the eminent officer of the law might have thought proper to descend; "cleverest man in these parts by a long chalk, and we are a bit proud of him."

So full of admiration and pride was Host Popkiss that he failed to take notice of his guest's ghastly face.

"Thank you, that will do," said Peckover hurriedly, with an effort to appear loftily satisfied. "If it is only the detective, I don't mind." His one and feverish desire now was to be left alone. The crisis was at hand, and it must be faced without witnesses.

As Popkiss with corpulent strut left the room, somewhat disgusted at having failed to excite interest in the artful Doutfire, Peckover went hastily to the door and shut it upon the retreating mass of licensed importance. Then he turned, almost in a state of collapse. The champagne bottle caught his eye; he staggered to the table, poured out a glass blindly, and swallowed it. "It's all up," he muttered in a hoarse whisper. "It has come to amen. That was not the detective, but he's not far off. Clever man: back directly." He laughed miserably, then subsided limply into the chair, and sat with his head resting on his clammy hands. He was caught. If the local police, headed by the nailing Mr. Doutfire, had got wind of his presence in the neighbourhood there was clearly no escape but one. "Ugh!" He shuddered as in imagination he heard handcuffs click and felt the cold embrace of the steel round his wrists. He sat there with head erect now, his hands pressed against his cheeks, his eyes staring fascinated by the scenes which his imagination, coloured by the study of police reports, pictured before him: he saw the magistrate committing him; then himself in the dock at the Old Bailey; the Treasury counsel unfolding a black case against him, his flash pals, the real culprits, grinning at his misery from the gallery; the jury shaking their uncompromising heads in all a small tradesman's Pharisaical virtuousness; he heard the verdict, guilty; he saw the judge, unrelenting and terrible in scarlet and ermine, mouthing at him before coming to the point—five years, ten, fifteen! He started up trembling, with beads standing on his forehead and with despairing eyes. "I couldn't stand it!" he moaned. "I'll never go through it. They shan't take me alive."

Feverishly he felt for his pocket, in his agitation missing the opening more than once. He took out the phial, gave an apprehensive glance round at the window, emptied the contents into the glass and filled it up with champagne. Then, with the means of escape ready to his hand, he seemed to steady himself. "Now," he said, with a grim smile; "five seconds' courage, and I can snap my fingers at 'em all. It's only like a sleeping draught." He raised the glass to his lips, held it there for two or three seconds, and then set it down. Perhaps there was no hurry for five minutes.

"Now, I'm going off," he soliloquized dreamily. "I wish I'd had a fairer fling while I was at it. It has been a poor, middle-class rollick after all," he continued ruefully. "It's too late now. But I should like to have done the real swell, if only for a week; gone in for thousands instead of a few paltry pounds; Belgravia instead of Camden Town; Monte Carlo instead of Herne Bay and Yarmouth; high-steppers; Hurlingham; Henley; a real lady or two mashed on me instead of—ah, well, she wasn't so bad; it wasn't her fault she wasn't class: she'll be the only one to be sorry. Champagne," he took up the glass, "I might have had this sort all along if I'd had the nerve."

Suddenly recollecting, he set down the glass hastily. "I forgot." Curiously he seemed to shudder at his narrow escape. Then, as though impatient with his temporizing, "Bah! let me get it over," he muttered, and lifted the glass again, only to set it down once more. "I wonder," he said, as making an excuse for delay, "what the bill for this little dinner comes to. Poor Fatty will have to apply to my executors. Wonder if he will see a joke there." He laughed at his touch of Cockneyfied humour. Then relapsed into the morbid state. "Will the pretty little daughter be sorry? Perhaps. Not she; no one will. The sooner I'm off the hooks the better. Here goes for the last time." He took up the glass. "I'll count three, and then toss it off." He shut his eyes, hesitated a moment, then began. "One, two, thr——"

The glass was but waiting for the last word to leave his lips when the door opened with an impatient, unceremonious burst, and a man came in, flinging it to behind him. Another dusty, worn-out man, who stared for a moment at Peckover, and then, turning a chair from the table, just let himself fall into it.

CHAPTER VII

Peckover, arrested in his intent, had opened his eyes, and now stood staring half dazed at the new-comer.

"Hullo!" yawned that person genially.

"Eh?" ejaculated Peckover hazily, eyeing him with suspicion, and not quite able to realize the situation.

"Excuse me if I disturb you," said the man, with another tremendous yawn. "If I don't sit down somewhere I shall drop on the floor."

Peckover told himself that this was scarcely the detective, and even if he were his condition gave colour to a wild hope of escape.

"Tired?" The superfluous question was put tentatively.

"You bet."

"Dry?"

"Always."

"Have a glass of fizz?" In Peckover's situation even that unusual hospitality was a matter of indifference.

"Thanks," answered the man, smothering a third yawn in recognition of his fellow-guest's civility. "You are a brick. Got more than you care to drink there?" he added to qualify his somewhat grabbing acceptance of the offer.

"Yes," answered Peckover with grim significance. Then checking himself as he was about to offer the drugged glass to the stranger, he exclaimed hastily, "Oh, that won't do."

"Short of glasses?" said the other accommodatingly. "I don't mind a tumbler to save time." He spun one across to Peckover who emptied the remains of the bottle into it. The stranger poured the wine down his throat without the action of swallowing. "Ah, that's better!" he declared with a great sigh of enjoyment.

"Walked too far?" Peckover suggested listlessly. "Not used to it, p'raps?"

"Got out of the way of it," the man explained. "Three months aboard ship."

"Australia?" Peckover suggested.

The stranger nodded. "That's it. Come from London this morning. Got out at Faxfleet to walk over here. Lost my way in the woods."

"Didn't come straight, then?" Peckover had an indistinct recollection of having seen this fellow at the station, but had been too much flurried to take more than passing notice of him. Were they companions in bad luck, he wondered. "Have a glass of port," he said, warming towards his fellow-guest.

"Your wine? Thanks. Good chap. Crime to refuse old crusted, eh?" He emptied the glass which Peckover promptly refilled. Then put on a mysteriously significant look. "No, I didn't come straight here, and for a good reason." He sank his voice. "Fact is, I'm dodging a bush-ranger."

"What?" exclaimed Peckover, disinclined to take the statement seriously.

The stranger pulled his chair close up to his companion, and tapped him with his forefinger on the knee. "Look here," he said confidently. "You don't belong to these parts? Nothing of the chawbacon about you. Town man?"

"Slightly," answered Peckover, with a chastened pride in the undisputable claim.

The other grasped his hand. "I can trust you?" Peckover, recovering from the cold thrill which the somewhat demonstrative clasp occasioned, nodded impressively. "You are a smart Londoner," the stranger continued, "I'll tell you my situation, and get your advice. Mind, though, it's a dead secret."

"It soon will be with me," thought Peckover miserably, as he assured his companion on the point.

Host Popkiss, glancing in at the door, saw the two in close confidence, and with the cocksureness usual with men of limited sagacity concluded that the "party" wanted by Mr. Doutfire had arrived and was trying the confidence trick on the new-fledged member of the peerage. And having so settled it, he strolled out to keep a watchful eye for the detective.

"It's downright romantic," the thirsty stranger was saying with an apologetic smile. "Now, you wouldn't think it to look at me, but I'm a peer of the realm."

"Jehoshaphat!" commented Peckover, more frank than polite.

"Just the remark I made when I heard I was Lord Quorn," said the other pleasantly. "Been sheep-farming in New South Wales for the last twelve years. Not much luck of any sort, though, till the other day. Got a letter to say distant cousin dead, and I had succeeded to the title. Not much trimming with it, they tell me. Bit of tumble-down family property near here, Staplewick Towers, let to some grand lady." He pulled out a letter and looked at the signature. "Lady Agatha Hemyock, that's it," he said, exhibiting the letter as documentary evidence of his veracity. "So I have just trotted down to take stock."

"And where does the bush-ranger come in?" was Peckover's not unnatural inquiry.

Lord Quorn wagged his head knowingly, and drank off another glass of port-wine without apology, as though the privilege of being made the recipient of a peer's confidences was in itself ample payment for the refreshment in question. "Out there," the vague wave of his hand was understood to be towards New South Wales, "I used up my spare time flirting with a fine woman who had a figure and a will of her own. She would not have me, though; refused me more than once: but hearing one fine day that she had said no to a real live lord she felt pretty sick. However, I wasn't going to give her another chance; not likely, seeing that, besides being somewhat off her, I knew I could have my pick over here. Thereupon she accuses me of playing the giddy deceiver, and threatens to bring me to book for breach of promise. Well, I smiled at that, but it rather sent me up a tree when she trotted out her brother, the bush-ranger."

"My eye!" observed Peckover, interested in spite of himself. "Fighting man, eh?"

Lord Quorn nodded seriously. "I saw him for the first time over here with her last night. A desperate chap, I tell you," he went on anxiously, "who will stick at nothing—except your favourite vital part with a bowie knife."

His auditor made a wry face to evince his sympathetic attention.

"He keeps on show," Quorn continued, growing more and more dismally in earnest, "fire-irons he has snapped, gun-barrels he has tied in knots, crown pieces he has bitten through, eyes he has gouged out, preserved in spirits of wine, and pickled ears he has wrung off just for fun. I'm not exactly a coward, but what can you do against a man whose favourite pastime is twisting bullocks' heads off, and squeezing cannonballs out of shape."

Peckover drew down the corners of his mouth and shook his head, finding himself fully in accord with the other's policy of non-resistance. "Awkward customer to tackle," was all the encouragement he could suggest.

"Awkward!" repeated Lord Quorn in impatient contempt for the inadequate adjective, "You'd be the one to feel awkward with your nose divided in two, and your left ear in a piccalilli bottle on an amateur bush-ranger's mantelpiece. Oh, I know," he continued in an exasperated tone, anticipating a trite and obvious piece of advice, "I could have the law of him, but there is precious small satisfaction in seeing a man go to prison out of your one remaining eye, and to know that when he comes out it will come out too. Got any more liquor?"

His apprehensive indignation left no room for the common courtesies of even coffee-room life, he was seething with the angry sense of impotence before this critical and grievous position.

Peckover emptied the bottle into his glass. "The last," he said, in a tone of sympathetic gloom; "and you're quite welcome."

"Good Samaritan!" was Lord Quorn's casual acknowledgment as he tossed it off. "Fact is," he proceeded to explain by way of tardy apology, "though I'm a swell and all that I am cleared out just now. Drew a tidy sum for my travelling exes, but spent a few days in London, and a few pounds—you know what that means?"

Peckover nodded a rakish appreciation.

"Well," Quorn resumed darkly, "who should I clap eyes on last night at the play but my Australian girl and her infernal brother. Followed me over, and on my track like an insurance agent. Luckily she didn't see me, and he doesn't know me by sight. Thinks I, best thing to do is to make a bolt down here and lie low till that bush-whacking nuisance eats his head off in London and has to go back to his happy hunting grounds. So, first thing to-day, sent a wire to Lady What's-her-name, and then found only just enough cash left in my pocket for third class to Faxfleet. So I've tramped over. That's the chronicle."

"You've given your friends the slip?" Peckover suggested encouragingly.

"Hope so," replied Quorn, doubtfully. "But they'll track me like kangaroo hunters. A woman has a fine scent for a title; a coronet is like a red herring. But I say," he broke off, as though a trifle ashamed of having monopolized the interest of the colloquy; "what does a smart chap like

you want in this dead-alive hole? You are not in a mess?"

Peckover's expression swiftly changed from altruistic interest to lugubrious self-pity. "I am, though," he replied. "Got Scotland Yard after me. Don't be afraid," he protested hastily, as Lord Quorn's eyes opened wide with suspicion and he gave himself a slight, but significant, set-back in his chair; "I'm only half a criminal: the victim of circumstances. Look here, confidence for confidence. I'll tell you all about it."

CHAPTER VIII

"You may rely on my keeping my mouth shut," said Lord Quorn, giving a tremendous yawn which for the moment seemed to cast a doubt upon his ability in that direction.

"It doesn't much matter," Peckover responded mournfully. "Well," he proceeded, with a touch of chastened self-glorification, "you must know I've been flinging myself about in London."

"Painting the town red, eh?"

"Painting myself black, more like it," he retorted. "Very pleasant, though, while it lasted. You see," he explained conceitedly, "I always had ideas above my position, and some time back I thought I'd emerge from the grub state and do a bit of butterflying."

Quorn nodded; so far in sympathy.

"But," continued Peckover, "to be a butterfly in town you want a lot of dust on your wings; and when it comes to dressing a bit toffish, treating your friends, especially the ladies—and they've been my ruin"—he interjected with complacent self-reproach—"doing the Halls regular, and tooling your best girl out to Richmond or the Welsh Harp of a Sunday, why, five-and-thirty bob a week don't go far."

Lord Quorn shook his head sleepily, as being in complete, if drowsy, accord with the estimate.

"That figure," Peckover declared impressively, "was my blessed screw at—well, at an eminent firm of auctioneers. Things were looking a bit bluish, a writ or two out against me, my tailor showed me no mercy, but his patience got shorter even than his thirteen bob trousers, in which, though too tight, as usual, I was ready to skip, when Jimmy Cutbush, a friend of mine in the racing world, put me on to a good thing which came off. Jimmy drew my winnings and paid them over to me, promising plenty more tips of the same sort, till I began to understand how Rothschild feels; but, what do you think?"

Lord Quorn was obviously not thinking anything worth mentioning just then, but, roused by the intensity with which the question was put, he rattled his ideas together and replied, "Ah, what?"

"Cutbush drew good money," said Peckover, knitting his brows, and throwing into the statement all the impressiveness which a five-and-thirty shilling clerk and voluptuary has at command, "and paid me in bad; and there was I, swaggering about and paying my way, with a lot of wrong 'uns in my pocket. That was pretty steep, eh?"

Words failed Lord Quorn, in his present condition, adequately to characterize the situation; he contented himself by receiving it with an absurd grimace which was intended as an effective substitute for verbal comment.

"Well," pursued his companion, accepting the distortion of feature in the spirit in which it was produced, "day before yesterday I drove down to Kempton to round proper on my pal, having likewise backed Cockalorum for the Great Comet Stakes."

"Did that come off?" Quorn inquired with an effort.

"No, but his jockey did, and landed me in a nice hole. Then when I tackled Cutbush, all he had to say was to call me a Juggins, and ask me what I took him for. 'Well,' I says naturally, 'I've won this oof, and can't spend it'; 'well,' he says,'buy a moneybox and save it.' Then, as if that wasn't enough, as I was driving home, rather down in my luck, I had the misfortune to run over a noble duke in Piccadilly. His Grace was in the middle of the road, looking for his balance, but of course the police took his side—a duke is never drunk, only deaf. Having left them my name and address, as well as my blessing, I drove on, when suddenly my beast of a horse took it into his head to say his prayers; result, both knees damaged. When I left the stables, after a little friction with the proprietor, my landlady meets me and says I had better not go home, as the police have been waiting for me all day. Now you know why I am here."

Inspirited by realizing that his companion's personal narrative had come to an end, Lord Quorn was able to rouse himself. "Hanged if you aren't worse off than I am," he declared with a yawn. "Don't think I'd change place with you. Rather run the risk of being chawed up by that bush-devil. Well, what are you going to do?" he asked, with lethargic sympathy. "Slip across the water?"

For a moment Peckover debated with himself whether he should declare his expedient. To conclude that it would serve no practical end. "Oh, I've got a proper way out of my troubles," he answered enigmatically.

"Glad to hear it," Quorn replied indifferently. "They are rather unkind to people who enter into competition with the Mint, aren't they? Well," he concluded, taken with a fresh access of yawning, "I hope you'll give 'em the slip. Wish I could help you, but," he added waggishly, as giving a cheerful wind-up to the somewhat depressing mutual confidences; "you see it is more than I can do at present to help myself."

To drive home his double meaning he reversed the empty bottle, and then began sleepily to fill his pipe, humming a comic song the while.

"He's cut out for a lord," was Peckover's mental comment as he sat watching his companion with some contempt. He was perhaps a little disgusted and disappointed that the story of his chapter of ill-luck and present critical position should have had no deeper or more lasting effect upon the man who had been so glad of his hospitality. Peer or no peer, he might know better than to sing "Peculiar Julia" by way of dirge for one whose minutes of life, or at any rate, liberty, was numbered. So he sat in disgust, watching the drowsy nobleman strike a match, and being too sleepy to apply it to his pipe, hold it, nodding, till the flame touched his fingers and brought him to with a start and a smothered word of objurgation. "A pretty addition to the peerage," he muttered with a sneer. "Lord Quorn, indeed! A fellow who hadn't the sense to keep awake when he had a lighted match in his hand. And here was Percy Peckover—" Suddenly a circumstance which the companionship had driven out of his mind recurred to him. Both the landlord and his daughter had called him my lord. It had seemed a feeble provincial joke, but it was now in a flash made intelligible. "Of course," he exclaimed under his breath as he started up at the thought, "I understand now. They have been taking me for him. That's what they meant by their silly my-lording. And if that's the case, why shouldn't they go on taking him for me! If they only would till I can get clear out of this, I might give that precious detective the slip and get clean away."

With eyes full of the hopeful project he stood looking at the noble slumberer, then suddenly turned and tip-toed to the door.

Quiet as it was, the movement half roused Quorn. "Jul-i-ah, Jul-i-ah! Why are you so very pecu-li-ah?" he sang sleepily.

Peckover stopped and looked back. "I'll try it," he muttered. "It's a bold stroke, but—where's that mug of a landlord?" He opened the door softly, and stole out.

A sudden gust caught the window, and the rattle woke Quorn with a start. He sat up, staring round stupidly, and found himself alone and thirsty with a full glass of champagne on the table before him. He stared at it, then round the room again.

"Gone?" he exclaimed. "Flash little coiner chap gone? Sin to waste good liquor." With the word he took up the wine and tossed it off; then set down the glass with a wry face. "Queer brand!" he ejaculated. "Faugh! Filthy stuff—or else——" He got up with a shiver of disgust, and faced the doorway just in time to see his late companion peep in. "I say, Mr. Ooff-merchant!" he called out, pointing to the empty glass, "What's the matter with this stuff?"

Occupied with the strange chance of escape, Peckover had for the moment forgotten all about his drugged wine. As his eye followed Quorn's unsteady finger, he went cold, and his knees knocked together. In a flash he saw his effective way of escape cut off and—what was worse—his own predicament intensified a thousand-fold. "You've never drunk that?" he gasped, when his dry tongue could articulate.

"I have though," Quorn replied, regarding him with fearful suspicion.

Peckover clasped his head and staggered forward. "You're a dead man," he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Scott! What do you mean?" cried Quorn, going pale.

"It was—doctored," stammered the other, hardly knowing what he said.

"Poison?" demanded Quorn in a horrified tone, clutching fiercely at Peckover who dodged, as frightened as he.

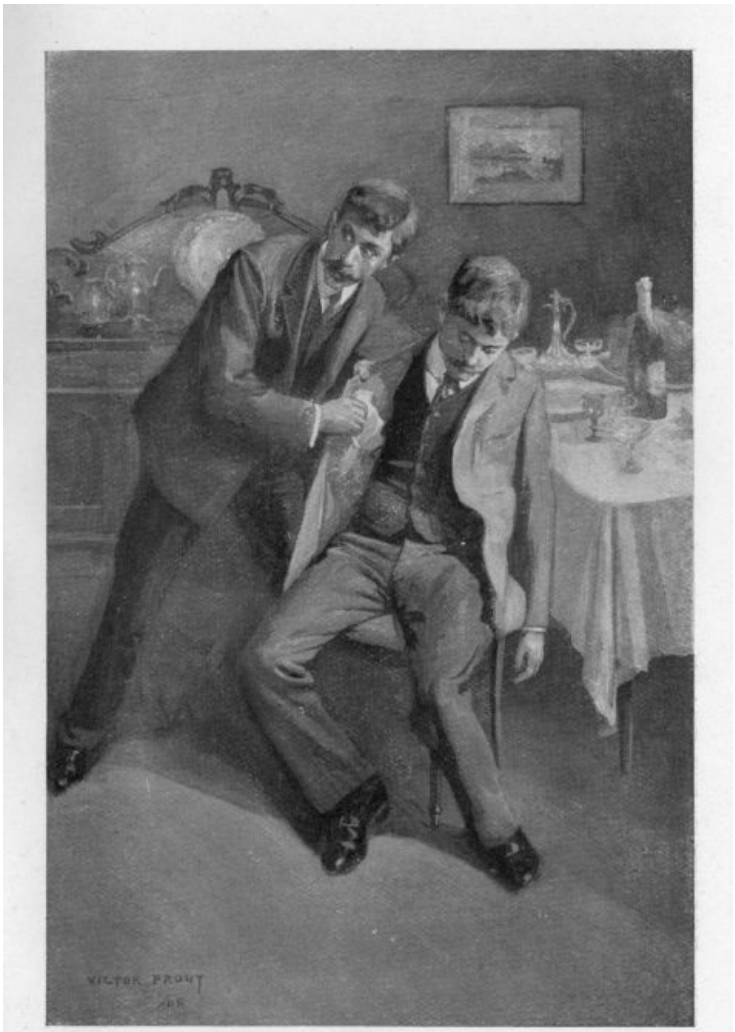
Then he gave a laugh of desperation. "Well, yes, if you like to call it so. It's as good as murder," he assured himself in a woeful whisper. "What am I to do?" He ran to the window, but was arrested by a cry from his companion, and turned to see him collapse in a chair. "Here, wake up! Stand up! You'll be all right," he cried, desperately shaking him.

"Oh, I do feel queer," muttered Quorn. The irises of his eyes seemed to turn up into his head, and he fell forward on the table insensible, with his too liberal entertainer standing over him aghast.

What was he to do? If he called for help, everything would come out, and he would be taken red-handed.

"He's done for, poor fellow," he told himself in a terrified whisper, trembling in every joint. "He's a dead man. I'd better follow him." He caught up the fatal glass, but it was empty. "Not a drop left. Ah, there will be another sort of drop for me," he whispered through his chattering teeth. "What shall I do?" Then his face sensibly brightened as the idea of his desperate expedient, which had been frightened away, came back to him. "Ah, that's it!" he muttered. "That's my only chance. They think I'm Lord Quorn. Now is my real tip to be Lord Quorn. No one here knows him, and he's not so very unlike Percy Peckover. Quick!" He ran to the window and pulled the curtains across; then hurried back and began feverishly searching the lifeless man's pockets.

"Any papers to identify him? Ah!" He pulled out a packet of letters, and transferred them to his own pocket, replacing them by some bills and a writ.



" He pulled out a packet of letters, and transferred them to his own pocket."

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"He pulled out a packet of letters, and transferred them to his own pocket."

"That's it," he muttered. "They're of no use to him now, and may save an innocent man from the gallows." He set the empty phial into Quorn's limp hand. "There!" he exclaimed, as with a long drawn sigh of desperate relief he surveyed the position. "Percy Peckover is dead. Long live Lord Quorn! It's a fair desperate shift; but I can't be worse off than I was, and I may be better."

CHAPTER IX

The shuffling of feet sounded outside the door, and Peckover had just time to throw himself

into a chair at some distance from Lord Quorn and snatch up a newspaper when the landlord came in accompanied by Mr. Doutfire.

With a well simulated yawn, Peckover threw down the paper wearily and nodded at Popkiss. "Any one from the Towers yet, landlord?" he asked in his best off-hand style.

"Not yet, my lord," the host answered, ceremoniously important, to impress Mr. Doutfire and to show that official that he was not the only eminent personage of his acquaintance.

Peckover yawned again, and affected to consult his Waterbury with as much flourish as was consistent with the necessity for concealing the fact that it was not a hundred guinea repeater.

"Beg pardon, my lord," observed Popkiss, indicating the renowned representative of the law who already had a severe and suspicious eye upon the collapsed form at the farther end of the room; "this is the gentleman I spoke to you about."

"Oh, ah, good evening," Peckover said, acknowledging the interesting introduction as airily as the critical nature of the situation permitted.

Having dealt with the social side of the detective's presence, Mr. Popkiss' fat face became stern as he proceeded to justify it from a business point of view.

"Is that your man?" he observed, somewhat superfluously, indicating Quorn.

The alert Doutfire already within pouncing distance of his quarry was unfolding the telegram. "Five foot seven." Quorn's doubled-up attitude made an accurate estimate of his inches somewhat difficult and untrustworthy. Mr. Doutfire, glanced under the table, taking in his legs, allowed for turnings and swiftly added the measurement to the body and head, mentally straightened out for the purpose. The total was evidently not inconsistent with the official dimension, since he passed on. "Dark hair," he nodded, availing himself of a certain latitude which the somewhat vague adjective allowed. "Slight moustache," Quorn's was clipped like to a toothbrush, and the description held. "Flash dress." For a moment Mr. Doutfire looked doubtful. With all a true police official's desire to make description tally, it was plain that a very considerable point would have to be stretched before that Colonial get-up could be classed as flashy. In search of some hidden evidence of the toff in apparel, Mr. Doutfire drew aside the lappel of Quorn's coat. Some papers sticking half-way out of the breast pocket were thus disclosed. Deftly Mr. Doutfire whipped them out, glanced at them, and a gleam of satisfaction shot across his face. "My man," he announced, with a touch of pardonable triumph which thrillingly communicated itself to Peckover, whose principal employment during the process of identification had been to keep his teeth from chattering. "Here! Wake up, my man!" the detective cried, roughly shaking the irresponsive form. "Wake up, Peckover, you're wanted." Then suddenly as he turned the limp body over, his face fell from complacency to blank disappointment. "Why, burn me, Popkiss," he exclaimed savagely, "if I don't think he has given me the slip."

"What?" cried that worthy, as resenting his implied complicity in the fiasco. "Not dead?" he added, with as much awe as a quadruple chin can express.

"Or next door," replied Doutfire, clinging to the shadow of a hope which experience belied.

"Next door," echoed Popkiss, losing the man in the innkeeper. "I wish he was. I don't want no suicide in my respectable house."

"Well, you've got it, Popkiss," retorted Doutfire, as he picked up and sniffed at the phial which had fallen from the lifeless hand. "Poison, if I know anything. Send for a doctor."

The exigency of the situation roused Mr. Popkiss' sluggish faculties into prompt action. "Here, Mercy!" he bawled. "Mercy! Quick! Run for Dr. Barton directly. Gentleman taken bad."

"Now Mr. D.," he proceeded, puffing with excitement, when Miss Mercy, in a state of disgust at the contingencies to which licensed premises are liable, had gone off through the rain with such haste as was compatible with due care for her personal appearance, "if you don't want to ruin me, for heaven's sake keep this unfortunate business as quiet as you can."

"Certainly, Mr. Popkiss," the detective replied, assuming at once the mastery of the situation, "certainly, so far, that is, as is compatible with the due requirements of the law."

"Can't you take him out of here?" Peckover suggested, as he began to feel the strain on his nerves.

"Ah, we might do that, Mr. D., with your permission," the landlord begged submissively. All his importance was gone now; the last five minutes had turned him into a fat, abject slave, ready to grovel at any man's feet.

"Don't care to move him till the doctor arrives," objected Doutfire, less by way of conforming with legal procedure than of asserting his authority. Mr. Popkiss had thrown open an inner door. "Only just through here, Mr. D.," he whined spasmodically. "Nice snug little room; better for the doctor and—and all parties," he urged. "Gentleman, I mean nobleman there," he sank his wheezy

voice and jerked his head towards Peckover; "Lord Quorn, on his way to the Towers. Very distressing for his lordship as it is for me. You'll oblige an old friend, Mr. D.!"

The appeal was so abject that Mr. Doutfire felt he was losing nothing of his importance by yielding. "Lend a hand, then," he said, having first judicially inspected the room in question. Between them, with much puffing and wheezy mutterings, they carried out the limp form, and as the door closed upon them Peckover's air of lofty indifference fell from him as a garment, and resting his elbows on his knees and bowing his head on his hands he collapsed into a state of utter fear and misery.

CHAPTER X

From this flaccid condition he was roused by a somewhat obstreperous knocking and whistling in the passage dividing the coffee-room from the bar. In a moment he had sprung up and run to the window, which he threw open, and stood there ready to bolt through it if necessary.

"What ho! Anybody alive here?" a voice called out. "Hi, yi! Where do I come in?"

As the invocation and inquiry seemed reassuring. Peckover turned back into the room as the door opened and a man in a dripping mackintosh appeared looking in.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "I can't find anybody worth mentioning. Bar empty as a mortuary chapel. Young lady in the cellar hiding from the thunderstorm, eh? You don't happen to be the proprietor of the establishment?"

"Not exactly," Peckover answered, wondering what kind of customer he had come across now.

"That's near enough," said the man in the mackintosh. "You're alive at any rate. Well, somebody has looked after you all right," he remarked, eyeing the remains of Peckover's last dinner.

"Oh, yes, I've dined," Peckover replied loftily.

"You bet. Like a lord," assented the stranger cheerfully. "By the way"—he scrutinized him curiously, much to that gentleman's uneasiness—"by the way, you don't by any chance happen to be a lord?"

Something in the man's manner suggested a reason for the inquiry other than mere chaff. "Suppose I am?" returned Peckover, with his best attempt at an enigmatical smile. The newcomer stared at him as though unable to make up his mind to risk a question, and as he hesitated, the dripping mackintosh made a circle of water round him. "Well, if you are——" he stopped, and abruptly changed the subject. "Staying here?" he asked; "or just waiting till the rain stops?"

"That's it," Peckover answered, scarcely knowing how to take the fellow.

"Far to go?"

"Few miles, I'm waiting for the carriage," said Peckover casually, remembering what Quorn had told him.

"H'm!" The man looked at him as though stoked to blowing-off point with curiosity. "Not going Staplewick Towers way?"

The problem as to whether it were better to say yes or no was too complex for Peckover's present state of mind.

"That's my way," he declared, and chanced it.

The stranger's face brightened with anticipation. "Going to the Towers, perhaps?" he asked with hopeful persistence. Peckover nodded in as non-committal a fashion as he could command. "Why," cried the other, "I do believe I'm in luck after all. You hinted just now you might be a lord. You don't tell me you are Lord Quorn?"

"You've guessed it."

With another word the stranger turned and walked energetically to some pegs at the end of the room, unbuttoned the humid mackintosh and hung it up; also his hat. Then, with business-like action, he came back and favoured the astonished Peckover with a long stare of gratified curiosity. "Excuse me," he said, "but it's more than curious that the man I have been hunting all the week should run across me like this."

Instantly Peckover remembered Quorn's amateur bush-ranger.

"You're from New South Wales?" he faltered.

"Wrong," the other declared cheerfully. "You're not quite as good at guessing as yours truly. I'm from Tasmania, I'm proud and happy to say."

It struck Peckover that the dapper, well-knit man with the keen hustler's face set in straight black hair could hardly be Quorn's bully. He could not quite imagine the man before him spending even his leisure time in trying feats of strength on his long-suffering neighbours who chanced to displease him, to say nothing of cattle and fire-irons.

Just then Mr. Popkiss appeared, and approached Peckover with a mien of deferential apology. "Beg pardon, my lord," he said confidentially, "but I'm glad to say that Dr. Barton has had that unfortunate mishap removed to his surgery, which is a great relief to me, and I must apologize to your lordship for the unpleasantness occurring on my respectable premises. We've never had anything of the kind occur before."

"Oh, you couldn't help it," Peckover replied graciously, his wits more keenly about him. "He ought to have known better, but people, I believe, are very careless about these matters. I didn't see what the poor fellow was up to."

"No, my lord; naturally, my lord."

"Now, landlord, since you've seen fit to come to light, bring us a bottle of your best champagne," directed the stranger.

Mr. Popkiss, who had been inclined to disregard the new customer, at once became exceedingly attentive and bustled off on his errand, since a hungry guest is worth twenty full ones.

No sooner was he gone than the man drew his chair up to Peckover's and said quietly: "Now that I know I'm really right and you are Lord Quorn, I've got a proposal, a genuine business proposition to make to you."

"Have you?" replied Peckover, wondering what in the world was coming, and cursing Popkiss who came in just then with the wine and so delayed the explanation of the mystery.

The stranger's quick eye had caught the similarity of the labels on the bottles. "Why you've been having one of the best too," he remarked. Then added in an undertone as the fussy Popkiss left them, "I thought in your case the title didn't carry exactly a million with it."

"No, not exactly," Peckover replied equivocally. "But I don't see what business that is of yours," he added by an afterthought, to maintain his dignity.

"You will directly, though," the other retorted. "Till then I beg to apologize. Now look here," he touched glasses with his companion, "luck; and may we both get what we want, which is assured if we come to terms." They emptied their glasses, and the stranger, refilling them, leant forward to whispering distance.

"No time to lose, if this matter is to go through," he said in a business-like undertone. "So I won't beat about the bush. This fat publican"—he jerked his head backwards towards the bar —"knows you are Lord Quorn. Does any one else know it in these parts?"

The question was put so purposefully that Peckover had no hesitation in answering it frankly. "No one but the barmaid. I've not been here more than two hours."

"That's all right. Now for my proposition." He drew up yet an inch or two closer to Peckover. "First of all it is necessary for me to state I am a rich man; well, practically a millionaire."

Peckover pushed back his own chair. "I say; no room for the confidence trick here, old man," he exclaimed suspiciously. "Try next door."

"Pouf!" the stranger contemptuously blew away the suggestion. "'Confidence trick?' It's the other way on. It is I who am going to place the confidence in your lordship. Now, look. Here is my proposal in a word. You're a poor man, or at least a poor peer; I'm a rich man. We are both of us practically unknown over here. I want you to sell me your title."

"What?" cried Peckover in amazement.

"Don't make a noise," said the other quietly. "If this transaction is to go through, as, if you are not a fool, it will, the less attention we call to ourselves for the moment the better. Just hear what I've got to say. My name is Gage. Come into property down under from my father. Now I'm, as I say, a millionaire. But the devil of being a millionaire is, when you are nobody in particular but a millionaire, that you don't and can't get value for your money."

"Ah!" Peckover nodded sagaciously as he began to comprehend.

"Now," pursued Mr. Gage, "an ordinary person would imagine that a man with an income nearer forty than thirty thousand could have for the asking—and the paying for—the best of everything this world has to offer. All rot. An outsider like myself with the income I have mentioned doesn't have nearly such a good time as a smart young sprig of good family, who's been born and bred in the swim, can get with a beggarly fifteen hundred a year."

"That's right enough," Peckover assented with an air of endorsing from experience that profound truth.

Mr. Gage took out a coin and laid it on the table. "There's a sovereign," he said, tapping it impressively, while his companion eyed it covetously. "There it is. Coin of the realm. Value fixed and accepted all the world over, you'd say. Yet it's a strange thing, as society is constituted, that, according to the value to be got out of it, to one man it will be worth, say, five and thirty shillings, and to another about six and sixpence. You follow me?"

Mr. Peckover intimated by a knowing nod that not only did he follow the argument, but that, as a member of the aristocracy, he was prepared to back it by getting the enhanced value from the coin in question.

"The reason is," continued Mr. Gage, "that when you are what what's called an outsider you have to pay, and pay double and treble for everything. And when you've paid, and paid till you're sick of shelling out, you find you haven't got half what, if you'd only been 'class,' you'd have got gratis for nothing."

"That's so," Peckover assented dogmatically.

"The millionaire business has been overdone," Gage proceeded, warming feelingly as he got into the swing of his grievance. "Men like myself have been in too much of a hurry to buy up all the cake in the universe, consequently the price has gone up for it, and now, instead of a good substantial slice for a reasonable sum, we get only a few crumbs at famine prices."

"No doubt," Peckover agreed, getting impatient of the preamble and anxious to come to the gist of the offer.

"The fact is," Gage went on, hammering one fist on the other emphatically, "money by itself is a delusion and a daily eye-opener. Money with a title like yours is quite another pair of shoes. If you reckon its purchasing power, and that's what justifies its existence, the golden sovereign in a millionaire's pocket dwindles to the size of a threepenny bit, and in a peer's it expands to the size of this." He held up a dinner plate.

"Inconveniently bulky," observed Peckover with a grin.

"That's merely my illustration of the fact," said Gage severely, as deprecating cheap witticism in business discussions. "Anyhow, I am content to put up with the inconvenience. I want to have a good time. Fate has given me money with one hand and with the other prevents my getting value for it. I don't want to waste time in building up a social position for myself; I want one ready-made, now; when I can enjoy it. You want to have a good time, a better time than you'll get living on an empty title which means starving at Staplewick Towers. You're just the man I have been looking out for. When I heard of your being found in Australia, I determined to do business with you if I could catch you soon enough, before you got known."

"Well, what do you propose?" Peckover asked, a vista of escape and the enjoyment of a snatched opulence opening before him.

"I propose," Gage replied impressively, "that you should allow me to assume the title, the identity and privileges of Lord Quorn. After all, you did not expect to come into it; you are a backblocksman, like myself; only my father made it pay, and you hadn't begun to when you were sent for to join the House of Lords. So far as any one outside our two skins is concerned it doesn't matter a rush whether you are Lord Quorn, or I. So far as the British constitution goes there's no divine right about you, visible at least to the naked eye, that I don't possess. You don't feel anything like it inside, do you?"

"Can't say I do," answered Peckover, with more instant conviction than the other could possibly give him credit for.

"No," resumed Gage; "we are of the same make, I guess; and if it suits us to make a fair exchange, why nobody's hurt."

"Just so," assented Peckover. "Well, what's your offer?"

"Four thousand a year, paid monthly, as long as you let me hold the title undisputed."

Four thousand a year! It was as much as the thirty-five-shillings-a-week clerk could do to refrain from an astounded whistle at his luck. But he did repress it, and, shrewdly grappling with the overwhelming proposition, replied, after what seemed a calculating pause, "Make it five thou., and it's a bargain."

Five thousand had been the figure of Mr. Gage's willingness; only, in accordance with a well-established business method, he had offered less than he was ready to give.

"All right," he replied. "Five thousand while I'm Lord Quorn. We shan't need a written contract. It will be as much to your interest to keep quiet as it will be mine to write you a cheque on the—let's see—the ninth of every month. So that's settled, eh?" He refilled the glasses.

"Yes, my lord, that's settled," responded Peckover with a grin, and feeling happier than at any time during the past twenty-four hours. "Here's health and the best of luck to your lordship."

CHAPTER XI

"I don't quite see ourselves bluffing all and sundry that you are Lord Quorn," Peckover said doubtfully, as they finished the bottle.

"My good sir," replied Gage, "I don't see how we can help taking them in if we make up our minds to do it. Just think; what man is there alive who could really, logically prove his own identity if he were put to it. Not one of us. We are just accepted by the world as William White and Henry Black, John Thompson or Thomas Johnson; and in most cases correctly so. In one case in ten thousand the world makes a big mistake, but it doesn't count for much."

"Suppose not," observed Peckover, wondering whether he would not have plenty of enforced leisure for counting if the world should find out its mistake about him.

"Very few people know us over here," argued Gage; "and the few who do can be easily bluffed, if it comes to that. If we both swear to the same thing, who can stand against us?"

"No, that's right enough," Peckover agreed.

"Now I've been thinking," continued Gage, "that it won't do for us to part company till this little arrangement of ours can run along without pushing. You must come over to these Towers with me and see how the land lies. We shall want to spend some money, at least I shall, so you had better be a rich friend I picked up on the voyage, and we can pretend the ready comes out of your pocket."

"But only Lord Quorn is asked," Peckover objected.

"Oh," replied Gage, "a rich man is always sure of a welcome. He may be expected to pay for it, but there it is, all ready for him, if he asks for it cheque-book in hand."

"I see."

"Perhaps it may not be a very genuine article; a sort of rolled-gold welcome for which you are expected to pay as though it were twenty-two carat all through. But it will wear long enough for our purposes, and the adulteration won't be all on their side."

Host Popkiss looked in. "Rain clearing off, my lord," he announced. "I expect Colonel Hemyock will be here directly to welcome your lordship."

"All right, landlord," replied Gage. "In the meantime my friend and I are quite comfortable here."

Popkiss stared at him, in mind to resent what he considered an irreverent liberty.

"Still, I shan't be sorry to find myself at the Towers," Gage observed casually.

This was rather more than Popkiss could stand. He did not approve of casual customers (even if they ordered champagne) playing unseemly jokes with noble guests in his coffee-room. "Beg pardon, sir," he said with puffing severity, "I was addressing myself to Lord Quorn."

"Then," returned Gage, "you were addressing yourself to me."

In consequence of the superincumbent fat which circumvallated them Mr. Popkiss could not open his eyes very wide, but, as far as the muffling flesh permitted, his spacious face was understood to express an electrifying astonishment amounting almost to incredulity. "Lord Quorn? You, sir?" he gasped.

"Look here, my venerable joker." Peckover beckoned the bewildered Popkiss to him by a backward jerk of the head. "You've been tying yourself up in the wrong bag all the afternoon. I've let you go on because I never spoil a good joke, but now my friend and fellow-traveller, Lord Quorn, has appeared, it is about time your folly was pointed out to you."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry, my lord," the discomfited Popkiss apologized. "But as this gentleman did not deny it when I addressed him as my lord, and as we were expecting your lordship to honour my poor house, why, the mistake was only natural."

"That's all right," replied Gage.

"You're forgiven," grinned Peckover.

Wheels sounded under the archway of the courtyard, and Popkiss was glad to bustle out. "I had my doubts about him all the time," he told himself in extenuation of his error. "If I'd seen them both together at first I should ha' known at once that 'tother was the lord."

Meanwhile the two confederates were laughing at each other over the success of the first step on the path that promised to be so pleasant for both.

They composed their faces as the door was thrown open and Colonel Hemyock and the Misses Ethel and Dagmar Hemyock, accompanied by John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook, were ushered in with breathless ceremony by the egregious Popkiss.

"Lord Quorn?" the Colonel inquired in a tone of pompous cordiality.

Popkiss unctuously indicated Gage, who came forward with plausible aplomb.

Then the ladies were presented, and Sharnbrook noticed gleefully the dead-set that lurked in their eyes. His escape, he told himself, was now assured.

"May I present my friend, Mr. Percival Gage?" the supposititious Lord Quorn said, as, taking the permission for granted, he brought up Peckover, whom, however, the Hemyock trio regarded a trifle doubtfully. "Made a fine position for himself out in our part of the world," Gage continued half confidentially, "and has come over to the old country to enjoy the fruits of his good fortune."

The ladies instantly thawed. The golden sun easily gets through snobbery's thin coating of ice. They looked at his aggressive diamond, excused his vulgar flashiness on the ground of Colonial ignorance, and received his advances with as much gush as was left over from the lavish expenditure on the *soi-disant* Lord Quorn.

"A millionaire," Gage observed to the colonel, sinking his confidential tone yet a little. The highly starched Colonel became almost limp under such a shower of good fortune.

"I—ah—hope Mr. Gage will do us the honour of staying at Staplewick," he said, and there was no doubt that he meant it. "Lady Agatha will be charmed. Any friend of Lord Quorn's will be more than welcome."

So after a few more flourishes, it was settled. Mr. Gage's luggage had unfortunately gone astray, but his costume would be excused that evening by Lady Agatha, and next day a complete outfit, the visitor declared, would be a mere question of the resources of Great Bunbury.

Presently the neglected but chuckling John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook was noticed, and casually, as a matter of grace, introduced. He lost no time in getting on easy terms with his prospective deliverer.

"I'm the tenant of your shooting, Lord Quorn."

"Hope you get good sport?" Gage replied politely.

"Birds thick as cabbages," Sharnbrook assured him. "I hope you will come out with me and see for yourself. Of course you and your friend shoot?"

"I should just think we did," Peckover chipped in with an eagerness due to the near realization of one of the dreams of his life. Hitherto his shooting had taken place under cover at the rate of seven shoots for six-pence, and the presentation of a cocoa-nut if by luck or markmanship he rang the bell.

That so bucolic and provoking a person as Sharnbrook at present clothed in the contempt woven of familiarity should be allowed to monopolize the distinguished guests by his stupid sporting chatter was intolerable. Accordingly he was promptly snubbed and thrust aside. Then, amid much smirking and exhibition of the best side of everybody's face, a move was made for the phaeton. Gage surreptitiously slipped a bank note into Peckover's hand, with which, and with a grand flourish, that unexpected plutocrat settled the somewhat exorbitant demands of Mr. Popkiss, and bestowed a liberal guerdon, accompanied by a wink, on Miss Mercy. Then with what excitement and the nearest approach to cheers a country town on a wet evening can furnish the distinguished party drove off to Staplewick Towers.

CHAPTER XII

"It is too bad of you, Ethel. I do wish you would mind your own business and confine your attentions to either old Sharnbrook or Lord Quorn. The way you try to flirt with Mr. Gage is disgraceful. Even you ought to be ashamed of it."

"My dear Dagmar," her sister replied blandly, "Sharnbrook is, as you always said, after finding he preferred me to you, an idiot. Only fit to be a keeper at the Zoo, or curator of a Natural History museum. Four thousand a year is utterly wasted on him."

"No reason why it should, or should not, be wasted on his wife," returned Dagmar shrewdly.

"Lord Quorn," pursued Ethel, "falls to you by right. A coronet, when he can afford one, will no doubt suit your style of beauty."

"Thank you," retorted Dagmar, "I happen to prefer reality to mere show. Quorn hasn't a penny to speak of, Mr. Gage is as rich as anybody need be."

"He is hopelessly vulgar, and has an unhappy knack of making himself ridiculous," Ethel argued.

"All millionaires are vulgar and absurd," her sister rejoined. "It is expected of them. People wouldn't believe in their money if they didn't bound and make fools of themselves. Mother says Mr. Gage's vulgarity is as good as an auditor's certificate—whatever that may be. And if he has taken a tremendous fancy to me——"

Dagmar flared up. "What conceited impudence! You want everybody. You are the elder and Lord Quorn properly falls to you. Failing him, Sharnbrook."

"John Arbuthnot," said Ethel dreamily, "has the bad taste not to be very keen, and Gage is."

"Quorn's all right," Dagmar suggested.

"Then you have him, dear," her sister retorted. "Plain Percy Gage is good enough for me."

As Ethel was clearly holding to her point, and that not a point of honour, Dagmar saw that a mere appeal to her better feelings was futile. "Tell you what it is, my dear," she said, changing her tactics. "If you go on like this we shall lose Quorn and the millionaire bounder and old Sharnbrook into the bargain. We must have the coronet and the million in the family."

"All right," Ethel agreed, after a few moments' calculation. "Let's compromise and give each other a fair chance with Gage. Suppose we take it in turns to bring him to the scratch." She took a pack of cards from a box. "Cut for first innings. First knave; two out of three."

"Why knave?" Dagmar objected, "Gage is more of a f—the other thing."

"Perhaps," Ethel agreed. "Anyhow, the knave is the nearest approach to him in a pack of cards' catalogue of humanity."

They began to cut with business-like eagerness. Presently Ethel held up the desired card. "Hurrah! Knave!" she cried exultingly.

From the amiable Miss Dagmar's protracted lips came the sound of an exclamation not unlike that which profane men are said to utter when the last match is puffed out with the pipe still unlighted. "Two out of three," she insisted, and with the next turn cut a knave also. But fate favoured Ethel, who cut the third.

"My first try," she cried.

"Wish you joy of Gage," said Dagmar spitefully.

"Now, Dagmar," her sister protested, "it's a bargain. Half an hour of uninterrupted running."

"All right," replied Dagmar hopefully. "Then I relieve guard, and you turn out. I take up the running and so on alternately, till one of us lands him." "Which shall not be so very long first," she promised herself.

"Let's find out where he is." Ethel, with business-like promptitude, sprang to the bell and rang it. "Of course," she observed complacently, "whichever of us does not bag Gage will have the reversion of Quorn or old Sharnbrook."

"Of course," Dagmar agreed with a suggested determination that the privilege in question should not be hers. "Fancy Sharnbrook! Ferrets in one's bedroom."

"Rats where you least expect them," Ethel chimed in, hilarious at what she was resolved should be her sister's fate.

"That idiotic one-legged partridge," cried Dagmar.

"Pet mice asleep in your boots," responded Ethel.

"Pattern of the carpet undecipherable for fox-terriers."

"Wouldn't I put my foot down on them," declared Ethel grimly. "Is Mr. Gage visible yet, Bisgood?" she inquired of the butler who now appeared.

A very faint film of suppressed amusement seemed to spread over the well regulated face of Mr. Bisgood. "Mr. Gage went out riding this morning," he answered woodenly. "His lordship accompanied him."

"Have they returned?"

Again the haze of enjoyment seemed to blur the suave features. "No, miss," Bisgood answered, and there might have been detected a slight, ever so slight, catch in the unctuous voice; "Mr. Gage did not get far. Harlequin was rather fresh."

"Did—did anything go wrong?" It was Dagmar who asked the question.

This time there was no doubt about the abnormal expression on the butler's sleek face. "Well, miss," he replied, with an apologetic grin, "I believe Mr. Gage came off."

Without trusting his dignity to carry him through any elaboration of the bare and pointed statement, Bisgood, turned abruptly from the room.

Miss Ethel tried to laugh off a certain sense of annoyance. Till she had tried and failed Gage was more or less her property. "Poor Gage," she exclaimed. "Fancy his taking a toss. I hope he has not damaged himself. That brute Harlequin!"

"Now, Dagmar, dear, honour between—knaves. You will take Quorn and Sharnbrook off while I have my innings, won't you? I'll do as much for you."

"All right," she answered, still rather sulky. "But mind, no unfair advantage. No running me down, or falling into his arms."

"No, no," Ethel assured her; "that's a last resort. We may have to toss for that later on."

"There's mother coming across the lawn," Dagmar remarked with a yawn of indifference. "You had better be off and console the noble sportsman."

And as the fair Ethel vanished through the door, Lady Agatha Hemyock came in by the French window. She was a woman of somewhat stately presence, acquired by long practice of standing on ceremony and on her dignity. Her face was well set off by white hair dressed straight up from her forehead, pompadour fashion, which had the effect of bringing into rather aggressive prominence her sharp physiognomy which she could make, when she chose, the vehicle of a gamut of remarkable expressions. In French phrase, her face jumped at you; nevertheless, had not the nose been rather too long and too sharp she would have been as good-looking as she was wily. Among her ladyship's more prominent accomplishments was an interesting trick of carrying on a conversation with one person while she listened to everything else that was being said in the room; a feat difficult of successful execution, and one which has a tendency to depreciate the performer's popularity.

"Where's Ethel?" Lady Agatha inquired sharply, after a preliminary glance round the room to make sure they were alone.

"Gone after Mr. Gage," Dagmar informed her, still sore from the consciousness of a lost chance.

"How provoking of her," exclaimed her mother, "when I particularly want her to look after Quorn."

"Just what I tell her," said Dagmar resentfully.

"Mr. Gage," Lady Agatha declared, "will keep. He is a fool, and is to be secured whenever we choose to bring him to the point. Quorn is—er—not such a fool, and if the coronet is to come into the family it is essential that he should be looked after. He ought to have the choice of you."

"No money, mother."

"Perhaps not. But a nice old place and an aristocratic position."

"You've got most of that, mother," Dagmar observed shrewdly, "and you are discontented enough."

"Well, you can't both marry Mr. Gage," Lady Agatha argued, ignoring the personal citation. "And if you don't take care, the one he does not choose will lose Quorn as well."

"Well, for a peer and a millionaire," Dagmar observed decidedly, "they are the most hopeless

specimens. Neither being in the least like what he ought to be, I should prefer the money. It is the only thing here that looks like what it is."

"I am thinking of your position, my dear," her mother replied insinuatingly. "Millionaires are getting so common and unpopular."

"Peers are common enough," Dagmar retorted. "They made a dozen—and such a dozen—the other day."

"Not old ones," rejoined Lady Agatha. "Quorn's peerage is centuries old, and improves with time."

"But I don't," returned her daughter pointedly. "And the idea of my descendants swaggering about with a coronet wherever they can put it, in the year 2147 doesn't amuse or comfort me at all, or reconcile me to the fact that nobody, without being told, would take Quorn for a peer, even if he dressed every day in robes and coronet, always supposing he could afford that somewhat expensive get-up."

"After all, a peerage is above money, my dear," Lady Agatha urged.

"Yes," was the quick reply, "it ought to be above it, and have the money underneath to support it. No, I prefer to take my chance of cutting out Ethel, and buying a peerage with some of Gage's money."

Lady Agatha shrugged. She could not bring herself to let Quorn slip through their fingers when they had him in hand. "There is as much difference between an old title and a new one as between new wine and old," she asserted dogmatically.

"Granted, mother," Dagmar assented cheerfully. "But when some idiot has pulled the cork out, causing the strength and the flavour to evaporate, and the dust has got in, the old is worse than the new."

"You are most provoking and disappointing, Dagmar," Lady Agatha exclaimed, losing patience. "To think that the Quorn coronet should go begging."

"That's exactly what the owner will have to do, it strikes me," the undutiful one retorted. "And it is what I don't intend to do while Messrs. Gage and Sharnbrook are handy and bachelors. Here's Ethel. Hurrah! She doesn't look all over a winner. My turn," she said with a snap, as that discomfited-looking young lady came in.

"That it isn't," Ethel flung back in a reciprocally pleasant tone. "I haven't seen the man yet."

Dagmar's look would hardly have been accepted as a testimonial to her sister's veracity. The statement, nevertheless, was true. Ethel had raced all over the grounds in pursuit of her quarry, but had just missed striking the trail; the object of her hunt having contrarily appeared in the drive as the fair huntress, after drawing it blank, moved off hungrily to the park on the other side of the house, whence having prowled herself tired, she had at length come in, spent and out of breath and patience.

Noting her amiable state of mind, Lady Agatha, prompted by experience, prepared to withdraw, with a Parthian shot which took the form of the sarcastic expression of a thoughtful hope that, in case of possible accidents, the pair of charmers were not entirely losing sight of the existence and eligibility of a certain John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook, nor were permitting him to ignore theirs.

"You haven't hurt the horse?" Gage inquired, as he and his confederate walked towards the house together. "Sorry now I didn't think of stopping to see what happened."

"Hurt him?" Peckover exclaimed, resenting the question as making light of his own peril. "Never had a chance. It took all my time to see he didn't hurt me. Hurt the brute? I should like to," he continued wrathfully reminiscent. "I'd teach him the difference between a quadruped and a gentleman."

"How did you come to take him on?" asked Gage.

"Take him on? He took me on," returned the discomfited equestrian. "All right, I'll remember that groom, Wilkins, or rather, I won't remember him. 'Just throw your leg over Harlequin, sir,' he says, 'and take him over the turf!' Now, old man, I should describe that animal, from a safe distance, as an inferior plater; but when I got up my feeling of contempt changed to one of respect—it usually does. On foot I'm pretty familiar with horses; once on their back I feel as though I had not been properly introduced. Well, I mounted in best jockey style; I haven't shelled out for the saddling paddock for nothing. 'Me up,' says I, just waking him up with the whip. Next moment it was me—down, and instead of putting him over the turf, he very nearly put me under it. I don't think you could have passed a five-pound note between his hind hoof and my front teeth. His near plate was so near that my jaw was almost off."

"Good job it wasn't," observed Gage, wondering how much such a catastrophe would have affected his enjoyment of the pleasures of the peerage.

"You're right. Well, the fellows were grinning; so, thinks I, if the horse won't be beaten, no more will I. So I ups into the pigskin again, and tries the soothing system."

"Did that do better?"

"Slightly. The animal began to feel quite comfortable, and after a bit sat down."

"Sat down?" laughed Gage. "What became of you?"

"Well, I don't know," answered Peckover, with rueful humour, "whether it has ever struck you, in Tasmania or elsewhere, that it is a difficult thing for a horse and its rider both to sit down at the same time. You see, there is no back to the saddle, so I just slid down over the tail, with as much side as I could put on, and then footed it off. It's all very well for you to laugh, my lord," he remonstrated, as the other man's guffaws grew exasperating, "but it would take you all your time to keep your back stiff when the horse under you is sitting up like a cat, and the back of his head trying to play the castanets with your front teeth. Harlequin? He's a regular pantomime rally."

"I shouldn't wonder," suggested Gage, "if he was called Harlequin, because he'll jump through anything."

"Dare say!" replied Peckover dryly. "No doubt he'd have tried jumping through a brick wall if I'd stayed there long enough. No, thank you. I prefer seeing these little funniments from the top of the Grand Stand, not from the top of the performer."

CHAPTER XIII

"Can't say I notice much family likeness, old man." Peckover had been enjoying the novelty of a contemplative cigarette in the ancestral picture gallery of the Quorns, and was there surprised by Gage who had stood for a while silently comparing the portraits of dead and gone Quorns, in all stages of costume and self-consciousness, with the cheap, up-to-date cockney swell who sprawled in a great chair of state before them. "I guess they didn't pick you out in Australia by the family mug."

Peckover gave a short awkward laugh. "I should hope not," he replied, recovering his mental balance. "If I thought I was anything like that tuppence-coloured Johnnie I'd go and hang myself." He pointed to a depressing portrait labelled, "Everard, fourth Baron Quorn." "Good old Everard," he went on. "I've no use for a nose like that, nor for the dial of that old juggins in the Dutch oven —what's his name? Marmaduke. He'd only have to take the top off the pepper-castor to give the enemy a shock. Useful face that to fall back on, and it looks as though some one had been falling back on it." And he flicked the ash off his cigarette scornfully at the doughty warrior.

"We don't run to beauty, do we?" Gage remarked. "At least we didn't till quite recently," he corrected politely.

"Fact is," said Peckover, "the old crowd were an over-rated lot. Making allowances for bad workmanship on the painters' side, we should have no use for them except on the Fifth of November. They are fair frauds. What do you think of a man who wears a steel lounge suit like that?" He flung the end of his cigarette, having lighted a fresh one, at the nearest suit of armour.

"Well, it covered up his deficiencies," observed Gage.

"Yes," said Peckover, "it's about as clever as wrapping a twopenny smoke in silver-foil."

Gage gave a look round the gallery as though to see that they were alone, and then sat down beside his friend. "Tell you what it is, old man," he said seriously; "to change the subject, we must do something to make things hum a bit more for me. I became my lord to get some fun out of it, but as things are, it strikes me that I've got the empty title, and you're having all the fun."

"What do you mean?"

"Why," Gage proceeded, "what's my position here? I'm Lord Quorn with a million of money; but because Lord Q. is known to have next to nothing a year, nobody looks at me. You're supposed to be the millionaire and every one runs after you."

"Is that my fault?" Peckover asked pertinently.

"I don't say it is," Gage returned. "It suited our purpose to fix it so. But it don't work. There must be a change. I don't pay five thousand a year to stand out in the cold on the bleak eminence of an impoverished peerage, looking on and seeing every girl in the place tumbling into your

arms."

"One can have too much of that sort of tumbling," Peckover remarked sententiously. "And ——"

"Well, I'd like a little of it," snapped Gage, "and I'm going to have it."

"That's reasonable," Peckover agreed. "What do you propose?"

"Well," answered Gage, "I've thought it out, and it's simple enough. I've got to find an excuse for spending my money, or, rather for having money to spend. I've a plan. I'm going to save your life."

"What?" Peckover jumped a foot away and turned a suspicious and alarmed face on his companion. "What—what do you mean?"

"Just what I say," the other replied quietly. "I've got to save your life——"

"What from?" Peckover inquired apprehensively.

"Drowning, for choice," was the cool answer. "Then in common gratitude you will make over to me a sum sufficient to give me a handsome income. See?"

Peckover looked immeasurably relieved. "I see that much," he replied. "But how are you going to save me from drowning?"

"Well, that presents no difficulty. We are going fishing on the lake, and you are going to over-balance yourself in your excitement and slip overboard."

"Oh, am I?" Peckover looked uneasily doubtful. "I don't see where the excitement about fishing comes in."

"That's a detail."

"Then I can't swim," Peckover objected.

"All the more reason for my jumping in to save you."

"But supposing you don't save me?"

"I'm bound to save you. If I'm not going to rescue you, there is no point in your getting wet."

"If you are not going to rescue me there's no point in my getting drowned," Peckover returned, with misgiving.

"I shall work it all right," Gage assured him. "Never let go of you. You're too precious."

"I don't know. It would be worth five thousand a year to you to let me dive to the bottom and stay there."

"I'm neither a fool nor a murderer," Gage declared.

"Not much catch in taking a cold bath with your clothes on," Peckover remarked, with an uneasy shiver. "However, I suppose I must do it."

"Yes," said Gage, "after all it's the most feasible form of life-saving, combining as it does the minimum of risk with the maximum of effectiveness."

So it was arranged, and the next afternoon the confederates, dressed for the occasion in their oldest clothes, went fishing on the lake. Peckover, whilst ostensibly instituting inquiries as to the best pools for sport, had cunningly obtained information as to the depth of the water at various spots, and it was at one of the shallowest that he insisted on having the punt moored.

"What's the good of my pretending to save your precious life in four foot six of water," Gage expostulated in a disgusted tone, as he pointed to the watermark on the punt pole. "We shall be taken for blithering idiots."

"That won't matter," returned Peckover stolidly. "It's better than being blithering idiots, and dead ones at that."

"We shall give the show away."

"Better than giving a peerage and a million away," Peckover retorted. "Life's too comfortable just now for us to run any risks. Besides who's going to remember how shallow the water is; and it stands to reason that if we could keep our breathing apparatus above water by just standing up, we shouldn't be such fools as to want any swimming and life-saving."

So Gage had to submit, which he did with a better grace when he reflected that there might, after all, be some risk in saving a panic-stricken lover of life in really deep water.

The two fishermen made a great fuss over their sport, angling as probably no one in this world had ever angled before, and in a manner calculated not to take in the most unsophisticated fish that ever swam. What their proceedings, however, lacked in method, they made up in exuberance; never before had two such showy fishermen sat in a punt. Naturally their intention was to emphasize, generally, their existence, more particularly their presence in the punt on the lake, and incidentally their designs upon the fish. To their satisfaction they saw that they were not without observers. The farmer, to whom the grazing of the park was let, had luckily put in an appearance to inspect his sheep, accompanied by a semi-sporting person who might, however, have been, and indeed was, a butcher from Bunbury in quest of raw material. Presently two women came in sight, crossing the park by a right of way which skirted the lake.

The moment was propitious.

"Old man," said Gage, "this is grand. We're in luck for an audience. Now, over you topple; only, do it artistically, or you will have your dip for nothing."

Peckover threw a distasteful glance at the weed-grown water, and then his eye roved from the haggling fanner and butcher to the chattering pair of villagers. "Almost too much of an audience," he objected, with a view to postponing his immersion as long as possible.

"Rats! Can't be too many for our purpose," Gage returned impatiently. "We've got to make a business of it, if it's to do any good. Over you go. The water won't be any damper for you than it will be for me."

"You can swim," observed Peckover with something suspiciously like a chattering of the teeth.

"What odds does that make in four foot six of water?"

"Beastly weedy hole," remarked the unwilling adventurer.

"All the better. Makes it look more dangerous, and keeps people from seeing how shallow it is."

"I believe," said Peckover, with an admirable air of conviction, "there is an out-sized pike under those weeds. I just saw his scales glisten."

"Then you'll astonish him, that's all," was the unsympathetic reply. "Any one would think it was a crocodile or a shark by the funk you're in. Now, are you going over? Not knowing the treat that's in store for them these people aren't likely to wait all day. They'll be past directly. Stand up and swing your line out." Nerving himself to the disagreeable task, Peckover stood up, and began swinging the rod round his head.

"That'll do," said Gage, with a show of directing his attention elsewhere. "Now, over! That'll do with the rod. They'll think you mad. Over, you fool!"

Thus adjured, Peckover took the plunge, if plunge it can be called. Dropping the whirling rod on the placid surface of the lake, he suddenly stooped, nervously clutched the gunwale of the punt and, assisted surreptitiously in the manoeuvre by Gage's left foot, tamely rolled over the side. His despairing shout, which had been agreed upon, was smothered by the shock of the cold water and the utterer's general preoccupation. It therefore remained for Gage to do the shouting, which duty he performed with a vigour out of proportion to the apparent exigences of the case.

CHAPTER XIV

For the dripping Peckover was still holding tenaciously on to the side of the punt, with a fixity of purpose which no mere considerations of stage effect seemed likely to dispose him to relax. Added to this, there was more of his body above the surface of the water than appeared quite consistent with the idea of imminent and deadly peril; this was accounted for by the fact that he was standing, miserably enough, on the bottom of the lake.

"Get down! Let go of the punt! D'ye hear?" commanded Gage, in an exasperated undertone. "What's the good of hanging on there like a fool? Get down, will you? Duck that idiotic mug of yours under water, or how am I to go after you?"

"I—d—d—daren't," chattered Peckover: "my feet are slipping or sinking or something; it's dashed deep mud at the bottom."

"I wish your head was in it instead of your feet," retorted his prospective heroic rescuer, all the while making a fine show of bustle, for which, however, as viewed from the shore there was no obvious need. "Will you get down, before I knock you under?"

As he spoke Gage was surreptitiously jabbing at Peckover's fingers, and, incidentally, at his face with the butt-end of his rod. This somewhat drastic method of enforcing his orders and ensuring the vraisemblance of the performance was perhaps justified by the manifest absurdity and uselessness of his taking a showy and heroic dive in order to rescue a man who was, to the spectator's eye, holding comfortably on to a substantial punt with his breathing organs high out of the water. As matters—that is to say, Peckover—stood, danger was the last thing that would suggest itself to the casual onlooker. The note at the moment was farcical; it was urgently necessary to change it to the tragic, even at the expense of loosening a few of Peckover's front teeth.

That unhappy dissembler, finding the episode of having a brass-capped butt in forcible contact with the more sensitive and damageable parts of his physiognomy more than he had bargained for, spluttered forth an objurgatory remonstrance, and, to cut short the objectionable attentions, let go, disappearing forthwith under the side of the punt. Whereupon Gage, uttering a wild and wholly unnecessary shout, poised himself for a few moments with one foot on the gunwale, and then, having attracted the attention he desired, took a tremendous dive into the water. With such vigour did he go down that he forced his head and arms into a thick bed of weeds, which demanded for a time his breathless attention. On extricating himself from the difficulty, and coming to the surface, he was much concerned to find that Peckover was nowhere to be seen. Instantly he took another superfluous dive, and as he came up, knocked his head against the bottom of the punt. Half dizzy with the blow, he now saw Peckover watching his efforts from the other side of the craft whither he had worked his way round while the diving was in progress.

"What are you doing round there, you idiot?" he gasped. "Get right down into the water at once and shout for help till I come along and catch hold of you."

With the word, he struck out manfully and swam round to the other side of the punt, only to find on arriving there that Peckover had disappeared. Whereupon he dived again, only to come up empty-handed once more, and to see the anxious face watching him, alertly apprehensive, over the farther gunwale.

"What fool's game is this?" he hissed.

"None of your larks," returned Peckover in a tone of resolute desire for self-preservation. The cold water, the weeds and the mud were beginning to tell upon him; all sense of a practical joke had evaporated.

Gage looked round. On the right the farmer and the butcher, on the left the two women had come down to the margin of the lake and were watching the proceedings in a silence which betokened some doubt in their minds as to how they ought to take it.

"Will you get under water and let me come to the rescue?" Gage demanded with exasperation.

"Not good enough," Peckover replied, and thereupon he began a spirited effort to climb back into the punt.

"Fool!" Gage shut his mouth with a snap, and took a vicious dive under the punt as the shortest cut to his objective.

As he rose, Peckover was half on board. Without further expostulation Gage seized the leg which still hung in the water and furiously tried to drag it down. Peckover resisted, kicking, and a very pretty struggle ensued, which taking place, as might be supposed, between a millionaire and a peer of the Realm, must have given rise to singular reflections and conjectures in the minds of the onlookers.

Eventually the turn of the position favoured Gage. The conditions under which Peckover fought rendered the struggle additionally painful; by degrees he lost ground and finally was dragged back exhausted into the water.

"You stupid ass, I've a good mind to shove you under and keep you there," Gage growled.

His victim could only gasp and shiver.

"What must we look like from the shore?" Gage demanded savagely.

Peckover made no reply, but from his manner it might have been gathered that his mental attitude on the subject was one of complete indifference.

"Haven't we had enough of this tommy-rot?" at last he ventured to suggest.

Gage was maintaining a fine show of keeping afloat in the four-foot-six. "I think we have," he returned. "I'm getting chilly, so we had better come to business. Now, will you keep down in the water when you've quite done advertising the fact that it isn't up to our shoulders?"

All the response Peckover made was—"Look at the punt!"

Keeping the corner of an eye warily on his companion, Gage turned and looked. The distance between them and the punt instead of a few feet was now some twenty yards. The cause of this alteration was obvious. Their struggles had caused the cord which made fast the craft to one of the poles to become untied and the other pole to work loose. There was some wind, under which the punt was now moving at a fair pace over the lake, dragging one pole with it.

"All right," said Gage, "I'll soon catch it and bring it back."

But Peckover clutched him with the tenacity of despair. "No, you don't," he exclaimed, anxiously resolute. "You don't leave me here. How am I to get ashore if you don't come back?"

"Walk," answered Gage, trying to free himself.

"Yes, I dare say," Peckover retorted. "You don't catch me trying it. It's not the same depth all over. We're on a bit of a bank here."

"Look at the blamed thing going off," Gage cried. "Let go! She'll be a quarter of a mile away directly."

But Peckover was not to be shaken off. "You don't go and leave me here," he insisted wildly, "for any old punt."

The situation was an interesting one, and as such, no doubt the four spectators acknowledged it. Their comments, however, had not so far been directed to the performers.

"What are you going to do?" Peckover asked, still gripping the plunging Gage.

"Going for a swim," he answered unfeelingly, at the same time making spirited but futile efforts to dive.

"No, you don't," Peckover returned, restraining his companion's attempts with all the energy that the chill and unusual element allowed him.

Gage, kicking and struggling, was at length obliged to desist, after having furnished a several minutes' novel and exhilarating exhibition to the puzzled spectators. Short of actual murderous violence, it was not possible for him to free himself from the tenacious Peckover. It was difficult, he had to own, to do much in the way of natation with a desperate person hanging like grim death on to his legs, moreover, Peckover's embrace had a tendency to send Gage's head under water and to keep it there. So, exasperated and vindictive as he felt, he had to compromise.

"Well," he said, veiling his displeasure and sense of defeat with a cheerless grin, "am I going to save your life or not—before we catch our death of cold?"

"You've got to," was the dogged reply. "Five thousand a year is too good to say good-bye to in the middle of a pond."

"It is all your silly rot that has stuck us here," Gage returned. "If you hadn't played the drivelling idiot, the life-saving performance would have been comfortably over half an hour ago."

"Well, get it over now," retorted Peckover, "as quick as you like, and no tricks."

"All right; come on," said Gage ill-humouredly. "Let's hope those fools won't see through the fake."

"This way," said Peckover, starting off breast-high in the water, towards the nearest shore, and still holding tightly to his companion.

"You are not going to walk?" Gage exclaimed aghast.

"I'm going to do what I can do best, and I can't swim," Peckover replied, with a determination which was apparent even through his shivering. "We'll have to try this life-saving joke in some other form. It's getting a bit stale this way."

Slowly their progress towards the shore, impeded by mud and thick weeds, began. They had not noticed that the farmer, actuated by humanitarian motives or with an eye to reduction of rent, had run off to an old boat-house, and was now hurrying back with an oar and a coil of rope.

"All right, my lord!" shouted the butcher, as taking credit for his friend's action. The two men, shivering and struggling unromantically through the jungle of weeds, smiled unpleasantly at the cry.

Suddenly Peckover became aware that the water was up to his chin. "It's getting deeper," he gasped, trying to hold his companion back.

"Let it," Gage retorted sulkily. "We've got to get to shore, dead or alive."

With an energy which suggested his preference for the latter mode of arrival Peckover threw his arms around Gage and tried to draw him back. "Try another way," he panted.

"You can. I'm going straight on. You should learn to swim," was the unkind response. "If you don't let go, not another penny of my money shall you see," Gage added, beginning to have doubts about his own ultimate safety in those dreadful weeds.

"You're not going to leave me here to drown?" Peckover remonstrated, shaking with terror.

"You can go back."

"What's the good of that?"

"I'll fetch a boat."

Water had become so utterly distasteful to Peckover that even the comparative shallows had no longer the slightest attraction for him. "What am I to do?" he shrieked. "Gage, you must save me!"

"Don't feel up to it now; too cold," was the unfeeling reply.

Peckover now found that the extra six inches in the depth of the water made all the difference when it came to a struggle. The margin below the breathing point was too small to permit of a sustained effort. Gage struck out, and Peckover, choosing what a momentary consideration suggested as the lesser of the two evils, let go his hold and stayed behind where at least his mouth was above water.

What the four people on the bank now saw was this. The supposed Lord Quorn leaving his companion, and energetically striking out for the shore, while the head which was all that was visible of the pretended millionaire remained a weird and ghastly object on the green expanse of water. To add to the interest of the scene, Peckover, finding the mud on which he stood, had a tendency to give way beneath him, was forced, as he gradually sank, to keep jumping, with the object of maintaining his head well above water. That the situation had grown critical was now fairly apparent, and it became borne in upon the farmer and his friend that heroic measures were indicated.

Directed by the butcher, who assumed an important (and dry) superintendence of the operations, the farmer now waded to the tops of his gaiters into the lake, and flung out the oar with the rope attached towards the wildly struggling Gage.

"There you are, my lord. Lay 'old!" shouted the butcher. "Then you can go back for the gentleman. You'll 'ave to get a little farther out, Mr. Purvis; the rope's a bit short."

"Wish you'd come and lend a hand yourself, Mr. Fanning, instead o' telling me what any fool can see," Mr. Purvis called back testily, as the water lapped over the rim of his gaiters.

"You're all right, Mr. Purvis," Mr. Fanning cried encouragingly, ignoring the invitation. "Pull the oar in and throw it out again to his lordship."

"Thought you could swim, Fanning," observed Mr. Purvis, wrestling uncomfortably with the difficulties of the situation.

"Never," Mr. Fanning protested promptly and mendaciously. "Wish I could. Now, out with it! Take care of his lordship's 'ead."

Once more the oar hurtled through the air, and fell this time within a yard of Gage's blanched face. Making a desperate and supreme effort, he seized it, and, once sure of the timely support, clung to it panting and exhausted. As he rested there, his feet naturally sank till they met with an obstruction. Moving them about to clear himself, Gage found that they had touched the bottom; he forthwith stood up and disclosed the fact that he had been swimming for his life in three feet of water.

"Look to the other gentleman, Mr. Purvis," directed Mr. Fanning from his post of high and dry observation.

Mr. Purvis and Gage accordingly directed dubious glances at the bobbing head of the unhappy Peckover.

"If your lordship would swim out with the oar to the gentleman," Purvis suggested, "I can pull you both in."

"I dare say," returned Gage with chattering teeth. "I'm not going back, the fun doesn't pay for the trouble. You wade out as far as you can and throw the oar to him, and let your friend hold the rope. Hi!" he called, to the complacent Mr. Fanning, "come here and catch hold. Hurry up or there'll be an inquest."

The dictatorial Mr. Fanning's expansive face, together with his self-centred spirits, fell at the invitation. "Sorry I can't swim, my lord," he objected, advancing along the margin with dry and lagging steps.

"No one wants you to," retorted Gage as he heavily emerged, dripping and pitiful from the

water. "Go in, and hold the rope," he commanded, "or my friend will be drowned."

And indeed Peckover's sharp cries, uttered so as to fill the opportunities when his mouth was above water, gave colour to the statement.

Mr. Fanning, perhaps by the nature of his trade, rendered somewhat indifferent to the question of life and death where he was not personally concerned, had been congratulating himself on being well out of the affair; and now the order coming as it did from so important a personage and customer as Lord Quorn, was neither pleasant nor to be disregarded. Personal discomfort was a thing to be endured by him only in other people, and now as he waded reluctantly into the water he resolved to avenge his outraged feelings and damp extremities by an extra penny a pound all round on his future deliveries at Staplewick Towers.

"Now throw me the end of the rope, Mr. Purvis," he commanded when the water reached half-way up his calves.

"You must come right out, Mr. Fanning," was the peremptory reply, "or we shall never reach the gentleman."

Accordingly Mr. Fanning, standing between a cross fire of admonishment and objurgation, was fain to advance till waist-deep.

Encouraged by the recently indicated shallowness of the water, Mr. Purvis now went boldly forward, as much with the idea of exhibiting superior prowess compared with Mr. Fanning, as of ingratiating himself with the lord of Staplewick. The resoluteness of the proceeding, however, had the effect of demonstrating its own superfluity, for as Mr. Purvis pushed forward he sank no deeper in the water and was able to approach waist-deep within the oar's length of Peckover who, it appeared, had unfortunately come upon a hole and, in his fright, stayed there. Clutching the end of the oar he was pulled out into safety, not, however, without a great show of superfluous energy on the part of Mr. Purvis, who wished to make the most of his effort and have the greatest possible return for his ruined breeches and gaiters; and so the three, rescuers and rescued, stumbled with mixed feelings to the shore.

CHAPTER XV

The most tangible result of the aquatic performance was that Gage, through his long immersion, caught a bad chill, and had to take to his bed. Peckover, who was none the worse for the trying twenty minutes (having probably been too frightened to think of catching cold), was summoned to his lordship's bedroom, and there passed a particularly uncomfortable quarter of an hour.

"It is all your idiotic fault that I'm stuck away here," the patient declared wrathfully. "That ass of a doctor says he won't let me get up for a week. A fine lot of fun I'm getting out of the title up to now. And I'm paying you a hundred pounds for a week in bed. As though it matters when I'm between the blankets whether I'm a lord or a solicitor's clerk. A peerage only counts when you've got your boots on."

"I'm very sorry, old man," said Peckover contritely. "But I don't see that you can blame me."

"I do blame you," Gage burst out. "Why couldn't you do as I told you, instead of dodging about like a fool and nearly bringing us both to our death!"

"You might make allowances," urged Peckover, "for a chap's feelings, when he finds himself for the first time in cold water with his clothes on."

"Bah!" Gage returned scornfully. "You've no pluck. And you spoilt the whole show. Well, it will have to stand, anyhow; I'm not going to let you make a fool of me again, whatever you may do with yourself. Now perhaps you will put your mind to carrying through the dry land part of the trick. If you don't I'll chuck you back your beggarly title, and get on without it. It hasn't done much for me yet."

"What do you want me to do?"

"While I'm lying here," Gage answered in an aggrieved tone, "you've got to make the most of the rescue. I reckon neither of us wants to play the joke over again."

"Not me," Peckover agreed heartily.

"Well, then, the least you can do is to make out what a splendid rescue it was, and that I'm a first-class hero, and that you're going to recognize the fact by making over to me a big slice of your fortune. D'you see? If I'm not a hero there can be no point in your solid admiration and

gratitude. So rub it well in."

"All right," Peckover promised.

"You may as well," Gage proceeded, "send for the lawyer chap from Bunbury and have a deed drawn up, settling, say, a couple of hundred thousand on me, it won't mean much as between you and me, but it will impress the local public; and I tell you I mean to have a good bit of glory to pay for this beastly cold. Now, do it at once and do it with a snap, or I shall find a better use for five thousand a year than a cold-catching title."

Thus admonished, Peckover carried out his instructions with a will, and in a very few hours the *soi-disant* Lord Quorn's heroic act promised fair to be an undying tradition for the country-side. In fact, Peckover, in his anxiety to retain his desirable income, rather overdid the business, and so much so that one or two cynical spirits were goaded into making question whether the life so saved was really, apart from the income it might have left behind, quite worth the value its owner evidently set upon it. Still, that mattered nothing to Peckover, who was not thin-skinned, at least on dry land.

The *Bunbury Bulletin* devoted a column and three quarters to the "Romantic and Heroic Incident at Staplewick Park," and told its breathless readers in unusually and adjectively gorgeous language how a distinguished young Colonial of immense wealth was the guest with the newly succeeded Lord Quorn at Staplewick Towers, temporarily in the occupation of Colonel and Lady Agatha Hemyock; how he had, while fishing in the justly celebrated and admired lake in the beautiful park, overbalanced himself in making a cast, had fallen into deep water, and he being in imminent risk of drowning, how the gallant young nobleman, worthy descendant of a line of heroes and otherwise distinguished ancestors, had plunged in and with great difficulty and after unheard-of exertions rescued his friend. The writer having fully described the occurrence, with a minuteness of detail only possible from the pen of one who was not there, proceeded to give the respective lineage and achievements of rescued and rescuer, while the interstices in the thrilling narrative were filled up with topographical, historical and picturesque notes by way of local colour; items which were kept ready for use in the event of anything worthy of description happening at Staplewick, from a chimney on fire to a royal visit.

Great as was the sensation which the highly coloured account created, it may be safely asserted that by none was it read with more consuming interest than by Mr. Purvis, the farmer, and Mr. Fanning, the butcher. Their traditional and rooted belief in the infallibility of the newspaper press received a shock from which it never recovered. But when their astonished perusal reached the last and most sensational paragraph, in which it was stated "on the best authority" that the grateful millionaire had, as a mark of his esteem, admiration and gratitude, settled a considerable fortune, "a sum which, it was an open secret, might be represented by a two and five noughts," on his deliverer, their sensations became of a complicated character that defied analysis. Anyhow, the result was that they met to discuss the matter, and the outcome of the meeting was that next morning they proceeded to the Towers and sought an interview with the supposititious millionaire.

Peckover felt somewhat uncomfortable when the visitors were announced. In his exuberance in making the most of a sham rescue he had overlooked the spectators, or at least had regarded them as negligible factors in the episode.

After a few words of disingenuous congratulation, Mr. Fanning came to the point. He and Mr. Purvis had seen it stated, doubtless correctly, in the local paper that Mr. Gage had in his gratitude, etc., rewarded his purported rescuer in more than princely fashion. And Mr. Fanning and Mr. Purvis, whilst not withholding their meed of admiration from his lordship, whose illness they deplored, and who had, they generously admitted, done the best he could, were anxious to know where they came in, and could only say that it was hard for them to express in words their joint and several disappointment at being mentioned in connexion with the affair only in the roles of casual spectators. Whereas, Mr. Fanning urged with a suggestion of latent heat, it was they who brought the accident to its comparatively happy termination; but for them and the parts they played, he, Mr. Fanning, did not think they would that day be having the pleasure of addressing Mr. Gage, or at any rate he, Mr. Gage, the advantage of being in a position to listen to them; the depressing inference being obvious.

As Peckover had by this time come to take a more comfortable and even jocular view of the affair, he was not inclined to give more notice to the claim than seeing in it evidence that the bogus rescue had deceived its witnesses. Moreover, as a Cockney, he had not much opinion of or consideration for the feelings of a farmer and a country butcher.

"Oh, I don't think you did much," he replied off-handedly.

"Begging your pardon, sir," Mr. Fanning maintained, "we did everything, if the lives of yourself and his lordship count for anything."

"You didn't risk your lives," Peckover argued.

"We did, begging your pardon, sir."

"What, in three feet six inches of water?"

"How," urged Mr. Fanning, "were we to know the depth? We were prepared to go much deeper."

"I dare say," returned Peckover incredulously. "But as you didn't that doesn't come into the account. You did a lot of shouting, I admit, and nearly knocked my head off by flinging that infernal oar at me as though you thought you were harpooning a whale. Well, what do you want?"

Mr. Fanning's face was lowering, and that of Mr. Purvis was overspread by a foolish grin of disappointment. Certainly matters were not turning out as they had anticipated on their walk to the Towers. They were being rudely awakened from their dreams of returning to their respective homes rich men.

Mr. Fanning paused for a moment, as collecting, so to say, his routed forces for a final charge. "Well, sir," he said, bluntly now and with a note of repressed indignation; "putting myself aside for the moment, I should like to ask, seeing what you are doing for his lordship, whether my friend Mr. Purvis' efforts on your behalf are not to meet with suitable recognition. It was Mr. Purvis who, with me, kept our presence of mind when matters looked black; it was Mr. Purvis who, under my direction, ran with splendid promptitude to the boathouse; it was Mr. Purvis who fetched out all there was to fetch, the oar and the rope, and, under my directions, lashed the one to the other; it was Mr. Purvis who, at my suggestion, and at imminent risk to himself, first made sure of his lordship when his lordship was totally exhausted. Yes."

Mr. Fanning paused, and drew a murrey-coloured handkerchief lightly across his heated brow. Mr. Purvis, with the reticence of conscious desert, stood eyeing Peckover with an expression which suggested, that if that unsympathetic person was not duly impressed by the catalogue of his achievements, he ought to be, and that if he, Purvis, failed to obtain due reward for the same he would be content to leave his claim to the judgment of posterity, but at the same time would much prefer an immediate and more material recognition.

"It was Mr. Purvis," resumed the butcher, "accompanied and assisted by your humble servant, who at considerable risk, I may say, great risk, since I am no swimmer——"

"Nor ain't I," interjaculated Purvis, thankfully, as looking to his ignorance to increase the figure of his recompense.

"Anyhow," continued Fanning, rather put off his eloquence by the interruption, "we risked it. We risked it. And we are husbands of wives and fathers of families."

Mr. Fanning, who was said to be in the habit of knocking his wife about after an evening at the *Pigeons*, became, for a butcher, almost touching, and Mr. Purvis, whose wife ruled him with a copper-stick on the rare occasions when her tongue failed, experienced no difficulty in looking intensely married.

"It was Mr. Purvis, guided and sustained by me, who pushed out for you, sir, and——"

"It was Mr. Purvis, directed by you, who nearly sliced the top of my head off," Peckover interposed flippantly.

"Your rescue," pursued Fanning, ignoring the interruption, "was no light matter. It was the stiffest job I've ever been concerned in, though I must say I never expected to have to bring the fact home to the gentleman most interested in it."

"Well," said Peckover curtly, "what did you expect?"

"Leave it to you, sir," Purvis replied promptly, shrewdly fearing the effect his friend's verbosity might have upon the ultimate figure.

But Mr. Fanning would have his say. "Putting aside, sir, the risk of life we ran, to say nothing of the most valuable existence which it has been our privilege to prolong, I may mention that I was wearing on the occasion a bran new pair of boots which are now good for nothing, quite ruined, sir; I had on likewise my best market-day gaiters and breeches ditto; added to which the tails of my coat and the sleeves were so saturated that my missus can do nothing with 'em. And I believe I am correct in stating that Mr. Purvis' wearing apparel was greatly deteriorated."

He turned towards Purvis for corroboration. That worthy man gave an assenting nod. "Ain't been able to get into my breeches since, nor my boots, nor my gaiters," he asserted painfully.

Peckover made a rapid calculation based on the price-tickets he had studied during the luncheon hour in the windows of various establishments in Cheapside. "All right," he said graciously, "I shall be happy to present you with five pounds apiece; that is one pound seventeen for the damage and three guineas each for your trouble."

For a few moments a sepulchral silence reigned in the room. Then Mr. Fanning's mouth slowly opened, as though the machinery, brought to a sudden stop, was just set going again. But all he could say was:

"Five pounds apiece?"

So profound was his emotion that for the moment Peckover was at a loss as to the real effect of his offer.

"As a mark of my high appreciation of your services, and taking into consideration that we did not know the depth of water was only three foot six, I shall be pleased to make it guineas," Peckover announced, in as grand a manner as he knew how to assume.

Mr. Fanning threw up his hands and turned to Mr. Purvis, an incarnation of despair. "Five guineas! Five!" he gasped.

"The gentleman's joking," was all Purvis could say.

"No, I really mean it," said Peckover with princely condescension. "I absolutely refuse to reward your services at any lower figure, however much less your modesty may feel them to be really worth. I said five guineas and I mean five guineas, and not a shilling less than five guineas apiece shall you have."

Mr. Fanning was now reduced to a state of abject helplessness. "Five guineas! five guineas!" was his cry. "While the man who had to be rescued himself—by us, by us—gets a sum running into six figures. It's something to be a lord."

"A poor look-out for respectable farmers and tradesmen," put in Purvis.

"What," demanded Peckover, in well-feigned surprise, "aren't you satisfied?"

"Not exactly," Fanning answered feelingly.

"Well," returned Peckover, "I consider five guineas very good pay for ten minutes' work in preventing two gentlemen from drowning in three foot six of water."

"It's an insult," Fanning maintained.

"Oh, well," retorted Peckover, "I won't insult you. Good-day."

But neither Mr. Fanning nor Mr. Purvis had any intention of leaving heroism to be its own reward. They made a simultaneous movement to intercept their insulter as he moved towards the door.

"Don't misunderstand us, sir," said Fanning, tempering with a nice sense of dignity his demand for justice. "We are poor men, and if five guineas apiece is really all you are disposed to offer us, why, our duty to our families is to accept it."

"Ah, I thought you'd come to your senses," observed Peckover with a grin. "Five guineas isn't to be sneezed at."

"I've done a lot of sneezing for it," replied Fanning, "and so has Mr. Purvis. We both got bad colds from the wetting."

"Well, you can't expect me to pay you for having a cold in the head," returned Peckover, with more flippancy than justice. "Here's your bonus."

He took out the money and paid them, with the full intention of recovering the same from his friend and patron upstairs. Messrs. Fanning and Purvis received the inadequate solatium in a due spirit of protest. The crackle of the notes in their bucolic fingers woke them from their dreams of affluence, and as they gazed with sorrow on the legend thereon the fact was established that five, not five thousand, was the figure at which their heroism was assessed, and that if justice was to be found in the world her habitat was not Staplewick Towers.

With the departure of the dissatisfied pair Peckover threw himself into a chair and laughed for some minutes as he recalled, one after another, the salient points of the serio-comic interview. He had his limitations and deficiencies, but a certain sense of humour was not among them, and the logical consequence of that magnificently absurd rescue and reward appealed to it strongly.

"Oh, I'm in for a fine time at last," he chuckled, in unrestrained enjoyment of his new state of existence. "What a bit of luck! I'm going to be in clover for the rest of my days. Tal ra, ra! It's immense!" He jumped up and began, in pure joyousness, to dance a double shuffle. In the midst of his saltatory abandon he suddenly stopped. The light in the room had become sensibly diminished. Pirouetting round to the window to ascertain the cause, he saw bulking therein the huge figure of a man who was watching his caperings with a threatening eye.

CHAPTER XVI

The man who, with his burly form filling up the window, stood looking in with grim amusement at Peckover's performance, was a great round-faced, bullet-headed fellow of six feet two, whose massive proportions, coupled with his juvenile countenance and somewhat vacuous expression, gave him the appearance of a fat schoolboy seen through a magnifying-glass. He was dressed in a Norfolk suit of leather, which by its amplitude of cut made the wearer look even a bigger man than Nature had intended him to be.

For some seconds the two stood staring at each other in a sort of stupefied silence. Then Peckover, somewhat nervously, remarked, "Hullo!"

"Keeping warm?" the substantial apparition enquired, drawing back the corners of his wide mouth in a sarcastic grin.

"Foot asleep," was the ready explanation, given with a certain apprehensive quaver.

"I see." The stranger accepted the statement for what it was worth. "This is Staplewick Towers?" The question was put in a tone of settled conviction that only an answer in the affirmative would be deemed worthy of credence.

"Yes. Front door round to the left," said Peckover perking up.

"Thanks," returned the intruder significantly. "I'll try that way when I leave." He took a step in to the room and stared round him curiously.

"Awkward member!" was Peckover's muttered comment, duly impressed by the other's size, which made the furniture look small. "You wish to see Colonel Hemyock?"

"Not particularly," returned the stranger gruffly, "I want Lord Quorn."

"Lord Quorn!" Peckover caught up his face in the act of falling. "Pressing business?" he inquired politely.

"Very."

"Any message?"

"No." The man's voice was unnecessarily, objectionably loud, Peckover thought. "You would not care to take what I've come all the way from Australia to give him," he added with unpleasant significance, as he twirled a thick crop, just missing a statuette by half an inch.

So the complication which Peckover had feared but of which his good fortune and the zest of his new life had made him forgetful, had arrived. In a moment the particularly awkward truth flashed upon him, that this was the dreaded bully from Australia, the brother of the would-be Lady Quorn.

The idea put his thoughts in such a whirl that he was not ready with any reply. His hesitation seemed to have the effect of exasperating the quick-tempered visitor.

"Where is this nobleman?" he roared, with sneering emphasis on the substantive.

Peckover, with the income of a Cabinet Minister at stake, was rapidly running over expedients for meeting the monstrous emergency. To put him off for the moment and send for the police seemed the most feasible way.

"Lord Quorn?" he replied. "Oh, he's about."

"He won't be about much after I have done with him," was the grim retort. Suddenly stooping forward and looking viciously round the room, the unpleasant visitor carelessly threw his crop away over his shoulder and caught up the poker. "Look here!" he bellowed. "His lordship's right leg." With the word he made a furious effort and snapped the poker in halves. "See?" he panted, throwing the pieces down so near Peckover's feet that the impressed observer sprang eighteen inches into the air. "How will his lordship like that?" he asked loudly.

It occurred to Peckover that, considering the poor fellow's situation, the tampering with his noble limbs would not be likely to affect him much, and he said so.

The strong man stared at him in incredulous exasperation that the performance had missed its intended effect. "What? He's not a big chap, is he?" he demanded.

"No," Peckover answered, "I—I mean he is so devoid of feeling."

The visitor caught up his crop and flourished it. "My poor sister is not, though," he roared, with a violence which even his possibly just resentment scarcely seemed to justify. "He promised to marry her, and then ran off. But we are on his track. Yes, I've got my broken-hearted sister waiting outside in the garden."

Peckover felt that he must have a few minutes' solitude in which to think out the solution of the awkward problem. "Hadn't you better go and fetch her in, while I tell Lord Quorn?" he

suggested.

"I will," was the answer, given with a violent suddenness which made Peckover start. "And when I catch sight of his lordship," added the amiable zealot, "I'll astonish him. I'll—I'll make him jump."

"You'll astonish a good many people besides if you do," murmured Peckover dryly, as the bully flung off through the window. Here was a pretty situation. Was the good time he was enjoying and promising himself to turn into ash like a pipe of tobacco? Already the *soi-disant* Lord Quorn was complaining—and with some justice—that he was not having much fun for his money. Would he be likely to continue paying five thousand a year for the privilege of marrying an undesirable colonial maiden with the alternative of having his arms and legs snapped, possibly his nose slit and his eyes gouged out, if he refused? Not likely. Nor that he would care to wear the title when he found it carried so little fun and so many inconveniences with it. But what was he, Percy Peckover, to do? The situation baffled him. Temporize was all he could think of; temporize till he could hit on some expedient for ridding the position of this awkward element which threatened to spoil it. It was certainly exasperating just when he had settled down into a good thing to have to return to the hard world of work which he hated, poverty which he loathed, and his own identity of which he stood in terror. But this great noisy bully—ugh! how he would like to——

His bitter meditations were interrupted by footsteps on the path and next moment the *bête noire* reappeared, this time with the lady. The first anxious glance at her did nothing to dissipate Peckover's apprehensions. A fine woman she was certainly, according to the popular acceptation of the term—tall and massive, but coarse and off-hand almost to vulgarity. She had challenging black eyes, a nose which the most casual glance could never overlook, and a determined mouth and jaw. Her hair was cut short like a man's, and in her hand she swung a substantial ash stick which she seemed quite capable of using to enforce any argument which verbal persuasion had failed to drive home. As to her dress, it was of masculine cut, the skirt being deeply edged with leather. Altogether she was a formidable and workmanlike young woman.

Peckover had taken the precaution to latch the French window. Finding it did not yield to his heavy hand, the gentleman from Australia applied his boot to it and burst it open.

"This rotten window sticks," he remarked by way of apology. "Come in, Lalage. Mind the glass. This," he said aggressively to Peckover, "is my poor deceived sister, Miss Lalage Leo. My name is Carnaby Leo. Now, where's Lord Quorn?"

"In bed," answered Peckover manfully.

"What?" roared Mr. Leo.

"You need not shout," Peckover suggested, fearful that the noise might reach other ears and occasion complications. "We had an accident on the lake the other day, and he has been in bed ever since."

"We've heard of it," said Miss Leo, speaking for the first time. Her tone was as downright and masculine as her appearance. "And are you the rich young man who was rescued from drowning?"

"I am."

Brother and sister exchanged glances, and the glances, Peckover told himself, foretold a further complication.

"Lord Quorn is very seriously ill," he said impressively. "Took a bad chill, and is suffering from congestion and—and fever. It is quite impossible that you should see him for at least a fortnight, if he isn't dead by that date."

"I'll see him, dead or alive," shouted Mr. Leo, who was making a tour of inspection round the apartment.

"Be calm, Carnaby," said his sister casually.

"It would kill him," observed Peckover, with conviction.

"Killing's too good for him," returned Carnaby, loudly.

"Hush, Carnaby!" the lady commanded.

"He is delirious," said Peckover, warming to his work.

"I'll bring him to his senses," growled Leo.

"Better leave him to me for the present," suggested Miss Leo.

"He wouldn't recognize you, or you him," said Peckover, for once touching upon the truth.

"I'll soon let him know who we are," bellowed Mr. Leo, "and what we are—and what he is."

"Impossible, while he's in this state," Peckover maintained. "If you kill him——"

"Good job too!" Mr. Leo interpolated.

"He won't be much good for matrimonial purposes."

"True," Miss Leo admitted.

Peckover had noticed with some discomfort that of late her eyes had rested on him with increasing interest. He was always typically alive to the slightest sign of female attraction to himself, but this particular attention did not produce in him the usual sportive complacency. The situation was becoming tense. The very complexity of his position took from Peckover his usual volubility. Then he bethought himself of certain alcoholic sustenance which he and Gage kept in a closed cabinet in order to be able to indulge in it at uncanonical hours without the fuss of ringing and ordering drinks. *Noblesse oblige*, the new-fangled peer had observed in reference to his obligation to hide the evidence of irregular refreshment.

"Have a drink?" he suggested, as he whipped out a decanter of derelict sherry which a foraging tour of the cellars had discovered.

Mr. Carnaby Leo's interest in his surroundings seemed to deepen at the suggestion. "I will," he promptly responded, as he swooped down upon the wine. "Sherry!" He pronounced the word with a contortion of his fat face which might be construed into an indication of preference for some other beverage not immediately forthcoming; but he drank it, gulping down a glass at a swallow, nevertheless.

Suddenly Miss Leo turned to Peckover. "You are not married?" she demanded with startling significance.

"Not yet," he answered, blanching.

"Engaged?"

She stood over him breathing a fell design, her black eyes transfixing him, and seeming to wither his flippant courage to the very root. Still he made a feebly desperate effort to stave it off. "Not quite. Almost. Practically," he stammered.

"That's a trifle," the lady returned with masterful decisiveness. "Easily got over." Then to his relief she turned her blighting gaze from him and directed it meditatively to the expanse of park beyond the window. "I think," she said musingly, "that in any event I see my way out."

"Yes, that is the best way out," murmured Peckover as loudly as he dared, following her gaze.

But she ignored the rash speech, and for some moments the silence was broken only by the smacking of Mr. Leo's lips as he endeavoured to impart gusto into his occupation.

Peckover, dreading the next words, was about to call attention to the beauty of the landscape when Miss Leo suddenly turned upon him, and, as though struck by an exceptionally brilliant idea, said—"In the event of my not being Lady Quorn, why should I not marry you?"

"Oh, bother!" Peckover was startled into the expression of disagreement. "Why should you?" he objected manfully.

"If I set my mind upon it," she said, with a dangerous look in her eye.

"Please take it off," he protested. "Lord Quorn is my friend; he saved my life, I could not be so base as to rob him of you."

"No," the lady replied dryly, "you wouldn't if I wanted him. But I'm not so sure about it. Anyhow, in case the poor fellow doesn't get better, why, he couldn't complain."

"No, that would be my work," Peckover reflected anxiously.

"Weak stuff, this," exclaimed Mr. Leo. "Brandy neat is my sauce. Can't taste sherry."

"It's not for want of trying," Peckover thought, as he noticed the almost empty decanter, but he did not say so.

"Isn't he a fine fellow?" murmured Miss Leo, with an unwelcome approach to affectionate confidence. "Be nice to him and he'll soon take to you."

"He has soon taken to the sherry," was Peckover's mental commentary.

"Strong as a lion," said Lalage, waxing enthusiastic.

"And thirsty as a dozen," Peckover told himself.

"Carnaby, dear," his sister called sweetly, "I want you and Mr. Gage to be great friends. We are so already," she added caressingly to the unhappy Peckover; "more than friends, eh?"

"Don't seem to have lost much time," was her brother's not unnatural comment as he leered at their victim.

Peckover felt that if he did not take a firm stand at once he was lost. "I quite agree with you," he replied boldly, addressing himself to the still thirsty Mr. Leo and ignoring the lady's blandishments. "There is no need to be in such a deuce of a hurry. You see"—he took courage to face his would-be enslaver—"I never set eyes on you till ten minutes ago."

Miss Leo's face changed swiftly from affection to resentment. "Carnaby," she exclaimed, as an ill-boding light flashed from her eyes, "do you hear that?"

Carnaby, disturbed in his employment of draining the last drops out of the decanter, responded loudly, and, it seemed a trifle perfunctorily, "Never set eyes? All right. I'll take them out for you, and reset them directly."

"But I'm not the man you want," Peckover protested.

"Nobody," roared Leo, "will want you much after I've shaken hands with you."

"I want Lord Quorn," Miss Leo declared resolutely. "Failing Lord Quorn, I'll take you."

"Well, but——" Peckover began to expostulate, when Mr. Leo rolled up and stopped him.

"Now, look here, my pretty dickey-bird," he explained grimly, "I'm gentle up to a point, because my sweet sister doesn't like bloodshed. That poker," he pointed to the broken steel, "was his lordship's right arm; here is yours."

He caught up the shovel, and with a quick movement snapped it, throwing the pieces back into the fender with emphatic and dismaying clatter.

"Would you mind listening to me?" urged Peckover, regarding the object-lesson as unpleasantly superfluous.

But the man of strength disregarded his appeal. "I shan't hurt you yet," he declared with an under-lying threat, as he caught up the tongs and flourished them. He opened and closed them with a snap several times uncomfortably near Peckover's nose. "Both legs," he exclaimed, as, putting forth a mighty effort, he twisted and broke them, throwing them down with the same provoking clangour.

"I tell you," Peckover declared desperately, "this house is not mine. It is not even at this moment Lord Quorn's. It is let furnished. I wish you would not interfere with the fire-irons."

"I'm not particular," Leo returned. "Can't stop to go into the ownership of fire-irons. You've seen what I'm capable of; now send 'em up to his lordship with my compliments."

"Lord Quorn is not at home here at present," Peckover insisted.

"A lord," said Lalage, "is at home anywhere."

The thought of the real Lord Quorn crossed Peckover's mind.

"Fine thing to be a lord," he reflected bitterly. "That poor chap has missed this fun." Then seeing Carnaby evidently on the look-out for fresh worlds, or, rather, domestic implements, to conquer, he turned desperately to Lalage. "I say," he proposed seriously, "can't we compromise this?"

The words, or at least one of them caught the ear of her brother, on whom possibly the sherry was beginning to take effect. "Compromise, you wombat?" he bawled. "Compromise my beautiful sister?"

"No, no, Carnaby," protested the beautiful one in question, with a look at Peckover which gave unmistakable point to her words, "how absurd you are."

"Compromise my precious sister, you slink!"

"No, no," Peckover objected, getting quite reckless between the two fires; "not your precious sister. How absurd you are!"

Next instant the giant had sprung at him and had him in his grip. "Absurd? Am I? I'll wring your neck!"

"I mean settle," Peckover explained in a shriek.

"I'll settle you," was the retort, emphasized by a tightening grip.

"I mean settle with money," gasped the tortured one, hoping the magic word might have a

relaxing effect upon the stricture.

But whatever might have been its effect upon his tormentor's mind when unclouded by alcohol, it had now the reverse of the desired result. "Money!" he cried in maudlin indignation as he threw him off, "what is money where the honour of my lovely Lalage is concerned?"

Peckover had come to the inevitable conclusion that it would be worth his while to make some pecuniary sacrifice in order to get out of the difficulty. He would do well to jettison part of the cargo of his ship which had seemed to be coming home so nicely.

"You see," he explained, "much as my friend Quorn may admire your sister, he will be bound to marry a rich girl to support his title."

"A peer wants a lot of keeping up, I suppose," growled Mr. Leo, taking out another bottle from the cabinet and shaking it viciously, demonstrating by his action that a bush-bully requires a certain amount of keeping-up as well.

"It stands to reason," Peckover replied. "Now," he added insinuatingly, "if a hundred pounds ——"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when he was sorry he had uttered them. There was an explosion, a smash, and the little table with its contents was lying on the floor broken by a thump from the mighty fist.

"Hundred devils!" Mr. Leo roared.

CHAPTER XVII

So far as he dared, Peckover began to lose his temper. "I wish you would not smash things," he ventured to remonstrate. "I'll take your word for your muscle."

"My muscle prefers to speak for itself," was the retort.

"It need not talk with such a deuced lot of emphasis," Peckover rejoined. "What do you say," he added, returning to business, "to two hundred pounds?"

"Don't you wish I may take it?" exclaimed the fair Lalage with infinite scorn.

"You can't expect any more," Peckover urged. "Lord Quorn is a very poor man."

"Is he?" Lalage asked, becoming thoughtful.

"Certainly he is. Really not worth looking after. Now," he added, coaxingly. "Can't you put a fair price on your journey?"

"What price my glorious sister's broken heart?" bellowed Mr. Leo, truculently maudlin.

"Damaged goods half price," was Peckover's inaudible reply.

"Eh, you scallywag?" The big man advanced upon him threateningly. "Let me go into figures with your beautiful Lord Quorn. Once before a man played the fool with Lalage, and we got five thousand pounds out of his executors."

"Executors?" repeated Peckover, interested in spite of more urgent considerations. "Poor fellow died then?"

"Yes, you see Carnaby called upon him," Lalage explained sweetly.

"Now," proceeded Mr. Leo, always with unnecessary volume of tone, "before I proceed to extremities, I should like to know from you, as his lordship's friend, how we stand."

It occurred to Peckover that the chances were that either he or both would stand on two stumps before long if the weather did not change. "Name your own sum for the return ticket," he said desperately.

Mr. Leo walked up and placed his hands upon Peckover's shoulders with such energy that the smaller man wondered he did not collapse into his boots. "Does he mean it?" he cried, glaring tipsily into Peckover's contorted face. "Not he! Look at his eye; it's shifty."

The victim considered he might esteem himself lucky if the feature in question did not shift out of his head forthwith.

"We must take time," said Lalage, laying a repressing hand on her brother's arm.

"We'll stay a week or two with you," Mr. Leo declared; "till his lordship has decided whether he will remain on above ground or not."

It occurred to Peckover that the property would be considerably out of repair by that time, but he recognized that a refusal was at the moment quite out of the question. Then, as Mr. Leo, having given him a preliminary shake, released him from his clutch by sending him backwards with uncalled-for violence against a floor lamp which was not improved by the contact, the door opened and Miss Ethel Hemyock looked in. "Oh, Mr. Gage, I have only just got rid of poor Mr. Sharnbrook."

The young lady came in with a smile for Peckover and a doubtful glance at the strangers. Perhaps Miss Leo's appearance suggested to her ignorance that she had not much to fear from that quarter in the way of rivalry; anyhow, her look changed to one of easy graciousness as Peckover, awkwardly enough, introduced them.

"Let me present some Australian friends of mine," he said.

"Very great friends," added Lalage, with a significant smile.

"More than friends; brothers, eh, Gage, my boy," put in Carnaby taking the cue from his sister, and accompanying the words with a slap which nearly dislocated Peckover's shoulder.

"Oh," said Miss Ethel, rather drawing back, and looking enquiringly at Peckover.

"So pleased to know all your friends, dear," observed Lalage with mischievous significance. "I am sure we shall be great friends, Miss—Miss——"

"Ethel Hemyock," the young lady supplied frigidly, the word "dear" having congealed her.

Lady Agatha and Dagmar came in. The hostess' look of enquiry at the sight of the abnormal visitors was cut short by Ethel's anxious enquiry. "Where is Mr. Sharnbrook?"

The tone suggested to her mother's sharp ears that something was wrong.

"Mr. Sharnbrook has just gone."

"He is staying to luncheon?"

"No," Dagmar answered. "Mother did not ask him."

"He must!" Ethel exclaimed, making for the door.

"Ethel!" Dagmar cried, as she sprang after her.

Lady Agatha, scenting mischief, turned to Peckover. "Will you present your—friends?" she said coldly.

Peckover, roused from the natural preoccupation induced by his position, did so. "Miss Leo, Mr. Leo——"

"Friends from the Bush?" Lady Agatha enquired superciliously, eyeing through her "witherers" Lalage's short hair and short dress.

"Yes—just so," Peckover answered in his confusion.

"What?" roared Carnaby. "Bush? I'll bush you!"

"Carnaby," his sister remonstrated, "be calm. Yes, we are just from Australia."

"Friends of Mr. Gage's?" Lady Agatha enquired, in a tone of disgusted resignation.

"Friends of Lord Quorn," Peckover corrected swiftly.

"And of Mr. Gage's, I should hope," Lalage added with an embarrassing show of affectionate insistence.

"Ah!" said Lady Agatha, transferring her attention and her glasses to Carnaby, "Lord Quorn's former sheep partner, perhaps?"

"What?" shouted the worthy fellow, more bellicose than usual under the influence of the sherry. "Sheep partner?"

"It is not necessary," observed Lady Agatha with cutting distinctness, "to speak so loud. I am not aware that any one in the room is deaf."

"What," demanded Carnaby of Peckover in a roaring whisper, "does the old lady mean by calling me a sheep partner?"

"Hush! It's all right," he replied. "She thinks you are an Australian swell—a mutton-king."

"Mutton king?" Carnaby bawled, raising his arm as though to pulverize his insulter.

The evidences of his strength had meanwhile attracted Lady Agatha's attention. "Are you," she asked severely, "the person who has been taking liberties with the fire-irons?"

"Yes," answered Carnaby with justifiable pride. "I just snapped them to amuse this little wombat." Then, as a brilliant afterthought, he suggested—"Shall I ring for some more and show you how it is done?"

"By no means," was the frigid answer. "I should very much object to be shown anything of the sort. And I must request you, if your friends need amusement, to choose some other method of providing it."

"All right, don't be alarmed," replied Carnaby, on whom her grand tone was quite wasted. "Winter's coming on and I won't reduce the stock; I've got something more interesting to break than fire-irons."

"By the way," Lady Agatha observed, "we saw a strange and not very prepossessing person in the shrubbery by the drive just now. Was he by any chance a friend of yours?"

"Not likely, ma'am," Carnaby answered, "unless it was Lord Quorn, and this little wallaby tells us he is in bed."

"It was not Lord Quorn," said Lady Agatha.

The Misses Ethel and Dagmar came in breathless, with Sharnbrook between them, looking as a pick-pocket might under escort of two policemen.

"We caught him, mother, at the drive gate. I told him how sorry you were you had let him go when you meant to insist upon his staying to luncheon."

"Of course," Lady Agatha corroborated, conveniently ignoring the fact that she had practically sent him off as having no further use for him. "Mr. Sharnbrook might have known we never could be so inhospitable."

Sharnbrook gave an enquiring glance at Peckover, who could only helplessly reply by a sign directing his attention to Miss Leo, at sight of whom hope gave way to despair in the Sharnbrook bosom. Bisgood announced luncheon. Lady Agatha's look at Peckover said as plainly as speech —"What are you going to do with these impossible people?" And under the look he felt more limp and nonplussed than ever.

Under the circumstances Peckover was actually relieved when the tension of the situation was snapped by a loud exclamation of satisfaction from Carnaby. "Lunch! Good! I'm all there!" With a stride he placed himself by Lady Agatha's side, and offered her his arm with what might be supposed to stand in the Bush for the grand manner. Ignoring his arm, Lady Agatha crossed her own and walked stiffly and resentfully from the room. By no means abashed, Carnaby looked round and pounced upon Dagmar, who, having lost Sharnbrook in a struggle for him with her sister, was also disappointed of getting Peckover, whom Miss Leo had taken prompt care to annex. But Carnaby was hardly acceptable, even as a consolation prize. Dagmar drew back and made a sudden dart after her mother leaving the rest to follow in various degrees of discontent.

"Oh, mother," she exclaimed breathless with indignation, "what appalling people! We had better keep an eye on the silver. Do you know, I saw that horrid man again in the shrubbery just now."

As the last of the party were pressing through the library door "that horrid man" came up to the window and looked furtively in. It was none other than Lord Quorn, the real Lord Quorn; he who had drunk Peckover's drugged champagne at the *Quorn Arms* at Great Bunbury.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I've had enough of this, I'm going to get up," Mr. Gage, the *soi-disant* Lord Quorn, declared, as Peckover after luncheon devoted a few minutes of his present complicated existence to visit that impatient patient.

"No, you don't."

"Won't I?" was the querulous rejoinder. "Why not? The doctor's gone, and——"

"There's something worse than the doctor come," said Peckover with a long face.

"I don't know what's worse than the doctor, unless it's the undertaker," returned Gage.

"Well, I do," said Peckover feelingly. "A most unfortunate thing has happened. A girl who I was a bit sweet on out there has followed me over."

Gage whistled. "Then our game's all up. Of course she'll know you are Quorn and I am not."

"No," replied Peckover subtly. "I have made it all right about that. Told her there was a mistake and I was not the rightful heir."

"That was smart of you," Gage said with gloomy approval. "Well, what's the trouble, then. The lady doesn't expect me to marry her, does she?"

"Yes," answered Peckover with intensity, "she does."

"What?" Gage nearly landed out of bed in his surprise. "Me?" Then laughed incredulously.

"She says she has come six thousand miles to be Lady Quorn and she is going to be Lady Quorn."

"The deuce she is. How is she going to manage that?"

"By force."

"What?" Gage shouted. "Marry me by force?"

"Yes," answered Peckover seriously. "You see, she has brought her brother with her, a dare-devil rampaging brute of a bush-ranger, six foot three tall, and broad in proportion, who sticks at nothing but your favourite vital part with a bowie knife."

"I'd like to see him," Gage observed scornfully

"You will, if you get out of bed and come downstairs," returned Peckover impressively. "Also you will have an opportunity of remarking the havoc he has made with the fire-irons."

"What? Fire-irons?"

"He has been snapping a few pokers and tongs just to show what he will do with you when he catches you."

"What absurd rot," Gage said with rising exasperation. "I never had anything to do with the brute's sister."

"But you have got to marry her," rejoined Peckover quite seriously, "or take the consequences."

"Oh, have I?"

"Yes; you had better stop in bed."

"Had I?" Gage exclaimed, flinging off the clothes. "I rather think I'll get up and hand the ruffian over to the police, as you don't seem to have the *nous* to do it."

"Not I," returned Peckover shrewdly. "Not quite such a fool. Once open police-court proceedings, and our little arrangement will come out and be spoilt, even if nothing else happens."

"Well, what are we to do?" Gage demanded, recognizing the weight of his friend's objection.

"You stop in bed," said Peckover, with an air of authority based upon expediency.

"D——d if I do," Gage retorted.

"If you don't, you'll have to," replied Peckover with truth underlying paradox. "A fortnight of the downy is better than six months of the plank."

"What, stop here for a fortnight?" Gage cried wrathfully. "It's a regular take in. A rollicking time I'm having for my money; cold-shouldered, half-drowned, and now tucked up in this beastly bed for weeks. Where does Lord Quorn come in?"

"Lord Quorn," observed Peckover sententiously, "will go out if Mr. Carnaby Leo gets hold of him. He has got a museum at home of pickled ears, and eyes and noses, et cetera, of which he has deprived certain parties who didn't do as he told them. After all," he added persuasively, "it is better to stop in bed with the schedule of your features complete than to get up for a rollick and find some of the items missing."

"Why the devil didn't you tell me you'd been playing the fool with a bush-ranger's sister?" Gage snapped savagely. "I wouldn't have looked at you or your title. You've got my money under false pretences."

"You never gave me time to go into my past history," was the plausible reply. "You might have known when you took over a peerage you were letting yourself in for something of the sort. You know it's a way we have."

"A pretty brilliant way, to get tangled up with bush-rangers," sneered Gage.

"He didn't come on the scene till an hour ago. I suppose, by the way," he suggested mischievously, "you would not care to marry her, and so see your way to getting out of bed without damage?"

"Marry ten thousand devils! That's not my idea of fun."

"Lalage is a fine figure of a woman," Peckover continued. "Make an imposing Lady Quorn. Fine mover; takes the drawing-room in three, including anything that stands in the way. The coronet would suit her better if she'd let her hair grow."

"Crops her hair short?" Gage enquired, in a tone of infinite disgust at the picture.

Peckover nodded. "Bit too much of the dragoon for our taste, my boy. You stop in bed, and let me try to get rid of them."

"I won't stop in bed," returned Gage. "Where are these brutes?"

"Sent 'em down to *The Pigeons*," Peckover answered. "Lady Agatha wouldn't have 'em in the house. Don't blame her. Their manners aren't exactly Vere de Vere. Things were a bit awkward at lunch. Carnaby, the beauty, had been mixing his liquors and fell asleep with his ugly head in the salad bowl, and the tomato which Lalage aimed at him to wake him up, missed, and spattered on Bisgood's shirt-front. Lady Aggy wasn't pleased."

"It's all very well," said Gage sulkily, "but I'm going to get up. The woman can't make me marry her against my will, nor can the great ox, her brother."

"No," Peckover agreed, "but he can have a good try for it, and the process might not be pleasant."

"I never heard such nonsense."

"No; I wouldn't have believed it," said Peckover, "if I hadn't had the fellow's dukes round my windpipe. He is just a buffalo in trousers. And if you get up, and shy at the sister, who is a hyæna in petticoats, you'll know it; that is, if he leaves you in a state to know anything."

"A pretty abominable treat you've let me in for," said Gage sourly. "But I'm not going to stay in this four-poster. You've got to go and square this at once. Ask them what they'll take to go back."

"I've offered them a couple of hundred," Peckover replied, "and got nearly strangled for my trouble."

"Couple of hundred!" said Gage contemptuously. "You'll have to make it thousands and take it out of your five."

"Oh, I say!" the other protested.

"All right; if you don't," Gage declared resolutely, "I'll chuck the title and leave you and your friends to fight it out among yourselves. If she means Lord Quorn she shall have him, but not me, my boy. And I'm not going to stop between the sheets for any bush-ranger in Australia or out of it. So there!"

CHAPTER XIX

After Lord Quorn—supposed to be Percy Peckover—had been carried to Dr. Barton's surgery, he lay for several days in a state of now total, now semi, unconsciousness. The astute Mr. Doutfire, pluming himself on his neat capture, hovered about the unfortunate peer, drank whisky and water with the much-bored medico, and discussed over sundry cigars the chances of the patient's slipping through his fingers into the next world. The object of his solicitude did slip through them, though not quite so far as that. And it happened in this wise.

When Doutfire was not himself on guard (to the accompaniment of nicotine sedatives and alcoholic tonics) he took care to post a constable about the doctor's premises with instructions to keep a sharp look-out for any sign of activity on the part of the lethargic criminal. Then suddenly the police authorities of Bunbury and district were thrown into a state of excitement by the news of a daring burglary which had taken place at Mansetter Park, the seat of Sir James Rumbelow,

the importance of which crime was heightened by the fact that the stout baronet, roused from his post-prandial nap by the news, had unwisely attempted to pursue the thieves, who had by that time got four or five miles' start, and had cut short the chase, so far as he was concerned, by tripping over a croquet-hoop on the lawn and thereby severely injuring himself.

It was clearly a case that called for the utmost activity on the part of the representatives of the law; the Bunbury police force was on its mettle, and the fussy Mr. Doutfire became in a moment the incarnation of bustling importance. The comatose culprit at Dr. Barton's was forgotten in the gravity of Sir James Rumbelow's stolen plate and broken nose. And it so happened when the detective was reminded of him it was by a communication from headquarters announcing that Peckover's associate, Cutbush, had been arrested, and he had volunteered a statement which made it appear that there might not be much of a case against his dupe. Under the circumstances, Mr. Doutfire felt little hesitation in withdrawing the guard and drafting him into the Mansetter district, especially as the doctor assured him that he might be under no uneasiness as to the likelihood of the patient's being in a condition to get up and walk about.

Nevertheless, that is exactly what Lord Quorn did. Suddenly waking from a lethargic sleep, he stretched himself, sat up, looked round in a dazed fashion, and after a futile attempt to remember who and where he was, feeling an irresistible longing for fresh air, he got up, shuffled into his clothes, and walked unnoticed into the street.

It was market day; the noise and the bustle worried him, and in his weak state the jostling of the yokels was more than he could stand. So he turned into one of the quieter streets and thence wandered off into the country, his mind still a blank as to what had recently happened to him. Although the fresh air revived him and was grateful after the drug-laden atmosphere of the doctor's dispensary, yet it did not quite drive the fumes from his brain, and his existence and identity were, as he strolled on, as much a puzzle to him as ever.

"Have a lift?" asked a good-natured farmer, overtaking him on the dusty road, and noticing his dragging footsteps. Quorn mechanically got into the cart, in his aimless, drifting state of mind; all he knew was he had begun to feel tired and wanted to get right away from the place whence he had come.

"Going far?" inquired the farmer, as they bowled along.

"Far as you like," was the dull answer.

The farmer stared at him, and then proceeded to cross-examine him, with the result that he came to the conclusion that he had picked up an escaped lunatic. With this idea he resolved to set his passenger down at the first village they came to, which happened to be Staplewick. Finding Quorn had no money, the good fellow took out a coin and gave it him, in lieu, as it were, of taking him further, and drove off in a state of cogitation.

Naturally Quorn had been set down opposite an inn, the sight of which, combined with the touch of the silver in his hand, told him he was hungry and more especially thirsty. He went in and called for refreshment, and then took his seat in a room which had already two occupants. They were no others than Messrs. Fanning and Purvis, who, after their discomfiture at the Towers had dropped in at *The Pigeons* to discuss their all-absorbing grievance.

Until Quorn's hunger and thirst were appeased he paid little attention to his companions, but when he had pushed his plate away and lighted up the churchwarden pipe that the house afforded, he fell to listening lazily to the unrestrained emphasis of their remarks.

"Fi'pun note! Fi'pun note!" exclaimed Mr. Fanning almost tragically. "And his blooming lordship, who didn't do nothin' more in the water than a cat would 'a done, smothered with wealth, just because 'e 'appens to 'ave a 'andle to his name. Mean, I call it; low mean."

"That it is," agreed Purvis. "And 'im adding insult to injury telling us to get a noo rig-out, and keep the change for our trouble. Noo rig-out? I'll wear my old boots and breeches down to the last nail and stitch first."

"Right!" exclaimed Fanning, with an energy which ignored the æsthetic considerations which such a proceeding would involve. "Fi'pun note!" he repeated, relapsing into his now chronic state of truculent grievance. "Fi'pun note for us poor deserving 'eroes, and two hundred thousand quid for that bit of gilt gingerbread, Lord Quorn."

"What?"

In a flash of enlightenment the real Lord Quorn jumped from his seat, and stood staring at the two men with distended eyes. "By Gum! You said Lord Quorn?"

"I did," Fanning declared, half defiantly, as not quite sure whether he had not opened his mouth rather too wide and too often. "I said Lord Quorn, and I meant Lord Quorn, but my grievance ain't agin 'is lordship. I blame no man for takin' wot's offered. Wot I blame and 'ate and detest is the meanness of those 'oo call themselves gents and reward a man not accordin' to the services rendered, but accordin' to persition in life."

The trenchant pronouncement was entirely wasted on the person to whom it was addressed.

"Lord Quorn!"

He had started to his feet with a great cry of self-recognition. The word seemed to have pierced the mist of oblivion which clouded his brain, and the incidents of the last hour of his former waking existence came thronging to his memory. Lord Quorn? Why, of course, he was Lord Quorn; although exactly what had happened to him in consequence he could not make out. "Lord Quorn?" he demanded eagerly of the astonished pair of grievance-nursers. "What about him?"

"Do you know his lordship?" Fanning asked suspiciously.

"I ought to."

"Well, then," said the butcher resentfully, "you know the man who has earnt two 'undred thousand quid quicker and easier than any man ever did before. Look 'ere!" Determined to speak his mind to his lordship through his acquaintance, Fanning jumped up and tapped Quorn impressively on the chest to emphasize his story. "Wot do you think o' this, mister? Lord Quorn and a rich millionaire friend of 'is—I won't call 'im a gentleman—goes out fishin' on the lake. They fools themselves overboard into the water, and is within an ace of drownin'. This gentleman," indicating Purvis who sat stolidly blinking with conscious merit, "and me, goes to the rescue, and at the risk of our lives pulls 'em out when they were just at the last gasp. What 'appens? My nobleman persuades 'is friend that it was 'e 'oo saved 'is life, and ignores what me and this gentleman done. Again wot 'appens? Millionaire, 'oo, in my opinion ain't fit to own two and sixpence, ups and settles a couple of 'undred thousand sov'rins on his lordship, and when me and this gentleman who 'ad risked our lives and ruined our best suit of clothes 'appens to ask where we comes in—what do you think?—'ee fobs us off with a beggarly fi'pun note."

"I wouldn't have taken it," Quorn commented wonderingly, as he recovered from the extra hard slap with which the last words were driven home.

Mr. Fanning waggled his greasy head knowingly. "P'raps you wouldn't, mister. But you didn't catch me nor this gentleman playin' into 'is 'ands by refusin' it."

"That accounts for it," said Quorn, following his own train of thought rather than Mr. Fanning's biassed narrative. "That accounts for it. I've been half drowned. Funny I don't remember anything about it."

"You?" exclaimed Mr. Fanning.

"According to your story," Quorn maintained.

Mr. Fanning turned a glance on Mr. Purvis which suggested a grave doubt as to their companion's sobriety. "Oh," he replied sarcastically, "and 'oo may you be?"

"Well," answered Quorn deliberately, "I rather think I'm Lord Quorn."

Again Mr. Fanning's glance sought Mr. Purvis', and this time it indicated a diagnosis of more serious mental trouble than mere alcohol would account for.

"Oh, you think that, do you?" he returned with gentle banter. "Then," he added mischievously, "I should recommend your lordship goin' up to the Towers 'ere, and turnin' out the party 'oo is at present occupyin' your position."

"Oh?" Quorn started up as a fresh puzzle took hold of his mind. "Is that so?"

Instead of replying directly to his questioner, Mr. Fanning turned to his friend, and somewhat exasperatingly repeated the enquiry to him. "Is that so, Mr. Purvis?" Then with an exaggerated wink, he added, "Yes, no doubt about it, there's a screw loose somewheres."

Quorn stared at him for a moment, and then turned to the door. "What's the name of the place?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Your lordship's residence?" grinned Fanning. "Staplewick Towers." And as the door shut upon their late companion the two aggrieved heroes indulged in the first merriment they had found the heart for since it had been borne in upon them that their gallantry was held so cheap.

CHAPTER XX

Staplewick Towers. That was the name of the place, his own, that he had been on his way to see. He would soon get the answer to the riddle. As to his having been nearly drowned, it could

not have been he. The last thing he remembered was drinking the drugged wine at the *Quorn Arms*. Surely he had not gone through an active existence between that and his waking up in the doctor's surgery. He argued the probabilities with himself as he hastened eagerly towards the Towers which loomed grey and real enough before him. Confident now of his position he walked through the lodge gates with an air of ownership, and made his way up the drive until he saw a little way in front of him several people. The sight checked his hurry. It suddenly occurred to him that it would be a good plan and amusing to lie low and just see what was really going on before declaring himself. One thing was certain. He was not the Lord Quorn who had been rewarded with a fortune for pretending to have saved a millionaire's life. That was too good to be true; he only wished it were. Then who was the other Lord Quorn, and what devil's game could they be playing?

So he turned off the drive and slunk along behind the shrubs which fringed it, lurking in the bushes until he could see his way clear to get up to the house. He was seen, as has been shown, but the observers were too intent on their own ends to take more than casual notice of him.

Presently, however, he got his chance, and was able to make his way unseen to the library windows. He peeped through, and the first person his eyes lighted on was Percy Peckover.

In an instant some idea of the real state of affairs flashed upon him; and his hazy guess was not far from being correct. Fired with indignation and a furious desire to put an instant stop to the nefarious game that was being played, he put forth his hand to open the window. Before he could do so a figure advanced from a side of the room which was hidden from him, and with a sickening shock he recognized his former flame, Miss Lalage Leo. Behind her loomed now the unmistakable form of the great bully whom he had never actually met, but had learned to regard with the enhanced terror which the unknown inspires, and from which the present glimpse detracted nothing. Happily the frightened face was not noticed by any of the party who were setting their faces resolutely towards the dining-room. So Quorn, as he recovered from the shock of the forgotten terror, was able to move back unobserved and slip away to a quiet spot where he could review his deplorable situation.

After luncheon and Peckover's interview with Gage, he and Sharnbrook had a somewhat uncomfortable half-hour together over a cigar. Lady Agatha had proved herself equal to what had seemed the impossible task of bundling the Leos out of the house. But then Carnaby was in a state of comparative helplessness, and Lalage, although she would have liked to stay and, perhaps, smoke a cigar with the object of her matrimonial intentions, was disarmed by the superior style and the strength of Lady Agatha's grand manner. It was something quite outside her experience, and, for the time at any rate, it paralysed any tendency to opposition and insistence on her part. So she went off with her clumsy, staggering brother, and with a promise, unacceptable, but not to be ignored, to return very soon and keep a business eye upon Lord Quorn and Mr. Gage.

"Whew! That's a good riddance," Peckover exclaimed, with a great puff of relief as he lighted a big cigar and dropped into an easy chair. "I've had some uncomfortable meals in my time, but that bangs the lot."

"Nice let-in for me," said Sharnbrook ruefully. "I'm back in their clutches again, just when I was congratulating myself you had got me out."

"Well, I couldn't foresee this volcanic eruption," replied Peckover apologetically.

"No," Sharnbrook admitted. "You did your best to draw them off. They are nailers, and their staying power is wonderful. But, I say, you are never going to marry that——?" He jerked his head backwards in the direction Miss Leo was last seen taking.

"Not if I know it," Peckover answered feelingly. "I'm going to compromise——"

"What?"

"I mean compromise any claim she may have on me; pay her off."

"I see. But how on earth did you ever get nuts on her?" Sharnbrook inquired wonderingly.

"How, indeed?" thought Peckover. "Well, you see," he answered, "out there the girls aren't enough to go round. You're lucky if you see one in a month, and somehow, when you do see her you don't care to lose sight of her. Where there's only one, that one's the best. Over here Lalage suffers by comparison."

"You bet she does," assented Sharnbrook with more warmth than gallantry.

"Out there," Peckover declared, "she was unique."

"So she is here," said Sharnbrook with conviction. "Well, if you are going to square matters with her otherwise than on a matrimonial basis, you might call the fisher-girls off me again before I'm quite landed."

"All right," assented Peckover who had now quite recovered his spirits. "I'll do anything to oblige, especially when there's a little fun attached to the job."

At that moment Miss Ethel's voice was heard singing in the corridor leading to the picture gallery.

"She's coming after me," Sharnbrook exclaimed in an agitated whisper.

"Slip out," said Peckover, "and leave me to do my best for you."

Sharnbrook gave him a nod of gratitude and ran off by the opposite door, just as Miss Ethel, keen on the scent, looked in.

"Do come in, Miss Ethel," Peckover besought her, with an earnestness not to be ignored.

"I was looking for Mr. Sharnbrook," she replied coldly.

"He has just gone out that way," said Peckover indicating the other door.

"Did he see Dagmar?" Miss Ethel inquired jealously, crossing the room with determined steps.

Peckover sprang to intercept her. "Don't run away from me, Miss Ethel. I know you must be annoyed by those vulgar people who intruded here just now——"

"I should think so," said Ethel haughtily, trying to pass.

"But," urged Peckover, "you won't be troubled by them again. I'm paying their fares back to Australia; so that will settle them—out there."

Ethel suddenly appeared to be somewhat less desirous of reaching the door. "Oh?" she said slowly. "And are you going with them?"

"Not if I know it. Old England's the place for my money."

"Not going to marry the—the lady?" she asked breathlessly.

"Do I look like it?" he replied insinuatingly. "Now, don't trouble about them, or about that silly old Sharnbrook, who prefers to go off and buy his fifty-ninth fox-terrier to waiting for you. Let's sit down and have a nice cosy chat."

The invitation was, under the circumstances, hardly to be resisted, whatever short work the young lady might, under others, have made of it. As they took their seats side by side, Peckover stretched out his arm behind the lady to arrange a cushion for her—and let it stay there.

For as many seconds as probability allowed Ethel affected to be unaware of the caressing attitude. Then suddenly she seemed to wake up to the fact that her companion's arm was round her shoulders, upon which she leant forward to allow him to withdraw it.

But Peckover was not keen on taking hints when they ran counter to his amusements. "Isn't it comfortable?" he asked.

"Your arm."

"My arm's all right," he assured her cheerfully. "Do lean back. Hope I'm not in the way. Of course if you'd rather I went and sat at the other end of the gallery I'll do so. Only it will be a bit slow."

"Mr. Gage, how absurd you are."

"Yes," he agreed, "the suggestion is rather far-fetched. We may as well keep within kissing distance, mayn't we?"

"Oh, but it is not proper," Ethel protested.

"Kissing?" he asked in surprise, "I think it is proper; if you are going in for a proper time. Why not?"

"It is," she answered demurely, "between some people."

"People who know how to make the time pass?" he suggested.

"People who are—engaged," she said, with as much indifference to the immediate and personal application as she could assume.

"Well," he rejoined flippantly, "you are engaged, and I may be."

"Mr. Gage!" She turned on him indignantly. "I am not engaged."

"Not to Sharnbrook?"

"Mr. Gage, how absurd you are."

"I hope so. Are you engaged?" he asked significantly.

"Whether I am engaged or free," she answered, "it is all the same to you."

"No," he returned, "if you were a little more free it would be quite different."

"Would it?" she asked, with a provocative glance at his face.

"Wouldn't it? Like this." He closed his arm round her and tried to draw her to him.

"Oh, Mr. Gage, you don't mean it," she protested, holding back.

"Come!" he said. "One kiss."

"Oh, no. It wouldn't be right," she still objected. Then she sighed. "Poor Jack!"

"Ah, poor fellow," Peckover said, with a hardly suppressed grin. "Poor old Sharnbrook."

"He is very fond of me," she said, regretfully. "But of course if I can't care for him as much as I ought to—I don't know what the poor fellow will do."

"Give me something handsome, I hope," was Peckover's thought. "Ethel," he whispered, and this time did get something like a kiss.

"Percy, it is wrong of you," she murmured.

"I know it is," he admitted, drawing in a breath as of pain. "Poor old Sharnbrook; and he thinks I'm his friend. He'll never give you up," he added with conviction.

For an instant Miss Ethel's look suggested that that matter might be safely left in her hands to bring to a satisfactory conclusion. But it swiftly passed away, and she said, "Jack Sharnbrook is a good fellow. He will not stand in the way of my happiness."

"That he won't, I'll go bail," said Peckover to himself. "Ethel!" he murmured caressingly.

"Oh, Mr. Gage," she returned, in half-yielding protest. "Percy, darling," he suggested, drawing her to him for another kiss.

"You must wait," she objected, "till we are engaged."

"We Gages never wait," he assured her softly. "It's a tradition in the family. No. We don't hang about for the mistletoe to grow."

Nevertheless the present representative of that impatient race had to postpone his endearments, for the door opened softly and Miss Dagmar's scandalized voice cried, "Oh, Ethel!" making the fond pair start aside with electric unanimity.

"Bother it," Peckover muttered, putting on the air of self-conscious indifference usual in such contretemps.

"All right, Miss Dagmar," said Ethel through her teeth.

"Hope we haven't disturbed you," exclaimed Sharnbrook who had followed Dagmar into the room.

Peckover jumped up and went to him. "Got a cigarette?" he asked in a loud voice, adding in a whisper, "Don't look so pleased, old man; or you'll spoil everything."

Sharnbrook took the hint at once. "Don't speak to me, Mr. Gage," he cried resentfully.

"You've not lost any time," Dagmar sarcastically remarked to her sister.

"No, dear," Ethel replied with feline sweetness.

"He belongs to that appalling woman from Australia," said Dagmar confidently. "She'll hold him. Don't you wish you may get him."

"I've got him," Ethel declared.

"She's ready to break it off," whispered Peckover to Sharnbrook. "Don't be too eager. Pretend to be broken-hearted."

The other nodded. "Mr. Gage," he said, with a fine show of dignified feeling, "I find I am mistaken in you."

"That you are," Peckover muttered aside through the corner of his mouth.

"How do you do the broken-hearted?" Sharnbrook enquired in a whisper, seeing the ladies were occupied in reciprocating sarcasms.

"Don't make too much noise," Peckover instructed him, in the same tone. "Think you are feeling sick; that it's your wedding-day with Ethel. Fancy you've missed a pheasant and shot your best dog."

"But I should make a noise," the pupil objected.

"Well, mug a bit," said Peckover, with a model grimace suggestive of the wrong horse winning.

"Oh, don't speak to me!" Sharnbrook shouted, as the ladies seemed to tire of their mutual repartees.

"That's it," murmured Peckover. "Don't let her go too easily."

"I—I have something to say to you, Ethel," Sharnbrook declared with a sob in his voice.

"Oh, Jack," she exclaimed, with a pretty imitation of remorseful distress.

"Come round the garden with me, if it be for the last time," said Sharnbrook, his tones quivering with emotion.

"Too loud," whispered Peckover critically as the jilted swain passed him.

"Oh, Jack," cried Ethel, the distress in her voice counterbalanced by the look of triumph she threw at her sister, "don't look so miserable. I couldn't help it."

Sharnbrook gave vent to an explosive, window-rattling sigh as, with a wicked half-grin at his deliverer, he held open the door. The fickle Ethel, as she prepared to pass out, put her shapely hand to her treacherous lips and contrived to waft a kiss to her latest lover. And she did this without detracting in any appreciable degree from the contrite expression with which she successfully veiled her sense of triumph. Which shewed that, up to a point, she was a clever girl, or at least a credit to her maternal up-bringing.

CHAPTER XXI

It was, however, unfortunate that Miss Ethel had to leave her lover and her sister together. Peckover, baulked of a kiss in one direction, was by no means above trying for one in another; and, while Ethel was getting off with the old love, thought he might as well utilize the opportunity in getting on with the new. And Miss Dagmar, save in the matter of temper, was quite as interesting an object for his attentions as her sister. What was considerably more to the point, her manner suggested that she was even more susceptible to his fascinations than Ethel.

"Well," he observed with a leer, "while they are settling their differences we've got to amuse ourselves, eh?"

A wild desire to cut her sister out on the spot took possession of Miss Dagmar. Lord Quorn was for the time out of the question, and even if he were available, she was certain that she would give herself a far better time by marrying the richer man.

"How shall we do that, Mr. Gage?" she asked, with an archly provocative glance at him.

"Well," responded Peckover, by no means at a loss, "suppose we try how much we can get to like one another in ten minutes."

"I'm afraid——" she began, when suddenly she became aware that his arm was round her waist.

"Don't be afraid, Dagmar," he entreated.

"I am," she returned, releasing herself. "I'm afraid you are a deceiver."

"Oh, no," he protested, far from displeased, however, at the accusation.

"You have just been making love to Ethel."

"Nothing to speak of," he assured her lightly. "You see," he added, more amorously, "I did not know you cared for me."

"Oh, Mr. Gage!"

"I didn't," he maintained, wilfully misunderstanding her protest. "I dare say I ought to have, but I didn't."

"And now"—she laughed meaningly—"you think you have discovered my secret?"

The last word nearly brought a whistle to Peckover's lips, but he suppressed it in time. "Yes," he urged, "if I am right, if I have discovered it——" he paused to get a look at her face, and something more.

"Yes?" she murmured.

"Let's make the most of it," he suggested. "Give me a kiss."

"Oh, no, it wouldn't be proper," she objected, holding back.

"Quite proper," he assured her. "There's nobody looking."

"I don't quite see," said Dagmar thoughtfully, "how the fact that nobody is looking makes it proper."

"Well," argued Peckover, "if nobody is looking I don't see how it matters whether it is proper or not."

"But it does," she maintained, holding off.

"So long as it's agreeable to both parties," he urged; "we've no one to please but ourselves. Of course," he added airily, "if you've any rooted objection to kissing——"

"It is," said Dagmar hastily, "a question of what is right and what is wrong."

Peckover began to think this was dry work. "You think kissing wrong, then?" he suggested.

"Unjustifiable kissing," Dagmar declared.

"Unjustifiable?" Peckover repeated, with the suspicion of a yawn. "Seems to me if both parties don't object the act is justified."

Dagmar glanced reflectively at the clock and calculated how many minutes more remained to bring him to the point. "Not necessarily," she rejoined with provocative archness. "There are certain people who may kiss each other, and the rest may not."

"That's no reason why they shouldn't try," argued Peckover, warming again under the influence of the fetching glance. "That's just where the fun comes in. You ought to kiss your mother and your grandmother or your sister, or your aunt, or your——"

"Or your fiancée," Dagmar supplied quietly yet promptly.

"Naturally," he agreed, "but that doesn't count."

"Doesn't it?" Dagmar enquired in a tone of surprise.

"You see, it's expected of you," he explained. "There's—much more of a catch, the poets tell us, in the unexpected."

Dagmar was beginning to grow desperate. Ethel's next (and nearly due) innings might hold the unexpected for her. "There are some things," she observed demurely, "which are made much more delightful by being looked forward to."

"That's right enough," he assented, catching an inviting gleam from her eyes. "But it's poor fun looking forward to a thing you aren't going to get. You know what I'm looking forward to?" He pointed the question with a leer.

"Oh, Mr. Gage," she protested artlessly, "how can I know?"

"By my teaching you," he answered promptly putting forth an endearing arm, which, however the lady deftly avoided.

"No, no," she declared, as bewitchingly as her limitations allowed. "It is not right, as we are."

It was a pretty broad hint, but the sands of opportunity were running low, and Miss Dagmar meant business.

"As we are?" the philanderer echoed, with a short laugh of discomfiture. "No, it's certainly not right or even possible when we are so far apart."

Dagmar fancied she caught the hateful sound of her sister's voice. "That's what I mean," she said, covering her desperation that a touch of demureness. "We might be close enough to——"

"Right!" Peckover exclaimed eagerly, making a spring towards her.

On this occasion she did not seek to elude his grasp, possibly considering that the time for that was past. She contented herself with keeping her inviting cheek at a tantalizingly safe distance from Peckover's lips till he wearied of the struggle.

For that spoilt child of Fortune was not used to opposition about trifles on the part of the fair sex. "This is dry work. What are you afraid of?" he protested impatiently.

"You really mustn't. We are not engaged," was the artificially agitated reply.

"That doesn't matter," he insisted. "Who'll be any the wiser?"

Matrimony, not wisdom, was Miss Dagmar's concern just then. "I couldn't let you," she declared, with a cunning suggestion of duty overriding inclination. "I couldn't—unless——"

To her disgust, she found herself suddenly released. "Oh, all right," said Peckover, settling his necktie. "You shan't, if you don't want to. There are other girls about who ain't so particular. Ethel's not coy." And he made for the door.

In an instant she was after him. "Ethel?" she cried, clutching his arm in desperation, as she saw the lady in question coming across the lawn. "You forget Ethel is engaged." Which speech was, to say the least of it, rather disloyal.

"What of it?" Peckover demanded off-handedly. "All the better. You allow engaged persons may kiss."

"Yes, each other. Ethel is engaged to Mr. Sharnbrook."

"Oh, Sharnbrook won't mind," he returned, with more truth than politeness.

Dagmar's clutch increased in force. "Mr. Gage," she exclaimed, in almost horrified protest, "you are never going to be so thoughtless as to wreck two people's happiness?"

"I wasn't aware of it," he replied, somewhat sarcastically.

"Oh, but you are," she urged vehemently. "Jack Sharnbrook is wrapped up in Ethel."

"Finds the wrap a bit too warm to be pleasant," Peckover observed.

"Sooner than see John Sharnbrook's happiness wrecked," the suddenly emotional and altruistic Miss Dagmar proceeded, "I would make any sacrifice. Mr. Gage," the moment was critical, and her grasp now intense, "you shan't make love to her. Promise me you won't, and—and you shall have a kiss, even before we are engaged."

Footsteps sounded on the gravel just outside the window.

"All right," Peckover responded cheerfully. "I promise to let her alone if she lets me alone. I'm not the man to stand in Sharnbrook's light."

His arm was round her and his lips three inches from hers, when a vigorous exclamation of disgust from the window made it expedient that even they should pretend to be engaged in quite another of the varied but limited number of occupations which necessitate the heads of two persons being close together. Nevertheless Dagmar found time, before the window opened to admit Gage, who had come down for an hour, and Ethel, to say hurriedly but with none the less fell intent, "Remember your promise. You will be true to me, now?"

Miss Ethel, rendered thoughtfully emulative by the evidences of her sister's progress, contented herself with tossing her head peremptorily and disdainfully at her treacherous sister. Further activity on the part of the young ladies was, however, postponed by the announcement of tea. Gage lingered behind to say a word to his friend.

"Beats me," he observed sourly, "what's the matter with this peerage. Always thought a lord had it all his own way. Instead of that, the girls talk about the weather and the flower-beds to me, and they drop into your arms one after the other."

"They're a bit calculating all the same," Peckover remarked with a sense of failure. "I don't know that we might not just as well have been talking about the weather."

But John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook came in whistling and radiant.

CHAPTER XXII

It was to appear that Mr. Carnaby Leo and his sister were not to be put off so easily as the

confederates imagined. Encouraged by what they considered the other side's weakness, and led on by their ignorance of European ways, they—or rather the lady—grew determined to make out of their trip a much bigger coup than at first seemed likely to be forthcoming from what was really nothing but a huge piece of bluff. It is true that Lady Agatha, with her unassailable manner, was a serious obstacle in the path which this enterprising couple proposed to take, but she, after all, Lalage argued, was but an outside and detached factor in the affair, an outlying rampart, as it were, in the defence.

Nevertheless the influence of her repellent personality was so great that neither of the Leos cared to come face to face with her again if that situation could by any possibility be avoided, and in their councils of war (in which Lalage tried to teach her thick-witted brother how to back up her brain by his muscle) the temporary mistress of Staplewick was never regarded as a negligible quantity.

So it happened that when, in the evening, the Leos resolved to pay another visit of coercion to the Towers, they took care to enter unannounced, and to keep out of Lady Agatha's way. Confident in the reasonable cause of their presence, they made their way quietly from the hall along a corridor leading to the picture gallery which seemed to offer an inviting lurking-place. As luck would have it, the gallery, as being somewhat isolated, had been appointed the trysting-place of Peckover and Miss Ethel. And it was there that the arch-deceiver with a cynically expectant smile on his face was awaiting his lady-love.

The long room had struck chill as he entered it, and he had lighted a cigarette, if not with the idea of warmth, at least to keep his nerves in order. "Quiet," he remarked aloud to himself as he glanced with a little shiver along the line of effigied Quorns before whose canvases at intervals were arranged, like sentinels, stands of armour. "Not to say Madame Tussaudy. Rum things ancestors. What a lot some folks seem to think about 'em. Can't say I ever troubled about mine. That reminds me, I must get up a family history of these Quorn Johnnies, and impart it to poor old Gage. It need not," he gave a little knavish laugh, "be all strictly correct according to 'Ume and Smollett. Well, Percy, my boy," he kept talking to himself as though to keep the silence at bay, "you've dropped into a nice thing. It's a fine life to be a rich toff, or the imitation of one—which is quite sufficient for the general public. Ethel is a smart little thing; she has come on wonderfully since those Australian nuisances gave her a fright. Poor old Gage! Strikes me I'm having the fun he's paying for. Ah, here she comes."

Footsteps were heard by the door. He flung away his cigarette, and went forward as quickly as the semi-darkness would allow him. "Ethel!" he whispered.

The figure whom he addressed emerged into the stream of moonlight, and he saw, to his dismay, Lalage Leo.

"It's me, dear," was her greeting, pleasant, yet with a suggestion of business behind it. "Lalage."

"Eh, yes," he stammered, trying to mask his annoyance with a laugh. "Funny place to meet, isn't it?"

"You and Miss Ethel evidently don't think so," was the obvious retort. "So you were expecting her?"

"I thought the step was hers," he replied disingenuously.

"Poor girl! She must have a heavy tread if it is anything like Carnaby's," Lalage returned pleasantly.

On the hint Peckover looked beyond her and saw the looming figure of her brother with an irritating grin on his just discernible face. "Carnaby has got a heavy foot," his sister pursued significantly, "and he is going to put it down and keep it there. Eh, Carnaby?"

The objectionable figure lurched forward. "Point out the spot you want it planted, Lal," he said truculently, "and down it goes."

Peckover found himself wishing that the abominable extremity had been planted in the Antipodes and had taken root or, for preference, withered away there. "Where?" he asked wearily.

"Where," Miss Leo echoed. "Why, on your carrying on with these Hemyock girls. Carnaby, dear," she made the appeal with a vicious look, not at her brother but at his intended victim, "you won't see me fooled?"

"But I tell you——" Peckover began, when she snapped him up.

"If you are good enough for other people, you are good enough for me. So no nonsense."

"Nonsense?" Carnaby roared. "I'll——"

Lalage thoughtfully turned to shut the door. "That's it," she whispered. "Frighten him a bit."

For it seemed to her that the effect of the snapped fire-irons was wearing off. "Tell Mr. Gage," she said aloud, holding Carnaby in the moonlight with a glittering eye, "what happened to those three mounted police who went after you."

Owing either to the suddenness of the demand or the spell of his sister's masterful glare, the small mind which dominated the mass of muscle seemed paralysed. "Ah, yes," he responded stupidly. "Didn't they!"

Miss Leo for the moment seemed to justify her name; she looked like a lioness ready to spring, but withheld by considerations of expediency. "Go on," she whispered through her clenched teeth. "Carnaby!" she said more mildly and aloud. "The three who looked after you in the Bush."

But either the hero's recollection was hazy or invention was not his strong point. "Eh?" he said confusedly. "Yes. They—they followed me into the Bush."

"Yes? Well?" enquired Peckover, curiously.

"And two of them are there now," continued Lalage with a world of uncomfortable meaning.

"I wish you two were," thought Peckover. "Tell us all about it," he said resignedly.

"Go on, Carnaby," his sister commanded.

Whether or not the man of thews and sinews had been keeping up his constitution injudiciously at the *Three Pigeons*, certain it was that his brain did not seem in glib working order. "Ah, yes," he said slowly, quailing under Lalage's eye, "three mounted constabulary——" after which thrilling statement he paused.

"Came after you in the Bush," the flippant Peckover ventured to supply. "Yes, we've heard that." For the little man saw no chance of ending the interview till the narrative was concluded.

Mr. Leo, failing to stimulate his imagination to the required point, fell back upon a more ready and less intellectual form of address. "I'll eat you in a minute, boots and all," he informed his impatient listener with an undue amount of emphasis. Then, as though the outburst had spurred his invention, he went on, "Three—three mounted police at me at once. Three to one——"

"Cowards," commented Peckover warmly.

"I was alone," shouted the son of Mars, now plunging recklessly into the recital; "no bush-armour; nothing but my fighting-jacket. They—they——" he stammered and stopped as the trickling stream of imagination ran dry. He, however, sought to make up for verbal shortcomings by fixing Peckover with a stare of the most appalling ferocity. Lalage saved the situation by prompting from the darkness behind him into which she had slipped. "They came on at the charge," he roared, never relaxing his truculent glare at his listener; "one in front, one on each flank——"

"That's right," whispered Lalage. "Keep it up."

"And one——" roared the encouraged swashbuckler.

"Thought you said there were only three," objected the irrepressible Peckover.

"I'll wring any man's neck who interrupts me and puts me off my stroke," was the savage response, and as the application of the remark could bear but one interpretation, its object decided that it would be better to curb his critical faculties before they brought on an interference with his personal appearance and comfort.

"On they came like a hurricane," roared Carnaby, as the promptings reached him, "one here in face: one on the right flank, one on—on——"

He stopped with some hazy notion that he had made a mistake. In his graphic action illustrating the narrative he had landed himself beyond ear-shot of his prompter.

"On the left," Peckover supplied sympathetically. "What's the matter?" For the reciter seemed confused.

"He has had so many fights that he forgets them," explained Lalage, emerging from the darkness to the rescue. "More than the other fellows do, though. Go on, you great fool!" she politely adjured the free-lance under her breath.

Thus incited, Carnaby put on a grimace which would have been nicely calculated to send an old lady into a fit or an infant into convulsions, albeit there lay beneath it an abject fear of his sister's displeasure. "I'll show you!" he bellowed, while Peckover, with an uneasy calculation of the means of exit, wondered whether the object lesson would involve his posing as the inadequate representative of the unfortunate mounted police. "First chap," the mighty one proceeded, with, it must be confessed, a certain tendency to reiteration, "first chap comes on full gallop in front." Peckover nodded his absorbed interest. "I pull off my boot and dash it in his

face." For an instant Peckover looked dubious; then realizing his ignorance of fighting under antipodean conditions, he accepted the statement for what it was worth.

"Down he goes," the story continued, "tobogganning over the horse's tail." Peckover, having without prejudice admitted the premises, could not resist accepting the conclusion as highly probable.

Suddenly the warrior's hand shot out and grasped him by the shoulder. "You," he shouted, becoming intoxicated with excitement as the tale of his prowess grew, "are the second man. As you pass, I slip under your arm and catch you a smack on the point of the jaw which puts you to sleep."

Instantly Peckover covered with both hands the part of his anatomy referred to, and was understood to intimate that his own powers of imagination were quite equal to the task of realizing the particular form of assault which it was unnecessarily proposed to illustrate.

Postponing for the moment the exemplification of the knock-out blow, Mr. Leo proceeded in spluttering ferocity with his narrative. "In a moment I have got hold of the first man's cutlass——" here he caught up in his excitement a sword which unfortunately hung near, and flourished it in a fashion not hitherto adopted by any recognized school of arms. "I turn, and cry——" he bellowed, when, as luck had it, his energy led him to catch the weapon, in his terrific swing, against a suit of armour which was brought toppling over upon him and thence to the floor with a crash which sounded through the gallery with startling din.

The effect on the man of doughty deeds was, however, even more than startling. He fell forward under the shock of the cold metal, and with the helmet, thus jerked loose, striking him a smart blow on the head, his roaring was changed in a moment from truculence to terror. "Oh! Oh!" he cried, as he sprawled over a chair, "don't hurt me. I am only pretending!"

But his quicker-witted sister was already at hand to cover his confusion. "Carnaby will have his joke," she exclaimed laughing loudly. "You see?" she demanded suddenly of Peckover, effectually dispelling the amusement which was gathering on his face, "he is a man of action," she continued with grim significance. "Cares for nobody, except his sister. And he won't see her made a fool of." Then, having beaten Peckover into retreating from too close an inspection of her brother's real state of mind, she turned, caught the sprawling fighter by the collar, and pushed him to his feet. "Great goose!" she hissed at him. "I could strangle you!"

The striking of a clock told Peckover that the time appointed for his assignation had arrived. "We'll hear that bloodthirsty anecdote to-morrow," he said, half trembling at his own temerity. "It's too good to be wasted on an audience of one."

"All right, my little wallaby-rat," responded Carnaby in a tone unpleasantly threatening, and with a valiant attempt to cover his discomfiture.

"Don't wait," Peckover's apprehension of a coming complication forced him to say. "Not much fun in this dark, chilly place. I'll stop and pick the tin plates up."

But as he made for the scattered armour, Lalage seized him. "No, you don't," she said, with determination that filled her victim with despair. "You come with us. I don't trust you out of my sight."

"Going to meet a girl here?" cried Carnaby, with a quite surprising flash of intuition. "I'd like to see him."

"We will," said Lalage, with quiet insistence; "we will see him. Here!" She took up a breastplate and helmet. "Get inside this armour, Carnaby dear, and we'll just keep an eye on him."

Piece by piece she picked it up and buckled it on him, Carnaby during the somewhat irksome operation relieving his feelings by addressing various minatory remarks to the now discomfited Peckover. "You stir a foot, and I'll twist it off, my pigeon. You just mention we're here, and I'll pull your tongue out, my little magpie. So you'll play fast and loose—chrrr Lal, you're pinching me—fast and loose with my beautiful sister, will you? You just try it on, my chicken, and it will be the last article you ever do try on. I'll flatten you out, and then swab the floor with you."

With a running fire of such cheering announcements did Mr. Leo relieve the tedium of his process of adornment. At length the pieces of armour were fixed to him. There were absurd gaps in the covering; nevertheless, in the semi-darkness there was no manifest difference between him and the empty suits of mail.

"Now," directed Lalage, as she arranged him on a stand, "you stay there as still at you can. And you"—she turned to Peckover—"stir from the room if you dare. You just tell the young minx you won't have anything to do with her, and, if she poaches on other people's preserves there won't be much sport for her by this day week."

"Yes!" A husky voice filtered through the vizor of Carnaby's helmet, as he flourished the sword in his hand. "If you try fooling I'll cut your——"

"Hush!" Lalage commanded, as she drew back into the obscurity of a recess. "Some one coming."

"Nice evening this evening," muttered Peckover ruefully as the door softly opened.

CHAPTER XXIII

"Mr. Gage—Percy—are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here," was the lugubrious response.

"Have you been waiting long?" Ethel asked, coming close to him.

"Hours," he declared feelingly, then quickly corrected the statement. "No, I mean, not long." Back in the darkness he fancied he could see the truculent eyes glaring through the bars of the helmet.

"I couldn't get away," Ethel said invitingly. "Had to dodge Dagmar."

"Ho! she wanted to come too, did she?" Peckover remarked in desperation. "The more the merrier."

Ethel drew back with rather a sour look on her expectant face. "Mr. Gage, what do you mean?" Then with characteristic tenacity, she sidled up to him again. "Percy, how cold you are," she observed reproachfully.

"Cold?" he returned miserably. "Yes, it is a bit chilly. Enough to give any fellow the shivers. Chamber of Horrors is a fool to it. I mean," he quickly added, as an ominous movement of Carnaby's sword caught his eye, "the armour strikes cold."

"Of course," said Ethel huffily, "if you would prefer Dagmar, I'll go and send her to you."

"Oh, no; please don't trouble. You'll do," he replied, with an indifference born of desperation.

The lady resolved to try another tack. "Oh, Mr. Gage," she said, with a tremor in her voice; "how unkind you are!"

Her face was so close to him that the trial was almost more than he could stand. "No, no, not unkind," he denied, looking wildly round for a way of escape.

"So changed," she insisted.

"No, not changed," he replied equivocally.

"So distant."

"Wish I was—a hundred miles distant," he groaned to himself. "Can't help it," he declared, goaded by the consciousness of those four eyes magnetizing him from the darkness. "Perhaps I've been too familiar." "Oh, no," she protested, growing desperate in turn, as the prize of a millionaire husband seemed slipping from her. "If I don't mind it Percy, dear——"

She put out her arms, but he fell back. "Don't," he exclaimed, the hateful words almost choking him. "It isn't proper, you know."

"I'm afraid," she urged forlornly. "I have been too absurdly proper."

"Oh, no—yes, I mean, no, no." In his state of mind Peckover found it impossible to differentiate between what he longed and what he was forced to say.

"You said to-day it was dry work," Ethel observed caressingly. "You may have a sip if you like."

The invitation, reminding him, with a difference, of his Crystal Palace and Welsh Harp days, was well nigh too much for the well-versed philander of the suburbs. "Oh, don't, don't!" he almost shrieked. "Please go away. You will drive me mad. This is awful," he groaned.

"Of course, if you'd rather not——" Ethel suggested with a toss of the head.

"It's never rather not with me," he protested under his breath. "Only——"

Accepting his lowered tone as one of endearment and invitation, Ethel, wondering at his unusual diffidence, drew closer to him. Mechanically and most unwillingly, he drew back. "Well, you need not run away," she pouted.

From what he could, in the semi-darkness, see of her eyes he fancied he detected there an intention to spring at him, or at any rate to fall into his arms. In tantalizing terror he hastily retreated still further, and in doing so stumbled against the stand of armour which just then contained the redoubtable Carnaby, receiving for his clumsiness a sound cuff from the mailed fist of that truculent spirit. Luckily, as the episode took place in the shadow, it was not noticed by the lady who had stopped her pursuit of matrimony and mammon in a not unjustifiable huff.

"I know," she declared resentfully. "It's all that horrid Colonial girl. How you can like her beats me."

"Oh, she's not bad," was Peckover's reluctant explanation.

"I think," returned Ethel with decision, "she is simply awful. If that is Colonial taste, I am sorry for you. You could never think of marrying her!"

"I'm afraid so," he blurted out in his woe and confusion. His guilty eyes perceived a disquieting movement on the part of the man in armour, and in turning, ready to flee from the probable onslaught, he saw in the gloom Lalage's eyes scintillating vengeance. "I—I mean I hope so," he corrected, almost in a shriek.

Induced by this strange and contradictory behaviour, Ethel suddenly made a dart and flung her designing arms round him. "Oh, Percy," she cried with an adequate imitation of a sob, "you are not going to throw me over for that creature?"

"I must," he replied, releasing himself firmly and with what dignity was possible under the circumstances, "obey the dictates of honour."

Miss Ethel drew back, looking very sold and desperate in the moonlight. "What a charming brother-in-law you will have!" she exclaimed, panting with scorn and her late exertion. "Great lout! Only fit to guzzle and smash furniture."

"And," Peckover added miserably to himself, "people who don't agree with him."

His silence gave rise to a wild hope in the besieging breast that the defence was wavering. In a trice, with an improvement upon her former tentative onslaught, she had thrown herself with greater deadliness of aim and more convulsive tenacity into his willing, yet unwilling, arms again.

"Oh, Percy," she howled in a judiciously modulated pitch, "I can't bear your coldness! I can't let you go!"

Peckover's situation with those four glaring eyes and those two matrimonially determined grips upon him was truly deplorable. "I'm a dead man," he gasped, as he saw, over Ethel's reckless shoulder, the awful mail-clad figure raise the sword with grim significance. "I say; stop!" he cried, struggling ungallantly to free himself. "Keep away! I can't marry you!"

"Mr. Gage! Do you mean it?" It was most undignified from both parties' point of view, but the fact must be chronicled that she shook—actually shook him. "Oh, I won't be swindled like this!" she cried, in the height of exasperation.

Finding that with the obvious intention of being as good as her word, she, instead of releasing him with scorn, was hugging him tighter in desperation, he was fain to cry, in a hoarse whisper, "Hush! Keep off! We are not alone. Somebody in the room."

Ethel started back and looked round with a half-indignant, half-distrustful eye and saw—Dagmar. That young lady having had her suspicions aroused by the prolonged absence of her sister and their eligible guest, who, by the way, was supposed to be cheering the sick bed of his friend, Lord Quorn, had started off on a search expedition, and had just then crept pryingly into the picture-gallery.

"Ethel?" she cried with a pounce. "All alone with Mr. Gage here, of all places, and in the dark! This is disgraceful."

"Mr. Gage," Ethel declared calmly, "is going to marry me."

She was quite ready for her sister to join issue on that statement, but to her surprise the contradiction came from another quarter.

"Mr. Gage is not going to do anything of the sort." It was Lalage Leo who, emerging from the obscurity which had shrouded her, uttered the flat denial.

"There!" said Peckover in uncomfortable justification of his backwardness, "you see we were not alone."

"No!" cried a loud voice as Carnaby clanked forward. "Not much."

"Oh, Mr. Gage, how dishonourable," Ethel exclaimed trying to look scandalized while she resolved how best she could turn the situation to account. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I did tell you not to hug me," Peckover replied bluntly.

"If," suggested Carnaby with a leer, having, after a struggle to a running accompaniment of murmured strong language, got his helmet off, "if you want anybody to hug——"

"Oh!" Ethel cried in manifest disgust, as though her demonstrativeness was regulated by any less material consideration than its object's bank balance.

"I'll take the armour off," Carnaby assured her, his tone suggesting that that might make all the difference.

"I will not be treated like this," Ethel exclaimed indignantly, aware of the necessity for having her position in the complication settled then and there. "Mr. Gage is engaged to me." She seized Peckover's arm and hung on to it grimly.

"No, to me," Dagmar objected as with a desperation born of an insecure tenure she clutched his other arm.

Lalage, with mischief in her dark eyes, swooped down upon the trio. The unhappy Peckover's arms being fast held, the only way that occurred to him of avoiding the coming assault was to endeavour to sit down on the floor, in which he succeeded, after a short and spirited attempt on the part of his captors to defeat the manoeuvre.

"I have a prior and a stronger claim on Mr. Gage," said Lalage with calm determination; "and I mean to enforce it, eh, Carnaby?"

"Just let me get out of this rotten armour," growled her brother, thus appealed to. "I'll——"

"But it's not my fault," urged Peckover plaintively, from his undignified position on the floor.

His weakness was not, however, shared by the ladies who, having him fast in their grips, knelt, under the exigences of the situation, beside him.

"He is engaged to me," Ethel maintained stoutly.

"You are engaged to Sharnbrook," objected Dagmar.

"I am not," she denied loudly and with decision.

"All right! That's settled," exclaimed a blithe voice from the gloom, from which next moment the said John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook emerged.

CHAPTER XXIV

The real and resuscitated Lord Quorn had all this while been having a deplorable time of it. Driven from the *Three Pigeons* in consequence of that hostelry being the abode of the terrible Leos, denied access to his own home through the same fear, he had betaken himself to a neighbouring village, and there spent his days, only venturing towards Staplewick after nightfall, when he would prowl about the Towers like an uneasy, discontented ghost. But now the small sum he had been able to raise on the little jewellery he wore was all but spent, and he was becoming desperate. Every day he expected to find that his trackers from the Antipodes had departed in disgust; every night he was disappointed. Surely, thought he, with the false Lord Quorn to all intents established, what have these nuisances to wait for? Surely even the self-and-brother-reliant Lalage can scarcely be stupid enough to suppose that she had a chance of catching the substituted lord of Staplewick. If he has the cleverness and enterprise to fill that position backed by his friend's money he will hardly be such a rank idiot as to allow himself to be snapped up by those Australian sharks.

Meanwhile the position for the real owner was drawing to a point when something would have to be done. Necessary as it was for him to lie low, it was yet more necessary for him to live, and his resources were now about exhausted.

And the other Lord Quorn, he who had, so to speak, bought a title without a title, was, except so far as nourishment went, in an almost equally uncomfortable position. He had vowed that he would get up (his chill having left him) and he had done so, much to Peckover's annoyance and apprehension. That astute person, rendered yet more wily by the chance of losing a handsome income, and furthermore of being kicked out of the fairly safe asylum he had found in the Towers, had set himself, with all the desperate disingenuousness he could summon to his aid, to work upon the fears and personal considerations of the convalescent. The consequence was that Gage, obstinate as he was, so far succumbed to the lurid picture, drawn by his friend, of the certain consequences of showing himself, that he had to submit with a very ill grace to confining his

perambulations to the more secluded parts of the house and garden.

He would not have minded this so much had his circumscribed existence been mitigated by the charm of constant—or even inconstant—female society. But the fact was that so long as the rich Mr. Gage, represented by the strategic Peckover, was more or less free, Lord Quorn, even with a fair income, the result of his performance in the lake, was, to these ladies at least, less to be desired than the man of wealth. The Misses Hemyock were too familiar with an aristocratic position for it to have any charms for them. They were also well versed in the tricks of keeping up appearances on limited means, which meant going in for the parade and going without the desirables of life; in consequence of which their discontented hearts were both rigidly set upon solid fortune rather than upon empty grandeur; money was what they hankered after; they were tired of mere social standing. So Mr. Gage's yearning was still ungratified, and so he told himself, and his friend, Peckover, in no measured terms as he rampaged about the more secluded quarters of the demesne.

Meanwhile the time for the Hemyocks to give up their tenancy of Staplewick had arrived, and that designing family had left the Towers. Not to go far, though. Lady Agatha with an eye to bringing the business in hand to a happy conclusion, had persuaded some acquaintances, two elderly sisters, to turn out of the Moat, a house within half a mile of the Towers, and seek the invigorating air of a seaside resort for a month or two. From this point of vantage she continued to keep an opportunist's eye on the eligible bachelors, whose position of comparative freedom was now from the lady's point of view that of a bird who is let out of its cage and allowed to hop and flutter to the extent permitted by the string attached to its legs. But the Moat and the *Three Pigeons*, where the enterprising Leos still lingered in an attitude of doubtfully restrained aggressiveness, were both marked with a red cross in the minds of Peckover and Gage, to be given a wide berth in their rambles.

Now a curious chance was to bring about a still more complicated state of affairs than already existed. Gage was out riding one afternoon, exploring the roads and bridle-paths of the neighbourhood alone, for, since his adventure with Harlequin, Peckover had decided that life on five thousand a year was too precious to risk on horseback. He was jogging along a woodland road, turning over in his mind plans for the extraction of more fun than he was just then getting out of his purchased dignity, when suddenly a turn in the way gave him a glimpse of the well-known figures of the ladies from the Moat who did not exactly fit in with the distractions he was seeking. Luckily their backs were towards him, while the grassy road deadened the sound of his horse's hoofs. Quickly he reined up and turned aside into the wood with the intention of striking a bridle-path, a few hundred yards ahead, which would bring him to the park and safety. As he gained the covert he heard or thought he heard, the would-be charmers giving tongue in pursuit. Accordingly he shook up his horse into a smart trot, hoping to get clear away without apparent rudeness.

Now it is manifestly difficult to ride fast and far through a pathless wood unscathed. In his anxiety to press forward Gage had one or two narrow escapes from being rubbed off by interposing trees. As he was being carried away at a smart pace he suddenly had occasion to duck over the saddle-bow to avoid a low branch. While in this attitude, leaning sideways, his horse tripped over an exposed root, plunged forward and recovered himself, but not before the impetus had shot his rider out of the saddle. In trying to save himself Gage somehow contrived to twist and wedge his foot in the stirrup as he fell. So he was dragged along, just able to keep his head from contact with the ground by the purchase he got from the bridle which he still clutched. He tried in vain to stop the horse, preferring naturally the society of the Misses Hemyock to the excitement of that bumping progress; but the animal was not amenable to snaffle or reason, and the severely inconvenient mode of getting over the ground continued.

Then suddenly, in his undignified, not to say dangerous, position, Gage heard a man's voice cry, "Whoa, boy!" the horse swerved inconveniently for his hanger-on, who became aware as the painful method of equitation came to a stop, that a man was at his head. Without unnecessary loss of time Gage allowed himself to be extricated from his unbecoming attitude and set on his feet.

"Awkward position to adopt," remarked his rescuer dryly. "Lucky thing I happened to be on hand."

"I'm awfully obliged to you," Gage said, gratefully, feeling that his good time had hung in the balance during those exciting moments. "Shouldn't wonder if you've saved my life."

He surveyed his preserver inquiringly to gather what manner of man he was. A shabby, hungry-looking fellow, who ought to have been more respectable than his clothes proclaimed.

"I think it's quite likely," was the cool response.

"Horse stumbled when I was off my balance ducking away from a bough," Gage thought proper to explain by way of excusing his late pose.

"Ah! Just so. Not an easy position to recover from when once you're well shaken into it," the man commented indifferently; "with the horse a bit fresh, and the ground not exactly a billiard table. Lucky I noticed you, if you happen to be in no particular hurry to hand in your checks."

"I really am more than grateful to you," Gage protested warmly, realizing the narrow squeak he had had of losing a big investment. "I hope I may be able to prove my gratitude. Do you belong to these parts?"

"No. Not exactly," the man answered gloomily. "Came down here to get a place only to find it snapped up by somebody else."

"Ah, the way of the world, I'm afraid," Gage commented sympathetically. "Well, perhaps I can find you something to do on my place here. I'm Lord Quorn."

"Oh, are you?" returned the man in a tone which left Gage a little doubtful as to his manners.

"I've taken over an old place that wants a deal of looking after to get it ship-shape," he continued. "Any experience in land and farming?"

"Plenty," was the prompt answer.

"Then you ought to do for me," Gage said. "Anyhow I should like to put something acceptable in your way. You've done me a service I shan't easily forget, and I hope you won't do anything to make me want to regret it. Now, will it suit your book to take a position on the Staplewick estate?"

"Just what I was after," replied the stranger in a curiously mechanical tone. He seemed strangely preoccupied, even apathetic, but Gage was not going just then to criticize too closely the man who had saved his life.

"Come along, then," he said.

The man seemed to rouse himself from a reverie, then laughed oddly. "Yes, I'll come," he agreed more briskly. "You shan't find fault with the way I look after my place."

"We'll talk it over as we go," said Gage, throwing the bridle over his arm and moving on.

"Full of fun and pretty surprises, the peerage," Gage observed to his friend later in the afternoon. "Makes one wonder what the next start is going to be."

"What's wrong now?" Peckover inquired with a laugh.

"Had a nasty spill, and nearly got sent to bye-bye just as the fun is beginning."

"Come off?"

Gage answered by an aggrieved nod, as though he held his friend responsible for the mishap. "Got my foot caught in the iron and was dragged ever so far."

"Awkward," Peckover commented. "Still you can't put that down to the peerage. Noblemen's feet don't swell, although their heads may."

"I don't," returned Gage snappishly. "Only the Quorn title doesn't seem exactly a mascot."

This was a proposition which the vendor of that equivocal dignity did not feel himself in a position to traverse. "How did you get out of it?" he asked sympathetically.

"The iron? I shouldn't have been taken out alive, with the brute bumping me over the ground fit to drive my spine out at the top of my skull," Gage replied in a victimized tone, "if it hadn't been for a chap that came along in the nick of time and held him up."

"Lucky," remarked Peckover. "Going to settle a few hundred thou. on him?" he inquired playfully.

"Not exactly. But I'm going to give him a billet on the estate. Poor devil, out-at-elbows; superior sort for all that. Knows all about farming, he tells me. He'd better have that glib old thief Treacher's place at the farm. Turn him in there, and let him make the best job he can of it. He has given me an idea of how he'd work the land, which seems pretty sensible, and at the worst he can't rob me more than Treacher has been doing."

"Good idea," Peckover agreed, not wildly interested in the arrangement.

"Yes," said Gage. "After all, the fellow saved my life. I owe him a chance of showing he can be honest as well as useful. Now, as I'm considerably bumped about and only fit for a hot bath, I'd be glad if you'd just trot the fellow down to the farm, give Treacher his notice, and show his successor how the land lies. We can put him up somewhere till Treacher clears out."

"All right," Peckover responded with a yawn. "Anything to oblige. Where is the party?"

"He's in the gun-room. I told Bisgood to get him something to eat. Poor fellow seemed half starved. His name's Jenkins. Treat him kindly. He has done us both a service," he added

significantly.

"All serene," Peckover assured him with another yawn. "I'll handle him tenderly. In the gun-room, eh?"

As Peckover opened the gun-room door, Gage's preserver was standing with his back to it, scrutinizing a sporting print. "Up, Jenkins," was Peckover's facetious salutation and mode of attracting his attention. Next moment it was down Peckover, for he staggered back and subsided helplessly into a low chair as, in the stranger who turned quickly, he recognized with a gasping cry the real Lord Quorn, whom he had believed to be lying poisoned and forgotten in Great Bunbury churchyard.

CHAPTER XXV

For several seconds neither man spoke; Peckover, sprawling limply as he fell, staring with distended, apprehensive eyes at Quorn who, master of the strange situation, regarded him with a certain grim amusement.

"Hope you are having a good time, Mr.—Gage, is it?—or something else, which for the moment has slipped my memory?"

Peckover's wits were rapidly recovering from the shock of dispersal caused by the unexpected bomb which had fallen on them. "Curious we should meet again like this," he said with a sickly smile.

"Very," was the pointed response. "And a trifle awkward, I should fancy, for you."

"Oh, no," Peckover protested, pulling himself together and assuming the boldest face he could summon up. "It wasn't my fault you drank that doctored wine, which I intended for my own consumption."

"Dare say not," Quorn returned uncompromisingly. "Admitting for the sake of argument that was an unfortunate mistake, how about you and your friend annexing my place and title?"

Peckover's face showed bland surprise. "Me and my friend taking your place and title? What do you mean?"

"Oh," replied Quorn with impatient sarcasm, "we are dense this evening. It may astonish you, Mr. Alias Gage, but I rather fancy Staplewick Park and Towers belong to Lord Quorn."

"Who suggested they didn't?" asked Peckover wonderingly.

"I'd like to see the man, that's all," retorted Quorn. "And," he resumed, "I'm rather under the impression that I'm Lord Quorn."

"I dare say," was the prompt rejoinder. "But it doesn't follow you are that nobleman."

"What?" he roared.

"Don't make a noise," said Peckover, with a touch of dignity; "the servants aren't used to it."

"I say I am Lord Quorn," the other repeated with less volume but more intensity. "And you know it."

"But Lord Quorn says he's Lord Quorn," argued the wily Peckover with maddening plausibility. "That's all I know. I'm not the Heralds' College."

"You're a pair of frauds," cried Quorn.

"Naturally, if you're the rightful peer," was the bland reply. "But we don't know it, nor anybody else."

"Don't they?"

"Except yourself, I was going to say, and a lady and gentleman who have come all the way from Australia to stick to it—and you."

The hit told. Quorn's manner visibly weakened.

"What—you've had the nuisances up here—what is their infernal game?" he asked, darkly apprehensive.

"Simple enough," replied Peckover, beginning to feel the courage he had hitherto simulated. "The fair Lalage's game is to be Lady Quorn, or to know the reason why. And she has brought over dear old Carnaby as an extra note of interrogation."

"Oh! What persevering devils they are," Quorn observed uneasily. "And what do they say to your friend who calls himself Lord Quorn?"

"Say?" Peckover's native smartness was quick to turn the situation to advantage. "Why, their idea is that one Lord Quorn's as good as another and failing one the other will do nicely."

Quorn gave a long whistle. "Why, you don't mean to say that Lal Leo is going for your friend?"

"She is, though, by George," was the blunt answer. "Only, of course, she hasn't got the hold on him she would have on you. And that's where Carnaby comes in."

Quorn looked at him searchingly, but was fain to accept the statement. Besides which, it tallied with his idea of the Leonine methods. "Well, that's a queer go," he said, and then fell into a puzzled silence. Presently he burst out with a question, not unnatural under the circumstances. "Who the devil is the thief who has the cheek to call himself Lord Quorn?"

Peckover shrugged. "For aught I know to the contrary he is Lord Quorn," he replied blandly.

"Rats!" cried the dispossessed one wrathfully. "It's a put-up job between you and him."

"My good sir——"

"You know he's not Lord Quorn, and you know I am."

"I've told you already, not being in the know of the Heralds' College, I'm not in a position to say anything about it."

"Aren't you?" sneered Quorn. "I know all about it, though. When I drank that loaded stuff that sent me to sleep that was your chance, and you took it."

"Did I?"

"You did. And I don't blame you. But I've woke up now."

"Then," rejoined Peckover sarcastically, "since you are so wide-awake, perhaps you can explain why I didn't take the title myself?"

"I suppose," Quorn replied nastily, "you didn't feel you could fill the part."

"Of a British nobleman?" Peckover laughed scornfully. "Too steady and respectable, eh? My highly creditable record wouldn't have stood in my way if I'd had a chance of nobbling the coronet."

Quorn brought his fist down with a bang on the table. "D—n it, man, who is this fellow?"

"Lord Quorn," Peckover maintained.

"Lord Quorn!" The real man could not find words to express his disgust. "How did you pick him up?" he demanded, seeing the uselessness of arguing the question of identity.

"He picked me up," Peckover replied coolly.

"How? When? Where?"

"I'll tell you all about it, if you won't make such a noise," Peckover said suavely. "He came to the *Quorn Arms* just after you had made that little mistake in the refreshment, and announced himself as Lord Quorn; and who was I to say he was not Lord Quorn?"

"Funny," remarked Quorn, "that he should have brought you along here."

"Fact is," was the ready explanation, "he was afraid of being caught by those Hemyock terrors who straightaway began tumbling over one another to get him. Brought me along here as a chaperon, or an umbrella, if you like, and I've made myself useful."

"I see," said Quorn suspiciously. "And how about being a millionaire?"

"That," replied Peckover, "is how we worked the trick. Lady Agatha is a nailer. She wouldn't have wasted board and lodging on a poor man. And as a rich chap I can whistle the dear girls off when they get closer to Quorn than he cares about."

The assumption of the title irritated its real holder. "Quorn?" he repeated resentfully. "I like that. There's only one Quorn, and I'm going to show everybody where he is."

"Lalage and all?" was the pertinent objection.

"Oh, confound Lalage!"

"Just so—confound Lalage," was the hearty response, "Only take care Lalage does not confound you."

For a few moments Quorn preserved an aggrieved and discomfited silence. "You don't suppose," he said at length, "I am going to stand being humbugged like this."

"I don't reckon anything about it," replied Peckover with wise mendacity. "You two Quorns had better fight it out between yourselves. Only——"

"Only what?" the other snapped.

"If I were you I should wait until the ring's clear before I put up my hands."

Quorn stared in front of him in gloomy silence. "Pretty darned mess it is," he remarked presently.

"It is. But it will clear up," said Peckover cheerfully. "That is if you give it time."

Quorn made a sour face. "Nice position for me——"

"If you will go engaging the affections of ladies from the Bush with short hair and muscular brothers," put in Peckover. "It's a mercy as it is that this other claimant cropped up. He has saved you a lot of worry."

"So they're after him?" asked Quorn with grim amusement.

"You bet. He had to stay in bed for a week to keep out of their way. Lalage has crossed over to be Lady Quorn, and she means business."

"The devil she does!" exclaimed Quorn uneasily.

"Just think," urged Peckover with telling plausibility, "what this other Quorn has saved you from. Dear old Carnaby has a rare hankering after experiments on people's physiognomies; trying how a man looks with his nose bent, his eye closed, and a tooth or two smudged out. He fitted his dooks once round my throat, and I can feel 'em there now."

"What was that for?"

"Just to keep his hand in. He is uncommonly keen on meeting you, and he has got a bagful of funniments ready for the occasion."

"Pleasant fellow," ejaculated Quorn ruefully.

"Yes," pursued Peckover, "it's providential this chap, t'other Quorn, turned up. And if you take my advice you'll let him sit where he is till the Leos have eaten their heads off at *The Pigeons* and turned the game up."

"Looks as though I'd better," Quorn agreed reluctantly.

"It will be bad enough if Carnaby catches you about as it is," continued Peckover, encouraged by the success of his argument. "He may do something distinctly unpleasant, but, not being for the moment Lord Quorn, you won't have to marry old Lalage into the bargain."

"That's something," murmured Quorn.

"Everything, almost," said Peckover cheerfully. "If you wriggle out of that matrimonial spring-trap, you won't mind leaving half of your tail behind. You may lose a feature or two, but you'll be saved a life-time of bother."

"To get quit of Lalage would be gratifying," Quorn admitted gloomily. "But with my nose sliced off——"

"If," urged Peckover encouragingly, "you keep away from the looking-glass you'll never miss it."

"But other people will," Quorn objected, clearly discomposed by the idea.

"Well, then," Peckover summed up, "if you don't feel equal to tackling the gentle Carnaby either as Quorn or Jenkins, you had best lie low till they cart themselves away. The other Quorn won't be particular, since you saved his life, and Treacher doesn't go for a month. We'll fix you up a room in one of the lodges, and you can spend your time in keeping out of Lalage's way. Give out you are surveying the estate, which, if it should turn out to be yours, won't be trouble thrown away. I'll look after you, and back you up. You can trust me."

"I don't know that I can," was the not unnatural objection.

"Of course you can," Peckover assured him sympathetically. "Anyhow, you've got to, unless

you want Carnaby to wring you out and swab the stable yard with you."

"A nice thing," Quorn protested distastefully, "for me to be skulking about, and playing the understrapper on my own estate."

"Ah, yes," said Peckover sententiously. "We often have to pay for our fun when we least expect to."

Thus it came to pass that matters shaped themselves to the wily Peckover's handling, and he was able with native shrewdness to snatch a fresh reprieve from the threatening exposure. And it was of manifest importance for him to do so, since every day's income made an appreciable addition to the little capital he was amassing. If only he could keep the game up for a few months it would be for him, an independence. That former income of his, thirty-five shillings a week, would be his for life, and without working. No wonder he sharpened his wits to keep his oddly diversified puppets dallying.

So the unsuspecting Lord Quorn by purchase continued to enjoy his title, little dreaming of the Jenkinsian volcano at his very door. So likewise the chafing and mystified Quorn was assiduously taken in hand by Peckover and his fears kept up to high-water mark.

CHAPTER XXVI

Lady Ormstork was a practitioner in somewhat the same line of business as Lady Agatha Hemyock. Her dealings were however, of a wider scope and carried out with more histrionic embellishment than those of her sister schemer who, as may have been gathered, had her hands full with her two discontented and recalcitrant daughters. Lady Ormstork had, she was thankful, and also given to say, no daughter. But other people had them. Also she had no money to speak of, and again other people had. So, being a tough and wise lady of tireless energy and a grasping turn of mind, she set herself to take certain other people's daughters, for matrimonial objects, be it understood, and at the same time as much of their money as she had the face—and hers was fairly expansive and brazen—to ask for.

In pursuance of a scheme which her ladyship had already several times put in practice with success, she, on hearing certain rumours, ran down to Great Bunbury, and secured a furnished house on the outskirts of that somewhat uninteresting borough.

As the upshot of this apparently pointless and fatuous action, it was one afternoon announced to Gage who was seeking relaxation from the duties of his position in a game of billiards with his friend Peckover, that Lady Ormstork and Miss Ulrica Buffkin were in the drawing-room.

"Who the deuce are they, Bisgood?" Gage inquired, in not the best of humours at being interrupted in a promising run of nursery cannons.

"I don't know, my lord," answered Bisgood stolidly, his air suggesting that it was his master's business to find out for himself. "Never heard of the ladies before."

"What are they like?" asked Peckover, ever on the alert for an unpleasant surprise.

"Middle-aged lady, sir, and a young one."

"Good-looking?" Gage demanded, weighing the visitors against the joy of the prettily placed balls by the top pocket.

"The young lady decidedly so, my lord," Bisgood answered with the dictum of a connoisseur. "As regards the elder lady opinions might diff——"

"Oh, bother the old lady. You can look after her, Percy," said Gage, putting on his coat. "I suppose they are ladies, Bisgood?"

"Lady Ormstork, my lord."

"Where's the book? Let's look her out."

Bisgood fetched Debrett, while Gage brushed his hair and gave an upward twist to his moustache.

"Yes, here it is, correct enough. 'Harriot, Lady Ormstork, widow of Henry Fitz-fulke Candlish, fourth Baron Ormstork.' Come on, old man," Gage commanded; and with pricking curiosity concerning Miss Buffkin, he led the way to the drawing-room.

The first glance told both men that Bisgood had not overstated the case. Miss Buffkin had a roguish, voluptuous prettiness which fitted each man's ideal of feminine beauty. Indeed it was so long before they could bring themselves to notice her companion that any other than the gratified Lady Ormstork would have reasonably shown signs of being offended.

"Lord Quorn?" the wily peeress inquired sweetly, looking from one to the other; and for once, perhaps naturally, at fault.

Gage, wrestling with his sudden preoccupation, went forward and shook hands. "How do you do?" he inquired tentatively, in a manner from which no unprejudiced observer would have deduced any deep concern as to the state of her ladyship's health.

"I must introduce myself." She opened the conversation winningly, as the men took chairs opposite to her and kept furtive eyes on the alluring Ulrica. "I was a great friend of the late peer's —your cousin——" Gage bowed. "My husband and he were at Eton together and kept up a life-long friendship." Lady Ormstork sighed. The men tried to look sympathetic and merely found themselves looking at the beautiful Miss Buffkin to see how she took it.

"We often stayed here," the peeress proceeded in a voice of tender reminiscence. "We always loved Staplewick and the—the neighbourhood."

With an effort the men accepted the interesting statement with a duly chastened glance at the maundering lady.

"So much so," Lady Ormstork continued, dropping with surprising ease the tone of lament in favour of one which suggested business-like hope, "that being sadly in need of change of air after the fatigue of the London season, I suggested, instead of the inevitable Homburg, the healthy and peaceful paradise of Great Bunbury."

It struck as much of the minds of her listeners as they could afford to detach from the prepossessing Miss Buffkin that it had never occurred to them so to regard that unlovely market-town, but they made allowances for variation in tastes and found it possible to rejoice that some one, particularly this talkative old peeress, took pleasure in it.

"It's an interesting old place," Gage agreed, with as much irony as anything else.

"Nice change after London," Peckover chimed in, with a slight shudder at the recollection of his first impressions of that unattractive town. "Don't you think so?" he suddenly asked Miss Buffkin.

The young lady hesitated, and her hesitation could not be said to count as a testimonial to the grimy place in question. "It's not exactly lively," she answered with a smile that disclosed an irreproachable set of teeth. "When you've walked up one side of the street and down the other you are ready, if not anxious, to bid Great Bunbury a life-long farewell."

"My dearest Ulrica," Lady Ormstork remonstrated, "you have no romance."

"If I had a sackful, Great Bunbury would shake it out of me pretty quick," her protégée retorted.

"Well," the elder lady resumed almost plaintively, "perhaps it is that I view it in the light of happier days. It used to be quite a treat to drive in from here on a fine afternoon to shop in the quaint little town."

Both men glanced at Miss Buffkin as inviting a comment.

"The things you buy there aren't much of a treat," she observed dryly.

"And that is why," proceeded Lady Ormstork, ignoring the remark, "my heart turned towards Great Bunbury and dear old Staplewick, so that I felt I must come and see it again, even at the risk of being considered intrusive."

The expression on the two men's faces was calculated to assure her that so long as she appeared similarly accompanied she need have no fear of her welcome.

"I'm sure I'm delighted," Gage assured her, with a sly glance at the fascinating Ulrica. "I hope you will stay to tea now, and come often," he said with real enthusiasm. "As often as you can."

Lady Ormstork looked deeply grateful; indeed, as though a load of ungratified longing had been lifted from her shoulders; while Miss Buffkin seemed, from one cause or another, highly amused.

"Thank you, Lord Quorn, it is most kind," Lady Ormstork replied gushingly. "I shall revel in revisiting the dear old haunts. I warn you I shall take you at your word, and come very, very often."

"Can't come too often," Gage assured her gaily. "Hope Miss Buffkin will come too. You mustn't leave her moping in Great Bunbury. We'll try to get up some fun for her out here."

Lady Ormstork had no intention of leaving the profitable Ulrica behind, and she intimated as much. Miss Buffkin, on her part, seemed to find more than a transitory amusement in the effect she had produced upon the men.

"Perhaps you would like a turn before tea and look round the gardens," Gage suggested, nudging his friend, "Rather untidy, but we are going to make them trim directly."

"Oh, I should dearly love to see them as they are," the wily old peeress assured him. "Untidiness lends itself to romance, does it not?"

"I dare say it does," responded Gage, "and gets interest out of it."

Lady Ormstork was too busy manoeuvring to get hold of Peckover to notice the joke. Her game was to throw the new Lord Quorn and the fair Ulrica together with ultimate profit to herself.

Peckover, it may be stated, was not wildly interested in the dowager peeress. Not quite taking in the situation, he had anticipated that she would hang on to Gage, leaving Miss Buffkin in his willing charge. But the whole sense of the meeting was against him. Between the grasping old lady and the repudiating Gage, he had no chance.

"Go on!" commanded his friend in a peremptory whisper pushing him towards the peeress.

"Don't you love a winter garden?" that astute dowager enquired sweetly as she annexed him, and then, without waiting for his predilections on the horticultural question, proceeded to arrange for "dear Ulrica" to be personally conducted by Gage. There was no help for it, and Peckover resigned himself to the tolerance of aristocratic age and presumed inanity.

"I can't tell you," Lady Ormstork observed in the cooing tone with which she smoothed over her designs, "how delighted I am to make the acquaintance of your friend, the new Lord Quorn, and to revisit dear old Staplewick. What a charming fellow he seems."

"Oh, yes; he's a slice of all right," Peckover agreed, wondering whence the lady had formed that conclusion, since Gage's behaviour had hitherto shown more signs of being charmed than charming.

"He has," declared Lady Ormstork, "the family likeness. Particularly the nose. I saw the Quorn nose at once."

This was a somewhat trying statement for Peckover, but he manfully repressed all evidence of agitation. "Yes," he assented, "he's got the nose all right, and a bit of the Quorn lip, I'm thinking."

Looking round as it were to verify the comparison, Lady Ormstork was pleased to see the lagging pair in close and animated conversation.

"Yes, he reminds me of the late peer, particularly when he smiles," she declared with boldness, considering that she had never set eyes on a Lord Quorn in her life, nor been until a week before, within fifty miles of Staplewick.

"Oh, does he?" responded Peckover indifferently, as he suppressed a yawn.

"It will be so nice to come over here often," pursued Lady Ormstork, ignoring her companion's preoccupation. "So delightful for my dear young friend, Miss Buffkin. Naturally to a high spirited girl Great Bunbury is a little dull."

"I should think it would be," Peckover responded.

"Yes," said the lady with a little sigh of relief, "and so it will be such a pleasant change for her to have, so to speak, the run of this lovely park."

"I'm sure," Peckover said with emphasis, "Lord Quorn will be delighted for Miss Buffkin to come here all day and every day."

"How good of him," exclaimed Lady Ormstork, greedily accepting the suggestion. "And I shall enjoy it too, more than I can express."

Peckover was silent as he fell gloomily to wondering whether his desirable lot would be to entertain this suave old lady while his friend flirted with the fair and lively Ulrica.

"My young friend," proceeded Lady Ormstork, "is a really charming girl—what a superb Wellingtonia!—Yes, I see a great deal of her. Her father is not able to take her about, and so she has become almost like my own daughter."

"Except that she doesn't exactly take after you in looks," thought Peckover; but he merely bowed acceptance of her statement.

"You see, her position is quite enviable," the lady continued in her society voice and drawl,

"As an only child she will be immensely rich. Indeed Ulrica has her separate fortune now. I'm sure I may confide in you, Mr.——'

"Gage," Peckover supplied alertly.

"Mr. Gage. Not one of the Shropshire Gages?"

"Not that I know of," he replied, beating down a sporting instinct to claim kindred with that highly respectable, if rural, family.

"Ah! Some of the Worcestershire branch, the Lovel-Gages, were my greatest friends," said Lady Ormstork regretfully reminiscent. "You don't come from Worcestershire?"

"Not straight," he answered.

Lady Ormstork laughed, as she always did when there was the possibility of a joke being intended. "Well my dear Mr. Gage, I may tell you in confidence, as I feel we are going to be very good friends, that one of the reasons I brought dear Ulrica down to this quiet place was to be out of the way of certain fortune hunters who were pursuing her with their attentions."

"I don't wonder," responded Peckover, with a touch of enthusiasm.

"No," the lady agreed. "Apart from her immense fortune, she is adorable. So handsome! and so clever!"

"Yes, she's all that," said Peckover, enviously thinking of what a good time his friend was having, and regretting for once, that he had let the title go.

"One person in particular," pursued the dowager, "has given me great anxiety. A Spanish duke, of undeniable family, a Grandee of Spain, and all that sort of thing, don't you know, but very poor, and consequently most persistent. You know what these foreigners are."

"Rather," Peckover assured her, in a tone which implied an intimate acquaintance with the procedure of Spanish Grandees, rich and poor.

"Of course," the lady continued, "—oh, how pretty that peep is!—of course an alliance with Ulrica would set him, the duke, on his feet again. It would enable him to resume his position and live on his estates like a prince."

"Get a new hat to wear in the royal presence," added Peckover, remembering that attribute of Spanish Grandees which he had read of in the "interesting items" column of a weekly paper.

"He is, I believe, devotedly in love with Ulrica, apart from her fortune," continued his companion. "And of course from the point of view of mere rank and grandeur, the alliance would have been quite desirable. But, after all, an English girl should marry an Englishman, that is my feeling and the wish of Ulrica's father; and so we have come down here to let the storm of the Duke de Salolja's passion blow itself out."

"I see," said Peckover thoughtfully, wondering how much of the storm was true, since his last habit of mind was naturally now prone to suspicion and to look askance at unwarranted confidences.

CHAPTER XXVII

"Well, Percy, my boy, what do you tot them up to come to?" inquired Gage jovially as they turned from an impressive adieu to their guests who drove off radiant—at least as far as Lady Ormstork was concerned—at the success of their visit.

"They're all right," Peckover answered somewhat gloomily. Considering the poor time he had had as the medium through which the wily peeress desired to convey certain information to his friend he could scarcely be expected to emulate that gentleman's enthusiasm.

"Right? I should think so," Gage exclaimed with emphasis. "The girl is simply scrumptious."

"I dare say," Peckover returned, with a jealous twinge. "Rather different from our friends at the Moat, eh?"

"Slightly. There's no comparison. She's a real beauty, and full of fun."

"Oh, you found that out, did you?" Peckover observed curiously.

"Rather. This is the sort of Lord Quorn I'm paying for."

"She has a lot of money," said Peckover.

"How do you know?"

"The old lady-bird told me so. Confidential old party. Good as admitted they had come down here to have a dash at you."

"Me?" cried Gage, much interested.

"Your title. Or, rather mine," his friend declared sombrely, so dismally, indeed, that Gage said —

"Come, you are not going to repent? This is what I paid for. I told you so at the outset."

"Oh, yes," Peckover agreed. "It's fair enough," and with the image of Miss Buffkin's commanding beauty in his heart, he darkly resolved to try whether some of her smiles might not in future be for him.

Lady Ormstork was, as might have been confidently anticipated, as good as her word. Almost every day she brought the fair Miss Buffkin to Staplewick, and on those that were missed the two friends contrived to find an excuse for calling at Cracknels, as the villa, built by a retired biscuit baker, was named. The game was not a very pleasant one for Peckover, seeing that in it the dowager was invariably his partner, nevertheless he continued to stick to it doggedly in the hope that his opportunity for making running with the captivating Ulrica would surely come.

Accordingly he disguised his feelings and the alertness with which he waited for an opening to assert his powers of fascination, making himself the while as agreeable and attentive to the astutely meandering peeress as the nature of her society talk permitted.

"Lord Quorn and dear Ulrica seem to have taken quite a fancy to one another," she remarked one afternoon, tactfully leading the way so as to give a wide berth to a plantation of rhododendrons in the midst of which she had reason to suspect the other pair of promenaders was lingering. "Don't you think so, Mr. Gage?"

"Looks like it," answered Peckover with a sardonic curl of the lip.

"You are his great friend. He would naturally confide in you," observed the lady with a pointed invitation to betray the said confidence.

"Oh, yes. He is very far gone," was the somewhat ill-humoured reply. "No need for him to mention it, so long as I retain my eyesight."

"I am inclined to think," Lady Ormstork observed meditatively, "that the alliance would not be at all a bad thing."

"No?" Peckover, smarting under his confederate's good fortune, would not commit himself to an opinion.

"Don't you think so?" the dowager asked suavely.

"I don't blame old Quorn," Peckover replied, rather crudely. "As to whether Ul—Miss Buffkin might not do better is a matter of opinion."

"Possibly she might; or she might do worse," was the sage response. "After all, Quorn is a charming fellow."

"Oh, yes," his friend assented in a tone so warped that it seemed to signify, "Oh, no."

"It's a fine old title," said the lady reflectively.

"Title's all right," he agreed equivocally.

"Undeniable," Lady Ormstork maintained. "But of course, my dear Mr. Gage, you understand that advantage would weigh nothing with me if Quorn were not genuinely fond of Ulrica."

"Just so," responded Peckover with a wink at a passing swallow.

"Naturally," she pursued, "you will see my position is a somewhat delicate one. It is on that account, my dear Mr. Gage, that I make no scruple in asking you, a clever man of the world—if I may call you so——"

"Oh, don't mention it," he replied glibly.

"I'm asking you not to let me be in the dark as to your friend's real feelings and intentions. For if I were sure that Quorn had no idea of proposing I should consider it my duty to take Ulrica away from here at once."

"He has not expressed any such intention to me," Peckover replied, brightening a little.

"But surely you think he will, he must?" demanded the lady anxiously.

"Yes, he should by rights," Peckover agreed. "But he may not be a marrying man."

Lady Ormstork looked scandalized. "Every man is a marrying man when he meets a girl like Ulrica. Besides, it is the duty of every peer to marry, or what will become of our old nobility? Heaven only knows to whom, as matters stand, the Quorn title will go next."

Peckover had an idea that he could claim to share the knowledge. "He ought to come to a firm offer if he means business," he said.

"Our time here is getting short," Lady Ormstork declared significantly. Not but what she was prepared to grace Great Bunbury with her presence for a twelvemonth if that were likely to bring off the match. "As Ulrica's temporary guardian I cannot allow Quorn to flirt with her indefinitely if he has no intention of proposing."

"No," Peckover responded promptly, wondering how he could get a look in. Then a happy idea struck him. "Quorn is a shilly-shallying fellow," he said guilefully. "Can't make up his mind. I usually have to do it for him."

"I wish you would in this instance," the lady exclaimed fervently.

"Well, I think I might," he replied with sudden animation. "But of course it won't do for me to tell him straight he ought to propose. He'd see you working the figure. No, I've got a more artful plan than that."

"Oh, you dear Mr. Gage!" cried Lady Ormstork, brightening at the prospect of an end to her uninteresting sojourn at The Cracknels. "Do tell me."

"Easy enough," said Peckover, sparkling likewise; "and highly effective. One trial will prove it, or money returned. Make him jealous."

"How can we?" asked the dowager with a dubiousness which her companion did not find altogether complimentary.

"Leave it to me," he replied, his sparkle subsiding to a touch of huffiness. "Don't you think I'm equal to it?"

"Oh, yes, indeed, dear Mr. Gage," the lady drawled, eyeing him still rather doubtfully.

"Don't you make any mistake about it," he protested severely. "I always was first favourite with the ladies, and Quorn knows it—to his cost, I may tell you."

"And you are still friends?" was the astute comment.

"Sworn friends," Peckover replied with much truth. "I'll prove it by making up his mind for him to marry the finest girl in England."

"And what is your plan?" Lady Ormstork inquired approvingly.

Rapidly the alert little mind had blocked in the outline of his scheme. "Let me make the running for a lap or two," he suggested. "If that doesn't hurry him up, nothing will. You come up as usual to-morrow; I'll slip away from Quorn, meet you, and go off for a stroll with Miss Ulrica. You come on to the Hall. Tell Quorn offhand, when he asks, what has become of the young lady. Say she thought she'd prefer a stroll with me for a change, and if he sits still after that it's odds against Miss Buffkin being Lady Quorn. You watch the effect."

Lady Ormstork looked as though she might be safely trusted to keep her eyes open for it.

Next day things happened as had been arranged. Peckover made a timely desertion, and Lady Ormstork arrived at the Towers dignified and alone.

"Not brought Miss Buffkin to-day?" Gage asked, trying to look as though he had still got the better half of the Cracknels establishment. "Hope she's not ill?"

"Oh, dear no," Lady Ormstork answered sweetly. "She is here. But we met your charming friend, Mr. Gage, just by the lodge gates, and dear Ulrica said she had been cramped up in the fly long enough, so she got out to stroll up through the park."

Gage evidently experienced some difficulty in looking as pleased as a host should at the idea of his guest doing what pleases her best. "I see," he said, uneasily reflective. "Shall we walk back and meet them? It's a lovely day."

"So Ulrica thought," the astutely suave lady responded. "And the park looked so tempting. Yes, a short stroll would be delightful."

Accordingly they made their way down the drive at a pace which, set by the deliberate old

peeress, ill accorded with Gage's impatience.

Naturally Peckover had foreseen this move, and had proposed a circuitous and covert route to the house. Ulrica, quite privy to the scheme, offered no objection.

"Sun's rather hot," Peckover observed, when the carriage with its guileful occupant had rolled away from them. "Let's keep under the trees."

Ulrica laughed, and took without comment the path he indicated.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"This is a real pleasure to me," Peckover remarked, determined to get on flirting terms without wasting precious time in preliminary small-talk.

"This lovely day?" Ulrica responded, with an obvious pretence of misunderstanding his drift. "Yes, it is quite a treat."

"I meant," he pursued, with a stimulating glance at the fresh, pretty face, highly provocative now with a roguish smile, "a walk with you. I've been longing for this moment ever since I first set eyes on you."

Her glance of amused surprise suggested that she thought he was plunging *in medias res* with a vengeance. "Clearly," she commented, "patience is one of your virtues."

"I don't know about patience," he replied. "If I've waited a long time for my chance, it has not been exactly patience, but because I couldn't get it sooner."

"Everything comes to him who waits," Ulrica observed with a careless laugh, to show she was not taking him too seriously.

"I hope you don't mind the change?" he suggested.

"In the weather?" she asked mischievously.

"Bother the weather! No. From Quorn to me."

"That remains to be seen," she answered. "So far, I have no objection to it."

"Same here. Lady Ormstork is a proper old grandee, but, well, naturally she's not exactly my idea of an afternoon's fun."

"I dare say not," Ulrica said dryly.

"Now you are," he declared boldly.

She ignored the compliment together with the amorous look which accompanied it. "I have often wondered how you and dear old Ormstork were getting on;" she remarked with self-possessed blandness. "One hears of such curious matches nowadays."

For a moment Peckover hardly realized the drift of the remark. Then he stopped dead. "Why, you don't mean to say," he gasped, "you thought I was making love to the old gal?"

She looked intensely amused at his face of disgust. "Lady Ormstork is not bad looking for her age," she suggested wickedly. "You must admit she is rather handsome."

"I dare say," he returned, not certain how far she was in earnest. "It never occurred to me to take stock of her."

Ulrica kept her countenance steady, but her eyes were dancing. "Then your devotion was purely Platonic?" she observed.

"You may call it what you like," he replied, playing for safety. "As I wasn't taking any."

"Ah, then, I suppose it was devotion to your friend, Lord Quorn," she pursued, the corners of her mouth twitching with mischief. "Of course. He saved your life, didn't he? And you—yes; how generous of you."

"Oh, bother my life," Peckover exclaimed with an impatient laugh. They had covered a good deal of ground without getting on very far towards the end he had in view, and any moment now Quorn might run them down.

"I expect poor old Quorn is feeling rather sick by now," he remarked pointedly, "at your

giving him the slip and going off with me."

"You don't think he'll be jealous?" she asked with a laugh.

"Shouldn't be surprised."

"There is no real reason why he should be," she said.

"Nor no reason why he shouldn't be—if you like," he rejoined insinuatingly.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Gage," she said, looking at the same time as though she understood him perfectly.

"If you liked me half as well as I like you," he explained bluntly, under the compelling spur of her charms.

"You think it would matter to Lord Quorn?"

"You ought to know best," he returned. "I know it would matter a lot to me. The question is, which do you prefer?"

"Oh, his lordship, of course," she answered mockingly.

"Because he is a lord?"

"Naturally."

"I see," said Peckover catching her tone. "Is that your own original idea or Lady Ormstork's?"

"It is certainly Lady Ormstork's," was the evasive answer.

"But not yours. Not altogether," he urged wickedly. "You might have room in your heart for a little fondness for me?"

She laughed. "Why should I?"

"It would be such a treat," he pleaded.

"You are very, what Lady Ormstork calls, unconventional," she said quizzingly.

"Does that mean nice?"

"It may."

"You can't tell unless you give a fellow a chance," he said amorously, as his arm, extended behind her, somewhat unnecessarily, to put aside a bough, remained there. "Ulrica!" he murmured.

"Mr. Gage!"

"Percival—Percy," he suggested with empressement. "Ulrica, time's short, so don't let's quibble about trifles. You're the loveliest girl I've ever set eyes on," he continued with glib passion, "and I'm desperately in love with you. I've been dying to tell you so all the time, but never could till this blessed chance came along. Ulrica, say you're a little fond of me, in return."

"Mr. Gage!" Ulrica's expression was compounded of indignation, scorn and amusement. But perhaps the last was the only sentiment that was genuine. "It is not necessary," she protested, "to overdo the part like this."

"The part?"

"Lady Ormstork's little scheme," she said coolly. "You need not take the trouble to make it quite so life-like."

"Oh, it's no trouble," he assured her promptly. "It is a pleasure."

"I understood," she observed laughingly, "that the idea was to put it into Quorn's head that he ought to be jealous."

"That's it," Peckover replied readily. "And I'm doing my very best to give him cause for jealousy."

"It is very spirited of you," she said, with her provocative, mischievous twinkle. "But you need not act quite so hard, need you? At any rate till he sees us."

He made a wry face. "Not much fun in waiting till he sees us. It occurs to me this is a little game it pays to play in earnest. That is," he added pointedly, "if both parties are agreeable."

"Ah, that's the question," she said tantalizingly.

"Won't you answer it?" he asked insinuatingly.

"H'm! I rather like you," she admitted. "You are breezy."

"Thanks," he replied. "Then I ought to be in request on a warm day like this."

"Lord Quorn," she said with provoking irresponsiveness, "is breezy. But with him it blows from a rather different quarter. And he is apt to be a little gusty."

"Ah, yes. Dare say he would be," Peckover agreed, recalling certain squally passages in their intercourse. "Well, after all, a change of air ought to be grateful. Does you good."

Ulrica laughed. "With the wind chopping about there is likely to be a storm coming."

"Is there?" he returned. "Then let us take advantage of the fine weather while it lasts."

He was about to give a practical suggestion of how they might make the best of the sunny hours, with his arm only prevented from encircling her waist by a vigorous repulsive action on Ulrica's part, followed by a suggestion that the conditions did not exactly lend themselves to waltzing, when suddenly a man emerged from the bushes and stood in front of them. It was not the Lord Quorn they were expecting, but the real Quorn who had sighted them while prowling about the grounds, and now confronted them with an expression of jealous irritation on his now chronically aggrieved face.

"Hullo, my cunning little puppet," he exclaimed rudely. "Enjoying yourself this fine morning?"

"Trying to," replied Peckover, betwixt resentment and politic submissiveness.

"That's right," said Quorn with a distinctly objectionable sneer. "Poaching on the preserves of the person who calls himself Lord Quorn, it strikes me."

"Who is this rude person?" asked Ulrica, not knowing whether to be amused or alarmed.

"Oh, he's all right," Peckover assured her uneasily.

"Yes," responded Quorn with dismaying suggestiveness. "I am particularly all right. About the only man on the place who is all right, it strikes me."

Peckover, reduced to an apprehensive and gloomy silence, noticed that Quorn's eyes were fixed on Ulrica with a look of unmistakable and more than passing admiration. The aggressive manner was softening too, clearly for the lady's benefit, and indeed Miss Buffkin showed signs of a temptation to laugh at the embarrassment of her cavalier.

"Right you are," Peckover said, nodding to Quorn as pleasantly as the situation permitted, and at the same time trying to get a chance of winking at Ulrica to intimate thereby that she need not take the new-comer seriously. "Well, we must be getting up to the Towers now."

But Quorn showed no intention of budging from their path. His eyes were still fixed in the same resolute admiration on the fascinating Ulrica, and it was manifest that the spell of her beauty was holding him more strongly every moment.

"You run off to the Towers, old man," he ordered Peckover, with a wave of the arm, while his eyes never left the object of their attraction. "You're wanted up there at once. I'll escort the lady."

There was a note of determination in his voice that Peckover had not noticed before. Doubtless it was derived from the enchantment of Miss Buffkin's personality. Peckover dared not disobey. Happily a ruse suggested itself to him. He nodded to Ulrica; "See you again presently," and made off down the winding path.

Scarcely had Quorn time to pull himself together in his overmastering admiration, and frame the preamble of a rough flirtation, when Peckover came rushing back with apprehensive face.

"Well, what's the matter now?" Quorn demanded, upset by the interruption.

"Lions on the prowl," Peckover announced in a loud whisper.

"Lions?" cried the exasperated Quorn. "What do you mean. You must be dr——" Then the meaning flashed upon him, and he grew white. "Not Leos?" he demanded hoarsely.

Peckover nodded warningly. "Both of 'em. Looking nasty. They'll be round the corner in a moment."

Lord Quorn had decided before that moment elapsed not to stay to test the truth of the statement. With an exclamation which savoured less of good manners than of abject, if wrathful, fear, he sprang without a word of leave-taking or excuse into the bushes and disappeared.

Then Peckover winked at the astounded Miss Buffkin.

"That was clever of you," she remarked with a puzzled laugh. "How did you do it?"

"Superior power of intellect," was his somewhat vague and unsatisfying explanation. "Mind can start muscle any day. Never mind that poor chap. Where did we leave off?"

"You wouldn't," she replied significantly. "If I remember rightly."

"No more I won't," Peckover exclaimed, with boldness increased by his late coup. "Wasn't I just——? I don't mind beginning again, if you don't."

His impudence made her burst out laughing. "You are absurd. And you are not treating your friend well."

"P'raps not," he returned. "But when I look at you I feel called upon to treat myself well. Besides, he'll never miss it."

"Miss what?" she asked, innocently or by design falling into his trap.

"A kiss," he answered. "You'll let me have one, Ulrica?"

Miss Buffkin was saved the trouble of dealing with the—perhaps embarrassing—request, by the appearance of Gage, who came up somewhat heated and resentful, followed by Lady Ormstork, whose face wore the look which dowager peeresses wear when their plans, matrimonial and financial, succeed.

CHAPTER XXIX

Gage, *soi-disant* Quorn, was, to put it mildly, anything but pleased at Peckover's manoeuvre, Nevertheless he did not take the first opportunity of proposing to the fascinating Miss Buffkin. In point of fact he preferred the role of Philander to that of Benedick. He was in no hurry to settle down, however strongly the superb Ulrica might tempt him to matrimony. He was more than rich enough to treat her wealth as a negligible quantity; added to which he desired to taste the sweets of life as dished up to a bachelor peer, and this was the first of them which had not turned sour in his mouth.

Naturally he was not going to allow any interference or competition on the part of his paid confederate, Peckover. That gentleman, had, he considered, put off the trappings of nobility for a handsome consideration, and was in honour bound not to start an opposition business on his own account, nor to obtain credit in the guise of a millionaire, within an equitable radius from Staplewick, or, indeed, from the person, wherever it might be, of the peer by purchase.

The first practice of the scheme not having produced the desired effect, namely a proposal, it was arranged to repeat it next day; but Gage was too resentfully wide-awake to be taken in again. He stuck to Peckover with all the persistency, and much more than the annoyance, of his shadow, and finally took care as the hour of their visitors' arrival drew near to post himself at the point of interceptance; the wily Peckover remaining at the house in a state of tantalizing discomfiture.

But Lady Ormstork, who had not lived in vain in a world where even peeresses play "beat my neighbour," was equal to the occasion, and more than equal to the suddenly alert Mr. Gage. Perhaps she had anticipated his move; anyhow, she was prepared with a prompt counter.

As Gage met the carriage by the lodge, the driver, being either new or instructed, did not pull up for a hundred yards or so. Then Lady Ormstork quickly alighted and the carriage bowled on at a good pace towards the Towers.

With a wealth of amiability the lady advanced towards Gage who was hurrying up with a lowering face.

"Where's Miss Buffkin?" he cried in a cold, exasperated voice.

Lady Ormstork held out both hands gushingly. "So delighted to come again. So sweet of you to have us!" she crowed. "Another quite heavenly day. And the dear old park looking more lovely than ever."

"But where's Miss Buffkin?" Gage demanded hoarsely, clutching the old lady's double-dealing hands and thinking unutterable things.

"Oh, dear Ulrica is rather tired," was the plausibly artless reply. "She went for a walk to the Scotton Woods this morning. So she has gone on in the carriage and will make herself at home till we come. I am sure that you, as the soul of hospitality will not mind that."

Mr. Gage looked as though he did mind it very much indeed. However, he shut his lips, perhaps to keep back the unspeakable, and began to move on towards the house.

"The park is truly delightful to-day," exclaimed his companion with studied rapture. "The air is simply life-giving. Do let us stroll up by the beech avenue, dear Lord Quorn. It is a sin to hurry indoors on an afternoon like this. Ulrica will not mind."

Gage's face suggested thoughts too poignant for words.

"Shall we stroll round by the rhododendron walk?" Lady Ormstork suggested with a fine air of ignorance of anything abnormal in the situation.

"Must go up to the house first," Gage insisted bluntly, his rage being almost too great for coherent speech. "Was on my way there when you drove in. Just remembered, forgot to give Bisgood an important order."

"Oh, then do let us go by all means," the lady assented graciously, her heartiness stimulated by a wave of satisfaction in thinking that the proposal could not be far off now. "If only you had told us, you might have got into the carriage and driven up with Ulrica. What a pity."

Considering the steps she had taken to obviate such a contingency this was a somewhat bold speech on Lady Ormstork's part. But the grand manner carries a certain, if not altogether convincing, plausibility with it, and disarms rude censoriousness.

So they walked towards the house together; the gracious dowager finding, as was natural, the slight incline up to the Towers rather against anything like pace.

"We have had rather a disagreeable surprise to-day," said Lady Ormstork, summoning back to her side the irritated Gage whose impatience kept him farther in front of her than politeness might have dictated.

"Oh?" he responded discouragingly, wishing she would keep her breath for the pedestrian effort and defer conversation till the Towers and the elusive Miss Buffkin were reached.

"Yes," she proceeded. "I think I told you—or was it Mr. Gage?—of a very persistent suitor of dear Ulrica's, the Duke of Salolja, a fiery Spaniard, who had been paying her great attention in town last season. In fact it was mainly to escape his importunities that we came down here."

"Oh, then you didn't come to see Staplewick?" he observed, between chafing and chaffing.

"That was my object," the lady maintained with dignity. "And I brought dear Ulrica with me to Great Bunbury as to a sanctuary where we could be safe from the duke. Judge, then, of our embarrassment when, driving up the High Street, we saw him coming from the station."

"Awkward, if you've been fed up on him in town and don't want any more," Gage commented.

"Very. He proposed five times at least to Ulrica, and would not take a refusal."

"It's a way they have in Spain, I believe," remarked Gage, wondering gloomily how this new development might interfere with his amusement.

"Still," continued Lady Ormstork, "as I think I told Mr. Gage, one cannot have the dear girl forced into a marriage, even with a Spanish duke, against her inclination. One cannot blame him, poor man; she is lovely, and altogether most adorable; but from our point of view why should she exile herself in Spain for the sake of a man she does not care for?"

"Why, indeed?" assented Gage, wondering what the odds were on the Spanish duke's being a creature of the old lady's imagination.

Meanwhile the fatigued Miss Buffkin had come as an agreeable surprise upon the baffled Peckover, and that alert opportunist had lost no time in making the most of his good fortune.

"Dear old Ormstork has hooked Quorn down by the lodge," she explained laughingly. "But I expect they'll be up here before long by the look on his face as she fastened on him and he saw me bowling on up here."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Peckover with a grin. "Well, if we've got to make him jealous, don't let's lose any time in preliminaries."

"Mr. Gage, you are too absurd," Ulrica remarked as she unwound her feather victorine.

"Don't see much absurdity in that suggestion, anyhow," he returned. "What's the good of a chance if you don't take it?"

"We need not exactly act in earnest," she suggested.

"I've always thought that make-believe was poor sport," he rejoined engagingly. "We were getting on nicely yesterday; if only——"

"Ah, yes," she continued archly; "there's always an if only——"

"If only," he continued, "Quorn wasn't on our track, we need not be in such a hurry to say

what's uppermost in our minds. As it is——"

His arm seemed, to her alert eyes, to have a caressing twitch about it. "Shall we go out into the garden?" she proposed, by a plausible manoeuvre putting the table between them.

"Too many men about, setting the place straight," he objected knowingly. "Safer here, and snugger too, Ulrica!"

"Oh, Mr. Gage!" she expostulated, as by a swift dart he got round to her side of the table.

"Ulrica," he said seriously, for since yesterday a wild design and hope had taken possession of him, "Ulrica, need you marry Quorn? Tell me, like a dear girl. You don't love him as much as all that, do you?"

She laughed. "How do you know? I'm not going to tell you."

"It's only for the title," he pleaded, feverishly anxious to arrive at an understanding while the chance lasted. "That's nothing. It can be bought, if you go the right way about it. Ulrica, I don't believe you like him as well as you like me. Tell me you don't. Tell me the truth, dearest."

He seized her hands insistently. There was no doubt about his earnestness and she could hardly laugh at him now.

"I like you well enough," she answered.

"Darling!" he cried with genuine rapture. "Then you'll marry me? Won't you? Say yes. You're your own mistress. Say you'll marry me?"

"How can I?" she laughed evasively. "I've got to marry Quorn."

"Because he's a lord?"

She nodded.

"Is that all?"

She shrugged.

"You like me best?"

"You're more my sort," she was fain to answer. "But it is no good." Then suddenly breaking away she said, "I've just seen another of my admirers, a real Spanish duke."

"Oh, that chap! I've heard of him," said Peckover with sovereign contempt. "Well, you wouldn't look at him again?"

"I daren't," she replied. "I was afraid he'd see me."

"You leave him to me," said Peckover in his grand manner. "I'll settle the Dook. I'll slice the top off the Spanish onion. Ulrica, you'll have me? Hang the title. Have the man you like."

She looked at him. He was very different from the reckless little fugitive who had once tried to put an end to his existence at the *Quorn Arms*. Prosperity, high living, and a general good time had transformed him, smartened him up, and, backed by a certain native shrewdness, made him fairly presentable. Still—— Ulrica laughed. Her ideas and original breeding were but middle-class in spite of her wealth and expensive education. But for certain successful speculations on the part of Buffkin *père* (who knew his striking limitations, and wisely kept in the background) there would have been nothing very unequal in the mating of his daughter with Peckover. And, after all, in spite of the transmuting power of wealth, of changed circumstances and surroundings, human nature has always a tendency to seek and revert to its old level; to find most pleasure and ease in the society of those who are as it once was.

So it was that she made answer to her eager wooer. "I like you well enough, but a rich girl can't choose as she likes."

"I should have thought," he urged, "she can like where she chooses."

"So she can," Ulrica rejoined. "But she can't marry him."

"I'm just as much a gentleman as Quorn," he argued. "He happens to have the title, but I might have had it and fitted the part just as well as he," he added with hidden truth.

"So you might," she agreed. "But you haven't got it. And that makes all the difference."

"I'll get one if you'll marry me," he pleaded, vaguely optimistic on the subject. Then he fancied he heard Gage's voice outside. "I say," he urged with desperate affection, "here they come. Quick. If you love me give me a kiss."

"I don't know that I do," she objected, her voice rising to a half scream of remonstrance as he

clutched her.

"Give me the benefit of the doubt," he insisted drawing her face towards him.

But before his lips could reach hers, Lady Ormstork's shrill voice called "Ulrica!" The handle of the door was turned, and Peckover sprang guiltily over as much carpet as he could cover from that interesting take-off, as Gage burst in upon them with a face of suppressed fury which was not diminished by the obvious suggestiveness of the attitudes of the conscious pair.

CHAPTER XXX

"Look here, old man," said Gage to Peckover, as they settled down to their cigars after dinner, "you're not playing the game."

"What about?" his confederate inquired blandly. He had felt from Gage's sulky attitude all dinner that something was coming and was consequently prepared for it.

"Your carrying on with Ulrica Buffkin," was the blunt answer. "She is my girl; and you know that as well as I do."

"It's not in our contract that all the girls belong to you," Peckover suggested gently.

Gage frowned. "She came for me. She was after me," he returned in an exasperated tone. "That was the arrangement. And I don't pay you five thousand a year to interfere in my love affairs."

"It's not my fault," Peckover urged coolly, having drunk champagne sufficient for a reckless enjoyment of the controversy, "if the girl fancies a change. It's your business to make yourself sufficiently interesting to keep her affection. If you don't, well, I may as well take her on as any other fellow."

"Don't you talk a lot of conceited nonsense," retorted Gage, keeping down his fury with an effort. "The girl's all right: but she's led by your infernal monkey tricks into thinking that I'm neglecting her; so naturally she pretends to take up with you."

"Well, that's one way of looking at it," Peckover observed with vinous sarcasm.

"It's the only intelligent way," Gage returned.

"From your point of view," his friend rejoined, tossing off a glass of port wine.

"It's from my point of view that we've got to look at the affair," Gage said, with rising anger, for the other's coolness and confidence were more exasperating than his words. "And," he proceeded, banging his fist on the table, "my view of the case is, that if you don't stop your little game and sheer off the Buffkin there's going to be a row."

"I wouldn't," observed Peckover sententiously, "have anything to do with a girl, however good-looking, for whom my sole attraction was my title, and who didn't mind showing as much."

"Has she told you that?" Gage snapped.

Peckover shrugged. "Practically."

"Of course," Gage returned with an ugly mouth, "that's because she's huffy with me, thinking I'm not so keen on her as I ought to be, and you are."

"I suppose her feelings don't count," Peckover retorted, being pretty sure of himself with the fair Ulrica.

"Mine do, at any rate," Gage declared wrathfully. "I've been humbugged enough over this precious title. And as to your expecting me first to take on your revolting Australian pet and then to give up a girl like Ulrica Buffkin, why, you don't diagnose my character right, that's all. This is my show. I'm paying for it, and I'm going to run it."

"Then," returned Peckover, still cool and unmoved by his friend's thumping and shouting, "you'd better make it your business to see who that is prowling round the booth."

Gage's irate eyes followed Peckover's nod to the window. Outside, just discernible in the dusk, the figure of a man was moving to and fro. Gage jumped up and threw open the French window.

"Who are you? What do you want here?" he demanded in a rough and unnecessarily loud

tone. Peckover rose and lounged against the mantelpiece, cigar in mouth, lazily interested in the encounter.

The man outside stopped, turned, brought his heels together, and made a low bow. "Have I the honour to address myself to his Excellency the Lord Quorn?" he asked in a high-pitched voice and foreign accent.

"You have. What do you want?" was the ill-matching, even brutal, reply.

The man approached the window; then bowed again. "I have the honour of the friendship of the most gracious Lady Ormstork," he said. "As one who enjoys that privilege, I trust I may not be regarded as a trespasser."

He spoke with such ceremonious politeness that Gage was shamed into gulping down his ill-humour and softening his mode of address. "What can I do for you?" he inquired.

"I have," said the stranger with another courteous flourish, "already given myself the high pleasure of surveying your charming park and castle by moonlight. It is romantic, it is enchanting. And now there but remains to me to crave the honour of a short conference with your lordship. Am I permitted, then, to flatter myself that my request is granted?"

"Oh, yes. Step in," said Gage, not over cordially.

"Before I so unceremoniously cross the threshold of your window," observed the man with another bow, "permit me to announce myself—my name and condition." With more flourishes he produced a pocket-book almost entirely covered with an immense gold coronet and cypher, extracted therefrom a card of unusual dimensions, and with a deep bow presented it to Gage, who drew back into the light, glanced at it, and showed it with a wink to Peckover; that worthy greeting the information it conveyed with a low whistle of amusement.

"Your friend——?" said the stranger with a low bow to Peckover.

"Mr. Gage."

"Ah? I have heard of him too. Mr. Gage, I have the honour." And he bowed again.

When at last he resumed an upright position with some prospect of permanency, the friends could see what manner of man the stranger looked. He was small, wiry and rather bald. His bristling moustache turned up from under the longest nose and above the most prominent jaw nearly into the fiercest eyes they had ever seen. With less aggressively piercing eyes he would have been rather a comical figure; as it was, except when he shut them (which he had a trick of doing), or hid them by bowing, he was no laughing matter. His jutting chin wore a closely clipped Vandyck beard, and his clothes were black.

Both men, as they regarded him, tried to persuade themselves that they were amused, without, however, the result being quite convincing.

"I have the honour," said the stranger, inclining his head and shutting his eyes, "to request—I do not say, demand—the grace of a few words with my Lord Quorn and his honourable friend."

"Have a glass of wine?" Gage proposed.

The stranger made a stately gesture of refusal. "We have a proverb in my country, Spain," he said, "'The thistle before the fig.' You are too kind. But with your permission I will defer the acceptance of your gracious hospitality for the present."

"Not a cigar?" Peckover suggested, pushing along the box.

Again the pantomime of refusal. "At considerable pain to myself, I must decline—at least till I have done my poor best to make myself understood," the man replied, with his eyes shut. "Nevertheless, you will not impose upon me the heavier penalty of seeing you forego the enjoyment of your own cigars?"

They bowed, none the less appreciatively that neither man had entertained the slightest intention of doing so. But they were strangely subdued. Somehow, ridiculous as they assured themselves it was, the stranger's personality chained and fascinated them. He was a little man with an absurd nose, but—— They found themselves staring at him, drinking in every detail, every flourish, as he drew forward a chair with a gesture of asking permission, then sat down and faced them with a quiet mastery of the situation which was horribly disconcerting. So they waited in a silence, half apprehensive, half quizzical, for him to begin, not without a shrewd idea of the purport of the approaching communication.

At length with a preliminary flourish of a ringed hand, and an effective raising and dropping of the fierce eyes, he began.

"You will have already graciously noted by the acceptance of my poor card that it is the Duke of Salolja, Hereditary Grand Sword Bearer to his Most Gracious Majesty the King of Spain, Lord Keeper of the Royal Vaults, Duke also of Oswalta, Marques of Risposta, with many other titles

and offices, and a Grandee of Spain,"—at the recital of each succeeding dignity he raised his voice till at the culminating title the reverberation made the glass rattle—"who has the honour to address your grace."

Both men bowed, and at the same time did their best not to feel much smaller than the diminutive duke who held them as an undersized rattlesnake might fascinate a couple of finches.

"I must begin," said the duke, with what looked like the dangerous calm of a quiescent volcano, "by craving your grace's most amiable patience while I touch, very briefly, on a few points which stand out in my family history, the chronicles of the noble House of Salolja, of which I have the honour to be the present unworthy representative."

Peckover glanced at Gage and his look said, "Family history. We've got hold of a crank," and they both looked less uneasy.

"Families have their characteristics and idiosyncrasies," pursued the duke, nodding his head to and fro sententiously. "In my country, Spain, this is peculiarly the case. Family tradition is strong, it is tenacious, inexorable, immovable." At each succeeding adjective his voice rose till it reached the climax in an intense scream. Then he dropped back quite casually into a conversational tone, and proceeded—

"It is a notorious tradition in my family that we never suffer an interloper in affairs of the heart."

The faces of his two listeners indicated a realization that he was now coming to business, and their interest visibly quickened.

"In the year," the duke threw back his head, as though searching for the date in the ceiling, "1582, my noble ancestor, Alfonzo de Salolja was pleased to love a Castilian lady of great beauty, Donna Inez de Madrazo. A certain vain Hidalgo, one Lopez de Fulano, was rash enough to cast eyes on her and enter the lists with him. Alfonzo did not insult the lady by questioning her preference. He ran de Fulano through the heart. His blood is still to be seen on the Toledo blade which hangs in my poor palace in Segovia."

He paused to let the anecdote soak in, before pouring out another. His audience looked interested, but uncertain in what spirit to take the recital.

"Nearly a hundred years after that," the duke resumed, chattily reminiscent, "a rash Frenchman, the Comte de Gaufrage, suffered himself to indulge a passion for the lovely Donna Astoria de Rivaz y Cortano, heiress of the de Rivaz lands and wealth. Duke Miguel de Salolja, who at that date represented my honoured family, heard of this breach of punctilio on the morning of the day he had appointed for offering the fair Astoria his hand and dukedom. By noon the Comte de Gaufrage was in Purgatory and Duke Miguel in Paradise."

"Both killed?" asked Gage.

"Cut him out?" suggested Peckover.

"My ancestor," the duke replied in stately tones and with a flash of the eyes, "did not die till thirty years later. And," he turned to his second questioner with a bow and a wave of the hand, "permit me to tell your Excellency, no duke of the Saloljas ever stooped to 'cut out' as you term it. We do not enter into competition. We have a shorter and more effectual way. I may explain that by noon the Comte was in his coffin, and Duke Miguel accepted by the lady."

The tone seemed to snub their denseness of comprehension. Peckover accepted the elucidation with a faint and inept smile.

For a few moments there was silence as the duke sat immobile; confident in, as it were, the cloak of homicidal tradition in which he had wrapped himself.

Then with a suddenness which made the two jump (for he was beginning to get on their nerves) he plunged again into his blood-stained narrative.

"To pass over many like instances of this family trait, and come to comparatively modern times," he said pleasantly, "it happened to my great grandfather, Duke Christofero, to commit a deplorable mistake. He and his neighbour, the Prince de Carmona, unknown to each other, loved two sisters, the daughters of the Marques de Montalban. One night they both determined to serenade their respective lady-loves. When the duke arrived at the Castle he heard a guitar, and came upon the unfortunate Prince beneath the windows of the ladies' apartments. Only when he was drawing his rapier out of the Prince's left lung did he learn that it was Donna Maria and not Donna Lola for whom the compliment had been intended. It was unfortunate; nevertheless it tends to illustrate the working of the traditional law which governs our house."

"Oh, yes. I believe that sort of mistake did often happen in the good old times," was the not altogether confident remark of Peckover, who felt he must make a stand against this sanguinary catalogue.

A flash from the duke's remarkable eyes, brought any further tendency to volubility to a full stop.

"Such occurrences," he said pointedly, "are, pardon me, by no means confined to bygone times. The traditions of my house will end only when my race is a thing of the past. In the year—to venture with your courteous permission to resume—in the year 1841, a titled compatriot of your own, Sir Digby Prior, allowed himself at one of the Escurial balls the freedom of paying too much attention to my father's *fiancée*, the sainted lady whose unworthy son I have the honour to be. Next morning they met on the Buen Retiro Park, from whence in that same hour Sir Digby was carried with a bullet in his brain. Yes!" He sighed reflectively. "It is not perhaps a cheerful, or agreeable record; still it is curious and interesting to trace the same inevitable characteristic of our blood in almost each succeeding generation."

"Very," Gage agreed.

"Most singular," Peckover chimed in mechanically, as he tried to fall into a pose of polite indifference under the duke's eye.

The little man received their appreciative commonplaces with a grave bow. "We have now arrived at a point," he said glaring at them, but speaking with quiet if significant deliberation, "when it becomes my duty to claim the honour of your unwavering attention."

The request was in the highest degree unnecessary. Both men were incapable of greater heed than they were already giving. "Now it's coming," was the simultaneous and uneasy thought in their minds.

"But I fear the politeness with which your graces have brought yourselves to listen to my long preamble has caused your cigars to extinguish themselves," remarked the duke, with an ambassadorial smile. "Pray let me have the supreme pleasure of seeing you relight them."

CHAPTER XXXI

"Having now," resumed the duke, when the two men had, with a fine affectation of nonchalance, but with somewhat unsteady hands, lighted up again, "taken you through as much of the history of my family as to persons of your acuteness of perception is necessary, I have the honour to invite your attention to the moral of my house's story."

His listeners, by this time mentally detached from each other, and held pitilessly and without respite by those auger-like eyes, puffed nervously at their now tasteless cigars, and by their apprehensive silence bade him proceed.

"The present unworthy holder of the dukedom of Salolja," that person continued, with a deprecatory gesture, "—to leave ancient history behind us—is for the moment in one of those inexpedient positions to which his ancestors were occasionally liable, and from which they invariably took prompt measures to extricate themselves. In the province where we hold sway there is a proverb, 'A Sololja's rival should make his will.' When one wishes to describe a useless action, 'It is like granting a lease to the rival of a Salolja.' Meaning that he does not live to enjoy it. The phrase is expressive."

"Rather neat," commented Peckover, with an effort.

"Now to come to the point," pursued their tormentor, his fierce eyes in singular contrast to his bald head and deliberate speech, "the present Duke of Salolja—to keep the discussion conveniently impersonal—has made up his mind to contract an alliance with a certain English lady; a commoner, it is true, but one whose beauty and wealth may claim to make up, in a measure, for genealogical deficiencies. The lady's name is Miss Ulrica Buffkin."

Both hearers nodded an acquaintance with it.

"It has come to the duke's knowledge," continued that same nobleman, raising his tone to a slightly minatory pitch. "That another person, an Englishman, I should say an English nobleman, has, unwittingly I am ready to allow, been led into paying certain attentions to the lady in question. I am sure that to capable and clever men like yourselves it is not necessary for me to set myself the disagreeable task of pointing out the inevitable result of such an unwarranted and deplorable interference should it be persevered in."

He paused, took out a silk pocket-handkerchief embroidered with a flamboyant coronet and cypher, and passed it lightly across his lips, never taking his vicious eyes off the two men who had by this, under the paralysing gaze, assumed the appearance and almost the condition of a pair of waxworks.

As the lengthening pause seemed to demand a response, Gage with a great effort roused himself from the Tussaudy rigidity, and, with a desperate attempt at boldness, replied—

"You might let us know, while we are on the subject."

"No harm in mentioning it," Peckover chipped in with a somewhat ghastly pretence of a smile.

The little duke thrust back the handkerchief into his breast pocket, and then threw out his hands expressively. "I should have imagined," he replied, with a transcendentally threatening eye, "that men of the sagacity and penetration of your graces would have found no difficulty in deducing from the instances you have just heard with such admirable patience, the fate in store for any one who is rash enough to enter the lists with a Duke of Salolja."

His voice, rising with abrupt suddenness, thundered out the last words with a volume and intensity which made his rivals fairly jump in their uneasy seats. Anyhow, the wordy Grandee had come to the point, and the point had to be faced or run from.

Gage, whose mode of life had kept his nervous system in better order than his companion's, was the first to reply.

"That's all very well," he said, bracing himself to join issue with the fiery little Castilian, and assuming a courage he did not feel. "But this is a free country; and in these enlightened days you can't run a man through the body before lunch because your best girl has the good or bad taste to prefer him."

Fury leapt like a flame in the duke's eyes, but he replied calmly, even suavely, "Your excellency is wrong. What is to prevent me?"

"The police," Peckover suggested promptly, trying to catch boldness from Gage's attitude.

The duke burst into a loud and particularly unpleasant laugh. "The police? Really, your graces compel my amusement. May I ask you three questions?"

"Three dozen, if you like," answered Gage unsteadily.

The duke accepted the bounty with a bow. "Three will suffice." Whereupon very loudly, "One." Then in a normal tone, "How many police have you within a radius of, say, three miles from Staplewick Towers?"

"One or two," Gage was forced to answer rather sheepishly.

The duke bowed, this time with a sarcastic smile.

"Two." Again the disturbing, superfluous shout. "How long would it take you to send for the nearest, supposing you found him at home?"

"Oh, about twenty minutes," Gage tried to reply casually.

Once more the absurdly loud enumeration. "Three. And how long do you consider it would take me to put a bullet through your body?"

Simultaneously with the question a glittering object shone in his hand. It was the highly polished barrel of a revolver which he had whipped out casually with a deftness which seemed born of practice, and with which he now covered his rival.

Both men started to their feet with blanched faces.

"Here, I say!" Peckover remonstrated in ill-concealed terror.

"How long?" sang out the little demon of a duke in his commanding voice. "Oblige me by answering the question."

"A second, I suppose," gasped Gage. "Now please turn that revolver away."

"That is," proceeded the duke in a tone of satisfaction, "nineteen minutes and fifty-nine seconds before the policeman arrives." Still holding the weapon in his hand, but now pointing to the floor, he rose, brought his heels together and bowed. "I trust, milord Quorn and Mr. Gage, my most honourable friends, that at length we understand one another." Then he sat down again, his aggressive eyes moving with mechanical regularity from one man to the other, since the exigencies of the moment had sent the friends apart.

But now, throughly roused by the critical situation, Peckover spoke. "I don't know, my lord dook, whether you are aware that we have strict laws in this country against murder."

"And," put in Gage, "against carrying firearms without a licence."

The duke laughed scornfully and with superfluous volume. "Do your Excellencies think we have no such laws in Spain? And do your graces suppose that if the Dukes of Salolja had cared a

fig for them the occurrences which I have narrated to you would have happened? You hang a man for what you call murder here. But have you ever heard of your English law hanging a Grandee of Spain? And do you think you would be allowed to do so? Pah!" He snapped his fingers with a noise like the crack of a whip. "What is your English law compared with the immemorial traditions of the Saloljas? NOTHING! Shall it stand between a Salolja and his vengeance, his desire? NEVER!"

He shouted the answers to the last two of his many questions with scornful vehemence. His manner was, no doubt, irritating, and that, perhaps, accounted for Peckover's boldness.

"You don't bluff us you are above the law," he said, trembling at his own temerity. "If we haven't hung a Spanish Grandee as yet, it's because none of you have killed anybody over here that I remember."

The demon duke grinned and spread out his hands before him, as though sweeping away a feeble protest.

"My gracious friend, you jump at hasty conclusions. Who talks of killing, of murder. Faugh! It is a vulgar word. Accidents happen, here as in Spain; deplorable, fatal accidents. Firearms go off, almost of themselves; it is sad to think how easily they go off. I could tell you stories of such miserable fatalities in my own family, but you have probably heard enough of the ways of the Saloljas for one evening. Death is very near us always," he continued sententiously. "So near that the healthiest of us is only just alive. Which of us bears a life worth an hour's purchase? NONE! And the man who trifles with a Salolja cannot call the next moment his own. There it is. Accept it or not, it is the truth, the eternal, bitter, naked truth."

His voice was like a Nasmyth hammer, now pounding, roaring, seeming to shake the room, now gentle and soft as a shy schoolgirl's. As he concluded his speech his tone sank into a solemn hush, indicative of the awesome inevitable. For some moments there was silence in the room, save for the ticking clock. Then, when the tension had lasted as long as was desirable, the duke rose, and advancing to the table took the finest peach in the dish. The flashing had now faded from his eyes, and the expression on his face was truculently amiable.

"I sincerely hope I have not wearied your excellencies," he observed. "It has been most condescending and gracious of you to let me explain myself at such length. A veritable poem of a peach; I have not met its fellow in England. May I now, since our slight misunderstanding is at an end, do myself the honour of drinking a glass of wine with your graces?"

Rousing themselves from the gloomy preoccupation of their discomfiture, their graces, with a quite futile pretence of ease, hastened to minister to their undesirable visitor's request. That worthy proceeded to toss off a couple of bumpers with a relish commensurate with his long and thirst-giving harangue. "If I ask further for one of your graces' excellent cigars," he suggested with a pleasantness which could not seem other than grim, "it is as another proof of how unwilling I am to bear malice. Ah!" He lighted the cigar and blew out a long cloud with evident enjoyment.

"Unlike my ancestors I make allowances," he declared significantly. "Unlike them again, I never strike without warning. Yes," he added, dropping his voice into a genial tone; "it is perhaps well for us that we did not live, and in the same relations one to another, a hundred, two hundred years ago. At least we should not all three be enjoying these superb cigars."

It was a difficult sentiment for the smarting pair to respond to. "Just so," was all Peckover, with an awkward laugh, could think of.

"I am ashamed to have stayed so long," said their guest, with an expressive glance at the clock. "But it is better to risk missing the strict punctilio than to have to intrude again. Your excellency's house and park are delightful. I felicitate myself on my visit. Your cigars are exquisite. I take another, in token of our better understanding, to enjoy on my way to your somewhat depressing Great Bunbury. Good-night, milord Quorn. Good-night, Mr. Gage. A thousand compliments and adieux to you both. May it never be necessary for us to meet on less amicable terms than those which prevail between us at present. Once again my most distinguished homage. Adieu."

With his heels together he made to each man a most profound bow; then turned to the window, opened it with a sure touch upon the latch, turned again, bowed, and disappeared into the night.

For some moments the two men stood staring speechless into the darkness. Then their eyes met.

"This is a glorious title," said Gage, clipping out the words with bitter intensity. "I am having a ripping time with it. It's a fine thing to be alive just now."

"All things considered, it's lucky we are alive," was Peckover's dry but feeling response.

CHAPTER XXXII

"Tell you what it is, Percival, my boy," said Gage at breakfast next morning; "I've had about enough of nobility. Grandeur and aristocracy have too many inconveniences to suit me. I've a mind to clear out, and hand you back this precious title of yours."

Peckover laughed awkwardly. "Don't do that yet awhile, old man," he urged. "You haven't given it a fair trial."

"It has given me one," was the prompt and pointed retort. "And it strikes me if I don't look sharp and get out of the peacock's feathers I shall soon be pecked to death. That Salolja chap last night was an eye-opener."

"Unpleasant customer," his friend agreed.

"Unpleasant? Noisy little devil!"

"Barking dogs don't bite," observed Peckover, but without conviction.

"I wouldn't trust him," returned Gage with the firmness the other's remark lacked. "These Spaniards are the very deuce when they're jealous. They get simply mad. And nobody on this earth is safe from a loose madman if he takes it into his head to go for you. Our friend, the duke, meant business."

"Only so long as you interfere between him and Miss Buffkin," Peckover agreed.

"How was I to know what I was being let in for?" Gage exclaimed in an aggrieved tone. "When the old lady mentioned a foreign chap who'd been dancing after Ulrica I naturally thought it was some monkeyish fellow who'd squirm if you shook hands too hard, and would cry if you spoke to him unkindly. She never gave us a hint she'd got a bald Beelzebub with a voice that sends you the jumps and a homicidal history that gives you the shivers—to say nothing of that sickening revolver. Ugh! I can see the gleam of it now, as I've seen it all night. I was on the point of trying to get in first shot with a champagne bottle."

"Yes," Peckover admitted; "I've spent a pleasanter five minutes than when he was playing with the highly polished popper."

"Well, much more of this and I go back to plain Mr. Gage," that gentleman declared in a disgusted tone. "They talk of the fierce light that beats on royalty, but I didn't know the nobility lived in a set-piece of fire-works with occasional red-fire."

"They can't all of them do it," argued Peckover.

"They are all of 'em liable to it," Gage returned. "The squibs are there, only waiting for some little complication to come along and touch 'em off. It is getting on my nerves, and I'm wondering where the next little disturbance is coming from."

It seemed almost in answer to his thought that, just as he had voiced it, Bisgood announced that Lady Agatha Hemyock was in the drawing-room. Theirs was a late breakfast; still the call was early.

"That's where it's coming from," Peckover observed with an uneasy grin.

Lady Agatha was sympathetically troubled as she shook hands with them. Her preliminary business was to ask them down to the Moat to tea that afternoon; but as the men, exchanging significant glances, gladly accepted the invitation as affording an asylum from any immediate complications connected with the Duke of Salolja, they both felt that something more was coming, and of greater moment than a message which a note would have adequately conveyed. They were not long left in doubt.

"I had another object," said Lady Agatha, pursing her lips and looking unutterably important, "in paying you this unconventional visit. One has heard from various sources of the advent of Lady Ormstork to this neighbourhood. I have even been informed that the lady in question has gone so far as to call upon you, which is the reason why the Colonel thought it would be only neighbourly and friendly to give you a word of warning."

"Anything wrong," Peckover asked apprehensively. His nerves had not recovered from the previous night's disturbance.

Lady Agatha took a letter from her pocket with business-like deliberation. "Very wrong—or likely to be," she replied as she slowly unfolded it, "from what my friend, Lady Bosham tells me. I happened in writing to mention Lady Ormstork's name as having taken a furnished house near here, and my friend writes by return imploring me to have nothing to do with her. A most

dangerous woman," she added, presumably quoting from the closely written letter.

Gage and Peckover caught each other's guilty and apprehensive eyes.

"She has," continued their visitor, confident in the effect she had produced, "I believe, a young person—a young lady nowadays she would be called—with her. A Miss Buffkin. A mysterious Miss Buffkin, given out as an heiress."

"Isn't she an heiress?" Peckover inquired rather foolishly.

Lady Agatha shrugged. "Possibly. That is a matter known only to Lady Ormstork and Miss Buffkin. But the more vital question is what are Lady Ormstork's character and intentions."

It was somewhat a relief to both men to find someone else's intentions called in question.

"Lady Bosham says," proceeded their visitor, "and indeed one has heard something of the kind vaguely oneself, that Lady Ormstork is notorious for getting hold of good-looking girls, often of very doubtful origin, and finding husbands for them—for a consideration."

Both men expressed a surprise which they could scarcely be said to feel.

"According to Lady Bosham, she is a determined and most unscrupulous woman," continued Lady Agatha, apparently quoting from the report. "Once she gets people into her toils they find it no easy matter to extricate themselves."

It occurred to her hearers that there were other titled spreaders of nets besides the histrionic Lady Ormstork, but they did not say so.

"Of course," said Lady Agatha, with apologetic plausibility, "it is perhaps a great liberty which I take in venturing to warn you. But being such close neighbours and friends, and knowing you to be, comparatively speaking, strangers to this country and some of its less desirable features, we thought it only right to do so."

"Much obliged to you, I'm sure," responded Gage.

"Quite so," added Peckover.

"Of course," Lady Agatha pursued tentatively, "I am unaware how far this Lady Ormstork," she spoke the name with withering emphasis, "may have forced her intimacy upon you. Still, it is better to be forewarned, even if yours is as yet nothing beyond a formal acquaintance."

"Just so," Gage agreed with balking irresponsiveness.

"Lady Bosham is very strong on the undesirability of these people's acquaintance," said Lady Agatha rising. "She, that is, Lady Ormstork, is a terrible old woman when once she gets her tentacles fixed on the victim she has marked down. But there, I trust I have said enough to sensible men like yourselves to put you on your guard."

"Quite," replied Gage, wondering where, in it all, the Duke of Salolja came in.

Lady Agatha took her leave, having made them promise to come early to the Moat that afternoon.

The promise was faithfully kept, since it seemed expedient to both men to avoid their friends from The Cracknels, at any rate till they saw how their Castilian rival was going to be disposed of.

"They are bound to come up this afternoon as usual," Gage observed to his friend.

"With that Spanish terror after them, shouldn't wonder," said Peckover. "We're best out of the way."

"Ethel and Dagmar will be poor fun after Ulrica," Gage remarked gloomily.

"Tell you what it is, my friend," said Peckover. "The sooner you bring yourself to consider Ulrica a thing of the past the better chance you'll have of making old bones. Ethel and Dagmar may not be all our fancy painted, but at least they haven't got a blood-thirsty Spanish nob hanging about them with traditions and a nasty way of talking polite flummery with a revolver playfully pointed at the vital parts of your anatomy all the time. You won't have a ducal freak poking his long nose in there."

"Well, we had better go down, have a fling with the second quality beauties and then clear out of the place till things cool down," said Gage with the air of a man who has made up his mind.

Accordingly, after an early luncheon, they went down to the Moat, and flirted so recklessly with the not unduly obdurate young ladies, that Lady Agatha was induced to dismiss from her mind a grand plan she had been formulating for the recapture of John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook, and even went so far as to canvass the respective claims of pink and apple-green in connexion with

the general scheme of colour for a double bevy of bridesmaids.

It was late, as late for safety as they could make it, when Gage and Peckover returned home, discussing plans for a sudden flight next morning.

"Lady Ormstork called?" Gage asked Bisgood carelessly, as he turned into the smoking-room for a cigarette before going up to dress.

"Yes, my lord. And Miss Buffkin."

"You gave her ladyship my message?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"Did she say anything?"

"Her ladyship said she would wait, my lord, as she had something very important to tell your lordship."

"Ah," Gage said knowingly. "Did she wait long?"

"Her ladyship and Miss Buffkin are in the drawing-room, my lord."

The cigarette fell from Gage's parted lips, thrust out by a profane charge which exploded behind it.

"In the——" he turned helplessly to Peckover.

"Percival, old man, they're waiting for us," he gasped.

"Anybody else?" Peckover inquired of Bisgood, with a vision of a pair of terrific eyes backed by a bald head and set off in front by a long nose and a gleaming revolver barrel.

"No one else, sir," Bisgood answered with as much surprise as that functionary ever permitted himself.

"Better scoot, eh?" suggested Peckover in a panic-stricken whisper, as the butler left them.

"No. Let's go and hear what the old bird has to say," Gage replied, after a few moment's hesitation. "If any one is equal to tackling that Spanish nuisance she's the person. Let's go and hear how she takes it."

CHAPTER XXXIII

Lady Ormstork received them with pleasure tinged with just a shade of vexation. "We were so disappointed at not finding you at home to-day of all days," she exclaimed. "We heard this morning of an absurd misunderstanding which we were anxious to set right without delay. And we have been waiting nearly four hours."

"You've had tea?" Gage suggested, somewhat beside the point.

"Oh, yes, thank you," Miss Buffkin assured him.

"We heard casually," pursued Lady Ormstork, "that you had gone to call at the Moat, and naturally expected you would be back soon. But no doubt,"—this with a world of spiteful significance—"Lady Agatha Hemyock made a point of keeping you there as long as she could. I know her."

"Of course," said Gage gallantly, ignoring the suggestion, "if we had known you were waiting we should have been back long ago."

"Not if Lady Agatha knew it," was the tart reply. "But never mind about that hateful woman. I have waited to see you on a more important subject."

She glanced at Miss Buffkin, who rose with an amused face and sauntered to the window. "I'll take a turn among the flowers while you are telling the tale, Lady Ormstork," she said casually. "I'm getting a little tired of it."

Both men looked longingly after her as she strolled across the lawn, but a consuming anxiety to hear the latest news of the duke curbed the desire to invent an excuse for making after her.

"The Duke of Salolja, tiresome person," Lady Ormstork began, "called at The Cracknels this morning, and upset us very much by telling us of a visit he had the impudence to pay you last

evening."

"Yes; we had a pleasant hour of him here," said Gage, grimly reminiscent.

"He tells me," proceeded the lady in a tone of righteous anger, "that he has, in the most unwarrantable manner, suggested the existence of an engagement between himself and dear Ulrica. Is that so?"

"He suggested that he wasn't going to allow anybody else to be engaged to her," Peckover replied.

"Most improper!" commented Lady Ormstork. "And most unwarranted. Dear Ulrica detests him. But he is most absurdly persistent."

"Yes, he's a bit of a nailer," Peckover agreed feelingly.

"Was he very rude?" the lady inquired.

"No, he was polite; the most confoundedly polite cuss I ever encountered," answered Gage.

"I'm glad to hear that," said Lady Ormstork. "And so your interview, preposterous as it was on his part, was quite amicable?"

For a moment neither man felt equal to answering the question. Then Peckover said, "Quite amicable, only a touch one-sided. You see, it don't exactly pay to be nasty when a fellow's sitting over you with a revolver."

Lady Ormstork threw up her hands. "A revolver? Ridiculous person! Really—I hope you told the foolish man that that sort of thing was quite out of date."

"The revolver wasn't though," objected Peckover with a reminiscent shiver. "It looked quite new, with all the latest improvements and in first-class working order."

"Really?" cried the lady incredulously.

"As far as we could judge. Didn't want any closer inspection. I'm content to take a revolver's business capacity for granted."

"But surely," remarked Lady Ormstork with an amused curl of the lip, "you don't mean to say that you allowed this droll Salolja to alarm you?"

The men glanced at each other with long faces.

"We weren't exactly sorry when he said good-bye," was Gage's evasive answer.

"Oh, but this is too absurd," protested the lady.

"The funny side wasn't exactly turned to us last night," said Peckover.

"I have," proceeded Lady Ormstork coolly, "told the duke he is making himself ridiculous."

"And how did he take it?" Gage inquired with considerable curiosity.

The lady shrugged. "It is hopeless to argue with that sort of person. And naturally dear Ulrica is, from every point of view, a girl whom even a duke would find it difficult to give up hopes of. But her father, a man of great discernment and determination would never hear of such an alliance. A foreign title does not appeal to him. So, my dear Lord Quorn, you need have no fears that Ulrica is in any danger of becoming Duchesse de Salolja."

This was pretty direct speaking. "It would be a pity," Gage agreed warily, "if Miss Buffkin should be coerced into a distasteful marriage."

"There is," replied Lady Ormstork resolutely, "no chance of that. I have told the duke so in unmistakable language. And I also gave him a piece of my mind with regard to his uncalled-for interference between Ulrica and yourself. He had the impudence to suggest that you were at his bidding ready to break off your understanding with Ulrica and relinquish her to him. To him! To a man whom she detests, I simply laughed at him, as I hoped you had laughed too."

Gage started up. "You didn't tell him I was engaged to Ul—to Miss Buffkin?" he gasped.

"Naturally I did," was the composed answer.

"But—but I'm not," he protested.

Lady Ormstork gave a smile of pitying encouragement. "My dear Lord Quorn, you are not going to allow yourself to be frightened out of your engagement by the bluster of that grotesque little Spaniard?"

"But," he urged wildly. "Spaniard or no Spaniard, I am not engaged."

Lady Ormstork shrugged. "Anyhow, Ulrica is under the impression she is betrothed to you. I have even gone so far as to inform Mr. Buffkin of the engagement, being, as you will understand, responsible to him for Ulrica's well-being. You cannot in honour even pretend to be induced by threats to repudiate it. You have your own reputation as well as Ulrica's to consider. That is why I spoke so straight to the duke this morning."

Her tone was resolute and conclusive. Gage knew not whether to look upon it as a well-arranged piece of bluff or as his dying knell.

"It's all very well," he replied wildly. "I'm very fond of Ulrica and all that. But the traditions of the Salolja family have, from time immemorial, pointed to killing their rivals on sight. There's not much use to either of us in my being engaged to Ulrica if I'm to be shot next minute."

"Even if you anticipated such a contingency," Lady Ormstork replied coolly, "it would not justify you as an English nobleman in jilting Ulrica. It is a point of honour. You see that, don't you, Mr. Gage?" she demanded, suddenly turning to the deeply interested Peckover.

"Just so," he answered with a start. "Only it's poor fun having your wedding and your funeral on the same day."

"I do not," Lady Ormstork declared, "understand such pusillanimity. After all," she urged, "you are man to man. Why should you be more afraid of the duke than he of you?"

"I've no homicidal traditions in my family," Gage explained.

"A jealous Spaniard is the very devil," supplemented Peckover, whose experience of foreign temperament was derived from penny serials and half-crown melodrama.

"Fact is," added Gage, "what I want is a good time, without any fuss or bother from Spanish dukes or anybody else. I'm willing to do the right thing, so far as it can be done without friction."

"A somewhat shallow, not to say unromantic, view of life," was Lady Ormstork's sarcastic comment. "I must confess it never struck me that the Duc de Salolja carried such terror in his absurd person.

"He carries a revolver on his absurd person," was Peckover's pointed rejoinder.

"Ulrica will under no circumstances be allowed to marry him, even if she wants to," the lady declared, changing her tone. "I have announced to her father that she is going to be Lady Quorn, and am certainly not going to take upon myself the odium of suggesting that Lord Quorn has been frightened out of the match by the first ridiculous little Spaniard who chooses to flourish in his face his family traditions and a—possibly unloaded—revolver."

"We didn't go into that question," Peckover remarked with a reminiscent shiver.

"The whole business is too droll," said Lady Ormstork with an amused smile. "But of course we cannot submit to the duke's impudent coercion. It is, however, easily obviated. I will take the matter in hand, since you seem reluctant to do so. I am responsible for dear Ulrica's welfare and happiness. It is my business to see the sweet girl does not fall a prey to a foreign fortune-hunter. Yes, dear Lord Quorn, you may leave the matter with absolute confidence in my hands. You may depute me, as Mr. Buffkin has already done, to deal with the Duc de Salolja."

Gage did not receive the assurance in the spirit in which it was so confidently given. On the contrary he looked more uncomfortable than ever.

"All very well," he said, after an embarrassed pause, "but the more you insist on sticking me up the more he'll feel called on to knock me down. Eh, Percival?"

"Right you are," was Peckover's gloomy response.

"I'll take care of that," Lady Ormstork assured him.

"He won't go for you; he'll go for me," urged Gage.

"Not he. I'll draw him off," said the lady.

"Suppose he won't be drawn off?" suggested Peckover.

"Trust me," replied Lady Ormstork, grandly confident of her powers. "Diplomacy counts for much."

"Strikes me it will count revolver shots if we aren't careful," said Gage dryly.

Lady Ormstork drew back her mouth in a pitying smile.

"My dear Lord Quorn! This is unworthy of you," she declared. "Do think of Ulrica. Have you so little regard for her? Is not she—superb creature!—worth a little daring?"

"Certainly," Gage assented doubtfully.

"All you want to do," continued the lady, following up her successful appeal, "is to show a bold front, and the terrible Duke of Salolja will run away."

"Think so?" asked Peckover, his secret hopes reviving.

"I am sure of it," said their visitor, rising. "There, I am certain you never meant, dear Lord Quorn, to repudiate in earnest your understanding with the dear girl. Ulrica will be the loveliest and most queenly peeress in the kingdom. And with her immense wealth, the alliance is most desirable in every way. Don't give the wretched, preposterous duke another thought. Do, like a sensible man, dismiss him from your mind. And if he should have the impudence to intrude here again show him the door and tell him to go back to his own——"

"Perhaps you'll do that for us, Lady Ormstork," said Peckover, whose restless eyes had been kept on the window. "There he is."

The others looked round with a start. There sure enough was the Duke of Salolja, stalking, with as long strides as his short legs would allow, across the lawn, obviously in pursuit of the fair Miss Buffkin.

CHAPTER XXXIV

The sight of yesterday's visitor seemed to paralyse both men, and the grim fascination that had held them before now clutched them again. Gage, who had, under the influence of Lady Ormstork's bitterly persuasive tongue, began to pluck up courage, and to view the magnificent Miss Buffkin once more in a proprietary right, now visibly wilted. He even glanced round at the door, as though meditating flight. Peckover whistled uncomfortably and tunelessly through his clenched teeth; a more elaborate expression of feeling he did not feel equal to. Then they both glanced somewhat helplessly at Lady Ormstork in search of some indication of a plan of campaign.

"Actually intruding here again," the lady exclaimed indignantly, as the duke's purposeful strides took him out of sight behind a hedge of laurels. "If I were you, Lord Quorn, I would not hesitate in ordering him out of your grounds."

Gage did not look the least inclined to act upon the suggestion. "Oh, let him walk about there, if he likes," he replied with a weak laugh.

"Walk about?" repeated the lady warmly. "But he's walking after Ulrica. It is not to be tolerated. I was under the impression that I had given him his *congé*. Lord Quorn—Mr. Gage," she turned fiercely upon Peckover, "as Lord Quorn seems content to endure this intolerable conduct rather than be man enough to protect his future wife from this tiresome person, perhaps you will go and intimate to the duke that his presence is undesirable."

Peckover's reception of the order did not suggest alacrity. "No affair of mine," he protested with a resolution born of care for his own skin. "Don't believe in interfering in other people's business. My motto is——"

"Motto!" cried Lady Ormstork scornfully. "Is chivalry quite dead, that a lovely girl like dear Ulrica must be persecuted and victimized by an under-sized desperado, and two Englishmen stand by tamely and allow it?"

Notwithstanding this somewhat pointed appeal, the two Englishmen seemed still disinclined to sally out and try conclusions with the Spanish terrorist. Luckily, however, the argument was diverted by the appearance on the lawn of three persons, the duke, Miss Buffkin, and Lord Quorn, all with looks of stress on their faces.

"Ah, here they come," said Lady Ormstork with her teeth set ready for battle. "Who, may I ask, is that person with them?" she asked, lowering her eye-glasses and turning to the men who were for the moment preoccupied in weighing the merits of the respective courses of standing their ground or seeking a sanctuary in the wine cellars.

"That? Oh, that's Jenkins," answered Gage, wondering what he was doing in the *galère*.

"Jenkins?" Lady Ormstork echoed the name, as though it did not convey very much to her.

"One of my people," Gage explained, in an agony of indecision as to the propriety of flight.

By this time the approaching trio had reached the window, inside which Lady Ormstork stood grimly waiting for them. Next instant the duke had thrown it open and was with a flourish and a bow inviting Ulrica to enter. A similar though modified pantomime having been gone through in

the case of Lord Quorn the three at length stood inside the room, with the irate Lady Ormstork facing them, and with Gage and Peckover within jumping distance of the door.

"Duke," Lady Ormstork's sharp tone rang through the room like a defiant bugle-call, "this is most extraordinary, not to say unseemly, conduct on your part."

The representative of the Saloljas was, however, far too busy in distributing elaborate bows and extravagant greetings all round to be in a position to give heed at once to the lady's challenge. In Spain punctilio gives way to nothing, not even to an angry old lady's impatience.

Presently when Messrs. Gage and Peckover had been favoured with bows and compliments into which they were inclined to read their death warrants, the duke raised the top of his coercive head the whole of his five feet three inches from the floor and observed blandly—

"Ten million apologies, most noble lady. I am ashamed to confess I did not hear the remark you did me the undeserved honour to make."

In no wise disconcerted, the most noble lady repeated the remark, slightly strengthening the language in which it had originally been couched.

"Ah—h!" The duke's grimace and pantomime expressed deprecation with a more elaborately hideous vim than that feeling had probably ever been clothed with before. "Most illustrious lady," he protested, "what would you have? The state of my unworthy heart is well known to you. And the heart excuses everything—everything."

The repetition of the last word had a sinister sound in the ears of Gage and Peckover. With its dire comprehensiveness it seemed to include their lives in its sweeping embrace.

But Lady Ormstork, with sundry material reasons to influence her judgment, was far from accepting the proposition. "It does not," she objected stoutly. "To force your attentions where they are distasteful is inexcusable."

"It is," rejoined the duke, with the light of battle in his eyes, "clearly my duty to render acceptable the homage of my affection."

"It is quite hopeless," declared Lady Ormstork curtly.

"I believe not," insisted the duke with, under the circumstances, an admirable display of assurance.

Lady Ormstork glanced with equal confidence at her *protégée*. "Miss Buffkin will bear me out."

"Yes. It's no good, duke," said the young lady with discomfiting promptness. "You are not my sort."

The duke accepted the verdict with a shrug, and at once proceeded to misread it. "The Dukes of Salolja," he said with a touch of defiant pomposity, "have never permitted inequality of birth to be a bar in affairs of the heart."

Lady Ormstork had also her personal rules of life. And one was never to allow herself to be bluffed out of a possible advantage. "You mistake, duke," she said suavely. "Miss Buffkin wishes delicately to suggest that she does not return your affection, and therefore, the alliance you propose is out of the question."

"I can," replied the duke, in no way abashed, "afford to wait for the return of my affection."

As he glanced significantly round at the three silent men he seemed a very monument of determination.

"But," Lady Ormstork maintained, "we do not wish you to wait. There would be no point in your waiting. Miss Buffkin has made up her mind to contract a quite different alliance."

"Ah?" The duke opened his mouth wide and emitted an exclamation in tone and mode of utterance worthy of a surprised hyæna. Then shutting his mouth and opening his eyes whose light the facial contortion had absorbed, he added with, to certain of the party at least, disquieting significance, "Our Spanish proverb says, 'He who buys ground may rest under it before he can repose above it.' May I, without offence, ask the ever gracious Miss Buffkin whether you correctly interpret her sentiments and intentions?"

The ever gracious Miss Buffkin looked as defiant as her questioner—and much less polite, as she answered, "That's right enough. I'm going to marry an Englishman, for one thing."

"Ah?" Again the zoological grimace. "Has the radiant Miss Buffkin honoured any particular Englishman with her much-to-be coveted preference?"

The question, accompanied as it was, by a sweeping and minatory glance, had the immediate effect of making two Englishmen in the room try to look severely recusant and anti-matrimonial.

And under the influence of that fell glance Gage took a desperate resolve.

Lady Ormstork, who believed in coming to the point where her own interests were concerned, answered with bold preciseness, "Certainly. Miss Buffkin is going to marry Lord Quorn."

At the declaration the duke made a face which raised his bristling moustache till his eyes glared through a fan-like screen of hair, the real Lord Quorn uttered an exclamation which conveyed no definite sentiment, Gage turned the colour of the fruit associated with his name, and Peckover, trying to persuade himself that the discussion did not touch him, whistled softly through his teeth.

"Lord Quorn!" repeated the duke in a tone of bland surprise. "No. That may have been. But I fancy, most illustrious lady, you are mistaken. Milord Quorn has renounced all pretentions to the lady's hand."

"Lord Quorn has done nothing of the kind," Lady Ormstork denied stoutly.

The duke turned to Gage, polite yet threatening. "Doubtless milord Quorn will do me the honour to confirm what I have stated."

"Lord Quorn," interrupted the old lady, "will do nothing of the sort."

The duke raised himself on tip-toe and fixed the apprehensive Gage with his fiercest glare. "Milord Quorn will do so—or lay himself open to the consequences," he insisted, with a truculent nod of command.

"I—er—of course I—I have no wish to stand in the lady's light," Gage stammered weakly.

"Light?" echoed Lady Ormstork in a high-pitched voice. "I fancy, my dear Lord Quorn, we are the best judges of the quarter the light shines from."

"It shines," observed the duke with grim imperturbability, "from Spain."

"It shines," retorted the dowager with haughty insistence, "from Staplewick Towers."

"I am deeply grieved," said the duke, "to sound a discordant note in the symphony of your distinguished plans. But I declare that the adorable Miss Ulrica shall never marry Lord Quorn."

"I say she shall," retorted Lady Ormstork defiantly.

"She shall not—even if a regrettable necessity should dictate that there be no Lord Quorn for her to marry."

Thus the duel proceeded; the passes growing hotter and keener every moment. Miss Buffkin had subsided on a sofa and from her attitude might have been an uninterested and slightly bored spectator. And all the while the three men who looked on said nothing, wisely, perhaps. But their interest in the encounter was not to be judged by their silence, as they watched their champion's efforts with mixed feelings. They were, all three, in love with the beautiful Miss Buffkin, but each was likewise consumed by an intense regard for his own safety.

"It is not," said Lady Ormstork with dignity—and that aristocratic matrimonial agent could be very dignified when she chose—"the fashion among English gentlemen to indulge in absurd threats when their pretensions are rejected. In this country we took leave of the Dark Ages long ago."

"Absurd threats, eh?" the little duke repeated, with a laugh which fell chill and jarring on, at any rate, Gage's ear. "We shall see. Yes, we shall see—those of us"—he glanced fiercely round the room—"who are alive next week—how far my threats are vain."

"Ridiculous nonsense!" Lady Ormstork exclaimed with a scornful and somewhat stagey laugh.

The duke bowed. "I have the honour, most illustrious lady, to receive your ultimatum, and to accept it. It is horribly unfortunate that we find ourselves diametrically opposed. But so it is; and I have no more to say—to you, except to bid you *au revoir*, with my most distinguished compliments."

He bowed very low to her, then to Ulrica, after which with a kind of fiendish politeness to each of the three men, taking Gage with marked intention last. "Milord Quorn," he said, drawing back his lips till his moustache stood up like two wings against his cheeks, "I regret that my friendly hint has not been taken. You have called the game. I shall have the honour of playing it—as," he raised his voice, "as my honoured and distinguished ancestors have always played it."

"Don't talk nonsense, duke," said Lady Ormstork sharply.

The representative of the distinguished and bloodthirsty Saloljas raised himself abruptly from a bow he was elaborating, and faced the lady. "A Salolja," he said, with as much dignity as a short stature coupled with a long nose is capable of, "never talks nonsense."

"If you presume," she continued threateningly, "to annoy Lord Quorn——"

"A Salolja," he interrupted, with a significant smile, "never annoys."

"Or threaten—' pursued Lady Ormstork.

"A Salolja," he returned, with a Castilian gesture of deprecation, "never threatens. It is only within the last hundred and fifty years that he has condescended to warn."

"We can warn too," retorted the lady doggedly. "Warn the police."

The duke looked quite tickled. "Most gracious lady," he replied, showing his teeth in a grin from which none of his male listeners derived any mirth, "you make me smile. I think the question of your police we have already analysed, I and the excellent Lord Quorn. If your graces have no more notable argument to put forth to arrest the traditions of the Saloljas I will ask your gracious permission to take my leave—for the present."

He accompanied the last three words with a glance which boded battle, murder and sudden death to at least one of his hearers. Then, with a sweeping bow, he turned to the door.

"Stop!" cried Gage in a voice resonant with fear. "You are all making a mistake. I am not Lord Quorn!"

CHAPTER XXXV

At the startling declaration the duke swung round and eyed Gage with a glance that seemed capable of penetrating an inch board. Lady Ormstork, surprised for a moment out of her transcendent self-possession, stared aghast at the object of her designs; Ulrica looked half astonished and half relieved; Peckover's mien was one of abject discomfiture; while Quorn's showed grim expectation.

"Not Lord Quorn?" screamed Lady Ormstork incredulously.

"So? Not Lord Quorn?" repeated the duke, prepared to resume the aggressive.

"No, I'm not," Gage declared stoutly. "If I ever was, I've had enough of it. But I never was by rights."

"Not Lord Quorn by rights?" gasped Lady Ormstork.

"Never. At least never no more. So you'll please to consider me out of this little complication."

"This," observed the duke, truculently thoughtful, "is very singular."

"Very," Lady Ormstork agreed. "One would like to have some explanation of such an extraordinary statement."

"We must know how we stand," said the duke, who had assumed the attitude of a stunted bravo.

"I tell you," Gage maintained, "I am no more Lord Quorn than you are."

There was a short silence. Then Lady Ormstork demanded pointedly, "Then who, may I ask, is Lord Quorn?"

Gage indicated the unwilling Peckover. "This is Lord Quorn. I am plain Peter Gage."

Quorn, the real Quorn, laughed scornfully, and seemed to see light.

Miss Buffkin clapped her hands. "You Lord Quorn? How lovely!" she exclaimed, beaming at Peckover.

"Aha! So you are Lord Quorn?" cried the duke transferring to that person his highly undesirable attention.

"No, I'll be hanged if I am," protested the abnegating Peckover.

"You'll be shot if you are," observed Gage half aloud, with a glance at the highly-stoked little Spaniard, who stood pulling his quill-like moustaches, and whose unswerving glance confirmed the forecast.

Ulrica had jumped up. "There, we've settled it already, dear Lady Ormstork," she cried. "Isn't it lucky!"

"Lucky?" echoed Lady Ormstork, rather non-plussed.

"Yes," Ulrica assured her. "We've settled it between ourselves. I like him. He's my sort."

From the duke came a deep, rumbling "Oom!" as a grim commentary on the reshuffle of the position.

"But I'm not Lord Quorn," Peckover urged vehemently, beginning to be seriously alarmed.

"You are!" maintained Gage.

"One of you must be," said the duke, as though merely anxious not to make a mistake in the selection of his victim.

"Not me!" To such a state of poverty was Peckover's vocabulary reduced.

"Oh, Percival!" Ulrica exclaimed reproachfully. "Don't deny it."

"He can't," declared Gage, under the influence of the baleful Salolja eyes and moustaches which dominated the scene.

"May I ask," said Lady Ormstork with dignified severity, "how you came to call yourself Lord Quorn?"

"Well," replied Gage frankly, "I thought I'd like to see how it felt to be a lord. And," he added pointedly, "I don't care much for the feeling."

"And may I ask," continued the dowager, addressing herself to the bothered and daunted Peckover, "how it was you came to renounce your title?"

"I made it worth his while," Gage explained shortly, determined to be off with the galling honour.

The real Lord Quorn in his corner gave a long whistle of semi-enlightenment.

"I never had it," protested the unhappy Peckover.

The duke, bristling, took a step forward. "Lord Quorn!" he snapped his fingers loudly and contemptuously. "It is no matter. You are at least a suitor of this lady?"

Happily Lady Ormstock saved Peckover from replying to the delicate suggestion. "Not unless he is Lord Quorn," she declared resolutely.

"I tell you," cried Peckover desperately, "I am not Lord Quorn."

"Then you are a fraud," Gage asserted roughly.

"I never said I was Lord Quorn," urged Peckover.

"You never said you weren't," rejoined Gage.

The fiery blood of the Saloljas was beginning to weary of these polemics and to be impatient for its cue. "It is no matter," he said with loud, painfully loud, authority. "I take it"—to Peckover—"that you are Lord Quorn, and you have, for reasons inexplicable to a Spanish nobleman been pleased to divest yourself temporarily of your rank. You have addressed yourself to this lady—as Lord Quorn or by a humbler name, it matters not. I have the honour to request a few words with your excellency in the garden."

His excellency's countenance expressed a strong disinclination to any such *al fresco* conference. Indeed, so far was he from complying with the duke's haughty and peremptory invitation that he sat down on a chair which stood handy. "Not much," he said vernacularly. "I'm not taking any just at present, thanks all the same." He felt himself comparatively safe where he was. Even a Spanish duke of vindictive and homicidal idiosyncrasies could scarcely have the face to murder him coolly in a room before four non-accessory witnesses.

Whether the duke realized that the refusal contained a certain admixture of defiance is uncertain. Anyhow, he took two strides with his short legs, and, at uncomfortably close quarters, repeated the invitation.

But Peckover sat tight. "I'm not Lord Quorn," he maintained doggedly, "and I've had as much fresh air as I want for one day." His complexion was green with fear. With the searching fire of those eyes upon him he felt it was as much as he could do to keep from shrivelling up; still, what mind panic had left him was dominated by the assurance that once in the garden it would be all over with his somewhat luridly chequered career. The Salolja eyes held him. He tried to glance round for encouragement, for a touch of companionship even, at the others in the room who, however, watched the scene in grim and more or less embarrassed silence. But though for a moment his eyes sought them, he saw nothing, and next instant they were riveted again on the demon duke, now so near that he could feel his fiery breath. But he kept his seat with a drowning

man's desperation.

"Will your grace come?" rang out the sharp, staccato tones. "Or will it be necessary for me to drag your excellency out by the nose?"

The alternative was not attractive, and its proposer looked quite capable of putting it into execution.

"I tell you I am not Lord Quorn, and never was," yelled the wretched Peckover, now simply beside himself. "If you want him, there he is." He pointed to the corner where stood the real peer, looking, however, particularly unlike one, and in a high state of doubt as to the line he should take. He compromised with the question by giving, in the first instance, a loud, derisive laugh.

"Very pretty, Mr. Gage, or whatever your alias is. So I'm Lord Quorn, am I, when it suits your book? That's a rich idea. Ho! ho! ho!" And he laughed again with offensive resonance.

"Who," demanded Lady Ormstork in a tone of disgust, "is this noisy person?"

"Lord Quorn," was Peckover's prompt reply.

"What?" cried Gage in bewilderment.

"Milord Quorn, eh?" said the duke, transferring his bristling attention to the latest participant in that questionable distinction.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Lady Ormstork, obviously judging by appearance, which certainly did not go far to suggest a member of the peerage.

Quorn laughed again, less comfortably this time under the observation of the duke. "Of course I'm not," he said, in a tone which lost in the utterance its original intention of irony. "How can I be, except in these gentlemen's imagination?" For he had a shrewd idea, as things were going, that, at the moment, the title carried certain unpleasant contingent liabilities with it.

The duke pursed his face into a quizzical sneer. "No, I do not think you are milord Quorn, my good fellow," he concluded, taking Lady Ormstork's view of the badly groomed object of his scrutiny.

"He is Lord Quorn," Peckover insisted vehemently, "if anybody is."

"Of course," retorted Quorn with withering point, "I am Lord Quorn when it is necessary."

The duke, manifestly tiring of the question of identity and resolving (possibly Castilian fashion) to settle the point for himself, was about to resume his somewhat drastic argument with Peckover when Ulrica interrupted the genial intention.

"I believe this person is Lord Quorn," she said, with pointed reference to the real man. "He told me so himself just now in the garden. He said the other was an imposter and advised me to have nothing to do with him."

"My dear Ulrica!" cried Lady Ormstork, half doubtingly; then turned to Quorn with a face prepared to beam on the shortest notice.

"What did I tell you?" exclaimed Peckover realizing it was a case of *sauve qui peut*.

The duke, almost forgetting punctilio in his cumulative exasperation, turned again to Quorn, resolved to be at definite issue with somebody, while his jealousy was spurred by Lady Ormstork's evident readiness to establish as Miss Buffkin's suitor the right Quorn, if only she could get hold of him.

"So you are Lord Quorn, my fine fellow," he exclaimed with a mock bow (for, as we know, Quorn was shabby). "You are eager to pay your addresses to this adorable lady, and are doubtless prepared to accept the consequences?"

Quorn, at a loss for a reply, stared stupidly at his fierce interrogator, while Peckover judged himself sufficiently reprieved to venture to wink at Gage.

"I don't do anything of the sort," Quorn at length said weakly.

"Oh, Lord Quorn," protested Ulrica mischievously. "You know you said I was to marry the right Lord Quorn, and you were the man."

"So?" cried the duke, with fell conviction that he had at last got his man. "It is well. You are Lord Quorn. *Je l'accepte*. May I request the honour of a private word with your illustrious lordship in the garden?"

"Not exactly," was that illustrious noble's pithy reply to the invitation.

Of the duke's Castilian stock of patience very little was left. "It is necessary," he insisted with a ferocious grin. "I am not to be denied. Your grace shall come—now."

"You will not be so absurd as to go, Lord Quorn," put in Lady Ormstork with time-serving sympathy.

Quorn did not look in the least like committing the absurdity. He set his teeth and glared round at the other men in a sort of forlorn hope of assistance. But they, though naturally deeply interested, made no sign. The conditions were, at the moment, too complex for a clear line of altruism.

"Your excellency shall come," said the duke through his teeth. "I am the Duke of Salolja, and a Grandee of Spain. I will not be balked."

But the representative of the British aristocracy still hung back. "I insist," maintained the Spaniard, darting forward and seizing a reluctant arm. The Englishman's counter move was to sit down on a chair which stood beside him. Anticipating the move, the duke pulled him sharply away. The consequence was that Quorn sat down on the floor. Not quite seeing his way to conduct his adversary from that posture into the garden, the duke was fain, while seeking a feasible plan, to spurn the lowly nobleman with his foot.

"For shame!" cried Lady Ormstork.

"If you kick me I'll hand you over to the police," said Quorn unhappily and speaking at a certain disadvantage.

The duke gave a crowing laugh of scorn, a favourite trick of his when "the force" was mentioned. "The police! Hah! hah! Where are they, your police?"

The question was answered by Bisgood, who at that juncture opened the door, and, subduing with difficulty all outward signs of a pardonable astonishment, announced—

"Detective-Inspector Doutfire from Great Bunbury wishes to speak to your lordship."

CHAPTER XXXVI

Mr. Doutfire came in close upon Bisgood's announcement, and threw a severely professional eye round the company. His manner, in fact, suggested, in a measure, that he was raiding a gambling den; but then the suspicious habit had become characteristic with him. And indeed, the attitudes of the party might be said to have justified mistrust, or at any rate an inquisitorial curiosity on his part. He bowed to Gage with a nicely adjusted balance between the homage due to a peer of the Realm and a due regard for the Law whose representative he was and which boasted itself no respecter of persons. It is, perhaps, scarcely necessary to state that Peckover viewed his advent with an uneasy eye.

"Beg pardon, my lord," Doutfire said in his consequential, witness-box manner, "sorry to intrude upon your lordship, but I considered it my duty to inform your lordship that a certain suspicious character has been noticed hanging about the grounds here, and I took it upon myself to just step up and warn your lordship."

The somewhat tense silence which followed was broken by the duke's staccato tones. "So this is milord Quorn, eh, policeman?"

Mr. Doutfire looked not merely scandalized, but ready at a moment's notice to take the representative of the lordly Saloljas into custody.

"Detective-Inspector is my rank and appellation, sir, begging your pardon," he said severely. "With regard to your question, sir, I have every reason to believe I am right in stating that this gentleman—I should say nobleman—is Lord Quorn."

"So? Thank you, detective," said the duke with a bow of acknowledgment for the information, and a smile for the futility of the police, once again preparing to focus his traditional aggressiveness upon the unhappy Gage.

But that gentleman did not propose to sit again. "It's all a mistake," he protested loudly. "I am not Lord Quorn. There he is, so far as I can make out."

He pointed to the real Quorn, who had retained his seat upon the floor, and whom, owing to his position behind the door, Doutfire's eagle glance had so far not taken in. That alert officer now, however, lost no time in wheeling round and fixing the lowly peer with a glare of more than suspicion. "This?" he exclaimed incredulously. "Why, this," he darted his head forward and sideways with the sure air of a master of the art of criminal indemnification, "this is the party I have just mentioned to your lordship. A suspicious character who has given us the slip as well as

a lot of trouble. A party known to us as Peckover."

"There!" cried Lady Ormstork, turning from the sedentary nobleman with a face of contemptuous disgust. "I said it was impossible he could be Lord Quorn."

"I know him as Peckover," Mr. Doutfire maintained with authority. "A party against whom a charge of being in possession of and uttering counterfeit coin was lately preferred, but which charge the Treasury has now seen fit to withdraw."

"Oh!" Peckover's face brightened at the news. "But he is Lord Quorn," he insisted.

Mr. Doutfire, who had been keeping that nobleman under observation with a wary and scornful eye, looked as though quite unable to reconcile the statement with its object's position on the floor. "Do I understand that he states he is Lord Quorn?" he asked severely, taking out a large note book with bodily contortions and ominous play with its broad elastic band.

"On the contrary, I've said nothing of the sort," objected Quorn. "Did I?" he added appealing to the company above him.

Mr. Doutfire's look suggested that to his mind that assertion, even if correct, did not fully account for the suspect's position on the carpet. "Well, bring yourself up," he commanded roughly. "And let us get at the rights of the question."

Thus bidden, Quorn rose, and faced the officer of the law, defiantly reticent.

"You shall find out at once which of these gentlemen is Lord Quorn," ordered the Duke of Salolja, folding his arms.

"By your leave, sir——" began Doutfire in a tone of trenchant reproof.

"Sir?" cried the duke, speaking very fast and staccato. "My rank and appellation are the Duke of Salolja, I am, moreover, a Grandee of Spain."

Mr. Doutfire covered the hit by a business-like action of putting the point of a stubby lead pencil in his mouth. "I'll make a note of that," he said, to all appearances unmoved by the momentous announcement. And he proceeded to do so, taking a subtle revenge by making the haughty Castilian spell his title, and furthermore suggesting that his pronounciation of the alphabet was suspiciously misleading.

"Your grace," he observed sternly, when the elaborate entry had been made and deliberately revised, "may trust me to take the steps, if any, necessary to clear up this matter." He turned from the fuming Spaniard, and addressed himself pointedly to the rest of the company. "Do I understand," he asked approaching the extraordinary complication with an absence of emotion which suggested that the tackling of such questions was with him an every-day occurrence, "do I understand that there is some doubt as to the identity of Lord Quorn?"

"Precisely," replied the duke.

Mr. Doutfire by an authoritative wave of his notebook enjoined the Castilian despot to silence. "I ask you, sir," he said, pointedly to Gage, "whether you are or are not Lord Quorn?"

"Not I," was the prompt and comparatively cheerful answer.

Mr. Doutfire accepted it with a suggestion of reserving all comment on the surprising statement till a later stage. "Perhaps, then, you will be good enough to tell me who is," he said.

Gage pointed with his thumb to Peckover. "If it's not this gentleman, I don't know who it is," he replied indifferently.

"Nothing of the nobility about me," Peckover declared in answer to Doutfire's interrogative glance. "I tell you that is the individual, over there," indicating Quorn, who was now sufficiently recovered from the ducal onslaught to laugh jeeringly.

"I like that!" he exclaimed. "Making me Lord Quorn when it comes useful."

"You are Peckover?" demanded Mr. Doutfire confidently.

"If you say so," was the reply.

"I do say so," said Doutfire, whose reputation clearly hinged on the correctness of the statement.

"I knew he was not Lord Quorn," put in Lady Ormstork.

"He told me he was," observed Miss Buffkin.

Mr. Doutfire turned a threateningly suspicious glance on the stolid Quorn, then pursed his mouth with a pitying smile of non-acceptance as he shook his head emphatically at the young lady. "He's Peckover all right, miss," he assured her. Then glared at Quorn as though challenging

him to deny it.

And Quorn, although not overburdened with intellect, had sense enough to recognize that his game just then was to lie low and admit nothing if he could help it.

"My dear Ulrica," said Lady Ormstork in her superior fashion, "how could you allow yourself to be taken in by such a transparent pretence? Does the person look in the least like Lord Quorn?"

"Or any other nobleman?" supplemented Doutfire, with menacing sarcasm. "Of course," he added, in a more uncompromisingly professional tone, "if he has been defrauding any of you ladies and gentlemen, under the false pretence that he is Lord Quorn, I'll take him now to Bunbury against your preferring a charge against him."

His enquiring look round meeting with no response, save a scornful smile from Quorn, Doutfire proceeded, eyeing the suspect malevolently, "I don't know how he comes to be here, in this house, but——"

"He stopped my horse that was running away with me," Gage explained chivalrously.

"Oh!" Mr. Doutfire's face hardened, as though that in itself were a questionable circumstance, and made the doubtful record worse. "Well, of course," he continued, not seeing his way to any active measures under the reprobative circumstances, "if you are satisfied, it is no business of mine. I've merely done my duty."

The Duke of Salolja who had endured this discussion with ill concealed impatience, now spoke again.

"Then it is one of these gentlemen who is really Lord Quorn, eh, constable?"

"Detective-Inspector, if your grace has no objection," was the withering correction. After giving the same time to take effect, he addressed himself to deal with the question. "As to which of these gentlemen is his lordship, I do not, in the absence of any stated charge or legal reason feel myself called upon to decide. Speaking unofficially and without prejudice, I should, if interrogated, incline to the opinion that this gentleman," he indicated Gage with a passing and casual wave of his pocket-book on the way to its resting-place in his coat-tail, "would answer to the description. But I have no *locus standi* in the dispute, and therefore merely express an opinion, as a matter of courtesy, that if the question of identity should be gone into, the gentleman by the palm-stand may possibly be found to be Lord Quorn." After which impressive and useful dictum he bid the party "Good evening," and took a somewhat abrupt departure, fearful, perhaps, of being led into giving an opinion which might at some future time be inconveniently used against him.

As the door closed on him Lady Ormstork said, in a tone of repressed and compromising exasperation, "This is altogether a most extraordinary, unheard-of proceeding. Perhaps by to-morrow more sensible counsels will have prevailed, and we shall know who is and who is not Lord Quorn. But," she added significantly, "I do not overlook the fact that each one of you gentlemen, and consequently whichever of you bears the title, has proposed an alliance between himself and Miss Buffkin. Is that not so, Ulrica, dear?"

"Yes; they've all said as much," replied that young lady casually.

"So?" The Salolja growl reverberated through the room like the first muttering of thunder.

"And," concluded Lady Ormstork, ignoring the minatory rumble, "Miss Buffkin will marry whichever of you turns out, when this absurd mystery is solved, to be Lord Quorn."

"Will she?" observed the duke from the depths of his thickset throat.

"Undoubtedly," was the determined and conclusive reply. "Come, dear. We must be getting home."

"I shall," said the duke, suddenly galvanizing himself into his native politeness, "do myself the distinguished honour of constituting myself your graces' escort. Have I the much prized permission?"

"We will give you a lift—without prejudice," replied Lady Ormstork, with the laudable object of drawing him off from further exercise of his powers of intimidation upon whichever might be the prospective bridegroom.

The duke bowed himself into a right angle. "Your illustrious kindness transcends my poor deserts. I am overwhelmed by this distinguished mark of your favour." He straightened himself, pivoted on his heels till he faced the three men, and bowed to them, this time stopping at an angle of 45°. "Your excellencies, I shall further do myself the supreme honour of returning to pursue my enquiry as to which of you I may have the inestimable privilege of addressing without fear of contradiction as milord Quorn."

He pivoted again till he faced the door, took a phenomenally long stride to it, recovered

himself, flung it open, and with a ceremonial which had quite a mediæval flavour about it, and, indeed, had been probably handed down from one generation of the amiable house of Salolja to another, conducted the ladies to the hall, leaving the three men inert with gloomy anticipations.

CHAPTER XXXVII

So paralysed were they that it was not till the crunching of the carriage wheels on the gravel roused them from their lugubrious stupor that they found tongue to discuss their situation.

"Nice let-in for my money and trouble," said Gage writhing in the Nessus shirt of that fatal peerage.

"At any rate you can't blame me for this pleasing little episode," returned Peckover dispiritedly.

"I like your swearing you are not the rightful Quorn," said Gage huffily.

"I'm not, whoever else may be," maintained his late confederate with a glance at the real man, who met it by an irresponsive glare.

"I only took it for as long as I fancied," urged Gage.

"A bargain's a bargain," observed Peckover. "You can't take on a title and give it up as though it were a furnished house."

"Can't I?" his friend rejoined vehemently. "Anyhow, I mean to. I've had too much of it. I didn't suppose it included Spanish bullies and Australian bush-rangers."

"You can do as you like about giving it up," retorted Peckover. "Only it don't come back to me I promise you. I didn't sell it on appro."

Quorn, who had been ruminating on the events just past in glowering silence, looked up quickly.

"Sell?" he demanded suspiciously. "What do you mean by sell?"

"Mind your own business," returned Gage snappishly. "That's the worst of men like you. You do a fellow a service and then there's no end to the advantage you take of it. Thrusting yourself in and talking absurd rot to the girl. If you don't keep in your place I shall have to put you there."

"That's what I'm going to trouble you to do before you're much older," retorted Quorn darkly.

Gage looked puzzled. "What was your reason," he demanded, turning to Peckover, "for sticking out that he was Lord Quorn? Were you pulling that infernal little fire-brand's short leg, or did you mean it?"

Peckover considered a moment, then replied with a nod at Quorn, "You'd better ask him."

Gage did accordingly ask him.

"Mind your own business," was the unsatisfactory answer. "If you are Lord Quorn nobody else can be. But it would be interesting to know how you came into the title."

"What the deuce does it matter," Peckover protested. "That conundrum will keep. That little devil will be back here directly. What we've got to talk about is how we are going to tackle him."

The suggestion was so profoundly to the point that a depressing silence fell on the trio. They all three jumped when Bisgood came in softly to announce that dinner had been ready half-an-hour.

"Dinner?" cried Gage. "No dinner for me. I'm off."

"Don't be silly," Peckover remonstrated. "We'll have our dinner first. A bottle of champagne is the stuff to bring us into condition. Come on, Jenkins, old man. You're dining with us to-night."

An exacting afternoon had left the trio in a state so low that sustenance was imperative, wherefore they went gloomily in to dinner. The meal was taken hurriedly, and, with regard to the wine, copiously. So by degrees they began to feel in a less abject state of panic.

"Why did we let that fool of a detective talk himself off the premises?" said Peckover regretfully. "Anyhow, we had better have the local man up here in case that nuisance of a duke tries his 'Come into the garden, Maud,' again with us."

"What good will that chaw in uniform be against that little devil?" objected Gage drearily.

"He's somebody," urged Peckover. "And he's got the law behind him."

"And the traditions of the Saloljas in front of him," rejoined Gage.

Nevertheless, to strengthen the garrison, the local constable was sent for, and the three resumed their repast with a slightly enhanced appetite. They had arrived at the sweets stage, and Peckover was wondering whether it was the last apple-tart he was destined to taste, when a clangorous peal at the bell followed by a thundering knock at the door sent the diners' hearts into their mouths.

"If—if that is the Duke of Salolja," said Gage, sick with fear, to Bisgood, "show him into the library. Don't let him—that is, his grace, come in here."

"Very good, my lord," responded Bisgood, whose imperturbability—and immunity—he would have given a fortune to possess.

None of the three men could sit quiet. Gage, after a restless turn round the table, went to the door and listened. As he did so a shade of relief came over his face. "That's not the little brute's voice," he declared hopefully.

"Isn't it? He has got so many," Peckover said dubiously. They scuttled back to their places as the men returned.

"Mr. Carnaby Leo, my lord," Bisgood announced in a tone which suggested a month's notice on his part.

"Has he gone?"

"No, my lord. He said he must see your lordship, so I showed him into the library."

"Miss Leo is not with him?" Quorn asked anxiously.

"No, sir," answered the footman, the great Bisgood declining to notice the question.

"Better turn the key on him," suggested Peckover.

This unheard-of order Bisgood took upon himself to ignore likewise. In the abnormal state of affairs the strain on his dignity was nearly at breaking point.

A footman who looked like going to put the suggestion into practice was loftily, but *sotto voce*, rebuked by his superior, and abandoned his intention.

"I'll go and do it, by Jove," exclaimed Quorn, jumping up and leaving the room, at which action the scandalized Bisgood made no effort to hide his disgust.

Quorn returned. "Got him safe," he said.

"Is the library safe, though?" Peckover suggested shrewdly.

"As if," remarked Gage bitterly, "we hadn't got our hands full without that great nuisance turning up to complicate matters. Let's get on with the wine while we've got any taste left in us," he added, filling his own glass and sending round the decanters.

As Bisgood and his satellites withdrew, eager to find vent for their disgust in the servants'-hall, Peckover jumped up. "An idea!" he cried, brightening. "What do you say having this beast, Leo, in, and passing him off to the duke as Lord Quorn?"

"Not a bad idea," responded Gage, thinking it out.

"Dashed good one," Peckover insisted.

"How can you pass him off," objected Quorn. "He'll say he is not Quorn."

"We've all said that," rejoined Peckover shrewdly. "All the same, one of us is that noble lord. We'll tell the duke that he is incog. for certain private reasons, and let 'em fight it out between themselves."

"If any one can tackle that little spit-fire it's Carnaby," said Gage.

"And if any one can hustle Carnaby it's the duke," added Quorn.

"Whichever way it goes we shall be gainers," observed Gage. "But how about Ulrica?"

"Oh, we'll work her into it all right," Peckover replied confidently. "Let's have the ruffian in and give him some pop."

"Hark!" cried Quorn, holding up his hand. As Gage opened the door there came across the

hall from the library sounds suggestive of a domestic tornado. Their obvious message was that Mr. Carnaby Leo had discovered, and was resenting, the fact that he was more or less in durance, and was communicating his state of feelings through the medium of double-soled boots to the furniture in general and to the mahogany door in particular.

"Let's buck up, and release the brute before he wrecks the place," said Peckover; "or he'll have no kick left in him for that Spanish beauty."

He walked boldly to the door, and threw it open. "Anything wrong?" he inquired, with what was, under the circumstances, an irritating blandness.

"Anything wrong?" roared Mr. Leo, lashing out backwards and kicking a chair, quite futilely, to a remote corner of the room. "No. But there's going to be. Lock me up, will you, you pair of skunks?" For Quorn had withdrawn to a somewhat obscure position. "I'll teach you——!"

"The lock's out of order," Peckover explained with admirable plausibility. "Slips forward when the door's banged. See? We were just coming to ask you to join us over a bottle of champagne."

The proposal had an immediately mollifying effect on the rampageous visitor. "Lead the way, then," he responded thirstily. "I've got a word or two to say to you from my sister Lalage, and I can talk better when the hinges of my voice-box are oiled."

They returned to the dining-room, and Mr. Leo began to pay an unremitting attention to the lubricant which, according to his statement, should have conduced to unusual eloquence. Anyhow, he spoke, when at last he found time, if not rhetorically, at least to the point.

"What I've come to say to you scallywags," he began politely, in a tone which made his hearers look round to be sure the doors were fast shut, "is that we, me and my sister, splendid girl, have just about had enough of this shilly-shally nonsense. We want Lord Quorn, dead or alive, and, what's more, we mean to have him."

He banged his great fist down on the table and glanced at the three men. Gage and Peckover looked politely tolerant, while Quorn regarded his bugbear now for the first time at close quarters, with an attention bordering on fright.

"As," proceeded the gentle Carnaby, "I have said before, and say now for the last time you'll have ears to hear it, I and my beloved sister have not come ten thousand miles to be made fools of."

Gage and Peckover made sympathetic responses, and Quorn exhibited signs of marked uneasiness.

"The man," their amiable guest resumed, "who tries to make a fool of us is a goner." He caught up a large apple from a dish. "I take the skunk in hand like this. See?" He twisted the fruit in halves which he casually threw over his shoulders. They reached the sideboard, where one accounted for a tray of liqueur-glasses, while the other took effect upon the globe and chimney of a tall lamp.

"See?" he repeated, with a certain pride in the rather extravagant object lesson. "See?" He turned suddenly upon the much-impressed Quorn and thundered the somewhat superfluous question at him.

"Ye-es, I see," he answered, jumping half out of his chair and trying to look amused.

"Then why the blazes don't you say so?" Carnaby demanded, ignoring the fact that the comment he looked for was clearly unnecessary. "Who is this silly mug?" he added, with evidence of a natural antipathy to persons who received his feats in presumably unappreciative silence.

"Jenkins," answered Quorn hastily, rattling his wits together.

"Jenkins?" echoed Carnaby in loud scorn. "He looks it. Well, now, see here, Jenkins Esquire, my beauty. Just fancy yourself for the moment, if Jenkins is equal to the strain, fancy yourself Lord Quorn. He's a skunk, so perhaps it'll come easy to you, Jenkins."

Quorn could but smile uneasily at the pleasantry.

"Now, I should say to you," proceeded his urbane neighbour, making the most of a happy stroke of innuent personification, "Look here, Quorn, my dasher, the man, lord or lout, or both, who makes love to my sister, my lovely Lalage, and engages her affections has got to marry her. See?"

The uncomfortable personator of himself signified promptly his entire comprehension.

"If you jib," continued the Antipodean Chesterfield, "if you kick, if you try to slip out,—well—you've got to settle with the strongest man for his weight in the continent of Australia; a man, mark you, whose trade is fighting, against odds for preference, and who means business. See?"

The fascinated Quorn signed his complete grasp of the speaker's meaning.

"A man, I repeat," Carnaby went on, after seeking fresh ideas in a further libation, "who sticks at nothing where his honour and the honour of his family are concerned. Law? What's the law to me? Nothing. They know that out there. The law where I came from gives me a wide berth. It knows me. When a slink calls himself a nobleman, he's got to act as a nobleman, or I'll make him act as a swab and scrub the place down with him. See?"

He glared round at his three auditors who were listening to his edifying account of himself and his proposals with rapt attention.

"I've not seen the man I'm after, unless I see him before me now," Mr. Leo proceeded, waxing truculent. "But I presume he has a nose." This supposition remaining unchallenged, he took up a banana, and proceeded, "There it is." He wrenched off the end of the fruit and tossed it in the air whence it came down plump into Quorn's forgotten glass of wine. Ignoring the episode, the pretty fellow continued, "He has, or as a nobleman, should have, two eyes."

No one had a word to say against the computation.

"Here goes," said Carnaby, accompanying the words by a graphic illustration (using the remaining portion of the banana for the purpose) of the latest and most approved method of removing the human eye without having recourse to a surgical operation. Then, the experiment having been brought to an eminently impressive conclusion, the performer playfully took aim with the residue at a portrait of Everard, ninth Baron Quorn, and was successful in hitting that nobleman in the middle of his somewhat vacuous face, and rendering the likeness, if any, for the time unrecognizable.

Emboldened by the effect produced not only on the face of the family portrait but on those of his living hearers, Mr. Leo became even more ruthlessly virulent.

"Lord Quorn!" he cried in thick accents of withering scorn, "If Lord Quorn or any other man, noble or otherwise, plays fast and loose with my glorious sister, I'll just take him and twist his head off his shoulders. Won't I?"

He glared round as though some one had had the temerity to contradict him, which, however, was not the case. His question meeting with no material response, he next, in pursuance of his pomological method of illustration, snatched up a pineapple. "Twist his head off his shoulders," he repeated somewhat unnecessarily, "like this." With a frantic effort he tugged and twisted the cactus-like plume till it came away from the fruit.

"That's the style," he roared exultingly, "I'll treat any man who gets in my light or annoys my sister. See? I'll scatter his carcass to the four winds of heaven. See?"

Suiting the action more or less to the words he flung the fragments viciously into various corners of the room, where they did more or less damage, coming in their flight unpleasantly near his interested audience. Then turning round with a ferocious action, he heaved the body of the pine in another direction. This happened to be towards the door, which had just opened to admit an addition to the cheerful party. Next instant a cry of rage made it apparent that the heavy fruit had struck in the middle of his waistcoat no less a personage than his Grace the Duke of Salolja.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

The hit was greeted by an offensive laugh of exultation by the thrower, with a gasp of subdued rage by the receiver of the spinous missile, and by the rest of the company with various indications of apprehensive curiosity.

"Now," murmured Peckover through his teeth, "we're going to see something."

An Englishman, under the same circumstances, would probably have picked up the weighty fruit and returned the shot. Not so the little Castilian, whose dignity was in no direct ratio to his inches. Quickly recovering from the discomposing impact, and forcing his sinister features as far into a smile as his mental attitude would allow, he bowed ceremoniously, although the full effect of the salutation was somewhat marred by the fact that, following close on the shot, it had rather the appearance of a doubling-up caused by physical derangement. However, he presently straightened himself and regarded the party with comparative, if delusive, serenity.

"Your excellencies are pleased to be merry to-night," he observed, in a tone which seemed to promise a speedy end to the merriment.

The duke now addressed himself to Mr. Leo. "Your grace is an admirable shot," he observed pleasantly. "If, that is, my poor person was chosen as the mark for your grace's aim." Then suddenly changing his manner from the courteous to the terrific, till he became five feet three of

incarnate bristling, scintillating ferocity, he added, "I too, as I shall hope soon to convince your grace, am a tolerable shot, although not with articles of dessert."

The pug-dogged look of aggressive impudence faded from Carnaby's face, giving way to an expression of foolish discomfiture. Nevertheless he replied, with a not too convincing nod of assurance. "All right, my prime bantam, I'll show you something."

But for the moment all he showed his challenger was his back as he turned and walked to the other end of the table, where he grabbed up a fistful of cigars.

"Who," asked the duke, suddenly polite again, "may I inquire, is this distinguished gentleman?"

For reasons best known to himself the distinguished gentleman seemed inclined to let the question of his identity remain in suspense rather than hold further communication with the questioner. Apparently he was too deeply engrossed in lighting one of his raided cigars to notice the query.

But here the ever-alert Peckover saw and seized his opportunity. With a pantomime of mystery he called the duke aside.

"That's him; Lord Quorn. The real man and no mistake," he said rapidly under his breath, "Calls himself Leo, for private reasons, you understand. Threatens to kill us if we give him away."

"Oho! So?" The duke turned an ominously interested eye on the latest idea of the interloping nobleman, his mind, meanwhile, rapidly running over the probabilities of the case. Mr. Leo, having recovered from his late upset by the aid of a bumper of old port wine, was now lounging against the mantel-piece with that easy air of proprietorship which stature and muscle coupled with low brain power are apt to give. He might, indeed, have fitted in very well just then with a foreigner's idea of a bucolic English milord, and as such his appearance commended him to the ferocious Spaniard's purpose. The Duke glanced searchingly at his informant, however, as though determined to make certain before turning his polite attentions to the new candidate for a thrill.

"Why did your excellencies one after another call yourselves milord Quorn?" he demanded pertinently.

"We had to. He made us," was the ready answer. "Says he'll twist the neck of any man who calls him Lord Quorn."

The duke received the information with a grim elevation of his thick eyebrows. "So? We shall see. But Miss Buffkin?" he asked sharply. "There is nothing between them?"

Peckover made a grimace which might be understood to signify amusement at the suggestion. "Isn't there?" he replied, "when she is brought up here every day to see him. That's why he's keeping himself dark," he added slyly. "There's another lady in the question; see? And he's all for Buffkin."

A roar came from the fireplace. "What are you mumping about there, you little rats? Speak up, and let's hear all about it before I shake it out of you. I've got my say to finish when you've done croaking."

The muttered conference therefore ceased. Peckover resumed his seat, and the duke turned and regarded Carnaby with an attention which was doubtless somewhat irritating to that sensitive gentleman.

"What are you staring at, smallbones?" he demanded fiercely as though lashing himself into a fury to counteract the effect of the Salolja eye. "When fools stare at me I scoop their eyes out to teach 'em better manners."

The duke accepted the interesting statement with a bow. "Yes?" he responded appreciatively.

"Yes, I do," maintained Mr. Leo savagely. "I'm a man, as I've been telling these scallywags, who stands no nonsense."

Again the duke bowed. "I applaud your grace," he said.

A horrible suspicion that he was being laughed at seemed to take hold of the doughty Mr. Leo. "You applaud my grace, do you?" he cried, forcing his voice into a sneering squeak. "Who asked for your halfpenny opinion? You keep your sauce to stew that over-grown nose in when I've pulled it off."

For an instant, at the dire insult, there was a flash of murder in the duke's eyes. Then, with an air of storing up what he had received for cumulative repayment he inquired softly, with his eternal bow, "I have the distinguished honour of addressing milord Quorn?"

"You're an undersized liar," was the somewhat pointed reply.

"I think not," rejoined the duke confidently, "although it will be my duty to remember that

your grace has called me one. Lord Quorn——"

"My name's Leo!" came with a roar.

"I believe not," insisted the duke.

"Lord Quorn! I'd like to catch him!" cried Carnaby.

The duke smiled indulgently, yet with a homicidal preoccupation. "I believe," he said coolly, "I have had the good fortune to catch him."

"Where is the skunk?" demanded Mr. Leo, with a noticeable falling off in the volume of his tone. It was clear that his opponent's steadfastness was beginning to tell.

"May I ask," observed the duke, "as a favour, that your grace will not make so much noise, but will accord your most humble servant the supreme privilege of saying a few words to you?" His voice had begun to come out in bursts, in the fashion which had created such a disagreeable effect on Gage and Peckover at the first interview.

Mr. Leo, inclined to wilt, made yet a gallant effort to pull himself together. "If you want to jaw," he replied with scarcely equal courtesy, "go into the next room and jaw your jaw off. You won't spoil your beauty, for plain reasons. I'm getting sick of you. You spoil the flavour of this cigar."

"I intend to," was the hardly expected retort. "Although it is a pity, as it is possibly the last your grace will ever smoke."

The dark eyes were now fixed on his grace with all their scorching ferocity. Mr. Leo looked as though the cigar or something else had indeed disagreed with him. The three spectators of the duel wanted only the sense of complete personal immunity to enjoy it hugely.

"I have not the honour of knowing," proceeded the little Spaniard, holding the big bully in his best rattlesnake fashion, "whether your grace is aware that I am the Duke of Salolja, and a Grandee of Spain, the present and, alas, unworthy representative of the noble house of Salolja, a family which has preserved its traditions and its honour intact from time immemorial."

The effect of the announcement on Mr. Carnaby Leo was not quite apparent, except that he seemed in two minds whether to crunch up his diminutive opponent or to give way to abject terror. "What's all that to me?" he returned, in a voice that seemed to be getting rather out of control.

The duke shrugged. "It is customary," he explained, "in my country, that in affairs of honour strict punctilio should be maintained. Further, I wish to do myself the honour of informing your grace that my family, the Saloljas, have never permitted an injury or an insult to pass unavenged."

"Same with me," responded Mr. Leo, addressing himself, however, possibly for convenience' sake, to the men at the table.

"It is," pursued the duke, intensifying his steady glare, "a matter of felicitation that our sentiments agree upon the point. But enough. I come, as you British say, to business. I have the honour to be the aggrieved party. Your grace is probably aware that I purpose to ally myself matrimonially with Miss Ulrica Buffkin?"

The apparent irrelevance of the observation prompted Mr. Leo to pluck up a little courage. "No," he answered with a touch of his old manner, "I don't know, and I don't care."

"So?" The little man steadied his rage by tugging at his portentous moustache. "Your grace refuses then to recognize my pretensions?" he demanded menacingly.

Mr. Leo gave a stupid laugh. "You don't," he retorted with clumsy humour, "expect me to take off my hat to them, do you?"

The duke accepted the defiance with a bow. "Perhaps not," he returned viciously. "So we will leave that affair for the present. It may be we shall never arrive so far together. There are, happily, other matters which have the precedence."

"What are you mumbling about?" Mr. Leo inquired with characteristic politeness.

"As I entered the room," continued the duke, ignoring the interruption, "I was struck on the—breast by a pine-apple thrown by your grace. Is it not so?"

Mr. Leo forced a laugh. "Didn't see you coming," he explained weakly.

The duke drew back a pace with every indication of astonishment. "Is it possible then," he demanded severely, "that your grace asks me to believe that you scatter fruit about your room for amusement?"

"Sometimes," Carnaby replied uncomfortably.

His tormentor waved aside the answer as frivolous.

"Subsequently to that blow which only blood can efface," he resumed impressively, laying his hand on the spot where the shot took effect, "your grace was pleased to distinguish my poor self by certain opprobrious remarks and designations, in the hearing of these honourable gentlemen. Your grace permitted yourself to allude disrespectfully to my stature. Your grace will understand that the character and deeds of the Saloljas are not measured by inches," he added proudly.

"Glad to hear it," Mr. Leo growled rashly.

"Your grace was further led," proceeded the duke, raising his voice ominously, "to speak in unbecoming terms of my opinion and of my nose. It is a matter of regret that my judgment and my features do not meet with your grace's approval, but it is the judgment and it is the nose with which Heaven has been pleased to endow my poor self, and up to the present the noble house of Salolja has had no serious cause of complaint against Heaven in respect to its gifts."

Mr. Leo tried to give sign of amusement, but the laugh stuck somewhere, and did not reach the surface.

"Your grace," the little demon went on, "also took upon yourself to cast an aspersion on my veracity. A Salolja," he continued with pompous dignity, "does not lie. No Salolja has cause to lie. Pride is truth. Lying is for slaves and shopkeepers. Now when a man insults me it is something to pay for, when in my person he insults the most noble family of Salolja it is everything. He shall pay with the last drop of his blood."

The somewhat one-sided conversation was evidently making for a climax. The interest of the three men had become breathless. Mr. Leo, literally and metaphorically with his back to the wall, realized that his reputation was about to be put to the touch; also that he was, all things considered, in a somewhat parlous situation. His dull brain became obsessed by a lively regret that he had addressed his diminutive adversary in terms which were conspicuous by their disregard for the noble duke's personal dignity. Still something had now to be done. He must assert himself and at once. The instinct of the coward and the bully wrestled sharply within him. But the promptings of fear were not to be followed, since retreat dignified or otherwise, was out of the question The tricks of his old trade were the only resource left him, and so he was forced blindly to fall back on them.

CHAPTER XXXIX

With a prodigious effort Mr. Leo pulled himself together. "We've had enough of your lip," he declared in a loud voice. "I don't jaw, I fight. Look here." He caught up the fire-irons one after another and went through the rather too familiar business of twisting and snapping them. The duke watched the performance with folded arms and a sarcastic smile. Mr. Leo, lashing himself into as much of a fine fury as he could attain, and losing his head in the process, took a silver goblet from a niche in the overmantel and with a mighty play of muscle squeezed it out of shape, not altogether to the silent Lord Quorn's satisfaction. "That's the way I talk," he cried, with gathering confidence, as he tossed the shapeless cup on the floor. "Any man who argues with me knows what to expect. It's too late to apologize when I've snapped your legs and arms for you and dislocated your neck."

The duke intimated politely to his fuming opponent his entire agreement with the remark. "I am sorry," he went on suavely, "if I have spoken in a language which has not appealed to your grace. Perhaps I may yet be so fortunate as to be able to make myself better understood."

As he spoke he took a candle from the table, and, flicking off the shade, set it on the side-board. Then he pivoted round and stepped ten paces across the room, turned, whipped out his revolver, took instant aim and fired. The candle stood as before, but extinguished. The duke advanced and bowed with something, it must be confessed, of the air of a music-hall performer. "That," he said quietly, "is how I reply to your grace's remarks. I trust I have the good fortune to make myself understood. No?"

Quite gratuitously imagining a negative on Mr. Leo's part, which that redoubtable fighter was far from expressing, the duke made a swift movement and tore down a rapier which hung as an ornament on the wall. After making a few passes, which seemed to have Mr. Leo's person for their ultimate destination, he spitted the shade of another candle, flung it aside, and drawing back, put himself in fencing attitude, and lunging furiously, after a grand flourish, just hit the wick and extinguished it likewise. Then he favoured his impressed audience with a deprecating gesture intimating that his exhibition of skill was a matter of small account, after which, without waiting for comments or applause, he turned with startling ferocity upon Mr. Leo and in an

unpleasantly resonant tone commanded him to take down the fellow weapon and defend himself.

Mr. Leo showed no sign of falling in with his desire, but made a ghastly attempt to laugh the order to scorn and then to treat it with the contempt due to such an out-of-date proposal. But as it is difficult to preserve an attitude of dignified opposition in the neighbourhood of an aggressive and business-like hornet, so the Antipodean giant found it impossible to treat the duke with the passive scorn which prudence dictated. For the little Castilian had now arrived at a stage when he considered he might fairly let himself go, and let himself go he did.

He simply danced like a blood-thirsty Rumpelstilzchen before the anxious man of muscle, making his sword cut the air as though it were a riding whip, and describing inconvenient circles and passes with it in close proximity to the more cherished portions of his unwilling opponent's anatomy.

Mr. Leo looked very unhappy, and in the deplorable condition of a man who is consumed by the knowledge that he ought to be very angry and retaliative, and yet dares not. As he continued to hang back with a suggestion in his stupid face of how much he would give to be safe at *The Pigeons*, the duke's aggressiveness increased to the extent of prodding the massive frame before him with playful sword thrusts. This was more even than the abject Mr. Leo could stand.

For an instant he looked dangerous; then with a roar, of rage or pain according to the fancy of the audience, he made a snatch at a decanter with the object of hurling it at his tormentor. But before he could raise it for the fling the little rapier came down with a smart flash upon his wrist and the decanter fell shattered to the floor.

"That your grace's idea of fighting a Grandee of Spain, you abominable great hulks?" cried the duke viciously. "You want a lesson, milord, you foolish breaker of tongs. When shall you begin to snap my legs and arms and to screw my neck, you quaint elephant? You shall go down on your knees and apologize to me or I will run you through your absurd body and let the saw-dust run out. Shall I not, eh? eh? eh?" He accompanied each note of interrogation by a stinging slash of the flexible steel, and Mr. Leo began to look very weary and unwell.

But Lord Quorn's face was beaming as though a load had been taken off his mind.

For an instant Mr. Leo seemed to be gathering himself together for a bull-like rush, then the intention died away in helplessness. "It's all a mistake, I tell you," he blurted out in a quavering roar. "The pine was not intended for you."

"Indeed? So?" cried the duke incredulously, making the point of his sword whirl within two inches of the herculean thorax. "And the allusions to my nose, the Salolja nose, which is historical, and to my stature and to my veracity—they were not intended for me? Eh?"

"If you touch me again with that beastly sword I'll have the police on to you, duke or no duke," Mr. Leo declared, falling back somewhat feebly behind the shelter of the law.

It was with some consternation that he noticed that not only the duke, but the whole party seemed to derive genuine amusement from his threat.

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed the little terrorist in his window-rattling tones. "The police! How rich! How exquisite! When a man insults a Salolja he does not call in the police, but the undertaker."

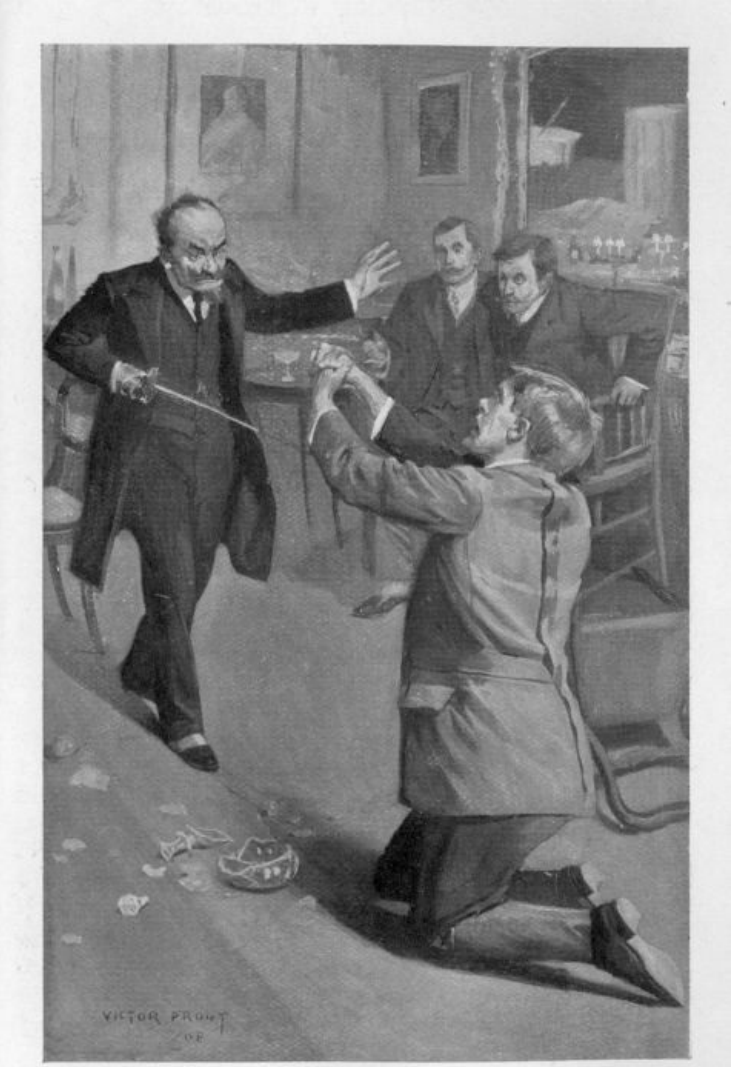
Mr. Leo's bronzed face had now that greenish tinge so much the fashion in modern sculpture.

"How are you going to send for your police?" laughed the duke, emphasizing his question by a playful prick in Mr. Leo's biceps. "Before you touch the bell or the door-handle you are a dead man."

Mr. Leo looked as though he reluctantly accepted the probability.

"Now, your grace will go down on your knees, won't you, you absurd hippopotamus, and make your humble confession and apology for having treated disrespectfully a Grandee of Spain and a Salolja, before you pay the penalty of your mistake."

There was a painful flourish of the rapier, and a gentle stab on the lobe of Mr. Leo's large right ear. With a howl he went down on his knees, with another he begged for mercy, and it was a third howl of a very different character which made the duke and the other men turn to the window, at which some one stood rattling.



" With a howl he went down on his knees, and with another he begged for mercy."

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"With a howl he went down on his knees, and with another he begged for mercy."

The ever-alert duke opened it, as though nothing unusual were occurring, giving entrance to Miss Leo, who with a manly stride came in only to stand dumfounded before the abject spectacle of her brother's abasement.

"Carnaby!" she cried in a voice calculated to put fire into a lump of wet clay. "You great oaf! What fool's game is this?"

The duke explained. "It is simply the result of a slight personal difference between his grace and my humble self."

"Get up, you great booby!" Lalage commanded, naturally thinking that the slight personal difference between the two men should have reversed their positions.

"Stay where you are," cried the duke in his most stentorian tones. And Mr. Leo stayed.

"Quorn! At last!" The cry came in a tone of menacing rapture from Lalage who had now found time to glance round the table.

"Hold on!" was that nobleman's chilling response, as he rose and stretched out a fending hand in front of him.

"My Quorn!" repeated Miss Leo with native tenacity.

"Quorn?" cried the duke in a voice of puzzled exasperation, "Quorn again in that quarter. I get tired of this Quorn here, Quorn there."

"This is Lord Quorn," Lalage declared with an exultation which, considering the position her champion occupied at the moment, was scarcely justified.

"So? Are you sure?" the duke demanded searchingly.

"Sure? I knew him in Australia. I have come over to marry him," was the convincing answer.

"So?" The fiery little Castilian turned to Quorn. "You marry this lady, eh?"

"No," he returned, ungallantly. "I'm hanged if I do."

"Carnaby!" cried his sister in a ringing voice. "You hear that?"

"Yes," said Carnaby impotently from the floor.

"Let the poor fellow alone," recommended Quorn. "He's a thing of the past."

But his crow was cut short by the duke. "So, your grace thinks to marry Miss Buffkin?" No answer. "In spite of your engagement to this handsome lady?" The duke's wry face was lost in a grin. "May I request once again the honour of a few words with your grace in private?"

"You may, but you won't get it," was the dogged reply. "I stop here."

"So? I believe not," said the duke, turning on his vindictive glare to the full. "I have been long enough made a fool of with your different Lord Quorns. I am sick of Lord Quorn. I put him away, and if I make a mistake—ah!"

He turned swiftly with the cry of an enraged tiger. Prompted by signs from his sister, Carnaby had taken advantage of the duke's back being turned to rise from his undignified position and stealthily approach his little adversary with the idea of taking him unawares from behind and trying what muscle would do. But the Spaniard, whose energies and faculties were concentrated in a small space, was too wide awake for him. With the turn he sprang back and whipping round his rapier brought it with a swift cut across Carnaby's ample countenance. As Mr. Leo roared and danced with pain, and Lalage, throwing her arms round the duke's, shouted to the three to help her, if they were men, in disarming the wriggling Grandee, the door was thrown open and Mr. Doutfire came quickly in, followed by the local constable.

CHAPTER XL

Mr. Doutfire with professional promptitude at once proceeded to adapt himself to the situation. He planted himself in business-like fashion before the wriggling duke, and with a wave of both hands, suggested to his captor that she should release him.

"Let go, ma'am," he said reassuringly. "It's all right now. I'll rake the fire out."

Thus bidden Miss Leo relaxed her clasp, not however, before Mr. Doutfire had, with a practised twist, wrenched the sword from the ducal grasp.

"Now, then," he demanded in a tone of stern reproof, "what's this all about? What's the trouble now?"

"You shall not interfere," foamed the duke. "You are not wanted, policeman."

"Detective-Inspector is my rank," Mr. Doutfire reminded him with a touch of severity. "Looks as though I was wanted," he added with a curl of the lip and a confident glance round the company.

"You are not," insisted the duke in his fiercest tone and with his most appalling glare. "I am the Duke of Salolja, and I tell you you are to go."

He might as well have glared at the spattered portrait of Everard, ninth Baron Quorn, on the wall for any effect his eyes produced on the uncompromising and unimaginative official.

"I should like that corroborated," was all the response he got from Mr. Doutfire.

"No, don't go!" cried Mr. Leo with a subdued and, painful roar. "He has assaulted me, stabbed me, threatened to shoot me. I give him in charge. Take him. I——"

"Has he got firearms on him?" enquired Mr. Doutfire severely.

For answer the duke whipped out his revolver. But swift as the action was, Mr. Doutfire's counter move was quicker.

With practised skill he clutched the dangerous wrist and with a business-like jerk held it in the air with the revolver pointing to the ceiling.

"That'll do, my lord duke," he said with playful insistence. "Better let me take care of that. It's a dangerous plaything."

But the duke's characteristic under-estimation of the power of the British police system prompted him to resist and to struggle violently to release his hand. Mr. Doutfire gave a well-understood nod to his subordinate, and that functionary smartly acting upon it, came behind the duke and pinioned his arms. Next moment the revolver was detached by a knowing professional trick, and was in Mr. Doutfire's pocket. "You can let go, Tugby," he said with calm authority, and the raging noble was free to dance and gesticulate in a very tornado of rage.

He was understood to intimate that the insult put upon him, a Duke of Salolja and a Grandee of Spain, by a mere paltry English policeman, in not allowing him free vent for his display of *force majeure* and homicidal proclivities was one which would not only be the cause of private and personal bloodshed, but would in all human probability result in a devastating war between the two Powers, from which the least unpleasant outcome England could expect would be the loss of Gibraltar and the bulk of the British fleet. Mr. Doutfire received the intelligence with a tolerant stolidity. Custom had made him impervious to threats and sceptical of the practical value of vindictive utterances. His scornful and unmoved attitude had the effect of raising to a still higher pitch the rage of the Spanish fire-eater, who seemed now to have lost all that self-control which before had been so telling. He had, in fact, become inebriated with wrath and excitement.

"Scoundrel, villain!" he cried, shaking both fists in the air before the imperturbable Doutfire. "You lay your ignoble hands on the Duke of Salolja! I will have your life."

"Steady! Steady!" responded Mr. Doutfire in a tone of gentle warning.

"I shall not steady," roared the duke, whose face had now assumed the look of the false nose, eyes and moustache of a carnival mask. "You shall not defy me. You shall go this moment, or I will run you through your wretched body."

With a sudden dart he snatched up the sword from the floor and began a series of flourishes which threatened seriously to embarrass Mr. Doutfire. "Steady, now," commanded that gentleman, but instead of complying, the duke seemed to be ferociously bent on selecting a suitable point of impact in the detective's thick-set figure.

"Lay hold, Tugby."

The duke comprehending the order, jumped round swiftly, bringing the sword point in opposition to Mr. Tugby's advancing tunic. But the diversion was enough for Mr. Doutfire's purpose. He seized the Spaniard's flourishing arms from behind, then planting his knee in the small of the ducal back, by way of purchase, he held the heir of all the Saloljas trussed.

"Take the sword away from him," he ordered his subordinate. "Now," when that was, after a short but fierce struggle, accomplished, "you had better slip on the bracelets."

Accordingly, with some difficulty and much explosive language the hands of a Grandee of Spain were, it is sad to relate, for the first time on record, fastened behind his back by a pair of vulgar English handcuffs, and the traditions of the Saloljas were, for the moment, rendered a negligible quantity.

In his violent struggles the duke had stumbled backwards into a low and deep-seated armchair. From this he was, from the fact that his hands were fastened behind him, unable to rise or regain his balance. All he could do was to kick furiously and to make loud use of expletives which, although couched in the Spanish language, were obviously of an exceedingly florid, even ensanguined, character. To quiet him and to prevent possible mischief, Mr. Doutfire and his underling, approaching the job on either side from behind, each seized a ducal leg, and tucked it in comparative harmlessness under his arm. It may be doubted whether in the long and blood-stained annals of the house of Salolja any member of that distinguished and ruthless family had ever occupied quite so undignified a position before.

"Dangerous party to deal with, my lord," remarked the panting Mr. Doutfire jerkily, owing to the convulsions of the Salolja leg, addressing himself impartially to the three men, any one of whom might be Lord Quorn. "I'm afraid we shall have to see him safe to Bunbury and give him a night in the cells, in default of bail."

The prisoner laughed in the very impotence of his rage. "You shall have your absurd Great Bunbury pulled down about your ears if you do not instantly release me," he spluttered through his teeth.

"All right, my lord duke," Doutfire returned, with a wink at the company. "We'll keep in the middle of the street in case the buildings should come down on our hats. Now, when you're ready, sir, we'll make a move as it's getting late. Sorry to have to put the bracelets on a gentleman of your position, but I take the responsibility. In this country even dukes have got to behave themselves, and we don't allow tricks with these dangerous playthings."

He pulled the duke up and set him on his feet, then took up the rapier and revolver and handed them to his subordinate.

"You shall release me at once," hissed the duke through his wolfish teeth, "or it will be the worse for you."

"All right. We'll see about that," replied Mr. Doutfire in the tone he might use to a naughty child. "I understand the prisoner threatened and assaulted you, Mr.——?" he added to Carnaby, producing his note book.

"Yes," affirmed that valiant gentleman. "I'm cut and stabbed all over."

"Tut!" cried the prisoner explosively. "The fellow is a great coward. He cries if you prick him."

"You will," continued Mr. Doutfire, unheeding the interruption, "charge the prisoner, I presume, with feloniously cutting and wounding?"

"That's it," replied Mr. Leo, regaining confidence.

"Carnaby, you great fool, why didn't you wring his neck and fling the little brute into the dust-hole?"

Carnaby failed to impart into his expression any regret that he had not endeavoured to forestall the suggestion.

"Good job he didn't try it on, ma'am," observed Mr. Doutfire dryly. "Whether he succeeded or not, in either case it might have been awkward for him. You'll attend at 10.30 a.m. to-morrow at the Court House, Great Bunbury," he added. "And some of you gentlemen had better be on hand to give evidence if required."

He nodded to Tugby, and each taking an arm of the speechless duke they conducted him, with certain indications of unwillingness on his part, to the door. This the representative of the Saloljas favoured with a mighty kick, by way of protest and also doubtless of letting off some of his compressed rage. Mr. Doutfire pulled him unceremoniously back, then, as Tugby opened the door, shot him forwards, and in such humiliating fashion did the manacled Grandee disappear from the scene of his brief triumph.

Those who remained were now at liberty to take more precise and less preoccupied notice of one another.

"So I've got you at last, Lord Quorn," observed Miss Leo with somewhat menacing satisfaction.

"No, you haven't," objected that person, coolly lighting a fresh cigar."

"Oh, haven't I?" the lady rejoined. "You hear that, Carnaby dear?"

"Don't worry dear Carnaby," put in Peckover. "He has got a headache."

Mr. Leo's stony stare of discomfiture did not relax to traverse the statement. Mechanically he put forth a great hand and poured himself out, as in a dream, an overflowing glass of port wine. He then, still in a state of mental apathy, sought, with cowed and lacklustre eye, the cigar-box and absently helped himself—to more of the contents than he could smoke at once. But he made no other and more relevant answer to the bugle-call of his sister's question. It was felt by the three men that the legend of his doughty deeds was a myth; as a terrorist he belonged to ancient history.

CHAPTER XLI

The hour of 10.30 next morning saw the depository of the Salolja traditions, a defiant and fretful Castilian porcupine with quills erect, standing in the dock of an occasional court, composed of one alderman of Great Bunbury (incidentally a family grocer), one public-spirited local doctor, and a couple of fussy half-pay colonels, to answer the serious charges of threatening to murder divers of His Majesty's subjects, and also with feloniously stabbing and wounding another, to wit, one Carnaby Leo, described somewhat vaguely as of Australia.

Mr. Doutfire here saw an opportunity for more than regaining some loss of prestige which he had lately incurred, of course through no fault of his, but of a cheese-paring Treasury; and moreover for handing his name down with undying fame in the criminal annals of Great Bunbury.

The Duke of Salolja insisted upon regarding the whole business as beneath his serious notice. His line of defence was to maintain a haughty and contemptuous silence, at the same time to shrivel up his very common-place judges by focussing upon them in turn his most ferociously fascinating glare. Alas! He misjudged the stuff of which British parochial authority is composed. Even if he had succeeded in terrifying the retired colonels, there was still the florid general practitioner to reduce to a quite improbable state of collapse, and it is well known that a family grocer fears nothing in this world—except another family grocer.

Evidence sufficient to justify a remand was taken, and the prisoner, who seemed to emit sparks of indignation was told that he would eventually be sent to Quarter Sessions. Then in pursuance of a plan which Peckover had concocted overnight, Gage and Lord Quorn offered themselves as bail for the duke. This was, after some demur and difference of opinion, accepted, the two colonels being dead against allowing a foreigner of homicidal tendencies to be at large, while the doctor and the grocer took a higher position and declared themselves in favour of doing no act that should endanger the *entente cordiale* between Great Britain and Spain. So finally, bail was accepted for the duke's appearance on the following Saturday.

Upon his release from durance his sureties and Peckover sought an interview with the irate nobleman, and, ignoring certain dark and direful threats, gently but convincingly hinted to him that the only way to avoid a considerable term of imprisonment with its incidental tarnish on the scutcheon of the Saloljas was to lose no time in putting the English Channel and the republic of France, to say nothing of the Pyrenees, between himself and the Great Bunbury Bench. At first the duke, pulsating with a sense of injury, declared that sooner than run away from a handful of English shopkeepers, he would put the whole of the inhabitants of Great Bunbury, as given in the last census return, to the edge of the sword. On its being pointed out to him, however, that his plan, attractive in itself, was deficient in certain elements of feasibility, he consented to meet the objection by reducing the number of his intended victims, and intimated that his thirst for blood might be satisfied by the immolation of the mayor and corporation, the heads of the fire brigade and the police force, the town clerk, town crier, the station master and a picked half-dozen of the principal tradesmen on the altar of his vengeance.

When he was made aware of certain practical objections which stood in the way of the town of Great Bunbury falling in with this modified suggestion, the noble Castilian proposed as a last alternative that he should meet a selected dozen men of the township's best blood in a suitable arena, and should engage these representatives one after the other in a duel *à outrance*. On this proposal being ruled out of order owing to the deplorably faulty state of the English law, the duke, glaring and bristling with suppressed vindictiveness, declared that he must do something to remove the stain that had been cast upon him and his house; whereupon Peckover suggested that the best thing he could do to prevent the said stain from spreading would be to disguise himself as the representative of a firm of Spanish claret merchants, and take the 1.15 train on the way to Dover.

This plan did not, however, commend itself to the representative of a Spanish house, whose trade appeared to be, not the bottling, but the spilling, of claret of a very different type. "It is very amusing, very clever of you, gentlemen," he objected in withering scorn. "You wish to get me out of the way that you may pay court to Miss Buffkin. I am not an idiot."

"You'll be a convict this day fortnight if you don't clear out," remarked Peckover. "Great Bunbury is not to be trifled with."

The duke laughed discordantly. "Great Bunbury! It makes me laugh."

"You'll have plenty of time for laughing," observed Peckover, "in jail. You can do a lot of smiling in twelve calendar months if you stick to it."

The duke snapped his fingers, but he looked uneasy, and the snap wanted tone. Perhaps the fingers were clammy. "I shall not go," he maintained, "till I have killed some one in Great Bunbury."

"Not good enough," argued Peckover. "If you kill anybody here you'll be hanged. And you couldn't kill anybody worth a duke's being hanged for. Why, the best man you could select for the purpose in the town wouldn't rise above an auctioneer or a brewer. It wouldn't be a fair deal."

Still the duke was obstinate. "I marry the adorable Buffkin," he declared, "in spite of Great Bunbury."

"All right. Here she is," said Gage, pointing to an open carriage which was approaching.

A portmanteau shared the box with the driver. Inside were three people, Lady Ormstork, Miss Buffkin and a middle-aged man with greyish-red hair and a face which partook curiously of the characteristics of the fox and the sheep. He was a common-looking person, and, as such, had the air of being out of place in that company.

Lady Ormstork stopped the carriage and hailed the group on the pavement. "My dear Lord Quorn, this is fortunate," she exclaimed, addressing her remark to the three possible holders of that title, with a leaning towards Gage. "What absurd goings on at Staplewick! How d'you do, duke? I always said your wilful ignorance of our English ideas would land you in trouble. Well, and how has the ridiculous business at the Court House gone off? Laughed out of court, I presume."

As the duke seemed inclined to impart no more precise information than could be gathered from a bow and a scowl, Peckover answered the question. "Remanded on bail."

Lady Ormstork threw up her hands in amused horror. "A Salolja, a Grandee of Spain, remanded on bail by a bench of provincial cheese-mongers!" she cried. "Really, it is the very

acme of the ridiculous. It is only fit for a burlesque. My dearest Ulrica, do think of it! Oh, dear me, it is too absurd for comment." And she went off in a fit of rather stagey laughter.

"It is no laughing matter—for somebody," hissed the duke darkly.

Lady Ormstork's burst ended with an abruptness which suggested a doubt as to its genuineness. "It is really so diverting," she said, "that I am forgetting to introduce Mr. Buffkin, dear Ulrica's father, to Lord Quorn."

The inference to be drawn from Mr. Buffkin's demeanour was that he was not in the habit of being suddenly presented to peers of the realm. Lord Quorn, however, relieved his embarrassment by seizing his hand with a cordial grip. "Glad you've come down," he remarked, with his eyes on Mr. Buffkin's daughter.

"Pleased to meet your lordship," responded Mr. Buffkin.

Lady Ormstork raised her eye-glasses in diplomatic caution. "You don't mean to say you are Lord Quorn, after all?" she asked with a hedging smile.

"I'm nobody else," was the confident reply.

"He's Lord Quorn right enough," corroborated Peckover, with a chastened confession of a truth which could no longer be kept in the well.

"How singular," murmured Lady Ormstork, only half convinced and wondering how, if it turned out to be true, she would stand.

A professional-looking elderly man with a brief bag in his hand who had been regarding the group with some attention now came forward.

"Lord Quorn?" he said, addressing the peer.

Quorn jumped round. "What, Powler!" he cried. "Just the man, in the nick of time. Here, you can tell this lady whether I'm Lord Quorn or not. This, ladies and gentlemen, is Mr. Powler, my lawyer, of the firm of Powler, Gaze and Powler, Lincoln's Inn. Come down to see me, eh?"

"Getting no reply to our letters since your lordship left town, I thought I would just run down to Staplewick and see how things were getting on," Mr. Powler explained. "Yes," he continued, "I am quite prepared to vouch for the identity of this gentleman as Lord Quorn."

"There!" cried Lady Ormstork, "I always said so. What a splendid practical joke, though, to try to take us all in. How well you played the part," she said guilefully to Gage. "Dear Lord Quorn," she continued gushingly, "this is all most interesting. May we come up this afternoon us usual? Mr. Buffkin is so anxious to see beautiful Staplewick."

"Come as soon as you like," said Quorn promptly.

"How sweet of you," murmured Lady Ormstork. "Dear Ulrica would be sorry to miss her daily ramble in the lovely park. Wouldn't you, dear?"

"I dare say I should," responded Miss Buffkin indifferently, with a half grimace at Peckover.

"I have," the duke suddenly burst out, "a word to say to Miss Ulrica. I do myself the honour of following your distinguished carriage to The Cracknels."

"Please don't," both ladies protested. "I fear," the elder continued. "I cannot, after this *esclandre*, undertake to receive you."

The duke gave a mingled shrug, scowl and bow. "It plunges me into despair," he said, with just a suspicion of sarcasm, "to be deprived of the supreme happiness of milady Ormstork's coveted society. Perhaps, though, I may be humbly permitted an interview with the distinguished Mr. Buffkin?"

Mr. Buffkin, whose distinction required the penetrating eye of the Spaniard to notice it, and whose conversational powers did not seem to be of a high order, looked aggressively uncomfortable. "Is this," he inquired bluntly, "the Spanish gentleman who has been pestering Barbara—I mean Ulrica—with his attentions?"

The duke made a prancing step on the pavement. "Pestering?" he repeated hoarsely, pulling his moustache with nervous fury.

"That," replied Lady Ormstork uncompromisingly, "is the person; the Duke of Salolja."

"I have," said the duke, with a flourish, "the honour to desire a matrimonial alliance with your gracious and adorable daughter."

"No, thank you." Mr. Buffkin's voice was high-pitched, almost squeaky, and quite common. "We don't desire any foreign alliance."

"As Duchesse de Salolja"—began the duke.

"No good," interrupted Mr. Buffkin, with a decisive shake of his very commercial-looking head. "Spanish titles are not a line I care to handle. I've told Bar—Ulrica she can marry whom she likes, but if it's a foreigner, duke or fiddler, she'll have to do it on three hundred a year."

The Salolja lip curled. "His excellency jests. The renowned millionaire Buffkin allows his daughter, the Duchesse de Salolja, three hundred pounds a year! It is rich!"

Mr. Buffkin looked particularly irresponsive. "Who says I am a millionaire?" he demanded shrilly. The duke bowed and indicated Lady Ormstork. "A *façon de parler*," that lady explained. "Anyhow, a very rich man."

"Divide it by ten," said Mr. Buffkin with a twinkle.

The duke looked suddenly chastened, not to say depressed. "The glorious Miss Ulrica," he said with an obvious effort, "would be an inestimable prize without a penny of dowry."

"That's about what she'll have if she marries you," returned Mr. Buffkin, whose eloquence, if not exactly copious, was considerably to the point.

"Shall we drive on?" suggested Lady Ormstork. "*Au revoir*, Lord Quorn," she gushed. "Till this afternoon, then. *Au revoir*, Mr. Gage." Not knowing Peckover's name, since the reshuffle, she discreetly left him out.

But Ulrica's parting nod was for him alone.

As the carriage rolled away up the High Street the duke was the first to speak.

"What time does that infernal train leave your unsavoury town of Great Bunbury?" he inquired.

CHAPTER XLII

Sharnbrook had called at Staplewick for an authoritative version of certain blood-curdling rumours which had reached him, and he stayed to luncheon.

"Wish I'd known you were having such a thrilling time," he said regretfully. "I'd have come up and helped. Well, I say, with this new twist of the Quorn title our fair friends at the Moat will get a nasty shake, eh? I'm ever so grateful for the way you fellows have relieved the pressure of the fair dodgers; they've eased off wonderfully of late, and I've got my wind again."

"Glad to hear it," observed Peckover. "Always willing to oblige a sportsman."

"Ah," said Sharnbrook in a gratified tone, "if I'd only known you were having fits with that little Spanish bantam, I'd have brought along a rare good bull-dog that would have reduced him to fragments and pulp inside three minutes. A nailing beast, knows his business from A to Z and quite a picture when he's——"

"The little devil of a duke would have put a bullet through him," said Gage, "and that would have been a pity."

"Yes," Sharnbrook agreed, "that wouldn't have suited me. I've only had the beggar a month, and have just got fond of him."

"Even a Spanish bluffer has his uses," observed Gage. "He has knocked the stuffing out of Quorn's bush-ranger."

"Yes," said Quorn, "that brute has no more terrors for me; I suppose, though, I shall have him and Lalage hanging about the place till I can afford to send them back."

"Better keep the fire-irons out of the way," remarked Peckover.

"I'll send the precious pair back home for you, if you don't get the Buffkin money," said Gage magnanimously. "After all, I owe you something. I can't say I've had much fun out of your title, and hope you'll do better with it. But it has been an experience, and I certainly shan't hanker after the peerage again."

Quorn thanked him. "Hope you'll stay on here as long as you fancy," he said.

Gage shook his head. "No thanks. I'm off to-morrow. Too much Hemyock about for me. But I'll run down later and see what you're making of it."

"What's going to become of you?" he asked Peckover. "Got anything more to sell that doesn't belong to you?"

"You can't blame me," Peckover protested. "I kept to my part of the bargain as long as you had any use for it. And I couldn't help it. If you hadn't made a bid for the title I should have had to take it on myself."

"Right you are," responded Gage good-humouredly. "Well, you had better come with me and show me round. You can draw £300 a year as my secretary."

"I'm your man," said Peckover with alacrity. "What I don't show you won't be worth seeing."

Lady Ormstork with Mr. and Miss Buffkin was announced.

The dowager was full of gush. "Dear Lord Quorn! What an amusing incognito! Quite like the lord of Burleigh. One can quite understand your wishing to put people's real affection to the test."

"We won't inquire how the article stood it," Quorn replied bluntly.

"Quite romantic, as dear Ulrica was saying," the lady proceeded, quite unabashed. "May we, before going out, look round the picture gallery? Mr. Buffkin would so like to see the interesting family portraits and wonderful old armour."

If Mr. Buffkin's expression was meant to be corroborative it was a distinct failure. Whatever sentiment might have been read in his commercial face, a yearning for the satisfying of an artistic curiosity was not there.

No objection to the proposal being made, the party proceeded to what Peckover called the ancestral showroom.

"Won't you look after dear Ulrica and show her round?" Lady Ormstork said pointedly to Quorn when the somewhat dreary gallery was reached.

Quorn, nothing loath, attached himself forthwith to Miss Buffkin, who had somehow gravitated to the now negligible Peckover. "Now, Mr. Peckover," he said bluffly, "you ought to know all about these fifth of November Johnnies. Give us a bit of the showman. Take us round the effigies, and don't be too long about it."

On account, perhaps, of Miss Buffkin's obvious preference, Peckover was in higher spirits than his lot seemed to warrant.

"All right," he responded, pulling a ramrod from an ancient gun for use as a showman's wand. "Here goes! Lord Quorn, ladies and gentlemen: with a view to combining instruction with amusement, I propose to give you some points concerning these noble effigies with which the spacious apartment is lined. True, it is only the outer crusts of these distinguished warriors and sportsmen that I am able to bring to your notice. The kernels are all gone, and the shells are—hem!—left tenantless. But, as in these days the tailor makes the man, so we may say that in olden times the blacksmith made him, from which we may conclude that we have the best part," he tapped a suit of armour with his wand, "of the noble house of Quorn remaining with us to this day."

"Hear! hear!" cried Sharnbrook, with more appreciation than tact, while Miss Buffkin laughed sympathetically.

"The clockwork has long since run down," continued Peckover finding the vocabulary of his former vocation coming in usefully; "the striking gear is out of order, on account of the dust getting into it. The hands can point no longer, and the faces have lost their enamel. But we have still the cases—some plain, like this,"—he tapped a suit of plate armour—"some engine turned, like that," pointing to an inlaid suit, "some with open faces, like this yawner," he rattled his wand in the cavity of a vizorless helmet, "some hunters, like this prancer," indicating an equestrian portrait. "To begin at the beginning." He held up a dilapidated helmet in one hand and in the other a fragment of armour. "Sir Guy de Quorn, founder of the family."

There was a laugh from everybody, although Lady Ormstork's was rather belated, that astute dowager's sense of humour being outweighed by her concern at seeing that Ulrica was paying more attention to the flippant little showman than to the more solid worth of Lord Quorn.

"Not much of him remaining," Peckover went on. "Ladies and gentlemen of vivid powers of imagination may reconstruct in their minds from these scanty materials the noble mien, the imposing figure, of this doughty warrior. Pass on to Sir Nicholas de Quorn," he pointed to the suit of armour that stood next, "in a high state of preservation. A mighty man of valour, who had the advantage of living in times when he could knock a man out for sneezing in his presence without being liable to forty shillings or a month. Sir Nicholas spent a useful life in trying his muscle and weight on other people, and was getting his name up nicely, when unfortunately setting out to attack the castle of an absent neighbour in a thunderstorm, his lance acted as a lightning conductor, and he was prematurely cremated. Notice the aperture through which the electric

fluid tunnelled its way to his knightly vitals, and the look of blank astonishment with a dash of 'uffiness on the champion's visage."

The said visage being indeed a blank, this fancy seemed to tickle even the unimaginative Mr. Buffkin. Peckover now directed attention to a weird-looking portrait. "Sir Penning de Quorn, surnamed the Feckless. He never did anything distinguished, and only escaped being made Commander-in-Chief through one of the Royal Family fancying himself in a cocked hat." He passed to another canvas. "Sir Brian de Quorn—sometimes called the Buffer, as nothing made any impression on him. He married four wives, three of whom survived him."

Sharnbrook guffawed, and Lady Ormstork looked scandalized.

"Sir Walter the Willing," proceeded Peckover, working up the showman business, as he pointed to the next portrait, "a distinguished advertising politician. He pushed his way to the front and became a Cabinet Minister by his imitations of popular jesters, and by dyeing his raven locks crimson with a secret wash which he purchased from a bald Crusader who had no further use for it. When at length the supply failed and the substitutes he tried to manufacture turned his hair green, and by their offensive odour left him alone on the Treasury Bench he was soon sent to the Upper House, becoming first Baron Quorn."

Mr. Buffkin, for an out-of-place, commercial Philistine seemed, to Peckover's gratification, to be taking in the lecture with genuine amusement.

Thus stimulated, the showman proceeded, "Harboro' de Quorn," he tapped a sporting portrait, "second Baron Quorn, and inventor of the Quorn Hunt. He induced the noble Normans to abandon the shooting of foxes which they consented to, owing to gunpowder being in its infancy, guns taking a quarter of an hour to load and fire, and the wily animal being hard to hit with a bow and arrow. He was the first M.F.H., and having an impediment in his speech he originated the expression, Yoicks! which, being interpreted, was his bovrilized way of cursing people who rode over the hounds."

"Good man," ejaculated Sharnbrook.

Peckover, encouraged by Ulrica's animated interest, went on with his lecture in spite of Lady Ormstork's obvious impatience. His next object was a big suit of armour on which he irreverently rattled his wand. "We now come to the third Baron, Marmaduke, surnamed the Masher. His fatal gift of beauty was the cause of some anxiety—to the married nobility, clergy and gentry of his acquaintance. He was, as you will observe, very particular about the cut of his armour and the shape of his helmet, which was constructed with an extra-size pigeon-hole, in order that the full extent of his handsome physiognomy might be utilized to dazzle the doting damsels. His end, ladies and gentlemen, was, I regret to say, a somewhat melancholy and unusual one. While drinking a stirrup-cup, and trying at the same time to wink over the brim of the goblet at the young lady behind the bar, a portion of the pick-me-up went down the wrong way; to correct which mistake his faithful squire seized a spade and smote him therewith on the back. The clang of the blow on his armour startled his horse, which took to bucking, and at the first attempt laid the coughing nobleman in the ditch. He never wunk again. Notice the rectangular impression of the shovel between the shoulders, also the extra-sized sliding kissing-trap of the helmet so contrived for the purpose of simplifying the process of osculation to which he was addicted."

A marked diversion was here created by the entrance at the farther end of the gallery of Bisgood ushering in the entire Hemyock family. Their arrival was not greeted with that cordiality which is usually desirable and customary; it was, indeed, anything but welcome to any except two of the party. As Quorn, followed by the rest, went forward to receive the visitors, Peckover and Miss Buffkin lingered behind together.

"Like to see the view from the Tower?" he suggested with a grin. Ulrica laughed and they slipped unnoticed through a covered door. From an octagonal chamber a winding stairway led up to the tower. "Come along," said Peckover elatedly.

Ulrica with a mischievous laugh followed, and they soon emerged at the top where floated a tattered flag from a tall staff.

"How lovely," Miss Buffkin exclaimed.

"Never mind the view," said Peckover desperately. "How do you like the new Lord Quorn?"

Ulrica pouted. "I don't see myself Lady Quorn," she answered with a certain amount of decision.

"No," Peckover agreed with conviction. "He's not a bad sort, but he wouldn't be my fancy if I were a pretty girl."

"He's too glumpy for me," Ulrica declared. "And what's more I'm not going to have him."

"What'll the guv'nor say?" Peckover asked dubiously.

Miss Buffkin laughed. "Oh, father won't mind. You see," she went on confidentially, "this

coronet racket isn't his idea at all. Not it."

"Yours?"

"Not likely. It is old Ormstork's. We ran across her at the Grand Oceanic at Harrogate. She hung on to us like a stoat on a rabbit. We couldn't make her game out, till one day she asked father what odds he would lay her that I didn't marry a peer. And she has been dragging me about the country ever since, till it has fairly come to pall."

"I should think so," observed Peckover sympathetically.

"I don't know," she continued, "how many noble heads I've been thrown at. But somehow I've always managed to rebound, and sometimes hit the old lady in the eye. You see, I like a live man, not a stuffed peer, with about as much soul as a gramaphone."

"I wish I was a peer," he said ruefully. "I'm alive all right."

"So you are," she agreed, gazing round the depressing park.

"Yes," he said with a wistful touch, "you said you liked me once, when you thought I was something else."

"What was that?" she inquired naively.

"A rich chap; a millionaire."

"Well, aren't you?" she demanded.

"Not exactly," he answered rather lugubriously. "That dream's over. We've been playing a queer game, but it has come to an end sooner than I expected. I'm a poor devil again now, and there's all about it."

For a moment Ulrica's violet eyes rested on him sympathetically. Then they looked away and seemed to be interested in the distant figure of Mr. Treacher who was slouching across the landscape.

"If people are poor," she said presently in a low voice from which all feeling was rigidly excluded, "it doesn't make any difference with me, when I like them."

Peckover jumped up. He could do no less. "Ulrica," he said and his voice trembled, "you like me? Yes, you said you did once. But I can't hold you to that for I was a regular fraud when I got you to say it."

Miss Buffkin gave a little sigh, and with a lingering glance at the uninteresting Mr. Treacher, turned towards the stairway. "All right," she said with an affectation of indifference. "I think I hear some one climbing after us."

The steps were steep and awkward. He had to take her hand, and at the touch his resolution (more honourable than many a better-bred man would have formed) gave way. "Ulrica," he said with a diffident tremor, "you couldn't care for a little nobody like me?"

She was gathering up her skirts for the descent. "I always rather liked you," she confessed.

"You wouldn't marry me?"

"What would Lady Ormstork say?" she objected archly.

"Ulrica, you are not fooling me?"

"Not much," she answered. "By the way, my real name is Barbara. Only the old lady thought Ulrica more classy, and so it had to be Ulrica."

In an instant he had sprung to the top step and his arms were round her. "Barbara, my darling."

"Hark!" she protested struggling.

From below came Lady Ormstork's insistent call.

"Barbara, quick! Is it to be?"

"Poor old Ormstork."

"Bother her. It's your father."

"I think he likes you. You're rather his sort, and Q. isn't," she said over her shoulder as she went down the winding stairs.

At the bottom stood Lady Ormstork looking properly scandalized. Apart from her charge's

escapade, her meeting with Lady Agatha had not been conducive to serenity.

"My dearest Ulrica," she said sourly, "how absurd of you to hide yourself away up in that horrid tower. Lord Quorn is hunting for you everywhere."

"I'm so glad he hasn't found me yet," was the not very soothing reply.

"Are you mad, girl?" cried the dowager.

"Not yet. If I marry Quorn you may inquire again."

Lady Ormstork's indignation was so great that she could only glare, first at Ulrica, then at Peckover. "Is this," she demanded in her most withering tones, "the sort of person you prefer to Lord Quorn?"

"All things considered, it is," answered Ulrica boldly.

"You hear that?" screamed the irate dowager to Mr. Buffkin, who had just appeared in his flight from the embarrassing position of a target for the shafts of the Hemyock family. "Your daughter actually refuses the ennobling alliance which I have been at such pains to arrange for her."

"I'm not exactly surprised to hear it," was the unsympathetic reply.

"Perhaps you will be to learn that your daughter has the unheard-of wrongheadedness to prefer a person of this most equivocal description," Lady Ormstork indicated Peckover with a contemptuous wave of her glasses, "to Lord Quorn."

"Ah," said Mr. Buffkin with provoking foolishness. "I dare say she prefers some one lively, and I don't blame her."

"But—but," urged Lady Ormstork, almost speechless with discomfiture, "do you call this person a good match?"

"I should say he matches her better than the lord," was the hopeless reply.

"That's right, father," observed Miss Buffkin.

Lady Ormstork turned and without another word went into the gallery, the others following at a safe distance.

The enlightenment of the Hemyock family as to the identity of the real Lord Quorn had been, for obvious reasons, delayed by the parties most interested in keeping them in the dark. But now that the new-found peer was not to fall to Lady Ormstork's bag, that spiteful dowager determined to let the cat out of it.

"May I order my carriage, Lord Quorn?" she said in her most distinct and penetrating tones. "It is getting late."

As Quorn rose in his lumbering fashion and rang the bell, the Hemyock girls who had been gaily chattering to Gage became abruptly silent, and Lady Agatha looked stonily nonplussed.

"Lord Quorn?" she said, with a brave attempt at a successful smile. "Surely this is not Lord Quorn?"

"I'm nobody else," Quorn assured her bluffly.

"How very singular," said Lady Ormstork icily, "that you should not have known it."

"Not at all," rejoined Lady Agatha promptly. "We have for weeks past understood this gentleman was Lord Quorn."

"I didn't like to contradict you," said Gage on being indicated.

Lady Agatha, for once too dumfounded for speech, could only give a significant look of appeal to her daughters. And at the look John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook, who had taken the precaution to get near the door, opened it quietly and slipped out.

Meanwhile the brown eyes of Miss Ethel and the black orbs of Miss Dagmar were fastened searchingly on Lord Quorn, and they transmitted to their owners the impression that he was not an attractive personage. In truth there was yet a good deal of the Jenkins about him. His clothes looked as though he had been in the habit of going to bed in them, and his hair cried out for the barber. For the moment, at any rate, he was not to be jumped at, and with that conviction the original impulse to spring was stilled. Lady Agatha rose, with a lofty ignoring of Lady Ormstork's exultant smile.

"If," she said to Gage, "you are not Lord Quorn, as you have all along thought proper to

pretend to be, may one ask who you are?"

"I am Peter Gage," he answered with a touch of amusement.

The eyes of Lady Agatha and her daughters met, and all that could be read in them was an indignant perplexity.

"It is all very extraordinary." Colonel Hemyock's thin voice sounded through the room, but his family heeded it not. Their minds were busy with the enigma of the position which was too complicated, not to say suspicious, to be comprehended at once. Only one thing in all the business seemed safe, and their minds jumped together to it. They recoiled, as by a single impulse, from the unattractive personality of Lord Quorn, from the doubtful individualities of Gage and Peckover, and their eyes by common consent sought the spot where their sheet-anchor had lately rested.

"Sharnbrook!"

"Where is he?"

They ran a dead heat to the door, charged through it, and so out into the garden. But John Arbuthnot Sharnbrook's start served him well, and he was at that moment sprinting homewards down the drive with a canny smile on his simple face.

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