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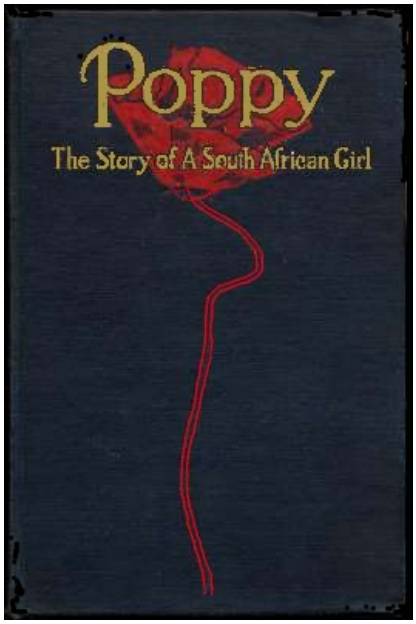

Poppy
The Story of a South African Girl

"IN HIS LOOMING ABOUT THE ROOM HE HAD STOPPED DEAD BEFORE WATTS'S PICTURE 'HOPE' OVER THE MANTELPIECE"
From the painting by G. F. Watts, R.A.
(See p. 336)

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(*See p. 336*)

POPPY

THE STORY OF A SOUTH AFRICAN GIRL

BY

CYNTHIA STOCKLEY

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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To

Em

PART I

[2]

"... and some do say of poppies that they be the tears of the moon shed in a land beyond the seas: and that they do bring forgetfulness and freedom from pain."
(*From an old Irish Legend.*)

POPPY

[3]

NOTHING more unlike a gladsome poppy of the field was ever seen than Poppy Destin, aged nine, washing a pile of dirty plates at the kitchen table.

Pale as a witch, the only red about her was where she dug her teeth into her lips. Her light lilac-coloured eyes were fierce with anger and disgust. Her hair hung in long black streaks over her shoulders, and her dark hands, thin and bony as bird's claws, were each decorated with a bracelet of greeny-yellowy grease.

There had been curry for dinner. Horrible yellow rings floated on the top of the water in the *skottel* and Poppy hated to put her hands into it.

She was hating her work more than usual that day because she was hungry as well as angry. She had slapped her little cousin Georgie for throwing a heavy hammer at her which had cut a gash in her leg; and her punishment for this crime had been two stinging boxes on the ear and sentence to go without food all day. Fortunately the incident had occurred after breakfast.

Once or twice she looked longingly at the scraps on the plates, but she did not touch them, because her aunt had eaten from one and she was not sure which, and she knew that to eat from anything her aunt had touched would choke her.

So she threw the scraps to Nick the black cat, under the kitchen table, and went on hating her aunt, and washing up the plates. She would have liked to smash each plate on the floor as she took it out of the water, and to have thrown all the greasy water over the freshly-scrubbed white shelves and dresser. And she would have done it too, only that she did not like boxes on the ear.

[4]

Presently she tried to fill her bitter little heart and her empty little stomach by going on with the story inside her head. She always had a story going on inside her head, and it was always about just two people—a beautiful lady and a man with a face like Lancelot. She used to begin at the end to make sure they should be quite happy, and when she had married them and they were living happily "ever after," she would go back to the beginning—how they met and all the sad things they had to go through before they could be married. Afterwards she would make a little song about them.

That day she had a heroine with red gold hair for the first time, because she had seen such a beautiful red-gold-haired lady in the street the day before, dressed in brown holland with a brown hat trimmed with pale green leaves. Poppy dressed her heroine in the same fashion, instead of the usual white velvet with a long train and a wreath of white roses resting on her hair. Just as Lancelot was telling the heroine that her eyes were as beautiful as brown wine, a harsh voice called out from the dining-room:

"Porpie! Haven't you done that washing-up yet? Make haste there! You know you got to smear the kitchen before you clean yourself and take the children up to the Kopje."

Poppy gritted her teeth and furious tears came into her eyes; her aunt's voice always seemed to scrape something inside her head and make it ache; also, she detested taking the children up to the Kopje. It was such a long way to carry Bobby—all up Fountain Street in the broiling sun—and she *had* to carry him, because if she put him into the pram with his twin, Tommy, they kicked each other and screamed, and when the children screamed, Aunt Lena always got to hear of it and boxed Poppy's ears for ill-treating them.

[5]

Listlessly she dried the plates and stuck them up in lines on the dresser, soaked the *fadook* and washed all round the edges of the bowl, making the water swirl round and round so that the grease would not settle again, then, while the water moved swiftly, carried the basin to the back door and emptied it with a great "swash" into the yard. The fowls flew shrieking in every direction and the water ran down in little rivers to where old Sara was doing some washing under the shade of the biggest acacia tree. When the little stream reached her bare black feet she clicked her teeth, crying, "Aah," and moved round to the other side of the stones on which she banged the clothes to make them white.

Poppy dried her basin out with the *fadook*, wiped the table dry, and put the bowl upside down upon it. Then she went into the yard again and approached an old pail which stood in the forage-house. It was full of an atrocious mess, slimy and thick, giving out a pungent odour that made her nose wrinkle in disgust. Nevertheless she took it up and carried it down to old Sara to get some soapy water. The old Basuto in her red *kop-dook*, rolled the whites of her eyes sympathetically

and muttered in her native tongue as she watched Poppy stir the green slime with a stick. She was sorry for the child. She knew it was Kaffir's work to smear floors. Black hands are hard, and the little thorns and stones to be found in the wet cow-dung do not hurt them; neither does the pungent smell disgust black noses.

"But the *old missis* had strange ways! Clk! It seemed she liked the *klein-missis* to do Kaffir's work!" Old Sara shrugged her fat, wobbly shoulders, and flopped over her wash-tub once more. [6]

Poppy went back to the kitchen. She had swept it just before dinner, now she sprinkled it heavily with water, then kneeling down on a folded sack beside the bucket, she rolled up her sleeves, closed her eyes, and plunged her hands into the sickening mess. Quickly she withdrew them, flinging two handfuls on to the floor and began to smear it with the flat of her right hand.

Kitchens and verandahs (or stoeps) in old-fashioned South African houses always have what are called "mud floors," which means that they are just mother-earth with all the stones picked out and the surface kept smooth and level by constant smearing in or pasting on of wet cow-dung once or twice a week. Smearing is a disgusting business, but joy comes after. When freshly dry the floor looks cool and green and fresh, and no longer does the *mis* smell vilely; rather, there is a soft odour of grasses and flowers, as though some stray veldt wind had blown through the room.

But Poppy had no time to enjoy the result of her labour. After she had spread sacks upon the floor to prevent feet from marking her work until it was dry, she stopped for a moment to dig out a thorn from her thumb with a needle, but immediately her aunt's menacing voice could be heard from the front stoep, where now she sat drinking her after-dinner cup of coffee with her husband, admonishing the slowness of Poppy's proceedings, and demanding that she should "makaste."

Poppy ran into the bedroom which she shared with her two elder cousins, and cleaned herself of all traces of her recent occupation. Later she appeared on the front stoep, in a print pinafore over her grey linsey dress, and an old straw hat much bitten at the edges shading her pale fierce little face. [7]

"My word, that child looks more like an Irish Fenian every day!" was her aunt's agreeable greeting.

Weak, good-looking "Uncle Bob," who was really no more than a second cousin of Poppy's, laughed in a deprecating kind of way. He was cutting a twist of tobacco from a great roll that hung drying from the stoep roof.

"Och, you're always going on at the girl, Lena!"

"And good cause I have," retorted Mrs. Kennedy. "Stand still, Ina, while I tie your cappie."

Poppy said nothing, but if having black murder in your heart makes you a Fenian, she knew that she was one.

Silently she assisted her aunt to put their pinafores upon the struggling twins, and to array Ina in her cape and bib—all starched to stand about them like boards, to their everlasting misery and discomfort. Mrs. Kennedy gloated upon the fact that all the neighbours said, "How beautifully kept Mrs. Kennedy's children are!"

At last Tommy was in the pram; Bobby pranced astride on Poppy's small bony hip, and Ina, who was just four, clung toddling to her skirt. Thus Poppy set forth, pushing the pram before her.

"And mind you bring them in before sun-down, and don't let them sit on the damp grass—" was Mrs. Kennedy's last word shouted up the street after the procession.

A little lane lined with syringa trees led from the house and was shady and sweet to loiter in, but Fountain Street glared and blazed under the afternoon sun. Poppy was pale and sadly-coloured as some strange cellar-plant when at last she brought her charges to a halt by the Kopje. She put Bobby down from her hip with a bump, tilted the pram and let Tommy scramble out the best way he could, then sat down on a rock and covered her face with her hands.

Bobby was a heavy-weight, and though she changed him from one hip to another all the way up the street, she never got to the Kopje without a pain in her stomach and a feeling of deathly sickness. [8]

Nearly all the children of the town came to the Kopje in the afternoons. It was only a slight hill, but it had bushes and clumps of mimosa trees, and little quarried-out holes and masses of rocks, and other fascinating features dear to children. The Kaffir-girl nurses squatted under the trees jabbering amongst themselves, and the children congregated in small herds. Poppy was the only white-girl nurse to be seen. She had a little circle of trees and stones where she always took her brood, and if she found anyone else in possession, she threw stones at them until they retreated.

When she had spread a rug for them to sit on, the children were left to amuse themselves in whatsoever fashion seemed good unto them. Poppy sat dreaming to herself, wrapped in the veils of poetry and romance. Near the Kopje was St. Michael's, a high school for girls kept by an English sisterhood, and when Poppy and her brood reached their haunt before three o'clock, she would see all the girls coming out of the gates, passing by in their nice dresses and hats with bags of books in their hands. They would stare at Poppy, and sometimes laugh; then the pain in her stomach would come into her throat and almost choke her. No one ever spoke to her. They knew quite well who she was, but she did Kaffir's work, and her clothes were old and ugly, and she was altogether a person to be despised and laughed at.

But sometimes a little ray of human friendliness would break through the hedge of snobbery. On this summer day a girl called Edie Wyllie, who used to sit next to her in Sunday-school, called out in quite a jolly way as she passed:

"Hullo, Poppy Destin!"

But her sister pulled at her arm at once and rebuked her. [9]

"Edie! You know mother doesn't let us speak to Poppy Destin."

"Pooh!" called out Poppy with the utmost scorn and derision. "Who wants to speak to you? I hate you."

She made fearful faces at them; but when they had all gone past, she rocked on her stone and wept.

"I hate them! I hate them!" she sobbed. "And I hate God! God is a beast."

Ina stood by and listened, with her pinafore in her mouth.

"I'll tell mother that, what you say," she remarked gravely.

"'Tell-tale-tit, your tongue shall be slit.' Go away from me, else I'll beat you," shouted Poppy, and Ina ran for her life and hid behind some rocks. Poppy continued her weeping, dry-eyed now, but sobbing spasmodically.

Suddenly a voice behind her!

"What's the matter little girl?"

Turning round she saw that the beauteous lady in the holland dress was sitting on a stone opposite her, smiling kindly. Her hair was like sovereigns shining in the sunlight, Poppy thought.

"Do tell me what is the matter!"

"Nothing's the matter," said Poppy defiantly.

The lady laughed long and merrily as though she found something refreshing in the child's sulky misery.

"Well, but how silly of you to cry and make your eyes red for nothing! You've got such pretty eyes, too!"

Poppy stared at her, gasping.

"Oh! If I only thought I had pretty eyes—" she said breathlessly.

"Well, you have indeed. And they are most uncommon too—just the colour of lilac, and 'put in with a smutty finger' like an Irish girl's. Are you Irish?"

Poppy was about to inform her that she was a Fenian, but she thought better of it. [10]

"I was born here in Bloemfontein," she answered.

"Well, perhaps your mother came from Ireland, for you have *quite* an Irish face: only you're so thin, and you look so cross—are you?"

"Yes. I am always cross. I hate everybody."

"Good heavens! What a little savage! but you shouldn't. It makes one so ugly to hate."

"Does it?" Eagerly. "Do you think if I was never cross I'd get beautiful?"

"You are much more likely to," said the other encouragingly, thinking in the meantime that nothing could ever make harmonious and beautiful that small tormented face.

"Is that why you are so beautiful?" was the next question.

The beauty smiled: a little complacently perhaps.

"I expect so. I am never cross and never unhappy, and I never mean to let anyone make me so." She opened her brown holland sunshade lined with sea-green silk and got up to go.

"Now be sure and remember that," she said pleasantly. "Never cry, never be unhappy, never hate anyone, and never be cross and—you'll see how beautiful you'll become."

"Oh, I will, I will," cried Poppy ardently.

"Now I must go," said the beautiful one. "I want to take one last walk round your pretty Bloemfontein, because I am going back to Cape Town to-morrow."

"Have you any little girls in Cape Town?" asked Poppy, wishing to detain her a little longer. She laughed at that.

"You funny child! Why I'm not even married. But I'm going to be, and to the most fascinating man in Africa."

"Is his name Lancelot?"

"No. His name is Nick Capron. How old are you, child?"

"Nine." [11]

"Only nine! You look about thirteen, you poor little thing. Well, good-bye, I must really go."

"Good-bye; and thank you so much for speaking to me," Poppy stammered. She felt that she could adore the beautiful study in brown holland, who only laughed at her again and went on her way.

But Poppy, sitting on her rock had a gleam of hope and happiness; for at last she knew the secret of being beautiful; *and*—it had been told her—her eyes were pretty.

She sat thinking for a long time and making resolutions. She even determined to strive to hate Aunt Lena less. Minor resolutions were—not to be unkind to the children when they made her angry and told tales on her; not to quarrel with her two elder cousins, Clara and Emily; not to scratch them and beat them with her fists when they called her *Foelstruis*,[1] because her legs were so long and thin; not to fly into awful rages in which she could not speak, only shake all over and bite her hands and lips till the blood came; not to sit and think of Aunt Lena's ways until a red curtain came down before her eyes and her heart felt like a red-hot coal burning her to death.

[1] Ostrich.

These were a few of the terrible obstacles in the path to beauty which she set herself to overcome. There were other arts, too, she would practise to the same end. She would brush her hair until it sprang into waves, even as the hair of the beautiful one in brown. She would cut her eyelashes, as Clara did, to make them thick and long. She would run and jump, even when she was tired, to make her body strong and her cheeks pink. She would walk upright, even when she had the pain in her stomach, so that she might grow tall and graceful. Furthermore, she would find out from old Sara where that wonderful milky cactus grew, which the young Basuto girls gathered and rubbed upon their breasts in the moonlight to make them grow round and firm as young apples. [12]

Last, but most important of all, she evolved from her dreamings and devisings a promise to herself that she would never, *never* do mean things, for meanness she surely knew to be the friend of hideousness. Meanness showed in the face. Could not anyone see it in Aunt Lena's face? The traces of mean thoughts and deeds showed in the narrow space between her eyebrows, in the specks in her pale eyes, were brushed into her sleek, putty-coloured hair and crinkled her coarse thick hands. If you only looked at the freckles and loose skin all round her wrists, her fat fingers and the way her ears stuck out, you must see how cruel and hateful she could be, thought Poppy. Whereupon, forgetting the greatest of her resolutions in a moment, she fell to hating her Aunt Lena again with a particular malignancy. But presently she noticed that the trees were casting long giant shadows towards the town, pansy-coloured clouds were in the sky, and a certain dewiness had come into the air. Hastily collecting the children she departed with them. In the same order as they came, they returned home down the long white street.

But it was hard in the house of Aunt Lena Kennedy to attain beauty through virtue.

On Saturdays Poppy even forgot that she had ever made resolutions to that end. Upon that day of days, Mrs. Kennedy subjected her house and all that therein was to a scrubbing in which there was no niggardliness of what she termed "elbow grease." Poppy was not exempt; her turn came at ten o'clock at night; and that was the hour of shame and rage for Poppy. When all the rest of the children were comfortably in bed, sucking their weekly supply of *lekkers*, Mrs. Kennedy would roll up her sleeves and approach in a workmanlike manner the big pan-bath in the middle of the kitchen, wherein stood Poppy, lank, thin-limbed, and trembling—but not with cold—under the scrutiny of the speckled eyes she hated so well. [13]

"Ah! you bad-tempered little cat!" was the usual preliminary; "why can't you be grateful to me for taking the trouble to keep you clean? It isn't every aunt by marriage who would do it, I can tell you. I suppose you'd like to go about with the dirt ingrained in you! What are you shivering and cringing like that for? Are you ashamed of your own body?"

"It is horrible to be naked, aunt," she would retort, striving to keep tears from bursting forth and full of apprehension that someone might come into the wide-open kitchen doors.

"Horrible! what's horrible about it, I'd like to know, except in your own nasty little mind? A body like a *spring-kaan*,[2] that's what you've got ... and don't want me to see it, I suppose! Dirty pride! the ugliest child *I've* ever seen ... the longest legs ... and the skinniest arms ... look what nice fat arms Clara and Emily's got! ... one would think you never got enough to eat ... pass me that other arm."

[2] Grasshopper.

With a rough flannel and blue mottled soap she scoured Poppy's body and face as if it had been the face of a rock; scrubbing and rubbing until the skin crackled like a fire beneath her vigorous hand. Later came a scraping down with a bath towel made of something of the same fibre as a door-mat. At last Poppy crept to her bed, her eyes like pin-points in her head from the scalding of the strong soap; her hair strained back from her sore, glazed face and plaited as tightly as possible into two pig-tails behind her ears.

On such nights she was far enough from the beauty she so much coveted. To herself she appeared hideous—*hideous*. It gave her pain to look at herself in the glass. And she believed that her aunt made her hideous with malignant intent. Her cousins had their hair loosely plaited, and it hung nicely over their faces, and they had frills to their nightgowns. Poppy's nightgown of unbleached calico had a tight narrow neck-band that nearly strangled her when buttoned with a linen button the size of a small saucer. [14]

Those were the nights when a thousand devils ate at her heart and fought within her, and she knew she could never be beautiful. She would lie awake for hours, just to loathe her aunt and concoct tortures for her. In imagination she cut slits in that hated body and filled them with salt and mustard, or anything that would burn; dug sharp knives into the cruel heart; saw the narrow hard face lying on the floor and beat into it with a hammer until it was red, red, red—and everything was red.

"Scorpion! Scorpion!" she would rave.

Worn out at last and half asleep she would choke and groan and bite her pillow, thinking she had her enemy under her hands, until her cousins in their big bed across the room would call out:

"Ma! I wish you would come and speak to Miss Poppy here. She's calling you a 'scorpion'!"

The chances were that Mrs. Kennedy, in no pleasant temper after all her exertions, would fly into the room, tear down the bedclothes, and administer two or three stinging slaps on Poppy's bare body, crying out upon her for an ungrateful, vile-tempered little fagot.

"You want a *sjambok* round you, that's what you want, my lady, and you'll get it one of these days. I shan't go on with you in this patient way for ever."

"I won't have a *sjambok* used on a child in my house," Uncle Bob would mutter in the dining-room, asserting himself in this one matter at least. [15]

But Clara and Emily would jeer from their beds, calling her *Miss* Poppy in fine derision.

"*Now* you've got it! How did you like that, hey? *Lekker*, hey?"

Some time after midnight Poppy would weep herself to sleep.

Once Poppy used to go to St. Gabriel's Infant School, where she had learned to read and write; but when the twins arrived in the world, Aunt Lena could no longer spare her from home, and her education languished for three years. But at last there came a letter from her god-mother in Port Elizabeth saying that she had sent five pounds to St. Michael's Home, asking the Sisters to give Poppy as much education as possible for that sum.

Poppy was wild with delight. It had been beyond her wildest dreams to go to St. Michael's and learn all sorts of wonderful things with all the *grand* children of Bloemfontein. She could not believe that such joy was to be hers. Mrs. Kennedy made great objections to the scheme, and seemed likely to get her way until her husband took the trouble to insist. So Poppy went off one morning full of hope and high ambition, in a clean, very stiffly starched overall of faded galatea, her old straw hat freshly decorated with a yellow pugaree that hung in long tails down her back.

But school was only the beginning of a fresh era of misery. The girls stared at her old boots and sneered at her pugaree, and no one would be friends with her because she wore white cotton stockings, which were only sixpence a pair, and sold to Kaffir girls to wear on Sundays.

Poppy gave back sneer for sneer and taunt for taunt with great versatility; but her heart was sometimes near bursting under the galatea overall. It seemed to her that even the teachers despised her because of her shabbiness and ugliness, and that when she worked hard at her lessons she got less praise than the pretty girls. "Yes! it's because I'm ugly, and everything I wear [16] is ugly," she whispered to herself as she walked home alone every day, hurrying because she knew the children would be dressed and ready, waiting to be taken to the Kopje as soon as she had bolted her cold dinner. Clara's and Emily's dinner was always kept hot. They went to the Dames' Institute, another school of some importance where all the nice high Dutch Boers sent their children: and they got home at two o'clock. Mrs. Kennedy said she would keep no dinner hot later than that hour, so that Poppy, arriving at three, found her stewed mutton cold in a dish of fatty gravy, and sometimes a bit of cold suet pudding. She would always have "filled up" contentedly enough with bread, but Mrs. Kennedy grumbled when too much bread was eaten, as she only baked once a week.

Sometimes, when Poppy had been very unhappy at school, she used to stop at the Kopje instead of hurrying home, so that she could cry without being spied on by Ina or the twins. She would lie down among the rocks and the kind green leaves, and moan and cry out against God and everybody in the world. Her little songs and stories seemed to have died in her heart and been buried. She would call out to God that He *might* have let her have *something*—a kind mother, or golden hair, or brains, or a white skin, or a happy home, or *something*; it wouldn't have hurt *Him*, and it would have made all the difference to her. Later she passed from argument to anger and from anger to frenzy; shouting at the sky because she was ugly and poor and horrible within as well as without, so that no one loved her and she hated everyone.

At last, tired out, hopeless, sick with bitter crying, she would lay her head against an old mimosa tree that had a curve in its trunk like the curve of a mother's arm, and the soft odour of the fluffy round yellow blossoms would steal over her. Later, a land of peace and strength [17] seemed to come out of the tree to her, and she would have courage to get up and go on her way.

One of the teachers, Miss Briggs, was always scolding her about her hands. She would draw the attention of the whole class to them, covering Poppy with shame. They were not big hands like Clara's and Emily's but they were rough and coarse with housework and through being continually in the water washing stockings and handkerchiefs and plates; and in the winter they got horribly chapped, with blood marks all over them, so that the teachers couldn't bear to see them and the girls used to say "Sis!" when she reached for anything. Her nails, too, were often untidy, and her hair. She never had time in the mornings to give it more than just one brush and tie it back in her neck, and she used to have to clean her nails with a pin or a mimosa thorn while she was hurrying to school, learning her lessons on the way. It was the only time she had to learn them, except in the afternoons when she took the children out. If they were good and would stay happy, she could get out her books from under the pram seat and learn; but almost immediately Ina would want to be played with, or Georgie would fall down and hurt himself and whimper in her arms for half an hour. The fact was that the children had been brought up to believe that Poppy was in the world entirely for their comfort and convenience, and they could not bear to see her doing anything that was not for them.

"I'll tell ma," was their parrot cry: and that meant boxes on the ear.

"I up with my hand" was a favourite phrase of Aunt Lena's.

In the evenings Ina must always be sung to sleep, and sometimes would not go off for more than an hour. Then Mrs. Kennedy would say briskly: [18]

"Now get your lessons done, Porpie!"

But by then Poppy's head would be aching and her eyes would hardly keep open, and what she did learn would not stay in her head until the next morning.

And after all, none of the teachers seemed to care much whether she learned them or not. If by accident she did them well, she got no praise; if she did them ill she was scolded and the lesson was "returned"—that meant being kept in on Friday afternoons until the lesson had been learnt or rewritten. But when Friday afternoon came, Poppy could not stay; there were the children to be taken out, and her ears would be boxed if she were too late to do that; she would get no tea, and the whole house would be thoroughly upset. So the "returned" lessons had to go to the wall. She would slink home when supposed to be taking recreation in the play-ground before the "returned" bell rang. That meant bad conduct marks, unpopularity with the teachers, and as the deserted Fridays mounted up—all hope lost of gaining a prize. After a while the teachers said she was incorrigible, and gave her no more attention.

"I wonder you bother to come to school at all, Poppy," was the favourite gibe of Miss Briggs.

When examination days came she did badly, except in history and geography, which she liked and found easy.

Break-up day was the worst of all.

The girls all came in their pretty soft white frocks and looked sweet. Only Poppy was ugly, in a piqué frock, starched like a board, her hair frizzed out in a bush, her pale face looking yellow and sullen against the over-blued white dress; her long legs and her narrow feet longer and narrower than ever in white stockings and elastic-sided boots.

There was never any prize for her.

She knew there never would be. She used to keep saying inside herself:

"*Of course* there isn't a prize for you"; and yet she was so silly, her ears were cracking and straining all the time to hear her name read out of the list. And her heart used to feel like a stone when the list came to an end without her name being called; and her pale face would be strangely red and burning like fire. Sometimes a little extra piece would be read, that Poppy Destin's historical essay or geography paper was the best, but the prize had been passed on to the second best on account of this girl's disobedience, untidiness, and the number of undone returned lessons against her name. Then everybody would look at Poppy Destin, and her heart would stop so still that she believed she must fall down dead in one minute. [19]

But the entertainment would go on. The girls fetched their prizes from the table covered with lovely books, and curtseyed to Lady Brand, who spoke and smiled to each one of them. Afterwards would come the recitations and songs that everyone joined in but Poppy. She had been turned out of the singing-class because she sang off the key. Also, Sister Anna said, she moaned instead of singing; though Poppy was aware that she had lovely tunes going on inside her head all the time. It must have been true about the moaning, for Ina used to say when Poppy sang to her at nights:

"Your songs always sound just's if you are crying all the time, Poppy."

She loved music, but was not allowed to learn it. Clara learned and Emily could have if she had liked, but Aunt Lena said she couldn't afford those "frills" for Poppy. Once a lady named Mrs. Dale offered to teach the child if she could be spared two afternoons a week, and Poppy begged her uncle to let her go. He shook his head.

"You must ask your aunt if she can spare you, Poppy."

"Spare her!" shrieked Mrs. Kennedy. "Isn't she away all day now? What help do I get from her, I'd like to know? and now she wants to go gadding off in the afternoons, the only time she can be of a little use to take the children off my hands. Music indeed! Gadding with Nellie Dale is more like it." [20]

"Only twice a week, uncle," pleaded Poppy.

"My girl, you must do what your aunt thinks best. Can't you spare her two afternoons a week, Lena?"

"Oh, let her go ... fine musician she'll make, *I'm* sure," said that lady. And for two weeks Poppy went. Then Mrs. Kennedy, storming and raving, refused to let her go again. She missed her slave; so Poppy went back to the old life of weariness; but she had something new to think over. Mrs. Dale had known her mother quite well, and remembered Poppy as a baby.

"You were a sweet little thing," she said. "So beautifully kept, and the apple of your mother's eye."

This was most wonderful and shining news. Any illusions Poppy might have had about her mother had long since been scattered by such remarks from her aunt as:

"Your mother ought to be alive. She'd have skinned you for your dirtiness—your deceit, your laziness" (whatever the crime might be).

Or:

"It's a good thing your mother's lying cold in her grave, my girl—she would have had murder on her soul if she had had *you* to deal with."

Now, to hear that her mother had been a gentle and kind woman, not beautiful, but with wonderful Irish eyes and "a laugh like a bird's song!"

"Clever, too," said Mrs. Dale. "Though she was only a poor Irish girl and came out here with the emigrants, she had a lot of learning, and had read more books than anyone in Bloemfontein. I think the priests must have educated her."

"But why has no one ever told me before?" asked Poppy in amazement. "No one speaks of her, or of my father, to me! Why?" [21]

Mrs. Dale shook her gentle head.

"Ah well, my dear, she's at rest now and your wild Irish father too. Her heart broke when he broke his neck somewhere down on the diamond diggings, and she didn't want to live any longer, even for you—her Poppy-flower she always called you. One day, when I went to see her, she said to me, looking at you with those eyes of hers that were like dewy flowers: 'Perhaps my little Poppy-flower will get some joy out of life, Mrs. Dale. It can't be for nothing that Joe and I have loved each other so much. It must bring some gift to the child.' And she told me that the reason she had called you Poppy was that in Ireland they have a saying that poppies bring forgetfulness and freedom from pain; but then she took to weeping, that weeping that is like lost melodies, and that only the Irishry know.

"'But I see,' she wailed, 'that she's marked out for sorrow—I see it—I see it.' And three nights after that she died."

This was Mrs. Dale's story. Poppy treasured it in her heart with the verbal picture of her mother, "eyes like a dewy morning, black, black hair, and a beautiful swaying walk."

"It must have been like hearing one of those old Irish melodies played on a harp, to see her walk along the street," was the thought Poppy evolved from Mrs. Dale's description.

After that she never found life quite unlovely again. But she longed to hear more, and whenever she could, even at the risk of curses and blows, she would steal to kind Mrs. Dale for another word. How ardently she wished her mother had lived. How unutterably beautiful to be called Poppy-flower! instead of *Porpie*! Her mother would have understood, too, the love and craving for [22] books which had seized her since she had more learning. She would not have been obliged to creep into the fowls' *hok* or the forage-house when she wanted to read some book she had borrowed or found lying about the house, or the old Tennyson which she had rescued from the ash-heap one day and kept hidden under the chaff-bags in the forage-house.

"There's that Porpie with a book again!" was her aunt's outraged cry. "Lazy young huzzy! For ever squatting with her nose poked into a book reading some wickedness or foolishness I'll be bound.... Anything rather than be helpful ... no wonder your face is yellow and green, miss ... sitting with your back crooked up instead of running about or doing some housework ... more to your credit if you got a duster and polished the dining-room table or mended that hole in the leg of your stocking." Oh, the thousands of uninteresting things there are to be done in the world! thought Poppy. The dusters and damnations of life!

She used to long to be taken ill so that she might have a rest in bed and be able at last to read as much as she liked. But when she broke her arm she was too ill to care even about reading, and when she got scarlet fever she could not really enjoy herself, for Ina sickened of it too, and was put into bed with her, and was so fretful, always crying unless she was told stories or sung to. So they got better together and *that* was over.

Before she was twelve Poppy's schooldays came to an end. The five sovereigns had been spent and there was no more to come. Wasted money, Mrs. Kennedy said, and wrote and told the god-mother so. The fact that never a single prize had been won was damning evidence that the culprit was both idle and a dunce. It was quite true that she had learnt nothing much in the way of [23] lessons. History and geography or anything with a story in it, or poetry, were the only things that interested her. Grammar and arithmetic were nothing but stumbling-blocks in her path, though she never spoke bad grammar, being quick to detect the difference in the language of her teachers and that of her aunt, and profiting by it, and she learned to use her voice as they did too —softly and low—never speaking the half-Dutch, half-English patter used by Mrs. Kennedy and her children to the accompaniment of "Och, what?" "Hey?" and "Sis!" Her Uncle Bob had a sweet way of turning his words in his lips, which made even the kitchen-Dutch pleasant to the ear, and with great delight Poppy discovered one day that she also had this trick. Not for years however, did she realise that this was Ireland in her tongue; her country's way of marking Bob Kennedy and Poppy Destin as her own, in spite of Africa.

Her ear was fine for beautiful sounds and her aunt's voice scraped the inside of her head more and more as time went on, and whenever the latter dropped an "h" Poppy picked it up and stored it in that dark inner cupboard of hers where was kept all scorn and contempt.

She never made a remark herself without *thinking* it first and deciding how it was going to sound, so afraid was she of getting to speak like her aunt. Often she used to practise talking, or recite to herself when she thought no one was listening, but when overheard, fresh sneers were thrown at her.

"Was she going daft then? ... speaking to herself like a crazy Hottentot ... concocting impudence, no doubt ... the lunatic asylum was *her* place ... and don't let me hear you again, my lady, or I'll up with my hand ... etc."

One day Ina fell very ill, and Mrs. Kennedy sent a messenger flying for the doctor. When he [24] came he shook his head gravely, and after a week or two announced that the child had dropsy. It sometimes followed on scarlet fever, he said ... especially if the child had taken cold ... probably she had been sitting on the damp ground. At once Mrs. Kennedy's imagination conjured up a picture of Ina sitting on a damp stone on the Kopje while Poppy amused herself reading a book. That was quite enough to convince her as to who was the cause of the child's illness. Thereafter

she never ceased to reproach Poppy with this new crime.

"If it hadn't been for *your* wicked carelessness, my child wouldn't be lying at death's door now," was her eternal cry, followed by a long list of all the sins and offences committed by Poppy since first the affliction of her presence had fallen upon the Kennedys' home.

"A thorn in my side, that's what you've been ever since I first set eyes on your yellow face.... I don't know what God lets such beasts as you go on living for ... no good to anyone ... dirty, deceitful little slut ... nose always in a book ... muttering to yourself like an Irish Fenian ... ill-treating my children.... Your mother ought to have been alive, that's what ... *she* would have learned you ... etc."

A fresh offence was that little Ina would have no one else with her but the despised and evil one. The cry on her lips was always, "Poppy, Poppy—come, Poppy!"

She lay in her cot, white and swollen, and marbly-looking, and at first the doctor steamed her incessantly; a wire cage covered with blankets over her body, a big kettle, with its long spout stuck into the cage, boiling at the foot of the bed. She would moan and fret at the heat and Poppy had to be singing to her always; even fairy tales she would have sung to her. One day the doctor cut three slits in the instep of each poor little foot while she lay in Poppy's arms, clinging and [25] wailing, and Poppy, quivering and sick, watched the sharp little knife and the water spouting out almost up to the ceiling—no blood came. After that, all Ina's marbly look was gone, and it was plain to see that she was nothing but a little white skeleton; and so weak she could hardly whisper to Poppy to sing to her—"There's a Friend for little children," and "Snow-white and Rose-red"—her favourite hymn and her favourite fairy-tale.

It had never occurred to Poppy that the child would die; but one day the doctor stood a long time watching her as she lay staring straight at the ceiling with her pretty brown eyes all glazy, and her little ghost hands clutching the bars of her cot, and presently he shrugged his shoulders in a hopeless way and turned to Mrs. Kennedy.

"I thought we might save her as she was so young, but——"

Then he went away and did not come so often after. And day by day Ina grew thinner and whiter, and her eyes got bigger and shone more, and she never made a sound except to whisper, "Poppy—sing, Poppy."

Poppy's voice had gone to a whisper too, then, and she could only make strange sounds in her throat; but Ina did not notice that.

The whole family used to creep into the room and stand round the cot, while Poppy sat there with Ina's hand in hers, whispering songs between the bars of the cot, while her head felt as though there were long sharp needles running through it, and her throat and body were full of horrible pains. Sometimes the room seemed all cloudy and she only faintly saw dead faces through the dimness; Ina and she whispering together seemed to be the only alive people in the world.

Even Aunt Lena's tongue was still those days, and forgot to abuse, but sometimes when Ina [26] turned away from her, moaning for Poppy, the mother's eyes could be seen gleaming malignantly across the cot. Poppy glared back, for she had come to love little Ina so passionately that she could hardly bear anyone else to come near. No one had ever wanted Poppy and loved her before, and from her gratitude sprang a deep love for the sick child. All through the day she sat by the cot, even taking her food there, and at night she slept wrapt in a blanket on the floor or sitting in a chair by the bed.

One evening at nine o'clock Ina died.

Poppy had been singing a little Boer love song to her in a dreadful rustling voice, with face pressed against the cold bars and eyes shut, when she heard a gentle sigh that seemed to pass over her face like soft white feathers. She left off singing and peered down into the cot. The room was very dim, but she could see the little white face with the soft damp rings of hair round it, lying very still and with eyes closed.

"Ina," she whispered with a dreadful fear. "Ina, speak to Poppy—open eyes, darling."

But Ina never opened eyes or spoke again.

Immediately Mrs. Kennedy filled the house with her lamentations, and mingled with them were cursings and revilings of Poppy. She would kill her, she shrieked, even as her child had been killed by that cursed Irish Fenian. She was raving mad for the time, and no doubt she would have killed Poppy, or attempted it, if her husband had not been there to keep her by main force from violence. But that Poppy should be driven from the house she insisted.

"She shall not sleep under my roof with that innocent little corpse," she screamed. "Go, go out of the house, brute and beast and devil." And breaking loose from her husband's hands she [27] caught hold of the ghost-like child and flung her into the yard.

When Poppy got up from the ground it was late and the door was shut for the night. The world

was black save for a few pale stars. She wondered heavily where she could go and lie down and sleep. She was like a man who has walked unceasingly for hundreds of miles. She could think of nothing but sleep. She groped for the forage-house door, thinking how sweet it would be to rest there on the bundles of forage, with the smell of the pumpkins coming down from the roof, where they were ripening; but the door was locked. The fowl-hok swarmed with lice in the summer; even in her weariness her flesh crept at the thought of spending the night there. She remembered the Kopje and her old friend the mimosa tree, but there was a certain gloom about the Kopje on a dark night. At last she thought of the poplar trees by the Big Dam; they were her friends—all trees were her friends. When her heart hurt her most and her eyes seemed bursting from her head because she could not cry, if she could get close to a tree and press against it, and put the leaves to her eyes, some of her misery seemed to be taken away: thoughts and hopes would come into her mind, she could forget what had made her unhappy and her little songs would begin to make themselves heard.

When she broke her arm she used to cry all night for them to put green leaves on the place to stop the aching, but they would not. Only the doctor, when he heard about it, brought her a bunch of geranium leaves one morning. She put them quickly under her pillow and when no one was there laid them down by her side, because she could not get them under the splints, and they eased the pain, until they were withered and "Aunt Lena" found them in the bed and threw them away: then the pain was as bad as ever. [28]

The poplar trees grew in a long line of thirty or so by the side of the Big Dam which lay just outside the town past the Presidency. Poppy was sometimes allowed to take the children there, when Clara and Emily went to help mind the children, in case they climbed up the dam wall and fell into the water. They were tall, grand trees, that never ceased rustling in the breeze that crept across the big expanse of water, even on the hottest days. Poppy had climbed every one of them, and she never forgot the moment of pure gold joy that she felt when she reached the top of each and sat there silent and afar from the world, cloistered round by the mysteriously whispering leaves. But the seventh tree was her specially loved friend. It belonged to her—and she had climbed to its very tip, higher than anyone ever had before, and cut her name in the soft pale bark.

And this was the friend she turned to on that night of dreadful weariness when Ina died.

She never knew how she got through the town, silent and dark, and over the little hill thick with *bessie* bushes and rocks that lay between the Dames' Institute and the Presidency. She did not even remember climbing the tree, which had a thick smooth trunk and was hard to get up for the first six or seven feet. But at last she was in her seat at the top between two branches, cuddling up to the mother-trunk with her arms round it and her eyes closed.

Then, even though her heart took comfort, the darkness and strange sounds of the night terrified her, and filled her with dread and despair. There were wild ducks flying and circling in long black lines against the pallid stars over the dam, wailing to each other as though they had lost something they could never, never find again. And the wind on the water made a dreary pattering that sounded like the bare feet of hundreds of dead people who had come out of the graveyards close by, and were hurrying backwards and forwards on the dam. Then there would [29] be a mysterious rushing through the trees and all the leaves would quiver and quake against each other, like little ghosts that were afraid to be out in the dark night. Poppy wondered if Ina's little ghost was with them.

In the highest windows of the Dames' Institute there were still a few lights showing, and a dim red glow came from a window at one end of the Presidency, and when Poppy opened her eyes these seemed like friends to her. But they went out one by one, and with the last, light seemed to go out of her mind too. She shut her eyes again, and pressed her heart against the poplar tree, and called through the darkness to her mother. She did not know whether she really called aloud, but it seemed to her that a long thin shriek burst from her lips, as a bullet bursts from a gun, piercing through the air for miles.

"Mother! Mother! Mother, my heart is breaking." She sobbed, and sobbed, and sobbed, gripping the little ghostly leaves and pressing them to her eyes. But her mother did not come, of course. No one came. Only the little ghostly leaves shivered more than ever and the dreary dead feet came pattering over the water. At this time a sweet, sad cadence of words streamed into Poppy's head and began to form a little song. Strange, that though its burden was misery and wretchedness, it presently began to comfort her a little.

"My heart is as cold as a stone in the sea"—it ran.

Yet Poppy had never seen the sea.

Everyone in the world seemed to be sleeping except the dead people and Poppy. Even the clock in the Government buildings struck as though muffled up in blankets, speaking in its sleep. When it was striking she raised her head to listen and count the strokes, and forgetting the horror of the night opened her eyes—and beheld a terrible, shroudy vision creeping over the world. It came [30] very slowly and stealthily, like a grey witch in a tale of horror, and ate up little patches of darkness as it came, swelling larger as it ate. Oh! the dead people swaying to and fro on the water! She prayed they might be gone back to their graves before the grey witch reached them with her long, clutching fingers; she prayed in a frenzy of fear for herself, calling to Christ and Mary Mother of God, to save her from the grey witch. She rocked herself backwards and forwards, praying and moaning, and almost falling from the tree, and at last in reckless desperation opened her eyes, and glared out over the dam—and saw that the dawn had come. The grey witch had turned into a lovely lady, all decked in palest pink, with her arms spread wide in the sky, trailing long veils of sheeny lavender cloud behind her.

A man and a boy with guns in their hands were creeping along under the dam wall, trying to get near a covey of wild duck on the water. Presently they stopped, and crouching, took aim and fired. The birds rose in a swarm and flew shrieking in long black lines, leaving two poor little black bodies on the dam—one flapping the water with a feeble wing, trying to rise, and falling back every time. The boy threw off his clothes and went in after them, while the man drew under the shadow of the dam wall, and began to run, making for the far side of the water, where the ducks seemed likely to settle again.

Presently the lady of the sky grew brighter and streaks of gold came into her pink and lavender veils; the grass was all silvery with the heavy dew, and the earth gave up a sweet and lovely smell. God seems to go away from Africa at night, but He comes back most beautiful and radiant in the morning. Birds began to chirrup and twitter in the trees and bushes, and take little flying journeys in the air. The clock struck five—clear and bell-like strokes now, that sang and echoed [31] out into the morning.

Poppy felt cold and stiff and hungry, and very tired, as though she should fall down and die if she stayed in the tree any longer.

There was nothing to do, and nowhere to go but home. After all, Aunt Lena could only kill her once. Then she would join Ina and see her mother, and hear Irish melodies, and be where it was not cold or lonely any more. She got down from the tree almost cheerfully and made her way through the grass, plucking a few *crase bessies* by the way and munching them as she walked. There was hardly anyone about the town, except a few *boys* carrying pails of water from the fountain. When she reached home, she found that the house was still shut and locked, with all the blinds down. So she sat on the kitchen step and waited until old Sara, coming out to get wood for the fire, nearly fell over her.

"Tch! Tch! Tch!" she clucked. "*Arme kentze! War vas sig gisterand?*" (Poor child! Where were you last night?)

"*Dar bij de dam. Ge koffi O'Sara. Ik is freeslik kow.*" (Up by the Big Dam. Give me some coffee, Sara. I am very cold.)

"Jah! Jah!" said old Sara, and hurried away, clucking and muttering, to make the fire and get the morning coffee. Poppy went in and warmed herself, and presently got down the cups and beakers and stood them in a row on the kitchen table. Cups and saucers for aunt and uncle and Clara and Emily, and beakers for the children. Old Sara poured them full of steaming black coffee, added milk and sugar and a home-made rusk in each saucer, and carried them away to the bedrooms. Poppy sat down with a beaker full, dipping a rusk into the coffee and eating it sopped, because the rusks are too hard to eat any other way. Presently old Sara came and [32] squatted on her haunches by the fire too, drinking her coffee from a white basin with a blue band round it (blue that it gave Poppy a pain to look at, it was so cold and livid), and making fearful squelching noises, she sopped and ate. Rolling her big black and white eyes at Poppy, she whispered all that had happened after she had gone. Aunt Lena had screamed and cried for hours, raving that she would not have her child's murderess in the house again. She could go and live in the fowls' *hok*, or the forage-house, until another home was found for her, but if Poppy came into her sight again, she would tear her limb from limb. Afterwards she had coughed and spat up blood. Old Sara wagged her head, giving this piece of information as one who should say: "Serve her right, too." The doctor had come and said that "something was broken inside." Old Sara patted her wobbly stomach. "She must go to bed and not move for a month or she would go too." Old Sara pointed sanctimoniously upwards.

It was even so. Aunt Lena lay for weeks on her bed, but still ruling her house from it. Poppy was not allowed to eat or sleep under the house roof. A blanket was given to her, and she slept on the bales of chaff in the out-house with a bundle of forage for a pillow. Old Sara brought to her there such meals as she was allowed to receive.

The twins were not allowed to speak to her: a strange girl was hired to take them out—Poppy did not mind that. Clara and Emily passed her in the yard as though she was a jackal or some unclean beast—she minded that even less. The only thing she minded at all, was not being allowed to see Ina before she was buried.

On the day of the funeral, the little cold form in the coffin was not more cold and numb than one lying out in the out-house between two bales of chaff. Despair of mourning had Poppy by the throat. She could have wailed like a banshee. Indeed, if her voice had not gone from her, it is [33] probable that she would have relieved the pressure on her heart and brain in this fashion. As it was, she was the only person in the place who gave no outward sign of mourning. Her old blue galatea overall, with the pattern worn faint in front, and the sleeves in rags, might have grown to her back. But old Sara was given a dark dress of Aunt Lena's, and a new black *dook* to wear on her head. Clara and Emily had new black alpaca dresses, with tucks round the bottom and black ribbon sashes. Eight little girls came dressed in white, with their hair down and long floating white muslin veils hanging behind, and bunches of white flowers in their hands. They were to carry the coffin in turns, four carrying and four walking behind, because it was a very long way to the graveyard. Mr. Kennedy and Georgie and Bobby walked behind them, and then a great many men. But the saddest mourner of all watched from the crack of the forage-house door, and thought how sad and beautiful it all was, and how it would have been spoilt if she had gone out and joined it in her blue overall; and after the procession was out of sight, lay there on her face on the chaff, and could not cry; and seemed to have swallowed a stone, that stuck in her throat and gave her dreadful pains all across her chest; and whose heart kept saying: "I hate God! I hate

aunt!" And when she tried to scream it aloud, found that she had no voice.

In the evening when the sun was set, but before it was dark, a figure stole out of the back yard, crept through the empty *spruit*, slipped through a private garden and came out by the cathedral steps; then up past the big church bell that tolled for the dead, and so to the graveyard.

All the way she gathered wild flowers and grasses—rock-maiden-hair, *rooi gras*, moon-flowers, and most especially shivery-grass, and the little perky rushes with a flower sprouting out of them, [34] which the children call *tulps*. Ina had always loved these. Some "four o'clocks" too, stolen from a front garden as she passed, were added, and even a *stink bloem* graced the great bunch with which Poppy entered the churchyard.

She found a new little heap of red earth that she knew must be Ina's grave, for it was all covered with wreaths and the bunches of flowers the eight girls had carried. Scraping them all to the foot of the grave, Poppy laid hers where she thought Ina's hands would be, whispering down through the earth:

"From Poppy, Ina—Poppy who loves you best of all."

Some nights old Sara would come sneaking softly over to the forage-house, to sit a while with Poppy; sometimes she had a rusk to give the prisoner; most often she had nothing but an end of candle, but that was very welcome. Lighting it, and sticking it on a side beam, she would squat on the floor, and taking off her *dook*, proceed to comb her wool. Poppy was glad of company, and interested in the frank way old Sara attended to the business of catching and killing her *chochermanners*; besides, there were a lot of interesting things in old Sara's wool besides *chochermanners*: there was a little bone box full of snuff, and a little bone spoon to put it in the nose with; and a piece of paper with all old Sara's money in it; and a tooth belonging to old Sara's mother, and several small home-made bone combs and pins and charms.

Old Sara's Dutch was poor, and Poppy could not speak Basuto, so that much conversation did not ensue, but black people can tell a great deal without saying much.

Once Poppy asked her why she did not go to her *kraal* and live with her children instead of working for white people.

Old Sara took snuff and answered briefly: [35]

"*Ek het nê kinders, oor Ek is ne getroud.*" (I have no children, because I am not married.)

This was good, but not infallible logic, as Poppy even in her few years had discovered.

"Why didn't you get married when you were young, old Sara?" she queried.

Old Sara rolled her eyes mournfully at the child, and muttered some words in her own language. Then slowly she undid the buttons of many kinds and colours which adorned the front of her dress. From the left bosom she took a large bundle of rags, and placed them carefully on the floor, then opening her bodice wide, she revealed her black body bare to the waist. Poppy's astonished gaze fell upon a right breast—no object of beauty, but large and heavy; but where the left breast should be was only a little shrivel of brown skin high up out of line with the other.

That was old Sara's only answer to Poppy's question. Afterwards she quietly replaced her bundle of rags, and rebuttoned her dress.

As for Poppy, she pondered the problem long. At last she made a little song, which she called:

"The woman with the crooked breast."

One night old Sara brought news.

Poppy's box was being packed. In two days she was going to be sent away in the post-cart. Poppy thrilled with joy, and had no foreboding until next day when she overheard Clara and Emily whispering together in the yard. It transpired that though they envied Poppy the journey to Boshof in the post-cart, they did not envy her subsequent career under the protection of their mother's sister, Aunt Clara Smit.

"Do you remember that time ma sent us there when Ina had the diphtheria? We never got anything but bread and dripping, and she was eating chops and steaks all the time." [36]

"Yes," said Clara, "and remember how she used to beat *Katzi*, the little Hottentot girl, in bed every night for a week until the blood came, just because she broke a cup."

"Ha! ha!" they chirruped, "won't Miss Poppy get it *just*!"

"Yes, and mammer's going to give her something before she goes, too. She sent me to buy a *sjambok* this morning, because pa's hidden his away, and when he's gone out to the 'Phœnix' to-night, she's going to have Poppy across the bed in front of her. You're to hold her head and me her feet."

"Tlk! Won't she get it!"

This interesting piece of news determined Poppy on a matter which had long been simmering in her mind. She decided at last that she would take no more beatings from Aunt Lena, and neither would she sample the quality of Aunt Clara Smit's charity. She would run away.

All that afternoon she lay turning the matter over, and later she took old Sara into her confidence for two reasons: old Sara must commandeer some food for her, and must also get for

her the only thing she wanted to take away with her—a round green stone brooch which had belonged to her mother, and which Aunt Lena kept in her top drawer.

Poppy felt sure that with her mother's brooch on her she need fear nothing in the world; it was green, and therefore kindly disposed, as all green things were, being akin to trees.

It took a long while to beguile old Sara to obtain the brooch, for the old woman was very honest and she thought this looked too much like a stealing matter. Eventually she was persuaded, and a little after seven o'clock she brought it stealthily to the forage-house, together with a pocketful of [37] food-scraps saved from her own portion of the evening meal.

After this, Poppy did not dare wait another instant. She knew that as soon as he had finished his supper, her uncle would light his pipe and stroll off to spend a cheerful evening in the billiard-room of the "Phœnix Hotel"; then they would come to fetch her indoors!

With a hasty farewell to old Sara, her only friend, she slipped out through the dark yard and ran swiftly up the street. Her direction was towards the *Uitspan*, a big bare place about half a mile from the town where wagons halted for a night before starting on a journey, or before bringing their loads into town in the morning. There was a big *Uitspan* out beyond St. Michael's, and she made for that one, remembering there were always plenty of wagons there.

When she stole near it in the darkness, she counted eight wagons, four of which were loaded to depart, since their dissel-booms were turned away from the town.

There were several fires burning, and the fume of coffee was on the night air. Someone was making *as-kookies* (ash-cakes) too, for a pleasant smell of burnt dough assailed Poppy's nose. Four Kaffir *boys* were sitting round a three-legged pot, dipping into it and jabbering together, and by the light of another fire a white woman and three children were taking their evening meal. The wagon behind them was loaded with furniture and boxes, and by this Poppy was sure that they were a family on the move. She crept nearer to them, keeping in the shadow of the close-growing bushes. The dull red fires and the stars gave the only light there was.

"Ma," said one of the children at the fire, "I see a spook over there by the bushes." The mother's response was: "Here, you make haste and finish your coffee and get into the wagon. It's [38] time you children were asleep. They're going to inspan at eleven and you'd better get a good sleep before the wagon starts creaking and jolting."

This was useful information to Poppy. Her plan was to follow the wagon when it started and keep near it until late the next day, when too far from Bloemfontein to be sent back.

She crouched lower among the bushes, and presently began to munch some of her oddments of food, while still she watched the family she meant to adopt. When they had finished their meal they first washed up their tin beakers and plates with water from a small *fykie* which hung under the wagon; then everything was carefully put away into a wooden locker, and they prepared to retire for the night. The mother was a round-faced, good-natured-looking, half-Dutch colonial, evidently. She climbed sturdily into the tented wagon by the help of the brake and a little *reimpe* ladder. Across the tent was swung a *cartel* (thong mattress) and atop of this was a big comfortable mattress with pillows and blankets arranged ready for use. By the light of the lantern which the woman fixed to the roof of the tent, Poppy could see that the sides of the tent were lined with calico bags with buttoned-over flaps, all bulging with the things that would be needed on the journey. The woman proceeded to store away more things from a heap in the middle of the bed, some she put under the pillows, some under the mattress, and many were tied to the wooden ribs of the tent so that it presently resembled a Christmas-tree. Meantime the children clustered on the brake and the *reimpe* ladder, fidgeting to climb into the snug-looking nest. The mother talked while she worked:

"Here, Alice! I'll put this pair of old boots into the end bag, they'll do for wearing in the veldt ——" [39]

"Oh, sis, ma! I hate those old boots, they hurt me—" expostulated Alice.

"Nonsense, how can they hurt you? You keep your new ones for Pretoria, anything'll do on the veldt. Now you all see where I'm putting the comb—and this beaker we'll keep up in your corner, Minnie, so we don't have to go to the locker every time we're thirsty. I hope that boy will hang the *fykie* where we can reach it. Begin to take your boots off, Johnny. I'm not going to have you in here treading on my quilt with those boots; no one is to get in until they're *carl-foot*."

"I'll get *deviljies* (thorns) in my feet if I take them off out here," says Johnny. "Can't I sit on the edge of the bed?"

"All right then, but keep your feet out. Minnie, take off that good ribbon and tie your hair with this piece of tape," etc.

Eventually they were all in the tent, lying in a row crossways, the mother by the opening as a sort of barricade. They did not undress—only loosened their clothes.

Everyone wanted to lie across the opening. They couldn't see anything at the back of the tent, they complained; only had to lie and stare at the things bobbing overhead.

"You never mind that," said the mother, arguing. "You've got three or four weeks to see the veldt and the oxen in. I'm going to lie here so that I can keep you children from falling out while we're trekking. Why I knew a woman once who let her baby lie on the outside, and in the middle of the night she woke up and heard an awful crunching under the wheels, and when she felt for the baby it wasn't there!" This story caused a great sensation, but presently Johnny asked how the baby's bones could crunch under the wheels "if it fell out behind the wagon!" [40]

The mother considered for a moment, then said:

"It was the wheels of the wagon behind, of course, *dom-kop*."

But Johnny pointed out that a whole span of oxen would come before the wheels of the next wagon, and that the baby would be all trodden to bits before the wheels reached it.

"Oh, *Kgar! Sis!*" cried the sisters; and at this his mother told him amiably to shut his mouth and go to sleep.

But though she put out the lantern the talk still went on intermittently until replaced by snores.

The *boys* and the transport-drivers all lay wrapped in their blankets, snoring too. Only afar the oxen could be heard moving as they grazed, and the bell on the neck of one of them clanked restlessly. The fires had died down to dim red spots. The watcher in the bushes was the only one awake in the camp. She feared that if she slept the family in the wagon might be up and away. Her mind was made up to accompany that good-natured-looking woman and her family to Pretoria, since that was where they were bound for. She would follow the wagons and join them when a long way from Bloemfontein, and her tale would be that she belonged to a wagon which had gone on in front. She would pretend that she had got lost, and ask to be taken on to rejoin her relations in Pretoria.

At about eleven o'clock the moon rose, but no one stirred in the camp. Suddenly the figure of a man arose, took a long whip from the side of a wagon, unwound it, walked a little way from the camp, swung it whistling softly round his head for a moment, then sent a frightful report ringing across the veldt. Afterwards he lay down again until a great crackling and trampling and shouting told that the oxen were in the camp with their herders hooting and yelling round them. In a moment other still figures were on their feet; a clamour arose of voices shouting, wooden [41] yokes clattering, dissel-booms creaking; bullocks were called at by their names and sworn at individually:

"*Rooi-nek! Yoh Skelpot! com an da!*" (Redneck! You tortoise! come on there!)

"*Viljoen! Wat makeer jij?*" (Viljoen! What's wrong with *you*?)

Loud blows and kicks were heard and demands for missing oxen.

"*Jan, war is de Vaal-pans?*" (John, where is the yellow-belly?)

"*Ek saal yoh net now slaan, jou faarbont.*" (I'll strike you in a minute, you baseborn.)

"*De verdomder Swart-kop!*"

Each wagon had a span of eighteen or twenty oxen, and as soon as the last pair was yoked, a small black boy, the *voerlooper*, would run to their heads, seize the leading *rein* and turn them towards the road. Then came a tremendous crack of the driver's whip, a stream of oaths and oxen's names, intermingled and ending in:

"*Yak!*"

One by one the four wagons took the road, raising clouds of red dust, the drivers and boys running alongside.

Usually passenger-wagons go first in the line, but the wagon with Poppy's adopted family in it, started last, because *Swart-kop*, a big black-and-white ox, had been particularly fractious, and had delayed the operation of inspanning, putting the driver into a terrible passion. Poppy waited until his cursings and revilings were only faintly heard on the air, then slipping quietly through the camp which had returned to peaceful sleeping, she plunged into the clouds of dust.

Throughout the night hours she padded along, her throat and ears and mouth filled with the fine dirt, her eyes running and sore; afraid to get too near the wagons for fear of being seen; [42] afraid to be too far behind for fear of she knew not what.

Towards dawn they passed through a narrow *sluit*. The water was filthy at the *drift* when all the wagons had gone through it, but she left the road and found a clean place higher up where she thankfully drank and laved her begrimed face. As the dawn broke she could see that the veldt was well-bushed with clumps of rocks, and big ant-heaps here and there; there would be plenty of hiding-places when the wagons stopped.

Presently there were signs of a coming halt. The oxen slackened pace, the drivers began to call to each other, and the man who was evidently the *Baas* of the convoy went off the road and inspected the ground.

Then a long loud:

"*Woa! An—nauw!*" passed along the line, each wagon took to the veldt, drawing up at about fifty yards from the road.

Thereafter came the outspanning, with the identical accompaniments of the inspanning. When the oxen had gone to seek water and food in charge of their herders, the *voerloopers* departed to gather wood and *mis* (dry cow-dung) for the fires, and the drivers unrolled their blankets and lay upon them resting, but not sleeping, until a meal had been prepared; someone began to play a concertina at this time. Afar from the encampment Poppy had found a big dry hole in the heart of a clump of bushes. The thorns tore her face and her clothes as she struggled through them, but in the hole at last she fell down and succumbed to the passion for sleep which overwhelmed her. She lay like a stone all through the day, hearing nothing until the loud clap of a whip pulled her out of her dreams.

"*Yak—Varns!*"

Half dead with weariness—stiff, wretched, hungry—she crept from her hiding-place and [43] stumbled on her way, wrapped once more in the impenetrable dust.

On the night of the second day she discovered herself to the family in the tented wagon. Staggering from the bush at the side of the road she climbed on to the brake of the slowly moving wagon and appeared before the comfortable contented occupants—a filthy, tattered, unkempt

vision; her face peaked and wan under the dirt, her eyes glazy. "Give me food and water," she whispered—her voice had never returned since Ina's death.

After one long stare, and amidst screams from the children, the woman pulled her up into the tent, bade the children make room, and quickly found water and biscuits.

Poppy ate and drank ravening, then lay back and cried weakly, the big hot tears washing white streaks down her cheeks. The woman with an eye to her clean bedclothes, proceeded to sponge her face with water in a tin beaker, and told Alice to take off the tattered boots and stockings. She questioned Poppy the while, but Poppy cared for nothing but sleep. She lay back and slept even as they washed her. About noon she awoke and found herself still lying on the big bed, and the woman was standing on the brake with coffee and a plate of stew.

"Wake up and eat this, girl; and now you are better tell me where you come from and where you're going, hey?"

Poppy, between eating and drinking, recited her tale: she was travelling with her father and brothers and sisters to the Transvaal; had wandered away from the wagons and got lost on the veldt—believed she had been wandering for a week; her name she fancifully gave as Lucy Gray (it seemed to wake no echoes in the minds or memories of her listeners); no doubt, she said, these wagons would catch the others up in a few days. She begged the woman to take care of her in the [44]
meantime. She would help with the cooking and the children—she wouldn't eat much.

The woman regarded her suspiciously once or twice, but she was stupid as well as good-natured and had not the wit to find flaws in the well-thought-out tale. She consented to fall in with Poppy's request—in common humanity she could do little else—found some clean clothes for her and a pair of old boots, and gave her *fat* to smear on her wounds and sore feet.

But first Poppy had to be passed before the *Baas* of the wagons—the big fierce-looking Boer who fortunately was not at all fierce, only very stupid, and although he refused to believe her tale, turning to Mrs. Brant and remarking briefly: "*Sij lê!*" (she lies!) he could not offer any suggestion as to what the truth might be; nor did he make any objection to Mrs. Brant's plans; so Poppy was outcast no more. She became one of a family, and speedily made herself so useful to Mrs. Brant that the good woman was glad to have her.

Followed many long happy weeks. Happy even when the wet-season swooped down on them and they had to wait on the banks of swollen rivers fireless for days; or remain stuck in a mudhole for hours, until their wheels could be dug out or pulled out by three spans of oxen combined, while mosquitoes bit and swarmed over them, leaving a festering sore for every bite they gave; even under the heavy sweltering *sail* that was flung over them at nights to keep rain out, and which also kept the air out and made the small tent like a pest-house; even when the food gave out and they had to rely on what they could get at the scattered farms.

In spite of all the mishaps, everyone was kind and good-natured. No one offered blows or taunts to Poppy, and her starved heart revived a little and began to hold up its head under the gentle rain of kindliness and friendliness. Then, the glamour of travel was upon her for the first [45]
time. Never before had she seen the hills, the mountains, the great rolling spaces of veldt, the rivers sweeping and boiling down their wide ravines. It was most wonderful and beautiful, too, to wake every dawn and step out of the wagon to a fresh world. Where last night had been a hill, to-morrow would be a rushing river, befringed with mimosa, whose odour had been sweet on the breeze all the day before. The next day would find them on a bare plain, with no stick or stone to give shelter from the burden of the sun or the rain, and the next they would lie in the purple shadow of a mountain, on which were scarlet geraniums as tall as trees, and strange flowers shaped like birds and insects grew everywhere.

And oh! the fresh glory of the morning dews! The smell of the wood smoke on the air! The wide open empty world around them and the great silence into which the small human sounds of the camp fell and were lost like pebbles thrown into the sea! Happy, rain-soaked, sun-bitten days! Bloemfontein and misery were a long way behind. Poppy's sad songs were all forgotten; new ones sprang up in her heart, songs flecked with sunlight and bewreathed with wild flowers.

But a cloud was on the horizon. The convoy of wagons drew at last near its destination. Poppy began to be haunted at nights with the fear of what new trouble must await her there. Where would she go? What would she do? How could she face kind Mrs. Brant with her tale of parents and friends proved false? These frightful problems filled the nights in the creaking wagon with terror. The misty bloom that had fallen upon her face during the weeks of peace and content, vanished, and haggard lines of anxiety and strain began to show.

"Child, you look peaky," said good Mrs. Brant. "What'll your ma say? I must give you a Cockle's [46]
pill."

But Poppy grew paler and more peaky.

Two days' *trek* from Pretoria she was missed at inspan time. Long search was made. The wagons even waited a whole day and night for her; the *boys* called and the drivers sent cracks of their great whips volleying and echoing for miles, as a signal of their whereabouts in case she had wandered far and lost her bearings. At night they made enormous fires to guide her to their camping-places. But she never returned. It was then and for the first time that two little lines of verse came into the memory of Alice, the eldest girl, who had been at a good school. She recited them to the family, who thought them passing strange and prophetic:

"But the sweet face of Lucy
Gray
Will never more be seen."

Unfortunately, after leaving the wagons and hiding herself in a deep gulch, Poppy had fallen asleep, and that so heavily after her many nights of sleepless worry, that she did not awake for more than fourteen hours. When she did wake she found that some poisonous insect or reptile had stung one of her feet terribly: it was not painful, but enormously swollen and discoloured, and she found it difficult to get along. The wagons had gone and she could never catch up with them again, even if she wished. On the second night she heard, many miles away, the cracking of the whips and saw little glow-worms of light that might have been the flare of fires lighted to show her the way back to the wagons; and her spirit yearned to be with those friendly faces and kindly fires. She wept and shivered and crouched fearsomely in the darkness.

The next day it rained: merciless, savage, hammering rain. Sometimes she wandered in it, fancying herself wandering in a forest of trees, all with stems as thick as a rain-drop; sometimes [47] it was so strong she could lean against it; sometimes she thought she was a moth beating against glass, trying, trying to get out.

Another night came.

Through most of that she lay prone on her face, thinking—believing—hoping that she was dead and part of the earth she lay on.

And, indeed, the greater part of her was mud.

She had long ago lost the road. She supposed she must be in the Transvaal somewhere; but at this time, half-delirious from pain, hunger, and terror, she believed herself back near Bloemfontein—seemed to recognise the hills outside the town. Terrified, she took another direction, falling sometimes and unable to rise again until she had slept where she lay. Whenever she saw bushes with berries or fruits on them she gathered and ate.

Sometimes from her hiding-places she could see Kaffirs pass singly, or in small parties; but after searching their faces, she let them pass. Even in her delirium something warned her not to make herself known.

One night, it seemed to her weeks after she had left the wagons, she was suddenly dazzled by the sight of a red light shining quite near her. She gathered up her last remnants of strength and walked towards it; she believed she urged and ran—in reality she merely drifted by the help of a friendly wind that happened to be blowing that way. At last she saw that it was not one—but many lamps and candles shining through the windows of a house. But the windows themselves could be only dimly seen through the leaves of a tree, which overhung the house and threw long claw-like shadows everywhere. Next, her broken feet knew gravel under them: white walls were before her, too—and green doors and green window-shutters, all laced and latticed with the shadows of one great tree that stood like a monster in the path by the big door. The lights that [48] shone out and dazzled showed her that the tree was very, very green, with a myriad strange scarlet eyes glowing in it; eyes that glowed with an alert brightness that was not friendly. Poppy had always loved trees and believed them to be her friends, but this tree frightened her. Nevertheless she crept closer to the biggest, brightest window of the house, and peered in through the glass panes, a little dulled and dimmed by the ever-beating, everlasting rain. She saw a man sitting at a table spread with beautiful shining vases of flowers, dishes of food, plates and glasses that glittered, fruit—two black *boys* waited on him, dressed in white uniforms, and through an open doorway a tan-skinned old woman with a white *dook* could be seen speaking to one of the *boys*—handing him a dish that flamed with little blue flames. The man at the table leaned back in his chair and faced the window. If it had not been that she believed herself dying, or perhaps already dead, Poppy would rather have gone back to the veldt than into the house where that face was master, for it terrified her even as the faces of the Kaffirs on the veldt had done. The man was not ugly; but his mouth was cruel and bitter, and his eyes were of the same hard, cold blue as the stripe on old Sara's coffee-basin. And across his face, from the left eye to the corner of his mouth, was a long, raw, newly-healed scar.

It seemed to Poppy that while she stood watching this man, something inside her shrivelled up and blew away from her like a leaf in the wind. It came into her head then that, after all, she would not stay here at this house; it would be better to go back to the veldt. Wearifully she stepped down from the high steps she had climbed, reached the green door, and then her hobbling feet would go no further.

She sank on the steps and her head knocked against the door. At once dogs barked inside, [49] voices came near, the door opened, letting strong light fall across the face of Poppy, now lying on the floor. She saw black faces around her and heard native voices crying, "Wha!" in astonishment. Then someone lifted her up very strongly and held her under a hanging lamp and looked at her. She saw through failing eyes that it was the man with the scar.

"Who are you, child?" he asked, and his voice was quite kind and friendly.

Again the feeling of terror and panic swept over the child's heart; but she was very tired. She believed she was already dead. Her head fell back.

"My soul is like a shrivelled leaf," is what she answered.

PART II [50]

"I never saw anything like the way a poppy lives with its heart and soul every second of the day.

"It is the most joyful flower in the world. Not a joy of strength, for it is fragile, but just sheer delight in existence and devil-may-care. I would much rather have poppies on my coffin than stupid affected lilies and white roses.

"Then the sheer cheek of a poppy, and the way it dies quickly, without any bother, when picked! It is such a definite vivid thing, whether it is braving the sun, or sleeping folded under the stars. A wild, fresh individuality; not a banal neutral-tinted affair out of the garden, or something with a smile on its face and a claw underneath, like a rose."

(*Extract from a letter.*)

CHAPTER I [53]

THE girl, with a little curling motion, leaned back in the rickshaw and gazed with fascinated eyes at the moving picture before her, seen through the hazy heat of a summer day.

Above the wide main street of Durban the sun blazed and glared like a brazen image of itself in the high ardent blue. Men in loose white ducks and flannels sauntered along, or stood smoking and talking under the shop awnings.

Carriages and rickshaws flew past, containing women in light gowns and big veils, with white and sometimes scarlet sunshades. Black boys at the street corners held out long-stalked roses and sprays of fragrant mimosa to the passers-by, beguiling them to buy. Coolies with baskets of fish on their heads and bunches of bananas across their shoulders, shambled along, white-clad and thin-legged. One, with a basket of freshly-caught fish on his arm, cried in a nasal sing-song voice:

"Nice lovely shad! Nice lovely shad!"

Two water-carts, clanking along in opposite directions, left a dark track behind them on the dusty road, sending up a heavy odour of wet earth which the girl snuffed up as though she had some transportingly sweet perfume at her delicate nostrils.

"I'm sure there is no smell in the world like the smell of wet Africa," she cried softly to herself, laughing a little. Her eyes took on a misty look that made them like lilac with the dew on it. [54]

Her black hair, which branched out on either side of her forehead, had a trick of spraying little veils of itself over her eyes and almost touching her cheek-bones, which were pitched high in her face, giving it an extraordinarily subtle look.

She was amazingly attractive in a glowing ardent fashion that paled the other women in the street and made men step to the edge of the pavement to stare at her.

She looked at them, too, through the spraying veils of her hair, but her face remained perfectly composed under the swathes of white chiffon which she wore flung back over her wide hat, brought down at the sides and twisted round her throat, with two long flying ends.

The big Zulu boy between the shafts, running noiselessly except for the pat of his bare feet and the "Tch-k, tch-k, tch-k" of the seed bangles round his ankles, became conscious that his fare was creating interest. He began to put on airs, giving little shouts of glorification, taking leaps in the air and tilting the shafts of the rickshaw backwards to the discomfort of its occupant.

She leaned forward, and in a low voice spoke a few edged words in Zulu that made him change his manners and give a glance of astonishment behind him, crying:

"*Aa-h! Yeh—boo Inkosizaan!*" behaving himself thereafter with decorum, for it was a disconcerting thing that an *Inkosizaan* who had come straight off the mail-steamer at the Point should speak words of reproof to him in his own language.

Presently he came to the foot of the Berea Hill, which is long and sloping, causing him to slacken pace and draw deep breaths.

A tram-car dashed past them going down-hill, while another climbed laboriously up, both open to the breeze and full of people. The road began to be edged with fenced and hedged-in gardens, the houses standing afar and almost hidden by shrubs and greenery. [55]

The girl spoke to the rickshaw-puller once more.

"The *Inkos* at the Point told you where to go. Do you know the house?"

He answered yes, but that it was still afar off—right at the top of the Berea.

She leaned back again content. It delighted her to be alone like this. It was quite an adventure, and an unexpected one. A malicious, mischievous smile flashed across her face as she sat thinking of the annoyance of the *Inkos* left behind at the docks. He had been furious when he found no closed carriage waiting for them.

There was one on the quay, but it was not theirs, and on approaching it and finding out his mistake, he stood stammering with anger. But she had flashed into a waiting rickshaw, knowing very well that he could not force her to get out and go back to the ship without making a scene.

Nothing would induce him to make a scene and attract the attention of people to himself. He had indeed told her in a low voice to get out and come back with him to wait for a carriage, but she merely made a mouth and looked appealingly at him, saying:

"Oh Luce! It will be so lovely in a rickshaw. I have never ridden in one like this yet."

"Well, ride to the devil," he had amiably responded, and turned his back on her. She had called out after him, in an entrancingly sweet voice:

"Yes, I know, Luce; but what is the address?"

"It was a shame," she said to herself now, still smiling; "but really I don't often vex him!"

A man and a woman passed, as she sat smiling her subtle smile through her spraying hair, and looked at her with great curiosity. [56]

Afterwards the man said excitedly:

"That girl takes the shine out of Mary——"

The woman, who looked well-bred with a casual distinguished manner, agreed with him, but did not tell him so. She said:

"Her eyes look as though they were painted in by Burne-Jones, and she is dressed like a Beardsley poster; but I think she is only a girl who is glad to be alive. Mary, however, is the most beautiful woman in Africa."

The girl heard the words "Burne-Jones eyes," and knew they were speaking of her.

At last she arrived at the gates of her destination. Big, green iron gates, that clanged behind her as she walked quickly forward down a winding path into a deep dim garden. There was no more to be seen but trees and tangles of flowering shrubs and bushes and stretches of green grass, and trees and trees and trees. Some of the trees were so tall and old that they must have been growing there when Vasco da Gama first found Natal; but there were mangoes and sweetly-smelling orange arbours, that could only have been planted a mere twenty or thirty years. The magnolia bushes were in bud, and clots of red and golden flowers were all aflare. Cacti, spreading wide prickly arms, and tall furzy grasses. Cool wet corners had grottos frondy with ferns; other corners were like small tropical jungles with enormous palms trailed and tangled over with heavy waxen-leaved creepers and strangely shaped flowers.

At last, deep in the heart of this wild, still garden, she found the house. A tall rose-walled house, its balconies and verandahs, too, all draped and veiled with clinging green. One lovely creeper that clothed the hall-porch was alive with flowers that were like scarlet stars.

She broke one of them off and stuck it in the bosom of her gown, where it glowed and burned all day. [57]

Then she rang the bell.

After a minute, someone came bustling down the hall and the door opened, discovering a stout and elderly coloured woman in a tight dress of navy-blue sateen with large white spots. Upon her head she wore a snowy *dook*. At the sight of the girl she shrieked, and fell back into a carved oak chair that stood conveniently at hand.

"Poppy!" she cried; "and no carriage sent for Luce! What time did the steamer come, in the name of goodness me?"

"It's no use asking that question now, Kykie," said the girl grimly. "The only thing to do is to send a carriage down at once."

Kykie departed with amazing alacrity, while the girl examined the hall, and opening the doors that gave off it, peeped into several rooms.

"Most of the old furniture from the farm!" she commented with a look of pleasure. Presently she came to a flight of three stairs, and directed by the sound of Kykie's voice, she stepped down them and found herself in a large white-washed kitchen lined with spotless deal tables and broad shelves. An enormous kitchen range, shining and gleaming with steel and brass, took up the whole of one side of the kitchen. Wide windows let in a flood of cheerful sunshine.

Kykie, having loaded three Zulu boys with imprecations and instructions and driven them forth, had sunk into a chair again, panting, with her hand pressed to her heart, and an expression of utter misery on her face.

"Don't be so excited, Kykie," said the girl. "You can't escape the wrath to come; what is the use of making yourself miserable about it beforehand?"

Kykie rolled her big eyes heavenwards; the whites of them were a golden yellow.

"His first day home!" she wailed. "They told me at the shipping office the steamer wouldn't be in before three. May their mothers——" [58]

Poppy walked round the kitchen, looking at everything.

"You've got all the same nice old copper things you had at the farm, haven't you, Kykie? But it is a much bigger kitchen. Which table will you let me have to mix the salads on?"

Kykie's face became ornamented with scowls.

"My salads are as good as anyone's," she asserted.

"Nonsense! you know Luce always likes mine best. Come upstairs now and show me my room."

"Me? With the lunch to get ready!" screamed Kykie, and jumping up she ran to the stove and began to rattle the pots.

"Well, I will find it myself," said Poppy, going towards the door, "and I think you're very unkind on my first day home."

But Kykie gave no heed. As a rule she was of a sociable turn of mind and under other circumstances would have hung about Poppy, showing her everything and bombarding her with questions; but now she was in the clutches of despair and dismay at the thought of her neglect of her adored master, Luce Abinger, and her very real fear of the storm that would surely break over her head when he arrived.

Kykie called herself a "coloured St. Helena lady," but by the fat gnarled shape of her, it is likely that she was more than half a Hottentot. Also the evidence of her hair was against her: it was crisp and woolly, instead of being lank and oily as a proper "St. Helena lady's" should be. However, she always kept it concealed beneath a spotless *dook*. Her real name, as she often informed Poppy in aggrieved accents, was Celia Frances Elizabeth of Teck Fortune; but Luce Abinger had brutally named her Kykie, and that was all she was ever called in his house. By way [59]
of retaliation it was her agreeable custom to address her master and Poppy Destin by their Christian names; but Luce Abinger only laughed, and Poppy didn't mind in the least. The old woman was quite ignorant and uneducated, but she had lived all her life as a servant amongst civilised people, and she spoke correct and fluent English, tacking many curious expressions of her own to the tails of her remarks with an air of intense refinement.

She was often crabbed of temper and cantankerous of tongue, but the heart within her wide and voluptuous bosom was big for Luce Abinger and all that pertained to him. She had served him during the whole of his twenty-five years of life in South Africa; and she was a very pearl of a cook.

Poppy found her room without any difficulty. On opening the first door on the first landing and looking in, she recognised her books, and the faded yellow silk counterpane with the border of red poppies worked by Kykie in past days. She took off her hat and surveyed the room with contentment. Her cushions were in her chairs; her books in their accustomed book-shelves; her long mirror with the slim gilt frame hung between two windows that gave upon the balcony; her writing-table stood opposite the mirror where she could look up and see herself as she wrote. Her brown print of *Monna Lisa* was above her dressing-table, and her silver cross with the ivory Christ nailed to it hung over her head—

"To keep a maid from harm!"

There were no pictures on the pale gold walls: only three wonderful drawings of herself, done in grey and blue and scarlet chalk on sheets of rough-edged common brown paper and fastened up by drawing-pins. These were the work of Luce Abinger. [60]

She observed that all the bowls and vases were filled with green leaves—no flowers. Kykie and the *boys* knew that green leaves were dearer to her than flowers.

Presently she rose and went to the mirror on the wall. Her hair did not quite please her, so she took out two little gold side-combs and ran them through it, until it branched out characteristically once more. She performed this ceremony on an average of twenty times a day, and always with a look of the frankest pleasure at the sight of herself.

"How nice my hair is!" she thought, "and how glad I am that it branches out in that fascinating way that just suits my face! If it were any other kind of hair, sleek, or smooth, or curly, I should not look nearly so charming."

Later she stepped into the balcony. The sun still glared, but the place was full of dim coolness, for its roof was massed with clematis and Virginia creeper, and heavy curtains of creeper hung from roof to rail; but long openings had been cut in the greenery to afford a view of the town and sea. Over the tops of the trees, far away below, beyond many white houses and gardens and a shining beach, was the Indian Ocean. It lay very still and splendid: a vast sheet of Sèvres enamel with a trivial frill of white at its edges, like the lace froth at the bottom of a woman's ball-gown. When storms sweep the Natal coast, that still shining sea can boom and roar and flash like a thousand cannons bombarding the town; but on the day that Poppy Destin first looked at it from her balcony, it was as still and flat as a sea on a map.

Long, long thoughts were hers as she stood gazing there; and the best of them all was that she was back once more in the land where the roots of her heart were planted deep.

While she stood lost in her reveries, Luce Abinger passed through the garden below, walking noiselessly across the green lawns. He saw her dreaming there, in her white gown with the [61]
scarlet flower flaming at her breast, and his tormented face became even less lovely. At that time his mood resembled the mood of Job when he desired to curse God and die.

Poppy, becoming hungry, went down to look for lunch. She found the master of the house already seated, beating and jangling his forks together, a habit of his when he was impatient. He

never touched his knives. Poppy had come to the conclusion that, like James I, he had some reason to hate and fear naked blades.

"The g-gong has been sounded twice for you," he began agreeably. "Were you afraid the view wouldn't be there after lunch?"

"I beg your pardon, Luce. I didn't know you were in, and I never heard a sound of the gong. Kykie, you should beat it louder."

Kykie was at the sideboard decanting whiskey. She resembled a person who had recently taken part in a dynamitic explosion. Her *dook* was pushed to the back of her head, her eyes stuck out, and perspiration beaded her nose and cheek-bones. Several of the buttons of her tight dress had come undone.

"Heavenly me!" she retorted in shrill staccato, "you never hear anything you don't want to, Poppy." With that she banged the decanter down and floundered from the room.

"What can be the matter with Kykie!" said Poppy in a wondering voice. What she was really wondering was, whether the fireworks had all been exhausted on Kykie's devoted head or whether there would be a detonation in her own direction shortly.

Babiyaan, a *boy* who had been in Luce Abinger's service for ten years, waited upon them with deft, swift hands. Poppy gave an inquiring glance at him; but though he had also received a generous share of obloquy and vilification, his face was as serene and impassive as an Egyptian's. [62]

Some delicious fish was served, grilled as only Kykie could grill, followed by cutlets and green peas, and a salad of sliced Avocado pears, delicately peppered, and with a ravishing dressing.

Luce Abinger always preferred Poppy to mix the salads. He said that she combined all the qualifications demanded by the old Spanish receipt for the maker of a good salad—a spendthrift for the oil, a miser for the vinegar, a counsellor for the salt, and a lunatic to stir all up. It appeared that she sometimes fell short in the matter of salt, but she assured him that he had a fine stock of that within himself to fall back on, and acids too, in case of a lack of vinegar.

Kykie's salad was very good, and Poppy told Babiyaan to tell her so. Later, she also sent a message of praise concerning the *omelette au Kirsch*. Except for these remarks the meal was partaken of in silence. Poppy, while she ate, observed and approved the old-rose walls, the few beautiful mellowy pictures upon them, the dark polished floor and the Persian praying-rugs spread sleekly down the room. She looked everywhere but at the face of Luce Abinger, for she knew that his devils were at him; and as the possessor of devils of her own, she both felt compassion and exhibited courtesy in the presence of other people's. She never looked at Luce Abinger's face at any time if she could help it, for the sight of unbeautiful things always gave her intense pain; and his face had the added terror and sadness of a thing that has once been beautiful. Its right side was still strong and fine in line; and it was easy to see that the mouth, before it was dragged out of drawing by the scar and embittered and distorted by its frightful sneer, must have been wonderfully alluring. The scar had left his eyes untouched, except for a slight pulling-down of the outer corner of the left one where the disfigurement began. They must [63] have been strikingly beautiful blue eyes once, but now a sort of perpetual cold fury at the back of them gave them an odd and startling light. Apart from that, they were eyes which it was not good for women to search in. Poppy sometimes thought of them as dark and sinister pools from which it was best to retreat, for fear of drowning and strangling in strange waters.

Presently Babiyaan brought in the little silver urn and placed it before Poppy, and she lighted the spirit-lamp under it and made the coffee as she was always used to do in the old white farm. Cigars and cigarettes were put before Abinger.

Abinger drank his coffee as he had eaten, in absolute silence. Then, getting up suddenly, he bit off a word of apology with the end of his cigar, and left the room, Babiyaan following him.

Poppy immediately helped herself to a cigarette, put her elbows on the table and began to smoke. Later, she took her coffee and sat in the verandah. It was shady and full of deep comfortable chairs. From thence she presently saw Abinger emerge from the front door and depart into the garden; the closing clang of the gate told her that he had gone out. The heat of the day was oppressive. She lay back, staring at the lacy green of the trees against the blue, and considering the horrible affair of Luce Abinger's devils.

"It is bad enough for me to have to live with them—what must it be for him!" was her thought. She had seen his torment coming upon him as they neared Africa. Day by day he had grown more saturnine and unsociable. At last he spoke to no one; only Poppy, as a privileged person had an occasional snarl thrown in her direction. It was plain to her that returning to Africa meant to him [64] returning to purgatory; especially since he did not intend to go back to seclusion, but to take up his residence in this house in Durban, where he had often lived in past years. Poppy had gathered from Kykie that before he "got his mark," as she curiously expressed it, and went to live at the old white farm, Abinger had kept house in Johannesburg and Durban; had lived for a part of the year in each house, and was well known in both places. So that coming back would cause him all the torture of meeting old friends who had known him before his disfigurement. He would have to run the gauntlet of familiar eyes grown curious and questioning.

"Why should he have chosen to come back at all to the place of his torment?" Poppy wondered. "It would surely have been simpler and easier to have settled in Italy or somewhere where he knew no one, and would not be noticed so much. It can only be that Africa has her talons in *his* heart, too; she has clawed him back to her brown old bosom—he *had* to come."

As Poppy sat in the verandah thinking of these things, she heard the *boys* in the room behind her clearing the luncheon-table, and talking to each other in their own language. Either they had forgotten her or they thought she could not hear.

"Where has *Shlalaimbona* gone?" asked Umzibu; and Babiyaan answered without hesitation:

"He has gone to the *Ker-lub* to make a meeting with *Intandugaza* and *Umkoomata*."

Few things are more amazing than your Kaffir servants' intimate knowledge of your affairs, except it be their absolute loyalty and secrecy in these matters outside your own walls. Abroad from home their eyes and ears and tongue know nothing. They are as stocks and stones. They might be fishes for all the information they can give concerning you and yours. [65]

Also, whether they love or hate or are indifferent to him they serve, they will infallibly supply him with a native name that will fit him like his own skin. Sometimes the name is a mere mentioning of a physical characteristic but usually it is a thing more subtle—some peculiarity of manner or expression, some idiosyncrasy of speech—a man's secret sin has been known to be blazoned forth in one terse Zulu word.

It must not be supposed, however, that South African natives are as deep in mysterious lore as the Chinese, or as subtle as Egyptians. The fact is merely, that like all uncivilised peoples they have a fine set of instincts; an intuition leads them to nearly the same conclusions about people as would a trained reasoning power. Only that the native conclusion has a corner of the alluring misty veil of romance thrown over it, while the trained reason might only supply a cold, hard, and perhaps uninteresting fact.

Instances are, where the meaning of a native nickname is too subtle for the nominee himself—though any Zulu who runs may read and understand. If Luce Abinger had asked his servants why they called him *Shlalaimbona*, they would have shrugged shoulders and hung their heads, with a gentle, deprecating gesture. Being questioned, they would look blank; being told to get out and go to the devil, they would look modest. Afterwards they would exchange swift dark glances, and smiling, repeat among themselves with a gesture of stabbing: "*Shlalaimbona!*" Literally this word means—*stab when you see him*. What they meant by applying this name to Abinger, God and themselves knew best. Poppy had often pondered the reason, but she had never made any inquiries for fear it might have something to do with Abinger's scar. For another thing, Abinger desired her never to talk to the *boys*. [66]

"Keep them at a distance: they will be all the better servants," was his command; and in this, as in most things, Poppy found it wiser to obey him.

Babiyaan continued to give interesting information to Umzibu.

"Just as *Shlalaimbona* was going to get into the carriage, *Umkoomata* came to the docks and fell upon him with great friendliness. Afterwards they went to an hotel to drink. Then *Umkoomata* made a plan for meeting at the *Ker-luk* when *Intandugaza* would be there and others—*Baas Brookifield*, he with the curled hair and the white teeth; and that other one, *Caperone*, whose wife is like a star with light around it; and *Port-tal*, who is always gay with an angry face."

At this juncture Umzibu missed Poppy's coffee-cup, and coming into the verandah to seek it, the presence of Poppy was revealed to him. He immediately communicated the fact by sign to Babiyaan, and a silence fell. Thereafter no more confidences; Poppy was left to speculate upon the identity of the person who wore so fascinating a title as *Intandugaza*, which name she translated to herself as *Beloved of women*. The word *Umkoomata*, too, had a charm of its own.

"That means someone who is very reliable, literally *Sturdy One*. I should like to know that man," she thought.

At about this time it occurred to her that she was tired and would go to rest in her room a while. She had risen at five that morning to watch the African coast and revel in the thought that she would soon have her foot on her own land again. The excitement of the day had tired her more than she knew. When she looked in her glass to rake the little gold combs through her hair, she saw that she was pale. The only colour about her was her scarlet ardent mouth and the flower at her breast.

She flung off her gown and plunged her arms and face into cold water, then let down her hair [67] with a rush and pulling her chair opposite her mirror, she sat down in company she had never so far found uninteresting—the company of her own reflection.

She did not put on a wrapper. For one thing the day was warm, for another she found great pleasure in seeing her bare pale arms and shoulders, and the tall pale throat above them, so slim and young. Indeed, there are few more beautiful things in the world than a young throat—be it girl's or boy's, bird's or beast's.

The scarlet flower she had plucked at the door she wore now between her breasts. She looked at the girl in the glass a long, long time, and the girl looked back at her. But it was not the look of the woman who counts and examines her weapons, for Poppy Destin was heart-whole; she had never yet looked into her glass to see how she was reflected in some man's eyes. Always she looked to wonder. The transformation of herself from what she had been only six years ago to what she was now at eighteen, never ceased to fascinate and amaze her. When she thought of the tormented, tragic features she had feared to catch a glimpse of, and looked now into that narrow scarlet-lipped, lilac-eyed subtle face, crowned with fronds of black, black hair, she believed she must be witnessing a miracle. When she remembered her aching, thin, childish body, beaten, emaciated, lank, and beheld herself now, long-limbed, apple-breasted, with the slim strong grace and beauty of a Greek boy, she could have shouted for joy and amazement at the wonder of it all.

Yet in the old white farmhouse where she had found refuge and a remarkable education, she had been able to watch with her own eyes the change of the famished, wretched little two-leaved seedling into a beautiful flowering plant.

She had often thought of herself as one set alone in an arid waste to travel where and how she [68] could, with no help from anyone, and who, in her terrible travelling had found hidden gifts by the

wayside, and little pools of consolation to lave her wounds and her weary heart, little patches of flowers to refresh her senses—all left there for her by the loving forethought of those who had travelled that way before her; her beauty, her voice, the grace of her body, her clear understanding, grace of tongue, had come upon her as she travelled to womanhood—all so unexpectedly; all wonderful gifts hidden deeply away until she came suddenly upon them, one by one.

At last, through long thinking and piecing together of many broken ends of memory and disjointed scraps of information concerning her family history, she had come very close to realising the truth—that she owed much of what she was to the sweet simple Irish-women who had been her maternal ancestors. If your grandmother has worn a shawl over her head and walked barefoot on the bitter coast of Clare with a smile on her lips and a melody in her heart, she had something better to bequeath to you than money or possessions: her song and her smile will come down through the years and make magic in your eyes; her spirit will trample your troubles underfoot. If your mother has laid her heart in a man's hands, and her neck under a man's feet, and died for want of his kisses on her mouth, she, too, will have had something to bequeath: a cheek curved for caresses, lips amorously shaped, and sweet warm blood in the veins.

And there was more that Poppy Destin did not know. She was only eighteen and could not know all her gifts yet—some women never know them at all until they are too old to use them! She had unwittingly left uncounted her biggest asset, though it was signed and sealed upon her face—the sign and seal of Ireland. Ireland was in the frank, sweet eyes of her; in the cheek-bones pitched [69] high in her face; in her branching black hair; in her soft sad voice, and her subtly curved lips. Though she had never seen that sad, lovely land, she was one of its fair daughters: there lay her beauty; that was her magic.

Presently she left her glass and going to the load of trunks which had been piled up inside the door, she took her dressing-case from the summit of the pile, and unlocking it, extracted a little white vellum-covered note-book. Sitting down before her writing-table she opened the book at random and kissed its pages with a rush of tears and a passion that always surged in her when she touched it. For it contained the story of her childhood, sung in little broken, wretched songs. Her blurred eyes looked from one heading to another:

> "My heart is as cold as a stone in the sea!"
> "My soul is like a shrivelled leaf!"
> "The woman with the crooked breast."

This was the title of old Sara's story made into a little song.

Poppy Destin dreamed of being a great writer some day; but she knew, with the sure instinct of the artist, that even if her dream came true she could never surpass these little studies in misery; these cries of wretchedness wrung from a child's heart by the cruel hands of Life.

Nothing had ever yet been able to wipe from her mind the remembrance of those days. For six years she had lived a life in which fresh events and interests were of daily occurrence; and like a blighted seedling transplanted to a warm, kind climate, she had blossomed and bloomed in mind and body. But the memory of those days that had known no gleam of hope or gladness hung like a dark veil over her youth, and still had power to drive her into torments of hatred and misery. Her soul was still a shrivelled leaf, and her heart as cold as a stone in the sea. She was very sure that this should not be so; she knew that she was incomplete. The instincts of her artist nature told [70] her that somewhere in the world there must be someone or something that would wipe this curse of hatred from her; but she had never been able to find it, and she knew not where to seek it. Art failed her when she applied it to this wound of hers that bled inwardly. Despairingly she sometimes wondered whether it was religion she needed; but religion in the house of Luce Abinger was a door to which she found no key.

Often, abroad, she had stolen away and knelt in quiet churches, and burnt candles in simple wayside chapels, trying, praying, to throw off the heavy, weary armour that cased her in, to get light into her, to feel her heart opening, like a flower, and the dew of God falling upon it. She had searched the face of the Madonna in many lands for some symbol that would point the way to a far-off reflection in herself of

> "The peace and grace of Mary's face."

She had knelt in dim cathedrals, racking her ears to catch some note in gorgeous organ strains or some word from the lips of a priest that would let loose a flood of light in her and transform her life. But always, when the ecstasy and exaltation had passed off, and the scent of incense no longer wrapped her round, she could feel again the cold of the stone and the rustle of the leaf in her breast. She could hear without annoyance the bitter fleers of Abinger at religion and priests and churches, and though they offended her taste, could listen serene-eyed. She understood very well what ailed Luce Abinger, for she was touched with the blight that lay thick upon him. His nature was warped, his vision darkened by hatred and evil memories. His soul was maimed and twisted in the same cruel fashion that his face had been scarred and seamed, and he terribly hated God. Poppy often thought of it as an ironical trick of fate, that she and Luce Abinger—just [71] the two people in all South Africa, perhaps, who could do least for each other's peace and healing

—should be thrown together to live under the same roof for many years. In some ways they had served each other well. He had made his house a refuge for her from persecution, and had been the means of educating and bringing her to fine womanhood. She, on the other hand, had come into his life at a time when he was on the verge of madness and when it meant everything to him to have some interest that would tear his thoughts from himself and his disgust of life.

The solitude of the quiet old farm, chosen for its isolated position, was lightened by the presence of the young girl. Abinger had been diverted to watch the change and development in the small, shipwrecked vagabond. Afterwards it had first amused, then interested him, to feed her eager appetite for learning. For three years he had taught her himself, in strange desultory fashion it is true, but it happened to be the fashion best suited to her needs and temperament. He imported from England huge weekly packages of books of both modern and classical literature, together with every variety of journal and magazine. He allowed Poppy the free run of all; only, always she must recount to him afterwards what she had read. A sort of discussion ensued, so dominated by his mordant cynicism and biting wit that she certainly ran no danger of developing any *mawkish* views of life. This for two or three hours daily. The rest of time was hers to read in or wander for hours in the lovely silent country, knowing a peace and tranquillity she had never dreamed of in her early wretched years. The part of the Transvaal they were in was but thinly populated—a few scattered Boer farms, and a native mission-house with a chapel and school instituted by a brotherhood of French priests of the Jesuit order. These were their only [72] neighbours, and they not close ones.

Abinger had chosen his retreat well.

After three years it had occurred to him to leave the farm and go back to the world. He had tired of seclusion, and longed, even while he feared, to be amongst his fellows again. He was not yet prepared, however, to go back to the African haunts that had known him in the past, but made for the big open world beyond the seas; and Poppy went with him as his sister. Wherever they went he never allowed her to make any friends; only when they reached any city or place where he cared to stay for any length of time, he at once engaged masters and mistresses for her, to continue the education that he had by now tired of superintending, but which, for reasons of his own, he wished to perfect.

CHAPTER II [73]

AT five o'clock Kykie appeared with a tea-tray. She had assumed an air of calm, and her afternoon dress, which afforded a fine display of roses trellised on a bright blue background, and gave her the appearance of a large and comfortable ottoman. She cast an outraged look about the room.

"Haven't you unpacked yet, for gracious' sake, Poppy?"

"No, I haven't. Bring the tea over here, Kykie."

She was lying on her bed, which was long and narrow as the path to heaven, and yet seemed to have grown too short for her, since she was obliged to perch her feet upon the brass bar across the end.

"Then what have you been doing, in the name of goodness me?"

"Nothing ... just thinking ... pour it out and come and sit by me here.... I haven't had a word with you yet."

Kykie poured out the tea, and put some little toasted cakes on a plate, using her fat, yellow hands with extraordinary delicacy. Afterwards she sat in a chair with the things in her lap, waiting until Poppy should be ready.

"What is it like here in Durban, Kykie?... How long have you been here?"

Kykie became very important, waggling her shoulders and rolling her eyeballs.

"More than six months getting this house ready for habitation ... men working in the garden day and night, for it was a wilderness and the poor old place all gone to pot, dearest me." [74]

"It looks all right now; I should think Luce was pleased?"

"Never so much as a thank you extremingly."

"Oh well, you know his ways ... but I am sure he appreciates all you do. He has often said to me while we were away that he wished you were with us."

Kykie looked well pleased at this, but having passed the tea, she waved her hands deprecatingly.

"You're just buttering me up to heaven, Poppy!"

"No, I'm not. And he will eat again now he has you to cook for him. Abroad he used to eat frightfully little, but to-day I noticed he made an excellent lunch."

Smiles wreathed Kykie's wide and dropsical face, and every tooth in her head was revealed.

"Dearest me, now Poppy, really? Well! but then I don't suppose they know how to cook very well abroad in London, do they?"

"Not so well as you, of course," said Poppy smiling and munching toast.

Suddenly Kykie's face became dolorous.

"Did they look at his mark much, for heavenly goodness?" she inquired in a dismal whisper.

"Not so much. You know, Kykie, the world is full of all sorts of strange-looking people—especially France and Italy. In Naples, now, they didn't take the slightest notice of him."

"For goodness' sake there must be some sights there!"

"More tea. It is lovely to be home again and have you waiting on me."

"Ah! I expect you liked it best abroad in that London, now Poppy?"

"Never. I *thought* I should, but I had forgotten that my roots were planted out here. As soon as I got out of sight of Africa they began to pull and hurt ... you've no idea of the feeling, Kykie ... it [75] is terrible ... and it always came upon me worst in cities. I used to be sick with longing for a glimpse of the big open spaces with nothing in view but land and sky ... for the smell of the veldt, *you* know, when it is baking hot and the rain comes fizzling down on it; and the early morning wind, when it has blown across a thousand miles of sun-burnt grass and little stalky, stripy, veldt-flowers and stubby bushes, and smells of the big black patches on the hill-sides where the fires have been, and of the *dorn bloems* on the banks of the rivers ... and the oozy, muddy, reeking, rushing rivers! Oh Kykie, when I thought of Africa, in some prim blue-and-gold continental hotel, I felt like a caged tiger-cat, raging at the bars of the cage!... In Paris and London I couldn't bear to go to the big open parks for fear the sickness would come upon me.... It was like being a wild ass of the desert, knee-haltered in a walled-in garden."

Kykie might have been an amazingly-arrayed copper idol representing Africa, so benign and gratified was her smile.

"Tell me some more, Poppy. Where else did you think of Africa?"

"Well, Palermo nearly drove me wild. It has the same hot moist air as Natal, and the flowers have the same subtle scents. The big spotted mosquitoes bit like terriers and followed us as high as we could go; but I couldn't even hate *them*, Kykie, they were so like the wretches we have out here—there's been one biting my instep all the afternoon." She pulled up her foot, and began to rub the spot gently through her stocking.

"I think Norway was the worst of all. The men there have beards and the same calm eyes as the Boers, and the people are all simple and kind, just as they were on the farms in the Transvaal ... [76] and sometimes on the top of a steep still hill I could close my eyes and pretend that I was on a wild mountain krantz and the hush of the waterfalls all round one was the hush of the tall veldt grasses waving in the wind.... But when I looked, and saw only the still green waters of the fjords and afar off a glacier thrust out between two hills like the claw of some great white monster ... oh Kykie, I could have torn the heart out of my breast and thrown it into the waters below."

"Heavenly me! And were there coloured people there too?"

"Not in Norway; but America is full of them, and I hate them for cheats and frauds ... for I was always listening and waiting to hear some Kaffir or Dutch word from their lips ... and they never spoke anything but mincing, drawling American, through their noses, like this, Kykie:

"'Oh say, would *you* tell *me* what time this *kyar* is due to start?'

"Once I saw a boy in an elevated-railway car, who, though he was magnificently dressed in navy blue serge and wore a brimmer hat, looked so *exactly* like Jim Basuto who ran away from the farm, that I said to him in Kaffir:

"'You had better make haste and come back to the farm, Jim, and mind the sheep!'

"He simply stared at me, and said to another *boy*, who might have been a Zulu chief except for his clothes:

"'Say, this one looks to me as if she is dippy. I think she is the new star at Hammerstein's that *ky-ant* speak anything but French.'

"Luce was so furious, he used fearful language at the Kaffir, and made me leave the train at the next station, and wouldn't speak to me for a week."

Having finished her tea and eaten all the bread-and-butter and cakes, the girl lay back on her [77] pillow and closed her eyes.

"For gracious' sake, and so you have seen the world!" said Kykie. "And now you have come back to the old quiet life?"

"Not at all, Kykie. I'm going to persuade Luce to go about here, and meet people, and let me do the same."

"He'll never do it," said Kykie vehemently. "I can see that he is worse than ever about his mark."

"But he knows a lot of people here. I don't see how he can keep them from coming to the house; and I heard the *boys* saying that he had gone to the Club this afternoon. Surely that is a sign that he is not going to shut himself up again?"

"He may go to the Club, but he won't let anyone come here. He has given me strict orders that no one is to come in the front gates; they are to be locked and he will keep the key. Everything is to come by the back entrance and that, too, is to be locked."

Poppy's face clouded.

"Oh Kykie! I wouldn't mind if we were back in the old farm with the free veldt all round us; but to be shut up in a house and garden—(and with Luce's devils," she added to herself),—"even if it *is* a lovely garden!"

Kykie's face expressed lugubrious sympathy, but she held out no hope.

"You'll have to amuse yourself like you did before, with your music, and your reading, and writing, and be a good child," she said.

"But I'm not a child any longer. Can't you see how I've grown up?"

"I can see that you won't have to go and find milk-cactus to rub on your breasts any more," said Kykie, eyeing her with the calm candour of the native.

Poppy coloured slightly, and made occasion to throw a corner of the quilt over her bare shoulders and arms. [78]

"For the sake of grace you needn't mind me," remarked Kykie. "Haven't I watched you many a moonlight night stealing down to where it grew by the old *spruit*?"

The girl's colour deepened; she gave a wistful little side glance at the old woman.

"I *did* so want to be beautiful. I would have dived to the bottom of the filthiest hole in that old *spruit* a dozen times a day to make myself the tiniest atom less ugly than I was. Do you remember that deep part where the water was so clear and we could see hundreds of crabs pulling pieces of flesh off the leg of the dead horse?"

"Oh *sis* yes! I wondered how you could go and look at the stinking thing day after day."

"I used to be pretending to myself that it was my aunt they were eating. Oh Kykie! I have some dark caves in my soul!"

"And no wonder, surely to goodness. Never will I forget the night we opened the door and you fell into the house, all blood and mud, and your eyes like a *mal-meit's*[3] flaring and flickering like the sulphur on a match."

[3] Mad-maid.

Poppy covered her eyes.

"Don't talk about it——"

At this time a telephone bell began to ring somewhere in the house, and Kykie on her feet in an instant, flew from the room at top speed. She came back later to say that Luce Abinger had called up to tell her he would not be home to dinner. Poppy was delighted.

"Oh Kykie! that means that he is dining with old friends; and it will do him *so* much good, and he'll want to be cheerful and sociable with all the world again, and we shan't be locked up any more," she cried all in one breath. "And now you needn't bother about dinner, but come and help me unpack, and I'll show you all my clothes and the nice things I've brought back for you." [79]

"For me, gracious saints!"

"Yes, for you, you wicked old thing; silks and satins of every shade of the rainbow. You need never dress in anything else any more."

They spent an engrossed hour unpacking, and afterwards Poppy dined alone, and betook herself to the garden. She knew that she had the whole place and the whole long evening to herself, without disturbance, for it was a peculiarity of Kykie's that she could not keep her eyes open after nine o'clock at night. As for the *boys*, after they had performed their duties in the kitchen and stables, their time was their own, and they made the most of it elsewhere than within reach or sight of their employers.

It was early still, and though the darkness had fallen, the moon was at the full, and showed to advantage the solemn splendour of the trees, the long soft stretches of sward, and the festooned jungle-like arbours and arcades. In many a winding path she lost her way (for the place was of enormous extent), and had difficulty in locating once more the house or the gate or any point she was acquainted with. Coming to the gate once she tried it, and finding it securely locked she shook it with the sudden fury of a wild thing that finds itself caged. Then she stood still, and presently two great tears rolled down her face; but afterwards her wanderings became curiously systematised. Taking the gate as her starting-post she commenced a *détour* of the wilderness, keeping to its outskirts and examining as she travelled every inch of the enclosing walls. The part which gave on to the main road she found to be hopelessly impregnable; it had first a high stone wall with a cresting of particularly sharp and jagged bottle-glass; and further, was backed by a species of laurel that grew both tall and bushy, and rattled aggressively if anyone so much as looked at it. Then came a long side-stretch of thick-set green bushes of what she judged—after pinching the leaf and smelling it—to be quince, with an undergrowth of pink pepper. After penetrating this, in a weak spot, and discovering that the outside rampart consisted of galvanised iron, standing lengthways and painted dark green, she did not feel so confident, but she went bravely on, until at last she came to a gate; it also was made of iron and painted green, but though it was unlocked, Poppy did not go through it, for she saw beyond, the stables and iron houses that were evidently the quarters of the black servants. She could hear their voices and the sound of a concertina. Plainly this was the back compound, through which all trades-people must make their way to the house. No doubt there was an entrance at the other side—but it was not for Poppy! She proceeded. The wall continued of the same quality, monotonously familiar; then occurred an impassable jungle that it would have taken a herd of buffalo to make any impression upon. After beating round this for some time, to the detriment of her trailing white gown, Poppy pursued her way with a frowning brow and a quivering under-lip. Next came a hedge of prickly-pear; she turned her head away from this in disgust. Farmers plant prickly-pears round their [80]

gardens to keep out cattle. It is the most perfect barrier in the world. Certainly, a human being *might* cut his way through it; but he would spend the rest of his life picking from his festering flesh tiny invisible white thorns. On and on she marched; it seemed to her that the large pale hands of the pear-hedge flapped mockingly at her. Sometimes she was obliged to make a wide *détour* to avoid a clump of trees, or a rockery, or a summer-house with a pergola leading to it, smothered with vines and passion-flowers and roses. It seemed that she walked miles and miles. Suddenly she saw light glimmering through a trellised opening, and ran forward. Her hands [81]
touched cold wrought-iron. It was the front gate! This time, when she shook it, she did not cry. Her gown was torn, her hair was loosened, there was a scratch on her cheek and blood on her hands, but she laughed.

"Ah, my *very* dear Luce Abinger," she said, "we shall see if you can keep a creature of the veldt behind a padlock."

Immediately she recommenced a fresh tour of the garden, and though the long hot day and all its incidents must have told upon her strength, she seemed to have suddenly acquired fresh life and buoyancy. She had that within which urged her on—a taste for liberty. At that time it seemed to her that the whole world was too small a place for a free spirit; and that if this were indeed the world, she would somewhere find some desperate edge and leap over, even if it should be into the abyss of nothingness. On this tour she included the arbours and the summer-houses in her itinerary. The third one she came to was only a small hut of a place, but it had a long spire to its roof, and from thence trailed and hung long lines and stalks of the passion plant—everyone knows it: vine-leaved, with great round cream-coloured flowers, a purple outer ring divided into ten thousand tiny leaves, signifying the crowd that gathered to listen to Christ on the Mount; and in the centre, mysteriously arranged, like the dishes upon the table of some oracle, the three loaves and the five fishes! They call it the grenadilla in Africa, and eat its fruit with port wine and cream. Poppy dived in under the trailing vinery, and entered the hut. All round it had a low seat running, but everything was old and damp and rotten she could feel by the touch, and in one place the wood crumbled under her fingers, and thrusting her arm forward, she was able to feel that it was part of the wall itself; there was no further barrier beyond. [82]

She had found an exit.

For a time she sat still on the cool mossy floor of the arbour, trembling a little at the thought of the spiders and strange beasts that might be dropping upon her from above. At last she nerved herself to the point of pushing and urging and disentangling the thick partition of green that kept her in. Her idea was to make an opening without making a gap; something she could re-arrange afterwards, leaving no sign of disturbance.

At length she was through, and behold! she found herself in another garden. Was it a maze too, she wondered rather drearily? A maze without an opening? But no, there was a pleasing openness of view about the place. A few bushes and trees, a straggly flower-bed or two. Almost immediately she came upon a gravelled path; but she did not walk on it, choosing rather to follow its direction by way of the grass and soft earth which enflanked it. In the natural course of events a house was discovered. Quite a simple affair of galvanised iron, painted green, with a verandah running all round it and heaps of shrubs and bushes and creepers to hide its nakedness. Its front verandah was full of pale, heavenly light that was certainly not contributed by the moon; nor could the words that came floating over the bushes into the garden, be, by the wildest and most poetic imagination, endowed with a heavenly meaning.

"Oh, damn it, I'm sick of this rotten typewriter and everything else in the world. I wish Brookie would type his own beastly law-papers."

Poppy approached with the utmost gentleness, and through the screen of a bush covered with tiny pink flowers that smelt of musk she surveyed the scene.

The room itself was terrible as an army with banners. It contained "gypsy-tables," [83]
antimacassars, "what-nots," plush fans upon the walls, indescribable villainies of wool and paper, a crewel-worked mantel-border, and every atrocity under the moon. In the midst of all was a good solid mahogany table, with a typewriting-machine on it, and seated before this was a girl. For pity of herself Poppy was glad to see another girl; and more especially a girl who, like herself, appeared to have reason to be bored with her surroundings and the general management of the universe. In the enthusiasm engendered by a fellow-feeling, she had an inclination to march in and take the girl to her heart, but after a further survey she changed her mind.

In a large, ripe fashion, the girl was very good-looking indeed, with a tall and generous figure of the kind that attracts prompt and frank attention from the generality of men, but is not deeply admired by other women. Her face was of a familiar Colonial type, large-featured but well-shaped, with big brown eyes, rather inclined to roll, suggestive of what is known as "a dash of colour"; a mouth of the kind that expresses nothing at all until the twenties, when by the aid of a *retroussé* nose, grown unaccountably coarse it suddenly expresses things which should be left unexpressed; a round, rather plump chin, and masses of dark hair which had been sadly maltreated by curling-irons, and had a dusty appearance. On the whole a handsome girl, probably good-natured enough for the ordinary purposes, and of a personality pleasing enough for an ordinary acquaintance.

Certainly not a girl to be made a friend of, thought Poppy, and decided that she would go no further.

"I'll wait and see first if Luce is going to let me out to meet nice people," she thought. "If he doesn't, this girl may help to pass away an idle hour sometimes, and she might serve as one of the characters in my novel. At any rate she could teach me to use the typewriter, and I could [84]
teach her not to live in a chamber of horrors."

With these reflections she stole back soft-footed in her tracks, and through her little exit-hole, which she covered up with the greatest care and skill, for fear that in the future it should prove to be her only mode of entrance into the world of men and women she longed to know.

For a whole week she refrained from broaching to the tyrant of the house the subject which lay uppermost in her thoughts. For one thing she thought it would be well to allow him to regain some semblance of good humour; for another she wished to give him full opportunity and time to make daily excursions into the town and lunch and dine with his friends, so that she might have some grounds for the reproaches she meant to level at him when she demanded freedom. In the meantime she was absorbed in affairs which included the inspection and re-arrangement of every room in the house, excepting only Abinger's, which she never ventured near. Touches of her personality soon lay upon everything, from the chintzes in the drawing-room which she had chosen herself at Waring's, and sent out to Kykie for the making, down to the curtaining of Kykie's own bedroom windows with some cobwebby snowy muslin she had bought in Shanghai. She spent several hours every day at the piano, playing old Irish melodies, for which she had a passion, and of which she had made an enormous collection; but she always waited until Luce was out of the house, for he had a peculiar aversion to melodies of any kind and more especially Irish melodies. He said:

"There may have been something in them when the strolling poets played them on their harps, but since that fellow Moore made them pretty, I consider them damned mawkish."

So Poppy kept her melodies to herself. The rest of her time was divided between studying [85]
literature, writing, dreaming and wandering in the garden, which became dearer to her day by day.

At last, one evening, on hearing from Kykie that Abinger would be dining at home, she made herself look as charming as possible in a pale maize satin gown with a wreath of green leaves on her hair, and went down prepared to do battle.

Luce Abinger was already in the drawing-room, standing at one of the French windows, staring out into the garden—a sombre, solitary figure. She noticed, as often before, how tall and well-built he was, and the fine line of his head under the smooth, fair hair. He always looked distinguished and well-born in evening-dress. At the sound of Poppy he turned, and the lights shining on his maimed and distorted face, showed her that he was entertaining at least seven devils. A mental shiver passed through her and hope fell several degrees; but she advanced with a serene smile and a gay word. She had long ago learnt to control the expressions of her face, so that he might not guess the mingled terror, pity, and repulsion he often roused in her; and though she knew that in most things he had intuition as cruel as the grave, she believed that in this, at least, she was able to deceive him.

The second gong had not yet sounded. She sat down at the piano and ran her fingers up and down the keys by way of bracing up her nerves.

"Luce," she began, "I hope you are in a good temper, for I want to talk to you very seriously about something."

He gave a croaking sort of laugh.

"Oh certainly. I am at my very b-best. It is only necessary for you to p-play an Irish melody to have me p-purring at your feet. *Il ne manquerait plus que ça.*"

This was inauspicious, but Poppy refused to be daunted; and the gong sounding at this [86]
moment, she rose and put her hand upon his arm, saying cheerfully:

"That's right, come along then, we'll talk it over in the dining-room."

His smile was grim. They sat down to dinner, and Babiyaan and Umzibu, arrayed in white, hovered over them like guardian angels. Abinger ate little and said nothing. Only when the *boys* were not in the room he fixed his eyes on Poppy in a curious way that caused in her a sensation of indescribable discomfort and annoyance. Once, for some unknown reason, she found herself remembering how she had covered herself up with the bed quilt from Kykie's eyes, and wishing that she had it round her now. She had never felt like that in a low gown before, and she could not understand it at all. For a time it quite unfitted her for the task she had in hand, but the idea occurring to her that this was perhaps what Luce intended, she plucked up heart again, and with the fruit fired her first shot.

"Luce, what are you going to do about getting me a chaperon?"

He gave a little jerk of his fruit-knife, so that she knew that he was taken unawares, otherwise he remained undisturbed by what she supposed must be something in the nature of a bomb-shell going off under his nose. He did not, however, proceed with the business of peeling his peach, and on giving him a swift side-glance, she found that he was smiling at her. Now, his smile was at no time an alluring affair, but when it was field day for his devils——!

"Am I not a sufficiently p-proper and responsible p-person to have the care of your young white s-soul?" he inquired blandly.

She knew *that* mood. Perhaps, after all, it would be better to postpone the discussion; but then, sometimes these fits of fury and rudeness lasted for months. It was impossible to wait all that [87]
time.

"I am not particularly concerned about my soul," she answered carelessly, dipping her fingers in the fine Venetian bowl before her and drying them delicately. One of Abinger's devils betrayed itself by laughing loudly and with character, but she did not even wince.

"Your young white b-body, then?" He pushed back his chair from the table with a horrible scrench on the polished floor.

"You talk like some odious sultan, but you forget that I am not a slave," she flashed back at him.

She pushed her chair from the table also, and loosening from her wrist a little painted inlaid fan which she had bought from a street-seller in Algiers, she essayed to cool her flushed face.

"Cigarettes, Babiyaan!" she said. "It is very hot; I think I will smoke out in the garden," she finished coldly to Abinger.

But he had risen too, and lounged in the doorway leading to the verandah.

"Oh, p-pray let us finish this interesting discussion."

They stood looking at each other for a moment: she, quite collectedly; he, smiling with his eyes and sneering with his mouth. Babiyaan, well aware that she was not allowed to smoke, knew better than to hand her the cigarettes, but placed them on the table and discreetly retired.

"There is no discussion, Luce," she said quietly, though her voice contained a tremor. "I simply want you to realise that it is impossible for me to go on living like this for ever. It isn't fair...." she added petulantly. He said nothing, only smiled. She regained her dignity and spoke more gently:

"I am a woman now, Luce, and it is only natural that I should wish to know other women—and men too." [88]

At that he laughed raspingly.

"Why d-drag in the women?"

She looked at him scornfully. It was ridiculous of him to pretend that men meant more to her than women.

"It is unreasonable of you to expect me to spend my youth in secrecy and seclusion, just because you—" she stopped hastily.

"Go on!" he said with a devilish gaiety. "'Just because *you* happen to have a face like a mutilated b-baboon'—was that what you were going to say?"

"Oh Luce, you *know* it was not! Because ... because ..." she stood stammering with distress, while he stood grinning. "Because *you* don't happen to care for the society of other people—was what I was going to say.... Don't think," she went on appealingly, "that I don't appreciate all you have done for me. I remember it every day and every night.... I shall never forget it ... and though I know I can never repay you, I will show you all the rest of my life how grateful I am.... But I don't see what difference it would make to you to let me know a few people ... you have so many friends ... surely you know some nice women who would call on me——"

He broke out in a harsh voice, smiling no longer. "You are mistaken; I have no friends. The whole thing is out of the question and impossible."

"I don't see why it should be at all," she pursued valiantly; "if you get me some pleasant woman as a chaperon."

"In God's name what do you want with women?" he burst out. "A g-girl like you will never find a friend amongst them. They will hate you for your face, and your brains, and your youth.... They are d-devils all—lock, stock and barrel.... They'll rip you open and tear the story of your life out of you; if they once find out that you are a South African they'll never rest until they have nosed out [89] the whole thing, and then they'll fling the t-tale to the four winds and the first thing you know you'll have your Bloemfontein aunt bearing down on you——"

"Oh Luce! I don't believe they're as bad as all that——"

"Then don't believe it," he retorted, with the utmost rudeness. "But understand one thing, I'll have no she-devils round this house."

"Very well, let them be he-devils," she flung back at him. "I am accustomed to those."

At that he stamped away from her towards the other door, gesturing with rage, and throwing broken words in her direction.

"Isn't my life bad enough already?... Oh Hades!... I wouldn't stand it for a minute ... curse all women ... don't ever talk to me about this again ... I tell you.... It's monstrous ... a lot of thieves and blackguards.... You're driving me out of my own house ... I shall go to the Rand to-morrow ... why, by God, I!..."

The door closed with a crash behind him.

CHAPTER III [90]

AT two o'clock one afternoon Sophie Cornell walked into her sitting-room and flung upon the table by the side of her typewriter a great roll of MSS. She was gorgeously attired in a hat massed with roses of a shade that "never was on land or sea," and a furiously befrilled gown of sky-blue silk-muslin. But her face was flushed and heated, and her eyebrows met in a scowl of decided ill-temper. Opening a door that led through a long passage to the kitchen, she shouted:

"Zambani! Zambani! *Checcha* now with my lunch. Send Piccanin to lay table. *Checcha wena!*"

She flung her hat into one chair and herself into another, and stared at a telegram which she spread out before her.

"'Sorry can't come,'" she read, muttering; "'something better turned up; you understand!' Yes, I understand well enough! Just like the rotter to study her own convenience and throw me over at the last moment. What am I to do *now*, I'd like to know?"

She lolled in her chair and glared angrily at a small black *boy* in a blue twill tunic and short blue knickers above his knees, who was laying a cloth on one end of the table.

"Is there any soda in the house, Piccanin?" she demanded; and when he signified yes, ordered him to fetch it then and be *checcha*. In the meantime, she rose and unlocked from the sideboard a bottle of whiskey.

Lunch was a slovenly meal, consisting of burnt mutton-chops, fried potatoes, and a beet-root salad liberally decorated with rings of raw onion. Miss Cornell, however, ate heartily, and [91]
enjoyed a whiskey-and-soda. She then proceeded to attack a wobbly blanc-mange beringed with strawberry jam. Occasionally she demanded of some invisible personage:

"And what am I going to do *now*, I'd like to know?" and the scowl returned to her brows.

Suddenly, upon the front door which stood slightly ajar fell a soft knock. Miss Cornell's hands slipped to her hair, the scowl disappeared from her face, and in a high affected voice she called:

"Come in!"

Entered, with a shy and demure air, a girl dressed in the simplest kind of dress made of thin black muslin, with a white fichu over her shoulders falling in long ends below her waist. Her large white-straw hat had round it a wreath of lilac, which was of exactly the same colour as her eyes. Her lips were amazingly scarlet.

"I beg your pardon," she said in a soft, entrancing voice. "I am sorry to disturb you at your lunch——"

"That's all right," said Sophie affably; "I'm just done. Do sit down!"

The girl seated herself daintily. Sophie, observing that she wore no jewelry of any kind except a ring, in which the diamond was so large that it must surely be paste, decided that her visitor must be "hard up." She (Sophie) had not much of an opinion of that "black rag of a gown" either, but she thought she detected the faint murmur of a silk lining as her visitor moved. The lilac eyes looked at her winningly.

"I heard that you had a typewriting machine," she said, "and I wondered if you would be so good as to do a little typing for me—" She indicated a tiny roll of writing which she held in her hand. Miss Cornell sat up with an air. [92]

"Oh, I don't take in work!" she said perkily. "I couldn't be bothered with that sort of thing. I'm *sekertary* to a gentleman who has an office down town."

"Lilac Eyes" regarded her calmly and did not seem overwhelmed by the importance of this communication.

"What a bother!" said she serenely.

Miss Cornell became languid.

"I get an enormous salary, and I have more work than I know how to get through already. Indeed, I am trying to get an assistant."

"Really?" said the other girl. "I wonder if I would suit you?"

"You!" Miss Cornell's face lit up with sudden interest and eagerness. She surveyed the other again. *Of course*, she was only a "hard-up" girl looking for work, and that air of gentle insolence that Sophie had been conscious of, was, after all, only "side" stuck on like the rose in the front of the simple black gown to hide poverty. Upon these reflections Miss Cornell's air became exceedingly patronising.

"You? Well, I don't know, I'm sure. Can you type?"

"Not at all. But I daresay I could soon learn."

"Oh well! I couldn't give you much salary if you are only a beginner."

"I shouldn't want any salary," said "Lilac Eyes"; but added quickly, as she saw the other's look of amazement: "At least, not for some months. If you would allow me to use your machine for my own work sometimes I should be repaid."

At this Sophie had neither the wit nor the patience to conceal her satisfaction. Her haughty air departed and she beamed with delight. She had suddenly seen a clear way through a very difficult *impasse*.

"You'll suit me down to the ground," she declared joyfully. "When can you move in?" [93]

"Move in?" the other gave her a wondering smile. "Oh, I couldn't come to live—only for a few hours every day."

Sophie's face clouded again, but in a moment her eyes took on the absorbed look of a person who is rapidly reviewing a difficult situation. Presently she said:

"Well, perhaps that wouldn't matter so much if you wouldn't mind *pretending* sometimes that you live here."

The other girl looked puzzled.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"Well, if there's any chance of you're doing as I ask you, I'll explain," said Sophie; "but, of course, I don't want to talk about my private affairs if it's no good. There's nothing in the reason

for *pretending* that you need object to," she added boldly. "What is the reason you can't come and live? Got a sick mother, or an old aunt, or something?"

The other hesitated for a moment, then her lovely lilac eyes took on a curious expression.

"Yes, I have an aunt," was her odd answer, but Sophie was no acute reader of eyes or odd answers.

"More fool you," said she cheerfully. "I'd like to see the old aunt who'd get *me* to support her. Well, all right now, if you think you'll come I'll tell you the whole thing."

"Yes, I think I'll come. But as I have said, it will only be for a few hours daily; sometimes in the mornings, more often in the afternoons."

"That'll do all right. Have a whiskey-and-soda and we'll talk it over."

"I don't care for whiskey, thank you," said "Lilac Eyes"; "but I am very thirsty, and will have some soda, if I may."

Sophie shouted to Piccanin to bring another glass, and pushed the soda and lemons across the table. [94]

"Make yourself at home," said she affably; "but I hope you're not one of those asses who don't drink!"

"No, I drink if I want to—but not spirits."

"Oh, I know—those old Cape pontacs. Save me from them!" Miss Cornell looked piously at the ceiling. The other girl, who had never tasted Cape pontac in her life, only smiled her subtle smile.

Sophie seated herself in a lounge-chair, opposite her visitor, and crossed her legs, incidentally revealing her smart French-heeled shoes and a good deal of open-work stocking through which to lilac-coloured eyes her legs looked as though they were painted red. Piccanin meanwhile removed from the room the luncheon débris, his bare feet cheeping on the pale native matting and his long black eyes taking interested glances at the visitor whenever she was not looking his way.

"And now let's get to business," said Miss Cornell. "First of all, you haven't told me your name yet."

The lilac eyes were hidden for a moment under white lids, and a faint colour swept over the pale skin.

"Rosalind Chard."

"Well, I shall call you Rosalind, of course, and you can call me Sophie if you like. Sophie Cornell's my name. Rather pretty, isn't it?"

"Very," said Miss Chard in her gentle, entrancing voice.

"Well, now I'll tell you: I come from Cradock, in the Cape Colony, but I've been living all over the place since I left home. First, I went to stay with my sister in Kimberley. Have you ever been to Kimberley? *Man!* I tell you it's the most glorious place—at least, it used to be before everybody went to Jo ... you know Jo-burg, *of course*?"

Miss Chard shook her head.

"Never been to Johannesburg?" Sophie's tone expressed the utmost pity and contempt. "Well, but you're an English girl, I can see. Not been long out here, have you?" [95]

"Only a week or so."

"Great Scott! you've got a lot to learn!"

Miss Cornell took a packet of cigarettes from her pocket and lit one. She then offered the packet to Miss Chard, who did not, however, take one.

"Don't smoke either? Och, what! You're not *half* a good fellow! Well, take off your hat, then. Do be sociable."

Miss Chard unpinned her floppy white hat and wore it on her knee for the rest of the interview. Sophie noticed the piled-up crown of black, black hair; also, the peculiar branching way in which it grew above the girl's brows. ("I wonder if she uses bay-rum to make it all dry and electriccy like that?" was her inward comment. "And I'll bet she wears a switch.")

"Well, to continue my tale—I had a lovely time in *darling* old Kimberley: dances, theatres, suppers, everything you can think of; then my sister's husband must needs go off and buy a rotten old farm at the back of nowhere—Barkly East, if you love me! They wanted *me* to come, too, but I said, Dead off! No, *thanks*! I want something more out of life than mountain scenery."

Rosalind Chard looked at her and could well believe it. At the moment Sophie reminded her of nothing so much as a full-blown cabbage-rose, dying to be plucked.

"And so you came here instead?"

"Well, no; first I went to Jo-burg, and I *must* say I had a heavenly time *there*; but—well—it didn't suit my health, so I became *sekertary* to an old snook called Johnson. He had been in Rhodesia, poking about in some ancient ruins there, and—oh, my garden flower!—the stuff he used to give me to write and type! And the way he used to bully me when I didn't get through it! And then complained of my spelling, if you please. I didn't stay with *him* any longer than I could help, you bet, though the screw was good. But I *must* tell you, such fun—just as I was going to leave him I discovered from his correspondence that he was going up to Zanzibar to make some researches for some rotten old society or other, so I stuck to him for another month. I thought I might as well get a passage to Durban for nix. So I started with him from the Cape, but when the boat touched here, I said, Good-bye, Johnnie! Oh crumbs! The row he made when he found me [96]

trekking!"

The listener's sympathy happened to be with the old snook, but Sophie was not asking for an opinion.

"And do you mean to say," demanded the latter unexpectedly, "that you would rather live with your old aunt than in a sweet little house like this, with me?"

Miss Chard did not mean to say anything at all as far as her own affairs were concerned.

"Never mind about me, Sophie," was her reply. "Tell me some more of your interesting adventures, and how you came to live in this sweet little house."

Miss Cornell's glance shifted from her new friend. She looked out of the window, round the room, at the pictures on the wall, at the typewriter—anywhere but into the two clear wells of lilac light opposite her, as she answered:

"I rent it, of course. I told you, didn't I, that I am *sekertary* to a man down town, named Brookfield. He thinks the world of me, and gives me a big salary; and then I get other work from a man called Bramham. Oh, I have more to do than I want, and I really *had* to get help, so I wrote last week to a pal of mine up in Jo-burg, and told her to come and join me. She promised, and I expected her right up till to-day, when I got a telegram, if you please, to say that she'd got something better. Wasn't that a low-down trick? And after I had told Brookfield and Bramham [97] and all! Brookie gave me the morning off to go and meet her, and I waited for the train and found she wasn't in it, and when I got back to the office there was the telegram! Fortunately Brookie was gone from the office when I got back, so he doesn't know that she hasn't come."

"But why should it matter to him and to the other man whether she comes or not?"

Again Miss Cornell's glance took flight.

"Because of the work, of course—there's such tons to do ... and I can't get through it all by myself."

Miss Chard watched her narrowly.

"Well, but why do you wish me to pretend that I live here, and am your friend from Johannesburg?"

"You see, it's this way ... Brookie and Mr. Bramham take an interest in me.... They don't think that I ought to live alone here, and all that sort of rot—and if I could show *you* to them they'd think it was all right."

Miss Chard looked startled.

"Oh, I couldn't promise to meet strange men! I didn't suppose you would want me to do that or ——"

An exasperated look came over Miss Cornell's face.

"You're not going to back out now, after me telling you everything?" she demanded angrily, but Miss Chard's scarlet lips took a firm line.

"I don't wish to meet strange people," she said. To her surprise, the other girl at once became propitiatory and beseeching.

"Well, but I won't ask you to meet anyone else. I'll keep you a deadly secret. And I can assure you that Brookie and Bramham don't matter in the least. Brookie is—well, to tell you the truth, he is entirely my property; he's crazily in love with me, and he won't bother you at all. Neither will Brammie, if it comes to that. He is an *awfully* nice man—everybody likes him, and he's fearfully rich too. He's married, and his wife lives in England for her health, they say, but of coarse that [98] must be all rot. Anyway, he never goes into society at all—only has men friends."

"Well, what does he want here?" asked Miss Chard calmly, watching the flushed face before her.

"Nothing—nothing at all. It's only a matter of business, and a friendly interest in me, and all that—and, you see, as he employs me as well as Brookie, I have to be civil and ask him to tea sometimes."

It seemed to Miss Rosalind Chard that there was more in this than met the eye, but she was not able to fathom it at present. However, after listening to another long description of Mr. Bramham's inoffensiveness, she consented at last to be at the house one afternoon when he called.

"As for Brookie——" began Sophie, ready to open up another chronicle of guilelessness.

"No, no! I won't meet Brookie, I absolutely jib at Brookie!"

Sophie became lugubrious. "But he knows that you were to have arrived to-day——"

"Well," said Miss Chard decidedly. "Tell him that I came, but that I am as ugly as a monkey and as old as the sea. And now I must go, or my—aunt will be looking for me. I shall try and come in to-morrow and take a lesson on the typewriter. What time will be best?"

"You'll have to teach yourself, my dear. I go to the office every morning at ten, and I lunch in West Street, and don't get back until above five in the afternoon. But I'll bring you all the MSS. there is no immediate hurry for—and you can do it one day and I'll take it back the next. We shall get along like one o'clock."

"That's all settled then; good-bye!" Miss Chard had stepped out of the room into the verandah and was gone before Sophie could remove her high heels from the bars of the chair in front of [99] her, where she had hooked them for extra ease and comfort. Inadvertently she listened for the click of the gate. But the gate did not click. Miss Chard, having got out of view of both house and gate, made a dash for the tall green hedge on the right side of the garden. Stooping down, she

instantly disappeared.

A few moments later Poppy Destin sat in the passion-leaved summer-house, delicately smoking a cigarette and brushing all traces of dust from her thin black muslin gown. Between little puffs of smoke she presently spoke to herself.

"Certainly she is a terror ... a common mind, terrible clothes, Colonial slang ... I don't know that I can put up with her at all ... and those awful Brookies and Brammies! ... but it will be useful to be able to go through her garden whenever I want to make a little excursion into the world ... and, of course, I couldn't be there without some right or reason ... besides, it will be splendid to learn typewriting, and do all my own writing ready to send to the publishers ... but what a room! ... and those roses in her hat! Can such things be?... I must go and see whether Kykie has my tea ready."

A few days later it would have been hard to recognise the sitting-room of Sophie Cornell's little green bungalow. Books had spread themselves about the room, the tawdrinesses had been removed, flowers were everywhere, and a fine vine in a long glass crept delicately up the side of the mirror above the mantel. When Poppy had hinted that she would like to change the room a little, Sophie had good-naturedly given her *carte-blanche* to do anything she wished, saying:

"It was not *my* taste either, you know; but the place was furnished when I came into it and I haven't bothered to do anything since."

The only things Miss Cornell would not allow to be banished were the photographs of her [100] numerous admirers, which she insisted on ranging along the narrow wooden ledge running round the room above the dado. They were in all degrees of preservation—some of them yellow with age or exposure, some quite new; all were autographed and inscribed. Some of the inscriptions ran thus: "From your loving Jack"; "To the best girl I know"; "To one of the best from one of the worst," etc. It was to be observed that the most ardent *mots* were merely initialled. But Sophie was equally proud of them all, and would exhibit them on the smallest provocation, giving a short narrative-sketch of each person which included the most striking features of his character, together with a thrilling account of his passion for her and the reason why she did not marry him.

"Now, isn't *he* good looking? Such a dear boy too ... and *generous*! My dear, that man would have given me the boots off his feet ... but there—he had no money; what was the good?... He's in Klondyke now ... I do hope he'll have luck, poor boy...."

"This is Captain Halkett. No, I don't know his regiment, and he never would give away his photos in uniform, though he had some perfectly lovely ones.... Someone told me he was a 'cashier' in the Army ... but that was silly, of course ... there are no such things as cashiers in the Army, *are* there? ... he simply adored me ... he gave me this bangle ... such a darling ... but he was married—or, *of course*——"

"Oh, *that* is Jack Truman, of Kimberley. Everyone knows *him* ... a fearful devil, but most fascinating.... Isn't he handsome? ... such eyes ... you simply couldn't look into them, they made you blush all over. The women were all crazy after him, but he told me he didn't give a pin for any of them except me.... He wanted me to run away with him ... but he had a wife in a lunatic asylum [101] ... obliged to allow her forty pounds a month, and he was *dreadfully* in debt ... they tried to arrest him at Cape Town, but he got away dressed like a woman ... and now he is in the Australian Mounted Police, they say.

"And, *of course*, you know who this is? One of the biggest men on the Rand ... with *thousands*, my dear.... Och! you should see him in riding kit ... you never saw any one look so perfectly *noble* ... he was *madly* in love with me ... everybody said so ... he told me I was the only girl who could ever keep him straight ... but he behaved rather badly.... I always believe some snake of a woman made mischief ... and when he went to England, one of those English girls snapped him up ... they live out at Jeppestown now ... and they say she's the *living image* of me ... funny, isn't it?... but I think it just proves how he adored me, don't you?"

Listeners of defective vision and an over-developed sense of credulity might have believed that Helen of Troy II had come to town—unless they had been long enough in South Africa to realise that the best way to enjoy a little quiet humour is to take a Cape-Colonial girl at her own valuation.

Poppy listened to all with tranquil eyes. She was willing to believe that it might be true that Sophie was admired and adored and desired. But in the type of men who formed the army of admirers and adorers and desirers she could not pluck up the faintest kind of interest. It seemed to her that it was impossible that any man worth knowing could forgive the size of Sophie's hands and the shape of her feet, the look about her mouth, the paint on her face, and the dust in her hair.

She was aware, however, that life in South Africa is too busy and too eventful to allow men much time for digging into personality—and that it has to suffice, as a rule, if the surface-metal [102] shines pleasantly and looks like the real thing. Sophie's surface, no doubt, had an attractive glitter, but Poppy felt sure that if anyone with the time and inclination for such occupation had ventured to go a-quarrying into the nature of Sophie Cornell, the output would be found to be surprising, even in a land where surprises are every-day fare and the unexpected is the only thing that ever happens.

CHAPTER IV

[103]

IN the meantime all went well. Secure in the knowledge that Abinger was away for some weeks, that Kykie would never search for her except at meal-times, every day found Poppy spending four or five hours at her new occupation—typewriting. She had determined that she would master this art before she went adventuring further into the world that lay beyond Sophie Cornell's gate.

Sometimes she would arrive before ten in the morning, in time to see Sophie depart, gloriously arrayed, with the air of one due at the same garden-party as royalty.

When she inspected the huge rolls of work which Sophie invariably brought back, she would sometimes wonder if the latter had indeed been to a garden-party and never put in at the office at all, except to fetch the MSS.

The little house in the morning hours was always calm and peaceful. Through the trees of the garden Poppy could hear the world go buzzing by—the grating of the tram-cars on the lines, the clatter of horses, and the hiss of wheels going down hill, and an occasional street cry. No one ever came down the little pathway. Only the click of the machine, the voices of Zambani and Piccanin, busy with the pots and the pans in the kitchen and yard, broke the silence; or Poppy's trilling whistle as she corrected her proofs. By half-past twelve there would be piles of neat manuscript ready for Sophie to take back the next day, and Poppy would be speeding home through her own garden to luncheon. Sometimes in the afternoon she would finish early, and, [104] going out into the kitchen, would toast buns and prepare the tea, and Sophie, coming home at five o'clock, would find it laid cool and dainty among flowers on the long table.

One day, when Poppy had arrived almost directly after lunch, with the idea of getting in a long afternoon at her own work, she was disagreeably surprised to find Sophie stalk in a few moments later, flushed and handsome, and bringing with her a large bale of papers and the faint but unmistakable odour of good cigars.

Poppy's little nose went up and a warmth ran through her; the smell of a good cigar unaccountably roused in her a vivid interest in life. For a moment she slightly envied Sophie, but a glance at the brilliant languid eyes and heavy mouth changed her mind, and singularly inspired her with the thought that good cigars were probably often smoked by hateful men.

"Would you like me to order you a cup of tea, Sophie?" she asked presently.

"No, thanks!" said Sophie, languidly stretching herself in a chair. "I couldn't drink tea. I've had a most tiring morning. Brookie brought Nick Capron in, and they simply *wouldn't* let me work."

After which calmly contradictory statement, she closed her eyes and fanned herself with a legal-looking document, chosen for its stiffness from among the papers she had brought, and which were now at sixes and sevens upon the floor.

At the name "Nick Capron," Poppy gave a little start. How well she remembered the day she had heard that name from the lips of a beautiful woman in Bloemfontein! Could this Nick Capron possibly be the "most fascinating man in Africa" whom the gold-haired heroine was going to marry? She must try and discover. [105]

"I think a cup of tea would refresh you, Sophie," she presently said.

"*Och ni vat!* I can't eat or drink when I get worn out like this—I become a perfect wreck."

Poppy surveyed the healthy, not to say opulent proportions stretched before her, and could not forbear to smile.

"Oh, you should keep up your strength," she said, with irony entirely thrown away.

"The only thing that would be the *slightest* use to me, now," announced Sophie, "is a glass of champagne—and, of course, I can't have that."

Poppy began to pore over her manuscript. She was in the mood for work and hated not to take advantage of it.

"I wish I were rich enough to drink champagne whenever I am tired," was Miss Cornell's next contribution; and Poppy laughed without being amused.

"You'd soon be bored with that."

"Never!" said Miss Cornell fervently; then relapsed into languor.

"I hope those papers are not important, Sophie, they are blowing all over the room."

"Yes, they're *very* important. They're all about a Malay abduction case which a friend of Brookie's is defending in the Courts next week. It's the greatest fun, Brookie and Capron were shrieking over it this afternoon."

"Is Mr. Capron a lawyer?"

"Oh, no—he isn't anything; just a pal of Brookie's. He's a Johannesburger, but he has a house here as well, and *tons* of money, and a lovely wife—a perfect stunner, my dear—Brookie says she is the loveliest woman in Africa; but Capron has always got his eye on some other woman. By the way, Rosalind, to-day he was describing a girl he had seen in a rickshaw, and from the description I feel sure it was you. Your particular style of beauty appears to have struck him all in [106] a heap."

Miss Cornell made this statement as though she thought it humorous, which, indeed, she did,

for that anyone should admire a girl so unlike her own type, and her own idea of beauty which that type represented, seemed to her really funny and incredible. Yet she looked intently now, and observed, so far as in her lay, "with the seeing eye," and for the first time since they had met —the girl before her. Nick Capron's unmistakable enthusiasm had made a great impression upon her.

"He said that you were alone in a rickshaw," she told Poppy, "and that he and Mrs. Portal were walking together and met you. And Mrs. Portal said you looked like a Burne-Jones dressed like a Beardsley poster. What rot these society women talk! Who can understand a thing like that?"

"What is Mrs. Portal like?" asked Poppy, remembering now the well-bred-looking woman who had been talking about Burne-Jones to the man with the dissipated eyes on the day of her arrival.

But Sophie took no heed of the question. She was closely and furtively regarding Poppy, and thinking: "Has she any attraction for men, I wonder? She's not a bit smart ... and so pale ... and yet, and yet ..." Here Sophie's expression of thought gave out. If she could have expressed it, she would have added: "She is pale, and yet glows as though something within her is alight."

"I hope you did not tell him anything about me?" asked Poppy suddenly.

"No, I did *not*!" said Miss Cornell emphatically, and her annoyed look as she said it brought a ring of laughter from Poppy and a lovely mischievous glimmer to her eyes. [107]

Suddenly Sophie sprang up.

"Great Scott! I *quite* forgot to tell you—Brammie is coming to tea. That's why I came home so early. Do buck up, old girl, and make things look nice. Your papers are all over the place. I want the room to look as nice as possible for old Brammie."

"Oh! blow Brammie," thought Poppy crossly. "I was just going to write something extraordinarily fine; now it will be lost for ever!"

Nevertheless, she put her papers away with a good grace, tidied the room, laid the tea-things—as only she could—and went out to pluck fresh flowers for the vases. Sophie stood in her bedroom door buttoning a plaid silk blouse over her richly-endowed bosom.

"That's ripping," she said approvingly. "Och! but you *can* arrange flowers—I'll say that for you, Rosalind. Wouldn't you like to run home and change your dress, though?"

"No," said Poppy, her head slightly on one side as she surveyed a great flaming hibiscus-blossom she had just put by itself amidst a heap of green on the mantlepiece. "Why should I change my gown?" she asked. "This is quite all right. And the man's coming to see you, Sophie, not me."

"Oh, he really *wants* to see you, and I think you ought to try and look nice. I'll lend you one of my silk blouses, if you like."

"No, no, thank you," hastily. "It's awfully good of you, Sophie, but I think my gown is quite presentable."

She looked absolutely charming in a pale-blue linen, perfectly laundered by Kykie; but Sophie considered anything less than silk very ordinary wear indeed.

Poppy began to arrange her hair at the mantel-mirror, pulling out her little side-combs, running them through strands of hair, then plunging them in deeper, so that great waves leaned out on either side of her face and delicate fronds fell veil-wise just over her eyes. Then she took a bunch of green leaves and fastened them under her throat with a big, old malachite brooch she had. [108]

"Well, put some colour on your cheeks, or something," said Sophie discontentedly.

Poppy flew into one of the fierce little rages that sometimes seized her. "I will *not*, Sophie! Why on earth should you suppose that because *you* have a violent colour no one admires pale women? Do not make the mistake of thinking that everyone adores your type because *you* do!"

Sophie, utterly taken aback, was about to make a tart rejoinder, when there came a light tap with a crop on the front door.

"Anyone at home?"

Sophie flew to her room to complete her toilette, leaving Poppy to swallow her rage and open the door. A big, grey-eyed man, with a kind smile, was standing in the verandah. He was in riding-clothes and carried a crop in his hand.

"Come in," said Poppy, without enthusiasm; adding: "Miss Cornell will not be long."

"Are you Miss Chard?" said he pleasantly, and came in.

He looked round in a friendly, boyish way that rather charmed her.

"By Jove! How pretty you've made this place look! It's quite different."

"Ah, I suppose you were here before, when it was a chamber of horrors," said Poppy coolly. "I never saw a more impossible place in my life."

He looked at her curiously as though greatly surprised. Then he said carelessly, and rather curtly she thought:

"Oh, yes, I have been here before." [109]

He sat down in one of the easy chairs and Poppy began to put in order some books that had fallen from the book-case on to the floor. When she turned she found him still staring at her in that curious fashion, but without his smile. She missed it because it was a singularly heart-warming smile.

"The last people here were rather addicted to antimacassars and glass-shades and things," she said, appearing not to notice his curious look; "and as it seemed to me a pity to let such things

spoil a pretty room, I put them out."

"Oh!" was all he vouchsafed. She felt chilled. But here Sophie burst into the room, very magnificent and highly coloured.

"How *sweet* of you to come, Mr. Bramham," one hand up to her hair and the other outstretched, while her body performed the Grecian bend.

"Rosalind, *do* see about tea, there's a dear. I'm sure Mr. Bramham must be *parched*."

Correctly estimating this as a hint to leave them alone, Poppy retreated to the kitchen, and did not reappear until she followed Piccanin in with the tea-tray. Sophie was saying, "*Do* bring him around, Mr. Bramham. We should *just love* to meet him."

Poppy, arranging the cups on the table, had a pardonable curiosity to know whom she should *just love* to meet; but she made no remark; merely sat down.

"Shall I pour out tea, Sophie?"

The latter nodded, but made no other attempt to include her in the conversation, continuing to monopolise Mr. Bramham entirely.

In a short time Poppy became wearied of this state of affairs. After observing "Brammie's" boots, his fingers, his tie, the shape of his lips, his hair, the size of his ears, and his manner of sitting on a chair (all while she was apparently arranging the cups and looking into the teapot to see if the tea was drawing properly), the "eternal feminine," which is only another name for the dormant cat in every woman, awoke in her. She did not exactly want "Brammie" for herself, but she decided that he was too nice for Sophie. [110]

Immediately afterwards, Bramham began to realise that there was a charming personality in the room.

"Do you take sugar?" blew like a cool little western wind into his right ear; while on his left, Sophie Cornell was bombarding him with instructions to bring someone to call.

Poppy got her answer first, and a sudden glance of recognition fell upon the slim, pale hands amongst the tea-cups; then:

"Certainly, Miss Cornell! I'll ask him to come, but I can't promise that he will. He's not much given to calling."

"Bosh! I know he goes to the Caprons and the Portals—I've seen him with that horrid Mrs. Portal."

"Ah! you don't admire Mrs. Portal?"

"I don't see anything to admire," said Sophie. "She is not a bit smart, and her hats are simply awful!"

"She is considered one of the most delightful women in South Africa," said Bramham.

"Oh, she may be," Sophie's air was unbelieving; "but I don't see where it comes in."

She took her tea sulkily from Poppy's hand. Bramham looked bored. The little western wind blew again in his ear.

"Perhaps her charm is not to be seen. Perhaps it is an essence—a fragrance——"

Sophie scoffed at what she did not understand.

"Oh, you and your old poetry——"

"That's just what it is," said Bramham. "There's an odour of happiness about her that infects everyone who comes near her—no one cares a hang about what she wears or anything like that." [111]

"Well, I don't like her, anyway," said Sophie, now thoroughly ill-tempered, "and I don't see why you do. She's covered with freckles."

That should have ended the matter, but Poppy's taste for torment was whetted.

"Perhaps Mr. Bramham doesn't know her as well as you do, Sophie," she said softly.

Sophie glared. Mr. Bramham looked amused. They all knew that Mrs. Portal could never be anything but a name to Sophie—that it was really an impertinence on her part to be discussing Mrs. Portal at all.

"Do *you* know her?" she retorted rudely.

"Of course not!" answered Poppy. "I know no one in Durban except you, Sophie—and now Mr. Bramham," she smiled, a sudden smile of great sweetness at Bramham, and at that he gave her his whole attention.

"That's dull for you, surely!"

"Oh, no! I have plenty to do; and books to read; and how can one be dull in such a lovely place as Natal?"

The sun came out in Bramham. He was a Natalian and proud of it.

"I believe she gets up in the morning and goes out to see if the sun rises!" said Sophie, as if denouncing the conclusive symptom of idiotcy.

The cold look with which Bramham had at first surveyed Poppy had now quite disappeared, and his grey-eyed smile was all for her. He also was a sun-rise man.

"Do you like books?" he asked. "I can lend you any amount. We get all the new ones, and as soon as they're read the Lord knows where they go! I'll send you some up, if I may." [112]

"Thank you, that *will* be good of you," said Poppy with enthusiasm.

"Send her up all the old poetry books you can find," jeered Sophie. "Personally, *I* like a jolly

good yellow-back."

Mr. Bramham looked extremely bored by this priceless piece of information, and more so still when she returned immediately to the subject of the men she was anxious to meet. Poppy got up and, opening the piano, began to play a little gay air to which she whistled softly; she never sang.

"I'm just *dying* to know him," said Sophie ardently. "He looks as though he has committed every sin you ever heard of. And how *did* he get that fearful scar right across his face? Vitriol?"

The little air at the piano stopped suddenly.

"I really couldn't tell you. He is not communicative on the subject," said Bramham drily. "But perhaps he will unfold to you—do go on playing, Miss Chard!"

He adored music, and had an excellent view of an extraordinarily pretty pair of ankles under the music-stool.

Poppy complied, but she changed the air to something savage that made Bramham think of a Zulu war-chant.

"Well, I shall certainly ask him when I meet him. I wonder you haven't been able to find out! He lives with you, doesn't he?"

"He is staying with me, at present, yes." Bramham's tone was full of weariness.

"And that dark, strange Irishman everyone is talking about—Carson—he is staying with you, too, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Are they great friends?"

"We all know each other very well."

Miss Cornell laughed genially. [113]

"I should say you do—isn't it true that you are called the three bad men all over Africa—come now?"

"I'm afraid someone has been filling your head with nonsense. Who spreads these stories, I wonder?"

"Ah, yes, that's all very well, but you know it's true, all the same. You are three dangerous, fascinating men, everyone says so, and the Kaffirs have names for you all. What is yours, Mr. Bramham?"

"Kaffirs have names for everybody if one had time to find out what they were."

"Oh, I know—*Umkoomata*—that's what they call you. Now, what wickedness can that mean?"

"Who tells you these wonderful things, my dear young lady? You really have a lot of inside information about everything. You should start a newspaper." Bramham was slightly exasperated.

"Oh, I know a lot more besides that," said Miss Cornell, shaking her finger at him archly. "About you, and Mr. Carson, too. He is going up on a secret expedition into Borapota for the English Government, isn't he?"

"*Very* secret, apparently," thought Bramham. "How the devil do these things leak out?"

"Something or other, yes," he said aloud.

"They say the English Government thinks an *awful* lot of him."

"Yes, he's a clever fellow," said Bramham, casually. No one would have supposed him to be speaking of a man dearer to him than a brother. Bramham did not wear his heart where it could be pecked at by the Sophie Cornells of the world.

Poppy got up from the piano, and Bramham got up, too, and looked at his watch.

"I must be off," said he, with a great air of business-hurry, which left him as soon as he got out of the gate.

"Now, don't forget to bring Mr. Abinger next time," Sophie called after him from the verandah; [114]
"and that Mr. Carson, too," she added, as an afterthought.

Poppy positively blushed for her.

"Sophie, how can you! It was perfectly plain that he did not want to bring the man—and that he doesn't intend to, anyway. Are you really as dense as you pretend to be?"

"Bosh!" said Sophie, retiring to the table and beginning to make a fresh onslaught on the bread-and-butter. "They'll turn up here in a day or two, you'll see. Isn't there any jam, I wonder?"

"I shall not see anything of the kind. I wash my hands of you and your men friends. I didn't engage to meet anyone but Mr. Bramham, and I've done all I promised."

She had done a little more than she had promised, as she very well knew, but observation was not Sophie's strong point, as her next remark made plain.

"Now, don't be cross just because he didn't admire you. I told you to put on my silk blouse, didn't I?"

Poppy laughed her entrancing laugh.

"Do you really think men care for clothes, Sophie?"

"Of *course* they do! They love to see a well-dressed woman—especially when they don't have to pay for the dress. Lots of men won't even be *seen* with a woman unless she's *perfectly* turned out. Brookie is like that; and I'll bet that man Abinger is, too!"

"Is he, indeed! Then remove him far from me. I'm afraid you won't suit him, either Sophie," with a touch of malice.

"Why not? Don't I pay enough for my clothes? I dress far better than Mrs. Portal does, anyway. She always has on faded old linens and things, and I've only seen her in two hats since I came here—both of them *awful*!"

"I thought she looked extremely nice when I saw her." [115]

"Well, your taste and mine differ, my dear. *I* think she is a frump. Capron's wife now *is* good looking, and always dressed mag-*nif*-icently. But it makes a person sick to see the way they freeze on to all the decent men and never let them meet anyone else."

"But do the men want to meet anyone else? If one woman is witty, and the other pretty, what more is there to be desired?"

"You talk like a book with all the pages torn out, and the cover lost," said Sophie irritably.

Poppy laughed provokingly, and lay back in her chair, thinking—the whole thing was rather amazing. Abinger still here, and moving amongst pretty and witty women, whilst he pretended to be up in the Transvaal! His friend *Umkoomata* the *Sturdy One*, whom she had told herself she would like to know, here too, visiting Sophie Cornell, whom he plainly didn't like. Nick Capron! How odd the world was! She began to ponder about *Intandugaza*, too—whether he was the mysterious dark Irishman who went on secret expeditions——

"*Man!* Rosalind," broke in Sophie suddenly. "That fellow Abinger is just crazy to meet me. We ran into each other as I was coming out of Brookie's office yesterday, and he gave me a look that made me go hot all over. He's got those bad eyes that make you feel curly all down your spine —*you* know!"

Poppy turned away from her. With the remembrance of certain recent sensations still burning within her, she could not say that she did *not* know; but her mouth expressed weariness and disgust.

"It seems to me that you are talking about some kind of brute, Sophie," she said.

"Brute! Oh, I don't know," said Sophie, and laughed. The laugh sent Poppy out of the room with her teeth in her lip. [116]

"I can't stand Sophie any longer," she said to herself in her own garden, looking at the rose-red walls of the house and the flaming flowers on the plant before the door. As she went indoors her thought changed; she began to smile subtly to herself.

"So Luce is in Durban all the time! He simply pretended to go away, to avoid discussing that matter of going out with me! And Mrs. Nick Capron! If I were to go out here, should I meet her? And would she recognise in me, I wonder, the little wretched vagabond of six years ago?"

She reached her glass, and looked in.

"I think not."

CHAPTER V [117]

BRAMHAM and Carson sat smoking in the verandah of Sea House. Before them, not two hundred yards away, lay the sea, washing and rippling on the beach under the full of the moon. Behind them, through the open French windows a number of large woolly moths were *buzzing* in and out, much intrigued by the light that shone through a pink silk lamp-shade, which had been made and presented to the establishment by Mrs. Brookfield, on the occasion of her husband's accession to Bramham's mess for six weeks. The electric-lights had been turned out to keep the room as clear as possible of insects. It was Bramham's house, and they were Bramham's native servants who stepped so gently, removing the dinner-things deftly without clamour, making no sound but the rustle of bare feet on polished boards and an occasional softly-spoken Zulu word.

Bramham's household included no woman, but there was no better-appointed one in Natal. Having laid bare the gleaming oak dining-table, one of the *boys* solemnly spread down its centre a strip of silver embroidery, while another placed two silver bowls of roses at each end, and removed the lamp with the pink shade to a side table. Afterwards the ice-bucket was replenished and fresh glasses placed near the spirit-tantalus.

Having performed these duties with the greatest decorum and ceremony, they withdrew silently to the back regions of the house, where their solemnity slipped from them as suddenly as [118] water slips from a Kaffir's skin. They disported themselves amongst the pot-washers and dish cleaners, the cooks and stable-boys, with many a merry snicker and laugh, chattering like magpies, clicking and clacking, and crying "Hah!" over the affairs of the *Old Baas* (the master of natives is always *Old* whatever his age) and the various other *Baases* who sat at Bramham's board with regular irregularity.

Ha! ha! where was *Shlalaimbona* to-night, they inquired among themselves. It is true that he would sleep here in the house of the *Old Baas*, as he had now done for many nights, but where did he eat to-night? In the house on the hill, where a white star was hidden by day and by night?

No; the information was forthcoming that he dined to-night at the house of Por-tal—he who was gay always with an angry face and had the wife whose hands could smooth away troubles.

And where, the cook particularly desired to know, was *Bechaan*? He whom the world called Brookfield—who had slept in the house of *Umkoomata* for the matter of six weeks now? Where was he to-night? Followed the tale of the return of Mrs. *Bechaan*, with particulars amazing.

Vetta, Carson's personal servant, gave an imitation of the lady, from which might have been gathered that her chief characteristics were a kangaroo-walk and a face which in contour and complacency resembled a camel's.

In the meantime, *Umkoomata* and *Intandugaza* smoked in the verandah, which was like the deck of a yacht, broad and white-planked, and lined with a long row of every kind of easy-chair, a Madeira lounge, and a hammock with Union-Jack cushions.

Carson, with his head far back in a canvas chair and his hands behind it, was smoking a cigar at the mosquitoes, sending them in shrieking swarms to roost in the roof. Incidentally, he was trying to persuade Bramham that the fine weather indicated a three-weeks' trip into Zululand, to [119] get some good shooting.

"I have another three weeks to put in, Charlie, and what is the good of loafing here, at a loose end?" He gave a glance at Bramham seated by him, pipe in mouth, hands in pockets, the picture of health and well-being. "And you are looking really seedy. A trip would do you good."

Bramham immediately began to think himself precariously ill.

"I know," said he uneasily; "I feel confoundedly slack. I must take a dose of quinine to-night. A trip would be just the thing to set me up, damn it!" He stared at the moonlit night, his eyes full of a wistfulness that was extraordinarily boyish in a man on the wrong side of forty. He thought of a lovely spot he knew up on the Tugela, where the moon would just be rising over a great Kop, and he seemed to smell the wood fires on the night air——

"But I can't get away. I've got a big case coming on next month, you know." His face changed, the boyishness passed and the business-man reappeared. "Those fellows in Buenos Ayres are trying to do me up for five thousand."

They smoked in silence for a moment or so, then Bramham continued:

"My lawyer, of course, wants to see me almost every day on some point or another. I really couldn't get away at present, Carson. Why not take a run up to the Rand? By the time you are back I'll have those fellows on toast, and then we'll go off for a few weeks."

"No," said Carson discontentedly, "everything is confoundedly dull on the Rand. I was sick of the place when I was there last month."

"What's wrong with it?"

"It is not the same as it was, Charlie. The old crowd has all gone away or gone to bits—Webb is [120] in the Colony; Jack Lowther is mostly engaged (I think) in praying that his wife won't be too much for him when she comes out—she is on the water! The Dales are away. Bill Godley is up Inyanga way. McLeod's finances are in bits, and he's too busy keeping a stiff lip to be sociable. Clewer is now Public Prosecutor and has become a saint. Little Oppy has gone home. Solomon says he has met the Queen of Sheba at last, and expects that to account for his never being in evidence anywhere except in the stage box of the Standard Theatre."

"Oh, damn it! disgusting!" commented Bramham.

"And, anyway, the Rand air always chips the edges off my nerves, Bram. It's too high. Lord knows, I don't feel any too fit now! I believe I have another go of fever coming on."

Bramham looked at him critically and affectionately. "You *do* get some doses, but I hope you're not in for another, Karri!" he said. "By Jove! When South African fever puts her loving arms round a man she clings as only fever and a woman can."

Bramham's face was clouded, but there was no real bite in his words. He had no quarrel with the clinging arms of women, or of fever. But he blamed these things for the look of bitter discontent and cynicism that lay across the beauty of the fine face beside him. Carson wore in his eyes the look, and round the mouth the marks, of one who has "wearied of every temple he has built"; or, as Bramham's thought expressed itself with no great originality, yet not without point—the look of a man who has got to the core of his apple and finds it rotten.

"It's that look," Bramham told himself, "that gives women an instinct to comfort him; while if they had only let him alone from the first, maybe it wouldn't be there at all! And you can't comfort a man for his soul's bitterness, as though he has the stomach-ache. Besides which, Karri [121] takes to comfort badly; he'd rather get a smack in the teeth any day from someone he can hit back!"

Thus Bramham, musing and staring at the sea. In spite of its marred beauty, Carson's face seemed to him finer than that of any man he had ever known—and he knew most men of any consequence in South Africa. Meanwhile Carson, giving him another glance, wondered what kept him quiet.

"Thinking of some woman, I suppose!"

Presently Bramham did turn his mind to his own affairs.

"I want your advice about something, Karri."

"Fire away, Bram; let's hear all about her."

At this Bramham, for reasons of his own, became slightly annoyed.

"Don't be an ass, Carson."

"Don't be a rake-hell, Bram. You know quite well you are always at some apron-string."

Indignation dried up Bramham's eloquence.

Carson mocked him further.

"Why don't you lay the 'deadly doing' down, before it lays you out?"

"Take your own excellent advice, my dear fellow. Or give it to Abinger; perhaps he needs it," said Bramham.

"Poor old Abinger! I don't think it would be of much use to him. He scarcely does much 'roving by the light of the moon' these days."

"Good Lord, no! the less moon the better in his case!" said Bramham grimly. "Where the deuce has he been all these years, Karri?"

Carson shrugged.

"Not much doubt about where he has been! He could give us some vivid inside information about the slow-fires that consume."

They smoked a while in silence. Later, Bramham said: [122]

"Whatever Carmen Braganza found to do, she did it well! She told me that it had only taken her six months to learn to dance as she did—and *you* know how she danced! And, I suppose, if she had studied her man for a hundred years, instead of three months, she could not have got in a subtler revenge on Abinger—laying waste his looks like that! It's hard to believe what a magnificent specimen he was; and how mad the women were about him! Bah! it was a foreign devil's trick!"

"But she *was* a foreign devil. That was the point Abinger lost sight of."

"Did you ever hear who the other woman was, Karri?"

"Never. It was an amazing thing that it never leaked out, considering that the whole Rand was nose to trail. But the fact was, I suppose, that no one knew who she was except Abinger and his old housekeeper."

"*And* Carmencita herself. She swore to me afterwards that she had sprung upon them from behind a curtain in Abinger's room and slashed his face open before the other woman's eyes. Why she kept silence God only knows! More foreign tricks probably."

"The other woman must have felt mighty uncomfortable all the months after, while Carmen stayed on dancing, and everyone was hot to find Abinger and get to the bottom of the mystery. There is no doubt that if he hadn't disappeared so neatly afterwards the police would have found some ground for rooting out the whole scandal for the public benefit, and the other woman's name would have been thrown to the beasts!"

"Perhaps that was what Carmen was waiting for!"

Carson got up to get another cigar and the subject dropped. When he came back Bramham reverted to his own troubles.

"Colonial girls don't interest me at any time," he proclaimed aggrievedly; "especially the adventuress brand. I didn't think that even I was such an idiot as to get tangled up with one." [123]

Carson stared straight before him with a smile at the sea.

"This girl is Brookfield's typewriter—confound him!"

Carson's satirical eyebrows moved, but he said nothing.

Bramham continued:

"A tall girl, with a fine figure and a high colour—but what has that got to do with me?"

"What, indeed?" an ironical echo from the canvas chair.

This irritated Bramham.

"If you think you're going to hear a tale of love you'll be disappointed. Nothing of the sort. It's a matter of highway robbery, if it's anything."

Karri began to laugh.

"Oh, come, Bram! This is not like you!"

Neither was it. If Bramham made alms and oblations on strange altars, he was the last man to talk about it afterwards, or sigh over the stub-end of his cheque-book even with his closest friend. At this time, however, he was too much taken up with his grievances to defend his principles to Carson.

"I don't say the girl isn't good looking," he now interpolated, as one who wishes to be quite fair and square; "and she *may* be a good girl, for all I know," he added doubtfully.

Carson grinned.

"Any way, I'm quite sure the other girl is straight."

"Great God of War! Are there two?"

"What a fellow you are, Carson!" said Bramham peevishly. "Of course there are two, but the other one is quite different—English, I think; anyway, she's no Colonial. I don't know what to make of it, to tell you the truth, Karri. She's a friend of that Cornell girl and *that's* against her; yet she looks good——" [124]

"Do you mean that she is unlovely?" asked Carson with a wry smile.

"No, I don't!" emphatically. "But the odd thing is that she didn't strike me at all at first; except as being bright and alive-looking—not like some of the dead ducks you see around these parts

sometimes—then suddenly right under my eyes she blossomed out. You never saw anything like it—eyes, hair, feet, hands, everything—perfect; and her voice a melody."

This was the most astonishing tale of highway robbery Carson had ever heard.

"What next?" asked he.

Bramham beat the bowl of his pipe against the balcony rail.

"Cursed if I know what next!" he proclaimed. After a pause he added: "I wish you'd come and help me sift it out, Karri."

Carson shrugged; his face grew a little weary.

"I am not particularly interested in girls, Bram; I'm afraid I couldn't help you much."

Bramham might have made a rude retort, but he didn't. He got up and leaned against a pole of the verandah, facing Carson.

"Well, I should like to have had your opinion, Karri. What with that girl with the saint's eyes, and Brookfield's slippery ways——"

"But where does Brookfield come in?"

Bramham did not answer immediately. He appeared to be turning it over in his mind as to whether he should tell that part of the story at all. Eventually he roused himself to a point of indignation when he *had* to tell.

"Well, now, look here, Karri—this is the whole thing: About a month ago Brookfield came to my office with a yarn about his typewriter—pretty girl—good girl—knew her business, but fearfully poor, and he hadn't enough work to keep her going—would I give her some of my typing? It [125] meant bread-and-butter to her, etc. *Of course*, I said 'Right!' But when it came to finding the work for her ... well, Milligan, my head man, put it to me that it meant taking away the typewriting from our own man, who can't do anything else, and has a wife and family ... and when I thought it over, anyway, I kicked at having a woman about the office. However, as I'd promised Brookfield to do something, I went round to see him about it and met the girl—Miss Cornell. I didn't take to her much; but she's poor, you know, and something had to be done to help her out."

"I don't see what business it was of yours at all."

"Karri, it's everybody's business when a woman's down on her luck—even if she has the shifty eye of Miss Sophie Cornell. All the same, I didn't contemplate having to tip up three hundred pounds, and I feel deuced sore about it."

"Three hundred *what*?" cried Carson.

"Well, look here, what was I to do?" said Bram sullenly. "Brookie badgered me into promising to do something; then the girl said she had a friend who wanted to come and join her, and if they could only get a little hole of their own they could set up an agency and take in work. Presently Brookie heard that some people called Lumsden were going to leave, and wanting to sell up their cottage—offered to sell the whole bag of tricks as it stood for three hundred, and Brookie said he would stand in for half if I would for the other half. I wasn't prepared to plank down one-fifty by any means, but the Cornell girl got hold of me and pitched me a long story about her friend, an English girl, who had got left in Kimberley by some people she was governessing for ... also, she was so full of gratitude about all our plans for them, that before I knew where I was I had promised. Well, Brookie asked me to arrange the thing quietly and take the house over from the Lumsdens in my name, as he didn't want to appear in the matter, because Mrs. Lumsden's sister [126] at the Cape is a great friend of his wife's and he was afraid it might get to her ears. So I paid Lumsden one-fifty down on the nail, and the rest was to be paid in a month, and Miss Cornell settled in and the other girl turned up from Kimberley, and they've made the place all snug and seem as happy as sandboys. In fact, everything was going all right until this afternoon, when Brookie looms up with a face as long as a horse's, and says he's not prepared to pay the other one-fifty."

"The little blackguard!"

"Exactly. Just what I said to him. He said: 'Not at all!' Declared he hadn't let me in for anything.... I could get three hundred pounds any day of the week for Lumsden's place.... Just as if I could, or would, turn those two poor girls out now they're so happy! So, of course, I've just got to tip up the rest of the money and look pleasant ... and, after all, you know, Karri, why should I?... They're nice little women, and all that, and I'd gladly have done something, but three hundred!... I've troubles of my own, by Jove!... My wife doesn't live on Quaker Oats and barley water, by any means."

"And then there's the pleasure of knowing you've been rooked. I never heard of such a piece of barefaced roguery in my life."

"Well, what could I do? He said his wife was coming back unexpectedly and he couldn't raise the money."

"You're three hundred different kinds of fool, Bram, if you let him rook you like that."

"He's been too clever for me," grumbled Bramham, and shut his mouth on his pipe.

"H'm! Mind the girl's not too clever for you too." [127]

A plaintive expression came into Bramham's face, mingled with irritation; he took his pipe out again.

"My dear Karri, don't I tell you that I have nothing to do with the girl, or she with me? I was sorry for her and helped her out of a hole, and there the matter ends. I don't really regret the money—because of that other girl—but as you know, I am not a millionaire, and three hundred *is*

three hundred. What annoys me is that I should have been such a fool——"

"Why did you pay? I should have refused."

"Oh no, you wouldn't, because the women would have had to get out. No, that would never have done."

"Well," said Carson, getting up and walking down the long verandah. "It's just as well that Mrs. Brookfield has come back. I wouldn't live in the house with Brookfield after this." He went indoors and began to negotiate a whiskey-and-soda.

"Oh, come, I say, Karri!" Bramham got up and came and leaned in the doorway, one leg in the room and one in the verandah. "This isn't your affair, you know. Don't you get your back up about it. I've really no right to have told you; but you understand that I've been a good deal annoyed, and it's been a relief to speak of it. Of course, if Brookie had been here I should have gone into his room and blazed away at him after dinner and got rid of it that way. As it is, I feel better and there's no harm done. By Jove! what a glorious moon! Let's go for a tramp before we turn in."

"Right!"

They fortified. Later, without hats, they tramped off along the shining sands silvered by the light of a shimmering moon gazing at herself in the sea.

Brookfield's wife having returned, he came no more to Sea House. But he hailed Carson [128] blithely at the Club next day.

"What do you say to a drink, Karri?"

"I don't want a drink," said Carson shortly.

"Why not?"

"Don't ask me why not. I don't want one, that's all."

"O God! look here! Now, damn it, why not?"

Brookfield was as easily infuriated as Carson.

On this occasion Carson stayed cool.

"Because I don't like you—if you must have it."

Brookfield at once became calm; he prepared to argue out the matter.

"Karri," he began plaintively, "I want to tell you one thing. I like you and Charlie Bramham better than anyone in this rotten country, but there's no one who can annoy me more than you can——"

Carson yawned, got up, and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER VI

[129]

IT was a moonless night, but the stars were out in their legions, and the garden was full of a warm, silvery silence—the silence composed of the thousand tiny sounds and scents that make the charm and wonder of an African night. The moon-flowers were tolling their heavy, white bells, and some big flowering-bush, with pale, subtle blossoms, seemed to have all the fragrance of a beautiful woman's hair.

Poppy walked in the gracious dimness, her bare, pale feet picking their way delicately amongst bright things lying like fallen stars in the grass. A green, clinging plant, waving long tendrils, clutched at her gown as she passed, and she broke it off, and, twining it into a crown, put it on her hair. It had tiny flowers dotted amongst its leaves. The trees shut her in from all the world, and it was as though she walked in some great, dim, green well.

She had been all through the garden and was tired. At last she threw herself down and lay at full-length on the soft, short grass, in which there was no dampness, for a terrible pall of heat had lain all day upon Natal, and through the thin nainsook of her gown Poppy could feel the warmth still in the earth. She stared into the solemn velvet sky where Orion, in gleaming belt and sword, leaned above her, and the Milky Way was a high-road to Heaven, paved with powdered silver. Far away, in the town below, a church clock flung out eleven clear strokes upon the night air. Poppy turned on her side and lay with her cheek to the earth. [130]

"Old Mother Africa! What have you hidden in your bosom for me?" she whispered.... "I believe that if I sleep on your breast to-night I will dream my destiny. I love you, and you love me.... I am your child ... a poppy growing in your old brown bosom. You are the only mother I have ever known.... Whatsoever you give unto me, I will take and say it is good. I feel predestined to-night.... If I lay my ear to you, will I hear the foot-falls of my fate approaching?... What is there for me? Fame? Love? Those are the only two things in the world! ... but no one can have them both it is said.... Which have you for me, Mother? Will you tell me in a dream?... I will sleep here to-

night," she said at last; and shutting her eyes she lay still.

A man, coming very softly and wonderingly across the grass lawns, thought he saw a slim beam of moonlight lying there, and gave a startled exclamation when it sprang up and flickered into a cluster of tall shrubs.

"That was an odd thing!" he said to himself. "I'll swear I saw.... And yet there is no moon to-night!"

He stood long, looking into the darkness of the bushes until at last he imagined that he saw a moonbeam, shaped graciously like a woman's face, looking back at him. But when he approached it retreated. He stepped back again and it returned.

"H'm!" he remarked; "I must have a bad attack when I see moonbeam faces on a moonless night!"

The wedge of moonlight in the bushes seemed to him to give out two little gleams at that.

"This is a fool's game," said the man aloud. "I must go behind these bushes and see where this thing begins and ends."

Instantly the moonbeam disappeared altogether.

"I thought so," he muttered. "Then it *is* a woman, and I'm not delirious yet, though by the Lord [131] my head feels.... I wonder if she will come back if I behave myself very nicely.... I'd like to see that face a little closer ... it looked.... Is it possible that I've made a mistake and this is not Portal's place at all? Perhaps I've found my way into Brookfield's zenana! It was *something* like the gate Bram pointed out to me yesterday.... But what am I doing *here*, by the way?... I wish someone would tell me ... perhaps she will ... how can I get her to come back? ... it might be a good idea to light a cigar and let her see my guileless features.... I think I'll sit down too ... it's odd how queer I feel!" He sat down in the grass among the fallen stars, a tall, powerful figure in a light-grey lounge suit, and taking out a cigar he carefully lighted it, making as long a process of the lighting as possible. Then he threw away the remains of the match and looked up at the bushes, but his dazzled eyes could see no wedge of moonlight in the Egyptian darkness. It was there, however. And by the time the match had burnt his fingers, Poppy had been able to take a long absorbing look at what seemed to her the most wonderful face she had ever seen. She believed that in that short time she had read all that should, and should not, be written on the face of a man—strength, weakness, tenderness, tyranny, gentleness, bitterness, cynicism, gaiety, melancholy, courage, despair. But how came he here? How had he found his way through a locked gate? Was it possible that he had come through the *boys'* compound? ... or by way of her secret hole in the summer-house? ... but he had not come from either of these directions. What did he want?

In the meantime the man was holding his cigar between his knees and gazing in her direction.

"O moon of my desire that knows no wane," he gently misquoted, "come out and talk to me!" [132]

His voice had a rustle in it of leaves before the wind. No woman could listen to it cold-hearted.

"But what are you doing in my garden?" she said in her own entrancing tones.

The man's veins thrilled in turn.

"*Is* it your garden? I was looking for the house of a friend. I'll go if you tell me to, but I'd much rather sit here and listen to your voice. I can't see you very well—" he finished with an air of complaint.

"How did you get in?" asked Poppy. "Isn't the gate locked?"

"My *boys* have a name for me of which one translation runs—all gates open to him."

"But it *must* be locked."

"It is not, I assure you. Though if this were my garden, it should always be—with me inside."

"You talk very oddly," said she, trying to speak coldly; "nearly as oddly as old Khayyam himself ... I trust not for the same reason!"

"You wrong me bitterly," he said. "I am trying to speak and behave with unusual decorum. It is the poetry of the night which affects me in spite of myself. You suspect some more occult reason, I see, but I can assure you on my honour that I dined quietly at the Club and drank no more than one whiskey-and-soda with my dinner."

A silence prevailed.

At last he said: "I think it would be a gentle and kind thing to do, to come and sit near me on the grass. I would like to look at you closely and see if you are a moonbeam I used to know long ago in Rhodesia."

"I have never been in Rhodesia."

"No? Then perhaps it was in my own land. The women there have voices like you.

"There be none of beauty's daughters
With a magic like thee,
And like music on the waters [133]
Is thy sweet voice to me—"

Poppy heard the rustle of leaves again through Byron's beautiful words, and a little shiver of happiness flew through her. She hoped he would sit there for ever, beguiling her with his sweet Irish tongue.

"Tell me that you came from Ireland and I'll believe you with all my heart," said he next.

"No; I was born out here."

"In this bad, mad land?" His voice had a note of disappointment in it; he added: "I wish *you* were mad and bad—but that is too much to expect, I suppose?"

"Why do you wish it?"

"Because then you would come and sit by me on the grass and talk to me. I am a very bad man, and I want company."

"But," said Poppy softly, "*Il n'est jamais de mal en bonne compagnie.*"

"Voltaire in an African garden! O Lord! I *must* be delirious," he muttered to himself. "I suppose you haven't such a thing as a pinch of quinine about you?"

Poppy having very little about her at that time, began to laugh. Her laugh was rather like the first note of a bird's song, and she understood very well when he said:

"O thrush, sing again!"

"I think you must really be a little bit mad——"

"If you would only be a little bit bad——"

"Oh, I am—I often am——"

"Where will you sit? On my right there is a patch of lesser darkness that smells passing sweet, and might be mignonette; on my left——"

"No; I can't come over there; don't ask me."

Her voice was tremulous now, for in her blood there was the strangest, wildest urging to come at his call. She wondered how long she could hold out against it—if he did not go soon. [134]

"Why should you want me to?"

"Why? Because I want to know whether you are real ... or only a wraith, a streak of moonlight, a phantom of my brain. I want to be sure that the world is still going round, and that I am still in it. All I can see is a faint wedge-shaped gleam of white, crowned with strange stars. Have you tiny white stars in the darkness of your hair? Is your hair as black as the raven's wing, as night—as hell?"

"Yes; it is."

"And are your eyes long cameos of carved moonlight?"

"They are indeed!"

"Then Carissima—Adorissima ... come and sit on the grass."

All the magic sweetness and sadness of Ireland was in his words. But he did not expect the slightest result from this impassioned entreaty, for he had long ago made up his mind that this strange witch of the night, who could throw the thrush's note into her voice, and quote Voltaire, and daintily but cynically suggest that he was drunk, was no simple maid to be beguiled by the tongue. This was a woman who knew her world and all the moves in the great game, and as a man who had played that same game often and well, and could appreciate a clever opponent, he awaited her next move, secure in the thought that it would not fail to be an interesting one.

What he was wholly unprepared for was a glimmering fragrant presence beside him on the grass. The breath of her mouth was so close that he could feel it in little waves across his face. In the purple darkness he descried her white gown, and down each shoulder of it a long, long rope of blackness. The thought of a woman's hair had always some sorcery for him. He could never look at beautiful hair, even in the most conventional surroundings, without turmoil of flesh and [135] spirit, inward curses at his own base nature, and revilings of all things feminine formed to lure the brain and bind the soul of man.

At this moment every instinct of his being, every desire of his nature, fought with his self-control, desiring, inciting, almost compelling him to stretch out his hands to this witch-woman's hair and draw her nearer. Little beads broke out on his forehead; he dug his hands into the earth beside him. He could hear her breathing. A perfumed warmth came out of her and stole to him. He desired greatly that she should speak; but she did not; only sat there giving out perfume and weaving God knew what Ephesian spells to bind him. At about this time it seemed to him that this was a very fine dream and that a fine thing to do would be to get up and go hence before the dream could break. But that mood was soon inconstant. Silence enfolded them—a silence that was mutable and disquieting. At last he leaned towards her and spoke, dry-throated:

"You win!" His voice was very low, and jarred like a fine instrument that has been struck.

"Victory is to you! Tell me to go—or stay!"

The girl, glowing and swaying beside him, could not speak; but her hands made some little motion to him that he interpreted as he wished. He grasped them in his, which were broad and powerful, but had eyes in the fingers: hands with the gift of discovery by touch. In that moment his heart and his purpose changed. At the greatest of all games he was no novice; but he had always played honestly as far as in him lay. It was his principle not to gamble unless the chances were equal for both players. As if they ever can be between a man and a woman! But, strangely enough, all honest men honestly believe it possible. By the feel of those soft hands quivering and burning in his, he had reason to believe that he had made a mistake—with regard to his opponent, at least. [136]

His head was far from clear that night in any case, and sitting there, with those hands in his, that fragrance ... those ensnaring plaits of hair ... was not conducive to coolness and sanity. It should be written down to him that he made an enormous effort to fight the sweet fumes that pressed upon him to cloud his brain and slacken his moral muscles.

"Tell me something about yourself, Carissima," he said softly. "Tell me that you are married, and that your husband is a brute!"

She drew her hands away swiftly. This was a jarring note that broke *her* dream at least. What could he mean? How strange he was! Was it possible that he was mad? Was it at the bidding of a madman that the little cold stone in her breast was turning into something living—something that felt like a sweet red rose bursting into blossom?

"Of course I am not married!" she said slowly and clearly. "I am only a girl of eighteen ... I do not understand why you say such things."

He made a sound which might have been a groan.

"My dear little girl, you must forgive me.... I believe I am ill to-night.... *Of course* you are only a girl ... a good girl!... gates and girls! ... gates!..." Suddenly he leaned closer to her and peered into her face, striving to distinguish the features he instinctively knew were lovely. "Who are you? What are you?" he strangely asked.

"I am a poppy ... a poppy growing in Africa," said she, smiling subtly to herself, but trembling—trembling.

"A poppy!... then that is why your hair has that mystic odour!... 'Give me of poppy and mandragora.'... Poppies give sleep ... I believe that is what I want ... I am a sick man ... like Peter's wife's mother, I am sick of a fever ... and you are—a girl ... O Lord God!" [137]

"Oh, you really are ill!" she cried "Let me go to the house and get you something—some brandy. Rest here a while——"

"Rest here, by St. Anthony!... No, no, nothing, it's nothing ... I'll go." He sprang up and stood at his full height above her. She, too, rose on her feet. She put out her hands to him, but he did not take them.

"Good-night, Carissima ... I'll go home ... be good.... Girls should always be good ... and gates ... I must find the gate——"

Strangely he went, striding away as silently as he had come through the darkness, and leaving her standing there on the grass. Later, she flung herself down and burst into bitter crying.

"Oh, what a brute!... how I hate him!... how my heart hurts!... O God! what shall I do?... where has he gone?... I shall never see him again ... I wish to die! I wish to die!... Does he love some other woman?... Oh, I cannot live any longer ... he despises me because I am a girl.... How my heart hurts!... There is a knife in it.... If I could only hear him speak again!... I shall never see him again!"

Suddenly she sprang up and ran swiftly across the grass, in the direction he had gone—the direction of the gate. But the gate was a long way off, and the way was dim. She ran into trees, and hurt her feet on stones and thorns, and presently, as she ran, she stumbled and fell over something or someone lying prone on the grass. In horror and fear she sprang away, but the figure did not move, only breathed heavily. She stole closer and peered down. It was he. She recognised the tall figure, the pale-grey clothes, the faint aroma she had recently known.

"Oh, what has happened to you?" she tearfully cried, leaning over him. "Are you dead; are you dead?" Using her utmost strength she lifted his head and leaned it against herself as she half [138] kneeled, half sat upon the grass. He was leaden-limbed as the dead, but his loud breathing reassured her; peering into his face she could see that his eyes were closed. She considered swiftly what thing she could do that would be best, presently resolving to run to the house and get brandy and restore him; and quinine, too, as he had asked for it—she knew that Abinger always kept a supply in his room. But first she would try and prop him against this tree-trunk. She dragged and strained at his arms, trying to move him, but he was a dead-weight. Tears of terror and distress streamed down her face and fell hot on his.

"My dear! my dear!" she cried. "What is it with you?" Just as she made to let his head gently to the ground again, he stirred, and his breathing changed to that of a conscious, wakened man. In a moment he had dragged himself up into a sitting pose, with the tree-trunk at his back. She still remained kneeling by him—breathless, glad, afraid, and he leaned his handsome head against the laces of her bosom.

"Are you better?" she whispered tremulously, joyously. "I am going to fetch you some restorative if you will let me leave you an instant."

"You must never leave me again, dearest of all women," he said, and flung his arm about her. "I love you! Give me your lips." He slewed his head round suddenly and his mouth was hard on hers, dragging terrible kisses from it—kisses that shook her through and through as with some strange ague. He felt the trembling of her and laughed with his hand on her heart to still its loud beating.

"'Your mouth is as sweet as bracket,'" he said, quoting some old song that sang in his brain, and kissed her again; then took her hair in his hand and wound it round his throat, holding the long plaits across his face and smelling them as though they were wonderful flowers. [139]

"And I never knew that your hair had this mystic fragrance!... What is it? It is not only sweet, it has some other essence, some fragrance that has a touch of earth in it, and pet, by God! it breathes of Heaven, too!... I think it is a flower that grows upon the eternal hills ... those strange red flowers.... Ah! poppies smell so, I think!... yes, poppies! poppies!... Dearest, if I were stricken blind and deaf in this hour, from ten thousand women I could search you out by this sweet scent of your hair."

He kissed the soft sprays that fell over her eyes. "Speak to me!" he cried down on to her lips. "Speak to me in the voice I love!... *O! Ci risuoniamo in cristallo ... wine in a crystal beaker*.... I

never knew until to-night there was so beautiful a voice in the world!... Speak to me——"

"If I could tear the heart out of my breast," she said, "I would put it into these two hands. I love you! I give you my life."

"God forgive me, I will take it!... I will rob you of all your gifts!"

"I give them to you ... I was born for this hour!" she whispered.

A wave of the great sea that can submerge all the world rushed over them, beat them, drenched them, kissed them, crushed them to its breast; lapped them round, blinded them—flung them quivering and broken on the sands; left them.

He said: "I cannot see your face, darling ... I will never forget this night. There has never been a night like it in all my life, and never will be again."

"I love you! I love you!" her voice cried faintly.

"I have loved you for so long," he said gently. "But always you have turned your face from me ... though I knew you were mine. I saw it in your eyes ... but always you denied me even the touch of [140] your hand ... and I never knew that your hair smelled so sweet until to-night.... *Loraine*, dearest of all women, kiss me again...."

A terrible chill crept through the veins of Poppy Destin. Now she lay like one dead against the wild, loud-beating heart under the grey coat. Her own had ceased to beat; what words were these?

He held her closer. The seeing fingers touched the fabric of her gown, and the slim, boyish body beneath.

"Why, you're only a girl!" he muttered wonderingly. "You have slipped back to girlhood for love of me. God forgive me my sins! I am not worthy to touch your little bare feet, Loraine."

At that she wrenched herself from his arms, sprang to her feet, and ran from him, blindly; she knew not, cared not, where. At one time she stumbled into a Christ-thorn bush and tore her hands and gown, but she felt no pain nor the warm blood running down. She only stopped at last because she found herself in the street with a rickshaw boy demanding where she wished to go. That recalled her to her senses and she stepped back hastily out of the light of his lamps, and stood in the shadow of the gate.

"There is a *M'rungo* in here who is ill. Come and help him to your rickshaw," she said, suddenly inspired.

"Where does he want to go?" demanded the boy. "I go no more on the Berea to-night—only townwards."

"Yes, that will do." She collected her thoughts hastily. He would probably not be able to give the boy his address, the safest thing would be to send him to the Club, where he had dined and was probably well known. She added, therefore: "He wishes to go to the Club."

"Ker-lub!" repeated the boy and nodded sagaciously; *Ker-lub M'rungos* always paid well!

Well satisfied, he followed the girl through the gates and over the soft, dark lawns to the tree [141] where the *M'rungo* was sitting. She spoke in a clear, cold voice:

"Here is a boy with a rickshaw; you had better let him help you home. You are certainly ill."

He rose easily, and stood up like a well man, but his voice was hoarse and vague.

"Ah, thanks, Mrs. Capron—you are always kind. I shall be all right in the morning. Good-night!" He went away muttering, followed by the rickshaw boy. Poppy stood like a stone woman.

Later, she heard the gates clang and the rickshaw bell begin to tinkle down the long hill. Then she broke into dry sobbing, clutching at her throat with both hands, like one suffocating. At last some wild words burst from her lips.

"Oh, I could kill myself to-night!... but first I will kill that woman Loraine!"

CHAPTER VII [142]

A storm shook the house next day when Luce Abinger returned. Kykie's shrill crescendo, expostulations and denials, were smothered like little frothy waves in the breakers of her master's wrath. Once the words "key" and "gate" came floating up the staircase and reached Poppy where she lay on her pillows, as she had lain until dawn, staring at the walls and the ceiling with dry eyes, and her pale lips took a wry and bitter curve. Later, pandemonium was extended to the yard and stables; then, after all these voices there was peace.

Behind her locked door Poppy was vaguely thankful for safety from Abinger's fury and tyrannical questioning; and not all Kykie's cajoleries and threats could make her emerge.

"Go away, Kykie. I'm not well. I want nothing," she repeated monotonously to all demands, until at last Kykie, from sheer weariness, obeyed.

The strange emotions and events of the past night had left the girl numb. The ecstasy of hatred

which had possessed her for that other woman, the birth-pains her heart had suffered, the anguish of humiliation and defeat had all passed. She felt nothing. She thought of nothing. Only sometimes as she lay there staring at *Monna Lisa* on the wall, she had the fancy that she was a little wrecked boat, lying broken and useless on a beach where of late had raged a cruel storm.

In the torrid afternoon hours she slept a while—dead, dreamless sleep, that revived her into at least some mechanical resemblance of herself; so that when Kykie once more pounded upon her door and demanded admittance with a tea-tray, she arose and let the anxious flustered creature in. [143]

"For goodness' gracious, and what do you look like, Poppy!"

"Kykie, stop asking questions, or go!" was the answer given so fiercely that the old woman thought it wiser to say no more on the subject. She inveigled Poppy to sit down and take some tea and some delicately prepared sandwiches; in the meantime, she unfolded the tale of her woes to the girl's unhearing ears. Luce had beaten her best kitchen *boy*, and he had run away, so that she had been obliged to do all his work as well as her own. Every dish at luncheon time had been sent out untasted, and nothing eaten but bread and cheese—a terrible insult to poor Kykie!

"And he's been prowling round the house like a lion all the afternoon, wanting to know what's the matter with you. Promise to come down to dinner, Poppy, or in the name of gracious me I don't know what I shall do."

"I'll come down, Kykie," said Poppy dully. "What is all the trouble about?"

"Just because the front gate was left unlocked all the time he was away. Of course, we little knew that it was open. But he said that I or the *boys* ought to have found out and looked for the key in his room and locked it. *Me!* Me that is on my weary feet in that kitchen all day thinking of his stomach—heavenly me! Take some more tea, my poor child; you look like a spook."

"No, I have had enough, Kykie. Go away now, and see about your dinner. I'll be down."

"Let me brush your hair first; you know you always like me to when you feel bad." The old woman took up Poppy's hair-brushes and approached the long ruffled plaits of hair; but the moment she touched them the girl sprang away from her like a white flame. [144]

"No, no, Kykie; never dare touch my hair again!" she cried violently.

"In the name of—!" Words failed the indignant Kykie. She grabbed her tea-tray and floundered from the room.

At dinner-time, white and fateful as a narcissus with a broken stalk, the girl faced Abinger's curious eyes across the table. But there was more than curiosity in his glance as it swept over her. The same peculiar quality was in it that had troubled her at their last dining together. Only now she did not notice it. If she could have given her thoughts to anything at all but weariness and despair, she might have wondered to see his very real concern at her appearance.

"Why, what have you been doing to yourself?" he said. "You look half dead. Here, drink this wine at once." He poured out a glass of champagne for her, and would eat nothing himself until she had partaken of one of the *hors-d'œuvre*. And when the soup appeared, he waved hers away and ordered an *entrée* to be brought at once. The wine flew into Poppy's cheeks and sent a little scarlet to her lips. She felt a warmth stealing into her being that had been sadly absent since the past midnight. Presently she smiled a little wan smile across at him.

"Oh, I'm all right, Luce! Only I didn't sleep much last night ... the heat——"

"We'll get out of this infernal place—" he began.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried violently, then pulled herself together and added more calmly: "I like the place, Luce—and the garden ... is so lovely ... I should hate to go away."

He was curiously amenable. [145]

"Very well, we'll stay if you say so. And I've been thinking over what you asked the other day, Poppy ... we'll change things. You could go out if you want to ... we must talk about it ... I want to talk ..." he halted a little in his speech—"to you."

"I'm not keen about it any longer, Luce. I don't want to know people, after all. I think I'll shut myself up and work for ten hours every day. I mean to write. I will write a wonderful book. Surely people who work hard are happy in a way, aren't they, Luce?" Her voice and her eyes were wistful. "One would never want anything else—after a time—but to go on writing wonderful stories of life, would one?"

He smiled grimly. She thought he was going to hurl a barb at her, but he only said with the same unusual gentleness:

"Work will never fill *your* life, Poppy. You are the kind of girl who will live the wonderful stories that the other women write."

The lilac eyes in the *troublante* face opposite gave a sad long look into his; then fell. She shivered a little.

"Some wonderful stories are terrible, Luce," she said in a low voice.

When she rose from the table, he said:

"Come and smoke in the garden with me."

She turned her face away from him, staring vaguely at a picture on the wall.

"I don't care about the garden to-night, Luce. The drawing-room, if you like—but I am very tired."

"I shan't keep you long. There is something I want to say to you."

He followed the slim, upright figure walking with such weary grace and trailing her white chiffons behind her, to the drawing-room, where the lights were low, the windows open to the night scents, and the big chintz-covered chairs and sofas held out rose-clad arms to them. She [146] went straight to one she knew well, and dropped into it, laying her cheek against the cool, shiny chintz. Close beside her was an open window, and Abinger came and stood in it, his face in profile to her, staring out into the darkness. His hands were clasped behind him tightly gripping a cigar which he had taken out but did not light. Poppy closed her eyes and the lids burned against them. She had a great longing to be alone with her thoughts. But Abinger had begun to speak.

"Now—about your going out, Poppy, and meeting people, and all that; my chief reason for being disturbed when you mentioned the thing the other day was that I was unprepared. I hadn't had time to think out what was the best plan for you—for us. Of course, you know—it was very well for you to travel all over the place as you have done as my sister; but the thing is, that it won't do here. I can't spring a sister on people who know that I haven't got one."

"No, I suppose not," said she vaguely, from the depths of her chair.

"You realise that then?" he went on evenly. "Well, you see, you rushed me before I had been able to decide what was best to do, and of course I got mad. I'm sorry, Poppy, I beg your pardon, I'm sure."

Poppy, dimly surprised at this unwonted penitence, would have murmured something, but he went on quickly:

"Had *you* any plan? How did you think of accounting to people—women particularly—for the fact that you were living here alone with me?"

"Accounting to them?" she echoed faintly. "Will they ask me?"

"Well, not exactly you, but they'll ask anyone who can tell them, and expect a satisfactory answer before they take you to their breasts." [147]

"But, Luce, you could tell them, or let it be known. I shouldn't mind ... *not* how I first came to you, starving and ragged and beaten; I couldn't bear anyone knowing that ... but they could know how good you have been to me, bringing me up and educating me and being a guardian to me."

"And you think that would satisfy them?"

"I don't see why not. Of course, it is unconventional. But I believe it is not unheard of for a girl to have a guardian ... and guardians are not always old."

"That is so. Unfortunately, my dear girl, there is one thing you omit to take into consideration."

"What is that?"

"I happen to be a dog with a bad name."

Poppy made a little weary exclamation. In truth, she did not see any use in prolonging the discussion. The desire to go out into Durban and meet men and women no longer burned within her. In her present state of weariness she believed she would never again have any taste for human society. Abinger, however, pursued the course of his remarks.

"It is very sad, but my reputation is not one that would commend me to the good ladies of South Africa as the guardian-angel of a young and remarkably pretty girl."

Poppy sat silent.

"I regret to say that the very notion of my appearance in such a *rôle* would be received with ribald shouts of laughter by all the men who have the pleasure of my acquaintance, and in Durban and Johannesburg it would be considered the best joke ever told in the clubs."

At last the girl was moved out of her apathy. She shrank back in her chair with her hands before her face. She thought of the Durban Club and a man in it listening and laughing.

"O God!" she softly cried. [148]

"As for the women," continued Abinger calmly, still staring out of the window. "Well, generally speaking, all the women out here are of the genus crow, and their virtue is a matter of whitewash. Of course, there are degrees. Some of them have managed to assume four or five coats of it, and there's not a speck to be seen anywhere. These are saintly far beyond the understanding of you and me, my child, but as they mostly live in Johannesburg and we don't, we won't worry about them. There are others there too, who are only in the grey, or one-coat stage, and I've no doubt they would extend a claw of welcome to you, if you'd like to go and live up there. Durban is another matter altogether. This, I must tell you, is a city of the highest moral rectitude. The whitewash is within, as well as without. It flows in the women's veins. Some of them are solid blocks of it! I'm afraid, Poppy, that by the time their husbands have handed the highly delectable tale of my guardianship round the morning tramcars on the way to office, and discussed it in the evening while having their high-teas in carpet slippers, you will not stand much chance of being received into the 'white and winged throng' which makes up Durban society. You will be black-balled."

Poppy sat up in her chair now, her eyes shining, her cheeks aflame.

"Why do you say all this?" she demanded haughtily. "If it is as you say and through your fault, you must put the matter right. I do not wish to know these women, but I do not choose that they shall shake their skirts at me, because you have a vile reputation. You will have to find some way out——"

Abinger looked away from the window at last and at her. There was a tall lamp to his hand, and he turned it up high, and she saw that he was smiling—a smile none the less unlovely because it had in it the same unusual quality of gentleness that had distinguished it all the evening. [149]

"But, of course, my dear girl!" he said with a note of surprise in his voice, "that is what I am coming to. I have told you these things simply to show you the impossibility of your living any kind of social life here, unless you are prepared to let everybody know the real state of affairs. When everything is known it will be a simple affair for you to take your place, and you will have an assured position that no one will be able to cavil at. It is for you to say now, whether or not you are ready for the truth to be published."

Poppy's look was of amazement.

"The truth? But what do you mean, Luce? You have been at great pains to tell me why they won't accept the truth."

He stood looking down at her vivid face for a moment. There was an expression on his own that she found arresting too, and she said no more; only waited till he should speak. He turned the lamp down again.

"Poppy," he said in a very low, but clear voice, "do you remember the old French Jesuit coming to the White Farm?"

She stared at him. Her expression reverted to irritation and surprise.

"Father Eugène? Of course I do. And I remember how furious you were, too. And how you stormed at each other in French for about twenty minutes, while Kykie and I stood wondering what it was all about."

"Do you remember any other details? I'm not asking out of idle curiosity," he added, as she threw herself back impatiently in her chair. She wrinkled her brows for a moment. Her head really ached very badly, but she wished to be reasonable.

"I didn't understand French at that time, but you explained the meaning of it all to me. You [150] remember you took me into your study and told me how he thought you frightfully immoral to have a young girl living in your house without her parents, and that he wished you to make a solemn set of promises to him to the effect that you would be a good friend and guardian to me all your life. You said it was a fearful nuisance, but that if you didn't do it, he meant to get to work and find my proper guardians and make things generally unpleasant."

"You remember that clearly?"

"Certainly I do, and so do you. What is the use of this tiresome repetition? It is quite beside the point."

"No, it is not. Just one more question—you remember going back into the dining-room to the priest and making the promises, I suppose?"

"Yes; we stood before him and *you* made the promises. I didn't—though I certainly said '*Oui*' whenever you told me to, and some words after him once. It was then you gave me this ring that I always wear. By the way, Luce, I'm tired of wearing it. You can have it back."

"Thank you, my dear girl; but I wouldn't think of depriving you of it. It is your wedding-ring."

"My—? I think you have gone mad, Luce."

"Not at all. That is your wedding-ring, Poppy. When we stood before the priest that day we were being married."

She burst out laughing. "Really, Luce," she said contemptuously, "you are developing a new form of humour. Does it amuse you?"

"Not much," he said drily; "not so much as it does you, apparently. I don't see anything funny in a marriage ceremony. I remember being exceedingly annoyed about it at the time. But I have come round since then." As he went on, Poppy ceased to smile contemptuously; when he had finished speaking, her mouth was still disdainful, but she was appreciably paler. [151]

"Of late," said Abinger in a voice that had a meaning, "I have begun to find the fact that you are my wife wonderfully interesting."

She sprang up from her chair.

"This is the most ridiculous nonsense I ever listened to!" she cried excitedly. "I don't want to hear any more about it. I refuse to listen." She turned to go, but he caught her by the wrists and stood holding her and looking into her deathly pale face.

"Am I the kind of man who wastes time talking nonsense? Kykie was a witness. She knows we were married that day."

"Kykie! I'm *sure* it is not true. She has never spoken of it——"

"I forbade her to do so. I told her that she'd go out at a moment's notice if she did. Further, as you are so very hard to convince, Poppy, I will show you the marriage certificate signed by Father Eugène."

He took a paper from his pocket, and held it towards her. But she had suddenly sunk back into the big chair with her hands over her scared and ashen face.

"Oh, Luce! Luce!" she cried pitifully. "Say it is not true! say it is not true!" and burst into wild weeping.

CHAPTER VIII

[152]

SOPHIE CORNELL sat at her breakfast-table looking pasty-faced and unwholesome, without any colour on her cheeks, her good looks effectively disguised in hair-wavers and a hideously-figured heliotrope dressing-gown.

Poppy stared at her in dull amazement, wondering how she could have so little vanity as to allow another girl to see her look so unlovely.

"She will probably hate me for it, but that doesn't matter," was the thought that came into her mind as she encountered Sophie's eyes, sleep-bedimmed, but distinctly resentful, taking her in across the table. As a matter of fact, Sophie's vanity was so great, that it never occurred to her that she could appear unlovely to anyone—even in her unpainted morning hours. Her resentfulness was roused entirely by reason of the fact that this was the first time she had laid eyes on her assistant typewriter for a full three weeks, and that even now the recalcitrant only came to say that she didn't feel quite equal to work.

"Och! nonsense!" said Miss Cornell, eyeing her coolly. "You look all right. A little pale, but, then, you're always as washed out as a *fadook*."[4]

[4] Dishcloth.

Poppy's lips performed a twisted, dreary smile. She was entirely indifferent to Miss Cornell's opinions of her looks. To anyone's. As she stood there in the little black muslin gown she always wore to come to Sophie's house in the morning, she might have posed for a black-and-white drawing of Defeat.

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Sophie saw nothing but the prospect of another two or three days' hard work, and she didn't like it.

"You're a fine sort of assistant," she grumbled, her mouth half full of toast. "And another thing: Bramham's been here several times inquiring for you, and the whole place is littered up with parcels of books and magazines he has sent you. I couldn't think what excuse to make for his not seeing you, for, *of course*, he thinks you live here, so I told him at last that you had a touch of dengue fever and wanted quiet. He's stayed away ever since, but he's been sending flowers and fruit. You've evidently made a mash."

Poppy had no inclination to disguise her feelings from Miss Cornell.

"Sophie, you make me sick!" she said and turned away.

"Yes, that's all very well; but you made a bargain with me, that you would meet Bramham sometimes, and if he likes you, so much the better. You don't seem to know when you're lucky!"

"Lucky?" Something broke from her lips, that might have been only an exclamation, but had the sound of a moan.

"Pooh!" said Sophie. "Some fellow's been kidding you, I suppose, and you don't like it. Oh! I know all about it."

"You know some wonderful things, Sophie!" said Poppy at last, in her soft, low voice. "Your mind must be a treasure-house of dainty thoughts and memories."

But irony was ever wasted on Sophie. She got up and stretched her well-shaped arms above her head until the heliotrope sleeves cracked and gaped at the seams.

"Well, all I can say is that you are a donkey not to want to meet nice fellows when you get the chance. Don't you ever intend to marry?"

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Poppy, who had gone over to smell some flowers, probably Bramham's, which were clumsily bunched in rows on the mantel-shelf, faced her with an air of insolent surprise.

"What can that possibly have to do with you or your men visitors?"

"Oho!" said Sophie aggressively. "You won't get many chances of marrying without *my* assistance, my dear. Perhaps you don't know it, but men don't come to Africa with the idea of entering into the holy state of matrimony. When they *do* marry, it's *quite* by accident, and the girl has to work the accident. You don't know much about that business, my child," she added contemptuously. "Better take a few lessons from me."

"Why? Have you been very successful?" Poppy's tone was one of polite inquiry. The other girl flushed.

"Jolly sight more than *you'll* ever be, with your white face and thin figure," she retorted, adding pleasantly: "Your eyes remind me of a snake's."

Poppy sauntered carelessly towards the door.

"And *you* remind me of the man who, when he was getting the worst of a discussion on original sin, said to the other man: 'If I were you, I would not drink with my mouth full.' I am quite willing to believe anything you like to tell me about your conquests, Sophie; only please don't bother to hunt a husband for me. The good God kindly supplied me with the same instincts as other women. I can do my own hunting."

She went out and closed the door behind her with a gentle, sad movement, as though she was shutting in the light of the world and regretted doing it. A little colour had come to her face. She felt better.

Abinger had gone away. This time his destination was really the Rand, for the *boys* had taken

his luggage to the station and seen him leave. He had told Kykie that he would be away for six weeks at least. [155]

After that stormy scene in the drawing-room, when he had left Poppy wrapped in wild weeping, nothing further had passed between them on the subject of their marriage. Indeed, she had not seen him again. But he had left a letter for her, and enclosed was a copy of the marriage certificate, to show her that he had not been inventing. He further informed her that Father Eugène was still alive, and that by writing to the Jesuit Monastery in the Transvaal she could at any time ascertain the simple truth. The rest of the letter was written in a strain of casual indifference, that Poppy found singularly reassuring. His attitude appeared to be that of a man rather bored with the subject because it bored her; but, facts being facts, he plainly felt it his duty to show her that there were less pleasing and many more boring things in life than to be called Mrs. Abinger. He told her first of all, not to be a foolish girl and make herself ill about nothing; that it would be in every way to her advantage to make her *début* in South African society as the wife of a well-known man.

"I have not disguised from you," he wrote, "that I have what is called a bad reputation, but that will not affect you—rather redound to your credit in fact, since the wives of rakes are always looked upon as possessing something unusual in the way of brains and charm. As my wife, your lines will be laid in not unpleasant places. You may have as many friends as you like, and I will allow you five thousand pounds a year to entertain them and yourself upon. In making the matter public, no painful details need be gone into. All that is necessary is that you give me permission to make the truth public. Tell me when you are ready to assume the title of Mrs. Abinger—I'll do the rest. In this, dear girl, as in all things, pray please yourself. Only, remember that if you don't choose to accept the situation, the situation still remains—*we are married*. And it is only under the conditions stated that I can permit you to live any other life than the one you have lived so long." [156]

When first she received this letter, Poppy read it and flung it from her. But in the calm that came after a week's intolerable torment of longing, and despair, she read it again. The fierce fires that had consumed her were burning low then, and cast but a faint and dreary flicker down the pathway of the future. That future looked a land all shadows and gloom, whatsoever pathway she chose to take towards it. The simplest thing to do seemed the most desirable; and surely it was simplest just to let things stay as they were! She would tell Luce Abinger that her choice was to let things remain as they had always been, and then she would live on, drifting through the weary days and months and years, working a little every day, until work at last would become everything and fill her whole life. Perhaps, as she had missed love she would find fame. It did not seem to matter very much whether she did or not.

All she asked was to find peace. Knowing very little of life she did not realise that in asking for this she asked for everything. For no woman finds peace until she has tasted of all the poisoned dishes at the banquet of life—and then the peace is either of the dead body or the dead mind.

After those seven days of suffering, Poppy sat with her broken love-dream, like a pale child with a broken toy. She thought because she was numb that all was over then, except the dreary living through the dreary days. But the young have a great capacity for suffering, and she had forgotten how very young and strong she was, and how hot the blood ran in her veins. After a day she was back again in the trough of the sea. When at last she emerged she was a child no longer, but a woman with something to hide from the world—a wound that bled inwardly and would always ache. [157]

Abinger had been gone nearly three weeks then, and wrote to say that he should probably be away for two or three months, as he was selling all the property he owned on the Rand, and the final settlements would take him quite that time. The thought of the long respite from his presence was a great relief to the girl, and by unconsciously lifting a little of the strain from her mind helped her to come back the sooner to her normal self. Kykie's delight was enormous when Poppy was to be seen wandering aimlessly through the house once more and into the garden; though *there* she never stayed long now, and there were parts of it she did not go near.

From Kykie she learned incidentally, and without resentment, that the front gate was locked once more and the key safe with Abinger. That reminded her of her secret exit, and then she remembered Sophie Cornell, whose image had quite faded from her memory. It occurred to her that she ought to visit her self-imposed employer, and make her excuses and farewells as simply as possible, for something in her now strongly repudiated further association with the Colonial girl.

The visit and quarrel had braced her in a remarkable way. Afterwards she felt that in spite of all she was really alive still, and she found herself regretting that through Sophie's garden must lie her only way into the world beyond. The restrictions of the house began to irk her, and she was afraid of the garden. She felt she *must* go out. She determined to visit the sea and explore the Berea; choosing such times as would be safest to make entries and exits through the little opening in the passion-flower house. In the early mornings she knew well that wild horses might pass through Sophie's garden without her knowing or caring—and again, under cover of darkness it would be simple to slip through unseen. She told Kykie that in the future she always desired [158]

dinner at six-thirty; and Kykie, who had grown curiously meek and obedient of late, made no demur. This arrangement gave Poppy a long evening to herself, and she had never allowed anyone to intrude upon her evening hours. It would be supposed that she spent them in the garden, for always she had found great pleasure in wandering in the moonlight, and in the early morning hours, and the servants were well acquainted with her habits.

So she took to going forth. As soon as darkness fell she would depart, darkly-cloaked and with her head draped mantilla-wise, to see what the forbidden world looked like "'twixt gloam and moon." Her favourite route was by the Musgrave Road, a long thoroughfare that leads to the top of the Berea. Over gates would come to her glimpses of charmingly-lighted rooms, and pretty women sitting down to dinner, or sauntering with their husbands, enjoying the gardens after the heat of the day. Past one house and another she would go, catching little pictures between the trees, at windows, and through open doors—sometimes an exquisite little vision of a mother romping with her children and kissing them good-night; or a husband standing back with a critical cock to his head to get a better view of his wife's new gown, or the way she had done her hair. She never stayed for the kiss that would come after the verdict, but flew swiftly on with her eyes suddenly hot and teeth set in her lip. Other sights were amusing: a face contorted and a head and arm screwed in the agony of fixing a collar-stud; a man grooming his head before an open window with two brushes, and a drop of something golden out of a bottle. Once she saw quite a sensible-looking man practising a charming smile on himself in the glass, and at that [159] could not restrain a little jeer of delight at the "nobler" sex. When she caught children at windows in their nightgowns, peering out, she just gave a weird "*Who! Who!*" like the lesser-owl common in Natal, and they scuttled like rats.

These things affected her variously. Times she mocked the peaceful citizens of Natal for Philistines and flesh-potters. Times her heart came into her throat and tears scalded her eyes, and she felt like a prowling hungry jackal. But most often she flung a bitter laugh to the wind and said:

"I have the best of it—better prowl the veldt lean and free, than be caged and full."

Once or twice she had occasion to recall a French saying she had come across while her French was in the elementary stage. She had studied the phrase for an hour or two, and applied the dictionary to it, and eventually it read to the effect that if all the roofs in Paris were lifted one night the devil might be observed in every house lighting the fires to make the pots boil. The remark seemed to have lost some of its original point in translation, but it still bore an air of significance, and came singularly to hand once or twice, startling Poppy to the thought that Paris and Durban are both under the same sky, and that fuel of fire is the same all the world over. On these occasions it was she who scuttled, and she did it with good-will, almost cured of her taste for living pictures. But the pastime was fascinating to a lonely and lonesome creature, and she returned to it.

Many of the houses she passed stood hidden away in thick gardens, with nothing to indicate their presence but glimmering lights and voices, or sometimes music, or the clank of dinner plates. But if sound attracted her, Poppy was not deterred by gates or gravelled paths. With a fleet foot, a sweet tongue, and an excellent imagination, there is little to fear in forbidden gardens, or anywhere else for that matter. The chief thing is to have the bump of adventure [160] sufficiently developed!

Sometimes she found that there were others abroad for adventure also—some of these of a sociable temperament most inconvenient. Once a magnificent person in evening-dress followed her so persistently, that she was driven at last to the expedient of walking under the glare of a street lamp with her shoulders humped and her skirts held high enough to display to all who took an interest in the matter a pair of knock-kneed legs and horribly pigeon-toed feet. The device worked like magic; she was followed no further.

On another occasion she allowed a youthful Romeo to sit beside her on a bench, only to discover that she was afflicted with a painful sniffing cold—about forty sniffs to the minute. She was soon left sole occupant of the bench.

There were other *contretemps*. Once her evening out cost her sixpence, and she was very much annoyed, for her stock of sixpences was low. Abinger paid all bills and did not expect her to have any need for money. It was her habit, if she saw a native policeman eye her suspiciously, to step quietly up to him with a most grand air and tell him to send her a rickshaw when he reached the main road, as she was in a hurry and could not wait for the car. The minute he was out of sight she would scud down a side street. But upon this occasion a rickshaw was so close at hand that she was obliged to take it and boldly direct the boy to Sophie's front gate. Arrived there, she ran full into a man coming out. The light from a passing car showed her his face, dark and dissipated, but keen. He was carrying his hat in his hand, as men do on hot nights, and she observed that his hair was parted down the centre with a curl on either side.

"Ah! What Luce calls a German from Jerusalem!" was her comment. Incidentally she smelled a smell she was familiar with, from daily contact with Sophie and sheets of MSS. This made her [161] certain that it was the redoubtable "Brookie" himself whom she had encountered.

Often as she glided like a wraith through Sophie's garden the sound of laughter and the flavour of smoke came to her through the trees, or Sophie's voice, outraging the gentle night by some sentimental ballad.

One late February evening, when all the world was steeped in silver light, Poppy's heart

seemed to her to be lying very still in her breast. As she walked over the trembling moonlight shadows a curious feeling of happiness stole across her.

"Am I at peace already?" she asked herself wonderingly at last. "Has my soul forgotten what I did to it, and how I found it only to give it away to a man who called me by another woman's name?"

It must have been late, for carriages and cars passed her, bearing homewards people who had been to the theatre or dining out. She caught scraps of conversation concerning the play, and little intimate remarks about people were flung freely to her upon the night wind. But her ears heeded nothing, for she had a companion who singularly engrossed her attention. She believed it was herself she walked with—a new-found, detached, curiously-contented self. She did not know that it was Destiny who had her by the hand.

At the top of the Berea Hill, not far from her own gate, she stopped a moment under the deep shadow of some wayside trees. All in black she seemed part of the shadow, and she stood very still, for she heard rickshaws coming up the hill, and she thought she would let them pass before she essayed the glare of a street lamp a few yards ahead. As it happened, the first rickshaw stopped at a double white gate which was full under the light of the lamp. A man descended, [162]
turned, and held out his hand, and a woman stepped daintily down. She was a thin, slim woman, wrapless, in a black satin gown with silvery sleeves. She looked as interesting, though not as wicked, as the Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith. In the lamp-light her hair, which was dark brown, appeared to have seven red lights in it. Her face was neither beautiful nor pretty, but well-bred and harmonious, with a sort of glimmering gaiety about the eyes. Poppy instantly recognised her as the woman she had seen on the day of her first arrival in Durban and had subsequently ascertained to be Mrs. Portal. She was carrying on a desultory conversation with the man, and they continued it as he stood feeling in his pockets for money for the *boy*.

"Why don't you flirt with her yourself, Billy—Bill?" said she. "You would be good for her and she wouldn't do you any harm!"

He was a heavily-built, sullenly-handsome man, who looked as though he had never said a good-tempered thing in his life.

Poppy was astounded when he blithely answered:

"Darling, when there is only one woman in a man's life, he can't convincingly imply to the woman he is with that she is the only one in the world——"

Mrs. Portal fell to laughing.

"Billy, you fraud! You know you always carry along on top-ropes when I'm not there."

"Not with Mary," the man asseverated. "Mary would want too much of a deuce of a lot of convincing. She would smell a rat."

"Don't be subtle, Billy," cried Mrs. Portal, laughing and going in at the gates.

The other rickshaw drew near, and "Billy" waited to receive it. As it passed Poppy, two scraps of conversation floated to her. [163]

"I've a great mind to persuade Nick to go with you—and to take me too," said the woman, laughing a little.

"Yes, why don't you? 'Better a bright companion on a weary way, than a horse-litter,' you know. But it would be too rough a journey for you, I'm afraid."

The man's voice sent all the blood in Poppy's body rustling to her ears. She burnt and glowed at the thought of his nearness. *Now* she knew that it was Destiny who had walked with her. Now she knew that peace would never be hers so long as this man's feet trod the earth.

The rickshaw appeared to be filled with something resembling yellow foam—billows and billows of it fell everywhere, even upon the shafts and the folded hood behind. The moment the bearer stood still, the man called Billy came forward and put out his hand to the woman in the rickshaw, and she regally descended. The watching girl, through eyes dim with jealous pain and anger, seeking nothing but the dark face that came after, still saw that the woman was very beautiful and recognised in her the heroine of her childhood's days. It was, indeed, Mrs. Nick Capron!

She also was cloakless, with magnificent bare arms and shoulders gleaming white above the rippling waves of yellow chiffon. Her hair rippled and waved too, and shone in masses on her head, and diamonds twinkled in it. She seemed almost too bright a vision for the naked eye.

"And what did you think of *that* for a play?" asked the sullen-faced one as he opened the gate.

"Enchanting," said she vivaciously. "So full of introspection and retrospection, and all that, and ——"

"Yes, and mighty little circumspection," was the ready answer, and they passed in, laughing.

The last man, moving with casual deliberation, came slowly to the side-walk, and stood there speaking to the bearer, a powerful Zulu, as he paid him, asking if he had found the pull uphill too [164]
hard. The *boy* laughed in response and shook his winged arms boastfully, saying:

"*Icona.*"

Afterwards both rickshaws jingled away. The man should have followed the others in, but he stood still. He stood still, with a yellow chiffon wrap flung over his arm, and distinctly snuffed the air.

"Poppies!" he muttered. "What makes me think of poppies?... God! I could almost dream that dream again...."

For an instant his brilliant moody eyes stared straight into the black shadows where Poppy

stood, watching him with both hands on her heart. Then the voices of the others called, and he turned abruptly and went in.

Poppy fled home to dark, sad dreams.

CHAPTER IX

[165]

ONE blue-eyed morning, about a month after Abinger's departure, Poppy was down on the sea-beach. She sat in the loose sand, and ran her hands restlessly in and out of it, making little banks about her. She was wondering if she would be able to sleep if she came out and lay in these cool white sands some night. She was so tired of never sleeping.

The sun had not risen, but there was a pale primrose dado painted across the East.

Presently the girl became aware of another woman sauntering along close to the edge of the sea. She was digging a walking-stick in the sand every few yards and watching the hole fill with water afterwards. She carried the tail of her white-linen skirt under her chin, and her feet all wetted by the little incoming waves, had caught the pale light and seemed shod with silver as she walked, singing a little French song:

"Le monde est méchant, ma petite,
Avec son sourire moqueur:
Il dit qu'à ton côté palpite
Une montre en place du cœur."

When she came opposite Poppy she left off singing and stood for a minute looking at her. Then came slowly sauntering up the beach to where she sat. Poppy recognised Mrs. Portal. Mrs. Portal recognised the Burne-Jones eyes; but she wondered where the gladness of living was all gone.

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"You look like a pale, sea-eyed mermaid, forsaken by your lover," she said. "Why aren't you combing your hair with a golden comb?"

"What is the use, if my lover is gone?" said Poppy, with a smile.

"Oh! if you did it a new way he might come back," laughed Mrs. Portal, and sat down by her side. "I thought I was the only sun-worshipper in Durban," she remarked, as one continuing an ordinary conversation with an old friend. "I have felt rather superior about it, and as lonely as a genius."

"I am often down here in the morning," said Poppy, "but it must be lovely at night, too. I was thinking that I should come and sleep here one night when it is moonlight."

"*Never* sleep under the moon," said Mrs. Portal darkly, "or an awful thing will happen to you—your face will be all pulled out of drawing."

Poppy unconsciously put up one hand and felt her face. But Mrs. Portal burst out laughing. "You have done it already? Well, she must like you, for she hasn't done you any harm."

"I like *her*," said Poppy.

"And well you may. She's the only woman who knows everything about one and yet doesn't give one away." Mrs. Portal plugged her stick deep in the sand and made a support for her back. She then clasped herself about the knees and continued her remarks:

"Yes ... she knows too much ... but she keeps on smiling. I suppose it's because the old pagan is so used to sinners.

"'There's not a day: the longest—not the 21st of June—
Sees so much mischief in a wicked way
On which three single hours of moonshine smile——'"

"And yet she looks so modest all the while!" Poppy finished.

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Mrs. Portal reproved her.

"I consider you too young and good looking to read Byron."

"Do you think he wrote for the old and ugly?" laughed Poppy. "And how came you to read him?"

"What! The retort flattering! *You're* no Durbanite. *You* don't grow in the cabbage garden. Ohé! I can say what I will to you. Ding-Dong!"

Her little, high-bred face was neither too sunny nor too sad, but had a dash of both sunshine and sorrow about the eyes and lips. She screwed it up in a way she had, and began to sing her little French song again:

"Le monde est méchant, ma petite:
Il dit que tes yeux vifs sont morts,
Et se meuvent dans leur orbite
A temps égaux et par ressorts."

The odour of happiness which Bramham had spoken of began to make itself felt. Little fronds and scents of it caught hold of Poppy and enfolded her. Looking at the face beside her she saw in it no signs of any mean content with life. There were fine cobwebby lines around the eyes and mouth, and a deep one between the brows, and Poppy wished that they were upon her face, too, for they were beautiful. Yet they could only have come through suffering, for Mrs. Portal was not old.

"She has had sorrows, too—but not shameful ones. She wears them like jewels," thought the girl.

The woman beside her had indeed greater gifts than mere beauty. She had seven red lights in her hair, which was always extraordinarily tumbled without being untidy; a heart of gold; and a tongue of silver.

Many men loved her, as fine men cannot help loving what is lovable and sweet, and gentle, and kind, and brave, and gay, and wise.

Even women loved her; and so the worst thing they could find to say of her was that she must have been quite pretty—once! [168]

In return, she loved all men, and was kind to all women, loving one steadfastly.

But now, half in pity, half for some reason she could not fathom, she found a place in her heart for Poppy Destin, too. She was touched by the girl's beauty, on which her seeing eyes saw the shadow of tragedy.

"*Quite* a child!" was her thought. "Too young to have so much to hide behind those lovely eyes!" A line from Pater's monograph on *Monna Lisa* came into her mind:

> "Hers are the eyes that have looked on all the world; and the eyelids are a little weary."

She put out her hand to Poppy. If Poppy had eyes like *Monna Lisa*, she herself had the hands of that Mother of all saints and sinners—only a little browner.

"I would like to be your friend," she said quietly.

Poppy flushed, and then became pale. The hand Mrs. Portal touched stiffened a little, and the lilac eyes looked away at the sea rather than meet the kindness of the other's glance—but they were dim with tears. Mrs. Portal's warm, Irish heart felt a chill. She was a little sore too, for her friendship was more often sought than proffered, and never before had she known a repulse. She could not know that the girl before her felt honoured as never in her life before, and was filled with gratitude and affection. But Clementine Portal was a creature full of intuition and understanding. Possibly some of the girl's feeling subtly communicated itself to her, for she became aware that the rebuff did not come of rudeness or indifference—or coldness of heart; but of some other strange feeling.

"Is it possible that she's afraid of me?" she thought at last. "Poor child! doesn't she know an enemy from a friend? It must be that she has found all women her enemies!" [169]

They had been saying little ordinary things to one another in the meantime, while they gazed before them to where the risen sun was transforming the curved, purple waves into a sheet of dazzling copper.

Presently Clementine got up from the sands, very reluctantly.

"I must go home to breakfast, or my household will be searching for me," she said, with a mournful smile, shaking her skirt into shape. "Heaven meant me to roam the deserts and run in the woods; but Fate laid upon me the burden of respectability and planted me in the cabbage garden. I must run and catch a tram-car!"

Poppy laughed at her; but her laugh ended on a queer note.

"Being a wild ass of the desert has its drawbacks, too!" said she, with something of bitterness.

Clementine put out her hand and touched the girl's. "Well, don't be a wild ass any more. Come and see me. I hold agricultural shows on the first and last Fridays of the month, and you will find the best kinds of turnips and cabbages in my drawing-room. But if you seek me in love and charity as a friend *should*, come on Sundays. You never told me your name, yet, mermaid!"

Poppy held the brown, thin hand and answered firmly:

"Rosalind Chard."

But afterwards, when the other had gone a little way, she ran after her and caught her up and said:

"But I wish you would call me 'Poppy.'"

Nevertheless, it was not until a month later that she visited Mrs. Portal. Strongly attracted by

the kind, gay ways and looks of that fascinating woman, she yet feared to know her better. And she feared, too, that in the house of Mrs. Portal she might meet the man whom she knew not whether most she loved, or feared, or hated; for whose sake she gashed herself with the knives of defeat and despair. She knew that he belonged to Mrs. Portal's circle of friends, and she had heard from Sophie Cornell that the chief of these was Mrs. Capron. *Mrs. Capron!* That was the name in which he had bidden her good=bye, speaking in his drunkenness or delirium, she knew not which. Mrs. Capron, the splendid, milky creature, who had been with him in the rickshaw, and whom Poppy had so clearly recognised! Would *she*, too, recognise Poppy? The girl was not so certain now of the improbability of such a thing, for of late it seemed to her that she had begun to present a singular resemblance to herself as she had looked in those unhappy, far-off days. The strain of suffering had told upon her terribly, and her face was tragically drawn, with a sharp, childish look of suffering about her mouth, and soft, though not unlovely hollows, in her cheeks. Her eyes looked larger and more unreal for the shadows beneath them. [170]

The day she decided to go to Mrs. Portal's found her examining herself in her glass with apprehensive eyes, keen for every defect. She was a woman now, examining her weapons for battle, and her courage misgave her as she saw her reflection. She had put on a white gown that was all simple lines and soft laces, and she really looked very young and girlish, but she hated her appearance when she thought of those two charming-looking women of the world with their eloquent clothes. What if she should meet *him* there and he should compare her with them? What if either the thin, vivacious, sunburnt woman, whom she herself could hardly help loving—or the regal-milky-woman of yellow chiffon should be that *Loraine* whom he so loved? [171]

"With either of them what chance should I stand?" she asked herself, desperate-eyed. "Why have I got these vile, purple shadows?—and holes in my cheeks? I never had them before!" She burst into tears, and at this juncture Kykie thought fit to make her entrance unannounced with her everlasting tea-tray.

"Now, Poppy, to goodness! what you ought to do is to take off that tight frock and put on a nice cool gown and rest," said the beldame importantly.

"You're mad, Kykie—and I wish you wouldn't come into my room without knocking." Poppy made occasion to fling a towel over her hat and gloves which lay on the bed, and which it was not desirable Kykie should see.

"Ah! you needn't mind old Kykie, darling," was the response; and Poppy, unused to such blandishments, stared at the yellow face which continued to waggle archly at her.

"What will Luce say when he comes back, if I haven't taken care of you?"

The girl suddenly sickened at her tone.

"How dare she speak to me like that!" was her furious thought. "As if Luce has any right over me or my health!" She could have struck the leering smile from the woman's face; she turned away trembling with anger to her dressing-table.

"So you knew all the time about Luce and me being married?" she said in a toneless voice, when she had presently mastered herself.

"Heavenly me! yes, and I knew it would all work out and come right in the end. But I think you ought to wear your wedding-ring now, Poppy.... All right, all right, you needn't look at me like a *mal-meit*!... I'm going now ... I wouldn't stop with you another minute when you look like that ... you and Luce are a nice pair for temper ... surely to goodness one would think all would be peace and love *now*—" The door was closed and locked on her and she was obliged to continue her soliloquy on the stairs. [172]

An hour later found Poppy letting herself in at the double white gates of Mrs. Portal's garden. It was neither the first nor last Friday in the month, nor yet Sunday afternoon; but she had not come for society. She came because she must; because of her bitter need of some word concerning the man she loved.

The house was a big, red-brick villa, with many verandahs and no pretentious, except to comfort. An English maid, in a French cap and apron, showed her into a drawing-room that was full of the scent of flowers, with open windows and drawn shades. Almost immediately Mrs. Portal blew into the room like a fresh wind, seized her hands, and shook them warmly.

"I knew you would come to-day," she said. "I dreamed of you last night. Poppy, I have a feeling that you and I are going to be mixed up in each other's lives somehow."

A creature of moods and impulses herself, Poppy thoroughly understood this greeting, and it warmed her sad and lonely spirit gratefully; she let herself be beguiled to the fireside of Clementine Portal's friendship. Before she realised it, they were seated together in a deep lounge just big enough for two people, and a pile of cushions with cool, dull-toned surfaces, talking like friends of long standing. Mrs. Portal was quite in the dark as to who the girl was, but that did not bother her at all, and her remarks contained no shadow of a question. It was enough that she "had a feeling about her," and had dreamed of her and believed in her.

To ordinary persons these might not seem very cogent reasons; but Clementine Portal was in no sense ordinary. Her judgment concerning things in general, and women in particular, was both keen and sound; but she never allowed it to interfere with her inspirations, which she considered far safer. Apparently intensely practical and conventional, she was, in reality, a woman who lived the most important part of her life in a hidden world. She had the seeing-eye and the hearing-ear for things that went unnoted by the every-day man and woman. Being Irish, [173]

she was packed full of superstition, but, fortunately, a strong vein of common sense counterbalanced it. As for her humour, that most fatal gift in a woman, it sometimes resembled a fine blue flame, that scorched everything in reach; and sometimes, to the consternation of the conventional, was the rollicking wit of a fat and jolly Irish priest addicted to the punch-bowl. She had a wonderful way of attracting confidences from people about the things they most cared for in life. In a little while Poppy had told her what she had never told to a living soul before—about her little book of songs—and her great ambitions as a writer. For some unknown reason the girl felt these ambitions very much alive in her that afternoon. Clementine Portal sat like a creature entranced, with her lips slightly apart. When Poppy had given her, upon urgent requesting—a halting, eloquent outline of her novel, Clem said:

"I *know* it will be good.... I can feel that it will have big bits of open space like the veldt in it, with new sorts of trees growing by the wayside as one passes along.... I hate the modern woman's book, because it always makes me gasp for air. It is too full of the fire that burns up all there is in life."

"You would write far better than I, probably," said the girl. "I know so little of life—only what I feel. You know everything——"

"Dear girl, you are better as you are. When you know everything, you will have discovered that the world is full of sawdust, and the people stuffed with shavings, and no one worth writing about [174]
—then, where will your fine books be?"

"Have you ever thought of writing?"

"Often," she began to laugh. "And when I discover a real good man in the world I shall burst into glory in a novel. But no such man exists. He died when the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair. Here is tea. We'll drown my pessimism in the cream-bowl, shall we?"

She went to the tea-table. The maid drew up the window-shades, letting the lovely rose-lights of late afternoon into the room. It was a real woman's room, full of flowers and photographs, and cushions, and piles of magazines and weeklies everywhere. There were no wonderful pictures on the walls, or valuable china in cases. Only a few well-arranged native curios, a good piano, and the kind of things people from home gather about them when they are sojourning in a foreign land. As Poppy followed to the tea-table, her eye caught a full-length photograph on the wall over the writing-desk, and she stayed a moment to look. It was a woman in her presentation gown—two long, lovely eyes smiled contentedly on the world. Underneath, in a woman's writing, were the words: "To Clem, from Mary."

It was the regal-milky-woman—Mrs. Capron. Mrs. Portal turned round from her tea-cups.

"Ah! everyone looks at that photograph! She is very beautiful. The remarkable thing is that she is good, too. That *is* remarkable, isn't it? I'm sure if I had a face like that I should go to my own head and be a perfect divil."

"Who is she?" asked Poppy, still before the smiling picture.

"My friend, Mrs. Capron."

"Is that her name written there?" [175]

"Yes, hers and mine. She is my dearest friend, and so she is allowed to call me Clem; you may, too, if you like."

Poppy came, thanking her, and sat by the tea-table. She felt suddenly happier, for now she could follow the dictates of her heart and love this woman—whose name was *Clem*.

As they took tea the door opened gently and a little figure stole into the room straight to her mother's knee.

"I like you, and love you," said she solemnly.

"Hyacinth, what have you been doing?" Mrs. Portal asked anxiously.

It was easy to see that they were mother and child, for they had the same golden-brown eyes, full of dots and dashes and shadows, and the same grave-gay mouths. There, however, all resemblance ceased. The child's physique consisted of a head covered with long, streaky brown hair, and a pair of copper-coloured legs which apparently began under her chin.

"I love and like you," she repeated glibly.

"Then I know you have been doing something very wicked, Cinthie. You always have when you like and love me."

"*Pas!*" said Cinthie, now gazing calmly at Poppy.

"I shall go and find out," said Mrs. Portal. "I have to go, anyway, to speak to cook about dinner; do forgive me for five minutes, dear; Cinthie will look after you. Cinthie, I hope I can trust you to be good with Miss Chard for five minutes."

The moment she was gone Cinthie made a boastful statement.

"My face is bigger than yours!"

Poppy put up her hand and felt her face carefully; then looked at Cinthie's with the air of one measuring with the eye. [176]

"Well, perhaps it is!" she acceded.

"It's bigger'n anyone's," continued Cinthie, even more bragfully. "Who are you married to?"

This was an awkward and surprising question, but Poppy countered.

"Why should you think I am married, Cinthie?"

"Everybody's married," was the swift response. "*I'm* married to Mammie, and Mammie's

married to Daddie, and Daddie's married to the moon, and the moon's married to the sun, and the sun's married to the sea, and the sea's married to the stars, and the stars are married to the stripes—Daddie says so. Let me sit on your lap, I'm as tired as a bed."

Poppy lifted her up, and Cinthie, lolling against the white, lacy dress, gazed for a space into the lilac eyes. She then carefully selected a long streak of her own hair and put it into her mouth, thoughtfully sucking it as she continued her remarks:

"I think you had better marry Karri," she said. "I like Karri better'n anyone, except Daddie. His face is bigger than anybody's."

"Is Karri a man, then?"

"Yes; but he's got two women's names, isn't that funny? One's Karri and the other's Eve. I'll show you his photo."

She ran to the other side of the room, grabbed a frame from a table, and brought it back triumphantly.

"There!" she cried, and dumped it into Poppy's lap.

Poppy stared down into the pictured face of the man she loved.

Mrs. Portal reappeared.

"Oh, Cinthie, I've heard all about it from Sarah, and I'm very angry with you. I knew you had been doing something specially wicked. You're a *petite méchante*."

"*Pas!*" said Cinthie stoutly. [177]

"You are. Go away, now, to the nursery. I'm very angry with you."

Cinthie retreated, bitterly reasseverating:

"*Pas! pas! Pas petite méchante! Pas!*"

Clem observed the photograph in Poppy's lap.

"She has been showing you her hero—the hero of us all. Everyone in this house genuflects before Eve Carson."

And so at last Poppy knew the name of the idol before which she, too, worshipped!

"By the way, did Cinthie mention that his face is bigger than anyone's? That is the final point of beauty with Cinthie—to have a big face. Well, Evelyn Carson's face is not so big, but his ways are, and his ideas, and those things make for bigness of soul——"

Poppy said nothing: only she prayed with all her soul that Clem would continue to talk upon this subject; and Clem, looking dreamily at the girl, but obviously not thinking of her, responded to the prayer.

"He is a wonderful person, and we all adore him, even though our judgment sometimes asks us why, and our ears sometimes hear the untoward things that are not compatible with reverence," she was smiling. "I daresay you have heard of him."

"Yes," said Poppy, in an even voice.

"Most people have, by now—he's been one of the foremost figures in South African life for years, one of the many Irishmen who have left their native land, burning with the sense of England's tyranny, only to go and strive for England's fame and glory in some other part of the world. We met him first on the Rand, where all the interesting blackguards forgather at some time or another; but he was always in trouble there, for, you know, Oom Paul doesn't approve of Imperialistic Irishmen, and invariably contrives to make anyone of the kind exceedingly uncomfortable. Karri Carson has been a marked man, watched by the Secret Service, and his [178] every action and every word reported, with the result, of course, that he has said and done many daringly foolish things, and nearly been deported over the border once or twice. Fortunately, there are more interesting places than the Rand, and there is always a rumpus going on in *some* quarter of Africa, and he has been in all the rumpuses of the last fifteen years—Uganda—Matabelel and—anywhere where there was anything in the wind and where *real men* were wanted. He's earned the V.C. a dozen times, though he's only got the D.S.O. But it is not love of honours that is his moving spirit—just an Irishman's lust for being in the "redmost hell of the fight." Between intervals of active service he has gone off into the wild deeps of Africa, where no one has ever been before—discovered a new quadruped and a new tribe of natives. The Royal Institute is *dying* to trim him up with blue ribbons and exhibit him in London, but Africa has kissed him on the mouth, and he will not leave her." Clem drew a long breath. "I can't think what we shall all do now that he is gone," she finished sadly.

"Gone!" Poppy wondered what kept her voice so calm while her soul cried out within her.

"Yes, gone away to Borapota: a little red-hot spot in the red-hot heart of Africa. It is very conveniently situated for us—not too far from our lovely Mombassa harbour—and it is very rich and fertile, and in every way desirable, and the Imperial Unionists think we ought to own it, and the Liberal Little Englanders think we ought to get it—without spilling a drop of blood or saying a single bad word to anybody. And Evelyn Carson has gone to get it for us *sans* Maxims and *sans* men and *sans* anything much besides a high heart and a squad of *boys* who have been everywhere with him. He has gone on a *peaceful expedition* into the midst of one of the fiercest tribes in Africa to barter or bargain for Concessions that will eventually extend the Empire by [179] sixty thousand square miles, and add a country crammed with coal and iron and ivory and a dozen other lovely things to the pink part of the map. And he has gone without even *official* permission, so that if he succeeds—why, hurrah! for the Union Jack and everything under it! And if he fails—only another reputation buried in an African grave! No one will care a rap, and everyone will forget him except the people who love him. The only thing I care to think of in the

matter is, that the Borapotans are said to be extremely intelligent and reasonable men, who will make splendid soldiers—and then everyone knows what a way Evelyn Carson has with all natives! The Zulus and the Basutos, and all the war-loving tribes, simply adore him! Still, there's no denying the fact that he's gone with his life in his hand. Even if the natives prove to be sweet and reasonable, there are half a dozen other deaths lurking in every mile of the Interior."

"Has no other white man gone with him?" Poppy heard herself asking.

"No one except his *boys* will go with him once he starts on the unbeaten track—but our friends the Caprons have sailed with him as far as Mombassa, and Mrs. Capron declares they will accompany him inland, too, until he drives them back. Of course, he's sure to do that before they reach the danger zone—but isn't it intrepid of her?"

Poppy did not know what she answered. Darkness engulfed her spirit, almost her senses.

"They started about a month ago, and I am terribly lonely without them all. Mrs. Capron and her husband will be back within three months, I expect, but we feel—*everybody* who knows—very anxious about Eve Carson, more especially because he is very susceptible to malarial fever. He had a frightful attack about six weeks before he left; he was found raving in a rickshaw one night, [180] and for nearly a fortnight afterwards was practically delirious. However, no sooner was he out of danger than he took up his preparations again, and in spite of the doctors, he sailed on the date he had originally fixed."... Mrs. Portal looked extremely mournful, but presently she added: "We are so thankful to think that Mrs. Capron will be with him for a while, because her husband has often had fever, and she thoroughly understands it."

"I must go home," said Poppy suddenly; and Clementine, roused from her reverie by the strangely sounding voice, stared at the girl.

"You look quite ill, dear," she said gently. "I am so sorry; I have been wandering on, about all the things that interest *me*!... Will you lie down a little while? or shall I ring for some wine?"

"No, no, I must go home ... it is nothing ... I feel odd sometimes ..." she spoke vaguely, but she stood up, arranging her veil and pulling on her gloves. Clem came with her through the garden, and they stood for a moment with the low double gate between them, bidding each other good-bye. Mrs. Portal kissed her and told her to come again soon, but the girl answered nothing. Suddenly a visionary look passed like a veil across Clementine Portal's face.

"Poppy," she said in a dreamy, yet intent way; "there will be deep waters around you soon! ... you will need courage, resolution, *and* silence ... those are a woman's greatest friends in this world ... but, in so far as one human being can count on another—count on me, too, for a friend."

Already the swirl of the waters was in Poppy's ears, but the kind, brave message came to her like a friendly oar in the dark sea of trouble. For a moment she clung to the older woman's hand like a child afraid; then they parted. Poppy walked away through the vapoury, delicate light shed [181] by a slender fragment of moon, and Clem Portal stayed staring abstractedly over the gate. It was three years before they met again.

CHAPTER X

[182]

POPPY lay upon her bed like a drowned woman. She had come in almost fainting, and Kykie, meeting her on the stairs and seeing her face, had flown after her to her bedroom with water and brandy. The old woman had taken the girl in her arms bodily, and placing her on the bed, proceeded to drench her face and hair with ice-cold water and eau-de-Cologne, and to force doses of brandy between the white lips.

At last, reviving somewhat under this vigorous treatment, Poppy found breath and sense to remonstrate:

"What do you mean, Kykie? Do you want to choke me? Stop that ... I'm nearly drowned."

"You were drownded enough before you came in," responded Kykie with asperity; "your dress is soaking. Where have you been?"

Poppy had been lying in the dew-drenched grass of the garden for some two hours or more after her return from Mrs. Portal's, but she was not conscious of the fact.

"... And, Luce coming home without warning, and you not in to dinner, and everything in the world to aggravate a gracious Christian woman!" continued Kykie, panting like a stout sheep.

"Luce? Dinner?" said Poppy vaguely. "What is the time, Kykie?"

"I think you're going cracked," said Kykie with fresh ire, "not to know the time! Half-past nine it is, indeed, and me not in bed yet, when you *know* what I suffer if I don't get my night's rest. You [183] and Luce simply haven't the consideration of a *cow* for me."

"Oh, go to bed!" said Poppy wearily.

"I'll do nothing of the sort, thank you, extremingly. I will not go to my bed until you have eaten some dinner. Do you think I want all the trouble of a funeral in the house? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Poppy, not taking any care of yourself, knowing what you do——"

The old woman paused with some significant intention, but Poppy only waved a pale hand in her direction.

"Go away and hold your peace, Kykie, for the love of Heaven!"

"I'll only go away to get you some food ... and you're to eat it, Poppy dear," she began to coax. "I'll bring you some nice hot soup, lovey, and a little chicken mayonnaise, and you *will* try and eat it, won't you? and a little glass of champagne."

"I couldn't Kykie ... only leave me alone...."

The old woman promptly seated herself upon the side of the bed with the air of an immovable rock.

"Well.... Oh, all right, then ... *anything* ... why can't you leave me alone?"

Kykie did; but she took the precaution of removing the bedroom door-key and taking it with her, for she knew her mistress's ways well. In a few moments she was back again, with half a pint of champagne and a little pile of caviare sandwiches, which she warranted to put life into a corpse if she could only force them down its throat. She almost proceeded to this extreme measure with Poppy, threatening, cajoling, and complaining all the while.

Eventually she took her departure with an empty plate and glass, and as she went she threw back a last menacing remark to the bed.

"And *I shall stay up to speak to Luce* when he returns from the Club." What she could mean by this Poppy neither knew nor cared. Revived a little by the wine and food, but with a body and [184] mind demanding rest, she closed her eyes and fell into dead slumber.

When the candles which Kykie had lighted in the tall silver sticks on the dressing-table had burnt far down from their scarlet shades, Poppy awakened to the fact that someone was moving about her bedroom. She opened her eyes, but did not stir or make a sound.

A man was standing by her writing-table humming softly to himself while he took up each little ornament and article upon it, and gently broke it between his hands. There were several paper-knives of wood and silver and tortoise-shell; quaint pens, and two gold-set rose-glasses. He broke them all gently between his hands, and the snapping of them was like the snapping of little bones. He then tore up some photographs, and a black-and-white etching of the Bay of Naples, and piled the pieces into two little heaps. As he walked away from the writing-table towards the lighted dressing-table, the candles gleamed on his profile, and Poppy saw that it was, as she supposed, the profile of Luce Abinger. He was humming between his teeth, a little tune—an odd noise resembling much the sort of monotonous hum made by black fighting ants when they go out seeking battle with other ant tribes.

Something resembling panic stole over the girl as she listened, and once she saw his distorted mouth smiling terribly, and could have cried aloud, but she controlled herself and continued to lie still with half-closed eyes, watching his strange proceedings. From the dressing-table he took up her two beautiful ivory brushes with her name written in silver across their backs, and bending them in his hands, snapped off their handles, laying the broken bits down. Then carefully and methodically he broke every one of the silver articles on the table. The sound of them snapping [185] seemed to give him acute pleasure. Even two tall vases of silver and cut-glass were not too strong for his skilful hands; nor was a little porcelain trinket-tray, with a scene from the *Tokaido* inlaid upon it (for which he had paid thirty pounds at Yokohama), spared.

A handful of rings and bracelets, which Kykie had removed from her fainting mistress and placed in a little heap upon the table, he dropped upon the floor and ground his heel upon.

With no look towards the bed where Poppy lay, he left the table then, and sauntered to the walls, from which he stripped the wonderful chalk drawings and flung them in ribbons to the floor. His eye caught the silver and ivory crucifix.

"Ah, Christ! I had forgotten you," said he, speaking for the first time, in a soft and pleased tone, and picking up a boot-tree left carelessly by a chair he approached, and struck a ringing blow upon the beautiful ivory face, shattering it. Again and again he struck until it lay in a hundred tiny splinters on the ground. Poppy's eye had sought the door and found it closed; the lock gleamed and there was no key to be seen. She came to the conclusion that she was locked in with a man who had gone mad. The house was absolutely silent.

"If he chooses to kill me, he can; no one will hear my calls," she thought, and she continued to lie very still.

In smashing the crucifix Abinger had for the first time made a noise louder than the gentle cracking and crunching of bones; but he had now awakened to the charm of breaking things with a crash. He beat the boot-tree full into the smiling face of *Monna Lisa*.

"Stop smiling, you leaden-jawed Jewess," he said softly.

The glass flew in jingling showers in every direction, but the strong, quiet face remained on the [186] wall in its frame; and though the mouth was full of splintered glass, the eyes smiled gravely on—the eyes of a woman who had seen many such violent scenes come and go.

There was a tiny bronze bust of Daniel O'Connell, standing on a little cedar-wood shelf, which Abinger caught up and flung with a calm, sure aim at the long gilt-edged mirror, making a great white radiating asterisk full in the centre of it.

All vases and flower-bowls he took from their places and dropped upon the floor. The sound of

their breaking was not unmusical.

He still continued to hum. At last there was nothing left to destroy except the books arranged in their shelves round the room. A few he pulled from their cases and tore them across, but the sound of their tearing was tame and had no charm for him after so much exciting noise. Leisurely he left them at last and came to the foot of the bed and stood looking down upon the girl lying there. She met his eyes with a calm and quiet glance, though the soul within her was apprehensive enough.

The smile on his mouth was like the carved smile on the mouth of some hideous Japanese mask, and his eyes resembled the eyes of a gargoyle. He was in full evening-dress and very immaculate, and his fair hair lay as smooth and sleek upon his head as a sleeping child's.

"Awake?" he asked, with continual and unfailing pleasantness.

"You hardly expected me to have remained asleep?" asked Poppy equably. She saw very well now that he had not lost his reason. His eyes were not an insane man's eyes, though they were lit by some frightful emotion, and he was plainly in the grip of one of his extraordinary rages: the worst she had ever witnessed. It did not occur to her that she could in any way be the cause of his anger, and she felt wearily indignant that it should be obtruded upon her at this time. She did [187] not mind much about all her beautiful things with which he had made such holocaust, though her possessions had always had for her that pathetic value and meaning which the lonely attach to inanimate things. But her whole life was *bouleversé* now, and she understood that such things mattered little.

Abinger was looking at her with a tinge of something that might have been expectancy in his fury. Was he waiting for her to demand what he meant by this unprecedented outrage on her privacy? Ill and careless of life as she felt, she still had strength to rebel against this new form of tyranny, and to meet it with courage and disdain. It seemed to her that it would be more insolent not to ask him what he meant, but to simply take such vile and brutal conduct as a matter of course. So she stared back calmly at him from her pillows, not knowing what a strange picture she presented, lying there. Her arms wide from her, revealing the long, curved line of her boyish young form; her subtle face, pale, with strong ivory tints in it against the whiteness of the pillows, the blue scornful light of her eyes, and her drowned black hair lying like gorgon ropes about her. Passion-racked and pale as Magdalene, she was a sight to kindle the fires of pity and chivalry in any good man; but the lust of Luce Abinger's eyes was for the grace and bloom and beauty of her, that even misery and fatigue could not rub out, and these things kindled his blood to such a fury of savagery and desire that he scarce knew what he did. With one quick movement he had left the foot of the bed and was sitting beside her with an iron hand on each of hers. So she lay there, like a pinioned bird, with his tormented face above her.

"Harlot!" he whispered, still smiling; and the word leapt from his lips like a shrivelling flame and scorched across her face. [188]

"Harlot!" he repeated softly. "Tell me the name of your lover!"

That bleached her. Disdain departed from her looks and she lay there quivering under his hands; her dry lips parted, but her tongue was stiff in her mouth. The blow was so utterly and profoundly unexpected. What did he mean? What could he mean? How could he know of that secret idol in that secret grove of her heart, before whose altar she had slain her girlhood—and his honour? How could he know of that sweet shameful secret that she shared with a mad or drunken man—but mad or drunk, the man she loved? Had she not buried the secret deep and sworn that no one should ever drag it from the depths of her? Was it possible that she had not buried it deep enough? Was it written across her face for all the world to see? She searched the scorching eyes above her and then at last she was afraid; her own fell and the lids closed over them.

Vile epithets fell again and again from his lips, and under each her face blenched and shrank as though little flickering flames or drops of corrosive acid had touched it; but her eyes were sealed and her lips gave forth no word.

At last it ended strangely. Weariness seemed suddenly to overcome Abinger, for his grasp grew loose on the girl's hands, his tense features relaxed, a bluish shade stole over his face.

Presently he stumbled to his feet, and, walking unevenly and vaguely, made his way from the room.

In a moment Poppy Destin had leapt from the bed to the door and locked it soundlessly.

Sophie Cornell was saying good-night to a visitor. "Well," said he. "Tell Miss Chard how sorry I am. As soon as she feels well enough, I shall send up my carriage, and I'd like her to use it and [189] get some fresh air."

"Och, what, she won't be well enough for that some time yet," was Miss Cornell's answer. "She is very dickie indeed. I shouldn't be surprised if she croaked."

Bramham gave her a searching look.

"Well, look here; she ought to have a good doctor in. I'll ask Ferrand to call. He's my doctor, and the best I know——"

"Oh, don't do that?" said Sophie hastily; "we've called a doctor in already, you know."

"Who have you got?"

"I must go—I can hear her calling," said Sophie suddenly. "Good-night."

Incontinently she disappeared, the door closed, and Bramham was left to pick his way through the dark garden as best he might.

After the sound of his steps had died away a figure stole from among the trees to the verandah, softly opened the front door and walked in upon Miss Cornell, who was in the act of mixing herself a whiskey-and-soda. The drink spilled upon the table and Sophie's mouth fell apart.

"My God, Rosalind! What a *shrik*[5] you gave me! *Man!* What's the matter with you?" At the end of her question her voice fell into a whisper. She stared with genuine horror at the wraith-like face before her: Rosalind Chard, with dilated eyes in an ashen face, drenched hair, a white lace gown wet and torn, hatless and shoeless.

[5] Start (fright).

"*Gott!* Rosalind!" repeated the Colonial girl. "Has someone been trying to murder you?"

"Yes," said the other tonelessly. "And I've come here for safety. Will you take me in, Sophie?"

"Of course. But who was it? A man, I'll bet—or has your old aunt gone up the tree?" [190]

"Don't ask me anything, Sophie. I shall go mad if I have to talk. Only, hide me and never let anyone know I'm here, or I shall kill myself." The girl fell exhausted into a chair and Sophie stood staring at her with a long face. It would not suit her book at all, she reflected, if Rosalind Chard wanted to be shut up and never see anyone. However, she saw that this was no time to argue the point, and that her present pressing business was to get the exhausted girl to bed.

This she proceeded to do.

CHAPTER XI [191]

THE person largely instrumental in bringing Poppy back to health and a remote interest in life was Charles Bramham.

One day Sophie Cornell met him in West Street and asked him to come and call.

"I have Rosalind up at last," she told him; "but she looks like a dying duck, and I believe she *will* die if someone doesn't buck her up. It would be a *real* charity if you would come and talk to her."

Bramham, though an exceedingly busy man, accepted the invitation with vivacity, for he was much *intrigué* on the subject of Miss Chard, and, further, he had not forgotten the romantic and piquant sensations she had inspired in him upon the occasion of their one meeting. Now, piquant and romantic sensations are very valuable in South Africa, and should always be followed up in case of life becoming too monotonously saltless and savourless. Bramham swiftly found a spare hour and arrived one afternoon in Sophie's absence.

He was utterly taken aback by the change in the girl. He came upon her suddenly, sitting in the verandah with her hands laced round her knees and her eyes staring straight in front of her with a look in them that was not good to see.

"Why! *you* ought to be away up in the country somewhere, out of this sweltering heat," was his first remark after ordinary conventionalities. She observed him coldly and assured him that she [192] was perfectly well. Her invitation to come into the verandah and take a chair was polite, but lacking in enthusiasm. But it was hard to daunt Charles Bramham when he was looking for sensations. Besides which, he felt a genuine and chivalrous interest in this desperate-eyed girl.

"This climate is only meant for flies and Kaffirs," he said pleasantly. "It's quite unfit for white men in summer—to say nothing of a delicate English girl unaccustomed to it."

A smile flickered across Poppy's lips at this description of herself, and Bramham, encouraged by his success, went on to tell her about just the ideal spot for her to recover her health.

"At the Intombi, near Port Shepstone," he said, "you can stand on hills that undulate to the sea five hundred feet below, with the whole veldt between brilliant with flowers."

Poppy looked with surprise into the keen, strong face. She believed Bramham must be a lawyer, because he had such a scrutinising, business-like look about him. But to her astonishment he went on to tell her of a valley where arum-lilies grew in such masses that they looked like miles of snowdrifts lying on the grass.

"All along the south coast," he continued, warming to his subject, "there are thousands of acres covered with flowers—red and variegated and white. I think the white ones are mostly wild narcissi. The smell of the sea wind blowing over them is warranted to cure the sickest body or soul in South Africa. I wish I were there now," he added wistfully, and the pupils of his eyes expanded in an odd way.

"But you are not sick," said Poppy, smiling less wanly.

"No, but when all the flowers are in full bloom the quail come down," was the artless rejoinder. "Not that *that* will be for a long time yet; September is the time. But I like that place." [193]

And Poppy liked him. It was really impossible to help it. She remembered now that she had experienced the same pleasure in his frank, kind glances and direct remarks the first time she

had met him. Certainly there were dangers about him. Undoubtedly he could be a villain too, if one allowed him to be, she thought; but there is something attractive about a man who can forget he is talking to a woman and remember acres of flowers instead—and get that boyish look into his eyes at the same time! She was not the first woman, however, who had felt the charm of Charles Bramham. When he had finished with Upper Natal, he fell to telling her of a woman, a *great* friend of his, who had once lived in Durban, until the women drove her out saying that she was mad and bad.

"Certainly her face was all marked up," said Bramham gravely. "She said her temperament did it; but *they* said it was wickedness. So she went away and wrote a book about them. She let some of them down on a soft cushion, but others she hung up by their heels and they're hanging there yet—food for the aasvogels."

"She must be very clever," said Poppy drily.

"She is. She's a *bird*," said Bramham with enthusiasm. "When her book came out everybody here black-guarded her, and said it showed what an immoral wretch she was to know such things about men and women." He gave Poppy a side-glance to see if he should add something else that was hot on his tongue, but he decided that she was too innocent-eyed.

"All the same, we all sneaked off to Piet Davis's and looked at the Bibles whilst we shoved bits of paper across the counter: 'Please send me two copies of *Diana Amongst the Wesleyans* at once; wrap each in the *Sunday at Home* and despatch to my office.'" [194]

Poppy gave a little ringing laugh and asked eagerly:

"Is she here now?"

"Lord no! I wish she were. She has settled in France, where, she says, they understand temperament better than out here, and I believe it. Last night I went to a dinner-party—a thing I never do, and it served me right—and a woman opposite started tackling me about her; said she had seen Mrs. Haybittel in Paris, and that she was older-looking than ever."

"'Yes, so am I,' said I, 'but I am also more in love with her than ever.' At which she giggled, and they all turned up their mirthless eyes at me. That woman is an old enemy of mine, and she always trains her guns on me whenever she can get an audience. She's a Mrs. Gruyère, and if ever you meet her, beware!"

"'I thought the ideal woman was always young,' she snippered at me.

"'Not at all,' I said. 'She may be old, but not *too* old. She may be ugly, but not *too* ugly. She may be bad, but not *too* bad. It is a pity you didn't find someone to tell you about this before,' I finished. That gave her something to bite on with her celluloid teeth."

Bramham amused Poppy in this fashion for something like two hours, and then, having given himself an invitation to call again shortly, he left her with laughter on her lips and the shadows fled from her eyes. She went indoors and, her old trick, looked at herself in a mirror.

"What is the matter with me," she said wonderingly, "that I can laugh and be gay, when I know that the future is dark with fateful things."

Nevertheless, she continued to laugh, and that night, while Sophie was away at the theatre and the house was quiet, she began and finished with the winged pen of inspiration a little merry song that was all sparkling with tears, full of the shadows that lie in dark valleys, but also fresh [195] with the wind that blows across the hills lifting the shadows. Her personal troubles all forgotten in her work, she went to bed wrapped in the ecstasy of one who has achieved and knows the achievement good. But not to sleep. The lines of her poem twinkled and flashed back and forth through her brain; the metre altered itself to one, oddly, daringly original. Phrases like chords of music thrilled through her and everything she had already written seemed tame and meaningless. Lying there she re-wrote the whole thing in her brain, setting it to a swinging, swaying metre that swayed and swung her tired mind to rest at last. But in the calm light of morning she did not change her poem, for she had the artist's gift of selection and recognised inspiration when she saw it.

That day found her descended into the pit of desolation once more, with the "black butterflies" swarming overhead, shutting out the light. What was happening to her was that temperament was claiming her. The poet-artist in her that had struggled so long for the light was being born, with all the attendant pangs and terrors of deliverance, for when the body is sick and the soul torn with suffering is temperament's own time.

Intermittently she began to do fine work, but there were always the black hours afterwards when she forgot that she was an artist, and only knew the terror of being a woman. Then she suffered.

In the meantime, Sophie had her chained to the typewriter. She had begun to hate the clicking horror, but she felt an obligation to work for Sophie as hard as she was able, to pay for the food she ate and the roof over her head. She never dared to think of Abinger and whether he sought her. The secret exit in the garden wall she had skilfully hidden. Abinger would probably think that she had a double key to the front gate and had escaped that way, or else through the *boys'* compound. Certainly he would never dream of seeking for her in the house of Sophie Cornell. She [196] had rigorously bound the latter to silence as to her presence in the little bungalow, and knowing that for some reason it was exceedingly important to Sophie to have her there, she had no doubt that the Colonial girl would keep her lips sealed. To the many men-friends of the fascinating Miss Cornell, it became known that a companion and assistant mysteriously shared her house, and her work, but the astounding thing was that this mysterious person kept to her own quarters at all times, and did not care for theatres, late suppers at the Royal, or drives to Inanda! It was generally supposed that she was, in the slang of the day, either "moth-eaten," or "cracked."

At the earliest opportunity Poppy tied Charles Bramham's tongue also, by telling him frankly that she had an enemy she was afraid of and whom she feared would find her out.

Bramham had become a constant visitor whom Poppy always welcomed. His visits meant to her a time of ease from the torment of her own thoughts, a respite from evil dreams. His big, bracing individuality evoked in her a strong liking and comradeship, and she hoped he had the same feeling for her; but she was sometimes afraid of the glances of his grey eyes.

She was not long in discovering that though he was essentially a man's man, he had a great fondness for the society of women; that, indeed, he was one of those men who are lost without a woman as the central figure of existence—to work for and wind dreams around. He told her so very often, in words that were meant to be enigmatical and symbolical, no doubt, but which were really as frank and simple as the man's nature.

"Life out here is saltless and savourless—just one day's march nearer *voetsack*, unless someone takes an interest in you," was the disconsolate remark he made to her one day, with a look in his [197] eyes that was even more direct than his words.

"But you must have heaps of people who do that," Poppy answered evenly, "and you strike me essentially as being one of them yourself. I'm sure you must be, or you would not have made a success of your life."

"How do you know I'm a success?" somewhat gloomily.

"Oh, anyone can see that. You have the calm, assured look of a man whose future is secure."

"You mean I look smug and self-satisfied!"

"Nothing of the kind. When a man has any intellect to speak of, money merely expands his interests and makes him ever so much more interesting than before. Do you think Sam Johnson ever got smug-looking? even when he had three hundred a year, which was quite an income those days?"

"Are you comparing me with Johnson?" asked Bramham, grinning.

"Oh, you needn't be vain. Africa is swarming with men who are the equals of Johnson in brain, without being hampered by his principles. His endurance and fine courage are another matter entirely. I don't suppose there are many men here who have gone through what he did to reach success."

"You're mistaken there," said Bramham. "There are plenty of men out here who have beaten their way through almost insurmountable difficulties, and come out top-dog."

Poppy smiled sceptically.

"Difficulties, yes—but poverty and bitter want?

> "'Slow rises worth by poverty depressed!'

"What do South Africans know of terrible poverty? Their minds are often starved, but never their bodies, and there is always the sunshine, to clothe and warm. Even the little Kaffir children [198] have their stomachs filled with rice or mealie-meal pap and can roll in the sun and be happy. I don't suppose any of the residents of this place know the real meaning of the word poverty—you, for instance?"

"Oh, I'm not much of an instance," said Bramham carelessly. "I am a Colonial, but, as a matter of fact, I happen to have spent a great part of my youth in London. I had to leave Africa when I was ten and I thought it pretty rough luck. If you cast your eye around, you will notice that Natal seems to have been just made for boys of ten—there's the sea, and the bluff, and the bay, and the Bush. Ah, well! I don't suppose you will understand what it meant to leave all these things and go and settle in a gloomy little side street in Chelsea!"

Poppy *could* understand; but she was so much surprised that she said nothing.

"My mother was left a widow with two young sons," continued Bramham in a pleasantly narrative tone. "She had no means, but she had the pluck of ten men and a heart for any fate. She used to give music lessons and teach a few youngsters; but there is no income to speak of to be got out of that. We boys had to hustle out and find something to do as soon as we left school, which was pretty early. There was no hope of a profession for either of us; the only thing to do was to grab with teeth and nails whatever offered and make the best of it. I was the eldest and had to get out when I was twelve, and the first place I got was with an undertaker as a sort of boy-of-all-work. Lord! how I hated that business and that man! But I got a sound knowledge of book-keeping there that was invaluable later on. Afterwards I got a billet with a firm of auctioneers, and the experience I got *there* has been mighty useful too. But their place of [199] business was a long way from Chelsea, and I couldn't afford fares, so I had to get up at three-thirty in the mornings and go off on foot with fourpence in my pocket to feed myself on during the day. There was a place I used to go to for my mid-day meal—a sort of 'Cabmen's Rest,' where I used to get a fine hunk of what is known as 'spotted dog' for twopence-halfpenny; but I couldn't run to that every day in the week, because it didn't leave me enough to live on for the rest of the day. The winter was the worst time. My mother was always up to see me off in the mornings, with a cup of coffee to put heart into me for my long walk—and she would be waiting for me in the evenings with a smile and a hot supper, probably something she had done without for her own dinner. During supper she usually had some astonishing tale to tell us of great men who, having had to struggle with adversity, had won through and come out top. She was a brilliantly-educated woman, and had been a wide reader—I don't think the life of *any* famous man had escaped her knowledge. It certainly put heart into *me* to know that finer men than I had gone through the same mill, and I often went to bed in a glow of virtue. But I'm bound to say that the glow had a

way of wearing off during the daytime. We had a wealthy cousin who could have helped us a deal if he'd liked, but his help never went any further than writing letters of advice and forwarding parcels of discarded clothing. His frayed collars used to come my way. I think now, looking back, that the worst physical pain I can remember in those London years was the feel of that fellow's collars sawing at my gorge. He is still alive, and I am often obliged to meet him when I am in London, and I can tell you I never let him off those collars. I harp on them until he gets as frayed and sore as my neck used to be."

Bramham smiled gaily. Poppy wondered what the worst mental suffering had been, but she had too much respect for suffering to ask. [200]

Indirectly, Bramham presently enlightened her.

"It was pretty bad those days to remember the life we had known out here. My brother, being fairly young, didn't feel it so much. My mother and I had our memories all to ourselves."

He made a long pause. Poppy said nothing. She was sitting with her elbows among the papers on the table listening intently.

"We came out here afterwards, and my brother and I put up a big fight for fortune, and we won out at last; but I don't know that we ever should, if my fine old mother hadn't been at the back of us all the time."

"She was a noble woman," said Poppy softly. "How you must have made it up to her afterwards."

"She died just when things were beginning to come our way," said Bramham.

CHAPTER XII [201]

POPPY and Bramham were alone together as they had been many times before. The verandah being the coolest place, they were sitting there, on a low basket-lounge affair, in darkness, except for the streaks and squares of light that stretched through the open windows and door of the sitting-room, falling across the verandah and losing themselves in the massed greenery of the garden. The little red glow at the end of Bramham's cigar gave enough light at times for him to observe that upon the face of his companion the strained, tortured look which often haunted it, was getting full play under cover of the dimness. She laughed lightly, however, at his sallies as they talked—the disjointed intermittent conversation of people who are far from the subject under discussion.

By reason of the shortness of the lounge they were seated rather close together; so close, that when Bramham's arm, which was lying along the back of the sofa, slipped down, it, as a matter of course, touched her waist. Her face was averted, so that even if it had been light enough he could not see the troubled look that flashed across it. She sat perfectly still, however, and said nothing. It *might* be an accident—she would wait and see. But presently she felt personality and magnetism in the touch of that firm hand, lightly as it rested on her; and she knew that this was not an accident.

"Don't do that," she said; her manner was careless, but there was a *timbre* in her voice that chilled. Bramham instantly removed his hand. [202]

"Why not?" he asked discontentedly.

"Because I don't care about it," she said, her tone pleasant and friendly again.

Bramham smoked a while. He was not at all offended, but he chose to pretend to be. His experience of women presently prompted him to make a remark which he had discovered they regarded in the nature of a taunt.

"I'm afraid you are very cold-blooded."

Poppy merely laughed. Bramham, piqued that his shot had missed fire, and, having no other ready at the moment, repeated it with as much disagreeableness as he could muster—which was not any very great amount.

"It must be unpleasant to be so cold."

"Oh, not in this climate," said she tranquilly; adding, with a touch of malice: "and there are always plenty of fires where one can warm oneself, *quelquefois*."

"I think that what *you* need is a bonfire." Bramham was feeling distinctly cross, but Poppy laughed so merrily at this *mot* that his good-humour was restored. He began to smoke again, sitting sideways now, because he was able to see her face better, and there appeared to be no object in sitting cheek by jowl. Later, he said:

"I don't see why you should despise my nice bright flame."

Poppy meditated swiftly. She liked Bramham well, and she desired to keep him friendly; only, there was a thing he had to understand clearly. She was learning to make use of any twist of the tongue in difficult situations, but she knew that she was dealing with man of a good type and it seemed indicated that a *little* of the truth would not be out of place at this juncture—a little only!

the real, bitter, wonderful truth she would share with no one in the world! [203]

"I am far from despising it, Mr. Bramham," she said at last, very gently. "But I happen to want you for a friend, not an enemy."

Bramham did not see his way quite clear through this. However, he declared stoutly that he had never been a woman's enemy yet.

"Then you must often have been your own," she retorted, with a little glint of bitter wisdom. Thereafter, the conversation flagged again. Bramham had missed his cue and his broad shoulders took on a somewhat sullen expression. Poppy had the hopeless feeling that she had lost a lover without finding a friend, and the thought filled her with sadness. Only God and she knew how much she needed a friend; and she was sure she could find no stronger, firmer rock to her back than this big, kind man, if she could only get him away from these shoals of emotion on to the firm ground of friendship.

But Bramham was sighing sulkily, and flipping with his forefinger at the end of his cigar, as though he had no further use for it. Obviously, he was thinking of making a chilly departure. Suddenly she put out her hand and touched his, resting on his knee.

"You are quite right, I *am* cold," she said softly; "starving with cold; and you can never know how charming and attractive your fire looks to me, but—after all, the best seat is already taken isn't it?"

Bramham stared hard at her, swallowing something. This was the first time his wife had been mentioned between them. She did not falter.

"Don't you think I am nice enough to have a fireside of my very own?" She spoke with the soft bird note in her throat, and her smile was a wistful thing to see.

Bramham's other firm hand came down on hers, and gave it a great grip.

"By Jove! I do. And I hope you'll get the best going." [204]

A wave of grateful warmth rushed over the girl at his words. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you; thank you!" she cried brokenly; and added, on a swift impulse: "The fire I want seems to me the most wonderful in the world—and if I can't be there, I'll never sit by any other."

She did not attempt to stanch her tears, but sat looking at him with a smiling mouth, while the heavy drops fell down her cheeks. Bramham thought that, because of the smile, he had never seen any woman look so tragic in his life.

"Don't cry; don't cry, dear!" he said distressfully. "I can't bear to see a woman cry. Do you love someone, Rosalind?" he asked, using her name shyly.

"Yes, Charlie," she said simply; "I do. But there is a knife in my heart." She turned from him now, and looked away, that he might not see the despair and humiliation in her face.

"I will be your friend, Rosalind. Trust me. I can't understand at all. You are altogether a mystery to me; I can't understand, for one thing, how a girl like you comes to be living with Sophie Cornell——"

"I came here quite by accident," she interrupted him. "I have always meant to tell you, though I know that for some reason Sophie doesn't want you to know. I walked into the garden one day, and saw Sophie using a typewriter, and I came in and asked her to take me for an assistant."

"What! But weren't you a governess to some people in Kimberley, and an old friend of Sophie's in Johannesburg?"

"No, I've never been a governess, and I never saw Sophie until I walked in here some three months ago. The girl you take me for never came at all, and Sophie was glad to have me take her place, I suppose. But, indeed, it was good of her to take me in, and I am not ungrateful. I will pay [205] her back some day, for she is of the kind money will repay for anything." She added this rather bitterly, for, indeed, Sophie never ceased to make her feel her obligations, in spite of daily slavery on the typewriter.

"Well, of all the—!" Bramham began. Later, he allowed himself to remark:

"She certainly is a bird of Paradise!" and that was his eulogy on Sophie Cornell.

"But how comes it that a girl like you is—excuse me—kicking about the world, at a loose end?—How can any fellow that has your love let you suffer!—The whole thing is incomprehensible! But whatever you say stands. You needn't say anything at all if you don't want to——"

"I can't tell you anything," she said brokenly. "If I could tell *anyone*, it would be you—but I can't. Only—I want a friend, Charlie—I want help."

"I'll do anything in the world for you—all you've got to say is 'Knife.'"

"I want to get away from Africa to England, and I haven't a penny in the world, nor any possessions except the things I am wearing now."

"Oh, that's simple!" said Bramham easily. "But have you any friends to go to in England?"

"I have no friends anywhere—except you.

"'I have no friend but Resolution
... and the briefest end!'

"But I don't think my end is yet. I must go away from Africa, when I love it most—as *you* did, Charlie. There are things to do and things to go through, and I must go and suffer in London as you did. But I mean to win through and come back and get my own, like you did, too."

She jumped up and stood in the light of the window, and Bramham could see that her eyes were shining and her cheeks flushed. She looked like a beautiful, boastful boy, standing there, flinging out a mocking, derisive hand at Fate. [206]

"Life has had her way with me too long, Charlie. Ever since I was a child she has done nothing but cheat me and smite me on the mouth, and beat me to the earth.... But I am up again, and I will walk over her yet!... Love has found me, only to mock me and give me false coin and pass me by on the other side; but I will come back and find Love, and it will be *my* turn to triumph. Look at me!" she cried, not beseechingly, but gaily, bragfully. "There is no white in my hair, nor any lines on my face, nor scars ... where they can be seen. I have youth, courage, a little beauty, something of wit—and I can write, Charlie. Don't you think that I should be able to wrest something for myself from the claws of that brute Life—a little Fame, a little Love——?"

"I should just say I *do*," said Bramham heartily. "You're true-blue all through, without a streak of yellow in the whole of your composition."

PART III

[207]

Nothing is better I well think
Than Love: the hidden well water
Is not so delicate to drink.

CHAPTER XIII

[209]

POPPY sailed by one of the pleasant small lines that run direct between Natal and England without touching at East London or the Cape.

"If it will amuse you," said Bramham, "to sit down with diamonds at breakfast, and diamonds-and-rubies-and-emeralds at lunch, and the whole jewel-box for dinner, take the Mail-steamer and go by the Cape. And then, of course, there are the scandals," he added seductively. "Personally I like them; but *you* look to me like a girl who wants rest, and to forget that there is such a place as Africa on the map."

Poppy agreed. She had travelled by the Mail-boats before, and thought them excellent places—for anyone who values above all things a little quiet humour. Also, persons returning from Africa with little else than a bitterly acquired philosophy, find satisfaction in putting their only possession upon the sound basis of contempt for riches. For herself, not only was she able to sustain life for three weeks without scandals and the elevating sight of millionaires' wives lifting their skirts at each other and wearing their diamonds at breakfast, but she longed and prayed with all her soul for peace, and solitude, with nothing about her but the blue sea and the horizon.

The battle before her needed a plan of campaign, and to prepare that she must have time and rest. First, there must be some bitter days spent in wiping from her mind, and memory, Africa and all that therein was. She realised that if the greater part of her thought and force was afar from her, seeking to follow a man who by that time was deep in the heart of Africa, it would be futile to expect anything great of the future. Abinger and his soul-searing words must be forgotten too; and Clem Portal's fascinating friendship, and Charles Bramham's kind grey eyes and generous heart. All these were destroying angels. If she admitted thoughts of them into her life, they would eat her time, and her strength, which must austerely be hoarded for the future. [210]

Courage, resolution, silence—those were three good things, Clem Portal said, to be a woman's friends. And those were the things the girl strove to plant firm in her soul as she watched with misty, but not hopeless eyes, the retreating coast of her beloved land.

She kept aloof from everyone, spending long, absorbed hours of thought and study in some canvas-shaded corner; or swinging up and down the decks, drinking in the freshness of the wind. Before many days were past, care departed from her, and rose-leaf youth was back to her face. Gladness of life surged in her veins, and the heart Evelyn Carson had waked to life, sang like a violin in her breast. Her feet were on the "Open Road" and she loved it well, and could sing with Lavengro:

"Life is sweet, brother ... there is day and night, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath."

She had yet to find that the gods love not the sound of women's feet upon the Open Road. Its long, level stretches are easy to the feet of men, but for women it most strangely "winds upwards" all the way, and the going is stony, and many a heavy burden is added to the pack the journey was commenced with. Youth and Love are stout friends with whom to begin the climb, and Poppy knew not that she had a pack at all. Certainly she suspected nothing as yet of the burden which Fate and her own wild passionate nature had laid upon her. So still she went glad- [211]
foot. No one who watched her could have believed that she was a girl out in the world alone—a girl breaking away from a past that was a network of sorrows and strange happenings, to face a future that lay hidden and dark.

The few quiet passengers on board chanced all to be middle-aged, and not greatly curious about the affairs of other people; but they often pondered idly among themselves upon the identity of the fleet-footed girl with the face like a spring morning; mildly speculating as to what had happened to her chaperon at the last moment; for they thought it would be ridiculous to suppose that she was travelling alone, except by accident.

Only one person thought differently—the ship's doctor. He had seen her eyes the day she came on board, and he knew a few things about women's eyes. Indeed, it is certain that if Maurice Newnham had given half as much attention to medical science as he had divided between the engrossing subject of women's eyes, and the poker-table, he would not have been preparing black-draughts for able seamen, and treating passengers for *mal-de-mer*, in return for a passage home. He was a good doctor gone wrong for lack of principles, application, energy, ambition—anything but brains. Ten years of roaming through Africa found him at last kicking its dust from his feet with his achievements and fortune ably represented by a duck's egg, and nothing before him but the prospect, at best, of a post as ship's doctor on one of the big Atlantic liners. He was a square-built man with a clean-shaven face that would soon be fat and loose-jawed. Laziness—physical and mental; intellect gone to rack and ruin; savage boredom with the world in general—these were the things writ large upon him. He detested with all his heart the few worthy passengers; the untemptress-like women, and the men who only went to the smoke-room when it [212]
was too hot on deck, or for a quiet game of whist. And always he turned his burnt-out eyes to where Poppy sat dewy in the sunshine or swung down the deck—trying to place her and read her story. He was sure that she had a story. He considered her clothes, and her manners, and her walk, distinguished, and in keeping with the general theory that she was a well-born girl accidentally travelling alone. It was only on the evidence of her eyes, as he had seen them the day she came aboard, that he formed the conclusion she was facing life on her own responsibility. He told himself *then*, that they were the eyes of a girl who had come to a bad bit of the road, and though she had wonderfully changed in a few days, his professional eye, blurred though it was, saw still on her the traces of stress and storm. Now, Maurice Newnham knew all about bad bits of the road. He had stumbled through muddy and broken places himself, and seen others do the same; some dying in the holes they had made, some lying down by the wayside with no heart to start afresh. His keen instinct for a fellow-stumbler was the only instinct he had not deliberately blunted. Therefore he greatly desired to make the acquaintance of "Miss R. Chard," as the passenger-list described her. Moreover, he was attracted by her unusual beauty.

However, it was plain to everyone that Miss Chard did not wish to form acquaintances. When the women made pleasant little overtures, she smiled a kind of cold vague smile, and let *that* be her answer. And she simply looked through the men. Dr. Newnham got into her way several times on deck and on the companionway, forcing her to meet his eyes, but she remained composed and indifferent under their bold glance. He had almost despaired of ever gaining his end, when chance, the only friend he could lay claim to, intervened. [213]

On a hot day in the tropics the ship's *chef* had resort to tinned supplies, and amongst other things sent to the luncheon-table was an *entrée*, which had the appearance of tongue-in-aspic, charmingly wreathed with lettuce and cress. Most people attracted by the greenery, partook of this dish, and though they immediately discovered themselves to be eating "Sarah Anne Lane," they calmly continued the cannibalistic performance, for "bully beef" is too old and close a friend to be despised by any South African sojourner. However, on this occasion "bully" was an enemy—perhaps the historic Sarah-Anne was really present at last (in portions)—for before night everyone who had partaken of the fascinating bewreathed *entrée* was *hors de combat* with a mild attack of something in the nature of ptomaine.

Poppy was one of the sufferers, though by no means the worst. She was ill enough to require the services of Dr. Newnham, and to be grateful for them. He was always very grave and curt, never stayed for more than a few moments, or talked of anything but the state of her health. Soon she was up on deck again; but for a few days he continued to professionally superintend her doings. Afterwards he fell naturally into the habit of staying to talk to her. Everyone knows how easily these things are done on board ship. Poppy, after all, was glad to talk to someone. In the few days spent below she had grown weary of herself, and Newnham was an interesting interlude—as interesting as a character on the down-grade always is, if only because of its efforts to hide the wreckage from the eyes of a new acquaintance. But efforts that are not natural cannot be kept up long. The old Adam soon reasserts himself. Poppy began to get prehistoric peeps of the raw savage that Newnham hid under his professional manner and well-made clothes, and they sickened her. She knew too much about white savages, and she much preferred the real thing— [214]
Zulu or Basuto. However, she forgave him a great deal for the sake of the curious things he knew about people in different parts of Africa. He had been everywhere, from the Karoo to the

Kalahari, from Boshof to Blantyre, and from Matjesfontein to the Matoppos.

Both in Rhodesia and the Transvaal he had seen history made, and in the telling of these things he possessed that idle eloquence so often found in men of a dissolute type. In Newnham the gift, being grafted upon the trained observation of his student years, was specially striking.

At Johannesburg, his last and latest place of residence, he had been in charge of a native Hospital in one of the mine compounds. He said he had cut off enough Kaffirs' legs there to fill a forty-foot shaft.

"If one of them came to me with a corn, I'd make it into a reason for cutting his leg off," he said malevolently. "I hate the brutes."

"I hate brutes too," retorted Poppy, with the curled lip of disgust. "You know very little of natives, if you think they all come under *that* heading."

"Ah!" said he. "I see you have the tender heart that goes with the tender-foot. If you only knew as much of them as I do——"

She probably knew a great deal more, but she left it at that.

Her mind had flown away into the dark deeps of Africa, where a man forged ahead over unbroken tracks, through fevered swamps, with no companions but his faithful *boys*, upon whose courage and staunch loyalty his life must of necessity often depend—and not depend in vain; for "good men" (the expression has nothing to do with morals) trust their *boys*, and are trusted by them to the death.

Ah! with an effort she dragged back her thoughts from across the sea. That way madness lay! [215]
She gave her ears once more to Newnham and the Rand.

He spoke of Johannesburg with the mingled hatred and admiration everyone who has ever lived there feels for that evil, fascinating Monte-Carlo of money, and tragedy, and suffering.

"It is the only place worth living in," he averred; adding: "At least, that is what all the old residents say, and you can understand the emotion with which they say it when you consider that most of them came out as waiters and cook-generals, and blossomed later into millionaire squires and dames of society."

"But they all go and live in Park Lane, don't they?" smiled Poppy.

"Oh! they revisit the scene of their triumphs. It lures them across the sea. A poignant longing comes to them sometimes, even in Park Lane, for the glitter of galvanised-iron and sardine-tins and Nestle's Brand—and the red dust, and the spectral blue gums. But they do precious little for the place that has done so much for them," he sneered. "I should say that with the exception of the Barnato ward, and an open space for games, not a millionaire of the lot has done anything to beautify or benefit Johannesburg. 'Make your pile and scoot' has always been the watchword. But I suppose it isn't in human nature for a debtor to love his creditor!"

Newnham and Poppy spent many days in talk of Africa. The evenings, which were all blue and gold—sea and sky alike thickly sown with stars—she loved to dream away alone in some shadowy corner, or leaning over the taffrails with the gleam of the phosphorescent waves reflected on her face. But when Newnham sought her out she would either walk, or have her chair put where a big electric-light blazed on the face of her companion.

"Never sign a paper, or drink water in the dark," was a Spanish proverb well known to her, and [216]
she had another of her own:

"Never rest where you cannot see the eyes of a man you distrust."

She was frankly interested in what Newnham had to say, but she distrusted him. Nevertheless, she went ashore with him at Teneriffe and they wandered about the narrow débris-strewn streets, and were stared at by the women who wear such liberal coats of powder and rouge upon their handsome olive skins and grow stout so early in life.

Poppy had a fancy to climb the zig-zag road to Laguna, but Newnham looked lugubrious at the idea—probably his muscles had long been out of gear for climbing or any other physical activity—and hastily suggested that the boat would not be making a very long stay. So they roamed about the lower slopes of the hills instead, watched the barefooted women in the washing pools, and did some shopping. Poppy, accustomed in her travels to have Abinger behind her paying for everything she bought, quite forgot that all she owned in the world was forty-five pounds, the remainder of seventy pounds she had allowed Bramham to lend her (she had been obliged to expend twenty-five pounds upon a wardrobe), fell with rapture, upon a lovely piece of Spanish lace, and handed out five pounds without the turn of an eyelash. It was only afterwards that she realised her foolish extravagance. As they were returning to the ship followed by two men carrying baskets of fruit and flowers bought by Newnham, he suddenly observed that her face had become dolorous.

"What's wrong?" he asked in his casual but not offensive manner.

"Oh, nothing!" Then she stood still, seized by a sudden thought. "Do you think the woman would take that lace back again?" [217]

"That five pounds' worth? No—not for a minute. I saw the gleam in her eye when she stowed away your fiver. But why—don't you like it?"

"Oh, yes. I love lace. But I have just remembered that I can't afford it."

"Well, I don't think it's the slightest use going back. But *I'll* buy it, if you like?"

"You? What for? What would you do with it?"

"Give it to you, of course," he said pleasantly, but she flushed and her manner instantly became

cold.

"I do not wish you to buy it," she said shortly. "I like it and will keep it myself."

"I wonder how many times to the minute a woman changes her mind!" he jested, but he was secretly much amazed.

"She's hard up!" was his thought. That side of the picture had not presented itself to his mind before, and it "gave him to think." He later resolved that he would offer to buy the lace from her to give to his sister—and then get her to take it back under the name of a "keepsake" when they reached England.

"I bet that'll suit her book," he cynically thought.

But Poppy did not come on deck after dinner, and the next day she let Newnham see very plainly that she was offended. For two more days she kept the atmosphere about her so frigid that he did not dare venture into it. He found the time singularly blank. There was nothing to do but sit in the smoke-room and curse the day that he was born, between drinks. On the third evening she relented and allowed him to approach her under the blaze of electric-light.

"Why have you been so cruel to me?" he demanded almost violently. "What have I done to make you angry?" [218]

He half expected that she would—as girls generally do—first feign ignorance of his meaning, and, later, allow herself to be persuaded that she had never been angry at all. But she was not of the same kidney as the girls Maurice Newnham had been meeting for the last ten years. She spoke at once, and to the point.

"I thought it extremely insolent of you to offer to give me five pounds," she said, and Newnham, being much taken aback, could only find tongue to utter:

"I swear I didn't mean to be insolent."

"Oh, yes, you did. I hated the way you spoke; and when I remember the way you looked, I wonder that I allow myself to speak to you again."

"I'm awfully sorry," he stammered. "I'd no idea you would take it in such a way. It was an ordinary thing to do, I thought. Most women or girls in Africa would think nothing of taking a little bit of lace."

"I am not at all like most women and girls in Africa," was the cool response. "However, I will say nothing further about it, Dr. Newnham. Only please, if you care to talk to me, behave yourself—and don't ever mention *lace* again."

Newnham had never been spoken to in this fashion by a woman since he came to Africa, and he did not take to it at all. But he was afraid to show his resentment for fear she would carry out her threat and never speak to him again. And if she turned her back on him now, he believed he should go mad. It had come to *that* with him. He was half-crazed with passion for this girl who could look at him so composedly and speak to him so contemptuously. But together with his passion was bitter rage with himself and with her. He was torn between primitive emotions. At one moment he longed with all the malignity of a mean weak nature to fling coarse words at her that would make her crouch before him; in the next he longed only to crouch himself, offering his [219] neck, his body, his soul to her feet.

While he wrestled with his longings and inclinations, breathing hard at her side, she composedly arose and left him with a cool good-night.

He returned to the smoke-room and kept the steward busy for the next two hours; and when at last, by reason of the emphatic dimming of the electric lights, he roused himself to thoughts of bed, he had come to a conclusion and a resolution. Quite an epoch for him!

All the next day he haunted Poppy strangely. He was never far from her, and the look in his eyes stirred her to discomfort and foreboding, although it was not comprehensible to her. Something in his eyes she understood only too well—she began to expect *that* in men's eyes now! But what did that half-pitying, half-scornful expression mean? She resented it extremely; but her curiosity was aroused. In the evening, therefore, she let him pull his chair next to hers in the usual corner. Only, the electric light was gone; the burner had died out, and someone had forgotten to replace it or thought it not worth while to do so, for this was the last night at sea and the ship was to dock on the morrow. They were creeping near the grey-green English coasts now, and the English weather was sweet and grateful after the heat of the tropics and the dusty land left far behind; but there was a freshness in the late-April air that made Poppy turn up the collar of her coat and take shelter under the lee of her chair cushion.

Newnham, restless and miserable, quoted with some trace of emotion:

"O to be in England
Now that Spring is there."

But his emotion was neither for Spring nor England. He led the talk to London with the hope of [220] getting her to speak of her destination; but she went off at a tangent and began to tell him about the wonderful shades of blue to be found in the interior of a glacier. He ignored that, and made occasion to give her his card with a Kensington address written on it, saying in rather strained fashion:

"If ever you want a friend—doctors are sometimes useful people, you know."

She thanked him and took his card, holding it carefully in her hand. But she offered no information on the subject which so engrossed his thoughts. An uncomfortable pause followed. Suddenly in the darkness she felt a hand hot on hers.

"Miss Chard ... Rosalind ..." he had discovered her name—"I will do anything for you."

It was far from being a surprise to her that he should make some kind of avowal. But his words seemed to her rather odd—and somehow in keeping with his odd looks at her. She very gently drew away her hand from under his and put it behind her head. The other was quite out of his reach.

"Thank you, Dr. Newnham," she said kindly, but with no particular fervour.

"Do you understand what I mean?" he said huskily, after another pause. "I can help you."

He could not see the expression on her face, but he saw that she turned her head to look at him as she answered:

"What can you mean?"

"Oh, you needn't beat about the bush with me," he spoke with coarse irritation. "I know what you have to face."

"You must be wonderfully clever," she said, with a touch of sarcasm; "but I should like to know just what you mean."

Irritation now became anger. [221]

"You know well enough," he said brutally. "What is the good of playing pure with me! It is my business to see what isn't plain to other people."

In the darkness she grew pale with anger at his tone, but she had fear too, of she knew not what. Her wish was to rise and leave him at once; but curiosity chained her—curiosity and creeping, creeping fear. Dimly she became conscious of the predestined feeling that once or twice before in her life had presaged strange happenings. What was she going to hear? She sat very still, waiting.

The man leaned close to her and spoke into her ear. His breathing was quick and excited, but he had some difficulty with his words; he muttered and his sentences were halting and disjointed.

But Poppy heard everything he said. It seemed to her that his lowest whisper pierced to the inmost places of her being, and reverberated through her like the echoing and resounding of bells. Afterwards there was a terrible quiet. He could not see her face. She appeared almost to be crouching in her chair, all bundled up, but he did not venture to touch her—some instinct kept him from that. Pity, mingled with his base passion and scorn. He regretted that he had spoken so violently. He feared he had been brutal. At last she spoke, in a faint voice, that seemed to come from far away.

"I don't know what you mean ... I think you must be mad."

Newnham laughed—derisively, devilishly.

"I'll bet that's what you are going home for, all the same."

While he was furiously laughing, with his hand flung above his head, she flamed up out of her chair, and spoke for a moment down at him in a low, vibrating voice:

"You vile man! Never dare speak to me again. You are not fit to live!" [222]

Then she was gone.

After a time he got up and stumbled towards the smoke-room, intending to get drunk; but he changed his mind before he reached it, and went to his cabin instead. Having closed his door, he sat in the berth and stared at his boots. He said at last:

"H——! What a beast I am! But what is worse, I am a fool. I am no good any longer. I made a mistake in my diagnosis. That girl is straight! Pure as the untrodden snow! I had better cut my throat."

However, he did not.

Poppy, lying on her face in her cabin, was tasting shame. Bitter-sweet, mysterious, terrifying knowledge was hers at last—and with it was shame. Shame that the knowledge should come to her from profane and guilty lips! Shame that the child of the king of her heart should be unworthily born; that a king's child should be robbed of its kingdom; that the mother of her child should be one to whom men might throw vile words. Shame that she was a transgressor.

CHAPTER XIV [223]

LONDON was not new to Poppy. She had lived there for months at a time, but always at the best hotels and under luxurious conditions. Now, she hardly knew where to seek a home in accord with her limited means, but she had heard of Bloomsbury as being the resort of writers and artists and people whose riches are rather to be found in their heads and hearts than in their purses; so she took her way thither.

She walked the old-fashioned squares the day after her arrival and found them all green-tracery, and darts of spring sunshine that touched the gloomy houses with the gilt of past romance. After much roaming, and knocking, and climbing of stairs, and making of awkward adieus to angry, disappointed landladies, she eventually discovered a tall, white house, whose front windows overlooked the pigeons pecking in the straggly grass that grows in the courtyard of the British Museum. A room on the top floor but one seemed likely to suit her purse and her tastes, and she seized upon it eagerly. It was big and bare, with no noise overhead, except the footsteps of two tired maids, who crept to bed at eleven o'clock with very little to say to each other. It seemed to Poppy that she could not have found any better place to start hard work in, and yet, from the first day there, a dreariness crept over her spirit—a kind of mental numbness she had never known before, oppressed her. She supposed it must have something to do with her physical condition and the shock she had lately received, and that after a few days it would pass. [224] Instead, it increased. Her nights became indescribably weird and unhappy. Always it seemed to her that she heard someone calling somewhere, and she used to wake up, thinking that she had been urgently roused to fetch something. Sometimes, still half asleep, she would get up and begin to dress to go out; then, gradually becoming conscious of what she was doing, she would light the gas and stare round the room, looking for the person who had been speaking to her. In the daytime it became impossible to work, though she perpetually goaded herself to her writing-table. The only time she could get any ease from the intolerable restlessness and depression that filled her, was when she was half out of her window, leaning above the street, watching the intermittent stream of uninteresting-looking people who passed up and down the broad, dingy steps of the Museum, and listening to the roar of London afar. Trying to interpret the street calls was an idle amusement, too, wondering why the coal-carters should shout *Ko-bel*, and the cry of the oyster-man be exceeding dolorous like the cry of a soul in the depths.

Clam ... Clam ... clamavi.

In the afternoons, when still haunting sadness obsessed her, she would put on her hat and visit a picture-gallery, or walk in the park, or roam the streets looking at the shop-windows and into the strained, anxious faces of the hurrying passers-by. She speculated as to whether she would ever get that look, and always she wondered what was worth it; then one day, as she walked, she felt what seemed tiny fluttering fingers clutching at her heart-strings, and she *knew*! Flying home on swift feet, she nailed herself once more to her work-table. She *must* work, she told herself feverishly; and when she could not, frenzy seized her, then terror, then despair. Yes, those were the things she had seen in the strained, hurrying faces that passed along—frenzy, terror, despair; [225] not for themselves, but for *others*. *She must work!*

But Inspiration hid Her face; and shadows came out of the four corners of the room and closed in upon her.

Breakfast was always brought on a tray by a maid called Kate. For the rest of her meals she frequented A.B.C. shops, and the like, existing on cups of tea and boiled eggs and glasses of milk, after the manner of women who live alone and have to economise. But sometimes in a wild burst of extravagance she would wend her way to Soho and order a little Italian meal all *hors-d'œuvres* and thin Chianti. She loved to hear the French and Italian chatter about her, and felt more at home there than anywhere, not minding the men's bold, dark glances, for in her travels with Abinger she had learnt to know that there was really little of harm in them. Of course, she attracted much attention and often had uncomfortable adventures in her lonely goings and comings; but she did not let these ruffle her greatly, telling herself that all such things were part and parcel of the fight. She minded nothing, in fact, except the tragic atmosphere of her room, which engulfed her spirit as soon as she entered. The nights began to be even more eerie. She lay awake often until dawn, and presently longings and urgings came upon her to procure something that would produce sleep. She had never known anyone who took drugs or sleeping-draughts, and could not imagine what put such an idea into her head—indeed, having read De Quincey's *Confessions*, she had a horror of such things, and so, fought the suggestion with all her might. But still it returned. Once when she was sitting at her table, with a throbbing head, biting her pencil before a blank sheet of paper, she distinctly heard someone softly say: [226]

"Go and *buy* some inspiration."

She stared about the empty room.

"What can be the matter with me?" she demanded of herself, after a time, and strove with all her strength to work and drive such insane thoughts from her. But the writer within her was mute, the poet dumb, and her woman's body was very weary.

One day, she had been striving with herself for many hours, writing down dry, banal words that she almost dug out of the paper a moment afterwards. At intervals she sat with her head on her arms, wondering what had ever caused her to dream that she was born to the pen; brooding over the possibilities of her chances as a shop-girl, a waitress in a tea-shop, a chorus-girl, a housemaid —as *anything* but a writer of poems and romantic fiction, at which she was obviously a dismal failure.

At last she flung papers and pencils to the four corners of the room, and left the house. Out of doors it was raining fearsomely. After tramping for an hour or so, soaked through, she found herself back near home, in Theobald's Row—a hateful street that smells of fish and rank cheese, where men bawl out the price of pork-chops, and women come furtively stealing from side-doors, wiping their lips. She made haste to get into Southampton Row, which has a sweeter savour to

the nostrils and a staid, respectable air. At a corner she passed a paper shop, which had many news-boards exposed, with the "sheets" hanging dripping and torn from them. One yellow sheet stood out boldly with the words "*South Africa*" in black letters across it. A pang of joy shot through her. She could have fallen down before that tattered paper and kissed the magic words. The name of her own land! The land that had beaten her and bruised her and flung her out to seek a living and safety in another country—but her own land! Some words came to her lips: [227]

"She said: God knows they owe me naught.
I tossed them to the foaming sea,
I tossed them to the howling waste,
Yet still their love comes home to me."

So far she had forbidden herself entirely the luxury of journals and magazines, saying that she could not afford them; but now she went into the shop and recklessly bought up everything that had any connection with South-African affairs.

Afterwards, going home, she saw a flower-girl crouching in a doorway with a bale of wet daffodils and narcissi in her arms. Flowers, too, were luxuries, concerning which she had laid down a law unto herself; but the girl made a piteous appeal, and without a thought of dwindling funds, Poppy bought up the whole wet fragrant bale. Before she reached home she was reproaching herself bitterly.

"How *can* I be buying magazines and flowers with money I have not earned?... I am becoming degraded! ... a parasite!"

Only the smell of the narcissi reassured her, and changed the trend of her thoughts, for they reminded her of Charles Bramham and his acres of flowers seen from the hilltops.

"He would be glad to think that his money brings this rift of blue into my grey sky," she thought; and she turned her dreary room into an enchanted spring garden, extravagantly ordered a fire and sat before it, tearing the news out of the papers with her eyes, searching for the name of Evelyn Carson. She had not far to look. In every paper she found news of him. His party had arrived at Borwezi, a spot in Central Africa, the last civilised touching-place before they plunged into the savage unknown. He had made a long stay there—for it was on the banks of a "fever river," second only to the Pungwe. Carson was reported to have been laid up with malarial fever [228] for a week, and a doctor who had joined the expedition at Mombassa had been so ill from the same cause as to be obliged to abandon his intention and to be taken back to civilisation under the care of people who had accompanied the expedition as far as Borwezi. One paper mentioned the names of Mr. and Mrs. Nick Capron as being of the returning party. This was as far as the actual news went. Rumours there were in plenty. One arresting story, brought into Borwezi by native runners, was that the natives of Borapota were departing from every part of their country to assemble in the capital, where the King would receive Carson and his men—whether in a friendly or hostile spirit was unknown. Several papers devoted articles to Carson himself, dealing with his achievements in different parts of Africa, his personality, his influence with the Zulus and Basutos, and other less-known tribes. One journal headed an article with the word —*Intandugaza*: fortunately the writer did not attempt to translate the Zulu word, nor explain how Carson came to bear it. (Perhaps that was "one of the untoward things about him not compatible with reverence," thought Poppy sadly.) After she had drunk in every word of him, the papers lay scattered at her feet, and she, lapsing from the decree she had made not to think of him, lost herself at last in dreams of him. She had lived according to the rules of Alice Meynell's *Renouncement*:

"I must not think of thee; and tired yet strong
I shun the thought that dwells in all delight,
The thought of thee: and in the heaven's blue height:
And in the sweetest passage of a song——"

Now she forgot the fine, firm words, and long, long sat dreaming by the fire, with her hands before her face. Anyone looking into the room would merely have seen a girl lying back in her [229] chair resting, asleep perhaps. But only the lesser part of Poppy Destin was there. The spirit of her wandered in a moonlit Natal garden, listening to a voice with a rustle in it, and from thence ... far, far!

Afterwards, she reconstructed all the chapters of her life since the magic night that began so wonderfully and ended in despair with the uttering of another woman's name. Of that woman —*Loraine*, she thought little now, having fought down and killed the bitter hatred of her, as once she had wished to kill the woman. There was no room in her awakened heart for hatred—only Love could be there. Love of the man who had awakened it, and to whom, whether he loved her or not, she believed herself to be secretly linked for ever; and to whom, whether she saw him again or not, her hopes, her future, her life were dedicated. But she *would* see him again!—of that she was blindly, fatalistically certain: and he would know her for his mate, as she knew him —or of what use her beauty, her wit, her charm, her life at all? All things would entangle themselves, she told her heart. As soon as she had money enough she meant to free herself from the marriage with Luce Abinger that was no marriage at all; and from which he knew a Court of

Justice would free her as an innocent, unwitting victim. As she sat thinking, many things that had been dark became clear. The meaning of Abinger's fearsome conduct was plain to her now—he *knew*! Kykie had told him. That was what she had stayed up for, supposing herself to be the herald of glad tidings.

It made the girl recoil and quiver to think that those two had known and spoken of what had been hidden from *her*; of what, even now, she dared hardly consider with herself because of its wonder and terror—something that no one in the world should know except just two people: so it seemed to her. [230]

"But, oh, Mother of God!" she cried aloud and bitterly. "Why is this thing so sweet, and yet so terrible to bear?"

Even while she asked she knew, and gave herself the answer.

"I am a Transgressor——"

At last, far into the night, she undressed and went to bed; so tired from emotion that she fell at once into dead slumber. But no sooner was she asleep than she was dreaming that a woman lay by her side on the bed whispering into her ear, pleading, asking for something, begging, urgently demanding. With a wrench Poppy threw off sleep and sat up staring into the darkness of the room. She was only half-awake, but she was certain—she could have *sworn* that a shadowy figure rose, too, from the bed, and slipped into the far shadows.

Beads of fright sat on her forehead.

"I am going mad!" she thought. "There was a woman on my bed ... she is still in the room. I am going mad!"

She was afraid to lie down again, and afraid to get out of bed. She sat there in cold terror until she thought herself turned to stone. Then, slowly, reason reasserted itself, and courage. She clenched her teeth and nerved herself to move, to get from the bed and from the room. The whole house was wrapped in darkness. Instinctively she made for the room above her, where she knew the servants were. Reaching the door she knocked and then entered. One of them was awake at once.

"Who's there? What do you want?" said an excited voice, ready to scream.

"Don't be afraid, Kate ... I am the girl who sleeps in the room below ... Miss Chard.... I don't want to disturb you—only—let me stay here until morning, will you?... I'm afraid to be in my own room." [231]

Kate was "a good sort." She struck a match and stared at the intruder before answering; then she said: "Lock the door," and was obeyed with alacrity.

The maid hopped out and soon had a blanket round Poppy's trembling form. She made room on the bed, and they sat whispering together. The other maid slept on like the dead.

"What did you see?" asked Kate.

"See? I don't know ... there was something strange——"

"It was *'er*, sure enough!"

"What do you mean, Kate?" Poppy felt her spine curling.

"I'm new here," whispered Kate mysteriously; "but I got five minutes' talk with the last girl, though the missis tried hard to keep us from meeting. Miss—*no one ever sleeps in that room long*. A lydy cut her throat there!"

"What!"

"Yes—sure as I'm sitting here. I've been afraid to creep up the stairs at night for fear of *her*. How you could a *slep* there, Heavin knows!" She lowered her voice to a whisper: "She used to take them drugs. She was a hactress, and she and her 'usbin had that room. She was very clever, they said, but she hadn't had no work for a long time, and she used to eat away at them drugs night and day, and 'er 'usbin never knew. And at last, one day he found 'er out, and there was an awful shindy and he said as 'e'd leave her if she didn't knock it off. And she tried and tried. For a whole three days she did without ... walked the room all day and would go out and no sooner out than in again ... she told the girl it was *'ell*. Every time anyone came to the door she would stand up and just say, ''ell! 'ell! ell!' very quiet to herself all the time they was speaking. Then on the third night she went out and got *it*. And the 'usbin found out as soon as he came in. She was so [232] gentle and sweet-like, and began to 'elp 'im off with his coat. He gave her a look ... like *hanythink*, then 'e put his hat and coat on again and walked out. And that very night she done for 'erself with one of the razors 'e left behind. *She done it in the very bed you bin sleeping in.* I says to cook I says it's a shime of the missis to do it!—but there! she's one of them would sell 'er mother's shroud for sixpence. I shan't stay here no more after this, don't you believe it, miss—not for a thousand pound; and nor won't you, I reckon."

Poppy's reckoning came to much the same sum. When she stole down in the morning light, it was to dress herself and pack her belongings swiftly for departure. Kate stayed by the door until all was done, casting fearsome glances about her, ready to fly at a sound. They left the flower-decked room then, to the poor, disquieted spirit that haunted it, and sought the mistress of the house. But she discreetly excused herself from an interview, and only sent the cook to demand a week's extra money in lieu of the notice that should have been given. Poppy expostulated, but it was of no use: she was told that it was the rule under which rooms were let and that her luggage

could be detained. When she had paid, she realised that this extra expense would force her to seek still cheaper lodgings. That evening found her installed in a dingy room in Hunter Street—another top-floor-but-one.

How she wished at this time, that she had betaken herself from the first to Paris, where, she had been told all top-floors are white-and-gold rooms, with faded true-lovers' knots festooning the ceiling, and wide oak fireplaces in which burnt little bright *briquette* fires. Once, wishing to have a picture in the Louvre copied for Luce, she had visited a clever but penniless girl-artist in such a [233] room, in quite a poor part of the *Quartier*; and the girl had carelessly told her that there were plenty of the same kind to be had.

In her new quarters Poppy had barely room to turn round: but she was more content. No tragic ghosts kept vigil there, it was certain. A healthy scent of Irish stew pervaded the atmosphere, and the walls were decorated with smiling faces and charming figures. The landlady, a stout, breezy woman on the right side of forty-five, had once been a chorus girl at the Gaiety, and her circle of acquaintances had evidently been large. Little now remained to her of beauty, but she had an attractive *bonhomie* and a wide charity for the world of women.

CHAPTER XV [234]

IN Hunter Street, Poppy put the finishing touches to her book of poems—as far as anything is ever finished until it appears in print. For it is certain that a writer will always find something new to do to a book as long as it is in MS. and within reach. But with Poppy, time pressed. She knew that shortly she would be wanting money. Moreover, she was horrified to reflect that after nearly four months in England she had nothing ready for publication but the poems, which had been the work of years. The thought came to her that if she could get this book accepted and published it would bring courage and inspiration back, and so spur her on that she would presently come to her own on a full tide. With this hope high in her, she sent the poems to a publisher whom she had read of in a literary journal as having a reputation for encouraging new authors on new subjects. The journal in question had omitted to mention that the new authors got very little out of the process *beyond* the encouragement, so poor Poppy went home gay of heart from posting her precious manuscript and essayed to start work on a batch of short stories. She had six of them in a skeleton condition; some of them consisting of no more than half a dozen startling phrases which were almost stories in themselves. These she intended to finish and get into the magazines.

Afterwards, she would complete her book and fire it off at the world. She knew she could write. All she needed was time—and peace of mind. Alas! Time began to press terribly; and peace of [235] mind was anywhere but in a little fourth-floor room in Hunter Street. Inspiration appeared to have fled from so commonplace an atmosphere; and again the lurking shadows came out of their corners, and cast themselves across the pages she could not fill.

Her physical condition began to oppress her sorely, too, and she no longer *wanted* to work, for sitting at her desk caused headaches and dizziness. She longed for fresh air and bracing walks across grass and in the wind: for peaceful and beautiful scenes. But London was stifling in the grip of summer, and Bloomsbury was the hottest, most stifling place in it. The little room was suffocating, and out-of-doors the conditions were not much better. The streets gave up a white, afflicting dust; the pavements burned the feet. The best Poppy could do was to take a 'bus to some park where she could seek the quiet little unfrequented walks. Most of all, she loved the river when it swelled serene and full-bosomed from Chelsea onwards to Putney and the upper reaches. Along the Embankment how often she lingered before the beaten-copper lilies on Whistler's door, wishing dreamfully that she might see that master of paint and satire come forth, eye-glass perched in eye and cane in hand: but he never did—for her. From thence she would go to the statue of grey old Carlyle, who sits always in his little green garden watching Mother Thames flow by. On, past the Rossetti Fountain, and the house where the poet lived; and George Eliot's dull and drearsome residence. The Clock House charmed her, and she thought that if she *could* live in London she would choose to live there. Always she trembled a little when she passed Tite Street, thinking of the tragic genius who had made it famous and who was eating out his heart in Reading Gaol. She would never pass through the street, or look at No. 16, for fear her [236] action might seem to savour of the cruel curiosity that lifts the cere-cloth from a dead face to seek upon it the marks that life has made and death been unable to erase.

At last she would be home again, braced and fresh from her long walk and her thoughts—until she sat to her table. Then slowly, but unfailingly, physical weariness would steal upon her, and mental depression that could not be shaken off.

The facts were to be faced at last that the six stories had sped no further ahead than the first few startling phrases; and that living with the utmost frugality she was down to the bare cold sum of ten pounds. She had long ago decided that she could make no further demand on Bramham, although he had urged her to do so if she found herself in need "before her ship came home" laden with the rewards of labour. She had received several kind and cheery letters from

him, and answered them in the same spirit. Afterwards, she had let the correspondence lapse, for he wrote of a trip "home" before long, and she was afraid that he might seek her out.

She possessed no valuables to realise on, except the piece of Spanish lace which had been valued by a pawnbroker at thirty shillings. She had nothing, in fact, but her literary genius, which had gone back upon her in her hour of need. Terrible doubts of her powers assailed her now. Could she really write? Or was she merely a scribbling woman who *might* be successful as the editress of a woman's dress paper?

No! no! She denied it vehemently. She *knew* that she had the "restless heart and plotting brain" of the born writer; the cunning hand for the swift, smiting word; the fine eye for the terse or sonorous sentence; the tuned ear for the phrase that, like a chord of music, caused her exquisite pleasure. And she had knowledge of a magic land full of strange people and cruel ghosts and [237] dear delights: and an imagination: and a vocabulary.

Of these things she was certain, when she was sane and calm; but she was not often sane and calm. No woman in her state ever is, even under the kindliest circumstances. Terrors, pleasures, fears, hopes—all are seen through the blurred, exaggerating glass of emotion.

The fear began to haunt her that she would not have enough money in hand to pay the expenses of her approaching illness. Sometimes she threw fear down and trampled on it; but other times it overcame her, swept her off her feet, engulfed her. Lest she should succumb entirely and ignobly she would wrench herself free, and, hastening out of doors, spend the remainder of the day wandering, resting sometimes in the Abbey, sometimes in the Brompton Oratory, seeking always a scene of peace and beauty.

One day her breezy landlady approached her, using all the tact and kindness she had command of, yet taking the girl cruelly unawares.

"My dear," she said pleasantly, "I hope you have found a place to go to when your time comes?"

Poppy sat paling and reddening before her, speechless with confusion.

"Ah, my dear, you needn't mind me," said Miss Drake kindly. "I've lived among 'theatricals' all my days, and I know what life is for a lovely girl like you—and I can see you're a good girl, too!"

Poppy got up and walked away to the window, so unnerved she knew not what to do or say. The kind woman's words threw her into a state of misery. She had no idea that her secret was shared by others yet.

"What I wanted to say, dear," continued Miss Drake, "was, that if you haven't made your arrangements, you ought to do so at once: because it would be very inconvenient if anything happened here. You can see yourself, dear, the kind of house this is, full of quiet business people, [238] who wouldn't like things to be upset—a doctor coming and going on the stairs and a nurse and all that fuss, you know. So, much as I shall regret losing you——"

"Oh, don't say anything more, Miss Drake," Poppy interposed hastily. "Of course, I shall go—I am going quite soon; I haven't made up my mind *where*, but I will do so at once—I'll find out as soon as I can——"

"Yes, yes, of course—don't worry; don't upset yourself, dear—*Butterton's Weekly* is a good paper to find a nursing home in, if you haven't the address of any woman. But there! I expect you will get along all right."

The moment she had gone Poppy flew out to the nearest paper-shop, bought a *Butterton's Weekly*, and brought it home for deep study. It is an odious paper. When she had read a few of its advertisements, nausea seized her. Was she one of the army of these asking for *secret* and *confidential* homes? And were these homes offered by *discreet nurses* who could *get the baby adopted if desired*, meant for people like her? Again shame flushed her, flooded her. She crushed the paper into a ball, hid it, and went out for the whole day. But when she came in she uncrushed it, and read in it again with dull eyes.

One little shabby advertisement drew her at last. The address it gave was a little mean street in Westminster. But the advertiser with great subtlety, and doubtless at the cost of extra pence, had added the magic words, "*Near Westminster Abbey.*"

Those little words redeemed the whole of the wretched sordid rag for Poppy. Her soul lifted up its head once more. Westminster Abbey! The sight of that beautiful place was for all the poor creatures who wanted these homes—it was for her! *His* son should be born near Westminster Abbey!

The next day she sought the address—No. 10, Old Street—and found it after long wandering. It [239] was, indeed, near Westminster Abbey, but the street was terribly poor. The minute she got into it, she cried out within herself:

"No: it cannot be here: I will not have it here—." But at last she found the number staring at her from a dingy door. At that she turned and looked for Westminster Abbey—but there was no sign of it: only tall, narrow, sad houses, with frowsily-curtained windows; bleak children playing in the gutter and a knife-grinder wailing out his chant:

"Knives to grind.
Scissors to grind.
Pots and tea-
Kittles to mend."

"I shall die if I come here," she said desperately, and turned to fly, but the door opened suddenly and a woman came out and ran an eye over her.

"Good-evening, lady. I see it is me you want," was her laconic greeting. "Step inside."

And Poppy found herself doing as she was bidden, following the woman into a tawdry sitting-room, which a seething gas-jet lighted with a blue and pallid glare. She and the woman faced each other over a plum-coloured table-cloth that had a border of yellow-floss flowers in hideous free-hand design.

"Are you Nurse Selton?" Poppy asked; and Mrs. Selton smilingly acknowledged her name. She was a little dark villain of a woman, with a hard mouth full of assorted teeth, and shrewd, black eyes. Her expression, however, was good-tempered, and the nursing costume she wore gave her an air of respectability, even refinement. She proceeded to inform Poppy that she was well known and *esteemed* in the neighbourhood; that the house was quiet and private "in the extreme"; and that, as a nurse, she possessed all the necessary diplomas and certificates. (Whether this last was [240] true or not her listener never discovered.)

"You will be *most* comfortable," she finished. Poppy shuddered.

"What are your terms?" she asked, in a dull voice, having entirely made up her mind not to stay with this hateful woman in this hateful house. But she wished to parley and give herself time to rest, for she felt strangely ill. The woman named a sum ridiculously high.

"I could not afford to pay that," she answered; and Nurse Selton regarded her coldly.

"That is not much for a lady of your sort—*first*, I presume? You won't get lower terms anywhere else. Won't *the gentleman* help you?"

When Poppy realised the meaning of this question, the best she could do was to bite her lips and avert her eyes from the odious woman, who discontentedly continued:

"Well—I'll make it thirty shillings a week *until*, and two pounds a week *after*. Two guineas *for the little affair*—and if you want a doctor, a guinea extra."

"I don't think I care to stay," said the girl in a low voice. "You said in your advertisement that your house was near Westminster Abbey, but I see that it is nothing of the kind."

"Well, you make a great mistake," said the nurse perkily. "I'll show you a room where you can see the Abbey as plain as the nose on my face. Follow me."

And Poppy followed again, through the hall that smelled of frying herrings and soapsuds, up a narrow, oil-clothed staircase; across two landings; higher and higher, darker and darker, stumbling and kicking the narrow steps, to the top landing of all. There were three doors upon it, and one of them Mrs. Selton opened and drove forward to light a gas-jet. It smelled close and dank, but yet was inoffensively plain and simple—the ordinary bedroom furniture with no [241] adornments of any kind. Straight facing the door was a little casement-window, with a wide ledge to lean upon; this the nurse approached and threw open.

"There you are," said she stormily; and Poppy looked forth, and looked again, and stayed looking, for it was well worth having "clomb the deadly stair" to see. There was the grey old spired pile, lying lovely against the pale evening light.

"I will stay," she said simply.

The woman thought her a fool.

"Everything paid in advance," said she in a business-like tone. Being satisfied on that point they descended. Presently, after answering a few more odiously piercing questions, Poppy escaped.

CHAPTER XVI [242]

IN the room overlooking the Abbey were spent many dark and ominous hours. By direction of Nurse Selton, Poppy presented herself at No. 10 one dreary October day, and while she stood knocking at the door of the mean house, the grey, sad shadows of Westminster fell across her, and were not lifted by day or night.

Each part of London has its own peculiar atmosphere. Chelsea is cheerful; Kensington reserved; Bayswater extremely refined; Bloomsbury vulgar and pathetic—and a number of other things. Westminster is essentially sad—sad with a noble, stately sadness.

"It cannot grieve as them that have no hope," but its high towers and spires, its statues, cloisters, yards, hospitals, and ancient walls—all have an aloof air of haunting melancholy. Beautiful but unsmiling, Westminster dreams always and sadly of the great, noble past.

So, when Poppy came into it that October day, its brooding spirit enfolded her, and all her life after she was never quite able to lift from her heart the sad, lovely hand of Westminster.

At night, when she could open her little casement-window and gaze out at the profile of the Abbey, and hear sometimes the bells of "sweet St. Margaret's," life went kindly with her. Before leaving Hunter Street, at the last moment, a fair thing had happened. The editor of *The Cornfield* had sent her a cheque for eight pounds seventeen shillings, in payment for a story which she had [243] written in Sophie Cornell's bungalow and discovered of late at the bottom of a trunk. It was a story full of sunshine and gay, gibing wit, and the editor asked her for more work in the same

vein. She had none, indeed, to send, but the request put her in good heart for the future. She essayed to write a little from day to day in the upper chamber; but the atmosphere was wrong for the romantic sun-bitten tales of her own land that seethed within her, and yet evaded her pen when she sought to fasten them to paper. Also, though she had but to close her eyes to see Africa lying bathed in spring sunshine, and to remember every detail of scents and sounds, it broke her heart to write of these things in a room dim with fog and full of a piercing smell that found its way from the kitchen up four flights of stairs and through closed doors—the smell of bloaters.

She brightened her room as much as possible with flowers, and taking down Mrs. Selton's tawdry pictures, had the walls bare, except for a blue print of Watts's *Hope*—a statuesque-limbed woman, with blindfolded eyes, who sits at the top of the world sounding the last string of a broken viol. On a day when hope was bright in her, Poppy had bought the picture at a little shop in Victoria Street, and now she counted it one of her dearest possessions. Always it comforted and cheered her on.

Days came when she needed all the comfort she could get. There were other women in the house who were apparently in the same case as herself, but they were haggard, furtive creatures, holding converse with none, shutting doors swiftly at the approach of anyone but Nurse Selton, creeping out for air under the cloak of night.

Sometimes the woman in the adjoining room moaned all night, railing at Fate and God that she should have been brought to this pass. [244]

Once through an open door Poppy heard haggling going on about the premium to be paid with a baby that was to be "adopted."

The sordidness of life, and the meanness of human nature, pressed around her. It was hard to keep ideals in such an atmosphere; hard to flaunt the green flag of love and hope, when there were so many hands eager to pull it down and trample it in the mire. A joyful spirit seemed out of place here. To the people she had got among, the thing that she thought wonderful and lovely was a curse and a bane! The mean house in the back street and the common-minded people seemed in a conspiracy to make her feel low, and shameful, when she wished only to be proud and happy.

"This must be part of the terror that comes of breaking the moral law," she whispered to herself. "One's act can bring one into contact with sordid people, and squalor and vice—one may become degraded and soiled in spite of oneself." She looked around her with hunted eyes. "There is nothing fine or noble anywhere here, except Watts's picture!" she thought; but when she opened her window and saw the grand old Abbey, she could think it no longer. There it lay in the gloom, grand and silent, standing for great, proud things: the long pile with the hunch at one end of it and at the other the stately twin pinnacles facing Palace Yard, where Raleigh's head fell, and where London goes rolling by to East and to West.

Yes: it stood for all high and noble things and thoughts! All grand ideals! Nothing squalid there, or shameful! Surely it belonged to her—belonged to everyone who loved it, and loved what it meant. But did it? Was she cut off from it because—? She drew in her breath, and thought for a long time with closed eyes and clasped hands. [245]

"... I suppose morality is one of the high things—and I am not moral. I am one of the Magdalenes of the earth now!... whoever knows, will call me an immoral woman! I think I am only a mistaken one. I can see *that* now, thinking not of myself, but of my son to be. I should, if I had no moral instincts, at least have thought of consequences to my child! Well-brought-up girls are trained to think of these things, I suppose. But I was not well brought up—I was never brought up at all. I was a child of Nature. A poppy, blowing and flaming in the field—and plucked. If I had been anything else I should not have been in the garden that night at a time when well-brought-up girls were in bed! And I should have flown at the first sound of danger—but I didn't. Not because I did not recognise danger; but because I *did* recognise something I had been looking for all my life—Love. And I put out both arms and embraced it. *Now* it seems revealed to me that I should not have done this ... I should have fenced and fended ... guarded myself ... given nothing ... until he had asked for me and taken me, before all the world ... and made a nest for me somewhere away from the squalor of the world where no begriming thoughts could touch me and smirch the mother of *his* son. *Then* I suppose the Abbey would have been for me too!—--"

She twisted her lips and flung out her fingers.

"And I wouldn't change a thing that is done. Not for all the world could give would I forget or have undone that radiant hour!... And yet ... and yet ... how I should love the nest for my child ... the peace and fine honour of a wife's bed to lay *his* son upon! Oh! why does life tear the hearts of women in half like this?" She rested her head on her hands and shed passionate tears for herself and for all women like her. At last she said:

"Good-night, old Abbey! You are *mine* all the same—mine because, moral or immoral, I love the things you stand for. You cannot rob even bad people of the love of beauty. And no one can rob me of the peace you have put into my heart night after night." [246]

At last illness descended upon her. She had often known torment of mind, now she knew torment of body, and her mind did not suffer at all; but was possessed of a kind of exultation that supported and refreshed her through terrible gaps of time.

Nurse Selton came in often, but the girl preferred to be alone. Most of the day was spent between *Hope* over the mantelpiece and the casement-window. Often she thought of the native

women in her own land, who, when the time comes to bring forth, go quietly away and make a soft green bed in some sheltered place, and there suffer in silence and alone; then, after a few hours, return as quietly to every-day work and go serenely on with life, the new-born child slung behind the shoulders. The thought appealed to Poppy. She said:

"That is the way I should have borne my son if I had stayed in Africa ... out in the air—with the sun shining. But oh! these terrible walls that shut one in!... and without—cold, fog, mud!"

When evening fell, sickly and grey-green, she opened her casement-window and leaned upon its sill. The roar of London heard through the fog was like the dull boom of the breakers on the Durban back beach. Far away, the sky above Trafalgar Square was spasmodically lit by electric advertisements.

In the street below, a woman's raucous voice pathetically shrieked:

"It's 'ard to give the 'and
Where the 'eart can
Nev-ver be."

But Poppy did not hear. With hidden eyes and hands clasped tight upon the pains that racked her, she was unravelling the mystery of Life and Love. [247]

Evelyn Carson's son was born in the dawn of a late October day: heralded in by Big Ben striking the hour of five. Poppy gave one long, ravished glance at the little dimpled morsel, with its sleek, black head and features like crumpled rose-leaves, then lay back content and at peace with all the world.

"How sweet it is to be a woman!" she thought, forgetting all past pain and despair, all anguish to come. "My heart can never be a stone again, nor my soul a shrivelled leaf."

She drowsed happily through the days that followed, letting her mind rest with her body; she thought of nothing but the sweetness of being a mother; she was intoxicated by the cling of the little lips to her breast.

"I am a *real* woman," she said. "This is what I was born for and made beautiful for. Poor, *poor* old Sara!"

When Nurse Selton came one day and asked if she would like to get her child "adopted," she would have struck the woman's face if it had been within reach. As it was not, she said in a voice that was a drawn sword:

"Go away! I hate you!" And Nurse Selton actually understood and went away. She considered Poppy—taking one thing with another—the craziest patient she had ever had.

Poppy talked to her baby afterwards. "I said I would be at peace with the world for evermore dear one; but here I am, my old self already. And I see that it will always be so. I must be at war for *your* sake now. I must fight *your* enemies—until you are old enough to fight them for yourself. [248] To *dare* suggest such a thing!" A little while after she whispered passionately to the sleek, black head:

"She did not know she was speaking of a king's son!"

CHAPTER XVII [249]

WHEN the time came for departure from No. 10, Old Street, Poppy did not go from Westminster. The grip of the place was on her and she did not care to leave it. But she sought and found a part of more cheerful aspect—a quiet square with a triangle of green in its centre, and the spire of an old church showing above the branches of trees in one of its corners. The house where she engaged two rooms had an old-fashioned air, though upon the opening of the front door was disclosed the depressing interior common to most houses of its kind—the worn linoleum in the hall and stairway; the inevitable pretentious hall-chair and umbrella-stand; the eternal smell of fish and boiling linen. But the two rooms were an artistic find. They had been inhabited and furnished by an actress, who was married to an artist, and were original without being uncomfortable.

The walls were papered with ordinary brown paper to a ledge of painted wood, above which rose a smoke-grey paper with pale zigzags upon it, making a charming background for a number of water-colour sketches and black-and-white etchings of all the chief theatrical celebrities, from Sir Henry Irving downwards.

There was also a piano—old and wicked, but still a piano, and various odd and quaint bits of furniture. The owners of these things had gone to America for a two-years' tour, and being anxious to come back to their rooms when they returned, had given the landlady instructions to [250]

"let furnished," and make what she could out of them. Poppy seized them with joy, glad to have so pleasant a setting for the struggle and fight she knew must ensue.

From the first it was bound to be a handicapped fight, for the king's son behaved like one, and a tyrannical despot at that. It was plain that work would only be achieved by desperate and persistent effort at all sorts of odds and ends of time in the day and night.

Probably things would have been more difficult still, but for the offices of a kindly soul who lived in the lower regions of the house by day, and ascended to somewhere near the stars at night, accompanied by her husband and two children.

She had opened the door to Poppy on the first visit, and having been the medium through which the rooms and tenant were brought together, she thereafter looked upon the tenant as her special *protégée*. She was a real Cockney, born and bred in Horseferry Road—quite young still, but with the hopelessly middle-aged, slack-waisted, slip-shod look of the English working man's wife who, having achieved a husband and two children, is content to consider her fate fulfilled and herself no more a player, but merely a *passée* looker-on at the great game of life. However, Mrs. Print did her looking on very good-humouredly. Her teeth were decayed, her hair in strings, but she carried an air of perpetual cheer and a wide smile. Her husband, a spruce, fresh-cheeked young cabman, looked, on the contrary, as though all the cares of the universe lay across his shoulders.

"'E always puts on that look," smiled Mrs. Print to Poppy; "in case I might ask 'im for an hextra sixpence for the 'ousekeeping."

She "charred" for Poppy; did various things, such as lighting the sitting-room fire and keeping the hearth and fire-irons clean. During this last business, which she always managed to prolong [251] to the best part of an hour, she would give Poppy a brief summary of the morning news; an account of what the rest of the people in the house had been doing; what her George had said to her before he went to work; little bits of information about her two children; and advice about the treatment of Poppy's baby—generally sound.

She nearly drove poor Poppy frantic, yet it was impossible to be really angry with her: she was so essentially well-meaning and so unconsciously humorous. Besides, she took the king's son into the garden of the Square for a couple of hours every fine afternoon, carrying him most carefully up and down whilst she conversed in loud, agreeable tones with a dozen and one people who passed by, exchanging chaff and banter, roaring with laughter, scolding her own children—Jimmy and Jack—who were left to amuse themselves by staring at the immaculate plots of arsenically-green grass and the bare branches of the trees. If they did anything else, their mother's tongue would wag and her finger threaten.

"Come off there, Jimmy! Jack, if you do that again, I'll pay you—I'll pay you *somethink merciful*!" Jack, a stolid, emotionless boy, looked as though he had been badly carved out of a log of wood; but Jimmy was of a more vivid appearance, being afflicted with what his mother called *St. Viper's Dance*.

In her window Poppy would sit at her table, her eyes occasionally glancing at the figures in the Square, her pen flying over the paper before her. She was writing for money. Thoughts of Fame had slipped away from her. She put her child before Fame now: and wrote no better for that.

Day by day she grew paler, and the high cheek-bones had shadows beneath them that might easily turn into hollows. She had not regained flesh much, and a little of her buoyancy was gone. [252] What she needed was to sit in the air and sunshine all day playing with her baby's dimples. Dank Westminster, built on a swamp, low-lying and foggy, when all the rest of London was clear, was no place for her or for her baby; but she did not know it, and had no time to find out, so wrapt was she in the business of making money that would assure home and life for her child and herself.

The days were all too short, and soon the midnight-oil began to burn. Thereafter, shadows really *did* change gradually into hollows—very soft hollows, however. Still, her eyes were always blue and brave. Mrs. Print used to observe her disapprovingly and tell her that she should take a leaf out of the book of the *lydy* upstairs, who lay on the sofa all day reading novels.

"Miss Never-Sweat—that's what I calls her!" she said, contemptuously dismissing thus an anæmic blonde damsel on the first floor, who mysteriously did nothing except take a fat poodle for half an hour's walk every day. Mrs. Print's attitude towards this graceful *dilettante* was one of resentful suspicion—resentful because she did nothing: suspicious for the same reason!

"With everybody helse in this 'ouse, including you, Mrs. Chard, it is

"'Come day, go day,
Please, God, send Sunday.'

"But all days looks the same to *'er*," she remarked, as she diligently polished the fire-irons in Poppy's sitting-room. The latter, intensely bored, knew that it was no use trying to divert Mrs. Print from the subject until it was exhausted; *then*, mayhap, she would depart.

"When I went up to do 'er fire this morning, she says to me, she says" (here Mrs. Print pitched her voice high and fell into a drawl), "'Oh, Mrs. Print, *dear*, I *do* feel so hill this morning. I've got [253] pains in my 'ead and chest, and I can't henjoy my food at all. And my nerves is quite *rore*.' I gives one look at her yeller skin, and I says: 'Why, you've got the *boil*, that's what *you've* got, for want of getting about on your two pins. Wot you want to do is to go to the chimist's round the corner, and arst him for a pennorth of ikery-pikery. When you've took *that*, come back 'ome and turn out these two rooms of yours and cook your dinner—' She give me a look like a mad hyhena, and slabbed the door."

"Now, Mrs. Print," said her listener wearily, "do make haste and finish that fender. I want to work while baby is asleep."

"Yes ma'am, I shan't be another minit. I must just give the 'earth a brush up, 'a dirty 'earth makes dinner late,' and that's what mine'll be to-day, same as breakfast was, and Old George gone off in a dandy because he was late."

She always spoke of her husband as Old George, her children as *our* Jack and *my* Jimmy.

As the days went by, writing became more and more impossible to Poppy. It had begun to be a weary grinding out of words, common-place, and uninspired. She came to hate the sight of her writing-table, because of the torment of disgust that seized her as she sat at it and read over such things as she had been able to write. And her longing to be out in the air became almost intolerable. She felt like a starved woman—starved for want of the wind and trees and flowers, anything that smelt of open free spaces such as she had known all her life until now.

And nothing happened to encourage her. She had no news of her *Book of Poems*, and when she called to see the publisher, he was never visible, and when she wrote she got no answer except [254] that the reader for the firm had not been able to look through the book. Her story had not yet appeared in *The Cornfield*, and the one she had followed it up with came back, accompanied by a little printed paper, which read to the effect that the editor was at present "overstocked." Of course, this was a polite way of saying that the story wasn't up to the standard of the magazine. She burned with chagrin when she first read it. Afterwards, she became hardened to the daily sight of intimations of the kind, and to the sickening thud of returned manuscripts in the letter-box.

The day when she had no money in the world but the thirty shillings realised by the sale of her piece of Spanish lace, she left the baby with Mrs. Print and walked all the way to Hunter Street, on the forlorn hope that some editor might have addressed a letter to her there, enclosing a cheque. Miss Drake, the good-natured landlady, was alarmed to see her looking so ill.

"You are sitting to your desk too much, dear, and losing your beauty—and you know no girl can afford to do *that* until she has forty thousand in the bank," she said with a broad smile. "Why don't you chuck writing over and try the stage? A girl of your appearance could get into the Gaiety or Daly's any day, especially if you have any kind of a voice. The change of life and scene would do you a lot of good—and take it from *me*, dear, there's nothing so comforting in this world as a regular salary."

On top of the 'bus she was obliged from sheer weariness to take back to Westminster, Poppy turned the idea over in her mind. The stage had never had any attraction for her. Unlike most girls, she did not hold the belief that she had only to be seen and heard upon the boards to become famous. But she could not turn away from the thought of the change from sitting at her desk; and the regular salary had its potent charm, too—Miss Drake spoke like an oracle there! [255]

However, she put the thought by for another day or two. She would give literature another chance, she said, with an ironical lip, and she essayed to finish her novel. For three days and the better part of three nights she hung over it in every moment she could spare from her child; at the end of that time she thrust the manuscript into the drawer of her table and locked it up.

"Lie there and wait for the inspired hour," she said. "I must look for other ways and means to boil the pot."

The wrench was to leave the "king's son" at home crooning in hired arms beneath the eye of Mrs. Print.

It did not take long to find out the whereabouts of theatrical agents and managers. She presented herself at the office of one of the best-known agents in London.

The staircase that led to his waiting-room was crowded with lounging, clean-shaven men, and the waiting-room hummed with the voices of girls and women and more men, all gabbling at once. Phrases made themselves heard above the din.

"No: I won't go into panto—not if Frankie goes down on his knees to me."

"Oh, he's sure to do *that*, dear!"

"She says that her figure is her stock-in-trade—musical comedy, of course."

"H'm! more stock than trade, I should say."

A score or so of made-up eyes raked Poppy from under heavy *complexion*-veiling; she became aware of such strong scents as *frangipani* and *chypre*; many ropes of large pearls; heavy fur coats flung open to reveal sparkling *art*-chains slung round bare, well-powdered necks. A wry-lipped quotation of Abinger's flitted through her memory: [256]

"Diamonds me.
Sealskins me,
I'm going on the stage."

When, after weary waiting, her turn came to be admitted to the agent's inner sanctum, she found a clean-looking, brown young man, with grey hair and a shrewd eye. He shot an enveloping glance over her while she was closing the door.

"Well, dear, what do *you* want?" he asked briskly, but pleasantly—all theatrical people "dear" each other automatically, but Poppy, not knowing this, flushed at the term. She explained that

she was seeking work on the stage.

"Any experience?"

"No."

"Can you sing?"

"No."

"Dance?"

"Yes." (Abinger had allowed her to take lessons in Florence.)

"Good legs?"

He regarded her puzzled eyes with impatience.

"Any photographs in tights? I like to know what I'm engaging, you know. A lot of you girls come here with your spindle-shanks hidden under flounced petticoats and flowing skirts; and your bones wrapped up in heavy coats and feather boas, and you cut a great dash, and when we get you on the stage in tights it's another story altogether—not that I'm saying it about *you*, dear, for I can see——"

"I don't think I am what you require in any case," she said as she reached the door. "Good-morning."

She fled through the waiting-room and down the stairs. Some of the loungers shared a smile.

"A greenhorn, evidently!" they said. "What has Frankie been saying?" [257]

The next day she beat her way through wind and rain to another office. And the next day to yet another. Within a week she did the whole dreary round. All the waiting-rooms were crowded, for the spring provincial tours were coming on, and engagements were being booked briskly; also, there were many vacancies occurring in the pantomimes.

Several managers, taken with Poppy's appearance, offered her small parts (with a good understudy) in touring companies. But she knew that it would be impossible to think of travelling with her baby, and she did not for a moment contemplate leaving him.

By talking to all the people who talked to her, and "theatricals," generally, are a kindly, sociable people, she learned that it was of no great use to try the agencies for London engagements.

"Go to the theatres themselves," they said; adding cheerfully: "not that *that's* much good either. Every stage manager has a gang of pets waiting for an opening to occur, and they never let an outsider get in."

One agent, rather more kindly than the rest, suggested that she should try the Lyceum Theatre.

"Ravenhill is taking it for a Shakespearian season," he said. "And I should say that class of work would just suit you."

Poppy thought so too, and wasted no time about finding the Lyceum.

"Yes, Mr. Ravenhill is seeing small-part ladies and walkers-on to-day," the door-keeper informed her confidentially, and after a long waiting she was eventually shown into the Green-room, where she found the well-known Shakespearian actor sitting on a trunk, reading his letters, in the midst of piles of scenery and robes.

He was a thin, Hamlet-faced man, with a skin of golden pallor and romance-lit eyes, and he [258] looked at Poppy with kindness and comradeship.

"Have you had any experience?" he asked.

"None at all," said Poppy sadly. She was getting tired of the question, and felt inclined to vary the answer, but the truthful, kind eyes abashed the thought.

"Is there anything you could recite to me?"

Poppy thought swiftly. She knew volumes of prose and poetry, but at the word everything fled from her brain except two things—Raleigh's "O Eloquent, Just and Mighty Death!" which she in somewhat morbid mood had been reading the night before, and a poem of Henley's that had been dear to her since she had loved Carson. In desperation, at last she opened her lips and gave forth the sweet, tender words, brokenly, and with tears lying on her pale cheeks, but with the voice of a bird in the garden:

"When you are old and I am passed away—
Passed: and your face, your golden face is grey,
  I think—what e'er the end, this dream of mine
  Comforting you a friendly star shall shine
Down the dim slope where still you stumble and stray.

"Dear Heart, it shall be so: under the sway
Of death, the Past's enormous disarray
Lies hushed and dark. Still tho' there come no sign,
Live on well pleased; immortal and divine
Love shall still tend you as God's angels may,
When you are old."

When she had finished she stood, swaying and pale, tears falling down. Ravenhill looked at her

sadly. He thought: "This girl has more than her share of the world's hard luck."

"I will take you as a walker-on," he said, "with an understudy and with the chance of a small part. You have a fine voice, and a temperament—but I need not tell you that. Of course, if you want to get on, you need to study and work hard. I can't offer you more than thirty shillings a [259] week—with a difference if you play."

He did not mention that all other walkers-on with understudies were only getting a guinea; some of them nothing at all. He only looked at her with kindness and comradeship.

As for her: she could have fallen at his feet in thankfulness. The contract was signed and she went home happy.

Thirty shillings a week *certain*!

CHAPTER XVIII [260]

IT was in bitter February weather that Poppy's engagement began, and there had been a week of heavy rehearsing before the opening night. She soon felt the strain of the unaccustomed work. Ravenhill's was a Repertoire-Company, and the bill was changed every week, so that while they played one play at night they were busy most of the day rehearsing another for the coming week. This meant that from ten o'clock in the morning until three or four in the afternoon, and again from seven until eleven at night, Poppy was parted from her baby. She was obliged to permanently employ a little nursemaid, and also, to her bitter sorrow, to wean her baby.

She comforted herself disconsolately with the thought that the change was better for him, because she was not so vigorous now as at first. But many a time the silky black head was scalded with its mother's tears, for that she might no more feel the cling of little lips.

The theatre began to interest her from a literary point of view. The writing of plays suggested itself as a fascinating medium for the expression of herself; she saw that knowledge of stage-craft would be of enormous use to her in this direction, and she became absorbed in observing and making notes on everything concerning stage technique and production.

Her appearance, when "made up," was quite charming, and Ravenhill was always glad to put her into a scene, and would give her a one-line part whenever it was possible. Often she would [261] find herself "on" alone with the "star" in a scene—a court lady, perhaps, lingering by a window while the Queen gave forth an impassioned soliloquy; or a picturesque figure in the background of a garden-scene; but terrible shyness and emotion affected her when she had to open her lips on the stage, if only to say "Good-morrow" or "Come hither"; and her voice was altogether too delicate and canorous for stage use. She preferred to be on with the crowd—a peasant woman in a tattered skirt and kerchief, leading a hooting riot in *Richard II*, or a stately lady dancing in the house of the *Capulets*, or an Egyptian girl in the streets of Alexandria carrying a torch to light *Antony* and *Cleopatra* to bed. Ravenhill was disappointed in her that she did not work at her voice, nor seem anxious for parts. He did not know that she was trying to serve two gods; and that all her incense was burnt at the altar of literature, for still she returned and returned again to the mistress she loved, but whose face was turned from her.

She could not afford to ride to and fro from the theatre, for there were four journeys to be made on ordinary days, and on *matinée* days six, and tenpence a day made too large a hole in a salary needed for many things. So at night she took a 'bus to Westminster Bridge at the cost of a halfpenny and from thence, in all weathers, she faithfully padded-the-hoof for home. The shelter of the long stretch of St. Stephen's and the Houses of Parliament was always grateful; sometimes, just as she turned the corner of the Victoria Tower, the wind from the river would sweep and curl around her, nearly rushing her off her feet. Then came the long, cutting tramp along the Embankment. Often in those midnight walks she thought of Charles Bramham. He, too, had known walking in the biting cold on tired feet and with a painfully empty stomach! The fatigue [262] that got hold of her sometimes was terrible. But always for the sake of the silky black head of a king's son, she laughed and worked on.

The people at the theatre were kind and pleasant, and she made many friends. But they were friends of the theatre only, she kept them all rigidly out of her private life; and that not without effort, for her personality was magnetic and people always wanted to know her. She was interesting and mysterious, they thought, and presently she became the enigma of the theatre because she never lied about her salary, nor bragged of her genius, nor repeated fascinating things that "someone in front" had said about her voice and her face, nor bored anyone with tales of the great future predicted for her.

Indeed, she was at this time striving with a valorous heart to live according to Stevenson's creed:

> "To be honest: to be kind:
> To earn a little—and to spend a
> little less."

One day when she had got home early from rehearsal, and was spending some rapturous moments over the adored silken head asleep on its pillow, Mrs. Print came to her very much *en déshabille*, her head wrapped in a towel, full of excitement.

"There's a gentleman at the front door, knocking," she said; "and, oh, ma'am, Mrs. Chard would you be so kind as to open it? As sure as I wash my 'ead, it always 'appens so!"

Poppy, good-naturedly, complied, giving a switch of her eye at a mirror first, for vanity was far from being dead in her yet. She opened the door to—Charles Bramham!

Pale with amazement, she stood glimmering at him through her hair. [263]

"You!" she cried; then held out her hands in welcome, for welcome he truly was, with the smell and burn of Africa on him.

"Yes; me! I bet you didn't think I'd have the cheek to come and find you out. I had a great time digging your address out of Miss Drake. But why should you hide? Mayn't I come in?"

"Of course," she said, and led the way; but her manner was a little constrained. It had not been on her programme at all to let Charles Bramham, or any other man, into the secret of her life.

"What do you want?" she asked half crossly, when they were in the sitting-room.

"To see you. And you looked mightily glad to see me, at first. Don't tell me now, that you are not! But what have you been doing to yourself? London is killing you. You'd better come back to Africa, or you'll pass out. You're so thin I can see through you, and your eyes are too big for your face."

He sat down and they talked eagerly. She told him something of her disappointments, more of her hopes, and at last, of being obliged to take to the theatre as a stop-gap "until such time as she began to succeed in literature."

"But why work like this?" he said discontentedly. "You'll kill yourself burning two candles at once."

"Not I?" said she gaily. She had no intention of letting him know that but for her stage salary she would be penniless.

"I don't see any sense in it," he muttered. "It can't be because you like work. No woman ever yet liked work—they weren't meant to. Anyhow, you can knock off for to-day. Put your hat on and come out for a drive and to dinner. I'll drive you to your theatre afterwards."

"I'm afraid I can't," Poppy faltered. "I never go out ... I can't leave my work ... I am tired." She [264] stopped lamely. He knew that she was not speaking the truth. The fact was, that she had given the little nursemaid an hour or two off.

"Ah! there's something you don't care to tell me," he said with a half-smile; but a shadow crossed his face. At that moment they were both transfixed by a sound. The king's son began to lament in the next room. Bramham would never have guessed, but he happened to see the look that leapt into her eyes at the sound; then he stood staring at her with a question in his, while the scarlet slowly mounted to her cheeks.

In truth, she was filled with confusion, and did not know what to say. She remembered the time she had accepted his offer of money and help; how she had talked to him then of her work and aspirations, but had breathed no word of *this*. How could he know that the truth had been hidden even from her? What could he think but that she had deceived him, made use of him?

The king's son cried again, indignantly, beseechingly. Again Bramham saw the mother-look leap to her eyes. With no word she flew from the room. When she returned she was carrying a little fragrant bundle, and she came to Bramham, who was apparently rooted to the spot where she had left him. He had heard her crooning to the child in the next room, but, like an unbelieving Thomas, he wanted still more proof. Her face gave it to him. Confusion was gone. Only tender, brooding peace and love was there. She held the baby under his eyes.

"My son, Charlie!"

He stared down blankly at the little lovely thing, and it stared back at him.

"Good God!" said he; "am I dreaming? I could swear that was Eve Carson's child!"

"Yes," said Poppy softly, and her voice was *ci risuoniamo in cristallo*. "It is. But how did you [265] know?" she wonderingly asked.

Charles Bramham was dumb. He could only stare. Later, he sat down heavily in a chair and used his handkerchief.

"Life has held a good many surprises for me, but never one like this. *Carson!* ... and *you*!... He my dearest friend! You, well, you know what I feel about you. Yet you two have deceived me! Sprung this amazing thing on me. Why! I *can't* understand it.... Good God! I love that fellow! ... *he* could—?"

"Oh! Charlie, dear friend, you go too fast. Don't judge or misjudge. Nothing is as you think. He did not deceive you ... nor did I. That night you offered to help me and I accepted, I ... *I didn't know that this wonderful thing was going to happen to me* ... and *he* knows nothing. It is *my* secret."

Bramham digested these things as best he might. Later, he said:

"Well he's *got* to know—and I shall tell him. Why, he's not that sort of fellow at all, Rosalind ... he would throw everything to Hades for the sake of a woman he loved ... and, of course, he loves you, and would be here with you if he knew.... The whole thing is the craziest mystery I ever

heard of ... *of course*, he can't know ... but I shall tell him, if I have to go up to Borapota after him."

"Never, *never*!" said she. "No one shall ever tell him. It is *my* secret. You dare not interfere. I would never forgive you."

He turned away from her, angry, sore, bitterly puzzled.

"Oh, Charlie," she said wistfully. "Don't be angry. This is *my* life—my secret.... Leave me to do as seems best to me.... Tell me," she said softly, "how did you know that my child ... is ... *his* son?" [266]

"Know? Why, anyone would know. He is the dead image—and there are Eve Carson's eyes staring at me. No two men in the world have eyes like that."

"Are they not beautiful? And yet so strange!—one blue and one brown! I never—" she stopped suddenly. She had almost told Bramham that she did not know that Carson's eyes looked thus, since she had never seen them, except in the darkness. But much as she liked Bramham, she could not share with him *that* strange, sweet secret.

Only one more question Bramham asked her.

"Was it Karri you told me of that night, Rosalind?—the man you loved?"

"Yes," she said. "The only man I have ever loved, or will love."

She dined with Bramham, after all, and before they parted she had bound him by every oath he honoured never to reveal her secret to Carson.

"If you do," she passionately told him, "you may precipitate both him and me into terrible misery, and neither of us would forgive you. We should probably hate you for ever. Leave alone things that you do not understand.... How *should* you understand! You have accidentally touched on the fringe of a strange story ... something you would never have known except by accident. For I don't intend the world to know this when it knows *me* some day, Charlie."

"Why?" said he, looking keenly at her. "Are you ashamed of your child?"

"Ashamed!" she laughed happily. "Ashamed of the greatest joy that ever came to a woman; the son of the man she loves!"

A happy look came into his face, too, for the first time since he had known the truth.

"That's the spirit! If a woman has the courage to take the big jump, she should have the grit to face the fences all round the course ... but I don't believe many do; and you can't blame them for [267] that either. Rosalind, I want to tell you something. I'm a rich man, and I ... I have no children." He swallowed an odd sound in his throat and averted his eyes for a moment, but went on calmly: "I long ago made up my mind to leave every rap, when I die, to women who have done what you have done—and had to suffer for it."

She looked at him thoughtfully for a while.

"I think you would be wrong, Charlie. People would call it putting a premium on sin, and—you couldn't really help the woman who suffered. Nothing could help her. The right kind of woman would value her suffering more than your money, believe me." Then, as she saw his saddened face, she said, "Help the little love-babies, if you like, and bring them up to be as kind and sweet a friend as *you* are to women—" Impulsively he put his hand on hers lying on the dinner-table.

"Let me—" he began.

"But never offer to help *my* love-baby," she said warningly, "as long as he has a mother to work for him, and a king for his father somewhere in the world."

CHAPTER XIX [268]

AT the end of April the season at the Lyceum drew to a close, and Ravenhill re-formed his company to tour the provinces.

Many of those who had worked with him throughout the season were moneyed girls, with such a passion for the stage, that they were only too glad to give their services—"walking-on," dancing, and understudying—without salary, for the sake of the experience in a London theatre; and it would have been an easy matter for the manager to have composed his touring company largely of such people. But he happened to be a man with a big heart for the stragglers of the profession; those who were in it for the love of their art, too, but incidentally obliged to make a living. And so, though he did not disdain to employ occasional rich amateurs, he never allowed them to usurp the work of legitimate actors and actresses.

In making a selection of people who would be useful to him by reason of their looks, or talent, or both, he included Poppy on his list, and forthwith she received a little notice during the last London week to the effect that if she cared to go on tour (with the hope of advancement if she studied) the offer was open to her. But the salary offered was smaller than she had been receiving, and she knew that it was useless to think of travelling with her small Pat and supporting herself and him on it. (Ravenhill was unaware, of course, that there was any question

[269]

of supporting a child.) She was obliged to refuse the offer.

With the closing of the theatre the face of the future took on a blank and appalling expression. Exercising the greatest economy, she had yet not been able to save more than three pounds out of her long engagement; and she knew not where the next money was to come from. The stories she wrote still faithfully returned. The *Book of Poems*, the one brave string in her viol of hope, had been lost. The publisher said that it was only mislaid and might be found at any moment; but Poppy felt a sick certainty that she would never hear of or see her darling book again. Most foolishly, she had kept no copy of it, and though she believed that by turning up the pages of her memory she might re-write it, she could not spare the time it would cost to do this. Even if she had the necessary leisure, she despaired of ever writing her poems again in all their first perfection—a thought would surely be lost here, a line missing there!

Heart-broken, rage seized her when she first received the news. She saw a red haze before her eyes as in the days when she hated Aunt Lena, and she longed for a hammer and the publisher's head on a block. Afterwards she achieved calmness that was not resignation, and went to interview the publisher and find out what he meant to do. Apparently he had not meant to do anything except take up the bland and Micawberesque attitude of waiting for the book to "turn up." But Poppy's heart was full of the rage and fear of a mother-wolf who sees famine ahead, and though she successfully hid these primitive emotions under a composed manner, there was a feverish urgency about her which, strangely convincing, subtly communicated itself to the publisher, so that presently, quite unintentionally, he found himself promising (in the event of the book not being found within three months) to pay her a sum to be agreed upon, but not less than twenty pounds. In the meantime he engaged, if the book should "turn up," to read it and make [270] her a *conscientious offer* for it. He did not forget to add that poems were unmarketable ware at the best of times, and that he could not hold out hope of any specially high price for hers.

With these conditions Poppy was fain to be content, though there was poor comfort in them for her. Three months is not long if fame and name wait at the end. But it is a long time to wait for twenty pounds. And it is too long to starve. In a panic she started out once more on the dreary round of agents' offices and theatres. At the end of a week's wasted walking, and talking, chill despair began to eat its way into her brave heart; in the second week the chill was freezing bitter cold that enwrapped, and seemed to paralyse her senses, so that she could feel nothing but dull fear, not for herself, but for little crowing, merry Pat. At that time her thoughts turned to Bramham, her friend. But he was gone, and she knew not where to find him. He had bidden her good-bye and sailed for South America on a prolonged visit. It would be many months before he returned to Durban.

In the third week, while she was eking out her last ten shillings, still desperately seeking work at the theatres, she met in the Strand a girl who had been with her at the Lyceum—one of Ravenhill's moneyed girls, pretty and charming, with a host of friends and acquaintances, of whom she bitterly complained that they would not allow her to fulfill her destiny and become a *Sarah Bernhardt*. She and Poppy had shared the same mirror in a Lyceum dressing-room, and become friendly over their "make-up" boxes.

By many little marks and signs that women judge on, Marion Ashley had concluded that Miss Chard needed every penny of the small salary she earned. Her idea was that Poppy probably had an invalid mother or sister to support; and she had often wished for an opportunity to lend a [271] helping-hand to a girl whom she sincerely liked and admired. When, in the Strand, she met Poppy, pale and harassed, in worn shoes and an unseasonable gown, a thought shot through her quick mind and she advanced gaily, holding out her hands.

"You are the *very* girl I wanted to see," she cried. "Come into 'Slater's' for tea, and *do* see if you can help me in a *great* difficulty."

While Poppy took off her gloves Marion Ashley poured out the tea and her tale. It transpired that she had a cousin who was young and pretty and rich, but with a broken back. She had injured herself in the hunting-field and would never be able to walk again.

"Ever since, she has become the most awful peevish creature in the world, poor thing, and one can't be surprised at that! But no one can put up with her temper, and no one will stay with her, though she has had companion after companion. She insists on their being young and pretty, and afterwards she is jealous of them and fires them out. Then her mother and her husband come and fetch *me* round, no matter where I am, and really, you know, dear, it's a *little* hard on *me* to have my *career* interfered with ... it isn't as though I can be of any real use, for Frances is jealous of me too, if I am in the house much. Well, I'm looking out for someone for her now, and—I thought perhaps you could help me. *Do* say you can?"

She looked appealingly at the pale face opposite her, but Poppy gave no sign. She had considered the matter rapidly, but—companionships were badly paid, as a rule, and she would have to be separated from her little Pat. Marion Ashley's face fell.

"To tell the truth, dear," she said, "I thought you might undertake it yourself. Of course, I know you're far too good for that sort of thing; but I thought you might make a stop-gap of it—and the [272] salary would be good—a hundred a year Frances pays, and you'd have no expenses."

Poppy's face changed. A hundred a year! If she *must* part with Pat that would at least ensure him a home in the country, and she could save the rest.

"It is very good of you, Miss Ashley.... Will you let me think it over?"

"Oh, yes—*anything*, if you will only take it on. I should be *so* glad. Her husband is always round bothering the life out of me to find someone. Oh! I must tell you, dear there's *one* thing besides Frances's temper ... *he* is difficult."

"Bad-tempered, too?" smiled Poppy.

"*Far* from it—altogether too good-tempered and fascinating—especially where a pretty girl is concerned. In fact, my dear, he's rapid—and Frances is jealous; so there you have the trouble in a nutshell. Tiresome, isn't it? It's just as well to know these things beforehand. But I daresay you'll be able to keep him in his place."

This information depressed Poppy more than a little. She was beginning to realise that whether she liked them or not, she attracted men, and she would rather have heard of some place where there was no man on the scene. As it happened, she was still smarting from an experience of the night before. She had, in mistake, opened the door of a first-class carriage in the underground station at Victoria. She speedily closed it, but the one occupant, a man, had had time to observe her, and instantly he whipped the door open again and was out on the platform. A minute afterwards she found an almost empty "third" and stepped into it just as the train started, someone hard on her heels. When she looked up there was the first-class passenger opposite, smiling at her. For the rest of the journey he made ardent love to her with his eyes, and she sat, [273] flaming and paling there with anger. The man was serenely handsome, a gentleman in appearance at least, but his eyes had a look that angered and terrified her; a look that now she seemed to know the meaning of.

"It is terrible to have no innocence left! to know the meaning of a man like that!" she thought shudderingly, and she would not meet his eyes. Only she resolved that *always* she would turn her feet away from the paths frequented by men.

"Where does your cousin live?" she asked at last. "Perhaps, I'd better go and see her, if I make up my mind I can take the engagement."

"Yes, *do*, dear—Lower Sloane Street—I'll write the number down for you. I must fly now for rehearsal. I'm going to be in the new romantic play at The York. Send me a line there after you've seen Frances. *Do* take it on, there's a darling—good-bye."

Poppy spent the afternoon crooning and weeping over Pat's head. It seemed to her that she died a little death every time she thought of parting with him. But—was it not true that the little face had lost some of its pink tints of late?—that the odd eyes were growing larger? After she had dried her desperate tears and could trust herself to speak equably and reasonably, she called Mrs. Print into consultation.

Mrs. Print had a sister-in-law who lived in a rose-clad cottage in Surrey, and adored babies. Poppy had often seen and talked to her, and let her take Pat out; for she came up to London constantly to try to beguile Mrs. Print to part with one of her little boys—even the vivacious Jimmy would have been made welcome.

Mrs. Print assured Poppy that no *Dook's* baby would be better looked after than a child in Sarah Print's care, and that she (Poppy) could go and stay down in the little rose-clad cottage [274] whenever she was free, for Sarah had lots of room, a lovely garden, and corn-fields all round her.

"You can't see nothing but 'ills and corn-fields wheresumever you look! It would drive me off my nut to live there a week, but Sarah likes it. You tike baby down and go and 'ave a look to-morrow, ma'am."

"Nothing but hills and corn-fields!"

The words brought a mist over Poppy's eyes. *That* was what she wanted for her son. She kissed him and asked Mrs. Print to mind him for an hour while she went to Sloane Street.

In a bright room, among flowers, the invalid woman lay on a couch, with an embroidered coverlet of crimson satin drawn up to her chin. Her face was pale and petulant, with great brown eyes that roamed restlessly and were full of peevish misery. She was of the fickle, impetuous nature that indulges in groundless hates and likings, and the moment she saw Poppy standing there, she put out her hands feverishly, as if for something she had long wanted. Poppy, indeed, was sweet and dewy-looking, as always when she came from her little love-baby, and now the added beauty of courageous renouncement lighted her lilac eyes.

"Ah! I *know* you are the girl Marion was talking about," cried the invalid. "You *will* come, won't you? How lovely you are—I shall just *love* having you with me! Come and sit here where I can see you—but don't look at me; I can't bear to be looked at."

Poppy sat down by the couch and submitted to being stared at, even touched by the pale, restless hands. Mrs. Chesney did most of the talking. She only required a monosyllable here and there, and her manner varied oddly, from a cold hauteur which she vainly tried to make [275] indifferent, to entreaty that was almost servile.

"Do you like reading aloud?" she demanded, and before Poppy could speak, continued swiftly: "Oh, never mind, I don't care if you don't—*of course*, everybody *hates* it. Can you play?"

This time she waited for an answer, and Poppy saying yes, was waved towards a beautiful Erard that stood in a far corner. Taking off her gloves, she went over to it, and immediately her fingers fell into a soft and haunting melody of Ireland. The woman on the couch closed her eyes and lay like one in a trance.

While she played, Poppy resolved to take the opening offered her here. It was a living and a well-paid one. Little Pat could be sent away to a good home in the country, and though the parting must be bitter—bitter— Ah! she could not think of it! What she *must* think of was food to keep life in his little loved body, health for him in fresh sweet air; money to keep herself alive to

work for him.

As she rose from the piano there was a prayer of thankfulness on her lips for this fresh chance to live. A door opened and a man came nonchalantly in.

"Oh, Harry!" cried the invalid. "This is Miss Chard—she is going to be my new companion. Miss Chard—my husband."

Poppy bowed to the man, meeting the amused cynicism of his glance gravely. Not by word or look did she betray the fact that she had ever seen him before. But thankfulness died away in her, and once more the face of the future lowered.

Harry Chesney was the hero of the adventure in the underground railway carriage.

While she was putting on her gloves, preparing to go, she told Mrs. Chesney that she would call in the morning, when the engagement could be finally arranged. [276]

It would have been awkward and painful to have told the sick woman *now* that she was not able to accept the engagement. Being of so jealous a temperament, the invalid would probably suspect that the decision had something to do with her husband and would be caused misery in this thought.

"It will be simple to write to-night that circumstances have occurred which prevent me from coming," was Poppy's thought as she said good-bye.

"Touch the bell twice," said Mrs. Chesney.

"Oh! I'll see Miss Chard down," said Chesney, but Poppy had made no delay in touching the bell and a maid magically appeared.

The next day she waited at the York Theatre and saw Marion Ashley after rehearsal.

"I wanted to thank you," she said, "and to tell you that after all I couldn't undertake that companionship. Something has happened that makes it impossible for me to leave home. I wrote to Mrs. Chesney last night."

The brightness of Marion's smile was dashed for an instant, but she speedily recovered.

"Never mind; a lucky thing has happened here. One of the walking-on girls dropped out to-day and they want another. Mr. Lingard is a friend of mine, and he's sure to have you when he sees you—you've just the face for romantic drama. Come along and see him; he went into his office a minute ago—don't forget to say you've been with Ravenhill."

And so through Marion Ashley's kindly offices Poppy found herself once more signing a contract to "walk-on-and-understudy" at a guinea a week!

But the romantic drama was an unromantic failure.

Long before the end of the first week, the principals were looking at each other with blank faces, and holding conclaves in each other's dressing-rooms for the purpose of exchanging opinions and reports on the probable duration of the run. In the "walkers-on" room they gave it three weeks, and *that* playing to "paper houses" every night. [277]

Marion Ashley met Poppy in the wings during a quarter of an hour's wait that occurred in the second act.

"Isn't this an awful disappointment?" she said. "Have you anything in view, dear, if we come to a full-stop here?"

"Nothing!" said Poppy, with a brave, careless smile. "Divil a thing!"

"Well ... wouldn't you ... what about Mrs. Chesney? She's hankering after you still. In fact, she appears to have developed a craze for your society. She wrote to me this morning, asking me to search you out."

Poppy flushed slightly. "I'm afraid I should be a failure as a companion," was all she could say. Marion looked at her with curiosity, vexation.

The next day a terrible thing happened. For the first time in his short life little Pat was ill. Not very ill, just white and listless and disinclined to eat. Poppy, like a pale and silent ghost, held him in tender arms every moment of the day, except while he slept, when for his own sake she put him into his bed, but hovered near, watching, praying. Mrs. Print pooh-poohed the sickness as nothing but teething-fever, but the wild-eyed mother begged her to go out and find a doctor. A grave, kind man was found, and his words were not comforting.

"He is not very ill, but he wants care. London is hardly the right place for babies at this time of the year. If it is possible, I should advise you to take him away into the country."

When the hour came for her to go to the theatre, Poppy called in the faithful Mrs. Print once more to watch over the sleeping child. It broke her heart to leave him, but there was nothing else to be done. She might forfeit her engagement if she did not appear at the theatre; or, at any rate, she would forfeit part of her salary, and she needed that more than ever. [278]

She took a halfpenny tram to Victoria Street, meaning to walk from there to the theatre. Someone had left an evening paper on the seat, and she took it up to glance at the advertisements, and see if any hope for the future might be gleaned from them. As she turned over the pages her distracted eyes caught the impression of a name she knew, printed large among several other names. She looked again, and flame came into her face, light to her eyes.

It was, indeed, a name she knew: and yet did not. *Sir* Evelyn Carson! His name was on the Birthday List of Honours. He had been made a baronet *for services rendered to the Empire*.

Swiftly she scanned the column, until she found the short biographical paragraph which told in brief outline of his daring expedition into Borapota; of the extraordinary personal influence he had speedily acquired over the warlike people of that country and of the remarkable concessions he had gained for the Empire. He had, in fact, without bloodshed or political complications, succeeded in establishing a British Protectorate in a rich and profitable country.

At the end of the column there was a further piece of information concerning Carson. It was embodied in a cablegram from Durban, which stated, with the convincing brevity peculiar to cables, that Sir Evelyn Carson, having arrived from Borapota, was to be married immediately to Miss May Mappin, only daughter and heiress of the late Mr. Isaac Mappin, former Mayor of Durban.

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[279] On her dressing-table at the theatre Poppy found a little envelope, pale-tan in colour, containing a week's salary and a note from the manager, saying that after the next night (Saturday) the play would be taken off the boards; no further salaries would be paid. Every member of the company had received a similar notice.

During the wait in the second act she sought out Marion Ashley.

"Does Mrs. Chesney still want me?" she briefly inquired, and Marion turned to her eagerly.

"Of course she does. Will you go? Oh, you dear girl! I'm *so* glad. When will you be able to take up your residence with her?"

"On Monday next, I think. I can't go before as I have to ... take some one ... who is ill ... into the country. I shall stay a day there only ... unless, unless ... the ... person is ... *worse*."

"And if the person is better?" asked Marion quickly. "Oh, my dear, you won't fail poor Frances, will you, if you can help it?"

"No." Poppy spoke in a perfectly calm and composed voice now, though her eyes were strange to see. "If I am alive, and have any reason to wish to continue living, you may rely upon me not to fail Mrs. Chesney."

Marion did not quite understand this, but she came to the conclusion that some man Miss Chard was in love with was desperately ill, and that that accounted for her distraught look and strange words.

PART IV

[281]

"This bitter love is sorrow in all lands,
Draining of eyelids, wringing of drenched hands,
Sighing of hearts and filling up of graves."

CHAPTER XX

[283]

ON a January night in 1898, Charles Bramham was smoking and writing in the dining-room of Sea House.

All the doors and windows were open: his coat was off: his white silk shirt gaped at the neck and the sleeves were turned up. Mosquitoes in vicious clouds proclaimed with shrill, treble voices their intention to make a dash for his throat and hands as soon as they could find a way through the tobacco smoke.

It had been a pitiless day—the sun a ball of brass, and the thermometer at eighty-five degrees—but the evening sea-breeze had reduced the temperature by five degrees. Flying ants and gnats of every description were flinging themselves at the electric lights, and a bat circled monotonously round the ceiling. But Bramham wrote and smoked placidly on. A little stack of a dozen or more finished letters stood at his elbow, and he was busy on his last now—one to his brother in England.

"Read the *Field* for December 16th. There are two letters about American cartridges for shot-guns—they've impressed me very much, and for long shots at grouse, and driven partridge, I am certain they'll be better than anything we've had yet."

As he made his period voices and steps advanced upon him, and he blew an opening through the smoke to get a view of the doorway. Entered Carson and Luce Abinger with scowls upon their brows. [284]

"Ah, you great, lazy hulk!" growled Abinger amiably. "Sitting here in your shirt sleeves, and neglecting the decencies of civilised life." They distributed themselves upon chairs and proceeded to add to the density of the atmosphere.

"Yes, I know," said Bramham, pushing back his chair and regarding them—"a boiled shirt with a flopping front to it like yours, and poker with a lot of perpetual growlers. What made you leave the delights of the Club to come and spoil my mail-night?"

"Capron," said Abinger laconically.

"What! again? A repetition of last night?"

Bramham shot a glance at Carson, but the latter's face expressed nothing more than *ennui*: he had put his head far back in his chair, and was smoking ceilingwards, following the gyrations of the bat with a contemplative eye.

"A repetition of every night until he gets knocked on the head by some fellow whose temper isn't so sweet as mine." Abinger's smile was not seductive. "He as good as told me that I had an ace up my sleeve, and later, he suggested that Carson had better not play for such high stakes in case he shouldn't find it convenient to pay. We discovered that we had a pressing appointment with you: but we left him Ferrand to insult."

Bramham got up and went to the sideboard, bringing glasses and decanters to the table.

"Capron isn't built for too much corn," he remarked. "Water-gruel is his tack, and he ought to be put on to it before somebody hurts him."

They all drank and smoked again in reflective concord.

"It is a pity," continued Bramham, with a dreamful Socratic air, "that some fellows' tastes and appetites are not matched by their physical abilities. There's an odd jumble of material in our construction! It would be an advantage and make life much more interesting, now, if all our [285] anatomical parts were standardised, so that every weak or worn portion could be taken out and renewed from a stock controlled by the highest power, who would only replace the affected piece if one had made a decent effort to retain one's mind and body in a healthy condition."

"Oh, get out!" said Abinger. "Is your name Max Nordau, perhaps?"

"Or are you Mr. Lecky?" derided Carson.

"Ah, well, you fellows can laugh, but it would be a good scheme all the same. Capron, now——"

Without warning of either foot or voice the last-named person at this moment appeared in the doorway with a debonair smile upon his lips, the figure of Ferrand behind him.

"Capron, now—is thirsty," said he. "And what was the interesting remark you were about to make, Brammie, my dear?"

"Only just *that*," Bramham responded serenely. "That you were probably thirsty—as usual. Help yourself—and you, Ferrand."

They drank and were seated, and all smoked, less peacefully now, but more reflectively. Capron appeared to be the only person afflicted with *gaieté de cœur*.

"What do you men think?" he demanded. "I went with Ferrand to see his patient at the Royal—he's actually got a patient!—and what do you suppose I saw while I was waiting for him in Ulundi Square?"

The others remained calm and incurious.

"A stunning girl. Just arrived by to-day's mail-boat I found, upon discreet inquiry, in the office. You fellows ought to see her. She swung herself through that square like a yacht in full-rig. The funny part of it is that I saw her in Durban a year or two back, and she was pretty *then*; but now, [286] by Gad! she has a face that would set any man's blood on fire."

"Indeed!" said Abinger dryly; and Bramham virtuously remarked: "We are not all so inflammable as you."

"Ah, I forgot! You're all saints and celibates here."

Capron's loose lips took a sardonic twist. "Quite a mistake for the women to call you and Abinger and Eve the three bad men, isn't it? I asked the beautiful Mrs. Gruyère only yesterday why it was—and what do you think she said, my dears?"

No one seemed anxious to learn, but Capron sprightfully proceeded:

"—Because one's wife wouldn't live with him, and another wouldn't live with his wife, and the third has a *penchant* for the wife of his neighbour."

The withers of the three bad men were apparently unwrung. If any of them were embarrassed they concealed the fact skilfully behind stony eyes and complexions of varying degrees of tan. Carson seemed to be composing himself for a good night's sleep. It is true that Bramham, whose wife had been dead for less than a year, appeared to swallow something unpleasant before he remarked in an equable manner that Capron and Mrs. Gruyère were a nice brace of birds.

"Don't say that, Brammie." Capron was possessed of a high-pitched, rather Celtic voice. "I defended you all manfully. 'Oh,' said I, 'you should not be too hard upon them. They have a *mot*

which they respect about gates and girls.' At that she left me so suddenly that I hadn't time to find out from her which of you is which."

"P-per-haps," stammered Abinger softly, "if you ask us we'll tell you."

"Well, y-yes," said Capron, mocking Abinger with the fearlessness of the man of many drinks; "I think p-perhaps I ought to know, seeing that I have a wife myself." [287]

The silence that ensued had a quality in it which made it differ from all the other silences of that evening: and it only lasted a second, for Carson awoke, and he and Bramham rose abruptly and spoke together.

"I am going to bed," said one.

"I must finish my mail," said the other; and added, "Don't go to bed, Carson. I want your opinion about those American cartridges for shot-guns. Would you advise me to have my guns re-chambered?" He put his hand on Carson's shoulder and they walked away together to the end of the room.

"Heum!" commented Capron. "Commend me to a Colonial for good manners and hospitality!" But both Abinger and Ferrand had turned their backs on him and gone into the verandah. In consideration of these things he helped himself once more to Bramham's good whiskey, and presently went home with the rest of his witticisms unsaid, but far from being dead within him.

Insensibly the others presently found themselves once more in their chairs in the dining-room. Desire for sleep had apparently forsaken Carson, and Bramham's mail no longer pressed. They looked at each other with grim, unsmiling faces.

"What did you want to bring him here for?" demanded Carson of Ferrand, but the latter was unabashed.

"I couldn't shake him, and I was tired of his insults. It was indicated that Bram should have a turn."

"Someone ought to do unto him as was done unto the Levite's concubine," was Abinger's graceful contribution.

"Stop talking about the fellow," said Bramham irritably. "He makes me tired. If he hadn't a beautiful and charming wife he would be lynched, and I'd supply the rope."

So they talked about other things, but there was a notable lack of charity, divine or human, about their conversation, for Capron's words had left a bad taste in the mouths of three of them, [288] and the fourth knew it. Indeed, Ferrand, being a doctor, knew most things about his neighbours, and having lived in Africa for a score of years, he could not be expected to be entirely lacking in malice and a touching interest in other people's sins. He presently proceeded to give them a neighbourly dig.

"I caught a glimpse of the girl at the Royal myself. She certainly is a wonder. Let us hope that all Capron's legends are not based on an equally good foundation?" He grinned cynically at the others. It would have been better for all bad men present to have ignored this friendly amenity, but Carson had a raw place and didn't like it flicked.

"Hope is all most of us have to live on in this land of flies and lies," he snarled. "We won't rob you of your income, Ferrand."

"Bite on that!" added Bramham without any polish of manner.

Capron had certainly succeeded in leaving an atmosphere of irritability behind him. Only Abinger remained impassive, and suavely demanded a description of the girl. Ferrand, amongst other things, was something of a poet: fire came into his eye.

"She's pale, but she glows like a rose: she has chaste eyes, but there is *diablerie* in the turn of her lip. She walks like a south wind on the water, and she has a rope of black hair that she can take me in tow with if she likes."

At the end of this monograph the three bad men laughed rudely, but they avoided looking at each other; for each had a curious, half-formed thought in his mind which he wished to conceal.

Bramham thought: "Part of that might fit one woman ... but it literally *couldn't* be her ... I wonder if I should go round and——"

"If I *could* be interested in a girl," thought Carson, "I might.... *A rope of black hair!* ... anyway, I [289] have to go and look up Nickals at the Royal to-morrow."

"Could it possibly be that devil Poppy?" was Abinger's thought. "I shall go round and see." What he said was:

"She must be a boneless wonder!" and the others derisively agreed. They further advised Ferrand to go and lie in Hyde Park with a sheet of brown paper over him, like all the other poets out of work.

Subsequently other subjects arose. When the clock struck eleven, Ferrand departed, remembering suddenly that his long-suffering man was waiting round the corner to drive him home.

Abinger was the next to make a move. His house on the Berea was still open, and in charge of Kykie, but it knew him no more. When he chanced to come to Durban from Johannesburg, where he now chiefly resided, he slept at the club. As he was making himself a last drink, Bramham said:

"Isandhlwana nineteen years ago to-day, Luce!"

The two men looked at each other with friendly eyes. They were not greatly sympathetic, but brave memories shared make a close bond between man and man. Silently both their glasses

went upwards in a wordless toast. In a moment and silently, too, Carson was on his feet. They drank to the men who died on Isandhlwana Day. Afterwards, Bramham and Abinger fell into talk about that year. They had both fought in the Zulu war. Carson listened with glinting eyes, the weariness swept from his face for the first time that night. Bramham's face became like a boy's. Abinger's looks changed, too. His sneers were wiped out, and his scar took on the appearance of one that might have been honourably gained. Once he laughed like a rollicking boy.

"That day we lay above Inyezan, Bram ... do you remember? When you potted the big fellow in [290] the *umpas* tree!... after he had sniped about ten of our men ... by God! the cheek of that brute to perch himself up there within a hundred yards of us!... and no one knew where the shots were coming from ... it was a miracle you spotted him in that thick foliage ... he came down like a fat, black partridge ... and lay still under the tree ... we went and looked at him after the fight was all over, Carson ... he was an enormous chap ... the biggest Zulu I ever saw ... our natives recognised him—chief *Gaarons*, one of their best leaders ... a sure shot ... he got ten of our men ... but Bram got *him* all right."

They sat for two solid hours reminiscing.

"You and Luce have had some times together, Charlie!" said Carson, after Abinger had gone.

"Yes ... it makes one feel old—I suppose we *are* getting on, Karri, but we were in our early twenties those days ... Abinger rather younger than I was, perhaps ... he was a different fellow then, too—of course, it was years before he met that Spanish devil who slashed his face open.... Do you know, Eve, that when I was in London last I saw her dancing in the old, sweet way at the Alhambra?"

"I thought she was dead?"

"So did I—but she wasn't. She is, *now*, however ... dropped down one night behind the scenes and passed out in half an hour."

"*Tant mieux!*" said Carson serenely. "She didn't play according to rules. Well, I suppose, we must turn in, Bram—I've a ton of things to do to-morrow ... those cases of guns and ammunition and stuff are due, aren't they?"

"Yes: I got the advice about them: they'll be in dock to-morrow. We'll go down and look everything over during the week if you like. How long are you going to give yourself before you [291] go back?"

"Well, my leave is six months, you know—one of them gone already, by Jove! I shall be about another three or four weeks fixing up my private affairs on the Rand and getting things sent off from here. Then I propose to give myself a few months at 'home' before I go into exile for five years."

"Five years of solitude and natives and pioneers!" commented Bramham. "Pretty tough on you!"

"Oh, you needn't pity me. I don't mind the solitude. There'll be plenty to do turning that little sixty thousand square miles into a civilised centre, now that we've got the roads open. In five years' time we shall have the rails laid right to the capital, and the mines in full swing. That's the time I shall make tracks for newer scenes. But in the meanwhile it's fine, Bram. The fellows that make pioneers are the right stuff—*you* know that. It's the people who come up after the work is done who stick in my gizzard."

"I daresay it's all right," said Bramham. "There are bright bits, no doubt. And, of course, you'll get more ribbons to tie your stockings up with and lockets to hang on your breast when you come back. But it seems to me to be a precious lonely life in the meantime, and I'm glad it isn't mine. Why don't you take your wife up with you, Karri?" He spoke with an idle smile, not looking at Carson, but at his hands on the bale before him arranging cigars in a box. Carson gave him a quick glance, but he laughed carelessly.

"Even if I possessed such a luxury I couldn't very well ask her to come up to a wild place like that—for wild it will be for many a year yet, thank the gods! Do you suppose any woman would care about it?"

"I know half a dozen who'd jump at the chance, and I expect you do, too. Women are fearfully [292] keen on adventure nowadays. And then you're an attraction in yourself, Karri."

"Thanks, old chap! You're easily pleased, I'm afraid." Carson's smile was affectionate, but frankly sleepy. He began to yawn. Bramham, caring nothing for hints of weariness, pursued the subject.

"Joking apart—you ought to marry. Why don't you, Karri?"

"For one thing, I can't afford it. You forget that I'm not a bloated millionaire like you. My little excursions into different parts of the interior were never cheap, and the original expedition into Borapota cost me privately as much as it did the Government, and since I've been Administrator I've found it a mighty expensive business, and you know, I've never been a money-hugger, Bram. I suppose I am a thousand or two to the good now, apart from my shares and concerns on the Rand, which wouldn't fetch much with the market in its present condition. But how far would that go towards setting up a *ménage-à-deux* in the desert? Even supposing that I knew someone anxious to share it——"

"You have your salary—two thousand a year," argued Bramham. He did not know what a *ménage-à-deux* was, but he could guess.

"So I have, by Jove! and I need it. If you think I play John the Baptist when I take to the wilderness, Bram, you're mistaken. I do myself remarkably well to make up for the lack of society. If the soul is neglected, the carcase isn't. You come up and visit me some time, old man. You'll find all the blessings of civilisation with me, except woman."

"You're a nice sort of pioneer!" Bramham said; but he knew what Carson meant. The best kit, the best guns, and saddlery, and horses, cost money everywhere, and when it comes to [293] transporting them over a few thousand miles of unbroken roads—why, of course, it is expensive!

"I know all about that, Carson—all the same, I think it would be a good thing if——"

Carson interrupted him. "You're beginning to be a nuisance, Bram. But I'll be patient with you, and tell you the truth. I don't want *a* wife, but *the* wife, and I haven't met her yet—the woman who could stand the test of five years of *wattle-and-daub*, and boot-and-saddle, and sleeping under the stars for a change when one gets tired of the *wattle-and-daub*; with nothing much to contemplate by day but the unlimited horizon and nothing much to hear by night but the dirge of the jackals, and the sound of the wind in forest trees, or the rush of a river. *We* know that these things are fine, Bram—the best you can get in a passable world. But would they be fine with the wrong woman?—with any woman but the one who——"

He stopped abruptly, got up, and began to walk about the room. In the doorway he stood for a moment looking seawards through the black night. A cool wind was stirring every paper and drapery in the room now, for the tide was full, swirling and rustling on the sands not a hundred yards away with nothing to be seen in the blackness but a skirl of white foam.

"—Who—what?" asked Bramham stolidly in the room behind him. Carson came back and sat on the table with his hands in his pockets. The old discontent was on his face.

"Who can never materialise because she's mostly made up of dreams."

Bramham laughed. "Mrs. Portal once said to me, 'The most wonderful woman in the world could not pass the standard of a romantic Irishman: or come near the perfection of the dream-woman whom every Irishman has secretly enshrined in his heart.' It appears that she was right." [294]

Carson laughed, too: but his face softened.

"Mrs. Portal knows most things about Irish and every other kind of men, I fancy. The wonder is that she can continue to be charming to us in spite of it. She's the most delightful woman in the world."

Bramham gave him a shrewd glance. He would have given half he possessed to say at that moment:

"What about a lovely girl who is drudging away in England to support your child?" But it was not an ordinary promise that same girl had wrung out of him, never to reveal by word or look that he knew her secret. She had bound him by every oath she could think of that had any sanctity for a man.

Something of scorn presently mingled with the shrewdness of the look he cast at Carson. He searched the dark face that had so much in it that was fine and lovable, and yet was marked with sins. But whatever Carson's sins were they did not give him peace. He did not grow sleek on them. He had the weary mouth and haggard eyes of the man with the dual nature, a finer self perpetually at war with a baser, sometimes winning, sometimes losing—but always striving. Scorn left Bramham's look and affectionate loyalty came back.

"You can't hate a fellow like that," he thought.

He presently found a further thing to say in which he was far from imagining himself disloyal to Rosalind Chard, or even prompted by curiosity.

"Carson ... since we've tumbled on to the subject of women, I'd like to know what you think about something I've rather advanced opinions upon ... girls ... girls who've gone over the hard-and-fast line ... not the ordinary demi-semi-quaver, of course ... nor the kind that are bound to slip off the rails even with gold fastenings ... I mean the sort of girl one would be glad and proud to [295] marry, but who, given 'the time, the place, and the loved one altogether,' as some poet fellow says, cuts loose the painter for dear love and sheer love. What do you think of a girl like that, Karri?"

Carson had a distant visionary expression in his eyes. Bramham's words appeared to have driven his thoughts far afield. He might have been a man trying to remember a sweet air that evaded his memory, or to lay hold of something that had no substance.

"It is odd that you should ask me that, Bram," he spoke slowly ... "and you are the only man in the world I would say it to ... but, that was the kind of girl I was speaking of when I said *the* wife ... the only kind of girl I should ever care about marrying ... I suppose I am alone among Irishmen in holding such an opinion ... for all their wildness they're a conventional lot at bottom, especially on this subject ... and, of course, that's as it should be. But I've lived too long in lonely places, and I'm more woodsman than Irishman now!... I didn't think this way always, either.... But once I had a vision, a dream, *something* ... about such a girl. The odd part of it is that I was crazy about another woman at the time—had been for years—and it cured me of *that*.... But, oh, Lord!" (he gave a sort of groan) "there's been plenty of water under the bridge since then ... and it was only a dream, anyway. There may be such girls in the world somewhere ... but not for me, Bram. Some woman will trap me with an antenuptial-contract, some day." He got up, laughing mirthlessly. "Great Tophet! it's two o'clock! I shall never get through with my work to-morrow."

They gripped hands and parted for the night.

Afterwards Bramham mused thus to himself:

"He was lying! He must have been—or else she was. What the deuce is one to make of it? [296] *Plenty of water under the bridge since then!* I daresay!... Capron's stray shaft went home.... I wonder if there's any truth in *that* tale!... Well! the longer I live the more I am inclined to agree with that fellow who said there never yet was a game in history or anywhere else played square with a woman in it!"

CHAPTER XXI

[297]

THE next morning, by a strange circumstance, which did not immediately unfold its inner meaning, three bad men met in the front verandah of the Royal.

The order of their coming was thus: Bramham dropped in at about eleven o'clock to discover Abinger sitting in the verandah with a drink at his elbow—

> "And a smile on the face of
> the tiger."

That, at least, was the line from the poets which flashed into Bramham's head, as Abinger grinned upon him.

"What do *you* want?" was the latter's affable greeting, and Bramham answered fearlessly:

"Oh, just a gin-and-bitters! It's getting somewhere about lunch-time, isn't it?"

Abinger refrained from inquiring why the Royal should be patronised for gin-and-bitters, when the Club was just across the road from Bramham's office: he merely continued to grin. The next arrival was Carson. But he saw them before they saw him, so it was for him to play tiger. He saluted them blandly.

"Hullo! you fellows! Waiting to see Nickals, too?"

This was the first information the other two had of the presence of Nickals in the hotel; but Abinger gravely stated that his case was a desire to see that gentleman. Bramham repeated his gin-and-bitters tale. They sat for a quarter of an hour, abusing the weather, the market, and the country, and Carson then said he should go and see if he could find Nickals in his room. The [298] others thought they would accompany him. It appeared that Nickals, hitherto a simple honest fellow, had suddenly grown in importance and magnetic personality.

They did not, like sane men, inquire at the office, which was just inside the hall door, but strolled instead through the vestibules into the palm-garden, and from there to Ulundi Square, having passed the drawing-room windows and looked in, in case Nickals might be playing the piano or resting on the sofa, as Abinger facetiously remarked. Eventually they stopped a strolling waiter and asked if Nickals was in. The waiter went away to see, and the three sat in the Square until he returned with the information that Mr. Nickals had gone to the Berea and would not be back before four o'clock. This was conclusive. They searched each other's faces for any reasonable excuse for further loitering; finally, Abinger said *he* would now take a gin-and-bitters. Carson thought he would like a smoke. The chairs are easy and comfortable in Ulundi Square, and there are newspapers.

They spent another peaceful twenty minutes. Too peaceful. No one came or went, but an ample-breasted concert soprano, who was touring the country and compiling a fortune with a voice that had long ceased to interest English audiences; a crumpled-looking lady journalist, with her nose in a note-book and her hat on one ear, and a middle-aged American tourist, with a matron as alluringly veiled as the wife of a Caliph, but who unfortunately did not remain veiled.

Ennui engulfed the trio. At last they departed in exasperation—no one having once mentioned his real reason for being there. Carson and Abinger went into the Club, Bramham into his office, promising to join them in a short time for lunch. As he passed through an outer office lined with desks and busy clerks, his secretary followed, to inform him in a discreet voice that a note had [299] come for him by one of the Royal *boys*. Bramham, forgetting that he was over twenty-five on Isandhlwana day nineteen years before, sprinted into his private room in amazing style. On his desk was a letter addressed in the writing of Rosalind Chard.

"I had a premonition, by Jove!" he exclaimed excitedly, and tore it open. It was brief.

> "I am staying at the Royal. Could you call on me some time to-day? I should be delighted if you would lunch with me. It will be charming to see you again."

Bramham stared at the letter for several minutes, then seized his hat and rang the bell.

"Call Mr. Merritt," was his order, and the secretary reappeared.

"Merritt, I am going out again at once. If Mr. Carson or Mr. Abinger send over for me from the Club, *I'm engaged. Very important business—here.* Shall probably see them later in the afternoon —understand?"

"Certainly, sir," said the discreet Merritt, and withdrew.

Arrived at the Royal once more, Bramham this time addressed himself to the inquiry office like an honest man, and was presently informed that Miss Chard would see him in her private sitting-room. His mental eyebrows went up, but he decorously followed the slim and sad-eyed coolie attendant.

In a room redeemed from "hoteliness" by a few original touches, fragrant with violets and sprays of mimosa, he found a girl waiting for him, whom for a moment he scarcely recognised. It was the first time he had seen Rosalind Chard in any but the simplest clothes, and he at first supposed the difference in her attributable to her dress. She wore a beautiful gown of lilac-coloured crêpe, with silken oriental embroiderings scrolled upon it, and a big lilac-wreathed hat [300]

—a picture of well-bred, perfectly-dressed dewy womanhood, with the faint and fascinating stamp of personality on every tiniest detail of her. She stood in the middle of the room and held out a slim, bare hand to Bramham, and he took it, staring at her and it. He was relieved to see that it was not jewelled.

"I can't believe my eyes," he said. "It is the most amazing thing that ever happened—to see you!"

"Why?" she asked softly, looking him in the eyes.

"I thought you were in England fighting your way along the road to Fame——"

"I don't care about Fame any more, Charlie."

"Don't care for Fame! Why, you were crazy after it!"

"Crazy—yes, that is the right word. Now I am sane. You have had my hand quite a long time ——"

He did not release it, however, only held it tighter.

"I'm knocked right off my mental reservation. I don't know what I'm doing. You shouldn't stand and smile at me like that. What's the matter with you, Rosalind? You don't look happy!"

His last words were a surprise to himself, for until he uttered them he had not clearly realised that in spite of her radiant beauty and her perfect clothes there was a haunting enigmatic sadness about her. And as once before, he fancied it was her smile that made her so tragic-looking. Suddenly it seemed to him that he heard a little bell tolling somewhere. He gave a glance round the room, but his eyes returned to her.

"What has happened to you?" he asked, in a low voice.

"My son is dead," she said, and she still smiled that bright, tragic smile, and looked at him with dry, beautiful eyes, that were too tired to weep. His were the eyes that filled with tears. He knew that he was in the presence of grief too deep for words. The hand that he awkwardly brushed [301] across his face was his salute to sorrow.

"Thank you," her voice was a little dreary wind; "thank you, kindest of all friends." She moved away from him then in a vague, aimless fashion, went to a bowl of violets and smelled them, and looked up at a strange blue picture on the wall, the like of which he had never seen in an hotel and could not believe to be part of the furnishing of the Royal. It was, indeed, *Hope* sitting at the top of the world playing on her brave one string; but Bramham had never seen Watts's picture before. While she still stood there she spoke to him.

"Don't ever speak of it again, will you?... I can't ... I am not able ..."

"Of course not.... No, all right ... I won't," he hastily and earnestly assured her.

He wondered if she knew of Carson's presence in Durban. It was strange that they had had no sight of her that morning. He would have given much to have seen her meet Carson face to face unexpectedly.

"Were you in this morning?" he presently asked. "I was about the hotel for an hour or so with two friends—Carson and Luce Abinger. We might so easily have run across you——"

Her face when she turned told him nothing.

"I spent the greater part of the morning sitting under the palms facing the bay, talking to Mrs. Portal—but I left a message where I was to be found in case you called."

"Mrs. Portal! I didn't know you knew her."

"Yes; she and I met when I was in Durban, and became friends. She happened to be lunching here yesterday when I arrived, and she came up and spoke to me. You can imagine what it meant to have someone welcoming me as she did, after long exile from my own land—but, if you know [302] her at all, you know how kind and lovely her ways are."

"Yes, indeed," Bramham heartily agreed. "She is altogether charming."

All the same, he was astonished. Mrs. Portal was charming, but she stood for orthodoxy, and the girl before him was mysteriously unorthodox—to say the least of it.

"I am dining with her to-night to meet her great friend, Mrs. Capron," continued Poppy, eyeing him gravely.

"Then you ought to be careful," he blurted out; "for you are dining with the two most precise and conventional women in the place"—here he perceived himself to be blundering—"but I may also say the most delightful," he added hastily.

"Ah! and why shouldn't I?" she queried softly, but her tone brought a slight flush to Bramham's cheek.

"Oh, I don't know," he stammered. "No reason at all, I imagine."

"On the contrary," she said quietly, "you imagine every reason."

Bramham scrambled out of his tight corner as best he might.

"At any rate," he made haste to say, "I am delighted that you have a woman friend who has it in her power to make things as pleasant and interesting as they can be in a place like this."

"Thank you," she said; "and, dear friend—you need not be anxious for me. I only confess where I am sure of absolution and the secrecy of the confessional—never to women."

Bramham, first pleased, then annoyed, then sulky over this piece of information, made no immediate response, and a waiter appearing at the moment to inquire whether they would take lunch, the matter dropped. He followed in the wake of her charming lilac gown, through [303] tessellated squares and palm-gardens, with the glow of personal satisfaction every right-minded

man feels in accompanying the prettiest and best turned-out woman in the place.

When they were seated at the pleasantest corner of the room, and she had ordered without fuss an excellently dainty lunch, Bramham's desire being to sit with his elbows on the table and dip into the depths of lilac eyes lashed with black above two faintly-tinted cheek-bones, he reverted to his sulky demeanour. But a scarlet mouth was smiling at him whimsically.

"Don't let us be cross! Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, you know; and you are the best of all possible confessors. There is nothing I can hide from you. I am even going to tell you where I got my pretty clothes from, and the money to be careering about the world and staying at the Royal—I know you are consumed with apprehension on these two points."

She smiled at him with such comradeship that he could not sulk any longer.

"Well, you know the last time I saw you, you were in hard-luck street, at a guinea a week, and too proud to use a friend's purse. I suppose you have been getting on?"

"You suppose rightly: I have *got* on. I have three plays running at London theatres, two novels selling well, and a book of poems in its tenth edition—not bad for poems, you know."

It was a day of surprises for Bramham, and it should be excused in him that he sat for three minutes with his mouth open.

"You!... You!... why, I've never even heard of you!" he cried, mortified, astonished, and it must be confessed, slightly unbelieving.

"But perhaps you have heard of *Eve Destiny*? Here are a pile of letters and things from my [304] managers and publishers. I want you to look over them, and advise me, will you, about money and things ... I'm most frightfully unpractical and extravagant.... I can see that I shall very soon be poor again unless someone advises me and puts me on the right road. And I don't want to be poor again, Charlie. Poverty hurts ... it is like the sun, it shows up all the dark corners—in one's nature. If I can only arrange my affairs so as to have about a hundred a year to live on, I shall be satisfied."

"A hundred a year!" Bramham had been skimming through her papers with his business eye, which fortunately for his feminine acquaintances was a very different organ to his pleasure eye. All his instincts were outraged at this careless view of what was evidently a splendid working concern.

"A hundred a year! Why, if you go on like this you'll be more likely to haul in ten thousand a year."

"Ah! but I'm not going on," she interpolated calmly. "I don't mean to work any more."

"Not work any more? Why? Are you panned?... dried up ... fizzled out?"

"Not at all," she laughed. "I have as much fizzle as ever ... I don't want to work any more—that's all. I'm tired ... and there is nothing to work for."

"But since when did you begin to feel like that?"

"Oh, since a long time ... I haven't worked for ages ... I've been buying frocks in Paris, and sitting in the sunshine at Cannes, and looking over the side of a yacht at the blue Mediterranean, and just spending, spending ... but there is not much in *that*, Charlie ... there's not much in anything if your world is empty." Her voice broke off strangely, but when he looked at her the tragic smile was back on her mouth again. He knew now why she did it—it was to keep herself from wailing like a banshee! An interval here occurred, monopolised entirely by the waiter—a [305] coolie, slim, snowily-draped, and regretful as are all coolie-waiters.

It was Bramham who again broached the subject of Carson. He could not help himself—these two people were dear to him; and, besides, he was eaten up with curiosity.

"If you go to the Portals you will meet Eve Carson. He is *persona grata* there."

"I know; Mrs. Portal said to me, amongst other things, 'You must meet our great friend, Sir Evelyn Carson.' She did not mention his wife, however."

"His wife——?"

"It will be interesting to meet his wife," she said tranquilly. Bramham gazed at her. She was carefully dissecting the pink part of a Neapolitan ice from its white foundation.

"Yes, I should think it would be—when he gets one. I was asking him only last night why he didn't marry, and he said——"

"He would be sure to say something arresting," said Poppy, but she had grown pale as death. Her eyes waited upon Bramham's lips.

"He said, first, that he was not wealthy enough—a paltry reason. Secondly, well, I can't quite repeat it, but something to the effect that the girl of his dreams wouldn't materialise."

There was a long silence. She sat with her hands in her lap and her eyes veiled. The colour of life came slowly back to her face, but she was racked and shadowy-looking. Compassion filled Charles Bramham.

"I suppose you heard that May Mappin tale? All rot. She's a foolish little Durban girl, left with a large fortune. He has never thought twice about her, but she has always persisted in making a fool of herself. It is a common story here that she cabled home reports of their engagement and [306] marriage. Poor devil! I suppose she can't help herself ... but never mind her.... You, Rosalind! I can't pretend to understand you ... the mystery is too deep for me to probe. But I believe, that if last night I could have broken my promise to you——"

"Never! Never!" she cried fiercely. "I should curse you for ever ... I.... And so he is not

married?" she said in an ordinary voice.

"No, nor ever will be, till he finds the woman of his dreams, according to his own tale."

Suddenly she rose from her chair.

"Good-bye ... I must go now ... I want to be alone ... I want rest ... I must think. Forgive me for leaving you like this—" She went away, down the long, well-filled room, and every feminine eye raked her from stem to stern, and every man strained the ligaments of his throat to breaking-point to catch the last flick of her lilac-coloured draperies.

Afterwards, every eye severely considered Bramham. He found himself staring at two coffee-cups. A waiter at his elbow rudely inquired whether the lady took sugar.

"Yes, two—all ladies do," he answered aggressively. To conceal his discomfort he fell to perusal of the packet of papers she had put into his hands. They were from managers, agents, and publishers, and concerned themselves with contracts, royalties, and demands for the first refusal of the next work of Miss Rosalind Chard, otherwise *Eve Destiny*. Bramham became so engrossed at last that he forgot all the staring people in the room and the two coffee-cups and his discomfort.

"She's a genius, by Jove!" he said grimly. "One must get used to being made uncomfortable."

CHAPTER XXII

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IT was a turgid, sun-smitten Sunday afternoon at the Portals' house on the Berea. Through the open French windows of the drawing-room came the chink of many tea-cups, and a desultory but not unsprightly murmur of conversation. Some one's hand was straying absent-mindedly on the keys of the Bechstein, making little ripples, and sometimes a girl would laugh on two notes—a short, but peculiarly melodious sound like the beginning of a song in a bird's throat. Evelyn Carson, on the west side of the verandah, arguing with Bill Portal about water-fowl in Madagascar, found that laugh curiously distracting. It reminded him of an old dream that he was always trying to forget.

"You're thinking of a Francolin-partridge, my dear fellow," he said to Portal; "very dark feathering ... almost black ... a little bigger than the Natal grey hens." (There was that little tender laugh again! God! What a dream that was!)

"Not at all," disputed Portal. "They were grouse, I tell you ... sand-grouse ... the male bird has dark-brown wings ... very light back and a pencilled head ... rather like English grouse ... with a black neck. I got scores of them at Solarey ... splendid sporting shots——"

He lifted his voice slightly in his enthusiasm, and it was heard round in the east verandah, where Mrs. Portal was sitting with her great friend, Mary Capron, two other women, and Luce Abinger.

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"Listen to the blood-shedders!" said Mrs. Capron.

"Yes, one of them is Bill," said Clem, "and I hoped he was looking after people inside! Who is he talking to, I wonder."

Mrs. Capron opened her lips to answer, then closed them again and looked away at the sea. Luce Abinger smiled to himself.

"That's C-Carson," he said. "He c-came up with me."

Abinger's slight stammer arrested people's attention and made them listen to what he had to say. But to do him justice, what he had to say was usually worth listening to. It is always worth while to be amused, and a man's malice is invariably more amusing than a woman's because it is not so small, and is more daring. What Abinger did not dare with his tongue, he made bold to let you know with his eyes, which were as bad as they could be. Not that he looked at all women with the same look Sophie Cornell had once complained of. He was far too clever for that—he had as many sets of expressions for his eyes as he had for his tongue.

But in whatsoever way he looked, he always made the woman he was talking to *tête-à-tête* feel that she was doing something rather wicked and none the less fascinating because she could not be indicted on it by Mrs. Grundy. And then his appearance was so peculiarly revolting! That frightful scar running all the way down one side of his clean-shaven face, from his eye to his chin, *must* have been made with a knife; but no one knew how it had been done, and that made it all the more mysterious. Certainly he was not communicative on the subject.

At present he was sitting on the clean, sun-burnt boards of the verandah floor, with his back against the wall and his knees drawn up, peacefully considering the four women arranged in chairs on either side of him. Mrs. Portal, bunched up with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, was not pretty, but her face bore the marks of race, and her hair and her kind Irish eyes were full of sunshine. Abinger considered that she had less style than any woman he knew, but that it must be distinctly interesting to be Bill Portal. Mrs. Gerald Lace was silent and reposeful, with the inevitable silent reposefulness of a woman with a fourteen-inch waist. Mrs.

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Gruyère, warm and pink, fanned herself vigorously with an expensive painted fan, and took breath for a fresh onslaught upon the characters of her friends. Mrs. Capron, staring out at the sea with her lovely, golden eyes, was sufficiently beautiful to be forgiven for not saying much. It was enough to look at her.

Durban lay below them in green and white array, but the green was too green, and the white blazed even through the drapery of passion-plant leaves that hung and clambered on the verandah and let in the sunshine upon them in jaggling Chinese patterns. The garden was delightfully, raggedly picturesque. Two sloping lawns were divided by a tall hedge of Barbadoes-thorn. There was a grove of orange-trees, and a miniature forest of mangoes. Scattered everywhere, grew golden clots of sunflowers, and away to the right a big Bougainvillea bush flaunted its fearful purple-magenta blossoms against the blue. Far beyond was the sea.

The Portals' house stood so high on the Berea that no sound from the town or the sea reached it on a still day. The peace in the verandah was unbroken, save for the *cheep-cheeping* of some tame guinea-fowl in a neighbouring garden.

If only Mrs. Gruyère could have ceased from troubling, they would all have been at rest. "Why can she not be calm and still, like Mrs. Lace?" thought Abinger. Mrs. Lace was not over-burdened with brains, but she could say "Oh!" and "Really?" quite prettily at appropriate intervals, and he [310] much preferred her to Mrs. Gruyère, a most tiresome person, who, if you did not tell her the truth, invented it. She now began to worry Mrs. Portal about a girl inside, whom Abinger, not long arrived and having got no further than his present seat in the verandah, had not seen, but from the venomous tone of Mrs. Gruyère's inquiries he gathered that she must, in some fashion, be worth seeing. Mrs. Portal said in an airy way she had, that she knew nothing of Miss Chard except that she was a Cheltenham College girl, and had pretty ankles—"both highly desirable qualifications, surely?"

Mrs. Gruyère, who had been educated at a Colonial *seminary*, immediately drew her feet, which had been obstructing Abinger's view of the Indian Ocean, into the seclusion of her peculiarly ungraceful, though doubtless expensive, skirt, and pursued the subject with more intense malignity. Abinger was of opinion that Mrs. Portal had probably made a life-long enemy for Miss Chard: which showed that she was harassed, for he knew her to be the soul of tact and kindliness. As an old ally, he felt that it behoved him to listen and prepare a weapon for the defence.

"But, *dear* Mrs. Portal, desirable qualifications are not always sufficient ones. *Where* did she come from, and who are her people, I wonder? It seems *strange* in a small place like Durban, not to have met her before! What does she want here?"

"She paints charmingly," was all Mrs. Portal vouchsafed—"most beautiful little water-colours." After a moment's consideration she added: "She is going to do my miniature."

Thereafter, she looked dreamily into space, apparently thinking of something else—an old ruse of hers when harassed about her harum-scarum acquaintances. Abinger began to think it highly [311] probable that she had met the remarkable Miss Chard in a tea-shop, become interested in her face (or her ankles), and gone up and spoken to her; but he quite understood that these illegitimate proceedings must be concealed from such a keeper of seals and red tape as Mrs. Gruyère.

"Indeed! An artist?" that lady insisted abominably. "I wonder if——"

Mrs. Portal removed her charming eyes from blue space and looked for the hundredth part of a second in the direction of Abinger. He dashed briskly into the conversation.

"Yes; an exceedingly c-clever artist. I saw an exhibition of her pictures somewhere in Bond Street last year. Some of her sunset-effects were brilliant—quite Whistlerian. But," he cocked his head meditatively for a second, "if I remember rightly, it was with her miniatures that she made her chief hit—yes, decidedly her——"

"Really?" said Mrs. Gerald Lace, all attention, thinking what a charming miniature her blonde beauty would make.

Mrs. Gruyère said nothing. She was completely knocked out of the ring for five seconds, during which time Mrs. Portal smiled an amazed smile at the sunflowers on the lawn, and Abinger, with the pride of one who has done exceeding well, rose and handed tea-cups and cake from the tray of a neat and pretty maid—Hyacinth's English nurse, to be precise, who was always harnessed-in on Sunday afternoons. Having modestly helped himself to three sandwiches, he reseated himself upon the floor, for time was up: Mrs. Gruyère had got her second wind.

Could it be true, she demanded of him, that there was talk of that odious Sir Evelyn Carson getting a peerage next? Why should he have got the Administratorship of Borapota, when there were so many fine men born and bred in Africa, *much* more eligible for the post? (Her own [312] brother, in fact—*hinc illæ!*) Wasn't it a fact that Carson was exiled to Africa ten years ago because he had been mixed up in a famous divorce suit with Royalty and dared not show his nose in England again? Did Abinger consider it likely that Carson would marry May Mappin, who was still scandalously in love with him and ready to throw herself at him, together with the fortune which her father had made by "running guns" to the Zulus in '76?

"—And was made Mayor, and died!" she finished as though she had been reciting a new kind of creed.

Some portion, at least, of this surprising indictment had made Mrs. Capron's tinted cheek pale with anger. Clem Portal, too, was disturbed. She glanced fiercely at Mrs. Gruyère, and remarked with great emphasis and point:

"Rot!"

Mrs. Gruyère looked as if she would have liked to snort at this rude reception of her news; she contented herself, however, with a sniff—a Colonial habit of hers.

Mrs. Lace also roused herself to an effort. She had not Mrs. Portal's pluck to fire boldly in the face of the enemy, but she was inspired to make a little side-attack.

"He would never *dream* of marrying a Colonial: Gerald told me so."

Mrs. Gruyère's nostrils broadened like a hippo's; she could have tomahawked Mrs. Lace on the spot. For a moment she cast her inward eye back across the trail of Mrs. Lace's past—if she had only been a Johannesburg crow, with three coats of whitewash, *how* Mrs. Gruyère would have turned the waterspouts of truth on her! But as it happened, Gerald Lace had extracted his blonde bride from a tender home at Kingston-on-Thames—and that was a far cry! And since her marriage, she was known to be what is called "absolutely de-*vo*-ted." What satisfaction can be got out of a woman like that? Mrs. Gruyère was obliged to hide her tomahawk for the time being. [313] Smiling a thin smile with an edge as sharp as a razor to it, she addressed herself to the audience at large.

"At any rate, no one will deny that May Mappin is still throwing herself at his head. Isn't that so, Mr. Abinger? You practically live with him and should know."

Abinger's answers were as various as Mrs. Portal's sandwiches, and as liberally supplied with mustard.

1. Yes; but he didn't live with Miss Mappin.
2. Carson had not asked his advice about the best place to spend a honeymoon.
3. Miss Mappin had not told him that she loved Carson.
4. He did not read Carson's letters.
5. He could not swear that Carson was not already married.
6. All women were in love with Carson, anyway.

At that, Mrs. Gruyère sat back satisfied.

"I knew it," she said triumphantly, "and no good can come of it." She made a hollow in her lap for her cup of tea and began rolling her veil into a thick, black stole across the end of her nose.

No one was quite sure what she meant, and no one particularly cared, but Mrs. Portal thought it quite time poor silly May Mappin was left alone. Mrs. Portal talked scandal herself and enjoyed it, but she didn't backbite, which is the difference between good and ill nature.

"You ask too much, Mrs. Gruyère," said she, sipping tea from her blue cup, delicately as a bee sips honey from a bluebell. "When you are in love with a man like Evelyn Carson, the only thing you can do is to pray with fasting and tears that no bad may come of it."

"When *I* am in love!" said Mrs. Gruyère loudly. [314]

"Oh!" cried Mrs. Lace with a shocked little laugh.

"Isn't it true, Mr. Abinger?" Clem asked.

"Oh, Carson is not so black as he's painted," said he with a great air of liberality.

"As he paints, I suppose, you mean," pertly rejoined Mrs. Gruyère.

"There is a form of colour-blindness that makes its victim see everything black!" said Mrs. Capron drily. Mrs. Gruyère sniffed again.

"You need be colour-blind when you look at his eyes," she said unpleasantly; "but some people have a morbid liking for deformity."

They all looked astonished.

"*Deformity!*" cried Mrs. Capron; "why, everybody admires his striking eyes!"

"And, *dear* lady," said Abinger, with great *tendresse*, "do you really suppose that the colour of Carson's eyes has anything to do with it? It's the flame inside him that draws us and scorches us. He's made up of fire and iron, and——"

"Brass," said Mrs. Gruyère neatly—for her.

At this opportune moment Carson sauntered round the corner and joined them, and Mrs. Gruyère's face became so like a Bougainvillea flower that there was hardly any difference, except that the Bougainvillea was prettier.

"How do you do, Sir Evelyn?" said Mrs. Portal, tendering him her hand tranquilly. "Talking of brass, can it be true that you are very rich?"

Seeing no chair, Carson seated himself next to Abinger on the floor—"two bad, dissolute men, cheek by jowl," said Mrs. Gruyère to herself.

"Not very," he said apologetically, smiling at them all with his unusual eyes. "Not so rich as Abinger. He says he has two pounds a week for life. But we think he exaggerates." [315]

Mrs. Portal and Mrs. Capron began to laugh, and Mrs. Lace to wonder how they could wear such nice boots on such small incomes. But Mrs. Gruyère, thoroughly disgusted with the contemptible tone of the conversation, was about to rise and leave the scene, when there came a general exodus from the drawing-room, preceded by Portal and a girl, who was laughing in her throat like a bird about to begin a song.

It was Poppy.

The two bad men looked up.

She was amazingly arrayed in a gown that was a poem composed in France—silky, creamy muslin, curving from throat to hip, and from hip to foot in sleek full folds like the draperies of a

statue. Some unwonted emotion had brought a faint spot of colour to the high-pitched bones of her cheeks, and the pupils of her eyes were so large they seemed to fill her eyes with darkness. She wore a wide hat of pastel-blue straw, wreathed with silken poppies of an ashen shade, and round her neck was slung a great rope of blue-and-green Egyptian scarabei, which had cost her the whole price of one of her plays, and which repaid her now by adding in some mysterious way to her glowing personality.

Clem Portal rose, and, under cover of general conversation, said swiftly to her:

"If Mrs. Gruyère puts you to the question—*you paint*—charming little water-colours. You are going to do my miniature."

Poppy stood there, smiling at her through the spraying veils of her hair. Her glowing loveliness had the effect of making the other women in the verandah seem colourless. Even Mary Capron's classical beauty was dimmed.

Carson felt the old dream stir. He gave her a long, long look. As for Abinger, the expression of utter astonishment and bewilderment had passed from his face; he was smiling. [316]

"So *this* is Miss Rosalind Chard!" he said softly, but not too softly for Carson to hear him.

"*Who* is she, do you say?" he asked in a low tone.

They had both risen from the floor.

"A Cheltenham College girl, with pretty ankles," was the enigmatic response.

Unaccountably, they both found themselves at Mrs. Portal's elbow. She introduced them with a gay inclusive little: "*Les amis de mes amis sont mes amis*"; then turned away to bid a guest good-bye.

Miss Chard met Abinger's insolent mocking glance fearlessly, with a prepared heart and, therefore, a prepared smile; then turned to Carson for the first time: looking into his eyes the smile drifted out of her face and suddenly she put up one of her hands and touched, with a curious mystical movement, a dark-green stone she wore at her throat as a brooch. To both men she gave the impression that she was crossing herself, or touching a talisman against something evil.

Abinger stared, grinning. Carson, extremely disconcerted, appeared to turn a deeper shade of brown, and his eyebrows came together in an unbecoming line over his brilliant, sad eyes. Abinger, well acquainted with the Irishman's temper, knew that the girl's action had got him on the raw. If she had been a man she would have been made answerable for a deadly insult. As it was, Carson struggled horribly with himself for a moment, then smiled and made a characteristic remark.

"You are very *un-Irish*, Miss Chard, in spite of your face and your superstitions."

This, said with great grace and gentleness, meant that no real Irishwoman would have had the abominable taste to notice what Mrs. Gruyère had termed his "deformity." But the girl either [317] could not, or would not, taste the salty flavour of his compliment. She made a curious answer.

"I do not profess to be Irish."

For some reason Carson took this for a fresh affront, and it was more than he could put up with. All his easily-lighted fires were ablaze now, and the reflection of them could be seen in his eyes. He gave her one fierce look, then turned away without a word. Abinger stood grinning. But the lilac eyes filled with tears, and the scarlet mouth went down at the corners like a child's.

"Oh, you mustn't mind Carson," said Abinger easily. "You see, he has unfortunately got a real Irish monkey for sale."

"An Irish monkey?"

"Yes. Have you never heard of the species? Carson's is quite famous. It used to be a source of revenue to the Transvaal and Rhodesia for years—they thought nothing of giving him fifty pounds for letting it out on the spree."

Her tears had slipped back unused to whence they came; she was now dry-eyed and rather haughty.

"How could I know?" she began stiffly.

Abinger apparently thought it not wholly out of place to deliver her a short lecture on the undesirability of hurting people's feelings, together with the information that Carson, though hot-tempered and rather mad, was one of the finest gentlemen in the world and happened to share the misfortune of his nationality with a few of the most charming people in South Africa, not excluding their pleasant hostess—Mrs. Portal.

By the time he had finished his remarks Miss Chard had regained her tranquillity.

"Thank you," said she sweetly. "I think it very nice and friendly of you to tell me all these things. I suppose you are an Irishman, too?" [318]

Some emotion kept Abinger dumb for several seconds; then under her tranquil gaze he recovered himself.

"No, I am a cosmopolitan; incidentally of Scotch birth."

"Indeed!" Miss Chard looked politely interested. "You flatter yourself chiefly on the first, I suppose?"

"I did, until to-day."

"To-day?"

"Yes. A cosmopolitan's chief pride, you see, is in the fact that he can conceal his nationality,

whilst able to detect instantly that of the person he is speaking to. Now I should never have guessed that *you* are—English."

Her colour remained unchanged: her eyes regarded him steadfastly.

"You took me for some new kind of barbarian, perhaps?"

He moved a hand deprecatingly: "Not at all; but if I had been asked for an expression of opinion, I should have said, 'A little Irish vagabond dragged up in Africa.'"

The girl's sweet laugh fell from her lips.

"What a ridiculous thing to say! You evidently have not heard that I have only been in Africa for a few weeks or so—my *first* visit."

Then, as though the conversation had ceased to interest her, she turned away and began to talk to Portal—who introduced to her a man with a satanic expression on a woman's mouth as Dr. Ferrand. The doctor immediately began to talk to her about "home!"

She stemmed that tide.

"Why talk about 'home'?" she said impatiently. "It is far more interesting out here."

"Why?" cried Ferrand the poetical. "*Why?* Because the air of 'home' still hangs about you. By just looking at you I know that you have lately heard the jingle of hansom bells, and 'buses rumbling on asphalt, and voices crying, 'Only a penny a bunch!'; that you have been tasting the [319] fog and getting splashed with the mud and smelling the Thames...."

"Yes," said Miss Chard; "and I infinitely prefer the smell of mangoes."

Ferrand would have turned away from her, if he had been able to turn away from any woman.

Mrs. Portal, who had just joined them, agreed with her.

"How can anyone compare the two lives—flowers in your hands and the Indian Ocean blue at your feet, to London with smuts on your nose and nutmeg-graters in your chest?"

But still Ferrand looked at Miss Chard.

"'She is London, she is Torment, she is Town,'" he muttered.

"Don't believe it," said Mrs. Portal in her other ear. "He is his own torment: he has his own box of matches.—Good-bye, Mrs. Gruyère ... Good-bye, Mrs. Lace; so glad—Thursday, then, for polo, and you're going to call for me; good-bye, good-bye. (You're not going, Cora, you and your husband are staying to supper.)... Good-bye, Mrs. Leigh ... yes—don't forget.... Good-bye."

Everyone was going except the elect few who had been asked to stay to what was called "supper" on Sunday night, because no one wore evening-dress—but was really an extra-specially excellent dinner. They gathered at the end of the verandah, where Carson was swinging little Cinthie Portal in a hammock and talking to Mrs. Capron seated on the low stone balustrade above the steps.

She was a picture in pale-blue muslin, with deep-red roses on her hat. The colour of her hair gave the impression that she was gilt-edged and extremely valuable. Certainly she was the best-dressed Roman in Natal, perhaps even in Africa; but at the moment she was wondering how she [320] could possibly get the address of Miss Chard's dressmaker without asking for it.

"*Of course*, you are staying, Mary," said Mrs. Portal, sitting down by her and putting an arm around her waist. "And you, too, Karri?"

But Carson had a grievance. He was suffering such bitterness of spirit as only Irishmen with their half-mystical, half-barbaric, half-womanish natures can suffer about nothing at all. The sun had gone out of his sky, bitterness was in his mouth, and a snake ate his heart because a girl, whom he did not know or care about, repudiated Ireland, and touched a stone against the evil of his strange, Irish eyes. And he was conscious of the girl standing at the other end of the hammock now; he could feel the new movement in the hammock since her hand rested on it, and she, too, swayed it gently; and he knew that she was looking at him with dewy and wonderful eyes. Nevertheless, he excused himself to Mrs. Portal.—Thanks—he was sorry, but he must go and look after Bramham—he had promised—etc.

They all expostulated. And Rosalind Chard's eyes, through the veils of her hair, besought him to look her way. With all her heart she willed him to look her way. But after he had finished excusing himself to Clem Portal, he looked Mrs. Capron's way instead.

Portal said that for two brass pins he would go himself and fetch Bramham. De Grey said that Bramham would probably be found dining peaceably at the Club, with no thought of Carson. Abinger declared that he had, in fact, heard Bramham arrange to go and dine with a man from the Rand. Mrs. de Grey remarked that it was a shame that poor Mr. Bramham, even now that his wife was dead, could not go anywhere for fear of meeting Mrs. Gruyère, who always came and stood near him and began telling someone in a loud voice about his poor devoted wife living and [321] dying like a saint at home.

"Just as though it wouldn't have been far more saintlike to have come out here and minded her sinner, if he *is* one, which I don't believe," said Mrs. Capron.

"*De mortuis!*" broke in Clem, gently; and de Grey said, laughing:

"This country is full of sinners who keep their saints at home—and I want to say that some of the saints have a jolly good time. We saw two of them giving a dinner-party at the "Café Royal" last time we were home; and for saints, they did themselves remarkably well—didn't they, Cora? And looked remarkably well too."

"Yes: it's a becoming rôle—dressed by *Paquin*," said Cora de Grey drily. *She* never looked well, and had never had anything better than an Oxford Street gown on her back: but her tongue was

as dry as the Karoo, and that helped her through a troublesome world.

Abinger began to stammer softly, and everybody listened.

"B-Bramham will be able to come forth at l-last. Mrs. Gru' has a new nut to crack."

He smiled sardonically and felt in all his pockets as though about to produce the nut—but everyone knew that this was merely a mannerism of his. Mrs. Portal looked at him apprehensively, however, and for one moment Poppy left off willing Eve Carson.

"And it will t-take her all her time to do it," he finished gently—even dreamily.

"You frighten me!" said Clem. "What *can* you mean?"

Poppy had the most need to be frightened, but she returned to her occupation. It was now Mary Capron's turn to intervene. Perhaps some of the "willing" had gone astray, for she had certainly given Poppy all her attention for the last five minutes.

"Miss Chard," she cried suddenly. "I keep wondering and wondering where I have seen you [322] before. *I know* we have met."

Her tone expressed extraordinary conviction, and everyone gazed at Poppy with curiosity and even a faint hint of suspicion—except Clem, whose eyes were full of warmth and friendliness, and Carson, who pretended to be bored.

But Poppy only laughed a little—and by that had her will of Carson at last. He forgot to be bored, and gave her a long, deep look. Unfortunately, she was obliged to turn to Mrs. Capron at this moment to make an answer.

"Perhaps," she said pensively, "we were rivals for a king's affection in some past age——"

Mrs. Capron's proud, valuable look came over her, and she stiffened as if she had received a dig with a hat-pin: the men enjoyed themselves secretly. But no one was prepared for the rest of the context.

"—Of course, *I* was the successful rival or it would have been I who remembered, and not you."

This solution left Mrs. Capron cold-eyed and everyone else laughing in some fashion; but there was a nervousness in the air, and Clem vaguely wished that the gong would sound; for long ere this the dusk had fallen deeply, and little Cinthie was asleep in the hammock. It appeared that Carson still held to his plan to depart, and chose this moment to make his farewells in a small storm of abuse and remonstrance. One person minded his decision less than she might have done ten minutes before. The eyes veiled behind mists of hair knew that their service had not been in vain. The invisible hands, that had dragged and strained at Eve Carson's will, slackened their hold and rested awhile. Only: as he went down the flight of shallow stone steps that led to the gate—a tall, powerful figure in grey—a woman's spirit went with him, entreating, demanding to go with him, not to Bramham's home, but to the ends of life and death.

CHAPTER XXIII [323]

NEARLY a week passed before Bramham again saw Poppy, for private affairs unexpectedly engrossed him. He made time, however, to write her a letter full of excellent business advice. Later, he called at the Royal with her papers, and found her writing letters in the library. She had just come in, and a big, plumed, grey hat, which matched her pale grey voile gown, lay on the table beside her. Moreover, the flush of animation was on her cheek and a shine in her eye.

"Oh! come now; you look as if you had taken fresh hold," said Bramham approvingly. "I've brought back your papers, and thanks awfully for letting me look through them. It is pretty clear that if you would only work, you could be coining money as fast as you like. You've caught on at home and everywhere else. Your books have been the wonder of this country for months, and descriptions of your plays have been cabled out to every big centre—but, of course, you know all this."

She nodded.

"And, of course, you know how your little book of poems rang up the country from end to end! By Jove! if the Durban people only knew who they had in the midst of them——"

She looked at him quickly, apprehensively.

"It is more important than ever to have no one know. Since I saw you and talked to you I have reconstructed my plans entirely. Life seems to mean something to me again for the first time [324] since—" She closed her eyes. He did not speak, only looked at her with compassionate eyes and waited.

"I have made up my mind not to let everything go to wreck," she began again presently. "I'm going to work again—I *am* working." She threw back her head and smiled.

"Hurrah!" cried Bramham. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to hear it. As a business man, I hated to see such a chance of making money chucked to the winds—and as a—well, as a plain

man, I can't help applauding when I see what it does to your looks."

"You are certainly plain spoken," said she, smiling. "But I want to tell you—I've taken a little house. I've just been there with the painter, and it's all going to be ready by the end of the week."

"Where is it?"

"Facing the bay—a funny little bungalow-cottage, with an old-fashioned garden and a straggly path through sea-pinks right down to nearly the edge of the waves."

"It sounds altogether too romantic for Durban. I expect these features exist only in your imagination. But can you possibly mean Briony Cottage?"

"But, of course."

"Good—it *is* a dear little place—and with the bay right before you, you'll hardly know you're down in the town."

"I'm having a companion." She made a mouth, and Bramham himself could not disguise a faint twist of his smile.

"Mrs. Portal said it was necessary, if I didn't want to be black-balled by the Durban ladies, so she found me a Miss Allendner, a nice little old thing, who is lonely and unattached, but eminently respectable and *genteel*."

"Ah! I know her—a weary sort of plucked turkey," said the graceless Bramham, "with a nose that was once too much exposed to the winter winds and has never recovered. Never mind, you'll [325] need someone to keep off the crowd as soon as they find out who you are——"

"But they are not going to find out! Charlie, I see that I must speak to you seriously about this. I believe you think my not wanting to be known is affectation; it is nothing of the kind. It is *most imperative* that my identity should be kept secret. I must tell you the reason at last—I am working now for money to fight out a case in the Law Courts before anyone in Africa knows who I am. Under my own name no one will recognise me or be particularly interested; but, of course, pleading as *Eve Destiny* would be another matter. I couldn't keep that quiet."

"A law case! Great— Well, Rosalind," he said ironically, "you certainly do spring some surprises on me. Is it about your plays? Why can't you let me manage it for you? But what kind of case can it be?"

"A divorce case—or, rather, I think a nullity case is what it would be called."

"A *what*?" Bramham could say no more.

"Don't look at me like that, best of friends ... I know, I know, you are beginning to think I am not worth your friendship ... that I don't seem to understand even the first principles of friendship —honesty and candour!... Try and have patience with me, Charlie.... Perhaps I *ought* to have told you before ... but I've never told a single soul ... in fact, I have always refused to consider that I am married. It is a long story, and includes part of my childhood. The man who adopted me and brought me up in an old farmhouse in the Transvaal allowed me to go through a marriage ceremony with him without my knowing what I was doing ... an old French priest married us ... he couldn't speak a word of English ... only Kaffir ... and he married us in French, which I could [326] not understand at that time. Afterwards, my life went on as usual, and for years I continued to look upon the man simply as my guardian. At last, here in Durban, when I was just eighteen, he suddenly sprang the story upon me, and claimed me for his wife. I was horrified, revolted ... my liking for him, which arose entirely from gratitude, turned to detestation on hearing it.... I believed myself to have been merely trapped. In any case, whatever I might have felt for him didn't matter then. It was too late. I belonged to ... the man you know I belong to ... I didn't know what to do at first. There were terrible circumstances in connection with ... the man I love ... which made me think sometimes that I could never meet him again ... I would just keep the soul he had waked in me, and live for work and Fame. But the man I was married to wanted to keep me to my bond ... and then suddenly he found out ... something ... I don't quite know how it came to pass, but he *knew* ... I was obliged to fly from his house half clad.... It was *then* I found refuge with Sophie Cornell."

"And these things all happened here? Do you mean to tell me that blackguard was some Durban fellow?"

"He did live here at that time."

"And now?"

"He appears to be here still ... I saw him the other day. He behaved to me as though I were really Miss Chard ... but I know him. He will fight tooth and nail ... I don't suppose he cares about me in the least, but he will lie his soul away, I believe, and spend his last penny for revenge."

"Well, upon my soul! I can't think who the fellow can be!" said Bramham artlessly, and Poppy could not refrain from smiling.

"I don't think there would be any good in telling you, Charlie. You may know him ... in fact, you [327] are sure to, in a small place like this ... and it would only make things difficult for you."

Bramham was plainly vexed that she did not confide in him, but she was perfectly well aware that he knew Abinger intimately, and fearing that something might leak out and spoil her plans, she decided not to tell him.

"You should have tackled the thing at home," said Bramham thoughtfully. "They'd have fixed you up in no time there, I believe."

"No, I had advice about it, and was told that as the ceremony had taken place in the Transvaal, and the man is out here, I must go to the Rand Courts ... and, by the way, I must tell you—I wrote to the mission monastery which the old priest belonged to and made inquiries. They wrote back

that old Father Eugène was dead, but that they had already gone into the matter on behalf of *my husband*, who had made representations to them. That they could only inform me that the ceremony performed by the Father was absolutely valid, and they were prepared to uphold it in every way. They added that they were well aware that it was my intention to try and disprove the marriage and for my own purposes escape from my sacred bond, but that I must not expect any assistance from them in my immoral purpose.... So, you see, I have them to fight as well. Another thing is, that the only other witness to the ceremony was a woman who would swear her soul away at the bidding of the man who calls himself my husband."

"By Jove! It looks as if you're up against a tough proposition, as they say in America!" was Bramham's verdict at last. "But you'll pull through, I'm certain, and you've pluck enough. As for money—well, you know that I am not poor——"

He stopped, staring at her pale face. [328]

"Don't ever offer to lend me money," she said fiercely rudely.

"Why, you let me lend you some before! And were unusual enough to pay it back." Smiling broadly, he added: "I never had such a thing happen to me before!" But she would not smile. The subject seemed an unfortunate one, for she did not regain her joyous serenity during the rest of the interview.

He went home wrapped in cogitation, turning over in his mind the name of every man in the place on the chance of its being the name of the culprit. Abinger's name, amongst others, certainly came up for consideration, but was instantly dismissed as an impossibility, for he had plainly given everyone to understand that—after the time of his disappearance from the Rand, until his readvent in Durban on the day Bramham had met him coming off the Mail-boat—he had been travelling abroad, and there was no reason to disbelieve this statement. Moreover, Bramham was aware of other facts in Abinger's private life which made it seem absolutely impossible that he could be the villain of Rosalind Chard's tale.

The day Poppy moved to her new home, Clem Portal was the first person to visit her and wish her luck and happiness there.

They took tea in the largest room in the house, which was to be Poppy's working-room and study. It was long and low, with two bay-windows, and the walls had been distempered in pale soft grey. The floor was dark and polished, and the only strong note of colour in the room a rose-red Persian rug before the quaint fireplace. The chintzes Poppy had come upon with great joy in one of the local shops: ivory-white with green ivy leaves scattered over them—a great relief from the everlasting pink roses of the usual chintz. The grey walls were guileless of pictures, except [329] for the faithful blue *Hope* which overhung the fireplace above vases full of tall fronds of maidenhair-fern, and some full-length posters of the Beardsley school in black-and-white wash. Poppy's writing-table was in one window, and on the wall where she could always see it while at work was a water-colour of a little boy standing in a field of corn and poppies. The tea-table was in the other window. She and Clem sat looking at the blue bay flapping and rippling under the afternoon sunlight, with the long bluff ridge sleeping sullenly beyond.

"You've found the sweetest place in Durban," said Clem. "Whenever I feel like a mealie—a *green* mealie—which, alas! is very often, I shall sneak down here to 'simplify, simplify.' While you work I'll sit in the sun in the Yogi attitude and triumphantly contemplate eternity and jelly-fish."

Later, she said:

"Mary Capron wanted to come too, but I told her I must have you all to myself to-day. I'm afraid she was rather hurt, but ... I was not sure whether you liked her, Poppy. I do hope you are going to, dear, for I love her, and we shall be a triangle with sore corners, if you *don't*."

Poppy was dreaming with her tea-cup in her lap, and the glitter of the bay in her eyes.

"Do you think three women ever get on well together?" she asked evasively. "There is always one out."

Clem was quick to see the meaning of this. A look of disappointment came over her gay, gentle face.

"Mary and I have been friends for years," she said. "She is the only woman I have never had any inspiration about; but though I am blinded by her beauty, I know her to be good and true. It would be a terribly disloyal thing if I deserted her for you ... what am I to do if you two don't like [330] each other?"

"If *you* love Mrs. Capron, Clem, she won't need to bother about the liking of a woman like me."

"She likes *you*, however. And I'm sure when you get to know her better, you'll like her.... I daresay when two beautiful women first meet, a feeling of antagonism is natural. But *you* should be above that, Poppy. And poor Mary is a subject for pity rather than dislike—any woman is who has drawn blank in the big lottery. I daresay you know *that* about her—most people do."

"I have gathered that she is not very happily married," said Poppy.

"Have you ever seen him?"

"I believe the first time I ever saw you, Clem, he was with you."

"Ah, yes, I remember now—and we talked of you, the girl with the Burne-Jones eyes." Most women would have made this an easy stepping-stone into the flowing brook of confidences, and found out where Poppy was going to on that sunny day, and where she had been all the long

years since; but Clem Portal had an instinct about questions that hurt. Her husband often said of her:

"She is that lovely thing—a close woman!" Now, the peculiarity of a close woman is that she neither probes into the dark deeps of others, nor allows herself to be probed.

"Nick Capron was not *quite* impossible in those days," she continued; "but now a good place for him would be under the débris heaps outside de Beers'. When she first met him he was a romantic character on the down-grade. Had been all over the world and gone through every kind of adventure; lost a fortune at Monte-Carlo on a system of his own for breaking the bank; written a book (or more probably got it written for him) about his adventures as a cowboy in Texas; and [331] made quite a name for himself as a scout in the war between Chili and Peru. Amongst other things he has an intimate knowledge of torpedoes and is supposed to have been the author of the plan that sent the Chilian transport, the *Loa*, to the bottom by a torpedo launched from an apparently harmless fruit-boat. At any rate, he was seen on the fruit-boat, and when he came to Africa shortly afterwards, they said it was to escape the vengeance of the Chilians. Mary, who was on a visit to this country, met him at the Cape when everyone was talking about him. Unfortunately, when women hear sparkling things about a man, they do not always think to inquire about the sparkling things he drinks—and how much *that* has to do with the matter. She fell in love with him, or his reputation, and they were married in a great whirl of romantic emotion. Well, you know what happens to people who engage in whirling?"

Poppy looked up, anxious to learn, and Clem continued with the air of an oracle of Thebes:

"After a time they find themselves sitting still on the ground, very sick. That is Mary's position. She sits flat on the ground and surveys a world that makes her feel sick. Nick Capron, however, continues to whirl."

"She must have great courage to face the situation," said Poppy sincerely.

"She has more than courage," said Clem, alight with loyal enthusiasm. "She is one in a thousand. You know enough of Africa, I daresay, Poppy, to know that life out here is just one huge temptation to a beautiful unhappily-married woman. The place teems with men—good, bad, and indifferent, but all interesting (unless drink is sweeping them down hill too fast), and they all want to be kind to her. Many of them are splendid fellows. But the best of men are half-devil, [332] half-child, and nothing more, where a beautiful woman is concerned. You know that, don't you?"

What Poppy *did* know was that Clem had far greater knowledge of the world of men and women than she had, and she was only too interested to sit and imbibe wisdom. She frankly said so.

"I thoroughly understand these things," Clem replied without pride. "Sinners can never take me by surprise, whatever they do. Perhaps it is because I might easily have been a devil of the deepest dye myself, but for luck—Billy is my luck."

This from the most orthodox woman in Africa! Poppy could not refrain from a trill of laughter.

"I think you are one of those who paint themselves black to be *en suite* with the people you like, Clemmie," she said; "but you're not extraordinarily clever as an artist."

"Not so clever as *you'll* have to be when Mrs. Gruyère comes round to have her miniature done," said Clem maliciously. "I must think about going, darling. Mary is coming to fetch me in her carriage and she will be here in a minute or two now. Before I go, I want you to promise me to steal away whenever you can. If you sit too much over work you will fall asleep, and have to be put in the poppy-garden instead of flaunting and flaming in the sunshine and being a joy to behold. What a fascinating flower it is! Both your names are fascinating ... *Eve Destiny!* ... what could have prompted it, I wonder?"

"Simply an idea. I am a child of destiny, I always think—at least, the old blind hag seems to have been at some pains to fling me about from pillar to post. Eve—" She turned away, knowing that she could not mention that name without giving some sign of the tumult it roused within her. [333] "Eve—was the most primitive person I could think of" (the lie did not come very glibly), "and *I* am primitive. If I were my real self I should be running loose in the woods somewhere with a wild-cat's skin round me."

"Well, you wouldn't run alone for long, that's very certain," laughed Clem.

"No, I should want my mate wherever and whatever I was"—Clem laughed again at her frankness, but she went on dreamfully—"a Bedouin, or a shaggy Thibetan on the roof of the world, or a 'cassowary on the plains of Timbuctoo.' Oh, Clem! the sound of the wind in forest trees—the sea—the desert with an unknown horizon, are better to me than all the cities and civilisation in the world—yet here I sit!" She threw out her hands and laughed joylessly.

"You ought to marry an explorer—or a hunter of big game," said Clem thoughtfully, and got up and looked out of the window. "Here comes one in the carriage with Mary. But he is an Irishman, so I wouldn't advise you to look *his* way.... An Irishman should never be given more than a Charles Wyndhamesque part on the stage of any woman's life ... a person to love, but not to be in love with...."

"Oh, Clem! You are Irish yourself——"

Clem did not turn round. She went on talking out of the window and watching the approaching carriage.

"Yes, and I love everyone and everything from that sad green land ... the very name of Ireland sends a ray of joy right through me ... and its dear blue-eyed, grey-eyed people! Trust an Irish-woman, Poppy, when she is true-bred ... but never fall in love with an Irishman ... there is no fixity of tenure ... he will give you his hand with his heart in it ... but when you come to look there

for comfort, you will find a bare knife for your breast ... unstable as water ... too loving of love ... too understanding of another's heart's desire ... too quick to grant, too quick to take away ... the tale of their lips changing with the moon's changes—even with the weather.... Hullo, Mary! Here I am.... How do you do, Karri?" [334]

Mrs. Capron's carriage had pulled up before Poppy's little side-gate, which gave on to the embankment. She was gowned in black, a daring rose-red hat upon her lovely hair, and by her side was Evelyn Carson. She waved at the two women in the window, but did not leave the carriage. Carson came instead, making a few strides of the little straggly, sea-shelled path.

"We've come to drag Mrs. Portal away," he said to Poppy, after shaking hands through the window, "having just met her husband taking home two of the hungriest-looking ruffians you ever saw."

Clem gave a cry of woe and began to pin on her hat.

"The wretch! I thought he was going to dine at the Club."

"He gave us strict orders to send you home at once," laughed Carson, "so Mrs. Capron won't come in."

"Who are the men?" demanded Clem.

"Two brutes just arrived by to-day's boat, with a sea-edge to their appetites. I should say that nothing short of a ten-course banquet would appease them."

Clem's groans were terrible.

"Cook will have prepared half a chicken's wing for me. She always starves me when I'm alone. You come back with me," she commanded Carson. "If you talk beautifully to them they won't notice the lightness of the *menu*."

"Oh, but I'd rather come when you are prepared," said the graceless Carson. "I'm hungry, too. When you've gone I'm going to ask Miss Chard for a cup of tea." Smiling, he plucked a sea-pink and stuck it in his coat. They were in the garden now on the way to the carriage. [335]

"Deserter! Well, Mary, *you'll* have to come and let them feed upon your damask cheek—something has got to be done."

Poppy exchanged greetings with Mrs. Capron, and presently the two women drove away, leaving her and Carson standing there with the gleam of the sunlit bay in their eyes. Turning, she found him staring in an odd way at her hair, which she was wearing piled into a crown, with the usual fronds falling softly down. Her lids drooped for a moment under his strange eyes, but her voice was perfectly even and conventional as she asked if he would really care for tea.

"I should, indeed—and to come into the restful grey room I got a glimpse of through the window. It reminded me of a cool, cloudy day in the middle of summer."

Pleasure at his approval brought a faint wave of colour into the face she was determined to mask of all expression. She led the way indoors, he following, his eyes travelling swiftly from the crowned head she carried with so brave an air on her long throat, down the little straight back that was short like the classical women's, giving fine sweeping length from waist to heel.

She rang for fresh tea and went to the tea-table. Carson stood about the room, seeming to fill it.

"If you are fond of grey, we have a taste in common," he said, and she gave him a quick, upward glance. The face which Africa's sun had branded her own looked extraordinarily dark above the light-grey of his clothes and the little pink flower stuck in his coat. It seemed to her that no woman had ever loved so debonair a man as this Irishman with his careless eyes and rustling voice.

"I love *green* best of all colours," she answered steadily; "but one gets tired of green walls now that they are fashionable and everyone has them—" her voice broke off suddenly. In his looming about the room he had stopped dead before *Hope* over the mantelpiece. The cup Poppy held rattled in its saucer. He presently asked who the picture was by, and where he, too, could get a copy of it. [336]

"I like it," he said. "It seems to me in a vague way that I know that picture well, yet I don't believe I have ever seen it before ... strange...!" He stared at it again, and she made no response. For the moment she was back in a little upper chamber in Westminster.

He came presently over to the tea-table, and was about to sit down when another picture caught his eye—the water-colour of the little child among the poppies and corn. He stepped before it and stayed looking for a long time. At last he said, laughing constrainedly:

"You will think I am mad ... but I imagine I know *that* picture too ... that little chap is extraordinarily like someone I know ... I can't think who ... but I'm certain ... is it some of your work, Miss Chard?"

He looked at her with keen inquiry, but his glance changed to one of astonishment. Her eyes were closed and she was pale as a primrose; her hands had fallen to her sides.

A moment afterwards she recovered herself and was handing him a cup of tea with some inconsequent remark. She had made absolutely no response to his questions about either picture, and he thought the fact rather remarkable.

Afterwards they talked and he forgot surprise (for the time being) in listening to the shy graces of thought to which she gave utterance and watching her inexpressibly charming delicacies of manner. When he left her the magic of her was on him; she had bound him with the spell of his own country; but he did not know it. If he *had* known it he would have repudiated it with all his strength, for already he was a bound man. [337]

"His honour rooted in dishonour stood."

CHAPTER XXIV

[338]

THE women of Durban received Poppy into their midst with suspicion and disfavour, which they carefully veiled because they could find out absolutely nothing, damning or otherwise, about her, and also because Mrs. Portal's introductions were as good as a certificate of birth, marriage, and death, and to be questioned as little; and Mrs. Portal's position was such that no woman dared assail her for exercising her privileges. What they could do, however, was narrow their eyes, sharpen their claws, and lie in wait, and this they did with a patience and zest worthy of their species.

Meanwhile, those who sought Poppy might sometimes find her at the house of Mrs. Portal; but not as often as she wished, for work chained her almost perpetually, and she was working against time. She was straining every nerve to have her work finished and paid for, and her law case quietly settled in Johannesburg, before the time came for Carson to set out for his five years' exile in Borapota. She was working for freedom and bondage and life—for, indeed, all that life had to offer her now was the word of a man bidding her to follow him into bondage. It was hard on her that while she worked she must lose time and opportunities of meeting him and winding more spells to bind him. But—she had grown used to fighting her battles against odds. So she gave up six solid hours of daylight and two of the night to hard labour; and she made a rule never to count the hours, which were many, that were spent at her desk *dreaming*. For no writer does [339] work of any consequence without dreaming, even if the dream is not always of work.

Miss Allendner might have found life a dull affair in Briony Cottage had she not been of that domesticated type which finds satisfaction and pleasure in managing a household and ordering good meals. Under her rule the little cottage became a well-ordered, comfortable home, where things ran on oiled wheels, and peace and contentment reigned. No one and nothing bothered Poppy, and the long, bright hours of day were hers to work in uninterruptedly. Such visitors as called, and some did call, if only out of curiosity, were received by Miss Allendner, and regaled with dainty teas and mysteriously impressive statements as to Miss Chard's *work* which unfortunately kept her so busy that she could see no one—*at present*. The companion had of necessity been let into the secret of her employer's work and identity, for Poppy was a careless creature with letters and papers, and it irked her to have to exercise caution with an intimate member of her household. Poor Miss Allendner almost exploded with the greatness and importance of the information. But she was a faithful and trustworthy soul, and happy for the first time in all her needy, half-rationed life.

If Poppy had been a bread-and-butter woman she might have been happy, too, in some fashion, within the trim, well-ordered confines of comfortable mediocrity. But it was not there that her desire lay. She had tasted of the wine and fruit of life—Love, and wanderings in far lands, and vagabondage. Bread-and-butter could never satisfy her again.

Work was wine, too. She felt the fire of it circling in her veins, even when wearied out she flung her books and pencils from her and ran out to the sea. And play was wine—when on some lovely [340] evening she arrayed herself amazingly, took rickshaw and Miss Allendner and ascended the wide, sloping road that led to Clem Portal's home on the Berea.

The Portals' social circle varied, because it was constantly being enlarged or decreased by the comings and goings of travellers and visitors; for, besides knowing everyone worth knowing in South Africa, they could beckon friends and acquaintances from the four poles. Add to this that they were both charming, witty, cultivated people, with the true Irish love for bestowing hospitality and the true Irish grace in bestowing it, and it will be easily understood that all delightful and interesting people who came to South Africa sought them as the bee seeks clover.

As a background to new faces could always be found those of fixed and steadfast friends—Mrs. Capron's—the de Greys'—the Laces'. Always Carson, when he came to Natal; and Abinger, because he was both interesting and something of a crony of Bill Portal's.

A sprinkling of Durban people came and went.

Evening is a pleasant time in Natal, and the Portals' moonlit gardens and lawns and long verandahs lent themselves agreeably to strolling people, tired of the clang and glare of the day. With someone always at the piano to sprinkle the still air with melody, it was pleasant to saunter, the dew in your hair and all the sounds of the night-things about you, while you talked with someone whose interest interested you, or gossiped of life as it could, or would, or might be, or of "Home," meaning England, which through the glamour of an African night seems the moon of all men's Desire. There are more intense sudden joys in Life than these, but few more poignantly sweet.

To be Mrs. Portal's friend was to share her friends, to know them, to gossip with them, to criticise and be in turn criticised by them. Sport, books, music, pictures, people—all that goes to [341] the making of life worth the living, came under discussion; and in Africa, where everyone is using

every sense of mind and body, living and feeling every moment of life, there are always new things to be said on these subjects—or perhaps only things that are so many centuries old that they sound new. Truth, after all, is older than the everlasting hills.

Naturally, there was never much grouping. General conversation has more than a liability to platitude, or, at best, to flippancy, and the finest talking is never done in groups, but *tête-à-tête*. Indeed, it is on record by a thinker of some importance that the best things men say are said to women who probably don't understand them:

> "To the women who didn't know why
> (And now we know they could never know why)
> And did not understand."

That is as may be. Remains the fact that the best talkers (apart, of course, from orators, politicians, and professional diners-out) do not talk for a crowd, and the most potent phrases and epigrams—when epigrams are not *vieux jeu*—are made for one, or at the most, two listeners.

Poppy's ears took in many pretty and many witty things.

Bill Portal was a blithe soul, overflowing with gay parables and maxims for the unwise, whom he claimed to be the salt of the earth.

Abinger was epigrammatic, sardonic, and satanic, and he never asked for more than one listener—a woman for preference, as she would certainly repeat what he said—and there were other reasons. But the women of the Portals' circle recognised a serpent when they met him, however leafy the garden, and always preferred to listen to his wisdom in twos and threes. With Poppy he never encompassed any talk at all, unless she felt Clem strong at her back. He smiled at [342]
this: the smile of the waiting man to whom everything cometh at last.

Nick Capron never graced the assemblies with his handsome dissipated presence. His lust was for poker and his fellow-men—which meant the Club and small hours. He was never even known to fetch his wife. But many a man was pleased and honoured to do his duty for him. Sometimes she stayed all night with her friend Clem. Sometimes Carson took her home in a rickshaw.

The women with attentive husbands pitied her amongst themselves; but she gave no sign of discontent, and they never ventured to offer sympathy. Invariably she looked wonderfully beautiful—and, therefore, it was not necessary for her to exert herself to much conversation. Since Poppy's soft thrush-note had first been heard in Clem Portal's verandah, Mrs. Capron's laugh had been silent: though it was a pretty laugh, too. But her smile was as alluring as the sound of a silvery brooklet, and sometimes the sympathetic wives trembled when they saw their husbands lingering near her—not to talk, but to look. She sat so fearlessly under bright light, and looked so flawlessly good. It was, indeed, a comfort to remember that she was as good as she looked, or she would not be Mrs. Portal's closest friend. It was remembered, too, that she had never tried to beguile any woman's man away from her.

When one wife after another had ceased to tremble for her man, realising that this Circe did not use her toils, they rewarded her by saying amongst themselves that it must be sad to be so *cold*. This warmed the coldest of them—with a glow of self-satisfaction.

Mary Capron did not bother about any of them. The riddle she sought to read was Rosalind Chard. Always she watched Poppy, and pondered where she had seen her before. Poppy [343]
suspected this, but it did not agitate her. She had prepared another soft-answer-warranted-not-to-turn-away-wrath if Mary Capron should attack her in the open again. But Mary Capron, if she was not witty, was wise. She was no fencer, and had no intention of encountering Miss Chard's foil with the button off. She preferred to choose her own weapon, time, and place, and to pursue the little duel in her own fashion. She was merely "getting her hand in" when she said to Abinger, looking dreamily at Poppy the while:

"Did you ever hear of a Sphinx without a secret?"

"It's what Wilde taxed the modern society woman with being, I believe," he answered idly; he was easily one of the best-read men in Africa. "But it would not apply out here."

"No," she said dreamily. "Everyone has a secret in this country, haven't they? even girls."

At another time she and Carson were near when Poppy, with her arm in Clem's, presented Luce Abinger with a suave answer, so heavily encrusted with salt, that even his seasoned tongue went dry. However, his impertinence had warranted punishment, so he bore it as best he might. And Clem's tact oiled the troubled waters.

But Mary Capron said something to Carson that kept him awake that night.

"She's *quite* clever, isn't she? Only it's a pity she has to begin at the beginning for herself."

Carson had scarcely been struck by Miss Chard's *cleverness*—considering that on both his first and second meeting with her she had had odd lapses of something very like *gaucherie*. But he thought her interesting, arresting, and beautiful. He knew of no reason why he should think of her at all; but he sometimes found her face and her voice amongst his thoughts and considered [344]
the fact a curious and rather annoying thing.

And the sight and sound of her had an extraordinary power at times to rouse to active, vivid life, a dream of the past that was old grief and pain.

Circumstance sometimes threw them together in the verandahs or out under the Southern-Cross flaming above the garden, and Poppy's low laugh might be heard mingling with his voice; but she did not always laugh because she was amused.

Carson's silver tongue could take on an amazingly sharp edge. Being an Irishman, he was a law unto himself, with a fine taste for unconventionality in other people. But if he knew South Africa from one end to the other, he also knew men and cities, and the rules that govern women all the world over. Gradually he had become to be aware that Miss Chard outraged the most important of these by being both unclassifiable and mysterious. Even in what calls itself society in South Africa, women and their belongings and connections must be above-board and open to inspection. An unattached woman has got to prove her right to social status there, as elsewhere. If she cannot, she must prepare to take the consequences—and the least unpleasant of these is to have the worst believed of her.

Of course, Rosalind Chard was backed by Mrs. Portal, but that did not prevent tongues from wagging.

Carson took it upon himself to let Miss Chard know something of these things whenever Fate ordained that he and she should walk under the stars together.

It was wittily done, by the delicate instrumentality of chosen implication, and it never missed the mark: the arrow quivered in Poppy every time. Hot and cold, with sudden rages and terrors, she would turn on him only to find the strange eyes so pleasantly indifferent; his expression so [345] guileless that it was hard to suspect him of malicious intent. Her refuge was a little laugh. Carson told himself sardonically that the game amused him. It may have done so. Doubtless Indians were amused when they threw barbs at their staked victims. But as a fact, something more than an Indian sense of humour would have been appeased in him, if, instead of the brave smile that flickered across his victim's face, or the little dry retort that her lips gave out even while they quivered, she had answered him haughtily with the pride of race or family or position—the pride of *anything with a root to it*. That was the important point: what were the roots of Rosalind Chard? That she had pride was plain enough—the fine pride of courage; the pride of a slim, strong young tree that stands firm in winds that tear and beat, flaunting a brave green pennon.

But what was the name of the tree? In what strange garden had it first grown? Was it of a garden at all? Or a highway? Whence came the suggestion that it had bloomed in the desert?

Carson scarcely realised that he fiercely desired information on these matters. He supposed it to be curiosity about a pretty and interesting girl—pure curiosity. He had heard things said, a word dropped here and there—mostly by women, and he knew that harsh winds had begun to blow round the young slim tree with the brave green pennon.

So out of *pure curiosity* he tormented her when opportunity arose; and she—gave him witty, gentle little restrained answers, with her hand against her heart when the shadows allowed. Or if she could touch a tree she had greater strength to bear her torment and to laugh more easily.

Of all the rest she was careless. Let them think what they would—Clem was her friend. [346]

If her personality and appearance had been less fascinating, probably the gossip about her mysterious appearance in Durban without friends or connections, or a known home, would have died a natural death. But with her first coming to Clem's house, her loveliness seemed to have grown. In the heat of a room there was a dewiness about her that began in her eyes, and was wonderfully refreshing to the jaded spirit. In the chill of the late evening she seemed to glow with a warmth that was cheering to the coldest heart. Unfortunately, she sometimes forgot to be conventional and ordinary in little social matters. Clem never took notice of such trivialities, but Mrs. Capron and the other women would raise delicate eyebrows and even the men exchange inscrutable glances.

One day Mrs. Capron said:

"Clem, didn't you tell me that Miss Chard was a Cheltenham College girl?" in an incredulous voice. (It is not always convenient to be faced with your statements made at a pinch.)

"Mary," was the answer, after a little pause, "that girl has got a wound that bleeds inwardly, and has spent her life trying to hide it from the world. She has had no time to notice the little conventionalities and banalities that count with us."

"One wonders sometimes if she ever had the opportunity—that is all. She walked into the dining-room ahead of Lady Mostyn and everybody else last night——"

Clem winced; then, remembering Lady Mostyn's outraged face, laughed.

"Well, one hardly picks up those things at school, *chérie*—and she may have been on a desert island ever since."

"That would be an interesting reason for her bad manners, darling, but——"

"I won't admit that they are bad—only unusual; and, besides, she has the excuse of genius. If I [347] might only tell you what I know of her work——"

"*Miniatures?*" asked Mrs. Capron wickedly.

"No: lovey-dovey darling—don't tease and don't be uncharitable—you are much too beautiful to be a cat. Some day that girl will burst forth upon us all in the glory of fame."

"Clem, you are infatuated."

"You'll see," said Clem. "Only be patient and kind—I must really go and see what cook has for lunch. If she gives us curried mutton once more and stewed guavas and custard, Billy will calmly proceed to bust."

She escaped.

CHAPTER XXV

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MRS. PORTAL knew that Poppy was working as for her life, but she did not know why. Only, sometimes, out of the deep love and sympathy she felt for the girl, she longed to know the truth. The truth was far even from her far-seeing eyes.

She believed that there must be a man somewhere in the world whom Poppy loved, for well she knew that such a wound as Poppy hid could only have been dealt by a man's unerring hand—and none but a loved hand could strike so deep! With all the mystical-religious, loving side of her nature, Clem prayed that life might yet do well by her friend and give her her heart's desire; but hope did not rise very high. She was fond of quoting that saying:

"The things that are really for thee gravitate to thee. Everything that belongs to thee for aid or comfort shall surely come home through open or winding passages. Every friend whom not thy fantastic will but the great and tender heart in thee craveth, shall lock thee in his embrace."

—and she would have liked to believe it, but Life had taught her differently. In the meantime, in so far as she was able, she watched faithfully and anxiously over Poppy's destiny, dragging her from her desk when the lilac eyes grew heavy and the tinted face too pale for health; making up gay little parties to drive or walk or go to the theatre, arranging merry dinners and excursions—anything that would distract, and presently bring back vivacity and strength, and renew courage.

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If it had not been for these things it is very certain that Poppy, with all her resolution and purpose, must have broken down from overwork and the strain of seeing the man she loved turn his eyes from her perpetually. For there were desperate hours when she obliged herself to face the fact that Evelyn Carson gave no sign of any feeling for her but a certain polite curiosity. In the black, despairing days that never fail to come to highly-strung, temperamental people, she bitterly derided herself, her work, her cause, asking what it was all for?

To win freedom from Luce Abinger and cast herself into the arms of Eve Carson? But were his arms open to her? Plainly not. Plainly here was another of the "little songs they sing in hell"—of the woman who loves, but is beloved not by the beloved.

Oh! she had her black and desperate days—

> "And the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night."

But afterwards *Hope* played for her on the one brave string—and she took up her pen and worked on.

On a stormy, sullen day towards the end of April she wrote the concluding words of the two things she had been working on at the same time—a play and a novel. They contained the best work she had ever done, for though they were begun for the love of a man, they were gone forward with, for the love of her craft, and, as all good craftsmen know, it is only in such spirit that the best work is achieved. All that remained to do was to go over and through the manuscripts once more, when they had been typed, to polish here and re-phrase there; and just to linger over all for a day in sheer delight and surprise. She was not peculiar among writers, in that, apart from the plan and construction of a thing, she never remembered from day to day what she had written, and always felt the greatest surprise and freshness in re-reading passages which had sped from her mind to paper in inspired moments, and which, if not written at those moments, would have been lost for ever.

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Schopenhauer was not the only person in the world to discover that a beautiful thought is like a beautiful woman. If you want to keep the one always you must tie her to you by marriage, if the other, you must tie it to you with pen and paper or it will leave you and never return.

On that morning when she made her finished work into two tall piles of exercise-books before her on her table, the measure of content was hers that is felt by even the heaviest-hearted when they look upon good work done.

She laid her head on the books and tears fell softly down, and her heart sang a little song that was pure thankfulness and praise for the goodness of God.

And while she sat, there came a little tap at the door.

Miss Allendner entered with a letter, and Poppy, taking it from her, saw that it was addressed in the small, strong writing she had not seen for years, but which she instantly recognised as Luce Abinger's. She laid it down mechanically on the table.

"Mr. Abinger brought it himself," said Miss Allendner, "and would not leave it until he heard that you were here and would receive it at once. He said it was *very* important."

"Thank you," said Poppy quietly, and sat staring at the letter long after her companion had left the room.

Afterwards, she laid her head on the books again, but wearily now, and the tears of her eyes were dried up and so was the little chant of praise in her heart. She was afraid—afraid of the letter; of the look she had seen in Luce Abinger's eyes of late—the old, hateful look—and of the fight before her. Now that she had done the work and would have the money to fight with, she was afraid. But only for a time. Those who have fought with any of the grim forces of life—sorrow, pain, poverty, despair—and defeated even the least of these in battle, have strength to fight again, and secret springs of courage to drink from in the hour of need. Poppy rose from her

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table at last with such new courage in her, that she could laugh disdainfully at the sealed letter and all it contained of threats, or commands. She left it sealed and lying there for some other hour's perusal. It should not spoil *this* her glad day of finished tasks.

She locked the door upon it and her work, and went to her room to change her gown and get ready to spend the rest of the day with Clem Portal. She would probably stay the night, but she took nothing with her, for she had now quite a collection of clothes at Clem's for emergencies.

On the afternoon of the same day she sat dreaming in a Madeira-chair in Clem's drawing-room, while the latter meditated on the piano, trying to compose an air sufficiently mournful to set to the words of a little song of Poppy's called "In Exile." Softly, she sang it over and over to long slurring chords—curiously sweet and strange.

I.

Across the purple heather
  The winds of God blow sweet.
But it's O for the smell of London
  And the roar of a London street!

II.

Upon the wine-dark waters
  The sun strikes clean and hot.
But it's O for a London garden
  And the woman who loves me not!

"You say you are no musician, Clem, but I never knew anyone who could make lovelier sounds [352]
come out of a piano," Poppy said.

Clem laughed.

"Dear, I can't play at all: it is this little song that sets chords singing in my head. What were you thinking of when you wrote it?"

"Of Dr. Ferrand, I think, that first Sunday I came here. You remember how he talked of London?—and you said that he had 'his own box of matches and could make his own hell any day in the week,' like poor *Dick Heldar*. The circumstances seemed to indicate that there was some woman in England who didn't love him—but I daresay that applies to a good many men out here."

"The most usual circumstance," said Clem laughing, "is that the woman loves too well. Some men find that hardest of all to bear."

Poppy reflected on this for a while.

"I suppose you mean wives! It is curious how many people seem to marry to live apart, isn't it, Clem?"

"Yes; I call it the cat-and-reptile game," said Clem, swinging round on the music-stool and beginning to run her hands through her crinkly, curly, fuzzy dark hair with seven red lights in it. "The cat catches the reptile, scratches him, bites him, wounds him, puts her mark on him for good, and as soon as he has no more kick left in him, off she goes and leaves him alone."

Poppy was laughing.

"Well, some of the reptiles make marvellous recoveries," said she, remembering one, at least, whom she had known.

"You can't blame them for *that*—it isn't very interesting to be dead, I suppose."

"As for the cats who don't leave their reptiles," continued Poppy, thinking of some of the dull people she had recently met, "nothing could be deader than the pair of them. And then they label [353]
themselves 'happily married.'"

"Now, Poppy, I won't have you walking over my cabbages and onions."

"I'm not, Clem—but they don't make marriage look alluring to anyone with an imagination, do they? Of course, it is wonderful to see your happiness——"

"Yes; Bill and I *are* rather wonderful"—Clem jumped up in a hurry—"I must *absolutely* go and get some socks and stockings to mend. There is a pile as big as a house waiting—" She flashed out of the room.

"She won't discuss her happiness with me," thought Poppy. "It is too sacred!"

By the time Clem came back a settled gloom was over everything; the rain was heavily pelting against the windows; occasionally a bright beam of light shot through the room, leaving it as grey as a witch; afterwards the thunder groaned like some god in agony.

"You won't be able to see to darn holes," said Poppy.

"Ah! you don't know Billy's holes," Clem answered sadly. "And Cinthie inherits the gentle trait. It is *too* bad, for I hate darning."

She settled as near the window as she dared, and sat peering her glimmering head over her work, while they talked in desultory fashion: but the storm got worse, the thunder groaned more terribly.

"God sounds as though He is tearing His heart out to throw it under the feet of dancing women and men," said Poppy, in a voice that rang with some unusual emotion.

Clem Portal looked at her in astonishment.

"Darling, I ought to rebuke you for blasphemy."

To her astonishment the girl burst into wild weeping.

"No ... it isn't blasphemy ... I am in pain, Clem ... these storms ... a storm like this reminds me of when I was a child ... I was once out in a storm like this." [354]

"You?"

"Yes ... once ... on the veldt ... for three days."

"On the veldt!" repeated Clem; a streak of lightning tore through the room, showing her for an instant a tortured face. She reached out and took the girl's hands in hers, gripping them tight. Dimly, through the rumble of the thunder, she heard Poppy's voice.

"Yes ... out on the veldt ... I, whom you think have only been in Africa for a few months at a time ... I, the gently-nurtured English girl! ... educated at Cheltenham College! ... I did not actually tell you these things, Clem, but I let you believe them ... they are all lies ... I was born in Africa ... I have roamed the veldt lean and hungry ... been a little beaten vagabond in the streets."

"Dear," said Clem, with the utmost tenderness and gentleness; "what do these things matter—except that they have made you suffer? ... they have made you the woman you are, and that is all I care to know.... I have always known that there was a wound ... don't make it bleed afresh ... I love you too well to want to hear anything that it hurts to tell ... always believe this, Poppy ... I love and trust you above any woman I have ever known."

"Clem, you are too kind and good to me.... I am not worthy even to speak to you, to touch you.... It is nothing when I say I love you ... I bless you ... I think there is nothing in the world I would not do for you.... I did not know one woman could be so sweet to another as you have been to me ... you are like the priceless box of sweet-smelling nard that the harlot broke over the feet of Christ ... and I ... Ah! Christ! What am I?"

Dense blackness filled the room. In it nothing was heard but the sound of deep weeping. [355] Outside the storm raged on. But when next a gleam of light flashed through the windows, the figure of a kneeling woman was revealed clasped in another woman's arms.

"I am weary of falseness, Clem ... weary of my lips' false tales ... since I have been near you and seen your true unafraid eyes ... the frank clear turn of your mouth that has never lied to anyone ... I have died many deaths ... you can never know how I have suffered ... pure women don't know what suffering there is in the world, it is no use pretending they do ... they are wonderful, they shine.... O! what wouldn't *we* give to shine with that lovely cold, pure glow ... but they can't take from us what our misery has bought."

"Poppy, don't tell me anything," the older woman said steadily. "I don't want to know ... whatever Life has made you do, or think, or say ... I don't care! I love you. I am your friend. I know that the root of you is sound. Who am I that I should sit in judgment? It is all a matter of luck ... God was good to me ... I had a good mother and a fleet foot ... when I smelt danger I ran ... I had been trained to run ... you had not, perhaps, and you stayed ... that's the only difference ——"

Poppy laughed bitterly at the lame ending.

"The difference lies deeper than that ... you are generous, Clem, but truth is truth, and I should like to speak it to you now and always ... confession has no attractions for me, and I once told a man I should never confess to a woman——"

"Silence is always best, dear," Clem said. "When a woman learns to be silent about herself, she gains power that nothing else can give her. And words can forge themselves into such terrible weapons to be used against one—sometimes by hands we love." [356]

"It would be a relief to clean my heart and lips to you, dear, once and for all. Let me tell you—even the name I use is not my own!"

"I don't care. What does a name matter?"

"Well, my name is not Rosalind Chard, nor Lucy Grey, nor Eve Destiny, nor Anne Latimer, nor Helen Chester, though I have called myself by all of these at some time in my life. My real name is Poppy Destin ... 'an Irish vagabond born in Africa.'"

"What do these things matter?"

"My life, for the last three years, has been a struggle in deep waters to keep myself from I know not what deeper deeps——"

"I have always maintained that a woman has a right to use whatever weapons come to hand in the fight with life, Poppy."

"So have I," Poppy laughed discordantly, "and my weapons have been—lies. Oh, how I have lied, Clem! All the tears of all the years cannot wash me clean of the lies I've told ... I feel you shivering ... you hate me!"

"No, Poppy—only I can't understand why! What could have been worth it?"

"Ah! you think nothing is worth blackening your soul for, Clem! That is where you will not understand."

"I will try to understand, dear one ... tell me. One thing I am sure of, it was never wanton. You had some miserable reason."

"*Miserable!* I am misery's own!" she cried passionately. "She marked me with a red cross before I was born.... Well! let me tell you ... have you ever noticed the look of candour and innocence about my face, Clem? More especially my eyes?... all lies! I am not candid; I am not innocent ... I never was ... even when I was twelve I could understand the untold tale of passion in an old black woman's eyes ... she had only one breast, and she showed me that as a reason for [357] having no home and children of her own.... I understood without being told, that in the sweet hour of her life the cup was dashed from her lips ... her lover left her when he found her malformed.... Immediately I began to sing a pæan of praise to the gods that *my* lover would never go lacking the gift of my breasts. I made a song—all Africa knows it now:

"'I thank thee, Love, for two round breasts——'"

"And what harm in that?" cried Clem, staunchly. "When Cinthie is twelve, will you want her to be thinking of lover's caresses?"

"You would not have been, either, if you'd had a mother's caresses. Your nature was starving for love, poor child!"

"You have a tender heart for sinners."

"I don't consider you a very bad sinner, darling."

"You don't know all the lies yet.... I am going to tell you *something* of what the last three years have been ... three years of lying to get a living ... lying to get money: the stage, governessing, serving in shops, nursing invalids, reading to old women ... there was a great variety about my *rôles* in life, Clem, except for one faithful detail.... Everywhere I went and in everything I undertook, a man cropped up and stood in the path. There was something special about me, it seemed, that brought them unerringly my way—nothing less than my *wonderful innocence*. That drew them as the magnet draws steel ... lured them like a new gold-diggings.... And they all wanted to open the portals of knowledge for me ... to show me the golden way into the wondrous city of Love. And I?... I had the mouth and eyes of a saint! Sin was not for me.... I was pure as the untrodden snow! I looked into their eyes and asked them to spare me ... I told them I was good [358] and adjured them by their mothers to leave me so. At first they were always deeply impressed, but later they became slightly bored.... The affair nearly always ended in weariness and a promise on my part never to forget that I had a *real* friend if I should ever want one, and I understood very well what *that* meant, but invariably I pretended that I did not, and went my way innocent-eyed.... But there were variations on this ... sometimes they insisted on showing me devoted friendship in the meantime ... and their purses were to hand. In such cases I always helped myself liberally ... I had an unerring instinct that I should shortly be seeking a new home —a new friend ... and that instinct never played me false ... soon I was on the 'out trail' once more, looking for a way to earn a living and stay *pure* and *innocent*. Once I was almost content with an old woman. I washed her and dressed her, and, incidentally, was sworn at by her ... but the salary was high.... Alas! like the widow of Nain she had an only son ... a decent boy, too ... but when he had looked into my eyes and found me good, there was the old tale to tell.... *He* used to give me lovely presents ... I was never too good to take presents, Clem—under protest.... He wanted to marry me, but marriage was not in my plan ... then the old mother found out, and I had to go. Another man in Birmingham, whose children I taught, gave me *hundreds*—just for being good! would have given me thousands only that his wife read memoranda of some sum once and flew to the worst conclusions ... she believed I had stolen her husband and was as bad as I could be ... no one could be surprised at what she called me ... but it was quite untrue in its literal meaning. I had to go back to London, and there was nothing at first to go back to but the stage.... I did not stay *there* long ... innocence is not very valuable on the stage—except in the play!... and [359] though I have a special talent for acting *off* the stage, I am too nervous *on* it to open my lips ... so there was no hope for advancement that way ... I had to begin again on the old round."

"But, Poppy, dear, forgive me, I can't understand—why? *why?*... what was it all for?"

"For money, Clem. I wanted money."

"I can't believe it!—Oh! *not* for money!"

"Yes; for money. Some women are bad for money; there is nothing they will not do to get gold in their hands. I was *good* for money ... a saint, an angel, a virgin—most especially a virgin."

"Don't hurt me like this," Clem said. "Whatever you say can make no difference to me. I *will* love you. I *will* be your friend. But—is there anything in the world that money can get that was worth it all? I ask out of sheer curiosity—*is* there?"

Poppy answered her "Yes!" And after a long time a few words dropped into the silence of the room.

"I wanted the money for my child."

The storm had died away at last, leaving a terrible peace behind it. The colour of the evening sky was sard-green, than which nothing can be more despairing.

Mrs. Portal sat with her head drooped forward a little as if very tired, and Poppy arose from her seat, pushed open a window, and stood looking out. The smell of wet steaming earth came into the room. Presently, speaking very softly, she continued her narrative:

"I wanted all the money I could get for my son. He had no name, no heritage ... his father ... had, I believed, married another woman. I was resolved that he should at least have all money could give him.... I thought that when he grew up he would turn from me in any case as a woman

who had shamed him and robbed him of his birthright, so that it did not matter *what* I did while [360]
he was yet young, and yet loved me, to insure him health, a fine education, and a future. First it was to give him the bare necessaries of life, later to provide a home in the country where he could grow up strong and well under good, kind care ... then, my thoughts were for his future ... Oh! I hoped to redeem my soul by his future, Clem!... So I worked and lied ... and lied and took ... and lied and saved ... not often with my lips did I lie, Clem ... but *always* with my eyes. I had at last amassed nearly eight hundred pounds ... you will think that remarkable, if you will remember that always I amassed it virtuously ... that there is no man of all I met in those years who can call me anything but a good woman—abominably, disgustingly, vilely *good*.

"And then ... I was introduced to a financier, who, because of the charm of my innocent eyes, told me that, in a few weeks, he would transform my eight hundred pounds into eight thousand pounds. Incidentally, he remarked that we must see more of each other ... and I looked into *his* eyes and saw that they were *not* innocent,—and that there would be a difficult day of reckoning for me later on ... but for eight thousand pounds, and secure in mailed armour of *purity*, I risked that ... especially as he was just leaving England for a few weeks ... I handed over my eight hundred pounds without a qualm, for he had a great name in the financial world. In less than three weeks his dead body was being hauled over the side of a yacht in the Adriatic, and my eight hundred pounds was deader than Dead-Sea fruit, for I never heard of it again ... nor wanted to ... the need of it was gone ... my boy was dead!"

"Poppy! Poppy!" Clem got up and drew the girl down to the floor by her side. "Rest your head on me dear ... you are tired ... life has been too hard for you. [361]

"'Dost thou know, O happy God!——'

"Life has been brutal to you. I think of my own sheltered childhood, and compare it with yours —flung out into the fiery sands of the desert to die or survive, as best you might!... The strange thing is that your face bears no sign of all the terrible things that have overtaken you! I see no base, vile marks anywhere on you, Poppy.... It cannot all be acting ... no one is clever enough to mask a soiled soul for ever, and from everyone, if it really *is* soiled.... You *look* good—not smirking, soft goodness that means nothing, but brave, strong goodness ... and I *know* that that look is true ... and so I can love you, after all these things you have told me ... I can love you better than ever. But *why* is it, Poppy?"

"I don't know. If it *is* so, the reason must be that all was done for Love, Clem ... because always I had a sweet thing at my heart ... the love I bore to my child, and to the father of my child. Because, like the mother of Asa, 'I built an altar in a grove' and laid my soul upon it for Love. I want to tell you something further. Being *good*, as the world calls it, has no charm for me. Many of the men I have spoken of had a sinister attraction. *I understood what they felt.* I looked into eyes and saw things there that had answers deep down in me. I am a child of passionate Africa, Clem ... the blood in my veins runs as hot and red as the colour of a poppy.... It is an awful thing to look into the eyes of a man you do not love and see passion staring there—and feel it urging in your own veins, too. It is an awful thing to know what it is that he is silently demanding, and what that basely answers in your own nature.... Yet there are worse things than this knowledge. A worse thing, surely, would have been to have gone hurtling over the precipice with some Gadarene swine!... Clem, if I had been *really* innocent those years, nothing could have saved me. I should have gone to the devil, as they call it, with some vile man I had no love for, just because I [362]
didn't know how to keep out of the traps laid for me by my own nature—and then I should have 'been at the devil' indeed! But I had bought knowledge with the price of my girlhood ... and I had mated with my own right man.... I had looked at life, if only for an hour, with love-anointed eyes ... and so, it came to pass that I had a memory to live for, and a child to fight for ... and courage to fight my greatest enemy—myself. I think no one who knew the workings of my heart would deny me courage, Clem."

"No, and it is a noble quality, child—the noblest, I think, when it is used to fight one's own baser nature. That only would keep a woman beautiful ... it is to *that* you owe your beauty, dear."

"Then it is to you I owe it to a great extent—for it was you who first put the creed into me of courage—and silence—and endurance. Do you remember the night you wished me good-bye over your gate, Clem?"

"I remember everything—but, dear, there is one thing that grieves and bewilders me—why, *why* could you not have earned a clean, fine living with your pen ... where was your gift of writing?"

"It left me, Clem, when I tried to earn money with it. I could not write. I tried and tried. I sat to it until my eyes sank into my head and hollows came to my cheeks—until we were hungry, my little Pat and I—and cold. For bread and firing I had to leave it, and turn to other things. After the boy died ... it came back and mocked me. I wrote then to ease my pain ... and everything I have written since has been successful ... found a ready market and in some sort Fame ... but it was all too late!"

"Poor child! everything has mocked you!" Clem put her arms round the girl and kissed her tenderly; then drew away and assumed an ordinary pose, for a maid had come into the room [363]
bringing lights, and with the intimation that she was about to sound the dressing-bell, as it wanted only half an hour to dinner-time.

"Heavens!" cried Clem; "and I hear Billy's voice in the garden; Eve Carson's, too, I believe. *Fly* to your room, Poppy. I expect Sarah has laid out one of your gowns."

CHAPTER XXVI

[364]

IT was, indeed, Carson whom Portal had brought home with him. They had encountered in West Street, and Bill had insisted on bringing him back just as he was in the inevitable grey lounge suit, assuring him that there would be no one to find fault with his appearance but Mrs. Portal, who was notoriously forgiving.

So Carson came, and had no faintest inkling that Poppy was there too. Being an old *intimé* of the family, he knew his way about the house and after leaving Portal's dressing-room, he sought the nursery, was admitted by Cinthie's nurse, and stayed talking and romping with the child long after the second bell had sounded and dinner been announced, with the result that Portal insisted on taking Poppy into dinner, while Clem sought the recalcitrant in the nursery. Later, they came laughing to the dining-room, and for the first time Carson knew of Poppy's presence. She was sitting facing the door, and a big silver candlestick, with wide branching antlers, framed her in a silver frame. With her mysterious, tendrilly hair, her subtle scarlet mouth and Celtic cheek-bones, she had the alluring appearance of a Beardsley-drawing without any of its bloodlessness, for her gown was as scarlet as the poppies of the field, and she glowed with inward fires at seeing Carson. The deep, sweet glance she gave him as they greeted made him glow too, with gladness of living, and some other radiant reason that for the moment was not clear to him. He only knew that weariness was gone from his veins and that the splendour of life had come back at last with [365] the rush and swell of full-tide.

After dinner they all went into the verandah and the men smoked there. Clem never smoked, but she liked the smell of cigars. Poppy had long broken herself of the cigarette habit. Later, Portal said he must go and write two important letters to catch the mail—after that they would have a game of Bridge if anyone liked. Clem said she would go and play to the others her setting to "In Exile," of which she was very proud. She sang it softly over and over to them for a while. Afterwards she wandered through Chopin's "Prelude" into Schubert's gentle "Andante." Then unaccountably she began to fling out into the night the great solemn chords of a Funeral March. It was a wonderful thing, full of the dignity of sorrow, underlaid by thin wailings that spoke of little memories of all the past sweetnesses of the dead. There was a place in it that made Poppy think her dead child's arms were round her neck, and another where Carson thought of Alan Wilson and his thirty-one brave companions lying under the stars up in lonely Zimbabwe. At another time, he remembered a man dear to him, killed at Gwelo in the second native rising; he seemed to see the fellow with his hands in his pockets whistling to his dogs in a peculiar way he had.

Through all the playing Poppy and he sat in the verandah, side by side, in two low canvas chairs. A fold of her gown lay across his feet. They were absolutely silent and they did not look at each other. Carson was staring straight before him, but without a turn of his head or flicker of his eyelids he was conscious of every tiniest detail of the woman by his side. He saw the gracious line of her cheek and throat and thigh and foot; but, more than that, he believed he saw the spirit of her too, gentle and sad, but brave and desirable to him beyond the soul of any woman—*and his*. [366] She was his. He was certain of that now. He had taken the knowledge from her eyes when they met that night; and yet it seemed old knowledge to him, something he had known since the beginning of time.

Her hand lay within reach of his, but he did not touch it. Only too conscious of the mysterious magnetism of the flesh, he strove with all the fine instincts and high aspirations his spirit had ever given birth to and his body honoured, to free himself from the shackles of the flesh and give to this woman whom he loved and blessed a greater salute than the mere touching of hands.

As for her—her eyes were closed. She, too, was reaching out with spirit-hands to him. Inasmuch as human souls which are aloof and lonely things can communicate—theirs met and hailed each other as mate until the end of time.

Suddenly Clem freed them of sorrow. She began to play something that was like an old piece of brocade all flowered over quaintly with tiny leaves, true lovers' knots, and little pink-and-blue rose-buds. Presently the brocade became a stately dress, worn with powder and patches and high scarlet-heeled shoes.... Portal, having finished his mail, came back to the verandah, and Clem closed the piano then and came out too. They sat and talked, and no one again suggested cards.

The night was fresh and sweet after the rain, and the sky above alive with newly-washed stars. Far away, Durban flashed and sparkled, and just above the bay there was a great splash of vermilion against the darkness of the bluff—sometimes it showed streaks of carmine in it. They discussed the phenomenon, and eventually concluded that a boat out on the water was afire. Whatever the cause, it certainly gave the finishing touch to the picturesque beauty of the night.

A little after eleven Carson left. He shook hands with everyone at parting, and for a brief instant he and Poppy drank another deep draught of joy from each other's eyes. [367]

No sooner had he gone than Clem said:

"Poppy, you are to go to bed instantly, and stay there until I give you leave to get up. You look like a spectre."

Poppy took her hand and kissed it. She was trembling with happiness, but she dared not speak of it. Clem put an arm round her.

"I must come and see if your room is all right."

"Yes, but who are these midnight vigilantes in the garden?" exclaimed Portal. "I believe I hear Bramham!"

Bramham, indeed, it was who came into the light with a crumpled and weeping woman clinging to his arm.

"What the——?" softly demanded Portal of Heaven, and Clem stared. Poppy swiftly recognised Miss Allendner.

"What is it?" she cried, stepping forward.

Miss Allendner only wept more violently.

"This poor lady has been greatly upset," said Bramham, and placed her in a chair. Then he spoke with the brevity of a good man with a bad tale:

"Miss Chard's house has been burnt to the ground; fortunately no one is hurt, but everything is destroyed."

"Burnt! *burnt?... everything?* My work ... my freedom—" cried Poppy wildly with clasped hands.

"Everything! Nothing left but a few bricks and some melted iron. I wonder you didn't see the flare-up—it lighted the whole bay. The thing was discovered too late to do anything but get Miss Allendner out." His firm brevity left him. "Oh, Lord, I *am* sorry!" He stared dismally.

"Oh, Poppy!" cried Clem, with pitiful voice, and they all drew round the pale girl. She did not speak for a time—just stood there in the light streaming from the drawing-room windows, white and still; and presently some tears fell down her face. Then she said: [368]

"Poor Miss Allendner. Shall we put her to bed, in my bedroom, Clem? She is worn out!"

The women went away. At the gate Bramham said to Portal:

"And there is worse to come.... That crazy Allendner turkey was shrieking round the fire like a lunatic ... imploring the crowd to save the writings of *Eve Destiny*, the South African writer—everybody knows who she is now ... the place is humming like a beehive with the news ... and it will be in all the news-rags in the morning.... She'll be more broken up over that than anything ... for reasons of her own she didn't want it known.... Oh, it's a hell of a country, Portal."

This thing was news also to Portal. Mrs Portal being that lovely thing, a close woman, he knew nothing of Poppy's identity with *Eve Destiny*.

CHAPTER XXVII [369]

WHEN Carson left the Portals he did not go home. He turned his face towards the higher heights of the Berea, and those surmounted, tramped on—on past darkened blind-drawn, lonely houses, and long stretches of gardens and vacant lands, until he came at last to the cliff-side that overlooks Umgeni. Afterwards he tramped and tramped, without knowing or caring where he went, but always with the light silent feet of the athlete. Irishmen are natural athletes. Also, if they are *real* Irishmen, that is, born and brought up through boyhood in their own land, they have learned to play "Handball"; and so their feet are as light as their hands are swift to feel and their eyes to observe. For a man whose lot must be cast in the sinuous paths of Africa—jungle or money-market—there could be no better training than constant play in his youthful days in an Irish ball-court, for it teaches quickness of wit and limb more than any game ever played, as well as developing both sides of the body, thus making for perfect symmetry. Carson had a passion for the game, and he went hot with anger when he thought how neglected and ignored it was amongst the fine sports of the world. "Pilota," the Spanish national game, has some resemblance to "Handball," and is played by men of all classes in Spain. But in Ireland with the exception here and there of a gentleman enthusiast, who has learnt his love of the pastime at his college, only the poor fellows play it now, and those usually the roughest of their class, who are obliged to depend for their "courts" on the proprietors of public-houses. [370]

All young Irish boys love "Handball," however, and Carson had often thought it a wistful thing to see little ragged chaps watching a game with eyes alight, holding the coats of players, on the chance of getting a chance to play themselves when the "court" was vacated.

In the Protectorate he had established, he meant to build "ball-courts" and teach the fine stalwart Borapotans to play the finest game in the world.

But to-night, as he tramped, he did not think of these things. The sports and pastimes of his boyhood were as far from his mind as was the innocence of his boyhood from his heart. He was trying to tramp out the remembrance of a sin. Trying to obliterate from his memory the face of a woman he did not love, never had loved, never would love—but to whom honour held him fast. A woman who had nursed him in sickness with devotion and care—and who, when he was still physically weak, had flung herself into his arms—at his feet, offering her life, her love, her honour. And he had weakly fought, weakly resisted, and at the last most weakly taken—taken just for the love of pity, and the love of love and all the other loves that Irishmen, above all men, know

all about, and that have nothing to do with Love at all.

The bitter cud to chew now between his gritting teeth was that he had never reaped anything but soul-misery and sacrifice of fine resolves from the thing. Yet here it was holding itself up before him like some pure star that he must never cease from following after: a creed never to be forsaken; an idol before which to sacrifice the rest of his life—to sacrifice the most wonderful love that ever thrilled a man's veins and shook from his life all mean and paltry things.

Oh, Lust past and Love present had a great fight in the heart of Evelyn Carson, Bart., D.S.O., C.M.G., in the early hours of that April morning. It must have been close on six hours that he [371] tramped and fought, for when at last he came by devious ways to Sea House, the shroudy dawn was breaking over the face of the Indian Ocean.

And Bramham was in his dining-room insanely drinking whiskies-and-sodas.

"What the——?" Carson stood in the doorway staring.

"Waiting up for you, of course! Where have you been?" said the drunk and dauntless Bramham.

"I can't remember engaging you to wet-nurse me." Carson was too savage with life to be polite even to the best friend he had ever possessed. He strode into the room, threw his soft hat rolled into a ball into a corner, and would have passed through, but Bramham detained him with a word.

"Miss Chard's house was burnt to the ground last night!"

Carson came back and stood by the table. It seemed to him that a good thing to do would be to mix a strong whiskey-and-soda, and he did so, and drank it thirstily.

"What was that you said, Bram?" he asked, later.

"Miss Chard's house is burnt to the ground. The whole town knows now that she is *Eve Destiny*, the South African novelist——"

"The how much?"

"The South African novelist. The woman who wrote the book of poems that set all the African mothers flying to lock the nursery doors—and the plays *In a Tin Hotel at Witpoortje* and *A Veldt Ghost*. Why, Carson, you don't seem to know anything! You ought to employ someone to dig you up every five years."

Because of his desire for further information on this interesting subject, Carson kept his temper between his teeth and bore as best he might with Bramham's unusual wit. It was to be remembered, too, that Bramham was a "good man," and as such permitted a lapse. However, if [372] the latter had anything more to tell he kept it to himself, and only gave a repetition of his former statements with a graphic description, which Carson was not at all interested in, of the fire.

One thing alone, stood out, a salient point in the narrative:

"And I happen to know that everything she has is burnt. With the exception of a few royalties, she is penniless. All her finished work is burnt—everything she had in the world. She had a face like a banshee when I told her," was his complimentary conclusion.

Carson departed and took a bath and shave on this information. Afterwards he went down and looked at the sea. When he came in to breakfast, a sane and calm Charles Bramham was seated there before him—bathed, groomed, dressed, eating an orange with a tea-spoon.

They took breakfast with the appetites and serenity of good men, who having passed an excellent night, were about to attack the problems of the day with clear consciences. There was nothing noticeable about Bramham, except a thirst for tea.

Just before they had finished, Carson casually said:

"I'm going up to the Rand to sell everything I hold."

Bramham regarded him piercingly, and at the moment a *boy* entered with the morning papers. Each man reached out for one, and turned with striking unanimity of interest to the Market reports.

"Good Lord!" cried Bramham instantly. "*East Rands* at 5.5.0, and still sinking."

Carson gave a groan, which meant, "Oh, Hades! why didn't I sell at £10?"

Bramham continued his dolorous tale, quoting all the prices in which he and Carson were interested.

"Main Reefs, Randfonteins, Crown Reefs, Knights—all steadily sagging in sympathy; if you sell now, Karri, you'll be in the cart." [373]

And Carson knew that Bramham spoke the thing that was. In the state of the market it would mean ruin to sell. The loss would be so great that he doubted if he would be able to pay up the inevitable deficiency at his bank. He reflected that possibly a few of his syndicate shares might pull him through, but what good was that! He wanted *money*—money to marry Rosalind Chard and take her with him to Borapota; to free *her* from the cares of life and money for evermore.

As he stared gloomily at Bramham, the colour of his prospects were of the same hue as the black scowl on his brow. But like all speculators, he was not long without a ray of hope. His face suddenly cleared.

"What about my claims on the South Rand?" he demanded blithely.

"Have you still got those?" cried Bramham in surprise. "Good! How many?"

"Half interest in a hundred?"

"By George! Well, you'd better go up and see what Charlie Rosser can do. If there's anything to be made he'll do it for you."

They rose from the table.

"When shall you go? To-day?"

"No; to-day I have every moment occupied until six o'clock."

"There's a good train to-night at nine."

"I can't go to-night—I have something else to do."

A transforming look flashed across Carson's face. Whatever grace of heart was his showed in his eyes for a moment as he thought of the girl who would be waiting for him to-night.

CHAPTER XXVIII

[374]

"CLEM, scuttle up—we'll be late," shouted Portal. "What *is* she doing, Miss Chard?"

"Hearing the bratiken's prayers, I think."

"I wish you'd hurry her up."

Poppy went out into the hall and stood at the nursery door, which was ajar. Clem's voice could be heard inside arguing with a small, sullen one.

"Say them now, Cinthie—'Gentle Jesus——'"

"No, mummie."

"Yes, darling."

"I want you to sing 'Bye-low Lady.'"

"Not to-night, my dearest" (sound of a kiss); "there isn't time. Daddy's waiting for me to go to the theatre; we'll have longer sings to-morrow night. Say prayers now, Cinthie."

"No, mummie."

"Go on now, darling. Mother'll be cross with you in a minute. 'Gentle Jesus——'"

"No, mummie."

A silence.

"'Gentle Jesus'—Go on now, Cinthie—'Gentle Jesus—'"

"'Gentle Jesus'—sat on a wall," said the small voice, and burst into a peal of laughing. There was a rustling and Clem appeared at the nursery door gowned and gloved, her face bearing traces of smothered laughter. But from the door she called back, in a voice intended to be most hauntingly sad:

[375]

"Mother's sorry her little girl is so naughty to-night. Good-night, Cinthie."

"G'night," was the cheerful response.

Clem came out into the hall and shut the door, and putting her arm in Poppy's hurried to the drawing-room, where Portal was offering up loud prayers for patience, and bemoaning the miserable, wasted lives of all married men.

"Time is simply nothing to them, I tell you!" he chanted. "It is no concern of theirs! They cannot wear it, nor give it to their offspring to play with! As for punctuality, it is a rule invented for men and dogs only—and rickshaw pullers. Ours has been waiting at the gate for twenty minutes—but *that's* all right—what do *we* care for the first act of a play?"

Clem took not the slightest notice. She turned to Poppy.

"And, darling, when you've finished your coffee I wish you'd go in and hear her prayers. She feels very much injured to-night—you will, won't you? I am so vexed that we have to go out and leave you—and *I do* wish you would have come too. It might have made you forget all about that wicked fire."

"I shall be quite happy here, Clem. I have much to think of and plan; and, of course, I'll mind Cinthie. Be off now."

Poppy hustled her into her cloak and laces and saw them both off into the rickshaw. Afterwards she returned to the drawing-room, poured out her coffee, and took it into the nursery. Cinthie's little straight, white bed stood in the centre of the room, and she was lying with the sheet drawn up to her chin, two long pigtails stretching down on either side of her, and two big, dark eyes glooming out of the little, soft, dark face. Beside her on the pillow two still, inanimate forms glared glazily at the ceiling.

"Cinthie!"

[376]

"Eum!"

"Hallo, Cinthie!"

"Hallo!"

"You asleep?"

"No, not yet."

"Sure you're not?"

"No, I'm not, Poppy." She sat up in bed and gave a lively prance to show she was awake.

"Well, I've come to have a little talk."

Cinthie made a joyful noise that sounded like *corn-cookoo*, and gave another prance.

Poppy sat on the edge of the bed and sipped her coffee, tendering to Cinthie an occasional spoonful, which was supped up rapturously.

"Who've you got there with you?"

"Two my chil'ren."

"Which ones?"

"*Daisy-Buttercup* 'n *Oscar*"

"Oh! have they said their prayers yet?"

A pause, then:

"I didn't tell them to say prairses to-night."

"Not?" cried Poppy, in shocked surprise.

"No." (A pause.) "They's too tired."

"Oh, but Cinthie! Fancy, if they died in their sleep! How sorry they'd be they hadn't said their prayers."

An uncomfortable pause. Poppy drank some more coffee.

"I know *you* would never go to sleep without saying *your* prayers."

A silence.

"I hope you prayed for me to-night, sweetness?"

A silence.

"—And for that darling mummie of yours?"

Silence.

"—And your lovely daddie?" [377]

Silence.

"—Because I know they couldn't enjoy themselves at the theatre, or go to sleep to-night, or anything, if you didn't. But of course, you did. Good-night, sweetness—give a kiss."

"G'night!" The little figure bounced up and put its arms round her and kissed her all over her face. Poppy tucked her in carefully.

"I'm so glad you prayed for mummie and daddie and me," she said fervently. "Good-night, darling-pet."

"G'night."

"You don't have the candle left, do you?"

"No."

"Shall I put the mosquito-curtain round?"

"Yes, please."

Poppy flicked it well with her handkerchief and arranged it round the bed like a big, white bird-cage; then taking the candle in her hand, walked slowly to the door.

"Well, good-night."

"G'night."

She opened the door and went out slowly.

At the last conceivable instant, as the door was on the point of closing, a little voice cried:

"Poppy!"

"Yes, sweetness."

"I want a drink of water."

Poppy went back, poured a glass of water, and carried it to the delinquent, who took a mouthful; then said, slowly and sorrowfully:

"I think I'll say prairses, Poppy."

"All right darling!" She sat down on the bed again and put her arms round the slim figure, who, kneeling with her nose snuggled into the soft, white shoulder, said her "prairses" at express-speed down into Poppy's evening-gown: [378]

"Gen-tuljeesus, meek n' mil',
Lookup pon a little chil';
  Pitimysimplisitee,
  Suffer me t' come to Thee.

"Our Fath 'CHART in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy King and come, Thy will be done 'Nearth as 'tis 'Neaven. Give us 's day our *DAILY BREAD* N' forgive us our trespasses 'gainst us. But 'liver us from evil. For Thine's kingdom, Power and GLORY, frever and ever, Amen.

"Our Father, please bless my darling Mummie, and take care of her at the theatre, and my lovely Daddie, *and* Grannie, *and* Grandad, *and* Poppy, *and* all the servants in *this* house, *and* all the little children in the world, *and* fill our hearts with love 'n kindness, Amen—now I must say my *Latins*."

Clem was Catholic and Bill Protestant, and the result was a strange medley of prayers for Cinthie. She kneeled up, crossed herself solemnly in Latin, and began to chant the lovely words of the Angelical Salutation:

"*Ave Maria! gratia plena, Dominus tecum: benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui Jesus.*"

"*Sancta Maria! Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in hora mortis nostræ. Amen.*"

Afterwards she fell into a peal of laughing.

"Why do you laugh, darling?" Poppy gravely asked, and the answer was:

"Oh, Poppy! Wouldn't *Nunc* be a funny name for a dog!"

Then once more the sheets were tucked in, the mosquito-net arranged, and a kiss blown through it.

"Good-night, Pansy-face!"

"G'night, Red-rose!" responded Cinthie ardently.

"Good-night, Gold-heart!"

Cinthie thought laboriously for a few seconds, struggling for a fitting response. At last, just as [379]
Poppy reached the door, she shouted breathlessly:

"G'night; White-soul!"

At that Poppy gave a cry and ran back once more and hugged her.

When at length she tore herself away from the warm, loving little arms and went alone to the drawing-room, heavy tears were splashing down her cheeks and her lips were like a wistful, sorrowing child's. She stood in the open window and stared out at the beauty of the night. Above in the solemn purple sky was the Cross, picked out in scarlet stars. Far below twinkled the town lights, and at quick intervals the Bluff Lighthouse sent long, sweeping, golden lines across the bay, revealing for an instant the shadowy fabrics of ships and sailing craft lying safe in dock.

Out at sea a great liner steamed slowly to anchorage, hundreds of lights flashing from her three tiers, and presently the rattle of her cable through the hawse-pipes floated distinctly up to the heights, the throbbing in her breast died away, and she lay rocking softly like some great tired bird nested at last.

In the dim valley a Zulu boy, heart-hungry for his home-kraal, was making music of an infinite sweetness and melancholy on that oldest instrument in the world, a reed-flute. The sound brought further tears to Poppy, and a burning in her throat. It seemed the voice of her heart wailing, because she had never been a child, because "earth was so beautiful and Heaven so far"; because she loved a man and was beloved of him and darkness lay between them! At that, she longed passionately with every sense and nerve in her for Evelyn Carson. She ached in the very bones and blood of her for a sight or sound of him. If he would only come——!

"Oh, God! be good to me for once!" she cried with soundless lips. "Let him come—I will do the rest. There is no barrier I cannot break down between him and me. He is mine—dear God, you [380]
know that he is mine! I bound him with my hair, my lips, my soul. I gave him of my best, I gave him my girlhood—*I bore his son*." The green leaves of the passion-plant trailing over the window lapped gently against her cheek, and she put up her hands to them. "Oh, trees, leaves, all green things, help me—let him come——"

And he came, through the open gate, up the broad pathway, straight to her.

Her eyes were closed tight to stop her tears, but she heard him coming as she stood there with the shaded lamps behind her in the empty room, and the silver night on her face. He came so close to the verandah that he could look in upon her, and plainly see her pale emotion-wrung face and the tears urging through her tightly-closed lids and dripping from her lashes. Her lips opened and her breath came heavily, and the sight of her took strange hold of him. His own lips unclosed; the marks self-mockery had made about them had been wiped out; his handsome, haggard eyes had changed, boyhood had come back to them.

"Won't you come into the garden?" His voice had all the sweetness of Ireland in it. She unclosed her eyes and came out to him, the tears still shining on her cheeks: a pale, ardent woman—strangely like a narcissus.

He put an arm through hers and they walked together in the gracious dimness.

Down the centre of the garden dividing two lawns ran a high hedge of Barbadoes-thorn. It is a shrub garlanded with white tiny flowers of a perfume probably the most pungent in the world—much like the gardenia, or tuberose, but heavier, sweeter. To-night this perfume hung upon the air, and stayed with these lovers all their lives after. They sat on the grass under a giant flamboyant tree and a tiny green tree-frog sang a love-song to its mate in the branches over their [381]
heads. But they did not hear. They were deaf to everything now save the drumming in their hearts and the urging of their pulses. Carson had his arm about her, half for her support, wholly because he could not help it. Her tears were still on her face, and he leaned so close that his cheek was wetted by them. One heavy drop fell on his lips and he tasted the salt of it, and it was as if he had tasted blood. Suddenly he turned her lips to his and began to kiss her with a mouth of flame.

"Eve! Eve!" she cried, afraid of her gladness. He did not speak; nor could he, if he would. Only

he dragged kisses from the mouth he had desired so long; the eyes he had looked away from; the curving, cloven chin; the throat that shone in the darkness like a moony pearl. And when he came to her lips again, they kissed him back with wild, sweet kisses. Her arms were round him too. One held his throat and her eyes were shut and sealed.

After some short, blind moments, in which she was lost, and he torn in two between desire and iron-determination, he lifted her suddenly to her feet.

"Darling, my heart, good-bye—for a little while," he said; "and then—*never* good-bye again. The next time we kiss, you must be my wife."

CHAPTER XXIX

[382]

CARSON left the next day for Johannesburg as he had intended, speaking to no woman after he had parted from that pale, ardent one under the flamboyant tree. Other women, indeed, had ceased to exist for him. With *one* he knew there must yet be a scene, most painful and bitter, which could not be shirked; the thought of it, *when* he thought of it, turned his heart cold—but it must be confessed that he did not think of it often. He was too busy in his first weeks of absence to think of any woman much—even the best-beloved. Up to his eyes in affairs, and among a hundred old friends and haunts in the busy, virile life of the Rand, he had scarcely time to turn up the book of his mind for a page he knew was there, illumined with letters of fire and gold. But always he wore a red rose in his heart. Always a star glimmered at the back of his life, colouring the days golden.

Sometimes in the night-hours, or with the dawn, a vision of her face would come to him, so sharp and clear, that it seemed her body must be in the room, as well as her spirit, and almost she would fill the arms he put out for her. In those hours it was made clear to him how Love can wrench the spirit from the body and send it speeding across the miles to the Beloved.

He had not asked her to write, nor did he write himself. Their love was not one which needed to be kept afire by words; already it burned too fiercely for peace. Letters would have been a delight, it is true; but he was artist enough to realise the value of restraint from small joys that a [383] great joy may be more complete, and he knew that their meeting would be the dearer and sweeter for this intervening silence "too full for sound or foam."

Moreover, his affairs were critical. He required all his coolness and judgment for the share market, and the letters he must write if he wrote at all to her, though they would not have disabled him for the fight, must at least have left him less calm and unshaken than he desired to be at this juncture. Fortune is a woman, and a jealous one at that. She must be wooed and worshipped, and all others forgotten for her sake before she will bestow her smiles. Carson approached her in a spirit of ravishment. His desire was for her favours, and he was prepared to drag them from her, if she would not give. He was prepared to buy and sell as never before in all his gay, careless life—feverish for gain.

The glance with which he searched the face of Fortune was neither imperialistic nor altruistic now, but purely personal; he was thinking, plotting, planning for the future; but the details of that same future were too wild and sweet to be thought upon. They sang a song in his veins that would not be silenced.

His first business was to find Charlie Rosser, his broker, the shrewdest, straightest man on 'Change,' and a personal friend at that. But the slump was affecting people's health. All Johannesburg was laid up, nursing its lungs, its hump, or its pet stocks, and Rosser was amongst the invalids. So Carson's first week was spent at a loose end, for he was too wise a citizen of the world to venture upon the seas of finance, of which he had no great knowledge, without a good man at the helm. Most days, however, found him making his way through the crowded streets to "the Chains" for news of the market. Things were as bad as they could be, and every man had a tale of dolour to pitch, but no one looked dolorous. The high, fine air of Johannesburg is a [384] wonderful thing for making people think they are all muscle and no nerves—and they don't find out their mistake until after they have made their pile, or lost it, when the "finding out" doesn't matter, anyway.

The place was always home to Carson, and "full of friendly faces," and he trod its streets as familiarly as the decks of his own soul.

One morning, just before High Change, he found an extra jostle going on amongst the crowds of brokers and dealers "between the Chains." Everyone was agog. The market had come better from London. In anticipation of a demand at High Change, shares were changing hands merrily. Carson was hailed blithely by friend and foe alike, offered everything he didn't want, and alternately elated and depressed by the news that came to him concerning the stocks in which he was interested. But on the whole, the outlook was bright.

"Boom!" was the hilarious word that cleared the horizon of clouds. "There's going to be a boom!" men shouted, and their eyes were full of the bland joy of piracy. Rumours had come that the "Corner House" was supporting the market for *their* special stocks, and other houses followed

the lead. Johannesburg is the most sensitive market in the world—it responds to outside influence as the violin to Sarasate.

In the midst of the dust and din Carson caught sight among the crowd of a puffy red face, with grim eyes and the sweeping moustache of an Algerian pirate. He was waving frantically at Carson and yelling:

"My office! Come and pow-wow!"

In five minutes Carson had trailed Rosser to his lair, and they were deep in a discussion of prospects. Rosser's tips were no better than any other, but his opinion on the trend of the market [385] was always worth hearing, and usually as nearly right as possible.

"Shall I sell or hold?" demanded Carson, when his affairs had been laid upon the board and swiftly scanned.

"Hold?" screamed Rosser. "Everything is going to the devil. Do you think I take any stock in this good news? Why—*the country is rotten*. The British public is steadily selling. This improvement can't last—it's only a flash in the pan. Sell! This is your chance. Sell all you've got. Sell calls—sell your shirt—sell *anything*—up to ninety days. Destruction comes after."

This was Carson's mood also. But he had an anchor now that deterred him from advancing too gaily towards the breakers. He first examined Rosser from top to toe with steely eyes, then advanced the objection that if he had to pay brokerage on the whole amount out of his call-money, he wouldn't make a heap of profit. Rosser began to prophesy, but without sanctity.

"No calls will be taken up this year. Hell! I've a good mind to run the biggest bear account you've ever dreamt of, Carson. Take my advice and sell, man. Sell on 'fixed delivery' and 'buyer's option' and 'to arrive'—play bear till all is blue." He suddenly became calm and business-like. "Think it over for a few moments while I read my letters, and then decide."

In old days Carson would have embraced the proposition with the devil-may-care philosophy of the usual Rand man, that if "bearing" smashed him up he'd be no worse off than a hundred better men who'd done the same thing before him. But now—he was feverish for gain—the thought of loss was unendurable. Rosser suddenly looked up at him with a waiting smile.

"Well?"

"Damned if I don't do it, Charlie. You can sell calls on everything I've got, this morning—here's the list, and in the afternoon you can sell everything I haven't got on 'fixed delivery,' or 'to [386] arrive.'"

"Good, man!" cried Rosser.

"And what about my block of South Rands?"

This was Carson's hold-by. The biggest stone in his box. He had bought these fifty shares at a sheriff's sale for twenty pounds each, years before, and though he had often wanted the money, some indefinable superstition had kept him cheerfully paying up licences and hanging on. *Now* rumour went, the Big House wanted them.

"What will you take for them?" asked Rosser, grinning. "Cost?"

"No!" said Carson violently, "nor double, nor quadruple. I'll do or die by those damned things."

Rosser regarded him cynically, but with affection. It had not escaped the grim eyes that Carson here present was not the notoriously careless, indifferent Carson of the past.

"You sound to me like a man who wants to buy a trousseau for himself," he remarked, but his gibe brought no blush to the brazen cheek before him, and he did not dream that he had made a bull's-eye.

"But you're quite right, Karri.... You're going to make a big bag out of that little preserve ... only keep cool ... and if Wallerstein asks you about them, say they're not for sale ... I haven't time to tell you any more now." He was looking at his watch. "By Cli! I must get away to 'Change. Where shall we meet afterwards?"

"At the Club," said Carson briefly. "One sharp. My table is third on the left as you go in ... don't be late."

They parted. Rosser for 'Change, and Carson to walk swiftly away down Commissioner Street towards Jeppestown, past the City-and-Suburban-Township-blocks, with the fine buildings that look so substantial and impressed every new-comer with the stability and security of life and [387] fortune in the great mining centre. The place was teeming with life and apparent prosperity. But a grim smile hovered on Carson's lips. He knew, as well as Rosser, that things, so far from being secure and stable, were, under the corrupt Boer Government, rotten to the core, and could never be on a sound basis until England intervened. But this was '98, and the time was not yet.

Punctually at one Rosser arrived at the Rand Club. Carson was deep in an *indaba* with two men he knew well, and the talk was all of shares and money—big business had been done on 'Change. Rosser was cold-eyed and inaccessible until the other men went, then he brightened and told Carson what he had done.

"I've sold everything on time!" he said. "Committed you—roughly—to ten thousand pounds of sales ... sixty days ... buyer's options."

If Carson's spirit groaned, his face gave no sign; but the little broker was as sensitive as the market. He looked at the other keenly.

"Don't do the business if you're afraid; I'm perfectly satisfied to go into it alone. Why! I'm so certain of the coming fall that I advise you to run a bear account up to fifty thousand pounds. Hell! Carson, what's come to you? I've never known you like this before."

"I've got a touch of fever," said Carson irritably, but he did not specify the peculiar brand he was suffering from. He was ashamed of his funk—but the best of men get attacks of it in certain circumstances.

"Well, if you'll make up your mind to stick to it for three months you'll make ten thousand pounds at least."

"Three months!" It was Carson's turn to cry "Hell!" But presently he said firmly: "Go ahead, Rosser, and sell another ten thousand—buyer's options, this afternoon."

"Right!" cried Rosser gaily, and with a heart at peace proceeded to acknowledge his friends at [388] various tables, while Carson turned up the wine-list. They had been eating and drinking steadily through lunch.

"Coffee, 1830 Brandy, and '94 Coronas," was Carson's order, and when the waiter had come and gone, Rosser sadly said, looking at his glass:

"I wonder how long it will last!"

"What, the market?" Once more the teeth of Carson's soul chattered.

"No—Karri, you're all to bits—the brandy. There can't be much of it left. Now let's get to this South-Rand proposition. Look here—you know I'm a few pounds to the good ... and I'm really smitten with my bear scheme. If you're anxious about it, I'll stand in with you ... share and share. But only on the condition that you give me a share in your South Rand claims."

"Let's hear the proposition," said Carson, beginning to take a more cheerful view of life through his smoke rings.

"You have fifty claims? Wallerstein will give you one hundred pounds each for them; but they are worth five times that if the business is properly engineered. They're a long way from the out-crops, but the reef *must* be found dipping through them, and the Big House *must* have them to make up their area. Now what I propose is this: You leave the business to me. Value the claims say at two hundred pounds each, and give me half of what I can get over that."

It did not take Carson very long to come to a conclusion. He knew he was dealing with one of the straightest men and best fellows in Johannesburg, and there was no faintest chance of his confidence being abused. He closed.

"I'll have an agreement drawn up, relating to the claims, at once," said Rosser. "What about the bear scheme? Shall I stand in with you, or will you stand alone?" [389]

"I'll stand alone, thanks, old man." All Carson's careless nerve had come back to him, with the memory of a face fair to see. He knew, in spite of his words, that whatsoever fortune befell—poverty or riches—he would never again stand alone in the world.

"Good, man!" cried Rosser. "I must scoot. I've two appointments before 'Change this afternoon —so long!"

Carson was left to his own many and various devices.

The market rose steadily for a week. The air was full of good and gentle rumours. An Industrial Commission was to be appointed! The iniquitous Dynamite Monopoly was to be smashed! Native labour was to be guaranteed at lower wages! Everything in the garden was to be lovely! And everyone wore a brow unsullied by care! And bears were tumbling over each other in every direction to cover.

Carson had some bad times with himself, but his under-lip never slackened. Rosser's grip on the market was firm and unhesitating. He sold heavily "to arrive."

"I have never known anyone who made money—worth talking about—by buying and holding," was the creed he offered to Carson. And in this case he was right. Suddenly the reaction began. Shares fell with a bump, and kept steadily on the down-grade for months.

At the end of the first month Carson's bear account closed with a handsome profit to himself of twelve thousand pounds.

In the meantime, negotiations had been proceeding over the South Rands. The lifelessness of the market did not affect the fact that the "Big House" wanted Carson's claims, and was steadily working to get them by hook or by crook. But Carson and Rosser were both up to every hook and crook of the game. They held the cards and they knew it, and when four hundred pounds each was offered for the shares, they only sat and smiled like little benign gods. Further, Rosser airily [390] informed Wallerstein, the representative of the "Big House," that he would not consider anything under one thousand pounds. However, in secret conclave, the two conspirators agreed to take eight hundred pounds apiece—not bad for claims that had cost Carson twenty pounds each at the sheriff's sale. Rosser was for holding out for a thousand, but Carson's time was running out, and his patience.

"No: get a definite offer for eight hundred pounds, and close on it," were his orders, and on that decision he rested, as much as a man *can* rest in Johannesburg, taking the days quietly and dining sanely at nights with old friends. But he got little joy of their society, for the reason that though he knew their lives and interests, they knew nothing of the most vital and important part of his. They had never seen those lilac-coloured eyes with the big, black velvet centres; they could know nothing of the sweet, wild strain on his heart. He felt like a man who stood on the walls of a citadel filled with treasure, parleying with friends and enemies alike, but allowing no one to enter.

Suddenly he grew horribly lonely; the days dragged and the nights brought memories that set him in bodily torment.

Fortunately at this juncture Forsyth, an old crony, carried him off to the Potchefstroom district

for some veldt shooting. The air, the long tramps, and the joy of sport, filled in the days, and found him too tired at nights to do anything but fall log-like into the blankets.

CHAPTER XXX

[391]

POPPY and Cinthie were sitting in the garden together under an orange-tree, which was set in the midst of the thick fence of Barbadoes-thorn. Poppy's muslin gown was of a colour that made her look like a freshly-plucked spray of lilac, and she wore a wide white hat, trimmed with convolvulus.

Every ornament she possessed had been burnt except a jewelled pendant she always wore round her neck, and her big malachite brooch; but now on the third finger of her left hand she wore a ring—a great, gleaming emerald, which had arrived in a little box that morning from Johannesburg.

She had seen Clem looking at it with wondering eyes, but as yet she had not been able to explain, for Clem that day was rather more especially busy than usual. During breakfast she had been flitting in and out constantly to her husband's bedroom. Portal had been suffering from a bad attack of slump fever, and instead of doing the "camel-trick," and feeding on his hump, he required a special *menu* which kept the cook and his wife busy. He had been more or less confined to his room for three days. It is true that he made wonderful recoveries in the evenings, and rising up donned glad raiment and went to the Club to dine. But when the morning papers arrived he was worse than ever.

The moment breakfast was over Clem had flown to prepare the drawing-room for a committee-
meeting of ladies interested in the fate of fifty able-bodied domestics arriving by the following [392]
week's mail-boat.

So Cinthie and Poppy had taken to the bush for shelter. For since Poppy's identity had become known, everyone was anxious to examine her closely, to see what colour her eyes were, whether her hair was real, and how she behaved generally in the strong light of notoriety which enveloped her. The feeling about her had entirely changed. People said they understood *now* why she should be so strange-looking, and alone. She was a genius—the newspapers said so! And as such they opened their arms to her, and their doors, and bade her enter. But instead, she invariably fled with Cinthie into the bush.

Cinthie was six now, and growing tall. Her brown holland overall was a mere frill about her neck, and looked anæmic beside the deeper colouring of her legs. Her sailor-hat hung at the back of her by its elastic, and in the corner of her mouth she thoughtfully sucked the end of one of the long streaks of hair. In her fingers she held a large and discoloured lump of dough, which she was kneading and pinching with the busy concentration of a beetle rolling a *mis bolitje*. Her nine dolls were seated, some against a flat rock, some against the tree, but all gazing stonily at their mother, except the banshee, who lay prone on her back, her arms extended as if to embrace the universe, her beady eyes fixed revengefully on Heaven.

Poppy, sharing the trunk of the tree with the dolls, leaned lazily peeling an orange, which had kindly dropped from the branches above. Other oranges were lying about on the short grey-green grass.

"What are you going to do with that dough, Cinthie?" she asked.

"Make pudding."

"Who for?"

"For my chil'ren." She dipped her fingers into a doll's tea-cup full of water, which stood at the [393]
elbow of the banshee, and continued to knead; the dough now clung to her fingers in long, elastic threads, and her face showed a deep and vivid interest in her occupation.

"Are these all the children you've got?"

"No; *Minnie-Haha* and *Danny Deever's* inside. They been naughty. They's in bed."

"What on earth did they do?"

"Wouldn't say they prairses last night."

"Oh, how naughty!"

"Yes; I don't love them when they don't say prairses for their daddy."

"Their daddy?"

"Yes; he lives in England. He has been living in England for twenty years. They have never seen him."

"Goodness!"

"Yes; it's very sad." She wagged her head dolefully.

Presently she unplucked the dough from her fingers and began to spread it out on the large, flat stone, patting it smooth with the palm of her hand. Thereafter, she made a pattern round its

edges with a doll's fork, as she had seen cook do.

"I wish I could make puddings like you," said Poppy, lying on her elbow and eating her orange.

"I can make nicer ones'n this," said Cinthie boastfully. "I can make Best-pudding-of-all."

"Oh, do tell me, Cinthie, so when I have nine children I can make it for them too."

Cinthie looked at her dreamfully.

"Perhaps you won't have any children," she said. "Perhaps you'll be a widow."

"Oh, Cinthie, don't be unkind—of course, I shall have some! Go on now, tell me about the pudding."

Cinthie rubbed her nose and reflected for a long time. At last, solemnly, with a long think between each sentence, she delivered the recipe. [394]

"Get some dough ... dip it in water for a minute or two ... get some pastry ... dip it into water twice ... roll it hard ... put it into the dish on top of everything—" Long pause.

"Yes?"

"Straighten the edges ..." (she carefully cut all round the dough on the stone with the handle of the fork); "bang it with your hand and it will come straight" (she banged the dough with the palm of her hand); "then spread a little water over it ... and there!" She sighed and took a fresh mouthful of hair.

"Well, I shall just make a pudding like that," said Poppy determinedly.

The gentle slurring of a silk petticoat was heard on the dry grass, and Mrs. Capron joined them, smiling mischievously.

"The committee meeting is over," she said, "and Clem has gone to see Lady Mostyn off on *The Scot* and taken Miss Allendner with her. She hopes she will be back for lunch, but is not sure; if not, we are to go on without her. She gave me leave to come and look for you two in the garden, so you can't very well kick me out, even if you don't want me. Hyacinthie, your nurse is walking about with two baked bananas smothered in cream, asking everyone if they've seen you."

"Ooh!" Cinthie slashed the hair out of her mouth in anticipation of her favourite eleven-o'clock lunch. "Mind my babies!" she commanded Poppy with a menacing eye, and sped up the lawn, disappearing into the trees surrounding the house. The two women looked after her with entirely different emotions in their eyes. Mrs. Capron sighed.

"Fleet of foot, but, alas! that one should have to say it of Clem's child—flat of foot also." She seated herself daintily upon the rock which had served for Cinthie's kitchen-table; her eyes fastened themselves upon the emerald ring. She had never seen a ring on Poppy's hand before. [395]

"Her feet are scarcely formed yet," said the latter; "and Clem has perhaps let her wear sandals too long."

Mrs. Capron withdrew her fascinated eyes from the ring and shook her head sadly.

"She will grow up ugly in every way; and it is just as well. If she had Clem's temperament and charm and Bill's beauty she might wreck the world."

"Oh, no—only herself," said Poppy, with a tinge of bitterness. "The world goes gaily on, whatever befalls. But I don't agree with you at all about Cinthie's looks!"

"Most people do. Someone was saying to me the other day—I forget who—Mr. Abinger, perhaps—that Cinthie looks like the incarnation of all the deviltries Clem and Bill have left undone, all the wickedness they have kept under."

"Mr. Abinger is a better judge of deviltries than of good women," said Poppy drily.

"He is a rip, of course. But, then, rips always unerringly recognise other rips," smiled Mary Capron, and Poppy smiled too, though she was not extremely amused.

"Are you accusing Clem of being a rip?"

"Of course not, though Bill is so charming he must have been one some time, don't you think?"

"I think he is nearly nice enough to be Clem's husband," said Poppy curtly, "and too entirely nice for any other woman." It was an old suspicion of hers that Mary Capron was not as real as she pretended to be in her friendship for Clem.

"You are a very loyal friend, Miss Chard; and I hope you don't think that I am *not*, just because I find it intensely interesting to talk about the people I care for?" Mrs. Capron spoke with a quiet sincerity that made Poppy feel ashamed of her thought, for, of course, most women do find it interesting to talk of people they care for. The best of friends do it. After all, Mrs. Capron had said nothing that a friend might not lightly say. [396]

"I would never talk about her to anyone but you," continued Mrs. Capron, "and I know that you love her as much as I do. But I see that you think I am wrong."

"I think, Mrs. Capron, that one would be a stock or a stone to know Clem, and yet not be intensely interested in her husband, her child, and everything that concerns her," Poppy answered warmly. "I could sit all day and watch her face, wondering how she came to know so much about life without being old, or bitter, or uncharitable about anything in the world."

"She will tell you that the deep lines she has on her face are only little mementos of Africa—that Africa always puts her marks on the faces of those who love her. But"—Mary Capron's voice was very gentle and sad—"I happen to know that she has been *pounded in the mortar*."

Poppy sat silent, thinking how great must be a nature that could be pounded in the mortar of life, and come out with nothing but a few beautiful marks on the face. Further, her thought was that if Mary Capron knew Clem's sorrows, Clem must love her very much indeed, and she must

be worthy of that love.

She determined that she would never again allow herself to feel jealous of the bond of friendship existing between the two women. Mary Capron spoke again in a very low voice.

"What I am terribly afraid is that her suffering is not over, but only beginning."

Poppy stared at her startled, and saw that the beautiful brown eyes were filled with tears. [397]

"Sorrow has her elect!" said the girl gently. "Dear Mrs. Capron, do not let your sympathy for Clem beguile you into telling me anything that she would not wish me to know; I believe you have her confidence. I wish I had too. But I would rather not hear anything ... of her inward life ... from anyone but herself." Poppy began falteringly, but she ended firmly, for she was convinced that she was right. She had laid her whole life bare to Clem, and if Clem had wished to give her confidence in return, she had had endless opportunities to do so in their intimate talks. She felt that she was right in stopping Mrs. Capron from saying anything further. But already Mrs. Capron had gone further.

"*Once* I have seen her in the ashes of misery and despair. I would rather die than witness it again."

Poppy sat up and rested her hand on those of the trembling, troubled woman before her.

"Don't," she said soothingly; "don't fret—Clem is brave and strong enough to fight every imaginable trouble in the world; and *don't* say anything more; I'm sure she would not wish it."

"But I *must* ... I must tell you.... She is going to suffer again—*terribly* ... and I want to save her if I can, and I want you to save her."

"Me!" faltered Poppy, listening in spite of herself. "What can I do?"

Mary Capron's tears were falling thick and fast now.

"Clem's sorrow is a terrible one," she said brokenly. "She loves a man with all the depth and passion her nature is capable of—and the man is not her husband."

"Oh!" Poppy went white to the lips. She sat rigidly against the orange-tree and stared at the other woman. "Clem!... I'll never believe it ... *Clem!*" Afterwards she said burningly: "If it *could* be true, how could you sit there and betray her?" [398]

Mary Capron's eyes flamed at her through the tears.

"How dare you think I could do it idly?... You think no one feels love for her but yourself ... I hope you are prepared to show your love and prove it ... by saving her. If *I* could do it, I would. Let me tell you, Rosalind Chard, that there is *nothing* in this world that I would not give up for Clem, or do for her. And you? Can you say that too? Or is your love of the school-girl type—all marks of exclamation and admiration and—was it *condemnation* that I heard in your voice?" She spoke scornfully, yet there was a wondrous, thrilling appeal in her words. "Would you condemn her, Rosalind? Do you know nothing of love, then? That it is always the best whom it attacks most violently—that no one can keep one's heart from straying ... that there are men in the world who when they call must always be answered ... whom no woman can fight successfully against...."

But Poppy could only whisper to herself: "Clem! Is there *any man in the world* who could beguile Clem from the straight, clear way on which her feet are set ... away ... to the deep pits whence comes the wailing of ... transgressors! Is there *any man* ... in the world?..." Suddenly she sat up straight and rigid, and her head struck the trunk of the orange-tree. A look of terror was in her face. She knew the answer. *She knew what she was going to hear.*

What came dully to her ears was something she had long known—long, long.

"—And when he went away to Borapota she was like a woman mad with grief ... I thought she would have died.... She besought me, *besought* me to go as far as I could with him ... Nick and I ... in case he should sicken and die of fever.... He did get fever again ... was terribly ill at Borwezi ... and always his one cry was for her.... Nick would tell you ... he too knows ... it was always [399] *Loraine*...."

"Ah!" The girl under the tree gave a cry and covered her smitten eyes with her hands.

"Always it was *Loraine*. That was his secret name for her.... I never knew till after I came back that it really is her name ... I asked her one day ... she only said it was her name, but that she never let anyone use it ... *he* used it though ... he ... *he loved her*... Miss Chard, I believe that he loves her still ... it is not possible that a man could cease to love a woman like Clem ... a girl's face might attract him ... and draw him for a while ... but *Clem* ... a man would always come back to her ... she is the kind that men come back to ... are faithful to for ever.... Oh, child! I believe I have hurt you bitterly ... deeply to-day ... forgive me ... it is for *her* sake ... I love her ... do *you* love her ... enough to spare her?"

When Poppy's hands fell away from her eyes, which were dull now, like the eyes of a dead woman, she was alone in the garden. She sat on—all through the morning, far into the afternoon hours, and no one disturbed her.

Indoors an odd thing had happened. The servants had laid lunch for five people, according to the after-breakfast instructions of their mistress. But of the five people who were to sit down in the dining-room not one appeared. Mrs. Portal had telephoned up from the Point that she and Miss Allendner could not be back in time, and so would lunch on the ship with Lady Mostyn. Nurse had received the message on the telephone, but there was no one in the house to deliver it to. Mrs. Capron had come to the nursery window and informed nurse (just free from beguiling

Cinthie off to her mid-day *siesta*), that she felt faint and ill, and had decided to take a rickshaw home instead of remaining for lunch. Then, Mr. Portal, after sleeping badly all night and breakfasting in his room, had gone afterwards to lie in the garden, to see if he could sleep there. But when Sarah went to seek him he was nowhere to be found. His book was open on the grass, and the cushion he had taken for his head had a dent in it, showing that it had been used. Both were lying by the Barbadoes-hedge, under an orange-tree that grew in the middle of it, but Mr. Portal had gone. Nurse, however, believed that from the nursery window she had seen him walking out of the garden with his hat pulled right down over his eyes. [400]

"But then, again," she said to cook, "I really couldn't be sure, for he looked so strange, and walked so funny. If I didn't know that master doesn't drink, I should have said he'd had a drop too much. But there, he's not well—maybe, that's why he looked so queer!"

As for Miss Chard, no one thought about her; the servants supposed that she had gone with Mrs. Portal to the Point. If Sarah had thought of looking over the Barbadoes-hedge just at the place where Mr. Portal had been lying, she would have seen Miss Chard sitting there, sometimes staring vacantly before her, sometimes holding her face against the orange-tree as though for comfort.

CHAPTER XXXI [401]

ON their way home from the Point, Mrs. Portal and Miss Allendner looked in for a while at a friend's house on the Musgrave Road, where an "At Home" was in full swing.

Everyone clustered about Clem with solicitous inquiries for the health of Miss Chard, and she found herself detained a good while longer than she had intended. When at last she reached home she was flushed with haste, for not only were there people coming to dine, but two women friends were arriving that night to stay for some days; and the margin of time she had allowed herself to dress, give a final survey to the bedrooms, inspect the *menu*, and attend to the table-flowers, was far from wide. Also, she had a longing for a few moments' gossip and rest in Poppy's room, for through the rush of small affairs she had been barely able to exchange a word with her friend all day.

As soon as she entered the hall Sarah handed her a telegram, which she tore open and read immediately, supposing it to be from one of her expected guests. But as her eyes fell on the flimsy paper, both Sarah and the elderly spinster saw by the change that swept over her face that this must be something more serious than a guest's telegraphed regrets. A look of blank astonishment was followed by one of horror. Her lips went white and the deadly shade crept over her face, seeming to age it suddenly. Then, her dazed eyes perceived the two women looking [402] anxiously at her. Instantly she controlled herself; gave an order to Sarah, asked Miss Allendner if she could possibly arrange the table-flowers for her as she didn't think she would have time to do it herself, and with apparent indifference took up and read the cards of some visitors who had called during the afternoon. She even called Sarah back and made some inquiries as to whether any of the visitors had asked to see Miss Chard.

"They did so, ma'am. But I could not find Miss Chard anywhere, and I thought she was with you—afterwards she came in from the garden."

"Very well, Sarah—give cook as much help as you can this evening."

"Oh, *yes*, m'm."

The maid went her ways, and Mrs. Portal to her room.

When she had closed her door she stood still and re-read the telegram upon which her hand had retained a convulsive clutch. Afterwards, with a little groan, she dropped it and fell upon her knees by her bed. Kneeling there, her face buried in her hands, she after a while lost count of time, and did not hear a knock on her door.

When the senses are dulled by suffering they play strange tricks on the poor human beings who depend on them. Poppy, who knocked, imagined that she distinctly heard a voice say:

"Come in," and opening the door she softly entered.

Clem sprang to her feet and turned her haggard face to the intruder, anger in her eyes; and Poppy, aghast and trembling, suddenly shrank back.

"Oh, Clem!... I beg your pardon," she stammered. "I was so certain I heard you say 'Come in' ... I ... Oh, you *know* I would not dream of intruding on you...." She was whiter even than when she entered; her lips were quivering so much she could hardily speak coherently. Unwittingly she had seen Clem kneeling there—abandoned to misery! And now she saw the tragic eyes that looked at [403] her—and she knew what it all meant! *This* was the first moment in the whole long day Clem had had to herself ... and she ... *she* must needs intrude on the secret grief of the woman she loved *and had robbed*! She put out her hand with a gesture that implored forgiveness and told of love. Almost for the moment she forgot her misery in Clem's. But Clem had turned away and was standing at her dressing-table. Over her shoulder she said in a strained voice:

"It doesn't matter ... I don't mind *you* ... I have had some bad news. But don't ask me about it, dear. I can't speak of it—*even with you*!"

Was this said in bitterest irony? Poppy wondered dully, and she did not know what she answered before she left the room, and that did not matter, for Clem Portal did not hear. They were two people walking in heavy darkness that cut them off from the voices of their fellows.

Half an hour later the house rang with the laughter and merriment of the two new arrivals—old friends of the Portals—who had come down from Maritzburg to spend a few days and attend the Durban Club Ball, which was to take place the next night. In the drawing-room, before dinner was announced, Clem's laughter was the gayest of all; but to Poppy's ear there was a note in it like the clank of a broken bell. The Maritzburgers were two light-hearted, pretty women of the military set, whose husbands' regiments had so recently come from India that they were still keenly and sorely feeling the difference between Simla and the benighted capital of Natal. But their repinings were for the time forgotten in vivacious crowing over the fact that their husbands had been unable to accompany them at the last moment, so that there would now be nothing to prevent them from having a delightful fling and dancing their heels off at the coming ball. [404]

"Robbie is all very well up to supper-time," cried Mrs. Dorand to the world at large, "but after supper he gets sleepy, and I meet his sulky face at every corner imploring me to come home."

"*Everybody* knows how foolish Theodore is about my adoration for your Billy, Clem." The wife of Major Monk was a violet-eyed, jolly girl from the Curragh. "But *now* I shall be able to dance with him uninterruptedly all night."

"Indeed then you won't," said Clem, "for he's been called away on business quite suddenly, and I doubt if he'll be back in time for the ball—so we shall be a hen party."

Amidst moans and expostulations she added: "But I daresay I can beat up a few wild-geese from somewhere. There are several coming to-night." She proceeded to recount the names and accomplishments of the men expected, and during the tale the rest of the party arrived and dinner was announced.

Poppy found herself upon the arm of Luce Abinger.

There were moments during the course of that dinner when she believed herself to be on the point of going mad; when the lights and the jewels and the wine and the faces were all hideously mixed, and she could have shrieked like a banshee at the two merry Maritzburg women, and fled from the table and the house. But always she was recalled to herself by just glancing to the head of the table where Clem Portal sat, the wittiest and most charming of hostesses, with two badly-painted streaks of red in her cheeks, and flaming lips which gradually lost their colouring and looked oddly at variance with the rest of the "make up" by the end of the dinner. Even bad dreams come to an end some time. [405]

If there were two things in Poppy's world impossible to associate with peace and gratitude, they were assuredly the darkness of a garden and the exclusive society of Luce Abinger. Yet she found herself during a part of that nightmare-evening looking upon these things as blessings for which to be distinctly thankful to Heaven.

Two other people were sauntering afar, and in the drawing-room a quartette had settled down to Bridge, with Miss Allendner at the piano playing the stilted *polonaises* and polkas of her vanished youth.

Abinger and Poppy talked together in a friendly, natural fashion that they had never known before. He congratulated her about her work, said how much he had enjoyed reading her last book, and asked her if she had sold the African rights of her plays, as they were sure to bring in a large sum. She told him she had long ago sold all rights and spent the money; that, indeed, she had spent most of her money, and must begin to think about earning more at once. He knew, of course, about her loss of all the work she had recently done. Suddenly the recollection swept over her that it was to fight him that she wanted the money. She stood still in their idle sauntering, and faced him. All the terror and misery of the past, that he indirectly had been the cause of, came back. Yet she could not hate him when she saw his haggard, distorted face. And how ill he looked! For a moment she forgot her wrongs, in womanly pity.

"You look ill, Luce," she said kindly.

"I am ill; I am a starving man." He came near her and looked at her. "You and I are both starving—for something we can't have. I have never been able to discover what it is you want—or, to be more precise, *who*—but you know very well who it is, and what, that I want."

She drew back from the look in his eyes. His tone changed instantly; he looked and spoke idly. [406]

"Well—my offer holds good at any time."

"Your offer?"

"Yes ... don't forget it ... I know that the mere fact of money is nothing to you ... but you're not happy. If you like work and fame, well—you don't look like a girl who does, that's all!"

They were walking now over the dew-spangled lawn, and she was wondering what he meant. Suddenly he stood still and began to stammer at her incoherently.

"When I told you the truth in that letter, I did not do it in the spirit that a man throws up the sponge—don't think that! I did it," he continued hoarsely, "to be fair and square with you for once. To begin again with the way clear before us—if you will. It was a rather fine thing to do, I thought," his tone changed to the old, sneering one; "but like all the fine things I've ever done it ended in repentance. I know now that I was a fool to tell you."

"What are you talking about, Luce?" she wonderingly asked. Then for the first time since she had locked her studio door on it she remembered his unread letter. "Is it something you told me

in the letter you sent to the cottage?—I never read it. It was burned unopened the night of the fire."

A change came over his face. His scar seemed to twitch and gleam spasmodically in the moonlight. There was a silence. Then very softly he began to laugh, looking at her intently and feeling in all his pockets.

"What was in the letter, Luce?" she said beguilingly. She knew now that it was something she ought to know. But he only went on laughing softly. She tried to recall and understand the words he had been saying, but she could not.

He thought of all the furious rage and contempt he had expended on himself within the last few weeks while he waited and waited for some word of thanks from her for the fine generous thing [407] he had done in telling her the truth at last—that she was not his wife at all; that Carmen Braganza, the beautiful Spanish dancer, whom he had secretly married in Johannesburg, was still living at the time of the ceremony between himself and Poppy——

And she had never read the letter! All was as before!

She did not know, and there was still a fighting chance that, wearied out with the strife and siege, she would turn and surrender.

Then he would say:

"Yes—but we will not take the world into our confidence about the little ceremony in the White Farm. We'll go and be married publicly."

Thinking of these things, what could he do but look at her and softly laugh?

As for her, sick at heart, hopeless, remembering her misery, she turned away and set her desolate face towards the house, where a woman whom she loved well wore two little painted flames in her cheeks.

> "What need to strive, with a life awry?"

Life was awry with everyone it seemed! What did it matter what Luce Abinger had to say?

She had no fight left in her. Her feet, as she walked up the sloping lawn, seemed too heavy to lift—they caught in the grass as she stumbled wearily towards the house, Abinger following.

"Good-night, Luce," she said lifelessly as they reached the verandah. She felt no anger towards him now. She let him take her hand and she listened without resentment to his whispered words.

"When are you coming back to your home and your husband, Poppy?"

Indoors, the card-party had broken up. The travellers were tired, and Clem was for hunting [408] them to bed. The men made farewells and went, Abinger with them, and Clem and Miss Allendner hustled away to the rooms of the guests. Poppy took the opportunity of slipping into the narrow little writing-room, which opened off the hall and was meant for common-use. She wished to write out a telegram, and she knew there were forms to be found there. Sitting down to the desk she found the stack of forms and began to write on the top one. But someone had been using it before her, and with a violent hand and stubby pencil had left an entire message deeply indented on the form beneath the one that had been used and torn off. With the first word Poppy wrote the ink flowed from her full pen into the rutted words, outlining a part of the message, and she read all then as dully and unthinkingly as she had done everything else that evening.

> "*Come back to me. You have never been out of my heart for a moment since first I loved you.—Loraine.*"

The address was a code word, care of the Rand Club, and the words were in Clem's writing. It was the last link in the chain. If Poppy had had any lingering, hoping doubt in her mind, it fled now. She forgot the words she had meant to write, and then she told herself they didn't matter in any case. Vaguely she remembered to tear the form off and destroy it; then rose from the desk and walked rather blindly to the door and out into the lighted hall. Clem was waiting there to bid her good-night.

The red had faded from her cheeks now, or else the light was kinder, and her eyes looked big and dim. She put out her hands, took Poppy's, and gave them a little, gentle squeeze, and she smiled her own brave turned-up-at-the-corners smile. [409]

"Life is a curious thing, Poppy," she said gently. "It is hard to tell which is dream and which is real. Sometimes I don't think any of it is real at all. Good-night dear."

CHAPTER XXXII [410]

AFTER a week or so at Potchefstroom, Carson returned to Johannesburg, to find Rosser beating the town for him, crazy with impatience. Wallerstein had offered seven hundred pounds apiece for the South Rands, but Rosser had not closed; he considered it madness not to

stand out for eight hundred.

"It'll only be a matter of a week or two," said he. But Carson gloomed and cursed. It maddened him to find the thing still unsettled, for he had made up his mind not to return to Durban until he knew definitely whether he had poverty or wealth—both comparative, of course—to offer to the woman of his heart. However, as he had stayed so long already, a few days more could not make much difference, he argued lifelessly with himself, so he gave a grudging half-assent to Rosser and went his ways. He still had several minor affairs to attend to, and various people to see, but he did all half-heartedly. Choosing and despatching a ring to Poppy was the only thing that gave him any joy, and that was too poignant for pleasure. Then, suddenly, in one day he grew restless and haggard. Hunger was on him for the sight of a face, and at last he knew he could wait no longer, but must go. The decision came upon him suddenly in the Club with the sight and scent of a gardenia Forsyth was wearing in his coat at lunch-time. Now, between the scent of a gardenia and the scent of Barbadoes-thorn there is scarcely any difference at all, except that the gardenia's fragrance is perhaps more subtly insistent. Carson spun out of the Club into a cab and [411] in fifteen minutes was in his broker's office.

"Close for seven hundred pounds each, Rosser," he said briskly. "And get the whole thing fixed up as soon as possible. I'm leaving to-night."

"Oh, but I've already closed for eight hundred pounds each," chirruped the elated Rosser. "The transfer is completed and the money paid in." He pranced into an inner office and produced voluminous documents. "Loot, my son! Loot from the house of Rimmon! I take my little fifteen thousand pounds and you take twenty-five thousand. Isn't *that* all right? *Now* will you be good!"

An hour later Carson regained his cab and was driven to his rooms. A portmanteau at *Vetta's* head was a sufficient indication of his intentions, and the rest of the afternoon was spent in settling up his remaining business matters and appointments by telegram and telephone. Then he dined, and caught the eight o'clock express by one minute and a half. *Vetta*, who was on the look-out for him, indicated an empty first-class, and Carson fell into it and slept like the dead until morning.

Those were the days when the run between Johannesburg and Durban occupied the better part of twenty-seven hours. The first stop of any importance was at Volksrust, the boundary town, and Carson roused himself to take a look at country he knew well, and was not likely to see again for many years. It was as early as five A.M., and a wet salt mist lay over everything, chilling him to the bone as he opened his window and looked out at the bleak Drakensberg looming through the haze, and tragic Majuba, which throws a shadow athwart every brave man's path as he passes. Later, the train dashed through the Laing's Nek tunnel, and as it descended the sloping spur of the range, Natal lay before Carson's eyes—all beautiful green valleys and running water: the land of his desire. The mist had cleared from the air, but it still seemed to obscure Carson's vision as [412] he looked, and he passed Ingogo, and Mount Prospect, with ill-fated Colley's monument, unknowingly. Only the far blue haze that meant the coast lured his eyes, for there for him lay heart's content.

Presently, at Newcastle, came the faithful *Vetta* with tidings of breakfast; and Carson scrambled amongst a weary, sleepy crowd, in which he recognised no face, for sandwiches and vile coffee flung at him, half in cup and half in saucer. When he had breakfasted in this fashion, taken a leisurely stroll, glanced in all the carriages to see if there could possibly be any passengers he knew, inspected the accommodation of *Vetta*, and inquired into the matter of the latter's breakfast, he returned to his carriage. There was still a residue of sixteen hours to get through before the journey ended. Having no reading-matter with him, he thought at first to kill time with pleasant thoughts of a woman in a garden, but it was presently borne in upon him that his consciousness, or conscience, or memory, or whatever he may have cared to call it, had another and less agreeable affair to consider with him. Something within, that he would fain have cursed into silence, earnestly solicited his attention to the fact that the train which was crawling with him to the woman he loved, was at the same time tearing with most indecent haste towards one whom he had never loved, and the hour in which he must tell her so. Presently the thought of that hour lashed him, cut him with knives, turned him sick.

In time, he stared at the wild and rugged outline of the Biggarsberg, until it seemed blurred with a red haze; and as the flat and dreary land of stunted bush that lies between Elandslaagte and Howick unrolled itself monotonously before his window, rocks appeared to grin and gibe at him, and isolated trees menaced him with gnarled arms, even as in Wiertzs's picture Napoleon is [413] menaced by the arms of women.

As the hours passed his eyes grew bloodshot and his throat dry. His mouth sneered with self-contempt; unconsciously his lips opened and closed, and he swallowed with the expression of a man who is tasting the bitterness of death. But through all, his heart held steadfast to one plan—the man's plan, the old plan that was in the beginning and shall be till the end.

Later, he lay on the seat of the carriage, his face to the wall, his eyes closed, his hands clenched—thinking, thinking. He would remember Poppy's shut eyes as he kissed her under the flamboyant tree; how her throat shone in the darkness. Then a voice, *not hers*, would break in upon him, crying:

"Evelyn, I love you. For your sake men may brand me—swear you will never forsake me for another woman!"

Did he ever swear? Was that his voice he seemed to hear?—tender, fervent—swearing by her face, by his life, by——

"Oh, Lord God! what a blackguard!" he groaned aloud.

But his heart held steadfast to his plan.

When at last evening fell, the train reached Maritzburg, and the passengers poured out into the station dining-room. Carson, haggard-eyed, found the bar, and drank three brandies atop of each other. He was on the point of ordering a fourth when a Maritzburg acquaintance stepped in and saved him the trouble—slapping him on the shoulder, and claiming his attention with a little scheme, which he said Bramham was standing in with. It was something about coal, but Carson never afterwards remembered details, though he listened very politely and intently to every word, for it was good to be spoken to by a decent man as if he were another decent man, after those years of degradation in the train. [414]

The four brandies might have been poured over a rock for all the effect he felt of them; but when the starting bell rang, he made his way back to the train through the hustling crowd with a calmer mien, and leaning from the window, wrung his acquaintance's hand with unassumed warmth. Ever afterwards he felt real friendship for that Maritzburg man.

To his surprise, he found that he now had a fellow-passenger, a lady. Her figure seemed vaguely familiar as she stood packing her things into the rack, and when she turned round he wondered where in the world before he had met the unabashed gaze of those large brown eyes beneath a massed fringe of dusty, crispy hair. She, on her part, was regarding him with the pleased smile of an old acquaintance.

"Sir Evelyn Carson! How funny!" she said, and smiled winningly. Carson bowed, and his smile was ready and courteous, for, in truth, he was glad not to be alone; but he continued to greatly wonder.

"I believe you don't remember me!" said she archly. "How unkind! And I've so often bowed to Mr. Bramham when you've been with him in the old days. And you've been to Brookie's office, too, when I was his seckertary."

At last Carson was enlightened. He was, in fact, in the pleasant company of Miss Sophie Cornell.

"Ah! yes, of course—I remember quite well," said he. Indeed, if she could but have known it, he remembered a good deal more than was flattering, for Bram's tale of highway-robbery was still clear in his mind. She had changed a good deal since then: grown coarser and more florid—and there were other things—! When a woman has flung her kisses to the world as generously as summer flings daisies in a green meadow, the tale of them is marked upon her face for all who run to read. However, her dress was black, and so extremely neat that it was a pity she should [415] have spoiled its effectiveness by wearing a pair of yellow *suède* evening shoes.

Carson was not surprised when she informed him that she had left the uninteresting field of typewriting, to adorn a profession where beauty and wit are more readily recognised and liberally remunerated.

"I am in an *awfully* nice bar in Maritzburg," she told him languorously. "Come in and have a drink next time you are there—'The Falcon.' All my friends were *awfully* annoyed with me for leaving *literary* work, but really it was *so* dull—and, of course, it's a great mistake to think one can't stay *a lady*, whatever one does; don't you think so, Sir Evelyn, eh?"

"Certainly!" he gravely agreed.

"I am treated as *quite* the lady by all the smartest men in the town, and there's a great difference between that and being bullied from morning to night by a little bounder like Brookie, you know. Not that he didn't have his good points. But still, the way he treated me in the end was perfectly *frot*[6], and there's no other word for it. In fact, everybody did. Charlie Bramham, now, always said he'd be my friend, but as soon as it suited him, he just scooted off and never came near me again ... after persuading me in the first place to come to Durban to work for him."

[6] Rotten.

"Oh! Bramham's a good fellow," said Carson, smiling at this new version of a tale of highway-robbery. "I don't think he could have behaved very badly."

"Good fellows and bad fellows are all just the same when they're tired of you," said Miss Cornell feelingly; adding, with great hauteur: "Not that I ever allowed any man to get tired of *me*, Sir Evelyn, I assure you. There's not a single fellow in Africa can say a *thing* about me." [416]

This was very impressive, but Carson did not exactly know what it might mean. He only knew that he was growing a little weary.

"And then there was a girl that I befriended. I took her in when she came to my house without a rag to her back, or a shoe to her foot, one night—fed her, clothed her, and treated her like my own sister—or would have done if she hadn't been such a cold-blooded, standoffish *slang*.[7] Yet I can assure *you*, Sir Evelyn, that when I was on the Durban Race-course three weeks ago, with two *perfect gentlemen* from the Rand, she sat quite close to me in a carriage with that Mrs. Portal, and though I smiled and bowed to her *twice*, she deliberately looked right through me.... I might have been a bit of rubbish lying in the street...."

[7] Snake.

Something in this narrative dimly, though unpleasantly, interested Carson. He forgot his weariness for the moment and looked at the woman intently.

"Yes ... what do you think of that? Deliberately *cut* me ... me who had been her friend in need. I supposed it was because she had managed to get taken up by a big-pot like Mrs. Portal.... I said so to one of my friends—such a nice boy—you may know him—Wolfie Isaacs, of the firm of Isaacs and Jacobs. But after he'd been away talking to some other men, he came back and told me that *she* was the great authoress who wrote all the cracked books and poems about Africa, and that

everyone was raving about her. He said I must have made a mistake when I thought I knew her! What do you think of *that*? The girl I had taken in without any shoes to her feet!... and, oh my! couldn't I tell a tale to her swell friend Mrs. Portal if I—" Something in the steely expression of the face opposite suddenly arrested her flow of eloquence. [417]

"Do you mind telling me whom you are talking about?" said Carson quietly.

"Certainly—I'm delighted to. It is only fair that everybody should know what a *slang* that girl is, to cut *me* like that, who had taken her in without asking a single question about where she came from.... Och! but I can tell you I found out afterwards, Sir Evelyn ... she's as bad as she can be, that Rosalind Chard——"

Carson's tanned skin had turned an ashy-yellow shade, which was neither becoming nor artistic.

"Woman—" he said in a low, hoarse voice, scarcely audible; but his eyes said a great deal more than his lips; and Miss Cornell, at first surprised, became angrily red.

"Och! don't you *woman* me!" she cried, bridling. "So *you're* a friend of hers, too, I suppose! She's got very grand all at once!... but I wonder if she told you she used to be constantly in a house on the Berea with Luce Abinger. That it was from *his* house she came that night I took her in! My *boy* Zambani saw her come through the gap in the hedge that led from Abinger's garden. Ha! ha! and she pretending to be such a saint all the time! Ask Mr. Bramham! He knows all about it."

Carson took it like a blow between the eyes. If he had not been sitting, he would have reeled. As it was, he leaned against the back of the seat and closed his eyes for a moment, though the lids scorched like flame. But the woman mistook his attitude for calm unbelief. She thought he shut his eyes because he was pretending to be bored, and she was furious.

"And she pretending to be such a saint all the time," she repeated. "A saint in the company of Luce Abinger!" she laughed coarsely.

Carson's eyes were still closed. He was considering—as well as fury, and surprise, and misery, and four neat brandies become suddenly potent would let him. [418]

Would this woman dare bade up her vile statement with Bramham's name, unless—?... but there must be some explanation. She and Abinger! Oh, God! *no!* Bram could explain ... she could explain ... if she could not, he would kill her ... he would take her by that long, fair throat——

At that the coldness and calmness of moonlight fell upon him like a pall; his brain cleared; he reflected on the inflamed, furious face opposite him, surveying it deliberately, insultingly, with stony, arrogant eyes. Slowly his handsome lips took on a curve of incomparable insolence and contempt—a look no woman could ever forgive. In that moment Sophie Cornell knew what she was. The colour left her face, and her lips and tongue went dry; She had no words.

His voice was almost gentle.

"It would be scarcely fair to expect a woman of your" (he paused) "*inducements*—to understand that Miss Chard's reasons for——"

"No," she sneered, hissing like a cobra. "No—of course not—a *saint* like that! But I know well enough what sort of a man Luce Abinger is—and so do you. His name isn't spelt L-o-o-s-e for nothing."

That arrow quivered in Carson, but he gave no sign, going on deliberately:

"—For knowing Mr. Abinger might be different to your reasons—or shall we say inducements?"

She hated him with her eyes.

"You would scarcely credit, perhaps, but there *are* other things of interest in the world besides —inducements. And that the side of Mr. Abinger's character which appears to be so well known to you, is one that he reserves specially for ladies of your—distractions." [419]

He smiled and added:

"I'm afraid you hardly realise how distracting you are. Here am I, for instance, with a number of pressing matters waiting for my attention"—he put his hand into the breastpocket of his coat and brought out a bundle of letters and papers—"neglecting them to indulge in a fascinated contemplation of you. But if you will be good enough to release me——"

Miss Cornell damped her lips with her tongue.

"I hate Rosalind Chard," she said hoarsely, "but I am sorry for her, all the same, if she gets you. I think you are the worst devil I've ever met in my life. Talk about the three bad men! Abinger and Charlie Bramham are angels compared to you."

"I will let 'Charlie' know of your favourable opinion of him—he will be flattered. Pray excuse me!" He looked apologetically at the papers in his hand.

"Oh! go to hell!" she screamed. Carson bowed, and with that insolent smile still lingering on his lips, gave his attention to his letters.

At Inchanga he stepped out of the carriage and looked about him with careless interest, lighted a cigarette, and presently lounged down the platform. Incidentally he went into the telegraph-office and sent off a wire, requesting Bramham to meet him at the station or be at home waiting for him. When he came out of the little office he was still smoking placidly, but the writing on the telegraph-form resembled the writing of a drunken or palsied man.

On his return to the carriage he found that Miss Cornell had been good enough to remove her distracting presence to some other part of the train.

CHAPTER XXXIII

[420]

IT was the night of the Club ball, the first and chief event of the Durban season, and all the fashionable world was busily pranking itself for the occasion.

Bramham had dressed early, for he had been elected by Mrs. Portal to be one of the wild-geese who were to escort her house-party to the Town Hall. Just as he was choosing some cigars for the night at the dining-room table, Carson's telegram arrived. He whistled, meditating upon it for a while.

"Well, this Carson!" he called out to Abinger, who was in a neighbouring room, also arraying himself for the festival. "Wants me to meet him at the station, I thank you!"

"Meet him! What for? He ought to get a maid!"

"Well, I can't do it, anyway," said Bramham, and sitting down, hastily scribbled a note, saying that he could not possibly wait on account of his engagement with Mrs. Portal, but suggesting that Carson, on arrival, should dress and come down to the Town Hall. He left this note on the table, with instructions to the *boys* to see that Carson got it as soon as he arrived; then jumping into his carriage, he set off for the Portals' house.

On his way up he had an impulse to call at the Caprons', to see what arrangements Mrs. Capron had made for going to the ball. He was aware that Nick had been away for a week, and was not in the way of returning yet a while. A man called Lessing had pitched a camp out beyond [421] Inanda, to try some experiments in coursing with six pedigree dogs he had imported from home, and several other men had joined him, to see the sport and incidentally get a little late fishing. Bramham had received a note from Lessing that morning, asking him to come out for a few days before they broke camp, and mentioning that he should not be in for the ball, because Capron, having put in a week's steady drinking without anyone particularly noticing the fact, was now in the uproarious stage and couldn't possibly be left. Whether Mrs. Capron was aware of the state of affairs Bramham did not know, but he thought that a friendly thing to do would be to find out if she had arranged for an escort, and, if not, to offer to call for her with Mrs. Portal's party.

At the sound of the carriage she came out into her verandah, looking supremely lovely, as white-skinned, red-haired women have a way of doing in a black setting.

"I thought I'd just look in to make sure that you were coming, Mrs. Capron," said Bram, his eyes shining with the delight and excitement he always felt at the sight of a pretty woman.

"Yes, I'm coming, though Nick isn't," she said gaily. "He is out at George Lessing's encampment, you know. I've lent my carriage to Mrs. Portal for some of her party, but Mrs. Lace is going to call for me—she will be here any moment now."

"Good! I heard that Nick was still away, and thought I might be of some use. When do you expect him back?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said carelessly. "I haven't heard from him for several days. I expect he'll stay until Mr. Lessing breaks up his camp."

"Well, I must bustle on. I'm afraid I'm late, as it is ... but that's Carson's fault with his telegrams —" He was off towards the gate. [422]

"Is he back, then?" called Mrs. Capron after him.

"No, coming back to-night—should be in by eleven," said Bram, getting into his carriage.

At the Portals' he found that some of the party had already gone. Mrs. Portal was not quite ready, but Miss Chard was in the drawing-room. She was resting in a big chintz chair, with her white chiffon skirts foaming all round her, and her hands holding a great bunch of shining orange leaves that gave out a faint, crushed scent. She had them held to her face when Bramham came in, and her eyes were closed. She looked like a woman praying. At the sound of him she started up, and the leaves dropped rustling to the floor.

"Oh!" she cried in a wild, odd voice that Bramham did not recognise. He looked at her in surprise.

"Did I startle you? I'm sorry!"

"No—oh no ... not at all ... only I thought—" She regained her composure rapidly and sat down again, arranging her draperies.

"I believe I must have been asleep, and you woke me up," she smiled. Her face was as white as her gown, but her eyes were dark and dilated, as if she were under the influence of a drug. Bramham thought she looked like death, until she smiled, and then he decided that he had never seen her more alluring.

"Unlucky man! you will have to ferry three of us down!" she said. "Mrs. Portal is insisting on Miss Allendner coming too. The poor soul has been so depressed ever since the fire——"

"Good," said Bramham. "The carriage will hold a quartette easily, but if you want more room for your skirts, I'll sit up aloft."

"Not at all. You will come in with us or I shall sit up aloft too." [423]

They laughed, and he asked if he might secure a dance or two from her now.

"I know it's no use asking for the first waltz," he ventured.

"Oh, yes ... you can have it, if you like."

"*What?*"

"Yes, really—and whichever others you like." Bramham seized her card blithely.

"Now this comes of getting ahead of pirates like Abinger and Carson——"

"But ... *he* ... has not returned?" she asked quickly. It occurred to Bramham to be wily in the interest of his dances. Carson is big enough and ugly enough to look after himself, was his thought.

"No ... not yet. But he *might* run in, mightn't he? You're not thinking of going back on me, are you?"

"Of course not!" She turned away.

He dotted his initials thickly on her card, for he had discovered at a little informal affair that she danced delightfully. When he gave it back, her hands were trembling violently. Even the mention of Carson's return had power to shake her whole being.

Mrs. Portal came in, looking thin and worn, but with her little gay air that carried everything along and made people forget to observe that her eyes were ringed, and her cheeks drawn, or what colour she was dressed in. Laughing and apologising, she implored Poppy to give a glance at the back of her gown to see if it was all right.

"Really, I believe I laced it with my toes," she said. "My hands haven't had a moment since daybreak.... Come along, or we shall be late, and have to sit glued to the wall all night.... Miss Allendner, you simply take the shine out of us all in that gown ... you are *all* shine ... I never saw any one so shamefully magnificent.... Come along, good peoples." She pushed the pleased old [424]
soul gently out of the room before her, and Bramham and Poppy followed. Miss Allendner was, indeed, at her best in a shining sequined gown, which Mrs. Portal had been at some pains to reconstruct and bring up-to-date.

Eventually they set off—Poppy still carrying her bunch of orange leaves, faintly scenting the carriage. Sometimes when the others were absorbed in talk, she secretly pressed them against her heart. She felt as though she had gone back again to the days of her childhood, when misery claimed her, and there was no hope of comfort, or strength, or kindness, from anything but trees and green leaves. She was glad that she wore her mother's old green brooch and that there were great pieces of green malachite in the high Empire comb she had stuck in her piled-up crown of black, black hair; she needed all the strength that green things could give her to-night.

One of the first people they saw on entering was Mary Capron, standing in the centre of the ball-room, a little crowd of people about her, supremely beautiful in black lace and diamonds. She came over to them at once with a little loving pat of welcome for Clem and a brilliant smile for the others. She half extended her hand to Poppy, in friendliness; but Poppy turned away from her. She could not welcome the touch of a hand that had smitten happiness out of her life. They all moved down the big ball-room together. There were little groups everywhere of laughing men and women, and the seats that ran all round the room were all occupied. The bandsmen up on the stage, massed with palms and flags and greenery, were making quivery-quavery sounds on their instruments.

Other women came up and greeted them.

"What a crush!... we shall have the gowns torn off our backs when the dancing begins ... don't you think it was a mistake to have the ball so early?... so hot still!" [425]

Behind her Poppy heard one of the Maritzburg women say to the other in a low voice:

"Clem's got paint on again.... She never used to do it ... I wonder if Bill has been badly hit in the slump? There's *something* wrong!"

"I hear that Nick came in from the camp at the last moment. Do you think it could possibly be true, Clem?" said Mrs. Capron.

"That depends on who told you."

"Young Head. He said he heard someone say that Nick and your Billy were both at the Club. Perhaps they are going to surprise us by appearing." Mrs. Capron's voice did not express much enthusiasm. Clem's eyes flashed like lightning round the room, in search of young Head, and she saw him immediately, busily collecting dances. She had an inclination to rush straight over to him, but she curbed it. Another inclination that almost overwhelmed her was to fly from the hall, and take a rickshaw to the Club; but she curbed that too, though to do so cost an effort that threw up her rouge-spots more clearly by reason of the increased pallor of her cheeks. She continued to talk easily.

"How did you get here, Mary?"

"I drove down with Mrs. Lace. How do I look, darling? This is my *Machinka* gown ... you haven't seen it before, have you?"

"Perfect, dear. I never saw you look more beautiful.... Isn't Poppy wonderful to-night, too? ... she looks like a woman who has stepped out of a dream ... no wonder the men crowd round her. If I could only catch her eye, we'd move on."

When Poppy's card was all but full, a voice said at her elbow: [426]

"Don't forget *me*." Nothing could have looked more out of place in that gay ball-room than Abinger's scarred, sardonic face. But he stood there, cool and irreproachably dressed.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid there are none left."

"I am unfortunate." He shrugged and turned away, and Poppy, looking round for the others,

caught Clem Portal's face with the mask off for one moment. With that sight her faltering, fainting purpose changed to firm resolution. Softly she called after Abinger, but when he reached her again she seemed breathless.

"I have a dance ... number five—" She held out her card, and while he wrote upon it she spoke again, swiftly and low. The preliminary soft bars of the first waltz were already floating down the room.

"Will you please be where I can see you—and reach you *instantly* ... if I should want you?"

A slight, bitter smile came to his lips.

"Certainly! The middle of the room would be a good place, I should say."

Her eyes blazed at him for a moment. Then a subtle, alluring look crossed her face, for all her lips were the lips of a ghost. She half whispered to him:

"Do you want me—*Luce*?"

Her eyes looked into his for one short instant before she veiled them quickly, and her heart seemed to turn over within her, for desire stalked, naked and unashamed, in the eyes of Luce Abinger.

"Do I want you. By God!" he said, under his breath.

"Well—to-night—I think I may come—*home*," she faltered; then without another word or look she turned away, and took Bramham's arm for the first waltz.

Abinger did not approach her again; neither did he dance. He lounged conspicuously in a doorway, and if anyone spoke to him, he snarled at them and they went hastily away. When the [427] fifth dance came, he waited until the music began; then walked across to where Poppy was sitting, offered his arm nonchalantly, and they took the floor together. When they had been dancing for a few moments he spoke:

"Poppy ... *to-night*?"

"To-night," her pale lips gave back answer. Her feet moved in time to the waltz, but she lay half fainting in his arms. He had the daring to bend his head and touch her face with his burning lips. Amid the flashing lights of jewels, and the whirling faces, it was almost safe to have gone unnoticed; everyone was too busy to watch what others were doing.

But there happened to be a man standing in a doorway, hiding his grey travelling tweeds behind two or three immaculates, who were trying to persuade him that it would be quite a remarkable joke if he would come in as he was, and pirouette amongst the dancers.

"Come on now, Carson ... give us a taste of the old Karri of old, mad days," a Rand man was saying; and Carson, though listening and laughing, was watching two people in the room. So it happened that he saw the kiss—and the woman's face almost lying on Abinger's shoulder. How could he know that she was dazed, half unconscious, not knowing what she did, or caring? Abruptly he pushed through the laughing group and stood full in the doorway. For an instant he was on the verge of trampling over everyone in the room to get to those two and tear them apart; for an instant the other men thought they were going to have a return of mad Carson with a vengeance, and were sorry they had spoken; one of them laid a hand on his arm. But in that instant a woman's eyes had met Carson's—long, topaz-coloured eyes, full of eager welcome and tenderness. The next moment he had flung away from the other men, and was striding through the wide vestibule, down the Town Hall steps towards a rickshaw, to take him God knew where. [428] As he put his foot on it a hand fell to his shoulder, and Brookfield's voice to his ear—full of relief.

"Carson! By gad! I'm glad you're back; Capron's cut his throat, and they say he's dying at the Club. Come on!"

Carson stared at him with a stunned air.

"Capron!" he stammered.

"Yes; sliced his head off nearly. He was too drunk to go home, so they hid him in Ferrand's room at the Club with Portal in charge. But while Portal was out of the room for a moment, Nick found Ferrand's best razor."

"Well, I can't come," said Carson roughly, after a pause. "I have business of my own."

"You've *got* to come, Karri. He's raving for you. Someone said you'd arrived, and Ferrand told me to find you, or he'd have another hæmorrhage. Come on, now. He won't keep you long; he's booked!"

Carson cursed and muttered, but eventually they got into the rickshaw and went off together.

Five minutes later a woman shrouded in a long, black satin cloak, her head muffled in veils, slipped down the steps and beckoned a rickshaw. In a whisper she directed the *boy* and told him to hurry.

At about an hour after midnight Clem came to Poppy, who was sitting out a dance with a peaceful partner, and drawing her aside said:

"Dear, something awful has happened to Nick Capron and Mary can't be found. I fancy she must have been feeling ill and gone home without telling anyone. Anyway, Mr. de Grey and I are going to see. I've asked Bramham to take you home as soon as you would like to go.... the others [429] will want to dance until dawn.... Billy is at the Club, too, it appears."

"I'll come now," said Poppy quickly, forgetful of everything in the momentary excitement.

"No; I can't wait for you, dear, as I'm ready. Better come on with Mr. Bramham or Mr. Abinger. Suppose you and Miss Allendner wait at Sea House for me?... It's an easy drive from the Club.... I'll call for you there, and we'll all go up home together.... it will probably be painful, breaking the news to poor Mary. I'll come as soon as I can afterwards." She hurried away, and Poppy, excusing herself to her partner, went to the dressing-room for her wraps. On her way she met Abinger, told him swiftly what had happened, and asked him to find Miss Allendner. But when she emerged from the dressing-room Abinger and Bramham were waiting for her, minus the companion.

"She was dancing so happily for the first time to-night, that I hadn't the heart to drag her away," said Abinger, with unheard-of benevolence. The truth was that Miss Allendner did not at all enter into his plans for the evening, and so he had not bothered to look for her.

The three of them left the hall together and reached Bramham's carriage, which had been sent for. Afterwards they drove away in the direction of Sea House. Bramham, with permission, smoked moodily out of a window, and Abinger, without permission, under cover of the uncertain light, took Poppy's hand; but it lay like a smooth, cold stone, and gave no response to his hot hold. His hands were as bad as his eyes; by just holding a woman's hand for three seconds, he could tell her things which for her soul's sake she had avoided knowing all her life.

They were a silent party when they arrived at Sea House. In the dining-room they sat down and Bramham drummed his fingers on the table, wondering where Carson was. Luggage was lying in [430]
the verandah, and Bramham's note was open on the table; but of Carson himself no sign.

Inspiration came to Abinger to go and rout out the servants to make coffee and sandwiches, for there was a distinct chill in the air, and as none of them had partaken of any supper to speak of, they felt weary and collapsed. As it happened, the servants had not gone to bed, so the coffee soon made its appearance, and at Poppy's suggestion a further supply was ordered to be ready for Mrs. Portal and de Grey. They sat at the table, and Poppy poured out the coffee; but Bramham was restless and began to walk the room, staring out at the night, and then into Carson's room, which led from the dining-room, and the door of which stood ajar. Once he sniffed the air, and then stopped and listened.

Abinger smiled sourly at him.

"Whose trail are *you* on, Bram?"

"There's something odd in the air—some unusual scent," was the answer.

"Perhaps Miss Chard can account for it," suggested Abinger. Bramham ventured near her, sniffing still.

"I never use scent," said she, "but I, too, seem to smell some heavy scent."

"Someone's been here," said Bramham, convinced, and thereupon called in the *boys* again and questioned them in Zulu.

"No—no one had been," they said, "excepting only *Intandugaza*, who had remained but a little while and gone away very angry."

Both Abinger and the white woman in the white gown who sat by the table understood Zulu, and heard for the first time now of Carson's arrival that evening. To Abinger the fact did not mean much. But Poppy sat staring with frozen lips at her bunch of orange leaves which lay now [431]
upon the table. Also, she was listening intently. It seemed to her that the sea, rustling and whispering on the beach at the foot of the garden, had a message for her that she had often heard before, but had never understood. Dimly, for the first time, the meaning of its mysterious sighing was creeping into her weary brain.

"*Rest, rest, rest—peace—rest*," it whispered and sang.

Bramham came to the table, took another sandwich, and ate it walking about the room.

"Well, I can smell something," he averred, as though making a new statement. "Can't you, Abinger?"

"Oh, have some more coffee, Bram. Your nerves have gone back on you."

Poppy poured him out another cup.

"We are all odd to-night," she said, with a wan smile.

"It must be the news about poor Nick Capron," Bram said, and was just taking his coffee-cup from her hand when they thought they heard a sound. They looked at each other. It was a gentle little sound, and might have been anything imagination suggested—a groan, or a cough, or an exclamation. They waited intently to hear it repeated, but it never came again. Abruptly Bramham caught up a lamp—the lamp with Mrs. Brookfield's little pink-silk shade upon it, and walked towards the only door of the room that was open. It was the door of Carson's bedroom—Poppy's eyes saw that in a moment. She and Abinger had risen and followed Bram, and stood behind him in the doorway. Her eyes took in every detail of the wide, breezy room; the long, green curtains at the windows, the heavy oak furniture, the guns, and whips, and rods standing about, the books—and a big photograph of Mrs. Portal's gay-sad face, smiling, on the mantelpiece. [432]

Then she went back to her chair and listened once more to the whispering sea:

"*Rest, rest—peace, rest.*"

"I swear I heard someone say 'Oh!'" said Bramham angrily.

"Look under the bed," mocked Abinger.

"Look under it yourself, my dear fellow!"

They returned to the dining-room.

"What a beast of a night!" continued Bramham explosively. "What is one to do? I've a good mind to take a run up to the Club and see whether I can do anything, or where the others are ... shall I? Will you people come too?"

"No," said Poppy quietly. "We'll stay here. I have something to say to Mr. Abinger."

At any other time Bramham might have found this remark surprising, but on this upside-down night, when nothing had happened as it should have done, and the air was full of odd scents and sounds, he merely thought it in keeping with the rest of things, so he departed, without even taking his hat.

CHAPTER XXXIV

[433]

NICK CAPRON lay on a bed in one of the bedrooms of the Club—a sobbing, raving, blaspheming figure, fearful in bandages sodden with blood, his arms strapped to the sides of the bed to keep him from tearing at his throat. The doctor and Portal stood by, regarding him, one with a calm, professional eye, the other with a wet forehead. Carson sat on a chair at the foot of the bed with a face like a stone wall, staring straight before him, his hands in his pockets.

The injured man spoke continuously in a gurgling, guttural way, half of his words intelligible, the other half maniacal. His main plaint was for the sight of Carson, whom he had not recognised.

"I wish you'd fetch Carson ... there's no one like old Karri ... he's worth the whole damned boiling of you ... besides, I have something to say to him ... if I am booked for the last stretch I'd like Karri to see me off.... Oh, blazes! what the——is this at my throat? Carson! Karri—where is my devoted wife, too? *She* ought to be here to speed the parting guest ... Mary—a damned iceberg ... but I'd like some ice.... Give me some ice, Karri——"

After a time the narcotic administered began to take effect, and the watchers were relieved from the strain of listening to these ravings. Ferrand and Portal took drinks and sat down to wait for the coming of Mrs. Capron.

"—And an infernal long time she is about it," said Ferrand. "What do *you* think, Karri?" [434]

If Carson had an opinion on the subject he did not state it, but he roused himself and looked at the time. It was nearly half-past one.

"I must get home," he muttered. "If you want me Ferrand, you can telephone to Bramham's house. I want to see Bramham," he added absently.

Ferrand cocked a professional eye at him.

"You're used up, Carson. Go home and sleep, but first see if you can find Mrs. Capron, there's a good chap. We can't have this over again when he comes to. She *must* be here and that's all there is to it. You can use my cart if you like, to get home in. Get a rest, old man ... you look just about *peleela* ... take my cart."

Carson accepted the offer and went out, followed by Portal through the silent rooms of the Club to the front verandah.

Ferrand's red-wheeled dog-cart, with its coolie-driver, usually formed part of the street furniture, for the doctor had a happy habit of leaving it outside the Club door, going in and settling down to poker and forgetting all about it. But at the moment it was nowhere to be seen, the fact being that the man, tired of sitting still, had begun to walk the horse, and was now out of sight at the far end of the street.

There was not a rickshaw to be seen; they were all waiting for revellers outside the Town Hall. Fatigue was beginning to tell on Carson: he rapped out a bad and bitter word.

"Cheer up!" said Portal blithely. "You'll soon be dead!"

It was a well-worn expression, and Carson was accustomed to it, but upon this occasion it jarred. Something in Portal's voice was jarring, too. Now that Carson came to remark it, for the first time that evening there was something wrong with Portal's appearance as well as his voice. [435] Instead of being in evening-dress, he had on a brown tweed morning-suit, in which, to judge by its appearance, he might have been knocking about the veldt for several weeks. On the other hand, his face was as bloodless and sallow as if he had been shut in a cellar for a month, and his eyes were sunk deep in his head. Withal, he was cheerful, full of suppressed excitement—almost it might be said that he was gay. After many years in Africa, Carson was accustomed to all kinds of moods and tenses in his friends; also, being an intimate of Portal's, he was aware that the latter possessed a troublesome liver. But somehow, none of these things could quite account for the extraordinary aspect and manner of Portal to-night. Under the powerful rays of a street light which fizzled and hummed close by, Carson observed him intently.

"What's the matter with you, Bill? You look queer. Anything wrong? ... besides Capron, I mean...?"

The other responded with apparent composure.

"No, nothing. I'm only glad to see you, Carson, that's all. I'd no idea you were back from the Rand. I had arranged to go up there after you, but——"

"When? What for?" asked Carson in surprise. He was unable to make head or tail of Portal's speech.

"Oh, nothing; just wanted to see you. You're a fascinating chap."

Carson gazed at him.

One of Portal's hands spasmodically gripped and ungripped the verandah rail. With the other he appeared to be holding something stiff in the right pocket of his coat. He continued to talk in parables.

"I went as far as Maritzburg, but I came back to-night to put my affairs into shape and write a few letters—then those fellows came in and asked me to take charge of Capron ... I left him asleep, I thought ... I was writing a letter to—well, never mind who to—when I heard a row ... and [436] there was Capron ... *he'd got ahead of me*."

"But, good Lord! what do you mean?" Carson burst out. "What's wrong with you? Have your finances gone smash?" he brought an iron hand down on the restless one gripping the verandah railing. The stiff article in Portal's pocket twitched. Carson's career had been adventurous and dangerous, but he had never been nearer death than at that moment. Entirely unconscious of the fact, he went on speaking.

"If you've had a smash-up, Bill, everything I've got is at your disposal.... I've just made a good turn-over in the market.... I thought I should need it, for ... but *my* castle is in ruins.... You can have it if it's any good to you."

"Thanks, Carson—my finances are all right."

"Then what in thunder's the matter with you?—haven't you got the only good woman in this filthy country I'd like to know! I could swear to *two* until to-night. *Now*, if it were not for your wife, I should say they were all rotten to the core ... false as—Oh, well, what's the use?" he turned wearily away.

"Have you spoken to my wife since you got back?" asked Portal. He had come closer and was staring intently into Carson's odd eyes as if searching for something there. His gay air was gone; he breathed heavily.

"I haven't spoken to any woman—except a devil in the train to-day—for nearly three weeks. And after to-night I think I'll be able to exist without 'em forever. But I saw Mrs. Portal from the door of the Town Hall; and she looked to me remarkably ill. Is *that* your trouble?"

Portal did not answer at once, and Carson turned on him austerely and keenly. "If it's any other woman, don't expect *me* to sympathise with you—I could forgive any man that but you—bah! but it couldn't be ... impossible!... Look here, Bill, I may as well tell you something now ... you can [437] take it how you like ... I'm not ashamed of it ... I was in love with your wife for years ... she has never known it for one moment ... but I loved her crazily—everything and everyone else went by the board ... until I met her I was—well, I needn't tell *you* what I was—no follower of Plato, anyway—and you can take this how you please, too—I am not going to pretend that there was anything platonic about my feeling for her ... there was *not*.... But, because she never turned her eyes my way ... or stepped down once in all the years I've known her and you from her shrine ... it got finer and finer until it got to be the highest, finest thing in my life, and anything decent that I've ever done was because of it."

Portal had turned his head away before Carson had finished and appeared to be looking at something down the street. The thought came to Carson that he was either indifferent or not listening.

"Ah, well!" said he, angry to have wasted his confidence and yet too weary to be angry long. "I daresay this doesn't interest you much ... you know, of course, that dozens of men have been in love with your wife ... she's one of the women men can't help loving with all that's decent in them —any more than one can help loving one's mother. A love like that is like a star in the sky of a man's life ... a star that shows the way to the east.... And if *you* are one of those fellows that don't know when a star has come down to you, why——"

Portal turned a shaken, strange face to the other man.

"Carson, you must excuse me; I'm queer to-night ... I've been listening to Capron's ravings until I'm nearly raving myself ... but I think I understand ... I begin to see through it all.... Women do and say strange things in the name of Love!... But I *know* that what you say is true—I believe in [438] you, Karri."

Carson could not pretend to understand the meaning of this, and moreover, Ferrand's cart was at the door, and the sickening remembrance of his own broken hopes was upon him.

"Well, good-night, old man.... I must go home. If anything I've got can be of any use to you, let me know." He held out his hand and Portal gripped it.

"Good-night, Karri—I'm going home, too." His face was transformed.

Carson never solved the problem of that conversation with Portal; never knew how near death he had been, never knew how his accidental confidence had saved his life and given back her husband to Clem Portal. Indeed, he never remembered much about his interview with Portal at all. The memory of it was lost amongst the crowded events of that phantasmagorial night.

Ferrand's coolie spun the cart along at a great rate behind the doctor's best polo pony. Just as they turned into West Street a flying rickshaw passed them, but though Carson heard a man's

voice hailing he did not respond. Mrs. Portal and de Grey were in the rickshaw returning from long and vain seeking for Mrs. Capron, and it was de Grey who shouted, thinking he recognised the doctor's cart in the darkness.

But even if Carson had known, he would not have stopped. He had been too long delayed from his own affairs, and he was driving now to get ease from the torture burning in his brain and searing his heart. His thoughts were fixed on one thing now—an interview with Bramham.

"He's the only honest man amongst us, by Heaven!" he said loudly, so that the coolie driver gave him a nervous glance, and drew away. "The only one I'd take the trouble to believe." [439]

He stopped the cart at the gate of Sea House, and told the man to go back to the Club, then strode away up the sea-sanded path. Lights gleamed brilliantly from the dining-room, but silence reigned, and every other part of the house was dark as death. Walking through the verandah with light, swift feet and into the dining-room, he came upon Poppy and Abinger sitting there, facing each other across a corner of the table. There were tears on her face, and one arm was flung out before her with the gesture of one who has thrown the dice on a last and desperate venture. Abinger's hand lay on hers.

They stood up as Carson sped into the room, his eyes blazing light in his dark face, and before anyone could speak he reached Abinger and without word or warning struck him a tremendous blow between the eyes, felling him to the floor, where he lay quite still. Then he took the girl by the throat—the long, white throat that shone in the darkness.

"By God! I must kill you!" he said, and his voice was whispering like the sea's. She heard him; but she made no movement upward of her hands, though the pressure on her throat was terrible to bear. She closed her eyes and prepared to die. The thought slipped into her mind then that it would be good to have rest at last from the ache and storm of life. That was the message the sea was whispering.

"*Rest, rest ... peace ... rest!*"

After a long while she opened her eyes and found that she was sitting in the same chair she had previously risen from. Bramham's broad back was before her, but she could see Evelyn Carson leaning heavily against the wall like a drunken man, and Abinger seated in another chair delicately wiping his lips. His scar had opened, and blood was trickling down it. The silence was [440] broken by Bramham's voice—quite calm and pleasant.

"If you want to kill each other, take a brace of revolvers and go out and do it decently somewhere in the open, where it won't make a mess—killing Miss Chard, however, is quite another matter."

Again silence prevailed. Later, Carson said collectedly:

"She can live—*if she wants to*"—he gave her a look that lashed across her face like a whip, leaving it distorted. "Let them both live, and be damned to them!"

The tone and expression of bitter pleasantry Bramham had adopted, died away.

"Well! *you* fellows from home—!" he began, and looked from face to face. Abinger continued to wipe blood delicately away, but he did not wipe the sneer from his lips. The girl had the face of a little tired, weeping child: the sight of it turned Bramham's heart to water. He put out a hand to Carson, appealingly:

"God! Karri, what is it?"

The paleness of Carson under his tan had once more given place to an inartistic-grey tint, and his eyes were dull; but he appeared strangely composed.

"Nothing, Bram," he said. "Only to find the girl you love—less than nothing."

A cry broke upon their ears, and all started and stared about them, especially at the open door of Carson's room, from whence that muffled, involuntary sound had come. A stiffness came over them; their masks slipped on. What unknown person had listened to the wild words that had been spoken?

Suddenly Bram remembered the sensations and scents that had assailed him earlier in the night; catching up the same pink-shaded lamp, he once more entered Carson's room. He gave one searching glance about him, and then instinct took him to the only possible cover—a narrow [441] curtained recess in which to hang clothes. He thrust his hand between the curtains. Mary Capron spared him further trouble—she swept out from the recess, and from the room, giving him one burning glance of hatred as she passed.

In the dining-room she stood still, the centre of attraction for the second time that night. Her cloak had fallen from her shoulders, and her beautifully-*coiffé* hair was ruffled and limp, her eyes were long gleams of topaz light in a carved-stone face. And for some reason she poured the full measure of her rage and scorn upon poor Bramham, who had dazedly followed her, stepping carefully to avoid her train, and standing there now with the little pink lamp in his hand.

"Have you peered and pried enough?" she asked, piercing him with her eyes. "Is your curiosity satisfied—now that you have dragged me out? I came here to speak to Evelyn Carson—hearing voices, I foolishly hid.... Is your taste for scandal appeased?"

Poor, gallant, woman-loving Bramham! He paled and started, like a man who has unexpectedly been struck in the face; then, turning, still dazed, he walked away with the lamp in his hand from the room, and from the house—*his* house! In the pathway he discovered the lamp in his hand and

put all his strength and disgust into flinging the hapless thing with a crash into a bush.

In the room the girl, still sitting in her chair, but with an awakening look of amazement and hope upon her face, said some words very softly to Mary Capron:

"So you lied! ... false woman! ... and *base friend*!"

But Mary Capron turned from her. Shaking with rage and defeat, she flung a torrent of low, rushing words at Carson.

"*You* love this girl ... girl! ... her confessions to Luce Abinger here to-night were not very girlish ... I could not hear all that she said to him, but I heard enough.... She told him that she gave [442] herself to some man in a garden three years ago ... that she belonged *only* to that man and could never love any other——"

"No more," broke fiercely from Carson's white lips.

"But you *shall* hear!" she cried, flinging out a hand and catching his arm. "*She has had a child* ... she boasted of it ... *the child of the man in the garden*.... Do you deny it? Do you deny it?" she cried, turning to Poppy. But Poppy did not deny, did not speak: only lifted her head proudly and smiled.

"There ... there ... you see?... let her deny it if she can!"

Stiffly Carson turned his head now and looked at Poppy; his lips twisted like a man's who is tasting poison; his eyes demanded.

"Yes, I have borne a son," she said simply.

For a moment there was such a silence as is found in rooms where the dead are lying. Then Mary Capron broke it again:

"She is proud of it!... You *see* ... you see what you love? Is it possible that for a woman like *that* ... that for *her* you can turn from my love, I who would let men brand me in the face for you—who ——"

"Oh, for God's sake!—are you mad?... be silent." Carson caught her hands roughly and made to draw her away. But she was beyond herself. "And now Nick is dying ... I have heard them saying it ... and they are looking for me to go to him, but I will not ... I will not!... I will stay here with you, Eve—I am terrified of blood—I—" she finished on a high note that was almost a shriek, for Abinger had risen quietly from his chair in the corner and was before her with his scarred, bleeding face. Then at last she was silent. What there was to be said, Abinger said—blandly, softly. [443]

"Oh! I think you had b-better come, Mary. It will not be the first t-time you've seen a man cut about. You remember the night this was done?" He touched his face and she shrank away blenching. "The night Carmen punished me for *our* sins. You were quite brave then. You saw the whole performance without uttering a scream or a cry that might have brought people to the scene and discovered you. No one should blame you for that, but—I think you could be brave enough to see Nick." He held out his hand to her. She shrank from him, wilting with shame, her eyes frozen in her face; but he was inexorable.

"I think you had better come. It seems to me that you have said enough for one night to Carson and Miss Chard. She is free of me for ever—I have told her so. And Carson is free of you. Is not that plain to you? They love each other ... let us leave them to settle their affairs. You and I—have many old memories to discuss—unless you would rather discuss them here?"

She went at that, with hurrying feet; and the man with the bleeding, smiling face followed her.

Carson and Poppy were left alone. They stared into each other's eyes with an agony of love and longing and fear. Anger was all gone from Carson's face; only fear was there—fear that was terror. It was the girl who stood now; he had fallen into a chair, wearily, desperately.

"Is it true?" he muttered; "is it true, after all?—*a child!*" His own sins were forgotten in this overwhelming, bitter revelation.

She went over to him, and kneeled between his knees.

"Yes; it is true, Eve ... *your* child! ... child of the night you dreamed that poppies grew upon the eternal hills.... *I am Poppy!* Do you not know me?" He sat up straight then and looked down at her, looked down deep into the glimmering eyes. "I am Poppy," she said, and her voice was wine [444] in a crystal beaker. She dragged the malachite comb from her hair, and it came tumbling down upon her shoulders in long black ropes. "I am Poppy who gave you all her gifts."

The sea helped her; it sent into the room a strong, fresh wind that blew the veils of her hair across his face and lips. He breathed sharply. God! What strange scent of a lost dream was here? What sweet, elusive fragrance of a most dear memory!

He took hold of her hair as though he would have torn it from her head. A light was in his face —he drew her to him, staring into her eyes.

"Poppy? ... *Poppy!* ... *not* a dream?... *Not* the ravings of fever?... Poppy!" He held her hair across his face as though smelling some wonderful flower.

"Eve ... did you not say to me, '*If I were stricken blind in this hour*—'" she stopped.

"'—*from ten thousand women I could search you out by the scent of your hair*,'" he finished.

Again they stayed long, staring into each other's eyes. Staring—glance falling to glance and rising again; staring with the brave, shame-stricken looks that women give to men they adore and

endow, and men to women they rob, and bless—and rob again. Strange that two people who love each other cannot for long bear the ardent flame of each other's eyes.

"Part of it is lost—for ever," he said at last.... "Gone! ... only fragments remain. But there never was a dream like the dream we dreamt on that lost night." And after a long time:

"Poppy—where is my son?"

She lifted her eyes to him. The tears which she could never shed for herself would always come rushing forth for that sweet memory. [445]

"All my love could not keep him, Eve."

She pulled a child's framed face from her bosom and held it up to his eyes. He saw the little familiar face he had looked at once before, pictured in a field of corn and poppies, and trembled. He gave it one swift, sorrowful look and then he wrapped his arms about her, and she lay on his breast.

"Do you regret?" he asked. "Have you ever regretted? Oh, God! how can I ask?"

"No, no," she cried, but her voice was faint. Even while she spoke she knew—none better than she—how vain were denials against the truth of the past. How all their memories and all their gladness to come must ever be salted with pain and tainted with the bitter gall of regret. How, when she laid a child in his arms, their thoughts would terribly fly to that lost son of a lost dream lying far from them in an alien land. They were transgressors—and the reward of transgressors must ever be theirs!

Not much more was said. Only enough to chase the shadows of others from the road of life they meant to take together and make it clear before them. For the rest—they had all the years to come in which to understand and suffer and forgive.

He thought of the turmoil and transgression and "tremendous disarray" of his life—and of dark, still nights far away in Borapota, with this woman of his dreams by his side—and his heart sent up a cry that was not unworthy of it.

"O, Lord God—forgive me my sins!"

When Bramham came into the room long after, she was still kneeling there in her white gown and her loosened hair, and she thought it no shame for him to find her so. She rose to her feet and gave him her hand, and he held it closely, preciously—for he, too, loved this woman. [446]

"Thank God that out of this jumble and carnage comes one good thing!" he said. "*Your* ship is home in port. Take her out to the gate, Carson. Mrs. Portal is waiting, and they're going to pick up Portal at the Club. Capron will recover, Ferrand says."

When Poppy had hastily fastened her hair, and Carson had wrapped her in her cloak, they went down to the gate where Clem waited half in and half out of a carriage window. Her face was radiant, too. She drew Poppy in beside her.

"Are you two happy?" she whispered. "So am I." But she told nothing of the golden moment that had been hers within the past hour, when, in the darkness of the Club verandah, a big, sullenly handsome man had taken her in his arms and just whispered:

"Forgive!—*Loraine!*"

She was that lovely thing, a close woman.

CHAPTER XXXV [447]

THE quay at the Point was crowded with people to see the sailing of the *Tunis*. The English Government had chartered the vessel specially to take Sir Evelyn Carson, his men, stores, horses, guns, mining and agricultural machinery, and all the other quantities of things needed in the great business of opening up and civilising the latest possession of the Empire—to Borapota.

The sailing of the ship was, of course, an event of great public interest, but Sir Evelyn had, at the last moment, provided a further and electrifying sensation by being quietly married that morning to the distinguished African authoress, *Eve Destiny*; and his wife was accompanying him to Borapota on the *Tunis*.

Durban considered itself badly treated in not having been invited *en masse* to witness the ceremony; also, in being cheated of introspective discussion of the match, by having no faintest prenotion of it. But it was not to be done out of at least a parting glimpse of the principals in this unexpected *dénouement*. And so it happened that the quay was crowded, for the fashionable world had come down like the Assyrians, and everyone with the slimmest claim to the acquaintance of Carson or his wife made occasion to visit the *Tunis* before the hour of sailing. The rest of the world was obliged to be content with lining the docks and blackening the Breakwater.

Just after twelve, with the tide at full, preliminary sirens and scrunching of chains began to be heard, and word was given for people to leave the *Tunis*. That was a sign for everyone to come on [448] deck, and the curious watchers ashore got a chance at last of seeing the special object of their curiosity. She appeared in the companionway door, smiling, with her hand through the arm of her great friend, Mrs. Portal; behind were a little group of men with Eve Carson towering in their midst.

Lady Carson was still wearing the gown she had been married in, and she looked vividly beautiful. Shimmering leaf-green draperies swept the decks, under a long coat of pale-grey velvet, and her poem face was shadowed by a plumed, grey hat. Her husband thought that she looked like the incarnation of Ireland—and than the beauty of *that* imagination could no further go.

She and Clem Portal, alone together for the first time in all that busy, eventful day, walked a little apart to make their farewells, and the eyes of the men followed them, resting naturally on the vivid glowing woman in the shimmering green-and-grey. Her husband's were the only eyes that did not follow her. He had given her one deep, long glance at the altar; and since then had not looked her way. His tanned face wore the impassive, almost cataleptic expression that men assume when they wish to conceal deep emotion from the eyes of the world. But he walked as one whom the gods have chosen to honour. Bramham strongly suspected him of suffering from what is known among men as—a swagger in the blood!

"I expect he feels tall enough to pull the sky down to-day," was the loyal fellow's thought, and he smiled affectionately and put an arm on Karri's shoulder.

Clem and Poppy walked along the deck together. They did not say much. Only, under cover of a big, grey velvet sleeve, and a stole of delicate lace Clem wore, their hands were tightly clasped together. The Portals would be gone from Africa before Eve Carson's five years' work in Borapota [449] was over; and where, or when, the two women would meet again was a matter that lay upon the knees of the gods. Neither wished to let one word of regret mar the gladness of the day; but each knew how deeply the other felt the parting.

"Oh, Clem!" Poppy said at last, with something like a sob in her voice. "It is all so wonderful—to be out of the 'tangled wild' at last, with the clear, open land before us! Can it be true? I have had so many blows in the face, and I am so undeserving of this great happiness—*can it be true*?"

"Chance is more just than we are!" Clem softly quoted. "Poppy, before we part I must tell you something ... about my name—*Loraine*. Bill wants me to tell you ... and he says *you will know why*. It is my own name, dear—but I have never allowed anyone to call me by it but Bill. When people love each other very much *you know*—they give each other little secret gifts that no one else must know of—this was one of mine to Bill. All the world can call me Clem—but *Loraine* was only for him. Others came to know of it by accident, but I never gave anyone the right to call me by that name but Bill——"

Poppy held the little brown, thin hand more tightly.

"I know, I know, darling," she fervently said. She could not at this time tell Clem how much else she knew—all that Carson had told her of the secret love he had borne for Clem for many years; but she had no feeling of bitterness now, or anger concerning that love. Clem went on, a little hurriedly, for time was flying:

"I had another reason too—under my mask I am dreadfully superstitious and primitive. All the Loraines in my ancestral history have lost those whom they loved—in some tragic way. I am afraid of history. Oh, Poppy! when one loves ... when one loves ... one is afraid of *everything*." She [450] turned white and began to tremble. "How *fearful* one is! I have been so fearful always for Bill ... that I have never even dared show *him* how much I care. I always think if I am silent, silent, silent ... never bragging, never telling of my soul's idolatry, God will be merciful to me." She was trembling like a leaf, and stammering with pallid lips—this calm, well-masked, self-possessed woman of the world. Never before had any woman's eyes seen past the barriers into the inmost chapel of Clem Portal's heart. And Poppy, overwhelmed, could only tenderly say:

"Dear Clem ... thank you.... God bless you!" Bramham bustled up.

"We've got to clear out, Mrs. Portal ... they're going to haul up the gangway!" He turned to Poppy. "And the siren is hooting us out of your paradise. Well, Lady Carson! the world will expect wonderful things from your pen up in the silences of Borapota!"

She smiled at him with radiant, misty eyes.

"Let it expect. I shall never be able to write any more, Charlie. I can never do anything again but live. I know how to *live*."

The others joined them then, and the whole group moved gangwaywards, individual remarks swamped in general farewells, jests, laughter, good wishes. All were ashore at last, leaving Poppy and Carson standing alone, side by side, with the keen winter sunlight bright upon them.

When they could no longer recognise friendly faces to wave to, they turned and looked at each other. Catalepsy disappeared from Carson's face—it grew boyish, ardent, gay.

"'The Lord is debonair,
Let sinners not
despair,'"

said he, and they smiled into each other's eyes. [451]

And so their ship swept out to sea.

Ashore, one or two acrid things were said. In a little detached group, of which Mrs. Gruyère, Mrs. Lace, and Cora de Grey were the central figures, Brookfield thought it interesting to say:

"There's a rumour that she's as wicked as her books—if so, Carson is not to be envied."

Cora de Grey, who was sometimes also called *Cobra* de Grey, bit into him swiftly:

"If she's wicked, she's clever beyond the cleverness of any woman, for none of her men friends have ever given her away."

"Her *men* friends—that's a new story!" retorted the surprised Brookfield.

"Oh, no; quite an old story amongst married women," said Cora, with her Karoo smile. "When a woman is *really* wicked, some renegade will always tell his dearest friend, or his wife, and then—short shrift for *her*."

Brookfield retired.

Mrs. Gruyère said:

"It's a scandal that he didn't marry May Mappin. And I *know* Charles Bramham was in love with *her*. What will he do now, I wonder?"

Mrs. Gruyère's voice was so penetrating that it often reached the ears of her victims. Bramham, coming up, answered her cheerfully.

"Oh, haven't you heard?" said he, grinning. "My dear Mrs. Haybittel is arriving from Paris to pay Durban a visit. Everyone is sure to make her as comfortable as they can—for fear she should make them as uncomfortable as *she* can. She says she's bringing out twelve trunks full of French gowns."

This was terrible news for Mrs. Gruyère, who only feared two things on earth—French gowns and the malicious pen of Mrs. Haybittel. But she preserved a brave front. [452]

"Let us hope that she has had her face enamelled to wear with them," was her last barb.

Driving home, Clem said to her husband:

"Will they be happy, think you, Billy-Bill?" And he, with the deep wisdom vouchsafed only to true lovers, answered her:

"Happy? Of course not! But they will count unhappiness with each other the best that Life can give."

FINIS.

Transcriber's Notes:

p. 22 corrected doubled "she"
p. 68 "unwittingy" changed to "unwittingly"
p. 72 "eared" changed to "cared"
p. 110 "relasped" changed to "relapsed"
p. 146 "widow" changed to "window"
p. 178 "quater" changed to "quarter"
p. 183 "champange" changed to "champagne"
p. 272 "aways" changed to "always"
p. 356 "whatver" changed to "whatever"
p. 361 "knowlege" changed to "knowledge"
p. 377 "found" changed to "round"
p. 449 "love each very much" changed to "love each other very much"
Minor punctuation corrections left unnoted.
Words with multiple spellings left as in original.

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

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