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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HUNDREDTH CHANCE ***



WITH THE UTMOST GENTLENESS HE LAID HIS HAND AGAIN UPON
HERS. "ARE YOU AFRAID TO SAY IT?" HE SAID.

Drawn by E. L. Crompton

(See page 98)

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UPON HER. "ARE YOU AFRAID TO SAY IT?" HE SAID. Drawn
by E. L. Crompton. (See page [98](#))*

The Hundredth Chance

BY
ETHEL M. DELL

AUTHOR OF
THE LAMP IN THE DESERT,
THE SWINDLER, ETC.

FRONTISPIECE BY
EDNA CROMPTON

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BY
ETHEL M. DELL

The Way of an Eagle
The Knave of Diamonds
The Rocks of Valprê
The Swindler
The Keeper of the Door
Bars of Iron
Rosa Mundi
The Hundredth Chance
The Safety Curtain
Greatheart
The Lamp in the Desert
The Tidal Wave
The Top of the World
The Obstacle Race

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I Dedicate This Book
to
My Old Friend
W. S. H.
In Affectionate Remembrance of Many Kindnesses

"The plowman shall overtake the reaper,
And the treader of grapes him that soweth seed."
Obadiah 9-13.

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The Hundredth Chance

PART I THE START

CHAPTER I BEGGARS

"My dear Maud, I hope I am not lacking in proper pride. But it is an accepted--though painful--fact that beggars cannot be choosers."

Lady Brian spoke with plaintive emphasis the while she drew an elaborate initial in the sand at her feet with the point of her parasol.

"I cannot live in want," she said, after a thoughtful moment or two. "Besides, there is poor little Bunny to be considered." Another thoughtful pause; then: "What did you say, dear?"

Lady Brian's daughter made an abrupt movement without taking her eyes off the clear-cut horizon; beautiful eyes of darkest, deepest blue under straight black brows that gave them a somewhat forbidding look. There was nothing remarkable about the rest of her face. It was thin and sallow and at the moment rather drawn, not a contented face, and yet possessing a quality indefinable that made it sad rather than bitter. Her smile was not very frequent, but when it came it transfigured her utterly. No one ever pictured that smile of hers beforehand. It came so brilliantly, so suddenly, like a burst of sunshine over a brown and desolate landscape, making so vast a difference that all who saw it for the first time marvelled at the unexpected glow.

But it was very far from her face just now. In fact she looked as if she could never smile again as she said: "Bunny would sooner die of starvation than have you do this thing. And so would I."

"You are so unpractical," sighed Lady Brian. "And really, you know, dear, I think you are just a wee bit snobbish too, you and Bunny. Mr. Sheppard may be a self-made man, but he is highly respectable."

"Oh, is he?" said Maud, with a twist of the lips that made her look years older than the woman beside her.

"I'm sure I don't know why you should question it," protested Lady Brian. "He is extremely respectable. He is also extremely kind,--in fact, a friend in need."

"And a beast!" broke in her daughter, with sudden passionate vehemence. "A hateful, familiar beast! Mother, how can you endure the man? How can you for a single moment demean yourself by the bare idea of--of marrying him?"

Lady Brian sighed again. "It isn't as if I had asked you to marry him," she pointed out. "I never even asked you to marry Lord Saltash, although--as you must now admit--it was the one great chance of your life."

Again Maud made that curious, sharp movement of hers that was as if some inner force urged her strongly to spring up and run away.

"We won't discuss Lord Saltash," she said, with lips that were suddenly a little hard.

"Then I don't see why we should discuss Giles Sheppard either," said Lady Brian, with a touch of querulousness. "Of course I know he doesn't compare well with your poor father. Second husbands so seldom do--which to my mind is one of the principal objections to marrying twice. But--as I said before--beggars cannot be choosers and something has got to be sacrificed, so there is an end of the matter."

Maud turned her eyes slowly away from the horizon, swept with them the nearer expanse of broad, tumbling sea, and finally brought them to rest upon her mother's face.

Lady Brian was forty-five, but she looked many years younger. She was a very pretty woman, delicate-featured, softly-tinted, with a species of appealing charm about her that all but the stony-hearted few found it hard to resist. She put her daughter wholly in the shade, but then Maud never attempted to charm anyone. She had apparently no use for the homage that was as the very breath of life to her mother's worldly little soul. She never courted popularity. All her being seemed to be bound up in that of her young brother who had been a helpless cripple from his babyhood, and dependent upon her care. The ten years that stretched between them were as nought to these two. They were pals; and if the boy tyrannized freely over her, she was undoubtedly the only person in the world for whom he entertained the smallest regard. She had lavished all a mother's love upon him during the whole of his fifteen years, and she alone knew how much had been sacrificed before the shrine of her devotion. He filled all the empty spaces in her heart.

But now--now that they were practically penniless--the great question arose: Who was to provide for Bunny? Lady Brian had lived more or less comfortably upon credit for the past five years. It was certainly not her fault that this bruised reed had broken at last in her hand. She had tried every device to strengthen it. And then too there had always been the possibility that Maud might marry Lord Saltash, who was extremely wealthy and--by fits and starts--very sedulous in his attentions.

It was of course very unfortunate that he should have been connected with that unfortunate scandal in the Divorce Court; but then everyone knew that he had led a somewhat giddy life ever since his succession to the title. Besides, nothing had been proved, and the unlucky affair had fallen through in consequence. It was really too absurd of Maud to treat it seriously, if indeed she had treated it seriously. Not being in her daughter's confidence, Lady Brian was uncertain on this point. But, whatever the circumstances, Charlie Saltash had obviously abandoned his allegiance. And Maud--poor girl!--had no one else to fall back upon. Of course it was very sweet of her to devote herself so unsparingly to dear little Bunny, but Lady Brian was privately of the opinion that she wasted a good deal of valuable time in his service. She was twenty-five already, and--now that the crash had come--little likely to find another suitor.

They had come down to this cheery little South Coast resort to recruit and look around them. Obviously something would have to be done, and done very quickly, or they would end their days in the workhouse.

Lady Brian had relations in the North, but, as she was wont to express it, they were not inclined to be kind to her. Her runaway marriage with Sir Bernard Brian in her irresponsible girlhood had caused something of a split between them. The wild Irish baronet had never been regarded with a favourable eye, and her subsequent sojourn in Ireland had practically severed all connection with them.

Sir Bernard's death and her subsequent migration to London had not healed the breach. She was regarded as flighty and unreliable. There was no knowing what her venture might be, and, save for a very occasional correspondence with an elderly bachelor uncle who was careful not to betray too keen an interest in her affairs, she was left severely alone.

Therefore she had too much pride to ask for help, sustaining herself instead upon the

kindness of friends till even this prop at length gave way; and she, Maud and poor little Bunny (whose very empty title was all he possessed in the world) found themselves stranded at Fairharbour at the dead end of the season with no means of paying their way even there.

Not wholly stranded, however! Lady Brian had stayed at Fairharbour before at the Anchor Hotel down by the fishing-quay--"the Anchovy Hotel" Bunny called it on account of its situation. It was not a very high-class establishment, but Lady Brian had favoured it on a previous occasion because Lord Saltash had a yacht in the vicinity, and it had seemed such a precious opportunity for dear Maud. He also had large racing-stables in the neighbourhood of the downs behind the little town, and there was no knowing when one or other of his favourite pastimes might tempt him thither.

Nothing had come of the previous visit, however, save a pleasant, half-joking acquaintance with Mr. Sheppard, the proprietor of the Anchor Hotel, during the progress of which Lady Brian's appealing little ways had laid such firm hold of the worthy landlord's rollicking fancy that she had found it quite difficult to tear herself away.

Matters had not then come to such a pass, and she had finally extricated herself with no more than a laughing promise to return as soon as the mood took her. Maud had been wholly unaware of the passage between them which had been of a very slight and frothy order; and not till she found herself established in some very shabby lodgings within a stone's throw of the Anchor Hotel did the faintest conception of her mother's reason for choosing Fairharbour as their city of refuge begin to dawn in her brain.

She was very fully alive to it now, however, and hotly, furiously resentful, albeit she had begun already to realize (how bitterly!) that no resentment on her part could avert the approaching catastrophe. As Lady Brian pathetically said, something had got to be sacrificed.

And there was Bunny! She could not leave Bunny to try to earn a living. He was utterly dependent upon her--so dependent that it did not seem possible that he could live without her. No, she could see no way of escape. But it was too horrible, too revolting! She was sure, too, that her mother had a sneaking liking for the man, and that fact positively nauseated her. That awful person! That bounder!

"So, you see, dear, it really can't be helped," Lady Brian said, rising and opening her sunshade with a dainty air of finality. "Why his fancy should have fallen upon me I cannot imagine. But--all things considered--it is perhaps very fortunate that it has. He is quite ready to take us all in, and that, even you must admit, is really very generous of him."

Maud's eyes travelled again to the far sky-line. They had a look in them as of a caged thing yearning for freedom.

"It is getting late," said Lady Brian.

Sharply she turned. "Mother," she said, "I shall write to Uncle Edward. This is too much. I am sure he will not condemn us to this."

Lady Brian sighed a trifle petulantly. "You will do as you like, dear, no doubt. But pray do not write on my account! Whatever he may be moved to do or say can make no difference to me now."

"Why not?" Curtly her daughter put the question. The beautiful brows were painfully drawn.

"Because," said Lady Brian plaintively, "it will be too late--so far as I am concerned."

"What do you mean?" Again, almost like a challenge, the girl flung the question.

Lady Brian began to walk along the beach. "I mean, dear, that I have promised to give Mr. Sheppard his answer to-night."

"But--but--Mother--" there was almost a cry in the words, "you can't--you can't have quite decided upon what the answer will be!"

Lady Brian sighed again. "Oh, do let us have a little common-sense!" she said, with just a touch of irritation. "Of course I have decided. The decision has been simply thrust upon me. I had no choice."

"Then you mean to say Yes?" Maud's voice fell suddenly flat. She turned her face again to the open sea, a glint of desperation in her eyes.

"Yes," said Lady Brian very definitely. "I mean to say Yes."

"Then Heaven help us!" said Maud, under her breath.

"My dear, don't be profane!" said Lady Brian.

"I say, Maud, what a dratted long time you've been! What on earth have you and the mother been doing?" Young Bernard Brian turned his head towards his sister with the chafing, impatient movement of one bitterly at variance with life. "You swore you wouldn't be long," he said.

"I know. I'm sorry." Maud came to his side and stooped over him. "I couldn't help it, Bunny," she said. "I haven't been enjoying myself."

He looked up at her suspiciously. "Oh, it's never your fault," he said, with dreary sarcasm.

Maud said nothing. She only laid a smoothing hand on his crumpled brow, and after a moment bent and kissed it.

He jerked his head away from her caress, opening and shutting his hands in a nervous way he had acquired in babyhood. "I've had a perfectly sickening time," he said. "There's a brute with a gramophone upstairs been driving me nearly crazy. For goodness' sake, see if you can put a stop to it before to-night comes! I shall go clean off my head if you don't!"

"I'll do my best, dear," Maud promised.

"I wish to goodness we could get away from this place," the boy said restlessly. "Even the old 'Anchovy' was preferable. I loathe this hole."

"Oh, so do I!" said Maud, with sudden vehemence. And then she checked herself quickly as if half-ashamed. "Of course it might be worse, you know, Bunny," she said.

Bunny curled a derisive lip, and looked out of the window.

"Did you really like 'The Anchor' better?" Maud asked, after a moment.

He drew his brows together--beautiful brows like her own, betraying a sensitive, not too well-balanced temperament. "It was better," he said.

Maud sat down beside his sofa with a slight gesture of weariness. "You would like to go back there?" she asked.

He looked at her sharply. "We are going?"

She met his look with steady eyes. "Mr. Sheppard has offered to take us in," she said.

The boy frowned still more. "What! For nothing?" he said.

"No; not for nothing." The girl was frowning too--the frown of one confronted with a difficult task. "Nobody ever does anything for nothing," she said.

"Well? What is it?" Bunny's eyes suddenly narrowed and became shrewd. "He doesn't want you to marry him, I suppose?"

"Good gracious, Bunny!" Maud gasped the words in sheer horror. "What ever made you think of that?"

Bunny laughed--a cracked, difficult laugh. "Because he's boulder enough for anything; and you're so beastly fond of him, aren't you?"

"Oh, don't!" Maud said. "Really don't, Bunny! It's too horrible to joke about. No, it isn't me he wants to marry. It's--it's----"

"The mother?" queried Bunny, without perturbation. "Oh, he's quite welcome to her. It's a pity he's been such a plaguey time making up his mind. He might have known she'd jump at him."

"But, Bunny--" Maud was gazing at him in utter amazement. There were times when the working of her young brother's brain was wholly beyond her comprehension. "You can't be-pleased!" she said.

"I'm never pleased," said Bunny sweepingly. "I hate everything and everybody--except you, and you don't count. The man's a brute of course; but if the mother has a mind to marry him, why on earth shouldn't she? Especially if it's going to make us more comfortable!"

"Comfortable on his money!" There was scorn unutterable in Maud's voice. Her eyes were tragically proud.

"But, why not?" said Bunny, with cynical composure. "We shall never be comfortable on our own, that's certain. If the man is fool enough to want to lay out his money in that way, why, let him!"

"Live on his--charity!" said Maud very bitterly.

The boy's mouth twisted. "We've got to live on someone's," he said. "There's nothing new in that. I think you're rather an ass, Maud. It's no good being proud when you can't afford it. We can't earn a living for ourselves, so someone must do it for us, that's all."

"Bunny!" There was passionate protest in the exclamation; but he passed it by.

"What's the good of arguing?" he said irritably. "We can't help ourselves. If the mother would rather marry that bawling beast Sheppard than starve on a doorstep with us, who's to blame her? I suppose we're included in the bargain for good, are we?"

Maud nodded mutely, her fingers locked and straining against each other.

Bunny screwed his face up for a moment. Then: "There's that filthy gramophone again!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Go and stop it, I say! I can't bear the noise! I won't bear it! It's--it's--it's infernal! That's what it is!" He flung his arms up frenziedly above his head, and then suddenly uttered an anguished cry of pain.

Maud was on her feet on the instant. She caught the arms, drew them firmly down again. "Oh, don't, dear, don't!" she said. "You know you can't!"

The boy's face was convulsed. "I didn't know! I can sometimes! Oh, Maud, I hate life! I hate it! I hate it!"

His voice choked, became a gasping moan, ceased altogether.

Maud stooped over him. His eyes were shut, his face white as death. "Bunny, Bunny darling!" she whispered passionately. "I would give--all the world--to make it better for you!"

There fell a silence, while gradually the awful paroxysm began to pass.

Then very abruptly Bunny opened his eyes. "No, you wouldn't!" he said unexpectedly.

"Indeed I would!" she said very earnestly.

"You wouldn't!" he reiterated, with the paralysing conviction that refuses to hear any reasoning. "If you would, you'd have married Lord Saltash years ago, and been rich enough to pay one of the big men to put me right."

She winced sharply. "Bunny! You're not to talk to me of Lord Saltash. It isn't kind. He is the one man in the world I--couldn't marry."

"Rot!" said Bunny. "You know you're in love with him."

"I know I couldn't marry him," she said, a piteous quiver in her voice. "It is cruel to--to--" She broke off.

"All right," said Bunny waiving the point. "Find some other rich man then! I don't care who it is. You'll have to pretty soon. We shall neither of us stand this Sheppard person for long."

"If I could only--somehow--make a living for the two of us!" the girl said.

"You can't!" Again deadly conviction swept aside argument. "You're not clever enough, and you haven't time--unless you propose to leave me to the tender mercies of the Sheppard. It would be a quick way out of the difficulty so far as I am concerned anyway."

"Of course I could never leave you!" Maud said quickly.

"All right then. Marry--and be quick about it!" said Bunny.

He turned his drawn, white face to the window--a face of unconscious pathos that often stirred his sister to the depths. Youth--and the gladness of youth--had never existed for Bunny Brian. Life for so long as he could remember had always been a long, dreary round of pain and disappointment, of restless nights and dragging, futile days. Only Maud, who shared them all, knew to the uttermost the woeful bitterness of the lad's existence. It hurt her cruelly, that bitterness, moving her to a perpetual self-sacrifice, of the extent of which even Bunny had small conception.

She identified herself completely with him, and had so done since the tenth year of her life when he had come--a puny, wailing baby--into the world to fill the void of her childish heart. She had, as it were, grown up in his service, worn and sallow and thin, with the sharp edges of nerves that were always strung up to too high a pitch--the nerves of one who scarcely ever knew a whole night of undisturbed rest. They had told upon her, those years of anxiety and service; they had shorn away her youth also. Only once--and that for how short a time!--had life ever seemed desirable in her eyes. A brief and splendid dream had been hers, spreading like a golden sunrise over her whole horizon. But the dream had faded, the sunrise had been extinguished in heavy clouds that had never again parted. She knew life now for a grey, grey dreariness on which no light could ever shine again. She was tired--tired to the soul of her; and she was only twenty-five.

"Maud!" Bunny's voice half-irritable, half-eager, broke in upon her. "See that fellow down there trying to make his nag go into the sea? It's going to be a big job. Let's go down and see it done!"

Bunny's long chair was in a corner of the room. It was no light task to get it in and out of the house; but Maud was used to the management of it. The weight of it went in with the other burdens of life. She was used also to lifting Bunny's poor little wasted body, and no wish of his that she could gratify was ever left neglected. Moreover, the offensive clamour of the gramophone overhead added to her alacrity to obey his behests. And the day was bright and warm, with a south wind blowing over a sparkling sea.

It would do Bunny good to go out, especially if he desired to go. It was not always that he would consent to do so after a sleepless night. But there was an extraordinary vitality in the

meagre frame, a fevered, driving force that never seemed to be wholly exhausted. There were times when inaction was absolute torture to him, and Maud was ready to go until she dropped if only she could in some measure alleviate that chafing restlessness. She counted it luck indeed if these moods of fret and turmoil raged during the day. She was better able to cope with them then, and it gave the night a better chance. Poor lad! He could fight his own way through the days, but the long-drawn-out misery of nights of incessant pain broke him down--how completely only Maud ever knew.

So, gladly she wheeled him forth on that afternoon of late October, down the hill to the sun-bathed shore.

That hill taxed her physical powers to the uttermost. Secretly she dreaded the ascent, but not for worlds would she have had Bunny know it--Bunny who depended solely upon her for the very few pleasures that ever came his way. To the last ounce of her strength she was dedicated to the service of her idol.

CHAPTER III THE NEW ACQUAINTANCE

They reached the sunny stretch of parade in time to see the young chestnut that had excited Bunny's interest being coaxed along the edge of the water by his rider. The animal was covered with froth, and evidently in a ferment of nervous excitement. The man who rode him sat loosely in the saddle as if the tussle in progress were of very minor importance in his estimation. He kept the fretting creature's head turned towards the water, however, and at intervals he patted the streaming neck and spoke a few words of encouragement.

At Bunny's request his chair was drawn to the edge of the parade, and from here he and Maud watched the progress of the battle. A battle of wills it undoubtedly was, though there was nothing in the man's attitude to indicate any strain. He was obviously one who knew how to bide his time, thick-set, bull-necked, somewhat bullet-headed, with a face of even redness and a short, blunt nose that looked aggressively confident.

"Wonder if he'll do it," said Bunny.

Maud wondered too, realizing that the task would be no easy one. The horse was plainly on edge with apprehension, and her sympathies went out to him. Somehow she did not want to see him conquered. In fact, not greatly admiring the physiognomy of his rider, she hoped the horse would win.

Stepping with extreme daintiness, as if he expected the ground to open and swallow him, the animal sidled past, and she caught the gleam of a wicked eye as he went. There was mischief mingled with his fear. He evidently was not feeling particularly kindly disposed towards the man who rode him. The loose seat of the latter made her wonder if he were wholly aware of this.

"He'll be thrown if he isn't careful," she said, half to herself and half to Bunny, who was watching with the keenest interest.

"Hope he'll tumble into the water," said Bunny, who enjoyed dramatic situations.

The pair had passed them and were continuing their sidling progress along the beach. The man still appeared preoccupied, the horse still half-frightened, half-mischievous. Some fifty yards they covered thus; then the figure in the saddle slowly stiffened. Aware of an impending change of treatment, the animal began to jib with his head in the air. An odd little thrill went through Maud, a feeling as of electricity in the air. It was almost a sensation of foreboding. And then clean and grim as a pistol-shot, she heard the crack of a whip on the creature's quivering flank.

It was a well-earned correction, deliberately administered, one stinging cut, delivered with a calculation that knew exactly where to strike. But the horse, a young animal, leapt into the air as if he had been shot indeed, and landing again almost on the same spot began forthwith to buck-jump in frenzied efforts to free himself of the task-master whose lash was so unerring.

The whip descended again with absolute precision. It looked almost like a feat of jugglery to Maud's fascinated eyes. The horse uttered a furious squeal. He was being forced, literally forced, into the hated water, and he knew it, set himself with all the fiery unreason of youth to resist, and incidentally to receive a punishment none the less painful on account of its extreme deliberation.

As for his rider, he kept his seat without apparent effort. He kept his temper also to all outward appearance. He even in the thick of the struggle abandoned force and tried coaxing again. It was only when this failed that it seemed to the watching girl that a certain quality of

implacability began to manifest itself. His movements were no less studied, but they seemed to her to become relentless. From that moment she knew with absolute certainty that there could be but one end to the struggle.

Some dim suspicion of the same thing must have penetrated the animal's intelligence also, for almost from the same moment he seemed to lose heart. He still bucked away from the water and leapt in futile frenzy under the unsparing whip; but his fury was past. He no longer tried to fling his rider over his head. He seemed to be fighting to save his pride rather than for any other reason.

But his pride had to go. Endurance had its limits, and his smooth, clipped flanks were smarting intolerably. Very suddenly he gave in and walked into the water.

It foamed alarmingly round his legs, and he started in genuine terror and tried to turn; but on the instant a hand was on his neck, a square, sustaining hand that patted and consoled.

"Now, don't be a fool horse any longer!" said his conqueror. "Don't you know it's going to do you good? Go on and face it!"

He went on, splashing his rider thoroughly, first in sheer nervousness, later in undisguised content.

He came out of the water some five minutes later, a wiser and considerably less headstrong youngster than he had entered it, and walked serenely along the edge as if he had been accustomed to it all his life. When the spreading foam washed round his hoofs, he did not so much as lay an ear. He had surrendered his pride, and he did not seem to feel the sacrifice.

"A beastly tame ending!" said Bunny in frank disappointment. "I hoped the fellow was going to break his neck."

The horseman was passing immediately below them. He looked up, and Maud coloured a guilty scarlet, realizing that he had overheard the remark. He had the most startlingly bright eyes she had ever seen. They met hers with a directness that seemed to pierce straight through her, and passed on unblinkingly to the boy in the long chair. There was something lynx-like in the straight regard, something so deliberately intent that it seemed formidable. His clean-shaven, weather-beaten face had an untamed, primitive look about it, as of one born in the wilderness. His mouth was rugged rather than coarse, but it was not the mouth of civilization.

Bunny, who was not easily daunted, looked hard back at him, with the brazen expression of one challenging a rebuke. But the horseman refused the challenge, passing on without a word.

"I'm tired," said Bunny, in sudden discontent. "Let's go back!"

When he spoke in that tone, he was invariably beyond coaxing. Maud turned the chair without protest, and prepared to make that exhausting ascent.

"How slow you are to-day!" said Bunny peevishly. "I hate this beastly hill. You make me go up it on my head!"

The slant was certainly acute. Maud murmured sympathy. "I would pull you up if I could," she said.

"You've never even tried," said Bunny.

He was plainly in an exacting mood. Her heart sank a little lower. "It's no use trying, darling," she said. "I know I can't. But I won't take a minute longer over it than I can help."

"You never do anything decently," said Bunny in disgust.

Maud made no rejoinder. She bent in silence to her task.

Bunny could not see her face, and she strove desperately to control her panting breath.

"You puff like a grampus," the boy said discontentedly.

There came the quick fall of a horse's hoofs behind them, and Maud bent her flushed face a little lower. She did not want to meet that piercing regard again. But the hoof-beats slackened behind her, and a voice spoke--a voice so curiously soft that at the first sound she almost believed it to be that of a woman.

"Say! That's too heavy a job for you."

She paused--it was inevitable--and looked round.

In the same moment he slid to the ground--a square, sturdy figure, shorter than she had imagined him when he was in the saddle, horsey of aspect, clumsy of build, possessing a breadth of chest that seemed to indicate vast strength.

Again those extremely bright eyes met hers, red-brown, intensely alive. She felt as if they saw too much; they made her vividly conscious of her hot face and labouring heart. They embarrassed her, made her resentful.

She was too breathless to speak; perhaps she might not have done so in any case. But he did not wait for that. He pushed forward till he stood beside her.

"You take my animal!" he said. "He's quiet enough now."

She might have refused, had she had time to consider. But he gave her none. He almost thrust the bridle into her hands, and the next moment he had taken her place behind the invalid-chair and begun briskly to push it up the hill.

Maud followed, leading the now docile horse, divided between annoyance and gratitude. Bunny seemed struck dumb also, though whether with embarrassment or merely surprise she could not tell.

At the top of the steep ascent the stranger stopped and faced round. "Thanks!" he said briefly, and took his horse back into his own keeping.

Maud stood, feeling shy and awkward, while he set his foot in the stirrup. Then, ere he mounted, with a desperate effort she spoke.

"It was very kind of you. Thank you very much."

Her voice sounded coldly formal by reason of her extreme discomfiture. She would have given a good deal to have avoided speaking altogether. But the man stopped dead and looked at her as though she had attempted to detain him.

"You've nothing to thank me for," he said, in that queer, soft voice of his. "As I said before, it's too heavy a job for you. You'll get a groggy heart if you keep on with it."

There was no intentional familiarity in the speech; but it made her stiffen instinctively.

"It was very kind of you," she repeated, and with a bow that was even more freezingly polite than her words she turned to the chair and prepared to walk on.

But at this point Bunny suddenly found his voice in belated acknowledgment of the service rendered. "Hi! You! Stop a minute! Thanks for pushing me up this beastly hill!"

The stranger was still standing with his foot in the stirrup; but at the sound of Bunny's voice he took it out again and came to the boy's side, leading his horse.

"What a beauty!" said Bunny, admiringly. "Let me touch him, I say!"

"Oh, don't!" Maud said nervously. "He looked so savage just now."

"He's not savage," said the horse's owner, and pulled the animal's nose down to Bunny's eager, caressing hand.

The creature was plainly suspicious. He tried to avoid the caress, but his master and Bunny were equally insistent, and he finally submitted.

"He's not savage," his rider said again. "He's only young and a bit heady; wants a little shaping--like all youngsters."

Bunny's shrewd eyes flashed him a rapid glance, meeting the red-brown eyes deliberately scrutinizing him. With a certain blunt courage that was his, he tackled the situation.

"I say, did you hear what I said down on the parade?"

The man smiled a little, still watching Bunny's red face. "Did you mean me to hear?" he enquired.

"No," said Bunny, staring back, half-fascinated and half-defiant.

"All right then. I didn't," the horseman said.

Bunny's expression changed. He smiled; and when he smiled his lost youth looked out of his worn face. "Good for you!" he said. "I say, I hope we shall see you again some time."

"If you are here for long, you probably will," the man made answer.

"Do you live here?" Bunny's voice was eager. His eyes sparkled with interest.

The man nodded. "Yes, I'm a fixture. And you?"

"Oh, we're going to be fixtures too," said Bunny. "This is my sister Maud. I am Sir Bernard Brian."

Maud's ready blush rose burningly. She fidgeted to be gone. Bunny's swaggering announcement made her long to sink through the earth. She dreaded to hear his listener laugh, even looked up in surprise when no laugh came.

He was surveying Bunny with that same unblinking regard that had disconcerted her. The slight smile was still on his face, but it was not a derisive smile.

After a moment he said, "My name is Bolton--Jake Bolton. Think you can remember that?"

"What are you?" said Bunny, with frank curiosity.

"I?" The faint smile suddenly broadened, showing teeth that were large and very white. "I am a groom," the horseman said.

"Are you?" The boy's eyes opened wide. "Then you're not a mister!" he said.

"Oh no, I'm not a mister!" There was certainly a laugh in the womanish voice this time, but it held no open ridicule. "I'm plain Jake Bolton. You can call me Bolton or Jake--which ever you like. Good day, Sir Bernard!"

He backed his horse with the words, and mounted.

Maud did not look at him. She felt too overwhelmed. Moreover, she was sure--painfully sure--that he looked at her, and she thought there must be at least amusement in his eyes.

With relief she heard him turn his horse and trot down the hill. He had not even been going their way, then. Her face burned afresh.

"What a queer fish!" said Bunny. "Hullo! What are you so red about?"

"I wish you wouldn't tell people your title," she said. "They only laugh."

"He didn't laugh when I told him," said Bunny. "And why shouldn't I? I've a right to it."

He would not see her point she knew. But she made an attempt to explain. "He would have liked to call himself a gentleman," she said. "But--he didn't."

"That's quite different," said Bunny loftily. "He knows he isn't one."

Maud abandoned the argument then, because--though it was against her judgment--she found that she wanted to agree.

CHAPTER IV THE ACCEPTED SUITOR

"Hark to the brute!" said Bunny.

A long, loud peal of laughter was echoing through the house. Maud shuddered at the sound. The noisy wooing of her mother's suitor made her feel physically sick. But for Bunny, she would have fled incontinently from the man's proximity. Because of Bunny, she sat at a rickety writing-table in a corner of the room and penned an urgent, almost a desperate, appeal to the bachelor uncle in the North to deliver them from the impending horror. No other consideration on earth would have forced such an appeal from her. She felt literally distraught that night. She was being dragged, a helpless prisoner, to the house of bondage.

Again came that loud, coarse laugh, and with it the opening of a door on the other side of the passage.

"Watch out!" warned Bunny. "They're coming!"

There was a hint of nervousness in his voice also. She heard it, and swiftly rose. When their own door opened, she was standing beside him, very upright, very pale, rigidly composed.

Her mother entered, flushed and smiling. Behind her came her accepted lover,--a large, florid man, handsome in ascertain coarse style, with a dissipated look about the eyes which told its own tale. Maud quivered in impotent resentment whenever she encountered those eyes. They could not look upon a woman with reverence.

He strolled into the room in her mother's wake, fondling a dark moustache, in evident good humour with himself and all the world.

Lady Brian ran to her daughter with all a girl's impetuosity. "My dear, it's all settled!" she declared. "Giles and I are going to be married, and we're all going to live at "The Anchor" with him. And dear little Bunny is to have the best ground-floor rooms. Now, isn't that kind?"

It was kind. Yet Maud stiffened to an even icier frigidity at the news, and dear little Bunny's nose turned up to an aggressive angle.

After a distinct pause, Maud bent her long neck and coldly kissed her mother's expectant face. "I hope you--and Mr. Sheppard will be very happy," she said.

The happy suitor broke into his loud, self-satisfied laugh. "Egad, what an enthusiastic reception!" he cried. "Have you got a similar chaste salute for me?"

He swaggered towards her, and Maud froze as she stood. Her eyes shot a blue flare of open enmity at him; and--almost in spite of himself--Giles Sheppard paused.

"By Jove!" he said. "You've got a she-wolf here, madam."

Lady Brian turned. "Oh, Giles, don't be absurd! Maud is not like me, you know. She was never demonstrative as a child. She was always shy and quiet. They are not quite used to the idea of you yet. You must give them time. Bunny darling, won't you give Mother a kiss?"

"What for?" said Bunny.

He was tightly gripping Maud's cold hand with fingers that were like tense wire. His eyes, very wide and bright, defied the whole world on her behalf.

"I'm not going to kiss anyone," he said. "Neither is Maud. I don't know what there is to make such a fuss about. You've both been married before."

The landlord of "The Anchor" gave a great roar of laughter. "Not bad for a bantling, eh, Lucy?"

Didn't know I was to have a sucking cynic for a step-son. You're quite right, my boy; there is nothing to make a fuss about. And so we shan't ask you to dance at the wedding. Not that you could if you tried, eh? And my Lady Disdain there won't be invited. We are going to be married by special licence to-morrow afternoon, and you can take possession of your new quarters while the knot is being tied. How's that appeal to you?"

Bunny looked at him with a certain grim interest. "It'll suit me all right," he said. "But I'm hanged if I can see where you come in."

Giles Sheppard laughed again with his tongue in his cheek. "Oh, I shall have my picking at the feast, old son," he declared jovially. "I've had my eye on your mother for a long time. Pretty piece of goods she is too. You're neither of you a patch on her. They don't do you credit, Lucy, my dear. Sure they're your own?"

"The man's drunk!" said Maud suddenly and sharply.

"My dear! My dear!" cried Lady Brian, in dismayed protest.

The girl bit her lip. The words had escaped her, she knew not how.

Giles Sheppard however only laughed again, and seated himself on the edge of the table to contemplate her.

"We shall have to try and find a husband for you, young woman," he said, "a husband who'll know how to bring you to heel. It'll be a tough job. I wonder who'd like to take it on. Jake Bolton might do the trick. We'll have Jake Bolton to dine with us to-morrow. He knows how to tame wild animals, does Jake. It's a damn' pretty sight to see him do it too. Gosh, he knows how to lay it on--just where it hurts most."

He chuckled grimly with his eyes on Maud's now crimson face.

"Now, Giles," protested Lady Brian, "you've promised to be good to my two children. I'm sure we shall all shake down comfortably presently. Dear Maud has a good deal to learn yet, so you must be patient with her. We were foolish ourselves at her age, I have no doubt."

"Oh, no doubt," said her fiancé, with his thick-lidded eyes still mocking the girl's face of outraged pride. "We've all been foolish in our time. But there's only one treatment for that complaint in the female species, my lady; and that is a sound good spanking. It does a world of good, takes the stiffening out of a woman in no time. I've had a daughter of my own--a decent little filly she was too. Married now and gone to Canada. But I had to keep her in order, I can tell you, before she went. I gave her many a slippering, and she thought the better of me for it too. She knew I wouldn't stand any of her nonsense."

"Oh, well," smiled Lady Brian, "we are not all alike, you know; and that sort of treatment doesn't suit everybody. Now I think we all know each other, and my little Bunny is looking rather tired. I think we won't stay any longer. It means a bad night if he gets excited."

"Wait a minute!" interposed Bunny. "That man you were talking about just now--Jake Bolton. Who is he? Where does he live?"

"Who is he?" Giles Sheppard slapped his thigh and rose. "He's one of the best-known fellows about here--a bit of a card, but none the worse for that. He's the trainer up at the stables--Lord Saltash's place. Never heard of him? He's known as 'The Lynx' on the turf, because he's so devilish shrewd. Oh yes, he's quite a card. And to see him break one of them youngsters--well, it's a fair treat."

Mr. Sheppard's grammar was apt to lapse somewhat when his enthusiasm was kindled. Maud shivered a little. Lady Brian smiled indulgently. Poor Giles! He was a rough diamond. She would have to do a little polishing; but she was sure he would become quite a valuable gem when polished.

"Oh, he's Lord Saltash's trainer is he?" she said. "Lord Saltash is a very old friend of ours. Is he--does he ever come down here?"

"Who? Lord Saltash? He has a place here. You couldn't have been very intimate with him if you didn't know that. Just as well p'raps with a man of his tendencies." Sheppard laughed in a fashion that sent the hot blood back to Maud's face. "A bit too fond of his neighbour's wife--that young man. Lucky thing for him that he didn't have to pay heavy damages. More luck than judgment, to my thinking."

"Oh, Giles!" protested Lady Brian. "How you do run on! I did know that he had an estate here. That was why I asked if he still came down. You really mustn't blacken the young man's character in that way. We are all very fond of him."

"Are you though!" Sheppard's laugh died; he looked at Maud with a hint of venom. "Like the rest of your charming sex, eh? Well, we don't see much of the gay Lothario in these parts. If that was your little game, you'd better have stopped in town."

Maud's lips said, "Cad!", but her voice made no sound.

He bowed in ironical acknowledgment and turned to her mother. "Now, my lady, having received these cordial congratulations, I move an adjournment. As you have foretold, we shall doubtless all shake down together very comfortably in the course of a few weeks. But in the meantime I should like to inform all whom it may concern that I am master in my own house, and I expect to be treated as such."

Again his insolent eyes rested upon Maud's proud face, and her slight form quivered in response though she kept her own rigidly downcast.

"Of course that is understood," said Lady Brian, with a pacific hand on his arm. "There! Let us go now! I am sure we are all going to be as happy as the day is long."

She looked up at him with persuasive coquetry, and he at once succumbed. He pulled her to him roughly and bestowed several resounding kisses upon her delicate face, not desisting until with laughing remonstrance she put up a protesting hand.

"Giles, really--really--you mustn't be greedy!" she said, and drew him to the door with some urgency.

He went, his malignancy for the moment swamped by a stronger emotion; and brother and sister were left alone.

"What a disgusting beast!" said Bunny, as the door closed.

Maud said nothing. She only went to the window, and flung it wide.

CHAPTER V IN THE DARK

Black night and a moaning sea! Now and then a drizzle of rain came on a gust of wind, sprinkling the girl's tense face, damping the dark hair that clustered about her temples. But she did not so much as feel it. Her passionate young spirit was all on fire with a fierce revolt against the destinies that ruled her life. She paced the parade as one distraught.

Only for a brief space could she let herself go thus,--only while Bunny and their mother played their nightly game of cribbage. They did not so much as know that she was out of the house. She would have to return ere she was missed, and then would follow the inevitable ordeal of putting Bunny to bed. It was an ordeal that seemed to become each night more difficult. In the morning he was easier to manage; but at night when he was tired out and all his nerves were on edge she sometimes found the task almost beyond her powers. When he was in pain--and this was not infrequently--it took her hours to get him finally settled.

She was sure that it would be no easy task to-night. He had had bouts of severe neuralgia during the day, and his flushed face and irritable manner warned her that there was a struggle in store. She had sometimes sat waiting till the small hours of the morning before he would permit her to move or undress him. She felt that some such trial was before her now, and her heart was as lead.

The house had seemed to stifle her. She had run out for a breath of air; and then something about that moaning shore had seemed to draw her. She had run down to the parade, and now she paced along it, staring down into the fathomless dark below her where the deep water rose and fell with a ceaseless moaning, thumping the well beneath in sullen impotence.

There was no splash of waves, only that dumb striving against a power it could not overthrow. It was like her own mute rebellion, she thought to herself miserably, as persistent and as futile.

She reached the end of the parade. The hour was late; the place deserted. There was a shelter here. She was sure it would be empty, but it did not attract her. She wanted to get as close as possible to that moaning, mysterious waste of water. It held a stark fascination for her. It drew her like a magnet. She stood on the very edge of the parade, facing the drift of rain that blew in from the sea. How dark it was! The nearest lamp was fifty yards away! The thought came to her suddenly, taking form from the formless deep: how easy to take one single false step in that darkness! How swift the consequence, and how complete the deliverance!

A short, inevitable struggle in the dark--in the dark; and then a certain release from this hateful chain called life. It would be terrible, but so quickly over! And this misery that so galled her would be for ever past.

She beat her foot on the edge with a passionate impatience. What a fool she was to suffer so--

when there was nothing (never had been any thing) in life worth living for!

Nothing? Well, yes, there was Bunny. She was an absolute necessity to him. That she knew. She was firmly convinced that he would die without her. And though he would be far, far happier dead, poor darling, she couldn't leave him to die alone.

She lifted her clenched hands above her head in straining impotence. For one black moment she almost wished that Bunny were dead.

And then very suddenly, with staggering unexpectedness she received the biggest shock of her life. Two hands closed simultaneously upon her wrists, and she was drawn into two encircling arms.

She uttered a startled outcry, and in the same moment began a wild and flurried struggle for freedom. But the arms that held her closed like steel springs. A man's strength forced her steadily away from the yawning blackness that stretched beyond the parade.

"It's no good kicking," a soft voice said. "You won't get away."

Something in the voice reassured her. She ceased to struggle. "Oh, let me go!" she said breathlessly. "You--you don't understand. I--I--only----"

"Came out for a breath of air?" he suggested. "Of course--I gathered that."

He took his arms away from her, but he still kept one of her wrists in a strong grasp. She could not see his face in the darkness, only his figure, which was short and stoutly built.

"Do you know," he said, "when people take the air like that, I always have to hold on to 'em tight till they've had all they want. It's damn' cheek on my part, as you were just going to remark. But, my girl, it's easier than mucking about in a dark sea looking for 'em after they've lost their balance."

He had led her to the shelter. She sat down rather helplessly, wondering if it would be possible to conceal her identity from him since it was evident that so far he had not recognized her.

He stood in front of her, squarely planted, his hand still locked upon her wrist. She had known him from the first word he had spoken, and, remembering those startling lynx eyes of his, she felt decidedly uneasy. She was sure they could see in the dark.

She spoke after a moment with slight hesitation. "I shouldn't have lost my balance. And if I had meant to jump over, as you imagined, I shouldn't have stood so long thinking about it."

"Sure you're not thinking about it now?" he said.

"Quite sure," she answered.

He bent down, and she was sure--quite sure--that his eyes scrutinized her and took in every detail.

The next moment he released her wrist also. "All right, my girl," he said. "I believe you. But--don't do it again! Accidents happen, you know. You might have had one then; and I should still have had to flounder around looking for you."

Something in his tone made her want to smile, and yet she felt so sure--so sure--that he knew her all the time. And she wanted to resent his familiarity at the same moment. For if he knew her, it was rank presumption to address her so.

She rose at length and faced him with such dignity as she could muster. "I am obliged to you," she said, "but I fail to see why your responsibility should extend so far. If I had fallen over, the chances are that you could never have found me--or saved me if you had."

"Ninety-nine to one!" he said coolly. "But, do you know, I rather count on the hundredth chance. I've taken it--and won on it--before now."

He was not to be disconcerted, it was evident. He was plainly a difficult man to rout, one accustomed to keep his head in any emergency. And she--she was but a slip of a girl in his estimation, and he had her at a disadvantage already.

She felt her face begin to burn in the darkness. She shifted her ground. "I don't see why anyone should be made to live against his will," she said, "why it should be anyone's business to interfere."

"That's because you're young," he said. "You haven't yet got the proper hang of things. It only comes with practice--that."

Her face burned more hotly. He was actually patronizing her!

She turned abruptly. "Good evening," she said, and began to walk away.

But he fell in beside her at once. "I'm going your way," he observed. "May as well see you past the bar of 'The Anchor.' They get a bit lively there sometimes at this end of the day."

He walked with the slight roll of a man accustomed to much riding. She imagined that he never appeared in anything but breeches and gaiters. But his tread was firm and purposeful.

Quite obviously it never entered his head that she might not desire his company.

For that reason she had to submit to the arrangement though she felt herself grow more and more rigid as they neared the circle of light cast by the street-lamp. Of course he was bound to recognize her now.

But they reached and passed the lamp, and he tramped straight ahead without looking at her, after the square fashion that she had somehow begun to associate with him.

They reached and passed "The Anchor" also, with its lighted bar and coarse voices and lounging figures. They began the steep ascent up which he had pushed Bunny that afternoon. It was dark enough here at least, and her self-confidence began to revive. She would put him to the test. She would pass the gate that he had seen her enter earlier in the day. If he displayed surprise or hesitation she would know that he had recognized her.

But yet again he baffled her. He tramped steadily on.

She began to get a little breathless. There was another lamp at the top of the road. She did not want to reach that.

In desperation she paused. "Good evening!" she said again.

He stopped at once, and she thought she caught the glitter of his eye, seeking her own in the darkness.

"You're going in now?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

He came a step nearer, and laid one finger on her arm. "Look here, my girl! You take a straight tip from me! If you're in any sort of trouble, go and tell someone! Don't bottle it in till it gets too big for you! And above all, don't go step-dancing on the edge of the parade in the dark! It's a fool thing to do."

He emphasized his points with impressive taps upon her arm. She felt absurdly small and meek.

"Suppose I haven't anyone to tell?" she said, after a moment.

He rose to the occasion instantly. "I'm sound," he said. "Tell me!"

She had not expected that. He seemed to disconcert her at every turn.

"Thank you," she said, taking refuge in extreme frigidity. "I think not."

"As you like," he said. "I daresay I shouldn't in your place. I only suggested it because I can't see a girl in trouble and pass by on the other side."

He spoke quite quietly, but there was a quality in the soft voice that stirred her very strangely, something that made her for the moment forget the man's dominant personality, and feel as if a woman had uttered the words.

She put out a groping hand to him, obeying a curious impulse that would not be denied.

"Thank you," she said again.

He kept her hand for a second or two, holding it squarely, almost as if he were waiting for something.

Then, without a word, he let it go. She turned back; and he went on.

CHAPTER VI THE UNWILLING GUEST

"But, my dear child, you must appear!" urged the bride, with a piteous little twist of the lips. "I can't go unsupported into that dreadful crowd."

"Oh, Mother!" Maud said. And that was all; for what was the good of saying more? Her mother had made the choice, and there was no turning back. They could only go forward now along the new course, whithersoever it led. "I'll come," she said, after a moment.

Her mother's smile was full of pathos. "We must all make sacrifices for one another, darling," she said. "I have made a very big one for you and Bunny. He--poor little lad--isn't old enough to understand. But surely, you, at least can appreciate it."

She looked so wistful as she spoke that in spite of herself Maud was moved to a very unusual show of tenderness. She turned and kissed her. "I do hope you will be happy," she said. "I expect you will, you know, when you are used to it."

She spoke out of a very definite knowledge of her mother's character. She knew well the yielding adaptability thereof. Giles Sheppard's standards would very soon be hers also, and she would speedily cease to find anything wanting in his friends.

She turned with a sigh. "Let's go and get it over!" she said. "But I can't stay long. I shall have to get back to Bunny."

She and Bunny had spent all the afternoon and evening settling into their new quarters at the Anchor Hotel, and it had been a tiring task. The bride and bridegroom had gone straight from the registry-office where the ceremony had been performed to the county town some thirty miles distant, in the one ramshackle little motor that the hotel possessed, and had returned barely in time to receive the guests whom Sheppard had invited to his wedding-feast.

Neither Maud nor her mother had been told much of the forthcoming festivity, and the girl's dismay upon learning that she was expected to attend it was considerable. She was feeling tired and depressed. Bunny was in a difficult mood, and she knew that another bad night lay before them. Still it was impossible to refuse. She could only yield with as good a grace as she could muster.

"Make yourself pretty, won't you, dear?" said Mrs. Sheppard as, her point gained, she prepared smilingly to depart. "Wear your white silk! You look charming in that."

Maud had not the faintest wish to look charming, but yet again she could not refuse to gratify a wish so amiably expressed. She donned the white silk, therefore, though feeling in any but a festive mood, and prepared herself for the ordeal with a grim determination to escape from it as soon as possible.

She was not tall, but her extreme slenderness gave her a decidedly regal pose. She held her head proudly and bore herself with distinction. Her eyes--those wonderful blue-violet eyes--had the aloof expression of one whose soul is far away.

Giles Sheppard watched her enter the drawing-room behind her mother, and a bitter sneer crossed his bloated face. He was utterly incapable of appreciating that innate pride of race that expressed itself in every line of her. He read only contempt for him and his in the girl's still face, and the deep resentment kindled the night before began to smoulder within him with an ever-increasing heat. How dared she show her airs and graces here?-- She, a penniless minx dependent now upon his charity for the very bread she ate!

He turned with an ugly jest at her expense upon his lips to the man with whom he had been talking at her entrance; but the jest was checked unuttered. For the man, square, thickset as a bulldog, abruptly left his side and moved forward.

The quick blood mounted in Maud's face as he intercepted her. She looked at him for a second as if she would turn and flee. But he held out a steady hand to her, and she had to place hers within it.

In a moment his peculiar voice accosted her. "You remember me, Miss Brian? I'm Jake Bolton--the horse breaker. I had the pleasure of doing your brother a small service yesterday."

Both hand and voice reassured her. She had an absurd feeling that he was meting out to her such treatment as he would have considered suitable for a nervous horse. She forced herself to smile upon him; it was the only thing to do.

He smiled in return--his pleasant open smile. "Remember me now?" he said.

"Quite well," she answered.

"Good!" he said briefly. "Let me find you a chair! I don't suppose you know many of the people here."

She did not know any of them, and as Sheppard had seized upon his bride, and was presenting her in rude triumph to each in turn with much noisy laughter and coarse joking it was not difficult to slip into a corner with Jake Bolton without attracting further attention.

He stood beside her for a space while covertly she took stock of him.

Yes, he actually had discarded his gaiters and was wearing evening dress. It did not seem a natural garb for him, but he carried it better than she would have expected. He still reminded her very forcibly of horses, though she could not have definitely said wherein this strong suggestion lay. His ruddy face and short, dominant nose might have belonged to a sailor. But the brilliant chestnut eyes with their red-brown lashes were somehow not of the sea. They made her think of the reek of leather and the thud of galloping hoofs.

Suddenly he turned and caught her critical survey. She dropped her eyes instantly in hot confusion, while he, as if he had just made up his mind, sat down beside her.

"So you and your brother are going to live here?" he said.

She answered him in a low voice; the words seemed to leap from her almost without her conscious volition. "We can't help ourselves."

He gave a short nod as of a suspicion confirmed, and sat in silence for a little. The loud laughter of Giles Sheppard's guests filled in the pause.

Maud held herself rigidly still, repressing a nervous shiver that attacked her repeatedly.

Suddenly the man beside her spoke. "What's the matter with that young brother of yours?"

With relief she came out of her tense silence. "It is an injury to the spine. He had a fall in his babyhood. He suffers terribly sometimes."

"Nothing to be done?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No one very good has seen him. He won't let a doctor come near him now."

"Oh rats!" exclaimed Jake Bolton unexpectedly.

She felt her colour rise as he turned his bright eyes upon her.

"You don't say that a kid like that can get the better of you?" he said.

She resented the question; yet she answered it. "Bunny has a strong will. I never oppose it."

"And why not?" He was looking directly at her with a comical smile as if he were inspecting some quaint object of interest.

Again against her will she made reply. "I try to give him all he wants. He has missed all that is good in life."

He wrinkled his forehead for a moment as if puzzled, then broke into a laugh. "Say, what a queer notion to get!" he said.

She stiffened on the instant, but he did not seem to notice it. He leaned towards her, and laid one finger--a short, square fore-finger--on her arm.

"Tell me now--what are the good things in life?"

She withdrew her arm from his touch, and regarded him with a hauteur that did not wholly veil her embarrassment.

"You don't know!" said Jake. "Be honest and say so!"

But Maud only retired further into her shell. "I think we have wandered rather far from the subject," she said coldly. "My brother is unfortunately the victim of circumstance, and no discussion can alter that fact."

He accepted the snub without a sign of discomfiture. "Is he here now?" he asked.

She bent her head. "In this house--yes."

"Will you let me see him presently?" he pursued.

Distantly she made reply. "I am afraid that is impossible."

"Why?" he said.

She raised her dark brows.

"Tell me why!" he insisted.

Calmly she met his look. "It is not good for him to see strangers at night. It upsets his rest."

"You think it would be bad for him to see me?" he questioned.

His voice was suddenly very deliberate. He was looking her full in the face.

A curious little tremor went through her. She felt as if he had pinioned her there before him.

Her reply astounded herself. "I don't say it would be bad for him,--only--inadvisable. He is rather excited already."

"Will you ask him presently if he would come to see me?" said Jake Bolton steadily.

She bit her lip, hesitating.

"I shan't upset him," he said. "I won't excite him. I'll quiet him down."

She did not want to yield--yet she yielded. "I will ask him--if you wish," she said.

He smiled. "Thank you, Miss Brian. You didn't want to give in, did you? But I undertake that you will not be sorry."

"Hullo, Jacob!" blared Sheppard's voice suddenly across the room. "What are you doing over there, you rascal? Thought I shouldn't see you, eh? Ah, you're a deep one, you are! I daresay now you've made up your mind that that young woman is a princess in disguise. She isn't. She's just my step-daughter, and a very cheap article, I assure you, Jake,--very cheap indeed!"

The roar of laughter that greeted this sally filled the room, drowning any further remarks. Sheppard stood in the centre, swaying a little, looking round on the assembled company with a facetious grin.

Jake Bolton rose and went to him. He stood with him for a moment, and Maud, shivering in her corner, marvelled that he did not look mean and insignificant beside the other's great bulk. She wondered what he said. It was only a few words, and they were not apparently uttered with much urgency. But Sheppard's grin died away, and she fancied that for a moment--only for a moment--he looked a little sheepish. Then he clapped a great hand upon Bolton's shoulder.

"All right. All right. It's for you to make the running. Come along, ladies and gentlemen! Let us feed!"

There was a general move, and a tall, lanky young man with a white face and black hair that shone like varnish slouched up to Maud.

"I don't see why Bolton should have all the plums," he said. "May I have the honour of conducting you to the supper table?"

She was on her feet. She looked at him with a disdain so withering that the young man wilted visibly before her.

"No offence meant, I'm sure," he said, shuffling his feet. "But I thought--as you were being so pally with Jake Bolton--you wouldn't object to being pally with me."

Maud said nothing. She was in fact so quivering with rage that speech would have been difficult.

A very stout elderly lady, with a neck and arms that were hardly distinguishable from the red silk dress she wore, sailed up to them. "Come, come, Miss!" she said, beaming good-temperedly upon Maud's pale face. "We're not standing on ceremony to-night. We're all friends here. You won't mind going in with my boy Tom, I'm sure. He's considered quite the ladies' man, I can assure you."

"Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Wright? Miss Brian is going in with me," said Jake Bolton's smooth voice behind her. "Tom, you git!"

Somehow--before she knew it--the black-haired young man was gone from her path, and her hand lay trembling within Bolton's arm.

She did not utter a word, she could not. She felt choked.

Jake Bolton said nothing either. He only piloted her through the crowd with the smile of the winner curving the corners of his mouth.

They readied the dining-room, and people began to seat themselves around a long centre table. There was no formal arrangement, and some confusion ensued in consequence.

"Fight it out among yourselves!" yelled Sheppard above the din of laughter and movement. "Make yourselves at home!"

Bolton glanced round. "There's a table for two in that alcove," he said. "Shall we make for that?"

"Anywhere!" she said desperately.

He elbowed a way for her. The table was near a window, the alcove draped with curtains. He put her into a chair where she was screened from the eyes of those at the centre table. He seated himself opposite to her.

"Don't look so scared!" he said.

She smiled at him faintly in silence.

"I gather you don't enjoy this sort of bear-fight," he said.

She remained silent. The man disconcerted her. She was burningly conscious that she had not been too discreet in taking him even so far into her confidence.

He leaned slowly forward, fixing her with those relentless, lynx-like eyes. "Miss Brian," he said, his voice very level, faultlessly distinct. "I'm rough, no doubt, but please believe I'm white!"

She looked at him, startled, unhappy, not knowing what to say.

He nodded, still watching her. "Don't you forget it!" he said. "There are plenty of beasts in the world, but I'm not one of 'em. You'll drink champagne, of course."

He got up to procure it, and Maud managed in the interval to recover some of her composure.

When he came back, she mustered a smile and thanked him.

"You look fagged out," he said, as he filled her glass. "What have you been doing?"

"Getting straight in our new quarters here," she answered. "It takes some time."

"Where are your rooms?" he asked.

She hesitated momentarily. "It is really only one room," she said. "But it is a fine one. I have another little one upstairs; but it is a long way off. Of course I shall sleep downstairs with Bunny."

"Do you always sleep with him?" he asked.

She coloured a little. "Yes."

"Is he a good sleeper?" He had moved round and was filling his own glass.

She watched his steady hand with a touch of envy. She would have given much for as cool a nerve just then.

"Is he a good sleeper?" He repeated the question as he set down the bottle.

She answered it at once. "No; a very poor one."

"And you look after him night and day?" Bolton's eyes suddenly comprehended her. "I guess that accounts for it," he said, in a tone of enlightenment.

"For what?" She met his look haughtily, determined to hold her own.

But he smiled and refused the contest. "For much," he said. "Now, what will you eat? Lobster? That's right. I want to see you started. What a filthy racket they are making! I hope it won't upset your appetite any."

She had never felt less hungry in her life, but out of a queer sensation of gratitude she tried to eat what he put before her. He had certainly done his best to shield her from that objectionable crowd, but she was still by no means certain that she liked the man. He was too much inclined to take her friendship for granted, too ready to presume upon a very short acquaintance. And she was sure--quite sure now--that he had recognized her from the very first moment, down on the parade the night before. The knowledge was very disquieting. He was kind--oh, yes, he was kind. But she felt that he knew too much.

And so a certain antagonism warred against her gratitude, and prevented any gracious expression thereof. She only longed--oh, how desperately!--to flee away from this new and horrible world into which she had been so ruthlessly dragged and to see no more of its inhabitants for ever.

Vain longing! Even then she knew, or shrewdly suspected, that her lot was to be cast in that same world for the rest of her mortal life.

CHAPTER VII THE MAGICIAN

"Oh, Maud! I thought you were never coming!"

Bunny's face, pale and drawn, wearing the irritable frown so habitual to it, turned towards the opening door.

"I have brought you a visitor," his sister said.

Her voice was low and nervous. She looked by no means sure of Bunny's reception of the news. Behind her came Jake Bolton the trainer, alert and self-assured. It was quite evident that he had no doubts whatever upon the subject. His thick mat of chestnut hair shone like copper in the brilliant electric light, such hair as would have been a woman's glory, but that Jake kept very closely cropped.

"What on earth for?" began Bunny querulously; and then magically his face changed, and he smiled. "Hullo! You?" he said.

Bolton came to his side and took the small, eager hand thrust out to him. "Yes, it's me," he said. "No objection, I hope?"

"I should think not!" The boy's face was glowing with pleasure. "Sit down!" he said. "Maud, get a chair!"

Bolton turned sharply, found her already bringing one and took it swiftly from her.

He sat down by Bunny's side, and took the little thin hand back into his. "Do you know, I've been thinking a lot about you," he said.

Bunny was vastly flattered. He liked the grasp of the strong fingers also, though he would not probably have tolerated such a thing from any but this stranger.

"Yes," pursued Jake, in his soft, level voice. "I reckon I've taken a fancy to you, little chap--I beg your pardon--Sir Bernard. How have you been to-day?"

"Don't call me that!" said Bunny, turning suddenly red.

"What?" Jake smiled upon him, his magic, kindly smile. "Am I to call you Bunny--like your sister--then?"

"Yes. And you can call her Maud," said Bunny autocratically. "Can't he, Maud?"

Jake turned his head and looked at her. She was standing before the fire, the red glow all about her, very slim, very graceful, very stately. She did not so much as glance at Jake, only bent a little towards the blaze so that he could not see her face.

"I don't think I dare," said Jake.

"Maud!" Peremptorily Bunny's voice accosted her. "Come over here! Come and sit on my bed!"

It was more of a command than an invitation. Maud straightened herself and turned.

But as she did so, their visitor intervened. "No, don't!" he said. "Sit down right there, Miss Brian, in that easy-chair, and have a rest!"

His voice was peremptory too, but in a different way. Bunny stared at him wide-eyed.

Jake met the stare with an admonitory shake of the head. "Guess Bunny's not wanting you," he said. "Don't listen to anything he says!"

Bunny's mouth opened to protest, remained open for about five seconds, and finally he said, "All right, Maud. You can stay by the fire while we talk."

And Maud, much to her own surprise, sat down in the low chair on the hearth and leaned her aching head back upon the cushion.

She had her back to Bunny and his companion, and the soft murmur of the latter's voice held nought disturbing. It seemed in fact to possess something of a soothing quality, for very soon her heavy eyelids began to droop and the voice to recede into ever growing distance. For a space she still heard it, dim and remote as the splash of the waves on the shore; then very softly it was blotted out. Her cares and her troubles all fell away from her. She sank into soundless billows of sleep.

It was a perfectly dreamless repose, serene as a child's and it seemed to last indefinitely. She lay in complete content, unconscious of all the world, lapped in peace and blissfully free from the goading anxiety that usually disturbed her rest. It was the calmest slumber she had known for many years.

From it she awoke at length with a guilty start. The fall of a piece of coal had broken the happy spell. She sat up, to find herself in firelight only.

Her first thought was for Bunny, and she turned in her chair and looked across the unfamiliar room. He was lying very still in the shadows. Softly she rose and stepped across to him.

Yes, he was asleep also, lying among his pillows. The chair by his side was empty, the visitor vanished.

Very cautiously she bent over him. He had been lying dressed outside the bed. Now--with a thrill of amazement she realized it--he was undressed and lying between the sheets. He was breathing very quietly, and his attitude was one of easy rest. Surely some magic had been at work!

On a chest of drawers near stood a glass that had contained milk. He always had some hot milk last thing, but she had not procured it for him. She had in fact been wondering how she would obtain it to-night.

Another coal fell, and she crept back to replace it. Stooping she caught sight of another glass in the fender, full of milk. It must have been there a long time, for it was barely warm. Clearly it had been intended for her. She put it to her lips and drank.

Who could have put it there? Her mother? No; she was sure that her mother would have roused her from her sleep if she had entered. She was moreover quite incapable of getting Bunny to bed now that he had grown out of childhood.

The house was very quiet. She wondered if the guests had all gone. The room was situated at the end of a long passage, so that the noise of the party had scarcely reached it. But the utter silence without as well as within made her think that it was very late.

She dared not switch on the light, but as the fire burned up again she held her watch to the blaze. Half-past two!

In utter amazement she began to undress.

There was no second bed in the room; only a horse-hair sofa that was far less comfortable than the chair by the fire. She lay down upon it, however, pulling over her an ancient fur travelling-rug belonging to her mother, and here she lay dozing and waking, turning over the mystery in her mind, while another quiet hour slipped away.

Then there came a movement from Bunny, and she sat up.

"Are you awake, Maud?" asked his voice out of the shadows. "Has Jake gone?"

"Yes, darling," she made answer. "Are you wanting anything?"

She was by his side with the words; she bent over him. He wanted his pillows rearranged, and when she had done it he said, "I say, when did you wake up?"

"About an hour ago," she said.

He chuckled a little. "Weren't you surprised to find me in bed?"

"Yes, I was," she said. "How did you get there?"

Bunny seemed to regard the matter as a joke. "That fellow Jake--he went over and looked at you, came back and said you were fast asleep, asked what I generally had done, and if he couldn't do it for me. He managed very well and was jolly quick about it too. I thought you would be sure to wake, but you didn't. And when I was settled, he asked if I didn't want anything, and I said, 'Yes, hot milk', and he crept off and got it. He brought a glass for you too. He stuck it in the fender. Have you had it?"

"Yes," Maud said. "But Bunny, didn't he hurt you at all? You nearly always cry out when you're lifted."

"I didn't that time," said Bunny proudly. "I told him I should probably squeal, and he said if I so much as squeaked he'd throttle me. He's a brick, do you know, Maud. And he seemed to know how to get hold of me without being told."

Maud's amazement was growing. The man must be a genius indeed to manage Bunny in that fashion.

"After that," said Bunny, "he sat down by me and got hold of my hand and said, 'Now I'm going to send you to sleep.' I told him I never slept the first part of the night, and he grinned and said, 'You'll be asleep in five minutes from now if you let yourself go.' And I said, 'Rats!' And he said, 'Shut up!' So I did. And he held my hand tight and sat staring across the room like a mute till somehow he got all blurred up and then I suppose I went to sleep. I never knew when he went. Did you?"

"No," said Maud. She had an uncanny feeling that Jake had somehow left his influence behind him in the atmosphere. His personality seemed to dominate it still. She was sure he had meant to be kind, but a queer sense of antagonism made her resent his kindness. She did not like Bunny's whole-hearted admiration.

"He's a brick," the boy said again, "and do you know he's done almost everything under the sun? He's been a sailor, and he's dug for gold, and he's kept a Californian store, and he's been a cow-boy on a ranch. He says the last suited him best because he's so keen on the wilds and horses. It was out in the wilds somewhere that Lord Saltash came on him and brought him home to be his trainer. But he's British-born all the same. I knew he was that the first time I saw him."

He was evidently a paragon of all the virtues in Bunny's estimation, and Maud did not attempt to express her own feelings, which were, in fact, somewhat complex.

Very deep down in her woman's soul a warning voice had begun to make itself heard, but she could not tell Bunny that. Scarcely even to herself dared she admit that the straight, free gaze of those red-brown eyes possessed the power to set her heart a-fluttering in wild rebellion like the wings of a captive bird.

CHAPTER VIII THE OFFER

In many respects the change from their lodgings up the hill to the Anchor Hotel by the fishing-quay was for the better, and as the days went on and winter drew near Maud realized this. Bunny's room had a southern aspect, and it was only on dull days that they needed a fire before evening. It possessed a French window also, which was an immense advantage; for it was perfectly easy to wheel him out on to the stone verandah outside it, and here he would lie in his own sheltered corner for hours; watching the sea and the shore and the passers-by, and sometimes talking to the very infrequent visitors who came at that season to "The Anchor."

He and Maud lived their lives apart from the rest of the establishment, an arrangement which Mrs. Sheppard deplored although she knew it to be an eminently wise one. Her husband, who never lost an opportunity to revile the girl who always treated him with the same aloof distance of manner, bitterly resented the circumstance that so limited his chances of what he styled "taking her down a peg." He hated her with the rancorous and cruel hatred of conscious inferiority, savagely repenting his undertaking to provide for her. They did not often clash because Maud steadfastly avoided him. And this also he resented, for he was in effect simply biding his time to drive her away. She was a perpetual thorn in his side, and he seized every chance that presented itself of inflicting some minor humiliation upon her. His antipathy had become almost an obsession, and he never saw her without flinging some gibing taunt in her direction.

And those taunts of his rankled deep. Maud's feelings towards him were of a very deadly order. If she had not avoided him, she knew that she could not have remained. But for Bunny's sake she endured his insults when contact with him became inevitable. She could not be separated from Bunny, and she knew of no other haven.

Towards Bunny, Sheppard displayed no ill feeling. He had small cause to do so, for the boy was kept rigorously out of his way, and his mother was more than willing to leave the entire care of him to Maud. In fact there were sometimes whole days on which she scarcely saw him. The

change that Maud had foretold on her wedding-day had already begun in her. She had quitted her own world without a pang, and was sunning herself in the warmth of her husband's rough devotion. As she herself expressed it, she was getting really fond of Giles, whose brutish affection for her was patent to all.

Maud suppressed a shudder whenever she encountered any evidence of it, and as a result he was always noisier and coarser in his demonstrations before her face of white disgust. What wonder that she rigidly avoided him and insisted upon taking all her meals with Bunny?

In this way she avoided his loud-voiced friends also,--another frequent cause for offence!--all, that is, save one. That one was Jake Bolton; and, since Bunny had so decreed it, this man came and went exactly as he chose.

She never raised the smallest objection to his presence, but she certainly never welcomed him. In fact she generally took advantage of his coming to leave Bunny for a space and it even became a recognized thing between them that she should avail herself of the leisure thus provided to run down to the shore for the brief recreation which was never obtainable in any other way.

Very often she would not return until after Jake's departure, and so on the whole, though they met so frequently, she actually saw but little of him. He was Bunny's pal, and--obedient to the inner warning--she was firmly determined that he should never become hers.

He did not seem inclined to combat this determination, but on the other hand he never relinquished by a hair's breadth the position he had taken up at the beginning of their acquaintance. It was impossible to snub him. He never heard a snub. He never advanced, and he never retreated. He simply stood firm, so that after a time her uneasiness began to die down almost in spite of her, and she even came to look upon him in a very guarded way as a friend in need. He could do anything in the world with Bunny, and though she was half-suspicious of his influence she could not deny that he invariably exercised it in the right direction. He had even begun to implant in Bunny a wholly novel and sometimes almost disconcerting consideration for herself. Bunny was more tractable just then than he had ever been before. It was the only bright spot in her sky.

It was on an afternoon in late November that she went down to the shore during one of Jake Bolton's visits to her brother, and watched the fishing-fleet come in through a blur of rain. The beach looked dank and sodden and there were trails of mist in the air. Dusk was just beginning to fall, and it would be a wet night. But the air blew in off the water sweet and southerly, and it did her good to breath it.

She walked the length of the parade twice, and finally, as the fishing-smacks dropped one by one into the harbour on the further side of the quay, turned homewards, feeling invigorated and considerably the happier for the brief exercise.

She wondered if Jake meant to stay to tea. He did not often do so, only, on the very rare occasions when she added her invitation to Bunny's. She supposed she would have to ask him to-day if she found him still there when she returned. But she hoped she would not. She liked him best when he was not there.

Regretfully she turned her back upon the heaving waters, and crossed the road to the Anchor Hotel. It was growing rapidly dusk.

She reached the entrance, and was stretching out a hand towards the swing-doors when one of them opened abruptly from within and Jake stepped out. He was smoking a cigarette, and he did not in the first moment perceive her. She drew back in an instinctive effort to escape notice.

But he stopped short almost immediately and accosted her.

"Ah! Is that you? I was just wondering where you were."

Her thoughts flew to Bunny. "Am I wanted?" she asked quickly.

He checked her with a gesture. "No, the lad's all right. It's I who want you. Can you spare me a minute?"

It was impossible to refuse, but she did not yield graciously. Somehow she never could be gracious to Jake Bolton.

"I ought to go in," she said. "It is getting late."

"I shan't keep you long," he said, and she noticed that it was plainly a foregone conclusion with him that she would grant him what he asked.

She turned back into the misty darkness with a short sigh of impatience.

"Walk to the end of the parade with me!" he said, and fell in beside her.

Later she wondered why she did not lodge a more energetic protest, for it was beginning to rain in earnest; but at the time it seemed inevitable that she should do as he desired.

She re-crossed the road with him, and turned to walk to the nearest end of the parade. They approached the spot where he had once laid peremptory hands upon her and drawn her out of danger. It was as they neared it that he suddenly spoke.

"I am sorry to have brought you out again into the wet. Will you come into the shelter?"

She acquiesced. The shelter was empty. She stepped within it and stood waiting.

He took out his cigarette and after a moment dropped it and set his heel upon it.

"I want to speak to you about your brother," he said. "And, by the way, before I forget it, I've promised to trundle him up to the Stables next Sunday to show him the animals. You will come too, won't you? I can give you tea at my house. It's close by."

Maud's eyes opened a little. The suggestion somewhat startled her, and she resented being startled. "You are very kind," she said coldly. "But I don't think we can either of us do that."

"I am not in the least kind," said Jake. "And will you tell me why you are offended with me for suggesting it?"

"I am not--offended," she said, feeling herself grow uncomfortably hot over the assertion. "But--I think you might have proposed this to me before mentioning it to Bunny."

"But what's the matter with the proposal?" he said. "The boy was delighted with it."

"That may be," Maud said; and then she paused, feeling suddenly that she was being absurdly unreasonable. She blushed still more hotly in the gloom, and became silent.

Jake stretched out one steady finger and laid it on her arm. "Don't take fright at nothing!" he said, in an admonitory tone. "If you're going to shy at this, I reckon you'll kick up your heels, and bolt at my next suggestion."

She drew herself away from his touch, standing very erect. "Perhaps you would be wiser not to make it," she said.

"Very likely," agreed Jake. "But--as you object to my mentioning things to your brother first--I don't see how you can refuse to listen."

This was unanswerable. She bit her lip. "I am listening," she said.

"And the answer is 'No,' whatever it is," rejoined Jake, with a whimsical note in his soft voice. "Say, Miss Brian, play fair!"

She felt somewhat softened in spite of herself. "I have said I will listen," she said.

"With an unbiassed mind?" he said.

"Of course." She spoke impatiently; she wanted to get the interview over, and she more and more resented his attitude towards her. There was something of the superior male about him that grated on her nerves.

"All right," said Jake. "I'll go ahead. If you will condescend to come up to my place on Sunday, I will show you a man--one of our jockeys--who was injured in just the same way that your brother is injured, and who is now as sound as I am. He was operated upon by an American doctor called Capper--one of the biggest surgeons in the world. It was a bit of an experiment, but it succeeded. Now what has been done once can be done again. I chance to know Capper, and he is coming to London next spring. He makes a speciality of spinal trouble. Won't you let him try his hand on Bunny? There would be a certain amount of risk of course. But wouldn't it be worth it? Say, wouldn't it be worth it, to see that boy on his legs, living his life as it was meant to be lived instead of dragging out a wretched existence that hardly deserves to be called life at all?"

He stopped abruptly, as if realizing that he had suffered his eagerness to carry him away. But to Maud who had begun to listen in icy aloofness that same eagerness was as the kindling of a fire in a place of utter desolation.

For the moment she forgot to be cold. "Oh, if it were only possible!" she said. "If it only could be!"

"Why can't it be?" said Jake.

She came back with something of a shock to the consciousness of his personality. She drew back from the warmth that he had made her feel.

"Because," she said frigidly, "doctors--great surgeons--don't perform big operations for nothing."

"I don't think Capper would charge an out-of-the-way amount if he did it for me," said Jake.

"Perhaps not." Maud spoke in the dead tone of finality.

He leaned slightly towards her. "Say, Miss Brian, aren't you rather easily disheartened? Wouldn't your people scrape together something for such a purpose?"

"No," she said.

"Are you quite sure?" he urged. "Won't you even ask 'em?"

She turned from him. "It's no good asking," she said, her voice low and reluctant. "The only

relation we possess who might help won't even answer when I write to him."

"Why don't you go and see him?" said Jake. "Put the thing before him! He couldn't refuse."

She shook her head. "It wouldn't be any good," she said, with dreary conviction. "Besides, I couldn't get to Liverpool and back in a day, and I couldn't leave Bunny for longer. And--in any case--I know--I know it wouldn't be any good," she ended, with half-angry vehemence.

"I wish the little chap were my brother," said Jake.

Maud was silent. Somehow her vehemence had upset her; she had an outrageous desire to cry.

Jake was silent too for a few seconds; then abruptly he squared his shoulders and spoke with aggressive decision. "Miss Brian, a good friend is nearer than a dozen beastly relations. With your permission--I'll see this thing through."

"Oh no, no!" she said quickly. "No, no!"

"For the boy's sake!" he said.

"No!" she said again.

There fell a sudden silence. Then, in an odd voice Jake said, "Bunny told me--only to-day--with pride--that there was nothing in the world that you wouldn't do for him."

She made a sharp movement of protest. "I can't take--what I could never repay," she said, speaking almost below her breath. "Neither shall Bunny."

"There are more ways than one of paying a debt," said Jake.

He looked almost formidable standing there in the twilight with his legs well apart and unabashed resolution in every line of his sturdy figure.

She faced him with a sinking sense of her own inferior strength. His self-assertion seemed to weigh her down. She felt puny and insignificant before it. As usual she sought refuge in stately aloofness. She had no other weapon, and at least it covered the beating of her heart.

"I am afraid I don't understand you," she said.

"Shall I explain?" said Jake; and then, as she was silent: "Can't you see I'm making a bid for your friendship?"

She froze at the effrontery of the words.

"Oh yes," said Jake. "I quite understand. I'm only tolerated for Bunny's sake. Isn't that so? You're too proud to associate with a clod like me. But for all that--though you'll never look at me--I'm not afraid to let you know that I've taken a fancy to you. You've never contemplated such a fool idea as marriage with me, I know: but you go home and contemplate it right now! Ask yourself if you wouldn't find a husband like me less nauseating than a step-father like Giles Sheppard! Ask yourself if the little chap wouldn't stand a better chance all round if you brought him along to me! I reckon we'd make his life easier between us even if Capper couldn't make him walk. He's too heavy a burden for you to carry alone, my girl. You weren't created for such a burden as that. Let me lend a hand! I give you my solemn oath I'll be good to you both!"

A tremor of passion ran through his last words, and his voice took a deeper note. Maud, upright and quivering, felt the force of the man like the blast of a tearing gale carrying all before it. She would have left him at the commencement of his speech, but he blocked the way. She stood imprisoned in a corner of the shelter, steadying herself against the woodwork, while the full strength of his individuality surged around her. She felt physically exhausted, as though she had been trying to stand against a tremendous wind.

Several seconds throbbed away ere she could trust herself to speak without faltering. Then: "Please let me pass!" she said.

He stood back instantly and she was conscious of a lessening of that mysterious influence which had so overwhelmed her.

"Are you angry--or what?" he said.

She gathered her strength, and stepped forth, though she was trembling from head to foot.

"Yes, I am angry," she said, forcing her voice to a certain measure of calmness notwithstanding. "I have never been so insulted in my life!"

"Insulted!" He echoed the word in unfeigned astonishment; then, as she would have left him, put a detaining hand upon her arm. "Say, Miss Brian! Since when has a proposal of marriage constituted an insult in your estimation?"

He spoke with something of a drawl, but it compelled attention. She stopped, resisting the desire to shake herself free from his touch.

"A proposal of marriage from you could be nothing else," she said very bitterly. "You take advantage of my position, but you know full well that we are not equals."

"Oh yes, I know that," he said. "But--is any man your equal?"

"I meant socially of course," she said, beginning to recover her composure and her dignity.

"I see." Jake's voice was very level. "And that is why you are upset--angry?"

"It is a very sufficient reason," she said.

"Yes, but is it--as things now are? There is another point of view to that problem. If you had been leading a happy, sheltered life in your own sphere--that might have been a reason for me to hold off. You might with justice have scorned my offer. But--as things are--as things are--" he spoke with strong insistence. "Is it taking advantage of your position to want to deliver you from it? It's a beastly position--it's a humiliating position. And I gather you've no prospect of deliverance. Well, I offer you a way of escape. It mayn't be the way you would choose, but--there are worse, many worse. I'm not a bad sort, and I've got a soft spot in my heart for that little brother of yours. Say, Miss Brian, do you despise me so badly that you can't even give the idea your impartial consideration?"

He spoke whimsically, but there was a rough dignity about him nevertheless which had an undeniable effect upon her. She could no longer spurn him with contempt, though neither could she yield a single inch to his persuasion.

"It would be quite useless for me to consider it," she said. "I am sorry if I was rude to you just now, but your suggestion rather took my breath away. Please understand that it is quite, quite impossible!"

"All right," he said. "Still you won't dismiss it quite entirely from your mind? That is to say, you'll hold it in reserve just in case a way of escape becomes essential to you. I shan't break my heart about it, but neither shall I change my mind. The offer remains open day and night just in case the emergency might arise which would make you willing to avail yourself of it."

He took his hand from her arm, and she felt that the interview was over.

Yet he walked beside her as she began to move away, and crossed the road again with her to the entrance of the hotel.

"And one thing more," he said, as they reached it. "I have no wish or intention to force myself upon you, so if--to please Bunny--you can bring yourself to accompany the pair of us on the Sunday expedition to see the stud, you need not be afraid that I shall attempt to take advantage of your position again."

The colour flamed up in her face at the few, leisurely words. He seemed to possess the power of calling it up at will.

She stood on the first step, looking down at him, uncertain whether to be haughty or kind.

He moved close to her, and by the lamplight that streamed through the glass doors she saw his frank, disarming smile.

"And look here!" he said. "Don't fling cold water on that other scheme for Bunny that I broached to you, yet! You never know what may turn up."

The smile decided her. She held out her hand to him. "But, you know, I couldn't--I really couldn't--" she said rather incoherently.

He gave the hand a firm grip and released it. "No. All right. I understand. But think about it! And don't run away with the idea that I planned it just for your sake! I'd like jolly well to be of use to you. But--in the main--it's the lad I'm thinking of. You do the same! After all, it's second nature with you to put him first, isn't it?"

"He always will come first, with me," she said. "But I couldn't--I can't--incur such an obligation--even for him."

"All right," said Jake, unmoved. "Class it with the impossibles--but, all the same, think about it!"

He was gone with the words, striding away down the street without a backward glance.

Maud was left alone with the warm blood still in her cheeks and an odd feeling of uncertainty at her heart. She felt baffled and uneasy like a swimmer in deep waters, aware of a strong current but still not wholly at its mercy, nor wholly aware of its force and direction. She did not mean to let herself be drawn into that current. She hung on the edge of it, trying to strike out and avoid it. But all the time it drew her, it drew her. And--though she would not admit it even to herself--she knew it and was afraid.

That Sunday of their visit to the Burchester Stables was a marked day with Maud for the rest of her life.

The Stables were situated on the side of a splendid down about a mile from the sea. Lord Saltash's estate stretched for miles around, and he practically owned the whole of Fairharbour. Burchester Castle was the name of the seat, an ancient pile dating from Saxon times that had belonged to the Burchester family since the days of the Tudors. Charlie Burchester had inherited it from his uncle five years before; but he did not live in it. He had occasional wild house-parties there, especially for the event of the Graydown Races. And he sometimes spent a night or two when the mood took him to visit the stud. But for the most part the house stood in empty grandeur, its rooms shuttered and shrouded, its stately gardens deserted save for the gardeners who tended them.

Exquisite gardens they were. Maud had a glimpse of them from the height of the down-terraced gardens with marble steps and glistening fountains, yew-walks, darkly mysterious, quaintly fashioned, pines that rustled and whispered together. The house was securely hidden from view among its trees.

"It used to be a nunnery," said Jake. "Its inhabitants had a chaste objection to publicity. It's an interesting old place, about a mile from the Stables. I'd like to show it to you some time. You'd enjoy it."

"Not to-day," said Bunny quickly.

Jake smiled at his tone. "No, not to-day, lad. We'll go and see the animals to-day."

He had brought them up the long, winding private road which, though smooth enough, was a continual ascent. Maud had wanted to help with the invalid-chair, but he had steadily refused any assistance. She marvelled at the evident ease with which he had accomplished the journey, never hurrying, never halting, not even needing to pause for breath, untiring as a wild animal in its native haunts. She remembered the nickname he bore on the Turf, and reflected that it fitted him in more than one respect. He was so supple, so tough, so sure.

Suddenly those bright eyes flashed round on her. "Say, you're tired," he said, in his queer, lilting voice. "We'll have tea first."

"No!" cried Bunny on the instant. "We'll do the Stables first, Jake. It's not time for tea. Besides, tea can wait."

Jake's brown hand came over the back of the chair and filiped the boy's cheek. "Shut up, my son!" said Jake.

Maud stared at the action. Bunny turned scarlet.

Jake unconcernedly continued his easy progress. "Reckon the animals won't die if we don't inspect 'em till after tea," he said. "What's your idea, Miss Brian?"

"If Bunny wishes to go straight to the Stables--" she began.

He interrupted. "Bunny has changed his mind. Ain't that so, Bunny?"

"I don't care," said Bunny rather sullenly.

"All right then," said Jake. "Tea first!"

He wheeled the chair into a great gateway that led into a wide stone courtyard. White-washed stables were on each side of them and at regular intervals large green tubs containing miniature fir-trees. At the further end of the courtyard stood a square, white-washed house.

"That's my shanty," said Jake.

It was a very plain building; in former days it had been a farm. There was a white railing in front and a small white gate flanked by another pair of toy firs. The whole effect was one of prim cleanliness.

"There's a bit of garden at the back," said Jake. "And a summer-house--quite a decent little summer-house--that looks right away to the sea. Now, Bunny lad, there's a comfortable sofa inside for you. Think I can carry you in?"

"Can't you take in the chair?" Maud asked nervously.

Jake looked at her. "Oh yes, I can. But the passage is a bit narrow. It's not very easy to turn."

"Of course he can carry me, Maud. Let him carry me!" broke in Bunny, in an aggrieved tone. "You make such a stupid fuss always."

Jake had thrown open the door of his home. "You go in, Miss Brian!" he said. "Turn to the right at the end of the passage, and it's the door facing you."

She went in reluctantly. The passage was small and dark, oak-panelled, low-ceiled.

"Go right in!" said Jake.

She did not want to turn her back on Bunny, but she knew that the boy would resent any lingering on her part. She passed down the passage and turned as Jake had directed.

The door that faced her stood open, and she entered a long, low room, oak-panelled like the passage, with a deep, old-fashioned fireplace in which burned a cheery wood fire. Two windows, diamond-paned, and a door with the upper panels of glass occupied the whole of the further side of the room, and the western sunshine slanting in threw great bars of gold across the low window-seats.

Tea had been set on a table in the middle of the room, to the corner of which a sofa had been drawn. There were bed-pillows as well as cushions on the sofa. Evidently Jake had ransacked the house to provide comfort for Bunny.

Maud stood just within the doorway listening, dreading to hear the indignant outcry that generally attended any movement of the poor little crippled body. But she heard nothing beyond Jake's voice murmuring unintelligibly, and in a few seconds the steady tread of his feet as he entered the house.

Then, while she stood listening, the feet drew near and there came a pleased chuckle from Bunny. Jake came squarely in, carrying him like an infant, and deposited him with infinite care among the cushions that Maud hastily adjusted for his reception.

"There you are, my son," he said. "Make yourself as much at home as you can!"

Bunny looked about him with keen interest. "Oh, I say, what a jolly room! What a ripping room! You're beastly lucky to live here, Jake."

"Oh, yes, it's a decent little crib," said Jake. "Those doorsteps were just made for an evening pipe."

He indicated the closed glass-panelled door. Maud went to it and found that the ground sloped sharply away from this side of the house, necessitating a flight of several steps. They led down into a sunny space that was more orchard than garden,--fruit-trees and grass spreading down the side of the hill towards the magic, pine-screened grounds of Burchester Castle.

Jake came and stood beside her for a moment. He was being studiously impersonal that day, an attitude which curiously caused her more of uneasiness than relief.

"The arbour is at the end by those apple-trees," he said. "You can just see the roof from here. It looks over the field where we train. It's sport to watch the youngsters learning to run. Lord Saltash calls it the grand stand."

"Do you know Lord Saltash?" broke in Bunny. "He used to be a great pal of ours once."

"Oh, that was years ago--in London," said Maud quickly. "No doubt he has quite forgotten our existence by this time."

She spoke with unwitting sharpness, hotly aware that the lynx-like eyes of her host were upon her.

Bunny took instant offence. "I'm sure it wasn't years ago, Maud; and you know it wasn't. It isn't more than two since we saw him last--if that. As to forgetting all about us, that isn't very likely, considering the mother was one of his bad debts."

"Bunny!" Maud began in rare anger.

But in the same moment Jake swung calmly round. "Say, Bunny, do you like shrimps?" he asked. He moved to Bunny's side and stood looking down at him. "I got some in case. Miss Brian, I hope shrimps are good for him, are they?"

"She doesn't know," said Bunny irritably. "What's the good of asking her? Of course I like shrimps! Aren't we going to begin soon? I want to go and see the horses."

"You seem to be in an all-fired hurry," observed Jake. "Left your manners behind, haven't you?" He took out his watch. "Half-past three! All right, my son. We'll go at four, Miss Brian, do you mind pouring out?"

He set a chair for her facing the window, and sat down himself next to Bunny.

It seemed to Maud that, seated there in his own house, she saw him under a new aspect. He played the host with ability and no small amount of tact.

He talked mainly about the stud, interesting her in a subject which she had never before viewed at close quarters. He described various events in which some of his charges had won distinction, and presently, to Bunny's keen delight; he began a brief but stirring description of an attempt to tamp with one of the animals two summers before on the eve of one of the Graydown Races. Some inkling of the intended attempt had reached him, and he himself had lain in wait to frustrate it.

"But how?" cried Bunny breathlessly.

"I decided to spend the night in the loose-box," said Jake. "There's no hardship in sleeping alongside a good horse. I've done it many a time. I wasn't so intimate with Lord Saltash then as I am now, but I knew enough not to be altogether surprised when he came sliding into the stable-

yard a little after midnight in a two-seated car and made straight for the loose-box where I was. The top half of the door was ajar, and there was a dim lamp burning in the yard, but his headlights showed up everything like day. He pushed the top half right back and leaned his arms on the lower and said, 'That you, Bolton?' I got up and went to him. There was no one else about. 'I've put myself in charge this trip,' I told him. 'You needn't be nervous.' He grinned in a sickly sort of fashion and said, 'I am nervous--deuced nervous, and I'll tell you why. If that brute runs tomorrow I'm a ruined man.' And then he started jawing about some fool wager he'd made, said he was under the thumb of some rascally booky, and actually began to try and talk me into spoiling the animal's chances."

Jake paused. He was looking at Maud as if he expected something.

She looked back at him, her head very high, her eyes shining defiantly bright. "Lord Saltash has a double apparently?" she said.

"Now, that's real clever of you!" said Jake, with a smile. "Yes, that is the key to the mystery, and I soon grasped it. He offered me a large sum of money to prevent Pedro running. Pedro was listening to the transaction with his head on my shoulder. I said yes to everything, and then I suggested that we should settle the details outside where there was no chance of witnesses. He agreed to that, and I picked up my whip and got into his car after him, and we slipped out and ran about half-a-mile into the Park where I stopped him."

Jake paused again, still looking expectantly at the girl facing him. She was flushed but evidently not greatly moved.

"What a thrilling recital!" she said.

And, "Go on!" urged Bunny impatiently.

Jake laughed a little. "I felt rather a skunk myself. He was so sweetly unsuspecting, till I used the cowboy clutch on him and tied up his arms in his own coat. That opened his eyes, but it was a bit too late. He was in for a cowhiding, and he realized it, scarcely showed fight, in fact. I didn't let him off on that account, and I don't suppose he has forgotten it to this day. I didn't quite flay him, but I made him feel some."

"And you let him go afterwards?" questioned Bunny.

"Yes, I let him go." Jake took up his cup and drank in a contemplative fashion. "After that," he said, in his slow way, "I went back to Pedro, and we finished the night together. But--I don't know whether having his rest disturbed upset his nerves any--he only managed to come in second after all."

"And Lord Saltash?" said Maud abruptly. "Did you ever tell him what had happened?"

"Oh yes," said Jake. "I told him the following evening, and he laughed in his jolly way and said, 'Well, I'm glad you weren't taken in, but I'm glad too that you let the poor devil go. A leathering from you couldn't have been any such joke.' It wasn't," added Jake grimly. "It was as unlike a joke as a blue pill is unlike raspberry jam."

"But what became of the real man?" questioned Bunny. "Did he get clean away?"

"Clean away," said Jake. "And now--if you're ready--we'll go and see the hero of that episode."

"Who was the hero?" asked Maud, with a hint of sarcasm as she rose.

He looked at her with a faint smile. "Why, Dom Pedro, of course," he said. "Come along and make his acquaintance!"

CHAPTER X THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

It was among the horses that Maud at length saw Jake Bolton in his true element. They were all plainly very dear to his heart. He introduced them as friends. His pockets were stuffed with sugar which both she and Bunny helped to distribute, and not till dusk came upon them did they realize the lateness of the hour.

It was at the last minute that Jake suddenly summoned a little man who was lounging in the gateway. "Here, Sam! I've been telling the lady about your tumble and how they put you together again. It interested her."

Sam approached with a sheepish grin. "I thought I was a goner," he said. "But Mr. Bolton--" he looked at Jake and his grin widened--"he's one of the Never-say-die sort. And the Yankee doctor, well, he was a regular knock-out, he was. Mended me as clean--well, there, you wouldn't never have known I'd had a smash."

One eye wandered down to Bunny in his long chair as he spoke; but he discreetly refrained from comment, and it was Bunny who eagerly broke in with: "What happened to you? Was it your spine? Let's hear!"

Sam was only too willing to oblige. He settled down to his story like a horse into its stride, and for nearly a quarter of an hour Maud stood listening to the account of the miracle which, according to Sam Vickers, the great American doctor had performed.

Bunny drank it all in with feverish avidity. Maud did not like to watch his face. The look it wore went to her heart.

She did not want to glance at Jake either though after a time she felt impelled to do so. His eyes were fixed upon Bunny, but on the instant they came straight to hers as if she had spoken. She avoided them instinctively, but she felt them none the less, as though a dazzling searchlight had suddenly and mercilessly been turned upon her, piercing straight to her soul.

It was soon after this that he quietly intervened to put an end to Sam's reminiscences. It was growing late, and they ought to be moving.

Maud agreed; Bunny protested, and was calmly overruled by Jake. They started back through a pearly greyness of dusk that heralded the rising of the moon. They spoke but little as they went. Bunny seemed suddenly tired, and it did not apparently occur to either of his companions to attempt to make conversation.

Only, as they descended the winding road that led down to Fairharbour and a sudden clamour of church-bells arose through the evening mist, Jake glanced again at the girl who was walking rather wearily by Bunny's side, and said, "Wouldn't you like to go to Church now? I'll see to the youngster."

She shook her head. "Thank you very much; I don't think so."

"Oh, go on, Maud!" exclaimed Bunny, emerging from his reverie. "I don't want you if Jake will stay. I'd sooner have Jake. He doesn't fuss like you."

"I'll get him to bed," Jake went on, as if he had not spoken. "You can trust me to do that, you know. I won't let him talk too much either. Say, Miss Brian, it's a good offer; you'd better close with it."

She heard the smile in the words; and because of it she found she could not refuse. "But I don't like to give you so much trouble," she said.

"You give me pleasure," he answered simply.

At the gate of the churchyard he stopped. "I'll say good-bye," he said. "But don't hurry back! I shall stay as long as I am wanted."

She knew that she could rely upon him in that respect as upon no one else in the world. She gave him her hand with another low word of thanks.

"May I walk to the door with you?" he said, and drew Bunny's chair to one side.

It would have been churlish to refuse. She suffered him in silence.

The church was on an eminence that overlooked the harbour. Reaching the porch, the whole wide view of open sea lay spread before them, flooded in moonlight. The clanging bells above them had sunk to stillness. A peace that seemed unearthly wrapped them round. They stood for the moment quite alone, gazing out to the far, dim sky-line.

And suddenly Maud heard the beating of her heart in the silence, and was conscious of an overwhelming sense of doom.

With an effort that seemed to tear at the very foundations of her being, she turned and walked down a narrow path between the tombstones. He followed her till in breathless agitation she turned again.

"Mr. Bolton!"

Her voice was no more than a whisper. She was thankful that her face was in shadow.

He stood silently, his eyes, alert and bright, fixed intently upon her.

"I must ask you," she said, "--I must beg you--to regard what I said the other day as final. If I am friendly with you, I want you to understand that it is solely for Bunny's sake--no other reason."

"That is understood," said Jake.

She drew the quick breath of one seeking relief. "Then you will forget that--that impossible notion? You will let me forget it too?"

"I shan't remind you of it," said Jake.

"And you will forget it yourself?" she insisted.

He lowered his eyes suddenly, and it was as if a light had unexpectedly gone out. She waited in the dark with a beating heart.

And then with a great clash the bells broke out overhead and further speech became

impossible. Jake wheeled without warning, and walked away.

She stood and watched him go, still with that sense of coming fate upon her. Her heart was leaping wildly like a chained thing seeking to escape.

As for Jake, he rejoined Bunny and squarely resumed the journey back to the town, without the smallest sign of discomposure.

He seemed somewhat absent, however, trudging along in almost unbroken silence; and it was not until he laid the boy down at length in his own room that he said, "Now, look here, youngster! If you can't be decently civil to your sister, I've done with you. Understand?"

Bunny turned impulsively and buried his face in Jake's sleeve. "All right. Don't jaw!" he begged in muffled accents.

Jake remained unmoved. "I've been wanting to punch your head most of the afternoon," he remarked severely.

"You can do it now if you like," muttered Bunny, burrowing a little deeper.

Jake did not respond to the invitation. "Why can't you behave yourself anyway?" he said.

He settled Bunny's pillows with a sure hand, and laid him gently back upon them. But Bunny clung to him still.

"You aren't really savage with me, Jake?" he said.

"All right. I'm not," said Jake. "But I won't have it all the same; savvy?"

He put his hand for a moment on Bunny's head and rumbled the dark hair. Bunny's lips quivered unexpectedly.

"It's so--beastly--being managed always by women," he said.

"You don't know when you're lucky," said Jake.

Bunny's emotion passed. He looked at his friend shrewdly. "I suppose you're in love with her," he remarked after a moment.

Jake's eyes met his instantly and uncompromisingly. "Well?" he said.

"Nothing," said Bunny. "Of course she's my sister."

"And so you think you're entitled to a voice in the matter?" Jake's tone was strictly practical.

Bunny's fingers slipped into his. "I'm the head of the family, you know, Jake," he said.

The man's face softened to a smile. "Yes, I reckon that's so," he said. "Well? What has the head of the family to say to the notion?"

Bunny turned rather red. "You see,--you're not a mister, are you?" he said.

"Not a gentleman, you mean?" suggested Jake.

Bunny's uneasiness increased. He squeezed Jake's hand very hard in silence.

"All right, little chap," said Jake. "Don't agitate yourself! I'm not what you call a gentleman,--not even a first-class imitation. Let's go on from there! Any other objections?"

"I don't want to be a cad, Jake!" burst from Bunny. "But you know--you know--she might have done a lot better for herself. She might have married Charlie Burchester."

"Who?" said Jake.

"Lord Saltash," explained Bunny. "We thought--everyone thought--five years ago--that they were going to get married. He was awfully keen on her, and she of course was in love with him. And then there was that row with the Cressadys. Lady Cressady got him into a mess, and Sir Philip always was an obnoxious beast. And afterwards Charlie Burchester sheered off and went abroad. He came back after he succeeded, but Maud--she's awfully proud, you know,--she wouldn't look at him, vows she never will again--though I'm not so sure she won't. He's sure to come back some day. He's such a rattling good sort, and he's jolly fond of her."

"And the rest," said Jake drily.

"No, really, Jake, he isn't a rotter. He's an awfully nice chap. You'd say so if you really knew him."

"I do know him," said Jake.

"And you don't like him?" Bunny's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Yes, I like him." Jake's tone was enigmatical. "But I shouldn't call him a marrying man. Anyway, he won't marry your sister, so you can make up your mind to that! Any other gentlemen in the running?"

"You couldn't prevent their being married if--if Maud changed her mind," said Bunny.

Jake smiled. "Anyone else?" he persisted.

"No, no one. She never sees anybody now."

"Except me," said Jake. "And I'm not genteel enough, hey?"

"You're a brick!" said Bunny with enthusiasm. "But, you know, women don't see that sort of thing. They only care about whether a man opens the door for 'em or takes off his glove to shake

hands."

Jake broke into a laugh. "Say, sonny, what a thundering lot you know about women!" he said. "Anyway, I conclude I am right in surmising that you personally could swallow me as a brother-in-law?"

Bunny's eyes began to shine. "You're the best fellow I know," he said. "If--if it weren't for Lord Saltash, I wouldn't say a word!"

"Well," said Jake very deliberately, "I refuse to be warned off on his account. That's understood, is it?"

Bunny hesitated. The red-brown eyes were looking full and unwaveringly into his. "I'm not thinking of myself, Jake," he said, with sudden pleading.

Jake's hand closed squarely upon his. "All right, old chap, I know; and I like you for it. But I'm taking odds. It's ninety-nine to one. If I win on the hundredth chance, you'll take it like a sport?"

Bunny's hand returned his grip with all the strength at his command. He was silent for a moment or two; then, impulsively: "I say, Jake," he said, "--you--you're such a sport yourself! I think I'll back you after all."

"Right O!" said Jake. "You won't be sorry."

He dismissed the subject then with obvious intention, and Bunny seemed relieved to let it go. He turned the conversation to Sam Vickers, asking endless questions regarding the American doctor and his miracles.

"I wish he'd come and have a look at me, Jake," he said wistfully at length.

"Thought you didn't like doctors," said Jake.

"Oh, a man like that is different. I'd put up with a man like that," said Bunny, with a sigh.

"You might have to put up with more than you bargained for," said Jake.

Bunny moved his head wearily on the pillow. "I don't think anything could be worse than this," he said.

"I'm glad to hear you say so," said Jake, with sudden force; and then, pulling himself up as suddenly, "No, we won't get talking on that subject. Capper's in America, and you've got to sleep to-night. But you keep a stiff upper lip, old chap! I'm in with you from start to finish. Maybe, some day, we'll work a change."

"You're no end of a trump!" said Bunny with tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER XI THE DECLARATION OF WAR

For three weeks after that Sunday visit to Jake's home, life went on as usual, and a certain measure of tranquillity returned to Maud.

She found herself able to meet the man without any show of embarrassment, and, finding him absolutely normal in his behaviour towards her, she began to feel a greater confidence in his presence. He had promised that he would not force himself upon her, and it was evident that he had every intention of keeping his word. That he might by imperceptible degrees draw nearer to her, become more intimate, was a possibility that for a time troubled her; but he was so absolutely considerate in all his dealings with her that this fear of hers at length died away. If he were playing a waiting game he did it with a patience so consummate that his tactics were wholly hidden from her. He had to all appearances accepted her decision as final, and put the notion away as impracticable.

Christmas was drawing near, and several visitors had already arrived. There was generally a short season at Christmas, during which the Anchor Hotel had its regular patrons. Its landlord was in an extremely variable state of mind, sometimes aggressive, sometimes jovial, frequently not wholly sober. Maud avoided all contact with him with rigorous persistence, her mother's protests notwithstanding.

"He can't be civil to me," she said, "and he shall not have the opportunity of being anything else."

And no persuasion could move her from this attitude. Mrs. Sheppard was obliged reluctantly to abandon the attempt. She herself was seldom out of favour with her husband, whatever his condition, and that after all was what mattered most.

But the state of affairs was such as was almost bound to lead to a climax sooner or later. Giles Sheppard's hectoring mood was not of the sort to be satisfied for long with passive

avoidance. Every glimpse he had of the girl, who ate his bread but disdained to do so in his company or the company of his friends, inflamed him the more hotly against her. It needed but a pretext to set his wrath ablaze, and a pretext was not far to seek.

One day about a week before Christmas he unexpectedly presented himself at the door of Bunny's room.

The weather was damp and raw, and a cheerful fire burned there. Bunny was lying among pillows on the sofa. He had had a bad night, and his face, as he turned it to the intruder, was white and drawn.

"What on earth--" he began querulously.

Sheppard entered with arrogance, leaving the door wide open behind him. "Look here!" he said harshly. "You've got to turn out of this. The room is wanted."

Maud, who was dusting the room as was her daily custom, turned swiftly round with something of the movement of a tigress. Her face was pale also. She had slept even less than Bunny the previous night. Her blue eyes shone like two flames under her knitted brows.

"What do you mean?" she said.

He looked at her with insult in his eyes. "I mean just that, my fine madam," he said. "This room is wanted. The boy will have to go with the rest of the lumber--at the top of the house."

It was brutally spoken, but the brutality was aimed at her, not Bunny. Maud realized that fact, and curbed her resentment. She could endure--or so she fancied--his personal hostility with fortitude. But his announcement was sufficiently disquieting in itself.

"I understood that we were not to be disturbed at any time," she said, meeting his look with that icy pride of hers that was the only weapon at her command. "Surely some other arrangement can be made?"

Sheppard growled out a strangled oath; she always made him feel at a disadvantage, this slip of a girl whom he could have picked up with one hand had he chosen.

"I tell you, this room is wanted," he reiterated stormily. "You'd better clear out at once."

"Bunny can't possibly be moved to-day," Maud said quickly and decidedly. "He is in pain. Can't you see for yourself how impossible it is? I am quite sure no visitor who knew the facts of the case would wish to turn him out."

Sheppard stamped a furious foot. He was getting up his fury; and suddenly she saw that he had been drinking. The knowledge came upon her in a flash of understanding, and with it a disgust so complete that it overwhelmed every other consideration.

She pointed to the door. "Go!" she said, in tense, frozen accents. "Go at once! How dare you come in here in this state?"

Before her withering disdain he drew back, as it were involuntarily. He even half turned to obey. Then, suddenly some devil prompted him, and he swung back again. With one gigantic stride he reached the sofa; and before either brother or sister knew what he intended to do he had roughly seized upon the boy's slight body and lifted it in his great arms.

Bunny's agonized outcry at the action mingled with his sister's, but it ceased almost immediately. He collapsed in the giant grip like an empty sack, and Sheppard, now wrought to a blind fury that had no thought for consequences, carried him from the room and along the passage to the stairs, utterly unheeding the fact that he had fainted.

Maud, nearly beside herself, went with him, striving to support the limp body where long experience had taught her support was needed. They went up the stairs so, flight after flight, Sheppard savage and stubborn, the girl in a dumb agony of anxiety, seeking only to relieve the dreadful strain that had bereft Bunny of his senses.

They reached at length a room at the top of the house, a bare garret of a place with sloping ceiling and uncarpeted floor. There was a bed under the skylight, and on this the man deposited his burden.

Then he turned and looked at Maud with eyes of cruel malevolence. "This is good enough for you and yours," he said.

Over Bunny's body she flung her fruitless defiance. "You drunken brute!" she said. "You loathsome coward! You hateful, tipsy bully!"

The words pierced him like the stabs of a dagger too swift to evade. He was sober enough to be cowed.

From the door he looked back at her, where she stood at the bedside, upright, quivering, a dart-like creature full of menace despite her delicacy of form and fibre. Again he knew himself to be at a disadvantage. He had not drunk enough to be intrepid. Swearing and malignant, he withdrew like a savage beast. But as he went, the madness of hatred rose in a swirl to his brain.

She had defied him, had she? Her bitter words rang again and again in his ears. She had proclaimed him a drunkard, a coward, a bully! And she thought he would put up with it. Did she? Did she? Thought she could insult him with impunity in his own house! Thought he would tamely endure her impertinences for all time! He ground his teeth as he went down to the bar. He would have a reckoning with her presently. Yes, there should be a reckoning. He had borne with her too long--too long! Now matters had come to a head. She would either have to humble herself or go.

He had tried to be patient. He had hoped that Jake Bolton would soon relieve him of the unwelcome burden he had taken upon himself. Jake could tame her; he was quite sure of that. But Jake seemed to be making no headway. He had even begun to wonder lately if Jake meant business after all.

In any case he was at the end of his patience; and when his wife came to him with tears to remonstrate on behalf of poor little Bunny he hardened himself against her and refused to discuss the subject.

As for Maud, she spent the rest of the day in trying to make Bunny's new quarters habitable. She hoped with all her heart that Jake would come in the evening so that they could move him into the room she occupied, a floor lower, which had at least a fireplace. But for once Jake disappointed her, and so the whole day passed in severe pain for Bunny and vexation of spirit for her.

Towards evening to her relief he began to doze. She watched beside him anxiously. He had been very plucky, displaying an odd protective attitude towards herself that had gone to her heart; but she knew that at times he had suffered intensely and the fact had been almost more than she could bear. She knew that it would be days before he would shake off the effects of the rough handling he had received, and she dreaded the future with a foreboding that made her feel physically sick.

Now that Sheppard's animosity had developed into active hostility, she knew that the situation could not last much longer, but how to escape it remained a problem unsolved. Her uncle had made no reply to her letter. She could not write to him again. And there was no one else to whom she could appeal. Alone, she could have faced the world and somehow made a way for herself; but with Bunny-- She clenched her hands in impotent anguish. There was only one person in the world willing to lift the burden from her, only one person besides herself who really cared for Bunny. She suddenly began to tremble. That sense of approaching doom was upon her again. The current had caught her surely, surely, and was whirling her away.

Bunny stirred--as though somehow caught in the net of her emotions--stirred and came out of uneasy slumber.

"I say, Maud!"

"What is it, darling? Are you uncomfortable?" There was a wealth of mother-love in her low voice as she bent above him.

Bunny put out a cold, moist hand. "I say, Maud," he said again, "Jake's a good sort. You like Jake, don't you?"

"Yes, darling," she answered soothingly.

He turned his head on the pillow; she could feel his fingers opening and closing in the restless way he had. "I like him too," he said. "I like him awfully. He's--the real thing. I wish----"

"What, Bunny?" There was constraint in her voice, and she knew it, but it was a subject upon which she could not bring herself to speak freely. She dreaded his answer more than she could have said.

Possibly he divined the fact, for he heaved a sharp sigh and said, "Nothing," in a tone that told her that he was very far from satisfied.

But she could not pursue the matter. Thankfully she let it drop.

The evening wore away. There was only one candle in the room. By it she and Bunny ate the supper which Maud herself had fetched from the kitchen. No one had time to wait upon them. The boy was still trying to make the best of things, and she marvelled at his courage.

When the meal was over he looked at her with a faint smile under his drawn brows. "Look here, Maud! There's that bed in the corner. Can't you make it comfortable and get a good night for once?"

She looked at him in surprise. It was very unusual for Bunny to give a thought to her comfort.

"Yes, I want you to," he said. "Go and undress, and then bring your blankets up here! You can't sit up all night in a straight-backed chair, so you may as well be comfortable. Don't stare! Go and do it!"

The bed in the corner was a thing of broken springs and crippled frame-work, but it had a

mattress of straw albeit bedclothes were lacking. Bunny's suggestion seemed feasible, and since it was plain that he would not be content unless she followed it she yielded without demur. Her own room was only a flight of stairs away, and she had already fetched several things from it for his comfort. She hoped to get him down to it on the following day, if only Jake would come. It was neither warm nor spacious, but it was preferable to this fireless attic.

She brought the blankets, and arranged the bed. "I don't think I'll undress, Bunny," she said.

"You are to," said Bunny. "Jake says no one can possibly rest properly without."

She was inclined to resent this assertion of Jake's teaching, but again she yielded. Bunny was in a mood to work himself into a fever if his behests were not obeyed.

She went down and undressed therefore, and presently slipped up to him again, hoping to find him asleep. But he was wide-eyed and restless.

"It's so beastly cold," he said. "I can't sleep. My feet are like stones. Where's the fur rug?"

She looked round for it. "Oh, Bunny, I'm so sorry. I must have left it in your room downstairs. Never mind! Here's a blanket instead!"

She was already pulling it off her bed when Bunny asserted himself once more.

"Maud, I won't have it! I will not have it! Do you hear? Put it back again! Why can't you go and fetch the fur rug?"

"My dear, I can't go down like this," she objected.

"Rot!" said Bunny. "Everyone's gone to bed by now. If you don't get it, they'll be turning the room out in the morning, and it'll get lost. Besides, you look all right."

She was wearing no more than a light wrap over her night-dress; but, as Bunny said, it was probable that everyone had retired, for the hour was late. Only a few dim lights were left burning in the passages. There would be no one about, and it would not take two minutes to slip down and get the rug. She dropped the blanket he had refused, and went softly out.

CHAPTER XII THE RECKONING

The whole house was in silence as noiselessly she stole down the stairs. It was close upon midnight, and she did not meet or hear anyone. The place might have been empty, so still was it.

The long, long roar of the sea came to her as she groped her way down the winding, dark passage that led to the room from which Bunny had been so rudely ejected a few hours before. There was no light here, but she knew her way perfectly, and, finding the door, softly opened it and turned on the electric light.

The room was just as she had left it, the sofa drawn up by the burnt-out fire. She had collected all Bunny's things earlier in the evening, but, since the rug had been forgotten, she thought it advisable to take the opportunity of ascertaining if anything else had been left behind. She found the rug, pushed the sofa back against the wall, and began a quiet search of all the drawers and other receptacles the room contained.

She had almost finished her task, and was just closing the writing-table drawer when a sudden sound made her start. A creaking footstep came from the passage beyond the open door. She turned swiftly with a jerking heart to see her step-father, bloated and malignant, standing on the threshold.

For a single instant he stood there looking at her, and a great throb of misgiving went through her at the savage triumph in his eyes. He had been drinking, drinking heavily she was sure; but he did not seem to be intoxicated, only horribly sure of himself, brutally free from any trammels of civilization. He closed the door with decision, and moved forward.

In the same moment she moved also towards the sofa over which she had thrown the rug she had come to fetch. Her heart was beating hard and fast, but she would not address a single word to him, would not so much as seem to see him. Supremely disdainful, she prepared to gather up her property and go.

But as she turned to the door she found him barring the way. He spoke, thickly yet not indistinctly.

"Not so fast, my fine madam! I've got to have a reckoning with you."

She drew herself up to the utmost of her slim height, and gave him a single brief glance of disgust. "Be good enough to let me pass!" she said, in tones of clear command.

But Sheppard did not move. He had been fortifying himself against any sudden strain such as

this all day long.

"Not so fast!" he said again, with a gleam of teeth under his dark moustache. "You made a mistake this morning, young woman; a very big mistake. Don't make another to-night!"

Maud froze to an icier contempt. The steady courage of her must have shamed any man in his sober senses.

"Stand aside instantly," she said, "or I shall ring the bell and rouse the house!"

He laughed at that, a cruel, vindictive laugh. "Oh, you don't come over me that way! You mean to have your lesson, I see, and p'raps it's as well. It's been postponed too long already. There's a deal too much spirit about you, and too much lip too. You think I'll put up with anything, don't you? Think yourself much too high and mighty to associate with the likes of me? Think you can call me any darn' names you please, and I'll bear 'em like a lamb?"

His voice rose. Obviously his temper was already beyond control. He was in fact lashing it on to fury. Maud knew the process well.

It was enough for her, and she waited for no more. She stepped quietly to the bell.

She was nearer to it than he, and she did not for a moment imagine that he would dare to molest her. But she had not realized the maddened condition to which he had wrought himself; and even when he suddenly and violently strode forward she did not draw back or dream that he would touch her.

Only as his hand caught her outstretched arm did the knowledge that he was as utterly beyond control as a wild beast burst upon her. She uttered a desperate cry, and began a sharp, instinctive struggle to escape.

It was a very brief struggle, so taken by surprise and utterly unprepared was she. One moment she was fighting wildly for freedom; the next he had her at his mercy.

"Oh, you may scream!" he gibed. "No one will hear you! Now--do you know what I am going to do to you?"

"Let me go!" she panted, crimson and breathless.

He locked her two wrists together in one iron hand. His strength was utterly irresistible. She was as a pigmy in the grip of a giant.

"I'll let you go when I've done with you," he said, gloating openly over her quivering helplessness. "But first you will have your lesson. I'm going to give you the trouncing of your life!"

With the words he suddenly wrenched her round and forced her, almost flung her, face downwards over the sofa-head.

"You've been spoiling for this for a long time," he said, "and--being your step-father--I'll see that you get it. Never had a good spanking before in all your life, I daresay? Well, well see how you like this one!"

And therewith he pulled off one of his down-at-heel carpet slippers and proceeded to flog her with it, as if she had been a boy.

What she went through during that awful chastisement Maud never forgot. She fought at first like a mad creature till she was suddenly aware of the light wrap she wore ripping in all directions, and from that moment she resisted no more, standing passive in an agony of apprehension while he wreaked upon her all the pent malice of the past few weeks.

It was a brutal punishment, administered with the savage intention of breaking down the stark silence with which she sought to meet it. And even when he succeeded at last, even when the girl's strength went from her and she collapsed as he held her with a wild burst of hysterical crying and broken, unnerved entreaties, he did not stay his hand. Now was his grand opportunity for vengeance, and he might never get another. He did not spare her until he had inflicted the utmost of which he was capable.

Then at last roughly he set her free. "That's right! Blub away!" he jeered. "I've taken all the stiffening out of you at last, and a damn' good job too. P'raps you'll keep a civil tongue in your head for the future, and give me no more of your dratted impudence. There's nothing like a sound drubbing to bring a woman to her senses. But I don't advise you to qualify for another."

He put on his slipper, breathing somewhat heavily after his exertions, then stood up and wiped his forehead. His fury had exhausted itself. His mood had become one of semi-malicious elation.

He looked at the girl still crouched over the sofa-head, sobbing and convulsed, utterly broken, utterly conquered.

"Come!" he said. "Don't let us have any more nonsense! You won't give me any more of your airs after this, and we shall be all the better friends for it. Stand up and say you're sorry!"

She gasped and gasped again, but no words could she utter. The hateful callousness of the man could not so much as rouse her scorn. Her pride was in the dust.

He took her by the arm and pulled her roughly up, making her stand before him though she was scarcely capable of standing.

"Come!" he began again, and broke off with a brutal laugh, staring at her.

A flame of fierce humiliation went through her, burning her from head to foot as she realized that her night-dress had been rent open across her bosom. She caught it together in her trembling fingers, shrinking in an anguish of shame from the new devil that had begun to gibe at her out of his bloodshot eyes.

He laughed again. "Well, my fine madam, we seem to have pitched the proprieties overboard quite completely this time. All your own fault, you know. Serves you jolly well right. You aren't going to say you're sorry, eh? Well, well, I'd give you another spanking if I felt equal to it, but I don't. So I'll have the kiss of peace instead."

He caught her to him with the words, gripped her tightly round the body, tilted her head back; and for one unspeakable moment the heavy moustache was crushed suffocatingly upon her panting lips.

In that moment the strength of madness entered into Maud, such strength as was later wholly beyond her own comprehension. With frenzied force she resisted him, fighting as if for her very life, and so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that in sheer astonishment his grip relaxed.

It was her one chance of escape, and she seized it. With a single furious wrench she tore herself from him, not caring how she did it, found herself free, and fled, fled like a mad thing, panting, dishevelled, frantic, from the room.

His laugh of half-tipsy derision followed her, and all the devils of hatred, malice, and bitter cauterizing shame went with her as she fled.

CHAPTER XIII THE ONLY PORT

It was a rainy, squally morning, and Jake returning from the Stables after an early ride, looked down at his muddy gaiters with momentary hesitation. Mrs. Lovelace, his cook and housekeeper, objected very strongly to muddy gaiters in what she was pleased to call "her parlour." They generally meant disaster to a clean table-doth, though Jake himself could never be made to see why, since he was the only person to use it and never noticed its condition, this should be regarded as a matter of vital importance.

On the present occasion, Mrs. Lovelace being out of sight and hearing, he decided to risk detection, and, leaving his cap on a peg in the dark oak passage, he passed on to the room overlooking the downs and the distant sea in which he had once entertained Bunny and his sister.

Breakfast would be awaiting him, he knew; and he was more than ready for breakfast. In fact he was ravenously hungry, and he hastened to hide the offending gaiters under the spotless table-doth as soon as he had rung the bell for the dish which was being kept hot for him.

When Mrs. Lovelace came stoutly in, he greeted her with a smile. "I'm late this morning. Been having a tussle with one of the youngsters. No, don't put that whip away! It wants a new lash. What a cussed nuisance this rain is! The ground is a quagmire, and the animals can hardly keep their feet. Any letters?"

"One, sir," said Mrs. Lovelace, and laid it before him. Then she looked at him searchingly. "Did you get very muddy?" she enquired.

"What?" said Jake. He took up his letter. "Yes, you can take the cover. No, leave the coffee! I'll pour that out when I'm ready. Muddy? Look out of the window, my good woman, if you want to know! Don't wait! Time's precious, and I guess you're busy."

Again he smiled upon Mrs. Lovelace, his pleasant, candid smile; and Mrs. Lovelace had perforce to smile back and withdraw.

Jake heaved a sigh of relief, and began his breakfast. His letter, bearing a purple crest of a fox's head and under it the motto: *Sans Vertu*, lay on the table before him. He eyed it as he ate, and presently took it up. It bore a Swiss stamp.

Jake opened it and read:

"DEAR BOLTON,

"I meant to winter in Cairo, and heaven alone knows why I am here. It is fiendishly cold, and blowing great guns. There was skating when I arrived, but that is a dream of the oast. We now sloop about knee-deep in slush or play cat's cradle in the *salon* during the day. We dance or cuddle in corners practically all night. Some of the female portion of the community are quite passably attractive, but I always preferred one goddess to a crowd, and she is not to be found here. Unless it freezes within the next forty-eight hours, I shall come back to beastly old England and look for her. So if I should turn up at Burchester within the next few days, please accept this (the only) intimation and have the stud ready for inspection.

"Yours sincerely,
"SALTASH."

Jake's face wore a curious expression as he folded the letter and returned it to the envelope. It was what Bunny called his "cowboy" look--a look in which humour and sheer, savage determination were very oddly mingled. There was a good deal of the primitive man about him at that moment. He continued his breakfast with business-like rapidity and presently helped himself to coffee with a perfectly steady hand.

The cup, however, was still untasted beside him when Mrs. Lovelace once more made her appearance, her plump face looking somewhat startled.

"Miss Brian has called, sir. Wishes to see you for a moment. Shall I show her in?"

Jake's chair scraped back and he was on his feet in a single movement. "Of course! Where is she? No, I'll fetch her myself. Out of the way, my good woman!"

He removed her from his path without the smallest ceremony, and was gone before she could protest.

In the passage he almost ran into his visitor. "Miss Brian! Is that you? Come right in! Snakes! You're wet. Come along to the fire!"

He had her by it before his greeting was fully uttered. A man of action at all times, was Jake. And Maud, still panting from her recent struggle with the elements, found herself in an easy-chair, holding numbed fingers to the blaze almost before she realized how she came to be there. He knelt beside her, unbuttoning her streaming waterproof. She saw the glint of the firelight on his chestnut hair.

"Thank you," she said, with an effort. "You are very kind."

He looked at her with those lynx-like eyes of his. "Say, you're perished!" he said, in his soft, easy drawl.

She smiled quiveringly at the concern in his face. She had expected a precipitate enquiry about Bunny, but it was evident that he had thoughts only for her at that moment. And she was very badly in need of human kindness and consideration just then.

She sat huddled over the fire, all the queenliness gone out of her, tried to speak to him twice and failed; finally, shook her head and sat in silence.

He got up and reached across the table for the coffee he had just poured out.

"Drink a little!" he said, holding it to her. "You need it."

She made a small gesture of impotence. Somehow the warmth and comfort of the room after the cheerless cold without had upset her. She still smiled, but it was a puckered, difficult smile, and her eyes were full of tears. She could not take the cup. Her throat worked painfully. Again she shook her head.

Jake stood beside her for a moment or two looking down at her, then with swift decision he set down the coffee, stepped to the door and quietly turned the key.

He came back to her with the steady purpose of a man quite sure of himself, knelt again by her side, put his arm about her.

"You lean on me, my girl!" he said softly. "Don't be afraid!"

She gave him a quick look. The tears were running down her face. She covered it suddenly with both hands and sobbed.

He drew her to him so gently that she was hardly aware of the action till her head came to rest on his shoulder. His free hand, strong and purposeful, took possession of one of hers and sturdily held it.

"It's all right," he murmured to her soothingly. "It's all right."

She wept for awhile without restraint, her nerves completely shattered, her pride laid low. And while she wept, Jake held her, strongly, sustainingly, his red-brown eyes staring unblinkingly full into the heart of the fire.

At the end of a long interval she grew a little calmer, made as if she would withdraw herself. But very quietly he frustrated her.

"No, not while you're feeling so badly. Say, now, let me take off your hat! Guess I can do it without you moving."

She was not in a condition to forbid him, and he removed it with considerable dexterity, while she still hid her quivering face against him with an instinctive confidence that paid a dumb tribute to the man's complete mastery of himself.

"I'm dreadfully sorry--to have behaved like this," she whispered at last.

"You needn't be sorry for that," said Jake. "No one will know except me. And I don't count."

"I think you do," she faltered, and made a more decided effort to free herself.

He let her go with a kindly pat on the shoulder. "Say, now, if that coffee ain't cold, p'raps you'll try a sip."

He reached for it and held it to her without rising. She lifted the cup in both her trembling hands while he held the saucer, and slowly drank.

Jake's eyes went with abrupt directness to her wrists as she did it. He did not speak at the moment. Only as she returned the cup he put it quietly aside and laid his hand over hers.

"What's that skunk Sheppard been doing to you?" he asked.

She shrank at the straight question "How--how did you know----"

He lifted his hand and pushed back her sleeves without speaking. There was something dreadful about him as he regarded the bruises thus exposed.

A quick fear went through her. "Jake," she said sharply, "that--is no affair of yours. You are not to--interfere."

His eyes came up to hers and the hardness went from him on the instant. "I reckon you're going to make some use of me," he said.

She trembled a little and turned her face away. She had used his Christian name spontaneously, and now suddenly she found that all formality had gone from between them. It disconcerted her, frightened her, made her uncertain as to his attitude as well as her own.

Jake waited a few seconds; then with the utmost gentleness he laid his hand again upon hers. "Are you afraid to say it?" he said.

"To say--what?" Her hands moved agitatedly beneath his till strangely, unexpectedly, they turned and clasped it with convulsive strength. "Yes, I am afraid," she said, with a sob.

"But I asked you to marry me weeks ago," said Jake.

Her head was bowed. She sought to avoid his look. "I know you did."

"And you are going to marry me," he said, in a tone that was scarcely a question.

She turned desperately and faced him. "I must have a clear understanding with you first," she said.

"I--see," said Jake.

He met her eyes with the utmost directness, and before his look hers wavered and fell. "Please!" she whispered. "You must agree to that."

He did not speak for a moment, but his fingers wound themselves closely about her own.

"I don't want you to be scared," he said finally. "But--that's a mighty big thing you've asked of me."

Maud's face was burning. "I knew it isn't for me to make--conditions," she said, under her breath.

A gleam of humour crossed Jake's face. "I guess it's up to me to accept or refuse," he said. "But--suppose I refuse--what are you going to do then? Will you marry me--all the same?"

She shook her head instantly. "I don't know what I shall do, Jake. I--I must go back and think."

She mustered her strength and made as if she would rise, but he checked her.

"Wait!" he said. "I haven't refused--yet. Lean back and rest a bit! I've got to do some thinking too."

She obeyed him because it seemed that he must be obeyed. He got to his feet.

"Poor girl!" he said gently. "It hasn't been easy for you, has it? Reckon you've just been driven to me for refuge. I'm the nearest port, that's all."

"The only port," Maud answered, with a shiver.

"All right," he said. "It's a safe one. But--" He left the sentence unfinished and turned to the window.

She lay back with closed eyes, counting the hard throbs of her heart while she waited. He was very quiet, standing behind her with his face to the storm-driven clouds. She longed to know

what was passing in his mind, but she could not break the silence. It held her like a spell while the clock on the mantelpiece ticked the dragging minutes away. She whispered to her racing heart that the moment he moved she would rise and go. But while the silence lasted she could not bring herself to stir. She was worn out physically and mentally, almost too weary for thought.

He moved at length rather suddenly, wheeled round before she was aware, and came back to the fire.

"Don't get up!" he said. "You look ready to drop, and you may just as well hear what I have to say sitting. It won't make a mite of difference."

She raised her eyes to his in unconscious appeal. "I am afraid I have made a mistake," she said.

She saw his smile for a moment. "No, you haven't made a mistake, my girl. You're safe with me. But I wonder if you have the faintest idea now why I want you for my wife."

The simple directness of his speech touched her as she did not want to be touched. She sat silent, her hands clasped tightly together.

"You haven't," he said. "And p'raps this isn't the time to tell you. You've come to me for refuge--as I hoped you would--and I shan't abuse your confidence. But, you know, I had a reason."

He paused, but she still said nothing. Only she could not meet his eyes any longer. She looked away into the fire, waiting for him to continue.

"Say, now," he said, after a moment, "if I make a bargain with you, you won't accuse me of taking advantage of your position?"

She winced a little. "I wish you--to forget--that I ever said that."

"All right. It is forgotten," said Jake. "I'll go ahead. We haven't mentioned Bunny though I take it he is a fairly big factor in the case. That is to say, if it hadn't been for Bunny, you would never have taken this step."

Maud's eyes went swiftly up to his. "But of course I shouldn't!" she said quickly. "I thought you understood that."

"I quite understand," said Jake. "I assure you I'm not taking anything for granted. But now--I want to put it to you--supposing the impossible happened, supposing Bunny were cured,--yes, it's only the hundredth chance, I know--still, just for a moment, suppose it! Bunny cured, able to look after himself like other lads. You would be married to me. What then?"

"What then?" She repeated the words, still with an effort meeting his look.

He made a slight gesture with one hand. "You would stick to me?"

The hot colour flooded her face and neck. "Of course," she said, her voice very low. "That goes without saying."

He bent slowly towards her. "Maud, if we ever live alone together, it must be as man and wife."

His voice was low too, but she heard in it a deep note that seemed to pierce through and through her. His eyes drew and held her own. She wanted to avoid them but could not. They burned like the red, inner heart of a furnace.

The blood receded from her face. She felt it go. "We--need never live alone," she said faintly.

He held out a quiet hand to her. "P'raps not. But I should like your promise to that, all the same." He paused a moment; then added: "I have sworn already to be good to you, remember."

She laid her hand in his. She could not do otherwise. He held it and waited.

"Very well," she said at last, her voice almost a whisper. "I--agree."

He let her go, and straightened himself. "It's a deal, then," he said. "And now for more immediate details. You've decided to marry me, and I gather you don't mind how soon?"

He picked up a clay pipe from the mantelpiece, and knocked out some ash against the fireplace.

Maud watched him with a curious species of fascination. There was something in the man's serenity of mien that puzzled her, something that did not go with those fiery, possessive eyes.

He looked at her with a smile that was half-quizzical, half-kindly, and her heart began to beat more freely.

"We must somehow get away from 'The Anchor' to-day," she said. "I have a little money. Perhaps if you would help me to move Bunny, we could go into lodgings again until----"

"I have a little money too," said Jake. "And I will certainly help you. But first,--do you object to telling me what has been happening at 'The Anchor'?"

She coloured again vividly, painfully, but he was fully engrossed with the filling of his pipe and did not notice her embarrassment.

"To begin with," she said with difficulty, "he--Mr. Sheppard--has turned us out of the room

downstairs. He carried Bunny off himself to an attic under the roof, and hurt him horribly. I was driven nearly mad at the time." She broke off, shuddering at the remembrance.

Jake frowned. "Go on!" he said briefly.

She went on with increasing difficulty. "That happened yesterday. I hoped you would come round in the afternoon or evening, but you didn't."

"I couldn't get away," he interpolated. "Yes? And then?"

"Then--in the evening--that is, late at night--" Maud stumbled like a nervous child--"I went down to fetch something and he--he came in after me, half-tipsy; and--and--he--" She halted suddenly. "I can't go on!" she said, with quivering lips.

Jake laid aside his pipe and stooped over her. "Did he beat you, or did he make love to you? Which?" he said.

There was a sound in his voice like the growl of an angry beast. She could not look him in the face.

"Tell me!" he said, and laid an imperative hand on her shoulder. "You need never tell anyone else."

She shrank a little. "I don't see why I should tell you," she said reluctantly.

"You must tell me," said Jake with decision.

And, after brief hesitation, miserably, with face averted, she yielded and told him. After all, why should he not know? Her dainty pride was crushed for ever. She could sink no lower.

"He held me down and thrashed me--with his slipper. I was in my night-dress, and--and it was rather a brutal thrashing. Perhaps some women wouldn't have minded it much; but I--I am not used to that kind of treatment. I hope you will never beat me, Jake. I don't bear it very heroically."

She tried to laugh, but it was a piteous little sound that came from her quivering throat.

Jake's hand closed upon her shoulder. She seemed to feel the whole man vibrate behind it like a steel spring. Yet he made no comment whatever. "Go on!" he said, his voice short and stern. "Tell me everything!"

She braced herself to finish. "He went on till he was tired. I believe I was wailing like a baby, but no one heard. And then--and then--he suddenly discovered that I was a woman and not a naughty child, and he--he--kissed me." She shuddered suddenly and violently. "That's nearly all," she ended. "I got away from him, heaven knows how. And I got back to Bunny. I didn't tell him everything, but I couldn't help him knowing I was upset. We neither of us slept all night. And the night before was a bad one too. That's how I came to be so idiotic just now."

She leaned slowly back in her chair till she rested against the hand he had laid upon her.

"Do you know," she said tremulously, after a moment, "I think it has actually done me good to tell you? You are very kind to me, Jake."

He withdrew his hand and turned away. "That may be," he said enigmatically. "And again it may not. Thanks anyway for telling me." He picked up the horsewhip that he had flung down on entering, and began with his square, steady fingers to remove the lash. "You are right. You can't spend another night at 'The Anchor.' If you will allow me, I will find some comfortable rooms where you and Bunny can stay till we can get married. I will go up to-morrow and get a special licence. The marriage might be arranged for Sunday--if that will suit you."

"Next Sunday?" Maud started round and looked at him with startled eyes.

He nodded. "In church. After the eight o'clock service if there is one. Your mother must give you away. Afterwards, we will come on here with the boy." He glanced round at her. "He shall have this room for the daytime, and the one over it to sleep in. I'm sorry there are not two ground-floor rooms for him; but I know how to carry him in comfort. Of course, if necessary this room could be used as a bedroom as well."

He threw down the worn lash and went to a drawer for a new one. Maud still watched him in silence.

"Does that meet with your approval?" he asked at length.

"I think you are--more than good," she said, a tremor of feeling in her voice.

He kept his eyes lowered over his task. "I am not hustling you too much?" he enquired.

She smiled wanly. "I am asking myself if I ought to let you do it," she said. "It doesn't seem very fair to you."

"It chances to be the thing I want," said Jake, his fingers still busy. "And I reckon you won't disappoint me--won't draw back? I can count on you?"

She rose, turning fully towards him. "You can certainly count on me," she said. "But are you really sure you meant it? It isn't going to spoil your life?"

Jake stood upright with a jerk. She met the extraordinary brightness of his eyes with an odd mixture of boldness and reluctance.

"My girl," he said, in his queer, anomalous drawl, "there ain't a man anywhere in God's universe who knows what he wants better than I do. If I didn't want this thing I shouldn't ask for it. See?" He came to her with the words, and laid one finger on her arm. "Don't you know it's your friendship I'm after?" he said, with a touch of aggressiveness. "Why, I've been after it ever since that night I found you down in the dark alone on the edge of the parade. You were up against it that night, weren't you? And didn't like me over much for butting in. Do you know what you made me think of? A forlorn princess of the Middle Ages. There's a mediæval flavour about you. I don't know where you keep it. But it makes me feel mediæval too."

She drew back a little, stiffened ever so slightly. Something in her resented the freedom of his speech. Something rose in swift revolt and clamoured to be gone.

He must have seen her gesture, her quick, protesting blush; for he turned almost instantly and jerked the whip-lash through his fingers, testing it.

A fitful gleam of sunshine suddenly pierced the clouds behind him and shone on his bent head. His hair gleamed like burnished copper. The tawny glint of it made her think of an animal--a beast of prey, alert, merciless, primeval.

She put on her hat. "I must be getting back to Bunny," she said.

"I am coming with you," said Jake.

She looked at him sharply. "You will walk?"

"Yes, I shall walk."

She pointed with nervous abruptness to the whip he held. "Then you won't want that."

Jake smiled, and tested the whip again without speaking.

Maud waited a moment; then steadily she spoke. "You realized of course, that when I told you about Mr. Sheppard's behaviour of last night, it was in strict confidence?"

Jake squared his broad shoulders. "All right, my girl. It's safe with me," he said. "There shan't be any scandal."

Maud was very white, but quite resolute. "Jake," she said, "you are not to do it."

He raised his brows.

"You are not to do it!" she said again, with vehemence. "I mean it! I mean it! The quarrel is not yours. You are not to make it so." She paused, and suddenly caught her breath. "Oh, don't look at me like that! You make me--afraid!"

Jake turned and tossed the whip down on the window-seat. "You've nothing to be afraid of," he said rather curtly. "You're making your own bugbear. P'raps it's natural," he added, with abrupt gentleness. "You've had a lot to bear lately. There! I've done what you asked. We had better get back while it's fine."

He unlocked and opened the door, standing back for her to pass.

He kept his eyes downcast as she went through, and she knew that it was in response to her appeal that he did so. She tingled with a burning embarrassment, which vanished all in a moment as he said: "Say, now, do you mind if I light my pipe before I follow you? Don't wait! I'll catch you up."

And she made her way out into the fleeting sunlight and racing wind with a strong sense of relief. The pipe was not a particularly aristocratic feature of Jake's existence, but it was an extremely characteristic one, and it placed matters on a normal footing at once. Jake was never disconcerting or formidable when he was smoking a pipe. She consented to it gladly.

And Jake turned back into the room with a grim smile on his lips, picked up a letter from the table, and thrust it deep into the fire.

After that he lighted his pipe with the charred remnants thereof, and followed Maud into the open.

CHAPTER XIV THE WAY OF ESCAPE

The sun shone out again as they went down the hill, and the sea gleamed below them like a sheet of silver.

"You like this place?" asked Jake.

"I could like it," she made answer.

He smiled. "Then I reckon you shall. Say, does Bunny know about your coming up here to me?"

She coloured deeply. "He knew I came, yes. He did not know why."

Jake was still smiling. "Guess he'll be pleased," he said. He added, between puffs at his pipe: "We'll make him happy between us. We'll give him the time of his life."

She drew a deep breath. Surely no sacrifice was too great for that!

They passed the church on the hill, and descended the steep road to the town.

"There are some rooms I know of along this road," said Jake. "Kept by the wife of one of our stable-men. Shall we go in and have a look at 'em?"

She hesitated. "Bunny will wonder where I am."

He glanced at her. "Well, look here! You leave me to see to it. I'll fix up something, and then I'll come on after you and we'll get the boy away."

She met his look somewhat doubtfully.

"Why not?" said Jake.

She answered him with an effort. "You do understand, don't you, that I couldn't--I can't--accept help from you before--before--our marriage?"

"Why not?" he said again. "Reckon you mean to stick to your bargain?"

"Oh, it isn't that," she said painfully. "Of course--of course--I shall keep my word with you. But I have a little pride left--just a little--and----"

"And I'm to humour it, eh?" said Jake. "Well, you shall have it your own way. But let me do the fixing for you! I know just what you want. It's only for a few days either."

He smiled at her, and she yielded.

But when they separated at length she paused uneasily. "Jake!"

"Your servant!" said Jake promptly.

She stretched a nervous hand towards him. "Jake, if you meet--my step-father, you will not--not----"

"Most unfortunately I can't," said Jake. He held her hand for a moment, and let it go. "There! Good-bye! I won't do anything indiscreet, I promise you. There is too much at stake. Now you get back to Bunny as quick as you can! I shan't be long after you."

And Maud went with a feeling at the heart of relief and dread oddly mingled. She knew that Jake would keep his word. There was a rocklike strength about him that nothing could ever shake. For good or ill, he would stick to a bargain, be the price what it might. But she saw him overriding every obstacle to attain his purpose. He would never flinch from possible consequences; of that she was certain. What he had said he would do, that he would do, and no power on earth would divert him therefrom.

She shivered suddenly and violently as she walked. The relentless force of the man had in it an element that was terrible. What had she done? What had she done?

She encountered her mother as she mounted the hotel stairs.

"Oh, my dear, here you are at last!" was her greeting. "I have been so worried about you. Come into my room!"

But Maud resisted her. "I must go to Bunny. He has been alone for so long."

"No, dear, no! Bunny's all right for the present. I've been to see. He doesn't want anything. He told me so. Come into my room--just for a moment, dear child! We can't talk in the passage."

As Mrs. Sheppard was plainly bent upon talking, Maud concluded she had something to say; and followed her.

"Shut the door, my darling! That's right. How white you look this morning! Dearie, I am more sorry than I can say for what happened last night. Giles told me about it. But he says he is quite willing now to let bygones be bygones. So you won't bear malice, darling; will you? Of course I know he ought not to have done it," with a slightly uneasy glance at her daughter's rigid face. "I told him so. But he assured me he only did it for your good, dear. And he seems to think that you were rather rude to him earlier in the day. He is old-fashioned, you know. He thinks a whipping clears the air, so to speak. It's better anyhow than saving up grievance after grievance, isn't it, dear? You'll start afresh now, and be much better friends. At least it won't be his fault if you're not. He is quite ready to treat you as his own daughter."

She paused for breath.

Maud was standing stiff and cold against the door. "Is that what you called me in here to say?" she asked.

Mrs. Sheppard still looked uneasy though she tried to laugh it off. "Not quite all, dear. But I really should go and make friends with him if I were you. He isn't a bit angry with you any more.

In fact he has been joking about it, says his arm is so stiff this morning he can hardly use it. You couldn't possibly keep it up if you heard him."

"I shall not hear him," said Maud.

White and proud she faced her mother, and the latter's half-forced merriment died away.

"Child, don't look so tragic! What is it? Come, he didn't hurt you so badly surely! Can't you forgive and forget?"

"No," Maud said. "I shall never do either. I am going away with Bunny to-day. And I hope--with all my heart--that I shall never see his face again."

"Going away?" Mrs. Sheppard opened startled eyes. "But, Maud----"

"I am going to marry Jake Bolton," Maud said, her voice very deep and quiet. "He will take me and Bunny too."

"Oh, my dear. That man!" Her mother gazed at her in consternation. "He--he is infinitely rougher than Giles," she said.

"I know he is rough. But he cares for Bunny. That matters most," said Maud. "In fact, I believe he likes Bunny best!"

"My dear, it's you he wants--not Bunny," said Mrs. Sheppard, with a rare flash of insight. "I saw that at the very beginning of things--at our wedding-party. He looked at you as if he could devour you."

Maud put out a quick hand of protest. "Mother, please! That doesn't prove he cares about me--any more than I care for him. It--it's just the way with men of his sort. He--he has been very kind, and he is genuinely fond of Bunny, and--and--in fact it's the only thing to be done. I can't--possibly--stay here any longer."

Her lip quivered unexpectedly. She turned to go. But her mother intercepted her quickly, endearingly.

"Maud, darling, wait a minute! I haven't finished. You took my breath away. But listen a moment! This sacrifice won't be necessary, I am sure, I am sure. You couldn't marry that horsey creature. You would never bear life with him. You are not adaptable enough nor experienced enough. You could never endure it. It would be infinitely worse than poor Giles and his tantrums. No, but listen, dear! If you really feel you must go, I think a way of escape is going to be offered to you and poor little Bunny too. I have had a letter from your Uncle Edward, and he is coming expressly to see you both."

"Mother!" Maud almost tore herself free, gazing at her with that in her eyes that was to haunt Mrs. Sheppard for many days. "Oh, why, why, why didn't you tell me before? When did the letter come?"

"It was last night, darling. You were such a long way off--right at the top of the house--and I was too tired to go after you--I meant to tell you first thing, dear; but when I went to look for you after breakfast, you had gone. I am very sorry, but really it wasn't my fault. Still, you won't want to marry that vulgar person now, for I am sure your uncle means to make provision for you. He can well afford it. He is very wealthy."

But Maud resolutely put her mother's clinging arms away from her. "Jake is not vulgar," she said in a voice that sounded flat and tired. "And I have promised to marry him. Nothing can make any difference to that now."

"My dear! What nonsense! I will get Giles to talk to him. How can you dream of such a thing, you who might have married Lord Saltash--and may yet! There is no knowing. Maud, dearest, you must be reasonable. You must indeed. This Jake Bolton may be a very excellent man, a very worthy man, but as a husband for you he would be utterly unsuitable. Surely you can see that for yourself! I can't imagine what possessed you to entertain such an idea for a moment. It was rank presumption on his part to dare to lift his eyes to you. Why, my dear, if you were to marry him your life would be an absolute thralldom. You mustn't think of it, dear child. You mustn't indeed. Why, he is not much better than a stable-boy. And his speech----"

"He has spent a good deal of his time among cowboys." Maud was still firmly trying to disengage herself. "His speech is more or less acquired. In any case--in any case--I have given him my promise. And you had better not let Mr. Sheppard interfere. It would be wise of him to keep out of Jake's way in fact. Jake knows exactly why I am prepared to marry him."

"My dear! You actually made a confidant of that dreadful person! How could you?"

"I wanted a man to protect me," Maud said very bitterly, "from the vindictive savagery of a brute!"

"Maud! How can you talk so? And I am sure Jake Bolton is much more of a brute than poor Giles. Why, look at the man! Look at his mouth, his eyes! They absolutely stamp him. Oh, dear,

you're very headstrong and difficult. I begin to think Giles had some excuse after all. Perhaps your uncle will be able to manage you. You are quite beyond me."

Maud almost laughed. "When does he arrive?" she asked.

"This evening. He has asked us to reserve a room for him." Mrs. Sheppard had speedily developed a proprietary interest in the management of the hotel. Its welfare had become far more engrossing than that of her children.

Maud opened the door. "We shall be gone by that time. Jake's finding us rooms somewhere in the town."

Mrs. Sheppard held up her hands. "Jake finding rooms! Maud! how--scandalous! How do you know--you don't know!--that he is to be trusted?"

Maud made a brief gesture as of one who submits to the inevitable. "I trust him," she said, with that in her voice that stilled all further protest.

And with the words she passed with finality out of her mother's room, and went away upstairs without a backward glance.

Mrs. Sheppard sat down and shed a few petulant tears over her child's waywardness. "She never would listen to advice," was the burden of her lament. "If she had, she would have been happily married to Lord Saltash by now, and I might have had my house in London to-day. Oh dear, oh dear! Children are a bitter disappointment. They never can be made to see what is for their own good. She'll rue the day. I know she will. That trainer man has a will of iron. He'll break her to it like one of his horses. My poor, proud Maud!"

CHAPTER XV THE CLOSED DOOR

A way of escape! A way of escape! How often during the hours of that endless day were those words in Maud's mind. They pursued her, they mocked her, whichever way she turned.

To Jake she merely very briefly imparted the news of her uncle's expected advent, and he received it without comment.

Bunny was much more speculative. He had been somewhat carried out of himself by the trend of events. It was Jake who whispered to him the amazing information of his sudden conquest, together with a very strenuous injunction not to talk to Maud about it unless she started the subject. And Maud, for some reason, could not start it. She went through all the necessary arrangements for their removal as one in a dream, scarcely speaking at all, responding very occasionally to Bunny's eager surmises respecting the unknown great-uncle who had never before taken the faintest interest in them, or shown himself so much as aware of their existence. His coming did not seem to matter to her. If indeed he were about to offer her a way of escape, it could not matter to her now. The door that led thither had closed, closed in the night, because her mother had been too tired to seek her out and tell her. The irony of it! The bitter cruel irony! She dared not pause to think.

Jake spent a great part of the day with them, working with a will to get them comfortably settled in their new quarters before the fall of the early dusk. After that, he remained to tea; but he devoted almost the whole of his attention to Bunny, who had in fact come to regard it as his right.

He left soon after, refusing to remain for the game of chess for which the lad earnestly pleaded.

"Not to-night, my son! Your brain has got to settle down. It's a deal too lively at present."

He bent over Bunny at parting, and whispered a few words that were inaudible to Maud. Then he turned to go.

She followed him to the outer door. The evening air smote chill and salt upon her, and she shivered involuntarily. Jake stopped to light a cigarette.

"I shan't be coming round to-morrow," he remarked then. "I shall be too busy. But I'll look in on Saturday, and tell you what I've fixed up. Will Sunday morning do all right if I can fix it?"

She shivered again. "Yes," she said.

"Say, you're cold," said Jake gently. "I mustn't keep you standing here. But you really meant that Yes?"

He looked at her, and she saw that his eyes were kindly. She held out her hand with a desperate little smile.

"Yes, I meant it."

His hand closed strongly, sustainingly, upon hers. "Guess there's nothing to be scared of," he said. "I'll take care of you, sure."

She felt a sudden lump rise in her throat, and found she could not speak.

"You're tired," said Jake softly. "Go and get a good night! It's what you're wanting."

"Yes, I am tired," she managed to say.

He still held her hand, looking at her with those strange, glittering eyes of his that seemed to pierce straight through all reserve and enter even the hidden inner sanctuary of her soul.

"What's this relative of yours like now?" he asked unexpectedly.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I've never seen him."

"Think he's coming along to offer you a home?" asked Jake.

Her face burned suddenly and hotly. For some reason she resented the question. "I don't know. How can I possibly know?"

"All right," said Jake imperturbably. "But in case he does, I'd like you to know that you are at liberty to do as you please in the matter. He'll tell you, maybe, that I'm not the man for you. That, I gather, is your mother's attitude. I sensed it from the beginning. If he does, and if you feel inclined to agree with him, you're free to do so,--free as air. But at the same time, I'd like you to remember that if you should accept anything from him and then not find it to your liking, you can still come along to me and follow out the original programme. I'm only wanting to make you comfortable."

He stopped; and in the pause that followed, Maud's other hand came out to him, shyly yet impulsively. "You are--such a good fellow!" she said with a catch in her voice.

"Oh, bunkum!" said Jake, in a tone of almost indignant remonstrance.

He held her two hands, and turning, spat forth his cigarette into the night; an action of primitive simplicity that filled Maud with a grotesque kind of horrified mirth, mirth so intense that she had a sudden, hysterical desire to laugh. She restrained herself with a desperate effort.

"Good night!" she said, with something of urgency in her voice. "It isn't bunkum at all. It's the truth. You--I think you are the best friend I ever had. But--but----"

"But--" said Jake.

She freed her hands with a little gasp. "Nothing," she said. "Good night!"

It was a final dismissal, and as such he accepted it. She heard the steady fall of his feet as he went away, and with his going she managed to recover her composure.

There was an undeniable greatness about him that seemed to dwarf all criticism. She realized that to measure him by ordinary standards was out of the question, and as she reviewed all that he had done for her that day a gradual warmth began to glow in her. There was no other friend in all her world who would have extended to her so firm or so comforting a support in her hour of adversity. And if her face burned at the memory of her own utter collapse in his presence, she could but recall with gratitude and with confidence the steadfast kindness with which he had upheld her. She had gone to him in anguished despair, and he had offered her the utmost that he had to offer. As to his motives for so doing, she had a feeling that he had deliberately refrained from expressing them. He wanted her and he wanted Bunny. Perhaps he was lonely. Perhaps years of wandering had created in him a longing for home and domestic comfort.

But she did not speculate very deeply upon that subject. She felt that she could not. There was something in the man's nature, something colossal of which she was but dimly aware, and which she had no means of gauging, that checked her almost at the outset. She found herself standing before a closed door, a door which she had neither the audacity nor the desire to attempt to open. She was even a little fearful lest one day that door should open to her of its own accord and she should be constrained to enter whether she would or not.

But on the whole that talk with Jake had calmed her. The man was so temperate, so completely master of himself, and withal so staunch in the friendship he had established with her, that she could not but feel reassured. There was a delicacy in his consideration for her that warmed her heart. She knew by every instinct of her being that he would take care of her as he had promised. And she wanted someone to take care of her so badly, so badly.

She was so deadly tired of fending for herself.

She found Bunny in a mood of remarkable docility, and she managed to get him to bed without much trouble. He also was worn out after two nights of restlessness, and he fell asleep earlier than usual.

She herself sat for awhile in the little sitting-room with a book, but she found she could not read. She was too tired to fix her attention, and the thought of Jake kept intruding itself

whenever she attempted to do so. It was wonderful how she had come to rely upon him, knowing so little of him. He had always been far more to Bunny than to her.

She was drifting into a kind of semi-doze, still with the memory of him passing and repassing through her brain, when there came the sound of a bell in the house, and almost immediately after, the opening of the sitting-room door.

She started up in surprise to see her landlady usher in a little, spare grey-whiskered man who walked with a strut and cleared his throat as he came with a noise like the growling of a dog. He made her think irresistibly of a Scotch terrier bristling for a fight.

He halted in the middle of the room, and banged with his umbrella on the floor, as one demanding a hearing.

"Hullo!" he said. "My name's Warren. You, I take it, are Maud Brian. If so, I'm your Uncle Edward."

Maud came forward, still feeling a little dazed. Since Jake's departure she had almost forgotten the approaching advent of this relative of hers.

"How do you do?" she said. "Yes, I am Maud Brian. Come and sit down!"

He took her hand, looking at her with small grey eyes that were keenly critical.

"How old are you?" he demanded.

"I am twenty-five," said Maud, faintly smiling.

He uttered a grunting growl and sat down with a jerk. "I've come straight from your mother to talk to you. She's a fool, always was. I hope you're not another."

"Thank you," said Maud sedately.

He brought his shaggy grey brows together. "I've come the length of England to see you, but I haven't any time to waste. I'm going back to-morrow. That letter of yours--I meant to answer it, but business pressed, and it had to stand over. Then I decided to come and see what sort of young woman you were before I did anything further. I couldn't stand a replica of your mother in my house. But--thank goodness--you're not much like her. She tells me you're thinking of making a marriage of convenience to get away from your step-father. Now, that's a very serious step for a young woman to contemplate. It seems to me I've turned up in the nick of time."

Maud, sitting facing him with her hands folded in her lap, still faintly smiled. The bluntness with which he tackled the situation appealed more to her sense of humour than to any other emotion. She realized that he was actually about to offer her a way of escape, but, curiously, she no longer felt any desire to avail herself of it. By his generous assurance that she was at liberty to do as she would, Jake had somehow managed to range her on his side. She did not want to escape any more. Moreover, there was Bunny to be thought of. She knew well in what direction his desires--and his welfare also--lay.

"It was very kind of you to come," she said. "But, as regards my marriage, my mind is quite made up. He--the man I am going to marry--understands everything. I have been quite open with him. He has been most kind, most generous. I could not think of drawing back now."

"Pshaw!" said Mr. Warren. He sat forward in his chair, his hands gripping the knob of his umbrella and surveyed her with growing disapproval. "You're prepared to sell yourself to a man you don't love in return for a home, hey?" he asked.

She winced sharply, and in a moment her tired young face was flooded with colour. "Certainly not!" she said, her voice very low. "Most certainly not!"

"Looks uncommonly like it," he maintained.

"It is not so!" she said, with low-toned vehemence. "I have told you--he--understands."

"And is prepared to give all and receive nothing for his pains?" pursued the old man relentlessly. "If so, he's a very remarkable young man; and let me tell you for your comfort, it's an attitude he won't keep up for long, not--that is--unless he's a blithering idiot? Is he an idiot?"

Maud almost laughed. "No, that he is not! But really--really--you are wasting your time. If you had come this time yesterday, I would have listened to you. To-night it is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Because I have promised."

"Tut! tut! He must release you."

"He would release me," Maud said slowly. "That is just it."

"Just what? Talk sense if you can!" It was evident that patience was not Uncle Edward's strong point. He fidgeted his umbrella testily.

She looked at him with her clear, straight eyes. "That is just why I will not ask for my release. In fact, I--don't want it."

"Don't want it! Then, young woman, you're in love with him. I've come on a fool's errand, and

I'll wish you good night."

He was on his feet with the words. Maud rose too. She laid a hand of half-timid restraint upon his arm.

"I am not--in love with him, Uncle Edward," she said, her voice not wholly steady. "Such a thing would be impossible. But at the same time--though I can't give him everything--he shall not repent his bargain. We are going to be--friends."

"Pshaw!" said Uncle Edward again. He gripped her hand unexpectedly, staring up at her with his keen eyes. "Do you know how old I am?" he said.

She shook her head.

"I'm eighty," he said. "I've seen a little of men in my time, and I've been a man myself. So let me tell you this! There's not a man on this earth who could be satisfied for long with that kind of farce. You've got him on the leash now. He's tame and good. But there's a ravening wolf inside us all, my dear, when we're thwarted, and the longer we're thwarted the more savage we get. You can't bring up a wolf--not the tamest wolf in the world--on bread and butter. Sooner or later he'll begin to feel a bit empty, and whine for the real thing. And if you still go on starving the brute till he's famished, he'll either break away and go elsewhere for food, or else he'll round on you one day and tear you in pieces. You'll be the sufferer either way. It's nature I tell you, it's nature. You'll have to give all or drive him away at the outset. There can't be half-measures with a man who is a man. If you offer them you must expect trouble. And remember, it's always the woman who pays in the end,--always the woman who pays."

He repeated the words with the impressiveness of a judge pronouncing sentence.

Maud was trembling, though she tried to conceal the fact. "And then there is Bunny to be thought of," she said.

"Bunny? Who is Bunny? Oh, your brother, is it? And he's a hopeless cripple, I understand? Is it for his sake that you've hatched this mad scheme?"

"In a great measure. You see, he and--and Jake Bolton are very fond of one another."

"Pshaw!" the old man exclaimed. "So this Jake Bolton is to have the boy, with you thrown in as a makeweight; is that it? And you think you're all going to be happy together, do you? Never heard such a tomfool scheme in my life. Where does this Jake Bolton hang out? I'll go and have a talk to him."

"Oh, please don't!" Maud begged. "He'll think I sent you. And really--really there is nothing to discuss."

"We'll see about that," he rejoined grimly. "Seems to me it's high time somebody came along and interfered. Now, look here, what's your name?--Maud! I'm going to get you out of this mess. You shan't marry a man you don't love just because there was no other way out. There is another way out, and you're to take it. You're to come and live with me, do you hear? You and your precious Bunny too! And when I die, I'll leave you both provided for. See? Come, I can't say fairer than that."

He was still gripping her hand, and looking at her with shrewd eyes under their beetling brows as though prepared to beat down all opposition. There was a look of Bunny about those eyes, Bunny in a difficult mood. She recognized it with a sigh. It seemed her fate to be continually doing battle with someone, and she felt wholly unfitted for it. All she asked of life was peace and quietness.

"My home is a dingy one," said her uncle, "but you may be able to make it more cheerful. I shan't interfere with either of you. Come, now, you're going to be a sensible girl, hey? I'm sorry I didn't turn up before. But the knot isn't tied, so I'm not too late. We must explain the situation to the young man. Unless he's an absolute bounder, he'll be amenable to reason."

But Maud shook her head. "I can't do it, Uncle Edward. I know you mean to be kind. I am very grateful. But--I can't."

He rasped his throat aggressively. "That's nonsense," he said with decision. "Plainly the man is beneath you. You say you don't love him, and never could."

"I am not--altogether--sure that he is beneath me," she said rather wistfully.

"But you don't love him?" her uncle insisted, scanning her piercingly.

She bent her head with an instinctive desire to avoid his eyes. "No."

"Or anyone else?" he pursued.

She made a small movement of protest.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, in the tone of one who has discovered something. "Your mother hinted as much. And you think you're going to make things better for yourself by marriage with a rank outsider. Is that it? Is that it? Then take my word for it, you're going to make the biggest mistake

of your life. And if you persist in it, I've done with you. At least, no, I haven't done; for I'm going straight to that young man of yours to tell him the sort of bargain he's going to make."

He paused, for suddenly Maud had drawn herself up very straight and proud. "If you wish to do so, you must," she said, and her pale face was very regal and composed. "But it will not make the smallest difference to either of us. Jake has my promise. I have his."

It was at this point that the door opened again to admit the landlady with a note on a salver.

"Mr. Bolton's compliments," she said, "and will you be good enough to send back an answer?"

CHAPTER XVI THE CHAMPION

Maud took the note with a glance at her uncle.

"Open it!" he said. "Don't mind me!" and stumped irately to the bay-window and pulled aside the blind.

Maud opened the note. Her hands were not very steady. The envelope contained a half-sheet of notepaper with a few words scrawled thereupon, and a short length of string.

"Sorry to trouble you," ran the note. "But will you tie a knot in the enclosed to show me the size of your wedding finger? Yours, Jake."

She looked up from the note as her uncle came tramping back. "Is it the young man himself?" he demanded.

"It's Mr. Bolton, sir," said the landlady.

"Then show him in!" ordered the old man autocratically. "Show him in, and we'll get it over! No time like the present."

A swift remonstrance rose to Maud's lips, but she did not utter it. The landlady looked to her for confirmation of the order, but she did not utter a single word.

"Get along!" commanded Uncle Edward. "Or I'll fetch him in myself!"

A whiff of tobacco-smoke came in through the open door. Maud stood very still, listening. A moment later there came the sound of a pipe being tapped on the heel of a boot, and then the firm, quiet tread of Jake's feet in the passage.

He entered. "I didn't mean to disturb you again, but I'd forgotten this little detail and I've got to catch an early train." He turned with no sign of surprise and regarded Maud's visitor. "Good evening, sir!" he said.

Mr. Warren gave him a brief nod. Maud still stood mute, Jake's note with the piece of string dangling therefrom in her hand.

He went quietly to her. "Say! Let me fix that for you!" he said.

She suffered him to take her hand. It lay cold and quivering in his. He wound the string round her third finger and knotted it. Then he slipped it off, and took the hand closely and warmly into his own.

"I hope you haven't come to forbid the banns," he said, calmly returning the grim scrutiny that the old man had levelled at him from the moment of his entrance.

Uncle Edward uttered a sound indicative of intense disgust. "I? Oh, I've no authority," he said. "I disapprove--if that's what you mean. Any decent person would disapprove of the sort of alliance you two are determined to make. But I don't expect my opinion to be deferred to. If you choose to marry a woman who doesn't care two straws about you, it's your affair, not mine."

Jake turned in his deliberate fashion to Maud. "Your uncle, I presume?" he said.

"Yes," she made answer.

His face wore a smile that baffled her, as he said: "It's my opinion that we should get on better alone together, though it's for you to decide."

She looked at him rather piteously, and as if in answer to that look Jake slipped a steady arm about her.

"What about the head of the family?" he said, speaking softly almost as if to a child. "Reckon he'll be wanting you. Won't you go to him?"

The slight pressure of his arm directed her towards the door. She yielded to it instinctively, with an abrupt feeling that the matter had been taken out of her hands.

He went with her into the passage, and they stood for a moment together under the flickering lamp.

"Bunny in bed?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

He was still faintly smiling. "You go to bed too, my girl!" he said. "I'll settle this old firebrand."

"Don't--quarrel with him, Jake!" she said nervously.

"What should I quarrel about?" said Jake. "Good night, forlorn princess!"

His voice had a note in it that was almost motherly. She went, from him with a distinct sense of comfort. His touch had been so strong and withal so gentle.

As for Jake, he turned back into the room with the utmost confidence and shut himself in with an air of decision.

"Now, sir," he said, "if you've any complaint to make, p'raps you'll be good enough to mention it to me right now, and I'll deal with the same. I'm not going to have my girl bullied any more."

His voice was quiet, even slightly drawling, but his eyes shone with something of a glare. He came straight to the old man, who still leaned on his umbrella, and stood before him.

The latter gazed at him ferociously, and for a space they remained thus, stubbornly fixing each other. Then abruptly the old man spoke.

"You're very masterful, young fellow-my-lad. I suppose you think yourself one of the lords of creation, good enough for anybody, hey?"

Jake's stern face relaxed slowly. "I don't claim to be a prince of the blood," he said, "but I reckon I've got some--points."

"And you reckon you're good enough to marry my niece?" snapped Uncle Edward.

Jake squared his shoulders. "I shall make her a better husband than some," he said.

The old man smote the floor with his umbrella. "Shall you? And has she told you that she's in love with another man?"

Jake's right hand went suddenly deep into his pocket and remained there. "I am aware that she was once," he said, speaking very deliberately. "But that is over. Also, he was not the man for her."

"A scoundrel, hey? Not a sound man like yourself?" There was a malicious note in the query, but Jake ignored it.

"He does not count anyway," he said, with finality. "If he did, your niece wouldn't have come to me for protection. I believe she appealed to you first, but you had more important things to attend to. With me it was otherwise, and so I consider that I have a greater right to be her protector than anyone else in the world."

"Do you?" said Uncle Edward. "That means you're in love with her, I suppose?"

Jake's eyes fenced with his. "You may take it to mean that if it pleases you to do so," he said.

The old man raked his throat pugnaciously. "It's damn' presumption. I tell you that," he said.

"That may be," said Jake, unmoved.

"But it doesn't alter your intentions, hey? You're one of the cussed sort, I can see. Well, look here, young man! I'll make you a proposal. You seem to think I've neglected my duty, though heaven knows these Brians have no claims on me. But I've taken a fancy to the girl. She's gentle, which is more than can be said for most of your modern young women. So you just listen to me for a minute! You're on a wrong tack altogether. Courting should come before marriage, not after. You may marry first and you may think for a time that all is going to be well between you, but there'll come a day when you'll wake up and find that in spite of all you haven't won her. And that'll mean misery for you both. Don't you do it, young man! You'll find the game's not worth the candle. You have a little patience! Let the girl come to me for a bit! I may be old, but I'll protect her. And if you care to come after her, and do a little courting now and then, well--it's not a very brilliant match for her, but I shan't forbid it."

He ceased to speak. There seemed to be a smile in the eyes that watched him, but there was no suggestion of it about Jake's mouth, which was slightly compressed.

"That's all very well, sir," he said in his slow quiet way. "But have you laid this proposal of yours before Miss Brian herself?"

Uncle Edward made a sound of impatience. "She can think of no one but her brother. She'll agree fast enough when she realizes that it's the only thing to do."

"Will she?" said Jake. "And have you put it to her in that light?"

The old man coughed and made no reply.

Jake went on with the utmost composure. "You offer her a home where she can continue to be a slave to her brother. You don't propose to lift the burden at all, to ease her life, to make her happy. You wouldn't know where to begin. You are ready and anxious to deliver her from me. But there your goodness starts and finishes. You talk of my damnable presumption." A ruddy glitter

like the flicker of a flame dispelled the hint of humour from the lynx-like eyes. "That is just your point of view. But I reckon I'm nearer to her--several lengths nearer--than you or any other man. She hasn't brought all her troubles to you and cried her heart out in your arms, has she? No,--nor ever will--now! You've come too late, sir,--too late by just twelve hours! You may keep your money and your home to yourself! The girl is mine."

A deep note suddenly sounded in the man's voice, and Uncle Edward was abruptly made aware of a lion in his path.

He backed at once. He had not the smallest desire for an encounter with the savage beast.

"Tut, tut!" he said. "You talk like a Red Indian. I wasn't proposing to deprive you of her; only to give the girl a free hand and you the chance of winning her. If you take her without, there'll be the devil to pay sooner or later; I can tell you that. But, if you won't take the chance I offer, that's your affair entirely. I have no more to say."

"I am taking a different sort of chance," Jake said. "And I have a suspicion that it's less of a gamble than the one you suggest. In any case, I've put my money on it, and there it'll stay."

He looked Uncle Edward straight in the eyes a moment, and then broke into his sudden, disarming smile.

"Can't you stop over the week-end now and give her away?" he asked persuasively. "Her mother seems to shy at the notion."

"Her mother always was a fool," said Uncle Edward irascibly. Here at least was a safe object upon which to vent his indignation! "The biggest fool that ever lived! What on earth men found to like in her I never could understand. Oh yes, I'll give the girl away. If you're so set on getting married at once, I'd better stop and see that it's done properly. Lucy never did anything properly in her life."

"Thank you," said Jake. "You are most kind--and considerate."

"Mark you, that doesn't mean that I approve," warned the old man. "It's a hare-brained scheme altogether, but I suppose I owe it to my family to see that it's done on the square."

Jake had suddenly become extremely suave. "That is very benevolent of you, sir," he said.

"I regard it as my duty," said Uncle Edward gruffly.

He had never been called benevolent before, and the term was not altogether to his liking. It seemed safer to accept it, however, without question. There was an unknown element about this young man that was in some fashion formidable. An odd respect mingled with his first contempt. The fellow might be a bounder,--he was not absolutely decided upon that head--but, as he himself had modestly stated, he had some points. By marrying him, his young niece was about to commit a very rash act, but it was possible--just possible--that it might not lead to utter disaster. It was not a marriage of which he could approve, but the man seemed solid, and certainly he himself had no urgent desire to take in the girl and her cripple brother. Altogether, though he did not like to think that his advice had been ignored, and though at the back of his mind there lurked a vague uneasiness not unmixed with self-reproach, it seemed that matters might have been considerably worse.

"Don't you tyrannize over her now!" he said to Jake at parting. "You've got a fighting face, young fellow--my-lad. But you bear in mind, she's a woman, and--unless I am much mistaken--she is not the sort to stand it."

"I don't fight with women, sir," said Jake somewhat curtly. "I've other things to do."

Uncle Edward smiled a dry smile. "And you've a few things to learn--yet," he remarked enigmatically.

CHAPTER XVII THE WEDDING MORNING

It was very dark and draughty in the church. Maud was shivering from head to foot. Her heart felt as if it were encased in ice. Now and then it beat a little, feebly, as if trying to break free, but the awful cold was too much for it. She did not know how to keep her teeth from chattering. Her hands lay in her lap, numbed and nerveless. She wondered if she would ever manage to walk as far as the dimly lit altar where Jake would be awaiting her.

It was evidently draughty there also. The candles flickered fitfully. Uncle Edward was eyeing the candles with obvious disapproval. She hoped he would manage to suppress it at close quarters. She was sure she would have to laugh if he didn't, and laughter, she felt, would be fatal.

How different this from the wedding-day which once she had dared to picture for herself! It was like a mocking fantasy, a dreadful travesty of that which might have been. Like an arc of prismatic colours it hung before her--the vision of that other wedding--the wedding of her dreams; the sunshine and the laughter and the flowers! The shining altar, the waiting bridegroom, his flashing smile of welcome! She saw it all--she saw it all!

How dear he had been to her! How, unutterably dear! And she remembered how in those far-off days he had always called her his Queen Rose.

Her heart gave a swift throb that was anguish. She stood up with a quick, involuntary movement. She had not dreamed that this long-past trouble possessed the power to hurt her so. She cast a desperate glance around her. This waiting in the cold and the dark had become intolerable. A wild impulse to flee--to flee--was upon her. The door was quite near. She turned towards it.

But in that moment Uncle Edward cleared his throat and rose.

"Here comes your precious bridegroom!" he said. "I suppose they're ready at last. We had better get moving."

And then it was that Maud's knees abruptly refused to support her, and she sank down again white and powerless on the chair by the door.

Jake's sturdy figure was coming down the aisle. She watched it with eyes that were wide and fixed.

He came straight to her, bent over her. "I'm real sorry you've been kept waiting," he said, in his womanly drawl. "It's the parson's doing. He forgot all about us. And there was no fire either. I had to force the door of the stoke shed to light it."

He bent a little lower over her, and suddenly she felt his hand against the icy cold of her cheek. She started back from it.

"Jake, I--can't come yet. I'm so cold." Stiffly her pale lips whispered the words; her whole body seemed bound in a very rigour of cold. And through it all she still thought she could hear phantom echoes of that other wedding that once had seemed so near.

"Where is your mother?" said Jake.

There was a hint of sternness in the question. Uncle Edward answered it.

"I'm expecting them every minute. I drove up first to fetch Maud. Lucy is a hopeless fool. She's never in time for anything."

Even as he spoke, there came the rush of wheels on the hard road outside and the hoot of a motor horn.

The sound as it reached Maud, seemed to galvanize her into sudden energy. She rose, white to the lips but resolute. "I am ready," she said.

Jake gave her a straight, hard look, and turned without another word. He went back up the aisle, square, purposeful, steady, and took up his stand by the waiting clergyman.

Maud's hand pressed her uncle's arm with urgency. "Let us go! Let us go!" she said. "I can see my mother--afterwards."

The old man also gave her a shrewd glance, but he also said no word. Only as he stumped up the aisle beside her, he took the girlish hand upon his arm and held it hard in his gnarled fingers.

They had reached the chancel steps where the clergyman awaited them ere the opening of the door and the sound of fluttering feet announced the arrival of Maud's mother. A heavier tread and a man's loud whisper and barely muffled laugh testified to the presence of Giles Sheppard also.

Uncle Edward cleared his throat ferociously, releasing Maud's hand with a mighty squeeze as Jake came to her side. Then he turned with deliberation and scowled upon the advancing couple.

Maud did not turn. Her face was white and still as the face of a marble statue. Her eyes stared blankly at the flickering candles on the altar. Had Jake lighted those candles, she wondered, as well as the fire in the stoke shed?

She heard her mother's step behind her, but still she did not move; and after the briefest pause the clergyman began to read the service.

It was all horribly unreal. The only thing of which she was vividly and poignantly conscious was the cold. She heard Jake's voice beside her, very calm and steady, and when her turn came she spoke with equal steadiness, for somehow she seemed to be imbued with his strength. But she was too frozen, too ice-bound, to feel any meaning in the words she uttered. She spoke them like an automaton, through lips that would scarcely move.

Jake's hand, warm and purposeful, holding her own, sent a faint, faint glow through her; but it did not reach her heart. She thought it had ceased to beat long ago, and she wondered how

soon he would realize that he was wedded to a dead woman, what he would say when he knew. For Jake was so essentially full-blooded, so burningly alive. He was the most virile person she had ever met. Standing there by his side, she could feel the warmth of him. She thought it was that alone that kept her from turning into a solid block of ice.

When she knelt, his hand came under her elbow and supported her; when she rose, it lifted her. When the dreadful nightmare service was over at last, his arm was round her, and by its aid alone she stumbled stiffly to the vestry.

The young curate who had married them looked at her with nervous solicitude. He had been recently married himself, and he had a painfully vivid memory of the agonies thereof.

He set a chair for her, and Jake put her down into it. Then he stood up and took command of the situation.

"Get a glass from somewhere!" he said to the curate. "And you, sir," he turned upon Uncle Edward, "don't let that man come in here! Her mother can if she likes, but I won't have anyone else."

He stooped over Maud, looking closely into her deathlike face. He took her frozen hands and held them up to his lips, breathing on them.

Her great eyes gazed up at him in mute apology. She felt he had begun to find out.

"It's all right, my girl," he said in answer, "all right."

And then her mother came to her, and surprised Maud at least by folding her close in her arms and fondly kissing her poor numbed lips.

"Why, Maudie, darling," she murmured to her tenderly as though she were a child again, "what is it, dearie? What is it?"

The words, the embrace, moved Maud, piercing straight to her frozen heart. She turned with a passionate, inarticulate sound and hid her face on her mother's breast.

"My precious! My own girlie!" said Mrs. Sheppard; and gathered her closer still.

There followed a brief, brief interval of peace while she rested in the sheltering arms that had not held her since her babyhood. Then she heard Jake's voice close to her bowed head.

"Maud, I want you to drink this."

She stirred uneasily, and was aware of her mother's tears dropping on her face.

Then again came Jake's voice, quite courteous but extremely decided. "I am afraid I must trouble you, Mrs. Sheppard. She is half-dead with cold."

Mrs. Sheppard gave a little sob and relaxed her hold. "Maud--my darling, here is some brandy and water. Will you try and drink it? Mother will hold the glass."

But it was Jake's hand that held it, guiding it steadily to the cold, blue lips; and it was in response to his insistence, and not of her own volition at all, that Maud drank the fiery mixture he had prepared.

She shuddered over it, but it revived her almost immediately. She felt the blood begin to stir in her veins, her heart begin to beat.

"That's right," said Jake, and she saw his smile for the first time that wintry morning and felt the better for it. "Now, sit quiet for a minute or two till you feel well enough to sign the register! Mrs. Sheppard, I think your husband wants to speak to you."

"Oh, dear!" sobbed Mrs. Sheppard. "He's always wanting something."

Maud gently released herself. "You had better go to him, Mother, dear. You can bring him in if you like. I am quite all right now."

Her eyes met Jake's as her mother tearfully departed. Something like a glance of intimacy passed between them. She held out her hand to him, and he took it and held it, so that some of his abundant strength seemed to communicate itself to her.

"I don't want your mother to upset you," he said.

She dismissed the notion with a smile. "I am quite ready to sign now. Let us get it over, shall we? I want to go back to Bunny."

His hand relinquished hers. He turned to the table. "The sooner the better," he said, in a tone of cool deliberation.

CHAPTER XVIII THE WEDDING NIGHT

It was over. Maud sat before the open fireplace in Jake's oak-panelled parlour, gazing into the red

heart of the fire with a stunned sense of finality, a feeling that she had been overtaken and made prisoner by Fate. She was terribly tired. Every limb seemed weighted as if with iron fetters. She longed with a sick longing for sleep and oblivion. She ached for solitude and repose.

Overhead she could hear Jake moving. He was helping Bunny to prepare for the night, by Bunny's own decree. Very soon he would come down again, and she would have to rouse herself and make conversation. She wondered wearily how she would do it.

The best room in the house had been given to Bunny. Out of it led a smaller room in which she could sleep and be within call when he needed her. Jake had made every provision he could think of for their comfort. She felt that she ought to be very grateful to him; but somehow she was too tired for gratitude. And she could not concentrate her thoughts; they wandered so.

Now it was the glint of the firelight on her wedding-ring that drew them. It shone with a burning, intolerable sparkle that somehow reminded her of Jake--and the look in his eyes when he had said-- But she pulled her mind up short at this point, with a sharp, involuntary shiver. She would not dwell on that thought. She would bury it deep; deep, far below all others. For she knew she would never cast it out.

She clenched her hand and covered the ring from sight.

The thought of Uncle Edward presented itself, and she seized upon it with relief. He had been with them during the greater part of the day, and had left but an hour before to catch the night train to town. He had been very kind to her, and had taken a shrewd interest in Bunny. Just at parting he had drawn her aside for a moment, looking at her with his sharp eyes under their shaggy brows with just the look of a terrier on the hunt.

"And if at any time you should be in need of a change of air, my dear," he had said, "don't forget that you've got an old uncle at Liverpool who wouldn't be sorry to see you--and the boy too--however busy he happened to be."

He had meant that as an offer of help, should she ever stand in need of it. She had recognized that, though neither he nor she had emphasized the fact. He foresaw a possibility of difficulties ahead with which she might be unable to cope single-handed. He wanted her to know that she would never call upon him a second time in vain. She had thanked him with simplicity, and now she registered the offer in her mind. Almost unconsciously, she had begun already to seek for a way of escape, should her captivity become at any time unendurable.

For a captive she undoubtedly was. She had given herself, voluntarily but completely, into the keeping of a man whom she felt she hardly knew,--a man who had shown her every consideration in his power, but upon whom even yet she was half-afraid to lean. Full of kindness as she had found him to be she knew instinctively that he possessed other qualities, was capable of other impulses. Something of the caged beast, something of the pirate on shore, there was about him. He was quiet, he was considerate, he was kind. But on his own ground, in his own element, would he be always thus? Would he be always the generous captor; the steadfast friend? Her heart misgave her a little. Words that Giles Sheppard had uttered only that morning arose suddenly in her memory, gibing words that sent the hot blood again to her cheeks.

"Ah, he's a deep one, is Jake. What he gives with one hand he takes with the other and more to it. He's not the man to make a one-sided bargain. But he knows how to bide his time. He hasn't saddled himself with a penniless wife and a hunchback brother-in-law just for the fun of the thing. He'll be getting his own back presently, and I think I can guess who'll pay the piper."

Bitter words! Cruel words! Flung in her face for the malignant pleasure of seeing her wince!

She had not winced. She was glad to remember that. She had turned her back on the man's hateful, sneering face. He had humbled her to the earth once, but he would never have another opportunity. Henceforth Jake stood between her and all the world. She had bought his protection at a price, and she knew it for a weapon that would never fail her. As to the price, she would pay him in service and obedience. It might be he would never ask more of her than these. Life was short, and she was very tired. Why should she fret herself over that which might never come to pass? She closed her eyes from the red glow of the fire, and lay still.

Yet she could not have travelled far along the dim path to oblivion for the quiet opening of the door a few minutes later brought her back in a second. She started up in her chair, alert, nervous, to see Jake enter in his square fashion and shut the door behind him.

"Don't disturb yourself!" he said.

He came and stood before the fire, and Maud, sinking back into her chair, strove to calm the unreasonable inner tumult that his entrance had excited.

"Are you going to sit down and have a smoke?" she suggested.

He gave her a side-glance that had in it a hint of humour. "You don't object to being smoke-

dried?" he asked, in his slow, gentle voice.

"Of course I don't," she said.

He took his clay pipe from his pocket and considered it. It was very old, blackened, and discoloured with much use. He looked at her again, doubtfully.

An odd impulse moved her unexpectedly. She sat up again and held out her hand. "Give it to me! I'll fill it for you."

His hand closed upon it. She saw surprise in his eyes.

"You!" he said.

She found herself smiling. He actually looked embarrassed, a fact which set her wholly at her ease. "But why not?" she said. "Is it too great a treasure to be entrusted to me?"

But he still held it back. "What do you want to do it for?"

She kept her hand outstretched. "As a small--very small--return for your goodness to Bunny," she said.

His face changed a little. He put the pipe into her hand. "I don't want any return," he said. "Don't do it for that!"

She coloured, but she still smiled. "Very well. It is a favour bestowed gratis. Where's your tobacco?"

He fetched a pouch--nearly as ancient as the pipe--out of his pocket, and laid it in her lap.

"You're not to watch me," she said, speaking with a new-found confidence that surprised herself. "Sit down and read the paper! I'll tell you when it's done."

He sat down opposite to her, and took up the paper. "You'll make a beastly mess of your hands," he said uneasily.

"Be quiet!" she said.

He opened out the paper, and there fell a silence.

Maud pursued her self-appointed task with mixed feelings. The tobacco was rank and coarse, and it smelt like mildewed hay. It was, moreover, nearly black, and she found herself fingering it with increasing disgust. She was determined however not to be beaten, and with compressed lips she pinched and poked the revolting substance, ramming it deep into the blackened bowl with a heroic determination to accomplish the business to the best of her ability, her feelings notwithstanding.

"You're packing it too tight," observed Jake gravely.

She looked up half-laughing, half-vexed. "I told you not to watch."

He dropped his paper, and leaned towards her. "I reckon I can't help watching you, my girl," he said. "I've never seen anyone like you before."

He spoke with absolute simplicity, but his directness struck her like a blow in the face. She lowered her eyes swiftly.

"I'm sorry I haven't done it to your satisfaction," she said, in a small, cold voice, from which all hint of intimacy had fled. "You had better do it over again."

She held out the pipe to him, and again the firelight gleamed golden-red on that new bright ring that he had placed on her finger that day.

He leaned further forward, stretched out a quiet hand that grasped and held her own.

He took the pipe from her with the utmost gentleness and laid it aside; but he kept her hand, and after a moment he left his chair and knelt beside her.

She did not draw back from him, but she stiffened on the instant. Her breathing quickened.

There followed a silence, which she found peculiarly hard to bear, and which she eventually broke.

"Perhaps I ought to go to Bunny for a little. He will feel neglected."

"He's not expecting you," said Jake. "Say,--Maud!"

"What is it?" she said.

She strove for composure and attained an aloofness that startled herself. He released her hand and began to gather up the litter of tobacco in her lap.

"I was going to speak to you about Bunny," he said. "I've settled to sleep with him to-night."

"You?" She looked at him in quick surprise.

He was not looking at her, being too intent upon his task. The firelight shone red on his bent head. "Yes, I," he said. "You can sleep in my room. I've had it got ready for you."

The calm decision with which he spoke nearly took her breath away. "Oh, but--but--" she began.

He looked up, and she saw his frank, reassuring smile. It sent a curious thrill of relief through her. It was such a smile as would have gained the confidence of a child.

"That's all right," he said. "Don't you start making difficulties, because there aren't any at present. I've fixed it all. You're going to bed to-night without any cares, and you're going to sleep the clock round. See?"

"I couldn't sleep--away from Bunny," she said, somewhat breathless still, notwithstanding the comforting kindness of his eyes.

"I reckon you'll have to try," he said. "And if it's any comfort to you to know it, Bunny is charmed with the idea."

His words sent an odd dismay to her heart. With this lightening of her burden, she seemed to see Bunny slipping away from her,--Bunny, who filled her world.

Jake was on the point of rising from his knees when she laid a detaining hand upon his arm. "Jake," she said, with slight hesitation, "it--it is more than kind of you to think of this. But do you know I would rather--really rather--go on in the old way and look after Bunny myself at night? You can help me in the daytime if you will. But--but--at night,--Jake, please, let me take care of him at night!"

There was entreaty in her voice. Jake remained beside her, his hand grasping the arm of her chair. Once more she was conscious of the warmth of the man as of a force that emanated from him. Her fingers closed almost beseechingly upon his sleeve.

"Say," he said slowly at last, "is it for your own sake--or for Bunny's?"

She quivered at the question. He was looking past her into the fire. She had a feeling that he was deliberately compelling himself to do so.

"I have always mothered Bunny," she said rather piteously. "I--shouldn't feel easy about him if--if I were not within reach."

"Is that quite true?" said Jake.

"True!" she echoed.

He nodded two or three times. "Is it quite true that you wouldn't feel easy--absolutely easy--about leaving the boy in my charge?"

She hesitated.

"Now, don't mind me!" he said. "Be honest! I'm honest myself."

She hesitated still.

He turned his head slowly and looked at her, "It's not--quite--true, is it?" he said.

Her eyes fell before his. "Very well," she said, her voice very low. "We will say it is entirely for my own sake. I want to be with him at night."

Jake was silent a moment. Then: "That's a pity," he said, "because I'm afraid the matter is practically settled. Of course I'd call you if he needed you," he added.

She drew her hand from beneath his. "You have settled it between you, I see," she said, with a small, pinched smile.

He got up and solidly returned to his chair. "Yes, that's so. I don't say we are going to make a rule of it. But for to-night anyway----"

She interrupted him suddenly, with the vehemence of an abrupt resolution. "No, Jake. It must be one thing or the other. I can't have this discussion over again. So please understand that after to-night we shall return to the usual arrangement, which is far the best for us all."

She spoke with nervous force. She was for the moment painfully afraid of being mastered by this man whose strength was still such an unknown quantity that she braced herself to test it as though she were challenging a giant.

Jake was digging in the bowl of his pipe with a penknife, and was for the moment too engrossed with the matter to look up. At length, however, he stuck the pipe into his mouth and began to search his pockets for matches. He found one loose, and bent to strike it on the heel of his boot. She watched him with a growing uneasiness. Would he never speak?

The rasp of the match set her nerves on edge. She rose and stood before the fire, very slim and straight.

Jake puffed at his pipe with immense deliberation, and in a moment the burning match sped past her into the flames. He lay back in his chair with his legs stretched out, his hands in his pockets, and regarded her.

She turned to him at length, meeting the untamed glitter of his eyes with stern composure. "Jake!"

"My girl!" said Jake.

She shivered suddenly and uncontrollably. He spoke as if--as if he had a proprietary right over her. She read ownership--and the pride of ownership--in his look. Abruptly she turned her back upon him. Just so might he look upon one of his favourite horses. It was the look of the

master, admiring, arbitrary, possessive; and with all her soul she resented it.

She stood a moment gripping the mantelpiece, gathering her strength. Then without another word she drew herself up and walked out of the room.

She knew even as she closed the door that by strength she would never prevail against him. She might beat her will to atoms against his, but not by a hair's breadth would she thus turn him from the course upon which he was set.

CHAPTER XIX THE DAY AFTER

When Maud slept that night, it was the deep, deep sleep of exhaustion. All the pressing cares of the past few months, all the strenuous efforts, the unremitting anxieties, had culminated in one vast burden which had at last overweighted her strength. Against her will the burden had been lifted from her, but now that it was gone she slept and slept. No dreams pierced that intense repose. She lay without stirring, as though the ancient spell had been renewed and laid upon her.

The room in which she lay overlooked the whole stone-paved length of the stable-yard, but no voice or stamping of hoofs awaked her. The cheery sounds of the coming day did not even vaguely penetrate her rest. Body and soul were wrapped in complete oblivion while hour after hour went by.

There had been snow in the night, and the sun arose upon a world of dazzling whiteness. The toy fir-trees were mantled in it. The stable-roofs gleamed in a thousand sparkles.

She had pulled up the blind before lying down, and the reflection lit up the room with an ever-growing brightness. She opened her eyes at last quite suddenly and stared at the oak-beamed ceiling.

The next instant she turned sharply on her side, aware of a furtive movement in the room. Someone--a man--was on his knees before the grate, stealthily coaxing the fire to burn. She had a glimpse of brown leggings and a rough tweed suit. There were spurs on his heels that shone like silver. His red-brown head was on a level with the bars at which he was softly blowing.

As she moved a flame shot up in response to his efforts and he turned, still kneeling, and looked at her.

"Say, you've had a real good night for once," he said in a voice of soft approval. "How do you feel yourself this morning?"

Maud, crimson-faced, searched for words and found none. It was one of the most difficult moments she had ever had to endure.

Jake glanced at the fire, pushed the poker into it, and got to his feet. He came to her side.

"Don't be mad with me!" he pleaded humbly. "Someone had to light the fire, and old Lovelace is busy."

He smiled as he said it, and when Jake smiled he was hard to resist. Maud suddenly found the difficulties of the situation swept away. With Jake in a docile mood she found it comparatively easy to deal.

"Thank you," she said after a moment, and with slight hesitation extended a hand to him. "It was kind of you to light the fire though I could have done very well without it."

He took the hand very respectfully. She even had a faint suspicion that he also was secretly embarrassed. "The room faces due north," he said. "It had to be done, though I hoped you wouldn't wake."

"Thank you," she said again, and withdrew her hand from his steady, all-enveloping grasp. "How--how is Bunny?"

He smiled again with more assurance. His strong white teeth were very good to see. "He had a splendid night. I've got him up and dressed. He is downstairs, waiting for you to take him out."

This piece of diplomacy obviously came to Jake as an inspiration. His smile broadened at the brightening of her face.

Maud raised herself on her elbow and pushed the thick hair back from her forehead. "You are very good," she said gratefully. "Please, will you go now, and let me get up?"

He turned at once to the door, but paused as he reached it. "Say, Maud," he said tentatively; "there's a breakfast-tray waiting for you. May I bring it up?"

"Oh, please don't!" she said hurriedly. "I never breakfast in bed. Besides----"

"I'll put it outside the door then," said Jake, and was gone.

She heard him clatter down the uncarpeted stairs, whistling as if well-pleased with himself, and as she reviewed his unceremonious behaviour she decided to treat it with the simplicity with which he evidently regarded it himself. There was that advantage in the situation at least. His character and his conduct were wholly without subtleties--or so she imagined. When he dumped down the breakfast-tray in the passage a little later she called her thanks to him through the closed door as though he had been an old and intimate friend. Perhaps after all she had been over-fanciful the night before!

She ate her breakfast with a growing sense of reassurance, dressed, and went downstairs.

Something of an ordeal here awaited her in the form of an encounter with Mrs. Lovelace, who greeted her deferentially but with a reticence that certainly did not veil any good-will. She presented her with the household keys with the stiff remark that Mr. Bolton had desired her to do so.

Maud received them with an odd dismay. Somehow she had not visualized herself as the mistress of the establishment.

"Mr. Bolton also wished me to take your orders for dinner, ma'am," said Mrs. Lovelace, with stiff dignity. "He is accustomed to dine in the middle of the day, but I was to tell you that if you preferred a late dinner it was all one to him."

The slight emphasis on the last word did not escape Maud, and she saw at once that Mrs. Lovelace could not be considered equally indifferent on the subject.

"But of course we will dine in the middle of the day," she said at once, and was rewarded by a faint flicker of amiability on the old woman's severe countenance.

"That is as you please, ma'am," she said, with less formality, and Maud felt that she had scored a point.

She escaped from the interview at length with a sensation of relief, and hastened to Bunny whom she found awaiting her with some impatience.

The boy was in excellent spirits. He had enjoyed having Jake in attendance, and unhesitatingly he let her know it.

"Why, there's no trouble at all in being lifted by him," he said. "And, by the way, he says you're not to lift me any more. It's too much for you. I'm ready to go out now, but he will put me in the chair. He said you were to call him. He's somewhere in the stables."

Bunny's fashion of expressing himself was not a diplomatic one. Maud did not argue the matter, but as she went in search of Jake a deep resentment kindled and burned within her. So this was to be the first consequence of her rash step--the gradual removal of Bunny from her care! Bunny--her Bunny--for whose dear sake she had made the sacrifice!

Out in the stable-yard she came upon Sam Vickers sucking a straw the while he cleaned a saddle. He greeted her with a smile, and informed her that the boss was in one of the loose boxes round the corner.

Maud followed his directions, passing down a narrow passage between stalls to an open stone-paved space beyond that was surrounded by loose boxes. Here she paused, catching the sound of voices, and uncertain whence they proceeded. A bony red setter came up to her and poked a friendly nose into her hand.

She bent to fondle him, and as she did so she heard Jake speaking in a building close to her. She turned towards the voice with the intention of joining him; but, so turning, she heard the words he uttered and stood petrified. For Jake, albeit with the utmost calmness and deliberation, was speaking a language that made her blood run cold. His words came with a fluency and distinctness that made them all the more terrible. If he had been stuttering with rage, she felt it would have horrified her less. She stood rooted to the spot, white-faced and powerless, while the kindly setter fawned about her knees.

She thought the soft voice would never stop. Someone had done wrong and was being cursed for it with appalling thoroughness. Such oaths as Jake uttered she had never before heard or dreamed of, and the scathing cruelty of his speech was like a stinging lash.

No remonstrance or protest of any sort was offered in return; but after what seemed to her an intolerable length of time there came the sound of heavy, shuffling feet, and a small sandy-haired stable-lad of about seventeen came blundering out into the yard. His face was crimson and screwed up like the face of a crying baby. He sniffed emotionally as he went past her.

Maud remained where she was. She was sick with disgust. Her whole being physical and mental was in revolt. She wanted to turn and go, but something kept her there. She stood like an outraged princess, clothed in a dignity that was wholly unconscious, while Despair, grim, relentless, forced a way to her quivering heart. This--this was her husband! This coarse-mouthed

brute--this monster of evil eloquence! This was the man to whom she had fled for protection, to whose chivalrous instincts she had entrusted herself! Oh, what had she done?

And then suddenly he came out upon her, striding forth, his riding-whip clenched in his hand, his brows drawn in a ruddy, threatening line.

He saw her and in a moment, magically, his face changed. The cruel, lynx-like vindictiveness went out of it. He came to her smiling.

"Hullo, Maud!" he said.

And Maud shrank, shrank visibly, so that he could not fail to see; then drew herself together, instinctively summoning her pride.

"I came to look for you," she told him, with icy aloofness. "Bunny is waiting to be moved."

"Right O!" said Jake.

He moved towards the passage by which she had entered the yard, and she walked beside him, very pale, very erect, yet tingling with a disgust that almost amounted to loathing.

They went a few yards in silence, then silence became a burden. She spoke.

"It is really quite unnecessary to trouble you. I am fully capable of moving him myself."

He turned his head towards her. "Say, Princess, what's wrong?" he said.

She quivered afresh at his tone; it had the possessive quality that she so dreaded--was beginning to abhor.

She did not answer, and he passed on with scarcely a pause. "I know you can lift the boy; but it's very bad for you, and not over good for him. Where's the point of it anyway when you've got me at hand to do it for you?"

"It is quite unnecessary to trouble you," she said again, "unnecessary and absurd."

"All right, my girl," he said unexpectedly. "Call it just one of my whims and--humour it!"

She felt herself flush. His tone--though perfectly good-tempered--had been almost one of command. As they emerged from the stone passage into the outer yard she gave abrupt rein to her indignation.

"I really cannot submit to any interference in my care of Bunny. I told you so last night, and I meant it. He has always been my especial charge, and I cannot give him up."

Jake's eyes were upon her, vigilant, intent, dominant. He spoke in a drawl that sounded to her slightly derisive. "Say, now, what will you do if Bunny is cured?"

She turned her face sharply from him. What would she do indeed? But the thing was an impossibility. She put the thought away from her.

"I am not discussing that," she said, speaking with a grim effort at calmness that cost her all her strength. "It is the present with which I am dealing now. I believe you mean to be kind, but---"

"You don't say!" interjected Jake softly.

"But," she said again, with emphasis, "it is a mistaken kindness. I am very grateful to you for your help, but really you must let me do my share."

An involuntary note of wistfulness in the last words softened the look in Jake's eyes. He even smiled a little as he said: "Bunny being the only person in the world for whom you entertain the smallest spark of affection?"

She looked at him quickly. "He is all that I have," she said, in a low tone of protest.

"That so?" said Jake deliberately. "Well,--I'm sorry."

She felt the flush deepen to crimson in her face, and she quickened her steps as they neared the house, longing to put an end to an encounter that had brought her nothing but discomfiture.

Jake lengthened his stride. He looked no longer at her, but straight ahead with the eyes of a man who reads the future. Evidently the prospect was a pleasing one, for the faint smile still lingered about his lips. She was thankful that he had not observed that painful blush of hers.

At the door of his house he paused and stood back for her to precede him; and so standing, suddenly and softly he gave utterance to the thought in his mind.

"Say, Maud," he said into her ear, "some day--when the boy is well and off your hands--I'd just enjoy to see you with a child of your own in your arms."

She started away from the whispered words, started and quivered like a wild thing trapped. For a single instant her eyes met his in open, passionate revolt; then swiftly she passed him by.

Jake followed with his lips pursed to a whistle, and a certain hard glitter replacing the dream in his eyes.

CHAPTER XX
A FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

Someone was whistling in the stable-yard with elaborate turns and trills to the accompaniment of a horse's hoofs that danced upon the stones.

It was Christmas Day, and from the church half-way down the hill there came the gay peal of bells. The stable-doors were all closed, and the yard was in perfect order. There was no one about besides the solitary whistler on horseback; and he, it seemed, had no intention of prolonging his solitude, for he was heading his horse straight for the spotless white gate that led to Jake Bolton's dwelling.

He was a young man, with a swarthy face of undeniable ugliness that yet possessed a monkeyish fascination that was all its own. His eyes laughed out of it with a merry wickedness--odd eyes, one black, one grey, that gave a most fantastic expression to his whole countenance. They were not trustworthy eyes, but they were full of humour. He had a comedian's trick of working the brows above them so that his features were scarcely ever in repose.

He sat in the saddle as one completely at home there; but there was no grace about him. His limbs seemed to be fastened on with wires, like the limbs of a marionette.

Reaching the closed white gate, he stooped from the saddle, and with the end of his riding-switch lifted the catch. On the little finger of the hand he thus extended he wore a slender gold ring in which was set a single sapphire surrounded by diamonds.

He walked his horse up the footpath to the door, and on this he beat a rousing tattoo, still without dismounting.

During the pause that ensued he whistled a few more elaborate bars of his melody, and then, coming to a break, bent and knocked again.

The door opened in haste as if agitated by the second summons, and Mrs. Lovelace, red-faced from her kitchen fire, appeared curtsying in the entrance.

"So sorry to keep you waiting, my lord! The girl's gone to church. And will your lordship be pleased to walk in? We'd only heard this morning of your lordship's return, and we'd not hardly expected to see your lordship up so soon."

"A merry Christmas to you, Lovelace!" said his lordship, with that most engaging grin of his; he leaned towards her confidentially. "Take this for love of me, in honour of the occasion!"

He slipped a coin into Mrs. Lovelace's hand that caused her to curtsy again ecstatically and wish him every blessing she could call to mind on the spur of the moment. But he laughed easily and cut her short.

"Hear, hear! But I can't stop to listen. Where's Jake Bolton? Is he in?"

"Well, no, my lord. I'm sorry to say Mr. Bolton's gone to church."

"Sorry! Oh, come, Mother Lovelace, spare my morals! I always thought going to church was an innocent amusement. Don't disabuse me of my childish fancies! But what's the good of my walking in if the boss is out and you are cooking the turkey? Unless you're wanting someone to come and turn the spit!"

Mrs. Lovelace raised hands of horrified protest. "How your lordship do carry on, to be sure! No, no, my lord! I was only thinking that you'd maybe fancy a glass of my cherry brandy with the wind in the east as it is. I'm sure as Mr. Bolton would be wishful for me to make the suggestion."

"I should prefer the cherry brandy by itself," said Lord Saltash, with a mischievous chuckle. "But I won't stay now, thanks all the same. I suppose he'll be back some time? I've never known Jake go to church before. Is he courting or what?"

Mrs. Lovelace opened her small round eyes to their widest extent. "Why, can it be as your lordship hasn't heard?"

"Heard! Heard what? Tell me quickly!" urged his lordship. "This suspense is too horrible!"

"About Mr. Bolton's marriage, sir," explained Mrs. Lovelace, looking suddenly prim.

"What!" ejaculated her listener. "You don't say Bolton's been caught?"

"The marriage took place last Sunday, my lord," said Mrs. Lovelace, still looking prim but plainly enjoying her *rôle* of informant.

Lord Saltash slapped his thigh with a yell of laughter. "Poor old Jake! And who is the bride?"

"Mrs. Bolton, my lord, is the step-daughter of Mr. Sheppard of the Anchor Hotel," said Mrs. Lovelace.

"Is she though? What's she like? Pretty?"

Mrs. Lovelace pursed her lips. "She is a lady, my lord,--own daughter to a baronet."

"Oh, I say!" protested Lord Saltash. "You're cramming me!"

Mrs. Lovelace looked shocked but at the same time flattered by the accusation. "Indeed, my lord, it's the truth!" she protested. "And her brother Sir Bernard Brian is in the house at the present moment. He, poor young gentleman, has the misfortune to be afflicted with a humpback."

"What? What? What? My good woman, do you know what you're talking about?" Saltash's mobile brows came suddenly low over his eyes in a heavy scowl that added years to his appearance. He leaned nearer to her. "What?" he said again.

Mrs. Lovelace paused, debating which of her statements he desired her to repeat. But ere she could make up her mind, Lord Saltash dropped with a thud to the ground. He threw his horse's bridle over the gate-post, and turned to enter.

"Just ring up one of the stable-lads, and tell him to walk Moscow up and down till I come!" he ordered, his voice no longer bland, but curt and imperious. "I should like to see this brother-in-law of Bolton's, so show me in!"

Mrs. Lovelace turned before him and scurried down the passage like a startled hen.

Lord Saltash strode after--a figure of medium height, sudden of movement, unimposing of carriage, yet withal possessing that nameless something that denotes high breeding. It was said that there was a strain of royal blood in the Burchester family, and this member of it had long been dubbed "the merry monarch" by his intimates. There was about him an inherent arrogance that no one dreamed of resenting, so essentially was it a part of himself.

He entered Jake's sunny parlour with absolute assurance, though the frown still drew his forehead.

"Lord Saltash!" announced Mrs. Lovelace.

And "Hullo, Bunny!" came from Lord Saltash in the same moment as he strode forward to Bunny's sofa with the confidence of one entering the presence of an old friend.

Bunny's quick cry of "Charlie!" fully justified this attitude, and Mrs. Lovelace withdrew with a very greatly enhanced opinion of the importance of the Brian family.

"He might have been greeting his own brother," she said to herself, as she trotted back to her kitchen.

There was certainly no cordiality lacking in Bunny's reception of the visitor. He clung to Lord Saltash's hand with shining eyes upraised.

"I say, what a bounder you are to have stayed away all this time! I thought you'd have come back long ago. Maud's married. I suppose you know?"

"Married to Jake Bolton?" There was a peculiar intonation in the question. Lord Saltash was smiling as he uttered it, smiling with drawn brows.

"Yes; and he's the best of good fellows. But I wanted her to wait for you all the same," said Bunny, with the candour of the confidant. "It was no good talking though. She couldn't wait."

"How long has she been married?" Lord Saltash's tone was settling into studied indifference.

"Only a few days," Bunny told him. "Only since Sunday."

"Was it so urgent as that then? She isn't generally in such a desperate hurry."

Bunny looked uncomfortable. "You see, it was that brute of a Sheppard at 'The Anchor.' The mater married him, you know. Thought she was going to do a good thing for us all. I think it has turned out all right so far as she is concerned. But he was a perfect beast to Maud and me."

Lord Saltash nodded comprehension. "I never did think your mother was over-endowed with wisdom," he commented. "And how did you come to know Bolton? Is he a friend of Sheppard's?"

"They're in the same lot, though I don't think Jake likes him. Jake's a good sort, isn't he?" said Bunny almost pleadingly. "He's been jolly decent to us."

Lord Saltash was gazing before him through eyelids that were slightly contracted. "I believe he is quite a good sort," he said after a moment without enthusiasm. "And Maud? Is she in love with him?"

"Good gracious, no!" said Bunny.

Lord Saltash turned towards him sharply. "You're very emphatic. Why?"

"Well, she isn't," Bunny asserted. "Jake knows she isn't."

"Oh! And what may Jake's sentiments be?"

"He's gone on her of course," said Bunny. "But he isn't nearly so pally with her as he is with me. Why, he even smacks my head sometimes!" He spoke with genuine pride.

Lord Saltash laughed. "Oh, Jake's a great disciplinarian," he said, "or he wouldn't be where he is. But look here, does he know that I am--so to speak--a friend of the family?"

"Yes, I told him," said Bunny.

"What did you tell him?"

"Told him that you and Maud were chums, and that if she married anyone she ought to marry you." Bunny's tone was blunt, his face somewhat red.

Lord Saltash laughed again. The drawn look had wholly gone from his eyes. He worked his brows up and down with astonishing agility. "That pleased him, I'll bet," he remarked flippantly. "And so he decided to get married the next day, did he, and damn the consequences?"

"Oh no, it didn't come off then. We had a big row with the Sheppard beast first; and it was after that Maud went off and fixed it up with Jake on her own. It was a pity you weren't there, Charlie. She'd have married almost anyone to get away."

"Any scoundrel?" laughed Lord Saltash. "Well, old chap, do you know, between me and you, I'm not sure that she hasn't done better for herself than if she had waited for me to come along? Marriage has such a nasty way of taking the gilt off the gingerbread, and I must admit I always liked the gilt the best. Now, Jake,--good soul--prefers the stuff itself; in fact, I'm not sure that he isn't a bit of a beast in some ways. He looks it. But possibly Maud likes beasts."

"Indeed she doesn't!" said Bunny, with quick warmth. "And as for Jake--he's a brick. I see a good deal of him, for he's taken me on at night now; so I ought to know."

Lord Saltash got up and strolled to the window. "Yes, he must be rather a brick," he said, after a moment. "Doesn't Maud think so?"

"No, Maud's furious because Jake won't let her lift me any more. I expect she is jealous," said Bunny, with some complacency. "And she doesn't like being bossed."

"You don't object apparently?" Lord Saltash sounded indifferent, even slightly bored.

"Oh, I'd sooner be bossed by a man than a woman any day," said Bunny. "Besides, Jake's a sport. I like him."

"He's a gentleman," said Saltash unexpectedly.

"Not exactly," protested Bunny. "He doesn't profess to be that."

"My dear chap, a gentleman is born not made. Jake's sound. It's more than most of us can say. I wouldn't part with him for a thousand pounds."

Lord Saltash turned from the window with a pleasant smile on his ugly face, and broke into a careless whistle.

Bunny watched him fidgeting to and fro with a slightly puzzled frown. He had expected something more dramatic than this easy acquiescence to the ruling of Fate. He was sure in his own mind that the Lord Saltash of to-day loved his sister as much as had the Charlie Burchester of other days, and he could not understand the serenity of his attitude.

"I suppose you'll wait and see Maud," he said presently.

"I suppose I shall," said Saltash, with a baffling grimace. "Are you going to eat your Christmas dinner without visitors?"

"Yes. The mater was coming, but that Sheppard bounder turned awkward at the last minute, and as we none of us wanted to go there, it fell through. They've got some show on at 'The Anchor.' We're well out of that."

"And you consider this a change for the better?" questioned Lord Saltash.

"Rather! I wouldn't go back for fifty pounds. Neither would Maud. It's much nicer up here than down by the sea, too," said Bunny, with enthusiasm.

"I suppose you haven't been to the Castle," said Lord Saltash, coming back to the fire to stand before it.

"No. Jake said something about taking us some day. But it's not much good my going. I'm such a log." The old bitterness suddenly sounded in Bunny's voice.

Lord Saltash lightly poked him with the end of his riding-switch. "I'll take you round myself some day, you and Maud. I'm off for a ride now when I've had a look round the stables. I shall be back in an hour or so, in time to see the virtuous Jake when he comes back from church."

He turned to the door therewith, and fell to whistling softly the tune to which he had entered the stable-yard a short time before. Opening it he glanced back to wave a careless adieu, then passed whistling out.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Bunny. "Anyone would think he didn't care a jot!"

Which was precisely the impression that Lord Saltash had intended to convey.

That Christmas morning was like a dream to Maud.

To find herself in church with Jake by her side was a circumstance that she had been very far from expecting, and the experience was so unique that it seemed scarcely real.

It was by his suggestion that they were there, and he had overruled her hesitation as to leaving Bunny with a masterly skill that had enlisted Bunny himself on his side.

So they had gone, like a sober married couple, as Maud said to herself, though the thought of Jake as her husband was somehow one that she invariably failed utterly to grasp. She herself found it impossible to give her undivided attention to the service with the perpetual consciousness of his presence at her side. She could not tear her mind from him. He came between her and her devotions.

And yet he himself seemed to be wholly absorbed. Not once did those watchful eyes stray in her direction. He followed the entire service with reverence and a steady concentration that she envied but could not emulate.

When it was over and they were walking back, he drew a deep breath and remarked: "That's the first time I've been in church, except for our wedding, for twenty years."

Maud looked at him in amazement. "So long as that?"

He nodded. "I used to go regularly till my mother died. After that, I went to sea and got out of the way of it."

There fell a silence upon his words. The colour that was always so quick to rise in Maud's cheeks spread upwards to her forehead.

It was with an evident effort that she said finally: "You haven't told me anything about your mother yet, Jake."

He turned his head slowly towards her. "It didn't strike me that you would care to hear," he said, with simplicity.

She conquered her embarrassment with difficulty, but her voice was curiously devoid of enthusiasm as she said: "I am interested--of course."

"Really?" said Jake. "I don't know why you should be. She was a very fine woman, and she killed herself with hard work when my father failed as a farmer. That's about all her story."

"Oh, Jake, how dreadfully sad!" There was quick sympathy in Maud's tone. She put out a shy hand to him as they walked.

He took it, held it fast for a moment, and let it go. "A woman will always attempt the impossible," he said, "for the sake of anyone she cares for. You would do the same for Bunny. I saw that the first day I met you. I've seen it a hundred times in different parts of the world, and I guess it's one of the greatest things in life."

Maud uttered a sharp sigh. "I don't see anything great in doing what one must," she said rather sadly. "It is very nice of you to admire women, but I expect it is chiefly because you don't understand them."

Jake's frank smile appeared at her words. "I'm not disputing that most women need a burden of some sort," he said gently. "I guess that's just a woman's way. She wouldn't be happy if she hadn't one."

"And yet you want to take mine away!" The words were out almost before she knew it. She repented them even as they fell.

Jake's smile passed, and an odd, dogged look took its place. "I reckon that's different," he said. "You've carried too heavy a burden all your life. Do you know, Maud"--his voice softened though his face remained unchanged--"that first time I saw you, I recognized that look of desperate endurance in your eyes that my mother used to have? It cut right through me. And you were so young, which made it worse."

"I don't feel young," she interposed.

"I know," he made answer. "You've missed it all. But when you're stronger--happier--you'll find you're not so old. There are quite a lot of good things in the world even for middle-aged folk like you and me."

She uttered a little dubious laugh.

"Yes, that's so," he asserted, in that calm, confident drawl of his. "And that brings me round to what I've been wanting to say to you. I don't want to deprive you of anything worth having, but I am wanting--real badly--to make a sound man of Bunny as soon as may be. Reckon you're wanting that too?"

Her heart gave a thick, hard throb. "Of course," she said rather breathlessly.

"Yes, of course," agreed Jake imperturbably. "Well, I had a letter last night from Capper, one of the biggest surgeons in the world. I had the good luck to do him a small service, once, and he

can't somehow forget it. Now he's coming to England in a few weeks, and he'll look me up. I've told him about Bunny, and he's sort of interested. Say, Maud, it would be a mighty big thing to let him examine the little chap and see what he thinks."

Maud's face was very pale. She walked in silence.

Jake glanced at her. "You'd be afraid?" he suggested.

"I don't know," she said, in that same breathless tone. "It--it seems rather soon. And suppose--suppose he failed!"

"My dear," Jake said gently. "Capper won't fail. He'll either tackle the job and carry it through, or he won't attempt it. That's the sort of man he is."

Maud dropped back into silence. The road at this point was somewhat steep, and she was gasping for breath.

Suddenly Jake reached out, took her hand, and pulled it through his arm. "All right, my girl, all right!" he said kindly. "We won't hustle any. I shan't say another word to Bunny on the subject till you have made up your mind what you'd like done. Now you lean on me! I'll pull you up."

She did not want to lean on him, but for some reason she could not at once withdraw her hand. They mounted the hill side by side.

Jake said no more upon the subject. He evidently regarded it as closed. As they turned in at length at the white gates, he said: "I was wondering if your mother could be persuaded to come up to tea if I went and fetched her with the dog-cart. We couldn't squeeze Sheppard into that if we tried."

She knew that he made the suggestion solely for her pleasure, and a sudden warmth kindled within her.

"You are good to me, Jake!" she said gratefully.

"Oh, rats!" said Jake. "Being good to you is all one with being good to myself. I'll go then as soon as dinner is over. Now who in thunder--" He stopped abruptly gazing straight ahead.

A momentary frown drew his level brows and passed. "Hullo!" he said, in a soft drawl.

Maud was looking ahead too. She saw a man's figure moving towards them over the stones of the yard; she heard the ring of spurs. And suddenly she stood still, white to the lips, panting, unnerved.

It could have been only for a second, that pause of hers; for at once she was aware of Jake's hand pushed lightly through her arm, leading her forward.

"I guess I don't need to introduce Lord Saltash," he said. "You've met before."

Yes, they had met before, met and parted, and the memory of it stabbed her to the heart. She moved forward, as it were mechanically, under Jake's guidance. She had known that this ordeal would have to be faced, but it had taken her unawares. She was unprepared.

But the moment she heard his voice, his laugh, her agitation was gone. There was a subtle *camaraderie* in Lord Saltash's greeting that smoothed the way. She remembered with a pang that it had ever been his custom to take the easiest course.

With his hand holding hers, and his ugly face laughing its debonair welcome into her own, she could not feel tragic or even disconcerted any longer, even though with his other hand he clapped Jake on the shoulder.

"So you've gone and got married, have you?" he said, his eyebrows working with monkeyish rapidity. "How original of you! I won't be banal enough to congratulate. It's such a bore to have to reply to that sort of thing. Let me wish you a happy Christmas instead! *Ma belle reine des roses, je te salue!* You are more faultily faultless than ever!"

He made her a sweeping, cavalier's bow, and lightly kissed her hand.

She laughed without effort. "How odd to meet you like this, Charlie! I thought you were still abroad."

She was not even aware of uttering his Christian name, so naturally did it rise to her lips. It seemed to her suddenly that the old cruel barrier had been removed. Since they could never again be lovers, they were free now to be friends.

Surely the same thought had struck him also, for his odd eyes smiled intimately, confidentially, into hers, ere he turned in his lightning fashion to Jake, standing solidly by her side.

"You knew we were old friends?" he questioned.

Jake's eyes, red-brown, intent, watched the swarthy, mobile face without the smallest shade of expression. "Yes," he said, in his slow soft voice, "I knew."

Maud glanced at him quickly. How much did he know? Had Bunny ever confided in him upon the subject?

But his face, absolutely composed and normal, told her nothing. He accepted the hand that Lord Saltash extended, looking him full and straight in the face. And through her mind unbidden there ran the memory of that strange story of treachery that Jake had once told to her and Bunny. Looking at the dark, keen countenance of this man who had once been so much more to her than friend, she tried to visualize his double, and failed utterly. Surely there could be but one Charlie Burchester in all the world!

"What are you trying to see?" laughed Lord Saltash. "I carry neither my virtues nor my vices in my face, being long past the ingenuous age. Have we time to go round the Stables? Or is your Christmas turkey clamouring to be eaten?"

Maud shot a swift look at Jake who after a momentary pause said, "I can go round with you now if you wish, my lord."

Saltash made a quick grimace. "That's very obliging of you, Bolton. But don't let me interfere with your domestic arrangements! I can come over again later."

It was then that Maud very quietly intervened. "If you care to join us at dinner I am sure we shall be very pleased, and you can go and see the stud afterwards."

"What! Really?" said Lord Saltash. "Of course I shall be delighted. There are to-morrow's events at Graydown, Bolton, I want you to post me up with the latest. Sure I shan't be in the way?"

He put the question directly to Jake, who replied without haste or hesitation: "I reckon no guest of ours could be that."

There was nothing in his manner to indicate if he were pleased or otherwise by the arrangement. He seemed to be in a mood of extreme reticence, and Maud wondered as they walked to the house if she had vexed him by taking upon herself to extend hospitality to his patron.

But then it had been the only course open to her. Surely he must see that! She and Charlie were such old friends; they could not begin to be strangers now.

Yet the doubt worried her. Jake was plainly not upon very intimate terms with Lord Saltash. Or was it her presence that caused constraint? She wished she knew, but she had no means of ascertaining. She could only do her best, ably seconded by Saltash, to smooth over any slight difficulties that might arise from a situation that was certainly none too easy.

Despite her efforts she could not fail to note that Jake was more self-contained, more unresponsive, than she had ever before seen him, and for a time she felt her own manner to be strained and unnatural in consequence.

Lord Saltash plainly noticed nothing. Throughout that Christmas dinner he was just as gay, as debonair, as audacious, as he had been in the old days, complimented her with his usual effrontery, provoked her to laughter with all his old quick wit. She found it impossible not to respond, impossible not to expand in the warmth of his good comradeship. She seemed to be drawn into a magic circle of gaiety that could not last, that was all the more precious because it could not last. Bunny also was well within that charmed region. He was full of animation, eager, excited, even merry. She had an uneasy fear that he would pay for his high spirits later, but for the time she had not the heart to check him. She understood his feelings so thoroughly. It was so good to have Charlie with them again and to bury all the troubles of the past, so good to see the flower of friendship spring from the dead root of passion. so good to be on easy terms again with this man whom in spite of everything, she could not but regard as a kindred spirit.

They had always been sympathetic. They looked upon much in life with the same eyes. They had the same tastes, the same intuitions, often the same impulses. Yes, he had shown himself unworthy. There was a fatal flaw in his character. He was wild, lawless, immoral; but he was her friend. Somehow she could not feel that anything could ever alter that. They had been too near, too intimate. He had become like one of the family. She could not regard him in any other light. He had wounded her to the heart, but yet, with a woman's odd faithfulness, she forgave him, pitied him, understood him. Only upon that one point she had stood firm. Her innate purity had arisen as an angel with a flaming sword, dividing them. She had not been able to overlook his sins and marry him. She had known him too well--too well. Possibly even she had loved him too well also.

But all that was over now. The pain was stifled, the sacrifice was past. She could suffer herself to accept his easy friendship with no dread for the future. She could let herself be at ease with him once more, knowing herself to be beyond his reach. Once very sorely she had been tempted to yield to him, but that temptation could never occur again. Her marriage was a safe anchor from which she could never break free and drift out to sea. She could afford now to be

kind, since henceforth no more than kindness could ever be expected from her. And it was so good to be with him again. With all his waywardness and instability Charlie Burchester was the most satisfying friend she had. He never wearied her. He always caught and charmed her mood. He was so rarely sensitive, so delicately alive, to every change of feeling. There was even something almost uncanny sometimes in the way he read her woman's heart, a feat for which he himself accounted by declaring that they had been born under the same star.

It all came back to her as they sat at the same board on that Christmas Day. It was just as if there had never been any lift in their friendship. The memory of the man's passionate pleading and her own anguished refusal had faded into an evil dream. They were back once more in the old happy days of comradeship before he had ever spoken to her of love.

Only Jake's presence held her to the present, and when at the end of dinner he rose to carry out his suggestion with regard to fetching her mother in the dog-cart she felt, as soon as the door closed upon him, that the old life she knew and loved had wholly returned. She and Bunny and Saltash were just children together, and they settled down to enjoy themselves as such.

CHAPTER XXII THE FAITHFUL WIDOWER

Lord Saltash's desire to see the stud evaporated completely during the afternoon. He stayed and made himself extremely charming to Mrs. Sheppard, who returned with Jake, very fluttered and arch, to spend an hour--only an hour or Giles would be so cross--in her daughter's new home. And when she left again under Jake's escort it was already growing dark.

"I've got to talk business with Jake so I may as well wait till he comes back," said Lord Saltash comfortably, and they gathered round the blazing fire and sat in luxurious enjoyment.

Undoubtedly Bunny had enjoyed himself that afternoon, but he had begun to grow restless and irritable, signs which Maud had learned to recognize as the heralds of a wakeful night. She wondered with some uneasiness if Jake would be able to manage him with his usual success.

"You haven't got a piano here, have you?" asked Saltash in a pause.

She told him, "No."

In the old days they had sung duets together. She wondered if he remembered.

He went lightly on. "You will have to use the one at the Castle. You mustn't let your talents run to seed. Come up any day, you and Bunny. The place will always be open to you, whether I am there or not."

She thanked him for the thought. "We should love to come; I have had no opportunities for playing for months, not since we left London."

"No?" he said. "I say, what made your mother come to Fairharbour? It's a hole of a place to live in."

She felt her face burn in the firelight. She hesitated, and at once Bunny cut in.

"The mother always has an eye on the main chance," he said. "And she is a great believer in friendship. When things look black she always likes to hunt up old friends and give them their opportunity."

His meaning was not obscure. Maud made a quick movement of protest; but Lord Saltash's inconsequent laugh covered her discomfiture on the instant.

"Poor Lady Brian! I am afraid her luck and mine are made of the same rotten material. It tears at a touch. But I should have thought she might have chosen a sounder man than Sheppard of 'The Anchor' for a husband."

"Isn't he sound?" asked Maud quickly.

Lord Saltash laughed again. "I could sell him up--lock, stock, and barrel--to-morrow if I wanted."

She started. "Charlie! You don't mean that!"

He looked at her with a gleam of mischief in his queer eyes. "Of course I do! 'The Anchor' belongs to me, and all that is in it. It's mortgaged for considerably more than its value, and I hold the mortgage. Did he never mention that detail?"

Maud sat speechless.

He stretched out a lazy hand. "It's all right, Queen Maud. He is quite safe so long as he behaves decently to you and yours. He's something of a brute-beast, I believe? Well, if he needs any salutary correction, you must let me know."

His ugly face laughed into hers; the light in his eyes was half-mocking, half-tender.

"It's good to know that there may be something left that I can yet do for you," he said. "The worthy Jake may have a stout right arm, but he is not a Croesus."

He turned the conversation in his easy, well-bred fashion, and her embarrassment died down. But the carelessly uttered information dwelt persistently in her mind, even though she found herself talking of indifferent things. It was strange that all her affairs should be so completely--and it seemed so irrevocably--under the direct control of this man whom she had once so resolutely driven out of her life. Fate or chance had thrown them together again. A little secret tremor went through her. What would come of it?

She had not attempted to touch the hand he had stretched forth to her. It had fastened upon the arm of the chair in which she sat and rested there. Presently she looked down at it, her eyes attracted by the gleam of the ring upon it.

"Your own," murmured Saltash. "Violets blue as your eyes!"

He moved his hand in the firelight, and the sapphire shone in the midst of the diamonds like a deep blue flame in the heart of a leaping fire. He drew a little nearer to her.

"You sent it back to me," he said. "I have worn it--like a faithful widower--ever since."

Her heart contracted with an odd little pain. "Don't wax sentimental, Charlie!" she pleaded, with a difficult smile.

"Would you prefer me heartless?" he said; but he withdrew his hand, and the sapphire burned no more.

They began to talk again upon ordinary topics, and the conversation turned upon the Graydown Steeplechase Races of the morrow. Two horses from the Burchester Stud were running.

"Beauties they are too!" said Bunny, with enthusiasm. "Sam Vickers swears they'll win." He uttered his quick, impatient sigh. "What wouldn't I give to see 'em do it!"

"Why shouldn't you?" said Saltash. "I'll take you over."

"Will you?" cried Bunny, with shining eyes.

And in the same breath. "No, no!" said Maud quickly. "Charlie! Why do you suggest these impossible things?"

Saltash laughed. "I never suggest the impossible," he said. "Bunny--and you too--can come along in the car if you will. I can make him quite comfortable with cushions."

But Maud shook her head. "It isn't so easy as it used to be. And he gets tired so soon. Really--really, it can't be done!"

"Oh, Maud, do shut up!" broke in Bunny. "You jaw like any old woman! Of course I'll come, Charlie! When will you be round?"

Lord Saltash looked at Maud with an impish expression. "I am afraid you are in the minority, *ma reine*. But leave it to me! I'll undertake that no harm is done."

Maud rose suddenly from her chair. She stood upright and slender in the firelight. "I can't consent to it," she said with resolution.

He sprang instantly to his feet. "You don't want to come?" he said.

She met his challenging eyes with an effort. "Don't make things difficult," she begged in a low voice.

"But if I got your mother to come too!" he urged. "She used to love race-meetings."

She turned her eyes away. "Neither Bunny nor I can go," she said steadily.

"I say I will go!" cried Bunny hotly. "I'm old enough to do as I like, and I won't be dictated to by anyone."

Saltash turned back to him. "I'll take you one day, old chap. But the queen's word is law, you know. We can't go in direct opposition to it. Moreover," with audacious simplicity, "it wouldn't be great sport for any one if the queen herself did not deign to accompany us."

"She'll go fast enough if I do," said Bunny. "She sticks to me like a leech."

"Lucky beggar!" said Saltash.

He glanced back at Maud. She was still on her feet, turned partially from him. It was evident that she did not mean to renew the friendly intercourse that his unwelcome suggestion had interrupted.

"I must get back to my lonely castle," said Saltash.

She turned then, as he had known she would. "No, don't go--why should you?--till--till Jake comes back!"

He laughed into her eyes. "Now, don't try to persuade me that you want me any longer! I know the signs too well. I am going to walk down and meet Jake, as I must have a word with him

about the animals. By the way, why don't you call him Jacob? The other is too frivolous for your august lips."

There was a sting in the smiling question of which she alone was aware. She knew that he had it in him to be malicious at times. But she would not seem to notice.

"Are you backing either of the horses running to-morrow?" she asked.

He raised his agile brows. "But, of course I am. Who ever went to a meeting without putting something on? And you don't suppose I would lay a wager against one of my own beasts, do you?"

"You always back your own before anyone else's?" she said.

"Of course," he made prompt reply. "We've pulled off a good many events since Jake took command."

"Yes," she said slowly. "He is a genius with horses."

"Oh, quite useful," said Saltash carelessly. "Well, good night to you both! Many thanks for your kind hospitality! Don't forget the piano at the Castle! Come and go exactly as you like! I will give orders to that effect."

"You are very kind," she said.

But the pleasant intimacy between them was broken. She knew that her refusal to go with him on the morrow had hurt him. He was in a mood to sting at a touch.

She gave him her hand with genuine regret. "Good-bye, Charlie!" she said gently.

He took it with a gesture that made her remember that his mother had been a Frenchwoman. "Good night, *ma chère!*" he said lightly. "When thou art dreaming, think of me!"

Her faint laugh had a note of bitterness. "But I never dream," she said.

CHAPTER XXIII THE NARROWING CIRCLE

When Jake returned at length, he entered an atmosphere so unmistakably stormy that he looked instinctively to Maud for an explanation.

The room was lighted and the curtains drawn. She was sitting in the low chair by the fire doing some intricate crochet-work with knitted brows. There was tension in her attitude, tension in the firm compression of her lips.

Bunny lay on his sofa, hot-cheeked, fiery-eyed, beating an impatient tattoo with one hand on the table by his side. On the table lay the presents that he had received that day, a box of paints and sketching block from his mother, a book from Maud, a small telescope from Jake himself. But he was looking at none of them. His brows too were closely drawn. His teeth bit viciously into his lower lip.

Maud did not raise her eyes at Jake's entrance. She seemed intent upon her work. He came and stood beside her.

"I should have been back sooner," he remarked, "but Lord Saltash met me, and I had to take him back to the Castle in the dog-cart."

Her fingers moved very rapidly. "I thought perhaps you would dine with him," she said, in a voice that sounded very cold and aloof.

"Not I," said Jake. "Give me my own fireside, and my clay pipe that doesn't go into aristocratic society!"

She raised her eyes momentarily. "Are you a Socialist?" she asked.

His eyes were unblinkingly upon her. "I guess not," he said, speaking with something of a drawl. "I've seen life--lots of it--that's all. As to my politics, well, I reckon they're mine and no one else's. I think just what I like of everything and everybody." He turned those intent eyes suddenly upon Bunny. "What's wrong with the head of the family?" he asked.

At once Bunny burst into speech. "Jake, it's--it's infernal that I can't go to the races in Charlie's motor--to-morrow. He's offered to take me. Why shouldn't I go? Hang it all, I will go!" He banged his clenched fist upon the table with the last passionate words.

Maud kept her eyes upon her work. Her hands though they moved so rapidly, were not wholly steady. "He is not fit to go," she said.

"That's not the reason you refused!" flung back Bunny, who was rapidly working himself up to fever pitch. "You said No just because you thought Jake would be jealous if you said you'd go. You're afraid of him, that's what's the matter with you,--afraid of his finding out that you're still in love with Charlie."

He broke into his cracked, painful laugh, stopping abruptly as Jake left the hearth and stepped quietly to his side.

"Don't touch me!" he said, shrinking sharply back.

Jake stooped. His face was grim. "My son, I'm going to touch you," he said. "I'm going to carry you straight up to bed. You've had more than enough excitement for to-day."

"I'm not going to bed!" cried Bunny, his voice high and defiant. "I'm not going for hours yet. Jake--Jake--leave me alone, do you hear? You're hurting me!"

"Afraid you've got to be hurt," said Jake.

He was slipping steady hands under the boy's writhing body. Maud had risen. She came swiftly forward. She touched Jake's shoulder, her face pale and agitated.

"Don't, please, Jake!" she entreated. "It does more harm than good."

He did not look at her or pay the smallest attention. Bunny was already in his arms,--Bunny, purple with rage, waving his arms in blind impotence.

"P'raps you'd open the door for me!" said Jake, in his slow gentle voice.

She went to the door. Somehow it was the only thing left to do. Jake followed her with his burden.

As he did so, Bunny ceased to struggle, realizing the mastery of the steady arms that bore him, and spoke; in a voice of tense hostility.

"You beastly groom!" he said.

Jake said nothing whatever. He carried him firmly, unfalteringly, from the room.

Maud closed the door softly behind him, and went back to her chair.

But she did not take up her work again. She sat gazing into the fire with wide, troubled eyes. She was beginning to realize that old associations, old friends, could be nothing but a disturbing element in her life, beginning to wish with yearning sadness that Charlie had not come back into it. She was tired--so tired, so sick at heart.

As for Bunny, he had grown out of hand and would never be the same to her again. She was sure of it, she was sure of it. Nothing ever could be the same again in this new world that she had entered. It was a world of harsh realities, wherein dwelt no softening magic. The fate she had dreaded was surely closing in upon her. Whichever way she turned, she found a narrowing circle.

A long time passed. She began to grow anxious. What was happening upstairs? Was it possible that Jake might after all lose his temper and visit his wrath upon Bunny's rebellious head? Would he by any chance make use of that frightful language which she had heard him employ only a few days before to a negligent stable-boy? Bunny's bitter epithet dwelt in her memory. Surely Jake would be something more than human if he did not resent it!

And then suddenly she heard his square footfall on the uncarpeted stairs, and a great wave of agitation went through her. All her being quivered at the thought of him, his unyielding mastery, his utter confidence. Two eyes, one black, one grey, seemed to flash a mocking question out of the depths of the fire into which she gazed. Her heart gave a little quiver of misgiving that yet was oddly mingled with satisfaction. No, she was not wholly sorry that Lord Saltash had come back into her life. He was so subtly refreshing. He sounded deeps in her of which none other guessed. His gaiety of soul called back her vanished youth.

Jake entered, and she turned her head, masking her embarrassment with a resolute effort. "Oh, Jake, come and sit down! I am so sorry this has happened."

He pulled forward a chair and dropped into it. "The little chap is overtired," he said. "He'll be better left to himself for a bit."

He spoke in a quiet, temperate voice. She realized with relief that he had not taken Bunny's bitter outburst seriously. She took up her work again.

"He is always difficult to manage when he gets caught by one of these moods," she said. "And he is apt to say wild things."

Jake began to fill his pipe, making no comment.

Maud worked on for several seconds, still struggling against an uneasy feeling of shyness.

After a little, in a low voice she spoke again. "Jake, I think--with you--that if Dr. Capper will examine Bunny and--and perhaps operate on him, it had better be done--as soon as possible."

"That so?" said Jake.

She knew that he turned his head to look at her, and a hot sense of discomfiture surged through her. She worked with fevered speed, as if much depended upon it.

"Of course--of course I want him to have--every chance. I am not so selfish as that. But--but--the anxiety will be very hard to bear. I dread it more than I can possibly say."

Her lips quivered suddenly. She became silent, still desperately making stitches that she

could hardly see. She had not meant to make any appeal for sympathy. It had, as it were, escaped her from sheer embarrassment. She had never felt more utterly ill at ease in Jake's presence than she felt that night.

He did not immediately respond though she knew that he continued to watch her with those lynx-like, brilliant eyes. But after a very decided pause, his hand, square and steady, came forth and stopped her fevered working.

"Sit still for a bit, my girl!" he said. "Give yourself a rest!"

She started sharply at his touch, but gave in at once, suffering him to draw the work from her hands.

"Say, now," he said, "when you married me, I made myself a vow that you shouldn't be burdened any more beyond your strength. This anxiety you speak of, will it be harder to bear than to see Bunny suffering and not be able to help?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Guess you're overwrought," he said gently. "Why don't you lie down on the sofa? P'raps you'd get a sleep."

She mastered herself with an effort. "No, thank you. I am quite all right. Of course Bunny's welfare comes before everything and always will with me. Do you know, I think I will run up to him and see that he has all he wants."

"No, my girl, no! You stay where you are!" said Jake. "I've got him in hand. Don't you go making more trouble!"

She glanced at him with quick uneasiness. "But is he happy? Is he comfortable? I never leave him for long when he is like this. Once he dragged himself right out of bed and on to the floor. He was worse for weeks after."

"He won't do that to-night," said Jake.

But she was not reassured. "He may. How can you tell? He can be quite violent sometimes."

"He won't be to-night," said Jake with unmistakable conviction.

"What have you been doing to him?" she said, with quick suspicion.

He put a restraining hand upon her for she seemed on the verge of rising. "Now, don't you meddle!" he said. "The boy will be all right; only leave him alone! He won't come to any mischief because he can't. I've tied him down. No, he ain't uncomfortable," as she uttered a sharp cry of protest. "I saw to that before I put out the light and left him to come to his senses. He won't hurt, I tell you. You leave him alone!"

But Maud was already on her feet. "How could you?" she panted. "How dare you?"

He rose with her, still holding her. "Now be reasonable!" he said, in a voice of soft persuasion. "I'm real fond of the little chap, and I'm trying to make a man of him. He knows that all right. It's discipline he wants and discipline he's going to have. Don't you get interfering! You'll do more harm than good."

"Let me go!" breathed Maud.

She was white to the lips as she said it, white and desperate. Her eyes burned like two stars. But Jake held her still.

"Say, now!" he drawled. "Aren't you a bit unreasonable? I've taken a lot of trouble to bring him into line. And, as I tell you, I haven't hurt any part of him, except his pride, and that'll soon mend. Maud, my girl, now don't act the fool! Don't, I say, don't!"

She had made a sharp effort to wrest her arm free; but he frustrated it, taking her two wrists very gently but very decidedly into his square hold.

"Let me go!" she cried again, her pale lips trembling. "How--how dare you hold me against my will? Jake, you--forget yourself!"

He was looking at her with a hint of humour in his red-brown eyes. They were shining too, shining with a hot intensity, as though the leaping flames of the fire were reflected there. But at her words, he let her go very abruptly and turned from her. He took up his pipe again, standing so that she saw only his broad back and gleaming hair, while she waited behind him in palpitating silence.

Some seconds passed before he spoke. And then: "All right, my girl," he said. "Have it your own way! I reckon he's your brother more than mine, and I know you have his welfare at heart. If you think it to his interest to go and undo him--he ain't uncomfortable, mind you! I saw to that--I shan't interfere either way. Do whatever seems good to you!"

So he delivered himself, and having spoken sat squarely down and pulled out his match-box as though the matter were at an end.

She stood irresolute, facing him.

"Well? Aren't you going?" he said, after a moment.

And still she stood, feeling the strain to be past yet not daring to relax her guard.

Jake struck a match and held it to his pipe, looking at her whimsically between great puffs of smoke.

"There! Sit down!" he said, after a moment. "Leave the child alone for a bit! I'll go up to him myself before long."

Casual as was his voice, the force of his personality reached and dominated her. It was certainly not of her own volition that she obeyed.

She sat down again in the low chair before the hearth. "I know he will have a bad night," she said uneasily.

"It won't be any the worse for this," said Jake, with confidence. "And, now, look here, my girl, I want to ask you something--just in a friendly way."

Maud's hands clasped each other hard. There was no repose in her attitude. "What is it?" she asked, in that aloof voice of hers that emanated from intense shyness rather than pride.

Jake was smoking steadily. The heavy odour of his tobacco filled the room. "I don't want to give any offence," he said. "But it seems to me that Lord Saltash is on a footing of intimacy with you and Bunny that rather points to your not knowing the sort of person he really is."

Maud's eyes grew suddenly darker. She looked him full in the face. "I know him too well to discuss him with any--outsider," she said.

"That so?" said Jake, slightly drawling. "Well, that certainly makes matters rather more complicated. I know him, too--awfully well--so well that I shall have to request you to keep the young man at a respectful distance; for he certainly won't stay there if you don't."

Maud sat tensely still. Several moments of utter silence passed away. Then, almost under her breath, she spoke. "Are you absurd enough to be jealous?"

Jake's eyes watched her unwaveringly through the smoke. "Would it be very absurd of me?" he asked gravely.

"Utterly." She spoke the one word with a free disdain.

He bent his head slightly. "Since you say so--it goes. At the same time, it might be well for you to remember that Lord Saltash invariably hunts for himself. He is not a man that any woman can safely trust. He has his points, maybe, but--he is not sound."

Very steadily he delivered his verdict, and Maud received it in unbroken silence. More or less she knew it to be true, and yet very bitterly did she resent its utterance. It was as if he had exposed to her the worthlessness of a possession which for old sake's sake she treasured though conscious that in itself it was without value. For she had never idealized Charlie Burchester. Even in the old days of close intimacy she had always seen the feet of clay, though in her fond woman's way she had sought to overlook them. It was intolerable to have them pointed out to her by one whom she still curiously regarded as a comparative stranger.

She had nothing to say on her friend's behalf. Reason warned her that it would be useless to attempt to take up the cudgels in his defence. And so she sat in silence, inwardly burning, outwardly calm.

Jake smoked on for several minutes, then quietly rose. "I'll go up and settle the youngster now," he said. "And you have made up your mind on the other subject? I am to write to Capper?"

She did not answer for a moment; her eyes were fixed upon the fire.

He paused beside her, and again there came to her that sense of warmth, of bodily force, that seemed to reach her from the very centre of the man's being, rushing out to her, enveloping her.

She made a slight, involuntary movement of withdrawal. "I have said so," she said.

He paused no longer. "Then so be it!" he said, and walked away to the door.

CHAPTER XXIV BROTHERS

"Is that you, Jake?"

Outraged pride and sullen submission combined in the utterance of the question. The room was in complete darkness.

"Yes, it's me," said Jake.

He went forward into the darkness, feeling out before him.

"Why don't you strike a match?" said Bunny.

Jake found the bed and stood beside it. "Going to behave yourself, my son?" he asked.

There was silence from the bed, a dogged, uncompromising silence.

Jake stooped. Feeling over the boy's body, he began to undo his bonds.

"Say, Bunny, I reckoned you were a bigger man than this," he said.

Bunny remained silent, stiff and unyielding.

Jake completed his task and stood up. "If you're wanting to tell me to go to blazes, you may as well say it as not," he said.

"I'm not," growled Bunny. "But you've no right to treat me like a dog. I'm not used to it."

"A damn' good hiding is what you're most in need of," said Jake, in his soft, imperturbable voice. "You'd learn a lot that way. There's too much pride in your family, my son, and it ain't always the proper sort of pride either. It's likely to lead you into difficulties." He paused a moment; then bent again, his hand moving lightly upwards over the bedclothes. "Say, Bunny, climb down a bit; climb down!" he said. "I can't get within a mile of you on that high horse of yours."

There was a hint of coaxing in the words and action to which Bunny taken by surprise made instant almost involuntary response. With a swift, passionate movement, he caught the persuasive hand.

"Old chap--" he said, and stopped, breaking off short.

There followed a few, pulsing seconds, during which Jake's hand was pressed hard against a burning face. Then, very suddenly Bunny cast his pride wholly from him and burst into choking tears.

"Little feller! Little feller!" said Jake, and gathered him into arms that were full of motherly comfort.

He sat down on the bed, so holding him, rocking him a little, soothing him in the darkness that seemed to banish all barriers and link them in a brotherhood more close than either had anticipated before that moment.

Bunny's surrender was complete and unconditional. He clung fast to Jake with whispered words of penitence. "I'm always like that when I feel bad. I've had that filthy neuralgia in my back ever since tea. It makes me want to bite and kick. I didn't mean to be a beast to you, Jake. I take back all I said. You'll forget it--say you'll forget it!"

"I have forgotten it," Jake assured him. "Don't you fret now!"

Bunny burrowed into his shoulder. "You're so beastly good to a fellow. But you're right--quite right--about the hiding. I only wish you could give me one. It's just that I want."

"No--no!" Jake said tenderly. "I wouldn't lay a finger on you."

"You would if I were sound," protested Bunny, strangling a sob.

But Jake shook his head. "No, sonny, no! I was wrong. It ain't the treatment for a soft-hearted little chap like you. I've been used to dealing with roughs, and I'm rough myself. I try not to be; but there it is. You've sensed it, and so has Maud. But--I say it now, and I'll stick to it--I'll never use violence to you as long as I live."

"Jake, old boy, that's rot!--I--I like you to smack my head sometimes," blurted forth Bunny, still in accents of distress.

Jake laughed a little. "Well, maybe, I'll do that now and then, seeing we're brothers." He was rubbing the head with a caressing hand as he spoke. "You know, I've got a sort of liking for you, little pard; and I want you to grow up a man."

"How can I?" said Bunny very bitterly.

"It ain't the body that makes the man," said Jake gently. "Physical conditions don't matter two cents. Reckon if you were to be a cripple all your days, you could still be a great man. But, please God, you won't be a cripple always. My friend Capper--you've heard me talk of him--he's coming over from the States, and maybe he'll be able to put you right. We'll give him the chance, eh, Bunny? We'll get him anyway to come along and look at you."

Bunny's frail body had begun to tremble. He held very fast to Jake's arm. "Oh, Jake!" he whispered.

"Guess it's a big proposition," said Jake. "But you've got spunk for anything. I'm going to send him a letter right away. Maud views the matter as we do. She says, the sooner the better."

"Whatever made her say that?" said Bunny curiously.

"She was thinking of you," said Jake. "She thinks more of you than of anyone else in the world. Reckon you owe her a mighty lot, Bunny. Ever thought of that?"

"Reckon she'd be rather lost without me," said Bunny perversely.

"Not for long," said Jake.

"She would," persisted Bunny. "If I were to get well, she'd be glad for my sake, but she'd be utterly miserable for her own."

He spoke with the shrewdness that years of passive observation had wrought in him--a shrewdness that somehow lifted him above the plane of ordinary unthinking boyhood. Almost instinctively Jake responded to it. He spoke to Bunny as though he had been a man.

"She won't be miserable when she has children of her own to look after," he said. "That's what she wants, and what I want too. They'll make all the difference in the world to her."

Bunny was momentarily surprised. This was a possibility that had not occurred to him. "Oh, that's the idea, is it?" he said.

"What's the matter with it?" said Jake.

"I don't know," said Bunny. "Somehow I don't seem to realize that she actually is married to you."

"She doesn't realize it either," said Jake rather shortly.

"That's because you don't make love to her," said Bunny wisely. "Why, you don't even kiss her, do you?"

"I haven't." Jake's voice was an odd compound of humour and dissatisfaction.

"Why on earth don't you?" said Bunny.

"You'd better ask her," said Jake somewhat grimly.

"Aren't you friends?" There was quick sympathy in the boy's voice. "I know Maud is a bit difficult to get on with. She was very odd even to Charlie this evening when he wanted us to go to the races with him. Why shouldn't we have gone, Jake? She knew I wanted to, and she used to like it herself."

An echo of resentment sounded in the question. Bunny had plainly not wholly buried his grievance.

"I'll take you one day, my son, when you're stronger," Jake promised. "And Maud too--if she's keen. I didn't know she was. She didn't tell me so."

"She doesn't tell you everything, does she?" said Bunny, giving him a squeeze.

"Reckon she's half afraid of me," said Jake. "What reason did she give for not going with Lord Saltash?"

"Oh, none. She just said we couldn't. Charlie wasn't best pleased about it. Charlie can be rather hot stuff when he isn't pleased."

Jake uttered a dry laugh. "Did he make himself unpleasant?"

"No. But he cleared out almost at once. You see, he always used to be able to twist Maud round his little finger--till she broke with him."

Jake's arms suddenly grew tense about the slim boyish body he held. "Say, young feller! Will you tell me something?" he said.

"Of course! If I can," said Bunny.

"Just this--only this," said Jake, his voice sunk to a whisper. "Have you any real reason--any good reason--for believing that Maud still cares for this old flame of hers? Honestly now! Was there any truth in what you said downstairs?"

"Oh, Jake, I'm beastly sorry I said it!" Bunny turned a distressed face upwards, pressing his hot forehead hard against Jake's neck.

"All right. You needn't answer." Jake's words seemed to come from between his teeth. "It's what I suspected all along. It won't make any difference in the end, so you needn't be upset about it. I always knew I was taking chances."

"She'd soon forget him if you started making love to her," Bunny assured him. "Why don't you, Jake? Why don't you?"

"Ah! Why don't I?" Jake uttered again his dry, somewhat scoffing laugh. "P'raps I'm waiting for someone else to make the running. But don't you bother your head about that, my son! I shall get home on the straight--or perish in the attempt."

He stooped, and laid Bunny gently down on the pillows.

"I'll light your lamp now and leave you. Maud will be up with your supper directly."

But Bunny clung to his arm. "You'll come back, Jake? You--you'll sleep with me?"

"Oh, yes, I'll sleep with you--if Maud will let me." Jake's voice held ironic humour. "But it's a sore point, I warn you."

"Of course she'll let you. She can't help herself. She knows I'm ten times more comfortable with you to look after me. It's jolly decent of you, Jake." Bunny hugged the arm a little closer. "Sure you've forgiven me for being such a beast?"

"Shucks, lad! Don't think any more about it! We're all beasts sometimes, though we don't all

take the trouble to be sorry afterwards." Jake stooped abruptly and kissed his forehead--a token received by Bunny with a satisfaction as great as his surprise. "Be decent to Maud, little chap!" he said. "Remember, nearly the whole of her life has been one big sacrifice to you!"

"Oh, I know she's a brick," Bunny said quickly. "I'm awfully fond of her of course. You--I suppose you're fond of her too, Jake?"

He put the question with slight hesitation, not wholly certain as to whether Jake would welcome it, yet oddly desirous of a reply.

Jake had withdrawn his arm. He stood by the bed in the darkness, only dimly visible to Bunny--a square, powerful figure, of rock-like strength, endued with the hard endurance that springs in the wilderness and is the natural heritage of beasts and savage tribes, coming but seldom upon the sons of adoption.

He did not speak at all for several seconds, and Bunny began to wonder if he had given offence. Then suddenly he stretched out his arms with a wide, fierce gesture as of one who would seize and hold in the face of any odds.

"My God!" he said, and in his voice was a deep throb as of a force that rose unfettered from the very heart of the man. "I--worship her!"

In the awed silence that followed the words, his arms fell. He stood a second or two as one in a dream striving to grip afresh the realities of life. Then, quite calmly he turned aside and crossed the room to light the lamp.

Bunny, watching him, marvelled that the kindling flame revealed only the resolute face and steady eyes of the man he knew. For it seemed to him that another man had spoken in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXV MISADVENTURE

Lord Saltash had the satisfaction of seeing one of his own animals a winner at the Graydown meeting on the following day, a circumstance which plainly gave him the keenest pleasure. He joined his trainer at the conclusion of the event and warmly congratulated him.

Jake was himself well-pleased. He had worked hard for the victory, and the horse was a particular favourite with him. But he did not betray any especial gratification at his patron's openly expressed approval, receiving it with the reticence that Maud had remarked in him the day before.

Lord Saltash, however, seemed bent upon breaking down all reserve. He treated him with easy familiarity, chatted upon a thousand subjects, received suggestions with cordiality, and finally, when the races were over, insisted upon motoring him home in the open car which he invariably drove himself when at Burchester, and which was the terror of the countryside.

The evening was chill and mist-laden. "With your permission we'll go steady," Jake said, as they left the teeming race-course behind.

"What! Nervous?" laughed Saltash.

"I have a wife to think of," was Jake's unmoved reply.

"Oh, to be sure!" A hint of mockery ran through the words. "What an artful fox you were to go and get married on the sly like that! If I'd known, I'd have come to the wedding."

"It wasn't much of an affair," said Jake. "And it had to take place at short notice, or I should have told you about it."

"Perhaps it wouldn't have taken place at all if you had," laughed Lord Saltash. "You know the legend of Young Lochinvar. And--" his dark face screwed up into a comic grimace--"I presume you know my reputation."

"Almost as well as I know you, my lord," said Jake drily.

Saltash sent him a sharp glance through the gathering twilight. He was driving swiftly but well. "Nobody ever really knows anybody in this world of noughts and crosses," he observed lightly after a moment. "It's a queer place, Bolton. And it isn't always the fellows that gather the fruit that enjoy the eating thereof. Ever reflected on that truism?"

"I reckon it couldn't apply to me in any case," drawled Jake, turning up his collar and settling into it with square deliberation.

"Because you're one of the favoured few?" questioned Saltash.

There was an unmistakably jeering note in his voice this time. A faint smile came into Jake's

face. His eyes stared straight before him.

"Maybe so," he said. "But my opinion is, if a man can't hold his own,--well, he deserves to lose it."

Saltash laughed aloud. "It isn't always brute force that counts, most worthy cow-puncher. There is such a thing as brains."

"You don't say!" said Jake in a tone of gentle incredulity and, in a moment: "Do you mind reining in a bit? We're coming to a cross-roads."

"You're mighty nervous!" gibed Saltash.

"It's safer," said Jake imperturbably.

They dropped into silence with one consent.

Saltash was obviously inclined to recklessness though he seemed for awhile to be trying to restrain the impulse. They shot through the gathering darkness with ever-increasing speed.

Jake made no further protest. He sat sphinx-like, gazing straight ahead through the misty wind-screen. The distance from Graydown to Fairharbour was scarcely ten miles. Lord Saltash chose the shortest route, bumping through bye lanes, whizzing round unexpected corners, shooting uphill like a rocket, dropping down again like a thunderbolt.

He drove with a skill that was in its way magnificent, but the entire run was a series of risks such as only the driver could enjoy.

It was evident that he speedily forgot the presence of his companion, and Jake did not remind him of it. Perhaps he deemed it inadvisable to divert his attention in any way from the task in hand.

For nearly a quarter of an hour of rapid travelling he spoke no word. Saltash was humming to himself an old tune with a waltz refrain which seemed to give him considerable pleasure.

They were drawing near the outskirts of Burchester Park when abruptly he broke off, and spoke. "I want you to come up to lunch on Sunday, you and Maud and the boy."

He spoke jerkily, almost curtly. Jake turned his head.

"Have you put the proposition before--my wife?" he asked.

"Oh, I asked her to come of course," said Saltash carelessly. "I didn't mention any particular day. Why? Have you any reason to suppose she would refuse?"

He laughed as he said it, but there was a challenging note in his laugh.

Jake passed the question by. "It is real kind of your lordship to think of it," he said. "I can't--of course--answer for my wife or the lad; but I shall be very pleased to come."

Saltash made a curious sound half of ridicule, half of exasperation. "If she doesn't come, I shall know whose doing it is," he said, with a touch of malice.

Jake was silent.

Impatiently Saltash turned towards him. "Look here, Bolton," he said aggressively; "it's no manner of use your raising any objection to the intimacy between us. It began long before you came on the scene, and it's going to continue. Understand?"

"Look where you're going!" said Jake. "Or else jam on the brake!"

He uttered the words with a sharpness so unexpected that Saltash started. As a consequence, the car swerved and instantly skidded in the mud, jerking the wheel from his hold. In a moment they were half-way up a steep bank at the side of the road, and a moment after with a crash of splintering glass they were over, flung headlong into the roadway.

"Damn!" said Jake.

"Damnation!" cried Lord Saltash with violence. "It was your fault! What the devil did you startle me like that for?";

He sprang up with the agility of a monkey, unscathed and furious.

Jake remained seated in the mud. He was panting a little but his speech when it came was unhurried.

"What the blazes did you want to drive at that preposterous speed for, you all-fired fool?" he said.

"Eh? What?" Saltash stamped in the mud to relieve his feelings. "Do you dare to say it was my fault?"

"I say you're an all-fired fool," said Jake, with the deliberation of one who has come to an unalterable decision. "You can draw your own conclusions from that."

He proceeded to get up with an effort so obvious that Saltash's attention was caught. "Hullo! You're hurt, are you? Where?"

"I reckon that's what I've got to find out," said Jake. "Maybe it's no worse than a broken head. What about you?"

"Oh, I'm all right," Saltash declared impatiently. "I say, are you really hurt, man? Curse this dark! Wait while I strike a match!"

"Curse everything!" said Jake whole-heartedly. "I wonder if there's a lamp not smashed."

Saltash struck a match and regarded him by its flare. "Great Scott!" he ejaculated in dismay.

For the illumination had revealed to him that which he had certainly not expected to see; one side of Jake's face streaming with blood.

Jake strove ineffectually to staunch the flow with a handkerchief. "I don't know where the mischief is exactly," he said. "Somewhere above the temple, I fancy. Don't alarm yourself, my lord. I always bleed like a pig. It's my nature to."

A faint grim smile drew his mouth with the words. He looked at Saltash with eyes of steady mastery. "Let me hold that match!" he said. "P'raps you wouldn't mind locating the mischief."

Saltash, genuinely disturbed, complied with this suggestion, and discovered a deep, jagged cut on Jake's forehead.

"I say, this is a bad business!" he said, as the match went out. "Are you feeling bad?"

"Oh, not in the least," said Jake drily. "Sorry to give you so much trouble."

"My dear fellow, I'm sorrier than you are," declared Saltash impulsively. "I've driven for ten years and never had a smash before. Here, strike another match and let me see what I can do!"

It was no easy matter to bandage adequately under such conditions, but Saltash was not without a certain rudimentary skill. He went to work with business-like promptitude, and had succeeded in securing a handkerchief round Jake's head with a firmness calculated at least to check the flow of blood when the sound of wheels warned them of the approach of some vehicle.

It proved to be the dog-cart of a farmer known to them both who was himself returning from the races; and Saltash was relieved beyond measure to bundle Jake into the cart and see him depart for home. He remained with the overturned car till help should arrive from the Stables.

Jake also was not sorry to find himself jogging homeward, unpleasant though he found the jogging to be. He was nearer to collapse than he would have allowed.

He sat with his head in his hands, struggling desperately against a deadly sense of weakness that threatened every instant to overcome him.

His companion was full of solicitude. "Whatever will your missus say?" he said, as they drew near the Stables.

Jake roused himself. "Don't drive in!" he said. "Put me down at the gates! I must make myself respectable before I go in."

"Lor' bless you man, if she's a woman of sense she'd sooner know the worst at once," declared the old farmer. "Don't ever try to hide anything from your wife! It don't pay. I've been married three times, so I ought to know."

But Jake adhered firmly to his intention of descending at the gates, resolutely declining all further help; and there his friend left him, driving away with the reflection that there was sure to be someone about to give him a hand.

As it chanced, there was no one in the stable-yard when Jake entered it. He staggered forward over the stones like a drunken man, his cap pulled forward over his face, feeling vaguely out before him with his hands. His brain was reeling, and he did not know how he covered the ground or maintained his balance. So dazed was he that he did not even realize that he reached the white railings before his home, and only awoke to the fact when he had been leaning upon them for some time.

With an immense effort he pulled himself together and made his way to the door. Here the thought of Maud made him pause. She must not see him like this. Then, reflecting that she would almost certainly be safe upstairs with Bunny who had not left his room that day, he fumbled with the door, opened it, and entered.

All was quiet within with the quiet of a well-ordered household. The passage was dimly lit. Slowly he made his halting way along it, reached the stairs and stopped at the foot, leaning on the banisters while he summoned his strength. At last, heavily, like a man in a trance, he began to mount.

The stairs seemed endless. Once or twice he stumbled. At the top he slipped and came down upon his knees.

"Oh damn!" he ejaculated, with weary vehemence.

At the same moment Bunny's door opened, and he heard the light tread of a woman's feet close to him.

She was coming towards him, moving swiftly, when suddenly something seemed to strike her. She stopped dead, recoiling as from a thing unclean.

"Jake!" she said.

He heard the frozen horror in her voice and thrust out a groping hand. "It's all right, my girl. Don't be scared! I didn't mean you to see me--like this."

She drew back from him sharply, speaking no word, gazing at him in the dim light with eyes of wide abhorrence.

"It's--all right," he said again, and with a labouring effort managed to blunder to his feet.

She drew back still further. He saw her slim white figure standing before him erect and rigid against the wall. He caught the blazing scorn of her blue eyes.

"Say, Maud," he said in confused apology, "you're looking kind of vexed. It wasn't--any fault of mine. It was--it was--that fool--Saltash." He spoke the name with difficulty. His tongue felt dry and powerless. "Guess I want a drink," he said.

She spoke then, briefly and witheringly. "You had better go to bed and stay there till you feel better. There is plenty of water in your room if you want it."

Her words were icy. He felt as if she had flung the water of which she spoke full in his face. And then suddenly the truth flashed upon him, and he uttered a laugh.

"Columbus!" he said. "I believe you think I'm tipsy!"

She did not attempt to contradict him. "You had better go to bed," she reiterated.

He put up a trembling hand, but it was only to draw the cap down further still over his face. "I reckon I'd better," he said, and staggered past her to his room.

The door closed behind him, and Maud turned, white and quivering, from the scene.

"O God!" she whispered passionately. "What have I done? What have I done?"

CHAPTER XXVI THE WORD UNSPOKEN

It was late that night when Mrs. Lovelace called Maud out of Bunny's room with a white, scared face to tell her that Lord Saltash was below asking for her.

"He wanted Mr. Bolton first," she said, "but I told him as I didn't know if he was back, and then he said something about a slight motor accident and seemed surprised like that Mr. Bolton hadn't come home."

"It's all right. He is home," Maud said. "There is no need to be anxious about him." She hesitated a moment; then: "Tell Lord Saltash so!" she said. "I think I won't come down now. He will understand."

Nevertheless, after she had dismissed the old woman, something prompted her to go and listen at Jake's door. She was convinced in her own mind that there had been no accident. Charlie had seen her husband's condition and was anxious to know if he had returned home safely. That was the explanation, doubtless, and she felt she could not face him.

She listened intently, but she heard no sound. Jake was sleeping no doubt, sleeping heavily. An overwhelming disgust came upon her. She turned shuddering away.

Mrs. Lovelace came wheezing back. Lord Saltash had gone. Was Mr. Bolton all right? Should she fetch him anything?

No, Maud was quite sure he wanted nothing. He was asleep and Mrs. Lovelace had better go to bed.

But she herself remained up till long after, in dread of a summons for Jake from Sam Vickers or some other of the men at the Stables. Probably they all suspected what had happened, but she felt that at all costs she must prevent the shameful certainty reaching them. It was too horrible, too lowering to her own personal pride. Very strangely it was that overpowering sense of shame that first made her realize the man as her husband. He had dragged her into the mire, and though her whole soul revolted she felt with a sinking despair that she could never be clean again. She was bound to him for better for worse, and nothing could ever set her free. She was, as it were, identified with him, and the evil of his nature must lie upon her like a taint. There could be no escape for her, loathe him as she might.

She lay down at last sick at heart and full of a great bitterness. Life was horrible, life was repulsive. Whichever way she turned some evil monster crouched across her path.

Bunny was restless and querulous throughout the night. He was deeply hurt by Jake's desertion, and, though he forebore to say so, he plainly regarded his sister as a very poor substitute.

"I shan't get up till Jake comes to see me," he announced in the morning.

And Maud went down to fetch his breakfast with a reluctant promise to inform Jake of this intention if she saw him.

She hoped very earnestly that she would not see him, but her hope was not to be fulfilled. Coming from the kitchen with Bunny's breakfast-tray, she almost ran into him. He had evidently just entered the house, and was hanging up his cap on the rack that stood in the darkest corner of the passage.

He stood back for her to pass him. "Good morning!" he said.

Her face was burning. So great was her agitation for the moment that she thought she must drop the tray she held.

Jake evidently thought so too, for he reached out and steadily took it from her. "I'll take up this," he said. "I want to see the little chap. Do you mind going into the parlour? I shall be down directly."

He spoke in his customary slightly sing-song drawl. She longed to refuse, but could not. With an inarticulate murmur she turned aside.

In the parlour the fire burned brightly. She went and stood before it, striving desperately for composure. She would have given all she had to escape the coming interview. But she knew she could not, knew she must face it, listen to semi-humorous excuses, possibly a good-natured apology for an offence which she regarded as inexcusable, hideous.

With all her strength she fought for self-control. She must make it clear to him, must somehow make him understand that this thing had raised up a barrier between them that could never be broken down, an immovable obstacle to all intimacy, a perpetual stumbling-block to friendship. He had brought it on himself and never--never--never could it now be otherwise. They had never been very near, but now they were as far asunder as the poles. No kindness from him could ever make her forget.

She heard him descending the stairs, and braced herself with a throbbing heart to meet him. But she was trembling in every limb.

She did not turn to greet him as he entered, but kept her face resolutely averted.

He came in, closed the door with evident purpose, and drew near to her. She shrank at his coming. A quick involuntary shudder went through her. She stiffened herself instinctively.

He spoke, in his voice a soft, half-wheedling note of remonstrance. "Say, Maud, it ain't--altogether--reasonable to condemn a man unheard."

Her breath came short. She would not look at him. With a quivering effort she spoke. "I don't see any point in discussing the obvious. I am bound to believe the evidence of my own eyes."

"Without doubt," conceded Jake. "And they testified to my being screwed last night?"

"You can't--with truth--assert that you were sober," she said.

Jake did not make the assertion. He stood considering. After a moment: "Do you object so strongly to the sight of me that you can't bear to look at me?" he asked.

His tone was faintly humorous. She resented it on the instant, hotly, almost fiercely. It was so exactly the attitude that she had anticipated.

"I do object--yes," she said, her voice low and vehement. "I can't think how you can have the effrontery to speak to me until I give you leave."

"That so?" he said.

There was insolence in his tone this time. She turned and faced him. Then she saw a large cross of strapping-plaster across his temple. She looked at it a moment ere defiantly she met his eyes.

"I suppose you are going to make that your excuse," she said.

"I was," said Jake imperturbably.

She bit her lip. His utter lack of shame made her pitiless. "If I hadn't met you on the stairs last night, I might believe you," she said.

"You're real kind," he rejoined. "As a matter of fact I didn't cut my head open tumbling upstairs, but I reckon that detail won't interest you. You'll think what you want to think, whatever I say. And p'raps, as you say, there's not much point in discussing the obvious. Shall we have some breakfast?"

His eyes shone with a mocking gleam into hers. She was sure he was laughing inwardly, though his mouth was grim.

"I shall breakfast upstairs," she said coldly.

He made a slight movement that passed unexplained. "Oh, I think not," he said suavely. "It won't hurt you any to sit at table with me. I am a very ordinary sinner, I assure you."

Something in his tone made her flinch. The colour went out of her face. She turned without a word to the table.

They sat down, and he helped her to food, she knew not what. There followed a silence that she felt to be terrible, a silence through which it came to her for the first time in her experience that Jake was angry. She looked at him no longer, but she felt as if his eyes were upon her unceasingly.

"What about coffee, Mrs. Bolton?" he said suddenly.

She gave a great start. The coffee-urn was in front of her. She proceeded to pour out for him, the cup clattering in the saucer she held.

He did not move to take it; she rose, as if compelled, and carried it to him.

As she set it down, his hand suddenly descended upon hers. He looked up into her face, faintly smiling.

"Maud, my girl, don't be such a fool!" he said. "Can't you see you're making a mistake?"

She froze in his grasp. "Don't touch me, please!" she said. "You--I--see things from a different standpoint. It may seem a small matter to you, but to me--to me--" She stopped. "Let me go!" she said, with a nervous effort to free herself.

But he held her still. "Say, now, do you think you're wise to treat me like this?" he said. "You've got to put up with me, remember. Wouldn't it be to your own interest to give me the benefit of the doubt?"

"There is no doubt," she said, speaking quickly, breathlessly. "You haven't tried to deny it. As to--to--putting up with you--" the hand he held clenched convulsively--"I have a little self-respect--"

"Call it pride!" interjected Jake softly.

She looked at him with eyes of burning revolt. "Very well. Call it pride! And understand that if this shameful thing ever occurs again, neither Bunny nor I can stay with you any longer!"

Quiveringly the words rushed out. He had goaded her into uttering an ultimatum that she had never contemplated addressing to him at the commencement of the interview and the moment that she had uttered it she knew that she had done wrong. The red-brown eyes uplifted to hers suddenly kindled. He looked at her with a fiery intensity that sent the blood to her heart in a wave of wild dismay.

His hand closed like a steel spring upon her wrist. "So, you think you'll make a fool of me!" he said, and in his voice there sounded a deep note that was like the menace of an angry beast. "All right, my girl! You just try it! You'll find it an interesting experiment if a bit costly."

"Are you--coward enough--to threaten me?" she said, through panting lips.

"Reckon you've done all the threatening this journey," Jake rejoined, with a smile that made her shiver. "It wasn't exactly a wise move on your part, but p'raps you'll think better of it presently."

He let her go, with the words, and she went back to her place, outwardly calm, inwardly shaking.

Jake proceeded with his breakfast in a silence so absorbed that it was almost as if he had forgotten her presence altogether. It was never a lengthy meal with him. He ate and drank with business-like rapidity, not noticing that she did neither.

Finally he rose. "I shall come in presently to see if Bunny wants to come down," he said. "But the little chap doesn't look up to much this morning. He'll have to take it easy."

Maud did not respond. She sat rigidly gazing towards the window.

Jake stood a moment, waiting for her to turn, but she made no movement. He came quietly round to her, bent over her chair.

"Say, Maud, you aren't going to keep it up? That's not like you. I'll tell you all that happened last night if you'll listen."

She made a slight gesture of distaste. Her face was white and cold as marble. "I would rather not hear, thank you," she said, without looking at him. "I would rather you went away."

Jake stood up. There was no longer any suggestion of anger or any other emotion about him. His eyes glittered like red quartz in the sun; but his brow was absolutely unruffled.

"Well," he said, in a very pronounced drawl, "I should have some breakfast if I were you, and see how I felt then. It's wonderful what a difference breakfast makes."

He turned away with the words; she heard him go with relief.

On the other side of the door was the red setter, Chops. He pushed his way in with a passing smile at his master, who had conferred the freedom of the house upon him since Bunny's advent, to Mrs. Lovelace's prim disgust.

Jake made no attempt to hinder his entrance. He knew that Chops possessed privileges of friendship denied to himself. He closed the door upon him and departed.

Chops, after a cursory glance round for Bunny, came to the feet of his mistress. He looked at her with soft, questioning eyes, then, as she made no response, sat gravely down before her and rested his red, silken head upon her lap.

She looked down at him then. Her hand went forth to caress. He snuggled closer, sensing trouble, and breathed wistful greetings through his nose. His eyes, clear brown and full of love, looked up to hers.

The rigidity went out of her attitude. She bent suddenly over him and kissed him, touched by the honest devotion and sympathy of those eyes. By the simple method of offering all he had, Chops had managed to convey a little comfort to her soul.

CHAPTER XXVII THE TOKEN

"Why wouldn't you see me last night?" said Saltash.

He sat on the corner of the table, swinging a careless leg the while under quizzical brows he watched Maud arrange a great bunch of violets in a bowl. The violets were straight from the Burchester frames, and he had ridden over to present them.

Maud was plainly in a reticent mood. She had accepted the gift indeed, but with somewhat distant courtesy.

"It was late," she said. "And I was attending to Bunny."

"Bunny!" He echoed the name with half-mocking surprise. "Does he still engross the whole of your energies? I thought you would have been more occupied with Jake."

She stiffened ever so slightly at his words. "I only saw him for a few moments," she said.

"What! Didn't he come to you to tie up his broken head?" said Saltash. "I nearly killed him, you know. But it was his own fault."

"I am aware of that," Maud said coldly.

"What!" ejaculated Saltash again. "Did he have the impertinence to tell you so?"

She raised her eyes momentarily; they shone almost black. "He told me--nothing," she said, her voice deep with a concentrated bitterness that made him stare. "He was not in a condition to do so."

Saltash continued to stare. "He was talkative enough when he left me," he remarked.

Her eyes gazed full into his. "Why should you try to deceive me?" she said. "Really, you needn't take the trouble."

Comprehension dawned on his face. He laughed a little in an amused fashion as if to himself. "What! Wasn't the rascal sober when he got back?"

"You know he was not," she said.

"I know he tumbled out of the car and cracked his head," said Saltash. "I daresay he'd been celebrating the Mascot's victory. They all do, you know. But, my dear girl, what of it? Don't look so tragic! You'll get used to it."

"Don't!" Maud said suddenly in a voice that shook. "You make me--sick."

She bent her face swiftly to the violets, and there was a silence.

Saltash continued to swing his leg, his lips pursed to an inaudible whistle. Suddenly he spoke. "Please remember that this is quite unofficial! I don't want a row with Jake!"

"You needn't be afraid," she said, putting the bowl of violets steadily from her. "No more will be said on the subject by either of us."

"I'm not afraid." Saltash was looking at her hard, with a certain curiosity. "But with my best friend tied to him for life, it wouldn't--naturally--be to my interest to quarrel with him."

She flashed him a sudden glance. "I think you had better not call me that, Charlie," she said.

He laughed carelessly. "I'll call you my dearest enemy, if you like. It would be almost as near the mark."

She was silent.

He bent suddenly towards her, the laugh gone from his face. "Maud," he said, and there was a note of urgency in his voice, "you're not wanting to throw me over?"

She shook her head very slightly. "I can't be on really intimate terms with you any more," she said. "You must see it's impossible."

"No, I don't," he said. "Why is it impossible?"

She did not answer.

"Come," he said. "That's unreasonable. What have I done to forfeit your friendship?"

She leaned slowly back in her chair, and met his eyes. "I am quite willing to be friends," she said. "But--now that I am married--you mustn't try to flirt with me. I detest married women's flirtations."

He made a wry grimace. "My precious prude, you don't even know the meaning of the word. Did you ever flirt with anyone in all your pure, sweet life? The bare idea is ludicrous."

Maud's eyes held his with severity. "No, I never flirted with you, Charlie," she said. "But I gave you privileges which I can never give again, which you must never again expect of me. Is that quite clear?"

He stooped towards her, his hands upon her shoulders; his dark face deeply glowing. "O Maud, the sincere!" he said, in a voice that vibrated with an odd intensity, half-fierce, half-feigned. "Dare you look me in the face and tell me that in marrying you have not done violence to your soul?"

She looked him in the face with absolute steadiness. "I have nothing whatever to tell you," she said.

He released as suddenly as he had taken her. "There is no need," he said. "I can read you like a book. I know that if I had been at hand when your mother brought you down here--as heaven knows I would have been if I had known--if I had guessed--you would have been ready enough to marry even me." He stopped, and over his ugly, comic face there came a strangely tragic look. "You could have dictated your own terms too," he said. "I'm not hard to please."

"Charlie, hush!" Sharply she broke in upon him. "That is a forbidden subject. I told you definitely long ago that I could never marry you. You know as well as I do that it wouldn't have answered. You would have tired very quickly of my prim ways--just as you did tire in the old days when you fancied you cared for me. I couldn't have satisfied you. I am not the kind of woman you crave for."

"No?" He laughed whimsically. "Yet, you know, you are unjust to me--always were. I don't know that you can help it, being what you are. But--if it had been my good luck to marry you--I would have been faithful to you. It's in my bones to be faithful to one woman. However, since she is denied me--" he snapped his fingers with an airy gesture--"*je m'amuse autrement*. By the way, are you coming up to lunch at the Castle on Sunday?"

"I?" She raised her brows momentarily. "No, I don't think so," she said.

"What! You won't? Jake's coming."

She lowered her eyes. "No, Charlie," she said firmly. "Bunny has had one of his bad attacks. He won't be well enough for any excitement, and of course I couldn't dream of leaving him."

"How you do worship that boy!" said Saltash, with a touch of impatience.

Maud was silent.

"Look here!" he said abruptly. "Why don't you have a proper opinion for Bunny? I'll lend you the wherewithal. I'm quite well off just now."

She looked up then with eyes of frank gratitude. "Charlie, that's more than kind of you! But as a matter of fact--Jake has the matter in hand. He knows an American surgeon--a very clever man--a Dr. Capper, who is coming to England soon. And he is going to get him to come and examine Bunny. He--it is really very good of Jake."

She spoke haltingly, with flushed cheeks. Saltash was watching her with critical eyes.

"Oh, so the worthy Jake has the matter in hand, has he?" he said, as she paused. "Wise man! I suppose it is no part of his plans to be hampered with a helpless brother-in-law all his days."

She broke in upon him swiftly. "Charlie! That is ungenerous!"

He laughed. "My dear girl, it is the obvious. Were I in Jake's position, my first thought would be to relieve you of the all-engrossing care of Bunny. You don't suppose he married you just to make a home for Bunny, do you?"

She rose quickly and turned from him. "Why do you try to make things harder for me?" she said in a voice of passionate protest.

Saltash remained seated, still swinging an idle leg. "On the contrary, I am anxious to make everything as pleasant as possible," he said.

But there was a slightly malicious twist to his smile and his voice was suavely mocking, notwithstanding.

Maud moved from him to the window and stood before it very still, with a queenly pose of bearing wholly unconscious, unapproachably aloof.

He watched her for a space, an odd, dancing gleam in his strange eyes. At length, as she made no movement, he spoke again, not wholly lightly.

"See here, Maud! As a proof of my goodness of heart where you are concerned, I am going to make you an offer. This doctor man will probably want to perform an operation on Bunny, and it couldn't possibly take place here. So if it comes to that, will you let it be done at the Castle? There's room for an army of nurses there. The whole place is at your disposal--and Bunny's. And I'll undertake not to get in the way. Come, be friends with me! You know I am as harmless as a dove in your sweet company."

He stood up with the words, came impulsively to her, took her hand and, bending with a careless grace, kissed it.

She started at his touch, seemed as it were to emerge from an evil dream. She met his laughing eyes, and smiled as though in spite of herself.

"You are going to be friends with me," said Saltash, with pleased conviction.

She left her hand in his. "If you don't suggest--impossible things," she said.

He laughed carelessly, satisfied that he had scored a point. "Nonsense! Why should I? Is life so hard?"

"I think it is," she said sadly.

"It's only your point of view," he said. "Don't take things too seriously! And above all, stick to your friends!"

She looked at him very earnestly. "Will you be a true friend to me, Charlie?"

He bent, pressing her hand to his heart. "None so true as I!" he said.

She caught back a sigh. "I want a friend--terribly," she said.

"Behold me!" said Saltash.

She drew her hand slowly from him. "But don't make love to me!" she urged pleadingly. "Not even in jest! Let me trust you! Let me lean on you! Don't--don't trifle with me! I can't bear it!"

Her voice trembled suddenly. Her eyes filled with tears.

Saltash made a quick gesture as if something had hurt him. "I am not always trifling when I jest," he said. "That is the mistake you always made."

Maud was silent, struggling for self-command. Yet after a moment she gave him her hand again in mute response to his protest.

He took it, held it a moment or two, then let it go.

"And you will consider my suggestion with regard to Bunny," he said.

She replied with an effort, "Yes, I will consider it."

"Good!" he said. "Talk it over with Jake! If he doesn't view it reasonably, send him to me! But I think he will, you know. I think he will."

He turned as if to go; but paused and after a moment turned back. With an air half-imperious, half-whimsical, he held out upon the palm of his hand the sapphire and diamond ring which till that moment he had worn.

"As a token of the friendship between us," he said, "will you take this back? No, don't shake your head! It means nothing. But I wish you to have it, and--if ever the need should arise--the need of a friend, remember!--send it to me!"

She looked at him with serious eyes. "Charlie, I would rather not."

"It isn't sentiment," he said, with a quick lift of the brows. "It is a token--just a token whereby you may test my friendship." Then, as she still stood dubious: "Here, take it! He is coming."

He almost thrust it upon her, and wheeled round. She did not want to take it, but the thing was in her hand. Her fingers closed upon it almost mechanically as Jake opened the door, and as they did so she was conscious of a great flood of colour that rose and covered face and neck. She turned her back to the light as one ashamed.

Jake came in slowly, as if weary.

Saltash greeted him with airy nonchalance. "Hullo, Bolton! I came round to enquire for you. How's the broken crown?"

Jake's eyes regarded him, bright, unswervingly direct. "I reckon that was real kind of your lordship," he said. "I had it stitched this morning. I am sorry I omitted to send help along last night."

Saltash laughed. "Oh, that's all right. I hardly expected it of you. As a matter of fact the car didn't turn over as you supposed. I soon righted her. You were a bit damaged, eh?"

Jake's eyes were still upon him. There was something formidable in their straight survey. "So the car didn't turn over," he said, after a moment.

"No. If you'd hung on a bit tighter, you wouldn't have been pitched out. Old Harris brought

you safe home, did he? No further mishaps by the way?"

"None," said Jake. He advanced into the room, and stopped by the table. His riding-whip was in his hand. "I came home too dazed to give an intelligible account of myself," he said, speaking very deliberately, wholly without emotion. "My wife imagined that I was not sober. Will your lordship be good enough to convince her that she was mistaken?"

"I?" said Saltash.

"You, my lord." Jake stood at the table, square and determined. "I was in your company. You can testify--if you will--that up to the time of the accident I was in a perfectly normal condition. Will you tell her so?"

Saltash was facing him across the table. There was a queer look on his swarthy face, a grimace half-comic, half-dismayed.

As Jake ended his curt appeal he shrugged and spoke. "You are putting me in a very embarrassing position."

"I am sorry," said Jake steadily. "But you are the only witness that I can call."

"And why should she accept my testimony?" said Saltash. "Evidence given, so to speak, at the sword's point, my good Bolton, is seldom worth having. Moreover, if she had seen my crazy driving last night she might have been disposed to doubt whether my own condition were above suspicion."

"I see," said Jake slowly. He still looked hard into Saltash's face, and there was that in the look that quelled derision. "In that case, there is nothing more to be said."

Saltash made him a slight bow that was not without a touch of hauteur. "I quite agree with you. It is an unprofitable subject. With Mrs. Bolton's permission I will take my leave."

He turned to her, took and pressed her hand, sent a sudden droll smile into her grave face, and walked to the door.

Jake held it open for him, but very abruptly Saltash clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Come along, man! I'm going round the Stables. I'm sorry you've got a sore head, but I'm off to town this afternoon, so it's now or never. By the way, we shall have to postpone the luncheon-party til a more convenient season. I've no doubt it's all the same to you."

He had his way. Jake went with him, and Maud drew a breath of deep relief. She felt that another private interview with her husband just then would have been unendurable.

She sat down and leaned upon the table, feeling weak and unnerved. Not till several minutes had passed did she awake to the fact that she was holding Saltash's ring--that old dear gift of his--tightly clasped within her quivering hands.

CHAPTER XXVIII THE VISITOR

"I do hope as I don't intrude," said Mrs. Wright, passing her handkerchief over her shining forehead. "I didn't mean to take the liberty of calling, Mrs. Bolton, but your husband met my Tom the other day, and something he let fall made me think p'raps you'd be finding it a bit lonely; so I thought I'd come up on the chance."

"It was very kind of you," Maud said.

She sat with her visitor in the little dark front room in which Jake kept his business books, his whips, and all the paraphernalia of his calling. It was a bare, office-like apartment, and reeked horribly of Jake's tobacco; but Bunny was lying in the parlour and he had strenuously set his face against admitting the worthy Mrs. Wright there.

It was extremely cold, and Maud felt pinched and inhospitable. The grate was full of shavings, the whole place was cheerless and forlorn. It was a room that she scarcely ever entered, regarding it in fact more as Jake's office than an alternative sitting-room.

Mrs. Wright, however, stout, red, comfortable, did not feel the cold. She sat with her umbrella propped against her chair and regarded her stiff young hostess with much geniality on her homely face.

"You do look like a princess in a cottage, my dear, if you'll allow me to say so," she said. "And how are you getting on? I hope Jake's a good husband to you. I feel sure he would be. He's such an honest fellow. I often says to Tom, 'Give me a plain honest man like Jake Bolton,' I says; 'he's a man in a thousand.' I'm sure you think so yourself, Mrs. Bolton."

Maud, not knowing quite what to say, replied with reserve that she had no doubt he was. She

was wondering if she could possibly offer Mrs. Wright tea in that dreadful little room of Jake's and if she would ever get rid of her if she didn't.

Mrs. Wright, serenely unconscious of the troublous question vexing her soul, went comfortably on. "I've often thought that if it had pleased the Almighty to send me a daughter, Jake's just the man I would have chosen for her. I like them eyes of his. They're so straight. But mind you, I think he has a temper of his own. Mayhap you've never met with it yet?"

She looked at Maud slyly out of merry little slits of eyes, and chuckled at the flush that rose in the girl's face.

"He certainly never loses it in my presence," Maud said stiffly.

Mrs. Wright's chuckle became a laugh. "Lor', my dear, you needn't be shy with me. He worships you; now, don't he? I saw that the first time I laid eyes on you. That was when you was waiting for him to come and take you in to supper, and my Tom came first. I said to myself then, 'Ah, Jake, young man, it's plain to see where your fancy lies.' And I laughed to myself," said Mrs. Wright, still chuckling. "For I couldn't help thinking he was ambitious to lift his eyes to a real lady. Not that in my opinion a man who is a man isn't good enough for any woman, and I'm sure you think the same. And then, you know, he's that fond of children, is Jake. The wonder to my mind is not that he's married now, but that he stayed single so long."

"He is very fond of my young brother," Maud observed.

"Ah! Is he now? The poor little lad is a cripple, isn't he? Many's the time I've watched you go by my shop-window. It's the wool shop at the corner of East Street with one window that looks over the sea. I used to wish you'd drop in to buy something, my dear; but you never did. P'raps now you'll manage to find your way round there some day."

"Thank you," Maud said. "But I so seldom go anywhere. My brother takes up all my time."

Mrs. Wright's rubicund face took a look of disappointment, but she still smiled; it was a face that lent itself to smiles. "It isn't to be expected that he'd want to come," she said. "But I'd be very pleased to see you both any time. What a good sister you are to him, my dear! I hope as he appreciates you."

Maud's heart smote her suddenly. She realized that she had been ungracious. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Wright," she said, with more of cordiality than she had yet shown. "I will try to run in some day."

Mrs. Wright looked enchanted on the instant. "My dear, I'd be delighted! Come any time of day, just when it suits you! Tom and me, we live alone now. He's such a good son. He keeps a hair-dresser's saloon, you know, at the side of the shop. That's how we come to know Mr. Bolton. He comes as regular as possible every third week to have his hair cut. Such a head of hair it is--hair such as a woman would give her eyes for. It's to be hoped he'll get a little daughter some day, as'll take after him. Your eyes and his hair--wouldn't she be a picture!"

Maud's geniality passed like a light extinguished. She became statuesque. "How soon the light goes!" she said, with a glance towards the darkening window.

"Yes; don't it?" said Mrs. Wright.

There fell a silence most unusual with Mrs. Wright. With an effort Maud dispelled it.

"We are very much interested in the horses. You heard of the Mascot's victory at Graydown?"

Mrs. Wright came out of her silence, shook herself together, as it were, and smiled again. "Now, isn't that nice for Jake? He's that wrapped up in the animals, and to have you interested in 'em too! Now I should be jealous of 'em if it was me!"

It was at this point that Jake himself threw open the door and entered, stopping short within the room in surprise to find it occupied.

Mrs. Wright laughed aloud. "There, now! You didn't expect to find me in possession, did you? How de do, Jake? What's happened to your head?"

Jake advanced with extended hand. "Hullo, it's Mother Wright!" he said, and to Maud's amazement stooped and kissed her. "If this isn't a real pleasure! But what are you doing in here? My head made a hole in the road coming home from the races the other night, and it is still too sore a subject for discussion."

"Now--now, Jake!" protested Mrs. Wright.

"Fact!" he assured her, with the candid smile that Maud had seen but little of late. "But now what are you doing in here, I want to know? This place is like a vault. Come along into the parlour and have some tea!"

He had not so much as glanced at Maud; she spoke suddenly, with nervous haste. "Bunny is in the parlour, Jake. He may be dozing."

"We'll soon wake him up," said Jake,

He drew Mrs. Wright's tightly-gloved hand through his arm and turned to the door. But she held him back, laughing.

"Jake! Jake! You've forgotten something."

"What's that?" said Jake.

She told him amid many fat chuckles. "Why, you've kissed me, and you haven't kissed your wife. Come, now, that's not right, and you but just married. I know you're wanting to, so don't be shy! I've been a bride myself, and I know all about it."

She would have withdrawn her hand from Jake's arm, but he would not suffer it.

"No, no!" he said, with a careless laugh. "We don't do our kissing in public. Guess it isn't a genial enough atmosphere either. Come along, Mother! You'll perish in here."

He led her from the room, still without glancing in Maud's direction, and drew her along the narrow passage to the door of the parlour.

Maud followed with a stateliness that veiled a burning embarrassment.

She listened for Bunny's voice at the opening of the door, and instantly heard it raised in cracked remonstrance.

"Here, I say! Don't bring anyone in here! Oh, it's you, Jake! I thought it was Maud. I thought--"

His voice suddenly ended in what she felt to be the silence of disgust, and Jake's accents very measured, very determined, took up the tale.

"This is my young brother-in-law, Mrs. Wright, Sir Bernard Brian, commonly called Bunny. Well, Bunny, my lad, I've brought you a visitor to tea."

Bunny growled an inarticulate response, and Mrs. Wright covered all deficiencies with her cheery chuckle.

"So nice to see you so cosy and comfortable, my dear. I hope as I'm not intruding too much. Do you know, Jake, I don't think I'd better stop to tea? It's getting dark, and Tom'll be wondering."

"Let him wonder!" said Jake. "I'll see you home all in good time. You know you always have tea when you come to see me. It's seldom enough you come too. Maud," for the first time he addressed her directly, and in his voice was a new note of authority such as she had never heard before, "order the tea, will you? We will have it at once."

It was a distinct command. Maud's delicate neck stiffened instinctively. She crossed the room in silence, and rang the bell.

The summons was answered with unusual promptitude by Mrs. Lovelace, who entered with the supper-cloth on her arm and was greeted by the visitor with much joviality.

"How is it I never see you round our way, Sarah? Have you quite forgotten your old friends?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Wright, ma'am," said Mrs. Lovelace, dexterously flinging her cloth over the table. "But I've been a bit busy, you see, what with one thing and another, and me time's been occupied."

"What on earth are you spreading that cloth for?" here broke in Bunny, in irritable astonishment. "We never have that for tea."

Mrs. Lovelace looked at him with dignity and hitched one shoulder. "We always has a good spread when Mrs. Wright comes to see the master," she said, in a tone that conveyed a distinct reproof for ill-timed interference.

Bunny subsided into sullen silence, and Mrs. Wright laughed again. "I remember as it always used to be a heavy tea," she said. "But I don't suppose a young gentleman like you would know what such things mean. Now, I do hope you won't put yourself out on my account, Mrs. Bolton. It's true I'm not accustomed to drawing-room meals, never had tea on my lap in my life. But there, you might say as I haven't got much lap left to have it on. Is that sardines you've got there, Sarah? Ah, you always remember my pet weakness. Well, Jake, my dear, I haven't congratulated you yet on your marriage. I hope it's going to be a very prosperous one. I don't doubt as you've got a wife to be proud of, and I hope you'll pull together well and make each other happy and comfortable; and may you have your heart's desire, Jake, which--if I know you properly--isn't very far to seek!"

"That's real kind of you, Mother," said Jake sombrely.

He had seated himself near Bunny whose brows were drawn in an ominous scowl.

In spite of the fire that roared up the chimney, the atmosphere was very far from being a genial one. Jake's eyes, compellingly bright, were fixed upon Maud, who though burningly conscious of his regard refused persistently to raise her own. She was bitterly resentful of Jake's attitude. It placed her in an intolerable position from which she felt herself powerless to break

free. She had no desire to treat this impossible old woman churlishly, but somehow Jake forced her to a more acute realization of the great gulf that stretched between them. She could not even pretend to be cordial in his presence. She sat tongue-tied. Mrs. Wright, however, chatted on with the utmost complacency. She was plainly quite at her ease with Jake and she kept the conversation going without an effort, despite Maud's obvious embarrassment and Bunny's evident impatience.

She made a hearty meal, urged on by Jake who presently bestowed the whole of his attention upon her, seeming to dismiss his wife and brother-in-law from his mind.

"I really must be going," she declared at length, having detailed all the local gossip she could think of for his delectation. "You shouldn't encourage me so, Jake. I'm sure you'll all be tired out."

"I reckon you're just the most welcome visitor that ever darkens my doors," said Jake, rising with her. "Now, you're not to hurry. I'm going to tell them to put the horse in."

"No, no, Jake, my dear, don't you! I'd sooner walk. I would indeed. It does me good, and it's too cold to-night for driving. No, and I'm not going to let you see me home either. I'd know the way blindfold, and I'm not that nervous. Oh, there now! What's this?"

Mrs. Lovelace had just thrown open the door with some pomp. She entered, bearing an enormous bunch of violets which she proceeded to present to Maud with the ceremonious announcement: "Lord Saltash's compliments, ma'am, and will you do him the honour to accept these?"

"Oh my! How lovely!" cried Mrs. Wright.

Maud said nothing. She took the violets and held them up to her face.

Jake glanced at her momentarily, and thence to Mrs. Lovelace who had come forward to help Mrs. Wright into her cloak.

"Is Lord Saltash at the door?" he asked.

Mrs. Lovelace gave a start, as if something in the query surprised her. "No sir, the flowers was brought by a groom," she said.

Jake said no more, but something in his silence sent the ever-ready colour flooding Maud's face and neck. She bent a little lower over the violets, saying no word.

Mrs. Wright came clumsily into the breach. "But aren't they lovely, to be sure? Never did I see such beauties. And the scent of 'em, why, the room is full of it! Isn't that kind of Lord Saltash now?"

"They have a great quantity at the Castle," Maud said in muffled tones.

She held the flowers for Mrs. Wright to smell, and at the same moment Jake reached forth and took them from her outstretched hand.

"You take 'em if you like 'em, Mother. We get more of 'em than we want," he said, in leisurely tones, and thrust the bouquet forthwith into her astonished grasp.

"Oh, my dear!" cried Mrs. Wright, between dismay and delight. "But-but they was a present to Mrs. Bolton. I couldn't really! No, that I couldn't!"

"Take 'em!" Jake said. He was smiling a smile of deadly determination and his leisurely utterance held something of a fateful quality that induced Mrs. Wright to hush her remonstrances and turn appealingly to Maud.

The latter was standing erect and still with eyes of burning blue fixed steadily upon emptiness. She made no response whatever to her visitor's unspoken appeal, it seemed that she did not even see it.

"It's all right, Mother," smiled Jake. "You take 'em home and enjoy 'em. As a matter of fact, Maud and I are getting a bit fed up with 'em ourselves. Yes, I'm going to see you home. I'd rather."

"And I'd rather not, Jake," Mrs. Wright asserted with sudden decision. An odd expression of sternness had come into her jolly countenance. It sat very strangely there. She came close to Maud, and as the girl extended a stiff hand in farewell she took it and pressed the flowers into it. "They're not Jake's to give," she said, "and I'm not going to deprive you of 'em. Thank you kindly for a very good tea, Mrs. Bolton, my dear. And now I'll wish you good-bye. If there's ever anything as I can do for you, you must let me know."

The words, the tone, were full of kindly comprehension, a sympathy too subtle for outward expression. Maud looked into eyes of shining friendliness, and as if a sudden shaft of sunlight had caught her heart, her bitterness melted into something that was near akin to gratitude.

She held up the violets with a smile. "Wait a moment!" she said. "I would like you to have some of them."

She untied them with the words, divided the great bunch, and gave back a generous half into

Mrs. Wright's plump hand.

"Now, that's very good of you, dear," said Mrs. Wright. "I shall just treasure them violets. They'll make me think of you whenever I look at 'em. They're just the colour of your eyes. Good-bye, and thank you most kindly."

It was then that Maud did a thing that amazed herself, impelled thereto by that subtle sympathy which she had so little expected to meet. She bent her stately neck and kissed the red, smiling face uplifted in such honest admiration to hers. "Good-bye, Mrs. Wright," she said. "And thank you for coming. I shall try to come and see you one day--when I can make time."

"Any time, dear, any time!" beamed Mrs. Wright. "Drop in just whenever you feel inclined! I'm most always there." She gave her a hearty hug with the words, and then, as if afraid that this demonstration had been too ardent, she turned and trotted to the door.

"Good-bye, Jake! Good-bye! There, now, I've forgotten Sir Brian. You must excuse me for being so stupid."

"Oh, don't trouble!" said Bunny, with ironical courtesy. "Pray don't come back on my account!"

She looked back at him from the threshold, a very motherly compassion on her jolly face.

"Poor little lad!" she murmured pityingly. "How sadly he looks, to be sure! Good-bye, then, Sir Brian! I won't come back. Now, Jake, I'll let you see me to the door-step--no further. The moon's up, and Tom'll be sure to come and meet me." She started down the passage with Jake behind her, her voice dwindling as she went. "I'm so glad as I've seen your princess, Jake. I think she's lovely. Mind you're very good to her! She's high born, you know, Jake, my boy; better-class than you and me. I never see anyone so proud and so dainty. You be kind to her, my lad, and see you treat her like the lady she is!"

Jake's reply, if he made one, was inaudible.

"Common old hag!" growled Bunny from his sofa.

Maud said nothing at all. Her face was hidden in her violets, and she was as one who heard not.

CHAPTER XXIX HER OTHER SELF

It was on an afternoon in mid-January that Maud found herself for the first time in the precincts of Burchester Castle. She had heard nothing of Lord Saltash since his departure for town, though gifts of flowers arrived at regular intervals from his hot-houses; and it seemed that his absence was to be indefinitely prolonged. She almost hoped that it would be so, for though he was practically her only friend his presence was not an unalloyed pleasure. She felt more at ease when he was away.

On this particular afternoon she had left Bunny wrapped up in his long chair and lying in the summer-house that overlooked the field where Jake was occupied in breaking in a wild young colt. The day was fine and unusually warm. Bunny was in a contented mood and, since Jake was close at hand, she did not see why she should not leave him for a space. He had been needing her less and less of late, and though his behaviour towards herself had undoubtedly undergone a considerable improvement, it was becoming very evident to her that he vastly preferred Jake's masculine companionship to her own. He was in fact so devoted to Jake that he would endure correction from him without a murmur, a state of affairs that Maud vaguely resented, without knowing why. They were such close allies that she often felt herself to be superfluous. Neither by day nor by night was her presence any longer essential.

She knew that she ought not to regret this, for it meant that Bunny's health was very materially improving; but yet at the heart of her there often came a pang. She missed his dependence upon her with a poignancy that was very hard to bear.

And so for the first time that afternoon she decided to avail herself of Lord Saltash's permission to use the piano at the Castle. She had an intense love of music and a natural gift for it which she had never been able to develop very freely.

Charlie was musical too. Some of her happiest hours had been spent at the piano with him in the old days. He was an accomplished musician himself, and he had given her many a lesson and valuable hint. She sometimes thought that it was over the piano that her heart had first gone out to his.

She did not want to recall those happy times they had had together. They lay far behind her with her buried youth. But the longing to make music was strong upon her. It had risen out of her loneliness like a fiery thirst in the desert, and she yearned to gratify it.

And after all why should she not? Charlie was away. There was no one to know or care how she spent her time. It was obviously and unquestionably her own.

Jake had wholly ceased to take any interest in her doings. He treated her as the most casual acquaintance. When he greeted her, he never so much as touched her hand. He was everything to Bunny, he was nothing to her; and every day it seemed to her that he drew a little further away from her. She had tried to make overtures more than once, but he never seemed to understand. He would look at her in his straight, impenetrable way, and pass deliberately on to some other matter, whether with intention or not she could never wholly decide. He had never tried to be kind to her since the day that she had refused to hear his proffered explanation.

A great bitterness was growing up within her. She felt as if he had deprived her of all she cared for, and given her nothing in return. It was in part this bitterness of spirit that drove her to Burchester Castle that day, and, added thereto, an intense and feverish desire to escape if only for an hour from the atmosphere of her daily existence. She felt as if it were crushing out her individuality, and she longed desperately to be herself, her best and happiest self, if only for an hour.

So, with no word to any but Bunny of her intention, she passed up the long fir avenue to the Castle with the winter sun sinking red behind her.

The great stone building frowned upon her as she drew near. She approached it with a certain awe. The dark windows seemed to gaze at her. The massive entrance yawned to receive her.

She stepped into the echoing Gothic porch, and found herself confronted by a massive oak door. The electric bell at the side of this, however, was reassuring, and she rang it without hesitation.

While she waited for the door to open she amused herself by examining the gargoyles that surmounted the pillars of the porch,--jeering, demon faces that made her shiver. There was about the place an ecclesiastical dignity at which those faces seemed to mock. The thought of Saltash went through her. Saltash in a derisive mood was strikingly like one of these.

The door opened with noiseless state, and an ancient man-servant stood before her. He looked at her with grave enquiry, and with a touch of nervousness she explained her presence.

"I am Mrs. Bolton. Lord Saltash is away, I know; but he has given me permission to use his piano. I thought I should like to do so this afternoon."

The old man stood back and bowed before her. "Come in, madam!" he said.

She entered with a curious sensation of unreality, and found herself in an immense stone hall, carpeted with rich Persian rugs, and splendidly warmed by a great fire that roared in an open fireplace. The sense of ecclesiastical austerity completely vanished as soon as the door closed behind her. The whole atmosphere became luxurious, sensuous, Eastern. There were some wonderful pieces of statuary, some in marble and some in bronze, placed here and there, that were of anything but monastical design. One in particular in a niche in the stone wall caught Maud's eyes as she followed her guide--a nude, female figure with wings, one of which was spread like an eagle's pinion as though to soar, while the other trailed back, broken, drooping, powerless. It was a wonderful marble, and she paused before it almost involuntarily. The arms of the figure were outstretched and straining upwards, the head flung back, and in the face such anguish, such longing, such passionate protest as thrilled her through and through.

The old butler paused also. "That," he said in his decorous monotone, "is Spentoli's *Fallen Woman*. His lordship prefers to call it *The Captured Angel*. A very valuable piece of sculptury, I believe, madam. Quite one of the features of the place. His lordship sets great store by it, and it is universally admired by all visitors."

"It is wonderful," Maud said. But yet she turned her eyes away almost immediately. There was something about that mute, agonized figure of womanhood that she felt she could not bear to look upon except in solitude.

The butler stumped on down the great hall, and she followed, to a grand oak staircase that divided into two half-way up and led to a panelled gallery that ran along three sides of the hall. Solemnly they mounted. A high oak door confronted them at the top which the old man threw open with much ceremony.

"The grand piano, madam, is over by the west window," he said, and with another deep bow withdrew, closing the door without sound behind her.

Maud went forward into the room. The first impression she received was of great loftiness. It was a huge apartment, oak-panelled, and with a floor of polished oak. The whole of one side of the room was lighted by south windows that looked out over terraced gardens to the pine-woods of the park. At the end was a turret in the western angle of the wall, and here stood the piano, full in the glow of the sinking sun. There were two fireplaces in the room, and in the one nearer to the piano a red still fire was burning. A low couch stood before it, and a great tiger-skin--the only rug in the whole vast place--was spread on the hearth. There were other couches and strangely-shaped divans in the room, but no chairs, and only one small table. The whole effect was spacious and Eastern, curiously attractive to the senses and yet curiously elusive.

Maud went over the uncovered floor, treading lightly, with a feeling of having entered an enchanted land,--a feeling not wholly pleasant of being caught in a fairy web of subtleties from which she might not find it easy to escape.

The whole atmosphere breathed of Saltash. She was sure that he had designed every elusive detail.

The piano was thrown invitingly open. A French song was on the rack. It had the appearance of having been placed there but a moment before. A sudden doubt assailed her, a sensation as of having walked unwittingly into a trap. Some force had drawn her hither, some magnetism had surely been at work.

The impulse came to her then to turn and go, yet she resisted it. Later, it seemed to her that she had lacked the motive power to do aught but move straight to the piano and drop onto the music-stool before the keys. Her hands went out to them, and suddenly she was playing, at first very softly, then with gathering tone as she felt the instrument respond to her touch, till at length all sense of strangeness left her, and she began to sing the little French ditty that once had been one of her favourites! She had never heard her own voice to greater advantage than in that lofty music-room. It was a mezzo, sweet rather than powerful, with a ringing, bell-like quality that Charlie had been wont to compare to the tentative notes of a bullfinch. He had always declared that she was afraid of the sound of it, but this was certainly not the case to-day. The glad notes left her lips, true and free and birdlike. The heart within her had suddenly grown light.

The song came to an end. Her fingers began to wander idly over the keys. She played a dreamy air with an old-world waltz refrain, too lost in her trance of delight to realize what she played, and again half-unconsciously she was singing, as she had sung long ago before the gates of youth.

"There has fall'n a splendid tear,
From the passion flower at the gate,
She is coming, my dove, my dear;
She is coming, my life, my fate.
The red rose cries, 'She is near, she is near';
And the white rose weeps, 'She is late';
The larkspur listens, 'I hear, I hear';
And the lily whispers, 'I wait.'"

Softly, sweetly, the notes stole through the room, wandered awhile, and ceased. There fell a pause, and the girl's eyes rested dreaming on the long dark line of pine-trees red-flushed in the glow of sunset.

Then, still following her dream, she sang on.

"She is coming, my own, my sweet,
Were it ever so airy a tread
My heart would hear her and beat
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead;
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red."

And then she was singing the refrain, and while she sang it she awoke.

"Come into the garden, Maud,
For the black bat night has flown;
Come into the garden, Maud,
I am here at the gate alone,
I am here at the gate alone."

She stopped suddenly with the conviction that a man's voice had joined hers in the singing of that refrain. Yet, if this had been so, the accompanying voice ceased as abruptly as her own. She found herself sitting in absolute silence, with every pulse racing, every nerve strained to listen.

No sound came to her. The whole great chamber was as still as death. The fire burned red and silent. There was not so much as the ticking of a clock to be heard. And yet it seemed to her that eyes watched her from some vantage point unseen. She had a firm conviction that she was not alone.

She controlled the curious excitement that possessed her, and slowly set her fingers once more on the keys. She played the old refrain again, singing it very softly, listening intently while she sang. This time she was sure--quite sure--that a man's voice hummed the air. She went on to the end, and suffered her hands to fall.

"Charlie!" she said, without turning.

There came a slight sound behind her, the click as of a spring catch. She looked round, and saw him standing against the high panelling of the wall.

"What a childish game to play!" she said, with lips that slightly trembled.

"We are all children," observed Saltash. "We may think ourselves mighty clever, but the fact remains. Greeting, my queen rose! I am enchanted to see you."

He came forward, his black brows working comically, his queer ugly face smiling a welcome.

In spite of herself, Maud smiled in answer. "But why did you pretend you weren't at home?" she said, in a voice of protest.

He laughed as he took her hand. "But I wasn't," he said. "I motored down on purpose to receive you. Are you so disappointed?"

She shook her head, but she still looked at him somewhat dubiously. "You know, Charlie," she said, "I like people to behave quite straightforwardly, and to tell the truth."

"Heavens above!" laughed Saltash. "Why so grievously moral? Well, look here, let me be quite, quite honest, and admit that it was wholly by chance that I came down here to-day. Chance or the beneficent will of the gods! Call it what you will! And, my dear girl, don't be prudish now you are married! Remember, that though it is a state of bondage there are certain liberties attached that are well worth having. Now, you are going to play and sing to me while I smoke and admire."

He turned from her and threw himself upon a low settee in the window embrasure. The scent of his cigarette came to her, aromatic, Eastern, fragrant of many subtleties. She breathed it as one who inhales the magic of the gods.

"Now, play!" he commanded, his strange, restless eyes upon her. "Play as the spirit moves you! Never mind me! I am of no account."

She had done it often before in the old days. It was not difficult to do it now, with the spell of his personality upon her. Her own spirit responded instinctively to the call of his. The sympathy between them became communion. She began to play, and, playing, lost herself in the music as one inspired.

Saltash lay without moving, as if half-asleep. He also seemed as one under a charm.

And Maud played on and on, seeing visions, steeping her soul in romance, forgetful wholly of the chain by which she was bound; forgetful also of her companion, or perhaps so merged in his individuality as to be unaware of any dividing line. It was the old, sweet dreamland that had always held them both.

Time passed, and the red sun with it. The early dark began to fall, the shining visions to wane. She came out of her trance at last with a deep sigh, and suffered her hands to fall.

Instantly Saltash sat up. "Bravo, *ma belle reine!* Your touch is like velvet to the senses. You have scarcely sung to me at all. But no matter! You have closed the gates now, and we can't go back. But wasn't it good? Come, be honest and say so."

She lifted her eyes to his with something of her dream still lingering there. "It was--very good," she said.

"And you'll come again?" he insinuated.

The dream began to fade. With her right hand she picked out a nervous little air on the piano,

saying no word.

He leaned towards her. "Maud," he insisted, "surely you'll come again!"

"I don't know," she said slowly.

"Surely!" he said again.

Her eyes grew troubled. "Charlie," she said, her fingers still softly pressing the keys, "I can't come here when you are here. I like to come,--oh yes, I like to come. But I mustn't."

"Why not?" said Saltash. "Afraid of the cow-puncher?"

She shrank, and struck a sudden discordant chord. "I am not afraid of anyone, but I must think of appearances. I owe it to myself. I should like to come sometimes and play. But--with you here--I can't."

"All right," he said abruptly. "I'll go."

Her eyes flashed up to his. She took her hand from the piano and gave it to him. "You are going to be a true friend to me, Charlie," she said.

He smiled rather wryly. "My friendship is to take a somewhat negative form, it seems to me, but perhaps it will stand the strain. Have you heard anything yet about the American doctor?"

She shook her head. "No, nothing."

"And you have not laid my proposal before Jake, I gather?" he pursued, boldly keeping her hand in his.

"Not yet," she said.

"Have you given the matter your own august consideration?" he asked.

Her hand began to fidget for freedom. "I have thought about it, Charlie. I have not quite made up my mind. But you mustn't be hurt if I say No."

"I shan't be hurt," he said, slowly relaxing his hold so that her hand slipped free. "But I shall think that your love of propriety somewhat outweighs your love for Bunny."

She flushed, and turned aside to take up her gloves in silence.

He stood and watched her. "That is so like you," he said, after a moment.

She glanced at him. "What do you mean?"

He laughed lightly, but without mockery. "Your stately silences! Do you know I remember you best by your silences? It is there that you differ from all the rest of your charming sex. Other women, when they are misjudged, clamour for redress. You endure in silence, too proud to complain. I wonder if Jake has realized your silences yet."

Maud stiffened a little. "I must be going," she said. "I promised Bunny I would be back to tea."

"I'll walk back with you," Saltash said.

She shook her head. "No, I would rather go alone."

"Why don't you tackle the situation boldly and ask me to tea?" he said.

She was walking down the long room, and he sauntered beside her, smoking a cigarette, careless and debonair.

"I think it wiser not, Charlie," she said.

He laughed. "As you will. But remember, life is short. We may as well enjoy ourselves, while it lasts. Did old Billings show you up here? He is the one respectable feature of this establishment."

"Yes, he certainly is respectable," she agreed, with a smile. "But where were you when I came in? You didn't come through this door."

He laughed again in a fashion half-mocking, half-secretive. "That is my affair, *ma belle reine*. Some day I may show you--several things; but that day has not dawned yet."

He threw open the door, and they found the great hall below them ablaze with electric light. "I suppose I may accompany you downstairs," he observed.

"What a wonderful place it is!" Maud said.

Her eyes went almost involuntarily to the statue that had arrested her attention on entering. It shone from its niche with a white splendour that seemed to give forth light.

"My *Captured Angel* has the place of honour by night and by day," said Saltash. "I have been wanting you to see her, or perhaps it would be more correct to say, I have been wanting to see you together. Have you ever met your other self before?"

"My other self?" She looked at him interrogatively.

He made her a quizzical bow. "Have you never seen that face before?"

She descended the stairs, and approached the statue. They stood together before it. She had desired to see it in solitude before, but with Saltash by her side that desire had left her. They viewed it from the same standpoint, in that subtle communion of spirit that had always characterized their intercourse.

And she saw--as he saw--her own features carved in the marble, piteous, tragic, alive.

"Poor *Captured Angel!*" murmured Saltash softly. "So fair of face, so sad of soul!"

She did not respond. She felt as if in that recognition something had pierced her heart. It was like a revelation of things to come. So for awhile she stood, gazing upon that tragic figure of broken womanhood; and finally in silence turned away.

He went with her to the door, but he did not offer a second time to accompany her farther. On the threshold she gave him her hand in farewell.

"You will come again?" he said.

She met his strange, unstable eyes for a moment and fancied that they pleaded with her.

"Not to see you, Charlie," she said, and was conscious in a vaguely troubled way that the words cost her an effort.

His eyes flashed her a laugh. "No, not to see me," he said lightly. "Of course not. Just for your own enjoyment. You will enjoy that piano, you know. And you can have it all to yourself."

She smiled in spite of herself even against her will. "Very well," she said. "I will come again some day, And thank you very much."

"Oh, don't do that!" he protested. "It spoils everything."

She released her hand, and turned from him, still smiling. "Good-bye!" she said.

"Farewell, Queen of the roses!" he made light response.

She passed through the wide stone porch and out into the dark of the winter evening.

CHAPTER XXX THE RISING CURRENT

It was very dark along the avenue of pine-trees, darker than she had anticipated. She almost wished that she had allowed Saltash to accompany her. She went as quickly as she dared in the gloom, conscious that it was growing late. The road wound considerably, and she could not see the lamp at the gates. Overhead a rising wind moaned desolately through the pines. They swayed and creaked as though whispering together. Very soon the lights of the Castle were obscured behind her, and she was in almost total darkness.

She pressed on with an uneasy suspicion that it must be later than she had thought. Doubtless Jake had wheeled Bunny back to the house long before. Bunny knew whither she had gone, so they would not be anxious about her; but they would wonder why she was so late. The afternoon had fled away like a dream.

She began to quicken her steps somewhat recklessly, but the road curved more abruptly than she realized, and she presently ran into the grassy bank, nearly falling into the outstretched arms of a fir-tree. She recovered herself sharply with a gasp of dismay, and paused to try to discern more clearly the winding of the way. It was at this point that there came to her the sound of advancing footsteps. Someone was approaching with a slow, purposeful stride that suddenly sent the blood to her heart in a quick wave of something that was almost apprehension. She stood quite still and waited.

Nearer and nearer came the leisurely tread. Instinct, blind and unreasoning, prompted her to draw back into the shielding recesses of the tree with a desperate desire to escape notice. It was a footfall that she had come to know, and--why she could not have said--she did not want to meet Jake at that moment. With a very curious dread at her heart she stood and waited.

He came to within a couple of yards of her, and stopped. "You can come out," he remarked dryly. "It's just you I've come along to fetch."

His voice was perfectly quiet and natural, but there was that in the words that fired within her a burning indignation. She came forward and faced him in the gloom.

"Why should you take that trouble?" she said.

She saw his eyes glitter in the darkness, and knew that they were upon her with a lynx-like intensity. "I reckon I have the right," he said, in his slow way. "You've no objection, I presume?"

Her cheeks burned hotly in the darkness. She knew that he had her at a disadvantage. "I am fully capable of taking care of myself," she said, beginning to walk on down the dim avenue.

He fell into his easy stride beside her. "Is that why Lord Saltash left you to walk home alone?" he said.

She clenched her hands in the darkness. "What do you mean?"

"I think I am right in concluding that you have spent the afternoon with him," Jake said, in his

measured tones.

Maud stood suddenly still. She was quivering from head to foot. "You are--quite right," she said, in a voice that she strove in vain to steady. "I think I have told you before, Lord Saltash and I are old friends."

"Yes, I am aware of that," Jake said.

He reached out a quiet hand and took her by the arm, leading her calmly forward.

She went with him because she could not do otherwise, but she would have given all she had at that moment to wrench herself free. There was no escape for her, however; she was forced to endure his touch, forced to go forward with him along a road that she could not see.

He led her in silence, calmly, unflinching, with the utmost confidence. She was sure that those lynx-eyes of his could see in the dark.

But his silence speedily became intolerable. It seemed to her to bristle with condemnation. It goaded her against her will into speech.

"Lord Saltash has given me his permission to use the piano at the Castle. I did not know when I went that he had returned."

"I could have told you that," commented Jake.

Again her resentment rose to a flame, burning fiercely. Yet his words held no insult. With all her strength she strove for calmness.

"I did not know of it. In any case, I do not see that it was a matter of very vital importance. An hour at the piano is a great treat to me, and I shall probably go again."

"For an hour?" said Jake.

This time the peculiar intonation of his voice was unmistakable, not to be ignored. She flung him instant defiance.

"For as long as I choose. My time is my own."

He was silent a moment, but she was conscious of the tightening of his hand. At length: "All right, my girl," he said. "But remember, my claim to it comes before Lord Saltash's. Some day it may happen that I shall put in my claim. I never have been content to be passed at the winning-post."

Her heart quivered at the deliberate purpose with which he spoke. She walked on, saying no word.

They were nearing the gates, and the glare from the two great lamps shone towards them, lighting the way. She braced herself, and made a resolute attempt to free her arm from his hold.

"Easy! Easy!" said Jake. "We haven't got there yet. It's dark beyond those lights."

She abandoned her effort, feeling that she had no choice. They walked on together silently.

They reached and passed through the gates. The road stretched before them steep and winding.

"We'll cut across the fields," said Jake.

He led her to a stile almost concealed in the hedge, and here his hold upon her relaxed. He vaulted the rail, and waited for her.

He did not offer to assist her though the step was high. She mounted in nervous haste to avoid his touch.

But for the darkness she would have found no difficulty in springing down, but as it was she misjudged the distance, slipped, and fell. She threw out her hands with a cry, and the next moment she was caught in Jake's arms. He held her fast, so fast that for a few palpitating seconds she felt the hard beating of his heart against her own. Then, in response to her desperate efforts for freedom, he let her go, without excuse, without apology, in a deep-breathing silence that somehow appalled her. They walked side by side along the field-path, saying no word.

There was a gate at the further end that led into the training-field below the little orchard. As they reached this, Jake paused very deliberately and spoke.

"I reckon I've got to prepare you for a visitor."

"A visitor!" She stopped in swift dread of she knew not what.

"A friend of mine," drawled Jake, with an odd touch of aggressiveness. "You're not precisely dead nuts on my friends as a rule, I know. But I guess this one may prove an exception. Dr. Capper turned up this afternoon. I left him having tea with Bunny."

"Dr. Capper!" Maud gasped the name, scarcely conscious of speaking at all.

"Dr. Capper from the States," said Jake, unmoved. "He chanced to be just leaving for this country when my letter reached him, so he thought he'd answer it in person and look us up first. He and Bunny are fast pals already. He's a regular magician, is Dr. Capper."

"But-but-you never expected him so soon!" faltered Maud. "Surely--he won't want to-to-examine Bunny yet."

"Not before to-morrow, maybe," said Jake. "We can't expect to keep him very long, you know. He's a busy man. I've heard that people in this country simply tumble over each other to consult him. He could make a score of fortunes over here if he would. But he won't. He'll only take up the cases he fancies, won't waste himself over easy things. That's why we're so almighty lucky to get him."

His easy, unhurried speech gave her time to collect herself. She forced her first, involuntary dismay into the background, facing the sudden exigency of the situation with all the strength at her disposal.

"Jake," she said, "this thing has come very suddenly, but curiously enough Lord Saltash was speaking about it only this afternoon. If-if there is to be anything of the nature of an operation, he has offered to place any part of the Castle at our disposal. It is a very generous offer, and it-it would be an excellent thing for Bunny."

"Then you have decided to accept it?" said Jake.

His tone was perfectly quiet and matter-of-fact, but it amazed her. She had expected a determined opposition. Disconcerted, she paused before replying.

"I don't think it is especially generous," Jake said, and again it seemed to her that he was talking to give her time. "But it might be a good thing for Bunny. If you like, I will go up to-night and see Saltash about it."

He opened the gate for her with the words, and she passed through with feelings too mixed to bear any analysis.

"Am I to go?" he asked, as he dropped back into his sturdy stride beside her.

"Please," she said, in a low voice.

His attitude was a complete puzzle to her. It seemed so utterly at variance with the absurdly jealous line he had taken but a few minutes before. But she could not ask for an explanation. The relief of finding him prepared to act in unison with her on this point was too great. She did not understand either his motives or his actions, but she was thankful to find that there was to be no battle of wills between them. After all, his motives were not of paramount importance.

As they walked through the last field, she tried to banish her embarrassment and recover her normal composure of mien. But strive as she would, she could not wholly reassure herself. Nor could she forget the fast holding of his arms and the strong, deep throbbing of his heart against her own. That moment had been a revelation to her upon which she dared not dwell.

They reached the dark orchard, and passed up the dim path to the house. Jake went straight up the steps to the French windows of the parlour from which a cheery welcoming light shone forth. He raised a hand to the catch.

"Wouldn't it be better to go round?" Maud said.

She was suddenly trembling all over in an agitation that seemed to possess her, body and soul.

Jake did not pause. Steadily he raised the latch. "Come right in!" he said.

The door opened, the light poured out upon them?

There came to her the sound of Bunny's cracked, difficult laugh. She entered in front of Jake, dazzled, hesitating, uncertain.

Instantly a man's voice greeted her, a quiet, casual voice with an unmistakable New York accent. "Ah, I guess this is the lady of the house. I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, madam. Mr. Bolton will have told you who I am."

Tall and gaunt and meagre, he bent over the hand she offered him, holding it in a strong, sustaining clasp.

She looked at him rather piteously, aware of green eyes darting over her with lizard-like swiftness, eyes that shone intensely in a face that was the colour of old ivory. She also saw a yellow pointed beard that for a moment prejudiced her and the next was forgotten.

"It was so kind of you to come," she said, with a quivering smile.

He smiled in answer, a sudden, transforming smile that warmed her heart. "I guess I followed my own inclination," he said. "Say, now, you're cold. Bunny and I have been keeping up a good fire for you. Sit down and make your husband do the waiting!"

His manner was so kind and withal so courteous that Maud's embarrassment passed like a cloud. She came to the fire, pulling off her gloves and stretching her fingers to the blaze.

Bunny accosted her with eager eyes. "Maud, he's going to overhaul me and see if he can do anything for me. Maud, can't he do it to-night? I won't sleep a wink if he doesn't."

Her heart sank inexplicably. She seemed to have stepped into a new atmosphere that seethed with possibilities that somehow frightened her. She was as one in the grip of a force indomitable that hurled her headlong towards a goal she dreaded.

She leaned upon the mantelpiece, looking towards Capper with more of appeal than she knew. "You are much too kind," she said.

He pushed up a chair for her. "Say, now, there's no need to hustle any," he said. "I suspect there is no harm in my looking at the lad; but we don't take any further action at present. I've a lot to get through in this old country, and I'd just like to know right now if this is a case for me or not."

He patted the back of the chair with fatherly insistence, and she sank into it with a feeling of utter weariness and impotence. It seemed futile to battle any longer against the torrent that bore her. She was as a straw in the whirlpool of Fate.

"It is so good of you even to think of helping us," she said rather unsteadily. "Please make your examination whenever it suits you best! But Bunny is not a good sleeper. You will remember that, won't you?"

Capper took up the cup of tea that Jake had prepared, and handed it to her. "Let me have the pleasure of seeing you drink this!" he said. "I should like to make my examination to-night, if you have no objection. In fact, I have come down for the purpose. My time, madam, is more limited than anyone on this side could ever be made to realize. I won't hustle you, but if I didn't hustle myself I guess I'd have to account some day for a waste of good material."

He sat down in a chair facing her with the words, and fell to cracking his finger-joints one after the other with absent energy. It was a way he had, as Maud was soon to discover.

"You have had tea?" she asked.

He nodded. "I am ready to get to work. I shan't want an audience. If I want anything I'll let you know. But I've a very decided notion that my patient and I will get on best alone."

Jake raised his eyes suddenly. "That so, doctor?" he drawled. "Then I guess I'll carry the youngster up right now."

Capper looked at him with a smile, and pulled his beard speculatively. Bunny beamed approval.

Maud drank her tea in utter silence, feeling as if it would choke her.

The silence became prolonged, but she did not realize that anything was expected of her till Capper leaned slightly towards her, and spoke.

"Have I your permission, madam?" he asked courteously.

She met his keen eyes and was struck afresh by the kindly reassurance they held. "Of course," she said, in a low voice. "I--am very grateful to you."

"I hope--some day--you may have cause to be," he rejoined.

Jake went to Bunny's side. She saw the boy raise his arms as he bent, and clasp his neck. A few muttered confidences passed between them; then Jake's strong arms lifted the frail, impotent body as they alone knew how to lift. And in that moment it seemed to Maud that the beloved burden had been taken finally from her, and she was left to wander alone in a desert that was very dark and bare.

CHAPTER XXXI

LIGHT RELIEF

"May I come in?" said Capper.

Maud started. She had been sitting huddled over the fire for what seemed like countless ages, listening with straining nerves to every sound overhead and sometimes shrinking and trembling at what she heard. Jake had gone out long since to the stables, and she had been thankful to see him go. His very presence was intolerable to her just then.

At the sound of Capper's voice she turned an ashen face. "Say, now," he said, in a tone of kindly chiding, "you've been scaring yourself, Mrs. Bolton; and if that's not the silliest game under the sun, you may call me a nigger."

She rose to receive him, trying to force her quivering lips to practical speech. But she could only articulate, "I heard him cry out several times. Does he want me?"

"Not yet," said Capper. He laid a very steady hand upon her shoulder. "Leave him alone for a little! He'll pull himself together best alone. He's got the spunk all right."

She stood still under his hand, piteously awaiting the information for which she could not bring herself to ask. He was looking at her keenly, she knew; but she could not face his look. She could have been strong had strength been essential, but the need for it seemed to have gone.

Bunny no longer leaned upon her sustaining love.

"Come, now, I want a straight talk with you," the great doctor said. "I want to understand your point of view if you will be gracious enough to expound it to me."

She made a pathetic attempt to laugh. "Do you think you can cure him, Doctor?" she said.

Capper laughed too with a species of grim exultation. "Is that what troubles you? If that's all, I guess I can soon set your mind at rest. I can cure him absolutely--within three months. But I shall want your co-operation. Can I count on that?"

His hand pressed upon her with something of insistence. His yellow face looked searchingly, with an odd elation into hers. She met his look reluctantly, and became dominated by it.

"Of course you can count upon it," she said.

He nodded, pulling restlessly at his beard with his free hand. "To what extent, I wonder? Are you keen?"

"Of course I am keen," she said, almost with indignation. He stood silent a moment, his hand still upon her shoulder. Then, "Mrs. Bolton," he said, "do you know your young brother has got a curious notion into his head that you don't want him to be made sound?"

"Ah, but that is a mistake!" she said quickly.

"Is it a mistake?" said Capper. "No, don't answer! Why should you? But it's curious that I should have sensed the same myself the moment I saw you. However, if you tell me it is not so, I shall take your word for it. But at the same time I think I begin to see your point of view. Without the care of him you would feel lost for a bit. Life might be rather difficult. Isn't that so?"

She laughed somewhat tremulously. "I think I have always found life difficult. But lately--just lately--" She paused in uncertainty.

"Ah!" said Capper. "Maybe you're up against it. But you've got solid ground to stand on. You may take my word for that, because I happen to know."

He spoke with a kindness that went straight to her heart. Almost involuntarily she put her hand into his, feeling the long, active fingers close upon it with a sense of security that was infinitely comforting.

"Did Jake ever tell you the foundation of our friendship?" he asked her suddenly.

She shook her head.

"It's an interesting story," Capper said. "P'raps you'd like to hear it."

Maud was silent.

He proceeded as if she had answered in the affirmative. "It was on a dark night in the Atlantic ten years ago. Do you remember the wreck of the *Hyperion*? No, maybe you wouldn't. She ran into a submerged iceberg and was nearly torn in two. I was knocked down by the shock and got jammed against a locker in the saloon. It was a case of every man for himself, and I was soon left to my fate. But Jake--he was working his way across as ship's carpenter--came back on his own to see if there were anyone left below, and found me, wedged there in the wreckage. We were settling down fast, the water was over our knees, and I told him to look out for himself; but he wouldn't. I cursed him for a fool, I remember." Capper's yellow face was strangely alight; his fingers gripped hers tensely. "But that didn't make any difference. He had no time to go and get any implements to work with, so he just set to with his hands and ripped and tore at the wood till at last it splintered and he got me free. He worked like a Titan. I've never forgotten. He got me out just in time, Heaven knows how. The water was above his waist before he'd done, and I was on the verge of drowning. But he did it, and more also. He grabbed me up out of that death-trap, as if I had been a priceless possession of his own. He dragged me upon deck and roped me to him because I was too damaged to help myself. And when we went down, as we very soon did, we sank together and we came up together, and he managed at last to get me to a boat. Now you'll never get him to speak of that episode, but it's about the finest piece of work I've ever come across. The man was utterly unknown to me and I to him. Yet he never thought of passing me by, but just kept on till he'd saved my life. Not a thought to his own safety, mark you. He wasn't out for that. And he wasn't out for reward either. When I offered him money later he just laughed in a purring sort of fashion and told me to keep it for some chap who had failed. 'We don't all of us win out on the hundredth chance,' he said. 'Thank the high gods, not me!' I saw he meant it, so of course I let him have his way. But it's been a sort of bond between us ever since--a bond that stretches but never breaks."

He ceased to speak, ceased also to hold her hand. Maud's face was turned towards him, her

blue eyes were intently fixed upon his. She said nothing whatever, and there fell a silence that was curiously intimate between them.

Capper broke it at length. "He's been a bit of a rover, but I've never quite lost sight of him since that night. When I make a friend like that, I can't afford to lose him again. But I've never had a chance of doing him a service till now. He's a married man and considerably more civilized than he was in those days. But I have a notion that there's a leaven of the wild ass still in his composition. That's why I'm afraid you may not realize that he's gold all through--all through." He paused a moment, looking at her quizzically; then: "By way of light relief," he said, "I guess you know the fascinating story of the princess and the frog. She had to take the beast as he was, and even give him her pillow o' nights. But only when she struck at last and threw him against the wall did she find out that she'd caught a prince after all. I guess the man who wrote that story was a student of human nature. It's a comic story anyway."

Maud was laughing. Somehow, inexplicably, the man had eased her burden. "I don't think you are presumptuous, Doctor," she said. "I think you are very kind."

"It's mighty fine of you to take that view," said Capper, with a tug at his yellow beard. "I shall do my best to deserve it."

CHAPTER XXXII THE ONLY SOLUTION

"Oh, Lord Saltash! So you're home at last! What a pity you didn't come back a little sooner!"

"Am I late for anything, Lady Brian?" smiled Lord Saltash, holding her hand in his.

She shook her head at him. "You are hopelessly late. And you mustn't call me that. I have renounced my title."

"Really? How generous of you!" Saltash began to laugh in his easy, mocking way. "Lady Brian has left town for the South Coast, and Mrs. Sheppard is now in residence at Fairharbour. I am sorry that I was not at hand to escort her ladyship; but I am none the less pleased to be received by Mrs. Sheppard. Have I missed anything besides the first-mentioned privilege?"

Mrs. Sheppard threw out her hands with a dainty gesture of despair. "My dear Charlie, you've missed--everything! Have you seen my poor Maud?"

He nodded. "More than once. I make a point of seeing her whenever I feel so disposed. Now that she is in such safe hands, there is no longer any necessity to hold me at arms' length, I assure you we are on the best of terms."

Mrs. Sheppard groaned. "Why, oh, why didn't you come back sooner? It would have altered--everything."

He looked at her, the teasing smile still hovering about his swarthy face. "It would have been too obvious a solution," he said lightly. "Don't you know that the unattainable is always the dearest?"

Mrs. Sheppard clasped her hands with a tragic gesture. "You don't realize--or perhaps you don't care--that she has sold herself to a man for whom she has not the smallest shadow of affection."

"In pursuit of her illustrious mother's example?" suggested Saltash, with careless effrontery. "But why did you allow it? Wasn't it up to you to forbid the banns?"

"I?" Mrs. Sheppard cast up her eyes. "Do you suppose I have ever had any control over her?"

"I presume you had the slapping of her in her babyhood," he observed.

She laughed almost hysterically. "As if I ever did or could! She was always so serious and quiet and determined. No one she didn't love could ever move her an inch. And the dear child never loved me, you know. Somehow we didn't touch. No, I couldn't prevent the marriage. Only one person in the world could have done that. Oh, Charlie, what a pity! What a pity!"

The easy tears had risen to her eyes. She was very appealing in woe.

But Saltash was apparently unmoved. He sat facing her with his odd eyes glancing hither and thither, the brows above them jerking continually. "She certainly married in the deuce of a hurry," he remarked, after a moment. "What made her do it, eh? I presume it was the old man? Did he turn amorous, or what?"

Mrs. Sheppard laughed rather pathetically and dried her eyes. "Oh, dear, no! Giles was rather too severe. He was always willing to be friendly, but Maud's attitude was so hostile that at last--it was hardly to be wondered at--he turned against her. I was very sorry, but, you know,

Maud always takes things so seriously, poor child, and she wouldn't hear of making friends when it was over, but must needs go straight away to Jake Bolton and offer to marry him. He was ready to take her at any price of course. So they settled it all between them with never a word to me."

"But you haven't altogether enlightened me even now," said Saltash, recalling her with his semi-ironical courtesy. "What was this dire offence that Maud couldn't bring herself to forgive? I should like to know for my own future guidance."

Mrs. Sheppard's laugh had a deprecating note. "Oh, it was only a little thing, quite a little thing. If she hadn't been really spoilt all her life, I don't think she would have thought so much of it. I blame myself of course. But there, what is the use? Giles is a plain man, and he believes in a little wholesome chastisement now and then. It does a woman good, he says. And I daresay he is not altogether wrong. But in this case----"

"Oh, forgive me for interrupting you!" Rather lazily he cut her short. "That term 'a little wholesome chastisement'--does it mean a beating or what?"

Mrs. Sheppard nodded with some agitation. "Yes, he gave her a whipping one night. It was very unfortunate, but I must say, not wholly undeserved. And I am afraid he had rather a heavy hand. Poor Maud was very much upset."

"Really!" said Saltash.

"Yes. He shouldn't have done it of course, but----"

"He probably was not in a state to know what he was doing," suggested Saltash.

There was a slight frown between his mobile brows, but his voice was suave.

Mrs. Sheppard eyed him wistfully. "Poor Giles!" she murmured.

Saltash uttered a sudden sharp laugh and rose. "Well, I mustn't take up any more of your valuable time. No doubt you are busy. You have heard about Bunny's prospects, I presume?"

"Oh yes, they have told me about Bunny. I am sure I hope it will be a success, but of course I have had no say in the matter," said Mrs. Sheppard plaintively. "I don't so much as know when the operation is to be performed."

"That isn't finally settled," said Saltash. "It's to be according to the American doctor man's convenience. I suggested that they might like to make use of Burchester for the occasion, and Bolton has caught on to the idea. Very sensible of him!" Saltash's mouth twisted into a faint smile. "How do you get on with your son-in-law?" he enquired pleasantly.

Mrs. Sheppard shook her head dubiously. "I never liked him. There is something of the wild about him. Maud doesn't like him either. I am sure of that. They are complete strangers, and always will be. In fact, if it weren't for Bunny--" she lowered her voice--"I believe she would very soon desert him."

"What? Really?" said Saltash, in a peculiar tone.

She met his interrogation with a swift upward glance. "She would never stand life alone with him. It would drive her desperate. I am sure--quite sure--if it comes to that, she will somehow break free."

"Really!" he said again, subtle encouragement in his voice.

Mrs. Sheppard suddenly clasped her hands against her bosom and went close to him. "Oh, Charlie, I do think--sometimes--divorce is the only way. You know she has always loved you. And it isn't your fault you came too late. Charlie, if the chance were to come to you again--the chance to make her your wife--you wouldn't--surely you couldn't--let it slip again?"

"Again!" said Saltash. His lip lifted a little. He was looking at her fixedly.

She made a small nervous gesture of pleading. "You would marry her, Charlie, if you could. She loves you. You would never--never----"

"Let her down?" suggested Saltash.

His expression was utterly cynical, yet something in those queer eyes of his emboldened her. She placed her two hands against his shoulders, and suffered the tears to run down her face.

"Charlie, I am wretched about her--quite wretched. Save her from that rough cow-herd, Charlie! Make her your own--in spite of all!"

She broke down into muffled sobbing, and would have leaned upon him for support had he permitted it. But with gentle decision he eluded her, taking her hands and leading her to a chair.

"Now, Lady Brian, there is no need for this agitation, believe me. For the present there is nothing to be done. Bunny occupies the centre of the stage. He won't, of course, remain there for ever, but he has got to have his turn. Till that is over, we can only possess our souls in patience."

"But afterwards!" wailed Mrs. Sheppard. "It is the afterwards that troubles me."

"Afterwards," he said lightly, "I presume it will be someone else's turn."

"And Maud will be miserable," she protested.

Saltash was silent. Only after a moment he strolled to the window and stood looking at the grey, tumbling waves that dashed against the sea-wall.

Mrs. Sheppard dabbed her eyes and began to recover herself; it was plainly the only course. She remembered regretfully that sympathy had never been dear Charlie's strong point.

When he glanced over his shoulder a few seconds later she mustered a somewhat piteous smile. "Life is very difficult sometimes," she said apologetically.

"Oh, quite damnable," he answered, in his careless, mocking way. "But we've got to get through with it somehow, and with as few tumbles as possible. I really think I must be going now. We shall let you know when anything definite is settled about Bunny. Don't fret, you know! Take it easy!"

He came back to her with the words and took her hand with a certain arrogant kindness characteristic of him.

She looked up at him with quivering lips. "It is so good of you to let them have Burchester," she said.

He made her a brief bow. "I serve my own ends," he said.

Mrs. Sheppard rose. "And I don't know what will happen when Bunny is cured," she said pathetically. "He will have to go to school. And who is going to pay for it, I wonder?"

Saltash shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps he'll train for a jockey. Who knows?"

Mrs. Sheppard sighed. "I can't think how you can treat everything as a joke. I can't myself."

He laughed. "I don't chance to be gifted with a serious mind, you see. Besides, *cui bono?* Does worrying help?"

"I'm sure it ought to," sighed Mrs. Sheppard.

He laughed again derisively. "Sheer waste of time, believe me. Either fight or submit to the inevitable! Personally, I prefer to fight." He shut his teeth with a sudden click, and for a single instant his face was grim. But the next he was laughing again. "Good-bye, Lady Brian! In the name of beauty, don't fret! It can't be done with impunity, remember!" He pressed her hand and released it. "You've given me quite a lot to think about. It's been an interesting conversation. I have quite enjoyed it. Good-bye!"

He was gone. She heard him departing, light-footed as a happy boy, whistling under his breath an old, old waltz refrain.

Gradually a smile came into her own face as she turned to the glass to repair the ravages of her recent emotion.

"I wonder whether he will do anything," she murmured to her reflection. "He isn't a man to sit still. And really, the circumstances are so exceptional. It is the only solution--literally the only one." She paused a moment, drew out a hairpin, twisted back a curl and very nicely readjusted it. "And when Giles is bankrupt," she added, with a little nod to the thoughtful gaze that met hers, "there will be a home for me to go to." She heaved a pensive sigh. "I am glad he knows everything," she said. "There is nothing like telling the whole truth."

She smiled again with more assurance, and went her way.

CHAPTER XXXIII THE FURNACE

It was on a frosty morning in February that Maud stood in one of the great guest-chambers of Burchester Castle, waiting with Bunny for news of Dr. Capper's coming.

A nurse was busy in the room, and the hour fixed for the operation was drawing near.

Bunny was full of pluck that morning. He had greeted her bravely smiling. Yes, he had slept like a top, thanks to Jake, who had held his hand half the night and scared away the bogies. Jake was a stunner; he was going to pay him back some day. And what a ripping room Charlie had given him! Was it true that there was a music-room close by? That would be ripping too. Maud would be able to play to him all day long while he was getting well. Maud was looking a bit blue this morning; what was the matter?

She had to admit that she had passed a restless night.

"Silly!" said Bunny, and squeezed her hand. "Why didn't you come and sleep in here? Jake could have looked after you too then."

He chattered on incessantly, making her respond, compelling her attention, till news was brought to her of Dr. Capper's arrival, and she went down to receive him.

She found him standing in the great entrance hall with the doctor from Fairharbour. He moved forward to greet her as serenely as if he had come upon pleasure bent.

"Delighted to meet you again, Mrs. Bolton. I am just admiring this fine old English castle. Guess it's the sort of setting that suits you."

He held her hand a moment and looked at her, but he made no comment upon her appearance.

She faced the green eyes with an odd little feeling of shame. They seemed to see so much that she hid from all the world.

"You are very--punctual," she said, with an effort, as she turned to greet the local doctor. "I hope you found the car ready at the station."

"We were driven up by his lordship himself," said Capper.

She gave a great start. "O! Has he come down? I didn't know."

"He joined us at the terminus quite unexpectedly," Capper told her. "I have brought my assistant Rafford to administer the anæsthetic. Rafford, where are you?"

A dark young man, with absolutely black eyes and a high, dominant forehead, turned sharply from a rapt contemplation of Saltash's *Captured Angel*, and bowed automatically to Maud.

"I was just trying to make out the anatomy of those wings," he said, in a very pronounced American accent. "Guess it's a cute addition to the human frame, but I'd like to know how it's worked from the spinal column without an extra vertebra or two."

Maud suddenly felt hysterical. She looked at Capper, who pulled at his beard and smiled.

"Guess it's up to you to find the solution, Raff," he said.

Rafford bowed again. "I'd like to make a sketch of that figure if Lady Saltash will permit me," he said. "It's an anatomical problem."

The blood rose to Maud's pale face in a great wave. She was about to speak, when a voice at her shoulder spoke for her.

"I am sure Lady Saltash will be charmed to do so. But I think the face must be excluded. That can scarcely be of any anatomical interest to you."

Maud started. Saltash's hand gripped her elbow for a moment and instantly relaxed. He did not speak to her. The young American glanced back at the face of the statue, stared at it for a second, then looked again at Maud. She saw his thin black brows rise ever so slightly.

"The face is certainly of interest," he said, speaking with evident caution; "but not, as you say, my lord, from an anatomical point of view."

He withdrew himself with the words, seemed as it were to become Capper's background, while Saltash sauntered forward to offer refreshment.

Capper asked for coffee and smoked a cigarette. He sat in an ungainly attitude by the fire while these were in process of consumption, and spoke scarcely at all. Maud stood near him in silence, chafing at the delay, yet dreading unspeakably the moment when it should be at an end.

Saltash lounged smoking on a settee with Dr. Burrowes of Fairharbour, and chatted cheerily about local matters with one eye on the great American surgeon who sat cracking his long fingers so abstractedly before the fire.

Suddenly Capper turned his head and looked up at Maud. "Where is Jake?"

"He is coming," she made answer.

"Coming! Why? Does the boy want him? Is he nervous any?"

"He is being very brave," she said. "But of course, naturally, he is nervous."

He nodded. "Well, I guess we needn't wait for Jake. Let's go up! He'll keep a stiff upper lip if you're there."

He got up with the words; his bony, yellow hand closed upon her arm, kindly, reassuringly, confidently.

The burden of her anxiety grew magically lighter. She felt immensely comforted by reason of that friendly pressure. She prepared to lead the way.

Capper paused a moment. "I am going to have five minutes' talk with the patient," he said to Dr. Burrowes. "Will you be kind enough to follow on when the time is up? Raff, you can make your anatomical study right now, but be at my disposal in five minutes! Lord Saltash, maybe you will stay behind and show them the way."

He made his dispositions with the calm air of a man accustomed to obedience; and then, his hand still upon Maud's arm, he turned with her to ascend the stairs.

A great shivering fit assailed her as they went. She fought it resolutely down.

"Say, you're not worrying any?" he questioned. "It seems to me that it's you Jake ought to be thinking about. What have you been doing since I saw you last?"

"Nothing, nothing," she said hastily.

Capper grunted. "That's a very unhealthy occupation, especially for a woman."

She looked at him appealingly. "Oh, please, Dr. Capper, don't talk about me! I--I would so much rather not."

Capper smiled a little. "You're a true woman. But I can't have you worrying to death like this. Will you believe me when I tell you that this operation is going to be an almighty success?"

She stopped short. "Are you sure--quite sure?" she breathed.

He nodded. "I am willing to stake my reputation on it. If I weren't sure, I wouldn't touch it. I'm past the speculating age." He led her gently on along the corridor at the head of the stairs. "You may bet your last dollar," he said, "that I shan't mush up this business. I never lose my patients when they're young and keen. It's the older ones, when they get tired, fed up with life--" He paused, and a very human shadow crossed his face, darkening his shrewd eyes. "That's when God sometimes interferes," he said. "So I'm never quite sure of the older ones. But the youngsters--He lets me have my own way with them. There's such a mighty force in what the French call *joie de vivre*."

A quick sigh rose to Maud's lips. She laid a sudden, impulsive hand upon the long thin fingers that held her arm. "You are so good, so very good," she said tremulously.

Capper smiled. "Oh, just ordinary, I guess. Wait till you're up against me! You won't like me then. I'm going to have a straight talk with Jake presently--about you."

She gave a quick start of dismay. "Oh no! Please don't! Please don't! It--it's nothing to do with Jake. He wouldn't understand."

"He'll understand me," said Capper inexorably. "I've a patent way of expressing myself that leaves no room for misunderstandings. There! Now I've given you something more important than your brother to think about. Suppose you take me to him!"

She would have detained him to protest still further, but he refused to be detained, and she found herself compelled to yield. Very quietly he insisted, and she had no choice.

They entered the room in which Bunny lay; and immediately a square check-clad figure rose from the boy's side and came forward with hand outstretched in greeting.

"Hullo, Doc!" said Jake.

Maud gazed at him in astonishment. "I had no idea you were up here. When--how did you come?"

Jake was faintly smiling. "I came just now, by the back way, as is my custom. I promised to be here to give him a send-off, Doctor. Guess you've no objection?"

"So long as you go when you're told," said Capper rather shortly.

"Reckon I always do that," said Jake.

"Do you?" said Capper, with his sudden smile. "That's not always been my experience of you."

"Oh, shucks!" said Jake, turning deep red.

Capper passed him by, and went to Bunny. Maud saw that he was intent upon reassuring him as he had reassured her. She turned away to the window, and waited.

Jake did not join her there, possibly because his hand was tightly locked in Bunny's. But very soon Capper called her back to the bedside, and drew her into talk, keeping her there till he finally rose and went out with the nurse.

Maud scarcely knew how she came through the next few minutes, but Jake and Bunny seemed to feel no strain. Jake was talking of the horses, and the boy's keenest interest was aroused.

"And you're going to teach me to ride like you do," he said, with an eagerness that Maud had seldom seen in him. "I'm just mad to begin."

He was picking up Jake's manner of speech in a fashion that his sister deplored but could not attempt to check; but no evil word had she ever heard on his lips, nor had she ever heard Jake use bad language in his presence.

Like one in the mesh of an evil dream she listened to Jake's reply, marvelling at the easy detachment with which he made it. And then the door opened, and the nurse came in with Rafford. She stood up, her heart beating as if it would choke her.

Bunny shot a swift glance around. "You'll stay with me, Jake?" he said quickly.

"Sure," said Jake.

Bunny drew a hard breath. "Hang on to me--tight, Jake!" he whispered.

And Maud turned to the door without a word. He did not need her--he did not need her!

She had a passing impression of the sympathy in Rafford's eyes as he held open the door for her, and then she was alone in the passage outside.

She moved along it uncertainly, almost as if groping her way, found the door of the music-room ajar, and entered.

A warm fragrance met her on the threshold, a sense of Eastern luxuriance and delight, soothing her troubled spirit as with a soft, healing hand, wooing her to a curious peace of mind. It was as though a misty veil had been drawn over her troubles, obscuring them, deadening her faculty for suffering.

She went forward to the fire that burned so mysteriously red and still, reaching out her cold hands to its comfort. She had a feeling that she ought to kneel and pray, but somehow in that strangely soothing atmosphere prayer was an impossibility. Her brain felt drugged and powerless, and she was numbly thankful for the respite.

"Come and sit down!" a cool voice said.

She turned with no surprise or agitation and saw Saltash lounging on a divan behind her. He had a cigarette between his fingers. The scent of it came to her with a strange allurements. Almost mechanically she accepted the invitation.

"Have you been here at all in my absence?" he asked, stretching a careless arm along the cushions behind her.

She shook her head. "No."

"But why not? Does Jake think I am not to be trusted?"

She smiled at that. "Oh no. Jake never interferes. But--somehow--I haven't wanted to make music lately."

"You are not happy," said Saltash, with conviction.

She coloured a little. "It has been an anxious time, Charlie, and, I am afraid, yet will be."

"You take things too hard," he said.

She clasped her hands tightly together. "How can I help it? Everything is hard. Life is hard."

"Only if you choose to have it so," said Saltash.

He leaned a little forward, looking into her face. She turned her eyes to his with a vague reluctance.

"Yes," he said. "You've got the wrong pilot on board. That's why you're getting dragged into the whirlpools. You'll have to heave him over the side if you want to ride the seas with a free helm. My dear girl, what a frightful mess you've made of things!"

She did not resent his tone. Somehow in that atmosphere resentment was difficult. Moreover, her attention was not wholly given to what he was saying.

"I had to think of Bunny," she said, after a moment, as one in search of an excuse.

Saltash laughed. "And when are you going to begin to think of yourself? Don't you realize what is going to happen now that Bunny has been taken off your hands? You, the dainty, the proud, the fastidious, who wouldn't look at even the man you loved because you thought him unworthy! On my soul,--" a sudden tremor of passion ran through his speech--"I think you were mad. You must have been mad to have done such a thing. Have you looked forward at all? Can you see yourself a few years hence? I can--and it's a sight to make angels weep. Oh, Maud, my love, my fate, is that to be the end? I'd sooner see you dead!"

His hand was upon both hers as he ended. His dark face was burning with a fierce emotion.

But Maud only shivered, and leaning forward, gazed deep into the heart of the fire, saying no word.

Saltash watched her, a mocking light in his eyes that shone and slowly died. "What are you looking for?" he said.

She shook her head in silence. He threw his cigarette suddenly into the deep glow upon which her eyes were fixed. It leaped at once to flame, flame that burned ardently for a brief while, and then went out.

"Are you trying to find a way out?" he asked her then very softly. "There is a way out of every hole, believe me."

She gave him a quick glance as of one hard pressed, but still she did not speak.

He leaned forward also, pointing to the red heart of the fire that glowed but never flickered. "If you have the nerve,--the pluck--to face the furnace," he said, "it may scorch you a bit, but it shan't consume you. And it would be soon over. Would you be afraid--would you be afraid--to face it with me?"

His voice was low, stink almost to a whisper; yet it reached her, for he spoke almost into her ear.

She sat rigidly still, gazing before her. The fragrance of the burnt cigarette came out like incense from an altar.

He drew a little closer to her. "Maud, I am always ready--always ready. I am willing to offer any sacrifice. I should never count the cost. Nothing could be too much. I don't say any more that you are mine--unless you stoop to bestow yourself upon me. But I am yours--always--for all time. Bear that in mind--when the time comes!" He paused a moment; then: "Let that ring of ours be the sign and message," he murmured. "When you need deliverance, I will come to you from the world's end."

He rose with the words, so suddenly that she was startled; and in a moment his voice calm and debonair rang across the room.

"Hullo, Bolton! How long have you been hiding there? Come over here, and see if you can put a little heart into your wife! She needs it."

Maud, her white face turned over her shoulder, saw Jake's square shoulders outlined against the furthest south window. He was looking over his shoulder also; their eyes met across the room. Then he turned round fully in his solid way and came to them.

He was wearing slippers that he had donned for the sick room, and they made no sound.

Saltash's lithe form straightened. He stood ready, almost on guard, at the other man's approach. But his face remained debonair still. There was even a hint of humour about his mobile brows. His eyes flashed wickedly.

"So they've turned you out, have they?" he said, with that hint of regal haughtiness that usually characterized his speech when addressing an inferior.

Jake did not answer. His eyes, red-brown and very still, were upon Maud. They did not leave her for a moment. They seemed to search her through and through.

There came to her a second of deadly panic, panic that stopped her heart. She put up a hand to her throat with a spasmodic effort to breathe. And suddenly it seemed to her that she sat engulfed in the red, red heart of a soundless furnace. She gave a gasping cry, tried to rise, and fell forward fainting at her husband's feet.

CHAPTER XXXIV THE SACRIFICE

He lifted her. She knew that he lifted her, but all her powers were gone. She hung, a dead weight, in his arms.

Over her head she heard his voice, intensely quiet but deeper than usual; she thought it held a menacing note.

"I'll take her to the window. Thanks, I'm not wanting any help from you."

She felt the strength of the man as he lifted her bodily, and bore her across the room. He set her down upon the window-seat, supporting her with the utmost steadiness while he opened the window. The wintry air blew in upon her, and she shivered and came to life.

"Don't move!" he said.

The awful weakness was still upon her; she obeyed him because she had no choice, lying back against his arm in quivering submission.

"I'm--so sorry," she whispered at length. "I--I never did anything so stupid before."

"That so?" said Jake.

She lifted her eyes with a piteous effort to his. "Please leave me now! I shall do quite well--by myself."

"That so?" he said again.

His eyes held hers with a piercing, straight regard; but after a moment his hand came up and rubbed her icy cheek. It was a small act, but it affected her very curiously. She turned her face quickly to hide a rush of tears.

Jake's attitude changed on the instant. He stooped over her, his arm about her. "Say, Maud, my girl, what is it? What is it?" he said. "The little chap will be all right. Don't you worry any!"

The old kindness was in his voice; he held her to him just as he had held her on the morning that she had first gone to him for help. For the moment she yielded herself, scarcely knowing what she did; then she realized his nearness and began to draw herself away.

"I am foolish," she whispered, "just foolish. Don't take any notice!"

"Guess you're worn out," he said gently.

She shook her head, striving to master herself. "No, it's not that. It isn't anything. Please leave me alone for a little! I would rather."

He let her go, but he still remained beside her, looking down at her bent dark head. She leaned against the woodwork of the window, panting a little.

"I am better," she said uneasily, after a moment. "Please don't worry about me any more!"

"Who else should I worry about?" he said. "Do you suppose you aren't first with me every time?"

She quivered at the question, but she made no attempt to answer it.

He went on with a restraint that was somehow eloquent of vehemence suppressed. "I know well enough that you aren't happy with me. It's not in nature that you should be. Maybe it's my fault too; maybe it's not. I've been a damn' fool; I know that. But even so, you've no call to be afraid of me. You won't come up against me if you play a straight game."

He paused, and she saw his hands slowly clench. At the same moment she became aware of someone approaching, and turned her head to see Saltash coming towards her with a wine-glass in his hand.

"Oh, that's right; you're better," he said. "Here, Bolton! Make her drink this! It'll put a little life into her."

He gave the glass to Jake who stood a moment as if undecided as to what to do with it, then bent over Maud.

She drew back. "Oh no, thank you! I never drink brandy. Besides, I am quite well again now."

She made as if she would get up to demonstrate this fact, but he stopped her. "Take a little!" he drawled. "Lord Saltash has had the trouble of fetching it."

"I would rather not," she said. "I would much rather not."

"Let her please herself!" said Saltash sharply.

But Jake's hand, steady as rock, was already holding the glass to her lips. She drank as one compelled.

Saltash fidgeted up and down in front of the window in evident dissatisfaction, his ugly face full of lines. "I am infernally sorry this has happened," he said. "You ought to have had the stuff sooner. I wish I had ordered champagne. We'll have some presently. Ah, that'll do, Jake, that'll do! Don't force it on her, for Heaven's sake! Look here, you and I will clear out now, and let her rest in front of the fire. You'd like that, Maud, wouldn't you?"

Maud murmured an affirmative.

"Sure?" said Jake.

She looked up at him. "Yes; but not too near the fire. And--and leave the door open. I want to hear--to know--" Her voice failed, sank into silence.

"All right," Jake said quietly. "I'm not leaving you till it's over."

The calm decision of his speech silenced all protest. Maud attempted none. Saltash shrugged his shoulders and flung round on his heel. Jake bent to offer a steady arm.

She accepted his support in silence. There was that about him that would not brook resistance just then. She was sure that Saltash was aware of it also, for after a very brief pause he began to whistle under his breath and in a very few moments more sauntered from the room.

Jake, very quiet and determined, led her to a settee.

"I won't lie down," she said restlessly. "I want to listen."

Jake was looking round for a chair. Failing to see one, he seated himself by her side. "I reckon this is the most respectable piece of furniture in the place," he observed. "Here is a cushion. Lean back and shut your eyes!"

"I wish you wouldn't wait here," she murmured uneasily.

"I've got to wait somewhere," said Jake.

And then his hand descended upon hers and held it.

She started at his touch, seeking instinctively to free herself, but in the end she yielded, lying back in a tense stillness in which she knew the beating of her heart to be clearly audible.

What was he going to say to her? What had he overheard? What must he think of the agitation she had displayed upon discovering him?

Her breath quivered through her parted lips. The dread of the night before was upon her, but ten times magnified by her present weakness and the thought of that which he might have overheard.

But Jake sat in unbroken silence, his hand holding hers in a steady, purposeful grasp; and gradually, very gradually, her fear began to subside. He could have heard nothing! Surely he could have heard nothing! Surely, if he had, he would have spoken, have questioned--or accused!

A great shiver went through her.

"Cold?" said Jake.

She opened her eyes. "No."

His hand closed more firmly about her own. "Don't be so anxious!" he said. "It'll be all right."

His voice was kind, she tried to smile.

"Was he--was he very nervous?" she asked, finding relief in speech.

"Game all through," said Jake. "Went off like a baby. Say, Maud, he'll be a fine man some day."

"He'll never be mine any more," she said, and turned her face aside.

Jake said nothing. He fell into a musing silence that seemed to stretch and widen to an unknown abyss between them. She closed her eyes, hoping that he would think her sleeping.

He remained absolutely still by her side while the silence lengthened and deepened. She wondered for a while if he were watching her, wondered if he were actually as free from anxiety on Bunny's account as he appeared, became finally vaguely aware of a curious hushed sense of repose stealing over her tired nerves. She drifted away at last into a state that was not quite slumber, that yet held her trance-like and unaware of time. She knew that Jake was beside her, never wholly forgot his presence, but he had ceased to have a disquieting effect upon her. Somehow he fitted into the atmosphere of peace that surrounded her. She was even dimly glad that he had not left her alone. She was tired, unutterably tired, but her mind had ceased to work at the problems that so vexed her soul; it had become as it were dormant. Even the thought of Bunny did not disturb her any more. Had not Dr. Capper solemnly declared that all would be well?

So she sank into an ever-deepening sea of oblivion, unmindful of the hand that so surely held her own; and so that long, long hour crept by.

When there came at last the opening of a door and the sound of voices she was too far away in her merciful dreamland to hear. She knew in a vague fashion that Jake's hand left hers, even murmured a faint protest, but she did not attempt to rouse herself. She had yielded too completely to the healing magic of rest.

There followed a space during which all consciousness was entirely blotted out and she slept like a weary child, a space that seemed to last interminably, and yet was all too short. Then at length nature or conscience stirred within her, and her brain began to work once more. Out of a vague obscurity of dimly registered impressions the light of understanding began to dawn. She opened heavy eyes upon the red, still fire that burned so steadily, so unflinchingly. It put her in mind of something--that hot, silent fire--but she could not remember what it was; something that was vigilant, intense, unquenchable, something that she could never wholly grasp or wholly elude.

She opened her eyes a little wider, and moved her head upon the cushion. Surely she had slept for a long, long time!

And then she caught the sound of a voice that whispered--a low, clear whisper.

"Why don't you take her for a honeymoon, my son? It would do you both all the good in the world."

There was a pause, and then someone--Jake--murmured something unintelligible. Maud raised herself slightly and saw him standing before the fire. His thick-set figure was turned from her. His head leaned somewhat dejectedly against the high mantelpiece.

Capper was standing beside him, lounging against the carved wood in an ungainly attitude, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. At Jake's muttered words he turned and looked at him keenly, with eyes of semi-quizzical sympathy.

"Say, Jake," he said, "the man who walks his horse along a hedge-side never gets there. The hedge has a way of getting higher, moreover, every step he goes. Guess being in love has kind of demoralized you. You'll never win out this way."

Jake moved a little, straightened himself, stood squarely facing the great doctor. "I'm going to win out," he said; and with that very abruptly he wheeled round and came straight to Maud, as though she had called him.

So sudden was his movement that she was taken wholly by surprise. He stooped over her and took her hand before she had time to draw back.

"It's all right, my girl," he said, and she heard a note of reassurance in his voice. "The little chap's come through it finely. There's nothing to be anxious about. Capper says so; and whatever Capper says goes."

"Guess that's so," said Capper. He remained at his post by the fire, a smile of keen satisfaction on his parchment face. "You shall see him presently; not yet, not for another hour, and then only for a few seconds. He's got to be kept as quiet as an infant. But I've done just what

I figured to do. In another six weeks he ought to be learning to walk."

"Bunny--walking!" Maud spoke the words as one dazed. The whole of her world seemed suddenly to have changed. It was as if she actually breathed a new atmosphere. She caught her breath, feeling half afraid. "Is it--is it true?" she said.

Capper laughed. "Seems like a miracle, does it? Never met with a miracle before? Yet there's quite a lot of 'em to be seen in this curious old world. Maybe you'll come across some more, now you've started."

He came quietly to her, bent and took her free hand into his. She felt his thin, sensitive fingers press her pulse.

"I'm quite well indeed," she said in a tone of protest. "Please tell me more about Bunny. I want to hear everything."

"My dear lady, you know practically all there is to know," he made answer. "Bunny is going to be one of my proudest successes. But there's just one thing to be arranged, I want to have him under my own eye for a time. It's for his own good, so I know your consent is a foregone conclusion. No, not yet of course. I will give him a month here, and then I want to fetch him up to London and keep him in a Home there belonging to my colleague Sir Kersley Whitton until I am able to discharge him as cured. Will you agree to that?"

His eyes, shrewd and kindly, looked down into hers. His hand still held her wrist. She felt the magic of his personality, and found it hard to resist.

But, "To take him away from me!" she said rather piteously. "Must you take him away?"

Jake had withdrawn a little as if he did not wish to take part in the conversation. Capper sat down beside her.

"Mrs. Bolton," he said, "I guess that young brother of yours is just one of the biggest factors of your existence. Isn't that so? You'd do anything for him, and never count the cost. Well, here's something you can do for him, a mighty big thing too. It'll be a very critical time, and I want to have him under my own eye. I also want to have complete control of him. I'm not hinting that your influence isn't good. I know it is. But, for all that, he'll do better with comparative strangers during that critical time than he would with his own people. I want to lift him entirely out of the old ruts. I want to start him on an entirely new footing, to give him self-reliance, to get him into good, wholesome habits. It'll make all the difference in the world to him or I shouldn't be urging it so strongly. Say, now, you promised me your co-operation, you are not going to refuse?"

She could not refuse. She realized it with a leaden heart. Yet she made one quivering attempt to pierce through the ever-narrowing circle.

"But the cost," she said.

"It won't cost you a single cent," said Capper. "It's just for my private satisfaction that it will be done."

Her last hope faded. She made a little gesture of helplessness. "He is in your hands, Doctor," she said. "I-I am much more grateful to you than I seem."

Capper's hand pressed hers. "You will never regret this sacrifice as long as you live," he said, looking at her with his keen, kindly eyes. "I'm even ready to prophesy that you'll one day reap a very considerable benefit from it."

But Maud's only answer was a dreary little shake of the head.

CHAPTER XXXV OFFER OF FREEDOM

Slowly the dreary winter days gave place to spring. March came with gusty rain-storms that swept over sea and downs; lashing the waves to fury, blotting the countryside like a torn veil. March went, smiling and wonderful, with a treacherous graciousness that deceived all nature into imagining that the winter was really gone.

At Burchester Castle, Bunny, lying perpetually flat on his back by the doctor's unalterable decree, alternated between fits of bitter complaining and fits of black despair. He suffered more from tedium and weariness than from any definite pain, and Maud found herself fully occupied once more with the care of him. The nurse was thankful to have her at hand, for Bunny was at all times a difficult patient. And to be in attendance upon him was Maud's greatest joy in those days. She watched over him with such a wealth of devotion as she had never displayed before, a devotion at which even the boy himself sometimes marvelled.

Jake came and went, but he was never with him at night. The nurse slept in his room and Maud in the one adjoining. Jake went back to his home to sleep.

He and Maud saw but little of each other. They met daily, but she avoided all intercourse with him so strenuously that only the most ordinary commonplaces ever passed between them.

She saw much more of Saltash, though he was often away. His comings and goings were never known beforehand, and he never intruded himself upon her. Only when she went in the afternoons or evenings to the music-room and, propping the door wide, played and sometimes sang to Bunny, he had a fashion of coming lightly in upon her, dropping as it seemed from nowhere, and lying outstretched upon the settee near her while he smoked his endless cigarettes, and occasionally criticized.

How he entered she never discovered; he was always there before she knew, and he never came in by the door. When she asked him, he would only jest.

"Some day I will show you my secret chamber, *ma belle reine*. But not yet--not yet."

No intimate conversation took place at these times. They were seldom really alone, being always within call of Bunny's imperious voice.

Saltash was very good to Bunny, but his company was considered by the nurse to be too lively for her patient, and she would not permit him to stay long in the sick-room. Her orders regarding Bunny were very strict. He was to be kept quiet,--contented also, if possible, but always quiet.

For that reason his mother's visits were also very brief. She did not often come to the Castle. It seemed to Maud that her plump face was beginning to wear a harassed look, but there never had been any confidence between them, and she did not like to question her. She knew herself quite powerless to assist in the bearing of her mother's burdens.

During that final month of devotion to Bunny she gave herself up to him so completely that even her own problems grew remote and almost unreal. She was upon the usual friendly terms with Charlie; but he was very far from occupying her first attention. So absorbed indeed was she that the memory of their brief conversation on the day of Bunny's operation, together with his mad, characteristic suggestion, had faded altogether into the background of her mind. It seemed somehow impossible that Bunny could ever cease to be the centre and aim of her whole conscious existence, impossible that Capper and his miracles could so alter the trend of her life's destiny.

Her feeling for Saltash seemed to be lying dormant, very far below the surface. She was not thinking of herself at all just then. She was too fully occupied. Her feeling for Jake also was almost a blank. Now that he no longer attempted to play any part in her life but that of passive spectator, she treated him without conscious effort as a comparative stranger. But all the time deep down in her heart she smothered that nameless dread of the man that once had been so active. She did not want to think of him; she instinctively restrained herself from thinking of him. She had schooled herself to meet him without agitation. She had thrust him unresisting into the furthest background of her consciousness. And now she lived for Bunny, and for Bunny alone.

So that last month slipped away.

April came, but no word from Capper. A faint, new hope began to dawn in her heart. Was it possible that the sacrifice might not after all be demanded of her? Was it possible that the miracle might even yet be worked out with much patience at Burchester? Bunny did not seem to be making much progress, but at least she was sure he was not losing ground. He did not suffer so much as formerly, though his chafing irritability sometimes seemed to her to be even greater than before. He talked incessantly of Capper, urging Jake to write to him.

But Jake would not be persuaded. "Capper knows his own business, my son. You leave him alone!" he said.

And Bunny had perforce to accept the fiat. He never seriously attempted to resist Jake. Their friendship was too near for that. Jake's influence over him was practically boundless.

But he could not check the boy's fierce impatience which grew perceptibly from day to day.

It was on a warm afternoon towards the middle of the month that Maud was sitting at the piano, trying to soothe him with the music he loved, during the absence of the nurse, when the sound of a footfall in the room made her turn. Saltash had been away for a few days, but she was half-expecting him. He never remained away for long.

"Why, Charlie,--" she began, with a quick smile of welcome, and broke off sharply. It was Capper.

Her face must have displayed something more than surprise, she reflected later, for his first words, albeit he smiled whimsically as he uttered them, were words of apology.

"So sorry, Mrs. Bolton. I shouldn't have taken you off your guard like this, only I had a notion

that being somewhat over-due, you might be more or less prepared to see me."

She left the piano, and went with outstretched hand to meet him. "You at last!" she said.

Her welcome was cordial, but it was wholly without eagerness. Her heart was beating wildly, uncontrollably. She felt suddenly cold, as if she had stepped into a stone vault.

Capper bent a little over her hand; she saw his eyes flash over her. "I don't find the frog in attendance," he remarked. "Has he been shunted for a spell?"

She felt her colour come again. "Don't you want to hear about Bunny?" she said.

He smiled at her. "I know my own business so well, madam, that I know all I need to know about Bunny," he told her dryly. "The boy is just mad to be allowed to try his strength, and between you and me he'll have about the biggest disappointment of his life when he does. It won't do him any harm though, so don't you worry any!" He suddenly held up her hand to the light and surveyed it critically. "Say, Mrs. Bolton," he said, "what do you live on? Just monkey-nuts?"

She laughed in spite of herself. "I live very well, I assure you. But I could never get fat. It's not my nature."

He grunted and pulled at his yellow beard. "Do you realize that you've lost pounds of flesh since it was first my privilege to meet you?"

She shook her head protestingly. "Oh no, really. It is your imagination."

Capper shook his head also. "My imagination feeds on facts only. Jake is not looking after you properly. It's my belief he is treating you to slow starvation."

"Oh indeed--indeed," she broke in with vehemence, "Jake has had nothing to do with me lately. I have been much too busy with Bunny, and he has had the good sense not to interfere."

"Is that good sense?" said Capper, in the tone of one who does not require an answer.

"Besides," she went on rather breathlessly, "it's not Jake's business to look after me."

"I thought that was what husbands were for," said Capper, with his whimsical smile. "It's a fool policy anyway to leave a woman to look after herself, and you're just a living illustration of that fact."

Her hands clasped his arm almost unconsciously. "Please--please don't ever discuss me again with Jake!" she begged in tones of distress.

He patted her hand with fatherly reassurance and passed the matter by. "What are you going to do when Bunny is gone?" he asked.

Her face paled again. "You are really going to take him away?" she said.

"To-morrow," said Capper.

She removed her hands with a gesture that was piteous, she said nothing whatever.

Capper turned aside. "Maybe you'll take up housekeeping," he said practically. "If I dare to venture upon the suggestion, you would make a charming hostess."

She was silent still.

He glanced at her. "Say, Mrs. Bolton," he said, "I guess you'll think me several kinds of a nuisance; but your husband has offered me his hospitality for to-night. And I--well, I have accepted it provisionally, that is, on the condition that he can supply me with a hostess."

She looked at him in blank dismay. "But I sleep here!" she said. "I--I must be always at hand in case Bunny should want me."

"Isn't the nurse in attendance?" asked Capper, with a touch of sharpness.

"Oh, of course," she answered. "But--but----"

"And how often in the night does she generally call you?"

Maud was silent.

Capper's hand patted her shoulder again, paternally, admonishingly. "Guess he could spare you for to-night," he said. "Pack your grip and come home! Jake will be pleased to see you, sure."

She shivered. "It isn't home to me," she said.

"What?" said Capper. "Not your husband's house?"

The hot colour rushed up over her face. She turned from him. "Come and see Bunny!" she said.

A few minutes later she stood alone in the music-room, gazing forth from the western window with eyes that seemed to search the horizon for help.

Capper was occupied with Bunny. The nurse had returned, and she was not needed. The certainty of this was upon her, a dead weight pressing her down. Bunny's need of her was past forever. Duty, stark and implacable, was all that remained in life.

Ah! A step behind her! She turned swiftly. "Charlie!"

He came to her, a smile on his swarthy face, a gleam of wickedness in his eyes. He took the

hands that almost involuntarily she stretched to him. "You summoned me!" he said.

Something in his look warned her of danger. His clasp was electric in its tenseness.

She stood a moment before replying; then: "I didn't so much as know you were in the house," she said.

She left her hands in his. An odd recklessness was upon her, the recklessness born of despair.

He laughed into her eyes. "Yet you summoned me, most tragic queen of the roses," he said. "You weren't so much as thinking of me, perhaps? Yet subconsciously your spirit cried to mine, and behold--I am here."

He had drawn her close to him, holding her hands against his breast, so that the quick, ardent beat of his heart came to her, sending a curious, half-reluctant thrill through her own.

She looked into his face of mocking subtleties. "No, I wasn't thinking of you, Charlie," she said. "I was thinking of myself, hating the life before me--hating everything!"

The concentrated bitterness of her speech was almost like a challenge. She spoke passionately, as one goaded, not caring what came of it.

Saltash was bending slowly towards her, still laughing, ready to take refuge in a joke if refuge were needed, yet daring also, warily marking his game. "Why don't you think of me--for a change?" he said.

She turned her face swiftly aside. Her lips were suddenly quivering. "No one--not even you--can help me now," she said.

"You are wrong," he answered instantly. "I can help you. It's just what I'm here for."

She glanced at him again. "As a friend, Charlie?" she said.

He bent his dark head over her hands. "Yes, a friend," he said.

"But--" She began to tremble; the old dread was upon her, the old instinctive recoil, the old ache of distrust. She set her hands against him, holding him from her. "How can you help me?" she said.

He did not lift his head. "I can't keep you out of the furnace altogether," he said. "But I can save you from living in bondage to a man you loathe. You will have to trust me--to a certain extent. Do you trust me?"

"I don't know." Her voice was low, quivering with an agitation she could not repress. "Tell me what you are thinking of! Tell me how--how----"

"I will tell you," he said, "when you have made up your mind as to my trustworthiness."

She controlled her agitation with an effort. "Oh, don't play with me, Charlie!" she besought him. "Don't you see I'm cornered--desperate? Of course I will trust you."

He looked up at her with a wry lift of one eyebrow. "Being a case of needs must," he observed dryly. "Well, my dear girl, the case is simple enough. You are ready to trust me because you must. No one else is under the same obligation. Everyone else--the worthy cow-puncher included--knows my fascinating reputation. Disappear with me for a week or so--we'll run away and hide--and all charitably-minded folks will jump to the obvious conclusion. The result will be an undefended divorce suit, and I shall pay the damages." His smile became a grimace. "That is your road to freedom, *ma belle reine*," he said. "And think on me, I pray thee, when that freedom shall be achieved! There are sunnier lands than England where lovely ladies may be wooed by wandering cavaliers. And surely, surely," his smile flashed forth again, "having thus made such atonement for past offences as lies in my power, my queen would stoop to be gracious to me at last!"

He bent again over her hands, holding them pressed to his lips.

Maud stood mute. The audacity of the suggestion seemed to deprive her of the power of speech. None but Charlie could ever have evolved such a plan. None but Charlie--who loved her!

The sudden realization of his love went through her like a sword-thrust in her heart. She actually gasped with the pain of it. What he suggested was impossible of course--of course! But how gallantly, and withal how tenderly, he had laid the offer before her, urging no claim, merely--out of the love he still had for her--offering her deliverance!

But she must find an answer for him. He was waiting, bent in courtly fashion, with that kinglike carelessness of pose that marked him out from all other men.

She looked at the bowed head that could be poised so arrogantly, and suddenly her eyes were full of tears. She made a movement to withdraw her hands.

"Oh, Charlie," she said, in a broken, passionate whisper, "if I were only free!"

He raised his head on the instant. "But you can be free. I am offering you freedom. A little courage, a little confidence! Can't you face it with me? Are you afraid?"

His voice was eager, his eyes were shining and boyishly persuasive. His hands still clasped hers with a pressure so vital and insistent that she felt impelled to suffer it.

She shook her head. "No, Charlie. It isn't that. But--but--my promise!"

"Oh, what of that?" he said impetuously. "A promise made under compulsion is no bond at all. You can't keep it and yet be true to yourself. The mistake lay in making it. But to stick to it would be worse than madness. Listen; Maud! You must listen! Your marriage is an abomination, and you must rid yourself of it, whatever the cost. I can see--I have seen all along--that it is an absolute violation of your whole nature. You shrink from the man. I believe in your soul you abhor him. You did it on impulse. He knows that. And you have repented ever since. Your heart was never in it. I think I know where your heart is,"--his voice suddenly softened, and his hand began subtly to draw her back to him. "But we won't discuss that now. It isn't the time. I am concerned only to deliver you. And I am offering you such deliverance as you can accept, a deliverance that you can safely contemplate without shrinking. The publicity of the thing need never touch you personally. You can live in seclusion till it is all forgotten. Maud, my Maud, won't you--can't you--trust an old friend?" His hands were drawing her closer. His dark face, aglow with the ardour of his quest, was close to hers. "You want to be free," he urged. "And--my darling,--I want you free, I want you free!"

His voice throbbed into silence. He was drawing her--drawing her. In another moment he would have had her in his arms, but she held back from him with quivering, desperate strength. "No, Charlie! No!" she said gaspingly.

He released her hands at once, and abruptly. With a species of royal indifference curiously characteristic of him, he veiled his ardour. "It is for you to choose," he said. "I don't take. I offer." Then, as she covered her face, he softened again, took her suddenly, very lightly, by the shoulders. "Have I gone too far, queen of the roses?" he whispered. "Yet he will go further still. It is that that I want to save you from. You must forgive me, sweet, if I seem too anxious. I am hard pressed myself. I want you badly enough, it's true. But that isn't my main reason for urging this. If you had married a man you cared for, I could have borne it. But this,--this is intolerable. There! I have done. Only remember, that I am ready--I am always ready. I shall wait for you by day and by night. Sooner or later--sooner or later, I know you will come. Don't be afraid to come, Queen Maud! I will be to you whatever you wish always. I only ask to serve you."

Rapidly he uttered the low words, still holding her with a touch that was scarcely perceptible, but of which she was so vividly conscious that she quivered from head to foot, every nerve stretched and vibrant, burningly alive, chafing to respond.

The wild impulse to yield herself to his arms, casting away all shackles, was for the moment almost overpowering. Her spirit leapt to the call of his, beating fiercely for freedom like a caged bird viewing its mate in the open sky. How she restrained it she knew not. Perhaps it was fear, perhaps it was that old, instinctive sense of fitness that had influenced her long ago. But the moment passed, and she remained motionless.

Saltash turned aside.

He betrayed no sign of disappointment. That also was characteristic of him. He saw no defeat in failure. He regarded it only as victory postponed.

And his attitude said as much when after a moment or two he began to speak in a light and careless strain of matters indifferent to them both. If he had not squarely hit his mark, he was not far therefrom, and with that he was content. He knew her to be nearer to his level than she had ever been before. The Maud of old days would have viewed his suggestion with the shrinking horror of a spirit that had never known temptation. The Maud of to-day was different, more human, more truly woman. She had suffered, and her dainty pride had ceased to uphold her. He had offered himself to her in the light of deliverer, and as such he believed he would win her. The odds were at last in his favour.

As for Jake, he might be formidable, but Saltash was no coward. He fancied that when the time came, Jake would accept the inevitable. In any case he was far too keen upon the chase to be deterred by the thought of an outsider like Jake. If any element of danger existed, he welcomed it. If a thing were worth having, it was worth fighting for, Saltash never had in any one of his rash intrigues paused to count the cost, and certainly it was not often that the cost had been borne by him. He snatched his pleasures, and he drank deep thereof; but the dregs he was wont to throw away. Once only--or possibly twice--had he ever been made to drink to the bottom of the cup. And he did not stop now to consider that on each of those occasions the cup had been firmly held in the hand of Jake Bolton.

CHAPTER XXXVI
THE BOND

"I have called him The Hundredth Chance," said Jake. "But I guess he is going to be a winner."

He was stooping over a tiny black foal that stood with trembling legs pressed against its mother's flank. She was looking round at the master with questioning eyes. Even he was only allowed in the loose-box on suffrance.

"You're very hopeful," said Capper.

He stood leaning on the half-door, looking in upon Jake's latest treasure.

Maud was standing with him, but slightly apart, fondling the red setter Chops who fawned about her knees. Chops had been unfeignedly delighted to see her again, and he could not desist from telling her so. She had bid good-bye to Bunny till the morrow, but she had made no definite arrangements for leaving the Castle, and even yet she was wondering if she might not manage to return for that one last night of her brother's sojourn there.

Jake had received her without comment when she had arrived with Capper half an hour before. She fancied his manner was somewhat guarded, but he treated her as if he had expected her and her coming had caused him no surprise.

Upon an ordinary occasion she would have been charmed with the sight of the week-old foal that Jake had brought them thither to see, but at the moment she was too stiff with shy reserve to enjoy it. So she stood apart instead while Jake talked in his soft voice to the doctor, striving to hide her embarrassment in murmured endearments to Chops.

"Oh yes, the dam's a blood mare," Jake was saying, "the most valuable animal we have. She's a mass of nerves, unfortunately. We've had a lot of trouble with her."

He stretched a fondling hand to the creature's enquiring muzzle. She laid her ears for a moment, but the next her tongue came out and softly licked first his fingers and then the wistful black face of her offspring.

Jake smiled and stood up. "She's a good mother, Doctor. I like a good mother," he said.

His eyes fell on Maud, bending low with flushed face over the dog. A momentary shadow crossed his face. He had counted upon a greater enthusiasm on her part. Never before had she failed to take a keen interest in the animals. "Reckon we'd better go in and get some supper," he said.

They went in. The spring twilight was falling and with it a brief shower that pattered awhile and was stayed. Down in the orchard the blackbirds were singing in a wonderful chorus that seemed to fill all the world with music. The scents that rose from the rain-steeped earth were of that wondrous fragrance that holds the senses spellbound in the magic of Spring.

From somewhere near the open French window there came the breath of violets, and from a little further away, subtly mingling with it, the incense of wallflowers, all wet and luscious from the damp, sweet earth.

"A wonderful season," said Capper.

Jake smiled somewhat grimly. "A stormy May," he said.

The meal was of the simplest, served by Mrs. Lovelace in her best gown of black sateen. Her plump face wore a pursed look of peculiar severity. Maud, very pale and still, at the end of the table, gave her a murmured greeting which called forth a very grim response.

Jake was apparently at his ease, but he made no attempt to draw his wife into the conversation. He talked to Capper or was silent. He was still wearing the riding-costume with which she always associated him. She heard the clink of his spurs whenever he moved.

Capper was very gentle with her, full of kindly consideration. There were no difficult pauses. To a casual observer there would have been no evidence of strain. Only to the girl, sitting there at her husband's table, a stranger, was it almost insupportable. She did not know how she came through the meal, nor was she aware of eating anything. When it was over at last, she was thankful to rise and go.

She took refuge upstairs in the room that had been Bunny's, standing there in darkness, striving with herself, fighting desperately for composure. What was expected of her she did not know, whether to go or to remain. The impulse to go strongly urged her, but she held it back. There was the morrow to be thought of, the morrow to be faced, and she had a feeling--a dreadful, growing suspicion--that Jake was drawing to the end of his patience. Not that he had betrayed it by word or look; only he seemed to be waiting, waiting with an iron determination

that no action of hers could balk. She felt that if she fled from him to-night, she would never dare to face him again.

The thought of Charlie arose within her, Charlie, careless, debonair, gay of soul. He had offered her his protection. Should she go to him--even now? Could she? Dared she?

The temptation drew her, drew her. She knew Charlie so well. She was sure he would be chivalrous. She was sure she could count upon him. But his protection--what was it worth?

Now that she had seen Jake, had felt the primitive force of the man anew, her heart misgave her. She was possessed by the appalling conviction that in the matter of lawlessness Jake could outdo Charlie many times over, if once roused. No trammels of civilization would hold him. He would go straight for his prey, and no power on earth would turn him aside, or make him relinquish his hold till he had wreaked his vengeance.

For the first time it occurred to her that it might not be upon herself alone that that vengeance would fall. A great shudder went through her. She quivered all over, and turning crept to the bed and crouched beside it. She was terrified, unnerved, despairing. Her own wickedness frightened her, so that she could not even pray for help. She knew not which way to turn.

A long time passed thus; then there came a step upon the stair, a steady, quiet step. A hand pushed open the door.

"Say, Maud, are you here?" Jake said.

She tried to answer him, but could not. She knew that the moment she spoke, she would betray herself.

He came forward into the room. She saw his square figure against the light outside the door.

"Capper has gone back," he said. "He wouldn't stay any longer."

That startled her to a tragic activity. She sprang up in wild dismay. "Dr. Capper--gone! I--I thought he was spending the night!"

"I wanted him to," said Jake. "He wouldn't. He said I was to wish you good-night, and thank you for your hospitality."

Maud stood still, her hands at her throat. For the moment she was too electrified for speech. Then anger--bitter, furious resentment--came to her aid.

"So you brought me here by--a trick!" she said, her voice pitched very low but full of a quivering abhorrence that must have reached him where he stood.

"I don't know what you mean," said Jake. His voice was curt and cool; he spoke without the smallest evidence of indignation or constraint. "I never asked you to come, nor did I ask Capper to bring you. I presume you were a free agent so far as that goes. But since you are here there is not much point in running away again. It's here that you belong."

The finality of his speech came upon her with stunning force. It had the dead level of absolute assurance. As he made it, he came forward into the room, and she heard the rattle of his matchbox as he drew it forth.

She stood and waited tensely while he deliberately struck a match and lighted one of the candles upon the mantel-piece. All the blood in her body seemed to be throbbing at her throat. She had not been alone with him for weeks. She had never been alone with him as she was to-night.

The light from the candle showed her the room prepared as for a guest. The chintz covers were all newly-starched, and from the bed there seemed to come a subtle scent of lavender. The lattice-window was wide to the night, and from far away there rose the long deep roar of the sea.

Jake turned from the lighted candle, and pointed to a low chair by the bed. "Sit down!" he said. "There's something I've got to say to you."

She looked at him with hunted eyes. She thought his face was very grim, but the dim flickering light threw strange shadows upon it, baffling her.

He came to her as she still remained upon her feet, took her between his hands, and held her so, facing him.

"Say, now," he said, and a hint of half-coaxing kindness softened the measured resolution of his speech, "where's the sense of fighting when you know you can't win? You're not a very good loser, my girl. But I reckon it's just a woman's way. I won't be hard on you on that account."

She drew back from him swiftly, with the old, instinctive shrinking from the man's overwhelming force of personality.

"Oh, need we talk about that now?" she said hurriedly. "I--there is still Bunny to think of. It is his last night, and--and--and----"

She broke off with a sound half-choked that was almost a cry. For Jake's hands were holding her, drawing her, compelling her. She realized that in another moment she would be in his arms.

She set her quivering hands against his shoulders, pushing him from her with all her strength.

He set her free then, with a gesture half-contemptuous. "So it's to be the same old fool game to the bitter end, is it?" he asked, and she caught in his voice a new note as of anger barely held in check. "Well, I reckon it's up to you to make good sooner or later. It was not my intention to hold you down to that bargain of ours; but if you must have it, you shall. I want to know when you propose to make good."

She shrank away from him in quivering disgust. "Oh, never, never!" she said.

The words rushed out almost against her will, and the moment they were uttered she wished them back. For Jake's eyes leapt into sudden furious flame, such flame as seemed to scorch her from head to foot. He did not speak at once, but stood looking at her, looking at her, while the awful seconds crept away.

At last, "It's rather--rash of you to put it that way," he said, and there was a faintly humorous sound in his voice as though he restrained a laugh. "So you're not--a woman of your word after all? That's queer--damn' queer. I could have sworn you were."

She wrung her hands hard together in a desperate effort at self-control. "Oh, Jake," she said piteously, "it isn't my fault that we're not made of the same stuff, indeed--indeed! You--you wouldn't ask the impossible of me!"

"P'raps not," said Jake, and now he spoke in the old soft drawl that she knew well as a cloak to unwavering determination. "But has it never occurred to you that I might leave asking and just--take?"

She recoiled further from him. The man's deadly assurance appalled her. She had no weapon to oppose against it. And his eyes were as a red-hot furnace into which she dared not look.

"Now, listen to me!" he suddenly said. "There's been enough of this fooling around--more than enough. I've put up with it so far, but there's a limit to everything. The time has come for you to remember that you are my wife, I am your husband. We may not be over well suited to one another, as you have pointed out. But the bond exists and we have got to make the best of it. And so you will not go back to the Castle to-night. You will stay here under your husband's roof, and fill your rightful place by my side. Is that understood?"

He spoke with the utmost decision; and Maud, white to the lips, attempted no reply. She had made her appeal, and he had not heard it. She knew with sure intuition that further resistance would be useless. She had staked all, and she had lost. In that moment she saw her life a heap of ruins, blasted by a devastating tempest that had scattered to the four winds all that she had ever held precious. And nothing was left to her. Nothing of value could ever be hers again. Only out of the smoking ruins there presently arose one thing--a poison plant--that was to flourish in the midst of desolation. Out of the furnace of a man's unshackled passion it sprang to full growth in a single night ready to bear its evil fruit when time should have made it ripe.

The seed of it had been sown by Saltash. The tropical raising of it was the work of Jake Bolton. The nourishing of it was left to Maud. But the final ingathering of that bitter harvest was to fall to the lot of all three.

PART II THE RACE

CHAPTER I HUSKS

Chops the setter was puzzled.

He had been following his mistress about in his faithful way throughout the whole of that hot July afternoon, and he had fathomed the fact that she was preparing for a visitor. He even half-suspected that he knew who the visitor would prove to be. But none the less was he puzzled by her attitude. For to Chops' plain and honest mind the coming of a guest was a cause for undiluted joy. But it was evident that to Maud the advent of this one was a matter of anxiety, even almost of dread.

Jake's old bedroom facing the Stables had been assigned to the newcomer. She had spent hours of loving care upon it, yet on this, the great day of arrival, she did not seem happy or by any means content.

A great restlessness possessed her, and Chops in consequence was uneasy also. He had conceived a vast affection for his young mistress that was in some fashion vaguely mingled with pitying concern. She had a disconcerting way of weeping in private when only Chops might see, and he had a feeling that such consolation as he was able to proffer, though quite whole-hearted, was never altogether equal to the occasion. The tears she shed were so piteously hopeless, and even her smiles were hopeless too. Chops often mourned over the sadness of his idol.

She had just come in from the garden with a great handful of sweet peas. It was a glorious sunny morning, and she had put on an old blue sunbonnet that had done duty down on the sea-shore in previous summers to protect her from the glare. She was holding the flowers up to her face as she mounted the steps to the parlour, and such was her absorption that she did not notice what Chops, following close behind, perceived on the instant,--the strong, square figure of her husband waiting in the entrance of the glass door.

She was actually within touch of him before she was aware of his presence, and then with a great start she lowered her flowers, while over her face there came a look that was like the sudden donning of a mask.

"I thought you had gone," she said.

"Not quite," said Jake.

He bent slightly as she entered, stretched out a hand, took her by the chin, and kissed her mask-like face.

She endured his action with the most complete show of indifference, neither returning nor avoiding his caress. A faint, faint tinge of colour showed in her cheeks as with scarcely a pause she passed on into the room; that was all.

"It is getting late," she observed. "I think you had better go."

Jake's eyes, red-brown and shining, followed her with a masterful expression as she moved to the table and laid down her flowers, marking the queenly bend of her neck, the cold majesty of her pose.

He said nothing for the moment, merely took his pipe out of his pocket and began to fill it.

Maud went to the sideboard for a vase. Her movements were very measured, very stately. She did not so much as glance towards the man who watched her. The old quick nervousness of manner had gone utterly from her. She was like a marble statue endued with a certain icy animation.

"You don't look exactly--excited," remarked Jake, as he finally stuck his pipe into his mouth.

She smiled, a cold, aloof smile, saying nothing.

He lighted his pipe, his eyes still upon her. "Say, Maud," he said, between the puffs, "why don't you come too?"

She raised her beautiful brows a little at the question and slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"You don't want to?" pursued Jake.

Her blue eyes met his for a single instant. They were dark and remote as a deep mountain tarn. "Not in the least," she said.

He swung round with a jingle of spurs and came to the table by which she stood.

"What if I wish you to come?" he said.

The faint, cold smile still drew her lips. She had begun already to arrange her flowers.

"Of course your wish is law," she said.

He leaned towards her, laying an abrupt hand upon hers. "Maud!" he said.

She became still on the instant, but she did not look at him or attempt to avoid the tobacco smoke that curled between them.

"Maud," he said again, and there was a hint of pleading in his voice, "why can't you be friends with me? Surely I'm not all that hard to get on with!"

She kept her eyes lowered. The pale composure of her face did not vary as she made reply. "I am sorry if you are not satisfied. I thought you had got--all you wanted."

He pulled the pipe from his mouth and laid it on the table. "Do you think any man is satisfied with husks?" he said.

Her lip curled a little. She said nothing.

He took her by the arms, not violently but with firmness. "Maud," he said, and there was urgency in his voice, "where's the use of behaving like this? Do you think it's going to make life easier, happier? Is it doing God's work in the world to be always fighting the inevitable? I'm rough, I know; but I'm white. Why can't you take me as I am, and make the best of me?"

He had never thus appealed to her before. She stood stiffly between his hands. But still she did not look at him. Her eyes were upon the flowers on the table that lay scorching and slowly

shrivelling under his pipe.

"I really don't know what you want," she said, in a tone of cold aloofness.

"And don't care!" said Jake, with sudden vehemence. "On my soul, I sometimes think to myself that if you treated Sheppard as you treat me, he had some reason for giving you a hiding."

Her eyelids quivered sharply at the rough allusion, but she did not raise them. "You are rather--hard to please," she said, in a low voice.

"Am I?" said Jake. "And do you ever try to please me by any chance?"

A slight tremor went through her. "I give you submission--obedience," she said. "You have--all that you married me for."

"Have I?" said Jake. His voice was suddenly ironical. "Ah, my girl, you know a mighty lot about that, don't you? And have I also your confidence, your goodwill, your--friendship?"

Her eyes flashed him a look of swift protest. "They were not a part of the bargain," she said.

"Damn the bargain!" said Jake, with force. "If I didn't want them, what did I want?"

Her eyes comprehended him and fell again. She said nothing.

He held her by the shoulders and gave her a sharp shake as if to bring her to her senses.

"P'raps you think I'm brutal," he said. "But you treat me as I wouldn't treat any brute in creation. Why do you never speak to me? Why do you never kiss me? On my oath, you starve me of all that's good in life and yet expect me to remain civilized."

She made no attempt to free herself, nor did she utter remonstrance of any kind. If the grip of his hands hurt her, she did not show it. She stood in utter silence.

Slowly Jake's hold relaxed. The fierceness went out of it. He stood for a few seconds watching her, a deep frown between his brows.

"I don't seem able to get hold of you somehow," he said at length. "And yet it ain't for want of trying. Say, Maud, can't you be decent to me for a bit now the little chap is coming? He'll notice, sure, if you're not. Guess we don't either of us want him pestering around with questions."

There was a species of half-grudging persuasion in his voice. He held her as though at the faintest sign of encouragement he would have drawn her into his arms.

But Maud made no such sign. She stood motionless. Without looking at him she spoke.

"I can't pretend to love you. You see,--I don't."

He made a sharp gesture--such a gesture as a man might make if stabbed in the back. A very bitter look came into his eyes. It was as if an evil spirit looked gibing forth. They glittered like the red flare of a torch.

"All right, my girl," he said, and his voice was soft and slow and wholly without emotion. "Then I continue my meal of husks."

With the words he let her go, took up his pipe from the table, and left her. Mutely she watched him go. Then, as the sound of his footsteps died away, she sank on her knees by the table, burying her face upon the scorched and ruined flowers; and so she remained for a long, long time.

Even the sympathy of Chops was lacking. He had followed his master and the dog-cart to the station to welcome the visitor for whom such loving preparations had been made. And he was being compelled to fly like the wild to keep pace with the flying wheels.

CHAPTER II THE POISON PLANT

The wheels of the dog-cart clattered back over the stone paving of the yard, and a wild whoop of welcome echoed through the place. A small, boyish figure leapt impetuously to the ground to be caught and fast held in Maud's straining arms.

"Hullo, Maud! Hullo, Maud!" cried Bunny.

He hugged her none the less ardently, hugged and kissed her. They had not seen each other for three months.

Maud's greeting was quite inaudible; she could only hold him passionately close, feeling the abounding activity of his light young frame, and realizing with a great throb of rejoicing that the miracle had been wrought indeed. Bunny had been made whole.

"I say, isn't it fine?" the boy cried eagerly. "I've been doing gymnastics and physical exercises to any amount. I can swim too, and Dr. Capper says I may learn to ride. Jake's going to teach me, aren't you, Jake? Oh, isn't it fine, Maud? Isn't it fine?"

She held him a little from her, gazing at him fondly ere she gathered him close again. He was very slight and thin but he was taller than she had thought possible. The deep hollows about his eyes were far less marked than before, though his whole face bore that indelible stamp of suffering which had always made him older than his years.

He gave her another hearty hug. "I'm as fit as a fiddler," he declared. "But I still have to do four hours flat on the floor every day. I told Jake I wasn't going to do it any more, but he swears he'll tie me down to the table-legs if I don't. You're a sport, aren't you, Jake?"

He left his sister abruptly to attach himself to Jake whose threats of violence were plainly a huge attraction to his boyish mind.

Jake thrust an arm about the narrow shoulders. "We've got to make a man of you somehow, my son," he said. "And Capper is very emphatic about keeping up the treatment for another six weeks."

"Yes, and after that I'm going to school," said Bunny, with the assurance of a man who holds the ruling of his own destiny. "There's Fairhaven College up on the hill, Jake. That'll do for me. And I'll be a weekly boarder, and you'll take me to races on Saturdays."

But Jake shook his head. "Not at your time of life, young feller. No, when you go to school you'll stay there. You've got to make up for lost time. P'raps in the holidays we'll see. But I make no rash promises. Now, Mrs. Bolton, what about tea?"

They went within to the meal prepared in the sunny parlour with its door thrown open to the garden.

They sat at the table, Bunny alert, excited, radiant; Jake cheery and indulgent, bestowing his exclusive attention upon him; Maud, very quiet and reserved but watching the boy with eyes of shining affection that scarcely left him for a moment.

He had so much to tell them of this treatment and of that, how at the beginning of things he had found it so hard to bear, and how the doctors had helped him through.

"They were so awfully decent," he said. "There was one of 'em--Dr. Wyndham, who was no end of a swell. He used to come twice a week and put me through the most ghastly drill that rolled me out quite flat. He made me think of you, Jake. He was such a chap for getting his own way. Somehow I never could get ratty with him, though I used to dread the sight of him for ever so long. He soon got to know it, and he'd sit down by my side, and talk in a reassuring sort of way till he'd worked me up to it. He seemed to have no end of time to waste, and yet he was always ready; used to come in with his hands in his pockets and a funny smile on his face, and send the nurse packing because he knew I hated anyone looking on. I got to like him no end. You'd have liked him too, Maud. He was just our sort." And there he stopped suddenly, for the first time gazing fully at her. "Great Scott!" he said. "How queer you look!"

"I?" said Maud, slightly startled.

Bunny was looking at her hard. He turned abruptly to Jake. "Why does she look like that? She hasn't been ill, has she?"

Jake's eyes went to his wife's face. He regarded her critically for a moment.

But before he could speak Maud hastily broke in. "Bunny! How absurd! Of course not! I am never ill. Jake, pass up his cup!"

He obeyed in silence, and she received it with a hand that trembled. Her face was burning.

"You look better now," said Bunny. "P'raps it's the heat. How do you amuse yourself nowadays? Is Saltash at the Castle?"

She shook her head. "No. He left on the same day that you did. I have scarcely seen him since."

"You have heard from him," said Jake, in the tone of one making a casual statement.

She was silent for a second or two while she poured out Bunny's tea; then, without lifting her eyes, "Yes," she said. "I have heard from him."

"Where is he?" asked Bunny. "Does he write often?"

"Not often," said Maud. She suddenly looked across at Jake with eyes that seemed to fling a challenge. "I expect you know where he is," she said.

"He is in town," said Jake.

He met her look with the utmost deliberation, and almost at once she looked away.

"I expect he'll be going to Scotland next month," said Bunny. "But I hope he'll come here first. I'd like to see him. Aren't there some big races at Graydown soon, Jake? Won't he come for them?"

"I can't say what he'll do," said Jake, pulling out his pipe. "The Burchester Cup will be run in a fortnight."

"Oh, Jake, old chap, do--do let me see that!" urged Bunny, with shining eyes. "Is the Mascot going to run again?"

"No, not the Mascot this time,--the Albatross. You remember him? Reckon he ought to carry it off if his jockey is good enough." Jake spoke with something of a frown.

Bunny was all eagerness. "The Albatross! Wasn't he the chap you were forcing into the water that day you first spoke to us? Yes, I remember him, of course--a beauty. Who's up, Jake? Isn't he any good?"

"I wanted Vickers to ride him," Jake said. "He's been training. But he has just broken his thumb, confound him. That leaves it to Dick Stevens, and I don't feel just sure of him. He may pull it off; but he's not like Sam Vickers. The animals haven't the same faith in him,--any more than I have."

He got up from the table as he spoke, and went to the mantelpiece for a match. Bunny gulped down his tea and sprang up also.

"Say, Jake, I'm coming round the Stables with you," he said. "I won't be in the way."

Jake, his clay pipe between his teeth, puffed forth a cloud of smoke, and turned. "Not to-night, my son. You've got another two hours' floor-drill before you. You go and do it!"

Bunny's face fell. "Oh, damn it, Jake! Not to-night!"

Jake's hand shot forth and grasped his shoulder. "Who taught you to say that?" he demanded.

Bunny stared. "I don't know. Lots of fellows say it. Charlie often does."

"I do myself," said Jake grimly. "But you're not to, savvy? I mean it. It ain't a mite clever, my son. It's beastly ugly. And you--you've got to be a gentleman if you do live under the roof of a bounder. Now you go and do as you're told, quick march! I shall know if you don't, and I shall know the reason why too. Take him upstairs, Maud; and if he don't behave himself, undress him and put him to bed!"

He would have gone with the words, but Bunny with a red face stayed him. "I'll do as you tell me, Jake," he said, "but I won't be managed by anyone else. And I'm not a bit afraid of you. See?"

Jake stopped, and the old kind smile that once had been so much more frequent lighted his face. "That's right, little pard; you've no call to be," he said. "But I won't have it said that you were brought up in a stable. And I won't have you hanging around with the boys in the yard either. Our language is not your language, and you're not to learn it. Now go and do your duty! I'll take you round the Stables to-morrow."

He bestowed a kindly pat upon Bunny's shoulder, and departed.

Bunny turned round to Maud. "What's the matter with him?" he said.

She sat with her face to the window, her eyes fixed unseeingly upon the sunlit garden. "Nothing that I know of," she said, without moving.

Bunny came to her side. "But, Maud, he isn't always like that, at least he used not to be."

"Like what?" she said.

Bunny was looking at her hard. "You used not to be like this either," he said. "What's happened to you both?"

She gave herself a sharp shake--it was almost like a shudder suppressed--and came out of her reverie. She met Bunny's questioning eyes with a smile.

"My dear boy, nothing has happened. Don't look so suspicious! There! Come and let me look at you! Do you know I hardly know you? You seem so young."

Bunny pushed an arm about her neck, and gave the kiss for which she yearned. "You look years older than you did," he said, with brotherly candour. "I thought you'd get on like a house on fire when you hadn't me to worry you, but you look more down in the mouth than ever."

"I shan't now I've got you," she whispered, clinging to him. "I've missed you--horribly, dear."

"I thought you would," said Bunny with complacency. "I missed you too at first. When they gave me that beastly massage, I used to howl for you."

"Was it so terribly bad?" she murmured, holding him faster.

"It was--unspeakable," said Bunny. "I shouldn't have stuck to it if you'd been there. As it was,--well, I couldn't help myself. But they were awfully kind too. No one ever pitched into me for behaving badly. They all seemed to take it for granted that I should. And when I began to get better, they were so jolly encouraging. But I'd rather be flogged every day for a year," ended Bunny, "than go through it all again."

"Dr. Capper didn't tell me it would be so bad," said Maud.

"No. Capper's a deep one. He didn't tell me either. He laughs about it now," said Bunny, "and says the end has fully justified the means. He's rather a card, but he's a fine chap. He is coming to see us before he leaves England. I made him promise. He'll be off before the end of August."

Bunny stretched himself luxuriously. "How's the mother getting on?" he enquired.

"I haven't seen her for quite a long time. I believe she is very busy," Maud said. "They have discharged some of the servants at 'The Anchor.' I don't believe it answers. She was looking rather worried the last time we met. But she didn't tell me anything, except that times were bad."

"They always are with some people," said Bunny. "I suppose Jake is quite prosperous, is he?"

"Oh, quite, I think," she said in surprise. "Of course he is Charlie's paid man. Why do you ask?"

"He looks a bit bothered," said Bunny. "P'raps it isn't that though. Come along! Let's go upstairs!"

He twined his arm in hers. They went up side by side.

A little later they separated, and Maud went to her own room. Down in the training-field below the orchard a solitary horseman was riding a young, untamed animal that fought savagely against his mastery, striving by every conceivable artifice to unseat him. She paused at the casement window and watched the struggle, marked the man's calm assurance, his inflexible strength of purpose, his ruthless self-assertion. And, as she watched, that evil thing that she nourished in her heart opened its first poisonous flowers and bloomed in rank profusion. She hoped with a sickening intensity that the animal would win the day, and that Jake Bolton would be killed.

CHAPTER III CONFIDENCES

Three days after Bunny's return, Maud drove him down in the dog-cart one afternoon to see their mother. She herself would not go into the Anchor Hotel. She had never entered it since that bitter day in the winter when she had thrown herself upon Jake's protection, nor had she exchanged a single word with her step-father since her wedding-day.

Her mother seemed to have grown completely away from them, and would seldom be persuaded to visit her daughter even though Jake himself offered to fetch her. She had become fretful and irritable, and was in a certain measure vexed with Maud who had not apparently made the most of her opportunities. There was no denying the fact that they were drifting further and further apart, and to neither of them did the other's presence afford the smallest pleasure. Now that Lord Saltash had quitted the scene, Mrs. Sheppard took no further interest in her daughter's doings. She strongly suspected that it was in response to Maud's insistence that he had gone, and she was inclined to regard his absence as a personal grievance against her in consequence. Emphatically, Mrs. Sheppard was not improved by adversity. Her looks were fading, and her placid temperament had vanished. Giles was such a trial, life was so difficult. She had always acted for the best, but she never reaped any benefit therefrom. In fact, Fate had never been kind to her, and she was beginning to cherish a grudge in consequence.

Bunny was by no means anxious to pay her a visit; it was only by Jake's commands that he went. Maud was a little surprised to find that he was developing a scrupulous regard for Jake's wishes. She drove the dog-cart into the stable-yard of "The Anchor" and left it there with a promise to return for him in an hour. Then she herself wandered down to the shore to pass the time.

The day was sultry with a brooding heat. The sea lay wrapped in mist like a steaming sheet of molten lead. There was no sound of waves; only now and then the wailing cry of a sea-gull floated across the water, and sometimes there throbbed upon the heavy air the paddle of an unseen steamer beating through that silent waste of greyness.

She had no sunshade, and the glare was intense, albeit the sun was veiled. Half-mechanically she turned her steps towards the shelter in which--how long ago!--Jake had made his astounding proposal of marriage. She felt miserable, depressed, sick at heart. The close weather did not agree with her. She was limp and listless, and she could neither eat nor sleep.

She dropped wearily down upon the seat and leaned back with her eyes half-closed. Her head was aching dully, as if a heavy weight pressed upon it.

There was no one in sight. That end of the parade was little frequented. The gay crowd preferred the vicinity of the bathing-machines where a little troupe of Pierrots were making merry. Now and then the raucous voice of the funny man of the party reached her, but it was too far away to disturb her. She was thankful for the attraction that kept the people away.

Chops lay at her feet, snapping at the flies, grave, sympathetic, watchful. He was feeling the heat too, but he took it philosophically, with the wisdom of experience. He knew better than to chafe at the inevitable.

Half-an-hour crawled away thus in dumb oppression while the atmosphere grew imperceptibly thicker, gradually extinguishing the sun-rays, darkening the world. At length a long ridge rose with ghostly suddenness on that flat desert of waters and swept shorewards, bursting upon the beach with a startling roar.

Maud started and opened her eyes. In a moment she was on her feet, dismayed, irresolute. One glance at the ominous sky and sullen, glassy water told her that a storm was imminent. She could not stay in that exposed place. She would not contemplate taking refuge at "The Anchor." Whither could she go?

She began to walk swiftly along the parade, Chops pacing sedately behind. The Pierrots were gone, the crowd scattered. She was sure that in a few moments there would be a terrific downpour.

Another long swell showed like the back of a swift-moving monster on the face of the waters. It travelled landwards with incredible rapidity; it burst in thunder just below her. A great swirl of surf rushed up to the wall and receded to rejoin the inky water. And suddenly the blast of the storm caught her.

Almost before she realized it, she was fleeing before it down the deserted road. Eddies of dust rose up under her feet, and sand whipped up from the beach stung her face. She raced the tempest, making for the nearest side-road to escape the unbroken fury with which it raged along the shore.

As she tore across to the sheltering houses there came a blinding flash of lightning, and instantly overhead a splitting explosion that seemed to shatter the whole world. For a second or two she was checked in her wild career. She felt stunned. Then in a sweeping torrent the rain was upon her, and she stumbled towards the nearest doorway.

Before she reached it, however, a voice called to her, a stout figure came running forth with amazing lightness, and two plump hands seized one of hers.

"Come in, my dear, come in!" panted a wheezy voice. "Why, whatever brought you out in such a storm? You look scared to death. Come and sit down in my back parlour behind the shop! It's all right, dearie, all right. Don't be upset!"

Gasping and unnerved, Maud tottered into the little shop, groping, clinging to her guide. The gloom without made almost impenetrable darkness within. She had not the faintest idea as to whither she was being led. But there was no hesitation about her companion. She pressed her forward till a glimmer of light revealed a window in a dingy little room beyond the shop, and here she deposited her with friendly firmness upon a horse-hair sofa, making her lean against a cushion sewn with beads while she recovered her breath.

"Don't you be frightened any more, my dear!" she admonished her. "You're quite safe. Trust the dear Lord for that! The wind and storm are only fulfilling His Will. Poor child, you're all of a tremble! There, let's take your hat off! And I'll get you a cup of tea, dear. You'll be better then."

Tenderly she removed the hat while Maud, panting and spent, lay limply against the cushion. Chops sat pressed against her, his silken head on her knee.

"Why, look at him! It's just as if he's trying to tell you not to take on," said her rescuer. "There's a deal of soul in a dog, I always say. Now you know who I am, Mrs. Bolton, my dear, don't you? You don't feel as if you're taking shelter with a stranger?"

"You are--Mrs. Wright," Maud said, speaking with an effort.

"That's right, my dear. I felt sure you'd remember me. Now will you be quite comfortable if I run into the kitchen and make the tea? Or will you come along with me? I often think company is a good thing in a storm."

Maud was recovering herself. She sat up with something of her usual quiet demeanour, though her heart was still beating unpleasantly fast. "Please don't trouble to get any tea for me!" she said. "If I may stay till the worst is over, I shall be very grateful. But I must go directly it gets better. My brother is waiting for me at 'The Anchor.'"

Another terrible flash pierced the gloom, and she shrank involuntarily, one hand covering her face while the thunder crashed above them with a force that shook the house.

As the dreadful echoes died away, she awoke to the fact that Mrs. Wright was kneeling stoutly beside her, one kindly arm pressing her close.

"It's all right, darling. Don't shiver so!" she murmured maternally. "We're quite safe in the Lord's good keeping. He won't let us be harmed if we trust in Him."

Maud made a slight gesture as though she would withdraw herself, and then the comfort of that motherly arm overcame her shyness. Very suddenly she let herself go into the old woman's embrace. She hid her face on the ample shoulder.

"I'm not really frightened," she whispered piteously. "But oh, I'm so tired--I'm so tired!"

"Poor lamb!" said Mrs. Wright compassionately.'

She gathered her to her bosom rocking her softly in her arms as one who soothes a hurt child, and whispering endearing words from time to time, while Maud, spent and weary, wept silently there till with the shedding of tears some measure of relief came to her aching soul.

She forgot the storm that raged around them; she forgot that Mrs. Wright was a comparative stranger to her; she forgot the passage of time and all besides in the blessed consciousness of another woman's sympathy compassing her round, sustaining, comprehending, lifting her up from the depths of despair into which she had lately sunk so low.

"There then! There! You're better now," murmured Mrs. Wright at last. "Would you like to talk a bit, darling? Or shall we just pretend as there's nothing to talk about?"

h But Maud was clinging to her, as a drowning person clings to a spar. "You're very good to me," she whispered tremulously.

It was enough for Mrs. Wright. She proceeded with boldness. "It didn't become me to take the first step, dearie, you being a lady like you are, and me only a clumsy old woman. But I've had troubles myself, and I'm not blind. You aren't well, dear; you aren't happy. I was afraid that day in the winter, and I've been much more afraid since. I was wanting to step up and see you again; but then I wasn't sure as you 'd want me. But I've thought of you often and often, and poor Jake too."

Maud shivered. "Life is horrible--horrible!" she said, and there was a quiver of passion in the words.

"Ah, dear!" Mrs. Wright held her closer. "Maybe that's because you're not taking things just as you should. No, I don't suppose as it's your fault. I wouldn't presume. But there's ways and ways of looking at things. And sometimes, when a girl is hurried into marrying, like you were, she's likely to be a bit taken aback when she comes to realize what it means. And it is then maybe that she gets a wrong impression of men and their ways which is like to interfere with all happiness. But, you know, dearie, men are only a pack of children. Any woman can manage a man if she puts her mind to it, and he'll like her the better for it too. But if once a man gets the whip-hand, and knows it, that's fatal. A spoilt child soon becomes a tyrant."

"Jake is no child!" Low and bitter the words came; Maud's face was buried deep in her new friend's shoulder. "He is nothing but--a brute!"

"Lord love me!" ejaculated Mrs. Wright. And then very tenderly her hand began to smooth the girl's tumbled hair. "Has he been--that--to you?" she said. "Ah, dear, dear, dear! And what's going to happen, I wonder, when he knows what you're going to give him? No, don't shrink, darling! There's nothing to be ashamed of. Would you be ashamed if God sent an angel to lay a baby in your arms? For it's just that, darling. It is His gift. Aren't you going to thank Him for it? The first is so much the most wonderful. Think, dear, think of the little wee thing that will cling to you, cry to you, depend on only you!"

Maud was shivering violently. She did not lift her head or speak.

Mrs. Wright's hand did not cease to caress and soothe. "I am right, dear, am I?" she asked softly.

And Maud's silence answered her.

Thereafter there came an interval during which the loud patter of the rain was the only sound. Maud's tears had ceased. She sat bowed upon the old woman's breast as though she lacked the strength to lift herself.

But presently, without moving, she spoke. "I suppose I am very wicked; but I don't feel like--that about it. I can't. I don't want it. You'll be dreadfully shocked, I'm afraid. I've never spoken my mind to anyone before. But--the fact is--I've never felt really married to Jake. I don't in my heart belong to him. And that makes everything wrong."

"My dear! My dear!" said Mrs. Wright. "But he is your husband all the same. And you--you are the one woman in the world to him. He loves you as his own soul."

Maud shook her head hopelessly. "Oh no, indeed he doesn't! He doesn't know the meaning of the word. If he did--things would be very different."

"Dear heart, that's just where you go wrong--the beginning and end of the whole trouble," declared Mrs. Wright. "I knew he loved you that night last year at your mother's wedding-party. Why, it was shining in his eyes for all to see. Was he such a dunderhead then that he never told

you so?"

But at that Maud raised herself. She met the old woman's eyes in the gloom, her own heavy with bitterness.

"Mrs. Wright, that was not love," she said, "or anything approaching to love." She paused a moment, as though the tragic words had cost her all her strength; then piteously she ended, "He told me he had a fancy for me; that was all. So for Bunny's sake--and partly for my own--I married him. And now I am the slave of that fancy."

"Oh dear, dear, dear!" Mrs. Wright said again. "And has he never made love to you at all? What a silly fellow, to be sure! Men don't know anything; upon my word, they don't!"

"I didn't like his methods of making love." Maud spoke with growing bitterness. "And I never suffered them. Oh yes, I have to endure them now. He takes whatever he wants. But every spark of affection or respect that I ever had for him went out one night in the winter when he came home the worse for drink."

"Sakes alive!" exclaimed Mrs. Wright. "Not Jake!"

"Yes, Jake." Maud spoke with tragic vehemence. "I saw him, and so did Charlie. We both knew it."

"Who is Charlie?" questioned Mrs. Wright.

A faint tinge of colour rose in the girl's pale face. "Lord Saltash. He is an old family friend of ours. He was always Charlie Burchester to us in the old days."

"And he told you Jake was drunk?" demanded Mrs. Wright, with round, indignant eyes.

Maud made a gesture of weary indifference. "He didn't actually tell me so. I think he didn't want me to know. But he couldn't deny it when I put it to him."

"Then, my dear, he was very grievously mistaken," declared Mrs. Wright, with stout emphasis. "Jake was not drunk. He never drinks. Why, look at the man! His eyes are as clear as the day. Oh, believe me, dear, you've wronged him. You've wronged him cruelly. And that's maybe what's brought about all your trouble. For men can't put up with injustice. It's the one thing they can't abide, and I don't blame 'em."

She paused. Maud was listening, but not as one convinced, or even greatly interested.

"It doesn't really alter anything, whether it's true or not," she said. "I had begun even before that to know what sort of a man he was. I heard him using the most appalling language one day. That opened my eyes."

"Not to you, dear, surely?" urged Mrs. Wright, looking momentarily shocked.

"Oh no, not to me. I overheard it accidentally. But," Maud shivered again, "I've never forgotten it. Sometimes the memory of it turns me nearly sick!"

"Oh, dearie me! What a pity! What a pity! And he loving you so!" Mrs. Wright put up a very tender hand, and stroked her cheek. "Poor little hurt princess!" she said. "If I could but open your eyes and show you how much true love there is behind his roughness! You'll see it some day. I'm sure of that. Please God some day quite soon! You're tired and heart-sick now, dear. But that'll get better as time goes on. And if you'll take an old woman's advice, you'll tell him soon of the little one that's coming. It'll maybe make all the difference to you both."

But Maud drew back sharply at the bare suggestion. "I couldn't possibly tell him yet. I-I couldn't tell anyone."

Mrs. Wright looked at her with eyes of motherly wisdom. "You'll feel different--presently," she said. "I know, dear, I know."

"You don't know! You can't know!" Maud's voice was strangled. She seemed to be striving for self-control.

"I do know." Very firmly Mrs. Wright made the assertion. "Just you listen a minute, dearie, and I'll tell you something that I've never told to mortal being before. I'm only just an ordinary old woman; but I am a woman, and I know what it means to--love the wrong man." She spoke impressively, but she did not seem to notice Maud's quick start. "When I was a girl, I was something of a belle. It seems funny now, don't it? But I attracted the attention of a good many young men, and I got a bit uppish in consequence. My poor Tom was the best of the bunch, and I always knew it, though I led him a fine dance before we came to walking out together. And then a young doctor's assistant came to the place, and--well, I'll not deny it now--we was both young and a bit flighty. We got larking together on them roundabouts one night at a fair, and after that we took to meeting one another on the sly, till, to cut it short, I fell in love with him--very badly in love. I ought to have known better, of course, for gentlemen like him don't marry little farmers' daughters like me. But I was young and inexperienced, and I thought his intentions were honest, till one night I found as they weren't. I've never ceased to thank the Almighty that I had the

strength to send him about his business then and there. And I got engaged to Tom the following Sunday, and tried to forget it all. I wasn't in love with him, but I knew he was a good sort; and the match pleased my people who weren't too well-to-do. Well, I thought I was going to be happy in a home of my own, and I let everything be arranged, and I deceived myself into thinking that it was going to be all right. And then--when the wedding was over--I felt, quite sudden-like, sick, just sick, to think what I'd done. I didn't let on to Tom. He was such a good, solid man. I'd have died of shame if I had. I didn't let on to anybody. But I was that miserable. There were times, on and off, when I almost hated him. And then--well, then--I began to have hopes. It didn't help me a bit at first, but gradually, very gradually, the thought of poor Tom's baby purified me. And when I'd come through my trouble and little Tom was born, I felt as if I had been born again too, and all my regrets were gone. I never had 'em any more, dear, after that. And I got that fond of poor Tom, he never guessed. I thank the Almighty he didn't, for the morning as he died he told me so simple-like that I'd been the sunshine of his life from the very first day he ever met me." Mrs. Wright paused to wipe her eyes. "Poor Tom! I was never good enough for him," she said. "He was such a good, kind soul, and--luckily for me--he never saw an inch beyond his nose."

She got up with the words, dismissing the subject with practical common sense.

"Now I'm going to get you some tea, dear, and by that time it'll have left off raining. See! It's getting lighter already. I'm so glad you came this way. Maybe, you'll come again now, and if there's ever anything I can do, why, you've only to let me know, and it's as good as done."

She bent, in response to Maud's silent gesture, and kissed her tenderly. "Try not to fret any more, darling! Everything will come right. I'm sure of it. I know Jake so well. You only know the rough side of him at present. There's a whole lot of reserve in Jake. He won't show you his heart so long as he thinks you've no use for it. Maybe, he's shy too. I've sometimes thought so."

Maud turned from the subject with a sigh. In some subtle fashion old Mrs. Wright's confidences had helped her, but she felt as if the matter would not bear further discussion. "I shall never forget your kindness," she said rather wistfully. "I wish I had come to see you long ago. I did mean to. And then there came Bunny's operation; and after that--after that--I felt too miserable."

Mrs. Wright shook her head in gentle chiding. "Don't ever again stay away on that account, dear!" she said. "And do you know I've got a feeling that maybe he is miserable too? Why don't you try a little kindness, my dear? Do now! It's wonderful what a difference to sore hearts a little kindness makes."

She bustled away with the words. She also knew that for the moment there was no more to be said. Yet there was a smile on her face as she closed the door--a wise, mother-smile that turned its plainness into beauty.

"Poor children!" she murmured to herself. "They'll find each other some day. And then--dear Lord--how happy they'll be!"

She permitted herself a little chuckle as she set the kettle to boil. Things always came right in the end.

CHAPTER IV THE LETTER

Maud drove home with Bunny after the storm through an atmosphere washed clean of cloud and golden with evening sunshine. She found him very silent, and concluded that he had not greatly enjoyed himself.

She asked few questions about his visit, and Bunny did not seem inclined to volunteer anything, till as they reined in to a walk at the steep hill by the church, he turned abruptly towards her and spoke.

"I told the mother you were corresponding with Saltash."

Maud started a little. "Really, Bunny!" she said, in a tone of protest.

Bunny's face was red. He looked at her with a species of dogged defiance. "I didn't mean to tell her. It just came out. I don't see why she shouldn't know anyway. Jake knows."

"There is not the faintest reason." Maud's tone was cold. She stared straight between the horse's ears with eyes that were fixed and hard. "I don't see why it should interest her, that's all. Charlie is such an old friend that surely there is nothing very surprising about it."

"Or anything to get ratty about," said Bunny, with a touch of warmth. "That wasn't what I set

out to tell you; but you do jump down a fellow's throat so. Of course the mother didn't see anything in it. Why should she?"

"What were you going to tell me?" Maud's voice still sounded cold but she forced herself to smile. She had no desire to give offence to Bunny who was not always easy to conciliate.

Bunny considered a moment. "Well, it has to do with Charlie. You know, he owns 'The Anchor.'"

Maud's attitude relaxed. She turned towards him. "Yes, I know he does. He holds the mortgage, at least."

"Yes, that's it; the mortgage." Bunny's face wore a troubled frown. "Well, it seems that the place isn't answering and they can't go on paying interest. In fact, they are badly in arrears already, and he--or his agent--is tightening the reins and threatening to sell them up. The mother is pretty desperate about it, but she was very particular that I wasn't to tell anybody but you. She says it means ruin, and no one can prevent it but Charlie--unless someone came along with a little money, which is the last thing likely to happen. She wants you to get hold of Charlie; says he will do anything for you, though I don't know how she knows that. In fact, she went on as if it was a matter of life and death. Say, Maud, do you really think they are going to be ruined? What would happen if they were?"

Bunny looked at her with worried eyes. Evidently Mrs. Sheppard had succeeded in impressing him with the urgency of the situation.

Maud shook her head. She had not the least idea. "How much money do they want to tide them over?" she asked.

"Rather a lot," said Bunny uneasily. "Four hundred pounds at least, she said. I suppose it would be no good to write to Uncle Edward? He wouldn't do it for the mother, I know, but he might for you."

"I couldn't ask him," Maud said. "I might if it were for you or myself. But not for Mother. I am sure he wouldn't do it."

"It's a beastly mess," said Bunny gloomily. "You'll have to get round Charlie, there's no other way."

"I must think," Maud said.

They reached the top of the hill, and she shook the reins. In sober silence they trotted home.

Jake was in the yard when they turned in. He came to meet them.

"I've had a fine scare about you," he said, as he helped Bunny to descend. "Were you caught in the storm?"

Sam Vickers came to the horse's head, and Maud followed her brother down. Jake did not offer to assist her. He was wearing neither coat nor waistcoat, only a white canvas shirt with rolled up sleeves, unbuttoned at the neck and displaying a good deal of brawny chest. His clay pipe was between his teeth, and the pungent scent of his tobacco seemed even more nauseating than usual.

"No, we weren't caught," Bunny made answer. "I was at 'The Anchor,' and Maud took refuge with that old Wright woman who came here in the winter."

"What? Old Mother Wright?" Jake turned to his wife with a smile of approval. "Been having tea with her, have you? I'm real pleased to hear it. You couldn't be in better company."

Maud stiffened a little. Somehow his approval nettled her. "I took the first shelter within reach," she said coldly.

Bunny stared at her as though astonished at something in her tone. Sharply Jake turned on him.

"You trot in, my son, and do your floor-drill!" he said. "You've got just two hours before supper."

Bunny coloured and flung away. "Oh, damn!" he said.

He was on the step with Maud immediately behind him when Jake's voice arrested him. "Bunny!"

It was a perfectly quiet voice, but it was the voice of authority. Bunny stopped short. "Well?"

"You will do an extra half-hour for that after supper," Jake said.

Bunny faced round, his face crimson. "Oh, I say, Jake! That's too bad. I didn't mean to say it, and anyway I can't do any extra time. It's beastly enough as it is."

"I have said it," remarked Jake.

Bunny clenched his hands. "Dash it all, you can't make me!" he said, his voice low and defiant.

"No, no, you can't." Impulsively Maud broke in, her hand through Bunny's arm. "It's

ridiculous and tyrannical. I won't have him bullied, Jake. You are to leave him alone."

She spoke with vehemence, carried away by a gust of indignation. But the moment she had spoken, she realized that she had made a mistake.

Jake said nothing whatever. He did not so much as look at her. But he did look at Bunny hard and straight, and in a moment the boy's attitude changed.

He unclenched his hands with a gesture half-shamed, half-deprecatory. "All right, Jake," he said, in a tone of sullen submission; and to his sister curtly, "Shut up, Maud! You always make a mess of things."

With the words he pulled himself from her hold and went within.

She turned to follow him upstairs, but was checked by the knowledge that Jake was entering the house behind her.

He did not speak, but it was certainly not of her own free will that she passed on to the parlour instead. Angry as she was, she yet would have avoided the encounter had it been possible.

It was not possible. Jake followed her, grim as Fate, and in desperation she turned and faced him the moment she was in the room.

"Jake," she said, in a voice that quivered in spite of her, "I can't have you interfering with Bunny--punishing him--like this. It's too much."

Jake closed the door and stood against it. The sheer brute strength of the man had never been more forcibly apparent to her than at that moment; the thick, powerful neck and broad chest, the red-brown, lynx-like eyes, the merciless mouth, all seemed to mock her openly, exulting over her, dominating her.

Like Bunny she clenched her hands, meeting the straight gaze of those glittering eyes with the defiance born of conscious impotence. "And another thing!" she said. "I wish you wouldn't come into the house in that horrible wild West attire. You look worse than any stable-hand. I don't know how you can expect Bunny to be civilized with such an example before him."

She paused a moment, but, as he said nothing, rushed blindly on, finding silence intolerable.

"You come in at all hours in the day with your horrible clay pipe and vile tobacco. You behave like a farm labourer; you use hateful language to the men; and still you take it upon you to mete out punishment to Bunny, because he has picked up, doubtless from you, an expression that is a household word in your daily life!"

She stopped, for Jake had made an abrupt movement as if her fierce words had somehow pierced a joint in his armour.

He came squarely forward, took his pipe from his mouth and knocked out the half-burned contents into the grate. She turned to watch him, feeling her heart racing like a runaway engine. And, so turning, her eyes fell upon a letter that lay upon the table. She could not read the address, but in a flash she recognized the handwriting, and suddenly the mad racing of her heart died down, so that it did not seem to be beating at all.

Swiftly, while Jake was still intent upon his pipe, she reached across the table and picked up the letter. Her fingers felt the crest on the back of the envelope as she slipped it into her dress. She had fallen into the habit of walking to meet the postman of late, but to-day the storm had made her miss him. She hoped--earnestly she hoped--that Jake had not chanced to see the letter. She was sure his eyes had not rested upon the table.

Her heart began to beat again with great leaps as Jake turned from the fireplace. She felt as if she had over-taxed her strength in opposing him, and yet now that she had begun she must go on,--she must!

But still he did not speak, and, fascinated, she stood and watched him, saw him thrust the offending pipe deep into his breeches pocket, unroll the sleeves of his shirt, and button it at the neck.

Then at last he came and stood before her and spoke. "I'm sorry I've offended you," he said.

The words were so utterly unexpected that Maud literally gasped. She drew back before him as if he had threatened her. There was something about him at that moment that made her feel infinitesimally small and mean. She stood silent, dismayed, ashamed.

Jake was looking straight at her with a steady intentness that seemed to search and search her soul. There was no anger in his face. She almost wished there had been.

He waited for her to speak, but as she did not, broke the silence again himself. "I know my ways are not exactly polished. I'll try and mend 'em. As for my language, I didn't know you had ever heard me in full swing. You were never meant to, anyway. As for Bunny, I guess he's your brother, and you've a right to stick up for him if you think he needs it. But I give you my word of

honour--my oath if you like--that he'll never be one cent the worse for anything I may do to him. You can tell him from me that if he don't do that extra half-hour, I shan't say a word."

Maud's lips quivered. She strove for dignity in the face of overwhelming defeat. He had beaten her as it were with his hands behind him. "He won't take it from me," she said. "You know that quite well."

"That so?" said Jake. "Well, I reckon he'd better go through with it then. It won't hurt him. It'll do him good." He paused a moment, then, "Are you still feeling mad with me?" he asked.

Her eyes fell before his. She did not understand his tone. It held a note of gentleness which she had not heard since the day of Bunny's operation. It was almost as if he were pleading with her, striving to pierce through her resentment. She found it very difficult to reply.

"I--don't want to quarrel with you, Jake," she said at last, with an effort.

Jake's intent look deepened, became for a moment almost intolerable. Then it passed. He even faintly smiled, albeit his smile had a touch of irony. "All right, my girl," he said. "Don't you worry any about that! I like you for being open with me. It's an almighty mistake to keep things back."

He moved to the window with the words, stood a moment or two as if to give her an opportunity to call him back, then, as she remained silent, went down the steps into the garden and passed out of sight round the house.

Maud was left with a stinging sensation of discomfiture that was compounded of doubt, indignation, and shame.

She was relieved to think he had not seen the letter, but she hated the impulse that had moved her to conceal it.

CHAPTER V REBELLION

That letter from Saltash, written in French, contained the announcement of his approaching return. It was at her urgent written request that he had gone three months before. Somehow the very thought of him at the Castle had been intolerable after what had passed between them on the day of her return to her husband. But they had corresponded ever since. She could not refuse to receive and answer his letters. Her intimacy with Charlie was like a gem with many facets. He had an adroit fashion of flashing it before her hither and thither till, dazzled, she wondered if she had ever truly grasped its full value. Sometimes it seemed to her that it had been cut from the very bedrock of friendship, and at such times the realization of the sympathy that ever pulsed between them was a pure joy to her. At other times, remembering the strange impulses of the man, his sudden gusts of passion, swift misgiving would assail her and she would tell herself that she was making a terrible mistake. And then again she would catch a glimpse of his careless, butterfly temperament, and her doubts would vanish almost in spite of her. How could she take him seriously? His gay inconsequence made the hare notion seem ridiculous. They were pals, no more. True, he had offered to help her; but, knowing him through and through as she did, he was the last man in the world to whom she would really turn for help. And since she was so sure of herself, what had she to fear? Charlie was before all things a gentleman. There was nothing coarse or brutal about him. In his own words, where women were concerned, he did not take; he offered. For that very reason he was the harder to resist.

But she knew him to be safe. That was the foundation of her confidence. She had no fear of him; he had always set her at her ease. Without virtue he might be, yet was he not without a certain code of honour. He tempted; therein lay the subtle attraction of the man; but he never compelled. He was selfish; oh yes, he was selfish, but he was also strangely, whimsically kind at heart. In all her experience of him, she had never found him merciless.

And so she did not see why she should wholly deny herself the friendship which seemed to her to be the only good thing left in her life now. She had not wanted to see him, but now that he wrote to announce his return she found that she was glad. The first meeting with him might be a little difficult, but Charlie always knew how to deal with difficulties. He understood her; it would not be really hard. They would be friends again--just friends.

She slipped the letter away with a smile. He always allowed himself a little more latitude when he wrote in French. It was but natural. It meant nothing, she knew. How could anyone take him really seriously? His soul was as elusive as thistle-down. It was only in the realms of music

that she ever really saw his soul.

He did not say on what day he would return. She wondered if Jake knew, wondered if she could induce Bunny to ask him without betraying any interest in the subject herself. She was a little afraid of Bunny. His shrewdness embarrassed her. It was like a microscope, discovering things that otherwise would have escaped notice. She did not want to come under that microscope very often. There were some parts of her existence that would not bear it. She suspected that Bunny was already beginning to find out. She was sure that he was aware of a lack of sympathy between herself and Jake, and she wished she could have kept it from him.

With regard to her mother's affairs also, she would have been glad if the boy had not been drawn into the discussion. It was characteristic of Mrs. Sheppard to fling her burden upon the first shoulder that offered, but Maud was fashioned otherwise, and she wanted Bunny to throw off his precocities and become like other boys. The thought of his education was beginning to weigh upon her. She wanted to talk about it to Jake, but somehow she did not know how to broach the subject. She wondered if she should write to Uncle Edward, but hesitated to do so. Letters were never satisfactory.

She was pondering this matter as she undressed that night when a sudden thought struck her--a thought that darted through her like a flash, leaving a shining trail of possibilities behind. Why should they not accept the old man's invitation and go to him for a little while? He would be glad to see them, she was sure; and she would be glad--oh, unspeakably glad--to get away for a time. Face to face with him, she might even plead for her mother. She would infinitely rather be under an obligation to him than to Charlie.

The idea drew her more and more. She wondered it had not occurred to her before. In the end, finding it still early, she sat down at the table and began to scribble a hasty note. She determined that she would not tell Jake until Uncle Edward's reply reached her. She felt convinced that it would contain the invitation she was soliciting.

Feverishly she penned her appeal. Would he invite them to spend a few days? Bunny was well, or nearly so; she herself was feeling the heat, and would like a change. Jake--no, she found she could not mention Jake. With trembling fingers she brought the note to an end.

She had scarcely finished addressing the envelope when she heard Jake's step on the stairs. Startled, she caught up letter and writing-case, and pushed them into a drawer. He seldom retired late, but she had not expected him so early as this. Swiftly she turned, shut the door that led into his room, blew out her lamp and slipped into bed.

But he did not pass on to his own room. He stopped at the door of hers, paused a second, then quietly opened it. She heard the creak of his gaiters as he entered. He had a candle in one hand; he put up the other to shield it from the draught, and the door blew gently to behind him.

Maud leaned against her pillow and watched him. Her heart was beating very fast. She wondered if he had heard her hasty movements of the past few moments.

He came to her side and set down his candle. "Say, Maud," he said, "I saw your light go out, so I guessed you weren't asleep."

Maud's eyes, blue-black and sombre, looked up to his. "What do you want?" she asked him coldly.

He stood squarely beside her. "I wanted just to speak to you," he said, "and I thought if I waited to undress, maybe you'd be asleep."

With the words he sat down rather heavily in the chair by her side, and there fell a silence, a dragging, difficult silence. Maud's heart was beating very fast. Had he come to talk about that letter from Saltash? Was he about to make a scene?

His stillness began to act upon her nerves. She turned towards him restlessly. "Oh, what is it?" she said, veiling her doubt with a show of impatience.

He stretched out a strong hand and took one of hers. "It's you, my girl," he said, and in his voice was a note of anxiety that partly reassured her. "You've not been yourself lately. Guess there's something the matter."

"There is nothing the matter," she said hastily.

He held her hand closely. "You've no call to be afraid of me," he said gently. "Maybe, I've been rough and rude at times. I've never meant it, my princess. I can't live up to you always; but I try.--God knows I try!"

A sudden tremor sounded in his voice; he became abruptly silent.

Maud's hand was hard clenched in his. She did not look at him; but the beating of her heart rose up between them--a hard, insistent drumming that she was powerless to control.

After a brief space he spoke again, his voice quite steady and controlled. "Reckon you're not

happy. Reckon you're not well either. I've been thinking maybe you'd like to go away for a spell--you and the boy. If so, I'm willing to manage it. It'll be a bit of a rest for you."

He paused. The clenched hand he held had made a sharp, convulsive movement as if at a sudden twinge of pain. Maud lay breathing rapidly, her eyes fixed upon the flame of the candle.

He waited a few moments; then, "What do you think of the proposition, my girl?" he asked.

She turned her head slowly towards him. "Bunny and I alone?" she said.

"That's the idea," said Jake.

Her eyes met his resolutely, with a certain challenging directness. "As a matter of fact, I had thought myself that we might go to Uncle Edward for a little," she said.

He showed no surprise. "You would like that?" he asked.

"Yes." She spoke with instant decision.

"Then go!" said Jake. He set her hand free with the words, but he remained seated as if he had something further on his mind. "By the way," he said, after a moment, "I had a letter this evening."

She started. "A letter?"

"Yes." Very deliberately he answered her. "I met the postman and took it from him at the door."

"Ah!" It was scarcely more than a whisper. She shrank against her pillow with a gesture wholly involuntary.

Jake's eyes were upon her, alert, unswerving, dominating. "My letter came from Capper," he said quietly. "He is coming to us in a few days; he wants to see Bunny again before he leaves England."

"Oh, surely we needn't wait for him!" With a sudden rush the words came; she spoke with feverish vehemence. "If we really are going away, let us go soon!" she urged. "Why should we wait?"

"I thought maybe you'd like to say 'Thank you' to Capper before he goes," said Jake.

"But I needn't see him for that," she said, in growing agitation. "I'll write."

Jake was silent.

"He will very likely sail from Liverpool," she went on. "Be could come and see Bunny there."

Jake bent towards her. "Say, Maud," he said in his soft slow way, "don't be upset any. If you're not wanting to meet Capper, it's all one to me. But, my girl, there ain't anything he could tell me about you that I don't know already."

Her face flamed scarlet. For the moment she was furious with an indignation that burned intolerably. Her very soul felt on fire. It was more than she could bear.

"Oh, go away!" she cried out fiercely. "Go, I say! Go! You make me hate you more and more every day--every night!" He rose on the instant. For a few quivering moments she thought she had roused him to anger, for his eyes glowed in the dimness like a slow-burning fire. And then in utter silence he turned away. He went into his own room, and softly closed the door.

CHAPTER VI THE PROBLEM

"He's going to be a winner, is he?" asked Saltash, flicking the ash from his cigarette as he stood in the training-field with Jake.

"That depends how he's ridden, my lord," said Jake dryly. "He is a hot favourite."

"Pity you can't ride him yourself," observed Saltash, watching the Albatross with a critical eye as he cantered down the field. "Who is in the saddle? Not Vickers?"

"No. Vickers is incapacitated. I have put Stevens up. He seems keen for the chance, though I'm not so keen to give it him," Jake spoke with grimness.

"He ought to pull it off," said Saltash.

"He ought, my lord." Jake's tone lacked conviction notwithstanding.

Saltash turned. "What's the matter with the lad? You don't seem over enthusiastic about him."

Jake flicked at a clump of nettles with his riding-whip. "I've done my best to shape him, but he's a bit of a cur. The animals don't trust him."

Saltash uttered a careless laugh. "Oh, you always were an adept at reading the equine mind. Come along and show me the latest offspring! What was it you called him? The Hundredth

Chance? A curious name to choose!"

Jake's grim face relaxed to a smile. "Oh, he's in the paddock along with his mother. He promises to be the most valuable animal in the Stables. He'll carry everything before him when the time comes."

"Is that why you've given him such a hopeful name?" asked Saltash.

Jake uttered a brief laugh. "Even so, my lord. He carries my luck with him wherever he goes."

"You're a queer fish, Bolton," observed Saltash, turning to leave the field.

The paddock lay on the further side of the orchard, and here they found the pride of Jake's heart, a frisky black foal who kicked up his heels and scampered at the sight of him.

"He'll take some taming presently," commented Saltash.

"And he'll knock spots off any animal I have ever had to tame," said Jake.

Saltash laughed again with nonchalant interest. "If ever there were the right man in the right place, it is you," he said. "Can we go back through the garden? I believe that's the shortest way." He spoke with a wary glance in the direction whither he wished to go. A white figure was visible on the steps that led into the parlour. "I hear Mrs. Bolton is away," he added, immediately averting his eyes.

Jake turned in his sturdy fashion, and began to walk towards the house. "No, she is at home for the present," he said. "We are expecting Capper. In fact the lad has gone to the station to meet him."

"What! Bunny? Is he really all right? Capper must be a magician!" ejaculated Saltash.

"He is the biggest man I know," said Jake simply.

They approached the house. The white figure had disappeared.

Saltash chatted inconsequently, strolling along with a cigarette between his lips, and a confident smile on his dark face. He had come down as usual unexpectedly, but she was probably aware of his advent. His car was awaiting him in the stable-yard. He did not think she would suffer him to pass the window unnoticed.

Yet as he drew near she made no sign. Chops came smiling down the steps to greet him, and he paused at once to fondle the dog.

Jake paused also, but he did not invite him to enter. He stood pulling at the lash of his riding-whip, stolidly patient, awaiting his patron's pleasure.

Suddenly Saltash looked up. "I believe your guest has arrived, Bolton. You'd better go. Never mind me!"

There came undoubtedly the sound of wheels from the other side of the house. Jake glanced towards the gate that led thither. Saltash bent again over the dog.

"You'd better go," he reiterated. "I won't show. Don't let me keep you!"

Jake raised a hand to his cap and turned away.

Instantly Saltash straightened himself. He uttered a low, clear whistle, and almost immediately Maud, clad in white, came to the window. He sprang up the steps in a single bound and caught her hands into his own.

"I had your letter," he said. "Quick! When can you meet me?"

Maud was gasping a little. Her face was deeply flushed. "Charlie! You are so sudden! I only want--a few minutes alone with you."

He held her hands. "When?" he said.

His eyes were gazing into hers freely, ardently; but he was laughing as he always laughed, ready to turn his ardour into a joke at a moment's notice.

She hesitated.

"Quick!" he said. "They are coming, and I must go. Come down to the orchard-gate after dinner to-night! Jake and Capper will be smoking. No one will know, Queen Rose. That is settled then. I shall be at the gate alone." He laughed under his breath, lifted her hands to his lips, made a wide gesture as if he would clasp her in his arms, laughed again as she drew back, and wheeling, sprang down the steps and was gone in a moment round the side of the house.

Maud's cheeks were burning. She turned to meet the visitor with the feeling of one who has had a sudden rapid fall through space. She was not sure of the ground beneath her feet.

She did not know how she greeted Capper, but somehow the difficult moment passed. She was convinced afterwards that her manner had been perfectly normal, for the atmosphere was quite natural and free from strain. In a very few minutes they were all seated round the tea-table, and to her relief Bunny, and not she, was the centre of observation and general topic of their talk.

She feared that when tea was over Capper would seek her out; but he did not. He went round the Stables with Jake.

She went to her own room to rest and recover her composure. It was true that she had wanted to see Charlie alone; in fact it had become essential to her mother's interests that she should do so. But she had not altogether expected so prompt a reply to her request. She wished she could have made some more ordinary arrangement. She wished with all her heart that she had had the presence of mind to veto his suggestion. It had never been her intention to meet him secretly and at night. Not that she cared personally how or when she met him. Their friendship was too old for that. But she did not like secrecy. Small as was the confidence she extended to her husband, she yet had no desire to exclude him deliberately from the knowledge of her doings. She did not wish to commit any act, however innocent, which might appear suspicious in his eyes.

The thing was unavoidable, however, the appointment was made. She could not leave Charlie to wait in vain. For this once she must run the risk and trust to luck to bring her through. It would not be a long interview; she was fully determined upon that point. And she would never agree to another on the same clandestine lines. She must assert her independence, and meet him openly. Jake must learn to trust her. She must not suffer him to interfere with her liberty of action. If he were ridiculous enough to be jealous, that was his affair. She would not allow herself to be influenced by such an absurd attitude. She never questioned his doings; she must not suffer him to question hers. So she sought to reassure herself the while her uneasiness grew.

She put on a dress of black lace when the supper-hour drew near. It made her look even paler than her wont, but she gave scarcely a thought to her appearance. Her mind was weighed down by far more serious matters.

Even the prospect of a *tête-à-tête* with Dr. Capper hardly disquieted her, and when she discovered him on the garden-steps of the parlour she went forward to join him without hesitation.

His greeting of her was full of kindness; there was nothing disconcerting about his attitude.

"I was just thinking about my friend Rafford," he said. "You remember him? And how mad he went over that piece of statuary at Burchester Castle? But, strange to say, it's not the anatomy that interests him any longer. It's the face."

She felt herself colour a little. "If it bears any resemblance to me, it is purely accidental," she said.

"Or rather, a coincidence," amended Capper. "It's a fine piece of work anyway. But he is nothing of a judge. Guess it's just the humanity of the thing that gets him."

"It's rather a painful study," Maud said.

"Ah, but it leaves endless possibilities. That is where the genius of the sculptor displays itself. Rafford saw that. 'The hotter the furnace, the purer the gold,' he said to me; 'if I had the naming of that work I'd call it *The Crucible or Seven Times Purified*.'"

"What a peculiar point of view!" Maud exclaimed, almost in spite of herself.

Capper assented. "Raff is highly imaginative. He has a very long perspective. A bit of a dreamer too. If it weren't for that, I should prophesy a great future for him. But there's no time for dreaming in this world. You must either hustle through or be content to stand aside. You can't do both."

"I don't like hustling," Maud said, with a smile.

He made her a bow. "No, you are English. But Raff has not that excuse. That's why I doubt if he ever gets there. He needs to be up against a thing before he considers it worth while. That's not the way to win out handsomely. It's the way to get whipped off the field."

"Always make for the crest of the wave!" said Jake's voice behind them. "You may get there--some day--if you're lucky; though it's more likely you'll be dragged under and swamped."

Capper turned to him. "Not you, Jake!" he said. "You're a born winner. I'm sure Mrs. Bolton will bear me out there."

Jake's hand descended upon his wife's shoulder. "Mrs. Bolton doesn't know my capabilities in that respect at present," he remarked dryly. "She has only witnessed the start."

Maud did not turn her head. "You are all invincible, of course," she said.

Bunny's advent diverted the conversation. He could think and talk of nothing but the forthcoming races at Graydown which had been fixed for the end of the week, and which he had prevailed upon Jake to allow him to attend.

Capper, though not particularly enthusiastic, was to remain for them, "just to see Jake come out on top," as he expressed it. It was taken for granted by all that Maud would go too, and she supposed she would do so; but she took no part in the conversation which Bunny found so all-absorbing. She was too occupied with the thought of Charlie.

There was no need for her to talk. She sat silent and abstracted while the protracted discussion went on around her. Bunny had learned more about the animals in ten days than she had discovered in as many weeks, and Capper listened with amused indulgence. It all went over her head, and no one seemed to notice her aloofness.

Bunny would gladly have sat up till late, but Jake would not permit this. He ordered him off to bed on the stroke of nine, and Bunny went without demur. He was learning to obey his brother-in-law without any thought of rebellion. Maud noted the fact bitterly. It was another proof to her of the despotic mastery of Jake's personality. He ruled them all.

She herself rose from the table upon Bunny's departure, and as she did so she was for the first time conscious of Capper's critical scrutiny. It passed almost immediately as he sprang to his feet to open the door.

"I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again?" he asked.

She bent her head. "I am only going to fetch a wrap for the garden."

He smiled and bowed her out.

Jake was in the act of lighting a cigarette when he returned to the table. He proffered the end of it to Capper, and as the latter stooped to kindle his own their eyes met. Capper's held a question that could scarcely be ignored.

Half-reluctantly Jake removed his cigarette and spoke. "It's the biggest problem I've ever been up against."

Capper puffed forth a cloud of smoke. "What's troubling you?"

Jake sat down heavily. "She ain't pleased--not any. Life is damnably difficult. I thought I was going to make her happy, but I've made an almighty failure of it. She used to just tolerate me in the old days; but now--she hates the very sight of me. The mere thought of bearing me a child seems to drive her clean crazy."

He ceased to speak and sat bowed in his chair, his chin on his breast, his eyes gazing sombrely forth under bent brows.

Capper was still on his feet. He stood cracking his fingers one after the other with meditative regularity. His eyes, very green and shrewd, rested upon Jake's head that shone like copper in the lamplight.

There fell a silence of several seconds; then at length with another great puff of smoke he spoke. "Guess it's just a case for patience, Jake, my lad. These things right 'emselves, you know, when the time comes. It's wonderful how childbearing softens a woman. And you love her. That'll make a difference too--when the time comes."

Jake did not look up. "God knows I do," he said slowly. "But you know, Doc--" he seemed to be speaking with something of an effort--"I don't fancy she knows it."

"Oh, shucks!" Capper exclaimed. "She wouldn't be a woman if she didn't."

Jake shook his head despondently. "I suppose I'm just a brute beast. She thinks so, and I can't show her anything different now. Maybe I am more flesh than spirit; but for all that she is the one woman I want, and none other could ever satisfy me now. But I haven't got her. Even when I hold her in my arms, she ain't there. And she has never kissed me, never once."

Again he ceased to speak, and Capper pulled at his beard and said nothing.

There fell a long silence between them through which the grandfather clock in the corner ticked with a melancholy beat. It was like the heart of a tired man.

Jake's cigarette hung neglected between his fingers which almost trailed on the floor. His eyes still stared before him as though they saw one thing, and only one.

Capper smoked with scarcely a pause. His yellow face was very thoughtful. His cigarette came to an end, and he dropped it smouldering on to a plate. Then he turned and laid a kindly hand upon Jake's shoulder.

"Keep a stiff upper lip, my son! I guess she's yours for the winning, or she will be. It's no good trying to understand a woman's moods. You never will do that as long as you live. But she'll come to you in the end, sure. Give her all the rope you can! If she hasn't any use for you at present, it'll come."

"Will it?" said Jake rather bitterly. "I reckon I'm further away from winning her now than I've ever been. Once--it's ages ago--she came to me and cried out her troubles on my shoulder. She'd no more dream of doing that now than she'd dream of flying. She'd be more likely to--" He broke off short.

"What?" said Capper.

Jake sat slowly up. His eyes still seemed to be fixed upon some definite object. "I was going to say," he said, in a voice that had become peculiarly soft and deliberate, "that she'd be more likely

to carry her troubles to Saltash. But I don't think exactly that. He's too crooked to hold a woman's confidence. No woman with any sense would trust him."

He grasped Capper's hand and looked up with a curious smile.

"It would be a pity to have to shoot a freak like Saltash; wouldn't it?" he said. "Reckon a good many women would miss him."

His eyes shone red for a moment, then he uttered a laugh that seemed to dismiss the subject.

"Come into the garden and see the moon rise!" he said.

CHAPTER VII THE LAND OF MOONSHINE

The dew was thick on the orchard grass as Maud ran down under the trees. An orange moon was rising behind them and the shadows lay deep and mysterious across her path. The wind blew fresh from the sea, sweeping the wide down, bringing relief after the heat of the day.

She was trembling as she went, yet as she neared the trysting-place she checked herself and walked with some dignity. She did not want to arrive in a state of agitation. She was sure he would be waiting for her. She was sure, she was sure!

Yes, he was there. They saw each other simultaneously, and in a moment he had sprung to meet her with the ardour she knew so well. Her hands were in his almost in the same instant. He held them closely, lingeringly.

"At last!" he said.

Rather breathlessly she made response. "Yes, but I can't stay. I want to speak to you--only to speak to you--about my mother."

"Good heavens!" said Saltash. His hold relaxed for a second, then tightened again. "My dear girl, how absurdly prosaic of you to come to me on such a night as this and talk about anybody or anything on earth besides ourselves! I won't allow it and that's a fact."

She laughed a little unsteadily. "But it is just that I have come for, Charlie; and nothing else. And I can't stay either. You must let me say what I have to say quickly, and then go."

He drew her gently through the gate and led her to the summer-house close by that overlooked the down. The moonlight filtered in upon them through a lattice-work of leaves.

"Don't tremble, *ma belle reine!*" he said. "You shall go whenever you will. But need we waste to-night? I will call upon you formally in the morning if you desire it and talk about anything you wish."

She sat down with the feeling of one who moves beneath a spell, and after a moment he sat beside her, still lightly holding her hand. Yes, she was at liberty to go whenever she would; and yet she could not, she could not!

The witchery of the hour was upon her. It was not the first time that they had sat thus, he and she, hand in hand, wrapped in the mystery and romance of a summer night. Her thoughts went back with a bitter pang to the old dear dream. Ah, why had she sent him from her? She had obeyed the instincts of her soul, perchance; but she had wrecked her life to do it. Why? Why?

He was speaking, leaning to her, his swarthy face against her shoulder. "Maud, let us forget the world to-night! Never mind what brought you! Just remember that you are here--in the land of moonshine--with me!"

She turned at his voice; she yielded ever so slightly to the subtle drawing of his hand. "But let me speak, Charlie!" she whispered. "I am so troubled. I want your help."

"It is yours for ever," he made answer. "You have but to command."

"That is a promise?" she urged.

"My solemn promise," said Saltash. "Now--shall we forget?"

His voice was full of a tenderness that stirred her to the depths. A piteous sob caught her throat; she put up a swift, silencing hand. "Oh, if I only could!" she said.

"You can," said Saltash. He moved also, slid a gentle arm about her. "Close your eyes, dear heart, and forget all your troubles!" he whispered. "I can charm them all away."

She shook her head. Her eyes were full of tears. "I am caught in the whirlpools, Charlie," she whispered back. "I shall never get away. All the romance is gone out of my life--for ever."

"I can bring it back," he said.

Her tears overflowed. She could not hold them back. "I wish I were dead!" she said.

The arm that encircled her grew gradually tense like the tightening of a coil. "Come to me!"

he murmured. "Listen to your own heart and come! What does it matter what lies behind? Put it all away from you--and come!"

She suffered his arm, but she yielded herself no further to it. "I can't," she said hopelessly. "I--can't."

"Why not?" he urged. "Haven't I waited long enough? Are you afraid?"

She bent her head, covering her face. "Oh yes, I am afraid--afraid. Life is so dreadful. It is full of--terrible consequences."

It had come upon her so suddenly. She had as it were stepped out of prison into a world of seething temptation with the passing of that gate. Never before had she felt so lured and drawn by that which was evil. The swift spell had caught her in a moment, and it held--how it held her!

His arms were about her. He drew her to his breast. "What do I care for consequences?" he whispered passionately. "Come to me, queen of my heart! I have been cheated of my right long enough. Yes, my right--my right! You have belonged to me always, and you know it. Oh, what are we to fight against destiny? Do you think I don't know how you have suffered? Do you think I haven't suffered too? All because you loved me--and sent me away! You will never do that again, queen of the roses. You have called me back to you. You are mine. Turn your face to me, sweetheart! There is no love in all the world like ours. How can we resist it? It is greater than we ourselves."

But she kept her face covered, hidden low against the throbbing of his heart.

His words went into silence--a silence that was stark and cold--the very shadow of Despair. It bound them both for a while; then shudderingly she spoke.

"It is no good, Charlie. I can't do it--now. If I had known--three months ago--what was before me--I think I would have come. But the whirlpools caught me--drew me down. I realized too late--too late. I can't come now. I am bound--hand and foot--in outer darkness."

"I can deliver you," he said.

"No one can deliver me." The bitter conviction of her voice silenced even him. "It is what you foretold. I am a slave, and I have got to bear the yoke of my slavery. I shall never be free now, never as long as I live. I am bound to the oar by chain that--even you--could never break."

She moved in his arms; she raised her head at last.

"Say good-bye to me, Charlie!" she whispered, "and--go!"

He caught her to him. He looked closely into her quivering face. "You love me still?" he whispered, with passionate insistence. "Tell me you love me still!"

She seemed to hesitate as if reluctant or irresolute. She seemed about to draw back. And then something magnetic in his face or his touch must have moved her; or was it the weird enchantment of the night? She gave him her lips without a word, and so he had his answer....

There came the click of the orchard-gate, the sound of a quiet voice.

"Come round to the summer-house, Doc! There's a fine view from there."

Maud stiffened in Saltash's arms as if turned to stone.

He set her free with the utmost coolness and rose. The next instant she was sitting alone in the chequered moonlight. He had vanished without sound round the side of the arbour furthest from the orchard-gate.

She sat with a thumping heart, waiting. There had been something almost eerie in his disappearance. She knew he must be standing pressed against the wall by which she sat, but yet his going had been so silent that--even though her lips still burned with the memory of his kiss--she felt curiously as though the whole episode were as incredible as a dream.

She made no attempt to move. Her limbs felt like lead. Only her heart raced so madly that she gasped for breath.

She heard again the quiet, drawling voice. "The gate was open. Very likely my wife is here."

A great shiver went through her. She felt suddenly cold from head to foot. She clasped her hands tightly together, striving with all her strength for self-control.

There fell the tread of feet upon the grass, and Capper's tall thin form came round the side of the arbour. He saw her in a moment, for the moonlight was on her face. She stared at him with hunted eyes. Where was Jake?

He accosted her at once. "Ah, Mrs. Bolton, so here you are! Say, do you think you're wise to sit here with the frogs? It's cold, you know. Where's that wrap you were going to fetch?"

She stretched out a hand to him instinctively. "Yes, I am cold," she said, and her teeth chattered upon the words. "Is--is--Jake there?"

Capper glanced over his shoulder. "He was there. But--Columbus!--how cold you are, child! You will be sick if you stay here. Come! Let me take you in!"

He drew her to her feet; then, as she tottered, leaning upon him, passed a wiry arm about her. As he did so, she saw Jake come round the other corner of the arbour and stop upon the threshold.

She turned suddenly giddy and clung weakly to Capper. He had seen; he must have seen! But why had there been no encounter--no challenge of any sort? Where--where was Charlie?

She went through an agony of apprehension during those few moments. She thought the awful suspense would kill her.

Then Jake's square figure advanced, blocking the opening. His voice pierced through her agitation.

"So you have found her, Doc. I thought she would be hereabouts. I see there is a mist coming up. We had better go in."

There was nothing in the words, but she shivered uncontrollably at the sound of them. That slow soft speech was as a veil that hid unutterable things. With a great effort she mastered her weakness and spoke.

"Yes, it has turned quite cold. I think it is the dew. Did you come here to admire the view, Dr. Capper? It is one of the best in the neighbourhood. I often think I should like to come and camp out here on these summer nights."

"You would want plenty of blankets," said Capper. "There is a creepy chill in the atmosphere that reminds one of the fall." He took his arm from about her, and drew her hand through it. "Come, we must go. It isn't right for you to take risks. A glass of wine before you turn in is what I should recommend."

She made an attempt to laugh, but she did not feel it to be a success. "That is Jake's invariable remedy for all ills," she declared. "But I thought it had ceased to be popular with your profession."

She emerged from the summer-house, holding his arm, but a new strength born of terrible expediency seemed to have entered into her. She moved without effort, Jake stepping back to let her pass.

"Do admire the beauties of it before we go!" she urged. "It is so romantic by this light. The Brethaven lighthouse is over there. It has a revolving light. Do you see it?" She turned and spoke over her shoulder. "Jake, come and show Dr. Capper all the different points of interest."

But Capper would have none of it. "I shan't be satisfied till I've got you indoors," he said. "What have you got on your feet? Nothing but light slippers? Say, Mrs. Bolton, you ought to take more care of yourself."

"Oh, but I never have," she protested. "I am wonderfully strong. Jake will tell you that."

"I think as Dr. Capper thinks," Jake said. "You ought to be more careful."

She felt herself flush. Now that her agitation had subsided, she was capable of feeling resentment once more, and there was that in the quiet utterance that stung her.

She made no rejoinder, but her face burned hotter and hotter as they began to walk back. She was sure--quite sure--that she had been made a subject of discussion between her husband and Dr. Capper.

Jake walked on her other side. She had the feeling of being a prisoner between two warders. And she wondered if Charlie were watching with that mocking humour in his eyes.

She set her teeth as the memory of his voice, his touch, went through her. She wondered with a sinking heart what she would have to tell him when they met again....

CHAPTER VIII THE WARNING

Half an hour later Maud stood in her bedroom, waiting. The window was wide open, and the night-air blew in cold and pure, with a scent of dew-drenched roses and the salt of the sea behind. There was a large moth in the room. It had been attracted thither by the light of the candles, but it seemed to be dashing to and fro now in a wild search for freedom. She watched its futile efforts with a vague pity. But she was powerless to help it. Every moment it was circling closer and closer to the flame and would probably perish there in the end. She supposed it didn't matter. It was born to die in any case, and surely death was kinder than life. She had often thought so.

If she could have chosen death in that moment instead of this numb waiting for an ordeal

which she felt would be beyond her strength, she believed she would not have hesitated. This continual battling against a will so immeasurably stronger than her own was wearing her down. The bare thought of an open conflict made her sick. And that an open conflict was before her she felt convinced. He had not chosen to confound her in the presence of Capper, but she knew that the reckoning was only deferred. She had come to know him as a man of unerring justice, and she had long ceased to hope for mercy from him.

Ah! She heard his step at last, and turned, bracing herself. The moth was flitting dizzily round and round the candle. Her eyes followed it fascinated.

Suddenly it made a headlong dash for the flame, there came a sharp crackle, and then the dull thud of its fall upon the floor. A great shudder caught her, almost convulsed her. And in the same instant the door that intervened between her room and Jake's opened; and he stood before her.

She faced him stiffly in utter silence. One glimpse she had of his face, and only one; for she could not look again. The red-brown eyes were alight with a fire that seemed to consume her even from afar. She stood and numbly waited.

He came straight to her. "So," he said, "you have decided to make a fool of me, have you?"

His voice was very low, but it had in it the sound as of an angry animal. There was something of the animal in his pose also, something from which her whole being shrank affrighted.

Yet she was not without courage. She forced herself to a certain calmness. "Will you tell me what you mean?" she said.

He made a slight gesture that seemed to cry aloud of a savagery scarcely restrained. "I guess you can do that," he said. "What do I mean? Tell me!"

She drew back from him with an instinctive movement of recoil, but on the instant, as though she had stepped into a trap, his hands came out and caught her by the wrists. He held her firmly before him.

"Tell me!" he reiterated.

But she took refuge in silence. She had no words.

He held her so for many seconds, and she knew that during those seconds his eyes remained immovably fixed upon her. She made no attempt to resist him. She knew beyond all question that resistance would be worse than useless. But she refused with mute determination to meet his eyes. Crush her, conquer her, as he would, he should not force his way past every barrier unopposed. Her submission was physical but not mental. She had always held back from him her soul.

He spoke at length, and still in his voice she heard that terrible, deep menace as of a savage force that gathered and gathered under the thinning surface of his civilization. "I reckon you think I'm easier to fool than I am. Old friends must have their privileges. Ain't that so? And if they include a little genteel love-making, where's the harm? Who is to raise any objection? Not the husband who has been too big an oaf ever to make love to you in his life! The husband who just takes what he wants and leaves what's over for the lover! He should be the last person to interfere, I reckon. Ain't that so?"

She shivered in his hold, but she spoke no word. Had they not always been utterly at variance with one another? How could she hope to make him see anything but evil now that his brutal passions were aroused? How could she ever attempt to convince him that he alone was responsible for the fact that temptation had become even possible to her?

And so she stood in silence while the dreadful force of the man mounted and mounted, menacing her.

He waited for several seconds for some response from her; then, at last, as she made none, he moved, drew her locked wrists behind her, forcing her slowly back till her face was turned up to his gaze.

She felt the scorching fire of the eyes she would not meet, and in a moment her whole body seemed to burn in a furnace of shame. The hot blood stung her from head to foot, pricking every vein. Crimson and quivering, she hung there in his hold, waiting.

"So you won't speak to me?" he said. "Won't even try to defend yourself? Well, maybe you're wise. Maybe explanations would do more harm than good. I know well enough how it is with you. You've got to the pitch of enduring me like a loathsome but incurable disease. You never reflected, did you, that in so doing you were making your own hell? You hate me, but you don't realize that the thing you hate is not me at all but a brute of your own creation. And because of that--p'raps it's a natural consequence--you've come to prefer another man's love to mine."

His hold was tightening upon her; she felt herself being drawn to him, felt the warmth of his

body like the glow of an open fire. And a sudden wild wave of rebellion went through her, goading her into action at last. She had never resisted him before; she resisted him now fiercely, passionately, striving with all her strength to free herself from that pitiless hold.

"You never offered me love," she panted, straining back from him even while he mastered her. "Love--love--is a very different thing!"

Her voice went into a gasp that was almost a cry. He was holding her crushed to him in a grip that nearly suffocated her. His eyes blazed down into hers, terrible in their intensity, cruelly, appallingly bright. The savage in him had leapt free of all shackles at last, and had her utterly at his mercy.

"Well?" he said, speaking with lips drawn back, showing his set teeth. "And what is love--as defined by you--and Saltash? Something peculiarly holy?"

The taunt pierced her like a knife, with a pain so unbearable that for the moment she was almost beside herself. For an instant she winced from that intolerable thrust; but only for an instant. The next with a furious wrench she freed one hand and struck him--struck him across his grim, menacing mouth.

"How dare you say that?" she cried. "How dare you? How dare you?"

She struck him afresh with each repetition, so stung to frenzy was she by that sneer. But when the sudden realization that he stood to endure her blows without the smallest attempt to check or avoid them came upon her, the spirit went out of her. She became passive again, trembling from head to foot, so that but for his upholding arms she must have fallen.

"Let me go!" she whispered voicelessly. "Let me go!"

He was still gazing at her, but his look had changed. His eyes still burned, but they no longer threatened. Rather she read in them a slow-gathering wonder, as of a man who has picked up some strange substance of which he does not know the value or properties.

He held her awhile longer, and then very gradually he let her go.

She drew away from him, her bosom heaving, her lips panting, and leaned upon the dressing-table for support. She had withstood him indeed, but it had cost her every inch of her strength.

She did not know how she endured his silence. It seemed to pierce every nerve, while he still stood observing her, as it were appraising her.

Then at length very slowly he spoke. "I take back what I said about Saltash. I see I was wrong."

He paused a moment. She had made a sharp gesture of surprise, but she spoke no word. He went on.

"I realize--now--that you do not know what love is. If you did, you wouldn't be so--ashamed. Maybe you never will know. It isn't given to all of us--not that sort. But let me tell you this! Your friendship--or whatever you call it--with Saltash must end. There must be no more letters--no more secret meetings. Saltash is not a white man. I believe in your own heart you know it. Trust him, and he will let you down,--sure."

He spoke with sombre force. She heard him in utter silence, her head bent, still striving to call back her vanished strength.

He came a step nearer to her. "Maybe you think you can hoodwink me--disobey me, and I shan't know. You haven't a very great opinion of my intellect, I guess. But--you may take it from me--I shall know. And if you try to deceive me, you will repent it. You wouldn't fancy life on a lone ranch with not a soul but me to speak to--and all the dishes to wash?" A grim note that was not without a hint of humour crept into his voice. "That's what it will mean, my girl, if you don't obey your husband now. I'm a man of my word, and I think you know it."

He was standing close to her. She felt the vitality of the man, encompassing her, enthralling her. Her brief resistance was over. The very heart of her felt too tired to beat. He had not forcibly quelled her rebellion, yet in some fashion he had taken from her the power to rebel.

He waited for her to speak, but still she could not. Only after a moment or two she drew back from him again and sat down in a chair by the table. He had delivered his ultimatum. There seemed nothing more to be said.

She wished dully that he would go. Surely he could see that the game was his, that she had ceased to move or to attempt to counter that final stroke! Yet he still stood motionless, almost as if he were waiting for something.

Suddenly he spoke again with an odd, restrained vehemence; she felt that he spoke in spite of himself. "That's a prospect that doesn't attract you, I reckon. You've no use for me, never have had--save once. My love is just an insult to you. You even call it by another name. But I tell you this," his voice deepened with a strong vibration that affected her very strangely, gripping her

close attention, "whatever it is, it's a driving force that I can't restrain. It may be an obsession, it may be a curse; but there is no getting away from it. It simply is and it has got to be. And if any man ever dares to come between us--you had better mark what I say--I'll shoot him!"

He spoke with a fatalism that sank deep into her soul. It was no savage threat, but the clear pronouncement of a man who knew exactly what he would do under given circumstances. And she was sure in that moment, absolutely sure, that no dread of consequences would deter him.

She did not answer him; there was nothing to say. But there swept over her another dreadful wave of apprehension such as had caught her in the summer-house an hour before, turning her cold from head to foot. What would he say if he knew what had passed between them--if he knew that their lips had met?

She pictured him selecting his weapon with the deadly determination that had inspired his words, saw the cruel set of the mouth, the ruthless glitter of the savage eyes; and she shivered, shivered uncontrollably, convulsively, as one in the grip of an ague.

He saw the shiver; he could not fail to see it, and his attitude changed a little. A measure of softening came into it, even a tinge of kindness.

"There, you're overwrought," he said. "It's time you got to bed. Reckon you understand me, so we'll give the matter a rest."

He turned with the words, turned in his sturdy, purposeful fashion and went back to his room.

She did not watch him go, but she listened with straining ears for the closing of the door between them. It did not come to her. There was to be no relief from his presence that night. The door remained half-open.

She sat on motionless for a moment or two, listening in a numb, hopeless fashion to his quiet, methodical movements.

She got up sharply at length and began with quivering speed to undress, not daring to linger lest she should have to meet again the straight, unsparing scrutiny of those terribly bright eyes.

Once only, and that just at the last, did she stay a moment and stoop over a small dark object on the floor--something she fancied she had dropped. But the next instant a wild fit of trembling seized her, she stood up again, feeling giddy, physically sick. The thing on the floor was the charred remnant of the moth that had fluttered impotent wings to escape but so short a time before. It lay there shrivelled, lifeless, the wings that had beaten so madly for freedom shattered and consumed in the flame.

She caught her hand to her throat. What evil Fate had decreed that such things should be? Even the tiniest thread of life could not escape the seething whirlpool of destruction.

Sick at heart, she turned and extinguished the candle that had wrought so cruel a doom. The moonlight shone whitely into the room. She went to the window and pulled down the blind; then trembling, she crept to bed. And the darkness covered her soul.

CHAPTER IX THE INVITATION

Saltash did not come to her on the following day, and for her own sake she was thankful that he did not. But the problem of her mother's difficulties had begun to vex her sorely. Without communicating with him, she knew that it could not be solved. He had given his promise to help her, yet somehow she did not feel the task before her to be a very easy one. Charlie was so curiously elusive in some respects. It was not always a simple matter to detach him from the whim of the moment. And she had many a time heard him declare that he was not a business man.

She watched the post with nervous anxiety, but nothing came for her. She was relieved to have nothing to conceal, but her mother's anxieties weighed upon her. She hesitated to write to Charlie, but told herself she would have to do so if no word came from him. It was all highly unsatisfactory, and behind her uneasiness there lurked a deep sense of self-reproach, self-distrust. She had suffered him to go too far, too far. It might be difficult to recover a normal footing. It might be he was even now planning some deep game, some master-stroke to follow up the advantage he had gained and win her for his own.

He would not succeed. He could not succeed. She would not so much as allow her thoughts to wander in that direction. She had been mad that night. There had been witchery in the very air.

But now she was awake to the crude realities of life, awake and sane and bitterly ashamed of her weakness. He might plot and intrigue, but he could not overthrow her reason a second time. The madness had passed, and it would not return. But the necessity for seeing him remained, and it was an urgent one. She found it hard to wait in inactivity.

The whole day passed without a sign from him, and her patience began to wear thin. Surely, surely he could not fail to keep that solemn promise of his! Surely he could not have forgotten--or be waiting for her to make the first move!

She went for a walk on the down with Capper in the evening. She did not greatly want to go. She was a little afraid of his shrewd insight. But she found that she had no cause for fear. He was full of kindly commonplace topics, and he touched upon no intimate subject whatever. She returned from the walk feeling soothed and refreshed.

They went through the training-field on the way back, and here they came upon Jake, giving Bunny his first riding-lesson. It was good to see the boy's eagerness, his flushed face and shining eyes. He was utterly fearless and even impatient of Jake's care.

They stood awhile and watched, then turned and walked up through the garden.

"He is very happy," Maud said.

Capper smiled. "Jake is an A1 companion for him, Mrs. Bolton. He is thrice lucky to be in the care of a man like Jake."

She agreed without enthusiasm. "Yes, Jake is very kind."

"That's so. And he won't spoil him either. Also," Capper spoke with emphasis, "he'll never learn anything that isn't clean and straight from Jake. Guess he'll make a fine man some day."

"Thanks to you, Doctor!" Maud said.

"No, madam. Thanks to Jake! My part was a very small one. I am just a mechanic; but Jake is a driver of engines--a maker of men."

Maud said nothing, and he changed the subject.

They lingered in the garden till Jake and Bunny joined them; then they separated, Bunny, contrary to custom, attaching himself to Maud, and Jake taking possession of Capper.

Brother and sister ascended the steps into the house and entered the parlour. Bunny was still flushed and excited. Life was full of absorbing interest to him. He had actually been off the leading rein most of the time,--yes, and he had cantered too. Jake said he was to go and have a warm bath and then do his time on the floor. It was a great bore, but he supposed he'd have to. What was Maud looking so sick about? Wasn't she well?

This amiable enquiry was made just as Maud's eyes had fallen upon a letter lying on the table. She almost snatched it up, and then found with a mingling of relief and disappointment that it was not from Saltash.

The crabbed writing was wholly unfamiliar to her. She stood gazing at it while her sudden agitation subsided.

"Who's it from?" said Bunny, coming to peer over her shoulder. "Liverpool post-mark. Why, that's from that queer old codger who was down here in the winter, I'll bet. What on earth does he want?"

"To be sure--Uncle Edward," Maud said.

She opened the letter with Bunny looking on. They read it together.

"MY DEAR GRAND-NIECE,

"I am pleased to acknowledge your letter of the 4th inst., and I write to inform you that I shall be delighted to receive you and your brother on whatever date it may suit you to come. I am glad to hear of the latter's excellent progress. I presume you are capable of keeping him in order. You will of course be prepared to find your own entertainment. Should your worthy husband care to join the party by any chance, I have room for all.

"Your affectionate uncle,

"EDWARD WARREN."

"Holy Christopher!" ejaculated Bunny. "What on earth did you want to write to him for? I'm not going there,--jiggered if I am! And to be tied to your apron-strings too,--not much!"

Maud folded the letter. "I thought you might like to go away with me for a little," she said.

He stared at her. "What! Away from Jake? Not--much!"

She tried to smile. "You're not very flattering, Bunny."

Bunny was still staring. "I can't think what's come to you! Jake's the best chap in the world,

and yet you don't seem to get on with him. Say, what the blazes is the matter with you anyway?"

She bit her lip. "I wish you wouldn't be so horribly imitative, Bunny. You never used to talk like that."

Bunny flared up on the instant. "I'll talk as I damn' well please! It's no affair of yours. As to leaving Jake, I'm hanged if I will! You can jolly well go by yourself!"

"And as to behaving like a beastly bounder, you'll apologize for it before you leave this room," a soft voice said.

Both started violently. Jake had come up the steps from the garden. He walked over to the mantelpiece, searched for and found a box of matches; then turned.

"If we were alone, my son, I'd punch your head for you. Maud is quite right. You've no call to talk like a cowboy. Now apologize--quick!"

But Bunny stood sullenly silent.

Maud turned to the door. "Pray don't trouble to make him do that!" she said. "I am accustomed to cowboy manners."

The door closed upon her, and in the same instant Jake's hand closed upon Bunny's shoulder.

"Go after her!" he commanded, "Catch her up, and say you're sorry!"

But Bunny resisted him. "I won't, Jake. I'm not sorry. And I won't go and stay with Uncle Edward. There! If you send me, I'll run away."

Jake shook him. "I'll be mad with you in a minute, my son. Go after her, do you hear? Go after her and make it up before she starts crying!"

"She won't cry!" said Bunny incredulously. "She never does."

Jake swung him round to the door. "Bunny, don't you be a skunk! If you don't go, there'll be trouble--bad trouble."

"But it was her fault!" protested Bunny, stung to remonstrance. "She set on to me first."

"I don't care whose fault it was," said Jake. "You're to go."

Bunny writhed in his hold. "You're beastly unfair, Jake. If I do go, I shan't apologize."

"You won't?" said Jake.

"No, I won't!" There was a faint note of apprehension in Bunny's voice, notwithstanding its defiance. He stood up to Jake, but his eyelids quivered ever so slightly. His hands opened and shut in the old nervous fashion.

Jake was holding him fast. "Think it over!" he said. "Think it over!"

His voice was steady, his grip inflexible. His eyes never left the boy's hot face. They held a stern warning that could not be ignored.

Bunny straightened himself to meet it. "I suppose you'll thrash me," he said. "Well,--you must, that's all."

A faint gleam crossed Jake's face. It was hardly a smile, and was gone on the instant. "No, I shan't thrash you," he said. "Now, will you go?"

And Bunny capitulated, struck his colours unconditionally, flung his arms round his brother-in-law's shoulders. "All right, Jake. I'll go, old man. I'll go. Don't look so confoundedly grim!"

Jake held him back with one hand on his rough dark head. "Be off with you, boy! I'll see you later--maybe when you're in bed. Go now!"

He smiled upon Bunny, for there were tears in the boy's eyes, patted him on the back, and turned to go as he had entered.

Ten seconds later Bunny was beating a rousing tattoo on his sister's door. "Say, Maud, let me in--quick--quick!"

He wriggled at the handle, for the door was locked, and, meeting with no response, beat again.

"Maud, I say, let me in! I've come to say I'm sorry. Don't be waxy, old girl! Open the door!"

There came a lagging footstep. The key turned, Bunny burst into the room headlong.

"You're not crying, are you? I knew you weren't. There! It's all right, isn't it? What makes you so touchy, nowadays? You never used to be."

Her arms held him tightly in a mute embrace. She kissed him with a yearning tenderness.

Bunny drew back and looked at her with sudden, close attention. "Maud, what's the matter? Tell me what's the matter!"

She was smiling, a strangely drawn smile. Not for the first time he became conscious of the veil of reserve that hung between them. He strove with it indignantly, seeking to tear it aside.

"Maud, tell me, I say! You would have told me in the old days."

She caught back an involuntary sigh. "You were older then, Bunny."

"I wasn't!" he declared. "What rot!"

"Ah well," she said gently, "things were different in those days."

And suddenly there came to Bunny--Bunny who had lain and watched life so long that his eyes had grown tired with watching--one of the old shrewd flashes of enlightenment, solving the mystery.

He held her very tightly, his face burning red. "Say, Maud--old girl, is it--is it--I know what it is!"

"Don't, Bunny!" she whispered inarticulately.

He kissed her with the warmth of renewed understanding. "That's why Jake's so beastly worried about you. Poor old boy! He's getting as lean as Chops. Have you noticed?"

She had not. They sat down together on an ottoman near the window, Bunny's arm protectingly around her.

"He sent me up after you in such a hurry because he was afraid you were going to cry," he went on. "He was furious with me for vexing you. Poor old Jake!"

A curious little pang of resentment went through her. "You seem to think he is very much to be pitied," she said.

"I do," said Bunny instantly. "He looks so down in the mouth nowadays. I saw it directly I came home. He's got a sort of hurt look at the back of his eyes, as if he wasn't getting on with himself. I sometimes wish you'd be a bit kinder to him, Maud. I'm sure he mopes."

This was a point of view so new to Maud that she hardly knew how to regard it. Somehow it had never occurred to her that Jake could take her attitude to heart, Jake who trampled down all rebellion with so merciless a heel. She had always told herself that Jake had all he really wanted. That he was aware of any need of the spirit she had never seriously believed. Bunny's assertion brought to mind Mrs. Wright's kindly assurance that there was a whole lot of reserve in Jake; and for the first time the old woman's words recurred to her. "He won't show you his heart so long as he thinks you've no use for it." Was there a measure of truth in those words? She wondered. She wondered.

"Guess I must be going," said Bunny. "I've got to have a bath. You might turn on the water for me like a brick while I go and undress."

There was subtle tact in the suggestion. Bunny knew--none better--that to wait upon him was his sister's dearest privilege, and he judged by her sad face that it was time to change her thoughts.

When he arrived in the bath-room a few minutes later, he found everything put ready for his comfort, and Maud waiting to turn off the water at his command. He was attired in a large bath towel which he held artistically draped about his person. He thrust a bare, warm arm about her neck.

"Thanks, old girl. You're jolly decent to me! I don't know how I managed to be such a beast. Guess my temper must have got warped in its youth. By the way, there's a letter for you from Charlie on my dressing-table. He told me to give it to you when we were alone. I suppose it's something to do with the mother's affairs."

"Oh, perhaps," Maud said; and she hoped he did not note her sudden start or the quick flushing of her face. "When did you see him?"

"He came up the garden way this evening just before I went riding with Jake. You were out with Dr. Capper. He was in rather a decent mood," said Bunny. "He gave me half a sovereign. Not a bad sort--Charlie."

He began to emerge from the enveloping towel, and Maud turned to go.

"You can stay if you like," said Bunny graciously. "I've no wish to make a stranger of you."

But she smiled and declined the invitation. "You do better without me now," she said.

And as the boy's small thin figure slipped down into the bath, she went out and crossed the passage swiftly to his room.

The letter from Charlie was not on his table, but tossed carelessly on the bed with his clothes. She shivered at the thought that Jake, and not she, might have found it there. The purple crest stood out conspicuous on the white envelope--a fox's head with the motto: Sans vertu, underneath. She wondered what wild ancestor of his had designed the cynical device.

Her hands were trembling as she tore open the flap. She was impatient, yet half-afraid. Her heart throbbed hard at sight of the dashing scrawl once so familiar and so dear.

"*Ma belle reine des roses;*"--her heart throbbed a little faster. The old sweet name, how it brought back to her those free, happy days of her youth! How she marvelled now at the high, girlish pride that had sent him away. How cruel had been the cost of that same pride!

She read on. It was a characteristic epistle, half-mocking, half-tender, throughout. Would she

meet him again? But of course she would! Had she not said that he could serve her? But they would not risk another interruption. Would she be going to the Graydown races? If not, he would manage to return early and come to her by the garden way. They would thus be sure of at least half an hour together before anyone else got back. He seemed confident that she would not refuse, and she knew, even as she read, that she could not. She must see him somehow. She must somehow get back to normal relations with him. She could not sacrifice his friendship to that one night's madness. Besides, there was her mother.

A trampling of hoofs in the yard below drew her to the window. She looked forth.

It was the Albatross being led out of his stable for the evening canter.

Dick Stevens held the bridle. He wore a heavy, glowering look. She remembered--and the memory seemed to scorch her--that morning after her wedding-day when she had stood and listened in petrified horror to Jake pouring forth terrible invective upon the lad's head.

He was standing by now, watching with a frown, as though the boy's movements displeased him; and even as she looked he went forward and took the bridle into his own hand.

Stevens stood aside sullenly, while he readjusted the bit with set lips. The Albatross nozzled against him, and after a few moments Jake's hand went to his pocket and brought forth a piece of sugar.

Then, while the animal munched it, he turned round upon the sulky stable-boy and spoke.

"If any harm comes to him through any damn' carelessness of yours, I warn you,--and I'm a man of my word--I'll leather you to a jelly, if it costs me fifty pounds."

His words were quiet, but absolutely distinct. His right hand was hard gripped on his riding-whip.

Stevens slunk back a step, not speaking, his face crimson and defiant.

Maud at the upper window clasped her hands suddenly and very tightly upon the letter they held. Yes, he was a man of his word. And what if he kept that other promise he had made to her? Life alone on a ranch with Jake! Her whole being rose in revolt at the thought. She turned away with a shudder.

CHAPTER X THE MISTAKE

The day fixed for the race for the Burchester Cup was inclined to be showery. Jake was up at an early hour, and when he was gone Maud rose also. But she felt too languid to bestir herself very greatly. She sat by the open window, breathing the pure morning air, and wondering, wondering, what the day would bring forth.

Since the receipt of Saltash's letter, she had been making up her mind. That she must see him alone that day was inevitable, but she had formed a strong determination that for the future she would put bounds to their intercourse. It could but lead in the one hopeless direction. Moreover, open friendship between them had become, owing to Jake's prohibition, impossible.

She did not blame Saltash for what had happened, but bitterly she blamed herself. She had been carried away by the moment's madness. Her feet had slipped. But the determination to retrace that false step was strong within her. For Charlie's sake, as well as for her own, she knew that they must not go on. With fatal clearness she realized that it was the downward path leading to destruction. It had never attracted her before her marriage, that downward path. The care of Bunny had absorbed her life. But now that her life was empty of all but the bondage she hated, she faced the fact that her resolution had begun to waver. She could no longer trust herself to stand firm.

Sitting there, drinking in the refreshing coolness of the rain-washed air, feeling the sweet morning chill all about her, something of that innate purity of hers seemed to revive. Some of the bitterness went from her soul. She was very, very tired; but after long meditation she had begun to see her way more clearly. Perhaps dimly the future had begun to draw her. Yes, her life was empty now. But in a little while--a little while-- A deep, deep breath escaped her. The memory of Mrs. Wright and her confident words of wisdom came to her. Her life would not be always a dreary wandering in a desert land. Prisoner she might be, but even so, the flowers might bloom around her, within her reach.

A little tremor went through her. Ah yes, it might be there were compensations in store, even for her. Her life would not be always empty.

A kind of waking dream came upon her. It was as though a soothing hand had been laid upon her, stilling her wild rebellion, giving her hope. The kaleidoscope of life was changing every day. Why should she despair?

When she descended to breakfast, she was calmer, more at peace with herself, than she had been for long.

She found Capper waiting alone. He gave her his quick, keen look, but characteristically he made no comment upon what he saw.

"I am wondering how I shall catch the boat-train to-night," he said.

"Must you do so?" she asked.

He nodded vigorously. "Indeed I must. I have trespassed upon your hospitality quite long enough. And there is work waiting across the Atlantic that only Maurice Capper can do."

She smiled at him. "How indefatigable you are! Won't it wait a little longer?"

"Not a day!" declared Capper.

And neither of them dreamed that that same work would have to wait many days ere Maurice Capper was at liberty to handle it.

They sat down alone to breakfast. Jake and Bunny had had their meal long before.

"There's no holding the boy this morning," Capper observed. "It will be a good thing now when you can get him off to school, Mrs. Bolton. He'll grow quicker there than anywhere."

Maud looked up quickly. "You think so?"

He smiled. "I have told Jake so. He, I believe, is waiting till these all-absorbing races are over to consult you on the subject."

Maud's eyes fell. "He won't do that," she said, in a low voice. "He and Bunny will settle it between them, and I shall be told afterwards."

"That so?" said Capper. "Then, if I may take the liberty to advise you, madam, I should consult them first."

She shook her head in silence. How could she even begin to tell Capper of the utter lack of sympathy between herself and Jake?

"And you really think he is fit to go to school, and fend for himself?" she asked, after a moment.

"Do him all the good in the world," said Capper. He added kindly: "Guess you'll miss him some, my dear; but believe me you won't be sorry when you see what it does for him."

"Oh no, I shall never be sorry on his account," she said.

And there the subject ended, but before she left the breakfast table she found an opportunity to acquaint him with her decision to remain at home that day.

He expressed regret but not surprise. "You are wise not to overtire yourself," he said.

She became aware again of the green eyes surveying her for a moment, and coloured. "I-am not sleeping very well," she said, with an effort.

He nodded as one who fully understood. "Take things easily!" he said. "Don't fret over 'em! Let the world go by!"

She got up, moved by an impulse curiously insistent. "Dr. Capper," she said, "it--it's rather a difficult world, isn't it?"

Her voice had a quiver of wistfulness in it. He reached out a hand at once that sought and held hers. "My dear Mrs. Bolton," he said, "we live too hard--all of us. That's nine-tenths of the trouble. It's because we won't trust the Hand on the helm. We're all so mighty anxious to do our own steering, and we don't know a thing about it."

The hold of the thin yellow fingers was full of kindly comfort. There was nothing disconcerting in the shrewd green eyes that looked into hers.

"I think you'll be happier presently, you know," he said. "It seems to me that two people I'm mighty fond of have got wandering off their bearings in the wilderness. They'll find each other presently and then, I guess, that same wilderness will blossom into a garden and they'll settle down in comfort and enjoy themselves."

He pressed her hand, and released it, making it evident that he had no intention of pursuing the matter further without definite encouragement. And Maud gave him none. Something in her shrank from doing so. He was Jake's friend before he was hers.

The day seemed very long. It was oppressive also, gleams of sunshine alternating with occasional heavy thunder showers.

She was lying in a hammock-chair under the trees in the orchard with Chops at her feet when Jake came striding through at the last moment to find her.

"Capper tells me you don't feel up to coming," he said.

She barely glanced up from the book in her lap, she did not want to meet his eyes. "I didn't tell him so," she said.

"But it is so?" insisted Jake.

"I have decided not to come, certainly," she said, feeling her heart jerk apprehensively as she made the statement.

He stood a moment in silence, then bent unexpectedly, took her by the chin, and turned her face up to his own. It was flooded with scarlet on the instant; her eyes flinched away from his.

He held her so for several seconds, looking at her, mercilessly watching that agonizing blush, till it faded under his eyes, leaving her white to the lips. Then, without another word, he let her go.

She heard the jingle of his spurs as he went away, and for a long time after she lay as he had left her, too unnerved to move. What could he know? How much did he suspect? She felt cold to the very heart of her, stricken and sick with fear. He had not so much as kissed her in his brutal, domineering way, and that fact disquieted her more than any other. Though she hated the touch of his lips she would have welcomed it thankfully in that hour of sickening apprehension only to feel reassured and safe.

The patter of rain roused her to activity and drove her back to the house, in time to meet Mrs. Lovelace hastening forth with an umbrella to her rescue.

"You shouldn't be sitting out there, ma'am, on a day like this," the old woman said. "And, lawk-a-massy, you do look bad!"

Maud tried to smile. "I am not bad, Mrs. Lovelace. It's only the heat."

Mrs. Lovelace pursed her lips and looked severely incredulous. "You'd best lie down, ma'am," she said. "I'll bring your lunch immediately."

She bustled away, and Maud sank on the couch in the parlour and strove to compose herself. But she could not with that awful fear coiled like a snake about her heart. A terrible restlessness possessed her. It was impossible to remain still.

If she could only send a message to Charlie, warning him not to come! But that was impossible. She knew that no message could reach him now. He would have to come, and Jake would know of it. Manoeuvre as she might, those lynx-eyes would wrest from her the secret. She knew herself powerless to withstand them.

She made scarcely any pretence to eat the luncheon that Mrs. Lovelace brought her. She had never before been in such a ferment of disquietude. Those few awful moments of Jake's silent scrutiny had shaken her to the very foundations of her being. She felt that he had ruthlessly forced his way past her defences and looked upon her naked soul. And she realized that he had spoken the truth when he had said that she could not deceive him. He could tear her reserve from her like a garment and expose her most secret thoughts.

She spent most of the afternoon in pacing to and fro, for she could not rest. Her feet were soaked with the drenched orchard grass, but she did not know it. Her limbs were strung to a feverish activity. There were times when she thought she would go mad.

The hours crawled by leaden-footed. She did not know in the least when Charlie would come, but she began to expect him long before he could possibly arrive, and the waiting became a torment that chafed her intolerably. If he would only come soon--so that she might make her petition and let him go!

Back and forth, back and forth, she wandered, conscious sometimes of a dreadful, physical sinking, but for the most part too torn with anxiety to be aware of anything else. And Chops paced with her in mute sympathy with her distress.

The afternoon was beginning to wane towards evening when Mrs. Lovelace came forth once more in search of her--Mrs. Lovelace with prim, set lips, sternly disapproving.

"You'll make yourself bad if you go on, ma'am," she said. "And if you please, Mrs. Wright is here, and I'm laying the cloth for tea."

"Mrs. Wright!" Maud looked at her with dazed eyes, bringing her thoughts back as it were from afar.

"There she is!" said Mrs. Lovelace.

And even as she spoke Maud caught sight of the comfortable, portly figure standing on the steps.

She gave a gasp that was almost a cry, and began to hasten towards her.

Mrs. Wright on her part bustled down to meet her. "Don't hurry, my dear, don't! I've only just come. Why, how tired and white you look! There! Run along, Sarah, and get the tea, like a good soul! I'll take care of Mrs. Bolton."

Her arm was already around Maud's waist; she looked up at her with round eyes full of kindly concern.

Maud bent to kiss her. "How--good of you to come!" she said.

She herself was divided between relief and dismay; but the relief predominated. It would not matter now if Charlie came. She would have to write to him on her mother's behalf. It was the only way. She believed she could evade Jake's vigilance with a letter--so long as Charlie did not write to her. The anguish through which she had passed had made her realize that she must not, could not, take such a risk again.

She clung to Mrs. Wright as to a deliverer. "Thank you for coming!" she said.

Mrs. Wright had begun to steer sturdily for the house. "Lor' bless you, dear, I'm as pleased as anything to come," she said. "Jake dropped in this morning casual-like, and happened to pass the remark as they was all going to the races but you. So I sent down to Tom's young lady to be so kind as to come and mind the shop for me this afternoon, and after dinner I dressed myself and came along to keep you company. I could have got here an hour ago, but I thought as you'd be resting, and I knew as Sarah would be busy."

So it was Jake's doing! He had taken this step to circumvent her. Maud was conscious of a throb of anger against him, but her visitor's guileless chatter made her stifle it. Mrs. Wright was so obviously unsuspecting.

They ascended the steps together, Mrs. Wright's arm stoutly assisting her. Then in the parlour she turned and looked at Maud.

"If I was you, my dearie, I should lie right down and have a rest. And I'll give you a drop of brandy in your tea."

She sank upon the sofa without protest. The reaction from those hours of feverish suspense was upon her. She felt exhausted in mind and body.

Mrs. Wright attended upon her with the utmost kindness. She did not talk a great deal, for which forbearance Maud was mutely thankful. She was so unutterably tired, too tired even to protest against that drop of brandy in her tea upon which Mrs. Wright insisted.

Another hour went by, but there was no sign of Saltash's coming. The evening was turning dark and wet. Maud lay on her sofa, sometimes dozing, sometimes talking abstractedly to her visitor. For Mrs. Wright was determined to remain till Jake returned, and briskly said so. Maud did not want to combat the decision. She was glad to have her there. It seemed that Charlie was not coming after all. Something had detained him. Her anxiety had spent itself, but she felt terribly weak. The comfort of the old woman's tender care was too great to refuse.

She scarcely knew how the time went, so overpowering was the languor that possessed her. The rainy sky brought down an early dusk long before the setting of the sun. A brooding stillness hung upon all things through which the patter of the rain sounded with unvarying monotony.

"Deary me! They will get wet," sighed Mrs. Wright.

Slowly the heavy clouds gathered and hung! Slowly the darkness deepened.

Suddenly Maud raised herself, sat up, tensely listened. "What is that?" she said.

Mrs. Wright looked at her. "I hear nothing but the rain, dear."

Maud broke in upon her impatiently. "Yes, that--that--that! Don't you hear? What is it? O God, what is it?"

Her voice rose wildly. In a moment she had sprung from her couch and was standing with caught breath, listening.

"My dearie, it's only the rain," said Mrs. Wright soothingly. "Don't let yourself get jumpy! There's nothing there."

But Maud paid no attention to her. With a movement incredibly swift she reached the door and threw it open.

Then indeed Mrs. Wright heard sounds, muffled but undeniable, of some commotion in the stable-yard. "I expect they've just got home, dear," she said. "And very wet they'll be. Hadn't you better tell Sarah to get a nice hot brew of tea ready for 'em? Little Sir Brian will be sure to want his tea."

But the rush of Maud's feet along the oaken passage was her only answer. The girl went like the wind, urged by the most awful fear she had ever known.

The front door was open. Bunny was on the step. But she brushed past him without so much as seeing him, tearing forth bare-headed, ashen-faced, into the rain.

For there in the murky twilight, terrible as a lion newly roused, stood Jake, gripping by the collar a struggling, writhing figure, the while he administered to it as sound a horse-whipping as his great strength could accomplish. His right arm moved slowly, with a deliberate regularity

unspeakably horrible to behold. She had a glimpse--only a glimpse--of his face, and the savage cruelty of it was such that it seemed no longer human. Of his victim she saw very little, but of his identity not the smallest doubt existed in her mind; and as the sound of those awful blows reached her, the last shred of her endurance was torn away. She shrieked and shrieked again as she ran.

Those shrieks reached Jake as the cry of its mate in distress might reach an animal intent upon its prey. He flung the prey from him on the instant and wheeled. He met her a full ten yards from the spot, just as her feet slipped on the wet stones of the yard. He caught her--she almost fell against him--and held her hard in his arms.

She was sobbing terribly, utterly unstrung, hysterical. She struggled for speech, but the wild sounds that left her lips were wholly unintelligible. She struggled to free herself, but her strength was gone. In the end, her knees suddenly gave way under her. She collapsed with a gasping cry. And Jake, stooping, raised her, and bore her in senseless out of the drenching rain.

CHAPTER XI THE REASON

"You've only yourself to thank," said Capper. He tugged irritably at his pointed yellow beard. His eyes were moody under brows that frowned. "You might have known what to expect if you had an ounce of sense."

"Guess I always was an all-fired fool," said Jake.

The great doctor looked down at him from his post on the hearth, and his eyes softened a little. For Jake's dejection was very thorough. He sat as it were in dust and ashes.

"Not always, my son," he said. "But I guess you've surpassed yourself on this occasion. Well, it's done. She may get over it, but she won't love you any the better for it. It'll be up to you to make a fresh start presently."

Jake was silent. He was not smoking. He sat with bent head and lowered eyes.

Capper contemplated him awhile, till at length a faint glint of humour began to shine in his green eyes. He moved, and laid a long, wiry hand upon Jake's shoulder.

"Say, Jake!" he said. "Don't take it too hard, man! Let it be a lesson to you, that's all. And the next time you want to whip a stable-boy, do it on the quiet, and there'll be no misunderstandings. Guess you'll have to sing small for a bit, but it's not a hanging matter. She'll forgive you by and by."

"Why should she?" Jake did not move his head or respond in any way to the friendly touch.

"Because she's that sort." Capper spoke with stout conviction. "She won't hold out against you when she sees you're sorry. Don't be afraid to tell her so, Jake! Don't hide your soul!"

Jake raised his head suddenly, looking full up at Capper with eyes that glowed red and sombre. "You don't quite grasp the situation, Doc," he said. "She won't be sorry for this when she comes to herself. She never wanted to bear a child of mine. She loathes the very ground I walk on. She'd do most anything--most anything--to get quit of me. No, I reckon she won't be sorry any. She'll be--sort of--glad!"

"Oh, shucks!" Capper's hand suddenly smote him hard. "You don't know women. I tell you, you don't know 'em!"

"I know one!" Jake's voice was deadly calm. His eyes shone like a still, hot fire. "I thought I could win her, though the odds were dead against me. I staked all on the chance--the hundredth chance--and it's gone. I've lost. There's no sense in pretending otherwise. Now that this has happened I shan't hold her any longer, unless it's by brute force; and I reckon there's more lost than gained that way. And yet I know--I know--" his voice suddenly took a deeper note--"that where I've failed, no other man has ever yet succeeded. No one else has ever got to the heart of her. That I know."

He spoke with grim force, as though challenging incredulity on Capper's part, but Capper made no attempt to contradict him. He even nodded as if he held the same opinion.

"Then I guess it's up to you to find the way," he said. "There's a better way for all of us than brute force, my son. There is a power that all the violence in the world can't beat. It's greater than all the devils. And you'll win out--you'll win out--on the strength of it."

He paused. Jake's eyes had kindled a little. He set his hands on the arms of his chair as though about to rise.

"You get me?" Capper asked.

A faint smile came over his face. "You speak as one who knows," he said.

"I do know." Capper's voice was very emphatic. "It's not an easy world to live in. It's a mighty difficult one. But we've been given a compass to steer by--a Divine compass, Jake, my lad. Guess it's our own fault in the main if we fail to get there."

He waited. The light was gradually growing in Jake's eyes. He had a speculative, half-doubtful look.

"And yet you advised me to jump the hedge," he said.

Capper smiled somewhat ruefully. "I didn't tell you to burst your way through, did I?" he said. "You didn't take it the right way, my son. You blundered, and it's left a nasty breach. It's not beyond repair, mind you. But it'll take some patience and some faith before it's all filled up. Set to work on it right now! You've got the materials. Use 'em--all you know! Show her what Love--real Love--is worth! She's a woman. She'll soon understand."

Jake got to his feet with the quiet, purposeful movement of a man who has work before him. He gripped Capper's hand for a moment, and looked him straight in the face.

"I reckon you're right, sir," he said, speaking rather heavily. "I've made a damn' muddle of the whole show. I was nearer to her--several lengths nearer--in the old days when we were just friends--just friends--" his voice quivered slightly--"than I am now. Well, I reckon I must get back to the old footing. We'll be--just friends--again."

He turned from Capper with the words, went to the mantelpiece and took up his pipe.

The doctor watched him for awhile silently. There was a greatness about the man's simplicity that commanded his respect. There was even an element of the superb in it.

"I take off my hat, to you, Jake," he said at length "You're a white man."

Jake's head was bent over his pipe. He made a brief, contemptuous sound, and rammed it into his mouth. "We don't all think alike," he said. "Well, I must be going anyway. So long, Doc!"

"Where are you off to?" Capper asked.

He made a gesture as of one who contemplates an unpleasant task. "I must go up to the Castle. I said I would. I've got to tell Lord Saltash how the Albatross failed this afternoon."

"But, man, he knows!" exclaimed Capper. "He was there!"

Jake turned round. His pipe was alight. He puffed at it grimly. "Maybe he does. But it's my duty to tell him all the same. It may interest him also to hear that Stevens won't be fit for the saddle again for a week or two. I'd have marked the young blackguard for life if I hadn't been stopped." His brows suddenly met fiercely. "I'd have got out of him what he did it for too--though I guess I know. When a hot favourite like the Albatross gets left behind like that there's always a reason--a damn' substantial reason--at the bottom of it. Oh, it's a foul business," he said bitterly. "I ought to have scratched sooner than run the chance of having him pulled. I never trusted Stevens--never. I'll see him drawn and quartered before he ever rides another horse of mine!"

"But you've no evidence?" suggested Capper.

"I've the evidence of my own eyes," said Jake bluntly. "And there'll be further evidence presently, or I'm a nigger."

"What do you mean? He'll never own it."

"No." Jake spoke with a savage disdain. "He won't have the spunk for that. And he won't have the spunk either to take out a summons for assault. He'll just take it all lying down. I know. I know."

He swung round on his heel to go, went as far as the door, then suddenly wheeled and came back.

"Say, Capper!" he said, and all the savagery was gone from his voice; it held a note of pleading. "She'll get over it, sure?"

Capper's yellow face was full of kindness. He reached forth a hand that gripped hard. "Please God she'll live to be the mother of your children yet, Jake!" he said.

Jake drew a sharp breath. "God knows I don't want her--just for that," he said, with husky vehemence.

And then abruptly, as if ashamed, he pulled his hand free and departed.

Capper's fingers sought his beard as the door closed. "You're learning, Jake," he said. "You're learning. Wonder how soon she'll begin to find out that there's another man in the place where her husband used to be!"

He coiled himself down into a chair, bending and cracking his long fingers with meditative zest. But the frown remained between his brows. If Capper the man was satisfied, Capper the doctor was very much the reverse. He was not dismayed, but he was anxious, more anxious than

he deemed it necessary for anyone to know.

"She'll pull through," he muttered to himself once. And again: "She must pull through."

But in his heart he knew that it was more than possible that his patient's life might ebb out on the bitter tide of disappointment and misery even when the worst danger seemed to be over. She was so lonely in her trouble, so piteously bereft of all desire or incentive to live.

Up in the room above, Maud lay, white and still, her dark hair all about her, her eyes closed, an aloofness that was almost like the shadow of Death wrapping her round.

Mrs. Wright sat by her side, very alert and watchful. It was growing late, but she had long ago signified her intention of remaining for the night. Very practical and sure of herself was Mrs. Wright. She and Dr. Capper were already firm allies.

The night was close, and the windows were flung wide. The door into the adjoining room was wide open also, and a faint current of air eddied about the room, stirring now and again the chintz hangings of the old-fashioned bed, rustling occasionally the white muslin curtains at the window. The wash of the sea came up vaguely from the dark distance. It sounded like the far splashing of mighty oars.

Near at hand, down in the dim garden there came sometimes the mysterious movements of some small creature creeping stealthily through the bushes, and once or twice down in the orchard an owl hooted its weird, half-human signal.

Mrs. Wright did not like the voice of the owl. She shivered whenever she heard it; but Maud lay as one oblivious of all things, drifting, drifting, on a great lonely sea on which no sun ever rose or star shone.

Someone came into the adjoining room and stood in the open doorway. Mrs. Wright looked swiftly round.

Jake's eyes met hers, he made a brief sign for silence. Then, without sound, he crept in and stood against the bed-curtain, looking down mutely at his wife's still face.

Several seconds of complete silence followed, then, quite suddenly, as though someone had called her, she opened her eyes wide and turned her head.

He drew back behind the curtain on the instant ere she could catch sight of him, standing motionless as a statue, not seeming so much as to breathe.

A troubled frown gathered on Maud's face; she made a restless movement.

At once Mrs. Wright bent to her from the other side of the bed. "What is it, my dearie? You're not in pain?"

Maud was panting a little. She tried to raise herself, but was gently checked by a motherly hand. She took and held it with trembling fingers.

"Mrs. Wright,--please--you won't go!" she begged.

"Surely not, my dear." Stoutly Mrs. Wright made answer. "I'm going to take care of you all night long."

But Maud was not wholly reassured. She clung faster to the plump, soothing hand. "If Jake comes in, he--he will want to send you away. Don't let him, Mrs. Wright! I--I can't be alone with Jake to-night."

She was becoming agitated, but Mrs. Wright gently hushed her. "You shan't be, dearest. Jake wants me to be with you to-night. He is very unhappy about you, is poor Jake. Dear knows you needn't be afraid of him."

"Oh, how can I help it after what he did to Charlie? Did you see? Did you see? Is Charlie very badly hurt?"

"Charlie?" questioned Mrs. Wright.

"Charlie Burchester--Lord Saltash. Didn't you see what--what Jake did to him? Oh, it was terrible--terrible!" A great shudder shook her at the remembrance of what she had seen.

"My dear! My dear!" Mrs. Wright leaned to her, smoothing her pillow. "Why, what a mistake to be sure! And to think you've put yourself out like this all for nothing! Dear, dear, dear, to be sure! That wasn't Lord Saltash, darling. Whatever made you think it was? It was just one of them pesky stable-boys as he was giving a jacketing to; and richly he deserved it, I'll be bound."

"Oh, Mrs. Wright!" Maud's voice was suddenly eager. "Are you sure? Are you sure?"

Her dark eyes, wide and beseeching, were raised in earnest questioning to her old friend's kindly face. She clung to the sustaining hand.

"My dear, of course I'm sure. I came along behind you. I saw it all. It was that young dog, Dick Stevens. I know him well, never did like him; and I'm sure he deserved all he got, probably more. Now you mustn't worry yourself any longer. Leave it all to old Mother Wright and go to deep! Will you, my dearie?"

"You're sure Charlie is safe?" Maud said quiveringly. "He--he was coming--don't tell Jake!--to see me to-day. But he didn't come. And I thought--I thought--Oh, are you sure Jake isn't listening?"

She broke off in sudden terror, starting up as if she would tear aside the curtain. But Mrs. Wright was swift to interpose.

"My dear, you mustn't upset yourself like this. It's very wrong. What if Jake did know? Surely he would understand. He would know that there could be no reason why Lord Saltash should not drop in and see you in a friendly way now and then. Didn't you tell me you were old friends?"

"Oh, you don't know Jake!" moaned Maud. "He is so terrible--so terrible. He would shoot Charlie--if he knew!"

"My dear!" Mrs. Wright was genuinely shocked. She threw a sharp glance towards the curtain. "But there is no reason! There can be no reason! You're talking wildly. You can't know what you're saying."

Maud had sunk back upon her pillows, white-lipped, exhausted. "There is a reason," she whispered. "There is a reason! I love Charlie. I have loved him for years. And Jake--Jake would kill him if he knew. He does know--a little. That's why--why I am so--afraid. Oh, I wish--I wish I were--dead!"

She ceased to speak, and a dreadful pallor crept up over her face. Mrs. Wright, anxiously watching, saw that she was slipping into unconsciousness, and across the bed she issued a sharp command.

"Quick, Jake! Go and fetch the doctor!"

The shadow behind the curtain vanished. Mrs. Wright reached for a fan. The heat was intense. The darkness hung before the window like a pall. And the good woman trembled a little in spite of herself. She felt as if the Angel of Death had suddenly entered the quiet room to share her watch.

CHAPTER XII

REFUGE

"So you've come to see your old uncle at last! Dear me, you've been a precious long time about it. Tut, tut, child, what a clothes-peg to be sure! Sit down. Sit down! You don't look fit to stand."

Old Uncle Edward pulled out a chair from his dining-room table and almost thrust his visitor into it. Then he turned, seized a decanter, and poured some wine into a large old-fashioned glass goblet.

"You drink this! It's good stuff--older than you are. It'll turn to blood in your veins, and a good thing too. You look as if you hadn't got more than a thin half-pint in the whole of your constitution. There! That's better. Don't be afraid of it! Don't be afraid of it! Take another dose before you start talking! I know what you women are once your tongues get going. Take another dose, I say! You're looking half-dead. What have they been doing to you? Starving you?"

His grey whiskers seemed to bristle with indignation as he asked the question; his eyes glared at her like the eyes of a terrier on the hunt. Maud sat in the red velvet chair with a feeling of vast unreality. It was true that she was feeling almost too weak to stand, and her weakness imparted to her an odd desire to cry. The gruff kindness of her reception made her feel like a lost child brought home to a kind but somewhat severe parent. She drank the wine in almost unbroken silence.

Uncle Edward stood looking on, sternly critical. "So you've been ill, have you? I can see you have. Poor girl, poor girl! Well, we must see what we can do, to get you strong again. And you haven't brought your young brother along? How is he? Quite cured?"

"Yes, quite cured." Maud put out a hesitating hand and somewhat shyly slipped it into her uncle's. "He is quite cured," she said, forcing a difficult smile. "And he would have come too--it was so good of you to ask him--only it is September, and the school will soon be opening; and it seemed a pity not to let him go at the beginning of the term. We all thought so."

Uncle Edward grunted as if not wholly pleased. But his old knotted fingers closed very kindly about her own. "So your good husband is going to pay for his schooling, is he? That's very generous of him--very generous, indeed. He's a man of property, is he,--your Jake?"

A quick flush rose in Maud's upturned face; she averted it swiftly. "I don't know. He seems to be able to do anything he likes. He--he is very kind to Bunny."

Uncle Edward grunted again. "Well, and how do you amuse yourself, now that the all-important Bunny is off your hands? I suppose you play the busy housewife, do you?"

Maud uttered a faint laugh as forced as her smile had been. "Oh no. I don't do anything. There is an old woman who cooks and does everything. I really can't think of anything that I do. Of course lately--just lately--I haven't been able to do things. But everything goes very well without me."

Uncle Edward squeezed her hand and released it. "You've too humble an opinion of yourself, my dear. Most women get uppish when they marry. I don't as a rule like young married women for that reason. They think all the world stands still to admire 'em. But you--well, you're different. You and I will get on together."

He smiled upon her so suddenly and so genially that she felt as if a burst of sunshine had warmed her tired soul. She lifted her face with a gesture that was half-instinctive, and he stooped at once and kissed it.

"You're a very pretty young woman," he said, patting her cheek paternally. "At least you might be, if you weren't so painfully thin. You've been very ill, I can see. You're hardly fit to travel alone now. Why didn't you tell me? I'd have come and fetched you if I'd known."

"Oh, I didn't travel alone," she said. "I had Dr. Capper with me. I shouldn't have come so soon but for him. He was going to the docks, and he offered to bring me and take care of me. He knew how dreadfully I wanted to get away."

"And who may Dr. Capper be?" Uncle Edward demanded grimly.

"He is a very great American surgeon--a friend of Jake's. He was with us when--when I began to be ill. And--and I have been in his hands ever since." Maud spoke haltingly. "He is a very kind man," she said. "I don't think I should have lived if it hadn't been for him. He made me live."

"Oh, he's one of your quacks, is he?" Uncle Edward spoke with a mighty contempt. "Well, I thank Heaven I've never called in a doctor all my life, and I consider it's one of the chief reasons why I've lived so long. People think a deal too much about their health nowadays. The world is getting neurotic. Plenty of fresh air and exercise, and good wholesome food. That's my motto. No beastly doctors' messes for me. Now that man of yours, he's a healthy animal, I'll be bound. I liked the looks of him, and the ways of him too. A bit off-hand, but straight and clean. He's been good to you, has he?"

He shot the question with an abruptness that found Maud wholly unprepared. She made an involuntary movement of shrinking.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Uncle Edward. "He's been high-handed, I gather. Just what I expected. If a man doesn't make love to a woman before he marries her, he'll never be bothered to after. Silly fool! Silly fool! Still, you might have done worse. Don't take him too seriously, my dear! Tip him off his perch if he crows too loud!"

Maud smiled her faint sad smile and rose. "I am not complaining of anyone, Uncle Edward. You mustn't jump to conclusions. And you mustn't call Dr. Capper a quack, for he has healed Bunny. Now, may I please go up to my room? I know you are busy, and I shall be glad to rest for a little if I may."

"Go by all means!" said Uncle Edward. "You're to do exactly as you like in this house. Consider the whole show at your disposal! Come and go exactly as you will!" He drew her to him abruptly and kissed her a second time. "Be happy, my dear!" he said. "Be happy! You won't be young always, and there's not much fun to be had when you're old--specially if you're alone. But you'll never be that, please Heaven. You'll have your children and your children's children growing up around you--even when you're old."

He paused, holding her, for Maud had suddenly hidden her face against his shoulder. "I can't look forward--like that," she whispered. "I often think--that I'd rather--live alone."

There was a pathos in her words that bordered upon tragedy. Uncle Edward thrust a protecting arm about her, rasping his throat as if something had made it smart. "Tut, tut!" he said. "You wouldn't enjoy it for long. There's precious little fun in the lonely life, I can tell you, for I know. I sit here on a Sunday and listen to the quiet till even the racket of a dog-fight would be welcome. We're all the same, I expect; wanting what we haven't got instead of making the best of what we have. I should think the Almighty must smile sometimes at the very contrariness of us."

He patted her shoulder as she lifted her head, looking at her with his keen grey eyes that held humour as well as sympathy.

"You'll have plenty of solitude in this establishment, anyhow," he said. "You can soak yourself in it all day long. There's a library that may amuse you, but that's all I can offer in the way of entertainment."

"Oh, I don't want entertainment," Maud assured him.

"You're singularly unlike your mother," was Uncle Edward's comment.

He did not ask her how her mother was faring, and she did not feel that the moment for speaking of her affairs had arrived. There was a touch of the formidable about the old man, all his kindness to her notwithstanding; and she felt too tired and ill for a difficult discussion. She wanted to lie down and rest for a long, long time.

This visit to Uncle Edward meant deliverance to her from a yoke too heavy to be borne. All through her illness she had yearned for, striven for, this escape; and because of this intense longing of hers, Capper, realizing that disappointment could but retard her progress, had set himself to further her desire.

Jake had offered no opposition to it. She had scarcely seen Jake since the night of the races, and not once had they been alone together. He had bidden her farewell that morning in Capper's presence briefly, almost coldly. There had not been even so much as a touch of hands between them at parting. He had got into the carriage after them, it was true, and had wrapped a rug about her knees; but he had done it without any personal solicitude or show of sympathy. Only at the very last, just as the train started, had he looked her in the face; and then as it were half against his will he had turned his eyes upon her.

And the memory of that look had gone with her throughout the journey; it was to haunt her for many days with a strange poignancy. For the red-brown eyes had held no mastery, no passion, only a dumb misery that had somehow gone to her heart. Why had he looked at her like that? Why was he so unhappy? Had he wanted to speak to her and failed for lack of words? Did he blame himself at all for what had happened? Did he desire in any way to make amends?

She had thought that to escape from his proximity would have been sheer relief, but now that she actually found herself free from all possibility of seeing him she was curiously perturbed by the thought of him. She had an odd little regret that she had not waved a hand to him as the train had borne her away. Just a friendly wave to show him that she harboured no resentment any longer! She might have done it, but for an overpowering shyness that had prevented any expression of farewell. Ill though she was, ill and weary, she could have made him that sign of friendship and been none the worse for it.

But reserve had held her back. It towered between them, a barrier more insurmountable than it had ever been before. And behind that reserve her whole being crouched in fear. For she had begun to tell herself over and over, over and over, like a panic-stricken child, that once away from him she could never return, never, face again that which she had faced.

Possibly he had begun to realize this also; possibly that was why he had looked at her so. Would he accept it as inevitable, she wondered? Would he, now that she had dragged herself free for a space from a bondage unendurable, be merciful and let her go altogether?

There was her promise. Oh yes, there was her promise. But might not that promise now be regarded as fulfilled? She had striven to do her duty, but it had proved too hard for her. Surely he must see that now! Surely he could not wish to hold her any longer against her will! The thought tortured her. She was like a hunted creature in a temporary refuge all exits from which were barred. If she made a final dash for freedom and the open, she would almost certainly be trapped.

Against her will the thought of Charlie went through her like a flaming sword;--Charlie who had sworn to be a friend to her--Charlie from whom she had not heard one single word since that awful day that she had awaited him in vain. No one had spoken to her of him, but that he was no longer at the Castle she was fairly convinced. He had, as it were, darted like a fire-fly into her ken and out of it again. But he would return. She was sure he would return. And when he came--what then? What then?

She did not ask herself why he had gone in that sudden fashion. It was so characteristic of the man that she saw nothing in it. That there had been no encounter between him and Jake she was now certain. Perhaps he had gone away for her sake in order to avert Jake's suspicion. His complete silence seemed to point to this. But it was quite useless to speculate. His ways were past understanding, so vague was her knowledge of the motive that governed his actions.

Meanwhile the problem of her mother's difficulties remained and was becoming more and more acute. The place had been mortgaged by Sheppard to Saltash's predecessor who had had a fancy for possessing the whole of Fairharbour; and the affairs of the landlord of the Anchor Hotel had been on the downward trend ever since. Occasionally a good season would arrest this decline for a space; but good seasons were becoming more and more rare. Giles Sheppard sought consolation too often in his cellars, and the management was no longer what it had been. Regular visitors were beginning to desert him in consequence, and the downward slope was rapidly

becoming precipitous. Saltash's man of business was tightening his hold, and Sheppard's tenure of the place was becoming week by week more uncertain.

All of this Maud knew. Her mother was growing desperate. Her life, it seemed, had been nothing but a series of misfortunes, and this threatened to be the greatest of them all. Giles had deceived her outrageously, and now that he had secured her he cared for her no longer, save when his frequent libations rendered him tipsily amorous. Something of a vixenish nature was beginning to develop in Mrs. Sheppard. She was no more the gentle, plaintive creature she had been. She had once--and only once--approached Jake on the subject of financial help. Maud was unaware of this. Jake's reply had been perfectly courteous but uncompromisingly firm. He would give Mrs. Sheppard shelter, if she ever needed it, but he would have nothing to do with her husband or his affairs. Mrs. Sheppard had turned from him with a bitter look that had said more than words. And since that day she had steadily avoided all intercourse even with her daughter, declaring herself far too busy to get as far as the Stables.

Maud had not needed her; but none the less she was uneasy about her. She wished she knew where Charlie was; but she could not risk sending a letter to the Castle. There seemed to be nothing more she could do. She had begun to tell him of her trouble. He knew she needed help. Possibly even he might without further persuasion refrain from carrying matters to extremes. She had mentioned her mother to him. He must have understood. He would surely remember her distress.

And yet whenever her thoughts turned towards him the memory of Jake's words awoke within her, tormented her: "Trust him, and he will let you down,--sure." Why had he spoken so certainly? What did he know of Saltash and his ways? Was it possible--could it be--that he knew a side of Charlie's whimsical nature that had never been presented to her? Or was she so blind that she had failed to perceive it? It was true that in the old days he had failed her, he had wavered in his allegiance. But he had come back. He had come back. Always she remembered that. And because he had come back, her heart had warmed to him again, against her will, against her judgment, even in spite of every instinct. He belonged to her; that was the thought that flashed with such a burning intensity through her soul, the thought that refused utterly to be stifled or put away. He belonged to her and to none other, trifle or intrigue as he might. She was his fate. How often he had said it! And so he would return. She was sure he would return. And when he came--what then? Ah, what then?

CHAPTER XIII THE LAMP BEFORE THE ALTAR

Life at Uncle Edward's was as he had predicted a very quiet affair indeed, but Maud slipped into it very easily, with a sense of comfort at her heart. It had a healing effect upon her. It stilled the fevered unrest of her spirit. It was all so well-ordered, so methodical. It soothed her, gave her a sense of normality and peace. Her physical strength came back to her with a rapidity that surprised herself, and with its return she found herself beginning to look upon the world with new eyes, found herself able to thrust dark thoughts and problems into the background, found herself at rest.

At Uncle Edward's suggestion, she wrote once a week to Jake. It was not easy to write, but when her uncle remarked that the young man would probably come tearing hell-for-leather across England to find out what was the matter if she didn't, she deemed it the wiser course to follow. Her letters were very brief, very formal, and the letters she received in reply were equally so. She was sure that they were penned in that cheerless little den of his that faced north and overlooked the stable-yard.

Bunny's letters were very few and far between. He was completely engrossed with the thought of the new life at school upon which he was about to enter, and it was very plain to Maud that he missed her not at all. The fact had ceased to hurt her as poignantly as when she first discovered it. Empty though her life was, she had learned by degrees to do without him. She was learning day by day to endure that emptiness with patience, for by some secret instinct she knew that it would not be her portion for ever.

Not far from her uncle's house, at the corner of a busy street, there stood an old grey church. The doors were always open, and one day she dropped in to rest.

It was the first visit of many. The place was infinitely peaceful, full of silence and soft

shadows. A red light burned ever before the altar, and there were always beautiful flowers upon it, white lilies that never seemed to fade. She loved to draw near and smell the incense of those flowers, to gaze upon their shining purity, to feel with awe that the ground beneath her feet was holy.

She did not often turn her eyes upon the lamp that burned so still and red. It was always the flowers that drew her, the fragrance of them that comforted her soul.

Once, on a golden afternoon in mid-September, she came in late and stayed for the evening service; and then it was that, sitting in the body of the church, she found herself gazing, gazing, not at the flowers, but at the red, mystic flame that burned unflickering before the altar. It reminded her of something, that still red flame,--something that made her want to flee away and hide. It came between her and her prayers. It lay in wait for her in her dreams.

And yet when Sunday evening came and Uncle Edward prepared to sally forth alone, she put forward a tentative suggestion that she should accompany him.

He was delighted with the proposal, and as they fared forth together, his horny old hand was on her arm, making her glad that she was with him.

They sat near the door, and she was secretly relieved. In the glare of many lights all down the body of the church, the gleam of that one red light was swallowed up and she saw only the flowers. It was a beautiful service--a harmonious whole in which no individual note was struck. The man who officiated was young and very quiet, and not till he ascended the pulpit was she aware of anything out of the ordinary in his personality. It came to her then instantaneously, like a flash-light piercing her soul. He struck no attitudes, made no visible attempt to gain the attention of his audience; but it was fully his from the moment he began to speak. He preached, not as one delivering a discourse, but with the absolute simplicity of a man who speaks from his heart. "Let your lights be burning," were the words he first uttered, and then without preamble he began to talk of Love--Love Divine, Unconquerable, Eternal--Love that stoops but is never small--Love that soars, but is never out of reach. He spoke of the great warfare of the spirit, of the thousand difficulties holding back the soul. And he declared that Love was the one great weapon to meet and overcome them all. "We do not know the power of Love," he said. "We only know that it is invincible and undying--the very Essence of God." He spoke of spiritual blindness, and swept it aside as nought. "We may not all of us be able to believe; but we can all have Love. Nothing counts in the same way. However blind we may be, we can keep that one lamp burning in the darkness, burning in the desert, giving light to the outcast, and guiding the feet of the wanderers."

It was while he was speaking thus that the lights in the body of the church went down and the red flame before the altar shone clear and unchanging in the gloom. Maud's eyes were drawn instantly to it, became riveted upon it. She sat with bated breath, almost as one who watched a miracle. And by some strange telepathy the man in the pulpit became aware of it also. He turned towards it.

"Look at that light!" he said. "It is kept burning perpetually, the symbol of undying worship, undying Love. Everyone may keep such a light as that burning always. The spark is ours for the kindling. It may be placed before the Altar of an Unknown God. But none the less is it offered to His Glory and immortal. It is not faith or hope that the soul needs above all things. It is Love, the power to love, and the power to create love--the will to offer love perpetually before the Altar of Love. It is only love that counts in the long run, only love that survives. There may be a thousand other things around us when we die, good and evil, but the only thing we shall carry with us beyond is that lamp that we have always kept burning before the altar and never suffered to go out. It is no easy thing to keep it always burning in this world of many failures. It is bound to flicker sometimes, even to die down; but while we live, the power to revive it is still ours, the power to worship God with love." He paused a moment, turned slowly back to face the dim nave, and then very quietly he gave utterance to words that Maud was never to forget. "We all want Love, hunger for it, starve for it. Our lives are mere ash-heaps without it. But do we all realize that love is only gained by love, that we must pour out all we have to win it, that we must purge our hearts of all selfish desire, sanctify ourselves by self-sacrifice, by the complete renunciation of self, before the perfect gift can be ours? Love is a joyful sacrifice. There are people whom everyone loves. They are the people who realize what Love means, who give and give, without measure, not counting the cost, rejoicing only in the power to give, till it all comes back to them a thousandfold. It is then that the ploughman overtakes the reaper, for ploughman and reaper are one."

When Maud lay down that night, those words were still running in her mind. That unstinted

giving, that measureless pouring out, that utter sacrifice, were these indeed the means by which the desert could be made to blossom--even for her?

She slept sooner than usual, but the echoes of that quiet voice still followed her down through the deeps of slumber, till she dreamed that she was back before that shining altar of flowers. And a radiance that was not of earth was all about her--a radiance unimaginable that was warmth as well as light; and looking up she saw that it came from the red lamp above her--the symbol of undying Love.

As in a trance she waited, for the wonder of the thing held her spellbound. And while she waited, she became aware of someone else in the holy place, someone who moved stealthily, as if half-afraid. And turning, by the light of that revealing glow, she saw her husband with that look of silent misery in his eyes.

It pierced her then as it had not pierced her before. She was conscious of an almost fierce impulse to comfort, an impulse that urged her to him, banishing all hesitation, all doubt. She went near to him, she gave him both her hands. And even as she did so, the look in his eyes changed. She saw a deep, still fire come into them. It seemed to be reflected from the red lamp above. He moved forward with her into the glow.

And suddenly her own eyes were opened and she knew that he loved her--he loved her....

Then she awoke with a palpitating heart and realized that it was a dream.

CHAPTER XIV THE OPEN DOOR

Not till she had been in her uncle's house for close upon four weeks did Maud brace herself to speak to him of her mother. She had been on the verge of doing so many times, but always, in his bluff fashion, he had managed to convey to her that the subject was not to be broached.

But for an urgent letter from Mrs. Sheppard herself, she would scarcely have summoned the courage to break through what was almost a prohibition, for Uncle Edward was not an easy man to resist; and even as she did so, she knew with absolute conviction that her effort was foredoomed to failure. She scarcely knew how to make it, so uncompromising was the old man's attitude, and when at last it was made, when in desperation she forced herself to tell him of her mother's pitiable plight, she regretted it almost immediately so curtly was her information received. She saw that Uncle Edward was really angry though he said but little. She also saw that what she said on her mother's behalf made not the smallest impression upon his will. He heard her out indeed, but so grimly that at length, feeling that she was presenting the matter quite inadequately in face of his total lack of sympathy, she gave him her mother's hysterical appeal to read.

He shook his head at first, but finally, as she pressed it upon him almost tearfully, he took and read the letter. Then, while anxiously she watched him, he tore it across and across and flung it back to her over the table.

"Pshaw!" he said. "The woman's a hypocrite--a confounded impostor. I know her. You don't. Leave her alone, and let her sink!"

And with that he stumped angrily from the room with beetling brows and fiery eyes.

Maud sat very still after his departure. She had known in her heart that it was hopeless to appeal to him, but now that the appeal had failed she was utterly nonplussed. There was no doubt in her mind that matters were desperate. Her mother had made her realize that, and she felt she could not write and tell her that she could do nothing. Slight as was the bond of sympathy between them, still were they mother and daughter, and she could not fling her off as Uncle Edward recommended. In a fashion the old man's anger reacted in her mother's favour; for she was conscious of indignation on her behalf. Whatever Mrs. Sheppard's faults might be--and it was quite possible that insincerity was among them--he had no right to abuse her to her daughter. It aroused her own anger, and it aroused also that protective instinct which was never very far below the surface with her. When she rose at length, her face was very pale and determined. She had not wanted to write to Charlie, but it seemed that she had no choice.

It was a still, warm afternoon in October. She went into the drawing-room, a stiff apartment upholstered in gold brocade, and sat down at a writing-table in a window-recess to write.

It was the most difficult letter she had ever composed, and yet she had never experienced the smallest difficulty in writing to him before. She could not express herself freely. Words would not

come. She desired to avoid all reference to what had passed between them on that night of witchery on which they had last met. She wanted to blot it out of her mind and heart, to address him, to regard him, as only a friend. Ever since that Sunday evening, now nearly a week ago, she had kept her thoughts rigidly from straying in his direction. Had it been possible she would have put him altogether out of her life. It was not possible, and she knew it. But it was with the greatest reluctance that she set herself to write to him, and her reluctance displayed itself in every sentence.

She sat over that letter for the greater part of the afternoon, and when it was finished at last she felt utterly dissatisfied with it. She had an urgent desire to tear it up. But she could not face the writing of another. With a weary sigh she closed and stamped the envelope.

It was then that there fell a step outside the drawing-room door, and Uncle Edward's discreet, elderly maidservant peeped in.

Maud turned in her chair. "What is it, Martha?"

Martha was about to explain, but broke off with a gasp and drew back. There was a muttered word in the doorway, and the next moment Martha had disappeared, and a man's figure stood in the opening.

"Hullo!" said Charlie, with a smile of gay effrontery. "May I come in?"

Maud sat for a second or two as one in a trance and stared at him. It was as if the afternoon's labour had suddenly taken concrete form.

He did not wait for her greeting, but came lightly forward with hands outstretched. "Ah, queen of the roses," he said, "what a peculiarly unbecoming setting you have chosen for yourself! Why--why--what is that? A letter to me? How many times a day do you write them?"

With a lithe, elastic movement, he drew her to her feet, held her a moment, looking at her, then bent his smiling, swarthy face to hers.

"Greeting, queen of the roses!" he said.

She awoke then, came out of her trance, drew swiftly back from him. "Oh, Charlie, is it--is it really you?" she said rather incoherently. "You--how you startled me!"

He let her go, as always, at her desire, but with a faint, monkeyish grimace of disapproval. "You were always easily shocked," he said. "But on this occasion I assure you there is no need. I found myself in the neighbourhood, and thought it would be the correct thing to pay you a morning call."

His queer eyes mocked her openly as he made the explanation. She felt discomfited, painfully embarrassed, and withal conscious of an almost desperate longing to tell him to go.

But she knew she could not do that. Too much hung in the balance.

"Sit down!" she said, mustering her dignity with an immense effort. "And I will tell you why I have been writing to you."

"Wouldn't it save trouble to show me the letter?" he suggested, with easy audacity. "Or have you decided--now that you have had a further opportunity of considering my personal charms--that you really can't?"

She flushed at the implied suggestion. "You can read the letter if you like," she said somewhat stiffly. "It is on business."

She held it out to him, and he sank upon one knee to receive it.

"*Merci, ma belle reine!* Do you wish me to read it in your august presence?"

"Please!" she said.

He sat facing her, and read it.

She watched his mobile brows as his eyes travelled over the page. She saw amusement turn to humour and humour to merriment on his face. When he looked up at her at length he was laughing.

"You write as a serf appealing to a feudal lord," he said. "Did you mean to write like that?"

She shook her head at him gravely. "It is not a laughing matter," she said.

"What I am laughing at is," he rejoined, still smiling with a hint of derision. "By the way, have you heard from our worthy cow-puncher lately?"

She flinched sharply, before she was aware. Her whole body tingled with a sudden, burning blush.

And Saltash laughed again wickedly. "I saw him yesterday. He was in a fiendish temper for some reason or other. Naturally I asked after you, when he was expecting you back. What do you think he said?"

"What?" Maud breathed the word through lips that panted. Her heart was beating violently she knew not why.

Saltash's dark face seemed to exult over her agitation. "He said,--you know his soft, drawly way--'I guess I shall go--shortly--and fetch her back, my lord.' I wondered if you were aware of his amiable intention. There was the most deadly air of determination about him. I thought you might like to know."

Maud's face was no longer burning; she was white to the lips. But she turned from the subject with composure. "How did you know where to find me?"

He laughed teasingly. "You are curiously curious, Maud of the roses. Don't you yet realize that I always know everything? For instance, I know exactly why you are treating me to this wet-blanket reception. But you would be angry if I told you; so I won't. I also know--" he paused suddenly. "Shall I say it? No, perhaps I had better not."

She smiled faintly. "Perhaps it is beside the point, Charlie. Do you mind coming back to the subject of that letter? It is that that is troubling me now more than anything else."

"Really?" he said. "But why should you be troubled? It wouldn't trouble me to see my arch-enemy in dire straits."

"It is my mother I am anxious about," she said. "If Giles Sheppard goes under, she will go too."

Saltash raised his brows in amused interrogation. "Oh, does that follow? I should abandon the sinking ship if I were Mrs. Sheppard. She has nothing to gain by sticking to it."

Maud received the remark in silence. He leaned forward, his dark face still smiling.

"Do you know I love you for that?" he said. "*Chère reine des fleurs*, lady of the golden silences! Do you ever say what you really think?"

She shook her head. "Charlie, I am learning--very slowly--a hard lesson. Don't--please--make it any harder for me!"

"What?" he said. "You are really going back to him?"

She put up a hand to her face, almost as if she would hide it from him. "I don't know--yet--what I shall do. But I do know that it would be wrong not to go back."

"*Mais vraiment!*" he protested. "Is life so simple as that? How do you arrive at that conclusion? Do you follow always the easy path of virtue?"

She looked at him quickly. "It is not easy!" she said.

He lifted his shoulders. "No? But it is--safe at least. And you do not possess the adventurous soul. You like to be--safe, *ma belle*, even at the sacrifice of your very heart. Do you remember that night of moonshine? But of course you do. Do you know that I prowled in the garden half the night for your sake--just in case you should deem it worth while to be true to that poor heart of yours? You went through a good deal that night, my Maud." His voice changed subtly; the half-scoffing note went out of it, a faint warmth of pity took its place. "And yet you endured it all in silence. Why didn't you break free and come to me? You knew--and so did he--that I was waiting,--or you might have known."

Maud's head was bent; she did not attempt to answer him.

He got up abruptly and came to her. "Good-bye, Maud of the roses!"

She started slightly. "You are going?"

"Yes, I am going. I have received my discharge. My faithful service is at end--unless--or may I say until?--that message comes to call me back." He bent towards her. "Even I cannot wait for ever." he said. "Do you know I stood by the orchard-gate in the rain for two hours on the day of the races? You had a visitor, and so I would not intrude upon you. But you, *chère reine*,--you knew I was going to be there. And yet you never came."

She raised her head sharply, moved by something in his tone. "But how could I? How could I?" she said. "Besides,--Jake knew."

He laughed. "Yes, Jake knew. He saw me that night of moonshine. He nearly challenged me. And then he changed his mind and passed on. I conclude it didn't suit him to quarrel with me. But what of that? He was bound to know some day."

She clasped her hands tightly together. "If he knew all--he would shoot you," she said, with a sudden hard shudder.

But Saltash only laughed again, and touched a wisp of her hair. "Oh, I don't think so, queen of the roses. I think he would have pity on my innocence--if he knew all. But that isn't the point, you know. The point is that you choose bondage with him rather than freedom with me. And that being so, I can only bow to your ruling. Once more--good-bye!"

She parted her hands with an effort, and gave him one of them. "What about--my mother, Charlie?" she said.

He pressed her fingers lightly. "I commend her to the kind care of her worthy son-in-law."

She raised her eyes to his almost incredulously. "You are going to--to let them be ruined?"

He smiled at her, flashing his strange eyes. "It wouldn't do for you to be under an obligation--a personal obligation--to me, would it? Jake--you know--Jake might object."

She rose quickly and stood facing him. "Charlie, please don't jest!" she urged him, her voice low and very earnest.

His smile became a grimace. "It rests with you," he said, "whether I jest my way to the devil or whether I live a godly, righteous and sober life for evermore. If it is to be the latter, then I am quite prepared to fulfil my virtuous devoirs to my prospective mother-in-law. But if the former is to be my portion--well, I don't think even St. Peter himself would have saddled himself with anyone else's. That is the position, *chère reine. Tu comprends maintenant?*"

Yes, she understood. There was nothing complex in the situation. She stood looking at him her hand still in his.

"Then I cannot look upon you as--a friend?" she said at last, almost under her breath.

He smiled upon her--a sudden, baffling smile. "But ask yourself that question, Maud of the roses!" he said. "You will find the answer there in your own heart, if you seek for it."

She quivered at the words, feeling the subtle attraction of the man even against her will.

"You have refused to help me," she said.

He bent towards her, his dark face glowing. "I offer you--all I have," he said. "It is your own, to do with as you will. But you must take all or leave all. Maud, Maud," his speech quickened to sudden vehemence, "you love me! Why do you cling to your prison when the door is standing wide? Now is your time to escape, if ever. I will take all your cares--all your burdens. You shall be free as air. Only--now that the door is open--come!"

"Yes. I should shut the door another time if I were you," a gruff voice commented behind them. "It's a rash thing, young man, to leave the door open when you're talking confidences. What are you doing in this house, I wonder? Did you come in at the door?"

Both Maud and Saltash had faced round at the first sentence, she with a sharp exclamation, he with a laugh.

Uncle Edward, his eyes very bright under the beetling brows, stumped up to them with the air of an old watchdog investigating the presence of a suspicious stranger. He rasped his throat ferociously as he came.

"Who may you be?" he demanded.

"I?" Saltash was laughing still, facing the situation with his hands in his pockets, the soul of careless effrontery. "I don't suppose you have ever heard my name before. I am Saltash."

"Who?" Uncle Edward turned for explanation towards his niece.

"Lord Saltash," she said, in a low voice.

"Oh! Lord Saltash!" The old man turned back to him with a sound like a snarl. "Yes, I have heard of you before. You were co-respondent in the Cressady divorce case a few years back."

Saltash laughed again with easy nonchalance. "You have a good memory, sir. If it serves you as it should, you will also recall the fact that the case was dismissed."

"I remember--all the facts," said Uncle Edward, with ominous deliberation, "And as it is not my custom to admit men of your stamp into my house, you will oblige me by quitting it without delay."

Saltash turned to Maud. "I am sorry you have been caught in such bad company," he said. "Pray explain that I came uninvited! I shall be at Burchester for the present. When you come back, you and your husband must come and dine. Good-bye!"

With the unabashed smile still on his ugly face, he turned to go, moving with the easy arrogance of the ruling race, royally incapable of discomfiture.

Uncle Edward followed him to the door, and grimly watched his exit. Then still more grimly he came tramping back. "And now to pick a bone with you, my niece!" he said.

CHAPTER XV THE DOWNWARD PATH

She stood erect, facing him. Her face was very pale, but her eyes were quite unflinching. There was about her a majesty of demeanour that might have deterred a less determined man than Uncle Edward. But he stood upon his own ground and grappled with the situation quite undismayed. He was moreover very angry.

"You young hussy!" he said, bringing out his words with immense emphasis. "How dare you have your lover here? Thought you were safe, eh? Thought I shouldn't know? Oh, you're like the rest of 'em, crafty as an eel. What's the meaning of it, eh? What have you got to say for yourself?"

She did not attempt to answer him. Where her mother would have been loud in self-justification, she uttered not a word. Only, after a moment or two, she turned slowly and sat down at the writing-table, leaning her chin on her hand as one spent. Even so, there was an aloofness in her attitude that conveyed to the wrathful old man beside her an unpleasant sense of being at a disadvantage.

He stood looking down at her, grievously resentful, striving to select a weapon sharp enough to pierce her calm.

"I thought you were to be trusted," he said. "Goodness knows why! You didn't seem to have any leaven of your mother about you. But I see now I was wrong. You are just your mother over again. But if you think you are going to pursue an intrigue with that aristocratic blackguard in my house, you're very much mistaken. No doubt I'm very old-fashioned and strait-laced. But there it is. I object. I object strongly. The man's a liar and a thief and a scoundrel. Don't you know it, eh? Haven't you found him out yet?"

He stopped so pointedly for an answer that she could not maintain her silence longer. She moved a little, turned her head slightly, without raising her eyes, and spoke.

"I know him very well. But--forgive me, Uncle Edward!--I can't discuss him with you. I--I am sorry you thought it necessary to insult him."

"Insult him!" Uncle Edward's anger boiled afresh. "Didn't I catch the hound making love to you? Here in my house where I have lived decently and respectably for over fifty years! Didn't I catch him, I say--he a well-known profligate and you a married woman? Didn't I actually hear him trying to tempt you from your husband and your duty? And you were calmly permitting it. Look here, young woman! I've been too kind to you. That's the fact of the matter. You've had too much liberty, too much indulgence, too much of your own way. You married in a hurry against my judgment. But--by heaven--since you are married, you shall stick to your bargain! You take a pen now--do you hear?--and a sheet of paper, and write to your husband this minute, and ask him to come and join you here! I won't be surety for you any longer. Tell him to come to-morrow!"

But Maud only stiffened as she sat making no movement to comply. She looked like a marble statue of Despair.

Uncle Edward came a little nearer to her. He was not accustomed to being set at naught. Most people regarded him as formidable even when he was in a comparatively genial mood.

"Are you going to do as I tell you?" he said.

She glanced up at him momentarily. "I think," she said, "we will wait till to-morrow."

He stamped a furious foot. "Will we, indeed, madam! Well, you may wait as long as you please; but I tell you this: If you don't write that letter--instantly, I shall go straight to the post-office found the corner and send your husband a telegram to summon him at once. He will be here by the morning, if I know him. And then I shall tell him exactly why I sent for him. So now you can take your choice. Which is it to be?"

He had moved her at last. Maud rose to her feet with a suddenness that was almost suggestive of panic. "You would never do such a thing!" she said. "You could not be so--so wickedly cruel!"

He snapped his jaws like an angry terrier. "Oh, that would be wicked, would it? You have some odd ideas of morals; that's all I can say. But wicked or cruel, it's what I mean to do. So take your choice, and be quick about it! For I shan't go back on what I've said. When a woman starts on the downward path, she usually takes it at a run; and I won't be responsible. So which is it to be? Your letter or my telegram? Make up your mind! Which?"

His manner was almost menacing. She stood facing with an awful sense of impotence growing at her heart. To summon Jake herself was a proceeding that she could not for a moment contemplate, but the bare thought of Uncle Edward's alternative pierced like a poisoned knife. She felt again that dreadful trapped feeling of former days. The liberty she had enjoyed of late made it all the more terrible.

"I can't decide anything just now," she said at last, and she knew that her voice trembled painfully. "Please--please let us wait a little! There is really no need to send for Jake. Lord Saltash has gone, and he will not come back."

"Don't tell me!" said Uncle Edward truculently. "Even if he doesn't, how am I to be sure that you won't take it into your head to go to him? No, my niece, I've heard too much. Why, he'd have had his arm round you in another second. I know--I saw. If I'd waited another three seconds, he'd

have been kissing you. And not for the first time, I'll be bound."

The hot colour rushed to Maud's face; she turned sharply aside.

"Ha! That touches you, does it?" snarled Uncle Edward, with ferocious triumph. "I guessed as much. Now which is it to be? Are you going to write that letter?"

It was hopeless to carry the discussion further. A burning wave of anger went through her, anger that buoyed her up above despair, stimulating her to a fierce rebellion. She drew herself to her full height and faced him with supreme defiance.

"I will not write that letter!" she said. "I will not be forced into a false position. If you are tired of me, I will go. I will not stay--in any case--to be insulted!"

And with that boldly, with the carriage of an outraged princess, she swept by him and out of the room, leaving him staring after her in a fury too great to express itself before the closing of the door.

Up to her room she went, outwardly calm, inwardly raging. All the old hot rebellion against destiny had awaked within her. It had died down of late, soothed into quiescence by the peaceful solitude in which she had been living. But now it had sprung afresh to quivering life. Her freedom from bondage had given her new strength. She would not be bound again hand and foot, and thrust back into the old bitter slavery. It was too much, too much. She had her life to live. It was hers, not Jake's. She had a right to do with it as she would.

With hands that trembled she began to pack. Uncle Edward had made it impossible for her to stay. If he had not set her feet upon the downward path, he had sped her upon it with an impetus that drove her irresistibly. She worked in a fever, not pausing for thought, conscious but of the one urgent desire to be gone, to escape--she had scarcely begun to think whither.

No one came near her during those evening hours. The daylight waned, and she realized that it was nearing the dinner hour. Then suddenly it came to her that she could not face her uncle again. She must make some excuse.

Her work was done; she rang the bell.

After a pause Martha came to her. There was a scared look on the woman's face. She seemed half-afraid to meet Maud's eyes.

"Did you ring, ma'am?" she enquired.

"Yes." With an effort Maud made reply. "Is--is my uncle in?"

"He's just come in and gone upstairs to dress for dinner, ma'am," Martha told her.

"Ah!" Maud's heart contracted a little. "He has been out some time?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am, a long time. He seems a bit out of temper about something," Martha's round eyes suddenly conveyed sympathy that shone out to Maud like a beacon in the darkness. "I shouldn't take much notice of him, ma'am," she said. "He often says what he don't mean when he's in one of his tantrums. He'll be better in the morning."

Again that awful sense of impotence assailed Maud. She leaned her head against the door-post, closing her eyes for a second. What would the morning bring forth? The thought turned her sick.

"Is there anything as I can do, ma'am?" asked Martha.

"Yes." Abruptly Maud pulled herself together. A sudden resolution had sprung up within her. She could not face another storm such as that through which she had just come. Above all she could not face the morrow and its possibilities in this house. She turned back into the room, and took half a sovereign from the table. "Martha," she said, "I have packed everything up, and I am going away. I want you, please, to call a cab now, at once, to take me away before my uncle comes downstairs. I will write him a note while you are gone. Please, please, Martha, be as quick as you can!"

The sympathy in Martha's eyes became a sort of tragic friendliness. "I knew as you wouldn't stay, ma'am," she said, "not after the way he hollered at you. I wouldn't myself in your place, ma'am; no, that I wouldn't. But you see, I've been with him so long. I don't mind his rough ways. I'll go at once, and thank you kindly, ma'am. It won't take me five minutes. But, mind you, I think he'll be sorry to lose you."

"I can't help that," Maud made answer. "It is quite impossible for me to stay. He will know why. But I will write him a note all the same."

And when Martha had gone, she sat down and scribbled two notes.

The first she addressed to her uncle:

"DEAR UNCLE EDWARD,

"I do not think you will be greatly surprised at my leaving you. After what has passed, I could

not stay. I am very sorry for what has happened, but I suppose it had to be. I wish I could thank you for all your kindness to me, but I know this is not the time. So I will only say good-bye.

"Yours,
"MAUD."

The second note consisted of one sentence only, "I am going to my mother. Maud." And when she had written it she picked up a tiny packet of tissue-paper that lay beside her and dropped it into the envelope with the note. She addressed the envelope to Lord Saltash, Burchester Castle, and later she sealed and registered it, stopping at a post-office to send it on its way. She believed it would reach its destination almost as soon as he did. And that packet--that tiny object wrapped in tissue-paper--would convey its own message. No further words were needed.

She herself went for the night to a small hotel in a back-street that was not far from her uncle's house. There would be a train in the early morning. She would not travel by night. Something held her back, some instinct she did not attempt to fathom. But she believed that Charlie would travel by the night-train, and she did not want to see him again until he had received that packet. Afterwards--well, the afterwards would rest with him.

Her sleep was fitful and troubled that night, broken repeatedly by the persistent chime of a church-clock. Towards morning she slept and dreamed again that strangely haunting dream of the flower-decked altar and the red, shining lamp above. For a space she held herself aloof from the dream, refusing to yield to it. But at length it seemed to her that someone came and took her hand, drawing her forward, and she had no choice.

Straight into the wondrous glow she went, and presently she knelt before those flowers of dazzling purity. The quiet hand still held hers in a calm and comforting grasp. She felt that she would have been frightened but for that sustaining hold.

And then suddenly she saw that the candles also were burning upon the altar, knew that she was kneeling there with Jake, heard a voice above their heads very low and clear that seemed to be speaking to their hearts:--"Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder." ...

And turning she found Jake's eyes upon her, alight with adoration....

She awoke with a gasping cry to a seething, passionate regret. Because in those first wild moments she knew with an awful certainty that her feet were set upon the downward path, and she could never turn back again.

CHAPTER XVI THE REVELATION

The autumn dusk was falling as the Fairharbour train crawled at length into the station. A sea-fog hung clammily along the shore, and a smell of burning weeds was in the air.

Maud shivered with cold and weariness as she descended to the platform. It had been a long, long journey. Her whole body ached with fatigue.

There were not many travellers, and they had all disappeared before she had collected her luggage and made her way out into the dank chill of the station-yard where a rickety cab stood waiting.

She shivered afresh as she got into it. The dampness and the cold seemed to penetrate to her very bones. She sat huddled in a corner.

"Where to, miss?" The porter thrust a cheery face in upon her, and, albeit she was veiled, she shrank back with an instinctive desire to avoid recognition.

"The Anchor Hotel," she said, through teeth that chattered in spite of her.

She heard him give the order, and in a moment the ramshackle conveyance was on its way. They clattered forth over the stones into the clinging billows of mist.

The cold caught and pierced her anew as they neared the dreary front. She heard the muffled roar of the sea splashing dully against the wall. The mist became a wet drizzle beating in through the window. She tried to close it, but the strap was broken. She could only draw her wrap more closely about her.

The cab horse stumbled, and was dragged up by his driver with a curse. They were nearing the Anchor Hotel. She wished she had prepared her mother for her advent. She had not dared to

do so in case--just in case--it should come to Jake's knowledge, though she believed that Jake must be well on his way to Liverpool by now, if he had not already arrived there. It was possible that he had not been able to leave at a moment's notice, and she had not dared to take the chance of any rumour of her coming reaching him. But now that she was so nearly at the end of her journey, she wished earnestly that her mother were expecting her. The thought of meeting Giles Sheppard, asking his hospitality, was hateful to her.

It would not be for more than that one night. Of that she was convinced. Charlie would be swift to answer her summons, if indeed he had returned to the Castle. But he was so erratic in all his ways that she had some doubt on this point. If he had not returned--! But she could not think of that possibility. She turned from it with a sick foreboding. Surely Fate could not play her so hideous a trick!

They lumbered on.

Suddenly the light from the swinging lamp that hung in the porch of "The Anchor" burst across their path. The horse stumbled again, recovered itself, jolted on a few yards, stopped. They had arrived.

Maud gathered her energies for one supreme effort though she felt almost too stiff with cold to move. The cabman shambled down and opened the door.

"No one about seemin'ly," he remarked.

She controlled her quivering nerves. "Perhaps you will get down my trunk," she said. "You can leave it in the porch."

The man grumbled to himself, but proceeded to comply, she standing on the step to watch him.

The mist was beating in from the sea. Her face was wet with it. And yet her dread of entering that house was such that she could hardly bring herself to open the swing door, debating with herself if even then she might not run up the hill to the house in which they had lodged a year before--only a year before--and obtain shelter for the night there.

The darkness and the rain deterred her. Her courage seemed to have quite left her. In the end she turned with a species of dreary desperation and pushed back the heavy door.

The entrance-hall was empty, vaguely lit by one flaring gas-jet round which the fog-wreaths curled and drifted in the draught, cold as a vault, and smelling of stale tobacco-smoke. The place looked bare and poverty-stricken, almost squalid. The rugs were gone from the floor, the pictures from the walls.

The door swung closed behind her, and she felt as if she stood inside a prison. The office-window was shut, and no sound came from any quarter. Only through the desolate silence there came the sullen thump of the sea against the wall, like the waning struggle of a giant grown impotent with long and fruitless striving.

The utter solitude of the place began to possess her like an evil dream. She stood as one under a spell, afraid to move. And then, quite suddenly, she heard a step.

The impulse came to her then to flee, but she did not obey it. She stood stiffly waiting. Even if it were Giles Sheppard himself, she would meet him before she went out into the dripping dark outside.

It was not Giles Sheppard. A man in a tweed suit and black gaiters, square-shouldered, rather short than tall,--a man of bull-dog strength--came suddenly upon her from the interior of the house. She heard the jingle of spurs upon the stones of the hall, caught one glance of a sunburnt, dominant face and hair that shone like burnished copper in the light; and then she was tottering blindly backwards, groping, groping for the door by which she might escape.

He came to her ere she could open it, and in a moment she became rigid, as one fascinated into passivity. He took her ice-cold hands and held them.

"Why, Maud! Maud!" he said, in the tone of one who would comfort a child.

A great shiver went through her at his touch; but she stood speechless. His face swam before her shrinking vision. She felt sick and faint.

"Snakes!" he said. "You're perished with cold. Say, why didn't you tell me you were coming?" Then, as still she could not speak: "Come along into the office! There's no one there; and I'll soon have a fire for you. You lean on me, my girl! It'll be all right."

His arm went round her; he supported her strongly. The warmth of his body sent a faint glow through her. Almost without knowing it, she leaned upon him.

He took her into the deserted office, put her into a chair by the empty fireplace, lighted the gas, then knelt to kindle the fire. The wood was damp; he coaxed it to burn, blowing at the unwilling flame, his head in the smoke.

"Say, that's better," he said softly at length. "Now I'm going to give you something you'll hate, but I reckon you'll take it to please me. Won't you?"

He still knelt beside her, but there was no hint of authority, no possessiveness, in his bearing. Rather there was about him a curious something that was almost like humility.

She watched him dumbly as he pulled a small glass flask out of his pocket and withdrew the cork. He turned to her as he did it, and for an instant she met his eyes. The old hot glow was wholly gone from them. She missed it with an odd sense of shock. Only kindness shone out at her; only friendliness was in the clasp of the hand he laid on hers.

"You'll take it?" he said, in his voice of soft persuasion, "It's raw spirit; but it's not going to do you any harm. Just a drop, and then I'll feel easier about you! There now, if that's not real good of you!"

He was pressing it gently upon her; and she could not refuse. She took the flask from him and drank a burning drain.

"Has it gone?" said Jake.

She nodded silently, feeling the glow of the spirit spreading through her veins and the deadly coldness at her heart giving place to it.

He smiled upon her, his pleasant, sudden smile, and took the flask back into his own keeping. Then he bent again to the fire, blowing at it persistently, patiently, till it shot up into a blaze.

She watched him as one in a dream--a dream from which all nightmare horror had been magically banished. This--this was the old Jake to whom she had once turned in trouble, in whose arms she had sobbed out her misery and despair. This was Jake the friend into whose keeping she had given her life.

He straightened himself again, coughing a little. She caught again the gleam of the red-brown eyes, seeking hers.

"Better now?" he asked her.

She bent her head. "Yes, I am all right now. You--you--I didn't expect to see you here."

"Guess it was a mutual surprise," said Jake. "What brought you anyway?"

Her heart gave a sudden quick throb of dismay.

Actually she had forgotten the desperate resolution that had urged her for so long. She turned her face quickly from him. "I--came--to--to see my mother," she faltered.

He raised his brows momentarily. "She wasn't expecting you, sure," he commented.

"No," she felt her cheeks burning, and strove still further to avoid his look. "No. It--it was a--surprise visit."

There fell a brief silence upon her words, and while it lasted, she sat in tense suspense, waiting--waiting for him to pounce upon her secret and drag it to the light. She dared not look at him kneeling there beside her, dared not meet the awful scrutiny of those lynx-eyes. Such was her agitation that she scarcely dared even to breathe.

And then an amazing thing happened. Jake's hand was suddenly laid upon her knee, pressing it reassuringly. "Well," he said in his casual drawl, "I reckon you've come in the nick of time so far as your mother is concerned. Your amiable step-father has cleared out bag and baggage, and left her to face the music. He pawned everything he could lay his dirty hands on first, and the place is empty except for the old ostler who is serving behind the bar till further orders."

"Oh Jake!" Startled, Maud turned back to him. "And what is my mother doing?"

There was a faintly humorous twist about Jake's lips as he made reply. "Your mother has gone to bed in hysterics. I can't get out of her what exactly she means to do. P'raps you will be more successful. I came down this morning as soon as I got the news of Sheppard's departure, and tried to persuade her to come along to the Stables; but she wouldn't hear of it. She's got some idea at the back of her mind, I gather; or maybe the Stables aren't aristocratic enough. Anyway, there was no moving her. I've been up at Tattersall's all day. Only got back half an hour ago. I thought I'd look in again here, and see how things were going before I went home. But they haven't moved any since this morning, and she is still in bed with hysterics."

He had not been home all day; he had received no message. The thought darted through Maud with a suddenness that nearly made her gasp with relief. He did not know of Uncle Edward's summons. And then she remembered that it must be awaiting him, and her heart sank again.

"You're shivering still," said Jake gently.

"It's nothing," she made answer. "It's nothing." And then desperately: "You--you didn't get--a telegram from Uncle Edward--last night?"

"I?" said Jake. "No. What should he wire to me for?"

She hesitated a second, then feverishly faced the danger that menaced her. "You--I expect you will find a message waiting for you. We--we had a disagreement yesterday. That's why I came away."

Jake's brows met abruptly. "Hasn't he been treating you properly?"

"Oh, it's not that. I--I can't tell you what it was. But--he said he should wire to you--to go to Liverpool."

Maud's hands clasped each other very tightly. She was striving with all her strength for composure. But she could not bring herself to look him in the face.

"And so you came away," Jake said slowly.

She nodded, swallowing down her agitation. "I didn't want to meet you--like that. I didn't know what was in the telegram."

Jake's fingers patted her knee gently. "And so you came back here for refuge! All right, my girl! You needn't be afraid. Uncle Edward may go to blazes. I shan't read that telegram."

He stooped with the words, picked up a fragment of burning stick that had fallen at her feet, and tossed it back into the flames.

Maud uttered a sharp exclamation. "Jake! You'll be burnt!"

He looked up at her with a smile. "I guess not," he said. "And now that that matter is disposed of, you'll maybe like to go and see your mother."

She met his eyes with a feeling that she could do no less. "You're very good," she said, with an effort.

His smile broadened. "Then it's the cheapest form of goodness I know," he said. "If your Uncle Edward were a little younger, I'd give myself the pleasure of accepting his invitation just for the sake of administering the kicking he deserves. However, we won't waste time discussing him. Are you going to spend the night here along with your mother?"

He seemed bent upon making things easy for her. His attitude amazed her. She kept asking herself again and again if this could be the man from whom she had fled in bitterness of spirit all those weeks ago.

She hesitated to answer his question. She was painfully uncertain of the ground beneath her feet. Almost she expected it to cleave asunder at any moment and reveal the raging fires that once had scorched her soul.

But Jake did not suffer her to remain in suspense. Very quietly he filled in her hesitation. "Maybe you'd sooner stay here," he said, in his soft, rather sing-song voice. "It's up to you to decide. Guess I shan't interfere any with your movements."

His one hand still lay on her knee. It pressed upon her a little as though seeking to convey something that she was slow to grasp.

Her doubt subsided under the steady touch. She suddenly knew beyond all questioning that she stood on solid ground. Yet it was not without difficulty that she answered him. "I think--perhaps--for to-night--I will stay with her."

Jake nodded with his face to the flames. "It's up to you," he said again.

She looked at his bent head, conscious of a new distress. How was she going to repay him for this his goodness to her? He was trusting her blindly. He had refused to let his eyes be opened. For she knew he would keep his word about that telegram. Jake always kept his word.

Her distress grew, became almost unbearable. She saw herself in a new and horrible light, and shrank in anguish of soul from the revelation. It was as if upon that downward path she had suddenly caught a glimpse of the precipice at the end, the cruel rocks, the dreadful fall, the black, seething whirlpool below. And her whole being revolted. All that was pure in her made swift outcry.

If Jake--Jake--had climbed back to the old high ground, surely she could do the same! Surely she could do no less. He trusted her--he trusted her! How could she go on?

The wild tempest of feeling rushed through her, and passed. She was left very cold, striving desperately to suppress a fit of shuddering that threatened to overwhelm her.

Jake was not looking at her. He seemed unaware of her agitation. After a moment he took his hand away, and rose.

He began to feel in his pockets, produced his clay pipe and tobacco-pouch; then suddenly paused. "Do you mind if I light up? I'm just going."

"Oh, please do!" she said.

He began to fill the pipe with minute care. "Don't let your mother take too much out of you!" he said. "Have a meal and turn in as early as you can! Guess you're needing a good rest."

She leaned her head on her hand. "Yes. I am tired."

Jake was silent again for a space. Finally he put the pipe into his mouth and shook the tobacco back into his pouch. Then in a curiously hesitating voice, he spoke. "Say,--Maud!"

She gave a start, and raised her head. He was looking down at her with a faint smile in his eyes, a smile that struck her as being whimsical and yet curiously wistful also.

"I just want to tell you, my girl," he said, "that you're not to be scared of me any more. Reckon you've had a hell of a time all your life, but it's to come to an end right now. For the future, you do the asking and I the giving. You're boss, and don't you forget it! I'm your man, not your master, and I'll behave accordingly. Guess I'll even lie down and let you kick me if it'll make you happy any."

Maud was gazing at him in open amazement long before he had finished his astounding speech. The slow utterance, half-sad, half-humorous, was spoken with the full weight of the man's strength of purpose. Every word came with the steady force of unwavering resolution. There was a touch of the superb about him even with that unlighted pipe between his teeth. And every word seemed to pierce her with a deeper pain, pain that was well-nigh unendurable.

As he uttered the last deliberate sentence, she rose quickly with a gesture of protest. She could bear no more.

"Jake, you--you--you hurt me!" she stammered incoherently.

He put out a hand to her. "No--no!" he said. "That was not my intention."

It was almost as though he pleaded with her for some species of clemency. She was sure she read entreaty in the red-brown eyes. But she could not lay her hand in his. She could not--she could not! She stood before him panting, speechless, shaken to the very foundations of her being.

His hand fell. "I just want you to be happy, my girl, that's all," he said gently; "happy after your own notions of happiness. Maybe there ain't room for me in the general scheme of things. If that's so,--I reckon I'll stay outside."

He turned aside with the words and struck a match to kindle his pipe with the air of a man who has said his say. Then while she still watched him, he puffed a great cloud of smoke into the air, straightened himself, and made her an odd, clumsy bow.

"I'm going now. So long!" he said.

And so, without further parley, he left her, striding away in his square, purposeful fashion without a backward glance.

Only when he was gone did it flash upon her that this--this--was her dream come true. All unknowing, wholly without intention, he had opened her eyes. And she knew that he loved her--he loved her!

CHAPTER XVII THE LAST CHANCE

"It's a cruel world," complained Mrs. Sheppard. "Nothing ever goes right, and no one ever thinks of anybody but themselves." She wiped her eyes pathetically. "I'm sure I've always tried to consider others. And this is the result. In my hour of need I am forsaken by everybody."

"It's no good fretting," Maud said very wearily. "We must think what is best to be done."

She realized that her mother was in her most unreasonable mood, and she felt herself powerless to cope with it. Yet the situation had to be faced, and with a heavy heart she faced it.

"My dear, I've thought and thought till my brain refuses to work," said Mrs. Sheppard plaintively. "What is the good of it? You know as well as I that if Charlie refuses to help, all hope is gone. And you say he has refused."

"Yes." Maud was stooping over the kettle that she was boiling in her mother's bedroom. "He has refused."

"Unconditionally?" Mrs. Sheppard sent a sudden keen glance across at the slim, drooping figure and noted the weariness of its pose. "Maud, tell me! Unconditionally?"

Maud remained bent. "I am not going to accept his conditions," she said, after a moment.

"Then he made conditions?" The question came sharp and querulous from the bed.

"One condition." Maud bent a little lower.

"What was it? My child, you must tell me. I have a right to know." Mrs. Sheppard raised herself to a sitting position. "What was this condition?"

Maud did not turn. "What does it matter what it was as I am not going to accept it," she said.

"You have refused?"

"I am going to refuse." There was utter weariness in her voice. She spoke as one to whom nothing mattered any more.

"Maud! Then you haven't actually refused him yet?" Mrs. Sheppard suddenly flung out her arms. "Maud--darling, come and tell me all about it!" she urged. "There is something behind that you haven't told me yet. Come here, dearest! Come to me!"

Maud turned an unwilling face over her shoulder. "I am too tired to-night, Mother," she said. "Besides, there is really nothing to tell. Charlie made me a certain proposal which--which I thought for a little that I might accept. I now realize that I can't and--and--" a faint quiver of vehemence crept into her voice,--"I want to forget that I ever thought I could. Please let me forget!"

"My dear child! Do you mean that he made you a proposal of marriage?" The eagerness of Mrs. Sheppard's query was scarcely veiled. Her eyes had the look of one in search of treasure.

"Yes; just that." The emotion had gone out of Maud's voice again. It sounded flat and mechanical. She leaned her arm upon the mantelpiece for support. "I ought not to have suffered it. I was to blame more than he. He has always been--that sort. I--haven't."

"But, my dear, you have always loved each other. Why should either of you be to blame? The fault was certainly yours in the first place for sending him away long ago; but now--now---"

"Now I am married to another man," Maud said.

Mrs. Sheppard clapped her hands together in a sudden access of impatience. "A man for whom you have not the smallest respect or affection! A man of intemperate habits who took advantage of a weak moment to marry you, who has made you utterly miserable, and deserves nothing from you but the utmost contempt! My dear Maud, I always thought that you were proud and fastidious. Didn't Charlie always call you his queen rose? How can you--how can you--regard that farcical marriage of yours as binding? How can you contemplate ruining your own life and Charlie's also now that another chance has been given you? It is sheer wilful folly. It is madness. Or is it that you are just--afraid?"

Maud shook her head. "I don't suppose you would ever really understand, Mother," she said. "Anyhow I don't know how to explain. But I can't do it--now. I thought I could. I came back because I thought I could. But now I am here--now I have seen Jake--I find I can't."

"That is because you are afraid," declared Mrs. Sheppard, "He has terrorized you. But, oh, my dear, do try to break away from that! Do think of yourself--and of Charlie who has loved you all these years! One great effort--only one--and you will be free from this horrible, unnatural bond. I know that Charlie will be true to you. You are the one woman so far as he is concerned. And he--he is the one man, dear, isn't he? You can't--surely you can't--bear to disappoint him now! Think of the years to come! Think of the life-happiness waiting for you if you only muster the strength now to grasp it! Maud, my darling, my own girlie, can't you be brave just this once when so much hangs upon it? He will take you away in his yacht, and you will be all in all to each other. You will find all the good things you have missed till now; and this dreadful year will fade away like a dream. Oh, darling, surely you will make this one great effort to gain so much! The chance will never come again to you. It is the one chance of your life,--the last. How can you bear to throw it away?"

"And what of Jake?" Maud spoke the words as though uttering her thought aloud. She was gazing downwards at the steaming kettle and the red-hot glow of the fire.

"Jake!" Mrs. Sheppard's reply was instant and contemptuous. "He will marry a girl in his own station who will satisfy all his desires. You can't honestly imagine that you have done that, that he regards his marriage with you as a success! He may be annoyed at your preference, but he will be as glad as you are to be rid of his bargain. It will be the greatest kindness you can do him--if you want to be kind. You know you hate him from the bottom of your heart."

"Mother! You're wrong!" Sharply--as though stung to action--Maud turned. "I don't hate Jake. He--he is too good a man--too upright a man--to hate. It is true I haven't been happy with him, but that has not been his fault. Our ideas of happiness are not the same, that's all."

Mrs. Sheppard stared in momentary discomfiture at this sudden display of strength. She had not expected serious resistance in this quarter. But she was quick to rally her forces.

"Oh, I don't blame him entirely," she said. "As you say, you are utterly unsuited to each other. But it is sheer nonsense to call him a good man. I know that he is often the worse for drink. I have seen him myself flogging his horses down on the beach as no man in his sober senses would dream of doing. He is an utter brute at heart. There is no getting away from that fact. He may not be a wholly bad man. I have not said that he is. But he is a man of violent impulses. He knows nothing of the refinements of life. He is a brute."

Mrs. Sheppard paused. Maud was standing mute and motionless with tragic eyes fixed before her.

After a moment or two to give her words time to sink in, Mrs. Sheppard continued on a note of pathos.

"You may say to me that I have made exactly the same mistake myself. But then, I did it for you children. And it was not the whole of my life that I had to offer. But you,--you are young. Your good time is yet to come. And think, dear, think how much depends upon you! If Charlie dies unmarried, there will be no one to succeed him. He is the last of the Burchesters. And if he doesn't marry you, I am sure he will never marry any other woman. He loves you so devotedly. Through all his peccadilloes, he has always remembered you, come back to you. Are you going to let him be lonely always because of his love for you? He has laid the greatest gift in the world at your feet, dear. Oh, grasp it while you can! Don't let the whole of his manhood, your womanhood, be one long and fruitless regret!"

It was the climax of her pleading. The tears were running down her face as she reached it, and she did not check them too readily though she knew that she had made an impression. Victory would not come at once, she fully realized. The stony immobility of Maud's attitude told her that. But she had laid her plans with craft. She believed that by the exercise of extreme patience victory might ultimately be achieved.

"There, darling! You're very tired," she said, as she slowly dried her eyes; "much too tired to see anything in its proper light to-night. You must go to bed and sleep. You will see things much more clearly in the morning. And shall I tell you a secret?" She smiled, a wistful, loving smile. "Charlie will be at the Castle to-morrow afternoon."

"How do you know, Mother?" Maud spoke quickly as one suddenly awakened.

"How do I know? But everyone knows," Mrs. Sheppard answered vaguely. "The yacht is in the harbour, and they are getting her ready for a trip. Darling, the kettle is boiling at last. Mind how you take it off! Oh dear, I'm very tired. I hope I shan't end my days in the workhouse. So trying to have to make one's bed every day. Good night, darling! No tea for me, thank you. I haven't the heart to drink it. There's a bed made up in the room next to this. I hope you will find it comfortable. Good night, dear! Good night!"

The words went into a deep sigh. Mrs. Sheppard sank down upon her pillow. And Maud turned with a set face, and prepared to leave her for the night.

Yes, her mother's words had made an impression upon her. They had voiced all the doubt and turmoil in her own sad heart. But they had not blotted out that vision of the precipice, the rocks, and the black, black whirlpool that awaited her at the end of the downward path.

Neither had they wholly taken from her the memory of a man's eyes, straight and honest and strangely appealing, that had looked into hers only a couple of hours before.

Above her mother's warnings, above all the trouble and the tumult of her soul, she heard a voice within, clear, insistent, indomitable: "Love is only gained by love. We must pour out all we have to win it, purge our hearts of all selfish desire, sanctify ourselves by the complete renunciation of self, before the perfect gift can be ours."

The perfect gift! The perfect gift! She had almost ceased to believe in it. But that night she dreamed that she had it in her grasp.

CHAPTER XVIII THE WHIRLPOOL

"Well, Billings, you're looking as cadaverously blooming as ever. How do you do it, man? Did someone give you an over-dose of respectability in your youth?"

Saltash leaned back in his chair smiling up at his wry-faced servitor with insolent humour.

Billings, the decorous, betrayed not the smallest sign of surprise or resentment. It was said of him that when Saltash had once in a fit of anger flung a wine-glass at his head, he had knelt and collected the fragments and mopped up the wine before he had dreamed of retiring to attend to the cut on his face that the glass had inflicted.

On the present occasion he made response with the utmost gravity. "I can't say, my lord. Shall I light the fire, my lord?"

"Oh yes, it's a filthy day, typical of a filthy climate. Yes, light the fire, and pull down the blinds, and let's be comfortable!"

"It won't be dark yet, my lord," observed Billings, with a glance at the clock.

Saltash's eyes went in the same direction. It was not quite three o'clock. "What of that, good Billings? I please myself," he said. "By the way, you might take coffee up to the music-room. Leave it to brew up there! And when Mrs. Bolton calls tell her I'm out, but I shall be back in a very short time! Ask her to wait in the music-room, and pour her out some coffee! Light the red lamp by the piano, but leave the rest! Is that quite clear, Billings?"

"Quite clear, my lord."

Billings was on his knees before the fire. Saltash leaned forward in his chair.

"Be sure you get her to have some coffee, Billings!" he said. "Tell her I specially recommend it."

"Very good, my lord." Billings spoke with his head nearly touching the logs of wood he was seeking to kindle. "I quite understand, my lord."

Saltash got to his feet. "I'll give you a gold watch if you succeed, Billings," he said.

"You're very good, my lord," said Billings.

Saltash wandered down the hall. He had a cigarette between his lips, but he was not smoking. He reached the marble statue near the grand staircase and pressed a switch that flooded it with light. Then he stood before it, silent and intent. White and wonderful the anguished figure shone, but it was rather a figure of death than life. Its purity was almost dazzling. Its very agony was unearthly.

Saltash frowned abruptly and switched off the light. Then for a space he stood in the gloom, staring at the vague outline.

Billings came up behind him soft-footed, unobtrusive. "The rose light, my lord, was placed on the other side according to your lordship's orders," he said deferentially, and passed on as if he had not spoken.

Saltash glanced over his shoulder momentarily, and resumed his silent contemplation of the figure in the shadows.

Several seconds passed. Then very suddenly he moved again, bent swiftly and pressed another switch. In a moment the figure was fully visible again, but no longer did it dazzle the eyes with its whiteness. A soft rose radiance surrounded it. It glowed into life, pulsing, palpitating flesh and blood.

And the man's eyes suddenly kindled as they passed over the naked, straining form. "I have you now, my Captured Angel," he murmured.

He stood and feasted upon the vision. Once he stretched a hand to touch the faultless curve of the breast, but checked himself with an odd, flickering smile as though he did reverence whimsically to a sacred element in which he had no faith. The agonized shame of the thing, poignant, arresting, though it was, seemed wholly to pass him by. His queer, glancing eyes saw only the unveiled voluptuousness of the form, the perfect contour of the limbs, the exquisite moulding of each full and gracious line. He dwelt upon them all with the look of an epicure. He moved again at length, drew near to the statue, reached a hand to the dark panelling of the recess behind. It slipped inwards noiselessly, disclosing a narrow doorway. In a moment he had passed through, and the great hall was empty; empty save for that figure of tragic womanhood, rose-lighted, piteously alive, standing out against the shadows.

It was nearly half an hour later that an electric bell sounded through the silence, and Billings, the respectable, came noiselessly through the hall. He swung the great door open with a well-bred flourish.

A woman's figure clad in a streaming waterproof stood on the step, and in a low voice asked for Lord Saltash. Billings stood back with a deep bow. "Will you walk in, madam?"

She entered and stood on the mat. He took her umbrella and set it aside.

"Will you permit me to remove your waterproof, madam?" he suggested.

She seemed to hesitate, but in a moment yielded. "But I can only stay a few moments," she said. "Please tell him so!"

"Quite so, madam!" Billings was deftly removing the wet garment. "Up in the music-room, if you please, madam."

She suffered his ministrations in silence; only as he turned to lead the way she shivered suddenly and uncontrollably.

She followed him up the dim hall. They approached the rose-lit statue. Her eyes were drawn to it. She stopped as though involuntarily, stopped and caught her breath as if in sudden surprise or dismay. Then quickly she passed on.

They ascended the grand staircase in solemn procession, and reached the music-room door.

Again Billings stood back for her to enter, but when she had done so, he closed the door, remaining within.

The great room was dim and shadowy, heavy with some mysterious Eastern fragrance that hung in the air like incense. It was lighted by two red fires that burned without flame and a red-shaded lamp that shed a mysterious arc of light far away by the piano.

There was a small table by the further fire, and on this a silver coffee-pot hissed over a spirit-lamp. A low divan--so low that it looked a mere pile of luxurious cushions--stood invitingly close. Billings deferentially led the way thither.

"If you will be pleased to take a seat, madam," he said. "His lordship will not keep you waiting long."

"Is he out?" Maud asked quickly.

"He has been out, madam. He came in wet through and is changing. He begged very particularly that you would drink a cup of coffee while you awaited him."

He indicated the divan, but Maud remained on her feet. The atmosphere of the place disturbed her. It seemed to be charged with subtleties that baffled her, making her vaguely uneasy.

She had come in answer to a message accompanying a great bunch of violets that had reached her that morning. She had not wanted to come; but for this once it seemed imperative that she should meet him face to face, and explain that which she felt no written words could ever express. She had sent him her rash summons, and he had replied by that bunch of violets and the request that she would come to him since he did not wish to risk interruption from "*madame la mère*." On this point she had been fully in accord with him, and she had sent back word that she would come in the afternoon, just to speak with him for a few minutes. She had hoped that he would gather from that that since the sending of her summons she had repented of her madness. It would not be an easy interview, she was sure; but she was not afraid of Charlie. She hated the thought of hurting him all the more because she did not fear him. He would let her go; oh yes, he would let her go. He had never sought to hold her against her will. But that very fact would make the parting the more bitter. His half-whimsical chivalry was somehow harder to face than any fury of indignation. He had hurt her at their last interview, hurt and disappointed her. But yet the man's fascination overpowered all thought of his shortcomings. Already she had almost forgotten them.

She stood before the fire, absently watching the servant as he busied himself over the coffee, till the aromatic scent of it suddenly brought her out of her reverie.

"Oh, thank you," she said. "I don't think I will have any. I have only come for five minutes' talk with Lord Saltash."

"His lordship particularly desired that you would take a cup, madam," the man replied. "It is a very special Egyptian brew." He turned round with a small silver cup on a salver which he decorously presented. "It is supposed to be particularly pleasing to a lady's palate, madam," he said.

She did not want the coffee, but it seemed ungracious to refuse it. She took the cup and set it on the mantelpiece.

"It should be drunk very hot, madam," said Billings persuasively. "Will you be so very kind, madam, as to taste it, and tell me if it is to your liking?"

She hesitated momentarily, but it was too small a matter to refuse. She took the cup by its slender handle and put it to her lips. Instantly it was as if a warm current of life went through her, a fine, golden thread of delight.

She looked at Billings and smiled. "It is--delicious," she said.

Billings looked gratified. "The second cup is generally considered even better than the first, madam," he said.

"Oh, I won't take more than one, thank you," she said.

And Billings retired, closing the door soundlessly behind him.

Maud lifted the cup again to her lips. Its fragrance pervaded all her senses. It was unlike anything she knew, and yet in some subtle fashion it made her think of palms and orange-groves, and the strong sunshine of the East. It presented before her mind a vivid picture of beauties that she had never seen. She drank again; and again that strange sense of dawning bliss came to her. It was like the coming of a tropic morning after a long, black night. Her anxiety was magically lifted from her; a sensation of pure gladness, of warmth of soul and body began to possess her. It was like drinking in the pure essence of sunshine. All things seemed easy, all difficulties were smoothed away. She was sure that Charlie would understand and be content. Had he not

promised to be to her whatever she wished?

She drained the cup, and set it down. It seemed a little strange to her that her hand should be trembling as she did so; for all her misgivings had vanished. She had stepped as it were into a garden of delight. A strange, unearthly happiness was hers. It was as if her life had been suddenly and mysteriously filled to the brim with all that she could desire.

The only thing lacking was music. She looked across at the grand piano lighted with that one red lamp, and a haunting memory came to her--came to her. She saw the altar and the glow of the undying flame before it; but the flowers--the white lilies of purity--where were they?

A vague distress came to her, filtering as it were through locked senses, dispelling the golden rapture, dimming her dream. She moved over the polished floor, drawn by that red arc of light. She reached the piano. She stood before it. And then her dream changed.

The vision of the altar faded, faded. She slipped down before the gleaming keys. She struck a soft, sweet chord. And with it the former magic took her. The sun and the orange-groves were hers again, and a blue, blue gleam of sea came into the picture like the last touch of romance into a fairy-tale. As one beneath a spell she sat and wove her vision into such music as she had never contemplated before....

As of old, she never knew quite when he came to her. She only realized very suddenly that he was there. His dark face gleamed down at her in the lamplight. His odd eyes sent a mocking invitation into hers.

Again her vision was swept away. Her hands fell from the piano, and were caught in the same instant into his.

"Oh, Charlie!" she gasped incoherently.

He drew her close, laughing at her with half-teasing tenderness. "Oh, Maud!" he said. "O queen of all the roses!"

But she hung back from him. It was almost as if something dragged her back. "I--I have something to say to you," she faltered confusedly. "I came to say it. What was it? Oh, what was it?"

His swarthy face was bending nearer, nearer. She saw the humorous lift of his black brows. "You have said it," he told her softly. "There is nothing left to say. There will never again be any need for words between us two."

He laughed at her again with a kind of kingly indulgence. His arms went round her, pressing her to him, ignoring her last, quivering effort to resist. His lips suddenly found her own.

And then it was that her eyes were opened, and her memory came back. In a flash of anguished understanding she was brought face to face with the realities of life. She knew that she had been enmeshed in a dream of evil delight, drawn unaccountably, by some hidden, devilish strategy to the very edge of that precipice that she had striven so desperately to avoid.

In that moment she would have torn herself free, but her strength was gone. Her body felt leaden and powerless; her throat too numb to utter any protest. Her visions had all fallen away from her, but she thought she heard the roar of the whirlpool below. And through all she was madly conscious of the lips that pressed her own, the arms that drew her closer, always closer, to the gulf.

She thought that her senses were leaving her, so utterly helpless had she become. An awful cloud seemed to be hanging over her,--slowly, slowly descending. Faintly she tried to pray for deliverance, but his lips stilled the prayer. Against her will, as one horribly compelled, she knew that she returned his kiss.

And then she was lying on the low divan with Charlie beside her, holding her, calling her his queen, his captured angel--his wife.

She did not know exactly what happened afterwards, for a great darkness took her. She only knew that she was suddenly lifted and borne away. She only heard the rush of the whirlpool as it closed over her head.

CHAPTER XIX THE OUTER DARKNESS

Something was waking her. Someone seemed to be knocking on the outer door of her brain. She came back to consciousness as one returning from a far, far journey that yet had occupied but a very brief space of time. An inner sense of urgency awoke and responded to that outer knocking.

As through a maze of disconnected impressions she heard a voice.

"I give you ten seconds, my lord," it said. "Just--ten--seconds!"

The words were absolutely quiet, they sounded almost suave; but the deadly determination of them smote upon her like the call of a trumpet. She started up.

The next instant she was staring about her in utter bewilderment. She was lying on a deep couch in a room she had never seen before, a strange, conical chamber, oak-panelled, lighted by a domed skylight. It was furnished with bizarre Eastern luxury. The couch on which she lay was a nest of tiger-skins.

But she saw these details but vaguely. That voice she had heard had made all else of no importance. It had spoken close to her, but it was not in the room with her, and she could not for the moment tell whence it had come. She could only listen with caught breath for more, listen with starting eyes fixed on the stuffed skin of a cobra poised on a small table near as if ready to strike. She even fancied for a moment that the thing was alive, and then realized with a passing relief that it had been converted into the stem of a reading-lamp.

Again the voice came. It was counting slowly, with the utmost regularity.

But it was not allowed to continue. Saltash's voice; quick and imperious, broke in upon it. "Be quiet, you damn' fool! If you murder me, you'll only be sorry afterwards. I have told you I don't know where she is."

"You have told me a lie, my lord." Grim as fate came the answer, and following it a movement that turned her sick with fear.

She sprang to her feet with a wild cry. "Jake! Jake! I am here! Jake,--come to me!"

She threw herself against the panelling of the wall in a frenzy of terror, and beat upon it fiercely, frantically. There was a door behind her, but instinct warned her that it did not lead whither she desired to go. It was through the panelling that those sinister words had reached her.

But it resisted her wild efforts. She beat in vain. "Oh, Jake!" she cried again, and broke into agonized sobbing. "Jake, where are you?"

And then she heard his voice again, short this time and commanding. "Let her out, my lord! The game is up."

"Trust a woman to give it away!" said Saltash, and laughed a cold, hard laugh.

The panelling against which she stood suddenly yielded, slid back. She found herself standing on the threshold of the music-room, close to one of the carved fireplaces. And there, face to face with her, one hand thrust deep into his breeches-pocket, stood her husband, stood Jake. All her life she was to remember the look he wore.

Saltash was nearer still, but she scarcely saw him. She went past him, sobbing, inarticulate, unnerved. She stretched out trembling, beseeching hands to the man in whose eyes she read the lust of murder. She cried aloud to him in her agony!

"Come away! Oh, come away! Be merciful this once--only this once! Jake! Jake!"

She reached him, she clung to him; she would have knelt to him. But he thrust his left arm around her, forcibly holding her up.

He did not speak to her, did not, she believed, so much as look at her. His eyes were fixed with a terrible intensity upon the man beyond her. His attitude was strained and unyielding. The untamed ferocity of the wilds was in every line of him, in every tense muscle. Ruthlessness, lawlessness, savagery unshackled, fiercely eager, beat in every pulse, every sinew of his frame. She felt as if she were holding back a furious animal from his prey, as if at any moment he would burst free, and rend and tear till the demon that possessed him was satisfied.

But she clung to him faster and faster, seeking to pinion the murderous right hand that was thrust so deeply away out of her reach. She heard another laugh from Saltash, but she did not dare to turn. And then came a sound like the click of a spring-trap.

The tension went suddenly out of Jake. He relaxed and with a certain cowboy roughness took his hand from his pocket and grasped her by the shoulders. His eyes came from beyond her, and looked straight into hers. And she knew without turning her head that her own hour of reckoning had come. They were alone.

For many, many seconds he looked at her so with a red-hot glow in his eyes that seemed as though it would burn its way to her most secret soul. She endured it with a desperate courage. If he had caught her by the throat she would not have flinched. But his hold, though insistent, was without violence. And at last very, very slowly he let her go.

"I guess that ends it," he said.

"What do you mean?" Through quivering lips she asked the question. She felt as if an icy wind

had suddenly caught her. She was cold from head to foot.

He made a slight gesture as of one indicating the obvious, and turned away. She saw his square figure moving away from her, and a terrible fear went through her. Her very heart felt frozen within her. She tried to speak, to utter his name; but her throat only worked spasmodically, making no sound.

He reached the door, opened it, and then--as if he could not help it--he looked back at her. And in that moment with frantic effort she burst the bonds that held her. She threw out her arms in wild entreaty.

"Jake!" she gasped. "Jake! Don't--don't leave me!"

He stopped, but he did not return. There was a curious look on his face. He seemed to stand irresolute.

She began to move towards him, but found herself trembling too much to walk. She tottered to the mantel-piece for support. But she still looked towards him, still tremulously entreated him.

"Jake, you--you don't understand! You never will understand if you leave me now. I'm going under--I'm going under! Jake,--save me!"

She bowed her head suddenly upon her hands, and stood quivering. She had made her last piteous effort to escape from the toils that held her. Nothing but a miracle could save her now. Nothing but the power of that love that dieth not.

Seconds passed. She thought that he had gone, had abandoned her to her fate, left her to the mercy of a man who would compass her ruin. And she wondered in her agony if she could muster sufficient strength to flee from that evil place and snatch her own deliverance down on the dark, lonely shore, where no one could ever drag her back again.

And then very suddenly a hand touched her, closed upon her arm. It was as if a current of electricity ran through her. She turned with a great start.

Jake's eyes, very level, quite inscrutable, looked straight into hers. "I guess we'll be getting along home," he said.

His hand urged her steadily, indomitably. He led her speechless from the room, supporting her when she faltered, but never hesitating or suffering her to pause.

They came out at the top of the great, branching staircase. The hall below them was lighted only by the soft glow that surrounded Saltash's favourite statue. The hand that held Maud's arm tightened to a grip. They went down the stairs together, and passed the tragic figure by.

As they moved down the long hall, a man stepped suddenly out from behind the statue, and looked after them with eyes that shone derisively. He did not utter a word, and his movements were without sound.

Neither of the two was aware of his presence. Only as they paused at the outer door, Maud glanced back and saw the arc of light about the statue vanish.

She uttered a quick exclamation, for it was as if the marble itself had come to life and fled from her gaze. And then she was aware of Jake's hands fastening her waterproof about her, and she forgot all but her longing to escape--to escape.

A few seconds more, and she heard the heavy door shut behind them. She was out in the gathering darkness with Jake, and the rain was beating in her face.

It was then that her weakness came back to her, a sense of terrible exhaustion that gave her the feeling of dragging heavy chains. She fought against it desperately, dreading every instant lest he should misinterpret her dragging steps and leave her. An overwhelming drowsiness was creeping over her, numbing all her faculties. She struggled to fling it off, but could not. It crowded upon her like an evil dream. She staggered, stumbled, almost fell.

Jake stopped. "Reckon you're tired," he said.

She answered him with a rush of tears. "I can't help it! Really, I can't help it! I--I believe I must be ill."

She tried to cling to his supporting arm, but her hands slipped weakly away. She felt herself sinking, sinking into a black sea of oblivion, and knew it was futile to struggle any longer.

Yet a vague sense of comfort came to her with the consciousness of his arms tightening around her. She gave herself to him like a tired child. She even feebly thanked him as he lifted her.

And then for a long, long space she knew nothing. Billows and billows of unfathomable nothingness were over her, under her, all about her. Sometimes her drugged brain stirred as if about to register an impression, but no actual impression reached it. The things of earth had faded utterly away. She was as one vaguely floating in a nebulous cloud through which now and then, now and then, a dim star shone for a moment and then went out.

After a time even this slender link was snapped. She went into a deeper darkness, and there for awhile her troubled wanderings were stayed. She slept as she had never slept before. It was as if for a long, long space she ceased to be....

Out of the silence at last came a fearful dream. Out of a great emptiness she entered another world, a world of demon shapes and demon voices, of faces that jeered and vanished, a world of terrible, outer darkness, in which she seemed to be bereft of all things, to stand as it were naked and alone. She dreamed that the statue had come to life indeed, and behold, it was herself! In horror unutterable, in shame that was agony she went her appointed way,--a fallen woman who could never rise again.

And ever a voice within seemed urging her to soar, to soar; but she could not. Wings had been given her, but she could not use them. One wing had been broken, how she knew not. Perhaps it was in beating against the bars of a cage. Some such struggle hovered vaguely in her memory, but all struggling was over now. All hope of escape was dead.

Again the demon-faces came all about her, demon-hands clutched at her, pulling her down. And every face was the face of Charlie Burchester, every hand wore the ring which twice over he had given to her. And still she heard his laugh, that cruel, bitter laugh with which he had left her alone in the music-room with Jake.

At last she knew that she cried aloud to die, but instantly she realized the futility of her prayer. There was no God to hear her in this awful place. And there was no Death.

Yet it was then that it seemed to her that a door was opened somewhere very far above her, and a gracious breath of purity came down. Crushed as she was, over-whelmed with evil, grossly besmirched and degraded, it came to her like a puff of morning wind from the clean, open spaces of the earth. She turned her face upwards. She gasped and opened her eyes.

And then all in a moment the dreadful vision passed away from her, and she saw Jake's face gazing, gazing into hers.

CHAPTER XX DELIVERANCE

She stared at him vaguely for a space half in wonder, half in fear. His look was very intent, but it was without anger. She wondered hazily what had happened, why he was watching her so.

"Where am I?" she murmured at length.

He made answer very quietly, as if he had expected the question. "You are here in the old parlour with me. I brought you here."

"Oh?" She gazed around her doubtfully. Her brain felt clogged and dull. "Have I been away then?" she said. "Where is Bunny?"

He rose and moved across the room to the fire. "Bunny is at school," he said, and stooped to lift off a saucepan. "Yes, you have been away. You came back from Liverpool yesterday."

"Ah!" She gave a quick gasp. The mists were beginning to clear a little. She became dimly conscious that there was something terrible behind. She raised herself on her elbow, but was instantly assailed by a feeling of sickness so intense that she sank back again.

She was lying with closed eyes when Jake came back to her. He bent over her with a steaming cup in his hand.

"Try a little of this!" he said.

She looked up with an effort. "I don't think I can. Jake, what has happened? Am I ill again?"

"Guess you'll remember presently if you drink this," he said.

She drew back shuddering. "What is it? Not brandy?"

"No. It's beef-tea." He sat down beside her with a resolute air, and she suddenly realized that resistance was useless.

He was very gentle with her, feeding her spoonful by spoonful; and gradually as she swallowed it she revived. Her brain stirred and seemed to awake. Memory came crowding back. Long ere the cup was finished, that last scene in the music-room hung before her like a lurid picture from which she could not tear her gaze.

Quietly Jake set aside the cup. "Maybe you'll sleep better now," he said.

She lifted her heavy eyes to his. "No, I don't want to sleep any longer. Jake, you--you are not going away!"

He seemed on the point of rising. She stretched out a beseeching hand and laid it on his arm.

"Jake, I--I want to tell you something. Will you listen to me? Please, will you listen to me?"

His arm grew tense as a stretched wire under her touch. She thought there was a glitter of hardness in the red-brown eyes as he said, "There is no call for you to tell me anything unless you wish."

She sat up slowly, compelling herself to face him, "But I want you to--understand," she said.

He laid his hand abruptly upon hers with a gesture that almost seemed as if he would restrain her. "You needn't fret any about that," he said. "Reckon I--do understand."

The vital force of the man was in that free grip of his. She looked to see the awful flare of savage passion leap back into his eyes. But she looked in vain. His eyes baffled her. They seemed to hold her back like a sword in the hand of a practised fencer.

The words she had thought to utter died upon her lips. There was to be no reckoning then. And yet she could not feel reassured. He did not look like a man who would forego his revenge.

"What--what are you going to do?" she faltered at last.

"I shouldn't want to know too much if I were you," said Jake, softly drawing. "Not at this stage anyway."

His hand still held hers. He looked her hard and straight in the face, and she was conscious of something fiery, something elementary, wholly uncivilized, behind his look. There was a suggestion of violence about him. She saw him as a man tracking his enemy through an endless wilderness, breasting mighty rivers, hewing his way through pathless forests, conquering every obstacle with fixed determination, mercilessly riding him down.

She braced herself and rose, drawing her hand free. Her head still swam, but she controlled herself resolutely. She stood before him like a prisoner upon trial.

"Jake," she said, "I am going to tell you something that will make you terribly angry; but it's something that you must know."

She paused, but he sat in silence, grimly watching her. She found her resolution wavering and gripped it with all her strength.

"When I came back here from Liverpool, it was not--not to see my mother as I gave you to understand. It was to--to--" She faltered under his look, found she could not continue, and suddenly threw out her hands in piteous appeal. "Jake, don't make it impossible for me to tell you!"

He rose also. They stood face to face. "Are you going to tell me that you lied to me?" he said.

She drew back from him sharply. The question felt like a blow. "I am telling you the truth now," she said.

"And for whose sake?" He flung the words brutally, as a man goaded beyond endurance. But the moment they were uttered he drew a hard breath as though he would recall them. He came to her, took her by the shoulders. "You take my advice!" he said. "Leave the whole miserable business alone! You've been tricked--badly tricked. You have appealed to me to protect you, and that's enough. I don't want any more than that. I reckon I understand the situation better than you think. You are trying to tell me that it was your original intention to elope with Saltash. Well, maybe it was. But you had given up the notion before you went to him at the Castle, and he knew you had given it up. If he hadn't known it, he wouldn't have taken the trouble to drug you. It's an old device--old as the hills. He's probably done it a score of times, and with more success than he had to-day. Yes, that makes you sick. I guessed it would. And that's what he's going to answer to me for,--what he'll ask your pardon for on his knees before I've done with him."

"Oh no, Jake, no!" She broke in upon him with a cry of consternation. "For pity's sake, no! Jake, I can't bear it! I cannot bear it! Jake, I beseech you, leave him alone now! Oh, do leave him alone! You--you can punish me in any other way. I'll bear anything but that--anything but that!"

Piteously she besought him, shaken to the soul by the grim purport of his speech. She did not flinch from him now. Rather she appealed to him as one in sore straits, pouring out her entreaty with all that remained of her quivering strength.

And her words made an impression upon him of which she was instantly aware. His hands still held her, but the tension went out of his grasp. He looked at her with eyes that were no longer hard, eyes that held a dawning compassion.

"Reckon you're the last person that deserves punishing," he said at length, and in his voice she fancied she caught an echo of the old frank kindness. "You've been the victim all through. Reckon you've suffered more than enough already."

She hid her face from him with a sudden rush of tears. Something in his words pierced straight to her heart.

"You don't know me!" she sobbed. "Oh, you don't know me!"

She drew herself away and sank down in the chair by the fire where once she had poured out all her troubles to him.

He did not kneel beside her now. He stood in silence, and as he stood his hands slowly clenched and he thrust them into his pockets.

He spoke at last, but it was with a restraint that made the words sound cold. "Maybe I know you better than you think. I know you've cared for the wrong man ever since I first met you. Guess I've known it all along, and it hasn't made things extra easy for either of us, more especially as he was utterly unworthy of you. But you're not to blame for that. It's just human nature. And you'd never have fallen in love with me anyway." He paused a moment. "I don't see you're to blame any for that either," he said, and she knew by his voice that he had turned away from her. "Anyway, I'm not blaming you. And if--if punishing Saltash means punishing you too--well,--even though he's a skunk and a blackguard--I reckon--I'll let him go."

He was moving to the door with the words. They came half-strangled as if something within rebelled fiercely against their utterance.

He reached the door and stopped with his back to her.

"You'd better get your mother to join you here to-morrow," he said. "I'm sleeping with The Hundredth Chance to-night. He's been below par lately, and I'm kind of worried about him."

He opened the door. He was on the point of squarely passing through when quickly, tremulously, she stopped him.

"Jake, please--please wait a moment! I must--I must--Jake!"

He closed the door again and turned round, but he did not come back or even look at her. There was a hint of doggedness about him, almost as though he waited against his will.

She stood up. Something in his attitude made it difficult, painfully difficult, to speak. She strove for self-control. "You--are going to--to forgive me?" she said quiveringly.

He glanced up momentarily, a grim flicker as of a smile about his mouth. "For what you haven't done, and never could do? It would be mighty generous of me, wouldn't it?" he said.

She moved a step towards him. "I--might have done it. I--so nearly--did it," she said, in distress. "I don't deserve any kindness from you, Jake. I--don't know how to thank you for it."

He made a sharp gesture with one hand. "If I've given you more than bare justice," he said, "put it to my credit! Make allowance for me next time!"

Something rose in her throat. She stood for a moment battling with it. Bare justice! Had she ever given him so much as that? And he rewarded her with this blind generosity that would not even be aware of her sin.

Trembling, she drew nearer to him. She stretched out a quivering hand. "Jake," she said, and the tears were running down her face. "I--will try--to be worthy of your--goodness to me."

He took the hand, gripping it with a force that made her wince. "Shucks, my girl!" he said, with a gruffness oddly uncharacteristic of him. "That's nothing. Be worthy of yourself!"

And with that abruptly he let her go, turned and left her. She knew by the finality of his going that she would see him no more that night.

CHAPTER XXI THE POISON FRUIT

It was curiously like the old days to see Jake enter the parlour on the following morning with Chops the red setter at his heels. But for Chops' delighted welcome of her, Maud could almost have felt that the intervening weeks had been no more than a dream.

She sat in her accustomed place and fondled him. Then, as Jake passed her, she put out a detaining hand.

"Good morning, Jake!"

Her face was burning; yet she lifted it. He stood a second, only a second, behind her chair; then bent and touched her forehead with his lips.

"You're down early," he said. "Have you slept?"

She nodded, feeling her agitation subside with thankfulness. "How is--The Hundredth Chance?"

Jake went to the fire. "I think he'll be all right; but I won't trust anyone else to look after him. By the way, here's a letter for you!"

He held it out to her behind his back. She took it. Her fingers closed upon a crest.

She got up sharply, went to his side, and with a passionate movement dropped it straight into the flames.

"Shall we have breakfast now?" she said.

"Here's another letter!" said Jake.

The grim smile was hovering about his mouth; but he made no comment whatever upon her action.

She took the second letter. "Is this all?"

"That's all," said Jake.

"It's from Uncle Edward." She opened it, and began to read.

Suddenly she glanced up and found his eyes upon her. They fell instantly.

"You can read it too," she said, and held the letter so that he might share it with her.

He stood at her shoulder and read.

It was a very brief epistle, written in evident distress of mind.

"MY DEAR GRAND-NIECE,

"Will you permit me to tender to you my very humble apology for the gross behaviour by which I drove you from the shelter of my roof? The fact that you have returned to your husband's house convinces me of the base injustice of my suspicions. I ought to be old enough to know that a woman cannot be judged by her friends. If you find that you possess sufficient magnanimity to extend a free pardon to a very lonely and penitent old sinner, will you of your charity return--for however brief a period--and give him an opportunity to demonstrate his penitence?"

"Yours humbly and hopefully,

"EDWARD WARREN."

"Oh, poor old man!" Maud looked up quickly. "But how did he know I was here?"

"I wired to him of your safe arrival," Jake said, "in reply to a wire from him which I didn't read. I thought he might come posting down here if I didn't."

"Poor old man!" she said again. And after a moment, "Thank you, Jake."

He looked at her. "For keeping my word? I generally do that. Say, what are you going to do?"

"I'll write to him," she said.

He moved round to his place at the breakfast-table. "You're not wanting to go back then?"

She hesitated.

"What is it?" he said. "Money? I can let you have some if you're short of it."

She flushed. "No, Jake, no! I think--I think I'll stay here for the present. I will make him understand."

"Please yourself!" said Jake, and opened the morning paper.

A faint sense of disappointment went through her. She had fancied her decision would have evoked approval if not open pleasure from him. She poured out his coffee in silence.

As she brought it to him, he glanced up at her. "Don't stay on my account if you feel you'd sooner go!" he said. "I get along very well alone."

She stiffened ever so slightly. "Thank you," she said. "I'll think about it."

Jake fell to work upon his breakfast with his usual business-like rapidity. She did not attempt to keep pace with him. Somehow the idea that he really wished her to go had robbed her of all desire to eat.

After a time he glanced across at her again. "Are you going down to see your mother?"

She answered him somewhat listlessly. "Yes, I suppose so."

"She'll have to decide on something soon," he observed.

Maud bit her lip. The thought of going to her mother again was wholly repugnant to her. She marvelled that he did not see it.

"I am sure she won't come and live in this place," she said, after a moment,

"She can please herself," said Jake imperturbably.

That was to be his attitude then. They were to please themselves. He had withdrawn his control over her actions. An evil spirit suddenly whispered to her that he would even have left her in Saltash's keeping had she not called to him to deliver her. She shook off the poisonous thought; but it had been there. He had been kind--more than kind--to her. She forced herself to dwell upon his kindness. But his present indifference was even more obvious. He was engrossed in his work. He had thought only for his animals. Plainly it was a matter of small importance to him if she went or stayed.

He finished his breakfast and got up. "Well, so long!" he said. "I may not get back before nightfall. I have to go over to Graydown."

She scarcely acknowledged his words, and he did not wait for any acknowledgment. He took up his riding-whip and went out. Chops looked round at her doubtfully and followed him.

The door closed upon them. And suddenly Maud leaned upon the table and hid her face. This was to be her life then--the unspeakable dreariness of a loveless home. She had thought he loved her. She had thought! She had thought! And now she saw that it began and ended with mere kindness, and possibly a sense of duty. His passion for her--that fiery, all-mastering desire--had burnt itself out, and there was nothing left. An unutterable weariness came upon her. Oh, she was tired--she was tired of life!

It was then that in some mystic fashion that voice which she had once heard spoke again in her soul. "The spark is ours for the kindling--the power to love--the power to create love...."

Was she indeed capable of kindling this lamp in the desert? Out of those dead ashes of passion, could Love the Immortal indeed be made to rise?

She sat for a long time and pondered--pondered.

When, an hour later, she went down the hill to the town, the day was brilliant and the sky without a cloud. The sea was one glorious sheet of blue that seemed to stretch away limitless into Infinity.

Down by the quay a white yacht rocked at her moorings. She marked it with a throbbing heart. Why, oh why, did he linger? She yearned to thrust him for ever out of her life.

She reached the Anchor Hotel and entered. The bareness of the place smote cold upon the senses. She passed through it quickly and went up to her mother's room.

"Oh, my dear, at last!" Querulously Mrs. Sheppard greeted her. "Shut the door and come in! Charlie is watching for you. He will be over directly."

She was clad in an old pink wrapper, and kneeling before a half-filled trunk.

Maud stood still in the doorway, every spark of animation gone out of her. "Mother, what are you doing? What do you mean?"

Her voice sounded frozen and devoid of all emotion. Her fingers were clenched rigidly upon the handle of the door. She stared at her mother with eyes that were suddenly stony.

"What do you mean?" she repeated.

Mrs. Sheppard looked up at her smiling. "I mean, dear, that while you go for your Mediterranean cruise, I am going back to London. Dear me, why did I ever leave it? I have never been happy since. Fairharbour never suited me. I was saying so to Charlie only last night. He told me all about it, dear. Poor child, I hope that horrible cowboy person wasn't very cruel to you. I couldn't help letting out where you had gone yesterday afternoon. He came in only a few minutes after you left, and was so insistent. But, thank goodness, you've broken away. You had Charlie's letter, did you? I told him I was sure you would come directly you knew he was waiting. Dear Charlie! He really is very good. I quite see his point of view about the poor old 'Anchor,' and I really think it is all for the best. Giles is gone anyway, and I am released from any obligations in that direction. Charlie hated Giles for some reason, though I can't discover that he ever met him. Come in, child! Why do you stand there looking so tragic? Surely all's well that ends well?"

Maud turned stiffly as though her limbs had become automatic. "I am going," she said. "I am going."

"Oh, wait till Charlie comes for you, dearest! Don't be too impetuous! I am sure he will come immediately. He would be watching the shore from the yacht. Such a lovely morning for a cruise too! You will be wanting a few little necessaries, dear. I have put them up for you in that leather bag. I knew you would never think of that for yourself. I believe he means to take you straight to Paris, you lucky child. The yacht will go round and wait for you at Marseilles. Charlie always does things so royally, doesn't he? He has been most kind, most generous, to me."

Mrs. Sheppard was talking into the trunk, a smile of happy anticipation about her lips that made her almost comely again.

"Really," she said, "it is quite wonderful how things always turn out for the best. I only wish I had known a year ago how happy you and dear little Bunny were going to be. It would have saved me so much anxiety. When you are Lady Saltash, of course you will make a home for him at the Castle. And there may be just a corner sometimes for me too, darling. What a happy party we shall all be!"

She threw a smile over her shoulder, and then suddenly turned and stared. The door was closed, and she was alone.

Down the wide staircase Maud ran like a wild thing seeking freedom, down into the bare,

echoing hall. But the moment she reached it, she stopped--stopped dead as one suddenly turned to stone.

He was waiting for her, there in the sunny open doorway, a smile of arrogant satisfaction on his ugly face, and triumph, open triumph, in his eyes.

He came to meet her like a king, carelessly gracious, royally self-assured.

"Ah, Maud of the roses!" he said. "Free at last!"

He reached her where she stood, rigidly waiting. He opened his arms to take her. And then--as though there had been the flash of a dagger between them--he stopped.

She had not moved. She did not move. But the blazing blue of her eyes gave him check. For the space of many seconds they stood, not breathing, not stirring; and in those seconds, as by the light of a piercing torch, each read the other's soul.

It was Saltash who gave ground at last, but insolently with a smile of bitter mockery. "This scene is called 'The Unmasking of the Villain,'" he observed. "The virtuous heroine, having descended from her pedestal to expose his many crimes, now gathers her mud-stained garments about her and climbs back again, in the confident hope that the worthy cow-puncher who owns her will conclude that she has never left her exalted position and that the mud was all thrown by the villain. Now, I wonder if the worthy cow-puncher is quite such a fool as that."

Her face was quite colourless, but she heard his gibe without a sign of shrinking. Only as he ceased to speak, she lifted one hand and pointed to the open door.

"Go!" she said.

Just the one word, spoken with a finality more crushing than any outburst of anger! If it expressed contempt, it was involuntary, she uttered only what was in her soul.

He looked at her, and suddenly the derision in his eye flamed into fierce malignancy. "Oh, I am going," he said. "You will never kick me from your path again. You shall tread it alone--quite alone except for the cow-puncher who no doubt will see to it that you walk on the stony side of the way. And I warn you it will be--very stony, especially when he comes to realize that his lady wife has been his ruin. A tramp across the world with Jake Bolton under those conditions will at least destroy all illusions as to the stuff of which he is made. And I wish you joy of the journey." He made her a deep, ironical bow, and swung upon his heel.

But as he went she spoke, suddenly, passionately, as though the words leaped forth, compelling her. "Jake Bolton is a man--a white man!"

Saltash laughed aloud, lifting his shoulders as he sauntered away. "With the heart of a beast, *chère reine*," he said. "For that cause also, I wish you joy."

He went. The sun smote through the empty doorway. She put up both hands to her eyes as though to blot out some evil vision.

And presently--like a creature that has been sorely wounded--she also crept away, fleeing ashamed by another door, that no one might observe her going.

No, Jake was no fool. He saw only what he chose to see, believed only what he willed to believe. He had been generous to her--ay, generous past all understanding. But he was no fool. He had refused the mute offer of her lips only that morning. Wherefore? Wherefore?

The answer lay in Saltash's mocking words, and all her life she would remember them. The poison plant had borne its bitter fruit indeed, and she had been forced to eat thereof. It burned her now with a cruel intensity, consuming her like a darting flame. But she knew by its very fierceness that it could not last. Very soon her heart--her soul--would all be burnt away; and there would be only dead ashes left--only dead ashes from which no living spark could ever be kindled again.

No, Jake was no fool--no fool! He would not blame her, that was all; because she was a woman.

CHAPTER XXII THE LOSER

"Why doesn't Maud come back?" said Bunny discontentedly. "It's beastly mean of her to stay away over the holidays."

"You can go to her if you like, my son," said Jake, between whiffs at his pipe.

"Oh, I know. But it isn't the same thing. And besides, I'm not going to leave you alone for Christmas, so there! Say, Jake, I wonder you put up with it. Why shouldn't we go--the two of us--

and fetch her back?"

"She's better where she is," said Jake. "And as to my going away, it's out of the question. I'm a fixture--so long as there's anything left to do."

Something in the last words caught Bunny's attention. He looked at him with sudden shrewdness. "What do you mean, Jake? What's up?"

Jake was silent. He sat moodily smoking and staring into the fire. His chin was sunk on his chest. He looked older than his years.

Bunny on the other side of the hearth gazed at him for several seconds with close attention. Finally he got up, went to him, slipped down on to the arm of his chair.

"What is it, Jake, old feller? Tell me!"

Jake looked up, met the warm sympathy in the boy's eyes, and in a moment thrust a kindly arm about the slim young figure.

"Don't you worry about me, little pard!" he said. "There ain't anything the matter that I can't face out by myself."

"Oh, but that's rot, Jake." Bunny's cheek went down against the man's bronze head and pressed it hard. "What's the good of bottling it up? 'Sides, you know, Jake, I don't count. I'd die before I'd split."

"Guess I know that," Jake said.

He hugged Bunny to him as if there were comfort in mere contact, but he said no more.

Bunny hugged him in return, and after a brief silence began to probe for the enlightenment he desired. "Why do you say Maud is better where she is, Jake? After all, she is your wife and no one else's, isn't she?"

Jake puffed at his pipe for a few seconds as if considering his reply. At last, "I say it because it is so," he said. "Your Uncle Edward wanted her, and I reckon that's just the silver lining to my cloud. He's a rich man, I gather. He can look after the two of you--if I go under."

"Jake! You aren't going under!" Horrified incredulity sounded in Bunny's voice. He leaned swiftly forward to look into Jake's face.

A queer, dogged smile showed upon it for an instant and was gone. "Don't you worry any, sonny! I shall come up again," said Jake. "I've been under before, practically down and out. But it hasn't killed me. It ain't going to kill me this time. So long as you and Maud are provided for, I can fend for myself."

"But Jake, what's it mean? You haven't lost money?" urged Bunny in bewilderment.

"No. I've got a little money. There are plenty of poor devils worse off than I." Jake leaned his head back against Bunny's wiry arm. There was a fighting gleam in his eyes. "But it ain't enough to keep me going. If it had been, I reckon I shouldn't have waited for notice to quit."

"Is that what you've got? Jake, you aren't in earnest! Charlie wouldn't be such a blackguard!"

Jake uttered an abrupt laugh; his teeth were clenched on his lower lip. "Oh, Charlie's a blackguard all right--blackguard enough for anything. Don't you ever make any mistake about that! But I presume it's up to him to sell the stud if he feels so disposed. There ain't anything specially blackguardly in that. It's just his polite way of telling me to git."

"Sell the stud! Is that what he's going to do? Oh, Jake, old feller! Jake!" Shocked sympathy was in Bunny's voice.

Jake hugged him harder. "I hadn't meant to tell you on your first night. But you're such a shrewd little chap. And you've got to know sooner or later. Don't make an all-fired fuss about it anyway!"

"All right, Jake." Bunny sounded a little breathless, but there was resolution in his voice. "It's you I'm thinking of. When--when's it going to be?"

"The sale? Early in the year I expect. I haven't any definite instructions as to that. I'm expecting 'em every day. All I've been told officially at present is to cancel all engagements. Of course I guessed what was in the wind then. I tackled old Bishop the Agent about it the other day; and he had to confirm it. Ah, well!" Jake heaved an abrupt sigh that seemed to catch him unawares, and became silent.

"P'raps he won't sell 'em all, Jake," said Bunny hesitatingly. "He couldn't--surely--sell The Hundredth Chance!"

Jake's pipe suddenly cracked between his teeth. He sat up sharply, and took it out of his mouth. It fell in twain between his fingers. He sat staring at it, then with a curious reverence he stooped forward and dropped the pieces into the heart of the fire.

"Yes," he said heavily. "I reckon The Hundredth Chance will go with all the rest."

He looked at Bunny, and there was desolation in his eyes; but he gave it no verbal expression.

And Bunny also found that the subject demanded silence; it was beyond words.

"Does Maud know?" he asked at length, speaking rather doubtfully, as if not quite sure of his ground.

"No. I didn't want to worry her before I need." Jake's eyes went back to the fire, gazing into it, dumbly troubled. "I fancy there's no doubt that the old man will provide for her--for both of you. That's what I'm counting on anyway."

Bunny made an abrupt movement of impatience. "Oh, damn all that, Jake! What of you?"

For the first time his strong language went unrebuked. Jake's eyes remained fixed upon the fire where burned the remains of his treasure. He spoke slowly, as one reading words but dimly discerned.

"Reckon I shall go back to America. I shall find my feet again there. There's no call for you to be anxious about me. Guess I shan't starve."

"Jake!" Bunny's arm went round his shoulders, gripping them hard. He spoke into Jake's ear, a rapid, nervous whisper. "Jake, if you're going to America, I reckon I'm coming too. There's no one worth speaking to after you. I just won't be left behind. I'll work, Jake. I'll work like a nigger. I won't be a drag on you. But I can't stay behind--not after all you've been to me. Jake, Jake, old feller, say you'll have me! I'm as strong as a horse. And I'd sooner starve along with you than be left without you. I--I--Jake, old feller, please!" He suddenly bowed his head upon Jake's shoulder with a hard sob.

"Little pard!" Jake said, and pulled him down beside him. "Don't act the fool now! That ain't like you!"

Bunny clung to him almost fiercely. "You shan't lose everything, Jake. First Maud, and then the animals, and then the home,--and--and--me too. You like me a bit, don't you, Jake?"

"Just a bit," said Jake, ruffling the black head.

"Then let me come with you, Jake! I'll do whatever you tell me. I--I'll black your boots for you every day. I'll do anything under the sun. Only don't leave me behind! I miss you badly enough at school. But I can't stick it--without you--altogether."

"Shucks! Shucks!" said Jake very softly.

He was holding Bunny in his arms in the old brotherly way. They were too close to one another for any boyish dignity to come between. The bond that linked them had been forged in the fires of adversity, and adversity served but to strengthen it.

"I can't!" Bunny reiterated. "You don't know what you are to me, Jake. You've just made me. And I--I feel as if I'll all come undone again if you go right away."

"I haven't gone yet," Jake said, in a drawl that was slightly unsteady. "But if it is to be, Bunny lad,--and God knows it's more than likely--you can do a bigger thing for me by staying back here--along with Maud--than if you came along and roughed it with me. You'll be the link between us, boy, when--all the other links are gone."

He became silent, gently smoothing the hair that he had ruffled.

Bunny was silent also for a space. It was as if something sacred had come into their communion. At last with his head still pillowed on Jake's shoulder he spoke.

"Say, Jake!"

Jake's arm tightened almost as if he would silence him, but he said nothing.

And Bunny persisted. "Jake, old chap, it doesn't take a prophet to see that things aren't as they should be between you two. I'm beastly sorry. I know jolly well it's not your fault."

"It ain't hers," Jake said, almost under his breath.

"No. I guess it's that blackguard Charlie. I wish I were a man. I'd shoot him!" said Bunny vindictively.

"I guess you wouldn't," Jake said, faint humour in his voice. "Besides, there's nothing to shoot him for now. He's as much a loser as I am."

"What! They've quarrelled?" questioned Bunny. "Where is he? At the Castle?"

"No. Heaven knows where he is. He's been gone for the last six weeks and more."

"It's twice that since Maud went away," observed Bunny uneasily. "Why on earth doesn't she come back, Jake? She's not--not--afraid of you?"

"She has been back once in that time," Jake said quietly. "She stayed one night with your mother at 'The Anchor.' The place is shut up now, and your mother has gone back to London. I thought possibly that she would have settled down here a bit with Maud. But she didn't quite see it. And it was as well, for the old uncle wrote asking Maud to go back to him, and she went."

"Without consulting you?" asked Bunny quickly.

"She didn't consult me certainly, but she knew I was willing for her to go." Jake spoke with a

touch of restraint.

Bunny raised his head and looked at him with sudden shrewdness. "Who did she want to get away from? You? Or Charlie?"

A flicker that was scarcely humorous crossed Jake's face. "Maybe both," he said.

"And you--you quarrelled with Charlie?"

"No. Seeing he was a loser, I let him go in peace. It was the only thing to do."

"And he has got his knife into you on that account?" questioned Bunny.

"Maybe," Jake admitted.

"Then he's a low hound, and I'd love to tell him so."

"Where's the use? Reckon he knows it all right," said Jake dryly.

"I hope Maud knows it too!"

"She does," said Jake.

Bunny looked slightly mollified. "That's something anyway. Say, Jake?"

"What is it, my son?" Jake's red-brown eyes looked at him with a tenderness that only Bunny was ever allowed to see.

Bunny's head went back to its resting-place against his shoulder swiftly, endearingly. "Jake, Jake, old man, why don't you go back to her? Maybe she's wanting you--and hasn't the pluck to say so. Women are like that, you know."

Jake was silent.

"Give her the chance, Jake!" Bunny urged. "You don't know her like I do. She always was shy. Lots of people thought her proud, but it was mostly shyness. Give her the chance, Jake, old fellow! Just this one chance! It may make all the difference."

"Think so?" said Jake.

"Course I do. I know Maud. She'd sooner die than show you her feelings. But she's got 'em all the same. Maybe she's wanting you--quite a lot, Jake. You can't tell."

"And maybe she's not," said Jake.

"Oh don't--don't be an ass, Jake! Come along and find out anyway! It's--it's up to you, Jake. And there's no one else in the running."

A whimsical smile touched Jake's grim mouth. "Guess that's just what makes it so difficult," he said. "Is anyone at all in the running? I'd sooner draw a loser than a blank."

Bunny lifted a hot, earnest face. "Don't be an ass, Jake!" he urged again. "Go in, man! Go in and win! You love her, don't you?"

It was a straight shot, and it found its mark. Something fiery, something wholly untamed, leaped into Jake's eyes. They shone like a flame upon which spirit has been poured. Bunny pulled himself free with a sound that was almost a whoop of triumph. "You silly coon! Go and tell her so!" he said. "I'll bet you never have yet!"

And Jake uttered a laugh that was curiously broken. "You're getting too damn' clever, my son," he said.

CHAPTER XXIII THE STORM WIND

"It'll be real sport to take her by surprise," said Bunny, with a chuckle of anticipation. "But what a beast of a journey it's been!"

They had been travelling practically all day, and a black night of streaming rain had been their welcome.

They had found accommodation at the hotel in which Maud had once spent a night, and having dined there they splashed through the muddy streets in search of their goal.

They found it, a tall, gaunt house standing back in a dark, dripping garden, unlighted, forsaken.

"It can't be the place!" said Bunny, for the first time feeling his ardour for the adventure slightly damped.

"We'll soon find out," said Jake.

They groped their way to a flight of steps and with the aid of a match found the bell. It rang desolately through the building.

"The house is empty!" declared Bunny.

But after a considerable pause a step sounded within, and a white-faced maid-servant opened

to them.

"Come in!" she said, in a hollow voice. "You're very late."

"Mrs. Bolton here?" asked Jake, as he stepped on to the mat.

She nodded as if in agitation. "Yes, I'll tell her."

She shut the door behind them and went away, leaving them in the narrow, dimly-lighted hall.

"What a rum go!" said Bunny.

Jake said nothing. He was gazing into the shadows in front of him with intent, searching eyes. How would she greet him? Would she be glad? Would she be sorry? He watched for her face, and the first instinctive expression it would wear at sight of him.

There came the rustle of a dress, a footfall that was light and yet somehow sounded weary. She came through the dim hall with a slow, tired gait.

"Good evening!" she said. "Will you come upstairs?"

Bunny's fist suddenly prodded Jake in the back. He went forward a step almost involuntarily.

"Maud!" he said.

"Jake!" She stood as one transfixed.

And in that moment he forgot to notice how she looked at him, forgot everything in the one overwhelming thought that he was with her. He strode forward, and somehow her two cold hands were in his before he knew whether he had taken or she had offered them.

"My girl!" he said, and again huskily, "My girl!"

She lifted a quivering face. "Jake, thank you for coming! I-I hardly thought you could have got here so soon."

He drew her to him and kissed her. "You've been wanting me?" he said.

She nodded. "I sent for you, yes. I-I didn't feel as if I could--face it all--by myself."

His hold was warm, full of sustaining strength. "You'll have to tell me what has happened," he said. "I didn't get your message."

"You didn't?" She looked momentarily startled. "Then why are you here?"

"I came--" he hesitated, glanced over his shoulder. "Bunny's here too," he said.

"Thought we'd just look you up," said Bunny, emerging from the background, "Hullo, Maud! What's the matter? Is the old man ill?"

She turned to greet him. "He died yesterday," she said.

"Great Scott!" said Bunny.

Jake said nothing. He was watching her closely, closely.

She kissed Bunny lingeringly, but without emotion. "He was only ill five days," she said. "It was a chill and then pneumonia. I nursed him right up to the last. He wouldn't have anyone else. In fact he wouldn't let me out of his sight." Her face quivered again, and she paused. Then drearily, "I was expecting the undertaker when you came in," she said. "I've had to arrange everything. The funeral will be the day after to-morrow. Will you come into the dining room? There's a fire there."

She led the way to that stiff and cheerless apartment. Bunny pressed close to her and pushed his hand through her arm.

"Say, Maud, old girl, you're ill yourself," he said.

She looked at him out of deeply shadowed eyes. "No. I'm not ill; only tired, too tired to sleep. There is some wine in that cupboard, dear. Do you mind getting it out? You and Jake must have some."

She went over to the fire almost as one moving in a dream, and stood before it silently.

Jake came to her, put a kindly arm about her. "You must go to bed, my dear," he said. "You're worn out."

She shook her head with a rather piteous smile. "Oh no, I can't go for a long while yet. I must get some rooms ready for you and Bunny."

"You won't need to do that," he said. "Bunny is putting up at the hotel round the corner. And I can sleep just anywhere."

She let herself lean against him. "Thank you for coming, Jake," she said again.

She was plainly worn out, and from that moment Jake took command. He made her sit in one of the stiff velvet chairs in front of the fire, made her drink some wine, and finally left her there with Bunny in charge.

She was absolutely docile, gladly relinquishing all responsibility. To Bunny she gave a few halting details of the old man's death, but she could not talk much. The strain of those days and nights of constant watching had brought her very near to a complete breakdown. She was so

tired, so piteously tired.

She dozed presently, sitting there before the fire with him, holding his hand. It was so good to have him there, so good to feel that there was someone left to love her, to think for her, so good to know that Bunny--though he had ceased to be the one aim and end of her existence--had not drifted wholly out of her life.

It must have been more than an hour later that she was aroused by a few whispered words over her head, and sat up to see Bunny on his feet, preparing to take his departure.

She looked up in swift distress. "Oh, are you going? Must you go?"

"Yes, he must go," Jake said gently. "He'll get locked out if he doesn't. And the little chap's tired, you know, Maud. He's been travelling all day and wants a good night's rest."

That moved her. Though Bunny disclaimed fatigue she saw that he had been sleeping also. All the mother in her rose to the surface.

"Yes, of course, dear. You must go," she said. "I wish you could have slept here, but perhaps it's better you shouldn't. Can you find your way alone? Jake, won't you go with him?"

But Bunny strenuously refused Jake's escort. He bade her good night with warmth, and she saw that he hugged Jake at parting. And then the door closed upon him, and Jake's square figure came back alone.

He came straight to her, and bent over her. "My dear," he said, "you're tired to death. You must go to bed."

She shook her head, wanly smiling. "It's no good going to bed, Jake. I'm much happier here. Directly I lie down I am wide awake. Besides, I'm too tired to get there."

"All right. I'll put you there," he said.

"No, no, Jake." She stretched out a quick hand of protest; but there was no holding him off.

His arm was already about her; he lifted her to her feet. His face wore the old dominant look, yet with a subtle difference. His eyes held nought but kindness.

She yielded herself to him almost involuntarily. "I haven't been to bed for nearly a week," she said. "I've slept of course in snatches. I used to lie down in Uncle Edward's room. Poor dear old man! He wanted me so." Her eyes were full of tears. "I--I was with him when he died," she whispered. "We had arranged to have a nurse this morning, but the end came rather quickly. We knew his heart was weak. The doctor said--it was better for him really--that he went like that."

"Why didn't you send for me sooner?" Jake said.

Her pale face flushed. She turned it from him.

"I didn't think--you would want to come. It wasn't till--till I got frightened at the dreadful emptiness that--that--" She broke off, fighting with herself.

"All right. Don't try to tell me! I understand," he said soothingly. He went up the long, dim staircase with her, still strongly supporting her. He entered her room as one who had the right.

The tears were running down her face, for she could not check them. She attempted no remonstrance, suffering him like a forlorn child. And as though she had been a child, he ministered to her, waiting upon her, helping her, with a womanly intuition that robbed the situation of all difficulty, meeting her utter need with a simplicity and singleness of purpose that could not but achieve its end.

"You treat me as if--as if I were Bunny," she said once, smiling faintly through her tears.

And Jake smiled in answer. "A man ought to be able to valet his own wife," he said.

The words were simply uttered, but they sent the blood to her cheeks. "You--you are very good to me," she murmured confusedly. "I--ought not to let you."

"Don't you worry any about that!" said Jake. "The main idea is to get you to bed."

"I am sure I shall never sleep again," she said.

Yet as she sank down at last upon the pillow there was a measure of relief in her eyes.

"Now you're going to lie quiet till morning," Jake said, tucking in the bedclothes with motherly care. "Good night, my girl! Is that comfortable?"

He kissed her for the second time, lightly, caressingly, exactly as he might have kissed a child.

She tried to answer him, to thank him, but could not. He smoothed the hair from her temples, and turned away.

But in that moment her hands came out to him with a gesture that was almost convulsive, caught and held his sleeve. "Oh, Jake!" she said. "Jake! I'm so lonely!" and suddenly began to sob--"I want you more than Bunny does. Don't go! Don't go!"

It was a cry of utter desolation. He turned back to her on the instant. He stooped over her, his face close to hers. "Do you mean that?" he said, and in his voice, low as it was, there sounded

a deep note as of something forcibly suppressed.

She clung to him, hiding her face against the rough tweed coat. "I've no one else," she sobbed.

"Ah!" Jake said. A very strange look came into his face. His mouth twitched a little as if in self-ridicule. "But, my girl," he said, "I reckon you'd say that to anyone to-night."

"No--no!" Quiveringly she answered him. "I say it to you--to you! I'm--so terribly--alone--so--so--empty. Uncle Edward used to tell me--what it meant to be lonely. But I never knew it could be--like this."

"Poor girl!" Jake murmured softly. "I know--I know."

The look of faint irony still hovered about his lips, but his voice, his touch, conveyed nothing but tenderness. He was stroking the dark hair with a motherliness that was infinitely soothing.

She was holding his other hand tightly, tightly, against her breast, and it was wet with her tears. "I've been--so miserable," she told him brokenly. "I know it's been--no one's fault--but my own. But life is so difficult--so difficult. I've treated you badly--badly. I haven't done--my duty. I've always yearned for the things out of reach. And now--and now--oh, Jake, my world is a desert. I haven't a friend left anywhere."

"That's wrong," Jake said in his voice of soft decision. "You've got me. I mayn't be the special kind of friend you're wanting. But--as you say--I reckon I'm better than nothing. And I'm your husband anyway."

"My husband--yes. That's why--I sent for you, Jake," she hid her face lower, deeper into his coat, "if--if I had had--a child, would it--would it--have made you happy?"

"Oh, that!" Jake laid his head down suddenly on the pillow above hers. He spoke into the thick darkness of her hair. "My girl, don't cry so! I wanted it--yes!"

She moved slightly, stretched a hesitating hand upwards, touched his face, his neck. "Jake, it--it would make me happy--too."

He put his arm about her as she lay, and gathered her close to him, not speaking.

She was trembling all over, her face was still hidden. But she yielded to the drawing of his arm, clinging to him blindly, desperately.

He held her so for a little space, then with steady insistence he moved his other hand, beginning to turn her face upwards to his own. She tried to resist him, but he would not be resisted. In the end panting, quivering, she yielded very suddenly. She lifted her face voluntarily to his. She offered him her lips. But her eyes were closed. She palpitated like a trapped thing in his hold.

Yet when his lips met hers, she returned his kiss; and it was for the first time in her life.

She slept that night in the shelter of his arms, safe from the desolate emptiness of her desert. And if she dreamed that she had gone back into the house of bondage for the sake of the fire that burned there, the dream did not distress her, nor did the fire scorch. Rather the warmth of it filled her lonely spirit with such comfort as she had long ceased to hope for. And the steady beat of a man's heart lulled her to a deeper rest.

When the dim dawnlight came filtering in, Jake's eyes turned to meet it with a lynx-like watchfulness as of an animal on guard. There was no sleep in them. He had not slept all through the night. His face was grim and still, and there was a hint of savagery--or was it irony?--about his mouth. For the second time in their lives Fate had driven her to him for refuge. Like a bird out of the storm she had come to him, perchance but for that one night's shelter. Already a contrary wind was blowing that might sunder them forever. With the coming of the day, they might drift apart and meet no more at all, so slender was the bond between them, so transient their union. For he knew that she loved him not, had never loved him.

His eyes grew harder, brighter. They shone with a great and bitter hunger. He turned them upon her sleeping face. And then magically they softened, grew pitiful, grew tender. For though she slept, the veil was lifted, and he read the sadness of her soul.

His lips suddenly trembled as he looked upon her, and the irony went out of him like an evil spirit. Whether she loved him or loved him not, she was his, she was his, till the storm wind drove her from him.

And she needed him as she needed no one else on earth.

His arms clasped her. He gathered her closer to his breast.

"By Jove!" said Bunny, in a voice of awe. "I never thought of that! Then--Maud--will be rich, will she? Rich as Croesus! Just think of it! Maud!" He drew a deep breath that ended in a whistle. "Puts a different complexion on things, eh, Jake, old feller?" he said.

"Quite different," said Jake.

He stood at the window, gazing forth into the murky atmosphere with his brows drawn. He looked like a man searching the far distance.

Bunny glanced at him questioningly. "What does she say to it? Was it a great shock?"

"I don't know. I think it was. She said he once offered to provide for the two of you, and leave you provided for at his death. But that was before her marriage."

"And now he's gone and left her the whole caboodle! Say, Jake, what's it come to? Did the lawyer chap give you any idea?"

"No one knew what the old man was worth," Jake said, with his eyes still fixed steadily ahead. "He wasn't very great at spending money. But he owned a large factory, and had a vested interest in several others, besides some thousands in other concerns. The lawyer put it down at not less than two hundred and fifty thousand."

"Jake!" Bunny began to execute an ecstatic war dance behind him.

Jake wheeled sharply. "Don't do that here, Bunny! It's not decent."

Bunny stopped. "Oh, sorry, Jake! I forgot. But aren't you pleased, old feller? You don't look it. Or is it just decency on your part?"

"I'm pleased she's got enough to live on, yes," Jake said. "I don't know that a whole pile is specially good for anyone. And now look here, young chap! I'm going back directly after the funeral--I've got to go--and you're to stay and take care of her."

Bunny's face fell. "Oh, I say, Jake, I'd sooner come with you."

"That may be." Jake smiled momentarily. "But you've got to do as you're told. See?"

Bunny looked mutinous. "But she won't want me, Jake. She'll be much too busy. And this is such a beastly hole. And there's the hunting. You promised I might hunt these holidays. Oh, I can't stick here. I shall only be in the way." His eyes flashed sudden rebellion. "Can't and won't, Jake!" he said boldly, "so that's settled."

He stood and defied Jake openly for an instant, then flung round with a dogged air and walked away.

Jake remained motionless watching him. "Say, Bunny!" he said after a moment, his voice very soft and drawling.

Bunny came to a stand before the fire which he poked with considerable violence. He did not turn his head.

"Put that thing down!" The order came from the further end of the room, but he obeyed it.

There fell a brief silence, then from his post by the window Jake spoke. "You can do as you like about it. You can come back with me to the Stables. But you'll do all your riding on a leading-string if you do. And if you hunt, it'll be on foot."

Bunny's face flamed scarlet. "Jake, you're a beast!" he said.

"Oh, I can do beastlier things than that," Jake said. "I can give you one hell of a time, my son. I'm dashed ingenious in that respect when I give my mind to it."

Bunny growled something deep in his throat, and kicked the coals with a savage foot.

Jake turned deliberately round, and looked at him, watched him with the utmost patience till he desisted; then,

"Come here now," he said, "and have your head punched!"

Bunny growled again less articulately, more ferociously.

Jake left the window. The boy wheeled to meet him with the glare of a tiger. "Touch me if you dare!" he exclaimed.

There was a faint, relentless smile on Jake's face. He took Bunny by the shoulders, and looked him full and straight in the eyes.

Bunny stood before him for a space, with clenched hands. Then he dropped his own eyes sullenly before that stern regard--slowly lowered his head. There fell a tense silence; then: "Get on with it, Jake!" he said in a voice half-sulky, half-submissive. And Jake abruptly moved, struck him twice lightly on the side of the head. "That's for using the forbidden language," he said. "And that's for general fooling around. A taste of the leather would do you good, only I can't leather a jolly little cock-sparrow like you. Don't you think you're rather a fool, Bunny? I do."

"I'm a damn' cad!" Bunny said with shaky vehemence, and pulled himself away with the

words. "I can't help it. I don't see much of you now. And I do hate being left behind."

He turned his back on Jake and leaned dejectedly against the high mantelpiece. But Jake's arm went round his shoulders, giving him a comforting squeeze.

"Don't you know I'm trying to make a partner of you, my son?" he said in his soft voice. "You needn't be so mighty difficult to handle. What I'm on to now is more than a one-man job. I'm wanting all the help I can get."

Bunny laid a hot cheek against his hand. "You know I'd do anything for you, Jake," he said. He swallowed once or twice hard and faced round. "Anything under the sun," he said.

Jake's hand smote him the blow of good-fellowship. "I'm counting on--just that, sonny," he said.

He turned round with the words. Someone was entering the room.

"Hullo!" said Bunny. "Hullo, Maud!"

He moved to meet his sister with a curious new shyness. She looked pale, aloof, very sad.

"Jake has been telling you?" she said.

Bunny nodded. "It's rather great, isn't it?" he said.

She came slowly forward, not looking at Jake. "It's too great," she said. "I might have been glad of it once. But now--now--" She broke off.

Jake drew forward a chair. "Reckon you'll find it just as useful now as then," he said.

She glanced at him quickly, and a tinge of colour rose in her face. "Oh, I daresay we shall all find it useful," she said.

Jake's expression was enigmatical. He stood up squarely, looking straight before him. "You'll be able to buy anything and everything you want," he said, "to live where and how you like; in short you'll be in a position to create your own atmosphere. Money is freedom; remember that! If you choose to buy a team of camels and trundle off into the desert, there's no one can prevent you."

She shivered as if a cold blast had struck her, and leaned towards the fire. "I'm not particularly fond of the desert," she said, in a low voice.

"Oh, you needn't go alone," Jake said. "You'll be able to buy your friends by the score and populate all the lonely places."

There was no sound of scoffing in his voice. It was even not without a hint of kindness. But she shook her head in silence.

And suddenly Bunny knelt down beside her, thrusting an impetuous arm about her waist. "Say, Maud, he's only rotting. We'll have a ripping time together presently. Don't be so down in the mouth, old girl! There's plenty of fun to be got out of life."

She smiled with lips that trembled. "I'm afraid I'm getting rather old, Bunny," she said wistfully, "old enough anyhow to know that money doesn't bring happiness."

"Depends how you spend it," maintained Bunny stoutly. "Of course it is a downright curse to the people who hoard it--like that beast who buried his talent. But you can make any amount of happiness out of it if you try. Think of the crowds you can reach with it! That's where the fun comes in. Why, you reap as fast as you sow!"

Maud made a sudden quick gesture. "Bunny! How curious that you should say that!"

"Why?" Bunny opened his eyes in surprise.

"Oh, never mind! It reminded me of something--something rather big--I once heard in a church here." Maud gently passed on as though it were a matter too sacred for discussion. "Perhaps you're right, dear. Perhaps there is happiness to be got out of it. Anyhow we'll try, won't we? Won't we, Jake?"

There was almost a note of entreaty in her voice; but she received no answer. She turned sharply. Jake had gone.

"Never mind!" said Bunny, quick to console. "He's busy. Letters or something. But you've got me. Say, Maud, you'll be able to keep the mother above water now. That's rather a mercy anyway."

He almost forced her into the channel of his own cheery speculations with the reflection that if it wasn't decent at least it was wholesome.

But when he looked back upon that talk with her later, he could not remember that she had made a single suggestion of her own, or displayed the smallest spark of enthusiasm in connection with the great fortune that had come to her. She was tired of course and sad. No doubt she would change her mind; but for the present she seemed to regard it only in the light of a new and heavy burden that had been laid upon her. Bunny could not understand it, but an uneasy wonder awoke and stirred in his heart. Was it because she was married to Jake that she felt it had come too

late? If so--if so--well, if so, poor old Jake!

CHAPTER XXV THE BLOW

"Home for Christmas. Motoring from Graydown. Three cheers, Bunny."

The ecstatic message stood on the mantelpiece in the old parlour above a roaring fire, and Jake stood in front of it, grimly patient, while the old grandfather clock ticked monotonously in the corner.

It was Christmas Eve, still and frosty. The glass door into the garden was wide open so that he could hear the first hoot of a motor, and he was listening for it with a lynx-like intensity, a concentration that had in it something almost terrible. It was nearly a fortnight since he had left her, and all his veins were on fire at the thought of having her again. He yearned for her with a fierce hunger that tore at the very soul of him, a hunger that he knew he must suppress, crush down out of sight, ere he met her.

Because in her desolation she had turned to him for comfort, he must not take it for granted that she needed him still. She had had time to recover, time possibly to be amazed, to be shocked, at her own yielding. He dreaded to see that instinctive recoil from him which he had learned to know so cruelly well in the summer that was dead. Those words of hers--"I can't pretend to love you. You see--I don't,"--still haunted him. And he remembered how once in bitterness of soul she had told him that she hated him.

He clenched his hands over the memory, cursing himself for the passion that even now leaped so fiercely within him. She had changed towards him since those days; that he knew. But even though she turned to him she was half afraid of him still, and he dared not show her his heart. He must be calm and temperate, taking only what she offered, lest he should drive her away again. It might be she would never offer very much. Possibly it did not lie in her power. She had given her whole love to another man, and it had been crushed into the mud. It might be that it still lived there in quivering shame, a thing to be hidden if it could not be utterly destroyed. He could not tell. But he did not feel that his chance of winning to the heart of her was very great. It might be that when she came to realize the practically boundless power with which this great fortune endowed her, it would vanish altogether. True, he might put up a fight for his rights. He might insist upon his ownership. But--had he not already done that? And what had it brought him? Nothing but emptiness. The desire of the flesh was nothing to the aching longing of the spirit, and that could never be satisfied by such means. And she did not so much as know that it existed!

He had dreamed once that a child might draw them together. But now--but now--a curiously wistful smile drew his mouth. Poor girl! She wanted a child to comfort her desolation. But if she had her wish, he knew that she would never turn to him again for comfort. His last chance would be gone.

Someone knocked at the open door that led into the garden. He turned sharply and saw Sam Vickers' good-humoured countenance looking up at him.

"Post just in, sir," he remarked. "I was comin' round so brought your letter along."

"Oh, thanks! Come in!"

Jake remained before the fire, and after an instant's hesitation Sam mounted the steps and entered. He was carrying a huge bunch of mistletoe in one hand.

"Thought you'd like a bit, sir," he said, with a cheery smile. "You haven't got any decorations, I see."

"Thanks!" Jake said again. "I don't know where you'll fix it."

"Over the front door, sir, if you ask me," said Sam promptly.

"Oh, no, not there, Sam! It's a bit too public. Over this door if you like." Jake smiled a little and began to open his letter.

"All right, sir. I'll get a nail," said Sam.

He departed, and Jake, with a face grown stern, proceeded to read his letter.

When Sam returned, the letter had disappeared, and Jake was grinding at the fire with the poker with his head down and a deep red flush on his face. Sam noticed nothing. He was too much engrossed with the matter in hand.

Mounted on a wooden chair and whistling softly he applied himself to the task of hanging the

mistletoe at the most inviting angle.

"Like a bit for your cap, sir?" he enquired, with an impudent grin, when he had finished.

Jake made no reply.

Sam threw him a glance, and found that he had turned and was standing with his back to the fire, gazing out before him with eyes that shone like two pieces of red quartz.

Sam was momentarily disconcerted. "No offence meant, sir," he said, picking up his own cap, and hastening somewhat clumsily to conceal the decoration it bore.

Jake's eyes came to him, regarded him for a moment fiercely without seeing him; then abruptly softened and took him in. "Sam," he said, "I trust you, and I'm going to tell you something. Shut that door!"

Sam obeyed. He looked straight at Jake with sunny, honest eyes. "Hadn't you better think it over first, sir?" he suggested.

"No." Jake held out his hand suddenly. "I trust you," he repeated, a dogged note in his voice.

Sam's hand gripped his like a vice. "Right you are, sir," he said cheerily.

Jake went on, as if impelled. "You remember what happened in the summer at the Graydown Meeting when I thrashed young Stevens?"

"Quite well, sir." Sam's reply came brisk and smart. He held himself like a soldier on parade.

"You know why I thrashed him?" Jake proceeded.

"Yes, sir. Thrashed him and kicked him out, sir. I was never more pleased in my life," said Sam.

"He's been employed at the Castle stables ever since," Jake said very bitterly. "I was a fool! a damn' fool--not to expose him. But Lord Saltash knew that he pulled the Albatross. I told him so. He now says that he has proof that I aided and abetted--proof enough to get me warned off the Turf."

"Proof be damned, sir!" said Sam warmly. "That ain't a good enough story for anyone with a head on his shoulders to swallow."

"No, Sam. You're right. And Lord Saltash knows it. I can't go to him and demand to see his proof because he's on the other side of the world. But there's no scotching a lie of that sort. It'll have spread like the plague long before he gets back. And meantime he has decided that horse-racing and breeding are no longer his fancy, and he is going to sell the Stud--and me along with it."

Jake's mouth took a bitter, downward curve with the last words.

Sam's jaw dropped. "Going to sell the Stud, sir?"

Jake nodded. "Yes, before the Spring meetings. You'll be all right, Sam. Anyone would be glad to get you. The Stewards know you all right."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that, sir. I was thinking of you." Sam's blue eyes were gravely troubled. "You've got a wife, sir."

"My wife inherits her uncle's money. She is not dependent upon me--fortunately for her." Jake was speaking through set teeth. "I knew it was coming," he added. "I've known it for some weeks." His eyes suddenly glittered afresh. "It ain't a knock-out blow, Sam," he said. "Don't you make any mistake as to that!"

Sam's eyes sparkled in response. "It's you that's the knock-out, sir," he said, with eager partisanship. "He hits below the belt, but he won't down you that way. You're better known than I am. And no one will believe as you're not straight. If I was to hear any chap say a single word against you, why, I'd crack his skull for him. I would that--if it was Saltash himself!"

Jake uttered a brief laugh. "No. You steer clear of Saltash! He's one too many for honest men."

"He's a dirty swab!" said Sam, and spat into the fire with fervour. "He ain't fit to employ anyone except Dick Stevens and the likes of him. I often wondered who squared Dick that time, but it wouldn't surprise me now if--" He paused, looking at Jake interrogatively.

But the latter's face had changed, changed magically, as though some transforming hand had touched it, wiping all the bitterness away.

He looked at Sam with a dawning smile in his eyes. "Good night, my lad!" he said. "I must go."

He went to the door with the words and opened it. There came the sound of a motor-horn without, the gay whoop of a boyish voice. Jake's spurs went jingling down the passage.

And Sam turned to leave by the garden-door by which he had entered. He crammed his cap down over his eyes as he did so. "Poor old boss!" he said. "Poor--old--boss!"

CHAPTER XXVI
THE DEED OF GIFT

"Oh, isn't it good to be home again?" said Bunny. "Isn't it just good?"

They sat before the blazing fire in the parlour after a late supper, drinking Mrs. Lovelace's rhubarb wine and enjoying the glow.

Maud's cheeks were flushed and her eyes very bright. She did not look at her husband very often, and there was that about her manner that seemed to suggest that she was striving against considerable odds to appear at her ease.

"How are the animals, Jake?" she asked. "How is The Hundredth Chance?"

Jake on the other side of the fire was lying back in his chair with a cigarette between his lips. His gaitered legs were stretched out before him, and eyes fixed downwards as if he were half-asleep. He did not stir from this attitude as he made reply.

"They're all going strong. You must see them for yourself in the morning."

His words did not seem to invite any further development of the subject. Perhaps he really was sleepy. Maud bent to fondle Chops who lay on the hearth at her feet, and asked no more.

But Bunny at once plunged into the silence. He had not permitted any silences during supper, having plainly determined that the evening should not drag. He also was a little fevered in his animation, a fact which made Jake's absolute calmness of demeanour all the more marked. He had been getting quieter and quieter ever since the removal of the supper things.

Bunny fought against this quietness, talking with a nervous excitement that elicited only occasional low replies from Maud and none at all from Jake.

But it was Jake who finally at the striking of the clock broke in upon his insistent chatter. "Time you went to bed, my son. Say good night and go!"

A quick word sprang at once to Bunny's lips, but Jake's hand abruptly gripped his knee hard and he swallowed it unspoken. He got up with a somewhat wry smile.

"Yes, all right. I'll go. But I don't generally clear out before eleven, do I, Maud?"

"You do in my house, whatever you do in Maud's," said Jake imperturbably. "Good night, my son! pleasant dreams to you!"

He looked up at Bunny with a sudden, kindly smile, and Bunny bent impulsively to him.

"Say, Jake, come and see me presently, when--when you come up yourself!"

The request was proffered in an undertone with unmistakable nervousness. Jake looked him straight in the eyes.

"All right," he said.

The door closed upon Bunny, and there fell a silence.

Maud sat very still, her hands clasped in her lap. But there was no repose in her attitude, only a dumb tension that seemed to indicate suspense.

Jake leaned forward slowly, at length, took the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it into the heart of the fire. Then, without looking at her, he spoke.

"What's the matter with the little chap?"

She looked across at him quickly, from beneath eyelids that slightly fluttered. "Is there anything the matter with him? I didn't notice."

"He was nearly crying when he said good night, anyway," said Jake.

"Oh, was he! Perhaps he thought--perhaps he thought--you were vexed with him," murmured Maud.

"Why should he think that?" Jake's eyes, piercingly bright, suddenly met hers.

She winced involuntarily, as one might wince from the glare of a searchlight. Then, with a visible effort, she met them. "Jake," she said, "I--want to talk to you."

Jake's eyes fell away from her. They went with a sombre directness to the fire and became fixed. "About your affairs, my girl?" he said.

She hesitated momentarily; then: "Our affairs, Jake," she said, her voice very low.

He jerked his head as if to indicate attention, but he said nothing further. It remained for her to proceed, and she did so, slowly, as if carefully weighing each word.

"You have left me a free hand in the settling of Uncle Edward's affairs, and Mr. Craven is a very clever business man. I know Uncle Edward trusted him implicitly. But I should like you to know everything that has been done--that is, if you care to know." She paused a moment. "You do care, don't you, Jake?" she said.

"I care for your welfare, my girl," he made answer. "Not being your trustee, it's not essential that I should be told every detail."

"I wish you were a trustee," she said.

He bent his head. "Thanks. But I don't know that I am especially well suited to be. It's better for you, I reckon, to have--a free hand. And it's a mighty lot better that you should have a man of education to attend to your business affairs."

"Jake!" There was quick pain in her voice, pain that he could not fail to note. She leaned forward, stretching a hand to him across the hearth. "Jake!" she said again very earnestly. "Do you think that--that I shall ever forget--that I owe you--everything?"

He took her hand, but with a curious doggedness he kept his eyes averted. "I guess we're quits," he said. "You don't owe me anything. I took my payment for all I ever gave you."

There was no bitterness in his voice, no emotion of any sort. The clasp of his fingers was no more than kind. His mouth looked stubborn.

But a strange sort of stubbornness seemed to have entered into Maud also. She kept her hand in his.

"I take--another view," she said. "I don't think any man--has ever done--more for a woman--than you have done--for me." Haltingly the words came, but she spoke them bravely. "It's a big, big debt, Jake--immeasurably big,--a personal debt that can never be repaid. I feel--contemptible--whenever I think of it." Her voice shook.

Jake's fingers closed upon hers with a quiet strength. "You've no call to feel like that," he said.

Her hand clung to his suddenly, desperately. "You--believe in me, Jake?" she whispered.

His face did not vary. "I guess I've proved that," he said very steadily.

She uttered a sharp, catching sigh. "Yes--yes! That is another debt. But till--till that night you came to me at Uncle Edward's--I was never--quite--sure."

"Why weren't you sure?" He put the question abruptly, with an insistence that demanded an instant reply. But still he did not look at her. His eyes gazed ever straight into the fire.

Tremulously she answered him. "I met Charlie--Lord Saltash--the morning after--down at 'The Anchor.' He said--he said--you wouldn't be--such a fool. That was why I went away."

"Damn him!" The words burst from Jake with terrific violence. He sprang to his feet as a man goaded beyond all bearing. "Curse him!" he said, his face gone white with passion. "May his soul rot in---"

"Jake!" The name was a cry, breaking through the fierce rush of his fury. Maud was on her feet also. She held him by the shoulders, in a vital, quivering hold. "You are not to say it!" she said and her face was close to his, compelling him to silence. "You are not to curse him! A curse comes back--comes back!"

She put one hand on his mouth, for he seemed on the verge of breaking forth afresh. She looked him full in the eyes.

"You're not to, Jake!" she said. "I won't have it. You who have been--so splendidly generous--can afford to leave a beaten enemy alone. Ah,--Jake!"

For his arms were round her, gripping her. The naked soul of the man was looking into hers. With a supreme impulse, she took her hand away and gave her lips to his, surrendered herself wholly to the fiery passion that had suddenly blazed forth upon her.

But in a moment his arms were loosened. He went back against the mantelpiece as though he had been struck a blow between the eyes. He stood motionless, his mouth working but uttering no word.

She stood before him, pale to the lips but not without a certain strength. She had offered, and he had not taken. But yet her doubts were set at rest. Perhaps for the first time in her life she faced him wholly unafraid.

"So--we will leave him out of it," she said, breathing fast. "He has--ceased to count."

Jake moved, pulled himself together. "You must forgive me," he said. "Maybe you'd be wise to leave me I shall be--saner--presently."

She put one hand against his breast. "No, Jake, no. You're going to be sane now. Sit down again! Let us finish our talk!"

He looked at her with the red light still smouldering in his eyes. After a moment he took her wrist with a grip in which passion lingered. "I'm trying to act fair by you, my girl," he said, with a faint smile that somehow touched her heart. "It seems to me you've never had a chance--not a real chance--all your life. What with Bunny--and me--and--and--Saltash"--his mouth twisted over the name--"you've been handicapped right and left. That's why I've sworn to myself that I won't

interfere with you anymore. You shall have a free hand--a free hand. This money of yours makes it possible. Play with it, spend it, enjoy yourself! Be happy, my girl, be happy! I won't step in to prevent it."

Maud's eyes were suddenly full of tears, yet she laughed. "You've sworn to give me a free hand?" she said.

He nodded. "Sure."

Her other hand clasped his quickly, pleadingly. "Then, Jake, you won't be angry if--if--I decide to do something that--that you may not--altogether--like?"

"It's your money," said Jake doggedly.

"Yes--yes. And--I have your permission--your unreserved consent--to--to do what I like with it?"

Her voice quivered. She was clinging to him almost unconsciously.

He stood steadily facing her. He had forced his passion down again, but there was tension about him still. "My girl," he said, "if you want to turn it all into paper and make a bonfire of it,--I shan't object."

"Oh, I don't want to do that," she said, and again she faintly laughed though in her laughter there was a sound of tears. "I felt just at first--just at first--that I didn't want it. But I've got over that, though I've come to the conclusion that there's no fun to be got out of money unless there's someone to enjoy it with you. And so--and so--" she became a little breathless and her hands pressed his in agitation--"I'm making over half of it to you--by deed of gift. Please, Jake, please--you don't mind?"

"What?" said Jake. He raised his tawny brows, staring at her for an instant in sheer, overwhelming amazement; then they came down uncompromisingly in a thick straight line above his eyes. He put her hands away from him gently but with the utmost decision. He turned himself from her and bent to pick up the poker. Then, as he stirred the fire, with his face in the glow he spoke briefly, almost roughly. "I don't know if you're joking or in earnest; but that's the one thing that I can't--and won't--consent to. So I reckon that's all there is to it."

"Jake!" There was consternation in her voice, bitter disappointment, keen pain. "Oh, Jake," she said, "you can't mean to refuse--like that!"

"How did you expect me to refuse?" said Jake, without turning.

She answered him chokingly. "Not as if--as if--I had insulted you."

He dropped the poker and straightened himself. "Maybe you didn't intend any insult," he said. "But you don't credit me with an over-allowance of self-respect, do you?"

She did not answer him, for she could not. She stood fighting for self-control, striving to collect her scattered forces, but so overwhelmingly distressed that she could not attempt to withstand him.

He turned round to her slowly at length. "Say, Maud," he said, something of the old kindness in his tone, "we won't talk any more about it. Guess it's an impossible subject. You'll know me better next time."

She struggled for utterance with lips that trembled piteously; her eyes were brimming with tears. Finally, with a small, hopeless gesture, she turned away, moved across the room blindly, found the door and fumblingly opened it.

"Good night!" she whispered then in a voice that was scarcely audible, and in another moment the door closed without sound behind her.

She was gone. Jake's mouth set itself in a hard, straight line. He squared his shoulders with the instinctive movement of a man facing odds. He began to feel with brutal deliberation for his cigarette-case.

The rasp of his match made a short, indignant sound in the quiet room. It was like a sharp protest. The smell of his tobacco began to dominate the atmosphere. He smoked furiously.

Suddenly there came a check. The cigarette had ceased to draw. He ground his teeth on it, turned, and spat it into the flames. It hissed and vanished.

Then Jake abruptly lifted his clenched hands above, his head and swore a frightful oath that comprehended himself, the world, and all things in it, in one vast anathema.

"Say, Jake, are you going to spend the night downstairs?" Bunny's thin, eager face peered round the door with the words. He slipped into the room clad in pyjamas, his hair all ruffled on his forehead.

Jake was sitting before a burnt-out fire. He looked round at Bunny with heavy eyes.

"Were you asleep?" said Bunny.

"No." He got up stiffly. "Just--thinking. What have you come down for?"

Bunny glanced at the clock. "Why, you said you'd come and see me in bed, and it's long past midnight. I've been lying awake for ages." He pressed close to Jake, reproach mingling with a touch of apprehension in his eyes. "Fact is,--I--wanted to tell you something. But I've got cold now. I don't know that I shall, after all."

Jake put a hand on his shoulder. "I shouldn't, my son," he said. "I should cut back to bed if I were you. I give you a free pardon, whatever it is. There! Good night!"

But Bunny refused to be dismissed thus perfunctorily. "You treat me like a child, Jake," he grumbled. "It's not fair. I'd sooner be pitched into than that."

Jake smiled faintly. "Well, what's the matter?" he said.

Bunny's eyes gleamed a little. "It's just this. I expect you'll be savage, but you've got to know. Maud knows all about the Stud and everything. She was bound to know sooner or later, so I don't see that it greatly matters. But I'd no right to tell her. And I did."

He ended on a note of defiance. His penitence had plainly not survived his long-drawn-out suspense.

But Jake heard him without any sign of displeasure. "Betrayed my confidence, eh?" he said. "Well, I reckon that's a matter for your conscience, not mine."

Bunny bit his lip. "You ought to have told her yourself, Jake," he said.

Jake nodded. He seemed to be past all feeling that night. "I know that. But she had plenty to think of without worrying herself about my affairs. Anyway she knows now."

"Yes. Knows you're thinking of going to America, Jake." Eagerly Bunny broke in. "And she's jolly sick about it, I can tell you. She doesn't want you to go."

"Oh, doesn't she?" said Jake.

Bunny seized his arm and shook it. "Jake, surely you won't go! She's rich enough to keep us all. She wants to share everything with you."

"Oh, yes." Jake's voice was dead level. His eyes looked at Bunny, but they saw beyond him. "I know all about that. I know--just what she wants. She wants a watchdog, one that'll fetch and carry and accept all benefits with humility. She's lonely now; but she won't be lonely long. She'll have a crowd round her--a set of fashionable, gibbering monkeys, who will sneer at the watchdog, the meek and patient hanger-on, the adjunct at every party, who lives on his mistress's smile and doesn't object to her kick. That's what she wants. And that, my son, is the one thing she's not going to get."

"But what on earth do you want, Jake?" burst from Bunny, half-startled, half-exasperated. "You needn't be that. You never could be that. Her idea was to make you independent."

"Oh yes, I know." Jake's mouth twisted a little. "She is mighty generous. She figured to hand over half her fortune by deed of gift."

"And you wouldn't have it?" Bunny almost gasped.

"I wouldn't touch it," Jake said, with a sound that was oddly like a suppressed laugh in his throat.

"But why in wonder not?" Bunny stared at him as if he thought he had gone suddenly mad. "We've taken oceans of things from you."

"That's different," said Jake.

"How different? Make me understand, Jake! I've a right to understand." Bunny's voice was imperious.

Jake looked at him. There was actually a smile in his eyes, but it was a smile of self-ridicule. "You asked me just now what I wanted," he said. "I'll tell you. I want a woman who loves me well enough to chuck up everything--everything, mind you--and follow me barefoot to the other end of the world." He broke into a laugh that seemed to hurt him. "And that," he said, "is the one thing I'm not going to get. Now do you understand?"

"Not quite, Jake. Not quite." Bunny spoke almost diffidently. He looked back at Jake with awe in his eyes. "You think she doesn't love you well enough. Is that it?"

Jake nodded, still with that smile of self-mockery about his mouth. "You've hit it, my son," he said. "We're not a pair, that's the trouble. She means to be kind, but I'd sooner go empty than be fed on husks. I didn't offer either of you that. It was the real thing I gave you. But she--she hasn't

the real thing to offer. And so--I'll do without."

He turned squarely to put out the waning lamp as though the discussion were ended, but Bunny stayed him with a nervous hand.

"Jake, suppose you're wrong, old boy? Suppose she does care--care badly?" His voice quivered with earnestness. "Women are queer fishes, you know, Jake. Suppose you've made a mistake?"

"Where's the use of supposing the impossible?" asked Jake sombrely. Yet he paused, his hand rubbing the boy's rough head caressingly.

"Ah, but just for a moment," Bunny insisted. "If she loved you, Jake, you wouldn't refuse then to--to do what she wanted?"

"If she loved me," Jake said, and stopped suddenly. He moved abruptly to the lamp and extinguished it. Then in the dim light that filtered through the blinds from a full moon of frosty radiance, he spoke, deeply, slowly, solemnly. "If she loved me, I would accept anything under the sun from her. Everything she had would be mine. Everything of mine would be hers. And--before God--I would make her happy--if she loved me." He drew a great breath that seemed to burst from the very heart of him. Then in a moment he turned aside. "But that's the impossible, Bunny," he said. "And now good night!"

They went upstairs together, and parted in the passage. Bunny seemed too awed for speech. Only he hugged Jake hard for a moment before he went to his own room.

Jake passed on to his. Utter silence reigned there. He lighted a candle, and went softly to the door that led into his wife's room. It was shut. Softly he turned the handle, pressed a little; softly he turned it back. The door was locked.

Then he threw off his clothes, blew out the candle, and lay down alone.

And all through the night he was listening to words uttered over and over above his head, like evil spirits whispering together.

"I can't pretend to love you. You see--I don't."

He realized now that she had been right. It was better not to pretend! It was better not to pretend!

CHAPTER XXVIII THE FIRST OF THE VULTURES

Christmas Day was a farce in which Jake, Maude and Bunny each played their appointed parts with somewhat dreary zest. The brother and sister had drawn much closer to each other during the past fortnight in which they had been thrown together. The old quick understanding, the old comradeship, had revived between them, and on Bunny's part there was added to it a certain protectiveness that created a new and even more intimate element in their intercourse. In a fashion their positions were reversed. Maud leaned upon him as he once had leaned upon her, and his sturdy support comforted her sick heart.

As for Jake, he went his way among his animals, spending his time almost exclusively with them during that day and the days that followed. He was very quiet, invariably kind, but there was about him a suggestion of strain behind his composure, a hint of something terrible, as of a man hiding a mortal wound. He never talked about the animals now, and he did not welcome even Bunny in the stables.

"He's fretting his heart out over them," the boy said, and Maud knew that he spoke the truth. The thought of the coming parting with them hurt him to the soul.

Sam Vickers knew this also, and watched him in mute sympathy. He would have given all he had to avert this bitter blow from the boss, but he could only stand and look on.

It was on the last day in the year, a biting, sunless day, that he sought him late in the afternoon with a visiting card in his hand.

Jake was leaning on the half-door of the loose-box in which was lodged the black colt of his dreams--The Hundredth Chance. The animal's head was nuzzled against his shoulder. There seemed to be a perfect understanding between them.

But at sight of Sam the colt started back. He was suspicious of all the world but Jake.

Jake looked round, his face grey in the failing light. "Hullo! What is it?"

Sam came forward and gave him the card. "Mrs. Bolton was out, sir, and he asked for you; said he'd wait in the yard, sir."

Jake bent his brows over the card. It bore a name that seemed vaguely familiar to him though in what connection he could not for the moment recall:--Monterey W. Rafford. Jake looked up. "He's no friend of mine. Do you know what he wants?"

"Said he was a friend of Dr. Capper, sir," said Sam.

"Oh, that American chap! I remember now. All right, Sam. I'll see him." Jake gently pushed back the colt's enquiring nose, closed the upper half of the door, and strode off down the stone passage that led to the yard.

The visitor was standing under a lamp, a slim young man with a dark, keen face that broke into a smile at Jake's approach. He moved to meet him, speaking in a voice that betrayed his nationality at the first word.

"I am very pleased to meet you again, sir, though no doubt you have forgotten me."

They shook hands. Jake was looking at him with steady eyes. "No," he said, in his slow way, "I think you are the sort of man that doesn't get forgotten very easily."

Rafford laughed. He had an easy, well-bred laugh. "Capper doesn't believe in me," he said. "He declares I'll never get there. P'raps he's right. It doesn't concern me very much either way. Anyway, I've given up sending sick people to sleep for the present. I'm out on my own this journey. How is your young brother-in-law? Cure complete?"

"Absolutely." Jake was still looking at him hard. "If it's not a rude question," he said deliberately, "is that what brought you?"

The American met his look with a flicker of the eyes that betrayed a hint of wariness. "It's not a rude question, Mr. Bolton," he said. "And it is not what brought me. I'm after art treasures at the present moment. To be particular, I'm after Saltash's wonder in marble, *The Fallen Woman*. We did a deal over that marble, he and I, in New York the other day. He was showing me a card-trick, and--I--spotted--the knave."

Rafford suddenly drawled, and Jake's eyes grew brighter.

"Come inside!" he said.

But Rafford shook his head. "No, not right away if you don't mind. There's a little light left. Will you show me the animals?"

Jake's right hand clenched on his whip. "Have you done a deal over them too?" he said, sinking his voice very low.

"No. But I've got an idea," Rafford said. "I'll tell you what it is presently. You've got some valuable stock here, I'm told. Say, Mr. Bolton, you don't object to showing me round?"

His smile was disarming. Jake swung round on his heel without another word.

They went from stable to stable, inspecting one after another of Jake's treasures, Jake himself reciting the record of each. He began the tour almost in silence, speaking only words of bare necessity, but in some magnetic fashion Rafford broke through his reserve. His quiet enthusiasm reached and fired Jake. Gradually the glow kindled, the bitterness passed from him, he became himself in his own element, he opened his heart to the stranger because it seemed that he understood.

It was a long inspection, and darkness was upon them before it ended. They came last of all to the home of The Hundredth Chance, and here with his favourite's nose tucked confidently into his arm Jake told his hopes, his dreams.

Rafford listened with a sympathy that was scarcely perceptible in his speech yet of which Jake was very strongly aware, or he had not so expanded. Later he marvelled himself at his own candour, but at the time it seemed wholly natural, even inevitable. By that mysterious force which makes men know each other as comrades even from afar, he recognized in Rafford the one quality that his soul demanded. Circumstance had flung them together for an hour, circumstance would part them again, but for that hour the bond of sympathy between them was complete.

In the end he remembered again the coming loss, the crushing failure of all his plans, and the bitterness came down upon him afresh, an overwhelming burden forcing him down. He fondled the colt, and with a gentle hand closed the door upon him. "Yes," he said heavily, "given fair treatment he'll turn out a winner, but I shan't be here to see it."

"What's come to Saltash?" Rafford questioned. "He seems ready to throw up everything."

"Yes, that's him," Jake said. "But then he hasn't had the working up of the Stud as I have. It's nothing to him to part with the animals. They were no more than a pastime."

"And not always a creditable pastime at that?" suggested Rafford. "I guess you're too straight for him, Mr. Bolton. He's a crooked devil--but a curiously likable one." He smiled as if at some reminiscence. "Well, what's your opinion? Do you think he could be persuaded to sell this show privately if he got a good offer?"

Jake's reserve came down upon him like a mask. "I can't say. You'd better go to his agent, Bishop."

Rafford was still faintly smiling. "I've just come from him. He practically sent me to you. I've just paid him Saltash's price for the statue. She will be on her way to America with me in a fortnight. But I'd like to bring off this deal before we go."

"It doesn't rest with me," Jake said, doggedness in every line.

"No, I know. But I'd like to feel that I've got you behind me. My patron would like to know that."

"Who is your patron?" Jake asked.

"His name is Ruse. You mayn't have heard of him, but he's quite well known in a good many circles--specially on our side. He has taken a fancy for horse-racing and he will probably drop a lot of money over it before he's done; that is, unless he's lucky enough to retain you for his trainer."

A hot gleam suddenly kindled in Jake's eyes, and as suddenly died. "I reckon that won't be possible," he said, "Lord Saltash will see to that."

"Saltash may not be able to prevent it," Rafford observed quietly. "Ruse will want a trainer, and when I tell him how your heart's in the job, it wouldn't surprise me if he persuaded you to keep it on. You wouldn't be very hard to persuade, I take it?"

Jake hesitated momentarily, then passed the question by. "Is your friend in England?" he asked.

"He will be in England very soon after the deal is completed--if it is completed," Rafford answered.

"Won't he want to see the Stud first?" Jake's voice was quietly business-like. He seemed to have put all personal considerations away.

"I doubt it." Rafford said. "The value of the Stud is well-known, and--to let you into a secret--he is mad keen on securing it. You won't tell Saltash that of course, or Bishop, who, I understand, is empowered to act on his behalf. But I think Saltash will get his price without much haggling. My patron is particularly anxious to prevent the Stud coming on the market. He is prepared to offer something better than a market price to make sure of it."

"He must be a very remarkable man," observed Jake.

"He is, sir; a very remarkable man, a man who never misses his opportunities. And in consequence he is on the whole very seldom a loser. It would be a great mistake to let him slip through your fingers--a very great mistake."

Rafford spoke with earnestness. His dark face was alight with eagerness.

Jake looked at him, faintly smiling. "You have an interest at stake?" he suggested.

"Only the interest that makes me want to push a thing to success. I have full powers though." Rafford's face reflected his smile. "When my patron got news of this thing, shall I tell you what he said to me? Just 'Clinch!' I shall go to Bishop to-morrow, and carry out those instructions, if I can, to the letter."

"You won't do it in a day," Jake said. "Maybe you'd like to put up at my place pending negotiations."

Rafford's hand came out to him with impulsive friendliness. "No, sir. You're more than kind, but I won't do that. I've seen the animate and I've seen you. That's enough. You and I mustn't get too intimate over this deal. You know what Saltash is. When we've pulled it off, I'll be delighted--if there's still time." He gripped Jake's hand hard, looking him straight in the face. "You've given me a real happy hour, Mr. Bolton," he said. "And I shan't forget it. It was mighty generous of you, considering you regarded me as the first of the vultures. Well, I hope I shall be the last. So long!"

"So long!" Jake said. "I hope you will."

He accompanied the young man to the gate, and watched him go.

Then squarely he came back again, walked straight up the middle of the yard, looking neither to right nor left, went into his own house, and shut the door.

Late that night when Maud rose to go upstairs, he came out of what had apparently been a heavy doze before the fire and spoke for the first time of his own affairs.

"Bunny told you some time ago that the Stud was to be sold, I believe?" he said.

Maud stood still on the hearth, looking down at him. The question evidently startled her, for her breath came suddenly faster. "Yes, he told me," she said.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew?" said Jake. And then he saw that his abruptness had agitated her and leaned forward to take her hand.

She suffered him to take it, but she was trembling from head to foot. "I didn't think--you

wished me to know," she said.

He bent his head slightly so that only the shining copper of his hair met her look. "It wasn't--that," he said slowly. "At least not at first. Just at first I didn't want to bother you. Afterwards,--well, I guess I'm an independent sort of cuss and I was afraid you'd want to finance me when you knew I was to be kicked out."

"I did want to, Jake," she said quickly.

He nodded. "I know. I was mighty ungracious over it. I've been sorry since."

"Jake!" She stooped a little, a quick dawning of hope in her pale face; but he kept his head bent.

"No," he said. "The answer is still No. I don't want to hurt your feelings any, but I can't live on any one's charity. If there's anything under the sun that I can do to serve you, I'll do it. But I can't do the pet-dog business. For one thing I'm not ornamental enough. And for another, it ain't my nature."

He paused a moment, but Maud made no attempt to speak. Only the hope had all died out of her face, and she looked unutterably tired.

Jake went on. "Just when your uncle died, you were feeling extra lonely, and--" his voice sank a little--"you turned to me for comfort. But I didn't flatter myself that I had become permanently necessary to you. I knew you never intended me to think that. I saw it directly we met again. You fancied yourself under an obligation to me. You were willing--because of that--to give me anything I wanted. But it's come to this. What I really want is not in your power to give, and I can't accept less. For that reason, I've got to live in my own house, not in yours. I don't want you to feel bound to live with me, I know my setting never was good enough for you either. You can come to me just sometimes, and I shall be honoured to receive you. But I'd like you to know that you are absolutely free to come or go. I'm not insisting on my rights, just because I've learnt that it doesn't make for happiness on either side."

Again he paused, but still she did not speak.

Quietly he resumed. "That brings me to what I set out to tell you about the Stud. There is a chance--I think it's a good one--that it may be kept together after all. There is also a chance--a less promising one--that I may be retained as trainer. If I am offered the post, I shall accept it. If I am not offered the post, well, I shall have to start again at the beginning. I shall have to rough it. So if that happens, you will have to go your way and I mine."

He ceased to speak, and his hand relinquished hers.

Maud stood up. She was no longer trembling, but she was very pale.

"I hope you will get the post," she said, after a moment. "You--I think you would feel it if you had to part with the horses. They mean--so much to you."

"I belong to 'em," Jake said simply.

She smiled a little with lips that quivered. "Then I hope you will have them always," she said. "Good night--and thank you for being so--explicit." She looked at his bent head, stretched a hand above it almost as if she would touch it, then drew it swiftly back and turned to go.

A few seconds later she was ascending the stairs, still piteously smiling, with the tears running down her face.

CHAPTER XXIX THE DUTIFUL WIFE

"Well, my dearie, this is the biggest treat I've had for I don't know how long. Sit you down and tell me all your news! Is it true, what my Tom tells me, as you've come into a pot of money? Well, there now, I am pleased! Put your feet on the fender, my dear! There's a cruel wind blowing to-day. We'll have some hot buttered toast for tea."

"I hope you're not busy, Mrs. Wright." Maud clasped the round, dumpy form very closely for a minute.

"Lor' no, my dear; not a bit. It's early closing to-day. Fancy your thinking of that now! And fancy your coming to see me of all people! Why, I feel just as if a princess had stepped out of a fairy-tale."

"I don't feel a bit like a princess," Maud said.

She sat down before the cheery little fire in Mrs. Wright's back parlour and stretched out her hands to the blaze.

The old woman hovered over her tenderly. "You look like one, my dear," she said. "I think it's just wonderful that you should condescend to be friendly with the likes of me."

"Oh, Mrs. Wright, don't--please--put it like that!" Maud leaned quickly back, turning up a face of flushed protest. "I don't like that aspect of myself at all," she said. "I don't think I am that sort of person indeed."

"I always think of you as Jake's princess, dear," Mrs. Wright maintained. "I don't see why it should distress you. I like to think of you so."

Maud laughed a little. "I wish you wouldn't. And I wish Jake wouldn't either. Perhaps once I was foolish and proud, but really I have got over that now. I am very humble, nowadays."

"Are you happy, dearie? That's the great thing," said Mrs. Wright.

Maud stooped again over the fire. "I'm--trying to be," she said. "I don't succeed perhaps all the time. But--" She stopped. "Don't let us talk about my affairs till I have heard all yours!" she said. "How is Tom? When is he going to be married?"

It was the signal for Mrs. Wright to plunge into personal gossip, and she did so with zest. But she kept a motherly eye upon her visitor notwithstanding, missing no detail of her appearance and general demeanour. There was plenty to be said, Mrs. Wright was always voluble, but she was not a selfish talker. She did not monopolize the conversation, and she never lost sight of her listener.

Maud's sympathy was quite unfeigned. She liked to hear about Mrs. Wright's various interests, and there was a genial warmth in the atmosphere that did her good.

"Let me come into the kitchen with you and help you make the toast!" she begged at length.

And after a brief demur, Mrs. Wright consented. Tom was out and there would be no one to disturb them. She would not have dreamed of permitting Tom to sit down in the kitchen with Jake's princess.

So to the kitchen they went, and finding it cosier than the parlour, decided to remain there to partake of the meal they had prepared, Mrs. Wright, albeit sorely against her will occupying the wooden armchair of state, while Maud sat close to her knees on the fender.

"You're looking very thin, dear," Mrs. Wright checked her chatter to observe, as she put down her final cup of tea.

"It's my nature to be thin," Maud said.

Mrs. Wright permitted herself a more critical survey. "I wonder what Jake thinks," she said. "I shouldn't feel happy about you if I were Jake."

Maud smiled faintly into the fire and said nothing.

Mrs. Wright's plump hand stole down to her shoulder. "I hope as he's being good to you, dearie," she murmured.

Maud leaned back against her knee. "He is trying to be," she said. "You know that the Stud has been sold?"

"It really has?" said Mrs. Wright.

"Yes, it really has. The animals were to have been sent to Tattersall's, but a man we know--an American--came at the very beginning of the year and made an offer on behalf of a friend of his that Lord Saltash's agent thought too good to refuse. He has gone back to America now, and no doubt his principal will make his appearance soon. The idea is to build new Stables nearer to Graydown. Jake is negotiating about some land there. It's such a pretty part, and there will have to be a house for him too. We shall probably be allowed to stay on at the Burchester Stables till it is all ready. Jake is hoping that it may all be done in a year, I think," she smiled again with a hint of wistfulness. "I think Jake is going to enjoy himself."

"And you, dearie?" whispered Mrs. Wright, tenderly persistent.

Maud reached up a hand to clasp hers. "I have been lost in the desert for a long, long time, dear Mrs. Wright," she said. "But I am just beginning to find myself."

Mrs. Wright stooped impulsively and carried the soft hand to her lips. "May it please the dear Lord to guide you, dear!" she said.

"He is guiding me," Maud said with simplicity. "But I've some way to travel yet before I reach my goal. And--it's very sandy travelling sometimes, Mother Wright." She lifted her face with its sweet quivering smile. "And there are stones too, sometimes," she said. "But--I'd like you to know that I've passed the worst. I've left off yearning for--for--the mirage. It doesn't draw me any more--at all. I've left it all behind me,--like an evil dream and I can never, never, never be deceived by it again."

"My darling!" murmured Mrs. Wright very tenderly. "My darling!"

Maud suddenly clung to her closely. "I'm beginning to find out," she whispered tremulously,

"that the thing I took for a rank weed growing beside my path is the one flower I have always wanted in my garden. I've tried for ever so long to uproot it, but now--but now--I'm trying to make it grow. I want it--but this is a secret!--more than anything else on earth."

Mrs. Wright's own eyes were full of tears. "I am sure you will have it, darling," she said. "I am sure--quite sure--your want will be satisfied."

She kissed the quivering face on her bosom and fondled the soft dark hair. They remained so for a space not speaking; then very gently Maud withdrew herself.

"Did I tell you that Bunny is allowed to play hockey this term? It is horribly dangerous--I went up to watch it last Saturday--but he enjoys it tremendously; and they say it will do him good. He is growing fast, getting quite a man."

"I am very pleased to hear it," Mrs. Wright said warmly. "Dearie me, just to think of the poor little weakly thing he was a year ago! Do you remember that day I first looked in on you, and how you gave me them violets? I've never forgotten it."

Maud flushed a little. "You were so good to me, and I had been so ungracious. I wonder you ever forgave me."

"What rubbish, dear! What rubbish!" softly interpolated Mrs. Wright. "I loved you from the first moment I set eyes on you that night at Giles Sheppard's. And that reminds me. How is your mother doing now?"

"She is living in London," Maud said. "I believe Giles Sheppard went to Canada. She doesn't seem to trouble about him, but has settled down quite happily in a boarding-house in Bayswater. I invested some of Uncle Edward's money in an annuity for her. It seemed the best plan."

"I am so glad you have got that money, dear," said Mrs. Wright simply.

"Thank you," Maud said. "But--you know--I could have been quite happy without it. At least I think I could. We should have had to emigrate. And I--" she smiled momentarily, "I suppose I should have been a cow-puncher's wife in earnest."

"You wouldn't have liked that," said Mrs. Wright with conviction.

"Shouldn't I? I wonder. I am beginning to think that external circumstances haven't much to do with happiness." Maud spoke thoughtfully. "Still--now I am used to the idea--I am glad to have the money. Uncle Edward left all his affairs in such perfect order that they will probably be wound up very soon now. Mr. Craven, the solicitor, said it was one of the simplest matters he had ever had to deal with, which is all the better for me. He is in a position to raise almost any amount for me even now." Maud was smiling again, that faint, half-wistful smile that had become hers. "It will be useful when it comes to furnishing the new house, won't it?" she said.

"My dear, you will just love that," said Mrs. Wright. "And what does Jake say to it all? Isn't he pleased to know as you and little Sir Bernard are provided for as befits your rank and station?"

Maud's smile became a laugh. "Dear Mother Wright, you are incorrigible!" she declared. "No, Jake is not over and above pleased. I think he has a lurking fear that I want to take him away from his horses and make him lead a life of elegant idleness. He doesn't guess how thankful I was to know that he would not have to give them up after all. For he loves his animals as he loves nothing else on earth."

"Oh, tut, tut, dearie!" remonstrated Mrs. Wright. "And it really is settled for him to keep on in his present position?"

"Practically settled. He says he must wait and see his boss before he regards it as a sure thing. Meantime, he is carrying out Mr. Rafford's instructions as far as possible. He has gone over to Graydown to-day about the building-site for the new stables. I hope he will secure it. It is on a southern slope. It would be splendid for the animals."

"Why, you are getting quite enthusiastic!" said Mrs. Wright, with a chuckle.

"I believe I am," Maud admitted. "I never thought so much of them till it seemed that we were going to lose them. I think it would almost have broken Jake's heart."

"He don't keep his heart in the stables," said Mrs. Wright wisely, "nor yet in the training-field. What, my dear, you're not thinking of going yet? Why, it's quite early!"

"Yes, I ought to be going," Maud said. "I like to be in first, to give him his tea and so on. He is much too polite to say so, but I fancy he likes it."

"Of course he likes it, dear. And I think he's a very, very lucky man." Mrs. Wright spoke with great emphasis.

Maud was on her feet. She looked down at her half-laughing. "Oh, do you? I wonder why."

"To have such a dutiful wife, dear," said Mrs. Wright. "I hope you're not going to spoil him, now. It would be a pity to do that."

Maud uttered a funny little sigh. "Oh no, I shan't spoil him. He is most careful not to take

anything for granted. In fact, I sometimes wonder--" She paused.

"What, darling?" Mrs. Wright looked up at her with loving admiration.

Maud's face was flushed. "Oh, nothing very much. I was only going to say that I sometimes wonder if he has any real use for the dutiful wife after all. I try to please him, but all he seems really to want me to do is to please myself."

Mrs. Wright rose up in her own resilient fashion. "Oh, there now! How like a man!" she said. "They're as cussed as mules, my dear. But never you mind! You'll catch him off his guard one of these days if you keep on. And then'll be your time. You step in and take possession before he can turn round and stop you. It's only a question of patience, dear. It'll come. It'll come."

Maud smiled again as she bent to kiss her. "You're such a good friend to me," she said. "I'll be sure to take your advice--if I can."

"God bless you, my darling!" said Mrs. Wright, with great fervour.

CHAPTER XXX THE LANE OF FIRE

An icy wind was blowing as Maud climbed the steep road by the church. It whirled down on her with a fierceness that made quick progress out of the question. Nevertheless, she fought valiantly against it, fearing that Jake would have returned before her.

It was not dark. The tearing wind had chased all clouds from the sky, and the daylight still lingered. Ahead of her the North Star hung like a beacon, marvellously bright. There was a smell of smoke in the air that seemed to accentuate the bitter coldness.

The church clock struck six as she passed it, and she sought to quicken her steps, she did not want Jake to come in search of her. For some reason she did not greatly want to tell him how she had been spending the afternoon.

Round the bend of the road the wind caught her mercilessly. She had to battle against it with all her might to make any progress at all. It was while she was struggling round this bend that there suddenly came to her the sound of galloping hoofs and a man's voice wildly shouting. She drew to one side, and stood against the hedge; and in a moment a horseman dashed into view and thundered past her. He was lying forward on the animal's neck, urging him like a jockey.

He was gone like a whirlwind into the dusk, and Maud was left with a throbbing heart that seemed to have been touched by a hand that was icy-cold. She was nearly sure that the animal had come from the Stables and that the man was Sam Vickers. He was not a furious rider as a rule. What had induced him to ride like that to-night? Something was wrong--something was wrong! The certainty of it stabbed her like a knife. What could it be? What? What? Had Jake met with an accident? Was Sam tearing thus madly down to Fairharbour to find the doctor?

The strength of a great fear entered into her. She began to run up the hill in the teeth of the wind. She had only half a mile to go. She would soon know the worst.

But she had not gone twenty yards before her progress was checked. She became aware of a drifting mist all about her, a mist that made her gasp and choke. She ran on in the face of it, but it was with failing progress, for the further she went the more it enveloped her like the smoke of a vast bonfire.

The coldness at her heart became a tangible and ever-growing fear. She tried to tell herself that the suffocating vapour blowing down on her came from a group of ricks that stood not far from the entrance to the Stables. Some mischievous person had fired them, and Sam had discovered it and gone to raise the alarm. But deep within her there clamoured an insistent something that refused to be reassured. Struggling on through the blinding, ever-thickening smoke, the conviction forced itself upon her that no hayricks were responsible for that headlong gallop of Sam's. He had gone as a man going for his life. His progress had been winged by tragedy.

Gasping, stumbling, with terror in her soul, she fought her way on, till a further bend in the road revealed to her the driving smoke all lurid with the glare of flames behind. By that curve she escaped from the direct drift of it and found herself able to breathe more freely. The shoulder of the hill protected her at this point in some degree from the wind also. She covered the ground more quickly and with less effort.

It was here that there first came to her that awful sound as of a rending, devouring monster--the fierce crackling and roaring of fire. The horror of it set all her pulses leaping, but its effect

upon her senses was curiously stimulating. Where another might have been paralysed by fear, she was driven forward as though goaded irresistibly. It came to her--whence she knew not--that something immense lay before her. A task of such magnitude as she had never before contemplated had been laid upon her; and strength--such strength as had never before been hers--had been given to her for its accomplishment.

She did not know exactly when her fear became certainty, but when that happened all personal fear passed utterly away from her. She forgot herself completely. All her being leapt to the fulfilment of the unknown task.

The last curve in the uphill road brought her within view of the red flames rushing skyward and curling over like fiery waves before the wind. Through the roar of the furnace there came to her the shouting of men's voices and the wild stampeding of horses. And twice ere she reached the gates she heard the terrible cry of a horse. Then as though she moved on wings, she was there in the stable-yard in the thick of the confusion, with the fire roaring ahead of her and the red glare all around.

The whole stone-paved space seemed crowded with men and horses, and for the first few seconds the noise and movement bewildered her. Then she grasped the fact that only one side of the double row of stables was alight and that in consequence of the driving north wind the other side was in comparative safety.

They were leading the terrified animals out through a passage that led to further buildings on this safe side. But the task was no light one, for they were all maddened by fear and almost beyond control.

As she drew nearer however Maud saw that the men themselves were grappling with the situation with energy and resolution, and there was no panic among them. One--a mere lad--gripping a plunging horse by the forelock, recognized her and shouted a warning through the din.

She came to him, unheeding the trampling hoofs. "Is Mr. Bolton back?" she cried.

He shook his head, striving to back the animal away from her. He had a halter flung over his shoulder which he had not stopped to adjust.

Maud took it from him, and between them, with difficulty, they slipped it over the terrified creature's head. Then, obtaining a firmer hold, the boy shouted further information.

"No, the boss ain't back yet. He'll be in any minute now. Sam's gone for the fire-engine. He thinks the house will be safe if the wind don't veer. But the other side'll be burnt out before he gets back at this rate. We've got most all the animals out now though."

"Not all?" Maud cried the words with a momentary wild misgiving.

The boy yelled back again, still wrestling with the struggling horse. "All but The Hundredth Chance. He's gone by this time. We couldn't save 'im. It's like an open furnace along there."

Then she knew what it was that lay before her, the task for which this great new strength had been bestowed. She left the boy and ran up the yard in the rear of that raging fire. She did not feel the stones under her feet. The seething crowd of men and horses became no more than shadows on the wall. Twice as she went she narrowly escaped death from the plunging hoofs, and knew it not....

The heat was terrific, but the smoke was all blown away from her. She felt no suffocation. But when she reached the stone passage that led to the group of loose-boxes where once she had stood horror-stricken and listened to Jake reprimanding Dick Stevens in the language of the stables, she realized the truth of what the boy had said. It was like an open furnace.

Yet there seemed a chance--the faintest chance--that that one loose-box at the southern corner, the best loose-box in the whole of the Stables--might yet be untouched by the devouring flames. The block of buildings was alight and burning fiercely, but it was not yet alight from end to end. It looked like a lane of fire at the end of that stone passage, but she could see the line of loose-boxes beyond, fitfully through wreaths of smoke. All the doors stood open as far as she could see. They had evidently taken the animals in order, and it had been the fate of The Hundredth Chance to be left till last.

And how to reach him! It had baffled his rescuers. For the moment it baffled her also. She stood at the entrance to the stone passage looking through, feeling the stones under her feet hot like a grid, seeing the red flames leaping from roof to roof.

Then the driving wind came swirling behind her, and she felt as if a hand had pushed her. She plunged into the passage and ran before it.

She emerged in that lane of fire. It roared all around her. She felt the heat envelop her with a fiery, blistering intensity, but ever that unseen hand seemed to urge her. She hesitated no more,

though she rushed into a seething cauldron of flame.

And ever the thought of Jake was with her, Jake who loved his animals as he loved nothing else on earth.

She reached that line of boxes, how she knew not. The roof was burning now from end to end, but as she tore past the open doors there came to her an awful cry, and she knew that the colt still lived.

The smoke came down on her here, blinding her, but though it stopped her breath it could not stop her progress. It seemed as though no power on earth could do that now until she had reached her goal. Crouching, with lungs that felt like bursting, she forced a way over those last desperate yards.

Every door was open save that one, and against that one there came a maddened wild tattoo. The Hundredth Chance was fighting for life.

She reached the door through swirling smoke. The flames were shooting over her head. She caught at the bolt. It was burning hot as the door of an oven; but she knew no pain. She dragged it back.

Again there came that fearful shriek and the battering of heels against the wood. The animal was plunging about his prison like a mad thing. She mustered all her strength and pushed upper and lower doors inwards at the same moment.

Instantly there came the rush of hoofs. She was flung violently backwards, falling headlong on the stones. The Hundredth Chance galloped free; and she was left shattered, inert, with the fire raging all around her.

But the deed was done, the great task accomplished. And nothing mattered any more. Jake loved his animals as he loved nothing else on earth....

CHAPTER XXXI THE NEW BOSS

What was that red light burning? Symbol of undying Love! Symbol of the Immortal! The Lamp that burns for ever before the High Altar of Heaven!

Over the wide, sandy desert it shone, the only light in leagues and leagues of darkness. A great many wayfarers were drawing towards it, but they were very far away from it and from each other. Billows and billows of sandy waste stretched between. But they could all see the lamp. It shone like a red, still beacon, giving light to the outcast, guiding the feet of the wanderers.

Ah, the long sandy ridges--how weary for the feet! Who could have faced the journey if God had not lifted up that lamp in the desert? Who could ever have hoped to reach the goal? Even as it was, the journey was long--so long, and the light so far away!

Who was that speaking? Was it the Voice that had not sounded in tempest or fire, but only at the very last, when all other things were past? "Love is only gained by Love,--by the complete renunciation of self. Love is a joyful sacrifice,--to give and give without measure, not counting the cost, rejoicing only in the power to give, till it all comes back a thousand-fold--Love the Invincible. Love the Divine, Love the Perfect Gift."

Surely it was Love Itself that spoke those words--Love that had raised that eternal beacon--Love that drew the pilgrims out of the long, dark night! And the sandy desert faded and became a garden where white lilies bloomed--lilies that faded not, such lilies as decked the High Altar of Heaven.

There were no wayfarers here. There was no journeying for tired feet. Only a peace ineffable, beyond the power of words to describe. The lilies grew tall and white, unspeakably pure, fairer than any earthly flowers, dazzling in splendour, decked in holiness. Very peaceful was that quiet garden, with no song of birds to break the stillness, no whisper of fountains, no faintest echo of voices. Perfect rest was there, a calm as the calm of still waters, a hush that was Divine. Like a veil the solitude lay spread, stretching into the great spaces of eternity. And the lilies stood waiting, waiting, to be laid upon the Altar of God.

How long had they stood waiting thus? Were they yet not pure enough? How long had they still to wait? Would the gates of that garden never open and the angel that served the Altar come to gather the flowers? Ah! Surely they were opening now! There came a waft of air, the scent and sound of the earth. But no one entered, and the lilies never stirred. Only the gates remained

open, and the peace that wrapt the garden quivered like a filmy veil.

Very far away from that quiet place someone was calling, calling. At first it was suggestion rather than sound, a vague murmur from the old, sad world so many millions of miles away. But gradually it grew till it seemed the echo of a cry, and at last the cry itself became articulate,--a cry of anguish rising from the void.

"Come back! Come back! O God, send her back to me! Send her back!"

The lilies were moving now. They seemed to be listening, whispering together. The wind that blew through the open gates rustled among their ranks. Someone was lost then. Someone was wanted. Someone was sought through the great spaces of eternity. Was it a sod that had drifted free too soon? Would the searcher ever find that drifting soul? Did the one great Bond that nought could ever sever hang between them, linking each to each? It was only by the drawing closer of this Bond that they would ever find each other.

And the way back was long and dark and stormy. Other worlds were there, other worlds and other voices. And once there came a great sound of singing as of men and angels praising God before the High Altar of Heaven.

Then the darkness of earth rushed upwards like the smoke from a mighty furnace, and all was blotted out....

Someone was holding her. Someone was whispering her name. She opened her eyes upon the old world of cloud and sunshine, and knew that the Bond had brought her back. Through all the great spaces of Eternity he had drawn her to his side. She looked into his face, and it was the face of a man who had suffered agony.

"Thank God!" he said. "O thank God!"

Then she remembered in what cause she had spent herself. "What of--The Hundredth Chance?" she said.

He caught his breath. His lips were quivering. "He's safe enough. But--my girl--what made you do it?"

She looked at him wonderingly. "But it was all I could do," she said.

He bent his head over something that he was holding, and it came to her with a little start of surprise that it was her own hand swathed in bandages.

"Oh, Jake," she said, "am I ill? Have I been hurt?"

He did not look at her. "Thank God, not seriously," he said, speaking with an odd jerkiness. "The colt knocked you down. You were stunned. You scorched your hands over that infernal bolt. But the wind blew the fire away from you. You weren't actually burnt."

"Is the fire out?" she asked anxiously. "Tell me what happened!"

Jake's head was still bent. She thought that he suppressed a shudder. "Yes, they soon got it under. There wasn't much left to burn that side. It was a good thing the wind held, or the whole show might have been gutted. It's all safe now."

Maud's eyes wandered round the panelled parlour and came back to his bent head. "I feel so strange," she said, "as if I had been a long, long journey, and as if it had all happened ages and ages ago. Is it so very long ago, Jake?"

"About four hours," said Jake. "Dr. Burrowes has been in. He chanced to be passing in his dog-cart. He was on his way to a case, and couldn't stay except to give you first aid. He is coming back presently."

"And you have been here with me ever since?" she said, with a touch of shyness. "Didn't you want to be looking after the animals?"

He shook his head, gazing steadily downwards.

"Have you been--anxious about me, Jake?" she whispered.

"Yes." Just the one word spoken with an almost savage emphasis.

"But Dr. Burrowes must have known if--if I were in any danger," she said.

He answered her with what she felt to be a great effort. "Burrowes was anxious too. He was afraid of the shock for you. He thought there was--danger."

She moved her hand a little, and in a moment, as though he feared to hurt her, he laid it gently down.

"I am so sorry you have been worried about me," she said.

"It doesn't matter now," said Jake. He reached out for a glass that stood on the table. "Burrowes left this for you. Can you manage to drink it?"

He held it to her lips with a hand that was not so steady as usual. She drank and felt revived.

Her brain was becoming more active. There was something in Jake's attitude that required explanation. "I am better now," she said. "Tell me a little more! How did I get here? Who found

me?"

"I found you. The Hundredth Chance came tearing out. We had some trouble to catch him. And then one of the boys suddenly said--" Jake stopped and swallowed hard--"said--said you had been in the yard, and must have set him free. I--got to you--just in time."

"You saved me?" she said swiftly.

He nodded.

She raised herself, leaning towards him. "Jake! Were you hurt?"

"No." He kept his eyes stubbornly lowered.

"No one has been hurt?" she persisted.

"No one but you." His tone was almost surly.

But something urged her on. "Jake," she said wistfully, "aren't you glad your animals are all safe?"

"They belong to the new boss," he said doggedly. "They don't belong to me."

Her face changed a little. "I think they belong to you first, Jake," she said. "You love them so."

He made a sharp gesture. "It's quite likely the new boss will tell me to shunt."

"Oh, he won't do that, Jake!" she protested quickly. "I'm sure he won't do that. You--you are one of the best trainers in England."

His mouth twitched a little; she thought he wryly smiled. "One of the best blackguards too, my girl," he said grimly.

She opened her eyes in surprise. "Jake, what do you mean? Are people saying hateful things against you?"

He gripped his hands between his knees. "It ain't that I meant. People can say what they damn please. No, it's just my own estimate of myself. I'm going to chuck the animals. They've come near costing me too dear. I'm going to give in to you now. You can do what you like with me. I'll serve you to the best of my ability, fetch and carry and generally wait around on you till you're tired of me. Then I'll go."

"Jake! Jake!" She was half-laughing, but there was remonstrance in her voice. "But I never wanted you to give up the animals. Why, I don't believe you could live without them, could you?"

He gave himself an odd, half-angry shake. "I've done with 'em!" he declared almost fiercely. "I can't serve two masters. If the new boss don't chuck me, I shall chuck him."

"But the horses, Jake!" she urged. "And The Hundredth Chance! You can't be in earnest. You--you have always loved them better than anything else in the world!"

He winced sharply. "You're wrong! And I am in earnest. If--if you had lost your life over the colt, I'd have shot him first and myself after. What sort of brute do you take me for? Do you think I'm without any heart at all? All animal and no heart?"

The question was passionate, but yet he did not look at her as he uttered it. He was gazing downwards at his clenched hands.

He was formidable at that moment, but she did not shrink from him. Rather she drew nearer. "Of course I don't think so," she said. "But--but--am I first with you, Jake? Am I really first?"

He made a choked sound in his throat as if many emotions struggled for utterance. Then, almost under his breath, "An easy first!" he muttered. "An easy first!"

Her bandaged hand slipped on to his arm. Her eyes were shining. "Oh, Jake, thank you for telling me that," she said. "You--I know you didn't want to tell me. And--now--I've got to tell you something--that I don't want to tell you either--that I don't know how to tell you. Oh, Jake, do help me! Don't--don't be angry!"

He turned towards her, but he did not lift his eyes. He seemed almost afraid to look her in the face. "My girl, you've no call to be afraid of me," he said.

But there was constraint in his tone, constraint in his attitude, and her heart sank.

"I'm so--horribly afraid--of hurting you," she said.

A faint, faint gleam of humour crossed his face. "Oh, I guess I'm down," he said. "You needn't be afraid of that either."

She tried to clasp his arm. "Jake, if--if I really come first with you, perhaps--perhaps--you'll be able to forgive me. It's because you came first with me too--a very, very long way first--" her voice shook--"that I was able to do it. It's because I wanted you to have what you wanted without--without feeling under an obligation to me or anyone. It's because--because your happiness is more to me--a thousand times more--than anything else in the world!" Her breast began to heave; Jake's eyes were suddenly upon her, but it was she who could not, dared not meet their look. "Ah, I haven't told you yet!" she said brokenly. "How shall I tell you? It's--it's the animals, Jake. It's the Stud!"

"What about the Stud?" he said. His voice was sunk very low, it sounded stern.

With a great effort she mastered her agitation and answered him. "It's yours, Jake, all yours. The new boss is--is just an invention of Mr. Rafford's. You--you are--the new boss."

"What?" he said.

He got up suddenly, with a movement that verged upon violence, and stood over her, she felt, almost threateningly.

Through quivering distress she answered him again.

"I've played a double game. I met Mr. Rafford first at Liverpool and then I chanced to meet him again here after--after you had refused to have my money. And he was kind and sympathetic and offered to help me. I wanted you so to have the horses. And I couldn't bear to think that you should lose them through me. Oh, Jake, don't look so--so terrible!"

She sank back panting on her cushions. That one brief glimpse of his face had appalled her. He had the look of a man hard pressed and nearing the end of his strength. She saw that his hands were clenched.

He spoke after several tense seconds. "Why have you done this thing?"

She made a piteous gesture. "Oh, Jake, only--only because I loved you."

"Only!" he said, and with the word she saw his hand unclench.

For a moment a wild uncertainty possessed her, and then it was gone. Jake dropped down on his knees beside her and took her into his arms.

"Maud--" he said, and again "Maud!"

But no further words would come. His voice broke. He hid his face against her breast with a great sob.

Her arms were round his neck in an instant, her cheek was pressed against his hair. All doubts were gone forever. "My darling!" she whispered. "My darling!"

And through the great storm of emotion that shook Jake, she said the soft words over and over, holding his head against her heart, kissing the cropped hair above his temple, drawing him nearer, ever nearer, to the inner sanctuary of her soul, till at length by the shattering of her own reserve she broke down the last of his also. He lifted his face to her with no attempt to hide his tears, and in the long, long kiss that passed between them they found each other at last where the sand of the desert turns to gold.

CHAPTER XXXII

OLD SCORES

Someone was whistling on the garden-path below the parlour-window. Someone had sauntered up by way of the orchard through an April night of radiant moonlight, and was softly whistling an old, old love-song with a waltz-refrain.

There was a light burning in the parlour, and at the table a woman sat with bent head working. She did not look up as the sweet, rhythmic sound reached her. She worked steadily on.

The waltz-refrain came to an end. There fell a step outside the window. A wicked, mischievous face peered in.

"What! All alone, queen of the roses? Will you grant me admittance?"

She looked across at him then, but she did not rise. "Come in, certainly, if you wish!" she said.

He came in with the air of one conferring a royal favour. He moved round the table to her side, bent, and lightly kissed her hand.

She suffered him with an enigmatic smile, scarcely pausing in her work.

"And where is the worthy cow-puncher?" he said.

She raised her brows ever so slightly. "Are you speaking of Jake--my husband?"

He smiled briefly, derisively. "Even so. Of Jake--your husband."

She smiled also, but her smile was wholly sweet. "He will be in soon. He has gone round to see that all is well. Sit down, won't you, and wait till he comes?"

"Oh ho!" said Saltash. He sat down facing her, closely watching her every movement with his queer, restless eyes. "Do you think he will be pleased to see me?" he asked.

She glanced at him. "As pleased as I am," she said.

"Are you pleased?" He flung the question as though he scarcely expected an answer.

But she answered it with serenity. "Yes, I am quite pleased to see you, Charlie. I have been

half-expecting you all day."

"Really!" he said.

She bent her head. "Ever since I heard of your return to the Castle. It was kind of you to come round so soon. And we want to thank you--Jake and I--for letting us use the stables till the new ones at Graydown are leady."

"Really!" Saltash said again. He added, "As half are already demolished and the other half will be pulled down as soon as the Stud goes, it was not much of a favour to grant. Do I understand that Jake is to continue in command under the new regime?"

She smiled again as she answered, "In absolute command."

He frowned momentarily. "A fortunate thing for Jake!"

"He thinks so too," she said.

He began to finger his cigarette case. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not in the least." She raised her eyes suddenly and fully to his. "Please remember that you are in the house of friends!" she said, with a slight emphasis on the last word.

"You amaze me!" said Saltash.

She laid aside her work with heightened colour. "Charlie, I have some rather serious things to say to you."

"My dear girl," he protested, "must you?"

"Yes, I must, and you must listen." She spoke with resolution. "I will be as brief as I possibly can, but I must speak. Smoke--please smoke--if you want to!"

He laughed a little, leaning towards her. "On second thoughts, I don't. This promises to be interesting, after all. Do you know when I came in just now you looked so prim that I was nearly frightened quite away?"

She was looking him straight in the face. "Charlie, why did you come?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Ask the needle why it follows the magnet!" he said.

His eyes caressed her, but she steadily faced them. "I ought to hate you," she said. "But I don't. I think of you always--in spite of myself--as a friend. I suppose that is a woman's way--to be tricked and to forgive. Anyhow, I forgave you a long while ago. I believe I have even begun to forget. Charlie, I know that you are capable of a sincere friendship. I can't help knowing it."

"You deceive yourself," he said lightly. His eyes still dwelt upon her, but it was with a half-tender mockery, as one who smiles at the make-believe of a child.

Her lips quivered a little. "No," she said. "It is the truth. You are pleased to wear a mask--but I know--the real man. I know that you are often crooked in your dealings, often cruelly malicious and vindictive; but at the back of it all there is a man capable of big things, of chivalry, generosity, and honest kindness of heart. Charlie, I appeal to that man!"

"What do you want of him?" said Saltash. And still he looked at her, but again his look had changed. The mockery had given place to a species of dispassionate curiosity. His ugly face had the odd melancholy as of something longed for but hopelessly lost which may be seen on the face of a monkey.

Because of that look she suddenly stretched out her hands to him impulsively, generously.

"I want fair play," she said. "Perhaps I don't deserve it. I haven't always treated you fairly. But I want you to put the past away from you--as I have done. I want to trust you again."

There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. He held her hands hard pressed in his.

"A dangerous experiment, Maud of the roses," he said. "But if you will you must. What more do you want?"

She answered him quickly, pleadingly. "Charlie, you have a grudge against--my husband! I want it put right away--right away. I don't think you have the power to hurt him, but even if you had, I want to know that you wouldn't use it. He has always served you faithfully. I want fair play for him."

Saltash's dark face showed a faint, twisted smile. "You certainly credit me with considerable generosity," he said.

"He deserves fair play from you," she insisted. "You have tried to undermine his reputation, and you have failed. But you might have succeeded, although you know, as well as I do--that he is a white man."

"Do I?" said Saltash.

"You do! You do!" she said with conviction. "You have no right to cherish a grudge against him. He has done nothing to deserve it."

"And how do you know that?" said Saltash.

"I know him," she said with simplicity.

"I see." His smile became a little more marked. "Did he ever tell you the funny story of my double?" he asked.

She gave a great start, and in a moment her face was burning.

"I see," he said again. "You needn't answer. And you tell me that I have no right to cherish a grudge against him."

She spoke with difficulty. "He did not accuse you of anything."

Saltash laughed. "Left you to draw your own conclusions, eh? Score number one! And after that, when he knew that I was coming home, when he knew that you were mine for the asking, didn't he race you into marriage with him before you had time to find your breath?"

Her face burned more hotly. "Wouldn't you have done the same?" she said.

He looked sardonic. "You must remember that I am not--a white man, my queen of the roses. My standards won't compare with his. Score number two then! And hasn't he balked me at every turn ever since? When have I ever got back any of my own--except once when I made you see him as he wasn't--a drunkard, and except when one night of moonshine I held you in my arms and you gave your lips to mine?" His voice suddenly thrilled.

She caught her breath sharply. "I was mad!" she said. "I was mad!"

She would have withdrawn her hands from his, but he frustrated her. A gleam of mischief flashed in his eyes. "No, Maud of the roses, it was just--a dream. Have you never said to yourself, That was the happiest dream of my life?"

She shook her head. "That part of my life is over--quite over. I have come into reality, and--Charlie--it is better than any dream. That is why I want all that is evil to be taken away. If Jake has ever wronged you, then I have wronged you. And I appeal to your kindness of heart, your generosity, for forgiveness."

The mischief died out of the eyes that watched her. Saltash bent a little over the hands he held. "But why should you take that trouble--if I have ceased to count?" he said.

"You do count," she answered quickly and earnestly.

"Surely not if--as you say--it is out of my power to hurt him." There was a hint of banter in the words, but they held no venom.

"It isn't that," she said. "I want to know that the hatchet is buried, that there will be no more ill feeling. Jake is his own master, and I know he will make his mark. But I want him to have a fair chance, free from all handicap."

"What do you mean by that?" Saltash suddenly broke in. "I presume he is still a paid servant though it may no longer be my privilege to employ him."

She lifted her head a little. "No. Jake is his own master. The Stud was bought with my money. It belongs to him."

Saltash's brows went up. "Your money? You never had any!"

"Never before last winter," she said. "I inherited a very large fortune from my uncle in the North. It came to me--just in time."

Saltash's brows were working up and down like a monkey's. "And you--bought the Stud? Then all this American business was bunkum! Did my agent know of this?"

She shook her head. "No; no one knows yet except Jake, Bunny, and me."

He let her hands go abruptly, and began to pace the room.

She stood motionless, watching him. "Even Jake did not know till it had all gone through," she said, after a moment. "I told him--on the night of the fire."

"What did he say?" Saltash tossed the words over his shoulder. His dark face was drawn, almost distorted.

Maud hesitated. Then: "He asked me why I had done it," she said, in a low voice.

He paused in his walk. "And you struck a bargain with him? He was to let you go your own way for all time, please yourself, live your own life! Wasn't that it?"

Her eyes fell involuntarily before the sudden fire in his. "Oh no!" she said quickly. "Oh no! I didn't want that."

"What then?" He wheeled and came to her, stood before her. "Surely you didn't give him all that for nothing!"

She faced him again steadily. "He wouldn't have taken it," she said.

"Then--" he was standing close to her; his odd eyes gazed, deeply craving, into hers.

But she did not flinch. "I gave it to him--for love," she said.

He made a sudden movement; his features were for a moment convulsed. Then swiftly he controlled himself. "You--love the man!" he said.

She clasped her hands together tightly. Her eyes never wavered for an instant from his. "Yes,

I love him," she said.

He flung violently away from her. "Why didn't I destroy him long ago?" he said.

Again he paced the room with sharp, jerky movements. Suddenly he flung two questions over his shoulder. "That was why you changed your mind after sending me that ring? That was what you came to me to the Castle to tell me?"

She bent her head. "I believe that was the reason. But I couldn't have told you that then. I didn't know it myself."

"How long have you known it?"

He was not looking at her, and very piteously she smiled. "It came to me--quite suddenly--in the hall at 'The Anchor' when you told me--you told me--that he wouldn't be such a fool as to believe in me. I left him without seeing him again. And then--and then--just when my uncle died--he came to me. And I knew that he did believe in me after all."

Saltash broke into a laugh--the laugh of a man who hides pain. "It was my doing then! Come, you owe me something after all. But it seems I have been misspending my energies ever since. I thought you wanted to be rid of him."

Again abruptly he came back to her, stopped in front of her. "And so it all came out on the night of the fire," he said.

She looked at him, and her blue eyes shone. "Yes," she said softly. "There have been no misunderstandings since then."

He smiled a little with twisted brows. "Do you know who was responsible for that fire?"

She started. "No!"

"A certain scoundrel named Stevens," he said. "The same scoundrel who pulled the Albatross at the Cup Meeting, and was thrashed for it by the virtuous cow-puncher. Do you know who was at the back of that scoundrel?"

Her eyes fell before the grim bitterness of his. "Charlie!" she faltered.

"Yes, Charlie," he said. "Charles Burchester, Lord Saltash, another scoundrel blacker than the first who had suffered a similar punishment for a somewhat similar offence from the same virtuous hands. Scoundrel number one won't trouble you again. I have shipped him off to Australia. Scoundrel number two is awaiting his orders to go to--another place."

Her lips suddenly quivered. She put out a trembling hand. "Charlie, I don't believe it of you!"

"Believe it or not," he said, "it's true. I'm a spiteful devil. You said so yourself a minute ago." But he held her hand almost as one pleading for clemency.

She raised her eyes to his. The fascination of the man drew her, but--possibly for the first time--not against her better judgment. "Let us forget it all!" she said. "Let us be friends!"

He laughed in a fashion that moved her to pity, and bending kissed her hand. "If Jake agrees--Amen!" he said.

And then sharply, like an animal trapped, he turned towards the window and met Jake face to face.

They stood for a moment so, confronting each other in dead silence. Then lightly Saltash spoke.

"Caught trespassing, but not poaching!" he said. "Your wife and I have been settling--old scores."

Jake's eyes went past him to his wife's face. She made no sign of any kind, save that she met the look.

Jake came quietly forward. "You are very welcome, my lord," he said, and held out a steady hand.

A gleam of surprise crossed Saltash's dark face. He took the hand, looking at Jake whimsically. "You are the fellow who is not accustomed to being beaten at the winning-post," he said. "Well, you were a bad starter and the odds were dead against you, but you've got there. I congratulate you."

"You are very good, my lord." Jake's eyes, red-brown and resolute, looked into his.

Saltash shrugged his shoulders, with a slight grimace. "The *rôle* is thrust upon me. I wonder if I shall be able to sustain it."

Something in the word reached Jake. His lips parted in a sudden smile that banished all the hardness from his face. His hand squarely gripped and held. For a second--just a second--there was a gleam of comradeship in his eyes. "I guess it's up to you, my lord," he said.

The moment passed and Saltash turned aside, laughing with a certain royal graciousness that was all his own. "The odds are ninety-nine to one, Bolton," he said. "But you are too accustomed to that to be dismayed."

"I put my money on the hundredth chance," Jake answered in his slow, sure fashion. "And I reckon I shan't lose it."

EPILOGUE THE FINISH

"The black colt leads! The black colt leads! He wins! He wins! He wins!"

A great shout went up from the straining multitude as The Hundredth Chance, ridden by Sam Vickers, shot past the winning-post three lengths ahead of the horse behind. It was a sensational victory, for it was his maiden race, and the crowd yelled themselves hoarse over it, cheering and cheering again till the black colt came forth in a welter of sweat and foam to gather his laurels, still carrying his jockey and led by his owner, Jake Bolton.

He bore himself proudly, as if fully conscious of the distinction he had won. Jake looked proud too. He stuffed some sugar between the wet lips as he came, and his hand caressed the streaming neck. It was a popular meeting, and it was plainly a popular victory, though the favourite had not proved the winner. Jake Bolton's name went from mouth to mouth, and the throng cheered him to the echo. He smiled his open, pleasant smile in answer. He had been looking to this moment for the past two years, he had worked hard for it; and his trust in The Hundredth Chance had been vindicated, his labour rewarded. He knew that yet greater victories lay before his favourite. The Hundredth Chance was a born winner. He would be famous.

Back in the paddock a slim, boyish figure leaped to meet him. "Jake, he's a stunner! Let me hold him a minute, Jake! Well done, Sam! Well done!"

Sam grinned from ear to ear as he dropped from the saddle. "Pretty sight, weren't it, Sir Bernard?"

"Best I've ever seen!" declared Bunny enthusiastically. He led the black colt proudly after his jockey for a few paces, then gave him up and went back to Jake. "Old feller, I'm so jolly bucked," he said, hugging his arm, "I want to dance on my head. Do you know what I heard a chap say of you just now--a chap who knew too? He said, 'There goes the Lynx--one of the straightest men on the Turf.' It sounded just fine. I wanted to go and shake hands with him."

Jake laughed, a quiet satisfied laugh. "Was Maud pleased?"

"Oh! rather! She's going home now, said I was to tell you; said she'd save up and congratulate you in private."

"That so?" said Jake.

He disengaged himself from Bunny and went about his business, but the smile lingered in his eyes for the rest of the afternoon. And it was the smile of a man who grasps his heart's desire.

There was a white house on one of the great rolling downs behind the Graydown race-course, a low, white house with gabled roofs and dark green shutters. There were woodland trees about it, and a terraced garden bright with many spring flowers.

Behind it lay the racing-stables, also white,--model stables, the pride of Jake's heart. He seldom approached the house by any other route. But as he passed between the long, orderly buildings on that particular evening after his horse's victory, he did not linger. Straight to the house he went, and straight within, pausing only in the wide, square hall to throw down hat and whip ere he passed on, guided by the notes of a piano, to a room that overlooked the garden and the whole sweep of hill-side beyond.

She did not hear him enter, albeit she was playing softly, a dreamy melody that had in it something of dawning gladness and of infinite hope. Only Chops, the red setter, lying by the open French window, looked up and wagged a noiseless welcome. Then as he reached her, she caught the jingle of his spurs and in a moment she had turned to meet him with a vivid smile of eagerness.

"Oh, Jake, I am so glad--so glad!"

He put his arms about her as she sat, holding the flushed face upturned to his. "What's that you're playing, my girl? Not a pæan of thanksgiving!"

Her eyelids fluttered under his look. She laughed faintly. She offered him her lips with just a hint of shyness. He kissed her, but he continued to look at her with an intent glitter in his eyes. "You're glad, are you?" he said. "Real glad?"

Her arms clung about his neck. "Yes, real glad, Jake. I know you call The Hundredth Chance your luck. I was horribly anxious lest--lest he should lose after all."

He smiled a little. "What if he had? Think I can't stand up to a loss?"

She lifted her eyes to his for a moment, but they fell almost immediately. "No. To use your own language, I think you're just fine. But--but all the same, I've been saving up a little consolation for you in case you needed it."

"That so?" said Jake. He spoke very softly through lips that were suddenly tender. "Well, let's imagine I'm in need of consolation! I'd enjoy to be consoled by you."

She laughed again that faint, shy laugh, and, freeing one hand, began to feel over the keys of the piano, striking a soft chord here and there.

Jake stood for a moment or two, then squarely bent, bringing his face on a level with hers.

She made a slight gesture of protest, and then very suddenly, as if compelled, she raised her eyes fully to his.

"You once told me you'd enjoy--something quite different," she said.

The red-brown eyes gazed deeply into hers. "And--good land--how shocked you were!" he said. "You didn't view yourself as a plain man's wife in those days, my princess. Reckon you hated the plain man pretty badly for teaching you the meaning of the word."

She laid one hand against his breast. Her eyes were of that intense blueness that comes from the heart of a sapphire. "And now," she said, "I love him better every day--every night."

His big hand closed upon her wrist. He drew a great breath. "Ah!" he said.

She went on, albeit her lips were quivering. "I don't need to tell you that, do I? You know it so well. I don't think I really need to tell you--of this other thing either--of this big, big gift that is coming to us. Oh, Jake, dear Jake, I have so hoped--so hoped!"

He held her closer. "My own girl! Guess you'll be happy now!" he whispered.

She smiled at him through tears. "No, not for my own sake,--for yours--for yours!"

"For mine!" he said. "Haven't you given me all the world and then some?"

She uttered a trembling laugh. "I've given you lots that you didn't want to take--things that have cost me nothing. But this--this is different. And--it's the thing you wanted."

He clasped her to him almost fiercely. "My girl, I want nothing--no one--but you!"

She clung to him with a tenseness that was passionate. "That is what I wanted to say to you, my darling. You will always be first--first--first. Dr. Capper once told me that--that my frog would turn into a prince some day. And--dear--he was right. You are the prince of my heart--for ever. I love you as--as I never thought it was humanly possible to love."

"Maybe it's not--all human," he whispered, with lips that moved against her own.

"You are right," she whispered back. "It is Divine. The perfect Gift. But it only comes to those who give--without measure--not counting the cost--rejoicing only in the power to give--till it all comes back a thousandfold--a thousandfold." Her voice thrilled, her arms clung closer. "I once heard a man preach about that. And at the end he said, 'It is then that the ploughman overtakes the reaper, for ploughman and reaper are one.' Jake, I think that man spoke a great truth. You and I have done some heavy ploughing, but we are beginning to be reapers now." Her lips suddenly pressed his closely, lingeringly. Her tears were gone. "It's good to reap our own harvest, isn't it, Jake?" she murmured. "Yours and mine together?"

And Jake answered her in his own language, his voice very soft and slow, his eyes gazing straight into hers, seeing her soul. "Sure!" he said. "Sure!"

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HUNDREDTH CHANCE ***

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