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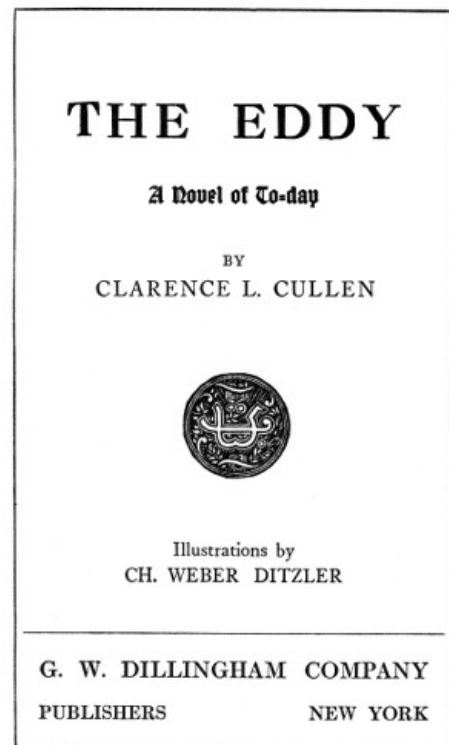
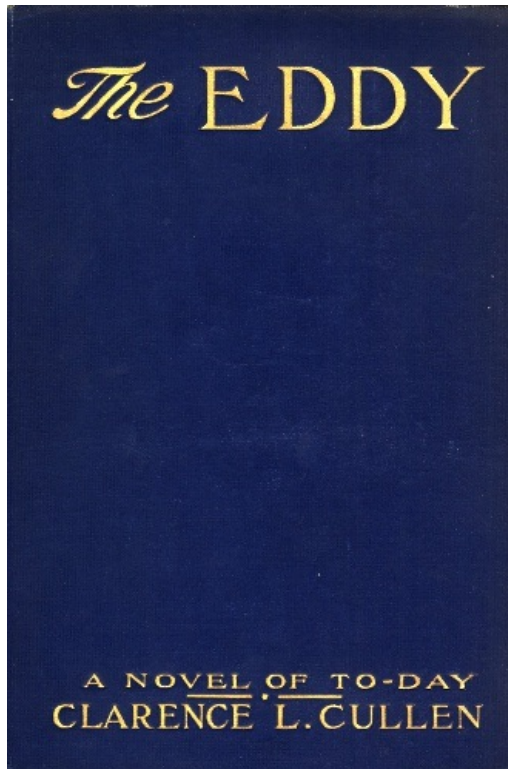
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THE EDDY

A Novel of Today

BY CLARENCE L. CULLEN

Illustrations by
CH. WEBER DITZLER

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The Eddy



LOUISE

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THE EDDY

CHAPTER I

"If only she were a boy!"

Mrs. Treharne almost moaned the words.

She tugged nervously at her absurdly diaphanous boudoir jacket, vainly attempting to fasten it with fluttering, uncontrolled fingers; and she shuddered, though her dressing-room was over-warm.

Heloise, who was doing her hair, juggled and then dropped a flaming red coronet braid upon the rug. The maid, a thin-lipped young woman with a jutting jaw and an implacable eye, pantomimed her annoyance. Before picking up the braid she glued the backs of her hands to her smoothly-lathed hips. Mrs. Treharne, in the glass, could see Heloise's drab-filmed grey-blue eyes darting sparks.

"I shall resume," croaked the maid in raucous French, "when Madame is through writhing and wriggling and squirming."

Laura Stedham—she was relaxing luxuriously in the depths of a chair that fitted her almost as perfectly as her gown—smiled a bit wickedly.

"Forgive me if I seem catty, Tony," said Laura in her assuaging contralto, "but it is such a delight to find that there is some one else who is bullied by her maid. Mine positively tyrannizes over me."

"Oh, everybody bullies me," said Mrs. Treharne, querulously, holding herself rigid in order not to again draw Heloise's wrath. "Everybody seems to find it a sort of diversion, a game, to browbeat and hector and bully-rag me."

"Surely I don't, afflicted one—do I?" Laura tacked a little rippling laugh to the question.

"You do worse, my dear—you laugh at me," plaintively replied the fading woman huddled before the glass. She was haggard as from a trouble that has been unsuccessfully slept upon, and her mouth—not yet made into a crimson bow through Heloise's deft artistry—was drawn with discontent. "Heaven on high, if only she were a boy!" she broke out petulantly again, after a little pause.

This time there was genuine enjoyment in Laura's laugh.

"Don't scowl, Antoinette—I know I am a beast for laughing," she said, abandoning her chair and lissomely crossing the room to glance at some new photographs on a mantel. "But, really, you say that so often that it sounds like the refrain to a topical song. 'If only she were a boy—If only she were a boy!'—don't you catch the rhythm of it? I wonder, Tony, how many times I have heard you give utterance to that phrase during the past few years—just?"

"You haven't heard me say it any oftener than I've meant it, my dear—be very sure of that," said Mrs. Treharne, without a symptom of a smile. Her sense of humor was embryonic, and Laura's laughter and words, obviously meant merely in mitigation, jarred upon her. "And a remark is none the less true for being repeated, is it?" she went on in her plaintive monotone. "I *do* wish Louise had been born a boy. You would, too, if you were in my place. You know you would."

"But, dear Tony, it is such a futile, such a dreadfully childish wish," said Laura, striving to erase the smile from her face. "It is like wishing for the fairy prince, or the magic carpet, or the end of the rainbow. Worry makes wrinkles, dear. That may sound bromidic, but it's true. Why worry yourself through all the years with wishing so impossible—I was going to say so insane—a wish? Not only that—forgive me for saying it, dear, won't you?—but it is rather a grisly wish, too; and so unfair to the girl, really. Don't you think—don't you know—that it is?"

"Don't scold, Laura—please," said Mrs. Treharne, almost in a whimper. "You don't know what a miserable mess I am in. You haven't given me time to tell you. Louise is coming home immediately."

"For the holidays, naturally," said Laura. "Why shouldn't the poor child come home for the holidays? It will be the first time she has had her holidays at home since she went away to school—nearly four years, I think—isn't it?"

"I hope you are not meaning that for a reproach," accused the haggard lady, now being corseted by the lusty-armed Heloise. "You are in a shocking humor today; and I did so depend upon you for advice and comfort, if not consolation, when I phoned you to come over."

"Oh, I am in a lark's humor," protested Laura, smiling as she rested a gloved hand upon one of the milky shoulders of her troubled friend. "But you puzzle me. Why should you make such a catastrophe of it, such a veritable cataclysm, because your pretty and agreeable and, as I recall her, quite lovable daughter announces that she is coming home for the holidays? Enlighten me, dear. I seem not to discern the point of your problem."

"Problem isn't the word for it!" repined the unhappy lady, upon whose nearly knee-length stays Heloise now was tugging like a sailor at a capstan. "Louise coolly announces—I had her letter

yesterday—that she is not returning to Miss Mayhew's school; that she is coming to remain with me for good."

"Well?" said Laura, murdering the smile that strove to break through her visible mask.

"Well?" wailed Mrs. Treharne. "Is that all you have to say—'well'? Can't you see how impossible, how utterly out of the question, how——"

"Her quitting school now, you mean?" said Laura. "Really, I think you should be pleased. Her announcement shows that Louise is a woman—a girl of nineteen who has spent nearly four years at a modern finishing school no longer is a young person, but a woman—that she is a woman with a sense of humor. It is very human, very indicative of the possession of the humorous sense, to tire of school. I did that, myself, a full year before I was through. All of the king's horses could not have dragged me back, either. I hated the thought of graduation day—the foolish, fluttery white frocks, the platitudes of visitors, the moisty weepiness of one's women relatives, the sophomoric speechifying of girls who were hoydens the day before and would be worse hoydens the day after, the showing off of one's petty, inconsequential 'accomplishments'—I loathed the thought of the whole fatuous performance. And so I packed and left a full year in advance of it, resolved not to be involuntarily drawn into the solemn extravaganza of 'being graduated.' That, no doubt, is Louise's idea. She is a girl with a merry heart. You should be glad of that, Antoinette."

Laura was simply sparring with the hope of getting her friend's mind off her problem. She knew very well the nature of the problem; none better. The idea of a girl just out of school being plumped into such an environment as that enveloping the Treharne household perhaps was even more unthinkable to Laura that it was to the girl's mother, a woman who had permitted her sensibilities to become grievously blunted with what she termed the "widening of her horizon." But Laura, not yet ready with advice to meet so ticklish a situation, sought, woman-like, to divert the point of the problem by seizing upon one of its quite minor ramifications. Of course it was not her fault that she failed.

"Laura," said Mrs. Treharne, dismissing her maid with a gesture and fumblingly assembling the materials on her dressing table wherewith to accomplish an unassisted facial make-up, "your occasional assumption of stupidity is the least becoming thing you do. Why fence with me? It is ridiculous, unfriendly, irritating." She daubed at her pale wispy eyebrows with a smeary pencil and added with a certain hardness: "You know perfectly well why I dread the thought of Louise coming here."

Laura, at bay, unready for a pronouncement, took another ditch of evasiveness.

"I wonder," she said in an intended tone of detachment, "if you are afraid she has become a bluestocking? Or maybe a frump? Or, worse still, what you call one of the anointed smugs? Such things—one or other of them, at any rate—are to be expected of girls just out of school, my dear. Louise will conquer her disqualification, if she have one. Her imagination will do that much for her. And of course she has imagination."

"She has eyes, too, no doubt," said Mrs. Treharne, drily. "And you know how prying, penetrating the eyes of a girl of nineteen are. You know still better how poorly this—this ménage of mine can stand such inspection; the snooping—wholly natural snooping, I grant you—of a daughter nearly a head taller than I am, whom, nevertheless, I scarcely know. Frankly, I don't know Louise at all. I should be properly ashamed to acknowledge that; possibly I am. Moreover, I believe I am a bit afraid of her."

Laura assumed a musing posture and thus had an excuse for remaining silent.

"Additionally," went on Mrs. Treharne, a little hoarsely, "a woman, in considering her daughter's welfare, must become a trifle smug herself, no matter how much she may despise smugness in its general use and application. What sort of a place is this as a home for Louise? I am speaking to you as an old friend. I am in a fiendish predicament. Of course you see that. And I can't see the first step of a way out of it. Can you?"

"For one thing," said Laura, mischievously and with eyes a-twinkle, "you might permanently disperse your zoo."

Mrs. Treharne laughed harshly.

"One must know somebody," she said, deftly applying the rouge rabbit's-foot. "One can't live in a cave. My own sort banished me. I am *declassée*. Shall I sit and twiddle my thumbs? At least the people of my 'zoo,' as you call it, are clever. You'll own that."

"They are freaks—impossible, buffoonish, baboonish freaks," replied Laura, more earnestly than she had yet spoken. "You know I am not finical; but if this raffish crew of yours are 'Bohemians,' as they declare themselves to be—which in itself is *banal* enough, isn't it?—then give me the sleek, smug inhabitants of Spotless Town!"

"You rave," said Mrs. Treharne, drearily. "Let my zoo-crew alone. We don't agree upon the point."

"I thought you had your queer people—your extraordinary Sunday evening parties—I came perilously near saying rough-houses, Tony—in mind in bemoaning Louise's return home," said Laura, yawning ever so slightly.

"Oh, I'd thought of that, of course," said Mrs. Treharne, artistically adding a sixteenth of an inch

of length to the corners of her eyes with the pencil. "But my raffish crew, as you call them, wouldn't harm her. She might even become used to them in time. She hasn't had time to form prejudices yet, it is to be hoped. You purposely hit all around the real mark. Louise is nineteen. And you know the uncanny side-lines of wisdom girls pick up at finishing schools nowadays. Since you maliciously force me to mention it point-blank, in Heaven's name what will this daughter of mine think of—of Mr. Judd?"

"Now we are at the heart of the matter," answered Laura. "Heart, did I say? Fancy 'Pudge' with a heart!" There was little mirth in her laugh.

"You must not call him that, even when you are alone with me, Laura," said Mrs. Treharne, petulantly. "I am in deadly fear that some time or other he will catch you calling him that. You know how mortally sensitive he is about his—his bulk."

"Well might he be," said Laura, drily enough. "Is there any particular reason why your daughter should have to meet Judd? Except very occasionally, I mean?"

"How can it be avoided?" asked Mrs. Treharne, helplessly. "Hasn't he the run of the house? You don't for an instant suppose that, even if I implored him, he would forego any of his—his privileges here?"

"I am not so imbecile as to suppose any such a thing," said Laura, with a certain asperity. "But the man might exhibit a bit of common decency. He knows that Louise is coming?"

"I haven't told him," said Mrs. Treharne, fluttering to her feet from the dressing table. "You will hook me, Laura? I don't want to call Heloise. She only pretends that she doesn't understand English, and she knows too much already. No, I haven't told him yet. He resents the idea of my having a daughter, you know. He will be here directly to take me out in the car. I shall tell him when we are going through the Park. Then nobody but the chauffeur and I will hear him growl. I know in advance every word that he will say," and the distraught woman looked wan even under her liberal rouge.

Laura impulsively placed an arm around her friend's shoulder.

"Tony," she said, gravely, "why don't you show the brute the door?"

"Because it is his own door—you know that," said Mrs. Treharne, her eyes a little misty.

"Then walk out of it," said Laura. "This isn't the right sort of thing. I don't pose as a saint. But I could not endure this. Come with me. Let Louise join you with me. You know how welcome you are. I have plenty—more than plenty. You shouldn't have permitted Judd to refuse to let you continue to receive the allowance George Treharne provided for Louise. That wasn't fair to yourself. It was more unfair to your daughter. You shouldn't have allowed her to get her education with Judd's money. She is bound to find it out. She would be no woman at all if that knowledge doesn't cut her to the quick. But this is beside the mark. I have plenty. She is a dear, sweet, honest girl, and she is entitled to her chance in the world. I am sure I don't need to tell you that. What chance has she in this house? The doors that are worth while are closed to you, my dear. You know I say that with no unkind intent. It is something you yourself acknowledge. The same doors would be closed to your daughter if she came here. She could and would do so much better with me. Neither you nor she would be dependent. We are too old friends for that. And I know George Treharne. He would renew the allowance that you permitted Judd to thrust back at him through yourself and his lawyer. Leave this place, this sort of thing, once and forever. I want you to—for your own sake and your daughter's."

Mrs. Treharne wept dismally, to the sad derangement of her elaborately-applied make-up. But she wept the tears of self-pity, than which there are none more pitiful. The reins of a great chance, for herself and her daughter, were in her hands. Perhaps it was the intensity of her perturbation that did not permit her to hold them. Very likely it was something else. But, at any rate, hold them she did not.

"You are a dear, Laura," she said, fighting back her tears for the sake of her make-up. "It was what I might have expected of you. Of all the friends I used to have, you are the only one who never has gone back on me. But you must see how impossible it all is. I am in over my head. So what would be the use?"

"You speak for yourself only, Antoinette," said Laura, a little coldly. "What of your daughter?"

"Oh, if only she were a boy!" the wretched woman harped again.

Laura Stedham removed her arm from her friend's shoulder and shrugged a bit impatiently.

"That refrain again?" she said, the warmth departing from her tone. "I must be going before I become vexed with you, Tony. Your own position would be quite the same in any case—if you had a son instead of a daughter, I mean. For my part, I fail to perceive any choice between being shamed in the eyes of a son or in the eyes of a daughter. True, a son would not have to tolerate so humiliating a situation. A son could, and unquestionably would, clap on his hat the moment he became aware of the state of things here, and stamp out, leaving it all behind him. A son could and would shift for himself. But a girl—a girl just out of school—can't do that. She is helpless. She is at the mercy of the situation you have made for her. I fear you are completely losing your moorings, Tony. When is Louise arriving?"

"Tonight," replied Mrs. Treharne, who had subsided into a sort of apathy of self-pity. "At nine something or other. I shall meet her at the station in the car."

Laura turned a quizzical, slitted pair of eyes upon her friend, now busy again with her tear-smudged make-up.

"Not in Judd's car, surely, Tony?" she said, in earnest expostulation. "Why do that? Why not let the girl in upon your—your tangled affairs a little more gradually? How could she help wondering at the extravagant, vulgar ornateness of Judd's car? For of course she knows perfectly well that your own finances are not equal to such a whale of a machine as that."

"It will not take her long to find out everything," said Mrs. Treharne, a little sullenly. "She need not be uncommonly observant to do that. And you remember how embarrassingly observant she was even as a child."

"Give her a chance to observe piecemeal, then," said Laura, laconically. "I shall be with you at the station. One of my poor accomplishments, you know, is the knack of ameliorating difficult situations. And I was always so fond of the child. I am stark curious to see how she has developed. She was a starchy Miss of fifteen when last I saw her. We'll fetch her home in a taxicab. That will be better. It is arranged, then?"

"Everything that you suggest is as good as arranged," Laura," replied Mrs. Treharne, with a wan smile. "Your gift of persuasion is irresistible—I wish I knew the secret of it. It is extremely good of you to want to meet the child. If I could only meet her with—with such clean hands as—well, as I should have!"

"Never mind—there'll be a way out of it," said Laura, cheerily. "I am off."

She grazed the adeptly-applied artificial bloom of the other woman's cheek with her lips.

As they stood side by side in the juxtaposition of a caress—they were friends from girlhood—the contrast between the two women was sufficiently striking. Laura Stedham, a woman of thirty-five, had the slender yet well-rounded structural sinuosities of a girl of twenty who passes all her days in the open air—minus the indubitable blowsiness which some open-air young women can't help but reveal to the dissecting eye. Unusually tall, she had the gliding grace of movement which so many women of uncommon stature lack. Even in the cluttered dressing room of her friend she made nothing of the obstacles that barred her path, but, walking always with a sort of nervous swiftness, passed around them to her point of destination—a mantel, a table, a hanging picture—with a threading ease of locomotion that made it seem oddly doubtful if she were dependent upon the ground at all for a base. There are tall women who, if they do not collide with stationary objects when they undertake a tour of a room, at least arouse the fear that they will infallibly do so. Laura possessed an eye for the measurement of distances, and the litheness perfectly to follow her measurement. Her complexion was that of a woman to whom a long tramp, even in the city, in the mist or in the blinding rain, was not a task, but a delight. Her hair, all her own, yet worn in the final perverse mood of exaggeration of the coiffure "artist," was of an incredible burnished black, in unusual contrast with her full, kindling, Celtic-grey eyes. A certain irregularity in the outline of her features—especially of her nose, which, far from being aquiline, was too short by the merest fraction—lent a certain piquancy to her expression, even when her face was in repose. She had the habit, growing rare in a world of social avoidances and white lies, of looking the person addressing her straight in the eye. It was not an impaling, disquieting gaze, but one that fairly demanded truthfulness and candor; a gaze unconsciously calculated to cause the liar to stutter in the manufacture of his lie.



LAURA, A WOMAN OF THIRTY-FIVE, HAD THE SLENDER YET WELL-ROUNDED STRUCTURAL SINUOSITIES OF A GIRL OF TWENTY.

Mrs. Treharne, four years older than Laura, had the somewhat hollow-eyed plumpness of an indoor woman who wars fiercely but hopelessly and unequally upon ever-threatening *embonpoint*. Her triumphs over the enemy never were better than drawn battles; she was compelled to devote at least three hours a day to her determined, almost hysterical warfare upon the natural process of accretion, solely that she might not gain; long before she had abandoned hope of achieving the fragility of outline she pined for. The nostrums she employed in this incessant conflict had made her fragile, however, in at least one respect: her health; besides imparting a certain greenish-yellow tint to her skin which made her make-up box almost as necessary a part of her equipment as the hands wherewith she applied the mitigating tints. Five years before she had been a fresh-skinned, clear-eyed, naturally pretty woman of a somewhat inconsequential type; but the necessity—the hideous duty, as she deemed it—of banting without cessation or intermission had left her merely her regular features upon which artificially to create the illusion of a youthfulness she was far from feeling. With the final touch added for an appearance in a company, she still looked dainty, certainly of impeccable grooming. But she had learned to be uneasy under the scrutiny of eyes that she felt to be unfriendly, and she had become exceptionally partial to veils. Her hair, originally a light, unaggressive red, had been "done over" into a sort of vivid, brittle "Titian." There were occasional reddish gleams in her slightly furtive, small eyes of hazel. She had a child's foot, and she was inordinately proud of her tiny, waxy, too-white hands. In a company she smiled continuously in order to display her teeth, which were perfectly assembled and of an almost porcelain whiteness. Mrs. Treharne was called a pretty woman even by those who perhaps entertained unexpressed misgivings as to how she might look at her rising hour.

After Laura had gone Mrs. Treharne tried, before her glass, the effect of a smile—somewhat frozen and quickly obliterated—upon her carefully studied and artfully executed make-up mask; then sighed drearily as she sank into a chair and began polishing her nails upon her palms.

"Of course Laura is right, as usual—it wouldn't help matters particularly if Louise were a boy," she mused with puckered brows. "A boy might be longer in finding out how affairs stood here; but when he did find out—what a storm, what heroics, what juvenile reproaches, what a stagey to-do there would be! Perhaps, after all, it is as well that Louise is—Louise. She can adapt herself to—to things as they are. She must. There's no other way. She can't have lost the tact she possessed as a child. I wish I knew her better, so that I could have some sort of an idea just what to expect from her. I hope she understands the good sense of closing one's eyes to things that can't be improved by looking at them. Perhaps I shall be lucky enough to marry her off quickly. That would be almost too easy a solution for me, with my vile luck, to expect."

She rang for Heloise to have her furs in readiness.

"It was thoroughly decent of Laura," she thought on, finger at lip, "to advise me to bolt all this and take refuge with her. But I haven't the nerve—that's the plain truth of it. How could I ask Treharne to renew the allowance? What a triumph it would be for him if I were to do that! He would be too Quixotic to view it as a triumph, but that wouldn't alleviate my humiliation in asking

him. And what would the three or four thousand a year be in comparison with—"

"The car is at the door, Madame," announced Heloise, appearing with the sables. Mrs. Treharne smiled at herself before the glass to smooth out the wrinkles of her musing, tripped lightly down the stairs, and was humming blithely when she nodded indulgently at the ponderous, shaggy-furred man who was waiting to help her into the huge, over-lavish, pulsing car.

"You take your time, don't you?" grumbled Judd, his breath vaporizing into broken clouds in the raw December air. "Does that monkey-chattering maid of yours sleep all the time, or has she a case on with the butler? I've been tooting here for ten minutes."

His tone was snarling, and his thin lips were drawn away from gnarled teeth. Judd was one of those physical anomalies, a man of Falstaffian girth with sharp, peaked, predatory features. He pulled off his fur cap to readjust it before stepping into the car, showing a head wholly bald except for crinkly wisps of mixed red and gray hair at the sides and back. There was a deep crease at the back of his neck where the scant hair left off, and his deep-set, red-rimmed little watery-blue eyes were alert and suspicious.

Mrs. Treharne laughed so carelessly that it almost seemed as if she deliberately sought to intensify his irritation.

"Still in your villanous humor?" she asked him, a taunt in her tone. "I believe this is one of the days—they grow rather frequent—when you should be allowed—required, I should say—to ride alone."

"Well, that's easy enough to do," grumbled Judd in a voice curiously high-pitched for so vast a man. "See here, perhaps you are conceited enough to think—"

Very deliberately, and still smiling, Mrs. Treharne rose to leave the car. Judd looked blankly nonplussed.

"Oh, stop this infernal nonsense, Tony," he said in a tone tinged with alarm. Then his ruddy face expanded into a grin behind which there seemed to be little mirth. "D'ye know, I believe you would be cat enough to step out, before we start, and—"

"No names, if you please," Mrs. Treharne interrupted, choppily. "Decidedly I shall leave the car if you feel that it is impossible for you to behave yourself like a human being. I have ceased to extract enjoyment from your growling humors."

It was a tone she might have taken in addressing a menial. Obviously, however, it was the tone required for the proper subjugation of Judd. He exuded a falsetto laugh and patted her hand, at the same time motioning the chauffeur to start.

"I don't complain of your hellish moods, do I, Tony?" he asked her, still chuckling unpleasantly. "In fact, I believe I rather like the feel of your claws. All the same, there may come a day when—"

"When I shall enjoy the sight of your back," calmly interrupted the apparently complaisant woman at his side. "Speed the day!"

Judd's face took on a half-chagrined, half-worried look. It generally did when Mrs. Treharne was operating upon him what she privately called her "system." This "system," in essence, consisted in her invariable habit of quarreling with him and reducing him to abjectness by more or less veiled threats of abandoning him to a lonesome fate whenever she had something to ask of him, or to tell him, that she knew quite well would arouse his surliness. It was a neatly-devised balancing method, and Mrs. Treharne as well understood the vital advantage of striking the first blow as she apprehended the extent of her power over him.

"I say, Tony," said Judd, patting her gloved hands again, "you wouldn't really cut and run just because—"

"Spare me your elephantine sentimentalities, please," she put in, a little less indifferently. "You were never ordained for that sort of thing. Anyhow, I would like a sane word or two with you. I've something to tell you."

"It's money, of course," said Judd, sulkily, leaving off patting her hands with ludicrous suddenness. "More damned extravagance, eh?"

"No, it's neither money nor extravagance, beautifully as those two words trot in tandem," she said, airily, yet with a new soothing note in her tone. "It is this: Louise is coming home. At once. Tonight."

"The devil she is!" blurted Judd. "What for? Who sent for her? How long is she going to stay? What's it all about?"

"One question at a time, please," Mrs. Treharne replied, looking indifferently out toward the bleak river as they shot by Claremont. It was a palpably assumed air of indifference; but Judd, unskilled at penetrating feminine subtlety, did not discern the nervousness underlying her careless manner. "My daughter is coming home because she wants to. Nobody sent for her. She is not going back to school. She announces that in her letter to me; and she is old enough to know her mind and to be entitled to freedom of action. She is remaining permanently with me."

She had expected him to storm upon hearing the news in full. Judd, however, was an individual

who owed a considerable part of his immense success as a man of affairs to his studied and carefully-elaborated habit of never doing the obvious.

He leaned back in the car and half-screened his turkey-like eyes with their small, veinous lids. Mrs. Treharne, surprised at his silence, went on hastily:

"I am wretchedly disturbed over it. I know that I have no fit home to offer her. I know that I have completely undermined her chance in life. But what can I do? She can't live alone. And she merely brings the difficulty to a head by coming now. She must come home some time, of course. The child has not spent her holidays or her summer vacations with me for four years. Always she has been pushed about among school friends, who, glad as they and their people may have been to have her, surely must have wondered why she did not come home."

Judd fluttered his eyelids and leaned forward in his seat.

"I understand perfectly, of course," he said with a sort of leer. "I understand, you understand, we understand, they understand, everybody understands. Then what are you making such a devil of a rumpus about it for?"

"Well," said Mrs. Treharne, making the mistake, in dealing with Judd, of falling into a slightly apologetic tone, "I thought that perhaps you might——"

"Wait a minute, Antoinette," interrupted Judd with suave brutality, leaning back again among the cushions and once more half-closing his eyes. "It doesn't matter a damn what I think. I can stand it if you can. She isn't my daughter, you know. She's your daughter. I suppose she has been taught to mind her own business? Very well. I can stand the situation if you can."

The slur cut like a rattan, as Judd, perceiving a rare advantage, thoroughly intended that it should. He made it worse by patting her hands as he spoke. She hated him with an almost virtuous intensity as he uttered the sneer. But she said no more about her daughter's impending arrival during the remainder of the ride.

CHAPTER II

The chair car was well filled when Louise somewhat misty-eyed from parting with the doleful group of school intimates who convoyed her to the little station, walked down the aisle just as the train began to move. Not in the least sorry because she was finally leaving school, she was affected by the glumness of the girls who had insisted upon bidding her goodbye at the train; but she had not actually wept at any stage of the parting. Perhaps the tear-reddened eyes and noses of her school friends had slightly touched her risibles; for her by no means latent sense of humor invariably struggled to the surface when she found herself figuring in anything of the nature of a "scene." She was not lacking in what the iron-jowled dowagers call "becoming sensibilities;" but she was habitually self-contained, and tears were unusual with her. Nevertheless, she found difficulty in properly discerning objects, even at close range, as she searched for her place; and it was due to her filmed vision that she took a chair that did not correspond to the number on her Pullman ticket.

Women as well as men pivoted about in their chairs for a second glance at Louise. Her unusual height was emphasized by the loose-fitting fur-lined cloth coat which fell straight from her shoulders to her skirt's hem. When she removed the coat her simple one-piece gown of blue cloth caused cogitating men in surrounding chairs to marvel as to how she had ever contrived to get into it, and, worse, how she would possibly manage to get out of it. The guimpe of the dress was of a creamy embroidery that dissolved bafflingly into the whiteness of her neck.

Louise might have reminded an imaginative traveler, had there been such in the car, of a freshly-blown, firm-petalled chrysanthemum. There are women in whom you first discern an utter, convincing wholesomeness; later you become aware of their beauty. Their wholesomeness, you think upon your first comprehensive glance, is like that of an early vernal breeze, of dew upon clean grass; then the contributing elements of their beauty emerge upon your consciousness as through a succession of lifted veils. Louise Treharne was of this type. Unusually tall, she had none of the raw-boned angularities of the over-trained young woman who makes a fad of gymnasium or out-of-doors activities and who thoughtlessly sacrifices the beauty of contour on the profitless altar of over-athleticism. Slender, yet well rounded, the fine amplitude of her proportions caused her to look several years older than her age. Her face contributed to this effect. It was a face such as the imaginary imaginative traveller might vaguely have associated with the faces of women stamped upon Roman coins. There is a sort of creamy, vivid pallor that, equally with ruddiness, denotes perfect health and vigor. This was Louise's; and the uncommon regularity of her features was tempered and softened by varying phases of expression that spoke of an habitual serenity and a searching common sense. Her hair, of the darkest shade of lustrous auburn, waved back loosely and often a bit rebelliously to the great knotted coil in which it was caught at the back of her finely-lathed head. Her eyes, the corners of which had an almost indistinguishable slant that only became agreeably noticeable when she smiled, were wide and full, and of so dark a brown that, at night or in shadowed rooms, they were often supposed to be black.

She had barely settled herself, chin in palm, to gaze out of the window at the blurred landscape of ice-crusted snow, before she became somewhat confusedly conscious of a loomful figure standing patiently in the aisle beside her. When she suddenly turned her head and surveyed him with calm, questioning eyes, he pulled off his cap of plaid a bit awkwardly and smiled. She mentally observed that his mouth was a trifle over-large; but his smile, for all of that, she thought, was the smile of a man. With the woman's mystifying ability mentally to absorb innumerable details at a mere glance, she noticed (without in the least seeming to notice) that he was of unusual stature and of the type called by women, in their between-themselves appraisals, "delightfully scrubbed-looking;" that he was perhaps a little above thirty; that he had a closely-shaven rugged jaw and somewhat jutting chin, huge, well-cared-for hands, rather closely-cropped brown hair slightly greying at the sides, candid grey eyes with tiny lines of humor and experience running away from their corners. She noticed, too, that he was not wearing gloves, which was satisfying. All of the other men in the over-warm car were wearing their heavy cold-weather gloves, and she was slightly contemptuous of this as an unmasculine affectation. Finally, in the same single glance, she perceived his visible embarrassment....

"Pray don't disturb yourself," he said, fumbling his cap with both hands. ("Why don't all men talk basso?" thought Louise.) "I can reach it without your moving at all, if you will permit me. My bag, you know. There are some papers in it that I want to go over, and——"

He stopped dead and looked quite wretched when Louise came to her feet.

"I am in your chair," she said, as he stooped to pick up a bag that, she now noticed for the first time, was wedged by the seat she had unwittingly taken. She was about to remove her coat to the back of the chair in front—her rightful place, as she quickly remembered when she saw the number on the panel—when he put out a determinedly detaining hand.

"Don't make me feel such a disgraceful nuisance, I beg of you," he said with an earnestness that was out of keeping with his twinkling eyes. "One chair is as good as another—better, in fact, when one already has possession of it. This bag is my only gear. You'll keep the seat, won't you? That's immensely kind of you," as Louise resumed the chair. "I wouldn't have had you move for ——"

"Of course," she interrupted him with a quietly frank laugh, "I hadn't the slightest intention of moving. It is more than good of you to suppose that I meant to be so agreeable."

"That," he pronounced, again with his liberal smile, "is probably a neat, quickly-conceived way of letting me down easily, for which I am nevertheless grateful;" and, bowing, he took the chair in front of her, dug into his bag and quickly became immersed in a batch of formidable looking documents. Louise, again leaning back in her chair, decided that the rear of his head was decidedly shapely.

The excessive warmth of the car was making her sleepy, and she closed her eyes and surrendered herself to dozing reflections. She was dubious as to the reception her mother would give her. She had not heard from her mother since writing the letter in which she had calmly announced, as something settled and therefore not open to debate, that she was through with school and would not return to Miss Mayhew's after the holidays. Laura had been only partly right as to Louise's reason for quitting school. Louise, it was true, was glad enough to escape the nightmare of "commencement exercises" by leaving half a year in advance of her graduation. But she had a far deeper reason for quitting the school without consultation with her mother. She wanted to be at home; any sort of a home. She had no very pleasurable recollections of the places—there had been many of them, and they had not been homes—in which she had lived with her mother before being sent to the finishing school in central New York. Her young girlhood had been a period of aimless drifting, at seashore and mountain resorts in summer, and in tiny but by no means snug apartments in New York in the winter; her mother's restlessness and her frequently expressed dislike of "smug domesticity" had combined against her ever establishing anything even approximating a genuine home for herself and her daughter. Louise only vaguely remembered her father; the separation, followed by a divorce, had taken place when she was only nine years old. At fifteen she had been trundled off to the up-State finishing school; and the school had been the only home she had known for close upon four years. Her mother had visited her twice a year, taking her to the seaside for a week or so during the summer vacation and to Lakewood for a brief stay during the holidays. Her mother had always been provided with some sort of an excuse for not taking Louise to her home—Louise knew that she must have some sort of a home—in New York. The place was being overhauled, guests had unexpectedly swooped upon her, she was about to start upon a journey; Louise had listened, mystified, so often to these reasons her mother gave for not having her daughter with her in the city at times when nearly all the other girls were leaving the school for home visits that she at length came to believe that her mother was treating her with somewhat humiliating disingenuousness. This feeling, however, aroused less resentment in the girl than it did a feeling of distress; she could not avoid, as she grew older, the conviction that she was being neglected. The feeling became intensified when, year after year, she was shunted, as she considered, on visits to the homes of her schoolgirl friends. It was natural enough, when she observed how cherished the other girls were in their homes, how the arms of strong affection constantly were thrown around them, that she should compare her own thrust-aside state with theirs and that she should develop the intense longing of a normal, affectionate young woman for similar love and protection.

She had no sense of resentment against her mother; it was rather a feeling of regret that the curious aloofness between them, which she had no possible way of understanding, had ever

risen. She hoped that perhaps, after all, her mother might really need her as sorely as she felt that she herself needed a mother and a home. She was returning to her mother with an open mind; no longer a child to be shunted and evaded, but a woman to be treated with frankness. There were some points in connection with her mother's affairs that she did not understand but as to which she had no undue curiosity. But she was intensely glad to be at least on her way home—on her way to her mother, at any rate—for good and all; and she formed plans for drawing nearer to her mother, wistfully hoping that the plans would have the fruition she longed for.

Louise's reflections gradually, with the purring movement of the train, became merged into dreams. She awoke with a start when the train came to a grinding stop at a station. She began cutting the pages of a magazine when, glancing up, she saw the man with whom she had held the little colloquy a while before striding down the aisle of the car. In his hand was an unopened telegram. She noticed that he was looking at her as he approached her seat, and that he was knitting his brow in a puzzled, serious sort of way.

He stopped when he came to her chair and held out the telegram.

"The boy paged the dining car, where I happened to be," he said to her, "and, thinking that you might still be asleep, I took the liberty of signing for your telegram."

The telegram was addressed to "Miss Louise Treharne." It was from one of Louise's girl friends at the school, telling her that a piece of hand-baggage that Louise had absent-mindedly left at the station was being forwarded.

Louise scarcely glanced at the contents of the telegram, so great was her astonishment over its method of reaching her.

"You grant, of course, that I have reason to be puzzled," she said to him, unconstrainedly but entirely in earnest. She noticed that he was far from being unconstrained, and that a certain seriousness sat upon his strong features which she had not before observed. "It is plain that you knew this telegram was for me."

"Otherwise, of course," he replied, a little huskily, "I should not have presumed to sign for it. I should not have signed for it in any case had I not supposed you to be asleep. I feared, you see, that you might miss it."

"But you do not in the least appease my curiosity," said Louise, smiling somewhat nervously. "If you knew me—as it seems of course you do—I cannot understand why you did not reveal yourself when we had our little conversation a while ago."

"But I did not know—I should say I did not recall you then," he said, plainly flustered.

"You only add to the mystery," said Louise. "You will enlighten me, of course?"

He whirled his chair about so that, sitting back on the arm of it, he could face her.

"It is simple enough," he explained, with a hesitancy which Louise did not fail to note. "When the lad with the telegram came through the dining car, calling out your name, I could not fail, with that startling reminder, to remember——" He broke off as if reluctant to proceed.

"Yes?" put in Louise, a bit proddingly.

"Well, I could not fail to remember your father's daughter," he said in a low tone, obviously striving to regain some ease of manner.

"You know my father?" said Louise, her sense of the mystery of it all increasing rather than abating.

"Yes," he replied, still struggling, as Louise could see, to conquer a trouble that was visible on his features. "I am your father's attorney. I know your mother quite well, too. But this is the first time I have seen you since you were a little girl in pigtails and highly-starched skirts." He strove to make his laugh sound natural and easy, but it was a failure. Some worry, as to the nature of which Louise could of course not even guess, was in his voice as well as on his face.

Louise impulsively held out her hand.

"The mystery is cleared," she said, brightly, "and it is delightful to meet so old a friend, no matter how oddly. Won't you sit down and tell me all about my father and my mother and myself and yourself and—and everybody? Or is it permissible for one to cross-examine so solemn and cautious a person as an attorney?"

He sat down in the chair facing hers and studied, constrainedly, the pattern of the cap which he held out before him. Then he glanced at his watch.

"I am leaving the train at Peekskill," he said, "so there is not much time. You are to be home for the holidays?"

"For the holidays and for all time," she replied with a certain eagerness. "You have visited my mother's home? Because, you know, I never have." She had not meant to say that so baldly, and she was sorry for the slip as soon as the words were out. "It is on Riverside Drive. Therefore it must be lovely; the view, at any rate. It is lovely, isn't it?"

He deliberately evaded the question.

"You are not returning to school at all?" he pointedly counter-questioned her instead. "Does your mother know this? I hope I don't seem inquisitive. But I am really interested in knowing."

"You trap me into a confession," replied Louise, smiling. "I simply announced to my mother that I was through with school, and here I am on my way home. I am hoping that she will not be excessively angry with me. Do you think she will be?"

Louise was finding him decidedly difficult, in spite of her efforts to put him at his ease. He became so immersed in cogitations which Louise could see were of the troubled sort that he seemed scarcely to listen to what she was saying.

"You have not answered my question, you know, Mr.—Mr.—you see I do not even know your name," said Louise, after a pause, pretending to be aggrieved.

"Oh, pardon the rudeness, won't you?" he said, hastily. "Blythe is my name—John Blythe. And forgive me for not having caught your question, Miss Treharne. You don't mind asking it again?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said Louise, appeased, but still curious as to the cause of the perturbation he had exhibited ever since he had brought her the telegram, and which had become more pronounced since she had told him that she was on her way to her mother's home to remain there. She had not failed to notice his quite manifest unwillingness to speak of her mother. Not of a prying nature, she concluded, without framing the thought in words, that, if he had a reason for that unwillingness, it was decidedly his privilege to keep the reason to himself. But her curiosity as to her father was not so easily repressed. She had not heard him spoken of—her mother forbade the subject—for many years, nor had he ever communicated with her directly; but her childish recollections of him were very sweet. She could not resist the temptation to speak of him to this newly-revealed friend. Why should she not, she thought, since he seemed to be so well acquainted with her parents—and was her father's attorney besides?

"Mr. Blythe," she found herself saying in a tone of unusual hesitation for her, a young woman of perfect frankness, "I feel that I may ask you about my father, seeing that you know—well, everything concerning him and my mother and—myself. It has been so many, many years since I have even heard him mentioned. Where is he? When did you see him last?"

"He lives in Hawaii, Miss Treharne—I saw him in Honolulu a few years ago," replied Blythe, promptly enough.

Louise pondered. There was nothing specific she wanted to ask about her father. But she considered that Blythe had not told her very much.

"Is he—well, nice?" she asked him.

Blythe, disturbed as he was, could not help but smile at the naïve question. But he sobered before he replied.

"He is almost, if not quite, the finest man I ever knew," he said. "I hope to be allowed to tell you all about him some time. I shall be writing to him presently. Tut! Here is Peekskill. I am dropping off here for a few hours," and he thrust his arms into his overcoat.

"You will send my love to my father in your letter?" said Louise, her eyes slightly filmed, touching him upon the sleeve. He looked gravely down upon her; her words touched him keenly.

"I am glad you have asked me to do that, Miss Treharne," he said. "And he will be more than glad—depend upon that. Goodbye—not for very long, I hope. I am overjoyed to have come upon you again—especially at this time," and he took her two hands in his huge palms for an instant and was gone.

"'Especially at this time'—I wonder what he meant by that?" thought Louise. He waved at her as he passed beneath her car window. She was conscious that his smile in doing so was slightly forced; an instant before he caught sight of her through the window she had noticed that his face was clouded with worry.

An hour later Louise was weaving her way through the rushing, holiday-chattering crowd toward the exit gate at the Grand Central station. Peering toward the gate, and able, with her unusual height, to see over the heads of the hurrying women and most of the men, she espied her mother, looking somewhat pettily stodgy beside the stately Laura, gazing rather wearily through the iron lattice. "I think I see myself being sent to bed without any supper," whimsically thought Louise, considering, as she drew nearer, her mother's bored expression. Louise was glad Laura was with her mother; when a mere growing girl she had become gratefully familiar with Laura's self-styled "ameliorating knack." She had become very fond of her mother's handsome, superbly-capricious but sunny-natured friend before being packed off to school; and now her eyes became slightly blurred at the thought that Laura had remembered her and had thought enough of her to be with her mother at her home-coming.

"Here is our blossomy, bronze-haired Boadicea!" Louise heard Laura say as she was taken into the older woman's arms and heartily kissed. Then Laura thrust her away with assumed annoyance. "But, minx, you are taller than I am; a full inch, maybe two, taller! How do you ever expect me to forgive you that, child?" and she smiled, drawing Louise toward her again, and

hugged her once more.

Louise's mother brushed the girl's cheek with her lips, her daughter bending toward her.

"You *are* grotesquely tall, aren't you, dear?" said Mrs. Treharne, not very good-naturedly. Her petulance over Louise's return was by no means allayed; and her masseuse had told her that evening that she had gained two pounds in a week! "You will have to get clothes that will reduce your shocking stature." Then, swept by a momentary compunction, "You are well, dear? You are looking excessively well."

Louise was not hurt by the tone of her mother's greeting. She was well acquainted with her parent's irritableness, and even more familiar with her indurated indifference. The main thing was that she was back with her mother, and with a chance to strive for a better understanding.

"But aren't you a mite thinner, mother?" Louise asked, thoroughly meaning it; for there wasn't an ounce of sycophancy in Louise's make-up, and she noticed her mother's hollowness of eye and generally distraught air and so concluded that she was losing in weight.

Mrs. Treharne flared instantly.

"You are not to make game of me, my dear, whatever else you do," she said, icily, to her astonished daughter. Laura laughed outright and caught Louise's arm in her own as they started through the station.

"Don't be absurd, Antoinette—the dear is not making game of you, as you call it," said Laura. "You know she is incapable of that."

"But I am all at sea," said Louise, still mystified over her mother's inexplicable outbreak. "What is it? What did I say that was wrong?"

Her mother looked at her and saw that the girl was wholly innocent of the sarcasm she had hastily attributed to her.

"You know very well, Louise," she said, in a tone meant to be appeasing, "that I am hideously, scandalously, shockingly fat; and you cannot expect me to be cheerful when you begin to taunt me with it before you have had more than one glance at me."

"But you are anything but stout, mother dear, and I really meant what I said," put in Louise. "Why, it perfectly stuns me to think you could suppose that I——"

"Tut-tut—can't we find something more engaging to talk about than what the weighing scales do or do not tell us?" broke in Laura, gaily. "Antoinette, dear, won't you see if you can attract that taxicab man's attention?"

When Mrs. Treharne walked over to the curb to summon the chauffeur of the taxicab Laura seized the moment to say to Louise in a low tone.

"Some things have occurred to disturb your mother, dear; so don't mind if she seems a bit *difficile* tonight, will you? She is a little annoyed over your intention not to return to the school; but I shall help you out there. I am going home with you now for a little while. You'll depend upon your old friend Laura?"

Louise, watching her mother, furtively pressed Laura's hand.

"You know how I always loved you as a little girl?" she said simply. Laura's eyes became suddenly suffused with tears. She knew the girl's need of affection; and she vowed in her heart, then and there, crowding back the tears when she saw Mrs. Treharne beckoning to them, that she would stand in the place of the girl's mother if the time ever came—and she more than dimly apprehended that come it would—when such a thing need be.

Laura forced the conversation and strove to give to it a note of gayety as the taxicab sped through the icy streets. Once, in addressing her, Louise called her "Mrs. Stedham." Instantly Laura assumed a mighty pretence of annoyed hostility.

"Mrs. Hoity-Toity, child," she said, severely, to Louise. "You are not supposing, I hope, that I shall permit a woman a full two inches taller than I am to call me any such an outlandish name as 'Mrs. Stedham'? Great heaven, am I not old enough as it is? I am Laura to you, dear; flatter me at least, by making me believe that you consider me young enough to be called by my christened name; the aged have so few compensations, you know," and Louise, not without initial difficulty, however—for Laura had always been a woman to her—called her Laura thenceforth and was pleased to imagine that the elder woman was her "big, grown-up" sister.

On the ride to the Riverside Drive house Louise, suddenly remembering, mentioned Blythe. She described the incident through which he had made himself known to her, but forbore, out of a certain diffidence which she always felt in her mother's presence, saying anything about Blythe's allusions to her father. She omitted that part altogether.

"How extraordinary!" commented Laura. "But John Blythe's practice is always sending him prowling about the country on trains. Everybody who knows about such things tells me what an enormously important personage he is becoming in the dry-as-dust legal world. I am sure he does astonishingly well with my hideously complicated affairs—you know he is my legal man, Louise. Isn't it odd that you should have met him in such a way? Didn't you find him rather—well,

distingué, we'll say, Louise?"

"I thought him very fine and——" Louise strove for a word haltingly.

"And with an air about him—of course you did, my dear; everybody does," Laura aided her. "If he wasn't such a perfectly wrong-headed, wrapped-up-in-the-law sort of a person he would have fallen in love with me long ago, even if I am old enough to be his grandmother; he is thirty-two, I believe, and I am bordering upon thirty-six; but he barely notices me in that way," with an acute emphasis on the "that," "though we are no end of first-rate friends; pals, I was going to say; for I've known him ever since——"

Laura came to a sudden stop. She had been upon the brink of saying "ever since Blythe had helped her to get her divorce from Rodney Stedham;" but she recollected in time that that was not exactly the sort of a chronological milestone that should be reverted to in the presence of a girl just that day out of school.

"Louise, did you tell Mr. Blythe that you were to remain with me—permanently?" asked Mrs. Treharne, constrainedly, suddenly joining in the conversation.

Louise reflected a moment before replying.

"Why, yes, mother, I did; he asked me about it, I recall now," she said.

"Did he have any comment to make?" asked her mother in a reduced tone.

"Why, no, dear," said Louise. "In fact, he appeared to be considerably worried about something, and so——" Louise felt herself being furtively prodded by Laura, and she left off suddenly.

Opportunely, the taxicab drew up in front of an ornate house on the Drive.

"Do you live here, mother?" Louise inquired, innocently. "I wonder how I managed to form the impression that you were living in an apartment?"

Mrs. Treharne pretended not to have heard her. The door was silently opened by a man in livery. Laura was watching Louise keenly as the girl's eyes took in the splendor of the foyer and hall. The magnificence was of a Pittsburgesque sort, in which beauty is sacrificed to a mere overwhelming extravagance; but, for its extravagance alone, not less than for its astonishing ornateness, it had a sort of impressiveness.

"Why, how dazzling!" Louise could not refrain from commenting. "How delightfully different from what I expected! I am so glad that I am home—home!" She lingered lovingly upon the word.

It was a difficult moment for Laura. But she was prepared for it. In addition to the "ameliorating knack" she had a way of being ready for contingencies.

"Antoinette," she said, mainly to stop Louise, "I have one of my headaches coming on. Can't we have some tea in your rooms?"

"I was just about to suggest that," said Mrs. Treharne, drily, and presently the three women were in her sumptuous sitting room, overlooking the twinkling lights of the Hudson. A butler spread the cloth and brought a fowl and salad and jams, while Louise roamed about exclaiming over the beauty of the rooms, and Laura fought desperately against her inclination to brood.

Laura contributed whatever of merriness there was to the home-coming feast. Mrs. Treharne confined herself to occasional questions directed at Louise, and the girl saw that her mother was tired and out of sorts; she remembered what Laura had told her at the station of her mother's state of mind "over matters," and she made the allowances that she had been accustomed to make for her mother since her earliest years.

The three women were still at the table, beginning to make allusions to bed—Laura had summoned her car by 'phone, for it was close upon eleven—when a great-girthed man, in a sealskin coat that fell almost to his heels, an opera hat set rakishly on one side of his bald head, and his turkey-like eyes still more reddened with the libations that his lurching gait made still more obvious, lumbered into the room without the least attempt at knocking on the door.

"Hay-o, folks—having a little party?" said Judd, lurching toward the table. "Am I in on it?" and he plumped himself drunkenly into a chair.

Laura rose at the first sight of him. Mrs. Treharne kept her seat but gazed at him vitriolically. Louise looked at him quietly enough. She was intensely mystified, but quite willing to wait for any information as to the intrusion. No information, however, was forthcoming.

"Your mother will show you to your room, dear," said Laura, placing an arm around Louise's waist and guiding her to the door. Under her breath she said: "No questions, dear heart. He is an—an adviser of your mother. We are going to be great cronies, are we not?" She kissed Louise and went. Her mother conducted Louise to a sleeping room done in white and silver, and kissed the girl good night with a sort of belated rush of affection. But she said nothing to her in explanation of Judd.

Toward midnight John Blythe, after striding up and down his solitary bachelor apartment for two hours in lounging robe and slippers, went to the telephone in his study and called up Laura.

"Is that you, Laura?" he said, quietly, into the transmitter when she answered the call. "What

time tomorrow forenoon will you be fit to be seen?"

"By noon," Laura's voice came back to him quietly. "I know what you want to see me about, John."

"Do you? I doubt that."

"It is about Louise Treharne."

"I'll be there by noon. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

CHAPTER III

Heloise's intentional noisiness in rearranging the toilet articles on the dressing table aroused Louise. The brilliant sunlight of a sparkling winter morning was pouring into the room. Half-awake and the brightness of the room filtering through her still-closed eyelids, she was obsessed for an instant with the fear that, over-sleeping, she was late for the exercises attending the beginning of a day at Miss Mayhew's school. She smiled at the thought, in spite of a brooding, indefinable trouble that had burdened her sleep, when, with wide eyes, she quickly sensed the lavishness of the room and saw the invincibly trig Heloise moving about.

"Mademoiselle is awake at last?" said Heloise in French, a trace of irritation in her tone. "One considered that Mademoiselle contemplated sleeping until the end of time."

Louise disarmed her with a laugh.

"Perhaps I should have," she said, lightly, but on her guard with her French in the presence of so meticulous a critic, "had I not just this moment dreamt of coffee. Am I too late for breakfast?"

Of course Mademoiselle should have her coffee instantly, said the appeased Heloise, ringing. The maid mentally pronounced that Louise's finishing-school French was almost intelligible to one understanding that language.

Mrs. Treharne had sent Heloise to look after Louise until a maid should be obtained for her. Louise, sitting up in bed, her fresh, clear-colored face aureoled by her agreeably awry mass of bronzed hair, the nocturnal braids of which she already had begun to unplait, laughed again at the thought of being attended by a maid.

"I shall have to be trained for that," she said to the mollified Heloise. "I never had a maid. I doubt if I should know how to behave with a maid doing my hair. I think I should find myself tempted to do the maid's instead; especially if her hair were as pretty as yours."

Heloise was Louise's sworn, voluble, tooth-and-nail, right-or-wrong, everlasting friend from that moment. She 'phoned to the butler, demanding to know why Mademoiselle's coffee had not been sent, although she had only called for it three minutes before, and she buzzed about the tractable Louise, arranging her hair with expert fingers, cheerful and chirpy, nothing whatever like the austere, croaking Heloise who scowled so threateningly over the slightest unruliness of her actual mistress. Heloise was prepared to give an enthusiastic recommendation of Louise to the maid who should be engaged to attend her mistress's daughter. And she began already to be envious of Louise's unobtained maid.

When Heloise had finished with her Louise, inspecting herself in the glass with frank approval, decided that never before had she looked so astonishingly well at that hour of the morning. But, when the garrulous maid had gone, Louise, sipping her coffee, sat in the streaming sunlight of the bowed window, watching the sparkling ice floes drift down the bleak Hudson, and the trouble that had weighted her sleep returned upon her, slowly taking shape with her consciousness. She had been too tired the night before to engage in much reflection, before losing herself in sleep, upon the incidents—one incident particularly—of the previous night. Now she was face to face with the gravamen of her depression, with an alert morning mind to sift over its elements. It was characteristic of her that she did not seek to thrust aside her consciousness of conditions which she imperfectly understood. She understood them, however, sufficiently to grasp at least the essentials of the situation.

Louise, whose native shrewdness was tempered by an innate and unconquerable tendency to look upon the bright side of the world and of such of the world's people as she came into contact with, was far better acquainted with her mother than her mother was with her; which was natural enough, considering that she had the receptive mind of youth, and that her mother's major trait was a sort of all-inclusive indifference. Many things in connection with her mother's manner of life, her almost hysterical love of admiration, her restlessness and her habitual secretiveness with Louise during the girl's early girlhood years, had become all too plain to the daughter as she developed into womanhood at the finishing school. Perhaps it may be added that a twentieth century finishing school for young women commonly is an institution wherein all of the pupils' deductions are not made from their text books nor from the eminently safe premises laid down by their instructors. The young woman who has spent four years at such a school does not step through a nimbus of juvenile dreams when she enters into the world that is waiting for her. It is true that, when she takes her place in the uncloistered world, she has a great deal to unlearn; but

this is balanced by the indubitable fact she has not very much to learn. Those who expect her to be utterly surprised over the departures that she sees from the rules of the social game are merely wasting their surprise. It is mere futility to suppose that several hundreds of young women of the highly intelligent and eager type who attend exclusive schools of the so-termed finishing kind, thrust constantly upon each other for companionship and the comparison of notes, are going to occupy all of their leisure in discussing the return of Halley's comet, or the profounder meaning of Wagner, or even the relative starchiness of their hair ribbons.

Louise, participating in the whispered precocities of the school, had often caught herself on the defensive in her mother's behalf. To seek to brush away imputations that seemed to fit her mother's personality and way of life had become almost a habit with her.

The habit, however, was availing her little on this her first morning after leaving school in her mother's sumptuous home—"that is, if it is mother's home." She flushed when she found herself saying that. But the doubt propelled itself through her consciousness, and she resolutely refused to expel it, once it had found lodgment in her mind, merely because it caused her cheeks to burn. Her mother's favorite word, in contemptuously denominating people who lived in accordance with convention, was "smug;" Mrs. Treharne considered that she had pilloried, for the world's derision, persons to whom she had adverted as "smug." Of the smugness of the kind Mrs. Treharne meant when she employed the word, there was not an atom in Louise's composition. Her nature, her upbringing, were opposed to the thought of a narrow, restrained, buckram social rule.

But here was a situation—the investiture of almost garish splendor in which she found her mother living, considered in connection with subconscious doubts as to certain quite visible flaws in her mother's character which had been forming themselves in the girl's mind for years—here, indeed, was a situation with respect to which Louise's unquietude had no need of being based upon mere smugness.

The girl knew quite well that, up to the time of her going away to school at any rate, her mother's income had been a limited one—some three thousand a year voluntarily contributed by the father for his daughter's support and education. It had not been, in fact, her mother's income at all, but Louise's; and it had been voluntarily contributed by the father because, as he had been the plaintiff in the divorce suit, the decree had not required him to aid his detached wife or his daughter at all; the court had given him the custody of the child, and he had surrendered that custody to the mother out of sheer pity for her.

How, then, had her mother provided herself, on an income which, with a daughter to educate, called for frugality, if not positive scrimping, with such a sheerly extravagant setting?

And Judd! Louise flushed again when she remembered Judd. She did not know his name. She had never seen or even heard of him before. She only remembered him—and the thought caused her to draw her negligée more closely about her, for she experienced a sudden chill—as the girthy, red-eyed individual who, with the proprietary arrogance of an intoxicated man who seemed perfectly to know his position under that roof, had lurched into her mother's apartments on the previous night without the least attempt at announcing himself.

How would her mother explain these things? Would she, indeed, explain to her daughter at all? In any case, Louise formed the resolve not to question her mother. She possessed, what is unusual in woman, an instinctive appreciation of the rights of others, even when such rights are perversely altered to wrongs. She considered that her mother's affairs were her own, in so far as they did not involve herself, Louise Treharne, in any tacit copartnership; and as to this point she purposed ascertaining, before very long, to just what extent she had become or was expected to become involved. For the rest, she was conscious of a distinct sympathy for and a yearning toward her mother. In her reflections she gave her mother the benefit of every mitigating circumstance.

Turning from the window, Louise saw her mother standing before the dresser glass studying her haggard morning face, now lacking all of the sorely-required aids to the merely pretty regularity of her features, with a head-shaking lugubriousness that might have had its comic appeal to an unconcerned onlooker. Louise, however, was scarcely in a mood of mirth.

"I knocked, my dear, but you were too much absorbed," said Mrs. Treharne, offering her daughter her cheek. "You were in a veritable trance. Did you get enough sleep, child? Was Heloise in a scolding humor? She makes my life a misery to me with her tongue. What beautiful hair you have! And what a perfect skin! A powder puff would mar that wonderful pallor. Yet you are not too white. It becomes you, with your hair. Appreciate these things while you have them, dear; look at your mother, a hag, a witch, at thirty-nine! But, then, you will keep your looks longer than I; you pattern after the women of your—"

She came perilously close to saying "your father's family," but adroitly turned the phrase when she caught herself in time. Louise, putting on a cheerful mask, replied to her mother's trivialities and devised some of her own. Her mother had not lost her banting-killed bloom when Louise had last seen her at such an hour in the morning; and the girl was inwardly pained to note how all but the mere vestiges of her remembered prettiness had disappeared. Mrs. Treharne caught her looking at her with a certain scrutinizing reflectiveness, and she broke out petulantly:

"Don't pick me apart with your eyes in that way, Louise! I know that I am hideous, but for heaven's sake don't remind me of it with your criticizing, transfixing gazes!"

She was of the increasing type of women who, long after they have the natural right to expect adulation on account of their looks, still hate to surrender. Louise quickly perceived this and provided unguents for her mother's sensitiveness.

They chatted upon little matters, Mrs. Treharne so ill at ease (yet striving to hide her restlessness) that she found it impossible to sit still for more than a minute; she fluttered incessantly about the room, her wonderful negligée of embroidered turquoise sailing after her like the outspread wings of a moth. After many pantheress-like rounds of the room, during which Louise somehow felt her old diffidence in her mother's presence returning upon her, Mrs. Treharne, after her evident casting about for an opening, stopped before Louise and pinched her cheek between dry fingers.

"At any rate, my dear," she said with a trace of her old amiability and animation, "you are not a frump or a bluestocking! There was a time when I had two fears: that you would not grow up pretty and that you would become bookish. And here I find myself towered over by a young princess, and you don't talk in the least like a girl with crazy notions of keeping up her inane school studies." Then, after a slight pause: "Are you religious, my dear, or—er—well, broad-minded?"

Louise smothered her mounting laugh, for fear of offending her mother in her mood of amiability; but her smile was eloquent enough.

"Is there any incompatibility between those two states of mind, mother?" she asked.

"Don't dissect my words, child; you quite understand what I mean," said the mother, with a slight reversion to peevishness. "Your father, you know, was—no doubt still is—shockingly narrow; he hadn't the slightest conception of the broad, big view; he belonged in this respect, I think, in the Middle Ages; and I have been tortured by the fear that you might—might—"

She hesitated. She had not meant to mention Louise's father, much less to speak of him even in mild derogation; and she suddenly recalled how, years before, there had been a tacit agreement between them that Louise's father was not to be mentioned. The agreement had been entered into after an occasion when Louise, then a child of eleven, with the memory of her vanished father still very keen in her mind, had rushed from the room, in blinding tears, upon hearing her mother speak of him in terms of dispraise.

"I did not have much time at school for self-analysis, mother," said Louise, coming to her mother's aid. "I suppose I am normal and neutral enough. I am not conscious of any particular leaning." She flushed, swept by a sudden sense of the difficulty, the incongruity, of such a conversation with her mother amid such surroundings. "Mother," she resumed, hastily, "I am so keen to see New York again that I am hardly capable of thinking of anything else just now. Are we to go out?"

"The car is yours when you wish it, Louise," said Mrs. Treharne, absently. "I rarely go out until late in the afternoon."

"The car?" said Louise. "You have a car, then?"

Her mother glanced at her sharply. It was sufficiently obvious that she was on the lookout for symptoms of inquisitiveness on Louise's part; though Louise had not meant her question to be in the least inquisitive.

"I have the use of a car," said Mrs. Treharne, a little frigidly. "It belongs to Mr. Judd."

Instinctively Louise felt that "Mr. Judd" was the sealskinned Falstaff whose unceremonious appearance the night before had startled her. But she remained silent. Nothing could have induced her to ask her mother about Mr. Judd. Her mother did not fail to notice her silence, which of course put her on the defensive.

"Mr. Judd," she said, "is—a—" she hesitated painfully—"my business adviser. He has been very good and kind in making some investments in—in mining stocks for me; investments that have proved very profitable. He is alert in my interest. It was Mr. Judd, my dear, whom you saw last night. He was not quite himself, I fear, or he would not have made his appearance as he did. He has helped me so much that of course it would be ungrateful of me not to permit him the run of the place." She rambled on, as persons will who feel themselves to be on the defensive. "In fact, he—he—But of course, if you have formed a prejudice against him on account of last night, there will be no occasion for you to meet him except occasionally."

Louise caught the hollowness, the evasiveness, of the explanation. Not one word of it had rung true. Louise had never felt sorrier for her mother than she did at that moment. She noticed a certain hunted expression in her mother's face, and it cut her to the quick. She placed a long, finely-chiselled arm, from which the sleeve of the negligée had slipped back to the shoulder, around her mother's neck.

"But I haven't the least use for a car, dearie," she said. It was not with deliberation that she ignored altogether what her mother had been saying as to Judd; it was simply that she could not bring herself to offer any comment on that subject. "I am a walker; every day at Miss Mayhew's I did ten miles—even in rain and snow, and it is clouding for snow now, I think. You will not mind my going out for a long walk? I am wild for air and exercise."

Mrs. Treharne was grateful to the girl for turning it off in that way even if, by so doing, Louise indicated that she was of more than one mind with respect to what had been told her regarding Judd. And Mrs. Treharne, careless and indifferent as she was, could not visualize her daughter in the gigantic yellow-bodied Judd car without being swept by a feeling that was distinctly to her credit.

Laura Stedham, over her cocoa, was weaving with careless rapidity through her morning mail when John Blythe arrived shortly before noon. Laura's apartment overlooked the west side of the Park. Its dominant color scheme now was based upon a robin's egg blue; but there was a jest among Laura's friends that they never had seen her apartment look the same on two visits running; they declared that every time Laura left the city for as long a period as a fortnight, she left orders with her decorator to have her apartment completely done over so that even she herself quite failed to recognize it when she returned.

Blythe, throwing his snow-sprinkled stormcoat over the extended arm of Laura's brisk maid, strolled over to a window and watched the still, unflurried flakes sift through the bare branches of the Park trees. His hands were thrust deep into his pockets and his eyes were so unusually meditative that Laura, used to his absorption as she was, laughed quietly as she turned from her escritoire.

"Yes, John, it is snowing," she said, thrusting away a heap of still-unopened letters.

Blythe turned to her with a twinkling look of inquiry.

"I thought perhaps you might not have noticed it," chaffed Laura, "seeing that you were looking right at it. You require an excessive amount of forgiveness from your friends. I believe you have not even seen me yet, although I've employed a good hour that I might have spent in bed in devising additional fascinations in anticipation of your coming."

"Meaning, for one thing, I suppose," said Blythe with rather an absorbed smile, "that—that—"

"Don't you dare call it a kimono," interrupted Laura. "It's a mandarin's coat—a part of the Peking loot. Of course you are crazy over it?"

It was a magnificent pale blue, ermine-padded garment, with a dragon of heavy gold embroidery extending from nape to hem down the loose back.

Blythe studied it for a moment and then glanced significantly at the faint-blue walls and ceiling of the room.

"I presume," he said, solemnly, "you had your rooms done this last time to match the Mother Hub—I mean the mandarin's coat?"

They did not need thus to spar, for they were (what, unhappily, is so unusual between men and women in a world devoid of mid-paths) close friends; even comrades, in so far as Blythe's hard work permitted him to assume his share of such a relationship; and they understood each other thoroughly, with no complication differing from a genuine mutual esteem to mar their understanding. Nevertheless, both of them found it a trifle difficult to undertake the lead on the subject that was uppermost in their minds and the occasion of Blythe's forenoon visit.

Laura with her customary helpfulness, finally gave him an opening.

"She told us of having met you on the train," said Laura, as if in continuation of a conversation already begun on the theme. "An odd chance, wasn't it? I wonder if you were so enormously struck with her as I was?"

"You met her at the station, did you not?" said Blythe, quietly. "That was like you; like your all-around fineness."

"Thanks," said Laura, appreciatively. "But you evade my question. Isn't she a perfect apparition of loveliness?"

"I wish she were less so," said Blythe, not convincingly.

"No, you don't wish that," said Laura. "I know what you wish; but it is not that."

Blythe was silent for a space and then he fell to striding up and down the room.

"Did you ever come upon such an unspeakable situation, Laura?" he broke out, stopping to face her. "What is Antoinette Treharne thinking of? Is she utterly lost to any sense of—"

"I wouldn't say that, John," put in Laura, holding up a staying hand. "It is natural enough, I know, for you to reach such a conclusion; on a cursory view the case seems to be against her; but you must remember that Louise came home without warning. Antoinette had no opportunity to devise a plan. She is horribly humiliated. I know that."

"Your usual method of defending everybody—and you know how I like you for that as for so many other things," said Blythe. "But, Laura, Louise's mother knew that the girl must leave school in half a year at all events. She must have considered some way out of the hideous mess?"

"None that she ever mentioned to me," said Laura. "You know her habit of procrastination. I grazed the subject two or three times in talking with her. She dodged, or was downright brusque. She has no plan, I am sure. But she is sorely distressed over it all, now that the situation has come to a head. I am very sorry for her."

"But the girl?" said Blythe, a slight note of irritation in his tone. "How about her?"

"I should be more worried if I were not so entirely confident that Louise is amply competent to take care of herself," said Laura. "She is no longer a girl, John. She is a woman, and a woman with more than her share of plain sense. Her position, of course, is positively outrageous, heartrending. But I am at a loss to suggest a single thing that her friends—that you or I, or both of us—could do just now to better it."

"That," said Blythe, a little hoarsely, "is just the devil of it."

"I should like to have Louise with me," Laura went on, "but I doubt if she would come, although I believe she is fond of me. Not just yet, at any rate. She would not care to leave her mother after her long separation from her. Louise will find out the situation herself. No doubt she already has sensed a part of its sinister aspect. I am horribly sorry for her. But, as I say, she is a woman of character. She will know what to do. All that we can do, for the present at any rate, is to be on guard for her, without seeming to be. Of course she shall know that we are her friends. She already knows that I am her friend. Did you, on the train—"

"Yes," put in Blythe, apprehending what Laura was going to ask. "I told her that I knew her father. The matter came about in an odd way. I wish, Laura, that you'd make it clear to her, if you have the chance, that she—that I—"

He halted embarrassedly.

"I quite understand," Laura aided him, smiling. "That you mean to be her friend, too—of course I shall tell her that," and Laura looked reflective when she observed how Blythe's face brightened. It soon clouded again, however, when he broke out:

"She will find out, of course, sooner or later, that she has been taken care of and educated for the past five years and odd with Judd's money," he said, worriedly. "You can imagine how intense her mortification will be over that discovery. Judd, you know, in contempt of George Treharne, forced Mrs. Treharne to return to me the quarterly checks that Treharne sent me from Hawaii for Louise—for of course I sent the checks to Antoinette. I explained this to Treharne when I saw him in Honolulu a few years ago. He was badly cut up over it. But of course he was powerless to do anything about it. He refused to take the checks back, though, and directed me to deposit the money to Louise's account. I have nearly fifteen thousand dollars—five years' accrued checks, for Treharne has never stopped sending them—on deposit for Louise now. Don't you think she had better be told this?"

"Wait a while," advised Laura. "Wait until she discovers how the land lies. Then she will be coming to you. If you told her now it would involve your telling her also that she had been educated with Judd's money. I think it better that she discover that for herself—if she must discover it. Then she will know what to do. She will be seeking you out then," and Laura smiled inwardly when again she noted how Blythe's face cleared at her last words.

"There is only one thing to do, of course, and that is to follow your advice and let the matter stand as it is for the present," said Blythe, preparing to go. "But the thing is going to sit pretty heavily upon me. I have been Treharne's legal man ever since my senior partner died, as you know, and, although it isn't of course expected of me, I can't help but feel a certain responsibility for his daughter when she is thrust into such a miserable situation as this. I wonder," catching at a new and disturbing idea, "if her mother will expect Louise to meet the wretched crew of near-poets, maybe-musicians and other rag-tag-and-bobtail that assemble at what Antoinette calls her Sunday evening 'salon?'"

"Antoinette's 'zoo,' I call it," laughed Laura. "What if Louise does meet them? They can't harm her. They, the unfortunate make-believes, will only appeal to her risibles, if I mistake not. Louise must have got her sense of humor from her father. Antoinette hasn't a particle of humor in her composition. If she had how long do you suppose she would continue her absurd 'salon?'"

Laura, in extending her hand to Blythe, who had resumed his stormcoat, gazed quizzically into his rugged face.

"John," she said, "is your solicitude for Louise solely on account of the—er—sense of responsibility you feel toward her father?"

Blythe caught the twinkle in her eyes.

"Humbug!" he ejaculated, striding out to the obligato of Laura's laugh.

When they were settled in the car for their snowy ride that afternoon, Mrs. Treharne turned in her seat to face Judd.

"You will understand," she said in a tone quite as hard as it was meant to be, "that I am not

wasting words. If you repeat your grossness of last night in my daughter's presence, our—our friendship is at an end. That is understood?"

"Now, now, shush, shush, Tony," said the Gargantuan Judd, soothingly, and resorting to his habit of patting her hands, "not so severe, not so terrifically severe, you know. How did I know that your daughter would be there? Didn't know the least thing about it—forgot, I mean, that she was coming. Got a bit screwed at the club, and—"

"I don't elect to listen to that sort of an explanation," interrupted Mrs. Treharne, with cold deliberation. "I am unutterably weary of your porcine manners. It is bad enough that I have permitted myself to endure them. You are not imbecile enough to suppose that my daughter is to endure them, too? You are to meet her only when it is absolutely necessary; be good enough to remember that. While she is with me—I don't now know how long that is to be—you are to curtail your visits; and if you come even once again in the sodden condition that you were in last night, I am done with you from that instant. I make myself plain, I hope?"

"Pon honor, Tony, you are horribly severe," blurted Judd, whiningly. "You know very well that if you were to cut and run I'd blow my head off." He felt that he meant it, too; for Judd was tremendously fond of the fading woman seated beside him, as he had been for years. He was blind to her departing prettiness; to him she was the one woman in the world—his prim, elderly wife, the mother of his family of grown children, being utterly negligible in his view; and Mrs. Treharne knew her complete power over him as well as she knew the lines of her face.

"I wish," she said, with a cutting way of dwelling upon each word, "that you had blown your head off before ever I met you. I might then have been able to cling to at least the shreds of self-respect."

Judd had no reply to make to that, and they rode the rest of the way in silence.

CHAPTER IV

By mid-January Louise had completed her inventory of the situation. She faced her position without flinching and with no visible sign of the distress the gradually unfolding picture caused her, save a certain silent preoccupation from which Laura vainly sought to rouse her by taking her on incessant rounds of the theatres, whisking her off on short up-State and Long Island motor tours, and providing other means of distraction and excitement. Laura's heart ached for Louise. Her own girlhood had been clouded by trouble. Orphaned at sixteen, an heiress with no disinterested advisors save those who were the legal guardians of her person and estate, she had yielded shortly after leaving school to a girlish infatuation and entered upon a surreptitious marriage with a man who, with his child-wife's large wealth at his disposal, had surrendered to one dissipation after another until, eventually becoming a drug fiend, he had, in his treatment of her, developed into such an utterly savage and irresponsible brute that she was compelled to divorce him, after which he had been put under permanent restraint. It had taken Laura long years to recover her natural equipoise after her bitter disillusionment. Louise's trouble, Laura could not help apprehending, was even more grievous than her own had been, intensified as she knew it must be by the girl's carefully-screened feeling of humiliation.

Laura admired Louise beyond words for her uncomplaining acceptance of her bitter bolus.

"I never saw such pluck," she told John Blythe time and again. "It is the pluck of a thoroughbred. I believe she thoroughly understands everything now, except that she is in Judd's debt for her education. Her loyalty to her mother is wonderful, beautiful; far greater than Antoinette really deserves. I don't remember ever meeting a girl or woman whom I admired so much as I do Louise Treharne."

Laura could not fail to note how Blythe's clear grey eyes would glisten when thus she praised the girl.

"Louise is like her father," he would say in reply to Laura's enthusiasm. "You know what a fine, game man George Treharne was and is. I'll never forget how generous he was in his treatment of me—and he tried to prevent me from knowing it, too—when, as a cub lawyer, I was first starting out on my own hook; and there wasn't the least reason in life why he should have been so decent to me, either. You remember how he never whimpered when Antoinette dragged his—Oh, well, no use in referring to that. But, when I first met the grown-up Louise on the train—after I accidentally discovered her identity, I mean—I couldn't help but observe how her resemblance to her father—"

"To whom," Laura watched him with twinkling eyes, "your sense of responsibility is so great that—er—that—"

Whereupon Blythe would flush hotly and proceed to shrivel Laura with whatever in the way of polite invective occurred to him in his confusion.

The thought of leaving her mother for the sake of extricating herself from a difficult and taxing situation never entered Louise's mind. Her mother, she felt, needed her. It was not, she considered, a problem for her interposition; she shrank from the thought of even mentioning it.

She knew that it was an utterly impossible situation; she had a profound belief that it was not, from its very nature, destined to last; but she preferred that her mother should take the initiative in casting off the evil. She clearly saw how, from day to day, her mother was becoming increasingly conscious of the grave trouble she was heaping upon her daughter's young shoulders; she perceived how her mother, not inherently vicious, simply was in the bondage of an ingrained, luxury-loving selfishness, and that, having been cast out of the social realm in which she formerly had moved, she was now possessed by a sort of despair which, more than anything else, prevented her from making the attempt to extricate herself from the slough.

Louise, then, schooled herself to wait. It was a sort of waiting that drew heavily upon her natural store of equanimity. But she could see no other course, and hopefulness is the tandem mate of youth.

"I have lived long enough," Laura said to her one afternoon, when they were driving, during this trying period when Louise was testing her adaptability to the utmost, "to have discovered that nothing matters very much except one's own peace of mind. If one have that, the rest is all a mirage. I don't mean the peace of mind that proceeds from a priggish sense of superiority to human weaknesses. That, I am pleased to say, is a sort of mental peace that I haven't yet experienced, and I hope I never shall. But when one's hands are just decently clean, and one at least has tried to shake off the shackles forged by one's own little meannesses, a sort of satisfying mental quiet ensues that is worth, I think, more than anything else one finds in life."

"But one's worry for others?" quietly suggested Louise, putting it in the form of a question.

Laura pressed the girl's hands between her own.

"All of us, dear, must know the meaning of solicitude—often painful solicitude—for others at some period of our lives," she said, tenderly. "I know what you mean. You are carrying yourself nobly through a difficult ordeal. Let that consciousness suffice. You will have the right to feel proud, in the coming time, to remember that you stood the test—as we are proud of you now."

"We?" said Louise, puzzling.

"We," repeated Laura, steadfastly. "I think you scarcely understand, dear, how profoundly interested—yes, and chivalrously interested, too—John Blythe is in your—your problem."

Louise felt the blood rushing to her face.

"Does Mr. Blythe know?" she asked, her cheeks tingling.

"How could he avoid knowing, dear?" rejoined Laura, gently. "He is your father's lawyer. He is an occasional visitor at your—" she hesitated; "—visitor on Riverside Drive," she resumed. "And so of course he knows—everything. You may be glad of that, dear. There is no man in the world whose friendship I value more highly than that of John Blythe. I think he would like to have you feel—I know, in fact, that he would—that he is interested in your—your concerns; that, indeed, in a way, he is standing guard for you."

Louise studied for a little while.

"I should have understood, of course, that he knew," she said, hesitatingly. "But it did not occur to me. I am afraid that I should have been a little reluctant to meet him on those two or three occasions at your home if I had known that he—" She paused.

"Why, dear child, should you have such a feeling when a man of innate nobility, who knew you when you were a little girl—"

"It is wrong, I know," put in Louise, hastily. "But I find it so hard to regard him as—as just a lawyer, you know, Laura. He is not like a lawyer at all—at least I have not found him so. He is —"

Laura pointed a teasing finger at her, which caused the color to reappear on Louise's face.

"Don't try to tell me what he is, Louise," said Laura, smiling. "Don't you suppose I know? But you don't know how intensely glad I am to hear that you can't regard Mr. Blythe as—as 'just a lawyer.' I shall tell him that you are going about criticizing his professional ability."

"Don't do that—please!" said Louise in such an obvious panic that Laura pinched her cheek reassuringly.

The meetings with Blythe to which Louise referred were casual ones in Laura's apartment. Blythe was in the habit of dropping in occasionally for coffee—he abominated tea—and a chat at Laura's tea hour in the late afternoon; and Laura duly noted, not without slyly chaffing him over it, that he had made this an almost daily habit since his discovery that he stood a pretty fair gambling chance of finding Louise there almost any afternoon. Once, when Laura and Louise came in from a drive which had been prolonged rather later than usual, they entered the library quietly, to find Blythe, looking decidedly glum, browsing among the books without the least seeming of being interested in any of them, for his hands were thrust deep into his pockets and they caught him yawning most deplorably. But at sight of the two women—one woman, Laura said, accusingly, to him after Louise had gone home in Laura's car—he had brightened so suddenly and visibly that Laura had to profess that her rippling laugh was occasioned by something she had seen during her drive.

On these occasions Laura had found it imperatively necessary to leave them together in order to confer with her servants. Louise and Blythe had talked easily on detached, somewhat light matters, finding an agreeable mutual plane without effort. Louise, remembering his somewhat sober preoccupation on the train, had been surprised and pleased—though she could not have told why—to note his possession of a rather unusual social charm. She was pleased, too, that, except in the matter of a remarkable physique, he was not to be rated as a handsome man. His features were too rugged for that. Strength, keenness and kindness shone from his masterful countenance; but he was anything but handsome judged from the magazine-cover standard. Louise had amused Laura one day by saying that she found Blythe's face "restful." She had not the least partiality for men of the generally-accepted straightout handsome type of features; she was, in truth, a little inclined to be contemptuous of an excessive facial pulchritude in men. But—again for a reason which she could scarcely have explained—she was glad that Blythe was perhaps two inches more than six feet in height, that he was as straight as a lance, and that he found it necessary to walk sidewise in order to get his shoulders through some of Laura's lesser doors.

On her last meeting with Blythe Louise had asked him, with a certain hesitancy which he noticed, if he had written to her father.

"Yes," Blythe had replied, simply, "and I sent him your love." He had not offered to become more communicative; and Louise, concluding that his reticence on the subject might be based on a considerateness for her which it might be unfair for her to seek to fathom, did not mention the matter to him again. She had an oddly resolute confidence in him, considering how short the time had been since he had come into her life; and she felt that, if he now exhibited a taciturnity which puzzled her, it would be explained in due time.

Louise Treharne belonged to that rare (and therefore radiant) type of women who know how to wait.

Louise's life at the house on the Drive quickly resolved itself into a daily programme tinctured with a monotony that could not but wear upon the spirits of a young woman of a naturally cheerful and gregarious temperament.

Her mother, generally in a state of feverish unrest that marked her strained incertitude over a situation which, in a way, was more intolerable to her than to her daughter because she was guiltily conscious that she was the maker of it, usually dropped into Louise's room for an hour's chat during the forenoon. She was alternately affectionate, stilted, indifferent and petulant in her attitude toward her daughter. She did not seek, in her brooding self-communings, to thrust aside the keen consciousness that she was utterly and hopelessly in the wrong; but this consciousness did not serve to allay her irritation, even if it was directed against herself. Like most women, she hated to be in the wrong; and she particularly loathed the thought of confessing herself in the wrong. She was less immoral than unmoral; her descent had been due to a sort of warped view as to forbidden relationships, nourished by an inborn and intense dislike for the sovereignty of convention—"the tyranny of the smug," she habitually called it—and based essentially upon her love of luxurious and extravagant living. But a consciousness of these facts only made her self-contempt the more keen. She measured and despised her sordidness. She was not, she fell into the habit of reflecting after her daughter's return, the victim of anybody but herself; her days of ardor had slipped away; she well knew that she had not even the excuse of a fondness for the man who had made her a social pariah. If she had ever experienced any such a fondness that fact might have mitigated, at least in her own self-view, the rawness of her course. But she cared nothing for Judd, which made her case abominable, and she knew it.

Yet her weakened will, her character rendered flaccid by years of careless self-indulgence, made it acutely difficult for her to contemplate the thought of abandoning her way of living, even for the sake of her daughter. Her prettiness was now purely a matter of meretricious building up; she would soon be forty; she fumed inwardly at the thought of middle age, which now, for her, was only around the corner, so to speak; she had been cast off by her own kind; and the terminal idea of her self-communings always was that, since there was no hope for her in any event, no matter what she might do, she might as well finish the scroll. She pushed aside Louise's involvement in the difficulty as something that would—that would have to—adjust itself. A way out for Louise must present itself sooner or later; but the way out for her daughter must be one that would not demand too great a sacrifice—if any sacrifice at all—on her own part. Perhaps a good marriage could be contrived for Louise; that would be the easiest and most natural solution; and she would cast about in her mind for eligibles on whose sensitive social concepts perhaps her own method of life would not grate. Her dreary meditations usually terminated with futilities of this sort.

Louise, fighting back the oppressiveness that had clutched her ever since her return from school, was cheerful and sunny when her mother was with her. She made no allusion of any sort to the conditions of her environment. Her mother, noticing this, was grateful for it, and she was conscious of a genuine and growing admiration for the mingled dignity and delicacy of her daughter's behavior. On one of her forenoon visits to Louise's dressing room the mother herself, swept by a feeling of remorse in the contemplation of the girl's fragrant, pure-eyed beauty, could not refrain from touching impulsively upon the nub of her own unrest.

"My dear," she said to Louise, passing a white and still prettily rounded arm around her daughter, "do you hate your little mother?"

Louise fought back the tears that suffused her eyes.

"Why do you ask such a thing, dear?" she asked in a voice the hoarseness of which she strove to disguise.

Her mother did not reply to the question, but went on, turning her head away:

"Because there are circumstances, conditions that you can't have failed to notice here that maybe—" She struggled for words. "It has never been in my heart to do anything except what was right and fair by you, child, but one drifts, drifts, always drifts——"

She could not proceed.

Louise wrapped her arms about her mother. Neither spoke for a space.

"Nothing can ever change me, dear," said Louise then in her quiet tone. "It is not for me to judge or condemn. I can—wait. We shall not speak of it again, shall we, mother?"

Her mother, haggard and with pain-drawn features, smoothed Louise's face with her hand for a little while and went away without another word. The girl's eyes were swollen when Laura came for her in her car an hour later. But Laura did not ask her why.

Louise went nowhere with her mother. Mrs. Treharne made it plain from the beginning that this was her intention. Louise, for her part, required no reason. She understood. Nor did Louise seek to re-establish the friendships she had formed with girls at Miss Mayhew's school, many of whom now were living in New York or visiting their homes there during the holiday vacation.

One afternoon, at an opera matinée, Louise, strolling out the entr'acte in the foyer with Laura, came face to face with Bella Peyton, a girl who had been graduated from the finishing school with the class ahead of Louise's. Miss Peyton was with her mother, a stony-eyed, granite-featured dowager who had often met Louise on her frequent visits at the school; for her daughter and Louise had been school inseparables.

Bella rushed up cordially to Louise and kissed her enthusiastically.

"You darling!" she exclaimed in the abandonment of her delight at coming upon the chum of her school days so unexpectedly. "When did you reach town? And why didn't you come to see me the very instant you returned?"

Mrs. Peyton, who, at sight of Louise, had purposely lagged in the rear, and whose adamant countenance reflected intensifying degrees of frozenness with each word that her daughter was saying to Louise, drew her adipose person into a posture of icy rigidity, and croaked:

"Bella!"

Mrs. Peyton had not so much as nodded to Louise.

"Why, mamma," Bella broke out, "don't you remember Louise Treharne, my sworn and subscribed and vowed and vummed chum at Miss Mayhew's?"

"Bella!"

This time it was not merely an adjuration, it was a command.

Bella, perceiving then that something was wrong, flushed. But she was loyal to her friend.

"You are coming to see me immediately, dear?" she said, hurriedly shaking hands with Louise in order to obey her mother's command.

"Bella! Come to me at once!" Mrs. Peyton croaked with cutting, unconscionable rudeness, seizing her daughter by the arm and incontinently marching her off.

Louise, crimsoning, took the stab without a word.

"The tabby!" broke out Laura, her eyes flashing with indignation. "Gracious heaven, is it any wonder that men privately sneer at the way women treat each other? Don't you mind the shocking old cat, Louise; she'll tear herself to pieces with her own claws some day;" and Laura was unusually tender and kind in her treatment of Louise for the remainder of the afternoon. But, after that encounter, Louise learned to avoid meeting her school friends when, as occasionally happened, she saw them before they caught sight of her. She felt that they all "knew" or "would know," and she did not elect to take chances on additional snubs.

Her first formal meeting with Judd had been a trial. It had been an accidental encounter, happening about a week after Louise's return from school, and at a time when Mrs. Treharne was in more than one mind as to whether she would permit Louise to meet Judd at all. Mrs. Treharne and Judd were stepping out of the huge yellow car at the close of their late afternoon ride just at the moment when Louise, alone, was returning in Laura's car. Their meeting on the pavement was inevitable. For a moment Louise hoped that her mother would permit her to lag behind on pretense of returning to Laura's car to find some imaginary forgotten article; but Mrs. Treharne, suddenly deciding that the meeting had best be over with, since no way of avoiding it, sooner or

later, had suggested itself, called to her; and Louise, very beautiful with her cold-ruddied cheeks nimbussed by her breeze-blown hair of bronze, walked erect to where her mother stood with the bulky, red-eyed Judd, who regarded Louise with a stare of disconcerting admiration.

"My dear Louise," said Mrs. Treharne, obviously quelling a certain tremulousness in her tone, "permit me to present Mr. Judd; Mr. Judd, my daughter Louise."

Judd, his mouth still unpleasantly agape, started the preliminary gesture toward extending his hand. But he made no further progress with the hand, for he was quick to notice that Louise, at that very instant, was inserting her loose right hand in her muff. Louise bowed and then returned to Laura's car in quest of the imaginary article; she desired to give Judd time to resume his place in his car before she joined her mother on the steps.

"Demmed handsome, that daughter of yours," Judd commented on Louise to Mrs. Treharne when he saw her the next afternoon, "but—er—uppish, what?"

"I can dispense with your generalities on that subject," Mrs. Treharne had replied.

After that Louise had met Judd casually in the wide, fire-lit down-stairs hall on two or three occasions, and once at the only one of her mother's extraordinary Sunday night receptions—the "salon" which at once provoked and amused Laura—which she attended; but she had exchanged no word with him. She was not lacking in diplomacy, but there were some stultifications that she found to be wholly beyond her; and she was conscious of a certain previously unexperienced difficulty with her neck when she even inclined her head to Judd.

"Would you care to meet some of my Sunday night people, Louise?" her mother had asked her. "I dare say Laura has told you they are freaks. Perhaps some of them are. But there are clever ones among them, and one must take the gifted with the mediocre. It would not harm you to meet a few of them. They are not wicked. They only think they are; some of them, that is. Their wickedness is an amiable abstraction. Shall you be down?"

It was on a Sunday morning, in Louise's apartments, that Mrs. Treharne made the suggestion. Louise was conscious of the need of a laugh, even if it were a politely smothered one; and Laura had comically depicted her mother's "salon" to her. She told her mother that she had been waiting for that invitation, which caused Mrs. Treharne to glance sharply at her to ascertain if Louise already had adopted Laura's point of view as to the Sunday evening gatherings.

"Do you entertain your people yourself, mother, or is there a—" Louise stumbled on the word "host."

But her mother was quick to catch her meaning.

"I should not ask you down, else, my dear—you should credit me that far," she had replied, a tinge of reproach in her tone. And so, an hour or so after dinner on Sunday night, Louise, willowy yet full-blossomed and splendid in a simple princesse dress of white broadcloth, a gardenia nestling in an embrasure of her velvety auburn hair, and a tiny-linked chain of gold, with aquamarine pendants—a gift from Laura—around her firm white neck, went, for the first time since she had been in the house, to the already crowded main floor.

Louise, in her inexperience, could not know that the gathering really was little less than an apotheosis of the *declassée*; she merely found some of the people agreeable, others of them unconsciously naïve in their ebullient enthusiasm over their imaginary achievements or accomplishments, still others frankly laughable for their indurated habit of self laudation.

It was in the main, so far as its social side went, an assemblage of persons, men and women, who, thrust outside the genuine social breastworks for various and more or less highly-tinctured lapses, thus foregathered in response to an instinct of gregariousness—an instinct around which the "birds of a feather" aphorism no doubt was framed. Having no choice in the matter, these persons were willing to accept the shadow for the reality. It might almost be said that on every uptown square of New York there is at least one common meeting point for similar assemblages of social exiles. Nearly all of the figurantes in Mrs. Treharne's Sunday evening affairs were *divorcées* of more or less note; the "cases" of some of whom had been blazoned in huge red block type in the yellow newspapers, and "illustrated," in default of genuine portraits, with blurred "cuts" of no less benevolent or redoubtable females than the late Mrs. Pinkham or Carrie Nation. The men in the company who had not already rocketed through the divorce court were willing, it appeared from their frank method of expressing themselves, to make that by no means perilous passage; though there was a sprinkling of younger men, still factors in a social world from which there are no voluntary expatriates, who attended Mrs. Treharne's Sunday evening affairs in a spirit of larkishness and glad of the chance to forsake, for a little while, regions more austere and still under the domination of at least a tacit repression.

For the rest, there were poetasters who fidgetted until they were called upon, out of pure sympathy, to read their own verse—some of the latter obviously "lifted;" temperamental musicians, male and female, who preferred to sway at or with their instruments with the rooms darkened while they performed; manufacturers and proselytizers of personally-conducted and generally quite unintelligible cults, physical, moral or ethical, all of the cults extending a maximum of "freedom of action" to the individual; devisers of impromptu or extemporaneous

religions or near-religions, none of which boasted so inconvenient a restriction as a Decalogue; fashionable or striving-to-be-fashionable palmists and chiromancers, "swamis," "yogis;" burnoosed, sullen, white-robed exploiters, from the Near or Far East, of women who mistook their advanced symptoms of neuresthenia for a hankering for the occult; and the other unclassified, sycophantic factors of a "Bohemianism" whose seams were perfectly visible to the naked eye and whose sawdust was only held in place with the all-together co-operation of the whole artificial assemblage.

Louise's entrance upon the scene created a stir which caused her to feel distinctly uncomfortable. She longed for Laura; but Laura had "sworn off" attending Mrs. Treharne's Sunday evening parties; not from any selfish motives of caution—for Laura was in keen demand in the social circle in which she had been born and reared; but simply because she had at length ceased to extract amusement from the self-idolizing vagaries of Mrs. Treharne's crew; more briefly still, because they bored her to extinction.

When the word was buzzed around among the slowly-moving, chattering assemblage to whom the entire lower floor of the house, including the conservatory, had been thrown open—that "the tall girl with the air and the hair" was Mrs. Treharne's daughter—the more privileged ones adverted to their hostess as Tony—there was a sudden clattering of the passageways leading to the room in which Louise was standing with her mother. In their keenness to catch a glimpse of the "just-bloomed daughter of Tony" many of them even forsook the long and generously-provided buffet, than which no greater sign of a consuming interest or curiosity could be given; for not a few of the raffish guests appeared to be so patently in need of nourishment—and stimulant—that they spent the major portion of the evening at the buffet.

A woman whose vision seemed to be slightly filmed from her inordinate devotion to the punch lifted her glass, after studying Louise in a sort of open-mouthed daze for a moment or so, and sang out, in a tone that she apparently had some difficulty in controlling:

"To Tony's daughter—the Empress Louise!"

The men and women in her neighborhood grabbed for glasses to fill from the punchbowls and took up the refrain:

"The Empress Louise!"

Louise felt the blood swirling to her head, but she braced herself to stand the volleying of eyes. Her mother was intensely annoyed and made not the least effort to conceal her annoyance. When the incident had been merged in a diversion afforded by a recitation of a Portuguese madrigal in another room by a man with unkempt hair and untidy fingernails, Mrs. Treharne glided away from Louise's side for a moment and found the woman who had proposed the toast. She was still absorbedly busy at the buffet.

"You are to leave at once, Ethel," she said in a low but determined tone to the toast-proposer, a woman whose divorce story in the newspapers had been remarkable for the detailed account of liquid refreshments she had consumed up and down the world, at foreign hotels and on board yachts, for a number of years at a stretch. "I shall never forgive you if you make another scene here."

"All right, Tony," the woman replied, with a vacuous smile. "Not angry at me, are you, for wishing luck to your little girl—your big girl, I mean; she *is* an empress, you know, and—"

Mrs. Treharne guided her to the cloak room and stayed by her side until she bade her goodnight at the door.

Louise, in the meantime, had been approached by a man whose eyes, she had noticed with a certain vague disquietude, had been following her about since her entrance upon the scene.

He was a handsome man of the florid type, with a sweeping blonde mustache and oddly-restless light brown eyes in which Louise, catching him devouring her with his gaze at frequent intervals, nervously thought that she detected certain felinely-topaz glints. He was tall and a trifle over-heavy; but there was a certain slow-moving, easy air of adventitious distinction about him which might have been in part lent by the immaculateness of his evening clothes and his facile way of disposing of his hands without requiring any article to give them employment; an art in which even practiced courtiers and carpet knights occasionally are deficient. Louise did not like his face; she observed, when she saw, not without a certain vague trepidation, that he was approaching her, that his over-red and over-full lips, from which the sweeping mustache was brushed away, were curved in a sort of habitual sneer which by no stretch of charity could be called a smile; though that, no doubt, was the desired intent of it.

He bowed low, keeping his eyes upraised on Louise's face, when he reached her side, and said:

"Miss Treharne?"

Louise, used to more formal methods of meeting new men, inclined her head.

"You will condone, I hope, Miss Treharne, my seeming breach of formality in presuming to address you without a presentation," he said, even his intensified smile failing to efface the sneering curve from his too visible lips. "But your mother is generous enough to permit her guests at times—on such occasions as these, for example—to forego formality. I have been

ineffectually trying to reach her for an hour in order to—"

"In order to ask me to do that which you have already done," said Mrs. Treharne, with quite unusual affability, coming up at that moment and catching his final words. "Louise, dear, permit me—Mr. Langdon Jesse. Don't expect her to know, Mr. Jesse, that you are a cotton king. I doubt if her routine at school permitted her to read the newspapers, even if they interested her; which I sincerely hope they did not and will not."

Louise had not often seen her mother in so gracious a humor toward any man; but this fact did not in any sense serve to quell the instinctive dislike which she immediately felt for Jesse, the "cotton king" of her mother's somewhat too purposely-significant introduction. She noticed that his hands were small and obtrusively white; that there was a wave in his burnished blonde hair; that his large clear-cut features were of a chiselled regularity; and her natural aversion to the merely handsome man promptly asserted itself. The sneer of his mouth, and his fixed way of gazing squarely into her eyes as if his own eyes were forming a question, disquieted her. She replied in purposed monosyllables to his rather trivial yet studied questions about her school life. She knew perfectly well that he was in no wise interested in her school life, but that he merely was seeking what he considered might be the most engaging method of capturing her attention. Five minutes after his meeting with her she devised an excuse and went to her apartments. She threw her windows wide and let the wintry air bulge the curtains when she reached her sleeping room; perhaps it was her subconsciousness that told her that she needed some such a bath of purifying air to obliterate what intangible traces there might remain of her brief contact with Langdon Jesse. That night she dreamt persistently of a leopard with large, blazing eyes of topaz; and an hour after she awoke a large basket of superb orchids, with Langdon Jesse's card attached, was brought to her. Laura was with her at the time.

"From Langdon Jesse?" said Laura, knitting her brow. "Did you meet him last night, Louise?"

"Yes. I disliked him intensely."

"If I were you, dear," suggested Laura, "I should send these orchids to a hospital. They can of course have no sinister effect upon those who have not met their donor. But I should be afraid to have you keep any flowers sent you by Langdon Jesse. They might poison the air. The bald impudence of him in sending you flowers at all!"

A footman was carrying the orchids to a nearby hospital five minutes later.

CHAPTER V

Langdon Jesse and his one-time associate and co-partner in lamb-shearing "deals," Frederick Judd, met at luncheon in a restaurant in the financial district a few days later.

Judd, one of the powers of "the Street," was past fifty-five, and he had no great toleration for the vacuities of young men. This fact, however, placed no inhibition on the admiration—it could scarcely be called a liking—which he felt for Langdon Jesse; for Jesse, whatever else he may have been, certainly was not vacuous in the matter of business; and it was from the angle of their success in business that Judd exclusively judged men. Jesse, well under forty, already was a veteran of the stock market; and on at least one occasion he had deftly "trimmed" no less a person than his former associate, Mr. Judd; wherefore Judd, with the breadth of vision of the financial general in considering the strategy of the general who has beaten him, admired Jesse, who had been virtually his pupil, all the more; resolving, at the same time, not to permit his quondam pupil to "trim" him again.

Jesse, accepting the nodded invitation, took a seat at the table at which Judd, alone, was eating his heavy luncheon. They exchanged market talk in brief, brittle phrases, for a while. Then Jesse, his too-prominent lips curving, and seeming to be gazing over the top of Judd's bare poll, said:

"Sumptuous, isn't she?"

Judd, used to Jesse's adversions to the sumptuousness of women—many women—went on doggedly eating. After a space he replied with a monosyllable:

"Who?"

Jesse did not answer for a moment; nor did Judd seem to be particularly worried over that fact.

"I dropped into your—er—your place on the Drive on Sunday night," said Jesse, fastening an abnormally long cigarette into a remarkably long cigarette holder of amber and gold.

Judd, his fork poised in the air, looked up at Jesse. There was a question in his red-rimmed eyes; but Judd made it a point not to submit questions of any consequence until he had turned them over in his mind several times.

"So I heard," said Judd, with no obvious interest, pronging away again with his fork.

"Who told you," asked Jesse, with a sharp glance at Judd. "Not——"

"How the devil should I remember who told me?" replied Judd in a matter-of-fact tone. "What's

the difference who told me, anyhow?"

But it made considerable difference, as a matter of fact, to Jesse; his self-satisfaction and his serene belief in his ability to make an immediate "impression" were very great; and when Judd told him he had "heard" he had been at the Riverside Drive house he took it for granted that Judd had "heard" it from the person on whom his thoughts were dwelling; Louise Treharne, that is to say.

"Oh, no particular difference," said Jesse, blowing a cloud of acrid Turkish cigarette smoke at Judd, which caused Judd to scowl. "I thought perhaps——"

Judd knew perfectly well what he thought; but Judd often failed even to mention things that he knew perfectly well.

"You take in those bear-garden affairs at Tony's—at Mrs. Treharne's," catching himself, "right along, don't you?" said Judd. "How the devil you can endure that pack of imbecile, loquacious what-are-theys is more than I can make out. One of those Sundays nights cured me."

Jesse, however, had not the least intention of being side-tracked.

"Well, she is—er—well, ripping; isn't she?" he said, after a pause.

Judd, perceiving the futility of evasion, gave way.

"Yes—if that's what you want me to say—and all ice, besides," said Judd. "You're up against it there, son," he went on, judicially. "Or are you looking for a death by freezing? Why, I'm afraid that she's going to fracture one of her upper vertebrae even when she nods to me! And that's all the recognition she ever gives me—a nod."

"She doesn't strike me as being so hopelessly Arctic as all that," said Jesse, inordinately proud of what he considered his keen judgment of women. "Did you ever happen to meet a woman with auburn hair who possessed a—er—a frozen or freezing temperament? And, by the way, why do you dwell upon her rigidity, so to speak, when she nods 'even to you?' Why 'even to you?'"

Judd, a little choleric showing in his purpling face, broke out:

"Because a man naturally expects a little manners, a little common politeness, from people he's taking care of, doesn't he? She's living in my house, by God!"

"That," said Jesse, quietly, "is precisely what I am getting at: since she is living in your house—if she knows it is your house—she can't be so—er—well, stupendously straight-laced, can she? And, by frozen, of course you meant straight-laced."

"I meant exactly what I said," replied Judd, sulkily. "Stop twisting my words around, will you? I said that she was ice, and that is what I meant to say. You're on a blind trail, Jesse, if that's what you're getting at. Take it from me. You're a hit with 'em, I know, and all that sort of rot. But this one is more than your match. She'll shrivel you good and plenty if you try anything on with her. At that, why can't you let her alone? There are plenty of the other kind—your kind. What's the matter, anyhow? Have all the show girls moved out of New York?"

Jesse didn't relish the slap. It was not exactly a truthful slap, moreover. Jesse had withdrawn his devotions to "show girls" several years before; since doing which he had quarried in entirely different quarters.

"Let the girl alone—that's my advice," went on Judd, seized for the moment by a flickering sense of fairness. "I don't fancy her particularly—because she's so damned haughty with me, I suppose, and looks down upon me from a mountain. But she's all right. I know that, and I'm telling it to you for your information. Better forget it. There isn't a chance on earth for you, anyhow."

Jesse didn't appear to be in the least thrown off the quest by the advice.

"Are you sure," he inquired of Judd after a short silence, "that she knows just where you figure in the Riverside Drive establishment?"

"Well, you could see for yourself that she is more than seven years of age, couldn't you?" briefly replied Judd.

"But," observed Jesse, obviously seeking to get hold of all of the threads of the situation, "she is only recently out of school, I understand, and perhaps she hasn't yet fully grasped——"

"I don't know what she has grasped, and I don't care a damn," thrust in Judd, tired of the colloquy. "She must know a good deal about the way things stand or she wouldn't treat me as if I were rubbish. I can see how I stick in her throat. When it comes to that, why shouldn't I? She's only a schoolgirl, if she is a head taller than I am. Her mother made an idiotic mistake in having the girl around the place. But that's none of my affair. I take the game as it stands. Only I advise you to stand clear. You might as well be decent for once in your life. Unless, of course," and Judd shot a glance of inquiry at Jesse, "you mean to turn respectable—it's about time—and go in for the marrying idea?"

Jesse's somewhat waxy, excessively smooth face flushed at Judd's afterthought.

"I marry?" he said, with a distinctly disagreeable laugh. "Well, it may come to that, some day or other. But can you see me marrying the daughter of your acknowledged——" He fumbled for the

word; "mistress" was what he wanted to say, but he discarded it out of sheer timidity; "—your acknowledged companion?" he finished.

"Be good enough to keep out of my personal affairs, Jesse," said Judd, coldly. "I don't dip into your private concerns. You may take my advice or leave it. But you want to go pretty slow, if you're asking me. Nobody has yet forgotten that West Indian affair of yours; just remember that."

With Judd, one shot called for another. Jesse gave a start and paled slightly at Judd's allusion to "the West Indian affair." Judd waited only long enough to see that the shot found its mark; then, with an amused leer, he rose from the table, his luncheon finished, and lumbered away with a nod.

Jesse, discarding his cigarette, bit off the end of a cigar and fumed. The "West Indian affair" was a sore subject with him solely because the world knew all about it. He had not the least feeling of self-condemnation over it; it was the thought that, for once, he had been found out that caused him to rage internally when the matter was adverted to; for the newspapers had been full of it at the time of the occurrence.

"The West Indian affair," Jesse well knew, had not been forgotten, as Judd had said, nor was it likely to be forgotten. It threw a raking light upon his general attitude toward and his treatment of women. A year before, after one of his periodical triumphs in the cotton market, in which, to quote the newspapers' way of putting it, he had "cleaned up millions," Jesse had made a midwinter cruise of the West Indies on his yacht. A girl of unusual beauty, whom he had met by accident on an automobile tour on Long Island, had been his companion on the cruise. She was inexperienced, of humble parentage, and he had overborne her objections by vaguely intimating something as to a marriage when they should arrive in the West Indies. She had protested when, upon the yacht's touching at many ports, he had of course shown not the least inclination to make good his merely intimated promise; and, in his wrath over her attitude, he had not only committed the indefensible crime, but he had made the stupendous mistake, viewed from the politic point of view, of deserting the girl in a West Indian city, without money or resources, without even her clothing, and sailing back to New York alone.

The girl, thus stranded amid new and unfriendly surroundings, had but one resource—the American consul. The consul provided for her passage back to New York. The correspondents of the New York newspapers in the West Indian city had got hold of the details, adding a few neatly whimsical touches of their own, and for days the newspapers had reeked with the story. There had been talk of prosecuting Jesse for abduction, but he had employed the underground method, rendered easily available to him owing to his wealth, to smother that suggestion. But the grisly affair had thrown a cloud over Jesse from which he knew, raging as he knew it, there was no emerging. Several of his clubs—the good ones—had dropped him; men and women of the world to which he aspired, and in which he had been making progress, cut him right and left; his name had been erased from most of the worth-while invitation lists; and the hole in his armor was wide open to the shafts of the kind Judd had just discharged at him.

Jesse sat at the table and gnawed angrily at his unlighted cigar for a long time after Judd had gone; it was characteristic of him that his compunction was all for himself. He had been found out and pilloried. That was what cut him. He never gave a thought to the young woman whose life he had destroyed.

Jesse had been instantly struck by the beauty of Louise Treharne. He surmised that it was through no complaisance on her part, but purely because she had been helpless in the matter, that she had found herself living with her ostracised mother in the house on the Drive. That situation, he was confident, had been thrust upon her. But this consideration, and the additional one that she was, as he could not have failed to note, nobly undergoing the ordeal, which might have aroused the admiration and excited the sympathy of a man of merely average fairness, had touched no compassionate chord in Langdon Jesse. Adopting the trivial and far-fetched methods of analysis which are employed by men who consider themselves expert in their knowledge of women, he had calmly concluded that in all likelihood Louise Treharne's manner was a skillfully-studied pose. At any rate he meant to find out. He meant to "know her better." It was thus that his determination framed itself in his mind; he would "know her better."

In gaining the attention of women, he believed in the gentle siege and then the grand assault; it was, in truth, the only "system" with which he had any familiarity, and it had generally proved successful.

Jesse returned to his office, summoned his car, went to his suite at the Plaza, gave himself over to the grooming activities of his man for an hour; then, resuming his car, he went to the house on Riverside Drive.

Louise, in brown walking suit and brown turban, her cheeks ruddy from a long and rapid walk from one end of the Park to the other, had just returned when Jesse's card was brought up. She was studying the card, trying to devise an excuse—for she shrank from the thought of seeing him—when her mother, ready for her motor airing, entered the room.

"I just caught sight of Mr. Jesse's car from my window," said Mrs. Treharne to Louise. Louise observed that her mother was in the same fluttered state that she had been in when she had

found Jesse talking to her on the previous Sunday night. "He has sent his card to you? Of course you are going to see him?"

"I think I shall not see him, mother," said Louise, ringing for Heloise with the purpose of sending word that she was indisposed, not at home—anything.

Mrs. Treharne looked annoyed and there was irritation in her question:

"Why not, my dear?"

"I don't care for him, mother," said Louise, frankly. "In fact, I believe I rather dislike him. Do you think he is the sort of man I should meet?"

Louise was intensely disappointed that her mother should care to have her meet Jesse. She tried to assure herself that her mother did not know or realize the character of the man as she herself had heard it briefly described by Laura; but she found that a bit difficult to believe.

"Tell me, please, Louise, why you ask me such a question as that," said Mrs. Treharne, irritably. "What do you know about Mr. Jesse? Who has been telling you things about him?"

Louise, remaining silent, plainly showed that she did not care to answer her mother's question.

"It was Laura, no doubt," went on Mrs. Treharne. "Laura, I begin to fear, is growing garrulous. You must not permit her to put absurd ideas into your head, my dear. I must speak to her about it."

"Pray do not, mother," said Louise, earnestly. "She is one of the dearest women in the world, and everything that she tells me, I know, is not only perfectly true, but for my good. It is not anything said to me by Laura that makes me dislike the idea of receiving Mr. Jesse. It is simply that I don't like him. There is a boldness, an effrontery, a cynicism, about him that make me distrust him. I don't care for his type of man. That is all."

"You must not fall into the habit of forming sudden prejudices, my dear," said her mother, diplomatically assuming an air of grave persuasiveness. "Mr. Jesse no doubt has had his fling at life. What worth-while man of his age hasn't? But he is a man of mark. He has made his way as few men have. Of course you found him handsome, *distingué*? Most women do, my dear. And I could see that he was greatly struck with you. You will soon be twenty, Louise; and Mr. Jesse, perhaps I should remind you, is a great *parti*."

Louise felt herself crimsoning. Her mother did know Jesse's record, then. That was manifest from her words. And yet she was calmly exalting him as an "eligible!"

The girl so shrank from having any further conversation with her mother on the subject just then that she turned to her and said:

"I would not see him of my own volition, mother; but if you very much wish it, I shall see him."

"For heaven's sake, Louise, don't look so terribly austere and crushed over it!" broke out Mrs. Treharne. "The man will not kidnap you! I very much wish that you should be sensible and receive eligible men, of course. Isn't that a perfectly natural wish?"

Louise, without another word, not stopping to remove her turban or even glance in the glass, went down-stairs to receive Jesse. Her mother fluttered past the drawing-room door a moment later, merely stopping for a word of over-effusive greeting to Jesse before joining the waiting Judd in his car. Jesse, whether by accident or from foreknowledge, had timed his visit well. He was quite alone on the floor with Louise Treharne. She caught the gleam of his upraised eyes and noted the bold persistence of the question in them when, still in his fur overcoat, he turned from the contemplation of a picture to greet her.

"Ah," he said with an attempt at airiness, slipping out of the overcoat and extending his hand, "our Empress already has been out?" glancing at her turban and her wind-freshened cheeks. "That is unfortunate. I was about to place my car at her disposal——"

He withdrew his hand, not seeming to notice that Louise had failed to see it.

"Yes, I have been walking," put in Louise, in no wise stiffly, but with an air of preoccupied withdrawal which she genuinely felt. "As to what you call me, I believe I should prefer to be known by my name."

Jesse, remembering what Judd had said as to the likelihood of his being frozen or shrivelled, laughed inwardly. He rather enjoyed being rebuffed by women—at first. It made the game keener. None of them, he remembered now with complaisancy, continued to rebuff him for very long.

"Pardon me, Miss Treharne," he said, with a certain languishing air which Louise found even more offensive than his initial familiarity. "I thought, when the title was so spontaneously applied to you on Sunday night, that perhaps you found it agreeable. But it is difficult to gauge—women." He dwelt upon the word "women," thinking that, considering how recently she had left school, it might flatter her.

Louise chose to talk commonplaces. Her bed-rock genuineness made it impossible for her to affect an interest in a visitor which she did not feel. And her lack of interest in Jesse was

complicated by her growing dislike for him.

"I am doubly disappointed," said Jesse after a pause which he did not find embarrassing. Nothing embarrassed Jesse when he had his mind definitely set upon a purpose. "First, I had hoped, as I say, that, not having been out, you would honor me by accepting the use of my car. Second, I am desolated because you are wearing a hat. I had been promising myself another glimpse of your superb hair. Is it *banal* to put it that way? I am afraid so. But consider the temptation! Was it Aspasia or Cleopatra whose hair was of the glorious shade of yours—or both?"

"Mr. Jesse," said Louise, now quite *déagé*, facing him squarely and speaking with the greatest deliberation, "I seem to find, from my two limited conversations with you, that you are suffering under some sort of a misapprehension as to me. You will discover that yourself, I think, if you will take the trouble to recur to several things you already have said to me after an acquaintanceship, all told, of perhaps ten minutes. Suppose we seek a less personal plane? I am too familiar with my hair to care to have it made a subject of extended remarks on the part of men whom I scarcely know. There are less pointed themes. Permit me to suggest that we occupy ourselves in finding them."

"By God, a broadside!" said Jesse to himself, not in the least abashed; his admiration always grew for women who trounced him—at first. "I didn't think she had it in her! And Judd, the fat imbecile, called her an iceberg! She is a volcano!"

Aloud, he said, with a neatly-assumed air of subjection and penitence:

"Well delivered, Miss Treharne. But I merit it. I have made the error of supposing—"

"That my comparatively recent return from school, and the open-mindedness naturally associated with that," Louise quietly interrupted, "made me a fair target for your somewhat labored and not particularly apt compliments. Yes, you erred decisively there."

"Again!" thought Jesse, bubbling with finely-concealed delight. "She *is* an empress right enough, whether she likes to be called that or not! What a prize!"

Aloud, he said with an air of chastened gravity:

"You do me scant justice there, Miss Treharne, but that is easily passed, seeing how chagrinedly conscious I am that I deserved your rebuke in the first instance. You are fond of motoring?" changing the subject with no great deftness.

"No," replied Louise, sufficiently out of hand. "I don't in the least care for it." The conversation was irksome to her and she would not pretend that it was not.

"I inquired," said Jesse, looking chapfallen though he did not in the least feel so, "because I had been hoping you might do me the honor to accept the use—the steady use—of one of my cars. I have several," this last with an ostentation that rather sickened Louise. But she could not allow the carefully veiled suggestion in his words to pass.

"Mr. Jesse," she said, reverting to her tone of deliberation and again gazing straight at him, "aside from the fact that, as I have told you, I don't in the least care for motoring, will you be good enough to suggest to me just one fairly intelligible reason why I should accept your proffer of the use—the steady use—of one of your cars? It may be that you will have some reason to offer for what, otherwise, I should deem a distinct impertinence."

Jesse's eyes gleamed with the joy of it. "What a prize!" he thought again.

"I seem, Miss Treharne," he said with a laugh which he purposely made uneasy, "to be stumbling upon one blunder after another. There is no reason for my having offered you the use of one of my cars—and I hasten to withdraw the offer, since it seems to offend you—other than my friendship of long standing with your mother and my desire—my hope, I was about to say—that you, too, might consider me worthy of your friendship."

It was rather adroitly turned, but it completely missed fire.

"I don't seem to recall that it is necessary for one to adopt one's mother's friends as one's own," said Louise, without the least hesitancy. His assumption of an easily-penetrated ingratiating manner had thoroughly disgusted her; she wanted him to take his departure; and she chose the most straightout means to that end. There was no possible way for her to know that Jesse enjoyed the early taunts of some women much as he relished the cocktails with which he preceded his dinners, and for very much the same reason—they were appetizers.

He rose with an air of irresolution which he was far from feeling.

"I fear," he said, resignedly, "that something has happened—or perhaps that something has been said—to predispose or prejudice you against me, Miss Treharne. It is a conclusion to which I am driven."

He paused, then faced her with an appearance of frankness which he was adept at assuming.

"Miss Treharne," he went on, cleverly adopting a tone with a tremolo note in it, "you will grant, I think, that men—men, that is to say, who cut any sort of figure in affairs"—a flourish here—"often are misjudged. Without in the least desiring to pose as one who has been a victim of such misjudgment, I feel, nevertheless—" Here he stopped, having carefully calculated his stopping

point, and, with impulsively extended hands, he went on with a beautifully acted semblance of real feeling: "Miss Treharne, I merely ask you to give me a chance to prove myself; a chance at least to wear the candidate's stripes for your friendship."

Despite her youthfulness and her utter inexperience with men of Jesse's type, Louise, aided by an unusually subtle intuition, and mindful of what she had heard of Jesse, caught the hollow ring in his tone, detected the false shifty light in his now furtive, eager eyes.

She rose.

"You are quite overpoweringly in earnest over what seems to me a very trivial matter, Mr. Jesse," she said with a little laugh that sounded harsh even to her own ears.

"You gravely underestimate the value of your friendship in calling it trivial, Miss Treharne," said Jesse, rising also; for at length he was ready to accept the dismissal which a less thick-skinned man, even of his type, would have taken long before.

"I have not been in the habit of placing any sort of an appraisal upon the value of my friendship," she replied, succinctly.

He thrust his arms into the sleeves of his greatcoat of fur and strolled, with a downcast air, to the drawing-room door.

"This is not your normal mood, Miss Treharne," he said, turning upon her a smile that he meant to be wan. "You see what unresentful justice I do you. There are to be other days. I shall find you in a humor less inclined to magnify my candidly professed demerits. I hope to have an opportunity to prove to you that I have at least a few merits to balance the faults."

The hint was sufficiently broad, but Louise appeared to be momentarily obtuse. At any rate she did not extend the invitation he too patently fished for. Her reticence in that respect, however, did not in the least abash Jesse.

"At least I have the cheering knowledge that this door is open to me," he said, entering the foyer on his way out. "Have I not?"

Unavailingly Louise strove to steady herself in order to thrust back the color which she felt mounting to her face.

"It is not my door," she said in a low tone; and instantly was keenly sorry for having said it.

"Oh, I quite understand that," he said, with an air of lightness, though at the moment he did not dare to turn and look at her. "But it is all the same, since it is your mother's, is it not?"

She made no reply. She felt that she deserved the barb for having given him the opportunity to discharge it. He bowed low, essayed the smile that he considered his most engaging one, and went out to his waiting car.

For the second time after having been in the presence of Langdon Jesse, Louise went to her rooms and threw all the windows wide; then stood in the wintry eddies and permitted the cold, sweet air to enwrap and purify her.

When Mrs. Treharne, after leaving Louise and Jesse together, stepped into the car with Judd, she found that adipose man of finance chuckling softly to himself. She deigned not to inquire of him the reason for his chuckling—knowing, of course, that presently he would be volunteering that information himself.

"That was Jesse's car in front of the house, wasn't it, Tony?" he asked her, still chuckling unpleasantly as the car pulled away from the curb.

"Yes," she replied, alert of a sudden, but disdaining to appear so.

"Jesse is calling to see—er—your daughter, eh?" Judd asked, continuing his rumbling manifestations of joviality.

"He is," replied Mrs. Treharne, carefully screening her impatience to catch Judd's drift. "But I fail to see why that fact should incite you to give vent to such a harrowing series of low comedy chuckles."

"Quite so, quite so, my dear Antoinette," said Judd, soothingly, but not in the least diminishing his choppy cachinnatory performance.

Mrs. Treharne, with an air of disgust which merely screened her worried curiosity, permitted him to continue for a while. Then she said, with an air of gravity intended to drag him back to his naturally sullen state, but assumed also for the purpose of sounding him:

"Jesse was plainly struck with Louise on Sunday night last. Her position now, of course, is hideous. Jesse may be the solution."

Judd straightened himself in his seat and suddenly stopped chuckling. Then he glanced with quizzical keenness out of slitted eyes at his companion.

"Meaning, I suppose," he said, "that you have an idea that Jesse might take it into his head to marry her?"

"What else could I mean?" she asked him huskily.

"Quite so, quite so, my dear Antoinette," said Judd, leaning back in his seat again. "Of course. Certainly. I fully understand you," and he closed his eyes as if about to lapse into a refreshing nap.

Mrs. Treharne, distinctly wrought up, grasped one of the lapels of his seal-lined greatcoat and shook him determinedly.

"Be good enough to explain to me, and at once, precisely what you mean," she said rapidly, a growing hoarseness in her tone.

Judd, for his part, promptly relapsed into his chuckling.

"It is nothing, my dear—nothing at all, I assure you," he said, between wheezes. "Only it strikes me as rather diverting that anybody should consider Jesse in the light of a matrimonial eligible. When, by the way, did you gather the idea that Jesse was a marrying man? Since that—er—somewhat widely-exploited little affair of his in the West Indies last year? Or more recently?"

Judd generally won in the little skirmishes they had in the motor car. The fact that he had won again was plainly indicated by the fact that she remained silent for the remainder of the ride.

CHAPTER VI

Louise, still bound by the discipline of school, was not a late sleeper. As early as seven o'clock on the morning following Langdon Jesse's call she was lying awake, striving to dispel, by the process of optimistic reasoning, the sinister nimbus that seemed to be enshrouding her, when the telephone bell in her dressing room began to ring persistently. Louise sprang up to answer the call.

"I know it is a barbarous hour, dear," Laura's cheerful contralto came over the wire, "but I've just been aroused from my juvenile slumbers by the telephone, and of course I must have revenge upon somebody. Listen, dear: I know that it only takes you about fifteen minutes to dress—of course you are not dressed yet? Well, begin this instant. Put on something for tramping and fussing around in the country. You must be over here by eight o'clock. We are going to have a romping day in the country. Now, hurry, won't you?"

"Just you and I, Laura?" asked Louise, delighted. A day in the country! Open fields to dispel vapors! The thought of it made her eager and excited.

"No, there'll be another," replied Laura. "I disregard the axiom, you know, that 'Three is a crowd.' Three needn't be a crowd if one of the three has a little tact and—and the knack of opportunely vanishing," and Louise heard her soft laughter. "A man I know has what he calls a little tumbledown place, with some ground around it, over in Jersey. He calls it Sullen Manor, because he says he always goes over there, in preference to all other places, when he feels the imperative need to sulk. Now, there is not another moment to be wasted in 'phoning. Start to dress this very instant! Will you solemnly promise me to be here on the stroke of eight? Very well. I shall be waiting. Goodbye."

Louise, "very trig and complete," as Laura remarked, in a suit of grey with a matching fur-trimmed grey toque, was with the astonished Laura a good quarter of an hour before eight.

"Heaven knows how you do it," said Laura, still in the hands of her maid. "Go into the dining-room and have some coffee, dear. I shall be with you directly."

Louise, humming happily at the thought of the care-free day ahead of her, sped into the bright dining room. John Blythe, sipping coffee at the table, rose to meet her. He looked fine and upstanding in his fresh, rough tweeds, his close-shaven face ruddy and his clear grey eyes showing an agate sparkle from the brisk walk to Laura's apartment from his own.

Louise halted abruptly in her astonishment when she saw him. But she was extremely glad to see him and said so frankly, resting her hand in his muscular but gentle clasp for a moment.

"Laura packed me off here to take some coffee," she said. "Does she know you are here? And how early you are abroad in the world. We are stirring about at this sunrise hour because we are going for a day in the country—and I am mad to get there! In my previous incarnation I must have been a milkmaid, for I dearly love the country." Then she added, with a little air of disappointment: "I do wish you were coming with us!"

"That," replied Blythe, smiling his wide smile as he poured coffee for her, "is precisely what I am going to do."

Louise, in the act of taking the cup from him, looked into his face with an expression of pleased mystification on her own.

"Why, what is—how can—" She broke off suddenly and rose from her chair in the intensity of a pleasure which she herself, at that moment, could scarcely have analyzed. "Surely," she went on in a lower tone, her face irradiated by a smile which it thrilled him to observe, "Surely you are not the man who sulks?"

"One of Laura's agreeable fictions," he pronounced. "She calls my little place Sullen Manor, and declares that it is my sulking cave, because I've not had her over there to see it. I've had no chance to ask her until now. Do you mean to say she did not tell you that I was the organizer of this expedition?"

"The secretive creature did not even hint at such a thing," declared Louise, not very successfully pretending to be miffed.

"Now I call that downright neglect of orders," said Blythe, also striving to show a serious face. "I particularly charged Laura to tell you who the party of the third part was to be in order that you might have the privilege of refusing to accompany the expedition in case you so desired. A shocking departure from discipline on Laura's part."

"Then it was you," said Louise, lighter in spirits than she had been for a long time, "who invited me?"

"My dear, don't you know he would say so to you no matter whether it were true or not?" said Laura, who had caught Louise's question, breezing into the dining-room at that moment. "Come on, children. Your antique chaperone is impatient to be on her disregarded way. Louise, have you had your coffee? And some toast? Finish them this instant! Even so ascetic and imaginative a person as Mr. Blythe knows that a girl must have a little breakfast before venturing upon an expedition into the jungles of Jersey."

Laura, perfect in a walking suit of shepherd's plaid and tan walking shoes, had, on this morning, the animation as well as the beauty of a girl. Blythe compared the two as they stood side by side, hastily sipping coffee. Laura, with her Judith-black, glossy hair and fresh, youthful color, and Louise with her thick coils of vivid, velvety auburn and glowing ivory pallor—Blythe thought, studying them for a moment over the rim of his cup, that he had never seen so splendid a contrast.

"*Allons!*" Laura broke in upon his reflection. "Are we to dawdle here until luncheon time? Already it is," looking at her watch, "twenty-four seconds past eight!"

Blythe, slipping into his greatcoat, turned a solemn face upon Laura when they had reached the hall, outward-bound.

"There is one thing, Laura, in connection with this expedition, that I am keenly sorry for," he said, assuming a sepulchral tone.

"Why, what is that?" asked Laura, a little alarmedly, taken off her guard.

"Well," replied Blythe, still solemn, "you'll only be away from here for about fifteen hours, and how are you possibly going to have your apartment completely redecorated, from forepeak to mizzen, aloft and aloft, in that space of time?"

"Tush!" laughed Laura. "There will be plenty of time to have the place done over—and it really does sorely need it, now doesn't it?" this with a wistfulness at which Blythe and Louise laughed, "—when I take Louise to Europe with me in May—less than three months off."

"Am I to go to Europe with you, dear—really?" asked Louise, surprised and pleased; for Laura had said nothing about it before.

"Most assuredly you are," replied Laura, entirely in earnest. "If, that is, you can make up your mind to be burdened by the companionship of one so aged."

The topic was lost in the excitement of their arranging themselves in Laura's car, which was to take them to the ferry. But the thought of it recurred to Louise several times during the ride to the ferry. It was an alluring prospect, barring the obstacles. How could she leave her mother, even for a short time, now that she had rejoined her after a separation of years? Finally she was able to dismiss such cogitations and yield herself to the enjoyment of the day ahead.

It was one of those unseasonably mild days in late February that occasionally "drop in" to point an accusing finger at the harshness of winter. A brilliant sun swam in a cloudless sky, and the soft yet invigorating balminess of late April was, as they noticed when they sped by the Park, deluding the buds of tree and hedge into swelling prematurely and even seducing the willows into a vague, timidly displayed elusive green. Hardy, pioneering robins, advance couriers sent forth to investigate the senile endurance of winter, hopped about the Park sward. School-ward bound boys, out of sight of their homes, were doffing their irksome overcoats, and thrusting them, blanket-wise, at demure little schoolgirls who, in turn, were carrying their stuffy jackets over their arms. Motormen and truckmen were smothering yawns that denoted a premature spring fever. Business-bound men, going more slowly than usual, glancing occasionally at the sky of sapphire, and feeling on their cheeks gusty little zephyrs from the South, thought of fishing "where the wild stream sings." Belated shopgirls, sensing the morning's benign balm as they hurried through crowds, thought of hats and furbelows for the season that, they surmised, was almost upon them.

In the ferry-bound automobile, John Blythe was thinking about a letter hid in the pocket of his coat and wondering how the person whom the letter most concerned would regard its contents. Louise was wondering if her mother would be annoyed over the word she had left with her maid that she would be with Laura for the entire day and part of the evening; occasionally she glanced sidelongwise at John Blythe, when there was no possibility of his catching her at it, and strove vaguely to analyze the sense of power, mingled with kindness, which his presence diffused. Laura, leaning back, emitting an occasional absurdity, studied them both and wondered, her eyes a little dreamy, if matters ever actually turned out in real life as they did in novels.

They stood on the ferryboat's prow, bathing in the sun's relenting glow and blinking at the gold-tipped river crests; and it was only ten o'clock when, after half an hour's ride on the slam-bang little accommodation train, they debarked at the spick-and-span little station, at the side of which Blythe's care-taker, a grinning but stolid German, had drawn up a fine and comfortable, if old-fashioned, surrey to which was hitched a pair of glossy, mettlesome sorrels.

Louise and Laura felt like clapping their hands when, after the two-mile drive through woodlands and past neat, well-cared-for little farms the clean, sweet-smelling soil of which already was being turned up, they drove on a firm, natural road through a wide wooden gate and came in sight of the pretty Colonial house, with four bright yellow pillars, topped by a balcony of snowy white, with wide-open shutters of an intense green, and a big white double door at the sides of which were little grooved columns surmounted by the inevitable Corinthian capitals. The house, fresh and smart in its old-fashioned way, was roomier than it looked from the front. It was divided by a wide hall which ran its entire length on the ground floor; and a wide stairway ran from the hall in front to the second floor, where, after the Colonial fashion, the balcony gave upon sleeping rooms.

"Sullen Manor," announced Laura, assuming the megaphonic utterance of the sight-seeing car's expounder. "But doesn't it beautifully belie its name and its owner's doldrumish use of it? Why, it is as pretty and cheerful as a pigeon-cote snuggling under sifting cherry blossoms! How much ground is there around the place, John?"

"Twenty acres," replied Blythe, smiling a little gravely. "I suppose I know every foot of the twenty acres, too, though I left here—it is where I was born, you know—when I was seven years old. My father lost the place, you see, through bad investments and what not, when I was at that age. We moved to New Orleans, and a year later both my father and mother were swept off by yellow fever. I only remember them in a shadowy way. Oddly enough, I remember this old place much better than I do my parents; its corners, clumps of trees, and that sort of thing. I had a chance to get the place back a couple of years ago, and I seized it. A good deal of the gear that was here when I was a tyke is still here, stowed in the attic; for the place has not been often occupied since we left it. I've refurnished it in a sort of a way. I hope you'll not find it so bad, Laura; but I'm prepared right now to wilt under your superior, and, I might say, your inveterate knowledge of interior decoration."

Blythe looked a bit self-disdainful over what had been rather a long speech for him, particularly when he observed that Louise had been waiting to ask him something.

"You will not think me inquisitive, Mr. Blythe?" she prefaced. "But what you said about the—the carrying away of your people by yellow fever not only touched me but aroused my curiosity. You were only a child then, of course. What did you do then? Were you taken in hand by relatives? You are not annoyed because I ask?"

"Why should I be?" Blythe laughed. "Particularly when the reply is so simple. I have no relatives—had none then. When my people died I was on the streets. I believe I hold the record yet for the number of *New Orleans Picayunes* and *Times-Democrats* sold in a given time. Whatever else I became later, I certainly was a hustling newsboy. Then I came up here and I've been working ever since. My annals, you see, Miss Treharne, are distinctly dry."

"But your education?" Louise asked, her eyes alight with an interest which caused Laura to smile.

"Well," said Blythe, "there are plenty of people living in Princeton yet, I think, who will tell you, if ever you take the pains to inquire, that I was an exceptionally successful furnace-tender, tinker, chore-doer, and all-round roustabout. Oh, yes, I forget. I was a persuasive peddler of soap and starch before the Lord, too. Likewise, I acquired the knack of mending umbrellas. Not to overlook the fact that, odd times, I drove a village hack. At Princeton, in short, I was virtually everything and anything you can think of except a barber and a policeman. I shied at those two occupations."

"And you took your degree?" inquired Louise.

"Just squeezed through," replied Blythe.

"Don't you believe anything of the sort, Louise," put in Laura. "He was valedictorian of his class, and, worse than that, he played full-back with his eleven, and a sensational full-back too. I ought to know. I am old enough, woe is me, to have been a woman grown the year John Blythe contributed a good three-fifths to the Tigers' victory over Yale."

Blythe, flushing embarrassedly, was holding up a protesting hand when the surrey drew up in front of the clean, scrubbed porch and the care-taker's wife, a freshly-ginghamed, bright-eyed German woman of middle age, appeared to receive them. Then, from around the left side of the

house, a terrific yipping began. Two hysterically joyous fox terriers, scenting their master, came tearing around the porch and literally leaped upon Blythe. Then they "side-wheeled" in circles over the lawn, first listing precariously over on starboard legs and then on port, whimpering in their sheer delight as they tore around. A huge Angora cat, as they entered the hall, made two bounds of it from the huge fireplace, from which a pair of smouldering logs diffused a red glow that contrasted oddly with the streaming sunlight, to rub her sides, purring almost vociferously as she did so, against Blythe's trousers legs. Later in the day, she was solemnly to conduct Blythe and his guests to the cellar for the purpose of exhibiting a litter which kept the women chained around the basket for nearly an hour.

In the lives of most men and women there are days—usually unanticipated days—so encompassed, aureoled, by a memorable happiness that, ever afterward, in hours of retrospection, they mark the beginning or denote the closing of the eventful periods.

This was such a day for Blythe and Louise and Laura. They rambled through miles of field and forest, chattering and laughing like children a-berrying; the women's hair blowing free or tumbling down altogether, their skirts caught by brambles, their deadliest fears aroused by the inevitable ruminative cow. They climbed fences, while Blythe pretended that something had just dropped out of his pocket back of him. They romped with the dogs, they tossed pebbles at a mark in a garrulous little just-thawed stream, they even sat down on an inviting little mound, beneath an old elm, and played at mumblety-peg with Blythe's jack-knife and quarrelled laughingly over the score of the game.

When they returned to the house in mid-afternoon, they found the German woman preparing a meal for them. Laura and Louise insisted upon helping her. In fact, they banished her from the kitchen altogether and did it all themselves. Louise announced, her features set rather determinedly, that she was going to make some biscuits, whereupon Blythe, asking her if she'd learned that in the cooking class at Miss Mayhew's school, incontinently fled in well-simulated alarm. But he came back to the spotless kitchen to watch the two women, aproned to the neck, and their arms bared to the shoulders, breeze about with their preparations. He was repaid for his inquisitiveness by being swaddled in an apron and set to peel the potatoes.

The meal was an unqualified success, including the biscuits, which, to Louise's intense surprise, were superb, although Blythe impertinently maintained that the German woman really had made them and that Louise had merely heated them over. The light began to fall as they chatted around the table, and Blythe, having no great liking for oil lamps, tossed logs on to the dining-room fireplace for the flickering glow of their light. Blythe lighted a cigar with his coffee and fell into a silence of content when Louise and Laura began to hum, very low, snatches of old songs in unison; Laura in her deep, moving contralto, with an appealing little "break" in it, and Louise in a clear, sweet soprano—she had been the honor girl of her school for her singing.

"More," Blythe would give the repressed command when they ceased; and they would willingly obey. After a while, darkness having quite fallen, Laura went to another part of the house for her after-dinner cigarette. She made it a practice not to take her cigarettes in the presence of quite young women.

Blythe, silent enough now, and his silence tacitly concurred in by Louise, who also had become preoccupied, under the spell of the flickering fire-light and her nearness, alone, to a man who made a strong appeal to her imagination, brought up a deep leather chair before the logs and motioned to Louise to take it. But she pulled an old-fashioned three-legged footstool before the fire, and Blythe himself had to take the chair. Thus they sat silent for a while, listening to the sputtering of the green logs.

"Louise."

It was the first time he had called her that. But she did not even turn her head. She was sitting near him on the low stool, chin in palm, her face illumined by the fire's glow. It was agreeable to hear him call her Louise. He knew her father. She had been thinking of her father while she and Laura were singing softly.

"Yes," she said, quietly.

"I am to be your guardian, Louise. Does that please you?"

Blythe, leaning back in the deep chair, did not take his eyes from the murmuring logs. Louise, chin still in palm, turned to look at him calmly. Then she gazed back into the fire.

"Yes," she replied, no surprise in her tone. Perhaps, she thought whimsically, the dancing, leaping flames had hypnotized her. But she was not surprised. She was, instead, swept by a surge of deep gladness. "You have a letter from my father?"

"Two," said Blythe. "One of them is for you."

She moved her little stool close to his chair and he handed her the packet. The letter for her was under cover of the letter addressed to Blythe. Louise studied, in the fire's glow, the bold, clear address on the envelope. It was the first time she had ever seen her father's handwriting. Her eyes became slightly suffused at that thought. Her letter dropped out of the larger envelope.

"If you care to, read the one addressed to me first, Louise," said Blythe.

Louise, turning a bit the better to catch the fire's glow, read her father's letter addressed to Blythe—as far as she could read it. She was nearly at the end when her unshed tears blinded her. Blythe's hand, which she then felt, without surprise, softly clasping both of her own as they rested in her lap, felt very cool and soothing to her.

After a while, nothing having been said by either, she broke the envelope and read her father's letter to her. It was not a long letter, but it took her a long time to read it; the tears would blot out the words, try as she would to crowd them back.

Her father's letter to Blythe was couched in the tone a man assumes in addressing his lawyer who also is his friend. It bore the postmark of Lahaina, Island of Maui, Hawaii—George Treharne's sugar plantations were on that island of the Hawaiian group. The letter concerned Louise wholly. He was tied to his plantations, owing to labor troubles with the Japanese, and there was no possibility of his visiting the States for some time. He had been surprised to hear that Louise had left school. She was now a woman grown. He had looked forward to the time when, he hoped, she might feel an impulse to come to him. If that time had not yet come he trusted implicitly to Blythe to see that she should be properly bestowed, placed in a fitting environment, and shielded from baneful influences. He knew that Blythe, the young partner of his old lawyer, now dead, would not fail him in this. He desired that Blythe should apply immediately for a court order appointing him his daughter's legal guardian. He inclosed the necessary papers for the accomplishment of that purpose. He was eager to see his daughter, and hoped to see her within a year. In the meantime he confidently committed her to Blythe's watchful guardianship.

His letter to Louise bespoke a deep and solicitous affection. He told her of Blythe, adverting to him in terms of praise as a man of exalted honor ("Poor father! as if I did not know that," thought Louise, when she came to that passage), and beseeching her to follow Blythe's advice in all matters in which his large experience would be invaluable to her. He added that he felt that she would not find Blythe's suggestions irksome. He inclosed a draft on a Honolulu bank for five thousand dollars, which would suffice for her needs until she heard from him again. He hoped to see her within a year. And he was hoping that she would be glad to see her "always-affectionate father, George Treharne."

At length Louise conquered her tears and turned a fire-illuminated smile upon Blythe.

"I am glad," she said simply. "Even before you told me, this had been the happiest day of my life. Now it is beautiful. I cannot even begin to tell you how beautiful it is."

"Then I shall apply for the guardianship, Louise," said Blythe. "I wish I could say how it pleases me to know you are willing that I should."

"Willing?" said Louise. "Do you know that, aside from Laura, you are the only—" She had been close to saying "friend;" but she could not leave her mother out in that way;—"the only adviser I have?"

Blythe, glancing from the logs into her eyes as she said that, longed to take her in his arms.

Laura, at the piano in the music room on the other side of the hall, began softly to play the barcarole from "The Tales of Hoffmann." They listened for a little while, and then Blythe said, smiling gravely:

"As your father says, I shall not be, I hope, an exacting guardian. There are many things upon which I shall not touch at all. I shall not affect to believe that you do not know what I mean."

"I know," said Louise.

"Your duty is that to which your heart prompts you—I know that," said Blythe. "It is not for me, nor for anyone else, to seek to alter your conception of your duty. All that I ask is that you call upon me in your time of need, if that time should ever come; and I hope it never shall. For the rest, nothing is to be changed at my suggestion. The scroll is in your hands, Louise. Only when you need me—I shall not fail you then."

"Would it be unworthy," she asked him after a pause, "if I were not to tell my father—just yet—that I am living with my mother?"

Blythe knew what a hard question that had been for her to ask.

"Not unworthy, or anything like it, I think," he replied promptly, "when the motive is so pure and fine."

Impulsively she rose and held out both of her hands and he took them in his.

"Call Laura," she said. "I want to tell her. I want my guardian angel to meet my guardian."

Laura came into the room as she spoke. She walked over to Louise and placed an arm around her.

"I knew it, dear," she said to Louise. "John told me last night. That is why we are over here. He thought, and I agreed with him, that it would be better to tell you at the close of a happy day. And was there *ever* such a happy day since the world began?"

Blythe looked at his watch and whistled.

"We've half an hour to make the last New York train tonight, and a two-mile drive to the station," he said. "If we miss the train we'll have to stay here all night."

Laura gathered up her skirts and raced for her hat, Louise after her.

"Stay here all night!" gasped Laura. "You are making a glorious beginning as a guardian, aren't you!"

It was past ten o'clock when Louise, in Laura's car, which had been waiting at the ferry, reached the house on the Drive, Laura having been dropped at her apartment. The sheer happiness of the day still absorbed her. Up to the moment when the car pulled up at the curb she had been going over and over, since parting with Blythe and Laura, the incidents of the day that had made it such an oasis of happiness.

But it all disappeared like a suddenly-vanishing mirage when, upon stepping to the pavement, she saw Langdon Jesse's car drawn up at the curb.

CHAPTER VII

Jesse's car looming suddenly upon her, instantly dissolved Louise's happy absorption and aroused within her the foreboding that she was upon the threshold of something sinister; and the premonition caused her to become physically and mentally tense as she ascended the steps.

The impact of the hall's stream of light slightly blinded and confused her as she entered; but she very soon discerned Jesse and Judd standing before the wide, brassy fireplace. Both were in shaggy automobile coats and plainly were about to leave the house. Judd, his burnished bald pate mottledly rosy from the heat of the blazing logs, was standing with his back to the fire, his hands thrust in the greatcoat pockets, his heavy under-shot jaw working upon an imaginary cud. Jesse, towering over the other man, but his own increasing over-bulkiness made more manifest by his bulging coat of fur, was the first to see Louise, who, with an inclination of the head, was for passing them to gain the stairs. Neither Jesse nor Judd intended that this should be. The two had dined together. The blitheness of their humor, therefore, contained also a seasoning of carelessness.

Without the least movement of his grotesquely-paunched body, Judd turned his head sidewise and viewed Louise quizzically through his sharp, red-rimmed, oddly small eyes.

"Evening—er—daughter," he said to her in an experimental but sufficiently matter-of-fact tone.

The greeting sounded so incredible that Louise, coming to a sudden halt, rested her hands on the back of a chair and stared curiously at him without a word. She felt very cold, in spite of the excessive heat of the hall; but she was amazed quite beyond the power of speech. While thus she stood, staring puzzledly at Judd, Jesse faced her, and, bringing his heels together with a click, made her a low bow accompanied by a sweeping cross-wise gesture with his cap of fur. It is a dangerous thing for a man to attempt the grand manner unless he is very sure of his practice or at least of the indulgence of his gallery. Louise, startled as she was, could not fail to notice the inadequacy of his attempt.

"Glad I haven't missed you, after all, Lou—Miss Treharne," said Jesse, catching himself before he had quite finished addressing her by her first name. His tone was grossly familiar; and Louise, merely glancing at him, saw that the question that was always in his eyes when he looked at her now was made more searching and persistent by his potations. "I've been dallying a-purpose. I came to offer you the use of my box for 'Pelleas and Melisande'—it's being done at the Manhattan tonight for the first time here, of course you know. They're repeating it Friday night, though. Mary Garden's a dream in it, they say—she's a dream in any old thing—or hardly anything, when it comes to that," and he laughed boldly at the suggestiveness of the remark. "The box is yours for Friday night. May I hope to join—"

Louise, as he spoke, had been steadying herself to make reply. Now she raised a hand for him to desist. The gesture was simple, but he obeyed the implied command. Perhaps it was the picture that she made in her anger that warned him. She stood straight, shoulders back, head up, eyes gazing unflinchingly into his; a moving figure of womanly dauntlessness, had there been eyes there thus to appraise her attitude.

"Mr. Jesse," she said in a clear tone, picking her words with a cutting deliberation, "you are not, I have heard, deficient in intelligence. A very short time ago you had the hardihood to proffer me the use of one of your cars. I declined for the same reason that I now repeat in refusing your proffer of the use of your opera box. There is no imaginable reason why I should accept such favors at your hands. I told you that before. And you knew it before I told you. My acquaintanceship with you is merely casual. But, since you force me to it by disregarding what I said before, permit me to say now, explicitly and I hope finally, that I am not conscious of the least desire to become further acquainted with you."

Judd choked on a gloatful cough. While Louise had been speaking he had been grinning malevolently at Jesse, the grin saying, as plainly as words: "Well, I was right, wasn't I? You're properly shrivelled, aren't you?"

Jesse smiled chagrinedly and, as he imagined, conciliatingly. But he evaded her direct gaze, and his wholly unconvincing assumption of the grand manner had quite departed. He was not, however, appreciably disturbed. Jesse had a habit of discounting such setbacks in advance. The stock market and women required deft manipulation, he considered, and his fame as a manipulator was established. The citadel, finally scaled, would be the more inviting for the difficulty of the besiegement. He entertained no doubts as to the outcome. In the meantime Louise could enjoy her schoolgirl heroics. He was not unfamiliar with that sort of thing. But in time they all sensed the glamour of the advantages he so well knew how to dangle before them. These thoughts danced agreeably before Jesse's mental vision even at the moment when he felt himself, with no sense of degradation, to be the target of Louise's scorn.

"Well, I am sorry, Miss Treharne, that you still seem to misunderstand me," said Jesse, attempting the tone of one whose sorrow overtops his mortification.

"It is because I do understand you that I speak as I do," replied Louise with perfect self-possession. Judd choked again in the gleefulness of his vindication and Jesse shot him a malignant glance. Then and there Jesse began to outline a little plan whereby, by means of "market" pressure, he calculated that he could promptly and effectually change Judd's attitude.

"I prefer to believe, Miss Treharne," said Jesse, "that you are indisposed and that upon reflection you will be sorry that——"

"I am perfectly well," interposed Louise in a tone of cold finality, "and I shall not be sorry." Then she passed up the stairs to her mother's apartments.

"Now will you be good!" broke out Judd, chuckling vindictively, when she had gone. "Say, Jesse, I wonder if you feel so much like a clipped and trimmed Lothario as you look?"

Jesse, his mask off, growled something inarticulate by way of reply. Then: "Are you for the club?" he asked Judd. He decided that he might as well test the strength of the screws upon Judd at once. They went out together.

Mrs. Treharne, dressed for a restaurant supper party that was to assemble at midnight, was reading, with the wistfulness of one debarred, the "society news" in a chattering and generally wrong weekly publication when Louise entered her sitting room. She was wonderfully coiffured, and encased in a *décolleté* dress that somewhat too liberately exploited the chisellings of her still milky arms and shoulders. She stiffened slightly in her chair at the sight of Louise; and the dimplings which had been creasing her plastic face in her enjoyment of the publication's malevolent gossip gave way to the expression of peevishness with which her daughter was becoming all too well acquainted.

"Well, my dear," she started to say as Louise, in whose eyes the embers of the wrath Jesse's words had aroused still slumbered, "I must say that you have a cool way of walking off and——"

"No reproaches just now, mother, please," interposed Louise, sinking wearily into a chair. "I never had a happier day until, returning here——"

She paused, passing a hand before her eyes. She was loth to enter upon the topic of Judd and Jesse with her mother. But Mrs. Treharne, looking at her more closely, saw her perturbation.

"Oh, you met Mr. Judd and Mr. Jesse as you came in?" she asked, a note of slightly worried curiosity in her tone. "Were they——?" She broke off. "Men are men, my dear," she resumed, placatingly. "They had been dining—I noticed that. But of course they said nothing to——"

"Your business adviser," said Louise—she could not bring herself to mention Judd's name—"greeted me as 'daughter.' I remember now that I was too much startled to tell him that he must not repeat that."

"Tush, Louise—a slip of the tongue, of course," said Mrs. Treharne, appeasingly. Privately, however, she already began to contrive the things she intended to say to Judd on the morrow. "And Mr. Jesse—did he——"

"Mr. Jesse," interposed Louise, "caught himself as he was about to address me as Louise. He offered me the use of his box at the opera. Several days ago—I was too chagrined to tell you—he insisted upon my accepting the use of one of his automobiles. I hope I made it plain to him tonight—and I tried hard enough to make it plain to him before—that there is not the remotest chance that I shall ever accept his sinister civilities."

"Why 'sinister,' Louise?" put Mrs. Treharne, bridling. "How can you possibly put such a construction upon it when one of my friends generously extends to you courtesies that are commonly and with perfect propriety accepted by——"

Louise sighed wearily and held up a pleading hand.

"Don't ask me such a question—please, mother," she entreated. "You don't know how the subject revolts me."

"But, my dear," her mother persisted, "what is it that you have against Mr. Jesse? I am entitled to

know."

"I am not sufficiently interested in the man to have anything against him," replied Louise. "Is it not enough that I loathe him?"

"No, Louise, it is not enough," pronounced her mother, plainly ready for argument on the subject. "You are too young a woman to be forming prejudices or leaping to conclusions. What do you know about Mr. Jesse that has caused you to form such an opinion of him?"

Louise hesitated. Her intimacy with her mother had never been very great. There had never been any plain talk, or even mother-and-daughter confidences, between them. The theme as she had said, was revolting to her. But her mother deliberately chose to remain on that ground. There was no path around the point her mother dwelt upon. Louise entertained no thought of evading it.

"Mother," she said, leaning forward in her earnestness, "it is natural enough, I know, that you still regard me as a child. But, before I answer your question, are you willing to grant, at least for the time, that I am a woman?"

"Don't be so unmitigatedly solemn about it, Louise," demurred her mother, evasively. "My question was simple enough."

"Simple enough to put, but not so simple for me to answer," was Louise's quiet reply. "But I shall answer it nevertheless. The reason, then, why I do not intend to have any further contact with Langdon Jesse is that he is one of the most notorious libertines in New York; a man who regards women from a single angle—as his prey. Everybody seems to know that, mother, except you: and you don't know it, do you?" There was a pathos in the eagerness with which the girl asked the question; it spoke of a dim hope she yet had that perhaps, after all, her mother did not know about Langdon Jesse. Her mother's harsh, dodging reply quickly dashed that hope.

"Who has been telling you such scandalous things, child?" Mrs. Treharne demanded. "Laura Stedham?"

"You must not ask me that question," replied Louise, quietly firm. "But if nobody had told me about Langdon Jesse—and I shall not deny that I was told—I am sure my instinct would have taught me to suspect him of being—precisely what he is."

Mrs. Treharne shook her head dismally.

"It is exactly as I feared it would be, Louise," she said, sighing drearily. "You are narrow, restricted, pent-in; you haven't even a symptom of bigness of view; your horizon is no wider than the room in which you happen to be. I always feared they would make a prude of you. Now I see that my forebodings were right."

Louise, very much wrought upon, rose rather unsteadily and walked over to her mother's chair.

"You repel me a little, mother," she said in a low tone. "It hurts me to say that: but it is the truth. If I am a prude, then I am unconscious of it. It may be that I don't know your definition of the word." She paused and gazed about the room wearily. "If to be a prude," she resumed, "is to be conscious of the desire and the intention to be an honest woman, then, mother, I am a prude," her voice breaking a little. "And if one must be a prude to recoil from the hideous advances of a man like Langdon Jesse, then again I am a prude."

She had been unfairly placed on the defensive. She had not meant to wound. But, while her words cut her mother like the impact of thongs, they did not arouse within her a sense of the humiliation of her position.

"Louise," she asked, hoarsely, moistening her dry lips, "are you saying these—these stinging things with the deliberate purpose of reflecting upon your mother?"

Addressed to anybody else but Louise, the question would have been absurd in the opening it afforded.

"I should hate to have you think that," replied Louise, flushing hotly and taking her mother's hands. "You don't think such a thing, do you?"

"I don't know what to think," said her mother, taking the martyred tone, "when you say such horrid things. I never heard you say such—such flaying things before. I can't think what is coming over you."

"I am very lonesome, for one thing," said Louise, looking at her mother through suffused eyes. "I see so little of you. Perhaps I become moody. But I never mean, never meant, to say anything to hurt you, dear."

"But you see enough, if not too much, of—of others, Louise," put in her mother, slightly mollified. "You have been with Laura ever since early this morning?"

"Yes; with Laura—and another," replied Louise, unflinchingly candid.

"Another?" said Mrs. Treharne, querulously. "Whom do you mean?"

"Mr. John Blythe," replied Louise, coloring.

"John Blythe?" said her mother, wonderingly. "You were with Laura and John Blythe? So that is the direction of the wind? Laura is trying to—" She broke off when she saw the expression of pain on her daughter's face.

"Please don't say that," said Louise, her face and forehead a vivid crimson. "I have often met Mr. Blythe at Laura's. I couldn't begin to tell you how I esteem him. And, mother, he is to be my guardian." She had meant to tell her mother that at a more fitting time; but, since Blythe's name had come up, she discerned that there could be no excuse for a postponement of the revelation.

Mrs. Treharne gazed at her daughter with mouth agape. When she finally spoke her words were almost inarticulate.

"Your guardian?" she gasped. "John Blythe is to be your guardian? At whose direction? Upon whose application?"

"My father's, mother."

"But are you sure that you are not being tricked—that—"

"John Blythe is not the man to trick anybody, dear—everybody, of course, knows that," said Louise, very prompt to a defense in that quarter. "Moreover, I saw the letters from my father. One of them is to me. So there is no mistake about it."

"What does your father say in his letter?" asked Mrs. Treharne, suspiciously. "Does he mention me? say anything to my detriment?"

"Nothing of that sort, mother," replied Louise, disliking exceedingly the drift of the conversation. "Mr. Blythe's guardianship is to be largely a matter of form. I—I am glad the arrangement has been made. There are times when I feel that I need guidance. You are so busy and I so much dislike to worry you. Often, since I came home, I've found myself wishing that I had a brother." She stopped, her voice faltering.

Mrs. Treharne started slightly, swept by the thought of how often she had wished that Louise herself had been a son. Now, for the moment, she repented that thought; the dignity and strength of her daughter were making their appeal to her. She had her periods of fairness, and she could not throttle her consciousness of the wretchedness of Louise's position under that roof nor subdue the accusing inner voice that held her solely responsible for it. She trembled with indignation when she remembered that Judd had dared to address Louise as "daughter." She raged at herself for not possessing the strength to cast the Judd incubus from her once and forever. And she ended, as usual, by giving way to an effusion of dismal tears and by promising herself that "some time—some day—"

Louise went to bed with a disturbed mind. She was trying not to face the indubitable fact that her mother was proving herself but a reed to lean upon. Then her drowsy thoughts wandered to the fire-lit dining-room of the serene old house in the country in and around which she had spent a day marked by a sort of placid happiness which she could not quite analyze; and her last thought, before succumbing to unquiet dreams based upon the events at the end of the day, were of a rugged, kindly-faced man quietly watching her as she read her father's letter by the flickering light of the droning logs.

Judd, still chuckling viciously, continued to taunt the rebuked but by no means cast-down Jesse after the two had got into Jesse's car.

"Not saying much, are you, old top?" he gurgled joyously as the car throbbed away from the curb. "Well, I don't blame you. Not, of course, that I didn't give you fair warning. I told you you'd be frozen stiff if you tried on any of your Don Juanish airs and graces in that quarter. But don't take it to heart—don't grieve over it. You'll thaw out again in time. Right now I wouldn't dare take a chance on touching you for fear one of your arms or something'd drop off. But you'll thaw—you'll thaw," and he squirmed and wobbled around in his seat in the excess of his mirth.

Jesse, gnawing on an unlighted cigar as was his wont when temporarily eclipsed or engaged in blocking out a campaign, listened in silence. When it becomes the unflinching habit of a man to enjoy the last laugh he learns to pay little heed to the too-previous chirrupings of those over whom he feels confident of eventually triumphing. So he permitted Judd to enjoy himself. When the chuckles of his companion gradually ceased, however, he said, drily enough:

"To all intents and purposes she's a dependent of yours, isn't she?"

Judd parried the question. He was indifferent enough as to what might happen to Louise Treharne: he regarded her as an interloper, and he was disgruntled over her studiously aloof treatment of him. But it had become a habit with him to parry Jesse's questions since the occasion when his over-expansiveness in replying to a few seemingly innocent and unmeditated questions from Jesse had resulted in the sound "market" trouncing which his one-time pupil had inflicted upon him.

"What the devil difference does it make?" was Judd's reply. "She has your number all right, and that's all you need to know, isn't it?" and he chuckled again.

Jesse waited again until Judd's glee had subsided, then resumed.

"She has to look to you to make provision for her needs—clothes, hats, ribbons, furbelows, that sort of thing—doesn't she?" he inquired with the coolness of one who does not mean to be rebuffed.

"Oh, forget it," said Judd, a little grumpily now. "Don't try to pin me, Jesse. I don't spout about these things. She's living under one of my roofs, is a member of one of my households. And she regards you as—well, as a considerably-drowned water-bug. Why don't you let it go at that? There are more women in the world than there are red ants or railroad ties. Can't you take your medicine—stand for the defeat?"

"Not in this particular case," was Jesse's perfectly frank reply; he could be frank when there was no possibility of a "come-back." "What's more, I don't intend to. Just make up your mind to that, will you?"

"Oho!" said Judd, struck by the intentional rawness which Jesse had put into his last phrase. "That's the tune, is it?"

"That house of yours on the Drive isn't the place for the young woman," said Jesse. Judd knew that he wasn't assuming any virtuous strain, but merely leading up to a point. "You ought to know that—as the father of a family."

"You're becoming confoundedly erect in your ideas, aren't you?" snorted Judd. "And I've told you before that I won't have you dabbling in my private affairs. Just cut out your harplings, in this connection, upon my family and all of that sort of thing, understand?"

"Damn your private affairs," said Jesse, quietly, but with a note of meaningfulness in his tone that caused Judd to sit up and take immediate notice. "I am no more interested in your private affairs than I am in the transactions of the Congo Missionary Society. But I repeat that your—er—that Mrs. Treharne's daughter doesn't belong under that Riverside Drive roof. Do you understand me?"

"No," said Judd, "I don't," nor did he. But he no longer chuckled.

"I think you've told me several times," Jesse went on calmly, "that the young woman flaunts you?"

Judd made some inarticulate reply which Jesse took for an affirmative.

"That being the case," inquired Jesse, "why do you keep her around the place?"

"What's your idea—that I should turn her into the street?" asked Judd, gradually getting a hold on Jesse's thread.

"Oh, she wouldn't be in the street very long," said Jesse with significant emphasis. "But, since on your own say-so she scarcely even nods to you, and you are paying the freight, what's the answer? Doesn't she know that she's dependent upon you?"

"How the devil could she help knowing it?" broke out Judd impatiently. "She has eyes and what belongs to her by way of brains, I suppose."

"Well," said Jesse, "if she cuts in on your—your game, and is such a nuisance to you, why don't you exert your authority—the authority of the provider—and——" He hesitated.

"And what?" inquired Judd, prodglingly.

"Make provision for her—not necessarily luxurious provision—under some other roof?" said Jesse. "In a modest little apartment, for example, with just the necessaries and that sort of thing. That would alter her demeanor toward you—and toward others. Once they've enjoyed the gewgaws of life the other thing is a come-down and they feel the sordid misery of it."

Judd studied.

"You're a deep sort of a reprobate, Jesse," he said, musingly, after a pause. "I don't profess to be able to plumb some features of your scoundrelism, and yet I've never been accused of being uncommonly dense. How the devil would my planting the young woman in a miserable little six-by-eight flat help your case?"

"That," coolly replied Jesse, "is my affair; but you exhibit your denseness, at that, in asking such a fool question. It wouldn't take her long to begin to pine for the light and laughter and lavishness of life after she'd had a taste of the miserable little six-by-eight flat as you call it, would it?"

"And when she did begin to pine that's where you'd come in, eh?" said Judd. "Yes, it was pretty thick of me not to catch your drift, I'll admit. But I guess I'll keep out of it. You can conduct your own damned round-ups. You've got your nerve with you to ask me to figure in any such a dirty subtle scheme as that, haven't you?" He spoke more in resentment of Jesse's overbearing tone than from any profound sense of the contemptibleness of Jesse's suggestion.

Jesse lit his cigar and said nothing for a while. Then, puffing hard so that the glow of his cigar lit up his stolid waxy face, he said:

"I hear you're carrying a pretty nifty line of cotton, Judd, and that you're still buying. Waiting for cotton to touch sixteen cents, eh?"

Judd cocked his ears.

"Well," he said, moistening his lips, "I haven't got anything on you. You're carrying ten bales when I'm only carrying one."

"Is that so?" lied Jesse with perfect serenity. "Well, you're entitled to have your dream out, of course. But it so happens that I am not carrying even one bale."

Judd sat up straight in his seat.

"Well?" he asked, huskily.

"Well, what?" asked Jesse.

"What are you shooting at?" inquired Judd. "Do you mean to say you're going to take the bear end of it?"

"I don't mean to say anything of the sort," replied Jesse. "And you don't suppose I'd go around placarding the fact if that was my intention, do you? I'm merely out of the market for the present, that's all. But you're in, eh, and waiting for sixteen cent cotton?"

The screws were working all right. Jesse saw that. It was chilly in the automobile, but Judd was mopping a damp brow.

"If I ever do break into that market," Jesse went on clinchingly but in the same even tone he had been using, "you want to watch my smoke. That's all."

Judd, in a cold tremor, resolved to unload his line of cotton as soon as the market opened on the morrow. Also he decided that it wouldn't be any impolitic thing for him to placate Jesse in the immediate meanwhile.

"Well, if I have been dense, I'm not now," he said, reflectively. "I understand you all right."

"I thought you would," said Jesse, tossing his cigar out of the car window.

Despite her natural reserve and the reticence, born of keen humiliation, which she maintained in respect of her mother's affairs, Louise, feeling the need of an experienced woman's counsel, gave to Laura Stedham, her one woman friend in need, a somewhat guarded account of her meeting with Jesse and Judd upon her return from the day in the country. Laura listened to the story in a sort of silent rage. She was not a woman to rant, and even if she had been, the recital that Louise gave her, with the wretched details which Laura could guess at, of her gradual hemming in at the Riverside Drive house, filled the other woman with a sense of anger and disgust beyond the mere power of words. Louise had not previously told Laura of Langdon's proffering her the use of an automobile; she feared that Laura's wrath and alarm over that would be directed against her mother for having made such a situation possible; and her loyalty to her mother never wavered.

At the close of her story, which she gave to Laura in a quiet, rather hopeless way that the older woman found pathetic to a degree, Louise, in a moment of inadvertence, let fall how Judd had greeted her as "daughter." Laura flared at that. But she held herself in, and she asked Louise, quietly enough:

"My dear, there is one thing that I want to ask you. I hope you won't think me intrusive for asking it. It is this: Just why are you remaining at that house? You know the—the circumstances there. I am not trying to influence you. But I want you to tell me just why, since you cannot change the conditions, you deem it necessary to go on living there?"

Louise replied without hesitation.

"I don't lose hope that I may be able to change the conditions some time, dear," she replied. "There would be no use in my staying with my mother if I did not possess that hope."

"But," asked Laura, not pressingly, but with a grave, interested earnestness, "don't you think your chance to change the conditions is almost negligible? Just how can you possibly expect such a change ever to come about?"

"I am hoping," Louise answered bravely, but coloring, "that, if I stay on with my mother, sooner or later she will become ash—"; she could not finish the word "ashamed;"—"she will come to a realization of herself," she took up the thread, "of what the conditions in which she lives mean; of what, eventually, they must bring her to, and bring me to, also. Often I think that she doesn't view it as I do—as we do. She is drifting. She told me that she was. She has lost her moorings. I want to bring her back. I am the only one who could bring her back, am I not? And I can't leave her as long as there is a chance to do that."

"But your own life, dear?" interposed Laura. "You must consider that, you know. You are a very young woman. There is no reason why you should be dragged down."

"I shall not be," replied Louise. "And, if my mother is to be dragged down, if she is to continue in this way, of what use would my life ever be to me? I never could be happy with her in such surroundings, could I? There is only one thing for me to do, dear; stay with her until she sees it

all. I know that she will understand sooner or later. She can't help it. She's bound to—to change. I want to help her. I don't ever say anything to her, of course. It would be impossible for me to do that. But she isn't happy as she is now. My mother and I will have a dear, cosy, happy life together yet, Laura, never fear."

Laura pretended that some pictures on a mantel needed straightening in order to hide her suffused eyes.

"All the same, Louise," she said, resuming her seat after a little while, "Mr. Blythe is entitled to know these things that you have told me. And you should have the benefit of his advice. He not only is your guardian, but he is a man—a regular man—and your—oh, well, I do not need to say that he is your friend, do I?" smiling.

"I meant to tell him," replied Louise, turning to gaze out of the window.

"Oh, you did, dear?" said Laura, teasingly. "Then my advising you to tell him was superfluous, wasn't it? I wonder why you decided to tell him, Louise?"

"Because——" Louise started to reply. But she did not finish, for at that instant John Blythe, in riding dress, walked into the room.

CHAPTER VIII

Laura glanced wistfully at Blythe's riding clothes.

"I suppose you come here in that apparel to tantalize me, knowing that my odious, ogreish medical man has absolutely forbidden me to ride for the present," she said to him in mock reproach. "There is nothing in the least subtle about that doctor man. He wants to buy my horse. That's why he has forbidden me to ride. But I am going to thwart him by turning Scamp over to Louise. You ride, of course, dear?"

Louise smiled her gratitude. She had become a finished rider as a young girl during the periods when her mother would abandon her improvident life in the city and retire to the country to enable her income partially to catch up with her expenditures.

"I've been trying the most ambitious horse I ever saw," said Blythe, very much the wholesome, out-of-doors looking man, dropping into a chair. "If I buy him—and I'm going to think that over carefully—I think I shall call him The Climber. He was very keen to accompany me up in the elevator, but the man on guard at the door wouldn't have it. Would you have minded my fetching him up, Laura? He has the true artistic sense, too. He tried all he knew to climb that statue of Bobbie Burns in the Park. Wouldn't it have been a victory for Art if he had succeeded in demolishing that bronze libel on Burns? Then he wanted to walk—prance, I mean—into the car of some people I stopped to pass the time of day with. Curious psychological study, that horse. I can't imagine where he acquired his mounting social ambition, for he's about one-half wild horse of the pampas and the other half Wyoming cayuse."

"Louise," suggested Laura, who had been meditating during Blythe's raillery, "would you care for a ride now?" Blythe's eyes lighted up at the words. "I must have some excuse, you see, for driving the two of you away, for my dressmaker is moaning piteously over the 'phone for me to try some things on, and I'll have to go. Scamp has been eating his head off for a fortnight, but he'll behave, I'm sure. And my habit, boots, everything, will fit you perfectly."

Before Laura had finished Blythe was at the telephone, directing Laura's stableman to send Scamp around and Laura was guiding Louise to her dressing room to put her into the hands of her maid for the change into Laura's riding things. Half an hour later Louise, well-mounted on the breedy-looking, over-rested but tractable enough Scamp, was on the Park bridle-path alongside Blythe, who rode the mettlesome cob he had maligned with the stigma of cayuse.

The two horses, adaptable striders, trotted teamwise for a while, Louise and Blythe silently giving themselves over to the enjoyment of the eager, tingling air and the brilliant sunshine. They reined up to cross the carriage road and for a while after that, by a sort of tacit understanding, they reduced their horses' pace to a brisk walk.

It is a bromidic truism, but it is none the less true, that it is only possible for a woman to be wholly at her ease in the presence of the man in whom she is not "interested." Louise, as she rode at Blythe's side through the bright vistas of bare, interlacing branches, perhaps would have shrunk from being judged by the mildly accusatory terms of such an axiom; nevertheless, alone with this man, she was wonderingly conscious of being possessed by a speech-cancelling diffidence, a restraint not so much superimposed as involuntarily felt, that was wholly unusual with her in the presence of anyone else. She caught herself, not without flushing when she became aware of her own purpose, in the act of permitting her horse to drop a pace behind in order that she might be free to glance at Blythe's rugged profile and the shapeliness of his head for an instant; for she was beginning to discover that it was oddly difficult for her to meet his frank, direct, generally cheerful gaze. This was, of course, from no lack of candor, but, on the contrary, because she was beginning to fear betrayal through her excessive natural candor. It would have been impossible for her to name any other human being with whom she would have

preferred to be riding through the sunny Park on this afternoon; yet this knowledge did not efface the other fact that she was not at her ease with him. She endeavored, in vaguely wondering about this, to assure herself that it was because of certain revelations which she intended to make to Blythe concerning happenings to herself since last she had seen him; but her inner frankness informed her that she was merely searching for a pretext for her slightly provoking diffidence.

Blythe was the first to break the silence.

"On a hazy, brilliant afternoon in February, 1754, a solitary horseman might have been seen—" he began to quote, smiling, in a sing-song way, as from the inevitable beginning of an antique novel. Louise laughed.

"Do you feel so lonesome as all that?" she asked him.

"Not precisely lonesome," said Blythe, "but—well, a little detached from the picture. Speaking of pictures, please try and steady yourself in the saddle for a moment while I say something pretty. I have been mentally browsing for a word to describe your profile. Now I have it. It is 'intaglio.' The beauty of that word is that I almost think I know what it means; and also it fits. The mountain has labored and brought forth a mouse. I think that is the first compliment I ever made in my life," and his reddening features testified to the truth of it.

"Then I shall not deny that it pleases me," replied Louise, able now to turn her head and look at him without the unwonted stealthiness which had been puzzling her. "It is what numismatists would call a 'first-minted' compliment, is it not?"

"Don't ask me to analyze it, Louise, or it might come apart in my hands and I shouldn't be able to put it together again, being so new at the craft," replied Blythe, whimsically. She found it very natural and agreeable that he should call her Louise; she had been conscious, in truth, of a deep-down little fear, now dissipated, that he might resume calling her Miss Treharne. She felt that she would not have cared for "Miss Treharne" any more—from him.

They fell silent again for a little while, during which Blythe, infected by the furtiveness which had actuated Louise a little while before, once slightly drew rein in order to steal an unobserved oblique glance at Louise's gleaming auburn hair, which refused to be confined under her three-cornered Continental hat of felt, but moved in rebellious, slipping coils under the impact of the occasional gusts of wind; and he wanted, too, to get the effect of her cameo face outlined against a patch of unusually dark shrubbery slightly ahead of them. His plotting, however, was a dead failure. She caught him in the very article of making this cribbed momentary inspection, and she laughed outright.

"Draw alongside, please," she commanded, and he noticed for the first time the all but indistinguishable slant of her full eyes when they were possessed by laughter. "You are not to criticize the fit of Laura's habit on me, as of course you were doing."

"Of course," said Blythe, more or less unconsciously delivering himself of a white one. "Additionally, I was wondering—" He paused a bit abruptly.

"Well?" inquired Louise.

"You won't be annoyed?" said Blythe. "I was wondering just what you used to think and do, and sing, and say, when, in your last-previous incarnation, Titian was spending all of his hours painting your face and hair."

"Now," replied Louise, smiling, "you are showing a suspicious proficiency for one who claims to have uttered his first compliment only three minutes ago. Annoyed? Why should I be? One might even become used, in the course of nineteen years, to the possession of green or blue or purple hair; so that I scarcely ever think of my ensanguined locks unless I am reminded of them."

"I think," said Blythe, musingly, "that you have the gift of cheerfulness."

"Oh," replied Louise, purposely misunderstanding him, "it doesn't take such an inordinate amount of resignation, really, to tolerate one's own red hair."

"I deny that it is red," said Blythe, assuming an impressive judicial air. "In fact, to employ a perfectly useless legal term, I note an exception to that statement. It isn't red. It's—it's the tint of an afterglow; an afterglow that never was on land or sea."

At that instant they emerged upon the open road, and a mounted policeman held up a detaining hand, holding up a huge yellow-bodied car to enable them to cross to where the bridle-path began again. Louise, crimsoning, saw her mother leaning back in the big car, Judd beside her. Blythe, too, saw Mrs. Treharne—and her companion—and lifted his hat. Louise had waved a hand at her mother; but it was a limp hand, and the sun had suddenly darkened for her. Blythe noticed her immediate abstraction. He understood. He rode a trifle closer to her, in silence, for a while. Louise was gazing at the pommel of her saddle, and he observed the tremulousness about her lips.

At a point where the path narrowed in passing a great boulder, Blythe reined yet closer, and, reaching out, pressed for an instant her gloved guiding hand.

"Don't worry, Louise—all of these things come right in time," he said in a subdued tone, and as if

they had already been speaking of that which had caused her sudden distress. "Be sustained by that belief. Everything works out right in time. I venture to touch upon that which pains you, not because we are to have a mere legal relationship, but because I am hoping that you view me as a friend. Do you?"

"You must know that I do," said Louise, more moved than he could guess. The touch of his hand had strangely thrilled her. "If it were not for you and Laura—" She paused, turning her head.

"I know," said Blythe. "It is not a matter for volunteered advice. But perhaps you have thought of some way in which I—we—can help you; make the course smoother for you. Have you?"

"No," replied Louise, simply. "There were some occurrences—some things that happened last night—that I meant to tell you about. But I can't now. Laura will tell you. You must not be too angry when she tells you. The happenings were not the fault of my mother's; she——"

"I can easily surmise that," Blythe helped her. "But, Louise, if you had meant to tell me these things yourself, what has altered your determination? Perhaps, though," reflecting, "that isn't a fair question."

"The unfairness—perhaps I should call it weakness—is on my side," replied Louise. "I make very brave resolutions," smiling a little detachedly, "as to the candor I am going to reveal to you when I meet you; but when I am with you—" The sentence required no finishing.

"There is no weakness in that," said Blythe. "Or, if there is, then I think my own weakness must be far greater than yours. There are many things that I want to say to you and that I find it impossible to say when the opportunity comes. Several times, for example, I have fruitlessly struggled to say that I hope my guardianship over you will erect no barrier between us."

"How could it?" asked Louise, meeting his eye.

"It is just that," replied Blythe, "which I find it so difficult to express. I fear to venture too close to the quicksands. But I might as well take the risk. I did not exactly mean to use the word 'barrier.' You make quite another appeal to me than as a ward to a guardian. My imagination is far more involved than that. Perhaps I take a roundabout method, Louise, of saying that, in spite of my approaching guardianship, I sometimes find myself presuming to hope that a time might come when you would be willing to accept my devotion as a man."

"That time," quietly replied Louise, pretending to adjust her hat so as to screen her face with her arm, "has already come." She had no *penchant* for evasiveness, and coquetry was apart from her; she spoke words that her heart brimmed to her lips.

Blythe, his face transfigured, caught himself reeling a bit in his saddle. Her words, so quietly and frankly spoken, had suddenly cleared what he had not hoped would be anything but a pathway of brambles. He swayed so close to her that their faces almost touched, and for a mere instant he was conscious of the fragrance of her pure breath, aware to the core of him of an intoxicating propinquity of which he had not until that moment dreamed.

"Perhaps I misunderstood you, Louise," he said, hoarse of a sudden, reining out and settling himself sidewise in his saddle so that he could see her. "It is impossible that I did not misunderstand you."

Louise, gazing straight ahead, but with misty eyes, shook her head. She had no more words. And her silent negation told him, better than words, that he had not misunderstood her.

They rode without speaking for the remainder of the way back to Laura's. Just before they drew up to the curb, where he was to assist her to dismount, Blythe broke the long reverie that had pinioned them.

"I only came to know the meaning of what is called 'the joy of living' an hour ago, Louise," Blythe said to her then.

A moment later he was lifting her from her horse, and the sky swirled before his eyes as, for a rocketing instant, he held her in his strong arms and felt her warm breath (as of hyacinths, he thought) upon his face. He rode away leading her horse, and their parting was of the eyes only.

Louise, a happy brooding expression on her face, walked in upon Laura, who was deeply snuggled on a many-pillowed couch, and sat down, pre-occupiedly tapping a gloved palm with her riding-crop, without a word.

"Well, dear?" said Laura, glancing at her.

Louise continued to tap-tap her palm with the crop, but she was devoid of words, it appeared.

"Louise!" Laura suddenly sat up straight on the couch and directed a startled, accusatory, yet puzzledly-smiling gaze at the wistful, unseeing and silent girl in the riding habit.

Louise turned her abstracted gaze upon Laura.

"What is it, dear?" she asked. "You said something, didn't you?"

Laura gazed at her with an absorbed smile for nearly a minute. Then she settled back among the pillows.

"No, sweetheart, I haven't said anything," she replied.

Judd prowled about his club that night in the humor of a savage, barking at the club servants, growling at or turning his back upon cronies who addressed him civilly enough, and almost taking the head off one of them who, noticing the baleful Judd mood, cheerfully inquired: "What is it, old chap—gout, liver, the market, or all three?" The market was in part responsible; the entire "list" had gone against him persistently and diabolically from opening to close. But the raking which Mrs. Treharne had given him during their ride on account of his "daughtering" of Louise on the night before was mainly responsible for the bubbling rage which he was taking no pains to conceal and which he was adding to by extraordinarily short-intervalled stops at the club buffet.

And so he'd been hauled over the coals again on account of that high-and-mighty daughter of Tony's, had he? Judd reflected, his thoughts swirling in an alcoholic seethe of self-sympathy. Well, he was getting tired of that sort of thing—d—d tired of it. He hadn't had a minute's peace of his life on his visits at the house on the Drive since the arrival there of that toploftical, sulky, ridiculously haughty daughter of Tony's. Haughty about what? Haughty for what reason? What license had she to be haughty—especially with him, Judd? Wasn't she living in his house? What the d—, then, did she mean by flouting him? Yes, Jesse had been right; she had flouted him since the first day she'd met him. And that wasn't "coming to him;" he didn't deserve it.

Didn't he fairly shower money upon her mother? Didn't her mother have his signed blank checks to fill out at her own sweet will and option? Didn't he humor all of Tony's extravagances without ever a word of complaint? Well, then! What the devil did Tony mean by snarling at him all the time about this daughter of hers that had come along and messed everything up? Anyhow, why shouldn't he have called the young woman "daughter" if he felt like it? That wasn't going to kill her, was it? He had been drinking a little at the time, anyhow, and it was a slip of the tongue; but even if it hadn't been, what was the difference? What right did she have, anyhow, to look at him as if he were a woodtick? He couldn't understand what Jesse saw in her; she was good-looking, of course, but when that was said all was said; she had an unthawable disposition, hadn't she? And a porpoise's cold-bloodedness?

But Jesse was entitled to his idiotic fancies; he, Judd, wasn't going to interpose any obstacles in Jesse's way. She needed taming, and Jesse's reputation as a tamer was established. Leaving all that aside, though, she wasn't going to stay around his house creating discord and giving her mother cherished opportunities to "open up" on him whenever she felt like it. She would have to go somewhere else. He'd take care of her all right. He had no idea of absolutely turning her out; Tony wouldn't have that, and, besides, there wasn't anything mean about him. But he wasn't going to be flouted any longer; wouldn't have it; wouldn't endure it; wouldn't tolerate it. Fact was, he intended to have it out with Tony that very night. He'd go over to the house on the Drive and get the thing over with. No use in postponing it.



HE'D GO OVER TO THE HOUSE ON THE DRIVE AND GET THE THING

Thus Judd, fuming, and already more than half drunk.

"Get me a taxicab," he ordered a club servant, and, with a final libation for the tightening of his resolution, he lumbered unsteadily into the taxicab and was catapulted to the house on Riverside Drive.

The butler admitted him and smirked behind his back with the derisiveness of English servants in American households when he saw Judd hold out a miscalculating hand for the banister post and miss it by a foot, thereby almost going to his knees on the stairs. But he recovered his equilibrium, growling, and made his way into Mrs. Treharne's sitting room. Heloise was there alone, reading a French comic weekly of extraordinary pictorial frankness with such gusto that she did not even rise when Judd partly fell into the room.

Judd glared at her out of red eyes.

"Why the devil don't you get to your feet when I come in here, you jabbering chimpanzee?" he inquired of the by no means flabbergasted Heloise. She had often seen Judd thus and she was used to his expletives and his fondness for comparing her to the simian species on account of her French tongue. "Where's your mistress?"

"Madame has gone to the theatre," said Heloise, giving Judd a view of a wide, unscreened French yawn.

"Oh, Madame has, has she?" said Judd, apeing the maid's tone with a drunken disregard for even the most ordinary dignity. "What theatre?"

Heloise shrugged.

"What theatre?" Judd bawled at her.

"How should one know?" inquired Heloise, disdainfully enough. "Madame did not say."

Judd plumped himself into a deep chair, cocked his evening hat at a little more acute angle over his left ear, fumblingly loosened the buttons of his overcoat, crossed his legs with grunting difficulty, removed his gloves, revealing the enormous diamond rings which he wore on the third finger of each freckled, pudgy hand; then glared at the unruffled Heloise again.

"Is anybody at home?" he asked her.

"Mademoiselle is here," replied Heloise. "But she is retiring and is not to be seen."

"Oh, she's not to be seen, hey?" snarled Judd. "Who says she isn't to be seen? You?"

Heloise shrugged again. She knew that her shrugs enraged him, but she was a dauntless maid of France.

"You tell her that I want to see her, understand?" ordered Judd, thickly. "Want to see her right here and right now."

"Mademoiselle sent her maid out for the evening and left word that she was not to be disturbed," protested Heloise.

"I don't care a continental hang what word she left!" raged Judd. "You tell her that I want to see her, here and now. You take that message to her or out you go, bag and baggage. I'm paying your wages."

Heloise, bestowing upon him a parting shrug which was artistically designed to inform him as to just how little she cared for him or his "wages," left the room and knocked upon Louise's sleeping-room door.

Louise, in a negligée and with her hair rippling silkily over her shoulders, was preparing for sleep. The afternoon's reverie still possessed her. Musing dreams lingered in her eyes.

She looked up, not surprised to see Heloise enter. The French maid, devoted to Louise from the beginning, often came in for a chat when her mistress was out, to the jealous concern of Louise's own maid. Now, however, Louise was struck with the light of wrath and disgust in Heloise's fire-darting, eloquent eyes.

"What is it, Heloise?" she asked.

Heloise broke into objurgation as to "zat Jood beast"—*cochon rouge*, she called him, explosively.

"He demands that you come," she said to Louise. "He is not himself; that is, he is himself; he is drunk."

"But what does he want with me?" asked Louise, apprehensively. Heloise could furnish her with no reply to that. "Of course I shall not see him."

Heloise, finger on lip, considered. She knew Judd exceedingly well, and she was acquainted with

his violence when in his cups. She knew that he was quite capable of breaking in upon Louise's privacy if she did not respond to his summons—even if he had to put his shoulder to her door. After a moment's reflection, Heloise advised Louise to go to him. He could not harm her, except perhaps with his tongue, and he would do that anyhow if she refused to answer his summons; Heloise would be hovering near to see that he offered her no other harm. Louise, who had the gift of becoming deliberate and cool in emergent moments, decided to take the maid's advice. She dressed hastily and Heloise quickly tucked her hair up. She was very regal, very much in control of herself, when she swept swiftly into her mother's sitting room and confronted Judd.

Judd did not rise. Neither did he remove his rakishly-tilted hat. He still sat with crossed legs, and he was muttering hoarsely to himself when Louise entered. When he heard her rustled entrance he dovetailed his fingers on the lower portion of his evening shirt, twiddled his thumbs, and gazed at her through his red, drink-diminished eyes.

"Oh, so you came, eh?" he wheezed, drily, continuing to regard her with his bleary stare.

"What is it you wish of me?" Louise asked him, meeting his gaze, but continuing to stand.

"Oh, nothing in particular—nothing in particular," said Judd with the incoherency of intoxication. Quickly, though, he took a tone of brazenness. "You're going to sit down, ain't you? It doesn't cost any more to sit down."

"I shall stand," said Louise, immovable before him.

"Oh, you'll stand, hey?" sneered Judd. "All right, stand. I sent for you because, in the first place, I wanted to see if you'd come or not. And you're here, ain't you?" this with an air of drunken triumph. Louise made no reply.

"Secondly," went on Judd, scowling over the drink-magnified memory of his wrongs, "I sent for you to ask you what in blazes you mean by continually stirring up rows and rough-houses between your mother and me? Hey? What's the answer?"

There was no answer. Louise, literally numb from the vulgar violence of the man, was bereft of speech. She faced him with her fingers tightly laced behind her back, and her face had grown very pale.

"That's what I want to find out from you," went on Judd, uncrossing his legs so that he could lean forward in his chair and wag an emphasizing finger at her. "And there are some other things I want to find out from you. One of 'em is why the devil you think you're licensed to treat me—*me!*—as if I were a flunkey?"

Louise retained her frozen attitude. She had the feeling of one being blown upon by icy blasts. Even had there seemed to be any need for her to make reply, she could not have done so.

"You've got a tongue, haven't you?" demanded Judd, her silence adding to the rage into which he was deliberately lashing himself. "Don't you try your infernal haughty airs on me any more, young woman. I won't tolerate it. I don't have to tolerate it. Didn't they teach you manners at school? If they didn't, by God, I'll know the reason why! I paid 'em to teach you manners!"

Involuntarily Louise pressed her hands to her temples, for she felt suddenly faint. But she conquered the faintness. The utter incredibility of his words seemed to nerve her.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked him, her voice sounding in her ears like that of someone else.

"Mean?" raged Judd, gripping the arms of his chair and half rising. "What do I mean? I mean what I say. I paid the people who educated you, or pretended to educate you, to drill some manners into you. And now I'm going to take a whole lot of pains to find out why they took my money under false pretenses!"

"Are you not beside yourself?" asked Louise quietly enough, though her thoughts were in a vortex. "Am I to understand that you really expect me to believe that you paid for my education?"

Judd flopped back into his chair and stared hard at her. Then he broke into a short, jarring laugh.

"Will you listen to that?" he croaked, looking around the room as if addressing an invisible jury. Then, lowering his head and glowering upon Louise, he went on: "Am I to understand that you are pretending that you don't *know* that I paid for your education?"

"I did not know it," said Louise in so low a tone that she could hardly hear herself.

"Am I to understand," brutally went on Judd, now entirely out of himself, "that you are pretending not to know that I've been shovelling out money for you for nearly five years—ever since you were in pigtails? D'ye mean to stand there, with your damned outlandish haughtiness, and tell me that you don't know that every hairpin, every pair of shoes, every frippery or furbelow that you've owned in that time, hasn't been settled for by me? That you don't know that the roof over your head and the bed you've slept in has been paid for by me? That you don't know that the clothes that you've got on your back right this minute were bought for you by me?"

It was the cruelest moment in the girl's life. Her senses were reeling. But, by an effort of pure will, of supreme concentration, she mustered her strength to withstand the shock.

"I did not know these things," she replied in a voice that sounded in her own ears like a mere distant echo. "They are true? I was not told. Until this moment I had always supposed that my education and maintenance were paid for out of funds from—" She could not mention the name of her father in the presence of this drink-inflamed brute;—"from other sources."

"Not by a damned sight," roared Judd, relentless, paying no attention to the girl's drawn features and trembling lips. "I know what you're getting at. But you're wrong. There haven't been any 'funds from other sources,' as you call it, disbursed for you for nearly five years. And that's easy to explain, too. I wouldn't have any 'funds from other sources' dribbling along to an establishment I was maintaining. That's why I chucked what you call the 'funds from other sources' back into the sender's teeth."

Louise, under the impact of that final cowardly blow, might have fallen prone had not her mother, eyes alight with mingled rage and compassion, swept into the room at that instant and gently pushed her daughter into a chair just as Louise felt that her knees were giving way beneath her. Mrs. Treharne, standing stunned in the hall upon coming in, had heard Judd's last few sentences; and she judged from them what he had been saying before her return.

Judd's jaw fell when he saw Mrs. Treharne, for the moment imperious in her anger and her solicitude for her daughter, sweep into the room in her trailing furs. But, after an instant, he brought his twisted teeth together with a snap and gazed at her with drunken dauntlessness. It was one of Judd's hours when he was too far gone to think of surrendering even to her.

"What have you done, you unspeakable brute?" Mrs. Treharne asked him, her voice trembling, as she stood facing him, one hand on Louise's shoulder.

Louise looked up at her mother.

"He has been telling me, mother, what I now believe to be the truth," she said; "that I am indebted to him for my schooling, my maintenance, my—" She could not go on.

Mrs. Treharne's eyes blazed.

"You low cad—you vulgar coward!" she fairly hissed at Judd.

But Judd, for once, would have none of that. He rose unsteadily to his feet and stood swaying before her.

"No more of that from you!" he thundered, the veins of his forehead standing out purplishly. "I know what I've said, and I stand for it! Don't you try to come that bullyragging business over me—I'm all through standing for that! You can do as you please, go as far as you like. But this is my house—don't you ever forget that! See that you remember it every minute from this time on, will you?" and with a parting glare he strode to the door, tramped down the stairs, and went out, pulling the door after him with a crash.

Mrs. Treharne, herself used to such scenes with Judd, but hideously conscious of what a horror this one must have been to an inexperienced girl less than three months away from the serene atmosphere of school, sat upon an arm of Louise's chair and began to stroke her daughter's hair.

"But why did you never tell me, mother?" asked Louise after a long silence.



"BUT, WHY DID YOU NEVER TELL ME, MOTHER?"

Mrs. Treharne, on the defensive, tried to devise excuses, but they were very feeble ones. She had not wanted to worry Louise by telling her; the girl had been too young to be told while at school, and, since her return, she had not had the courage to tell her; it would have done no good to tell her at any rate, would it? And so on.

After a while Louise rose.

"I can't stay here, mother," she said. "I am going at once."

"That is absurd," her mother replied, flutteringly. "It is after midnight. You must not be hasty, dear. He had been drinking. Men are beasts when they drink. It will all pass over," she added weakly.

"No, it cannot pass over," said Louise in a wearied tone. "I am going. I could not remain here another hour. You must not ask me to. It is impossible."

"But, my child," cried Mrs. Treharne, beginning to dab at her eyes, "it is out of the question— unheard of! There is no reason for it. These things happen everywhere. You must face life as it is, not as you have been dreaming it to be. Sleep with me tonight and think it over. You'll view it all differently in the morning."

"I am going now, mother," replied Louise, and her mother knew then that the girl's decision was unalterable.

"But where are you going at this hour of the night, child?" she asked, now weeping outright.

"To Laura's," said Louise. Saying it, she was swept by a sudden wave of feeling. "Mother," she went on in a broken voice, "come with me, won't you? Let us go together. I want to be with you all the time. I want to live with you only. I need you. We can be so happy together, just by ourselves! We can get a pretty little place somewhere and be happy together, just you and I. And I have been so unhappy, so miserable, here! Won't you come with me—come now?"

A beautiful hour had struck for that mother, had she but known it.

But she released herself from Louise's arms and shook her head, all the time dabbing, dabbing at her eyes with her little wad of a lace handkerchief.

"Don't ask me such an absurd thing, Louise," she replied. "Of course I can't do anything so outlandishly foolish."

"Then I must go alone, dear," said Louise, bitter disappointment placarded on her drawn face. "I wanted to be always with you. I never meant to leave you. But I can't stay now. Won't you come, mother?"

Mrs. Treharne shook her head and sobbed. Louise gazed commiseratingly at the weak, tempestuously-crying little woman, and then went to her rooms. She called Laura on the telephone.

"I am coming to you now, Laura," she said.

"You mean tonight, dear?" inquired Laura in her caressing contralto, refraining, with the wisdom of a woman of experience, from giving utterance to any astonishment.

"Yes, at once," said Laura. "I shall take a taxicab and be there within the half hour."

"I shall be waiting, dear," replied Laura.

Louise, in hat and coat, bent over her mother, who had thrown herself weeping on a couch, and sought to soothe her. But her mother had only wild, broken reproaches for her for going away "so foolishly, so unnecessarily," and Louise saw that her efforts to calm her were futile. So she bent over and kissed her mother's tear-wet face, then walked down the stairs and out of the house to the waiting taxicab. She never put foot in the house on the Drive again.

CHAPTER IX

Laura, her face flushed from sleep and a cheerful awakening, her burnished black hair in two great plaits that fell forward on her shoulders far below the waist of her negligée, tiptoed early next morning into the room, next to her own, where she had put Louise. But her tiptoeing was a considerateness wasted. Louise was wide awake. She had scarcely slept at all. The shock of her experience had been heavier than her ensuing weariness, so that, for the greater part of the night, she had lain wide-eyed, gazing into the darkness; dozing once, she had been gripped by a hideous dream, in which she had stood paralyzed by terror, awaiting the approach, from opposite directions, of two gigantic reptiles, wearing the faces of Judd and Jesse. Laura noticed the dark rings under the girl's feverishly bright eyes, and her heart glowed at the thought that Louise, quite as a matter of course, had sought asylum with her.

When the girl had arrived at her apartment on the previous night Laura, far from questioning her, had pantomimed, finger at lip, that Louise was not to tell her anything then; and Louise had been grateful for the fine delicacy of the remission.

Finding Louise awake, Laura, smiling to match the sunlight that streamed through the curtains, and exhibiting none of the curiosity or jarring glumness of manner with which a woman of less tact might easily have intensified the misery of such a situation, sat on the edge of Louise's bed and began to chatter as gaily as if her listener's world had been swimming in rose.

"My dear," she said, stretching her satin-smooth arms high above her head in an abandonment of waking enjoyment, "I feel as chirpful this morning as a sparrow in a wistaria vine. Let's talk until we get hungry. Let's make plans and things. Plan number one: we are going abroad next week, instead of early in May. I can't wait for May. I need things to wear at once. I am positively in rags and tatters, the Cinderella of Central Park West. How is that for one gorgeous plan?" It might easily have been thought, listening to her and studying her enthusiasm, that she was the girl and Louise the woman. But Louise, for all of her still throbbing memory of the night before, was infected with the older woman's unquenchable cheerfulness.

"You talk of going to Europe as if it were a run out to the Bronx in your car, dear," she said, smiling. "And am I really to go with you? At any rate, of course I must ask—" She had meant to say that she must ask her mother's permission; but the thought rushed to her mind that in all likelihood her mother would be only too willing to let her go. Laura divined her thought and rushed to her aid.

"Oh, I shall do all the asking," she interposed. "That's another of my glittering specialties—asking. I'm the most immoderately successful asker, I think, in all North America; yes, and getter, too, I verily believe. Really, I can't remember when I was refused anything that I out-and-out asked for. So I'll arrange that. But with this stipulation: you'll have to ask Mr. Blythe yourself."

"Mr. Blythe?" said Louise, wonderingly. The sound of his name somehow gave her an immediate sense of uplift; but for the moment she failed to catch Laura's meaning. "What is it that I must ask Mr. Blythe about, dear?"

Laura gazed at her with skeptical eyes.

"What is it we were talking about, Louise?" she asked, mischievously. "The Relation of the Cosmic Forces to—er—Mental Healing? The Real Nub of the Suffragettes' Cause? Child, you don't really suppose that you could gallumph off to the continent of Europe with a frivolous, irresponsible, happy-go-lucky person like me without first asking the consent of your guardian—or, at any rate, your guardian-to-be?"

Louise's flush shone through her amused smile.

"That is true, isn't it?" she said simply. "Of course I must ask him."

"I am in a frenzy of fear, though," went on Laura, affecting an exaggerated solemnity, "that the ogre will flatly put his foot down and refuse to let you go. I know that I should if I were he."

"Why, Laura?" asked Louise with such genuine wide-eyed innocence that Laura laughed outright.

"Why?" she repeated in Louise's tone. "Well, I haven't the least doubt that I should be a great deal more selfish about it than he will be. Just because a man has to be such a horridly legal, dry-as-dust creature as a guardian, is that any particular reason why he should become incapable of experiencing the entirely human misery called lonesomeness?"

Louise had no reply for that except a little gesture of deprecation that quite failed to convince.

"How could we possibly get ready to go abroad in a week, Laura?" she covered her confusion by asking.

"My dear," replied Laura, convincingly, "I could and would start for the Straits of Sunda inside of twenty minutes if there were any possible reason why I should want to go there—if, for example, there happened to be a dressmaker or milliner there whose creations I particularly fancied. The voyage to Europe is now a mere ferry trip. You speak as if we were still living in the Victorian period. In those days folks 'made preparations' to go abroad—the dear, fussy, old-fashioned creatures! Now it is like riding to Staten Island, with the exception of the sleeps and meals in between. One of the most delightful men I know goes to Europe every year with no other impedimenta than a walking stick—he is so used to a cane that he must have it for his constitutionals on deck—and a toothbrush; he gets his changes of linen from the head steward—I believe he knows every head steward afloat; and he is such a cheerful steamer companion, because he is unhampered by luggage, that it is a delight to be his fellow voyager. Once, when I was a young woman ("You are so aged and decrepit now, aren't you?" murmured Louise.) I went on board a steamer to wish some friends *bon voyage*. It was rather a cheerless day in New York, with overcast skies. I thought of sunny Italy. And so I went along with them, in the clothes I was standing in, and I had the most enjoyable voyage of my life."

Thus Laura chattered on, eager to take Louise's mind off the previous night's experience which, even without having heard any of the details, she well knew must have been a trying one. During the night Laura had decided to start within the week on the trip to Europe which she made every year. The climactic turn in Louise's affairs, which had by no means been unexpected by Laura, had prodded her to this decision. She had meant to take Louise abroad with her early in May at any rate; now, however, that her young friend, whom she had come to regard with an encompassing affection, was in obvious distressing straits, an almost immediate withdrawal of her from painful scenes would, Laura felt, be at least an attempt at a solution. A few months abroad would enable Louise to shake off the bravely-borne but none the less wearing depression which had taken possession of her when she found herself so unexpectedly thrust into a horribly difficult situation—a situation which Laura now blamed herself for not having actively sought to terminate before the interposition of the incident, whatever had been its nature, which had caused the girl to leave the house on the Drive in the middle of the night. And Laura, meditating these things as she lay awake, declared in her heart that Louise should never again be subjected to a renewal of that ordeal.

Without any questioning, Louise, after a little actual planning with Laura for the early trip abroad, told the older woman what had happened at the house on the Drive on the previous night. She went over the details calmly enough, grouping Judd's brutal utterances into a few phrases which presented the picture almost as plainly to Laura's mental vision as if she had been actually present at what she knew must have been a scene sufficiently searing in its effect upon a girl yet under twenty and fresh from school. It was only when she came to her mother's flaccid, vacillating part in the affair that Louise's voice weakened a little.

"She disappointed me, Laura," said Louise, feelingly. "I would not say that to anybody else but you. But she did. I don't know just what to think. I thought that, having returned in time to hear at least some of the things that were said to me, she would come with me when she saw how impossible it was for me to stay there. I can't even guess why she did not. That was the worst part of it—her remaining there. And now I am afraid that I did wrong in leaving her. Perhaps there was something to prevent her leaving. It may be that if I had stayed on with her for a while longer she might have——"

Laura interrupted her with a gesture.

"Don't say that, Louise," she put in, earnestly. "You must not do yourself injustice. That wouldn't be fair. Your mother is one of my oldest friends; we were girls together. But right is right. Your mother should never have permitted you to so much as set foot in that house. I am not disloyal to her in saying that. She herself knows in her heart that it is true. But, having been allowed to go there, you did your part; you played the game, as one says, without complaint; and you stayed as long as you could. You have nothing to reproach yourself for. Your mother herself, I think, will be fair enough to acknowledge that. And you are never to go back there. That, of course, is settled. The situation must work itself out in some other way. I feel perfectly confident that your mother will see it all in the right light, and before very long; probably while you are abroad with me. She will miss you. And it is right that she should miss you. Missing you, she will come to a realization of what she is sacrificing for—what? That, dear, is my prediction as to the way it will all come out. But you must not think of reproaching yourself for the step you have taken, nor even dream of retracing that step."

During the forenoon Laura telephoned Blythe, giving him an outline of what had happened.

"It was inevitable, of course," was Blythe's brief comment over the 'phone. "Since it had to come, I am glad that it is over with—better now than later. May I come up to see you?"

"To see *me*—hypocrite!" Laura answered, laughing—and she could hear Blythe hastily and rather fumbling hanging up the receiver.

Blythe arrived at Laura's early in the afternoon and his arrival was a signal for Laura to profess burdensome housekeeping cares in a distant part of the apartment.

This time Louise's feeling in Blythe's presence was not a mere vague shyness, but genuine embarrassment. She had thought of him a great deal during the night, particularly of that which had passed between them during the ride in the Park. Now she flushed at the thought that she had even passively permitted such a thing, much less have seemed to invite it. Her mother's position, and the stigma which, she could not but feel, that position placed upon herself, now seemed, with the humiliating incident of the night before fresh in her mind, to forbid the continuation of any relationship between Blythe and herself other than that of guardian and ward. It was purely from a sense of consideration for Blythe, a man who had won his way in the world in the teeth of almost insuperable obstacles, that Louise resolved that there must be an abridgement of their gradually growing intimacy. She had sighed in making that mental decision, for the relationship had been very agreeable and—and something else which she could not quite analyze; but she shrank from certain intuitive forecastings involving Blythe's progress toward the goal he had set for himself, which she feared a continuation of their closer relationship might develop.

Blythe was quick to notice her altered manner, expressed by a reserve which, with the penetration of an alert mind, he could not but see was studied. He was puzzled by it; but he attributed it, after a moment of rapid pondering, to the effect of the shock from which he knew she must still be suffering. Nevertheless he was conscious of a sudden depression which for a while he found it difficult to throw off.

Louise spared him the difficulty of making the first aversion to that which she knew was uppermost in his mind—her course, that is, now that she had voluntarily, but under the press of circumstance, detached herself from an impossible environment. More guardedly than she had related the incident to Laura, Louise told him of the affair; but he was more than able to fill in the grisly details.

"What I cannot understand," she said, not in any tone of reproach, but earnestly enough, "is the fact that I was not told, particularly after I left school, that I was so intolerably indebted to—that man. My impression always was so different. I never doubted that my father was providing for me. I was given to understand that when I was a young girl, and I never thought anything different. It would have been difficult, of course I know, to tell me any such a thing while I was at school; but I can't help but believe that I should have been told when I went to live in that house. I doubt if I could have stayed there had I known, even to be near my mother; I should have found some other way of meeting her. It is unthinkable that I should be in that man's debt. I shall not remain in his debt, at any rate, to the extent of the amount my father sent me recently. I shall use that, at all events, to help rid myself of such an intolerable obligation."

Blythe then explained it all to her: how her father had never ceased to make provision for her, even after Blythe had informed him that his remittances were being rejected; how, when he had seen her father in Honolulu, he had been instructed to deposit the remittances as a fund for Louise's future use, and he named the amount which he was holding for her. Louise's eyes lighted up when she heard this.

"I shall send the entire amount to that man," she said, in precipitate decision, "to reimburse him for what he has expended for me."

Blythe was forced to repress a smile.

"That decision does you credit, Louise," he said quietly. "But it is out of the question. The man not only would not accept the reimbursement, but, in offering it, you would simply give him another opportunity to mortify you by returning it. That is what he would do. He is very rich, and he has the porcine pride of riches. He would keenly enjoy the flourish of thrusting back at you the offered reimbursement, just enjoy as he enjoyed—I hate to say it, but I must to make matters clear—thrusting back the quarterly remittances of your father."

"But why did you not tell me these things when my father asked you to become my guardian?" Louise asked him. A natural curiosity, but no reproof, marked her tone.

"Because I did not feel up to it," Blythe replied plainly enough. "That would have involved telling you the whole miserable story. I could not do that. Nor could Laura. We talked it over and we found that neither of us was equal to so gruelling a task. It seemed better to let you gradually grasp the facts yourself. Our telling you would not have helped matters. Moreover, so far as I was concerned, I did not feel that I had the right to touch upon matters so intimate. It is different now—today. The proscription has been removed. I am now your guardian."

Louise gave a little start at his last words, and Blythe, trained in observation, did not fail to notice the increased lustre of her wide eyes, any more than he neglected to see that she was at some pains to quell words which he felt assured would have been phrases of gladness had she permitted herself to utter them. Why was she thus repressing her impulses? Blythe immediately concentrated an acute mentality upon the problem. The answer, and the right one, came to him in a flash, as if by telepathic revelation: he understood the reason underlying her new restraint, which he perceived, not without pleasure, she was having difficulty in maintaining. It was from a

keener realization of her mother's position: Blythe felt so sure of it that he smiled inwardly and was comforted. Her mother's position was nothing to him! But how to convince Louise of that? He made poor progress of this factor of the problem in trying to study it while talking with Louise. He told her that he had only been notified that morning that the court had appointed him her guardian.

"Are you prepared to be severely disciplined?" he asked her. He felt in vastly better spirits since arriving at what he felt assured was the correct solution as to Louise's manifestly changed manner toward him. "I rather believe I shall insist upon your permitting me to pick out your frocks and hats. I think I shall have you change at once to Quaker garb."

Louise could not repress a smile at that. She caught herself longing to be on her former plane with him. But her fancied ineligibility, her somewhat morbid consciousness that she was hedged in by circumstances which she had no right even to tacitly ask him to share with her, put a damper upon her temptation to resume her former manner with him.

Blythe walked to the window and looked out over the Park for a silent moment. Then he thrust his hand into his breast pocket, brought out a photograph, and handed it to her.

"I came upon the picture this morning in rummaging through my safe," he said to her.

Louise gazed puzzledly at the photograph. It was that of a tall, distinguished-looking man with silvered hair and mustache, dressed in white linen; he was shown standing on the porch of a squat, wide, comfortable-looking bungalow, the open space in front of which was a riot of tropical verdure.

Louise glanced up at Blythe, and her eyes filled.

"You must not think it odd that I did not give it to you before this," said Blythe, fighting a bit of a lump in his throat. "I've been spending at least two hours every day searching for it ever since—well, ever since I met you on the train," he admitted, his cheeks tingling with the confession.

"When was it taken? And is he so—so glorious-looking as this?" asked Louise, her enthusiasm over her father's photograph—the first she had ever seen of him, for her mother had resentfully destroyed the earlier ones—overcoming her hardly-maintained restraint.

Blythe sat down beside her and told her about the picture. He had gotten it from her father upon the occasion of his visit to Honolulu nearly three years before. Blythe had been summoned to California on some legal business, and, a bit run down from over work, he had made the six-day cruise down to Honolulu, partly for recuperation and partly to go over some affairs with George Treharne. Treharne had come from his plantations on the Island of Maui to meet him in Honolulu. Louise sat rapt for more than half an hour while Blythe answered her eager questions about her father. He had felt a delicacy about expanding on that subject so long as the girl was domiciled with her mother; now, however, that Louise had been literally forced to the severance of at least her constant propinquity to her mother, and, now, too, that he was her guardian in fact instead of in prospect, he felt at liberty to throw off that reserve; and he keenly enjoyed the absorption with which she listened to his account of her father, nearly every detail of which was absolutely new to her.

"How I should love to see him!" Louise exclaimed, sighing, when at length Blythe rose to leave.

"I am promising myself the intense satisfaction and pleasure of taking you to see him, Louise—some day," Blythe said, tacking on the last two words when he caught her scarlet flush. It was not until after he had spoken that he reflected that what he had said might easily be open to one very lucid and palpable interpretation; but that interpretation so fitted in with what he meant to encompass, all conditions being fair and equal, that he refused to stultify himself by modifying or withdrawing his words. And Louise's beauty was heightened when she flushed in that way, anyhow!

Laura, with the skillfully-assumed air of one who had been excessively busy, came in at that moment.

"Well, Mr. Ogre-Guardian, are you going to be at the pier to wish us *bon voyage*?" she asked Blythe.

Blythe stared at her. Laura stared back at him.

"Do you mean to tell me," exclaimed Laura, laughing, "that, after you've been here more than a solid hour, Louise has not told you? In heaven's name, what else could you two have been talking about?"

"Don't keep me oscillating on this—this ten-thousand-revolutions-to-the-minute fly-wheel, please, Laura," said Blythe, blankly. "What are you talking about?"

"Then it is true that Louise hasn't told you we are going abroad next week?"

"Next week?" Blythe's jaw fell.

"Why, I thought surely she would have finished asking your guardianly permission—and everything by this time," said Laura, shaking a finger at Louise. "But I can see how it is going to be: she means to wheedle me into asking her guardian all the terribly difficult things."

"But are you really going so—so scandalously soon?" inquired Blythe, for a moment genuinely glum. "Why, New York will seem like some miserable tank town plunged in Stygian darkness without you and——"

"Oh, finish it!" dared Laura when he came to a sudden halt. But Blythe did not, for already his mind was grasping the fact that the plan was a good one, as Laura's plans generally were. He did not try to convince himself that he would not miss them both sorely; Laura for her cordial, unexacting friendship and *camaraderie* and Louise because——He knew equally well why he should miss Louise, but there was a shyness about this man even in his self-communings, and so he did not go to the bottom of that in his summary reflection on the project. Laura's keen eye detected that there was something distraught in Louise's manner with Blythe, and, wondering, she made another escape in order to permit Blythe to make his devoirs to one instead of to two. Blythe took Louise's hands in his and gradually, by mere silent compulsion, drew her averted eyes into a direct line with his own, which were smiling and alight with an utter frankness.

"Louise," he said, going straight to the point, "I know what is in your mind and why you are holding me at a little more than arm's length. I am glad to say, although I am a little sorry that you do not already know it, that you are absolutely wrong; not hopelessly wrong, because you are going to see the matter differently when you are less troubled in mind than you now are. I wish such an idea had not entered your mind. I believe it would not have entered your mind had you known me better."

Louise, startled that he should have read her so clearly as his words denoted, replied, with no great conviction that what she said was exactly true:

"Does not the very fact that you seem to understand so clearly furnish the best evidence?" But that sounded rather inconsequential to her, and she went on flurriedly: "I don't mean just that. Perhaps I do not know precisely what I do mean," averting her head again in her confusion, "now that you——" and she came to a futile end.

"Now that I read you aright, you were about to say," said Blythe, smiling gravely. "Well, I am not going to be ungenerous enough to triumph over you because you have virtually admitted that you were wrong—for you have so admitted, haven't you?"

Louise remained silent, her head still averted; but her hands still rested in Blythe's.

"Haven't you?" said Blythe; and she was conscious that his grasp upon her hands was tightening.

Blythe peered around to catch a view of her face, and he saw that she was faintly smiling. He did not let go of her hands, nor did she appear at all eager to have him do so.

"I have an appointment for which I am already late, and I am keen to have a look at my watch," went on Blythe, quite cheerfully, without in the least relaxing his possession of her hands. "But of course I can't look at it—I can't do anything but remain here for a week, say—until you tell me that you are wrong."

Louise turned her natural face upon him and nodded brightly—conquered, and willing to be; there was, she noticed, an inviting little hollow in his coat, between his left shoulder and the rise of his chest, which she vaguely imagined would be a very inviting spot upon which to rest, if even for a transitory moment, a tired head; Blythe was conscious of a decided response when he pressed her hands just before releasing them; and when he went out she felt that the room, somehow, had become a little darker than it had been. She knew that he had understood, and she appraised his fineness in telling her that she had been wrong at its true value; but she was not entirely convinced, and she recoiled from the thought of permitting him to make any sacrifice for her sake. But she was glad that he had divined what had been in her mind, and her heart gave a little leap when she thought that, if ever there was to be any computation of or allusion to a sacrifice, it would be on her side, and not on his; she knew now that he was above even the thought of entertaining, much less measuring, such a consideration.

Her mother came to Laura's late in the afternoon, very downcast, very plaintive on the subject of how terribly she already had missed Louise. Judd, with his customary morning penitence, had seen her at noon and made his usual abject apology; and he had endured the lash of her scornful tongue with a shaky consciousness that his conduct had been pretty outrageous even for him. He did not acknowledge how set back he was, however, when Mrs. Treharne, a tirade over, let fall the fact that Louise had gone to Laura's, and the additional fact that Louise, having been placed under John Blythe's guardianship at her father's direction, would be very well looked after and provided for. But Judd wondered, nevertheless, just how these facts would dovetail with Langdon Jesse's sweet scheme to have Louise relegated, under Judd's provision, to the depressing and chastening surroundings of a "five-by-eight flat."

Louise's heart went out to her mother when Mrs. Treharne, in an effusion of tears, told her how hideously lonesome the house on the Drive was and would continue to be without her; but the girl had difficulty in matching this with the undeniable fact that, when she told her mother that she would be sailing for Europe within a week, Mrs. Treharne, drying her tears, offhandedly pronounced that the plan was a very wise one and would be the best imaginable thing for Louise.

Louise, as often before, was stunned by the palpable contradiction afforded by her mother's tears over what she called her lonesomeness and, in the next moment, her dry-eyed approval of a trip that would place an ocean between them. She wanted to go with Laura and she meant to go; but

she was conscious of a sinking of the heart when she found that, far from seeking to deter her, her mother appeared not only willing but anxious to have her go. Mrs. Treharne's one thought, of course, was that the trip would give her a breathing spell, "give her a chance to think," as she futilely expressed it to herself; for her life had become one continuous procrastination. Louise, she considered, would be "broadened by travel" and sheared of some of her "old-fashioned notions." And, while Louise was gone, she herself could "think things over" and block out a course. A misty, intangible idea of abandoning Judd already had crept into her mind, in her self-searching, self-contemning moments; perhaps, while Louise was across the sea, she might be able to evolve some plan whereby—And here her musings halted when she came plumb upon the thought of the surrender of luxuries that her abandonment of Judd would involve, the scrimping and saving of a "narrow, smug existence with smug, narrow people." Anyhow, Louise's absence from the scene would "give her time to think." That was the main point.

But Louise, who had been lonesome for her mother, now found herself lonesome in her mother's presence.

Judd met Langdon Jesse at the club a few nights later.

"Judd," Jesse sneered, "you are, all in all, about the most accomplished damned blunderer in the Western Hemisphere, aren't you?"

"That will be about all of that from you," growled Judd in reply. He had got out of the cotton market with, as he put it, an "unpunctured pelt," so that he had no present fear of the vindictive machinations of the younger man. "A civil tongue between your teeth henceforth in your dealings with me, or we don't deal. Do you get that?"

"Oh!" said Jesse, eloquently. He surrendered the whip hand with his customary deftness. "But you'll remember, I suppose," going on suavely, "that you told me that Miss Treharne was a virtual dependent of yours?"

"Well," snarled Judd, "supposing I really thought so? How about that?"

"Oh, if you really thought so, why of course that's different," said Jesse, graciously. "But you were pretty wrong, weren't you? You separated her from her mother on that presumption by bawling at her as if she had been a chambermaid; and all the time she was virtually, as she is now in fact, under the guardianship of that toploftical Blythe fellow; she is living with Mrs. Stedham, with whom she starts for Europe in a few days, and she is more than amply provided for by her father. In all candor, and between man and man, could you possibly have botched things worse than you did upon your mistaken premise?"

"You mean botched the thing so far as you are concerned, eh?" growled Judd. "Well, things were botched for you in that direction before you ever started. You've been kicking around long enough to know when you're left at the post; but you don't know it, all the same. Anyhow, count me out of your confounded woman-hunting schemes in future, understand? I've got enough to do to attend to my own game. Play your own hand. But you're butting your head against a stone wall in this one instance, let me tell you that."

"Is that so?" inquired Jesse, with no sign of perturbation or discouragement. "Well, to adopt your somewhat crude metaphor, I'll play the hand out, and I'll show you the cards after I've finished. Will you want to see them?"

"Oh, go to the devil," virtuously replied Judd.

CHAPTER X

Late in the afternoon of the day before Louise and Laura were to sail, John Blythe, having fled his office and a great mass of work at an unusually early hour and without any conscientious scruples whatever, strode up and down, back and forth, the entire length of his apartment—barring the kitchen—many dozens of times. He subjected his hair to an absurd hand-tousling as he paced; he kicked up corners of the rugs and then kicked them into place again on the next trip back; he stopped at tables to pick up books, glancing at their titles with unseeing eyes and then tossing them back on the tables with a bang; once he picked up an ordinary match-safe that he had owned for years, and caught himself holding it out in front of him and staring curiously at it—but really far, far beyond it—as if he had never before clapped an eye upon it, and, emerging for a moment from that trance, he replaced the match-safe on the table with a flickering smile.

Noticing all of which from the kitchen out of the corners of her solicitous and suspicious eyes, Sarah became worried. Sarah was the stout, grey-wooled colored woman who managed, not to say ruled, John Blythe's bachelor establishment, including John Blythe himself. She had been Blythe's boyhood nurse, and, never having been entirely out of touch with him through all of his early struggles, she had returned to him when he had won his way and set up his solitary Lares and Penates. She was highly privileged. There were times, indeed, when she exercised the actual veto power; as for example, when Blythe wanted to shift too early into lighter-weight linen, or

sought to rush off to an appointment without his breakfast, and so on.

Now, polishing a glass to give her hands something to do, she appeared at the door of the kitchen, completely filling it, and waited for Blythe to stride back that way. So intense was his absorption that he did not see her until she coughed remindfully. Then he looked up and at her—still without seeing her, as she well knew.

"Yo' all ain't sick, is yo' Mistuh John?" inquired Sarah, gazing at him slantwise and showing a good deal of the whites of her eyes.

Blythe didn't hear her. He gazed right through her, and, thence on, through the rear wall of the kitchen. After quite a pause, however, it was borne in upon his consciousness that she had said something.

"How is that, Sarah?" he asked her, coming to a standstill.

"Ah said, Is yo' tuk sick, suh?" repeated Sarah. "Dis heah crazy, triflin', no-'count N'Yawk weathuh is 'nough tuh mek anybody tuhn ovuh an' die, an' Ah got de misuhy in mah haid mahse'f. Is yo' got any fevuh, suh? Yo' face looks raid on de tips o' de cheeks."

Blythe, only half-hearing, felt tentatively of the "raid" spots on his cheeks, which, as a matter of fact, were decidedly flushed. Then he thrust his hands into his pockets and resumed his up-and-down pacing, saying:

"Oh, I'm all right, Sarah. Not a bit under the weather. Just—er—fixing up a case, that's all."

Sarah, polishing away at the glass, gazed intently at his back as he walked away. Then she slowly turned and re-entered the kitchen, muttering to herself:

"Can't tell *me* no sich conjingulatin' stuff—'fixin' up a case.' De case dat boy is fixin' up weahs petticoats an' puffs an' maybe one o' dese heah D'rectory dresses—Ah reckon Ah can tell de symptoms!"

Wherein, as to the main point of her suspicion, the sagacious Sarah was exactly right.

John Blythe was indubitably, whole-heartedly, whole-mindedly in love with Louise Treharne. He knew that. He had known it for some time. That, however, in accordance with a by no means uncommon rule in such cases, was, he considered, an exceedingly unimportant factor in the problem. The problem, briefly stated, was this: What did Louise Treharne think of him? He remembered now, with impatience, his words to Louise in the Park, when he had hoped that she might accept his "devotion as a man," and her reply. His "devotion as a man?" That, Blythe reflected, might mean anything, especially to a girl placed in a difficult position and, as a natural consequence, in need of all the devotion of any sort that might be offered her. Had Louise understood his words as he had meant them? Blythe, with the customary self-depreciating pessimism of the lover, was afraid she had not. He reproached himself for not having made his meaning more plain—another grisly pastime in which love-possessed males indulge for the purpose of making themselves even more acutely miserable. Immediately atop of this regret that he had not been more explicit, he flared at himself and decided that he would have been an inexcusable scoundrel had he done anything of the sort. It would have been taking a mean and an unworthy advantage of her in her distress.

Then he pondered the few words of hers that had so thrilled him. What, after all, had they amounted to? She had said that she was ready to accept his devotion. What of that? Devotion, how? Devotion, from whom? Why, her guardian-to-be, of course! How else could her words possibly be viewed by a sane man? What right had he to seek to torture her simple utterance into anything more meaningful, more solacing to his wretched self-esteem? At this point of his cogitations Blythe became quite indignant with himself.

Here he was (he reflected, figuratively hiding his head), a man of thirty-two who had been brushing elbows with the world's people nearly all his life, and wearing a few more than the average number of scars to show for it—here he was, actually thinking of pouncing upon a girl of nineteen, who had scarcely forgotten the discipline of school; actually contemplating the imbecility (why, worse than that—the crime!) of hurling himself and his love at her, before she had so much as had a chance to meet any other man or men, before, in fact, she had had even a chance to turn around—for hadn't he (accidentally or not) begun to vaguely form these idiotic notions on the very day she was leaving school? And what would be her natural implication? That he was seeking to take advantage of her inexperience and her helplessness, solely on the strength of his being her legal guardian!

He had been all wrong (he mentally maundered on) the other day at Laura's when he had attributed Louise's perfectly proper restraint with him to her keener realization of her mother's ostracized status in its bearing upon her own position. What had Louise's mother's status to do with Louise? And hadn't he been a complaisantly self-satisfied numbskull to suppose that this was the reason for Louise's obvious aloofness on that day! The truth was (still he drivelled on, never sparing himself) that she had come to a perfectly proper realization of how presumptuous he, Blythe, had been in his attitude toward her, and she had distinctly meant to indicate to him in an unmistakable manner that any aspirations of that kind on his part might as well be immediately suppressed, inasmuch as they were foredoomed to fail. True (taking again for the moment his own case as plaintiff), the love of any reasonably honest and fairly successful man for a woman ought to be at least worth considering, and Louise Treharne was the first woman he had wholly

loved; other little affairs, scattered through the flown years, had been mere inconsequentialities, the mutual amusements (and so mutually understood) of an hour, a day, a week, perhaps, at most, a month. Three months before Blythe would have smiled, if he had not laughed outright, if any smirking imp had whispered to him that the time was quite close at hand when he would be shamefully neglecting his decidedly important practice because of his work-disqualifying absorption in thoughts, not to say dreams, of a woman. And yet here he was, supposedly a self-contained, level-headed man of the law, a man rigorously trained in the austere school of experience—here he was, sighing like a furnace, drawing meaningless pictures on blotting pads when he should have been preparing briefs, forgetting his meals, to Sarah's profound worryment and scandalization, and walking the world in a veritable schoolboy trance! Blythe, in lucid moments, caught himself smiling inwardly at the thought of it. Was he sorry that such a thing had come to be? He quickly beat down that trivial question, tentatively submitted by his subconsciousness. Schoolboy, furnace-sigher, sentimentalist, imbecile, what not—he was glad!

Ceaselessly pacing the apartment, then, and mulling the matter over, first condemning himself for his presumptuousness and then wondering in a blank sort of a way if Louise herself took this view of his attitude, Blythe found himself on the horns of his life's dilemma. It would not be so bad, he thought with a catch at the throat, if she were not going away; but the thought of the wide Atlantic rolling between them caused his heart to thump against his ribs and incited him to rumple his hair still more outrageously.

At length, seized by an idea, he walked into his study, closed the door after him, sat down at his desk telephone, and called up Laura. Very promptly he heard her musically rising "Well?"

"Greetings, Laura," he said. "This is your insane friend, John Blythe."

"Greetings, Deserter Blythe," replied Laura. "You have not been to see us for an age. And how long have you been insane?"

"For several months, I believe. I am hardly a competent witness as to that."

"I am so distressed to hear it—when your career and—and everything looks so promising, too!"

"'Everything?' Define 'everything.'"

"I haven't the gift of being specific. You have. What, then, is the most convincing manifestation of your insanity?"

"I am thinking of taking a great chance; prematurely, and therefore insanely."

"You are talking rationally enough. Perhaps your madness is a sort of recurrent mania, with lucid intervals?"

"No, there are no lucid intervals. At this moment I am obsessed by a fear of the perils of the sea."

"That is odd, considering that you are not going to sea. Are you?"

"No; but you are—and she. Is she with you now?"

"No; she is in her room writing a letter to her father, the first she has ever written to him. A little sad, is it not? I am in my dressing room, quite comfortable, thank you, with my elbows on my writing desk; and so there is no danger of interruption. What is it you wish to tell me, John? Or ask me, perhaps?"

"It is something both to tell you and to ask you. In about an hour from now I want to ask Louise if she will marry me. That's the telling. The asking is this: Would that be a fair thing to do?"

"Such Druid-like deliberation! You speak, John, as if you were leading up to asking one for a cup of tea!"

"Do I? Well, I am mindful of this somewhat open medium of communication. Believe me, I feel anything but deliberate. But my question: Would it be fair?"

"How could it possibly be viewed as anything else but fair?"

"Because the circumstances are unusual. In the first place, I am almost the only man she knows—that she has had a chance to know. Then, I am her guardian. Would it not be rather presumptuous, not to say downright unfair, for me to take advantage of these things?"

"That, I think, is what might be called an obliquely conscientious view, John."

"Then the disparity in our ages."

"The difference between nineteen and thirty-two hardly constitutes a case of May and December. Another wholly trivial consideration of yours. Thirteen years' difference—and, by the way, haven't I heard you affirm that thirteen is your lucky number?"

"Finally, I haven't the least imaginable reason for supposing that she has ever thought of me in that respect."

"Haven't you? How perfectly unimportant! Isn't that quite the rule? How many men ever believed they were considered as possibilities until they endured the travail of finding out?"

"You are riotously optimistic this afternoon. I wish I were in the same humor. I think I shall be in

need of a mood like that very soon."

"What a glorious opportunity for me to work in that antique bromidiom, 'Faint heart ne'er won,' and so forth. But I shan't. In an hour, you said?"

"About an hour."

"Don't expect to see me. I am horribly busy packing silver and things. Perhaps I may see you a moment before you leave. If not, then at the steamer in the morning."

"I wish I had words to tell you what a trump you are, Laura."

"I wish I had words to tell you how delighted I am, John."

"Not prematurely delighted, I hope, good friend. At this moment I find myself believing that the perils of the sea are nothing to certain perils of the land. Goodbye."

"Goodbye. Don't lose confidence in your lucky number—even if you do call it a 'disparity!'"

It would have been the obvious thing for Laura, after her telephone conversation with Blythe, to at least intimate to Louise that she was upon the verge of an event quite universally and correctly deemed of considerable importance in a young woman's life—her first proposal. Most women in Laura's place would have done so. But Laura's dislike for the obvious was almost a part of her religion. She had none of the benevolent marplot in her composition. She made it a point never to interfere with symmetrical sequences. Her own unhappy marital experience had by no means bereft her of sentiment; and she felt that a girl about to receive an offer of marriage should be entitled to enjoy the surprise—and in this case she knew it would be a surprise—inhering to so important an occasion. So Laura, although she visited Louise in her room after her telephone talk with Blythe, said nothing about it; but she craftily intimated, in order that Louise might look her best, that she would not be greatly surprised if Blythe were to drop in. The intimation was sufficient. Louise, a very human woman, promptly proceeded, as soon as Laura returned to her own quarters, to correct even her most trifling disarrays; so that when Blythe (astonishingly conforming to Laura's prophecy, Louise thought) arrived she looked very lovely in a one-piece dress of Quaker-grey rajah, with a band of grey velvet, which somehow suggested to Blythe the insignia of a princess, around her wonderful hair. She was at the piano, striving, soft pedal down, to extract musical sense from Strauss' "Salome" (impossible task!) when Blythe came in.

He noticed her grey dress at once.

"It is a comfort to have such a tractable, obedient ward," he said, studying the dress approvingly when she rose to greet him. "Here, a little less than a week after I threatened to insist upon your adopting the Quaker garb, I find that you've voluntarily assumed it—the color, at any rate. I know some guardians who would envy me."

Louise, quickly at ease—which had been Blythe's purpose in beginning with persiflage—smiled with a woman's usual deprecation of a complimented costume.

"Seeing that I have had this dress for more than a year," she said, "my obedience must have become an unconscious habit before I knew you."

Blythe, a trained hand at sparring, took advantage of the opening.

"Before you knew me, perhaps, Louise," he said. "But not before I knew you. Aren't you forgetting that I knew you when you still believed in Kris Kringle and Hans Andersen?" He sighed with rather too smiling an assumption of melancholy. "That reflection, I confess, makes me feel pretty aged."

"Does it?" asked Louise. "You forget that, if it makes you feel aged, it should make me feel at least middle aged, don't you? And I believe in Santa Claus and in fairy tales yet, I think." Then, resuming the first thread: "It seems singular that there should have been a time when you knew me and I didn't know you; that is, to remember you. For I didn't remember you at all on the train that day. Come to think of it, you didn't remember me, either, until you were reminded—that telegram, you know. An odd chance, was it not?"

"So odd," said Blythe, "that I catch myself wondering what my life had been before and what it would be now if—" He paused, already groping for words;—"if I had missed that train."

Louise, far from missing his meaning, grasped it so acutely that Blythe caught the tell-tale color mounting to her face.

"And now I am wondering," he went on, gazing for comfort at his nails, "since we are on the subject, whether my having known you for such a long, long time confers upon me the privilege of—well, of being entirely candid with you?"

"I should expect candor, in any case—from you," said Louise, trying desperately to concentrate her mind upon something quite matter-of-fact in order to keep her color down.

"Why, particularly, from me?" said Blythe, grasping at straws.

"Oh, I can hardly say—because you are the embodiment of candor, or candor itself," said Louise. "Aren't you?"

"I don't know," he answered as if really in doubt about it—as he was. "It seems to me that if I actually possessed that quality in such a high degree, I should have proved it to you, Louise, before this. Proved it, for example, in the Park the other afternoon."

Louise knew quite well what he meant. Moreover, it never occurred to her to pretend that she did not know.

"Are you sure that you did not?" she asked him, flushing, but with a direct enough gaze.

"I am afraid that I did not," said Blythe, nervously rising and facing her. "Perhaps it was as well, too. For the first time in my life I am in more than one mind as to whether a certain sort of candor is always desirable."

Having thus plunged into the domain of the purely ethical, Blythe could scarcely have expected an offhand reply. As a matter of fact, he got no reply at all.

"What I am striving to say, I suppose, Louise," he went on, taking himself a little better in hand, "is that, after you sail tomorrow, I am going to be more lonesome than I have ever been in my life before."

"Is that so hard to say?" Louise asked.

"Not when it is rewarded by so helpful an answer," said Blythe, conscious of a throbbing at his temples.

"I do not find it in the least hard to say that I shall miss you," said Louise, frankly enough; nevertheless, to give herself countenance, she picked up from the table a little carved ivory tiger and examined it with great apparent curiosity.

"Miss me for—for my guardianly wisdom and ghostly counsel?" said Blythe, his wide smile visibly nervous. Then, when there was a pause, he pressed the point: "Is that it, Louise?"

Her silence did not imply affirmation, and, the throbbing at his temples increasing, Blythe knew it. He bent over her chair, gently but firmly removed the ivory tiger from her hands, took one of them in his own, and said:

"Listen to me, Louise. I am fearful, if I do not plunge ahead, of becoming entangled in a weave of subtleties. I don't want to be incoherent, even if my excuse would be that I became so while taking a desperate chance. I haven't the least idea what you think of me—I don't mean as your guardian and interested friend, but as a man very susceptible to human impulses. But I am not debarred from finding out. And I should have no right to ask you such a question before telling you, as I tell you now, that I love you." She rose as he spoke, her hand still tightly grasped in his, and their eyes mingled. "You have set a new light to glow within me. I am conscious of a new propulsion that I never knew before—that I did not believe existed until I met you as a woman grown. It means everything to me—the world and all. I do not know that I am fair in saying this to you. I am incapable of judging. I do know that I want to be fair. After all, there is no unfairness in my simply telling you that I love you. It would be different, I think—but you are to judge of that—if I were to ask you to marry me—yet. But that, Louise, is what I came here to ask you."

There is no eloquence, however ornately phrased, to compare with that of a man or a woman who is altogether in earnest. Louise thrilled under the quiet, but, as she knew, deeply-felt words of this man whose clear-cut, rugged face, as he spoke, became positively handsome. She placed an impulsive hand on his arm.

"I told you that I should miss you," she said haltingly, but with a womanly sweetness that moved him like a harp-chord. "And I could not miss you if I did not care for you? I do care for you—as much as I esteem and honor you; and that is a great deal. I have not yet asked myself, I think, if I love you. It may be that I do. If to miss you dreadfully when I do not see you every day—and, until now, I had not seen you for nearly a week!—is—is that, then perhaps I—"

Blythe, fighting, as if in actual conflict with something tangible, the temptation to take her in his arms, grasped her other hand. His face was very close to hers, and her curved, girlish lips sent his blood swirling with their maddening proximity. But he held himself in a vise, knowing that the hour had not yet struck for their contact of lips.

"It is enough that you care for me, Louise," he said, hoarsely fervid; and he felt as weak as a man who has successfully come through a great peril. "I could ask no more; I ask no more. Your caring for me is, I know now, more than I ever hoped or dreamed. It is enough—for now. It is a start." He smiled vaguely at the homeliness of his phrase. "I scarcely know what I am saying, Louise. But it doesn't much matter what a man says, does it, when he is happier than he has ever before been in his life?"

She raised the hand which had been resting on his arm and took hold, with thumb and forefinger, of a button of his coat. The unconscious little intimacy set his pulses to throbbing again.

"I shall know when I come back," she said to him with a simplicity that was almost quaint, "whether—whether my caring for you is more than just that. I believe that it is, but—but there are reasons—you know what they are—that restrain me from owning it, even if I knew positively;

which I do not, yet, John."

John!

A quiver ran through the man, which, as she still was unconsciously toying with the button of his coat, she could not help but feel.

"Louise," he said, bending so close to her that he felt her cool, fragrant breath upon his cheek, "I want you to call me that; but not again now. There must be an interval—tonight, say—for me to become used to it. I warn you of my irresponsibility if you call me that again before tomorrow. And I am not minding, my dear, about what you do not know positively. Neither am I presuming upon it. You have made me happy enough. Everything else can wait. You are not committed. I wouldn't dream of holding you committed. Your life is still all your unpromised own. I tell you that it is enough for me now—it will be enough for me hereafter, if nothing else is to be—to know that I am even cared for, have been cared for, by a woman like you. I am going now. My heart is raging with love and honor for you; I want to get out underneath the sky; feel the cold upon my face so that I shall know I am not dreaming. Goodbye, dear, until I send you away from me—send you away, not with wretchedness and despair in my heart, but with hope, and light, and happiness—tomorrow!" and he pressed her hands, gazed at her with wide, kindling eyes, and went reeling from the room, as one who seeks a secure footing after many days at sea.

Laura, by design, was standing in the doorway of her sitting room when he passed unsteadily out.

"Well?" she said to him. "Did the 'disparity' number win, John?"

He stopped, gazed at her for an instant unseeingly, then shook himself together and grasped her outstretched hands.

"I may be a John o' Dreams, dear friend," he said to her huskily. "In fact, I am sure that I am, right now. But it is worth a little delirium to find that, after all, I am not actually insane," and he strode out, Laura watching him with a dimpling face.

After a while Laura went in and found Louise standing musing before a window, seeming to watch the twilight settling upon the vaguely greening Park. Laura threw an arm around the girl's shoulder and kissed her.

"Did he tell you, dear?" Louise asked, turning.

"Not in words," replied Laura. "But one surmises. The air has been charged with it. I know, of course, that he has been worshipping you as did the shepherd of old a distant star. And you, heart of hearts?"

"I seem, somehow, to have been loving him all my life," said Louise.

"Did you tell him so?" asked Laura.

"I am afraid that he, too, surmises," said Louise, smiling shyly.

CHAPTER XI

"American letters!" exclaimed Laura, turning the packet over eagerly. "Some rainy afternoon—which means, probably, this afternoon, even if the sun *is* shining smokily now—I am going to write a brief but enthusiastic essay, 'for private distribution,' on how good American stamps look on American letters addressed to Americans who are not in America—long may she wave!" and she sorted over the just-brought letters with fluttering fingers.

"What a lot of America in one sentence!" said Louise, her own eyes alight at the bulgy little packet of letters from overseas. "I wish," she added a little wistfully, "America were as near as your patriotism is genuine."

"Don't *!*" heartily agreed Laura. "Could anything be better calculated to inspire patriotism in the American bosom than an occasional inspection of Europe—and particularly an occasional residence in London? All Americans possessed of the steamship fare should be forced by law to visit Europe—particularly London—at least once. Then there would be no further trouble in getting soldiers for our army. All of the tourists by mandate would become so patriotic that they would *enlist* just as soon as they got back to the United States!"

Then they fell upon their United-States-stamped mail as if the envelopes had contained anxiously awaited reprieves or dispensations, and for the next quarter of an hour the only sounds in the room were the crackling of paper and the absorbed, subdued ejaculations to which women give utterance in perusing letters.

The murk-modified morning sunshine of early June in London filtered wanly through the windows of their rooms at the Savoy. Very close to the consciousness of both women was the keen recollection of glorious Junes in the United States, with over-arching skies of sapphire, unstained for days at a stretch even by the fleeci-est of golden clouds. Louise was confessedly lonesome. Laura, who had her London almost at her fingers' ends, was lonesome, too, but not confessedly so. It would be too much to ask a seasoned Londoner from New York to admit such a departure

from the elemental rule of cosmopolitanism. Laura, in London or anywhere else in Europe, was lonesome in the abstract, so to speak. Her method of giving expression to her feeling was to comment—when no Europeans were of her audience, of course—upon the superior comforts and joys of life in the United States, which, to her, meant New York almost exclusively.

Louise shared the almost inevitable feeling of genuine lonesomeness and unanalyzable oppression which overcomes, to the point of an afflictive nostalgia, most Americans of whatever degree who find themselves for the first time in European capitals. They had spent their first fortnight in London; and Louise had only been saved from complete dejection during that period by the gayety—somewhat studied and reserved, but still gayety—of Laura's troops of friends, English and American, in the city that, for the socially unacclimated American, is the dullest and most hopeless in all Europe. Paris, whence they had gone from London for a month's stay, had been made endurable to Louise by her close fellowship with Laura in the older woman's incessant battlings with the milliners and makers of dresses. Victory had never failed eventually to perch upon Laura's banners at the termination of these conflicts; but the intervening travail had given her young companion more than enough to think about and thus to ward off an ever-recurring depression. She did not call it "homesickness," even to herself; for by this time she had become, if not used, at least reconciled to the thought that she had no real home.

One of the least true maxims of all of those having perennial currency is that which declares that "All good Americans go to Paris when they die." Most Americans, if the truth could be tabulated, are poignantly disappointed with Paris. It is a city where American men of a certain type feel that they have almost a Heaven-bestowed license to "throw off responsibility." But "the morning after" knows neither latitude nor longitude, and it is just as dismal and conducive to remorse and good resolutions in Paris as it is in any other quarter of the irresponsible world. It takes an American man about a week to become thoroughly disillusioned as to Paris. The American woman, who, like women the world over, must preserve her sense of responsibility at all times, even in the French capital, discovers her disappointment with and her weariness of the over-lauded Paris in considerably less time than a week. Louise found it unutterably tiresome, artificial, insincere, absurdly over-praised. Now they had been back in London for three weeks, and she was beginning to wonder when Laura would give the "pack-up signal" for the return to New York. Whenever she circuitously led up to such a suggestion, however, Laura told her how ridiculous it would be to return to New York in June, at the height of the London season; besides, there were thousands upon thousands of people in London whom Laura wanted Louise to meet; and Louise (Laura would go on) must fight to overcome her Londonphobia, because, after all, London probably would be on the map as a sort of meeting place for peripatetic folk for quite a long time to come; whereupon, with fine feminine inconsistency, Laura would round upon London for its primitiveness in the supplying of ordinary comforts, for its incurable smudginess, for the mediæval complaisance of its populace, and for a hundred other matters that made it a mere "widely-spraddled" hamlet in comparison with her beloved New York.

Additionally, there had been an utter absence of the querulous note, and an unwonted tone of positive sadness, in her mother's letters that gravely disquieted Louise. Her mother's self-revelations on paper hitherto had been characterized by a sort of acidulous recklessness; her letters to Louise while the girl was at school had been long-drawn out epistolary complaints, the pages running over with the acridness of a woman at variance not only with her world but with herself. But the half dozen and odd letters which Louise had received from her mother since leaving New York had been of an entirely different character. Their tone denoted, not the indifference which proceeds from the callousness of surrender, but the long-deferred awakening of a maternal instinct and a maternal conscience. They were filled with reproaches, not for others, but for herself. In them, too, Louise perceived a vein of hopelessness, as of one who has been aroused all too late to the evils and dangers of a self-wrought environment, a self-created peril, which sorely disturbed her daughter.

Louise's parting with her mother had been tender enough on both sides. The girl had said, simply enough, that she was going away for a while in the hope that there would be an adjustment, a righting, of all things awry with her mother before her return. She felt her helplessness, she added, even to make herself a helpful instrument toward such an adjustment by remaining near her mother; but she hoped and believed that before she came back—And Louise had been able to progress no further. Nor was there any need. Her mother, troubled even beyond the relief of tears by her daughter's words, had taken Louise in her arms and cuddled her as if she had been again a child; and her last words had been, "Everything will be changed, dear—the slate will be cleansed, and we shall start hand in hand again—before you get back. Depend upon that. It is odd, I suppose, that I am beginning to remember my duty to you as a mother before I have made a start toward seeing my duty to myself as a woman. But the two awakenings go together, Louise, I find—as you shall see when you return." Louise had been quick to detect the implied promise in her mother's words; and her main reason for not being insistent with Laura upon an earlier return was that she wanted to give her mother plenty of time to redeem the tacit pledge bound up in her parting words.

Her letters from Blythe had been perfervid variations—the effort at restraint being almost humorously visible between the lines—upon the one theme, the *leit motif* of which was: "We are to be married: when?" The fact itself, it will be observed, was masterfully taken for granted; the time only remained to be mutually agreed upon, so it appeared to Blythe.

It was from such a letter as this that Louise now looked up and gazed pensively at the reddish rays of smothered London sunshine flickering, with the movement of the curtains, upon the rug.

Laura herself, just having finished a far more informative letter from Blythe, caught the pensive expression and not unnaturally associated it with the still open letter on Louise's lap.

"Of course the man is impatient, dear," she said to Louise, weaving without effort into the subject matter of the girl's reflections. "But you must not mind that. Being impatient—at such an interesting juncture of their poor, benighted lives, I mean—is good for them. Really, it is the best thing that can possibly happen to them. It chastens them, teaches them the benignities, the joys of—er—abnegation and renunciation and things. By the way, Louise," veering about with diverting instability, "when do you really and privately mean to get rid of the man by marrying him?"

Louise, not without an effort, shook herself out of her reverie, folded her letter from Blythe with an odd sort of deliberation, and looked frankly enough at Laura.

"It is not certain, dear," she replied, with no irresolution of tone, "that I shall ever marry him."

Laura regarded the girl with a gaze of perfectly unaffected stupefaction.

"I wonder," she said, as if to herself, "if the acoustics of these London rooms can be so atrocious, or if I am really becoming so old that my hearing already is affected? Say that again, child. It isn't possible that I could have heard you correctly."

Louise was unable to repress a slight smile at the extraordinary bewilderment which was visible on Laura's face, but her tone was distinct enough when she repeated:

"It is far from a certainty that I shall marry him at all, Laura."

Laura rose from her deep chair, gathered her "getting-up gown" hastily about her, crossed over to where Louise was sitting, placed an arm about the girl's shoulder, and gazed wonderingly into her eyes.

"It is impossible," she said, "that you two are quarrelling across the wide Atlantic? I shall cable John Blythe this very hour! It is his fault! It must be his fault!" and she rushed to her escritoire and pretended to fumble for her cable blanks.

"Of course I know you haven't the least idea of doing any such a thing," said Louise, earnestness showing through her composure. "Won't you please stop your aimless ransacking and come over and talk with me?"

"But," said Laura, seating herself by Louise, "I am afraid I am too anxious to scold somebody—either you, here and now, or John Blythe, by a few stinging words sent under the sea, or—or anybody I can lay my tongue or pen to! Really, I am baffled by what you say, Louise. Of course the man has asked you time and again, since we've been over here, to marry him?"

"He scarcely writes about anything else," replied Louise, smothering a smile over Laura's intense but uninformed earnestness.

"And don't I *know*," pursued Laura, with a mystified rapidity of utterance, "that he made his incoherent, almost unintelligible declaration to you on the very day before we sailed—didn't I *see* him as he left, treading on air, and *hear* him emit the entranced gibberish that customarily mounts to a man's lips at such a time? And you received his declaration as if you had been timing its arrival, and you told me two minutes after he had gone that you loved him. Then what in the wide world is the—" Laura threw up her hands with a baffled gesture that was almost comic. "I confess myself completely daunted, dear. Won't you tell me what it is all about?"

Louise regarded Laura with steady, reflective eyes.

"You know how I appreciate your fine, generous impulsiveness, dear," she said to the older woman. "But you must have thought, haven't you, that it would not be fair for me to marry John Blythe?"

Another film of mystification appeared on Laura's widened eyes.

"Fair?" she almost whispered in her amazement. "How do you mean—'fair'? Fair to whom—to yourself or to John?"

"To him," said Louise. "Of course it would not be fair to him. I cannot see how there could be two views as to that."

Laura, arms folded, rose and lithely crossed the room several times, knitting her brow. Then she sat down again beside Louise.

"I think I know what you mean, child," she said. "But of course you are wrong. Utterly, hopelessly, pitifully wrong. He isn't that sort of a man. You should know that, dear."

"I don't underestimate him—far from that," said Louise. "It is just because he isn't that sort of a man, as you say, that I shrink from the thought of being unfair with him—of permitting him to do himself an injustice."

"But," said Laura, "he is not a cubbish, haphazard lad. He is a man—a real man. He knows and gauges the world. More and better than that, he knows himself. I should have difficulty in recalling the name of any man who knows his mind better than John Blythe does his."

"I know that, Laura," said Louise. "But his unselfishness is too fine a thing to be taken advantage of. He has made his way unaided. He has had a long fight. He will never cease to mount. Why should I hamper him?"

"Hamper him!" exclaimed Laura. "Child, how can the woman a man loves hamper him?"

"Your partiality causes you to generalize, dear," said Louise. "My case—our case, if you will—is entirely different." She took a turn up and down the room and then confronted Laura calmly. "Don't you *know* what the world—*his* world—would say if he married me?"

Laura shrugged impatiently.

"The 'They Sayers'!" she exclaimed. "The 'They Sayers' say this, they say that, they say the other thing. And what does their 'They-Saying' amount to?"

"It would amount to nothing at all in his estimation—I am only too sure of that," replied Louise. "But a man who is making his way in the world must even take heed of the 'They-Sayers,' as you call them. He cannot ignore them. His unselfish impulse would be, not only to ignore them, but to flaunt them; and all on my account. It would, I think, be simply contemptible for me to permit him to do that."

Laura studied for a moment, then shook her head despairingly.

"My dear," she said, "you are the first girl I ever knew deliberately to erect barriers between herself and the happiness that rightfully belongs to her. What, in Heaven's name, has your mother's departure from—from rule to do with you? How has it, how could it, ever involve you, or come between you and the man—the big-minded man—who loves you and whom you love? Tell me that."

"It could not come between *us*," replied Louise. "But the world—the very 'They-Sayers' you mention—could and would use it as a thong to punish him. And that is the one thing I could not have. I am the daughter of my mother. I am not very experienced, but I know how the world views these things. The world does not draw lines of demarcation where women are concerned. Its ostracism is a very long and heavy whip. Its condemnation does not take the least heed of mitigations. I can speak plainly to you, dear—you are of course the only living person to whom I would say these things. But, if I were to permit John Blythe to marry me, can you not hear the gruelling comment—comment that, while it might not actually reach my husband's ears, he could not fail to be conscious of? They would say that he had married a girl whose mother had been openly maintained by a man—a man in the public eye—whose wife was living. They would go farther and say—which of course is the simple truth—that I had lived for a time under the roof maintained by that man. And, with such things to go upon, how could the world possibly reach any other conclusion—granting, as you must, the knack the world has for leaping at conclusions—than that John Blythe, a growing man, a man destined for distinction, had made a tremendous mistake in his marriage? Of course you understand. I have been wanting to say these things to you for a long time, but I could not summon the courage. I wanted to say them to John on the day before we sailed; but I *could* not."

Her voice broke, and she gazed out of the window to hide the tears that stood in her eyes. Laura, so strongly moved that she deliberately forced herself to think of inconsequentialities to keep back her tears, wrapped her arms about the girl.

"My dear," she said, "I am not, I fear, as religious, as reverent a woman as I should be. But I do not believe that God will keep a woman like you and a man like John Blythe apart. That would be a deviation from His all-discerning rule in which I simply could not believe. I don't admit that you are right. I don't say now that you are wholly wrong. But, through the very nobility of the view you take, a way shall be found. Never doubt that, child. I know that in some ways—many ways—the world is awry enough. But I know, too, that there is not enough injustice in all the world to keep you from the arms of the man who loves you and is beloved by you."

There were two topics in John Blythe's letter to Laura that gave her more than a day's material for reflection. One of them concerned Louise's mother.

"Mrs. Treharne summoned me a few days ago, and in the evening I went to the house on the Drive," Blythe wrote. "There seemed to be nothing in particular as to which she wished to see me—except that she was good enough to intimate that she had noticed my 'interest' in Louise. (Interest!—when that very evening I'd been cursing the slow progress of the art of aviation, which made it impossible for me to fly to London out of hand—out of wing, I mean.) Really, Laura, I think the depressed little woman merely wanted to have a talk with somebody about Louise, which was why she sent for me. She looks in shocking health. If I read aright, I think she is at least at the beginning of some sort of a decline. Better not tell Louise this—just yet. There are reasons why I think it would be better for Louise to remain abroad with you for a while longer. One of the reasons is this: I gather that Mrs. Treharne is pretty nigh through with Judd. She as much as told me so. I was touched by her lack of reserve in speaking to me of this matter. Louise was right. Her mother, as Louise prophesied to you, is undergoing the miseries of an awakening—a singularly bitter awakening in her case, I fear. I felt and feel intensely sorry for her—she was never wrong at heart, but was caught in the eddy of circumstance.

"She hinted, not vaguely, but quite directly, that she was upon the verge of a complete change in her environment—and the intertwined remarks denoted that her keenly-felt humiliation in the eyes of her daughter was at the bottom of the contemplated change, whatever it is to be. I am very confident that it is to be a withdrawal from the protection, if one could call it that, of Judd. It is too bad, isn't it, that this did not come just a few months earlier? But (here's a bromidiom for you!) better late than never! Think what distress such a withdrawal would have spared Louise if it had happened before the child quit school!

"But enough of if-it-had-beens. The point is that Louise, I feel very sure, has accomplished a wonderful regeneration—the regeneration of her own mother! Could there be anything more unheard-of, more marvelous, than that? But it is merely of a piece with the influence which Louise has upon everybody. You know that badly-batted-around modern word, 'uplift'? It applies actually, I think, to but one human being in the world: Louise. I mean that everybody who comes even slightly under her influence experiences that sense of 'uplift.' I know that *I* do! And even you, my dear Laura, even you ..."

("Of course the dear headlong creature is right," thought Laura when she read this, "but isn't it hard to picture the self-contained, occasionally even austere John Blythe *raving* so! But they're all alike. I suppose that even Alexander, Cæsar, and Charlemagne privately raved the same way over their sweethearts!")

"So you will see," Blythe went on in his letter, "why it is better that Louise should remain on the other side with you until matters work themselves out here—until, in essence, her mother completely clears her skirts of the wretched Judd entanglement; and that, I think, is something very imminent. It will be a joy for Louise to be freely and unrestrainedly alone with her mother when she comes back. You understand, of course. So stay over there for another month at least, won't you, Petrarch's Laura and the Laura of all of us?..."

"A few forenoons ago I came perilously close to getting a bit of needed exercise by throwing a man bodily out of my office—and this will seem the more startling to you when you remember my almost lamb-like non-aggressiveness. I think, though, I should have gone the length of throwing him out of the window had I not mentally visualized, in an unaccustomed access of caution, the large, rampageous red headlines in the afternoon newspapers: 'Struggling Young (?) Lawyer Hurls Famous Financier From Fifth Story Window,' etc., etc.

"The man was Langdon Jesse, whom of course you know. (Sometimes I wish you did not know so many sinister persons, but perhaps you can't help it.) Probably you are aware that I don't like the Jesse individual. I don't believe I am a victim of a prejudice as to him, either. He is a waxy, doughy person who makes the pursuit of women a hobby as decenter men make hobbies of golf, billiards, cigars and so on. I do not lean to the condemnatory tone where men are concerned, but this man's record is too besmudged and his personality too repulsive even for my amiable, non-Pharisaical (I hope) taste. I have known him in a general sort of a way for a number of years, but have always been at some pains to make it clear to him that I preferred the sight of his back.

"He lounged in upon me the other forenoon, very oily and desirous of exhibiting to me his somewhat rhino-like brand of *savoir-faire*, and he told me that, inasmuch as he was leaving for Europe directly, he thought he would ask me if I, as the guardian of Miss Treharne, would be willing that he should extend the tourist's usual civilities and courtesies to that young lady. Can you imagine a more imbecile question? Naturally, I was astonished to find that he had even met Louise, and you may hold yourself in readiness to be very severely spoken to when you return because you did not inform me of it. Seriously, I am inordinately sorry that Louise ever did meet him. Of course I gave the fellow what the reporters call 'very short shrift.' I can't remember ever having been more annoyed. The impudence of this loathly Eden Musée Lothario, knowing (as he certainly must have known) that I was perfectly familiar with his record and character, coming to me on such a mission! He was upon the pin-point of hinting that a note of recommendation from me, submitting him to the fair opinion of you and Louise, might enable him to offer the two of you certain somewhat prized civilities not easily obtainable—when I, without the least attempt at hinting, indicated the general direction of my door and gave him a view of my back.

"I haven't the least notion as to what the fellow's actual purpose was, but if, as he claims, he really has met Louise, I am perturbed to think that presently he will be in the same hemisphere with her. (I would include you in my perturbation, only I know how thoroughly well able you are to crunch such objects with a mere word, if not, indeed, a simple lifting of the eyebrows.) Of course he will not now have the temerity to call upon you in London. But if he does exhibit such hardihood, and in any way attempts to annoy you or Louise with his 'prized civilities,' you will let me know at once, of course—by cable, if you think it necessary. I don't know why I have permitted and am permitting myself to be disturbed by this individual's inexplicable little machinations (his whole life, in business and in private, is one huge machination), but I have been and I am. Write me just how he contrived to meet Louise, won't you?"

Laura, in reading this, felt considerable compunction over the fact that she had not told Blythe of Louise's unavoidable meetings with Langdon Jesse and of the attentions which he had attempted to force upon her. She had not done so because she had frankly feared the possible consequences of Blythe's quick-blazing anger. While she would have been willing enough to commit Jesse to the corporeal handling of a physically adept man like John Blythe, she had no means of knowing in advance whether the story of such a chastisement, if it took place, would become public; and as Louise had come under her own protection very soon after her final encounter with Jesse, Laura had felt that, as the Jesse incubus probably had been disposed of for good and all, it would be

better not to disquiet Blythe by telling him anything about it. She knew that Louise had not mentioned Jesse to Blythe out of a feeling of plain shame that she had been put in the way of meeting a man of his stamp. But Laura, after re-reading that part of Blythe's letter referring to Jesse, found herself vaguely uneasy at the thought that even then he was on his way to London. She determined not to say anything about it to Louise. She also determined that London was going to remain large enough for Louise and herself and ten thousand Langdon Jesses; which, interpreted, means that she had not the remotest idea of bolting for it because of Jesse's impending arrival. Laura also concluded to obey Blythe's injunction to say nothing to Louise as to her mother's changing affairs. She longed to tell the girl of Blythe's forecasting of the approaching dissolution of the relationship between her mother and Judd; but she had learned the time-biding lesson, and she disliked to arouse hopes within Louise's mind that might not, after all, have fruition. Moreover, she had frequently had occasion to test Blythe's judgment, and she had always found it sound.

"But I wish John Blythe would take a vacation of a fortnight or so and run over here," she caught herself meditating. "He would fit into the situation beautifully at the present moment and in some moments that I seem to feel approaching. But there never was a man yet who could recognize the psychological moment even when it paraded before his eyes—much less grasp it by intuition."

CHAPTER XII

Not alone from John Blythe had Langdon Jesse suffered a rebuff in his attempt to gather ammunition, in the form of intimate and more or less mandatory credentials, for his European campaign, in which Louise Treharne figured as the alluring citadel of his sinister ambition. First he had tried Louise's mother with that purpose in view; and in that quarter he had been treated to one of the surprises of his by no means uneventful life.

Jesse's method of reasoning, in approaching Mrs. Treharne on such a mission, was in no wise subtle; it was, on the contrary, as plain and pointed as a fence-paling. It all started from the outright premise that Jesse "wanted" Louise Treharne and thoroughly meant to "have" her—for Jesse had the merit (negative enough in his case) of never attempting to deceive himself as to his eventual purposes where women were concerned. Louise, of course, had plainly given him to understand that she despised him. That, however, was, in Jesse's view, a negligible detail. It would make his final conquest all the more satisfying. Many women who had begun by disliking him and frankly questioning his motives had ended by yielding to him; whereupon, after basking in the joys of triumph, he had taken a revengeful pleasure in casting them into what, in his self-communings, he brutally termed his "discard."

It would be the same, Jesse thoroughly believed, in Louise's case. She now represented to him a difficulty to be surmounted, a transaction to be successfully carried through. The weakness in the armor of men of the Jesse type is that they have little or no imagination. They foresee merely results; and their handling of the means to an end often is singularly clumsy and unadept. In regarding all women, of whatever class, as mere palterers with virtue and self-respect, Jesse considered that he was justified by his experience with women; but he made the egregious mistake of supposing that his own experience with women established a criterion, a formula, from which there could be no departure.

A week or so before he contemplated going abroad, mainly for the purpose of continuing his besiegement of Louise, Jesse dropped in at the house on the Drive one evening. He was glad to find Mrs. Treharne alone. He was not unmindful of his boast to Judd that he would victoriously overcome what, in his B[oe]lotian imagining, he really deemed Louise's "prejudice" against him; and he preferred to lay his course without any Judd finger on his chart.

Mrs. Treharne, now thin and frail-looking, no longer from banting, but from the conflict with conscience that been consuming her ever since her daughter's departure, received him coldly enough. Not the least of her self-scornings since Louise had gone away had centered upon her complaisance in tacitly permitting her daughter to be pursued by a man of the Langdon Jesse type.

"I am leaving for England," Jesse found early occasion to announce.

Mrs. Treharne, very languid and tired-looking, did not find the announcement sufficiently important to call for comment.

"Louise, I believe, is in London?" pursued Jesse, sensing, without perturbation, the chill Mrs. Treharne was purposely diffusing.

Mrs. Treharne gave him a level, penetrating glance.

"Miss Treharne, I think, would not be interested in knowing that you possessed information as to her movements," she replied, with studied indifference.

Jesse smiled and stooped to stroke a dozing spaniel.

"What have I done, Tony?" he asked after a pause, looking up with a dental smile.

"You have presumed to employ Miss Treharne's first name, after having met her, I believe, not more than three times. Don't do it again," replied Mrs. Treharne in a tone that, while quiet enough, had a ring in it that was utterly new to Jesse. Jesse, seeming by his manner to take the rebuke in a chastened spirit, occupied himself again with the spaniel's silky coat.

"I seem," he said, finally breaking the oppressive silence, "to have found you in a somewhat Arctic humor. Still, that should not be allowed to congeal an old friendship. It cannot be that you, too, are beginning to misunderstand me, as Miss Treharne has from the beginning?"

"Miss Treharne should not have been allowed to meet you at all," returned Mrs. Treharne. "I leave you to imagine how bitterly I condemn myself now for not having at least screened her from that."

"You say 'now,'" said Jesse. "Why, particularly 'now?'"

"That," replied Mrs. Treharne, "is my affair."

The time, of course, had arrived for Jesse to make the best of a poor departure. The man, however, was of a surprising obtuseness as to such details.

"And yet I came this evening," he said, adopting a tonal tremolo which was intended to convey the idea that he was sorely put upon, "to offer, through you, any poor courtesies that I might have at my command to make Miss Treharne's stay in England agreeable."

Mrs. Treharne shrugged impatiently.

"Spare yourself these posturings, if you please," she said. "Miss Treharne has made it plain enough that she detests you. Are you waiting to have me tell you that I applaud her judgment?"

An ugly sneer flickered across Jesse's features. At length the barbs were hitting home. But he effaced the sneer and twisted it into a forced smile.

"What I can't understand is why you received me at all this evening, if this is your feeling—your newly-formed feeling—toward me," he said, quelling the hoarseness that proceeded from his repressed anger.

"I confess to having entertained a certain curiosity, perhaps a certain uneasiness, as to your purpose in calling at all," promptly replied Mrs. Treharne. "It is the first time you have been here since my daughter's departure. I have been sorting over certain of my mistakes since she went away. I have been considering them, too, from a different angle than any you could possibly understand. Not the least of these mistakes, as I have told you, was in permitting my daughter to exchange as much as two words with you. Happily, it is not too late to rectify that mistake, at least. She is well protected. I need not tell you that if you should have the temerity to attempt to call upon her in London she would instruct the flunkeys to cease carrying her your card. I think there is no more to be said?" Mrs. Treharne rose and assumed the attitude of dismissal.

This time Jesse, also rising, did not essay to erase the sneer from his wrath-flushed features.

"What is all this—a scene from some damned imbecile play?" he demanded, completely throwing off the mask. "Are you trying to regale me with a rehearsal of the flighty mother turned virtuous? Don't do that. That isn't the sort of thing you could reasonably expect me to stand for from Fred Judd's kept wo——"

"Say that if you dare!" exclaimed Mrs. Treharne, stepping close to him and transfixing him with blazing eyes.

Jesse, out of sheer timidity, broke off at the exact point where she had interrupted him. As she stepped to the wall to ring, he put on his hat with studied deliberation and patted it to make it more secure on his head. Thus, with his hat on, he spoke to her.

"I suppose your solicitude for the—er—the what-you-may-call-it of your auburn-haired daughter is natural enough, probably being based upon something that you, and you alone, know," he said, sidling, however, toward the door as he spoke. "But it is wasted solicitude, let me tell you that. She has lived here with you, hasn't she? Well, that fact will about settle her, you know. There's no downing that. And after awhile she'll give up. She won't be able to stand the stigma. None of them can stand it. It would take a superwoman to endure, without herself surrendering, the ignominy of having lived under this roof. Don't forget that."

Then the butler, answering the ring, appeared at the door. Mrs. Treharne raised a limp arm and pointed to Jesse.

"This man," she said to the butler, "is not to be admitted to the house again as long as I am in it."

The butler inclined his head with butler-like gravity, detoured to get behind Jesse, and Jesse, patting the top of his hat again to emphasize, in the menial's presence, the insult of wearing it, stalked down the hall.

The broken, faded woman tottered to her sleeping room and fell upon a couch in an agony of tears.

It was on the day following this scene that Jesse, inconceivably persistent in the pursuit of such a purpose as he had in mind, and now roused by obstacles to the point where he swore to himself

that he would "win out," made the call at Blythe's office which the latter purposely glossed over in describing it in his letter to Laura.

Jesse's purpose in seeking out Blythe was two-fold. In the first place, he wanted to measure the man who, he knew, had been appointed Louise's guardian. He only recalled Blythe in a general sort of a way, and he wanted to "size him up" from this new angle. He was aware that Blythe was not only the guardian but an admirer of Louise, and he wanted to ascertain, from the contact of an interview, whether Blythe's admiration was of a piece with his own; the manifestation of a mere predatory design, that is to say; for men of the Jesse type are ever prone to drag the motives of other men to a level with their own. Secondly, if he found, as he hoped to find, that Blythe was a mere supple and sycophantic young lawyer, eager to succeed, and therefore capable of being impressed by a call from a man looming large in the financial world, Jesse prefigured that probably Blythe, by means of credentials that would have the weight of a guardian's advice, might very easily aid him in his "little affair" (so he thought of it) with Louise when he reached London. Jesse was not in the least fearful of the consequences, so far as his standing with Louise was concerned, of his unmasking in the presence of her mother. He was under the impression that Louise had left the house on the Drive at odds with her mother and that no correspondence existed between them. So that he felt sure that Louise would not hear from her mother of his brutality toward her.

It took Jesse something less than thirty seconds, when he called upon Blythe, to discover that that young lawyer was neither sycophantic nor supple, and that, so far from being impressed by a visit from Jesse in his capacity of financial magnate, Blythe was coldly but distinctly hostile toward him. The interview had terminated with startling abruptness. After having mentioned Louise's name once, and been forbidden to repeat the offense, Jesse had involuntarily let slip her name again. Blythe, seated in his desk-chair with his hands on his knees, viewed Jesse calmly, but with eyes that showed cold glints of steel.

"Are you going to get out now, or are you waiting for me to throw you out?" Blythe inquired of him in much the same tone that he would have employed in asking for a match.

Jesse, it appeared, was not waiting to be thrown out. He went at once. But when he reached the street level and got into his waiting car, he was in almost as pretty a state of passion as any sepulchral-voiced stage villain. And he was quite as resolved to win the baffling battle, even under the lash of unintermittent scorn, as he had been from the hour of his first meeting with Louise Treharne.

An hour after Jesse had gone, leaving the stunned, shattered woman weltering in his litter of cowardly words, Judd walked into Antoinette Treharne's apartments. He found her dishevelled and still weeping convulsively. He sat down and regarded her with the bewildered helplessness of the male when the woman's tears are streaming. She scarcely saw him, but lay, huddled and shaking, a mere wraith of the woman whom he had beckoned to this present disaster and despair but a few years before.

Judd, a gross, fleshly man not without human traits, felt sorry for her as he sat watching her. Also, he felt sorry for himself. It was not agreeable that a woman—this woman—should be weeping and moaning and shaking her shoulders in her grief in such a manner. It was disturbing. It destroyed the poise of things. It created a sort of sympathy which was bad for the digestion of the sympathizer. But Judd felt sorry for her. He really did. He had been watching, with a sort of mystified concern, how her health had been going to pieces lately. He wondered why that was. Surely, she had everything that she wanted? Well, then. Anyhow, Judd was sorry. He was extremely fond of Tony. She had touched a certain responsive chord in him, and he knew that his chords were pretty well insulated; and here she was weeping and staining her face with tears, her hair all mussed, and all that—Judd was decidedly disturbed, and sorry as well.

"I say, Tony, what is it?" he asked her, after keeping vigil for fifteen minutes without emitting a word.

There was no reply. She did not even look up at him. Gradually, though, her weeping ceased. Judd walked up and down the room, smoking an enormously long, black cigar, occasionally stopping in his heavy stride to look at her. Presently she sat up, blinking in the light, her face still swollen with her tears. A certain prettiness still remained to her; but it was the pathetic prettiness of the exotic the petals of which are dropping, dropping.

"Is it anything that I can help, Tony?" asked Judd in a tone that was not lacking in kindness, as he stopped and stood before her. She shook her head wearily.

"No," she answered him in a quiet, tear-hoarsened tone. "It is nothing that you can help. It is all my own fault."

Judd flicked the long ash of his cigar to the rug and studied her with a puckered but not scowling brow.

"I don't want to stir up or start anything anew," he said, not unkindly, "but may I ask what it is that is your fault?"

She crushed her wet handkerchief between her palms and looked up at him with vague eyes.

"Oh, everything," she replied, with a shrug of utter weariness. "Few women could be found in all the world tonight, I believe, who have made such an utter mess of their lives as I have of mine."

But I am not so unfair, thank God, as to blame it upon anybody but myself. It is a compensation, at any rate, to be able to see things in their true light."

"You are ill, aren't you?" Judd asked her, with a solicitude that was obviously genuine.

"I don't know—I think so," she replied. "I am very tired—I know that. Tired of myself, of everything."

"You need a change," suggested Judd. "You ought to go away somewhere. But I don't want you to go alone. I am pretty busy, but I'll chuck everything to go with you if you want me to, Tony."

She looked at him with a sort of weary curiosity.

"It is just as I have said," she murmured after having made this inspection of him. "It has never been your fault. You have, in your way, been kind to me. You still are. You care for me in your way. But it is a bad way, Fred. I know that now. It is too late, of course. Nevertheless, I am going to make what amendment I can. I must try to preserve at least a shred of womanhood. I am sure you are not going to take it angrily or bitterly. But we have reached the parting of the ways, my friend. You have been fair enough, from your point of view, through the whole wretched business. It has been my fault, my weakness, from the beginning."

Judd plumped into a deep chair near her and, pondering, blew great smoke-rings at the portieres.

"The thing is," he said, presently, "that you've lost your nerve. And, having lost it, why, you've gone into the camp of the folks you call the Smugs. Am I right?"

"You are utterly wrong," she replied, spiritlessly. "I have little toleration for—well, death-bed repentances. That is too old and too unconvincing a story. A woman does as she likes, flouts the world, snaps her finger at usage, until she becomes middle aged or near it; then she begins to fumble her beads, takes on the face of austerity, and condemns, right and left, the lapses of the younger generation of defiant women. I haven't the least use for that sort of thing. It is simply that I have arrived at the knowledge that a woman is an idiot not to conform and to stay conformed. It is mere madness for a woman to suppose that she can fight so unequal a battle against the world's opinion as I have foolishly tried to fight. It makes no difference as to a man. He can do as he pleases. I suppose it was the inequality of that law that goaded me into it all in the first place. But I've lost. I see now that there never was the possibility of any other outcome."

"You get a bit beyond me, you know," said Judd, not argumentatively, but as one seeking enlightenment. "I am willing to grant that men have the best of it, and all that sort of thing. But women know the rules of the game. Then why can't they play the game without moaning and kicking to the umpire?"

"There isn't any umpire except conscience," she answered him. "There isn't any arbitration for a woman. She is what the steel-sheathed law of the ages says she is to be, or she is not. I have not been, and I have lost. That is all. I am not so futile as to complain of the game. I despise myself for having been so opaque as to suppose that I could defy the rules, win, and not be disqualified—as I have been, of course, ever since I tried it."

"It's queer," said Judd, reflectively, after a pause, "how these man-made laws sooner or later anchor all you women, after you've made your flights. The whole thing, you know, is an idiotic system. They try to regulate us by rote and rule, by bell, book and candle. But, after all, they only think they're regulating us that way, don't they? I wonder how many of us really follow their rules? Mighty few that I know of. Openly, we subscribe to all of the iron-bound tenets, privately we laugh at them and do the best we know to rip them apart. It's all a matter of being found out; of being caught with the goods. A woman, of course, has to watch out for more danger signals than a man. But they're pretty clever little watchers, believe me."

"Well, you can't blame them for that," said Mrs. Treharne. "Most of them, at any rate, have the common sense not to attempt to brazen matters out, as I have."

"I see what you mean," said Judd, cogitatively. "Your idea is that it is a woman's business to get all that she can out of life, and that the only way for her to get the most out of life is to pretend to agree to the rules as they've been made for her, and then, if she feels disposed to kick over the traces, why, to keep under cover about it. You're right in that view, of course. But, after all, what difference does it make? Sooner or later, no matter how we play the string, they toss us into a box and plant us. When it comes to that, I can't see why you should permit what you call your conscience to make a wreck of you in this way. What have you done? Why, you've been my companion. Will you be good enough to tell me how that companionship could possibly have been made any better than it has been if, at its outset, a man in a surplice or a mouthing justice had mumbled a few so-called binding words over us? Faugh! You can't believe such crass humbug. The so-called 'consecration of matrimony' is a good enough phrase and a good enough scheme to keep groundlings up to the mark. Don't you suppose we'd have fought and barked at each other just the same if we'd been married according to the frazzled old rule? At that, I'd have married you years ago, just to straighten you out, if there had been the least chance of my prevailing upon my wife, who made life a hell for me with her whinings, to get a divorce from me. But, now that the thing has ambled along to this stage, what's the use of talking about quitting?"

She listened to him composedly. But his words fell thumpingly enough upon her ears. He had never gone to the pains before of giving her so complete an elucidation of his doctrine.

"There is as little use in our debating the world's social and ethical system," she said. "I am not thinking of myself. There is no reason why I shouldn't acknowledge to you that I don't much care how our relationship affects myself. But——"

"Yes, I know what it's all about," put in Judd. "It's your daughter. Well, I'll have to grant that you've got a big end of the argument there. I've got daughters of my own, and I know how I'd snort around if I thought there was a chance on earth for any of my daughters to inherit my doctrine, my view of the world, the flesh and the devil. That's the finest little inconsistency I possess. I might as well stick in the observation here, while we're all confessing our sins, that I've felt a good deal more like a blackguard than has been comfortable to my self-esteem ever since the night I rounded on your daughter. That, I think, was about the meanest and commonest act of my life. A pretty fine sort of a girl, your daughter."

"I didn't think you had it in you to admit that, and I'm glad that you have admitted it," replied Mrs. Treharne. "Of course your surmise is exactly right. It *is* on my daughter's account that I have brought myself up with a round turn. It is pretty late in the day for me to do that, I know; but one must do the best one can. We can talk as we please about our opinions of morals and ethics and the world's harsh rules; but all of our talk vanishes into murky vapor when we begin to consider our children. The most contemptible act of *my* life, since you have so unexpectedly acknowledged yours, was in permitting my daughter to come here. You know that as well as I do—now."

Judd lit another cigar and smoked in silence for a time.

"The thing that gets me around the throat in connection with all this," he said, presently, "is that it seems all to simmer down to the fact that you are thinking of quitting me."

"Don't be absurd, Fred," said Mrs. Treharne. "That consideration doesn't disturb you a whit. You know very well that you will be glad to be rid of me."

"That," said Judd, leaning toward her, his small eyes curiously alight, "is not true, and you know it."

"But," she said, perhaps, with the unconquerable desire of the woman for affection and admiration, curious to hear his reply, "I have lost my looks; I am a mere relic of what I was when I came to you; I am not far from forty. You know these things."

"Yes, I know them," said Judd, and there was genuine feeling in the man's tone. "But I know, too, that I care a damned sight more for you than I ever did for any other woman in all my life. I know that, if you really mean to go through with this plan of quitting me, it's going to knock me sky-high. I can't figure myself being without you. You have grown into my scheme of living. I don't profess to much when it comes to morals and all that sort of thing; but I've got a heart built upon some kind of a pattern, I suppose; I must have, and you ought to know it, for you've possessed it for years. And, that being the case—and it *is* the case—our relationship isn't so bad as you might have been supposing it to be. Don't you imagine that I am so infernally dried up as to what is called the affections. I know that my life won't be worth much to me after you go out of it."

Mrs. Treharne, astonished and perhaps a little pleased at the earnestness of the man's self-revelation, nevertheless shook her head wearily.

"Yet you know very well, at this moment, that I *must* leave you," she said broodingly.

"Well, I'm going to be fair with you," said Judd, the latent manhood, that had been buried under the callousness of years, showing in him. "I'm leaving that part of it up to you. I wouldn't do that, either, if I didn't care for you as I do. But you've got your end of it, and a big end. You're entitled to do what you are prompted to do in consideration of your daughter. I'm not hound enough to try to block you in that. I'll go further and say that you're right about it. If I were in your place I'd do the same thing. The devil of it is that I care for you all the more when I see you moved to give your daughter the fair deal she's entitled to. I hate to have you go. I don't know what I'll do with myself without you. But you've hit me right where I live in this business—the progeny end of it. The young ones have got to be thought of. And there is, I suppose, no way whereby you could remain openly under my protection and at the same time be doing the right thing by your daughter. Of course, if you cared to be more private about it, why——"

"No, no—don't even suggest that," put in Mrs. Treharne. "That would be a pitiable evasion. You know that."

"Well, probably it would, but I'm putting all angles of the thing up to you," said Judd, perhaps more in earnest than he had ever been in his life before. "One thing, though, you must leave to me. It's only the fair thing that I should continue to take care of you, no matter where you go."

"Not even that, Fred," replied Mrs. Treharne, determinedly. "That, too, would be a dodging of the issue. I have a few thousands put by. They came from you, of course, but before I had made up my mind to—to live otherwise. I shall manage. Let me have my own way this final once, won't you?" and she smiled wanly.

Judd rose and picked up his hat and coat.

"Don't take any leaps in the dark, Tony, that's all," he said. "Think the thing all over. Don't give yourself the worst of it. You know that *I* won't give you the worst of it. I never have, have I?"

Maybe you'll change your mind about it all. I'll be back tomorrow night and see. Goodnight."

There were tears standing in the eyes of the huge-girthed man as he went heavily out of the room, and his shoulders were hunched forward as if he had suddenly passed from elderliness to old age.

Mrs. Treharne, for almost an hour after Judd had gone, sat, chin in palm, gazing into vacancy. Then she rose, heavily enough for a woman so fragile as she now had become, gazed for a moment in the glass at her haggard features, and shook her head, smiling bitterly.

"'*Facilis descensus*,' and the rest of it," she murmured. "That, I suppose, is the truest of the maxims; it stands the wear of time better than any of the rest of them. Well, I have the mournful satisfaction of knowing that I have sufficient intelligence, at any rate, not to blame anybody but myself."

Then she rang for her maid.

"Pack in the morning, Heloise," she said when the maid appeared. "Begin early. Get one of the housemaids to help you. Pack everything—all of your own things, too. We shall be leaving before noon."

"Everything, madame?" inquired Heloise, her eyes widening, "Winter costumes—everything?"

"Everything," repeated Mrs. Treharne. "I am not to return here."

Heloise nodded with a sage acquiescence, and began to take down her mistress's hair.

"Where do we go tomorrow, madame?" Heloise asked when she had finished her task and Mrs. Treharne was in readiness for retiring.

"I haven't the least idea, Heloise," replied Mrs. Treharne, gesturing her unconcern. "I shall decide between now and morning. To the mountains, I suppose—the Adirondacks, probably. I am not very well—New York stifles me. The mountains, I think it shall be, Heloise."

"Madame feels badly?" inquired Heloise, solicitously. "One has noticed that madame is *distracte*, grows thin, looks unlike herself."

"Sometimes I wish I were anybody but myself, Heloise," said Mrs. Treharne, enigmatically enough, considering her audience. "Goodnight."

After the maid had gone Mrs. Treharne went to her desk and wrote to Louise, telling her that she was leaving the house on the Drive, not to return. It was a long, self-reproachful letter, threaded with the wistful but not outrightly expressed hope that the step she was taking would atone, if only in a slight degree, for the "wretched sin," as she called it, of having permitted her daughter to set foot within the Riverside Drive establishment. She did not mention Langdon Jesse's name. She felt a singular uneasiness over the thought that Jesse's approaching visit to London in some way involved the weaving of a net about her daughter; but she dismissed that thought, as often as it recurred, when she considered Louise's poise and her protection by Laura Stedham, an experienced woman of the world. Moreover, Mrs. Treharne would have found it difficult, unless there were some grave actual peril, to mention Jesse's name in a letter to her daughter; for it brought the blood to her face to remember how unconcernedly she had permitted Louise to meet the man—how she had even chided her daughter for not having accepted Jesse's attentions in a more pliant, not to say grateful, spirit.

"I am leaving with Heloise tomorrow, dear, but I have not decided where to go," she concluded. "I shall write or cable you an address before long. I am entirely well, though I believe I need rest and change. Have out your good time—I know that you are in good hands with Laura, to whom my love. I am looking forward to our new, happy life when you return to me."

Then she penned a little note to be left behind for Judd.

"Don't think me unkind for going without seeing you again," she wrote. "We have gone over it all, and we are both of the same opinion as to the need for the step I am taking. I cannot quite tell you how you have advanced in my opinion for some of the things you said tonight. You have been very fair, and I am correspondingly grateful. I will not be so *banal* as to suggest that, if there be any chance for a reconciliation, or at least a decent armistice, between you and your wife, it might be at least a solution of a sort, considering your children; I only wish that I could suggest that outright without incurring the suspicion that, having made a belated repentance myself, I am seeking to reform the world. One thing, however, I shall say outright: If I had it all to do over again, I should *conform*. There is no other way for a woman. We seek to ridicule the promptings of conscience by calling conscience an abnormality, a thing installed in us to whip us into line with age-old system. But it won't do. It is, after all, the true voice. I wish I had never closed my ears to its urgings.

"Time heals all. You will find yourself thinking less and less often of me as the days drift by. That is as it should be. I am sorry for the hurt—I did not know until you spoke as you did tonight that it would be a hurt—I am inflicting upon you in thus effacing myself, at such short notice, from your life. But Time heals. Goodbye, and all best wishes."

Before noon, on the following day, Mrs. Treharne and Heloise left the house on the Drive, leaving no word behind as to whither they were bound.

CHAPTER XIII

Langdon Jesse maintained a bachelor apartment in London the year round. When he arrived there, about a fortnight after his turbulent scene with Mrs. Treharne and his signally unsuccessful attempt at an *entente* with Blythe, he found everything in order, quite as he had left it the year before. Gaskins, factotum and general overseer of the bachelor apartments, of which there were three tiers, Jesse's being the second, was a little more bald and fat, but he still rubbed his hands as a mark of subservience and cocked his head to one side in a bird-like way while engaged in conversation with his supposititious superior. He had a respectful but earnest complaint to make of one of Jesse's New York cronies, a man engaged in the somewhat tempestuous task of drinking himself to death, who had occupied Jesse's apartment for a month during the spring; for it was Jesse's habit to extend the use of his London lodging, which was desirable mainly on account of its highly privileged character, to those of his intimates who happened to be in London while he himself was in New York.

"'E was more than 'arf-seas hover hall the time, sir," Gaskins told Jesse, lamentingly, "which of course was 'is privilege, but 'e did give 'isself some 'orrid bumps when 'e come 'ome along o' three or four o' mornings. Hi'm afraid 'e would 'ave killed 'iself, sir, falling hagainst the furniture, 'ad I not been living on the premises hand come hup hand got 'im straightened hout hin bed. Hand, sir, when Hi didn't come hup, 'e would halways go to sleep in the bath-tub with 'is clothes on. A swift goer, sir, but killing 'isself; killing 'isself fast."

Jesse laughed. He was tolerant enough of the idiosyncrasies of his intimates, and this one, the "swift goer," had been of use to him in New York as a sort of organizer and major domo of revelries.

Jesse's apartment was on one of the quiet squares of Curzon Street, set amid a row of other houses given over to the accommodation of stationary and transient bachelors who found the restraints of London hotels irksome. It was beautifully appointed, even to the culinary department which Jesse himself only used on the occasions when he entertained companies of roystering Americans and their companions, who were usually more or less photographed figurantes from the musical comedies. His breakfast was brought to him from the Gaskins ménage in the basement, and he dined here, there and everywhere—not infrequently at the Savoy.

It had not taken Jesse long, following his arrival in London, to ascertain that Louise and Laura were at the Savoy. He had, in fact, within an hour after his arrival, caused a telephone canvass to be made of the London hotels mainly patronized by Americans during the touring season to gain this information. Now, lounging about his apartment while his Japanese man unpacked his things, he began upon the devising of a method whereby he might again meet Louise. He had been reluctantly forced to abandon the idea that by this time she might have "altered her prejudice" against him and might therefore be at least passively willing to meet him upon the plane of ordinary acquaintanceship, thus giving him an opportunity to exercise his fascinations upon her.

But he had not the least intention of abandoning his besiegement of Louise Treharne—even if the besiegement had to be turned into an ambuscade. He had come to London, leaving New York at a time when the market was setting strongly against him, solely with this purpose in his mind. He furnished himself with plenty of excuses for the deliberation with which he undertook this particular quest. It was his indurated habit to doubt the continence of all women; and he made no exception of Louise Treharne. The fact that she had scarcely been out of school a month when he had first met her did not in the least serve to give her immunity from such a doubt in Jesse's mind. His single guide in such appraisals of women was his own experience with them, and his experience, he told himself, embodied plenty of parallels to the case of Louise Treharne. Why should she be immune from a furtiveness, and the indulgences thereof, which he had so often studied at first hand? Why should she be less clever at dissimulation than many others he had known?

He had not the least doubt that he was right in this view. He sought to make himself believe that otherwise he would be entirely willing to permit Louise to go her way. But, being right, then it was intolerable that she should have flouted him—*him!*—as she had. It was a girlish, immature prejudice. He had not had sufficient opportunity to gain her better will. Her treatment of him had sorely touched his vanity as a moulder of women to his purposes. The circumstances of his meeting with her had deprived him of a fair chance. She was young, beautiful, and, he felt sure, superbly secretive. He had not the least intention of supinely yielding to her foolish belief—it could not be other than that—that she disliked him.

But how to proceed?

No problem, having to do with what he would have called his diversions, had ever before so daunted him. Laura, to begin with, was a stumbling block in his path. Laura, with whom he had a perfunctory acquaintanceship extending over several years, had pointedly cut him, not once, but frequently, since the newspapers had flared with accounts of the one disreputable affair concerning him which had leaked out. He knew very well that there was not the least possible chance for him to regain even a nodding plane with Laura Stedham. And she was the barrier between himself and Louise Treharne. They were rarely, he felt sure, out of each other's

company. If Laura were out of the way, and he could reach Louise alone, there would, he felt, be a chance. It was unimaginable that Louise would, in such a case, be unresponsive to the allurements of his wealth, his power proceeding from wealth, his personality—Jesse felt so absolutely certain of this that he smiled when a vague doubt of it passed through his mind.

He had won many aloof women by bestowing upon them magnificent gifts. But he knew perfectly well that this method would not do with Louise Treharne. Whatever else she might be, there was, he felt, not a particle of greed in her. There had even been times when Jesse had not scrupled to effect his designs by putting forth the pretence that his devotions tended in but one direction—the altar. How to employ even this final method to engage the attention of a woman whose eyes, he very well knew, would flame with scorn of him even if she found herself accidentally in his presence?

For several hours, while Mutsu, his Japanese valet, went forward with the unpacking, Jesse strode up and down his apartment, going over this problem as he would have calculated the chances and mischances of a market campaign.

It was inevitable that Jesse, at the end of his study of the problem, should have reached but one conclusion: it must be an ambush.

Having reached this conclusion, he measured the risk and sought to forecast the aftermath. Everything was in his favor. In the situation which he meditated bringing about, he knew that, in case anything went wrong, the man's word would be worth that of a thousand women, no matter how exalted their reputations. And more than likely, he calmly figured, there would be no aftermath at all. Entrapped, and perceiving no possibility of escape Louise would acknowledge her finely-acted furtiveness to him, and, like all women who used furtiveness as a screen, would make the best of the situation—which was all that Jesse desired.

The salient feature of the plan which rapidly took form in his mind consisted in discovering when Louise and Laura should be out of each other's company, even for a short time. Jesse, not in the least balking at the idea of setting a deliberate trap because he knew that he would hold the advantage no matter what the outcome, applied himself to the solution of this by no means minor difficulty. The sight of the silent, busy Mutsu, industriously stowing his master's gear in dressers and closets, furnished Jesse with a suggestion.

He would give his Japanese man a vigil at the Savoy. The vigil might be a tedious as it was sure to be a delicate one, but Mutsu was both patient and discreet. He was a studious but alert man-boy of indeterminate age, as is characteristic of Japanese males under fifty, who had been employed as a club attendant in New York for several years and thus had added to his natural gift for discretion. He had been with Jesse for more than a year, always doing more than was ever asked of him, but studiously refraining from indicating whether he entertained any personal liking for his employer—which is another trait of a certain type of Japanese in their relationships with Occidentals.

Jesse spent a concentrated half hour in minutely instructing Mutsu as to what he desired of him. The valet was to go to the Savoy on the morrow, and, by liberally tipping the doorman at the ladies' entrance, or the carriage-opener, or whomsoever among the hotel's menials he found the most pliable or knowing, have Mrs. Laura Stedham and Miss Louise Treharne, American ladies who were guests of the hotel, pointed out to him when they should make their appearance, as they no doubt would in the course of the day, either for driving or walking. Miss Treharne would be the younger of the two. After having familiarized himself with the personal exteriors of these ladies, Mutsu was to keep vigil, on whatever pretext he might invent, in or around the hotel, until such a time as he should see the older of the two American ladies leaving the hotel alone. Whenever that should happen, the valet was instantly to telephone to Jesse at the Curzon Street apartment. The watch on the movements of the two ladies was not to terminate until Mrs. Stedham should leave the hotel unaccompanied by Miss Treharne, no matter how many days of waiting should be required before such a thing occurred.

Mutsu nodded and exhibited his dental smile when Jesse had finished his instructions. He understood the instructions perfectly, without, of course, in the least guessing at the purpose back of them.

Jesse made no mistake in appraising his Japanese man's acuteness at such work. Within less than two hours after ingratiating himself, by the use of unostentatiously distributed backsheesh, with certain of the Savoy's flunkeys, Mutsu had had Laura and Louise pointed out to him as they left the hotel and entered a taxicab. He fixed their faces on his mental recording tablets, and called up Jesse on the telephone and told him of his progress.

Thenceforward, for several days, the wiry little Japanese valet hovered about the ladies' entrance of the Savoy, forestalling suspicion as to the purpose of his loitering by the bestowal of liberal *pourboires* upon such of the flunkeys as were in a position to notice the constancy of his vigil.

Jesse kept to his Curzon Street apartment during the day, ever on the alert for a telephone message from his valet. He chafed under the necessity—as he deemed it—which kept him indoors throughout the daylight hours and only permitted of his prowling about London at night. But he possessed a sort of Luciferian determination in the pursuit of such a purpose as that upon which he was now engaged; to the successful accomplishment of which he would have passed his days in a cellar if that had been one of the requirements of the game.

Laura had many friends, English and American, in London whom she received and called upon informally. She cared nothing for the "functionizing" of the Anglo-American social season in London, but she keenly enjoyed the unceremonious gayeties of little groups of friends. She laughingly declared that she had "trained" the people she liked to "drop in" upon her in London in the American manner of neighborliness; and she enjoyed "showing off," as she expressed it, "the beautiful Miss Treharne, from the States," as some of the chatty London weeklies had alluded to Louise. She liked to junket about, too, with Louise; and there was no lack of agreeable men keen to take them on day-long motor tours through the country, attach them for merry afternoons to houseboat parties, and so on. For her part, Louise enjoyed the contrast afforded by the shy diffidence of the young Englishmen whom she met to the exuberant breeziness of Laura's American men friends in London.

One afternoon—it was ten days after Jesse's arrival in London—Laura suggested to Louise, at luncheon, that, as they had a "clean slate" for the remainder of the daylight hours for the first time in a long while, a tour among the shops, including a visit to the American department store just then established in London, might fill in a part of the time agreeably.

"But I am not insisting upon your going with me, dear," said Laura. "I know your lack of keenness for shopping in London, and I don't blame you, considering how the tradespeople here try to positively *make* one buy things one doesn't want. So you can very easily escape on the plea that you have letters to write, or that you are tired and want to rest up for the theatre tonight, and I shan't be in the least miffed."

"I'll make it the letter-writing plea, then, Laura," said Louise, "and cling to the truth in spite of the temptation you offer me to fib. I really have a lot of letters to write."

Laura went away in a taxicab directly after luncheon, saying that she would not be gone more than three hours, and Louise, at the desk in the sitting room of their suite, began a letter to her father, from whom, forwarded by John Blythe, she had lately received a long and affectionate letter, expressing his anxiety to see her and the hope that he might so arrange his business affairs as to permit of his visiting New York late in the Autumn.

About half an hour after she had begun writing the telephone bell rang.

"His this Miss Tre'arne?" Louise heard a man's voice, "but Mrs. Stedham says that you are that of an upper servant," in the telephone.

"Yes, I am Miss Treharne—what is it?" she replied.

"Begging pardon, Miss Tre'arne," went on the man's voice, "but Mrs. Stedham says that you are not to be alarmed. Mrs. Stedham, Miss, was taken slightly ill in a taxicab—nothing serious, Miss, she asks me to assure you—and she is now with Mrs. 'Ammond, at Number Naught-Fourteen Curzon Street. Mrs. Stedham, Miss, insists that you be not alarmed, and wishes you to come to 'er at Mrs. 'Ammond's at once. This is Mrs. 'Ammond's butler that is speaking."

"Tell Mrs. Stedham, please, that I shall come at once," said Louise, instantly aroused by the thought that something serious might have happened to Laura. "What is the number and street again, please? And you are sure Mrs. Stedham has had no accident or is not seriously ill?"

"It is Naught-Fourteen Curzon Street, Miss Tre'arne," came the reply, "and Mrs. Stedham 'erself asks that you be assured that she is only slightly indisposed."

"I shall be there immediately, please tell her," said Louise, making a pencilled note of the address.

Very uneasy, Louise put on her hat and long pongee coat with fluttering fingers. She felt that something serious must have happened to deflect Laura from a shopping tour to the home of a woman friend. She had not heard Laura allude to any woman friend in London named Mrs. Hammond, but that consideration did not linger more than an instant in her mind, for Laura no doubt had many London friends of whom she had not chanced to speak.

Within less than five minutes after receiving the telephoned summons, Louise was on her way in a taxicab to the address in Curzon Street. She was pale and in a tremor of uneasiness when the taxicab pulled up at the curb of a neat three-story house near the end of a row of similar houses.

So perturbed was she by the thought that she had not been told the entire truth as to what had happened to Laura that she scarcely noticed the bald, bland Gaskins when he opened the door for her and said "Miss Tre'arne?"

"Yes, yes," hastily replied Louise. "Where is Mrs. Stedham?"

"If you please, Miss, I shall conduct you," said Gaskins, inured by years of experience to the sort of deception he was practising; and he softly padded up the thickly-carpeted stairs in advance of her. Closely followed by Louise, who paid hardly any attention at all to the surroundings in her trepidation as to how she might find Laura, Gaskins quietly opened the front side door of the second floor apartment and held it open for her. Louise stepped into the room, and Gaskins, not entering himself, closed the door after her. She did not of course notice the click which denoted that the closed door was fitted with a spring lock. Afterwards Louise remembered having thought it odd that Gaskins did not follow her into the room to announce her, instead of so suddenly

effacing himself.

Louise quickly saw that there was nobody in the charmingly arranged room—partly study, partly living room—in which she found herself. Also she noticed that it was distinctively a man's room. Wondering, but not yet affected by any fear, she made a few steps toward the portieres at the rear of the room.

She was about to reach out a hand to draw the portieres side, when they parted; and Langdon Jesse confronted her. He was trig in a big, overweight way in his lounging suit of grey; but the pallor of excitement had overspread his naturally waxy face, and his attempt at the debonair manner was proclaimed to be a mere assumption by the trembling of his hands and the huskiness of his voice when he spoke.

Louise had never swooned in her life. Now, however, at this apparition of the one human being she had ever learned to loathe, she pressed one hand to her forehead and another to her heart and swayed slightly. She feared that she would fall; but the thought rocketed through her mind that if she yielded to the almost overpowering physical weakness of the moment she would be at his mercy. By an effort of will which she afterwards remembered with wonderment, she steadied herself as if by the process of actually forcing her blood to flow evenly. She permitted her hands to fall to her sides and regarded Jesse with an appearance of calmness. In that clash of eyes, Jesse, after a very few seconds of it, turned his head away on pretence of motioning Louise to a chair. The impalement of her gaze was beyond his endurance.

Louise paid no attention to his arm-waved invitation to be seated, but stood in the spot where she had stopped when the first sight of him had almost sent her reeling. She regarded him steadily, almost incredulously; an expression of incredulity that such a thing could be.

"It is unpardonable, of course, Miss Treharne," said Jesse, with a clearing of the throat in an attempt to sweep away his huskiness. "But my madness to see you, the hopelessness of trying to see you, alone, in any other way—" He brought his sentence to a finish with a gesture meant to emphasize the excusableness of his position.

"Therefore you have sought to entrap me?" said Louise, with no trace of scorn in her tone; her contempt for him was quite beyond such a manifestation of loathing; she asked the question as if really astonished to discover that a man would do such a thing.

"What other method could I employ save a sort of strategy?" asked Jesse, evading her gaze. "Knowing that I was under the ban of your unreasonable dislike, that you would refuse to receive me, and wretched, despairing, under the constant castigation of your prejudice—what else could I do? What else could any man do who found himself in a state of desperation from his love for a woman?"

"Say anything but that, I beg of you," replied Louise, experiencing a surge of disgust at the man's effrontery in professing love in such a situation. "I have no reason to expect anything savoring of manliness from you, of course; but you might at least spare yourself the humiliation—if you can be humiliated—of seeming ridiculous."

"I expected harsh words from you, which, of course, is tantamount to confessing that I deserve them," said Jesse. "But I think we shall have a better understanding. Won't you be seated?"

"I would have credited you for knowing better than to ask me that," replied Louise. She stepped to the door by which she had entered, tried the knob, and of course found that the door was locked. Jesse, watching her, gradually resumed his attempt at the debonair manner. All of the odds were in his favor in this adventure. He could not see where he stood a chance to lose. Therefore, according to the smooth argument of cowardice, there was no reason, he considered, why he should continue his air of deference.

"You did not suppose that, having been to somewhat adroit pains to get you here, I would make it so easy for you to walk out without, at least, a little interchange of ideas?" he asked her, with coolly lifting brows, when she turned from the door.

She noticed his change of tone, and was conscious that she preferred it to his manner of fawning self-exculpation.

"Make your mind easy as to that. I have told you that I expect nothing whatever of you that befits a man," she replied with a coldness of tone from which he inwardly recoiled far more than if she had poured out upon him an emotional torrent of rebuke.

For a moment Jesse, studying her, was visited by the suggestion that perhaps, after all, Louise Treharne was wearing no mask; that she was really that anomaly—as he would have viewed such a one—a woman who was what she professed to be. But he quickly dismissed this prompting as something out of the question. She was merely a proficient in the art of acting, and she was employing her mimetic talent to the utmost upon him—thus he argued it out with himself. Moreover, he decided to give expression to his belief, as being calculated sooner to bring her to the realization that he had her measured.

"Listen, Louise," he said to her, thus calling her without even attempting to make his tone apologetic; he leaned his elbows on the back of a leather chair and forced himself to look directly at her as he spoke: "It is idle for you to seek to delude me. It might do if I were not nearly twice your age and had not had about five thousand times your experience. As the matter stands, it is

simply absurd. At least give me credit for having cut my wisdom teeth as to women. You portray the part you assume with me very well. I'll have to say that for you. But, seeing that I have penetrated to the heart of the comedy, why protract the play?"

Louise disdained to attempt to have him believe that she did not understand him. But she was so riven by the shameful of his imputation that she could not have found words to reply to him if she had wanted to.

"Why not give me a chance to make good with you, Louise?" went on Jesse in a tone of arguing familiarity, coming from behind the leather chair and advancing toward her. He accepted her silence for wavering, or at least a willingness to listen to the sort of a presentation he had started. "You know that I am devilishly fond of you, else I would not have gone to all this trouble to get you here. Of course you may call it a trap and all that sort of penny-dreadful rot; but what other way had I to see you? You've scarcely been out of my mind since first I met you at Judd's—I should say, at your mother's house. I've been stark raving about you—am yet; and that's the truth. Why can't we be bully good friends? Your little pretenses are all very engaging and that sort of thing, and do you credit, of course, but you see I have penetrated them. Well, then, why can't we hit it off? You don't know how good I'll be to you if you look at the thing in the sensible way. The first time I saw you I heard them hail you as Empress Louise. Well, I'll see to it that you have the adornment and the investiture of an Empress. Well, is it a bargain, Louise? Will you shake hands on it?"

He was very close to where she stood by this time, having continued to advance toward her as he spoke. A sudden flush had appeared on his features, and his enunciation was choppy, muffled, indistinct from the huskiness of passion.

"Don't come any closer to me than you are," she said to him when, within an arm's length of her, he stopped and held out his hand to bind the pact his words had attempted to frame. She spoke quietly, stood her ground, looked straight at him, and placed her hands behind her back. "And allow me to say this: I feel sure no coward of your kind ever yet escaped some sort of retribution. You will repent what you have said to me. But you will repent far more if you put your hands upon me. Will you open this door and let me go?"

She looked her innocence, her perfect purity, as she stood before him. But Jesse was blind to what even the most ordinary, uncultivated man might have seen at a glance. His prominent, protrusive eyes had become bloodshot, and, instead of breathing, he was almost gasping.

"So you're going to keep on your white domino of pretense, eh?" he sneered. "Open the door? Do you think I'm going to let you treat me as if I were some credulous cub just turned loose from school? Open the door? Don't, for Heaven's name, take me for an imbecile!"

Suddenly he reached forward and twined his arms about her waist and crushed her to him, making for her lips. She gave no outcry, but, raising her right forearm, pressed it under his chin, thus holding his head back and keeping his face from hers. But he did not relax his powerful embrace. Louise strove with all of her unusual woman's strength to break his hold upon her, but his hands were clasped back of her, and her exertions only caused the two of them to sway and change ground; and his embrace remained that of a python.

"You might as well drop this damned ground-and-lofty business and behave yourself like a sensible girl, you know," panted Jesse, speaking in a choked tone because her forearm remained wedged under his chin. "You're game, and all that sort of thing, and you're all kinds of a good actress, too; but, by God, you're not quite clever enough to pull the wool over my eyes! You're Antoinette Treharne's daughter, and you're some other things besides that I don't exactly know the details of but have a pretty good guess at; and you're going to rest quiet in these arms today, if you never do again!"

They struggled back and forth, Louise, quite conscious that she stood in the greatest peril she was ever likely to know, holding her own with a strength which Jesse, even in the madness of the moment, told himself was almost preternatural in a young, slender woman.

"You are simply wasting your strength, you know," Jesse went on, putting forth all of the power of his arms and holding her so close to him that for a moment she could not move. "I have no taste for this sort of schoolboy and schoolgirl tugging and hauling. But you force me to it. You haven't a chance on earth of getting out of here, even if I release you—which I shall, as soon as I have taken a little harmless toll of your lips. Now, are you going to be sensible and quit this idiotic business?"

Louise did not answer him. She had said no word, made no plea, since he had seized upon her. She knew that words would be useless, and she could not have framed a beseeching phrase to address to him had she tried. She was taking her chance, doing all she could to make the chance better. But she could not and would not implore him to release her. She thought of screaming; but, remembering how the man who had conducted her upstairs had let her into the room and then obliterated himself, she reasoned it out, even in the intensity of the struggle, that this man no doubt was a flunky accomplice who would pay no attention to her screaming. Nevertheless she did decide that, as a last resort, she would scream, taking the chance that whomsoever happened to be on the floor beneath or the one above might come to her assistance.

She had relaxed a little, for rest, as he spoke to her, and, catching her off her guard, Jesse suddenly put forth all of his power and swung her, slipping and almost falling as he did so, partly

through the portieres from which he had emerged when she came in.

When the portieres thus were thrust apart, Louise saw, standing in the middle of the room which they screened off, a surprised-looking, somewhat scowling little Japanese. Jesse caught sight of Mutsu at the same instant that Louise did.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Jesse demanded of the valet. "Get out and stay out till this evening, do you hear?"

Mutsu first lowered his head, then shook it with a most decided negative. His lips were pulled back from his teeth; mutiny shone all over him.

"What you do?" he demanded of Jesse, falling into a pidgin vernacular which he rarely used except when excited. "She no like to be crushed in embrace? She is of an innocence. She is of an honorable. I saw that at Savoy Hotel when first I see her. Why you no let go?"

"Get out of here, I say, you damned chattering monkey!" Jesse raged at him, relaxing his hold upon Louise, and leaping at the little Japanese.

Mutsu, retreating not an inch, met the charge of his employer with lowered head, and when Jesse thrust out a hand to grab him the Japanese, revealing a perfect adeptness at jiu-jitsu which Jesse never had known he possessed, seized the thrust-out hand between both of his own sinewy ones; and in an instant Jesse's face was drawn with pain. Then the Japanese made a sudden dart behind Jesse, pulling back the hand to which he still clung and the arm to which it was attached in such a way that the big, bulky man could not move without breaking the arm; he felt the tendons stretching to the breaking point as it was.

"Now you go, Miss innocent honorable lady," said Mutsu, without visible excitement, to Louise. "Go through next back room and out door there. I see you at Savoy tonight after I get fired-dismissed from valet position here."

Jesse, his face red with the torture of the accomplished jiu-jitsu he was receiving, stormed at and cursed the Japanese in fo'c'sle terms as he saw Louise pass toward the rear door the Japanese had indicated. She nodded affirmatively to Mutsu when he told her that he would be at the Savoy that evening to see that she had arrived there safely; then she passed through the rear door leading into the hall, went down the thickly-padded stairs without awakening the bald and bland Gaskins, who dozed in a hall chair; and had the luck to hail a taxicab almost in front of the house.

Laura was at the hotel, and in a panic of worry about Louise, when the girl got back. Louise told Laura what had happened in a few words, then fainted, falling back heavily upon a couch, for the first time in her life—after the danger was all over, with the usual feminine whimsiness.

That night the following cable message to John Blythe was flashed under the sea:

"Come immediately. You are needed here. LAURA."

CHAPTER XIV

The mutiny of Mutsu, culminating at so opportune a time for Louise, was the result of an enmity for his employer which had been slumbering for a long time in the mind of the Japanese valet. It had its origin in Jesse's treatment of several women and girl victims for the entrapment of whom Jesse had invoked the unwilling services of his Japanese man. Mutsu had been employed as an attendant at New York clubs long enough to know the meaning of the word "thoroughbred" in its vernacular application to men; and he knew very well that the "thoroughbred" man did not go in for the sort of women-corralling machinations to which Jesse devoted more than half of his time. Thus formed and grew Mutsu's contempt for his employer as a coward who preyed upon the defencelessness of inveigled women; and his contempt had reached a focal point when, after having been made the instrument to accomplish the enmeshment of Louise Treharne, he had returned to the Curzon Street house to find her in a peril with which he had become all too familiar since entering Jesse's service. Louise's beauty and palpable purity had touched a sympathetic chord in the Japanese; so that, after accomplishing his vigil, his knowledge, based upon experience, of the indignities and perhaps worse to which she was bound to be subjected by his employer had impelled him, in a sudden surge of Oriental wrath, to follow her after he had seen her start for the Curzon Street house.

Mutsu had no difficulty in making a leisurely departure from Jesse's establishment and service after having released Louise from his employer's toils. He retained his tendon-stretching jiu-jitsu hold on Jesse until he was sure that Louise had reached the street, while Jesse, literally foaming at the mouth in his rage, cursed him with an almost Arabic variety and profusion of epithets. Then Mutsu, suddenly releasing his employer, darted to the center of the room and faced Jesse with a teeth-exhibiting smile that was also half a snarl.

"Now I quit," said Mutsu, briefly. "I am glad for a quit. I despise-hate your typical. You not come near me—" as Jesse, rubbing his sorely-stretched arm, made a step toward him—"or I break your two-both arms. I pack. You pay me. I quit permanent-forever."

Jesse came to a full stop at the threat of being treated to a pair of broken arms. He was twice the size of the Japanese, but the difference in their sizes was more than compensated for by his own cravenness and the valet's mastery of the bone-breaking art. Mutsu, never taking his eyes off Jesse, got out his two suit-cases and packed them carefully and deliberately. Jesse, striding up and down and storming, seized a heavy jade ornament from a mantel, when Mutsu was about half through with his packing task, and drew it back as if to heave it at the valet; but Mutsu, making two agile backward steps, grabbed one of Jesse's pistols which lay on top of the tray of an open trunk, and thus waited for the missile. Jesse replaced the jade ornament on the mantel and resumed his striding up and down. When the Japanese had finished his packing, he consulted a little notebook and, totting up a column of expenditures, found that Jesse owed him fifteen pounds.

"You pay now and permanent I quit," the Japanese said to Jesse, and the latter threw his wallet on a table.

"Take it out of that, you dirty little mandril," he growled to Mutsu, "and be on your way before I have you handed over on the charge of being a thief."

"Just that you try," replied Mutsu, breathing hard, as he counted over the money that was due him, "and I—you see where you get off—just that you try! Your name like fertilizer I would make!"

Then Mutsu stuffed the amount that was due him into his pocket, tossing the rest of the money on to the table, clapped on his hat, picked up his pair of suit-cases, and walked out, flying the gonfalon of victory. He went straight to the Savoy, and was taken into the service of Laura Stedham the instant he made his appearance before her.

Jesse, wearing a thoroughly whipped look, huddled in a deep chair for hours after Mutsu's departure. The chair was close enough to his brandy bottle to enable him to apply himself to it at startlingly frequent intervals. The first "transaction" of his life, having to do with women, had gone flatly against him. He ground his teeth as he drunkenly pondered that irrefutable fact. He had no fear of the consequences of his attempt to enmesh Louise Treharne. Her only male protector, he knew, was on the other side of the sea. But it was the knowledge that he had utterly and finally lost out in the most diligent and ingenious attempt he had ever made upon a feminine citadel that enraged him. He did not even have the satisfaction of framing reprisals. What reprisals could he attempt? And they could avail him nothing even if he succeeded in setting such revengeful machinery in motion.

Jesse was considerably more than middling drunk when, his brandy having receded to the lees, he summoned the obsequious Gaskins.

"Anybody above or below me here now?" he inquired of Gaskins.

"No, sir," replied Gaskins. "The gentleman that 'as the hapartment below is abroad, hand the gentleman that 'as the hapartment above only comes 'ere occasionally, sir, for a little hamusement—'e's married now, sir."

"Well, that's good," said Jesse, reeling about. "That'll let me have the whole damned outfit for my parties for the next ten days or so, eh?"

"Hat your service, sir," replied Gaskins, familiar with Jesse's prodigality in devising and settling for his diversions.

"I'm going to have a series of rough-houses here," said Jesse, minus even a crumb of dignity in the presence of a man who had been a flunky all his life, "to celebrate a defeat—or make me forget a defeat; it all comes to the same thing. Fellows have been defeated before my time, haven't they? Yes, and they'll be defeated after I'm dead, by hell! You've got your work cut out for you, Gaskins; I'm going to paint this sheltered little corner of London a luminous red for a week or so, and then damn your England! I'll have you fix up the suppers and that sort of thing. Engage all the help you want, and right away. And, say, get me another man, will you? I've fired that dirty little Japanese chimpanzee—he's a thief."

"You may leave heverything to me, sir," said Gaskins, rubbing his hands. "Hi quite understand, sir."

The saturnalia in the Curzon Street house began that very night. Certain London stage managers of musical comedies still remember that week as one during which, for several nights running, they had to present their extravaganzas with mere apologies for feminine choruses, and, in some instances, with many of the female principals' shrill understudies doing their dismal best with only half-learned lines and songs.

John Blythe, making the *Mauretania* a quarter of an hour before that leviathan started on one of her East-bound record-breaking voyages, reached London on the sixth day after having received Laura's cablegram. He surmised why he had been summoned. So sure was he that his surmise

was correct that, when he walked in upon Laura and Louise at the Savoy, he did not even inquire why so urgent a summons had been sent to him. He preferred to postpone that question until he had an opportunity to be alone with Laura.

Laura had told Louise that Blythe was coming. But neither of the women had been expecting him so soon. When he was announced by telephone from the hotel desk Louise flushed and paled alternately. Laura watched her amusedly.

"Such hardened unconcern is dreadful to see in one so young, Louise," she was beginning to chaff when Blythe was ushered in by a diminutive Buttons. Louise gave him both of her hands. He held them, looking into her eyes with his wide smile.

"May I?" he asked her, a little unsteadily.

"As Louise's chaperon, I shall never forgive her if she refuses—nor you, if you accept her refusal," said Laura.

Louise upraised her face to his. It was a simple but eloquent confession that she knew her lips were for him.

"Not as your guardian, I hope, Louise?" said Blythe, putting it in the form of a question.

Her face still upraised and her eyes partly closed, she shook her head; and Blythe, drawing her to him, kissed her full on the lips. Then he quickly released her and took Laura's outstretched hands.

It was the luncheon hour, and Laura had luncheon served in the rooms. They chatted upon little intimate matters quite as if they had been lunching in Laura's New York apartment. Blythe, in fact, mentioned Laura's apartment.

"I met your decorator the other day," he said, "and he wore a very puzzled expression. He told me that you had charged him by cable to do your place over in Tyrian purple, and he was afraid that color would be too dark, or too obtrusive, or something—I forget his exact words."

They knew, however, that his banter was simply a device. Both of the women, taking Blythe's manner as their cue, and observing how pointedly he refrained from asking why he had been sent for, knew at once that he had formed his surmise. Louise, for her part, was awaiting Laura's signal for her to withdraw. When she had gone, Blythe turned a suddenly-sobered face upon Laura.

"It's Jesse, I suppose?" he said to her.

"Yes," said Laura, and she told him of what had happened at the Curzon Street house. Also she told him of Jesse's attempted advances upon Louise in New York.

"I reprove myself now, of course, that I did not tell you at the time about how the man sought to force his attentions upon her in New York," she said, "but you will understand, I know, why I hesitated to tell you. I felt that you would have found it too hard to keep your hands off of him, and I feared to put you to the test. Of course I should have known that you would do nothing, no matter how sorely tempted, that would have involved Louise; but my timidity, I suppose, is of a piece with that of other women in such circumstances."

"Don't worry about that part of it, Laura," said Blythe, consolingly. "You've atoned, if any atonement were necessary, by getting me here now. After all, I could scarcely have taken it upon myself to chastise him in New York. The blackguard did not go quite far enough there, as I understand it, to permit of me getting out on the firing line, even if I had known about it. It is just as well that you waited, for that and some other reasons. There is everything in having a good case," and his face wreathed in a dry sort of a smile which Laura analyzed as boding little good for the man of whom they were speaking.

"What are your plans, John?" Laura asked him presently. "London, you know, is quite as fruitful a field as New York for the achieving of an unmerited and distorted notoriety. I lean upon your judgment, of course."

"You are not supposing that I am going to call the cur out, or tweak his nose in public, or any such yellow-covered thing as that, are you, Laura?" Blythe asked her with another of his reflective smiles.

"I know that you are going to punish him," replied Laura. "I want you to punish him. Heaven knows that I am not bloodthirsty, but I should dearly love to be by while you are in the article of punishing him. Only it is an affair that must be handled with extreme caution. I promise not to say that again. But, really, John, you must—"

"The only thing I am afraid of," interrupted Blythe, meditatively, "is that he might have left London. Where did you say his place is? I'll have to devise some way to find out if he is still there."

"Mutsu can do that," said Laura. She had told Blythe of the Japanese valet's fine part in saving Louise from Jesse, and now she summoned him. Blythe, studying the wiry little man, who wore a distinctively agreeable smile when he made his appearance, commended him warmly for his conduct and asked him if he knew whether Jesse still remained at the Curzon Street house. Mutsu replied that he did not know but that he could find out; and he went to the telephone and

called up Gaskins, representing himself to be a club servant who had been directed to ascertain if Mr. Jesse still remained in town. Gaskins replied that he was, and Mutsu gave that word to Blythe.

"You go there, sir?" inquired Mutsu, evidently sensing that Blythe's contemplated visit to the Curzon Street house was not to be in the nature of a peace errand. "Let it be that I shall go with you, sir? I can the help-assist you."

Blythe laughingly told the Japanese that he considered that he had done his share and that he would not be needing any help-assistance; and Mutsu withdrew.

"Shall we all dine together here?" Blythe asked Laura, rising after the Japanese had gone. "I am staying at the Carlton, and I want to run over there to——"

"Listen, John: are you going to see that man at his place now, at once?" Laura asked him, with an expression of mingled worryment and curiosity. "You know you are!"

"Oh," said Blythe, "I have a bit of running about to do, and——"

"But listen, please: supposing the coward were to try to use some weapon on you and——"

"Tush, Laura. What became of Louise? But stay: make my devoirs to her, won't you, please? I am off to keep an appointment. We are dining here this evening then? You may expect me by eight o'clock," and off he rushed. He had, in fact, been "straining at his leash," as Laura thought, watching him, ever since he had found that Jesse still was in town.

Louise came back a few moments after Blythe's departure, and she looked rueful when she saw that he had gone.

"Don't take it so excessively to heart, dear," Laura said to her. "He left all sorts of messages of apology for going without seeing you, but he had an appointment—er—I mean he had to go to ——" Laura came to a somewhat feeble pause, and Louise, moreover, had noticed that her tone was a bit forced. Louise, trembling slightly, placed her hands on Laura's shoulders.

"Dear, he has gone to Curzon Street, has he not?" she asked the older woman.

"Of course he has!—why shouldn't he?" replied Laura, with a bravado which immediately gave away to tears. Louise promptly followed her example. It was merely another repetition of the age-old story wherein women weep when men go forth. And, although they of course did not know it at the time, no doubt both women enjoyed their tears quite as heartily as if they had been justified in feeling the least fear for the safety of John Blythe.

Jesse, his fiesta "in celebration of a defeat" at an end, was supervising the packing of his trunks by the young English valet obtained for him by Gaskins. His face was puffed and there were purplish pouches under his restless eyes. Three New York men, two of them somewhat youngish, the third of about Jesse's age, who had been drawn into the current of the recent gayety at the Curzon Street house, lounged about, smoking rather dismally, glancing occasionally into the mantel glass at their furred tongues and shaking their heads in the spirit of self-accusation which comes with the aftermath.

"Back to little old New York and at least a year's exemplary conduct for mine," observed the eldest of Jesse's three visitors, Jermyn Scammel, a stock broker widely known in New York for the catholicity of his views as to his associates.

"The veil for me," chorused the two younger men, sepulchrally.

Jesse accepted their vows of amendment as tributes to his lavishness as an entertainer and smiled flaccidly. The self-gratulating smile still flickered on his face when there came a knock, and Gaskins, grown unceremonious during the recent gay proceedings, opened the door without waiting for a "Come in" and said:

"Gentleman with an happointment with you, sir."

Blythe had told Gaskins that he had an appointment with Jesse and that therefore there would be no need to announce him.

Jesse's smile congealed, his jaw fell, and he stood with mouth agape, when John Blythe stepped into the room. Blythe bestowed a mere nod upon him and then glanced around at the other men. He knew Scammel.

"Hul-lo!" exclaimed that now repentent *bon vivant*, advancing upon Blythe with outstretched hand. "John Blythe it is, but too late for the doings! But who'd have thought you ever participated in doings, old man!"

Something in Blythe's eye, as well as the panic-stricken appearance of Jesse, stopped Scammel's airy greeting when he had got that far. "Why, what the devil——" he muttered, looking first at Blythe and then at Jesse, whose face had taken on a sickly, chalky pallor. The two younger men, seated a-straddle of chairs, watched the scene with curious eyes.

Blythe rather liked Scammel, in spite of the latter's excessively careless way of living. The man was genuine, at any rate, and Blythe was not displeased to find him there; he knew that Scammel would be a trustworthy witness as to anything that might happen. Blythe bowed to the two younger men, and turned to the still agape Jesse.

"Would you prefer to see me privately, or do you elect to have these gentlemen remain?" he asked Jesse in a quiet tone.

"I have nothing to see you about," spluttered Jesse, "and you are intruding upon——"

"You know what I have crossed the Atlantic to see you about," Blythe broke in upon him in an even tone.

"This is no place for a clergyman's son—I can see that!" ejaculated Scammel, picking up his hat and stick, the two younger men doing likewise; the fact having become very obvious by this time that something unusual between Blythe and Jesse was in the wind.

"Don't you people go!" gasped Jesse, and they all saw, not without a certain immediate disgust, that the man was in positive terror. "I want all of you as witnesses! This man," staring with protrusive eyes at Blythe, "has no appointment with me. He wasn't asked to come here, and he has no right here. He is intruding upon my——"

"Easy has it, Jesse," put in Scammel, putting off his airiness of a sudden and assuming the dignity which belonged to him. "I know Blythe. He doesn't intrude anywhere. This is a quarrel between you two. I am your guest and I'll stay if you want me to and if Blythe is agreeable. How about it, Blythe?"

"I would a little prefer that you and these other gentlemen remain," replied Blythe, quite at his ease. "I think it fair to tell you in advance, however, that you are to witness the chastisement of your host."

Jesse gave an audible gasp, and Scammel looked at him and then at Blythe.

"Well, since you both want us to stay, there is no other way for it, is there?" turning to the two younger men, who nodded acquiescently. "But it's a bit unusual, isn't it, Blythe? Coming to a man's house with a chastising programme?"

"You won't think so, Scammel, nor will your friends here, when I explain the reason," replied Blythe, no trace of excitement in his tone; "and, since you are going to remain, you are of course entitled to an explanation."

"It's all a put-up job!" broke out Jesse, hoarsely. "I've had no affair with this man. He's meddling, that's what he is doing—meddling! I swear it, by God!"

"Just a moment, Jesse," put in Scammel, squarely facing the man he addressed. "Blythe doesn't meddle. I know that as well as I know that I wear a hat. He wouldn't be here with any such purpose as he announces unless he had some pretty good reason. Don't try to prejudice his case in advance. That isn't the square thing."

"But," almost screamed Jesse, "he is picking up other people's affairs and trying to make them his ——"

"Stop that, Jesse!" broke in Scammel, raising an authoritative arm, a trace of anger in his tone. "Good God, man, can't you play the game? You've got a man's gizzard, haven't you? What the devil are you trembling and quaking about? Is your case so bad as all that? Go ahead, Blythe. It's your say now, and we're listening."

Jesse, knowing that the verdict of this court of arbitration could not but be against him, glanced at the portieres as if upon the point of bolting for it. Scammel, noticing this, passed behind Jesse and took his stand at the parting of the portieres. The two younger men rose from their straddled chairs and viewed the proceedings standing, their eyes slitting perceptibly when they perceived Jesse's manifest cravenness.

"Gentlemen," said Blythe, glancing from Scammel to the younger men and not even seeming to see Jesse, "I don't think it will be necessary to pledge you to secrecy as to what happens here, even if no names are to be mentioned. If the affair involved a man it would be different. But it does not. It involves a young New York lady, now in London, who has been out of school less than half a year. The young lady is my ward. Moreover, she is to be my wife."

"But I didn't know that!" broke in Jesse with a hideous shrillness of tone. "I swear to God that I did not know that, or——"

Scammel glared Jesse into silence, and Blythe went on.

"It makes no difference, as you will discover, whether he knew it or not," he said, speaking of Jesse as if he had not been present. "The thing that he did, in this place, a week ago, was a thing so incredibly base that my account of it might well tax your credulity. But that it happened precisely as I am going to tell it to you is of course true, else I should not be here. The young New York lady of whom I speak is in London under the protection of a chaperon, a friend of her mother's. A week ago, by means of a trick, this man enticed my ward, who is wholly lacking in experience, to this house. He caused a telephone message to be sent to her at her hotel, informing her that her chaperon, who had left the hotel on a shopping tour, had been overtaken

by an illness and had been brought to this house. This house was represented in the telephone message to be the home of a 'Mrs. Hammond,' an imaginary friend of my ward's chaperon. The young lady came here with all haste to see, as she supposed, her chaperon and protectress. This man, waiting for her, not only insulted her grossly, subjecting her to indignities and physical violence which I can scarcely speak of in the presence of gentlemen, but he told her, virtually in so many words, that it was his deliberate purpose to deflower her. His own valet, a Japanese, appeared in her moment of peril; and it was the valet's physical intervention alone that saved her from the fate this man had ingeniously and malignantly planned for her."

Blythe paused. He had spoken quietly, but there was a menacing timbre in his voice. Jesse, looking like a hunted animal, had attempted several times to break in upon Blythe's recital, but each time Scammel had stopped him with a warning gesture.

Now Scammel, with gathered brows, stepped in front of Jesse and inquired of him:

"What have you to say to this, Jesse?"

"I didn't know, I tell you," Jesse broke out in a voice that was choked with terror, "that she was to be married to Blythe, or——"

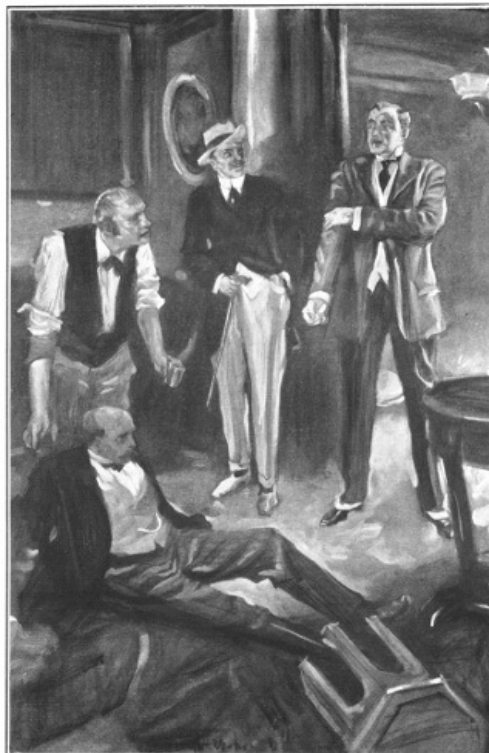
"Wait!" commanded Scammel, thrusting up a staying hand. "That convicts you, Jesse. You're a damned scoundrel on your own say-so. What difference does it make as to the main facts of your dirty bit of work whether you knew that or not? I am not unmindful of the duties of a guest; but, for all that, if I were Blythe I'd whale the everlasting hell out of you, here and now, and I reckon he will; and I, for one, am going to stick around to see fair play!"

"Same here" and "That goes for me, too," put in the two younger men.

Blythe stepped forward, and, drawing back his right arm, left the quickly-crimsoning imprint of his palm upon Jesse's waxy cheek. Jesse received the blow, merely meant to be introductory, with a shriek, and wriggled back and sought to huddle in a corner of the room.

"Why, damnation take it, Jesse," exclaimed Scammel, reddening with the shame of seeing a man he had been on terms with performing so cravenly, "you're going to put up your hands, aren't you? You're not going to be such a cur as to——Here, none of that, you know!" and he leaped at Jesse and wrenched from his grasp the heavy teakwood tabouret which the man, at bay and with no sense of fairness, had suddenly reached down and grabbed from beneath the jardiniere which it supported.

"Keep out, Scammel, please," quietly enjoined Blythe, and he stepped over to Jesse, pulled him to the center of the room by the lapel of his coat, and then brought his right fist crashing to the point of Jesse's jaw. Jesse, seeing the blow coming, squeaked like a rat; then he went down like a log and lay unconscious before the fireplace. Blythe and the three other men stood looking at him with wonderment mingled with disgust.



HE SQUEAKED LIKE A RAT; THEN HE WENT DOWN LIKE A LOG.

"Well, by St. George and the Dragon, that gets me—a man weighing two hundred if he weighs an ounce, and well put together, too, even if he may be not exactly fit—a man like that standing up and letting another fellow bang away at him without ever so much as sticking up his hands—Damn such carrion in a man's shape, I say! I consider that you've been cheated, Blythe. I know that you'd a thousand times rather he had taken at least one healthy swing at you!"

"I feel as if I had hit a woman," replied Blythe, a lump of loathing in his throat.

One of the younger men went to the head of the stairs and called to Gaskins to come up. Gaskins viewed the prone man imperturbably enough, then dashed a glass of water in his face. Presently Jesse's eyelids fluttered and after a moment he sat up, rubbing his chin, and staring about confusedly.

Then the four men left the house, Scammel and his two companions lashing out at themselves for having even unwittingly permitted themselves to become the guests of a man of such monolithic cowardice. Blythe, sickened by the spinelessness of the man whom he had called to account, went to his rooms at the Carlton to dress for dinner at the Savoy.

Louise and Laura, neither of them in a conversational humor, had just finished dressing when Blythe, ushered by the pompous three-foot Buttons, walked in upon them, very "tall and wide" in his evening clothes. As he came under the light of the electrolier both women surveyed his face keenly and nervously for marks of a conflict.

"Of course he has been there," thought Laura, "but——"

Just then Blythe, in removing his right glove in rather a gingerly fashion, pulled with it a piece of white sticking plaster, and Laura perceived that the skin was missing from the middle knuckle of his right hand. Then she knew that he had "been there." But she did not hear what had happened that afternoon at the Curzon Street house until Scammel, whom she had known all her life, told her several months later in New York; Scammel, while Blythe had been making his explanation, having correctly guessed, being acquainted with nearly all the Americans in London, as to the identity of the chaperon of Blythe's ward.

CHAPTER XV

Before Louise had risen on the following morning Laura entered her bedroom and handed her an unopened cablegram. Louise tore open the envelope with trembling hands. She had no means of surmising the character of the message. Blythe had been purposely evasive in replying to Louise's questions as to whether her mother had looked ill when he had last seen her, for he disliked to be the bearer of disquieting news. His private report to Laura, however, as to the obvious state of Mrs. Treharne's health had been sufficiently alarming to cause Laura to lie awake a good part of the night, meditating as to whether she should tell Louise. Laura had read Mrs. Treharne's letter to Louise, announcing her departure from the house on the Drive for an undetermined destination; and this complicated the situation and was the reason why Laura withheld from Louise what Blythe had told her about her mother's gravely-declining health. Since the receipt of that letter no message had reached Louise from her mother, giving her address; and Laura had not elected to alarm the girl needlessly while Mrs. Treharne's address remained unknown.

The cablegram took the problem out of Laura's hands. It was dated from Saranac, in the Adirondacks, and read:

"Am ill. Come immediately. MOTHER."

Louise handed the message to Laura and rose at once. She found it very natural that, at such a moment, she should lean upon the resourcefulness of John Blythe.

"I suppose John can arrange for our passage?" she said to Laura.

"John," replied Laura, confidently, "can do anything, I think, even to obtaining accommodations on a New-York-bound steamer in July, which is next to impossible."

Laura immediately telephoned to Blythe at the Carlton, telling him of the summons Louise had received from her mother.

"Of course I am to go with her," said Laura, "and equally of course we shall have a dreadful time getting steamer accommodations at this season."

"Probably I can manage," was Blythe's prompt reply. "The *Mauretania*, which brought me over, is returning day after tomorrow. I know she is booked to the gun'ls—but I'll see what can be done. Of course I am going, too. I'll see you by noon and let you know."

Jermyn Scammel and his two companions who had been witnesses of Blythe's meeting with Jesse at the Curzon Street house were staying at the Carlton, and Blythe knew that they had reserved accommodations on the *Mauretania*. Blythe found them at breakfast in Scammel's rooms and he told them of the quandary in which two American ladies found themselves owing to the extreme difficulty of securing passage on board West-bound steamers at that season.

"Anybody I know, Blythe?" Scammel asked him.

"I think so," said Blythe. "Mrs. Laura Stedham is—"

"Laura Stedham? Known her all my life—tried my infernallest to marry her when I was a cub, but she wouldn't so much as look at me," said Scammel, cheerily. "She can have my cabin if I have to stay over here for the remainder of my natural life. How about you fellows?" addressing his companions.

It was all one to them, it appeared. If Scammel was willing to remain in London for a while longer, why—

"But I haven't the least idea of remaining in London," put in Scammel when they had got that far. "The night train for Paris for mine, now that I can't get away on the *Mauretania*. No use talking, Blythe, fate is against me. I want to be good, but I'm not allowed to be. I'll leave it to you or anybody else if I had the slightest idea of making Paris this trip. I've been fighting the temptation to hit up Paris ever since I've been over this time. Now, you see, I'm positively driven to it. Man comes along and grabs my homeward-bound cabin away from me. What else is there for it but Paris? Are you cubs going along with me?" turning to the two younger men.

The "cubs," it appeared, were quite willing to defer their meditated repentance until such time as Scammel might be ready to repent with them, and they proclaimed that Paris sounded good to them. Thus it was that Blythe was able to appear at the Savoy long before noon with the announcement that he had contrived to obtain three highly-desirable staterooms on the *Mauretania*.

"What should we ever have done without him?" said Laura to Louise, while Blythe lounged about—making occasional discreet exits—during their packing operations.

"Without Jerry Scammel and the two apt and obliging young New York pupils he is breaking in over here, you should say," observed Blythe.

"John! Was it dear old Jerry Scammel who did this for us?" asked Laura, blushing. "Well, I shall certainly bake him a cake or crochet him a pair of pulse-warmers or ear-laps or something as soon as he gets back to New York. He's a dear, and always was, and I always fight tooth and nail for him when the catty old dowagers call him the most dissipated man in New York. Jerry, to this day, declares to me, every time I meet him, that he holds the world's record for proposals to the same girl within a given time. I was the girl. I believe I was somewhat under sixteen and Jerry was not yet nineteen. He swears that he proposed to me forty-four times within one month. Of course he is wrong. It was only twenty-three."

Laura and Blythe purposely kept up this sort of small talk to divert Louise's thoughts from her mother's illness. Louise, heavy-hearted as she was, quite understood their kindly purpose, and successfully strove to appear entertained by their banter. But her foreboding was not easy to dispel. She knew that her mother would not have summoned her if her illness had not been of the gravest character; for in her last letter—the one she wrote on the night before leaving New York—she had insisted upon Louise having her London visit out. The girl had been filled with an intense happiness upon reading her mother's announcement of her departure from the house on the Drive. She had pictured a happy reunion with her mother and had begun immediately to make plans for the home which they should have together upon her return to New York. So that her mother's summons and Louise's certainty that the summons would never have been made had her mother's condition not been very serious, bore heavily upon her.

"I begin to fear that I have found my mother only to lose her again," she had said to Laura in talking over the cable message; and Laura, while professing to be shocked at Louise's premonition, had turned away to hide her tears; for the same premonition, better-grounded than Louise's on account of what she had heard from Blythe as to the visible decline into which Mrs. Treharne had seemed to be falling, was depressing Laura.

The steamer made an unseasonably squally and heavy passage of it, and Laura, who had never been intended for a Vikingess, as she expressed it, kept to her stateroom almost throughout the voyage. Louise and Blythe were among the few on board the crowded steamer who did not shrink even once from mess call, which is the test of the born voyager. They kept pace with the most hardened constitutional-takers on deck every day, and were together almost constantly.

Louise Treharne and John Blythe already knew that they loved each other. On board the steamer, and for five days running, rarely out of each other's company, both found that, humanly speaking, they also genuinely liked each other. Even men and women entirely devoted to each other quite commonly develop a certain pettishness often verging upon actual irascibility when they find themselves incessantly in each other's company on board a steamer. Louise and Blythe, despite the unfriendliness of the elements and the consequent discomforts of the passage, both felt quite lost and miserable when they were separated from each other even for short periods during the voyage. Louise, in her inexperience, did not seek to analyze this phenomenon. But Blythe did.

"She is as fine-grained as she is beautiful, Laura," he said to that ever-receptive confidante, when he found himself alone with her for a moment one day toward the end of the voyage. "I have, as of course you know, no particular amount of sweetness of disposition at sea or anywhere else.

But, somehow, I have been a marvel of beatific mildness and contentment ever since we left England. There's only one way to account for that. Louise is temperamentally perfect."

"Charming, but wholly wrong," replied Laura. "Louise is magnificently deficient in the thing called 'temperament'—thank Heaven! Did you ever happen to encounter a female who delighted in calling herself a 'woman of temperament,' John Blythe? Then you know how hopelessly impossible a woman of that sort is, considered as a companion for any normal human being of either sex. If Louise had been temperamental—*any* kind of temperamental—I am certain that you two would be passing each other on deck without even nodding by this time. But the dear is just a sweet girl-woman with a wholesome imagination and human impulses, and I myself, a woman (and a fussy one, too, sometimes!), could live with her forever without a symptom of friction. You are a very lucky rising young legal person. I don't know what I shall do without her."

"Without her—when?" said Blythe, his surprise genuine. "You are going up to the Adirondacks with her, aren't you?"

"To be sure," replied Laura. "I mean that I don't know what I shall do without her when—" She broke off in momentary confusion. "Oh, you are impossibly opaque today, John," she finished, smiling illuminatingly.

"Oh—that!" said Blythe, enlightened, yet a bit rueful.

It was precisely "that" which, as the steamer drew near New York was causing Blythe no little disquietude. He knew that he would miss Louise acutely after the delightful intimacies of the voyage. No word as to their tacit relationship had been spoken by Blythe since they had thus been thrown almost constantly together. A natural delicacy had deterred him from touching upon that subject at a time when Louise was hurrying to the bedside of her mother. But, now that the steamer was less than half a day from New York, he began to draw a desolate picture of his lonesome state when he should bid goodbye to Louise at the station. Her vigil at her mother's bedside might be a protracted one. He remembered, not without a shock of astonishment, that he had never asked Louise to be his wife. When he mentally retraced the path, he found it easy enough to understand why he had not put this question to her. Nevertheless, the fact that she was by no means plighted to him had caused him a vague uneasiness since the beginning of the voyage; and, now that their separation, for an indeterminate period, impended, he found himself swept by a desire to make their mutual understanding—if such, indeed, he thought nervously, Louise really took it to be—more explicit, if not more binding.

It chanced that Louise herself furnished him his opportunity to speak. She had written a wireless message of greeting to her mother, to be transmitted from New York to Saranac, and they watched the operator as he flared the message over the waste of tumbling waters.

"I told her in the message that you are with us," Louise said to him. "And of course she shall know, when I see her, that Laura and I might have had to remain in England indefinitely had it not been for you."

"There is something that I want your sanction to tell your mother when I see her," said Blythe as they set out for a stroll on the long deck.

"Yes?" she said, with a quick sidewise glance at him. She understood perfectly well what he meant; had, indeed, been waiting for him to assume that direction; but women are not expected to make such admissions.

"I think you will be ready to admit that I have striven to practise self-restraint," said Blythe, with a smile in which there was a touch of nervousness. "But there is a point beyond which I cannot go. Are you to tell your mother that I have asked you to marry me, or am I to tell her when I see her?"

"Have you asked me that?" inquired Louise, a little mischievously; but she asked the question in order to gain time.

Blythe laughed in self-deprecation.

"If I have been guilty of so stupid an omission, I can rectify it by asking you now?" he said; and Louise noticed the flush that overspread his features. "I have, I know, a habit of taking too much for granted. But I really supposed you knew that my life is bound up in yours, Louise."

"And mine in yours," she replied with a perfect candor that thrilled him. "If I did not love you dearly—and I do—perhaps I should not so keenly feel that I would be doing you an injustice to marry you."

Blythe could scarcely credit his ears. Her first words had set him to soaring, but, when she had finished, he was conscious of as stunned a feeling as if he had received a physical blow. Involuntarily he stood stock still and faced her; but the need to keep moving in order not to block the progress of the other deck pedestrians quickly flashed upon him. When he moved forward again at her side, however, listening to her quiet, earnest words, he was conscious, for a while, of a certain numbness, almost approaching languor, which he found it difficult to throw off.

Louise, more reservedly but with no lack of clearness, touched upon the points which she had made in going over the same ground with Laura. Surprised as he was, Blythe, whose mind had never been visited by any of the considerations which she named, nevertheless had an immediate

and acute understanding of the ordeal through which the girl must be passing in thus presenting her analysis of the situation to him.

"It would be the logical thing for me to say that you have wholly misjudged me, Louise," he said to her when she had finished. "But I am not going to do that, because I know that you have done nothing of the sort. You are simply the victim of a perfectly natural supersensitiveness. I know how difficult you have found it to say such things. I blame myself for having pressed you to the point where you considered it necessary to say them. It is scarcely less hard for me to talk of such a matter—harder still because nothing that you have touched upon has even once occurred to me. I know that you are the woman my heart craves for. Nothing that you have said, or ever can say, will change that. And if you care for me—"

"I do," Louise interrupted him. "You are never out of my thoughts. I find it hard to believe that there ever was a time when I did not know you and love you."

The beautiful spontaneity and frankness of the avowal sent the blood pounding at Blythe's temples.

"Then do you suppose, Louise," he said to her, in a vibrant voice of enthrallment, "that anything in this world of God can ever keep us apart? Everything gives way—must give way—to the love of a man for a woman, of a woman for a man. You speak of my ambition, my career. What would they be worth to me without you? Vain things—things that I would thrust away from me! I tell you it has come to pass that my life is inseparably bound up in yours. All the rest would be a futile striving without you. The great miracle of life has come upon me. There was a time when I feared that it would pass me by. You are the woman of all my dreams—the dreams of boy and man. How can anything stand between us?"

"I have thought that, too, often," said Louise, no less moved by his fervor than he had been by her avowal. "But the thought that I might be the means of throwing a shadow upon your path—"

"Shadow!" broke out Blythe. "There would be no *path* for me without you!"

"But, dear," said Louise, conscious that her ground was giving way beneath her, "we cannot always do that which we want to do, can we? We owe each other unselfishness at least, if only on account of our love? And if you were to be swept by a regret in the time that is to come, how—"

"Don't say that, Louise," said Blythe. "It is too impossible. It is too inconceivable."

They came to a pause in their stroll and stood, hands on rail, gazing over the billowing expanse of sun-sparkling sea.

"You will give me time to think it all out, dear, won't you?" said Louise. "My experience has been so small that I do not often presume to feel very sure of my ground."

"When you speak of how small your experience has been, Louise," said Blythe, a symptom of a smile flickering around his eyes, "I am revisited by a kind of self-condemnation that I have known ever since I became aware that I loved you. Even now I wonder if I am really guilty of having pounced upon you, when you were barely out of school, and before you had your rightful chance to enslave and then appraise your cluster of suitors—"

Louise, smiling, placed a hand upon his arm.

"Please don't continue that," she said. "All the 'clusters of suitors' in the world would have made no difference to me. Always, I think, John, I should have been gazing beyond them—if they had appeared, which of course is merely your polite assumption—to see your face. And then the poor 'enslaved' ones would have disappeared in a sudden mist, and I should have seen only you."

Hands resting upon steamer rails may be furtively pressed, no matter how many deck strollers there may be.

"How royally you grant absolution!" said Blythe. "But, for all that, it is not as a sister confessor alone that I need you. If now you have made the path so clear for me, then it is your own fault, heart of dreams. It is as wife, mate of me, that I need you—and shall have you."

Wife and mate of the man beloved! They were new words—even expressing a new thought—to Louise, and they sang tumultuously in her heart.

Mrs. Treharne, very white and with the spiritual delicacy of an illness already far-advanced upon her features, was propped up in bed, gazing with a sort of vacant wonderment at her almost transparent hands, which she held up to the light, when the faithful Heloise entered the room with Louise's wireless message from the *Mauretania*. She read it eagerly and then suffered the message to flutter from her fingers to the coverlet.

"My little girl will be here day after tomorrow morning," she said to the maid, smiling wanly with the happiness of it. "Do you think she will know her mother, Heloise?"

"Know you, madame?" said the maid, half grumblingly, half soothingly, as she raised her mistress and patted the pillows. "Madame must not be morbid. The doctor said that. I, too, say it. Why should not Mademoiselle Louise know her mother?"

"Because, good Heloise, her mother is a spectre, a wraith, a lingering ghost," said Mrs. Treharne, taking the maid's hand in both her own and patting it; whereupon Heloise promptly produced a handkerchief from the pocket of her tiny apron with her free hand and began to dab at her eyes. The mistress studied the maid with surprise. "Why, Heloise, I did not know you cared so much," she said. "But I have noticed that you do not scold me any more. That is because you do care, then, Heloise?"

"Madame does not need to be scolded any more," said Heloise, brokenly. "Before, one was obliged to scold her; that is, one thought so." The girl turned away her face and gazed blankly out of the window at the swaying trees. "But now, madame, one is sorry ever to have scolded at all."

They occupied a pretty hotel cottage on the outskirts of the bright little town of Saranac in the Adirondacks. It is a town transiently inhabited mainly by victims of pulmonary affections. But Mrs. Treharne's illness was not of that character. She had been obliged to take to bed a few days after reaching Saranac. Her medical men had told her that she was suffering from a gradual disintegration of the vital forces.

"I quite understood that before I came here," Mrs. Treharne had said to them. "You express in terms of politeness a fact that I have been perfectly familiar with for a long time: that I am simply worn out. There are reasons, aside from any consideration of myself, why I should like to have you gentlemen inform me as to one point at once."

"And that is?" the physicians had asked her.

"Am I to get well, or am I to die?" Mrs. Treharne had asked them out of hand.

Very naturally the medical men had paused under the impact of so unusually direct a question. Then they had begun to tell her that her case presented certain complications of a somewhat grave character, and that—

"I understand," Mrs. Treharne had interrupted, smiling up at them with a bravery which the physicians later commented upon glowingly. But they had not sought to disabuse her of the inference which their halting words and manner had caused her to derive.

Mrs. Treharne had turned the matter over in her mind for days before cabling to Louise. Before sending that message she had, in her perplexity, turned to her maid for advice.

"Heloise," she had said to the devoted French girl, "tell me something, won't you? The doctors have given me to understand that—oh, well, that I am not to be here very long. Do you think it would be well for me to send for my daughter?"

Heloise, thus hearing of the physicians' pronouncement for the first time, had given way to a torrent of tears; but, upon becoming calm under her mistress's cheerful words, she had replied that it would be an everlasting pity if Louise were not sent for in any case.

"I am not so sure about that," Mrs. Treharne had replied. "I recall very easily how I myself, when I was of Louise's age, recoiled from the thought of death—though I do not at all now, oddly enough. I should have hated to be at the bedside of my mother when she died—I was only a child in arms and did not know anything about it. Louise, I think, must feel the same way. Why should she not? She is my daughter. Would it not be quite as well for her to return to this country and find me gone, as it would be to send for her now and subject her to the distress of seeing me pass? I am not considering myself, Heloise. Every minute I am longing to see her. But I want to be fair now, at least, and do what is best."

Heloise had found no difficulty at all in withstanding this sort of reasoning.

"If madame does not send for her daughter," Heloise had replied, "I myself shall do so, in my own name."

"Very well," Mrs. Treharne had replied, "I shall cable her at once, and God speed her over the sea to me!"

On the second morning—sunny and beautiful—after Mrs. Treharne had received Louise's wireless message, she and Heloise heard the grinding of carriage wheels on the short gravel road leading to the cottage porch. The doctor already had paid his visit and departed, so they knew that the sound was not that of his buggy. Heloise raced on tiptoes to the window and looked down. Then she turned a delighted face upon her mistress, whose hair she had been arranging with unusual care in expectation of Louise.

"It is mademoiselle!" cried the maid.

There was a sound of hurried tripping up the stairs; and Louise, flushed from the drive, regally beautiful, swept softly into the room and, kneeling by the bed, took her mother in her arms and held her tight, rocking back and forth on the pillows, and restraining her tears by sheer effort of will. Laura found an excuse to remain on the porch for a moment, giving directions to the driver of the carriage, while mother and daughter met.

Louise had schooled herself to withstand the shock of finding her mother looking badly. But her

first glance at the white-faced invalid had caused her heart to beat with agonized trepidation. It would have been obvious to an uninterested stranger that Mrs. Treharne was fast approaching the end of her days. Louise perceived it at a glance. But she would not yield to her almost overwhelming woman's impulse to weep. Her mother's penetrating mind quickly sensed the girl's struggle and the victory; and she raised Louise's head from where it nestled on her shoulder and held her face in her hands and looked at her with a smile.

"It is fine of you not to cry, dear," she said, stroking the girl's face. "It means a good deal to me to know that my daughter is a thoroughbred—and you are always that, sweetheart. And how superb you have become! What a commotion you and Laura must have made in London! Where is Laura—she is with you, of course?"

"Here I am, Tony dear, as unlosable as the proverbial bad penny," said Laura, entering the room just then and bending over from the other side of the bed and taking her old friend in her arms. "Isn't Louise looking superb? I can say it before her, because the child hasn't a goat's worth of vanity. And she has behaved extraordinarily well. I haven't had to tie her to the bedpost once."

"You are looking dazzling yourself, Laura," said Mrs. Treharne with a little sigh. "Did you know that I always was just a little jealous of you, dear?" and she laughed more merrily than she had for a long time. "Not that I ever had any reason to be, for it was the design of Providence that you should outshine me. You and Louise are to spend hours with me, are you not, telling me of your conquests in Europe? And where is John Blythe?" turning to Louise. "Is he not with you? I judged from your wireless message that—"

"Oh, yes, he returned with us on the steamer, but he remained in New York, mother," Louise put in, a quick flush overspreading her features. "Did you wish to see him? I know he would come if I were to—"

Mrs. Treharne glanced, smiling, at Laura, who returned the smile.

"Would he, dear?" asked Mrs. Treharne. "I haven't the least doubt of it. But there will be time. Later I should like to see him. He has a compelling way." She paused, then added with a smile at Louise: "But he is very lucky, all the same."

Louise, marveling at her mother's penetration in discerning, with so little to go upon, the bond between Blythe and herself, nevertheless was glad that the relationship had thus been read; for there still remained enough of her habitual shyness with her mother to have caused her to shrink slightly from making even so natural and simple a revelation.

Laura left the room presently to attend to the disposal of the arriving baggage, and Louise, removing her hat and travelling wrap, arranged her mother's pillows and then sat beside her on the bed.

"I do not ask you, you see, dear, to try to conceal the fact that you find me so greatly altered," said her mother, holding the girl's hand. "I am ashamed to recall how petulant it used to make me when you seemed to be tracing, with your big, wide eyes, my new wrinkles—which you were not doing at all; I know that now, dear heart."

"When does your doctor come today, mother?" asked Louise, a little haltingly.

"He has been here and gone," replied her mother, discerning what was in Louise's mind. "But there is no need for you to see him privately, daughter. Your little mother will tell you, for you have shown how brave you can be. I am quite as ill as you suppose me to be, Louise, and entirely beyond the help of medical men. Cry, dear, if you feel like it; I shall not mind; and there are times when tears do help one."

Louise, yielding at last, knelt beside the bed and buried her face on her mother's shoulder in an agony of quiet weeping, while her mother stroked her hair and murmured phrases of endearment that had not visited her lips since Louise had been a child.

"Take heart, girl of mine," she said after a while, when she observed that Louise's sobs were gradually abating. "I am resigned. It was to be—but I shall not distract you with phrases of that kind, which, after all, are not so consoling as they are supposed to be. I am glad that I have lived to know and to understand and to appreciate so fine and sweet a daughter as I have. And, Louise: listen."

"Yes, mother: I am listening."

"It is a gift of God, I know, that I have a daughter who, when my very soul was in peril, regenerated, recreated me. You have done that for me. I confess it without shame. My little girl summoned me, raised me from the depths. Thank God I answered the summons before I knew that my life was slipping away from me, so that I am at least open to no charge of hypocrisy or of repenting in mere grovelling fear of the judgment. My little Louise, grown to sweet, serene, pure womanhood, did this thing for me. It is something to have brought your mother to the foot of the Cross, my dear; and that knowledge, I know, will ennoble and exalt you during all the years that are to come."

When Heloise entered the room, hours later, she found her mistress asleep, and Louise's head still pillowed upon her mother's breast.

CHAPTER XVI

A tall, bronzed man, erect and broad of shoulder, strode slowly, meditatively, hands clasped behind him, back and forth on the wide porch of a rambling, palm-shaded one-story Hawaiian bungalow. He had the unlined countenance of a man of forty-five who had lived most of his life in the open; but his silvered, almost white, hair and mustache, might well have given at first glance, the impression that he was older.

He was clad in white linen, although it was the day before Christmas. December in Hawaii! There is nothing in the whole world to compare with it. The sun shone in serene splendor from a cloudless sky of the intensest indigo. The fronds of the towering palms stirred with a soothing sibilance under the light touch of fragrant whispering zephyrs. Surrounding the bungalow were many unfenced acres rioting in the myriad hued flowers of the tropics; thence, from where the welter of blossoms ceased, on all sides, as far as the eye could see, stretched miles of sugar-cane in growing, with its unmatchable tint of young, tender yet vivid green. It was the Island of Maui; and Maui, next to the main Island of Hawaii, is the most beautiful of all the sugar-cane islands in the world.

In the still air the chattering of hundreds of Japanese workers among the cane reached, mitigated by distance, the porch of the bungalow, attached to one of the stanchions of which was a telephone at which the bronzed man occasionally stopped to reply to the questions of foremen scattered over the plantation. From the rear came the softer tones of the Kanaka household servants; at intervals the voices were raised in fragments of the melodious but curiously melancholy Hawaiian folk songs.

But George Treharne, accustomed to the beauty of his surroundings, was giving little heed, as he paced unceasingly back and forth, to the sights and sounds of his marvelous investiture. His mind was upon the snowy Christmas Eves of the flown years. He had not heard from his daughter, nor even from Blythe, a punctilious correspondent in matters of business, since receiving Louise's announcement of her mother's death, in the early part of September. And he had been unable to make his contemplated visit to "the main land," as Americans living in Hawaii call the United States.

After one born and reared in temperate zones has passed many Christmases in tropic lands, the approach of that memory-hallowed day never fails to arouse longing for the keen bite of the cutting, North wind, the sight of drifting snow, the sound of sleigh-bells, the holiday activities of the icy Winter lands; nor does the flowery, fragrant beauty of the tropics, after long familiarity, compensate the native of the Winter-knowing lands for his severance from the holiday spirit to which his youth made him accustomed.

George Treharne was more lonesome on this day before Christmas than he had ever been in his life. He came to a pause in his stride, stopped by the telephone and began to devise the terms of a Christmas greeting by cable to Louise. He could telephone the message to Lahaina, the nearby seaport of the Island of Maui, whence it could be transmitted by telephone to Honolulu for the cable.

He was taking down the receiver, when he happened to glance down the long white road to the entrance gate, nearly three-quarters of a mile away. In the clear air he could discern that the horse trotting up the road was ridden by a woman. Many tourists visited the Treharne plantation and were received with solicitous hospitality by its owner in person. Knowing that this presumable tourist would reach the bungalow before he could finish his message to Lahaina, George Treharne deferred taking down the receiver of the telephone. He resumed his strolling back and forth on the porch, and, when horse and rider were within a hundred yards or so of the bungalow, he summoned a Kanaka boy to take charge of the horse. He himself descended the steps and went to the edge of the road, where, with bared head, he waited to assist the visitor from her horse.

The sunlight was blindingly in his eyes, so that he scarcely saw her face when he lifted her from the saddle. After a few words of courteous greeting he led the way, his vision still slightly obscured by the after-effects of the sun's direct rays, to the wide palm-shaded porch.

When she stood beside him on the porch, rather nervously switching her riding crop, he observed that she was a very lovely, unusually tall young woman with a great coil of auburn hair flowing from beneath her wide-brimmed soft hat; and he had noticed, too, when she spoke, that she possessed a singularly sweet, rather subdued voice.

But he did not know her.

He was about to conduct her through the open door into the long, cool hall, when, turning his head to speak to her, he was struck by something in her face and attitude. She was not following him. That was what he noticed at once. Instead, she was standing quite still in the middle of the porch, her riding crop now at rest, and holding up the skirt of her habit with the other hand. There was a half-smile on her face; but, in odd contrast to this, he noticed that her eyes were filmed with tears; that, in truth, two tears at least already had fallen.

Halting, then, in the doorway, he turned full around upon her. A tremor ran through his frame. He reached her in two bounds which were as sudden and springy as the bounds of a wrestler.

He crushed her to his heart without a word. He knew that he was incapable of speaking. He kissed her over and over again and devoured her with his eyes.

"My little girl Louise!" he was finally able to say in a broken voice. "My beautiful, woman-grown little girl—God forever bless her!" and he held her out at arm's length, his powerful, bronzed hands gripping her shoulders, and gazed avidly at her until once again he clasped her to his heart.

After a time, when father and daughter were able to speak collectedly, Louise walked over to the railing of the porch and raised her riding crop high in the air. Her father saw the signal. The man for whom it was intended saw it as quickly. Instantly, from behind the superintendent's house at the gate of the plantation road, a horse, ridden by a man in khaki, emerged and quickly swung into a gallop, making for the bungalow.

When John Blythe, with his wide smile, leaped from the horse and tossed the reins to the waiting Kanaka boy, George Treharne, recognizing him at once, glanced wonderingly from his face to the smiling, flushed face of Louise. Then his own bronzed features were creased by a smile of warmth and happiness.

"Then I have a son, too, Louise?" he asked his daughter.

But he knew how needless her brightly nodded answer was when, an instant later, he saw her clasped in her husband's arms.

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