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Lady Lilith
, by Stephen McKenna**

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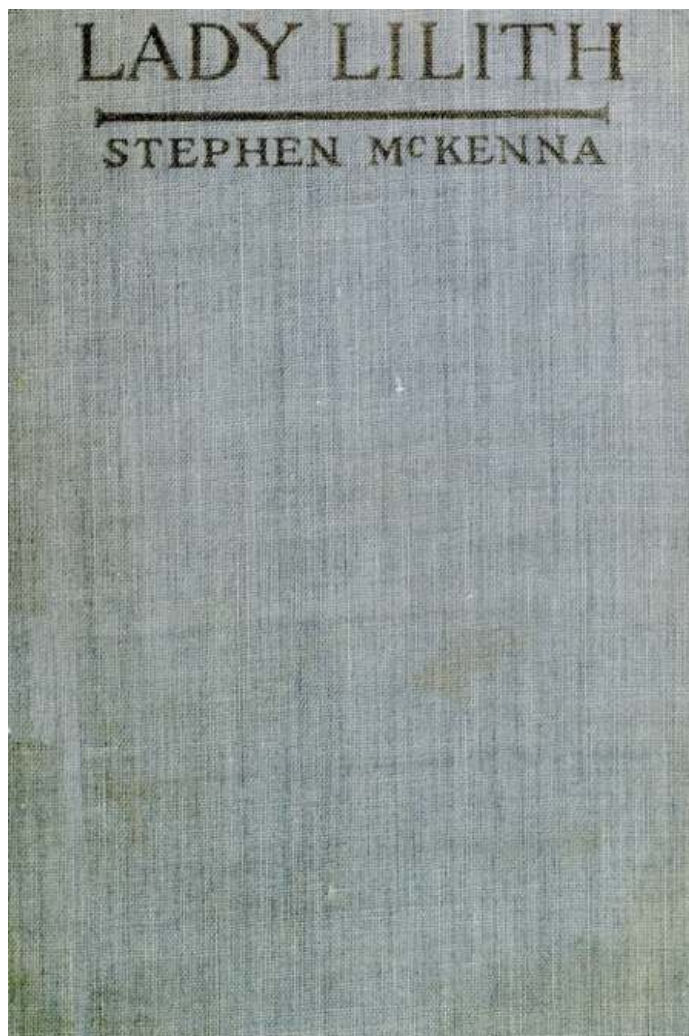
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THE SENSATIONALISTS: I
LADY LILITH

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STEPHEN MCKENNA

By
STEPHEN MCKENNA

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THE SENSATIONALISTS

PART ONE: LADY LILITH

PARTS TWO AND THREE: *In preparation*

SONIA MARRIED

SONIA

MIDAS AND SON

NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE

THE SIXTH SENSE

SHEILA INTERVENES

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

LADY LILITH

BY

STEPHEN McKENNA

AUTHOR OF "SHEILA INTERVENES," "MIDAS AND
SON," "SONIA," "SONIA MARRIED,"
"NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE,"
ETC.



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GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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TO
MY MOTHER
AND
THE MEMORY
OF
MY FATHER

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LADY LILITH

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"I became the spendthrift of my own genius, and to waste an eternal youth gave me a curious joy. Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation ... I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character...."

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OSCAR WILDE: *De Profundis*.

LADY LILITH

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CHAPTER ONE
THE DEATH OF THE PHOENIX

"Conceive of your life as an unfinished biography, and try to discover the next chapter and the end."

J. A. SPENDER: "THE COMMENTS OF BAGSHOT."

"Within ten years five of us will be married and five will be dead," cried O'Rane, writing rapidly. " (Every one of us will have made such a fool of himself that it's *wishing* himself dead he'll be.) One will have had to cut the country. One will have lost all his money. As you seem to like jam with your powder, I've said that one—and not more—will achieve fame—by the mercy of God; one—and not more—will make great money."

The prophecy, delivered with apparent sincerity in the mellow atmosphere of dinner to a score of men between the optimistic ages of twenty and twenty-five, was, on the face of it, discouraging. He who achieved fame and he who amassed a fortune were condemned, with the rest, to pass through the contemplation of suicide or, at least, the prayerful expectation of death. And the moment for the forecast was undoubtedly ill-chosen. Seventeen of the twenty members of the Phoenix had spent the last week wrestling with examiners in their final schools; O'Rane spoke with the subconscious triumph of one who was not bidding farewell to Oxford for another year; and, if a vote had been taken, nine-tenths of his friends would have accorded him the scant portion of worldly success with which Providence in his grudging prophecy would crown their

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ambitions.

"Dry up, Raney," growled Jack Waring. "It's all very well for you——"

"It's a twenty-to-one chance I'm giving you," O'Rane pointed out. "You might bring off the double event. And get a wife thrown in. It would be no fun, if we all leaped to the top. 'When everybody's somebody, then no one's anybody.'"

Waring jumped up and turned to the president.

"I have to report Mr. O'Rane for singing at dinner, sir. A good, thumping fine, Sinks," he added.

Jack Summertown intercepted the ruling.

"On a point of order, sir; was that singing? If it was—oh, my Lord!"

Sinclair rose majestically from the presidential chair and turned his eyes from one disputant to the other.

"The accused is acquitted, but he's not to do it again," he ruled diplomatically. "I have to censure Lord Summertown for addressing the Chair without rising."

Ten suspended conversations were resumed, as he sat down; and Waring reverted to his own gloomy thoughts. Unaccustomed to look more than a day ahead, he was only beginning to recognize that in twenty-four hours he would have gone down from Oxford for the last time and that within four months he would have to begin reading for the bar. He had interrupted his dressing an hour before to stare out of the window, sprawling on the sill and dangling a collar and tie with idle hand.

Outside, the setting sun of a late June day filled the Broad with sleepy warmth and dyed the crumbling stone of the Sheldonian rose-red. In the middle of the road two cabmen slumbered on their boxes, pillowing their heads on their arms and leaving their horses to munch contentedly from frayed nosebags and to twitch an ear or flick a tail at too persistent flies. Rare groups of sight-seers approached the deserted gates of Trinity and Balliol, sought inspiration from guide-books and vanished diffidently from view. Oxford belonged to the ages; and for the first twenty-fifth part of the twentieth century Waring had fancied that it belonged to him. A hansom, overfilled by an American and her two daughters, jingled lazily from Holywell; the driver exhibited a contempt for Oxford no less profound than for America and waved his whip from side to side in rough time with the scornful scraps of information which he drawled through the trap.

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"Ol' Clar'nd'n Buildin'. Bodleian be'ind it. Trin'ty. Balliol."

Three heads nodded and turned mechanically from right to left. The driver paused for new instructions, and an anxious voice from inside exclaimed:

"Gracious! it's a quarter of seven! Say, how many blocks are we from the depot?"

The high nasal intonation seemed to shiver the warm repose of the afternoon, and in another moment the Broad was echoing with life. A stream of bicycles poured down Parks Road; blazers of every colour flashed into sight and disappeared; men bareheaded and men in panamas, men with tennis racquets and men with dogs, men in flannels and men in tweeds, a few, even, still in white ties and coats of subfusc hue, parading the bondage of the Examination Schools, all hurried back to make ready for Hall. Oxford still belonged to them. At the gates of the colleges, deserted a moment since, the heirs of all the undergraduate ages assembled in careless disregard of their heritage; the last bicycles were tumbled into place; the last rainbow blazers and hat-ribbons vanished from sight; pipes were replaced in pockets, and necks bared from the dingy embrace of tattered gowns.

With a glance at the watch on his dressing-table, Jack Waring twisted himself to catch the reflection of his bottle-green dress-coat. It was the envied livery of the Phoenix Club, which—consistently with its name—died and came to life again once a year. At the end of every summer term not more than one survivor remained; the following Michaelmas the new president proposed and elected his own friends, choosing one junior to carry on the life and traditions of the club at the year's end. The institution had ensured for nearly two university generations and was the one constructive effort of Lord Loring's life at Oxford. With the grave self-absorption of nineteen he had demanded a club to which none but his own friends had access and of which he could nominate himself president and ordain the rules as he went on. He had long wanted a pretext, he explained in his inaugural address, for wearing a bottle-green dress-coat with brass buttons and white silk facings; and his position as founder of the club would give him an excuse for revisiting Oxford at the end of his lawful term.

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A faint frown of regret and perplexity hovered over Jack Waring's plump and cheerful face, as he resumed his dressing. He had no fault to find with Oxford, where he had done more than most men and all that could be expected of any man. A case full of silver cups testified to his success in college and university Grinds; he had been Master of the Drag and a member of the Bullingdon; less than three days before he had shewn his versatility by proceeding, without the ostentation of an Honour School, to the degree of Bachelor of Arts. Colonel Waring had urged him to enjoy himself, and the four years had passed very satisfactorily.

"Eric!"

"Hullo! Are you ready?"

The door was kicked open, and Eric Lane sauntered in and inspected his own clothes by the revealing light of the afternoon sun. He also was frowning, for the sense of departure was heavy upon him too, and the papers that day had not been to his liking.

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"Our final dissipation!" cried Jack, seizing him by the arm and clattering down the narrow staircase into the Turl. "I say, Eric, I don't half like the idea of not coming up next term; I was just beginning to find my way about this place. There you see Lincoln. Here we have Jaggers. I've never been inside Jaggers. Shall we make up a party and go to-morrow?"

A knot of Jesus men glared with the dumb fury which the small nations of the world feel towards the Great Powers. A sing-song Welsh voice commented devastatingly on the vanity of bottle-green dress-coats and their wearers.

"I can't go after *that*," murmured Jack with dignity. "Never imagined they understood English. Ought I to go back and apologize?" He stopped short in front of a haberdasher's shop and nodded gravely at the seductive window. Club colours and college colours contended and clashed with giant brown and yellow silk handkerchiefs adorned with white bulldogs. "We might buy them a peace-offering."

"I always wonder why you're not more disliked than you are," mused Eric.

"People only dislike me until I've given them time to see that I'm right and they're wrong," explained Jack complacently. "I was very unpopular at New College my first term. They wanted me to row—just because I'd rowed at Eton. You can't row *and* hunt. I never did any of the things they wanted; the people here are such sheep. Did I ever tell you that the rowing push came to rag my rooms just because I chose to dress for Hall? They said it was 'side.' Unfortunately, their spokesman was drunk, so I had to ask him to leave. It's such bad form to drink more than you can carry. Now any number of men dress for Hall. Sheep, just sheep. I think the reason you and I get on so well together is that you don't try to lead my life for me."

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"Oh, I'm used to you," Eric interrupted. "Ever since I can remember, you've sat still and let every one else revolve round you. Your people, Agnes, me——"

Jack smiled at his reflection in the window. Though his self-satisfaction annoyed women and older men, no one could remain impatient with him for long. He was always too good-tempered to provide sport and too sure of himself to mind criticism. The man who is content to do nothing starts, too, with an advantage over the man who not only wants something done but would like it done in his own way. In childhood the threat that he would not be taken to a party unless he behaved himself well had only once been used against Jack; his mother found afterwards that he had genuinely enjoyed himself more at home; and ever since he had won his own way by studied inertia.

"You're so efficient!" he explained. "I should never have got through my schools but for you. And you pack so well. By the way, you've looked out the trains for to-morrow, haven't you? And arranged with Agnes for a cart to meet me? I hate writing letters.... Shall we dig together in London? If you'll find some decent rooms and a man to look after us—Agnes will help you choose the furniture—and if you'll make everything shipshape and comfortable, I'm hanged if I don't come and live with you! There!"

Eric held out his hand with affected emotion.

"That's uncommon good of you! I thought you'd want me to choose some one to live with me in your place."

"I wish you'd find somebody to go to the bar in my place," murmured Jack with a momentary return of his earlier gloom. "Can't *you*? The exams are quite easy for a man of your powerful intellect, and you only have to eat a few dinners and get called. *I* should live at Lashmar as the simple, old English country gentleman.... Hullo! we're late! You'll see about paying the fine, won't you?"

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They crossed the High to a chorus of welcome flung at them from a first-floor window over a pastry-cook's shop. Two sleek heads protruded over the cushions in one tier, with three more, less lovingly cemented, in the background.

"Hurry up, Spurs," shouted the president.

The name, applied jointly and severally to the two men, had passed through ingenious refinements before reaching its present brief clarity. If Waring's Christian name was Jack, his inseparable companion Lane must be Jill; if Jack's surname was Waring, Eric's must be Gillow; the home of the furnishing trade, if not of Waring and Gillow, was Tottenham Court Road, which readily suggested Tottenham Hotspurs. An unexplained intellectual craving was at length satisfied when the pair were renamed "the Spurs."

After their first term no one shewed the psychological curiosity to wonder why so incongruous a couple lived together. Though neighbours in Hampshire, they were from different schools and of different colleges; the shrewd but consummately indolent Master of the Drag was the arbiter of taste for sporting, ultra-conservative Oxford—already a personality and almost a tradition; the fine-drawn scholar of Trinity was a recluse, a dreamer and a rebel, with ambition corroding the

fabric of a too frail constitution. Outside the Phoenix they had few friends in common, for Eric's disputatious poets grew silent under the breezy onslaught of a more robust generation; Jack's intellectual hunger was satisfied by Surtees, the text-books for his schools, the *Sportsman* and *Morning Post*; while Eric, who had divided the first ten years of his life between his father's library at Lashmar Mill-House and a verandah at Broadstairs, had read quickly, brooded deeply and taken up an attitude, sometimes precocious but always clearly defined, towards problems which as yet did not exist for Jack. On one side, the friendship was founded on a worship of opposites; Eric never forgot that he had gone friendless through six years at school because he was forbidden by his doctor to play games. On the other, Jack found devotion a convenience; he respected Eric's brains and needed some one to relieve him of minor exertions and to make up his mind for him. Accordingly, though all the fourth-year men in the University would have been honoured to live with him, it was to Eric that he drawled, "By the way, have you arranged to dig with any one next term? Well, do go and find some decent quarters, there's a good fellow."

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"Hullo! No fine to pay after all!" cried Jack, as he burst into the club dining-room and compared the number of covers with the members of the Phoenix already assembled. "Who's coming, Mr. President?"

"O'Rane and Deganway haven't turned up yet," answered Sinclair. "I've just had a wire from Loring to say that he's motoring down with Oakleigh and they'll probably be late. Summertown and Pentyre you can hear. It's their idea of music," he added, as a free fight broke out over the piano in the adjoining room.

Jack studied the *menu*, inspected the wine on the side-board and elbowed himself a place in the kneeling row at the open window. An interrupted conversation struggled back to plans for the Long Vacation and discussion of the schools. Sinclair, a stocky, simple-minded sportsman, now pitifully embarrassed by his presidential duties, had been chosen to play at Lord's for the University and for the Gentlemen; after that he would tour with the Authentics till the end of the season; and, until the following season, he would interest himself in the management of his father's mines in Yorkshire. Knight rider and Framlingham were destined for the army; Deganway and Pentyre were due to cram for the Foreign Office; Draycott proposed to study art in Paris; and Mayhew had forced his way into Fleet Street and the offices of the "Wicked World." It was a wide dispersal; and all felt that they were changing a life of proved comfort for something unknown and presumably less easy.

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"What are you doing, Spurs?" Sinclair asked Eric.

"I'm not quite sure. My people want me to try for the Civil Service. I want to have a shot at journalism. You can't *do* anything in the Civil Service."

"Who *wants* to do anything?" retorted Waring from his window-seat. "Late as usual, Raney.... I only want money and decent holidays.... Sounds of a car, furiously driven. You'll have to fine 'em double, Mr. President, if it's Jim and George; once for being late and once for not coming in club dress. It is! Two dozen of fizz from each!"

He withdrew his head from the window as the car came to a standstill. A moment later Loring entered apologetically in morning dress, fingering his moustache and smiling with pleasure at the volley of welcome; George Oakleigh followed, peering with approval at the familiar beams and dingy panels of the low-ceilinged room; while O'Rane strode across the passage and brought the free fight to an end by putting the heads of the disputants into chancery, the president rapped the table and tried to allot the places.

"Gentlemen! The toast of the Phoenix will be drunk in silence," he proclaimed, as every one obstinately seated himself next to his greatest friend.

Sinclair waited until the sherry was served and then rose to his feet. Of the twenty members present only O'Rane was staying up another year: in obedience to ritual he remained seated in the vice-president's chair.

"The Phoenix is dead," announced the president.

"The Phoenix will rise again," answered the vice-president with awful gravity. Then, as the others sat down, he added reflectively, "'Wonder where we shall all be in ten years' time? 'Wonder what we shall be doing? 'Wonder how many of us will be dead?'"

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"You can always depend on Raney for an irresistible little note of cheerfulness," commented Loring, as he pulled in his chair and looked round to see who was present.

It was then that O'Rane flung his prophecy at the head of the club.

"Bah! You know as much about life as a Sunday School teacher!" he retorted contemptuously, banging his hand on a bell. "Where's the betting-book? And give me a pen, somebody. Let you mark my words. 'Mr. David O'Rane bets the Marquess Loring ten sovereigns that within ten years of this date five out of the twenty members present to-night will be married. A further ten sovereigns that five will be dead—'"

"Always the optimist," murmured Oakleigh from Loring's side.

"I'll bet that every one of us will have made such a fool of himself that it's *wishing* himself dead he'll be.... A further ten sovereigns that one at least will have had to cut the country. A further

ten that one at least will have lost all his money.... I'm only dealing in averages. Ten years, I said; that's not much for any positive achievement, but I'll bet a further ten pounds that one—and not more than one—will have achieved what an independent tribunal considers fame. A further ten pounds that one of us will make great money——"

"That's sixty pounds," interposed Sinclair warningly.

"But I shan't have to pay it," answered O'Rane, writing rapidly. He read out a summary of the wager and passed the book for Loring to sign. "Besides, I'm going to be the one who makes all the money. I hope you won't be one of the five who die, Jim; or I shall have to claim against your estate and all. Which of us will achieve fame in ten years? Draycott as an Academician? I don't see it. Spurs as a judge? 'Don't see it either. The Gander as an ambassador? The other Spurs?" He looked round the table and went on quickly; half-unconsciously he had decided that Eric Lane would be the first of the five to die. "I should mark down Sinks as the first to marry; there's an appealing domesticity about him. And we shall *all* make colossal fools of ourselves; don't forget that! Folly's the great leveller. Jim, I think you'd better give a dinner once a year to the survivors just to see how we're getting on."

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"If I don't die or cut the country," Loring assented.

O'Rane snapped the clasp of the betting-book and tossed it on a chair behind him.

"You're far too healthy and respectable," he grunted, concentrating his attention on the cooling soup. "Besides, I'm reserving that for Summertown. You know he's been sent down for good and all?"

"A man cuts the country because of the disreputability of others," answered Loring. "By the way, I'm not going to be fined for being late, Mr. President, because I had a good reason. Also, the founder of a club is never fined."

"Let's hear the reason," suggested the president.

"I've been taking the chair at a family council." Loring looked round the table until he located his cousin Knight rider. "You ought to have been there, Victor. I don't want to wash my dirty linen in public, but Victor and I have a young cousin of twelve," he explained, "who's driven her father out of one continent and is on the point of driving him out of another. Crawleigh's a most dignified and worthy viceroy, and he's my own uncle, and I wouldn't say a word against him; but a fellow on his staff told me that he'd no more control over that child than over the man in the moon. She does whatever she pleases; Government House is turned upside down, and, if any one tries to coerce her, she just runs away. They've pursued her across Canada and they've pursued her across India. Now she's been sent home. The family council was convened to decide what was to be done with her. All the uncles and aunts and cousins met together; and I need hardly tell you that we got stuck with her. So, if I disappear suddenly, you'll know that my young cousin has been too much for me. If that isn't a good reason for being late, I don't know what is."

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The president adroitly reserved judgement on a fine which he knew would never be paid, and the conversation reverted to the former grim discussion of the schools and vague plans for the future. Eric Lane felt out of sympathy with his surroundings, for he alone lacked money and influence and a ready-made niche. In ten years' time Deganway would be progressing gently and comfortably in the Diplomatic; Summertown and Pentyre, who were avowedly waiting for their fathers to die, would either still be waiting or would have already succeeded; Framlingham and Knight rider would be swallowed by the army, even Jack Waring would make a career for himself at the bar or elsewhere, because men with his backing were not allowed to fail. George Oakleigh would be in the House, probably an under-secretary; Loring, with his position and an income which fluctuated between a hundred thousand and a hundred and fifty thousand a year in accordance with the yield of certain mines, might be anywhere.

"What are *you* going to do, when you go down?" Eric asked O'Rane.

"I haven't the least idea. That's where the fun comes in," O'Rane answered buoyantly.

"Starting behind scratch?"

"Yes, that gives you an incentive. I wonder which of us will get to the top first."

"I wonder how one starts."

"Oh, you'll write. I've never had any doubt of that. That rot I was talking about averages wasn't *all* rot; we ought to turn out one genius, and you're going to do something very big. I declare to my soul I'm not ragging! I've seen the things you wrote for *Cap and Bells*, I've heard you talk and I can see you're on a different plane from the rest of us. I could probably beat you at pure scholarship, but you've a literary sense which I should never attain in a life-time. Do *you* care for a bet with me?"

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Eric shook his head; but he felt the need of encouragement, and O'Rane was more serious than he usually condescended to be.

"I won't rob you, Raney."

"Robbery be blowed! You won't bet against your destiny. In ten years' time you'll have beaten the whole of our generation, starting behind scratch. And, God's my witness, I'd sooner have that

than be born with a title and a million pounds a minute like Jim. Hullo, they're off! Jim, may I take wine with you?"

He raised his glass and was quickly followed by Oakleigh and Summertown. Loring flushed a little at the compliment of being chosen first. In order of popularity O'Rane followed as a close second, with Waring third. Pentyre, Summertown and Deganway toasted one another; Oakleigh was honoured as an afterthought by half the table. There was a moment's silence, as the glasses were recharged, and Jack Waring leaned forward with a smile.

"Eric? Best of luck."

"Best of luck, Jack."

Their eyes met, and both smiled. Then the interrupted dinner went on. Oakleigh was detected, reported and fined for smoking without permission; Pentyre was deprived of port wine for allowing the decanter to stand at his elbow. A vote was taken, and Draycott was censured for wearing a pleated shirt. Less constitutionally, Deganway was stretched on the floor and deprived of his eye-glass amid falsetto protests. Then the loving-cup went round, and all stood to drink the health of the king and of fox-hunting, the president and vice-president, absent members and "our glorious founder." Sinclair presented a seven-branch candlestick to the collection of club plate; and Loring proposed and carried a unanimous vote of thanks.

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"And now a little Gilbert and Sullivan from Raney," ordained the president, as the last speech came to an end and he led the way into the next room.

Prising open a box of cigars, he sniffed it with the suspicion of inexperience and proffered it diffidently to Oakleigh. O'Rane slid on to the music-stool, while Deganway and Waring, Summertown and Eric sprawled over the top of the piano with pipes doggedly gripped between their teeth and with their chins resting on their arms, demanding of the musician that he should give them "something with a chorus." Pentyre withdrew to an armchair and fell asleep; the others formed themselves into a circle round Loring and tried to talk against the music.

*"Long years ago, fourteen, may be,
When but a tiny babe of four,
Another babe played with me,
My elder by a year or more.
A little child of beauty rare,
With marvellous eyes and wondrous hair,
Who, in my child-eyes, seemed to me
All that a little child should be.
Ah, how we loved, that child and I,
How pure our baby joy!
How true our love—and, by-the-by,
He was a little boy!"*

Waring, as "Angela" struck in with a deep, reproachful bass:

*"Ah, old, old tale of Cupid's touch!
I thought as much—I thought as much!
He WAS a little boy"*

"Patience" justified herself shyly.

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*"Pray don't misconstrue what I say—
Remember, pray—remember, pray,
He was a LITTLE boy"*

O'Rane gave the "Wandering Minstrel" as a solo, followed by "A Pair of Sparkling Eyes" and "Is Life a Boon?"

Loring turned approvingly to George Oakleigh.

"Raney's got a ripping voice," he said. "And he's in good form to-night. All the same, we must be getting back, George, if you want to be in London early to-morrow morning. It's very pleasant to see all these boys again. Sad, too, very sad; the young lions with all their troubles before them."

"I suppose this *is* absolutely the end," sighed Sinclair. "Shall I see you at Lord's, Jim?"

As the party began to break up, a chill of collective wistfulness descended upon it, too strong for even O'Rane to dispel.

"Yes, if you don't want me to watch the play. But I'll *look* intelligent."

It was still so early when the straggling escort convoyed Oakleigh and Loring into the safety of their hotel that an hour was agreeably spent by each in accompanying every one else home. Jack and Eric reached the Broad, only to turn back and take Deganway to Grove Street, and from

Grove Street they all proceeded by Boar Lane to St. Aldates. Here O'Rane protested that he could not go to bed until he had disposed of Sinclair in comfort. At a quarter to twelve the whole party, intact and a little bored, found itself on Magdalen Bridge; Jack and Eric broke away at a run up Long Wall, and the others, led by O'Rane, traversed the High for the fourth time that night.

The familiar rooms at the corner of the Turl were bare and disordered with the signs of coming departure. The undulating floor of the sitting-room was littered with paper and straw, with cases of books and half-filled crates of pictures; on a dusting-sheet in one corner was gathered a miscellany of broken pipes and perished pouches, tattered note-books and sprung rackets, torn photographs, old shoes and a policeman's helmet. Overflowing trunks and yawning Gladstone bags projected from the bedrooms on to the narrow, gas-lit landing.

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"Nice, comfortable quarters," observed Jack, as he looked for somewhere to sit. "It was quite a good evening, you know. The part I liked best was when it was all over. Oxford looks quite decent at night."

Eric had been trained to economy of enthusiasm in talking to Jack, who would not have understood him if he had said that the Meadows on a May morning or the Bodleian from All Souls, or the Trinity limes in leaf or a pack of low, grey clouds racing across the sky behind Magdalen Tower made him drunk with the consciousness of physical beauty. And he wondered what he could ever have said to betray to O'Rane his secret yearning for self-expression.

"Our last night in Oxford," he murmured.

"Oh, I think I shall come up occasionally and dine with the lads."

Eric said nothing; but the sense of incongruity with his surroundings still oppressed him, and he privately resolved that he would not revisit Oxford until he had done something to put himself at least on the level of his friends, perhaps above them. That night he lulled himself to sleep with a vision in which he burst on the world as a new Byron and took London by storm in a night. Comely heads turned and whispered his name, as he strode down Bond Street; the windows were full of his photograph; when he entered a room there was a hush of reverence for the new novelist, the rising playwright, the last wit and latest fashion. All his day-dreams led him to the stage. There, after twisting the house to laughter and tears, he would nonchalantly allow himself to be called before the curtain; after three gossamer epigrams, he would retire with a perfunctory bow. And there would follow supper on the stage for George Oakleigh, who was only a subordinate minister, and Loring, who was only governor of a colony, and Jack, who was only a successful barrister, and Knightrider, who was only a subaltern in the Guards, and Summertown, who was only a third secretary on leave from a distant legation, and Pentyre, who had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and had *done* nothing.... The vision was so stimulating that he resolved to conjure it up again whenever he felt depressed.

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They were roused in the morning by the cheerful and insistent voices of a cavalcade which reined in under Jack's windows for the last opportunity of wishing him good-bye.... Unembarrassed by spectators, he made a leisurely toilet and refused to be intimidated by Eric's prophecies that they would lose their train. "There is sure to be another," he pointed out, as he finished brushing his short, mouse-coloured hair and satisfied himself that he was smoothly shaved. Undergraduate Oxford was all too careless of its appearance, and Jack secretly believed that slovenliness in clothes was the visible sign of depravity in morals. Colonel Waring had said so, basing himself on his experience in the army. Jack respected his father's judgement, because it so often coincided with his own.

He appeared in time to see Eric distributing the last tips and counting the luggage as it was piled on top of the cabs. Waving good-bye to their landlord and surrounded by their escort, they drove with self-conscious solemnity to the station, cut a passage through the jungle of dogs and cricket bags on the platform and bribed a porter to find an empty first-class carriage and to lock the door after them. While Jack possessed himself of the papers, Eric watched the familiar landmarks fading one by one from view as the train steamed out of Oxford: Tom Tower and the Cathedral spire, the reservoir and gasworks, the Abingdon Road and Boar's Hill. The whistle of the engine as it entered Culham sounded like the last chord in an operatic score. Oxford was over. He remembered his shyness in first approaching it four years earlier and wondered whether he would as quickly overcome the sense of loneliness which filled his mind at the thought of working in London.

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"When do your bar lectures start?" he asked with a drawl which attempted to emulate his companion's easy carelessness.

Jack tossed aside the *Sportsman* and yawned with lazy contentment.

"I haven't the least idea," he answered.

"I was thinking about rooms. I'm going up almost at once for a month on trial with the *London News*. You've got no preferences?"

"I'd trust your taste and judgement anywhere."

Eric laughed a little impatiently.

"You—are—the—laziest—brute—I've ever come across. Are you going to behave like this at the bar?"

Jack put up his feet and closed his eyes.

"It's not half a bad idea," he mused. "I believe, if I let it be known that I didn't want briefs, the solicitors would form up at the early door out of sheer perversity. Everything comes to him who doesn't much care whether it comes or not. You see, as soon as you want anything, you increase the demand and raise the price against yourself; it's a great thing to have studied political economy. If I ever marry it will be some one who's madly in love with me and whom I can just tolerate. If you're fool enough to try it the other way round, you're simply selling yourself into slavery.... As a matter of fact, I'm not lazy at all, but I refuse to fuss about unimportant things. I had all this business out with the gov'nor two years ago; I'd got to do something for a living, and he had all sorts of gold-lace jobs in contemplation—clerk in the House of Lords, agent to my uncle at Penley, private secretary to this man and that. I said it wasn't good enough. If I couldn't go into the army like him, I'd go somewhere where I could make money. We haven't any particular influence in the city, so I chose the bar; and I've every intention of making money there. *That's* important. But I can't wear myself out looking for digs when I've a kind friend to do it for me. And I never try to do more than one thing at a time. During the next few weeks I shall stay with several very pleasant people. Lady Knightrider's invited me to Raglan as usual; and I'm going to Croxton with the Pentyles; and to House of Steynes with Jim Loring; and to Ireland with George Oakleigh. I wish you'd come, too; I've got such a good country-house manor, I should like you to see it."

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"I've got to work."

"So have I—every bit as much as you," Jack answered aggressively. "But I never believe in meeting trouble half-way." His voice became drowsy, and he composed himself for sleep. "Wake me, when we get to Reading."

Such philosophic detachment was a birthright, not to be bought or borrowed; and Eric looked with a mixture of amusement and envy at his slumbering friend. Some time in the autumn the bar term would begin, there would be lectures and examinations, Jack would be called; later he would pay a hundred pounds to an overworked junior for the privilege of sitting in a pupil-room and confusing his head with such papers as he was allowed to see; he would find chambers of his own and choose a circuit and open it. And get together a practice—or fail. In the meantime he slept with the sun shining on his face, trimly brushed and shaved, smiling, rosy and round-cheeked as a plough-boy.

Eric could not so casually leave the future to look after itself; and he was preparing, with a highly-strung man's dread of altercation, for a conflict with his family. Dr. Lane's suggestions were purely scholastic—a fellowship, if possible; failing that, a position on the staff of one of the great public schools. Either would give him security and a chance of earning money at once. There must be other things, of course, but a philologist lived too much out of the world to give practical advice.... Mrs. Lane favoured the Civil Service; but Eric, from the editorial chair of *Cap and Bells*, had lately made journalism the fabric of his day-dreams. During his last term the editor of the *London News* came to Oxford as guest of honour at a dinner of the Sherbrooke Club; with eye professionally skinned for rising talent, he had been first amused and then impressed by his young host; there followed a vague proposal of an article, and Eric had been careful to thrust his foot into the yielding doorway of the paper until a month's trial was suggested.

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A red-brick wilderness of villas warned him that they were running into Reading. He prodded Jack awake, collected his luggage from the rack and changed into the Basingstoke train. At Winchester a dog-cart, driven by a stiff, military groom, and a pony trap, with an eight-year-old child and her governess, awaited them. The luggage appeared unhurriedly and was separated and stowed out of sight. Jack edged away after a shy greeting to Sybil Lane, and a moment later they were heading through the town for the Melton and Lashmar road.

"Roll round some time and discuss those digs," Eric shouted, as the pony-trap turned from the high-crowned Melton road and jolted into the twilight of unreclaimed woodland whose youngest trees were old and firm-rooted before the New Forest had begun to show the first green of its leaves.

"No, you come to me," Jack called back. "It's shorter for you, because you walk so much faster."

As the low lines of the Mill-House came in sight, Mrs. Lane rose from her chair by the studded front door, closed her book and waved a handkerchief in welcome. For the first time in his life Eric felt that this was no longer his home. Lashmar and Oxford belonged to a youth wherein he was not required to look for a career or to trouble about money and ambition. Within a week he would be occupying chambers of his own and earning his own living.

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"Well, dear Eric, I'm very glad to see you again. You're looking thin," said his mother.

"I'm all right, thanks. How are you, mother? Is the gov'nor working?" asked Eric.

The need for action was strong upon him, and he had to explain once and for all that he aimed at something more than security and a chance of earning money at once.

"He's indoors."

Eric ducked his head and entered the long, low house. It was dark after the glowing June sunlight outside, chillingly cold, too; from the back of the house came the gentle murmur of the Bort with an unchanging drone of falling water and a regular double creak from the mill-wheel, like the

slow cadence of a grandfather's clock. Through the open French windows of the dining-room he sniffed the stream's familiar scent of decay, half-smothered by the coarse reek of a blazing patch of marigolds. Lashmar Mill-House was, for Eric, a place where ambition was brought to die.

Without waiting to be disturbed, Dr. Lane rattled open the door of the library and appeared in his shirt-sleeves, fleshless, tall and stooping, with the gentle, brown eyes, black hair and aquiline nose which he had handed down to Eric. An unkempt brown moustache drooped drearily on either side of a long corn-cob pipe-stem, and his bony hands fidgetted with an untanned strap round his waist.

"I want to have a talk with you," said Eric to his parents. "I'm starting work next week with the *London News*. Jack and I are going to live together." [Pg 30]

Mrs. Lane nursed a well-founded suspicion that Jack preyed on her son's scant vitality, but she shrank from confessing jealousy of his friend.

"Let's have a day or two to think things over," she proposed. "Journalism is very wearing."

"But everything's arranged," Eric answered.

And next morning he rose from breakfast and started through the Forest to Red Roofs and the task of pinning Jack down to the joint establishment in London. Every step on the familiar road was a gesture of farewell. There was a recognized point in the two-mile walk where even the smoke of the Mill-House chimneys was invisible; another point where he had to jump from stone to stone across a furlong of marsh; and another where the forest thinned imperceptibly and vanished. Over the tops of the last trees appeared a row of small-bricked Tudor chimneys, dusty-grey in the sunshine; then the deep red tiles of the gabled roofs; then the house itself, three-quarters covered in creeper that swung in the breeze and veiled the narrow windows with a curtain of tangled green. It was the perfect frame, Eric thought, for a perfect picture of country Toryism; a social analyst could not look at the house without peopling it in imagination with the cadet branch of a rankly conservative family—conventional, godly, sporting, military and, by a freak, unexpectedly evangelical—in a word, with such a family as the Warings. The colonel was returning home from an early gallop; he reined in his horse and walked beside Eric to the gate of the stable-yard, erect and dapper, with a dictatorial voice and a hint of ill-temper in his bearing, his face weather-beaten and the white of his eyes faintly tinged with yellow.

"Hullo! How are you? How's your father? How's the *magnum opus*?" he asked, as he dismounted and walked towards the house. The three questions never varied, and the colonel derived immense private amusement from the thought that Dr. Lane had given thirty years of his life to an Anglo-Saxon dictionary. "Jack tells me you're going to be a journalist. Dog's life, I've always heard." [Pg 31]

"I hope it won't be only journalism," said Eric, who was sensitive enough to be daunted by the misgiving which his proposed career excited first in his parents and now in an unbiased outsider. "I hope to do some rather more original work as well."

"Original? That's bad! Seven-act tragedies and five-volume novels." Colonel Waring had evolved the belief that young men could be coaxed out of their natural shyness by well-timed jocosity. "You must excuse me, I'm going to have my bath. You'll find every one in the smoking-room, I expect."

Eric escaped with relief and ran Jack to earth in the faded dining-room, where he was finishing a late breakfast. His sister ministered to his wants, keeping the food warm in a chafing-dish, plying him with coffee and fetching him clean plates. Mrs. Waring, plump, idle and self-indulgent, was fondly overhauling her son's wardrobe when Eric entered the room.

"Dear Jack, you can't go to Lady Knight-riding until you've ordered yourself some new shirts. These are a disgrace," she protested.

Jack nodded without looking up from his paper.

"I know. I was waiting till I got home so that Agnes could write to my man. I always forget his name. Hullo, Eric! You're bursting with energy this morning. Have some capital kidneys and bacon?"

"I came to talk about where we are going to live," Eric explained, shaking hands with Mrs. Waring.

"But I thought I'd left that to you? Why don't you and Agnes arrange something?" Jack filled a pipe and strolled towards the open window. "The gov'nor seems to have got me elected to the County Club; he rather favours my trying to get a bedroom there." [Pg 32]

Eric felt a twinge of dismay. It was only natural that a club should have been found for Jack, as everything else was found; but Eric could not afford to let him slip away. Perhaps the suggestion was only a diplomatic hint that, if he were troubled further, he would follow the line of least resistance.

"Oh, no! You're coming with me. If you've no preferences, Agnes and I will go straight ahead."

He motioned to the girl, and they went out into the garden together. Agnes Waring, in company with her mother, had been brought up to believe that Jack was the one person in the house who

mattered; though intellectually head and shoulder his superior, she had been kept at home from the day when Colonel Waring demonstrated incontrovertibly that he could not afford to send her to Newnham if Jack was to be given an adequate allowance at Oxford. Once isolated at home, she had nothing to do but to run errands for her father and brother. At her suggestion it was now arranged that Eric should look for rooms in the Temple.

Two days later he wrote that he had discovered an ideal set of chambers in Pump Court, and for a week they worked to get it in order for Jack's arrival in October. On the last afternoon Agnes looked on her completed handiwork and sighed with satisfaction and envy.

"If you're not comfortable, you ought to be," she declared. "Men are lucky creatures. I wish I could change places with you, Eric."

"So that you could wait on Jack?"

"I should like that, of course.... I hope Jack does well at the bar. You will make him work, won't you?"

Eric shrugged his shoulders and looked into the silent little court.

"Can any one make him do anything he doesn't want to? I wonder whether he was wise to choose the bar. I wonder whether I was wise to choose journalism, whether any of us.... We had a very cheerful dinner on our last night at Oxford. There were about twenty of us, and one man bet that in ten years' time five of us would be dead and a certain number bankrupt. A certain number more would have to cut the country. So far as I remember only one was to make anything of a success. Not an encouraging forecast."

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"A very cynical forecast," Agnes distinguished.

"Will he win his bet?"

"Oh, a man of character can make anything of his life," she answered with a glance of fleeting interest and affection which he did not see.

Eric recalled the extraordinarily young faces at the last dinner of the Phoenix. Their outlook was frivolous and their talk trivial. He was already feeling older in ten days.

"Do you get more than one man of character in twenty?" he asked.

CHAPTER TWO THE COMING OF LILITH

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"What private man in England is worse off than the constitutional monarch?... I don't believe he may even eat or drink what he likes best: a taste for tripe and onions on his part would provoke a remonstrance from the Privy Council."

BERNARD SHAW: "AN UNSOCIAL SOCIALIST."

The partnership in Pump Court lasted for more than four years. After nicely judging the minimum of work which would carry him through his bar examinations, Jack surprised his friends by closing the former life of indolence with a snap. When assizes were on, he made an indiscriminating round of the North Eastern circuit, conducting a dock defence as though it were a state trial; in London he attended suburban county courts with as much zeal as if he had been sent special. During the Long Vacation he remained at the end of a wire; the Bar Point-to-Point was sacrificed without a murmur, and invitations during his working day seldom penetrated farther than the telephone in his clerk's room.

Once a year, indeed, he consented to meet his friends at dinner with Loring, but they were contracting new ties and professing enthusiasms which he did not share. Framlingham and Knightrider had been drilled into the professional rigidity and limited outlook of junior subalterns in crack regiments: Oakleigh was a politician, Pentyre a man of leisure; Summertown had abandoned diplomacy for the army—the life of a public danger for that of a private nuisance, as Valentine Arden, the novelist, complained in a moment of exasperation. Deganway, on the same authority, rested in the Foreign Office by day and spent tireless nights adding to the number of those who addressed him by his Christian name. O'Rane and Mayhew were abroad.

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Had he ever felt the inclination, Jack professed to be without the time or energy to take part in a social life of dinners and dances. Exchanging one pose for another, he had ceased to be the arbiter of "good form," as that is understood at Eton and New College, and was aping the manners of an older generation; the new aloofness, like the old, dispensed him from doing anything that he did not like and gratified his faint but ineradicable sense of superiority. At night he now chose the society of his own profession at the County Club and steeped himself in forensic retorts discourteous and the aroma of judicial wit; by day he chopped leading cases at luncheon in Hall and smoked one cigarette in the Gardens, striding up and down with his chin

deep on his white slips and his hands locked beneath the tails of his coat. He was too busy for week-end parties, too old to take his sister to dances.

"It doesn't do to be seen lurching at your club too much," he explained to Eric, when at the end of four years he had decided that the inconvenience of moving was less than that of continuing to live in the Temple. "People think you've no work. Trouble is, I'm getting no exercise. I think I shall have to move away so that I can get a walk in the morning."

Eric received the news with little surprise and hardly more regret. Jack was in chambers before he himself got up in the morning and in bed before the *London News* began to print off. The dissolution would only cost them an occasional half-hour's talk in the early evening and a rare Sunday walk when Jack was not staying at Red Roofs.

"Nineteen nine, nineteen five," Eric calculated. "We're twenty-six and we've had four years here. By the way, are you dining with Jim to-night? Give him my love and say I wish I could come too. It's no good, if I have to run away after the fish. I remember your father telling me that journalism was a dog's life. He never spoke a truer word."

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"But you've done extraordinarily well," Jack insisted, rousing reluctantly from the contemplation of his own career. "What are you? Dramatic critic and assistant literary editor? And you're making a damn sight more than I am. I've decided to give up this twopenny ha'penny criminal work. Otherwise I shall get left in a rut."

Eric was thinking less of his routine work than of four dog's-eared plays which he had sent the round of the London managers; a critic was ever one who could not create.

"The right people have died at the right time," he explained. "It's not quite what I hoped, though."

Jack knocked out his pipe and left Eric to finish his early dinner by himself. It was the anniversary of their last Phoenix Club gathering at Oxford; and for the last four years a dozen or more of them had contrived to meet at the end of every June. So far, O'Rane's pessimistic forecast had halted short of fulfilment; none was dead, none was bankrupt, though Draycott was living at Boulogne with a warrant in readiness for him, if he ever returned to England. Sinclair was married, but the others had not yet found time for triumph or disaster. If Eric enjoyed a good salary and a responsible position, they had been bought with hard work, unsleeping contrivance and two severe illnesses; the instant spectacular effect of Lord Byron's descent upon London remained a day dream.

"You'll be able to find some one to take on my room, won't you?" asked Jack, with fleeting compunction, as he reappeared from his bedroom in shirt and trousers.

"I shan't try," answered Eric. "My books are overflowing into every room.... And I loathe strangers as much as you do."

Like Jack, he had soon found that it was impossible to play on equal terms with men who did not pretend to work for a living; and Eric's rare excursions from the Temple led him only to the supper-table of the Thespian Club and occasional luncheons in Chelsea. In the days of his apprenticeship to the *London News*, he had won the friendship of Martin Shelley by attending first nights when, as happened three times out of five, the dramatic critic was indisposed. For ultimate reward he succeeded to a coveted position; in payment by instalments he received a careless regard and full-blooded advice on drama and life. When Shelley's ill-used brain and nerves had been flogged to activity and not yet drowned, he would talk of theatrical art as a master. "Don't forget what I'm telling you, Lane," he would say through a cloud of smoke and whiskey fumes. "I've taught you what construction is—and dialogue—and technique—and characterization. You could write a *successful* play to-morrow, but you must wait until you've filled a sketch-book or two. You don't know live men and women yet; you're too much the maiden of bashful fifteen. The public isn't ready for naturalism; so, if you want to kill theatricality—which is what I've tried to do all my life—you must do it with a play that's overwhelming. I could teach you a hell of a lot, if I had time.... When I'm gone, fire in your application for my berth so that no one else gets in before you and yet leave just enough margin to keep the old man from thinking you pushed me under the wheels. Not that I'd blame you, we've all got to make our way. But the old man finds me rather an asset. My poor wife runs teetotal salons in Chelsea on the strength of my name. I'll take you to one. You'll fill a sketch-book with society smatterers alone."

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Eric went from courtesy and stayed from compassion. Mrs. Shelley, the faded, pretty daughter of a Cambridge tutor who had left her a few hundreds a year, threw herself tacitly on his mercy, as though he had come to blackmail her with sordid tales of her husband's degradation. They had no children; and she had set herself to make a life of her own. So long as she could fill her house with the North Street school of poets, the Fitzroy Square impressionists—and all who came humbly to her for a chance of meeting them—she shut her eyes to her husband's excesses and infidelities. He was required to act as decoy for new literary and artistic lions, to appear at one party out of five freshly shaved and decently habited, to lend her a hand when she could climb no longer unaided and to accept a rare invitation in return to lunch with Lady Poynter or the Duchess of Ross, when "the society smatterers" wanted him to write up a charity *matinée* or the amateur performance of a Restoration comedy.

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Before and after her husband's unheroic death under a newspaper van, Mrs. Shelley was Eric's single link with the world outside Fleet Street and the Thespian Club. Jack's white waist-coat and button-hole were occasionally a galling remainder of his own bondage.

"God! this is a life!" he broke out, as he looked at the clock and brought his dinner to an untimely end. "I never dine anywhere; I don't speak to a woman from one year's end to another——"

"Nor do I. It only encourages them," Jack returned, as he filled his case with cigarettes and gave a final polish to his hat.

"It would bring a little colour into one's life," said Eric, looking with disfavour at the grimly celibate sitting-room.

"Some people don't know when they're well off. I *can't* dance and I've nothing to say to the modern girl. Why they won't take 'no' for an answer I can never make out. I suppose you *like* women, Eric. Every time you go to a theatre, you come back raving about somebody's dress or pearls or eyes—honestly, you do! It's like a fashion article. I'm beyond all that. I don't mind 'em when they're as old as Lady Knight-riding; they've ceased to be exacting then, and you can count on them to see that you're comfortable and that you have plenty of bath-salts. But the vulgar little atrocities of nineteen! I'm not ragging; if you compare a girl like my sister Agnes, who's twenty-two, with the hoydens who think they constitute London Society! Brains of spiders and manners of factory hands! In my day.... However, they're all pure young girlhood to you. The Lord preserve you in your innocence and keep you from marrying one of them! I must fly!"

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He ran down the stairs and hailed a taxi at the top of Middle Temple Lane. Since the downfall of Draycott, the Phoenix Club dinners had lost their old strict form and were no longer confined to members of the club. As Jack entered the hall, Valentine Arden, a satirical consumptive, was divesting himself of a violet-lined cloak, smoothing his long straight hair back from his forehead, patting the tie that wound twice round his collar and adjusting the straps of his trousers under his insteps. There were other friends of a younger generation whom Loring had acquired in his easy-going progress, but the older members were meagrely represented.

The first arrivals were already in the library, exchanging fragmentary news of the absentees, when their host appeared with a preoccupied frown and a jejune apology for his lateness.

"Where's Pentyre?" he asked, as he looked round the room. "Here, my friend, you'll get yourself into hot water, if you give any more parties like your last one."

"What's the row?" asked Pentyre in surprise.

"Well, I won't mention names," Loring answered, "but one of your guests has come to grief as the result of your last little gathering at Croxton. I don't say that it's *your* fault," he added, "except that you ought to exercise more general control in your own house. There was a certain amount of gambling, wasn't there? Some fairly big sums of money changed hands? One man lost who couldn't afford to lose, I believe. It may have been absence of mind or it may have been the only way out of the difficulty, but the man in question signed his father's name on a cheque instead of his own. The son is now on his way to one of those 'thoughtful islands where warrants never come.' D'you mean this is all news to you?"

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Pentyre tugged at his moustache and shook his head in wide-eyed wonder. The only sign of discord that he could remember had occurred between his mother and Loring's own cousin, Barbara Neave. On the first night she had stayed up after Lady Pentyre had shepherded the women of the party to bed. In the morning there had been a gentle reprimand, but Lady Barbara ignored it and persisted in staying up as long as any one would stay up with her. She or one of the men—Pentyre could not remember—had started poker, which they played until two or three o'clock in the morning.

"I've never heard a word of it," he said. Less than a year had passed since he succeeded to his father's title and the ownership of Croxton Hall. The social life of the county had been brightened; but there had been one or two regrettable mishaps, and Loring always seemed to hear of them. "How did you get hold of the story?" he asked with a touch of bluster.

"From the man's father in the first place; then from my cousin Barbara. We're supposed to be responsible for her, and I tackled her about it. She won nearly five hundred pounds from this wretched boy. Of course, I made her disgorge it; but the fellow may be ruined for life. I told her so pretty plainly, and she seemed to take it as an enormous compliment."

"Who was the man?" asked Pentyre.

"Well, it wasn't your fat friend Webster, and it wasn't John Gaymer; they played poker before they could walk. I think you can guess now. Really, Pentyre, if you admit people of that kind to your house.... That girl will be the death of my poor mother. Thank goodness, Crawleigh's on his way home! D'you know, in the four years we've been nominally in charge of her we've been asked to have her removed from three different schools? Once it was for holding a table-turning *séance* in her bedroom after lights-out, and twice simply because they didn't know what to do with her. She's a holy terror. But I've got rid of her now, so let's have some dinner and forget all about her."

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The three-hour discussion, which had been brought to an end by the dressing-gong, was only the latest of a long succession of family councils; but hitherto Lady Barbara had split the court of enquiry into factions and escaped between the feet of the disputants. On this, as on earlier occasions, she had won over her two aunts, but Loring proved himself to be of sterner stuff. "It's no use her saying that it's just as if she hadn't a father and mother of her own! She has,—and they'll discover it to their cost," he said. "The immediate point is that, if Barbara stays in this

house, I go out of it. She's not in the least sorry. You think she's crying, but she isn't. I've seen her do that a dozen times when she wants to get round the servants. It's time some one else had a turn of her. If you believe in her repentance, Aunt Kathleen, you're welcome to her." While he dressed for dinner, the girl's clothes were packed and disposed in Lady Knightrider's car. She herself came to his door with a woebegone face, begging him to forgive her, for life with Lady Knightrider involved discipline, religious exercises and banishment for most of the year to Scotland or Monmouthshire. He refused and felt so small-minded at using his authority against a child that it was a relief to vent his ill-humour on a man.

"This is all very well," said Pentyre stolidly, as they sat down to dinner, "but I refuse to be bullied because you can't keep your own cousin in order."

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"I can't make out how you can be seen in the same street as Webster and Gaymer," answered Loring. "To me they're everything that's wrong in the life of the present day. Webster, Pennington, Lady Maitland, Erckmann——"

"You're so infernally narrow-minded."

"If it's narrow-minded to dislike a noisy little clique of rich cads who try to dominate society by being one degree more outrageous than anybody else."

A murmur of dissent made itself heard; but Loring warmed to his work, and the party divided into two camps and joined battle over the bodies of their friends. It was a stimulating encounter and afforded unrestricted opportunity for personal attack. For several years there had been raging a secret warfare which Valentine Arden compared with a tournament in a dark room between blindfolded combatants who did not know why they were fighting. On the one side was a group of influential and highly respected families led by the Loring, the Knightriders and the Pebberidges, on the other the cosmopolitans. They were an ill-defined host without leader or tenets. In every other capital of the world they had found their place as a wealthy and cultured class, excluded from the houses of the historic aristocracy but forming an artistic aristocracy of their own. In Paris, Vienna and New York Sir Adolf Erckmann was a social power; he would not, indeed, be found with the Princesse de Brise or Mrs. Irwin T. Churton, but he was known and revered in a world of music and pictures which did not know Mrs. Irwin T. Churton or the Princesse de Brise by name.

In England there were no such recognizable lines of demarcation. Erckmann was received by the Duchess of Ross, because she wanted him to subsidise a French theatre for London and hoped that he might be induced to take Herrig on a long lease; he was blackballed for the County Club, because the committee disliked his race, his accent, his friends and his too frequent appearance in the Divorce Court. With one foot in a Promised Land, from which the society of Paris, Vienna and New York had excluded him, Sir Adolf lifted the second; it was at this point that the battle was joined, and both sides fought blindly. The cosmopolitans were not always fortunate in their manners or their allies; and to Loring their very toleration meant the invasion of society by "a noisy clique of rich cads." Their antagonists were no less unfortunate in a few of their prejudices; and the cosmopolitans claimed with some reason to be fighting against a Philistine oligarchy. As there was not even a common ground of dispute, the warfare degenerated into indecisive skirmishes, and the discussion of it into embittered personalities.

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"They're a bit hairy about the heel," said Summertown, "but they *are* alive, and some of their shows are great fun. Val can bear me out."

Arden assumed non-moral detachment and explained that the novelist, like the sanitary inspector, entered all houses with professional impartiality.

"They've no sense of responsibility and not much feeling for decency. I don't want to make too much of this business," said Loring, as acrimony slipped out of control and threatened the peace of the dinner. "But I was thoroughly stirred up over that wretched boy and I felt it was time to make a stand."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Pentyre.

"Well, I've been knocking about in London for half a dozen years, watching these gentry, and I can see that *we're* not assimilating *them*. The egregious Pennington, that young swine Webster ——"

"Both of whom I've met in this house," interposed Pentyre.

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"I know. One gets roped in. Some one dragged me along to their parties, so I had to invite them back. But I don't go any more. The danger *now* is that they'll assimilate us. I went through my mother's book a short time ago and put a mark against certain names; and in future those people will not be invited or admitted to the house. No doubt they'll get on very happily without me, but so much mud is thrown at us in the ordinary way of business that I can't afford to put up gratuitous targets for the amusement of the gutter-press. Honestly, Pentyre, you'd feel rather small, if the *Sunday Budget* or *Morton's Weekly* came out with a 'Society Gambling Scandal.' Wouldn't you?"

Pentyre adroitly evaded the question and continued his own bombardment.

"Is your cousin's name in the condemned list?" he asked.

"It will be, if I have any trouble from her again. What I can't get people to see is that we're hanging on by our eyelids to such position as we've got. A hundred years ago we were a class apart and above criticism; nobody thought the worse of us, if we appeared at the theatre with a notorious cocotte or drank ourselves gently under the table. Our present accursed democracy was unborn. But, when once that came into existence, we could only keep ourselves from proscription by saying very loudly that we were still a class apart and were setting a standard. Democracy's too lazy and snob-ridden to be very exacting, but it's had its eye on us. George and his friends are conspiring to hamstring the poor, decent House of Lords; and, if they succeed, the rot won't stop there. I find life very pleasant, and it isn't worth a tremendous upheaval simply for the amusement of behaving like a Bank Holiday crowd.... Let's go and smoke in the library."

Under the tranquillising influence of tobacco, Loring recovered his good-humour and the controversy flickered to extinction. There was a short attempt to revive and explore the scandal of Croxton Hall, but Pentyre was secretly frightened by the possibility of seeing his name in the papers; and he knew from long experience that there was no surer way of achieving notoriety than that of telling anything in confidence to those of his friends whose social importance was measured by their range and freshness of gossip.

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"You're *too* provoking!" Deganway protested shrilly, pinning him in an embrasure and flapping irritably with his eye-glass. "You know it's not fair to tell a story without giving all the names."

"I didn't tell the story," Pentyre pointed out.

"But I've asked Jim, and he won't say. Val! Do make him tell! He's being so tiresome."

Arden shrugged his shoulders and, with the outward frozen detachment which had become second nature to him, retired to a table by himself where he called for China tea and produced a pack of patience cards. There were other means of investigating the poker episode, and he had decided that it was more than time for the social satirist to make Barbara Neave's acquaintance. For the merits of the controversy he cared nothing, but his sense of humour was maliciously stirred in contemplation of a self-consciously decorous clan stung into undignified curvettings by a gadfly girl of sixteen. Though he ostentatiously refused to be drawn into partisanship, the stiff blamelessness of the interlocked Catholic families occasionally oppressed him; and the material outcome of Loring's tirade was to stimulate his desire to explore the domestic dissension at first hand.

"One feels that Lady Barbara would repay study," he observed to Jack, as they left the house together. "She is a new element in our worn-out social system."

"You must study her for me," answered Jack. "I agree with every word Jim said. I'm too busy to go out much, but *some* of the people I meet.... My father says that twenty years ago they wouldn't have been tolerated. But since the South African diamond boom and all the new money.... Of course, the girl just wants slapping."

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"You have met her? No? One hoped that you would have effected the introduction."

"I avoid the present-day girl like the plague," said Jack.

The following afternoon Arden called in South Street with a book which, he assured Lady Knightrider, he had promised to lend her. Lady Barbara was at Hurlingham with Webster; but, as she was expected back to tea, he planted himself immovably in a chair and awaited her return. When at last she came, he found her utterly unlike the rebellious school-girl of his imagination. A childhood spent in public had matured her beyond her years so that she had the looks of twenty-two and the self-possession of forty. Instead of studying her, he found himself being studied; slender and lithe as a boy, she was tall enough to look down on him. He found her haggard with restlessness and a life of nervous excitement; her tired eyes, ever changing in size and colour, brightened as she took in his affectations of dress and mannerisms of speech; he felt that she was harmonizing her pose with his and that her vitality and quickness had already given her an advantage.

"I've read all your books. Witty, but very artificial," she said, as they were introduced. "The French do that sort of thing more easily, but you've not read much French, have you? There are several things I want to discuss with you. A play I've written." She drew off her gloves jerkily, splitting the thumb of one. "Did you come to see me or Aunt Kathleen? And you know Jim, of course. I want your opinion of him."

"*He* knows *me*," Arden distinguished, as he watched her carelessly calculated movements. Within sixty seconds she had shewn herself full-face and in profile, with a hat and again with two tapering hands smoothing a mass of wayward hair. He had seen her wistful and tired, as she came into the room, and again alert and galvanised at finding him there. Yet she had certainly noticed his hat in the hall; probably she had read the name and thought out her attack as she came upstairs. He was charmed by her conscientious artifice.

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"You talk just like Fatty Webster's imitations of you! That's so clever of you! But why do you do it? You've arrived. There's no need to be eccentric now. But perhaps you've grown into your own pose? In that case you're right to express yourself in your own medium. Life is simply self-expression, isn't it? The discovery of the Ego, the refinement of the Ego, the presentation of the Ego." She nodded quickly at a portrait of her father in Garter robes. "It would never do to be submerged by that kind of thing. I'm always so sorry for Royalty."

As he hesitated for an answer, she put her hands to her throat, unclasped her necklace and threw it out of the window. Arden sprang across the room and looked down into the street to make sure that he had seen aright. A District Messenger-boy approached, whistling; he explored the necklace with his foot and finally picked it up.

"My dear, what *are* you doing?" cried Lady Knightrider in amazement.

"I went flying to-day," Lady Barbara answered, as she poured herself out a cup of tea.

"Flying!"

"Yes, I didn't tell you beforehand, because I was afraid of a scene. Besides, I should have done it, whatever you said. Johnnie Gaymer promised to take me up. I haven't been near Hurlingham. Don't bother, Mr. Arden."

"But why—?" Valentine began, startled out of his invertebrate placidity by a sensationalist more original than himself.

"Because I wasn't killed. I love that necklace more than anything in the world. It was given me when I was recovering from typhoid and every one thought I *must* die.... The engine stopped in mid-air, and I made sure I was going to be killed. Johnnie thought so, too. I felt I owed something to Nemesis.... I've known you by sight all this season, Mr. Arden. You weren't at the Poynters last night, by any chance? I couldn't go, because I was in disgrace. And Lord Poynter sent his car this morning with a wreath of lilies, because he was afraid I must be dead."

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The short, disjointed sentences, flung out rapidly as she helped herself to cake, demanded all Arden's attention and left her aunt far behind. Lady Knightrider hurried belatedly to the window and then stretched her hand to the bell. Lady Barbara took her arm soothingly and led her back to her chair.

"Your disgrace was our diversion," said Arden.

"Did Jim tell you about it," asked Lady Barbara. "How like him! I'm beginning to think he's naturally cruel. Or unnaturally. Conscious cruelty is what divides men from animals.... Aunt Kathleen, if you fuss, I shall scream; I've been badly frightened and I hated throwing it away.... I'd sooner die than hurt any one.... Have you ever flown? I've wanted to for years; I felt it would be a new sensation. Won't it be awful when we've done so much that there are no sensations left? Aunt Kathleen's quite irrepressible, isn't she?"

After an interval of indecision Lady Knightrider had hurried out of the room and downstairs. Arden looked at his watch and prepared to follow her.

"One always lies down before dinner," he explained.

"You're going—just when we've been left a moment together?" she asked with a smile that had less of amusement than of artistic sympathy. "That's a brilliant effect. Not one man in a million would have thought of it. We must meet again. Why did you come at all? What had you heard about me? I don't recommend Aunt Kathleen's cigarettes."

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She offered him her case, and Arden lighted one.

"A poker party was mentioned at dinner last night," he told her. "One casually wondered who the man was."

"Claude Arkwright. Jim says I've got his soul on my conscience. Any more questions?"

Arden laughed and for a moment shed all his mannerisms.

"Yes. What's behind all this?" he asked.

"All this what? All this me? What I do?" Lady Barbara met him unreservedly on his own chosen ground of sincerity, and her voice and smile changed. "*I'm* behind it. Come, you're quite clever enough to understand. I want to enjoy life and know life and meet people and read books and do things.... I won't be treated like a minor Royalty. The world's full of Jim Lorings. Wherever I go, some one says 'Not there, not there, my child.' And then! *Then* I go quite mad! You'll like me, I think. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Lady Lilith."

"Lilith? Who was she? Wasn't she Adam's first wife?"

"She existed before Man tasted of the tree of knowledge; before good and evil came into the world," said Arden impressively.

"*I* remember. I hope you won't become sententious. That went out with the last of the Wilde plays."

Lady Knightrider was standing in the hall, plump, white-haired and perplexed, peering through her lorgnettes into the street. The messenger-boy had disappeared, and the necklace with him.

"He will take it to Scotland Yard," predicted Arden reassuringly. "And then Lady Barbara will throw it away again for fear of cheating Nemesis. One despaired of meeting honest superstition in these degenerate latter days."

"I've never heard—," began Lady Knightrider. One crime jostled another and confused her mind. "Crawleigh will be furious if he finds out she's been flying." [Pg 50]

Arden walked back to the Ritz, wondering whether the fuller study of Barbara Neave justified him in giving away points by betraying interest in her. His preliminary diagnosis discovered energy with no outlet, premature experience with unsated curiosity; public life held no mystery or attraction for the only daughter of a viceroy; unless Lord Crawleigh set himself to gain a dukedom, there were no social heights to scale; the family was too rich for her to be troubled about money; and so energy sought its outlet in making and receiving new sensations. This was well enough at sixteen or seventeen, but after another five years emotion-hunting...? He was still undecided when he encountered her a week later at Covent Garden, sitting with Summertown and Webster on a sofa outside Lady Maitland's box and having her fortune told by Sonia Dainton. Her setting was of more interest than her occupation, for Summertown and Miss Dainton were leaders of the younger cavalry in the cosmopolitan army; they echoed the noise and reflected the insistent glare of Sir Adolf Erckmann without sharing his solid prestige as a critic and patron of art. Webster was a sodden, characterless youth, who bought his way into toleration which he mistook for popularity. Arden wondered what Loring would say if he found his cousin in such company.

"The discovery of the Ego?" he enquired.

"Hullo! We're having such fun!" said Lady Barbara. "Miss Dainton's wonderful! I've had two bad illnesses, and something is going to happen soon which will change the whole of my life. I'm going to have an enormous success of some kind. And then an enormous tragedy. I'm very artistic and full of intuition. I've got a strong will and a great influence over people. Go on, Sonia."

"The line of heart—give me your other hand a minute," said Sonia Dainton. "Yes, the line of heart hasn't begun yet. When it *does!*" [Pg 51]

Lady Barbara withdrew her hand abruptly.

"I don't believe you know anything about it, Sonia. Are there any good palmists in London, Mr. Arden? I collect fortune-tellers. Let's go somewhere to-morrow. Father will be back in England next month, and then I shan't be able to do anything."

"You believe in all this?" Arden asked, remembering her action with the necklace and wondering how far she was trying to beat him at his own game of extravagant effects.

"Oh, implicitly. Don't you? And I do want to find out all about the future. Let's devote a week to it and try *every one.*"

"I might spare you two days," he answered, as he passed on to his box.

At the end of the first Arden's curiosity was satisfied. Lady Barbara was a study in crude contrasts. While she pained her family by sceptical indifference to religion, there seemed nothing that she would not believe, provided only that it did not come to her from the lips of a priest. As they drove from one clairvoyant to another, she revealed a curious knowledge of necromancy; she had read every book that she could find on Satanism and the Black Mass and would talk of astrology and the significance of dreams with grave conviction. But the cult of the fortune-tellers was inspired primarily by a desire to discuss herself and to be discussed. A single morning exhausted the possibilities of amusement from such a source, and her companions were less diverting than herself; Sonia Dainton dropped out when she found herself accorded second place, Summertown played a thin stream of monotonous jocosity over the survivors, and Webster fell asleep with an air of duty well done when he had provided luncheon for every one, discovered a new clairvoyant and driven the party to her at breakneck speed in the latest of the racing cars whose purchase constituted the overt business of his life. [Pg 52]

They were to have met again with Lady Knightrider at the end of the season; but, when Arden and Jack Waring entered the train for Raglan, Loring awaited them with a grave face and pointed to a column notice in his paper, headed "Serious Flying Accident."

"Thank Heaven, it happened when she was with her people and not with me," he began. "That's my silly little fool of a cousin again! She got that fellow Gaymer down to Crawleigh Abbey; and, when her parents' backs were turned, they went off for a jaunt to Salisbury Plain. The manœuvres were on, so they brightened them up by flying so low that the inspecting general bolted and the troops scattered in panic. There'll be the deuce to pay for that alone. Then, on the way back, they came down in the New Forest and got hung up on a tree. Gaymer's broken a collar-bone and two ribs; and Barbara's badly shaken and bruised. Here's an opportunity for your literary genius, Valentine; help me to draft a telegram of sympathy which will shew at the same time that I think she richly deserved all she got."

The accident was Lady Barbara's formal introduction to England. Throughout 1909 there was an official pretence that she was not yet out; she would still be no more than seventeen when her parents returned, and both Lady Loring and Lady Knightrider refused to present her before that. The baptism of blood in the New Forest made her name and face known to every reader of every illustrated paper. "The ideal *début* for her," exclaimed Loring in disgust. "I can see her spending the rest of her life trying to live up to it."

Four days later he came into Arden's room with a letter which he threw onto the bed with a grim smile.

"It was sweet of you to send me that wire. I've strained my back and covered myself with bruises, but it was worth it. Fear is a wonderful sensation; I believe it's the strongest of all the emotions. I certainly feel that I shall never again get that sublimated degree of fear. I got Death. (D'you spell Death with a capital D? I always do—from respect; Death will outlast God.) You heard I had concussion? I knew I was dying and that one step would carry me over the dividing-line. There was a black curtain, like a drop-scene; and I knew that, as soon as that lifted, I should be dead and on the other side. I said to myself I wouldn't die. When I came to, the doctor was frowning terribly, and I heard him mutter, 'Just about time, too, young lady.' I wonder whether you'd be sorry, if I died, Jim. When I had appendicitis at Simla, you couldn't get through the streets for the people who were waiting to hear how the operation had gone off. The wires were blocked for three days with enquiries.

"I'm to be allowed out at the end of the week and hope to be well enough to come to you at House of Steynes with father and mother.

Your loving Barbara."

Arden smiled as he handed back the letter.

"Characteristic," he commented.

"Oh, very! Not a word about Gaymer. Or the feelings of her parents. She's had two new sensations and she can't be sure whether she'd get as good a press for her death here as in India. Crawleigh will have his hands full. You've not met him? Well, it's one thing to govern India and another to keep a little devil like that in order."

A month later, still in the detached spirit of the social satirist, Arden allowed himself to be introduced to Lady Barbara's parents in Scotland. He was anxious to study her family setting, for Lord Crawleigh was already beginning to be regarded primarily as the father of his own daughter and only in afterthought as a distinguished public servant. Fifteen years earlier he had first shewn the administrative brilliance and incapacity to work with colleagues which impel a man to a viceroyalty or the leadership of a disgruntled party of one on the cross-benches. In Canada, in Ireland and in India he had been publicly admired and privately abhorred. Without the backing of long established authority, however, he was thrown on his own resources; and paper-work genius proved itself powerless without palpable force of character. Over-sensitive to his personal dignity, he treated his wife and children with the pomp and despotism of Government House; according to Loring's description, councils were convened to decide what train should bear them from London to Crawleigh Abbey; the cook's shortcomings were minuted to Lady Crawleigh for observations and appropriate action; the servants were pinned to the straight path of their duties by proclamation, and the household books were scrutinized with an exhaustive particularity not vouchsafed to the preparation of an Indian budget.

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It was the self-protective assertion of a man sensitive to his physical inadequacy. Lord Crawleigh's domed head, ascetic face and rimless spectacles were impressively intellectual, but he degenerated as he went lower. The bottom half of his face was confused with a straggling blonde moustache intended for an operatic viking; his body was too short, his legs too long; and, when he became excited, his voice rose querulous and shrill. But the viceregal manner carried him far. Lord Neave and his two younger brothers had been taught obedience at Eton; Lady Crawleigh, as her passivity and plumpness hinted, suffered from a family streak of laziness, which she shared with Lady Loring and Lady Knightrider, and from twenty-five years' experience of her husband, which she could share with no one. It required Barbara's temperamental irreverence and gypsy craving for liberty to break down the imposing forms and spirit of her father's rule. The boys, who could be caned while she remained immune, sheltered themselves behind their younger sister; and, with a woman's genius for tactical alliances and strategical choice of ground, she explored and profited by the weak places in the enemy's system of defences. Her father's public position and private dignity were her strongest accessories. "She can always blackmail him by threatening a scandal," as Loring explained.

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So long as she had her own way, Arden discovered a rule of peace and mutual affection. Lady Barbara hated to be on bad terms with any one; and her parents were humanly, if reluctantly, proud of her. Throughout his visit to House of Steynes, she dominated the party by her vitality and versatile charm. Loring was in the early stages of devotion to Sonia Dainton and disappeared as long and often as possible to escape his mother and sister, who were trying to avert an engagement, and Lady Dainton, who was forcing it to a head; and in his absence Arden watched Lady Barbara posing herself in the middle of the stage, methodically sharing herself among the guests and holding her own with all. It was the fruit of early years, during which she had lived consistently in public, meeting men of every profession and country, listening, remembering, learning and giving her best in return. She shewed a nice appreciation of personality and varied her attitude with her audience. In talking to Arden himself she still gravely met pose with pose and extravagance with extravagance.

"D'you feel you know me adequately now?" she asked him on the last night. "Mr. Deganway told me you were going to write a book about me."

"And you replied, 'Only one?' It is unfortunate that Meredith has already taken 'The Egoist' as a title."

Lady Barbara turned slowly, as though he were a mirror, and gave him time to appreciate her slender height and lithe figure. One hand directed attention to her hair, as she brushed away a curl from her forehead; and she looked at him sideways with her fingers pressed against one cheek so that he should see the size and deep colour of her eyes.

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"D'you think I'm unduly vain?" she asked.

"Genius demands vanity. But one comes back to the old question: what is behind it? One thinks of you in six years' time and asks oneself what will be left. You have been everywhere, Lady Lilith, and met every one whom the world considers worth meeting—they were not too numerous? No?—and you have read so much.... In six years' time you will be the best known woman in London, but there will be nothing left for you to do."

"There are always new experiences. When I had that accident in the New Forest, a man came from the other end of England, because he'd fallen in love with my photograph. He said he couldn't marry any one else after seeing me."

"It is surfeiting to be easily loved," Arden sighed. "One does not shoot sitting birds. Some day, perhaps, Lady Lilith will meet a man who goes to the other end of England to avoid her. That will be a new experience. She will follow him, of course. To find a heart will be the greatest experience of all. One will watch your career with interest."

"And describe it? Or are you afraid to risk my friendship?"

"The only book that could offend Lady Lilith is one in which she does not appear."

For the next six months Arden was compelled to study her through the press. Loring went abroad for the winter in his yacht, Lady Knightrider withdrew to Scotland, and Lord Crawleigh moved his seat of government from Berkeley Square to Hampshire. Despite the rival claims of a general election, however, she secured creditable space in the daily and weekly papers. A ball at Crawleigh Abbey was followed by an abortive rumour of her engagement to her cousin Lord John Carstairs. A prompt and unambiguous disclaimer was issued, but the findings of the commission, which Lord Crawleigh appointed under his own chairmanship to investigate his daughter's conduct, were such that he deemed it prudent to transfer his seat of government from Hampshire to Cap Martin. A series of photographs from the Riviera correspondent of the 'Catch' shewed her walking demurely with her father, playing tennis and participating less demurely in a battle of flowers and a fancy-dress carnival.

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In the spring of 1910 public interest was deflected to another branch of the family, for Loring's engagement to Sonia Dainton was announced. But by that time, as Arden pointed out, a man had only himself to blame if he did not know all that was to be known of Lady Barbara Neave.

"How poor Jim must loathe all this self-advertising," said Jack Waring, when he met Arden at the County Club to discuss the engagement. "I've never even seen her, but I've had *her* and her *hats* and her *clothes* thrust under my eyes by these infernal papers till I'm sick of them. She's talented, she's charming. I know all the things she said to all the big pots in India. When she is twenty-one she comes in for all her godfather's money on condition that she marries a Catholic.... I suppose there must be a public for this kind of stuff, or the papers wouldn't print it; but she's on the level of a musical-comedy star. Arden, my lad, I'm an old man, but I swear people had a little more dignity and restraint in my young days. The one good thing about the court mourning is that she doesn't get so much opportunity for her antics."

"She'll emerge again, when it's over," Arden predicted. "Meanwhile, London is becoming very tiresome. Has life lost its savour? Are we growing old? One would give much for the tonic of a good scandal."

"There'll be no lack of that," Jack prophesied, "judging from the people I see in London nowadays."

CHAPTER THREE THE SPIRIT OF PAN

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"A maid too easily
Conceits herself to be
Those things
Her lover sings;
And being straitly wooed,
Believes herself the Good
And Fair
He seeks in her."

FRANCIS THOMPSON: "ANY SAINT."

"D'you remember once saying that you wanted the tonic of a good scandal?" asked Jack Waring one night three years later. "It was soon after King Edward's death."

"And we were all very respectable and dull." Valentine Arden roused from sleep, blinked at the clock and rang for a whiskey and soda. "One recalls it. There is a difference between court mourning and the second coming of Christ, but the English are the last people in the world to recognize it. And there is a difference between taking a tonic and being pelted to death with medicine bottles. Since those days one scans the paper each morning to see what new reputations have been lost. Who has made the latest Roman holiday?"

"Oh, it's this old business about your friend Barbara Neave."

Jack threw the paper to Arden and took up another in which he could read, with insignificant verbal changes, a second and equally gratifying account of his own prowess in the Court of Appeal that day. Three years earlier he had talked to Eric Lane of abandoning his unproductive criminal work on circuit; he now wondered whether he dared abandon circuit work altogether and concentrate on his London practice. After, perhaps, six years more he would be wondering whether to risk his whole practice by applying for silk. Success was none the less gratifying because he had backed his own determination against the disparaging anticipations of his friends. Jack knew as well as any one that he was not a great lawyer; but natural shrewdness gained him a reputation for sound judgement; slowness passed for caution; and the inelasticity which saved him from seeing all round a case was reinforced by an obstinate refusal to let go the single point which he had grasped. More than one over-astute witness in those three years had entered the box with assurance and left it in dismay.

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Only those who had known him longest wondered occasionally whether his practice had not been bought at the price of his soul. The plea of work and a ponderous affectation of age excused him from any effort to widen his interests. As old a friend as Eric Lane was allowed to drop out of his life; he refused to enter a new house and on one pretext or another reduced the number of the old, until any time that he could spare from work was divided between his club and his home in the country. At the first his friends were at liberty to visit him, if they chose; but he was obviously happier with the two Chancery silks and the one Indian judge, all of them twice his age, in whose company he dined nightly. And the influence of Red Roofs was even more lamentable on a man who was born self-centred and opinionated; Mrs. Warning and Agnes idolized and spoiled him, the colonel crystallized an intolerant conservatism of ideas which was better justified as the mature experience of a middle-aged soldier and country gentleman than as the untried prejudice of a thirty-year-old barrister. "A man may be a prig or a bore or both," said Pentyre at a time of temporary estrangement, "but he needn't be so infernally pleased with himself about it." The school of sport and fashion which Jack had once led at Oxford entertained the same feeling, if it expressed it with more disappointment and less candour.

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"The coroner would seem to have spoken with visible emotion," commented Arden, trying to disguise his relish as he read the paper which Jack had thrown to him. "One wishes one had stayed to the end."

"I've no doubt she'll try to use it as another advertisement," Jack grunted. "What her unfortunate people must think... *And* what the younger generation is coming to. It's a good thing for Jim that he's being spared all this."

"Yet he also has unselfishly contributed to the general diversion," said Arden.

Three years had passed since Sonia Dainton delighted her friends by becoming engaged to Loring, and two since she astonished them by breaking off the engagement. He had at once gone abroad and was reported to be still cruising aimlessly in the East. The social ghouls had hardly sated themselves with gossip, when Webster entangled himself with the proprietress of a dancing academy and was constrained to pay damages for breach of promise; and, while this case was still being discussed, Jack Summertown proceeded to occupy the press for three days with an enquiry into a series of minor outrages inflicted on an unpopular brother officer. Valentine Arden sat through the whole variety programme, unamused and detached, watching his friends succumbing one after another to epidemic madness. "The spirit of Pan is abroad," he explained gravely.

Lady Barbara Neave had flitted on the outskirts of each new scandal; but, since her flying accident, she had contributed no scandal of her own.

For the first year of the three she opened her social circuit as comprehensively as an unfledged barrister. Lady Crawleigh carried her from Milford to Kenworth, from Warmslow to Lenge and from Cheniston to Granlake. Lady Barbara's interest in social analysis was roused and fed by her tour of the great houses; they required a technique different from the absolutism of Government House and the unaided personal ascendancy of London; and, if she remained unabsorbed into the new atmosphere, at least she returned to Crawleigh Abbey with a mature country-house philosophy and clear-cut ideas of what to avoid and extrude from her own parties. The second year was devoted to romantic exploration. At the end of the court mourning she met a pleasant undistinguished soldier on furlough and chose, for no better reason—so far as her parents could see—than that he was already married, to fancy herself in love with him. Their few meetings—and still more their emotional parting—convinced at least the theatrical side of her temperament that she had broken her heart in a hopeless passion. Always thin, she artistically allowed herself to waste. For twelve teeming months she passively accepted the worship of all who were

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intrigued by her attitude of mystery and unresponsiveness; then native impatience broke through the unconvincing crust of cynicism, and she returned to London in a dangerous state of expectancy and unsatisfied excitement. In the absence of an overt scandal, her father hoped that she was sobered from the tomboy who had spread devastation through his three viceregal terms of office; the lesser optimists opined that she was only awaiting adequate opportunity.

Disaster overtook her in the summer of 1913; and, whatever other criticism was made, no one could deny that she won notoriety in the grand manner. The facts, as disclosed in court, revealed that Sir Adolf Erckmann had given a ball at his house in Westbourne Terrace. Lady Barbara decided within a few minutes of her arrival that the party was over-crowded and tiresome. Finding her slave Webster unoccupied, she suggested that he should drive her to another dance in the country and return to Westbourne Terrace when the congestion had been relieved. As his own car was gone home, they explored the line until the unknown chauffeur of some one else's car was persuaded to take them to Rickmansworth, wait half an hour and bring them back. Lady Barbara promised that there should be no awkward consequences, if they were discovered; Webster substantiated her guarantee with a five-pound note; and, by the time that they had further cajoled him with a stimulating supper of champagne and cutlets, the driver's last reluctance was overcome.

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The story was liberally punctuated with questions on the general propriety of a girl's bribing a strange chauffeur and stealing an unknown car, with comments, too, on the dignity of their carrying a bottle of champagne and a plate of cutlets into the middle of Westbourne Terrace. There followed a digression to discover how much had been consumed; Lady Barbara and Webster asserted unshakably that the chauffeur was sober and that, if his driving became erratic at any point, this was due to his admitted ignorance of the route.

While the question of sobriety was left in suspense, the expedition was reconstructed to the moment when the car reached a fork in the road and the chauffeur turned to Webster and asked "Right or left, sir?" Examined on the question of speed, Lady Barbara was sure that they were not going more than fifteen or twenty miles an hour; twenty-five at the outside, Webster conceded unwillingly; they could not see the speedometer. It was suggested, however, that they must have calculated how long the double journey would take; they had even noticed when the car started and when it stopped; a damaging calculation shewed that their average pace was thirty-seven miles an hour and that, if they drove slowly out of London, they must have reached forty-five or fifty miles an hour in the country. And they had not told the man to moderate his pace; it even seemed that they had encouraged him to drive faster.

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At the fork in the road Webster called out, "To the right, I think"; then he saw that he was mistaken and shouted, "No! the left." In trying to change direction, the chauffeur drove into a wedge-shaped brick wall and was instantly killed. Lady Barbara and her companion escaped with a severe shaking and a few scratches from the broken glass of the wind-screen; the front of the car was smashed beyond repair.

The accident took place in open country without a house in sight. As soon as they saw that the driver was dead, Lady Barbara spread her cloak over the crushed head and broken face; Webster's nerve was gone, and she left him, whimpering, to guard the body, while she went in search of help. An early market-cart came to their rescue, and they rumbled slowly back to London, shivering in their thin clothes and glancing over their shoulders at a pair of twisted legs in black gaiters, which protruded stiffly from beneath a blood-stained cloak.

The news swept through London in the evening papers, and Lady Barbara was inundated next day with enquiries and messages of sympathy. So grudging a critic as Jack Waring contended warmly at the County Club that, apart from her silliness in rushing away to the country in the middle of the night and borrowing a car without leave, she was really not to blame; and it was a dreadful experience for any girl. By comparison with Webster she had kept her head and behaved very properly, taking the body straight to a hospital, communicating with the widow, making herself personally responsible for a liberal pension and undertaking to replace the shattered car. Before night two papers had published sympathetic interviews with her, reproducing in her own not undramatic words the abrupt transition from a careless drive to violent death, the slow passage of a funeral procession between barren grey fields, the silence and desolation of the night, the early-morning chill which beat on her unprotected arms and shoulders and the haunting sense of helplessness which dominated every other feeling. Inset was one photograph of her in evening dress and another with hollow cheeks and big ghostly eyes, in the subdued black frock which she had worn to receive her interviewers; for these Jack blamed the notorious vulgarity of the Press.

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Admiration changed again to pity when the inquest opened. Sonia Dainton, who attended as an act of friendship, reported that the coroner was underbred and ill-tempered; Lady Maitland, who felt no curiosity but did not want Barbara to think that her friends were deserting her, added that he was a natural bully; and the Duchess of Ross, who hated any unpleasantness and only went—with Lord Poynter, Mrs. Shelley and Val Arden—to give the girl confidence, brought back word that, to the best of his ability and the utmost of his despotic functions, he was resolved to humiliate Lady Barbara, to discredit her associates and, without respect of persons, to put such a brand on her family and herself that they would never again dare to shew themselves among decent men and women. The witness learned on the first day that she was a pampered and spoiled child; *blasée* and restless, she would do anything for a new excitement; with that absence of rudimentary decorum which some people appeared to think "smart," she had lawlessly

appropriated a car—the coroner wondered what she would think if any one took one of her father's cars "just for a joke"—she had helped to make the driver intoxicated, thereby shewing characteristic disregard for the safety of mere ordinary people who might also want to use the road; she or her companion—was it usual for a girl to ride about at night unattended in this way?—had incited the chauffeur to drive at a reckless rate of speed. And the price of this prank—the momentary diversion of the Lady Barbara Neave, daughter of the Marquis of Crawleigh, one time Governor-General of Canada, Viceroy of India and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland—was the hideous death of a man who left behind him a widow and four small children. Lady Barbara, who naturally thought that money paid for everything, was graciously and of her abundance trying to compute the dead man's cash value to his wife. The hearing was adjourned for a week, as Mr. Webster was indisposed by the shock of the accident.

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Had the coroner been inspired by malice, he could not have waged a deadlier warfare than by taking three days for the inquest and allowing intervals of a week for the case to be discussed. The stream of sympathy ran dry; and, if no one criticized Lady Barbara to her face, every one chattered about the enquiry and took his time from the coroner. Repenting his precipitate tolerance, Jack Waring told the two Chancery silks and the Indian judge that it was absurd for Crawleigh to say that the man was abusing his position and stirring up class prejudice; when one looked back over the last few years, one remembered a dozen things which Lady Barbara had been allowed to do for no better reason than that she was Lady Barbara Neave; but a line had really to be drawn somewhere. If Crawleigh disliked having mud thrown at him in public, he should exercise his authority with the girl; her friends were wholly impossible....

By the time that Webster was well enough to give evidence, the tide was in flood against him. The breach of promise case was fresh in the public mind; and, if it could not relevantly be brought up against him, it had at least familiarised his appearance and history and made a dark background to his examination. Mr. Webster was a young man; he did not work for his living, as he had considerable private means; in fact, he had nothing to do except to spend money and amuse himself. Pressed to state what good he was effecting for himself or the world at large, he could only say that he was interested in the theatre and fond of motoring—another instance of this small, rich, insistent class whose social importance varied in inverse ratio as its public usefulness. Put shortly, his object in life was to kill time, to avoid boredom.

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The story of the night drive was rehearsed a second time, as the coroner wished to know who had proposed it; and the suspended question of the driver's sobriety was brought up for retrial. A bottle of champagne had been mentioned; had Mr. Webster and Lady Barbara partaken of it in their idyllically democratic picnic? Mr. Webster had dined at his club; could he remember what he had drunk with his dinner? His bill would no doubt shew that.

On the second adjournment a sordid note had been introduced, alienating the last sympathisers and sinking a tragedy in a drunken frolic. No one acquainted with Webster would associate him with a temperate life; those who saw him for the first time in court with twitching hands, a puffy face and flickering eyelids drew their own conclusions. If it was a shock to look at Lady Barbara and to hear it suggested that she, too, had been hardly accountable for her actions, the shock was not wholly displeasing to those who believed in the rottenness of so-called "society."

"They say I've murdered the man," she whispered to her father, as she left the court. "They've made the foulest insinuations about Fatty Webster and me. Now they say I drink. There's not much left, is there? I shouldn't be surprised if the people in the street hooted me."

Lord Crawleigh chewed his blonde, viking moustache and hurried her across the pavement into a closed car. He had never been present at an inquest before; and a voice had murmured that the coroner was working for a verdict of manslaughter. A nondescript crowd, dotted with cameras, waited in a half-circle outside the court; it was curious, but at present it was silent. Valentine Arden paused at the door and ostentatiously raised his hat. He, too, would not have been surprised to hear hooting; and he was disappointed to have no vivid contrast for his gesture of chivalry. He wondered whether Lady Barbara was missing the hostile demonstration; it would have been a new sensation....

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On the third day she appeared once more in a black hat and dress and sat with her veil up, waiting for the verdict and the coroner's comments. Arden decided that she was modelling herself on Marie Antoinette and hoped that she would be given an opportunity of speaking. At the end, the jury found that death was due to misadventure; the reporters closed their note-books, and Lord Crawleigh reached for his hat. Arden left at once for fear of spoiling his earlier effect by repetition, but the evening papers reported the invective of the coroner in full.

"I suggest to the representatives of the press that it is their duty to give the widest publicity to this case. In an experience which goes back for a good many years now, I have never regretted so bitterly that I have no power to punish those who by wanton carelessness or evil disposition contribute to the death of a man or woman as surely as if they had killed him with their own hands. We have had an illuminating picture of the life and habits of some of those who traditionally expect us to look up to them for an example. If these people are too idle or vicious or brainless to live a life which shall be of use to the community, there should at least be power to restrain them from becoming a source of public danger. The proper treatment for such incipient hooligans and reformatory children is the birch-rod: I wish I had authority to order it. Rank and wealth can only be defended if they impose obligations: to these bright ornaments of the leisured classes they only afford opportunities. There has been far too much of this kind of thing lately, and I hope I shall never again be required to deal with so disgraceful a case. These young

hobbledehoys, unchecked by any domestic discipline, unrestrained by common decency, owing no obligation to any one, a law unto themselves, are a new and poisonous growth in our social life. They fulfil no useful purpose, there is no room for them." [Pg 68]

"There was a hostile demonstration in the street," Arden announced, as he came to the end of the report.

"How she must have enjoyed it!" grunted Jack.

"One wishes one had stayed to the end. The court was not unlike a gala night at Covent Garden. You have read the descriptions of the dresses? No?"

"All this only encourages her," Jack pointed out. "I'm about the one man in London who's succeeded in not meeting her, but, if there's ever a revolution, that young woman will have done more than any one else to bring it about. And she'll be photographed getting into the tumbrel; and some one will interview her on the scaffold. On my honour, I can't see what amusement she gets out of it."

"Emotion, drama, limelight, romance," Arden suggested. "Lady Barbara may be sure that every one in London is talking about her at this moment; London is her stage."

"Well, she'll have to retire from it after this," said Jack.

"She will re-emerge," Arden prophesied.

Both predictions were fulfilled before the end of the summer. Lord Crawleigh held his hand until the inquest was over, because he could not trust himself to deal even justice while the offence was fresh. For three weeks he was equally indifferent to Lady Barbara's tragic attitude, the sympathy of friends and the infamies of a hostile press: more than one anonymous letter reached him, to be read with a frown and silently filed with the documents in the case; and it was reported that a reference to his family had crept into the patter of a music-hall comedian. In the rich silence of a choleric and expressive man the nerves of family and retainers stretched to breaking-point.

On the morrow of the verdict he assembled his wife and children in the library, rehearsed the charges against Lady Barbara and made known his will. Henceforward she was to go nowhere unless attended by her mother, one of her brothers or her maid. The family would proceed to Crawleigh Abbey that day and would remain there until further notice. The ball which Lady Crawleigh was giving would be cancelled; his daughter was to refuse all invitations already accepted and to accept no more. At the end of the season she would stay in no house unless one at least of her parents accompanied her. [Pg 69]

As he ended, Lady Barbara stole a glance round the hushed library. Her three brothers were silent and submissive; her mother helpless and pained, like an "honest broker" who saw the nations of the world flying at one another's throats, when she had exhausted herself to keep the peace; her father's eyes were burning, and he dragged at one side of his moustache as though he were trying to tear it out by the roots. In every altercation, great and small, Lady Barbara had to fight single-handed.

"But, father, you seem to think this was my *fault!*" she cried in bewilderment.

Lord Crawleigh handed his wife a paper with fingers that trembled.

"Here are the dates and trains," he said. "You will go to the Abbey by the 4.10 from Waterloo. I shall join you at the end of the session." He turned to his daughter without trusting himself to face her dark, reproachful eyes. "I contemplate taking you to Raglan in August and House of Steynes in September, if your aunts see fit not to withdraw your invitation——"

"But how long is this going on?" Lady Barbara interrupted.

"I cannot permit any discussion," he answered in something that was half a whisper and half a sigh.

Lady Barbara looked at him reflectively and went to her room. When she came of age, in little more than a year's time, he would have no means of coercing her. Without waiting a year she could go to Harry Manders and demand to be given a part; he had offered her one in her own duologue. But the tension of the last three weeks and the dazing examination and attack at the inquest had left her uncertain of herself. A day or two at the Abbey, even though she were snatched away in the middle of the season, would give her time to find her bearings and discover what people really thought of her. [Pg 70]

The more she pondered, the deeper grew her bewilderment. If all had gone well, the dash to Rickmansworth and back would have been regarded as a wholly innocent diversion in the course of a tiresome evening; on her return every one else would have regretted that he had not come too; even the borrowing of the car was venial, for the owner refused to accept any compensation, though the insurance company might well make difficulties; even he regarded the expedition as a joke, which had unhappily turned to tragedy, and was far sorrier that Lady Barbara should have been upset than that the chauffeur should have been killed.

If the facts, then, were innocent, she was being persecuted by the coroner and threatened with persecution by society at large for an accident to which she had contributed nothing. The

chauffeur was sober enough to drive through dense traffic on the Harrow Road; Webster—she remembered his words—had looked at his watch and said through the speaking-tube, "You can let her out a bit now, I should think. We don't want to keep you out too long." The charge that any one of them was drunk would have been more insulting if it had been less grotesque. And for this the coroner had suggested that she should be ostracized. And her simple-minded father imagined that there were other simple-minded souls who would take such a Jack-in-office at his own pontifical valuation.

She almost hoped that they would, so that she might force them in triumph to acknowledge her innocence. To start as an outcast and win her way back was a dramatic dream which almost made her wish that she was guilty. To become an outcast might be as dramatic as to rise from obscurity to a pinnacle of fame.... Napoleon owed half his place in history to St. Helena.

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An undistracted fortnight at the Abbey cooled Lady Barbara's resentment and checked the more romantic flights of her imagination. Her father's judgement was clearly at fault; to run away was to admit herself in the wrong. By the time that she had got herself into perspective, the season was so near its end that she did not think it worth while to make a demonstration and to occupy her room in Berkeley Square by force. But the late summer and autumn lay before her, and, when her father came to the Abbey for a week-end in July, she informed him that she had not yet cancelled any of her arrangements for staying with friends.

"You will remain here till we go to the Riviera in February," he answered.

"But, father, I'm not going to. This is quite serious. I've been here a month without seeing a soul; I should go mad, if I had to vegetate for another seven months. If you won't let me go, I'm afraid I must go without your leave."

"That may not be as easy as you think."

"What d'you mean?"

Lord Crawleigh unlocked a red leather despatch-box, turned over his files and produced a sheet of paper which he spread before her.

"This is a copy of a cable which your cousin has sent to his mother from Surinam. I had intended taking you to House of Steynes, but that is out of the question now."

"Please arrange that Barbara and her friend are not admitted to my house. This applies to Monmouthshire and Scotland as well as London."

Lady Barbara handed back the paper and tried to laugh, but she knew that her expression was out of control. If the news had reached Surinam, it had reached every cable-station on the way; and the operators had hardly done feasting themselves on the inquest before a message, signed "Loring" and mentioning her by name, added a dainty titbit to the savoury repast. Sooner or later it would be common property that her own cousin had slammed his door in her face for fear of contamination; the family would be divided into those who knew her and those who publicly refused to know her; she would become a test-case for disreputability.

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"Jim has his own standards of loyalty, hasn't he?" she commented and was infuriated to find her voice trembling. "He's usually so keen on the family that I shouldn't have thought he'd have wanted to take the whole world into his confidence. One good thing, he can't call *me* self-advertising after this. Have you seen the darling boy's mother? Is she—*proud* of him over this?"

"She was as much shocked as I was that you should have made it necessary."

"I? Father, you can't make me responsible for *this*. But is she proud of his chivalry? And I suppose *you* didn't make a fight for me? I must see her. I want to tell her about the accident." She pressed her hands to cheeks which were still hollow from the anxiety of the last two months and looked at her father over her finger-tips. "I'd never seen any one killed before, I'd never seen a dead body; and I couldn't sleep at night, because of it. I kept seeing that unhappy woman's face, too, when I had to tell her that her husband was dead. I didn't ask for sympathy, but I thought perhaps my own father and mother might have seen that I wasn't exactly—enjoying myself, that I was ill, worried out of my mind. If *I* had a daughter, I should have felt for her, I think, when a foul-mouthed little reptile hinted that she was *drunk* and that her *lover* had helped her kill an innocent man for her own amusement. Never a word! Do you know that for three weeks you only said 'Good-morning' to me, father? Even if I was guilty a hundred times over, it wouldn't have compromised you to be sorry that I was suffering. I don't complain. You at least left me alone. But Jim waits till I'm beaten to my knees, waits till I'm bleeding—and then hits wherever he can see a bruise or wound. That *wasn't* necessary, father."

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Lord Crawleigh rearranged his papers without answering. He was himself so much humiliated by his nephew's cable that he had hardly thought how it might affect Barbara. She was always most formidable when she stood, as now, with drooping head, composed and subdued, speaking in an undertone and rejecting in advance any sympathy that he might belatedly offer her. She had learned in childhood to fight men with their own weapons and to fall back on her sex when the battle was going against her. He had seen her trading on pathos a hundred times with her mother and aunts, using to full advantage a pose of tired frailty, a wistful mouth and big eyes which filled with tears at will or flashed black with indignation; she could droop her head and body until she looked like a tortured martyr, or cough until she looked consumptive. Almost certainly she was acting now, but her passion for romance and a dramatic impact led her to act

without knowing it.

"If you had behaved properly, this would not have happened," he threw out with weak, inconsequent irritability.

"It's too late now. Are you going to House of Steynes? Do you allow people to say that they'll be glad to see you on condition you don't bring your daughter with you? And will you invite Amy and Aunt Eleanor here to meet somebody who can't be admitted to their house?"

Lord Crawleigh had enough imagination to see the more obvious consequences of his nephew's ultimatum; but he could not devise an effective reply, and it was merely exasperating to have his own disadvantage explored and stated by Barbara.

"I talked to your aunt. She says she daren't go against Jim's wishes. After all, they're his houses. She's writing to him——" [Pg 74]

"To intercede for me?" Lady Barbara interrupted scornfully. "When next I enter House of Steynes, it will be on his invitation. And, before I allow him to invite me, he will apologize."

"It's no use taking *that* line," cried her father testily. Her last two sentences had exceeded the probable limits of sincerity, and he swooped before she could escape into a convincing pathos. "If *any one* ought to apologize——"

Lady Barbara caught sight of her reflection, full-length, in a mirror, with her father fidgetting at her side. He looked insignificant, almost ridiculous, with his domed forehead and straggling blonde moustache, his short body and long legs. She wanted to make him see himself and to play up to their two reflections like Metternich and L'Aiglon in the mirror scene.

"I can only apologize for the fact of my existence," she sighed. "I was *not* responsible, father, and you know it. And, instead of standing up for your own daughter, you let her be insulted. I can't do anything with people who stab in the back, but I'm ready to meet every one! I *will* meet them. If they want to insult me, they can insult me to my face."

The embargo on Lady Barbara's presence only extended to the houses controlled by her cousin. In August she went to stay with Lady Knightrider in Raglan and was received with demonstrative affection. A gentle reaction had set in, inspired directly by Lord Crawleigh and aided by all who felt that Jim Loring's precipitous cable had placed the family in an intolerable position. Working in a sympathetic atmosphere, Lady Barbara enlisted her aunt's support in a campaign which was to rehabilitate her or at least to shew whether she stood in need of rehabilitation. As soon as they returned to London for the autumn, Lady Knightrider undertook to give a dance and to insist that Lady Loring and Amy should come; if Jim were home by then, she would make him come, too, and the whole ridiculous quarrel would be forgotten. Lady Barbara intended to go farther than the settlement of a family difference. The party should be a challenge to all who felt disposed to criticise her; she was determined to appear side by side with Webster and to give them their opportunity; and any one who declined to come would have to shew convincing justification for his refusal. [Pg 75]

The invitations were sent out six weeks in advance; Lady Knightrider reasoned with those who made excuses, sent reminders to those who had accepted and surrounded herself with a staff of energetic lieutenants.

"*You're* coming on, Val, aren't you?" asked George Oakleigh distractedly on the night of the ball, as he prowled hungrily through the County Club with a list in his hand. He had undertaken to bring six men and was bribing them beforehand with dinner.

"A doubt has crept in," Arden replied uncertainly. "One invitation may be attributed to hospitality; four suggest panic."

"Well, if there are too few men, you'll be all the more popular; if there are too many, you can go home early. Gerry, I'm counting on you."

Deganway paused for an instant on his way to the cloak-room.

"My dear, I wouldn't miss it for anything."

Oakleigh added a tick to his list and hurried after Jack Waring. They were still disputing, when Eric Lane was announced.

"I don't dance, I can't talk and I want to go to bed," said Jack firmly.

"You can go after half an hour," Oakleigh promised.

"Well, I'll come for one cigar, if Eric comes too. I'm an old man, George; I haven't been to a ball for ten years."

At eleven o'clock Oakleigh convoyed them securely into the drawing-room of Lady Knightrider's house in South Street. By the test of numbers the dance promised well, for the house was already crowded and Lady Barbara's relations were in full attendance. Her triumph was left incomplete by the absence of Webster, but he had been snubbed more than once in the last few months and was waiting for time to heal his reputation. She had spent the afternoon arguing with him until she felt her dignity compromised, and the embers of her ill-humour smouldered through the night. [Pg 76]

By prearrangement Jack escaped to the smoking-room for a cigar, while Eric unbosomed himself of news which had been choking him for three days; Harry Manders had accepted a play, which was to be produced in the following autumn; after eight years of disappointment the daydream was being realized. They were still bandying congratulations and thanks, when the smoking-room was invaded by Deganway and a girl.

"Isn't that the famous Lady Barbara Neave?" Eric whispered.

Jack half turned and shook his head.

"Don't ask me. I'm shortly starring at the Halls as the one man in the world who doesn't know her and doesn't want to. I think it must be, all the same. Gerry seems to be getting called over the coals for something."

Lady Barbara's annoyance with Webster was spending itself on Deganway. There were long silences, broken by deferential squeaks of small-talk from him and restored by petulant rejoinders from her. She treated her companion with a contempt that was almost insolent and jumped restlessly to her feet, as the band began to tune up. Deganway hurried after her to the door, and the calm of the smoking room was only disturbed by half-heard music and the sound of high, rapid voices on the stairs. As his second cigar burnt low, Jack looked at his watch and beckoned Eric from his chair.

"Come and say good-bye; then you can drop me at the club," he suggested.

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They steered a tortuous and apologetic course through the couples seated on the stairs and looked hopelessly for Lady Knightrider. In their absence the drawing-room had filled to overflowing, and the landings and balconies were packed to the limit of their capacity. As the next dance started, Deganway entered, blinking in the light, from one of the open French windows; Lady Barbara was still with him, but, as the music began, she was claimed and taken away.

"First time I've ever seen you indulging in frivolities like this, Jack," he said, letting fall his eye-glass and hunting for his cigarette-case.

"Well, I don't dance, and the conventional alternative is to talk to young women," answered Jack. "I confess that I can imagine less dreary pastimes—for both."

"That depends on the woman. I've spent most of the evening with Babs Neave. My dear, there's plenty of excitement in talking to *her*! Care to meet her?"

"I'm going home as soon as I've found Lady Knightrider," Jack answered.

"It'd pay you to talk to her for a bit. Let me introduce you! She's awful good fun—doesn't care a damn what she says or does——"

"That's her general reputation," interrupted Jack.

"Oh, you mustn't believe everything you hear about her. She's quite all right *really*; awful nice girl. Let me introduce you!"

Jack shook his head and took Eric by the arm.

"My dear Deganway, I've no doubt she's everything you say, but I don't care a great lot for the Websters and Penningtons and Welmans and Erckmanns and all that gang that she goes about with. They're such devilish bad style. Good-night."

Deganway grinned maliciously.

"I've a good mind to tell her what you said. Do her no end of good. And I should get a bit of my own back after the way she's been ragging me."

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They stood talking by the door until the music stopped. Then Jack and Eric turned and went downstairs, while Deganway sidled up to Lady Barbara.

"No, you're tiresome to-night," she told him, when he asked for another dance. "Who are those two going out? I don't know them."

"The fair one's Jack Waring——"

"Well, I should like to know him," Lady Barbara interrupted. "I'm tired of everybody."

Deganway hurried obediently out of the room and returned a moment later with a smirk of satisfaction.

"Try again, Babs," he suggested. "Waring's not taking any."

"Do talk intelligibly, Gerry!"

"Well, I told him *before* that he ought to meet you. I said what good fun you were and what he was missing and all that sort of thing——"

Lady Barbara shivered at the blunt catalogue of her charms.

"What did he say?"

By natural compensation Deganway atoned for certain defects of intelligence by an excellent power of mimicry. He gave not only Jack's lilt and phraseology, but his facial changes and rather prim, tight-lipped smile.

"I tried him again," he added, "but he said he *must* go to bed. I don't believe he wanted to meet you."

Lady Barbara smiled composedly, but the brusque rebuff, brusquely quoted, wounded her pride as nothing had done since Jim's cable. Some one had taken up the challenge, as she had feared—or hoped.

"Sorry he's so hard to please," she answered lightly. "You can give me some supper, if you like. Who and what is he? A candid critic is so rare that I should quite like to meet him."

CHAPTER FOUR

APHRODITE DEMI-MONDAINE

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"What rage for fame attends both great and small!
Better be d—d than mentioned not at all!"

JOHN WOLCOTT: "TO THE ROYAL ACADEMICIANS."

"The Princess Juanita dawned upon respectability like Aphrodite rising from the gutters."

According to Mrs. Shelley, as quoted by Eric to George Oakleigh and the author, this was the opening sentence of Valentine Arden's "New Jerusalem," and she had given a luncheon party on the strength of it. Since her husband's death, Eric had edged gently away from her self-conscious artistic menagerie; he had been recaptured for a moment after the Coronation, when his father was knighted for "eminent services to the study of Anglo-Saxon" and he could himself be introduced as "the son of Sir Francis Lane, you know"; and it was no sooner hinted that a play of his had been accepted by Harry Manders than she dragged him back into his cage with a tacit order to stay there until his public interest was exhausted.

It was Mrs. Shelley's practice to read every book of importance on the day of publication; it was her ambition to know all about it before it was written. The new satire, she informed her guests, had engaged Arden's energies for two years and presented a picture of London society under the empire of Sir Adolf Erckmann and the cosmopolitans; the forces of respectability had not escaped the impartial lash of his ridicule, and almost every character was a portrait. Mrs. Welman waltzed unmistakably over the glittering pages with Sir Deryk Lancing; Lord Pennington, Jack Summertown and the Baroness Kohnstadt flitted from place to place like the chorus of a musical comedy, and every scandal of the last ten years was described or mentioned. If the book were ever published, Mrs. Shelley was convinced that the heavens would rain writs for libel; certainly no one would continue to know the author. She had reasoned with him, but he was apparently tired of London and contemplated impressing his personality on New York.

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While no one was secure, Eric gathered that the greatest speculation surrounded the identity of "Princess Juanita." Mrs. Shelley maintained that the character must be intended for Sonia Dainton, who had joined the Erckmann faction when she broke off her engagement with Loring; Lady Maitland, who was still smarting in the belief that Arden had sketched her for his earlier "Madame Chasserese-de-Lions," had no doubt that he was now squirting his poison at Lady Barbara Neave. "A man like that," she told Mrs. Shelley, "would never waste time on a commoner like Sonia Dainton when he could besmirch the daughter of a marquess and tickle his wretched provincial audience by calling her a princess." Her bitter words were repeated to the author, who announced that he was giving his book the sub-title "Commoner and Commoner," and dedicating it to Lady Maitland. Only when he was tired of his friends' good advice did he admit that the satire existed but in his imagination.

"One is taken altogether too literally," he complained to his friends in the smoking-room of the Thespian Club. "A grim, cultured hostess, spectacled young poets having their own poems explained to them by Lady Poynter, a dinner which one ate and tried to forget, furtive confidences on the wine from Lord Poynter, a succession of *longueurs*—you see the scene? Chelsea.... Earnestness.... Ill-assortment.... Without any wish to *épater le bourgeois*, one played with an idea, developed it, invented characters, let fall a phrase.... Perhaps one has allowed good Sir Adolf to obsess one's mind.... It was not a remarkable phrase; but one could hardly have caused a greater stir if one had telegraphed anonymously to one's friends—"Fly. All is known." Lady Knight rider almost offered one a blank cheque to stop publication. A *jeu d'esprit* must be labelled before it is offered to the English."

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"Well, I'm glad the book's not going to be published," said Oakleigh. "That little gang's had quite enough advertisement without any help from you."

"One hates to disappoint Lady Barbara," answered Arden reflectively. "Undeniably she compels a reluctant admiration. She has lived in three continents—in regal state; she has met every one and

done everything; in her leisure she has written plays, selected poetry, exhibited caricatures—not altogether contemptible—of her family and friends, patronized new schools of decoration, invented new fashions of dress and, as all the world knows, worn them. What remained? One met her first some years ago and asked oneself that question. It is still unanswered!"

"At present she's bolstering up two or three dozen people who are only received on the strength of her name," Oakleigh replied. "And she's going to find that her name isn't strong enough to carry them."

"These people go to her head," Arden replied with disgust. "One credited her with more detachment."

The campaign of rehabilitation had not been an unqualified success. Lady Knightrider aimed at reconciling Barbara with her relations rather than at reconciling her relations with her friends. There was an implied threat that she must choose one or the other; and a prevalent feeling was crystallized by Jack Waring, when he said that she was not worth knowing at the price of having to know her disorderly retinue. While she welcomed the concordat, Lady Barbara could not explain to Sir Adolf Erckmann that he was her fit companion one day and unfit the next; she might gently repel a cosmopolitan here and there, but she could not refuse all their invitations always; loyalty imposed its obligations, and stronger than loyalty was an impatient desire to tell other people to mind their own business. Yet the concordat might have endured, if the discussion of Arden's hypothetical book had not impelled Lady Knightrider hot-foot from Mrs. Shelley's house to his rooms at the Ritz. Not content with her legitimate relief at finding that "Princess Juanita" was no less a myth than "The New Jerusalem," she confided to Arden that dear Barbara *did* go about with "really rather dreadful people"; some one at her party had said that the girl's friends were such that he preferred not to know her. So long as she associated with them, it was only too probable that there would be another unpleasantness of some kind.

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"I really think it my duty," she said on leaving, "to drop a little hint to my sister."

The nods and winks of verbal warning are apt to take on an exaggerated significance when defined in black and white. On receipt of the letter Lord Crawleigh motored to London and opened a new commission of enquiry to investigate the personal desirability of his daughter's associates. If Lady Barbara was at first bewildered, she was in no way daunted, for in the endless intermingling of groups throughout London she could usually find a sponsor for the most draggled of her friends. Sir Adolf Erckmann's private life might lead him into the Divorce Court, he might even be the "vulgar, common fellow" that her father described, but he had dined in Berkeley Square as a member of Lord Crawleigh's Departmental Committee on Indian Currency Reform. Lady Crawleigh always went to the vulgar, common fellow's famous musical parties in Westbourne Terrace. Lady Barbara had originally met Mrs. Welman at a performance of "The School for Scandal," organized by Lady Maitland for charity, and had naturally accepted the implied guarantee; it was not against civil, canon or moral law for a woman to have been on the stage. Those who, like Webster, could not so easily be defended were pushed into the background. The battle of wits ceased to be amusing when Lord Crawleigh repeated his threat that Barbara would not be allowed to go anywhere unless she were suitably chaperoned. The dreary banishment at the Abbey lingered in her memory as a summer stolen out of her life. As her patience ebbed, she decided that there must be an end of these inquisitions.

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It was easy to trace her present plight through Lady Knightrider to Val Arden; but there was some one behind Arden, for her father claimed to have chapter and verse for saying that people were refusing to know her so long as she associated with her present friends. With a shock of surprise she recalled a self-satisfied young man who had in fact met her invitation to be introduced with a drawing, "Thanks very much. She may be all you say, but...."

It was incredible that one bumptious boy could do so much harm.... Even when the commission adjourned without arriving at an agreed report, Lady Barbara felt that a vendetta was being forced upon her....

She had no plan of campaign and knew nothing of her adversary but his name. Apart from Gerry Deganway she did not know of any one who was acquainted with him; and Deganway had done enough harm already without being given new opportunities. But, if the vendetta required resource, resource should be forthcoming. She called on Sonia Dainton the day after her father's inquisition and proposed that they should go for a drive. As the car entered the Park by Albert Gate, she pretended to recognize a face and said:

"Wasn't that Jack Waring?"

"I didn't see," Sonia answered.

"It was like him—though I don't know him to speak to."

"You'll find him very sticky. He's a great friend of your cousin Jim. When we were engaged, I used to see a certain amount of him. He's a heavy, Stone-Age creature; when he and Jim and George Oakleigh put their wise old heads together, there was nothing they wouldn't disapprove of!"

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"I hear he's been good enough to criticize *me*," said Lady Barbara carelessly.

"When he doesn't even know you? What did he say?" asked Sonia.

"Oh, what does it matter? Some one started a story the other day that I took drugs. Li Webster

heard a woman say, 'I was told by a friend who'd been to the same dressmaker; her arm was all red and pulpy; I believe she's been doing it for years and that's why she always wears long sleeves at night.' Have you *ever* seen me in long sleeves, Sonia. I've got much too good arms! And, if I wanted to take the beastly stuff, shouldn't I have it injected where it wouldn't show? I *did* want to meet that woman—just to tell her to use her brains. And, if I ever meet your friend Mr. Waring—"

"My dear, he's not *my* friend! I was asked down to Croxton for the hunt ball at the end of this month; I made Bobby Pentyre tell me who was going to be there and, when I saw Jack Waring's name, I said 'nothin' doin'.' I know those hunt balls! Vermilion men in pink coats.... Jack will be just in his element; he'll support a wall and tell everybody that he doesn't know any of 'these modern dances,' as though it were something to be proud of."

Lady Barbara laughed mechanically and sorted the new information into its appropriate pigeon-hole. She was dining and going to a play that night with Summertown and his sister; Sally Farwell's passion for Pentyre had become a habit, and, if he did not reciprocate her passion, he could hardly refuse her friend an invitation for the ball. Once within the same house as Jack Waring, she had decided nothing save that he could not be allowed to walk through the world with his nose in the air, saying that she or her friends were "bad style."

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A week later she arrived at Croxton Hall and explored the terrain for the engagement. Waring, she learned, came once a year into Buckinghamshire from old habit, because he had hunted with the Croxton from Oxford; he was returning to chambers by the breakfast-car train next day. She had few hours for making her effect; and they were further reduced when Jack drove up three-quarters of an hour late to find that the house-party was already dressed and busily adjusting its relationships. Lady Pentyre scrambled through half a dozen introductions in as many seconds and hurried her guests into the dining-room, without giving him time to dress or even to see who was there; Barbara, standing a little behind the others, escaped notice; and, when she found herself seated by prearrangement at his side, she had to introduce herself.

"I believe you're a great friend of Jim's," she began. "He's a cousin of mine, and I've often heard him speak of you."

Jack was already disconcerted by having to dine unwashed and in a tweed suit; and his embarrassment increased as he guessed at her identity. For a while he would only talk disjointedly of Jim Loring, varying his conversation with apologies for his tweed suit; he had been kept late with a consultation, and, when he began to change in the train, two women got in at Bletchley. Barbara fastened on the consultation and with deft questions encouraged him to talk about his work. She had sat next to so many shy young men at official dinners that she could put any one at his ease. At her prompting and wholly unconscious of it, Jack discoursed of the bar in general and his own practice in particular for three-quarters of the dinner and was agreeably surprised to find her so intelligent a listener.

"I oughtn't to be here, really," he confided. "I haven't the time or energy for this kind of thing, but the Croxton's an old love of mine, I've not missed a Croxton ball since I was at Oxford." He was tempted to describe his first Croxton ball; but it was a long story, and he discovered that he had been monopolizing the conversation. "You're a great dancer, I expect?" he said with the indulgence of early middle age. "I look forward to watching you to-night."

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Lady Barbara began to shake her head and then stopped with closed eyes and a bitten lip.

"I'm not going," she answered. "I've had such an awful headache all day."

"I'm so sorry! I don't dance myself, but I hoped you might spare me one or two for sitting out. If you're *interested* in law—the bar's by no means the dry-as-dust life some people think."

Talking to her was so easy that Jack had half determined to ask if he might have supper with her. Of the rest of the evening he could dispose comfortably enough by gossiping with old Gervaise, who had been in his father's regiment, and the other veterans of the hunt. Lady Pentyre never regarded him as a dancing man in making up her numbers. It would not be half so easy to find common ground with Sally Farwell or Grace Pentyre; without meaning to be unsympathetic, he felt that Lady Barbara might have chosen any other night of the year for her headache.

"It'll be better, when you get there," he prophesied encouragingly and wondered whether she would mistake his convenience for her own triumph. So far he had not looked at her, but he now stole a glance out of the corner of his eye and saw a straight, thin nose, haggard cheeks that had a pathetic fascination for him and a mouth which drooped wistfully; the lips were red, her eyes a velvet black, fringed with long black lashes and shaded with dark rings, changing colour and size like a cat's. The white, hollow cheeks combined with the dark eyes and red lips to suggest ravaging dissipation or ill-health; he would never be surprised to be told that she was consumptive. And he could not understand how any one so thin could be so attractive.

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She caught him watching her and forced a smile.

"I've only been doing rather too much lately, I expect," she said.

"That I can well believe. But after dinner—I say, have you had *anything* to eat?"

"I had some melon.... But I'm not very hungry. If I *don't* go, don't tell Aunt Kathleen—Lady Knightrider, you know—will you? She gave me this dress specially and she'd be so awfully

disappointed."

"Jolly dress," Jack answered, looking unanalytically at something which he could only remember afterwards as being generally black—with bits of silver here and there—and little transparent triangular pendants hanging down from shoulder to elbow. "I hope you'll be able to come."

"I shan't be able to dance," she sighed. "Every time I turn my head—Oo! I did it then! It's like a red-hot needle at the back of the eyes...." She picked up her gloves and held out a hand, as the butler announced that the cars were at the door. "I'll say good-night and good-bye. I hope you'll enjoy yourself. And I hope I've not been too unutterably boring."

Jack felt her hand pulling gently against his.

"When I'm trying to persuade you to come on with us?" he asked.

Lady Barbara shut her eyes in a second spasm of pain.

"Do you really want me to?"

"If you're up to it."

"I will, if you want me to," she promised.

For many years longer than Jack could remember, the Croxton Ball had taken place in the vast and half-derelict "King's Arms," once famous, with its long coffee-room and unlimited stabling, as the best posting-house in the county and the beginning of the last stage for coaches running from the east and northeast coast through Oxford to South Wales and the west. Once a year the dingy grey-stone hotel, filling one side of the market-place, blazed with unaccustomed light; and the barrack of stables behind awoke to welcome the procession of tightly-packed cars that explored their way with long white fingers down the broad, uneven village street.

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Jack changed his clothes and joined a shivering group by the fire in the Commercial Room. Lady Barbara was sitting apart, sniffing a bottle of salts and gently repelling those who tried to engage her for a dance.

"She oughtn't to have come," murmured Lady Pentyre, who neither understood nor forgave her son for this eleventh-hour addition. After the disgraceful episode of the poker-party, she had vowed never to have the girl in her house again; and these later scandals were no recommendation to leniency. But, before she could hint at her objections, she was told that the invitation had already been issued. "If she's beginning a chill or anything——"

Jack crossed to the distant chair and was welcomed with a smile.

"How nice you look in that coat!" Lady Barbara cried. "Are those the Croxton buttons?"

"Yes.... May I sit and talk, if you didn't have too much of me at dinner? I feel responsible for bringing you here, you know."

"But I love doing what people ask me! It's my greatest self-indulgence. When are they going to begin, and what's all the fuss about in the hall?"

A babble of angry voices floated through the open door—criticism, suggestions and conflicting orders. The Secretary came in frowning and snatched at all members of the Committee within reach.

"I'll never go to those people again!" he thundered. "After all these years, too. Band hung up on the road. Wrong train. They won't be here for half an hour!"

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A murmur of disappointment swelled through the room, eddying round the hall and rising from group to group on the stairs and in the ball-room.

Lady Barbara sat up alert, without any trace of headache or fatigue. The red lips were parted expectantly, with a gleam of small white teeth.

"I'll play!"

She darted from her chair, humming to herself and only pausing to crumple her scarf into a ball and to toss it with her gloves to Jack. He caught it mechanically, wonderingly. In a moment the grave-voiced girl with the tragic eyes and hint of consumption had transformed herself into something untamed, with shining eyes and irresponsible restlessness. He listened to her voice growing fainter on the stairs, then looked with some embarrassment at the crumpled scarf and gloves.

"Sometime, somehow, somewhere—
How should I know or care?—
It is written above
That fortune and love
Are waiting for me somewhere..."

The strict waltz rhythm was slightly modified to give scope to the voice; but no one had begun to dance when Jack went upstairs, and Lady Barbara had to break off and say:

"Do begin, some one!"

"We want to hear you sing," murmured a diffident voice.

"Rubbish! What d'you like? Ragtime? A waltz?"

"When you are in love,
All the world is fair;
Hearts are light with laughter gay;
Roses,—roses all the way..."

Bobby Pentyre and Sally Farwell edged through the door; Summertown and his partner followed, and within two minutes the room was three-quarters full. Jack squeezed his way forward for a better view. Lady Barbara played tirelessly, modulating from waltz to waltz, humming a line here, whistling two bars there, until the Master panted up to the piano and cried "time." She laughed and sat back on the music-stool, softly fingering the keys and looking round the ball-room to see who was there. Jack stood self-consciously stranded by the door, assuring himself of the line of his tie, pulling down his waistcoat and glancing at the hang of his knee-breeches. Her eyes met his, and she smiled.

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"Say when you want me to begin again," she called out.

"Give us just a moment," begged the Secretary.

She struck a chord and threw "Lord Rendel" at them with such tragic intensity that, at the end, Summertown raised a husky view-holloa of applause and the decorous group at the door clapped noiselessly. Jack always freely confessed that he knew nothing of music, but he felt bathed in delightful irresponsibility, as Lady Barbara mingled old English ballads with plantation songs and jolting ragtime with waltzes which seemed to draw his heart out of his body. She was gloriously free from self-consciousness. After two false starts, which were not lost on her, he crossed the room in the wake of a little party which went to beg for its favourite tunes.

"Awfully good of you to play like this," he said, as the others edged away. "I hope you're not making the headache worse?"

"I love making people happy." She stretched out her foot and pulled a chair beside her stool. "Tell me what you'd like me to play. D'you know "Deirdre of the Sorrows"? Not the play, but the waltz. Little O'Rane wrote it. You know him, I expect, he's a great friend of my cousin Jim." At the first chords of the waltz, couples from all round the room rose and began to dance. Jack threw one leg over the other and pushed his chair a short way back, faintly and belatedly embarrassed to find himself marooned on the dais by her side. "Mr. Waring—"

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"Yes?"

"I want to ask you one question. You needn't answer it, unless you like.... And then we'll leave it alone. I'm not as bad as you expected?"

Though he had warned himself at the beginning of dinner to be untiringly on his guard, Jack looked up with a start. She was absorbed in the music; her head was bowed, and she only raised it to glance with half-closed eyes at the dancers, occasionally concentrating on one couple and regulating her time by theirs.

"You've answered your own question. Rather inadequately," he added.

"Thank you ... I wish you danced! You're missing such a lot!"

"Am I? Lady Barbara, why on earth did you ask me that?"

Her head drooped lower over the keys.

"Because it hurt so!" she whispered tremulously. "Am I so vulgar?"

"Do you imagine you're quoting me?"

"Oh, Mr. Waring, be honest! You despised me before you met me. Do you now?"

"It's the last thing I should dream of doing."

"Well, wasn't it rather unfair—before you even knew me? It's done me a lot of harm ... and it hurt so terribly. If you were just to say you were sorry—?"

Her humility was so unexpected as to be bewildering.

"My dear Lady Barbara, I've only seen you once before!" he exclaimed. "I *did* say something about you then; I criticized the people you went about with, if you're referring to that."

"Then you don't despise *me*?"

"You're the greatest revelation I've ever had."

As the waltz quickened to the coda, a stout, flamboyant figure appeared in the doorway, attended by a sallow escort armed with music-cases and instruments. The Secretary ended a warm

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exchange of invective to cross the room and thank Lady Barbara. Refusing to give an encore to the waltz, she bowed to Jack and hurried out of the room.

Half-way down the stairs he overtook her and asked to be allowed to sit out the next dance with her.

"We can hardly leave it like this, can we?" he urged.

"Like what? I must get some air! My head will burst, if I don't!"

She ran across the hall, rattled at the door-handle and hurried into the Market Square. The December night air lashed him like a jet of icy water and cut through his clothes; thirty yards ahead, Lady Barbara was running with arms outstretched and jumping from side to side over the grey-black puddles of dull, frozen water. A group of chauffeurs by the village pound removed their pipes and watched her; then replaced them; then removed them a second time as a second figure, in pink coat and knee-breeches, pounded along the echoing street. Once she glanced back on hearing the sound of footsteps; then ran on without changing her pace. They had overshot the last house and were facing an unhedged expanse of roots and crisp furrows before he overtook her.

"I say, what *are* you doing?" he panted, angry at being made conspicuous by her aimless freak.

Lady Barbara pressed a hand to her side, breathing quickly. Her hair had blown into disorder, her bosom was rising and falling; and once she kicked off a shoe to caress a bruised foot, balancing herself with her other hand on his shoulder.

"Impulse," she answered.

By moonlight her eyes were black; and, as she panted gently, her parted lips and rounded cheeks made a child of her. It was at least her third incarnation since eight o'clock, but Jack had lost strict count. As she squeezed the pebble out of her shoe, he noticed the provocative whiteness of her shoulders and the softness of her hair. His own pink coat and knee-breeches added the last touch to his discomfiture; and he knew that he could never equal her in creating the unconventional in order to master it.

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"I was afraid your head might have made you faint," he murmured, consciously fatuous.

"It was only partly my head. Sometimes.... Did you see "*Justice*"? You remember the man in solitary confinement? He *knew* he mustn't pound on the door; he *knew* he'd be punished, if he did. He pounded all the same.... I've got too much vitality; I seem sometimes as if I'm in prison...." She shivered and gave a slight cough. "Is it very cold?"

"Not more than ten degrees of frost. I thought of bringing you a cloak, but I was afraid of losing you. If you don't come back at once, impulse will land you in double pneumonia."

She slipped her arm through his and began to walk, with a slight limp, back to the hotel.

"We had a gipsy in the family, though no one's ever allowed to mention her," she announced abruptly. "D'you call me pretty? I think you would, rather. Val Arden says I'm the 'haggard Venus.' Well, any looks we've got come from her."

"With a dash of temperament thrown in. Suppose we go a *bit* faster and then look for a fire? You're quite well enough to dance now."

"But I'd sooner talk to you. A girl told me the other day that you were—what was the word? 'sticky'; you never had anything to say, you were prim and old maidish——"

"I'm no good at ordinary social patter," he interrupted. "But you'd hardly apply that term to our conversation to-night."

They strode incongruously down the broad village street, past the group of expectant chauffeurs and into an ill-ventilated box described as the "reading-room." Both were emotionally out of breath, and the lights of the hotel made Jack self-conscious; he stole a sidelong glance at her and waited for the next change. Wistful appeal passed into effervescent irresponsibility; the self-possession of a woman of the world alternated with the radiant joyousness of a child.... And six months earlier she had left a German Jew's ornate carnival to drive with a sodden debauchee in a stolen car and had impaled an unknown chauffeur on the grey angle of a jutting wall in Hertfordshire. And there was the aeroplane accident; and the poker-party; and a dozen other things.... His glance held admiration as well as curiosity, and she smiled with glowing friendliness.

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"Aren't you going to dance at all?" he asked.

"I didn't come here for that.... Now I'm going to pay you a compliment. I got myself invited because I heard you were coming; I wanted to give you a chance of judging me at first hand. There's an opportunity for returning the compliment, if you care to take it."

Jack looked at her with a surprise which he tried to veil, as he reminded himself again that he must be on his guard.

"I only hinted that your friends weren't good enough for you," he answered. "Knowing who you were and the positions your father had held——"

"Dear Jack, don't drag in father! Isn't that what I have to fight against? Having my personality submerged by his dead pomp and glory?"

Her use of his Christian name startled him; and she watched with amusement his stiff attempt not to seem startled.

"I'd sooner think of you as Lord Crawleigh's daughter than as Sir Adolf Erckmann's friend."

Her eyes half closed, and she looked at him through the long black lashes.

"I believe you're falling in love with me."

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Jack lazily threw away the end of his cigarette, dusted imaginary specks of ash from his breeches and rose slowly to his feet.

"I was only thinking what I should feel about you, if you were my sister," he said. "Ought we to be going upstairs? Lady Pentyre's rather concerned about you."

"I'll reassure her," said Lady Barbara. "Don't bother to come up; you won't be dancing."

Though she had a reserve of self-control for scenic emergencies, he had snubbed her so wantonly that she darted like a black and silver moth out of the room before he could mark a change of expression. Jack followed in time to see her locate Lady Pentyre and take the chair by her side. The warm, scented air of the ball-room struck and flushed his cheeks like the heavy breath of a hot-house. Summertown, waltzing by, disengaged one hand and whistled shrilly on his fingers above the boom and wail of the band.

"Missing two, Babs?" he called out.

Lady Barbara pressed her hand against her eyes, then drew it away and shook her head.

"I'm not dancing to-night," she answered.

Lady Pentyre turned to her with mingled anxiety and impatience.

"Aren't you feeling any better?" she asked.

"I can't say that I am. When I stand, the floor goes up and down; and, when I sit down, the room goes gently round me."

Jack was leaning aimlessly against the door, and Lady Pentyre beckoned to him. She had no intention of leaving her son to make a fool of himself with Sally Farwell; and, if she told him or young Summertown to take Lady Barbara home, she would next hear that all three had fallen down a shaft in Durham.

"Mr. Waring, you're not dancing! *Do* you think you could find one of the cars and take this child back to bed? I hardly like to send her alone, you know, and every one here has a party of her own to look after."

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Jack bowed with adequate graciousness, but Lady Barbara intervened with a vigorous refusal.

"I couldn't think of dragging him away," she exclaimed. "This is the only ball he ever comes to; and he's been looking after me so much that he hasn't had time to see any of his friends."

"But he can be back within an hour," Lady Pentyre urged. "It's still quite early."

Lady Barbara looked uncertainly at Jack, waiting for him to become more inviting. His face expressed no concern, and he was patiently gaining time by consulting his watch and looking from one to the other of them, as though he had no personal interest in the decision.

"Would that be agreeable to you?" he asked her at length.

"I don't feel that I have any right to spoil your evening."

"*Illness* is hardly within your control, is it?"

She walked downstairs with a novel sense of failure and a misgiving that she had overestimated his stupidity; yet a man must be more than ordinarily stupid not to appreciate her after the trouble that she had taken. Insisting on an open car, she settled herself in one corner and looked thoughtfully at her companion's reflection in the jolting mirror of the wind-screen. Valentine Arden, who allowed disparagement to become a disease, told her to her face that she had genius; George Oakleigh had said that she had "the clearest-cut personality of her time." And these things were industriously repeated to her.

Rather Lord Crawleigh's daughter than Sir Adolf Erckmann's friend... But Lord Crawleigh's world had no place for any woman who was above the average. In Canada, in Ireland and in India she had tasted greater personal success before she was sixteen than London could offer her in a life-time. She had seen the government of India at very close quarters; and, after that, it was impossible to feel Sonia Dainton's elation at bobbing to Royalty at the Bodmin Lodge ball in Ascot week. At other times and in other places, dusty, long streets, dazzling white and quivering with heat, had been cleared for her and lined with picked native troops; in an Empire crowded with immemorial sovereignties she had been the only daughter of a man who was vicegerent of the Emperor-King.

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"You spoke too soon in saying you didn't despise me," she murmured.

They had covered but two of the ten miles, and Jack instinctively avoided altercation. He was no longer interested in a girl who deliberately invited herself to the same house, singled him out and detached him, in an open car and a north-east wind, to pick a quarrel or justify herself.

"If you're feeling ill, why don't you try to go to sleep instead of making conversation?" he suggested.

"I'm not *making* conversation!" she answered impatiently. "You attacked me on such slender evidence that I was wondering whether you'd any better excuse for attacking people like Sir Adolf, who's a very fine musician——"

"And an impossible bounder," Jack interrupted. "My father pilled him at his club ten years ago; if he put up again, *I'd* pill him; if he got in, *I'd* resign."

"And I suppose you'd 'pill' Villon and Benvenuto Cellini and Verlaine——"

"I would, if they were friends of Erckmann," Jack answered cheerfully.

She shivered and lapsed into silence. Talking to Jack was like explaining colour to a blind man. She had never sought out the Erckmann circle; it was one of innumerable circles which a connoisseur in life patronized and sampled for its distinctive atmosphere. Her god-father, Dick Freyton, had kept a string of race-horses at Oxford and taken a double first; he had dined with the Queen one day and entertained a party of comedians and jockeys the next; he had been a gentleman-rider and an ambassador, a soldier and a collector of early printed Bibles, a competent sportsman and a more than competent poet. Touching life at every angle, there was an Elizabethan spaciousness about him;—Loring's father did not forbid him the house because Bessie Galton took her company to Liverpool and he invited them all to stay with him at Poolcup. Freyton was too big to be compromised. And the world had developed so fast that nowadays a woman could touch life at as many angles; for some it was the only thing to do. The queens of the salon were dead, the political hostesses were dying. There was room for one universalist.

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They drove to the lodge of Croxton Hall in silence. It was only when she saw him dropping asleep that she fanned the discussion to life.

"It's men like you who kill art in this country," she sighed.

"I can never see why there should be a special code of morals for a fellow because he grows his hair long and plays the fiddle," Jack answered, as he helped her out of the car and rang the bell.

While he explained their return to the butler, Lady Barbara let fall her cloak into a chair and walked to a glowing fire at the end of the hall. In the fender stood a tureen of soup and an urn of cocoa; behind her a big table was invitingly set with sandwiches, cake, fruit, syphons and decanters. Jack watched her for a moment and then explored the table critically.

"Is there anything you'd like me to bring you?" he asked as he chose a cigar and poured himself a brandy and soda. "Don't forget you've had no supper."

She looked at him over one shoulder and sighed contemptuously.

"*How* characteristic! The indecent irregularity of missing a meal! I eat because I love nice things; one gets a new emotion sometimes. When we were at Ottawa, father took me down to Washington, and one of the secretaries at our embassy fell in love with me. We met at twelve and he was in love with me by a quarter past. I suppose he was a man of method, like you, and never declared his passion under half an hour, so for five minutes we talked about food, and he asked me if I'd ever tasted Baltimore crab-flake. I hadn't. His car was at the door of the chancery, we both got in without a word; at 12:23 we were flying down Connecticut Avenue. We drove to Baltimore without a stop, had our crab-flake and returned to Washington in time for me to have a good rest before dinner. When father began looking for me, some one explained that I'd been taken to see the Congressional Library, and everything was all right till the papers next day came out with great head-lines—'Breakneck Race for a Crab-Flake.' 'Just Bully, Says British Governor-General's Daughter' Then there was the usual unpleasantness.... But the crab-flake *was* a new emotion." She turned from the fire and joined him at the table. "If I start eating caviar, I never stop."

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The butler returned to announce that her maid had gone to bed and to ask whether she should be called.

"Oh, it's all right, thanks," she answered. "I'm feeling much better." She had talked herself into good-humour and, when they were alone again, she looked at Jack with a smile. "Are you enjoying yourself? You look so bored. What shall I do to amuse you?"

She pulled a chair to the fire and beckoned him to her side.

"I'm sorry to seem ungracious," said Jack, as he put down his empty glass, "but I've been commissioned to send you to bed."

"But the others won't be back for hours!"

"Exactly. Barring the servants, we're alone in the house, and it wouldn't look well for us to bolt away from the ball and then sit here talking all night."

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Lady Barbara sprang from the chair and faced him with amazement in her eyes.

"My dear creature, do you imagine you're compromising me?"

"That's a strong word. I'm some years older than you, Lady Barbara," he added meaningfully.

"But if you *knew*—"

Jack interrupted her with a shake of the head.

"If you're trying to tell me some of the things you *have* done, you may spare yourself the trouble. I used to think you were being swept off your feet by the people you went about with. The more stories you tell me, the more I'm tempted to wonder whether you don't set the fashion. Some one's frightfully to blame for not pulling you up, though I know Jim did his best. Does it make no difference to you when a man like that refuses to have you inside his house?"

Lady Barbara walked slowly to the table.

"You must apologize for that, Mr. Waring."

She imagined that she was contending with one man over a single hasty sentence; but behind Jack stood his father, his father's regiment and his father's club, all honestly conservative and gently self-approving. Behind the sentence there lay in support a social philosophy framed in days before England was corrupted by the uncertain morals of the east and the uncouth manners of the west.

"Isn't it true?" demanded Jack, unabashed. "He cabled to his mother from Surinam after the motor smash and that inquest. I wasn't told the exact words, but you *haven't* been to the house very lately, have you?"

He was so certain of himself—he was always so certain of himself—that the question rang out like a taunt. Lady Barbara felt her self-control weakening.

"And your informant?" she asked, still trying not to yield ground.

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"I've really forgotten. Obviously no one in the family. So, you see, there must be several people who know. For what it's worth, I have *not* handed the story on."

"How chivalrous!—And to a girl that you'd never met!"

"I didn't want Jim to be mixed up in a fresh scandal. And you've driven this country near enough to revolution as it is."

He picked up his hat and was starting towards the stairs, when an unexpected sound stopped him, and he turned to see her burying her face in her hands. It was a surprising collapse in one who seemed to be made of steel, though he wondered whether the tears were an artifice or a novel indulgence of emotion.

"You *didn't* mean what you said!" she sobbed. "Please say you were only punishing me for taking you away from the ball!"

"I've not the least desire to punish you. You've got great qualities; you were charming at dinner, you're kind and good-natured, you can be fascinating when you like. And then you spoil all you are, all you might be and do, by tricks unworthy of a chorus-girl. Arranging this meeting at all to smooth one ruffled feather of your vanity. The sham headache. Calling me by my Christian name the first time we meet. Things of that kind. That's not the *grande dame*, Lady Barbara."

She began to collect her gloves and cloak.

"I'm sorry," she said with trembling lips. "You won't be troubled again."

"If you were sorry, you wouldn't try to be dramatic. Your 'curtain,' like your repentance, is only the latest form of the Baltimore crab-flake—a new emotion, a new indulgence.... Look here, I shall be gone before you're up to-morrow; won't you part friends?"

He crossed the hall with a smile and held out his hand without fear of a rebuff. She looked at him and had to confess herself at fault. His heavy overcoat was hanging open, and in his knee-breeches and pink coat he looked slim and boyish; he was a booby at dinner and a clod at the ball; outside his own profession he had no more knowledge or ideas than a schoolboy. Yet she submitted to his criticism almost in silence.

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"Won't you part friends?" he repeated.

Lady Barbara could not let him ride off so complacently. She pressed one hand to her side and groped her way to the table; as she leaned against it, the friendliness died out of his smile.

"I shouldn't do that again, if I were you," he counselled, reverting to his slightly nasal drawl; and this time she could have cried without feigning, for she was tired and humiliated by her consistent failure.

"I *am* ill," she protested. "Needless to say, you don't believe—"

"My dear Lady Barbara, the worst of taking people in by lies is that afterwards they refuse to be taken in by the truth. That always means a dreadful muddle for everybody."

There was no trace of anger in the indolent voice; a lazy, superficial smile played still over the composed face, but she felt that she had touched his vanity, which was so petty that he could allow no one even to chaff him.

"I say, you *are* revengeful," she cried. "Just because, in the most harmless way——"

"I don't mind any one making the most complete fool of me—once," he interrupted. "A very moderate sense of humour carries that off. One doesn't want to make a habit of it, that's all. And I always think it's a perilous thing to begin playing with the truth."

"So you'll never believe anything I say?"

"We're so very unlikely to meet that it hardly matters. Won't you shake hands?"

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She held out the tips of her fingers and, as he released them, caught him by the sleeve of his coat. He noticed that she was biting her lip and had either improved her acting or lapsed into sincerity.

"Are you like Jim?" she asked. "D'you despise me so much that you refuse to meet me?"

He looked carelessly at his sleeve, but she refused to understand the movement of his eyes.

"I should be honoured to meet you. Only I never go anywhere. Lady Pentyre and Lady Knightrider are about our only two links."

"And I suppose Jim will have me turned out of *their* houses, when he comes back. If you knew how I hated having people angry with me.... Will you meet me, if I don't have any of my objectionable friends, if I'm on my best behaviour——"

"I don't think that your experience of my society can be so alluring as all that," he laughed.

"I've never allowed any other man to lecture me as you've done!"

"Ah, but you invited it. You don't want me to come merely for a continuation of the lecture."

"Perhaps it won't be necessary."

Her voice and eyes softened appealingly—and then became charged with perplexity, as Jack gently removed her fingers from his sleeve.

"Another new emotion, Lady Barbara?" he laughed. "You won't easily convince me that I've changed your character in a night."

"You interest me," she murmured, with a puzzled frown.

"Ah, that rang true! But I'm no good at the modern business of discussing people with themselves. A man like Val Arden does that so much better.... Lady Barbara, are you *ever* going to say good-night to me?"

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"In a minute. Will you come to Connie Maitland's Consumptive Hospital *matinée* after Christmas? It's at the Olympic, and I'm dancing there. I *do* want you to appreciate me!"

Jack reflected for a moment and then smiled lazily.

"I'll come to the *matinée*, if you'll promise *not* to perform," he answered. "If I'm not in court.... I know I'm old-fashioned, but I call it intolerable for you to blacken your eyes and rouge your face and make sport for any one who cares to spend a guinea or two for the chance of gaping at you. It cheapens you. I'd as soon put on tights and tie myself in knots on a strip of carpet outside a public-house."

Barbara leant against the table in helpless amazement.

"You're more of a Philistine than my own father!" she cried.

Jack smiled imperturbably.

"And what would you think if Lord Crawleigh came to that same *matinée* and gave a display of juggling with billiard-balls?"

"I should die happy," Barbara answered with a gurgle of laughter; then more seriously, "But why on earth shouldn't he? If he can do it, if the thing's all right in itself, why should the professionals have the monopoly? I'm very good."

"No doubt. But, if you had no more idea of dancing than I have, people would still flock to see Lady Barbara Neave. Now do you understand why I loathe the whole life you lead?"

When, late that night, she thought over the long succession of snubs and insults, Barbara chose this as the most wounding. She had recited and danced, acted and sung on occasions innumerable, always hearing and feeling that she was meeting the professionals on their own ground; they themselves hurried to congratulate her, and she fancied vaguely that she was paying the stage a delicate compliment.

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"I've never been told that I hawked my father's position about for advertisement," she answered quietly.

"It's the result."

He picked up his hat again and again held out his hand.

Lady Barbara locked her fingers behind her back and turned away.

"I don't like the feeling that you'll ring for carbolic as soon as I'm out of the room!" she said.

"D'you think I should?"

"You wouldn't wait!" she cried, springing round as though she were going to strike him.

Jack's growing surprise merged in a novel sense of helplessness. The girl had wholly lost control of herself. Her pupils were dilated, her cheeks white with anger and fatigue; one hand gripped the back of her chair, and the other rolled her handkerchief into a tight ball. Not for the first time that night he felt that a man had only himself to blame for getting on to such terms with a woman. A lion's cage could be entered or avoided at will....

Yet he could not escape the feeling that even at the white-heat of passion she was enjoying her scene.

"Do part friends," he begged. "I shouldn't presume to criticize you, if I didn't think you worth it. I ask you—as a favour—to come to that *matinée* with me. Will you?"

Lady Barbara could not decide whether to try once again to punish him; she dared not admit that she was daunted, but she was certainly puzzled. At one moment he insulted her, at another he hoisted her on to a pinnacle and mounted guard below.

"Would you like me to come?" she asked.

"I should love you to."

"I'll come, if you want me to.... Now I think I *shall* go to bed. It would be a tragedy if we had *another* scene. Good-night, Mr. Waring." [Pg 106]

"Good-night, Lady Barbara."

She looked at him steadily before turning to the stairs, still undecided whether to be angry or intrigued. Jack went into the library, chose himself a book, undressed slowly, read for ten minutes and dropped instantly asleep. Lady Barbara stood for many minutes in front of a long mirror, admiring the black and silver dress and watching the gleam of her arms and shoulders as she moved. Then with careless impatience she loosened the dress, leaving it to fall and lie in a tumbled heap by the fire; shoe followed shoe, stocking followed stocking; her maid would repair the havoc in the morning, and it was a relief to lapse into untidiness after so many hours of Jack Waring's orderly influence. Pulling an armchair to the fire she began to brush her hair. Six hours before, as her maid had brushed it for her, she had rehearsed the meeting with Jack up to the point when he apologized for his presumption in criticizing her. If only she had stopped then! But he was wholly different from her preconception of him; fully as 'superior'—and with as little reason—but disappointing as an intellectual antagonist; he was commonplace in mind and yet had a certain blunt stubbornness of character, a refusal to be stampeded—together with an indifference which still piqued her.

And the indifference was broken by a solicitude which he expressed in terms to earn himself a horse-whipping. Her eyes were blinded by a hot rush of shame when she remembered her gentle words and appealing voice at the piano. "*I'm not as bad as you expected?*" Humility was a pleasant emotion, but a losing card. At their next encounter....

She laid aside the brush and sat staring into the fire. The room grew gradually colder, but she did not notice it. Only when her ears caught the sound of subdued voices on the stairs did she rouse with a shiver and jump into bed.

CHAPTER FIVE NOBODY'S FAULT

[Pg 107]

"Cock the gun that is not loaded, cook the frozen dynamite...."

RUDYARD KIPLING: "ET DONA FERENTES."

As a matter of form and to wash her hands of personal responsibility, Lady Pentyre sent next morning for the local doctor. His advice—to take things quietly for a few days—enabled Lady Barbara to keep her promise to Jack with a good conscience. "*They say that I have been doing too much,*" she told Sir Adolf Erckmann, "*so I'm afraid I shan't be able to come to your party on Thursday....*" On the same plea she wrote to Lady Maitland, promising to attend the *matinée* but regretting her inability to play an active part. When she had taught Jack to appreciate her, it would be time enough to shew him that her friendship was adequate guarantee for her friends.

On returning to London she angled without success for a first-hand report on him. To her earlier half-dozen words of disparagement Sonia Dainton added a break-up price for the family. The Surinam cable precluded consultation of Amy Loring, and Phyllis Knightrider could only affirm that Jack went every year to Raglan for a few days' fishing—when she was away and there was none but men present.

"I believe he's hopeless with a mixed party," she went on. "If you were told to bring a man anywhere, you'd never dream of asking *him*."

"Well, I think that's better than being the first man that everybody thinks of," Barbara answered. [Pg 108]
"God created Gerry Deganway to be the eternal fourteenth at dinner."

"Val Arden once said that God invented bridge so that Jack Waring might say he didn't play it," Phyllis went on. "That sums him up."

Lady Barbara was wondering whether the unintelligent appreciation of such a man was worth having, when Jack once more wantonly put himself in the wrong. After writing to remind her of the day and time of the *matinée*, he had gone about his business. She mislaid the letter and telephoned to his chambers to find out where she was to meet him. An unwelcoming Cockney voice answered that Mr. Waring was engaged and invited her to leave a message.

"I won't keep him a moment," answered Lady Barbara.

"Mr. Waring doesn't like being called to the 'phone when he's got a consultation on."

She hardly knew whether to be angrier with Jack for his hide-bound likes and dislikes or with the officious clerk for his interference.

"Will you be good enough to say that Lady Barbara Neave wants to speak to him?" she said in a voice of authority.

"I'll see," the clerk mumbled reluctantly. "Hold on, please."

She was not accustomed to being kept waiting, and Jack or the clerk kept her waiting so long that the Exchange enquired once whether she had finished and then cut short the call. She hung up the receiver and waited for the connection to be re-established. There was no sound for five minutes; they did not think it worth while to remember her existence or to recall that she had expressed a wish to speak to Mr. Waring, that she had been ordered to wait.... Taking down the receiver, she repeated the number. The same unwelcoming Cockney voice greeted her.

"I was trying to speak to Mr. Waring," she explained, "but I was cut off."

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"Mr. Waring's ingided—Oh, were you the lidy who just rang up? Mr. Waring says, Would you be kind enough to leave a message?"

Half an hour earlier Lady Barbara had been undecided whether to telephone herself or to arrange the meeting through her maid. Now she felt that, whatever it might cost her, she must speak to Jack without intermediaries. And, if he were engaged in a consultation (or whatever the absurd thing was called), so much the better.

"No, I don't want to leave a message," she answered. "I want to speak to him privately."

The new attack seemed only to consolidate the hateful clerk's already strong position.

"Oh, I thought it might be business. Mr. Waring never speaks to any one privately on the 'phone."

"Will you kindly ask him to make an exception, then?"

"I'm afride it's no good," answered the clerk with undisguised boredom. "And Mr. Waring won't be best pleased, if I go in agine."

While Jack should pay for his pleasure to the uttermost farthing, it was undignified to prolong an altercation with a Cockney voice, especially as she was gaining nothing.

"Mr. Waring asked me to go to the theatre with him. Will he kindly let me know when and where I'm to meet him?"

The words were repeated slowly, as the message was written down.

"When-and-where-you're to meet him. Very good. If you'll give me your number, I'll find out and 'phone you as soon as the consultation's over."

"But I want to know now! I've got arrangements of my own to make!"

It was no longer the deliberate high voice of authority. Grievance was merging in anger.

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"I don't like to go in agine.... But he can't be long now. If you'll give me your number...."

The Cockney voice suggested a mean, back-bent creature with bitten nails and cunning eyes, a Uriah Heep, cringing but sinister. She did not care for him to know that she had lost her temper; only this and the need to punish Jack for his latest indignity kept her from refusing to accompany him to the theatre.

"Oh, ask him to write," she answered with attempted carelessness.

As she ceased speaking, her maid came in to say that Mr. Webster had called. They had not met since their quarrel on the afternoon of Lady Knight rider's dance; and she was secretly relieved at the hardness of his ill-humour, for of all men he least repaid the discredit which she earned by being seen in his company. At best he was a good-natured, plastic slave with a ubiquitous car and a knack of securing seats in theatres and tables in restaurants when others failed; at worst he was an enigmatic sensualist, who attracted her because he privately frightened her. They met first on the common ground of an interest in spiritualism, later as companions in misfortune; Sonia Dainton alleged that he was always inviting chorus-girls to his rooms and giving them too much to drink for the amusement of hearing what they would say; some one else added that he smoked opium, and an agreeable air of mystery surrounded an otherwise disagreeable young man. After their last quarrel Lady Barbara had decided to give him up; and she only wavered now because she wanted a whipping-boy and felt that she was in some way scoring a point against Jack by receiving him.

"I'll see him—up here," she told her maid.

Her face was still flushed from the telephone altercation, and she posed herself carefully, backing the window, but with the curtains thrown to their widest extent, so that Webster's oedematous eyelids blinked as he crossed the room and held out a plump white hand. [Pg 111]

"New car d'livered t'day," he wheezed. The habit, induced by intemperance, of slurring the major parts of speech and omitting the minor survived even in his sober diction. "Wondered if you'd care come spin."

"Oh? *I* was wondering whether you'd been ill."

"Ill?" He shook his head and coughed. "No. Only too many cigarettes. Care come?"

"Not till you've apologized for your behaviour to me, Mr. Webster."

"Haven't least idea what mean, but I'll apologize. Always ready apologize."

As a whipping-boy he was too spiritless to be satisfying, and Lady Barbara addressed herself to the invitation. Since the accident and the inquest she had not embarked on any expeditions with him. Indeed, on the evening before she went into court, she had deliberately broken a prized Venetian vase and whispered to herself—or any one who was listening—that, if she emerged without discredit, she would never go with him again. Nemesis had accepted the vase and played false on the bargain. But, while she might fairly feel herself released from her promise, she was oppressed by premonition that disaster would overtake her if she risked her luck again with Webster.

"Where are you going to? I'm waiting for a telephone message," she answered.

At that moment the bell rang; and, as she picked up the receiver, she felt guilty towards Jack Waring; in part she had undertaken to drop her "objectionable friends," in part she felt that, if he were with her, he would stop her going.... But his clerk had been unpardonable....

Gaymer's voice invited her to dine and go to a theatre with him. She accepted and impatiently replaced the receiver. [Pg 112]

"I'll come for a short time," she answered and felt that she was defying Jack. "I must be back for tea, though."

"Have tea my place. Madame Hilary coming. Know who mean? Perfect wonder that woman. Doesn't use medium; makes you, me, any one medium; throws you in trance, and *you* do talking."

The *séance* was more alluring than the drive, for Madame Hilary had been famous in necromantic society for more than a month. Lady Barbara had been generally forbidden by her parents to dabble in black magic, and a special warning had been issued against Madame Hilary, whose methods had made her notorious, if not as a new witch of Endor, at least as an accomplished blackmailer.

"Is she good about the future?" Lady Barbara asked. "I don't want to be told that I've lived in distant lands, sometimes among the palms, sometimes in sight of the snows. I know that better than she does."

"*She* don't tell you anything," Webster explained. "*You* do all the talking, and we listen. Better hear some one else first; people sometimes more candid than they like—afterwards."

He chuckled maliciously and followed her downstairs. For an hour they drove round Richmond Park, and, as the light began to fail, he turned back to London and brought her to his flat by the Savoy in time for tea. The drowsy joy of rapid movement through the air had calmed her nerves and blown away her ill-humour; she was too tranquil to quarrel even with Jack Waring.

As she entered the smoking-room of the flat, the early premonition of disaster returned. It was an unwholesome place after Richmond Park on a December day.... Webster himself, white-faced and orientally impassive, in a frame of yellow down cushions and a heavy atmosphere of burning cedar-wood, was a sinister mystery-monger and purveyor of forbidden fruit. She came to him for excitements and experiences which the world conspired to keep her from obtaining elsewhere. An unwholesome man.... If anything happened, she had only herself to blame.... Yet nothing could happen, unless the new clairvoyant told her something horrid about the future.... She was not [Pg 113]

going to run away from a clairvoyant....

The warm rooms, thickly curtained and heavy with scented smoke, were already half-full. Sonia Dainton and Jack Summertown were on either side of the club fender with cigarettes in their mouths; the Baroness Kohnstadt, with something of her brother Sir Adolf Erckmann's build and colouring and with all of his guttural intonation, was impressively describing Madame Hilary's powers; Lord Pennington, with a tumbler of brown brandy and soda in one hand, swayed insecurely on one arm of a chair and discharged amorous darts at a weak-mouthed girl with big eyes and a high colour, who giggled in apprehensive appreciation; on the other sat Sir Adolf, bald, bearded and fleshly, competing with Pennington for her attention. Involuntarily Lady Barbara paused in the door-way. If Jack Waring heard that she had been to Webster's rooms on such an errand in such company.... They were not worth it....

"Hullo, Babs!" "Babs darling!" "Liddle Barbara!" "How ripping!"

The usual chorus of welcome greeted her and mounted to her head. Sonia Dainton was kissing her extravagantly. Sir Adolf lurched forward to praise her looks and dress, Lord Pennington to repeat and laugh at any phrase that she let fall. Doing nothing, saying little, simply by being herself, she dominated them until the door opened a second time and a gaunt woman in a clinging black dress and hat like an embossed shield rustled into the room. Her great height and noiseless movements diverted attention from Lady Barbara; she threw up her veil with a clockwork gesture as though she were ripping it from her face. Webster advanced with a bow and was preparing to introduce her, when she stopped him with a second mechanical fling of the hand.

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"Ah, no! You tell me who they are and then you say, 'Madame Hilary is an impostor; she knew a little before—and she make up the rest.' Is it not so? For an exhibition I like better to know nothing." Her eyes flashed, as she looked round on one face after another. "You, Mr. Webster, I know—your name, at least—but these others I know not at all. It is well. And I like better for you not to tell me. But you are all waiting! While I drink this tea, you shall decide who first is to make trial."

She sat down, unembarrassed by the stealthy examination to which she was being subjected on all sides, and, unpinning her veil, shewed a narrow, lined face with sunken cheeks, an aquiline nose and eyes that were lack-lustre after their initial flash. Too well-bred to seem bored, she displayed at least a want of interest which chilled the spirits of the party and left her ascendant. Webster was flustered at having to stage-manage the *séance*; for Sir Adolf was so diffident and Sonia so unsympathetic that he had difficulty in finding volunteers. Lady Barbara at once offered herself, but seemed impressed by his whispered warning that she had better first see what surprising exhibitions people sometimes made of themselves.

"Here, I'll start the bidding," cried Jack Summertown, jumping up from the fender. "Don't pinch my simulation-gold watch, any one. Only fair to warn you, ma'am," he went on to Madame Hilary, "that I think all this jolly old spiritualism is a fake. What do I have to do? And may I finish my goodish cork-tipped Turkish Regie?"

Madame Hilary, suddenly appreciating that she was being addressed, seemed to awake and assume new vitality. Shewing neither offence nor amusement at his scepticism, she motioned Summertown to a chair and drew her own opposite to it.

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"Yes, go on smoking. It does not matter." She looked round the room with another clockwork movement, switched on a reading-lamp, so that the light shone straight into her own face, and then plunged the rest of the room in darkness. "All that is needed is for you to look at me, into my eyes. Never take your eyes off mine. I like better for you not to try, not to will yourself. I shall ask you questions, and you will answer them. Questions about the past. I like better for you not to be sympathetic. Try *not* to answer my questions. And, when I have persuaded you to answer them, I shall ask you more questions—about the future. And you will answer them, too. And afterwards I will tell you what you have said. So you will come to know the future."

She paused to draw breath, and Summertown, obediently looking into her eyes, finished his cigarette and tossed the end into the fire-place. He was still smiling a little; but the room was grown silent, and every one was looking at him; the gaunt, narrow face before him, grimly serious, discouraged levity, though it sharpened his desire to expose her as soon as she began her tricks. And for that the easiest thing was obstinately to answer none of her questions.

"You would that I explain?" The deliberate affectation of broken English was the accepted convention of an English actress playing the part of a Frenchwoman; every one in the room was conscious of the artificiality. The voice was unmodulated and monotonous. "In all ages men have tried to read the future. By the stars and by crystal balls and cards and numbers and pools of ink.... What can a pool of ink tell you? The future lies in yourselves. Within your bodies are seeds of new life—innumerable; and each seed holds innumerable other seeds of new life—generation after generation, seed within seed. He who put them there ordained that the Future should lie buried in the Present, as the Present lay buried in the Past—and as the Past lies buried in the Present! It is hard for Man to unbury the Future. Man has not been ready to face the light, and I—I who help you to see that light have never seen it myself. Even I do not know how glaring is that light.... But, as the seeds of the Future lie in you, so the knowledge of the Future lies there also. Man *knows* all the Future, as Man *holds* all the Future within himself, but he has forgotten. It is within his unconscious. *I* do not know it, but I can help you to remember. I can tell you

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nothing, not even your name, but you can tell me everything about yourself, Past, Present and Future. What is your name?"

Lady Barbara started with surprise when the abrupt question cut through the sleepy drone of mock-mystic jargon. Summertown was trapped into seriousness, for he answered promptly:

"John Antony Merivale-Farwell. I'm usually called Jack Summertown."

"Why are you called Jack Summertown?"

"Well, you see, Summertown's the gov'nor's second title. Thirty per cent. on your bills, and not a dam' thing else."

He looked obediently into the unwavering eyes, but Lady Barbara felt that his familiar colloquialism was a deliberate effort to break up the atmosphere of pretentious mystery.

"And your father?"

"Well, he's rather at a loose end at present. He was Councillor of Embassy at Paris, and they offered him Madrid, I believe; but he'd been ill for some time and so he chucked in his hand. Oh, *who* is he? Marling. Earl of."

"You are married?"

"God, no!"

"You have been in love?"

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Summertown hesitated and then answered quietly:

"Oh, well, yes, I suppose so."

"Tell me about it."

Lady Barbara, watching his face as he gazed into Madame Hilary's eyes, became conscious of a change in expression; Summertown might have been drunk. His eyes were glazed, his features set and his forehead moist; he spoke cautiously, too, as though fearful of a trip in articulation.

"It sounds rather sordid," he began diffidently. "She was an awful pretty girl—in a shop. Flower-shop. I palled up with her.... I expect you'll think me an awful cad; I never meant to marry her. It would have meant such a hell of a row at home.... To do myself justice, I told her that. She knew who I was; she said that didn't matter.... The thing lasted for a year—nearly. And most of the time I went through the agony of the damned. Ask any one who thinks he knows me; you'll be told I haven't a soul to save and I'm the village idiot and all that sort of thing. All I know is—I wouldn't go through it again. I loved the girl; and I always felt that she was all right till I came along—and then I corrupted her; and though I sweated to get her to marry me, we both knew it would be God's own failure.... And the end was the most sordid part of the whole business. When I lay awake at night—I *did*, honest—thinking I'd dragged her half-way to Hell, another feller turned up. Number One. I was Number Two—or Ten—or Twenty.... That was nineteen-eleven, but, if you sat up till midnight telling me how rotten she was, you wouldn't be able to make me forget her. Wish to God you could!... But we *were* dam' well man and wife for a twelvemonth."

He laughed jerkily and grew restless, as though he were looking for the usual cigarette. Lady Barbara felt an overbalancing pull and discovered that she had been making her fingers meet in the soft flesh of Sonia Dainton's arm. Madame Hilary was triumphing. None of them could say when Jack Summertown had passed under her influence; apart from his pallor and glazed eyes, he had not changed; but there was a collective, sympathetic shudder through the room, as he told his stunted romance in characteristic colloquialisms. "Hell of a row at home.... A year—nearly.... All I know is—I wouldn't go through it again.... And then I corrupted her.... Dam' well man and wife for a twelvemonth...." And then the jerky, cynical laugh. It was Jack Summertown's manner of describing an unsuccessful meeting at Hawthorn Hill.

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"You cannot forget her—but you will find some one else?" The unmodulated voice was pitiless.

"Oh, generally speaking, yes. I mean, one wants to keep the jolly old family going. But I've not got much time with this war."

"This war?"

"Well, the general bust-up. I'm in the army, you know, and I shall get finished off as soon as it starts. Goodish early door for me. Hardly seems worth it.... At least, I mean, if the girl cares for you, it's a bit rough to leave her a widow at the end of a week."

"Then you are going to be killed quite soon?"

Lady Barbara held her breath until she felt that her heart must stop. The others were doing the same. Only Madame Hilary ladled out her questions with a voice as mechanical as her gestures.

"Oh, almost at once."

"Stop!"

Lady Barbara could not tell whence the cry had come. Had they conjured up a spirit? Was God Himself cutting short their quest? But she did not believe in God.... There was a bustle of

confused movement, followed by stupefied inertia. Lord Pennington, after flooding the room with light, was seen to be propping himself against the door; Madame Hilary sat blinking rapidly, so like a lone cat surrounded by reluctant terriers that little imagination was required to see the arched back and to hear the spitting tongue. Lady Barbara gripped her chair with both hands, overcoming fear. Only Webster, who had seen the experiment before and exulted in the sense of shocked terror around him, contrived to purge his face of expression.

There was a long silence.

"Well, that's that," gulped Pennington, with an unconvincing laugh.

Lady Barbara's brain was working so quickly that she had time to see and reflect on everything around her. These men who were always drinking made a sorry mess of their nerves; Pennington was hardly less incapacitated than Webster had been when they dashed into the jutting grey angle of wall. And Sonia, who did not drink but lived on excitement, was almost hysterical....

"Reached end of chapter," murmured Webster, glancing covertly at the late medium. "What deuce want spoil everything?" he demanded, in a hectoring aside, of Pennington's late giggling companion.... "Who'd like go next?"

Summertown had been peering lazily in search of cigarettes, but his host's question roused him to activity.

"Don't be in such a hurry, old son," he called out. And, turning to the hypnotist, "You were talking about the jolly old seeds. Big fleas and little fleas...."

Madame Hilary glanced at him and then, carelessly, at the group between the fire-place and the door. She was too well-bred to shew triumph.

"You tell me you doubt. Good!" she answered Summertown. "I try to explain just my theory. Now, in every man there are seeds of new life, and each seed contains seeds of other new life, of the Future...."

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Webster waited until he saw Summertown nodding intelligently; then he joined the group by the door.

"What do you think of it?" he asked, like a conjuror.

The Baroness Kohnstadt shuddered.

"Ach, derrible!"

"It's the same old game," said Pennington, with newly recovered valour. "She pinned herself down to something fairly definite, but, before anything comes along to kill Summertown, she'll have vamoosed and set up in Harrogate as a beauty specialist. Agree with me, Lady Barbara?"

"I don't know what to think—yet," she answered. "We mustn't let her tell him, of course...."

As she stood up, her knees were trembling.

"But nobody believes in it *seriously*," protested Sonia Dainton with a white face.

"I do."

They had been joined by Lord Pennington's giggling companion of the armchair. Her eyes were bigger, and fear had washed away the colour from her cheeks.

"Let me try next, Fatty," she implored Webster.

"Why?"

"I want to."

"But why?"

She moved out of earshot and waited for him to join her.

"I want to," she repeated. "I won't say anything that I oughtn't to."

Webster laughed harshly. He did not want to hear the girl unfolding her history before an audience.

"Keep out of it, Dolly; only make fool yourself," he advised. "You're such little coward—"

"I know!" She seemed to take the sneer as a compliment. "But I'm gingered up now. I *want* to know! I want to know if I'm going to die. They said I was, but they only did it to frighten me and get me away to a sanatorium. I'm going to find out!"

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While Webster was still sluggishly trying to make up his mind, she darted past him and presented herself to Madame Hilary. Summertown yielded place reluctantly and joined the group at the door. Before the lights were lowered, the Master of the Ceremonies found time to whisper, "Cut it short. Others want turn, too. Leave out Past and Present; it's Future she's interested in."

There was a rustle of dresses and a squeak of castors, as the audience settled into chairs and the lights were lowered. After the same initial silence the same droning voice pronounced the

elementals of the creed. "Though men have tried by the stars and by crystal balls, by cards and numbers and pools of ink, they have not hitherto looked for the Future within themselves...."

"How long does this tripe go on?" Summertown enquired so audibly that the girl started and turned towards the shadowy group by the fire.

Madame Hilary pushed back her chair and rose to her feet with dignity.

"Please! I cannot continue—like this." At a murmured apology she consented to sit down again, and the momentarily human voice became lost in the professional drone of the mystic. "Keep your eyes on mine—so! It is all I ask. I like better that you resist, that you determine not to answer my questions. But, if you look into my eyes, you will tell me all that I ask you. You must. You are telling me now! You are telling me now your name! It is—that name?"

"Dorothea Prilton. I'm called Dolly May on the stage."

"And you have been on the stage since long?"

"Three years."

"And how old are you?"

"Nineteen."

"And why did you go on to the stage?"

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"Oh, I always loved it! It's everything in the world to me! And a gentleman friend said he'd introduce me to the manager of the Pall Mall."

There was a tinkle of broken glass, as Webster's elbow swept an ash tray to the floor.

"And you expect to play great parts? What are you acting in now?"

"Well, I'm out of a shop at present. It's such killing work, you know. I had to break one contract and go into a nursing-home; and I've never really pulled up since. One doctor says it's lungs, and another says it's heart. I was never very strong, and my friend had an awful time with me. Sometimes at the end of the show, he had to give me an injection in my arm to pull me round. Of course, it saved my life, but I think it affected the heart, you know. The doctor was very angry, but I said to him, 'It's all very well for you to talk, but you weren't there at the time; I was just dying.' I shall be all right when I've had a bit of a rest."

"And you expect to play great parts?" Madame Hilary repeated.

There was no answer. As the silence lengthened, the audience looked critically at her; she had spoken hitherto with the prattling candour of her class, and the question was hardly an assault on her professional diffidence.

"And are you in love?" pursued Madame Hilary without pity.

The girl looked at her in silence but still without any expression of resentment or confusion.

"Are you never afraid of meeting some man and having to retire from the stage?"

At the third silence Summertown observed loudly:

"This is a blinking frost, you know. I *said* it was, from the beginning. She can't make you answer, if you don't want to." [Pg 123]

The penetrating voice brought Madame Hilary to her feet a second time.

"Mr. Webster! Where is Mr. Webster?" she demanded. "Please! I cannot go on—like this. You ask this gentleman to go away, and I continue. Otherwise, no! I cannot."

"Oh, I say, no offence meant, you know," Summertown pleaded.

"I cannot," Madame Hilary repeated firmly. "Mr. Webster—"

The sense of the meeting, expressed in murmured protests, was against Summertown.

"Oh, all right! I'll go," he sighed. "You goin' to break away, Babs? It's an absolute frost," he whispered. "Anyone seen a goodish billycock or bowler, not to mention a cane, a rich fur coat—Oh, my God!"

He had turned on the light to look for his belongings and, while the others ringed themselves about Madame Hilary with speeches of condolence and apology, he alone had leisure to see that Miss Dorothea Prilton, known on Pall Mall programmes as "Dolly May," sat dead in the chair which he had occupied ten minutes before.

CHAPTER SIX THE SHADOW LINE

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"A drunkard is one that will be a man to-morrow morning,
but is now what you will make him, for he is in the power
of the next man, and if a friend the better."

JOHN EARLE: "MICROCOSMOGRAPHIE."

"I knew it.... Yes.... Of course...."

Lady Barbara found herself repeating the words aloud, though no one listened to her. Now that disaster had come, she remembered her premonition; and it gave her a start over the others in recovering self-possession, so that she remained motionless instead of pathetically trying to charm the dead girl back to life. Only Webster and Summertown were making any show of keeping their heads. Madame Hilary had become hysterical; Lord Pennington, mottled and tremulous, was charging distractedly to and fro with a decanter of brandy; and Sonia Dainton, shrinking from the body, sobbed quietly to herself by the fire, while Sir Adolf towered over her, gesticulating with plump, white hands.

"Lock door," whispered Webster. "Tell 'em not s'much dam' row."

He felt the girl's pulse, hurried lumberingly into his bedroom and returned with a shaving-mirror, which he held before her lips. Then he closed the staring eyes and covered the face with a handkerchief.

"Heart failure," he pronounced. "Always had weak heart. Excitement. I tried stop her, you *heard* me try stop her!"

At the note of pleading in his voice, Madame Hilary's lamentations redoubled in vigour, this time in the unmistakable accent of Essex. [Pg 125]

"Before get doctor, better decide story put up," Webster went on more collectedly. "Short and simple, *I* suggest. All having tea here—Said she was feeling tired—Went pale—Suddenly stopped middle sentence.... Less said about Madame Hilary, better. Best of all, send her away now. Know what coroners are."

At sound of the formidable word Lady Barbara clutched frantically at Summertown's elbow.

"Will there be an *inquest*?" she whispered.

"Can't help it. That's bad enough, but, if there's anything of a *post mortem*, we may find ourselves in the soup. 'Deceased died as result of sudden shock.' *What* shock? *Why* shock? I don't at all know that we can afford to let this woman go." He wrinkled his snub nose; and his cheerful, rather dissipated young face was grave. "Don't at *all* know," he repeated.

The ink-and-whitewash smell of the court came to life again in Lady Barbara's nostrils; and she heard the coroner once more urging the reporters like hounds on to their quarry. She would again appear side by side with Webster to explain away another gratuitous death. Twice in one year.... And it was not her fault.

"I can't stand it, Jack," she whispered. "I can't! I can't!"

He looked at her in surprise, for it was generally accepted that she could never lose her nerve.

"Jove! yes. I'd forgotten," he answered. "Here, Fatty!" Webster hurried to them anxiously, and Summertown became elaborately calm and practical. "Look here, old son, *you've* got to go through with this; the body's on your premises. And Madame must go through with it, because they may find all sorts of funny things at the *post mortem*. When all's said and done, you and I didn't kill her, and there's no reason why we should get the credit of it. *I'm* in with you to the end. I think Pennington and Sir Adolf and the Baroness ought to stay to make a quorum, but we'll talk about that later. Point is—Babs must clear out before the vet. comes; she's never been here, we know nothing about her; we must stick to that and, if need be, swear to it. And there's no need to drag Sonia into the business." [Pg 126]

Webster reflected with slow mind, rubbing his fingers against the pad of his thumb, as though they still felt the dead eye-lids of the girl who had at last escaped him.

"Woman's tough customer," he warned them. "Blackmail you quick as thought. And looks bad—much worse—, if any one stays away inquest."

"We'll trust that she's too much rattled," Summertown answered. "And she doesn't even know who Babs is."

"Bet your life she does," Webster answered. Seeing Lady Barbara's undisguised fear, he deliberately played on it, as his price for allowing her to escape the inquest. "If she don't, dam' soon find out."

Future blackmail seemed a less evil than present exposure; and Lady Barbara only wanted to break away from the sweet-smelling, hot room and to avoid the sour-smelling, hot court. Summertown looked to her for an answer; but her eyes were blinking quickly, and two tears rolled unchecked down her cheeks.

"Here, if *you* break down, you'll do us all in," he said, glancing furtively round the room. "Sonia's no more use than a sick headache; you've got to take charge of her and clear out before any one

lodges an objection. Make certain that you've got *everything* before you go—no incriminating muffs or gloves. Now remember! It doesn't matter a damn where you've been, but you've not—been—here. I'll explain to the others. Get home or somewhere and establish a good fat alibi; we'll give you a start before we send for the vet."

With the shrill moans of Madame Hilary still pulsating through their heads, he pushed them out on to the landing and locked the door. Sonia ran headlong down the passage until she was caught and schooled to a careless saunter down the stairs and through the hall.

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"Come home with me," Barbara ordered. "Jack's quite right about the alibi."

"But, Babs—"

"If you start talking, I shall scream!"

They found a taxi in the Strand and drove to Berkeley Square. Barbara ostentatiously ordered tea, and they subsided into chairs without speaking. The shock of death was spent and could not be repeated. Dolly May—if that was her name—was dead; surprisingly, horribly dead, but there was no more to be said about it, and Barbara could now recall without a shudder the still face and staring eyes.... She wondered what they were all doing now, whether the doctor had come.... And what had really happened—not only to the girl, but to Summertown? Even death was not so terrific as the power which Madame Hilary seemed to exert.

"Have some tea, Sonia, and try not to think about it," said Lady Barbara, hoping to restore her own tranquillity.

There would be days of agony, while she waited to see whether she would be called as a witness and required to explain her flight. Madame Hilary was not the woman to drown alone; and, though the men had shewn magnanimity and *esprit de corps*, one never knew what would come out in court, one never knew how far to trust people whom the tolerant Summertown himself always described colloquially as "a bit hairy about the heel." Lord Pennington ... the upward-striving baroness ... Sir Adolf ... Webster, who was an unplumbed pool of iniquity. She would always be a little at their mercy; and, without trying to injure her, people always gossiped.

Sonia Dainton abruptly set down her cup and buried her face in a cushion.

"It was—Fatty closing her eyes," she explained with a gulp; and Lady Barbara, in trying to comfort her, found herself crying in sympathy.

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They were steadied by the bell of the telephone and a crisp voice, which for once was refreshing in its self-assurance.

"Mr. Waring," it announced. "My clerk told me you were expecting me to ring you up. Didn't you get my letter? I said I'd meet you by the box-office at five to two."

Lady Barbara looked in bewilderment at her watch; less than three hours had passed since her altercation with the Cockney clerk.

"I'm afraid I lost your letter," she answered, almost humbly. "Five to two. I'll try not to be late."

"I warn you that I never wait for any one," Jack laughed. "Was that all you wanted to talk to me about?"

In the first reaction from severe fright, she was prepared for an outburst of anger against the first victim—Sonia, for breaking down like a little fool; the Cockney clerk for his impertinence; and Waring himself as the mainspring of all evil. She had only gone to the flat because she felt that she was scoring a point against him. No one had ever behaved with his indifference—which was more galling than blunt rudeness; no one had ever equalled him in aloofness and self-sufficiency. His stubborn unquestioning faith in himself won her reluctant admiration. It was a new experience to find a man whom she could not twist round her finger at first meeting; if *he* had attended the *séance*, she felt that Dolly May would still be alive; he would—somehow—have intervened; perhaps he would even have persuaded her to stay at home. She would give five years of her life to have met any one with authority to stop her....

Sonia had ceased crying and was sniffing miserably at her handkerchief. The sound irritated Lady Barbara to the verge of hysteria; if the little fool could see what she looked like with pink eyes and a red nose....

"What are you doing?" she asked Jack.

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"To-night? I'm dining at the club," he answered with the same crisp assurance.

"You wouldn't like to dine here?" It was an impulse which she had no time to examine, but Jack's voice, which she had never noticed before, destroyed hysterical images and brought her in contact with reality. "I'd promised to go to a play, but I'm not in the mood for it," she added.

With her disengaged hand she wrote down "Gaymer" to remind herself that she must be excused going to the theatre with him. If her name were mentioned at the inquest, she did not want to hear the coroner explaining to the reporters that she was in her stall before the doctor had finished his examination of Dolly May's dead body; even if her name went unpublished, she did not want Summertown to feel that he had stayed at his post while she pusillanimously escaped and ran off to amuse herself.

"Thanks very much," Jack answered, "but I don't think I will. You know, I hardly ever dine out. And I couldn't talk up to your level for three minutes."

"Well, shall I do the talking? I want somebody to talk to; I shall be all alone."

There was a perceptible pause; and Sonia, finding the one-sided dialogue uninteresting, looked at her watch and began collecting her furs.

"Well, I don't think I very well can, you know," said Jack, "if you're all alone."

"Not in my own house? I must say, you are the most extraordinary person! There *are* men—strange as it may seem—who would give a good deal for the chance of having me to themselves at dinner."

"I'm sure of it. You're wasted on me."

Candour and conceit were so nicely matched in Jack Waring that Lady Barbara could not tell from his voice whether he was laughing at her.

"I've asked you *once* to come," she sighed. "I'm so used to getting my own way that I thought that would be enough." She broke off into a cough and gave Sonia time to get out of the room. "If you want to see whether I've got any pride, I haven't—just now. I ask you again. I told you I wasn't in the mood to go to the play; I'm worried out of my mind. But I don't fancy being alone all the evening. If it's too much *trouble* to—talk up to my level, don't come. But I should like you to."

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There was a moment's laughter—deliberately mocking or ingenuously unrestrained; she could never make out whether Jack was naturally or intentionally stupid.

"I can't resist the pathetic, Lady Barbara. What time shall I come?"

"We might dine about half-past eight. If you want to meet mother and make certain that I'm not compromising you, come earlier."

The taunt was left unanswered; but it was noticeable that Jack arrived in Berkeley Square at eight o'clock, when the car was at the door and the door itself open. In the hall Lord Crawleigh was being helped into a fur-coat, and a blushing young footman was paying the penalty of inexperience, clumsiness and some one else's hasty dinner. Lady Crawleigh steered a course round the storm-centre and approached the stranger with the outstretched hand of hurried welcome.

"Mr. Waring? You must forgive our running away like this; the wretched play starts at a quarter past eight. Babs will be down in a moment. You won't keep her up late, will you? We've got to go on to a party at the Carnforths, so I must leave you to see that she goes to bed in good time. She's rather overdone."

With a flying introduction to Lord Crawleigh, she rustled down the steps and into the car. Jack was shewn into the morning-room, where he smoothed his hair, straightened his tie and settled down to the evening paper, paying as little attention to the Japanese prints on the walls as he had done in the hall to a pair of historic porcelain vases which appeared from time to time at loan exhibitions and were beyond price. At Oxford and in the Temple his attitude to art was one of toleration, ungrudging and unpatronizing. "I suppose it's all right," he would say, when Eric Lane tried to interest him in a new discovery. "Not my line of country, though."

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Lady Barbara came down, as he was finishing the report of a case in which he had appeared that day in the Court of Appeal. He was too much engrossed to notice that she was ten minutes late.

"*Blame me not, poor sufferer; that I tarried,*" she began. "I had such an awful headache that I could hardly get up; and I thought it would be straining our friendship if I asked you to dine with me in my room. There's not the least need for you to ask if I'm feeling better," she pouted.

Jack laughed and laid his paper tidily on the table.

"Sorry! I—I warned you I wasn't a social animal. I hope you're all right now."

"Better. I feel rather as if some one had been putting hot coals at the back of my eyes." She paused and looked at him invitingly.

*"But thy dark eyes are not dimm'd, proud Iseult!
And thy beauty never was more fair."*

Some people *never* take their cues."

"I haven't a book of the words, I'm afraid."

"And you've probably never heard of Matthew Arnold."

"Oh, yes, I have. He translated Homer or something. My tutor was always quoting him."

"You're wonderfully banal at times, Mr. Waring."

"Well, I warned you that I shouldn't be able to stay the course," he answered unabashed.

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They dined in amicable dulness. Lady Barbara, who generally shewed a knack of knowing what she wanted and going straight for it, could not define what had made her invite him. His conversation was a minute-gun fire of laboured conventional questions about theatres, the House of Commons and her plans for Christmas. She lacked the lightness of spirit to banter him about his Cockney clerk, still less to work up a scene out of her conversation on the telephone. The humiliation of the Croxton Ball seemed very far away; and, now that she was face to face with him, she found it hard to believe that she had sat half the night staring vengefully into the fire and plotting to punish her glib critic. He was tough of hide as Fatty Webster....

The name, flashing through her mind, conjured up a picture which she had striven to forget—a hot, scented room with men and women shrinking against the walls, a dead girl in the middle and a convulsive, hysterical witch opposite her. She wondered whether they were still there, what the doctor had said....

"I hadn't time to see the paper to-night," she said. "Was there anything in it?"

"I don't think so. We won our appeal—the Great Southern Railway case; I don't know whether you've been following it—but they're sure to take it to the House of Lords. Otherwise—oh, your friend Webster seems to be in trouble again."

Lady Barbara felt as if he had struck her over the heart.

"What's he been doing?" she asked after a pause.

"Well, this time I think he was more sinned against than sinning. He had some people to tea in his flat, and one of them was inconsiderate enough to die on the premises."

"Oh, how dreadful!" She was quite satisfied with her inflection. "Where's the paper? Herbert, will you get me the evening paper out of the morning-room?"

"It's only a line or so in the stop-press," Jack warned her.

"But I want to see who was there!"

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He looked at her closely, for her voice had risen in excitement. When it was too late, she realized that it would have been more natural to ask who had died. Before Jack's eyes her own fell, but she had time to wonder again whether he was stupidly incurious or deliberately secretive. There were moments when his "superiority" seemed more than a manner, when she felt bare and trapped. The placid, round-cheeked smile might have belonged to a cheerful ploughboy, but the commonplace grey eyes were sometimes intelligent and always watchful.

When the paper came, she felt that he was looking through her, and her hands trembled.

"Did you know the girl?" he asked.

"I met her once—for a moment. What a horrible thing to happen!"

"You must be glad you weren't there."

"What d'you mean?"

As the indignant, frightened question broke from her, she felt that she was behaving like a stage criminal and betraying herself because the audience expected it of her. It was a barrister's business to lure you on with innocent questions.... She was convinced that Jack knew everything and was playing with her.

"You always used to go about with him," he pointed out; and she wondered what base satisfaction one human being could derive from torturing another.

"It's curious the way you dislike people without knowing them," she answered. "Now, shall I behave like a perfect Victorian and leave you to your wine while I do a little embroidery in the drawing-room? I haven't *got* any embroidery and, if I had, I couldn't do it. Or would you like me to sit with you?"

When it was too late, she knew that she wanted to escape and collect herself before he went on with his inquisition.

"You won't smoke while I'm drinking port-wine, will you?" he asked without answering her question; and his impudence determined her to throw away the opportunity of retreat.

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She prepared a crushing retort, discarded it for one more crushing and suddenly realized that in her present state he could beat her and very easily make her cry. If she cried, too, he would only think that she was acting....

"Please let me have *one* cigarette," she begged. "I'll go to the other end of the room."

As she walked away to the fire-place and stood with her elbow on the mantel-piece and her head half in shadow, Jack thought for a moment of asking her to come back; but he was not wholly reconciled to the practice of smoking among women, and Colonel Waring had taught him that to drink a vintage wine with a tainted palate was even less excusable than to enter a church without removing one's hat.

"Wouldn't you like a chair?" he asked by way of compromise.

"I prefer standing, thanks. Mr. Waring, I told you on the telephone that I was worried out of my mind. I don't know how much you've heard, but I was *with* Fatty Webster when that girl died. Did you know that?"

The placid, plough-boy smile faded slowly; and, as he raised his eyebrows, Lady Barbara appreciated that she was betraying herself gratuitously.

"I only know what's in the paper. What happened?"

She retained enough judgement to see that she must now tell him everything, enough prudence to exact a promise of secrecy. As she described Madame Hilary and the *séance*, she could see prim disapproval on his features, deepening with every name and incident in the story. For a man with no great range of facial expression, he succeeded in conveying categorical contempt for her manner of life, her friends and herself; and she forgot her troubles in a warm rush of anger.

"Just let me understand," he interrupted, as the story drew to an end. "Are you coming to me for advice, do you think I can help you? Or are you just entertaining me with your latest escapade?" [Pg 135]

Lady Barbara gripped the edge of the mantel-piece to keep control of herself.

"Perhaps I thought I might get a little sympathy," she answered.

Jack lay back in his chair, pushing away his wine-glass and reaching for his coffee-cup. He chose a cigar and pierced it; and every act in its deliberation and absorbed care for his own comfort set her on fire to ruffle his exasperating composure.

"I should have thought the others had a prior claim on any sympathy that's going about."

"I'm afraid no amount of sympathy will bring the dead back to life," she answered in a whisper.

"I wasn't thinking of her. But the others did at least stand their ground."

"You mean I deserted my friends?" she demanded furiously.

"Well, of course you did,—if they are your friends. It wasn't your fault, but it wasn't theirs, either. Because your own record of inquests doesn't court enquiry, you're allowed to cut and run."

"I couldn't have done any good by staying."

He made no answer until he had found matches and lighted his cigar. It was evidently important that the coffee and brandy and tobacco should march abreast; evidently science and art went to the skilled lighting of a cigar; a man—or at least Jack Waring—could not be expected to attend to other people's troubles until he had made sure of his own comfort.

"Ah, there I disagree," he said at length. "It would have made all the difference in the world. First of all you'd have proved that you *were* the sort of person one can go tiger-shooting with—it wasn't a particularly *proud* thing to do, was it?—and then you'd have proved to yourself that you'd got the moral courage to refuse a cheap surrender; and you'd have learned that eccentric amusements have to be paid for at blackmailing prices: you could go into court with an easy conscience, if you'd been having tea at Rumpelmayer's and the girl had died there. In the next place——" [Pg 136]

Lady Barbara turned her head slowly and succeeded in stopping him without saying a word.

"I should be careful, if I were you, Mr. Waring," she recommended, as he paused.

"My dear Lady Barbara, you introduced the subject. You can't have all the fun of posing as a candidate for sympathy.... If you'd stayed, it would have changed your whole life. There would have been such an outcry that you'd have been broken; people simply wouldn't meet you. Not only Loring House would be closed to you——"

A coffee-spoon rattled onto the floor, as she turned on him again.

"I *won't* be spoken to like this!"

"It may come yet, of course," Jack went on reflectively, hardly noticing her furious interruption. "These things always *do* get out——"

"Are you trying to frighten me?" she asked. But she was frightened long before he entered the house. This was the kind of mishap to bring her months of ill luck....

Jack was angry without shewing it or guessing the reason. The young actress's death shocked him less than Lady Barbara's easy acceptance of it. To her and to Sonia Dainton, to Erckmann and the baroness, to Webster and Pennington, the dead girl was a nonentity from another world; they were sorry that she had died so young, they were shocked that she had died at all; but, had she been a Kanaka or Lascar bunker-rat, they could not have troubled less to wonder whether she had mother or sisters to mourn her; she was a super from the theatrical underworld, and her ill-judged time and place of dying had put them into a very embarrassing position. When Jack hinted at a social boycott of Barbara, he was threatening, what he only lacked power to enforce; she deserved punishment, and, if he could not punish her as she deserved, he could at least get far away from her to a society which took death seriously. [Pg 137]

"I'm not sufficiently interested, I'm afraid," he answered with languid boredom that thinly veiled

his disgust.

"But you'd like to see me 'broken', you'd feel so superior——," she taunted.

He looked at his watch and slowly pushed back his chair.

"Why you invited me I don't quite know," he mused. "Surely not to help you out with one of your little dramatic scenes?... Now, about to-morrow—will you be up to coming to this show?"

"No! And even I might think twice before going to a theatre while that girl's still unburied. That's why I'm here now, why I gave myself the pleasure of asking you to dine with me.... And you may be quite comfortable in your mind; you won't ever need to risk your reputation by being seen in my company again."

Jack could see that her nerves were sadly unstrung, but he could not understand the restless vanity which always posed her in the limelight ahead of the world in novelty and extravagance and yet so lacked confidence that she was wounded if any dared criticize.

"I accept my dismissal," he said good-humouredly. Nothing would induce him to give her the satisfaction of a parting scene. His training at home, at Eton and at New College taught him that an Englishman might legitimately display every quality but emotion. "I warned you that I was not a social success."

"Have you tried very hard? You always talk to me as if I'd no more feeling than that table."

Lady Barbara needed concentration to analyze him. She knew that a man is usually cruel only to those whom he likes or loathes; and it dawned upon her that, when an unsocial animal consented to meet her at all, he would not try to hurt her unless he cared for her.

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"I'm not going to join your musical-comedy chorus of adulators, when I think you ought to be soundly whipped; I'm not even going to say, 'Oh, that's Barbara Neave's way; she's always a law unto herself.' I think that's the thinnest excuse.... Why did you insist on telling me about it at all? It's like some one boasting that he smokes a hundred cigarettes a day.... But your mother said I was to send you to bed early. Good-bye, Lady Barbara."

She walked with him into the hall and watched his elaborate and characteristic care in arranging his scarf.

"I seem to have failed again," she sighed; and this time there was an unaffected wistfulness in her voice.

"What were you trying to bring off?" he asked harshly.

"I hardly know.... I'm *not* trying to make a scene now, but don't you think you've been a bit hard on me? I was a fool ever to have anything to do with Fatty Webster: good. I was a fool to go to that *séance*: good. If you like, I was a coward to come away. But what actually happened was just bad luck, and you've been talking as if it was my fault. I didn't enjoy it very much, I don't like thinking about it; it's just possible that it was a very horrible shock. I wasn't asking you to approve of it, but you might have been a little bit more sympathetic."

Her lips were trembling, and Jack remembered with consternation the night of the Croxton ball when he had made her cry. Then and now he had said nothing that he wanted to retract, but all reasonable discussion ended when tears were brought in as an argument.

"It must have been beastly for you," he assented. "I should have been more sympathetic, perhaps, if I'd thought that it would have any permanent effect on you."

"Don't you think it will?"

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"I shan't be there to see," he laughed. "I've been dismissed."

Barbara sighed and reminded him of her headache by drawing her hand slowly across her eyes. Since the night of the ball, when he sat beside her at the piano, he had forgotten how beautiful her hands were.

"You made me lose my temper. I'm sorry, if I said anything rude. There! Do you want to be dismissed?"

The softening in her tone was infectious, and Jack smiled.

"I like you, when you're like this. But the more we meet, the more I shall ruffle your plumage. Why on earth did you ask me to dine with you to-night?"

Lady Barbara looked at him and looked away before answering. To put her feeling into words was at once to overstate it; but she had hovered that afternoon on a shadow-line and for the first time in her life she had lost confidence in herself and reached out towards some one strong enough to help her, perhaps strong enough to check her. It was an impulse inspired by the contrast of Sonia sobbing in her chair and Jack's assured voice on the telephone; the impulse would pass, when her nerves were steady again, but her spirit was changed and no longer self-sufficient.

"I wanted to tell you that I couldn't come to the theatre with you to-morrow," she improvised and wondered whether he would trouble to notice the glaring inadequacy of the excuse. She wondered, too, why she had chosen Jack rather than another.... "Mr. Waring, once in a way I give

a party at Crawleigh; no officials, no politicians—just my friends. I'm arranging one quite soon. Will you come? Just for the week-end. It won't interfere with your work."

Jack hesitated and fingered his hat in embarrassment.

"You know, I'm no good at that sort of thing," he grumbled.

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"But you like talking to me,—when I'm on my good behaviour."

"How long will it last?"

"As long as you're there," she laughed.

"In other words, you're going to make *me* responsible?"

"Doesn't that appeal to your missionary spirit?"

Jack looked at her and decided that even a formal protest would only feed her vanity. He stared abstractedly at her as though she were a horse led out for his inspection. Suddenly she smiled, and, as her face lit up with vitality and mischief, the haggard expression vanished and left her beautiful. Perhaps the smile had come in answer to an unsuspected light of admiration in his own eyes; perhaps she was a better actress than he thought and could transform herself at will; no one could gain her reputation as a coquette without earning it and working for it.

"It isn't fair to abuse me for behaving badly," she pouted, "if you're too lazy to make me behave well."

"I have a living to earn. You'd want one man's undivided attention," he answered.

"But I should be very repaying."

"You'd be amusing for a time. But it would be a wearing life; I'm doubtful even about this week-end."

"But you'll come?"

"If you haven't quarrelled with me or got into any fresh scrape by then." He turned on the doorstep to shake hands with her. "When you marry, Lady Barbara, I shall send your husband my warmest congratulations."

"Thank you. I think that's the first time you've come near doing me justice."

"As a wedding-present," he continued, "I shall send him a little silver-mounted dog-whip."

CHAPTER SEVEN A MATTER OF DUTY

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"My lord master, you have heard the design I am upon which is to marry... I humbly beseech you ... to give me your best advice therein." "Then," answered Pantagruel, "seeing you have so decreed and taken deliberation thereon ... what need is there of further talk thereof, but forthwith to put into execution what you have resolved." "Yea, but," quoth Panurge, "I would be loth to act anything therein without your counsel had thereto." "It is my judgment also," quoth Pantagruel, "and I advise you to it." "Nevertheless," quoth Panurge, "if you think it were much better for me to remain a bachelor, as I am, than to run headlong upon new hare-brained undertakings of conjugal adventure, I would rather choose not to marry." "Not marry then," said Pantagruel. "Yea, but," quoth Panurge, "would you have me so solitarily drag out the whole course of my life without the comfort of a matrimonial consort? You know it is written *Vae Soli*; and a single person is never seen to reap the joy and solace that is found among those that are wedlockt." "Wedlock it then, in the name of God," quoth Pantagruel. "But if," quoth Panurge, "..."

Rabelais: *How Panurge asketh counsel of
Pantagruel whether he should
marry yea or no.*

A week before Christmas, Loring cabled to his mother that he was on his way back to England; in the spring of 1914 he landed at Southampton and travelled unobtrusively to London while his yacht proceeded to Glasgow for overhauling and repairs. And, from the moment when his cable was received, an unconscious adjustment of relationships began, crystallizing in a series of

informal family councils.

Ever since the ultimatum from Surinam, Lady Barbara had not set foot in House of Steynes or Loring House. It was plausible to pretend that in Jim's absence his mother was not entertaining, but on his return all three branches of the family decided that they could not afford the scandal of an open breach and of a Catholic house divided against itself. Lady Crawleigh enlisted the support of Lady Knightrider and made an attack in force on Lady Loring. Thirty years before, the three sisters had, each in her own way, been celebrated; Lady Crawleigh had the good looks, Lady Knightrider the good temper and Lady Loring the brains; and their marriages, one after another, to a Scottish baronet and two of the richest Catholic peers in England were felt to be fundamentally satisfactory. As they had begun, so they went on; Kathleen Knightrider bore a daughter and a son, Eleanor Loring a son and a daughter, Doreen Crawleigh three sons and two daughters, of whom the younger died in infancy. The three husbands were above criticism in life and position; if Sir Charles Knightrider was little more than amateur landscape-gardener and ornithologist, Lord Loring was very nearly at the head of the Catholic laity in England; while Lord Crawleigh's succession of great offices, which he not only filled but adorned, would have satisfied the most ambitious woman. If the individuality of the three wives became merged in their husbands, they still made a strong social combination.

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"I hear Jim's on his way home," said Lady Crawleigh without preamble. "When he comes, Eleanor, we shall have to make peace between him and Barbara."

"I'll talk to Jim," answered his mother doubtfully. "But you know how obstinate he is." She was divided between loyalty to her son and pity for her sister, who could not enjoy having to plead like this for her own daughter. "I do hope this will be a lesson to dear Barbara."

"I hope so, too," sighed Lady Crawleigh.

If she spoke without conviction, it was because her brain was giddy with successive shocks. The secret of Dolly May's death was kept for exactly five days after the inquest. Then a gaunt woman, giving no name, demanded to see Barbara and, on hearing that she was in the country, bearded Lord Crawleigh, who promptly threatened her with attentions from the police. All previous courts of enquiry were trivial by comparison with the inquisition now erected; but, as the attack developed, Barbara's resistance developed equally, and she warned her parents that, on the day when she came of age, she would move into a house of her own where she could receive friends of every complexion and practice magic of every colour. If the form of the threat was old, its clarity and vigour were new; Barbara had less than six months to wait for her majority and independence.

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Lady Crawleigh was still reeling under the shock of one scandal averted and a second in prospect, when her energies were claimed by a new problem. From an untraced source came the report that Barbara was becoming very intimate with young Waring. He had spent a week-end at the Abbey, unobtrusively burying himself in the smoking-room for most of the time; and Barbara had included him in big and small dinner-parties in Berkeley Square. Save that he was a Protestant with only the few hundreds that he earned, he was unexceptionable; Eton, New College and the bar covered past and present, and for the future he stood second in succession to Penley and his uncle's title; in temperament and character he was reported to be dull and wholly dependable. It was a paradox of Barbara's position, her mother felt, that, when the interlocked Catholic families had been ruled out, she seemed to have no associates except nonentities like Gerald Deganway and John Gaymer, who were family furniture rather than friends, or young politicians, like George Oakleigh, or literary freaks, like Mr. Arden, or the really rather dreadful people like the stout young man with all the cars, Mr. Webster, who was always getting her into one scrape or another: the less said about them, the better. Barbara was lamentably gregarious in her friendships, but in these latter days all girls were allowed so much liberty, they seemed to know so much and to be so intolerant of restraint....

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Lady Crawleigh was not at present equal to a struggle on the question of religion. The Church had become unyielding about mixed marriages; that was the wretched Sonia Dainton's excuse for breaking off her engagement to Jim Loring, and, when she had nothing else to disturb her mind, Lady Crawleigh was haunted by the fear that Barbara, who was deplorably lax, would make some terrible scandal by marrying a Protestant without getting a dispensation. Of course, it would not be a true marriage, and no Catholic would consent to know her,—but it was the sort of thing that Babs would do.

The untraced rumour, like many another, travelled far before reaching those most intimately concerned. Jack Waring had devoted so many years to a middle-aged pose and the ostentatious avoidance of all social life that his own friends commented in outspoken amusement on his recantation. In the winter months of 1913 he began to appear at dances, though he still refused to take an active part. "Who's the man with Babs Neave?" quickly became "Who's the man who's always with Babs Neave?" and, before long, "Is anything going to happen about Babs Neave and Jack Waring?" Derision at the fall of a misogynist passed through speculation to resentment.

"Jack simply monopolizes Babs nowadays," complained Summertown one night in the New Year at a dance in his mother's house. He was aggrieved at being unable to attract Barbara's notice and had summoned Deganway, Arden and Oakleigh to a meeting of protest in the smoking-room. "Wonder what she sees in him," he grumbled. "He's a good fellow and all that sort of thing—capital company on a desert island, if you wanted plenty of bar shop, but he's taking all the bubble out of her. I tried to rope her in for my party at the Albert Hall, but, when she heard who

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was coming, she refused. Damned offensive, I thought. Said that people had been talking about her so much that she had to be very careful. And old Jack nodded—you could see she was doing it to please him; it'll be an awful chuck-away if she marries him."

"She will not marry him," Arden predicted. "If for no other reason, Lady Lilith has still to discover a heart."

"What's she doing it for, then?" asked Oakleigh. "I'm very fond of Jack, he's a thoroughly good fellow, but he's *rather* a bore."

"What man can choose from among a woman's motives?" demanded Arden. "Perhaps she finds a difficulty in getting rid of him. There was a time when she was certainly intrigued, when she pursued him relentlessly. Perhaps she feels a glow of respectability from his presence; one's cook, if not a *cordon bleu*, was recommended to one as 'a regular communicant.'... Perhaps she chose him to see what she could make of him, as *le Bon Dieu* chose the Jews. But she will not marry him.... One has a certain instinct."

He shook his head sagaciously and dismissed the subject. But a new mile-stone had been reached when four men could be found gathering to discuss Jack's marriage to Barbara as even a remote possibility. Similar discussions had for some weeks taken place in little groups round the walls of the ball-rooms. Lady Knightrider, who had known Jack longest and best, confided to a friend that he was an excellent influence, a man who would stand no nonsense from the girl; he was fearless and unmoved by Barbara's tantrums and had once spoken very sensibly when she revived the absurd project of leaving her parents and taking a house by herself. That evening Phyllis Knightrider epitomised and retailed a conversation which she had not been intended to hear by saying to Barbara, as they drove to the dance, "Mother's quite made up her mind that you ought to marry Jack Waring. She says he's the only man she knows who can keep you in order."

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The attack was opened three hours later from the opposite flank, when Gerald Deganway put up his eye-glass and stared at Jack with an affectation of shocked gravity.

"My dear, every one's talking about you," he exclaimed. "It's becoming quite a scandal."

"*What's* becoming a scandal?" asked Jack.

"You and Babs Neave."

"What a pity it is that people can't mind their own business!"

Any one acquainted with Deganway knew better than to take his gossip at face-value, but Jack was amazed to find that he had given material for chatter and speculation even to Deganway. To be a friend of Barbara Neave, as Arden once said, was like going for a walk with an arc-lamp; but they had been frigidly circumspect and restrained. Two week-ends at Crawleigh Abbey, perhaps six dinners in London and twice that number of dances, where he looked in at supper-time and left after an hour, covered their public intimacy. For a moment Jack was roused to violent irritation towards Deganway, then he dismissed the irritation in gratitude for the warning. There was no time to lose, if this kind of nonsense was being talked, and he stationed himself at the door of the ball-room and pounced upon Barbara at the end of the dance.

"You're not really hungry, are you?" she asked, when he suggested that they should have supper together.

"I want to talk with you," he answered.

Barbara started imperceptibly. Jack was less self-possessed than usual; of any other man she would argue from a varied experience that he meditated proposing to her.

"I'll come down, if you like," she answered gently. She always achieved success with Jack when her voice grew caressing and she promised to do a thing, if he liked. "I hope I'm not in disgrace?"

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"You? Oh, no. I'm going away on circuit to-morrow, though," he said, tidying away a litter of dirty plates from the only unoccupied table.

"When will you be back?"

Jack helped her to a cutlet as though he were serving out rations, sprinkled his own with salt, cut his roll in two, prospected for a clean glass and poured out some champagne, which he tasted cautiously, with a murmured, "'04 Bollinger! It's a crime to waste that on a ball!" For a man not naturally greedy, supper was very absorbing.

"I shall be away for a week or two," he explained, precipitately adding, "at least."

Barbara's eyes were on his face, but he had no attention to spare from the cutlet.

"Ring me up, when you come back, and suggest a night for dinner," she said.

"I shall have a good deal of work to do when I get back. I've been getting very slack lately. *And* dissipated; you've been making me keep too late hours."

Barbara sighed wearily.

"As if I 'made' you do anything! Will you be back before Easter?"

"Oh, yes."

"Would you like to come to Crawleigh for Easter?"

He went through the same ceremonial with a second cutlet and then said, without looking up:

"I shall be going to my people for Easter."

Barbara raised her eyebrows and turned half away.

"I apologize," she murmured.

"Why?"

"For bothering you with unwelcome invitations."

This time there was no hesitation, though Jack was conscious that his voice and lips were unsteady.

"It doesn't do much good, does it?" he asked with a lop-sided smile.

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"What doesn't?"

"Our meeting."

"I thought you liked being with me; and I thought it gratified your missionary spirit," she added tartly.

"But does it do much good beyond affording a topic of conversation for congenital idiots? I'm looking ahead, Lady Barbara."

"What does that mean?"

Jack glanced at her for the first time. He imagined that he could look her in the eyes without embarrassment; but his hand trembled, and he saw that he had spilt the champagne. She must have seen it, too; she could be in no doubt of his meaning. He had intended to warn her that the congenital idiots were coupling their names; and he had now to warn himself that, if he saw any more of the girl, if she ever again looked at him through smiling, half closed eyes, murmuring that she would do what he wished because he wished it, he was quite capable of making a fool of himself. It would not be serious, because any union between a Catholic and the straitly reared son of bitterly Evangelical parents was unthinkable; it would not be serious, because every one knew that Barbara would soon have seven thousand a year of her own, provided always that she married a Catholic, while he might hope very shortly to be making seven hundred a year, which already had to pay for the rent of chambers and club bedroom, share of clerk, subscription to Law Reports, expenses of circuit, club subscriptions, food, drink, tobacco, clothes and sundries. It would not be serious, but it might be very unsettling.

"You see ... I'm—a practising barrister," he explained. "That means that I work for my living and am looking forward to doing so for the best part of my life."

"And I've been wasting your time? I'm sorry, Jack. I like you, when you're gentle and don't find fault with me. I didn't mean to be selfish."

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She had not thought it prudent to use his Christian name since the disastrous night of the Croxton Ball.

"I've loved it," he answered. "I always told you that I thought a tremendous lot of you. But I have to work. I sometimes think that, so long as a man's decently dressed, a girl never bothers to think whether he's got twopence a year or ten thousand," he added with a touch of bitterness.

"Can't you manage Easter at Crawleigh?" she asked.

He picked up his gloves and offered her a cigarette.

"Don't you understand?"

"I don't understand about money; people make such an absurd fuss over it. I understand that, as usual, you're making me ask twice for what most men would give me without asking; and that's sometimes a little humiliating. Still, you say I'm a law unto myself. Will you come?" He still hesitated; and she leaned forward with her hand on his sleeve. "Have I *ever* refused to do anything you asked?"

"I don't think you have," said Jack slowly. "I—shall be delighted to come."

He drove her home that night, wondering what she meant by saying in such a context that she was a law unto herself. As the taxi left Berkeley Square, he half thought of driving to the Temple and talking to Eric Lane. But he had nothing to say and did not know what he wanted. He was elated and a little frightened; never before had he so sorely needed cold, brutal advice; and this question, which he did not yet dare to define, was one which he would have to solve by himself. As he undressed, he wondered what Barbara was doing, what she had meant, whether she had meant anything....

He was away from London for three weeks; and in that time he unhurriedly made up his mind to marry her. Lying awake in his berth on the night train to Newcastle, he decided that he must

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have fallen in love with her at the Croxton ball. As a bachelor his responsibilities and troubles were confined within the four walls of his bedroom at a very comfortable club; he lived like a prince on four or five hundred a year; and he had never needed the companionship of a woman—least of all, of a woman whom he had instinctively avoided for three years and who quarrelled with him daily when they had at last met. He appreciated now that they quarrelled because he could not bear to see her cheapening herself, because he was already in love with her.

And she must have fallen in love with him at the same time; though he lectured her until she broke down and cried, she begged him to come back and give her another chance. The night when she first invited him to dine with her marked her transition to certainty, but it was only when they were parting that their two certainties engaged and interlocked. While he pronged his cutlet and sprinkled it with salt, eyes prudently averted, each discovered that the other was becoming a habit; he liked her sudden petulance and sudden softening, her restless changes and lightning vitality; and he wondered in sudden humility what she, with her charm and quickness, could see in him. Her family, hitherto friendly, would be disappointed; for she could marry any one, and they would murmur that she had thrown herself away on a poor man who might, indeed, gamble his way into silk, but would never rise to the Bench, the Appeal Court or the House of Lords. She would forfeit her godfather's fortune by marrying a Protestant; and, if they were to live at all, the Crawleighs must come to their aid. Perhaps the Crawleighs disliked mixed marriages as much as the Warings....

Jack turned on the light and frowned at the imitation maple-wood compartment. He must be prepared for a struggle. *Imprimis* the theological history of the Warings began with Zachary Macaulay, diverged into abolitionism, collected and tidied itself under Lord John Russell and the No-Popery movement and came to an inglorious and unseen end, when the family purged itself politically of a whig taint. Mr. Kensit was a tough, awkward mouthful, and, in the absence of a more restrained leader, the Warings did their good to Protestantism by stealth. The colonel fought an honourable fight for the Geneva gown; he talked of "clergymen" and "communion-tables," where others lisped papistically of "priests" and "altars"; and there were heated and unconvincing arguments in the vicarage library about the ornaments rubric. But, if they no longer took a part in public ecclesiastical controversy, the family would choke at Barbara's name. The colonel was vaguely disquieted when Jack, under the guidance of Jim Loring, drifted into "that Catholic set" (he refrained from calling them Papists out of consideration for Jack's feelings, but he frequently abbreviated their definition to "R. C.'s"); to marry an "R. C." was hardly more venial than to marry a black woman or to wear a ring in one's nose. And since this insolent *Ne temere* decree....

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Jack had heard it quoted, but had never sought enlightenment lest he should pour oil on the sinking fires. Colonel Waring treated religious controversy as his safety-valve and needed no encouragement. But it was time for Jack to find out where he stood.

Val Arden was discovered unexpectedly in the hotel at Leeds, and Jack invited him to dine with the bar mess after the first day of the Assizes.

"One was persuaded to deliver a lecture," the novelist explained. "The hard-headed men of the West Riding will think twice before repeating the venture; but it was an experience for them, and one escaped with one's life. The North is very remote. One is still remembered in London? Yes? One's friends are in reasonable health?"

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"They're bearing up," Jack answered. "Jim Loring's back in England."

"A sadder and a wiser man, one hears. Well, if a man wants romance, he must be prepared to pay for it. One feels that it is worth the inconvenience of three years' exile not to be married to Sonia Dainton. You know the full sad story? No? It should be a lesson."

At dinner he weighted his gossip and airy moralizing with serviceable information. Jack learned that a Catholic could only obtain dispensation for a mixed marriage, if the non-Catholic undertook that all the children of the marriage should be brought up in the Catholic faith. It seemed an unequal stipulation, but the only alternative was for the Catholic to defy the Church and to renounce his faith, which was no less unequal. When Arden was gone to bed, Jack surveyed the problem from the standpoint of his family, of Barbara and of himself. There would be a bitter fight at Red Roofs and another at Crawleigh Abbey; but the alternative was to give up Barbara. Neither of them submitted easily to opposition.

He returned to London a few days before Easter, only concerned to wonder how a man prepared the ground before asking a girl to marry him; he had talked vaguely of admiration, but he had never made love to Barbara. And he must find out whether the Crawleighs regarded him as a *persona grata*. And he must explain to Barbara his financial position and the kind of life that a barrister led; and they must have a talk about this religious business....

Barbara herself, and the party which she had gathered for Easter at the Abbey, gave him generous opportunity. With Loring and his sister,—both persuaded by their mother "to give Babs one last chance"—with Summertown and Sally Farwell, Pentyre, Victor Knightrider, Gerald Deganway, Charles Framlingham and a leavening of the Crawleighs' official friends to entertain one another, there was no difficulty in slipping away unobserved. So long as Barbara distributed herself equitably at luncheon and dinner, no one seemed to miss her at other times; and, as Jack did not play bridge, some one had to talk to him in the evenings.

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She welcomed him with the mood and language of their last night together in London.

"Well, I hope the practising barrister made a lot of money," she said to him the first evening after dinner.

"I had rather a good assize," he answered. "My fair share at Leeds and more than my fair share at Newcastle. In money, it wouldn't seem much to you, but I'm quite pleased."

A word of congratulation launched him on a conscientious survey of his fees and cases from the delivery of his first brief. In succeeding conversation he threw further slabs of information at her by schedule, talking of himself with simple-minded absorption. Finance was polished off the first night; the Waring family, three times sub-divided, occupied the following day, and with healthy relentlessness he overhauled Catholicism in particular and revealed religion in general.

The conversation, if one-sided and monotonous, was at least amicable until a smouldering brand from the theological bonfire, waved to life in the kindling breeze of personality, set her ablaze.

"Of course, the whole bag of tricks wants overhauling," said Jack of the Established Church and its liturgy. "When a fellow's ordained, he *says* he believes all sorts of things that he doesn't, really. Every congregation mouths responses like so many parrots, but if you tackled any single member with a plain question, he'd have to admit that he didn't believe the whole business exactly as it's set out in the pleadings. Well, I've got a legal mind. If you say Christ *descended* into *Hell* and on the third day *rose* again from the dead and *ascended* into Heaven, I want to know if you mean it literally or figuratively? That's one of the beauties of *your* Church; you don't admit any doubt or vagueness."

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*"What are the laws of nature, not to bend
If the Church bid them?"*

murmured Barbara.

"You believe that?"

"It was a quotation. I'm sorry."

"It's a logical point of view. With us you pick and choose. In the marriage service it's becoming the fashion for a girl to say she'll 'love and honour' her husband. Now, the Prayer Book says, 'love, honour and *obey*.' If I were a parson, I'd refuse to go on with the service until she'd said 'obey.'"

"But if she doesn't mean to?" asked Barbara. "I think it's degrading."

"If it comes to a tussle, the woman has to give in; so why is she degraded by recognizing it and promising beforehand?"

"She doesn't have to. You couldn't make me—even with a dog-whip."

Though he affected a laugh, Jack had many times regretted the phrase. Barbara kept it in the forefront of her memory and persistently threw it down as a challenge to herself, when her natural independence flagged.

"You'd obey me without that. You can't have two captains on one ship. I don't suppose that any modern husband goes about saying, 'I order you to do this'; he tries to dovetail their two lives into one——"

"Then there wouldn't be much obedience, if I always got my own way."

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"That you certainly wouldn't do!" he laughed.

"What d'you mean?"

Jack looked down the long drawing-room and reflected before answering. It was the last night of his visit to Crawleigh Abbey, and he was hardly prepared for a declaration. Though he had conscientiously put Barbara in possession of all material information, she had received it without comment. In four days he had not brought her any nearer; sometimes it seemed as if she were not trying to help him, and all that he had achieved was to fall four days more in love with her. Instinctively he felt that this was not the most favourable time for a parade of authority; but he had defined his attitude towards every other relevant issue, and it was tidier not to leave his task unfinished. Before marriage or immediately after, he would have to indicate certain people whom he did not care for her to meet, certain things that he did not care for her to do. The theatrical connection, for instance, would have to be cut; Colonel Waring often said that, thirty years ago, an actress was never received at the big houses. Now there was a considerable group, ranging from Manders at the top to quarter-bred anonymities at the bottom, who regarded her as belonging to their world.

"If you were married to me, I should change your mode of life—drastically," he answered.

"What do you find so very unsatisfactory in it?"

Her tone was in itself a warning; but, if she challenged him to make out his case, Jack could not refuse the challenge.

"You're too big for your company," he began from the familiar text. "Take me as a typical case. I

knew of you years before I knew you; and I—on account *of* your friends, you know—I'd have gone miles to avoid meeting you. To me—and the world at large—you were simply a girl who forced yourself into the limelight and got up to mischief with people that you simply ought never to have known. Since I've got to know you and like you, by Jove, I'd give ten years of my life to get *unsaid* the sort of things I used to hear about you. I remember thinking, before I met you, 'If she were my *sister*....'"

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"What kind of things did you hear?" asked Barbara quietly.

"I needn't particularize," he answered.

Barbara shrugged her shoulders and relaxed her attention, only to concentrate it again as she found him particularizing in merciless detail. There were crimes, misdemeanours and sins of the spirit. The stolen car, the mangled chauffeur and the endless, unforgettable inquest were dragged to the light; Jack spared her the coroner's rasping comments, but he could not resist another allusion to the Surinam cable. There was a raided roulette-party, when Summertown had helped her into safety by the fire-escape. (She found time to wonder how he had heard of it; either Val Arden or Summertown was running up a bill against himself.) There was an embarrassing encounter at a night club, where she had gone with Sir Adolf Erckmann's party: all would have been well, if Sonia Dainton had not come with Webster and if Webster had not been drunk. As it was, there had been the makings of unpleasantness. George Oakleigh had taken Sonia home, Webster had become quite helpless; and, in trying to dispose of him, they had all attracted a good deal of notice. Then there was the episode of Madame Hilary. So much for the crimes.

"You take a great interest in the movements of some one you despise," commented Barbara. She wondered why she consented to listen to him, but she was unequal to the self-denial of going away while she was being discussed.

"My dear girl, these things fly from one end of London to the other almost before you've done them. You *won't* recognize how well known you are! D'you appreciate that I should let myself in for a first-class row with my people, if I told them that we were friends? All rot, of course; but there you are."

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After the crimes, the misdemeanours—the innocent things which she was "too big" to do. The one tiresome phrase was reinforced by others as insistent and tiresome. Some one—probably his stiff little sister—had taught him the word "grisette." "That may be all very well for a grisette, but you...." Some one—probably his mother—had divided a girl's behaviour into what was "hoydenish" and what was not; Barbara felt that she had all the markings of a pedigree hoyden. He contributed a few phrases of his own, assuring her gravely that this or that was "simply not done, you know;" and, as other men drew breath before embarking on a new sentence, he introduced every new count in the indictment with an apology that was but a veiled further reproach. "I expect you think I'm an awful prude.... I may be old-fashioned, but I've always been brought up to believe...."

After the misdemeanours, the sins of the spirit.

"You admit that you're frightfully vain and spoiled," he began pleasantly. "You admit that you expect every one to do exactly what you want without even being asked...." He traced the deleterious effect of such vanity on her character. Whatever was going on—from a pageant to a sale of work—she must be in it; her photograph must be in every paper. And, when there was no opportunity for public display, she made it, forced it. Hence this chain of escapades; it was self-advertisement, and, God knew, she was too big for that sort of thing.

At first Barbara listened in amazement; then she became so angry that her attention wandered, as she debated whether to stalk out of the room or to turn on him with all her resources of invective. But to run away was to spare him his punishment. He should apologize for each word, on his knees. And when he had made recantation, he could go.

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"If you were my wife, I should have to change all that," he ended.

Barbara touched her cheeks and was surprised to find them cool.

"You've—rather made mincemeat of me," she sighed, because a sigh loosed some of her pent anger, and she could not be sure of her speaking voice. "Jack, in addition to the vanity, do you think I've got any pride?... Let's go and see how the others are getting on. It's such a pity you don't play bridge."

As he got up, Jack touched her hand.

"I say, have I said anything to offend you?"

"A fly isn't 'offended' when some boy pulls its legs out one by one. *Please* let go my hand, Jack! You must admit I've listened patiently; I've not said a word in my defence—I suppose you think there's nothing *to* be said;—but I don't feel I can stand any more.... Or do you want to make me cry again?"

Her eyes opened and shut quickly; and, by the time that she turned to him, they were filled with tears.

"Barbara! It had to be said some time! But I honestly didn't mean to hurt you. Listen——"

"Not in my own house! I *do* count for something here! Don't make me cry! Don't humiliate me before all of them! It's only to-night. You need never see me again."

Her sudden abasement inflamed him as though he had struck her and she were begging for mercy.

"Barbara! forgive me! I want to say something to you." Though both were speaking almost in whispers, there was a change in his voice. Barbara looked at him mistily through a film of tears and saw that he was going to ask her to marry him before she was ready. When the time came, it should be of her choosing; and they would not be at one end of a room with three bridge-tables at the other.

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"No! I want to talk to you. May I? It's my turn, Jack." As she smiled at him, a tear trickled down her cheek, and she brushed it away with her hand. He stared at her without understanding, for, though she could be regal or pathetic, she seemed incapable of ill-temper or resentment. "Don't you see that, with father, I was brought up in the limelight since I was a child? Try to imagine how much I've always done and then tell me if I'm likely to be content with—well, the very domestic life you say your sister leads. Remember, too, that I've a passion for some things, which you could never understand. You don't like Sir Adolf, no more do I, but I'd go anywhere for good music. And, more than that, I'd be friends with any one, if he had temperament and interested me. I want the *whole* of life.... If a thing's not *wrong*, I don't care whether it's unconventional: if there's nothing wrong in roulette, if I play it under my father's eyes at Monte Carlo, I'll play it in London; and, if there's a silly law to drive an innocent thing under ground, I'll play it under ground. '*Publish and be damned. Your affectionate Wellington.*' I admire people who are too big to mind what's said in the servants' hall.... But don't let's wrangle on our last night! I'm sorry if I've disappointed you."

As she took a step towards the bridge-tables, Jack felt that he was losing her; yet he would only stultify himself by an apology.

"I'm afraid I don't put things very happily," he compromised.

"No more than that?"

"Well, it's your turn now."

"I could never criticize one of my guests."

She gave him time to see that no reply was possible, then took another step towards the bridge players. More strongly than ever he felt that he was losing her.

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"I hope I shall be one of your guests again, Barbara."

She shook her head and smiled with tired gentleness. Jack discovered that she was capable, in her quiet passages, of great dignity, which contributed to his general conception of her as "big" and punished him more completely than if she had lost her temper and made a scene.

"But you can't like hurting me.... And I've tried to be so sweet to you. You don't want to come again?"

"But I do."

He hoped to hear her say "Why?" so that he could recover ground and secure a good jumping-off place for their next meeting.

"Then I'll ask you. I told you at Croxton that I loved doing what people asked. We shall be coming up to London next week. But I shall never make you see my point of view."

"I think I've made you see mine."

Barbara turned away without answering, and Jack interpreted her silence as surrender. She whispered good-night to her mother and went to her room for fear of insulting him in public. Everything could be forgiven except this last blatant, avowed assumption that he had bullied her into submission. His punishment became a matter of duty.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A MATTER OF PLEASURE

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"But what will not ambition and revenge
Descend to? Who aspires, must down as low
As high he soar'd, obnoxious, first or last,
To basest things. Revenge, at first though sweet
Bitter ere long, back on itself recoils...."

MILTON: "PARADISE LOST."

"My Dear Barbara,

"I have seen so little of you lately that I don't know what your movements are. Are you expecting me at the Abbey next week-end? And shall I find you at Ross House on Friday? I particularly want to talk to you.

"Ever yours,

"JACK WARING."

The letter, written nearly a month after Barbara's Easter party, was Jack's first documentary admission that a state of war had been proclaimed and that he was tardily conscious of it. On returning to London, Barbara invited him to dine, as she had promised; but she invited so many other people at the same time that he had little opportunity of talking to her. In the excitement and rush of the early season, as she darted from dinner to play and from play to ball, it was impossible to catch her in a serious mood. Jack followed at a non-committal distance and tried to get her to himself occasionally for a moment at supper; but, after he had made two of these abortive attempts, she explained with gentle reproof that it was hardly fair to expect her to give up dancing because he himself refused to learn; if he wanted to see her, he could wait and take her home; she would not be later than three or perhaps four.... After two experiments, Jack changed his tactics; he could not stay up all night, if he had to be in court next day at ten o'clock, and there was little intimacy or romance in driving home with a girl who either dropped asleep or treated the taxi as an omnibus for distributing her friends about London.

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When they met, her good-humour and friendliness reassured him, but they met so seldom that he made no progress. Letters were unsatisfactory, for he was afraid of saying too much and always wanted to write "without prejudice" at the head of the sheet. She never answered more than one in three; and, though he wrote about himself and his work, she hardly responded to his suggestion that she had a right to know what he was doing and that he had no less a right to expect her to be interested in it. This, he decided, was the fruit of twenty years' spoiling; the effort—if need be, the abasement—must come on his side.

After a week in which he did not meet her at all, Jack convinced himself that love could not be conducted on a limited liability basis; no man achieved passion and saved his face at the same time. It would have been easier to treat marriage like a casual invitation to dinner and to say "Will you marry me? No? Well, it does not matter; I thought I'd just ask you ..."; but a woman was not to be won until she saw that it mattered more than anything else. After deep thought and with momentarily increasing reluctance, he went to an address which he had found in the *Morning Post*, paid three guineas and for a conscientious hour at a time practised steps and pranced round a studio off the King's Road with two fluffy sisters who taught him a little of dancing and much of humility. From the first they despised his clumsiness and resented his lofty refusal to talk, smoke, drink tea or take them out to dinner; but their dislike and contempt were nothing to his own sense of shame. Once back in the County Club, a man among men, deferentially—as became a young member—asking the chairman of the Wine Committee whether they had enough of the '84 Dow to sell it by the glass, he wondered what Mr. Justice Maitland or old Bertrand Oakleigh would think if they dreamed that he was lately escaped from an abomination called Effie, who revolved in a sticky fog of cheap chocolates, and a vulgarity named Dot, who called him "old boy." If Summertown or Gerry Deganway caught him slinking away from chambers to be told that his knees were too stiff or that he must hold his partner more tightly.... Jack blushed hotly and wondered why he had not been taught to dance as a child.

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And for all his pains he got little credit. At his next meeting with Barbara, he chose one of her favourite waltzes and suggested that she might "risk it" with him. In the infinitely small chatter of the tired woman round the walls it was remarked for a week that Jack Waring, who did not usually dance, might very often be seen dancing with Babs Neave. Val Arden accosted him with surprise and congratulated Barbara in his presence on having humanized him.

"But I haven't done anything," she answered.

"You said it was rather pointless for a man to come to a ball, if he didn't dance," Jack pointed out.

"And you did this to please me," she laughed. "How long did it take? Only a fortnight? I wonder how long it would take you to learn bridge. There's such a mob of people everywhere that I've made it a rule never to dance till after supper. George Oakleigh's collecting a table now."

As so often lately, this was not the moment for a man to advance his suit, but Jack could not decide whether Barbara, like all the girls in these restless, neurotic months, was too much excited to be serious or whether she was deliberately tantalizing him and deferring surrender to set a higher value on herself. As secretly as he had learned dancing, he set himself to master the leads and returns of bridge. Starting with "Auction for Beginners," he proceeded painfully to "Advanced Auction Bridge," and challenged his parents and sister to an experimental game during his next week-end at Red Roofs. The experiment was not repeated; Colonel Waring, who carried into bridge the formalism and irritability of a whist-racked youth, told him that he did not seem to have a "card head," and, after a night of helpless anger against the unreasonableness of women, Jack launched his ultimatum to Barbara with an indignant resolve that she should not trifle with him any longer.

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There was little enough of the love-letter in his few words and colourless phrasing, but Barbara felt a tremor as she read them. The letter awaited her, with others, when she came home after a

party; she read it first, then poured herself a cup of cocoa, then read the others and came back to it. This, then, was his capitulation to a woman of such ill-repute that he dared not confess to his own parents that he even knew her.

"*My dear Jack,*" she wrote in reply. "*Yes, I shall be there on Friday and look forward to seeing you.*"

It read naturally, but gave her hypercritical mind the sense that she was meeting him half-way; she would not let him say that his broadest hint had been a warning.

"*My dear Jack,*" she tried again. "*I've promised faithfully to go to the Marlings on Friday; there's rather a panic there, because poor dear Lady M. thinks that every one will desert her for Ross House—it's her own fault for choosing that night. If I can possibly get away, I shall look in for a few minutes. If not, we shall meet at the Abbey next day. Of course, we're expecting you then.*"

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Though this read even more naturally, Barbara was not wholly satisfied. She left the letter in the hall, then retrieved and carried it into her bedroom to see how it looked by morning light. As she undressed, she saw with surprise that there was an unaccustomed flush on either cheek and that her lips were tightly compressed. Jack had hurt her even more than she appreciated; and he was now going to be taught his lesson. The "haggard Venus".... The sight of her thin face and deep-set, glowing eyes made her feel a tragic actress in spite of herself. She was word-perfect in the scene, for she had rehearsed it every time that his bluff, sweeping condemnation had touched her vanity. No doubt he would still try to be bluff and off-hand, but she was resolved to make him plead humbly and to take back every reproach, one by one.

Barbara sat down before an open window in her bedroom; outside, the silent night was like a hushed and darkened auditorium for her speech.

"But we've nothing in common! You know you hate the life I had. I'm afraid I can't alter it, Jack. You'd take away all my friends, but they interest me; I've got music and books and pictures in common with them. Even if you got over your dislike, you'd hate to sit in a corner while we talked about the things that do mean everything to me. And I'm afraid I should always be shocking you. I've *told* you that I *must* have every new experience; I'd sooner be dead than live a sort of half-life, *afraid* to do this, *afraid* to do that—just because no one had done it before. I've got too much vitality.... Jack, you've seen eagles in captivity? Well! That's what would happen to me if I couldn't spread my wings and soar, soar, soar.... If I married any one who didn't soar with me. You wouldn't like to hear people say, 'She's grown so old and lifeless since she married.'

"I can't make out how you ever came to fall in love with me, thinking of me as you do. There are hundreds of girls just as pretty—much prettier, in fact. Sally Farwell. Sonia Dainton. I'm vain and I'm not going to pretend that I don't think myself much higher than *them*, but it's the things which put me higher that you'll never appreciate—never, never, never! You think they're wrong or cheap or vulgar.... Jack, you're in love at present, you're not seeing clearly; but you know in the bottom of your heart that you'll never change me. Well! Do you want to spend the rest of your life with a woman you despise, do you want to despise the mother of your children?... Yes, you actually used the word—it hurt me so much that I'm not likely to forget it—but, if you like, I'll try to forget it, I'll *say* I forget it.... Of course, I *forgive*! My dear, this is much too important for us both to have any silly little personal feeling.... And, whenever you say I'm 'big,' I hope it means that I've got a big soul, that I'm generous.... Dear, I'm not asking you to apologize, but you admit you said that I was vulgar? And now you say it's untrue? Well, *I* haven't changed? It's love.... But love doesn't last for ever. To be happily married, you want common sympathies, common tastes—something that will last for ever, when love's burnt out.

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"I suppose I ought to be—flattered that you think well enough of me to want to marry me.... Sometimes you were a little hard on me.... But flattery ... one's own *amour propre* is so small.... I can't marry you, Jack. No! Nothing you could ever say or do.... How you ever fell in love with me, thinking as you do.... Or *did*, rather. You don't think quite so badly of me now. But our happiness—for all our lives—No, please, Jack; don't say anything! You must never speak of this again, of course; I think it would be better for us not to meet. It's bound to be difficult, you know ... difficult and painful. I don't mean that you're to cut me in the street, but if we allowed ourselves to drift *gradually* apart.... And now don't think I'm heartless, if I tell you that you'll get over this. Time heals all things, Jack. You're hurt now; it's as if I'd hit your head and the blood were running into your eyes. But in time.... We'll say good-bye now. You may kiss me, if you like, Jack, but—I think you'd better not. The best thing you can do is to forget all about me."

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As she sat in a carved chair, whispering the words to herself, the drama of the scene swept Barbara off her balance and left her breathless. The flush had died out of her cheeks, and all emotion was concentrated in the trembling whisper of her voice and in her eyes, tragic, tortured and black, staring through the window into the silent auditorium of the night.

And Jack, who called her theatrical, never admitted that she could act....

The wind set her shivering, and she pulled the curtains together. The rehearsal had excited her, and, when she got into bed, there were gestures, which she felt she could improve, and phrases, which stood in need of polish. Jack would not appreciate the subtilty of the scene; he would go away—perhaps not quite so well satisfied with himself, but vaguely grateful for her gentleness in blunting the edge of disappointment. He would feel sure that she had been very wise, very maternal; and, if any one questioned him out of curiosity or a desire to be sympathetic, her bitterest critic would become her staunchest champion. "It was rather a wipe in the eye for me,"

she could imagine his saying, "because I was very hard hit; I am still. After all, there's no one to compare with her.... But I thought she behaved awfully well; and it couldn't have been easy for her; I'm not really sure that she didn't feel it more than I did—I mean, she saw I wasn't enjoying myself much and she did everything she could.... I was conscious at the time that I'd never loved her so much, I'd never appreciated what I was losing until I lost her. Of course, I always knew that she was *big*...."

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Many men had proposed to her, but none had done justice to his opportunity. She wondered how Jack would begin.... Men never troubled about a setting—or a time; they procrastinated and procrastinated until the car was at the door or the train was starting. If she were in his place, there would be splendour of setting and superb eloquence of rolling, romantic phrases. There was colour in the world when Cyrano de Bergerac swung down the street, quarrelling and making love, or when he stood dying and already preparing his bow to the Court of Heaven. But nowadays all emotion was starved; men were ashamed even of emotion's gestures, the bloom and the beauty of language. Barbara picked up a volume of Shakespeare and read where the book opened of its own accord. "Put off your maiden blushes; avouch the thoughts of your heart with the looks of an empress; take me by the hand, and say 'Harry of England, I am thine': which word thou shalt no sooner bless mine ear withal, but I will tell thee aloud 'England is thine, Ireland is thine, France is thine, and Henry Plantagenet is thine; who, though I speak it before his face, if he be no fellow with the best king, thou shalt find the best king of good fellows.' Come, your answer in broken music.... You have witchcraft in your lips, Kate: there is more eloquence in a sugar touch of them than in the tongues of the French council."

Barbara sat up in bed, clasping her hands round her knees and thinking of days when colour still shone in the world and when she made a part of it. India still lived gorgeously. She could still conjure up her triumphant arrival at Bombay, the roll of the saluting guns, the guard of honour, the lined streets and majestic progress of the new viceroy....

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On the evening of the ball she was careful to dress in such fashion that she should not seem to have taken any extra care, but her maid looked at her with undisguised admiration, and at dinner Lady Crawleigh woke to articulate enthusiasm. Barbara smiled to herself, as she put on her cloak and fastened a spray of orchids in her dress. Every one seemed eager and excited: her mother had more than once brought Jack's name into conversation without venturing farther: and, of course, all the world loved a lover. From Phyllis Knight-riding she knew that her aunts looked with hope and relief on the determined, steady young man who had at last been found to keep her in order. She wondered what they would say when he disappeared without explanation.... She wondered how Jack would begin and whether he would come first to Lady Marling's to make sure of not missing her. Catching sight of herself in a mirror, she smiled again, though she was beginning to feel a little nervous. She wondered how Jack had been spending the first part of the evening....

At half-past eleven he arrived to find her surrounded by four men of whom each claimed that she had promised him the next dance.

"I came to see if you were thinking of starting for Ross House," Jack explained. "Have you got your car here?"

"Mother's taken it on," she answered. "But Sir Deryk—you know Sir Deryk Lancing, don't you? Mr. Waring—Sir Deryk's offered me his. We'll give you a lift."

Jack hid his disappointment under an adequate bow and accompanied her downstairs. Young Lancing's presence disquieted him. Though numberless men made rival calls on her, there had so far been no serious cause for jealousy; but Lancing had so much in his favour that Jack felt an insane desire to establish something discreditable against him. He was young, healthy, good-looking and highly gifted; Barbara had more than once quoted him as an authority on music; he was something of an archæologist; and his black-figure pottery at Aston Ripley was no less famous than his collection of eighteenth-century miniatures. He was worth between twenty and twenty-five million pounds, he was a baronet; and he was unmarried. Their tastes harmonized; every one would say that it was a most suitable alliance. And some would whisper that she had come very near to throwing herself away on Jack Waring. People ought not to be allowed to be so rich....

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He strode bare-headed on to the pavement, feeling helpless and trying to persuade himself that he was only nervous. As they drove to Ross House, he watched and listened to Lancing and Barbara, envying them their ease and wondering whether it was fair for two people to exclude the third from conversation by choosing an impossible subject. Rimski-Korsakoff ... Ivan le Terrible ... Chaliapin.... While Barbara got rid of her cloak, he consciously tried to make friends with Lancing; they had apparently been at Eton together and had overlapped at Oxford. There was no harm in the fellow; though he was unutterably bored and made no attempt to hide it, he could not be dismissed as a conceited ass.... Barbara took an unconscionable time to shed one cloak.... And, when she returned to the hall, a newly arriving horde was already engulfing her.

"The first one's mine, isn't it?" Jack called out anxiously. "You promised it me in the car."

The anxiety was almost hysterical, and other people must be noticing it.

"Yes. And then Sir Deryk," answered Barbara. "Then Jack Summertown. Then Gerry. George?" She gave Oakleigh a quick smile over an undulating sea of heads and held up four fingers. "No, *missing* four! Jim? Missing five! What an *appalling* crowd! I don't see any prospect of supper."

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"May I have that with you—after Jim Loring?" asked Jack. Then he lowered his voice. "I don't see much prospect of that talk with you."

The voice was peevish, and other people must be noticing that, too.

"My dear, you'll have enough of me this week-end. Take me upstairs before I'm trampled to death."

As they pressed forward to the door of the ball-room, Jack gripped the banisters to make sure that he was awake. At one moment he was staring at the broad shoulders of the man in front of him, the next down his collar; fluttering hands tidied away vagrant wisps of hair and buttoned gloves. Waves of scent met and blended with the dominant sweetness of the carnations which wound in clustering chains about the banisters. Above and before them boomed a far-away voice, announcing names; and between the shrill clatter of surprised recognitions came the strangled music of a frantic band.

"You'll certainly be trampled to death, if you try to get inside," said Jack. "Let's sit it out somewhere."

She nodded, but, when he had shaken hands with the Duchess of Ross and was trying to cleave a passage, Barbara was deep in conversation with a pale, underhung youth; and he felt a second twinge of jealousy. She talked until the music stopped, while Jack fingered his tie and strove vainly to keep out of other people's way.

"You know him, don't you?" Barbara asked, when at last the rapt conversation came to an end. "My cousin, Johnnie Carstairs. He's been out in Rome for the last three years, but now he's being transferred to the Foreign Office."

Jack nodded without speaking and continued to look for standing-room. After his letter it was almost inconceivable that she should not know what he wanted to tell her; yet she light-heartedly abandoned him for a cousin whom she could see at any time, talking as though the fellow were on his way to the scaffold; and their promised moment together was relegated to the end of the evening; and in this hurly-burly it was almost too much to expect that they could find an inch of space or a minute of uninterrupted conversation.

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"I can see *one* chair at the far end, if we can get through to it," he said.

"The music's starting," she answered doubtfully. "We'd better get back, I think."

"No, they're playing the same thing. It's only an *encore*."

"Oh, then do let me have it with Johnnie! I haven't seen him for such ages. You don't mind?"

She had spied a thinning in the crowd and was half-way to the ball-room door before he had an answer ready. Noting the number of the dance, Jack went downstairs and tried to be philosophical over a cigar; but his nerves were unsteady, and, though there was an endless hour and a half to wait, he had to hurry back every few minutes to make sure that he was not missing the promise of supper with Barbara. It was irritating to be so restless—and doubly irritating to feel that others were noticing it. Jim Loring came into the smoking-room and settled himself for a comfortable talk, only to find that his companion had run away unceremoniously in mid-sentence. These people had no sense of the important; life to them was powder and patches and dance music—less than that, for they stayed up half the night to smoke furtive cigars and ostentatiously shut their ears to the dance music. And Barbara was flitting from one man to another, when their two lives were in the balance.

In one of his wanderings to and from the ball-room Jack found Deryk Lancing, ticket in hand, by the cloak-room.

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"You off?" he asked with secret relief.

"Yes, this sort of thing bores me stiff. Can I drop you anywhere?"

"Well, I'm booked for supper with Lady Barbara."

"Oh, you might remind her that she cut me."

He moved away, whistling drearily to himself and leaving Jack grateful for his absence. There was no rivalry to fear from Lancing. Gerald Deganway came up, swinging his eye-glass distractedly and calling for his hat.

"My dear, this sort of thing's killing me, positively killing me!" he simpered. "This is my third ball to-night, and I've got to go to two more. The Marlings, the Tavitons, this place, the Fenwicks—Oh, no! I've been to the Fenwicks; I'm almost sure I started there. I shall be such a wreck to-morrow, a mere bundle of nerves! But Helen Crossleigh will never forgive me, if I disappoint her. *You* don't look as if you were enjoying yourself much. I believe some one who shall be nameless has *cut* you! I *believe* that's it."

He laughed shrilly and dug Jack roguishly in the ribs with the gold knob of his cane; then set a resplendent hat at a jaunty angle and fluttered through the hall, murmuring, "Taxi! Oh, some one must get me a taxi! I shall break down and cry, if I don't get a taxi."

Jack watched him smilingly but with cold rage in his heart. If he had to wait hour after hour,

fretting with nervousness and fuming with impatience, he might at least have been spared the inane facetiousness of Deganway.

"A little more of this, and something will happen to my brain," he growled to Val Arden.

"It is the chatter of the Bandar-Log, aimless, restless, incomplete," was the answer.

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"Here we sit in a branchy row,
Thinking of beautiful things we know;
Dreaming of deeds that we mean to do,
All complete, in a minute or two—
Something noble and grand and good,
Won by merely wishing we could.
Now we're going to—never mind,
Brother, thy tail hangs down behind!"

Jack nodded and tried to smile; but it was no matter for jest when he remembered that he had himself chosen this time and place for asking Barbara to marry him.

"One is reminded of our good Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit," Arden observed, as he watched Deganway's flurried exit. "You play piquet? No? One would have challenged you to a game. As against bridge, the absence of vulgar abuse is noteworthy and welcome.... One likes to see the young people enjoying themselves, but these entertainments are only moderately amusing. One looked to Lady Lilith in old days to create a diversion, but your dire friendship has sobered her. Of course, one has one's bed...."

He sighed and tossed down the ticket for his hat. So many people were leaving that Jack looked apprehensively at his watch and hurried upstairs. Only one dance separated him from supper with Barbara; but, when the music began, she had forgotten her promise, and he had to stand for a quarter of an hour while she waltzed with Charles Framlingham. As he went forward to claim her at the end, Summertown advanced from another corner and forestalled him. There was nothing new in such behaviour, and Jack realized that he would only look ridiculous, if he shewed impatience or jealousy; but he felt that he was losing his temper and that she saw it. The heat of the house tired him, and he was hungry.

"Wait *one* more, Jack, and then you may take me home," she called out, as she swept past him.

"Aren't you going to have any supper?"

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"Oh, I'd quite forgotten about that."

She passed out of earshot, breathlessly and with shining eyes. If she remembered that he wanted to talk with her alone, if she guessed what he was going to say, he could not understand her behaviour; it was very feminine, but it was also rude and extraordinarily inconsiderate, exasperating him without in any way intensifying his love; if she thought that he wanted simply to compete with Deganway in vapidness or Arden in affectation, well, she was a fool; he had given her the broadest hints. He caught sight of himself in a strip of looking-glass and found that he was frowning; without that signal he knew that he had lost his temper.

"I forget everything, when I'm dancing," was Barbara's nearest approach to an apology on her return. "I promised to have supper with this child, too; let's all go down together."

She went on ahead of them before he could say anything; and, as Summertown shewed no sign of yielding to a prior claimant, Jack pulled off his gloves with careful deliberation and followed her into the dining-room. Though he tried to overcome his ill-humour, their minds were not in tune with his. Barbara prattled unceasingly, Summertown kept up a monologue of his own, and, when they tried to infect him with their own lightness of heart, he could only nod or shake his head or smile in dumb fury that she could play with him in the presence of a spectator. Women, he decided, must be innately cruel, for, though she was clearly trying to anger him, it was not mere mischievousness.

"I must have one more dance with this child," she cried at the end of supper, with a glance of invitation at Summertown.

"Then I don't think I shall wait," said Jack.

The tempo of her dialogue was retarded for half a beat but her expression was unchanged.

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"Oh, but didn't you say you'd got a message for me or something?"

"I can give it you at the Abbey to-morrow."

She looked at him with amused surprise.

"Jack, you're not grumpy with me because I cut your dance—or, at least, you say so? You may have another, and this child can come later. Let's go somewhere where it's cooler and where I can have a cigarette."

It was a trifling encounter, but, inasmuch as she saw that he had lost his temper, Jack felt worsted. He swore that he would keep control of himself, however much she exasperated him. He

was less tired and more certain of himself than before supper, and for some reason his nervousness had transferred itself to her. The change was apparent from the moment that they were quit of Summertown. She became tense in manner and a little frightened, no longer laughing; and he ceased to fancy that his hints could have been wasted on her.

"Where are we likely to be undisturbed?" he asked, as they hurried purposefully up the stairs. "You know this house better than I do."

"Oh—anywhere," she answered rather breathlessly.

CHAPTER NINE THE JUDGEMENT OF SOLOMON

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"The King hailed his keeper, an Arab
As glossy and black as a scarab,
And bade him make sport and at once stir
Up and out of his den the old monster....

One's whole blood grew curdling and creepy
To see the black mane, vast and heapy,
The tail in the air stiff and straining,
The wide eyes, nor waxing nor waning....

'How he stands!,' quoth the King....
'We exercise wholesome discretion
'In keeping aloof from his threshold....
'But who's he would prove so fool-hardy?
'Not the best man of Marignan, pardie!'

The sentence no sooner was uttered
Than over the rails a glove fluttered,
Fell close to the lion, and rested:
The dame 'twas, who flung it and jested
With life so, De Lorge had been wooing
For months past; he sat there pursuing
His suit, weighing out with nonchalance
Fine speeches like gold from a balance.

Sound the trumpet, no true knight's a tARRIER!
De Lorge made one leap at the barrier,
Walked straight to the glove,—while the lion
Ne'er moved, kept his far-reaching eye on
The palm-tree-edged desert-spring's sapphire,
And the musky oiled skin of the Kaffir,—
Picked it up, and...."

ROBERT BROWNING: "THE GLOVE."

Though he seemed to be leading the way, Barbara urged Jack by suggestion up a side-staircase and through a billiard-room to a broad *loggia* overlooking Greenhill Gardens. There were two chairs and a table with cigarettes and champagne cup; the night air blew chillingly with a scent of spring leaves, and the music reached them as a reverberation mingling with the distant traffic of Piccadilly.

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"I say, you won't catch cold, will you?" Jack asked.

Barbara smiled to herself. He would never have thought of the wind or of her, if his match had not been blown out.

"Oh, we shan't be here long enough for that."

Jack lighted the cigarettes and settled himself elaborately in his chair, with one leg thrown over the other.

"I wanted to talk to you. I think you know what it's about."

She had intended to be thrown off her balance with surprise, but the bluntness of his opening did not invite ingenuousness.

"I hope I'm not in disgrace," she answered meekly. "You—rather frighten me, when you're so mysterious. You're not going to say anything unpleasant?"

"I hope you won't find it unpleasant. Look here, the best thing will be for me to say what I've got to say, ... and then you.... I mean, if you interrupt, you'll throw me out of my stride. Barbara, I've

told you what I'm earning; and one naturally hopes that it will increase almost automatically year by year. As you know, I'm *not* a Catholic——"

"Jack——"

He flapped one hand at her with nervous impatience, drew furiously at his cigarette and looked away over the garden and house-tops to the shadowy Park.

"You mustn't put me off my stroke, Barbara.... These are the two big obstacles that all the world will see. Well, I can assure you that I shouldn't be talking to you like this, if you hadn't—in a way—given me the right to.... At first I couldn't stand you at any price whatsoever. Then there was a night when I said to myself that I should have to be careful. It was when you rang me up and invited me to dine with you alone—after that business in Webster's rooms. At first I was perfectly furious; you seemed to be taking that luckless girl's death so calmly and thinking only of the hole *you* were in. And then—I don't know; something changed. I began to feel sorry for you, I felt extraordinarily fond of you; I told myself that I should have to watch out. Then—something you said—it was when you invited me to one of your own special parties at the Abbey; I got the feeling that you liked me, rather. Was I right?"

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The question came so suddenly in the middle of his halting narrative that Barbara started. So far the scene was not developing at all as she had expected. She could interrupt, confuse, stop him; but there was no way of bringing in the open-eyed amazement which she had planned; he seemed to be putting the responsibility on her. And, when he brusquely told her not to interrupt, she felt strangely disposed to obey him.

"Was I right?" he repeated, turning to look at her.

The customary self-satisfied smile had disappeared, and he was frowning. Barbara chose to fancy that he must take on the same expression with a fighting case in court.

"Yes, I quite liked you," she answered. "I always liked you, when you're not trying to shew me that everything I say and do——"

He cut her short with a quick uplift of one finger.

"Good! Well, when you shewed me that, I took stock and began to look at things from another point of view. I suggested to you—as fairly and fully as I could—the chief obstacles; money ... and so forth. If you—or your people, through you—had thought that insuperable, then there was nothing more to be said. I felt I must give you the opportunity of entering a *caveat*. I need hardly say that, knowing you as I did.... I mean, if you wanted to marry a man, you wouldn't mind if he were a beggar. Would you?"

The new question again startled her by its abruptness. She had a misgiving that he was pressing her into a corner.

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"Would you?" he repeated; and she half expected to hear him browbeating her. "It's a simple question.... Yes or no.... I want you to tell the jury.... Remember you are on your oath. Come now ... yes or no...."

"Of course not. But, Jack——"

He stopped her with another jerk, as she had foreseen.

"I knew that. The next thing was—I suppose 'suitability' is the best word. I mean we lead different lives, our outlook's different in some ways. I had to consider what chance of success we should have together. Well, you sometimes say that I find fault with everything you do; I think you see now that I've never said a word that your father hasn't said to you a hundred times. It's what everybody was saying, and I think everybody's glad to see that you've come round to their point of view. We all felt that you were too *big*, you know...."

He hesitated and looked away, frowning again as he tried to remember the sequence of his argument. Barbara shivered instinctively at his hackneyed, hated phrase, but she was struck silent by the sheer audacity of his patronizing assumptions.

"Jack——" she began, but he again held up his hand.

"I don't know whether I ought to have gone to your father," he resumed. "It seemed rather getting hold of the wrong end of the stick to talk to a woman's father before you've talked to the woman herself. Of course, one naturally goes to him for his *assent*. I happen to know that your people, like you, saw what was in the wind, and, as they were good enough *not* to pitch me into the street...."

"Jack! Please!"

Barbara leaned to him with her hands appealingly outstretched. In a little while he would rob her of her last cue. By no abuse of language could such pleading be associated with passion, but he was quoting her against herself until it seemed as if she had almost begged him to marry her.

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"I've nearly done," he said, smiling for the first time; then he paused to collect himself for a concise summary, and she could have laughed hysterically at the spectacle of a plodding young barrister trying to argue her into marriage. His voice had never changed in timbre; and, if he had occasionally hesitated over a word, he had never lost the train of thought. His chair was as

discreetly remote as when he first sat down, one leg thrown comfortably over the other; and he had not thought fit to use one whisper of endearment.

"I don't want to hear any more!"

"You must."

"But, Jack, you're not in love with me!"

He laughed good-naturedly, as though he were humouring a child.

"I expect I'm the best judge of that. Well, you admit that I'm not wholly repellent to you; the difference in religion can be accommodated; I'm not altogether penniless. I want you to marry me, Babs."

"I can't."

She flung out the words as soon as he gave her a chance of speaking. With his dogged, relentless attack, it was surprising that he left her an opportunity of answering; she would hardly have been astonished if he had taken her firmly by the arm and led her home to announce their engagement.

"That means you *don't* care for me?"

There was no sign of perturbation; but he was watching her closely. One careless word would enable him to demonstrate that she had coquetted with him for her vanity's sake; his memory was relentless, and she could not pretend to convince herself that she had behaved merely as if she "quite liked" him, when a hundred people were gossiping about them.... And he had a passion for demonstrating things; he seemed to be addressing an invisible jury beyond the pillars of the *loggia*.

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"My dear Jack, how could you ever *dream* of marrying me—thinking of me, as you do?" she demanded with a breathless attempt to start her speech and to overwhelm his massive arguments with rhetoric and drama.

"Let's stick to facts. I do dream of it. I want to."

"But you disapprove of everything I do, you think I'm vulgar, cheap. Oh, you've said it, Jack; you've used those words. They hurt much too much for me to forget them easily."

"I'm sorry to have hurt you," he interrupted. "But I think you *have* come round to my way of thinking."

"I'll forget them—I'll try to," she went on, gabbling her speech murderously. "This is much too important for us to think about our own wretched little *amour propre*; and, when you say I'm "big," I always hope it means that I'm generous, forgiving. But, Jack, you despise me—or you *did*—the woman that you want to be the mother of your children——"

"You *have* changed. Otherwise I shouldn't want to marry you."

Barbara walked to the edge of the *loggia* and stood with her hands on the stone parapet, looking down on to the shadowy foliage of the gardens. She could no longer force into service the speech that she had rehearsed and at any moment she might expect to hear him say—in his horrible jury voice—"Then am I to understand that you never meant anything seriously, that this was all an elaborate trick? Was that your means of vindicating yourself? And do you feel that it has been successful?" He shewed a disconcerting mastery and a no less disconcerting restraint; she was not allowed to interrupt, and, when he had posed a question, he held her to it, waiting silently for an answer and blocking the loop-holes of irrelevancy.

"Why do you say you can't marry me?"

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She turned to find that he was still by the table; he had risen as she rose, but without following her, without disturbing his deadly, businesslike composure.

"We should be miserable."

"D'you mean I'm wrong? *Don't* you care for me?"

"'CARE'? I'm thinking about *love*! You don't know what love *is*! All the time you've been talking.... So cold and collected.... If you were in love with me, you'd want to take me in your arms, you'd be transfigured, there'd be radiance, glory in your eyes, you'd hold me as if you never meant to let me go!... You—you talked like a leading article; you never even said you loved me."

"I thought we might take that as read."

"But look at you now! If you loved me, you wouldn't want to keep away; you wouldn't be able to."

"I've got a certain amount of self-control."

"To resist something that's not a temptation?"

She came slowly back to him and stood gazing up into his face. As on the night when she had darted from him at the Croxton Ball, her cheeks were white and hollow, her eyes were nearly black; it was the morbid, feverish beauty of a consumptive kept alive by force of will. The spray of

orchids rose and fell with her breathing, and he could have caught and encircled her slender, boyish figure with one arm.

"You're looking *divine* to-night," he murmured.

"Is *that* all you've got to say?"

"No! I'm responsible for you at this moment. And, if I were you, I should think twice before you blaspheme against the Holy Ghost again. You don't doubt that I love you."

Barbara pressed her hands against her cheeks, throwing her head back and closing her eyes.

"I wish I could," she whispered. "I was trying to, trying to make you doubt it so that you wouldn't mind so much. If I could have made you think that we were just friends.... Jack, you *must*—before it's too late. You've made a mistake, you're exaggerating everything! Just because you've hardly met a girl before, you think you're in love with me. Because I'm pretty, because I amuse you ... I'll be ever so humble! I'm nothing—nothing but a great friend. If you go away, you'll see it like that; when you come back, we shall still be friends, but you'll wonder how you ever imagined you were in love with me. You're not, Jack! You must tell yourself you're not."

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"I don't understand, Barbara."

"I'm trying to help you. I can never marry you; and I want you to see that you're not losing anything. You don't *really* want me. Oh, you *don't*, Jack!"

"Why do you say you can never marry me? *Don't* you love me?"

Barbara had expected the question for so long that it had lost half its force before reaching her. Her mind moved quickly, as it had done all the evening, and she could anticipate Jack's slow change of expression, his dawning realization and then her punishment. There was no give-and-take, when he lectured or attacked; no neatness of phrase, no delicacy of sarcasm or irony, no intellectual joy of battle. He dealt the bludgeon blows of one who seemed to boast that he was not clever but tried to be honest. She felt suddenly frightened for her pride and for herself; and she knew that he would beat her as conscientiously as he had tried to win her.

"Love isn't everything," she answered.

"I'm waiting to be told what the obstacle is."

In another moment he would have summarized for the third time all possible objections to the marriage and his own complacent disposal of them. She could not bear that again.

"Jack, you're not a Catholic," she cried.

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"I know. I told you that from the first. But we can arrange that; I'll do whatever is necessary. It's a nuisance, because I expect your people loathe the idea of your marrying a heretic as much as mine loathe the idea of my marrying a Catholic. Fortunately, we can ignore them."

"I could never marry a man who wasn't a Catholic."

She clutched wildly at the promise of escape, and Jack betrayed emotion for the first time in a gape of astonishment.

"But your own church—if you still call yourself a Catholic—doesn't go as far as that."

"I don't care. It *should*. It's lying to your soul, if you believe one thing and let children believe something else that you *know* to be false. There's no sympathy of spirit when each thinks the other wrong and sneers privately.... I *can't* talk about this, but you *see* now why I tried to stop you.... Jack, do take me home! I feel as if I couldn't stand any more!"

She turned convulsively and hurried back to the parapet of the *loggia*. Jack picked up a cigarette, which he regarded absently, frowning again.

"You could never marry a man who wasn't a Catholic?" he repeated.

"No. Jack, don't let's talk about this any more! If I'm to blame for making you unhappy.... Oh, try to forgive me! If you let me think I'd spoiled your life— Please take me home."

He roused himself from contemplation of the gilt name and address on the cigarette and walked with her into the house.

"Is your car coming back for you?" he asked with a detachment that she admired.

"Yes. You can take it on, if you like. Or perhaps you'd rather *not* come with me.... I suppose you won't be coming to the Abbey to-morrow?"

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"I intended to."

"Jack, it can't do any good!"

"Do you withdraw the invitation?"

"I'd rather you didn't come. Later on we may be able to meet.... You won't believe me now, but time is a wonderful healer—"

He interrupted her with a laugh of grating boisterousness.

"Is there anything to heal?"

It was after four o'clock when Barbara returned home alone from Ross House; but, though she went quietly to bed, Lady Crawleigh interrupted her undressing. The Duchess of Ross was the latest busybody to wonder audibly whether young Waring was serious, and it was high time for the girl to know that people were talking about her.

"There was such a mob that, when Jack and I had got away from it, we didn't go back," sighed Barbara wearily, to explain her lateness. "I wish Eleanor Ross didn't know quite so many people. Oh, mother, Jack can't come to the Abbey this week-end. He's writing to you, but he asked me to give you that message."

Lady Crawleigh picked up a pendant, head-band and bracelet of fire-opals from their scattered hiding-places on the floor, trying not to seem either too much surprised or too indifferent. Then she knelt, with a cracking of knee-joints, to search for the missing half of a pair of ear-rings. Barbara, she reflected, had evidently done one thing—or perhaps the other—or even neither; mercifully she could not do both.

"He's really no business to chop and change like that at the last moment," she complained. "What's happened?"

"He's kept in London," Barbara answered. "Don't bother to look for those things, mother; Merton will be so disappointed, if there's nothing for her to tidy. She always waits till I'm fast asleep, *really* tired, and then throws tepid tea at me with one hand and knocks over all the furniture with the other.... I can hardly keep my eyes open. You'll let me go to sleep, won't you?"

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Lady Crawleigh scrambled to her feet and came to the side of the bed, an undignified, shrunken figure in a blue *peignoir* and satin slippers, with grey-black hair secured in thick short plaits.

"My child, is anything the matter?"

Barbara was lying with one bare arm over her eyes, as though the light hurt her. She had not waited to brush her hair, and the room was littered with furiously scattered clothes.

"I'm only tired," she said. "I've never known anything so hot as that place."

"Well, go to sleep." Lady Crawleigh shewed no sign of leaving the bedside. "On the whole perhaps it's just as well that he *isn't* coming to the Abbey. Some one was saying to-night——"

"Mother, I'm not going to marry Jack!"

Lady Crawleigh's eyes opened with innocent surprise.

"My darling, who ever said anything about it?"

Barbara laughed hardly.

"You were going to, weren't you? I thought I'd save time. Jack.... I've had a—remarkable evening, but I don't think I want to talk about it."

Lady Crawleigh changed the lights, but she continued to hover between the bed and the door, picking up a glove here and a stocking there, glancing stealthily at Barbara and flogging her imagination to guess what had taken place. The girl was a little exacting with men, and there might have been a quarrel; but it was rather drastic for Jack to default from the Abbey at the last moment. He had possibly received an unexpected rebuff; but then the rebuff was unexpected by every one, for Barbara had shewn him all the encouragement that a woman could give. Possibly she had encouraged him too much and received a rebuff herself....

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"Darling——"

"I'm *so* tired, mother."

She seemed without resistance or power to assert herself, as though she had been bullied and beaten. Lady Crawleigh felt a need to protect her, as she had not felt it for ten years; Barbara was usually stoical with bodily pains, and a wound to her pride or an ache at her heart was shared with no one.

"Yes, darling, I won't keep you awake, but has there been any unpleasantness? I mean, I have to think about the future—about inviting him here."

"Oh, there's no reason why you shouldn't invite him. He can please himself whether he comes or not."

Lady Crawleigh hesitated a moment longer, then tip-toed to the door and turned off the lights. Nothing was to be learned from Barbara at present.

No elucidation came from the letter of apology which she received from Jack next day. He was unexpectedly detained in London, but hoped that he might be forgiven and invited again some time later in the summer. It was a question of private business, which would keep him very fully occupied for some weeks. He would have given longer warning, if possible, but the business had only come to him in the middle of the night, as it were.... Lady Crawleigh tore up the letter

impatiently, then pieced it together and read it with perplexed attention. If there had been no quarrel, no rebuff, no unpleasantness, he would not underline this private business and hint that he did not want to be invited to the house for the present; if there had been a quarrel, it was incomprehensible that he should ask to be given another chance later in the summer.

But for the phrase, "I've had a remarkable evening, but I don't think I want to talk about it," Barbara might simply be tired. Certainly, she was in excellent spirits next day, and the whole party at the Abbey revolved round her and shone with her radiance. On their return to London she threw herself as insatiably as ever into all that was going on. The only difference now was that she never danced with Jack, because he had disappeared; and she never mentioned his name. Others also remarked his disappearance, and, though the excuse of private business was bravely presented, they at least were not satisfied. Lady Crawleigh suggested inviting him to a musical party, from which it might have been noticeable to exclude him; Barbara raised no objection, but Jack replied from his chambers that he was unfortunately compelled to refuse all invitations at present.

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It was mysterious and annoying, for an absurd amount of gossip was swirling and eddying among the weary, chilled women who sat night after night round ball-room walls. Deganway professed to have seen an impertinent paragraph in the column of *The Sphinx* headed "Riddles for Our Readers"; and, for every one who enquired what had happened to Jack, Lady Crawleigh knew that a dozen must be asking themselves why Barbara had made so public an exhibition of herself, if she did not mean to let anything come of it. And there was an added mystery and vexation when Jim Loring said: "I've the best reason for knowing there's nothing to worry about," in a tone which shewed that he was himself deeply worried.

He met his aunt on the morrow of a confession which lasted from ten o'clock until two next morning. Jack had invited himself to dinner at Loring House, stipulated that no one else should be present and pledged his host to secrecy.

"I can't quite trust my own judgement," he drawled, when they were alone after dinner. "A new factor, you know.... I haven't quite adjusted myself to it.... I don't suppose it's any news to you that I want to marry your cousin Barbara? Well, I've every reason to think she would marry me to-morrow but for the unfortunate circumstance that she's a Catholic and I'm not."

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Loring involuntarily winced and looked away, recalling his own shipwreck on a similar rock, the months of dull agony and the empty years of wandering, which had but lately come to an end. It was the first time that they had met alone, and Jim was more than three years older; new lines were visible at the corners of his eyes, his face and body were heavier and more inelastic. A note of bitterness broke over-often through the habitual irony of his voice, as though his spirit were still raw under its dressing of tolerant boredom.

"If any one knows anything on that subject," he murmured, "you've come to the right man. Have you—actually put it to her?"

"Oh, yes. We're hung up on that. Barbara says that she could never marry a man who wasn't a Catholic."

"But that's absurd! The Church itself—"

"So I told her, but she goes one better than her Church. Jim, I feel that there's the makings of a first-class tragedy, if we're not very careful ... and very clever. I want to marry her more than anything in the world. There's nothing—I think there's literally nothing I wouldn't do to bring it off. She—well, we went into it pretty thoroughly the other night. I could see she was torn in two.... I—didn't press it. I knew that, if she felt as strongly as that—in her bones—, I shouldn't sweep her off her feet, however much she seemed to be convinced at the moment. It didn't look like being permanent. I had to find some other way out."

He paused and relit his cigar. The door was ajar, and Loring got up to close it; then, instead of going back to his chair, he took a turn up and down the library, with his chin on his chest and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. Three years ago he had come back to that room from his last farewell with Sonia Dainton; he had distractedly summoned George Oakleigh to advise him and had paced up and down, up and down, flinging half-smoked cigarettes into the fire-place. And Oakleigh, whom he had invoked for help, would only tell him brutally that love was over and that he must set his teeth and face it.... Now again no other advice was possible.

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"I'm dam' sorry, Jack," he muttered.

His voice quavered in sympathy, because their tragedies had so much in common. He had never lost his heart to any one but Sonia, as Jack had lost his only to Babs Neave; they had been immune for the first thirty years of their life, and they were paying for their self-denial and their affronting indifference to woman. Jack probably enjoyed exposing his soul as little as he had done with George.

"It's rather a mess, isn't it?" said Jack.

"What are you going to do? Look here, we're old enough friends for me to talk freely to you. It hurts like hell at the time, but one *does* get over it. As you know, I went abroad for some years and tried to forget. I should be—*embarrassed*, if I sat next to Sonia at dinner to-night, but I shouldn't get the same tug at the heart that I got when I just saw her for a moment in the distance—at the Coronation. You'd better go away."

Jack smiled and then turned his head, finally resting his chin on one fist and staring at the empty fire-place so that his face should be hidden.

"I'm not going away," he answered. "I've every intention of marrying Barbara. I feel that we were made for each other."

"But what are you going to do?" Loring repeated, as he paused again.

"I propose to become a Catholic."

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Loring started and sat down on the arm of a chair without speaking. Jack's natural stolidity was a guarantee against melodrama.

"You can't do that, Jack," he said at length.

"We know several people who have."

"I won't criticize them, because they may already have been Catholics in everything but name. They're entitled to the benefit of the doubt. But you and I have talked religion a hundred times. It wouldn't be straight dealing."

"Then I'm glad I've not talked religion with any one else. There'll be no one else to give me away. *I'm* entitled to the benefit of the doubt."

"No one would believe you; Barbara certainly wouldn't; and you'd never be able to impose on yourself. You'd always feel dishonoured, Jack."

There was a long silence, in which Loring was visibly the more embarrassed. Jack smoked his cigar tranquilly, looking ahead of him at the fire-place and not striving to pose either as hero or as cynic.

"My dear Jim," he answered at length, "if this were an *easy* question, where I could trust my own judgement, I wouldn't inflict my troubles on you like this. I won't pretend I *like* it. If you could suggest a better way.... Now, when once the thing's done, there's no discussion; I don't question Barbara's *bona fides* and I won't let her question mine. Any children will be full-blooded Catholics, and the question will never be raised again. I've completed a formality; she will in fact marry a Catholic, which is what she's sticking out for, and I'll see to it that no shadow of difference ever arises from religion. It's not easy, God knows. Incidentally, the entire world will say I'm marrying her for her money and getting converted so that she shan't forfeit it. Always a pleasant thing to hear.... However, necessity knows no law."

"That's tied round the neck of every crime and immorality in the world's history."

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Jack looked up with the first sign of interest that his face had shewn.

"You really think that would be a crime? I've come to you for your opinion. A crime against Barbara?"

"Against yourself. I don't think it would affect her. Do you know anything about the course of preparation before you're received into the Church? You'll have to tell one lie after another, weeks and weeks of them. And, when you've been received, you'll have to continue. D'you propose to go regularly to Mass? Will you go to Confession?"

Barbara's reputation for laxity was widely known and disapproved.

"I'll do whatever my wife does," Jack promised.

Though he pretended to keep an open mind, he was inviting criticism only for the satisfaction of demolishing it. Loring was still shocked and doubly shocked that he could make no impression on his friend's stubborn insensibility.

"Have you discussed it with your people?" he asked.

"I've discussed it with no one. It'll be hell for them, of course."

"They won't be taken in."

Jack smiled a little ruefully and took up his position in front of the fire-place, facing his friend.

"They won't be taken in," he agreed. "They'll hate it. *I* hate it. It's a lie, a chain of lies. I don't expect that I shall ever be able to invent excuses or tell myself a fairy-tale to get round it. The best I can say is that it's the only means and that the end must justify the means. I can't defend myself, Jim."

It was difficult to reason with a man who admitted every charge in advance, and Loring was puzzled to know why they were arguing at all.

"You're committing a crime against yourself—and making your family perfectly miserable," he pointed out. "I know people rob and murder, when they're in love, but why come and tell me about it?"

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"I wanted you as a barometer—for my own sanity. *Have* I lost touch with reality?"

"I think you're quite mad. I've been through it myself; and I was just as mad. The best advice I can give you is to go away from Babs for three or six months and see how you feel. If it's as bad

as ever at the end.... No, I'm damned if I take the responsibility of encouraging you; I feel as badly about it as that."

Both started guiltily as the butler came in with a tray of decanters and glasses, and Jack murmured, "Jove! It's getting late." When they were alone again, he took a second cigar and flung himself into an arm-chair.

"We might make a present of this to Eric Lane," he said grimly, "for one of his plays. I've never before been up against a thing where there was so little chance of compromise. Or, if I have, I've always said, "There's only one possible thing to do," and I've tried to do it. D'you remember Raney's cheerful prophecy my last night in Oxford? Within ten years we should all have made such fools of ourselves that we should wish we were dead. Nine years ago. Your undergraduate is a sexless creature; we none of us thought then that a mere woman could mess up our lives.... Well, I've had a run for my money."

"There's only one possible thing to do here," said Loring emphatically, holding him back as he tried to change the subject.

"You weren't such a sea-green incorruptible three years ago."

"When *I* made a fool of *myself*.... There's no comparison. I was prepared to flout the Church and marry without dispensation; it wouldn't have been a valid marriage in the eyes of the Church, and the whole of Catholic society would have cut me. But I never offered Sonia to change one faith for another or to pretend that I had."

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Jack sprang violently out of his chair and strode to Loring's sofa, standing over him with legs apart and arms akimbo.

"But if she'd insisted? You've got to be honest about this."

Loring looked up at the unwontedly white face and burning eyes above him; then he looked away, whistled to himself and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'd have done it," he answered.

"Well, that's how *I* feel now."

"And if Babs were married already?"

Jack turned away with a mirthless laugh.

"Damn you, Jim!" he cried.

"Not a bit of it! You *would* stop short of some things."

"But then I should be injuring another man."

"He might rejoice to be rid of her. And here you're injuring yourself."

There was a long silence, and Loring tried to ease it by filling two tumblers with brandy and soda. Jack returned to his chair, drawing furiously at his cigar and rapidly smoothing the back of his head.

"I'm not going to give her up," he said at length.

"You can at least go away and think it over. Don't meet her. Work as you've never worked before. Mark you, the best thing is to go *right* away. She won't help you a bit. Women are cruel and women are selfish. If she's made up her mind that she can't marry you, she'll do the next best thing for herself and take good care that she gets all the time, attention, affection that she can out of you. And your nerves will crack. If you live within telephoning or writing distance, you're done for. *I* saw that for myself. When I got back to England a few months ago, I only consented to stay in London when I heard that Sonia had gone abroad. She'd have tried to get on *some* kind of terms with me. If I'd still been smashed up, she'd have wanted to have a look at her handiwork; if I'd completely recovered, she'd want to see whether she still had the power to cast a spell over me. And, if she felt she'd done me a great wrong, she'd have wanted to vindicate herself. Women drown bad consciences in self-justification. Will you go away?"

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"I'll think about it. Jim, did *you* know that Babs took her religion so seriously?"

"No, but then I don't know her at all well."

"I'm taking all she says at face-value, allowing for a little natural rhetoric——"

"Well, I shouldn't—with any woman," Loring interrupted. "Look here, Jack. You and Babs have got yourselves into a tangle. You can get out of it by refusing to see her again—which you won't entertain; or by perjuring yourself—which I hope and pray you won't do; or by *her* climbing down a bit. One of you has to make the sacrifice; and I'm inclined to think Solomon would have said that, if she's not prepared to climb down—you're not asking her to do anything that the Church forbids—she's not in earnest, she's not worth having. Solomon would have said that, if she put you in the second place, she didn't want you.... I wonder whether she does. For all I know she's just made up her mind to add your scalp to her belt. Why the deuce did she let you propose to her—you did *actually*, didn't you?—if she meant to bring up this objection at the last minute?"

"It was only when I began to trot out the objections that she recognized them. Jim, this is a question of instinct; whether a woman's really in love with you or whether she's only pretending may be *felt*, but no one can *prove* it. I take it—though I've had no experience—that there's always a moment when a woman surrenders, not only in words but with all her being. If you'd ever broken in a horse, you'd know what I mean. It's like that with her."

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Loring raised his eyebrows in passing surprise at the comparison no less than at Jack's assurance.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," he said without conviction. "If you're right, she'll climb down. If she won't climb down, it means she doesn't want you."

Jack pondered for a while without answering; then he looked at his watch and jumped up with a murmur of dismay.

"Jim, d'you know it's just on two?"

"I wonder what time it was when I'd finished pouring out my troubles to George that night! I hope it's going to be all right, Jack, though a mixed marriage is a hideous gamble. And Babs is a fair gamble in herself. And I wish I felt as certain of her as you do. Mind, three months——"

"I don't commit myself to any specific period," Jack interrupted, as they went into the hall. Barbara had the obstinate vanity of a spoilt and wilful child; after refusing to yield on one point, she was capable of sacrificing even her own happiness to sustain her refusal.

"If she holds out for three months," said Loring gravely, "it'll mean that there's something in her life bigger than you."

Jack laughed and ran down the steps into Curzon Street. That she wanted him was never in doubt since her first advances at the Croxton ball.

"Good-night, Jim, and many thanks. You'll hear from me before I die."

"Best of luck, old man," Loring called back, with such heartiness as he could force into his voice.

CHAPTER TEN VINDICATION

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"Casilda: But it's so undignified—it's so degrading! A Grandee of Spain turned into a public company! Such a thing was never heard of!

Duke: My child, the Duke of Plaza-Toro does not follow fashions—he leads them."

W. S. GILBERT: "THE GONDOLIERS."

At the beginning of June Jack received a letter in a well-known hand-writing from a familiar address.

"Pump Court, Temple, E. C.

"Have you ever done your duty by the University of Oxford? I mean, have you ever taken your M. A.? I haven't, though I ought to have years ago, and I'm sure you haven't, either. What do you think about going up next Degree Day? I'll find out when it is and order rooms and pack your suit-case and take it to Paddington and buy a ticket and generally nursemaid you, as I used to do in the days before you were a social success. I never see you nowadays either on the Winchester train or in London; they say that you have deserted your various clubs for the gilded saloons of Mayfair. Let me know what's happened to you. Ever yours,

Eric Lane."

Jack welcomed the diversion and wrote an enthusiastic acceptance. For some months he had been too much occupied with Barbara to spare regrets for Eric, but he was sorry to feel that they were drifting apart. And the invitation gave him an excuse for spending a long week-end out of London. Since the Ross House ball he had held no communication with Barbara; since his unburdening of soul to Jim Loring he had avoided every one who might ask him why he was in hiding or report to her that he had been tracked down. Lady Knightrider tried once or twice to secure him for dinner, but after a few failures she accepted his plea of private work. And very soon the inquisitive had other food for their curiosity. Arden concentrated his attention on a possible match between Loring and Miss Hunter-Oakleigh; Summertown threw needful light on a newly discovered intrigue between Mrs. Welman and Sir Deryk Lancing; and Deganway confined his energies to scandalous speculation about a motor tour which Sir Adolf Erckmann was conducting in South Europe with his sister, young Webster, Sonia Dainton and others of less stable reputation.

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"Delighted to come" Jack wrote to Eric. "Let me know the day and the train; everything else I

leave to you. It's ages since I saw you."

However far the gossip had spread, it was unlikely to have reached Pump Court. But, if he felt secure from impertinent questions, Jack would have paid a high price to meet any one who could give him tidings of Barbara. Until six months before, he had been content with his own company, but the daily close intimacy had set up an itch for confidences. He wanted to know how she was and what she was doing, whether she was missing him. In three weeks there had been no sign of capitulation. And he depended for news of her on chance paragraphs in the illustrated papers. Eric entered the train at Paddington with the current number of the *Catch*, containing a full-page photograph of her in eastern dress. There was also an Albert Hall group in which she figured with half a dozen of the very people who were not good enough for her. It was disappointing, and others were disappointed too.

"I've no news for you, but I've been thinking over this business a good deal," Loring had written two days earlier. *"I can promise you a very friendly reception from the family, if and when you do adjust your differences with Barbara. My aunt, Kathleen Knightrider, is in despair; she says you were the only person who ever had any influence over Babs. Now that you've disappeared, she's picking up with all the old lot. Crawleigh's afraid to protest, because he doesn't want to precipitate a row. She comes of age in a few weeks, and then no one can stop her..."* [Pg 200]

Jack was wondering with vague dissatisfaction how much more time to give her for making a move, when his hand was forced. On returning to London after the week-end, he lighted on a photograph with the description, *"Lady Barbara Neave, Who is Giving a Sensational Ball. See p. 7."* He turned to the page indicated and read a gossipy half-column over the signature of "A Woman About Town."

"A mad world, my masters! But an amusing one, don't you think? The oldsters say 'What next, what next?' but the youngsters always have 'next' up their sleeves, and it's always better than the last. Youth for ever! We had the Shakespeare Ball, and the Regency Ball threw it into the shade. Then the Young Bachelors took the field—and were driven from it (with full honours of war, and all thanks to you, dear young bachelors, for a glorious evening) by The Rest. Mrs. Leo Butler gave her Night in a Persian Garden, and Lady Hessler retaliated with her Daybreak Dance, which started at four—it's still going on, for all I know. A mad world! And the oldsters are being attacked by the madness. These 'boy-and-girl' dances were squeezing them into the cold, so they gave a ball to themselves where only the married could hope for admission. 'The Hags' Hop,' said irreverent Youth and bided its time for revenge. And now it is coming—in Ascot Week. I rub my eyes, for the World and His Wife will be at the Bodmin Lodge ball, as they have always been and as their fathers and mothers were before them. Ascot Week? Bodmin Lodge? One would as soon compete with the Royal Enclosure as with the Bodmin Lodge ball. Yet—it is not the whisper of my faithful little bird, but an engraved card—'Lady Barbara Neave, At Home.' Fancy Dress, she says in one corner. At the Empire Hotel. And my little bird tells me that it will rival and outshine the Jubilee Ball at Devonshire House, when we were all tiny tots. If I know anything of Lady Barbara, it will be the ball of the season. Youth for ever! But it is a mad world. 'What are our girls coming to?' the oldsters ask. 'A girl giving a ball!' 'And a wonderful ball it will be,' say I. Best wishes, Lady Barbara!" [Pg 201]

Jack assumed that Barbara must be organizing a ball for some charity and thought no more of the announcement until he met Loring at the County Club that night before dinner and was hurried into the cool and deserted billiard-room.

"I say, *have* you seen about my precious cousin's latest freak?" Loring began. "There's been the most colossal row!"

"I saw an announcement about a ball in one of the papers," Jack answered.

"*One* of them! She's got it in every rag in the kingdom, morning and evening, penny plain and twopence coloured. Barbara's thorough; I'll say that for her. There's no going back."

He paused to fan himself and ring for a glass of sherry.

"What exactly was the row?" asked Jack.

"Well, you know, she's coming of age next week; and the Crawleighs thought it was a good opportunity for working off old scores. Nominally it was to be Barbara's party, but, when they started on their list, she found that some of her more objectionable friends were being cut out. I've no doubt Crawleigh did it as tactlessly as possible, and Barbara took it as a challenge. Both sides fought the question on principle, Crawleigh lost his temper on principle, Babs—on principle—kept hers and said that, if her friends couldn't come to the house, she'd give a party for them elsewhere." [Pg 202]

"Characteristic," Jack murmured.

"Very. It sounded like an empty threat, but that little devil—she *is* a little devil, Jack. If I were in your place, I'd no more think of marrying her than of marrying a wild animal—well, she was going to make this an Austerlitz or a Waterloo—no drawn battles for Babs; she deliberately chose the night of the Bodmin Lodge ball and invited everybody she'd ever heard of. I got my card within twenty hours of the original row."

"Are you going?"

Loring laughed grimly and postponed answering the question.

"She's thorough!" he repeated. "I was still at breakfast, when she came in; I gather she's doing a house-to-house canvass. 'Jim darling, you're coming to my party, aren't you?' she said. 'I want it to be a success.' 'I am not,' I said. 'I heard about the row and I think you're behaving abominably.' 'It'll look bad, if my own—loving—cousin stops away from my coming-of-age ball,' she said, her eyes simply gleaming with devilry. 'Jim, if you all go against me, you'll spoil my party, and father'll think he's won. Then I shall go away and live by myself; and that *would* make a scandal, which you'd hate.' I told her that she was a little devil—in case she didn't know it before. Then she came behind my chair and put her arms round my neck; and I called her a number of other things. Mark you, I dislike her; I think she's intrinsically unsound, but I'm not in the least surprised that you fell in love with her; she knows her job so well. She said with a tear in her voice—and in her eyes; if you ever see her blinking quickly, it's just to make herself cry.... All right, but you may as well know these things *before* you marry her—she said, 'Jim darling, I love you, but you *do* make it hard for us to be friends.' I told her again that I wasn't coming to her ball. She sighed and began putting on her gloves. At the door she turned round and said, 'Jim, you know the little paragraph "Among those present ..."? Sometimes it's "Among those who accepted invitations...." *I'm* going to have a special paragraph—"Among those who *refused* invitations was the Marquess Loring.'" Then she became a hundred per cent. devil; she was thoroughly enjoying herself. 'I won't let it stop at that! I'm going to have this thing properly advertised. In the morning you'll see wonderful descriptions and pictures of the ball—and that paragraph. And the evening papers will comment on it—all the disreputable ones; I'm the greatest friends with all the really disreputable papers. And next day you'll see pictures of yourself in the disreputable daily papers—"Lord Loring, Who is Reported to have said 'Damned if I do!' when *his cousin* Lady Barbara Neave invited him to her ball." I don't want to do it; it'll be a great deal of trouble; but this quarrel has been forced on me, and, if you drive me to it, I shall go through to the end.'" Loring sighed and fanned himself again. "You can't argue with a woman, when she's like that. I said I'd come. My mother and Amy came in, and she talked them over inside two minutes—left them with the idea that the Crawleighs habitually tied her to the bed-post and took a cat-o'-nine-tails to her (I wish they would); then she went off to continue the house-to-house canvass. It's heart-breaking!"

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Jack listened with relief to the end of the tale. He had feared something worse, but he would almost rather hear of Barbara's misbehaving herself than not hear of her at all.

"There's no great harm done," he suggested.

"It's a toss-up. She can't blackmail everybody as she blackmailed me. God knows! you can do most things in the year of grace 1914, but an unmarried girl, with parents living, *doesn't* give balls on her own. Any number of people have rather raised their eyebrows in talking to me about it. If it's a success, there's about a six-to-four odds-on chance that people will think it rather a joke, Barbara's latest freak. But, if the thing's a failure, if any one starts a movement against it, then Barbara will declare war on society. Don't make any mistake; this isn't a fit of temper, it's a phase in her natural development. I've seen it coming for a long time; she wants to be in the position where a thing becomes right because she does it; she's always disregarded the law and now she wants to make the law. If the girl only had *sisters*! They *might* keep her in order.... You know, there's a certain magnificence about her; she's surrounded herself with every natural difficulty she could find—Bodmin Lodge; she's raiding the Pebbleridge preserve in broad daylight, she's asked Lady Pebbleridge to come on after her own party. Fancy dress—she's set herself to rival the Devonshire House ball.... Jack, is that the girl you want to marry? D'you imagine you'll ever be able to control her? If you'd seen her standing by the door—it was Joan of Arc giving the signal for battle."

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"She can't blackmail me."

"What else is she doing now? She's blackmailing every one."

"Well, obviously I can't stop it until communications are re-established."

"Then for the love of Heaven—No, I won't say that."

"Go on."

Loring looked at him closely and shrugged his shoulders.

"I wonder whether *you're* responsible for this new outbreak of hers? This is the way she used to behave a year ago and for some time before that. Then she dropped it. Now she's started again.... My difficulty is that I don't know if she cares for you, if she's capable of caring for any one. This may be her vindication—to shew that she *can* do anything. Or she may be fond of you, she may feel she's lost you. She's got the pride of a spoilt child. I think now, though I didn't think it when you dined with me, that she'll never climb down voluntarily. *Possibly* she's trying to forget you."

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Jack roused with a jerk and then dropped his head between his hands. He had never imagined that she was as lonely as he had been.

"What d'you suggest, Jim?"

"I don't know. If she's gone Berserk on your account, I warn you that she's in the mood to marry the first man in the street who's kind to her. *I* felt like that after the break-up with Sonia. This ball is only a symptom."

Loring ceased staring out of the window and glanced down at his companion. Jack was still sitting with his fists pressed against his temples, motionless and silent. A member flung open the door, peered round the room and withdrew. As the clock chimed eight, Loring looked at his watch, scribbled a telephone message and rang for a page.

"You've shifted your ground since last we discussed this subject," Jack observed at length.

"I don't know...."

"Oh, yes. You want me to stop the Berserk phase. You think I'm at the bottom of it? Well, I've got my share of pride or vanity or whatever you like to call it. I've asked her once, and she turned me down because I wasn't a Catholic. I'm not going to call daily, like a milkman. Do you want me to go to her and say I'm a Catholic?"

Loring shook his head resolutely.

"I'm not going to take the responsibility of that."

"Responsibility be damned! You've taken the responsibility of saying that I've brought about all this trouble and that, apparently, I'm the only person who can stop it. You're not naturally sanctimonious, Jim, but you've got a wonderful passion for not committing yourself. Will you take the responsibility of not repeating our conversation to anybody?"

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Loring looked up with startled eyes, but the door slammed before he could answer.

For perhaps three days the success of "The Children's Party," as Barbara's costume ball came to be designated, hung in the balance. Some of those who might not have objected to the ball itself disliked Barbara's association with it and the salvo of press welcome which advertised a private party as though it were a public charity. But, while her critics murmured, Barbara was telephoning, writing and driving round London to divide and win over the enemy, always using the promises of her first victims to persuade the others. If Lady Loring consented to come, who less exalted had the right to raise her voice? Because it had never been done before, was that a reason why it should not be done now? Novelty and organization effected much, curiosity more; for Deganway, with his genius for discovering other people's secrets, published abroad that there had been civil war in Berkeley Square and that the ball was Barbara's declaration of independence.

"The Crawleights simply don't know what to do!" he exclaimed gleefully on the fourth day of the campaign. "Positively *everybody's* coming—except the Pebbleridges, of course; I saw Harriet Pebbleridge yesterday, and she's *perfectly* furious."

"One was told that the parents were formally invited," said Val Arden, "but it was made clear that they must comport themselves as guests. Lady Lilith would receive alone. You are thinking of looking in, George? Yes? One had some difficulty in deciding on a suitable costume. A Modern Financier—after our good Sir Adolf Erckmann? Were one's health more robust, one would be tempted to give a party 'As Others See Us' and to insist that one's guests should each personate a friend. Chastening, chastening! One would expose oneself to indifferent parodies by Lady Maitland, whom one has had the ill fortune to offend...."

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For ten days the theatrical costumiers were kept busy. Historic dresses were disinterred, chain armour was taken down from the walls; and there was bitter rivalry between those who simultaneously selected the same character. When every one had made his choice, Barbara intimated that she would like photographs of all; and for another week the studios were thronged. It was agreed at the outset that no one would go to Bodmin Lodge and the Empire Hotel on the same night; and, as the discussion of costumes ruled out every other interest, Barbara found herself besieged with requests for invitations; to be omitted was to be disgraced; and she had the gratification of sending belated cards to more than one critic who in the first excited hours had protested that brute force alone would send her to the Empire Hotel under such auspices.

"It's her Austerlitz and my uncle's Waterloo," said Loring to Jack, when they met two days before the ball. He was careful not to ask what his friend had been doing since last they met. "It's her great vindication; Crawleigh's *asked* to be allowed to come—to avoid a scandal. She's stampeded London; everybody's accepted, and I believe they'll all come for fear people will think they've not been invited. It's as bad as that."

"There's one person who didn't accept," said Jack, with a crooked smile.

"She invited you? Well, it would have been rather pointed to leave you out. And she wouldn't be human, if she didn't want you to see her in her triumph."

"I shall depend on you to tell me all about it," said Jack.

"Oh, I shall just shake hands with her and then go straight home to bed."

As the day approached, the excitement redoubled until Barbara herself began to fear an anticlimax. Only the need of registering her triumph prevailed over physical exhaustion and sustained her in the stifling hostility of Berkeley Square. Her father and mother drove with her to the hotel and were formally announced. They would have liked to loiter near her and to suggest that they were the hosts and were indulging their daughter's whim, but Barbara urged them into the ball-room and returned alone to her place at the head of the stairs. There for an hour she

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received and tried to keep count of her guests. Congratulations poured in upon her; she was complimented on her enterprise, her looks, her dress.

"No one but you would have *thought* of doing such a thing," cried Lady Maitland admiringly.

"Oh, I expect a great many people thought of it, but I was the only one who *did* it," she answered, and the phrase comforted her.

Bobbie Pentyre, who had been sent to spy out the nakedness of Bodmin Lodge, arrived late with the report that it was almost deserted and that Lady Pebberidge, black with rage, had announced that she would never give another ball, if people deserted her at the last moment like this.

"She said that your leavings weren't good enough for her," he added. "I thought that was rather rude to the people who had toiled all the way out to Knightsbridge, so I handed it on to any one who I thought would be interested, and that emptied the house quicker than ever."

"I'm sorry if her party's a failure," said Barbara, "but—if people prefer coming to me...?"

She walked with him to the door of the ball-room. The crowd was too great for dancing, and her guests were parading four abreast, until she should give the signal and march at their head to supper. Inside the doorway her father was standing in the robes of John, first baron, Lord High Chancellor of England. She went up to him and slipped her arm through his. [Pg 209]

"Am I forgiven, father?" she asked with a smile. "You know how I hate people to be angry with me."

"It's all very well to ask for forgiveness when you've got your own way," said Lord Crawleigh with a vengeful tug at his blonde moustache.

"But, if I want my own way, haven't I inherited that from you?" she asked gently. "It's no good trying to bully me, because I won't be bullied. You admit now that there was nothing very sinful in this ball?"

"I didn't say it was sinful," Lord Crawleigh returned sharply. "I said that such a thing had never been done before. There was no precedent."

"But every one will do it now!" she cried proudly. "That you won't see, father; I *establish* precedents."

"I don't see it and I won't see it."

Barbara sighed and looked down on him with half-closed eyes and drooping mouth.

"Don't you like to see me happy, father? Won't you kiss me and say I'm forgiven?"

Lord Crawleigh stiffened and drew away, as Loring came up from behind, pushing open his visor.

"Well, I've kept my promise, Barbara," he began coldly. "The prodigal daughter scene didn't go with much of a swing, I thought."

"The prodigal son never promised not to be prodigal again. He was tired and hungry, poor boy, and nobody cared for him. *I'm* tired, too; I've been standing ever since a quarter past ten. And I'm hungry. Would you like to take me down to supper?"

Her pleading voice seemed to bring to the surface everything that was hard in Loring's kindly nature.

"Not in the least, thank you, Barbara," he said, "after the way you blackmailed me into coming here. I've kept my promise and I should be half-way home by now if I hadn't run into Violet Hunter-Oakleigh. I'm having supper with her." [Pg 210]

"Ah, I invited her specially to please you. Every one says you're in love with each other. She's a dear girl, but I think she's got fatty degeneration of the conscience." She looked thoughtfully at her cousin, and her face lit up with a mischievous smile. "Jim, darling! I only said that to see if it would make you angry. So you are in love with her? Well, I'm really very fond of Violet, even if she does cross herself when I come into the room.... If you knew how absurd it was to look angry in that costume! I'm not having a great success with my relations to-night. Sometimes I wish father were just a little bit fonder of me."

Loring turned away in disgust.

"You tried repentance with him, and it didn't come off. For heaven's sake don't try the pathetic with me. I'm not a responsive audience."

"Nor a very intelligent audience either, perhaps. You never know when I'm sincere. I *do* feel it most frightfully that I never seem to get on properly with mother and father; I love them—and yet I can't live their life. The last three weeks have been horrible—one scene after another until I was worn out; I was sent to Coventry. And to-night I felt dreadfully tired and, though the ball's been a success and everybody's been sweet, I felt horribly lonely; people were calling me 'dear' and 'darling' and saying how beautiful I looked, and all the time nobody really loved me—heart and soul. I was quite sincere; I wanted to be friends with father. Jim, won't you take me down to supper? I want to be friends with you."

She looked up to him with beseeching, tired eyes and disarming pathos. Loring surveyed her gravely for a moment and then broke into a laugh.

"So it was all leading up to that? My dear Barbara, if any one loved you—heart and soul—which you wouldn't deserve, you simply wouldn't recognize it.... I've already told you that I'm having supper with Violet."

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"And you won't—ask her to excuse you?"

"No."

"She'd let you go, if you reminded her that this is my birthday party."

"I shan't remind her."

Barbara threw up her chin and clasped her hands behind her.

"You think I can't *make* you take me in to supper?"

"I'm quite sure of it."

"I see. Well, ride your ways, Laird of Chepstow. They are waiting for me to head the procession. You had better take my place—with Violet. Tell them that I am not going down. And, if they ask why, say that I begged my cousin Lord Loring—as a present to me on my twenty-first birthday—to take me down to supper. Say that I was tired and hungry. You needn't say that you refused; they'll guess that."

She walked a few steps into the room; and Loring, after a moment's hesitation, followed her.

"Do behave yourself, Barbara," he whispered irritably.

"Am I misbehaving? No one else seems to have noticed it ... George! I haven't the least idea what you're supposed to be, but you look adorable."

"I'm a Spanish nobleman, *temp.* Philip the Second," Oakleigh answered. "You know, Armada and all that sort of thing. Barbara, I've been commissioned to tell you that the poor old Duchess of Ross is faint with hunger."

"Ah, poor soul, so am I! Are you taking her down? How sweet of you! She's so greedy and so malicious. I believe I told the band to play us in with "Pomp and Circumstance." Form them up, George, and tell Murano to begin."

"But you'll have to lead off."

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"I'm not going to have any supper."

"Why not? You deserve it, if anybody does."

"I've not found any one who'll associate with me at supper."

"D'you mean that every one's paired off and left you? That's monstrous. Look here, I don't like to leave my present partner stranded, but, if you can hold out for twenty minutes, may I come back and take you down?"

Barbara looked at Loring out of the corner of her eye and thanked George with a tired smile.

"I shall be too faint to eat anything by then," she answered. "But it was sweet of you to offer, and you're a living lesson in manners for my cousin."

Oakleigh looked from one to the other.

"Hullo! Have you two been quarrelling?"

"No, it's my fault. I've offended him," Barbara explained. "You see, it's my birthday, and, ever since I was a baby, everybody's done everything I wanted on my birthday. I wanted to have supper with Jim, so I refused Bobbie Pentyre and Charlie Framlingham and Johnnie Carstairs. Then I asked Jim, and I'm afraid he thought that a girl oughtn't to ask a man to take her to supper—even her own cousin, at her own ball, on her own birthday."

There was a conciliatory laugh from Oakleigh, but Loring frowned with ill humour.

"That's not true, Barbara," he said.

"I'm sorry, Jim; it was the only reason I could think of. When I first asked you, I didn't know you were engaged."

The two men looked at each other; and Barbara smiled a welcome to Summertown, who came forward cautiously, with the tail of his eye on a trailing sword.

"I say, Babs, Murano wants to know whether he's to play the jolly old march-past."

"Oh, yes! Tell him to begin. You've got some one to take down to supper? Good boy! Will you lead off? I'm not going down."

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Summertown's sword flashed to the salute and rattled clumsily back into its scabbard. He returned to the orchestra, and Loring, after a survey of the room to find his partner, followed

quickly after him. Oakleigh laid his hand persuasively on Barbara's wrist and lowered his voice.

"Your ball's been such an astounding success that I hope you're not going to spoil it for the sake of a quarrel with Jim."

Barbara pressed his hand gently.

"Dear George! I'm so fond of you! You always speak with the sweet reasonableness of a man with numberless troublesome little brothers and sisters. Don't worry about me! It may be a wrong-headed sort of pride, but, when I've *asked* a man for a thing, I'd sooner starve than take it from anybody else."

Over the drone of voices came the tap of the leader's baton. George shuffled from one foot to the other, shrugged his shoulders and hurried away with a lop-sided smile. The middle of the room quickly cleared until Barbara was left by herself, with the procession pressed in twos by the walls. As the first chord was struck, Summertown called out:

"Once round and then down, Babs?"

"Oh, twice, I think," she called back. "I want to see you all."

As the couples moved forward, she retreated to an armchair on a dais by the door, smiling down on them and returning their bows. There was a stiff nod from her father, walking with Lady Maitland, and a sweet, perplexed smile from her mother, who was with Lord Poynter. Oakleigh, with the Duchess of Ross on his arm, again shrugged his shoulders, but she had little attention to spare for him; immediately behind, Violet Hunter-Oakleigh was walking with Val Arden.

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Barbara looked quickly round the room, and, as the procession completed its first circuit, Loring came up and stood beside her.

"I told Violet it was your birthday," he said abruptly.

"And she let you go? I told you she would!"

"Oh, no one's likely to fight over my body! And Violet's too well-bred to make even a veiled scene. Besides, I think she understood—to the uttermost farthing."

"Then there's not the least need for you to be grumpy. Sit down on the arm of my chair, but don't topple me over. Have you ever seen anything quite so grotesque as poor Johnnie Carstairs? In case you don't know, he's supposed to represent Danton."

"I daresay. I don't want to talk about Johnnie Carstairs. Barbara, I've had enough of these antics."

He stood stiffly at a distance, towering over her and refusing to see the hand that invited him to her chair.

"Jim, are you angry with me?" she asked in surprise. "Remember, you challenged me; you ought to take a beating in good part."

"Oh, I don't greatly care how you behave to me, but I resent being made an instrument of rudeness to others. You've got to apologize to Violet."

"For giving her Val Arden instead of you for a partner? My dear, you're about equally tiresome in different ways, but Val is far more amusing. I rather expect Violet to come up and thank me. Do you like to challenge me over that?"

"I've no doubt that, if I challenged you to play leap-frog with Murano, you'd do it. I don't challenge you to do anything."

Barbara laughed softly.

"Is my impetuous cousin learning prudence? Jim, you're a dreadful old blusterer! From the distant security of Surinam you can be valiant—and hideously cruel—Oh, yes, I've got a memory—like other people—and a skin to be flayed—like other people—and feelings to be hurt—like other people. And it hurts to be hit from behind when you're down—and hit by your own family. You're not so valiant at close quarters—either three weeks ago or to-night."

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The tail of the procession was drawing near, and she rose and stood ready to fall in.

"I didn't send that cable to hurt you particularly," said Loring. "I was so disgusted that I didn't want to have you inside the house."

"Yet I'm always coming to lunch and dinner—even to breakfast occasionally."

"Yes, your mother interceded for you. It won't work a second time. Please understand that you are not a *persona grata* at my house."

Barbara laughed mischievously and then became menacingly emphatic.

"If that's another challenge, my impetuous cousin doesn't seem to have learned prudence! Jim, as a rule I don't interfere with you, and, if you won't interfere with me, there's no need for us to quarrel. You were good enough to call me a devil the other day; well, if you want your quarrel, you shall have it. But you'll be beaten. I've beaten you to-night, I've beaten father. I've *won*. And I've won because I go straight ahead and, when I threaten a thing, I do it. Men seem only to

bluster. You. And father. You all think you can bully me. A man once said to me that, when I became engaged, he'd send all good wishes or something—and a dog-whip to my husband as a wedding-present."

"Jack Waring said that."

"Did he tell you? When?"

"I've forgotten. We've discussed you more than once, and I've given him a very candid opinion of you." [Pg 216]

Barbara tossed her head, but her eyes were enquiring.

"What did you say?"

"Oh, it varies from time to time, as you shew yourself in different lights. Until this evening I didn't fully appreciate how vindictive you could be."

"And you're going to add that—with two more strokes of your delicate brush? I'm afraid Jack thinks too highly of me to be convinced by your picture."

"Well, I'd hardly say that."

"He doesn't talk about dog-whips any more. He doesn't abuse me and bully me. It's no good, Jim. The moment any one tries to coerce me—it's like slapping your hand down on an open wound; you set every nerve quivering in rebellion. If you were gentle and kind ... George Oakleigh was charming to me after you'd gone; I'd have done anything for him. I'd do anything for you, if you behaved like that. I don't want to quarrel with you or with any one; you'd find me great fun, if you'd only be friends. Fancy going on like this—and on my birthday, too!"

"After to-night I have no wish to be friends."

For an instant her eyes narrowed and her lips hardened in a thin straight line. Then she broke into a laugh.

"Well, for to-night at least let's keep up appearances!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE LAUREL AND THE ROSE

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"And some say, that it was at that time Pyrrhus answered one, who rejoiced with him for the victory they had won: If we win another of the price, quoth he, we are utterly undone."

PLUTARCH: "PYRRHUS."

The season ended in a riot of sound and colour before Jack received his promised report on the "Children's Party." In the last week of July Bertrand Oakleigh gave a dinner in Princes' Gardens to celebrate Deryk Lancing's engagement to Mrs. Dawson and Loring's to Miss Hunter-Oakleigh. It was Jack's first public appearance outside a club since the Ross House ball, and he was riddled with questions by his friends, who wanted to know whether he had been ill and, if not, why he had been in hiding for two months. Before dinner began, he escaped into a corner and asked if there was any hope of seeing Loring privately before he went to Monmouthshire.

"I should like a talk with you some time," he added.

"Yes, I know you would," Loring answered, smiling a little wistfully. "I'm taking Vi down immediately after lunch to-morrow, but, if you care to come round to-night—? We'll get away as soon as we can, and, after I've taken her home, I'm at your service for as long as you like."

"Thanks. I'll be at your place between half-past eleven and twelve. When are you going to be married?"

"At the beginning of September, if there's no hitch. I see from to-night's papers that there's every possibility of a row between Austria and Servia, which is a bore, because we wanted to spend our honeymoon in Dalmatia." [Pg 218]

When Loring entered his library at midnight, Jack was contentedly smoking a cigar and looking at a richly illustrated book on trout-flies. Closing the book, he accepted a brandy and soda and took up his stand by the fire-place.

"I heard you say you were giving a party at Chepstow," he began. "I was wondering whether Babs was going."

"Allowing for her rather erratic temperament, I should say 'yes.' I didn't want her, but she's invited herself." Loring described the 'Children's Party,' ending, "After that, I decided to have no more to do with her, but I was reckoning without Vi. As soon as the engagement was announced,

Barbara called and virtually persuaded her that *she'd* arranged the whole thing by inviting us both to her ball and opening my eyes to the fact that I was in love. I wasn't in the mood then to quarrel with my worst enemy, so I said she could come.... Jack, have you seen or heard anything of her lately?"

"Not since Ross House. What's she been doing?"

"Oh, nothing in particular. She's won her laurels, and there's no temptation. When all's said and done, the Children's Party was a big idea. She's made a unique position for herself; there's no one of her age, there's not an unmarried girl in England, who can compete with her—my sister Amy, Phyllis Knightrider, Sally Farwell, even Sonia, who makes the running for her; there are precious few married women, even among the political lot and semi-public hostesses, who can touch her; and, when it comes to a tussle between a girl of twenty-one and a woman like Harriet Pebbleridge, who's as solid and well-established as the Nelson Column, it's Barbara who wins. I'm told she's had a perfect crop of invitations to become visitor or patroness or vice-chairman of different things; she rules over committees on anything from a national theatre to an art guild— and does it uncommon well, I believe.... How do you stand with her now? You're very likely to meet, if you pay your annual visit to Raglan."

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"That's why I asked. I want to."

Loring was conscious that he had been talking rather volubly to postpone what he knew Jack had come there to discuss; inevitably advice would have to be given, an opinion expressed, responsibility shouldered.

"Apart from a formal invitation, she's made no effort to meet you? Jack, I *wonder* whether she's been playing the game with you. It's incomprehensible to me that a girl should let you get to the point of proposing and then fall back on something that's either non-essential or else so important that she ought to have warned you beforehand."

"I'm afraid you're rather biassed against poor Barbara."

Four years earlier, Loring knew that he would have been as immovable, if any one had suggested that Sonia had a blemish. Oakleigh had tried and failed; but he was right in trying....

"If you've said anything that's rankled.... She's vindictive, as she shewed by making a scene over the cable episode twelve months later. And she's full of mischief. And you, who take things rather seriously, probably don't appreciate that nothing matters to her except the moment—and her vanity. In effect the only thing she could find to say about you that night was that she'd cured you of criticizing her and talking about dog-whips. You've not seen her for a couple of months; why not wait a bit longer? As I told you months ago in this room, if she *wants* you, she'll contrive to meet you in some way."

"With her vanity?"

"Yes, if she cares for you more than for her vanity. You see that I can't very well keep her away from Chepstow, but I think you'd be wise to postpone your visit to Raglan."

The book of trout-flies was becoming irksome. Jack lifted it from his knees and restored it to its shelf. Then he ranged for a moment in front of the glazed cases, reading the titles and whistling to himself between his teeth.

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"It's too late. I've taken the plunge," he said at last, without turning round. "I don't propose to discuss it with you, Jim; but I shall certainly come to your party, and the only thing I ask you to do is *not* to tell Babs I'm coming. I want to pick up the swords exactly where we dropped them. You've nothing more to tell me about her? I've been kept on short commons of news lately."

The last few days had been so crowded with his own new happiness that Loring had lost count of time; he had forgotten that everybody else was not standing still; he had almost forgotten that the world held any one but Violet and him.

"I—wish—to—God you hadn't done it," he cried in spite of himself.

"There was no point in waiting."

"And if you're wrong?"

"But I'm not."

Jack's face, as he turned from the books, was composed and assured.

"She never promised to marry you, if you *did* become a Catholic," Loring persisted. "You're banking so frightfully on some mysterious instinct."

"I'm as certain of her as you are of Miss Hunter-Oakleigh."

"I was certain of Sonia four years ago. *If* you're wrong?"

Jack was silent for many moment before answering.

"Well, she and you and I shall know about it; and none of us will have much interest in talking about it.... For the rest—well, my poor family will be spared a nasty jar."

"You haven't told them yet?"

"No, I thought I'd wait till I'd got something to shew for my apparent lapse from sanity."

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When they parted, it was Jack who went to bed with a tolerably tranquil mind and Loring who first tramped the library like a caged beast and then put on his hat and wandered aimlessly into the streets. He was no nearer conviction when Lady Knightrider called next morning to warn him that there had been some unexplained friction between Jack and Barbara earlier in the season and to ask whether it was politic for them to meet at Chepstow.

"Jack knows she's going to be with us," was all that he could answer. "He asked specially; he's very anxious to meet her again."

"Oh, well!... I only wanted to be sure that there was no unpleasantness."

"Unpleasantness?"

Loring laughed incredulously; but, when his aunt was gone and he returned to his letters, the word echoed maddeningly.

As Jack had asked that Barbara should not be warned in advance of their meeting, the Chepstow party had to be handled strategically at Paddington. Lady Knightrider and Phyllis, Charles Framlingham and Jack were in a reserved carriage at the back of the train, and Barbara was deftly flanked by an obscuring bodyguard consisting of Arden, Deganway, four maids and a footman. Whatever the outcome of their meeting, her sense of the dramatic would have been excited if she had known that Jack and she were in different parts of the same train, travelling to the end of England for the last round in their long contest. For himself, Loring only wished that he could get rid of Barbara and of her elaborate atmosphere of mystery and intrigue; if she decided to marry Jack, he would rather not have it said by the Warings that he had abetted their son in a course which they would never condone: if there were any kind of unpleasantness, he would sooner have it happen elsewhere than at Loring Castle.... And in the meantime Barbara sat in her corner, sparring impartially with Deganway and Arden.

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It seemed for a moment that he might get his wish and avert the meeting. Lady Knightrider wrote two days later to ask whether the arrangements for the ball held good. Her son had written from London to say that "a man in the War Office" did not see how hostilities could be prevented. The word was to be interpreted in its widest sense; an outbreak between Austria and Servia was inevitable, and it was no less inevitable that Russia should come to the support of Servia and Germany to the aid of Austria. Then France would throw in her lot with Russia, and Great Britain with France. The sequence was automatic and inevitable. The diplomatists might possibly find a safety-valve, but, unless they did, there would be war, "and that," proclaimed Victor Knightrider, "is where we come in."

"It's all so unnecessary and so dreadful," wrote his mother, "that one feels almost wicked to talk of things like dancing until we see what is going to happen. Of course, you understand that, if the ball takes place, I shall come; I'm so happy about you and dear Violet that nothing would keep me away from a gathering like this. But, if you decide to postpone it till a less stormy day..."

Loring debated with himself and with his mother, before deciding to leave his arrangements unchanged. No one could pretend to be satisfied with the political outlook, but war on Victor Knightrider's all-embracing scale was inconceivable.

"Unless there's any change for the worse before Friday," he wrote in reply, "I propose to go on."

The papers, morning and evening, confirmed him in his optimism. A world at war had only to be imagined in order to be dismissed. It was not until the late afternoon before the ball that George Oakleigh, O'Rane and Summertown, deriving their information from different sources and speaking with different degrees of conviction and gravity, persuaded him that, even if the incredible did not take place, at least a great many intelligent observers thought that it would. At Raglan no one shared Lady Knightrider's alarms. Phyllis and Framlingham were as much resolved not to be cheated of the ball as Jack was determined to meet Barbara. He assured his hostess that Victor was only trying to make her flesh creep. For two days Framlingham and Phyllis played tennis or motored together, and for two days Jack walked up and down one bank of the stream that bordered the Knightrider property, meditatively thrashing the water and smoking one pipe after another. His luncheon he carried with him when he left the house after breakfast; on both days Lady Knightrider drove through the woods in her pony-carriage with a tea-basket and drove back again because she lacked courage to ask him about Barbara.

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On the morning of the ball, the optimism of the preceding days declined sharply. The news could hardly be called worse, because the papers contained nothing but the death-rattle of the Buckingham Palace Conference. But a presentiment of evil sprang up and was fed by crazy invention and baseless gossip. Victor wrote again with extracts from the prophecies of two journalists, the private secretary to a minister and the same "man in the War Office." Jack received a gloomy letter from Eric Lane, and Framlingham was warned to keep himself within reach of a telegraph office.

"It's too late for Jim to stop the thing now," said Jack.

"He'd have been wiser to stop it at the beginning of the week. Of course, he can't be expected to feel quite as I do. If we go to war, the Guards will be sent out before any one. And that means

Victor."

It was tea-time before she desisted from the last of her vacillations, and the car was ordered to the door. Wrapped in coats and dust-rugs, they drove through Raglan in blazing sunlight and reached Loring Castle as the first stars appeared. The men were still in the long banqueting-hall, and Lady Knightrider put her head in at the door to ask whether she might drink Jim's health. Jack stayed behind in the hall, trying to get his bearings in a strange house. A sound of voices came to him through an open door on the opposite side, and, without waiting to take off his coat, he walked on tip-toe and looked in.

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Barbara was standing by the fire-place, a coffee-cup in her hand, talking to Violet Hunter-Oakleigh. Slender and tall, a study in black and white, ghostly and arresting, she might have incarnated herself from an Aubrey Beardsley drawing. Her dress was raven's wing and silver, not unlike the one that she had worn at Croxton; there was a gleaming band around her hair, and silver heels to her shoes. As he looked at her, Jack remembered Loring's phrase in describing a distant view of Sonia at the Coronation, after their engagement had been broken off. He felt that same "tug at the heart" and told himself that he must be steady; though Barbara did not expect him, he felt sure that she would betray little surprise and no embarrassment.

Lady Loring was seated near the door, and, as they shook hands, Barbara turned and caught sight of him. He could not see whether her expression changed, but in a moment she had left Violet and was coming across the room to him.

"I never expected to see you here!" she exclaimed, holding out her hand and watching him with eyes that were unreflecting pools of deep blue.

"I'm staying with Lady Knightrider at Raglan, and she brought me over," he explained.

"I thought you must have gone abroad or something. You've quite disappeared lately."

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"I've been rather busy."

"No one seemed to know what had happened to you."

As Lady Loring moved away, he examined her critically.

"You're looking very well, Babs. And I've heard a great deal about *you*."

"You always had a talent for that," she laughed. "And for commenting very freely on what you heard. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"I'll tell you at supper, if you'll consent to have supper with me."

He was speaking in the tone and terms that he had used in the old days—before the Ross House ball, before the disastrous Easter gathering at Crawleigh.

"I've promised it to Val Arden," she answered in the same measure. "And two other people, now that I come to think of it."

"Well, promise me—and keep the promise."

"But why should I disappoint them?"

"I feel you owe it to me, after we've not met for so long."

Barbara could not wholly hide from him that she was puzzled.

"I'll—see," she said.

"You used to be more gracious; you used to say, 'Yes—if you want me to.'"

"That was in the old days," she answered quickly and saw, too late, that she had needlessly raised the temperature of the discussion.

"Nothing's happened to change it, I hope," said Jack easily.

After the first embarrassment of the meeting, he felt that he was holding his own and that Barbara was mystified and uncomfortable.

"Jack, you've not forgotten our *last* meeting?" she asked.

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"It was at Ross House. We had supper together then——"

"Well, you don't want to—repeat it, do you?" she asked deliberately.

"I want to have supper with you again."

She was undecided whether to be distressed or intrigued. Jack could always arouse her combativeness by criticizing, or—as now—by coolly taking her for granted. But she did not want to repeat the Ross House scene. He had an unpleasant faculty of frightening her—and yet to be frightened by him was not wholly unpleasant....

"You can find some one else far more amusing," she suggested.

"I don't even know who's here."

"But you didn't know I was going to be here."

"I asked Jim—five days ago.... I came straight in here without even taking off my coat. Barbara, may I have supper with you?"

Insensibility, which was his chief characteristic, counted for much. A brazen desire, which she could understand, to treat the Ross House meeting as if it had never occurred might count for more. Barbara would sooner have bandied epigrams with Val Arden or flirted with his supplanter, but she felt that she would be unable to sleep until she knew why Jack had disappeared for more than two months and then followed her to a remote castle in Monmouthshire—and why he came to her, like a needle to a magnet, without waiting to get rid of his scarf and coat.

"I'll have supper with you, if you want me to," she said.

A sound of voices behind him warned Jack that the men were coming out of the banqueting-hall, and, as he hurried to get rid of his overcoat before any of them could grow inquisitive about his surreptitious visit to the drawing-room, the doors were flung open and the first cars rolled into sight. Loring threw away the end of his cigar and ran upstairs to help his mother receive their guests. A group of men gathered round the open fire-place, pulling on their gloves and waiting for the rest of their parties. Jack stood with them for a few minutes, wondering what to do with himself until supper. He was in no mood to dance or to debate the possibility of war or to chatter about Jim's engagement or to discuss what he meant to do during the vacation. He could only think of one thing at a time and he had not determined whether they were to publish the news then and there or to wait until they were back in London. He would have liked to proclaim it at supper and to see every man and woman rising to drink their health, but he decided, on reflection, that he must talk to Lord Crawleigh before making the announcement.

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Phyllis Knight-riding and her mother came out of the drawing-room and went upstairs. He followed them and, in duty, asked for a dance; but, as soon as it was over, he escaped to the terrace in front of the castle and sat down by himself as far as possible from the door. Barbara's curiosity was piqued; and, if he met her before supper, she would disturb him with artless little questions instead of waiting to hear the whole story. Yet, if she would trouble to think, there was no room for curiosity.

"You are dancing? No?" said Val Arden behind him. "One can offer you the half of a tolerable lair, not too near the music and adequately provisioned."

He led the way to a recess overlooking the ball-room and waved his hands towards two armchairs and a table with cigars, coffee and liqueurs.

"Aren't you dancing either?" Jack asked, as he sat down.

"These young women may be less energetic in three, four hours' time. One is waiting for the requisite mood of abandonment. One rejoices to meet you again after this long time, even at the cost of losing Lady Lilith's companionship at supper."

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"Well, I think I deserve it," Jack answered. "I haven't seen her for months."

"She is a little *difficile* to-night. 'Out of temper' would be too strong a phrase. But, you may observe, even the urbane Summertown is out of favour."

Barbara swept by them, as he spoke, and both heard her exclaiming petulantly, "You're very tiresome to-night! I shan't dance with you any more." Both saw them parting at the door; Summertown laughed imperturbably, Barbara ran away and did not appear again until the beginning of the next dance.

She had found time to quarrel with four of her partners by eleven o'clock and was prepared for a fifth and all-atoning quarrel with Jack as soon as he claimed her for supper. The party at Loring Castle had been delightful, until he came; for the last two months in London she had felt like a released prisoner. Now the shock of meeting him again had spoiled her evening; and, when she wanted to enjoy herself, she could only worry her brain to find out why he had come. In the Ross House encounter she liked to think that, by all public tests, she had beaten him; but her victory brought her little satisfaction. When she reconstructed the scene, something that was suspiciously like conscience disturbed her. To pretend that she could not marry him because he was not a Catholic was more serviceable than true. And to pretend that religion meant anything to her was almost blasphemous, the sort of thing that might bring her months of ill-luck. Any other excuse would have been better, safer; at least she would not be inviting a judgement on herself. Some things did undoubtedly make Providence angry; and she had thought seriously of writing to Jack and saying that religion was not the stumbling-block, that she had been flustered until she did not know what she was saying. But then he would start again from the beginning....

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He had frightened her at Ross House with a simple and massive resolve to get his own way; and it was fear rather than curiosity or annoyance which was spoiling her evening for her. First he would arrange a meeting, then discharge a proposal, then retire for more ammunition, then arrange another meeting, and then.... She felt sure that he was going to propose to her again.... It was so characteristic of his methods that he should come early, engage her for supper—and then disappear. If she "forgot" her promise and supped with some one else, if she went to her room and locked the door, he would only wait until she reappeared or else engineer a meeting in Scotland or the Isle of Wight; he could not be avoided indefinitely.

Loring found her standing by herself at an open window and told her that she was looking tired.

"Supper's just starting," he added, and she felt herself wincing. "I needn't ask whether you've got a partner for it."

"I don't know that I want any supper," she answered, looking round over her shoulder. There was no sign of Jack, but punctually at the first note of the next dance he appeared from space and claimed her.

CHAPTER TWELVE AN ERROR OF JUDGEMENT

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"And I,—what I seem to my friend, you see:
What I soon shall seem to his love, you guess:
What I seem to myself, do you ask of me?
No hero, I confess.

'Tis an awkward thing to play with souls,
And matter enough to save one's own...."

ROBERT BROWNING: "A LIGHT WOMAN."

"Shall we go down before the crowd?" Jack asked.

"Oh, don't let's miss this!" Barbara begged. "Dixie, all abo-o-ard for Dixie! Dixie! Take your tickets here for Dixie."

"I've found rather a good table in the musicians' gallery," he confided. "If we go now, we shall get it to ourselves."

"Let's go downstairs like everybody else," Barbara proposed hastily. As he revealed each new stage of careful preparation, she dreaded being left alone with him. "Are you very greedy, Jack, or only hungry? I love that one-step. Why did you drag me away in the middle?"

They entered the banqueting-hall to the jig and stamp of rag-time overhead; Barbara was still humming, as she drew off her gloves and sat down opposite him at a corner-table.

"You ought to be grateful to me for getting you a table before the rush starts. I can't stand rag-time, myself. It's killed decent dancing. What are you going to eat, Babs?"

"Oh, anything." She wished that the tables were nearer together and that the room were fuller. They were remote enough for Jack to become very confidential, if he wished; and it was impossible to talk him down, if he formally asked for five minutes of her undivided attention and forbade interruption. She sought inspiration in vain from the vaulted roof and high-placed gallery, the tattered standards hanging in double row into the middle of the room, the rough stone walls half-covered with panelling and the stained-glass windows at either end. To discuss architecture with Jack was unprofitable at any time. "I *never* expected to see you here," she told him again. "What have you been doing since last we met?"

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"When did we meet last?" he asked her once more, with a nonchalance that made her look at him in amazement.

"It was at Ross House, soon after Easter," she answered with rare precision. "Don't you remember?"

"Oh, perfectly. I wanted to be sure that you did. It was hardly an evening that I should forget in a *hurry*."

Barbara was frightened and relieved at the same time. His deliberation and absence of embarrassment disconcerted her, but, in so far as his manner was vaguely threatening, she was vaguely comforted. If he wanted to punish her, she was well able to take care of herself; and she would far sooner hear reproaches than pleadings, though for once she would soonest of all be spared any kind of altercation.

"And what have you been doing ever since?" she asked again.

"I've just been received into your Church," he answered.

Overhead the music stopped to the accompaniment of a double stamp; it was as though the very orchestra were dumbfounded. After a moment's clapping, it started again, and Barbara sat through the encore with averted eyes and a frown of preoccupation, putting crumbs of bread into her mouth and eating salmon which nauseated her. She was conscious of mental cramp—and of nothing else, save perhaps that Jack was probably looking at her to mark how she received the news. When the music stopped a second time, there came a sound of voices from the stairs; and he glanced apprehensively over his shoulder as the first couples entered with flushed faces,

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pulling off their gloves and fanning themselves.

"Will you marry me now, Babs?" he whispered.

"I—*can't!*"

It was something to find that she could speak at all; but, if he began arguing, she was helpless. Rallying in desperation, she beckoned to Arden and Phyllis Knightrider.

"There's a table here," she pointed out. "Come and sit near me, Val, to shew that I'm forgiven for breaking my promise."

"One thought for a moment of starving oneself to death on your doorstep in alleged Oriental fashion," drawled Arden. "It would have entailed distressing privations, however, and one was persuaded by Miss Knightrider against one's more romantic judgement."

If Barbara could create a diversion, Jack determined not to be thrown out of his stride by it. He began to eat his supper with a show of relish which he felt to be incongruous after Barbara's emphatic and unqualified refusal. There was nothing else to do, and it made the absence of conversation less marked. Barbara had sent her salmon away unfinished and, refusing everything else, was beginning to fidget with her gloves; but, if he remained there all night, Jack was resolved to outstay Arden and to keep Barbara there until she had explained herself. In time she allowed him to give her some fruit. With every new couple the high babble of conversation and laughter swelled in volume until they were isolated in their corner. Behind the screen of voices Jack leaned forward and touched her wrist until she looked up.

"You say you can't. Why not?" he asked.

The words and tone were as she remembered them more than two months earlier, but this time there was no escape.

"Because I'm not in love with you."

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She nerved herself to look him in the eyes so that he must be convinced in spite of himself. For a moment there was no change of expression; then, though the grouping of the features remained unaltered, the face seemed to stiffen; lines discovered themselves from nose to mouth, and the lips grew set and thin. Barbara gripped the seat of her chair with both hands. Greater even than fear was respect for a man who could control himself; for the first time she wished that she loved him, because he was "bigger"—to use his pet word—than she had thought; she would not mind telling him so, if it would do any good; she would not mind telling him that he was bigger than she was, but nothing could do any good now.

Jack tried to speak, and she saw that he had to sip champagne before the words would come.

"That was not the reason you gave," he said at length.

"It's the true reason."

"Then the other was a lie? Jim thought it might be, but I said I knew you too well for that. Then you've been lying to me all along? You never intended to marry me?"

"No."

The hateful charge was used as a dispassionate definition. Jack refused to grow angry, and Barbara felt her resistance wearing itself out against him.

"Jack—"

He enjoined silence with the slightest movement of one hand and reflected unhurriedly.

"You always said that money didn't weigh with you.... I gave you every chance of slipping in a friendly warning.... Why did you do this, Barbara? If you never meant to marry me, why did you *deliberately*—"

While he continued to speak with frozen self-restraint, she felt that she could not bear the end of his sentence.

"How was I to know?" she interrupted; and there was a note of sincerity in her voice, for she had never imagined that he loved her to the point of perjuring himself. "You say you gave me a chance of warning you.... How was I to know? Up to the end—that night at Ross House—you were abusing me and finding fault with me. You dared to tell me you'd said nothing that my father hadn't said a hundred times! If you thought you'd changed me.... You must have been mad; I let you abuse me because it wasn't worth arguing about, I knew I was right, I've proved I was right.... I know I haven't changed you and I never shall. You always despised me so much, you said I was vulgar, shallow, vain, heartless.... Did you expect me to understand that that was your way of shewing that you were in love with me?"

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Jack touched his lips with one finger.

"We needn't take the *whole* room into our confidence," he whispered. "So this was your revenge? I congratulate you, Lady Barbara.... Or were you convincing me of my mistake? Oh, I beg your pardon! I didn't see you hadn't finished eating."

He laid his cigarette beside his plate and turned half round. Every one else seemed to be enjoying himself prodigiously. Twenty shrill-voiced conversations met and struggled; laughter swelled and died away. Some one proposed Jim's health and tried to coerce him into replying. Lady Loring appeared for a moment in the musicians' gallery, smiled contentedly on her handiwork and withdrew. Their lightness of heart was hard to bear, and the ecstasy in Violet's eyes was insupportable. Jack turned back to his own table. He was not going to marry Barbara; if he repeated it often enough, he might come to believe it; he was desperately tired and could not think what to do next.

A sudden hush, followed by a scrape of feet and the creak of moving chairs, greeted the opening bars of a waltz. Plaintive voices enquired for lost gloves, and in another minute Jack and Barbara had the room to themselves. She gripped the chair harder, bracing herself to receive her punishment; and, as he sat half asleep, she could have complimented him on his refined cruelty in making her wait for it. Gradually he seemed to see that the room had emptied, to guess that she expected him to speak; his expression changed, and, with it, her own dumb readiness to take whatever he might choose to mete out. There was still no anger, hardly even resentment; but his mouth was pursed in disgust, as though a toad had leaped on to his plate. Barbara felt herself aflame with desire to justify herself.

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"I've finished now, if you want to smoke," she said. "Jack, I don't want to reopen this, you *must* see that it would be hopeless! You disapprove of everything I do. You may be right: we won't discuss that. I'm a gipsy, and you're—I don't know what you are."

Jack reminded himself again that he was not going to marry Barbara. For three months and more he had never doubted it; when Jim Loring frowned and hesitated and let fall apprehensive uncertainties, he had answered with easy confidence, as though challenged to declare his belief in the solar system. Three minutes, or less, was a short time for readjustment, but he was beginning to repeat the sentence with his brain as well as with his lips. And so far he had not publicly disgraced himself in any way....

"I don't think we'll discuss anything," he said.

Barbara moved her chair, but he did not seem to notice it: he noticed nothing, and the silence was unendurable. She asked for a cigarette, and he gave her one, silently lighting a match.

"I'm—sorry, Jack," she said at last.

"You're losing nothing," he answered.

"I'm sorry for your sake."

"Ah, you can't afford the luxury of a conscience, Lady Barbara."

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"I thought you must have seen—after that night at Ross House...." she began hurriedly, but her voice and courage died away. "Lady" Barbara choked her.

"You took pains that I shouldn't see. We needn't go through this again? I took you at your word. You suggested one obstacle—one only,—and I removed it."

As he stood up, she saw him sway and for the first time understood the size of what she had done. She and Jack did not believe that immortal souls existed or could be imperilled, but if there *were* a jealous God who refused to have His name taken in vain....

"Jack—"

"Shall we go up-stairs?" he asked.

"I haven't finished my cigarette."

She tried to speak again, but stopped at an outburst of singing in the hall. "Geor-gie, what did you buy, what did you buy for Maud-ee?" Summertown and Framlingham waltzed into the room and swung recklessly between the tables to an accompaniment of falsetto small-talk. "Jolly floor, what? Have you been to many floors this season?" "Oh, hardly any, Miss Framlingham. I'm *quite* a little country mouse. Here, I say, what's the matter with this table?" Summertown subsided by the door, and Framlingham scoured the neighbourhood for food and drink. Their noise and high spirits were disturbing, but after one impatient glance over his shoulder Jack turned round and looked at Barbara. She was sitting lost in thought, with her chin on her hand, staring at the bubbles as they rose in her glass—puzzled but at ease. The long, exacting season had made her more haggard than ever, but Jack had learned to love and yearn for this wan, fragile beauty; her eyes were bigger and darker than usual, and a faint languor gave her added dignity. If he went on looking at her, Jack felt that he might strangle her in a passionate gust of jealousy and self-pity.

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The horn of a car sounded through the open windows, and he looked at his watch.

"Lady Knight-riding wants to leave early," he said. "We've got rather a long drive to Raglan."

"Don't go for a minute, Jack. I've got something to say to you."

It was that imperilling of soul—if there were souls and if they could be imperilled. Reparation was needed, but, unless she promised to marry him.... He would hardly want to marry her now....

"Can you spare me another cigarette?" she asked.

He handed her his case and sat down, waiting without a change of expression. Since he was not going to marry Barbara, everything else seemed wonderfully trivial. He rather hoped that she was not going to explain or apologize, because he was too tired for a scene, too tired to argue, too tired even to nod or say "yes" and "no" in the right place.... There was no point in sitting there, if she had nothing to say. And three hours earlier he had decided that, all things considered, it would be more proper not to announce their engagement until he had Lord Crawleigh's formal assent....

There was a sound of other voices in the hall, and George Oakleigh appeared in the doorway. He looked anxiously round the room and pounced upon the bachelor supper-party at his elbow. After a moment's earnest whispering, Summertown banged his fist on the table until the glasses rang.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, Hell," he cried. "One good thing—you're in this, too, Charles, my lad."

Framlingham emptied his glass and refilled it unhurriedly.

"To declare war in the middle of supper is not the act of a gentleman," he pronounced.

The phrase drove away Jack's mental drowsiness; Barbara forgot that she was even trying to think of anything to say; both sat upright. The possibility of war had long faded from their minds, and they welcomed it as a distraction.

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"Is it declared?" Jack asked.

"Not yet," answered Oakleigh. "And we'll hope it won't be. But things are looking pretty serious, and Summertown's uncle has called with a car to fetch him back to barracks. I'm going to mobilize all of our soldiers, but I don't want any fuss, or we shall spoil Jim's party. Help to keep things going."

He hurried away, and Barbara looked blankly at Jack. "War!" she murmured. He said nothing; but his eyes, dull a moment before, were shining with excitement. He looked at his watch and rose quickly to his feet.

"Good-bye, Lady Barbara."

"But you're not a soldier!"

"I must get back to London. I'm going to ask Summertown for a seat in his car and then I must have a word with Lady Knightrider."

He hurried away with scant ceremony, leaving Barbara standing by the table. She began to collect her gloves and handkerchief, then sat down and tried to think dispassionately. It did not matter that she was beaten and that he could add "liar" and "coquette" to his other charges. He would never tell any one how she had behaved.... But he had run away without punishing her, and she wanted to be punished. Punished by *him*; she could not hand herself over to Providence. For a moment she tried to persuade herself that he was lying. But Jack was incapable of lying. Yet for weeks he must have lied with a grim and sanctimonious face. The world was standing on its head! She pictured his methodical, deliberate conversion—the first interview and first lie, the elaborate instruction in ritual and doctrine until he had told enough lies to convince the priest, the final reception into the Church with a final lie that would infallibly imperil a man's soul, if there were such things....

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One sentimental idiot had shot big game in Uganda, when she would not marry him. Another had kept his bed for a week, pretending a broken heart. Jack said little; but, as she squandered his devotion, she felt that it would never come again. Perhaps her fear of him was the shell of love; certainly she would not have wasted ten minutes on a man who meant nothing to her. "Di'monds an' pearls.... Di'monds an' pearl I have thrown away wid both hands—and fwhat have I left? Oh, fwhat have I left?" The words came in one of Kipling's stories, surely.... But she could not remember.

The hall filled again with the sound of voices, and she hurried out rather than let herself be seen sitting alone and unexplained. Six young officers were hastily wrapping themselves in overcoats and golf-cloaks under the patronizing direction of Val Arden.

"They cast lots for one's raiment," he observed to Barbara, "and Summertown had the good fortune to draw one's violet-silk *surtout*. One could not wish it a worthier occupant. There used to be an inside pocket, and one recalls putting into it a trifle of *cognac*. They also serve who only stand the drinks."

Summertown was being dressed by his sister, who looked frightened in spite of his easy flow of facetious reassurance.

"Bless you, *I'm* all right!" he cried. "They wouldn't hurt a little thing like me, I should run away between their feet and get taken prisoner. You'll hear of me next as the regimental pet of the Death's Head Hussars. By the way, does anybody know who we're supposed to be fighting? My jolly old uncle never let that out—sly old dog! Good-bye, Babs! See you again soon."

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As they shook hands, she suddenly remembered the scene in Webster's rooms when Jack, under the spell of Madame Hilary, talked of a war, which was hanging over their heads, and of his own

instant death.

"Oh, my *dear*, I wish you weren't going!" she cried with such emotion that Sally Farwell stared at her.

"So do I. 'Haven't finished supper yet. Charles, my lad, d'you think that, if we went back for just a *little* one, we could manage to get left behind?"

Barbara turned quickly and walked towards the door. She knew that Summertown would be killed.... Her scepticism was a schoolgirl's; she refused to believe things because she was too ignorant to understand them. For aught she knew, there might be a Soul of Man, for which Man could be held to account....

Jack was talking earnestly by the steps, an overcoat and rug over one arm.

"I know nothing about the army," she heard Oakleigh say. "But any one of these fellows would tell you. Or you can try O'Rane. He was saying after dinner—in all seriousness—that, if Austria declared war, he'd raise a Foreign Legion and go and fight for Servia. He was through one of the Balkan wars, you know. But I can't believe there *will* be any fighting; it's on too big a scale, you'll have the whole world in flames. In your place I should do nothing for the present."

"But, if we *are* brought in, we shall have to raise every man we can lay hands on. I *am* partly trained; I was in the corps at Eton."

"I shall believe in war when I see it."

Barbara walked past them down the steps. She had not tried to catch Jack's eye; but he had seen her, and she hoped that he would follow her. The broad terrace was littered with chairs, as the deck of a steamer might be; but the night was turning cold, and she walked to the stone steps at the end without seeing any one. Then she heard the sound of an engine starting, and a muffled procession marched to the car. The murmur of subdued altercation reached her. "Charles, my lad, you're taking up too much room...." "I'm all right, I'll sit on the floor."... "That's a goodish hat Phil's wearing! Phil, if you perch on the radiator, you'll lend tone to the party...."

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She watched Jack coming slowly down the steps. An apology would be merely insulting. There was only one possible reparation, and, though he might not accept it, she must at least offer it; if he flung it back at her, she would feel less guilty. Another hour, and she could think this to rights. But George was already calling the roll.

"Come along, Jack! You're keeping the whole show waiting," cried Summertown. "'The stars are setting, and the caravan starts for the Dawn of Nothing. Oh, make haste!' Or words to that effect."

Barbara took a step forward, as Jack shook hands with Oakleigh and ran across the terrace to the car. He might wound her vanity again, if she could solace her soul with the knowledge that she had promised him all that she had to give.

"Jack!"

Her voice was a timid whisper; the audience of jostling, laughing young officers daunted her. What would they think of her, standing alone on the terrace, running up to the car and insisting that she must speak to Jack?

George came down the steps and slammed the door. "*Right* away!" she heard, and the car moved slowly towards her. At the corner of the terrace the head-lights swung dazzlingly on to her, and she threw up her arm as though they would blind her. Some one began to sing, "Dixie! All aboard for Dixie!" A voice murmured drowsily, "Dry up! I want to go to sleep." The gears changed with a grind; Barbara looked up to see a single red tail-light.

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"Jack! Before you go! I want to speak to you!"

She was calling with all her strength now, but the beat of the engine drowned her voice.

"Jack! *Please*, Jack!"

She hurried down the stone steps at the end of the terrace and ran a few paces along the drive, repeating his name with a sob and stretching out her arms to the vanishing pin-point of red light.

George was still standing in the door-way when she returned at a limp. For a moment she was afraid to speak lest she began to cry.

"I've got a stone in my shoe," she announced at length.

He smiled and offered her his arm.

"You're looking tired, Barbara. Have you had any supper?"

Only the kind and well-intentioned could ask innocent questions which hurt like the thrust of a needle under a finger-nail. At one time it seemed as though she would never escape from the banqueting-hall.

"I've had supper, thanks," she answered, resting one hand on his shoulder, as she felt for the stone in her shoe. Then she remembered a similar act and attitude, when she and Jack stood

breathless at the end of the Croxton village street on the night of their first meeting; and she limped to a chair. "It's dreadful to see all those boys going off. I feel that *some* of them will never come back."

"But we aren't even at war yet," George protested.

"Everybody seems to think we soon shall be. Didn't I hear Jack Waring talking to you about trying to get a commission?"

"Well, he wants to be prepared, of course. It's a military family, you see."

They walked upstairs together and stood in the doorway of the ball-room. Colonel Farwell's car had come and gone very unobtrusively; no one seemed to miss the absentees, and Loring and Mayhew, O'Rane and Arden were holding the party together with tireless energy and zest. At three o'clock Lady Knightrider and those who had long distances to cover reluctantly sent for their cars, but the house-party and its near neighbours danced indefatigably. At sunrise the curtains were flung aside and the lights turned out; the last of many suppers was eaten on the terrace at half-past four, and at five O'Rane organized a slow march-past of the remaining cars in honour of Loring and Violet who stood on the top of the steps, bowing with weary joyousness their acknowledgement of the last toast.

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Barbara had been compelled at first to do her share of dancing, but, when the band escaped to catch an early train back to London, she took possession of the piano. It was again horribly like that first night at Croxton, when Jack sat in some embarrassment by her side on the dais; but at least she was not expected to talk or to pretend that she was enjoying herself. When Arden joined her, she resigned the piano to him and slipped upstairs to her room. She was down again a moment later, trying to decide whether it was more intolerable to be with others or alone. Her room was too tranquil and cool; she had been so happy, as she dressed, so determined to enjoy herself;—and she had nothing on her mind. Through the open window she heard Arden's hand and voice at the piano, punctuated by burst of cheering from the strip of drive under the terrace. The engines of the cars thrashed and beat, then grew calm and jerked into sound again as one after another shot forward; Loring and Violet were hoarse but inexhaustibly happy, and, as Barbara ran downstairs, she told herself that she too wanted to congratulate them again; in their present state they were too rare to be wasted.

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"What's the next item, Jim?" panted O'Rane, as she came on to the terrace. His hair was disordered, his shirt and collar crumpled and his arms full of the champagne glasses which the departing guests had tossed to him after the final toast. But he was ready to go through the night's revelry from the beginning. "I'll race you to the river and back!"

"My little man, I assure you that you will do no such thing," Loring answered. "If any one wants to dance any more, you can play to them; if any one wants anything more to eat and drink, you can supply their wants. *I* think it's high time we were all in bed. *You're* certainly going indoors before you catch cold," he said to Violet. "And you, Sally. And you, Babs."

He rounded them up until Barbara alone remained behind with the chill wind of early morning beating on her bare shoulders and chest and blowing unchecked through her gossamer clothes. After the earlier insufferable heat, this cold air with its burden of dew and night-scented stock wrapped itself round her body like a bandage laid on burning flesh. It purified, too, like a mountain torrent of melting snow pouring over her arms and breast. Some girl in a book—it was by Gissing, but she could not remember names to-night—had bathed naked in the sea by moonlight—to cleanse her spirit because she had suffered men to touch her body; this wind, as yet unwarmed by the orange sun of dawn, served her in place of the kindly sea....

"If you *want* triple pneumonia, Babs, that's the way to get it," said Loring.

His voice suggested a new train of thought, and she pursued it without answering. Some young wife in a book—it was by Balzac, but she could not remember names to-night—broke her heart because she fancied that her husband had ceased to love her; no longer caring for life, she worked herself into a violent sweat and stood in the dew by the brink of a pond until she had given herself consumption.... But to take refuge in suicide was to shew that you were unfit to have been born, that you were unequal to life; this, even this night of horror, was a thing to be mastered; Barbara luxuriated in life as a thing to be dominated and enchained like a destroying flood or fire....

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"It's such a wonderful morning, Jim," she said, as she turned.

"Yes, but, as we've managed to get through one whole night without quarrelling, don't catch a chill at the end and put the blame on me. I thought, all things considered, that it went off very well."

"I suppose so.... Jim, when I'm responsible for a thing, I never put the blame on other people. You can't deny me courage."

"My dear girl, I can't remember a single occasion on which you've taken the blame for anything. Perhaps you'll reply that you never *were* to blame for anything, and we might argue about that for a very long time. Come to bed; you're shivering."

She walked with him into the house and looked wonderingly at the clock, while he barred the door behind them. Six! It seemed hardly worth while going to bed....

"Are you tired, Jim? Too tired to smoke a cigarette and listen to me blaming myself?"

Loring's heart seemed to sink. He had seen her with Jack and he had listened to an eager but unconvincing story designed to shew that, in Jack's eyes, it made all the difference in the world whether he motored to Gloucester and arrived in London in time for breakfast or breakfasted at the Castle or in Raglan and returned to London by a morning train.

"I'll listen—with pleasure," he said.

Barbara looked for a comfortable seat and led the way to a sofa in the smoking-room.

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"I believe Jack Waring has discussed me with you?" she began.

"I think he's told me everything that was to be told," answered Loring.

"Including to-night?" It was an idle question, for Jim would have been more Rhadamanthine if Jack had described the last disillusionment. "Well, you know he asked me to marry him; and I refused, because he wasn't a Catholic. He *is* a Catholic now—in name; he asked me again to-night, and I refused again."

"Why?"

Men preserved a rare sex-loyalty. Loring's tone was Jack's; his face was setting with the same rigidity, and he would shew as little mercy.

"I didn't feel I was in love with him."

"Were you ever in love with him? A good many people thought you were."

Barbara pondered deeply over her answer.

"I could never be in love with any one who wasn't gentle with me.... I—rather admired Jack, because he was clean and honest and had the courage to say things that I'd have hit another man for—"

"But you were afraid of him," Loring murmured. "Go on! You wanted to shew him how wrong he was—"

"I owed it to myself to shew him what I was *really* like, not what the halfpenny press thinks I am. He fell in love; and then, when he asked me to marry him, I lost my head—"

"But you never told him that you weren't in love with him," Loring interrupted again.

Barbara's eyes fell.

"I'd lost my nerve as well as my head," she sighed. "He'd have thought so much worse of me. I didn't see him after that until to-night; I hoped it was all over. I told him again that I couldn't marry him and then I told him the truth—that I wasn't in love with him. And then—then he saw everything.... Jim, I'm not asking for mercy from him or you or any one; I'm telling you the truth and I want to be judged on that. Until to-night I honestly didn't know how bad it was, I didn't know that I was anything more than some one who attracted him—"

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"You accursed women never do!" Loring broke in. "Well, go on! You played with him and led him on and checked him till he proposed—men, hard-headed men who aren't drunk, don't propose when they're merely 'attracted'—he proposed, and you told him an extremely ingenious lie which I should have thought your extravagant superstition might have kept you from telling. *Then!* Then, when he pays you the compliment of thinking you a woman of honour, you admit it's a lie. Go on, Barbara!"

She shook her head slowly and leaned wearily forward, resting her chin on her hand.

"It's no good, Jim. If any one hits you often enough in the same place, you cease to feel. You want to hurt me—I don't wonder!—but you can't; I'm too bruised. No, *he* said hardly anything. It wasn't necessary to *say* anything; he knew...."

Loring strode to the table, picked up a cigarette and flung it back into the box. He found that Barbara was watching him with wonder in her eyes and waited till his indignation was under control.

"And so you got a new emotion," he sneered. "Two, in fact. You played cat and mouse with a man's happiness; and then you had the morbid pleasure of letting yourself be flayed alive.... I should think it will be your last emotion for some time."

"As you like, Jim. But it'll be easier if I tell you everything and *then* let you criticize.... Jack hardly said a word. It was sinking in; and it was sinking in with me, too. I'm not a coward, Jim—"

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"Oh, leave your vile little posturings out!"

"I'm not a coward," she repeated patiently. "Standing out there a moment ago, I thought how *easy* it would be to get pneumonia and die and end everything—*Don't* say 'another emotion'! A coward *would* have. But I'd decided to accept the consequences. I was on the point of telling Jack he could marry me, if he wanted to, when that car came and everybody started running about.... I tried to catch him before he left, I ran after the car.... That's all, Jim."

Looking at her, he saw that she was indeed too much bruised to feel.

"And now?" he asked.

Barbara shook her head hopelessly and stared across the room out of the window.

"He can do what he likes with me. He can marry me and beat me. He can sit—dear God! he can sit as he sat to-night, looking at me as though I were a bundle of rags and sores that had thrown its arms round him. He can tell people.... Or he can keep me to himself and sneer and torture me when he's in the mood. He can take me and break my heart and fling me away after a week, if he likes. There's nothing, nothing I won't do!"

Her vehemence startled him for a moment, but her tone and phrasing were too rhetorical to be convincing.

"I admire your capacity for getting the last ounce even out of repentance," Loring murmured.

For a moment Barbara did not seem to have heard him; then she got up and walked out of the smoking-room and across the hall to a studded oak door. She rattled the handle for a moment and then came back.

"Where's the key of the chapel?" she demanded. "You believe in something, I suppose? And I suppose you admit that even I would stop short of *some* things. Give me the key! I'll swear to you on the image of the Blessed Virgin——"

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"I don't think I should dip any deeper into that kind of thing if I were you."

"I'll swear by anything! You see those two matches? That's the sign of the Cross. I swear by the Cross that I'll offer myself to Jack! And he can do what he likes with me."

"Wouldn't it be rather a waste of breath to talk like this to Jack?"

"You mean I'm not in earnest? I swear to you, Jim, that I'll *beg* him to marry me, if he still wants to."

The clock struck half-past six, and Loring shivered.

"I wish to God you'd died before you ever met him!" he muttered. "What the devil's the good of telling me all this?"

"If I hadn't told you, nobody'd have known. *Jack* wouldn't tell. I wanted to commit myself before I had time to go back. Now I'll give the whole of my life trying to make him happy, to atoning...."

Loring caught her wrists and gripped them.

"Leave him alone!" he cried. "It would be suicide if you married after this."

"If he wants me...." Barbara began again. "Jim, can't you see that I'm trying to save my soul? He can have everything. I'm quite young, and he can have all my youth and life, my looks, anything that I've got, anything that I am. He can take it all—or he can fling it all back at me."

She stretched out her hands to him. Loring pulled her to her feet and led her to the door.

"Leave him alone!" he repeated roughly.

Barbara left by the ten o'clock train, while the rest of the house-party was still in bed. Her maid was well used to sudden changes of plan, but she ventured to point out that the family was at the Abbey and that the house in Berkeley Square was closed.

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"Well, it will have to be opened, then," said Barbara.

She had not gone to bed, and there were dark rings round her eyes; but she was clear-headed and determined. Her maid tried to tempt her with breakfast before their long drive, but Barbara did not want to eat until she had seen Jack. In the train she could hardly keep her eyes open; but, until she had seen Jack, she did not want to sleep. Every one seemed to be hurrying to London, as though there would be later news of the war there; and she heard a far away babble of what Lichnowski had said, what Kuhlmann had proposed for localizing the war.... But she was wondering only what Jack was about. The luncheon-car attendant slid open the door, but she shook her head at him; the idea of food nauseated her, and she was glad to have the compartment to herself for half an hour.

When her fellow-travellers returned, they found her with her head against the window and her arms limply by her side. One of them hurried away for water, and, when she shivered and opened her eyes, some one had laid her flat on the seat, and a voice—the first kind voice that she had heard for days—was saying:

"Carriage a bit hot for you? Or perhaps you're not a good traveller. I'm a doctor—or used to be. Just going up to see if the War Office wants volunteers in case of war. I saw you didn't come along to lunch; when did you last have anything to eat?"

"I've really forgotten," Barbara answered.

"I thought so. Well, a cup of coffee and a biscuit, eh? And I'll try to get you a little more room."

He whispered to the men who were standing in the corridor and distributed them in the other

compartments until he and Barbara were alone. After the coffee she felt less sick and from Swindon to London she was able to get some sleep. At Paddington the doctor wanted to take her home, but she protested that her maid could do all that was necessary, and he left her with an urgent recommendation to bed.

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Barbara thanked him for all his kindness and ordered two taxis. One took the maid and the luggage to Berkeley Square; in the other she drove to the County Club and enquired bravely for Mr. Waring. The porter replied that he had left the club immediately after luncheon, and she made her way to the Temple. Hitherto she had not dreamed that there would be any difficulty in finding him; but Middle Temple Lane, narrow, cold and almost empty, daunted her. It was the first of August, and the rows of names painted at the foot of each staircase looked ownerless and impersonal as grave-yard head-stones in the general desolation. As she pattered up two flights of stone steps to Jack's chambers, the giddiness which had overtaken her in the train returned and stopped her short with a pain in her side. The walls were advancing and retiring, the banisters swayed and the floor of the landing heaved gently like a pitching boat.

When she felt steadier, she knocked at the door and waited patiently until she heard feet shuffling in the distance. A pink-faced elderly man informed her that Mr. Waring had gone away for the Long Vacation; he spoke with a strong Cockney accent, and Barbara decided that he must be the clerk with whom she had contended by telephone and whom she had imagined to be obsequious and yet sinister, with red eyes, short hair and bitten nails, a second Uriah Heep.

"Do you know where I can find him?" she asked.

"The first address he give me was at Raglan——"

"Ah, but he came back to London last night. He's not been here to-day?"

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"No, miss."

"Do you know his address in Hampshire? Do you think you could telephone to find out whether he's there?"

The clerk scratched his head and referred to a list of numbers pinned in the passage by the telephone. Barbara had disturbed his afternoon sleep, but she was an uncommonly pretty young woman, some one to relieve the monotony of the moribund chambers; expensively dressed, too, and one who would liberally repay a little trouble. His curiosity was whetted by her coming to see young Waring; still waters ran deep....

"If you'll come in and sit down, miss," he suggested hospitably. "What nime shall I siy?"

"Lady Barbara Neave. You needn't—I mean, I don't want to speak to him. It's just the address."

"I see. Had the pleasure o' talking to you once before on the 'phone, my lidy."

"Ah, yes."

Barbara walked into a shabby room with two scarred writing tables, a threadbare carpet and four hard little armchairs. One wall was covered by a book-case filled with Law Reports, old, discoloured volumes of the "Annual Practice" and standard works on Pleading, Criminal Law and Procedure, Real Property and the like. A few pounds would have freshened the dingy room out of recognition and perhaps even given it a personal note, but Jack was insensible to beauty and ugliness alike; he noticed the peeling yellow wall-paper as little as he noticed the intoxicating afternoon sun on the river; he had nothing in common with her.... She remembered the promise which she had made to herself and began to look at the papers on his table—long, white bundles tied with pink tape and engrossed with old-fashioned lettering which she could hardly read. These must be briefs, set out to look imposing, for many were grey with dust. There was an unexplained red sack, embroidered with his initials and fastened with a red cord; and a small black box with his name in white letters, containing an absurd wig. This was his life, a life which absorbed him....

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Outside in the passage the clerk began a sing-song monologue.

"Trunks, miss, please. Trunks, if—*you*—please. Is that Trunks? I want Lashmar four seven. This is Holborn double four nine double-two. No! *Nine!* Double-four nine double-two. Thank you." He shuffled into the room and smiled familiarly at Barbara. "They'll call me when I'm through. Now may I get you a cup of tea, me lidy?"

Barbara thanked him, but refused the tea. The Cockney accent was intensified when he spoke on the telephone, and it reminded her once again of the winter afternoon when she had tried to drag Jack away from a consultation, the afternoon of her visit to Webster's flat. If she had stopped then, there would now be nothing to regret or to repair. Her fatal step was to invite him to dinner that night merely because she wanted the support of some one solid and well-balanced. Since that day she had never been able to decide how she felt towards him; she had been unable to tell Loring a few hours before. If, instead of always frightening her, he could have shewn a little gentleness.... George Oakleigh, to whom she was nothing, always helped her into a cloak as though she were the most fragile and precious thing in the world; and she became rebellious and reckless, when any one was harsh to her. Jack would order her home after a ball like a drill-sergeant; George came up two minutes later and said, "I wonder whether you'll let me take you home? You're looking so white and tired." It was more than a difference of manner. Jack never

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realized that a girl could be hungry for tenderness, but love was nothing without affection.... And love was always easier to give than affection.

The telephone rang, and the clerk reported that Mr. Waring was not in Hampshire nor expected there for nearly another week. As Barbara walked downstairs and drove home, she tried to think of any means of getting into touch with him which her tired brain had not already suggested. At worst she could always write, but she wanted to throw her pride at his feet to be trampled and bruised, she wanted to look him in the eyes without flinching or begging for mercy....

In the train it seemed as if the whole world were coming to London, but London was now empty of every one that she wanted to see. Summertown, who might have useful information, could not be found in his rooms or in barracks; Framlingham was "expected back any minute." She called a second time at the County Club, but Jack had not returned. And, after dining by herself in her bare, half-resurrected bedroom, she telephoned with carefully disguised voice. At the third failure, she abandoned his club; to welcome humiliation from Jack was hardly the same thing as to accept it from hall-porters and page-boys....

Though she was a night's sleep in arrears, she could not lie still in bed. An old French clock with a squeaking, high note that reminded her absurdly of Jack's clerk, struck midnight, one and two. She turned on the light and reached for her writing-case.

"I don't apologize, because no apology is adequate; I don't seek forgiveness, for, though I honour and admire and wonder at you and your devotion to some one who never deserved a thousandth part of it, I don't believe any one has the greatness of soul to forgive me. I am writing to say that, if you still want me, I will do whatever you ask. I can never make amends. But I will try with all my heart and soul and mind and strength."

BARBARA."

She threw the letter into the writing-case and turned the key. A second sleepless night followed the first, but she was buoyed up by excitement and the sense of a purpose to fulfil. The Sunday papers dragged war from the middle-distance into the foreground, and, as she walked in a parched and unfamiliar Park before luncheon, she felt that Jim would not be able to keep away from London much longer. On Monday morning she heard that he was returning next day, and on Tuesday afternoon she called at Loring House.

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"Jim, I don't care what you think of me, but you've got to help me," she began.

He saw a pinched face lit by feverishly bright eyes, whose pupils contracted and dilated as he looked into them.

"I'm afraid this has rather come home to roost, Babs," he said gently. "I'm sorry; honestly, I am."

She was so broken-spirited that he found himself drawing her to him and kissing her forehead. At the touch of his lips her muscles relaxed until he was supporting her weight with one arm.

"Ah, kiss my eyes, Jim!" she whispered. "They're aching so terribly! I want to sleep; and I'm haunted.... What am I to do? I can't find him!"

"I shouldn't try to. Babs, you know Jack always had the pride of the devil; he's probably very sore. And this is the first time that a woman has played any kind of trick on him; I don't suppose it'll be the last, but you can be sure that he feels that the bottom's been knocked out the universe."

"But I want to help him! If I *can* give him anything——"

"He doesn't want you now."

"After doing what he did? Jim, if I'd loved a man as he loved me, I'd do anything to get him, to get him back! There'd be nothing left in life without him!"

"One thinks so at first. But, when love dies, resentment is a workable substitute. Leave it alone, Babs. I must run away now, because I want to talk to the War Office about taking a commission, if war breaks out. Jack's doing the same.... By the way, I'm standing by to have House of Steynes and the Castle and the place at Market Harborough turned into hospitals. If you want something to do, you can apply to be taken on as a nurse. In six months from now, when the war's over and forgotten, it'll be time enough to move. I begged Jack to go slow and think the thing out, because—frankly, Babs—I didn't know what you were up to; and I beg you to think and go on thinking and to wait till you're cool. You *hardly* know what *you're* doing now; and, if I know anything of men, Jack's a raving lunatic."

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He moved haltingly to the door. Barbara followed with bent head.

"And you want me to leave him like that?"

"You can't mend things at present—if ever."

"And in the meantime he may take a commission and go out——"

"And be killed," said Loring, as she hesitated. "Let's face it."

"And be killed," she replied. "Jim, I can't sit with my hands folded.... What d'you think Judas Iscariot felt like during the Crucifixion?"

Loring shrugged his shoulders and opened the door for her without answering. For the first time that day he doubted her sincerity. It was terribly in keeping with her love for the dramatic, the bizarre, the sensational, the gigantic for her to be comparing herself with Judas Iscariot....

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A NOTE OF INTERROGATION

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"Fenced by your careful fathers, ringed by your
leaden seas,
Long did ye wake in quiet and long lie down at ease;
Till ye said of Strife 'What is it?' of the Sword, 'It is
far from our ken';
Till ye made a sport of your shrunken hosts and a
toy of your armed men.
Ye stopped your ears to the warning—ye would
neither look nor heed—
Ye set your leisure before their toil and your lusts
above their need."

RUDYARD KIPLING: "THE ISLANDERS."

"You've probably stirred up an ant-hill with the end of your stick before now," said Eric Lane, shading his eyes and shifting himself in bed until he could catch a glimpse of the Lashmar Woods in their riot of autumn colour. "I feel that's what the Almighty has done here; we're scattered in every direction, running about in wild confusion without knowing in the least what any one else is doing. I feel amazingly out of everything."

He had already been seven weeks in bed at Lashmar Mill-House and was white-faced and cadaverous, with bloodless lips and immense sunken brown eyes. This was the worst breakdown that he had undergone since he was a boy; but all danger was now over, and his voice was beginning to recover its strength and music. Jack had walked over to sit with him. It was their first meeting since they journeyed to Oxford together for their degrees; Jack had been training in London and was wearing for the first time the uniform of a second lieutenant.

"How soon are you going to be allowed up?"

"In another week," Eric answered. "I don't know when I shall be able to start regular work again. I've had to chuck the paper. I don't think they were sorry to get rid of me: there's been drastic staff reduction in Fleet Street since the war. It's rather a bore, though. *If* my play's produced in the spring, *if* it's a success, I may have some money; otherwise I must live on my hard-earned savings and try to find work. One of the government offices might take me. You know that Oakleigh's in the Admiralty?"

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"Yes, and O'Rane's enlisted; and Jim Loring's a staff captain; and that swine Webster is driving a car for the Red Cross. Even the egregious Val Arden's taken a commission. I rather respect him—for the first time in my life; he looks three parts gone in consumption, but he got round the doctor. He wasn't going to have people saying that he was a funk, and I think he felt that he'd led a footling life and that this was the opportunity of shewing what he was made of. Most of us are feeling that we've wasted a good deal of our time.... What did they spin you for?"

"Overstrained heart. And, when I was examined, of course I was about half an hour removed from my final collapse—which I think we will not discuss.... Did you know Deryk Lancing? It was horrible about his death."

"Yes, I've been wondering whether it *was* an accident," said Jack. "He was so full of nerves that I should never have been surprised to hear he'd gone off his head. But what an opportunity the war would have been for him! Oakleigh told me that he was always worrying about his money and wondering what to do with it. Well, the beauty of being in the army is that you can't think about yourself; you're a tiny part in a gigantic machine, and your individuality doesn't matter a damn to any one.... When you think how every man and woman you know was attitudinizing and thinking about his own personality—Jack Summertown, Val Arden, Deganway.... And the women were worse than the men. Everything sacrificed for effect. Every one looking for new emotions. Sensationalists.... You tried your personality on a new diet of excitement every day. How amazingly *small* it all seems when you measure it by a war of this kind! Even the biggest thing of all. A man devotes months and years of his life to engaging the affections of a woman—"

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"Well, that charge can never be brought against you," Eric interrupted with a laugh.

Jack bent down and spent some moment in knocking out his pipe against the fender. His parents and sister still did not know that he was even acquainted with Barbara; but Eric might well have heard gossip from Oakleigh or a dozen others.

"Well, take Loring's case! *He* spent years over that business with Sonia Dainton. Then he got

sane. Then he fell in love with Oakleigh's cousin—engagement announced, flourish of trumpets, an immense ball in honour of the occasion. The war comes along, and it all fades into the background. I suppose they'll be married as soon as it can be arranged, but the war's the important thing in his life now. He's transferring to a service battalion as soon as he possibly can; with any luck he'll get killed.... By the way, you saw that Jack Summertown had been knocked out? In the first casualty list of all. *And Archie Stornaway. And Charles Framlingham.* All three heirs to peerages, and two of them were staying with the Loring's at Chepstow when I was there. If you'd been told a year ago.... But, by Jove, this is pretty much what O'Rane prophesied *ten* years ago. What was his bet? One or two of us have gone under, one or two are dead—with more to follow. One or two married. One or two have made pretty fair fools of ourselves. O'Rane himself has done well. And you're going to be our new playwright. *I* wasn't doing badly at the bar.... It all seems so small now."

Lady Lane came in with tea, and soon afterwards Jack left. He was due back in London to dine with Loring, who had written mysteriously to beg him, as a great favour, to arrange a meeting the moment that he found a free night. Jack guessed that Barbara was in some way connected with the request, but he could not imagine what she wanted. For two months he had divided his time between drilling and being drilled; there were new friendships to form and new confidences to exchange; the questions that mattered were the etiquette of the mess and the ethics of saluting—as they had once been the code and spirit of a public school and, later, the tone and rule of decorous society. Was the battalion to be sent out as a whole or used for drafts? Undoubtedly you would secure greater unity and *esprit de corps* by keeping it intact; but the men were not all equally trained, and the latest comers would set the pace for all. There were heated debates between the rival sects, and the colonel was claimed by both sides alternately. Once or twice Jack stepped aside and smiled at the picture of himself working under a captain of nineteen and taking a warm interest in mess politics. It was hardly the end that he had imagined; but at least he had worked himself into iron condition until his nerves were under control and he was too tired for introspection. Loring's invitation was the first test of fortitude; the library recalled their debates of other days, and, if he went there from friendship, he was determined not to exhume something that had been killed at Chepstow and buried by the war.

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"I'm glad you were able to come," Loring began. "I'll say what I've got to say and get it over as soon as possible. I'm not doing this on my own initiative. Have you seen Barbara lately?"

"Not since your party. Jim, I'd sooner not hear another word on this subject——"

"I'm afraid you've got to, old man, for my sake. She's in London and she asked me to give you this with my own hand."

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He held out a letter, and Jack looked at it in silence. The envelope was addressed in pencil; the upright awkwardness in some of the characters told him that it had been written, like so many others, in bed; a few words were smudged, and this, with the bent corners, suggested that it had probably been composed some time before.

"I don't want it," he said after a long hesitation.

If the mere sight of familiar handwriting could hurt him, he was resolved to take no further risks with his painfully acquired fortitude.

"You must take it," said Loring. "I don't care what you do with it."

Jack shrugged his shoulders, unbuttoned a pocket of his tunic and slipped the letter inside, as dinner was announced.

"How soon are you chucking up your staff job?" he asked, to kill any further discussion, as they walked out of the library together.

When Jack returned to camp, Loring called on his cousin in Berkeley Square. House and family were in tumult, for, when the Abbey was handed over to the War Office, Lord Crawleigh was driven to spend the autumn in London and he returned to find that it was one thing to urge his younger servants into the army and another to be left without a single able-bodied man to prepare for his coming. His wife was wholly immersed in the management of her hospital; Barbara was training for her certificate; Neave and the two younger boys had been given commissions in the Guards, and daily life was so uncomfortable that he decided to share his discomfort with the nation and to explain the origin and meaning of the war in a series of addresses throughout the country.

"Well, Jack dined with me to-night," Loring began. "I gave him the letter."

"Yes?"

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"He didn't want to take it at first, but I told him I'd promised to give it him with my own hand."

Barbara was unnerved by waiting, but she contrived to mask her curiosity with indifference.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"He put it into his pocket."

"He didn't read it?"

"Not then."

"And he didn't say anything? What did he look like?"

"He was like he always is; no one would call Jack demonstrative."

For all her studied indifference, Barbara shuddered involuntarily.

"I know. He frightens me when he's like that," she whispered. "If he ever flared up for a moment, I should feel that we were more evenly matched.... He *will* read the letter?" she persisted.

"My dear Babs, how can I tell?"

"Oh, of course you can't, but the waiting's so awful," she cried. "You know what was in it? I kept my promise—the promise I made on the Cross at Chepstow. If he wants me——"

"Well, if he does? You still don't love him?"

"I don't know. He fascinates me.... But that doesn't matter, I've given him my promise——"

"It seems to me to matter very much," Loring interposed drily. "I've grown quite fond of you lately, Babs, and I don't want to see you unhappily married. Or him, either. You say you don't know whether you're in love with him, but there's a simple test: if you were free in every way and could choose among all the men in the world, would you fly to Jack like an arrow to a target?"

"I don't know.... I think he might *make* me come to him."

"Against your will? Babs, you've either lost all your personality or else you're in love with him." [Pg 263]

She shook her head in perplexity, frowning and smoothing out the wrinkles with the back of her hand.

"I don't know that it would be against my will. I can't make out. He never loved me as I *wanted* to be loved.... I never feel that Jack could be gentle.... Do you know what I mean, Jim? There are some people who seem to take loving for granted. They can't waste time on the little daily tendernesses that are the glorious great tendernesses...." Her voice faded away, and she sat staring in front of her until a change of thought made her face resolute. "But it's not for me to find fault. If he wants me...."

"I wish to God I could do something to help," said Loring.

"I must just wait, I suppose. I wish I knew what *I* wanted.... Sometimes I feel I'm going mad, Jim. I *can't* get rid of his eyes, I *can't* forget the change that came over him when he *began* to understand what I'd done.... Has he gone back to camp? When d'you think he'll write?"

"My dear girl, you might just as well ask me how long the war's going on! Perhaps he won't write at all."

"What d'you mean?"

Loring sank lower into his chair and stared at the ceiling.

"I've been trying to think how I should feel in his place," he said. "If he was simply infatuated about you, he'd go on believing in you until you'd married some one else. On the other hand, he's ignorant enough of women still to idealize them; and there's no bitterness like the bitterness of your disappointed idealist. He may try to cut the whole thing out of his life; he may tear your letter up unread, he may read it and throw it in the fire without answering it.... What are you going to do then, Babs?"

"I belong to him until he throws me aside," she answered. "On my honour and oath——" [Pg 264]

"I wish you weren't quite so ready with your extravagant oaths," he interrupted. "You'll get into trouble one day. Jephthah took a similar vow and lived to regret it.... Well, Babs, if there's anything I can do to straighten things out, let me know."

He got up and prepared to go. Barbara sat with her hands pressed between her knees and her head bent.

"I must wait," she whispered. "You go, Jim; I'd sooner be alone. You go! I'll—just wait."

Loring looked at her for a moment and then went downstairs. He could have sworn that she could see her own drooping head and tired eyes in a mental looking-glass and was enjoying her doubt and misery; as likely as not, she would describe it to Jack, if they met. "Jim went away. I said, 'You go. I must wait.' And I waited...." A little of Jephthah's daughter, the Lady of Shalott, Monna Vanna and Sarah Curran; tragic pathos, tragic constancy, tragic hopelessness. By giving her the cue of Jephthah's daughter, he had helped to destroy the illusion of sincerity....

Barbara sat by herself for a few minutes and then rang for her maid and began to undress. She had never dreamed that Jack would not answer her letter. Though written on the night after she had failed to find him at the Temple, she had kept it locked away for nearly two months, afraid to send it and unable to say why she was afraid. Then Sonia Dainton had called on her and, standing by the window with her face averted, had talked of Jim's approaching marriage. "I hear he's going out to the front fairly soon," she began. "I want to part friends with him—in case anything happens. D'you think he'd see me?" "You can only try," answered Barbara. That was a fortnight ago; some weeks later, on the eve of the wedding, Sonia called at Loring House to beg and to [Pg 265]

receive forgiveness. In the meantime Barbara profited by her own advice to force herself into communication with Jack. It was all that she could do, if she hoped ever again to know self-respect or even a quiet conscience. She could make amends and give him his chance to embrace or spurn her; that he would ignore her she had never imagined.

The hospital at the Abbey opened three days after her conversation with Jim; and Barbara at once volunteered for night work. Ever since the party at Chepstow she had been unable to rest; Jack's haggard face and fixed stare invaded her dreams, and, when she slept, it was to wake up repeating some phrase that she had used to him. By going to bed in daylight and lying with the blinds up and the sun on her face, she never wholly lost consciousness; her brain was sentinel enough to rouse her, if she began to dream of the banqueting-hall at Loring Castle....

When Jim's wedding took place, she wrote to offer him good wishes and added in a postscript:

"I have had no news."

He wrote back,

"I have not seen him since that night. In a case like this, isn't silence itself an answer? George heard that he was possibly going out with a draft, but I believe this has been contradicted. Is there anything I can do? I'll try to get hold of him, if you like, and ask him what he's up to, but, while I don't mind exposing myself to a rebuff, I don't see myself leading you by the hand to have your face slapped by any one...."

"Thanks, it's best to do nothing," Barbara answered. *"I should be hurt if he thought I was forcing myself on him."*

At the beginning of 1915 Jim wrote on his own initiative.

"I hear Jack's gone abroad. George is my authority; I didn't see him myself. I think you may feel that this squares the account. On the whole I'm glad; and, if you feel as you did when last we discussed this, it's the best thing for you."

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A few weeks later Jim went abroad himself. So long as he was a channel of communication, Barbara waved away the necessity of deciding what to do if she were left with what he called a "cheque drawn but not presented." Without him, loneliness sapped her courage; and she wrote three extravagant letters, which, in the act of writing, she knew that she would never send. Then she tried to forget. Then she centred her hopes on seeing him, when he came home on leave....

A week before he was expected in England, Amy Loring called in Berkeley Square to say that Jim was "missing." George Oakleigh had the news from the War Office, and every one might be told except Violet, who was expecting a baby.

"At this rate I sometimes wonder who will be left alive," Lady Crawleigh wrote to Barbara. *"Sonia has had one of her brothers killed and the other wounded. Valentine Arden has been killed. Young O'Rane has come back slightly wounded but without his sight. No one can ever take their places. They are all equally splendid.... Poor Mr. Arden and Jack Summertown.... Though a man may have been frivolous before, that does not seem to keep him from shewing his true worth when the occasion arises.... The war has been a great opportunity...."*

Barbara's first thought was that, if Jim too were killed, there was one person the less to share her secret. She was aghast to find herself even playing with such consolation; but, as the weeks of silence became months, she lost hope. With every new death or mutilation she was becoming less and less equal to the great opportunity. Though she could work as hard as any one, she came no nearer to justifying herself or making atonement. The officers in the hospital sometimes refused to let her do anything for them, because she had already worn herself out with doing so much, but she was never tired enough to forget. Until she had placated Providence, she would not be allowed to forget. And Providence rejected her offering.

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In the summer she heard that Sonia Dainton was engaged to be married to David O'Rane.

"He and I were sort of engaged when I was sixteen," Sonia began. *"Of course, neither of us took it seriously. At least I didn't, as soon as I was old enough to think at all; perhaps HE did. He says that he always knew he was going to marry me and that for all practical purposes we WERE married from the time when I was sixteen. When I was engaged to Tony Crabtree—I wasn't properly engaged; I don't believe I ever thought I should marry him; but I was very young, and it was exciting to be engaged. I believe NOW that Tony only wanted to marry me because he thought I should be such an asset to him in his career; thought of course he was very much in love with me—David says that he knew all about it and didn't trouble himself more than if his wife were flirting with a man at dinner. Poor darling, he was very unhappy about Jim, because he thought I might really marry him; but yet—he says—at the bottom of his heart he always knew I shouldn't. Aren't men ridiculously vain? But, Babs, isn't it wonderful to think of him waiting all those years, standing aside, never trying to influence me, always quite certain that ONE day he'd marry me? Some time I'll tell you the whole story and how he came into the HEART of Austria, when war'd been declared, to rescue me. He was terribly wounded at the beginning of this year, and the doctors say there's no possibility of his ever getting his sight back. You can imagine what that means; but he says he'd go through it all again, if that were the only way of getting me! George told me that, when David was delirious in hospital, he kept calling out my name night and day. It's wonderful to be loved like that!"*

"We shan't have any money worth speaking of, and darling David thinks he's committing the most awful crime in wanting to marry me at all. 'A blind man with no visible means of subsistence ought to be quietly knocked on the head,' he says. When he got back to England, he wouldn't come near me, he wouldn't let me come near him; he says he couldn't trust himself. And, poor lamb! I'm getting quite tired of hearing him say that I'm throwing myself away and that I MUSTN'T marry him.... But, then, when he tells me that, ever since he was blinded, he's never seen anything except me, there's no arguing about it, is there?"

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"He's gone back to Melton as a temporary master, and we're going to be married in the school chapel. I should insist on your being one of my bridesmaids, if I were having any, but it's going to be the quietest wedding in the world. But I want you to think of me, Babs darling, and offer me your blessing. I'm so very happy...."

Barbara read the letter twice and tried to forget it. Sonia could not tell her too often how many men had been in love with her and how much David adored her; there was little mention of love on the other side, only the eagerly snatched tributes to a colossal vanity. Every one knew that she had no heart. She justified herself and explained away her early engagements and broken promises with a light brush. Women would justify themselves, whatever they did! And Sonia was marrying with both eyes on the auditorium, listening delightedly to the protests that she was wasting herself. She was enjoying her sense of reckless generosity; and, perhaps, like Val Arden and the others who hoped to atone by one sacrifice for an empty life, she would welcome the sacrifice even without the audience....

It was a heartless, horrible letter. If Barbara had been invited to the wedding, she would have refused to go. She wished that she *had* been invited.... Yet Sonia was only doing what she had failed to do. Jack's devotion was no less than O'Rane's, and she had thrown it away; she was trying to atone for everything in one sacrifice, as Sonia had already done. She might have been happy, like Sonia; she might have outstripped Sonia by discovering a heart. Every one was falling in love and marrying; it was time to discover a heart. Val Arden told her, when she was sixteen, that this would be her greatest emotion....

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The next day Barbara asked for leave to go up to London and choose a wedding-present. She avoided her family, for her looks did not court inspection and she could not afford to be torn away from the hospital. The life at Crawleigh Abbey suited her too well to be disturbed; though sometimes, as she came off duty and undressed in broad daylight, she wondered when and how her strength would break. The other nurses never wearied of telling her that she looked ill; the mirror shewed that her body was wasting, even if she had not felt that even her stockings hung loose. And there was a cough which had come mysteriously and as mysteriously refused to go.

On her arrival at Waterloo she telephoned to George Oakley and invited him to lunch with her. He, if any one, would have news, he was fond of her; and, ever since Sonia's engagement, she had felt that something was wanting until she commanded an equal devotion and gave an equal surrender. Of her, too, people were saying that she had no heart; she was ready and more than ready to fall in love.

"My child, you *do* look a little wreck," George exclaimed, when she called for him at the Admiralty. "This is a sad business about Jim. I was very sorry for you all."

"You don't think there's any hope?"

"I tell his mother and sister that he's sure to turn up. If you ask me whether I believe what I say.... It *is* a holocaust and a half! O'Rane, Jim, Tom Dainton, Summertown—Lady Maitland's eldest boy is back wounded. And with the rest you feel it's only a question of time. Val Arden lunched with me three days before he was killed, and I felt that he *wanted* to be killed. The thing had got on his nerves till he knew he couldn't stand much more of it without going out of his mind. Other people, again, seem to take the war like a game of rather irregular football." He hesitated and then tried to go on without allowing a change to come into his voice. "Jack Waring came to see me last week, and I'd swear that he was enjoying the whole thing."

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Barbara's pulses hammered at sound of the name, and she dreaded to seem too nonchalant.

"How was he?" she asked, though it was rather of Val Arden that she was thinking. Perhaps Jack, too, welcomed the chance of having everything ended for him. She remembered that his eyes had suddenly shone, when George came, grave-faced, into the banqueting-hall; he was making plans for taking a commission three days before war was declared and three minutes after he left her. It was in truth a new emotion to feel that she might have driven him to constructive suicide....

"Positively keen to get back," said George. "Didn't...?" He was going to ask, in some surprise, whether she had not seen him; the ball at Chepstow seemed to have healed any breach between them. But it was not his business. "Your mother tells me that your hospital is being closed," he substituted.

"Closed?" Barbara echoed in dismay.

"The War Office finds it difficult to work."

"But mother never told me! Oh, George! that's too awful! I can't get on without it. I *must* have something to keep me busy. If I start thinking—"

His eyes opened so wide that she checked herself.

"My dear, the war's getting on your nerves," he said significantly. "Doesn't Lady Crawleigh—?"

Barbara blamed herself bitterly for letting her voice get out of control; it was always happening....

"George, promise me you won't say you've seen me!" she begged. "I didn't tell them I was going to be in London. I know I'm disgracing you by looking like this, but, if mother saw me, she'd take me away; and I should die, if I didn't have work to do."

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"I see. Well, I'm not a doctor, but you'll die remarkably soon at your present rate. D'you know what I'm going to do when we leave here?"

"Drop me at Cartier's, I hope."

"If you like. And that's handy for Berkeley Square. I'm going to your mother and I'm going to tell her what I think of your general condition."

"George, if you do that, I'll never speak to you again! And really, you know, it *isn't* any business of yours."

"Except that I happen to be very fond of you. And, if you get ill.... Dear Barbara, to please me, will you see your doctor before you go back to hospital?"

Barbara had so long looked on George as a kindly and comfortable bit of universal family furniture that she was startled by the unexpected softening of his voice. Perhaps he, too, felt that it was time to cultivate a heart and to fall in love. She smiled with an approach to happiness. Any hint of tenderness in a man's voice made her like a flower opening its petals to the sun.

"D'you like me, George?" she asked.

"Not when you're looking like this. Now I only want to slap you and send you to bed. Will you go to your doctor?"

"If you like, I'll say that I'm going to him——" she began.

"That's all I want," he interrupted. "If you gave a promise, however extravagant, I should know that you'd always keep it."

She raised her eyes to his and looked swiftly away.

On the day after her return to the Abbey, the hospital was filled with rumour and gossip. No new cases were to be taken; and, as soon as the last bed was empty, commandant and doctors, nurses and orderlies were to be transferred to the new government hospital at Sunbury. Lady Crawleigh came down without warning to arrange for the reconversion of the house. In the middle of the afternoon she went into Barbara's room to find her with drooping mouth and wet eyes, crying in her sleep. The commandant was flushed from her office and invited to explain; without waiting for the hospital to be closed, Barbara was personally conducted to London and sent under the care of Lord Crawleigh's sister to the sea. She made no resistance; she did not even tell her parents that she was twenty-one and that she refused to be ordered about. She seemed no longer to matter either to herself or to any one else....

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Before coming off duty for the last time, she said good-bye to each of her patients and found herself presented at the first bed with a pendant.

"We had to get it in rather a hurry," explained the spokesman. "But we hope you'll like it. We all wish you weren't going, Lady Barbara. It's not worth being in hospital without you."

"You dears, *I* wish I wasn't going," Barbara cried with a quaver in her voice. "Good-bye, and bless you all! No, I *won't* let you kiss my hand! I'll kiss yours."

She walked from bed to bed, smiling until she reached the door; then her composure deserted her, and she ran out crying. It was her fate to make people fall in love with her, whether she tried or not—her fate, too, never to be in love with any one herself. Jim, of course, would have called this another experiment in emotion; he would have been very scornful about the presentation and her tearful farewell, reminding her that Florence Nightingale, her great prototype, had her shadow kissed, as she passed down the ward. And next day, as she might almost have foreseen, there were photographs of her in uniform: "*Lady Barbara Neave, who has been doing splendid war-work at Lady Crawleigh's hospital in Hampshire.*" For the first time in her life she wanted to be left alone and unnoticed, so that she could get into a train or walk about in London without being recognized.

Under the hourly care of a doctor she was no longer allowed to keep herself awake for fear of dreaming. But there was nothing to occupy her by day, and she brooded eternally on the workings of Jack's mind. A letter from Sonia started the train.

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"*Bobs darling, the bracelet is divine! Thank you ever so much for it! I didn't write before, because we've been so frightfully busy. I expect you saw that we were married last week. Babs, I'm so happy! I'm at PEACE now. With David I feel so secure. I always USED to think that I should feel circumscribed, but the COMPANIONSHIP'S so wonderful that I don't want anything more. At least, I want to have children—lots and lots of them; and I want David to go on loving me, as he does now; and I want it always to be summer. But I wouldn't change David for any one in the world; and I wouldn't be NOT married.*"

"Looking back on it all, I don't REGRET anything and I suppose I enjoyed myself, but it seems rather hollow now. We shall lead a very quiet, humdrum life and we shall be frightfully poor, but I think that's where the PEACE comes in. If I'd married poor Jim—though I know he'd have been the most adoring husband—I don't believe the privilege of being 'the beautiful Lady Loring' (if anybody had troubled to call me that!) would have compensated all the ceremony and fuss. I never felt a thousandth part of the love for Jim that I feel for David. I suppose that's the difference. All I ask now is to have David's love for ever and to give him every ounce of mine and to make our lives one. It's a silly thing to say, but, before I married, I never imagined how extraordinarily two lives DO become one. We each of us know what the other's thinking of; we carry on conversations where we only seem to SPEAK one sentence in three—everything else is understood. My dear, we are so happy! You know how I love you, Babs; I only hope that you'll be as happy as I am."

For all its irritating italics and ill-defined emotion, the letter unsettled Barbara. She, too, would like to have children—"lots and lots of them"; the papers pretended that this was an age-old world-instinct and that Woman—in the abstract—was being impelled by an abstract Nature to repair the life-wastage of the war; hence they deduced the absurd scandal of the "war-babies," thus they explained the abundant crop of "war weddings." Barbara's intelligence rebelled against world-instincts as much as against abstract Woman and abstract Nature. She wanted children because she wanted something of her own to love, and her untapped reservoir of devotion had overflowed when she was nursing the boys who pretended that nothing was the matter, when she could see their eyelids flickering with pain. She yearned to lay their heads on her breast and tell them to cry because it would do them good and because she wanted to comfort them.

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And she did not see why Sonia should have so much happiness.... *"We were married.... We've been so frightfully busy.... We shall lead a very quiet, humdrum life and we shall be frightfully poor.... We each of us know what the other's thinking of...."* Barbara writhed at the possessive, participating plural. She was ready to be poor and to live a quiet humdrum life, if she could share it; she appreciated the *peace* of marriage, so often underlined by Sonia, because it was what she hungered to feel. Eight months had passed since Jack went abroad, twelve since they parted. When she heard that he had been home on leave without communicating with her, she felt sure that he would never communicate with her; but, when the war ended, she must tender her promise again. In the meantime she might fall in love with some one else....

The memory of Jack in the banqueting-hall at Chepstow was replaced by a picture in which he stood, silent and forbidding, between her and some one whom she strove passionately to reach. The image haunted her until she jettisoned her last fragments of pride and wrote to him again.

"I sent you a letter nearly a year ago and I have never had an answer," she began. *"I don't think you can have read it, because it would be such a horribly cruel way of punishing me, if you read it and paid no attention. I don't think I asked for mercy or forgiveness, because I didn't deserve either; but, though I behaved unforgivably, I DIDN'T appreciate until it was too late quite what I was doing and quite how much you loved me. I don't want you to think I'm EXCUSING myself; I want you to understand that perhaps I do appreciate rather better now and that I'm ready, as I was then, to do anything in the world that you ask. I've taken a solemn oath. You may accept it generously or refuse it generously; or, if you like, you can just humiliate me—you know I'm vain and you know that's where you can punish me best. Don't play with me! Sometimes I think I'm going out of my mind. I want you to be just and, if you can, to be generous; it will be generosity, if you are able to say that you forgive me, and it will be justice, if you remember that I apologize and ask to be forgiven and offer to do anything that you want—and that there's nothing more I CAN do. I don't DESERVE consideration, but I need it."*

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Barbara knew that she was too uncertain of herself to trust her own judgement, and the letter was put aside until her mood of abject humility had passed. When she read it again, the terms of her own abasement set her cheeks flaming, but there was no other way of winning peace. She allowed five days for the letter to reach him and another five days for a reply. For the first two nights she never slept; on the third day Dr. Gaisford was summoned, and that afternoon she was despatched to the sea for another three weeks' rest. While there, the tenth day came and went without any reply. Barbara added an eleventh, because letters lost a day in forwarding. It was no less barren than its predecessors, but news came in an unexpected form on the twelfth.

"George has been dining," wrote Lady Crawleigh, *"and I'm sorry to say that he was once again the bearer of bad news. Poor Jack Waring is the latest. He is reported missing. George had it from the family, though it hasn't appeared in the papers as yet, and he told us in case we wanted to send a line of sympathy. I don't know Mrs. Waring, of course, but I felt I had to tell how sorry we all were. She replied at once with what I thought was a very brave letter. It's a great shock, but she's quite convinced that he's all right. Well, I'm afraid that, after our dear Jim's death, I don't put any faith in these 'missing' cases...."*

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Before she got to the end of her mother's letter, Barbara knew that her first and strongest feeling was relief, though she dared not put it into words. She wondered for the thousandth time why she had allowed Jack to gain so strong an influence over her, then ceased wondering for fear of persuading herself that perhaps, after all, she had loved him.... And, if there *were* immortal souls, if a man died with a lie to God still unexpiated....

On her return to London she sought details from Oakleigh, but he could only tell her that the company had been almost entirely wiped out. Two subalterns were reported to be prisoners; but the Warings had received no news of Jack, nor did the subalterns mention him.

"I'm afraid he's gone, too," George sighed. Then he took her hand and pressed it gently. "I can't say anything that will do any good——"

"When will they know for certain?" Barbara interrupted. She was shocked to find him treating this as her exclusive, personal loss.

"Well, you never know for certain until some one reports that he's actually seen him dead. That, of course, was what happened with Jim. Until then, I suppose, one *is* justified in hoping...."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN THE ANSWER OF THE ORACLE

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"Why, which of those who say they disbelieve,
Your clever people, but has dreamed his dream,
Caught his coincidence, stumbled on his fact
He can't explain, (he'll tell you smilingly)
Which he's too much of a philosopher
To count as supernatural, indeed,
So calls a puzzle and problem, proud of it
Bidding you still be on your guard, you know,
Because one fact don't make a system stand,
Nor prove this an occasional escape
Of spirit beneath the matter: that's the way!
Just so wild Indians picked up, piece by piece,
The fact in California, the fine gold
That underlay the gravel—hoarded these,
But never made a system stand, nor dug!
So wise men hold out in each hollowed palm
A handful of experience, sparkling fact
They can't explain; and since their rest of life
Is all explainable, what proof in this?"

ROBERT BROWNING: 'MR. SLUDGE, "THE MEDIUM."'

It was not until his name appeared in the Roll of Honour as "missing" that Barbara appreciated how eagerly discussed she and Jack had been. The discreet sympathy of her relations would have been bewildering if Lady Knightrider had not explained it.

"I hurried round the moment I had the news! My darling child, you've got to be very brave!" she faltered. "I know what you and Jack were to each other."

"Aunt Kathleen, I don't think I can talk about this," Barbara interrupted quietly.

"No...? It sometimes helps. I was always very fond of dear Jack, and you *know* how I love you! But I only came to tell you that you mustn't give up hope——"

"Thank you, dear!"

Barbara realized suddenly that she was being forced into an assumed intimacy which would have been comic at any other time. It was impossible, however, to begin explaining to Lady Knightrider. [Pg 278]

"Did you see him when he was home on leave?" her aunt continued with the persistency of one who, having come to harrow and to be harrowed, did not propose to be baulked.

"I've not seen him since that time a year ago."

"Ah, no! You've both been so busy. His poor parents——"

"They're the people to be sorry for," said Barbara.

"Darling, you're quite wonderful!"

Barbara had used the words to deflect the conversation from herself, but her aunt gave her credit for such stoicism that she took a step towards the door for fear that in another moment she would break into a scream. Lady Knightrider followed her, and in the hall they met George Oakleigh, embarrassed and trying to carry off his embarrassment with an air of earnest bustle.

"I'm absolutely at a loose end to-night, Barbara," he began. "I believe somebody must have made peace or something; the Admiralty's not been as slack as this since the first day of the war. I wondered whether you'd care to come and have dinner somewhere."

"It's sweet of you, George, but I've promised to dine with Aunt Eleanor and Amy. Is to-morrow any good to you?"

"I believe I'm dining out, but I can scratch that. Yes, to-morrow. I'll come and pick you up about eight. Now I must simply fly!"

"Back to work? I thought things were so slack?"

"M'yes, I said that, didn't I?"

"And it served its purpose. They'll be slack whenever I say that I want you; and you'll sit up half the night afterwards. Thank you, George. But I wish you didn't make me feel so horribly unworthy of your sweetness."

He turned away and fidgetted with the badge of his cap.

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"'Sweetness' be blowed! This war's such a ghastly business.... Sometimes one wants a little companionship. I'm glad you can come to-morrow. Keep a brave heart, Barbara."

It seemed sacrilegious to accept so much sympathy, and, as he hurried into Berkeley Street, she was tempted to run after him and explain. Once she read of some one who murdered a man and went to the widowed mother to confess his crime; his delicacy in telling her of the death caused him to be regarded as her son's dearest friend, and, when the murder went undiscovered, the murderer accepted the situation and attended the funeral as chief mourner, with the widowed mother leaning on his arm.... If Lady Knightrider and George fancied that she had loved Jack, she must accept the situation; it might be sacrilegious, but, on the other hand, if any one said "Did you love Jack Waring?" she could not honestly give a categorical "No."...

And there would be more sympathy—and sacrilege—at dinner. Barbara knew that she had only been invited that Lady Loring and Amy might try to comfort her. Neither referred to Jack by name; but they were more gently affectionate than usual, and she was left to discuss him or not, as she liked. Lady Loring told of the steps which she had taken and the offices which she had approached to gain tidings of her son. George had set enquiries on foot through the Spanish and American Embassies, the Vatican and The Hague; but they were barely instituted, when the War Office received indisputable evidence of death.

"Connie Maitland was very anxious for me to go to a clairvoyant," Amy put in. "She says Mrs. Savage in Knightsbridge is wonderful. When her boy was wounded—before she heard about it—she had a sort of presentiment that something was wrong, so she went there, and Mrs. Savage told her that he was wounded but that it wasn't serious. I believe she actually said that he was wounded in the head, but Connie may have added that."

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"Did you try her?" asked Barbara.

"No." Amy hesitated and looked uncomfortable. "I'm always afraid.... I believe, if we were *meant* to have that kind of knowledge it would come to us in some other way.... And, if anything terrible's going to happen to me, I'd sooner not hear about it beforehand."

Barbara whispered the name to herself and determined, if need be, to find out more about the woman. Since her tragic *séance* in Webster's flat, she had decided to play with fire no more; but she could never forget the sight of Jack Summertown, staring a little glassily but speaking with his natural voice and talking so freely of an imminent war and of his own approaching death that none dared tell him what he had said. It might be coincidence that his name had appeared in the first casualty list; but more than coincidence was needed to explain why he should have talked at all of a future war.

"But uncertainty's the most terrible thing of all," Barbara murmured.

"It *has* to be borne," said Lady Loring gently, after a pause. "And sometimes for a long time."

Barbara nodded. It was useless to tell them that she had already waited a year to find out whether Jack wanted to marry her.

The next night she dined with George Oakleigh, who told her that he had taken tickets for Eric Lane's play.

"Oh, George, I don't know that I *want* to go to a theatre," she said doubtfully. "I've not been for so long——"

"Isn't that all the more reason? You're the best unpaid dramatic critic in London; and I want to know what you think of it. Eric's a great friend of mine. I particularly want you to meet him.... Don't come, if you'd rather not. But I've got a box, and, if the play bores you more than my conversation, we can talk in peace."

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They compromised by arriving late, but Barbara was not in the mood to enjoy herself. It was a well-constructed play with dialogue of distinction and a good sense of the theatre; the characterization, she complained, was insufferably romantic.

"I congratulate your friend on a great commercial success," she said, "but I don't want to meet him. Listen to the applause! Every single character is so unmistakably labelled that the audience greets them like old friends. The theatre's so conventional that, if you tried to shew men and women who were higher *and* lower than stage standards, the critics would say that your characters were freaks. On the stage a woman may be jealous or high-minded or a mixture or a saint or a thorough-going, melodramatic villainess, but she's always a child, a kitten. Men idealize us so hopelessly! We're dear little fluffy, rather silly things, with silly little mental kinks of vanity

or motherliness; no man understands how mean a woman can be, the lies she'll tell and the crimes she'll commit from motives which she'd be afraid to confess. Your friend Mr. Lane has never met a woman."

"You're hard on your sex," George commented.

Barbara shook her head sadly.

"I've seen it—without its rouge and powder. Look here, Sonia's a friend of yours and of mine; we both know how she behaved to Jim, but you'd never dare put her into a play, because the audience won't accept anything that offends against its standard of human dignity, it won't accept realism which makes people unconventionally mean, it won't believe that any one who's pretty enough to attract can have a really deceitful, petty spirit. Sonia was getting rather a bad name before the war, but she marries a man who's lost his sight, and every one says that the other part was just froth and that this is the true, noble Sonia—just as nine women out of ten become true and noble at the final curtain. Sonia married that man for effect!"

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"I don't think you can have seen them together," George suggested.

"If it pays, a woman can always make herself think she's in love with a man—for a time. I daresay she thought she was in love with Jim; it would have been a sensational marriage, and she'd just made a fool of herself with that other man, the barrister. This, in another way, is a sensational marriage, and she feels she's justified herself. It's no good shaking your head, George; you don't know what romances a girl makes up for herself. *I* should do it. As long as women are exposed for sale in a shop-window, they'll do anything to keep up their price. They think it's self-respect; and you men admire them for their pride."

George drew her hand through his arm and walked to Berkeley Square without speaking. From her unwonted bitterness he guessed that she was trying to harden herself in advance for the news of Jack's death; every one had to choose his own form of consolation.

"When will you dine with me again?" she asked, as they reached her house.

"I'm going to the Abbey for the week-end. Any time after that."

"Then what about Monday? I'll pick you up at the same time."

When the day came round, Lady Crawleigh telephoned to say that the dinner must be postponed, as Barbara was ill in bed. She had fainted in the train and would have to take a complete rest; no plans had yet been made, no details or explanation were vouchsafed. Indeed, Barbara would only say that she had found herself stretched on the seat of the railway carriage, while a strange man forced brandy between her lips.

Any fuller report would have increased the already excessive alarm. The bare facts were that Barbara had entered the train at Crawleigh and remembered nothing until she recovered consciousness a few miles from Farnborough. A young man, who explained that he had got in at Winchester, had picked her up from the floor and taken charge of her until her maid appeared at Waterloo.

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When she had been put to bed, Barbara began to recall and reconstruct forgotten incidents. She had felt giddy and had tried to open the window.... At Waterloo the young man had insisted on carrying her, and she had protested that she was too heavy. "I'll take great care of you."... "You are very good to me."... Scraps of their conversation floated through her head, and she remembered that he had a caressing voice which soothed her; they had talked, but she was three parts asleep. Half-way along the platform, he put her to rest on a seat. "I'm supposed to have an overstrained heart," he told her, "so I don't like to take liberties with it." Barbara tried to see his face; but he was bending over her, and the light was behind him. And then he had disappeared before she could thank him. "I do hope you'll be all right. I've given your maid my flask in case you want any more brandy. Good-bye." Barbara remembered making a great effort to rouse herself and look at him; but he had dived into the crowd without even telling her his name. The flask was engraved with a monogram which seemed to be E. L.; that and his voice were her only clues.

In her oversensitive condition, the voice was haunting. When she fell asleep, Barbara heard it again; and in the morning she gave orders that, if he called for the flask, he was to be asked his name and address. Then she tried to remember whether she had told him anything which would enable him to identify her; there was a label on her dressing-case, but he might not have seen it; as soon as her maid and car appeared, he had no need to ask where she lived. Barbara felt a pang of disappointment at the thought that she might not meet him again. Two days passed, and no one enquired for the flask; she decided to wait until she was allowed out of bed and then to advertise in the *Times*. "E. L. Will the gentleman who rendered assistance to a lady who was taken ill on the 3.40 p. m. between Winchester and Waterloo communicate...."

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She was drafting the advertisement when her mother came into the room.

"My darling, you oughtn't to be writing," protested Lady Crawleigh. "Let me do it for you, if it's important."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Barbara answered.

She tore up the paper and lay back in bed. There was nothing to conceal, but she did not want to

talk about her nameless and mysterious rescuer. Every one would laugh at her, if she said that she had fallen in love with a voice; and, if she chose to weave a romance for herself, it passed the time and was no one else's business. When the advertisement appeared, "E. L." would write to a numbered box at the *Times* office; she would ask him to call so that she could thank him in person. And a charming friendship might result. No one could have carried her more tenderly or behaved more delightfully.... And, as long as she amused herself with speculating about him, she could avoid thinking of other things.

"George has brought you some flowers. He wants to know if you feel up to seeing him," said Lady Crawleigh.

"Oh, George! Yes!"

He was almost the only one of her friends whom she was willing to meet in her present mood, though his arrival interrupted the romance which she was constructing. He was also the only one of her friends who knew or had troubled to find out that she was ill. Apparently he was fond of her.... And she was quite ready to be fond of him.

"I hope you're better," he began. "I mustn't stay more than a moment, but I saw some roses in a shop and I thought they were as good an excuse as any other."

"You felt you needed an excuse?"

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"I wanted very much to see you; and I hoped these might mollify your mother. Babs, I thought you might like to know that I met Colonel Waring to-day and we're having some enquiries made through the American Embassy. Jack was such a friend of us all...." he added vaguely.

"Oh, I do hope that they'll be able to hear something."

"Yes." George looked round the room and held out his hand. "I promised your mother I wouldn't do more than put my nose in at the door."

"But I *want* you to stay!"

"And, dearest Babs, you know that's what I want to do more than anything in the world. But I mustn't tire you, and you mustn't tempt me." He lifted her hands from the sheets and bent quickly to kiss them. "You poor child!"

Barbara felt that this time she must explain, if she was not to be maddened with sympathy.

"You mustn't pity me, George," she began.

"I pity any one who's in suspense.... The colonel's absolutely convinced that Jack's all right. Good-bye, Babs."

As he turned abruptly and hurried out of the room, Barbara covered her eyes. George was not only fond of her, he was in love with her; and he had come on purpose to encourage her, against his own interests, with hopes of Jack's safety. There was a dramatic irony in his coming; there would be a further dramatic irony, if she fell in love with him for his sympathy about Jack and then heard that Jack was safe and sound. Or, indeed, if she fell in love with any one else. Because she was overwrought and full of fancies, the shadow of the man in the train was more real than George's substance; the one voice she could remember and reproduce, but George's might have belonged to anybody.... This was her old fear of the punishment which Providence had in store for her, the image of herself passionately reaching out towards some one and finding her way barred by Jack's inexorable ghost.

Suspense. "I pity any one who's in suspense."... It was the uncertainty of the last year which had worn down her strength. And Lady Loring told her to be patient.... Barbara's mind went back to her dinner of a week before and to Amy's chance reference to a new clairvoyant. Mrs. Savage of Knightsbridge.... No other address had been given, but she could find that from Sonia. All her life Barbara had treated impulse as a thing to be welcomed, a hint from destiny, a voice from the darkness. When she awoke next morning, it was to wonder why she had waited so long. On the first day that she was allowed out of the house she went by herself to Knightsbridge and asked, without giving her name, for an interview.

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At another time the setting and her own preparations would have amused her. By putting on her most inconspicuous dress and hat, by veiling herself and by sinking her voice to a whisper, she trusted to escape recognition; unconsciously she also induced in her own mind a mysterious expectancy, which was intensified by the atmosphere of the room into which she was shewn. There were no windows, and it was lighted from the ceiling; three low couches ran round the walls, which were covered with yellow silk hangings; occasionally the hangings moved weirdly, as though some one were peeping behind them. Though there were three women already waiting, they were as silent as if, they were watching by the dead; and it had been ingeniously arranged that, while they waited, there should be nothing to distract their attention from the coming invocation of the unknown. They, too, were dressed inconspicuously; they, too, wore thick veils; and the suggestion of stealth and mystery, which they had received from the room and from those whom they had found there, they handed on to the newcomer.

Barbara's nerves were still unstrung, and she had less control of herself than in the old days when she went to the Baroness Kohnstadt's *séances*; then she had gone to be thrilled, but now she was tempted to tell the maid that she could not wait and would come back some other time.

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But, if she ran away, the other women would guess the reason, and she could never allow another woman to know that she was frightened....

They were staring at her from behind their veils, and she stared coolly back at them until the maid returned and whispered to one that Mrs. Savage could now see her. The hangings moved again; it might have been the draught from the open door, or Mrs. Savage might be having a preliminary look at her clients; certainly it was disquieting, for no one liked to be watched without seeing the watcher.... When next the maid came in, Barbara looked at the clock and noted that interviews lasted for half an hour. She wondered what method the clairvoyant followed—and became suddenly sceptical and disgusted with the whole enterprise. She had done it so often before! Her hand had been read, her character told from her writing; one woman had taken her handkerchief and pressed it to her forehead, another had stared raptly into the time-honoured crystal ball; she had tried *planchette* and rappings; and from it all she had won nothing but an afternoon's excitement....

It was five o'clock; the last of the women had gone, and Barbara was alone. She pretended to examine the embroidery of the silk hangings and contrived to look behind them, but there was nothing more alarming than an expanse of discoloured plaster. Nerves, again.... But the silence and the waiting were hard to bear; the room was hot, Barbara wanted tea, and one of the women had been using a cheap, disagreeable scent which lingered intolerably. Nothing but a refusal to yield to her fear kept her from running away. She was trying to determine what questions she would ask the clairvoyant, when the maid returned.

"Mrs. Savage says she can see your ladyship now."

Barbara started and nearly cried out; but the maid was watching her, and she passed through the door with elaborate outward unconcern. The second room was similar to the first, for, though there was a window, it was thickly curtained, and the only light came from a standard lamp in one corner. For a moment Barbara could see no one; then Mrs. Savage came forward in a yellow dress which was invisible against the silk hangings. She wore a low yellow turban, covering her hair and half her forehead, and stood with her back to the light.

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"Good afternoon, Lady Barbara," she said. "Won't you take off your veil?"

The voice was unfamiliar, but after a moment Mrs. Savage lighted a cigarette and shewed cavernous dark eyes and an aquiline nose set in a curiously narrow face which looked as if the cheek-bones had been crushed together.

"Madame Hilary!"

"Won't you have a cigarette?"

She held out a case, and Barbara took one to gain time. So much had happened since the meeting in Webster's room that it no longer troubled her. The woman was certainly a blackmailer, as she had almost proved when she went to Lord Crawleigh and asked for "temporary assistance." There would, of course, be a terrible scene, if it were ever discovered that Barbara had been to her again, and Mrs. Savage would quite possibly threaten blackmail, if she saw her course clear. On the other hand, now as before, the relative positions were equally strong and equally weak; if she even hinted at a threat, she could be reported to the police.... After the two hours of dreary waiting, Barbara felt stimulated by the prospect of an encounter.

"I never imagined it was you," she said.

"What may I have the honour of doing for you?" asked Mrs. Savage.

Barbara thought for a moment of saying vaguely that she had made a mistake and of escaping as soon as possible. But after the strain of waiting she now felt deliciously free from fear. And "Mrs. Savage" or "Madame Hilary" was not as other clairvoyants; the incident of Jack Summertown proved that; and the opportunity of consulting her was too good to be thrown away. Barbara felt that she was not entitled to throw it away; had she not almost been guided there? Was it coincidence that Amy Loring, of all unlikely people, should have given her the name at all? Was it coincidence that, when there were scores of women plying the same trade, she should come straight and without choice or deliberation to this one?...

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"I'd heard about you," Barbara explained. "I didn't know who it was, of course, but I wanted to consult you."

She hesitated and tried to determine what she wanted.

"Yes?"

"I didn't know who it was," Barbara repeated. "But I'm glad to find it *is* you. Do you remember the man in Mr. Webster's flat?"

"Lord Summertown?"

"Yes. Do you remember what you told him?"

"I told him nothing. It was what *he* said."

"Well, yes. He said that he was going to die quite soon, that he was going to be killed in a war. Well, that was months before there was any talk of war. Do you know what's happened to him?"

Mrs. Savage shrugged her shoulders a little impatiently, as though such questions were a waste of time.

"He was killed in the war," she said.

She spoke as if she took credit for it, and Barbara shivered.

"Yes.... I saw him just before he went back to barracks. I never saw him again, but I *felt* then that he was going to be killed. How did you know?"

"He told me, as you heard."

"Yes, but...."

Barbara frowned and sat down, rubbing her forehead gently with her hand.

"I tell nothing, but I persuade people to tell me," explained Mrs. Savage with unconcealed boredom. As she dropped back into the part of "Madame Hilary," "Mrs. Savage" was reviving her old staccato English and giving it a hint of a foreign accent. "People come to me to find out whether their sons and husbands are going to be killed. I do not know. And I tell them so. Then sometimes they allow me to persuade *them* to tell *me*. And, in my turn, I can tell them what they have said. But, generally, no! They are afraid of hearing the truth. When their sons and husbands have been killed, when nothing has been heard of them since long, *then* they come, because they feel that the truth is less hard than the waiting. You have a brother?" [Pg 290]

"They're still waiting to go out," answered Barbara.

"And you want to know? I can only tell you, if you tell me first; and you can only tell me, if you know. The lines of life are interlocked. If their lines cross yours, then you know; but, if they are separated.... You understand? It is not likely that you know anything of a man at the other end of the world, whom you have never met, unless it has been ordained that you are to meet him. That is reasonable."

She lighted another cigarette and sat down, looking at Barbara with no apparent interest.

"You want to find out about some one whose life has crossed yours?" she resumed carelessly, and her indifference was more disconcerting than either her stereotyped mysticism or the hostility which she had shewn when Barbara came into the room.

"I want to find out *generally*," answered Barbara. "All about myself. What I've done and what I'm doing now doesn't matter, but I want to know about the future."

Mrs. Savage laughed and shook her head.

"I know your name," she said. "I know who you are, but I know very little about you. I imagine that your life has been very happy, you have had everything to make it happy. Perhaps it will not always be happy. If you learned that you were going to be very ill or die——" [Pg 291]

"I've got to die some time. When I'm seventy-five, I shall know that I'm going to die very soon, because hardly any one lives longer than that. I'm twenty-two now, and I don't in the least mind knowing that I *can't* live for more than about another fifty years."

"But, if it were five years? I do not know, of course."

"I'd sooner face it, I think."

Mrs. Savage threw away her cigarette impatiently.

"You're a child! And a silly child! Your friend, Lord Summertown—well, I suppose none of you told him what he had said. And I suppose he enjoyed his life to the end. The *whole* future! Would you like to know that you will marry in a year and be happy and lose your husband after three months and lose your child and marry again—perhaps, this time, some one who will not make you happy? And that then you will have an illness or this or that?... I am talking for your good, because you are nothing but a silly child. I *tell* you that people will not be persuaded to say to me all they know; they dare not face it. Their present and future happiness——"

"I'm not so very happy," sighed Barbara.

"You are a child. And your friends are being killed, perhaps some one whom you love——"

"I want to *know*," Barbara interrupted. "Everything's in such a muddle, I want to know what's going to happen...." She paused, but Mrs. Savage only shook her head. "Should I know what I was telling you? No! Lord Summertown didn't. Well, you need only tell me back the things that matter. If you ask me questions and I answer them.... Perhaps I *don't* want to know if I'm going to die within a year, but there are all sorts of things that I could quite well be told.... Will you do that? Just the things that matter?"

"But I do not know what matters to you. Do you mean, whether your—friends will come through the war without injury?" [Pg 292]

"Ye-es. That sort of thing. I want to know if I'm going to be *happy*. Generally."

"And you believe that I can help you?" Mrs. Savage's voice was changing its quality to a sleepy drone, and Barbara found herself looking into her eyes. "Only you can tell me what you think will

make you happy. I know nothing about you except what you tell me. Perhaps you are in love with some man, perhaps you think that he is in danger.... If you will tell me...."

Barbara never knew at what point she began to come under the influence of Mrs. Savage's eyes and voice. At one moment she was begging her to use her powers, at another she was talking very volubly; it was like a dream in which she fancied herself making a speech; words were pouring out of her, and she was astonished to find that they made the nonsense of words in a dream. "The distinction between the articles in counterpoint, if you think of heliotrope quite accidentally included...."

"What have I been saying?" she demanded.

Mrs. Savage leaned back wearily and closed her eyes.

"It is like that, when you return to yourself, to the present.... Lord Summertown was disturbed by that poor girl who cried out."

"But I didn't know.... Did I go off? How long...?" She looked at her watch and found that she had been in the room for three-quarters of an hour. "What did I say?"

"You were a good subject."

"But what did I say?" Barbara repeated. It was the sight of her watch that upset her. In forty-five minutes it was possible to say so much, and she remembered Jack Summertown's almost indecent want of restraint.

"What shall I tell you," mused Mrs. Savage. "You said much, but you described an empty life. Few lines crossed yours; there may be more to come.... But you did not tell me of any loss. Were you afraid of losing some one?"

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"No.... I wanted to know, I wanted to—to straighten things out. But I want to know everything I said. You *must* tell me that."

"You child!"

Barbara sprang up in a grip of terror.

"I've said something awful? You're hiding something from me! It's not fair!"

Mrs. Savage shook her head slowly. She seemed perplexed, and her early hostility had evaporated until she was almost kindly.

"You wanted to know whether you would be happy," she reminded Barbara. "You tell me that you are not going to die this year or next; and you are not going to have any painful or dangerous illnesses. Happy?... There are ups and downs of happiness, you cannot expect to be happy always at the same level. If you have been happy so far, you will be happy again; there will, of course, be ups and downs. What else?"

"I want you to tell me everything I said."

"That I shall not do."

"But why not?"

Mrs. Savage shrugged her shoulders.

"It would not make you any happier. If there is any one thing you want to know...."

Barbara looked at her and looked away. She felt her nerve going.

"What is your fee?" she asked.

Mrs. Savage was still perplexed in expression, but her eyes had lost their momentary softening of kindness.

"I shall charge *you*—no fee," she answered.

Barbara turned and ran out of the room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN PRELUDE TO ROMANCE

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"I loved you all my life; but some lives never meet
Though they go wandering side by side through
Time."

JOHN MASEFIELD: "THE DAFFODIL FIELDS."

"Fatalism is a doctrine which does not recognise the determination of all events by causes in the ordinary sense; holding, on the contrary, that a certain foreordained result will come about, no matter what may be done to prevent it...."

Barbara's first action on reaching home was to go into the library and consult a dictionary to find out the exact meaning of a word which she had been repeating to herself ever since she hurried out of Mrs. Savage's rooms. She had many new ideas to fit into place, but dominating them all was this sense of hopelessness and inevitability. Whether you walked on the north pavement or the south was preordained; if you asserted your supposed free will and crossed from south to north, even that pitiful show of independence was preordained; God was still pushing you from behind and, probably, laughing at you—as you laughed at the kitten which stared at you with head on one side and wondering eyes, to know what you had done with its reel of cotton. It was preordained that you should play with that kitten for a moment in eternity and that for a fraction of a moment you should hide the reel. Fatalism was paralyzing to the soul, destroying all effort. Nothing mattered any longer....

It was Summertown who had made her a fatalist. His life had been mapped out until all initiative was taken away. He had died very gallantly—but he could not help himself; he had lived rather dissolutely, but he could not help himself. There had been a tragedy and a disappointment in his life; but the tragedy was set beforehand, and Destiny decided whether he was to be made or broken by it, whether he was to avert or contribute to it. Fatalism was the negation of morality. It allowed of neither right nor wrong, only necessity.

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If there were neither right nor wrong, Barbara had no cause for self-reproach. Destiny had arranged that Jack should come into her life; that he should anger her and that she should try to punish him; in obeying Destiny she was not to blame. But, if fatalism relieved her of responsibility, it also robbed her of resistance; she could do nothing to shield herself from anything that Destiny might have in store for her. Nothing had shielded Summertown when he came within range of the first German bullet....

And the course of Destiny could be laid bare. Though for long she had not believed it, she and the others had known what would happen to Summertown, as Mrs. Savage now knew what would happen to her.... And she had been afraid to insist on being told. All her life she had fancied that she was a free spirit with head and hands to make herself what she pleased. Now she was content to be told that, on the whole, she was preordained to be happy.... Or so Mrs. Savage had thought fit to say; she might be hiding something; there was no obvious reason why she refused her fee.

"My darling, haven't you gone up to dress yet?" said Lady Crawleigh at the door of the library. "You'll be so dreadfully late!"

Barbara knew that whether she was late or punctual had been preordained. Her mother probably would not believe that; she would feel that every one had enough free will not to keep other people waiting for dinner.

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"I think I should like to dine in bed," she answered wearily.

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm not equal to meeting a lot of people."

"But it's only George and the O'Ranes and one or two more. They'll be so disappointed. And it's the first time Sonia's dined here since she was married."

Barbara got up and walked reluctantly to the door. It was preordained, then, that she should dine.... Once you accepted predestination, there was no limit to its application. Her maid wanted her to wear a grey dress, but she preferred something else, anything else; her choice fell on a blue, but she was conscious that she was compelled from outside to choose one rather than the other. She could not be troubled to decide what jewellery she would wear; Destiny must do a little work, must choose for her. She felt that she was scoring a point against Destiny, when she refused to wear any; but Destiny had decided beforehand that she was to have this moment's struggle before deciding not to wear any....

Her maid was almost in tears at such indifference.

"You don't do me credit, my lady, to-night," she complained.

"Don't I? I'm sorry, Merton! But I'm tired, I can't take the trouble."

"Your hair, my lady—"

"I think I shall cut it off! It's only a bother."

"My lady, your beautiful hair?"

"No, I shan't cut it off. It's too much trouble. Everything's too much trouble."

She hardly looked at herself in the glass before going downstairs, though she knew that Sonia O'Rane would have spent hours in preparing herself. But it was preordained whether she looked well ... or wanted to look well.

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Throughout dinner her mind struggled under the incubus. Predestination peeped round every

conversational corner, explaining and stultifying everything. When O'Rane spoke sympathetically of Jim Loring's death, she answered almost callously that it must have been preordained. Since leaving Mrs. Savage, she had tried vainly to discover some point in which she was superior to an animal that was born at the stockman's bidding, to be killed for lamb or shorn for wool or kept to bear other sheep at the stockman's bidding and ultimately killed for mutton.

"You see, I believe in Destiny," Barbara explained. "Destiny meant you to be wounded and Jim to be killed and some one else to be untouched. If Destiny didn't mean me to be burned, I could put my finger in the flame of that candle. Everything we do——"

O'Rane shook his head and laughed.

"You don't believe that, Lady Barbara. You don't believe that you've no choice whether you're good or bad, kind or unkind—that you're helpless."

"I am waiting for you to find fault with my logic," she answered.

"I won't try. I wish I could see you, though! You sound serious, but in the old days, when I looked at you, there was a sort of etherealized smile——"

"Ah, don't!" Barbara shivered.

"——It gave you away.... I'm sorry! I'm getting so used to being blind that I forget other people's feelings.... Your voice is quite serious, and I'm getting wonderful at voices. Shall I tell you something about yours? A change I've noticed?" He waited to assure himself that they were not overheard. "Lady Barbara, are you very unhappy about something? It's not curiosity; I want to help, if I can. When you're blind, you become a bit of an impressionist. If any one asked me to describe you, I'm glad to say that I can still remember exactly what you used to look like, but, when I describe you to myself, I get a massing of colours, a glorious freedom of line that no one else might recognize for you. Your voice would make me crowd my canvas with red, blood red. Pain is always red to me. And you give me the impression of horrible pain. More than that, I'm afraid you've giving in to it. I don't ask for your confidence, but, if I'm right, I should like to help."

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Barbara was too much startled to do more than thank him and say that she was not very well.

"Ah, that was a pity!" he sighed.

"But I can't help it, can I?"

"It was a pity to say that. You've covered my picture with a thin grey-yellow wash—Thames water—which dulls my colours."

"Do you mean that I'm not speaking the truth?" she asked stiffly.

"I had no right to say what I did," he answered apologetically. "But you sounded so heart-broken."

"Well, in addition to being not very well, I'm *not* particularly happy. Life's such a hopeless thing, if you can't control it."

"And *you* say that, Lady Barbara, with your brains and your looks and your health and your money——"

"Even if I've got them all, they needn't make me happy.... They *don't*! Sometimes I feel that, if I could give them all up, if I could make one gigantic sacrifice, I might be happy.... You're not sorry to have been fighting, are you? But I wonder what equal sacrifice a woman can make."

"Ah, to die with credit is the easiest thing in the world," O'Rane answered, as he pushed back his chair.

When she was half-way upstairs, Barbara excused herself and went to her room. Sonia and her husband were so happy that their happiness hurt her; she grudged it them. There was no reason under heaven why she should not be as happy, but Destiny had not yet ordained it. Perhaps Destiny had decided that she should see it for a moment and then have it snatched from her. It was a variant of her old fear that she would have to marry Jack and then fall in love with some one else; then she had regarded such a fate as her punishment. Destiny, she now felt, did not concern itself with rewards and punishments; it was altogether too arbitrary.

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She lay on her bed without undressing and thought over the day's emotions. Of all that she had done she only regretted her momentary panic when she ran away from Mrs. Savage; and, the more she regretted it, the more determined she became to go again and to demand full answers to all her questions. As soon as her mind was made up, she felt better. People might call her superstitious, gullible or anything else they pleased, but they should not say that she was a coward. Jumping up from the bed, she tidied her hair and went down to the drawing-room in time to find Sonia saying good-bye.

"Oh, don't go yet," said Barbara. "I had such a headache that I had to lie down, but it's better now. I haven't had a moment with you the whole evening."

"We've promised to go to a party," Sonia answered. "To-night's the hundred and fiftieth performance of Eric Lane's play, and he's giving a supper on the stage. Why don't you come too?"

"I haven't been asked. And I don't know him."

"Oh, that doesn't matter! I don't know him, but David was up at Oxford with him."

"I think I'll wait until I've met him. You're not going too, George?"

"I'm bound for the same debauch, I'm afraid. Barbara, will you dine with me some time to meet him? I'll try to fix a night and telephone to you in the morning." [Pg 300]

"I shall love that."

She went to bed, feeling that she would sleep; but her nerves were unsettled by the memory of her encounter with Mrs. Savage. After trying to read, she jumped up and began walking about the room. She was never conscious of having gone outside, but some time later she found herself in the hall, lying on a table with a rug round her. Lady Crawleigh was standing over her with a white face and frightened eyes; her maid hovered in the background, with her hair in curl-papers and a grotesque mackintosh over her nightgown. Farther away stood an unmistakable policeman with close-cropped black hair and a line of white at the top of his forehead. Barbara reflected that she had never before seen a policeman without his helmet. Then she sat up and stared round her.

"What's happened?"

"My darling child, lie still," Lady Crawleigh implored. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right."

"You were walking in your sleep. Oh, Babs, you've given us all such a fright! D'you know, you'd actually got outside.... Anything might have happened to you!"

Barbara looked from her mother to the policeman.

"Outside?" she repeated.

"You'd unlocked the door and pushed back both bolts—Aston's quite sure he bolted top and bottom——"

"And I went out like this?" Barbara interrupted. She pulled up the end of the rug and found that she was barefooted and in her nightdress. "I can't remember.... I went to bed; I *do* remember that it was very hot and that I walked about the room...."

The policeman coughed and prepared to retire. Lady Crawleigh despatched the maid for her purse, but Barbara was too much dazed even to thank him. A dream which had been wonderfully vivid a moment before was fading from her recollection, driven out scene by scene at the sound of her mother's frightened voice. She had fancied that she was again sitting with Mrs. Savage and that the flicker of kindness which had for a moment lighted up the gaunt face and smouldering dark eyes was once more visible. In another moment everything would have been told.... [Pg 301]

"I suppose I was going for a walk. What's the time?"

"It's one o'clock," answered Lady Crawleigh. "I sat up to finish some writing.... My darling child, are you sure you're all right now?"

Barbara stood for a moment to test her strength and then walked to the stairs.

"Yes, thanks. I'll go back to bed now. I'm sorry to have frightened everybody."

"I'll come with you, Babs. If you want anything in the night——"

"I'm really all right!" Barbara was so much exhausted that this time she knew she would be able to sleep. She did not know, however, what she might say in her sleep. "You can lock both doors, mother; and I couldn't throw myself out of the window, if I tried. I couldn't sleep, if I had any one in the room; I should feel I was being watched."

"But just for to-night——"

"I shan't go to bed, unless you do what I ask."

Lady Crawleigh knew well when it was useless to argue, and Barbara went up alone. Mrs. Savage had called her; if the dream had not been so rudely disturbed, she would have been able to remember the form of the call as she still remembered its urgency. But that hardly mattered now; she was only strengthened in her determination to go back to Knightsbridge in the morning. She fell asleep, happier than she had been for a year. Lady Crawleigh peeped into the room once or twice during the night, but Barbara did not stir until the telephone-bell rang by her bed-side at half-past nine. A strange male voice enquired for her and seemed more than usually anxious to be certain of her identity. [Pg 302]

"We are Furnivall and Morton, solicitors," said the voice. "It is Mr. Morton speaking. Is that Lady Barbara Neave?"

"Yes."

"You *are*—Lady Barbara Neave? You are acquainted with a client of ours, Mrs. Savage."

The combination of Mrs. Savage and a slightly hectoring solicitor who insisted on speaking to her at half-past nine disconcerted Barbara.

"What Mrs. Savage do you mean?" she asked.

"Mrs. Savage of Knightsbridge. You called on her yesterday. I am sorry to say that there has been a misunderstanding, and our client is in a position of some difficulty. She gave me your name, and, after thinking the matter over very carefully, I felt that you were the person who could be of most service to her. Mrs. Savage assured me that you would do anything in your power to help her, so I need not apologize for troubling you at this rather unseasonable hour."

The voice paused, and Barbara found herself trembling. It was not blackmail to tell her that she would do anything in her power to help some one but the tone could be so confident as to be menacing. Barbara had never been brought into contact with solicitors; she knew from books that it was prudent and legitimate to refer them to one's own solicitors, but it would argue an uneasy conscience to be so summary before she had given Mr. Morton time to explain himself.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"Some malicious person has been writing letters to the Home Office," explained Mr. Morton, "and the long and the short of it is that it's necessary for us to produce evidence as to character. If you would be kind enough——"

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"But I don't know her," Barbara protested. "I've only met her twice."

"That does not matter. One of the charges against our client is that she trades on the credulity of ignorant people who have been made unbalanced by the war and that, when she has got these same ignorant people into her grasp, she extorts money from them. You and I know that such a charge is grotesquely untrue. Our client had devoted her whole life to the study of what I may conveniently call 'the occult'; she has never advertised or solicited business—her peculiar powers have made that unnecessary—and those who have consulted her, so far from being credulous or ignorant people, are drawn to her by a common interest in a study which, though still in its infancy, is capable of almost infinite development." Barbara fancied that Mr. Morton must be reading aloud the draft of the defence which he had prepared for Mrs. Savage. "We feel that the Home Office will take a different view of the case, when confronted with a few of the people whom the anonymous informant is good enough to call ignorant and credulous. I am therefore collecting a few statements from some of the very many people who consulted our client. I shall be glad to know that you will allow me to call on you and suggest to you the general form in which these statements are being drawn."

Barbara was vaguely relieved to find that Mrs. Savage was once more on the defensive and that the solicitor with the ominous voice was asking favours rather than uttering threats. She would have liked to help, if it had been possible; a year before she would undoubtedly have responded; but now she dreaded the publicity of a newspaper report, and there would be a scene with her father to which she felt wholly unequal. The common sense of the world, too, would only rank her with the credulous ignorant.

"You can get other people who know her better, surely?" Barbara suggested.

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"I want to get every one I can," answered Mr. Morton. "Your name, if I may say so, will carry a great deal of weight. We wish to show the Home Office the *kind* of people who went to our client."

Barbara was quite convinced by now that she did not want to be known as "the kind of person" who consulted Mrs. Savage, though in an hour's time she would have been on her way to Knightsbridge.

"I think I'd sooner be left out of it," she said.

"I'm afraid we can't afford to spare you."

"But you can't *make* me!"

There was a pause, followed by a warning cough, and Mr. Morton began to speak more slowly and emphatically.

"If the Home Office authorities are ill-advised enough to recommend a prosecution, it will be necessary for you to attend. We want to avoid that, of course; we want to satisfy the authorities—without any unpleasantness—that they are under a misapprehension. A statement from you——"

"But would it be published?"

"That we should have to decide later. Our client has also been wantonly attacked by certain papers, and it is our business to see that she is cleared of all suspicion."

"I shan't say anything, if it's going to be published in the papers," Barbara rejoined obstinately.

Mr. Morton hesitated again and became even more impressive.

"I'm afraid—you'll understand, of course, that this is in no sense a threat—I'm afraid that you'll regret it later. If we're unable to settle the matter out of hand, if there's a prosecution——"

"But I've really nothing to do with it! You can't drag me in!" Barbara cried.

"Have you never heard of a *subpœna*?"

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A threat, like any other challenge, roused Barbara to combat, however ill and reluctant she might be; and, when roused, her first act was to throw aside prudence like a cloak that was fettering her sword-arm.

"Oh, I know you can make me come, if you want to," she said. "If you and Mrs. Savage think it's worth while. I've only met her twice—yesterday and about two years ago. She hasn't forgotten the first meeting. You can ask her if she thinks it's worth while."

Barbara hung up the receiver and lay back in bed, breathing quickly. Her mother came in a moment later to enquire how she was and found her with flushed cheeks and dilated pupils.

"My darling, what's the matter?" she cried.

"Oh, I'm worried! Everything worries me!" answered Barbara with a catch in her breath. "Oh, that telephone again!"

This time it was George Oakleigh, and his tone of gentle concern worried her until she wanted to scream and beg to be left alone.

"Good-morning, Barbara. I tried to get through to you before, but your line was engaged. I hope you're better this morning. Well, I went to Eric Lane's party last night after leaving you; I've made him promise to dine with me on Thursday, it's his only free evening for weeks. Is that any good to you? Even if you don't like his play, I think you'll like him."

Barbara felt that, if by pressing a button she could compass Lane's death, she would press it cheerfully and promptly. Then perhaps she would escape having him thrust down her throat every few hours.

"George, it's sweet of you," she said, straining to speak graciously, "but I don't know that I shall feel up to it. All my nerves seem to have gone wrong."

"I'm so sorry; I thought he might amuse you. Would you like to leave it open? Thursday. He's dining with me in any event. If you ring me up between now and then.... Take care of yourself, dear Barbara; you're too precious to lose."

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"Oh, I'm not going to die young," she laughed nervously. "The gods don't love me enough for that."

As she put the telephone away again, Lady Crawleigh came back to the bed; she had only troubled to gather one thing from the conversation, and that was the rare admission from Barbara's own lips that she was too ill to accept an invitation.

"Darling, I thought that after last night it would be a good thing for you to see Dr. Gaisford," she said. "Perhaps he can give you a tonic—"

"Oh, I don't want to see a doctor," Barbara interrupted. "My wretched body's all right. No doctor in the world can do me any good."

"But you're not yourself at all. And you've *never* walked in your sleep before. There *must* be something a little wrong, when you begin doing that."

Barbara said nothing, because she felt that her nerves were tingling and that she might break out with something so unnaturally irritable and rude that Dr. Gaisford would be summoned without the chance of an appeal. It was absurd to talk about sleep-walking; it was not in sleep that she had walked down the stairs and through the door-way. A trance it might fairly be called; but, where memory failed, instinct told her that she was obeying a call; she had no doubt that, when the policeman stopped her, she was on her way to Mrs. Savage; and she would there have heard something—perhaps everything....

"I was only restless," said Barbara at length, pulling the bed-clothes about with an impatient hand.

"You're not *thinking* of getting up, are you?"

Since she could not go back to Knightsbridge, Barbara was undecided what to do. At least she had to remain within reach of the telephone, for Mr. Morton might reopen communication at any moment; and she had to remain at home to secure that, if Mrs. Savage made a personal appeal, it should not be intercepted this time by Lord Crawleigh. Bed was as good a place as any other....

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Mr. Morton left her undisturbed, but two days later she heard the last of Mrs. Savage. At some period of her wandering career May Tennigen, sometimes known as "Madame Hilary" or "Mrs. Savage," had become a naturalized American; the Home Office, working sympathetically with the War Office, which suspected her activities, decided to dispense with a prosecution and to return her to the country of her adoption. When Barbara read of the deportation, she was first relieved and then plunged into despair. Her last contact with certainty had been broken. Lady Crawleigh came in to find her crying in her sleep; later she began to talk feverishly and in the morning Dr. Gaisford was summoned.

"She was dreadfully overworked in the hospital," explained Lady Crawleigh. "And I don't think she's got over it yet. *You* know how naughty she is as a rule, when she's told to stay in bed; now she won't get up. She says there's no point in getting up, that there's nothing to do. She says that, if she's *fated* to get up—or something like that.... She says she's got no will of her own, that

we've none of us got wills. That from *Barbara!*"

The doctor's task was easy in one respect, for Barbara did whatever she was told. If Destiny contrived a man and crossed the thread of his life with hers and made him a physician and sent him with a stethoscope and a fountain-pen to write prescriptions, what was the use of protesting? She could take the medicine—or leave it untouched; that had been arranged for her beforehand. Everything was arranged beforehand, but she had lost the means of finding out what Destiny had in store for her....

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"Is she worried about anything?" asked the doctor.

"Not that I know of," Lady Crawleigh answered.

Since the time eighteen months before, when Barbara said bluntly, "Mother, I'm not going to marry Jack," they had not discussed him. When he was reported "missing," Barbara never commented on her mother's letter, even with a phrase of conventional regret; she did not seem to discuss him with any one, she had rejected her aunt's sympathy, and, if she were breaking her heart for him, it was strange that even in sleep she never referred to him.

When the doctor left, Lady Crawleigh resolved that Barbara *must* be coaxed into saying why she was so miserable. But, if it was hard to corkscrew anything out of her when she was obstinately rebellious, it was harder still when she cowered like a beaten dog. For three nights she had lain moaning "Happy ... I do want to be happy.... Won't any one make me happy?" Lady Crawleigh alluded vaguely to restless nights, and the doctor prescribed a sedative.

For the first time in more than twelve months Barbara slept peacefully and awoke with the memory of a delightful dream. After the disturbance of her encounter with Mrs. Savage, her memory had at last gone back to the day when she fainted in the train. Twice in the night a voice was heard speaking to her very softly, with a child's confiding gentleness; then the child himself appeared, standing over her and holding out both hands until she got up from the grass and walked with him. She found that she, too, was a child, with bare arms and legs and her hair hanging loose and blowing into her face until he brushed it aside and kissed her. They walked with their arms twined about each other's waists, and, when Barbara looked wonderingly at their blue ephods, he said "The Blue Bird," and she answered, "Of course! The Blue Bird" and knew that he was come to bring her happiness.

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They set out seriously, for there was no time to be lost, through a long narrow garden built like a cliff road, terrace under terrace, with a silver ribbon of water turning in a cascade from the end of each terrace on to the one below. There were fig trees on either side, and he made her sit down in the shade while he gathered the warm soft figs and tossed them into her lap.

"Spain," she said. "We must go on."

"Aren't you happy here?" he asked.

"Yes. I love you."

"And I love you."

"But we must go on," she repeated.

He bent forward on one knee and kissed her feet.

"You are tired. Rest here, where you are happy."

"I am very happy, but we must go on."

He stood up and lifted her in his arms until she laid her cheek against his and clasped her hands round his neck.

"I am too heavy," she protested. "You are only a child."

"I cannot let you hurt your feet on all these stones," he answered.

"You are very good to me."

"I love you. If you will stay here, I will take care of you always. You will be happy. You will never be hurt. I will watch over you, and no one shall come near you."

She looked from under the shade of the fig-tree on to the silver ribbon of water falling in cascades from one terrace to another.

"No one *is* near us. We are alone in the world."

"And I love you; and you love me."

She struggled out of his arms and darted forward.

"We must go on."

"When you are happy?"

"Yes. *I* have to go on. Who are you?"

"I cannot tell you. I have not lived till now."

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"I never lived till you told me that you loved me. Kiss me! Kiss my eyes! I love you and I am happy.... But I have to go on. You are a child."

"Like you. Let me kiss your hand."

"My eyes! Kiss my eyes! They were aching, but you have made me happy...."

Barbara was still speaking when she awoke. Her arms were thrown wide, as though she were waiting to embrace some one, and she heard her own whispered "happy."

The door creaked. A wedge of yellow light advanced, broadening, into the room and slowly climbed the opposite wall. Through half-closed eyes she saw her mother; and, though she shut her eyes, she could feel that her mother was crossing the room, standing by her, watching her. Then the door creaked again. Barbara sighed with relief. In another moment sleep would have been banished, but now she might hope to recapture it. Spain ... The Generalife Garden ... Sunshine hot on her face ... Black stains of shadow from the fig trees ... The sweet, creamy figs ... Quivering waves of heat flung back and up from the burning earth on to her bare ankles ... A child in blue ephod kissing her feet in adoration....

She could not remember his face. But, if she did not wake herself by thinking too hard of him, he would come back. He *must* come back....

The boat was hardly big enough for them both, but he sat at her feet with a bare arm round his bare legs and his other hand dipped in the water. She never knew when he got into the boat or when she got into it herself; but he was speaking, as they came in sight of the Blue Grotto, and this time she determined to see his face.

"The river is not wide enough for oars," he explained.

"I was afraid I had lost you."

"I love you. I will take wonderful care of you. You will stay?"

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"We must go on."

The Blue Grotto changed to a horse-shoe doorway, through which she could see a valley of swaying corn studded with poppies. At the doorway their narrow river ended, and a ripple of water lapped and washed over the granite steps.

"I will carry you," he said. "You must not wet your feet."

"I am too heavy. You are only a child."

He laughed, and she found herself in his arms with her cheek pressed against his and one hand drawing back the hair from her eyes.

"At the end," she began, looking over the corn and poppies to a strip of white road winding out of the valley and merging in a white haze on the horizon.

"Stay with me! You are happy. And you love me."

"I love you.... But we must go on."

She ran ahead, trailing her fingers through the waving ears of corn, and looked over her shoulder. He had thrown himself on the ground, but, when she faltered back, he knelt and drew her to him.

"Stay with me! I love you!"

"If you love me, kiss me!"

She stood over him with her head thrown back until he sprang up and clasped her in his arms.

"I will never let you go!"

"You must let me go. I have to go on."

"But you are happy?"

"Yes! I am happy ... happy...."

She had run on alone, with his kiss still on her lips, and had reached the last height of the strip of white road before she awoke. She heard her own whispered "happy," but she was frightened....

Her bedroom was full of sunshine, and Barbara opened her arms to welcome it. She was sitting up, when her mother came in, turning the big illustrated pages of "The Blue Bird"; it was the last thing that she had read before going to sleep and she wanted to see again the Kingdom of the Future and the "halls of the Azure Palace, where the children wait that are yet to be born." The opalescent doors and the blue ephods of the children were still vivid to her; when she fell asleep, she had been reading of "the two holding each other by the hand and always kissing ... the Lovers," who spent "their day looking into each other's eyes, kissing and bidding each other farewell" ... because they could not be born into the world at the same time.

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"Darling, you're looking better," said Lady Crawleigh.

"Yes, I had a wonderful night," answered Barbara. "I'm going to get up to-day. I'm going out. I want to be in the sun."

She laid aside the book and began her breakfast.

"Dr. Gaisford's coming to see you at twelve," Lady Crawleigh reminded her.

"Oh, we'll telephone and put him off. He'd much sooner be told that I'd gone out. But he can give me some more of that medicine; it makes me sleep. And I'm quite hungry."

She hurried through breakfast and ran into her bathroom, eager to be by herself, where she could piece together her dream before it faded from her memory. The voice of the child-lover was the voice that she had heard in the train. If he ever kissed her again, she would know him, though she seemed never to have seen his face. Perhaps she would never see him, perhaps Destiny had contrived that they should always be lovers and should never meet, perhaps this was why she had felt frightened on waking. It was absurd, but delightful. She wanted to meet her playmate.... And it was a long time to wait until she could go to bed and dream of him again.

She ran into the Park, because she had been running in the dream; it was more natural; she was a child again, in a mood of unclouded happiness. The passers-by paused to stare and smile, but she smiled back at them and waved her hand. A young officer shot by in a car, turned round and stopped to ask if he could give her a lift, as she seemed to be in a hurry. "It's only lightness of heart," she explained with dancing eyes. The officer looked wonderingly at her and drove to his club, where he described the encounter and opined that Lady Barbara Neave ("It couldn't have been any one else") had apparently gone suddenly mad.

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In the Park she found O'Rane basking on a chair in the sunshine and crumpling the silky ears of his Saint Bernard. She sat down beside him, panting for breath and challenging him to guess who she was.

"I knew before you spoke," he answered. "No one else in London wears quite so many carnations to the square inch. I smelt them the moment you came within range."

"I have them sent up three times a week from the Abbey. I'm going to put one in your button-hole as a prize for being so clever."

"Oh, I can be much cleverer than that, when I try," he laughed. "Lady Barbara, either the sunshine's gone to your head—it always does with me; so much of my misspent life has been in the sun, I feel starved in England—; either that, or something very remarkable has happened to you. You've got a different voice, you're a different person. The last time——"

"Ah, don't talk about it," she interrupted. "I'm happy to-day."

"I know you are! If I painted you to-day, there'd be a riot of blue——"

"Blue? How funny!"

"The blue of a cloudless sky. That's how I *see* happiness. Tell me what's happened?"

"I just feel well and happy. I had a wonderful dream. I was about four, and there was a little boy with the most enchanting voice——"

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O'Rane laughed and began to sing under his breath:

"Long years ago—fourteen, maybe,
When but a tiny babe of four,
Another baby played with me,
My elder by a year or more—
A little child of beauty rare
With wondrous eyes and marvellous hair...!"

Good heavens! The last time I sang that song was at Oxford! A man called Sinclair—I'd been at school with him; he was killed at Neuve Chapelle; he was President ... The old Phoenix Club. Jim was there, and Jack Summertown, and George Oakleigh, and Eric Lane, the new playwright, and Jack Waring.... I suppose there's no news of him?"

"I don't think so," Barbara answered soberly. The name took away her lightness of heart and robbed the very sunshine of its glory.

"And I made a bet with Jim," said O'Rane after a moment's musing. "Tell me about your dream," he added abruptly.

"Oh, I couldn't! It's sacred! Besides, I don't remember very much about it except that he was the most adorable little boy in the world.... *I* was rather adorable, too, with my little bare feet. And *he* fell in love with *me*, and *I* fell in love with *him*. I *had* been feeling wretchedly ill and miserable, but I'm happy now. I think the only thing to do now is to find him and insist on marrying him; we should be wonderfully happy together, because I've never loved any one as I loved that child. How does one start?"

O'Rane shook his head sadly.

"We've no machinery for romance now. In the old days you'd have sat on a throne with your hair in two enormous plaits and a gold crown set with sapphires, and your father would have caused all the men in his kingdom to pass in front of you, and you'd have stepped suddenly forward, when you saw your lover, and you'd have taken him by the hand and made room for him by your side, and both of you would have lived happily ever afterwards."

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"The sunshine's gone to your head, too! Why are we sitting still? I want to run about... Mr. O'Rane, what *would* happen if I took off my shoes and stockings in Hyde Park?"

"*You* can do anything, Lady Barbara."

"Yes, but people would say that I was doing it for effect. I don't do things for effect. I do things because I *want* to, because I can't help myself. Long before I believed in Destiny, I felt that there was something inside me stronger than my will..."

She broke off and began thinking again of her dream. In this white sunshine it was easy to discount it, to talk of excited nerves, to trace the dream itself to the book which she had been reading; but, as she lay between sleep and waking, all had been too real to discount. Destiny had decreed the meeting, as Destiny decreed her smallest impulse.

A shadow fell across her feet. She started and looked up to find Oakleigh standing before her.

"I'm glad to see you about again," he said. "I've come to take Raney away to lunch with the Poynters. Sonia's not here yet?"

"She said she might be a few minutes late," answered O'Rane. "Lady Barbara and I have been sitting in the sun, telling each other how happy we are." O'Rane sat up to catch a sound too indistinct for the others. "And here's Sonia," he added. "We must fly, Lady Barbara, or we shall be horribly late, but won't you walk with us?"

"I'm afraid I must go back," she answered.

Barbara watched the two men walking away with Sonia between them. O'Rane was stooping to keep his fingers inside the great Saint Bernard's collar. Though he was blind, he was happier than she was; though he was blind, he had heard and recognized Sonia's footstep before she did. Some change of mood had overtaken her, and she traced it back to the moment when he asked whether she had received news of Jack....

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A car was standing at the door of her house, and she found Dr. Gaisford in the hall.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I *meant* to tell you I was so much better that I'd gone out," she apologized, rallying under her mother's eye.

The doctor noted the quick dilation of pupil and restless change of expression.

"As I've caught you, I may as well overhaul you," he said.

"But I'm all right now," Barbara protested.

"That's good hearing," answered Dr. Gaisford, but none the less he persevered in his examination, unmoved by a flash of petulance, which he did not fail to note, and by a spasm of nervous, contrite amiability, which he noted no less carefully. At the end he was puzzled and dissatisfied.

"You say that there *was* a change this morning?" he asked Lady Crawleigh as he left.

"She was a different girl. Now she's as irritable and melancholy.... Doctor, *is* this simply the result of overwork, or is it something more?"

It was as far as her mother would unbend towards suggesting that Barbara had anything on her mind. The doctor guessed the purpose of her question, but he felt that she was better qualified to answer it than he was.

"What do you mean by 'something more'?" he asked.

"Oh, well.... You know...."

"If we can get her *body* right and her *nerves* right," he answered, "everything else will come right. She's very highly strung, she's been taking a great deal out of herself all her life; and the war deals such an all-round blow that, if there *is* a weak place, we're all of us bound to feel it."

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He piled vagueness on vagueness and then took his leave. Barbara was suffering from more than overexcited nerves, but he could not yet diagnose her complaint. There was no suggestion of drink, no trace of drugs, but she had been in his care for several weeks and she refused to shew any improvement. With the best intentions, a woman in her state never told a doctor the truth about herself; and any doctor who had attended Barbara since childhood knew better than to waste his time in trying to make her confide in him.

"I'll come in again on Tuesday or Wednesday," he promised Lady Crawleigh on the door-step. "Then we can talk about sending her into the country. At present I think she'd only mope."

Barbara spent the afternoon at a concert and dined at home with her parents. She went to bed immediately after dinner, drank her medicine and lay with her pillows heaped under her

shoulders and the big illustrated "Blue Bird" open against her knees. When she was too tired to read any longer, she turned out the light and settled lower into the bed with her hands clasped under her head, as Peter Ibbetson had lain night after night, waiting for Mary, Duchess of Towers, "healthily tired in body, blissfully expectant in mind."

Drowsiness advanced on her from a distance, perceptibly. She dulled her senses to the far-away echo of footsteps in the house, to the shooting glint of moonlight, silver-grey on the cream-coloured blankets as her curtain bellied in the breeze, to the scent of her beloved carnations, stirred into fragrance as the curtains moved. Drowsiness deepened, but she could not fall asleep; her body lay defiantly in London, where she could still hear a drone of noises, however much she whispered that she was alone in the world—and waiting.

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Even her eyes refused to remain closed, but she decided that Destiny must have forced them open, for the curtains blew apart and she saw the boy standing at the foot of her bed. His face was in shadow, and he stood with his hands clasped in front of him, looking down.

"Ah!"

At the sound of her voice he looked up, but his face was still hidden.

"My dearest, I have waited for you so long! All day!" she whispered.

"And I have waited for you all my life. I love you."

"And I love you. You will stay?"

It was his turn to shake his head; and he swept sharply towards the door. Barbara sprang out of bed and caught him by the hand.

"You *shall* not go!"

"I cannot stay here. You will come with me?"

"I must stay here."

"If you come with me, I will take care of you always. You will be happy."

"I must stay here."

"Before, you would not stay. Now, you will not come."

His hand slipped from her fingers, and she saw him pass through the door into a formless marble gallery. His blue ephod shone brilliantly against the grey walls, then faded and lost all colour until she could no longer see him. The gallery foreshortened and grew dark until she felt suffocated. She could see the darkness and a shadow at her feet darker still. Something was holding her back; if she could spring across the forbidding shadow.... Unless she sprang, she would be stifled. Yet to be stifled was to win peace ... or to send her mad....

When she awoke, Lady Crawleigh was once more standing over her.

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"Where was I this time?" asked Barbara dully.

"Darling, you must have had a nightmare. You were calling out, so I came to see what was the matter."

"But where was I? What did I say?"

"You didn't say anything. You were just—moaning."

"They were stifling me!" she sobbed.

"No, darling, you'd only got your face among the pillows so that you couldn't breathe properly. What were you dreaming about?"

Barbara looked at her mother and summoned all her resolution to say nothing. It was wonderful to have any resolution left.... But Destiny had decided that she was to say nothing....

"I believe I'm going mad!" she whispered.

Lady Crawleigh tried to comfort her, but the girl shrank to the far side of the bed. It came to this, then, that she could no longer trust herself to go to sleep. For one night she had been in Heaven ... or in sight of Heaven.... She could not understand what had impelled her forward from the Garden and the Valley. Some one, something was waiting for her—on the lowest terrace, on the horizon where the white ribbon of road wound out of sight. Something called her away from the child in the blue ephod. And to-night Destiny had set an angel with a flaming sword to bar her path when she tried to follow him. Yet it was not an angel that she could see nor a sword that she could feel; it was an inhibition, an Authority.... Why not call it Destiny? It was something that kept her from the boy with the wistfully caressing voice, who loved her and promised to make her happy.... Something that frightened her, something that was sending her mad.

"I always said you oughtn't to sleep with all those pillows," sighed Lady Crawleigh.

"You can take them away, if you like. Good-night, mother. I hope I didn't frighten you. I'm going to sleep again now."

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She waited until she was alone and then sprang out of bed. If she slept, the shadow would return ... Jack's shadow; she mustered courage to call it by its right name. You could not go to sleep, if you walked up and down, up and down all night.... At three o'clock she stripped a row of glass beads from a dress and poured them into her shoes. You could not go to sleep, if every step made you wince with pain and bite your lip to keep from crying.... When her maid came in, Barbara was asleep, with smarting eyes and tears on her cheeks, huddled at the side of her bed. One foot had a blister as big as a young pea....

She breakfasted and dressed feverishly to escape from the house before her mother was up and before the doctor could mouth his inanities about "getting the nerves right, dear child, and then everything else will be right."

"I don't expect I shall be back to lunch," she told her maid.

Soon she was in St. James' Park, because Destiny sent her there.... Government cars were racing down the Mall; a procession of officers poured into Whitehall, and by the statue of James II she saw Oakleigh and O'Rane walking arm-in-arm towards the Admiralty. George would tell her that she did not look quite so well; O'Rane would mark her voice and paint his conception of her with such blazing splashes of his "red for pain" as seeing eye had never beheld. She turned and ran up the Duke of York's Steps; Destiny had decided that she was to escape these two for once....

To meet Lady Poynter in Bond Street was to be flung against reality and made sane.

"My dear Babs! How wretched you're looking," she heard; and the shops, the taxis and the passers-by steadied to immobility. They were gloriously solid; they would frown on her, if she screamed or ran away.

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"I'm feeling rather wretched," she answered in a recognizable voice. "I had rather a bad night."

"Your mother told me you were disgracefully overworked at the hospital," said Lady Poynter. "Now, what we's all got to do is to arrange a little holiday for you—"

Barbara smiled and shook her head. Yet it was no use shaking your head when Destiny had flung Lady Poynter across your path. If Destiny had arranged for her what might, for argument's sake, be called a holiday....

"I haven't made up my mind what I'm going to do," she answered.

"Then let me make it up for you! What are you doing to-night?"

"I believe mother's got some people dining."

"Well, see if you can't put them off and dine with us."

Barbara closed her eyes until she felt herself rocking. If Destiny meant her to dine with Lady Poynter....

"I should like to," she said.

"Then I shall expect you. At a quarter past eight. In Belgrave Square. It's only quite a small party. Have you met this new dramatist, Eric Lane? I've got him coming."

There was a conspiracy to force them together. George had tried, Sonia had tried. What was the good of meeting any one, if Jack's ghost intervened to thrust them apart? Eric Lane ... Eric Lane.... When she died, they would find "Eric Lane" on her heart. A neat monogram: "E. L." ... Barbara found herself trembling.... If Destiny meant her to meet Eric Lane....

"I was invited to meet him, but I couldn't go."

"You'll fall in love with him," Lady Poynter prophesied.

Transcriber's Note:

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected.

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