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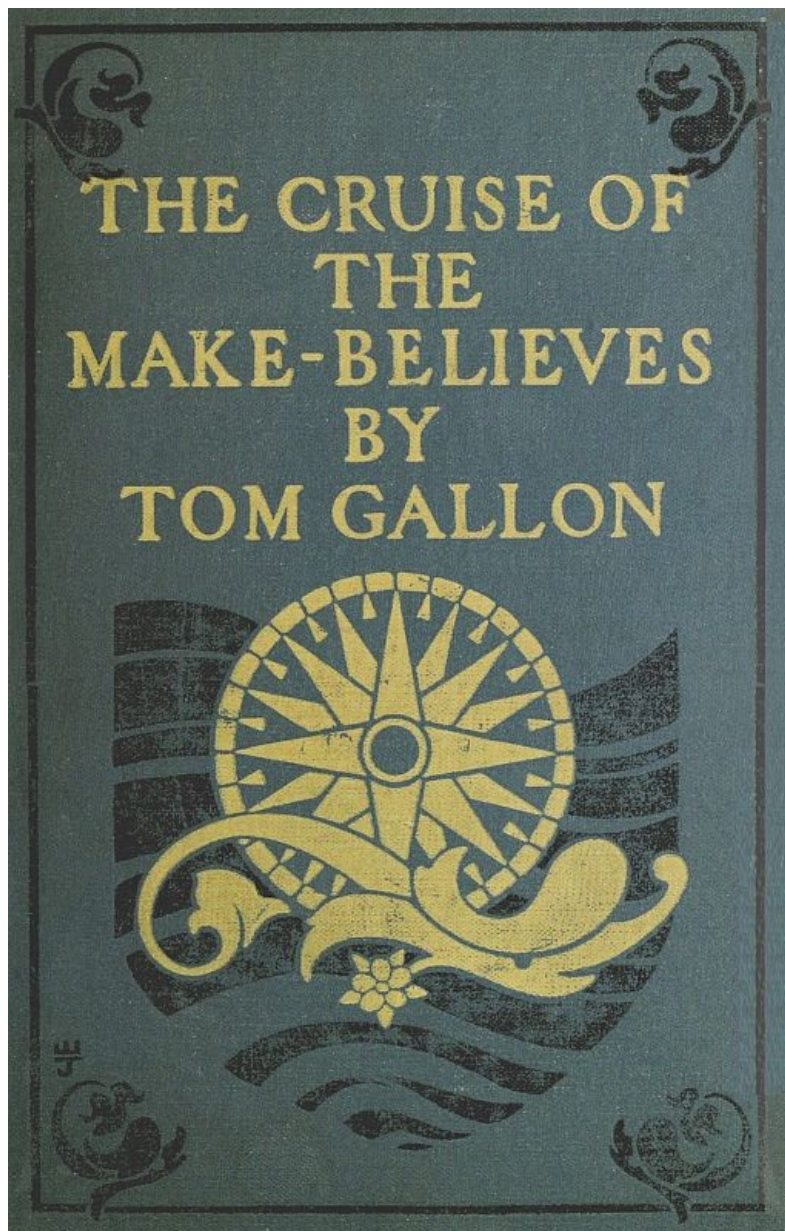
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRUISE OF THE MAKE-BELIEVES ***



THE CRUISE OF THE MAKE-BELIEVES



"TO ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES I
AM A RICH MAN."

(See [page 97](#)) FRONTISPIECE

THE CRUISE OF THE MAKE-BELIEVES

BY
TOM GALLON

AUTHOR OF "TATTERLEY," "MEG THE LADY," ETC.

Illustrated by
CH. GRUNWALD

BOSTON
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THE CRUISE OF THE MAKE-BELIEVES

[1]

CHAPTER I THE PRINCESS NEXT DOOR

THE thin young man with the glossy hat got out of the cab at the end of the street, and looked somewhat distrustfully down that street; glanced with equal distrust at the cabman. A man lounging against the corner public-house, as though to keep that British institution from falling, and leaving him without refreshment, got away from it, and inserted himself between the driver and the fare, ready to give information or advice to both, on the strength of being a local resident.

"Are you quite sure that this is Arcadia Street?" asked the young man in the glossy hat. He had a thin, meagre, precise sort of voice—delicate and mincing.

"Carn't yer see it wrote up?" demanded the driver, pointing with his whip to the blank wall that formed one side of the street. "Wotjer think I should want to drop yer in the wrong place for?" He was a cross driver, for he had already been driving about in the wilds of Islington in search of Arcadia Street for a long time, and he was doubtful whether or not that fact would be remembered in the fare. [2]

"Yus—this is Arcadia Street, guv'nor," said the man from the public-house. "You take it from me; I've bin 'ere, man an' boy, since before I could remember. Wot part of it was you wantin', sir?"

But the young man had already given the cabman a substantial fare, and had turned away. The man from the public-house jogged along a little behind him, eager to be of service for a consideration to a man to whom a shilling or two seemed to mean nothing at all; a few bedraggled staring children had sprung up, as if by magic, and were also lending assistance, by the simple expedient of walking backwards in front of the stranger, and stumbling over each other, and allowing him to stumble over them. And still the young man said nothing, but only glanced anxiously at the houses.

He did not fit Arcadia Street at all. For he was particularly well dressed, with a neatness that made one fear almost to brush against him; while Arcadia Street, Islington, is not a place given to careful dressing, or even to neatness. Moreover, silk hats are not generally seen there, save on a Monday morning, when a gentleman of sad countenance goes round with a small book and a pencil, in the somewhat cheerless endeavour to collect rents; and his silk hat is one that has seen better days. So that it is small wonder that the young man was regarded with awe and surprise, not only by the straggling children, but also by several women who peered at him from behind doubtful-looking blinds and curtains. [3]

Still appearing utterly oblivious of the questions showered upon him by the now frantic man who had constituted himself as guide, the young man had got midway up the street, and was still searching with his eyes the windows of the houses. If you know Arcadia Street at all, you will understand that in order to search the windows he had but to keep his head turned in one direction; for the habitable part of the street lies only on the left-hand side, the other being formed by a high blank wall, shutting in what is locally known as "The Works." From behind this wall a noise of hammering and of the clang of metal floats sometimes to the ears of Arcadia Street, and teaches them that there is business going on, although they cannot see it.

Now, just as the young man had reached the middle of the street, and the loafer who had accompanied him was almost giving up in despair, the eyes of the young man looked into the eyes of a young girl on the other side of a sheet of glass. The sheet of glass represented one part of one window of a house, and at the moment the young man turned his gaze in that direction, she was setting up against the glass a card which bore the modest inscription—"Board and Residence." And she was so unlike Arcadia Street generally that the young man stopped, and made a faltering movement with one arm, as though he would have raised his hat, and looked at her helplessly. Instantly, something to his relief, she raised the window, careless of what became of the card, and looked out at him.

"Perhaps, sir, you might be looking for—" So she began; and then faltered and stopped. [4]

"You're very good," he responded, in his precise voice. "Name of Byfield—Mr. Gilbert Byfield. Does he live here?"

"Next door, sir," she said, as she slowly lowered the window. And it seemed to the young man that for a moment, although she was evidently interested in him, a shadow of disappointment crossed her face.

He raised his hat, disclosing for a moment a very neatly arranged head of fair hair, parted accurately in the middle; and then rang the bell at the adjoining house. By this time his guide, seeing that he was about to escape, began rapidly to urge his claims, the while the young man took not the faintest notice of him, but kept his eyes fixed on the door he expected to see open every moment.

"Didn't I tell yer w'ere it was, guv'nor?" demanded the man. "Where'd you 'ave bin, if it 'adn't bin for me; you might 'ave lorst yerself a dozen times. I says to meself, w'en I sees yer gettin' out of the cab—I says to meself—"E's a gent—that's wot 'e is—'e's one of the tip-tops. You look arter 'im,' I says, 'an' see if 'e don't do the 'andsome by yer.' . . . Well—of all the ugly smug-faced dressed-up—"

For the door had opened, and the young man of the glossy hat had been swallowed up inside. Mr. Byfield was at home. The loafer looked the house up and down aggressively, and seemed on the point of expressing his opinion concerning it and its inhabitants publicly; deemed that a waste of breath apparently; and drifted away, to take up his old position at the corner of the street. The children, coming reluctantly to the understanding that there was not likely to be a fight, or even an altercation, drifted away also. [5]

Above the curtain of the window of the next house the plaintive pretty face of the girl appeared again for a moment, and then was withdrawn. So far as the street was concerned, the incident was closed, and the mystery of the young man's appearance had been transferred to the house itself. For his inquiry for Mr. Byfield had led to his being directed up certain shabby stairs, until he came to a door; he had just raised his knuckles delicately to knock upon it, when it was flung open, and the man he had come to see stood before him.

It would be difficult indeed to imagine a greater contrast between any two men than that which existed between the visitor and the visited. For Gilbert Byfield was big and hearty—not in any sense of mere fleshiness, but rather because there was a largeness about his actions and his gestures—a certain impulsive eagerness in all he did, as though each day was all too short for what he wanted to crowd into it. He was in his shirt-sleeves (for it seems always to be hot and stuffy in Arcadia Street, Islington) and a pipe was in his mouth. He grinned amiably, but a little sheepishly, at his visitor; suddenly leaned forward, and caught the immaculate one by the hand and drew him into the room.

"Of all wonders," he ejaculated—"how did you get here?"

The thin young man, who had removed his hat, was glancing round the dingy walls of the room, and at the table in the centre that was strewn with books and papers. "My dear Byfield," he said, in his thin voice, "I might almost repeat that question to you. I am amazed, Byfield; I am pained and outraged. Why are you hiding in this place?" [6]

Gilbert Byfield threw himself into his chair, and laughed. "No question of hiding," he said. "I came here for a change of air—change of scene—change of surroundings. I'm studying."

"What for?" demanded the visitor.

Byfield leant forward over the table, and looked at his friend half contemptuously, half whimsically. "The world I've left behind me," he said, "was peopled by quite a lot of men of the type of a certain Jordan Tant——"

"Thank you," said the other, with a nod.

"All very worthy and delightful people, but unfortunately all saying the same thing—day after day—year in and year out. They were always dressed in the same fashion, and they always had a certain considerable amount of respectable money in the pockets of their respectable clothes; and they always got up at exactly the same hour every morning, and they lived their dear little Tant-like lives, until the time came for them to be turned, in due course, into little Tant-like corpses, and presumably after that into nice little Tant-like angels. And I got tired of them, and finally gave them up. Now," he added, throwing himself back in his chair, and laughing good-humouredly, "you know all about it."

Mr. Jordan Tant had seated himself on a chair opposite his friend, and had been listening attentively. He now hitched his trousers up carefully over his knees, displaying rather neat ankles, and began to speak in an argumentative fashion, with his neat head a little on one side. "You're not complimentary, Byfield," he said; "but then you never were. I should not have found you, but for the fact that some one mentioned to me that you were living in a place called Arcadia Street, Islington; and as I wondered a little what reason you could possibly have for leaving your own natural surroundings, I decided to look you up. As for the Tant-like people of whom you speak so scornfully, I would remind you that they belong properly to that sphere to which you also belong, when you are not in your present revolutionary spirit. You are forgetting what I have endeavoured often to remind you about; you are forgetting the dividing line which must be kept between the classes and the masses. The world knows you as Mr. Gilbert Byfield—with any amount of money, and any amount of property; you are masquerading as a very ordinary person, in a very ordinary and commonplace neighbourhood. Now what, for instance, do you pay for these rooms?" He glanced round as he spoke.

[7]

"Ten shillings a week—which of course includes the use of the furniture," said Gilbert, smiling. "Meals extra."

"Horrible!" exclaimed his friend. "Where is the comfortable set of chambers in the West End; where is your place in the country—your yacht—everything of that kind? And what in the name of fortune are you doing it for?"

"I've already told you," responded the other, good-humouredly. "I wanted to see what life really was, when you didn't have someone near at hand to feed you, and clothe you, and make much of you; I wanted to look at a world where banking accounts and dividends were unknown, and stocks and shares something not to be considered. I wanted to see what people were like who had to scramble for a living—to scramble, in fact, for the crumbs that fall from tables such as mine. I had read in books of people who had a difficulty in making both ends meet—and quite nice people at that; I had dreamed of a world outside my own very ordinary one, where romance was to be found—and beauty—and love and tenderness. I was sick to death of the high voices and the gracious airs and the raised eyebrows of most of the women I knew—the time-killers, with nothing in the world to occupy them; I wanted to take off my coat, and get back to what I know my grandfather, at least, was in his time: a real hard-working citizen. A better man than ever I shall be, Jordan; a clear-headed, clear-hearted fellow, with no nonsense about him. He made a fortune—and my father trebled it; it has been my sacred mission to spend it. There"—he got to his feet, and stretched his arms above his head, and laughed—"I've done preaching; and you shall tell me all the news from the great world out of which I have dropped."

[8]

"What news can I have to give you?" demanded Mr. Tant, with an almost aggressive glance at his friend. "Oh, I know what you're going to say," he added rapidly as he raised his hand—"that that is the best comment on what you have said. But, at all events, we live respectably—not in hovels."

[9]

"Respectable is the word," said Gilbert, with something of a sigh. "And yet I'm sure that you really have news—of a sort. Come—a bargain with you: you shall give me your news, bit by bit, and item by item; and I'll see if I can match it from my experience here."

"Well, in the first place," said Mr. Jordan Tant, shifting uneasily on his chair, and finally drawing up his legs until his heels rested on the front wooden rail of it—"in the first place, Miss Enid wonders what has become of you, and is naturally somewhat troubled about you." He said it sulkily, with the air of one to whom the delivery of the message was a disagreeable task.

"Exactly. And the fair Enid is in that drawing-room which is like a hot-house, and is yawning the hours away, and glancing occasionally at the clock, to determine how long it is since she had lunch, and how best she shall get through the time before tea is announced. To match that, my item of news is of a certain little lady who has a habit of tucking up her sleeves, the better to get through hours that are all too short for the work that must fill them, who is afraid to glance at a clock, for fear it should tell her how time is flying; and who never by any chance had a best frock yet that wasn't almost too shabby to wear before it was called best at all. Go on."

"Oh—so that's the secret, is it?" exclaimed Mr. Tant, nodding his head like a smooth-plumaged young bird. "There's a woman in Arcadia Street—eh?"

"Beware how you speak of her lightly," said Gilbert. "In Arcadia Street are many women; they hang out of the windows, and they scream at their children, and they tell their husbands exactly what their opinion is concerning the characters of those husbands whenever the unfortunate men are not at work. But—mark the difference, my Tant!—there is but one woman worthy of the name, and I have found her. She lives next door." [10]

"Then I've seen her," replied Jordan Tant. "Rather pretty, perhaps—but pale and shabby."

"Ah—she hadn't got her best frock on," said Gilbert. "You have to wait for Sundays to see the best frock; and then you have to pretend that it isn't really an old frock pretending to be best. Where did you see her?"

"Sticking a card in the window—something about apartments or—lodgings," said Mr. Tant. "I think she thought there was some chance that I might be insane enough to want to live in Arcadia Street."

"Poor little girl!" said Gilbert softly, as he seated himself on the edge of the table, and thrust some of his papers out of the way. "She dreams about lodgers—and hopes for the sort that pay. I believe she gets up in the morning, dreadfully afraid that those who owe her money have run away in the night; I believe she goes to bed at night, wondering if by any possibility she can squeeze another bedstead in somewhere to accommodate a fresh one. She would like to go out into the highways and byways, and gather in all possible lodgers, and drive them before her to the house; and keep 'em there for ever. You've only got to say 'Lodgers!' to that girl, and her eyes brighten at once." [11]

"What an extraordinary person!" exclaimed Mr. Jordan Tant, opening his eyes very wide, and staring up at the other man. "What's she do it for?"

"For a living, Tant—for a sordid horrible grinding sweating living." Gilbert got up in his excitement, and began to bang one fist into the palm of his other hand close to the face of Mr. Jordan Tant. "You talk of life—and respectability—and what not; I tell you I've seen more life in a week in Arcadia Street than ever I saw in years before. Look out into the streets; you'll see a dozen sights that shock you—you'll see a dozen things that are unlovely. And yet I tell you that I have stepped in this place straight into the heart of Fairyland—and that I dream dreams, and see visions. And all on account of a pale-faced shabby girl, who lives next door, and lies in wait behind the parlour window to catch the lodgers who never pay her when they come!"

"Why don't you live there yourself?" demanded Mr. Tant. "You'd pay her well enough."

Gilbert shook his head a little sadly. "That wouldn't do at all," he said, "because I should take all the romance out of the thing. Besides, in Arcadia Street you mustn't pay more than a certain amount, or you bring down suspicion upon yourself. No—my method is a more subtle one: I am the mysterious man who lives next door—which is quite a great way off in Arcadia Street, I can assure you—and I appear to her only with a sort of halo of romance about me."

"You're in love with her, I suppose?" suggested Mr. Tant. [12]

"That's crude—and untrue," said Gilbert. "That's the only thing you sort of people seem to think about: you look at a girl, and instantly you're in love with her. Doesn't it occur to you that it may be possible that I, from the distance of my thirty-five years, may look at this child of seventeen—or perhaps even less—and feel sorry for her, and desirous of helping her. Bah!—what do you know of romance?"

"I know this about it," said Mr. Tant, a little sullenly, "that if I go back to Miss Enid, and tell her that you take a deep interest in a very pretty girl of seventeen, who lives next door to you in a slum, and with whom you occasionally visit Fairyland, it is more than possible that the lady to whom you are supposed to be engaged—"

"I am not engaged to her," exclaimed Gilbert, almost savagely.

"May have something to say regarding romance on her own account. I state facts." Thus Mr. Jordan Tant, very virtuously, and with his head nodding in a sideways fashion at his friend.

"You pervert them, you mean," exclaimed Gilbert. "Besides, if you're so deeply interested in Miss Enid Ewart-Crane, this will be a splendid opportunity for you to set yourself right with her, to my everlasting damage."

"You know perfectly well that she'd never look at me," said Mr. Tant. "She's a glorious creature—a wonderful woman, and in your own sphere of life; I can't see why you neglect her as you do."

"I have been told ever since I was a mere boy that at some future date I should marry Enid—if I were good. It's just like a small boy being offered anything—if he is good; he begins to loathe the idea of it at once. Enid is all that you say—and I like her very much; but if I've got to marry her I'll choose my own time for it. At present I'm in Fairyland—and I mean to stop there." [13]

"What do you mean by Fairyland?" asked Mr. Tant testily.

"You wouldn't understand if I told you," replied Gilbert. Then he added quickly, and with contrition—"There—there—my dear fellow, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings; you're not really a

bad sort, if you'd come out of your shell sometimes, and let the real wind of the real earth ruffle your hair a bit. I must talk to someone—and I'm not sorry to find you here to-day; only you mustn't tell anyone outside."

"Of course not," almost snapped Mr. Tant.

"I came here in the first place, Tant," began Gilbert, seating himself again on the table, "with the expectation of finding that I had got among commonplace people—and not nice commonplace people at that. Then I saw this girl—this mere child, that even a hard world and a hard and sordid life had not changed, struggling on day by day to make a living—not for herself, or for any selfish reason—but to keep those who should by rights have kept her. And I saw her, above all things, doing something else, and doing it rather splendidly."

"I don't understand you. What else was she doing?" asked Jordan Tant.

[14]

It was growing dark in Arcadia Street, and the lamps were being lighted. With the dying of the day a sort of hush had fallen upon the place; the sounds outside were subdued, as though even Arcadia Street might be inclined for rest. Gilbert had walked across to the window, and stood there, looking out; his face was turned from his friend.

"This child to whom life was a mean and sordid struggle had taught herself a lesson—had shown herself how best to live another life. You'll think it mean and commonplace, perhaps; but this little drudge—child alike in years and in thoughts—had learnt how to make-believe to perfection; knew how to gild the commonplace bricks and mortar of Arcadia Street so that the mean houses became palaces—the mean back gardens places of beauty, wherein one might stroll beneath the light of the moon, and listen even unto nightingales. Think of it, Tant; this child who had never known anything but the mean streets of a great city had yet learnt how to dream, and almost how to make her dreams come true. I tell you, man, you've only got to look into her eyes to understand that there is in her that brave spirit that defies poverty and disaster—that brave spirit that aims straight for the skies."

Mr. Jordan Tant sat still for a moment or two without speaking. He was used by this time to this impulsive friend, who was for ever doing unconventional things; and now, with this new unconventional thing to face, he had no words either of reproof or admonition. Very slowly he lifted first one foot and then the other from the wooden rail of the chair, and stood up; picked up his hat, and brushed it carefully on his sleeve.

[15]

"I've nothing to say to you," he said at last. "I expect, if the truth were known, you'd find that the lady who dwells in Fairyland in her spare moments has a scheming mind, and a money-grubbing soul; you'd find she thought more of the price of chops than she does of all the romances that ever were invented for fools to read. What am I to tell Miss Enid?"

Gilbert Byfield laughed good-humouredly. "Tell her," he said, "that I shall come and see her very soon. But you need not, of course, say anything about—"

"About the Princess next door? I suppose not." Mr. Jordan Tant walked to the door of the room, and laid his hand upon the handle. "It'll be all right for you—and you'll give up this madness, just as you have given up many, many others. But what about the—the Princess?"

"You don't understand in the least," said Gilbert, a little hastily. "She thinks no more of me than she might think of anybody who was good to her—kind to her."

"But so very few people have been good or kind to her, you see," Mr. Tant reminded him, as he opened the door.

"I'll come with you, and find a cab for you; you might get lost," said Gilbert. "And pray get all those silly notions out of your head; if you knew this child as well as I do, you'd look at the matter in a different light. At the same time, as people are so apt to misunderstand even our best motives, perhaps you'd better not say anything to Enid—or to her mother. If there's any explaining to be done, I can do it when I come to see them."

[16]

He found the cab for his friend, and saw him drive away. Walking back slowly into Arcadia Street, he determined that he would if possible see that little Princess next door that very evening—if only to assure himself that she was the child he knew her to be, and he her big friend—years and years older and wiser.

CHAPTER II

[17]

THE KING OF A LEAN KINGDOM

ARCADIA STREET is noted—locally, at least—for its "gardens." By this term I would not have you understand that hidden away in that corner of Islington are bowers of beauty, or that you may stroll at eventide under the drooping branches of trees, what time the soft scents of flowers are wafted to your nostrils. Rather let it be said that attached to each dingy house is a dingy plot of ground that is only a "garden" by courtesy—a place where the primeval instincts of man have from time to time urged him to dig in the earth, for the sole reason that it is earth, and in the mad hope to raise from it something that no other London garden has yet accomplished. The

moon that looks down on each slip of ground at night knows differently; she has seen the thing being done for generation after generation, and finally given up in despair. Also the cats look on tolerantly, because they too know how it will end, and that the victory will be with them easily in the long run.

You may look into many such gardens, and may see for yourselves how bravely they began—with what high hopes. Here, for example, is what was once intended to be a summer-house; and it has long since fallen into decay, and become a place where the shabby things that are not wanted even in a shabby house have been tossed from time to time, and left to ruin. You will see creepers that started well, and intended great things, and clung quite bravely to walls; until the London atmosphere and neglect and one thing and another put an end to them. And you may see rows and rows of pots, wherein nothing grows nor ever will grow, and wherein the very earth that fills them is of a consistency known nowhere else. Here and there, too, a bit of trellis-work had been put up and painted; in Arcadia gardens it is generally found to be an easy hanging place for cloths and doubtful-looking garments. [18]

In the gardens of Arcadia Street was one exception. That exception was the house, behind the front window of which, the wistful face of a girl had looked out at Mr. Jordan Tant—that girl about whom he had heard so much from his friend Gilbert Byfield. The house itself, poor and shabby though it was, was neat and scrupulously clean; but the real triumph of it lay in the garden. Not, perhaps, in the artistic sense, but rather that it was a garden of surprises—a place where it was impossible to say what you might meet next, if you wandered carefully through its circumscribed length, and took it seriously.

Yet to anyone to whom the mere name of garden means so much, what a pitiful place! For there was nothing really garden-like about it; it was a place of rags and patches and pretences. The few pitiful plants that struggled out of the black-looking earth here and there seemed to do so not because they liked it, but because they had a desperate desire to show what they could do, even against adverse fate, when they were put to it. Half a dozen things that could not have been named even by the most careful student in botany stood in pots under the kitchen window; and in front of these, spread out on the earth itself, was an old and very ragged carpet—a trap to the unwary, because of the many holes it contained and the uneven surface it presented on the uneven ground. [19]

With the idea of hiding the carpet as much as possible, and at the same time of giving an air of luxury to the place, an ancient staggering table on three legs had been placed in the centre of it; and on either side of this table a chair, long since set aside as being too deplorable even for use in that house. It was a very mockery of a table, and the chairs were in a dreadful conspiracy with it to let down any unwary mortal who should attempt to sit upon them in their old age, unless he treated them with due caution and respect.

Nor was this all; the garden held other treasures. Another ancient strip of carpet, as ragged as its fellow, had been hung against a wall to form a species of background to a crazy box that stood against that wall. Not that you would ever have called it a box; it had a dingy rug upon it, and that dingy rug made it, of course, a species of settle or ottoman—an easy lounging place on summer nights. You had to sit down carefully upon it, because it had a defective board, which gave way unexpectedly and might let you through; but with care that was a fault that might not be noticed. For the rest, the place contained a bulky old plaster flower-pot, with some seedy-looking moss growing in it, and with great cracks at the further side from the house. [20]

The kindly darkness was hiding the tawdriness of the place when a little door at the end of the garden opened, and a little man came in. A man shabby like all the place; with an old frock-coat much too large for him hanging in scarecrow fashion from his thin shoulders, with trousers much too long for him lapping over carpet slippers frayed and worn, and with an old velvet smoking-cap, with three strands of frayed silk to represent a tassel, stuck on one side of his head. A melancholy-looking little man, with a certain fierce sullenness upon him, as though he quarrelled perpetually with the world at large. He slammed the gate, and advanced into that sorry garden; made as if to kick the unwieldy cracked flower-pot, but thought better of it; and went shambling towards the table set upon the ragged carpet.

The fact that he caught his foot in a hole in the carpet, and almost precipitated himself over the table, did not improve his temper. He glared savagely about him, and gave his head a fierce rub with his cap before seating himself gingerly on one of the chairs. Having done so, he pulled his frock-coat closer about him, and shivered in the warm and stifling air.

"It's a conspiracy—that's what it is!" exclaimed the little man. "It's an infernal conspiracy against me from first to last!"

The shadows were lengthening in the garden, and the little man was rather a pathetic figure as he sat there, solemnly shaking his head and muttering to himself. Someone who had come to the back door of the house, and looked out upon him, hesitated for a moment, and then stepped quickly out towards him. A young girl with a bright, eager, thin face; the girl who had looked through the window at Mr. Jordan Tant. She came quickly towards the man, and dropped her arm round his shoulders, and whispered to him. [21]

"Father—you're home quite early," she said. "Will you have your coffee out here?"

He shook himself peevishly away from her embrace. "Coffee?" he exclaimed. "Who the devil wants coffee, Bessie? A man wants something stronger than coffee. Besides—what's the good of

making a fuss about my being home as early as this? You don't suppose I should have come home but for a very good reason—do you?"

The girl winced a little, and drew away from him. "I thought perhaps for once you were glad to come home, father," she said timidly. "And you know I always like to think of us sitting out in the garden—under the stars—and drinking our coffee. The best people do that every night of their lives—after dinner."

"After dinner!" he reminded her, raising a finger, and shaking it at her. "That makes all the difference in the world; I dare say anyone might drink the stuff after a good dinner—just to oblige a friend. But what is anyone to do—in what condition of mind do you imagine a man to be—when his dinner has been a thing not of the stalled ox order—but of herbs? Besides—I'm upset—annoyed."

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"I'm sorry, father," said the girl softly. She tiptoed into the house, and softly called to someone within; came out again, and sat down at the further side of the table, folding her hands upon it, and looking at the shabby figure of the man on the other side of it.

"What has gone wrong, dear?" she whispered; and at the question he suddenly turned upon her, and opened the very floodgates of his wrath and misery.

"Turned out—ejected—thrust to the door with gibes and laughter!" he exclaimed. "For how many years have I not, in a sense, been the very prop and stay of that place—its chief ornament—the one being who in an impoverished and sordid neighbourhood has shed upon it the light of what I may term real intellect. I ask you, Bessie—for how many years?"

"For more years than I can remember, father," whispered the girl, turning away her head.

"Exactly," he responded triumphantly. "It has been to me not a mere house of refreshment—but a club—a place in which, by virtue of long usage, I had a species of proprietary right. They'll find their mistake out, of course; they're bound to do that in time. The Arcadia Arms without me degenerates into a mere low public-house—a pot-house; I had succeeded in raising the place. I was a feature—almost an institution. And now a vulgar creature—without a coat, mark you, Bessie!—points to the door, and says that I'm not to be served again. Some talk of a score—of a paltry sum that should have been paid long since."

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There was silence between them for a minute; it seemed as if, in the gathering darkness, the petty record of the years was being told over between them—so much to this account, and so much to that. The man in the shabby frock-coat seemed to shrink and dwindle—to fall away from what he would have appeared in her eyes, and to be the mean thing he really was. When presently he went on with his tale, it was as though he sought for excuses for himself, and blamed her in so doing.

"That place was in a sense my last refuge; I held a position there I hold nowhere else now. When the cares of the world pressed upon me more than usual, I was able to turn there; I had my seat in a special corner—and I was respected. It was known always and everywhere as 'Mr. Meggison's place'; and only once in all the years has it been usurped—and then the man was drunk. He was very properly turned out at once, of course, and made to understand the enormity of his offence. And now—now, Bessie"—he turned to the girl, and feebly smote the crazy table with his fist—"now they tell me I am not to go there again—they turn me out; I heard them laugh when the door banged behind me. Oh—a bitter world—a very bitter world, Bessie!"

In all that he said she knew that there was an implied reproach for herself. For if Bessie Meggison had but passed into his hands certain shillings, this might never have happened; he might still have held up his head at the Arcadia Arms—still have filled his old seat in a corner—still have called like a man for his glass to be filled. In that Bessie had failed; and she knew it now.

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"We have had a hard time, father," she said, dropping a light hand on the fist with which he was beating the table. "People don't come and take the lodgings as they used to do; the things are getting so poor and shabby that perhaps the more fashionable young men don't like it. I try hard, father—but every shilling seems to be so important."

"My dear Bessie, I am not aware that I have blamed you," he said a little coldly, as he withdrew his hand and turned away his head. "Time was when Fortune smiled upon me, and I was able to do work that brought in money; that time is long since past. In a fashion, I may be said to have retired; I am no longer actively engaged in commercial pursuits."

"No, father—of course not," responded the girl cheerfully.

"And you have often assured me that you are glad—and proud—glad and proud to be able to assist my declining years. It is not much that I want: I saunter out in the sun in the morning, and go down to my—my club—"

"The Arcadia Arms, father," she said gently.

"I prefer to call it my club," he said, a little testily. "There I nod to an acquaintance or two—and I have my modest glass, and perhaps smoke a pipe, or even a mild cigar. In the afternoon, a stroll and perhaps another modest glass; in the evening a few more people gather there, and we are almost convivial. That's my programme; that's my day. For the rest, as you're aware, I occupy the

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cheapest bed in the house—and I don't eat much. Therefore I do urge," he concluded fretfully, "that it is a shame that a man should be deprived of the little thing that gives him so much pleasure. I have been wounded to-night—sorely hurt and wounded, Bessie."

"The coffee will be here directly, father," said the girl.

"Coffee—served in cracked cups by a dingy maid—in a back-yard," he cried viciously. "There's nothing soothing or helpful or restful about coffee—and I'm too old to pretend that this place is anything but the back-yard it really is."

"It's better than any other garden in Arcadia Street," she said. "And at a time like this, when—when you don't see things so distinctly—it looks quite good. If you shut your eyes the least little bit, so that you can only just see out of them, you seem to be looking down long spaces—ever so far; and you can sit there under the wall, and think you're anywhere—anywhere in the world except in Arcadia Street."

"I have shut my eyes to a great many things far too long, Bessie," he exclaimed fiercely. "I have been inclined to forget at times who I really am, and the position I should have occupied. I let my children do as they like with me. Where, for instance, is your brother to-night?"

"Aubrey always goes out in the evening," said the girl quickly. "He likes his freedom, you know, father dear." [26]

"I know his freedom," said the man; "the freedom of every low billiard saloon in the neighbourhood. No intellect about him, mind you; no discussing of matters of moment concerning the neighbourhood, and even the nation, with Aubrey. Oh dear, no; the knocking about of billiard balls is more in his line. Aubrey will never cut a figure in any resort of gentlemen. How much, for instance, did your precious brother receive out of the funds of the house—my house, mark you! How much did he receive this day?"

"Aubrey had half a crown," said the girl, in a mere whisper.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet. "He flaunts it with half a crown all over London, and his poor old father is shown the door in a pot-house, because he can't pay his score. Bessie, I could not have believed that you would sink so low!"

"Aubrey says that he must live," said the girl wistfully. "And he likes always to feel that he is a gentleman."

"Why doesn't he work?" exclaimed Mr. Meggison savagely. "He is young and strong—why should he borrow half-crowns; why doesn't he earn 'em instead? Things have come to a pretty pass when I—Daniel Meggison—am refused necessary refreshment in order that my son should flaunt it on half-crowns. Bah!"

"Somebody seems to be talkin' about me," said a voice from the doorway of the house. "What's the row?"

The youth who sauntered out, and stood with his hands in his pockets, looking from one to the other, was not of an inviting type. Shiftless son of a shiftless father, he lacked even that father's poor dignity, and failed to carry himself so well as the older man. He stooped at the shoulders, and his mean and narrow face was thrust forward, and bore an expression of knowingness, as though he asserted that there was precious little in this world you could teach him. A small billycock hat was thrust on the back of his head, and from between his lips drooped a cigarette; it was his proud boast that he was never to be seen without the latter. [27]

"The row is this," exclaimed the old man, "that I want to know when you are going to take your proper position in the world—and do your proper work?"

"Don't you worry about me, dad," replied the son; "I shall be there all right when the work comes along. Always provided, mind you," he added as an afterthought, "always provided that the work suits me, and is of a sort that a gentleman can take up. No hole-and-corner jobs for me; I know what I want, and I mean to get it."

"You have already obtained from your sister here to-day a sum of money far in advance of your needs or your deserts," said old Meggison, wagging his head at him. "Pray what do you want with half-crowns?"

"Father—you shall have all the money you want as soon as I get any myself," pleaded the girl in a low voice. "Surely there is no need for quarrelling."

"I am not quarrelling; my dignity does not permit me to quarrel," said Daniel Meggison, shaking his arm free of her touch. "But I trust that I know what is due to me as that boy's father; I hope I know my duty." [28]

"Hope so, dad, I'm sure," said the youth, as he turned away. "Can't see for the life of me what you're upset about. You've had your bit at times; you've been kept going, same as I have—haven't you?"

"My 'bit,' as you term it, is what is justly due to me as the head of this house," exclaimed the elder man.

"I wasn't aware that you were the head of the house," said the youth. "If it comes to that, Bess

is the only one that does anything for what I'm pleased to call a rotten family. I'm not saying, mind you, that she does what she might, or that she looks up the lodgers for what's due with that business instinct she should; I'm only sayin' that she does what a mere girl can do tolerably well. More than that, she knows that her brother, bein' a gentleman, can't go about London with empty pockets."

"What about my pockets?" demanded Daniel Meggison, plunging his hands into them. "Who thinks of my wants—my simple ordinary little wants? Who deems it necessary even to know that I have that refreshment that is not denied to the lowest of the beasts?"

"The lowest of the beasts drink water," said Aubrey, with a chuckle. "And I never heard of you doin' that."

While Bessie stood looking helplessly from one to the other, and while a savage retort rose to the lips of old Meggison, the door leading from the house was opened, and a little servant-maid appeared. A precise and prim little maid, who, having come from some institution but a little time before, had felt ever since that she was seeing life as she had never hoped to see it; to her, indeed, the sorry garden was a place of delight. She came out now almost with eagerness, bringing that despised coffee on a battered tray, and set it on the rickety table. And at the same time announced some startling news. [29]

"Oh, if you please, miss, a gent an' a lidy—name o' Stocker—was waitin' in the passage——"

"Hall!" thundered Mr. Daniel Meggison, so savagely that the child almost knocked over the coffee-pot. "How many times, Bessie, have I told you that the domestics are to be instructed to give proper names to the apartments in the house."

"You will be more careful in future, Amelia, won't you?" suggested Bessie mildly. She turned to her father, and spoke wistfully. "Perhaps Aunt Julia and Uncle Ted had better come out here—in the garden," she suggested.

"I will not see them," said Mr. Meggison. "I am in no mood to see anyone; I should probably insult my sister, to begin with. I dislike her as much as I dislike her absurd prosperity."

"Don't ask me to meet 'em," said Aubrey, making for the little gate in the wall. "Aunt Julia always asks a chap what he's doin'—as though earnin' your livin' was about the only blessed thing you'd got to do in this world."

"I'd be glad if you'd stop and see them, Aubrey," pleaded Bessie; then to her father she added slyly—"It will be so much more dignified if you stop and meet them, father." [30]

"Perhaps it will; I will put up with them on your account, my child," said Mr. Meggison. "Aubrey—I command you to stay."

"Your commands don't affect me the least little bit," said Aubrey coolly, shifting his cigarette to the other corner of his mouth. "But on Bessie's account I don't mind lettin' myself be seen. Amelia—trot 'em out!"

Bessie Meggison having some idea of how these things should be done, from certain accounts she had read, or from certain things she had heard, immediately got behind the crazy table, the better to preside over that pouring out of coffee. She bravely shut her eyes to the fact that the cups did not match, and that the saucers were either too large or too small, or that the coffee-pot was a mere tin affair, blackened all up one side from contact with the fire. She waited in that proud position the coming of the unexpected guests.

Mrs. Stocker came first, looking about her with the high dignity of one who moves in a very different sphere, and who has condescended for once, in a spirit of Christian virtue, to step down among beings less fortunate. She was a large lady, holding herself very erect; the sort of person with whom you could not under any circumstances have cracked a jest. Life was a simple and a respectable thing with her; a serious matter, that could but lead in due course to a very proper and becomingly elaborate funeral. Women had been known to do remarkable things, and to get their names into books and newspapers; not so Julia Stocker. "From the moment Edward Stocker claimed my hand, I knew exactly what was going to happen to me, and I acted accordingly," was her invariable summary of the course of her life. Incidentally it may be mentioned that Mr. Edward Stocker had "a little property" and that Mrs. Stocker looked after it. Which is to say that Mr. Stocker was a mild good-tempered little man, with a partiality for convivial good company into which he rarely got. [31]

The lady came out of the house now, looking about her somewhat disdainfully. She took Bessie's outstretched hand, and, still with her eyes searching the bare and shabby yard, touched the girl's cheek for a moment with lips that had no softness about them; performed the same ceremony with her brother Daniel; and stared at Aubrey Meggison. "I have come, brother," she said, in a voice that was in itself almost dirge-like, "to see how you are getting on."

"Very kind of you—but I'm not getting on at all," said Meggison, furtively rubbing the place on his cheek where her lips had been with his knuckles. "More than that, I don't expect to."

"Perhaps I should have said that *we* have come—Edward and myself—to inquire about you; for of course without Edward I never attempt to do anything. In my opinion the woman should always be dependent upon the man, and guided by him. Consequently, if Edward tells me that he [32]

desires that I should call and inquire about my relatives, I do so, however distasteful it may be to me personally. Edward—where are you?"

Mr. Stocker came from the house at that moment, holding his hat in his hand, and looking about him as though he felt he was in some place of historic interest. He saw Bessie's hand, and after looking at it for a moment or two, as though not quite certain what it was, or how it concerned him, decided to grasp it; and having done so looked up at the girl, and smiled in rather a pleased way. But he dropped the hand guiltily on hearing his wife's voice.

"Edward!—why are you loitering? Where are you?"

"Here, my dear," said Mr. Stocker, coming round the table, and still looking about him as though marvelling at the place in which he found himself. "Charming spot, this!"

"Charming fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Mrs. Stocker, sitting carefully on a chair. "A mere backyard—with nothing in it but rags and rubbish and draughts. Surely you people don't live out here?" she asked, glaring round upon them.

"We like to come here in the evening, aunt; it's very pleasant then," said Bessie. "Will you have some coffee, Aunt Julia?"

"No, I will not have some coffee—especially in the open air," said Mrs. Stocker. "Nor will your uncle Edward have coffee," she added, noting a tendency on the part of that gentleman to reach for one of the cups; "it always disagrees with him. Not, of course, that I would wish for a moment to interfere with your enjoyment, Edward—but I think I know what is best for you."

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Mr. Stocker sighed and turned away; found his way up to that improvised seat against the wall; and, with that luck that usually attends such men, discovered the loose board and almost went through; he was frantically readjusting his balance when Daniel Meggison, as though by the merest chance, strolled up to him and dropped a hand on his shoulder, and smiled in a friendly way.

"Glad to see you, Ted—always glad to see you," he said, keeping a wary eye upon Mrs. Stocker the while, and lowering his voice suddenly and dramatically. "You don't happen to have change for half a sovereign, I suppose?"

Mr. Stocker slipped his hand into his pocket, and brought out a small gold coin. "I don't think I have," he began in a whisper; and then discovered, something to his amazement, that by a species of conjuring trick the coin had disappeared from his hand and was entering the pocket of Mr. Daniel Meggison, who was beaming upon him.

"It doesn't matter—one coin's easier to remember," said Meggison. "You shall have it back—certainly within a week. You're a man to know, sir."

Mrs. Stocker was speaking in her loud and strident tones. "I should not be doing that duty that is imposed upon me by the mere fact of being a woman and a Stocker, did I not speak my mind. I come here, and I find you all drifting on in exactly the same way that you have always done—in a shabby and shiftless manner, that seems to belong to you and Arcadia Street. Don't interrupt me; there is only one being on this earth that has a right to interrupt me—and he dare not do it." She glared round upon Mr. Stocker as she spoke.

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"We are very happy, Aunt Julia," said Bessie, who was delicately sipping some of the half-cold stuff known to Amelia as coffee. "Father has been a little unfortunate over the matter of finding employment."

"A misfortune that has dogged him nearly all his life," snapped Mrs. Stocker. "In what direction are you looking, brother?"

"In all directions, my dear Julia," said Meggison, in a jubilant tone that sprang from the fact that he had unexpected money in his pocket. "I may be said to say to the world—'Give me work; help me to discover work; give me some hard task, with appropriate pay attached to it—and then see what I'll do!' I appeal to Bessie: am I not for ever condemning the state of the labour market?"

"I have heard you speak of it often, father," said the girl.

"And what, for example, is Aubrey doing?" demanded Mrs. Stocker, turning suddenly on that youth. "What are his prospects?"

"What he's doing at the present time is this," said the youth, opening the door at the end of the garden—"he's goin' out. And the prospects, as far as you're concerned, are that you won't see him again this evenin'. I'm goin' to have a hundred up at the Arcadia Arms. Good night!"

As he was swinging out of the door Mr. Daniel Meggison seized his arm, and held him for a moment. "How dare you address a relative in such a fashion, sir!" he cried. "Above all, how dare you suggest that you will waste money upon such a pursuit. Your aunt is right; you should by this time have decided what work you will seize upon in the world. There are many maxims I might employ in such a case as yours—but I—"

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"I wouldn't trouble, if I was you," said Aubrey, shaking himself free. "As I've said before, I'm ready for anything in the way of work, if I can only see it before me, and know what I've got to look forward to. If it isn't there, don't blame me."

He went out of the door, slamming it behind him; his father, in a sudden access of virtue, pulled open the door, and called after him down the narrow alley which ran at the back of the houses—"Understand, I will not permit you to frequent any such place as the Arcadia Arms—a mere ordinary pot-house——"

His voice died away, and he contented himself by shaking a fist in the direction of the retreating youth. He slammed the door, and turned again to his sister.

"I think that I shall be compelled to go out myself, Julia," he said, while his fingers lovingly caressed that small gold coin in his pocket. "I must really look in at my club."

"Club? I didn't know you had one," said the lady, rising. "However, we won't detain you; so soon as I know that Edward commands me to return home I shall be quite willing to leave Arcadia Street."

Mr. Daniel Meggison took the hint at once, and hurried into the house; a minute or two later he might have been observed shuffling down the street in the direction of the Arcadia Arms, having exchanged his smoking-cap for a grimy grey felt that was stuck jauntily on the side of his head. Mrs. Stocker, having brought Mr. Stocker to his feet by the simple expedient of turning to look at him, shook hands with Bessie, and gave that young lady at parting a few words of much-needed advice. [36]

"Call things by their right names, my child," she said sternly. "A garden's a garden—and a yard's a yard; this is a yard, and an untidy one at that. Don't pretend; when you haven't got enough to eat, don't eke it out with coffee badly served that nobody wants. Come out of your dreams, and wake up to the realities of life. Don't forget, whenever you feel inclined to think that you are any better off than you really are, or have anything to be grateful for, that you're a mere ordinary commonplace girl—or woman, if you like it better—and that your mission in life is to slave from morning to night for people that don't care a button about you. My advice to you is: clear away this rubbish, and keep chickens or something of that sort. Good night."

It is probable that Mr. Stocker would have said something more cheering, but for the fact that at the very moment he had grasped Bessie's hand Mrs. Stocker looked back from the doorway, and called to him; he departed hurriedly and obediently. The girl looked at the sorry array of cups and saucers, and then at the poor wilderness about her; all in a moment it seemed poor and mean and childish. She sank down on to that box that was covered by the dingy old rug, and covered her face with her hands. [37]

The shadows were falling all about her, and the Princess next door, as Gilbert Byfield had called her, was crying softly to herself.

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCE JUMPS OVER THE WALL

[38]

JUST how long Bessie might have sat there in the dusk of the garden it is impossible to say; an interruption was to be provided. Almost the last of her sobs had died away, and she was beginning to realize that this kind of thing would not do at all, if her small world was to be kept going, when the door leading into the little alley was opened cautiously, and a young man came in. A very presentable young man, with an honest face inclined to laughter, over which a look of relief was stealing as he saw the girl sitting there. He closed the gate quietly, and took a few steps towards her; paused and coughed. Instantly she sprang to her feet, and faced him.

"Good evening!" he said. "Did I startle you?"

"Very much; I did not know there was anyone there. How long have you been here?" she asked suspiciously.

"I came in this very moment," he assured her. "You see, I'm obliged to come in that way, because there might be somebody—somebody looking out for me at the front. Very handy house in that respect." He grinned cheerfully, and she laughed for very sympathy.

"Haven't you any good news, Mr. Dorricott?" she asked, forgetting her own troubles for a moment. [39]

He shook his head. "I went down to the theatre, just to let them know I was about, you know, and almost with the hope that someone might fall ill—or be run over——"

"Don't!" she whispered with a shiver.

"I'm sorry, Miss Meggison—but a fellow gets absolutely murderous at times, when he thinks of the people who stand in his way. Here am I, without a shilling to bless myself with——"

"Everyone that I have ever known, and everyone that I ever shall know, has been and will be in that state," exclaimed Bessie with conviction. "I don't believe in all the stories about people having more money than they know what to do with; I simply can't believe them. All the world is poor and struggling—and everybody fights for money that they never by any chance get. I know it!" she said with deep dejection.

"Well, it isn't quite like that," he replied. "There are fellows in the profession, for instance, who are known to touch three figures a week, and who simply live in motor-cars; it's a known fact. Other poor devils like myself walk on with the crowd, or get an understudy—or something of that kind."

"It must be nice to be an actor," said Bessie, looking at him with awe.

"It is—when you *are* an actor," he replied solemnly. He moved away a step or two restlessly, and then came back to her. "I say, Miss Meggison—there's something I'd like to say to you."

"Not about the bill!" she pleaded.

"About the bill—yes; and about something else," he replied earnestly. "The bill worries me [40] horribly—and it worries me more in your case than it would in the case of anyone else. I haven't any money, and I've got a large appetite—which I endeavour to suppress as much as is consistent with keeping a figure fit to be seen behind the footlights. Many and many a tasty dish, Miss Meggison, which you may think I scorn, I pass by because I simply feel that I have no right to touch it; it would not be fair. I never come into your little dining-room without seeing the figures of my bill in huge white characters on the wall; I'm ashamed of myself."

"I wish you wouldn't speak of it," she urged.

"But I must speak of it; it haunts me," he exclaimed. "I know that in time it will be all right; I know that in time I shall be able to pay you in full—and pay other people as well. More than that, the time will come when you will be proud of me—really proud of me."

"We're all proud of you now; I laugh still when I think of that time when you gave me tickets for the pantomime, and I saw you as the front part of the donkey."

"Don't!" he said in a low tone. "I know I was funny. Everyone said so—but I could get no real expression into it; you can't when the only way in which you can move your jaws is by a string. But I shall do finer things than that. In the years to come I shouldn't be a bit surprised if Arcadia Street was the scene of a rather imposing little ceremony—on my account."

"Ceremony?" She looked at him in a bewildered fashion. [41]

"Yes. They may in all probability affix a tablet to the house, recording the fact that Harry Dorricott once lived here; it's frequently done—there's a society for it. They will probably refer to me then as 'poor Harry Dorricott'—and will say how much greater things I might have done had I lived."

"Mr. Dorricott! You're not ill?"

"Oh dear, no; but I have a sort of feeling that I shall die young—or at least comparatively young. So very many of our best people have done that. I beg you won't alarm yourself, Miss Meggison," he added hastily—"because I'm quite all right at the present moment; never felt better in my life. The only thing that worries me is about you."

"About me?"

"Yes—because you see I'm actually living on you—and that's a shameful thing. Perhaps you may wonder that I don't go away, and live on somebody else—some fat and uninteresting old landlady, for instance, who wouldn't matter so much."

"I shouldn't like you to do that, because she mightn't be kind to you," said Bessie.

"Oh—that isn't the reason," he replied, coming near to her, and looking into her eyes. "You have been kind to me; there's never been anyone in all the world that has done so much for me as you have—helped me, and urged me on, and cheered me up. That's why, although I owe you this money, I can't go away; I'd rather be a slave to you than to anyone else. You didn't understand that—did you, dear?" he whispered, not daring even to take her hands. "From the very first [42] moment, when I saw you looking out of the window into Arcadia Street, my heart gave a sort of jump, and I knew exactly what had happened to me. Bessie—it's because I love you that I can't go away."

"No—it isn't that; it's only because you're sorry for me, just as quite a lot of other people are sorry for me," she said softly. "You mustn't think that I don't understand, or that I'm ungrateful; I shouldn't be telling the truth if I didn't say that it's quite the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me in all my life. But I don't love anyone—except my father—and Aubrey; I don't think I've got time to love anyone. So you mustn't speak about it again, please; you must forget it. And you can stay as long as you like—and the bill won't matter."

"But you'll give me some better comfort than that, Bessie," urged the boy. "I shan't always be poor; I shall make a great name for myself some day, and then I shall be able to lift you out of all this, and make you happy."

"I'm not sure that I want to be lifted out of it," she told him, smiling. "Good night—and forget all about it. You're my friend always, I know—and I want friends."

There in the dark garden, with perhaps an idea in his mind not wholly theatrical, he lifted her hand to his lips before he turned away; and she stood there, looking after him, with that warm touch still upon her fingers, and with her heart beating a little more rapidly than usual.

After all, it must be nice to be loved, she thought; to be made much of, and shielded from the cold, and from hunger and poverty; never to listen to anything but gentle kindly words; never to have to meet frowning tradesmen, or duns of any sort; never to trudge through the streets on Saturday nights, with the certain knowledge that your skirts were bedraggled, and your feet cold and wet, and that the money in the thin worn purse had come perilously near to nothingness. Oh—that must be good indeed! [43]

She went back into the house—with a strange feeling that to-night something had happened that had changed her; she would never be able to make-believe any more as she had done. The touch of the boy's lips upon her hand had wakened something in her that had merely lain dormant; she cried out dumbly for her natural and proper birthright. The world held something better for her, and it was denied her; she found herself wondering, without being able to put the question into words, whether she would ever get that which belonged to her, by right of the fact that she was a woman, and young.

Mr. Aubrey Meggison came in presently, and insisted on telling her of a few shots he had taken that night on the billiard-table—illustrating his words by means of a walking-stick on the shabby cover of the dining-room table—and how he had completely "wiped the floor" with his opponent, to the unbounded astonishment of a choice circle which seemed to consist of a billiard-marker, a bookmaker, and a long-dethroned music-hall star. The triumphs of the evening, however, had not smoothed his temper; he complained bitterly about the monotony of bread and cheese, and pushed his food from him with a few elegant expressions of disgust. [44]

"Tact and forethought—that's what you're lackin', Bess," he suggested. "You don't think to yourself what's the best thing to suit your brother, and your brother's appetite. Not you; the first thing that comes along'll do for him."

She bore his reproaches meekly, until presently he restlessly wandered out of the house again. He encountered his father on the doorstep; and Bessie heard a little wordy warfare between the two—Daniel Meggison protesting virtuously that his son should be in bed at ten o'clock to the minute—and that son suggesting airily that he knew what was best for himself. Then Daniel came into the room, not too steadily, but perhaps with the greater dignity on that account.

"What I've done this night will not soon be forgotten," he said, with a roll of the head. "On their knees, they were, in a manner of speaking—on their knees, my child. Nothing good enough for me; apologies flying about everywhere. Haughty with them, mind you; no sudden giving way on my part. At the same time—condescending; that's the right word—condescending." He sat down, and waved his hand to show exactly what manner he had adopted for the subjugation of the Arcadia Arms, and fell asleep.

The shabby little room seemed intolerable, with the old man gurgling and choking, and muttering in his sleep in his chair; once again the girl slipped out into her garden. And now, as if to welcome her, the kindly moon had come over the housetops, and was shedding a radiance even there. She sat down at the table, and leant her elbows upon it; she did not understand what this new and desperate longing was that had come upon her. She had been content for so many years; had been glad to accept things as they were, and to make the best of them. But now to-night there was a new and passionate longing for a world and a life that could never be hers at all. As she sat there, staring at the shabby wall before her, the walls seemed to vanish; and there grew up in their place a dim vision of a wide countryside, lying silent and peaceful under the moon; of a life that was gentle and secure and easy. And beyond that wide countryside, with a path of light made across it by the moon, lay the shining sea. The vision was gone, just as rapidly as it had come; the grey wall was there; out in the street coarse hoarse voices sounded, and a shout of discordant laughter. She let her hands fall on the table, and bowed her head upon her arms. What had she to do with dreams? [45]

It was at that precise moment that Mr. Gilbert Byfield determined to walk out of the house next door into that plot of ground attached to it which matched that in which Bessie Meggison was seated. That particular plot of ground did not boast any of the adornments of the Meggison garden; it was simply a stretch of bare earth, with scrubby grass growing here and there in patches. Gilbert thought nothing of that, because the place did not interest him, save for the fact that it adjoined the garden next door; and he had already learned that in that garden only was the Princess of Arcadia Street to be approached, if one did it delicately. Accordingly he stole up to the dividing wall now, and peered over it; and so, of course, saw that hopeless figure in the moonlight, leaning over the old table. [46]

As he had never seen her save with that demure brightness upon her that seemed to belong to her, he was naturally shocked at this sudden abandonment; besides, she looked pathetic indeed in her utter loneliness in that place. He called softly to her over the wall.

"Hullo! I say—what's the matter?"

He called so softly that she did not hear him, nor did she change her position. After a moment of hesitation, he glanced first at the back of the house he had left, and then at the back of the other one; swung himself up to the top of the wall; and jumped over. He alighted, as luck would have it, on that defective board in the old box set under the wall; swore softly to himself, and stepped down to the ground. The noise he made had startled the girl; she got quickly to her feet, and moved away from him.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," he began, smiling at her.

But she waved him back hurriedly. "Mr. Byfield!" she said in a whisper, with a glance at the house. "Oh, please—you must go back!—you must really go back!"

"If anyone comes, I can jump over in a moment," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of—and this is ever so much better than talking over the wall, you know. By the way," he added ruefully, "I'm afraid I've broken your—your ottoman."

"It doesn't matter," she said in a dull voice—"and it isn't an ottoman. It's an old box." [47]

"I don't believe it," he exclaimed. "It's an ottoman—and a very nice one at that."

"You're laughing at me," she said, with the shyness of a child. "You know it's all only pretending; you know what a shabby place this is—really and truly. You've been good and kind about it; you've never laughed at me, like other people."

"God forbid, child!"

"That's it!" she exclaimed quickly. "Child! That's what you think me; that's what you believe me to be. If a child brought you a broken doll, you'd be sorry, and make much of it, although in your heart you'd laugh, because it was such a little thing to make a fuss about. And you've been sorry for me—and have pretended with me that this place was what it has never been. And in your heart you have never ceased to laugh at me."

"In my heart I have never laughed at you at all," he said solemnly.

They had unconsciously drawn nearer to each other in the solitude of the garden under the moon; their hands were touching. For now it seemed that she wanted desperately to touch hands with some friendly being—someone, for choice, who came out of the big world mysteriously, as this man had done. She was so much of a child that she needed comforting; so much of a woman that she needed loving.

"I was wrong to say that you had laughed at me," she said penitently—"you have been the only one that has understood. I wonder if you remember when you first looked over the wall?"

"Shall I ever forget it!" he exclaimed, in all honesty. "You see, I had never imagined any place like this"—he glanced round about him, and whimsically shook his head as he spoke—"and of course I was surprised. And then I saw you—and I understood at once that you were so different from anyone I had seen in Arcadia Street, or indeed anywhere. And so we—we talked." [48]

"I shall never forget it," she said. "I had always tried to make-believe a little, because when one does that one gets away from all the tiresome things—all the things that *must* happen, and yet that ought not to happen at all. You see, so many people seem always to have held out hands to me for money; and I've had so little money to give them."

"And so—just to enable you to forget them a little—you started this great game of make-believe; this pretending that you were something better (although that could never be, you know)—something bigger and greater than you really were. The fine lady walked in her garden every night, and saw the flowers grow, and heard the summer wind rustling the trees and dreamed—what great dreams they were!"

She nodded, with shining eyes. "And then you one day looked over the wall—and you seemed to understand in a moment. Any one else but you, coming out of the big world, would simply have laughed, and would have seen that this was an old carpet, too shabby even for the house—and this a table we couldn't use for anything else—and that a box that no one wanted. And yet in a moment—do you remember?—you knew perfectly what each thing was. It was wonderful!" [49]

"I remember." He nodded gravely. "I knew that was the ottoman—and behind it the tapestry; I understood also how nice it was to have coffee in the garden every evening. Arcadia Street doesn't run to coffee—except in the morning."

"I had read somewhere—it was in a paper that came to the house—that ladies and gentlemen take their coffee generally on the terrace. Well, of course, we couldn't manage a terrace, and I couldn't quite understand whether it was anything like the terrace you get to round the corner, with the houses in a sort of half-circle, and the little bit of green in front; only somehow I knew it couldn't be quite like that; all I understood was that it was out of doors. So then I understood the best thing I could do was to make the most of the garden; and it really isn't half bad—is it?"

"It's a pity it isn't better appreciated," he said.

"Father said he didn't understand what I was driving at; and then he always seemed to find the hole in the carpet and to trip over it. And Amelia doesn't really make very good coffee; it's the sort you dare not stir too much."

"Poor little Miss Make-Believe!" he said, a little sorrowfully. "I wonder what you would do if the time came when some of your dreams came true, when you didn't have to make-believe any more; when you walked out of this place, and left behind all the shabby pretences of it. I wonder what you would say then?"

"That's never likely to happen," she said, with a shake of the head. "Father doesn't seem to belong to the rich side of the family. His sister, who was here to-night—Aunt Julia, you know—has lots of money; she owns houses, you know, and lives in Clapham." [50]

"Wonderful Aunt Julia!" he said.

"Father has said over and over again that if he had what he deserves he would be a rich man. I don't quite know what he means; he's never very explicit about it. But sometimes at night, when he comes home from—from his club, he cries a little, poor dear, and tells me what he would give me if only he had what he ought to have. And I know he would, too; he is really very generous by nature."

Gilbert Byfield knew enough of the girl's story by that time not to need to ask questions. Ever since that first meeting with her, when he had carefully gained her confidence over the wall, he had been able, by the simple process of piecing together her innocent answers to his questions, to understand what she did, and what sort of struggle she was constantly engaged in. He summed up the shiftless father and the shiftless son easily enough; understood, from the type of lodgers that came to the house, how difficult it must be for this girl to make both ends meet. Most he admired her unflinching courage, and above all that curious fanciful child-like nature that nothing had been able to crush or stamp out of her. With the most innocent feeling in the world, he had fostered that, and encouraged it.

It had been hard at times to remember that she was not a child, and that he had no right to treat her as such; it had, above all things, been difficult for him to tell himself, over and over again, that the life he lived in Arcadia Street was a sham, and that he was not the poor man he seemed to be to her. She had been frankness itself with him, and he should have been with her in return. Only of course he knew that, once she understood that he was playing a part, her confidence in him, as someone as poor as herself and as struggling, would be gone. For a period not yet defined in any way he intended to keep that fiction alive, and remain near her. And in that again there was no real motive, save one of pity for the girl. [51]

He asked a question now that had been on his lips many and many a time, and yet that he had not uttered before. They were standing together near the table, and she had one hand resting upon it; he noticed how short the sleeve was, and guessed that she must long since have outgrown this dress, and many others she possessed. He remembered suddenly that her dresses had always seemed short. "How old are you, little Make-Believe?" he asked.

"More than eighteen," she said; and laughed and blushed.

A shadow darkened the doorway of the house, and a man stood there. Gilbert Byfield stood quite still, watching; for his presence there would need explanation. The girl had drawn away from him, and was peering at the man in the doorway; she spoke his name hesitatingly at last—almost apologetically.

"Mr. Quarle?" she asked. "Do you want me?"

The man who stepped out from the doorway was a thickly-set man of between fifty and sixty years of age, with thin grey hair and with a somewhat sour-looking face. His shoulders were very broad, and he had the appearance almost of a man whose head has been set too far forward; the sharp clean-shaven face was thrust well out, as though the man spent his time in peering into everything about him. He carried his hands locked behind him; his voice was rather harsh. Certainly there was nothing amiable-looking about him. [52]

"I don't want you—but your father's asking for you," said the man.

"I'll go in at once," said Bessie. "Oh—Mr. Quarle," she added nervously, slipping her hand through the arm of the man, and drawing him forward a little—"this is Mr. Byfield—a friend of mine."

"Pleased to know you, sir," said Quarle, with a face that belied his words. "New lodger?"

"I live—next door," said Gilbert, a little lamely. For the girl had run into the house, and the situation was an absurd one. The only fashion in which he could leave this man, whose appearance he did not like, was by an undignified exit over the wall; and he had no wish for that. He could have gone out into the little alley behind, but he knew that the door at the end of his own particular garden was always kept bolted. So he stood somewhat awkwardly looking at the newcomer, and wondering whether he had better say something about the moon, or the warmth of the night. The man relieved him of the difficulty by speaking first.

"My name is Simon Quarle," he said, coming a step or two nearer to the younger man, and lowering his voice. "You're not likely to have heard of me; very few people have, because I keep myself to myself. It's a habit of mine." [53]

"And a very excellent habit too, I should imagine," said Gilbert with meaning.

"I could wish it was a more general habit," retorted Quarle, with a quick glance at the house. "Now, sir—I'm old enough to be your father—old enough, under happier circumstances, to be the father of that girl who has just left us. And the Lord knows she needs a father badly."

"I believe she has one already," said Gilbert coldly.

"She supports a drunken reprobate who has that title," retorted the man, with a snarl. "Perhaps, if he were worthy of the name, he might have something to say to a man who sneaks over a back wall at night to talk to his daughter."

Gilbert made a quick movement towards the man; Quarle did not flinch, nor did he take his eyes from the face of the younger man. Again the absurdity of his position was borne in upon Byfield; more than that, he seemed to see in this strange creature someone who had a greater right to say that he was the friend of Bessie—a friend of an older standing.

"You simply don't understand," said Gilbert. "From a younger man I shouldn't stand it—but —"

"Never mind my years," said the other. "I'll do you the justice to believe that yours has simply been the thoughtlessness of youth—the carelessness of a man to whom women are all alike——"

"I see that you don't understand," broke in Gilbert hotly. "I have been genuinely sorry to see this child slaving for those who should really be supporting her; I have seen in her something purer and sweeter than in any woman I have met yet." [54]

"You're right there," said Simon Quarle, with a nod. "But you'd best leave her alone to her garden, as she calls it, and to her dreams, and to the hard workaday world she knows. You belong to another world; go back to it."

"How do you know I belong to another world?" demanded Gilbert.

"Because I haven't lived in this one for nearly sixty years without watching men, and growing to understand them. You don't belong to Arcadia Street; you haven't the true stamp of it."

Gilbert took an impatient turn or two about the garden, and then came back to this strange man, who had not moved. "But if I tell you that I'm interested in her—that I want to help her——"

"Then I tell you that no help you can give her is of the sort she wants or deserves," said Quarle steadily. "At the present time, you stand to her doubtless as someone wonderful, who can talk to her as no man has talked to her yet—understand her with the understanding of youth. And presently, when the mood seizes you, you will turn your back on Arcadia Street, and go off to the world you know and understand. But you will leave her behind."

Again there was a pause between the two men, and again the younger one strode about impatiently, and again the elder one stood still, watching him. At last Gilbert came back to where Simon Quarle was standing.

"I beg your pardon if I spoke hastily just now," he said. "I had no right to do that, because no man would speak as you have done unless he was her friend." [55]

"Thank you," said the other simply. "Anything else?"

"I want to help her—I want to lift her out of this slum in which she lives—make some of her dreams come true. I am rich; I can do many things secretly without her knowledge."

"You are young; would you marry her?"

"My dear sir—she's a child. Besides—I——"

"Besides—you belong to another world," broke in Quarle mockingly. "Get back over your wall, my friend, and leave her alone. Much better leave her to her dreams and her fancies, even if they are never to be realized, than shatter them as you would shatter them. Get back over your wall."

"You don't understand, and I don't suppose you ever will," exclaimed Gilbert quickly. "But I shall find a way to help her yet."

"Perhaps—perhaps," said Simon Quarle, nodding his head slowly. "But for the present get back over your wall!"

CHAPTER IV THE PRINCESS GOES TO DINNER

THAT absurd business of climbing the wall again had to be got over, and was safely accomplished; to do him justice, Mr. Simon Quarle refrained from watching Gilbert's departure, and so took away one pang at least. The last vision Gilbert had of him was as he dropped over into the other garden, and, looking back, saw the old man standing with his hands clasped behind his back, and his bent shoulders turned towards where Gilbert had disappeared, and his eyes fixed upon the opposite wall.

But whatever resolution Gilbert Byfield may have formed to help the girl, and to lift her out from the sordid life in which he had found her, for the present he did nothing. Indeed, for the moment he decided after a restless night to abandon Arcadia Street altogether, and to touch again that life to which he most properly belonged. He would go back into that artificial existence, and, looking on this picture and on that, would decide clearly which was the most worthy. Which is to say in other words that the old life still drew him, and that this quixotic thing about which he had concerned himself could be easily laid aside, for a time at least.

Thus it happened that Mr. Jordan Tant, in his extremely neat and trim chambers, was informed [57]

by his extremely neat and trim man-servant one morning that Mr. Byfield had arrived. At the same moment the man-servant was thrust aside, and Gilbert strode in.

"Now, I don't want a lot of fuss, or a lot of talk," said Gilbert, a little impatiently; "you've just got to accept me as I am, and not talk about what I have been, or what I have done. You should know by this time that I cut up my life into slices; and when one slice is done with I go on to the next with a new appetite. Arcadia Street is gone—lost somewhere in the wilds of Islington. I am back again in civilization. What's the news?"

"There's no news that I'm aware of," said Mr. Tant, a little sulkily. "What news should there be?"

"Something's upset you, Tant," said Gilbert, with a laugh. "Come, now—I'm sure to hear about it sooner or later; why not tell me now?"

Jordan Tant stood with his arms folded, and his head a little on one side, and with an aggressive shoulder turned towards the other man. When he began to speak he shook himself almost in the fashion of a spoiled child that resents an injury.

"It isn't fair," he said, in his thin voice; "it really isn't fair. You go away for an unlimited time, and in a sense you leave the field to me. I cultivate that field; I'm careful about it; I am attentive and anxious—in fact, I work very hard. Then suddenly you step in, and if I may use such a term in so delicate a matter—you gather the crop."

"My dear Tant, you are really more Tant-like than ever," said Gilbert. "Why won't you tell me what you really mean in half a dozen words?" [58]

"One word will suffice," said Jordan, turning upon him, and speaking with a sort of mild fierceness. "And that one word is—'Enid.' While you've been living in your blessed Arcadia Street, on bread and cheese and moonshine, I've been seeing much of Miss Ewart-Crane; and there has been a gradually increasing respect for me in the family. You have shamefully neglected the lady; I have given her companionship. Now you turn up again, and will doubtless be welcomed with open arms, as having returned to the fold. For you will the fatted calf be prepared; I shall be lucky if I'm invited to the feast at all."

"My dear Tant," said Gilbert, laughing, "you are jumping at conclusions. Because I walk out of Arcadia Street, and come back here, is it to be said that I am about to take up the old life again in the old way? Am I going to call on the fair Enid, and stay to lunch—or perhaps drop in, in immaculate garments, for afternoon tea; or dine with her and her esteemed mother in a state of hopeless boredom; and take them afterwards to a theatre where the play's something I don't want to see? Perish the thought! I'm going to leave all that sort of thing to you."

Mr. Jordan Tant shook his head sadly. "It's quite impossible," he said. "I'm a useful man when there's no one else about; there you have me in a nutshell. If you had persisted in your folly, and had remained in Arcadia Street, it might have happened that some fine morning, or some fine evening, when Enid was more bored than usual, she would have said that she would put up with me for the rest of her life; and we should have got on very well. But about you always," he went on petulantly, "is a species of storm-cloud—a very whirlwind of romantic excitement. Now there's no whirlwind about me—and it's really the whirlwind fellows that attract the girls. One never knows what you're going to do; while, on the other hand, everyone knows what I'm going to do every hour of the day. I'm a sort of damp squib, that just fizzles about on its bit of ground, and does no harm to anybody; you're a gorgeous sort of rocket, that might even set fire to a town if you felt that way inclined. At all events, while I'm fizzing about down below, you'll be illuminating your bit of sky." [59]

"You're really most complimentary," said Gilbert Byfield. "But suppose I tell you that I've no intention of stepping into the place you have so laboriously made for yourself—what then?"

"It wouldn't make the least difference," said Tant, shaking his head. "Mrs. Ewart-Crane is all for you; she never ceases to speak of you. I think she knows that one of these days you'll go back and settle down comfortably with Enid. You see, the thing is really arranged."

"Oh—nonsense!" exclaimed Gilbert impatiently. "That was a boy and girl affair—a sort of arrangement made between our people, years and years ago. Besides, suppose I don't want to settle down—what then?"

"They'll make you; they'll persuade you," said Mr. Tant gloomily. "Mrs. Ewart-Crane is a mother, and has one thought in her mind, and one only—Enid's future. You'll simply be told that you've got to get married. After that, perhaps, they'll let you run about as much as you like—that is, within limits." [60]

"We shall see about that," said his friend. "By the way, what are you doing to-night? We might dine together."

"I am taking Enid and her mother to dinner and to the theatre," said Mr. Tant with dignity. "Perhaps you'd like to suggest that you will go too?"

"Certainly," said Gilbert, with alacrity. "Most kind of you; I'll join you with pleasure."

"I knew it!" Mr. Jordan Tant threw up his hands in a sort of comical despair. "I can see myself escorting Mrs. Ewart-Crane all the evening, and compelled to be polite while inwardly boiling."

It's a very unfair world."

Just as Gilbert was going Mr. Tant called him back, to deliver a word of warning. "Understand me clearly, Byfield," he said, "I will not have you springing in suddenly in any dramatic fashion. You shall be announced in a commonplace way—your return referred to as something quite of an ordinary kind. I will fetch the ladies this evening, but I shall tell them that you await us at the restaurant. There shall be no surprises."

"I don't want any surprises," said Gilbert, laughing.

Despite all his precautions, Mr. Tant found himself as usual very much in the background when it came to that moment of meeting between the gentleman from Arcadia Street and Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter. Mr. Tant had made all arrangements for a very excellent dinner; and he endeavoured, with what dignity he might, to take the head of affairs. But Enid was anxious to know everything concerning a certain Arcadia Street that had been spoken of, and she leaned eagerly towards Gilbert, demanding to know what he had been doing, and if it was really true that he had lived among people who were a sort of savages—and what he had had to eat, and how he had managed to live at all. [61]

"There's nothing remarkable about it at all," said Mr. Tant savagely. "Anyone would think that he had been exploring some wild region where the foot of man had never trod; instead of which, he's simply been living in a very thickly populated part of London, within a cab fare of his own home—and all for a whim! Besides, slumming's out of date."

"It wasn't exactly slumming—and besides, he really went to study the people—didn't you, Gilbert?" asked Enid, in her high voice. She was a tall, handsome girl, with a good carriage, and an abundance of good health and spirits; this evening she was particularly glad to see her old friend back again in his place among men.

"What I never can understand," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane, adjusting a bracelet on a very well-formed arm, "is why we need study men at all—or women, for the matter of that. I grant you that in your own sphere you are naturally interested in the people about you; but beyond that I decline to go."

"Exactly, my dear Mrs. Ewart-Crane," broke in Tant. "Just what I always say: let us remember always the dividing line, and stick to it. We should get jumbled up in the most horrible way if we didn't remember the dividing line always, and above all, if we didn't remember that the people who live in the Arcadia Streets of the world are very right and proper in their own places, and very wrong and improper elsewhere. The people of position in this world are those who have come by right to the top; it's fellows like Byfield that put wrong notions into their heads, by mixing with 'em, and coming down, in a sense, to their level. I assure you that when I discovered him he was living in a perfectly shocking place." [62]

Mrs. Ewart-Crane closed her eyes, and shivered. "Then I'm very glad to think that he's left it," she said. "For my part, I wish to hear no more about it; let us regard it as something happily done with and forgotten."

"But I want to hear about it, mamma," persisted Enid, laughing good-humouredly. "I'm quite sure there was an attraction down there—wasn't there?" She turned to Gilbert with a smile.

"Many attractions," he replied evasively. "All sorts of poor people, toiling cheerfully, and having rather a good time in their own way, in spite of poverty."

"Don't let him put you off, Miss Enid," said Tant, a little maliciously. "There was an attraction—I saw her, and I heard about her. And I don't mind saying that she was very pretty."

"Gilbert!" The girl was looking at him quizzically. "I want to hear all about this. What was she like? Big and rather brazen—quite a child of nature, with what they call a heart of gold—eh? I know the sort." [63]

"I beg again, Enid, that the subject may be dropped," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane icily. But no one took the least notice of her.

"I'm afraid you don't know the sort," said Gilbert. He was annoyed at the turn the conversation had taken—annoyed, too, at Jordan Tant for his breach of faith. He hated the thought of discussing the girl with these people; he knew that the more he tried to explain his feeling about the matter, the less they would be able to understand. But the rather haughty eyes of Enid were upon him, and he had to go on, against his will. "The girl Tant is talking about is a little hard-working thing, who lived in the next house to that in which I stayed; and she keeps a drunken father and a reprobate brother by the simple process of letting lodgings. Now you know all about it."

"How touching—and how romantic!" exclaimed the girl. "And the great man from the great world took a deep interest in her, and stayed perhaps a little longer in his slum on her account—eh?"

"For my part," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane stiffly, "since the subject must be discussed, I have never been able to understand what people let lodgings for. If they've got a house, why not live in it, and not give over bits of it to other people?"

Gilbert Byfield glanced at his watch. "We shall be late for the first act," he said.

"Which of course puts an end to the discussion," Enid said, as she rose from the table. "Of course, if you'd like me to send her anything that would be useful, I should be only too pleased. Mother likes me to be charitable." [64]

The play proved to be dull (at least to Gilbert Byfield), and the evening seemed to stretch on interminably. For the man was haunted by the miserable feeling that this child, in her common back-yard—this girl he had understood, as he thought, so perfectly—could never by any chance be understood by those who had not intimately touched her life. He was puzzled to think what he could do to carry out that brave determination of his to help her—to lift her out of her surroundings. If he remained where he was, among his own people, and in his own sphere, he deserted the child; if he went back to her, he deserted them, and took up his life in surroundings uncongenial, except so far as she was concerned. And he saw that it was utterly impossible to go half-way about one matter or the other; Arcadia Street was not to be brought into the West End and dumped down there.

It happened that between the acts he went out to smoke a cigarette, and found himself, with a dozen other men, near the open doors of the theatre. A few people were strolling listlessly outside in the street—pausing now and then to stare in at the well-dressed men, and to whisper. And once a girl went past—a thin shabby girl in black; and he was reminded so forcibly of Bessie Meggison that, without knowing what he did, he hurried out of the place, and went after her. Fifty yards down the street she stopped to look in at a shop window; and it was not Bessie at all, but someone quite different. Yet the thought assailed him, as he went back to the theatre, that just in that fashion the girl might be wandering alone in this horrible London—poorly clad, and not too well fed. He hated the thought of his own prosperity; quite unnecessarily called himself a brute, because he had had a good dinner, and was supposed to be out in search of enjoyment. [65]

Never for a moment, of course, did it occur to him that his point of view was wrong; never for a moment did he understand that properly his life could not touch the girl's, and could have nothing in common with it. He accused himself unnecessarily, when the only mistake that had been made in the whole matter was in going to Arcadia Street at all, and above all going there under false colours. That point of view he did not regard in the least.

But he walked home that night, after leaving his friends, feeling miserably that it would have been better if he had buried himself for ever in Arcadia Street; if in some impossible way, he could have forgotten this selfish purposeless life he had always lived, and could have flung himself into some real work that would have brought him nearer in thought and feeling to the girl. Not for the first time he cried out against artificiality; metaphorically speaking, he wanted to put on rough clothing and thick boots, and plunge into the real fierce work of the world.

Some sense of the injustice of the world in meting out such different lots to such different women urged him, after a lapse of days during which he had been at the beck and call of Enid, to go back to Arcadia Street. He told himself that it would be merely an experimental visit; he meant to see if something could not be done to shake old Meggison into an understanding of his responsibilities, and perhaps even to urge the derelict brother into an attempt to earn a living. That was what he told himself; in the end, of course, it amounted to his going with the prospect of seeing the girl, and of doing something, in a wholly indefinite way, for her personally. [66]



He was a little shy about meeting her; so many ridiculous suggestions had been thrown to him by Jordan Tant, and by Enid and her mother, concerning this girl, that the old freedom between them, so far at least as he was concerned, seemed a thing of the past. Even when that summer evening arrived when, leaning over the wall, he saw her seated in her garden, and called to her, it was with a new constraint.

"I've come back, you see," he said.

She was genuinely very glad to see him; he found himself wondering if the eyes of Enid could by any chance ever light up at his coming as did the eyes of this child. Things were different in Arcadia Street, he knew; almost he wished that they were not—almost he wished that this happy familiarity might obtain in other places with which he was more naturally in touch.

"I thought—thought you were not coming back," said the girl. "And yet I hoped—"

"Hoped that I was—eh?" he supplemented. "Even now, I don't know how long I may be able to stop here; I may go away again at a moment's notice—and never come back at all. Don't look so grave about it; you can go on making-believe, you know, just as well as ever." [67]

"It won't be quite the same," she said. "You see, in that you've helped me—because, as I told you, you understood."

"And how have you been getting on?" he asked. "I mean, of course—the house?"

She stood against the wall over which he leaned; she did not look up at him when she replied. "Oh, pretty well, thank you," she said in a low voice. "Nothing ever happens, you know, in Arcadia Street—except the thing you don't want to happen."

"Your father?"

"Father is quite established again at his club; they think a lot of him at his club," she said. "And Aubrey is positive he will hear of something to do very shortly."

"That's good news," said Gilbert. "By the way—that Mr. Quarle I met when I was here last—the night I came over into your garden—do you know him very well?"

"Oh, yes; he's been a great friend of mine for nearly two years. But for him I think we couldn't keep the house going; he is the only lodger I have ever had who pays money without being asked for it. He's simply wonderful. Not that he's well off; he's only retired from something, and I don't think the something was very much before he retired from it. But his payments—oh—they're beautifully regular!"

"He's a valuable man," said Gilbert, not without a curious little feeling of jealousy that anyone else should be good to the girl except himself. Then the thought of what he had meant to do—the remembrance of the girl, shabby and forlorn, who had walked past the theatre that night, and had been something like Bessie Meggison—urged him to say something else.

[68]

"Bessie—(you don't mind my calling you Bessie—do you?)—have you ever had a holiday? I mean, have you ever got away from this dull house for one long evening—and seen bright lights, and happy faces—and heard music? Have you ever done that?"

Still leaning against the wall, she shook her head slowly, without looking up. "There hasn't been time—or money," she said simply.

"If you found the time—and I found the money?" he suggested. "What then?"

She looked up at him wonderingly; did not seem for a moment to understand what he meant. At last she said slowly—"I'm afraid it wouldn't do, you know; it really wouldn't do at all. Someone would be wanting me—someone would be calling for me."

"I should let them call for once," said Gilbert. "Just suppose for once, little Make-Believe, that we went out of Arcadia Street—and far beyond Islington—just our two selves. There are certain places called theatres, you know."

She nodded, with a sigh. "I know," she said. "That is, of course, I don't know much about what they're like inside; the outsides are wonderful. But I expect they're very expensive."

"We might manage it—just for once," he urged. "I could save up, you know—go without something."

[69]

It needed a lot of persuasion before she would consent at all; but at last she named a night when it was probable that father would be more in requisition at his club even than usual, and when Aubrey would be engrossed in the mysteries of a billiard handicap. She would go then; and, the better to preserve the proprieties (for Arcadia Street was given to gossip), would meet him at a certain spot not a hundred yards from the Arcadia Arms.

He began to understand, almost at the last moment, that the expedition must be conducted in her own fashion; he had the delicacy to understand that he must be shabby to match her poor shabbiness. So that it is probable very few of his friends would have recognized Mr. Gilbert Byfield, had they seen him waiting about at the corner of a certain street in Islington, in a well-worn tweed suit and a billycock hat. At that time he did not like the idea at all; he would have liked to whirl her away in a hansom, and do the thing properly at a first-class restaurant, with stalls at a theatre to follow. He wondered a little how the evening was going to pass.

And yet, after all, it proved to be rather pleasant—viewed as a new experience. Pleasant, to begin with, to see that little thin figure coming towards him; to hold for a moment the little hand in the worn glove, and to notice with satisfaction how neat she was, and how tastefully dressed, despite the poor things she had on. He had the grace to forget that a swift hansom might be hailed with the raising of a hand; found an omnibus almost comfortable—quite delightful, in fact, with the girl seated beside him, wearing upon her face that extraordinary look of complete happiness. He forgot even to think what his friends would have said had they seen him riding in such a vehicle, dressed in such fashion, and with such a companion.

[70]

The choosing of a restaurant was a difficulty, because he scarcely knew the cheaper or more dingy ones. She drew back in alarm at the prospect of entering a place gay with electric light; became reconciled at last to a little place of few tables and fewer waiters; sat open-eyed and breathless at the glory of a fifth-rate place, with a decided smell of the kitchen about it every time a creaking door was opened near her. She did not talk much; only occasionally she glanced at him, and when she did she smiled that slow grave smile of gratitude and friendliness.

Afterwards he found himself, for the first time in his life, in the upper circle at a theatre; congratulated himself on the fact that a friend he saw in a box below would not be likely to raise his eyes to the third row of that particular part of the building. He contented himself, not with

looking at a play he had already seen, but with watching the thin face of the girl beside him—the bright eyes and the half-parted lips. Once, at a moment that was thrilling, she gripped his arm; and for quite a long time kept her hand there, holding to him while she watched the stage.

Coming out of the theatre, in the whirl and rush of people homeward bound, he got her into the hansom almost before she knew what had happened; it was only after the horse had started for Arcadia Street that she looked up at him reproachfully—shocked and awed by this friend who could spend so much money in a single evening. She voiced that thought as they drove along.

[71]

"You'll have to go without quite a lot for this, Mr. Byfield—won't you?" she asked wistfully. "I mean—it has been a frightfully expensive evening."

"I don't mind—for once," said Gilbert. "The only question in my mind is—have you really had a good time?"

She heaved a big sigh. "I should like to do it all over again," she said softly—"but to do it much more slowly. It has been wonderful!"

This was the one man in all the world that had ever thought about her, or had ever done her a kindness. Small wonder then that her eyes spoke more than gratitude when she put that little hand into his again in Arcadia Street, before the shabby house swallowed her up, and the door closed upon her. No one saw her, because Arcadia Street, save on Saturday nights, goes early to bed.

CHAPTER V

THE GREAT GAME OF MAKE-BELIEVE

[72]

IN the course of many scrambling, shambling years Mr. Daniel Meggison had learnt much, in the sordid sense, concerning the value of men. Had it been necessary for him, at any time in his later life, to pass a strict examination in the Gentle Art of Tapping People, he would in all probability have come out of the ordeal with flying colours, as one having vast experience.

For he could have told you to a nicety how, in the case of this man, you must not try for more than half a crown, and must be jocular with him; how, in another case, you might fly higher, and whine for a sovereign, with a pitiful tale pitched to charm the coin out of his pockets; and how, in other cases, you would have to drop your demands so low as a shilling or even possibly a sixpence. It is not too much to say that every man, in a very special sense, had for Mr. Daniel Meggison his price; and that on all and sundry occasions he was only too ready to exact that price from his fellows.

Exactly how far back in the years he had really made any attempt to earn an honest living it is impossible to say, and he had probably long since forgotten. It had at the beginning been a mere accidental business; a temporary loss of work had thrown him into the willing arms, as it were, of a wife who had always done something to help him. It merely became necessary for her to increase her efforts; Mr. Meggison was in no hurry to look for work, and gradually the truth was forced upon him that he need never do so again. True, he made a pretence, for something like twelve months, to gain a livelihood, but with no ardour in the pursuit; and so gradually drifted into that great and marvellous army which always in a big city manages to exist pretty comfortably without working at all.

[73]

He learnt their tricks and their ways—even their little catch-phrases slipped naturally from his tongue. He might have been heard talking loudly concerning the affairs of the nation, and how they should be conducted; he knew his newspaper by heart. More than that, he might have been heard often demanding to know why this man and that did not obtain the employment that was obviously waiting for him in a busy world. And so in time he grew to the belief that he was in all respects something of a poor gentleman, for whom others must provide money, and who, by reason of a certain superiority of birth and education and resources, stood outside the mere common grubbing workaday world.

There were, of course, mean shifts and petty frauds to be encountered; but in time the man grew hardened even to those. There was a bed in which he might sleep, and there was food for him, and tobacco always; he became a familiar figure in his poor neighbourhood, and accepted with each day that which was provided for him, not without grumbling. In time the patient wife folded her hands, and sighed, and fell asleep; and the patient daughter took up the burden quite naturally, as it had been bequeathed to her. The legacy of the shiftless father, who was always to be protected and looked after, descended to her, and was taken up as a sacred trust.

[74]

But with that shiftless life that had been his portion so long the man had not lost his natural cunning—the cunning of the creature that preys upon his fellows. Money was necessary, for the occasional replenishing of his scanty wardrobe, and for tobacco and drinks; he would have been a poor thing without money in his pockets. Hence the borrowing—hence the tapping of any and every one with whom he came in contact. Therefore, too, it is small wonder that he turned his eyes at last towards Gilbert Byfield, with something of a smacking of lips. For here was higher game; here was a man who might, if handled carefully, be a man of sovereigns instead of paltry shillings.

The man was not above playing the spy, and he had of course a jealous interest in the fate of that chief breadwinner—his daughter. More than once he had shivered, with a very genuine horror, at the prospect of love or marriage being even suggested to her; had been short with Harry Dorricott, when he had seen that boy's eyes turn with an unmistakable look of affection in them in Bessie's direction. For what, in the name of all that was tragic, was to become of Mr. Daniel Meggison if his daughter left him?

From behind the curtain of a window he had seen the stranger who lived next door talking to the girl over the wall; had been inclined to resent that at once. At the same time, he had a craven feeling that it would not do to upset Bessie; he had better watch, and be silent. So he had seen other meetings, until at last that night had arrived when Bessie was not in the house, and when she came in very late, and crept up to her room like the guilty truant she was. And had there not been a sound of wheels outside the house? Daniel Meggison shivered in his bed, and wondered what he had done in all his blameless life to deserve this. [75]

Questioned cautiously on the following morning, Bessie would say but little. Yes—she had been out—all the evening—with a friend. No—she had not spent money over it; she would not have thought of doing such a thing; the friend had paid for everything. She hoped that her father was not annoyed, and that he had not wanted for anything.

"No, my child, I am not suggesting that I wanted for anything; I spent the greater part of the evening at my club," he replied stiffly. "Only, of course, as a father I am naturally anxious for you—and I—"

"It was a very nice friend—a very nice one indeed," she broke in; and he decided that it would not be wise to pursue the matter then.

For the sake of his very livelihood, however, he saw that he must be alert; it might even happen that this precious child would be snatched away from him. He went to that club of his less frequently; came into the house at unexpected moments, and was to be found loitering about on the staircase, and in rooms in which he had no business. Also he haunted that garden, and had a watchful eye upon the house next door. He hungered for another sight of this man who could afford to pay for an evening's entertainment, and could travel in cabs. [76]

He knew, of course, that Gilbert Byfield was not as other men in Arcadia Street. Apart from his own observation, he knew instinctively that Bessie had hitherto held aloof from everyone; had gone about her duties soberly—a grown woman long before her time; he did her the justice to know that no ordinary man would have attracted her attention, or have drawn her away from the life her father had mapped out for her even for an hour. More than that, those who dwell in Arcadia Street have not money for evening pleasures or for cabs; and there had been from the beginning a sort of mystery about this young man who lived next door. Mr. Meggison determined to lie in wait for that young man, and to confront him.

He began artfully. On one particular evening he did not, as usual, shuffle off down the street, with his pipe between his teeth; he waited about in the house instead. Bessie hinted that she supposed he would be going out soon; he declared that he would wait a little while; he might not, in fact, be going out at all. He seated himself in his shabby easy chair, and declared that he was very comfortable where he was. He had been too much at the club of late; home was the proper place for the man and the head of a family, after all.

Bessie was moving towards the garden, when he sat up and called to her. "I dislike the idea of your sitting out in that garden so much in the evening, my child," he said, with a new tenderness that was startling to the girl. "Here you've been cooped up in the house all day long—no fresh air—no exercise; and now you expect to go and sit out there. We must take care of you, Bessie. Much better go for a walk." [77]

"But I like the garden, father," the girl urged faintly.

"For to-night, my dear—to please me," said Daniel Meggison, with an unaccustomed smile—"go for a walk. There may be little matters of shopping which you ordinarily leave to Amelia; go yourself on this occasion; you will probably buy more economically than she will. You must think of these matters in dealing with a household. Come, Bessie, I know what is best for you; put your hat on, and go out."

She kissed him obediently, and thanked him for his care of her; and went out into the hot streets. She was disappointed, because the garden would have been welcome, and it might just have happened that a face would look over the wall and a voice call to her; and then the ending of the day would be good and complete.

But Daniel Meggison, like greater men before him, had a motive. He desired to draw that shy being who dwelt on the other side of the wall; to come face to face with him, if possible, and discover something about him. He argued that it was a rare thing for Bessie not to be in the garden late in the evening if the weather happened to be fine, and that the man on the other side of the wall would be naturally surprised, and perhaps alarmed. Mr. Daniel Meggison chuckled to himself at the thought of his own cunning, and sat down in such a position that he could watch the garden. He had not long to wait. [78]

Mr. Gilbert Byfield was confident that on this particular evening the girl would be in the garden; and he wanted to talk to her. She had rather avoided him during these past few days,

and he had already come to understand that Arcadia Street was a remarkably dull place, unless it was actually represented by her. Consequently, on this evening he had determined that he would see her, if possible, and that he would have a little tender whimsical explanation with her, in which, appropriately enough, he would play the part of a species of elderly friend or brother, and would in fact be very good to her. He recognized that that feeling of protective tenderness for the girl was growing; but he told himself sternly that it was, of course, merely the protective tenderness of a friend. On that point he was very strong. He had come back to Arcadia Street because he was interested in her; and when the time came for him to leave Arcadia Street he would, of course, leave it with regret on her account. He would not think about it to-night; he simply recognized that the time was coming when he must know Arcadia Street no more.

An inspection of the garden over the wall showed it to be empty, but the lighted house was beyond. It occurred to him that in all probability she had stepped inside for a moment; he would get over the wall, and would surprise her when she came out again. He did so, and, carefully avoiding the broken boards in the ottoman that was not an ottoman, made his way cautiously towards the house. He sat down on one of the rickety chairs near the crazy table, and waited. [79]

This was Mr. Daniel Meggison's opportunity. He rose with an air of importance, and laid down his pipe; pulled down his waistcoat, and set his smoking-cap a little rakishly on one side of his head; and sauntered out. He went with the air of a gentleman about to gaze upon the beauty of the evening; his face was indeed turned towards the sky at the moment that he emerged from the door and stepped on to the ragged old carpet.

Gilbert Byfield had risen, in the surprise of the encounter; he stood watching old Meggison. Meggison, for his part, allowed his eyes to come down from their contemplation of the stars, and so gradually to rest upon the intruder who stood before him. He gave a very fine start, in the most approved fashion, and then stood in a dignified attitude, with a hand thrust into his waistcoat, looking at Gilbert up and down.

"Sir!" exclaimed Meggison.

"I—I beg your pardon," stammered Gilbert, looking helplessly at the wall over which he had scrambled.

"Sir—you are an intruder—a trespasser upon the privacy of my family, my home, and my property!" said Mr. Meggison, keeping his voice remarkably low, and watching the door leading to the house. "What do you mean by it, sir?—what do you want?"

"There is nothing to make a fuss about, Mr. Meggison," said Gilbert quietly. "I live next door here; I came over in order to have a word or two with—with your daughter." [80]

"Nothing to make a fuss about?" echoed Meggison, still in those cautious tones. "Came over to see my daughter? And what do you suppose, sir, her father will have to say to such a proceeding?"

"I do not wish to be offensive, Mr. Meggison," said the younger man—"but I fancy her father has not troubled very much about her until this moment. Don't bluster, sir; I am her friend before everything else."

Daniel Meggison took a step forward, and looked at the other; took a step back, and rolled his head threateningly; took another step forward, and laid a hand on Byfield's arm. "Sir," he said solemnly—"I am sure of it. Only you must forgive the anger and the suspicion of a parent to whom his child is very precious. She has no mother, sir."

"I know that," said Gilbert. "I had no right, of course, to trespass on your premises, Mr. Meggison—for that I owe you an apology. But I—"

"Not another word, sir—not another word, I beg," exclaimed Meggison, taking his hand and wringing it. "I like the look of you, sir; I like the blunt fearlessness with which you scramble over a wall; you are a man, sir!"

"You're very good," replied Gilbert awkwardly. "Is Miss—Miss Meggison in the house? I should like to speak to her."

"My daughter, sir, has gone out," said Meggison, seating himself, and waving a hand grandiloquently towards the other chair, "on a necessary errand connected with household matters. Poor child—poor child; I wish sometimes she did not have to work so hard." [81]

"So do I," said Gilbert, looking squarely at him. "She's young, you know, Meggison—hardly more than a child; and all her youth is slipping away, and she'll only know too late that it's gone. It seems a pity, doesn't it?"

Daniel Meggison sniffed audibly, and turned his head away; began slowly and methodically to search himself, until presently he drew from out his clothing a doubtful-looking handkerchief. This he applied first to one eye, and then to the other.

"Youth, sir, is a beautiful thing," he said. He gave a glance towards the house, and then leant across the table, and laid a hand on the arm of the younger man; he still kept that handkerchief to one eye, but the other was bright and alert. "Don't misunderstand me; don't think that I speak lightly. I have watched that child grow up—like a flower, sir. I have lain awake at night thinking about her—wondering about her—planning for her. I have mentioned to friends at my—my club

that I am tortured concerning her. 'What,' I have asked, 'is to become of one so tender—so loving to an unfortunate father—so willing to work for that unfortunate father?' That is the question I have asked others as well as myself. Mr. Byfield, she is not strong; in other words, she is very frail. Her mother was never strong; I worshipped her mother, and her mother (I can say it with pride) was devoted to me. You are her friend—Bessie's friend, I mean; has it ever occurred to you that she is not strong? I am her father—you will understand my anxiety." [82]

Gilbert Byfield had got up with some impatience from his chair, and had moved away down the length of the garden. For a moment he could not trust himself to speak, or to answer that hypocritical whining voice. He knew, however, that if he was to do anything to help the girl he must control himself, and must make what use he could of the one instrument ready to his hand. So he walked back to the table, and stood there, with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the old man.

"I am glad we think alike," he said slowly. "I do not think she is strong; it is a thousand pities that she cannot be taken out of this place—a thousand pities that she has to work so hard to—to support other people."

"I agree with you," said Meggison, eagerly getting up from his chair, and coming hurriedly round the table to the young man. "Sometimes, sir," he exclaimed, with a sort of feeble passion—"sometimes I am roused almost to madness at the thought that I am so helpless—that I can do nothing. The truth of the matter is that I was never brought up to do anything—not anything that would pay; I blame my parents bitterly for that. My late wife—devoted soul!—would often say that I was never really fitted to cope with the world. 'You are by nature and by instinct, Daniel, a gentleman and a man of leisure,' she would say; 'it seems natural that others should provide for you.' And she knew me—knew me intimately, sir." [83]

"I'm sure she did," said Gilbert, looking at him steadily. "But we are wandering from the subject a little—the subject of your daughter. Her mother is gone; it is not too late to do something for the child."

"True—very true," exclaimed Meggison, with an air of deep determination. "Bless you, my dear sir! Now—what shall we do? Let's put our heads together."

As though he meant to carry that suggestion into effect literally, Mr. Daniel Meggison pushed the old smoking-cap a little further on to one side of his head, and leaned nearer to his companion, and assumed a very wise expression. Gilbert, with a glance at the house, began to speak in a cautious tone.

"It has to be understood, of course, in the first place, that whatever is done is done for the girl only. Do you understand?"

Mr. Meggison stared at him almost with indignation; he opened his eyes very wide. "Of course—of course—Bessie only. You leave that to me; I'll see to that."

"I'll see to that also," retorted Gilbert. "In the second place, whatever is done is done by you."

"By me?" The man stared at him with growing uneasiness. "But I can't—"

"I mean that whatever is done for the girl must be done for her by her father—so far as she knows. She is the last in the world to accept anything from me, and I would not ask her to do so; it would be an insult. I ask you to do so"—(Mr. Meggison pocketed that insult cheerfully, and said nothing)—"because through you I can do what I could not do for myself. For example, if we are to help this poor daughter of yours, money will be required." [84]

"Yes—of course—money," replied Mr. Meggison, rubbing his hands, and nodding his head many times. "Oh, yes—of course money."

"And that must come through her father, as the only proper person who can give it to her. Again, in other words, Meggison, it becomes necessary, in order that this whim of mine may be carried out, that you and I should have a little secret understanding with each other. Whatever is necessary to be paid, I shall pay you, and you in turn will pay—"

"Somebody else," broke in Meggison, nodding again, and laying a forefinger against the side of his nose. "Splendid notion—and very easy—eh?" He coughed, and hesitated for a moment. "Should I, for instance—begin to-night?"

"I think not," said Gilbert quietly.

"Oh—you think not," Meggison replied with a look of disappointment. "Well—perhaps you know best. What are your plans? I'm a man for hurry always."

"My plans depend to a great extent upon you," said Gilbert. "I do not imagine for a moment that you are possessed of any sum of money?"

"I am a most unfortunate man, sir, to whom much money should have come had Fate treated me better. But I am not worth sixpence."

"Briefly, my plan is this," went on Gilbert, after a pause. "I would like to give Bessie a sight of the better world that lies outside Arcadia Street; not the world of London, and London streets and sights and sounds; but that bigger world for which she longs—that freer world of trees and flowers and blue skies. In other words, I would like to give her a holiday. Now, can you by any [85]

possibility suggest some reason why you should suddenly come into a little money, Mr. Meggison?"

"I can suggest a hundred reasons—but they would be equally romantic and absurd," said Meggison, scratching the top of the smoking-cap thoughtfully. "A rich relative of whom she has never heard—no—that wouldn't do, because she knows all my relatives. Work that suddenly brings in a lot of money? . . . No—she wouldn't believe in work, so far as I'm concerned; that would require too great a stretch of the imagination, I'm afraid. A lucky speculation? . . . No—one requires capital for that."

"I'm afraid you'll have to fall back on a relative—a distant relative—very much removed. Understand, it would only be a small legacy."

"May I ask what you exactly mean by the term 'small'?" asked Daniel Meggison.

"I would suggest a sum of about fifty pounds," said Gilbert quietly.

Mr. Daniel Meggison opened his mouth very wide, and then shut it with a snap; opened it again, as though intending to speak; and blurted out a faint echo of the sum that had been named.

"Fifty—fifty pounds!" Mr. Meggison came nearer, and touched Gilbert, as though to discover whether or not he was actually real. Then suddenly and harshly he burst out laughing. "Fifty pounds, indeed! Don't attempt to fool me, please. Where will you get such a sum—and you in Arcadia Street?" [86]

"I have not always been in Arcadia Street, and I shall not always remain here," said Gilbert. "As the world understands it, I am rather a rich man, and the fifty pounds is quite easily to be found. I am living in Arcadia Street for a whim, if you must know; that is part of our secret understanding, Mr. Meggison. Come, now—is it a bargain?"

Daniel Meggison looked at the young man for only one moment longer; then he seemed to leap at him, and to catch his hand between both his own. "A bargain, sir?" he exclaimed, in a rapture. "Of course it's a bargain—and in a noble cause, sir. Fifty pounds, did you say? It's a fortune!"

"A fortune into which you have very strangely come," Gilbert reminded him. "Don't say a word now; I can see your daughter coming straight through the house towards us. Come round and see me to-morrow, and we'll work out together this game of make-believe which you are to play."

"I'll play it well until the end!" exclaimed Meggison, shaking his hand again. "A great game of make-believe! Splendid notion!"

CHAPTER VI

SCHEMERS AND DREAMERS

[87]

BESSIE MEGGISON had no suspicion; for it was scarcely possible, in the first place, that anyone should be interesting himself on her behalf. She was glad to think that her father and Mr. Byfield had suddenly grown to be to all appearances such excellent friends; although even in that there was a lurking dread, lest the wily Daniel Meggison should exercise that "tapping" process upon his new acquaintance. For the rest, it simplified matters, and made it easier to carry on that innocent intercourse with Gilbert.

The plotters meanwhile may be said to have watched each other's movements with suspicion and distrust. Daniel Meggison was all for immediate action; wanted to feel his fingers grasping that good money, and putting it to such uses as only he, from a long experience, could accurately name. Bessie should, of course, have a share in the good things that were coming; but only, quite properly, after her father had been satisfied; quixotic notions were not to be encouraged where a rich young man absolutely offered to toss fifty pounds over a garden wall in Islington. Gilbert Byfield, on the other hand, already began to doubt whether after all he had not been a little precipitate; began to suggest this, and to demand that, in the way of security. Not that he regretted his action so far as Bessie was concerned; a single glance at her white face was sufficient to speed him to the undertaking; but he doubted the instrument he had been compelled to choose. [88]

Daniel Meggison's idea of a rest and a holiday for his daughter, when it came to the actual point of expression, seemed to consist in a vague notion of driving about London all day long, with large cigars for his own consumption, and new clothes, and an occasional visit with some ceremony to a saloon bar; which was not of course quite the idea that had been in the mind of Mr. Gilbert Byfield. The wily old man had already drawn sundry sovereigns, on account of that imaginary fortune, and still nothing had been done, when one evening he appeared in Gilbert Byfield's rooms with a face of mystery, and with round eyes that had a frightened look in them. He closed the door, and carefully removed his dingy skull cap; combed out the last threads of its silk tassel between his fingers; and looked up and spoke.

"Mr. Byfield, sir," he whispered—"my daughter is ill."

Gilbert got up quickly, and came across to where the little man was standing. "What do you mean?" he demanded in a shocked voice.

"Fainted, sir—gave way suddenly, and became all at once, in a manner of speaking, collapsed," said Meggison, nodding at him slowly. "Never knew her do it before—but it's not unlikely she may do it again. Mr. Byfield, sir—my heart bleeds." [89]

"She must be got away—at once," said Gilbert hastily.

"She must be got away—at once," echoed Meggison, moistening his lips with the tip of his tongue. "Just what I said, Mr. Byfield, sir, as she was coming to. Not a moment to be lost—eh?"

"Not an instant," said Gilbert, beginning to pace up and down the room. "We've waited too long already, Meggison, over that scheme of ours."

"Nearly a week—and nothing done," retorted the other, twisting the skull cap round and shaking his head at it. "Not my fault, of course."

"It's only because I haven't known what to do, or how to do it," said Gilbert, pondering. "But now we must wait no longer; you must take her away at once."

"At once," said Meggison, putting on his cap with an air of determination, as though he had quite made up his mind to start upon a journey forthwith. "All times are alike to me, Mr. Byfield, sir; it's only the question of money." His eyes were expectant.

"It's just the question of money, Meggison, that is troubling me," said Gilbert Byfield, seating himself on the end of his desk, and so facing the little man at the door with folded arms. "If it hadn't been the question of money, and the difficulty of dealing with it, and of dealing with you, something would have been done before."

"Of dealing with me, Mr. Byfield, sir?" Daniel Meggison put his head on one side, with a faint show of indignation. [90]

"Frankly, Mr. Meggison, I do not know quite what you would do with any substantial sum of money that might be placed in your hands. I do not trust your discretion. I want to speak quite plainly."

"Don't spare my feelings," said Meggison, leaning against the door, and folding his arms in turn. "I have been battered by the world; I can put up with anything."

"You clear the ground beautifully," said Gilbert, smiling grimly. "Frankly then, I don't care a rush about you or your son, or any of you—with the sole exception of Bessie. I want to help her—and I only use you because there's no one else that stands in such near relation to her as you do. She wouldn't take money from me—but you will; and so we've got to start some little fiction about the matter, as I suggested. This very night, Mr. Meggison, you must come into your property; but I shall have to be a sort of trustee, the better to keep a tight hand upon what you do."

"You mentioned a sum of fifty pounds," said Meggison, after an uncomfortable pause. "Fifty pounds is not much, when it comes to a holiday; as fortunes are counted, it's nothing to speak of."

"I've altered my mind about that," said Gilbert. "Instead of providing the money, I think I'll provide the place for a holiday, and see that you have sufficient money to keep it going. I've a cottage in Sussex—at a place they call Fiddler's Green; I've used it for fishing and so forth; it's rather pretty, and it wouldn't be half a bad notion to whisk this girl of yours away down there, and give her a holiday." [91]

Daniel Meggison looked dubious. "It occurs to me, on the other hand, Mr. Byfield, sir," he said, with a shake of the head, "that she might find it dull. No society—no familiar figures such as she meets every day; no intercourse with boon companions—"

"Perhaps you're thinking a little of yourself," said Gilbert, with a smile. "I imagine we can trust your daughter to like the place to which I'm thinking of sending her. We'll call it settled. Now for the method."

"Which I suppose is where I come in," retorted the other, a little sourly.

"Exactly. We want a fine stretch of your imagination; we want you to invent that mysterious relative, or that extraordinary speculation—either of which shall in a moment provide you with a substantial sum of money. What more natural, therefore, than that you—devoted father—should immediately turn to your daughter with the earnest desire that she should be the first to benefit by your good fortune. The cottage at Fiddler's Green you rent, as a surprise to her; you give her the rest she so sorely needs; you bring her back to London in due course, with renewed strength to take up the battle of life."

"Back to Arcadia Street? It seems rather a tame ending, Mr. Byfield, sir," said the little man, with a shake of the head.

"It's the ending we'll adopt for the present," retorted the younger man. "And you understand, of course, that I must not appear in the matter; I shall be as greatly surprised as she will be to hear of what has happened. Remember always that she believes me to be almost as poor and as struggling as herself." [92]

"It's all right up to a point," said Meggison, pursing up his lips and frowning; "what I don't like is the temporary nature of it. Come, sir—don't be cheese-paring; why not do the thing more handsomely—extend it a bit—eh?"

"All I intend to do is to give Bessie a short holiday at Fiddler's Green, and to bring her back to London restored to health," said Gilbert, with an air of finality.

"Well of course, Mr. Byfield, sir, you know best," Meggison said doubtfully. "In the meantime I will go and see my child, and will endeavour to act my part in that game of make-believe as becomes a father and a man. If by any chance you should be walking in the garden attached to this house a little later on, it might happen that Bessie would have some startling news to impart to you. Splendid notion—eh?"

With restored good humour Daniel Meggison set the old skull cap rakishly at one side of his head, and went downstairs, whistling softly to himself, and seeing before him a golden vision that was not soon to fade.

A visit to the Arcadia Arms gave him renewed confidence; through the glass he held he saw, by no means darkly, a rosy prospect wherein Gilbert Byfield continued from a mere matter of sentiment to supply the wants of Daniel Meggison, at least, for the rest of that gentleman's natural life. Daniel told himself, if not in so many words at least with so many nods and winks, that he would be a very limpet—sticking fast to his benefactor, and not to be shaken off. This young man had talked lightly of fifty pounds—had spoken of them, in fact, in much the same fashion in which Daniel Meggison might have spoken of fifty pence. Over a second glass Mr. Meggison said that this sort of thing should be encouraged; that men of sentiment were rare, and that for his dear daughter's sake at least the chance should be snatched at. With the draining of that glass Mr. Daniel Meggison had firmly persuaded himself that it was his solemn duty to sink his own personal feelings for the sake of his child, and to make war upon this young man. Not too steadily he went down Arcadia Street with that idea in his mind. [93]

Bessie had recovered, and was leaning upon the sympathetic Amelia, inclined to laugh a little at this new weakness that had come upon her. Her brother Aubrey stood looking at her in some dismay, with his hands thrust in his pockets, and with the inevitable cigarette drooping from his lips; for this was a new and uncommon disaster, which threatened the source of his income. Not that he put it quite in that crude fashion, but rather that he saw his small world shaken to its foundations, and trembled a little in consequence.

Mr. Daniel Meggison was jocose. He wondered if by any chance Bessie (always his favourite child!) was strong enough to bear a shock—to hear news that might prove startling? Bessie a little faintly declared that she was quite well—was sorry, in fact, to have caused such trouble; she was ready for any news. Perhaps he had heard of a new and profitable lodger? [94]

"To the devil with all lodgers!" exclaimed Mr. Meggison, with a sudden blustering violence. "We have done with lodgers for ever, my child; henceforth this particular Englishman's house is his castle—inviolable. Henceforth his child plays the lady, and takes that position in the world to which, as her father's child, she has a right."

"You've stayed a bit long at the club, gov'nor," said Aubrey, applying a light to his cigarette and winking at his sister. "'Tisn't quite fair to worry Bess now—is it?"

"Be silent, sir!" Daniel Meggison turned upon him wrathfully. "What do you understand of my methods—or even of me? While you, sir—a mere hobbledehoy—a lout—a frequenter of low billiard saloons and such-like places—while you are wasting your time and your substance in a species of debauchery—your father is out and about in the world—looking here and there and everywhere for opportunities. While you are wasting the hard earnings of your sister, and squandering money to which you have no right, I am turning that brain which has never really failed me yet to account—and making money!"

By this time Daniel Meggison had worked himself into that state of mind in which he was quite prepared to believe that he really had done the wonderful thing he suggested. He soared in imagination in high finance; dabbled with this and with that; held the great world of money in the mere hollow of his hand. For the first time in his mean and shiftless life he had his grip upon a man who was prepared to pay largely and without question; and the education Daniel Meggison had received in a hard world had prepared him to meet such a man, and to deal with him in the right way. The more he talked the more his ideas grew, and the more certain he was that he had tapped at last a gold mine. Moreover, on this occasion he knew that he had played a stronger card than any he had ever held before; his glance shifted to the figure of the girl, and he recognized that her white face had a power to charm gold out of the pockets of Mr. Gilbert Byfield, and that in her very innocence as to the plot lay Meggison's real safety. [95]

"You are excited, father dear," said Bessie, going to him with the intention to put him in his chair. But he boisterously put an arm about her, and stood thus in an attitude, facing the astonished Amelia and the contemptuous Aubrey.

"Excited! I should think so, indeed," he exclaimed. "Who would not be excited at the prospect of a sudden fortune—of an end to want and pinching and—and general meanness? Who would not be excited at the prospect of leaping, in one glorious moment, from Arcadia Street to affluence; of stepping in a moment gloriously out of the shadows in which for so long we have been plunged, into the splendid sunshine of riches and plenty? Excited!—I am drunk with excitement!"

"When you feel yourself fairly sober again, it mightn't be a bad idea to let us know what on earth you are talkin' about," suggested Aubrey, leaning against the mantelpiece, and presenting a bored expression to the company. "Not that I'm denyin', mind you, that you'd do a lot if you had the chance; you've always impressed that on us, so that we ain't likely to forget it. But what I argue is—show us something solid." [96]

Mr. Daniel Meggison laughed an easy laugh. "Something solid, sir," he ejaculated. "What if I tell you that I can to-night produce, if necessary, a sum of fifty pounds—"

"Father!" The girl was clinging to his arm, looking at him in bewilderment.

"What if I tell you that that is but the beginning—the forerunner of many similar sums? Yes, my child, your father has at last justified an existence that has in the past not perhaps been all that it might have been. For the future, my dear Bessie, I will make amends; for the future our relative positions will be changed. No longer shall you trouble about lodgers—no longer shall you weigh this and that, or reckon how much a shilling will do in this direction or in that; all that is done with. We have for the first time in our lives that very necessary thing—an income."

"But, father, I don't understand," she pleaded. "What has happened? It's only some dream—something that in your good heart you wish might come true—for my sake."

"I tell you it *has* come true!" he exclaimed. "The chance of a lifetime—a mere matter of fortunate speculation."

"Fortunate what?" demanded Aubrey contemptuously. "Where did you get the money to speculate?" [97]

"Borrowed capital," replied Meggison promptly. "What do you know of such matters? I hear of a great many things in the world—stocks and shares—this going up—that going down. It might have happened that I had plunged the family deeper into ruin even than before; that was a risk I had to take. But no"—he shook his head, and smiled with deep wisdom—"I knew from the beginning that I was right. A pound or two in the right direction—and a pound or two added to that. It mounted; it grew into a perfect snowball, which, rolling on, added to itself with every movement. So that to-night I stand before you revealed in my true colours. To all intents and purposes I am a rich man!"

She broke down then for the first time. It never occurred to her for a moment to doubt him; indeed she had always been secretly a little proud of this man, who was a little better, in the matter of dignity and deportment, than his fellows of Arcadia Street. Her life had at all times been a surprising thing of chances; this greater chance that had come was only what might in her dreams have been expected. Practical only in the matter of dealing with the small details of her daily life, she was utterly unpractical where it came to any question of dealing with the world. This was but a coming true of all the best dreams she had ever had.

She called him her dear, dear father; she blessed and praised him for his cleverness; she called the astonished Aubrey to witness that she had said over and over again that if only father had his chance he would do better than anyone. They were not to mind her tears; she had perhaps been a little tired and a little troubled at times; but all that was done with now, and they should see her bright and smiling. Above all, they had never had any real chance to show the best that was in them in the life that was done with from to-night! [98]

Mr. Aubrey Meggison was a little stunned. Feeling that perhaps it might be well if he ranged himself on the side of this new financier, he somewhat flabbily shook the hand of his parent, and murmured "Good old gov'nor!" as an encouragement to that gentleman to do even better yet. And then in a bewildered way, with Amelia the servant almost light-headed from sheer excitement, they sat down to a hastily provided supper, the better to discuss details.

"Of course you will understand that I have kept it all secret; I intended to spring a surprise upon you," said Daniel Meggison, between bites at an unaccustomed delicacy. "And I have done nothing by halves; in fact, I may tell you that I have already provided a place in the country—a mere modest cottage. Charming spot—Fiddler's Green, Sussex," he added carelessly, with a secret determination to discover from Gilbert exactly in what part of Sussex Fiddler's Green was situated.

"Oh, my dear!" whispered Bessie under her breath, as she looked at this new wonder. "The country—and a cottage! Is it a large cottage, father dear?"

"Largish," said Mr. Meggison cautiously. "Roomy place—and well furnished. Fishing, I understand, and other pursuits of a like nature."

"I will say that for the gov'nor—he has got large ideas," said Aubrey, with a solemn nod. "I wish he'd taken me into his confidence as to the locality—but still I'm not blaming him for that. Can't say I care much for the country *as* country—but I dare say I shall get used to it. Rummy thing, though, that you should have kept the game going so well that you haven't even added to your wardrobe, or changed your habits at all. He's a sly 'un, the gov'nor," added the young gentleman, with a wink at Bessie. [99]

"I intended that it should all be a surprise; moreover, I intended to assert myself, and to take for the first time my true position in the family," said Mr. Meggison. "In this matter you will have to take your time from me; when I say 'move,' we will move. Now, as I am perhaps a little excited,

I will just stretch my legs in the open air, and perhaps look in at my club for a moment or two."

By that time the man had fully persuaded himself that all he said was true—had fully made up his mind, in fact, that the great game on which he was embarked could be played out to the end by sheer bluff and cunning. Someone else was to pay the piper, but Mr. Daniel Meggison had quite made up his mind that he would call the tune. And so elated was he that he even unbent so far as to desire Aubrey to join him in that stroll to the Arcadia Arms; so that father and son went off arm in arm, with quite a new amiability sitting a little awkwardly upon them.

Meanwhile there was, of course, one person to whom it was absolutely necessary that the great news should be told—one person who would be glad for her sake, and yet, she hoped, a little sorry on his own account. She went out into that garden of her dreams, feeling a little strange now that the dreams were coming true—vaguely troubled in fact that there should be no more necessity for pretence. She was like a child that is promised with certainty a new and gorgeous toy, and yet looks back, in the very act of going to it, with regret at the broken, battered things left behind. [100]

Not that the place seemed poor or common; it could never be that, because of the memories it held. Nor did it look shabby even to-night, with the grander prospect opening out in Bessie's imagination; she would be in a sense regretful at the thought of leaving it, because so much had happened there—every poor sordid stick and stone of it meant so much more to her than to anyone else. She passed through the place now smilingly, looking and listening for her friend.

And the friend was there; in the strangest fashion he looked over the wall directly she emerged from the house. Of course he knew nothing of the great and glorious news; that was for her to tell him. Pride was in that thought, because all in a moment she was lifted nearer to him by reason of her new riches. She was greater even than this wonderful young man who could spend money recklessly on theatres and cabs. She went straight to him now, and told him without parley all the great news. He, expecting it, set himself to appear as surprised as she would expect to find him.

"Mr. Byfield—there's something I want to tell you," she began. "You've been my best friend—almost my only friend; so you must know before anyone else. It's great good news." [101]

"I'm very glad," he assured her, leaning on the wall, and looking down at her. "What has happened? Another and a splendid lodger?"

She laughed and shook her head—laughed more light-heartedly than he had ever known her. "It's nothing to do with lodgers; there are never going to be any lodgers any more," she said; and he thought how even the tired voice had changed in a little time. "Father has suddenly grown very rich!"

He stared at her for a moment in utter bewilderment; he could not understand. He was on the very point of correcting her, and of telling her that the strange fortune which had come to her father was a matter that would provide leisure for a period of a few weeks only, when he reflected that he must know nothing about it. Doubtless she had misunderstood old Meggison; that would be a matter to be set right afterwards.

"I'm very glad," he said cordially. "Very rich—is he? And what's he going to do with all his money?"

"He thought first of me; one might know he would do that," she said proudly. "He's taken a house in the country—and he's going to take me down there—and of course Aubrey."

"Oh—so Aubrey's going—is he?" said Gilbert slowly. "Anybody else?"

"I was only thinking, Mr. Byfield," she said shyly—"I was only thinking that we should be glad if you would come down. I know father would like it—and so should I. It's at Fiddler's Green." [102]

"I shall be delighted," he exclaimed, smiling at the thought of this strange invitation to his own place. "And I suppose you're going to stop there until you're quite well and strong again—eh? You'll be sorry to come back to Arcadia Street."

"But we're not coming back to Arcadia Street," she assured him. "Father's going to give it all up; we're going to live down there for ever. Think of it—in the country!"

The friendly darkness hid his bewildered face; he wondered what new blunder Daniel Meggison had plunged them all into. Even as that thought came to him the door at the end of the garden was opened, and old Meggison came in. He was singing to himself in a high cracked falsetto, and the hand that was not required to support him against the edge of the door was solemnly beating time to the tune. He closed the door, and leant against it; stared with drunken sternness at his daughter.

"Whash this?" he demanded. "Go in, m' child; go t' bed. Object mos' strongly—endanger precious life. Go t' bed!"

Bessie went in quickly, and her father, after a preliminary stagger, essayed to follow her. He was pulled up quickly by the stern hurried voice of Gilbert Byfield.

"What have you been telling her?" demanded the young man.

Mr. Meggison winked solemnly. "A little exaggel-exaggeration," he replied. "Splendid notion! Goo' night!"

CHAPTER VII

FAREWELL TO ARCADIA STREET

[103]

THE morning which followed that night of wild exaggerations found Mr. Daniel Meggison in a despairing mood. He knew that he had gone too far—understood that he had plunged not only himself but others into this new sea of deceit in which they must all struggle together, and from which only one hand—that of Mr. Gilbert Byfield—could drag them. In the calmer mood following upon a severe headache, and a petulant remembrance of certain absurd statements of the night before, Meggison saw that he must substantiate much of what had been said at the earliest possible opportunity. Bessie believed in him, and Bessie would require to be satisfied; if even that considerable sum of fifty pounds was to be wrung out of the matter, the game must be kept alive, for a few days at least.

In a sense, however, Bessie had taken the matter out of his hands. Her belief in him was so sublime and so fine that she had absolutely taken him at his word; and that morning the one or two lodgers who only paid when they were driven to it, and the one or two others who paid when by chance they had any money, had special interviews with a radiant girl in a shabby black frock, who told them with shining eyes that she was sorry to get rid of them, and that the bills did not matter. The house was to be given up; they were retiring to the country. So the lodgers went away puzzled, thereafter to make arrangements for other lodgings, where it was to be feared they might not find landladies who would deal with them so generously.

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Two lodgers were difficult to deal with: poor Harry Dorricott for one, and Simon Quarle for another. It was hard to turn Harry out into the world—harder still to make him understand that in one night his divinity had been removed far out of his reach. He did not understand in the least; he pleaded that he might have the new address, so that in time to come he could forward his long overdue account. For the rest, she cut short as delicately as she could his farewells and his protestations.

It was not so easy to get rid of Mr. Simon Quarle. Mr. Simon Quarle usually breakfasted late, because there was no business which claimed him, as in the case of the others; and this morning Bessie came upon him with a newspaper propped up against the cruet, and with a fork busily going over a breakfast that had been already cut up for greater expedition in eating. He looked up at her quickly as she came into the room, and then frowningly resumed his breakfast and his newspaper; which was in a sense his habit.

"If you please, Mr. Quarle—if I might speak to you," she began.

"Which is exactly what you're doing, you know," he retorted, not unkindly.

"I thought I should like to know when it would be suitable to you to go, Mr. Quarle."

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He laid down his fork very slowly, and looked up at her; picked up the fork again, and resumed his breakfast. "Don't talk nonsense, Bessie," he said.

"But, indeed, Mr. Quarle, I mean it," she urged. "The house is going to be sold up—and all the lodgers are going. Of course I'm very sorry——"

"And pray what's the execution for this time?" he demanded, laying down his fork finally with a sigh, and leaning back in his chair. "And how much is it?"

"You won't understand," she exclaimed, taking a seat at the further side of the table, and resting her chin on her folded hands, and smiling across at him. "You've been so very good to me always, Mr. Quarle, that I thought you'd be glad."

"Glad! Because once again you're in difficulties?"

"But we're not; it's quite the other way about," she exclaimed. "We're only getting rid of this place—and the lodgers—and you—because father has come into a lot of money, and is taking me down into the country."

"Your father has come into a lot of money?" The man burst into a laugh, and picked up his fork again. "Who's told him so?"

"Mr. Quarle—you are really most unkind," she said. "Father is much more clever than anyone has ever imagined; he has speculated and made money, while we have all thought that he has merely been living the life of a—gentleman—and doing nothing. Ask him yourself if you're not sure."

"I will," said Quarle grimly.

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"And will you please tell me when it will be convenient for you to go?" she asked again. "Oh, please don't think that I'm anxious to get rid of you; I'd like to keep you here for ever and ever; but of course I have to remember that things are so different—and that father and Aubrey must be considered. I'm sure you understand that."

Simon Quarle slowly laid down his fork for the last time, and pushed his plate away from him. "Come here," he said gruffly.

She got up, and came round the table, and stood close to him; he took one of the hands that was a little coarsened with work, and gently held it while he spoke to her; and his voice was altogether changed.

"When I came here first you were a bit of a girl in short frocks—shorter even than they are now—and I was sorry for you. I could have gone to other lodgings——"

"I'm glad you didn't, Mr. Quarle," she whispered.

"But I didn't. I came here because I liked the look of you, and I thought my bit of money might be useful. There was no woman in the world that was anything to me—and I had no chicks—no one who cared a button about me. I saw you grow up—and you didn't grow up half badly; and I suppose because I'm an old fool, I'm fond of you."

"I know," she said softly.

"Consequently, I don't want any tricks to be played, or any infernal nonsense to come into your life and to upset it. I'm not going to say anything about family matters, because I suppose after all a father's a father, no matter what color he is. Only I'm a business man, little Bessie, and we must know that everything is fair and square and straight. Do you understand?"

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"Yes, of course I understand; only I think none of us quite know what father is capable of," she responded.

"There I agree with you," he retorted grimly. "And I'll talk about going when I've had a chance to inquire into the matter. Don't turn me out before it's necessary; it happens that I'm rather a lonely man."

"You'll be able to come down and see us as often as you like—to stay with us," she reminded him; but to that he made no answer.

That arch-plotter Daniel Meggison had been spending an anxious hour or two in search of his patron. Inquiry at the front of the house next door elicited the information that Mr. Gilbert Byfield was having his bath; the landlady a little contemptuous concerning a man who found it necessary to wash all over every day. An impromptu peep over the wall at the back was equally useless. The only occupation left to Daniel Meggison was to saunter about the house, and to carry things with a high hand, and yet with a failing courage.

His man might escape at any moment, and go out into that world outside Arcadia Street, and never come back. The people with whom hitherto Daniel had had dealings were in the habit of repudiating a promise at a day or even an hour's notice; it was quite on the cards that this young man would do the same. Daniel Meggison began to wish that he had in some fashion got the thing reduced to writing; more than that, he began to doubt the actual value of that asset on which he had counted—his daughter. Therefore Simon Quarle, coming upon him unexpectedly, and thrusting his head out at him in characteristic fashion, found the man in no mood for questions.

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"It's all right," said Meggison, with a very distinct air of its being all wrong. "I have been lucky—fortunate; I have kept my eyes open."

"How much have you made?" demanded Quarle stolidly. "Always better to come to figures, you know."

"It doesn't concern you—and I am inclined to keep my particular figures to myself," snapped Daniel Meggison. "Suffice it that this system of living is ceasing; suffice it that I no longer find it necessary to depend for my income upon lodgers whose payments are not what they should be, and whose manners do not please me."

"Keep your temper, Meggison; there's nothing that should call for personal remarks. If you didn't like my manners you could have got rid of me years ago—always supposing, of course, that it suited me to go. Meantime, we're no nearer to this mysterious fortune—are we? Exactly in what particular investments were you so very lucky?"

"The investments were—were various," said Daniel Meggison, with a wave of the hand. "A little bit in this—and a little bit in that; it's taken quite a long time—but it's growing even now."

"Wonderful!" said Simon Quarle, nodding his head slowly. "Most remarkable. And so you sell up everything here—and you start for the country—eh? House cost much?"

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"I have merely—merely rented it—hired it for a period," said Meggison.

"What I shall do with you," said Quarle, with a bullying shake of his head at him, "will be to keep my eye on you. You've been doing something mysterious—something you don't want talked about; I shall find out presently what it is. You never were any good, you know—and you never will be. Don't wave your arms about, and don't splutter at me; bluster is the last dog that will frighten me. So far as you're concerned I don't care a snap of the fingers—but I do care about the girl."

"Sir—you are not the only one who cares about the girl," retorted Daniel Meggison. "It is for her sake that I have done this; it is on her account alone that I propose burying myself in the country, and having what will probably prove a devilish dull time of it. I decline to answer any further questions; it is no affair of yours."

He went away again on that hunt for Byfield; with the creeping on of the hours his courage had fallen more and more. He had burnt his boats, in the sense that even his daughter now was ranged against him in that mad business of giving up what had, at the best and the worst, been a livelihood for them all. He had hoped that she would have been content to take her cue from him, and to march a little behind his stride; he was appalled, now that he came to look at the thing from a common-sense point of view, to see that she was bringing to bear upon this new situation the characteristic energy that had helped her in the old one. He had forced her to be self-reliant in the past; that self-reliance now might well prove the undoing of them all. [110]

He was returning from a hurried visit to the Arcadia Arms when he met Gilbert Byfield in the street. He essayed a rather nervous "Good morning, Mr. Byfield, sir"; but it halted on his tongue as Byfield frowningly took him by the arm, and turned him round, and walked with him up the street. Without a word that young man conducted him to the door of that house in which he had taken a lodging; took him upstairs; and having got him into the room where the desk littered with papers stood, thrust him unceremoniously into a chair, and looked at him sternly over folded arms.

"Now, Mr. Daniel Meggison—let me know what the game is," said Gilbert.

"Game, Mr. Byfield, sir?" asked Daniel innocently. "I'm sure, so far as I'm concerned, there ain't any game; if I've been a bit playful in mentioning matters—a joke's a joke—and I——"

"There is no joke about this, Meggison," broke in Gilbert. "I want you to understand from the beginning that this is to be merely a holiday for the girl; whatever innocent lie you tell must not go beyond that. My cottage at Fiddler's Green is at your disposal for a few weeks; and that will be the end of it."

"Have I said different?" pleaded Daniel passionately. "A bit of money was what I've come into, and no more than that. I'll own that last night, Mr. Byfield, sir, I was excited—exhilarated—perhaps a little unduly happy. Mine has been a hard life, and if I may be said to have looked upon the rosy wine in a joyful moment, is that always to be thrown up in my face for ever after? Is there to be no charity extended to me?" [111]

"Last night you led your daughter to believe that this was no mere matter of a little sudden money to provide her with a holiday—but something in the nature of a fortune, that should mean ease and contentment for the rest of her days."

"A playful exaggeration; she perfectly understands this morning," said Daniel. "She knows her poor old father; she will take the thing in the right spirit, and be grateful. I am a man of imagination, Mr. Byfield, sir; I can assure you that a very ordinary duck with me may quite easily and legitimately become a swan."

"Well—so that you have explained it, I suppose it's all right," said Byfield slowly. "Only for her sake you must be careful."

"Careful, Mr. Byfield, sir?" exclaimed Daniel fervently. "From this moment I will be more than discreet. I was careless last night—reckless—unpardonably reckless. It shall not occur again; I'm annoyed with myself."

"Well—we'll say no more about it," said Gilbert, a little sorry and ashamed that he should have been so hard on anyone so abject. "Get her away to Fiddler's Green as soon as possible; I'll arrange that the house shall be ready, and that servants shall be there to look after you. There's a housekeeper and others there, and they shall be instructed that for the time being you are master, and that they take their orders from you."

"That will be highly satisfactory," said Daniel, cheering up wonderfully at the thought of the new importance that was to be his. "But if you will pardon my suggesting such a thing—there is a little matter of ready money——" [112]

"Oh, you shall have ready money," said Gilbert impatiently. "There will be certain things to be bought—certain expenses to be paid. I suggest that you should be at Fiddler's Green for the next month or six weeks. You will, I suppose, get someone to look after the place—your own house I mean—in your absence?"

"I can quite safely leave that to my daughter," said Daniel, with a sort of cold shudder going through him at the remembrance of what had already been done in regard to the house. "She will provide for everything, as she has always done. A most reliable good girl, Mr. Byfield, sir."

The little man was so quiet now, and so humble and grateful, that Gilbert had no hesitation in sitting down to write a cheque for a certain sum to meet initial expenses. In the very act of writing it he looked up, and spoke to the waiting Daniel Meggison; he was petulantly anxious that his own point of view should be understood.

"You will understand, of course, Meggison, that I do this very willingly and very cheerfully—just as I might do something to help some poor child that could not help herself. For she *is* a child—isn't she?"

"A mere babe, sir, in the ways of the world—a toddler, who should never have left her mother's knee," replied Meggison sentimentally. "Had she been, of course, anything else I should never for an instant have consented to this." He was carefully folding the cheque as he spoke, and was [113]

making rapid calculations in his own mind.

"One other point, Meggison. It is possible that your daughter might suspect that I had had something to do with the matter; I believe she thinks that I am a little richer than the people she generally meets. Therefore to avoid that, I have made up my mind to go away for a week, so that she may not in any way connect me with what is being done. You seem to have told your tale well—rather too well, if anything—and she believes you; when you come back here you will find me perhaps in this place again, quite in the ordinary way. So far as money is concerned, you will find your credit good at Fiddler's Green, and my housekeeper will order what is necessary for you. More than that, I will keep in touch with you, and will let you have what other ready money you may want. But no more talk of fortunes, Meggison, if you please."

"Certainly not, Mr. Byfield, sir; that was an indiscretion. I shall have a month or six weeks in which to explain to Bessie that I cannot go on beyond a certain time; she will understand perfectly. As for your notion about going away—I applaud it, sir. Splendid notion!"

"I'm glad you approve," said Gilbert dryly. "I will write down here exactly what you're to do to get to the house, so that you may in your daughter's eyes appear to be already familiar with it; and you will understand that to all intents and purposes you will be master there so long as you are in it. No one will question your right to be there—and no one will interfere with you." [114]

Thus it happened, in the little drama that was afterwards to be played out so strangely, that Gilbert Byfield, the better to preserve his secret, left his lodging, and went back into the more seemly world that knew him; while Daniel Meggison, knowing that the coast was clear, set his hand boldly to the work he had to do, and burnt what boats were left to him with a gay good will.

The cheque was cashed; and from that moment, with money in his pocket and apparently unlimited credit for the first time in his life, Mr. Daniel Meggison flung caution to the winds, and hurled himself with zest into the new life that was opening before him. Arcadia Street was shaken to its very foundations at finding that the Meggisons were leaving—that the Meggisons were arraying themselves in new clothing, that the Meggisons had turned their lodgers adrift, and that the Meggisons actually had money to spend. Arcadia Street heard rumours, and flung them further out into Islington, and even onward into Highbury and other districts. If you wanted a quick word for lucky or fortunate or anything of that sort, you simply said, "What price Meggison?" and clicked your tongue; and so became in a moment wonderfully expressive.

Bessie, for her part, had set about the business, if not exactly with caution, at least with some forethought. The respectable part of the furniture fetched a good price; a landlord who had long given up hope compromised matters, and went away congratulating himself on having got anything at all. Everyone suggested that the Meggisons might have behaved better, but that on the other hand they might have behaved worse. So that in the long run most people were satisfied; while quite a number suggested that, after all, if any luck was coming to Arcadia Street, Mr. Meggison—always quite the gentleman, mind you!—was the man who should properly have it. [115]

There came that tumultuous moment when the bare and empty house was to be left, and when, with such personal luggage as they had contrived to cram into several very new trunks, they were about to set out on their way to Fiddler's Green. Aubrey Meggison, not desiring to be associated with so public a departure, had casually suggested that he would "turn up at the station"; Mr. Meggison had gone out hurriedly, with a promise to be back in a moment; the actual business of leaving was left to Bessie. The small servant Amelia had drifted away hopelessly back to that institution from which she had come, there to wait until such time as another situation should offer itself.

The cab was at the door, and the trunks were piled upon it; and Arcadia Street had turned out to see the great departure. All the children of Arcadia Street had long since seized upon points of vantage, and had taken up positions on the pavement, leaving only a narrow lane, down which Bessie must presently pass. The elders stood behind, and suggested with sighs what they would have done if by any chance Dame Fortune had swooped upon them. By all accounts, it seemed unanimously resolved that they would have made something of a "splash," though in what particular water they did not specify. And while they waited, Bessie had gone through the blank and empty house for a final look at it—and so out into that poor garden of her dreams. [116]

The garden was stripped now; the box that had formed the ottoman was naked and broken; the whole place a wilderness. Yet, as she stood in it for a moment, she seemed to see it as it had been, and as it never would be again; looked with eyes that were bright with tears at the familiar shabby place.

"Good-bye—old garden!" she whispered. "You did your best for me—but you never had a real chance. Yet I have loved you as I shall never love any other place, however beautiful; because everything that was good and kind has happened to me here. Good-bye; I hope someone may love you half as well as I have done!"

So at last she fluttered out of the house, and into the cab, with a kindly word or two for those that pressed about her; and quite naturally, as it seemed, told the man to stop at the corner—at the Arcadia Arms. Someone raised a feeble cheer; and one man, beating time, amazingly started—"For he's a jolly good fellow"; then the cab rolled away, with the younger part of Arcadia Street trailing after it.

Outside the Arcadia Arms it waited, with the girl sitting quietly inside. It having been impressed upon Mr. Daniel Meggison inside that he was wanted, and that the time had come for farewells, he was presently prevailed upon to emerge. He appeared surrounded by friends, with a new silk hat, that had been rubbed in places the wrong way, upon the back of his head, and a large cigar with the band upon it in a corner of his mouth, and a little uncertain as to what to do with his legs. He shook hands with all and sundry, and murmured that he would never forget them; was helped into the cab by a dozen willing hands; and left to Arcadia Street the lasting remembrance that they had seen him, as the cab drove away, burst into tears.

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Arcadia Street, having been shaken to its depths, spent what was left of the day in discussing the matter, and in talking about the Meggisons in general, and Mr. Daniel Meggison in particular. And quite late at night there were little knots of people gathered outside the empty house, still talking of the glory that had fallen upon those who had departed from it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRINCE CUTS THE KNOT

[118]

A DULL week in that civilization to which he obstinately refused to be accustomed brought Gilbert Byfield back again—naturally, as it seemed—to Arcadia Street. It had been a week spent practically between three points of a compass which represented Enid and her mother—the club—and his rooms. A fourth point, of a smaller sort, was represented by Mr. Jordan Tant, who hovered about him anxiously, and wondered without disguise why the man had ever come back at all.

Jordan Tant had made one or two remarks concerning the strange little shabby girl of Arcadia Street, but had found, something to his annoyance, that Gilbert appeared to take no interest whatever in that matter, and was quite indifferent to anything that might be said concerning it. Tant groaned in spirit at the thought that after all Gilbert had returned to the ways of the world to which he belonged, and that in due course Mr. Tant would be an interested spectator at some such place as St. George's, Hanover Square, what time Gilbert Byfield held the willing Enid by the hand.

Yet, as has been said, within a week Gilbert disappeared again—turning into Arcadia Street, appropriately dressed for it, late on a warm evening just as the lamps were being lighted. He had kept his rooms, paying for them some time in advance; he put his key in the lock, and opened the door, and went up. Lighting the gas in the shabby little place, he saw that everything was just as he had left it, and nodded slowly with satisfaction. While he was still looking about him, his landlady bustled in to give him welcome, and to ask if there was anything he required. He told her that there was nothing he wanted that night, and somewhat curtly dismissed her when he saw that she was on the point of beginning to relate some piece of news that was doubtless of tremendous interest to her, if not to him. She went away, and he was left alone.

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Scarcely five minutes had elapsed when there came a quick thud at the door, and it was opened unceremoniously enough. Looking round frowningly, Gilbert saw before him the thick-set figure of the man Simon Quarle—that man who lived at the house next door, and who had once thrust himself so unwarrantably upon Gilbert in the garden. The man was hat-less, and his strong almost scowling face was thrust forward with its habitual bullying look.

"Good evening!" said Quarle abruptly, as he closed the door.

"Good evening!" replied Gilbert, not very graciously. "You wish to speak to me?"

"I do; I've come up for that purpose. At the time I'm living just below you."

"In this house?" Gilbert stared at him in some astonishment.

Simon Quarle nodded. "In this house," he said. "I didn't want to go far when I left next door, and I found that they had a couple of rooms vacant here. Nothing like so comfortable—but it serves."

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"But why have you left next door?" asked Gilbert, after a pause.

"I left next door, if you wish to know, because next door left me," retorted Quarle. "You've been away, so I suppose you don't know. The Meggisons have gone."

"Yes—I know that; I understood that they were going—into the country. But that's no reason why you should leave, surely?"

"I can't very well live in an empty house with no furniture," snapped Quarle, sitting down and rubbing his hands slowly backwards and forwards on his knees. "At least—I don't intend to, while there are furnished rooms to be had."

"Empty house? . . . no furniture? I'm afraid I don't understand," said Gilbert slowly, and yet with an uncomfortable feeling in his mind that he did understand after all. "Will you please tell me plainly what has happened to my little friend—our little friend—Bessie?"

Simon Quarle stopped rubbing his knees for a moment, and frowned. "I don't exactly know why

you should feel yourself privileged to call her 'Bessie'; I've known her longer than you have, and I'm older than you are. However, that's neither here nor there. The plain fact of it is that that arch tippler and shuffler, Daniel Meggison, has suddenly come into some money—or made some money—or stolen some money. He boasts that for the rest of his natural days he need not do any work (not that he has ever done any to my knowledge before)—and that he is going to live like a lord in the country—for the sake of his daughter. The letting of lodgings being quite out of the question for such a man in such a position, the house and all the crazy furniture has been sold up—and the family's gone."

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Gilbert Byfield stood at his desk, looking down at it, and fingering the papers upon it in an aimless fashion. He saw clearly enough the position in which he was placed; understood only too well that Mr. Daniel Meggison had decided to play that great game of make-believe in the grand manner, being certain in his own mind that Gilbert Byfield would hesitate to stop him. The pretty fiction which Gilbert had himself invented must be kept alive until such time as Daniel Meggison decided he had had his fling, and was prepared to come back to the sober things of life. That at least was Gilbert's first thought.

"I suppose, Mr. Quarle, our friend Meggison did not happen to mention to you what sum of money he had secured—did he?"

"I couldn't get a word out of him as to that—nor could I discover in what particular investments he had been interesting himself," replied Simon Quarle. "It struck me as somewhat peculiar that a man of that type should suddenly come into money—by his own judicious speculation. In other words, Mr. Byfield, there's a mystery about it."

"Well—at all events it doesn't concern me," said Gilbert, a little coldly; for he was not inclined to give his confidence to this abrupt bullying man who had so unceremoniously invaded his rooms.

"No—of course not," retorted Quarle. "How should it concern you? In a sense, you know, Mr. Byfield," he went on, with a slyness that was ominous—"I'm sorry for you. Things have been taken out of your hands a little; you haven't been able to do quite what you desired—have you?"

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"I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said Gilbert, turning over the few letters that were on his table, and idly picking up one, the handwriting of which was unfamiliar.

"The night I caught you trespassing you declared to me that you wanted to help the girl—to do something for her."

"Well—and I didn't succeed. What then?" Gilbert glanced up at him with an impatient frown.

"Very strange that it should happen that within a matter of days of that time her father—penniless ne'er-do-well—should suddenly come into money—eh?"

"A mere curious coincidence," responded the other quietly. "You'll excuse me?" He indicated the letter he held, and Simon Quarle nodded.

Gilbert ripped open the envelope, letting it fall to the floor as he unfolded the letter. Mr. Simon Quarle stooped forward politely and picked up the envelope; let his eyes glance across it for a moment as he laid it carefully on the desk. Then he sat with his hands on his knees, and with his head thrust forward, looking out of half-closed eyes at the man who was reading the letter.

The letter was from Bessie. It was a grateful, passionate, almost childish thing—written to a friend who would understand her great new happiness; and as he read it the man's face relaxed into a smile, and his heart softened. After all, the cost was nothing, as compared with this fine fruit; the game might go on for some time longer at least. She was a child, with the heart and mind of a child unspoiled; and it had been strangely given to him to have the power of bringing her into a world where for the first time she tasted joy—where for the first time she appeared to be radiantly happy. Yes—the cost was nothing.

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His musings were cut short by the dry, hard voice of Simon Quarle. "So she writes to you?" he said.

Gilbert looked round at him, visibly annoyed. "How do you know that?" he demanded.

Simon Quarle pointed a finger at the envelope he had placed on the desk. "I know the writing," he replied. "The weekly bills used to be made out by her; I've got dozens of 'em. Well—there's nothing to be offended about; how's she getting on?"

There was a curious note of wistfulness—almost a note of jealousy in the man's tones; he seemed to rage at the thought that this other man could have a letter from her that brought a softening smile to his face, whilst he—that older friend Simon Quarle—sat there empty-handed. The world was a bitter place just then, and he resented its bitterness more than usual.

"She's well—and she's very happy," said Gilbert grudgingly.

"Anything about her dear father?"

"Father also appears to be very well—though nothing is said about his particular happiness," replied the younger man, with a glance at the letter. "You will be interested also perhaps to learn that Aubrey finds the country somewhat dull . . . but perhaps you're not interested in Aubrey?"

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"I am not," replied Quarle. "I don't know that I'm particularly interested in anyone except the girl." He got up, and moved across the room, with his hands clasped behind his back; stopped without looking round, and put a question. "How long, Mr. Byfield, does this precious fortune last?"

"How in the world should I know?" demanded Gilbert, more savagely than he intended. "You'd better ask Meggison; he knows all about it. And may I suggest, Mr. Quarle, that I'm busy, and would rather be alone?"

Simon Quarle turned slowly, and walked towards the door; stopped there, and looked over his shoulder back at Gilbert. "I'm sorry, Mr. Byfield," he said, in a tone that was singularly gentle—"I'm sorry that you find it necessary to remind me that I'm not wanted; I'm more sorry still that you shut me out, not only from your room but from your secrets. Good night to you!"

"Stop!" cried Gilbert quickly, as the hand of the other man was upon the door. "Come back, please; let there be no misunderstanding about this. I have not meant to offend you in any way; I did not mean to be abrupt. But you must not connect me in any way with this matter."

The other man came slowly back into the room, and stood for a moment or two with his head bent, and his hands clasped behind him, and the toe of one boot grinding slowly into the carpet. Without looking up he said at last—"I'm an older man than you are, Byfield—and I know what a beastly world we live in, from some points of view. Talk to me of Meggison or his worthless son, and I don't care a snap of the fingers; tell me about this girl, and the old blood in me fires up as it might have done if it had ever been ordained that I should have a child of my own. That's foolish, I know—but for once it happens to come straight from my heart. I have a love for her that I have for nothing else on God's earth; and I can't stand by now, and see her in all innocence rushing on to a place where the feet of a stronger woman might not tread. Do you or do you not understand for one moment what you're doing?"

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"I think so," said Gilbert quietly.

"I don't think you do. As I understand it, you've cheated this girl—tried to draw her to you by a beggarly underhand payment of pounds shillings and pence. That's nothing to you, and you can keep it up for a long time; but where's it going to end? Who's going to tell her the truth—you or I?"

They faced each other in the shabby room—white-faced. "What do you mean by the truth?" asked Byfield at last.

"The truth—that your money buys the clothes she wears and the food she eats; that every copper she drops into the hand of a beggar is so much of your money. Who is to tell her that?" Simon Quarle did not flinch as he stood waiting for his answer.

"You put the thing crudely, Mr. Quarle," said Gilbert at last. "I admit that on the face of it the thing may be reduced to that; you have surprised my secret, and you probably know as well as I do that I am paying the small sum of money for this little whim—which pleases me and can do no harm to anyone else. Stop—don't interrupt me; I repeat that it can do no harm to anyone else, while on the other hand it may do a great deal of good. The money is nothing to me—what it can buy means a great deal to her."

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"But the end—the end of it!" persisted Quarle. "What of that?"

"Let the end take care of itself," replied Gilbert. "I would not have said so much as this to any other man; but I do you the justice to believe that you are honestly very fond of her, and that you would do a great deal on your own account to help her. Therefore I say that for the present the matter must be left where it is."

"What was the original intention in your mind—apart from merely helping her; what did you purpose doing?" demanded Quarle.

"I planned a holiday for the girl—and God knows she needed it badly. Our friend Meggison probably—certainly misunderstood me."

"Exactly." Quarle nodded slowly, and grinned. "It was the purpose of our friend Meggison to misunderstand you," he said. "Meggison, for the first time in his life, finds a rich man with a soft spot in his heart; it is a chance not to be missed. He proceeds to lie to everyone; to his daughter, who believes in him completely—to others only too willing to believe him. He displays some money; he has a house in the country to which he is to go— By the way—that house in the country?"

"Is mine," said Gilbert. "I originally intended that Meggison should take the girl down there for a few weeks; that they should then return to their own house. You know for yourself what he has done."

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"The question is not so much what he has done as what you are going to do," said the other. "The bubble must burst some day, you know."

Gilbert Byfield picked up the letter again, and looked at it attentively; turned to the other man, and tapped the paper with a forefinger. "She's very well—and very happy," he said slowly. "Think of that, Quarle: for the first time in all her short life she is very well and very happy. I say to you—to the devil with your conventions and your laws—your prejudices and what not; this child is

happy. I think you know in your heart that I shall do her no harm; in mercy let her remain where she is, for a little time at least, until I can decide what is to be done. Would you drag her back here again to slave for that drunken father and that lout of a brother; to face semi-starvation, and bills and duns, and every other sordid item that her life should never have known? Would you do that, Quarle?"

"Yes—I would," replied the other stoutly. "And keep her honest."

"She'll keep honest on her own account," said Gilbert. "For the present, I tell you the thing must remain as it is. Meggison won't speak, for his own sake; you won't speak—unless you want to break her heart."

"I'll promise nothing," said Quarle angrily. "You think you've got me in a corner so that I can't move—but I'll find a way to tell the truth without hurting her—or if I do hurt her a little it'll only be for her good. Oh—I wish I could make you understand what you're doing!"

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"I tell you the thing was begun innocently enough," replied Gilbert. "I'm not responsible for what has happened—except that I ought to have known what kind of man Meggison was, and so have been prepared. For the present the thing must stand—and you must be silent."

"It shan't stand an hour longer than I can prevent," was Simon Quarle's final declaration as he went away.

Gilbert Byfield, reviewing the matter carefully so far as it had gone, was disposed first to be righteously indignant, and then to be amused. That which he had done on the mere quick generous impulse of the moment had suddenly turned into something so enormous, and yet so cunningly devised, that he did not quite see how he was to get out of it; on the other hand, the sheer audacity of it held his unwilling admiration even against his better judgment. At one moment he told himself that he must honestly and frankly declare what had happened, and must set himself right in the eyes of the girl; the next he saw that to do that would be to break down her self-respect completely, and to strip old Daniel Meggison of whatever virtues he possessed in the eyes of his daughter—both clearly possible. Therefore, not knowing what to do, he adopted what seemed to be the wisest course—and did nothing at all.

Arcadia Street having grown distasteful, alike because there was no Bessie Meggison next door, and because the stern face of Mr. Simon Quarle fronted him now and then on the staircase and in the street, he determined once more to go back to his own ordinary mode of life, at least for a week or two; and so came again in touch with Mr. Jordan Tant and the rest. If he thought at all of what might be happening at Fiddler's Green, he steadfastly strove to banish the matter from his mind, and told himself that in that he had succeeded. Nevertheless he was restless and unhappy; and his spirit hovered, as it were, in waking and sleeping moments alike, between Arcadia Street and Fiddler's Green, Sussex.

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A fortnight later found him back again in Arcadia Street—there to discover another letter from Bessie, gently suggesting that he might have found time to write to her, and with a little general note of wistfulness in it that tugged at his heartstrings. Almost he determined to go down and see her; yet knew full well that he dared not do that, for the simple reason that he could not face those clear eyes and look into their depths. At last he told himself that he would get to work there in Arcadia Street, and would leave the problem to work itself out.

Like most problems it was destined to work itself out in a wholly unexpected fashion. It began to work itself out the very next day, with the arrival of Mr. Simon Quarle, who came in quickly, and closed the door, and looked at Byfield with a face of gloom. Gilbert waved his hand towards a chair to indicate that this unceremonious guest should sit down.

"Well—I've been to Fiddler's Green," was Quarle's first utterance, as he seated himself, and squared his shoulders, and frowned at his host.

"You at Fiddler's Green? What for?"

"To see for myself what was going on; to understand for myself how the Meggisons stand riches," said Quarle, evidently in a great state of grim triumph. "I've seen them—talked with them—been snubbed by one at least of them. Would you like to hear about it?"

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"How's the girl?—how's Bessie?" asked Gilbert.

"Oh—I grant you'd be pleased with her," retorted Quarle grudgingly. "As pretty as a picture—and with a smile in her eyes for the first time. But the other two! The dogs—the scorpions—the blood-suckers!"

"Steady! I'm sure there's nothing to get excited about. What have they done to you?"

"I stand for nothing—and I don't complain," replied Quarle. "But when I see that snivelling loungee Daniel Meggison cutting a dash, sir, in a hired carriage—when I see that ardent billiard-room enthusiast Aubrey Meggison cutting an absurd figure about the country lanes on a hired hack, and slapping his leg with a riding whip in the bar of the local inn—when I think of the bills that are running up, and the price there'll be to pay—plus the necessary explanations——"

"That will do, thank you, Quarle," said Gilbert, with a new gravity upon him. "I'll go down there at once; I've delayed too long. I give you my word I didn't think it was coming to this—I thought at least they'd have the decency to be quiet."

"Decency, sir, is a word they don't understand. Only I tell you I'm bitterly sorry for the girl. If I could in any way drown father and son, or smother them, or get rid of them somehow, I'd cheerfully do it, if it would keep her in ignorance of the truth. One word, Byfield: you've got to be mighty careful, because either Daniel Meggison or the boy is mean enough, if the game appears to be up, to tell the truth—and not to tell it with too nice a tongue. Be careful." [131]

Gilbert Byfield had crossed the room and had taken up a railway guide. There was a look of decision about him that impressed Simon Quarle. While the young man was busily fluttering the pages the door was opened, and Mr. Jordan Tant sauntered in, as immaculate-looking as ever. He glanced at the sturdy figure of Simon Quarle, and then looked across at Byfield; coughed to attract the latter's attention.

Gilbert turned and looked at him. "Hullo, Tant," he exclaimed. "I'm sure I'm very glad to see you. Let me make you known to my friend—Mr. Simon Quarle."

The two nodded distantly after the introduction, and Tant stood awkwardly while Gilbert still fluttered the pages. At last Gilbert flung the book aside petulantly, and crossed over to his friend, and shook hands with him.

"What's brought you to Arcadia Street?" he asked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, my dear Gilbert, I do not come exactly on my own account, but for somebody else," responded Mr. Tant. "Mrs. Ewart-Crane wanted a message conveyed to you, and I couldn't think of your number, although, as I told her, I knew the house when once I got into this beastly locality. Consequently, here I am."

"My friend Mr. Tant doesn't like Arcadia Street," said Gilbert, turning to Simon Quarle.

"The young gentleman doesn't look as if he did," retorted Quarle, with a curling lip. [132]

"What I always say is, 'Let us draw the line,'" said Mr. Tant severely. "However, my dear Gilbert, the message is this. The old lady—(by which term, of course, I refer not at all discourteously to Mrs. Ewart-Crane)—the old lady is anxious to get away into the country; thinks Enid is not looking well, and so forth."

"I'm sorry," said Gilbert absently. "But what can I do?"

"There's that beautiful place of yours that you leave empty so much—down at Fiddler's Green. Now, if you could let her have that——"

"I can't; it's quite out of the question," broke in Gilbert harshly, with a glance at Simon Quarle.

"But, my dear Gilbert, she seems quite set on it," urged Mr. Tant. "There can be no reason——"

"The reason is, young gentleman, that the house is full already," said Simon Quarle. "Full of people, I mean."

"You must understand, Tant," said Gilbert, without looking at him, "that I've lent the house to some friends of mine—for a time. Tell Mrs. Ewart-Crane that I'm sorry; under any other circumstances I should have been delighted."

"Oh, very well, my dear Byfield," said Mr. Tant. Then, as a thought occurred to him, he suggested quickly—"Perhaps after your friends have left—gone away from the house——"

"Mr. Byfield doesn't quite know when that's going to happen," said Simon Quarle maliciously. "These friends are down there as a sort of permanent arrangement—stop-as-long-as-they-like sort of thing." [133]

"You seem to know a great deal about it," replied Tant, in his precise tones.

"I do; I've just been to see them," Simon Quarle answered, with a grim laugh. "The sort of guests, young gentleman, that you don't get rid of in a hurry, I can assure you."

Gilbert plunged into the dangerous conversation hurriedly. "I don't think anything more need be said, Mr. Quarle," he exclaimed. "If you'll excuse me now, there are things I want to talk to Mr. Tant about. Good day to you!"

Simon Quarle got up, and walked to the door of the room; turned there, and spoke with characteristic bluntness. "Sorry if I've hurt anybody's feelings," he said. "Of course, it's no business of mine."

He was gone, and the two younger men faced each other. It is safe to say that Jordan Tant had always at the back of his mind one thought dominating all others; the thought of Enid. The fact that Byfield had gruffly refused even to consider the suggestion that the house should be lent to her and her mother set the man's wits to work; the fact that another man who obviously lived in Arcadia Street knew all about the strange occupants of that house at Fiddler's Green stirred into being a process commonly known as "putting two and two together." Mr. Jordan Tant did some hard thinking.

"Please explain to Mrs. Ewart-Crane why I can't let her have the house—and make my apologies!" said Gilbert after a pause.

"I will certainly do that—when I know what to say," said Tant, putting his head on one side, and [134]

looking at his friend with a smile. "My dear Gilbert—who have you been giving away your property to?"

"I have not been giving it away at all," retorted Gilbert. "I've simply lent the house to some friends. Say no more about it."

Mr. Jordan Tant said no more about it. After an awkward pause he made a remark, which in the connection was certainly startling. "By the way, Gilbert, I noticed as I came into this house that your little friend next door—the Princess, as you called her—has flitted."

Byfield, startled, swung round upon him. "And pray what the devil do you think that's got to do with Fiddler's Green?" he demanded savagely.

Jordan Tant fairly leapt in his astonishment. "Really—I never said— Why, Gilbert—you don't mean to say that you've sent her down to Fiddler's Green?"

All this interference with what he had come to regard as his private plans began to have a maddening effect upon Gilbert Byfield. He had savagely to acknowledge to himself that he had failed; that that impulsive generosity of which he had been guilty had been taken advantage of by those in whose hands he was practically powerless. The thought of that did not tend to mend his temper; and Tant was a handy victim. Byfield squared his shoulders, and set his hands on his hips, and gazed down at the shrinking little man with blazing eyes.

"And suppose I have sent her to Fiddler's Green—and suppose I intend to keep her there just as long as it pleases me—what then, my Tant?" he bellowed. "What do you, in your secure and comfortable life, hedged about by every conventionality, and not daring to stir by so much as a hair's breadth from that line you so often draw and so often talk about—what do you know of the world and the people who live in it? Can't a man stretch out the hand of friendship to a woman without your smug lips opening, and your smooth tongue beginning to bleat this and that and the other? Must you always think that we're in this world only to do wrong—that there are no better impulses in any one of us? I'll tell you now in so many words: the child of the white face and the shabby frock is down at Fiddler's Green at my expense—and she's having a holiday. Have you anything to say to that?" [135]

Jordan Tant backed away from him, and waved him off with protesting hands. "My dear Byfield—I have not said a word about it; it's not my business," he pleaded. "You have always been in the habit of doing unconventional things, and I suppose you will do them until the end of the chapter; but I am not criticizing. It's very kind of you—very thoughtful—and all that sort of thing. Necessarily one wonders a little what the world will say—and one is a little sorry for the girl, who is doubtless quite respectable—in her own sphere of life—and quite nice."

"I notice everyone's sorry for the girl," retorted Gilbert, a little bitterly. "I think the girl can take care of herself, and I think, even if it came to the point where she understood the real truth of the matter, she would come also to understand my motive."

"Oh, I see; then she doesn't understand yet?" said Tant slowly. [136]

"How the devil could I tell her that I was going to provide her with money—and a house—and various comforts? You've no delicacy, Tant. No—I arranged better than that; ostensibly her father is the man who provides the money; he is supposed to have come into a fortune unexpectedly. Now are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly," said Jordan Tant, looking at the floor. "It's all very simple—isn't it?"

Mr. Jordan Tant carried his amazed face out of Arcadia Street, and back to the other end of London; presented it in due course to Mrs. Ewart-Crane and to Enid. Suffering himself to be questioned closely, he refused to speak ill of a friend, but shook his head over that friend nevertheless; and so had the thing gradually screwed out of him.

"I wouldn't have you think for a moment that I'm saying anything against poor old Byfield," said Tant gloomily. "What I do think is that these designing people have got hold of him, and that, to use a vulgar phrase, they will bleed him pretty heavily unless someone steps in. He's mad about the girl; but of course he hasn't reckoned with the family. They'll stick to him like leeches; he'll never be able to shake them off."

"My dear," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane, turning to her daughter a determined face—"I think it is about time that we interfered. Apart from every other consideration, we owe a duty to a friend who, however wrong-headed he may be, is at least a gentleman. I shall most certainly step in, and shall understand once for all, if only for my own satisfaction, what these people intend to do. I dare say a small cottage or at the worst some rooms are to be obtained somewhere in Fiddler's Green; we will go down, and see for ourselves what is happening." [137]

"Personally, mother, I don't think I should interfere," said Enid. "If Gilbert likes to be so silly it's his affair, and it would be somewhat undignified on our part to interfere."

"Undignified or not, I intend to do it," retorted Mrs. Ewart-Crane. "Mr. Tant shall go down and secure a place for us; if I don't have those people out of Gilbert's house in something under a week, I shall be very much surprised!"

Meanwhile, Gilbert Byfield had started himself for the scene of operations. A telegram had flashed down, addressed to Bessie; a telegram had flashed back eagerly in reply; and here he was

on his way to Fiddler's Green. And all the thoughts he had tended in one direction.

"I did it for the girl, and for her alone. Ask yourself, Byfield, if there's anyone in the world like her; ask yourself if you've ever met anyone cut out of the living heart of life as she is; compare her with any woman you have ever seen. Be strong, man; cut the knot yourself, and get her out of the net in which you're both involved. Think of her—and think of yourself; nothing else matters."

His mind was pretty clearly made up as to what he should do by the time the train drew in at the platform at Fiddler's Green, and he was looking about to see if by chance someone had come to meet him.

CHAPTER IX AND THE PRINCESS TIES IT AGAIN

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DISAPPOINTMENT sat heavily on the face of Gilbert Byfield as an obsequious porter who knew him pulled open the door of the carriage and seized his bag. For there was no one with a familiar face in sight on the little platform; and Gilbert had rather hoped that there might have been someone with a smile to welcome him, and a hand to clasp his own.

Few passengers ever get out at Fiddler's Green, and on this occasion there was only a stout and heavy farmer, and an elderly woman with a plethoric basket. True, at the end of the platform was a young girl in a white dress, and with a slim and pretty figure; but young girls in white dresses were nothing to Gilbert Byfield at that moment. He followed the porter gloomily, muttering something to the effect that he supposed he'd better have the fly.

It was only when he was actually giving up his ticket that he found himself face to face with the girl in the white dress; and then discovered that he was holding her hands, and gazing at her—and that it was Bessie, half laughing and half crying, and saying again and again how glad she was to see him. And all in a moment the sun was shining, and Fiddler's Green was beautiful; and the fly was a musty affair, good enough to carry on his bag to the house, but not to be ridden in under any circumstances.

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They went on a little shyly and happily down the long road that led from the station towards the house. Once or twice she looked at him as he strode along beside her; and she laughed with the conscious shyness of a child, and yet with complete happiness. Presently, when it came about that a turn of the road hid them from the sight of the station or of any houses beyond, she slipped her hand into his; and so held it, as a child might have done, while they walked on side by side. And then it was that the problem he had to face loomed large, and asked fierce questions of the man, and would not be denied. Questions hard to answer, with that happy face beside him, and with those clear eyes looking up into his own. He found himself wishing passionately that the time might never come when those eyes should change, or should look at him with any indignation or any sorrow. Which might well happen, as he knew.

"Tell me everything," he said after a pause. "About your life—and what you do—and how you spend your days. This is such a changed Bessie that I scarcely seem to know her."

"For the better, Mr. Byfield?" She looked at him with no seriousness at all, and he gave her a gay answer naturally enough.

"Oh—this isn't the Bessie of Arcadia Street at all; this is a being in a white frock who belongs naturally and properly to the country. I shall believe presently that you've been here all your life."

"I believe it already," she retorted. "Arcadia Street seems miles and miles away, as though it had never existed at all; I find myself wondering sometimes exactly how one turned into it—and what the houses were like—and if they really were as small and mean as they seem to be now. You'll like Fiddler's Green," she added quickly.

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"I'm sure I shall. And so I suppose you are really and truly very happy?"

She did not answer for a moment; she walked on beside him, and he noticed as he glanced at her that her face was grave. "So happy sometimes, Mr. Byfield, that I'm afraid," she said steadily. "I wake at night in the great room that is mine, and I lie listening to the silence, and wondering if it's all true. I dread sometimes to open my eyes in the morning, for fear that I may open them in the old narrow room in the old narrow house in Arcadia Street; I'm frightened when they knock at my door in the morning, lest it should be Amelia come to say that the baker has stopped credit, or the milkman wants a little something on account. You don't know, Mr. Byfield," she added, turning wide, serious eyes upon him for a moment—"you really don't know what it means never by any chance to hear that phrase again—'someone wants something on account.'"

"I think I can understand," he replied. "And so you still like Fiddler's Green—eh?"

"I never believed that there was such a place," she said. "It's wonderful! Even poor father seems to be getting more used to it; he missed his club terribly at first. But now he is finding quite a lot to interest him; he drives round and studies the architecture of the various old inns round about—sometimes gives up a day to it."

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"And your brother?" asked Gilbert with a frown.

"Aubrey is turning out really splendidly," said the girl. "He looks quite handsome when he's riding; even father admits that—and father never did like Aubrey. In fact, everything is better than it has ever been—and all the dreams I ever had seem to have come true."

"Dreams fade, little Make-Believe," he reminded her.

"I don't think my dreams will ever fade," she replied. "And you mustn't call me Little-Make-Believe any more—because it isn't true. Everything is real; I don't have to make-believe any longer."

"Fortunes are lost sometimes; it happens every day," he urged again. "Suppose this great fortune of yours was swept away—this fortune that came by lucky speculation—what then?"

"I can't believe that it will ever end; I can't believe that Fate would be so cruel as to send me back again to Arcadia Street—and to all the old unhappy life."

"You forget, Bessie; you were very happy there—playing that great game of life."

She shook her head. "I didn't understand—that was why I was happy," she said. "I struggled hard to make myself happy—fought hard to reach every little gleam of sunshine that came my way. Now I don't have to fight; thanks to father, all my happiness comes to me naturally."

They were nearing the house when she turned upon him with astounding news. "Oh—I forgot to tell you that we've got visitors." [142]

"Visitors?" He stared at her as though not understanding.

She nodded brightly. "Yes; Aunt Julia Stocker and Uncle Ted. Father asked them down; father said—'What's the use of having a big house if you don't fill it?' Father's thinking of asking some other people—friends of his particularly. Of course there'll be lots of room for you, Mr. Byfield," she added; "I've seen about your room myself. Besides the housekeeper seemed to think that you'd like it; I suppose she knew what sort of a man you were."

Gilbert Byfield went on to the house in silence, listening as in a dream to the girl's animated chatter, as she pointed out this, that or the other familiar thing, and demanded his admiration. He began to understand that the difficulties he had created were greater than he had yet imagined; already he seemed to see an imaginary Daniel Meggison—grinning and triumphant—defying him to move at all, and sheltering himself in every extravagance behind this girl in the white frock, whose happiness Gilbert had purchased at so strange a price.

Mr. Daniel Meggison, for his part, made no secret from the beginning of the attitude he intended to adopt. For some weeks now he had been given a free hand, and that fact, combined with new clothes, and a comfortable house, and money in his pocket, and servants to do his bidding, had already gone far to spoil the man, and to bring out some of the original bully that had been suppressed in his nature. Whatever qualms he may have felt he hid successfully at the first moment of meeting. He stood at the door of the house, with arms outstretched, and with a beaming smile upon his face. [143]

"Welcome, my dear Byfield—thrice welcome!" he exclaimed, seizing Gilbert by the hand and wringing it hard—as much in apparent cordiality as to impress upon him that he understood the secret compact between them, and was acting his part accordingly. "Delighted to see you. I would have driven down myself to the station—but my child here seemed to think that you would expect her alone. Well—well—that is quite natural; you were always good friends. Come in, my dear Byfield—come in and make yourself at home. You will find friends here; stay as long as you like—do what you like—order what you like! Come in!"

So Gilbert Byfield went into his own house, not without some feeling of amusement, and looked about him. The servant who hurried forward as he saw his master was silenced with a look, and retired, wondering more than ever; Gilbert allowed the girl to run on before him up the stairs, to show him the way with which he was already familiar. He expressed due approval of the room (which happened to be his own), and said that he felt he should be very comfortable there for a few days.

When presently he went downstairs, his object was to find Mr. Daniel Meggison and to have a talk with that gentleman. But Daniel was not to be caught napping; he avoided Gilbert on every occasion, and clung to his relatives with an amazing fondness whenever he saw the young man approaching him.

The relatives, for their part, adopted characteristic attitudes towards Byfield. Mrs. Stocker conceived it to be her duty, being in the mansions of the great, to sit in the largest and the stiffest chair she could discover, in a condition of state, ready to receive all and sundry. Her dignity in this particular instance compelled her to suffer tortures, for the simple reason that her husband, Mr. Edward Stocker, was free to come and go as he liked, and was having rather a good time. He cheerfully flitted about the place, and smoked unaccustomed pipes in the boldest manner, and was for once quite happy. Being introduced by Bessie to the new-comer, he greeted Gilbert cordially. [144]

"It's a wonderful world, sir," he exclaimed, looking at Gilbert with a smiling face. "Now, it would never have occurred to me that Meggison was the man to make money—and yet to be so

dark about it. Having a little property myself—which runs to 'ouses—I may say that I know what property is, and how money is made. But Meggison seems to have gone a cut above us all. A modest place down Clapham way—or Brixton—or even Norwood—but when you makes a splash in the country—with servants and what not—well, I can only say that it's a very wonderful world, sir."

Gilbert left the little man, and, still in search of Meggison, came presently into the presence of Mrs. Stocker, sitting in state. She received him coldly, but with the resignation of one who expects that all sorts of people may drift in, and are not specially to be accounted for. He was retiring again hastily, when she recalled him.

"One moment, sir, I beg. One of my brother's new friends?"

"Oh, no—an old friend," stammered Gilbert. "A friend of his daughter."

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"She never told me—but that is not surprising; I seem to learn everything only by accident here. I should like to know, sir"—she lowered her voice, and looked round about her impressively—"I should like to know what you think of this business?"

"I've scarcely had time to think about it at all yet," replied Gilbert.

"My brother Daniel has surprised us all," said Mrs. Stocker. "I don't like sly people; I should have thought that he would have been only too glad to take me into his confidence. But, no—oh dear, no! He is glad, of course, to ignore me—and then to invite me down here on sufferance, as it were."

"Can you tell me where your brother is now?" asked Gilbert, moving towards the door.

"I cannot say," said Mrs. Stocker, in an affected voice. "I believe Daniel drives out a great deal. He might have asked me certainly to go with him; but no one ever thinks of me."

Gilbert was crossing the hall, still intent upon that search, when he was approached by the elderly manservant—staid husband of the housekeeper—who had been in charge of the house for years. The man hesitated for a moment, with puzzled face, remembering his strange instructions as to the new tenants; and Gilbert, seeing that the man had something to say, opened the door of a room and went in, beckoning the man to follow. He closed the door and waited.

"Do you want to speak to me?" he asked.

"To know, sir, if everything is all right," responded the man in a low tone. "Also, sir, to understand how long it's to last."

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"Until you have orders to the contrary, or until Mr. Meggison goes," said Gilbert, after a moment's pause. "Why do you ask?"

"Only, sir, on account of the wines and such-like," replied the man in an aggrieved tone. "Your friends was to have all that they required, and no questions asked; but I didn't quite understand it was to be champagne here, and champagne there—to say nothing of spirits in what I may call a fashion that is absolutely *had lib*, sir. Mr. Meggison, sir, and the young man—beg pardon, gentleman—they do put away a great deal."

"That's all right," said Gilbert easily. "You were quite right to mention it, of course. Anything else?"

"Only the manners of the two gents is a little bit 'arsh, if I may use the word, in regard to me and the other servants; also the young gent is not particular as to language if a little heated, sir."

"I'm sorry; I've no doubt his tone will improve from this time," replied Gilbert grimly. "That will do; and be careful to remember what I have said; I am only a guest here for the present. You take all your orders from Mr. Meggison."

The man was going slowly out of the room when he turned back and looked again at his master. Gilbert Byfield turned a lowering gloomy face to the man, and asked somewhat impatiently what more he wanted.

"Only one thing, sir; I wouldn't have you think for a moment that in any remarks it has been my duty to make concerning your friends I should be thought to include the young lady."

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Gilbert's face lightened a little, and he looked at the man quickly. "Oh—so you don't complain about the young lady?" he said.

"Between you and me, sir—if I may take so bold a liberty—if it 'adn't been for the young lady I don't think that any of us could have stood it. Oil on the waters more than once Miss Meggison's been—and always a smile if she wants anything—and always sorry to give any trouble. Fairly on her knees to her the wife is, Mr. Byfield, sir."

"Then that's a great compensation—isn't it?" asked Gilbert, laughing.

"It's everything, sir," replied the man earnestly. "Though, if you'll excuse the saying, it licks me how the young lady could ever 'ave had such a father—to say nothing of such a brother. Asking your pardon, of course, sir."

Gilbert decided that he would do no good in the matter by forcing the issue; on the other hand,

he might strengthen his position if he waited, and saw for himself what was happening. He rightly judged that Meggison at least would be anxious to know what steps the outraged owner of the house at Fiddler's Green would take, and would in all probability in very fear be the first to approach Byfield.

He decided to wait at least until evening.

In that great game that was being played, as poor Bessie fondly believed in reality at last, she had determined that it should at least be played properly. Thus dinner was a special function, and a solemn one; and although neither Mr. Meggison nor his son had yet reached that sublime point insisted upon in the pictures in the illustrated papers of "dressing" for it, she yet had hopes even that that might some day be accomplished. As a matter of fact, Aubrey, the better to show his complete independence, had a fashion of strolling in a little late, and sitting down attired in very loud riding clothes; old Daniel Meggison sported a frock-coat somewhat too large for him, and so was passable. Bessie fulfilled the dream of many years, and appeared always in white. [148]

On this particular occasion the dinner gong had gone for some minutes, and after waiting uneasily Bessie had at last suggested that perhaps they had better go in to dinner. Meggison had not appeared, nor his son; the tale was complete otherwise. They straggled awkwardly across the hall, and into the big dining-room; and there the girl took one end of the table, and quietly indicated where the others should sit. The head of the table was vacant, and one other place; and Gilbert found himself watching with amusement to see what would presently happen.

Suddenly the door was flung open, and Daniel Meggison came in quickly, smiling broadly and with a somewhat feverish air of patronage. He did not even look at Gilbert; but he glanced round at the others as he took his seat, and tucked one corner of his napkin inside his collar.

"You should not have waited," he said quickly. "Unexpectedly detained; so many things to see to in a place like this. My child"—this to Bessie down the length of the table—"you remind me of your poor mother. That frock suits you."

"Thank you, father," said the girl.

Daniel Meggison began to gulp soup at a great rate; paused to say over his spoon—"Pretty country about here, Mr. Byfield—eh?" [149]

"Very," replied Gilbert, looking at him steadily. "Do you find the house convenient?"

"There are certain things in it that I should change if it actually belonged to me," replied Meggison critically—"but it'll serve—it'll serve. I could suggest half a dozen ways in which money might be spent to improve it."

"In my opinion there's a lot of ground wasted," said Mrs. Stocker gloomily. "What's anyone want with more than a bit in front to keep people from staring in at the windows, and a bit behind to put a few seeds in? Why, you could build four houses this size on the place, and still have a lot of land to cut to waste. Of course, if I'm wrong I stand corrected; but I know what house property's worth."

It was at this moment that Mr. Aubrey Meggison entered the room. He came in with the inevitable cigarette drooping from his lips, but condescended to toss that into the fireplace; then seated himself, and expressed the hope that there might be some hot soup left, unless anybody had chosen to "wolf it."

"If you came in at a decent time you would partake of the same dishes as other people, and at the same moment," said Daniel Meggison crushingly. "In future, sir, you will clearly understand that unless you arrive at the moment—I repeat, sir, at the moment—you won't get—"

"I don't think anybody's paying any real attention to you, dad," said Aubrey patiently. "And perhaps others may want to get a word in on their own account." [150]

Daniel Meggison muttered and spluttered over his soup; Gilbert seized the opportunity to turn to Bessie. "And what do you do with yourself all day in the country—you who used always to be so busy?" he asked.

She turned to him with a smile. "Oh, there seems to be such a lot to do," she replied quickly. "So many people want me—and there are flowers to arrange—and orders to give—and half a hundred things to do. And then, of course, I'm obliged to go and see the dogs—"

"Who bark very early in the morning, and kick up a devil of a row at night," snapped Meggison from his end of the table.

"Yes, of course—the dogs," went on Gilbert, taking no notice of the interruption. "There's Ponto—and Billy—and—"

"Why—how did you know their names?" she asked, with a puzzled look in her eyes.

He saw in a moment the blunder he had made. "Why—your father—Mr. Meggison told me all about them," he replied lamely, with a quick glance down the table.

"Oh, yes—I told him—I mentioned it this afternoon," said Meggison hastily. "I found he was very deeply interested in dogs."

Gilbert saw that it was impossible to talk to the girl just then; he knew that Meggison at least was watching every gesture and listening to every word. He contented himself with looking at the girl; noting little subtle differences in her, and seeing that the little unnatural sharpness that had belonged to her scheming plotting life had already worn away and left her softened. Her hair was differently and more generously arranged; there was a refinement and a delicacy about her, greater even than that which had at first singled her out in his eyes in Arcadia Street. And it was pleasant, too, sitting there, to have her eyes turned occasionally in his direction, and always to see in their depths that fine smile of comradeship and friendliness. As the meal progressed he found himself weighing her against the others; noting their coarseness and their awkwardness and their airs and attitudes; and seeing her so different that she might not have belonged to them at all. Of all that strange assortment in the house at Fiddler's Green she was the one who seemed properly to belong there. [151]

They were getting to the end of the meal when a servant entered and spoke a little diffidently to Bessie, after a glance at old Meggison. "Mr. Quarle is here, Miss."

Bessie sprang to her feet at once. "Oh, please bring him in," she exclaimed; "how delightful that he should have come to-night. You know Mr. Quarle, Mr. Byfield?" she added.

"Oh, yes—I know him quite well," said Gilbert.

"Quarle has nothing to do with us now; he's an unpleasant reminder of things I endeavour to forget," said Meggison peevishly. "Second visit, too; what's he think he's going to get out of us? . . . ah!—my dear Quarle—delighted to see you," he broke off hurriedly as Simon came into the room, looking sharply about him. "I was just saying to my daughter Bessie how very charming . . . a place for Mr. Quarle there; what the devil are you standing staring for; don't you know your duties?" [152]

Simon Quarle cocked an eyebrow comically at sight of Byfield, and then, with a nod to the others, came round the table, and shook hands with Bessie. "I'll find room here, thank you," he said, as he pulled up a chair beside the girl—"no one need disturb themselves on my account. Well—and how's the little girl getting on?" he asked, taking no notice of anyone else.

Gilbert Byfield watched him, wondering a little what the object of this visit might be. He noted the old man's tenderness for the girl—the change in his tones when he spoke to her; he saw also, or thought he saw, a new grimness about the lines of his mouth. He knew in his own mind that something must be settled this night; felt certain that with this man in the house the bubble must be pricked, and poor Bessie be shown in a moment this new and horrible game of make-believe in which she had really had no part. Looking at the happy face of the girl, he seemed more than ever to separate her from those who had plotted, with her for a shield, and who had not hesitated to bite the hand that fed them.

"You didn't let us know you were coming," hinted Daniel Meggison.

"I didn't think it necessary," retorted Quarle, with a momentary glance at him. "Now I beg that just as soon as you have finished—all of you—you will go away and leave me with my young hostess," he added. "I've a great deal to say to Bessie—and I'm desperately hungry—and I know that I'm very late. No ceremony, I beg." [153]

"You seem quite to take possession of the house, Mr. Quarle," said Daniel Meggison, half rising from his chair.

"Exactly. Just as you have done, you know," said Simon Quarle, with a grim nod at him. "Don't you worry; Bessie understands."

It was curious to see how in that ill-assorted household one and another of them took the hint and went away. First Mrs. Stocker, with a toss of the head and much rustling of skirts; followed obediently by her husband. Then Daniel—followed at a grumbling interval by his son. So that at the last Bessie sat between Simon Quarle and Gilbert Byfield. And from one to the other, before her unconscious eyes, swept meaning glances; glances that meant appeal on the part of Gilbert, and determination on the part of Quarle.

"I'm going to talk to your father," said Gilbert at last, rising from his place, and looking squarely at Quarle. "We've not had a chat together yet."

"We'll excuse you," said Quarle gruffly. Then, as the younger man was moving towards the door, he got up quickly and followed him. "I wonder what they're doing about my bag," he began; and then, as he thrust Gilbert into the hall in front of him—and closed the door—"Well—so you've made up your mind that something must be done—eh?"

"Yes—something must be done—and to-night," whispered Gilbert quickly. "I can promise you that at least."

"Good." Quarle nodded, and turned to go back into the room. "I'm glad you see the necessity for that. Don't spare them." [154]

"I want only to spare *her*," said Gilbert.

Mr. Daniel Meggison proved to be as difficult of capture as before. In the drawing-room he was talking of the value and the security of having a stake in the country to his sister and brother-in-law; on the appearance of Gilbert he button-holed Mr. Stocker, and began rapidly to ask his

candid opinion concerning the work of our parish councils, and whether he did not think they required new blood—as, for instance, new blood from London, in the shape of a man who had had experience of the vicissitudes of life, and who knew what real government meant? Gilbert remaining, and looking at him steadily, he began to see that the matter had to be brought to a crisis, and could not much longer be delayed. Therefore he turned with an air of forced geniality to Byfield, and actually took him by the arm.

"You have something to talk to me about, Mr. Byfield?" he demanded with sublime assurance "As a matter of fact, too, I should like your advice on a little question of investments; I am a child in these matters—save accidentally. Suppose we have a bit of a talk—eh?"

"Nothing would please me better," Gilbert answered.

"Then, if my dear sister will excuse us—we will go and smoke a friendly cigar, and have a dry business chat," said Meggison, drawing Gilbert towards the door. "I want some sound advice."

They went towards a small room which had been used by Gilbert as a smoking-room; it was empty, although a lamp burned on a small table at one end. Meggison closed the door, and went into the room; threw himself on to a couch, and looked up smilingly at the other man. His face was rather white, and he had something of the air of a schoolboy about to receive punishment that he knew he had deserved; but his manner was as jaunty as ever. [155]

"Now, sir—what do you want with me?" he asked.

"Bluntly—an account of your stewardship, Meggison," said Gilbert. "I need hardly remind you of the facts; you were to come down here with your daughter; you were to give her that rest and that holiday she so sorely needed."

"Will you deny that she is having that rest and that holiday?" asked Meggison, with a grin. "Isn't there a wonderful change in her?"

"I thank God—yes," said Gilbert Byfield steadily. "But it is not of that I am speaking; I am referring to the fashion in which you are flinging money broadcast—you and your dissolute son; I refer to this persistent fairy-tale that you have a great fortune, and that you are here for the remainder of your life. You have sold up the house in Arcadia Street; you are living on my charity."

"My good man," retorted Meggison, with a new insolence in his voice—"you appear to forget all the circumstances; more than that, you appear to forget what manner of man you are dealing with; you lose sight of the fact that you are dealing with *me*. If you wanted your absurd scheme carried out in any halting cheeseparing fashion, you should have gone to a meaner man; you should not have come to Daniel Meggison. I am a creature of imagination; I soar, sir; I refuse to be confined or held back. I think only of my daughter, who in your own words was to have a much-needed rest and holiday; I have given her both. I let facts and results speak for themselves." [156]

"I see it is quite useless to argue the matter with you," said Gilbert. "I intend to take the matter into my own hands; I intend to let Bessie understand the true facts of the case, so that she may know exactly where she stands. And I intend to do that to-night."

Mr. Daniel Meggison rose to his feet, and thrust his hands in his pockets, and nodded brightly. "Splendid notion! I applaud it. Do it by all means; don't think of me in the least. Go to my daughter, and say to her—'I have to tell you that your father, for your dear sake, has lied to you, and cheated you, and made a fool of you. Egged on by a man with whom, under ordinary circumstances, he would have had nothing to do, your poor old father has tried to do something for you at last—to make your life easier.' Go to Bessie, and tell her that—make her understand that all her house of cards must topple down, and that she must for the future loathe the man she now believes in and loves. The way is easy; it only requires a very few words."

"You know I can't do that; you know you've got me hard and fast, because in front of you and all your scheming stands the girl who does not deserve to suffer. I must bring myself down, I suppose, to appeal to you," said Gilbert. "I want you to release me; I want you to find a way out of the tangle you have created for us all." [157]

"And I say that I decline to do anything of the kind," said Daniel Meggison. "I take my stand upon the happiness of my child; I raise my banner for her sake, and I fight to my last breath!"

"And very nobly said, too!" A voice came from the further end of the room, and there rose from the depths of an easy chair there, the back of which had been towards them, the long form of Aubrey Meggison. He held a sporting paper in his hands, and he now lounged forward, so as to put himself in a measure between the two men. "I don't always say that I uphold the old man, mind you," he added—"but on this occasion I think he has spoken as only a father and a man could speak. I suppose, Mr. Byfield," went on the youth aggressively, as he tossed the paper into the chair he had left—"I suppose it didn't occur to you that there might be such a thing—or such a being—as a man of the world to deal with—not an old man you could bully—eh?"

"I beg your pardon; in a sense I had forgotten you," said Gilbert, a little helplessly. "I quite understand that if only from motives of policy alone you would take the side of your father. I've nothing further to say to either of you."

They were glancing triumphantly at each other—the father with a new friendliness for the son—as Gilbert went out of the room. In the hall he stumbled upon Simon Quarle; was seized upon by that gentleman with the one inevitable question.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to settle the matter—once and for all—with the girl," said Gilbert; and with a new feeling that he was being goaded into this thing went on to find her. [158]

He found her, after some inquiries, just where he had expected her to be; she was wandering alone in the warm summer evening in that newer garden that had so eclipsed the old one. For a little time they walked side by side there; there seemed to be no actual need for words. He had told himself, as he came out of the house, that he would have done this night with the mad business; he told himself now, as he saw her face in the light of the stars, that it must go on. And even while he said that the natural man sprang up in him—the man who would not easily or lightly give way, and would no longer be robbed with impunity. Not in any spirit of meanness, but because of the dastardly fashion in which these people held out this innocent girl as their bait and their bribe.

Almost it seemed, in that quiet garden under the stars, that the two were alone. So that presently they stopped, with hand strangely holding hand; and it seemed almost that this new Bessie of the bright eyes was a woman. Her dreams had come true; the friend who had told her that they might some day come true was here with her, alone under the shining heavens. It was a matter of whispers—just the simple matter that it always must be in such an hour.

"Little friend—are you very happy?" he whispered.

"Happier than I have ever been in all my life," she replied. [159]

"Long ago, Bessie (or it seems long ago), in Arcadia Street we were friends—in that poor old garden that was never a garden at all. I'm a very lonely man, Bessie, and it seems to me to-night that I want my friend."

"Yes?" She looked up into his eyes; and seemed insensibly, in the dusk of the garden, to creep nearer to him.

"I want you, Bessie; there was never a woman in this world that was like you; you've stolen your way into my heart somehow. Bessie—if to-night I asked you to leave all this, and for love's sake to come away with me—out into the big world—what would you say?"

"I could only say what my heart is saying now," she whispered. "I should say—yes."

"Would you? Are you sure?" She was warm and tender and fluttering in his arms. "Are you sure?"

"Yes—because I love you," she breathed.

And so she tied again that strange tangled knot he had tried so hard to cut.

CHAPTER X

A DESPERATE REMEDY

[160]

WHATEVER judgment may be passed upon Byfield's methods at that time, it has to be remembered that up to that moment—and indeed long afterwards, in a lesser degree—he had regarded Bessie Meggison as a child. She was in his eyes a mere waif out of that London of which he knew but little; a mere pretty bit of flotsam flung at his feet in the stress and storm of the world, to be cherished by him very tenderly. That other people, with schemes and designs of their own, clung to her and therefore to him, was but an accidental circumstance that did not really affect her. He had to remember the conventionalities of the world—had to remember, for instance, that she was in reality poor and friendless and of no account, and that he had, on a mere foolish impulse, placed her suddenly in an impossible position. That which had seemed so simple at first was simple no longer.

And now, with that sudden declaration of her love for him, she had bound him to her with a tie more difficult to be broken than any with which he had been bound yet. His generosity was stirred—the natural chivalry of the man, that had only before been stirred to a sort of whimsical tenderness, woke to full life. More than ever was it necessary that that strange fiction should be kept up; because now, if she learned the truth, he knew that she must be doubly shamed: first because of the trick he had played upon her, and next because he had surprised from her that confession of love which she would never have spoken had she not believed that their worldly positions were pretty much the same. [161]

And he had asked her to go out into the world with him—still under that false impression—and she had leapt to the one conclusion, and the one only. His had been a matter of tenderness for the child for whom he was sorry; hers the love of a woman for a man who was the first and the greatest man in her life, because he had seemed to understand her. There was no going back now; they must tread the road on which he had been leading her until some end came that he

could not yet foresee.

The one vague thought in his mind had been to lift her clean out of that tangle in which they were both involved, and to leave Daniel Meggison and his son to struggle out of it for themselves. He told himself fiercely, again and again, that he had nothing to do with Daniel Meggison, save as an instrument for the furthering of that innocent plan to help Bessie. The father was unworthy of the child; he had lived upon her hard work for years, and was ready to turn her to account in any way at any moment; clearly he was not to be reckoned with. Gilbert held before him always the remembrance of the girl, and the girl only; argued that she would be better off with himself than with anyone else. All the old platitudes were called into play; she had but one life, and of that the best must be made—and love was superior to everything else—and love was the one thing worth living for and striving for. Of any Bessie grown older and wiser—of any Bessie grown ashamed, when she came to understand what the world was, he never thought at all. She stretched out to him now the trembling eager hands of a child, and pleaded for love and beauty and happiness; he would give her all three. [162]

He was in a difficult position. He knew that a breath—a look—a whisper might in a moment teach her the truth; he knew that Simon Quarle was waiting in the house, dogged and persistent, and determined that the truth should be told; he knew also that Daniel Meggison, if he once understood that the game was up, would not hesitate to blurt out unpleasant facts in mere viciousness. Whatever was to be done must be done quickly.

Impulsive always, Gilbert did not stop to reason now, any more than he had ever done. Wealth had been his always, and the impulse of the moment could always be gratified; the one impulse now was to get the girl away from Fiddler's Green, and so turn the tables, first on the father and son, and afterwards on that arch meddler, Simon Quarle. He broached the matter that very night, within a few moments of the time when her innocent declaration had been made.

"I wonder if you understand what I mean, little Bessie?" he whispered. "Love means a giving-up—a sacrifice; with a woman it should mean that she has no will of her own, but does blindly for love's sake everything that her lover demands."

"Yes—I understand that," she replied, looking at him wonderingly. [163]

"When I said just now that I wanted to ask you to come away with me—out into the big world that you have never seen yet—I meant it. There are great places across the sea—wide lands that are wonderful, cities where the sun always shines. If I asked you to come away with me, and leave all this behind—would you do that?"

"Of course," she replied, still with her eyes fixed upon his. "You would have the right—wouldn't you?"

Her simplicity unnerved him; her innocence was something that seemed to stand between him and her understanding of him. "My dear, you make me almost afraid of you," he said. "Do you trust me so completely?"

She nodded, and laughed confidently. "I can't tell you how much," she said shyly. "Only, ever so long ago, as it seems, when you looked over the wall into my poor garden in Arcadia Street, you made everything so different. I was only tired and lonely and sad after that when you went away. Don't go away from me again, because I could not bear it. I was afraid before that the happiness that father's fortune brought was too great to last; and now this that is greater has been added to it. If you are ever to take that away from me, I would be more glad that you should kill me to-night, so that I might not ever know."

"In this world of surprises, Bessie," he said, "there is yet another surprise for you. I'm not so poor as you thought I was. I only let you believe that I was poor, because it would have seemed a mean thing for me to appear rich when you had nothing—wouldn't it?" [164]

"And are you as rich as father is?"

"There's no actual comparison," he assured her. "But if I'm not very rich myself, at least I have rich friends—people who like me, and know me, and with whom I travel about the world sometimes. Now one of those rich friends of mine has a yacht."

It was still necessary that he should lie to her, in his dread lest she might suspect the real truth; and so this additional lie was added to the heap. Even then she suspected nothing; even then it never occurred to her to link the fact of this man's unsuspected wealth with that other fact of the unexpected wealth of Daniel Meggison.

"Now, they call that yacht *Blue Bird*, and she lies ready to take us away over the seas, miles and miles away, so that we may discover all those wonderful places that I've tried to tell you about. She's a big yacht, and she's very comfortable; and she's just waiting until Bessie Meggison puts her small feet on her white deck, and then she's off!"

She was silent for a moment or two; the man wondered of what she was thinking. He put a hand under her chin and raised her face; she was looking at him solemnly.

"And you want me to leave this place—and to go right away—with you?" she asked. "For how long?"

"Well, I don't exactly know how long, dear—perhaps just as long as you like to cruise about," [165]

he replied, a little uneasily. "Don't forget, Bessie, that you promised."

"I know—because you were lonely, and because you wanted me," she said simply. "That's where you have the right—because we love each other. I was only thinking—"

Her voice trailed off, and she stood very still; and once again the man wondered of what she was thinking, and yet did not question her. Knowing in an uncomfortable way that she would do what he asked, he thought it wisest not to put the matter more clearly before her, and not to enter into any further explanation. Instead, he began to tell her what she must do.

"I shall start off early to-morrow to see that the yacht is all right," he said. "Then you will slip away, and you will follow me to Newhaven. When you get to Newhaven, you will ask for the steam yacht *Blue Bird*, and you will come straight on board. Now, do you understand?"

"Yes—I understand perfectly," she replied. "And I am to leave Fiddler's Green—leave everybody?"

"Yes—leave them all behind. Aunts and uncles, and Simon Quarles and everything; we don't want them. I shall wait at Newhaven until you come."

She made no direct reply, but he seemed to understand that she had made up her mind, and that she would come. When presently they went back to the house, she slipped away, saying that she wanted to find her father; Gilbert set about what he had to do with a curious feeling of elation, and yet with a still more curious feeling of remorse and bitterness. He told himself savagely that he had not done this thing; that his impulses had been generous ones that had been taken advantage of by Daniel Meggison and by his son; that therefore they were directly responsible. He meant to be very good to her; she should have a better time than she had ever had yet. [166]

Simon Quarle—restless and watchful like himself—met him presently wandering about the house; and once more faced him squarely, with a demand as to what he was going to do. "The girl's got to be lifted out of this slough of deceit and lies and humbug; she's too honest to live in it," said the old man. "Try gentle means, if you can—if you don't, I must try rougher ones."

"I've fully made up my mind what to do," said Gilbert in reply. "To-morrow our game of make-believe will end; Mr. Daniel Meggison has come to the end of his tether."

"I'm glad of it," said Quarle.

Finally, Gilbert sought again that servant who was responsible for the house, and gave him certain instructions. "I'm going away to-morrow," he said—"and from that time my friend Mr. Meggison's connection with the house ceases. You will say nothing about it, of course; you will simply give him to understand that you've got my instructions to close the place, and that he cannot remain here any longer. Do you understand? From to-morrow night they all go—every one of 'em."

"Very good, sir," replied the man, looking at him a little curiously.

Still telling himself that what he was doing was right, and that no other course lay open to him, Gilbert Byfield went unhappily out of the house, and wandered about in the grounds. "I'm a mean brute," he muttered to himself—"and I'm sneaking out of a business that I'm afraid to face openly. But it's no good: I can't look into her eyes and tell her the truth; I can't drive her back penniless and friendless into Arcadia Street. The child loves me; in a sense we are both waifs of fortune—and in that sense we'll face life together. The whole circumstances are so mad and strange that they must be faced in a mad and strange manner. And oh!—I mean to be good to her!" [167]

While he stood there he saw before him, coming dancingly towards him through the trees, a little point of light; and knew it, after a moment or two, for the smouldering end of a cigarette. Wondering a little who this was at such an hour, he waited until the figure of a man followed the dancing point of light, and revealed itself as Mr. Jordan Tant. Mr. Tant, in evening dress, and looking even more immaculate than usual, expressed no surprise at seeing his friend, although in a curious way he seemed a little afraid of the big man facing him.

"Good evening, Byfield," said Mr. Tant precisely.

"Well—have you come to spy out the land, friend Tant?" demanded Gilbert, with a rough laugh.

"Yes—and no," said Mr. Tant, flicking the ash from his cigarette, and looking at it with his head on one side. "As you are aware, I am always doing something for others—or perhaps I should say for *one* other. Enid and her mother are naturally anxious to know what is happening to you; also they are curious concerning the people who have taken your cottage. You may not know that they are down here?" [168]

"I did not know—but I am not surprised," replied Gilbert. "Where are they staying?"

"They have taken rooms—extremely uncomfortable rooms, and very high-priced—at a house in the village," said Mr. Tant. "Enid complains—chiefly to me; therefore you may guess that I am remarkably unhappy, and that indirectly I blame you for my unhappiness. I strolled over to-night to see you; they will naturally demand to know what I know about you."

"Then you can give them my message," said Gilbert, a little contemptuously. "You can tell them that I decline to have my actions criticized by any one; you can let them understand that I know

that they had no real reason for coming to Fiddler's Green, and taking uncomfortable lodgings, except in order to find out what I was doing. You can tell them——"

"I beg your pardon, Byfield—but I can't tell them anything of the kind," said Mr. Tant. "You can't send messages of that description—and I can't take them."

"You're quite right, my Tant; of course you can't," replied Gilbert. "I'm obliged to you for reminding me. Forgive me; I'm a little worried and troubled, and I seem to think that everyone about me is plotting against me, and scheming against me."

"My dear Byfield—why don't you shake these people off?" asked Tant, lowering his voice. "Common charity is one thing; but these people will stick to you like leeches till they've sucked your very blood. After all, as I have said so often, one must draw the line somewhere, you know." [169]

"Yes—I know; and I'm going to draw the line to-morrow," said Gilbert, half to himself. "However, if the ladies have not retired, I'll stroll down with you and see them. Come along!"

"They'll be delighted, I'm sure," said Tant, without the least cordiality.

They found Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter astonishing so much of the village as remained awake by sitting in an extremely small garden in front of an unpretentious cottage stiffly on chairs in evening dress; behind them was the lighted room in which they had just been dining. Mrs. Ewart-Crane greeted Gilbert grimly, and hoped he was well; Enid nodded, and said casually—"Ah, Gilbert"—and turned her attention to Jordan Tant.

"Sorry I couldn't let you have my house," said Gilbert—"but you see I had already let it to other people. A little later on, perhaps——"

"My dear Gilbert—what is really happening?" asked Mrs. Ewart-Crane, lowering her voice, and turning away from the others. "Of course we all know that there's a girl—and that she came out of some quite impossible slum in which you chose to live. I'm not saying that she's not perfectly nice and good, and all that sort of thing; but you have to think of yourself, and of the future. And I suppose that she's got all her horrid people with her?"

"Some friends of mine are certainly staying at my house down here at present," said Gilbert—"and I originally met them in Arcadia Street, when I was living there. It has merely been a visit—and that visit ends almost immediately. As a matter of fact, I'm going away to-morrow on a yachting cruise." [170]

"I am relieved to hear it," said the lady, with a sigh. "I have been perfectly miserable over the whole business; I have not known how to sleep. I came down here, and took these rooms to-day, on the assurance of Jordan that they were the only ones to be had in the place; I wanted to keep an eye on you."

"Extremely kind of you," he said. "Only you see I rather object to anyone keeping an eye upon me."

"Now, however, that the horrid people are going, and that you have made up your mind in a sense to run away also, there is no further necessity for my remaining here," went on Mrs. Ewart-Crane. "But tell me; do you go on this yachting cruise alone?"

"Well—I've scarcely made up my mind yet," he returned evasively; and the lady looked at him, and silently drew in her breath and pursed her lips. "My plans have been made rather hurriedly."

"Exactly," she said. "Now, my dear Gilbert—would it not be a kindly thing to take Enid and myself with you? I know the yacht, and I know how very comfortable you can make your guests. And believe me, we should be more than grateful."

"I'm afraid I'm not able to do that just at present," he replied. "Mine is, in a sense, a sudden trip, and I have no real preparations made for the reception of passengers on the yacht. I'm sorry, but——"

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she said, with a smile. "It was only a sudden thought on my part."

Feeling annoyed and ashamed and resentful at this cross-questioning, Gilbert presently bade them good night curtly enough, and strolled off into the darkness towards his own house. As he disappeared, Mrs. Ewart-Crane turned to Jordan Tant and the girl. [171]

"Well—one thing I have discovered, at least," she said viciously. "Gilbert takes the girl with him to-morrow on this extraordinary voyage."

"My dear mother!" Enid rose with an appearance of indignation. "He wouldn't do such a thing."

"I don't know what to make of the fellow myself," said Jordan Tant, with a shake of the head. "I don't think he means any harm; I simply think he's got himself into a deuce of a hole, and doesn't quite know how to get out of it. That's my opinion. As for the girl—well, of course she's decidedly pretty—and nice-mannered—and all that kind of thing; and so I suppose——"

"I think we will wish you good night, Jordan," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane, rising. And Jordan Tant took the hint, and went off to his room at the village inn.

Gilbert Byfield walked far that night under the stars, and smoked many pipes. Now he was right, and now he was wrong; now he knew that this thing was good in the sight of that wholly

impossible heaven that smiles upon unconventional things when they are done for a good and proper purpose. Now there was no other way—and now there was a better way, by which he might speak the truth, and send her back to some Arcadia Street where she could struggle on, and yet live the old clean fine life. Now he hated himself for what he had settled to do; now he urged against a pricking conscience that Bessie loved him, and that nothing else mattered. Still, with those warring thoughts he got back in the small hours, and let himself in, and went to bed. [172]

There was much to be done on the following day, and he determined to start early. He made all necessary arrangements with the man in charge of the house; left a brief note for Bessie, to be given into her hands alone, in which he explained carefully what she was to do. Then, avoiding his strange guests, who fortunately for him were in the habit of rising late, he found his way to the little station, and left Fiddler's Green behind him.

There followed a hurried rush through London, and the settling of various affairs there, and the dispatch of telegrams. Late in the afternoon he found himself at Newhaven, with a small hillock of luggage, and facing a man who had the appearance of being half landsman and half seaman, and who was respectfully touching his cap to him.

"Ah, Pringle—so you had my wire," he said cheerfully.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. And everything's ready, sir," said Pringle.

Pringle was a long, thin, cleanly shaven man, with a countenance absolutely without expression, save for a pair of eyes that twinkled on occasion with a touch of humour very unbecoming a servant. He was neatly dressed in a blue suit, and was in fact a species of half steward, half man-servant, who had been with his master in various parts of the world on various occasions. He was that sort of man who, had he received a telegram to say that a young and lively tiger was being consigned to his care, would in all probability have bought the largest and strongest dog collar and chain obtainable, as a matter of precaution, and have gone to meet his charge with perfect equanimity. He had the luggage gathered together now, and in an incredibly short space of time had deposited that and his master on board the yacht *Blue Bird*. [173]

"Quite nice to be here again, Pringle," said Gilbert. "As you may have gathered from my wire, there is someone else coming; make the necessary arrangements. Also meet the trains this afternoon coming from London; a young lady will inquire for the yacht, and you can bring her down."

"Very good, sir," said Pringle; and vanished.

It was late in the evening when Pringle appeared again, standing solemnly just within the cabin door. His face was inscrutable to an ordinary observer—and yet one might have thought that there was in his eyes a lurking gleam of that humour that was so very much out of place.

"Young lady's come aboard, sir," said Pringle.

Gilbert sprang up, and pushed the man aside, and went out and mounted the companion. There was Bessie—smiling and bright-eyed, and obviously very excited; as he took her hands, and looked at her delightedly, she broke out into a flood of speech.

"Oh, my dear—such a journey—and yet I'm so glad to be here. I don't know how I should have managed it—all alone and not knowing anything much about travelling—if it hadn't have been for dear father."

"Dear father?" he repeated, with a curious chill creeping into his heart.

"Yes, of course," she replied. "You see, I couldn't come without father—and besides, he would have broken his heart if I had gone away without him. So I told him all you said, and all that you were going to do; and he worked hard to get things packed, and to get us off. See—there he is!" [174]

Gilbert dropped her hands, and walked a pace or two along the deck to where a man was standing looking over the side. The man turned, and revealed the smiling features of Daniel Meggison; Daniel in the frock-coat much too large for him—a silk hat perched upon one side of his head—and with an umbrella half unfurled grasped tightly by the middle in one hand. Daniel waved the umbrella cheerfully as he advanced to meet Byfield.

"Ha!—so here we are!" he exclaimed, with much heartiness. "Beautiful vessel—very trim and ship-shape. Splendid notion!"

CHAPTER XI

PURSUIT

THE explanation of that coming of Daniel Meggison to the yacht is a very simple one. He had seen for himself that the game could not last very much longer; he knew that in all probability Byfield would fling caution to the winds, and expose the trick that Meggison and his son were playing. Therefore he watched that young man with more anxiety than he really showed; despite the bravado he displayed, Meggison was really in deadly fear of what was to happen. [175]

The sudden going of Gilbert from the house, while it might have allayed the suspicions of a less cunning man than Meggison, only served to increase them in his case. He felt that in all probability Byfield had but gone away to seek advice or assistance; Meggison began to think that after all the game had been played a little too boldly, and a little too extravagantly. He blamed himself that he had not been more cautious; they might then have hung on for quite a long time.

Prying about the house, in the hope to discover something, Daniel Meggison became aware of the fact that no one seemed in the least surprised at Byfield's departure. True, a question was asked by Simon Quarle, but no definite answer given; Mr. and Mrs. Stocker paid no attention to chance visitors. The astounding thing to Daniel Meggison was that Bessie took no notice of Gilbert's departure, but went about the house singing gaily, and evidently very busy over something in her room. She flitted backwards and forwards to that room with an air of great mystery. [176]

Meggison summoned courage at last to mount the stairs, and to set off in search of her. At the very door of the room, as he knocked, he was confronted by Bessie, who had opened it at that very moment; she smiled at him, and beckoned him in, and closed the door again.

"My child," he whispered with deep anxiety—"what is happening?"

"Father dear, I'm running away," she said, with eyes dancing like those of a child. "And you are going to run away with me."

"But why, my dear? Why leave the beauties of the country?—why run away at all? Please explain," he pleaded.

"Sit down here, father, while I go on with my packing," she commanded—"and I'll tell you all about it. It's so wonderful that you'll scarcely believe it at first; so strange that it would be hard for anyone to believe it. Please don't interrupt me—because I shall have things to pack for you presently, before we run away together."

"I am of a singularly patient nature," said Daniel Meggison, seating himself and folding his hands. "Pray proceed, Bessie."

She proceeded then glibly enough to tell him of all that had happened; of how the Prince of that fairy tale that had come true so strangely had come down there, and had told her that he loved her. There was much that she could not tell her father, beyond the bald fact; but he would understand, and he would know that when the Prince commanded, his willing slave must follow. [177]

"He wanted me to run away with him out into the world—to sail far over the sea with him in this yacht that has been lent to him by a friend," said Bessie, on her knees beside one of the new trunks, busily folding garments. "But of course that wouldn't do at all—because, although I know Gilbert perfectly, and know how good he is, ladies mustn't travel about with gentlemen in that promiscuous way. More than all, it is necessary of course that a certain poor old father, quite incapable of looking after himself, should not be left behind; therefore that father comes in, as usual, very happily." She jumped up at that point, specially to kiss the old reprobate, who was thinking long thoughts.

"Wise little Bessie!" he said, patting her head. "I might have known that you would make no mistake over a matter of that kind. And so friend Byfield wants to take away his bride that is to be, and give her a little holiday on the sea—eh? Well—that seems a very excellent idea, and I promise you that you shall not find your poor old father in the way. But a word of warning, my Bessie!" He turned in his chair, and faced his daughter solemnly.

"Yes, father dear?"

"Not a word to anyone else—not a syllable!" he whispered. "Let us slip away together, leaving the other people in comfort here; we can write to them from some foreign port. Because, you see, we don't want to annoy our friend Byfield; and he might not have accommodation for everybody on this wonderful yacht. Your brother and the others will be very comfortable here; but as we do not wish to make them envious, we will say nothing about our new plans." [178]

"But when they find we're gone, they'll naturally be worried to know what has become of us," urged Bessie.

"True, my child, most true," he responded. "On second thoughts, it would perhaps be better to leave a note for them—a carefully worded diplomatic note—not giving too much information, but just enough. Leave that to me. I'll go and get the few things together that I shall need, and you can come and help me presently. Newhaven, did you say? I'm all excitement. It's a splendid notion!"

The matter of getting from the house was not after all so great a difficulty as may be imagined, for the simple reason that that astute servant in charge of the place saw in this packing up merely the exodus of extraordinary tenants, one of whom at least had been most undesirable. That they should demand that the thing be done secretly seemed under the circumstances reasonable enough; so that the luggage was actually smuggled out of the house, and taken out to a back gate, where a hired carriage was waiting.

"I've left the note in a prominent position, explaining enough to set their minds at rest," said Daniel Meggison, chuckling to himself as he got into the carriage with the girl.

Mr. Daniel Meggison understood, of course, exactly what had happened; saw, or thought he saw, that Gilbert had cunningly determined to lift Bessie neatly out of all the business, and leave the others to face the music as best they might. Daniel felt certain that secret instructions had been given to the servants at the house—instructions which were not to include Bessie; and that Gilbert Byfield had made up his mind to play a new game for himself alone. It is probable that on the score of morality alone Daniel Meggison did not regard the matter seriously; but this proposed desertion of himself was little short of a crime. [179]

"After this," he thought to himself, "I'll put the screw on a bit. He thinks he'll play fast and loose with me; he thinks he'll leave me in the lurch—does he? He doesn't know poor old Daniel! Bessie's the ticket—and I'll stick to her through thick and thin—poor child! After all, it's rather lucky that she loves her father so fondly!"

As we already know they arrived on board the yacht *Blue Bird* in due course, something to the astonishment of Gilbert Byfield, and giving him a new problem to be faced. So far as the note that had been written by Daniel Meggison was concerned—a mere shadowy trail, indicating vaguely the way they had taken—that was to be found some hours later by Mr. Aubrey Meggison.

Now, Aubrey had discovered for the first time on the previous day the real secret of that mysterious fortune the origin of which had more than puzzled him from the first. He was not a brilliant youth, but he knew enough to understand that his father was probably the last man in the world ever to have money to speculate with, or ever to be lucky in any impossible speculation in which he might indulge. Aubrey had been willing enough to accept his share of that impossible fortune, and to shut his eyes resolutely to everything outside the actual good realities that came to him; but he had a feeling that in some fashion a crash would come, involving him with the rest, in the near future. The conversation he had overheard between Daniel and Gilbert Byfield had given him the clue; and he had sprung to his father's rescue with the instinct of one who desires to save himself first of all. But from that moment it became necessary that he should watch the source of the unexpected wealth, the better to be sure that that source did not run dry. [180]

He knew that Gilbert was in a mood to kick over the traces; he was not surprised to find that the master of the house at Fiddler's Green had suddenly gone. But when he discovered that Daniel Meggison and Bessie were also missing, he began to be possessed by a great fear; and when a little later he discovered the note that had been left by his father, that fear was changed at once into a certainty of disaster.

The note had been left to him, as the eldest son, as a species of baneful legacy; it lay upon his dressing-table.

"MY DEAR AUBREY,

"You will have gathered, from the conversation you accidentally overheard yesterday, that our good friend Mr. Byfield is naturally restive at the prospect of providing for the wants not of one person alone, but of a family. In that restiveness I cordially agree with him; I feel that it is time a growing lad—or youth—or young man—whichever you prefer—should be doing something to provide for his own wants. Mr. Byfield is interested in the welfare of your sister, and I foresee for her an alliance in the future which will lift her into that sphere to which I have always felt the family should properly belong. [181]

"Mr. Byfield understands that father and child must not be separated; therefore I accompany Bessie. We are about to start on a voyage, but our ultimate destination is unknown; it will, however, probably be some foreign port. Let me advise you, my son, to keep a stout heart, and to wrest from the world that portion which belongs equally to every one of her sons. I shall expect to hear that you are doing well, and are a credit to the family whose name you bear."

Your father,
"DANIEL MEGGISON."

Aubrey Meggison remained for some minutes plunged in gloom after reading the letter; then he said some uncomplimentary things concerning that father who had been so willing to desert him. Child of that father, however, he came quickly to the conclusion that something must be done. He shivered at the thought of being left alone in the world—even such a world as that of Arcadia Street—with no one to feed him, and with no convenient Bessie from whom to borrow half-crowns and shillings.

"Only thing to be done, as far as I can see, is to stick to the *guv'nor*," he murmured disconsolately. "The *guv'nor*'ll stick to Bessie, and I suppose Bessie'll stick to that bouncer Byfield. Well, there'll be a nice string of us; and even if I am at the tail-end of it, I don't mean to be dropped. Only thing is—where have they gone to?"

He knew that it was quite useless to raise a hue and cry, because that would have set others on the track, and so have spoilt his own game. He determined to make cautious inquiries, and in the meantime to appear quite unsuspecting. And it happened that he received assistance from an unexpected quarter. [182]

Mrs. Ewart-Crane had had a sleepless night. She saw herself flouted and laughed at by this slip of a girl who had been picked out of a certain slum called Arcadia Street—saw in imagination that

imp of common wickedness known as Bessie Meggison setting her at naught, and leading Gilbert Byfield where she would. Mrs. Ewart-Crane thought of her daughter, and of that daughter's future—felt that this boy-and-girl courtship of years before should be made a binding thing once for all. If Mr. Gilbert Byfield did not know what was due to himself and his friends, he must be taught; and Mrs. Ewart-Crane, as a lady and a mother (for so she reckoned herself, in that order and in those actual words) was the one to teach him.

Rising after that troubled night, she determined to wait until the unlucky Jordan Tant should put in an appearance; she meant to seize upon him as a convenient messenger. It happened, however, that Mr. Jordan Tant was quite content to let well alone; he believed that Gilbert was gone, and was safely out of the way for a considerable time to come. Tant would very gladly have carried the ladies back to London in due course, there to teach them to forget the existence of any such person as Gilbert Byfield.

With this object in view, Mr. Jordan Tant, suspecting that he might be wanted in the business, kept out of the way; so that it happened that it was quite late in the afternoon—long after repeated messages had been sent down to the inn to summon him—that he put in a sheepish appearance at the cottage where dwelt Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter. [183]

Mrs. Ewart-Crane may be said to have seized him in no uncertain fashion, and to have pointed the way. He protested and pleaded; but all to no purpose. Mrs. Ewart-Crane demanded to know what had happened or was happening; and her dignity forbade that she should take any active part in the matter personally. Clearly Jordan Tant was the man sent by Providence for such a purpose.

So Jordan Tant went—and Jordan Tant arrived at the house at the very moment when the whole discovery had burst upon that house. Mr. Gilbert Byfield himself, as an apparent visitor, might not have been missed; but Bessie—the very head and front of everything—and Daniel Meggison, whose dictatorial tones had been heard everywhere at all times and seasons in that house; these were the people to be missed indeed. Mrs. Stocker complained first of discourteous behaviour on the part of host and hostess; later on became suspicious that all was not well, and wondered sarcastically if her brother had gone in search of yet another fortune. This suggestion she made with an accompaniment of sniffs and folded hands, and some pursing of lips.

Still Aubrey Meggison was discreetly silent. He wanted to find out what had happened, solely on his own account; he wanted to know what had become of that father who had so basely deserted him; but on the other hand he did not want, as he tersely expressed it, "a crowd." [184]

Simon Quarle sprang into the very heart of the matter, strident-tongued and fierce. It was his Bessie that was concerned, and he passionately swept aside any suggestion that anyone else might be injured. Where was she?—and what was being done?—those were the questions to which he demanded an instant answer—questions which he shook before the faces of all with whom he came in contact.

Mr. Tant, coming in the guise of a friend of Mr. Gilbert Byfield, was seized upon eagerly as someone having information. What did he know?—and what was he prepared to tell? Mr. Tant looked round on the eager faces, and feeling that for once he held a position of importance, waved the questioners aside, and declined to answer.

"I know nothing of Mr. Byfield's movements," he said. "There certainly has been a suggestion that he might be leaving here shortly—but beyond that I know nothing."

"Does nobody know anything?" wrathfully demanded Mrs. Stocker, glaring at her husband as though she fully expected that mild little man to be hiding important information in his quaking breast. "Are we all to be treated in this fashion, and no explanations to be given whatever?"

It was at that moment that the vanity which possessed Mr. Aubrey Meggison overcame all other feelings, and demanded to have speech. Aubrey had up to this moment been ignored; more than that, he had been ignored by this aristocratic-looking, well-dressed stranger. He thrust his way into the circle, elbowing out of it Mr. Edward Stocker, as being the weakest there, and faced Mr. Jordan Tant. [185]

"Seein' that everybody seems to be at sixes and sevens, and not quite to know what they're talkin' about, it mightn't be a bad idea if what I might call the last representative of the family put in a spoke. There's a lot of jawin' goin' on—and yet nobody seems to know anything at all. If I might say a word, p'raps I could elucidate what seems to be regarded as a bit of a mystery, but which ain't, mind you, any mystery at all."

"Why—what in the world do *you* know about it?" demanded Mrs. Stocker fiercely.

"What I know about it is this," replied Aubrey calmly, as he drew the note from his pocket, and flicked at it with a finger. "The gov'nor's taken it into his head to go—likewise that sweet sister of mine; and by all accounts our precious friend Byfield has gone also. No thought, mind you, of what's goin' to become of me, or of what I'm to do, left with this blessed house on my hands. Also to say nothin' of hints thrown out as to the necessity for me to earn my own livin'. That's what I know about it."

"I knew it," said Jordan Tant. "I was certain in my own mind that when it came to the point Byfield would shake himself free of you all, and go away. But I certainly did not anticipate that he would take the girl or her father."

"So you know the truth—do you?" demanded Simon Quarle, elbowing his way up to Mr. Tant. "You know the whole disgraceful truth—do you? I suppose you're one of his precious friends—eh?"

"Mr. Byfield is certainly a friend of mine," said Jordan Tant. "And I am the more sorry that he seems to have been sponged upon by all sorts of people with whom he should have had nothing to do." [186]

"Sponged upon!" Mrs. Stocker literally took him by one shoulder, and turned him round so that he faced her. "My brother, let me tell you, has a private fortune of his own——"

"Private fiddlesticks, ma'am," broke in Simon Quarle. "He never had a penny to bless himself with, until he happened to light upon a soft-hearted man who took an interest in his daughter Bessie. That soft-hearted man was Gilbert Byfield; and all this house, and the servants, and the rioting and the feasting, and the champagne and what not—it's all been paid for by him. So much for your brother's fortune, ma'am!"

"I'll not believe it," exclaimed Mrs. Stocker, seeing the matter clearly enough now, but clinging to straws. "It's ridiculous!"

"It happens to be true," said Mr. Tant. "Byfield's friends have long bewailed this absurd infatuation of his, and have done their best to get him away from it; now he has finally defied all their efforts, and has actually run away with this young person."

"Regardin' the fact that she's my sister—would you wish to offer any explanation of that remark to me?" asked Aubrey, with dignity.

"Don't forget, my friend, that she has gone with her father," Simon Quarle reminded Tant in his harsh voice. "There's not a word can be breathed against the girl; understand that."

"The only question is—where have they gone?" demanded Mrs. Stocker. "Personally, I should like to see my brother; I should like to let him understand that never for one instant was I deceived about the matter; never for one instant did I believe his tales of this fortune—and his speculations—and so forth. He would find it difficult to deceive me, I think. I saw through the whole business from the very beginning." [187]

"All I can tell you is this," said Mr. Tant, turning towards the door. "Our friend Byfield—or perhaps I should say *my* friend Byfield—is an extremely wealthy man, and has a yacht—the *Blue Bird*—lying at Newhaven. He has gone there, and will doubtless be found on board by anyone sufficiently interested in him to follow. So far as I'm concerned—I wash my hands of him altogether. Good day to you!"

Mr. Tant put on his hat, and walked with his little mincing steps out of the house; from the windows they saw him going down the drive, and turning out into the high road. There was a silence for a moment or two until he had disappeared; then Mrs. Stocker, in the most startling fashion, demanded of her husband why he was standing staring there.

"Will you permit me, Edward, to remain any longer in a house in which I have been insulted—defrauded—held up to ridicule? As you are well aware, I am compelled to accompany you whenever I receive orders to do so; such is my wifely duty. But at the present moment I implore you to take me away."

"Certainly, my love," said Mr. Stocker feebly. "Only I should have liked to know what had happened to poor Bessie; I always took an interest in the girl, and I was in a way—(subject, of course, to your decision in the matter, my dear)—quite fond of her. I should have liked to know ——" [188]

"Your wife, I believe, stands first," said Mrs. Stocker, pointing to the door. "I suggest, Edward—for of course I would not wish to put my views before yours—I suggest that you lead the way, and that I follow. We can then decide privately what is best for us to do."

So Mr. Edward Stocker, with a protesting glance at the others, led the way, and Mrs. Stocker followed. In the hall, with the door closed, Mrs. Stocker literally took him by the collar, and after administering a shake to him, the better to rouse his wits, spoke her mind.

"Edward Stocker—I am going after them," she said. "I am not going to allow that wretched brother of mine to triumph in such a manner as this; I intend to let him know exactly what I think of him. As for the girl"—Mrs. Stocker bridled and breathed hard—"I fancy I shall have a word to say to her also when we meet. Edward Stocker—our way lies straight for Newhaven and this vessel called *Blue Bird*."

"But, my love—I am not a good sailor," protested little Mr. Stocker.

"Idiot!—I don't anticipate a voyage," exclaimed Mrs. Stocker. "We may be in time to stop them; that's my idea."

Aubrey Meggison, left with Simon Quarle, looked at the latter dubiously; and then, in his despair, decided to seek that gentleman's advice. Simon was pacing about the room, with his hands clasped behind him, and muttering to himself. [189]

"Speakin' of myself for a moment—what would you advise?" said Aubrey.

"Advise? What do you mean?" snarled Mr. Quarle, turning upon him.

"As a man—and as a brother," said Aubrey a little feebly. "To say nothing of a being that's been abandoned, and left to what I might call his fate. What do you think I ought to do?"

"Do? See if you can find some honest work somewhere—preferably road-mending, or something of that sort," snapped the other; and turned and walked out of the room.

"Gentlemanly chap, that," said Aubrey, addressing the furniture. "Road-mendin' indeed! I think I know a trick worth two of that. If this man Byfield is so fly with his money, why shouldn't I have a turn at him? An outraged brother ought to count for something. Is it to be left to the old man to deal with him? Not much! Newhaven, wasn't it? I'll have a look at this blessed *Blue Bird* on my own account!" He buttoned his coat with some show of resolution, and went hurriedly out of the room.

It has to be recorded that Mr. Simon Quarle, on his knees in his room, hurriedly packing his small bag, had arrived also at a decision. He was cramming things in ruthlessly, muttering savagely to himself as he did so.

"Oh!—my Bessie—child in the ways of the world—and child most of all where your heart is touched—is there anyone that can look after you? You'll be lost, body and soul, among the lot of 'em, if your old friend Simon doesn't stir himself. Devils!—harpies!—vultures!—they shall reckon with me when it comes to the pinch. I'm for Newhaven!" [190]

Meanwhile, Mr. Jordan Tant had walked straight back to the cottage, in search of Mrs. Ewart-Crane and Enid. There, with many gestures, and with the air of a man whose feelings of right and wrong had been outraged, he told his story. "If Gilbert had only listened to me," he ended pathetically—"but he never would learn to draw the line."

"One thing I am resolved upon," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane grimly—"and that is that poor Gilbert shall not be absolutely lost. He must be rescued; he must be snatched away from these people, against his will if necessary. As I have already hinted, my mind is pretty well made up; we will go at once to Newhaven, and see what can be done."

"We?" Enid looked at her mother in bewilderment.

"That was the word I used," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane sternly. "Jordan, I am sure, would not allow us to go on such an expedition alone; he will doubtless be willing to lend us his support—morally and physically."

"Certainly—if you wish it," said Jordan Tant humbly. "Most delighted. To Newhaven, by all means."

CHAPTER XII

MISS MAKE-BELIEVE WAKES UP

[191]

IT becomes necessary that we should return to the deck of that yacht *Blue Bird*, there to discover Mr. Daniel Meggison beaming upon Gilbert Byfield, and inwardly congratulating himself on having once more stepped straight into the heart of a difficult and delicate business. We have to imagine the state of mind of that misguided young man Gilbert, in once again finding himself saddled with Mr. Daniel Meggison.

Yet, if the truth be told, there was behind this resentment some faint sneaking feeling of relief. In imagination he had gone over scenes that must presently be enacted on that yacht; and always had come against a dead wall, beyond which he could not go; and that dead wall had sprung up hard and firm whenever he thought of how he must look into the eyes of Bessie Meggison. He had seen her in many different moods—still always in his imagination; but, to do the man credit, he had seen her always pure. Which is only another way of saying that she had always been the girl he had first imagined her to be.

Shorn of all the romantic element in it, the thing had painted itself in brutal colours; and Byfield had been able to leap the years, as it were, and to see her in the future. He had set out to do this thing with the finest motives, and it was not his fault entirely that his hand had been forced, and that he had been compelled to take a different course from that he had at first contemplated; nevertheless he could not blink the fact that what he was to do now was shameful. So that the coming of Daniel Meggison, while it changed every plan he had, yet relieved the situation of awkwardness; there were to be none of those scenes between himself and Bessie, when she would demand an explanation he could not fully give. [192]

Nevertheless (such is the inconsistency of man) he rebelled at the thought that once again this man Meggison was to take matters into his own hands, and to do as he liked, with the unconscious aid of the girl. Gilbert was quite prepared to end the matter, and, however, reluctantly, to be done with the whole business for ever; but he was not prepared to go on with it under present conditions. The thing resolved itself into the ridiculous; this carrying away into the world of Mr. Daniel Meggison, in the absurd frock-coat and silk hat of his supposed respectability.

Dejectedly enough, Gilbert showed the girl over the yacht—Daniel Meggison tailing behind, and expressing loud approval of everything. Then, so soon as it could be managed, the young man got rid of Bessie, and approached the father. For he had determined that now he would no longer mince matters.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand the position, Meggison," said Gilbert, standing leaning over the side while the old man stood beside him. "What do you imagine I'm going to do; what do you think is going to happen, now that you have come here with Bessie?"

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Mr. Daniel Meggison opened wide eyes of virtuous astonishment. "What am I going to do?" he echoed. "Is it possible that you imagined, sir, that I was going to allow my daughter to come here alone? Is it possible that you thought that her old father would be so neglectful of her interests as to permit such a thing? What in the name of all that's moral did you think I should do?"

That was a poser indeed; Gilbert bit his lip and said nothing. Mr. Daniel Meggison pursued his advantage relentlessly.

"My child, sir, has no mother," he went on in a subdued tone. "I have not been fortunate, Mr. Byfield, so far as the world is concerned, but yet I have held up my head. I have been father and mother too to my girl; she has never been able to complain that I have not watched over her. Consequently, when she comes to me, and in the joy of her girlish heart says to me—'Father—I love this man, and this man loves me'—I take her to my heart, and I rejoice with her. Nevertheless, sir"—Daniel Meggison wagged his head sternly at the other man—"nevertheless, knowing the ways of men, I say to myself that I must be careful, and I must be watchful. My suspicions are aroused when I learn that there is to be a secret stealing away from the house—with talk of a yacht—and a voyage—and unknown countries. When my child turns to me, and says naturally and simply—'You will of course come with me, father'—the tears gather in my eyes, and I know that all is well. Providence has arranged that I am to shepherd my child, after all. And here I am."

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The difficulty lay, of course, in the fact that the old schemer was absolutely right; out of the lips of another man his words would have sounded magnificently indeed. Setting aside the fact that he had been working for himself, and had followed the girl simply because she led the way to that gold mine Daniel Meggison had discovered in his old age, the man was absolutely right in what he had done, and Gilbert had no word in reply. But after a moment or two he turned to Meggison, and said bitterly enough the only thing he felt he could say.

"Very well, Meggison—we will grant that you are right," he said. "But you must understand that I am not going to carry you about the world for your own pleasure; I shouldn't think of such a thing. Since the moment when I did a mad thing for the sake of this girl you have done your best to drain me; you have, in fact, announced your intention of living upon me for the rest of your life. Therefore I'll end the matter; since I cannot help Bessie without being preyed on by you for your own purposes, I will not help her at all. The game is ended; you can go back to that miserable, shiftless, shifty life you were living at the time I first met you. Take Bessie away, and let's put an end to the matter. I've done with it."

Daniel Meggison walked after him, and laid a detaining hand on his arm. "Not so fast, my young friend—not so fast," he urged. "For the sake of my child, and for the sake of the past, I will overlook certain references to what you term my miserable, shiftless, shifty existence; I will swallow that particular insult, as I have swallowed others. But this matter cannot be ended in the fashion you suggest. Nay more—it shall not be ended."

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"We'll see about that," said Gilbert. "I give you fair warning that you are to get off this boat as soon as you can possibly manage it; you are to make what excuses you like to Bessie; and you are not to come back here, nor to go again to Fiddler's Green. In fact, so far as Fiddler's Green is concerned, I may tell you that I have given instructions to the servants there that your credit is stopped, and that you are not to be admitted if you go to the place again."

"I guessed as much," said Daniel, with a grin. "That was one reason why I pursued you here—because I really wanted you to understand that you can't take people up one minute, and drop them the next, like so many hot potatoes. I did not seek you, young man; you sought me; consequently you've got to put up with me. I decline to go."

"You'll think better of it presently," said Gilbert, turning away helplessly.

"Sir—I defy you!" said Daniel Meggison, in a stage whisper, as he ran after the other man. "You dare not do anything—because you dare not tell Bessie. If I wasn't a weakling, without a penny to bless myself with in the world, I would not shelter myself behind my child. But you compel me to do so—and I am not ashamed. I defy you. You dare not tell Bessie the truth!"

Gilbert knew only too well that that was strictly true; he went below, nursing his wrath, and wondering what had better be done. Mr. Daniel Meggison, mildly jubilant, went down below also, in search of refreshment.

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Now that astute servant Pringle had had instructions that directly the guest expected by Gilbert arrived the *Blue Bird* was to start. Consequently he went below now in search of his master, and finding him, pointed out that the captain was ready, and only awaited Gilbert's instructions. Gilbert Byfield, in a quandary indeed, told the man angrily that he had changed his mind.

"I'm not going to start yet at all, Pringle," he said.

"Very good, sir," said Pringle cheerfully. "Expecting anybody else, sir?"

"The Lord only knows!" exclaimed Gilbert. "I shouldn't be surprised if everybody else came—any number of them. We must wait, at any rate; I won't start yet."

"Very good, sir," said Pringle; and retired wondering. "'Shouldn't be surprised if everybody came.' Wonder what he means?" muttered the man to himself. "However, it doesn't matter; only it doesn't look as if we should have a very cheery or chatty party."

Meanwhile those who were on their way to the yacht were proceeding as fast as various trains would carry them. Mrs. Julia Stocker and her husband had discovered that by taking a route across country they would avoid the necessity of going to London, and would arrive at Newhaven very late that night; they chose that route accordingly. Mr. Aubrey Meggison made a dash for London, and caught the mail train down—as did also Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter, piloted by Jordan Tant. As, however, they had never seen Aubrey (so far, at least, as the ladies were concerned), and as Mr. Jordan Tant was too busy even to notice him, it happened that they all travelled down by the same train together, without mutual discovery. [197]

Simon Quarle, for his part, was unlucky enough to miss the mail train, but found on that particular day that there was another and a slower train, half an hour later; by that he travelled, on his way to find that yacht on which all his thoughts were centred.

Now it happened that on that particular night a dense and heavy white fog, with indeed almost a suggestion of the "London particular" to add to its density, settled down upon Newhaven, and upon the coast for some miles inland, and upon the sea that washed that coast. A perplexing fog for the summer, and one not to be accounted for; and it only concerns us in so far that many strange things were to happen under the mantle of it. Pringle eyed it with concern, for it meant that there was no possibility of a start being made; and Pringle was of a restless disposition, with a love of the sea that was as incongruous as that suggestion of humour in his eyes. However, there was the fog, and they had to make the best of it.

But Pringle was troubled, because he could not quite understand what was happening, or what was going to happen. He knew enough of his master and of that master's moods to know that he must not question him further; and he had a vague notion that there might be other people coming to the yacht, or there might not. Being of a philosophical turn of mind, he decided to be prepared for anything that might happen. [198]

Then, in the most surprising fashion, various people drifted in, sulkily or suspiciously, out of the fog, and confronted Pringle. In the first place a lanky youth, with his hat on the back of his head, and with a cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth; a youth who was anxious to know whether this really was the yacht *Blue Bird*, owned by Mr. Gilbert Byfield; and whether, further, a young lady and an old gentleman had come on board already. Being assured as to these points, Mr. Aubrey Meggison instructed Pringle in a lordly fashion to show him to a cabin.

"And there's no call for you to mention that I've arrived; I'll break it to 'em later," said Aubrey.

Next there drifted in out of the night Mrs. Ewart-Crane and Enid, piloted by the anxious Jordan Tant; and in this case there was a long consultation on the quay, while Pringle stood waiting, before they consented to go on board. And there Mr. Jordan Tant button-holed Pringle at once, and explained the situation.

"No one is to be disturbed so late as this; Mrs. Ewart-Crane will choose her own time for an interview with Mr. Byfield. Let them retire somewhere—the ladies, I mean—and show me some place where I can be out of the way also. With daylight the atmosphere will be likely to clear, in more ways than one."

"Very good, sir," said the obliging Pringle; and proceeded to accommodate the party without further delay.

The coming of Mr. and Mrs. Stocker would have surprised any other man; but Pringle was equal even to them. He scratched his head a little as he thought of what the accommodation was; but cheerfully solved a difficulty that was growing in his mind by whispering to Mr. Edward Stocker—"Man and wife, sir, I presume?"—and on being assured that that was the fact, conducting them with some ceremony and much delicacy to one cabin. [199]

Pringle had finally decided that the vessel was fairly well stocked, and was discussing the situation with the captain, when he was hailed for the last time from the quay; and after preliminaries there descended to him the square-shouldered figure of Simon Quarle. Once again Pringle was button-holed, and once again he proved equal to the emergency.

"Yes, sir—quite right, sir; young lady and elderly gentleman. Best not disturb them till the morning, sir; sunshine an' daylight makes a world of difference, if the temper is at all 'eated, sir. Mr. Byfield, sir, wouldn't care to be disturbed, I know. Cold night, sir, with the fog; could I get you anything, sir?"

"What you can get me is a bunk of some sort—some place I can sleep in," said Simon Quarle, in a determined voice. "And you need not let anyone know that I'm here; I'll explain to Mr. Byfield myself in the morning."

"Very good, sir," replied the smiling but bewildered Pringle. "This way, sir."

Pringle counted them on his fingers, and shook his head over them, and decided that they were a little mixed. Proud of the way in which he had accommodated the party, he went on deck, and assured the captain that it was all right, but that they were "a rummy lot." Being summoned in a great hurry by Gilbert Byfield, he discovered that gentleman evidently in a very fierce and bitter humour, striding up and down his cabin. Pringle discreetly remained at the door. [200]

"Oh, Pringle"—Gilbert turned quickly as the man appeared—"let it be understood that we start as early as possible in the morning—directly it clears. Let there be no delay. Do you understand?"

"Certainly, sir—perfectly, sir," said Pringle. He hesitated at the door, and came a step or two into the cabin. "And—and the passengers, sir?"

Gilbert of course understood him to refer to Mr. Daniel Meggison and Bessie; he answered curtly enough. "They are not to be disturbed; they go with me," he said.

"Very good, sir," said Pringle, in the hushed tones of one labouring under deep amazement. "Very good indeed, sir." Then he vanished.

There were, of course, excellent reasons why the various members of that extraordinary company should keep out of each other's way. Mr. Jordan Tant, in particular, conjured up in a vivid imagination the wrath of Gilbert Byfield at discovering that Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter were on board. The Stockers were too much overawed by their surroundings, and too much afraid of the result of that impulsive action taken by Mrs. Julia Stocker, to do anything but remain in the cabin that had been allotted to them, a little frightened at what they had done. Aubrey intended to wait for that moment when he could throw himself, as he had done so often, on the protection of his sister; and Simon Quarle was fiercely determined to wait until daylight, and then confront Byfield on his own deck, and have the matter out with him. [201]

So far as Pringle was concerned, he dared not, of course, again approach his master; and gradually, as sleep settled down comfortably on the various passengers, the fog lifted, and the fair moon shone forth, and the crew set about preparations for departure. Presently the engines started, and the *Blue Bird* glided out of Newhaven Harbour into the English Channel, and turned westward. Unexpected journeys are always tiring; and all those with whom we are concerned had made unexpected journeys that day. They slept soundly, lulled to slumber by the throbbing of the engines, and the sound of the waves through which they churned their way.

Almost the first of the company to wake in the morning and to come on deck was Bessie. The *Blue Bird* was plunging and tearing through a choppy sea, but the new sensation was delightful; she had never experienced anything like it before. New ideas, and new hopes and desires, seemed to be buffeted into her by the boisterous wind; above all, it was good to feel that she was really afloat with Gilbert on this great sea, and to know also that her father was safely on board with her. She encountered Gilbert; and for a moment or two they held hands shyly, the man forgetting readily enough all that had happened.

"Good morning," she said, ducking her head to avoid the wind, and laughing.

"Good morning, Bessie mine," he responded. "You look as fresh as a rose." [202]

"You were not hurt with me for bringing poor father with me yesterday—were you?" she asked. "You see, I couldn't very well come alone—and poor father loves the sea; in fact he says that he has an adventurous spirit that has been kept severely in check. You didn't mind, did you?"

"I don't mind anything this morning," he assured her. "All the little cares and troubles and worries seem to have been left behind in the narrow life that I have lived; this morning I breathe a freer, better air, and you are with me; what more could any man desire? Come to breakfast, my dear; I'm hungry, if you're not."

In the midst of breakfast Mr. Daniel Meggison appeared, very much dishevelled, and with a wild and curious stare in his eyes not to be accounted for by the mere strangeness of his surroundings. During the progress of the meal he more than once broke out into a chuckle of laughter; and then checked himself, and became amazingly solemn. In the very act of cracking an egg he stopped, like one haunted, listening; chuckled again, and then became solemn again; and made a most surprising remark to Gilbert.

"Byfield—do you know what I did? It wasn't drink, because your man only brought me one in the course of a long and thirsty evening—and it wasn't dreams, because I slept soundly. But I"—he glanced over his shoulder, and his face became strangely convulsed again—"I opened the wrong cabin door!"

"Well—what of that?" asked Gilbert.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," said Daniel; and again became remarkably solemn. [203]

As a matter of fact Daniel Meggison, staggering along a corridor in the ship that morning, had opened a cabin door, and had seen that which caused his hair to rise and his flesh to creep. The vision before him, in the mere fragment of time before he closed the door again, was that of Mrs. Julia Stocker, leaning half-way out of a bunk and groaning; while Mr. Stocker held on to another bunk with one hand, and endeavoured to dress himself with the aid of the other, the while he groaned in concert. Daniel Meggison had been so alarmed that he had closed the door hurriedly,

and had come away, certain in his own mind that he had been deceived, and that this was but a mere uneasy vision.

After breakfast, however, he went down again and proceeded to explore. Discovering again that cabin, the door of which he had opened, he once more peered in, and once more saw the figures of the Stockers; retreated hurriedly, and began to have a dim idea of what had happened. He opened another door, and came upon Simon Quarle, also desperately ill, and too far gone to take any notice of him; slammed that door, and stood in the rocking, heaving vessel, striving to understand what had happened. He was on the point of further investigation, when Pringle came delicately and skilfully towards him, balancing a small tray on which was a glass.

"Morning, sir," said Pringle cheerfully. "A bit fresh—isn't it, sir?"

"Too fresh for me," said Daniel Meggison, clutching at the man. "Here, I say, my fine fellow—a word with you. Who came on board last night?" [204]

Pringle, balancing the tray and watching the glass upon it, answered deliberately. "Mr. Byfield first, sir—and you and the young lady. That's three. Then a large lady and a small gent—married—names unknown—"

"Stocker. I've seen them," said Daniel. "Was that all?"

"Oh, by no means, sir," said Pringle cheerfully. "Two other ladies, and a small gentleman very much out of breath; another gentleman, tall and thin, that asked most particular about you and the lady, and said you wasn't to be disturbed; smoking a cigarette, that gentleman was, sir."

"Aubrey—my disgraceful son—for a thousand pounds!" said Daniel. "Clever boy, Aubrey; knows his way about."

"And last, sir, just as I thought we had shipped the lot of 'em, in a manner of speaking, another gentleman, with a very loud voice and what I might call a way of snapping at a man. Square shoulders—clean shaven."

"Simon Quarle!" exclaimed Daniel Meggison. "We've got the whole menagerie!"

"Exactly, sir. Just what occurred to me, sir. You'll excuse me, sir, I know; lady very ill along 'ere—the married one."

Daniel Meggison struggled on deck, and tried to think. By what extraordinary process of events they had all contrived to follow he did not know; still less did he understand who the two strange ladies and the gentleman out of breath might be. He felt, however, that he would wait a little before imparting his knowledge to anyone else; some old spirit of deviltry that had long lain dormant in him whispered to him to be silent, and to await developments. [205]

But for the fact that Pringle was such a very discreet servant the discovery must have been made long before it actually was. But Pringle was that admirable type of servant that told himself he had certain duties to perform, and was well paid for performing them, and that nothing else mattered. Consequently during the next two days he waited upon these new passengers, prostrate in their cabins, with the most assiduous care, and said nothing to anyone. Daniel Meggison stumbled about the ship, hourly expecting the explosion that must follow the discovery of the full passenger list; Bessie was blissfully unconscious of everything, except that she was on the wide sea, with the man she loved for company.

Gradually, however, the weather changed; and gradually one by one the white-faced passengers crept out of their cabins. Pringle, feeling quite certain in his own mind that his master would welcome their advent in restored health, bustled about to get out deck chairs, and generally to make his patients comfortable. It was destined to be a morning of surprises for everyone; but Pringle did not know that, and he was as cheerful as ever as he gradually persuaded one and another to go up on deck.

It happened that Gilbert was standing alone when he heard a movement behind him, and turning, saw the first of the invalids being helped up the companion by Pringle, who made use of little encouraging remarks on the way. The patient was Mrs. Stocker, who clung to Pringle as she might have clung to her best friend. [206]

"That's it, ma'am—you won't know yourself when you're on deck, and get the breeze. Other foot, ma'am; that's right—now here we are, and here's Mr. Byfield absolutely waitin' for us. If you would be so kind, sir"—this to the amazed Gilbert—"if you would be so kind, sir, as to take the lady's other arm, I could get her to the chair there in a mere matter of winking. That's it, ma'am; take your time from us—asking the master's pardon."

"What—in the name of all that's marvellous——" Gilbert was staring at the woman who clutched him, and was quite mechanically stepping along the deck in the direction indicated.

"I can explain everything," said Mrs. Stocker. "I came on account of my niece; I have suffered severely for my devotion. I am suffering now."

"The gentleman, sir, said he'd find his way up alone," said Pringle. "It's taken it out of the gentleman a lot, sir; much more frail than the lady, sir. Talkin' of angels!—here he is, sir."

"Beautiful vessel, sir," murmured poor Edward Stocker, getting discreetly a little behind Pringle. "Most sorry to have been ill on the premises, as I might say, sir; it doesn't seem exactly

grateful for privileges—does it, sir?"

Gilbert walked past him, and accosted Pringle, who now for the first time began to look doubtful. "How did these people come on board, Pringle?" he asked.

"Well, sir," said the man—"they—they just came. Asked for you, sir, and seemed as if they knew they were expected, and—and here they are, sir. Every one who came on board seemed to know you, and seemed to think they'd be expected, sir." [207]

"Every one? How many more?"

"Five more, sir—only five. Two ladies, and a gentleman with them—and two separate gents that tumbled in without appearing to know each other, sir."

"But why did you let them stop—and who the deuce are they?" demanded Gilbert angrily.

"If you please, sir, you'll remember I asked you if any more was expected, and the remark you made, sir, was (askin' your pardon, of course, sir)—'The Lord only knows!' In fact, you seemed to think, sir, that all sorts of people might be droppin' in. Consequently, sir, when they did arrive I made 'em as comfortable as I could, and I've waited on 'em simply 'and and foot ever since. Very ill they've been indeed, sir."

From that moment the passengers may be said to have emerged gradually and with caution. Mr. Tant came on deck with something of a scared look, and seemed appalled to find himself on the open sea; seized by Gilbert, he blurted out something of what had happened.

"It's no use bullying me," he said, in an aggrieved fashion. "I didn't bring them; they brought me. Thank your stars that you've got a man on board in case of emergencies. Enid and her mother were both frantically anxious about you, and simply insisted on coming straight away to the yacht; though why on earth you wanted to bring 'em away to sea beats me."

"I didn't even know they were on board," exclaimed Gilbert furiously. "It's simply monstrous that I should be followed about in this fashion. I understand there are five of you, besides those I've already discovered; who are the other two?" [208]

"How should I know?" retorted Tant crossly. "You've taken an interest in so many people, and have adopted families wholesale, that you ought to know better than I do. Where's that man of yours? I'm ravenously hungry for the first time in three days. This is a beastly vessel for pitching."

As he went away sounds of a struggle and of heated voices floated to Gilbert from below; and a moment or two later Simon Quarle struggled on deck, grasping by the collar Aubrey Meggison, whom he was dragging in triumph with him. Aubrey was protesting feebly, and endeavouring under trying circumstances to sustain his dignity.

"Come out—stowaway!" exclaimed Simon excitedly. "Another hanger-on—another creature sneaking behind a woman's skirts, and shirking the honest work he ought to do. Come on deck and show yourself!"

"So you are the other two—are you?" asked Gilbert. "May I ask what brings you here, Mr. Quarle?"

"You may—and you shall be answered," said Simon Quarle sturdily. "I come to have an explanation with you—and I come also to set a few matters straight. I didn't expect to be carried away to sea like this—"

"You're not the only one," said Gilbert, with a smile. "All your followers are here—all the people with whom you have associated yourself. There's quite a ship's load of them—of all sorts and sizes and qualities!" [209]

Even in such an amazing business as this a crisis had to be reached; all the many threads had to be gathered together. That crisis was reached when Bessie presently came along the deck, accompanied by her father; when she stared with amazement at Mrs. Julia Stocker and Mr. Stocker, reposing in deck chairs; when she encountered her brother, disposed to be affectionate from sheer terror of what might happen to him; and when she was finally received into the arms of Simon Quarle with a friendly hug.

"Don't you be afraid, Bessie," said Quarle. "I came on board on purpose to look after you; no one shall do you any harm. You've got one friend in the world, at least."

"I seem to have a great many friends," said Bessie, looking round at them. "Father, dear—you and Mr. Byfield have been arranging a surprise for me; you've brought all our friends together, even here. Here's dear Aubrey—and Aunt Julia and Uncle Ted, and—"

"So this is the girl—is it?" It was an unfriendly voice, and it proceeded from Mrs. Ewart-Crane, who had that moment climbed to the deck accompanied by her daughter. From an unfinished breakfast Jordan Tant had also appeared; so that they were all gathered about her on that deck, with the friendly arms of Simon Quarle round her; her troubled eyes were turned upon Gilbert.

"I did not expect to see you here," said Gilbert slowly to Mrs. Ewart-Crane. "Perhaps now you'll explain what it is you want?"

"We've been carried to sea quite against our will, and in deplorable weather," said Enid. "May I ask if this is the young lady who is the cause of all this trouble and disturbance?" she asked, looking at Bessie. [210]

"Don't you mind, my dear; I'm close to you," growled Simon Quarle.

"This is Miss Bessie Meggison," said Gilbert.

"Gilbert and I are very glad to see you," said Bessie, still watching Byfield, but speaking bravely. "Gilbert has been good enough to take us all away on his beautiful yacht; I didn't know there was going to be such a large party. Why do you all look at me so strangely—why won't someone speak to me?"

"Don't take any notice of 'em; keep a brave heart, child," growled Simon Quarle in the same fashion as before.

"I certainly think it's time, Byfield, that some proper explanation was made," said Tant, adjusting himself with difficulty to the rolling of the vessel. "It's a mad business from beginning to end; but it seems to me Miss Meggison is the only one that doesn't understand it."

"She understands all that is necessary," broke in Daniel Meggison fiercely. "She trusts her poor old father, and she knows where her best friends are. Come, now—what if we all go to breakfast? or at all events get some refreshment of some sort? Splendid notion!"

"Mr. Byfield has asked us to sail with him on his yacht," said Bessie steadily. "What explanation is needed? My father and I would never have come away from England like this, but that my father had a fortune, and was able suddenly to make up for many years of hardship and misery. I would have liked to stay at Fiddler's Green for ever." [211]

"You don't seem to understand that the house at Fiddler's Green belonged to Mr. Byfield," broke in the cold voice of Mrs. Ewart-Crane.

"Borrowed by me under a special arrangement," persisted Daniel Meggison. "Why don't we all go to breakfast?"

"Lent to your father by Mr. Byfield, because for some absurd reason he thought it might be well for you, who had lived all your life in a poverty-stricken district of London, to have a taste of the country," said Enid. "Will the girl never understand?"

"Bear it bravely; keep a stiff upper lip before 'em all!" urged Simon Quarle, in a growling undertone. "We'll get you out of this muddle with clean hands yet."

"Mr. Byfield—won't you tell me what it all means?" asked Bessie.

"I never meant that you should know the truth," said Gilbert. "I played a game of make-believe, just as you had done; your father's fortune was make-believe too. God knows you've been welcome to anything I've been able to do for you; we'd have been happy enough but for all the meddlers and muddiers who have been about us. Now you know the truth."

"There was never any fortune—never any money, except what you gave us?" she said slowly, looking at Byfield. "All the rest is lies—and pretence—"

"Only make-believe, Bessie," said Gilbert gently.

"There's no more make-believe for me!" she exclaimed, with a sudden new fierceness. "I'm not a child any more." Then suddenly breaking down, she looked at them appealingly, with eyes swimming with tears. "Won't you turn your faces from me?" she pleaded. "Don't you see that I am shamed and mean and horrible? For pity's sake turn your faces away from me!" [212]

She turned her own then, and hid it on the friendly breast of Simon Quarle.



"SHE TURNED HER OWN FACE THEN,
AND HID IT ON THE FRIENDLY
BREAST OF SIMON QUARLE." Page
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CHAPTER XIII

MISERY MAKES STRANGE BOAT-FELLOWS

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IN that sudden strange finding of the truth there was no degradation for the girl; the degradation was for those who had deceived her. Even Mrs. Ewart-Crane—hard woman of the world that she was—seemed to understand that, and however contemptuous she might be for the amazing innocence of Bessie, she yet seemed to know it for innocence, nevertheless. With a shrug of the shoulders she was the first to make a move to leave the girl and Gilbert together for that explanation that seemed to be demanded; the others followed suit, a little sheepishly—Daniel Meggison and Quarle the last to go.

"For my part," said Daniel, looking round, and speaking with an air of great frankness, "I cannot for the life of me see what all the fuss is about. If a good fellow likes to perform a generous action—what's to prevent him? I hate all this over-squeamishness."

"The less *you* say the better for everyone," said Simon Quarle, elbowing him out of the way. "You and your precious son are responsible for all this trouble; and I've been a weak-kneed idiot not to have put a stop to your games long ago."

"You can leave the precious son out of it, mister," said Aubrey, looking back over his shoulder. "Whatever I've done doesn't concern anybody else; and what father's done has been on account of the family. You never having had a family ain't likely to understand what such a man's feelings may be." [214]

Simon Quarle would have turned back at the last; but he saw that the girl was standing straight and quiet, with her hands clasped before her, staring out at the sea, and evidently waiting until she could speak to Gilbert Byfield alone. Gilbert, for his part, watched the girl furtively, wondering a little what she would say or what she would do.

"Bessie," he said at last gently—"have you nothing to say to me?"

She did not look at him; she strove hard to keep her voice steady. "How long will it take us to get back?" she asked.

"To get back?" He looked at her quickly.

"To England. Don't you see for yourself how utterly helpless I am?" she demanded passionately, with a note in her voice he had not heard before. "I am a prisoner here; I cannot stir hand or foot to get away from you. Put me on shore—anywhere—and I will walk, if necessary, to get back to London."

"This is rank madness!" he exclaimed. "For Heaven's sake, Bessie, be reasonable, and let us face the situation fairly and squarely. What harm have I done you?"

"What harm?" She faced him suddenly, with her hands clenched, and with eyes that yet had the tears in them blazing at him. "What harm? Don't you understand—or won't you understand—that in all my life no one has ever been able to say that I didn't fight my own way—for myself and others; no one has been able to say that even in my poor fashion I didn't hold up my head—proud to think that I had never looked to anyone for a shilling. And you—you of all men on earth—have been"—she turned away her head, with the swift colour mounting in her face—"you have kept me!"

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"Bessie!"

"It's true!" she flashed at him. "You've lied to me in everything—fed me with smooth words, just as you've fed me and the others with food you paid for. The clothes I wear have been bought with your money—and I would rather stand naked before you than have to say it."

"I tell you you don't understand," he pleaded. "It was done for your sake—and for your sake only. I was rich—and I saw a chance to help you, a mere child, and to bring some light and joy into your life. It was nothing to me; and you had longed, naturally enough, for things far beyond your reach. I tell you I was glad to do it."

"I understand perfectly," she said, standing close to him, and looking at him fearlessly. "I was a toy—something that amused you—a child you were sorry for. You didn't see that behind the child was the woman, who could be shamed and outraged and hurt; you never thought of that. It pleased you to spend money—because money was nothing to you, and was the easiest thing you had to part with. And then, to crown it all—the bitterest blow of all—you lied to me, and told me that you loved me."

"Stop!" he cried hastily. "You're wrong there; I swear it. I did love you—and I do love you; you are more wonderful to me than any woman I have ever met. I've been a brute and a fool, and I haven't understood; but I understand now, and I love you a thousand times more than I ever did before. I've blundered on, not troubling about you, or what became of you; content only to let each day go on—happy in keeping you in ignorance. There are no words bad enough to paint what I've done; but what I said to you was true then when I said it, and is more than ever true now."

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She laughed, and flung up her head with a little quick gesture. "I don't believe it," she said—"but even if it's true it happens that at least I can spare myself something—can keep some little shred of self-respect to cover me. I hate you; when I said that I loved you it was wrong, and it wasn't true. I never want to see you again; I never want to have anything to do with you again. Some day, when I've fought and striven a little, I'll be able to pay you back what I've had from you; I shall work for that through all the years that are coming to me—I shall think only of that. That's my last word, Mr. Byfield. Now, if you have any feeling left at all, you will go away, and will let me alone until you can put me on shore. I don't want to stay here longer than I can help," she added, her voice breaking a little—"because there are so many people on this yacht who know all about it, and must be laughing at me."

He saw the utter hopelessness of arguing the matter with her; he turned away. At the same time there was, naturally enough, in his mind a bitter feeling of resentment that the matter should have ended in this way; for after all it must be remembered that, even with that mad impulse which had started the business, the mad impulse had been a good one, and had only been thwarted by others. The man had done his best, however mistakenly, and he bitterly resented the very natural attitude the girl took up. He was chafing with futile rage at the position in which he found himself, and in which he had placed her, when her voice recalled him.

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"Mr. Byfield—you have not told me how soon we can go back," she reminded him coldly. "Surely you understand that I have done with all this"—she gave a comprehensive sweep of her hands to indicate the yacht and all about it—"and that I want to get back to some such sort of Arcadia Street as that in which you found me."

He came slowly back to her; he looked at her steadily. "I'm not going back," he said. "You don't understand that, whatever I may have done, and however mistaken I may be, you're treating me very unfairly. I'll change nothing to which I've set my hand; I'll go back in my own good time. These other people came on board for their own purposes; I'll not be at the beck and call of anyone now that those purposes are finished. I've done everything for the best, and whether I have failed or not doesn't affect the matter. More than that, although you won't listen to me I love you, and I don't mean to give you up. It's you and I, Bessie, against the world, and against all these other people; you shan't go back to any Arcadia Street if I can help it."

"I'll find my own way back," she exclaimed passionately. "I have nothing further to do with you; you don't touch my life at all. You must take me back to England."

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"I will not," he replied obstinately; and with those final words left her.

Strange as it may appear, for two whole days the situation remained unchanged. Gilbert held practically no communication with anyone on board, save with Bessie, to whom occasionally he sent a note by the discreet hands of Pringle. But though she read the notes, and though over the first of them at least she wavered a little, she never sent any reply, and the notes themselves, in fragments, were tossed overboard. But on the evening of the second day after that disclosure of the truth, Mr. Tant literally forced his way into the presence of Gilbert, and demanded to know what was going to happen.

"My dear Gilbert," he exclaimed—"I can really stand it no longer. Mrs. Ewart-Crane, fortunately for all of us (though Heaven forgive me for saying so) has been extremely ill again, or she would in all probability have demanded to see you; Enid, I regret to say, has merely become sulky. Don't think that I blame her for a moment; in her position anyone might be excused for doing the same. The other people do not concern me, and so I have not troubled about them; but I would merely observe that the elder Meggison appears to be making a frantic attempt to drink himself to death, thanks to the services of the obliging Pringle. Something's got to be done—and quickly."

"There is one person in command of this vessel, and of the situation," replied Gilbert. "That person is Miss Meggison; and when she deigns to look at the matter from the proper standpoint, and practically to take no notice of any of those persons who have forced their way on to the yacht, we shall know what we are going to do. I am perfectly comfortable, and unless Miss Meggison moves in the matter the situation must solve itself." [219]

So Mr. Jordan Tant, shaking his head desolately, went off to find Bessie. As a matter of fact he was a little afraid of her, because of the extraordinary position that a girl of her origin had taken up; it was clearly against anything he had ever understood concerning people of her class. He approached her in the politest fashion, and pleaded with her to do something in the matter.

"I have been speaking to our friend Byfield, Miss Meggison," said Mr. Tant—"and I may be said to be a sort of reluctant ambassador. Personally I do not like the sea; there is not that stability about it that I require for my actual comfort; if you come to that, I think none of us here really like the sea; we should all like to go back safely to dry land. Now—what do you say?"

"I have already told Mr. Byfield that I want to go back to England," said Bessie.

"Excellent! I am sure that our friend Byfield does not really understand the situation. Perhaps you have not explained the matter clearly."

"I have explained it very clearly—but Mr. Byfield absolutely refuses to go back," said Bessie. "The matter is not in my hands, as you appear to think; I am a prisoner here just the same as you are. Here is my father; perhaps you had better speak to him about it."

"Personally I don't see that there's anything to discuss," said Daniel Meggison, airily stepping into the conversation. "Our good friend Byfield—owner of this charming yacht—prefers as an idle man to take a cruise on summer seas. I, as another idle man, am delighted to accompany him—and my daughter is included in the party. I confess there are certain people on board who have forced themselves, as it were, into the original scheme of things; but the vessel is a large one, and we may safely ignore them. Personally, I'm very comfortable, and I decline to question the motives of my friend Byfield in any way. Excellent fellow, Byfield—lavish with his money." [220]

"You hear what my father says," said Bessie, with a little note of contempt in her voice. "Surely you can want nothing else. I don't count at all, you see; all the other people have to be reckoned with first."

Mr. Tant went away, but did not return to Gilbert. Instead he spent some hours in going about between Mrs. Ewart-Crane and Enid and Simon Quarle—putting questions to them, with his head very much on one side, and speaking always in a plaintive tone. Those questions resolved themselves simply into—What ought a fellow to do under certain exasperating circumstances?—Wouldn't it be better to appoint a committee, or something of that kind, to take charge of things? Failing to get any satisfaction from any quarter, Mr. Tant took his sorrows to the cheerful Pringle, who seemed to suggest that there was nothing very much to worry about.

"Bless you, sir—so long as you're in comfortable quarters I don't think it matters much, sir, whether you're afloat or whether you're ashore. You've got to pass the time somehow, and you may as well make the best of things as they happen along, sir. Nice vessel, sir—an' company nice and varied; some of 'em swears at you, an' some of 'em complains about things—an' nobody seems just at the moment to be absolutely wild with joy. But Lor', sir, anything might happen to cheer everybody up at a moment's notice. Anything I can do for you, sir?" [221]

Mr. Tant went away, feeling more miserable than ever. Coming on deck, he found that it was growing dark, and that a soft uncomfortable rain was falling; the wind had dropped to nothing. He wondered despondently where they were, or for what port they were bound; he had not troubled to ask about such matters as that at all. Finally he went below, and curled himself up in a corner of the saloon, and went to sleep.

He was awakened from that sleep by a sudden violent shock that flung him full upon his face upon the carpet. He scrambled up, hearing above him a great noise of running feet, and the shouts of men, and once the agitated scream of a woman. He got the door of the saloon open, and went off along a corridor that seemed to slope in an unaccountable fashion in search of Mrs. Ewart-Crane's cabin. He met Enid at the door of it.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Everything in the cabin seems to be upside down."

"I don't know," responded Mr. Tant, with his teeth chattering—"but I should say that we'd bumped into something."

Mr. Tant left her, and went along that corridor that sloped unpleasantly on his way to the deck. At the foot of the companion he collided with Pringle, who apologized, and beamed upon him as [222]

cheerfully as ever.

"Shouldn't be a bit surprised, sir, if we wasn't all goin' to the bottom," said Pringle, with a grin. "This way, sir; take my arm, sir."

They scrambled on deck in a pitchy darkness of fog and a blur of rain, to see dim figures moving swiftly about the deck, and to hear a voice above them crying orders. The deck sloped as much as the corridor had done, and at quite as unpleasant an angle; somewhere near at hand they heard Gilbert's voice speaking sharply to the captain.

"It means taking to the boats, sir," shouted the voice above. "Plenty of time, if things are done quietly; the men are all standing by. Better get your friends on deck, sir."

That suggestion was more easily made than carried out. Mrs. Stocker, for instance, was in a great state of hysteria, and was clinging to little Mr. Stocker, something to his suffocation. She insisted upon being taken on deck, and at the same time vigorously resisted every effort to get her there. Mr. Daniel Meggison wept, and wrung his hands, and bawled for life-belts; Aubrey, with all the bravado gone out of him, stood still, and plucked at his lips, and stared into the blackness of the night, terror-stricken. Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter clung together; but Enid, to do her justice, was quite composed, and spoke sharply once to Mr. Tant when that gentleman demanded to know if anybody was ever going to do anything.

Simon Quarle found the hand he wanted in the darkness, and gripped it. "Well, Bessie—are you afraid?" he whispered. [223]

"No—not afraid," she said steadily. "If only father would be quiet; we can't do any good by shouting."

"Life-belts!" bellowed Daniel Meggison. "Oh—my God!—are there no life-belts on this rotten old hulk? Life-belts!"

The yacht was settling down slowly but steadily; there was nothing for it but to take to the boats. Some provisions were put in—the men hurrying hither and thither, answering cheerfully to the orders given them, and standing in their places without disorder. The only confusion was among the passengers; when their boat was at last ready, Daniel and his son scuffled together feebly for a moment or two, even with blows, in an attempt to get into the boat first.

Now, just how it happened that in the confusion that boat went off with the passengers only in it—the Stockers and the Ewart-Cranes, the Meggisons and Quarle, and Tant and Gilbert—will never be known. At the last moment Gilbert called out to know if Pringle was there; and the cheery voice of the man answered him; and Pringle, following the voice, stepped into his place.

"Nice smooth sea, sir," said Pringle, as he took an oar.

The other boats were being manned; to the last, as they pulled away, they heard the steady voice of the captain calling orders. Gilbert and Pringle and Simon Quarle pulled steadily; the women were huddled in the stern, and one of them at least was whimpering. Gradually the night seemed to close in above them and about them; gradually it seemed that they were left more and more alone on the gently heaving sea. At last—minutes after, as it seemed—there was a sound of rending and tearing upon rocks—and then a splash of waters; then all was still. [224]

"She's gone," said Gilbert, drawing a long breath.

They pulled slowly, waiting for the dawn; no one seemed inclined to speak. Daniel Meggison slumbered a little, murmuring in his sleep; Mrs. Julia Stocker also appeared to sleep, pillowing her head upon Mr. Stocker, who seemed to strive to make her as comfortable as he could. She murmured more than once of Clapham.

Gilbert strove to pierce the darkness to catch a glimpse of Bessie. He thought he knew where she sat—upright and slim and steady; he wondered of what she was thinking, out there in the darkness—remembered with a pang how far she was from that quiet Arcadia Street in which he had found her. Then gradually, from sheer exhaustion, he nodded a little himself, even while he kept his oar moving rhythmically. And the dawn grew at last in the sky, and shed its grey light upon them—that strange little company in an open boat upon the sea.

That little company woke gradually to the full meaning of their situation. Mrs. Stocker, shuddering, was absolutely certain that she "looked a fright"; Mr. Edward Stocker passed a sort of damp compliment to her concerning her appearance. Mrs. Ewart-Crane had withdrawn herself a little, with her daughter, from the commoner company; Enid might have been observed holding the hand of Jordan Tant. Daniel Meggison, for his part, more than once put the lives of them all in peril by standing up in the boat, holding on to the person nearest him, and declaring that he distinctly saw land; after such an exhibition he was usually hauled down unceremoniously by the coat-tails by his son. [225]

"Got any notion where we are?" growled Simon Quarle over his shoulder to Gilbert.

"Not the slightest," replied Byfield in the same tone. "As a matter of fact, I didn't trouble very much about the direction we were taking during the past few days."

"Then we must hope for luck—and cheer up the women," said Quarle, bending to his oar again.

"It might help a bit, sir, if I was to serve out breakfast," said Pringle, looking back over his

shoulder. "It isn't much, sir; but it might well be less. At the worst, it'll keep us going for a day or two, sir."

"Go ahead then—but be sparing," said Gilbert.

"Very good, sir," replied Pringle cheerfully; and proceeded to hand out miscellaneous provisions forthwith.

"I feel that I am a citizen of the world," said Daniel Meggison, biting a biscuit, and looking round upon his fellow-voyagers. "Anything might happen to me—anything may happen; but at least I shall have warmed both hands at the fire of life."

"That's about the only fire you ever will warm your hands at, Dad, I should think," retorted Aubrey. "Beastly chilly on the sea at this time of the morning." He flogged himself viciously with his arms as he spoke. "Besides, how anybody can be cheerful under these horrible circumstances [226] licks me. Biscuits—and tinned things—and water!"

"Water is certainly a drawback, but I believe thirst is even worse," said Mr. Meggison.

"If Mr. Stocker and I were at home now we should at least be having a comfortable breakfast," said Mrs. Stocker, shivering. "I do hope that girl is looking after the house; ten chances to one she won't have dusted the place since last I set foot in it. I wonder what'll happen if we all go to the bottom of the sea? I wonder if she'll stop at the house, and hope for us to come back."

"Let us hope, on our own accounts, that we shall go back, my dear," said Mr. Stocker. "After all, we're not the worst off by any means," he added, lowering his voice. "Mr. Byfield, for instance—think what he's lost. All that great vessel gone to the bottom of the sea."

"Well, he ought to have had more sense than to go tearing over the ocean, and bumping into things in the dark the way he did," snapped Mrs. Stocker.

"I don't know whether you noticed, ma'am," said Daniel Meggison genially, as he turned to Mrs. Ewart-Crane, "that about a fortnight ago, in one of the Sunday papers, there was an account of a shipwrecked crew—provisions exhausted—who decided to draw lots as to which of them should be killed to provide sustenance for the remainder. It fell to the cook—"

"I do not read the Sunday papers, sir," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane, turning her back upon him.

"That's a pity," he retorted, nothing abashed. "They seemed to find the cook somewhat reluctant, but finally overcame his scruples, and were just deciding how best to dispose his person among the crew—to divide him up, in fact, ma'am—when there was a cry from one of the number that a vessel was in sight. So the cook escaped. Highly interesting narrative, ma'am." [227]

"Even in the small compass of this boat, sir, you will find that it is more convenient to draw the line, if I may use the expression, between class and class," said Mr. Jordan Tanticily. "Because a lady is compelled to sit upon the same seat with you in a boat on the open sea is no reason why you should force your conversation upon her. It isn't done, sir."

"Confound your impudence!" exclaimed Daniel Meggison, starting to his feet. But Aubrey promptly pulled him down again, and he retired, muttering, into the depths of his large frock-coat, the collar of which he had turned up about his ears.

A mist had settled down again over the sea. They pulled on and on steadily, with no definite purpose in their minds as to what was to happen to them. But presently, amid a silence that had fallen upon them all (for even Daniel Meggison had given up conversation as hopeless under the circumstances), Gilbert leaned forward and spoke to Simon Quarle.

"I can hear the sound of waves breaking on rocks," he said. "I thought I heard it just now; but now I'm certain."

They rested upon their oars, and listened; the sound was unmistakable. Everyone sat up, and began to offer suggestions as to where they were, and what the land was likely to be; the three rowers settled again to their work. And now the sound grew louder and louder, until presently, [228] jutting up out of the mist, was a grey shadow that was certainly land—a grey shadow that presently resolved itself into a sloping shore, with white crested waves breaking upon it. They pulled cautiously, looking for an opening; Daniel Meggison was with difficulty restrained from leaping to his feet and shouting.

"For my part, I do hope there'll be somebody that can speak the English language," said Mrs. Stocker. "Also I hope there won't be any unnecessary bumping when we do land. I remember when I was a girl at Brighton when we were run up on the beach in a very nice boat—"

The speech was cut short by the boat that moment taking ground gently; the three men sprang out, and began to haul it up on the sloping shore. One by one the cramped passengers were handed out over the seats; they stood on a desolate shore, without any sign of human habitation anywhere, and looked about them forlornly.

"Looks to me very much like an island, sir," said Pringle cheerfully.

"By all the rules of the game it certainly ought to be an island," said Daniel Meggison.

CHAPTER XIV THE CASTAWAYS

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THE first business of the shipwrecked party, after hauling up the boat and taking out of it the various stores it contained, was to make some attempt at exploring the place upon which they had been so unceremoniously flung. That is true, at least, of the more energetic members, practically consisting of Gilbert Byfield, and Simon Quarle and Pringle.

Daniel Meggison and his son, together with Mr. Tant, were left to guard the ladies against those unknown dangers which in this strange place might threaten them; Mrs. Stocker had already declared that she had "heard savages"—but declined to enter into particulars regarding what particular noise she referred to. So in the grey morning mist Julia Stocker and her husband, and Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter, seated themselves upon the shore, and Daniel Meggison and his son with Mr. Tant stood ready to hurl themselves upon any approaching foe.

Byfield and his two companions had set off round the shore; and they had scarcely gone fifty yards when out of the mists they had left behind there came towards them, crying to them, someone running. Gilbert stood still, and even went back a few paces; and so came face to face with Bessie. She caught at his hand, and for a moment it seemed as though the old friendly confidence was restored between them. [230]

"I want to go with you," she panted.

"Come along then," he responded quickly; and they moved on to join the others.

"We mustn't make up our minds that the place is an island until we've made the circuit of it," said Simon Quarle as they went on. "Romantic notions are one thing—but we may be quite near to civilization."

"It only shows, sir, what a wonderful thing schooling is," said Pringle, pausing for a moment, and speaking with the utmost respect. "Now when I was a nipper,—boy I mean, sir—I was only too glad to cut what lessons I could, sir. But suppose, for instance, I hadn't had it well rubbed into me that an island was a piece of land entirely surrounded by water—I might have got into quite a muddle over this. Shouldn't have known, sir, how to set about it to find out if it really *was* an island. Wonderful thing education, sir."

By means of a pocket compass which dangled on the watchchain of Simon Quarle they discovered first that they were going due south, and then that they were turning towards the west. It was at about the most western point of the island that they found that the character of the land changed, and that from some low hills a deep wood stretched down almost to the shore. Skirting this, and turning northward, they found their further progress barred by a great chain of rocks that rose abruptly from the more level ground and plunged also straight out into the sea. It was obviously impossible for them any longer to keep to the coast; they skirted this line of rocks inland, and came in a comparatively short time again to the sea. This time the coast pointed southwards; following it, they came to the boat drawn up on the beach, and to the little company of people they had left. [231]

"I see exactly the shape of this place," said Simon Quarle, rapidly scraping out a rough design on the sand. "It is pear-shaped, with the narrowest part of the pear (where the stalk would be) to the north, and the broadest part of it running from east to west. There is only one question we've left unsettled; what is beyond those rocks?"

"The sea, of course," said Gilbert. "Though what part of the sea, or what this island is, or where we are, I haven't the least notion."

"The great question is—what are we going to live on?" asked Daniel Meggison, looking round upon the little company. "Fish we might procure, if anyone happened to be expert enough to capture them, or if we had rods and lines; certain berries might also be discovered which would sustain life. Of course in all probability so soon as the mist lifts we may be able to make signals, and to attract the attention of some passing ship."

"We must find out what lies beyond those rocks," said Bessie. "Will you come with me, Mr. Quarle?"

"I'll go with you," broke in Gilbert eagerly; but she kept her eyes fixed on Simon Quarle, and presently walked away with him.

"Mr. Quarle—what is going to happen to us?" she asked when they were out of ear-shot of the others. "I am a little afraid, because this has come upon us so suddenly; but is there no escape—no chance of getting away?" [232]

"Don't know, I'm sure—utterly impossible to say," said Quarle. "If we knew where we were, things might be different; or if the other boats turned up with the crew in them. But I'm afraid we're a mere set of amateurs at this Robinson Crusoe business—and I don't quite know what really will happen to us. At any rate we're on dry land—which is better than knocking about in an open boat on the sea—isn't it?"

They came again to that great wall of rock, and after some search discovered a sort of natural path which went up the face of it, and was comparatively easy to climb. As they gained the top,

their worst suspicions were realized; on the other side of what was practically merely a thick wall of rocks they heard the sea booming restlessly and peered only into the mist which shrouded it. As Quarle had said, this was the end of the island—the narrow part of the pear-shaped place on which the sea had tossed them.

They scrambled down the rocks, and retraced their steps in a gloomy silence. As they were nearing the place where they had left the party, Bessie suddenly stopped, and faced Simon Quarle, and spoke with something of the old, quiet, steady resolution that had been hers in Arcadia Street.

"Mr. Quarle—even if you and I are desperately afraid we musn't let the others know it," she said; "we've got to go on keeping brave faces until something worse happens—and even then we've got to keep brave faces. We shall have to make the best of the provisions we've got; and still we must keep brave faces even when we're beginning to be hungry. We've got to find some place to shelter us at night; and perhaps, after all, help may come sooner than we anticipate." [233]

"And perhaps, if help doesn't come, or if things get to the worst, little Miss Make-Believe may contrive to make us all think that things are better than they are—eh?" He smiled at her whimsically.

She stood for a moment looking out to sea; she did not turn to him when she spoke. "If we can live here at all, we may need all the make-believe we have in us," she said. "My poor make-believe seems to have made shipwreck of my life, and the lives of others too; perhaps here it may be more useful. I wonder!"

Quarle moved nearer to her for a moment; spoke to her over her shoulder. "Bessie—I haven't cared to say anything to you about—about yourself—and about this man. I rushed off to Newhaven, thinking you might need a friend; have you nothing to say to me?"

"Only to thank you," she replied. "There's some strange Fate working for me—or against me; I suppose that's why I've been dropped out of the world I knew into this place."

"You're not answering my question; you're not being fair to me," he said. "Have you nothing to say to me about this matter—about yourself? Do you love him?"

She stood still for a moment or two, looking at the waves tumbling at her feet; the man waited.

"Yes," she replied at last; and then turned swiftly to him, pouring out a very flood of words upon him. "I love him with all my heart and soul; there's no other man in all the world like him; he's my life—my everything. And just for that reason, and just because of what he has done, I can never have anything to do with him. In spite of all I said to him, I know only too well why he lavished all that money on me; I know that he never meant to wound me, or to shame me in the eyes of other people. That wasn't his fault; it was the fault of those who traded upon his generosity. If I have been shamed and hurt—how much more has he been shamed and hurt because of me. There"—she laughed quickly, and brushed the tears from her eyes—"that's the end of it—and that's the last time I shall ever speak of it. It's good to tell a secret sometimes—and I've told mine to the best friend ever a poor unhappy girl had. I won't ask if you're going to keep my secret—because that would be insulting you, and would show that I didn't know what a good friend I've got. And you won't ever speak of this again to me?" [234]

He did not answer in words; he took her hand for a moment, and gripped it; when presently they moved off towards the others he still held that hand as she walked beside him. Only when they came in sight of those who waited for them did he drop the hand, and resume his ordinary attitude of walking with his own clasped behind his back.

"It's an island," said Simon Quarle. "We climbed up the rocks, and there's nothing but the sea beyond. Therefore we must make the best of it."

"Someone ought to be appointed to look after the provisions and things generally—a sort of temporary ruler," said Daniel Meggison. "As perhaps the oldest here I'm quite ready to take the post. It requires dignity—and all that sort of thing." [235]

"I think we can leave the question of the provisions to Pringle," said Gilbert, "with the understanding that he is to be careful."

"Certainly, sir; most happy, sir," responded Pringle. "Sparing in all things, sir—and stimulants to be kept for medicinal purposes," he added.

"What the devil's the man winking at me for?" demanded Daniel Meggison fiercely as he turned away.

As the morning advanced the day grew very hot. There was no protection from the sun whatever on that side of the island, and it was presently arranged that one of the spare sails in the boat should be rigged up to form a species of shelter. There the women sat—a little removed from each other, so far as the Ewart-Cranes and Mrs. Stocker were concerned—and dozed at intervals; Bessie seemed to take her place naturally enough with Simon Quarle and Gilbert in the actual work that lay before them if they were to make any attempt to live at all.

Curiously enough, perhaps the most active of them all was that meek little man, Edward Stocker. Relieved for the first time in his married life from the thralldom of Mrs. Stocker, he was like a boy playing some great game; he entered into it with the zest of a child. He it was who,

setting out to make some further exploration of the island, and being lost for an hour or so, was presently observed racing towards them with wildly waving arms, shouting something wholly unintelligible as he ran. Mr. Daniel Meggison seeing him, promptly got behind Simon Quarle, interposing that gentleman between himself and coming danger.

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"He is pursued by some terrible beast—and we have no weapons!" he shrieked.

However, as Mr. Stocker drew nearer it was observed that his face was beaming with genuine pleasure, and that he was evidently very greatly excited. He bounded into their midst, and announced his great discovery.

"I say—gentlemen—everybody—I've found a building!"

"A building?" they echoed, staring at him.

"Up there—beyond that long hill you can see," panted Mr. Stocker, pointing. "It seems like a big sort of hut—but I didn't care to go in. Rather dilapidated—but unmistakably a hut."

"It is pretty obvious that someone has lived here before," said Jordan Tant. "More than that, it's not improbable that someone is living here now. Somebody had better go and look at the place," he added. "I'll stay here in case the ladies get alarmed."

Mr. Daniel Meggison also deciding to remain for the same gallant purpose, the rest of the party tramped off northwards, guided by Mr. Stocker, who was obviously not a little proud of himself. Skirting the foot of the low hills that seemed to lie in the very centre of the island, they presently came to a large hut, almost obscured by a tangle of trees and bushes, but in fairly good condition. After some little hesitation they ventured to thrust open the crazy door, and to peer inside; by the light which came streaming through an aperture near the roof they saw that the place was empty, and noticed with further satisfaction that it was dry and fairly clean. Whatever hermit had once inhabited it had long since departed, leaving behind him but few traces of his occupancy.

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A few rough boards had been nailed together in one corner to form a sort of bed; and on this some old brushwood still lay. An empty barrel, with nothing upon it to indicate what it had once contained or from whence it had come, stood in one corner; and on a heavy flat stone just under the aperture in the wall stood an old battered cooking-pot, quite sound, and with the ashes of some ancient fire still surrounding it. The place had a ghostly look, even on that bright sunshiny day; but it was better than nothing.

"With a touch here and there, sir, this place could be made a palace," said Pringle. "It's a good sizeable place too; a bit primitive, perhaps, sir, but none the worse for that. At any rate we could get it ready for the ladies, sir, against to-night."

"Is it bein' suggested that the gentlemen of the party sleep in the open air?" asked Aubrey. "I've nothin' to say against it for myself, mind you—but I've not been used to it, and I don't quite see why it should be necessary, even under special circumstances. Of course I wouldn't wish——"

"The ladies will sleep here to-night," said Gilbert. He turned to Bessie, who had accompanied the party. "Do you think the ladies will object?" he asked.

"I don't know," she responded, with a half-smile, "but I should think they'd be glad. Don't you think, Mr. Byfield, that things are turning out rather well?"

"Splendidly!" he exclaimed, glad of that friendly word from her. "But I wonder who can have lived in this place—and lived alone; or so it seems, at least. Whoever it was must have been taken off, I suppose, by some passing vessel; but how many years ago—or under what circumstances—it's impossible to say."

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"Whoever it was, we certainly hope and trust he was a gentleman," said Aubrey, as he moved away. "My word," he added from a safe distance, "if it wasn't for my sister I might have somethin' to say about this that would astonish people!"

That great discovery was duly communicated to the ladies; Mrs. Stocker, who had had visions of sleeping in the open air, guarded by Mr. Stocker, heaved a sigh of relief at the prospect of shelter. Mrs. Ewart-Crane, on the other hand, took Jordan Tant aside to speak of a vital matter.

"Island or no island, it is of course distinctly understood that I do not share the same sleeping accommodation with the Stocker woman, or with this girl. Kindly arrange that some other hut is discovered, or at all events that the present one be divided into two parts."

"Doesn't it strike you, ma, that we're rather lucky to get any place to sleep in at all—and that the girl, at any rate, isn't half a bad sort?" asked Enid good-naturedly.

"Silence, Enid; you do not seem to understand that certain social distinctions must be observed, even in such a place as this. In London I should not know the Stocker woman; why should I know her here? The island is large, I am informed; let her discover some other place for herself."

Even in that crisis the wonderful Pringle proved equal to the emergency. It being mentioned by Jordan Tant to Gilbert that there was a difficulty as to the sharing of that limited accommodation designed for the ladies, Gilbert in despair summoned his henchman; and Pringle smiled and suggested a way out.

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"It's always the way with the ladies, sir—bless 'em!" he replied cheerfully. "My poor old mother never could get on with the next-door neighbour, sir—no matter whether we lived in a small and humble way—or whether we was in what you might call the mansions of the great; mother being a caretaker, sir, and rather a good caretaker at that. Of course it isn't to be expected that a lady of the stiffness of Mrs. Crane should wish to lay herself down in the presence of people she doesn't really know; so I'll rig a sail up, sir, across the middle, and they can toss for sides if they can't decide any other way, sir. Leave it to me, sir; if you'll excuse the liberty, sir, I may say I know their little failings—an' I know just how to humour them, sir."

So the sail was rigged up, and Mrs. Stocker and Bessie took possession of one side of the hut, while Mrs. Ewart-Crane and Enid occupied the other. Pringle had collected brushwood and dried grasses, and had made two very respectable beds; the moon, when it came to the hour for retiring, was fine and fair above them, and the night was warm.

But before that there had come another great surprise, in the form of an impromptu supper. Certain provisions had been served out during the day, in a promiscuous fashion, by Pringle; but now, when everyone was gathered about the hut, the final preparations were being made, and "good nights" being said, Pringle appeared with something of a flickering smile about his face, and made a startling announcement. [240]

"Ladies and gentlemen—supper is served!"

"Look here, my man—a joke is a joke—but pray remember your place, and don't carry a joke too far," said Daniel Meggison sternly. "Remember who you are—and take yourself off."

"This way, if you please, sir," said Pringle, taking not the faintest notice of Daniel Meggison. "Not far, sir—just round the corner, as you might say."

He led the way, and the others followed wonderingly. Presently they came to a little clearing, sheltered by the hill that rose behind it; and in that clearing was a fire upon the ground, and over the fire was propped the old cooking-pot that had been discovered in the hut. Bessie was bending over the cooking-pot, and from it there wafted to the hungry little company an appetizing odour.

"By Jove!—this is capital," exclaimed Gilbert. "We can sit round here in gipsy fashion, and enjoy it. Pringle—this is really clever of you."

"I see no necessity for my daughter to be occupied in a menial office," said Mr. Daniel Meggison stiffly. "After all, there are certain decencies to be observed, even in this place."

"Not me, sir—nothing to do with me, sir," said Pringle, answering Gilbert Byfield. "I certainly did gather the sticks for the fire—but that's about all, sir. The cooking idea wasn't mine at all; I doubt if I could have done it. Miss Meggison, sir, is the lady who's saved our lives, as you might say, sir, to-night." [241]

"It is certainly well to be experienced in these matters," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane, lowering herself to the ground.

"It was quite easy," said Bessie, busying herself with the pot. "When Pringle and I came to look into things, we found that there were preserved meats and preserved vegetables; so it seemed to me that we might have a sort of stew. It's a little mixed—but I think it's nice. Pringle—the plates, please."

"Certainly, Miss," responded Pringle, and instantly produced, as if from the result of a conjuring trick, half a dozen battered old tin plates.

"This is wonderful—and most comfortable," said Mr. Edward Stocker.

"They took a bit of cleanin', sir," explained Pringle. "I found 'em under some of the rubbish in the hut—likewise a knife and fork and a big spoon. The big spoon's in the pot—and the knife and fork I suppose ought to be handed to one of the ladies."

"I have never eaten with my fingers yet—not even in the matter of asparagus," said Mrs. Ewart-Crane instantly.

"Then it's no use your makin' a start at this time of day—is it, ma'am?" responded Pringle, handing over the knife and fork to her with much politeness. "It's a three-pronger, ma'am—but still a fork's a fork."

The steaming food was handed out—Pringle deftly holding the battered tin plates to be filled. The little company was so ravenously hungry that even with that limited number of plates there was not much waiting, nor did it seem to be considered necessary that the plates should be washed for a newcomer. Mrs. Ewart-Crane ate with some elegance, and in a grim silence; the others used their fingers, and laughed a little among themselves at the strange meal. Then, when it was all over, and Pringle had collected the plates, and had taken away the cooking-pot, the men gathered about the fire—or what was left of it—and sat there on the ground, sharing what tobacco they had, contentedly enough. Mr. Tant did not smoke; he sat in a glum silence, staring into the dying fire. [242]

Gradually the fire burnt itself out; but by that time the men had made their several arrangements for sleep. Mr. Tant and Daniel Meggison and Simon Quarle lay down near the hut in a sheltered place, and seemed to fall asleep in a few minutes; Gilbert and Stocker and Aubrey

remained by the fire. Presently they too stretched themselves for slumber; at the last, Gilbert Byfield, hearing the murmur of the waves in the distance, thought sleepily how strange it was that he should have been brought to this place, and in such company; wondered, without any real uneasiness, what was to become of them all. A figure stealing towards him in the darkness roused him; and he raised himself on one elbow, to find Pringle bending respectfully over him.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?" asked Pringle, in a whisper.

"Nothing, thank you. Good night."

"Good night to you, sir," responded Pringle. "If I might take the liberty of laying myself down, sir, near to you—"

"By all means," said Gilbert.

"Much obliged, sir," said Pringle, dropping to the ground. "I just gave a last look at the hut as I came past—and everything seemed very quiet. A snore or two, sir—but that only suggests peace. Good night, sir!"

CHAPTER XV

THE SIMPLE LIFE

IT must not be imagined for a moment that a person of the quality and the dignity of Mrs. Ewart-Crane could long sustain life under the conditions imposed upon her on that first night on the island. This promiscuous mixing with people in a very different sphere of life was not at all to her taste; she set about to remedy matters at the earliest possible opportunity.

Her slumbers during that night in the hut had been spoiled, as she declared, by the persistent snoring of Mrs. Stocker; Mrs. Stocker was equally emphatic that she had not snored at all, but that Mrs. Ewart-Crane, on the other hand, had been no quiet neighbour. To add to the good woman's troubles, her daughter Enid appeared to have struck up a sort of friendship with Bessie Meggison; there was much dodging to and fro from one compartment of the hut to the other, and a dragging aside in consequence of the improvised screen. More than that, Mrs. Ewart-Crane was conscious that after a night during which she had tossed about restlessly on what she designated as "leaves and twigs and prickles" she did not look her best. It seemed, too, that until something was devised ablutions were impossible.

However, Pringle had been early astir, and there was something at least in the shape of breakfast, with a fire to warm the early morning air. They gathered about it, and made the best of a bad situation, according to their moods—Mr. Tant declaring wheezily that he had caught the worst cold he had ever had in his life—and Daniel Meggison stating that but for an absurd prejudice on the part of Pringle to allowing him an early morning draught of strong waters to keep out the cold, this was in reality the very life for which Daniel Meggison had been pining throughout his existence.

The finding of a little spring of pure clear water in the side of the hill above the wood to the west led to the unfortunate episode of the barrel. There had, of course, been a barrel containing water, and the contents had been jealously guarded; but the finding of the spring supply caused the barrel to be regarded by Pringle as an ordinary article for domestic use. Whether or not he felt that Mrs. Stocker looked more dilapidated than Mrs. Ewart-Crane will never be known; certain it is that he approached the former lady smilingly, with the vessel partly filled with water, and delicately suggested that she might use it for her ablutions in the privacy of the hut. Mrs. Stocker was gratefully accepting this boon, forgetful of the fact that the rigged-up sail, while it concealed her from the people on the other side of it, did not mask her voice, when Mrs. Ewart-Crane swept it aside, and stood indignant before the abashed Pringle and Mrs. Stocker.

"Is there no one in this community to whom I can appeal?" demanded Mrs. Ewart-Crane. "Is it not sufficient that I am kept awake for the greater part of one extremely long night, but that now, in the morning, I am to be ousted from the position Society has never yet denied to me? Who is this person, that she should be given precedence over me in such a matter?"

"I'm very sorry, ma'am," said Pringle, scratching his chin—"but I thought perhaps this lady"—he indicated Mrs. Stocker, who was standing with folded arms on guard over the barrel—"I thought perhaps—"

"Well—what did you think?" demanded Mrs. Stocker.

Pringle had been on the very point of saying, as delicately as possible, that he thought she needed it the most; but cowering under her gaze he abjectly said—"Nothing, ma'am"; and pretended to hear a voice calling him in the distance.

Mrs. Stocker held to her rights, and Mrs. Ewart-Crane went unwashed. But the matter, of course, could not end there; and before nightfall it was known that some other arrangement must be made, or Mrs. Ewart-Crane at least would take her repose in the night air. Simon Quarle was disposed to let her do it; Gilbert looked hopeless; but Jordan Tant was firm about the matter, and said that another place must be found. Accordingly a further search of the island was begun,

Pringle throwing himself into the matter with ardour, and with the utmost cheerfulness.

It was, after all, but an anticipating of after events. A little to the south of those miniature hills which rose in the centre of the island a sort of cave was discovered, going back some dozen feet into the hill itself; and over the front of this the wonderful Pringle arranged a sort of screen with the other sail, so that it might be lifted during the day, and form a pleasant shelter under which to sit, and might be lowered discreetly at night. To this place Mrs. Ewart-Crane and Enid were duly escorted; and over them during the day Mr. Jordan Tant kept watch and ward—extending that service even into the night, when he lay down outside the screen to sleep. [247]

So far as the larger hut was concerned, the screen which divided it into two was kept in its place; Mrs. Stocker and Bessie occupied one side, and Daniel Meggison and Aubrey, with Mr. Edward Stocker, the other. They would have been willing to make arrangements for taking in Simon Quarle (though this was somewhat against the wishes of Daniel Meggison), but Simon settled the matter in characteristic fashion by wrapping himself up in a great overcoat he wore, and sleeping in the boat upon the shore.

Guessing, perhaps, something concerning the difficulty in which his master found himself with these uninvited guests, Pringle had even arranged a separate sleeping place for Gilbert Byfield. On the top of the hill, just above the spring—the highest point in the island—Pringle laced branches, dragged from the trees, firmly together between the trunks of some young saplings growing in a bunch; and after roofing them over in the same way, contrived a very comfortable sort of hut for his master. For his own part, he preferred the freedom of the open air on these warm nights, despite Gilbert's protests; more than that, the moon still proving bright, he devoted some portion of the night to keeping watch, in the hope that some passing vessel might cross the wide track of silver that lay upon the waters. [248]

Thus it came about that only Jordan Tant, in his devotion, was left outside; and even he succumbed after a night or two, and crept up the hill, and craved shelter from Gilbert.

"Personally, I should be glad if I might be permitted to share this place with you—at night, I mean," said Mr. Jordan Tant. "Technically, of course, we are rivals, and that is a point upon which I shall never give way. I shudder to think what might have happened had Enid come to this place without that constant reminder of my devotion which my mere presence here affords. Nevertheless, even those claims must be waived when one is cold, and—and lonely."

"Come in, by all means," said Gilbert, smiling. "If it comes to that, I'm a little lonely myself—and a little bit afraid concerning the future. Frankly, I don't know what is to become of us."

"You alarm me," exclaimed Mr. Tant, seating himself on the ground, and staring at his friend.

"You see, we might stay here for months—and I haven't the ghost of a notion what we're to get to eat," went on Gilbert. "I don't care to alarm the ladies about the matter, and I've said nothing to anyone yet, except Pringle. But he tells me that the tinned foods are almost gone, and even his ingenuity hasn't been sufficient to enable him to catch any fish. In other words, my dear Tant, we're on the verge of starvation."

"We may see a vessel," said Mr. Tant, with a gloomy face. [249]

"And that vessel may not see us," retorted Gilbert. "In any case, we don't seem to have been noticed yet, and the position is a desperate one. If nothing happens within the next twenty-four hours we must have a volunteer party for the boat, and that party must start off in the hope of discovering some other land comparatively near."

"I suppose you've no idea where we are?" asked Tant.

Gilbert Byfield shook his head. "Not the least in the world," he said. "I paid no heed to the direction in which the vessel was going during those few days of our voyage, nor do I even know at what rate we went, nor how far. There's one curious thing about this island, by the way."

"What's that?" asked the other.

"Why, that the vegetation is not tropical, nor, for the matter of that, is the climate. I am more puzzled than I can say; but all the puzzling in the world won't help us. Food we must have, and clothing; the ladies especially are at a serious inconvenience, in having nothing but what they stand up in."

"Personally, of course, I should like to do something of an apparently brave nature—something in the way of a rescue—just to impress Enid," said Mr. Tant thoughtfully. "But I expect that when it comes to the pinch that sort of thing will fall to your share, and I shall have to stand aside and look on. And she admires brave men; she's rather rubbed that point in once or twice."

"I'll promise you that if anything does happen that calls for bravery, you shall have the first chance, Tant," said Gilbert. [250]

"I wasn't exactly suggesting that; there's nothing selfish about me, I hope," retorted Tant.

Presently he leaned back against the trunk of a tree, and fell into an uneasy slumber. Anxiety kept Byfield awake, and presently also urged him to leave the rough little hut, and to set off on a ramble in the moonlight. Pringle, sleeping like a dog with one eye open, stirred and sat up; then, reassured, lay down to sleep again. Gilbert picked his way down the hillside into the wood,

hearing more and more distinctly as he moved the murmur of the sea. And most of all now, in the silence of the night, he thought of Bessie—Bessie who had never complained; Bessie who worked hard, even here, for others; Bessie who had been, in her love and her innocence, so shamefully treated. He knew that he had brought ruin upon her, in the sense that she would never accept from him any help in the future, even should it happen that they were rescued from that place. He knew that she must start in some other Arcadia Street that old sordid battle of life he had but interrupted. He remembered bitterly enough how she had avoided him almost completely in this place; he knew that she felt that everyone about her knew now in what way she had lived, and on whose charity; he understood that she raged fiercely within herself at the thought of uncharitable eyes that watched her, and uncharitable lips that whispered about her.

He went down through the wood, and came out upon the shore at the western side of the island. And there, standing startlingly enough in that deserted place, was a woman at the very margin of the sea, her figure showing dark against the moonlit water and the sky. He went forward wonderingly, and yet with a vague feeling in his mind that he knew who it was; and so came to her, and spoke her name. [251]

"Bessie!"

"I couldn't sleep; I came out into the silence and the moonlight; I wanted to think," she said; and in that solemn hour it seemed as though the barrier she had raised between them had gone down again, and could not ever again separate them. She seemed to look at him with the old friendliness; she let her hands rest in his, while they stood together, with only the sea and the moon for company.

"I couldn't sleep—and I too wanted to think," he said. "I wanted to think most about you—about all that I had wanted and longed to do for you—and about all the ruin I have brought upon you. I have remembered all that you said to me on board the yacht—all that I deserved you should say to me."

"I don't want you to remember that," she told him earnestly. "I lay awake there to-night, and remembered that you were the only one that had ever gone out of your way to do anything for me, or to help me; I remembered that you spent your money recklessly for me, and to give me pleasure. And after that I said vile things to you, and told you that I hated you."

"I deserved it every bit," said Gilbert. "I didn't understand at the time—but I treated you like a child, without care or thought of your feelings in the matter—or of your future. I lied to you, and deceived you; but there was one matter about which I didn't lie." [252]

"What was that?" she asked.

"When I said I loved you. That was true enough—it grows more true every day I live. I wouldn't part with any hour of all that we have spent together; I wouldn't go back, or undo anything I have done, if the undoing meant that I must lose any hour of that time. The yacht is gone—and we are poor castaways who may never leave this place alive; yet I'm glad—selfishly and brutally glad—for my own sake. Do you understand me, Bessie?"

She nodded slowly, keeping her head turned away from him. "Yes—I understand," she replied. "And I believe you. I never meant anything that I said to you on the yacht—about the hating part, I mean," she added in a whisper.

He put his arms about her, and drew her close to him. "Have you nothing further to say to me?—or do you shut me out of your life altogether, Bessie?" he asked.

She bent her head down until her face was hidden on his arm. "You know I can't do that, dear," she whispered. "I've tried hard to do it—but love won't let me."

They stood for a long time there, without word or movement; it seemed as though, while he held her in his arms and she lay contentedly on his breast, no words were needed. And all else was forgotten—past bitternesses and misunderstandings—and even their present situation. That they were poor prisoners, cast away hopelessly and helplessly on an island of which they did not even know the name, did not matter then; for love has wide wings that may stretch even across great continents and great seas. Arcadia Street and Fiddler's Green and all the rest of the amazing business lay far behind; they stood here in the moonlight and silence, forgetting even the grotesque figures that slept so near them. [253]

"It is strange to think, sweetheart, how all the life we knew—the only life we seemed to understand—is left behind and forgotten," he whispered presently. "We were this and that in the world—and it was as if the great place could not go on without us; and in a moment we're swept away, and lost, and left stranded, high and dry out of all the hurly-burly of it. What is going to become of us I don't know—but even that doesn't matter."

"Nothing matters at all; nothing will ever matter again," she whispered. "But oh, my dear love—I do pray you never to let me make-believe any more—always to let me understand exactly what is happening—exactly the truth. The poor game has been played out now to the bitter end; promise me that whatever the future may hold for us, my dear, we shall face it hand in hand, and without any pretence about it. Promise me that solemnly."

He kissed her lips, and promised solemnly that in future she should always know the truth.



**"THEY STOOD HERE IN THE
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They left the sea behind them, and went up together through the woods towards the hut that had been made for him by the industrious Pringle; it was a shorter way to her own sleeping place in the bigger hut. Quite near to the place where the unconscious Jordan Tant crouched inside his shelter and slumbered fitfully the pair halted for a moment, as a sudden thought occurred to Gilbert. [254]

"My darling Bessie—I want you to understand that I wouldn't have anything that has happened changed in the least," he said, in a low tone. "I could never have had you all to myself in any other place; foolish scruples and conventions would have crept in, and you would have run away from me, and I should have lost you in the big world. If someone came to me to-morrow, and told me that we could be rescued, and could go back to the commonplace world again, honestly I think that I would not be glad. If only we can manage to live somehow I want to stop here with you always."

They went on down across the hill, and disappeared from sight. Within a few yards of where they had stopped Pringle raised himself on his elbow, wide awake, and stared after them.

"That settles it!" he said to himself. "I was in two minds about it, after what I found out this mornin'; but if the gov'nor wants an island, an island he shall have. I was never in love myself—not to any great extent; but it's pretty to see it in others. Pringle, my boy, you are on an island, whatever Nature may say to the contrary; consequently, keep your mouth shut, and go to sleep."

He dropped down again contentedly—chuckled once softly to himself—and slept.

CHAPTER XVI THE AMAZING PRINGLE

JUST so surely as had come about the division of the little company into its several parts, socially speaking—that necessary "drawing of the line" insisted upon in all things by Mr. Jordan Tant—so did it come about that the party he represented withdrew itself more and more from the rest of the islanders. It might have been thought that their common difficulties would have drawn them together; but the fact remains that the shabbier Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter became the more urgent was it that their real position in the greater world should be firmly impressed upon those with whom they had been thrown in contact.

Much tramping about over sand and rocks, and the necessity for sleeping on a bed of dry leaves and brushwood, to say nothing of a night journey in an open boat, had brought Mrs. Ewart-Crane's one dress to a condition of which a London charwoman would have been ashamed; while Enid was in no better plight. But although Mrs. Ewart-Crane was well aware that Mrs. Stocker was in the same lamentable condition, she resolutely declined to make common ground of complaint with her on that score; in other words, Mrs. Ewart-Crane wore her shabbiness with an air. [256]

The same condition of things ruled with the men. Mr. Jordan Tant had hitherto been a slave to nice detail concerning collars and ties, and neat shoes and socks; but those details, in his present case, were things to blush at. The neat suit he usually wore in the mornings, and in which he had taken that mad journey to the yacht, was creased and soiled and stained; his hat had been flung to the laughing waves by a wind more boisterous than discreet; and he had been compelled perforce to grow a beard, which he felt did not suit his type of face. True, there were improvements in the man, in the sense of an added colour in his cheeks, and more alert movements in his limbs; but such things he scorned.

Mr. Daniel Meggison, in a moment of forgetfulness, had gone to his improvised couch with his silk hat on his head, and thereafter had grown careless in regard to its appearance; it had become a mere dilapidated head covering, with no dignity about it at all. Contact with thorns and brambles had made shipwreck of the immaculate frock-coat; his linen was non-apparent. In fact, to put the matter shortly, the little company had suffered from the fact that they had at the beginning but one suit of clothing apiece, and no means of replenishing it.

The difficulty about food had been overcome by a sheer gift from Providence. There had come a night when they had sat about their fire, and when with discretion, and yet firmness, Gilbert Byfield had told them of the condition of the larder. The matter had to be broached somehow, because Aubrey Meggison had picked up his small portion of food from his tin plate disdainfully, [257]

and had muttered something about "stinginess."

"I think the time has come," said Gilbert solemnly, "when we should understand clearly—all of us—the exact position. We have been remarkably careful with the few things we were able to bring away—but we have found nothing on the island——"

"Beggin' your pardon, sir—except water," said Pringle, with deference.

"I had forgotten the water," replied Gilbert, with a smile. "Our case would indeed have been hopeless had we not been fortunate enough to find the spring. But our tinned provisions have gone, and we have no means of replacing them; and even with the utmost care we have had to go on short rations for the last day or two. To-morrow's breakfast is provided; after that we face starvation."

"Do you mean to suggest, my dear Gilbert, that we are to look at each other with the certain knowledge that we are to shrink day by day, with no hope of relief?" demanded Mrs. Ewart-Crane.

"In the name of the ladies under my charge, I protest," said Mr. Jordan Tant. "It was not by our wish that we were brought to this place at all; it will certainly not be by our wish that we starve here. I enter a solemn protest against it."

"I have been shuttle-cocked about from one place to another—despite my protests," said Daniel Meggison. "I make the common demand that each man has a right to make; I insist upon being fed. Look to it, someone, that the matter receives attention before to-morrow. My position in the world has hitherto been framed upon that common and ordinary basis; being in the world, I demand to be fed." [258]

"Seems to me that the real point is—what is generally done in these cases?" demanded Aubrey. "There must be a rule about these matters—a law, or something of that sort. I've read the newspapers pretty consistently since I've moved about the world; what's the exact procedure? I should like to say that my father—(with whom, mind you, I'm not going to say that I generally agree)—my father has voiced my opinion to what I might call a T. To put it simply: what happens?"

"I should imagine, for my own part, that one member of our pleasant little party will be missing after to-morrow—and the rest will feed sumptuously," said Simon Quarle, with a perfectly serious face.

Mrs. Ewart-Crane rose, and stretched out a hand for her daughter. "Enid," she said, in accents of considerable dignity—"I desire that we withdraw. There are certain questions which cannot be discussed in this public manner, if one has any desire to retain one's natural feelings of delicacy. And I should like to add," she went on, waving Mr. Tant to his feet with an imperious movement of her hand—"I should really like to add that in the event of any casting of lots, or any other such barbarous procedure, Mr. Tant will be our protector, and will not hesitate to sell his life dearly. Mr. Tant—Enid—let us go, before I feel called upon to express myself more strongly."

Simon Quarle and Gilbert walked long upon the shore that night, talking earnestly. Gilbert was disposed to be hopeful; a ship might heave in sight at any moment—or all sorts of things might happen that then seemed improbable. Simon Quarle pointed out that no ship had yet been seen, and that nothing else was likely to happen; incidentally he mentioned the one course open to them. [259]

"We must launch the boat to-morrow, and start off in the hope of finding some other land near at hand," he said. "If those who go in the boat don't come back, then the others must starve, or find a way out for themselves; in any case there's nothing else to be done. Let's get to sleep, and forget our troubles for one night at least."

After all, it was Pringle who was the direct agent of Providence. I would not have you think that in that respect Providence passed over better men; in all probability it was because Pringle had a habit of getting up early in the morning, and lighting that open-air fire, and generally preparing what food there was for the early meal. And in that way it came about that Pringle brought deliverance to the islanders in a quite miraculous fashion.

Gilbert Byfield had not slept during that anxious night; in a sense he felt that, by reason of the mad impulse that had started him on that wild journey from Newhaven, he was responsible for the lives of those concerned with him in the venture. Dawn was breaking, with the promise of a perfect day to follow, when he stepped over the legs of the sleeping Jordan Tant, and went down the hill to find Simon Quarle.

Simon was sleeping peacefully in his self-appointed quarters in the boat; he roused himself sleepily when Gilbert laid a hand on his shoulder. "Oh—you needn't remind me," he said, with a grim nod; "I've been dreaming that I was a starving loafer in the streets of London, and that all the workhouses and casual wards were shut. I believe we have breakfast—don't we?" [260]

"And a meagre one at that," replied Gilbert, sitting on the edge of the boat. "And after that a council of war, and a decision as to what is to be done."

"You're not the only one that's awake early, my friend," said Simon Quarle, pointing in the direction of the north of the island. "Who's that coming in the distance?"

"It looks like Pringle," said Gilbert—"and he's carrying something."

They waited while the unconscious Pringle drew nearer. As a matter of fact he was staggering under a load poised upon his shoulders; as he came within hail of them it seemed that the load was a heavy square packing-case. Evidently he had not expected anyone to be awake at that hour; as he trudged through the sand he was humming a jaunty tune jerkily to himself as though to encourage himself in his efforts. Being hailed suddenly by the deep voice of Simon Quarle, he stopped, and stared, and then let the packing-case down plump into the sand. And it must be confessed that at that moment he wore a curiously guilty air.

"Why—what have you got there, Pringle?" demanded Gilbert, advancing towards him. "Where did you get that from?"

"This, sir," asked the innocent Pringle. "Oh—this, sir? Washed ashore, sir."

"Washed ashore!" exclaimed Simon Quarle, looking at the case curiously. "Do you know what's in it?" [261]

"Not the least notion in the world, sir," said Pringle, sitting upon the case, and looking down at it between his legs. "Out for an early morning stroll, sir, there it was, knockin' about just on the shore; in fact while I was lookin' at it—stupid like, you'll understand, sir—the sea give it a shove, and pushed it up at my very feet. I shouldn't be surprised, sir, if it didn't hold food."

"Do you think it's come from the yacht?" asked Gilbert.

"I should think so, sir," said Pringle. "Now I come to think of it, sir, there was one or two cases on board the very identical of this. Food, sir, I should think—and perhaps other things. Washed ashore, sir—that's what this was."

"It doesn't seem to have been knocked about much," said Gilbert, walking round it curiously. "It's a frail sort of case to have been tossing about in the sea for so long a time. I hope the contents are not damaged."

"We'll hope not, sir," replied Pringle cheerfully, as he stooped to pick up the case. "Bit of luck I call this, sir," he added, as with the assistance of Simon Quarle he got it onto his shoulders. "Not that I'll promise anything about the contents, sir; it might be almost anything."

"Where exactly did it come ashore?" demanded Quarle.

"Just by the rocks, sir," said Pringle. "It was lucky, in a way, that I happened to be there, sir; what you might call a yard or two further on it would have missed the island altogether, and missed us. Great bit of luck, sir." [262]

The case, on being wrenched open, was found to contain a considerable quantity of tinned food, together with some that was not tinned, and that was remarkably fresh. There were tins of biscuits; there was tea and sugar and other things, as wonderful in that place as they were unexpected. Pringle, for his part, was very modest about it all; he described again and again to the wondering people who presently seated themselves about the fire exactly how the considerate sea had tossed the case at his very feet, and how he had picked it up.

Mrs. Ewart-Crane, relieved from the fear that her life might be in danger, made some advances to Mrs. Stocker, and even consented to listen with gravity to an account by that lady of the difficulties of rearing chickens in the neighbourhood of Clapham; "there was something in the air," according to Mrs. Stocker.

In a sense it may be said that among some of them at least a better feeling of comradeship sprang up. The fear of actual starvation was gone; the weather was superb, and they were all in excellent bodily health. It grew to be a sort of great picnic on the island, and those who had been at first inclined to grumble were now in a minority, and began to feel that for their own sakes they had best take what the gods sent them with an approach to smiling faces. Perhaps for the change Bessie Meggison was in a sense directly responsible; because that new happiness that had come to her had painted even this small and uncomfortable world in rosy colours. [263]

There grew to be a sort of competition among them as to who should discover the next bit of wreckage to be cast ashore. Mr. Meggison visited the neighbourhood of the rocks more than once, and peered frowningly out to sea; but he never discovered anything. Aubrey Meggison listlessly wandered round the shore—perhaps in the hope of finding something of actual use to himself; but he was as unsuccessful as his father. It came at last to this: that the only one of them all to do any real salvage work was Pringle. At intervals Pringle was able to bring to them the most astonishing things that had been washed ashore conveniently for his picking up.

Strangely, too, the things he found were always useful. It was no mere matter of broken woodwork, such as might be expected to come from the wrecked yacht; again and again he discovered in the most miraculous way articles for which a wish had actually been expressed by some member of the community. Food tumbled upon the shore almost in abundance; and always food that was wanted. The various articles that had been in use on the yacht must have been curiously packed; for tinned foods actually arrived more than once accompanied by articles of clothing that were distinctly useful to the shipwrecked party.

Thus it happened one day that some coarse strong flannel shirts were flung at the feet of Pringle in the early morning, and were distributed to the male members of the party soon

afterwards. Gilbert examined one of them with a thoughtful frown, and then took Pringle aside.

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"I can't understand this, Pringle," he said, looking at the garment.

"No, sir?"

"No. I don't see how these things could have been on board the yacht; who could possibly have bought them."

"You're forgettin' the crew, sir. Sailors ain't as delicate in their feelings as gentlemen, sir; take my word for it, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if they hadn't belonged somehow to the crew."

So the shirts were accepted, and worn with gratitude; even Pringle admitted how astonishing it was that they should have been flung on to the island just when they were most wanted. Emboldened by his success, he smilingly predicted that he shouldn't be a bit surprised if something else equally useful turned up within a day or two; and sure enough a considerable quantity of cheap strong print, with a pleasing design of pink rosebuds upon it, arrived one morning, and was brought in triumph to the ladies. On this occasion it seemed that the box in which the material had been contained had burst upon the shore, and the wood had been carried out to sea. The print was a little damp in one place; but Pringle seemed to have been amazingly clever in snatching it out of the reach of the waves.

The making of dresses for the ladies was left to a large extent to Bessie, with the assistance of Mrs. Stocker. Bessie—careful little soul!—had needles and cottons and a tiny pair of scissors and other necessary things in a little case in her pocket; and although Mrs. Ewart-Crane at first expressed herself strongly as to why print of a superior pattern had not been found for her daughter and herself, she ultimately accepted, even with some show of gratitude, the uniform provided for her. It was a curious sight at first to see them all arrayed alike; but that created some laughter, and was not in the end really resented.

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The packages arrived in no particular order; it was always possible that when they sat down to their open-air breakfast Pringle would have a surprise for them—or, on the other hand, it was possible that he would respectfully shake his head, as a sign that the sea had not been kindly disposed. Now and then some of the things flung up seemed to require some explanation; but Pringle always evaded any direct reference to them, and murmured something about being grateful to Providence. It was only when the new timber arrived, and was smilingly announced by Pringle as he handed round the tea, that Gilbert Byfield and Simon Quarle stared at the man, open-mouthed and wondering.

"I can't quite understand it myself, sir," said Pringle, keeping his eyes fixed upon the cup he was holding. "Nice clean boards, sir—and all about the same length. Rather handy, I should think, sir, for building an extra shelter for the ladies."

In a solemn silence Gilbert and Quarle walked down to the shore, with Pringle a step or two behind. There lay a pile of boards stacked neatly out of the reach of the sea; Pringle scratched his chin thoughtfully as he looked at them.

"These haven't come from the yacht," said Gilbert. "There was no loose timber there."

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"No, sir,—of course not, sir," said Pringle. "Some unfortunate timber ship, I should think, sir. P'r'aps I ought to say, sir, that it didn't come all at once—just a board or two at a time. I didn't think anything of the first one; I only mentioned it this morning because I thought it might come in useful, sir. Such a lot of things have washed on shore that I haven't noticed very much about them."

"It seems rather a pity that we haven't a hammer and nails," said Simon Quarle, after a pause.

"Oh—didn't I tell you, sir?" Pringle looked round innocently at his master. "There was a few tools came in the last package, sir—and some nails and things. I dare say some building work might be managed, sir."

"You certainly didn't mention it," said Gilbert, staring at him.

"Very careless of me, sir," said Pringle.

So a fresh hut was built, with trees for its main support; and into this Mrs. Ewart-Crane and her daughter were induced to go. Mrs. Ewart-Crane, indeed, seemed quite pleased with her new abode, and was almost on the point of giving herself airs again in regard to it. Simon Quarle also was induced at last to leave the boat, and to take up his quarters in the cave-like place vacated by the ladies; this he shared with Mr. Jordan Tant. The supplies that had so miraculously come to them had given them confidence, and they had practically ceased to think of the future, or of what it might hold for them, beyond that place to which they had been so strangely brought.

Nor did those supplies cease; from time to time other packages arrived—always to be discovered by the industrious Pringle; so that in time the wonder of the thing ceased, and it never occurred to any one of them to ask from whence the things came, or how long the yacht was to take in breaking up and in delivering itself of the many useful things it evidently contained. The weeks went by, and it was altogether a very happy and contented little band of people, albeit queerly dressed.

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The inevitable discovery was made one morning quite early by Gilbert. The beauty of the

morning had tempted him, and he had come out to taste the pure air, and to feel the warmth of the coming day. He found that Pringle, as usual, had been early astir; but he took no notice of that. Pringle was ever an early riser, and there was much to be done each day before the little company gathered round the fire for breakfast.

Gilbert strode away down the hill until he came to the eastern shore of the island; waited there a moment, as though undecided in which direction to turn. Then suddenly he became aware of a figure marching steadily towards the rocks at the north of the island; and, gazing more intently, discovered that figure to be Pringle, moving steadily and as though with a set purpose.

"What's the fellow up to now?" Gilbert asked himself, inwardly amused.

He decided to follow; and, keeping a safe distance between his servant and himself, presently saw that servant come to the great line of rocks which bounded the island to the north. But strangely enough Pringle did not stop there; in the mist of the morning he stepped as it seemed straight out into the sea, and disappeared. [268]

Greatly amazed, Gilbert broke into a run, and did not stop until he had come to the very edge of the rocks where, as he had seen them before, they jutted into the sea. But now there was a clean, clear stretch of sand round the base of them, and it was along this stretch of sand that Pringle had gone. Without a moment's hesitation Gilbert Byfield ran round the high wall of rock—and so stepped at once into the heart of the mystery.

Pringle was hurrying ahead of him—not into a watery grave, but straight along a little spit of land that had been left dry by the receding tide. As in a dream, Byfield followed; and presently found himself climbing a path on to another land, and seeing before him as he went evidences of civilization, in the shape of cultivated fields, and decent stone walls and gates. And still Pringle went ahead, looking neither to right nor left nor backwards.

It was only when Gilbert had topped the rise, and had come to a little old-fashioned bridge, that he stopped and let Pringle go ahead, and looked about him. Below lay a prosperous-looking little village, with already early morning smoke rising from many chimneys; about him in all directions were cultivated fields. He seated himself on the parapet of the bridge, and watched the hurrying figure of Pringle dipping down into civilization; and then all in a moment he understood for the first time the fraud that had been practised upon him. To his credit be it said he sat upon the bridge, looking after Pringle (now a mere dot upon the landscape), and shouted with laughter. [269]

He sat there for a long time, until presently the black dot appeared again out of the intricacies of the village, and began to climb the hill. When presently Pringle reappeared, he bore upon his shoulders yet another of those mysterious packages with which he had so thoughtfully provided the islanders. Toiling up the hill, singing cheerfully to himself, he stopped only when the long shadow of Gilbert fell across his path; paused for a moment to look at this surprising stranger watching him; and dropped his burden in the dust of the road.

"Morning, sir," said Pringle, a little nervously. And then, looking at the packing-case that lay between them, he added more nervously still, and yet with a dawning smile about his lips—"Washed ashore, sir!"

CHAPTER XVII

EXPLANATIONS

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DURING the time he had awaited the return of Pringle, Gilbert Byfield had been able to look the position clearly in the face, and to understand exactly how he was situated. Bessie alone had to be considered; her opinion of the situation was the one thing to be thought of then. After that first burst of laughter the real tragedy faced him, and was not to be lightly thrust aside.

For when this was discovered, as it must be—when this amazing fraud was laid bare—she would see once again that the man who professed to love her had treated her as a child, and had played again that amazing game of make-believe. So much she must believe; for it would never be credited that Pringle had acted on his own responsibility, and that his master had been innocent. Once again the girl must be held up to ridicule; once again it must be shown that she had been playing with life, just as she had played with it, outside the sordid details of ordinary existence, in the old garden in Arcadia Street. The island was no island at all; but for some extraordinary circumstance, yet to be discovered, the little party must have been rescued a dozen times over. The comforts of civilization had lain within a mile of them; yet they had dealt out food sparingly, and had been tricked by a servant into believing that a special Providence had watched over them, and had provided them miraculously with things the man had actually purchased. [271]

"How long has this game been going on, Pringle?" asked Gilbert at last, looking down at the man, who had seated himself upon the packing-case in the road.

"Quite a long time, sir," said Pringle, recovering his cheerfulness a little. "I've done my best, sir."

"Your best?" exclaimed Gilbert. "Don't you understand the position in which you have placed me; don't you understand that they've all been cheated and fooled—and that they'll believe it's my fault. What induced you to play such a game?"

Pringle looked really aggrieved. "It was my wish, sir, to please you," he said. "In a wakeful moment, sir, I happened to overhear you say something to the young lady about liking the idea of this being an island—I mean that place over there, sir—and you being cut off romantic-like with her, with nobody to interfere, sir. I'd only found out a little while before that at a certain state of the tide you could cut across to the mainland; and as everybody was so comfortable and happy, it seemed to me that it wasn't at all a bad idea to keep the game alive, sir, when that game was so easy played. I had money with me, sir, part of which I'd used for stocking the yacht and paying wages, so there wasn't no difficulty."

"Have you any idea where we are, or what that village is?" asked Gilbert, after a gloomy pause.

"I haven't made any exact inquiries, sir—but from the tongue and from general appearances I believe we're on a remote part of the western coast of Ireland. Nice people, sir—but a bit superstitious." [272]

"Superstitious? What do you mean?" asked Byfield.

"Well, sir—luckily for us, they're a little bit afraid of that bit of land we've called an island; there's a sort of feeling among them that it's haunted, sir."

"Haunted?"

"Yes, sir. It seems that there was a man who had a big house here who went a bit off his head, sir; and one day, when the tide was low, he slipped across to that bit of land, and had a look at it. He liked it, sir—and he liked the loneliness; so he got them to bring timber and so on out to him, and build him that shed that we first found on the day of our arrival. After that, sir," went on Pringle, "he liked it so much that he lived there altogether; cooked his own food, sir, and made a sort of hermit of himself. And then one day took it into his head to die, sir."

"Not a word of this to the ladies, mind," said Gilbert hastily.

"Not for the world, sir," responded Pringle solemnly. "It seems, sir, that somebody came out to him, to bring food or something or other, and found that he'd passed away, sir; and ever since then there's been a feeling that his ghost is knocking about, sir—unquiet like. Consequently no one comes to the place—which is a bit fortunate for us, sir."

"I'm glad you think it's fortunate, Pringle," retorted Gilbert. "And pray what explanation have you given of your purchases, and your surreptitious visits to the village?" [273]

Pringle got up from the box, and passed a hand slowly across his mouth; it was as though with that action he wiped away a smile that would not have been becoming to the situation. "Well, sir, you see, I found it a bit difficult at first, sir; the natives were what you might call a bit avaricious, and had a fancy for running over to the island, and selling things that they didn't actually want to keep themselves. So havin' discovered, sir, about the last tenant, I was careful to spread it about that you was another one of the same kidney, sir; and I never said a word about anybody else bein' there at all. I hope you'll excuse the liberty, sir—but something had to be done under the circumstances. As a matter of fact, sir, of course they were only too willin' to be quiet, because I've been rather a good customer to the village, one way and another, sir."

The sheer absurdity of the thing was borne in again upon Gilbert Byfield. From where he sat he could see the path leading down the narrow strip of sand; beyond that the great wall of rock—and beyond that (in his imagination, at least) the little company who had been playing, all unconsciously, that game of privation and starvation for weeks past. He thought of how the business had begun—far away in Arcadia Street; of that mad race to the yacht; of this madder business on an island that had never been an island at all. He thought of the outrageous costumes carefully made from comic-opera material supplied by the resourceful Pringle: and he told himself bitterly enough that the one being for whom it had all been done, and for whom the sorry business had been kept up, would believe less than ever that the man had not planned it all himself in sheer mockery of her. [274]

The voice of Pringle recalled him to a remembrance of where he was. "Excuse me, sir—but we shan't get back if we don't look quick, sir. The tide's coming up fast."

Gilbert set off at once, and Pringle, shouldering the box, followed him. As they came to the narrow strip of land, Gilbert turned to the man, and voiced for a moment what was in his mind.

"For the present you will say nothing, Pringle," he suggested.

"Very good, sir," replied the man.

"When the time comes for the truth to be told, I'll tell it," went on Gilbert. "You've landed me into rather a difficulty, Pringle; such a lot of explanations will be necessary—explanations that will not be believed. For the next few days, at all events, our necessities will come to us in the same romantic fashion as before—and not from the village shops."

"I quite understand, sir," said Pringle. "And if you don't hurry up, sir, we shall have to wade."

They just got round the corner of the line of rocks in time; the sea was within a foot or two of

their base, and was rapidly rising. In due course Pringle appeared with the news that was no longer surprising; that another box had been washed ashore. There being in it nothing more exciting than provisions, the discovery passed almost without comment.

Now the sea fell only in the very early morning, leaving that neck of land exposed; and fortunately for Gilbert's scheme the islanders were not early risers. Pringle, who had kept the secret so well, would keep it even better for the future; Gilbert had nothing to fear from him. [275] Nothing short of an accident could betray the fact that they were so near to civilization, and an accident of that sort was not likely to happen. The splendid summer weather and the open-air life and the freedom from anxiety and world-worry had had a soothing effect upon them all; they accepted all that came to them with the blind confidence of children, and appeared almost to have forgotten that they had ever led any other lives.

But the accident came, and the secret was surprised by the most unexpected person of them all. Gilbert had retired to his hut one night, when he thought he heard a movement outside it; and, knowing that Pringle was still busily occupied with domestic arrangements over the remains of the fire, he went out to see who was stirring at that hour. Somewhat to his surprise he saw Mr. Edward Stocker in the moonlight, smiling apologetically, and bowing with ceremony.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Gilbert.

"Nothing at all, sir," said Mr. Stocker in a whisper. "Only I rather wanted to have a word with you—in private—if you wouldn't mind sparing me five minutes. Might I come in?"

"By all means," said Gilbert, wondering what the little man wanted. "Sorry I can't offer you a seat—but the ground's dry, and I'm used to it myself."

"Nice little place," said Stocker, looking round it, and then lowering himself to the ground. [276] "For my part, sir, I often feel that in a way this is really very much superior to Clapham. No one to call after you from the front door when you're going out that you haven't got your gloves on, or that you've got one trouser leg turned up and the other down (not that I would wish to express any disrespect to Mrs. Stocker for a moment; the very best of wives, sir). And then again you don't have to take a cheap return to the seaside; you've got it on the premises, as it were. Of course, you don't get the niggers, or little entertainments of that kind; but, after all, niggers ain't everything."

"You had something rather important to say to me," Gilbert reminded him.

Mr. Stocker put a finger to his lips, and appeared to be listening intently; nodded his head with relief after a moment or so; and motioned to Byfield to sit down beside him. Then suddenly and unexpectedly, and with a note of triumph in his tones, he made a dramatic announcement—

"Sir—it's not an island at all!"

All sorts of wild suggestions flitted through Byfield's brain. There was of course the possibility that Pringle, after all, had betrayed the secret; there was the further possibility that Mr. Edward Stocker, in some early morning excursion, had discovered it for himself. Quite mechanically, Gilbert returned an evasive answer.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," he said. "What makes you say the place isn't an island?"

Mr. Stocker ventured to lay a hand on the other's arm; in his excitement he raised his voice a little. [277] "This morning I went for a walk round the island, and it occurred to me that I would like to climb the rocks at the further end—partly by way of a little pleasing exercise, and partly because I thought that if I gained the top I should be able to see much farther than I should while down below. With considerable difficulty I gained the top, grazing myself a good deal in the process. There was only a narrow ledge to which I could cling, but the air was clear, and the view very fine. I repeat, sir," he added impressively—"the view was very fine."

"Of a wide expanse of sea?" asked Gilbert.

"No, sir; of a certain expanse of sea, and, quite near to me—land—and civilized land at that. I distinctly saw the roofs of houses, with smoke coming from them; I saw a bridge—and I saw many other things to indicate that we are quite close to a sort of civilization, however primitive. There was a little strip of land that was almost covered by water; but as the tide was rising I should imagine that that strip of land is not covered at all at low water."

Gilbert was silent for what seemed a long time; then out of the darkness of the little hut he spoke. "Well—I suppose you've told everybody about it?" he said.

"Oh, dear, no," replied Mr. Stocker, with what seemed to be a little chuckle. "I haven't said a word all day about it; I've been waiting until I could catch you alone, and tell you about it."

"I knew it some days ago," said Gilbert calmly. "But I had my own reasons for saying nothing. Now I am in your hands, and you have a perfect right to tell anyone you like—to let the whole company walk ashore, in fact, with the least possible delay."

"Well, you see, sir—that's just my difficulty," said Edward Stocker gravely. [278] "Of course I know that everybody ought to be told—and everybody ought to go back to their own particular walk in life, after having had a rather good little holiday. But you see, sir, it means that Mrs. Stocker and me would go straight back to Clapham, where I've no doubt the girl (if she thinks we're still alive)

has been using my credit to live upon, and has been keeping the little house properly and respectably. It's a nice house, as houses go—hot and cold water, and a bit of garden back and front, and so forth; but after all it is a house."

"And doubtless you will be glad to go back to it," said Gilbert.

"Not exactly, sir—quite between ourselves, of course. You see, Mrs. Stocker and me, while rubbing along in a manner of speaking from the first of January until the end of the year pretty tolerably, might sometimes hit it off a good deal better together than what we do; that is to say, in Clapham. Now here, sir, on the contrary, we've done rather well; Mrs. Stocker has developed no edges to speak of—and the island is a bit larger than my little bit of property at Clapham, even with the front and back garden thrown in. In other words, sir"—Edward Stocker lowered his voice to a mere whisper—"in other words, I'm able to dodge Mrs. S. rather easily here—and I've had a better time than I've ever had in all my life before. Consequently, sir, if you was to say to me at the present moment—'Edward Stocker—be mum about it, and forget that you ever saw that bit of civilization beyond the rocks'—I should be the first to take you by the hand, sir, (the liberty being excused) and to say to you, sir—"Righto!"

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"Then that is exactly what I want you to do," said Gilbert. "For a little time, at least, until I know what is going to happen to us all, I want everybody to believe that we are stranded here, save for a miracle, for the rest of our lives. Go back to bed, Mr. Stocker, and sleep peacefully; unless you tell other people yourself, they will never hear it from me."

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged, sir," said Mr. Stocker, getting to his feet. "After all, sir, if the winter comes on, or we get tired of it, we can always find out quite by accident that there's a road by which Mrs. Stocker and me can start off for Clapham; let's hope it won't be soon, sir. Good night; I'm very much obliged to you."

Gilbert was still laughing to himself over the extraordinary reason given by Stocker for a further sojourn on the island when the apology for a curtain which covered the doorway of the hut was pulled aside, and he saw Jordan Tant looking down at him. After a moment of silence Tant came in, and stood leaning against a tree which formed one of the supports of the hut, staring moodily at Gilbert over his folded arms. In these days it was a sturdier, healthier-looking Mr. Tant, and his fair beard and moustache rather suited him.

"I like always to be strictly honest, Byfield," he began abruptly, "and therefore I begin at once by saying that I have been playing the eavesdropper. It was accidental; because I heard voices just as I got up to the hut, and then I was so interested that I didn't seem to be able to tear myself away. You have every right to speak strongly about the matter, but I beg that you will refrain until you have heard me."

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"How much did you hear?" asked Gilbert, feeling that now indeed the game was ended, and that he was at the mercy of this chatterer.

"Practically everything," replied Jordan Tant. "The first I heard was the surprising announcement by the man Stocker that this place was not an island—a statement afterwards corroborated by yourself. So far as that is concerned, I may be said to resemble the man Stocker, because I too have to make an appeal to you."

"An appeal?"

Mr. Tant nodded slowly. "It is one to which I would ask you to lend a generous ear, because it is one which affects not only myself but another person also. I refer of course to Enid—and I refer to her with the utmost delicacy. That young lady has been placed in a most equivocal position; she has been compelled to dress in garments totally unsuited to her position in the world; she has been compelled to live in caves and in rude constructions of timber. Consequently, whatever is done in regard to that young lady must be done with the utmost delicacy. Surely you see that?" Mr. Tant put his head on one side, and thoughtfully pulled at his new beard.

"I see it from the lady's point of view, of course," replied Gilbert. "But I don't quite see where the appeal comes in, so far as you're concerned."

"I will explain," said Jordan Tant eagerly. "You must know that when I was in London Enid looked coldly upon me—probably because I really did not shine in a civilized place. There was nothing romantic about me then; *you* were the one to whom she turned, naturally, because you did things rather out of the common. Since we have been in this place, however, she seems to have discovered in me qualities which had before lain dormant. She has hinted as much more than once, when we have been sitting in front of her rude dwelling-place at night. I will not say that the moon has had nothing to do with it; nevertheless, the fact remains that she is much more partial to me—I mean, of course, Enid, and not the moon—since we have been in this place. Perhaps my dog-like fidelity in keeping guard over her sleeping-place has touched her; at all events, she has given a promise that she will consider my claims, and will in all probability consider them favourably."

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"I'm delighted to hear it, my dear fellow," Gilbert replied. "But what appeal have you to make to me?"

"Not to let her know that this place is not really an island, and that she can escape at any moment," urged Jordan Tant. "Here, my dear Byfield, I am a person of importance—a man to be leant upon, and to be trusted in an emergency; she leans upon, and she trusts me. Take me back

to London, and I become at once a well-dressed atom that rides in cabs and takes afternoon tea; there would be nothing heroic about me there at all."

"But, my dear Tant—you can't remain here for ever," said Gilbert.

"I do not ask to remain here for ever," retorted Jordan Tant. "I ask to be allowed to remain here—keeping Enid in ignorance—until such time as she shall have promised to share what she believes to be an everlasting exile with me. She is a woman of her word, and once she promises to love me I can safely pass beyond the barrier of rocks, reach the mainland, and marry her with due propriety. If she were to discover now that in a sense she has been cheated, she would believe that I had been guilty of the deception. In other words, my dear Byfield, I am very near to winning her, in my present bold, bearded, and badly-dressed character; and it is the only real chance I have ever had." [282]

"Very well, Tant—I am already pledged not to reveal the secret—so you can proceed with your wooing as long as you like. And I wish you luck."

Mr. Jordan Tant felt for the other's hand in the darkness, and wrung it hard. "It's the real romance of the thing that touches her," he said solemnly. "The shipwreck—and the stores washed ashore—and the camp fire at night—and so forth. When we do get back to London it'll be so very nice, because we shall have quite enough to talk about for the rest of our lives. Think of the difference: in the old days I was not considered brilliant at all at dinner parties and so forth; now I shall be able to tell of how we nearly cast lots to decide which of us should be eaten."

"I'm glad it never came to that," said Gilbert, with a laugh.

"I may tell you in confidence, my dear Byfield," said Tant, coming nearer to him for a moment in the darkness—"in the strictest confidence, of course, that Enid has already assured me that had the lot fallen upon myself, nothing would have induced her to do anything other than starve on my account. I think that's rather touching. Good night—and thank you!" [283]

So it came about that the strange game was kept alive for yet a few days longer. Dread of what the girl might say or do when she heard of the deception that had been practised upon her, and when she saw clearly before her the way of escape, held Gilbert silent; he knew, too, that those who had already penetrated the secret would for their own purposes say nothing. More than once he was in a mind to tell Bessie everything, and to throw himself upon her mercy; but he had blundered too often before to care to make the experiment. She, for her part, with no particular care nor thought of the future, had her own secret to keep; she met him night after night in the wood—binding him to her more closely at each meeting with her innocence and her gentleness, and her tenderness for him. For now, when at last it seemed that they were both in the same helpless position, she did not hesitate to tell him frankly and fearlessly what was in her heart, and what had been in her heart so long. And even while he made up his mind that with the next moment she should learn the truth, she silenced him all unconsciously by whispering that now for the first time in her life she was happy—that now all doubts and fears had been swept away. It was all impossible—idyllic—absurd; yet he clung to the vague hope that they might make-believe a little longer yet.

The utter impossibility of the whole business was sprung upon them when Mr. Daniel Meggison stepped jauntily in, and pricked the bubble. It had not seemed possible that that wily old schemer should be able to discover anything; but Meggison had been cunningly setting his wits to work to discover some way of escape from the island. [284]

For him were no dreams and no romance; his exile here was marked only by the fact that he was sternly deprived of stimulants. He knew that Pringle had in charge some spirits, rigorously withheld until such time as they might be wanted for medicinal purposes; and it is safe to assert that Daniel Meggison had practised every art, and had pleaded every complaint known to science, in a vain endeavour to extract them from Pringle's custody. But he had failed; and for that reason had set himself to watch, in the hope that Pringle might be absent on one occasion, and so leave the way open for a direct theft.

It was in that spirit that he awoke early one morning, and crept out of the large hut, leaving his companions sleeping. In this particular instance he was rewarded; for he saw not only Pringle but Gilbert Byfield stealing away through the shadows of the dawn towards the north of the island. Curiosity overcame every other consideration, and Daniel Meggison stealthily followed.

It was, of course, a shopping excursion to the village. Gilbert and Pringle hurried on their way, and crossed the narrow neck of land; Mr. Daniel Meggison rounded the corner of the rocks, and gasped, and saw freedom before him. He followed them at a discreet distance, and disappeared in the village; then, the better to enjoy his triumph, returned to the bridge, and seated himself there, and waited. And while he waited he gazed smilingly at the dawn through a bottle he held up before one eye.

Gilbert Byfield and Pringle, toiling up to the bridge, came upon him, and stopped in amazement; Daniel Meggison winked at them knowingly. His face was flushed, and he had about him some of the old swagger that had been seen in Arcadia Street. [285]

"Splendid notion!" he said, pointing at the village and then at the distant line of rocks—"quite the best game of all, my dear Byfield. I beg you'll keep it up. I was so fortunate as to find an early morning house; charmingly easy manners the Irish have. Trust me, my dear Byfield—I won't say a

CHAPTER XVIII

MISS MAKE-BELIEVE ESCAPES

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THE discreet Pringle, as on one other memorable occasion, had seated himself on the box in the middle of the road out of earshot; Daniel Meggison, lounging not too steadily against the parapet of the bridge, addressed Gilbert.

"When I cast my mind back, sir, over the past, I find myself marvelling—marvelling is the correct word—at the splendid fashion in which you have kept the game alive for the sake of my child. For what," went on Mr. Meggison, waving a hand towards the sky, and addressing the landscape generally—"for what have you not done on her account? The splendid prodigality of it amazes me. In the first place, you give up to her a house in the country—to which, quite naturally, she brings her family, to say nothing of other relatives and friends who trespass upon her. From that we fly"—Daniel Meggison made a movement with his hands flutteringly in the air to suggest that flying—"to a well-appointed yacht, where perhaps at the beginning all is not as well as it might be. Reckless of the consequences—careless of the results to life, limb and property—you splendidly drive that vessel upon the rocks; you annex—(annex is the proper word, I believe)—a portion of country that is probably not your own property; declare it to be an island; and in the most romantic fashion provision the company cast upon it with you. In a word, sir, the thing is magnificent—even if carried a little too far."

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"I firmly believed it to be an island until a few days ago," said Gilbert. "I, like others, have been deceived; I, like others, have been driven on a road I never meant to travel. Great things and great consequences have sprung from my small beginnings."

"Nobly said, sir!" exclaimed Daniel Meggison. "But what I would ask is—why give the game away now?" He lowered his voice to a whisper, and took a step towards the younger man. "You've played the game splendidly; play it a little longer. Here is a village—ready and willing to supply all our needs; here is a pleasant land, where we may pass the summer, or what remains of it, in idyllic simplicity. Why change anything? For my own part, I needed but little to complete my personal happiness, and that little I have found. Your credit here, sir—or the credit of your servant—is particularly well established; they bow before your name, sir."

"Are you another of them anxious to keep the fraud going?" asked Gilbert in amazement.

"Certainly, sir," replied the unabashed Daniel Meggison. "In a primitive fashion I am very happy here: what will happen when the winter comes on is of course quite another matter. But let the future take care of itself; for the moment we are children, and we laugh in the sunshine."

"The tide's turning, sir," said Pringle, getting up from his box, and preparing to shoulder it.

"I'm afraid the tide has turned for me," said Gilbert with a sigh, as he moved away.

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Daniel Meggison was very merry over breakfast that morning. He chose to be flippant with Gilbert, and to rally Pringle on the ease with which these islands could really be inhabited when it came to the pinch. Dubbing himself the new Crusoe, he declared his intention of searching the shore that very morning, in the hope to find that solitary footprint of a possible Man Friday. He asked Gilbert whether it would not be wise to set about at once the building of a stockade, the better to protect themselves against the possible incursion of a dusky foe. Altogether Daniel Meggison enjoyed the situation mightily, and bore himself with that easy flippant gaiety that had marked him out in the Arcadia Arms as being above the common herd. He displayed his power by openly asking Gilbert if he had ever been to the west coast of Ireland, and if so, what he thought of the scenery.

But it was by a combination of circumstances that the secret was at last exposed to those who already were not in possession of it; and when the exposure came at last, it seemed to come in the strangest way from several quarters. In the first place, Daniel Meggison, growing bolder, walked across that narrow neck of land one morning, and spent the day in the village, or in an adjacent one, being regarded by the inhabitants as a species of amiable tramp who had drifted out of the great Unknown to enliven the monotony of their existence. As ill-luck would have it, however, he drifted down across the bridge to the shore again, blissfully forgetful of the fact that the tide only served at certain hours, and discovered that he was cut off for the night. Drifting back again, he made a bed for himself in an outhouse, and slept the night away.

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But to Bessie his disappearance was a great and inexplicable disaster. She had been in the habit, even as in the old days of Arcadia Street, of bidding him good night, and asking the question—futile here—whether she could do anything more for him. But this night he was missing; and an inquiry in various directions among that very scanty population of the island revealed the fact that nothing had been seen of him since early morning.

Gilbert had his suspicions, of course, and so had Pringle; but Bessie was frantic with anxiety. A thousand things, in her imagination, might have happened to him; he might have climbed the rocks and fallen into the sea, or he might have fallen asleep on the shore and been carried away

by the waves. At all events, the most exhaustive inquiry failed to find him within the limited circumference of the island; and Bessie was suddenly a new power to be reckoned with.

Those who were the head and front of the actual conspiracy came to Gilbert that night—drifting to him guiltily and secretly one after the other. Mr. Edward Stocker came first; and Mr. Edward Stocker was vaguely apologetic for his wife's brother.

"An anxiety to the family at all times, sir," said Mr. Stocker. "Clever man, of course, with much more dignity and much more of real gentlemanly feeling than ever I had, or am likely to have. Bit of genius in his way, sir." Mr. Stocker paused, and thoughtfully pulled at one ear as he looked at Gilbert. "I suppose it isn't necessary to ask where he's gone, sir?"

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"I'm afraid not," replied the other. "He penetrated the secret of this place a little time back; he's making the most of his new freedom on the mainland—and I expect he's been cut off by the tide. He's safe enough; but it means that we must tell Bessie."

"I suppose so," said Mr. Stocker, with a long face. "And that also means that Mrs. Stocker and me will go back to Clapham. Well," he added, with a sigh—"the best of holidays must end."

Mr. Stocker had perhaps more gentlemanly feeling after all than he imagined; at the very moment of departure from Gilbert's hut he came back to him, to make a little set speech that had been in his mind evidently from the first. "I should like to say, sir, on behalf of self and Mrs. Stocker (although Mrs. Stocker may not think it absolutely necessary to speak for herself), I should like to say that we take it kind that people who force themselves on a gent like you, without so much as 'by your leave,' should have been so treated as I may say we have been. It isn't everyone that would go and put up with people that shoved themselves on him, and insisted on being shipwrecked with him—and even on being supported, like the early Christians, in rocks and caves of the earth. On behalf of self and Mrs. Stocker—I am very thankful, sir."

Mr. Jordan Tant came up the hill jubilantly enough; he carried his head almost defiantly. He was still a yard or two away, in fact, when he burst out with his great news.

"She accepts me! As I predicted, she accepts me!"

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"That's not the most important thing on earth," retorted Gilbert. "What about this wretched old man who has suddenly disappeared, as his daughter supposes, and who will force us to tell the secret, and explain the false position in which we stand?"

"That scarcely matters to me now," said Tant. "My dear Enid is a woman of her word, and although I may be forced to return to civilization, she will I know go with me—understanding me better for the way in which I have risen to the occasion during our dangers and privations. She will say to herself—'If this man can behave in such a fashion amid unknown perils, and with the sea roaring and leaping about us—what will he not be like in the neighbourhood of a mere tame Hyde Park or Kensington Gardens?' That's what she will say; that's what she's already saying. Consequently, my dear Byfield, I don't mind how soon I go back to civilization."

"Well—you've won your woman; you can afford to play the deserter now," retorted Gilbert. "Go, by all means; I have a vision of you and Mrs. Ewart-Crane and the fair Enid, incongruously dressed, stepping daintily across to the mainland——"

"Where I shall immediately telegraph news of my safety, and proceed to buy a few rough garments with the money I still have, and which it has been impossible for me to spend in this place," broke in Jordan Tant. "Above all things, Byfield, I shall cherish the remembrance that in a fair and open field, when reduced almost to the condition of primitive men, I won her from you, as the better man. I always knew it; I was always certain that in me were qualities undeveloped by the artificial life I had led."

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"You can believe that if you will," said Gilbert, laughing. "As for myself, the bottom seems to have dropped out of everything I ever contemplated doing, and I am living here a more artificial life than ever I lived in London. Take your way out into the world, my Tant—and be happy."

Meanwhile there were other happenings. Mr. Edward Stocker had deemed himself safe from his formidable spouse, and had perhaps grown a little careless under his new liberty; but it happened that on that particular night, when the little man had climbed the hill to Gilbert's hut, Mrs. Stocker had thought it prudent to follow him. She had marked his absence on other occasions; she who had forced from him every secret his unromantic life had known determined that she would force from him now any knowledge he possessed outside that she herself held. She listened outside the hut, and heard that talk of the mainland and of the absent Daniel Meggison; when Mr. Stocker, after his set speech, cautiously scrambled down the hill, Mrs. Stocker, scratching herself with briars, and gasping as she stumbled over the rough earth, followed him. Bessie being absent from the hut, Mrs. Stocker suddenly pounced upon Mr. Stocker, to his great alarm, and dragged him into that portion of the hut hitherto occupied by Bessie Meggison and herself.

"My dear—I've been for a little walk," faltered Edward Stocker, looking at her with a faint smile.

"Plotter and schemer!—so you thought you would keep everything from your Julia—did you?" she demanded, in a suppressed voice. "You had no objection to your wife being made a guy of for the amusement of those who consider themselves superior in station; you didn't care if she lived

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in a sort of cattle shed, without so much as a scrap of looking-glass or a comb for weeks on end; you didn't mind if she had to endure the pity of women who never really look anything at all unless they are dressed to death! What's this talk of the island and the mainland; and where is my brother?"

"My dear—we've really been very comfortable here," pleaded Edward Stocker. "It's been quite a new experience—the sort of holiday to talk to our friends about long years afterwards."

"I dare say," she sniffed. "Friends who have enjoyed the privileges of Margate or Ramsgate, or even Brighton, and worn respectable clothing with the best—with a special blouse for dinner in the evening. Holiday, indeed! I shall never be able to hold up my head again as long as I live."

"I'm extremely sorry," said Mr. Stocker. "What would you like me to do?"

"The moment this tide or whatever it is turns, you will conduct me to the mainland. There, after we have procured proper clothing, you will discover the best way to reach Clapham; and for the rest of your life you will remain there—respectably. No more gadding about after people with whom one is not really concerned. And don't you ever dare, Edward Stocker, to refer to this time as a holiday!"

Late though it was, Mrs. Edward Stocker, primed with this new knowledge, set out to impart it to the lady she had hitherto regarded as her foe. Mrs. Ewart-Crane should understand that Mrs. Stocker was no mere ordinary woman, to be imposed upon; Mrs. Ewart-Crane should be impressed with the fact that Mrs. Stocker had sprung into the very heart of the secret, and had in fact, if it came to that, suspected the truth from the first. Binding the trembling Edward Stocker to her with a fierce command, she set out to find Mrs. Ewart-Crane. [294]

She performed the visit with all due ceremony; apologized profusely and yet with dignity for a call which she knew was not strictly in accordance with the usages of polite society; and then, in a most casual manner, declared that she had at last been able to verify the suspicion that she had entertained for a long time.

"In fact, for some inexplicable reason, we have been kept here, when we might have escaped at any moment. The whole thing is one gigantic hoax, and I am surprised that anyone should have been taken in by it for a moment," said Mrs. Stocker loftily. "Personally, I have had reasons for remaining here, not altogether unconnected with relatives of my own; but I see no further necessity for enduring discomfort when I can quite easily get home."

"I am extremely sorry that you should have had the trouble to call at this hour," retorted Mrs. Ewart-Crane, shaking out her print dress more gracefully about her. "But I was informed some time ago of the extraordinary fact you have related. Our friend Mr. Jordan Tant knows all about it. We shall of course return to London at once. We were brought into this discreditable business greatly against my wish, and the sooner we have done with it the better I shall be pleased. Good night, ma'am—and pray take care of your husband; he doesn't look strong." [295]

Mrs. Stocker led Edward Stocker back to the hut, commenting fiercely upon the manners of the upper classes, and upon the airs they gave themselves. On second thoughts she decided that, once back in her Clapham home, she might reasonably expand the adventures on this supposed island; might come near to starvation and that casting of lots that had been threatened; and might be rescued in the nick of time and in the last stage of exhaustion by a friendly vessel, flying a foreign flag, the captain of which was not altogether unimpressed by her charms. Also she determined that the island should be placed in a situation very remote from the British Isles.

Pringle sought his master in the hope of having some new light thrown upon this strange development of the story. Single-hearted as to purpose, so far as Byfield was concerned, Pringle had held obstinately to that fact he had set before himself at the first: that the place was an island. Now, in a moment, it seemed that there was no hope of that fiction being kept alive; he desired fresh instructions as to how to deal with the problem before him.

"Asking your pardon, sir, for interfering," he said—"but I suppose you understand that this won't be the end of it, by no means. Mr. Meggison, sir, has been lured away in search of things he couldn't find here, sir—and I'm afraid the others'll follow. I've done my best from the very first; I wouldn't have you think otherwise, sir."

"I know you've done your best, Pringle," replied Gilbert, laughing ruefully—"but that doesn't mend matters. The thing has gone beyond Mr. Daniel Meggison; there are others already who know it. You have played your part of the game admirably, Pringle; but unfortunately I shall be supposed to have played it with you from the very beginning. So far as Mr. Meggison is concerned, let him stay on the mainland, or let him come back; personally, I should be glad if both he and his son had gone altogether. The others are free to go when they like, because I'm afraid that the sorry game is played out. It isn't your fault, Pringle, because if it comes to that you played your game better than any of us." [296]

"Much obliged to you, sir, for your good opinion," said Pringle. "If it would ease matters at all, I'd take the boat and row across, and bring Mr. Meggison back—by force if necessary, sir."

"That wouldn't do at all; but we must invent some story to allay Miss Meggison's anxiety."

"If I might make so bold, sir—wouldn't it be better to tell her the truth? She's the best of the whole bunch, sir—again asking your pardon for the liberty—and I'm sure she'd understand, sir."

"Perhaps you're right, Pringle; in any case something has to be done, and that without delay."

That thought was in the mind of Pringle as he walked back towards his own quarters. Counting over in his mind the various people who had been so strangely brought together in that place, he came with particular dislike to a recollection of Mr. Aubrey Meggison—that coarse-mannered youth who had consistently refused to assist in any work on the island, and who had always taken growlingly his full share of all the food and clothing that were to be had. It might be a good idea to rid this harassed master of his of the son as well as of the father. [297]

Fortune played into his hands. He was sitting by the last remains of the fire when he heard steps, and, looking up, saw the man of whom he had been thinking staring moodily down at him. Pringle looked up, and nodded cheerfully, and spoke with that deep respect with which he spoke to all men.

"Good evening, sir," said Pringle cheerfully. "Bad business, sir—this about your guv'nor."

"A very mysterious business," said Aubrey darkly. "If I was in London, I should have a word or two to say about what the police had been doin'; I should let 'em know what I thought about the matter—and I should point out a theory or two, to put 'em on the right track. You can't deceive me, you know; I wasn't born yesterday, not by a long chalk."

"I can quite believe it, sir," said Pringle. "Now, what might be your theory, sir?—or, if left to yourself, how would you set about finding this guv'nor of yours, sir?"

Mr. Aubrey Meggison lowered himself to the ground, and, resting a hand on each knee, leaned forward towards Pringle. "My opinion," he said solemnly, "is that the guv'nor was in the way—another mouth to feed, you'll understand—and he's been made away with." Aubrey leaned back, and nodded slowly three times.

"Now, I should never have thought of that, sir," said Pringle.

"Nor anybody else that hadn't knocked about the world as I have, and seen things," said Aubrey composedly. "Mind, I'm not sayin' that in a way it doesn't serve the guv'nor right; he hasn't played what you might call the gentleman since we've been 'ere. At the same time, you see, he's my father—and as fathers go he wasn't bad. At the same time, justice is justice, and I want to know what's become of the old man." [298]

"If you'll excuse the saying, sir," said Pringle, with deep respect—"you're smart—but your father's smarter. That's putting it in the rough, sir; but you've not been fairly dealt with, sir, and I should like to speak my mind to you."

"You're probably mistaken, you know," said Aubrey—"but you can go on."

"Thank you, sir," said Pringle. "You must know, then, that your father has discovered that there is a way of escape from this place—and he has taken that way."

"Come—no bunkum, you know," said Aubrey. "You can't gammon me; I'm much too fly."

"It would be waste of breath to try to, sir," replied Pringle. "But your father has discovered, quite by accident, what no one else knows; he has found out that this place is not an island at all, but is connected with the mainland. Consequently, sir, to that mainland he has gone; and I expect at the present moment he's got his toes stuck up in front of a very decent fire, sir—with a glass of something in his hand, and I shouldn't be surprised if there was a cigar in the other."

Aubrey Meggison slowly got to his knees, and leaned forward, and stared in blank amazement at the placid Pringle. "You don't mean to say that while all these mugs are rottin' about here, playin' shipwrecks, the guv'nor's gone and found a little place for himself, where he can be nice and comfortable? Don't tell me that the old man's gone one better than anybody else!" he pleaded. [299]

"Unhappily it's a fact, sir. He's living on the fat of the land," said Pringle.

Aubrey got up, and walked round the fire, swearing softly to himself as he went. Then he stopped, and looked down at Pringle, and began to laugh; shook his head whimsically more than once, and slapped his thigh, and danced about a little.

"By George!—he's a wonder!" he exclaimed, in a tone of deep admiration. "I've always been proud of him in a way; never minded tippin' him the nod in a billiard-room or anything of that kind, because he wasn't quite like other chaps' guv'nors. But to think of him slipping off like that and having a good time—I tell you what it is—my old guv'nor would make a jolly good livin' at the North Pole, without a relief expedition. He's a living wonder!"

"He's a very remarkable man, sir," supplemented Pringle.

"But I'll bowl him over; I'll show him that two can play at that game," said Aubrey, with a chuckle. "You show me what's the best way to get off this blessed place—same as father's done—and I'll ferret out the old man, and stand before him, and show him that two can play at that game as well as one. All's well that ends well, don't you know; when I've got a good old cigar in between my teeth, and something a little stronger than water ready to my hand, I shall feel like a man again!"

Pringle, delighted with the success of his scheme, arranged an early meeting at the point [300]

where the rocks jutted into the sea. That appointment (surprisingly enough for one who hated early rising) was kept by Aubrey Meggison; and on the way across the narrow neck of land the youth chuckled to himself at the ease with which it had been possible all along to reach the mainland. On the opposite shore he turned to Pringle impressively.

"Don't you run away with the idea, my man, that you've got rid of us," he said; "we're not so easy shaken off as that. I know the gov'nor, and I also know myself; and we shall have just a word to say, if necessary, to the person that placed us in this position. I don't think I need enlarge on the subject; if you want to understand my feelings just cast your eye over my clothes. This Mr. Byfield has trotted us about for his own convenience; he needn't think he's going to dump us anywhere, and leave us to shift for ourselves. I'm going to find the gov'nor, and I'm going to make myself comfortable with him. So long!"

Pringle stood to watch him climbing over the bridge; shook his head over his departing figure with an expression of disgust. "It's a rum thing, when you come to think of it," murmured Pringle to himself—"it's a mighty rum thing that that sort of creature generally manages to get through the world, and to get some one else to keep it. I suppose the real reason is that it turns so nasty if it doesn't get what it calls its rights, that it becomes pleasanter for all parties just to pay it to keep quiet."

Bessie had gone, in her bewilderment and anxiety, at last to Gilbert; to him she presented that mystery which was no mystery at all. What did he think had become of her dear father? [301]

Even then he held back from the truth; even then he evaded the only explanation possible. "My dear," he said gently, taking her hand, "I can only assure you that your father is well—and safe."

"Then you know where he is?" she demanded quickly.

"I can guess—and I can only tell you that it is at the moment a little secret. You must trust me, just as you have trusted me all through. You shall know everything to-day; and everything shall be set right to-day."

"Set right?" She looked at him in perplexity. "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing," he assured her. "You shall know everything to-day, my darling; that at least I can promise you. And your father is well."

She plied him with questions, but he would not answer her. Truth to tell, he had not yet made up his mind what to do; he seemed to see her, in imagination, drifting again out of his life—refusing to receive any explanation that he could offer. He whispered of his love for her—of all that they might do together in some impossible future, when they should have been rescued from that place. She listened with only a vague understanding of what he said; doubts were in her mind already as to what was happening, and why it should be necessary to keep her in ignorance concerning her father. She loved Gilbert—she thought she understood him; but passionately she declared to herself that she had been tricked once, and she would not be tricked again. She strove hard to keep an open mind; strove to remind herself that what he did was done for her sake, and out of his love for her. But he had sworn to tell her the truth always, and to cheat her no more; and to that he must keep steadfastly. There must be no second path. [302]

Meanwhile, a series of personally conducted tours were taking place, under the guidance of Pringle. To Pringle each party appeared—and to him each party appealed. Mrs. Stocker, leading the obedient Stocker, demanded to be shown the way; the obliging Pringle, feeling that here at last was a solution of the great difficulty, willingly conducted the pair round the rocks—and pointed the way. He watched them climbing where Aubrey had climbed but a little time before—incongruous-looking figures, facing the dawn and going back into the world. Also he carried in his mind, as a message not to be delivered, certain parting words spoken by Mrs. Stocker.

"You may tell your master," that lady had said at the last moment, "that I am not likely to forget the position in which he has placed a lady who has hitherto been able to hold up her head with the very best in the most select part of Clapham. I am not sure that my husband will not lay the matter before his solicitors, with a view to a claim for damages. Do you understand?"

"I will bear it in mind, ma'am," said Pringle humbly.

"I am given to understand that we are probably on the western coast of Ireland, which is much the same as being cast among savages," went on the lady. "In any case the return fare to Clapham Junction (the station nearest our home), to say nothing of garments to be purchased, will be considerable; a claim shall be duly posted to your master, and must be met forthwith. So far as moral damage is concerned, I will consult with my husband, as I have suggested, and Mr. Byfield will doubtless receive a communication in due course." [303]

"Very good, ma'am," said Pringle. "Go straight across, ma'am, and keep to the road. Nice little village, and pleasant people. Good morning!"

Pringle was turning away, not troubling for once to conceal his laughter, when he was met by the second party, consisting of Mr. Jordan Tant, Mrs. Ewart-Crane, and Enid. Pringle straightened his face, and gave them at once a cheerful but respectful greeting.

"Good morning, sir," he said to Tant. "Are you taking a walk, sir?"

"We are leaving this place, if it is at all possible," broke in Mrs. Ewart-Crane. "You can no

longer deceive us, my good man."

"Not for the world, ma'am," said Pringle. "In fact, if you hurry a bit, there's just a chance you may be able to get across before the tide turns. Nice village, sir, just over the bridge; cheerful people. This way, sir."

He watched them also disappear—splashing a little in the middle of the neck of land, and with some lifting of skirts on the part of the ladies. Then he got back just in time himself, and set about the preparation of breakfast, quite as though nothing unusual had happened.

"Everybody's late this morning," commented Simon Quarle, as he took his place by the fire, and nodded to Pringle. "Heard anything about Meggison?" [304]

Pringle saw Bessie approaching, and merely shook his head. The girl greeted Simon quietly; her face was white and set, and she did not look round even when Gilbert approached. Gilbert seemed a little surprised to find that they were the only breakfasters; a gloomy silence had settled upon them all. Pringle was withdrawing as usual, to take his breakfast a little apart, when Gilbert called him back.

"Pringle—have you called the others?"

Pringle looked uncomfortable, and gazed down into the cup he was carrying. "Might I have a word with you, sir?" he asked, without raising his eyes.

"You can speak now; there's nothing to hide," said Gilbert, watching the girl.

"Well, sir—very early this morning the ladies and gentlemen made up their minds, sir, to go. It seems that everybody understood, sir—they'd found it out somehow or other, sir, and the delights of the island no longer attracted them. They've gone, sir, by the way you know."

"All of them?" Gilbert stared at the man incredulously.

"Every one of 'em, sir," replied the man. "First it was Mr. Aubrey—longing to see his father—and then it was Mr. and Mrs. Stocker—and then Mr. Tant and the other ladies."

"That will do, Pringle—thank you," said Gilbert; and the man walked a few paces away, and seated himself on the ground, and began his breakfast.

"Gone? Where the devil have they gone?" demanded Quarle, staring open-mouthed at Byfield. "I want to understand. Where could they go to?" [305]

Gilbert turned to the girl; there could be no further delay.

"Bessie," he began gently—"you must understand that this place is not, as we thought, an island at all. At low tide it is connected with the mainland—and that mainland is, I believe, Ireland. Your father found that out, and was one of the first to go back into civilization; the others have discovered the secret, and have followed him. I did not know until—until a day or two ago that this place was not an island. I have been perfectly honest with you—up to that time."

She did not take her eyes from his face; a chill drop of doubt seemed to fall upon her heart, and to deaden it. She got to her feet and walked away; the two men, watching her, saw her suddenly stop, and drop her face in her hands. Gilbert sprang to his feet, and Simon Quarle scrambled up also.

"Bessie!" cried the younger man; and again as he got nearer to her—"Bessie!"

She turned swiftly, and dropped her hands at her sides, and faced him. "And all these people know now that the thing has been a cheat—a lie from the beginning. Just as we played at make-believe at your house at Fiddler's Green—just as we played at make-believe on the yacht—so we've played at make-believe here. Is that true?"

He took a step towards her, and laid his hands upon her shoulders; he felt her stiffen under his touch.

"Bessie—my dear, dear girl—it's true—but it wasn't my fault this time. I did indeed believe that we were cast away here; I hadn't the remotest notion of where we were at all. Then, when at last—only a few days ago, comparatively speaking—I found out that we could get back into civilization so easily, I determined that I would keep the game alive a little longer——" [306]

"Ah!—the game—always the game!" she breathed tearfully, and dropped her head.

"And I did that because I loved you; and because I was afraid that you might stand before me as you're standing now, and refuse to believe what I told you. I wanted to keep you here a little longer—I wanted to see you cheerfully playing make-believe day after day; I didn't want you to go back into the world—the common ordinary world again."

"And now the game is ended," she said, looking up at him with eyes brimming with tears. "Take your hands away from me, Mr. Byfield, please; the game is ended. It has been a poor game from the first—and God help me!—I've lost every time. Take your hands away from me!"

He watched her go—standing miserably and helplessly looking after her. He dared not follow; he was afraid to think what she would do, or how this poor comedy that had so strangely developed into a tragedy was to end. Simon Quarle said nothing; he stood grimly muttering a

little to himself; he seemed dazed by the sudden turn of events.

"An island—and not an island; and to think that I never for a moment suspected it," muttered Quarle. "And for me, at my time of life, to play at shipwrecks and Robinson Crusoe and the devil knows what! It's amazing!" [307]

Strangely enough, Simon Quarle was to cut the knot on this occasion. He had sought out Pringle, and had got the real truth from him—understanding only too well that it would be necessary to wait until early morning if he would cross to the mainland. He was wandering disconsolately on the shore when Bessie approached him.

"Mr. Quarle—you were always my friend—weren't you?" she pleaded, looking quickly round about to see that they were not observed. "And you're going to help me?"

He nodded. "With my life, if necessary, my dear," he said, with an attempt at whimsicality. "What are you going to do?"

"The boat will take us across to the mainland; we need not wait another night here," she whispered hurriedly. "Dear good kind old friend—take me across—and set me free."

He nodded again, and turned away at once in the direction of the boat, she following. Together they shoved it into the water, and with sturdy strokes the man pulled round the rocks and in the direction of the mainland. As he helped her out, she suddenly bent, and put her arms about his neck, and kissed him.

"Good-bye, old friend," she said, a little brokenly—"I'm going to run away."

"You'll find the others all down in the village, I expect," he reminded her.

She shook her head, and smiled through her tears. "I'm not going to find the others; I couldn't bear to meet them," she replied. "I'm going to run away into the world—all alone. Good-bye!" [308]

"Stop!" he exclaimed, "you can't go like that." But she waved her hand to him, and ran up towards the bridge; turned there for a moment to wave her hand again, and to blow a kiss in his direction. And then ran on out of his sight, and down into the world.

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAMPS ARE LIT IN ARCADIA STREET

[309]

ARCADIA STREET, on a warm July evening some twelve months after that surprising day when Mr. Daniel Meggison had waved farewell to the Arcadia Arms for ever, looked much the same as it had ever done. Even the children who played wonderfully with no toys on the pavement seemed to be the same that had followed a certain Mr. Jordan Tant, on the occasion of his first visit to the street; and there were the same loungers (or others very like them) propping up that institution so necessary to Arcadia Street and the immediate neighbourhood—the Arcadia Arms.

Even in the house where Bessie had once toiled and struggled and dreamt there was a card propped up against the window-frame, announcing that within were rooms to let; quite as though that particular house had been marked from the beginning for that particular purpose, and could not change. Only in these days the house did not wear quite that air of neatness that it had worn when Bessie Meggison had presided there.

It was growing late this July evening, and the dusk was falling, and softening the outlines of the ugly houses, when a four-wheeled cab, after a preliminary objection on the part of the horse to entering the street at all, turned into Arcadia Street, and jerked and bumped and rattled its way along, until it came to a standstill at the door of that particular house. As the then landlady of the house afterwards stated, "it put her all of a quiver"—cabs of any sort being rare indeed in Arcadia Street. On the top of the cab were a couple of old and shabby portmanteaus, and a small square wooden box; inside was another box, and a smaller bag, and a young man. The young man got out, and, pushing his way through the small knot of children that had gathered to watch the proceedings, knocked quickly at the door, and then stood waiting. The cabman knelt upon his seat, with a hand on the foremost of the portmanteaus, and waited also. [310]

Mrs. Laws—the landlady in question—a stout and elderly woman with a chronic aversion to stairs—removed her eyes from the window of the front room, and crossed the room heavily, and went to open the door. When it was opened the young man nodded pleasantly, and indicated the card in the window.

"You have rooms to let?" he said. "I was walking through here yesterday, and saw the card, and thought the place might suit me."

"W'ich it's a sweet room, sir—or p'raps I should say two rooms—one hopenin' out of the other—and cheap at any price. On the second floor, sir—an' if you cared to walk in——"

"Thank you," said the young man. "I know the sort of rooms; I'll take them, if the price is all right. I can't afford very much—but I dare say we can arrange that."

It was arranged then and there—the landlady a little surprised at the suddenness with which the young man accepted an offer that was half a crown in advance of what the landlady would really have taken. The luggage was brought in, with the assistance of the cabman, who turned on each occasion as he got to the door with a box or a bag on his shoulder to shout sternly at the horse—"Whoa!"—as though that patient steed, apparently half asleep, had made up its mind to seize the opportunity to run away. Then the cabman was paid, and the cab was gone; and the young man, after declining to have any little thing cooked for him, was left in the shabby room to himself. He shut the door, and looked about him. [311]

He was a tall young man, with broad shoulders, and he was rather shabbily dressed. He presently walked through into the back room, and looked out over those apologies for gardens common to Arcadia Street and other places; shrugged his shoulders, and sighed a little, and shook his head.

"Just the same as ever—nothing changed, and yet everything changed," he muttered. "All the spirit of Arcadia Street—all that peopled it and made it beautiful—is gone; there's no one left to look for Fairyland within its limits. Well—it's as good a place for a poor man to live in as any other; and after all there are certain memories that float about its grimy chimneys."

He was roused by a knock at the door of the other room. Believing it to be the anxious Mrs. Laws with another appeal to the new lodger to partake of food, he walked into that further room, and called out somewhat impatiently— [312]

"Come in!"

The door opened, and a man came in; nodded grimly on seeing the young man, and closed the door again. A thick-set man, with head thrust well forward between his shoulders, and standing now with his hands clasped behind his back. A man called Simon Quarle.

"Well, Mr. Byfield—and what's brought you back here?" asked Quarle suspiciously. "I heard your voice on the stairs; also I happened to be looking out of the window when you drove up. I should have thought you had done with Arcadia Street long ago."

Gilbert Byfield laughed, and held out his hand. "Why treat me as an enemy still, Mr. Quarle?" he asked pleasantly. "I always rather liked you, and we've been through some curious adventures, one way and another. Won't you shake hands?"

"I will—when I know what new game's afoot," said Quarle. "As I told you once, you have no place in Arcadia Street; go back to your own world, and stop there."

Gilbert dropped on one knee beside a portmanteau, and began to unstrap it. "As a matter of fact," he said, "I think I have more right in Arcadia Street even than you have."

"How's that?" asked Quarle.

"Well, if I remember rightly, you have something of an income, even if it's a small one; I am under the impression that you retired from something or other, with just enough money to live upon."

"I did," said the other, with a nod. "I was thrifty in my young days, and I saved up the pence." [313]

"Well, I wasn't thrifty in my young days, and I didn't save anything. Consequently"—Gilbert looked up at him with a whimsical smile—"I have now no money at all, except such as I may be able to earn. All my affairs have gone to smash, Mr. Quarle; I've come to Arcadia Street, because in the old days I found it cheap, when I was playing a certain game for the fun of the thing—and I may find it cheap now, when I am playing that game in solid sober earnest. Now do you understand?"

Mr. Simon Quarle leaned forward, and peered down at this new wonder. "You mean to tell me that you are no longer the rich Mr. Byfield we used to know? You mean to tell me that you have got to set to work to earn your living?" he asked.

"Yes—and with no particular qualifications for doing it," said Gilbert. "I'm not afraid, because I think that it's really the life for which I was fitted; idleness never really suited me. It's too long a story to tell, but my affairs got out of order during that time I disappeared from the world; and when I came back they went from bad to worse. I have nothing save what I may earn—and I rather think I want friends."

Mr. Simon Quarle stretched out a hand, and Byfield grasped it quickly. After a moment of silence the elder man asked—"And that is the only thing that has brought you back to Arcadia Street—eh?"

"That—and the memory of the best woman I ever met. I've had a long year to think about her since she ran away from me—to wonder about her. I've looked back over it all—and I've seen what I was, and what I did, and how I strove to make her something that should please myself only. I wanted a toy—someone to be good to, and help—someone who would look up at me, and say how good I was, and how kind I had been—and so forth. I didn't understand her then; I didn't know the value of what I was striving to bend or break in my own direction. I don't know where she is—I don't hope ever to have anything to do with her again; because if I met her she must carry that resentment in her heart for me always. But I'd give a good deal to call her back here, if only for an hour—just to tell her what I think about it all. I suppose you know nothing about her?" [314]

"Am I likely to know anything?" snapped the other, in the old fashion. "I came back here because I liked the place, and because she had lived here; that's all. I can tell you about some of the others, and about what's happened to them, if you like; I've heard vague things from time to time."

"Do you think it likely that she has gone back to her father?" asked Gilbert eagerly. "Because if you know where he is I might be able——"

"Mr. Daniel Meggison has done rather well for himself—and I don't think he wants anything to do with his daughter," said Quarle, seating himself and folding his arms. "It appears that he wandered about a bit in Ireland, and finally drifted to Liverpool; and there he took up his quarters in a little public-house. The public-house was owned by a confiding widow—and Daniel Meggison was ever plausible. He married the widow, and settled down in some sort of comfort." [315]

"Ungrateful brute!" exclaimed Gilbert. "And the son?"

"Cast off by his father, and unable to find his sister, he really did something for himself at last, in his own particular fashion. I think he does a little in the way of billiard-marking, and a little in the way of racing, and more still in the way of borrowing. He'll never starve, you may be sure of that. The Stockers got back in due course to Clapham, and have doubtless settled down into their own old way of life; that exhausts my list."

"You will be interested to know, perhaps," said Gilbert in his turn, "that Mr. Tant married Miss Ewart-Crane some months ago; I've seen very little of him, but I believe their extraordinary adventures on a desert island are already quite the talk in their own particular sphere. Pringle—most wonderful of servants—is no longer a servant of mine, but is, I believe, doing well for himself. When last I saw him he had got in touch with the captain and crew of the lost *Blue Bird*; they were all picked up."

Simon Quarle got to his feet, and stood for a moment thoughtfully scratching his chin. "I suppose," he said at last slowly, without looking at Byfield—"I suppose that if the child ever came into your life again you'd make the same muddles—and do the same foolish things you did before—wouldn't you? Don't frown; I'm an old man, and I was very fond of the girl. I only ask because one likes to know the point of view of other people. You're never likely to see her again, you know—so that you needn't answer if you don't want to." [316]

"If I ever found her—and she ever forgave me—I should tell her simply and truly what I told her before—that I love her," said Gilbert. "If she'd let me I'd work for her with a better heart than I can ever work for myself only. Because I tell you," he finished simply—"there's no other woman like her in all the world."

"Amen to that!" said Quarle, moving to the door. "But you're a bit late; you're not likely to see her again, you know."

Simon Quarle, with a final nod, went out of the room, closing the door behind him. He went thoughtfully down to his own quarters, and for a long time paced about there, as though he had some problem in his mind difficult of solution. More than once he stopped in his restless walk, with his eyes upon the ground; more than once he shook his head, as though he felt that the way to solve the problem had not been found yet. And at last sat down in his shabby arm-chair, with his hands clasped on his knees, to think it out afresh.

The lamplighter had drifted in from the bigger world outside, and had lit the lamps in Arcadia Street—performing that duty in a casual perfunctory manner, as though it didn't matter very much whether Arcadia Street was lighted or not. The Arcadia Arms was doing a great trade, with its doors swinging and banging every minute or two, and the roar of the greater world outside Arcadia Street had not yet finished for the day. Out from that greater world there drifted into Arcadia Street a little figure that came with lagging feet—a little figure that had come into Arcadia Street many many times through the years that had once, as it seemed, been happily left behind. A shabbier figure even than of old, although as neat as ever; a white-faced girl, carrying bundles and parcels. She stopped at the door of that house that had so recently swallowed up a new lodger, and let herself in with a key. [317]

"Sich goin's on since you went out," said Mrs. Laws, nodding her head solemnly at the girl. "Cabs arrivin'—an' things bein' took upstairs—bags an' boxes, an' bundles an' things; an' as nice a young man as ever I set my two eyes on—though shy. An' goodness knows in these 'ard times a extra lodger is a puffed gift of Providence."

"I hope he won't be unreasonable," said the girl, with a little sigh. "Some of them have such a way of ringing bells for no particular reason—and one gets so tired sometimes. But I'm glad—for your sake, Mrs. Laws."

Simon Quarle had been on the look out; he bent over the stair head, and called in a hoarse whisper—

"Bessie!—Bessie!"

She looked up at him with a smile, and climbed the stairs; she thought, as she looked at him, that he seemed strangely excited. He held her hand for a moment as they stood together on the landing, and he patted it softly, and seemed almost (although that, of course, was absurd) to be chuckling. He drew her into his room, and closed the door.

"Why—what's the matter, Mr. Quarle?" asked the girl.

"Bessie Meggison—have you heard about the new lodger?" asked Simon Quarle, holding her hand and speaking very solemnly. [318]

"Yes—of course I've heard about him," replied Bessie wonderingly. "Mrs. Laws told me. What does it matter?—to me it only means so many more stairs to climb so many times a day. You forget that I'm nothing more than a servant here."

"I try not to remember it," said Simon Quarle, gently touching her cheek with one hand with a touch as light as that of a woman. "When you came back here, little woman—hoping to get shelter in the old Arcadia Street on which you had so gladly turned your back once upon a time—you found me—didn't you?"

She nodded quickly. "And you made it all right with Mrs. Laws, so that I might have food and shelter and a very little money in return for my work. Why—I might have starved but for you."

"Not quite so bad as that, perhaps—but still, you were pretty low down," said the man. "The world hasn't treated you well, my dear—but then the world never does treat the timid ones well. You didn't fight hard enough; you hadn't cheek enough. Only I want you to understand, Bessie dear, that you're not the only one that has suffered."

"I know that," she said quickly. "Poor father went through a lot of privations before he found someone to take pity on him; and dear Aubrey must find it hard sometimes to make a living."

"I wasn't thinking about poor father or dear Aubrey," exclaimed Quarle snappishly. "They'll get on all right for themselves. But there is someone else, my child—someone perhaps we have not quite understood." [319]

She tried to withdraw her hand, but he held it firmly, and patted it as he went on speaking.

"I know, my dear—I know all about it, and I know what you feel," said Simon Quarle. "Only in this poor strange topsy-turvy world of ours we are all a little like children—wilful and headstrong, and always so sure that we know what is best for us. And the great god Chance happens along one day, and sees that we are in a bit of a muddle, and are spoiling our lives; and shakes us up, and tumbles us about—and perhaps sets us straight again. This one has a gilded toy, and doesn't know how much it's worth; and so the toy is snatched away and given to another; and this one has nothing, and gets perhaps not the gift it craved, but something better yet. What if I told you, Bessie, that the man who played that great game of make-believe with you had touched disaster too, and was as poor as you are?"

"You have heard from him?" she asked quickly.

He nodded slowly. "I have heard from him—and he has been through rather a bad time. The game of make-believe for him is ended; he has come down to the realities. All his money is gone; he's got to work and fight and strive, as every other man must work and fight and strive in this world, if he's to be worthy to be called a man at all. And he wanted to know about you, Bessie."

"Only the old whim—only the old feeling that he's sorry for me. I'm only a little patient drudge again, in the house where he first saw me; and even the poor old garden that I think he laughed at secretly to himself is gone, and blotted out. You mustn't tell him where I am; I don't want him to know." [320]

"Did you love him, Bess?" Simon Quarle stood squarely before her, with his hands clasped behind his back.

She hesitated for a moment, and then looked up at him, with a little touch of colour stealing over her white face, and with a smile in her eyes. "Yes," she said slowly—"I loved him very dearly. If he blundered, he blundered rather finely; and I shall always think of him as I knew him first—someone frank and friendly, coming out of the great world, and liking me a little because I liked him. There—there—don't talk about it; he has his own friends, I suppose, even in his poverty. You said he was poor—didn't you?"

"Yes—very poor. Poor enough, I should think, to live in Arcadia Street in real earnest," said Simon. "Well—I'm sorry if I've touched on anything that has pained you; best forget it. Love's a queer business, and I'm not sure that you're not well out of it. Let the brute starve; it'll do him good."

"Mr. Quarle—you know I didn't mean that at all," faltered Bessie. "You're the unkindest man I've ever met."

"Sorry you think so," said Quarle, turning upon her frowningly. "But you needn't stop and bully me; if you remembered your duties properly you'd know that this new lodger by this time probably requires some attention. Go away and look after him; personally, I'm disappointed in

you."

"Oh, no, you're not," she coaxed, putting her arms about his neck. "You always growl at me, I think, when you love me the most." [321]

"Perhaps I do," he snapped, thrusting her away from him. "But go and attend to the new lodger."

She climbed the stairs wearily, thinking a little of what Simon Quarle had said—wondering why it happened that life must be always a grey and profitless thing to some, and not to others. She knocked softly at the door, and heard a shout from within, commanding her to enter; caught her breath for a moment, and passed her hand across her eyes, as though she felt that she might still be dreaming. Then, as the shout was renewed, she opened the door, and went slowly in.

The stars had come out even over Arcadia Street, to help the lamps a little; and still the two sat at the window of that room, looking out into an Arcadia Street that was strangely beautified. So much there was for them to say to each other—so much that had never been said before by any man or woman in all the great world—or so at least they thought. Only once, smiling through her tears, Bessie drew away from him, and looked at him for a moment with the old perplexed frown.

"If you should be cheating me again!" she whispered. "If, instead of this poor room for your home, you should really be rich, and should be trying to steal me out of my poverty by a trick! For the love of God, don't do that again; be fair to me—be just to me!"

"My darling, that particular game of make-believe ended a long time ago," he said—"but a new one begins from to-night. We shall have to work hard, you and I, to keep the wolf from the door; and we shall have to make-believe hard to show that we like it." [322]

"That won't be any make-believe for me, dear," she whispered.

Simon Quarle took it into his head to climb the stairs presently, and after knocking softly in vain, to look in and see them. They came forward a little guiltily, hand in hand, to bear his scrutiny; he shook his head over them whimsically enough.

"Well," he growled to Gilbert—"does she believe you now?"

"I think so," said Gilbert softly.

"Little fool!" said Simon Quarle, touching the girl's cheek with rough tenderness. He turned on his heel and walked out of the room; and his eyes were shining.

THE END.



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Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

Page 112, "herelf" changed to "herself" (not help herself)

Page 157, "ocasion" changed to "occasion" (occasion I think)
Page 198, "Meggson" changed to "Meggison" (Aubrey Meggison instructed)
Page 246, "posible" changed to "possible" (possible, that he)
Page 266, "though" changed to "thought" (I thought it might)
Page 290, "addel" changed to "added" (he added, with a sigh)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRUISE OF THE MAKE-BELIEVES ***

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