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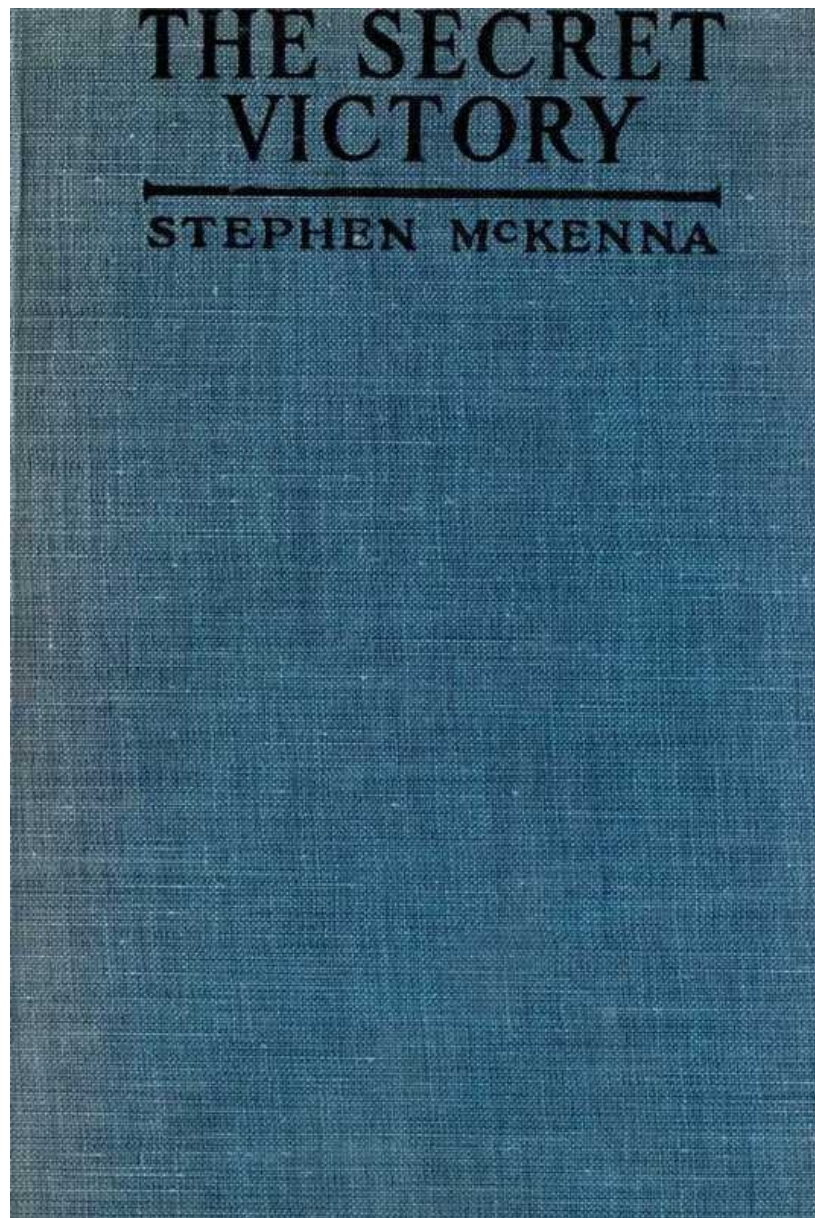
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET VICTORY ***



THE SENSATIONALISTS: III
THE SECRET VICTORY
STEPHEN MCKENNA

By STEPHEN McKENNA

THE SENSATIONALISTS

PART ONE: LADY LILITH

PART TWO: THE EDUCATION OF ERIC LANE

PART THREE: THE SECRET VICTORY

SONIA MARRIED

SONIA

MIDAS AND SON

NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE

THE SIXTH SENSE

SHEILA INTERVENES

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

THE SECRET VICTORY

BY

STEPHEN MCKENNA

AUTHOR OF "LADY LILITH," "SONIA MARRIED,"
"THE EDUCATION OF ERIC LANE," "SONIA,"
"NINETY-SIX HOURS' LEAVE," ETC.



NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO
ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS
WITH GRATITUDE

TO
TEX
WITH LOVE

Epistle Dedicatory

TO ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

You, who have read the three volumes of *The Sensationalists* in manuscript, place me under further obligation by allowing me to dedicate the third to you in commemoration of a friendship which has been long, intimate and—to me—unmatched. Though I acquit you of responsibility for shortcomings in anything that I have written, the tale of these shortcomings would have been far longer if I had not availed myself of your unfailing vigilance and ever-ready help, as I have profited by your sensitive criticism and sympathetic encouragement.

The novel-trilogy is so little acclimatized to latter-day Georgian England that, though it may need no defence, it has provoked attacks from readers who will suffer all artistic forms but those which are offered to the public in his present majesty's reign; I say no more in its apology than that it provides a convenient medium for a study in which the story-teller occupies, in succession, three different standpoints. In *Lady Lilith*, the emotion hunters and sensation-mongers who supply the drama of this trilogy are still practising their poses in mirrored and passionless detachment; in *The Education of Eric Lane*, artifice has grown to such strength that, in its contest with reality, the battle—between antagonists no longer detached nor passionless—stands drawn; in *The Secret Victory*, a close contact with reality deflates the tumid pretensions of artifice and forces an amateur company of tragi-comedians into the revealing daylight of the open street. Even if it had been possible to present these three phases in a single volume, I should have been sorry to lose the interval which bridged the transition from one phase to another.

Whether a study of flamboyantly conscious egotism deserves three volumes can hardly be decided impartially by one who has attempted the study; but the novelist has at no time been more insistently urged to contemplate unabashed egotism than in an age when the camera and the printing-press, the public confession and the private conversation, the conclusions of psychology and the phantasies of psycho-analysis combine forces to further the cult of personality. "Ninety-five per cent. of the human race," said Mr. Cutler Walpole in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, "suffer from chronic blood-poisoning, and die of it. It's as simple as A. B. C. Your nuciform sac is full of decaying matter...." Ninety-five *per centum* would seem a modest estimate for the proportion of the human race which, in one social division of England at the present time, is dying spiritually of acute egomania.

In reading the manuscript of this trilogy you encountered characters whom you had met in earlier novels; if at some future time you have the patience to read those later novels which have been executed, or at least planned, but not yet published, you are more than likely to meet some of them again. The practice of carrying certain characters from one book to another is hardly so much an arrogant assumption that the public has made their acquaintance in a former presentation as an effort to give additional verisimilitude to a picture which is being built up in sections: an academic history of the years before the war, of the war itself and of the years following it would inevitably introduce, in volume after volume, some at least of the same warriors, statesmen, financiers and social leaders; if, in an imaginary picture of the same period, the novelist offends by following the same method, he offends in the consoling company of Balzac, Disraeli and Thackeray among the dead and of Galsworthy and Mackenzie among the living.

To you I need offer no excuse for having hitherto confined myself for the most part to men and women whose means and leisure enable them to be occupied with public affairs or preoccupied with private introspection: as human beings, susceptible to pain and pleasure, they are not less interesting than those who devote a greater proportion of their time to the struggle for existence; in the opinion of some, they may win an added interest by the larger air of a more spacious life and by the subtle discrimination of wider intellectual sympathies; if a novelist offends by neglecting the narrow streets and sunless cottages of this era, he offends once more in the company of Disraeli and Thackeray.

The present volume of *The Sensationalists* brings the trilogy to an end; the reception accorded to the first volumes was too evenly mixed to indicate how the third will be greeted; but, since all three books were planned and completed as one whole before the first was published, it is as one whole that I should like them to be judged. Jointly and severally, however, their fate is of less importance to me than the pleasure which I derived from writing them; and, in the present volume, no words give me greater pleasure than those on the dedication page.

Ever yours,
STEPHEN MCKENNA.

Lincoln's Inn,
24 August, 1921.

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THE SECRET VICTORY

“There is no God; but still, behind the veil,
The hurt thing works, out of its agony.
Still like the given curse that did not fail
Return the pennies given to passers-by.
There is no God; but we, who breathe the air,
Are God ourselves, and touch God everywhere.”

—JOHN MASEFIELD: *Lollington Downs*.

THE SECRET VICTORY

CHAPTER ONE

VIGIL

"Though your wife ran away with a soldier that day,
And took with her your trifle of money;
Bless your heart, they don't mind—they're exceedingly kind—
They don't blame you—as long as you're funny!"
W. S. GILBERT: "THE FAMILY FOOL."

ROUSED by a report of peace hardly less deafening than the crash of war four and a half years earlier, the winter garden of the Majestic hummed like a vast and airless beehive. On the long sofas by the walls, in deferential clusters round some slow-voiced, arm-chair oracle and in wavering groups at one moment distinct and at another herded together, everybody who could find room between the crowded tables and the obtrusive palm-tubs eagerly volleyed question and answer, contributing his pennyworth of gossip and retiring with his pound of rumour.

No one in New York had seriously doubted that Germany would accept the armistice terms; but, until they were signed, the talk of private dinners and public celebrations remained half-hearted. Now that the invitations had been discharged, no one knew what to do next. One group of lean, sagacious officers debated how soon they would be demobilized and restored to their businesses; a harassed parliament of women exchanged acid confidences about the apartments which they had taken when their husbands came to New York for the war; a second and a younger group of officers deplored the untimely cessation of hostilities before they had seen any fighting.

"All-dressed-up-and-nowhere-to-go," hummed one. "Why, Carstairs, when did *you* get here?"

He shook hands with an agitated young Englishman who was peering over the heads and under the arms of his neighbours.

"Hullo, Long! I left Washington last night. You've not seen my wife, have you?"

"Lady John was over by the far door a while back. I'll shew you."

He took Carstairs by the arm and dragged him through the crowd to a corner where a young woman had entrenched herself behind a row of palm-tubs and a breastwork of wicker chairs.

"Much obliged. I say, what about a drink? Oh, of course, you're not allowed to. Never mind, there's a good time ahead of you as soon as you're out of uniform. By the way, we're coming to your dinner. Very good of you to ask us."

The officer bowed and went back to his own group. Carstairs dropped limply into a chair and rang a bell.

"God, what a mob! And what a day! I haven't had a moment to myself. The horrors of peace!"

His wife pressed his hand sympathetically, and the gold of a new wedding-ring caught and flung back the light from the great arc-lamps.

"Could you do anything about our passages?" she asked.

"Yes, I wandered into the chancery and got them to make up a bag. After that there was no difficulty, but the boat will be ankle-deep in Ministry of Munitions people and Treasury people and Propaganda people. There are more English officials than Americans in New York to-day. Precious glad every one will be to get rid of us! By the way, Sadler Long wants to give us a farewell dinner at the Biltmore; I said you weren't doing anything. Was that all right?"

"Is it to-night?"

"No. We're dining with Grant to-night at the Plaza. It's a farewell dinner to Eric Lane, the dramatist fellow. The great American people will be both tired and dyspeptic by the time it's given a farewell dinner to every munition-contractor, exchange-stabilizer and itinerant lecturer in the country."

"I want to meet Mr. Lane," said Lady John.

"Well, you'll have every opportunity on the boat. I can't say *I* do."

A waiter came to their table with two cocktails. Carstairs signed for them, lighted a cigarette and leaned back with one leg thrown over the other. On the far side of the serried palm-tubs and wicker chairs, an English voice said:

"Waiter! I ordered a Number Twenty-Three."

"Number Twenty-Three," repeated the waiter, turning his head for an instant in full flight.

Eric Lane nodded and pretended to read his paper, refusing to be driven from a comfortable chair because a strange Englishman, with the notorious tact of the English, chose to discuss him by name at two yards' distance. Until three minutes before, he had been agreeably lulled by the high hum of American voices; but this drawling English, with a hint of impatient superiority in it, assailed and defeated him. He was also humanly curious to know what the strange Englishman had heard or thought about him.

"I like his plays," said Lady John. "Is there anything against him?"

Lane decided that she must be a New Englander. Then he recalled his glimpse of the underhung, impatient Englishman and remembered that Frances Naylor of Boston had married Lord John Carstairs six months earlier. The match had caused nearly a week's excitement, for Carstairs was brother and heir-presumptive to the imbecile Duke of Ross, while Frances Naylor was a future heiress and a present beauty.

"Oh, I've no objection to him personally," said Carstairs. "But I don't suppose we're very popular with him as a family. There was a blighted romance between him and my cousin, Barbara Neave." He laughed, and Eric Lane felt his cheeks warming. "I'm afraid you'll find Barbara—and her relicts

and reputation—rather a mouthful.”

Not for the first time Frances Carstairs wished that the English had fewer relations. She had been bewilderingly initiated into the complex family tangle of the Neaves and Loring, the Carstairs and Knightriders; John had drawn her ingenious plans to shew who had married whom, but every new name impaled her on a new genealogical tree, so that she openly dreaded her arrival in England and the threatened tour of inspection among her husband’s manifold connections.

“But I thought you told me your cousin had married recently,” she said.

“Yes, she married George Oakleigh. He was a son of Miles Oakleigh, the head of the family; and his cousin, Violet Hunter-Oakleigh, who’s of the Catholic branch in the county Dublin, married *my* cousin, Jim Loring, who was killed in ‘15. I know it’s confusing at first—”

“It’s maddening! What has all this to do with Mr. Lane? If your cousin—our cousin—”

“Oh, *that’s* all over, but he may feel she made rather a fool of him. However, he’s in good company: when she was seventeen, I was supposed to be engaged to her, and Crawleigh had to contradict it in the press; and, to my knowledge, she’s been married off to six people in as many years, beginning with one of the young princes and ending with some barrister. She’s all right if you don’t take her seriously, but I’m told that Lane *did*, rather. She tried to drive him in double harness with the barrister until they both bolted in opposite directions; then Lane came out here, and the other man, Waring, quietly retired to the country; then she married George Oakleigh. And that’s the end of Barbara.”

Lady John felt that a criticism was expected of her, but could not decide how far it was safe to disapprove of her celebrated new cousin without incurring a charge of provincialism.

“Well, she had her fair share of romance,” she ventured after a pause. “I should think you’re all rather relieved.”

“The Crawleighs were a bit disappointed,” answered Carstairs; “but it might have been worse. Relieved? I don’t *know*. When I said that was the *end* of Barbara... There’s a curious little group that my cousin Jim Loring used to call “the Sensationalists”; they were always playing a part and pulling up their psychology by the roots to see how it was growing. Anything for a new emotion! Barbara always had more personality than the rest of them put together and she led them till she really made London too hot to hold her. Then the war came. The men were killed off and the women married; but the old Adam’s still alive in some of them. I’m wondering what Barbara’s next outbreak will be; she had one emotion by marrying a tame-cat Irish squireen, but how long she’ll stick to him... I’m sure we’ve not finished with her yet. You’ll find London a curious place... Look here, if we’re going to be in time, I must go up; I haven’t unpacked yet.”

At the creak of chairs, Eric Lane buried himself in his paper, only looking up when the bull-necked, consequential young man and his lithe, decorative companion had sauntered languorously past, leaving in his nostrils an elusive hint of violets and in his memory a dissolving view of pearls, a gold bag, white gloves, a cloak tentatively martial and exquisitely neat shoes. Lady John he had never seen before; Carstairs he now remembered as a young man with too much chin and too little hair, intermittently to be found in London theatres; they had overlapped for a year or two at Oxford where Carstairs won a brief notoriety by removing the minute hand of the General Post Office clock every Sunday night throughout one term; twelve years in the diplomatic service had robbed him of irresponsibility without putting anything in its place. As they disappeared from sight, Eric threw his paper away and lighted a cigar. After long months of solitude, it was stimulating to hear how the world represented by Carstairs summarized and dismissed his contribution to the romantic Odyssey of Lady Barbara Neave.

He had not, himself, been able to dismiss it so easily; and, when he left England at the end of 1916, Eric was determined never to come back. His health was shattered; Dr. Gaisford bluntly threatened him with a sanatorium; and he needed distance and change of work to heal a bruised spirit. After lecturing in the United States, he travelled for six months in South America and started on an aimless and endless holiday in Japan. While he was in Tokio, he heard that Barbara was married. At a time when the German armies were pouring down on Paris, the news was telegraphed all over the world; and the press of Tokio, New York, Ottawa, Sydney and Calcutta gave her a column of description. Eric was dining with two men from the Embassy, and throughout the evening they discussed nothing else. When he first saw the headline: “*Marriage of Lady Barbara Neave*,” he fought for breath as though his heart had stopped; then, with slowly returning composure, he realized for the first time that finality had been achieved and that, in all the months when he was philosophizing and hardening his heart, he had been waiting for a fantastic miracle to happen, hoping to see Barbara, breathless and dusty from the train, coming into his hotel. The London telegram killed his faith in romance.

And the excited column of small type killed his faith in women, for Barbara had apparently walked into the street and married the first man that she saw...

“Who’s this Oakleigh?,” asked his host, squeezing the last drop of relish out of the story. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“He’s a very nice fellow,” Eric found himself answering. Oakleigh henceforth was to have the stolen intoxication of glorying in Barbara when she was well and comforting her when she was ill, of seeing her great eyes change from mockery to tenderness and from tenderness to ecstasy; but Oakleigh could never have from her those fifteen fevered months when their hearts had beaten together... “I’ve known him ever since I was at Oxford. He used to be in the House; and then he ran a paper... He has a place in Ireland—”

“What they call ‘a suitable alliance’?,” suggested his host.

“Oh, very.”

“It’s rather a disappointing finish to her career...”

The gossiping discussion rambled on, introducing name after name of the men whom Lady Barbara had been expected to marry. Eric waited for his own and, when it was not cited, relapsed into reverie. He had received a letter that morning from his sister, telling him that she was engaged

and asking whether he would be home in time for the wedding. If he had ever doubted, there was now no question of returning to England; he was too well known to be left in peace. The Oakleighs and Neaves, the Knightriders and Lornings, the Pentyles and Carstairs, the Maitlands and Poynters all moved in the same little set of three or four hundred people. Fifteen years before he had dreamed at Oxford of the day when he would burst upon their startled world and hold it captive; the dream had sustained him through the mortification of neglect and the despair of ill-health until of a sudden the reality threw his dream into shadow. In London, in Boston, in Tokio he was recognized in the street; to escape the fulfilment of his own prayers he had to travel by unfamiliar lines and hide himself in unknown hotels; for ultimate and enduring sanctuary he must retire to a land untouched by books and theatres.

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After three months' desultory wandering he returned to Tokio and booked a passage to China. Already his health was improving; and, if he could lose all touch with English ways of thought, he might begin to lose touch with himself, to shed his personality, almost to change his identity; upcountry it must be possible to find a civilization and scenery so strange that it would absorb him. As he left his hotel for the shipping office, he was handed a cable from his American agent:

"Following from Lane Lashmar Hampshire England for you care of me despatched fourteenth your father seriously ill think you should return as soon as possible."

Eric studied the time of despatch and retransmission with stupid deliberation, giving himself time to recover from the shock. This meant, of course, that his father was dying, was perhaps already dead; and it was his duty to be shocked. Lashmar on the fourteenth, New York on the sixteenth, Tokio on the eighteenth;—the war had made cabling a slow business... He was a selfish brute not to have told his mother where he was going instead of leaving her to track him through his American agent and, before that, through his London agent. His father had never been ill since he was a child, but he had overworked for years; this probably meant a stroke....

Eric discovered that he was quite dispassionate; perhaps he was too much numbed to feel. He must of course return immediately; if anything happened, the eldest son must be at hand. Once in England, he must let the future take care of itself.

23

Three weeks later he landed at San Francisco and arrived in New York two days before the armistice was signed. "Mother's Son" was still running at the Grafton; he was met unexpectedly at the station, and, before the day was out, two reporters had called at the Majestic and sought an interview. He tried to dine by himself and was instantly caught up by a group of friends who set about organizing a banquet in his honour. A private party of twelve swept within twenty-four hours far beyond the organizer's control. Half New York had been to one or other of the plays; scores of people had already met him, hundreds more wanted to meet him.

"Look at it this way," said his agent, Justus Grant, defensively. "Every one knows you're here. Well, if it gets out that we've given you a dinner and cornered you, they'll all ask why in Hell they weren't invited. I've got to live in New York, and you haven't. It's only one speech, whether we're twelve or twelve hundred. And you've only to stand and shake a few more hands."

"I'll do my best," Eric promised with ebbing patience. "It's a tremendous honour...."

Then he began reading the letters which he had brought from his agent's. Lady Lane wrote to confirm her cable and to say that his father had indeed had a stroke. His life was no longer in danger, though for some days his speech had been affected and many months must go by before he could resume work. There was no immediate urgency for Eric to return; he must decide for himself. Of course, he had been terribly missed, and every one was looking forward to seeing him.

After resolving never to go back to England, Eric felt that nothing would now keep him away. There was almost everything to be said against it, and, in its favour, only that he had secured a cabin where others had tried and failed. The reason was frivolous, his mind was aimless; and he accepted the reason, because it chimed with his mood of aimlessness. Moreover—a reason yet more frivolous!—Justus Grant was arranging a farewell dinner for him, and, after being bidden God-speed, he could not decently loiter in New York any longer. Of such stuff were made the cardinal decisions of a man's life. Three years earlier, on the night of his first meeting with Barbara Neave, she had asked him to wait till the end of her rubber and to take her home.

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The crowd in the winter garden was thinning, and Eric could study in peace the notes which he had jotted down for his speech. Though Carstairs' chatter had set his nerves jangling, he must face a graver ordeal when he was welcomed to the midst of Barbara's friends in London; if for the moment he could not abdicate, he must sit his throne worthily; but he felt contempt for this servile herd which abased itself before him. For two years he had lived in isolation; and, if he was now flung face to face with his public, he would shew that he could preserve his isolation in their midst.

He roused from moody reverie to find his host standing, watch in hand, before him.

"Haven't you dressed yet?," asked Grant anxiously. "The automobile's at the door."

Instead of thinking about his speech, Eric was only brooding over the hollowness of his belated, unwanted triumph; three years earlier it would have intoxicated him to take New York or London by storm, but he was wondering for the first time whether this lust for theatrical sensationalism did not really lower him to the level of Barbara Neave and her school. Certainly he had outgrown the phase so much that he would have been almost a little glad to shew his contempt by making every one wait....

For a moment he pretended to be unconscious of Grant's presence; then he was stung to activity by a fear that this scorn of soul was only another experiment in sensationalism....

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"I'll be ready in ten minutes," he cried, as he ran out of the winter garden. For one night he must enter into the spirit of his company; after that he would hide himself where he could escape equally the emotion of courting triumph and of avoiding it.

Hundreds were assembled at the Plaza, when he arrived: how many hundreds he was too indifferent to enquire, but they were lined up in rows; the rumble of countless conversations shrank to a whisper and died away in a moment's silence; then every one who knew him hastened to shake hands, while the rest begged to be introduced. For all his indifference, Eric was warmed by his

reception. Throughout his wanderings in South America and Japan, imagination and will had swung alternate hammers to fashion a new life which he could find worth living. Here was acclamation. The throne awaited him, if he could mount it worthily. He was but thirty-five, his health had returned to him... All his life he had prayed for this moment of domination....

A waiter interrupted the chorus of welcome by thrusting his way forward with a tray of cocktails and caviare sandwiches. In the moment's lull Eric saw Carstairs at his elbow and turned to him.

"I believe we *have* met," he said, holding out his hand. "I just missed you when I called at the Embassy last year."

Carstairs shook hands awkwardly and muttered an introduction to his wife.

"When I was in Japan, I saw that Barbara had married my friend George Oakleigh," Eric went on. "I know them both very well. Jim Loring, of course, was one of my greatest friends. And your mother used to be kind enough to ask me to some of her parties."

He had dropped his indifference in a calculated effort to shew these Carstairs that, even if they did not want to meet him, he would meet them or not as he liked. This dinner, after all, was his apotheosis; some one at his elbow was whispering that five hundred tickets had been sold and that the committee could have sold more than twice that number. It was astonishing that a thousand educated men and women had no better use for their time and money; astonishing, too, that he had allowed himself to be dragged out for public display, for in all that vast gathering there was not one eager face that he wished ever to see again. Indifference and aloofness returned as a protection against such a sense of loneliness as he had never known when he was most isolated.

"I believe we're going by your boat," said Lady John.

"That will be delightful," Eric answered.

The babble of voices rose and swelled until the chairman wound his way back to Eric's side and led him into the dining-room. Detachment changed for a moment to antagonism as he walked between the long whispering rows: warm waves of scent beat upon his cheeks; before, behind and on either side he felt the magnetism of a thousand eyes drawing him out of his self-sufficiency and assailing his frozen reserve. As quickly as his companion would allow, he walked on, looking stiffly ahead, to the seat of honour. There, while the rigid, whispering rows broke up and poured in at his heels, he looked idly at the men and women who made up a world which he had left for ever. It was difficult to see all the tables and impossible to count his hosts; but the printed plan shewed him name after honoured name; New York political, New York a night's lodging for itinerant diplomacy, New York literary and artistic, New York rich, New York fashionable and New York merely curious had crowded into the great room; and his health was to be proposed by Nelson Millbank, who had been ambassador in London when Eric was still unborn. Through the flowers, over the little Stars and Stripes and the Union Jacks fluttering between the vases he tried to identify those who were nearest to him. Every one seemed to be looking in his direction; and, to escape their eyes, he turned to his neighbour.

"America's always been uncommonly good to me, Mr. Millbank," he said, "but I've never had anything of this kind before."

"You will shew your gratitude by coming back," was the answer, "though we feel that the indebtedness lies the other way."

"I'm leaving you from necessity and not choice."

"For leisure—and for more plays, we hope. And what psychological material, Mr. Lane! Had I your genius and your youth... The convulsion's as great, when you turn a soldier into a civilian, as when you turn a civilian into a soldier. It will be your privilege to capture and preserve for us the impression of a world in travail. A man gets his discharge papers one morning—and finds himself with an old life to take up or a new life to make...."

"Yes. I've been thinking of that for some time," said Eric, half to himself. "Though I'm not a soldier... It's all right if he himself has changed with the world around him; in peace the individual moves more quickly than the mass, but in war the mass moves more quickly than the individual."

He stroked his chin thoughtfully and looked up to find the woman opposite him leaning forward with a faint air of diffidence and a question in embryo.

"There's no old life for women to take up, is there?" she asked, plucking up courage, but evidently disconcerted by the clear ascendancy of her own voice.

"Woman is unchanging," Eric answered, "she resigns herself to civilization, but she has never been civilized. Man is, to her, a physiological incident and a domestic accessory, so that a war only affects woman by withdrawing so many potential fathers of her children and supporters of her house."

He glanced covertly at the plan of the table and found opposite his own name that of Lady Woodstock. Sir Matthew Woodstock, three chairs away, was a partner in Woodstock, McArthur and Company and had been sent to America by the Ministry of Munitions as British representative on the Purchasing and Priority Council.

To right and left rose an eager debate on sex and conduct. Eric had thrown them a bait which, he knew well, few men and no woman could resist. An "academic" discussion of sex enabled them to talk about themselves, to indulge their own sex-curiosity, to fancy themselves wholesomely fearless and unprejudiced; it enabled him to dine peacefully in the soothing haze of sham-intellectuality and to study anew the names on the table-plan. Next to Carstairs he saw Mrs. O'Rane deep in conversation with John Gaymer; next to him was Lady John, with O'Rane on her other side. It was indeed no great exaggeration to say that there were more British officials than Americans in New York; and the sight of this compact alien colony set Eric thinking about his speech. He was unlikely to enter the Plaza again, but he could not spend a week in London without meeting O'Rane or Gaymer; his valediction should be something for them to remember and quote when he had slipped through their hands into a retirement from which, this time, there would be no return... He was roused by the touch of a woman's hand on his sleeve. Finding him unoccupied, his neighbour was asking him to sign her *menu*. Instantly her example was followed by every one who saw him

writing; *menus* were passed from hand to hand, waiters appeared from other tables with piled-up trays; he was still signing when Nelson Millbank whispered a question and stood up to propose the toast of the evening.

Eric lighted his cigar and leaned back, looking over the heads of the diners to a vast fan-group of the Allied flags, draped over the main door. At a semicircular table twenty feet away the press-men were industriously scribbling: two were looking up at him from their sketch-books and down to the sketch-books again; he posed himself and sat patiently still. Millbank's rising had been greeted with a storm of cheers and clapping; his opening sentences called forth fresh cheers, and punctually thereafter, at the polished end of each resonant period, as he half turned to the guest of the evening or indicated him with a slight movement of his hand, there was a new outburst of applause.

Though he listened with only half his attention, Eric knew that it was a great speech from a man who had been known for more than forty years as one of the greatest after-dinner speakers in America. That much, at least, he had expected, but he was hardly prepared for the white-hot enthusiasm of the audience. This, if anything, should stimulate a man to better work than he had ever yet accomplished; but for two years all work had mysteriously lost its savour and purpose. If he ever wrote again, he would still be artist enough to give forth only the best that was in him, but he no longer cared for the applause of a blurred, indistinguishable mob; his plays, indeed, were running in three continents, but in a thousand audiences there was no one whose judgement mattered to him as in the old days when above "the mad houseful's plaudits" he looked "through all the roaring and the wreaths" for one half smile of praise from Barbara. Had all these bright-eyed men and women masked their faces, were Millbank speaking an unknown tongue, Eric could not have had less in common with them. Mrs. O'Rane threw him a dazzling glance of congratulation; and, before he could bow, he had to overcome his surprise that she had recognized him. In all this funeral throng he alone knew that for two years he had been dead....

Voice, gesture and mounting sentiment shewed that the peroration was at hand:

"And, lastly, I thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for the honour and the opportunity of having my name associated for a moment of one night with the loved name of our guest. He and I stand at the remote opposite ends of life, so that I cannot hope to meet him often again. You, who will meet him and see him and read him, I congratulate and envy. I ask you to rise and join me in wishing him long life, health and prosperity."

There was an instant's silence, and the room rose in a wave of black and white. "Lane! Lane! Lane!" The thundering repetition of his name drowned the clink of the glasses, the individual toasts and even the college yell which rocketed from the end of the room. Eric bowed to Millbank, then turned slowly and inclined his head to right, to left and in front. The speech had intoxicated them; they looked at him with shining eyes, an inch removed from hysteria.

"And what do they expect I can say after that, sir?" Eric whispered to Millbank, as the applause died slowly away and he sat down.

"Take your time, Mr. Lane."

Once more every one was looking at him in a silence broken only by a buzzing commentary on Millbank's speech. Eric straightened his tie, pulled down his waistcoat and laid his watch on the table beside his finger-bowl. As he pushed back his chair and slowly drew himself erect, he caught sight of his reflection in three long mirrors: black-haired and white-cheeked, aquiline and thin, with deep-set brown eyes and lips tightly compressed, he could fancy that he was looking at his own dead body. The applause broke out again, ten times louder and longer than before; there was a blinding flash of silver light from a magnesium flare, followed by dense grey clouds of smoke. As they cleared away, he once more established the position of Carstairs and his wife, holding himself upright and only touching the table with the tips of his fingers. Though slightly built, he was tall enough to dominate an audience; in three years of public speaking he had acquired such composure that he could stand for a full minute without saying anything. It was a test of grip; if he could hold his company without speaking, he could do what he liked with it afterwards. Before he turned to Millbank, the great room was as silent as the *Festspielhaus* before the opening bar of Parsifal. Something seemed to have come to life within him, for he now felt that he must at all costs eclipse Millbank's speech; if he could not match his slow stateliness of eloquence and diction, he would master him in pure lyrical fire and music....

"Mr. Millbank, Your Excellencies, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen..."

The voice was flexible and light, capable of infinite emotional variation, boyish and appealing after Millbank's deep resonance. Eric had discarded and forgotten his rehearsed speech. Dreary months of stereotyped lecturing set him ablaze to speak his soul. The audience had surrendered to his presence and surrendered again to his voice; he could twist every man and woman round his finger....

Forty minutes had passed before he sat down. There was no applause, for none dared break the silence; but he had made them laugh and he had brought tears into the eyes of the woman opposite; the audience had quivered and gasped. Now, if they had not guessed it before, they knew how he inspired with his own genius the actors who interpreted his plays; henceforth they would recognize whose personality it was that spread magnetically across the foot-lights... He picked up the dead cigar from his plate and felt for a match. He would have liked to look at Carstairs, but it was unnecessary; Carstairs himself, with his unmistakable English drawl, broke the silence by exclaiming: "Oh, I say, that was devilish good, you know!" Thereat the pent storm of cheering gushed forth as though he had touched a spring.

There followed a presentation and more introductions. Eric stood bowing to congratulations and trying to answer five questions at a time until the chairman rescued him and took him back to the Majestic. Even there he was constrained to hold a new court and to accept the homage of those who had not found an opportunity of speaking to him before. Mid-night was striking as he shook the last hand and lighted his last cigar; with it came nervous exhaustion and an abrupt reaction, in which once more he seemed to have crossed the boundary between two lives and to be wandering alone in

eternal emptiness....

As he walked back to the winter garden a woman rose from her chair and hurried up to him.

"Mr. Lane, I *must* thank you for that speech! It was wonderful! I've never heard anything like it. Aren't you dreadfully tired?"

The cloak and scarf kept him for a moment from recognizing her as the woman who had sat opposite him at dinner.

"I am, rather," he answered, leaning against the arm of a chair. "But it's the last speech I shall ever make."

"In America, you mean? It's so glorious to feel that I've actually met you! You're crossing on the *Lithuania*, aren't you? So are we. I shall hope to see you on board. And I shall make a thorough nuisance of myself by asking you to write in my autograph book. Now I mustn't keep you; I expect you've all sorts of packing to do."

"I'm glad to say I haven't unpacked since I left Japan... Good-night, Lady Woodstock."

She looked up at him curiously for a moment and then broke into a laugh.

"I'm not—Mr. Lane, you're not mistaking me for Lady Woodstock, are you?"

"I thought you were. I saw your name on the plan of the table—"

"Oh, but that was because she was too tired to come. Sir Matthew brought me in her place. *Wasn't* that a piece of luck for me? I'm his secretary. He's not come in yet, has he? I simply daren't go to bed until I've found out whether he has any more work for me."

"He was still at the Plaza, when I left," said Eric.

"Then I suppose I must wait up for him."

She chose herself a chair, threw open her cloak and untied the scarf from her hair. Now that the girl had told him what she was, Eric wondered how he could ever have imagined her to be anything else. She looked eighteen or twenty and displayed the brisk assurance which he had come to regard as a woman's price of admission to the temporary civil service. Her hair was bobbed and surrounded with a red band; a serviceable black dress revealed slender arms and shoulders; and her regular, rather sharp features were agreeably relieved by grey-blue eyes which seemed younger and less self-confident than the rest of her. Eric had met and striven to avoid very many of her type in English government offices; they were at all times too much emancipated for his liking, too energetic, efficient and certain of themselves, too conscious of sex-superiority to concern themselves with sex-equality. Sir Matthew Woodstock's secretary looked devastatingly conscientious and practical; she billeted herself in the most comfortable chair with the determination which he could imagine her shewing when she arranged appointments and guarded her employer from unauthorized telephone assaults. And she would call him her "chief" rather than her "employer."...

Force of habit, rather than any personal interest, had led Eric to spend a moment in cataloguing her; thereafter he was only concerned to find a polite excuse for going to bed. The girl seemed conscious that she had thrust herself upon him, for, after a short silence, she looked at her watch and exclaimed:

"I'd no idea it was so late! Mr. Lane, I mustn't keep you up."

She coloured bashfully as she spoke, and Eric felt that he had been unkind in not putting her at ease. The flush so changed her *façade* of efficiency and determination that, though she evidently wanted him to stay, she did not know how to ask.

"I'll finish my cigar with you, if I may," he said. "You must have a wearing life with Sir Matthew, if he always keeps you up as late as this. Have you been with him long?"

The jejune encouragement restored her composure; and Eric saw with dismay that he must talk in self-defence or submit to unrestricted loquacity.

"Two years," she answered; then in rapid, unsought confidence: "You see, he and father were great friends at Cambridge, and, when I wanted to do war-work, father wouldn't let me learn to make munitions and mother wouldn't let me go into an office. They're afraid to allow me out of their sight. I wanted to nurse or drive a car, but father *and* mother—"

"You have a lot to put up with from your parents!," Eric interrupted.

"Oh, they're hopeless. I expect you've met father—"

"I don't even know your name, as you assure me you're *not* Lady Woodstock."

"Ivy Maitland. Father's the judge, you know."

"I don't know him, but he's a brother of the general, isn't he? I know Lady Maitland very well—your aunt, I mean."

"Oh, as if mother knew anybody or anybody knew mother! Well, I had to do something: both my sisters were married, and my brothers were fighting. Then Sir Matthew *wanted* a secretary...."

Eric wondered how quickly he could finish his cigar without spoiling it, then settled resignedly in his chair and listened with eyes half-closed. Miss Maitland had worked for Sir Matthew Woodstock in London, New York, Paris, Rome and Petrograd, crowding into two years more excitement and experiences than she had dreamed of knowing in a life-time. She was nineteen and looking for new worlds to explore, but, as with Alexander on the confines of India, the army insisted on returning home: and there, Sir Matthew told her with regret, he had his own trained staff, and there would be no work for her.

"What are you going to do when you get back to England?," asked Eric in the first negotiable pause.

"Get hold of a new job before father has time to see that the war's over," she answered promptly. "There'll be a row, of course, when he finds out... D'you employ a secretary in England, Mr. Lane?"

"I used to."

"And you will again. Will you take me? Sir Matthew will tell you that I'm a first-rate shorthand-typist, I'm fairly well-educated, I'm intelligent, I hope I've got a certain amount of tact. I'll tell you that I'm honest—honest in the sense that, when I take money from a person, I work my fingers to the bones for him."

Eric smiled and shook his head.

"It wouldn't be very practicable," he said.

"Why not? I'll come to you for a month without salary! Three months! I can't afford more than that."

Underneath her eagerness Eric fancied that he could detect something more than restless impetuosity.

"My dear Miss Maitland, you must think me very sordid," he laughed.

"Well, why won't you give me a trial?"

"For purely conventional reasons. I know your uncle and aunt very well. I'm not going to be party to a conspiracy for taking away the daughter of a very eminent judge against his wishes. If I can help you to find work of which your parents approve, I'll do what I can. But I've been away from England so long that I can't promise anything; and I've no idea how long I shall be there."

The cigar was but half-finished, but he threw it away and shook hands, trying not to see that she was disappointed but in no doubt that it was hardly reasonable for him to be stampeded by any mercurial nineteen-year-old to whom he shewed a moment's civility.

"It's awfully good of you, I feel I've no right to bother you like this," she answered. "I *meant* to talk about your plays; and I've only talked about myself."

"It was more interesting—to me. If you think I can help in any way, write to me at the Regency Theatre or the Thespian Club, Grosvenor Place."

"But I hope to see you on the boat."

Eric had not overlooked that possibility, but he decided that he did not want to meet Miss Ivy Maitland again.

"But—in case we don't," he said. "Good-night."

In his own room he threw open the window to liberate the day's stifling accumulation of steam-heating. Kneeling on a chair with his chin on his hands, he looked down on a plateau of roofs startlingly punctuated by the blazing bean-stalks of slender giant buildings. It was the last time that he would see New York at night, the last time that he would be in America. He had made his last speech; he hoped devoutly that he had submitted for the last time to the unintelligent exuberance of too appreciative school-girls....

At three o'clock his vigil was not yet ended, but he turned from the window with a shiver and began to undress. It was well enough to make this catalogue of things that he would never do again, but for two years he had been trying to discover what life he could fashion for himself in their stead.

"I'm beaten," he whispered to the darkness as he turned restlessly from side to side. "I may as well admit it... I've never said it before in all my life. I never thought I *should* say it; and I can still put up a good bluff on occasion. But I'm beaten...."

CHAPTER TWO

DAWN

"And now... now that everything has turned out as I told you
it would, what do you mean to do?"
"I suppose... we must begin all over again."
EIMAR O'DUFFY: "THE WASTED ISLAND."

THE dinner at the Plaza, described at length and extravagantly illustrated in a dozen papers, was hardly a greater personal triumph than the farewell scenes on board the *Lithuania*. Ambassadors honoured and beloved had left in less magnificence. Scores of his friends came on board to bid Eric good-bye; the management of the Grafton filled his state-room with hot-house roses, and he was loaded with presents ranging from a gold cigar-case to an unsinkable swimming-suit; German submarines were being recalled, but his friends would not expose him to the risk of a belated straggler or of a forgotten mine-field.

As the land receded and vanished, Eric turned away from the rail and went below. He had been watched ever since he came on board; round, wondering eyes followed the coming and going of his friends, interested and envious eyes explored the parcels which mounted like a rampart on the deck more quickly than his steward could carry them away. Eager whispers rippled about him, becoming hushed at his approach. So Irving and Melba had travelled—in regal state and more than regal loneliness.

He spent the first day in his cabin, unpacking and re-packing, while his steward contrived supplementary cases for his spoils. In the saloon, which he was the last to reach and the first to leave, his seat was between Lady Woodstock, who seemed afraid to speak, and Lady John Carstairs, who retired from sight at the first roll of the boat. The passenger-list was made up almost wholly of soldiers and government officials, for the most part unknown to Eric and too much occupied with consultations and reports to force their company upon a man who was conspicuously avoiding it. John Gaymer, whom he had met at long intervals during three or four years and who had been seconded as an instructor at one of the American aerodromes, made a facetious comment on the Plaza dinner as an overture of friendship before asking him to play poker; and David O'Rane, returning from a campaign of propaganda in the Middle West, tried to persuade Eric to transfer himself to the Chief Engineer's table. For the rest, he was left in peace until the third day when, on entering the smoke-room in search of matches, he was caught by Carstairs and pressed to join him for a cocktail. At once and with apparent carelessness, four other men attached themselves to the table and conscientiously offered Eric their compliments on his work and their thanks for the opportunity of meeting him. He acknowledged the tribute with a practised show of gratification and submitted to diffident questions on his method of composition and his theories of art. When at last he excused himself and went out on deck, O'Rane overtook him and suggested a stroll before dinner.

"I've hardly had a word with you since we came on board, Eric," he began. "You've not been seedy, have you?"

"No, but I've reached an age when I can't move without running across people I know. From one end of America to the other, in Japan, here... On a ship I like to escape my fellow man and have—a rest... I don't mean *you*, of course, but the people who feel they must congratulate me on a play that I wish I'd never written...."

"I'm glad you make an exception in my favour, though I tell you frankly that I'm much too old a friend to be shaken off easily. It must be seventeen years since we first met. D'you remember the Phoenix dinners at Oxford? Jim Loring, Summertown, Draycott, Sinclair—*they're* all gone; George Oakleigh—married; you, Jack Waring and me—knocked out to a certain extent; Knightrider and Deganway pursuing the noiseless tenour of their way... You can crowd a great deal into seventeen years...."

"I've never forgotten the night when you cast our horoscopes for us," murmured Eric.

"I've sometimes tried to forget it... We were only about twenty, I gave every man ten years' run. It's been too frightfully true. D'you remember that even in those days I told you we should turn out one genius? I told you to your face who it would be."

Eric unlinked his arm on the plea of wanting to refill his pipe. What with knocking out the ashes and sacrificing four matches to a head wind, he gave himself time to become collected.

"One man was to achieve some kind of distinction," he said with an effort of memory. "And one was to make money... Touch wood and all that sort of thing, but in eighteen months I made more than I thought I could make in a life-time."

"With fame thrown in," added O'Rane. "That being so, I couldn't understand your speech at the Plaza."

They walked the length of the deck before Eric answered.

"It went down very well," he protested.

"Oh, yes! And no doubt you looked very nice. The decent women would always fall in love with you because you look delicate and interesting; and the fools because they think you're spiritual. And I've no doubt your button-hole and gestures and lumps in the throat were perfect; you're an old stage hand. I couldn't see any of that, but I could hear. You must be careful, old man, before you try to put it over people who can't see; we hear the very *devil* of a lot... And you must admit it was a rotten speech for you to make. Perhaps I know as much as most people about your private affairs; it was the yelp of a whipped cur."

"But—I don't know what you're driving at! They gave me a marvellous reception, and I—I let myself go. I told 'em what it meant to me, the years of agony and bloody sweat... God! I laid myself bare and talked about art like a Chelsea poet. It had taken me half my life to get there... And you

say it was insincere!"

"As you'd stripped so far, you might have talked about the future a bit," suggested O'Rane. "It was that silence I heard most distinctly... What are you going to do when you get to England?"

"Get out again as soon as possible."

"Dear man, you can't get away from yourself any more than a kitten can catch its own tail. It's time you pulled yourself together."

Eric stifled a sigh before it could reach his companion's too acute hearing.

"I'm a bit tired... As you know so much, you may as well know that, after that dinner, I knelt staring out into the night, thinking it all over; and at the end I had to admit I was beaten," he added quickly.

"That was what I rudely described as the "whipped cur" note in your speech," laughed O'Rane. "On my soul and honour, I should think a bit better of you if you'd quietly cut your throat. As you *haven't*... Look here, Eric, I've had one or two facers in my time; and I think, when the smash *has* come, the only thing to do is to count the arms and legs that are left and see what show you can make with *them*. (When I was blinded, I *did* wander out in the approved "Light That Failed" spirit and try to take a bullet through the brain; but to a certain extent one had lost one's head, and I've never dared tell a soul but George Oakleigh...) It's no good, I'm sure, preserving an amputated limb in spirits of wine. You forget you've lost a hand when you forget you've ever had it to lose. Think of yourself as born one-handed; in other words, think of yourself as a new personality; in other words, don't think of yourself at all. Can you do that?"

"I suppose it can be done if one makes a big enough effort."

"Then you'll succeed..."

*"A little onward, lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on..."*

Find me B Deck, there's a good fellow. It always takes me about four days to feel my way round a strange ship. You don't want to talk about this? I thought not... But don't waste a week of good Atlantic, skulking in a hot stateroom...."

On the following day Eric prospected cautiously among the rest of the passengers. The natural selection common to life on every liner was still in progress: the socially ambitious had struggled to the captain's table in the saloon; more experienced travellers were making friends with the purser. The government officials, unconsciously jaunty in their tweed caps and life-belts, separated into the corners of the smoking-room and drew up voluminous reports, competing craftily for the services of two overworked and seasick shorthand-writers; the returning soldiers exercised themselves with deck-tennis in the morning and scoured the ship for bridge-players in the afternoon. There were not more than six women on board, and these left Eric alone when they had secured his autograph. A distinction more subtle than that of mere age sent the older men to the feet of Mrs. O'Rane, while the younger ranged themselves round Ivy Maitland. Eric encountered her on the fifth day, looking no more than sixteen in tennis shoes and white stockings, woollen jersey and white Tam-o'-Shanter; she treated him to a friendly "good-morning", when they met, striding round the deck before breakfast; but her first conversation in New York did not encourage her to make further advances, and there were readier triumphs with Gaymer and the other soldiers of his age.

The three days of deliberate isolation had drawn round Eric a cordon which his fellow-travellers were at first reluctant to penetrate; but, when the coast of Ireland came in sight, the general reserve broke down for a moment: Lady John Carstairs hoped that he would come and see them in London; Sir Matthew Woodstock confessed bluffly to admiration of his plays; and on their last night on board Ivy Maitland, armed with her autograph-book, stalked him to the boat-deck and reminded him of his promise.

"I expect you thought me very forward in New York," she began brightly. "I did *so* want to meet you... What are you going to write? Something *nice*, won't you?"

"How would 'Children obey your parents' do?" asked Eric.

"Oh, I'd rather have nothing than that... You see, you don't know father, and I *do*..." She laughed a little impatiently and painted a clever and undutiful picture of their life in the Cromwell Road and her earliest recollection of the overworked junior who returned at half-past eight for a dinner which he persisted in ordering for eight, and of a submissive mother who brewed him cocoa at five o'clock in the morning and was too tired to entertain or be entertained at night. The vacations, consecrated to golf at Brancaster, had enabled the two elder sisters to escape into matrimony with a couple of promising chancery barristers. (The "promise" was largely invented by Mr. Justice Maitland by means of a dilemma which amused his humour and saved his pocket. "If a young man's worth his salt, he doesn't want anything from me. If he's *not* worth his salt, don't marry him. Of course, I don't expect you to listen to anything *I* say..."). The two brothers had drifted from Cambridge into the army, leaving Ivy to bear the full brunt of her father's jurisdiction. "It was bad enough before, but I couldn't go back to it after this."

"What will you do?," Eric asked, as he began to write.

"I want to live my own life... work... money of my own," she answered vaguely. "I don't want to ask them for *leave* to go to a dance, *leave* to do this and that..."

Eric looked for a moment at the petulant little face and made no comment. Ivy Maitland collected other people's phrases with the indiscriminating energy of a rag-picker; her brain was fermenting with ill-digested theories; but, when she came to put them into practice, ignorance or wilfulness set her doing all the things that she should have instinctively avoided. Decorum habitually took a holiday on board a big liner, but Ivy's idea of emancipation consisted in sitting on the boat-deck with the least desirable of the returning soldiers. On the second day out, Lady Woodstock had been compelled to detach her from a boisterous ring of cocktail-drinkers in the smoking-room.

"You're very young, Miss Maitland," he said at length.

"But I've been in all sorts of places. And girls nowadays *can* take care of themselves... Well, I mustn't keep you. Every one wants to say good-bye. I wish I were famous!"

As she ran away, Eric settled himself to the exchange of addresses and invitations which always lent an insincere good-will to the last day of a voyage. O'Rane he was careful to avoid, for, after the Plaza dinner and in this new flattering farewell, he felt unable to live up to the greatness which his admirers thrust upon him, however much he might talk of the big effort that he intended to make. In his return to England they saw triumph where he felt only despair. Every mile brought him nearer to streets and houses, theatres and restaurants haunted by the ghosts of his dead life; as the *Lithuania* steamed majestically into the Mersey, he felt that he was going into action...

As the great ship slowed to a standstill, a boat-load of assertive officials hurried on board. Port authorities, health authorities, emissaries of Scotland Yard... Eric was still idly wondering who they were, when the chief steward thrust a sheaf of telegrams into his hand. Welcome and good wishes, welcome and good wishes... This was a reduced replica of New York! There were telegrams from the family, telegrams from friends, telegrams from the theatre and from half-forgotten societies. He crammed them uncomprehendingly into his pocket, as a short, buoyant figure, rime-white in the mist, lined and mischievous as a monkey, steered towards him and slapped a crushing hand of welcome on to his shoulder.

"Manders!"

"Eric, boy! You bet you never expected to see *me* here! The company came up three days ago for a fortnight. Your old "Mother's Son". And a very fair play, though you *did* write it. I saw in all the papers that you were coming home and, though they didn't give the name of the ship, I put my pants on the *Lithuania*. Good old packet! Crossed on her a dozen times! Now look here! You needn't wait for the tender; I've chartered a motor-launch, and we'll be ashore half-an-hour before the rest. I hope you're in no hurry to get back to town, because I've ordered a bite of lunch for you at the Adelphi. One or two old friends... I'm mightily glad to see you again, boy."

He held out his hand a second time, and Eric took it with the unwillingness of embarrassment. This triumphal progress was well enough for America, but he could never live up to it in England. A semicircle of fellow-passengers was watching him, wide-eyed and envious, counting the telegrams which he thrust half-read into his pocket and speculating on the identity of Manders, who could play Marc Antony or Louis Dubedat on the stage and never contrived, in private life, to look anything but a blend of pugilist, publican and book-maker.

"Is the launch here?"

"Right alongside, boy."

Eric looked round and caught sight of Carstairs.

"I say, have you room for some friends of mine? Lord John Carstairs is carrying a Foreign Office bag; if we can get him ashore before the crowd... And Mr. and Mrs. O'Rane."

It was late afternoon before Eric found himself locked into a reserved compartment with a dinner-basket, a bottle of champagne and a box of cigars. As the train steamed out of Liverpool, he drew his head in from the window, wrapped a rug round his knees and went to sleep. There seemed nothing else to do. He was still sleeping when he reached Euston. A distracted mob burst from the train in search of taxis, bending under suit-cases and wicker baskets. Eric saw a liveried footman peering into carriage after carriage.

"Mr. Eric Lane? I have a car here for you, sir." He walked five yards across the platform and entered Manders' car. "If you'll tell me what your luggage is, I'll bring that along, sir," said the man.

Still not more than half awake, Eric gave the address of his club and sank shyly into a corner of the great limousine.

Next day he resumed possession of his flat and sniffed the vibrant air of London. The first bewilderment of the armistice was yielding place to the excitement of the peace conference and the coming general election. On one pretext or another every second man in club, office and street was escaping from England: an army of delegates was making ready for Paris, a second army was assiduously securing advantageous flats and rooms from which to direct the deliberations of the plenipotentiaries. The restlessness seemed greater than even in the first months of the war, and Eric was thankful for the fevered commotion. As Nelson Millbank had predicted, there was as great a revolution in turning soldiers into civilians as in turning civilians into soldiers: much time must pass before they adapted themselves to their new life. When the dust-clouds cleared away, Eric would have made or found his niche and would no longer have to drive in semiregal state or to slink through the streets like a fugitive from justice.

"*Welcome home expect you luncheon to-morrow Thespian one-thirty Gaisford.*"

The telegram was the first that Eric had opened on board; it was duplicated to his flat, and, when he entered his club, the squat, Bacchic figure of the doctor dominated the hall; he was prepared on slight provocation to extemporize a party of twenty-four, but, after a glance at Eric, he led him to a table for two and pondered long over the bill of fare.

When they had given their order, each waited for the other to break silence.

"Well, how are you?," asked the doctor at length, industriously polishing his glasses. "You're looking better than I've seen you any time since you entrusted your valuable young life to my care. For my private satisfaction—and to please your mother—, I'd better run the rule over you—"

"I didn't think I should escape that," laughed Eric.

"You're not fit to look after yourself. You never were and you never will be; and that, friend Eric, is apt to worry your friends. I'll tell you now, what I didn't dare tell you before, that it was touch and go whether your lungs would hold out. They're too valuable a part of the human body to be neglected... What's Japan like?"

"The same as anywhere else," Eric answered with a shrug.

The doctor devoted a connoisseur's scrutiny to the wine-list before speaking again.

"I suppose the English papers reached you?," he asked at length.

"I heard in Tokio."

"I was sorry, Eric, very sorry. But I'm glad it's over." He hurried on remorselessly to cover the whistle of indrawn breath. "It was killing you. Whether you're wise to come back so soon—"

"Well, my father's been very ill," Eric interrupted.

"I was sorry to hear it. Are you going to stay in England?"

"Yes."

Gaisford attacked his luncheon and ate for some moments without speaking.

"Is that prudent?" he asked at length.

"I don't suppose she's very keen to meet me."

The doctor threw up his hands and shook his head ruefully.

"Ah, my friend! That's where you're wrong. And your trade should have taught you better than that. A woman doesn't throw aside a man she's fond of, a man who was fond of her, if she can possibly keep him; it makes her feel warm and comfortable to have him at call. Mark my words: she'll try to get you back! If her conscience is clear, she'll want to prove it's clear; if her conscience is *not* quite clear, she'll never rest till she's justified herself."

Eric chewed his lips and looked away out of the window, afraid to trust his own voice.

"Marriage closes all accounts between us," he muttered. "I'm starting afresh, I'm not going to think about the past, I'm going to *forget*... I wonder why she married George," he added inconsequently.

"One woman in a hundred marries the man she wants," answered Gaisford; "the other ninety-nine look for some one they can at least tolerate." The bachelor's love of generalizing about marriage went swiftly to the doctor's head. "One man ripens the peach, and another always eats it.... Well, George has embarked on the great adventure with his eyes open: every one knows that he wanted to marry Amy Loring, only she was a Catholic; the other woman he's very *fond* of, but she's not the great love of his life. He felt it was time to get married; it was a passionless, restful, convenient marriage for both. Barbara's last act of independence, by the way, was formally to cut herself adrift from her church...."

Eric felt that his friend was helping him to dismiss the subject with an irrelevancy; but, for all his talk of forgetting, he only wanted to fill in the blank pages of his tragedy. None knew the whole truth. Even the actors were familiar only with their own lines and scenes. Of the first act he himself only knew that Barbara had played with Jack Waring until he lost his head and embraced her faith in the hope of marrying her: she continued playing until a panic rush of superstition persuaded her that she had imperilled Jack's soul and must offer herself blindly in reparation.... He did not know why Jack had cast her aside after keeping them both stretched on a rack for more than a year. And Jack did not know that his best friend prayed nightly for his death so that Barbara might be free to marry him. And, with her wild haze of superstition and conscience, devotion and vanity, passion and pose, no one could guess what Barbara knew....

A knot of members turned aside from the pay-desk and came up with congratulations and welcome. Eric was caught up and carried along with them until it was time for him to return with the doctor and have himself examined. That night he left London for Hampshire. The sight and smell of Waterloo were a new and unexpected pain, for the six-ten was a Winchester and Crawleigh train: Eric had travelled by it a dozen times with Barbara and, though he knew her to be away from London, he reconnoitred the filling carriages as though he feared that she would spring out and attack him. Once inside an empty compartment, he hid behind his paper, refusing to look up when the door opened and only rousing when a hand gently patted his knee and Jack Waring's voice enquired with surprise:

"Well, Eric, old man, when did *you* get back? And what sort of time did you have? D'you know I've not seen you for nearly four and a half years? When I came home after being a prisoner, I always missed you. Then you went off to America... Tell me all about yourself, old son!"

The voice was unmistakably cordial, and from Waterloo to Winchester the two men discussed themselves and each other. Jack Waring's head-wound had incapacitated him for work indoors; after a dozen failures he was abandoning the bar and taking to horse-breeding in Worcestershire; two friends, equally maimed by the war, were coming into partnership with him.

"And there I propose to end my days," he said. "Thirty-five's a bit old to be making a new start; but I'm alive, when I didn't expect to be, and that's something."

Eric nodded and looked out of the window at the familiar glimmering lights of south-west London. In different ways but in equal measure Barbara had spoiled both their lives; both must know it; and, now that she had left them for ever, there was a dramatic fitness in their rebuilding an old friendship out of their common experience and disaster. This was the fourth act of their play; and, after the catastrophe, the survivors could meet and prospect to see what remained... In the gleaming mirror of the window, Eric studied the reflection of his companion's face; he was glad to hear that Jack was going away to the other side of England; after all, the old friendship could never be revived when one had prayed aloud for the death of the other... He looked up, startled and conscience-stricken; he had been mad, but it was Barbara who made him mad, and Jack's friendship was part of the price which she exacted.

"I've read all about you in the papers, of course," said Jack, "but I've not seen you in the flesh since the first months of the war. Do you remember when you were ill and I walked over to talk to you? I'd just got my commission."

"I remember." Eric mustered all his courage and plunged before it had time to evaporate. "I've seen you once since—in the distance. You and your father and mother and Agnes came to a first night of mine—"

"Were you there?" Jack asked in surprise. "I came up on purpose to see you."

"Only for a moment. I'd been ill again and I was supposed to be in bed. I saw the first act from a box, but I couldn't sit it out. You were all in the front row of the stalls—"

"Oh, I remember it well."

Eric hurried on desperately:

"It was almost your first public appearance since you got back from Germany. Every one was congratulating you. George Oakleigh... and Barbara Neave." He paused, but Jack's face told him nothing. "They were there, I remember. When I was in Japan, I saw that they'd married."

"Yes."

Nothing more was coming, and Eric was forced to admire Jack's restraint.

"That was the last time I set foot in a theatre," he ended carelessly. "I suppose I shall have to begin again... I've been ill off and on for some time, and it's like making a new start with me... By the way, I met Raney on the boat from New York. D'you remember when you and I came down from Oxford for the last time? I always felt the night before was like a vigil. The dawn of a new life, a new world..." His voice became wistfully reflective; but Jack, as ever, prosaically declined to share his reverie. "It's easier to feel that at twenty-one than at thirty-five..." Eric went on with a laugh. "But I suppose one must try... When do you start for Worcestershire?"

"To-morrow. I'm only coming here to pick up clothes and say good-bye. You know Agnes is married? And I hear your sister Sybil's engaged... I don't suppose I shall see you again."

"Not at present, I'm afraid."

They shook hands at Winchester, and Eric dawdled behind to identify his luggage. He never wanted to see Jack again. Sometime he must walk over to Red Roofs and pay his respects to the family, but he would not go until Jack was safely out of the way. If possible, he would avoid the house altogether, for he never wanted to see Agnes since her marriage. Five years earlier he had fancied that he would like to make her his wife; in those days they would have been very happy together; but Barbara had spoiled his palate for other women...

A car, driven by his sister, was awaiting him, and on the familiar road out of the town, through the dripping Lashmar Woods and across the water-logged common to the Mill-House, he listened to tidings of the family. His father was making an unexpectedly good recovery; his brother Geoffrey was home on leave from the North Sea; Basil was on his way from Salonica; Lady Lane, though worried and anxious, was very well.

"And what about you, Sybil?" Eric asked conscientiously. The feeling which he had suspected in Tokio, when he received the news of her engagement, returned to perplex and oppress him; he was not interested in his family. "Tell me about this man you're marrying," he added quickly.

"I'm very well, thanks. And very glad to see you again, Ricky."

Her fingers slid down from the wheel and squeezed his hand. Outward affection from one so undemonstrative as Sybil was rare. Perhaps it was not wholly her pleasure at having him back; he wondered how much they had heard and guessed....

The doors were thrown open at the first sound of the horn, and Lady Lane stood silhouetted against the lemon light of the hall with her husband beside her, leaning on her shoulder. Eric hailed them and sprang out of the car, sniffing the well-remembered scent of pine-logs and submitting to a long inspection before he was allowed to take off his coat. The house, low, warm and homely, was unchanged, his mother was unchanged, the servants were unchanged; Geoffrey came out of the library with his invariable, half-cleaned gun under his arm and the inseparable retriever at his side; only Sir Francis seemed older and more gaunt, speaking a little indistinctly and glad of an arm when he walked.

After the triumphal send-off in New York, the splendid isolation of the voyage and his reception in Liverpool, Eric subsided gratefully into the tranquillity of Lashmar Mill-House. Nobody here expected him to play a part, and he could forget the war and put himself back seven years to the time when he was an overworked journalist coming home to sleep eighteen hours in country air, or fourteen years to the time when he was an undergraduate returning across country from Oxford, or twenty-five years to the time when he was a schoolboy, first allowed to bring himself unaccompanied from Broadstairs... He had promised Gaisford, he had in effect promised O'Rane to forget all that had happened since his first meeting with Barbara....

"We'll dine at once. Don't wait to unpack or dress," called out Lady Lane as he ran upstairs to his threadbare, bleak bedroom.

Throughout dinner and the long evening which followed he was kept talking of America and Japan. Sybil sat with her hands clasped round her ankles, eagerly drinking in every word; Geoffrey interjected lazy questions about New York and San Francisco, Hawaii and Formosa; Sir Francis sat lost in thought, hardly listening to what was said but proudly conscious that Eric had won honour on three continents.

"Bed time! You must tell us the rest to-morrow," said Lady Lane, as the clock struck eleven.

The three children were ready to protest, but she was looking at her husband, whose eyes had closed. Sybil poked the smouldering logs into safety; Geoffrey slipped an arm through his father's with a careless, "Going up, sir?" Eric was left alone with his mother. He knocked out his pipe and turned to her, with his eyes averted.

"Well, you must be worn out with all your travelling," she said, after a moment's silence.

"I'm not very tired... The gov'nor's better than I expected, mother."

"Yes, the first days were the worst. I *had* to cable to you, Eric. If anything had happened... I couldn't take the risk."

"But I'm very glad you did."

"I didn't *want* to bring you home."

Eric found a particle of paper on the carpet. He picked it up and carried it slowly to the fire.

"You knew, then?"

"I guessed, darling."

"You guessed I never meant to come back."

"Hush, Eric... I guessed that you probably *felt* like that. But I hoped that with time—"

"It gets worse every day! I'm waiting, listening for something to go snap in my brain!"

In body or nerves something "went snap," and he plunged forward, nearly throwing his mother off

her balance. She slipped her arm round his waist and walked slowly up and down the room with him. At the door she paused and noiselessly turned the key. He was shaking with dry sobs which seemed to tear him in pieces, and she pulled his head on to her shoulder, running her fingers through his hair and once kissing his neck. Thirty years before she had lifted him out of bed night after night, when he was crying with pain, and walked up and down the nursery with him until he dropped in her arms or fell asleep standing, with his head on her breast.

"You've grown so tall," she whispered.

"Since...? I'm sorry, mother! It's been such hell. I *couldn't* tell you before. That night, when you all came up and dined with me and said good-bye... I meant to clear out for good and all. When we had a submarine alarm, I prayed that we should be torpedoed and sunk. And you knew all the time?"

"I guessed a little bit. Mothers *do*, you know, darling child..."

"It wasn't her fault, mother," said Eric with unsteady emphasis.

"You'd always say that. But it's over, Eric; have you thought what you're going to do now?"

"I'm afraid I'm rather damaged goods," he sighed.

"Too bad to be mended?" She led him to a sofa and sat down with his head on her shoulder and her arms round him. "You're dreadfully thin, Eric... And you've been smoking too much. D'you see? Your fingers are all yellow... Darling boy, I'm afraid you have to make another effort, a big effort. Do you remember the doctors gave you up three times before you were seven? And d'you remember at Broadstairs, when you lived for eight months on the verandah? I'm afraid we've given you all the brains of the family and none of the constitution. But you're not going to give in now. Victory, Eric! This will be the biggest of all... In time—"

He broke away from her arms and buried his face in his hands:

"I've had two years!"

"You'll forget everything, if you can forget yourself. If you could lose yourself altogether in work or in looking after some one—"

There was a single sob, and he had to fight for breath:

"I used to walk up and down all night in front of her house, when she was ill."

"But that's over. In time..."

She rose and stirred the fire to a blaze.

"In time..." Eric murmured. He did not want to look after any one. Barbara had destroyed his faith in women.

"It won't be our first big fight, Eric. In a different way I've been fighting all my life. Father. And you. And the babies. And Sybil. I thought everything had come out right, before the war; if you'd been a little bit stronger, Eric, it would have been perfect. When the war came, it was a bigger fight than I'd ever had. You were ill... and I knew you weren't happy. And anything might have happened to Geoff and Basil. And then, of course, your father's illness..."

Eric slid on to the floor, resting his head against her knee and gently turning her rings from side to side.

"You don't get much rest, mother."

"I'm happier when I have one of you to look after."

"I feel I've been such a brute to you all."

"Perhaps I understood... Eric, if you want to go away again, I shan't stop you."

"No, I'm going back to the old life. I must start work again... and try to feel it's worth doing. I *meant* to funk it all, but now I'm determined to win... We won't talk about this again, mother. I don't want you to think hardly of her, and you must never let any one attack her... A new life from today," he ended jerkily. "Dawn...."

CHAPTER THREE

THE WILDERNESS OF THIS WORLD

"Eastward was the wise man's course.... Mr. Polly saw himself going along it with all the self-applause a wise man feels. But somehow it wouldn't come like that... the figure went slinking... and would not go otherwise than slinking. He turned his eyes westward as if for an explanation, and if the figure was no longer ignoble, the prospect was appalling.

"One kick in the stummick would settle a chap like me," said Mr. Polly.

"Oh, God!" cried Mr. Polly, and lifted his eyes to heaven, and said for the last time in that struggle, "It isn't my affair!"

"And so saying, he turned his face towards the Potwell Inn.

"He went back, neither halting nor hastening in his pace after this last decision, but with a mind feverishly busy.

"If I get killed I get killed, and if he gets killed, I get hung. Don't seem just somehow..."

H. G. WELLS: "THE HISTORY OF MR. POLLY."

"We should be so pleased if you could dine with us on Friday," said Lady John Carstairs on the threshold of the O'Ranes' house. "I never had an opportunity of thanking you for your kindness in getting us off the boat so early. It will be only a small party, but you'll meet one or two friends from America. I wanted to ask you before, but we're only now beginning to get our house straight."

Eric thought over the invitation in the moment allowed him for consulting his engagement-book. He had intended to begin work on a new play, but his friends and the strange monster of an adoring public that he had conjured into existence refused to leave him in peace. For a week after his return to England the illustrated papers were publishing photographs of him; four reporters called in two days to learn his plans for the future and his impressions of America; by letter and telegram he was begged to write and speak on the fruits of his tour; and, when he had deflected the applicants to the office of his agent, there remained private appeals less easy to shelve or refuse. The dramatic circle of the Thespian Club organized a dinner in his honour; Dr. Gaisford bade him to "a strictly bachelor party" of his friends and admirers; he was asked to take the chair for the Actors' Pension Fund; and the Penmen's Club invited him to be the guest of honour at their weekly luncheon.

Mingled with the official invitations, the unofficial rained down upon him. It was a repetition of the personal triumph which he had enjoyed when his first play was produced. Lady Maitland, Mrs. Shelley, Lady Poynter, Mrs. Manisty and a dozen more urged him to lunch or dine with them; war and peace made no difference to them, a man might travel to the end of the world and back to find them still chewing the cud of their sparse culture. If his position in London three years before had been incredible even to him, he was forced to believe now that his absence abroad had mysteriously consolidated it: then the critics had bracketed him with Pinero and Barrie for the excellence of his stagecraft and with Shaw for the wit and virility of his dialogue, in him they saw and blessed the promise of the future; now, though he had written nothing in the interval, they chose to regard the promise as fulfilled. "*Among the younger playwrights,*" wrote the grudging editor of "Green-room and Studio," "*it is unsafe to predict who will step into the shoes of the men we have named. Always excepting Mr. Eric Lane, whose niche is assured to him...*" The public seemed to take its time from the press; the enthusiasm of those who knew him reacted on those who had yet to meet him; and for a month he was whirled from house to house in a sandstorm of adulation.

When he could see and breathe again, Eric discovered gaps in the well-remembered catalogue of names: Lady Crawleigh and Lady Knight rider at least knew too much or suspected too much or had enough consideration not to ask him to their houses; but Lady John Carstairs' invitation was a test-case. If he accepted, Eric was sure to meet other of Lady Barbara's relations there; but, even as he wavered, he knew that he dared not surrender to shyness.

"I should love to come," he answered, as they went forward to shake hands with their hostess.

Mrs. O'Rane was signaling her return from America by assembling all of her many friends who had resisted the lure of the peace conference or the south of France. During the war Eric had attended sufficient of her parties to recoil from their noise and studied hilarity, but he was by now so much sated with the pompous entertaining of such intellectuals as Lady Poynter that he welcomed the informality of a Bohemian frolic. Here at least he would be screened by the shadow of some later and more modish celebrity. As he came into the long, crowded library, a space was being cleared in the middle; while their leader explored the quality of the floor, a group of dancers with only their heads and ballet slippers protruding from a swathing mass of cloaks and shawls stood whispering in one corner. A tentative chord was struck, the wrappings slid to the ground, and the dancers pattered forward on tip-toe with their arms arched above their heads.

Eric was trying to see who was present when Amy Loring came up with a radiant smile of welcome.

"I'm very glad to see you again!," she whispered. "Sonia told me you'd crossed by the same boat, and I came here on purpose to meet you. I do hope you're quite strong again now."

"I've as clean a bill of health as our friend Gaisford is ever likely to give me," Eric laughed. For a moment he had felt his muscles tightening in embarrassment and could only think of a dinner at Lady Crawleigh's house when Amy had given him the same glowing smile of encouragement; she had bathed in his happiness at being in love with her cousin and had exhorted him to go on and prosper in disregard of any obstacles that Barbara's father might impose. Eric wondered whether she remembered that night as vividly as he did. Gaisford's name touched another note in his brain, and he remembered the doctor's telling him that George Oakleigh had once been in love with her; it was an old, familiar tale, and, until a few months before, the gossips had predicted that neither of them would ever marry. In the act of wondering whether she felt any resentment towards George or Barbara, Eric realized that she was too big of heart to grudge happiness to any one. "I'm most awfully glad to see you again!," he added, unconsciously pressing her hand.

As they turned to watch the dancing, Eric recalled that he had never before met Amy in the O'Ranes' house. After her brother's jilting at Sonia's hands, the two families had found it more

comfortable not to meet; they were apparently now reconciled, and any one could choose between thinking that they had drifted together in the irresistible crosscurrents of London and imagining that the more generous had made overtures of friendship. Behind the warmth of her greeting Eric had fancied the diffidence of a suppliant, as though Amy were offering him amends on behalf of all her kin; he realized that he could, if he liked, live in retirement, but that, if he came back to the old life, he must try to shew as much graciousness and as little rancour as Amy displayed towards those who fell below her own exalted standard of chivalry.

"You don't see a chair anywhere..?," he heard her murmuring.

"Why shouldn't we stake out a claim at the supper-table?," he asked. "I was wondering if you were dining with the Carstairs next week... Oh, well, don't you think you might get Lady John to invite you? It's so very long since I've seen you; and it's impossible to talk here... London hasn't changed much in the last two years."

"Or the last five. I wonder if we're going *straight* back to 1914... I've not been to a party of this kind since the war. It's not *very* amusing..."

The scenes from the ballet were followed by a pianoforte solo; Harry Manders poured forth a stream of stories; Deganway gave imitations; and Pentyre accompanied himself on a banjo, until a restless group headed by Gaymer suggested clearing away the furniture for a dance. Eric, too, was finding but little amusement in Mrs. O'Rane's strenuous programme and would have preferred to talk in peace to Amy Loring or go home to bed. This, he decided, would be the last party of its kind which he could spare time to attend; for a moment he had wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of London, waiting to light upon anything that would occupy his thoughts. Nothing had come to him, and he recognized that he must find his refuge in work.

"I'm too old for this sort of thing," he murmured to Amy.

"I can't remember ever being young enough," she answered with a smile.

The heat and noise were by now almost unbearable; high spirits were rising by imperceptible shrill stages to rowdiness; and, as Gaymer's deputation pressed insistently for its dance, the older members of the party began to look at their watches.

"Anything you like, if you'll only wait until every one's had something to eat—," cried Mrs. O'Rane, leaving the supper-table to pacify Gaymer.

"Oh, they'll go on all night, Sonia! We—want—a—dance. Come on, Gerry, all together! Pentyre! One, two, three! We—want—a—dance—We—want—a—dance."

The three men ranged themselves against a wall and shouted through their open fists like trumpeting heralds.

At the second repetition, those nearest to them joined in the measured, relentless chorus, drowning the efforts of a girl at the piano and reducing Mrs. O'Rane to helpless gesticulation.

"Wait till the end of this!," she begged in an interval of silence.

"We—want—a—dance!"

"But it's so rude!"

Gaymer laughed and whispered to his companions.

"Do—not—shoot—the—pi—an—ist.—She—is—do—ing—her—best," rose the new chorus; then, with swelling menace, "WE—WANT—A—DANCE."

It was impossible to sing, play or argue against the concerted uproar, and after a moment's indecision Mrs. O'Rane gave orders for the rugs and furniture to be moved. Her husband apologized to the interrupted musician, and Eric was leading Amy Loring away when Gaymer petitioned for the first dance.

"Lady Amy's promised it to me," Eric improvised.

"The feller's cut me out," commented Gaymer with humorous solemnity. "The next one, then?"

"Didn't you ask me to find your car after that?," Eric enquired.

"Better go somewhere where I *am* wanted," muttered Gaymer. "No objection to my *asking*, was there? 'Hate to give offence, you know. Nod as good as a wink, you know. Pardon granted as soon as asked?"

As they drove back to Loring House, Amy thanked Eric for his intervention.

"I'm afraid Johnny's rather deteriorated since the war," she mused. "He was always rather wild, but he never used to be rowdy. There was quite an unpleasantness at Kathleen Knightrider's last week; I believe she had to ask him to go... If he'd only *drink* less..."

When Eric arrived at Queen Anne's Gate the following week, he found that Lady John had conscientiously assembled a novelist and war-poet to keep him in countenance; the "friends from America" were represented by Sir Matthew and Lady Woodstock, an *attaché* from the embassy, David O'Rane, his wife and Sir Matthew's former secretary. After that she seemed to have surrendered to her new family by inviting the Duchess of Ross, Amy Loring and Phyllis Knightrider; and, when Eric entered the drawing-room, she cut short her welcome to tell the butler that Captain Gaymer had asked whether he might dine and to order another cover to be laid. The dinner promised to be peaceful and proved so dull that Eric had to invent an excuse for leaving early: he had now sketched the ground-plan of a new play and, though he could as yet feel no enthusiasm for it, he conscientiously tried to recover his old habit of regular work.

"If you'll wait till half-past ten, we'll drop you," volunteered Gaymer. "Ivy and I are going to a dance of sorts, and I've chartered a taxi for the night."

Eric remembered that it was raining, when he arrived, and decided that his vague distaste for Gaymer's society was weaker than his dislike of wet pavements.

"It's very good of you," he answered. "A taxi for the night sounds luxurious."

"Necessary," answered Gaymer. "Can't be bothered to fight for the beastly things or walk home at three in the morning. I can do without everything except personal comforts. This fellow's been ticking up tuppences ever since Armistice Day; I suppose he'll have to be paid some time... 'Wonder if Amy'd like a lift."

As he crossed the room, Eric sat down in the empty chair by Ivy Maitland's side. It was

ungracious to accept a favour from a man and then, in the next breath, to disparage him; but, after Gaymer's unmannerly conduct at Mrs. O'Rane's party, any one might feel a little sorry to see Ivy becoming his friend. Before the war he had been a leader in the disorderly little group of roystering practical jokers headed by Jack Summertown and Pentyre; and, though the Air Force had kept him employed for three or four years, he seemed now to be casting about for fresh forms of dissipation and rather aimless mischief. While Ivy was too young and, at heart, too timid to amuse him for long, her behaviour on the boat had been feather-brained; it was, of course, their business, but Eric would have preferred to see her with some one who checked her youthful craving for independence instead of exciting it.

"Where are you dancing?" he asked her.

"Ssh! *Please!*," she whispered. "I wish Johnnie hadn't shouted it out like that! Mother'd have a fit, if she knew I was going to a dance alone."

Eric wondered for a moment whether she was yielding to the youthful temptation of trying to shock him.

"Your parents seem still to be a great trial to you," he observed.

"I've made *some* impression on them. Johnnie's got me a job at the Air Ministry, and they've allowed me to take it. The real fight's coming when I tell them I've taken rooms of my own."

"Are you going to live alone?"

"I think so. The girl who was coming with me has cried off... Now, it's no use finding fault with me, because I've absolutely made up my mind. I *must* lead my own life!"

"I think it's an awful mistake," said Eric with a shrug. "You're much too young, much too good-looking..." After saying good-bye at Liverpool, he had forgotten her very existence; but in a short and flimsy blue dance-frock, with blue stockings, shoes and head-band she was younger and more provocative than he remembered either at their first meeting in New York or on board the *Lithuania*. "Girls of nineteen do *not* leave home and set up housekeeping on their own," he added.

"But why shouldn't they? I know several who do."

It was waste of breath to tell any one so superficially self-confident that a girl of nineteen might need protection from risks older and more insidious than she would deign to admit. His eyes wandered for a moment to the corner where John Gaymer was talking to Amy Loring; it was hard for one man to say what attraction any other man exerted over women, but Gaymer was undeniably popular; without being handsome, he was more than presentable in appearance, with an immaculate shell; the war had proved his strength and reckless courage, and he comported himself towards women with a devil-may-care assurance that occasionally degenerated into a brutality which they did not seem to resent. It was his business if he embarrassed himself with Ivy Maitland's adoration and hers if she chose to fall in love with him... Eric tried to recall what he had seen of their manner to each other: Gaymer had apparently forced himself upon the party when he heard that Ivy was dining, but this was perhaps no more than a convenient means of meeting his partner before the dance; he had shewn her only the boisterous attention that he held in readiness for all women who would accept it; and, if they were in love, neither would welcome a third person in the taxi...

Eric's attention was recalled to Ivy when he heard her proclaiming rather petulantly:

"*Somebody* must make a start."

"You've not yet convinced me that you've any great hardships to put up with at home," he answered, with difficulty suppressing a yawn.

"They *aren't* great. They're small, absurdly small. But they're innumerable and everlasting. Now, take to-night. When I met Johnnie last week at Mrs. O'Rane's, we found that we danced rather well together. He's frightfully good at games and everything—"

"Do you know anything about him?" Eric interrupted.

"Not much. Do you?"

"Nothing at all. I've met him on and off for some years, but in all the time I've never seen as much of him as I saw of you that night in New York. On general principles, don't you think it's—imprudent; aren't your parents justified in thinking it's imprudent for you to tumble into an intimacy—not with Gaymer, but with any man of whom you know absolutely nothing?"

"But women have instincts about men! I should be no better off if I dragged him away and introduced him to mother and made her invite him to dinner. I daresay that's more conventional, but it doesn't do any *good*."

Eric hesitated long enough to ask himself why he inflicted so much advice on a very raw child, but not long enough to answer his own question.

"It puts your relationship on a different footing," he suggested. "When a man's been to your house and eaten your salt, he feels a responsibility to the house. Look at it this way: during the last week, how have you differed in essence from—let me say—a chorus-girl who dines with a man and goes to a dance with him and lets him help her to get taken on at a new theatre? I don't suggest that there *are* no differences, but what differences are there for a man like Gaymer to see?"

Ivy looked at him in perplexity which was too strong to allow resentment to creep in.

"I don't understand," she said, and both were glad when the taxi was reported to be at the door.

As he read his letters and looked with distaste at the work awaiting him on the morrow, Eric reviewed with morose dissatisfaction the five weeks that had passed since his return to England. He had sighed with boredom at the cultured table of Lady Poynter; and in the conscientiously Bohemian setting of Mrs. O'Rane the boredom had only been complicated by amazement. (He scrawled a blue-pencil "Refuse" across four invitations and tossed them into his secretary's letter-basket.) He had interested himself for a moment in Ivy Maitland, at least to the extent of giving her some good advice; but her pert assurance was a little tiresome, and he was now only interested to wonder how soon John Gaymer would weary of it. At the Mill-House he had tried to win his way back to a place in his own family, but they had mysteriously stood still and he had wandered into a spiritual wilderness of his own. Even his work no longer promised him a way out of the wilderness,

but it might keep him from brooding over the astounding emptiness of life.

He had achieved a dull quiescence of spirit when he read in Christmas week that Mr. and Lady Barbara Oakleigh had returned to London from Ireland and were leaving England for the Riviera after a few days in Hampshire. That night, on his way to Winchester, Eric chose a compartment at the back of the train to avoid all chance of meeting her in the Crawleigh or Southampton coaches. His window commanded two-thirds of the platform, and, five minutes before the train was due to start, he caught sight of Oakleigh and a footman hurrying by, with Barbara half a pace behind him. Valentine Arden had christened her "the haggard Venus"; her big sunken eyes and white cheeks had a morbid fascination of their own, compelling as ever; physical delicacy and nervous vitality still contended for possession of her tall, wasted body; tragedy and defiance alternated in the swift changes of her expression, as she flashed by the window of his compartment. For all his resolution and training, Eric felt his heart stop as it had stopped in Tokio, when he read the news of her marriage; when the red mist lifted from his eyes, he looked at her again from behind the screen of his paper, surprised to see no change: the green morocco travelling-cushion still bore the old "B.N." in one corner; he recognized her fur-coat, and George was carrying the red leather jewel-case which he had carried for her fifty times. At their first meeting she had criticized his first play, offering to re-write it, telling him that he knew nothing of 'Life' and proposing herself as instructor.

"Oh, well... This is Life, I suppose," Eric whispered to himself.

To have seen her would break the shock of meeting her on her return to England, but he was glad that she was going abroad; the shock would have to be broken by instalments, widely separated, if he was to acquit himself without disgrace. He wondered how much she had ever told her husband. He wondered how much she dared admit to herself... At Winchester he jumped on to the platform, before the train stopped, and ran out of the station, before any curious head could reconnoitre from the windows of the Crawleigh and Southampton coaches.

Finality... Eric turned up his collar and sank lower in the seat of the car. He did not want Sybil to see his face. Christmas Eve... Three years ago to a day he had reached finality; Barbara was falling in love with him, when she had sworn by the Cross to offer herself in reparation to Jack Waring; and in those easy, sane, clear-cut days Eric had decided to end their intimacy before either clouded it with tragedy. And then she had appealed to his compassion and sent for him... perhaps to see if he could continue to resist her. And he had gone back; and his resistance had broken down. A man only paid for his own weakness....

But it was finality to see her running along the platform arm-in-arm with her husband....

"Basil's home," said Sybil, as they left the town. "He got back yesterday and demobilized himself this morning."

"Oh, good work! I've not seen him for three years."

"It's the first Christmas since the war that all three of you have been home."

His two brothers had walked out to meet the car, and at the sparse edge of Lashmar Woods they sprang out like highwaymen and secured themselves on the running-boards. Lady Lane and her husband were waiting for them in the hall, and, when they sat down to dinner, no one could believe that they had been scattered for nearly five years. The obliteration of time was all that Eric needed to complete his sense of finality. For three days they talked and chaffed one another, exhuming time-honoured jests and bandying stories and experiences from four continents.

Half-consciously Eric realized that he was reviving an atmosphere of the past to avoid thinking of the future; but, when each had told the tale of his wanderings, all looked beyond the smoke and fire of the war to a world which might be peaceful but would certainly be drab.

"What are you going to do now, Basil?," asked Eric at breakfast on his last morning.

"Well, if a grateful Government has kept open my job in the India Office, I suppose I shall have to start in there—just as if there'd been no jolly little war."

"And I'm going back to the dear old China Station, just as if there'd been no jolly little war," added Geoffrey. "Everything's going to be rather flat... Hullo! Perfectly good postman with Yuletide greetings for all of us!" He bounded out of the room and helped in the sorting. "You've got more than your fair share, Ricky."

"You can have them all, if you'll pay the bills," answered Eric. "Or I'll pay the bills, if you'll accept the invitations and go in my place. Would you like to lunch with Lady Poynter? Her husband had some marvellous port a couple of years ago. Or dine with Mrs. Shelley? I can give you a list of her *clichés*: a book always "creates an illusion" with her, and modern poetry is "the pendant to a mood". I can't *honestly* recommend her. Misguided women who think I still dance... Or you may dine with Mr. Justice and Lady Maitland; I don't know them, but you're sure to get a good dinner, because their daughter says—here it is, if you don't believe me—'My father is so anxious to meet you.'"

"Sounds as if you'd been trifling with her young affections," said Geoffrey. "Take my advice and don't go."

"I've no intention of going," Eric answered. "I've work to do."

In the New Year he shut himself up with the first draft of a play and for three months only left his flat for an hour's walk each day in the Green Park. Sometimes, as he sat bent before his miniature theatre, marshalling, drilling and dismissing his little card-board figures, he could fancy Barbara's eager, low voice at his side, her breath warm on his cheek, and the keen, sweet scent of carnations once more, at each lithe movement of her body, filling the room where in other years she had argued out his plays line by line; sometimes, as he read his speeches aloud, he caught himself pausing for her judgement of their rhythm; and, when the first rehearsal was called, he knew that he would find her ghost sitting with clasped hands on a stool by his feet; on the first night it would await him in his box, defying him to bring any one else to a seat already taken.

"But this is Life," he whispered to himself. "I... I told Gaisford I was going to forget about all this."

As soon as the new play was mentioned in the theatrical gossip of the press, he received the usual appeals from unknown men and women to be given a trial. As usual he sent them bodily to Manders and, as usual, instructed his secretary and servants to admit no one who called without a

satisfactory explanation. Manders hoped to begin rehearsing in the late summer and to produce the play in the autumn; Eric had too much other work on hand to waste his scanty leisure on stage-struck amateurs; he had not seen a play since his return to England and was beginning to forget the highly-charged, conventionally unreal atmosphere of the theatre.

A week's conscientious study of contemporary drama satisfied him that, whatever else the critics might say of "The Gate of Horn", they would not degrade it by comparison with any of the plays that he had felt constrained to see. On the last night of his penance he was escaping into the Strand from the unknown people who persisted in bowing to him, when a girl, standing by herself a few paces ahead, turned carelessly and bade him good-evening in a diffident and rather surprised voice.

"I'm afraid I can't see who it is," Eric had to confess. "I'm as blind as a bat, when I come out of a theatre."

"It's Ivy Maitland. You wouldn't remember me."

"Indeed I do. Are you all by yourself?"

"Yes. I came with a man, but he—he had to go before the end."

"Then you must let me see you home," said Eric after a moment's hesitation which he hoped she would not notice. "It's the Cromwell Road, didn't you tell me?"

"Not now. I—in spite of your advice... I really couldn't stand it any longer at home. But you mustn't come out of your way; I'm only a step from here—at the back of the Adelphi."

"Let me see you as far as the door... Well, I hope it's a success."

They crossed the Strand and dived through a hidden courtyard and down a flight of steps before she answered:

"I can't say it is—so far."

"Come! that's honest!," said Eric. "If you've the moral courage to admit it's a failure, why don't you have the greater moral courage to chuck the whole thing up?"

"Ah! I can't do that." She stopped in front of a door and felt for her latch-key. "I suppose you wouldn't come in, if I asked you?"

Eric pretended to look at his watch and even walked away to the nearest lamp-post, where he looked at it again. He had still two hours' work to do, but the girl's dejection of voice and her candid admission of failure touched him.

"Are you all alone?" he asked.

"Yes. You won't compromise *me*; and I shouldn't mind if you did," she added with a touch of her old impatience. "I was thinking of you. You're so well-known—"

"If you're all by yourself... I'm thinking of *you*—"

"Ah, I was afraid you wouldn't come!"

She sighed gently and held out her hand. Loneliness and the sense of failure seemed to have taken away all her vitality: her hand was cold and limp, and her head drooped as though she lacked the strength to keep it erect.

"Let me come to tea some day," Eric suggested.

"Oh, you're too busy. It wouldn't be fair."

"I'm not too busy for that."

"Aren't you?" She made a pitiful attempt to collect the fragments of her pride; but the drooping head and unsteady lips belied the valiance of her voice, and haughtiness passed quickly into petulance. "You were too busy to dine with us, when I invited you; you were too busy to see me when I called on you, too busy even to answer my letter."

Eric stared at her in amazement:

"Miss Maitland, I simply don't understand! I couldn't dine with you, because I never dine out when I've a play on hand. But the call and the letter—"

"Your maid said you couldn't see me, as I hadn't an appointment."

"I must apologize for her. She probably thought you'd come to ask for an engagement."

"I had. And that's what I wrote about. You said in New York that I might come to you for help; I couldn't go to your club, because father's a member. Didn't you get my letter?"

"If it had anything to do with the theatre, I don't suppose I finished it; all those things are sent on to Manders. I'm sorry, Miss Maitland; I wouldn't have disappointed you for the world."

"I began to feel desperate," she answered dully. "It seemed needlessly unkind. Of course, I ought to have known that you were very famous—"

"Please! I've apologized. I hoped I'd cleared myself. Won't you choose your own time for coming, —if you think I can do any good?"

She swung her latch-key reflectively and then touched his arm with her fingers.

"Won't you come in—just for a moment?" she pleaded.

"I'm thinking of you," he repeated.

"You'll do me more good by coming in for five minutes than by thinking of my reputation... I'm desperate."

"That's the second time you've used that word; you oughtn't to know the meaning of it."

"Ah, if you come in, don't treat me like a child."

Eric followed her into a narrow, ill-ventilated hall, lighted by a pin-point of gas. The house was old and full of half-heard noises and dry, distant scents; the first floor was let to a solicitor, the second to a dramatic agent; above that was a double flat and at the top, crushed squat under the roof and pared by sloping ceilings, Ivy Maitland's own roomy attic. As she turned up the gas, he saw a round table and wicker chairs, a piano and book-case and, in an alcove, a cupboard, bed and chest of drawers. While she slipped off her cloak and pulled the curtains over the alcove, he read the titles of the books and glanced at the photographs on the piano. The place of honour was given to an officer in the uniform of the Air Force, and Eric guessed its identity almost without looking at the face or at the "Yours always, John Gaymer," scrawled across one corner.

"Won't you sit down? It's a miserable fire, I'm afraid," she apologized, dropping on to her knees and battering unscientifically with a bent poker on the top of three sadly smouldering lumps of coal,

each too big for the tiny grate.

"I'm not cold, thanks... How long have you been in these quarters?"

"Two months."

"And who looks after you?"

"A woman comes in and cooks my breakfast and cleans the place. I usually have my other meals out." Eric was not conscious that his expression had changed, but the girl looked up piteously and turned away to the fire. "Don't look so disapproving! I'm not defending myself!"

"My dear child, I'm not attacking you. Haven't I come here solely to find out if I can be of any assistance to you?"

She jabbed at the fire in reflective silence, and Eric, watching her through half-closed eyes, seemed to see rippling waves of unhappiness, disappointment, loneliness and discomfort rising until they submerged her and she ceased to struggle. She was white and tired; her arms were thin and her shoulder-blades sharply outlined under the green gauze of her dress, as she stolidly poked the fire and refused to look at him. The air of assured efficiency which she had worn in New York never seemed more than the assertive protest of extreme youth against patronage; her abandonment of it now suggested that she habitually attacked and then ran away, first disregarding advice, then admitting her mistake where a stronger woman would have converted it into success and where a prouder woman would have preserved silence. Perhaps it was too much to expect great strength or pride in a girl of nineteen whose head was still fermenting with unassimilated catch-words.

"It was very good of you to come. And it was awful cheek of me to ask you."

"Imagine—for one night—that I'm quite human," Eric suggested.

She jumped up and ran to the door.

"You'd like a drink!," she exclaimed.

"Is that the differentia of the human man?" he laughed.

There was a clink of glasses outside, and she returned with a bottle of brandy and a box of cigars. While he was mixing himself a drink, she slipped with apparent aimlessness behind him, and he heard something drop. When he looked round, the signed photograph of John Gaymer had disappeared, and she was holding out a tumbler for him to fill.

"I'm not going to give you brandy," he said, picking up the syphon of soda-water.

"Just a little! I'm so tired."

"Not a drop! If you start drinking brandy at nineteen—because you're tired—, where d'you think you'll be at thirty?"

"I don't much care!" she answered. "I believe those cigars are quite good. Won't you try one?"

"Not if you're going to sleep in this room, thanks," he answered.

"I don't mind it—honestly," she said.

"As a matter of fact I've been smoking all day."

Eric composed himself as comfortably as possible in a room where everything jarred upon him. She ought not to have been living there by herself, she was lonely, uncomfortable and probably ill-fed; she ought not to allow a man to come and see her, she ought not to dream of drinking a brandy and soda, she ought not to have brandy or cigars in the house, she ought not to know that she did not mind inhaling cigar-smoke in her sleep. The incident of the photograph recurred to his mind, and he wondered whether he was being offered refreshment which she had provided for Gaymer... and whether she had dropped the photograph behind the piano because she was ashamed of him... or whether they had quarrelled, whether it was Gaymer who had taken her to the theatre and abandoned her....

"I haven't seen you since that night at the Carstairs'," she began. "You remember?"

"When I gave you good advice. Yes."

"Well, I tried to follow it. I'm not altogether a fool and, thinking it over, I thought I saw what you meant. After the dance Johnnie asked me to go to another... It was very hard to do, but I tried to let him see that, though it was all *right*, of course... I invited him to come and dine with *us*. That was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"I thought it was better, certainly. Though, why you think my advice—"

"Because you know about things, you're clever, you've met everybody, you can understand people and write about them. Father's in such a rut... Well, Johnnie came. That was when I wanted you to meet him. He wasn't much of a success, I'm afraid."

"What happened?"

"Oh, I don't know! He *argued*... and father always expects an enormous lot of deference from boys. Father said afterwards that Johnnie had drunk much too much for a young man and had become very impertinent. After that, of course, he wasn't invited again, and mother kept nagging and trying to make me give up my job in his office. We had an awful row one day, just because I dined with Johnnie and came back rather late after the theatre. Father said I wasn't to go out with him and that, as long as I lived at home, he expected me to obey him. I decided that I couldn't live at home any longer. Johnnie found me these rooms...."

She coughed and took a sip of her soda-water.

"You consulted him?"

"Yes. He made me see that the only thing to do was to leave home...."

Eric sat suddenly upright and then relaxed to his former attitude, noting with quick thankfulness that his movement had been unobserved.

"What made you write to me?" he asked.

"Well, you see, everybody in my department is being demobilized, so I wanted a job. I saw you had a new play—"

"Already cast," Eric interrupted. "And we could cast the third footman five times over with people who've played respectable parts for years. There's nothing there, Miss Maitland, I'm afraid. Even if there were, I'd sooner see you living with your parents again—"

"I can't go back."

"I see. Well, what are you living on?"

"I saved a little money when I was with Sir Matthew. When that's gone—"

"Oh, Gaymer would see you didn't starve or get turned into the street," said Eric with soft irony.

"Yes. At least he said he would—"

"Before you quarrelled," he suggested.

She looked at him wonderingly.

"Who told you we'd quarrelled?" she asked.

"You did. Miss Maitland, however unconventional you want to be, you can't take money from a man. I'd most gladly lend or give you fifty pounds to-night, but you couldn't possibly accept it. You see that?"

"Of course! I hardly know you."

Eric shook his head in bewilderment, as he tried to determine whether she was naturally stupid or wholly unsophisticated.

"Are you in love with Gaymer?"

Ivy hesitated before answering, and Eric felt that he was not going to hear the truth.

"I like him when he's nice to me," she answered indifferently.

"Is he in love with you?"

"He likes me. He likes so many people," she said, as carelessly as before.

Eric nodded slowly and held out his hand.

"Well, good-night. I'll do what I can."

Though he could promise her little, she was better for the companionship and talk. In opening the door, he turned and saw her watching him; but now she was spiritless again, her hands were clasped in front of her, her shoulders were bowed, and she looked crestfallen, limp and fragile. Remembering how irritation at her pertness had warmed to impatient dislike on board the *Lithuania*, Eric blamed himself for intolerance towards a child whose worst crime was her childishness.

"Have you a telephone here?" he asked.

"There's one downstairs that I use. Shall I shew you?"

"Oh, no, thanks." Impulse sent him back into the room; and he shook hands with her again, as though to postpone for an instant the silent chill of loneliness which he could feel already settling upon her. Gaymer had contrived to make the girl uncommonly miserable; and, though unhappiness was a universal distemper of the soul, though Eric had told himself that Ivy's relations to Gaymer were their own business, he knew that he could comfort her spirit by putting an arm round her thin shoulders, by kissing her forehead and allowing her to sob out her simple perplexity and pain of heart. A hundred anguished memories warned him of the price that he had already paid for compassion; common sense cried out that this was not his affair. And yet, unless he made it his affair, no one would; and he had now learned wisdom and knew where to stop. "What I meant was: if you ever feel lonely, ring me up and have a talk. I'm nearly always at home, night and day. I'm not too busy for that. Suggest a day for lunch. I lead a fairly solitary life myself."

CHAPTER FOUR

EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

Qui monet amat.
PROVERB.

"Can you spare a moment to see me some time? You may remember Mrs. O'Rane's party and a young man whom we agreed not to like. I want to find out all I can about him..."

Amy Loring lay in bed, frowning over Eric's note and weaving interpretations of its discreet brevity. After telephoning to invite him to tea, she read the letter again with mingled curiosity and misgiving. Obviously the man in question was John Gaymer; no less obviously John Gaymer had been up to mischief. It was not easy, however, to establish a connection between him and Eric, unless he had been up to mischief with the little Maitland girl; Amy had overheard enough of a conversation between them at the Carstairs' dinner to realize that a certain intimacy existed; and she had not failed to detect in Eric at least a paternal attitude towards a girl whose eyes just perceptibly brightened when he spoke to her.

In the course of the morning she contrived a meeting with Gaymer's aunt Lady Poynter; encountering Lady Maitland at luncheon, she mentioned Ivy's name and returned home in time for tea with a collection of opinions which crystallized in the vigorous statement that Mr. Justice Maitland was a fool, Gaymer a cad and Ivy a child whom one had not seen since she was a baby.

"What is it, exactly, that you want to find out?," asked Amy when Eric arrived. 80

"I hardly know... I've met this girl half a dozen times; she's a nice child, but rather impulsive and very easily led. She's not happy at home, and I fancy she's allowing Gaymer to lead her... Let me put it this way: if she were your sister, would you entrust her to him with an easy mind?"

Amy shook her head emphatically:

"No! I daresay I'm old-fashioned... Mr. Lane, I'm waiting for a hideous scandal—not with her, poor child, but with all these girls who've broken away from home during the war, all the men too, who've been allowed so much liberty with girls that they've lost the old reverence that men like you or my brother Jim had. The parents are to blame—"

"But the children suffer," Eric interrupted. "That's an epitome of the world's history. And it's equally true if you put it the other way round... But what are we to do with this girl?"

A fleeting glance at Eric's worried eyes told her that he was less concerned for the world's history of suffering than for Ivy's immediate welfare; his use of the plural shewed that they were to be joined in a common rescue; and her mind, seizing the possibility that Eric might be in love, bounded forward to consider whether he should be helped to fall deeper in love with a girl who possessed superficially little more than the daintiness and intoxicating lure of adolescence.

"Tell me about her," she suggested. "I should like to help if I could."

Eric described their fragmentary conversation in New York, on the *Lithuania*, at Lady John Carstairs' and in Ivy's attic behind the Adelphi, adding guesswork sketches of the establishment in the Cromwell Road with an unsympathetic father and a helpless mother. Neither the range of his information nor his manner of giving it betrayed any great intimacy. 81

"Has she any other relations?," asked Amy.

"Two brothers—demobilized and back at Cambridge—we can rely on them, I suppose, to intervene with the usual horse-whip, if things go too far—; and two sisters who've married and shed all responsibility... Perhaps you wonder what I'm doing—"

"It's very natural. She's an attractive child."

"I'm not in love with her or anything of that kind. I don't think she's in... *danger*, but I'd do anything to keep her from being vulgarized."

Amy busied herself with the tea for a few moments.

"I think she's a little bit in love with you..." she ventured, when she had given his momentary warmth time to pass away. "Oh, tiny things that only a woman sees. She admires you enormously; and she's flattered that you take an interest in her. That strengthens your position."

"But I don't want to mix myself up in it," cried Eric impatiently. "One can't altogether stand aside... Everybody's business is nobody's business, and that girl *needs* some one to take an interest in her. As she doesn't get on well with her parents, I was wondering if her aunt could be persuaded to take charge of her. All this revolt of the young girl is rooted in boredom; it's the descent of Nemesis on the Cromwell Road. If Connie Maitland gave her a good time and introduced her and let her see that people would simply cut her if she went off on her own, she'd soon drop this aspect of provincialism. Can't you play on her vanity? A girl like that would much sooner be a success in society than a rebel against society; she'd sooner marry the second cousin of a baronet than live with the greatest poet or painter of all the age... That's the object of my call. Forgive me for boring you like this!"

"You haven't bored me. I took quite a fancy to her. I'll see what I can do." 82

Eric left the house with relief that he had transferred to other shoulders the responsibility for Ivy's welfare. From the library window Amy watched his thin figure striding away, with what she chose to construe as rapid purposelessness, until it disappeared round the corner of Clarges Street; for Ivy's sake it was worth her while to take a little trouble, and, if Eric were truly in love with her, she would take very great trouble indeed; but that, she decided, she would not know until she saw how impatiently he came to enquire what was being done. For all she knew, he was befriending Ivy from vague good nature—as she was befriending him—; Eric was one of the men for whom most women felt a mild and transitory tenderness because he was nearly always too much preoccupied to be aware of it.

When she had put herself in communication with Lady Maitland, Amy waited for another visit

from Eric, but for several weeks he was too busy with his play to think about Ivy; and, as she did not avail herself of his general invitation to lunch with him, he could only assume that her position was no more "desperate" than before. A month after his call at Loring House, Amy took the initiative and wrote to say that the judge had gone away on circuit and that his sister-in-law was to take charge of Ivy until her father's return, when the position could be reconsidered.

"I think she'll behave sensibly and go back home," Amy added when they met one night at Lady Poynter's. "Ivy and I have become great friends; and I'm sure that John Gaymer was at the bottom of the trouble. First of all he flattered her and dared her to break loose; then he neglected her, then he made a fuss of her, then he roused her jealousy. After that he could do what he liked with her. But I'm thankful to say that he's sheered off now, and you can rely on Connie to give her other things to think about."

Eric looked thoughtfully across the room to the corner where Mrs. O'Rane and Gaymer were talking in whispers. Throughout dinner Lady Poynter, whose latest intellectual relaxation was in the works of Freud and Jung, had been interpreting all human relationships in terms of psycho-analysis; adopting her language, Eric found that all this remote, whispered discussion of Gaymer had created a fantastic image of a man sinister and dissolute, bearing on his face the stamp of evil passions and the ravages of debauchery. False images, Lady Poynter explained with annihilating sweeps of a massive arm, could only be corrected or dispelled by contact with reality. It was a relief and a disappointment to Eric that he could detect no change in form and features which always seemed to have been cut by a machine; Gaymer was powerfully built with sturdy limbs, broad shoulders and back, a muscular neck and big-boned wrists and hands, the whole so well proportioned and knit together that his true height and breadth were unsuspected. In face, manner and dress he had set himself to be conventional to the verge of commonplace. His hair, black and straight, was cut, oiled and brushed back from the forehead, as though straight black hair could be treated in no other way; his blue Air Force uniform, vividly new and well-fitting, was built and worn unremarkably but with a suggestion that it could not be worn otherwise. He moved, smiled and spoke as if he were trying to suppress all personal characteristics; and everything about him was ready-made except his clothes.

Eric pretended to be judicial when he knew that he was on the look-out for faults; but there was no fault to find, unless a man was to be hanged for impatiently lighting a cigarette while waiting for dinner—and Mrs. O'Rane began to smoke before the fish-plates had been taken away—; these were war-manners. Eric watched and listened; but, like the others of his set, Gaymer talked like a gramophone and thought not at all. Failing to condemn, Eric tried to appreciate; but Gaymer's exasperating suppression of personality left nothing to admire. The set had agreed to put on humorous Cockney records; Mrs. O'Rane and Gaymer were improvising a duologue to represent one shop-girl bidding another good-bye at a station, and fragments of their speech floated across the room to mingle incongruously with Lady Poynter's undefeated exposition of psycho-analysis: "I *should* 'a thought A Certain Person would 'a come and seen you off, dearie..." "Ow, 'e knows, when I want 'im, I'll send for 'im; *and* not before. You *will* write, dearie? I love letters. And you'll send my washing on; I'm in me old lodgings"... "You won't be 'ungry, missing tea and all?"... "Thanks, I 'ad a nice bit of cold fish before I started...."

"I *don't* see the fascination," Eric murmured, turning away after a last look at Gaymer. Any other healthy animal in good condition, well washed and groomed, enjoying his food and drink, would be as attractive.

"Perhaps it's—impersonal," Amy suggested. "I've been trying to make out why so many girls marry in such a hurry. Partly it's instinct, of course, and partly it's just recklessness; when your husband might be killed any moment, it didn't much matter who you married. But far more often, I'm sure, girls marry something symbolical in a man rather than the man himself. They see a man in a top hat, and he's nothing in particular; they hear of him doing something wonderfully brave, and he's a very different person to them; he's a hero, he's been fighting, while they—with perhaps just as much bravery—can't use it."

"They marry the sex and not the individual," Eric suggested.

Amy nodded and looked across the room as though to contrast Ivy's youth with her own grave maturity.

"Yes, and in twelve or fifteen years' time, when she's my age, she'll know that it doesn't matter what a man *represents* symbolically or what he *is*. But what he *will* be, how he'll wear...."

"I believe Gaymer was incredibly brave until his smash," said Eric.

"And never really sober from one week's end to another. He must have a wonderful physique... That's another thing: I wonder how much of the immorality and unhappiness of the present-day is caused by a sort of shell-shock. It's a great excuse; it may also be a reason... Have you seen Ivy since our talk?"

"No, but I believe we're to meet on the opening night of the opera."

When Eric entered Lady Maitland's box the following week, he found Ivy recovered from her melancholy and pleasurably excited by the amusement and occupation which her aunt was contriving as a means of shewing her that, whatever changes the war had effected and whatever "those freakish people in Chelsea and St. John's Wood" might do, it was social outlawry, self-imposed, for a girl of her age and position to live alone; and it was a pity to be outlawed before she knew anything of the life to which she was saying good-bye.

Eric participated in the conspiracy to the extent of conducting Ivy round the house in the second *entr'acte*. Though most of the singers were new to London, Covent Garden had regained very much of its old appearance. War, indeed, and the passage of five years had expunged some well-known names from the box doors; Bertrand Oakleigh's place was taken by a war contractor, the double box in which Sir Deryk Lancing used to sit restless and alone, half-hidden by the curtains, had passed to Lady Poynter. But, though new names were occasionally seen and certain old names had taken on a British ring, the changes were inconsiderable.

"Is there any one you'd like to call on?," he asked Ivy.

"I haven't seen any one I know."

"You're to be envied." Eric bowed vaguely and found himself caught up by three different women in as many minutes. "Let's go back," he suggested, as he took off the last of them. "I'm tired of telling people that I'm too busy to lunch out; and, though I hate work, I think it's preferable to the average luncheon-party."

He picked up his opera-glasses and began identifying and describing to her the occupants of the other boxes.

"If I had genius—," Ivy began diffidently.

"But I haven't, Miss Maitland," he interrupted. Adulation was at any time a weariness, and he had not undermined her alliance with Gaymer in order to attract her to himself. "You mistake fashion for fame. I've written half a dozen successful plays... I'm glad to see you here to-night. This is a better frame for you than a garret behind the Adelphi."

Ivy left the challenge where it lay.

"I've never been to the opera before," she said. "I shall come as often as Aunt Connie has room for me."

"So shall I," answered Eric, "whenever she or you invite me. That's one of the few things I'm *not* tired of."

It was only when he had found Lady Maitland's car for her and sent Ivy home in it that he recalled his own words and wondered whether she was reading an unintended enthusiasm into them. Her big grey eyes seemed startled when the lights were turned on at the end of the third act; and, though she said nothing, he felt their light upon him. They were still startled at the opera's end and looked over her shoulder at him, as he helped her into her cloak. When they said good-night, she drew away her hand as though his touch sent a shock through her body, but she was turning to see the last of him as the car glided away from the door.

During the next fortnight Eric received three invitations by telephone and two by letter; but he recalled Amy Loring's hint and determined to avoid that one box until Ivy had lived down any suspicion that she was in love with him; he excused himself until he felt that Lady Maitland's friendship hung by a thread and then chose a night when *Louise* was being played and he could come late and leave early. As he walked upstairs, the shrill laughter of the *atelier* scene warned him that the second act was not yet over, and he crept down again to finish his cigar in the hall. He was reading the list of box-holders for the night, when a voice behind him said:

"Hul-lo! When did *you* get back from America?"

George Oakleigh was standing at his elbow, unembarrassed and cordial, waiting to shake hands with him. Eric was conscious only of an immense, sudden appeal to his own strength of heart and nerves; his eyes had taken in George and his expression at a glance; Barbara was almost certainly with him; and with another glance, not hurried enough to seem apprehensive, he saw her three yards away, speaking to Mrs. Shelley. He had taken in all that he needed, before George was ready for an answer. Unchanged; tall and slender; in a silver sheath of a dress; with a black head-band and a bouquet of the white carnations that she always brought him when he was ill; a white Indian shawl, embroidered with green and red parakeets, which he had seen her wear a dozen times. All the blood in his body seemed to rush to his eyes, and he felt himself rocking.

"I got back a fortnight after the armistice."

His voice was detached from him, but, though it came from an unguessed distance, he could hear that it was steady.

And then it was time for his own question:

"You've been on the Riviera, haven't you?" It was a triumph to meet and overcome "Riviera" without a stammer. "Lucky man! We had the wettest winter on record here... George, I hope it's not too late to offer you all good wishes. I was in Japan, when I heard about it; I meant to write, but I was suddenly called home to my father and I thought I should arrive before the letter... I crossed with Raney, by the way... Like me, I see you only come for the third act of *Louise*."

"Yes, I'm rather tired of the rest. I suppose this means that the second act's just over."

Two sluggish streams were trickling out of the stalls and down the stairs, converging by the open doors. Dr. Gaisford, heading the first, looked round, nodded to George and walked over to a sofa, where he perched like a fat, blond idol; it was a perfect opportunity for Eric to break away and join him, but he knew that this first meeting with Barbara must be faced and endured.

She brought her conversation to an end at last and looked round for her husband.

"Oh, how do you do?" she said to Eric.

Even through a glove the touch of her hand was unmistakable. If he did not meet her for twenty years, he could never forget it; if he were blind, he would still know it from any other woman's. He had kissed it a thousand times, kissed every finger of it; when he was ill and she came to sit with him, it had lain coolly over his eyes, charming him to sleep; at the first night of the "Bomb-Shell", when the success of the play hung in the balance, he had gripped it until a ring cut into her finger. He wondered how much she remembered, could not help remembering....

"How do you do?"

She smiled as she had smiled in saying good-bye to Mrs. Shelley, with a regrouping of lips and cheeks. It was a smile in which her eyes played no part; they told him nothing. She was as much collected as he knew she would be, equal to every social demand and blankly without emotion. She was neither tender nor hard, neither ashamed nor defiant; and, though she too must have rehearsed this meeting, her eyes looked at him without even curiosity.

He was already trembling in reaction before she passed out of sight. He could not trust himself to light a cigarette; and he was thankful for the press of people who gave him time for recovery as he threaded his way to Gaisford's sofa.

"What d'you think of it?," he asked, carelessly enough. "I've only just come."

"Oh, it's good. Anseau's marvellous, and Edvina's singing very well, though I'd always sooner hear her in Tosca than in anything. She's worked that up wonderfully since the first time it was put

on. I haven't seen you here before."

"I came to *Bohème* the first night. Not since... But I intend to be here as often as I can spare the time."

Dr. Gaisford offered him a cigarette, wondering idly why a man whose trade was in words allowed himself to say "intend" when he could have used "hope" or "expect" without betraying himself.

"Well, you're wise... if you feel equal to it," he said bluntly. "Was that the first time you'd seen her since her marriage?"

"The first time to speak to," said Eric, trying to control his voice.

"It will get easier by degrees," said the doctor.

"We'll hope so."

"Bad as that, old man?"

"It was hell!" Eric whispered. "Either she never *had* a soul, or she's lost it."

"Well, my dear boy—"

Eric interrupted him with a mirthless laugh.

"Oh, I'm sure you're right!," he cried. "But I wonder if you ever appreciate how little good it sometimes does to be right... I must go, or Lady Maitland will be fuming."

He jumped up and hurried through the hall and up the stairs. The first name to meet his eyes was "George Oakleigh, Esq." but the door was mercifully shut and he strode past it and worked his way through an argumentative circle into Lady Maitland's box. She was sitting with her husband and Ivy, and he was almost glad to be distracted by her reproaches for arriving so late.

"I'll make up by leaving early," he suggested. "Age cannot wither the infinite tedium of the fourth act."

"Oh, you must stay till the end. Maurice and I have to go on to the Poynter's musical-party; I was depending on you to take Ivy home or at least to find her a taxi."

"Oh, I'll stay for that with pleasure," Eric answered.

The drowsy mutter of slipshod conversation accelerated and became excitedly clear as the conductor climbed to his place. Eric drew his glasses lazily from their case and swept the boxes on either side of him. George and Barbara must be almost at right-angles; she could see him, if he sat forward; she might be looking at him then, but he dared not focus the glasses on her. Some one in the stalls underneath him drawled: "Hullo! D'you see Babs and George? I wonder when they got back?" Then the lights were lowered, one after another.

Eric tried to lose himself in the music. When that failed, he analyzed the orchestration and concentrated his attention on the conducting. Barbara's presence made itself felt, and he knew that, for all preoccupation, he was waiting until the stage was dark enough for him to lean forward and steal a glance at her between Lady Maitland's square grey head and Ivy's dancing black curls. When he turned slowly and looked at her with all the artificial calm that he could put forth, she was sitting with one arm on the sill of the box, fingering a big fan and watching the stage with rapt enjoyment. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

At the end of the act Sir Maurice and Lady Maitland hurried away, and he moved into the empty chair at the front of the box. Barbara was evidently holding a court; her back was turned to the house, and he could see a phalanx of men breaking rank, shaking hands, exchanging a word and squeezing their way out again. George was supporting her adequately, easily, as though it were natural and as though he were her husband as of right, never seeing that he was a grotesque usurper....

"Are you going to smoke?," Ivy asked him, as he laid the glasses down.

"I don't think so,—unless you'd like to."

"I prefer just to watch the people. I love the opera! I love the music and the acting, I love the house and the people and the dresses and the jewellery. I've been here every night since the beginning."

Eric forced himself to take an interest in her though her enthusiasm jarred on him.

"You're living with Lady Maitland, aren't you?," he asked.

"Yes. She wanted a sort of secretary to arrange her parties and answer her letters and deal with the telephone... I'm quite enjoying it."

"I knew you would."

"Did you suggest it to her?"

"Well, I had a hand in it. I was so shocked—I don't mean morally, but you seemed so utterly forlorn and miserable that night when I came to see you... Are you happy now?"

She looked away without answering for some moments:

"If I thought about it, I should be very unhappy. So I try not to think about it. I try to enjoy myself and keep so busy... I miss the freedom. It's great fun being with Aunt Connie; she's giving me an awfully good time, and I've all the money and clothes I need; and I'm meeting the most wonderfully interesting people—*You* know what her parties are like."

"Then what earthly excuse have you for being unhappy?"

"It isn't everything," she sighed.

There was no taxi to be found in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, and after a fruitless walk down the Strand they struck across the Park. At the corner of Buckingham Palace an officer in an open car, with a girl beside him, leaning on his shoulder, passed them and turned with a jerk of the head to look a second time and to wave his hand.

"Was that intended for me, do you suppose?" Eric asked. "My eyes aren't good enough—"

"It was Johnnie Gaymer," she answered.

Though her voice was dispassionate enough, Eric fancied that he had felt her hand dragging against his arm.

"I haven't seen him for a long time," he murmured.

"Nor have I... He lives in Buckingham Gate... Rather a nice flat," she explained jerkily.

Eric was vaguely disquieted at seeing Gaymer, as though not to see him were to bring his

existence to an end. The moment's glimpse had disturbed Ivy as much as his own meeting with Barbara. She spoke hurriedly, with unconcern too elaborate to be convincing; unconsciously she quickened her pace. And Eric would have wagered a year's income that Ivy's unhappiness was linked with Gaymer's treatment of her.

"I wonder whether we shall get a taxi at Victoria," she murmured as though she knew and wanted to interrupt his thoughts.

"I certainly don't want to walk home from Eaton Place."

It was distasteful to suspect a man, when there was no basis for suspicion, but Eric felt that Gaymer was not to be trusted. That conceded, it was plausible to imagine that Ivy had fallen in love with him and that he had tried to exploit her devotion for his own amusement. Either he had misjudged the character of his quarry or else he was waiting for her to come to her senses. Eric remembered his glimpse of the girl in the car, lolling back with her head on Gaymer's shoulder: it was a reasonable guess that Ivy had drifted without seeing where he was leading her and had pulled herself up in time to administer an unexpected rebuff...

Eric was startled out of his reverie when she drew her arm out of his and waved to a taxi.

"Don't come any farther with me!," she begged. "It was simply sweet of you to toil right out of your way like this."

"But I'll drop you in Eaton Place and take the taxi on." It was the most obvious and comfortable arrangement for both. As she hesitated to accept it, Eric became suddenly suspicious that she wanted to get rid of him and to be alone. The sight of Gaymer with another woman had hurt her until she had to cry—and to cry where no one would see her. As she stood with set face and eyes averted, against the immense gloomy background of the palace, with the wind blowing through her hair and snatching at her cloak, she seemed even more fragile and forlorn than on the night when she had begged him to come home with her from the theatre.

"Won't you let me stay with you for another two minutes?," he begged her gently. "I promised Lady Maitland to see you home."

"She only asked you to find me a taxi."

"But you're condemning me to walk the whole way from here to Ryder Street!" he protested.

"Won't you find a taxi at Victoria? Or you can have this one, and I'll walk; I'm nearly home now."

To press his company on her any further would have been persecution.

"You have your latch-key?," he asked. "And d'you want any money?"

"I've plenty, thanks. Good-night."

He slammed the door to and turned back towards the Park. As he paused to light a cigarette, the noise of the taxi grew fainter and died almost away; then it seemed to become unaccountably clearer, and he looked up with surprise. The taxi was returning, and, though he could not see any one inside, the flag was down, and he recognized the driver. In another moment it had passed him and swept away to the right down Buckingham Gate. Eric started in pursuit. If his suspicions were anything but the fruit of a disordered imagination, Ivy Maitland was preparing to fight the unknown woman for possession of Gaymer.

His pace slackened, as he tried to think how he should explain or justify himself to Gaymer. He came to a standstill, as he remembered that he did not know Gaymer's address.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE PRICE OF SYMPATHY

"Novelty is to love like bloom to fruit; it gives a lustre, which is easily effaced, but never returns."

DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD: "MAXIMS."

HALF-PAST twelve was striking, as Eric entered his flat. A pile of letters awaited him, but he went into his bedroom without looking at them and began to undress. His unexpected walk had tired him, and he wanted to go to sleep before his brain woke up to puzzle itself over Ivy Maitland or to reconstruct his meeting with Barbara and imagine ways in which he could have carried it off with greater dignity or triumph. Until twenty minutes ago he fancied that he understood the few elements of Ivy's simple character; but, if she were forcing her way into Gaymer's flat to evict another woman, she had more passion and determination than her record of short-lived impulses warranted his expecting....

The telephone-bell by his bed mercilessly violated the silence of the room; and he spun around to face it, dropping his watch. No one but Barbara had ever telephoned to him at such an hour; at such an hour she had hardly missed one night in fifteen months, when they were both in London; when last she telephoned to him at such an hour, two and a half years before, he had returned home after saying good-bye to her; next day he was leaving for America; and he had let the bell ring on unanswered, muffling it with his handkerchief, when he could bear the noise no longer and trying to face his new conception of Barbara as a woman for whom honour and love had no meaning. For two and a half years he had wondered what would have happened if he had listened to her pleading... He took a step towards the bed and then retraced it.

As he picked up his watch and continued to wind it, the bell rang again. This time he advanced to the telephone unhesitatingly, but with the dread of a man compelled to draw back the sheet from a corpse's face.

"Hullo?"

"Is that Mr. Lane? It's Lady Maitland speaking. I hope you weren't asleep?"

He sat heavily on the bed, limp for the moment with relief.

"Oh, I'm not undressed yet, thanks."

"I rang you up to find out what had happened to Ivy. She's not come in yet; and she's such a little harum-scarum... Did you bring her home?"

Eric wanted to think over the answer and knew that he had no time.

"I put her into a taxi," he said promptly.

"Oh... Then she *ought* to be home by now... She didn't say she was going on to a party, did she?"

"No... I hope there's nothing wrong, Lady Maitland. If *I* can do anything... Search-parties or anything of that kind?"

"Oh *no!* She *must* be in soon. I thought I'd just find out... Good-night!"

Eric lighted a cigarette and threw himself, half-undressed, on the bed. He could have done no good by handing on insubstantial suspicions... Half-an-hour later he went to bed with an unresolved riddle on his mind and found himself, in his dreams, counselling Ivy or tracking Gaymer. The riddle kept him company at breakfast, and, as he came to the end of his letters, he was wondering whether to call for an explanation, when Ivy herself was announced.

She shook hands and looked round the room with a show of interest, as his secretary collected her papers and withdrew.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you?," she asked.

"I think I was expecting you. Won't you sit down?"

She arranged herself with her back to the light, a moment too late to keep Eric from seeing that her face was colourless but for blue-grey shadows under her eyes; a black hat and black dress with transparent sleeves from shoulder to wrist accentuated her pallor.

"I won't keep you a minute; it's about last night," she began breathlessly. "You must have thought it very funny of me to ask you not to see me home, making you walk home yourself—"

"It was fair to assume that you weren't going straight home," Eric laughed.

Ivy's strangled voice and expression of tragedy warned him not to laugh again.

"I—went out to supper," she explained. "Aunt Connie told me she rang you up to know what had happened to me. So, if she says anything about it—"

She stopped in embarrassment at Eric's look of surprise.

"I suspect you of trying to involve me in a conspiracy, Miss Maitland," he said.

"Conspiracy?... Aunt Connie said that you were anxious and that you'd kindly offered to send out search-parties or something—"

"So you came in person to set my mind at rest instead of writing or telephoning! Your aunt was very anxious, I thought."

"I'm afraid she was. You see, I hadn't told her beforehand."

Ivy tried to look him frankly in the face, then lowered her eyes and pretended to inspect the furniture and pictures. Eric turned away and lighted a cigarette.

"Did you know anything about it, yourself, beforehand?" He gave her time to decide whether it was worth while to speak the truth. "I don't say I *will* be your accomplice, but, if you want me to be, you must tell me everything."

"My accomplice in what?"

Eric turned with a smile and offered her a cigarette:

"To put it quite brutally, in concealing from your aunt what happened last night."

"And what did happen?," she demanded.

Eric found her effort to put him out of countenance by attempted haughtiness of tone pathetically

unsuccessful.

"You went to Gaymer's flat in Buckingham Gate. I don't say there *wasn't* any supper; I don't even say there wasn't a party, if three constitute a party. It was informal, however, and as much of a surprise to the host as to his guests."

Ivy jumped up indignantly and subsided slowly in defeat.

"I don't know what you mean!," she cried with a last rally.

"Am I right so far?"

"How did you find out?," she asked limply.

"Intuition, if you like. You went there on the spur of the moment, because you'd seen him driving home with another woman. You went there to make a scene with the other woman."

"No, I wanted to talk to him about something."

"Doesn't it come to the same thing?"

"I never even saw her. I don't know who she was."

There was a long pause. Eric changed his chair so that he should not seem to be watching her face.

"Well, so far my intuition has been fairly good," he said. "Isn't it your turn now?" There was no answer. "I'm hardly adding anything, if I say that you're in love with Gaymer and jealous of the other woman."

"She'd no right to be there!"

"Oh, come! I'm afraid neither Gaymer nor any other man would allow you to dictate who may go to his flat."

"But he's engaged to *me*!"

Her left hand was bare and carried no ring; Eric seemed to remember her telling him overnight that she had not seen Gaymer for some time; and, when he went into her rooms off the Adelphi, she had confessed to at least a disagreement. The engagement seemed unstable.

"Ah, *that* I didn't know, of course," he said.

There was another pause, and the girl turned her head quickly so that even her profile was hidden from him. Eric saw the flash of a handkerchief and heard a sob half-choked down. Throwing away his cigarette, he seated himself on the arm of the chair and laid his hand on her shoulder. Nearly three years ago Barbara had swept into that room like a whirlwind and collapsed as suddenly. Since then he ought to have learned the price of sympathy....

"Wouldn't it help you to tell me all about it?," he asked her gently.

Ivy dabbed at her eyes and felt for his hand. Then she turned and pressed herself against him until he could feel the fluttering of her heart.

"*That's* why I told you I was desperate," she gulped, burying a tear-stained face of misery on his shoulder. "*That's* why I told you at the opera that I couldn't allow myself to *think* of things... We met on the way back from America; we liked each other, we were always meeting. When life at home became more than I could stand, he helped me... But I told you all about that... It was glorious at first, I'd never been in love, I felt I'd never been happy before. I used to dine with him almost every night and go on to a dance. He's a beautiful dancer, and I adore dancing. I seemed to *belong* to him... When we didn't do that, we used to go to a theatre, or he'd just come and talk to me in my rooms, or I'd go and talk to him—"

"Didn't you feel that was rather a risk?"

Either the girl did not hear him or she deliberately ignored the interruption.

"I didn't think any one *could* be so happy," she went on. "I remember thinking how wrong you were... *Some* days weren't as perfect as others, of course. I suppose I'm very jealous, but I loved him so much that I simply hated to see him *speak* to another woman; *I* never wanted to speak to another man, so it wasn't fair... We'd had a row that night when I met you after the theatre. A woman—she was rude to me, deliberately; he said he'd known her for years, but *that* didn't make any difference or give her the right... I never said anything to her, but I could see she hated me; and he just laughed at us both and seemed to enjoy it. I refused to have anything to do with him for ten days after that. Then he apologized and said the woman had once been in love with him and he didn't want a scene in public... Then we became engaged."

She threw out the words so abruptly that Eric was conscious of disproportion, even of omission.

"What happened?," he asked.

"He took me out to dinner, and we went on to a dance at the Burlington Rooms. Then we went to his flat for supper. I didn't want to go at first, because it was after two, but he begged so hard and said he was leaving London next day. We became engaged then."

Eric was still conscious of an omission.

"It was never announced, was it?," he asked.

"No. He didn't want us to marry until he knew whether he was going to stay on in the army. He wants to be demobilized as soon as possible; he has friends in the City—"

"But that's no reason why the engagement shouldn't be announced," Eric persisted.

"He didn't want it. He made me promise to keep it a secret. I oughtn't to have told you, but last night—"

She broke off and began to cry again.

"Well, what happened then?" he asked her after a pause.

"After that—My work in his department was over; and, when Aunt Connie asked me to come and stay with her, I went. Johnnie didn't like my going, he said he'd never see anything of me—"

"But I thought he was going away himself?"

"No, he didn't go—after all. At least, not then. I saw him whenever we could arrange it, he used to come and dine... He complained that he never had me to himself; but I told him that, as soon as the engagement was announced, he could have me as much to himself as he liked. When my sisters were engaged, every one ran away as if they'd got plague... I *did* dine with him once or twice, but in some ways Aunt Connie's as bad as mother; she always comes into my room at night to see I'm

home and she'd have had a fit, if she'd known that I was dining alone with Johnnie. We used to invent people—'Captain Richards' and 'Mrs. Bosanquet'; whenever Aunt Connie wanted to know who'd been there, I used to say 'Captain Richards and Mrs. Bosanquet'."

She laughed feebly at her strategem, but Eric was disquieted. Innocence or stupidity might excuse her for running risks; but there must be a blind spot in her conscience, if she could tell a lie so light-heartedly and then talk about it.

"And what happened then?," he asked, deferring censure for fear of drying the stream of her confidence.

"Well, then the opera started, and I hardly saw him at all. Aunt Connie was there every night, and I felt she *had* first call on me. Besides, I liked going; and there was always room in the box, if he'd wanted to come. He said he didn't care to be with me when there was a crowd of other people... Then he *did* go away. That was weeks ago, and I didn't see him again till last night."

"Did he write?"

Ivy turned with anguished protest in her eyes, as though he had asked the question for the pleasure of hurting her:

"No."

"And what happened last night?"

As she hesitated, he could see her hardening; and the grip on his hand tightened.

"I hardly knew what I was doing," she whispered. "I couldn't see... But I felt I *had* to go... He opened the door, and I asked him... Her coat was on a chair. I shan't tell you what we said... But I *did* tell him he was a beast to behave like that, when he was engaged to me, a beast not to write, a beast to make me miserable!"

Her voice had risen, she had drooped away from him and was crying without concealment. Eric lifted her hand to his lips and put an arm around her shoulders, drawing her to him until her cheek lay against his breast.

"You must steady yourself, Ivy! I warn you that, when any one cries, I'm always liable to join in!"

"You? I don't mind what you do! You've been ripping to me—right from the first time we met... I *hate* men! I'd never tell *any* man what I've told you. I don't know why you let me; you've better things to do, I should have thought."

"Well, perhaps I hope that I may be useful. What happened then?"

Ivy dabbed jerkily at her eyes and tried to steady her voice.

"He said that, if I thought so badly of him, we'd better end the engagement," she went on.

"There I agree with him."

"I said I only asked him to behave *properly* to me. He said the whole thing was a mistake and, if I wouldn't end it, he would. I said I wouldn't let him!"

She wiped her eyes and began smoothing the front of her dress as though she had nothing to add. Eric got off the arm of her chair and stood facing her with his shoulders against the mantelpiece.

"Don't think me prejudiced," he began, "if I admit that I don't greatly care for Gaymer, but believe me when I tell you that you're very well out of it—"

"But I'm *not!*," she interrupted. "I won't *let* him break it off!"

"I imagine you're not prepared to share him," Eric suggested drily.

"But I love him more than any one in the world!"

"That's not enough by itself."

She fingered her handkerchief for a moment and then broke out explosively:

"I *won't* let him go!"

"How can you keep him?" Eric asked. "Will you threaten him with an action for breach of promise?"

"I'll do anything!"

He shook his head and waited for her to calm herself.

"In the first place you couldn't prove that there'd ever been a promise to marry," he began. "In the next place, as it's never been announced, you couldn't prove damage. He's not kept you from marrying any one else; and a jury wouldn't give a farthing for your heart or feelings. And it's fantastic to think that you can *make* a man marry you by threatening an action if he doesn't. What kind of married life do you look forward to after that? Of course, I don't know whether he was serious last night or whether you'd both lost your tempers; but, if he meant it, you must regard the thing as being over."

Pouting and rebellious, Ivy stared at her shoes and bit at the border of a crumpled handkerchief:

"I won't!"

"My dear, you must! However much you love him, he's not worth having unless he loves you. What can you do to make him?"

"I'll publish the engagement!"

"And if he contradicts it?"

"He wouldn't! He couldn't! He couldn't be such a brute!" She was startled by her own vehemence and repeated in a whisper more poignant than the cry: "Oh, he couldn't!"

Eric looked at her and walked away to the window. Pillowing his chin on his arms, he stared into the lifeless street below. Somewhere in the silent flat a clock struck twelve; a second and a third joined in with softly discordant chimes, and he realized that he had been sprawling there in mental catalepsy for ten minutes....

"From your account—you've told me everything, I take it—?" he asked uncertainly.

"Everything!"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the room, avoiding her eyes because he knew that she was lying. There was no proof, but her desperate intensity convinced him, and he wondered why he had not guessed before.

"What are you going to do?," he asked.

"I don't know. I didn't mean to talk to you about this. I only wanted you not to give me away to

Aunt Connie." She stood up and looked round the room for a mirror. "Do I look very awful? I cried myself sick last night."

"Come into the next room and tidy up," he suggested.

"I could drown myself!," she cried.

He gave her a clean handkerchief and watched her thoughtfully as she bathed and dried her eyes. When she took off her hat and smoothed her short dark hair, she would have passed anywhere as a slim boy of fifteen masquerading in a woman's black dress. As he watched her, his mind went back to their first conversation in New York, and he felt that he had foreseen everything as well as if she carried her future branded on her forehead. It was a tragedy from which he could see no escape, perfect material for the third act of a play; and the psychology and emotion had been presented to him without any strain on his imagination... But artistic detachment was an indecency when a mere child was being ruined and heartbroken for the passing pleasure of a man like Gaymer. She was spiritually ruined whether Gaymer married her or not....

"You mustn't talk like that," he said gently. "I'm going to think whether I can suggest anything. May I take you home? A walk will do me good."

They left Ryder Street and crossed the Park without exchanging six words. Here and there the passers-by paused and looked back to marvel at their preoccupation, for both walked with knitted brows and bent heads, Ivy to hide her red eyes, and Eric to concentrate his thoughts with no other distraction than brown gravel and grey flag-stones. They said good-bye in Eaton Place after arranging to meet at the opera.

Eric turned back towards Grosvenor Place and walked to the Thespian Club. As he entered the dining-room, a hand was laid on his arm. Carstairs was lunching with Deganway, and they greeted him with an air of grievance.

"You've just cut us *once*. Don't make a habit of it," said Deganway.

"I'm sorry! May I join you? And tell me where I cut you."

"It was in the Park," said Deganway. "We were coming here from the Foreign Office, and you were walking with a young and lovely sylph. It was quite deliberate. I think I shall have to tell John Gaymer about it; on my honour I shall."

Eric reached for the *menu* and began to write his bill. Deganway was the most intolerable gossip in London, but a gossip was sometimes useful.

"How does *he* come into it?," he asked at length.

"Oh, those two! My dear, she's Johnnie's latest passion... At least I haven't heard of any one later. You'd better watch out, if he finds you poaching. You *are* behindhand."

"We can't compete with you, Gerry," said Carstairs.

Eric made no comment, but he ordered a light luncheon and ate it as quickly as it could be served. He had offered to take Ivy home because he knew that he could do no work while he was thinking of her; and it was useless to go back to his rooms or to fancy that he could compose his mind until he had done something for her or satisfied himself that nothing could be done. He wondered whether she knew that he had guessed... The slim, black figure with the short, boyish hair haunted him; he saw her in every corner of the dining-room and heard her cry of despair above the clatter of plates and the babble of voices. Once he tried to tell himself that it was not his business... But she had talked to him because there was no one else....

Before he could do anything, he had to hear Gaymer's version. That had been obvious from the first, but he had seen only the precipitous difficulties of a meeting until a chance hint from Deganway shewed him how to overcome them. As soon as he had finished his meal, he telephoned to find out whether Gaymer was at home. A voice answered that he was not expected until after six, and Eric strode into the Park to be by himself and to rehearse the interview.

There was no one who could undertake it for him. He passed General Maitland, the judge and Ivy's two brothers in rapid review, but they were the last people who must ever know. Then, waiving preliminaries, he wondered what he was going to say to Gaymer. Plain speaking was more salutary than effective. Gaymer might deny everything, he might laugh; this was probably not the first time that he had got himself into an ambiguous position, and he had probably received his share of plain speaking. Moreover, invective did not help Ivy. Eric tried to make up his mind whether he wanted, whether he would help, whether he would even allow her to marry such a man....

There was no one who could advise him. Amy Loring was a sensible, sympathetic woman, but, where sex morals were in question, she rather boasted of her old-fashioned intolerance. To tell her would be to alienate her forever from some one to whom she was at present mildly attached. Sonia O'Rane had crammed a life-time of experience into thirty years and would probably respect a girl the more flagrantly she overthrew the conventional canons of morality. But it was never safe to entrust Sonia with a secret. The longer he thought over it, the more clearly Eric saw that the secret could be shared with no one.

He walked slowly into the Green Park and timed his arrival at Buckingham Gate for half-past six. Gaymer had come home a moment before him and was still standing in the hall with his cap on, opening letters. For an instant he betrayed surprise at receiving a call from a man whom he knew but slightly and had never invited to his flat, but the surprise was banished without an effort.

"Hullo! How are you?," he jerked out. "Just let me finish these, will you?"

"I wanted to have a word with you, if you could spare time," said Eric.

"Come along." Gaymer crossed the hall slowly, reading the last of his letters, and threw open the door of a small sitting-room decorated with *Vogue* plates and furnished with a divan, two arm-chairs and a low Moorish table. "What'll you have to drink?," he asked.

"Nothing, thanks... I'd better explain *why* I'm here. I was at the opera last night, and Lady Maitland asked me to see Ivy home. I put her into a taxi just by the Royal Stables, but, when I got home, Lady Maitland telephoned to say that she wasn't in yet; did I know what had happened to her? This morning Ivy called on me, and I gathered that, after leaving me, she'd come here."

Gaymer rang the bell and ordered whiskey to be brought in.

"So it was you she was walking with?" he said. "I couldn't see."

"Yes... As the result of coming here, she's rather upset; and I wanted to straighten things out, if I could."

Gaymer filled his tumbler and looked at Eric over the top, slightly raising his eyebrows.

"Well, drive ahead," he recommended.

"You and she are engaged, aren't you?"

"Did she tell you that?"

"I should like to hear if that is so."

Gaymer emptied half the tumbler and set it down behind him on the mantelpiece.

"*Would* you?" he asked with a smile. "I rather feel that's my business."

"Not entirely. She's a friend of mine... You and she were being discussed at lunch to-day."

"Where?"

"At the Thespian. *Are* you engaged to her?," Eric persisted.

In the short pause which followed both men seemed to resolve no longer to waste time on appearances and the circumlocution of civility.

"What the devil's that to you?," Gaymer demanded.

"Are you going to marry her?," asked Eric.

"Do you want to marry her yourself?"

"I'd sooner marry her myself than see her married to you," said Eric and repented of the words almost before they were spoken. In themselves they were harmless, but he did not want Gaymer to see that his cool insolence and jerky monosyllables were wearing down his own patience.

"Well, *I* won't stop you, if you think you'll have any success."

"That's not the point. She says you promised to marry her, and I want to know if you're going to keep your promise."

"I see. Well, *I* want to know just where you think you come in."

"She's a friend of mine," Eric repeated.

"Bully for her! But I'm afraid I don't hold myself responsible to any friend of hers who chooses to come here and ask impertinent questions."

"Naturally. But I think I may say she's asked my advice. Certainly I've given her advice, and she seems to be guided by it to some extent."

"Bully for her again!"

"She was talking of making the engagement public."

Gaymer was only impressed to the extent of hesitating for an instant; then he shewed himself more assured than ever:

"And, if your advice to her is worth a damn, you told her not to do that!"

"You don't want to marry her, then?"

Gaymer first yawned and then frowned with a sudden irritability that suggested more that he wanted to end the interview than that he had lost his temper.

"Whether I want to or not is beside the point!" he exclaimed. "I've no money to marry on. *She* knows that. I don't know from one day to another whether I'm going to be demobilized. I can't marry on my pay." He looked round with sensual appreciation of the simple warmth and softness of his quarters. "Far too fond of personal comfort for that. Have I satisfied your curiosity enough now?"

"No, you haven't told me why you promised to marry her," Eric persisted.

"*Did* I promise? I should be enormously interested to know why you say that."

"Because she told me, and in this instance I believe her word in preference to yours. *Why* you promised to marry her—I needn't bother you to tell me that. I suppose you found it a necessary formality."

Eric waited for a denial, though he knew that it would tell him nothing. Guilty or innocent, Gaymer must now lose his temper in vehement earnest.

And yet no denial came.

"Did she tell you that, too?" he asked.

"I chose to infer it."

"You're a desirable friend for a girl to have, if you choose to infer that sort of thing about her... Lane, the artistic temperament runs away with you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I *must* go and dress. But, any time you think of anything else you'd like to ask me, don't hesitate to drop in. I'm nearly always at home this time of day and I can give you a cocktail, if you'll tell me how to get hold of any gin. Good-bye."

CHAPTER SIX

THE REWARD OF SYMPATHY

"And... there came down a certain priest that way: and... he passed by on the other side.

"And likewise a Levite..."

S. LUKE: 10. 31-2.

ERIC drove to Ryder Street with the knowledge that he had been beaten; and for the first time, now that it was too late to be of any use, he explored his motives in going. An ingrained conventional sense of fitness told him that, when a man had behaved as Gaymer had done, he must marry his victim as a matter of honour; more rational modern teaching objected that a man would commit two crimes instead of one if he consented to marry a woman whom he did not love. Eric felt he must really have assumed that Gaymer loved Ivy but that he was too inconsiderate to treat her kindly; he had himself gone to Buckingham Gate to demand an explanation rather than to force on the marriage.

But he had been beaten. And what else could he have expected, after interfering in something that did not concern him? Gaymer's victorious rebuff did not matter so much as his adroitness in preventing their ever getting to grips over Ivy; he might marry her, or he might not, but at least he had made it plain that he would not be coerced even into saying whether he cared for her....

In his bath and as he dressed, Eric became permeated with the feeling that Gaymer had no intention of marrying. An honourable man with an unclouded conscience would have resented interference far more warmly; and a man who meant to keep his engagement had no motive for not publishing it. And, after all, when Ivy had overcome her immediate unhappiness, was not this all for the best? In a further analysis Eric fancied that he had gone to assure himself of Gaymer's bad faith, in part because he distrusted the fellow and in part because he did not want to see Ivy's youth sacrificed to him. Perhaps he would have been a little disappointed if Gaymer had explained everything convincingly.

The first act of Aida was over before Eric reached Covent Garden. Hardly seeing who nodded to him, he hurried through the crowded hall to the pit-tier, only conscious of the languid, chattering double procession on the stairs, as of a well-dressed, rich and soulless stage-army that never participated in the emotions and crises of life; these people surrounded and stared uncomprehendingly at the drama in their midst, but they seemed to have no drama of their own. George Oakleigh's box-door was open, but he had passed it before he had time to wonder who was inside and in another moment was apologizing to Lady Maitland for his lateness.

"I must apologize to *you*," she said, "for disturbing you last night. It was this naughty child's fault. She went on to a party and never warned me."

Ivy's excuse had apparently been accepted without further question, and Eric bowed and shook hands with her as though they had not met earlier that day. She was paler than in the morning, and her eyes and cheeks were hollow with fatigue. He could have described every thought that was passing like a white-hot needle through her brain, for she was feeling as he had felt when Barbara broke faith with him, betrayed and utterly lost; ultimately it might be all for the best, but days of agony lay ahead of her, and she would learn how long and pitiless the nights could be.

As the lights were lowered, he pulled his chair forward, resting his arms on the sill of the box. Ivy leaned back to screen herself from her aunt, and, when he put down his glasses and half-turned to offer them to her, he saw tears standing in her eyes. Feeling for her hand, he pressed it gently, and a tear splashed hot and startling on to his own. She gripped and held his fingers till the end of the act; and, as the curtain fell, he stood up and made a barrier of himself.

"I think this is the appropriate moment for tobacco and fresh air," he suggested. "You not coming, Lady Maitland? Will you, Miss Maitland?"

He opened the door without waiting for a reply and hurried her downstairs and into the street before the first call had been taken.

"It's cooler here," he began, as they walked towards Long Acre. "Do you mind about smoking in public?"

"I feel too ill, thanks... Mr. Lane, I can't bear it! All this afternoon I had to hold myself back to keep from rushing around and beating on his door! I couldn't stay in the same room as a telephone. I *had* to see him and I was afraid he'd turn me away... I can't bear it, I *can't*!"

"Ssh! I've been through this, Ivy, longer and worse than I pray you'll ever know. And you can only get over it by setting your teeth—"

"I don't *want* to get over it!," she broke out.

"But you must. And you must begin getting over it to-night. Ivy, I went to see Gaymer this afternoon."

She turned on him in swift surprise which changed to dawning hope. But there was nothing in his face to encourage hope, and her eyes dulled to resignation.

"Yes?," she whispered.

"You may say, if you like, that I had no business to interfere. I went to see if I could do any good. I did no good at all, I found out nothing and I came away with what's commonly called a flea in my ear."

"Was she—?"

Ivy could not bring herself to finish the sentence, but Eric guessed its end and shook his head.

"I don't think she has anything to do with it. I don't believe he ever meant to marry you from the moment when he refused to publish the engagement."

"But he promised, he gave me his oath!"

"Because he... saw you expected it of him. Ivy, you said this morning that you'd told me

everything..." She covered her face with both hands as though he had struck her. "Dear child, I'm not asking for the pleasure of torturing you!"

She hurried on without answering by word or nod, and Eric had his answer.

"You poor child!" he whispered. "Ivy, I promised to help you, if I could; you know that this makes no difference, don't you? Except that I'm a thousand times more anxious to help you. I'll help you in any way I can. But you must help me to help you; you have to put all your courage into this—"

"I *can't*! I want to *die*!" she sobbed.

"Don't talk like that! This is a frightful thing for you, but you must see it in perspective. When once you've the pluck to recognize it's all over... You've told no one else; no one else has guessed, no one else will ever know—"

"But they can't *help* it!"

"Ivy—"

Eric looked at her, and the glib solace died on his lips.

"Ivy, pull yourself together and listen to me!" he whispered. "You're not to tell a soul till I give you leave! Do you promise? I want time to think this out. And it's *going* to be thought out, we're going to win on this. I swear to you that I'll see you through this somehow. Do you believe me?"

His vehemence steadied her, and she nodded quickly:

"Yes."

"Dry your eyes! We must be getting back, or your aunt will wonder what's been happening to us. Are you doing anything to-morrow? Right! I'll make a plan for to-morrow, and we'll talk things over. Now get control of yourself and of your voice: talk to me about the opera, anything. We have to put up a big bluff. Are you ready?"

They walked back to the opera-house, lazily discussing the singers. The hall was still half-full, and they stopped to exchange a greeting with Dr. Gaisford. In the passage behind the boxes, Lord John Carstairs and his wife were pacing slowly up and down, and they stopped again. Deganway scurried past like a frightened rabbit and confided to Lady Poynter that Eric Lane and the little Maitland girl were going about again together.

"My dear, it's the second time I've caught them to-day!," he added. "They're positively inseparable."

Eric walked on, deep in conversation. Barbara Oakleigh was standing in the open door-way of her box. He did not see her, but she looked curiously at his companion and turned for a second look, as they passed. When they were out of sight, she returned to the front of her box and levelled her glasses on them for a moment as they sat down.

"It's hotter than ever!," Eric exclaimed. "Lady Maitland, will you trust Ivy to me for the whole of to-morrow? I want to take her to Maidenhead, we'd lunch at Skindle's, punt gently for about ten yards—which is the limit of my punting capacity—, tie up under a tree until dinner, dine at Skindle's and return to London. May I do that? I promise not to drown her."

Lady Maitland smiled guardedly. She had noticed for some weeks that Eric was interested in her niece, but this was the first time that he had avowed it; and, though she was lazily content to keep Ivy at Eaton Place or in Shropshire until she or her parents came to their senses, a marriage so suitable in every way was undeniably the most satisfactory escape from an awkward family entanglement.

"What do *you* say about it, Ivy?," she asked.

"I should love it. It's sweet of you, Mr. Lane."

"I'll call with a taxi at half-past ten," said Eric.

At the end of the opera he intercepted Gaisford and begged him to wait and come home for a drink as soon as the Maitlands had been packed into their car. The distraction of the stage and of the music, the presence of Ivy and the touch of her hand, which sought his as soon as the curtain went up, kept him from thinking clearly; and he needed the shrewd brain and blunt speech of one who had been a second father to him in order to correct his own impulses.

From Covent Garden to Ryder Street the two men drove in silence. Only when the doctor had been given an arm-chair, a brandy and soda and a cigar did he say:

"Well, my son, who's worrying you now? It's a mistake to let people worry you."

"How d'you know any one's worrying me?," asked Eric.

"Because you're one of these damned reserved people who never squeal when they're hurt themselves, but simply go through the world inviting other people to hurt them. Drive ahead. To-morrow's Sunday, so I don't mind if you keep me up late."

Eric threw himself into one chair and put his feet up in another.

"It's in strict confidence, of course," he began slowly. "A girl I know slightly has been victimized by some one whom for brevity I may describe as an "officer and a gentleman"; now she has to face the consequences. My interest in the thing's confined to keeping her from chucking herself under the nearest train. What's to be done, Gaisford?"

The doctor hoisted himself on to a smaller chair, where he took up a favourite attitude with feet round the legs and his arms folded over the back.

"I want a lot more data than that," he grunted. "Is she the girl who was with you to-night?" Eric stared at his cigar without answering. "Good! I don't want to know her name—or the man's. I take it she's a girl in a good social position. And I take it that you're not proposing that I should run my head against the law? Good again! Why doesn't he marry her?"

"Doesn't want to. Never meant to."

"Does he know the state she's in?"

"I can't say. With respect, I don't think it matters. I'd never encourage any girl to marry a man against his will just to preserve her reputation."

"I'm inclined to agree. Has she any money?"

"Her parents have."

"She *has* parents? Then where do you come in?"

Eric laughed with impatient bitterness, jumping up with a wriggle of his shoulder-blades and beginning to fidget with the bibelots on his mantelpiece.

"That's what I've been asking myself for some time," he jerked out; "and especially while I was bearding the man this afternoon... Father, mother, married sisters, brothers... But I don't think she can go to her people. She doesn't get on very well with them at the best of times and, if I diagnose her aright, she'd screw up her courage to commit suicide long before she'd screw up her courage to face them. I met her for a moment in New York, and she's confided in me for some reason. She's one of these modern, emancipated girls who want to live by themselves and lead their own lives—"

The doctor interrupted him with an impatient sniff:

"Then she needn't bother to find a father for her child."

"My dear Gaisford, you know the worth and weight of all that froth! Modern woman wants to make the best of both sexes; she thinks she can get 'freedom' and 'equality' without fighting or paying for it. Once present the bill—! As I see it, I'm the only soul that the girl can turn to; and, in that belief, I've promised to see her through. I suppose this sort of thing is happening daily; I suppose she can be sent somewhere till the trouble's over... If necessary—I've not thought it out yet —, I'll take her abroad as my secretary—"

A scornful snort interrupted his flow of facile suggestion:

"How old is she? Twenty? And a very pretty girl, so far as I could see. And you're disgustingly well-known. Don't you think it would cause some little comment, if you and she went on your travels together?... After all, I think you'd better tell me who she is."

Eric shook his head, and a silence followed. Then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Connie Maitland's niece, a daughter of the judge," he said at length.

"My dear friend, there are limits to human faith even in your moral reputation!" cried the doctor. "No, something can be done in this country, but you must find an excuse for getting her away from her friends for a considerable time."

"I was wondering whether I'd get my mother to ask her down to Lashmar."

"It wouldn't be fair on Lady Lane; she's of the old school. Besides, your sister wouldn't give her a fair chance: a woman's severest judges are her own sex. And you've brothers; the girl wouldn't face them. And you always tell me it's a dead-and-alive little hamlet where the servants would gossip and every one would gape and whisper. In twenty-four hours the responsibility would be laid at *your* door, and people would wonder why you didn't marry her."

"I'm beginning to wonder that myself."

Gaisford prepared to speak and then closed his lips, waiting for more to come, as Eric covered his eyes with his hand and tapped the fender with one restless heel. By shutting out the light he could forget the doctor's presence and imagine the room as he had seen it that morning, with a slim black figure shrinking into one corner of a big chair. At this moment—he listened to the calm deliberate ticking of the clock behind his head—at this moment she was probably lying on her bed, powerless even to undress, smothering her sobs in a pillow; or perhaps she was on her knees, praying wildly, desperately until she fell asleep from exhaustion; when she awoke, a sense of disaster would cloud and terrify her mind until it defined itself and she wept to find herself still alive. The anguished incoherence of her prayers seemed to rise and swell like wind in the rigging of a ship; he could see her very clearly, hear her very plainly....

The creak of the doctor's chair recalled him to the present, and Eric looked cautiously round the room as though uncertain who was there. From the moment when Ivy came and sobbed in his arms, he had forgotten everything but an urgent need to help her; one accusing pile of letters lay unopened on his writing-table, another was waiting unsigned; he had done no work; and for the first time in nearly three years he had hardly thought of Barbara.

But there was something more than an abstract desire to help. He could now confess to himself that he would have been disappointed if Gaymer had been anxious or even willing to marry Ivy....

"It would be one way out of the difficulty," he suggested indifferently.

"And it would be one way into a great many others," said Gaisford sharply, a little startled to find himself taken so literally.

"You mean I'm damaged goods? I know that," said Eric quietly.

Gaisford made a noise of impatience as he looked up at the spare frame and thin, vital face in front of him. He was reasonably proud of the man whom he had so long kept alive and now restored to full health.

"I mean nothing of the kind. Eric, you owl, you're making a very big income, you've a very big reputation all over the world. You've *everything* to offer. If you're treating the question as a profit-and-loss account, I confess I don't see what *this* girl—"

"Don't you?" As he stared up at the light, Eric's eyes grew bigger and changed from smouldering brown to a black brilliance that illumined his whole face. "She gives me youth, beauty... Gaisford, if you try to be cynical, I shall brain you; she gives me something to talk to, something to look after, something to care for... Some one who believes in me... I don't ask more than that of any woman in these latter days. All this business about money and position... God! If I could give everything I've got, everything I'm likely to get, lay it at her feet, persuade her to accept it—"

"Are you in love with her?," the doctor enquired with a sedative detachment that stilled the passion in Eric's voice.

"It might make me... I've been paralysed for the last two years; there's been absolutely nothing in life for me. I must be fond of that child, or I couldn't worry about her so much... If I had somebody to care for, somebody to try and make happy, somebody to take me out of myself and make me forget myself... Then I could *win*... I never *used* to be lonely... I'm talking to you as the ideas come, Gaisford... You said it as a joke, but, if you ask me seriously why I don't marry her...."

His tone and attitude did not invite cynicism. Gaisford stood up and laid a hand on his shoulders.

"Sit down," he suggested. "You mustn't do anything till you've thought this over *coolly*. In the first place, what do you know of the girl? She's broken down completely in what most men consider to

be woman's first essential."

"She's a child," cried Eric, wrestling free from the numbing bondage of Gaisford's sedative voice. "If you told me that he'd made her *drunk*... or *doped* her... I shouldn't be surprised. This is a thing that touched her body and not her spirit."

The doctor grimaced unconsciously at the romantic phrasing:

"I see. She's a child, and you think you're going to form her mind and character... Don't interrupt, Eric; every man thinks that of every woman mentally less mature than himself. Is she going to be an intelligent companion or a pathetic doll? Is she honest? Is she honourable? Is she unselfish? Is she loyal? Has she grit—under the pink and white of the child? Those are qualities that every wife must have. In other words," he continued with prosaic mockery, "d'you know a—single—dam'—*thing* about her? Is she clever enough, Eric, to know how to live with you? I don't doubt your patience, affection, self-effacement and the rest, but you're a queer customer, you know; an idealist... you'd hit me if I said she deserved all she'd got...; too many nerves, much too sensitive; if I tell you you've a smut on your nose, you'll probably forswear human society and run away for ten years to a desert island. Can she live with you without getting on your nerves? And—remember I've seen her for three seconds, at a distance—are you man enough to control her? I don't gather she's learnt much self-discipline; can you lick her into shape, or will you go flabby every time she cries?"

He waited for an answer, but Eric only murmured:

"Go on."

"Marriage is a long and intimate business. You're not marrying her for passion—or money—or social advantage; you've to start right away with what most people come to when passion's worn out; you've to be *companions* from the beginning. And you know as little of her as I do. You must wait, therefore—"

Eric interrupted him with a quick gesture:

"If I'm to be of any use, I must act at once. The girl's nearly out of her mind."

"I'm sorry for her. That doesn't justify you in doing something that may send both of you nearly out of your minds before you've been married six months. After all, something *can* be done to avoid a scandal. And you must study her... And study yourself. I mean, have you considered how you'll like to have another man's child always with you and to pretend it's yours? Are you strong enough never to patronize? And do you want a wife who marries you out of gratitude or one who marries you because she loves you?"

"I want to have some one in my life who belongs to me," Eric answered. "Another man's child... Complications generally... I feel rather like a man who tries to escape from the pains of life by embracing a new faith; the more services and observances and penances you give me, the better I shall be pleased."

Gaisford wrinkled his nose and sniffed.

"Excellent for the first week," he said. "Will you be of the same mind a year from now, if you find she gets on your nerves so that you can't work? This is self-indulgence... Don't glare at me! You're as bad as all the rest, you've the faults of your ridiculous, neurotic generation. This is a *stunt!* You're having enormous fun with a brand-new emotion... By the way, you'll probably have to tell your people everything."

Eric nodded without speaking. Obviously Lady Lane would have to be told. She was a kind woman, a practical Christian; she would be shocked and touched; she too would think in terms of sacrifice and she would admire her son extravagantly. In her heart, too, she would despise Ivy as a traitor who had sold her sex; she would find a thousand honest objections to the marriage, she would conscientiously make Ivy miserable by hinting them to her; she would exhaust every device for getting her practical Christianity carried out by deputy; and, if she failed to save her son, he would lose his mother in the very struggle which she was making on his behalf.

"I see that," said Eric grimly. "Plenty of obstacles, aren't there? And all because she sat in this chair this morning and cried her heart out."

Gaisford looked at his watch and jumped up with an exclamation of dismay:

"D'you know it's two o'clock, Eric? I must get to bed. Understand! I'm not forbidding the banns, but *promise* me to think before you do anything irrevocable; you're too good to waste on an impulse. Only one thing more. Why was she crying this morning?"

"You can hardly expect her to be light-hearted. I should think the man didn't mince matters with her last night—"

"And she was crying—for *him*. Don't forget that, my friend. Unless she's right-down vicious, he must have fascinated her pretty completely before she consented to play the fool like this; she was *very* much in love with him. For all I know, she may be very much in love with him still. You're adding to your troubles, if you've to chain her by the leg to keep her from going back to him."

"She won't have much temptation when the blackguard's deserted her."

Gaisford put on his hat and coat to the accompaniment of a succession of grunts:

"Women don't—have much temptation—to go on living—with men who beat them.—They still do it, though—even when there are no children,—even when they could run away... You always underrate the strength of sex in a woman; I'm afraid you always will. It's because you're an idealist...."

Eric did not go to bed at once. The conversation had excited his brain too much; and he felt that, if he had to meet Ivy in the morning, he must first deal honestly with every objection raised by Gaisford and overcome it or be overcome by it. He started virtuously, as he began to undress, but quickly tired. There was a trace of powder on his looking-glass; he could not see his familiar wash-hand-stand without seeing in imagination Ivy's slim, black figure bending over it, as she bathed her eyes. And then he knew that he had only listened to Gaisford in order to have some idea what difficulties he had to face.

Already his brain was half-unconsciously making plans, as it had not done since last he had in his life some one who belonged to him, "somebody to work for and take care of." As he had lived

through the day with scarcely a thought for Barbara, so now he could think of her without wincing. He set himself to think of her deliberately, as she used to come into the library, or sit on the floor in front of the fire, resting her head against his knee. Her changes of expression were as familiar as ever; he could conjure up her phrases, her intonation and laugh; the touch of her hand was still felt in his, but he could think of her without pain. That was a silent answer to Gaisford's questions.

Eric could have put it into words, but he only discovered it when he was alone, when the flat was empty, when he could shut his eyes without seeing Barbara's wan ghost....

CHAPTER SEVEN

A DOUBLE RESCUE

"One marries a girl and lives with a woman. I think I know something about girls, but I am sure I know nothing about women."

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

THOUGH the sun shone with warm encouragement as Eric swerved and rattled through the forbidding Sunday calm of Eaton Place, he was chilled by anxiety, a broken night and a sense of his own amazing rashness. Though he was still uncommitted in act, his mind had made itself up so firmly that he could not change it without a breach of faith. And now he expected to meet with one disappointment after another: Ivy had proved herself frail and not wholly truthful; he would find her to be heartless or insipid or commonplace; perhaps she would reveal a disconcerting streak of vulgarity, he might well have been mistaken in thinking her even pretty....

"I hope you hadn't arranged to do anything else to-day," he said, as they drove to Paddington.

"I was only going to dine with father and mother," Ivy answered listlessly. "The usual Sunday supper."

"Well, we can get back in time for that."

"I don't mind missing it for once. He's just come back from assizes; and they always make him so pompous that mother and I can do nothing with him for weeks afterwards."

"But he'll be disappointed," Eric suggested. Already a blemish! Ivy always seemed so selfish in her attitude towards her parents that she might become equally inconsiderate towards her husband. "We'll telephone from Maidenhead to say you're coming, and you can ask if you may bring me. I don't mind cadging an invitation, because you remember I was invited once before and couldn't go."

"Oh, they'll be delighted to see you," Ivy answered without enthusiasm.

Was it a blemish that she acquiesced so easily? Would it have been a blemish if she had resisted? Eric told himself that he must cut short this microscopic search for faults, but he was not disposed to let her off a meeting with her parents. He would really know very little of Ivy until he had seen her framed in her own house and flanked by the formidable judge and his passive consort; a chance encounter in New York and their few stilted meetings in London revealed only her insincere social mannerisms, while in their two emotional passages she had shewn him only the tragic mask.

In the cab and in the train neither was at ease, for Eric did not know how or when to begin speaking, and Ivy stared blankly out of the window with watery eyes, accepting his arrangement and disposal of her with dull thanks from a drooping mouth. Would she always be like this? Must her vitality always be drawn from him? For months, perhaps for years, she would mourn her lost lover; Eric would have to bear with irresponsive apathy... He gave her two papers, which she allowed to rest on her knees, and tried to forget his discouragement in looking about him.

The station was crowded with men in flannels and girls in gauzy frocks, all oppressively high-spirited and resolved to enjoy themselves. Every seat was taken before the train had been five minutes in the station, and, when it started, Eric found himself squeezed between Ivy and another girl in a carriage with six aside and four men standing. He looked from one to another, contrasting the girls' faces and bearing. There was an absurd similarity in hats and dresses, in their very shape and feature and age. All were wearing grey or white buckskin shoes, grey or white silk stockings thin as gossamer; all were wearing spider's-web hats and low-cut dresses with transparent sleeves. Their average age was twenty; they were perfectly happy, perfectly well-pleased with themselves and in perfect health. Like that stage-army overnight at the opera, life—as a thing of ecstasy or racking pain—passed them by. Ivy watched him, as he watched them, and he could feel her arm trembling against his.

"I telephoned for a cab," said Eric, as the train slowed into Maidenhead. "And a table. And a punt." There was no answer; and he leaned towards her, lowering his voice to a whisper: "Ivy, I've been looking forward to this ever since last night."

"I hope you won't be disappointed in me," she sighed.

"I shall only be disappointed if you don't enjoy yourself."

Ivy shivered and hid her face from him; but, as the arrangements for the day unfolded themselves, she could not help responding to his solicitude. Nothing had been forgotten, nothing could have been improved. They drove in comfort through the crowded, narrow streets of Maidenhead, while others struggled for cabs or resigned themselves to walking; a table was waiting for them by an open window, and intuition had warned him that she would want to lunch off lobster and strawberries. By luck or contrivance they were served by the most attentive waiter; the most comfortable chairs were ready for them at the water's edge, when they came out to the lawn for coffee; and the sun blazed down on them from a cloudless sky. In the hotel several people had spoken or nodded to Eric; Grace Pentyre and Lady John Carstairs detached themselves from their parties to cross the lawn and compliment Ivy on her dress; she felt her self-respect reviving and surrendered to the enveloping atmosphere of well-being.

"You *are* good to me!," she exclaimed suddenly, when Eric returned to her after ordering the punt to be made ready.

"Are you happy?," he asked.

"I'm—enjoying myself."

"Ah! that's not enough... I don't believe I've been to Maidenhead since I was an undergraduate."

"Too much work? I've never had enough in one year to keep me busy for one day!," she exclaimed impatiently.

"And I've always had more in one day than I could do in a year, ever since I was a small boy."

He helped her into the punt and began paddling up stream in search of a quiet place for mooring. Half-an-hour passed before he noticed that he was talking only about himself and his boyhood, his family and his work; then he stopped self-consciously, and Ivy looked up eagerly, waiting for him to go on.

"I envy you! I'd give anything to be you!," she exclaimed. "When I think of *my* life... and *yours*...."

Eric smiled and headed for the bank, where he made fast to an obtruding willow-root. Then he stepped into the middle of the punt, rearranged the cushions at Ivy's back and sat beside her.

"Comfortable?," he asked her. "Ivy... I want you to think over what I'm going to say, take your time and tell me what you make of it when you've thought it over from every point of view for, say, a month." He lighted a cigarette and looked straight ahead of him. "I want to know whether you'll marry me." She sat up, rigid with amazement, looking at him with round eyes. He laid a hand on her shoulder and pressed her gently back. "I've saved a fair amount of money and I'm making a good income; one hopes it will go on. I would do all I could to make you happy... Before you decide, you must try to imagine whether I'm the sort of person that you think you could live with. I'm not a professional invalid, but I have to lead rather a careful life and I suppose I've as many angles as most bachelors...."

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When she tried to speak, he had stopped her; but he found it impossible to go on cataloguing himself while she sat silent with bitten, bloodless lips.

"But... I thought you understood!," Ivy broke in, as he paused. "I'm not fit... You... or anybody."

Eric could not trust himself to look at her, but he felt for her hand.

"I'm not asking you to—yet awhile," he said. "But, when you've had time to think it over... Anything that you've told me, I—I've forgotten. In your turn, you'll have to take me as you find me... I'm a solitary man... I should like some one to take care of... Will you think this over, Ivy, very slowly and very carefully? It's a big risk... If you say 'no'—" he hesitated and shrugged his shoulders. The doubts of the morning had melted like snow beneath a tropic sun; he had recovered the mood of overnight in which pity fiercer than desire set before his eyes the picture of Ivy, praying in wild despair, and filled his ears with the fancied mutter of her prayers. If she said "no," he would be tempted to plead and argue against her decision and his own better judgement; he hoped that he might not be tempted—"if you say 'no'"—he hesitated again and moistened his lips—"I can make certain arrangements that will spare you the worst; if you say 'yes', I propose that we get married very quietly and go abroad for a time. What matters now is that you should feel comfortable in mind; there's nothing in the world for you to worry about."

He withdrew his hand and shaded his eyes to look at the leisurely procession of boats converging at the gate of Boulter's Lock. Now that he had laid his proposal before her, he seemed cold and repellent where he had meant to make a single, irresistible gesture of magnanimity; it was only by giving her everything and by spending himself to give her more than he could heal the wounds in his own spirit. Ivy's world must be the fairy palace of a dream....

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As the silence lengthened, he wondered whether he wanted her to say anything yet... The announcement would create a sensation. Many would be disappointed, a few pleased by the surface of romance; his mother would look at the slim, dark, undeveloped child and wonder whether he had been captivated by her youthful prettiness and whether such inexperience could possibly make him happy; he wondered in his turn whether a mother's uncanny intuition would discover that he was not marrying for love. Ivy, for that matter, would not be marrying for love; she would be marrying, at nineteen, for safety. Even if she had loved him now, in ten years' time she would be a different woman, capable of a different love; if she were assailed later by a passion to which she could not now pretend, he wondered how far gratitude would restrain her....

"I don't understand..." Ivy's voice was quavering. "I've been praying to die, ever since I knew... Why *should* you...?"

Her voice rose tremulously, broke and died away. Still without looking at her, Eric gripped her wrist.

"But why not?," he asked.

"I'm nothing to you, and you're—It isn't fair on you."

"I'm the best judge of that," he answered with exultant, fierce excitement that made his voice harsh. "But you're not to decide anything for the moment," he went on more gently. "Just tell me—are you happy?"

He felt his hand brushed by her lips. Then she dragged her wrist from his fingers and bent forward, burying her head in her lap.

They both felt exhausted; and neither knew what to do next. The pitiless publicity of Boulter's Lock held them in artificial restraint; there were numberless prosaic arrangements to be contrived, but Eric shirked the emotional violence of abruptly broaching them. As she regained composure, Ivy took off her hat and drew herself upright with her hands clasped round her knees, looking away from him to the line of punts under the opposite bank. She had pretty feet and ankles, pretty arms and shoulders, a straight thin back and slender neck; since their first meeting she had lost something of her looks by suddenly becoming so thin, but the sharpness of outline added to her charm of youth and delicacy. Eric suddenly remembered his chill of misgiving as he drove to Eaton Place, expecting to be disappointed in her; a warm wave of compassion blinded him, and he asked himself how a man of Gaymer's upbringing and traditions could bring himself to commit the social sin for which there was no pardon; if he had waited till Ivy was married, an intrigue would have been venial; if he had chosen a girl from a humbler walk of life, no one would have asked more than that he should behave liberally to her... That was conventional morality in England....

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Perhaps the one impossible thing had been made possible by the war. For five years there had been whispered rumours of desolating scandals scotched at the last moment. England was sex-intoxicated; women married light-heartedly on a few weeks' acquaintance and married again a few months later when their husbands had been killed, without prejudicing their right to acquire three or four lovers in the interval. And those who remained technically virtuous talked sex by day and

dreamed it at night; there was nothing they did not know, nothing they would not discuss, and in this welter of short-lived artificial excitement, when all were overworked and overstimulated, when vague cosmic hungers made themselves felt and an opportunity became a duty, it was not surprising that some had lost their heads.

But Ivy looked too fastidious. Her deferential timidity, under the skin-deep manner of bustle and efficiency which had irritated him in New York, was no challenge to a man; her youth imposed an obligation on any one with the wit to see her as an emancipated school-girl; a libertine, when he had pierced the veneer of assurance, would find her insipid; and, even if Gaymer was insensible to discrimination and honourable restraint, Eric could not understand her allowing herself to fall into his hands. Men and women drifted dizzily without seeing where they were going or how far they had gone, but Ivy seemed yet enough of a child to stop herself by sheer ignorant instinct before she began to drift.

"Eric!"

He turned quickly, for Ivy had never before used his Christian name.

"Yes?"

"Eric..." She hesitated, and he saw that her cheeks were crimson. "Eric, I want to tell you about Johnnie."

"My dear, I've forgotten that there is such a person."

After screwing herself up to do her duty, Ivy did not feel entitled to be relieved of it.

"Perhaps you won't think as badly of me afterwards," she faltered.

"But I *don't* think badly of you! I want a new life to start from to-day. If we get married—you mustn't *dream* of deciding yet—I want to obliterate everything that happened before to-day. So far as our joint life is concerned, we meet now for the first time. Let's see all we can of each other. If we become engaged, we'll announce it, get married as soon as possible and go straight out to America. I've always an excuse to go there for as long as I like; we can come back when it suits us and we can settle down to domestic life in England. It's very probable that you'll meet Gaymer—I've found that you can't avoid meeting people in London, however much you may want to—, but you'll meet him as a mere acquaintance. And, Ivy, the only thing I know of him is that I've run across him for three years in other people's houses and have never invited him to my own, because we don't seem to have anything in common. Isn't that enough?"

She made a vague movement with head and shoulders, but he could see that she was hardly listening to him.

"I—can't understand," she faltered. "You must despise me so, and I've nothing to give... It's like a dream."

"I'm asking you to give me the whole of yourself for all my life..." Eric answered. "Now I'm going to paddle you back."

Though there had been no rain for several weeks, a strong stream was flowing, and he punted swiftly to Skindle's lawn before he found that it was still too early for tea. Shooting under Maidenhead Bridge, he crossed to the Berkshire side and drifted until he found another stretch of shady bank under which they could moor the boat and smoke. Ivy beckoned him to her side and struck a match for his cigarette.

"Eric, I shall never be able to *do* anything for you," she whispered. "All you say is that *you* want to make *me* happy! Long before I met you, I'd wanted to meet you, because you wrote such wonderful plays. In New York... If anybody'd told me I was going to marry you, I should have burst out laughing. You were so big and famous. Coming over on the boat I hardly dared speak to you. I can't believe it yet... If I came to you as I was in New York—I *had* something to give then—I couldn't believe it. But I never knew you then, I never thought that any man... out of a book, I mean... Oh, I can *never* do enough, I can never *begin* to repay you!"

Her urgency sent a glow through blood which Eric once thought would never again be warm. He wanted to see his mother and Gaisford, to say to them: "You told me to make one more effort, and I've made it. You told me to forget myself. Well, I have; and I've won. The biggest effort... and the biggest victory...."

"Love must be dead long before a man renders a bill, Ivy," he said.

"I want to pay without waiting for it!"

"But love hasn't been born yet."

"Oh, it has, Eric!"

"When?"

"When you promised... You know."

Eric laughed and took her hand:

"When you thought you were dreaming? You're dreaming still, Ivy. That's why I won't let you decide till you've had time to wake up and think. Cold, grey, early-morning thinking... Perhaps I'm dreaming too. It seems so long... And you're so absurdly young, Ivy; I'm half a generation older. When I saw you outside Covent Garden last night, I felt I'd do anything to make you less miserable. Anything in the world. If we hadn't been in a public street, I'd have taken you in my arms and kissed you... I thought and argued all the evening; I wished I had more to give you. And I was glad for my own selfish sake that you were unhappy. I wasn't particularly happy myself; and I suddenly saw that, if I could give you everything I had, if I could make a new life, a happy life for you, Ivy, I should be happy myself. You see, I've not been thinking of you very much," he laughed.

She turned quickly and put her face up to him.

"Kiss me now, Eric," she begged.

"I will, when you're sure you're in love with me,—if you ever are."

"I am! You know I am! I'd do anything for you. Isn't that love?"

"You don't yet feel that I'm essential to you. That's why you need time. And, if you knew what love was, you wouldn't need me to tell you."

Ivy knitted her brows and looked away.

"I thought I did," she murmured. "I thought I couldn't get on without Johnnie. That was why; he threatened to go away...."

Eric watched her out of the corner of one eye:

"And you find you can get on without him?"

"I had to." The answer came without hesitation, but she paused at once to consider it. Eric wondered whether he had heard regret in her voice.

"If he came to see you to-night," Eric propounded, "if he explained away whatever happened two nights ago and said that he'd always meant to marry you and wanted to marry you, if he told you that it was simply a question of money—"

She interrupted with a vigorous shake of the head:

"You don't understand! He's a different man."

"He *was* the man you fell in love with, Ivy."

"No! I'd been mistaken in him."

"I only want to be sure that you're not mistaken now."

"I'm *certain* now."

There was no profit in reminding her that she must have felt at least as certain before she surrendered to Gaymer. Eric concentrated his attention on the punt, which was making slow progress against the wind and stream. As they came alongside the lawn of the Guards Club, he saw Ivy stiffen and look away; there was no apparent reason for her abrupt movement, as he could only see two wounded officers, playing with a dog, and the back of a third, who was making his way slowly towards the club-house. Evidently she did not want to be seen, and Eric felt a twinge of misgiving when he reflected how little he knew of her. Whenever a man married, he had to some extent to inherit the relations and friends, the family bores and family feuds of his wife, with a greater or less legacy of complications and indiscretions; all that he knew of Ivy and her world could be written on a single sheet of paper.

Tea was a silent and reflective meal for both of them. It was only when they had driven to the station and were walking up and down the platform that he found a reason for her embarrassment. On a bench by the head of the stairs two officers were playing with a dog; between them sat Gaymer. Now as before, Ivy saw him first, but this time he saw her and bowed. Eric would have walked on, but one of the wounded officers waved a crutch and hailed him by name.

"Hullo, Pentyre! I haven't seen you to speak to since you were smashed up," said Eric.

"No, I came to look you up when I was home about a year and a half ago, but they told me you were in America. I caught sight of you in the distance at one of Sonia's parties... This is a memento of the final Hun push. You know my brother, don't you? And Gaymer?"

"Oh, yes!" Eric felt his heart quickening its beat. There was an adequate nod, Gaymer rose with adequate alacrity and bowed a second time to Ivy; but there was no glint of resentment over their late candid meeting in Buckingham Gate, no flicker of curiosity at finding Ivy in such company and no embarrassment in meeting her at all. "You know Lord Pentyre, don't you? Miss Maitland, Mr. Frank Pentyre."

"Oh, please don't get up," Ivy begged, as Pentyre and his brother reached for their crutches.

Eric was pleased to see that she was composed—as much composed as he had been when he found himself confronted with George and Barbara at Covent Garden; he also remembered his own emotions that night and led her away as soon as he could make an opportunity.

"Well done!" whispered Eric, pressing Ivy's arm.

"Let's go further in front," she answered. "I don't want to travel up with them... Eric! I could have killed him! So cool and collected... He *knows* how he's treated me, he *knows* he's been a brute and a liar—"

"Steady on, Ivy," Eric urged, as her voice became tremulous.

"He always frightened me, because nothing seemed to make any impression on him. When he was flying, he was inconceivably brave; people have told me. He'd have been given the V. C. again and again, if any one had known. When he crashed, it would have killed any other man, but, though he's not allowed to fly any more, it's made no other difference. He frightens me, because I can't do anything with him. That night—he let me do all the talking... He's a brute."

Eric was disquieted that Gaymer should have seen them together. Most men would be glad to be relieved so promptly of their responsibilities, but under his mask of indifference Gaymer was capable of being piqued at finding himself so quickly supplanted; it was almost an invitation to see whether he could reestablish his ascendancy, a challenge to his idleness and vanity, his taste for mischief and his love of power.

"Don't have anything to do with him," Eric urged.

"I want to punish him."

"You may only punish yourself—and me."

A taxi had been ordered to wait for them at Paddington, and they escaped with relief from the crowded train and drove to the Cromwell Road. It was the first moment of privacy since the morning, and Ivy caught his hand and pressed it eagerly.

"Eric, I want to cry!" she gasped, throwing her arms around him and hiding her face on his shoulder. "I've wanted to all day, you've been so wonderful! What can you *see* in me? I *will* try to repay you, though I never can. Eric, tell me it's all true and that you're not playing with me!"

"I'm no good at jokes of that kind." She had slipped half to the floor, and he lifted her on to his knees; with a gentle pressure she drew his head to her bosom and laid a cold, tear-stained cheek against his. "Ivy, this is not my idea of taking a month to think *calmly*—"

"I don't want a month!" she cried, tightening the grip of her arms as though he were trying to escape.

"Dear child, you *must* steady yourself! We shall be at your father's house in a minute, and you can't go in like this. Dry your eyes, Ivy darling. You said you couldn't see why I was doing this; don't you see it's because I want you? But, however much I want you, I can't take you till I'm sure that I

can make you happy. Wait a month—”

“I can’t wait a month!”

It was on his lips to say “a week,” but he stopped himself in time. There was always a temptation to do what a woman asked, when she was unhappy; but the one way to make a happy woman unhappy, an unhappy woman unhappier, was to yield to her. And in his overnight sanity, before she fired his blood, he had promised Gaisford to take time before risking a double tragedy.

“A month, Ivy,” he repeated. “You must find out the sort of creature you’re marrying.”

“I shall never see you,” she pouted.

“You shall see me all day and every day, if you like. My secretary went for a holiday on Saturday. Do you remember once offering yourself for the position? I don’t mind now. You can tell your aunt and say you’re coming as a great favour to me. *Then* we shall see how quickly you get tired of me... Sit still, you little eel!”

Ivy had slipped on to the floor again and laid her head on his knees:

“Tired of you... *Tired* of you! I *love* you. And I can never thank you or be worthy of you—” She stopped abruptly and sprang up. “Eric! My darling!”

The taxi came to a standstill, and he helped her out. As they stood decorously on the steps of her father’s house, he looked at his watch and said:

“Eight hours ago you were respectfully calling me ‘Mr. Lane.’”

He saw her shivering; and her eyes filled with fear:

“Eight hours ago—seven and a half—I prayed that our train might have a collision... Is her ladyship expecting us, Henry?”

Though Ivy had only once described her home—and then in a single sentence—, one glance at the outside and another at the hall enabled Eric to deduce the character of the occupants and the moral atmosphere of the house. A young footman with two wound-stripes on his livery coat took his hat and asked whether he would like to wash before dinner. Ivy had already run upstairs to her room, and, as he followed the footman, Eric saw massive orderliness on every hand. In the dim hall stood a heavy oak table, flanked by two black oak chairs and surmounted by a presentation salver and a rack with leather-cased Bradshaw, Whittaker and Law List. It was painfully irregular, he felt, that doors, intended by the genius of orderliness to be shut, should have been left open; but he was fortunate in gaining a glimpse, through one, of mahogany side-board and massive dining-table set with eight heavy mahogany chairs and, through another, of glass-fronted fumed-oak book-cases, a double writing-table and red leather couches. The furniture seemed to have been bought in sets and ordered by post; the books—each surely an accepted classic, though Eric could see nothing of them but their calf backs—might well have been supplied by measure. The house was lighted by gas, and each room had its accredited box of matches. The all-pervading solemnity filled Eric with unseemly thoughts of irresponsible humour; he longed to transpose the match-boxes marked “HALL” and “COAT ROOM” and to see what would happen; over the basin, as he washed, was a mirror and shelf with two hair-brushes, one branded “J. F. M.” and the other “VISITORS.” Perhaps Gaymer had been detected changing the match-boxes; perhaps that was why he had been forbidden the house....

Eric checked the impulse to laugh, as soon as Gaymer came into his thoughts. It was easy to understand why a girl had been so desperately anxious to escape from such a house, easy to imagine how she would welcome any one who stretched out a hand to help her... But he had felt no resentment towards Gaymer for two hours; a cad, yes, but a cad who had made his contribution to Eric’s own destiny... What mattered now was the remembrance of Ivy’s ecstatic plunge into his arms, her quavering whisper and trembling mouth, her eyes bright with unshed tears, a kiss that sent her soul on wings to his lips. He frowned at his reflection in the mirror and wondered whether the judge would suspect anything....

Ivy was not yet down when he was shewn into the grim, shadow-filled drawing-room, but her mother welcomed him with nervous warmth. As she turned to the light, Eric saw a thin, small woman with the incongruous remains of a loveable, baby prettiness under her lined skin and her air of being never at ease. While Mr. Justice Maitland was still an unproved junior, her friends murmured that she was throwing away both herself and the snug dowry which came to her from the family business of wholesale chemists, but the initial advantage was first equalized and then turned against her; the rearing of five children tied her to the house, and her speech and outlook hinted that she had not kept pace with her husband’s social advancement.

“It’s very good of you to let me invite myself like this,” said Eric, as he shook hands with her. “As I reminded Ivy, you *were* kind enough to ask me once before, when I couldn’t come.”

“It’s a great honour, I’m sure. And I expect you’re ever so much run after.”

The judge laid aside the book that he had been reading and raised himself with slow solemnity from his chair.

“It’s not our *first* meeting, Mr. Lane; you’re not likely to remember that,” he said with austere geniality. “I knew your father in old days and I did in fact meet you not so many months after your arrival in this troubled world of ours. I should like to think that your kindness to our daughter means that you are not going to drop your early friends now that you are famous.”

The hollow click which his eye-glasses, after glissading down his nose, struck out of his shirt-front was for a moment disconcerting; but the bleak, formidable smile which accompanied the words apprised Eric that his host was venturing on badinage. He hastened to smile sympathetically, as he took in the details of appearance and manner. Sir James Maitland was tall and spare, with a long, blue-grained jaw, plentiful grey hair and light, steady eyes set deep under bushy brows. His clothes, like himself, were deliberately old-fashioned; the loose-cut trousers accentuated his thin, bent legs, and a low double collar gave him the hungry, long neck of a vulture. Eric was prepared to find him pompous and despotic in his grave moments and tedious in all; he felt like a reveller who had strayed inadvertently into a grave-yard where the distant fragrance and music that he had left were swallowed in chilling mustiness and silence. If any one for a moment ceased talking in that house, the brooding spirit of melancholy would claim them all in forfeit.

"I didn't meet Ivy till just before I left America," he said. "I wish I'd seen more of her."

"I gather you gave her, if I may say so, very sound advice, *very* sound," said the judge. "She had heard the same sort of thing from her parents more than once, but it is the modern fashion to disregard what parents say. I've watched the growth of liberty among the girls of the present day," he went on, as though he were delivering a considered judgement and defying other courts to reverse it on appeal, "and I can't find a single good thing to be said for it; not a single good thing."

"Oh, *I* can!," Eric answered. "A generation ago I'm sure I shouldn't have been allowed to take Ivy on the river alone, and we should both have missed a very delightful day. At least, *I* enjoyed it; I mustn't speak for her."

"I'm sure she, too..." Lady Maitland turned, as the door opened. "Well, my dear, how did you get on?"

Ivy looked past her to Eric and then turned to her mother with shining eyes:

"It was wonderful! Mr. Lane, you're the perfect host, you know."

Eric bowed, noting from her form of address that she did not yet propose to take her parents into her confidence. Lady Maitland was looking closely at her, and he wondered what inference was being drawn from the tell-tale, starry brightness of the eyes. Magic and poetry were not dead so long as a man could charm that soft diamond sheen from a girl's eyes... He discovered that the judge was asking him a question—and wondered what inference would be drawn from his own tell-tale absence of mind....

"It was such a glorious day, it couldn't help being successful," he said hastily. "We caught the eleven o'clock at Paddington and went to Maidenhead...."

He was still describing their day, when Ivy's two sisters entered with their husbands. Eric did not hear much of Lady Maitland's mumbled introduction, but one woman appeared to be Rose and the other Myrtle. Their mother evidently inclined towards horticultural prettiness; and the judge had probably been very scornful when the names were chosen. Scorn, indeed, seemed his fixed attitude of mind towards his family; the sons-in-law forgot that they were promising young chancery barristers and were only careful to avoid being committed for contempt of court. One had travelled from Wimbledon, the other from Beaconsfield; they came every week like fascinated rabbits... If it had not been the middle of the Cambridge term, Ivy's two brothers would have completed the ceremonial, unchanging circle... The elder sisters had Ivy's good looks without her rebelliousness of spirit; in any massed attack against their parents they would first hesitate and then surrender; marriage was to them primarily an escape from the necessity of making massed attacks on any one; they were their mother's daughters....

Supper was announced; and Eric found himself between the elder sister, who never spoke, and Lady Maitland, who only stopped speaking when the judge drowned her voice. As wine followed wine and course followed course, Eric felt that rules could be framed for the legal profession, binding its private life as straitly as the inhibitions of caste-law. At one remove he had watched it in the days when he shared chambers in Pump Court with Jack Waring and observed the grub of the pupil-room, who lunched with fellow-grubs in Hall, developing through the chrysalis stage of the newly-called junior into the practising barrister who first marshalled a judge and was later bidden by younger marshals to dine with the judge in his lodgings. From his friend's description Eric gathered that most barristers and all judges lived in the same kind of house, married the same kind of wife and ate the same food. At the end of dinner they told the same legal anecdotes before suggesting bridge. (Mr. Justice Maitland probably disapproved of bridge on Sundays, but he had been playing golf at Walton Heath—with other judges....)

Eric sipped a matchless sherry and sympathized with Lady Maitland over her difficulties in obtaining butter during the war. (A small farmer who lived near her old home in Hampshire had been willing to supply an unlimited quantity, but the judge felt that it was bad citizenship to exceed their ration by an ounce.) Ivy was watching them silently, asking him with her eyes whether he now wondered why she had run away from home; no vice could be imputed to her parents, but they were solidly uncongenial, and in his turn Eric privately debated the possibility of being able to break away altogether from the Cromwell Road after marriage. To rescue her from the judge was no less important than to rescue her from Gaymer. It would be intolerable, if he were expected to dine there regularly; fortunately, he was at present being treated with extravagant deference, which shewed that a reputation still had its value; and, for a man, economic freedom consisted in being able to patronize his father-in-law....

Strong mock-turtle soup and sherry; cold salmon and champagne that was drinkable—and no more—(the judge had brought it out in Eric's honour, and it had been kept long enough to lose its quality); cold roast beef, gooseberry tart and cheese, followed by a bottle of '84 Dow; it was a plain, substantial meal, spoiled by Lady Maitland's unceasing efforts to make her guest overeat himself and by his own need to talk in three keys at once. The judge asked what the next play was to be and gave himself a cue for recalling and describing the London stage as he had known it in his youth (from the age of thirty he had been too busy to spare time for the theatre, and nowadays—with certain illustrious exceptions which he did not need to specify—there were no plays worth seeing). Lady Maitland was still troubled by the butter shortage and the difficulties of providing for a big house; it was a pain of spirit, which wrung from her a moan whenever she could make it heard; and, though the judge dominated the conversation with his cues and speeches, she remained resolutely undefeated with an inexhaustible store of food-news which she poked through the interstices of her husband's periods.

"I was asked to be chairman of a committee on dramatic censorship," he explained. "That's how I come to be interested in the subject."

"You must have some more gooseberries," insisted Lady Maitland swiftly, as he paused. "They're from our own garden in Norfolk. Fruit always seems so much nicer when you've grown it yourself, don't you think?... I was telling you about that salmon. The price—but prices don't mean anything to a bachelor, *I'm* sure; you just order what you fancy, and, if it's not in season, so much the worse for

you." She laughed at her own audacity. "Well, the reason why salmon is so disgracefully dear is that ever so much has been deliberately allowed to go bad so as to force up the price of the rest. I always think it's so wicked to waste food, don't you? With so much want about. The people with small fixed incomes—I'm always so sorry for them. I had a case the other day, the woman who used to teach my girls music—"

"I'm sure Mr. Lane doesn't want to hear about *her*," interposed Ivy with more solicitude for Eric than civility to her mother. "Father, Mr. Lane's secretary has gone away for a holiday, and I'm going in her place."

The two sisters looked up with dawning interest; Lady Maitland glanced covertly at Eric; the judge nodded slowly to give himself time to think. Ivy had thrown out the announcement without inviting his approval or opinion. If she wanted either, it was not fair to speak in front of Eric, but he had not adjusted himself to the new conditions of her emancipation....

"How does that work in with Connie's arrangements?," asked Lady Maitland, when her husband's silence began to look like discourtesy to Eric.

"Oh, she can get on without me for a month," Ivy answered easily. "Don't you think it will be fun?"

"What does Mr. Lane say?"

Eric wished that the subject had not been introduced, if it brought so much latent antagonism to the surface.

"She will be of very great assistance to me, if you'll let her come," he answered.

The judge reached out eagerly to take up the challenge:

"My dear Lane, *we* don't control Ivy's movements."

"But I shouldn't dream of asking her to come against your wishes. We discussed this in America, before I engaged my present secretary."

Lady Maitland was still visibly fluttered by finding Eric at her table and discovering him to be Ivy's intimate friend. The wives of barristers and judges lived to as rigid a pattern as that of their husbands; and it was part of their guild-law to dislike the idea of any girl's wandering off in the morning and returning at night without giving any account of herself or having any one to look after her. Mr. Lane, indeed, had a big enough position of his own to make him careful of his reputation; he seemed steady and sensible, agreeing with almost everything that she had said....

The judge felt that he had been trapped. It was no longer possible to launch side-long reproaches at Ivy, when the responsibility of the decision was put into his hands. As he waited for their decision, Eric was able to break free for a moment from their fog of timid conventionality and ask himself what they would think if they ever guessed why he was there at that moment.

"Well, that's a very proper sentiment," said the judge at length, "very proper. I'm glad to find one person in the house who thinks that the wishes of parents should be consulted; I'm glad that Ivy should see that this is not merely senile perversity or malice... I'm sure we can trust her to you, Lane. If you could discover what we've done to make life insupportable to her at home," he added caustically, "we shall be glad of enlightenment."

Eric laughed, because it saved an answer; but Rose and Myrtle were sitting upright and tense in scared anticipation of a scene, while their husbands ransacked void brains for an attractive subject of conversation. Lady Maitland was gamely casting back to the gross tonnage of bully-beef wantonly wasted by the expeditionary force in the first six months of the war; but their prompt and practised contrivance only strengthened his feeling that he had never seen a house in which the older generation succeeded less in understanding and sympathizing with the aspirations, the enthusiasms, even the follies of the young. He was sorry for Ivy and her brothers and sisters, sorry for the common, faded, pretty mother; but he was also sorry for the blue-jawed judge, who was a more interesting dramatic type, ruling like a patriarch until dumb obedience changed without warning, so far as he could see, to flaming revolt. A bigger man would not feel humiliated that his daughter had transferred herself to a house two miles away in the same city, because life at home rawed her nerves; the judge only knew that this thing had been done, and he suspected that the whole legal world of South Kensington was discussing it with malicious interest.

At the end of dinner, the two sisters whispered to their husbands about trains and slipped away with a murmured good-night. Left with an untried audience, the judge returned freshly to the charge. While he was at the bar, Maitland had won grudging tributes to the range and depth of his knowledge; in his facts, if not in his law, he improvised the little that he did not know, and the habit had become permanent in his conversation. Before they had finished discussing the rival degrees of hard work demanded of literature and the bar, Eric had detached himself from the plans of personal interest and fatigue and was surveying his host as a study to be committed to a certain closely guarded note-book in his safe at home. The judge conversed methodically: he would introduce his subject with a flourish like a self-conscious proprietor flinging open the door of a room and asking his visitors what they thought of *that*; after listening to half the answer, he would raise one hand, beg leave to interrupt and develop his theme unsparingly, only stopping when the chance of asking another question promised him the opportunity of delivering another discourse.

"I'm afraid I shall have to be going in a moment," said Eric, as the judge offered him a second cigar. "I have work to do before I go to bed."

"Well, I'm very glad to have had this talk. You'll come upstairs?" He led the way to the door and paused with his fingers on the handle. "Do you know a friend of Ivy's called Gaymer?"

"I've met him a certain number of times," Eric answered easily enough.

"What d'you think of him?"

"Oh, I hardly like to give an opinion of a man I know so little."

The judge laughed sombrely:

"A good answer! You're by no means as young and simple as you look, Lane. Well, the reason I asked is this: I'm making you personally responsible for Ivy and, if young Gaymer comes round after her, I shall be obliged if you'll send him about his business. Half the nonsense in Ivy's head comes from him. They struck up a very warm intimacy—quite unknown to her mother and me, of course!

that's the modern method; I only heard of it from people who were seeing them about together. So I got my gentleman to honour me with his company at dinner; and I put it to him—what was it all about? He pretended he didn't understand, but I wouldn't have any of that. 'I'll thank you,' I told him, 'not to behave in such a way as to cause people to gossip about my daughter. I daresay you think I'm old-fashioned,' I said. 'You may think I'm wrong,' I said. 'You may tell me that you're only doing what thousands of other men do; all I say is, I was brought up in a different school.' And I may tell you, Lane, that it was a school in which young men had manners flogged into them. My gentleman stared at me very saucily and said: 'Are you asking me my "intentions"? Nineteen-nineteen! Is that still done? I've been away at the war so long that I've lost touch with that sort of thing.' Well, then I rang for his coat and hat. I've not seen him since; but that was quite enough to make Ivy take his side, and I've never had any doubt that he put into her head the idea of going off and living her own life. 'Living her own life'! How tired I am of that phrase!...

"I don't encourage people to interrupt me when I'm working, judge," Eric reassured him.

The double doors of the drawing-room were open, and, as his head came on a level with the landing, Eric saw Ivy sitting on a cushion at her mother's feet and talking with listless unconcern. She had put on her hat, and her gloves were lying across her knees. Perhaps she was only tired after her long day in the open air, perhaps she was goaded beyond bearing by her father's pin-pricks; or perhaps she had been pleading fatigue so that he might take her away and be alone with her... As they came into the room, her unconcern dropped from her, and she turned with the same sheen of adoration in her eyes. He prayed that the judge might have missed it; he ought not to have been expecting it, for they had been talking gravely and responsibly as fathers of families, and Eric had been commissioned to protect Ivy from undesirable acquaintances... Lady Maitland had turned at the same moment, so she could not have seen the glance; but, unless she were blind, she must notice that Ivy was still transfigured....

"I was just coming down to say good-bye! Mr. Lane, what time do I come to you to-morrow? If it's early, I *must* go to bed now."

"I suppose nine o'clock's out of the question?," Eric hazarded.

"I can manage that."

"Then won't you let me see you home? I was telling your father that I'd work to finish. Lady Maitland, will you think me very rude if I run away? It's so kind of you to let me come."

"We were honoured to have you, I'm sure," Lady Maitland answered. "And now that you have found your way here—"

"That's too charming," he interrupted before she could finish the dreaded sentence.

The judge said good-night warmly to his guest and less warmly to his daughter, adding, before the doors were securely closed, that Lane seemed a sensible, steady, decent young fellow.

Ivy offered smiling congratulations.

"Eric, I thought you were never coming!," she whispered. "My dear, you were wonderful! Mother's in love with you! And you could hear what a success you'd been with father. Was it a very terrible evening? I didn't notice anything except that you were there; I couldn't see any one else. I suppose father was disapproving of me, as usual...."

She stopped speaking, as the front door was opened for them.

"We must get things right with your people somehow," said Eric reflectively. "I think it's awful when children don't get on well with their parents."

"But, my dear, is it my fault? I don't believe father ever cared for me much, but he really hates me now."

"If he does, it's because he was very fond of you before... Nature's substitute...."

Ivy slipped her arm through his and walked for some moments in silence. A taxi was on the rank by Gloucester Road Station, and they got into it.

"There's only one substitute for love," she whispered. "A greater love... Isn't that true?"

"I hope so."

"We'll make it so."

"If, Ivy. Remember that for a month—"

"A month! But it'll be just the same. I shall be with you every day. 'I suppose nine o'clock's out of the question,'" she mimicked. "I'll come at eight or seven or six. And stay till mid-night."

"And a nice character I should get from your father. He's made me responsible for you, Ivy... Eaton Place. And you *have* been happy?"

"Oh, Eric, I wish it wasn't over! Happy!"

Eric laughed and helped her out of the taxi. Her happiness was so radiant that he felt it could not last. As he drove away he wondered whether she had been as radiant with Gaymer. Such intensity of passion was frightening; love that grew from seed to flower and fruit in a single day might die in a single night....

Ivy stood on the doorstep until he was out of sight. Eric stared long at an unlighted cigarette and then searched his pockets for a match. He was bewildered and a little nervous and utterly exhausted....

CHAPTER EIGHT

HALF-HONEYMOON

“... And by and by my Soul return’d to me,
And answer’d ‘I Myself am Heav’n and Hell:
Heav’n but the Vision of fulfill’d Desire,
And Hell the Shadow from a Soul on fire...”

EDWARD FITZGERALD: “RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM.”

A FORTNIGHT before Whitsuntide Lord Pentyre engaged a taxi for the day and drove round London, belatedly assembling a house-party for Croxton Hall.

“Mothers aren’t fit to be trusted!,” he explained querulously to Deganway, when they met in the smoking-room of the County Club. “I suppose it’s the war. They’ve got utterly out of hand... And you could always rely on mine to collect the worst-assorted cranks, crooks and bores in the length and breadth of Buckinghamshire. I vaguely left things to her... You must help me out, Gerry; we’ll make up a party of our own and freeze out the others.”

Deganway called for a draft list of the guests before committing himself.

“General Sir Maurice Maitland,” he read, letting fall his eye-glass in blank dismay. “Oh, my dear, he’ll want to talk to me about the war; no one can make him understand that it’s *over*... Lady Maitland... She always wants to know what I’m going to do about Russia and *will* make me responsible for the peace conference... Ivy... Oh, that’s the niece; Eric Lane has a wild passion for her—”

“I saw him at Maidenhead with her last Sunday. Happy thought! He shall come and talk to her... I want one or two bright souls who’ll talk to *me* and perhaps take a hand in a little game of poker. You, me, Babs Oakleigh, Sonia O’Rane, my young brother,—Amy Loring doesn’t play—the Pinto de Vasconcellos....”

“Oh, Bobbie, *can* we bear them for the whole of a long week-end?,” asked Deganway with misgiving. “Madame is mortally offended with any man who doesn’t make love to her, and the husband with any man who does. I should hate to be knifed or garotted or whatever they do in Brazil or wherever they come from.”

“I don’t know them. Margaret Poynter wished them on to my mother.”

“I don’t know them either. I dine with them, and that’s surely enough... Well, I’ll see you through with them, if you’ll do the same for me another time.”

Pentyre reached for his crutches and returned to his taxi. After drawing blank at the Eclectic Club, he found John Carstairs at Hale’s and Eric at the Thespian. The draft list was again submitted for approval, with Ivy’s name prominently exposed as a bait; and, with an effort of concentration, Eric addressed himself to the invitation. For ten days he had been too much preoccupied to think of a world outside Eaton Place and Ryder Street; week-end parties were no doubt being made up; strange, half-forgotten voices summoned him to dine and go to the opera, but he lived and worked in a dream bounded by unconsciousness from the moment when Ivy left him at night till the moment when she reappeared next day.

“Most of the party will be coming on Friday afternoon,” Pentyre explained.

“Where to?,” asked Eric.

“Croxton, of course, you idiot! Do pay a *little* attention! You needn’t pretend you’ve never been there. Well, what about it?”

Eric stretched out his hand for the list and, on reading it again, discovered that he had read it the first time without taking in any of the names.

“I should love to come,” he answered absently.

Pentyre limped away in search of new victims, leaving Eric to dine with Dr. Gaisford. An accomplice is entitled to full confidence, and Eric had invited the doctor to receive a report on the Maidenhead expedition; when Pentyre burst disturbingly in on his reverie, he was wondering how much to tell. A week had passed since Ivy entered upon her duties as secretary; on the first day she walked sedately into the library, as nine o’clock was striking, then listened for the door to close behind her and fluttered into his arms.

“I came so early that I had to wait outside for a quarter of an hour,” she said, putting up her face to be kissed. “How are you, Eric?”

“Hardly awake yet,” he answered. “I usually dictate from my bed, at this hour, but I didn’t want to embarrass you, so I’m dressed long before my time.”

“But what a shame!... Won’t you kiss me good-morning, Eric?”

He shook his head and laughed. A half honeymoon was too dangerous an experiment with a girl who was supposed to be considering dispassionately whether she wanted to marry him. And, if he expected to leave England in six or eight weeks’ time, there was abundant work to be done first.

“I shall *probably* call you ‘Miss Maitland’ from nine till six,” he told her. “Do you like working with or without a hat? I’ll shew you where I keep my typewriter and stationery and files and things; and then I can give you enough letters to keep you occupied till lunch-time.”

He was leading the way to the door, when Ivy laid her hand on his arm.

“Don’t be so horribly efficient for *five* minutes,” she begged. “I haven’t seen you since last night, Eric! *Such* a long time! And I want to be shewn your flat. I was too miserable to see anything when I was here before.”

In a day and a night she had recovered her self-respect and composure; she had slept well, and the shadows under her eyes had faded. Eric had not the heart to chill her new-found happiness.

“Five minutes, then,” he conceded. “But we shall have to work twice as fast afterwards. Did your aunt raise any objection to your coming here?”

“Oh, she was delighted... Eric, you *have* got the loveliest rooms. We shall live here, of course; I

couldn't bear to go anywhere else."

"If," he warned her.

"When," she amended. "Eric, why d'you insist on waiting a month? D'you want to see if you'll get tired of me?"

"No, I just want to be sure that you know your own mind. Sudden conversions are always dangerous. And you're too precious to me to be married on a snap decision. So for a month we won't say or do anything that ties your hands in any way. I'm not giving a hint to any one, even my own people; I'm not proposing to make any allusion to you."

Before three days had passed Eric found that it was easier to take this resolution than to live up to it. Amy Loring stopped him in the street to say:

"I hear the little Maitland girl is working for you now. I'm so glad."

"My secretary's gone for a holiday," he answered, unconsciously putting himself on his guard. "Ivy kindly consented to come in her place for a few weeks."

"I was told you'd taken her on permanently."

"Oh, no! Who did you hear that from?"

"Johnnie Gaymer. He seems to have transferred his affections to another quarter. I won't mention names, but a woman—she's rather a friend of mine; at least, her husband is; and, while he's away, she's been getting much too intimate with Johnnie—I talked to her... And then I talked to him. Whether it ever does any good I don't know, but I did tell him very frankly to keep his hands off other people's property. And, while I was on the subject, I told him to leave this Maitland child alone. It was then that he told me she'd gone to you."

"His intelligence department is good," Eric commented. "She only came to me two days ago."

"I expect Johnnie feels that his nose is a little out of joint."

Eric smiled, but he was disquieted; though he saw and heard nothing of Gaymer, he could not help thinking of him; he had been brooding uneasily when Pentyre came into the club; he continued to worry himself with vague doubts as he waited for Gaisford.

"Well, I suppose I may say we're on probation," Eric announced, when the doctor arrived for dinner. "I put the whole case before the girl, the day after our talk, and we're taking a month to see how we get on before she makes her final decision. I hope that may be accounted to me for prudence. By the way, she's working for me as secretary for a few weeks."

"So I heard."

"Damnation!"

The doctor laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"You know, Eric, you're as much of an ostrich as you've always been," he said. "Either credit people with the faculty of sight, or be philosophical and say you don't care what other people think."

"I *don't* care,—but it's annoying," said Eric inconsequently. "How did you hear?"

"From Barbara Oakleigh."

Eric was startled, and his expression and tone grew hard.

"It's very good of her to interest herself in me," he murmured.

Gaisford ignored the sneer and gave Eric time to recover his urbanity.

"It's very natural," he amended. "I told you, when you first came back, that you'd played far too big a part in her life for her to let go of you without a struggle. You may think that, after the harm she's done, she'd keep away out of common decency—that's a man's point of view—; but, when a woman gets down to what she considers vital, common decency has no meaning for her. The function of woman—"

"What did she say?," Eric interrupted, blowing away the froth of generalization.

"We had a long talk. She asked if I'd seen you, and I said 'Yes.' How were you? I said you were better than you'd been in ten years. Did you seem happy? 'Very,' I said. (I'm devoted to Barbara in spite of everything, but she wanted the luxury of feeling that she'd spoil your life and of pretending to be inconsolable about it; I couldn't allow that). She asked if you ever mentioned her; I said 'no'... Then I could see that she wasn't satisfied, for her next question was—who was the girl who was working for you; and was she the girl who was always with you at the opera? I said, truthfully enough, that I didn't know... Be warned, my friend."

"I wonder how she heard," was all that Eric would answer; but he was aflame with resentment at the thought that Barbara even unconsciously dreamed of overturning the flimsy shelter which he was so patiently erecting from the rubble and ruin of his life.

Gaisford looked at him out of the corner of his eye and saw that he was frowning. He saw, too, that, were Barbara to question him now, he could not so truthfully pay tributes to Eric's health.

"Well, I wish you the best of luck, my son," he said. "Of course, it's an enormous risk, but I think you do at least see that; and you're giving yourself as fair a chance as circumstances allow."

"You're—temperate in your enthusiasm," Eric laughed.

"I've reached an age when I no longer look for perfection—even the perfect marriage," Gaisford said at length. "And I've outgrown romance. And I've not many ideals left. When everything else is burnt out, I want to know that you've found companionship. You're as bad as all the rest, Eric; at present you're doing this for a new emotion... I don't *know* this girl—, but is she going to be a *companion*? It's an awful thing to marry some one who's not educated up to your standard; it's like playing bridge eternally with a partner who doesn't know one suit from another."

"She's—a companion all right," said Eric softly, remembering with a warm rush of gratitude the new colour that she had already brought into his life. Ivy was quick and receptive; he found her also well-read and intelligent, with a personal standpoint towards books and ideas which she had taken up by herself and would not surrender without a struggle; if she picked up her generation's catch-words, it was because she was still too young to understand the emancipation of which every one was talking. Best of all, she was adaptable by nature, and he could see her moulding herself to his form in the single hope of bringing him happiness. "She's companion enough to make me forget

everything else—already,” he added.

“*Already?* It doesn’t occur to you that you’re both drunk with romance at the moment? The reason why your two-penny-halfpenny plays are so popular is that we all love telling ourselves stories and escaping into a world where we can be as dramatic and romantic and purposeful and magnanimous as a character in a book—or as you and this child are being at this moment. Admit that you’re both enjoying it! The heroics, the tragedy, the sacrifice—”

“I’m making no sacrifice, Gaisford,” Eric interrupted, soberly.

“You’re incorrigible! You were *bound* to say that! It’s in the part. Well, well! I only beg you—because I’m fond of you—not to make a farce of what you call your probation. Imagine yourself criticizing some one else’s play instead of living in one of your own. Detachment, detachment!”

For the next few days Eric conscientiously tried to regard his secretary as a soulless, amorphous machine; Ivy, however, was made too much of a piece to work mechanically from nine till half-past one, then give rein to her feelings from half-past one till three and again relapse into a machine. She toiled as though her life and his career depended on every letter that she wrote; her eyes shone when he came into the room; and she took in every movement of his body and every trick of voice and speech. At the end of the day she sprang up like a child released from school and threw her arms round him.

“Do you *always* work like this?,” she asked him one night. “It *must* be bad for you.”

“I don’t call *this* work,” he answered. “The atmosphere’s too highly charged with Miss Ivy Maitland for that. But I want to get my present job finished, so that, *if* I go to America—”

“*When,*” she interrupted with a pleading smile that taxed his fortitude. It was hardly possible to keep at an artificial distance without robbing her of her precarious security.

“We’ll discuss that in three weeks’ time. *If* I go, I want to go with a clear conscience.”

“You insist on waiting?”

“We can’t take any risk, Ivy,” he sighed.

She pushed him gently into a chair and knelt on the floor by his side, resting her face on her hands and looking at him with an adoration which seemed still too great for her to comprehend.

“My darling, do you think I don’t love you more and more every day?,” she asked. “I don’t *want* to wait. Sometimes I grow frightened, Eric; I wonder if you’ll repent... I know you love me, or you wouldn’t have done what you have done—”

“But you wouldn’t be a woman, if you didn’t want me to tell you at short intervals that I still loved you. I’m trying to get a cool judgement from you.”

“And I don’t want to be cool or temperate or sensible. I... I want not to be frightened again, Eric.”

Her eyes, wistful with discouragement, filled with tears and fell until he could see the long lashes black against her cheeks. Since their return from Maidenhead, she had never complained; and Eric was in danger of forgetting that she had anything to fear. Putting his arm round her waist, he lifted her on to the arm of the chair.

“You’ve nothing to be afraid of, Ivy,” he whispered, stroking her short black hair until she grew calm at his touch. “I shouldn’t go back on my promise, even if I wanted to. And it happens that I don’t want to.”

“But you *do* love me, Eric? I’ve been thinking—quite a lot and quite cold-bloodedly. I can’t take what you’re offering, unless you love me. It would be too much, I should have no right... If I did anything, after this, to make you wretched... And I *shouldn’t* take it... You said you’d marry me in spite of everything, but I sometimes think you’re marrying me *because* of everything, *because* I’ve made such a mess of my life, *because* you were divinely sorry for me. But do you love me apart from that? If I told you that the whole thing was a dream—”

“I should call it a device of destiny for bringing us together...” He stopped abruptly, afraid to trust his voice, as her eyes lit up. “And, by the same test, if that *were* only a dream, would you want to marry me?,” he continued.

“Yes.”

“More than any one you’ve ever met or are likely to meet?”

“Yes.” Eric sighed and lapsed into silence; for the first time in ten days he felt sure of himself. “But I shan’t love you a bit,” she pouted, “if you’re cold and remote when we’re married.”

“If... All right, I won’t tease you, Ivy child, if it frightens you. What can I say to keep you from ever being frightened again? Shall I tell you that my heart and head and everything inside me were dead until a few days ago? You’ve brought me to life again...” He leaned his head against her shoulder, staring into the empty fire and talking more to himself than to her. “What d’you think it means to me to feel that this room’s alive, alive with you? When I’m called, my first thought is that in two hours I shall see you. An hour and a half, one hour... When you come in, Ivy, it’s all dark outside. It’s not what I should call easy to work with you. I want to break the typewriter and pick you up in my arms... Is it just a coincidence that I’ve happened to lunch at home every day this week? Or is it possible that I’ve been looking forward to it ever since the last moment when we were off duty together? Is it coincidence that I’ve been to the opera every night this week—Aida, ye all powerful gods! and another dose of Louise—and that I’ve sat two feet behind you so that I could see your face lit up and knew that you were happy?” Her hand stole down over his shoulder, and he seized and kissed it. “And I wonder if you’ll ever guess how amazingly empty these rooms seem when I come back at night and find you’re not here—and *won’t* be here till next day?”

“I *know*. When I get back... I pray for you, Eric. I never used to pray before. At least, it never meant anything to me, but now... I thank God for you; and I feel He understands... He understands that you’ve interceded for me. And I pray Him to forgive me and shew me some way of paying you back. And sometimes I pray Him to make me patient; and sometimes, when I’m frightened, I pray Him just to make the weeks pass quickly. Ah, my dear one!” Her fingers tightened on his wrist, and the voice at his ear trembled. “If anything happened to you!”

“Nothing’s going to, Ivy!”

“But *ever?* You’re sixteen years older than I am. When I’m seventy—”

"You'll have had more than enough of me then."

"Please God, I shall die before you, Eric!"

"Well, I'll promise not to marry again," he laughed. "Ivy, are you too tired to take down one more letter?"

"My darling, of course not!"

"I want you to write to my solicitors. I've never made a will; and, of course, I shall have to make another, *if* and *when* we marry, but I don't want to run even the remotest risk. I gather that you can't look to your father with any certainty?"

"He told me so—quite definitely. If I *chose* to cut myself adrift—"

"Well, I'm going to tell my solicitors to draft a will; I'll leave your name blank and fill it in afterwards. Then, if I drop down dead in the street—"

"Don't, Eric!"

It was seven o'clock before he had finished, and they both had to dress and make their way out to dinner by a quarter past eight. Eric walked into Ryder Street to find her a taxi and to post his letters.

"What do you say to coming to my people for this next week-end?," he asked. "We won't tell them anything, of course, but I should like you to meet them. I'm committed to going any way; and I can take you on the plea of work, if necessary. My younger brother was away fighting, when he came of age, so we're celebrating it now. Will you come? Good. We'll discuss details at dinner; you're coming to this Brazilian show at the Ritz, aren't you?"

"Madame Pinto de Vasconcellos? Yes, Aunt Connie's taking me."

"Let's hope we're together. It threatens to be a tiresome evening."

His dinner-party, heralded by a flamboyant card of invitation and reinforced by the personal appeals of Lady Maitland, Mrs. Shelley and Lady Poynter, had threatened him for three weeks. Early in the season a taciturn and swarthy South American had descended upon London with a wife, a bottomless purse and inexhaustible letters of introduction. Madame Pinto had noteworthy diamonds, vitality, an interest in the more obvious forms of flirtation and a hunger for entertaining. Her first letter of introduction was presented to Lady Poynter, who telephoned to six friends in twice six minutes: "If you will help me out with this Pinto woman, I'll do the same for you"; and for three weeks the Brazilians were pushed from house to house by those who were menaced by their own Madame Pinto—under other names—or who had launched Madame Pintos in the past. Gerry Deganway, whose name headed every list of those whom it did not matter inviting to meet the Pinto de Vasconcellos, tracked them round London and sketched a map of their progress from Belgrave Square and Lady Poynter, where they were submerged by symbolist poets and rapidly expelled because they "contributed nothing" to the symposium, by way of Eaton Place, where Lady Maitland sold them boxes for charity concerts, to Grosvenor Square and Croxton Hall, where Lady Pentyre took them in because, in her son's words, she knew no better and would be kind to any one.

Thereafter gratitude or vindictiveness urged them to reprisals, and for three more weeks Lady Poynter arranged "Pinto parties" on the principle that, if her friends would keep her in countenance on one day, she would do the same for them when their turn came. The formula was incorporated in the code of social honour, till a man would more readily have malingered on the eve of an attack than failed to succour a friend who was struck down by a Pinto invitation. Eric had resisted for some weeks: but Lady Poynter at last presented an ultimatum, which he saw no means of evading.

There was already a considerable nucleus when he reached the hotel a few minutes before the advertised time for dinner; and those who knew nothing of their host were industriously adding to the saga collected by those who did.

"Why does Margaret Poynter *do* these things?," squeaked Deganway with a petulant glance round the company. "She's *too* tiresome. What she can *hope* to get out of it—"

"I understand she's trying to make him subsidize a Shakespeare theatre," interrupted Carstairs. "Well, I mustn't throw stones; my old mother wants to stick him with Herrig on a long lease. *I* think it's a bit of a gamble, because no one knows anything about them. The Embassy shuts up like an oyster, if you mention their name; and the Brazilian colony don't seem much the wiser."

"Oh, *I* heard—Now, let me see, what *did* I hear?," said Deganway, letting fall his eye-glass and frowning. "He got a contract for building a new railway and, because the contract said nothing about bridges, he stopped short, whenever he came to a river, and started again on the other side. Then they gave him a new contract to build the bridges and link up his system. *That's* where he made his profit; but Brazil wasn't healthy, when he'd finished, so he bolted with the boodle. So romantic! He didn't bolt quick enough, though; *she* overtook him just as the gangway was being cast off."

He laughed thinly; but Eric had heard enough from him and, turning away, he found himself face to face with Lady John Carstairs.

"Do *all* English people make fun of a woman before eating her food," she said rather sharply, with a quelling gesture at her husband, as they shook hands.

"Only the better-bred," Eric answered. "It's one of the things you have to get used to. What's Madame Pinto like? I don't even know her by sight."

"Oh, she's quite harmless, but you can't pick up everything in a day. I've been here six months and I can't yet keep all my own husband's relations distinct... Ah, here they are!"

She turned with a smile, as a stout, sallow woman in a pink dress advanced apologetically into the lounge with a tall, saturnine husband at her heels. Both looked round with dizzy shyness, breaking into shrill effusiveness, when they recognized a face and could fit it with an approximate name. Madame Pinto de Vasconcellos spoke fluent English with a strong accent; her husband limited himself to a bow, a handshake and a clipped "How do you do?," as his wife's friends brought up their own friends to be introduced. From time to time, pretending to count the numbers, he peered furtively at a type-written list, but, as Lady Poynter undertook the introductions and never remembered more than one name, his initial perplexity deepened to bewilderment.

Eric was caught and pushed forward with a hasty, "You know Madame Pinto, don't you? Now, is it worth while waiting for the Oakleights? Barbara was born a week late, and she's never caught up."

Though he fancied that for the last fortnight he had forgotten Barbara and that for the last three months he had rehearsed himself into impassivity, Eric knew that the muscles of his face were stiffening. Lady Poynter was happily too much preoccupied to notice any sign of embarrassment, and in a moment he was at ease again. It would be a strain on his fortitude, perhaps, if he were placed next to Barbara; but he knew that he could meet her and sit composedly at the same table. He knew also that this meeting had to take place....

Lady Poynter possessed herself of the type-written list and suggested that they should begin without waiting any longer. As he peered at the name-cards, Eric was relieved to find that he was five places away from Barbara, on the same side of the table, between Ivy and Madame Pinto; he was further relieved that he was facing the door so that he would probably see her before she saw him....

As dinner began, his hostess exchanged bewilderment for frank recklessness.

"I do not know half these people," she confided loudly. "I meet so many. Tell me, Mr. —," she reached for powdered sugar and tried without success to read Eric's name-card, "the woman next to Lord Poynter; who is she?"

"That's Lady John Carstairs," Eric answered. "Her husband's on Lady Maitland's right; and that's his mother, the Duchess of Ross, between your husband and Mr. Deganway."

"Ah, thank you. It is so confusing at first. I have made the most dreadful mistakes through not knowing who every one was."

"Well, Lady John says she doesn't yet know her own relations," Eric answered reassuringly. "She's an American, you know."

Madame Pinto rolled her eyes in consternation:

"I did not know. We met at Lady Poynter's house, and I said terrible things about North America. In my country—Brazil, you know... You are not an American?"

"You can say anything you like to me, Madame Pinto. Political, racial, religious... By the way, half these people are Catholics, you know...."

He broke off, as the door opened to admit Barbara and George Oakleigh. Eric felt his features stiffening again, as she looked round to identify her hostess and came forward with an exaggerated apology. She had always dominated any room that she entered; she dominated this one. While she paused a studied moment in the door-way, every one involuntarily turned to look at her; the comfortable clatter of conversation grew still and died away, to be succeeded by blurred cries of welcome: "Babs!" "Dear Barbara, how sweet you look to-night!" "Babs darling!" Eric had stood a dozen times, like George Oakleigh, a pace behind her, as she came into the room; like him, a little embarrassed to be late; like him, exulting in the theatrical magnificence of her entry....

Ivy touched his arm and whispered:

"Is that Lady Barbara? I've only seen her in the distance before. Eric, how fascinating she is!"

Barbara brought her apology to an end and looked for her chair. Her eyes met Eric's, and, as she passed him, she shook hands and murmured, "How are you?" There was a final spurt of welcome from the men on either side of her, as she sat down; and Eric tried to remember what he had been discussing before her interruption.

Madame Pinto had lost no time in establishing him as her confidant and adviser; with her second glass of champagne, matter-of-course friendliness warmed to embarrassingly out-spoken coquetry.

"You are clever and nice," she proclaimed resonantly, darting a swift glance from under darkened eye-lashes and touching his hand with sparkling, ring-laden fingers. "Those two, now? Who are they?"

"George Oakleigh and his wife," Eric answered in an undertone. "He used to be in the House—in Parliament, you know. She was Lady Barbara Neave, daughter of Lord Crawleigh, our Governor-General in Canada at one time, then Viceroy of India. She's related to almost everybody here—first cousin of Carstairs, first cousin of Lady Amy Loring...."

Madame Pinto nodded vehemently until her diamonds quivered and flashed.

"I remember! I met her at lunch with Lady Poynter. And, also, I have heard of her," she answered. "That young man in your Ministry of Foreign Affairs—"

"Deganway? You mustn't take all he says too literally," interposed Eric.

Madame Pinto's voice was more penetrating than she knew; and he could see that Barbara was sitting inattentive to her neighbours.

"He said that she had broken all your hearts, one after another... I am not surprised."

"You *must* be careful," Eric whispered in agony. "She'll hear."

Barbara had already heard and was pretending that she had not, galvanizing herself to an interest in her neighbour. Madame Pinto looked down the table and saw her preoccupied.

"Ah, you are one of all those relations! I am sorry, Mr. —?"

"An old friend," Eric answered brusquely.

Perhaps it was feminine curiosity, perhaps Madame Pinto felt subconsciously that she was being headed off something of interest, perhaps she had a perverse talent for the *mal à propos*. Certainly it seemed as though nothing would satisfy her until she had plumbed the bottomless pool of gossip in which Deganway had submerged Barbara; and for the hundredth time Eric wished that some one would thrash Deganway or cut his tongue out.

"I hear you're taking a house in London," he began hurriedly.

Madame Pinto was not to be so easily diverted from her quest.

"Mr. Deganway told me," she pursued, "that, when she was sixteen, a man blew his brains out, because she would not marry him. He says that, ever since, she has expected it of all the others."

"The first part of the story's probably untrue; the second certainly is," Eric answered curtly. "I know her very well, Madame Pinto. She's always been rather unconventional, she's always been greatly admired and very much in the public eye. The result is that no story is too fantastic to be

believed about her by people who don't know her. Deganway *does*; and he's no business to talk such nonsense... I used to see a great deal of Lady Barbara before her marriage; I look back on her friendship as one of the greatest achievements of my life. Steele said of Lady Elizabeth Hastings that to love her was a liberal education; I should like to think that my friendship meant half as much to any one.... Do you know Carstairs well? He's in the Diplomatic, and I believe he was out in Rio once...."

The abrupt transition from low-voiced, tense earnestness to a conversational drawl convinced even Madame Pinto that he was forcibly dismissing Barbara from discussion.

"Have I said something dreadful?" she asked with an unabashed smile.

"Didn't I tell you that you could say anything you liked to me?" he laughed. "Political, racial, religious? I only draw the line at something personal, when it concerns a friend of mine and doesn't happen to be true. Deganway ought to know better."

As he turned to Ivy, Eric glanced involuntarily past her and was in time to see Barbara looking quickly away. She, then, had heard, too. And probably half a dozen more on either side, but they did not matter. He wondered whether she would try to speak to him after dinner. She would love the dramatic sense of humility in thanking him for his defence....

"I sent my mother a line before dinner to fix up about the week-end," Eric announced at random. "I forget if I warned you that my father had a serious illness last autumn...."

His family and home provided a subject for discussion with Ivy until the end of dinner. While Madam Pinto was talking, it seemed as though they were rivetted to their chairs through all eternity; as soon as he was set free, their plates were snatched away almost before they could see what had been placed before them. Lulled by the drone of his own voice, Eric roused with a start to hear the Duchess of Ross asking her son whether he had room for her in his car, as she had to be at another party by eleven. One or two of the men looked at their watches; chairs were pushed back and heads dived under the table in search of gloves and bags. Barbara stood up and took in the room at a glance; and Eric felt that her personality spread through the air like a wave of electricity. Ivy was talking to Lady Maitland, Madame Pinto was receiving thanks and showering *adieux* on her guests; alone and apart, he was too far from any one to take cover.

Barbara began to draw on her gloves and walked slowly towards the door. As she came opposite him, she turned almost in afterthought, looking up for an instant before concentrating afresh on the buttons of her glove.

"It was nice of you to stand up for me against that odious woman, Eric," she whispered.

"One lie more or less hardly matters at this season, Lady Barbara."

"Dear God! don't call me that!"

Eric had a full armoury of bitterness, but opportunity killed any desire to use it. He had been ready to find Barbara falsely repentant or as falsely defiant; she would perhaps explain, perhaps scoff; he had not expected that she would plead for mercy because he had unwittingly hurt her.

"I did not seek this meeting," he answered.

"You never used to be vindictive."

"I'm doing my best to forget anything I was, anything I've done."

"You hate me as much as that? I thought... No, I hoped, I *hoped* you meant it when you said that to love me was a liberal education."

Her softly reproachful tone puffed into flame every memory of his own three years' suffering, which to her was but an occasion for snatching at a compliment.

"If so, a liberal education has no place for romance. You cured me of that. It was not your fault. As you know, I'd been a semi-invalid all my life; I'd been brought up among women who shewed me only unselfishness and devotion and patience and sacrifice. I could trust them; they told the truth. When you used the same terms, I thought they meant the same things to you."

She bit her lip until it shewed grey under the white gleam of her teeth:

"Well, I hope you at least will be happy, Eric, some time. When you are, you'll become magnanimous again. Then perhaps you'll forgive me."

"I can't feel that my forgiveness plays much part in your happiness."

"I sometimes wonder if I've ever known what happiness means... Good-bye, Eric."

She held out her hand and stood looking at him with eyelids flickering as though he had struck her in the face; she was wincing before a second blow. To act was so much second nature to her that her attitude of unfriended humility might be a pose; but Eric felt that, inasmuch as she had not descended to his duel of bitterness, she had prevailed in the encounter. He hated the whole evening, with its need to lie in her defence and his own bursting desire to escape the charge of magnanimity.

Eric drew his hand away, but he could not help looking at her flickering lids and reproachful eyes. So she had stood a score of times when she had goaded him to madness and his taut nerves had snapped. No longer acting, but suddenly hurt, suddenly shocked, suddenly tired; sorry to have maddened him, but helplessly torn and unable to let him go; and always gently maternal, yearning to comfort, to forgive... Her lips were parted; Eric could have sworn that her hands twitched as though she were once more going to throw her arms round him and seal her forgiveness with a kiss. With theatrical timeliness he heard George Oakleigh excusing himself from accepting an invitation....

It was impossible to stop looking at her... Why George? He wanted to fling the question at her, demanding why she had married George Oakleigh instead of waiting, though he knew that their love was paralysed before they parted. Waiting would have done no good. But why George, if he had not made her happy? She did not hint that she had married the wrong man, but it was written in her eyes; tragedy had come home to a woman who had played mock-tragic parts all her life... Loneliness... Despair... And Eric had fancied that the suffering had been all on his side, that she had at worst been worried to know how to explain away her treatment of him....

"Thursday, yes. I don't think we're doing anything on Thursday. I'll ask Babs."

George was still juggling with his invitation: he must have kept it aloft for hours by now... And he was coming to draw Barbara into the game.

"Good-bye, Lady Barbara," said Eric.

She winced again:

"Do you need that to make yourself secure? If you knew how it hurt! Whatever I've done... I haven't defended myself, have I, Eric? And, whatever you think of me, won't you say you forgive me, if I tell you that I need it, that it will make a difference to me? Do you want me to feel that I've killed your generosity—in addition to everything else?"

"I'll say it, if it's any consolation to you."

"Thank you, Eric. You needn't be afraid, I've had my share of education, too. I didn't know you were going to be here to-night; I've tried not to embarrass you. If it's any help for you to know where I'm dining and that sort of thing... I'll do anything I can not to make things harder."

Eric shook his head quickly and looked up, as George crossed the room. Barbara's moment of sincerity had passed: she had passed the half-obliterated line between emotion and drama. Already she was weaving a romance about the pair of them: there was to be a life's passion thwarted, two starved hearts beating in remote loneliness, resignation on her side and chivalry on his, with ingenious romantic appliances to keep the starved hearts starving; they were to spend as much quixotic contrivance on keeping apart as ever a pair of lovers had given to daily clandestine meetings... A sensationalist to the core... The distraction would keep her dramatic sense stimulated for years; in the endless possibilities of make-believe she might forget her tragedy. He would almost have abetted her, if so he might forget the look of tragedy which he had seen in her eyes; but he could not trust her....

"We'll take our chance," he said. "I shall possibly be going away fairly soon."

George was waiting patiently until they had finished.

"I say, Babs, are we doing anything on Thursday?" he asked. "Madame Pinto wants us to lunch, and I said I thought we could."

She looked at her husband with a smile of gentle reproach:

"Darling George, we've got the O'Ranes lunching with us. Am I right in thinking that you've forgotten all about them?"

Eric bowed and turned away. "*Am I right in thinking...?*" It was a familiar trick of speech; Barbara had used it to him on the night of their first meeting nearly four years ago. It hurt him to hear her using it to George, though he did not mind her calling him "darling". Women were a promiscuous sex, transferring their hearts and bodies as light-heartedly as a servant took a new situation "to better herself"... As he passed out of sound of their voices, he felt that this evening he had had the greatest escape of his life; Barbara would not try to meet him again, and he could keep her at arm's length, if she did. He only hoped that he would forget that look of tragedy....

Ivy was waiting for him by the door, and he felt that he owed her an explanation, perhaps an apology....

"Aunt Connie's gone home in Lady Poynter's car," she announced. "She's left her own for us. I'd better drop you at your flat and take it on home."

"I'll just say good-bye..." He darted back and rejoined her a moment later. "Well, thank goodness *that's* over. Of all the forcible feeders who outrage total strangers in the sacred name of hospitality... Did you enjoy yourself, Ivy?"

She pressed his hand, once more at ease; and he wondered whether she fancied that she was rescuing him for herself from Barbara.

"I love being with you—as you know, you vain thing!," she answered. "Shall I tell you something? I went into the dining-room before dinner and found Mr. Deganway and Lord Pentyre working round the table. Lord Pentyre said, 'Any luck, Gerry? I've drawn Amy Loring and Connie Maitland. Might be worse.' And Mr Deganway said, 'Oh, my dear, I'm between Eleanor Ross and Margaret Poynter. I don't think I can bear that; I shall break down and cry.' So he changed the cards. Well, you said you hoped we should be together, I didn't see why I shouldn't look after myself; so I changed places with Lady John and put myself next to you. Were you pleased?"

"You badly brought-up child! Yes, I was pleased, but I wish you'd given me Lady John on the other side instead of the Vasconcellos woman."

He settled comfortably in his corner of the car, reminded inevitably of the nights three years ago, when he drove home with Barbara, discussing the party that they had left. She was the first woman to break down the isolated self-sufficiency of the bachelor and to teach him the indulgent delight of sharing trivialities; and, from the day when she dropped out of his life, he had been groping blindly for anything that would breach the wall of desolation and silence which was her parting gift....

The car stopped at the door of his flat in Ryder Street, and Ivy put up her face to be kissed.

"Good-night, darling Eric," she whispered.

"Good-night, sweetheart."

As the car drove away, he stood irresolutely in the hall, swinging his keys. A widower remarrying.... He was beginning to treat Ivy very much as he had treated Barbara, thinking of her and for her in the same way, using the words which had once been sacred to Barbara. And Ivy was fitting herself into his life as Barbara had once done... Promiscuity was not the differentia of woman....

Two days later his mother wrote colourlessly to say that she would be delighted to see Miss Maitland for the week-end. If she speculated on the person and destiny of a girl whose name her son had not mentioned until that moment, she kept her own counsel. When they travelled down to Winchester on the Saturday afternoon, a Remington was included in their luggage, and Eric reminded Ivy that they must keep up the pretense that she had come to help him with his work. Though they had rehearsed their parts, both were a little self-conscious; and to their oversensitive appreciation every one at first seemed elaborately anxious not to betray surprise. Sybil met them at the station and greeted Ivy with unreserved friendliness; Lady Lane welcomed her in the hall, and,

when Eric went upstairs to dress, Basil came into his room with ingenuous congratulations.

"Very nice line in secretaries, old thing," he observed, throwing himself on Eric's bed. "And it's like you to keep her to yourself, you old dog, when I've been mouldering for two years in Salonica and simply yearning for refined female society."

"I took the earliest possible opportunity," Eric answered. "She's only been with me a fortnight, while my permanent secretary's taking a holiday; and she's only going to be with me another fortnight."

"Well, send her along to my jolly old office, when she's through with you," Basil suggested swiftly. "You've simply no conception of the sort of thing that's blown in during the war. Every sign of staying, too."

"I don't think she's on the look-out for that kind of job. I know her people, and, when she heard I was alone and secretaryless, she very kindly volunteered to come and lend me a hand till the other girl came back."

Basil wagged his head dubiously.

"I call it very trusting of her parents," he said. "Fresh sweet English girl, young bachelor of doubtful morality, notoriously associated with the stage... I don't like it at all. I think I must warn her about you."

"I doubt if you'll cut much ice... Is any one dining, or are we treating her to unrelieved family?"

"The Warings are coming over to ease the monotony. And, by the same token, I'd better go and dress!"

Basil, then, suspected nothing; Geoffrey would think what Basil told him to think; his father would awake to interest when the engagement was announced—and not before. There remained his mother and Sybil.

Lady Lane was by herself in the drawing-room, when he went down, and she laid aside her paper to say:

"My dear, what a sweet little girl! Where did you find her?"

Whether it were deliberate encouragement or not, Eric was pleased:

"I met her in America first of all. She's a daughter of the judge. I gather he knew the gov'nor in some prehistoric period."

"I don't remember the name." Lady Lane waited, as though she expected that Eric might have something more to tell her; then she repeated: "A sweet little girl. You're lucky to find her. What's happened to the other one?"

"She's only having a holiday. Ivy very kindly volunteered to come in her place."

He used the Christian name deliberately and left his mother to draw her own inferences. There was a second silence; and, because she asked nothing more, he felt that, before he left the house, he must take his mother into his confidence.

Throughout dinner he tried to keep one eye on his family and the other on Ivy. She was achieving a marked success, which was not confined to his younger brothers. Sybil and the Warings made at least a show of surrender, and her success reacted on Ivy. Though she dared not look at him, Eric could see that her eyes were shining as on the day when he had brought her back from Maidenhead; she was feeling, as clearly as if she cried it aloud, that he had the most delightful parents and brothers and sister in the world.

It was after eleven—and late for Lashmar Mill-House—before the Warings left. Eric waited to fasten the windows, while his mother turned out the lights; they met in his father's work-room.

"I quite forgot to ask Miss Maitland if she'd like her breakfast sent up to her," said Lady Lane, as she collected the day's papers and dropped them into a basket.

"She never eats any—except tea and toast," Eric answered. "Before you go up, mother, I should like you to tell me candidly what you think of her."

"She's very young, of course," Lady Lane answered deliberately. She was puzzled, for he was dispassionate, and no one else in the house seemed to suspect anything. Eric was grateful to her for cutting all circumlocution. "I like her, Eric, I like her immensely. She's sweetly pretty; I think she's intelligent, too... You can't expect any great experience at that age, but then most girls of the present day are wofully unpractical; she'll have to learn, like the rest. So far as one can tell on very short acquaintance, she's a thoroughly nice little girl... I always think a man should try to marry a woman whose experiences are behind and not in front of her. Of course, they're growing all the time, but, like children, they grow so much more quickly when they're very young. In that way a man's in danger of marrying a child and finding soon afterwards that she's grown into a woman that he doesn't recognize... Have you known her long, Eric?"

"No. And, while I know her very intimately in some ways, I hardly know her at all in others. That's why I wanted a general, outside opinion. It's more than possible, mother, that I may come to you one day and tell you that we're going to be married."

Lady Lane nodded and kissed him lightly on the forehead:

"Well, I hope you'll be very happy, dear Eric." His mother was delightfully practical and restrained. She looked out on the world with steady eyes, treating emotion as an indecency. Eric wondered why none of her calm nerves had descended to him. "She's devoted to you, you've only to say the word. Up to the present—?"

She paused interrogatively.

"Nothing's fixed definitely," Eric answered. "It's rather hard to explain, but there's what I suppose you might call "an understanding." I can tell you this much: we've both of us seen that in love it's possible to be quite certain of yourself and then to find, rather painfully, that you've been utterly mistaken. Yes, even at her age, poor child... We've both learned the lesson and paid the price; we don't want to make any more mistakes. I've burned my fingers sufficiently to have become very unromantic... Don't you think we're right to wait?"

Lady Lane did not know what answer to give. Since Eric had seen the blemishes in one woman, he was looking for them in all; soon he would see nothing else.

"You mustn't wait too long; that's the only thing," she advised him.

"I don't want to take any risks." He seemed to tell every one that—Ivy, Gaisford and his mother.

"But, in marriage, risks are necessary. Marriage is always an adventure, a blind leap. You don't begin to know anything about a woman until you're married to her. Even if you waited until you thought there was nothing more to learn, the girl becomes a wife, Eric, and the wife becomes a mother. Even she doesn't see how big the change is until long afterwards, when she has time to look back and compare. *I* don't want you to run any risks, my precious son."

"I know... And *I* want peace and quiet with somebody I love and somebody who loves me," he answered wearily. "You remember the last time we had a talk in this room?"

"Well, Ivy loves you. Of course you've got a certain name, a certain position; she's a good deal dazzled by that."

"That isn't the biggest factor with her... Shall we go up? You won't say anything about this to the others, will you?"

They walked through the hall and up the stairs, arm in arm. Lady Lane paused outside the door of her room and kissed Eric good-night.

"God bless you and make you happy, Eric," she whispered.

"Thank you... I met Barbara the other night, mother."

"Yes?"

"It was at a big dinner. I don't want to meet her again; it brought everything back much too vividly."

"I'm afraid you're bound to meet her occasionally."

"I don't think she'll try to force a meeting." Eric passed his hand over his eyes, and his mother looked at him with concern. He was beginning to shew her so many familiar danger-marks; and she prayed that he would make up his mind before his nerves broke down again. "I may be wrong," he went on slowly; "it may be my colossal egotism, but I thought that under all the vitality she was profoundly miserable. It wasn't an exhibition of remorse conducted for my benefit. I think she saw that she'd made a mistake and put all her money on a losing number. She didn't trouble to hide it..."

"Well, my dear, she has only herself to thank."

Eric shivered involuntarily:

"I don't wish my worst enemy that degree of torture. And I can see no way out of it for her."

"And, even if you could, it wouldn't be your business. She must lead her life, Eric, and you must lead yours."

CHAPTER NINE

A DOUBLE ESCAPE

“... Love so, then, if thou wilt! Give all thou canst
Away to the new faces—disentranced,
(Say it and think it) obdurate no more:
Re-issue looks and words from the old mint,
Pass them afresh, no matter whose the print
Image and superscription once they bore!

Re-coin thyself and give it them to spend,—
It all comes to the same thing at the end,
Since mine thou wast, mine art and mine shalt be,
Faithful or faithless, sealing up the sum
Or lavish of my treasure, thou must come
Back to the heart’s place here I keep for thee!...”
ROBERT BROWNING: “ANY WIFE TO ANY HUSBAND.”

“I WONDER what’s in store for us this time,” mused Deganway, as he paced up and down the platform at Euston with Carstairs. “Bobbie Pentyre has a genius for mismanaging a house-party. No technique, no personality—”

“It’s not for want of experience,” interposed Carstairs gloomily. “It must be ten years since I first stayed at Croxton, and something has always gone wrong... The food’s improved, but the wine has deteriorated. He knows such odd people, too... But that’s his mother’s fault; she finds good in every one, makes a boast of it. Lord! I don’t see why we shouldn’t have a Monroe doctrine against *rastaquouères!*”

Madame Pinto de Vasconcellos and Lady Maitland were being wedged into place by their maids, while their husbands remained on the platform to finish their cigars. Eric appeared with Ivy and was followed by Amy Loring and Lady John Carstairs, later by Mrs. O’Rane and her husband.

“I didn’t know *you* were going to be here!,” cried Amy, as she caught sight of Eric.

“It’s not too late for me to go back, if you’d prefer it,” he answered with a smile. “Carstairs and Gerry have decided that it’s going to be a sticky party.”

“Oh, I should love you to come...” She blew a kiss to Ivy; but a frown of misgiving settled on her face as she led Eric away from the carriage-door. “You know John Gaymer’s invited himself? I’m sure it’s only because he knows he’ll meet Ivy... I do hate rows and intrigues and scenes and schemings!”

“I don’t think he’ll get much satisfaction from her,” Eric answered reassuringly.

“I hope to goodness you’re right,” said Amy. “Unfortunately, Johnny’s had a rebuff recently in another quarter... Some actress, I believe... Sonia knows the whole story...”

She walked to and fro by the door, gazing anxiously down the platform; then, on an impulse, she took O’Rane’s arm, whispered in his ear and led him away from the others.

“Nothing serious, I hope?,” he murmured.

“Then you can hear there’s *something* wrong!,” she laughed. “I wish people’s voices told *me* as much... No, I just wanted you to pull the party together as much as possible; it’s not *too* well chosen, and poor Bobbie isn’t very clever at seeing a squall until he’s run right into it. Do you remember poor Jim’s last ball at Chepstow on the eve of the war? I shall never forget how wonderful you were in keeping things going then. So, if you *do* feel a storm brewing...?”

O’Rane nodded, and they walked back to rejoin Eric. The last stragglers were being urged into their places and the doors slammed, when her eyes opened wider. Looking past her, Eric saw a man in the light-blue uniform of the Air Force.

“I was hoping they’d be left behind,” murmured Amy, as she got into the carriage.

“Who’s with him?,” Eric asked.

“Barbara,” she answered shortly.

“Some one told me she’d gone to Ireland,” he said indifferently.

“No. George has only gone for two days on business, and she’s such a bad sailor that she preferred to stay behind... My dear Babs, you *nearly* lost the train!”

A leap, a scramble and the support of anxious hands landed the last-comers in safety, as the platform slid from under their feet. Barbara felt her way into a vacant corner and looked round to see who was in the carriage, nodding easily to Eric when his turn came. She seemed so radiantly well and happy that he wondered whether she was trying to make him forget the damning expression of tragedy which he had seen on her face a week before. The train was not out of the station before she had focussed all attention on herself, and she kept the carriage in amused subjection until the journey’s end. Once or twice Eric stole a glance at Ivy; but, if she felt shock or embarrassment at being with Gaymer, she concealed it as nonchalantly as he did and listened with the rest to Barbara’s picturesque story of a luncheon with Gaymer, the theft of a general’s car, a scheme for flying to Croxton, the breakdown of the car, the beguilement of a taxi-driver from his dinner and a breakneck drive to a barren aerodrome and from the aerodrome to Euston. She told a story as well as ever, he found, always shewing herself in the absurdest light; and one story followed another until the train drew in to Croxton.

“I’m so glad Lady Barbara’s here,” said Ivy, as they secured a car to themselves.

“She always makes a house-party go with a swing,” answered Eric. “I say, Ivy, if Gaymer gives you any trouble, let me know. I don’t suppose he will... But, as a matter of fact, does he quite appreciate how he stands? The last time you and he were together, you were engaged to him. Have you ever broken off the engagement?”

“Not in words. Except for a moment at Maidenhead, I haven’t spoken or written to him since that

night. And I don't want to now. I never want to see him again. If he tried to talk to me—"

"You never told him why you wanted to be married without waiting for him to be demobilized?"

Ivy's cheeks flamed, and she turned her head so that he should not see her face.

"With that woman there, in the next room?," she cried. "I wasn't going to beg for mercy. I left it to his honour... And then I told him he hadn't any honour. And he said that, if *that* was what I thought of him—"

"Then he still doesn't know?" Eric persisted. "If he comes and makes a nuisance of himself, are you going to tell him?"

Ivy shook her head passionately:

"No! D'you think I'd look at him, if he begged me to? He shall see that I don't need him..." She turned suddenly with a look of pleading in her eyes. "Eric, you won't make me tell him?"

"Of course not! Keep out of his way as much as possible and tell him that you simply don't want to talk to him. Don't make a scene, because he's probably more experienced in scene-making than you are."

Though Gaymer had sat without speaking the whole way from Euston, a feeling of tension, first experienced in advance by Amy Loring, gradually spread to Eric and Ivy. In spite of Barbara's high spirits, uneasiness developed slowly into an antagonism which was made apparent to the sensitive hearing of O'Rane less by the words spoken than by the significant silences. The arrival at Croxton Hall created a temporary diversion. As Gaymer quickly disappeared into the smoking-room on learning that he would find whisky and soda there, Eric was spared all danger of conflict with him. Ivy went at once to her room and only reappeared under the protection of Amy Loring; Barbara was caught and retained at the bridge-table until the dressing-gong sounded. Despite the sombre forebodings of Deganway and Carstairs, Eric began to feel that the week-end might pass without mishap, though he wished fervently, as he bathed and dressed, that it was the last night of his visit instead of the first.

When they went in to dinner, he was so much preoccupied with looking to see who was on either side of Ivy that he did not notice at first that he had himself been placed next to Barbara. The discovery that she was within a foot of him steadied his nerves like the first bomb in an air-raid. For half of the meal he talked with composure to Lady Pentyre; then turned and tossed Barbara the shuttlecock of their conversation, leaving her to shew whether she was content with safe impersonalities or whether she was still bound to improvise a romantic drama out of their meeting.

"Lady Pentyre's just been telling me that my bedroom's supposed to be haunted," he began. "She's offered me another, without a bathroom, but I told her that all the ghost-proof rooms in the world aren't compensation for the exclusive possession of a bath."

"I suppose you've got my old room," said Barbara reflectively. "I came here, the winter before the war, for the Croxton Ball... Lady Pentyre offered it to me again, but... I thought I'd leave it to some one who didn't take quite so many ghosts with him wherever he went..." She shivered almost imperceptibly as she looked round the room, pretending an interest in ill-executed portraits of mediocre Pentyres, none of whom achieved higher rank than that of colonel, commander or dean. "It was here... I told you the story... the first time you ever dined with me... as soon as I knew that you were a friend of Jack's. I had to get it off my conscience."

"I don't think *I've* been here since Bobbie's coming-of-age," Eric answered. "Several of us motored over from Oxford: Deganway, Sinclair, Raney, Summertown... That loving-cup on the side-table; I believe you'll find all our names on it—a joint present from all the other members of the old Phoenix Club. There are none too many of them left now," he added with a sigh. "It doesn't do to let yourself see ghosts..."

Barbara was paying as little attention to the history of the loving-cup as he had paid to her reflections on the haunted room. It was evident now that she was preparing some kind of dramatic scene; and, though her talent was hampered by the presence of others, he would not give her a chance of playing a part that she might continue later in less publicity. Eric was not likely to forget the first time that he dined with her: with evenly balanced triumph and consternation she had described her long and still unended duel with his best friend. Jack Waring, it seemed, had snubbed her, and she took her revenge by making him fall in love with her; when he proposed, she refused him because he was not a Catholic; when he became a Catholic, she refused him again and then, in superstitious terror that she was imperilling a man's soul, swore that she would marry him whenever he asked her again. Eric was unlikely to forget that dinner because it was almost the first skirmish in the long campaign by which Barbara set herself to make him too fall in love with her; and, when she had succeeded only too well, they discovered that her oath to Jack Waring still kept them apart.

"It doesn't *do*...!" Barbara echoed. "You can't always *help* it... I think of the last time I was here... and now! When I believed in God, I often used to think what fun He must be having with me!"

"I can't think God spends much time making people unhappy," said Eric. "They do it so well for themselves. He has only to create a little egotism..."

Barbara crumbled her bread in silence, waiting to assure herself that they were not being overheard.

"You still think it was egotism that kept me from marrying you, Eric? It wasn't. Fear, if you like; superstition... I *had* promised Jack, I was ready to stand all my life barefoot in the snow, waiting for him to forgive me... I loved you, as I've never loved any one before or since; you know that. But you wouldn't wait. It would have been a terribly easy way out... when I *wanted* to... The night after you said good-bye I telephoned to Jack, I asked him to come and see me... D'you remember abusing me because I was *vain*? I hadn't much vanity then, Eric. As soon as Jack recognized my voice—it was the first time we'd spoken alone since his release from Germany, since the war, since that ghastly night when I swore on the Cross that, if he wanted me, I'd marry him—he hung up the receiver. And then I knew at last... It may interest you to hear that my famous pride was still flourishing so vigorously next morning that I drove round to your flat as soon as I was dressed. They told me you'd

started for Liverpool. I didn't know your ship, or I'd have come on board."

It might be morbid luxury of self-torture—Eric had lived through his own nights and days of might-have-beens—, or a despairing effort to recapture him, or a blend of the two, or a connoisseur's appreciation of dramatic irony; impulse and calculation, sincerity and sensationalism were always curiously intermixed with Barbara.

"It wouldn't have made any difference," he answered coldly. "Superstition, if you like... Or vanity... I knew that night that you put something in life before love. You were *afraid* of Jack, but you never pretended to be in love with him... However, I don't think these *post mortems* do any good. Amy Loring tells me that George is in Ireland. Is it true that he's selling his place there?"

"He would, if he could find any one to buy it. We haven't very much money. You see, I forfeited mine by marrying a Protestant and I don't care to go to my family... We may as well have it out, Eric. I married him—dear God! I'd have married any one who spoke a kind word to me when you went away... I'm trying to make him happy, I'm trying to make amends to every one I've injured, but it's rather a long list."

"I hardly know Ireland at all," Eric continued in disregard of his emotional cue. "He invited me to Lake House years ago, but I couldn't afford the time...."

Barbara nodded mechanically, by now unconscious that he was trying to head her off reminiscent dissection, hardly conscious that he had spoken.

"It's not quite what I expected of life," she murmured humbly. "But you... Are you happy, Eric?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"I'm glad. Time's a wonderful healer. I always told you to go away and forget me. You said you couldn't."

"I haven't forgotten, but I've adjusted some of my values."

Barbara stole a glance at him and then looked away, with eyes narrowed in pain, over the head of the man opposite her, over the shoulders of the footman, blankly and dizzily into the shadows at the end of the room.

"Until humanity has no value at all..." she whispered. "Ah, Eric... If I could wipe it all out and draw a sponge over your memory so that we met as we met that first evening at Margaret Poynter's, if I could make you loving, tender—not to me, God knows!—, if I could cure your bitterness of spirit and teach you not to condemn all women because one woman once wrecked your life... Eric, if you could see yourself as I still see you that first night... like a faun, with big startled eyes..." She found her voice rising and stopped abruptly. "I think Lady Pentyre told me it was the ghost of a woman who'd been killed in the Civil War. You're not afraid of ghosts?"

"Like everything else, they have to be faced boldly."

There was a moment's deepening silence, and Lady Pentyre caught the eyes of the women. It was only when he was free from the tension of Barbara's presence that Eric realized her power. No other woman set his nerves tingling and his blood racing through his veins, and no other woman responded to him as Barbara did. When she flung her crude emotionalism at him, he was still never sure of himself; a very little more would go to his head... He looked round the table, counting the empty chairs and calculating the dinners that he had still to eat; with reasonable luck Lady Pentyre would not put him next to her for another meal.

A hand was laid on his knee, and he found O'Rane trying to speak to him. Pentyre and Gaymer were arguing with irritating heat about some trivial and forgotten aspect of the war, and it was difficult for any one else to make his voice heard.

"Our intrepid airman is becoming the least little bit of a nuisance," murmured O'Rane. "I thought he was a bit thick when he got into the train at Euston, though he didn't say much. I shall have to take him in hand; he used to be quite a nice boy."

Eric's attention had wandered until he was hardly conscious of his surroundings.

"I... scarcely know him," he answered.

"You'll find him worth cultivating... when you've overcome your dislike of him," said O'Rane with a softly malicious laugh.

Gaymer's voice could be heard growing in assertiveness; and, though Pentyre interrupted from time to time, his resistance gradually weakened until he faint-heartedly cut his opponent short by suggesting to General Maitland and Don Pinto that they should all go into the drawing-room.

"Strategic retreat," commented Gaymer in thick scorn.

He was flushed and combative, but still master of himself; and, as he crossed the hall and entered the drawing-room, his manner changed. Eric watched him being absorbed into a bridge-four with the Maitlands and Barbara; the rubber ended without unpleasantness, and he began to wonder whether he had not imagined all the tension which he seemed to feel from the moment when he caught sight of Barbara and Gaymer hurrying along the platform. It was difficult to see what either of them could do; Barbara had already played her scene and had not been encouraged to repeat it; Gaymer had hardly spoken to Ivy, and he could see that she was taking pains never to be left alone....

It might be nothing but coincidence that they were all meeting in the same house, but Eric did not want a single-handed encounter with a man whose hostility had been latent ever since their first meeting three years before. When the women went up to bed, he only stayed in the smoking-room long enough to choose a book. Gaymer threw him an abrupt but not uncivil "good-night," and he walked upstairs with vague, tired relief that he had survived the first evening without altercation. There was a note on his dressing-table: "*Good-night, beloved. Sleep well. God bless you. Ivy.*" He smiled and began to undress. At the end of the passage he heard doors shutting; as he got into bed, there was a slow clatter on the stairs, followed by "Good-night, Pentyre," "Good-night, General. You're sure you've everything you want?" There followed a belated "good-night" in the unmistakable clipped utterance of Don Pinto de Vasconcellos. Half-an-hour later Eric heard O'Rane and Gaymer coming up and separating, with suppressed chuckles, outside his door; their footsteps grew faint, and in another moment the house sank into silence.

Feeling too tired to begin a new book, Eric turned out the light and was settling himself comfortably in bed when he saw a square outline of yellow round the door of the bathroom. He raised himself on his elbow with a murmur of annoyance, when the door opened slowly and he saw a tall figure in a loose white wrap. For a startled, uncertain moment he remembered Lady Pentyre's warning that the room was haunted and Barbara's addition that the visitant was a woman who had been killed in the Civil War. While he did not believe in ghosts, his hand explored nervously for the electric-light switch; some one might be playing a practical joke, but Pentyre was still unable to walk without crutches, and Gaymer had barely had time to get to his own room. Possibly—he had forgotten or neglected the geography of the house—some one had mistaken his door.

"Hullo?"

"Eric!"

It was Barbara's voice; and his hand trembled as it turned the switch. Her hair rippled in waves over her shoulders; her eyes shone burningly, and the fingers that held the wrap together were shaking; with the other hand she clung for support to the edge of the door. Eric saw that her face was colourless, that her bosom rose and fell with her quick breathing; as she took a step forward, he noticed that her feet were bare and thrust hurriedly into slippers trodden down at the heel; and, as she moved, the dumb paralysis of surprise left him.

"What on earth are you doing here?," he cried.

"Hush! Eric... I was afraid one of the others might come in, so I waited. I thought they'd never go to bed... Eric, you think I've done you a great wrong—I have! I admit it!—But, if I can't undo the harm I've done..."

Her eyes and voice, her stumbling steps and trembling outstretched arms shewed that she had forgotten everything but a consuming need of him. Eric had never before seen a woman lose all control of herself, he had never imagined that Barbara was capable of such desperation; the madness in her eyes and the delirium of her mood appalled him.

"My God, what are you thinking of, Barbara?" he whispered. "And what d'you take me for? Your husband—"

"I'll leave him and come to you! We'll go away together! You once said—d'you remember when I dined with you in an air-raid?—you said you'd rather a bomb hit the house and killed us both than see me married to any one else! I'm here... And I'm blind with misery, Eric. I want to be happy. I want to make you happy. No one need know... Or, if you like, you can let every one know. I've made my mistake, I'll tell George, I'll ask him to forgive me. He won't want to keep me, when he knows I don't love him. We can go away for a time—"

She was creeping inch by inch nearer to him, and Eric suddenly felt the touch of dry and burning fingers on his wrist.

"Stop this nonsense!," he cried, shrinking back.

The grating harshness of tone sobered her a little. She did not try to touch him again, he could see her mentally preparing a retreat, an escape, a means of saving her face, if he finally repelled her; he could see, too, that she did not mean to be lightly repelled.

"You usedn't to call my love 'nonsense' in old days," she answered quietly.

"Things have changed."

"Your love has changed."

"My love is dead."

"And you used to say that I must marry you, because I'd spoiled all other women for you."

Eric nodded slowly. It was so characteristic of her to remember and quote, even at the most critical moment of her life, a dog's-eared phrase of extravagant adulation.

"Yes. And I might add that you've spoilt me for all other women. If one came to me now without blemish, straight from the right hand of the Creator, I should expect to find treachery or ingratitude... Will you please go back to your room?"

He was thankful that he had stopped without saying more. In her craving for new sensations, Barbara had some perverted strain which made her enjoy being scourged by the tongue of a man who loved her; and in another moment he would have said something which would enable her to put him in the wrong; and anything that he said gave her an excuse for staying...

"I've never tried to defend myself, Eric. You were right... You were always right. Isn't there room in life for mistakes?"

"There's sometimes no room to repair them."

"You're still thinking of George?"

"It's time one of us did, Lady Barbara... I try to treat other men's wives as I should expect other men to treat mine."

He reached for his dressing-gown and slipped his arms into the sleeves. When it was too late, he saw that for a moment he was putting himself at her mercy; in that moment she sprang forward and pinioned him:

"Eric!"

"Will you kindly let go and will you kindly leave my room?"

"Eric, you're going to marry that child! You must be mad! You'll be as miserable as I am... If you do that, it *will* be too late... Eric, don't struggle, you're hurting me... Listen! I've told you it was a mistake, but it's not too late to put it right. We were made for each other. You wouldn't be blamed, and I—I should glory in it... Listen! You *shall* listen! The other day I was at a party, and a man I don't know said, 'That woman looks as if she'd been through Hell.' They'll say of us that we're in Heaven. They'll try to attack us—and they won't be able to. We shall be in the clouds, we shall be walking on air. People who see us will go away hungry and envious. Eric, you remember what it was like before that awful parting! I lived for you, and you lived for me. Everything we did and thought... Whenever we were ill or unhappy... There's never been a love like ours; and, if I didn't see it, I see it now. God punished me to shew me what I was throwing away... *You* know what this last year has been, Eric; if *you* threw away your chance of happiness—Ah, you're hurting me!"

He had wrenched himself free of her embrace and sprung out of bed. Barbara fell forward with her face on the pillow. He listened for the silence to be broken: though she had never raised her voice above a whisper, it had vibrated with passion until he fancied that it must ring and echo through the house. He opened the door, took a step forward into the warm darkness of the passage and listened. When he came back, the room seemed to be filled with the keen scent of carnations. He saw Barbara slowly raising her head and brushing back the hair which had fallen over her face; she looked distractedly round the room through half-closed eyes and threw out her arms to him; then she saw the open door, and her arms dropped to her sides.

"This is a funny way for it to end," she murmured. Eric said nothing. "I used to believe you, too. I thought you cared for me...."

His silence daunted her, and she walked out of the room with a sigh and a half shrug.

Eric locked the door and began filling a pipe. Then he turned on all the lights and explored bedroom and bathroom on hands and knees. On the middle of the floor he found a crumpled handkerchief, scented with carnation; he fingered it irresolutely, then struck a match and tossed it flaming into the grate. Imagination or reality still scented the room with carnation, and he threw open the curtains, resting his arms on the stone sill of the window and leaning out into a starless night. A heavy dew was rising, and the stone was sticky with moisture. The scent of carnations changed to a scent of stocks; then the reek of his own pipe drowned both. He was wakeful but calm, surprised at his own calmness before and now.

He wondered what Barbara was doing....

He wondered what she would do at their next meeting. Presumably she would invent a letter from George in the morning, calling her to Ireland, or recalling her to London, but they would meet later. A man, after such a misfire, would surely go abroad for a year or two; woman seemed to lie about these things to others—"Eric Lane was staying with the Pentyles. You know he used to be rather in love with me? I'm afraid he still is, though I should have thought that, when I married, he'd have faced facts... I wish he'd find some nice girl... Connie Maitland's little niece was there, but she's hardly out of the nursery..."—until they could lie about them to themselves; in a few years Barbara would convince herself that he had broken down the locked door of her bedroom and entreated her to run away with him. Women could make themselves believe anything, when they had to save their faces, to ignore a rebuff and keep up their value in the sex-market. And, as a matter of fact, a man did not always retire to decent obscurity; he sometimes came, like John Gaymer, officer and gentleman, and stayed in the same house as the girl whom he had seduced and deserted. Seemliness of conduct, seemliness of feeling were dead....

Sleep was impossible; and he remembered with gratitude how Lady Pentyle had arranged for him to work undisturbed. She had made a literary picture of a preoccupied, irregular genius who wrote under the attack of fitful inspiration; breakfast would come when he rang for it: he was not expected, he was almost forbidden, to shew himself before luncheon; and, if he wanted to work during the night, there awaited him a touching equipment of electric stove, spirit-lamp, cocoa, biscuits, and cold chicken. Eric went into the dressing-room and surveyed with a smile her solicitous array of stationery; there was paper big and small, plain and ruled, there were pencils and pens, india-rubber, paper-fasteners and a chromatic riot of ink and sealing-wax. He unlocked his despatch-box and glanced at a bundle of manuscript; a character called Beatrice seemed to be speaking, but he read the name as Barbara; and the lines that he had given her were overlaid as in a palimpsest by the words that Barbara had spoken, was still speaking....

He wondered what she was doing....

Work was out of the question until he had thought a little more about Barbara. However far she fell, there was always a lower depth. He imagined that she had reached her own limits in marrying George, but she was prepared to be faithless even to him, she was already faithless in spirit. Barbara was too young and ardent of soul to exist without loving and being loved; it was a question of time before she joined the furtive, unsatisfied band of women who lived in more or less open infidelity; she would go from one to another, encouraging George to do the same so that he would have less cause for reproaching her.

And three years earlier she had seemed to walk clothed in a white flame of purity. Was it another pose, like her extravagant talk of devotion, gratitude, honour, sacrifice? Her romantic emotions and phrases were culled from Italian operas and sentimental novels; and she treated them seriously. He told her once that she lived in "the hall of a thousand mirrors", donning and discarding the dress and properties of a character, watching her reflection, posturing, mouthing her lines—until the personality of Barbara Neave lost outline and became a lay figure for the clothes of others. Her own form and stature did not satisfy her; she must be Isolde, Sarah Curran, Mrs. Blessington, Joan of Arc, Lady Hamilton and, at a pinch, Messalina; which part she played hardly mattered to her... She was without a sense of right and wrong... A sensationist, as Jim Loring called her while she was playing with Jack, before she began to play with him... or George... An emotion-hunter....

The night was paling to a grey-blue, and the dawn brought with it a chill wind. Eric found his body shivering and his fingers stiff. He looked lazily at the array of food, too tired to eat or drink; then he got into bed and once more turned out the light. Was Barbara asleep yet?... Apart from everything else, what a fool the girl was to run such risks! If Lady Pentyle had looked into her empty room, if one of the men had come to finish a cigar on the end of his bed!...

He rang for his tea at noon and looked curiously through his letters. There were ten loving words from Ivy, who disdained concealment from the servants, but he sought in vain for any note from Barbara. Perhaps he was foolish to expect one, for she knew that she could trust him to hold his tongue. The thorough-paced anarchist always expected the police to protect him from the violence of an enraged mob....

It was a shock, after he fancied that he had diagnosed her so exhaustively, to find an unsuspected depth of impudence. When Eric went into the garden before luncheon, he was astounded to find her reading under a tree. The others were working or playing golf; but she hailed him and explained

that she had stayed behind with a head-ache. Her manner was free of challenge or appeal; she did not invite him to play the accomplice; there seemed nothing to hide, and in all the time that he had known her he had never understood her less than when she lay in white skirt and knitted silk coat, bare-headed and bare-armed, smoking cigarettes and turning the pages of a book which she was too indolent to cut. Her movements and expression were gently provocative, as though she were trying to tantalize him.

"I wonder—," he began and stopped abruptly.

"Yes?"

Eric shrugged his shoulders and turned half away. He was wondering where and what Barbara would be in five, ten, twenty years' time, wondering why he had ever been in love with her, why she still attracted him and why he could not bear to touch or look at her.

"I was wondering how far it was to the links. I thought I'd go and meet the others. They must have finished playing by now."

"I think I shall stay here," she answered lazily. "It's cooler."

Eric sauntered across the lawn and through the garden, stopping for a moment to speak with Lady Pentyre and Madame Pinto de Vasconcellos, who were cutting roses. He sauntered into a wood and sat down on a stile commanding the pathway to the links. There was a sprawling group by the eighteenth green, and he identified O'Rane, Pentyre and the general. They were joined by a foursome, and he gradually distinguished Amy Loring and Ivy, Gaymer and Mrs. O'Rane. The sprawling figures straightened themselves, O'Rane collected the clubs of the women, and the party ranged itself in single file and threaded its way along the foot-path towards the wood. Eric had been thinking so much of Barbara during the last twelve hours that he had not troubled about Gaymer, but, as they drew near, he looked closely at Ivy for signs of annoyance or distress. She was frowning a little, but it might have been a frown of fatigue, and her face cleared at sight of him.

"How did you all get on?," he asked.

"Lady Amy and I were beaten at the last hole," Ivy answered. "Give me a hand over the stile, Eric; I've blistered my foot."

"All well?," he asked in a whisper.

"Ye-es," she answered doubtfully. "I had one bad moment. *He*—you know—came up and pretended to look for my ball. He told me that he wanted to have five minutes' talk with me some time; he said he'd invited himself here specially for that. I told him as politely as I could that I never wanted to speak to him again."

"What happened then?," asked Eric.

"He said it would take less than five minutes. I said it could do no good. He said that I couldn't tell till I knew what he was going to say... Then I said, 'If I give you five minutes, will you promise not to bother me ever again?'"

Eric found his eyebrows involuntarily rising in uneasy wonder. Ivy had shewn herself so much less valiant with Gaymer than she had boasted beforehand; she seemed to be cowed by him, so that she bargained and begged for mercy instead of standing up for herself.

"And then?"

"Well, he wouldn't promise. He just repeated 'Will you give me five minutes?' I told him I'd think it over. Eric, can't *you* explain—?"

He shook his head quickly:

"No, my dear! You can refuse to see him, if you think it'll upset you; or you can see him and tell him that everything's over."

"Eric, he *frightens* me!"

"But you'll have to get over that. Unless you fight him and beat him, you'll be troubled whenever he chooses to make a nuisance of himself to you. When you've convinced yourself that he has no more influence over you, he'll go away and leave you in peace. You'd better see him, but you mustn't let him bully you."

Ivy sighed and walked in silence to the house. At luncheon Lady Pentyre began to make suggestions for disposing of her guests: if they did not all know Melbury Cathedral, she said, they ought to take this opportunity of seeing it. It was only an hour's run in the car; they could have tea there, drive on to Wilmington Abbey and be back in time for dinner.

"Or, if you want to laze," she added, "there are the two punts...."

"That sounds more like me," said Gaymer. "Ivy, what do you say to exploring?"

She hesitated for a moment, but Eric gave her no lead.

"I don't mind what I do," she answered.

"I think I ought to put in a little work," Eric told Lady Pentyre.

An hour later he watched the party dispersing. Amy Loring had undertaken to punt O'Rane to Croxton for tea; and, if he still entertained doubts of Gaymer, he was reassured at feeling that Ivy would have help within call. General Maitland and Carstairs retired to their rooms with letters to answer; the others drove away in the car.

"We shall be back for tea," Ivy announced with an air of summoning witnesses. "I promised to help Aunt Connie with her letters."

Eric went to his room and tried to write, but his broken night and the flooding heat of the afternoon sun made him drowsy. He fell asleep in his chair and awoke with a start to find Ivy bending over him and kissing his forehead.

"My dear, there's nothing wrong, is there?," he asked.

"No! But you looked so anxious at lunch that I thought I'd come and tell you everything was all right. What a darling room Lady Pentyre's given you to work in! Or sleep in. Were you frightfully tired, sweetheart, and did I wake you?"

"I was only lazy. Is it tea-time?"

"We've had tea. And I'm supposed to be writing letters. Don't you think I've written them long enough? Don't you think you might take me on the river now?"

She held out her hands, and Eric jumped up and caught her in his arms. He had dreamed of many things, not all of them pleasant; when he felt the light brush of lips on his forehead, he could have sworn that Barbara was kissing him; and the sight of Ivy puzzled him, recapturing for an instant the fleeting cloud-wreath of a fancy that something had happened to her, that he had lost her....

"You *were* anxious, Eric?"

"I didn't want you to be upset; and I didn't want even a shadow to come between us."

"It hasn't."

They ran downstairs hand in hand, separating decorously in the hall and then slipping through a side-door into the garden. Reaction over her fright, the ever-new sense of security had elated Ivy until she was happier than at any time since their magical return to London from the river. In a week their month's waiting would be over; he was already beginning to think how the announcement should be made....

"One week more!"

Eric was startled:

"I didn't say anything!"

"I know you didn't. I was just thinking—"

"I was thinking, too—of that. Well, Ivy?"

"Bless you, Eric!... As if I didn't know all along! As if there'd ever been the faintest shadow of a doubt. But I shan't marry you unless you swear to me that you want me. I feel I shall disappoint you so terribly, Eric; you're so clever and so *wise*. I never *think*... You were quite right about Johnnie; I feel much better now that it's all over."

He helped her into the boat and paddled into mid-stream.

"It went off all right?," he asked. "I don't want to know what happened."

"But I want to tell you, I like telling you everything." She thought critically over her story before beginning it. "It was curious. He seemed to start again as though nothing had happened..." She was looking dreamily at the nodding blue and orange irises wading a third of the way across the stream; she did not see Eric's involuntary shudder and stiffening. "He began again from the time when I asked him when we were going to be married; he actually said, 'You remember that talk we had one night before I took you to the Vaudeville. You asked me how long I thought I should take to get demobilized...' I said 'Yes'. Eric.., well, I'll come to that later. He said he'd had a very bothering time, because sometimes, when he's not well, he doesn't seem able to make up his mind about anything; and no one in his wretched ministry seemed to know what anybody wanted to do... He'd thought it over and he'd decided to come out. You know his uncle, Lord Poynter, don't you? Well, Lord Poynter had offered him a job—a very good job, I imagine—in the Azores Line...."

She paused and regarded the irises with a puzzled frown, still trying to examine her narrative critically.

"Go on," said Eric.

"Well, he stopped short there... He was very quiet... He seemed to be saying that he'd made all arrangements and everything was right and I'd been rather impatient. I didn't know what to say... Well, then he said, 'The last time we were together you seemed to have a pretty low opinion of me. I told you that I couldn't marry you then. I can't marry you now. I can't marry you till I've got the job and held it. But I'm going to get it and I'm going to hold it.'"

"Ah!"

Ivy looked up in surprise at the rasping interjection.

"What d'you mean, Eric?"

"It sounds to me very like his original promise. And I think he's making it for the same purpose. He's trying to get you back." He paused and then hurried on for fear that prudence might restrain him. "He wouldn't have thought of you, if I hadn't been in the way. It's a trial of strength against me. Go on."

Ivy winced, and the pupils of her eyes dilated.

"I told him that things had changed," she explained. "I said—it wasn't true—I said that I'd always believed in him, but there was a time when I was frightened... I reminded him of everything—the night when he said 'If *that's* your opinion of me, we'd better call the engagement off.' I reminded him of the woman I'd seen him driving home with. He said...."

"Well?"

"He said, 'I've never pretended to be a saint. When I was knocked out in the war, I saw everything differently. Most people would cut me, if they knew anything of my private life; I drink too much, I do this and that... I *could* put up a case, if I thought it worth while, but I don't. You knew all this the first night we met. I didn't pretend to be better than my neighbour, I daresay I'm a lot worse; I don't know and I don't care. But I'm the same as I was that first night. I loved you then—and I've never loved another woman before or since. I asked you to marry me then; and I'm in a position—I soon shall be, at least—to make good.' Then he sort of left it to me... I'd thought of all kinds of bitter, horrid things to say, but I didn't want to. I think he meant it. I felt the only thing to do was to be cold and dignified. I said, 'There was a time when I thought I was in love with you. I've changed since then. I thought you'd broken your promise to me, I lost faith in you. Perhaps I never properly loved you, but, if I lived to be a thousand, I could never love you or trust you again'... While I said it, I felt that I might be terribly wrong, but it was—instinct. He looked at me... Then he looked at his watch... Then he said, 'We'd better be getting back, or we shall be late for tea.' Eric..."

"Yes."

"*Then* I felt free. I felt I'd won. I felt you were right and I should never be troubled again. I'm happy now... Of course, I was happy before, but, when he flung himself into the carriage at Euston... Eric, you'll despise me, but have you ever seen a dog being called simply to be beaten? It *comes*. It *knows* it's going to be beaten. And it *might* run away. But it knows it has to come back later. I felt that, if ever Johnnie... I felt it at lunch, when he suggested that I should come on the river with him..."

The stream was carrying them two yards down for every yard that Eric paddled towards home. He bent over the side for a merciful moment of eclipse and unshipped a pole.

"And now?," he asked.

"When he said we should be late for tea, if we didn't get back, I knew I'd won," she answered promptly.

A serpentine rivulet of water ran down Eric's arm; he turned his head and industriously rolled up his sleeve.

"Good for that," he commented. "Ivy, if you ever think I'm behaving like a cold-blooded old man, I should rather like you to suspend judgement for five seconds. Think of me as a man who might have kidnapped you, when you were so miserable that you didn't know whether you were on your head or on your heels; think that I'm trying to play fair when perhaps I might play foul and still win... I've forgotten what I was going to say, but, if we don't get back, we shall be late for dinner."

She looked at him fearlessly; and he realized that she had not looked at him like that before.

"I can think of you as all that—and a lot more," she answered.

For the second dinner Eric found himself between Lady Maitland and Amy Loring; he observed that Ivy was between O'Rane and Gaymer, but he felt no uneasiness. She had emerged morally stronger and with enhanced personality from her encounter of the afternoon. Gaymer shewed no sign of disappointment or rebuff, but he was silent and preoccupied. Eric would have given much to know what was going on inside his head and what he made of a girl who yielded to him and then refused to marry him....

Resentment was swamped in curiosity. The fellow might be genuinely in love with Ivy, though he modelled himself too closely on the dramatically strong, silent man who bluffly admitted that he was of flesh and blood like other men, that others must take him as they found him. Or he might be trying only to re-establish his ascendancy for a few days or weeks until some other woman came his way. Ivy might boast that she had won free of him, but at least she half-believed in him, at least she had let him off without a word of reproach, at least she was susceptible and even in danger, if he set himself to win her back. Was this new assurance and elation more than the response of a woman's vanity when she found two men equally desirous of marrying her? Eric looked impatiently on the week which still lay ahead of him. When their engagement was announced, Gaymer must inevitably take himself off, but it was possible to compress a great deal of mischief into one week.

After dinner Eric went out of his way to open conversation with his moody neighbour.

"I understand you're going to be demobilized shortly," he began.

"There's some talk of it," was the guarded answer.

"What are you thinking of doing?," Eric persisted, though his companion put no hint of welcome into his manner.

"I'm looking for a well-paid job with good holidays and short hours. Do you know of any?"

"I know of several men who started looking for just that job when they went down from Oxford a dozen years ago. But for the war they'd still be looking for it."

"Well, if you hear of anything," said Gaymer in a tone of dismissal, "mind you let me know. Or perhaps you wouldn't care to take the responsibility of recommending my name? You expressed yourself very fluently on the one occasion when you honoured me with a visit."

He was clearly undecided whether to end the conversation or to pick a quarrel. Eric knew that it would be wisest to turn round and talk to General Maitland, but Gaymer always employed a contemptuous insolence of manner which roused any combativeness that his audience might have.

"Did I say anything that wasn't justified?," Eric asked with an effort of memory.

"I suppose it's a matter of opinion how far any one's justified in interfering with other people's business. But, as that seems to be the serious occupation of your life, you can't be too thorough. I recognized that then, you remember; I begged you to drop in at cocktail-time whenever your feelings were too much for you. I suppose you've been too busy to come."

"No. I felt that, whether it was my business or not, you at least had dropped out of it."

Gaymer removed his cigar and stared dully at the glowing end.

"Well, you seem to have been very busy with my name behind my back," he said.

"I'm not aware of it."

"Oh? It was an impression I got."

"Can you remind me what I said?," asked Eric.

"I haven't the least idea. You seem to have been doing very efficient propaganda against me. Weren't you in the Propaganda Department at one time?"

"Yes. And my experience there was that the propaganda which you carry out against a nation never compares with the propaganda which a nation carries out against itself. One good *Lusitania* outrage was worth months of our solemn generalizations; that shewed the world what the Germans really were."

Gaymer yawned openly:

"I daresay you're right. I'm not a good judge of backstabbers." Eric smiled and refused to be roused by the word. "I admit that I sometimes wonder now, as I wondered then, just where you come in."

"I think I told you that I was a friend of one of the parties."

"But does that justify you in telling lies about me to the parents of one of the parties? I only ask for information."

"I never met or held any communication with either parent until some days later. Then I said that I did not know you well enough to give an opinion about you; it was untrue, but I erred on the side of generosity. All this was months after you had been invited to leave the house."

Gaymer turned away without troubling to answer, and for the next two days they only exchanged formal greetings when they could not avoid each other; but there was already so much tension in the house that a little more or less made no difference. Barbara stayed until the end of the party, talking without embarrassment to Eric and looking him frankly in the eyes. Amy Loring, who knew

as much of their relationship as any one, betrayed neither surprise nor curiosity. The Maitlands, who welcomed Eric as cordially as they repelled Gaymer, presented an attitude of stolid indifference and would have been artistically astonished if any one had hinted that the two men were fighting a subterranean duel for Ivy. Madame Pinto de Vasconcellos tried to compromise every man in turn, and her husband glowered silently at her frantic failures.

"I think it was so sweet of you all to come," said Lady Pentyre complacently each evening. "I do *hope* you're enjoying yourselves. I was thinking that *to-morrow*, perhaps..."

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She would then concentrate on the first attentive listener, suggesting expeditions and ordering cars indefatigably. The prevailing chill of misgiving had not spared her in the early days of her party, for Mr. Justice Maitland had begged her not to facilitate meetings between Ivy and Gaymer at her house; but what could a woman do, she asked herself, when a man buttonholed her son at the last moment and said that he had nowhere to go for Whitsuntide? She remembered, too, that years ago, when there was so much gossip about the O'Ranes, Sonia had run away from her husband and billeted herself at Croxton; she had invited the two of them without really being sure that they went about together. As Bobbie complained or boasted—in his silly way and without trying to help her—, the smallest Croxton party could be trusted to produce one catastrophe and three scandals; but, so far as Lady Pentyre could see, every one was now getting on very happily with every one else; and she had reached an age when she aimed less at positive success than at the avoidance of disaster.

At the end of each day Ivy reported to Eric all that she had done. There was little enough to say, for Gaymer had never tried to be alone with her since she gave him his dismissal on the river. As the train drew near London, he did indeed join for a moment in the general discussion of plans and ask her as a matter of form whether he was likely to see her again soon.

"I'm very busy at present," she told him. "I daresay you know that I'm trying to make myself useful to Mr. Lane while his secretary's away."

"I didn't know you were still doing that," he answered without interest.

Eric drove with the Maitlands to Eaton Place and took Ivy on in their car to his flat.

"Thank goodness! *That's* over!," he exclaimed, when they were alone.

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"Were you afraid there'd be a scene?," she asked.

"There were—several, only you were spared them. I suppose it was inevitable. But in five days' time—"

"It's only four and a half now."

CHAPTER TEN

THE WANDERING OF ISHMAEL

"It is not good that the man should be alone..."

GENESIS: II.18.

As Lady Maitland's car drove away from Euston, Carstairs set himself to divide the luggage and find seats for the rest of the party. His wife was sent with Madame Pinto, Amy Loring with Barbara; he himself arranged to share a taxi with Deganway to the Foreign Office.

"What are you going to do, Gaymer?," he asked.

"I'm going to have a drink," was the answer.

"We can drop you in Buckingham Gate," suggested Mrs. O'Rane.

Gaymer sat moodily on his suit-case, beating his cane against the side of his leg.

"Do I want to go there?," he yawned. "Well, I suppose it's as good a place as any... I'll drop you first and take the car on."

As they headed for Westminster, Mrs. O'Rane reviewed the house-party with a critical eye, while Gaymer stared out of window and her husband assembled and sorted such impressions as had come to him from words which were intended to cover feelings and from voices which broke through the disguise of words. The men and women who talked to him still made play with gestures and expressions which he could not see; they forgot to keep their voices mechanical; and, even without Amy's warning that they must be prepared for storms, he could have deduced a state of tension from half-heard changes of tone, from hesitations and accelerations, from shrill notes of self-betrayal and unctuous rolls of insincerity.

"We *must* make Bobbie Pentyre take a little more trouble before we go to Croxton again," cried Mrs. O'Rane. "His parties are such a hideous jumble. That appalling Pinto woman! I won thirty-five pounds from her at poker, but I'd pay twice that not to meet her again. And fancy asking Babs and Eric Lane at the same time!"

"I think that's all over, Sonia," said her husband.

A murmur of lowered voices had reached him the first night at dinner; and, though he could not hear the words, he guessed from Barbara's tone that she was testing her strength and that Eric was holding himself detached. It was safe to assume that there had been a scene of some kind, for on later days, when they spoke at all, Eric's voice was apprehensively frigid and Barbara's unnaturally composed. No one else seemed to have noticed anything, and any gossip centred round Eric and Ivy. O'Rane suspected antagonism here between Gaymer and Eric; however they spoke when they were alone, there was a frozen politeness of voice when any one else was present. Gaymer, presumably was in love, for his tone wakened to warmth when he talked to Ivy; and, presumably, his suit was not prospering, for, when they returned from the river, he had hardly spoken at all.

"The Maitland child was working hard," said Mrs. O'Rane.

"She's being hunted into it by the family," said Gaymer, breaking silence for the first time. "She doesn't get on with her own people—small blame to her!—, and Connie Maitland doesn't want to be stuck with her for all time; so, when a man with a certain amount of money comes along—"

"She'll get him easily enough," interrupted Mrs. O'Rane. "No man of thirty-five is proof against innocence and bobbed hair. They think they're renewing their youth; and, if they've made fools of themselves already, they imagine a girl of eighteen will be nice and tractable... And eighteen adores the wisdom of thirty-five and loves to think that purity and youth have won the day against experience. I had a *succès fou* when I was eighteen; nine old men proposed to me in one week, and seven of them said that I was like a flower with the dew still on me. The only one I cared for had a wife already; he didn't call me a flower, but he knew enough of women to be dangerous. I'm sure Eric Lane calls the Maitland child a flower; and, when she grows up, she'll be so bored that she'll run away with the first man who knows that women aren't flowers..."

O'Rane retired within himself and continued his analysis. Gaymer was certainly in love; too prudent to betray himself by attacking a rival, he soothed his own troubled spirit by pretending that Ivy Maitland, if not in love with him, was at least not in love with any one else. Sonia—to judge by her voice, though no one saw her stealthily examining her reflection in the strip of glass opposite her—was just old enough to be jealous of a girl ten years younger, who was beginning to attract men by her looks and youth rather than by artifice or qualities of mind. And, if the Maitlands were indeed forcing Ivy into marriage, no compulsion was needed on the other side; though Eric had talked to every one, his voice too became animated only when he was with Ivy....

"Well, here we are," said Mrs. O'Rane, as the car came to a standstill. "D'you like to take it on or will you come in for your drink, Johnny?"

Gaymer sat for some moments in silence, as though unable to make up his mind to do anything.

"Oh, never refuse a good offer," he answered at length, as he dragged himself out of the car.

"Help yourself, then. I'm lurching out and I must change my dress."

In the moment that she took to hurry into the house and glance at her letters, Gaymer watched her with a new, impersonal interest. His eyes followed her as she ran upstairs humming to herself. Less than three years before, it was commonly believed that she had quarrelled with her husband and run away with another man; tiring of him, apparently, she had come back. It was curious that women could dart to and fro like this; in his own experience he had always been the first to tire and he had never gone back to a woman after passion, drearily cooling, had at last mercifully died; if his passion for Ivy had cooled, he could not now return to her, but she had broken away while she still amused him, while his power over her was strongest, while he had only to rouse her jealousy in order to make her do whatever he wanted....

A faint fragrance of violets lingered in the hall, provocative as the broken music of Sonia's voice

when she sang to herself overhead. Though he had always found her too metallically sure of herself to be attractive, Gaymer felt resentfully that he was being denied something that other men had and that ought to be his. O'Rane was waiting for him in the library, but he was bored with the company of men. Softness of voice and touch, lightness of step, sweetness of body, yielding gentleness... A man was incomplete without woman....

He walked into the library and mixed himself a drink. Women were too near animals to be civilized, but they were pleasantly domesticated. Pink tulips on every table, great branches of lilac bursting from both fire-places... And his senses had brought with him that faint fragrance of violets. Gaymer wondered what O'Rane had done when Sonia ran away and left him with memories and a ravening hunger. The world was full of women, but their love was impermanent; you could not buy or steal a substitute if it was your wife who had left you... Or Ivy, who was as much your own as a wife....

"A drink for you, O'Rane?," asked Gaymer.

"No, thanks. I can smell things, but my taste is not what it once was... I don't want to seem inhospitable, Gaymer, but you're drinking *much* more than's good for you. It's a sound rule only to drink when you're at the top of your form; otherwise it's a waste of good liquor and ruination of a good constitution."

Gaymer drained his tumbler and refilled it. The decanter rattled, as he put it down on the tray, and he transferred it to the table-cloth so that he could help himself again, if he desired, without attracting his host's over-acute attention.

"I can drop it any time I like," he boasted.

"Then drop it now," O'Rane suggested. "Apart from health, you aren't doing yourself any good. I hear you're looking out for a job, and it's only fair to warn you that you're getting a bad name with men and women. D'you like candid advice?"

"I don't mind it from you."

"Well, I should clear out of this country. There's too little work for you, too much drink and too many women. Your record in the war was too creditable to fritter away in bars and promenades. Take a couple of years to steady down and then come home and get married. You're not fit to marry till you've got your nerve-centres back in place."

Gaymer refilled his glass and replaced the decanter carefully; the syphon was a noisy complication, so he dispensed with it.

"I haven't the least idea what I want to do," he yawned.

"Well, you want to be a decent member of society."

"Not in the least! Before the war I wanted to make money and have a good time; I enjoyed the war because I liked flying... and I liked killing. There was no 'thin red line' about me; I wasn't risking my skin for the people here. It was good fun, though and I believe I killed more French than Germans. Now I want to have a good time again."

"And what constitutes a good time?," asked O'Rane.

"Oh, I don't know. The usual things... Human nature's constant."

"And it's amazing how soon human nature gets tired of wine, women and song. Short of sudden death, you've a long life before you still; you must aim at something permanent. And the only permanent things you're going for at present are cirrhosis of the liver and general paralysis... Were you in love with this Maitland child?"

Gaymer turned in his chair so quickly that he upset his tumbler; as he picked it up, he wondered if O'Rane knew that blindness alone saved him from having the remains of the brandy thrown in his face... After a moment's industrious mopping, Gaymer looked up and was bewildered to find his ill-temper evaporating. Criticism, advice and questions were jerked out with a naked candour which mysteriously robbed them of offence.

"She's—a pretty kid," he answered carelessly.

"I've never seen her, of course. She's nothing more?" asked O'Rane.

"I was quite fond of her."

"Nothing more?"

"I'm fond of her still."

"Nothing more?"

Gaymer impatiently broke three matches before he could light his cigarette.

"What more d'you *want?*," he asked petulantly.

"Well, does she or any woman mean enough to you to make you want to be a decent member of society?... That's your fourth brandy! Yes, I know you spilt one... That's why I said you weren't fit to marry yet. Would you knock off drink and give up hanging about with every other woman you see and start in to earn a decent living?"

A patter of light feet and a rustle of clothes heralded Sonia's return. She hurried to the writing-table, kissing her husband on the way, rummaged among a litter of papers and hurried out again, leaving the same faint fragrance of violets as a provocative reminder of her presence.

"I'm rather out of favour at present," said Gaymer, as he stood up and began to inspect the room with critical envy.

"There are other women in the world. This one's much too much of a child for you."

"I'm not so sure. I'd do a lot for—for a woman I loved. Oh, I'd be the complete reformed character," he added with a laugh that was a contemptuous antidote to his sincerity of a moment before.

"Well, I'm glad to see that you have one vulnerable spot... It's time to pull up."

Gaymer looked at him for a moment without understanding.

"I wonder what you're trying to get at...," he murmured.

Refusing the offer of a seat in Sonia's car, he strolled towards Buckingham Gate and arranged to have his luggage collected from the O'Ranes' house. There had been no purpose in going there, no purpose in declining the lift, no purpose in anything. He could not make up his mind or decide what

he wanted to do next. After ordering luncheon at home because he did not want to meet people at his club, he countermanded the order and set out aimlessly across the Park. The government offices were emitting a stream of girl-clerks, and he paused to watch them with disfavour; other women were curiously unattractive at this moment... One o'clock... He too must have something to eat...

Instead of walking to his club, Gaymer found himself halting irresolutely at the corner of Ryder Street. It was in one of these houses that Ivy worked now; at any moment she might come out, he could invite her to lunch with him... He waited for half-an-hour and then turned disgustedly into St. James' Street. Ivy was not coming out. Eric Lane had taken possession of her with so much assurance that no one else was allowed to see her...

An errand-boy swept round the corner on the wrong side of the road and sent his front wheel over Gaymer's toes before overbalancing with basket and bicycle. Gaymer surveyed him dispassionately for a moment and then broke into such abuse that a crowd began to collect. The furious rush of foul language eased a pressure which was becoming unbearable. The boy was scared, the onlookers were cynically amused; amusement changed to inarticulate sympathy as Gaymer paused, drew breath and started again; he was still hurling maledictions when boy and bicycle had disappeared from sight, and the idlers raised a murmur of sympathy as a white-whiskered admiral intervened in defence of decency.

"Mind your own blasted business, curse you!" Gaymer roared in savage delight at finding a new antagonist.

"Another word, and I give you in charge for using obscene language," threatened the admiral.

The crowd, which was beginning to disperse, collected again and raised a subdued cheer in support of the old man. "Quite right too!" Gaymer heard. "Perfectly disgusting... Ashamed of himself..." He filled his lungs for an annihilating attack on them all; but, before he could deliver it, Carstairs elbowed his way through the onlookers and demanded to know what was amiss.

"Swine of a boy runs his bloody machine over my toes..." Gaymer began.

"Well, don't make such a row about it! Come to the club and have some lunch."

Gaymer directed a last furious look at his muddy boots, then turned from Carstairs and walked rapidly down Piccadilly. He would have liked to tell the interfering old admiral what he thought of him; he would have liked to thrash that damned boy, to thrash any one... Cursing him was good in its way, but he had been stopped before he attained any satisfaction...

The desire for food had passed; but Gaymer reached his club in time for a drink and felt better for it. The desire for a fight remained. In the open noon of his life as a soldier he had never known this maddening itch of truculence. To be able to call some one a German!... He prowled through the smoking-room in search of a victim, but people would only say "Hullo, Johnny! Coming to join us?"... And he had already been reported to the committee and forced to apologize "for conduct unworthy of a gentleman" in the card-room...

At five o'clock he returned to Ryder Street, only remembering when it was too late that he had not yet looked for Eric Lane's number in the directory. Ivy must come out *some* time!... Unless she spent the night there... Gaymer checked in his short, loathed beat, for this was a question that had to be faced and answered. *Imprimis*, all these writers—and especially the fellows connected with the stage who could blackmail a girl before they would give her a speaking part—helped themselves to anything that came their way; they were an immoral lot, but a man did not need to be a plaster saint in order to feel that some forms of immorality were worse than others, that the lethal chamber was the only place for the long-haired gang who pretended to be *above* the ordinary rules... Lane did not grow his hair long, he had been taken up by quite decent people; but what was true of all was true of one. He posed as a delicate idealist—with the caressing voice of a woman and a soulful, 'not-long-for-this-world' look in his eyes; so familiar was the pose become that Gaymer had been deceived by it into thinking he had nothing to fear. The fellow talked "spiritual beauty" to a little fool like Ivy until he won her, soul and body... And all the time looking like a parson...

Gaymer rang at the nearest door without looking at the number. He *might* have the luck to meet Ivy; failing that, he could always bait the parson-poet... Somewhere inside, a clock chimed seven, and he flung away in disgust without waiting for the door to be opened. Two hours! Ivy was home by now. Two hours walking up and down that forsaken street because a consumptive-looking Grub Street hack had walked off with the girl that he wanted... What could she see in him? Gaymer caught sight of his own sturdy, well-groomed reflection in a shop-window. In the name of Heaven, what could she see in the fellow?

It was still broad daylight, owing to this accursed "summer time"; and London was never so intolerable as by day. He walked aimlessly along Piccadilly and up Regent Street, along Oxford Street and up Tottenham Court Road. His course would be a zig-zag on the map... Zig-zag... Everything was zig-zag; purposeless, wearisome... He remembered suddenly that he had eaten no food all day. Zig-zag... His feet had strayed out of Tottenham Court Road into a side-street, and he found himself staring at a newly painted shop-front. Inside, a band was playing; appetizing savours of hot food floated up from the basement; and women with arms white and eyes darkly mysterious in the gathering dusk pattered through the door-way with a half-glance back in universal invitation.

"What's this place?" Gaymer asked the commissionaire.

"Fleur de Lys Dance Club, sir."

"Well, I want to be a member. Make up a name for me and fix it with the secretary. Add my subscription to the dinner-bill and keep this for yourself."

Without waiting for an answer, Gaymer walked through the hall, threw his hat on to a counter at the end and mounted to a gallery overlooking a garish green-and-gold ball-room. Dinner was being served at small tables round three sides of the gallery; in the fourth was ensconced a negro band. Gaymer looked and listened, forgetting himself for a moment in his effort to classify the place and the company. Cheap and tawdry, he decided, without even the appearance of spontaneous hilarity; respectable, in all probability... The men looked like clerks earnestly aping the life of gaiety and wantonness created for them in illustrated papers and cinematograph theatres. The women,

presumably, were typists, milliners, hotel clerks, mannequins. In cut and material their clothes were too good to have been bought new; here and there a draggled flounce or soiled shoe hinted at long service. Gaymer had always wondered what girls did with their cast-off finery....

It was a new world peopled by an unknown race, and he was uncertain of the technique for gaining admittance. At the table nearest to him a girl was sitting alone, and he asked leave to join her.

She did not know whether to be flattered or affronted that he had addressed her; and Gaymer was confirmed in his contemptuous diagnosis of the company's narrow respectability. As she lacked experience and dignity to assert herself, he decided that she would respond to treatment which took her for granted. He smiled and sat down with confident composure.

"I'm waiting for my friend," the girl answered doubtfully, looking past him to the door.

Gaymer inspected her critically. She was young, dark and anæmic with thin arms and a thin back bare to the waist; her extravagantly low-cut dress was incongruously rich half-covering to the meagre body which it so generously revealed, but she had abundant hair, warm lips and restless dark eyes. He looked away for a moment at the other women in their neighbourhood and decided that he had done well in choosing her; then he looked towards the door, trying to identify her "friend".

"You're not with that bandy-legged Yid, are you?," he asked with disfavour, as a man left the door and approached their table.

The girl looked at him in open-mouthed surprise.

"Please not to speak like that about my friend!," she exclaimed.

"You'll enjoy yourself much more with me."

"We—haven't been introduced... And I can't give him the go-by," she answered uncertainly, impressed in spite of herself by his assurance.

"This is a table for two," said Gaymer significantly, picking up the wine-list. "What are you going to drink?... God, what assorted poison! We'll try the champagne; if it's not fit to drink, we can fall back on an honest brandy and soda. What are you going to eat?"

Calling to a waiter, he began ordering dinner and was still absorbed in his task when the "friend" touched his shoulder and murmured deferentially:

"I think you've taken my chair, sir."

Gaymer glanced up for a moment and then turned to his study of the wine-list.

"I don't like Jews," he observed.

"This lady... I had to see about a ticket for her—"

"I don't like Jews," Gaymer repeated. "Waiter! Where the devil's our waiter gone to? Here, a bottle of forty-three. And ice it properly first." Then he looked up again at the man whose chair he had taken. "I've spoken about this before. Will you go away?"

The man stared at him for a moment, flushed and turned to the girl.

"We'll find another table, Gracie," he said with a tremble in his voice.

"Gracie's dining with me," said Gaymer. "She's much too good for you. If you go away at once, there need be no unpleasantness. If you persist in butting in where you're not wanted..." He paused to recollect his encounter with the errand-boy in Piccadilly, the fruitless hours of patrol in Ryder Street... "I shall send you to Abraham's bosom at such a pace that you'll come out the other side."

The young Jew hesitated and looked appealingly at the girl.

"I don't want a scene—" he began.

"You'll get one unbroken film from here to the nearest mortuary, if you've not gone in fifteen seconds," said Gaymer, laying his watch on the table. "One, two, three, four..."

"I'm going to speak to the secretary," said the young Jew with dignity. "Bear witness, Gracie! *He* started it!... Chucked out! That's what'll happen to you, sir!"

As he hurried away, Gaymer breathed luxuriantly.

"It's a pity there's not more lynching in England," he observed, "but I'm glad I came in time to keep him from molesting you any further."

"You didn't ought to have treated him like that," giggled the girl, who had enjoyed every moment of the altercation and was now looking furtively at the door in the hope of seeing her cavalier returning with the secretary. "He'll never speak to me again."

"He certainly won't while I'm here. And, if I have any trouble, he'll never speak to any one this side of the grave... Go to him, if you prefer it," he added brusquely. "So far as I know, I've never killed a Jew yet. One ought to, just for the experience."

"The things you say!," cried the girl. "I'd—like to stay, only poor Mr. Lewis... You scared him away, *no* mistake... Champagne. Shall I go all funny if I drink it?"

"I hope so," Gaymer answered, raising his glass cautiously. "God! it's like treacle! Waiter, if you've any brandy fit to drink, bring it here!"

As his rival did not reappear, Gaymer cast about for other means of distraction. Once again he had been disappointed of his fight; and there was no satisfaction in accumulating the spoils of victory without a struggle. It was something, indeed, that he could "scare away" another man and win over a woman by a mere word; but the woman was not worth trouble... and the man was only fit to thrash....

"What's your other name, Gracie?," he asked abruptly. "What d'you do with yourself all day? Tell me all your absorbing life-history."

Under the influence of the champagne, which he left her to drink by herself, the girl's tongue was loosened; and, though he paid little attention to what she was saying, Gaymer learned before the end of dinner that she was confidential typist to an export merchant, that she lived at Tottenham and that she was at that moment supposed to be spending the night with another girl from the same office and going to a concert. The young Jew was book-keeper in a neighbouring office and had long desired to marry her.

"But I keep him at a distance," she confided. "I want to have a look round before I settle down. No

sprees then," she added regretfully.

"Married life's what you make it," said Gaymer. "Come and dance."

Dinner had put him in good humour, and he was now less contemptuously critical. Gracie had a certain elemental charm, holding herself well, walking well and, as she danced, melting into his arms until she seemed a part of him. The champagne had brought colour into her cheeks, and her eyes shone in ecstasy. The crash and jerk, the bleating and rumble of the band sent a thrill of dancing madness through her nerves, and at Gaymer's touch she shivered and became still as though she were a bird and his hand had closed over her fluttering wings....

After a riot of rag-time the orchestra subsided into a waltz.

"If you—could care—for me," she hummed, "as I—could care—for you-ou...."

"Don't!" Gaymer snapped.

She was all right until she opened her mouth; but, when she spoke, there was commonness without depravity. He doubted whether she was clever enough to shake off her accent, her phrases, her devastating gentility. And, if she never spoke, there was little companionship in the adventure. Already she was giving him a foretaste of what their relations would be... mechanical, soulless, without intimacy or tenderness; they danced for ten minutes and then went back to their table in the gallery for a drink and a cigarette, then danced again. And, whenever the music stopped, he had to keep her from talking....

"I wonder what's happened to Mr. Lewis?," she murmured.

"Don't bother about him... I say, Gracie, have you had enough of this? I'm as hot as hell in these thick clothes. Let's get some air."

"Where are you going to?," she asked, as he led her into the hall.

"We'll talk about that later. Get your cloak."

The girl stopped short and looked at him, her eyes charged with fear.

"I... I must go home," she stammered.

"Get your cloak," Gaymer repeated. "I'll try to find a taxi."

They drove down Tottenham Court Road without speaking. Gaymer was tired, restless and bored, the girl fascinated and terrified. Once she laid her hand on his wrist and asked with dry lips where he was taking her.

"Home."

"I didn't ought to!... I *mustn't*," she cried.

Gaymer put his arm round her thin shoulders and kissed her.

"Don't you want to?," he asked.

"I didn't ought to."

He withdrew his arm and lay back in his own corner:

"It's a free country. Don't come if you don't like."

There was a second silence, and the girl turned to him timidly, putting her hands on his shoulders and looking at him through a mist of tears.

"I'm frightened," she whispered. "Be nice to me! Do you want me?"

Gaymer kissed her mechanically and with contempt for her cheap surrender. He had asserted himself against the young Jew and against this girl, but the proof of power brought him no satisfaction. For a week or two Gracie might amuse him; then they would grow tired of each other, there would be recriminations and a scene, he would have to find some one to take her place. And, while she was with him, she had nothing but her meagre looks and the servile passion which he had inspired. They might live together, but he would never deign to share his life with her....

"Is it far?," she asked. "I'm so tired."

Gaymer did not care whether she was tired or not; nothing that she could say or do would rouse him to tenderness; nothing that could happen to her would stir him to concern. She was useful, she could never be essential; a servant to be engaged and replaced. He despised her because she could give him no companionship; very soon, he knew, he would loathe her....

"If you're tired, you'd better go home," he said.

"You *are* horrid to me!," she whimpered.

"Sorry! But it's all a mistake." He tapped on the window until the taxi stopped. "I'm going to get out. You take this on home. Give this to the man. Kiss me good-bye and part friends! You *have* enjoyed yourself, I hope. Good-bye, Gracie."

He thrust a note into her hand, opened the door and walked rapidly away. The driver waited and then came to the window for orders; he was lazily amused to see a girl sitting forward with her cloak on the floor and her hands locked between her knees, staring in bewilderment at the vanishing form of her late companion. Her lips were parted, her eyes strained; she shivered and pulled the cloak over her bare shoulders and back; the movement seemed to break a spell and she roused to give an address. As the taxi turned, she took a last look over her shoulder, then dropped her head between her hands to think; at the same moment the driver looked around with a leer at her expression of perplexity, in which a wave of disappointment was succeeded by a wave of thankfulness and then a second wave of disappointment. She chewed petulantly at a corner of a crumpled handkerchief, then hid her face and began to cry.

Gaymer walked south, girding at himself. Nothing that he could do was right... He was mercifully rid of a woman whom he might well have strangled before morning. But he was not rid of the maddening loneliness which had tortured him all day, racking him with an extra twist every time that he saw a man and girl perambulating arm-in-arm....

At two o'clock he found himself once more in Ryder Street, pacing up and down for no better reason than that he had already paced up and down there for so many hours. Ivy could not be there at two o'clock... He turned into St. James' Street and crossed the Park to Eaton Place, led thereto by instinct and well knowing that he would find no satisfaction in staring at a blind window. It was more than time for him to be in bed, but he could not muster courage to enter his flat. Too many reminders of Ivy lingered to haunt him in each derisory void room. A game thrown away through

carelessness... He could have held her; granted opportunity, he could recapture her as easily as he had captured the yellow woman with the silly name at the counter-jumpers' carnival off Tottenham Court Road....

It was a pity to let that young Jew escape without a hiding....

A pity that he had not thrashed that errand-boy....

Gracie was not the girl that he wanted, but she was better than nothing. And he had let her go....

Three o'clock....

Gaymer walked to Jermyn Street in the grey chill of a summer morning. He did not greatly want a Turkish bath, but it would be good for him after the indifferent liquor that he had been consuming all day. And he could sleep for a few hours. And Jermyn Street was convenient for the parson-poet's flat....

Before he began the bath he must remember to look up the fellow's address in the directory....

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MIRAGE

Would I lose you now? would I take you then,
If I lose you now that my heart has need?
And come what may after death to men,
What thing worth this will the dead years breed?
Lose life, lose all; but at least I know,
O sweet life's love, having loved you so,
Had I reached you on earth, I should lose not again,
In death nor life, nor in dream or deed.
ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE: "THE TRIUMPH OF TIME."

Ivy always appeared so punctually that, on the morning after their return from Croxton, Eric was first surprised and then disquieted when nine o'clock, half-past nine and ten struck and there was still no sign of her. His hand was stretched to the telephone, when she came in breathless and apologetic.

"I couldn't get here before. Don't be angry with me, Eric," she begged, as she took off her gloves and hat.

"I was only getting rather anxious," he answered. "There's nothing the matter, is there, Ivy?"

"No. Yes. No... I ran into Johnnie opposite Buckingham Palace, and he insisted on walking across the Park with me. That's what made me late. We sat and talked. I thought it best to thresh the thing out once and for all and to have done with it."

The brisk voice and businesslike manner were not wholly convincing; as she smoothed her hair, Eric saw that she was flushed and still out of breath.

"What did he say?," he asked.

"Oh, he told me he could explain everything, and I'd promised to marry him, and he wanted to marry me, and I'd *got* to marry him... He was frightfully in earnest. He said I was the only girl he'd ever cared for in the least; and I hadn't been reasonable, wanting to marry when he hadn't anything to marry on and then making a quarrel out of it. He vowed that he'd never have looked at that woman or at any other woman, if I hadn't refused to see him. I did, you know; I wanted to punish him, so I wouldn't have him near me for a month; it was during that time that I found out... He said that, after all we'd been to each other, I *must* marry him, I couldn't marry any one else, I was practically married to him already... I said I couldn't discuss it with him. But I wish he didn't take it so seriously... Let's get to work, Eric; I don't want to think about it."

She shivered slightly and took her note-book and pencil from a drawer. Eric turned to his letters without saying anything more. She had grown suddenly pale, and her hands were trembling; obviously unfit for work, she was still less fit for sitting still and brooding... Since Gaymer had clearly contrived this meeting, he meant business; there was nothing more likely than that he would contrive a second and third. Eric stopped in the middle of a letter and looked out of the window, but the street was empty.

"D'you feel you've made him see that everything's over between you?," he asked.

"I've told him so again and again, but he simply pays no attention," she cried tremulously. "He keeps going back to my promise, as though the only shadow of difference between us was that he was so slow and I was so impatient. He says he'll marry me as soon as Lord Poynter's offer is confirmed, and I can publish the engagement as soon as I like. I told him I didn't *want* to, I said I wasn't engaged to him any longer; then we started again at the beginning... Eric, don't let's talk about it."

They returned to the letters, and he went on dictating until he discovered that Ivy was paying no attention to him. One hand supported her head; with the other she was drawing little patterns on the blotting paper. Suddenly the pencil slipped from her fingers; he saw her eyes close and her lips whiten, as she bit them.

"My child—!"

"It's nothing! I shall be all right in a minute, but I felt so funny all of a sudden."

"Are you in pain?"

"I am, rather..."

She bit her lips at a new spasm, and Eric put his fingers on her pulse. Then he picked her up and carried her into his room, leaving her there for a moment, while he gave orders for a bed to be made up in his spare room and telephoned for Dr. Gaisford to come round at once.

"I'm *really* all right, I just felt funny," she protested, when he told her what he had done. "I think meeting Johnnie, you know... I don't want a doctor."

She tried to sit upright, then fell back, covering her face with her hands. Eric took up his stand half-way between the window and the bed until he saw a car stopping at the door. The sight of the doctor's familiar, burly figure heartened him, and it was only as he ran downstairs and found himself, white-faced and agitated, being mistaken for the patient, that he realized how frightened he had been.

"When you're not ill yourself, you'll always take some one else's illness on your shoulders," grumbled the doctor. "I've never seen such a fellow! Where is she?"

"In my room."

"And what's happened?"

As best he could, Eric described Ivy's sudden collapse. The doctor raised his eyebrows once and grunted to himself:

"Right. Then you can go out for a nice long walk. I shan't have you in the room and I don't want you fussing about outside. Come back after lunch, and I'll give you a new set of orders then. It's

possible that we shan't be able to move her for some time."

"But is she bad? You haven't seen her yet!," Eric cried inconsequently.

"I can make a guess what the trouble *may* be. Now clear out, my son, and don't pull a long face. It's a thing that may happen to any one—any one who's fool enough to be a woman, that is. I don't propose to let her die, if I can help it, so you needn't summon the relations. The less said to them—and to every one—the better for your young friend."

He entered the bedroom, leaving Eric mystified and fidgetting with anxiety in the hall. There was a kindly, gruff, "Well, my dear?" and an inarticulate answer from Ivy. Eric hovered on tip-toe outside the door, waiting to be handed prescriptions or sent for brandy. He looked into the spare room to see whether the bed was yet made. "Miss Maitland's a little faint," he explained easily enough to the servants. Then he started and turned away, for across the hall and through an open and a closed door came an unmistakable moan. It was not repeated, and he lurked uneasily in the hall, trying to distinguish the mutter of voices. Then he went to his cellar and opened a bottle of brandy. Gaisford was a fool to keep him out of the room; he could not possibly know where anything was kept... Eric hurried into the library and wrote—"In the cupboard under my wash-hand-stand you'll find sal volatile, eau-de-cologne and aspirin. Also bicarbonate of soda and bismuth. I've got brandy here. Let me know if there's anything else you want." He twisted the paper into a thin spill, pushed it under the door and knocked gently.

Half-an-hour later Dr. Gaisford came into the library with the paper crumpled in his hand and a smile puckering his eyes and mouth.

"I thought I said something about a nice walk," he grunted.

"Is it anything serious?," asked Eric, disregarding the hint.

"*"Bicarbonate of soda and bismuth"*," read the doctor. "How old are you, Eric? Six? Seven? It's a very ordinary business; and there'll be no danger, if we are careful; but I somehow don't think *eau-de-cologne* quite meets the case, my learned colleague. I'm going to write a note, and you're going to take it away in a taxi and bring back a nurse. That child's not to move for three weeks. She won't want to, for a day or two, because she's in considerable pain; and, after that, she'll be very weak. And, after that,—well, you may feel that Providence has stepped in and solved a good many future difficulties for you. It's a curious thing—"

"Is she in danger?," Eric interrupted, as the doctor's meaning became clear to him.

"We-ell, it's worse than a cut finger and not as bad as a broken back. Perhaps I may be allowed to point out that you do no good to any one by getting into a panic. I'll tell you that she needs careful handling; and we'll leave it at that, because that part's my job. But you've to keep your head and lend me your inventive and dramatic genius. We've to concoct a convincing lie over this. What are we going to say is the matter with her?"

Eric sat heavily on the arm of a chair, too much numbed to think.

"I leave that to you," he answered with a helpless shake of the head.

"Then I make it appendicitis. We must study our parts; she must have been troubled with pains and sickness, and I recommended an immediate operation... We'll make a good lie, while we're about it; I happen to know that Fitz-William is ill and Greenaway's fishing in Ireland; they're the obvious men, so we'll say we tried to get them to operate; when they couldn't come, I said we daren't wait and I'd operate myself. You, meanwhile, tried to telephone to the girl's mother, but the line was engaged. I think that holds water... I'll get hold of a nurse I can trust and explain to her... Can you pick any holes in that?"

"Is it all right as regards the law?"

"Yes, unless she's inconsiderate enough to go and die. I don't put my name to a false certificate to oblige you or any one, friend Eric; and, if it were anybody else, I wouldn't touch the whole business with a pole. But, if she pulls through—as she's going to—, we don't do any good by telling the truth and we don't harm any one but ourselves by telling a good, saving lie. Give me a sheet of paper and a pen. And, when you've got the nurse, go off to this girl's mother and pitch her this yarn. She can come and see her for a moment, if she insists, but you can quote all my degrees and decorations to her and say that I'm very strongly against it. Now, d'you think that's clear?"

He dropped into a chair by the writing-table without waiting for an answer. Eric stood for a moment, trying to remember and understand all that he had been told; then he fetched a hat and stick and returned for the letter.

It was six o'clock before he accomplished his last commission and drove back to Ryder Street. On reaching the Cromwell Road, he was informed that Ivy's mother was at the house in Norfolk; he hurried to the Law Courts and waited for the judge, who wasted half-an-hour before deciding to do nothing. Then he laid siege to Eaton Place, pursued Lady Maitland round London by telephone and eventually intercepted her between two committees in Westminster. She wasted only twenty minutes in a succession of agitated questions; and by that time Eric had made his story polished and convincing, so that she accepted the doctor's ban without protest, only insisting that she was to be fed with morning and evening bulletins. The nurse had by this time taken charge; Gaisford had left and returned; Ivy was in as satisfactory a state as could be expected.

"I suppose nothing will induce you to let me see her?," said Eric.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and smiled grimly:

"Yes, if you won't excite her. We've carried her into your spare room, away from your infernal telephone contraptions. Don't try to talk to her."

Eric went in and returned swiftly, with a scared face.

"I say, she's in horrible pain," he exclaimed.

"I know. I sent you in to cure you of any desire to go back. The best thing you can do is to keep out of the way and find some work to do; otherwise you'll simply fret your nerves to ribbons. It'll be much worse than this when you're married, if that's any consolation. Go and get some dinner and find some one to take to a music-hall."

Eric knew that the doctor was trying to keep his emotional temperature low, but he winced

involuntarily at his inhuman detachment.

"While she's like that? Thank you, Gaisford," he answered shortly.

"I'm trying to make a philosopher of you," the doctor explained.

Eric looked at his watch and walked aimlessly downstairs. He had forgotten to eat any luncheon, and Gaisford's suggestion of dinner made him conscious of a head-ache and a vague feeling of sickness. He was dawdling irresolutely in the shadowy hall, trying to decide whether it was better to continue hungry or to face conversation at the club, when he heard his name called and looked up to find John Gaymer standing in front of the name-board by the fire-place.

"I was coming to return your call," he announced.

Eric realized dully that he wanted, above all things, to avoid an altercation. The head-ache told him that; he shuddered at the thought of noise and the effort of reining his temper and barbing his tongue for a wrangle. He had a head-ache, because he was hungry; he was hungry, because he had been about Ivy's business all day. And Ivy was in such pain that he could not bear to stay in her room. Gaymer—and Gaymer alone—was responsible; he was responsible for her agony of mind and of body; he would be responsible, if she died. It was hardly the moment for him to thrust himself into what, for all Gaisford's bluff confidence, might at any moment become a house of death; it was hardly the atmosphere or mood in which to force a gratuitous quarrel.

"I'm afraid I'm going out," said Eric with an effort to avoid copying the veiled bellicose tone of his companion. "I didn't have any lunch, so I'm dining rather early."

"Well, don't let me keep you. Shall I find Ivy upstairs?"

Eric looked thoughtfully at the composed face and powerful frame, wondering why he took the trouble to study him so carefully and realizing with a shock that he was gauging his strength for the moment when they had to fight this out. He wished that he felt less empty and sick. One well-placed blow over the heart from Gaymer's ready arm would probably kill him.

"She's upstairs," he answered. "You can't see her, though."

"What a slave-driver you are!," Gaymer laughed. "I only want to speak to her for a minute."

"It's impossible."

Gaymer raised his eyebrows slightly and felt for his cigarette-case. He looked vainly for a chair and then hoisted himself on to a table beside the fire-place:

"I'll wait till she comes out."

"Then you'll have to wait some time. She's not coming out to-night—or to-morrow—or the next day."

"I'm afraid I shall have to go up and see her, then. I quite appreciate that you don't want me to disturb her work, but you can't very well sequester her person for days on end." He got slowly off the table with a swagger of defiance, keeping his eyes on Eric and moving, with his head turned, towards the stair-case. "There'll be some one to let me in, I suppose?"

"There's a doctor and a nurse to keep you out," Eric answered without moving. "Ivy's very seriously ill, you'll be interested to hear. She mustn't be worried, and I can't allow any noise of any kind... Perhaps you'd better come out with me. There are one or two things which I think you've a right to know, because, if that child dies, you'll have murdered her as surely as I'm standing here."

Gaymer's foot was already on the lowest stair, but he first hesitated and then came slowly back.

"You mustn't allow your love of the dramatic to run away with you," he sneered. "What's the matter with her?"

"I'll tell you outside. Are you coming? I warn you that, if you try to get into my flat, I'll send for the police."

He held open the street-door, and Gaymer passed through it jauntily after just enough deliberation to shew that he was not yielding to a threat. Eric walked half a pace ahead of him down St. James' Street and into the Park. Once Gaymer broke the silence to ask where he was being taken; Eric strode on without answering until he found two empty chairs under a secluded tree.

"I'm glad to have this opportunity of talking to you," he said. "It must be understood that I can't let Ivy be molested by you any longer. You made a great nuisance of yourself at Croxton and again this morning—"

Gaymer leaned forward and thrust his face within a foot of Eric's with an unspoken challenge to strike if he dared.

"And who under the sun are *you* to tell me what I may do and what I *mayn't*, what you'll *let* me do?," he asked. "There are moments, my dear Lane, when you make me impatient. *I* don't butt into your private affairs—"

"As I told you once before, Ivy's a friend of mine," Eric answered, tipping his chair back.

"And of mine. You were very much concerned to find out whether we were engaged to be married; and, though it's no more your business now than it was then, I may tell you that we are."

Eric shook his head slowly:

"She's been trying to cure you of that delusion for some days. I understand you did once give her a promise, but that was for your own ends. And I understand you've offered it again, no doubt again for your own ends. But when a girl's been seduced and deserted and left with a baby—"

"You damned liar!"

Gaymer jumped up and stood threateningly over Eric.

"It's no use getting abusive! Perhaps I ought to have said that she was *going* to have a baby, but that now she won't. She may die, though; and, in that case, Gaymer, nothing in heaven or earth is going to save you; I shall honour you with my undivided attention. If she pulls through, we shall not require to see or hear anything more of you."

"You damned liar!," Gaymer repeated; but his voice had fallen to a whisper, and Eric discovered with nicely blended surprise and rage that the incredulity was unassumed.

"Don't go on saying that! These things do happen, you know."

"But this is the first I've heard of it!"

"Well... You know now. I saw Ivy for a moment this afternoon, I saw what she was going through..."

You vile little cad!... And I've seen her daily, I've seen what she's had to go through—mentally—for your pleasure and amusement. The first you've heard of it, you swine! Of course it is! Ivy has too much pluck and too much pride to come and ask you to marry her out of charity. I shouldn't be telling you now, if she wasn't lying at death's door—Yes, you beast, I've seen her—and if I didn't know it'd kill her to have you blustering in and bullying her... That girl—I met her before you did, and she was as innocent as a child—"

"Hold on a bit!," Gaymer interrupted.

Eric was out of breath with the vehemence of his attack. He leaned back panting, dizzy with excitement and hunger. Gaymer was still standing over him, but no longer menacing; he rocked a little, and his face was shapeless and flabby. Once, at the onrush of an air-raid, Eric had seen a drunken man lying helpless in the road; with the bursting crash of the first maroons he had become sober, drawing himself slowly upright, while the flush and fire of drink faded out of his cheeks, leaving him tremulous, unmanned but lucid. Gaymer was no less unmanned now.

"I think that's all I need tell you," Eric concluded.

"I'm not altogether there yet... I say, d'you feel inclined to come round to my rooms for a drink —?"

"I do not."

"I wish you would." The truculence which was second self to Gaymer had left him. "You can call me what you like... Look here, Lane, we're both of us a bit on edge; you say you've had nothing to eat... Come round and take pot-luck with me. It doesn't commit you to anything; you can go on saying and thinking just whatever you like about me. But I want to hear about Ivy. On my honour, I never suspected... Did you mean what you said about her being at death's door?"

Eric forced back a passionate answer.

"The doctor says he's going to pull her through," he said at length. "I don't know much about these things. I *saw* her... We shan't do any good by discussing it."

Gaymer leaned down and picked up his cane.

"Won't you come round?," he asked again. "I want to hear the whole story. You mayn't believe it, but I'm very fond of Ivy...."

Before he appreciated that he was yielding, Eric found himself being helped to his feet and led towards Buckingham Gate. Gaymer walked with an uncertain lurch, bumping into him at rhythmic intervals and saying nothing till they were seated on the divan in his smoking-room and he was collecting himself to order dinner. No sooner was his housekeeper out of the room than he poured himself nearly half a tumbler of brandy and drank it in two practised gulps.

"That's better," he murmured.

"You'll find yourself laid out with D. T., if you go on like that," Eric commented.

"I wonder... I've got a head like wood and, ever since I was wounded, I've needed the devil of a lot to keep me going... But I can ride or run or shoot or swim with any one you like to put up against me... Well, Lane, it's not much use my apologizing for anything I may have said, because I've never felt particularly friendly towards you from the first day we met, which is some years ago now, and I always very strongly resented your butting in where Ivy was concerned. I enjoyed riling you. But I do at least see that you had better reason for butting in than I thought. I honestly *didn't* think... I wonder if you'd mind telling me your version of the business from the beginning."

Starting sketchily from his first meeting in New York, Eric described his relations with Ivy from the night when he found her walking home alone from the Vaudeville. When he came to their Maidenhead expedition, he paused long in search of a formula.

"She admitted a little; the rest I managed to guess. I said I'd see her through," he told Gaymer.

There was a second pause, but Gaymer sat swinging the empty tumbler between his knees and staring blankly into the empty fire-place. Eric continued his story to the point where Gaisford came into the library to explain what was the matter with Ivy.

"That's all," he concluded.

The housekeeper came in to announce dinner.

"D'you like a wash?," asked Gaymer. When they were alone, he leaned his head against the mantelpiece, idly kicking the fender with his heel. "You seem to have jumped my claim," he commented with a note of surprise in his voice.

"Would you say you had much claim to jump?," asked Eric tartly.

"I think so... Come in to dinner. I'll give you my version, and you can tell me what you think of it."

While there was a servant intermittently in the room, Gaymer preferred to talk about his life before the war; and it was not until the end of the meal that he began to speak of Ivy. He was naturally so uncommunicative that Eric had been on nodding terms with him for three years without discovering more about him than that he had been severely wounded in the first months of the war and relegated to light duty ever since; it seemed to Gaymer unlikely that any one should want to know more, and he spoke as though anything that he said might afterwards be used against him. By the end of dinner he had relaxed his hold on unimportant scraps of autobiography, and Eric was able to sketch in a background; Eton and King's, a father who had died and a mother who had remarried and gone to live in Italy, a sister who had married and drifted out of his life; two years of aimless and mildly dissolute life in London, varied with motor-racing....

"I'd always had rather a turn for mechanics and I used to have a lot of fun taking out cars and motor-bikes for hill-climbing and reliability tests," said Gaymer, lighting one more in a long succession of cigarettes. He had come into the room smoking and smoked continuously, sending away one dish after another and drinking brandy and water in equal quantities. "You don't get fat on that sort of thing, though, so I went into a London agency and sold cars on commission to everybody I knew. 'Made a good thing out of it, too. Then I started flying—did you know Babs Neave in the days when we swooped down on Salisbury Plain and broke up the manoeuvres?... I perfected a new aero engine and hoped to make a good thing out of that. Then came the war... I was smashed up a few months before we met; d'you remember, you were dining with that pretentious prig, my

aunt Margaret Poynter, at the end of '15? Barring one trip to America, when I met you again, of course, I've been doing office work at the Air Ministry ever since, rather wondering what to do next. My old firm has been making lorries for the War Office these last four years; they won't have any cars to sell for eighteen months and then they can sell without the help of an agent. I waited till I was quite sure there was nothing for me in the Air Force, then I pulled strings to get out and went to Poynter for a job. He has all kinds of interests, and, if I don't mind going into exile at Rio, he'll place me with the Azores Line... Let's have coffee in the other room; then this old hag can clear away without disturbing us... Lane, this is a delicate position for us. I must tell you again that you seem to have jumped my claim."

"And I must repeat that you've no claim for me to jump. Tell me honestly: did you ever intend to marry Ivy?"

Gaymer poured out the coffee and rang irritably for liqueur glasses. Then he offered Eric a cigar, pierced one for himself and rolled it thoughtfully round and round in his mouth. It was impossible to guess whether he was deciding how much to tell or simply trying to arrange his thoughts. Eric sat down at one end of the divan, wondering why he had come there and what he could add to the few brutal facts which he had thrown at Gaymer in the Park. He would have fainted, if he had gone without food any longer, but, apart from the dinner, he had achieved nothing; there was nothing to achieve. He wondered how Ivy was....

"I—don't—know," drawled Gaymer at length, finishing his brandy and throwing himself into a chair. Drink had restored some of his assurance. He was no longer dazed, no longer a suppliant, and, if he had not yet reverted to his old attitude of detached, provocative superiority, he was growing gradually more combative. "You see, when I first met her, marriage was out of the question. Later on, when I said I'd marry her, I was quite ready... if it ever came to that. But I didn't start out with that intention. I liked her, and she liked me... England's the only country in the world where people think there's anything wrong or unusual... And, since the war, girls have altered a good bit; they don't see why they shouldn't have a good time. Ivy had a thundering good time, the best she's ever had in all her life. I got her away from her damned old stick of a father, I took her out and shewed her round; it was all quite innocent and harmless. Then some one began to talk, and she cooled off a bit; people were wondering whether we were engaged, she said. And bit by bit after that she began to put a pistol to my head. She'd evidently made up her mind to marry me; I wasn't a marrying man, I hadn't the money, but I told her that *when* things straightened themselves out... There's no point in being engaged unless you get some benefit from it... Before she actually came here, I did say as a matter of form that I'd marry her, but at the time I doubted whether either of us would want to. You know how these arrangements end—you have a good time for a month or two; and then the thing begins to pall; and then, if you're wise, you kiss and say good-bye while you're still friends—without waiting for the usual dreary scenes and quarrels. After we'd had two or three months of each other I didn't think she'd talk about marrying me any more; if she *had*—after three months—, she'd have been different from the others, and perhaps this might be the real thing, perhaps we *should* both want to go on. In that case I should have to consider ways and means... Even then, you see, I didn't think anything would come of it. Well, very soon after that she brought the question up again, and we had a bit of a bicker; *she* went away in a huff, and *I* waited for her to come to her senses. The next thing was that she came to see me that night—a month later,—and we had an up-and-a-downer. She never said a word then; as I told you, I never suspected till this evening. Well, I went on waiting for her to come to her senses, but, when she cut all communications, I saw I should have to take the first step. I was missing her. Most infernally... So I got myself invited to Croxton and I meant to find out what the trouble was. If she wasn't the girl I thought she was, if she'd developed a conscience or been talked over or had decided that it wasn't workable to go on having a good time in the old way, I'd made up my mind to marry her. That was the first time I saw it definitely; she suited me very well, she was a nice girl and very fond of me; it was rather a bore getting married, but I was ready to do it. I tried to talk to her down there, but she told me without any beating about the bush that she'd had enough of me. I should have expected to be a bit put out, but I only admired her for it. I didn't know she had it in her to hand me out my marching orders *quite* like that. There wasn't any opportunity of speaking to her again down there, but I watched out for her this morning and had a word; and, when I met you this evening, I was coming down to have another word... I never bother much about defending myself, but, if I didn't know till a couple of hours ago, you can't very well blame me. Now that I *do* know, I shall do the right thing."

He poured himself a second glass of liqueur brandy after his unusual effort of sustained articulation and waved the decanter towards Eric.

"There's nothing for you to do except to keep out of the way," said Eric. "If Ivy dies,—well, we won't consider that. If she gets well, she doesn't want any help or recognition from you; there'll be no consequences for you to fear; she starts fresh, and you may believe her when she tells you that she never wants to see you again."

Gaymer shook his head and smiled tolerantly.

"Ah, but I don't," he answered.

"She's told me and she's told you."

"I don't give her up quite as easily as that."

"I'm not going to let you persecute her." Eric took out his watch and got up from the divan. Gaymer was becoming truculent again, and they could look for nothing but the dreaded, unprofitable wrangle. "I came here at your request; if there are any questions you like to ask—"

"How soon can I see Ivy?"

"You can't. She may not live through the night. If she does, I'll make it my business to keep you away from her."

"Are you afraid?"

"Of you?"

"Are you afraid to let me see her, afraid that she may make up her mind for herself?"

"She'd done that before you got your marching orders at Croxton."

Eric turned his back and took a step towards the door, but Gaymer only sank deeper into his chair, with one leg thrown over the other and his finger-tips pressed together.

"You'd better look at facts, Lane. There was a time within the last four months when she belonged to me, soul and body; she may belong to me soul and body again. *May*... If you try to keep me away—I say 'try', because you won't succeed—, it's because you're afraid. You think you're going to marry her; I'll assume you do; I'll assume she's in love with you, if you'll admit that she must have been tolerably in love with me not so long ago. As between the two of us, if she's going to find that she prefers me, would you sooner she found it out before you try to marry her or after you're happily married?"

"She's decided already."

"She's decided on false evidence. When I tell her that it was only to-night—"

"You won't have an opportunity of telling her."

"You haven't much confidence in yourself."

"I can't see why we should either of us submit to being bothered by you any more. If you've nothing more to say, I'll get back to her. I warn you very strongly—don't make any attempt to see her."

Gaymer looked at him in silence for a moment and then drew himself slowly out of his chair and walked to the door. Eric picked up his hat and left the flat with a short, murmured "good-night." As he hurried across St. James' Park he tried to sort his ideas into order and to escape the oppressive sense of uneasiness which Gaymer's vague menaces had brought to life again. The fellow could do nothing—one said that again and again, to get the problem in perspective and perhaps to rally one's courage—; he could not break down doors, Ivy would never consent to speak to him, to read his letters... Yet, if he came and haunted them when they were married...

It was this eternal, insoluble question of the hold that a man retained on the woman whom he had once possessed, the hold of the faithless and the brutal on those whom they betrayed and ill-treated, the hold which women confessed and of which some men boasted. Gaymer had almost said in words that, as Ivy had once fallen to him, in her great first surrender, she would yield again when he demanded it of her... Eric found himself leaning against a tree on the Mall, idly watching the taxis which raced with a jar and rattle towards Buckingham Palace. Here was a sex difference, for women retained no such hold on their men. And he had spent half of his life trying to understand and systematize the psychology of women. If Gaymer fought him for possession of Ivy, it was anybody's victory.

The doctor was gone by the time that he reached his flat, but the nurse reported that all was well and that her patient was out of danger, almost out of pain. He telephoned reassuringly to Lady Maitland and asked leave to say good-night to Ivy. When he opened the door, her eyes were closed, and he felt a hot wave of anger that he should have submitted to threats from a cad who sat soaking himself with brandy, that he should still be threatened...

Ivy opened her eyes and beckoned to him, with a smile.

"Don't look so worried, dearest!," she whispered. "I know I'm being a frightful nuisance to you."

"Are you better?," he asked, kissing her hand, which was dry and hot.

"I'm all right—honestly. I only feel rather tired. I won't be a nuisance to you any more, though." She turned away with a jerk that set her short hair tossing. "You can get rid of me now, Eric, if you want to."

"If I want to? I thought I'd lost you to-day, Ivy. It wasn't a very pleasant feeling."

"Would you really be sorry...?" She stretched out her hand and caught his wrist. "Eric, be honest with me! You can get rid of me now—Oh, that sounds so horribly ungracious! But you know what I mean. Do you want me, Eric, or were you just sacrificing yourself for me? Tell me honestly. I can bear it."

She turned her face to him again; and he saw that her eyes were narrowed and her lips tightly shut, as though she were nerving herself to be struck.

"Can I keep you, if I want you?," he asked.

"You know you can."

"And is it love—or because you think you ought to? That's what I've been waiting to find out all these weary weeks."

"You needn't have waited, my precious darling! I knew that first day at Maidenhead."

CHAPTER TWELVE

NIGHT

"So when morning was come, he goes to them in a surly manner, as before, and perceiving them to be very sore with the stripes that he had given them the day before, he told them, that since they were never like to come out of that place, their only way would be, forthwith to make an end of themselves, either with knife, halter, or poison: 'For why,' said he, 'should you choose life, seeing it is attended with so much bitterness?'"

JOHN BUNYAN: "THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS."

WHEN the nurse came to turn him out of the room, Eric steadied himself and tried to walk into the library as though nothing unusual had happened. Once there, with the morning's letters still unanswered and the evening's unopened, he could not decide what to do. Forgotten names, from a dream-world that he had forsaken, assailed him with clamorous insistence; his friends, of course, could not realize that for days all his interest had been concentrated on Ivy and Gaymer, with the judge and Gaisford and his own dim family grouped in the middle distance. Absurd urgency to secure his presence at the opera: "*L'Heure espagnole, it's being given for the first time*"; letters from America, informing him that the writers, who would never forget the pleasure of meeting him in New York, were on their way to England... In three days their world was as remote from him as Venusburg from the regenerate Tannhäuser; America was but a country in which he had thought of finding a sanctuary for his wife. There was no need now for him to take Ivy abroad; and for three weeks he had worked and schemed in the expectation of going to America in the autumn for six months or a year....

Readjustment....

The telephone-bell rang, and a woman's voice enquired for him:

"It's Lady John Carstairs speaking. I'm so sorry to hear about poor Miss Maitland. Amy Loring told me at dinner. How is she? I was wondering if there was anything I could do. You've got all the doctors and nurses you want, of course, but it must be such an upset for a bachelor establishment. My husband wanted to know if you'd care for a bed here; we can give you a little room where you'll be able to work undisturbed...."

As he thanked her, Eric smiled wearily to himself at the speed and thoroughness of Gaisford's workings. In twenty-four hours it would be known from one end of his little London to the other that "Connie Maitland's niece, who was helping Eric Lane in the absence of his secretary," had collapsed unexpectedly with appendicitis. He assisted the report on its way by cancelling two dinner invitations and an engagement for the week-end; growing bold in mendacity, he stereotyped the story, as he had told it to the judge, and despatched it with a late bulletin to his mother. By this time there was no harm in telling Lady Maitland that she might come any day, provided that she did not try to stay more than a moment.

The swift-flying rumour of London dinner-tables was sometimes an occasion for blessing. In three weeks' time Ivy could be moved; the news of their engagement would flash from house to house; 'romance,' hard-worked and ill-used, would be pressed into service as thought-saving description until he might hope to be spared, even in the echo of a whisper, hearing the name of Barbara Neave or of John Gaymer. He was too tired to cope with the tumult which their names conjured up; he tried to forget them....

Yet even now Gaymer could not be left where he was.

"*There is one thing which I must add to our conversation of this evening,*" Eric wrote. "*Ivy and I are definitely engaged to be married. I write this in confidence, as the engagement cannot be announced until I have been through the formality of seeing her father. This I hope to do immediately. You will probably agree that this is the most definite answer to the question which you were proposing to raise.*"

He signed the letter and returned to the unexplored pile in front of him. The invitations stretched far into the summer, but for the future he must take Ivy into partnership in dealing with them; there were the customary appeals for money, opinions and advice, the usual requests for interviews, articles and lectures; a long envelope contained the draft of the will which he had instructed his solicitors to make for safeguarding Ivy in the event of his dying suddenly. The necessity had almost passed; but, as he read through the provisions, he filled in her name and rang for his two maids to come and witness his signature. From investments alone they would have rather more than a thousand a year, which was tolerable even in days of swollen prices; in addition he could reasonably hope that his plays would not all cease suddenly and at the same moment to yield him any fees. His income, taken on an average, was probably far bigger than Mr. Justice Maitland enjoyed from salary and securities.

Eric became absorbed in his calculations and worked at them until he was too tired to see any more. Ivy and he would have enough for a flat in London and a cottage in the country; they could winter abroad and travel to their hearts' content; when children came, they could be given the best upbringing and education, as befitted the beautiful, dark-haired, grey-eyed children that Ivy would bear. Hitherto he had never thought of himself as a father; and he fell asleep with a new, delightful picture of Ivy holding their first child in her arms, herself but a child still....

Next day a budget of sympathetic enquiries awaited him, and he was kept busy with pen and telephone. There were presents of flowers and fruit, offers of personal assistance, general invitations and an embarrassing procession of callers. Eric debated with himself whether to issue orders that Captain Gaymer was not to be admitted; he decided that, if his letter were not enough of a deterrent, there would at least be no attempt at a forced entry for some days.

Though he kept reassuring himself, it was a shock to receive a letter in the evening and to trace the straggling, unfamiliar writing down to the signature "Yours sincerely John Gaymer." Eric felt his

heart beating more quickly as he turned to the opening words:

"I have your letter. All that you say may be true, but it doesn't affect my point. So far as I know, the facts have never been put before Ivy. Will you tell her that I should like to see her as soon as she's well enough? The issue is quite plain."

Eric locked the letter away in a despatch-box and walked up and down the library, trying to compose himself before Gaisford came in from the sick-room. Even without Gaymer, the last few weeks had been sufficiently exhausting—first Ivy, then Barbara and the succession of unnerving encounters with her; and, before that, the shock of her marriage, the torturing sense of betrayal, the endless nights and days of inward raving and outward stoicism in which he had travelled and lectured and written from end to end of America like an effigy of himself with the spirit torn out and bleeding apart; and, before that, the two years of illness and madness. It was not surprising if he sometimes felt that something in his head, just behind the eyes, would snap; it was unpleasantly surprising to calculate that he had not felt well for months, that he was half-consciously waiting to hear the snap.

He was sitting with his head bent forward, squeezing his fists against his temples, when the doctor came in. The door was open, and Eric never knew how long Gaisford had stood watching him before he looked up; and, though he rallied at once and asked steadily enough for the evening report, he felt trapped.

"She's doing very nicely," said Gaisford, still looking at him curiously. "If you don't let people see her till I give you leave—"

"You can trust me for that," Eric interrupted.

"And if I say you're not to see her yourself?"

"I shouldn't dream of going near her against your orders!"

The doctor silenced him with a grunt and began digging like an industrious terrier among the papers on the writing table.

"Tell me where you keep your cigars and don't become theatrical," he advised. "Since when have you started this flattering regard for my orders?"

"I've done everything you've told me to."

"Since yesterday morning. In other days I used to prescribe for you, I've even pulled you out of one or two tight corners for which posterity is likely to be more grateful to me than you are. Shoo! Shoo! Shoo! *Seniores priores. I'm doing* the talking. Well, you've always had the sense and justice to admit that you wouldn't have got into eighty per cent. of those same tight corners, if you'd followed my orders earlier. D'you remember the man in Kipling who always prophesied trouble in the Balkans in the spring? It was a fairly safe shot. I always seem to prophesy a nervous breakdown in about a fortnight's time for you. Before you go to bed this night, I'm going to overhaul you; and then you're going away—not for my sake, nor for yours, but for your young woman's. You're no use to her, if you smash up; and you're going to smash up, unless you take in sail. What's the trouble? I left a message last night to say she was out of danger."

"And, before that, you sent me off to have a nice, bright dinner... I tumbled across that swine Gaymer, and you may be amused to hear that we dined together. Gaymer had never suspected anything till that moment; he appreciated that there was a certain coolness and he was leaving her to come to her senses! *Now...*"

Eric jumped up and shut the door, conscious that he was scoring bad marks against himself by his restlessness but hardly caring to keep up pretences any longer.

"Well?" said Gaisford.

"I don't know... He swears he's in love with her, wants to marry her. And he's made up his mind to see her."

"I shall have something to say about that for the next three weeks."

"And by then the engagement will be announced. The judge told me he was going away to-morrow, but as soon as he comes back..."

"What's troubling you, then?"

Eric continued to pace up and down between the windows and the door, staring at the carpet, locking and unlocking his fingers behind his back and trying to find words for the new doubt which Ivy had not resolved even when she promised herself to him the night before:

"I'm not easy in my mind... I don't know... Does a woman *ever* break her first lover's spell? I seem uncertain of everything."

"Then you'd better put it to the test. You'll be a fool to marry her, if you think she'll come at the other man's whistle. I told you that—weeks ago, in this very room, when we first discussed it. Let him see her, let her make up her mind."

"She's *made* it up. If he comes, she'll send him away again."

"Then she *has* broken the spell? I don't know whether I'm not following you very well..."

Eric laughed mirthlessly:

"I'm not surprised. Sometimes, Gaisford, you get a feeling which won't bear analysis or definition or argument; it's just there... I left Gaymer yesterday in a state of panic. I felt that he was the better man. He was doing prodigies of valour in the war, while I was collecting rejection papers; and I sometimes wonder whether women care for anything but the best animal on the market. Fastidiousness in conduct, super-culture, the ability to 'see two points in Hamlet's soul unseized by the Germans yet'—all that may appeal to some, but they're atrophied women, without sex. The war has made our scale of values very primitive... When I was at school, I wasn't allowed to play games; and, if other people despised me in consequence, you bet your life I despised myself more; I never had a friend, in consequence, till I went up to Oxford... The war was a fair test whether a man was a man—in courage, physical endurance, ability to command and to obey, herd-capacity to protect the female, the young, the home. Well, I couldn't survive that test. Better a live crock than a dead hero, you may think, if you happen to be one of the crocks; but, when I left Gaymer last night, when I stood leaning against a tree in the Park picturing the pair of us as two males fighting for one

female, I said, 'You drunken brute, you're the better man.' And, if I feel that, a woman will feel it, too... Ivy loves me; I'm quite sure of that. But I've never imagined she felt any passion for me, you wouldn't expect it in her present state. Undoubtedly she once felt passion for Gaymer... You want to know what's worrying me. Well, it's just that."

"And you've lost confidence in yourself so much that, if the girl came to you every quarter of an hour, protesting that she preferred you and didn't want to see the other man, you still wouldn't believe her. Go away for a holiday, Eric. If I agreed with your sex-generalizations about 'better men' and 'finer animals'—I don't; and I suspect you of taking your psychology from novels by unmarried women—, I should tell you you're becoming relatively worse and worse every day that you neglect your health. Go right away for a few weeks."

"I don't like leaving Ivy at Gaymer's mercy."

"Then agree with him that he may come and get his *congé* from the girl's own lips, if he'll promise not to bother her till she's well again. Now I'm going home. And you'd better cut off to bed and stop thinking about anything."

The next morning Eric drafted, copied and redrafted a letter to Gaymer:

"I have not given your message to Ivy," he wrote finally, "because she is not well enough to be worried even with a hint of such a thing. I should have thought that she had made her meaning quite clear, but, if you need to be convinced by hearing it again from her, I will suggest that she disabuse your mind once and for all. Whether she will see you or not I cannot say; and, if she refuse, I shall not allow you to molest her. If she consent, it must be on one condition; you must not attempt to see her or to communicate with her for a month from now. If you tell me that you agree, I will put this proposal before her."

There was no answer to the letter, but, as Eric left his club the following night, he met Gaymer returning from dinner with the Poynters in Belgrave Square. They so narrowly avoided a collision that it was useless for either to pretend that he had not seen the other. Both stopped short and stood silent; then Eric said:

"Hullo!"

Gaymer half put out his hand, withdrew it and put it out again.

"Hullo!," he answered with unwonted apparent cordiality. "You going my way?"

"I'm rather tired. I think I shall take the Tube to Dover Street," said Eric, reflecting rapidly that Gaymer could not reach Buckingham Gate by that route without fetching a wide compass.

"Split the difference and walk with me as far as Lancaster House," Gaymer suggested. "I got your letter. I'll say at once that I accept the conditions. You'd probably prefer to have it in writing—"

"That's not necessary, is it?," Eric interrupted quickly and in embarrassment.

Gaymer chuckled malevolently. He had hitherto spoken seriously and with a touch of dignity, hiding any antagonism that he might feel under an easy but disconcerting friendliness. The dignity and restraint were shattered by the chuckle.

"You mean that, if I'm going to break my word," he said, "I shall break it just the same whether it was in writing or not?"

"No, I meant that, if you gave me your word, I should accept it without any bonds or witnesses."

"Devilish good of you..." Gaymer paused and took out his cigarette-case. "You talk just like your own plays." He paused again and fumbled with an automatic lighter. "Babs Neave always used to say that."

In his turn Eric paused and began to fill a pipe. They had gone too far into the Green Park for him to branch off and seek the Down Street station; he could not turn on his heel and refuse to walk farther with the fellow; yet Gaymer was steadily and progressively attacking him, first with common rudeness, then with a sneer at his work, finally with a depth-charge which he exploded to see what effect the name of Barbara would produce. Gaymer had known much and suspected all; he had been present, when Eric and Barbara first met at dinner with Lady Poynter; he had speculated with the rest of them and had once interrogated Barbara about her "writer fellow" until she froze his jesting... Intoxication might explain much, but it provided no motive for the baiting unless Gaymer wanted the satisfaction of a brawl which would contribute nothing to the problem of Ivy.

"Even off the stage one accepts a man's word, until he's proved that it's unworthy of acceptance," said Eric.

"And you're satisfied with mine?," asked Gaymer. "It's not so long since you thought I'd broken my word to Ivy."

He was still obviously exploring for a quarrel, but Eric would not help him.

"It's easier, if we confine ourselves to the future," he said. "You've given me your word and you can see Ivy—if she'll see you; I'll ask her to—as soon as she's well enough. And you won't try to get in touch with her till then, will you? I shan't do anything to prejudice you. As a matter of fact, I'm going away for a few weeks, but, until the time comes, I'll promise not to queer your pitch, if you'll promise to wait till you're sent for. Is that a bargain? After all, it's not to the interest of either of us to injure her health."

They had reached Lancaster House, and Eric held out his hand. Gaymer hesitated for a moment and then gripped it.

"I was only ragging you, Lane," he said with an awkward laugh. "Dining with Aunt Margaret fairly gets on my nerves: she's like a gramophone with all the newest and most expensive "intellectual" records. Turn the handle, put in a new needle; "The Psychoanalyst's Ragtime Holiday, as played by the Freud-Jung syncopated orchestra"... Does she know *anything* about *anything*?... And that fellow Poynter riles me. "Told me to-night that my job had fallen through and I was to be patient... He's simply not trying... I'll keep the bargain—letter and spirit. In the meantime you're not announcing the engagement? I can't consent to that, you know; it prejudices my chances, if Ivy has that to explain away."

"I'll wait till she's seen you, if you like," said Eric. "Honestly, it won't make any difference to you, but I want to play fair. Good-night. One of us will write to you soon."

The next day he broke the news to Ivy that he was going to the country. Her face fell at the prospect of being left alone, but the doctor came in before the discussion was over and quenched the first smoke of opposition.

"I think I ought to tell you that I've seen something of Gaymer the last few days," Eric told her, when he came to say good-bye. "He's very anxious to see you. He didn't know you were ill, he didn't suspect any reason why you should be. I don't quite know what he told you at Croxton, but he assures me that he regards himself as being still engaged to you. I reminded him that you'd already given him his answer, but he persisted that there are new facts. If you don't want to see him—"

"I don't!," Ivy cried in apprehension. "You must keep him away."

It was an appeal for protection, but Eric could not protect her against an attack which had not been launched. It wrung his heart to see Ivy helpless and pleading, but he was so tired that he would gladly have dropped into a trance where responsibility and striving were unknown, where he could rest, where no one could blame him or attack him or appeal to him....

"He won't take it from me," he pointed out—and was hurt to see that Ivy was disappointed in him for the first time. He wondered how Gaymer would have spoken and acted, if the positions had been reversed....

"I can't see him without you!"

"My child, then don't see him at all. When you feel well enough, send him a line and tell him that nothing he could ever say or do would make any difference."

When Eric reached Lashmar Mill-House, he found that an inaccurate but serviceable legend had already been woven round Ivy's illness. For days and nights, he gathered, he had been nursing her single-handed, which accounted for a natural look of fatigue on his face; for the operation his flat had been turned upside down, and he had now been driven out to make way for a second nurse. It was an explanation which barred all speculation about his own health and absolved him from confessing that he was himself in Gaisford's hands.

"Will you be able to have Ivy down here, when she's fit to move?," he asked.

"Of course," Lady Lane answered warmly.

"She'll be convalescent in a fortnight or three weeks. I was thinking of staying here in the meantime... The country's looking very beautiful. I think I shall go for a stroll before dinner."

He walked through the house and crossed the mill-stream into the woods by the plank-bridge over the wheel. Unless he prompted her, his mother would patiently abstain from asking him about Ivy; but there was an unspoken question in her very silence, she was sharing his anxiety and his hopes, waiting hungrily to be told that all was well. It was curious that he felt so much less certain of Ivy since she had promised to marry him. Gaymer was so sure of himself that he must inevitably overpower her; people always seemed to win if they were convinced that they would win....

And, conversely, no man ever won unless he believed in himself. Eric pulled himself together physically, holding his head up and walking boldly instead of shambling. He believed in himself and he believed in Ivy. Unless a woman were dead to honour and gratitude, he had nothing to fear.

A fallen tree trunk barred his path. He was glad to sit down on it, because he was too tired to go on walking with any pleasure, and his train of thought had incapacitated him like a blow at the back of his knees. Barbara, who admitted always that she loved him, even when it was too late, had broken down at that test; he had confidently left everything to her honour and gratitude... Women were not to be trusted... But he trusted Ivy... Yet *should* he trust her?

The moment's pause had not rested him, but he jumped up because it was harder to brood when he was walking quickly. Besides, this holiday had to be taken very seriously. He had thought out a scheme which was to put him in hard physical condition; a plunge into the mill-pool as soon as he was called, a sensible breakfast instead of the jaded Londoner's tea and toast, a glance at his letters and the papers, one pipe (and no more; no cigarettes, either), a line to Ivy and then a good tramp, wet or fine, from ten till one, a bath and change of clothes, luncheon, another pipe, a second walk till tea or, perhaps, dinner, a third pipe and a book, with bed at half-past ten. That, if anything, would keep him from worrying and make him sleep. He looked at his watch and almost decided to begin the treatment then and there with six miles on the high-road before dinner. If he elected to saunter on through the woods, it was because he was really too tired to face the glare of the road and the exertion of hard walking.

It was easier to keep his resolution of going to bed early, though he made an unpromising start next day. Instead of the usual maid with letters and hot water, his mother came in unexpectedly with breakfast on a tray.

"You looked so tired last night that I thought I'd let you have your sleep out," she explained. "I waited till eleven and then, thinking I heard signs of life—My dear boy, how hot you are!" She put down the tray and laid her hand on his chest. "Your pyjamas are wringing wet!"

"Too many bed-clothes, I expect," answered Eric, as he inspected the handwriting on his letters.

"There's only one blanket. And it wasn't at all a hot night."

"Ah, but I can undertake to sweat away about two pounds a night in mid-winter. I suppose it's because I kick about in bed so much."

"But you haven't any flesh to spare. I wish you weren't so thin, Eric."

"You mustn't worry, mother. It's beyond the wit of man to make me fat."

Lady Lane did not pursue the subject, but she continued to look anxiously at him. To turn her thoughts, he handed her a note from the nurse reporting that Dr. Gaisford was wholly satisfied with Miss Maitland's progress and would in future not need to see her more than once a day.

"That ought to make you happier, Eric," said his mother.

"It does. I don't know what I should do, if I lost Ivy..." His voice was graver than he had intended, and he decided to go on and to fortify himself by taking his mother into his confidence. "You remember the last time we discussed her? You do like her, mother, don't you? You do—approve? As soon as she's well enough, we're going to get everything fixed up. Don't tell the gov'nor yet, because you know he's temperamentally incapable of keeping a secret. But you are pleased, aren't

you?"

Lady Lane bent down and kissed his forehead.

"My blessed boy! It's time you had a little happiness. And it's certainly time you had a wife to look after you."

What with his letters and the papers, which Sir Francis brought up in person, Eric narrowly avoided being late for luncheon; and his scheme of diet and exercise was again postponed by his mother's suggestion that he should come out with her in the car. He salved his conscience in consenting by the reflection that he would at least be in the open air; when, however, Lady Lane suggested after tea that he should lie down until dinner, he began to scent a conspiracy.

"You're looking so wretchedly tired and thin that I want to keep you from working," confessed his mother.

"Well, I'll join the conspiracy," said Eric.

For a week he spent half the day in bed and the other half motoring or walking in Lashmar Woods. If he failed to put on any weight, at least he began to feel less tired. The ghosts that lay in wait for him in London seemed to have been driven away by the sunshine and scented wind of the garden. Every day the nurse wrote that Ivy was maintaining steady progress; he had two reassuring letters from Gaisford and at last a pencilled note from Ivy herself.

"I'm almost well and longing to see you. Thank you for all your divine letters. I'm counting the days till you come here to fetch me away. Do thank your mother for asking me—and for the flowers. I had a long letter from J. G. this morning, explaining and arguing and asking when he might come to see me. He said he'd been expecting to hear from you and couldn't make out why you'd not written. I told him it was no good; in fact, I wrote just what I told you I would."

Eric tried to remember whether he had received a specific promise that Gaymer would not write; there had been some phrase about "not communicating"... Gaymer may have interpreted this to mean personal communication; or he might be acting on the principle that wise men give promises and fools accept them.

Ivy's next letter narrowed the field of choice.

"J. G. has been here," she began. "He called with some flowers, and nurse let him in. Several other people had been, so she never asked me. I said at once, 'I can't see you;' and I told him that I thought he'd promised you faithfully not to come here. He said he only meant to come to the door with the flowers, but that he couldn't help coming in. He wasn't going to argue, he said, but he was responsible for everything and he must come and ask me to forgive him. I told him I'd forgive him, if that gave him any pleasure, but he must understand that everything was over. On the whole, I was rather glad to have it out with him. He must see now, because at the end he said—horribly bitterly—, 'Your love is rather short-lived, Ivy.' I refused to be drawn. If he likes to think that, he may, I don't feel it's worth having a row with him, Eric, about coming, because we have cleared the air, however painful it may have been at the time. And it isn't pleasant, you know, to have him thinking that I'm unfaithful to him. I did love him—desperately; I'm even willing to believe now that he always meant to behave honourably; but, as I told him, it doesn't really matter whether there's any foundation for a misunderstanding, what matters is the effect it has on one's mind. It was no use pretending I hadn't utterly changed towards him. He couldn't see how I could love him once and then stop loving him, when the reason why I'd ceased to love him had been explained away. He's tired me out, dear Eric, and I don't want to think about him."

Her letter reached Lashmar by the evening post, and Eric spent a sleepless night after reading it. At one moment he decided to return by the first train to London and mount guard over Ivy's door; at another he shuffled and discarded cryptic phrases for a warning telegram to Gaisford... It was long after daybreak when he fell asleep without reaching a decision; and, when his breakfast was brought in, he was too tired to eat it or to read his letters or to begin getting up.

Only when Lady Lane asked leave to send for the doctor did he rouse to interest.

"Your man here is such a hopeless idiot," he exclaimed impatiently. "I think I shall run up and see Gaisford. All I want is a tonic, but he *does* know about me. I can't stand answering a string of questions from a stranger."

Lady Lane forbore to oppose him in his new mood of nervous irritability; she contented herself with making him promise to come down the following day and asking whether he would care for her to accompany him. Her obvious anxiety jarred on nerves that were already raw.

"I'm *really* all right, mother," he answered querulously.

"My dear boy, you're *not!* I *have* had some experience of you, remember. You're shockingly ill. You know I try not to worry you, when you're not feeling well, but you frighten me, Eric, when you look like that. Isn't there something you haven't told me? *Can't* you tell me?... People are commenting on it. After church on Sunday the vicar wanted to know... So, you see, it isn't just fancy. I have a pretty handful in your father, as it is,—trying to make him take care of himself. I can't have *you* getting ill... *Isn't* there anything, Eric?"

His mother had come nearer to breaking down than he had ever seen; a vague stirring of masculine protectiveness steadied Eric.

"I'm feeling used up," he answered wearily. "It may be this hot spring... I think it's the war... and the strain of the last few weeks, the strain of the last two or three years... It takes something to drive me into a doctor's arms, but I'll get myself thoroughly overhauled by Gaisford and, what's more, I'll tell you what he says and I'll carry out his orders to the letter. There's no need for *you* to worry, mother."

He kissed her with a bluff attempt at reassurance and scrambled out of bed. It was humiliating that he had to steady himself by gripping the top of his dressing-table, and, when he began to pour out his shaving-water, as much slopped on to the wash-hand-stand as went into his glass. He could only hope that, as she said nothing, his mother had seen nothing.

It was late afternoon when he reached Waterloo, and, after dining at his club, he drove to Dr. Gaisford's house in Wimpole Street. The butler, who was a friend of many years' standing, regretted

that his master was not yet returned and invited Eric to come in and wait.

"I suppose you've no idea where he is or how long he'll be?," asked Eric.

The butler retired to the consulting-room and returned with an engagement-pad.

"He dined at home at half after seven, sir," he announced. "Then he was going to Sir Marcus Fordyce in Hay Hill, then to Mrs. Grimthorpe in Upper Brook Street, then to Colonel Somers in Half-Moon Street—and then to you, sir; to your young lady, I should say. He said he'd be back not later than twelve."

"And it's half-past nine now. I'll go home and wait for him. If I miss him, will you tell him, when he comes in, that I called? And will you ring me up and let me know when I can see him to-morrow? Say I've come up from the country on purpose."

He reached Ryder Street in time to find the hall lit up and a bowler hat and stick on the table. The whole flat was sweet and heavy with the warm scent of flowers. They symbolized Ivy, and he could fancy that he was already married and returning to their home. It was a new, electrifying emotion, the sublime epitome of all the moments when he had waited of a morning to hear her ring. Latterly she had been too much the patient; until that moment the flat had not drawn its life from her.

A murmur of voices reached him from the passage leading to her bedroom; he wrote "Don't go till you've seen me" on the back of an envelope and dropped it into the hat; then he picked up the evening paper and went into the library.

At the end of one cigarette he threw away the paper and looked sleepily at the clock, thanking Heaven that he was not a doctor. At this rate Gaisford would not be home by midnight; and he must have had a heavy day to be calling on patients after dinner... The sleepiness dropped from Eric's brain as he remembered an early bulletin from the nurse, telling him that for the future Dr. Gaisford saw no need to come more than once a day. The most overworked doctor would not be paying his first visit at a quarter-past ten at night; this was the second visit, and Ivy had undergone a relapse; or the third, the fourth... If Ivy were dying, they would have sent for him... Telegrams took long... But Lashmar Mill-House was on the telephone... Trunk-calls took long, too... But he had not left home till after five... Perhaps they had forgotten, perhaps they had been too busy... But one could add "perhaps" to "perhaps" like paper bows to the tail of a kite... This was the discordant jangle of snapping nerves....

He sat long enough to recover self-possession, then strolled unconcernedly into the hall. The hat and stick were still there, the note in the hat. He bent down to read his own words and wondered why Gaisford, of all men, had abandoned his traditional silk hat for a bowler... A sporting bowler, too with flat brim. He was trying to remember whether there were any races near London to explain the unseemly hat and the doctor's no less unseemly hour for calling, when he noticed violet-ink initials over the maker's name.

The doctor was Richard or Robert Gaisford, Eric could not remember which; certainly not "J." As he began to be certain that "J. G." could only stand for John Gaymer, Eric told himself in an audible whisper that he had to be very calm; if there were anything in the old, hysterical premonition of a stand-up fight with Gaymer, it would take place in less than five minutes.

He inspected the hat carefully, as though it were filled with clues and secrets, then replaced it on the table, withdrew his note and walked quietly down the passage to Ivy's room. The door was ajar, and he could hear perhaps half Gaymer's words, when he dropped his voice, and everything, when he raised it.

"If you admit it, there's nothing more to be said. D'you like the prospect of being married for fifty years to one man when you're in love with another? Oh, it's too late now, you've admitted it. I never had any doubt. You've got to get out of it; and the sooner the better... It's no good denying it, Ivy; we've gone through all that. Look me in the eyes... Ivy, do as I tell you—*now*. You *have* to do as I tell you. You've never loved him as you loved me. Give me your hand. You don't shiver when you touch *him*, you don't belong to *him*... Kiss me, Ivy. I said, 'Kiss me, Ivy'." There was a laugh of contemptuous affection. "There!... So valiant we were! So independent—at a distance! Kiss me again—on my lips... Did you think I'd let you go so easily? Didn't you know that, if I stood at the back of the church when you were being married and just said 'Ivy, come here'...? *You* knew that, and *I* knew that."

Eric found himself sitting on a chair half-way down the passage. Ivy was being bewitched; obviously he must not allow her to be bullied like this... Somebody ought to go in and stop it....

"I've promised Eric," she was saying quietly.

"And d'you think I care about that? He can't hold you to your promise, if you don't want to marry him. You love *me*, Ivy. Say it again!"

There was no answer.

"Say it again!," repeated Gaymer.

"I...."

Eric could not hear the next whispered words, but they seemed to satisfy Gaymer.

"Say 'I love you more than my life'," went on the relentless voice.

"I love you more than my life."

"Say—'I will marry you and no one else—'"

There was a pause and a sob.

"Oh, Johnnie, don't make me! It isn't fair on him!"

"You can't be fair to us both!," Gaymer cried.

"He's been so wonderfully good to me. I should have killed myself, if it hadn't been for him. I *told* him I'd marry him, I said he was the only person in the world I cared for. He's done everything for me! We should have been married by now, but he wanted to give me time to be quite sure—"

She was interrupted by a harsh, triumphant laugh.

"Well for him he did! And you *are* quite sure, Ivy! I'm not going through all this again. 'I will marry you and no one else.' Say it."

"I will marry you and no one else... Johnnie, it'll break his heart! I *can't* say it!"

"But you have. Do you take it back?"

There was a long silence. Then Eric heard a low but distinct "No."

The passage had not been noticeably hot before, but the still air glared like the burning blast from an open furnace-door. Eric found his face streaming with sweat; and the wooden chair-back was slippery in his grasp. There seemed to be a murmur of confused voices everywhere—in the passage on either side of him, in the hall—preeminently in the hall, where one murmur dominated the other murmurs, and one voice dominated all.

It was Gaisford's voice, authoritative and ill-tempered, reprimanding some one.

"Yes, my girl, but I said my patient was not to be left. You go off duty when the other nurse comes on—and not a moment before. You've left the patient entirely unattended? 'Seemed all right' be hanged! Your duty is to do precisely what I tell you. When did you go out? Half an hour! I don't believe it! I don't mind telling you that you haven't heard the last of this."

Eric came into the hall, as the nurse hurried away with a scarlet face and the doctor pulled off his gloves and threw them on to the table, still muttering angrily to himself.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "I thought I'd sent you away."

"I came up this evening to consult you," Eric answered. His voice seemed small and remote, but the doctor found nothing amiss with it. "I was feeling rather seedy and I thought I'd ask you to overhaul me. If you're not very busy, we might get it over to-night, when you've finished with Ivy. I—I've only just come in," he added hastily. "I went to your place first. I rather fancy that in the nurse's absence some one must have let Gaymer in. I think he's with Ivy now, though I haven't been in to see yet."

It was all admirably calm. The doctor did not even look at him; but his frown deepened, and he strode down the passage with threatening footsteps. Eric was not conscious of having followed; but he found himself on the threshold, as the door was thrown open. Ivy and Gaymer had been given time to prepare themselves; she was lying back with half her face hidden in a bouquet of lilies of the valley, while he stood with his hands on the back of a chair, as though he were just leaving. Neither shewed surprise or discomfiture at the doctor's volcanic entry, but Ivy could not repress a cry at sight of Eric.

"Now, young man, you can take yourself off!" Gaisford snapped at Gaymer, jerking his thumb towards the door.

There was a confusion of four voices speaking at once.

"I just brought some flowers."

"Eric!"

"A pretty time to call—exciting my patient, when she ought to be asleep!"

"H-how are you, Ivy? I came up for one night—only decided at tea-time..."

Eric found himself face to face with Gaymer, who nodded quickly as he walked to the door. He was as much concerned as a man who finds that he has left himself too little time to dress before dinner—as much and no more. He seemed to be murmuring, "'Evening, Lane. No idea it was so late. 'Couldn't get round before. Glad to see she's so much better."

Thus far for the audience; he retreated in good order; and in another moment there was a rattle as he picked up his stick from the hall table. Eric found his jaw moving; but he could say nothing, he did not even know what he wanted to say. It was no use staring at the blank door-way, he could not turn without facing Ivy... The authoritative voice was speaking again, apparently addressing him; the resonant words defined themselves into "If you'll run away now, I'll come and have a word with you on my way out."

Eric went to his bedroom and began to undress, because it gave his hands occupation. They were trembling until he could hardly undo the buttons of his waistcoat. He looked at his reflection in the mirror and found himself a little paler than usual; his forehead was still glistening with the insufferable heat of the passage, but there should have been something to shew that he had been blown to bits and was held together by shreds of tattered skin. Lines that he had learned as a boy at school....

*"So tight he kept his lips compressed,
Scarce any blood came through.
You looked twice ere you saw his breast
Was all but shot in two..."*

And why should he murmur them to the tune of 'Wenceslaus'?... Was he delirious?

Gaisford had seen nothing amiss. If it were but possible to carry off the interview without shewing him anything... After all, Ivy and Gaymer had not betrayed themselves. "*I will marry you and no one else.*" With lips not yet still from her betrayal of him, she had made a show of composure. And Gaymer, forsworn and a walking lie, explained coolly that he had brought some flowers and could not get round before. They would probably have been no less composed if they knew that he was in the passage, listening to every word. Did they know? Did they fancy that he had come in with the doctor?

Did they care?

He could not begin to think about it all until his brain was fit to work. Gaymer had lied, Ivy had betrayed him; there was room here for anger, jealousy... He had lost her, when she alone had come to make life worth living, when she was the prize and symbol of his victory over fate; room here for shaking his fists at Heaven and cursing God. To curse God and die... But God was quite equal to keeping him alive. Room here for thinking of the future and going stark mad. But these were all parts of a whole too big for him to envisage yet; that at least he could see....

It was curious that force of habit should set him methodically folding his clothes and winding his watch... Before committing suicide a man nearly always shaved himself, without pausing to wonder whether it was not rather wasted labour....

He put on a dressing-gown and lay on his bed. It was curious that he and Ivy should be destined to spend this night of all nights within twenty yards of each other. Curious world... Barbara had once said something about the fun that God was having with her... Curious how the light seemed to burn through the back of the eyes into the brain. Curious that one lacked the energy to stretch a hand to the switch....

Eric was still staring at the ceiling when Gaisford came in. The doctor's moment of ill-temper had passed; and this was a pity, because he would be less preoccupied and more observant.

"Well, my son, and what's the matter with you?," he asked.

"I've become so extraordinarily limp." The voice was slow but firm. "The longer I stayed at Lashmar, the limper I got. I wasn't trying to work, but I couldn't even walk a couple of miles. It occurred to me that a tonic, perhaps...."

The doctor grunted and fitted the ends of a stethoscope into his ears. The ritual which followed was very familiar to Eric; chest and back, long breath, ordinary breathing, holding the breath, tapping... The stethoscope darted to and fro, as though it were playing a game with some elusive noise inside him; it finished with the heart and began chasing the lungs into improbable corners under the collar-bone and shoulder-blades, dodging back to the heart when it was least expected.

"Lie down. A deep breath," said Gaisford.

This lying-down portended something serious; or perhaps the doctor was not yet sure. They were always so uncommunicative; you might have a tolerably wide experience of these examinations and yet not know what they were trying to find.

"Anything the matter?," Eric asked, as the stethoscope was detached and pocketed.

"You've not much flesh on you," said the doctor, feeling his ribs. "Are you eating properly?"

"The usual amount. But you know I never *did* run to fat."

"Do you perspire much?"

"Like a pig. I gave my poor mother quite a shock when she came in one morning and found me as if I'd just come out of the mill-stream. I save pounds on Turkish baths."

Gaisford nodded and put a number of questions which Eric seemed to answer adequately. They did not appear to lead anywhere, but some of them were new to his experience. At the end, the stethoscope was produced again.

"Anything the matter?," Eric repeated, for the doctor was frowning. The examination, too, was unusually long.

"Well, yes. It's what I've feared ever since I've known you. We've caught it in time, but you'll have to be rather careful. There are four of you, aren't there? What are your brothers and sisters like? You can put on that dressing-gown; I don't want you to catch cold."

Eric weighed the question as he slipped his arms into the sleeves. God was enjoying himself....

"Let's come back to that," he suggested. "What is it? Heart?"

"That's been a bit tired for years."

"Lungs, then?... I see. Well, I'm not a child, Gaisford. How long do you give me? Six months? A year?"

The doctor changed his spectacles and tipped Eric's clothes from an arm-chair. He could be exasperatingly slow when he liked; and he always liked to be slow, when his patients shewed signs of becoming unnerved.

"Forty, if you do what I tell you," he announced at length. "If you don't, you'll get rapidly worse. By the way, it's chiefly in books that a doctor says you've three weeks and two days to live; science isn't quite so exact as that, and doctors aren't such damned fools... No! I'll tell you. This might have come at any time, because you've been on the delicate side ever since I've known you. Now you're a little bit touched. It's a bore, but it's nothing to be frightened about. I shan't let you live in this country, of course, and I shall cut down your work; but that doesn't matter, because you're indecently rich for your age. And I can give you a choice of places to live in—California, South Africa, the Riviera—"

"This is in confidence, of course," Eric interrupted. "You're not telling my people—or Ivy... or any one?"

"No. But I'll tell *you* that, if you try to marry that child in your present state, you'll deserve to be pulled limb from limb."

"I don't propose to."

"If you'll wait a couple of years...."

Eric was troubled to keep his brain, now suddenly alert, back to the doctor's deliberate pace. The immediate future was clear....

"How soon am I to start?," he asked.

"Get out of London as soon as possible."

"And—about Ivy. When will she be well enough to be told?"

"I should tell her at once—to-morrow. She'll see *something's* up; she wanted to know to-night why you'd suddenly come back without warning... I find that as a rule it's best to tell people the truth, however much of a shock it may be. We're all of us equal to a certain number of shocks; and it seldom becomes less of a shock by postponing it and wrapping it in lies."

"I'll tell her to-morrow," said Eric. "Do you want to do anything more with me?"

"I'm afraid there's no doubt of it."

"Then I may as well turn in."

Eric threw off the dressing-gown and put on his pyjamas. The doctor, he knew, was watching him, but he was successfully deliberate and composed. They shook hands and said good-night without emotion or straining after heroics. There was a half-heard phrase about "having another word with" him in the morning. Eric lay for a few moments in darkness, waiting to hear the doctor's car drive away; there was no sound, however, and he was asleep before he had done speculating whether Gaisford had come on foot or in a car....

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JOURNEY'S END

"Your distresses in your journey... are proper seasonings for the greater fatigues and distresses, which you must expect in your travels; and, if one had a mind to moralize, one might call them the samples of the accidents, rubs, and difficulties, which everyone meets with in his journey through life. In this journey, the understanding is the *voiture* that must carry you through; and in proportion as that is stronger or weaker, more or less in repair, your journey will be better or worse; though, at best you will now and then find some bad roads and some bad inns...."

"My long and frequent letters which I send you, in great doubt of their success, put me in mind of certain papers which you have very lately, and I formerly, sent up to kites, along the string, which we call messengers; some of them the wind used to blow away, others were torn by the string, and but few of them got up and stuck to the kite...."

LORD CHESTERFIELD TO HIS SON.

"MISS MAITLAND asked me to say she would like to see you as soon as you are ready."

Eric thanked the nurse and continued dressing. The night of unresisting, helpless exhaustion had been tranquil as death; he wondered whether Ivy had slept... Or had she been rehearsing the speech in which she would tell him that she could not marry him? Or would she say nothing, waiting for him to tell her that he had been in the passage outside her room while she threw him aside for Gaymer?... It was significant that she asked to see him. An easy conscience must have told her that he would have come as soon as he was dressed....

He went in to find her tired and nervously excited, but she achieved an unembarrassed smile of welcome and asked how he was.

"I'll return the c-compliment," he said, wondering why he stammered. "How are *you*, Ivy? You're the invalid."

"Oh, I'm much better. I shall be able to come down to Lashmar at the end of next week."

Eric turned away and looked for a chair. At times of great mental exhaustion it was hard to tell whether a thing had happened or whether he had dreamed it. Ivy was talking as though she had never perjured herself for Gaymer, as though she had never seen him again—an absurd, intoxicating child with short black curls and thin white arms, the immature bud of a woman... Yet there was a table by the bed within reach of her hand; on the table stood a black Wedgwood bowl; in the bowl a nodding mass of lilies. Once or twice before, when she was living with Lady Maitland and dining alone with Gaymer, she had confessed to inventing fellow-guests to keep her in countenance and to placate her aunt; she had regarded the lie as amusing and clever, certainly venial; Eric hoped that she was not going to lie now. Perhaps he had imagined that nightmare moment in the passage, perhaps the sight of her frank grey eyes kept his habit of love unbroken; undoubtedly he loved her still, loved her so desperately that he could not bear to see her made vile with a lie... But the lilies at least were not imaginary... Her easy reference to Lashmar shewed that she intended to confess nothing; she would leave him to find out. One day he would receive a letter to say that she had run off with Gaymer; in the meantime she played her double part with outward unconcern, as though she were already married and had a secret lover....

"At the end of next week," he repeated.

It was easier to echo her words than to break new ground.

"Are you going back at once? I hope you're going to stay here," she said, beckoning him to a chair.

"I promised my mother to go back to-day."

"Can't you telephone? I *do* so want you to stay... Eric, does your mother know? I've been so afraid she might disapprove of me. Have you told her?"

He shivered unconsciously; the appealing pose of fidelity was cynical enough, without her becoming inartistic by overdoing it.

"I gave her a very fair idea of what was in the wind," he said. "She's very fond of you, Ivy. There'd be no difficulty in that quarter."

"You haven't seen father yet? When are you going to?"

For a moment Eric was so much disgusted to find himself participating in this game of make-believe that he did not realize she was asking him a question and waiting for an answer.

"I don't know," he answered at length. "I don't know whether I *shall* see him. There are certain rather considerable difficulties... Ivy, d'you *want* me to go to him?"

As he spoke, he was conscious that his tone had hardened; there was a challenge and a warning in it. He waited to see whether she would go on lying; the hint of menace must shew her that she was underestimating his knowledge.

A slight frown, a slighter shrug were her only signs of emotion.

"I never *did* want you to go," she answered. "My father is nothing in my life now. I should actually have asked you not to if you hadn't frightened me by saying that he might make trouble because I wasn't of age."

Eric nodded and prepared a question which would leave no room for evasion.

"You've thought it over carefully, I hope?," he said. "You still want to marry me?"

"Of course."

She held out her hands to him, but he pretended not to see them. The last man to kiss her was Gaymer; where he kissed, a fume of liquor and lasciviousness remained....

"You want to marry me after seeing—him? You've satisfied him that it's all over?"

Her frown deepened, but there was no indication of embarrassment.

"He still claims that we're engaged—," she began.

"Does he still think he's going to marry you?"

"Yes."

"You've told him you won't?"

He regretted the question as soon as it was uttered. However dishonourably Ivy had behaved, there was no pleasure in driving her inch by inch into a trap; in a world of liars there was never much satisfaction in convicting any one of a lie.

"Yes, I told him that," she answered. "I also told him I would... You won't understand that, I expect, but I couldn't help myself. That's why I don't want you to go away and leave me, Eric; that's why, a month ago, I didn't want to wait. I daresay you despise me, but I always feel he can make me do whatever he wants. I can't tell you why. That night... when we came out of a theatre, he said 'Are you going home, or are you coming home with me?' I'd never been home with him so late, I knew what would happen, I didn't want it to happen. I was horribly frightened and I hoped, when he saw I was frightened, that he would spare me. I should have thought any man would... I couldn't help myself; and that's why I've never been as much ashamed as I ought to be. Even when I thought he'd got tired of me, when I hated him and could have murdered him, I still felt that he might come back and I should have to obey him... I don't want to be left alone, Eric. When we're married, it will be all right; I shall have you to protect me. I've been ill—and, before that, I was desperately miserable; perhaps I haven't really been accountable for my actions. But, if he'd picked me up in his arms last night and carried me off, I couldn't have resisted. Until we're married, you mustn't leave me—"

"And, *when* we're married, will it be easier to resist him?"

"He'll leave me alone. He may go abroad... *Do* you understand? Or do you just despise me?"

She smiled wistfully and held out her hands to him again. Though he had not kissed her on coming into the room, she had not commented on the omission; perhaps she had not noticed it. Their relationship had been wholly passionless. When he brought her back from Maidenhead and saw her for the first time in ecstasy, the glory in her eyes was spiritual; it was gratitude, admiration, love and a great amazement; if she then begged him to kiss her, it was because a kiss was her readiest symbol of love. For Gaymer she had once felt passion; when he ordered her to kiss him, knowing the degree and source of his power, she obeyed. That would pass in a few months; the strength of sex was only equalled by its transience; and they would find nothing to put in its place. While it was there, it was all-powerful; she could only escape it by running away, by surrounding herself with a bodyguard, by reminding the flesh that she owned claims of the spirit also. In so far as Eric could analyse her mind, she yearned to be with Gaymer; and she resisted the yearning, because she owed a spiritual debt to some one else. She would be happier with Gaymer—for a time; no doubt she fancied that she would always be happier. But she was prepared to sacrifice that for honour, for gratitude....

"I'm trying to understand," he answered. "*I* once thought that I was utterly helpless in one woman's hands. There was nothing I wouldn't do... But I found it was a thing one could overcome. If I went up in blue smoke here and now, you'd marry Gaymer? You remember there was a time when you wouldn't look at him."

"I didn't know everything then."

"And, if I *don't* go up in blue smoke and if he *got* enough money, if we stood side by side before you, and you had a perfectly free choice?"

Ivy laughed with a dove's coo of devotion:

"My darling, I should choose you!"

"And if Gaymer tried to entice you away?"

"But you wouldn't let me go!"

Eric shook his head sadly:

"Aren't you strong enough to stand by yourself without wanting a man always to dominate you?"

The conversation was tiring her, and her voice became faintly petulant:

"When you're lying in bed like this, all your will-power goes. And I couldn't sleep last night. I kept thinking of Johnnie, I was frightened. You oughtn't to have left me, Eric. Everything would have been all right, if you'd stayed here."

"Gaisford thought I wanted a change," he reminded her. "And I'm afraid I shall have to leave you again. He wants me to go abroad."

"Oh, Eric, why? Are you ill?"

Her eyes were filled with concern; he wondered how much came from sympathy with him and how much from fear for herself.

"Apparently I am. He wants to rest me and fatten me up."

"But how long will you be away?"

"A couple of years, I should think."

Ivy drew herself upright in bed and stared at him, with parted lips:

"Eric, you must explain!"

"There's nothing much *to* explain. It's out of the question for me to marry at present..." He hesitated and looked away. "It's not fair to ask you to wait two years."

For a moment she did not answer. Then she cried:

"Of course I'll wait! You know that!"

It was easier to keep his eyes on the ground than to meet hers. The valiant words were inevitable—at such a time and in such an atmosphere; the moment's hesitation was not. And that, more than anything that she had said or hinted, cleared his mind of doubt.

"Well, we won't talk about it any more at present," he suggested. "Gaisford's going to examine me again, and then we shall know rather better where we are. Don't worry, Ivy. I've no intention of dying yet awhile. I only heard about it last night, so I haven't had time to think much about the future."

In the afternoon Eric returned to Wimpole Street for the further examination. The second report was fuller, but not materially different: one lung was affected, and with reasonable care he would be cured in a year or eighteen months. He again begged the doctor to say nothing at present to his parents or Ivy.

"There's a lot to take into consideration," he explained vaguely.

"I'm sorry about this business, Eric," said Gaisford. "But I'm telling you the truth. If you'll be patient—"

"Everything will come right. *I see...* D'you think your man would like to send a message to Lashmar to say I shan't be down to-night?"

He walked into Oxford Street and through Hyde Park to Piccadilly. Once before, after bidding Barbara good-bye, he had bade good-bye to London, wandering from his flat to the theatre, from the theatre to, his club, almost pinching himself in the effort to remember that he was seeing them all for the last time. One could never reproduce an emotion in its first breathless perfection; though he went through the same emotions, the earlier shock had numbed him protectively against any that might come later. And, as it proved, it was not the last time. In another two years he might return to find Ivy married to Gaymer, as he had found Barbara married to George Oakleigh; he would be two years older, twenty years more disillusionized, with a bitter heart for women and a dread of the blank emptiness before him.

Ivy was not to blame for meeting a force too strong for her; she was ready to risk everything, even what she fancied to be her own happiness, for loyalty and the honourable observance of her promise. If he felt sore, it was because he had come to love her; she had made him forget Barbara and had given him the hope of a new life. But throughout, from the first night when he discussed her with Gaisford, he had made her his spiritual anaesthetic; while there was an opportunity of offering her himself, his money and reputation, his devotion and care, he had looked with the eyes of a fanatic on this single act of sacrifice which was to give value and meaning to his life. In trying to face the future, it was the meaninglessness of life that appalled him....

He had been trying, ever since their talk in the morning, to banish himself in imagination to California and to consider what was best for her. Gaymer would ruin her life; he would be unfaithful after six months and brutal after a year. And she knew it. Should she be saved from that? Was it ever worth trying to save man or woman from the woman or man that they desired? Yet it was a poor proof of love to stand aside and let her go to certain misery. If he mounted guard over her, he could still keep her from Gaymer....

And from her phantom of happiness.

He turned into the Green Park and walked in the shade of the trees towards Lancaster House. A woman bowed to him; he returned the bow without seeing who she was, but there was a scrape of gravel under her heel as she stopped, and he heard his name called.

"*I thought* it was you, but you had your chin so much on your chest... Thinking out a new play?"

"Mrs. O'Rane? I hope you didn't think I was trying to cut you! No, I hardly know what I was thinking about. How's your husband?"

"If you go on for about a hundred yards, you'll find him. I have to rush off to a committee. Good-bye!"

He shaded his eyes and looked down the pathway until he saw a Saint Bernard asleep with his head on his paws and the paws pressed in gentle protection against the feet of his master. Eric walked on and greeted O'Rane.

"That's—wait a bit! that's Eric Lane's voice. Am I right?"

"First shot. You're marvellous, Raney."

"It's patience, you know. And I've been thinking about you a lot lately. How's the patient? Lady John Carstairs told me of your troubles. I wanted you to come and have a shake-down with us, but she said you preferred to stay where you were. I hear the operation went off all right."

"Oh, yes. She's out of danger, I'm glad to say."

"So Gaymer told me. It all happened within a few hours of our coming up from Croxton, apparently."

"Yes."

Eric wondered when and why O'Rane had been talking to Gaymer, but his speculation was cut short by a question:

"By the way, is it true...? I heard an interesting piece of news about you."

"Oh?"

"I heard you were engaged."

"Now where did you hear that?"

Eric's laugh seemed to ring shrilly, but O'Rane did not notice it.

"Tell me first if it's true," he said. "I'm the soul of discretion."

He held out his hand, smiling and eager to congratulate. Eric hesitated and again laughed nervously.

"That ought to be an easy enough question for me to answer," he said, "but, as a matter of fact, I can't."

The neglected hand reached out and felt for Eric's arm.

"I nearly came round to see you," said O'Rane gently, "but I thought you'd wonder what business it was of mine. You remember our talk on board the *Lithuania*... I know a good deal about you, and we're very old friends... So I was glad, more than glad, when I heard you were actually engaged. Then I heard—"

His fingers slacked their grip on Eric's arm; and his voice died away.

"That I *wasn't*," Eric suggested.

"Well, no. I heard—at least, I gathered that it wouldn't be all plain sailing. I gathered it from Gaymer himself. D'you remember at Croxton that I said I thought I should have to take him in hand? He was drinking too much, he wanted pulling up. He's been living in my pocket the last day or two. I can make something of him. But I'm afraid his interests cuts across yours."

"Would it bore you to hear the whole story?," Eric asked.

There was a welcoming nod of encouragement. Eric tried to speak dispassionately, though he knew that he was appealing for sympathy and help; and the appeal grew stronger as he saw his companion's expression becoming more grave.

"Confidence for confidence," said O'Rane, when he had done. "Quite soon after I married, there came a time when it seemed possible that Sonia and I had made a mistake, a time when I felt that, if I wanted her to be happy, I should have to say, 'Think this over carefully; you've only one life and, if you believe you'll make more of a success of it with another man, you know I'll not stop you'... I said that, Eric, and I've always felt it was the right thing to do. I won't pretend it was easy, but the right thing seldom is. As it happens, everything's turned out well... I believe it's a question that a great many men ought to put to their wives, instead of exercising harem-rights over a human creature, made in God's image, that they've bought or attached to themselves. Do you want to love a woman or to enjoy a slave?... I tell you this, because you must give that girl the opportunity of slipping out of your grasp—"

He stopped at the touch of a hand laid deprecatingly on his knee.

"I can't keep her, if she wants to go," said Eric.

"Indeed you can. Use your imagination, man! After all you've done for her, with the knowledge that you're ill—Put it on the lowest ground; she wouldn't dare to have it said of her that she'd thrown over a man with consumption because she couldn't wait two years for him to get well. Probably you agree with me that a man who is a man doesn't make capital out of his physical infirmities. You must persuade her that she's under no obligation to you; and, if the decision goes against you, you must accept it with a good grace. You behaved well in coming to her rescue; you may have an opportunity of behaving even better in giving up all claim on her."

Eric sat for some moments digging at the gravel with his stick. Then he touched O'Rane's arm and stood up.

"Let's move on," he suggested. "It's—it's hot here... Raney, I'm not going to give her up. I don't see why I should."

"I hope you won't have to."

"No one can compel me, if she says she'll wait."

"No one would need to compel you. Dear man, your devotion to her is a very beautiful thing, it's a thing you've better reason to be proud of than anything you've ever done. You wouldn't degrade a devotion like that by keeping her against her will."

Eric said nothing for several moments, but he laughed to himself, and O'Rane gripped his arm as though the sneer in the laugh stung him.

"And I wonder what you think would be left for me, if I did give her up!" he resumed. "It's no good trying to make me live in too rarified air. All this business about 'the right thing'—I'm not cut out for Cyrano de Bergerac or for Sidney Carton; a good conscience, a glow of magnanimity—it does me no sort of good, Raney. I know what I want, I know how badly I want it. I can imagine pretty clearly what the next two years are going to be like—vegetating on a verandah in Arizona. She's all I have left... But if there's nothing to come back to... I'm the one that has to go through this and I want you to tell me what's left."

O'Rane laughed and linked arms with him.

"I'll change lungs, if you'll change eyes," he murmured.

"I'm sorry! My outlook's a bit jaundiced. I expected too much of life, I'd had a pretty fair hammering in one way or another and I thought it was going to change, to end."

O'Rane stopped short and sighed with whimsical regret.

"Like your novels and plays," he suggested. "Life differs from romance in that there are no happy endings. And, when you've learned that lesson, you must learn that life has no endings of any kind short of death. We try to divide our lives into dramatic phases, but you know that there's no finality about your first disappointment in love; it modifies the texture of your spirit and prepares you for something else just when the dramatist scrawls his 'Curtain' and the novelist writes 'The End.' Perhaps it prepares you for another and a different love, perhaps for marriage: no one but a fool would stop his play or novel with the clash of wedding-bells. It's not the end of anything except one stage of an endless development; it's not the beginning of anything except the next stage of development. These dramatic and literary forms destroy our sense of continuity. Hundreds of generations have gone to the preparation of your personality; you will enrich it in a thousand ways and hand it on by blood or teaching or example to thousands of generations unborn. You ask what is left... I should answer: your personality, your ego. You have that left to build up, fortify, perfect. I don't say that the next two years will be particularly happy, but you can come out of them a deeper, broader, bigger man... You'll give this girl her chance?"

Eric walked on without answering. They left the Park and passed along Cleveland Row to St. James' Street. The wind was blowing from the river, and they paused to hear Big Ben strike.

"Seven o'clock. I'd no idea we'd been talking so long," said O'Rane. "My wife's dining out and going to the ballet. I suppose you wouldn't care to take pot-luck with me?"

"I should love it, when I've been home. Ivy'll be wondering what's happened to me. Raney, what would you do in my place, if you felt certain that, by giving a woman up, you'd be sentencing her to utter misery?"

"To begin with, no one can ever be certain of that."

"Gaymer's a brute and a cad and a drunkard," said Eric hotly.

"He's given up drinking for good. As for the rest, when you see so many estimable men turning into brutes and cads on marriage, it's not unreasonable to hope that a brute and cad may be converted by marriage into something better. As a matter of fact, Gaymer's neither. I saw him when, to use his own phrase, he thought you'd jumped his claim; it was the time when the girl's life was in danger. Gaymer's very fond of her, too, though he's English enough to hide it from everybody but a man who has ears even if he's no eyes... Gaymer's no fool. He knows that all his nervous organism has gone to pieces in the war, he recognizes that he's left the rails and that, if he doesn't pull up, he'll go downhill with a run. He wants some one to keep him steady; and this girl—the only living creature in the world that he cares for—is the only one who can do it. He's fighting for her, because she's his one anchor. He can't afford to lose her."

"I can't afford to lose her."

"Perhaps you mayn't. I only want her to have a free choice."

"Freedom to marry a blackguard? He *is* a blackguard, Raney, to have taken advantage of a girl's youth and ignorance. He's a blackguard right through to the end! He solemnly promised me not to go near her and then bursts in the moment my back's turned. He's a libertine, a liar—"

"That's no objection in a woman's eyes. Every corespondent is all that and perhaps a good deal more."

"I'm not going to give her up."

They turned into Ryder Street and walked up the stairs to Eric's flat. O'Rane waited in the hall while Eric went into Ivy's bedroom. She was sitting up, writing on her knees, and, as he came in, she laid down her pencil and handed him the letter. Her eyelids flickered, and he could see that she spoke with an effort.

"It's to Johnnie," she explained. "He called immediately after you'd gone, but I told the nurse to say I couldn't see him. He's just sent me a note... What did the doctor say, Eric?"

"He didn't add much to what he told me last night. Do you want me to read this, Ivy?"

"I think you'd better. I told Johnnie that I didn't know what I was saying last night, when I promised to marry him. I've begged him not to worry me—"

Eric fingered the letter without reading it.

"If I told you that the doctor didn't know if I could marry even in two years, what would you say?," he propounded.

"Even!...? What do you mean? Did he say that? Eric, tell me! You frighten me when you won't say what's the matter with you."

He pulled a chair to the side of the bed and sat down, holding her hand.

"I can't tell you anything very definite," he answered. "But I'm trying to look at all possibilities. I feel responsible for you, Ivy. I want to think what's the best for you. If Gaisford says I must never marry, what will you do?"

She looked at him with frightened eyes, and he saw that her lips were trembling. Two slow tears rolled down her cheeks and splashed on to his hand. So she had cried once at the opera, and her tears had melted him. Now they seemed to eat into his hand like acid.

"I shan't die, if I can help it, Ivy," he added. "If I did, or if I couldn't marry you, what would you do? Would you marry Gaymer?"

"Oh, Eric, don't be cruel! Are you doing this just to frighten me?"

"No! I'm thinking of your future. If you married him, do you feel that you'd both be happy?"

"I should never be happy, if anything happened to you."

"Darling Ivy, leave me out for a minute! Imagine you'd never met me. Do you feel that you'd be happy with him?"

"If I'd never met you?... But, Eric—"

"You really love him, Ivy? Do you love him more than me?"

"Don't torture me! I could never love any one as I love you. Johnnie's quite different; I *feel* quite differently about him... Eric, it isn't kind not to tell me."

She drew her hand back and leaned forward, throwing her arms round his neck. He kissed her forehead and dried the tear-rivulets on her cheeks. Then he unlocked her fingers and stood up, turning half away.

"I'll tell you, Ivy," he said. "I asked you this morning whether you'd wait two years—"

"I will! You know I will!"

"I know you will! Bless you! But two years are no good. I hope to be very much better by then, but I shall never be well enough to marry... Gaisford t-told me so this afternoon," he added with deliberation.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

VIGIL

"He could not, Himself, make a second self
To be His mate; as well have made Himself:
He would not make what He mislikes or slights,
An eyesore to Him, or not worth His pains:
But did, in envy, listlessness or sport,
Make what Himself would fain, in a manner, be—
Weaker in most points, stronger in a few,
Worthy, and yet mere playthings all the while,
Things he admires and mocks too,—that is it.
Because, so brave, so better though they be,
It nothing skills if He begin to plague....

'Thinketh, such shows nor right nor wrong in Him,
Nor kind, nor cruel: He is strong and Lord.
'Am strong myself compared to yonder crabs
That march now from the mountain to the sea.
'Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so...."

ROBERT BROWNING: "CALIBAN UPON SETEBOS."

WHEN Eric came back to the hall, he was startled to find O'Rane still sitting there.

"I'd entirely forgotten about you," he exclaimed. "Have I been a frightful time? You must forgive me. I'm becoming appallingly absent-minded."

"You haven't been very long," answered O'Rane; then he added inconsequently, "I was beginning to fear she might not be so well."

"A bit unstrung. I just want to scribble a note to Gaisford; then I shall be ready for dinner."

He hurried into the library, tripped over an unseen obstacle and had almost overbalanced before he discovered that the lights were not turned on.

"I have told Ivy that you say I shall never be well enough to marry," he wrote. *"This may surprise you, but you must back me up. I'm going away as soon as I can get packed and tidied up; I shall be away for at least your two years. I want you to tell people that it's not serious, but I also want you to convince Ivy that it's all over. I'll give you the whole story if you want it; perhaps it's enough for the present to say that I want above all things to give her a free hand. After all, if she's still unmarried in two years' time and if I'm a whole man by then, we can revise our decision. She's too young to be tied for two years. You might burn this letter and keep the contents to yourself."*

Ivy had been crying as though her heart would break; and Eric had only left her room because his presence seemed to excite her to fresh outbursts, and she was reacting on him. While he wrote his letter, the long-drawn breathless sobs seemed to fill the library—as they had filled it once before on the night when he debated with Gaisford whether he should come to her rescue—; it was imagination, of course, but he wanted to get away as soon as possible, as far as possible. And assuredly there must be no question of seeing her again....

He walked to the door and clutched at the handle as he listened. The sobbing continued, and he wondered how long he would have to hear it. It was almost too clear to be imaginary; O'Rane must be hearing it, too... So might a man go on hearing that one accusing sound until he went mad. He filled his lungs and walked erect into the hall.

"I'm ready now," he said.

O'Rane felt for his hat and stood up.

"You think it's all right to leave her?" he asked.

"Why not? The nurse is somewhere about."

"She seems—rather upset."

The crying was real, then, and some one else could hear it. O'Rane spoke caustically, as though *he* were responsible....

"I'm afraid I shall only make her worse... Shall we start? I'll give you a hand, if I may; the stairs are rather tricky. Are we going to your place, or will you come with me to the club? I don't want to meet a lot of people. You said we should be by ourselves?"

One jerky question tumbled on to the heels of another. It was idle for Eric to pretend that nothing had happened; it was impossible to remain silent.

"It'll be only the two of us," said O'Rane.

"Let's find a taxi."

They had driven half-way to O'Rane's house in Westminster, when Eric leaned through the window without warning and countermanded the order.

"The club will be better," he explained. "We may meet my agent, Grierson, and I want to have a word with him. You don't mind?"

"Not a bit... I think I'd better take charge, Eric. First of all, have a cigarette. I don't carry them myself, I'm afraid. Then don't try to talk, if you don't feel like it; and don't try to keep up appearances on my account. I'm blind, to begin with; and I know what you're going through. Give me your hand. That's right... Sorry! I didn't mean to hurt you; I suppose I've rather a powerful grip. Now, you've to make the hell of a big effort—"

"I've made it," Eric interrupted unsteadily.

"You're only at the beginning. I take it you gave her free choice?"

"No, I decided for her. I had a moment of revelation and I jumped at the opportunity. I knew that, if I didn't take it then, I should go on struggling until I could never take it. I cut my own throat. I

lied to her and said that I'd been forbidden even to think of marrying—ever. That letter was to square Gaisford. She's upset—on my account; but she'll forget it the first time she sees Gaymer. That brute... And a month ago she was begging me to marry her without waiting, because she was so sure of herself. I've taken your advice, Raney, with—interest. I've handed her over without a fight. It's been a—most valuable experience,—something to think about when I'm abroad. I feel there's a tremendous joke somewhere, only I can't see it. Shall we telephone to Gaymer and see if he can help us? And she's crying because I've been so *good* to her, she can't *bear* to think I'm ill, I must *know* she'll wait till I'm well... *You* can see the fun of it, can't you, Raney? The rollicking farce? If I died, she'd die too; a perfect sentiment. We're just by Buckingham Palace now. I was taking her home from the opera, and Gaymer passed us in a car—on this spot—with another woman. Gaymer, who's going to make her happy! And she went and bearded him in his own rooms; and he turned her out!... Just on this spot... That was the beginning of everything. She'll tell you that, when she got home that night, she prayed that she might die...."

The taxi swerved to the kerb and stopped with a jerk. O'Rane relaxed his grip on Eric's hand and opened the door to let out the dog.

"A big effort!," he whispered.

The lights of the hall and the hum of conversation in the dining-room steadied Eric, and he discussed the bill of fare with a show of interest, even stirring himself to nod or wave a hand to his friends, as they threaded their way among the tables. Once he remembered that he had done all this before, two nights ere he said good-bye to Barbara Neave and to England. It would have been better, if he had never come back; he never meant to come back, but he had been summoned. It was not his fault; looking back on the past two months, could any one say that he was to blame for anything? Was he to blame for sacrificing himself now? Did it matter what any one did, so long as Providence punished folly and wisdom equally? That was where God came in. Perhaps that was the secret of this incomparable joke which he felt without understanding....

"I know now why Adam and Eve were turned out of the Garden of Eden!," he exclaimed suddenly. O'Rane looked up in surprise.

"Is this a new riddle?," he asked.

"It's the oldest riddle in the world. *They* knew the difference between good and evil; God never did. I sometimes wonder why any of us try to lead a decent life or to do the right thing. It doesn't pay in this world, and I'm sure God only despises you in the next... You'd like a glass of sherry, wouldn't you?," he added, as their waiter came within ear-shot.

"I hardly ever touch wine, thanks..." O'Rane listened for a moment to the departing footsteps, then lowered his voice. "If you feel like that, Eric, you've only to go back and say that you want to be married at once. She'll do it. If you told her you were going straight to a sanatorium—for the rest of your life—, you've only to ask her and she'll go with you. If you play that card, no one in the world can beat you. And you know it."

There was a long silence only broken by the drumming of nervous fingers on the table.

"Yes. I know it," Eric answered.

"Why don't you play it?"

"Perhaps I don't much care about the idea of bringing consumptive children into the world."

"She'll wait till you're cured... Don't be a humbug, Eric. You're going to spoil everything, if you become bitter. Cynicism is a young man's substitute for knowledge. We're not boys. We can see this dispassionately; you've done the right thing, the only possible thing, the inevitable thing. It hurts, but I can shew you a way of making it hurt less. At present you're seeing nothing but blackness ahead, but, if you'll come for a walk with me after dinner, I'll put something in place of all you think you're losing."

"I shall be interested to see you try."

"My dear Eric, I shall succeed! I've never doubted in all my life. Will you put yourself in my hands? We won't discuss it now, because I want to hear about your immediate plans. You'll be away for two years? Have you decided when you start and where you're going?"

Eric had thought only that he was losing this girl whom he had so unnecessarily allowed himself to love. He did not want to talk about the islands of the South Pacific, but O'Rane would not leave him alone. It was unseemly and brutal, this torrent of questions from a man who was in no way concerned. O'Rane knew some one who would be only too pleased to take over the lease of the Ryder Street flat; he knew some one else who might usefully be employed to spread the news of his departure through the Press; he knew men at every stopping-place between Liverpool and the Marquesas, between Southampton and the Cape, and letters of introduction were to be had for the asking.

"You're giving me a wonderful funeral," said Eric.

The words were rudely conceived and rudely spoken. It was a refinement of cruelty to be whipped with questions, when his brain was too much numbed to think of anything but Ivy.

"Hardly a funeral. But you've closed one chapter, and I want you to begin the next. It doesn't do any good to curse your luck. When I had this accident to my eyes, I walked straight out of hospital into my next job. Kind friends wanted to drive me in cars or to take my arm, but I had to start on my own *some* time. There's such a lot to be done in life that we've no leisure for thinking what fun it would be to have three hands or a million pounds a minute. When King David was punished in the person of his son, he did everything in his power to keep the boy alive; when once the boy was dead, he rose up and washed his face and put off all the signs of mourning and started on *his* next job. If you don't begin to-night, it'll be harder to begin to-morrow."

"But there's not very much I *can* do to-night," Eric objected wearily.

"I assure you there is. Did you find out whether your agent was in the club? Well, get hold of him and make your arrangements. I can't help there, because I know nothing about the subject, but you and he must know what you fixed when you went abroad before. In the meantime I'll get hold of my tame journalist. I'm going to say simply that you're going abroad immediately for the good of your

health; I shan't say where or how long for. And the news won't appear till the day after to-morrow, so you'll have time to warn your people. Then we'll meet—is half an hour long enough for you?—, and I shall have a lot for you to do. I'm going to find out if Gaymer's at home—"

"I'm not going to see *him!*" Eric broke in.

O'Rane looked up, with his head on one side, smiling to himself:

"If I convince you that you can contribute in any way to that girl's happiness? Dear man, don't be absurd! I'm assuming that you love her. That means that you'll do everything you can for her and that you'll rack your brains to think of new things. D'you imagine that you've done your utmost for her by clearing out of Gaymer's way—with the worst possible grace—and wishing them both joy of the other? You're going to help this thing through. You're going to set her mind at rest, you're going to shake hands with him, you're going to be the man they can both turn to... This has to be done with a bit of a gesture, Eric."

Forty minutes later they were walking towards Buckingham Gate. Eric did not know what he was expected to say or do, but O'Rane assured him that everything would be quite easy, and he was too tired to assert himself. He hoped faintly that Gaymer would be sober and that they would have no duel of words as on the occasion of his two other visits to the flat. Perhaps O'Rane would keep the peace....

Gaymer opened the door himself, nodded perfunctorily to Eric and led the way to his smoking-room. He could not wholly conceal his surprise at their coming; and he busied himself unduly with chairs, cigars and offers of drink until one of his visitors should think fit to explain the purpose of the meeting. Each waited for his neighbour to speak first; the last tumbler and cigar were distributed, and there was no pretext for further delay. When the silence became unbearable, O'Rane turned enquiringly to Eric.

"You were going to make a proposal?," he began.

"No. I came here, because you asked me to. I don't in the least know what you want me to say."

"I wanted you to explain; Gaymer's in the dark still. Shall I give him an outline?... Gaymer, you both of you love Miss Maitland, but you can't both of you marry her. I don't think we need consider rights or claims, because—quite obviously—neither of you would marry her against her will—"

"I have every intention of marrying her," Gaymer interrupted quietly.

"Not against her will. Lane or I have only to say a word to her, and she'd marry him. I'm not bluffing, Gaymer; that's quite certain. Lane doesn't want to force her hand, he wants her to marry the man who'll make her happiest. Don't you want the same? This is the judgement of Solomon, you know. Do you put yourself before her? If you do, you don't care for her, you don't deserve her; and, Gaymer, you won't get her."

Gaymer kicked his heels on to the edge of a chair and slid lower into his corner of the sofa:

"If she tries to marry Lane or any one else, I can have her back—in the heel of my fist—within a week."

"I can't agree," said O'Rane. "There are certain new factors of which you know nothing. But, if it were all true, would you try to marry her against her will?"

"No—"

"Come! That's better."

"But it's not against her will. *She* knows that. Simply looking at *her* happiness—"

"You won't make her very happy in your present state, Gaymer," said O'Rane sharply. "It's more than time for you to steady down and find some work to do."

"That's my business," murmured Gaymer unamiably.

"No, it's ours, if you want our help. Lane has seen her this evening; he's come to the conclusion that she wants to marry you rather than him. He's given way in your favour. It's not an easy thing to do, it's not an easy position for her; she's torn in two and very unhappy. Lane's going abroad—for his health. He's leaving her on such terms that she can do what she likes without having any cause to reproach herself; she can marry you with a good conscience. And you've to shew that you're worthy of what's being done for you; she's being made over to your care. How long will it take you to find some work?"

Gaymer looked uncomprehendingly from one to the other.

"I don't know," he answered stupidly.

O'Rane turned to Eric.

"Have you any money?," he asked.

"How much do you want?," said Eric.

"Well, how much can you spare? You want to make a success of this, don't you? If there's a question of their wanting money to marry on, capital to start in business, you know, you could supply it? You must have made a great deal the last few years; and you wouldn't like Miss Maitland to go short. Can I leave the question in your hands?"

Eric felt an insane impulse to laugh, but O'Rane's face was serious.

"I hardly feel—," he began.

"But you're going to do everything in your power to make it a success! They must have money, and I understand the judge is rather a screw. By the way, we shall have to put some pressure on him. He's got a great opinion of you, Eric. I met him at dinner the other night, and he was talking very warmly about you. You will have to do some propaganda for Gaymer. And then we must find regular work... Can you manage five hundred a year for a few years?"

As Eric hesitated in bewilderment, Gaymer intervened.

"We needn't discuss this," he said.

"If you don't take it, I'll see that your wife does," said O'Rane. "You could manage that, Eric?"

"I could."

"Then you will?"

Eric felt himself being hypnotized. A voice that was not under his control answered:

"I will."

O'Rane stood up and called his dog.

"Lane has to go abroad for his lungs," he explained. "He'll be all right in a year or two's time, but he's told Miss Maitland that he'll never be in a condition to marry; you must back up the story. Now that's pretty well all. Lane will be busy the next few days, so you'd better not go near his place. After that, I understand that Miss Maitland will have to go away to the country for a bit. When she comes back, you can see her. If she shows any hesitation, you can tell her that Lane himself provided the money for you to marry her on. That'll fix *that*... Now we must be going."

He walked to the door and felt for the handle. Eric rose wearily and followed him, hardly troubling to wonder where he was being taken. Gaymer sat biting his nails and staring at the floor.

"Good-bye," O'Rane called from the door.

There was an inarticulate grunt from the sofa. Eric was half-way across the room, but he hesitated and came back to Gaymer.

"I don't suppose I shall see you again," he said. "Good-bye. Good luck."

O'Rane was humming to himself in the hall. Gaymer looked towards the door; then his eyes swept slowly round on a level with Eric's waist; they raised themselves diffidently, and he saw a hand stretched out to him.

"Good-bye, Lane," he said.

"Will you shake hands?"

"Why? We're not friends. And you've not given me anything."

The humming ceased, and O'Rane called out to know whether Eric was coming.

"I'm too tired to wrangle," sighed Eric. "Don't shake hands, if you don't want to. Good-bye again."

"Good-bye."

Eric's hand fell to his side, and he walked slowly to the door and across the hall.

"What d'you want me to do now?," he asked dully.

"I'll take you home," answered O'Rane. "I'm afraid Gaymer hasn't learned the art of being gracious; and he'll be punished for it. I'm prepared to bet he's being punished now. Whenever he looks at his wife, he'll remember that you behaved well and he didn't. He'll try to forget it; but she won't let him, she'll always know that, when you found you couldn't marry her yourself, you strained every nerve to get her happily married to the man she loved better than you. If anything makes Gaymer run straight, it'll be that reflection. You've behaved uncommonly well, Eric, if I may say so, though not better than she deserved; you're giving up everything to her, but she was ready to give up everything to you. I've not finished with you yet; you've still to give your blessing to the marriage. Tell her quite simply that, as you can't marry her yourself—Yes, you must do that... And that's all you *can* do. If they're coming to grief, you can't stop them; you've already done what only one man in ten million would do. In future—you're finking the future, aren't you?"

"It seems a little—purposeless," said Eric.

He wondered whether his voice trembled as much as his lips.

"One gets moments like that. It's all due to our literary conception of beginnings and ends. How long have we known each other? Fifteen years? D'you remember your last Phoenix Club dinner with Sinclair as president? Jim Loring was there; and George Oakleigh; and Jack Waring. In those days I'd made up my mind to a great career; I was going to make pots of money and I was going to be the great democratic leader... Then the war came, just when I'd made the money and lost it; one was incapacitated to a certain extent... But, even when I was lying in hospital, I never said 'This is the end'... You're a bit incapacitated, but this isn't the end; you've just been pulled up by a big obstacle and you've overdone it. I said I'd give you something in place of all you were losing. Well, haven't I? You could have kept that girl, but you've done everything—at the heaviest possible cost—to serve her interests. You've that to be proud of. What are the things one has to overcome before one can attain greatness of spirit? Greed, fear, selfishness? You've done that. Weakness?... I keep on thinking of Sinclair's dinner-party. You know that my wife was engaged to Jim Loring before she married me; and you and Jack Waring were both in love with Barbara Neave before she married George. 'Curious what havoc one or two women can make in half a dozen men's lives! It came near to beating Jim; I believe it did beat Waring. But are you going to be beaten and to let your life be spoiled for a woman? You're bigger than either of those two; you've had ill-health to contend with all your life and you've made a world-wide reputation for yourself in spite of it. And in those days Woman for us was a girl of eighteen that we flirted with on the stairs at a dance... We underestimate them at first, then we exaggerate them enormously, then we get them into perspective; but Woman is not a man's chief business in his prime. Did you plan a wonderful career for yourself at that dinner? I told you even then that you were the genius among us all."

Eric looked back with a shudder over the devastation of fifteen years to his last night as an undergraduate at Oxford.

"I suppose I did... Yes, it was a solemn moment, just when we were going down. I dreamed that one day I should have the whole world at my feet. People would whisper who I was when I came into a room... I suppose I've got that. But it's so small. I'm genuinely surprised when I find that any one's heard of me. I'm terrified when people come up and congratulate me on my plays... If that's fame... I think it was when I found how unsatisfying it was that I began to yearn for something more... You haven't told me how I'm going to keep myself amused for the next two years, Raney. I shall be allowed to do very little work."

"You won't be amused. But you may be consoled to think that your soul's been in danger and that you've saved it by sacrifice. It was touch-and-go whether you spoiled that girl's life."

"And I've given her life to Gaymer to spoil."

"If he must. But you've set him an example that he won't easily forget. I still believe in sudden conversions; and I expect to find him a different man from to-night. You must give time for the lesson to sink in; he's dazed at present—like you."

Loathing of Gaymer was a feeling which Eric could not yet repress; he brought his stick with a crash on to the pavement.

"Not he! You talked about a 'gesture,' and he knows it's that and nothing more. I've given her up because I couldn't keep her... I don't complain. She had her choice of us, and the better man won."

"It was the better man who made the gesture," said O'Rane quietly. "Is this the house? I don't think I can do any good by coming in. Make her see that you're still her devoted friend and that love has no necessary connection with marriage. You told me you were going to your people to-morrow? You'll find that devilish hard, but you mustn't stand any sympathy from them, or you'll begin to pity yourself. Come and see me, as soon as you're back in London. I'll organize a farewell dinner for you. A bit ironical after your send-off in New York? I thought I'd discount it by saying it first... Remember you have to go through this with your head up. Good-night."

He held out his hand, and Eric gripped it.

"Good-night and thank you. Can you get home all right?"

"I'm not going home. I'm going to do some propaganda with this girl's father."

O'Rane turned with a wave of his hand, slipped his fingers through the dog's collar and strode towards St. James' Street. Eric watched him melting from sight and then walked upstairs. He tried to make a picturesque comparison between his own disappearance into the solitude of California and O'Rane's eternal solitude of blindness; he wondered why any one troubled to advise and guide him, why he so tamely submitted. What was the sum of all this counsel?... He was inexpressibly tired. And it was ironical that he should be spending another night so close to Ivy when he had renounced her.

The light was burning in her room, and after some hesitation he put his head in at the door. She seemed to be sleeping, but awoke as he looked at her and cried out to know where he had been.

"I was dining with O'Rane," he said. "I went away, Ivy, because I couldn't bear to see you crying. And I was a bit unnerved myself. It's done me good, talking to him. He's so extraordinarily plucky himself and he's never in any kind of doubt. He's cleared my mind of doubt. If I could marry you without doing you a wrong, there's nothing I wouldn't do to bring it about. You know that, don't you? I love you more than any one in the world, you'll always be my own child, and nothing can take away my right to love you and try to protect you. But we can't marry; so we mustn't upset each other by thinking about it. I'm going away to try and get cured, and you must get well yourself and make your own life just as though we'd never thought of marrying. You remember that I made a will some weeks ago? I'm arranging for certain money to be paid you—"

"Eric!"

"Yes. That'll make you independent. I want to see you happily married. You told me that, if I were dead or if we'd never met, you'd probably marry John Gaymer. I want you to pretend that we've never met. I hate to think of giving any one else the right to take care of you, but I can't do it from the other side of the Atlantic... You've been a wonderful thing in my life, a little fairy that walked in out of the street... I shall expect to hear everything that you do and how you're getting on. I'm going to get quite well, but a man with weak lungs has no business to marry. And that's the long and the short of it. I'm going down to-morrow to tell my people... If ever you need help, Ivy, you can call on me; I'll come back from California, if I can do anything for you. Now I mustn't keep you awake, or I shall get into trouble with Gaisford. Promise me you won't worry. Promise me you won't make yourself miserable... Darling Ivy, you mustn't cry again; I'm losing more than you are. Don't try to talk. Just kiss me good-night. May God bless you, Ivy, and make you very happy."

As he untwined her arms and turned out the light, he could hear the sobs breaking out afresh. They followed him across the hall into his bedroom. Nearly three years earlier, when he had said good-bye to Barbara, he had returned home to find the telephone ringing in every room and he had muffled the bells and thrown himself half-undressed on his bed, blind and mad with pain. For two years he had wondered what would have happened, if he had yielded to temptation and spoken to her....

The sobbing of a heart-broken child pursued him, though he shut his door and buried his head in the pillows. O'Rane was convinced that he had only to make his appeal, to trade on his own health and beg her to come with him....

If she dreaded the appeal, why did she go on crying?

He tried to think of next day's meeting with his mother. "No danger... I assure you there's nothing to worry about! Ask Gaisford, if you don't believe me..." And then, as in a careless postscript: "Of course, there can be no question of marrying. Just as well we found out in time, wasn't it?" Would his mother be deceived? He would have to tell her in that quiet, confidential hour when his father had gone to bed; he would surely tell her in his father's drowsy, smoke-laden work-room where he had already boasted—prematurely enough to set God scheming against him—that he would make an effort to win, that he *would* win, that he had won....

If indeed he had won, it was a secret victory; and Raney alone knew whom he had met and overcome....

The sobbing still haunted him. If Ivy dreaded the appeal, how *could* she go on crying?

He threw aside the pillows and walked uncertainly to the door. His fingers went to the handle and drew back without touching it, went forward again, tried and turned. The door opened, and he could hear muffled sobbing, no longer imaginary. He walked on tip-toe half-way across the hall, then returned and stood listening in the open door-way. Then he closed the door and locked it.

The sobbing grew fainter and died away.

1. Silently corrected typographical errors and inconsistencies; retained non-standard spelling.
2. Retained non-standard punctuation and ellipses.
3. Page 270: the left brace was not retained.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SECRET VICTORY ***

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