# THE TIGRESS

Anne Warner

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## BY ANNE WARNER

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# CHAPTER I

## ON A MOONLIGHT NIGHT IN SIMLA

"I do hope you are not going to weep!" said Nina.

She and he sat on a far-sheltered corner of the terrace in the gray shadow, and she had just told him that "everything was over."

As "everything" had been going on for the best part of three months, it was, perhaps, only natural that she should experience some concern as to how he meant to take it.

He was slow to reassure her, and she was impatient. "Because," she explained, "I never know just what to say or do when they weep. I'm never at a loss at other times; but—"

"Of course I shall not weep," he protested at length, with something of indignation in his tone. "Whatever gave you such an idea?"

"It isn't unusual," she explained. "Sometimes they storm. I've known them to swear most awfully. But when they are young, as you are, they so often just melt; and it is very trying, you know. Perhaps you'll swear. I'd much rather have it so. There was Emborough, for instance. He—"

"If you don't mind," he cut in, "I'd prefer not to hear."

"Ah, I see!" she exclaimed quickly. "You are neither going to weep nor storm. You are going to be just plain disagreeable. And if there is anything I hate it is a man who mopes."

He was thinking very hard, and for the moment he had failed to follow her. Disaster had dropped upon him like a bolt from the blue at the moment of his greatest confidence.

It was at Simla where, Kipling says, "all things begin and many come to an evil end;" and something, it seemed, had come to an end—evil or otherwise—as well as the season and the last of the dances at Viceregal Lodge.

Ten minutes ago he had been so convinced that the end was to be "otherwise" that even now he couldn't believe it was to be evil.

"Why," he managed to say after a brief pause, "I don't understand you at all. I—"

"No one ever has understood me," she assured him. "Even when I've gone to the trouble of explaining they manage somehow to get the explanation all upside down. It's very tiresome—very."

"I really thought you loved me! You—"

"They all think I love them. That's the odd part of it. I'm sure I never told any one. And yet they are so conceited—Oh, why can't you men appreciate being petted and amused, without imagining that it must be inspired by adoration and coupled with a desire for life-long attachment?"

"You promised to bolt with me," he asserted boldly.

Nina's chair jumped back three inches, impelled by the reflexes of a slim but sturdy pair of long legs. Hers, not the chair's.

"I abominate a liar!" she announced firmly.

"So do I," he came back. "You did promise me. It was during that last waltz."

"I am never responsible for what I say when waltzing."

"You admit it, then?"

"I admit nothing. I neither confirm nor deny. I don't know."

"But we came out here to arrange it. Or don't you remember that, either?"

"I fancied it was because you wished to smoke."

"God!" he exclaimed suddenly. "How can you be so bitterly cruel!"

She may have been a reincarnated tigress—in after years there was a man who always declared so—and then again she may not. It is quite possible that circumstance and environment made her what she was.

Certainly at heart Nina Darling was not a bad woman. There were times when she tried very hard to be a very good woman according to her lights. And yet, somehow, somewhere within her she seemed to possess a faculty for making men wretched.

The world—or a very large part of it—regarded it as an insatiable craving, an unappeasable appetite—a sort of lust for personal aggrandizement, growing out of personal vanity. But then the world knew nothing of Nina Darling's secret—which made all the difference.

For right judgment a few facts will not serve. Unless we have them all we are likely to fall into error. To argue from effect back to cause is a very risky undertaking. And that was what most people did in Nina Darling's case.

Young Gerald Andrews, of the civil service, the most recent victim, whom she had had in leading strings ever since he came to Simla, fancied her from the very first the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Now, stung by the lash of her scorn, the sheer fact of her unattainableness seemed to redouble her charm.

There was something wraithlike about her. She appeared to hold kinship with the moonlight, which in its loveliness overspread lawns and flowerbeds near at hand and turned to opal the mists that hung and swayed over the valley beneath them, where the lovely Annandale roses were blowing.

Until now he had always thought that her big eyes were violet-blue. But suddenly he saw opal lights in them and opal flame. And her gown was not white and silver, as he had fancied, but spun of moonbeams and studded with opals.

Her long, sinuous figure, more revealed than hidden by its gauzy investure, suggested to him Lilith, and the medieval conception of an angel as well.

He hardly expected an answer to the exclamatory question wrung from him by the torture of her words, but she had it ready.

"Because I eminently prefer my matrimonial frying-pan to the blistering coals of the illicit," she said coolly.

The boy—for he was scarcely more, big and handsome and strong though he appeared—looked terribly wobegone. But on the comparison floated a straw, and like the proverbial drowning man, he clutched at it.

"You admit it's a frying-pan," he reminded her.

"Sizzling hot," she told him. "I'm scorched through and through. My heart's a cinder."

The straw went under, carrying him with it, but he still clung on. "Let me take you out of it," he pleaded desperately.

But her shapely shoulders rose in a discouraging shrug.

"Into the fire?" she asked calmly.

"Into Elysium."

She laughed at that. "Worse," she said with a touch of cynicism. "The home of the blessed dead! I'm not blessed and I'm not dead—and I don't want to be!"

"You know I didn't mean that," he objected.

"The only other Elysium I know is Elysium Hill, with its doleful deodars. A most distressing—"

Young Andrews interrupted her by springing up. "Oh, don't be so frightfully literal!" he cried, annoyed to a point of misery. "You know very well what I meant."

"If you're going to be rude—" she began threateningly. And on the instant he was in his chair again, leaning forward, groping for her bare hand.

"No, you mustn't!" she warned, drawing both hands out of reach. "You'll only declare that I encouraged you."

At that he gasped audibly. "Encouraged me!" he exclaimed when he breathed normally again. "Aren't you a little late with your caution? I suppose I never have been encouraged."

"There! I knew you'd say it."

"Well, I've held your hands dozens of times, haven't I? More than that, I've held you in my arms, and I've kissed your lips and your eyes and your hair. Isn't that encouragement?"

She smiled calmly and whimsically.

"Yes. Encouragement for me. I couldn't resist you."

"Your heart isn't a cinder at all," he growled, frowning. "It's a stone! How many other men have you treated like this?"

"None," she answered boldly. "I never treat two alike. I have too much imagination for that. There are always variations."

His voice was very bitter as he said: "You'll meet your match some day. I hope to God you will!"

"I've met him already," she returned. "He's the only man I care a straw about."

"Your husband?" he hazarded.

"Good Heavens! No! Poor Darling! He doesn't deserve the life I lead him. I'm charitable enough to wish him a better fate."

"What happened to your match then?"

"Now you are asking riddles," she said. "That question has never been satisfactorily answered."

"You mean you don't wish to tell me, I suppose."

"I'd give anything in the world if I could. He was reported dead eight years ago, but—"

"He isn't?"

"He wasn't then."

"How do you know?"

"He was heard from after."

"Then he's alive still—you know that much?"

"No," she replied languorously. "I don't know that much. He may have died since, don't you see?"

"Let me find out for you," he proposed abruptly. "I'll—"

"You're very kind, but you'd have your trouble for your pains. He doesn't want to be found, wherever he is, dead or alive, and I'll back him against the world when it comes to having his own way."

She shivered slightly and drew the filmy scarf closer over her bare shoulders. "Besides," she added, "when the message was sent he was starting for 'the world's end,' and 'the world's end' is a big place to find a man. The needle and the hayrick are child's play to it."

"I'm terribly interested," said young Andrews. "I am really. I didn't believe you'd admit any chap was your match. Do you mind telling me what he was like?"

"He was more than my match," she confessed. "He was something else, and that is why no other man ever will be able to please me after his newness has worn off."

"As mine has?"

"As yours has."

"Gad! But you're frank, Nina."

"I know it. It's my one admirable quality. I'm tired of you, Gerald. I always get tired in the same place."

"The same place?" he repeated, puzzled.

"When they're not satisfied with a day and want to make it forever. The mere thought of forever wearies me. I feel like killing a man when he so much as hints at it."

"You haven't killed your husband," he reminded her.

"Ah, but how I have been tempted!" she laughed. "Some day I may."

"I know something of what a beast Darling is," he ventured. "I've heard it at the club. They say—"

"Don't!" she begged. "I won't listen. It may all be true, but I'd rather not hear it. I'm sorry for him. I'd only kill him to put him out of his misery—to put us both out of our misery."

"Of course you don't mean that. You shouldn't say it."

She didn't contradict him, and for a little there was silence between them. His thoughts reverted to the man who was her match—and more.

"And the other man?" he queried. "You said he was something else. What else?"

"My mate," she said simply. And again the silence fell.

Presently her laugh rang out, clear and bell-like, startling her companion from gloomy reverie. It jarred awfully. It was like dance music at a funeral.

"I can fancy what else you've heard at the club," she began, the opal lights in her eyes suddenly blazing. "They say I'm an angel, don't they?"

"They wouldn't dare say anything else in my presence."

"To be sure"—bitterly—"that's condemnation enough in itself. Before you they pronounced me a good and virtuous wife, I suppose. And behind your back—Good Heavens, what must they not say behind your back!"

"You *are* good and virtuous," he defended with boyish loyalty.

"Of course I am," she agreed. "I've driven one man to drink by marrying him, and more than I can count by not. I'm an angel, truly. But it's so hard to tell just what to do. I am my brother's keeper, and yet I go through life adding each year to the army of the besotted."

It was not at all the trend that young Andrews had foreseen in bringing Nina Darling to this shadowy corner of the terrace. Every fresh lead made the situation more uncomfortable. He had been brimming over with passion and sentiment, and here they had strayed away into a field rife with some of life's hardest facts.

"Promise me," she begged, "that you won't desert the civil service for the army—this army, my army!"

"God knows what I shall do, Nina!" he flung back desperately. "I banked everything on you. I didn't think you'd fail me."

"I've failed every one that ever came into my life," was her candid rejoinder. "Every time I crave and take a little passing pleasure some one suffers, and I haven't a drop of vicious blood in my veins. I believe I was cursed in my cradle."

He started to protest, but she shook her golden head dispiritedly. The blues—rare visitors—had settled down upon her.

"If I had only met you first!" he cried. "If you had married me I would have saved you."

"Don't!" she supplicated. "Please, please don't! I hate the word—marriage. Who was it said: 'Love is a soufflé that marriage changes to a bread-and-butter pudding?' I've seen it borne out scores of times. Soggy, indigestible stuff, without spice or flavor."

The melody of the dance music which all along had seeped to them in harmonic murmur from the distant ballroom was now hushed.

In the distance, at the opposite end of the terrace, figures—single and grouped—moved in silhouette across the glare from the lighted windows. Along the garden paths there passed at intervals sentinel Ghurkas from the viceroy's guard of honor.

Young Andrews's thoughts were long, long thoughts. He was sorry for the woman, but he was still more sorry for himself. He had turned a little away from her. His head was bowed, and his gaze was lowered to the pavement at his feet.

Nina had risen before he was conscious of her movement. Then belatedly he sprang up.

"It is late," she said. "The Ramsays are probably looking everywhere for me. I mustn't keep them waiting."

But he scarcely heeded. He stepped very close to her and gripped her by either arm.

"Tell me," he begged, low-voiced, earnest, "is there nothing in your heart for me?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered quite casually. "Sympathy—oh, ever so much sympathy!"

"And there can never be anything else?"

"There never can be anything else—except—"

She paused, and his hopes fluttered.

"Except—" he repeated.

"Gratitude. I am grateful. I was so afraid you were going to weep. And you didn't."

# CHAPTER II

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRETEMPS

Young Andrews was a sensitive soul, but he was not unmanly. He fought off the tears as long as he was conscious, but his pillow was wet in the morning.

His station was "on the Bombay side," as they say in India. To be exact, it was at Junnar. And he started down the next day, after sending Nina a bouquet of Annandale's loveliest roses. But when he alighted from the little branch railway line at Umballa, he halted.

The cantonment here was the home of the Darlings. But it was also the home of Dinghal, a deputy commissioner, who was a friend of young Andrews. So young Andrews lingered, and the deputy commissioner made him welcome.

Hitherto he had regarded Dinghal as rather a bore. And in this he was thoroughly justified. But since his two months at Simla the deputy commissioner had acquired for him a distinct interest.

Dinghal knew the Darlings intimately, and his passion for gathering and disseminating minor gossip, which had once been a fault, became now, in the changed tastes of his visitor, an enviable virtue, especially as the visitor found it the easiest thing in the world to direct the flow into the one desired channel.

As a rule there was nothing vicious about Dinghal's gossip. It was so pitifully tame and pointless that it wearied the listener to extinction; for Dinghal was a kindly man, inclined to gloss over faults and failings and to "play up" the good points of even the most unworthy.

This was another reason why young Andrews was so vastly entertained by all the little talks they had about Colonel and Mrs. Darling. He had heard enough of the other sort of thing in the club at Simla, and had relished it then, in that Nina's husband was the chief victim, and at that time his sympathies were all with Nina.

What he craved most now was unbiased truth. Which is sometimes a panacea—and sometimes not.

"They're not happy, to be sure," Dinghal admitted with evident reluctance. "But I don't know that either is to blame. Just a case of mutual inadaptability that neither discovered until it was too late. I knew Darling long before he married her, and I know people who knew little Nina Calthrop when she was crowing in swaddling clothes.

"There's not a better family in England. Good people all of them. The men have rather run to the army. You know how that goes in families. She's a grand-daughter of old General Buddicomb, who distinguished himself in Egypt in 1882.

"The general's sister, Nina's great-aunt, married the Duke of Pemberwell. Fine people, I tell you. Then there was Kneedrock; a husky young giant—viscount, you know—son of the Earl of Dumphreys, who went to South Africa and never came back."

"Never came back?" echoed young Andrews questioningly.

"Reported killed at Spion Kop, I think it was. Body never brought home, though. May have been Bloemfontein, I'm not sure. At any rate, they say he was Nina's favorite cousin. She certainly took his loss very keenly.

"After her first wild grief she developed a mania for particulars. When peace was arranged and the rank and file were coming home by the shipload she lost no chance of getting every fact she could from every officer she met.

"At the Pemberwell seat—Puddleford—she encountered Colonel Darling. It was he, they say, who identified poor Kneedrock's remains, what there was of them, and, of course, he held for her at that vital moment more interest than any other man, woman, or child in the United Kingdom.

"She annexed him—body, soul, and breeches, as the saying is. And it wasn't Darling's fault that he was flattered and fascinated, for Nina was then barely twenty, and the rarest, flowerlike slip of a girl you can imagine.

"You know what she is now. Beautiful, you think, eh? Everybody agrees that Nina is beautiful; and she is. But five years in India, and—well, let us say, the life of the mismated—haven't failed to rub some of the bloom off the peach."

Mixed metaphors had no terrors for Dinghal, who evidently inherited from somewhere a strain of Irish blood, despite his name, and treated "bulls" as if they were pets.

"Was this fellow, Kneedrock, ever heard of afterward?" his listener questioned. "Reported alive, I mean. It seems to me—"

"Oh, yes," Dinghal answered. "Every now and then a story crops up from somewhere that he's been seen. But nobody believes it. If he's alive there's no reason why he shouldn't go home, is there? The whole thing is ridiculous on its face. Besides Darling saw him. Says he was practically shot to pieces."

"I thought I'd heard it," returned young Andrews casually. And to himself he said: "Kneedrock is the man she meant. Her cousin, her match, and her mate—all in one."

"Yes," Dinghal went on, calmly filling his pipe, "Nina Calthrop was something to covet; and, naturally enough, Darling coveted her.

"Then, on her side, there was gratitude, for the colonel had given her a world of the sort of detail she wanted. She had cross-examined him like a K. C., and he had answered fully and freely out of the overflowing storehouse of his experience.

"If they could have gone on talking forever about that battle—I believe now it was Spion Kop—they might have been happy yet. But in time she pumped the cistern dry. There wasn't a crumb of fact or conjecture left in Darling's larder that hadn't been rolled over and over and stripped to its bare bones."

Young Andrews nearly howled. The mixture of figures was really superb.

"I fancy the pumping was pretty well finished before the wedding," the recital continued; "but I'm not stating that as a fact. You see that was quite six months after

their meeting, and two years or more after Kneedrock's taking off. And in that six months they had seen each other, not continuously, but at intervals, for Darling was a very busy man.

"Their honeymoon, such as it was, was spent on a P. & O. steamer. I have been told that they each discovered their wretched mistake before they got to the Gulf of Aden. Take it for what it's worth.

"Conditions weren't all they might have been when they reached Umballa. That is certain. Darling did his best to hide the rift in the lute; but Nina never seemed to care a hang what people thought or said.

"Mind you, I'm not blaming her. I like the frankness of it. Not that she complained or whimpered. Not she. But she just went wild. Flirted like the very devil with anything and everything that came along.

"That was five years ago, mind you; and she hasn't mended her ways since. There are some who say she is possessed of the seven devils that the Lord cast out of Mary of Magdala, but—"

"It's a lie!" broke in young Andrews furiously. "She's—"

"Of course," Dinghal came back heartily. "I know that. She's not a bad woman. But I've heard her painted blacker than the Black Knight of the Black Lands.

"There is no question that more than one young fellow has gone straight to perdition because of her—and some old fellows, too, for that matter. But they were weaker sisters, who hadn't wit enough to save their skins from Hades."

His listener writhed. The deputy commissioner's rhetoric was certainly most trying.

"I don't suppose," he pursued, "that in the history of the world there has ever been a married pair more lied about than the Darlings. Nothing has been too bad for the victims of her charms to say about her; and for years the gossips from here to Singapore have been telling wild tales of the colonel's cruelty, wreaked in vengeance on his wayward *mem-sahib*.

"They've had her drawn and quartered, cut, bruised, and dislocated. To believe the hundredth part of these stories she must, long ere this, if she managed to survive, have been resolved into a more helpless, unsightly cripple than the most distorted *Sadhu* that makes hideous the twice-yearly festivals at Tirupankundram. Yet I know there's not a scintilla of truth in any one of them."

"I heard something of that sort at Simla," said Andrews, frowning.

"You can hear it anywhere. Whenever conversation flags in Anglo-India some ass or knave will introduce the Darlings, and rehearse the latest invention of the prolific and never-failing scandal-makers."

"But he's cruel to her, isn't he?"

"He's only cruel to himself," answered Dinghal. "He's killing his body and soul with strong drink, and he's risking his temporal and eternal future as an officer in his majesty's service and as a Christian gentleman.

"I give you my word, Andrews, he's never spoken a harsh word to her nor laid a heavy hand on her fair person. And yet he suffers the torments of the damned because of her. It's a very painful situation."

Andrews said he didn't pretend to understand the thing, and would like to have the key.

Dinghal hesitated a moment. Then he looked very impressive, and when he spoke it was with lowered voice.

"I can give you the key in three words," he said.

He paused again, and Andrews waited.

"It is this," Dinghal divulged gravely: "He loves her."

The young man from the Bombay side was thoughtfully silent for a space. Then, as the revelation sank in, he murmured, half to himself and out of the abundance of his own recent experience:

"God pity him!"

"That's what I say," agreed Dinghal.

At the time of this conversation Andrews had not seen Darling. He met him a night or two later at the Umballa Club, and a strange emotional mix-up resulted. The young man's sentimental side was oddly stirred. Darling appealed not only to his sympathy, but to his admiration.

It was true that he had been prepared for something of this kind by Dinghal; but he never suspected that he could entertain more than a sort of passive pity for Nina's husband. He had an innate dislike for weak men, physically and morally.

In that respect—and in that only—Andrews was to a degree feminine. Strength appealed to him as it appeals to women. And the fact that Darling had given way to a dulling, deadening indulgence in alcoholic excesses argued for a sort of moral cowardice.

But when he met the colonel he was surprised. It may have been that he pictured him in advance as habitually maudlin, or sodden or morose. Certainly he was no one of these. He had the look of a hard drinker, it was true; but he carried his liquor well. More than that, he gave the unmistakable impression of inherent strength and courage.

Darling was not a large man. He appeared to measure barely five feet nine, and his weight could not have exceeded ten stone—apparently all bone and sinew, with no sign of bloating.

Sandy-haired, pale blue of eye, his firm chin a trifle long, he was not ill-looking. But his age must have doubled Nina's on their wedding day.

Before he and Andrews had chatted for five minutes a mutual liking was established. They were both passionately fond of sport, and the fact developed and was exchanged in that brief period of intercourse.

"If you've nothing better to do to-morrow," Darling suggested, "I'd be glad to show you some of my trophies. What do you say to tiffin with me? My wife is still in

the hills, and we can talk big game without fear of boring the other sex. Shall I expect you?"

Andrews knew that he should say he had met Mrs. Darling at Simla, but he was so eager to answer "yes" that the opportunity got away from him at the moment; and as it didn't again present itself, his failure to make the truth clear was a harassing worry from that time on.

Moreover, though he could not repent, he reproached and upbraided himself for having fallen in love with Nina. All that he had learned since arriving at Umballa appeared only to add to her desirability. Absence had indeed, in this instance, made the heart grow fonder.

That he had broken his journey here, not so much for the sake of pumping Dinghal as for the chance of getting one more look at her—possibly one more word with her—he had candidly to admit to his better self. But he wished with all his heart that she was maid or widow, or—if there must be a husband, that he was some other—almost any other than Darling. He would have felt less a brute had it even been Dinghal.

It was a psychological contretemps of the rarest sort, and distinctly uncomfortable. He had found the colonel as infatuating in his way as his wife was in hers, and, naturally, there were no means by which he could reconcile the liking and the loving.

Even when he appeared at the Darling bungalow, the next day, the thing got him by the throat, as it were, at every turn. For the trophies of the sportsman and the all-too-feminine evidences of the chatelaine clashed side by side; every clash echoing in young Andrews's soul.

Again and again he found his attention straying, for instance, from an especially fine tiger-skin or the mounted head of a curiously horned markhor to a dainty writing-desk that he knew at a glance must be Nina's, or to a framed photograph of a group on an English lawn, in which, instinctively, he detected Nina in the tall, girlish figure in the white frock.

Indeed, the drawing-room seemed to be all Nina. He saw her everywhere—in every chair, on every window-seat, and on every couch. The dining-room was more divided; but the gun-room, of course, was all Darling.

They lingered there the greater part of the afternoon. Every rifle, every fowling-piece had its story, and there were many of them; for Darling boasted a veritable armory.

It was here, too, that Andrews got some comprehension of the extent of the officer's unbridled indulgence. He drank and smoked practically continuously. One peg followed another with but the briefest intermissions; and the civil-service man made no attempt to keep pace with him.

If any effect was observable it was merely in a readier flow of narrative, in a more extended and richer vocabulary. But, strangely enough, from first to last, there

was no mention of Mrs. Darling. And his visitor, taking this in the nature of a warning, knowing what he did, deemed it not only wiser but safer, now, to guard the fact of his acquaintanceship.

In his closer study of Darling he had made a discovery which accounted, he believed, in a measure, at least, for his strange appeal. Even in his gayest moments there was a certain pathos in his expression.

Andrews had noted this the previous evening at the club, but had failed to trace it. He found it now in a very perceptible droop, at intervals, of the corners of his mouth. And it was as though he knew this and struggled to avoid it which gave the impression of bearing up against odds that were too great for him.

The afternoon was well spent before Darling would listen to his guest's going. They were still in the gun-room when, at length, he rose for departure. And then the colonel delayed it further by a proposal that he consider joining Major Cumnock and himself on a hunting trip they were planning.

"I'd love to, of all things," Andrews returned heartily. "But the fact is my leave ends in another week, and I've got to report at Junnar by the twenty-fifth. Otherwise, I shouldn't hesitate a second. I—"

And there he suddenly paused.

It was something in Darling's expression that arrested him first; something that he couldn't just interpret. Afterward he told himself that it was a most singular combination of rapture and pain.

Then he, too, caught the echo of voices—women's voices—and, the next instant, one woman's voice rose clear above the chorus. It was Nina's.

# CHAPTER III
## THE COBRA IN THE CORNER

"My wife!" said Colonel Darling. And the way he said it was almost reverential.

The tone struck young Andrews dumb. His chance had come again. He should have said: "Yes? I had the pleasure of meeting her at Simla." But he said nothing at all.

In dead silence he followed his host to the front veranda, where he came plump upon Nina Darling and the Ramsays. That is to say, upon Mrs. Ramsay, who was an American devotée of Kipling on a pilgrimage to the shrines, and her daughter, Jane.

Mr. Ramsay, busy in Chicago or Milwaukee, or some other place in the States, was not in evidence, and had not been.

It was clear to Andrews that Colonel Darling was about to greet his wife with a kiss; but she forestalled it. She nodded to him perfunctorily; said: "Oh, there you are, Jack!" in the most matter-of-fact fashion; and turned away to stoop and caress the Irish terrier that was frantically pawing at her skirt.

A lump rose in Andrews's throat at sight of the rebuff. His hope was that the Ramsays hadn't noticed, for their eyes were on him at the moment, and their surprise at seeing him there was manifest.

Darling made to cover up the awkward moment by presenting him all around. Nina, whose astonishment at the meeting must have exceeded even that of her friends, took refuge in the chilliest civility.

From nothing that she said could her husband possibly gather that she and Andrews had so much as ever touched fingers before. And the Ramsays were quick to follow her lead.

Nevertheless, the situation was far from comfortable, and the young man got away at the very earliest opportunity.

Before he had reached the gate of the compound, however, the voice of the colonel caught him up.

"I say, Andrews," he called, "don't forget to bring over that new automatic pistol you were speaking of. I should like to have a look at it if you don't mind."

And this eleventh-hour reminder gave him the excuse which later, in his superconscientiousness, he deemed a necessity. More than ever now honor and duty bade him flee; but a more insistent impulse urged another and final talk with Nina.

For forty-eight hours he fought it, only to yield at the forty-ninth. Having made sure that Darling was safely housed at the club, he rode over to the bungalow with the excuse spoiling the set of his coat.

Nina saw it almost at once and spoke of it. For, the devil being good to him, he had found her at home and alone.

"I knew your nose was out of joint," she said, "but what under the sun has happened to your hip?"

"Oh, yes," he replied, taking the excuse from his hip-pocket and placing it on a table close at hand. "I brought it over for the colonel. He's rather keen about the new safety device and wanted to see it." And he looked a trifle sheepish as he asked: "Does he happen by any chance to be at home?"

"You may thank Heaven he isn't," she answered with a light laugh. "I'm never at my best when he is within hailing distance. And you didn't come to see him. I know that."

Then he looked more sheepish still.

"I dare say you've learned his habits in the last week, and you could have found him at the club, you know," she added.

His laugh was rather mirthless as he said:

"Of course. What's the use of pretending? I saw him go in before I started."

"Then you've forgiven me, I suppose. That is sweet of you."

"It's harder to forgive myself. I feel like a cur."

"I've known some very nice curs."

"But I don't feel like that sort," he insisted. "No, it's the sneaking, thieving mongrel that I—" He broke off suddenly.

She had sat down and he dropped into a chair facing her.

"I'll tell you," he went on. "I've been persuading myself that I owed you an explanation of my continued presence in Umballa and the narrowly averted embarrassment of two days ago. I've been trying to make myself believe that in that and that only lay my reason for wishing to see you again."

"And there was another reason?"

"There was another reason," he admitted. "I wasn't honest with myself. Gad! When a chap isn't honest with himself—"

"All men are like that," she told him. "The higher their ideals the less frankly honest they are with themselves. They just won't admit the old Adam in them."

"I haven't any will," he declared. "I haven't any pride."

She lay back in her chair, pleasantly amused.

"Of course you haven't," she said confidently. "I've taken them from you. It was very wicked of me, wasn't it?"

"Do you do that to—to all of us?" he asked seriously.

"I'm afraid I do," she admitted. "But quite unconsciously. I don't mean to. Oh, I never mean to."

"I've been trying to put you out of my mind, out of my heart. I've been trying to kill my infatuation for you; but I haven't even stunned it. When I thought I had my foot on its neck it went on binding me with stronger chains."

And at that she laughed aloud.

"You're too funny," she said. "When did you think you had the horrid thing down?"

"When I met your husband—and—and liked him."

"You did like him, then?"

"Very much indeed."

"What an odd taste! Those pale eyes of his have an uncanny effect on me. It's something that goes through walls and floors; and it makes me quite vicious. It brings out all the cat in me. I have an irresistible desire to claw and rend."

"It must have followed you all the way to Simla, that last night," said Andrews, dropping into a chair that faced her.

But Nina shook her golden head and her violet eyes slowly narrowed. He observed that in the dusk, for the room was in the semi-gloom of a single, red-shaded lamp in a far corner.

"No"—her voice was very low and purring—"I wasn't in the least catty then. I was sorry for you. I was, really; but it couldn't go on. You can see now that it couldn't go on."

"It might have gone on," he qualified, "if I hadn't met Colonel Darling."

"You seem to forget that I had met him already—am married to him."

"Yes," he said; "but with you it's different. You joy in hurting him; whereas I—why, I'd never have a moment's peace if I did anything that would give him pain. I know I shouldn't."

She pretended to be surprised; though, for some reason, she was not in the least.

"You're an odd boy," she drawled. "You mean that if I were to tell you now that I had changed my mind, and was quite ready to go away with you, you'd beg to be excused?"

He didn't answer at once. Candor bulked large in his character. Now that she put it that way he wished to be very sure. It was not a matter to be decided offhand, with Darling absent and Nina there before him, temptingly precious in the magic witchery of the tinted half-light.

"No, I—I couldn't. I couldn't do him that injury," he declared at length.

"And you swore you loved me?"

"I did. I do. I swear it still," he cried with sudden vehemence.

Nina laughed at his protestation.

"'Not that I loved Cæsar less, but that I loved Rome more,'" she quoted. "Is that it?"

"No, that isn't it," he denied earnestly. "I—"

"You love me a great deal, but you are so fond of Darling that you would not pain him to make us both happy," she interrupted. And the sneer with which she did it cut him to the quick.

"I don't think you've any right to put it that way," he returned.

"I am putting it your way, really," she came back. "It is as plain as the nose on your face. You made the choice between us, and you took a minute or so to make it. You didn't answer on impulse; you answered after calm deliberation. I really don't see, Gerald, how you can argue it otherwise."

"But it wouldn't make *you* happy," he caught her up. "You've said it wouldn't."

"Did I?" she asked indifferently. "I don't remember."

"You said it would make you miserable; that you'd never care a straw in your life except for one man. You said that you'd married a man you did not love, and that—"

She lifted a slim white hand as if to ward off a blow.

"Don't! Don't!" she cried. "No matter what I said. That was then, and this is now. Besides, I don't always tell the truth. I am not as deliberate as you are, you see. Sometimes I say things on impulse; sometimes I lie with a direct purpose. And then, that night, I was not quite myself, you know. I had had a silly dream and I allowed it to affect me."

He drew his chair nearer and bent forward. He was by no means so sure of himself as he had been a moment before. It was wonderful—those tones in Nina's voice. They swayed his feelings against his better impulses. Her voice had always been her most effective weapon. Even her beauty was secondary to it.

He was conscious that his heart was pounding. It seemed to rise up chokingly with every bound. And so he stammered:

"You—you mean—you—would reconsider?"

"Ah!" she murmured. "I don't know what I mean. Only—"

"Yes, yes," he hurried her. "Only—only—"

She turned her head aside and covered her face with the hand that had checked his arraignment.

"I am so wretched!" It was little more than a whisper.

"No, no," he pleaded. "Nina, I beg of you."

His emotion swept him away, overriding all law, vaulting honor, trampling scruples. The possibility of possession revived, and the pathetic figure of Darling was forgotten.

He reached out for her, clasped her in his long, hungry arms; and, yielding, she let him draw her close to him, her head nestling against his shoulder.

"There, there," he murmured, smoothing her cheek with a hand nearly as soft as a woman's. "I did not mean it—I swear I didn't mean it. I—I love you more than anything in life."

Her arms wound about his neck, and he drew her up again until her gaze was level with his own. But, even at that moment, he saw her eyes stray across her shoulder and then suddenly grow wide as with alarm.

He felt, too, her whole figure tense, and instinctively there was conveyed to him a contagious sense of lurking danger. He was about to speak, to question, when, between lips barely parted, breathed rather than whispered even, came:

"*A cobra—in the corner—where I'm looking! The pistol—quick—and don't miss!*"

The pistol lay at his left hand, and he must needs swing quite around to aim after getting it. But she slipped swiftly away from him to give him free play, and he managed it very well indeed.

In the dim light he marked the cobra instantly, for a ray had been caught by its glistening brown, upreared body, and its spread hood stood out fairly distinct against the glazed panes of the long casement which stood partly ajar.

Andrews fired, and the report echoed sharply against the dead silence of the room. But there echoed, too, two other sounds, both puzzling and disconcerting. One was a metallic ring, as of a struck gong, only sharper and shorter, and the other was a hoarse, but muffled and evidently restrained, cry of pain.

Man and woman were on their feet instantly. Three strides took Andrews to the spot, and there he halted in amaze with a little exclamation of astonishment. For the cobra had toppled over, not limp and outlying, but stiffly; its coils intact, facing him, disklike.

It was an admirably modeled bronze.

In the perplexity following the discovery he turned questioningly to Nina, who was close behind him. But she only lifted a warning finger and made a sibilant sound with her lips, adjuring silence. And he noticed, strangely enough, that the look of alarm which he had detected was—in a lesser degree perhaps—still present.

She passed him, stepping over the bronze reptile; and, spreading wider the casement, went out onto the veranda.

In the act of following, the fact of the muffled cry recurred to him. Was it possible that the bullet, ricochetting from the metal casting, had found a mark beyond the window?

With one foot across the sill a scream seemed to stop his heart from beating. Certainly it held him motionless for a second or more. Yet he recovered himself in time—just in time—to catch Nina in his arms as she staggered backward, stunned and half-fainting. Nor was it any wonder that she screamed and was stunned and half-fainted.

For fate chose that moment for making her "silly dream" come true. She had seen a ghost on the veranda.

# CHAPTER IV

## A WHITE SLIPPER AND A RED STAIN

The native servants, startled by the pistol-shot, flocked in haste to the veranda. In the lead was Jowar, the Darlings' *khitmatgar*, whom Nina hated. And he saw her in Andrews's arms.

It was only for an instant, however. The presence of Jowar revived her like a cold shower, and she stood on her own feet with her chin in the air.

"I saw a man running," she explained. "It must have been he that shot through the window. Oh, how frightened I was!"

The *khitmatgar* inquired as to which way the miscreant had run, and Nina pointed in exactly the opposite direction from that in which she had been facing when she staggered back into young Andrews's embrace.

Jowar set off in pursuit instantly, and the others followed. All, that is, save Nina's *ayah*, who opportunely produced a bottle of smelling-salts and passed it to the *mem-sahib*.

Sniffing at it, Mrs. Darling dismissed her.

When Nina and Andrews were back in the drawing-room and again quite alone he saw that she was still trembling. Moreover, in spite of the ruddy glow from the single lamp in the corner, she was as pallid as ashes.

"Dearest," he murmured, hastily encircling her slim waist with a supporting arm, "you are wonderful! Any other woman would be in hysterics."

Very gently she extricated herself from his embrace.

"I haven't lived five years in India for nothing," she said.

"But what was it?" he asked. "Why did you want me to shoot? Why—"

"I fancied that devilish *khitmatgar* was spying again," she hastened to answer, slipping into a chair. "I saw something move—out there."

"And so you made me shoot at the bronze?"

"It's a very realistic bronze, isn't it?" she asked.

But he didn't answer. "Was it the *khitmatgar*?" he pressed.

And now she didn't answer.

"The bronze was a present," she went on instead. "Do you mind setting it upright again?"

He did so. "Odd I never saw it before," was his comment. "I thought I'd seen everything in this room. When I was here two days ago it seemed to me that every object spoke of you. I missed nothing. And yet—"

"That came this morning," she told him. "A gift without a card."

Young Andrews frowned.

"It's a horrid thing," he said. "I don't like it."

"It's beautiful!"

"It's ill-omened. I feel it is."

He saw her shiver again, but she tried to smile. Her pallor had grown no less.

"Tell me," he insisted, "*was* it the *khitmatgar*, do you think?"

"Who else could it have been? He will tell Jack Darling he saw me in your arms. And then—Hadn't you better be going? Aren't you overdue in Junnar?"

"And leave you? Never!"

"But you must," she said calmly.

"When I go you go with me. Now that I know you love me—"

"I never said I loved you. I don't. I can't. I love but one man. I know it now as never before. For just a moment I thought—" And there she stopped.

"You thought?" he questioned, suddenly agitated.

"I thought I might forget. I thought perhaps you could make me forget. I was, you see, so utterly weary of everything."

"You were right," he cried earnestly. "I can make you forget. I'll give my whole life to it. I'll—"

He bent over her, but she drew away quickly with a gesture of repulsion, which Andrews was quick to note. It cut him cruelly, and he stepped back, pained and crestfallen.

In the instant of silence that ensued he swept her with a devouring gaze from head to foot. Was he to lose her again—now, when for a second time he had been so sure?

One dainty, white-shod foot was stretched out from beneath her skirt, and as his eyes reached it a dark, smearlike stain across the toe arrested his attention and awoke a question. Impulsively he dropped to one knee and swept a finger across it.

"Nina!" he cried, springing up again, a note of alarm in his voice. "Look! There is blood on your slipper. It couldn't have been the *khitmatgar*. The bullet ricochetted and wounded some one. Who was it?"

She leaned forward, her heart pounding with sudden horror, and saw it for herself.

"But how—" she queried, her breath short and quick.

"From the shrubbery at the side of the veranda. Your foot must have touched the leaves. If it had been the *khitmatgar* who was bleeding like that he couldn't have hidden it."

She was up in an instant, crying: "What have I done? Oh, what have I done?"

"Between us," said Andrews, "we've managed to wing some prowling beggar of a native, I fancy. That's all." He said it in an effort to pacify her, but he knew in his heart that it was no native.

He had known from the first that Nina's scream, emotion, and pallor were results of the unexpected. Now he was more certain than ever that he was right.

For quite a minute she paced the floor, wringing her hands. Then there was a rap on the glass of the long window, and the tall, dusky, white-clad Jowar stepped into the room. His expression was unusually grave.

"The *mem-sahib* is mistaken," he said. "The fleeing *sahib* goes the other way. He is wounded. We follow the *sahib* until we see him enter the compound of the hotel. All the way the *sahib* leave trail of blood behind."

Nina had halted, her hand clutching a curtain as if to stay herself. At the words of the *khitmatgar* she swayed, and but for Andrews would have fallen, for the curtain stuff broke from its rings under her weight.

It was her companion who signed to Jowar that he might go. Then he supported her to a settee and eased her down upon it.

The cantonment at Umballa, which is four miles from the native town, boasts several hotels.

In a large upper room in one of these, not far from the bungalow of the Darlings, a burly, bearded gentleman—who had registered a few hours before as Henry Scripps, of Bombay—was at that moment impatiently and in no little pain awaiting the appearance of the English surgeon who lived nearest.

Around Mr. Scripps's left wrist was an improvised tourniquet, and the water which filled the basin on the wash-stand was claret-colored.

Mr. Scripps had just succeeded in filling a brier pipe with his right hand unaided, and was in the act of striking a match when his room door was swung hurriedly ajar to admit Mayhan, of the Buff Hussars, with his kit of surgical instruments.

"You've taken the devil's own time it appears to me," growled Mr. Scripps. "Now you're here, for God's sake, make haste!"

The greeting took the young surgeon somewhat aback.

"Sorry you think so," he returned, leisurely opening his bag and pretending that the catch had caught by way of retaliation. "As a matter of fact, I came on the instant."

Scripps rumbled under his breath and emitted a volume of gray smoke.

"Shot in the hand, I understand," Mayhan went on, wrenching the bag open at length with considerable fuss and feather.

Scripps grunted an affirmative.

"How did it happen?" the surgeon inquired, taking out a probe.

But the wounded man didn't answer. He dropped into a chair under the light and said: "Come now, make haste."

Mayhan emptied the blood-stained water from the basin, poured some fresh, and mixed an antiseptic in solution. Then he began cleaning the wound.

"Rather nasty, that," he commented. "The bullet has dug in here between the two outer metacarpal bones, and I'm not sure it hasn't shattered the trapezium."

"Get it out," cried Scripps impatiently, "and talk about it afterward. I'll grant you know the anatomy of the hand and the name of every bone in it. That's about the first thing you're taught."

Mayhan gritted his teeth. The man was certainly a boor. Still there was perhaps provocation in the pain he was suffering. Nevertheless, the surgeon rather enjoyed the

probing. He knew how he was hurting, yet his victim wouldn't give him the satisfaction of wincing.

He drew it out at last and held it up to the light.

"I know that," he said, inspecting it. "A forty-five of the sort they use in those new American automatics. Has yours the new safety device?"

Scripps's teeth let go his lip long enough to growl: "No! That was the devil of it!"

As the young surgeon proceeded with his work of cleansing he continued to chatter:

"I was hoping it had. I wanted to see it. Colonel Darling was speaking of it last night at the club. There's a friend of his here—a young fellow named Andrews, from over on the Bombay side—who has one. He's promised Darling to show it him."

Scripps was pale from pain, but his grit was indomitable. He choked back a groan and said:

"Darling? Colonel Darling? I think I know him."

"I dare say."

Scripps relapsed into silence again. The wound still hurt abominably.

"Darling distinguished himself at Spion Kop, you know," Mayhan gave tribute as he unwound some iodoform gauze. "Fine chap, the colonel."

But his patient only grunted.

"Same man you know?" the other pressed.

Scripps nodded.

"I'll mention you're here."

There was no reply.

"Know him well?" inquired the surgeon guardedly.

Scripps had his lip in his teeth again, and it was bleeding; but he let it go.

"Better than he knows me, apparently," he said with a grim smile.

"He'll remember your name, I suppose?"

"I'm sure he won't. He won't know who Scripps is from Adam."

Mayhan, mollified now in a measure by the man's fortitude, used the cocain that he had denied him at first and proceeded with the dressing.

"If you're so keen on telling the colonel, just say you've seen Nibbetts," the brusk one suggested.

"Nibbetts?"

"Yes. He'll know then."

"I'll remember. I'll probably see him to-night at the club. He may look you up at once, if you don't mind. Fine fellow, the colonel."

The relief from the cocain was instantaneous, but Scripps's manner showed no change.

"That's twice you said that," he rumbled. "There are some that don't agree with you."

"I know," returned Mayhan. "Some never agree with any one. That's where the word disagreeable comes from."

Scripps made no retort, and the dressing continued in silence. When it was finished and Mayhan was repacking his kit, he ventured: "Nibbetts, you said, didn't you?"

The merest movement of the tawny, leonine head gave assent.

"I'll tell him." And then the surgeon took a closer look. Scripps's bearded chin was on his breast. His face, in spite of its tan, was deathly white. "By the way," he added, "you'd better have a brandy peg. You've lost some blood, you know, and—"

"That's my business," the other interrupted roughly. "You're a sawbones, not a medical man. And a sawbones *sans merci*, at that. Otherwise you'd have begun with the cocain, instead of ending with it."

Mayhan turned away without another word and made a wry face behind the savage's back. Two minutes later he was down the stairs and in the hotel porch, where he was confronted by young Andrews.

"I saw you go in," lied the latter nervously. "And I've been waiting for you. What happened? I've a reason for asking."

The young surgeon, whose faculty for putting two and two together was as acute as the next man's, sensed the reason at once.

"He won't die," he answered—"if that's what you want to know."

"Who won't die?" Andrews came back evasively. He had volunteered to get what information he could for Mrs. Darling, and he was distinctly uncomfortable under the attitude taken by this man whom he had started to question.

"The boor upstairs who got in the way of someone's forty-five-caliber automatic. It wasn't by any chance yours, I suppose?"

The blood rushed to Andrews's face, but in the dim light of the porch it is probable that Mayhan failed to observe it.

"I don't indulge in indiscriminate pistol practice," he defended weakly. "I heard a man had been wounded and came in here, and I strolled over to inquire out of idle curiosity."

"He won't die," said Mayhan again, and prepared to move away.

"But who is he?" asked Andrews, following a step.

"The most insufferable beast I've met in years—name of Scripps."

"Army man?"

"No; civilian. Or uncivilian, rather."

"Badly hurt?"

"Hand torn up a bit. Anything else you'd like to know?"

Andrews hesitated. Then: "Say how it happened?"

Mayhan grinned toward the shadows.

"Oh, yes," he answered wickedly, "of course! Naturally, I asked him."

"Well—"

"You are curious, Andrews, aren't you?"

"Oh, if there's any secret about it—why, I—"

Mayhan laughed irritatingly; so irritatingly that his questioner was tempted to silence him with his fist.

"No secret at all," the surgeon said, starting off. "It happened—purely by accident."

Then young Andrews, nettled and thoroughly uncomfortable, hastened back to Nina with his scant news. The name "Scripps" meant nothing to her.

But Mayhan, meanwhile, dropping into the club, exploded a bombshell. He found Colonel Darling alone and brooding in his chosen corner, a tall glass of Scotch and soda at his right hand.

"I say, colonel," he blurted, "just came from a chap who says he knows you—or did. Name of Nibbetts."

Darling started so violently that his arm struck the table, jarred it, and sent over the whisky glass, splashing.

For a moment his face flamed and the veins in his neck swelled to the danger point. He gripped the chair-arms, and his throat emitted an inarticulate gurgle.

The next minute he relaxed suddenly, pale as paper.

# CHAPTER V

## THE QUESTION OF THE DEAD ALIVE

Colonel Darling's courage had never been questioned. But physical courage is one thing and moral courage is another—very much another; and it was physical courage in which Darling was strong.

It was beyond question that he could face overwhelming odds in the field without "batting an eye-lash," as the saying goes. He had proved that time and time again. Yet from unhappy wedlock he had fled like a craven wolf and sought surcease in the bottle.

This should have spoken his type of weakness for all to hear. But his fellow officers were deaf to the truth, forbearing to view the situation from the only right and real standpoint, though the condition was undeniably plain.

For the tidings brought by Mayhan the colonel was not in the least prepared. Again moral courage was demanded, and again he exhibited the white feather. To Mayhan's faith in his commanding officer the exhibition was an astonishing setback. Darling had been bowled over by a mere name.

Others, too, had heard and witnessed with much the same amazement. It was very clear to them all that Colonel Darling had been thrown into a white funk by the mere mention of the odd word "Nibbetts."

They could get it from no other angle, and they could reconcile it with nothing they knew of their man. In view of subsequent events, their attitude at this moment is important.

Darling was quite five minutes in pulling himself together. Then he caught the doubt in Mayhan's eyes, and his first impulse was to explain—or try to. But on second thought, realizing that there was nothing for him to say, he ordered whisky and soda and held his peace. And no man asked a question.

The clock pointed to five to eleven. At ten past Colonel Darling left the club and walked to the hotel, which was less than a quarter of a mile away. But there his cowardice caught him again, and he paused at the gate of the compound.

The broad, shaded roadway was deserted, so that what followed went unobserved. Back and forth, torn by indecision, he irritably and fearsomely paced. For the uplift of his flagging, flaccid will he seemed likely to require either the Archimedean lever or the Archimedean screw.

Fifteen awful minutes dragged torturously by before, in sheer desperation, he entered the hotel and faced the clerk in charge, his card in his hand.

"Send that to the Visc—" he began, only to pull himself up with a sharp jolt.

The clerk in charge, not overburdened with wits, failed to catch the significance of the abbreviation. He only stared and waited.

"Send that to Mr. Mayhan's patient," corrected the colonel, the sweat beading on brow and chin, and turned to pace the floor as he had paced the roadway.

The wait, though seemingly interminable, ended too quickly for his wish, and his rap on the door of Mr. Scripps's room was hesitant and feeble.

There came in answer an inarticulate rumble, and an instant later across ten yards of floor space he gazed on the confronting Nibbetts, and paused, speechless. But the confronting Nibbetts—the nickname by which the Viscount Kneedrock had been best known to relatives and close friends—was eminently more composed.

"I am indeed deeply honored," he said and bowed stiffly. The irony of his tone was withering.

Darling, fighting himself for words, advanced a step or two. Then: "I should never have known you," he ventured unfortunately.

The other laughed with a hoarse, grim bitterness.

"No?" he queried. "How odd!" And his caller colored to his eyebrows.

"Would you care to sit down?" the viscount continued, pushing a chair forward with his uninjured right hand. The left, bandaged, was supported by a sling. "It may help you to some self-possession."

But Colonel Darling, irritated, shook his head.

"I sha'n't detain you," he said. "But—I—you see—you see, I had to make sure. I should never have believed, otherwise."

"You're quite sure you believe now?"

"Quite. Still, I can't understand. I would have sworn—"

"You did swear," Kneedrock interrupted. "That was the devil of it."

The colonel's lip twitched under his mustache.

"I never had a doubt," he averred. "I—I am unspeakably sorry."

"Much good that does. Still, it's no end decent that you should say so. Yet, on the whole, I fancy you got rather the worst of it. Will you sit down to oblige me? I've something I'd like to say to you."

Jack Darling, wretched as never before in his wretched life, slid limply into the chair that waited.

"Can't I offer you something?" asked Kneedrock, his hand on the bell.

In spite of his pride and because of his misery the colonel accepted.

Certainly the viscount's was the more commanding presence. He seemed to have taken the situation in hand at once. Darling was still the reverse of composed. His eyelids twitched and his lips quivered.

The two men were nearly of an age. If there was any advantage here it, too, was on the side of Kneedrock, who had just turned forty-four. But in general appearance the colonel contrasted strongly for the better.

He was especially well groomed, whereas Nibbetts was at once leonine, rugged, and nearly shabby. His tawny hair and beard were ragged and uncared for. He gave the impression of having been out of the world in which such things mattered. And this was true.

Having dispensed his hospitality, he reverted to his sneer. He was still standing when he said:

"I assume Mrs. Darling never showed you my letter of six years ago."

His voice aroused the officer, who was in a reverie.

"Your—your letter?" he queried uncertainly.

"My letter from Zanzibar, in which I said I was starting for the world's end."

"Yes, I saw that."

"And still you refused to believe? How often our wishes guide our reason."

Something of resentment, of indignation, struck a light in Darling's pale eyes, but his voice held to a monotone.

"I couldn't. I—" He hesitated, took a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his perspiring brow. "You see, I—I didn't know your hand, and—well, the signature might have been any one's. It was, if I remember, your Christian name only."

"You mean you suspected that Nina was playing you a trick?"

"I—I didn't say so."

"Others saw it, I suppose? Others that knew me? Those that did know my hand?"

"Yes, I fancy they did. I heard the question discussed."

"What question?"

"The question of the miracle. The question of the dead alive."

Kneedrock's lip curled and his huge shoulders stretched their sinews.

"Huh!" he grunted. "After all, it didn't matter. You'd already married her. You'd already begun to reap tares."

Now the pale eyes of Darling flashed ominously. "You've no right to say that," he said shortly with irritation.

"I'm not alone in saying it," returned the honorable viscount calmly. "I've heard it in the islands of the south seas. You didn't fancy it was a secret, I hope?"

Colonel Darling was silent.

"She's led you a pretty dance, I dare say."

Still Colonel Darling was silent.

"I understood, too, that the worm had turned? Pray pardon the simile."

Colonel Darling being still silent, Kneedrock smiled.

"I was fool enough to come all the way back here with the idea of punishing you," he pursued. "But I've changed my mind about that. You're getting punishment enough, that's plain. So I am going to thank you instead. I know now what was spared me. Darling, you have my sympathy; you have really."

Darling got suddenly to his feet. "Damn your sympathy!" he cried. "I don't know what you've heard. But I do know it isn't true."

And at that the viscount laughed. "I haven't heard anything," he retorted. "I've seen. And I'm like you—I believe what my eyes tell me. Your eyes told you I was butchered to death at Spion Kop, and you couldn't be convinced I wasn't until you saw

me here to-night resurrected. You wouldn't take my written word, and I can't take your spoken word. The evidence to the contrary is too strong."

The colonel was again silent. He lifted his glass and drained it.

"I'm glad you called," Kneedrock continued. "Not that I needed any further conviction, but—"

"Further conviction?" Darling broke in. "I thought—"

"That you were yourself the only conviction. Oh, no. I knew before you came. I saw before you came. I had already made up my mind to go back without seeing you."

Darling gazed at him in mingled amazement and perplexity.

"I—I don't understand," he faltered. "You—you've seen Nina, perhaps?"

"I've seen Nina."

"And it was she who told you?"

"She hasn't spoken to me. I am going away without so much as a word from her or to her."

The colonel's perplexity waxed greater. "Will you kindly tell me what under Heaven you're driving at? It's all a riddle to me—a damned—"

"I'll not tell you another word," the other answered. "You must know all I do—and more, I dare say. Why should I add anything to the bare fact that I know where the fault lies, and that it is not in you?"

"Because you've said too much to leave it where it is," Darling insisted. "You must say it. You must say what you saw, and where and when you saw it."

But then Kneedrock laughed again in his grim, bitter fashion.

"You're not my superior officer here, remember," he came back. "I obey no commands but my own; and I refuse to submit to dictation."

The red flag of anger overspread Darling's visage.

"I infer that you have been spying," he charged.

"You may infer what you please—even that if it gives you any satisfaction. I shall not presume to dictate to you, either."

At that instant the bandaged hand protruded by chance a bit beyond its sling, and Darling's gaze rested upon it.

"I begin to see," he said more calmly.

The other noted the look and caught the inference. "Oh, this!" he exclaimed, holding it up. "Rather nasty."

"How did you get it?" asked the colonel boldly.

"Man-eater," was the answer. "Vicious beast!"

"You've been in the jungle, then?"

Kneedrock calmly began refilling his pipe. "Didn't Mayhan tell you?" he queried.

"Not a word."

"Ah! Yes, I've been in the jungle, and I stumbled on a she-tiger's lair." It was not intentional, but the manner of the speech gave it a significance aside from the phrasing.

Darling was standing by a table, and as he dropped his eyes musingly they rested on a small object that lay beside the tray of decanters and glasses. In an instant he was holding it up.

"May I have this?" he asked. It was a .45-caliber bullet, and the blood on it was still damp.

"No," refused Kneedrock flatly.

"I fancied not," rejoined the colonel. "You're keeping it as a souvenir, I suppose."

"I'm keeping it as evidence," the viscount said, lighting his pipe.

Later that night Jack Darling did an utterly unheard of thing. He knocked loudly on the door of his wife's bed-chamber and demanded admittance.

Nina, who had not yet fallen asleep, sat up in alarm, gathered herself together with an effort, and then, strangely enough, admitted her husband without protest. And if there can be a comparison in unheard of things, this was still more utterly unheard of.

She had turned up the reading-lamp, which, being shaded and its glow directed toward a limited area, did little more than make the general darkness of the room visible. Then she sat down on the bed's edge within the glow's circumference and waited.

Jack Darling didn't sit down. He stood in the shadow biting the ends of his mustache, his hands behind him, and his gaze, which was fixed on Nina, narrowed. She felt in her heart that something momentous was about to transpire; and it would be idle to say she was without suspicion of the underlying cause. For the report brought her by young Andrews had fallen far short of either satisfying or giving adequate relief to her anxieties.

Still she was not prepared for her husband's first and deliberately spoken sentence, which was:

"I have just come from Harry Kneedrock."

Nina wanted to scream then, but she couldn't. Her breath came too short. And she needed every bit of breath she could draw, because her heart had grown suddenly big in her breast and was pounding fearfully.

She felt, too, that if she opened her mouth it must pop out. It was only by breathing rapidly and keeping her lips tight-closed that she kept it in.

"He arrived in Umballa this evening early," Jack Darling pursued. "He saw you and got an ugly shot in the hand from—this."

He held something up which caught and reflected all the diffused light that had stolen outside the illuminated circle; and she saw it was the Andrews automatic. Still she couldn't have spoken had death threatened her for her silence.

"I found it in the drawing-room. Its magazine lacks a single cartridge. I've talked to Jowar, and everything fits. But there's something that Kneedrock won't say and that Jowar doesn't know. So I've come to you for it, and you'll tell me. You must."

He waited a moment for her to say something, but she was still mute. Her eyes were all pupils. They appeared like two black holes in a face devoid of any tint of color, for her lips were blanched and her lifted brows were hidden behind her drooping hair.

"I must know what it was that Kneedrock saw," he pressed.

Her hands were gripping the mattress on either side of her—gripping it until her finger-nails doubled and then broke.

"And I must know why he was shot at," he added.

And then Nina, who had been doubling all the while, broke, too. Before Darling could reach her she pitched forward, a hunched heap on the floor.

# CHAPTER VI
## A HARD MAN AND BITTER

It was the next morning, and Nina's *ayah* sat on a chair in the passage, guarding the door of her mistress's room. To all comers she gave the same answer—her *mem-sahib* was sleeping after a night of wakefulness and must not be disturbed.

She gave it to Colonel Darling no less than three times—once before breakfast, once after, and again before he rode away for parade, his eyes bloodshot and his hands all a-tremble.

And all the while the room behind the door was as empty of life as a hatched egg-shell. For in the darkest hour of a gray dawn, closely veiled, Nina had stolen away with her *ayah* escorting, and had taken refuge with the Ramsays, who had a small bungalow within the hotel compound—the same hotel, be it added, which sheltered "Mr. Henry Scripps, Bombay."

Of course she told the Ramsays her story—or, which is closer to fact, *a* story. Some of it was truth, but it was neither all the truth nor nothing but the truth. She believed dissemblance necessary, and so she had no hesitation in dissembling.

Her main purpose was to escape for a while from Darling and his unanswerable questions, and in the meantime to obtain at all hazards an interview with Kneedrock. She hadn't the faintest idea what the viscount purposed doing, but whatever it was she must stop him.

She knew from what young Andrews had told her that he was masquerading under the name of Scripps. So as Scripps she spoke of him in relating her tale of embarrassment to her American friend, Sibylla Ramsay, while Sibylla's daughter, who should have been fast asleep, sat by and listened with apparently adult understanding.

She implied without actually saying so that she had once had a more or less violent flirtation with Mr. Scripps; that her husband knew of it, and that she feared the consequences of his present presence in Umballa. Therefore it was imperative that she see him and urge his departure at the very earliest possible moment.

She couldn't receive him in her own home, but she'd like to receive him in theirs; and she did hope they would not regard it as an imposition on their friendship and good nature.

"Well, I should say not," returned Sibylla. "I think it's just the loveliest thing. I'm mad over romance, Nina, you know. And this is *so* romantic."

"Do you mind if I peep at him, dear Mrs. Darling?" asked Jane, nervously gathering her kimono more closely about her slim limbs. "I know he's handsome from his name. It isn't beautiful. Men with beautiful names are always so disappointing."

"You may peep all you care to, my dear," said Nina, "but you mustn't listen. Otherwise I'd suggest that you hide behind the piano or under the sofa. May I write him a note, Sibylla, and bribe your maid to deliver it?"

"You may serenade him from my front veranda if you care to, dear, and I'll beckon him when he comes to his window. But if you think the note idea more discreet, adopt it by all means."

So Nina wrote the note and then sat in a fever of impatience until the dawn grew brighter and the hands of the watch on her wrist circled to a more reasonable morning hour.

She had recovered some measure of poise, but the experience of the night had left its marks upon her, and the uncertainty as to whether Kneedrock would come or refuse to do so, coupled with the prospect of the meeting, which she both longed for and feared, filled the waiting period with a nervous tension that fretted and rasped.

She had begged him to send her an answer, if only verbal. But the maid returned without so much as a syllable. And so her waiting in uncertainty was prolonged. Meanwhile she drank the black coffee with which Sibylla plied her with the assurance that its sustaining power was superior to her habitual tea.

At ten minutes to nine, by the watch on her wrist, just as the fourth cup had been placed in her somewhat steadied hand, the maid who had carried the note brought proof of its delivery by announcing that Mr. Scripps awaited Mrs. Darling's pleasure in the bungalow drawing-room.

Sibylla and Jane were both wonderfully pleased and excited, and Nina, who had expected this moment, if it ever came, quite to overcome her with emotional agitation, surprised herself with a calmly self-contained placidity which she naturally attributed to the stimulation of the caffein.

Even the shock of Kneedrock's changed appearance—for he was almost unrecognizably changed in the nine years since their parting—failed to disturb her inner tranquillity. Only her voice betrayed her. It quavered just the least bit as she spoke the old name.

"Hal!" No one but she had ever called him that.

For his part he husbanded his words. He had taken a place with his back to the mantel and stood there in unmoving silence with his hands clasped behind him—the one still bandaged, but the sling discarded—and his brow drawn with a half frown.

Nina put out a hand tentatively and drew it back when he continued motionless.

"Perhaps you did not wish to see me," she said, nettled.

"You might have thought of that before sending me your extraordinary message." Those were the first words he spoke.

"It would have made no difference," she returned, pausing by the piano and steadying herself by resting a hand on its top. "I had to see you, whether you wished it or not. If you had not come here I should have gone into the hotel."

"I can't for the life of me see what is to be gained by it," he protested.

"There may be nothing gained unless you will believe me."

It was scarcely possible that he could miss the pathos of the words, even if he missed the pathos in the tone. Yet his only answer was a cynical smile.

"I want you to know that the shot which hurt you was not intended for you."

Then he laughed cruelly. "No?" he questioned with feigned surprise. "Still, you must admit that your lover's habit of firing at random through drawing-room windows isn't a perfectly safe amusement at best. He's liable to pot some one, you know."

Her face was crimson. "He's not my lover," she denied indignantly.

"Pardon me. I judged only from what I saw. It was quite evident he was not your husband. I am curious, seeing that he is not your lover, or one of them, what privileges you reserve for them."

"I have no lover or lovers," she protested.

"Dear me!" he said with mock astonishment. "How dreary your poor life must be! I had fancied quite the contrary."

"It was I who told him to shoot," she confessed. "He shot at a bronze cobra in the corner."

"Then he's a worse shot than I thought."

"Oh, he hit the cobra, nevertheless. The bullet glanced."

"Yes," he agreed. "I know. It glanced at me and caught my hand. I suppose the possibility of such a thing didn't occur to either of you."

"I didn't want him to kiss me," she defended at some sacrifice of truth. "In another second he would have, and I told him there was a cobra in the corner to distract him. Besides I meant to frighten our *khitmatgar*. I thought it was he who was spying. And it happened to be you."

"Yes," he admitted calmly. "I came all the way from Melanesia to spy. But I'm rather a novice at it, and got winged the first time. Too bad, I say."

"Then I'm not sorry. You deserved it."

"At all events," he told her, "I saw enough to send me back. I'm not fitted for civilization. I prefer the real savage to the counterfeit. I infinitely prefer the original tigress with her stripes to the reincarnated creature with her soft hands and her rose-leaf cheeks."

She didn't hear the last. It was quite lost upon her.

"You—you are going back?" she questioned, her breath short.

"To-night," he told her. "I've had enough. I'll get the boat at Calcutta that brought me."

She tried to realize the situation, but she couldn't in the least. It was all most extraordinary—she knew that. Nine years ago she had been tumultuously in love with this hulking cousin of hers.

Then, on sheer impulse, instigated by the devil within her, yet without the faintest thought of disloyalty, she had flirted riotously with the new curate, and Nibbetts had gone away to war in South Africa in a pet, without so much as a word of farewell.

In an incredibly short time had come the tidings of his death, and what with her crushing sense of irreparable loss and her ravening conscience all the world changed its colors from gay to dun.

Now the nine years of intervening space had rolled themselves into a pellet and dropped out of the actual. There was nothing real in time or place but this—he was there across the little room, alive, whole; and she was here, and they were talking as if yesterday had dated their parting. It was most extraordinary.

He was going so soon, too, and she had so much, so very much, to say.

"But you mustn't," she said simply.

In his answering look was amused amazement. "Oh, I mustn't, eh? And why mustn't I?"

"Do I have to tell you?" But her eyes were turned away.

"Yes, if you wish me to understand."

"Have—have you forgotten—everything?" And still she did not face him.

He turned sidewise and laid his left arm along the mantel-shelf to rest his injured hand.

"Most things," he answered, "thank God!" And when she did not speak he added: "You set me so fine an example in expeditious forgetting, remember, I had to profit by it."

"I never forgot," was her denial.

"For one who never forgot, you managed to mess things up a great deal, it seems to me."

"I think I was mad," she admitted, her eyes on the floor.

"I doubt if you were ever anything else," he told her bluntly. "And a man's a fool to trust a mad woman."

"Oh, I'm sane now," Nina told him. "Quite, quite sane. And I was hoping—" She paused, uncertain of her phrasing.

"Yes," he encouraged dubiously.

"That you might help me to put things straight," she finished.

He was not altogether sure of her meaning, but he chose to put upon it the worst possible construction.

"Why not let your friend of last night assist?" he asked coolly. "He seems rather expert with firearms. Mistakes are so easy, you know. He could shoot at the bronze cobra again, for instance, and aim a little high."

And at that she faced him.

"You never used to be so bitter," she said. "You can't think what you're saying."

"I've fed on bitterness. I always think the worst, and I'm usually justified. I can't see any way to undo your tangle except by murder!"

Nina shivered, and Kneedrock saw it; but she said nothing.

"I'm glad you didn't pretend to be shocked," he told her. "Only as a rule you're not very keen on quick deaths. You prefer the cat-and-mouse process. You like to play with your victim before adding the final finishing stroke."

"Who's catty now?" she asked simply.

But he made no answer. He moved over to the sofa where lay his hat and walking-stick and took them up.

"Better wait until I'm out of India," he went on cynically. "I might be brought back to testify, and that would be awkward."

"You're going now?" she asked distressfully.

"Only to the hotel. I can't sail until the twenty-seventh. Would you mind waiting until after the first?"

"But you haven't told me a thing," she deplored, ignoring his cruel implication. "Where have you been all the years? What have you been doing? Why have you hidden yourself? There is so much I want to know."

"There is so much you'll never know," he returned. "Why bother with any of it? The title dies with me. I'm not robbing any one, remember."

"You're robbing me," she said desperately, and took a step toward him. "Oh, Hal, if you only knew!"

He retreated a pace, smiling grimly.

"I'll have to ask you to stop that sort of thing, Nina," he said gravely. "You may as well know at once that I won't listen to it."

She sank down upon the sofa where his hat and stick had been, a red lip held by white teeth to check its quivering.

Kneedrock moved toward the door.

Abruptly, swept by a wave of impetuosity, she sprang up and ran to him.

"Hal! Hal! Take me with you. I won't—I can't let you go from me again!"

Already he had swung the door ajar and stood now in the opening.

"I'm afraid you'll have to," he said, his tone cold and hard as steel. "Still I'm glad you asked me. It has paid me for coming half-way round the world."

The door swung sharply shut with Kneedrock on the outside.

At the same moment the door at the opposite end of the room opened, and Jane Ramsay stood on the threshold.

"I was peeping," she cried. "He's homelier even than his name. And—and I hate him!"

"So do I," cried Nina, bracing herself. But she didn't in the least; and Jane Ramsay knew she didn't.

When Colonel Darling returned from parade the *ayah* was gone from the passage-way outside his wife's room. He entered to find Nina up and dressed. And he found her quite ready to answer his questions.

She told him truthfully what Kneedrock saw through the window, and she told him with equal truth why Andrews fired the shot.

More than that, she told him that his false identification of Kneedrock at Spion Kop had wrecked three lives, and that it was a dear price to pay for one man's carelessness or stupidity.

And that night there was a tragedy in the Darling bungalow.

# CHAPTER VII

## THE CROSS AND THE CROWN

It was the very last thing Nina expected—to see Kneedrock again; but she did. He called that night after dinner on his way to the railway station, and the motor-car waited for him at the porch. For a minute she fancied he might have relented and was really, after all, going to take her with him. But, if so, he had planned in the worst possible way, the day for Lochinvar enterprises having long since passed and gone, and Colonel Darling—miracle of miracles—being still at home, not having gone to the club.

She rushed into the drawing-room expectant, or half so, and then at a sight of her caller knew that her expectancy was without grounds. For Kneedrock with his well hand was holding out something to her, which she saw almost immediately was a small jewelry box.

"I came very near forgetting it," he said, "though I brought it with me all the way just to see it safe in your hands. It is a gift from my poor dear mother."

The poor dear marchioness had always been very fond of Nina, but she had died just before the breaking out of the Boer War and at the period of Nina's flirtation with the curate.

Nina Darling opened the jewelry box and took out a curiously fashioned ring. The setting was a cross of diamonds and the band was shaped like a crown of points.

"It is lovely," she said.

"It is symbolic," he contributed. "Still I don't see that it applies very appositely to your state. You don't bear your cross at all gracefully, and you certainly don't deserve a crown."

"I should like to know who does," she retorted.

"Oh, there are some martyrs left. There's your husband, for instance. You might turn the ring over to him."

"Jack is a saint," replied Nina. "I'm busy wondering all the time how he keeps his temper."

"And he does, then?"

"Always. He's so good to me I hate him."

"There's something wrong with you. You're not normal."

"I know it. My emotions are all reversed. I'd give anything to be like other women; but I can't be."

Kneedrock was smiling incredulously. "You fool yourself, I believe," he said, "just as you fool others. You are an odd creature."

He looked at his watch and sat down on one end of the settee. She was already occupying the other.

"Jack's going away in the morning," she told him; "to be gone a month. Why don't you stay?"

"Because I mean never to give you a chance to make a fool of me again. Now you have the truth of it."

"He's off on a shooting trip."

"I wonder he doesn't shoot himself, poor beggar."

"That's the only goodness he could do me that I'd appreciate," she said with a light laugh.

Kneedrock's hulking shoulders gave a clumsy shrug.

"You ought to be flayed," he declared.

She was silent for a brief moment. Then she said: "Hadn't I better tell Jack you are here? The *khitmatgar* will if I don't; and I've no desire to add to the sins I should be flayed for."

"I suppose it would only be civil. Though I'm not keen on seeing him again," was the answer. "I'd no notion he was at home."

Nina stood. "He's in the gun-room. I sha'n't be a moment." And she was gone.

The seconds ticked into a minute and she was not back. Two, three, five minutes followed without bringing her. Kneedrock's time was slipping away, and he had none too much to spare.

In some impatience he got to his feet and sauntered across the room. Then, seeing the bronze cobra, which was not altogether unfamiliar, he stooped interestedly to examine it; and he found the bullet-mark.

But still Nina remained absent. To miss his train meant to miss his boat. Yet he felt that he could not go without at least a final word. He would, he must, therefore, make an effort to find her.

The door through which she had gone stood open before him. Of the plan of the bungalow he knew nothing; but he left the room and turned in haste down a dim-lit passage.

It may have been a few seconds later or it may have been minutes—Kneedrock swore afterward that it was at that very instant—that Jowar, the *khitmatgar*, busy in his pantry cleaning silver, was startled by a muffled detonation that shook the frail dwelling as might an earthquake.

He had been bent over his work; but the report brought him to the upright with a jerk. The soup tureen he was handling turned over and rolled to the floor. For the briefest moment he stood dazed, irresolute.

Then, kicking the tureen aside, he shot out of the pantry, ran through the dining-room, the drawing-room, the passage—all empty—until he came of a sudden to the open door of the gun-room, against the jamb of which, pressed close, with pallid face and wide, wild eyes, was Mrs. Darling.

Above her head rolled a little cloud of gray smoke. In his nostrils was the acrid smell of gunpowder.

In the room Lord Kneedrock was on his knees, and Jowar's first impression, as he gave it at the investigation, was that it was he who had been injured. On the floor

beside him lay a double-barrel shot-gun, which the *khitmatgar* picked up. And as he stooped to do this he saw that over which the caller was bending.

Between a table and a chair, one leg gruesomely resting across a stool, stretched grimly stark and still the form of his master, Colonel Darling.

The head was in the table's shadow. But as Jowar drew closer he got sight of that which drove all the blood from beneath the dark pigment of his features. Whatever had happened it had made it impossible that he should ever look upon his master's face again.

There was no face there. It had been quite demolished.

At the same instant Kneedrock, sick at the sight, turned away to meet the *khitmatgar's* sinister gaze. Already it seemed the room was swarming with pressing, curious, excited native servants.

Nina had vanished, led away by her *ayah*. Later he learned that the gun found by Jowar had been examined. Both barrels were empty; but there was only one discharged shell.

The motor-car, waiting at the porch to take him to his train, was speeded for surgeons and medical men, as if, under the circumstances, there could be one faint ray of hope even. The garrison was advised, and the whole cantonment knew as if by magic.

Mr. Scripps, of course, couldn't go to Calcutta or anywhere else. He was as fast in Umballa as if there were chains on his hands and feet.

And it stood to reason, coming thus conspicuously before practically the whole British population, he could not hope to escape recognition.

Dinghal, the deputy commissioner, for instance, knew him at once as Viscount Kneedrock; and with Dinghal's fund of memory-stored fact and gossip, it was natural enough that he should put two and two together.

And when it is said that figures never lie, the sum of two and two is the exception that proves the rule. By adding these you can get about any result you choose.

Of Colonel Darling's tragic taking off there followed a rigid investigation.

The one person who knew the exact facts, or should have known them, was his widow. But Nina didn't and couldn't remember. The shock had wiped her memory as clean as a sponged slate.

For days she lay in a state between stupor and coma. When she came out of it she recalled that she had dreamed, but she couldn't remember the dream. It was awful, terrible, she knew that. But that was all she did know.

They had to tell her that Darling was hurt. She treated the tidings with indifference. Then they told her that he had been shot and that it wasn't certain how it happened. She thought he had gone on a shooting trip with Major Cumnock, and that the accident had happened in the jungle.

In the end they made her understand that he was dead; that his brains had been blown out in the bungalow gun-room, and that she was with him at the time. But she convinced them that she knew no more of it than she did of the fourth dimension, which was nothing at all.

Kneedrock, after frankly admitting his identity, swore to the facts as he knew them.

The native butler, Jowar, however, persistently contradicted him in one particular by averring that the viscount was in the gun-room when the shot was fired, as he himself was the first to enter it afterward, when he had found the Englishman bending over Darling's body and had picked up the gun which was lying at the viscount's right hand.

The word of a *khitmatgar*, however, had little weight against the sworn testimony of a British nobleman. The court agreed that death was the result of accident.

Those who knew certain matters which were aside from admissible evidence took the verdict with several grains of salt, and pointed out that in the matter of seeking motives for murder the authorities had been criminally remiss.

These knowing ones were about equally divided in opinion. The dissenting feminine element was inclined to believe that Mrs. Darling was the slayer. Whereas the doubting Thomases of the community would not put the responsibility past Kneedrock, who, they argued, had returned from hiding in a far corner of the globe, intent upon getting Jack Darling out of the way.

And for both of these views Dinghal, with his long tongue, innocent of venom still perhaps, but poisonous nevertheless—was largely responsible.

Young Andrews, risking everything, was still delaying his return to his post at Junnar. He simply must see Nina before going. He refused to abandon hope.

Once, after repulsing him, she had more than half-yielded. She had repulsed him a second time, it was true; and he did not overlook the significance of the return of Kneedrock, whom she had called her "match" and her "mate."

The odds were overwhelmingly against him. That he knew. But there might still be a chance. And he would make certain before—No, he questioned whether he could return to Junnar with that last hope gone. It might be that he—He didn't know. He wasn't going to face it until it was before him.

Then, in some roundabout way a whisper got to him that Mrs. Darling was much better. The Ramsays, for example, had been to see her.

He had all along been leaving a card for her every day or so. Now he scribbled a line on the card, asking that she would give him a few—just a very few minutes.

He hardly dared fancy that she would. But she did.

Except for her mourning, he found her very little changed.

"I thought you were at work ages ago," was how she greeted him.

He spoke then of the cards he had left. He had sent her some flowers, too.

"I've had no interest in anything," she told him. "There are hundreds of cards here. Some day I may look at them, and still I may not. Every officer in Umballa has sent me flowers, and some of the enlisted men as well. But I do thank you."

"You've never once thought of me, I believe," he reproached.

"That's true," she replied, "I haven't. I've had so much to think of, and it hurts me to think. So I've let Lord Kneedrock do most of the thinking for me."

"It hurts to be forgotten so quickly," he said, his big brown eyes suddenly misty.

"I've been trying to forget so much," Nina confessed.

"And me—did you have to try very hard to forget me?"

"I hadn't begun on you yet. You see, you didn't even occur." She noticed the mist, and added: "I'm sorry."

"You're not a bit," he declared. "You like to hurt me, I believe. But I'll make you remember."

She felt like laughing for the first time since the news of Darling's death was brought to her.

"Please don't," she pleaded.

"Don't make you remember?"

"Oh, you can't do that! I mean, please don't weep. You promised me once you wouldn't, you know."

He rose, frowning, the last hope dead, and she sat regarding him through drooped lashes.

"Good-by!" he muttered, and began backing toward the door.

She waited until his hand was on the knob. Then:

"Good-by, Gerald!" she said, smiling. "I'm so glad I had strength enough not to bolt with you when you asked me."

"Why?" he asked, desperately seizing an excuse to linger.

"Because you are so good-looking, and I do get so tired of looking at good-looking men."

When he got back to Dinghal's quarters young Andrews tried to cut his own throat, mainly to make Nina remember him. That he didn't succeed in the act was due primarily to a nervously irresolute hand, and secondarily to his friend Dinghal, who suspected and arrived in the nick of time.

In the excitement of the ensuing moment the young man told Dinghal every word of the conversation with Mrs. Darling; and the deputy commissioner, as he clumsily drew the edges of the shallow cut together and fastened them with court-plaster, waxed more and more indignant; for he was very fond of Gerald Andrews, and declared that if she didn't kill her husband it was not because she was not capable of it.

It seems probable that he did not confine the expression of this opinion, either, to the privacy of his own dwelling. For guests at a dinner-party which he attended that

same evening quoted him to the same effect—exaggerated, possibly, in the retelling—and the report in time trickled into the hearing of Kneedrock.

Thereupon the viscount called upon the deputy commissioner, and some hot words passed between them. Dinghal, it seems, made no attempt whatever to disguise his opinion.

"I don't care a damn what you think," returned Nina Darling's cousin. "That's your own business; the inalienable right of man and beast is to think whatever they please. But when a man gossips or a dog snarls, that changes the matter. They both deserve correction."

Dinghal was not the most robust of men, but he was no coward. As has been said, he was rarely malicious. As a rule, he rehearsed his story, and left it to his hearers to draw their own conclusions.

This time, through sheer loyalty to young Andrews, he had erred, and he knew it. But he was far from admitting this to Kneedrock.

"And in the present instance the correction is to be administered—how?" he asked.

"By me—with this," was the viscount's answer, holding up his doubled right hand.

"You mean your purpose is to punch my head?"

"Precisely," returned the other.

"You must be mad, Lord Kneedrock. Remember that I am a civil officer in his majesty's service. If you feel that I have injured you or yours in any way, there is a recognized means of adjustment. There are the courts."

"The courts are too slow and indecisive."

"Nevertheless, if you dare lay a hand on me I shall test them. I give you fair warning."

Kneedrock laughed his irritating laugh.

"You are quite meeting my opinion of you," he said. "You are a cur and a poltroon."

The deputy commissioner's face flamed. "If you dare repeat that," he snapped, "I shall—"

"Go to the courts, I assume."

The viscount saw his fingers double into his palms. "You are a liar and a scandalmonger!" he flung at him. And at this Dinghal drew back his fist.

"Although you have the advantage," he flared, "no man may blackguard me and go unpunished!"

"My left hand is crippled," said Kneedrock. "I shall not use it." And as Dinghal aimed a blow at his chin, he guarded with his right.

The bout lasted something over four minutes, during which Kneedrock landed at will. There was no instant when he did not command.

Now and again, to encourage his adversary to face further punishment, he permitted him to get in a body blow, or accepted a glancing tap on neck or cheek. And by way of finale he broke Dinghal's somewhat protuberant nose.

Three days later he and Nina took ship at Bombay and sailed for England.

# CHAPTER VIII
## IN A WORLD WITHIN A WORLD

"I'd rather have a whole cab-driver to myself than share a peer of the realm with another woman," said Mrs. Darling.

She had been in England eighteen months, and the shadow of her tragedy, which never bore very heavily, had lifted.

She sat in a basket chair on the lawn at Puddlewood, dressed all in filmy white, and sipped tea with the Duchess of Pemberwell, her great-aunt, in the shade of one of Puddlewood's ancient oaks. In her lap lay an unopened copy of the *Times*.

"Is he a cab-driver, then?" inquired the duchess, taking her literally.

"Yes," Nina laughed, "a heavenly cab-driver. He threads the milky way. Some say aviator."

"Oh, Nina!"

"He's very nice, I assure you, my dear. Not an ounce of fat on him. All bone and sinew and nerve."

"And—a Yankee," added the duchess belittlingly.

"A free-born American," corrected her great-niece, "and with the loveliest accent. You should hear him say: 'Evah at you' se'vice, Miss' Dahling.' You'd fall in love with him yourself."

"And this aviator person is yours exclusively?"

"Undividedly. Isn't it nice?"

"I think I should prefer Nibbetts myself; or Sir George Grey, or—well, scores I could name."

"I dare say. You married the duke. Your taste speaks for itself, dear aunt."

Though the duchess made no retort, she appeared annoyed. She poured herself a fresh cup of tea and sipped it in silence. Nina opened her paper.

She was still turning the pages when his grace sauntered over, halted, and gazed for a moment at the spread tea-table. He was small, bald and peaked, with tiny black eyes like shoe-buttons.

"There isn't any seed-cake," he complained. "I can't take tea without seed-cake. You know I never take tea without seed-cake, do I, Doody?" Doody was his pet name for his duchess.

"No, you don't," she said. "It's too bad. There was only a little, and Nina ate it."

Nina, who had not been listening, looked up.

"What's that I ate?" she asked.

"Doody says you ate all the seed-cake," explained the duke.

"Oh, I believe I did. It was exceptionally good, too. I wish there had been more."

"You don't wish it half as much as I," and there was a suspicion of querulousness in his grace's tone.

"He's flying at Doncaster to-day," Nina observed, devouring the aviation news, and already forgetful of the duke and the seed-cake.

"Who's flying?" he asked sharply.

"Pierson," answered Nina. "My David."

"Then I hope he jolly well breaks his neck," was the snapping rejoinder as his grace wheeled about and set off for the castle to admonish his housekeeper.

Having exhausted the aviation news, Mrs. Darling turned to the American cables. Everything American now held for her a magnified interest. Presently she slapped the page out flatter and interestedly bent her head closer.

"Fancy!" she exclaimed a moment later, sitting up straight. "He's been sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment."

"Your David?" asked the duchess indifferently.

"Certainly not. He's poor but honest. J. Sprague Ramsay, of Chicago, the multimillionaire banker, whose wife and daughter I knew in India. I don't in the least understand it—it's for lending himself money from his own banks or something. It's too bad. Poor, poor Sibylla. And Jane was just coming to a marriageable age. It will spoil all her chances."

"It should be a lesson to you, Nina. I should think you'd feel disgraced. You associated with the family of a convict. You must curb your indiscriminate freedom. You must, really."

"Pooh!" cried her great-niece. "The Ramsays were charming. It wasn't their fault that J. Sprague borrowed more than he had a right to."

Her great-aunt's disapproval of Americans in general and of the American aviator in particular, had the usual effect of disapproval when brought to bear on an independent spirit. It whetted Nina's ardor for the daring and intrepid David Pierson.

She not only attended the meetings at which he flew, but on repeated occasions she flew with him. Her infatuation was the talk of her friends and her enemies.

As a matter of fact the American was by no means a bad sort. He came of good, honest stock, was fairly well educated, and possessed a comfortable income from Kentucky tobacco plantations, which he had inherited.

With the coming of autumn, however, the inevitable happened. He proposed marriage to the young widow who had led him to believe he had only to ask to be given. And Nina refused him flatly.

David Pierson, however, was a distinctly different type from young Andrews. His eyes didn't grow misty and he didn't weep. He was, in fact, a distinctly different type from any of the men she had jilted or repulsed. He didn't storm and he didn't sulk.

On the contrary, he caught hold of her shoulders and he shook her until her teeth chattered. And then, not in the least gently, he boxed both her ears, and walked out, leaving her in a towering rage.

Out of sheer revenge, rather than for any other reason, she began almost at once to encourage the attentions of a certain cabinet minister. She let him hold her hand and send her books of amorous verses with marked stanzas.

More than that, she invited veiled paragraphs in the society journals, hinting at a pending betrothal, and mailed each issue, blue-penciled, to the aviator's home address in Louisville.

But with the cabinet minister Nina Darling went no further than she had with any of the others. She shunted him by making him madly jealous, first, and then openly casting him aside for one of the poets to whose passionate lines he had been the means of introducing her.

In the next three years she ran sort of continuously amuck against the susceptible, strewing her world with broken, bleeding hearts. And all the while the one man for whom she would gladly have given her life looked on with a sneer and a cynic smile, and said harsh, cruel things to her and of her, in season and out.

There were those who held that it was due in a large measure to Lord Kneedrock that the ugly mystery of poor Darling's horrid death was not permitted to rest in the grave with the victim.

Still there may have been injustice in this, for there were still quite as many to say that Kneedrock shot him because he coveted Nina for himself, as there were that it was Nina or that it was suicide.

Wherever two or three were gathered together in Vanity Fair, one was sure to hear the phrase: "Poor Darling!" and without waiting very long for it, either.

Someone said "Poor Darling!" at Bellingdown, one day in late March, and as usual the Umballa tragedy was threshed out all over again, though it was nearly five years gone, and to separate a fresh grain of truth from the chaff was nigh hopeless.

"Oh, Nina couldn't," Lady Bellingdown insisted. "I've seen a lot of her, and I could tell."

Lord Waltheof, who was the "tame cat" of the household, a tall, slim, dark man, reminded her that Mrs. Darling couldn't remember what happened.

"Oh, you're wrong about that, Wally," put in Charlotte Grey, the fair, thin bride of Sir George, who was up in town with Lord Bellingdown. "You're wrong about that. She didn't remember at first, but she does now. Nibbetts told me so. She remembers, but she doesn't speak of it. That is rather suspicious, you know."

"She's a widow without a sorrow," Kitty Bellingdown declared. "She never loved Darling; we all know that."

"She doesn't know what love is," asserted the bride, who was missing her husband terribly. "She has passion, but no affection."

"Has she been casting sheeps' eyes at Shucks?" It was Waltheof who asked. "Shucks" was Sir George's nursery name. It is a mark of the bluest blood to carry some such absurd nursery cognomen from the nursery to Eton, or Harrow, or Winchester, and then on to one or the other of the universities.

"She'd better not," Charlotte returned, her eyes snapping.

"I—I didn't know." And Waltheof slyly pinched Lady Bellingdown's shoulder as he stood behind her chair.

"I've always thought Nibbetts had a hand in it," Lord Waltheof ventured. "It was odd, his turning up just at that time, you must all admit that. Eight years he buried himself, God only knows where, and then all of a sudden he appears in Umballa, and the very next night poor Darling is mysteriously shot. Then back he comes to London and takes up the old life, just as if he had never been away and nothing had happened."

Lady Kitty nodded. "That's perfectly true," she said. "Does any one know where he was?"

"Yes," the tall man answered. "We all know generally. But only one man accurately. His solicitor was informed all the while. When I want a secret kept that's the man I'm going to employ."

"I'd see him right away if I were you," suggested Charlotte, and Lady Bellingdown frowned.

"I believe Nibbetts would marry Nina to-morrow if she'd say yes," Waltheof continued. "But she won't. She won't say yes to any man. Once was enough for her. That's flat."

"If he cares so much for her he has a poor way of showing it. I've never heard him give her a civil word." The bride spoke out of the richness of her experience.

"I'm certain she cares for him," averred Lady Bellingdown. "And he's a brute to her."

"It's the crime that stands between them," Waltheof said with decision. "Nibbetts is queer. And it's that that's preyed on his mind until he's not quite all there, don't you know."

"Everybody knows his father is queer," contributed their hostess.

They dropped the subject after a while without getting a step further than when they started. But they didn't drop gossip. Dinghal, with his broken nose, would have been in his element at Bellingdown. But he was still in Umballa, suffering tortures from catarrh.

"Caryll Carleigh's to be married on the twelfth." Lady Kitty flung the announcement to Lady Charlotte.

"So soon?"

"Yes. They've hurried it, because the girl's mother, who is the most restless of mortals, wants to go to China or somewhere. She's just back now from Egypt. Her daughter was with friends at Capri for the winter. That's where Caryll met her. They are Americans, you know."

"So I heard. I do hope Caryll will be happy; but it is a risk. Americans are always divorcing. They're so lacking in repose."

"He tells me she's adorable."

"Oh, of course. Still he might, don't you think, have done better at home? English girls fit in so much better."

"I dare say. But one never could advise Caryll. He's most exasperatingly headstrong." The young baronet was her nephew and she knew.

"I've met Mrs. Veynol and her filly," Waltheof put in. It was after dinner, and he had been sipping liqueurs and smoking cigarettes alone in the dining-hall. "She's exasperatingly headstrong, too. Not my choice for a mother-in-law."

Lady Bellingdown twisted her long neck to give him a smile. He was behind her chair as usual. "Caryll never met Mrs. Veynol until a week ago. It was all arranged by correspondence," she said.

"Who was Veynol?" asked Charlotte Grey. "It seems to me I've heard the name, but—"

"South African diamond man. She married him after a week's acquaintance at Cape Town, and he died in five months and left her a Mrs. Cr[oe]sus," Waltheof made clear. "The girl calls herself Veynol, too, but that isn't her name, of course."

"Americans hold their names so lightly, don't they?" observed Charlotte. "George says they change them at the drop of the hat."

"Due principally to the divorce courts and the bankruptcy laws," explained the man illuminatingly. "They're a rum lot out there."

He had never been to America; but the average Briton invariably assumes a wisdom if he has it not, especially when conversing with the dependent sex.

As events turned out, however, Rosamond Veynol didn't change her name again on the twelfth of April. For some reason which was not altogether made clear the wedding was postponed.

The published report was that Miss Veynol was ill, but Miss Veynol was not ill in the least, as a number of eye-witnesses who saw her in Paris, where she was temporarily residing, stood ready to prove.

There was no end of question, naturally, and there was no end of gossip. This condition lasted for three months. And then, to society's intense surprise, it received invitations for the nuptial ceremony at St. Margaret's, Westminster, and for the wedding breakfast at Mrs. Veynol's recently leased establishment in Park Lane.

Lady Bellingdown was up in town for the express purpose of selecting a wedding gift, in which Lord Waltheof had kindly volunteered to assist—"Donty-Down," her lord and master, being in Paris just then—when she chanced upon Nina Darling coming out of a shop in New Bond Street and looking absolutely radiant.

"The widow without a sorrow!" she exclaimed, grasping both her hands and kissing her through her veil. "I called you that the other day, and now I see how well it suits you."

"If it was the other day you were wrong," Nina returned. "But to-day you are right. I feel as free as the robins in St. James's Park. I have just sent the most

importunate of Austrian archdukes about his business, and I breathe freely for the first time in six weeks."

"My dear, you are incorrigible. Aren't you ever going to make some deserving man happy?"

"There is no such animal," declared this outrageous flirt. "I am a righteously avenging Nemesis. I dispense to man his just deserts."

"You are *la belle dame sans merci*."

"Tell me of Nibbetts, Mrs. Darling," Waltheof cut in suggestively. "I've not seen him in months."

"Nor I," replied Nina. "He's been in Dundee. I hear he's in love with a Scotch lassie. I suspect she's a marmalade-maker."

"Really!" exclaimed the tame cat, taking her seriously. "Too devilish bad!"

"Yes. Isn't it? Fancy how tired he must get of smelling orange peel every time he kisses her hand!" She made a grimace and turned back to Kitty Bellingdown. "You didn't come up for the season? Why?"

"I've been wretched. So upset over Caryll's affair. I hadn't the heart to face any one. But now it's all quite straightened out, you know, and I'm so glad for the boy's sake."

"Do tell me what it was," Nina urged. "I heard the mother fell in love with him and was jealous of the girl."

"No, it wasn't that," was the non-committal reply.

"Odd, but I haven't seen Caryll since we were kiddies. How has he grown? Handsome?"

"Oh, very. A sweet boy. He'd make any woman happy."

"Then he's a phenomenon. I wish I might have met him."

Waltheof laughed. "He seems to have had trouble enough," he said.

But Sir Caryll Carleigh's troubles weren't over by any means. At the last minute the wedding invitations were recalled and the presents returned. A fortnight later his aunt received from him the following letter, dated from a village in Perthshire:

DEAR AUNT KITTY: I'm up here spearing salmon and all that sort of thing, don't you know, and trying to forget. It was a beastly cropper—this wedding mess—and I've gone to pieces over it, for I did love Rosamond awfully. Such a ripping girl! Twenty thousand a year in her own right, too, left her by that diamond chap, just for taking his rotting name. Sounds like a disinfectant or some chemist stuff to me. Veynol. Pah!

However, she decided at the last minute that she liked it better than Carleigh, and there you are. And here am I, most fearfully cut up. I'll never get over it. I jolly well know I sha'n't. It is a sickener, I can tell you, and I'm thinking strongly of going in for the church—joining some order or brotherhood or some such silly old thing.

One thing I am sure of. I'll never look a woman in the face again. I hate the whole bally lot. Of course, you're not in this, you know—for you have been a good

sort all through. Regular top-hole, you are. But I mean other women—girls—and all that rubbishy lot.

And now, dearest and best of aunties, I've a favor to ask. This mess-up, you know, has cost me a pretty penny, and the truth is, I'm stony. Do send me a tenner by return of post. I'll pay you back when I sell the engagement ring. It's ripping. It is really.

Your affectionate but heart-broken nephew,CARYLL.

# CHAPTER IX

## THERE'S A LASS IN DUNDEE!

Into Nina's flat in Mayfair, one rare August morning, entered Lord Kneedrock, unannounced. He found her in her little drawing-room arranging flowers in a vase—flowers not a whit more lovely than herself.

"Whose?" he asked, nodding toward them. It was his first and only word, and she had not seen him for two months.

She went him one better—one letter better.

"Mine."

"Who sent them?"

"The florist."

"Who paid for them?"

"Nobody as yet. His bill won't be in until the first of the month."

"Who ordered them?"

"I did. Anything more?" She seemed delighted.

He strode over to an open, awninged window and dropped into an invitingly cushioned chair. He was still bearded, still rather leonine, but he was better groomed than in those days in India.

He employed a tailor that was an artist in his craft, and a hair-dresser that was no less so. After a fashion he was almost attractive.

"I am to infer then that there is no present adoring cavalier."

"No," she answered. "Not since last Friday. He has sailed, I believe, to offer his services to the Mexican revolutionists."

"Ah!" he leaned back and gazed pensively over his interlocked fingers. His eyes rested on a bronze in the opposite corner.

"You've never thanked me for that," he said casually.

Nina followed his gaze. "Thanked *you*?" she asked.

"Who else?"

"For the cobra?" For it was the cobra with the history that he continued to regard.

"For the cobra."

"You mean you were the one that sent it to me? There was no card with it—no name."

"I picked it up in Calcutta and fancied it might please you. Eve and the serpent, you know. Rather delicately significant—What?"

She was staring at him, astounded. After all these five years he had unsealed his lips. She noticed his scarred left hand, recalled the part that the bronze had played in that, too—and wondered the more.

"Some day," he said in an undertone that had become habitual, "I'll send you a bronze tigress. That will make the symbolism complete."

"Do—do you so much mind, then?" she asked yieldingly. "I mean about my amusements."

"Your *one* amusement?" The sneer, the cynicism was in his tone again. "Good God, no! Why should I?"

"You seemed to resent it. I—I'll be very good, if you wish."

"I don't wish anything about it. To be candid, it interests me, when I happen to think of it. You're a type. And I always did like types. The men you first charm and then devour are types, too—types of the weakling. They could never win my sympathy."

"No one has ever encouraged me to be different," she said, turning back to her flowers.

He waited a long moment, his lips parted. Then he said: "No? I dare say not."

She came to him, a white carnation in her hand, and, bending over, caught his coat-lapel between thumb and finger. But, noting her intention, he drew it away.

"No, no," he cried sharply. "Not for me. I am no *petit maître*."

She was about to retreat abashed, but he gripped her wrist and held it, and her cheeks flushed crimson. Then he let it go.

"I was looking at the ring," he said. "I see you still wear it."

"I'm still bearing my cross," she returned, "but I've given up hope of the crown."

"I told you to give it to poor Darling," he reminded her. "It should have been buried with him."

She made no rejoinder, but stuck the carnation among the gold of her hair. Almost at the same moment one of the doors was pushed ajar and an enormous staghound, black to a hair, slipped in and began nuzzling Nina's hand.

"Another present?" inquired Nibbetts, looking the beast over.

"Yes. A loan rather—my Irish soldier of fortune left Tara with me to keep his memory green, I fancy."

She patted his head, and into her eyes he looked unutterable things.

"You've bewitched the creature, that's clear," said her caller. He laid a hand on the hound's back and was answered by a low growl. "Surly brute!" he added.

"He senses in you his master's rival," she suggested roguishly.

"God forbid!" snarled Kneedrock.

"Tell me about the marmalade maid," Nina begged, sitting down and taking Tara's head in her lap. "The maid of Dundee."

"I was visiting a man I knew in Tahiti," Nibbetts answered frankly. "And it happens he has a niece. I ran away from her."

"Why?" Nina asked simply.

"For the best reason in the world," he told her. "I was getting to like her too well. That's why I'm here this morning. You're a perfectly incomparable antidote for that sort of thing."

"She's like her marmalade, perhaps—too cloyingly sweet," said Nina, indifferently.

"Her marmalade?" questioned Nibbetts, his brow knitting.

"Doesn't she make it, then? I can't think of Dundee in any other connection. Don't all the women there peel oranges?"

"She doesn't." He could be very literal at times.

"What does she do? How in the world does she spend her time?"

"She spends most of it, I fancy, talking to her parrot."

"Her parrot! How odd! Hasn't she any one else to talk to?"

"Only one other—her uncle. And he doesn't understand."

"But the parrot does, I infer?"

"Thoroughly. The Tahitian parrots are very wise little birds."

Nina's laugh rippled. "It talks back, of course."

"Most certainly. One must talk back to her—even if it is only a parrot."

"And what does she talk about? What do they talk about, I mean?"

The viscount took his time answering. The pause lent emphasis to his words.

"Of me, mostly, I fancy."

"How dull it must be for them!" Nina observed, and Kneedrock's eyes, twinkled. He was really amused.

"Mustn't it?" he chuckled. "Damnably! Still, you can see the picture. Ideal subject for a *genre* canvas. What?"

"Oh, perfect," agreed Nina, but she didn't smile. She patted the hound's head and answered the pathetic look in his appealing eyes.

"I'm afraid you've been unkind to her, Hal," she said presently.

"I'm afraid I have," he admitted. "I—" But he thought again and held his peace.

"Why?" she asked.

"Perforce. As a peer I'm bound to respect the laws of the realm. You didn't, but I must."

"I thought—But you know what I thought."

"Poor Darling," he said cryptically. Still there was nothing cryptic about it to Nina. She quite understood.

"I'm very good now," she asserted. "It's hard, but I do try. You must know how I do try."

"Why don't you keep out of temptation?" he asked, standing up. "Why don't you run as I do?"

"I've already told you. There's that in me which is too strong for my will. And the one man that could help me—won't."

He tossed his great tawny head in signal of annoyance. "Tommyrot! You like it. You've got a cruel streak. That's the whole explanation."

"I haven't," she denied, with rising indignation. "I'm too tender-hearted. That's half my trouble. When I meet a nice man who is hungry for my kisses I can't deny him."

"And after you've given you cut his throat or blow his brains out. You are a national menace. You should be either locked up or banished."

She rose, and the hound beside her pressed against her legs.

"Are you going to Bellingdown?" she inquired, ignoring his outbreak. "Kitty tells me she has asked you."

"I'm not sure. Are you?"

"Yes—on Thursday."

"Then I'll not," he said decisively. "No house is big enough for both of us at the same time."

"I'll promise not to eat you," she smiled.

"I'm not afraid of that. You're too devilish careful of your digestion to undertake it. But you'll be eating some other poor chap; and I don't enjoy the spectacle."

"But if I promise to fast?"

"I don't believe in your promises. You've broken every one you ever made me. No, I sha'n't go down. You'll have an open field."

But when Nina traveled down on the appointed day, accompanied by her maid, the black staghound, and innumerable bags and boxes, Nibbetts was the first man she met.

"One of the chauffeurs is ill and the other drunk," he explained, "so I volunteered to fetch you. They'll send a groom down for your luggage later."

"But I must have a dinner-gown," she complained, "and suppose—"

"We can strap one box on behind, I fancy—if we must."

"We certainly must. I can't pin all my hopes of a presentable first appearance to a stupid groom's ideas of expediency and expedition."

He offered no explanation of his change of plan, and Nina forbore to ask him. It developed later, however, that he had already been at Bellingdown for two days.

The Duke and Duchess of Pemberwell were there, too—as were also Sir George and Lady Charlotte. Lord Bellingdown was at home for the shooting, but Waltheof was expected that evening.

"And that's all?" asked Nina, to whom Nibbetts had conveyed this inclusive *personnel* of the house-party.

"All at present," he answered. "There may be one or two more to-morrow for the week-end."

"You don't know who?"

"I don't know who. I'm sorry we can't offer you better sport. The prospective prey so far is neither numerous nor promising. In decency, you know, you must keep your paws off Wally."

He was a distant cousin of Kitty Bellingdown and understood the situation thoroughly.

"I hate that man," said Nina. "Long, black, sardonic creature!"

"That reminds me," said Nibbetts. "What's become of the hound?"

Mrs. Darling glanced back. "He's following. Would you mind driving a little slower. Tara's out of training."

"You'll be late for tea."

"Bother the tea!" she exclaimed. "I can't have the beast winded. My soldier of fortune would never forgive me."

Then Kneedrock did something to the gear and the car shot ahead faster than ever. So they reached the house in ample time, with Tara nowhere in sight.

"And I'll never be able to replace him," Nina mourned. "The breed's dying out."

"Like that of good women," growled Nibbetts.

Lady Bellingdown, coming forward in the hall to meet them, overheard: "Is he ballyragging you again, dear?" she asked, while Nina lifted her veil for the impending greeting. "He's quite impossible."

"He's ballyragging the sex. We shall have to combine to crush him."

"Women will never combine on anything," was his gruff comment. "They're too jealous of one another. The fight for suffrage is foredoomed."

Nina and Kitty kissed and said sweet things to each other, and the viscount turned away with a sneer and a scowl.

"There's always plenty of seed-cake here," whispered the duke, finding a place beside Nina at tea. "Very good seed-cake, too. Much better than at Puddlewood. Let me help you to some."

He put a piece on her plate and she leaned over to get something quite confidential from the duchess, who sat on the end of the lounge nearest the fire. "Even if I am English I want to be warm," was a *bon mot* of her youth, still quoted, and still being lived up to.

"I've the very latest word in the Carleigh affair," she whispered behind her hand, with a stolen glance toward Lady Bellingdown, who was busy over the teacups. "Come to my room before dinner and I'll tell you."

Nina nodded, and then the two chattered commonplace for a moment to throw off suspicion. When Nina sat up again her seed-cake was gone and the duke was chuckling.

"But where is it?" she asked, perplexity in her violet eyes.

His grace pointed to the floor at her farther side. Tara was lying there. "He's yours, I suppose. He took the seed-cake at a gulp. Fine staghound that. I had a pair like him once. I say, Doody, didn't I have a fine pair of black staghounds once?"

"Yes, Pucketts." That was the duke's nickname from the cradle.

"Everything's foxhounds nowadays. But when I was younger," he went on—and on—and on.

Nina, delighted to see the animal once more, was caressing his long ears and mumbling baby-talk to him.

In the privacy of the guest-suite she occupied the duchess smoked one cigarette after another and told Nina Darling that it was Sir Caryll himself who had broken the engagement at the last minute, and not the prospective mother-in-law, as the world had it.

"But why? I thought he was madly in love with the girl."

"Oh, he was. But you see he learned something in a most accidental way, and when he asked Rosamond about it, she confirmed it with perfect candor. It seems her own father—Mrs. Veynol's first husband—is a convict. He is still in prison somewhere in the States.

"The whole story—without names, of course, but going just as far as they dared go—appeared last week in *British Society*. I don't take the scurrilous sheet, of course; but my maid does, and she gave it to me to read. I've been wondering if Kitty saw it."

"Perhaps it isn't true," Nina suggested.

"It must be. That's one thing about those wicked society papers—they're almost always right. Otherwise they wouldn't dare, don't you know. It's that that makes them so objectionable."

Nina left her great-aunt and flew to her own room with barely time to dress. There she found her hostess, already in full dinner regalia, awaiting her.

"I felt I must see you at once, dear," began Lady Bellingdown. "I've such a favor to ask you. You can do something for me now that I shall never forget as long as I live. And I don't know a solitary other woman that could do it."

Nina's suspicions ran at once to Lord Waltheof.

"If it's—" she began—but was checked instantly.

"You could never possibly fancy. It isn't anything you'd think. It's about Caryll Carleigh."

"About Caryll Carleigh?"

"Yes. He's been in Scotland, you know, practically buried, and growing worse—more morose, more heart-sick every day. He's had a fearful knocking down, and I've been worried about him—no end."

"Well?" pressed Nina, groping. She couldn't in the least see what she had—or could have—to do with it all.

"I want you to take him in hand—to make him forget."

"I! But how?"

"Here. He's coming. I've just had a wire. He has already started. He will be here to-morrow for tea."

Nina hesitated for just a second. "I—I'll do my best," she said at length.

# CHAPTER X

## A PRAYER AND A PROPHECY

"Poor darling!" sighed the duchess.

The hall was forty feet wide, eighty feet long, and fifty feet high. It was banked with palms and chrysanthemums and with Michaelmas daisies in silver pots. Yet the words echoed.

"You mean—" questioned Kneedrock, frowning.

The electricity behind a million prisms up aloft was well shaded, and the six dozen candles amid the pictures and bric-à-brac were half-smothered in pink frills. Moreover, Kneedrock had just come in and was still some distance off. Yet the frown was clearly seen.

"Oh, I didn't mean Darling. I didn't mean Darling at all," the duchess corrected quickly.

"We—we were speaking of Caryll," explained Lady Bellingdown, her hand upon the teapot's handle. "We're all thinking of him, you know. He'll be here now—any minute."

"I don't see why you asked him," growled Kneedrock roughly, as was a cousin's privilege. "He'll get no comfort here."

"Nina, remember," reminded the duchess, very interested in her bread and butter.

Then the noble viscount growled at her grace. "He'll get no comfort out of Nina. She'll chew him up alive and throw back the bones, as a snake does."

"Oh dear!" put in Lady Kitty deprecatingly. "You're always so hard upon her."

"It's Nibbetts's way," soothed the duchess, looking very kindly at him. In spite of a lingering unkemptness, he was indeed a fine object to view—massive and leonine. "He always puts things a bit boldly."

"Boldly?" he echoed. "Ugh! Why, the fellow, you know, is all knocked up. Can't go anywhere. Has been off spearing fish for a month, quite alone. And then you ask him here and throw him to Nina's teeth and claws. Ha!"

A minute before the comparison was ophidian, now it was feline. He was nearly as bad as Dinghal.

The duke, who was sitting in a corner of the huge lounge, very much hunched up and nibbling seed-cake as fast as his little, lean jaws would work, spoke defensively between nibbles.

"Maybe she'll amuse him," he said thickly, his mouth full. "Nina's very amusing when she likes. She's often made me laugh. I like Nina."

"I think she's a very delightful young woman," joined in the duchess, in order that her allegiance to her great-niece might not be open to question. "We shall have her at Puddlewood this autumn. We always have her at Puddlewood."

"And she makes life very interesting. Yes, she does," added the duke before taking a fresh nibble. "I always like her to come. Don't I, Doody?"

The duchess hastened with the required confirmation.

"Yes, Pucketts always has liked—" But there her grace stopped short.

There was a slight noise at the end of the hall, and the attention of every one was at once directed toward the door. It was a fact that the entire party was on the tiptoe of expectancy. Every soul there was speculating on how Carleigh would look and how he would act.

"No," said Lady Bellingdown, speaking in the assured tone of one who knows—and yet she had paused to listen, too—"that will not be he. I heard carriage wheels a minute ago. But we've sent a car for him."

She glanced nervously about. "Really, you know," she added, "you mustn't all stare so when he does come in. You must treat him absolutely as if nothing had happened. He is so frightfully sensitive, you know."

"I should think he would be," observed Nibbetts, lounging suddenly down on a settee and speaking in his usual resonant tone that was distinctly audible far and near. "I should think he would be."

"It was really her mother," said Charlotte Gray, who hadn't read *British Society* and was not in the duchess's confidence. "It was all her mother. It's a very shocking story. It's Borgian. It's Medicean. It's not a bit our present Georgian. Not in the least."

She was looking at Kneedrock, but she was talking for her own amusement, since every one knew all this, and she must have been aware of it.

"It's better not to talk of it," cautioned Lady Bellingdown, by way of gentle rebuke. "Donty feels that it will be wisest not to speak of it while the poor boy is in the house."

Whereupon Lord Waltheof, from his customary place behind her chair, voicing his somewhat superior knowledge of affairs at Bellingdown, said: "He's going early Monday. It won't be a very long strain."

"Going early Monday, is he?" queried the duke, nibbling faster than ever. "That won't help much. We're all going early Monday, too."

The door at the far end of the hall opened just then to admit Sir George Grey—a handsome, slight boyish fellow, with curling chestnut hair.

"Oh, it's Shucks!" cried Charlotte, setting down her teacup and running forward to meet her husband, of whom, being still a bride, she was extremely fond.

"Those were the carriage wheels," discerned the duke, cutting into another seed-cake while his hostess was over behind the palms for a word with the newcomer. "They were Grey's wheels, Doody," he elucidated to the duchess, who was back toward him at the moment. "They were Grey's wheels."

"I hear," said the duchess.

The footman was bringing fresh tea.

"I'm late," said Sir George, coming around to the fire. "Hello, Nibbetts!"

Then he nodded generally to the others. "I got shot in the back," he went on jovially, "and they had to undress me. And then I had to dress again, of course."

"Who shot you?" asked Lady Bellingdown, with the well-bred interest of a well-bred hostess. "Were you badly shot?"

When gentlemen go shooting, to be shot is so common that no one very much minds. Even Sir George's wife, loving him as she did, managed to preserve a stoical silence. To have appeared upset would have been very bad form.

"I don't know," answered the victim. "I don't know who shot me. I was ahead with Donty Down, and I heard Donty yell, and then—there I was peppered. He vows he saw the shot coming."

"How amusing!" cried the duke, delighted. "It is amusing. Donty's always funny."

"Was he shot, too?" asked Donty's wife.

"No, he—"

The door creaked beyond and the butler came tumbling forward to whisper: "Sir Caryll Carleigh."

Then he was really there before them—the hero of the biggest harvest of talk in recent years.

There had been nothing like it since the memorable day when Nina came back from India under the protection of her cousin, the viscount, and every one had a different version of everything.

He was very pale, a slender, brown-eyed youth with his underlip twitching nervously. To all appearances he was quite scared. Still, he certainly was really there.

Naturally there was a flutter—a perfectly visible flutter—for had it not been repeatedly and authoritatively stated that this love-wreck would never be repaired and float in his own especial "swim" again?

Grenfell and the icy coast of Labrador perhaps, or a government berth in Manchuria—but never home society again. Never, never!

And now he was here. His aunt, Lady Bellingdown, hurried forward, her hands extended.

"My dear Caryll! *So* glad to see you again. You know every one here, I'm sure. We're all *so* glad to see you. *So* glad, you know."

He bent and kissed her hand very prettily. Then he bravely cast his big, dark eyes over the rest of the group, taking them all in, individually as well as collectively.

He knew them, every one. Yes, they were all kinsfolk or friends, whose wedding presents he had returned a month before.

It was a trying pair of seconds, through which the duke's seed-cake cheeped like a canary.

"Did you come straight from town?" Waltheof asked in a carefully careless tone. Then he remembered. Very stupid of him; but now too late to mend.

He was standing back to the fire, and the violent agitation of his coat-tails, beneath which his hands were locked, was to the observant ones sign and symbol of his embarrassment.

"I've been in Scotland for a month," returned Carleigh, coloring deeply and seeking a seat.

Every one felt that it was unpardonable in Waltheof to have said "town" to the man who was the center of its talk.

"Oh, Scotland!" exclaimed the duke, as if the fact that the boy had been there was the very remotest thing from his knowledge. "Very amusing place, Scotland. Lovely place, too, Scotland. We went there on our honeymoon. I say, Doody, that was where we went, wasn't it?"

The duchess looked daggers at her duke. Fancy having a husband so lost to the fitness of things as to mention honeymoons in the presence of one who might have been on his at the moment—but wasn't!

"One goes there for the shooting now," she said, to ease the blow. "You always go there for the shooting."

"Not the last time," denied his grace; "it was the closed season—the last time." Then he took another piece of cake.

The duchess didn't quite know whether mention of the closed season was or was not painfully pertinent. "Scotland's so gray," she said in a confidential aside to Waltheof.

Lady Bellingdown was looking beseechingly here and there, praying for some one to say something. It was Kneedrock who responded.

"I hate Scotland," he growled. "I know a girl up there that—" He broke off, leaving them to think anything, and concluded: "I wish I could keep away from the bally place."

Then Lady Bellingdown wished that he hadn't. It was positively awful! Everybody looked at everybody in furtive consternation. Her hand trembled and she spilled Carleigh's tea all over.

He had risen in expectation of nourishment and was standing beside her. With a frozen smile, as she changed saucers, she gasped:

"Nina is here. You remember her, don't you? She's a widow now, you know. Very sweet, very bright. Extremely good company."

"Was she happily married?" Caryll asked, trying to look unconcerned.

"Why—er-r—I don't know. They went out to India, and he was killed in an accident. Cleaning a gun, you know. It was never very clear how it happened. Nobody ever knew. She's in half-mourning still."

"They were *not* happy," contributed Kneedrock in his resounding undertone. Then he lounged close. "I know," he added sharply. "She's a tiger come human, and Darling was her prey—some of her prey."

Lady Bellingdown was trying to laugh, though not very successfully. "What awful things you say, Nibbetts!" she sighed.

Carleigh stared in silence.

"It's true," the viscount pursued. "She's a reincarnated man-eater. She likes to take chaps and tear them and maul them and drive the souls out of them with pats that they're too far gone to feel!"

Every one was listening. Carleigh's pallor had gone white as paper. But it was the whiteness of intense interest rather than of alarm.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed the duke, swallowing hurriedly. "I say, Kneedrock! What you mean is that she's uncommonly amusing. That's so, and that's all you mean. Only you put it a bit strongly. But that's what you mean."

Nibbetts shrugged his broad, heavy shoulders.

"Have it your own way," he grumbled. "I know what I mean, and I know what I know. You just watch her eyes get narrow, and then you wait a month. They narrow when a new man appears; and in a month she's licking his blood from her paws!"

"Oh, how very rude you are!" Lady Bellingdown chided. "Really, you know, I won't have it. You sha'n't say another word. No, I won't have it!"

Carleigh looked down at his tea. A queer flush had succeeded the pallor—a flush of still livelier interest to which Kneedrock's remarks had stung him.

He wondered what a reincarnated tigress would be like. A pleasant thrill charged through him for the first time in quite five weeks.

And just then the door at the end of the hall opened and Nina Darling trod lightly in. She had been walking and still had on her hat—a hat of yellow felt with cocks' plumes sifting backward.

In her hand she carried a man's walking-stick, and by her side stalked a great black staghound.

Sir Caryll took her all in instantly. And remembering the reference to half-mourning, wondered whether it was expressed in the hound. Certainly there was no other sign, for her frock was a pale tan frieze and her boots were but a shade darker.

"I am very late," she cried, and her clear voice rang across them like a bell. "But I am forgivable. I found the quaintest little church, and I have been praying. Yes, only fancy! I've been down on my knees begging not to do wrong, because—" she looked at them all and laughed—"because I feel just like doing wrong and I don't want to."

"You'll do it," snarled Kneedrock, *sotto-voce*.

"You know Caryll Carleigh, don't you, dear?" asked Lady Bellingdown.

She turned her big violet eyes his way, and he, watching eagerly, saw them fold to slits, just as Kneedrock had said. And Kneedrock saw them, too.

"And you prayed to be kept from mischief, eh?" he mused. "But of course you didn't mean it."

She crossed to Carleigh's side and sat down there. "And I prayed for others, too," she told him. "For you." With a laugh. "You need it; don't you?"

"I need it," he answered shortly. "Yes, surely."

She pulled off her heavy gloves and gave them, with the stick, to the staghound, which walked gravely away at once.

"Did you walk far?" Lady Bellingdown asked.

"Rather. To the Pine Needles."

"Why, that's twelve miles," said Lord Waltheof.

"Perhaps."

Carleigh stared more frankly at her—at her head of gold, her brow of fairest ivory, set with gems of living amethyst beneath; at her long, sinuous figure, which suggested Lilith and the medieval conception of an angel as well.

When she lifted her eyes to him and smiled, he realized that it was the first really natural smile that he had encountered in a month.

Something cold within him warmed once more. The feminine then still held that which could affect him. His heart, after all, was not utterly dead.

He returned the smile, and the slits grew yet more narrow. And as they had seemed to young Andrews, on a night at Simla, and to Heaven only knows how many other men at Heaven only knows how many other places, so they seemed to him—cleft opals, with the devil splitting the hairs of the lashes that kept them from scorching a mere masculine mortal.

"I remember you as a little girl," he murmured.

"First blood," said Kneedrock, who had been listening, in a half-whisper to the duke.

"Yes, but you know she'll brace him up," returned his grace. "She really will. My word, but she's very bracing, is Nina. I like her. I always have."

"He'll be very glad to creep back, scratched and minus one ear, and marry his fiancée in six months," rejoined the honorable viscount with bitter cynicism.

"Do you really think so?" asked the duke.

"Think so! I know it," yawned Kneedrock. "She doesn't care who rattles the bones, once she's had the meat."

# CHAPTER XI

## THINGS ONE SHOULDN'T SAY

When the men came in after dinner that evening Mrs. Darling sat alone in a huge red satin *causeuse*; one of those queer, hard, tufted royal things that fashion pitched in among the wigs and powder of one past period.

She wore a gown of gray gauze with bands of beaded and jeweled fringe at corsage and knees. Few women can wear gray. Nina could, and did.

The other women were grouped near, talking, but not with her. They had not shunted her; but she had gone apart and sat so. It was her way when the time for the reappearance of the men drew near. Nobody misconstrued. They all understood.

"And yet, how she does make a party go, you know!" whispered her hostess to the duchess. "She's really quite wonderful at it."

"I like her," confessed the duchess. "She's such nice lines about her waist, too, hasn't she?"

"Y-yes," faltered Lady Bellingdown, "she's quite a picture. I do wish Nibbetts wouldn't pitch into her so. It's very nasty of him."

"But Caryll will never believe what he says," the duchess offered comfortingly. "Men never do."

As she spoke the doors slid apart and the six men straggled in in procession, scattering slowly like a flock of settling birds. Each married man tried to avoid his wife and rather missed the mark.

Caryll Carleigh walked to where Mrs. Darling sat, circled her and took the other end of the red tufted thing that was made for two. She just smiled.

All the rest began to talk at once. The air warmed with: "They made it a point to drive through once a year and preserve the right of way—" "He said: 'Don't hurry!' but she took it and the branch caught her and carried her off—" "Oh, no, it wasn't that winter; it was when I was in Malta—" and so on, and so on.

Sir Caryll lifted his eyes and lowered his voice. "Do you know, I was sure my heart was dead. I was certain of it. But now I begin to doubt."

She smiled still, staring straight before her.

"Do look at me," he pleaded. "Your eyes are so wonderful. Like an elixir. They give me back all that I have lost. Do look at me."

"Do you know," she asked, complying with his request, "that I'm considered a very bad woman?"

"I don't believe it."

"Oh, but I am. You ask Lord Kneedrock. He'll tell you. He has a hash about a reincarnated tiger that he tells every one. He calls my hands claws."

She looked down at her hands then and Caryll's gaze followed hers. They were wonderful hands, every finger a psychic index.

"Some day I'll let you hold one for a little," she said, moving them slightly. "You can judge for yourself what they're like then."

He was conscious of the most curious of thrills. It coursed through him from head to toes. It stimulated him, wonderfully. It redoubled his courage.

"Adieu, ordinary rules!" his heart cried. "To the front and fire!" And his voice said: "Has Kneedrock ever held them?"

"Oh, yes. Ever so many have. I'm making a study of holding hands. Some men keep boring into your palm with their thumb, and some like to grind all your knuckle-bones together, crosswise. They never seem to think how the woman may feel."

"I fancy, under such circumstances, if I were you, I should say something," said Sir Caryll, laughing.

She looked at him, seriously. "What, for instance?"

"'Oh, you hurt! Let go!'"

"I'll try to remember," she said, without a smile. "You think that is better than just bearing it?"

"Yes. Unless you like it."

"Oh, I never like it. I grew weary of it long ago. Men are all so dreadfully alike. Unless you are going to be different, I—Are you going to be different?"

"I'm heart-broken," said Carleigh, not quite seriously. "Perhaps that constitutes a difference."

"I know exactly how it feels to be heart-broken." She nodded wisely. "You feel that it will kill you; but it doesn't. The third day one takes pudding, as usual."

"Tell me," he pleaded suddenly, "did you love your husband?"

"Oh, no," she answered with emphasis. "What a stupid question!"

"What went on before he died?"

She laughed. "Lots," was her laconic answer.

"Were you very lonely?"

"No. I had compensation."

He felt a violent throb through all his veins.

"A lover?" he asked boldly.

Instantly her eyes came to his. "You really do think bad of me, then?" Her tone was reproachful. "You think that when I said people considered me a very bad woman they meant baddest bad, and that they considered right?"

"No," he corrected. "I didn't stop to think. What I said just jumped into my head. I'm curious about you—that's all."

"I'm not going to tell you my story," she declared. "You ask Kneedrock. He'll tell you that I shot my husband to marry another man, and that the other man begged to be excused. Kneedrock's very entertaining when he begins to be confidential about me."

"How can you joke about such things?"

"I joke about everything. It's my way of getting on."

"But such an awful tale!"

"Oh, dreadful!" she said, easily.

He felt a bit uncertain and his laugh showed it. "The other man was an idiot," he told her.

"Quite so," she assented.

There was a movement among the others. They were going to have bridge. All had risen and their backs were turned. Quickly he laid his hand upon hers. Then:

"Oh, how you interest me!" he exclaimed, below his breath. "You've had a bad time, too. I know it. I feel it. You'll tell me, and I'll tell you, and there'll be something in the world I'll care about again. You see, I thought—I really was sure—that all the caring about things had been killed in me forever."

Her hand was quiet beneath the throbbing of his own. He had a singular hand for a man—one of those rare hands that pale and flush, that shiver and burn.

It burned now, but hers had no responding heat or throb. If his quivered with a passionate call for some response, the response came not. He had to recognize that no sleeping ardor stirred to the call of his caress.

But her eyelids drooped lower and lower until her lashes lay close against her cheeks, and then as he looked—and longed—he saw suddenly with an ecstatic thrill of surprise and delight that tears shone among them.

"You feel—something?" he murmured breathlessly. "What?"

"I feel for you," she answered. "You are so young. How old are you? Do you mind telling me?"

Certainly he had not expected that answer. "I am twenty-six," he said. "But why?"

"Twenty-six!" Her eyes were still closed. "I am thirty," she said softly. "That is why."

He felt quite bewildered; in a maze as to her meaning. "I know you've had a bad time, too," he said again. "You'll tell me all about it, won't you? Don't join the bridge crowd. They'll be playing there for hours, and we can sit here and have ourselves to ourselves. Do! Do! I want to know such a lot, and you'll tell me all."

She drew her hand gently away. "Will I?" she whispered. "Will I, truly?"

He seized her hand a second time, "Yes—yes, you will. You're going to be so kind—so good—to me. You're going to let me have your trouble to think of instead of mine. I'm so tired of the ceaseless agony of mine. I didn't do anything, you know. 'Fore God, I didn't do anything. It was all a plot, and now they've ruined her life and mine. Perhaps it was a plot with you, too."

"No," she breathed. "With me it was a plan."

"Never mind the difference," he protested. "They say, you know, that I was in love with the mother. I wasn't. Really, I wasn't. But they told her and the engagement was broken. It was all the most horrible thing imaginable. You'll hear it on all sides.

"Of course no one would believe that story about you, but every one believes the one about me. They haven't ruined you, but they have ruined me. And then people think that Scotland should have helped me." He paused, quite pale, his voice shaking.

His hand had closed harder and harder on hers, and now he drew it nearer. When he had pressed it between both of his own for a long minute, he felt a painful point within his palm, and, freeing her, he looked. On her third finger sparkled a diamond cross.

It was a great, awkward thing to be attached to a ring, although lovely enough in itself. The cross had marked his flesh. He turned her hand and saw that the ring was shaped and carven like a crown—a crown with points.

"The cross and the crown?" he questioned then. "Your own design?"

"His mother's," she said, still with closed eyes. "If I had been his wife it would have been mine. But as I can never be his wife he gave it to me to wear—because I loved him."

"The man who backed out?" Carleigh asked.

"The same man," she made answer.

"Stupid idiot!"

"With all my heart."

With which she opened her eyes and rose abruptly.

"You are very young," she said in the most casual of tones. "Oh, dear, but you are so very young. When you've gone further on in life you'll know that very few of those that really love can ever marry. I almost think that it is the first sign of a great love to be separated. And a good thing too. It leaves one one's dreams."

The tone startled him, but the matter of her speech suited. She moved toward the fire. Kneedrock stood there, facing the chimney-piece.

"What are you doing?" she asked him, gaily. "Have you stopped playing?"

"They don't want me just now," he said.

Carleigh felt annoyed; but he followed close after her.

"We were talking of such interesting things," she went on, still addressing the viscount's back.

"I dare say. What for instance?" he asked, without turning.

"I've told Sir Caryll that you will tell him all of my story," she pursued, ignoring the question. "You will—won't you?"

"The whole of it?"

"Yes."

"I hope that it will interest him more than it does me."

"If it bores you to repeat it, you needn't," said Nina, gently. "But it is rather dramatic, you know. I mean that night, and all that happened."

"Poor Darling!" muttered Kneedrock.

Carleigh felt most uncomfortable.

"Nibbetts was there, you know," she explained tranquilly. "He was always a friend of the family."

"We're first cousins," said the viscount shortly.

"And once—once, in India—he fought for my good name," she continued, easily.

"The good name of the family," the cousin corrected—unnecessarily it seemed to Sir Caryll.

"It came to the same thing," she added.

Carleigh wished that the other man would go back to the game and thus end this bewilderingly frank conversation. And the next instant he did, and they two were alone again.

"You *have* had a hard time," he said, quickly. "I fancy I ought to know all about the story, Mrs. Darling, but I don't. I haven't any connections in the army. We are all diplomatic people. It's very stupid in us, I suppose."

"Not quite that," she returned. "I've sometimes thought that we are stupid to go in for the army so strongly. But it is all an affair of blood and bigness, I imagine."

He laughed. "Blood and bigness," he repeated. "How cleverly you put it! And with us it is—"

"Brains and littleness," she cut in.

Then he laughed again, outright. So outright that those at the tables heard, threw up their heads, listened, and then bowed their heads again, masking significant smiles.

"There is no one like Nina," Lady Bellingdown commented under her breath.

"Oh, he is saved, if you mean that," Sir George declared lightly.

"I told you so," reminded the duke, proudly. "I said: 'Nina will wake him up.' She always wakes everybody up. She says what you wouldn't think she'd say, and it wakes one up most uncommonly."

And they went forward with their game. For that matter so did Mrs. Darling and Carleigh.

"Are you stopping here for long?" he asked.

"For as long as I can stand it."

"You mean—"

She clasped her hands behind her head and gazed intently into the very soul of the embers. "I mean that I soon choke and stifle in the close air of man. I am happier alone."

Freshly startled, he stared afresh. "It's always bad, then?" he asked sympathetically. "You don't get over it?"

"It's always bad." She paused a second or more, and then turned toward him, her eyes narrowed in that characteristic style which Kneedrock had described so harshly.

"But it is glorious, all the same," she cried with an odd little soft rapture. "You haven't come to that yet. You've not gone on to where one fights for the mere joy of loving love, in life, as one fights for breath in a suffocating pit. Why shouldn't I love to love? I love to do it. I love it all. I'd double the stakes at every loss, if I could. Do you follow me?"

"N-no," stammered Sir Caryll, a trifle stunned by the sudden shock of a boomerang idea. "N-no—I—er—I—"

"But you will to-morrow," she declared, nodding at him. "You will to-morrow. I'll go first and you'll follow."

"Oh, if you mean that—"

"I never give up," she asserted. "I never will—"

"Does it look hopeless?" he broke in, laughing.

"I will tell you that to-morrow."

"When to-morrow?"

"We'll get off an hour before luncheon. I'll be down here waiting for you at a quarter to twelve precisely."

"You'll find *me* waiting," said Carleigh, smiling.

# CHAPTER XII

## THE JOY OF INTEREST

The next morning the sun soared radiant. Carleigh, handed his stick by his valet, was conscious, too, of a personal soaring radiance: a condition so unusual and unexpected that it metaphorically struck him in the face.

"Oh, no," he reminded his lovelornity with emphasis, "it cannot possibly be!" Yet he knew joy to be all over him.

Not even the fourteen rare old engravings of early Christian martyrs and their martyrdom, with which the corridor was cheerfully embellished, could dampen his bubbling gaiety.

One cannot, indeed, take much interest in hangings and burnings and other tortures when one is going to have an hour alone in the open with a pretty woman who says things that—as the duke put it—you wouldn't think she would.

In the hall below he found the great black staghound—sole symbol of her mourning—waiting in majestic solitude beside a chair that bore a slender switch of a cane and a rough gray Burberry.

Mrs. Darling, herself, was not there; but the hound, the cane, and the coat—the morning being cold—showed that she had not forgotten her appointment.

Carleigh strolled over to the fire and lighted a cigarette. He felt so delightedly content. Presently his hostess swept quickly in from another room and nodded at him with the good cheer that no one had of late dared exhibit before him.

"You're going out with Nina," she said, evidently well-posted. "We're all driving to lunch with the men in the open. Can't you and she find your way there, too?"

"We'll try, but don't wait for us," he answered, really blithely.

Then it abruptly rushed over him how much he had been eased of his pain in these few hours, and he went up and kissed Lady Bellingdown's cheek impulsively, with: "Oh, Aunt Kitty! When will you have a spare minute for me, alone? I've such a lot to tell you."

In his way he was as uncontrolled as Nina, and quite as given to bursting forth in unwary speech.

"Tell it all to her, dear boy," she advised, looking up into his flushed brightness. "She's such a sweet, sympathetic woman. And she'll help you. She helps every man. She has wonderful ways with her."

"You recommend her as a confidante?"

"Yes, indeed."

"But why, aunt? Why?"

"Oh, she has a way with her that brings men out of themselves. I don't know just what it is, because I'm a woman, and she never has it with women. But I know that she has it. She was always like that. And then she grew more so after her

marriage. There was a while when no one knew just what the end would be, but she pulled through quite straight."

"There was a story?"

"When a woman is magnetic, my dear Caryll, there is always a story."

"Who will tell it me?"

"She will, if you ask her, I fancy."

He smiled again. "I am so interested. If you knew the relief—the rest—the absolute joy of feeling an interest in something again!"

"I know, dear boy. It's been bad. But Nina will help you. She helps every one. Ah, here she is now!"

And she was; tall and withy as a willow-wand; more wondrous, it seemed to Caryll, by daylight than nightlight, because more clearly seen.

"Good-morning! Good-morning!" she cried, a hand to each. "What a glorious day! The bang-bang of the guns woke lazy me; but I thanked Heaven that I was a woman and went to sleep again directly."

Lady Bellingdown laughed, and kissing her hand to both, vanished quickly through a curtained archway opposite.

Then Mrs. Darling all at once altered. First she glanced at Carleigh, and then at the floor. "Have you been waiting long?" she queried.

"Hours," he declared, gloating over her confusion. He picked up the coat and offered her the cane. With a quick, fleeting smile, she took both; and then they were off; the funereal Tara at their heels.

Across the Italian garden they went, and then across the Dutch garden, and the French garden to the genuine English park. When their feet clapped gaily on the smooth, sodden mosaic of leaves, he turned to her, exclaiming:

"Life has become suddenly full again for me. I am really happy. And yet this time yesterday I was a misanthrope—a blighted creature. Think of that! It is your witchcraft."

But she shook her head.

"No," she contradicted firmly. "Not my doing at all. Manlike you wish to attribute all good and evil to some cause. But as a matter of fact you were already cured. I am but the 'top-stones of the corner.'"

"No, no, not at all," he denied gravely. "I was blighted, I—"

"Then you are blighted still," she declared. "What has happened is that you are just enough intoxicated to forget for a little. I've benumbed you. That's all."

"I beg to differ."

"Differ to beggary, if you will. Nevertheless, I know. I know I am right."

"I am divinely happy. I—" he began again. But she went on unheeding:

"We shall flirt, you and I, and we shall go pretty far. But we shall not fall in love and we shall not marry, because of two very excellent reasons."

"And they are?"

"A man and a woman."

"What woman? What man?"

She tossed her head in a way that might have signified anything.

"You mean that we love others—you and I?" he hazarded.

She laughed distractingly.

"Perhaps you love," he pursued. "But I am heart-free."

She walked on in silence.

"I don't ask the name of the man, for that's your affair. But no woman lives who can stand in the way of my bolting with you or marrying you if I choose."

"You are very positive," she said at length. "What if I am the woman and you are the man?"

For a second or two he stared blankly. "Oh," he said, crestfallen. "I see. Thanks!"

"Don't let us discuss such serious subjects as ourselves," she proposed. "Look at the sky and the swans—but be careful not to slip—and recollect that forgetfulness was the nectar upon which the gods subsisted."

"Quite so. There!" He squared his shoulders, but he looked at neither the sky nor the swans. He looked directly at her.

"I suppose I have just proposed to you and been refused; but, after all, what does it matter? Already I have forgotten the trifling episode. I've drunk of the gods' nectar. It saves one's reason occasionally. Because I have been able to forget, I have been able to live."

"You deserve the cross for heroism," she said. "I think you are wonderful."

He colored becomingly. "Spare my modesty," he pleaded. Then: "Look here! Now that we're quite alone, tell me your story."

"Tell me yours first."

"Oh, mine's so very hideous. But I don't mind telling you. My fiancée's mother, who had been out of the country for years, came back to find her little girl grown up, so she—well, she managed to break it all off—"

His voice slipped a note, and, turning, she saw that his face was working.

"I can't tell you more," he said, with a choke. "I'm not as brave as I thought. I can't help remembering. You'll find plenty to tell you that I loved the mother. She wasn't very old, you know."

"Why didn't you marry her?"

At her question he stopped short in the path.

"What's the matter?" she asked, turning.

"Why, I never thought of that way out," he answered, going white and red alternately.

"What a funny man you are!" cried Nina, startled. "Perhaps you will marry the mother yet. How old is she?"

"About thirty-seven."

"And rich?"

"Oh, yes. She's an American." As if riches and Americans were synonymous.

"Better marry her."

"I like you better just at present," returned Carleigh.

"Thanks, awfully. But I've told you what woman will stand in the way of your serious views about me. Besides, I'd never dare risk such a man as you. Everything will right itself, some day."

"Nothing can be right ever."

"Never?"

"Never."

"Ah, you've not told me all the story then?"

"Of course not. I never shall. I never can."

For a few steps they walked on in silence.

"Do tell me your—your story," he faltered. "Tell me what you can—what you'd like to."

"My story? My stories, you mean. I'm all stories." And she laughed her merry laugh.

"But *the* story?"

"Oh, *the* story!" She paused for the space of a heart-beat, and her eyes were serious. "Even that began with my birth," she continued. "It's rather long, you see, to tell on a short walk. It's a war story. I was born to battle; and not being a man, and medieval, was appointed to eternal combat with myself."

"With victory for the prize," he suggested.

She thought for a second; then dropped her head. "I don't know. No one can tell. Perhaps—perhaps not."

"But you can tell me some of it—me," he insisted.

"But it's so hopeless," she said wearily. "And you're really too young to know what I mean when I talk. Then, too, it's such a horrid story. Just as yours is, you know.

"Mixed love and straight-out killing haven't been respectable since the time when Catherine de' Medici shoved every pleasant way of getting on under a cloud. How I do wish I had lived when you could kill a man by shaking hands! If that were possible now, I know what I'd do to lots of men."

"What?" asked Carleigh, quickly.

"I'd never shake hands any more. I'd kiss them all instead. It would be so humane and blameless—and nice."

He felt all the blood in him bound out of his heart to meet her whimsy.

"You darling!" he cried ecstatically. "What could be nicer? A fig for your tragedies. We'll just flirt—and—and—"

He seized her and was drawing her into a close embrace. His face was scarlet, his pupils distended.

"The guns are just there on the hill," she said, ever so calmly. "Better wait!"

Carleigh released her with reluctance, but his expanded pupils were still devouring her.

"I *am* a new man," he whispered passionately. "Darling, oh, darling! I'm so glad I came."

Neither of them saw the tall form of Lord Kneedrock, who, at a little distance stood watching them, a bitterly satirical smile upon his lips.

# CHAPTER XIII

## SURPRISES FOR THE BROKEN-HEARTED

A little beyond, the forty beaters stood huddled together like a pack of hounds.

The head-keeper, that personage of indescribable majesty and humility, was consulting with Bellingdown, who looked very anxious.

The duke was taking a last sip and a nibble, while his hostess begged him not to hurry. All the rest were lighting cigarettes.

"You smoke, of course," Carleigh was asking Mrs. Darling.

"Of course."

"Shall I give you a light?"

"Thanks."

"I stick to a pipe," said Kneedrock, dragging one out of his huge, shapeless pocket.

"It is a nice thing," volunteered the duke. "I often smoke one at home. I say, Doody, don't I often smoke a pipe at home?"

"Yes, he does," the duchess verified. "He smokes one all the time at Puddlewood."

"Shall we join the guns?" Lady Bellingdown asked, rising and addressing the women generally.

"I can't," refused Charlotte Grey. "I can't see things killed. Sometimes they cry out, and it makes me dreadfully ill."

Bellingdown turned about with a worried air. "Here, Greggy, what do you say? Hemmings thinks the spinney there to the left. I'd thought only of Daggs Farm, and so on by the mill."

Sir George, whom they called "Greggy," looked as if the whole of the Far East was hanging on his nod. He silently considered.

"I tell m'lud that the spinney's quite fresh, sir," said Hemmings, touching his cap respectfully. "M'lud saw a fine bag off there last year, sir."

"What do *you* say?" pleaded Lord Bellingdown, quite visibly agitated.

The other men gathered about, all obviously perturbed.

"Hand me my field-glasses," commanded Sir George. "My man has them."

Sir George's man, carrying Sir George's two guns, came hurriedly forward with Sir George's field-glasses. Every one pressed close and glanced back and forth between the baronet and the spinney, which was an exceedingly ordinary spinney with some fir-trees beyond.

The owner of the field-glasses raised them, adjusted them, lowered them, readjusted them, raised them again and took a long look.

"I should toss up for it," he decided, without deciding.

"What an old fool he is!" the duchess observed confidentially into the ear of Charlotte Grey, who started visibly.

"Who do you mean?" asked Lady Grey sharply.

Then the duchess started, too.

"I thought you were Nina Darling," she confessed. "I meant the head-keeper, of course. Who else could I mean?"

"Oh!" said Lady Grey coldly.

"But where is dear Nina?" the duchess blandly inquired. "Such a charming person! She always livens one up so. I'm really very fond of Nina. We do so enjoy her whenever she comes to Puddlewood."

"She's just getting out of sight there," replied Lady Grey, still more coldly. "That's Sir Caryll with her. It seems he's given up shooting since his jilting."

"Shall we go on with the guns?" queried Lady Bellingdown. "It's just as you like, duchess."

"Oh, if I can do as I like I'll go home with the china and the butler and the pony-cart," her grace answered. "It would be something new to do."

Kneedrock laughed and hooked his arm through hers.

"I've a nice upholstered car turning up at three," he told her in an undertone. "Be patient and I'll provide for you."

"But there are two cars waiting now," said the duchess. "Oh, I see. You're making a joke. But such a poor joke, Nibbetts, dear."

"Do let us settle on what to do," begged the hostess. "Shall we walk with the guns or go home at once?"

"And is it to be the spinney or Daggs Farm?" cried the host. "Come, now, we can't wait about all day, you know."

"But we often wait about an hour after luncheon at Puddlewood, you know," objected the duke. "I say, Doody, don't we often wait about an hour after luncheon at Puddlewood?"

"Mrs. Darling and Sir Caryll are quite out of sight now," announced Charlotte Grey, slinging her blue scarf around her throat. "I wonder what they're saying."

As a matter of fact, at just that second they were not saying anything. They were stopping and trying to think, and their pulses were interfering rather too much for cool comfort.

They were at the Lower Stream Stile, which was a picture spot in the park. At the moment the picture had the deeper meaning always added by human figures.

Nina sat on the second step of the stile, and Sir Caryll sat on the lowest, cuddled in close by her feet. He had her hand in his and his eyes were raised to her face.

Affairs had moved on very fast—even since luncheon half an hour ago.

"Tell me the truth—your husband is really dead?" the man demanded passionately. "It isn't some horrible spasmodic playfulness of yours to talk loneliness and all that while really—"

"No," answered Nina, nestling her fingers closer and speaking in a warm, low voice. "No, he's really dead. He was cleaning his guns and one was loaded. So careless in his boy, wasn't it? No, it's quite all so. Really, I am marriageable, eligible, and all the rest of it."

Carleigh kissed the nestling fingers. "To think that I ever fancied I knew what love was before!" he murmured. "You dear! You darling! May I call you Nina?"

"But you've called me Nina three times already since luncheon."

"Have I? I didn't know it. Dearest, I do not know what I am doing or saying any more. You have me wound all in and out around these fingers.

"Do you know, I thought I knew a little bit about love and about women, and about what men and women could mean to one another. But I was a baby at the game. I knew the lines, don't you know, but I didn't know their expressiveness. I was a child playing with the letters of the alphabet."

"You saw the symbols, but you didn't know their meaning?"

"Exactly so."

"But now you know."

"Now I know."

Nina hugged herself seductively together. "Isn't it deliciously, delightfully dangerous to sit like this and think that if any one should appear anywhere there would be such an outbreak of talk as would even cause last month to pale with envy?"

He kissed her hand. "I'd love it all," he said. "I can hold no dearer wish than to share a scandal with you. 'There goes the man who made off with Mrs. Darling!' How I should look down with contempt on all less clever men!"

Nina rippled gaily. "You know you do this rather well," she praised. "I'm sure that whoever peeped would fain believe the lie."

"I hope so."

"I'm sure of it. I'll tell you how flirting compares with marriage. It's like the best rouge and the real color. You can manage the rouge; the real color you can't."

"You're so charming!" he exclaimed, rather absorbing the hand. "And, oh, I'm so happy! When we go home, should they guess, what will it matter?"

She laid her free hand on his shoulder. "I'd mind," she said gently. "I don't want them to talk. I'm asked to the house to comfort you; not to catch you or cure you."

"But, Nina, my darling, what can it matter? You will marry me some day soon."

She started so violently that the old stile creaked and bid fair to fall down. The staghound, which had been lying quietly on the grass at their feet, started up, too. Carleigh saw his bared fangs and heard his ugly growl.

"Oh, dear!" he protested, trying to pull her back into her place. "Why, what is it?"

"Don't say it!" she cried, in a tone of violent protest. "Don't! Don't! I'm perfectly willing to play with you at love; but don't speak of marriage.

"When men say that word it always brings me to my senses. I remember, then. The good in me comes back. I get my devil into harness once more. Have I sinned again? Have I fallen into the pit afresh? Does this man really and truly mean what he says? No, no, no! Oh, no!"

He did pull her down, and he got his arm around her.

"Why, love! Why, precious!" he murmured soothingly. "Dear, dear girl! Darling Nina!"

"I don't love you!" she cried vehemently. "I never can love you! I do love one man and I can't love any other. It's no use trying."

And then she was out of his grasp, striking him away as roughly as his other betrayer had done.

Carleigh stood paralyzed. In some ways he was little more than a boy. But—if a boyish heart that had swelled with newborn hope was shrunken suddenly by old, wizened despair—there was at any rate one man-thing about him, for presently he turned his back to her and that ghastly moan—the sob of a suffering man—fell on her ear.

At that Nina came down the two mossy steps and looked at him with curious irresolution, her hand pressed against her lips.

There was a long moment. There was another sob. Then, having drawn close to him, she placed her fingers on his arm.

"What can I do?" she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

He sobbed again. "You can love me," he whispered.

"But I love some one else."

"He doesn't love you. I do."

"But I love him."

"And I love you."

He reached back his arm and pulled her around in front of him. His eyes were shut, his face was wet. He held her hard against his bosom. Their lips met.

The staghound's growl ended the long, dumb seconds. It was provoked by Kneedrock, who was beside them.

Carleigh didn't care in the least. In spite of her struggling he held her fast, and his voice rang almost fiercely as he said:

"Don't tell this yet. You see we are going to be married."

"Yes?" observed the viscount, without a trace of wonder or any other emotion. "I wish you joy."

With that she wrenched herself free. "No, no!" she cried in a passion of protest. "It isn't so! It's not true! I have refused him. You know my story, Hal! You know how it is with me!

"I can never marry any man but one. I told him so, but he wouldn't believe it. And then he cried and I kissed him. You tell him that I can never marry him. Tell him everything."

Kneedrock's lip curled in a cynical half-smile.

"It's not my story to tell," was his retort. "I don't understand it. I never do understand love-stories. It's quite enough for me to go about alone without any love-story of my own and come suddenly upon broken-hearted people like yourselves."

Carleigh was deepest crimson. "You might spare Mrs. Darling at all events," he said haughtily.

Kneedrock glanced at him indifferently. "I'm not being rough with any one," he returned. "I haven't any faith in human nature, so stiles never give me shocks."

He paused a brief moment and looked over their heads at the gray sky. Neither of them spoke.

"I say," he added suddenly. "Do you know it's long past three? You'll both be jolly late for tea unless you make haste. I'm off." And he was gone.

"I wonder what will happen next," Nina hazarded as she watched Nibbetts disappear over the crest of the hill. Then she turned to Carleigh with a most enticing smile.

"Well, as we know one another pretty well now, perhaps you had better take me in your arms and kiss me very nicely once more, for it is quite possible we may never have another chance."

Carleigh could hardly place himself. Whether he was in his right senses or had all at once lost his reason—turned lunatic—he couldn't just tell for the life of him.

Nevertheless, he eagerly obeyed her suggestion. He took her in his arms and he kissed her—not once, but thrice.

Then they walked home.

# CHAPTER XIV

## TRUTHS, KISSES, AND DUCAL ENNUI

Carleigh, in his room before dinner that evening, took his head in his hands and wondered.

He wondered a long time, but nothing very clear resulted. Then he rebrushed his disordered hair until it was smooth and shining once more, and went down.

The dinner guests were Mr. Telborn and the Marchioness of Highshire, who happened to be legally man and wife. Both of them were exceedingly lofty personages.

"We wouldn't have come if we had known the Greys were here," the Marchioness said confidentially to Lady Bellingdown, with a slight frown as they sat waiting. "Mr. Telborn never liked him, anyway, and since the affair of—"

The marchioness rested her case there.

"Where's that old Rembrandt copy of yours now?" Telborn asked his host, fixing his glass in his eye and glaring about the room. "It used to hang over there."

"Oh, that's up in London on exhibition," writhed his lordship. "Some vow it's real, you know."

"Real—huh!" returned Telborn expressively.

"Well now, it may be real, you know," said the duke, coming forward with valor. "And if it isn't, ever so many good pictures are copies. I say, Doody, haven't we a lot of copies at Puddlewood?"

But the duchess was otherwise interested.

"You've heard about Emily, of course," she was saying, addressing the marchioness. "The poor thing's run off with the second coachman. A very nice-appearing man, I believe. But it seems that he has one wife already."

"How terrible!" exclaimed Mrs. Darling, who was sitting close to the fire, yet shivered slightly.

"People do run off sometimes," reminded Carleigh, who was standing beside her. "I don't know that it's so terrible. It settles things quickly."

"But not when the man's married; only when the woman's married," the duchess qualified. "When the woman's married it does settle things, of course; but when the man's married, it doesn't.

"I will say this—a husband left in the lurch is always much more obliging at helping to set things straight than is a woman. Think of the Betterton-Nyns! They've been waiting for ten years. So has Captain Leigh."

"I wonder why people who love one another don't bolt oftener," said Carleigh in a low voice to Nina, dragging a chair near as the duchess turned away and perching himself on its arm. "Conventionality is a very ghastly thing, with which I have less patience every hour."

"If they both want to, they generally do," she replied without smiling. "But they must *both* want to."

"Well, then, why don't the Betterton-Byns, or whatever's the name—I never heard of them before—do it, then?"

"Why, they have done it. They've been off for years. In Alaska or somewhere. Betterton-Nyn, not Byn, is the name they took. It's Claudius Synge and Elsie Fairweather, don't you know."

"No, I didn't know," said Carleigh, much shocked. "And who is Captain Leigh?"

"Leigh Fairweather, of course."

"Oh, of course."

After this came the dinner, and then coffee in the rose-pink picture-room, the royal blue picture-room being closed for the week to all but decorators.

Nina had slipped away, and the other women were having a thoroughly enjoyable time talking about her.

"She doesn't really want him, does she?" the marchioness asked Lady Bellingdown. "I thought that there was something very bad about him. If he's so nice, why didn't the mother marry him herself?"

"That's what every one is asking," said the duchess, noting her hostess's embarrassment. "I'm sure I think he's very nice myself. And so pathetic, too. We're going to ask him to Puddlewood later."

"I don't think that Nina will ever marry again," observed Charlotte Grey.

"And yet, you know, she'd be rather dear to marry," the duchess commented. "I always liked Nina Darling. Of course, we understand that she shouldn't. Yet she's very nice."

"Poor Colonel Darling!" sighed Lady Bellingdown reflectively.

"He's at rest now," said the duchess. "Poor soul! And yet," she added, "I did always like Nina."

"We all like her," agreed Lady Bellingdown. "And Caryll, who only came last night, is not only consoled, but desperately in love again, which is a great triumph for her particular talent."

"Yes," the marchioness agreed. "They say Caryll did have a hard time. Fancy! A mother jealous of her own daughter. Strange persons, those, Americans!"

"She almost killed Caryll," declared his aunt warmly. "The poor fellow was nearly crazed."

"He might do worse than marry Nina," the duchess decided. "There are a few years' difference in their ages, but that doesn't matter nowadays since Lady Grandison's leap in the dark. Ten years' difference there, and they're like a pair of turtle-doves."

"I know," said Lady Grey in her meditative way. "It wouldn't be bad, of course; but, then, Nina would never have him. She has her own story, you know."

"I know," said the duchess.

Nina, coming out of her own room to run back downstairs, ran into the arms of a man instead.

"Oh!" she cried in surprise; not in alarm.

"I saw you run away," laughed the right man's voice in her ear. "So I ran, too. Kiss me again and I'll make a bargain with you. Let me make all the love I please, and I'll promise not to speak of marriage again."

He had her locked fast against his breast. "You promise me something," she suggested. "Go to Harry—to Kneedrock, you know—and get him to tell you my story. You'll never want to marry me then; and I'll have a clear conscience."

"What rot! Fancy my fussing over your story! What do I care about your story?"

"But you must know it," she insisted, "because, you see, it will make it easier for both of us. After a while—when you've married that girl—you'll be glad that I was honest with you."

He was kissing her.

"I shall never marry the girl," he declared. "I shall marry you."

She laid her cheek against his shoulder. "If you marry me I shall get rid of you somehow," she whispered. "I love love, but I simply hate husbands. It won't do to marry me. You ask Kneedrock. He knows."

She could feel his heart flopping about in his bosom.

"You—you extraordinary creature!" he faltered.

"Yes, isn't it awful?" she asked. "I think myself it is shocking. But I can't help it. I am made so."

He tried to laugh and failed.

"Do you want to kiss me any more?... No?... Then step off my gown and I'll run back downstairs."

Sunday went off well. Some went to church and some didn't. Carleigh didn't. Nina didn't. They went for a walk instead.

"This is heavenly," said the man. "I'm so happy. You are an enchantress. I feel that before I met you I never knew what anything meant."

"Men all say that," she affirmed. "Men are very stupid. They get a little chain of pearly speeches together, and then they expect women to fancy that no other man ever even so much as saw a pearl before."

"Say what you please," he cried, all but caroling in his joy. "Only let me be by to hear, and let there be woods ahead where I may kiss you again."

"It's odd you should enjoy kissing me," she returned placidly. "It's droll. That's another thing I find charming in men. It's the energy with which they kiss a new woman."

Carleigh laughed heartily. "How rippingly you put it!" said he. "Come now, how many men have kissed you?"

"This year or in my whole life?"

"Either."

She considered a little and then she yawned. "I don't see the good in troubling to count. I know now that you are not really in love, so why bother further?"

"Bother further? Not really in love? What do you mean?"

"Why, my dear boy, don't get huffed. Surely even you know that a man really in love can't put up with a conversation like that. Of course, I'm asked here to cure you of the blues; not to plunge you into a fresh trap. You know that. And it's nice to see how well I do it."

"So you think I'm not really in love, eh?"

"I jolly well know you aren't."

There was a slight pause while Carleigh thought fast and furiously. Nina walked on, *insouciante*. He was the least of her troubles.

After a little they entered the woods. Then he finished reflecting and took up talking again.

"So you are just flirting with me?"

"Only that."

"And yet you know as well as I do that in every flirtation there lies the seed of a pure and passionate love."

She shook her head. "Not with me. My flirtations are pure, but my passionate love is all seed—gone to seed."

"The seed can be replanted," he suggested.

"More than planting must go toward my future harvest. I tell you frankly that my spade-and-harrow days are over."

"Let me spade and harrow."

"Oh, what rot it all is!" she exclaimed abruptly. "I'm so deadly weary of everything."

"Quite so," he interrupted eagerly. "So am I. We'll go away. I'll get a post somewhere. And we'll shunt all our troubles."

"I'd grow tired too soon," said Nina slowly. "You see, you wouldn't grow tired, but I should."

Carleigh hardly knew how to take that.

"I'm so interesting," she continued—"so fascinating—what you will. And a man always enjoys my talk while it's going on. But I'm tired of my own talk and want a change."

He smiled. "Keep still," he said, "and perhaps I'll give you one."

"That's a very old joke," she rebuked sorrowfully. "Oh, I can be quite certain of being bored to death with you. I mustn't consider you for a minute."

"What's to be done about me, then?"

"Oh, you will make up with the girl some day, and then—" she stopped.

"And then?"

"Oh, how you will hate yourself!"

Meanwhile—or later, between church and luncheon—Waltheof, in the billiard-room, was chalking a cue. "It will be a good lesson," he said. "He needs a shaking up."

"He'll get a shaking up," said the duke. "I say, Nibbetts, won't Carleigh get a shaking up?"

"It's wicked—all of it," declared Kneedrock gruffly. "I've never loved a woman in my life"—which was a lie—"but I've notions about things. Nina is unreasonable."

"You think so because you've never loved a woman," said Sir George.

"A woman is unreasonable because she is a woman—" began Nibbetts, but Sir George cut in before he could finish:

"And a man's unreasonable because she is a woman, too," he laughed. "Don't preach, but walk out and find them, if you feel it is really your duty to chaperon your cousin. All I can say is what I've often said before—poor Darling!"

"No, I won't go out and find them," Kneedrock refused, pitching his huge bulk down on the window seat. "It's none of my business."

"More's the pity," was Sir George's comment. "I'll tell you what I think. It ought to be your business. That's what every one of us thinks."

An ugly white look overspread the viscount's rugged visage, and the subject was dropped.

Later, however, in the privacy of his wife's room, the duke said more—much more.

"Doody, it's rotten how they go on here about dear Nina." That was how he began it. He repeated himself a great deal, and he appealed to the duchess for verification with every other sentence. But his finish was almost impassioned.

"I'm getting very sick of the whole thing, I'll be dashed if I'm not. Of course she shot her husband, or Kneedrock shot him, and of course Carleigh is in love with his fiancée's mother.

"But I say it's very tiresome to have to hear about 'em all the time. I'm very tired of hearing of 'em all the time. I say, Doody, you know I'm tired of hearing of 'em all the time. Don't you, Doody?"

"Yes," answered the duchess, "and I am, too. I'm sure I don't want to hear any more about them now. Do ring the bell for Olivette, and go to your room."

# CHAPTER XV

## A LAST WALK AND A LAST APPEAL

Monday, of course, meant the breaking up of the party and the conclusion of Nina's mission. She had done what she could and she was delighted to think that for once in her misguided career she had actually performed a service not wholly selfish.

As Carleigh emerged from the breakfast-room, where he and his aunt were among the last, Lady Bellingdown slipped her arm through his, saying:

"Well, my dear boy, we've done you good, haven't we?"

He glanced back over his shoulder to indicate whom he had in mind—for Nina had come down but a minute before—last of all—and said, smiling: "She's a wonder."

"Isn't she? Doesn't she say the most startling things? She's a bomb made animate."

"One is always wondering what will come next," he declared. "I'm wondering it just now."

As he proposed it himself, he might very easily have foreseen it without waste of speculation. They took a long walk—the last of their series of long walks.

"And now," said lover to loved as they went at swinging pace through the park, the staghound as usual at their heels, "where do you go next?"

"Carfen," she answered. "Just beyond the border of Carlisle."

"I know them," he announced delightedly. "I'll get myself asked."

But Nina shook her head. "Don't," she adjured. "Because if you do, I'll leave."

He stopped short in his stride. "In Heaven's name, why?" he asked, his astonishment and dismay undisguised.

"Because I will not have you ruined with your fiancée," was her calm answer.

"My dear girl, I have no fiancée. That's all over."

"Oh, no, it isn't."

"Oh, yes, it is."

She freed the hand he had been holding and then slipped it into his again. Then they walked on.

"Love's never over," she observed wisely. "You'll only care the more for her later." Then she raised her eyes and beheld him deeply crimson.

"With me it's all over," he declared in a voice that shook with mingled feelings. "You don't know of what you speak. It couldn't possibly be made up. I couldn't marry her. I couldn't possibly live in the house with—with—" He stopped short.

"It will straighten out," said Nina calmly. "Such things do, you know."

"Not this kind. Wait—look!" He opened his coat, thrust his hand within, and drew a jewel from some hidden pocket. It was a ring which he held out to her.

She took it from him, and her eyes opened very wide. For a brief space she gazed at him pensively and silently.

"Of what are you thinking?" he asked.

"I was wondering if you had it always with you."

"Always."

"Does your man transfer it from one suit to another?"

He had not expected just that question, but he repeated himself.

"Always," he said a bit stiffly, and added: "Do you want it?"

"Her ring?" she cried with an arrogant little laugh. "No, indeed."

He looked at her and then at the ring in her fingers. It was a rather remarkable pearl, surrounded by faintly bluish diamonds.

"Pearls mean tears," she said.

"Then throw it away!" he commanded irritably. "I don't want it, either."

He saw her, without another word, toss it off into the forest mold. In spite of his command he had not expected that. It gave him a start.

"Perhaps the stones were not real," she said lightly. "Were they?"

"Yes," was all that he could answer.

"What an effective bit that would make on the stage," she suggested. "A man bidding a woman throw away a rope of pearls if she would not accept them as a gift from him, and she taking him at his word and pitching them into the sea."

"You are a strange creature," he commented. "Fancy chucking off a ring in that manner!" It was very plain to be seen that he was annoyed.

"I know," she said seriously. "And I'd chuck myself away just as gaily if it were possible to do it completely. I was on the verge of doing it once in India. I thought anything would be better than the things that were."

"Why didn't you, then?"

"I couldn't. I was prevented. My whole life was changed again at that very instant."

"And what happened?"

"The man I was going to chuck myself away on cut his throat."

Carleigh gasped. "Killed himself?"

"Not quite," Nina answered coolly. "He was prevented, too. But he carries the scar. Every time he shaves he must think of me."

"My dear girl," he remonstrated. He was still thinking of the ring. It was of such value that he began to question whether she was quite in her right mind. "You do let one in for thrilling experiences. That I must say."

"Now as then," she admitted, stopping short. "I've been very horrid," turning her head until her eyes looked directly into his. "I'm not just myself to-day. I don't know why I threw your pearl away. Come back with me and I'll pick it up."

"Can you find it, do you think?" he asked, palpably pleased.

"Of course. I threw it on the bare roots. I meant to pick it up on our way back."

He was smiling now, as transparent as any schoolboy. "You are most awfully odd, you know," he said, vastly solaced. "But if we pick it up, you must let me put it on."

"No, no."

"Yes, yes."

"Well, if you insist. But it will mean nothing."

When they reached the spot both looked searchingly about. Carleigh went down on his knees and soiled his sensitive hands delving among the bare roots. Nina tossed aside bits of mold with the toe of her boot. But the ring was not found.

"Never mind; it's been a thrilling experience. You said so yourself," she remarked lightly. "And it isn't every day that a man gets a really new sensation, you know. And that was utterly new to you, I'm sure."

But Carleigh was far from accepting it with the same indifference. He made an effort to appear nonchalant, but throughout the rest of their walk he again and again relapsed into silence. The loss of the ring would not be kept down.

When finally they returned to Bellingdown it was to find the house full of smoke. The party lunched in the murk, choking between bites.

"That chimney always draws badly," her ladyship informed everyone with the utmost calm.

Then all the doors were opened, and they had coffee in the billiard-room.

Carleigh ate no luncheon and drank no coffee.

"They've had trouble," whispered Lady Grey to Kneedrock significantly, as they stood together by one of the billiard-room windows. "See!" she added, pointing. "He's been walking alone. I do wonder if he really did offer himself and if she really did refuse him."

Carleigh came in a few moments later, and he was evidently depressed.

"I'm perfectly sure she refused him," Lady Grey decided. But Kneedrock only shrugged his broad, burly shoulders.

Carleigh had been to search more carefully for the ring. But he had not succeeded. And now it came to him gloomily that should he ever renew his engagement with Rosamond Veynol—of course he had no intention of doing so; but if he ever should—he would have to invent some lie and tell it her.

Still, losing the ring—and losing it under such very unpleasant conditions—was the first circumstance that had ever presented the possibility of a renewal to him in a concrete form.

After he had gone up to his room Nina rose from the deep seat where she had been buried in the current *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and crossed to where Nibbetts—Charlotte Grey having left him—now stood alone by the window, staring out over the desolate garden.

"I want to speak to you, Hal," she said earnestly, and turning, saw that the others—all in a waiting mood, as they were about to go—were clustered before the fire. "I want to speak to you, seriously," she emphasized, and laid a hand on his arm.

"It's no use, Nina," he returned roughly, shaking off the plaintive hand. "I am the one man you can't cajole. Don't touch me."

But she still stood there, her eyes downcast. "I want to be good, Hal," she declared, her tone all contrition. "You know how hard I try. I'm trying uncommonly hard this time; but he's so tempting.

"Please do me a favor. I'm not asking much. I'm not really. Chain him up, won't you? Don't—oh, don't let him follow me. No good can come of it. He'll never go back to them if I spoil him any more. Interfere. You can if you will. Do—please, do!"

A look of utter disgust spread over the man's face.

"You make me so devilish angry," he growled below his breath. "One expects this kind of thing from men. But not from women."

"Men go a bit further than I do," she rejoined. "But never mind that. I beg you to do something. Disable him, why don't you? It will be a mercy to us all. He isn't strong enough to stand it, you know. Take him away, at least."

Kneedrock hunched his great shoulders. "The weakling!" It was as if the word were an oath. "And you! Weaker still, yet filled to the brim with the very devil."

"I know I'm bad," she said, in the simplest possible way. "But it's not my fault, Hal. It's the spoiled joy that was never allowed. I'm all for love, and I've never had it. That's all."

"Love!" he sneered with bitterest contempt. "What rot for you to speak of love! Poor Darling, with his brains blown out! The silly ass! I wonder he doesn't—" He had meant to say "haunt you," but he stopped short.

"He does," she replied, quite as if he had finished. "But live men do it more. Listen, Hal—rough as you are you've always been very good to me. Only you and I know how good. Be good again. Take him away. Otherwise I can't promise, and—you know I can't marry him."

"Why don't you marry him, damn it?" he asked cruelly.

She looked up into his face wistfully. "Why don't I?" and there was a quaver in her voice. "Ah, why don't I?"

He made no answer.

"Love is the only safeguard that I have," she continued. "If I didn't love—" she paused.

"Couldn't Carleigh hold you to—to something?"

"Nothing could hold me."

"Oh, hell!" growled the honorable viscount with excessive force.

She smiled serenely. "You will get him away, I know. He's such a boy. You'll do that for me, won't you, Hal?"

"His grace's car," announced the butler, quietly. And the duke started up, loquaciously, as usual.

"I say, we must be getting on. Good-by, old man! I have enjoyed myself. Good-by, Lady Bellingdown! Come, Doody! Good-by, Lady Grey! Come, Doody! Good-by, Wally! Good-by, Nibbetts! Good-by! Good-by! Good-by! I say, Doody, we must be getting on."

For answer to Nina's question, Kneedrock turned on his heel and strolled after the departing duke and duchess.

Later the viscount came upon Carleigh in the smoking-room.

"I'm glad of this," he said, taking a chair near him. "I want to talk with you. I suppose you've said good-by to Mrs. Darling."

Sir Caryll was looking white and disturbed. "I didn't see her," he returned a little thickly. "I'd no idea she was leaving so soon."

"That's her way," Kneedrock made clear. "It isn't polite, or kind, or considerate. But it's her way. I don't know why others put up with it, I'm sure. It's enough that I know why I do."

Carleigh didn't seem to be listening.

"She asked me to say something to you," the other man went on, picking up a copy of the *Tatler* and fingering its leaves. "Something rather nasty. But I said that I'd say it." He could lie perfectly.

"Something rather nasty?" repeated Sir Caryll, staring.

It happened fortunately that they were quite alone.

"Yes"—Kneedrock nodded—"just that. She wants me to carry you off. You see she's singular when it comes to men. She likes new ones. Nothing like the *Tour de Nesle*, of course; but just the novelty of the open play amuses her. You see, you have had your turn. That's the long and short of it. She's tired. She wants you to go away."

For a little Carleigh seemed turned to stone. "But she's gone herself," he said finally.

"Oh, yes. Of course she's gone. But you'll follow. Everybody does. I did. And she doesn't want that."

"How do you know?"

"She told me she doesn't. Besides, I know Mrs. Darling. Come, now, you'd better regard her wishes. I've a box of my own six miles from here, and I'm starting in a few minutes. Say you'll join me. I'll tell you some things, and it will be your salvation."

He paused and waited, but the younger man was still dazed.

"You'll make that other affair straight and marry some day if you break this off while you can. But if you don't stop you'll damage yourself badly. Take my word."

"And she asked you to say this to me?" It was an awful blow to the young baronet's pride. He couldn't quite believe it.

"She did. And it's nothing new for me, either. I'm quite used to saying this sort of thing to friends of hers. It's an old story.

"They had her down to divert your mind and bring you to your senses. She's done it, and now she's through. She's bothered with you until she's tired. A man doesn't last her very long."

Sir Caryll's face turned quickly crimson purple. "I've bored her, you mean?" he questioned in a tone of scorching outrage.

"Well, yes, since you put it that way," answered Kneedrock. "Or, perhaps, she's getting too fond of you. We'll never know the truth. No one knows the truth about a single thing in connection with her."

He held up his left hand and showed a nasty scar near the wrist between thumb and forefinger.

"Nobody knows just how I happened to get that, for example, except her. Nobody knows about her husband's death. I know that I'm generally supposed to have shot him. But I didn't. I wouldn't shoot a husband—too risky business nowadays. *Autres temps, autres moeurs.*"

"Good God!" cried Caryll Carleigh.

"I don't blame you," the honorable viscount said with a sympathetic emphasis that was most unusual for him. "I know how rough it is for you just after your other scrape. But women are made that way."

The younger man lifted his eyes in appeal to the elder.

"Do you understand her, or anything about her?" he asked with pathetic simplicity.

Kneedrock shook his head.

"Come with me," he urged, putting down his paper as he spoke. "Come with me. I'll put you up for a couple of days and you can think it over."

"The duchess has asked me to Puddlewood on Thursday," came the reply, a bit heavily.

"That will be quite all right. Fits in fine."

There was a little pause and Sir Caryll got up and moved uneasily toward the window. There, with his back turned, he halted, shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot and pulling at his mustache.

"It's no use," Kneedrock flung after him. "No use at all. She will never marry. She will never marry any one. She couldn't put up with it, don't you know."

Carleigh turned sharply about. "Did she ever kiss *you*?" he cried. "Could *you* forget it?"

"Kiss me!" calmly and indifferently. "My dear boy, of course she did. She thinks no more of kisses than other women do of touching finger-tips and saying: 'How are you?' She doesn't take osculation seriously, old chap."

Then there was another pause.

At its end Carleigh, speaking very low, said: "Thanks, my dear fellow. You've done your best and I'm grateful. But—I think I'll follow her."

And he did.

# CHAPTER XVI
## WHERE AMOR LED

Love leading, Carleigh followed. On his way to the railway station he wired to the Honorable Julian Archdeacon, Carfen House:

Can you put me up for a few days? Longing to see you and Cecile. Wire answer Junior Carlton Club.

When he got up to town the bid was there waiting for him. So he went down the next morning by a ridiculously—a suspiciously—early train.

The Archdeacons were not deceived in the least by the flattering wording of the telegram. They were strongly inclined to believe that something was up; and when their so suddenly demonstrative guest arrived before luncheon they were quite convinced.

Their first theory, however, which had to do with a certain presence at Cross Saddle Hall, the seat of the Dalgries, their nearest neighbors, was altogether wrong; as they very promptly discovered.

For before Sir Caryll had been in the house an hour Cecile came unexpectedly upon him and Nina Darling, with heads close together, ensconced in a secluded corner of the orangery.

Carleigh, blushing like a school-girl, had sprung up with a start.

"Fancy Mrs. Darling being here!" he cried, in a tone by no means free from embarrassment. "We were at Bellingdown, you know, for the week-end. But I'd no notion she was coming to you. It *was* a surprise."

The poor boy was wofully transparent. It was all Cecile Archdeacon could do to keep her face straight; especially when behind his back Nina deliberately winked at her.

Of course she lost no time in telling Julian. It was far too good to keep.

"By gad!" he cried, laughing. "Nina's never out of character, is she? Think of her catching poor Carleigh on the rebound! No man's immune from her. Even I—"

"Don't flatter yourself," his wife cut in. "You're far too pursy. Nina likes them with a waist."

"Really!" he exclaimed, swallowing his bruised conceit. "I didn't know. I've never noticed her preferences. At that I think you're wrong, Cis. It's just the chap that happens to be 'round."

"It's just the chap that happens not to be round," returned his wife. But Julian, as good, kindly and stupid as he was corpulent, never saw it in the least.

Meanwhile, Nina and Caryll were battling over old scores in the orangery.

"So you want me to go away?" said she.

"No. I want you to come away—with me," said he.

"I told you if you followed me here I'd leave."

"But you didn't mean it. I know you didn't mean it. It was just to test me."

"It was nothing of the sort. I was never more in earnest. I begged Lord Kneedrock to chain you if necessary. Did he say anything to you?"

"Oh, yes, of course. He did have quite a talk with me. Wanted to take me to his shooting-box and all that sort of thing. But I didn't fancy he meant to put me in irons. He was really very kind."

"Nibbetts kind?" queried Nina, plucking an orange leaf and doubling it in her long white fingers. "Then he must have contemplated extreme measures. What was it he said?"

"He said that perhaps you were getting too fond of me. Are you?"

"He didn't. I don't believe you. I can't hear him saying anything like that. Not at all."

"He said it," Carleigh insisted. "I'm wondering if it isn't true. You're afraid I'll carry you off by storm."

"I'm afraid you're very silly," she said, dropping the leaf and yawning without any disguise. "And I do hate to be bored."

"He said I bored you. Did you tell him that?"

"I forget. I may have. It's not unlikely."

"I'm sorry. You never gave any sign until just now. I thought you liked me no end. A woman doesn't let a man—"

She knew what was coming, and he got no farther.

"You'll bore me very much if you go into that. I'm different, you know. I thought I made that plain. I'm not at all like other women—prudish and all that. If a man can get any comfort out of holding my hand I'm not selfish enough to deny him. And you did so need comfort. It isn't at all kind of you to make more of it."

He leaned closer to her. His eyes were very big and there was an undeniable flush on his young, fair cheeks.

"But—you let me kiss you," he said, "and—and you—you—"

"You're trying to say I kissed you back, I suppose. Well, what of it?"

"Doesn't that count? Doesn't that mean anything?"

"Of course it means something. It means that I sympathized. You had been suddenly deprived of the kisses of your fiancée, and I felt how you must miss them. My kisses were purely vicarious. You were starving, and in her place—purely in her place—I fed you."

"And after two days you throw me adrift to starve some more." His tone was very plaintive.

"I can't go on indefinitely, don't you know," returned Nina. "I don't see how you can ask it. Besides it's fully time you went back to her and made it all up. After you've made it up you'll be sorry you ever saw me. My kisses will be on your conscience. You'll feel like telling her, and you won't dare. So—"

"But I shall never make it up. I've said that a dozen times. It's all over and done with forever."

"Then go to her mother. Isn't she kissable?"

"I hate her mother," he groaned.

"How about her father?"

Carleigh drew up his mouth, winked once with both eyes, and stared.

"Are you suggesting that her father might kiss me?" he asked, at length, in highest indignation.

"Oh, dear, no," answered Nina, laughing. "Did it sound like that? I was thinking faster than I talked. I was wondering about her father—her real, own father, I mean. Not the diamond man—not Veynol."

But still he looked at her, a question showing through his eyes.

"Is—is he still alive?"

"You've been reading *British Society*," he charged.

"Was there something in that about him? I swear I haven't seen the nasty rag in years."

"I saw it," he said. "It purported to give the real reason for the breaking off of my engagement. But it wasn't true. What it said I'd never so much as heard."

"What did it say?"

"It slandered Rosamond's father. And I'll not add to the slander by repeating it."

"Oh!" exclaimed Nina. "Then you don't hate the whole family."

But Carleigh made no reply. He shrugged his shoulders and, leaning forward, gazed moodily for a moment at a depending golden globe a half-dozen yards away.

So posed, he was a wistful, pathetic figure, and Nina's heart softened. "I won't go away," she said; and he looked at her, again pleased.

"You mean—"

"I mean I'll be nice to you for just one week more. If—"

"If—I don't care what the 'if' is, if you'll keep your word."

"If you'll promise to go back to the Veynol girl when the week's over."

"But there's no use," he insisted. "We had very bitter words. She would never consent to see me again. I know she wouldn't."

"I'm not saying she would," Nina argued. "Girls can be very stubborn. I'm a little like that myself. Still, you can try, you know. It's that I'm asking. Will you promise?"

He looked unutterable things at her—passion, love, adoration. "I'd promise to kill myself at the end for a week of your kindness. You can be so divinely adorable, when—you like."

"I don't want you to kill yourself. I want you to have life at his fullest—all that's brightest, and best, and most worthy. I want you to have the happiness to which you're destined."

"I'll have bliss for a week, at all events," he declared, edging closer and reaching for the hand nearest him.

"But bliss is so fleeting," she said. "You must have the joy that lasts." She drew her hand away. "Remember, I shall let you make love to me only on that condition."

He didn't in the least understand, and he told her so.

"Why are you so insistent?" he asked.

"Because I'll only do this wicked thing that good may come of it."

"Wicked thing," he repeated.

"It's wicked to her. She loves you—I'm sure she does. And it isn't right that you should console yourself for a silly little tiff by philandering with me or any other convenient woman."

"It isn't philandering," he cried indignantly. "I love you as I never loved before in my life. I'd marry you to-day if you'd say so."

"But I'm not going to say so to-day or to-morrow or any other day. I don't love you in the least. But it amuses me to play at love, and it salves my conscience when I think it's for a good cause. There! That's the whole story," and she threw him a look that conveyed finality.

He debated mentally for the best part of half a minute before speaking. Certainly Mrs. Darling was not flattering. He realized that hers was the stronger character.

"Have you always been so particular?" he asked, unable quite to dissemble his vexation.

"That's just it," she answered. "I haven't been. But I'm resolved to turn over a new leaf. I've sent so many to the devil that my heart is set on sending you to—to Heaven instead."

He opened his arms, hungrily and invitingly, and said:

"I promise. I'll take you on your own terms, since that is the only way."

"As a gentleman you can't break your word, you know," she reminded him. "Hadn't you better wait until after luncheon to think it over?"

"But luncheon won't be served for—"

"Oh, yes, it will," she interrupted. "It's served now. We mustn't set every one talking and gossiping by being late and coming in together." She was already on her feet, and his arms dropped disconsolately. "I'll go at once, and you can think a while and then follow."

"Just one kiss first," he implored.

"Not until you have thought it over. It wouldn't be fair to any one of us three." And she disappeared through the maze of orange trees.

When Carleigh reached the luncheon table it was to find Nina in animated conversation with a tall, bald, red-mustached man who sat on her left. Carleigh found his place opposite, but she barely noticed him, so thoroughly did she appear interested.

Her companion, who proved to be Sir Guy Waldron, the archæologist, just back from an excavating expedition to Sardis, in Asia Minor, was telling her about the buried riches of Cr[oe]sus, and his hope of digging them up.

The spectacle robbed Sir Caryll of his last vestige of appetite, and Lady Mary Wycherley, who couldn't take her eyes off him—she did so love romance—whispered to Mrs. Blythe, the poetess, her nearest neighbor, that it was quite clear the poor boy was eating his heart out in melancholy over the inhuman treatment of "that shocking American girl."

"It's clear he must be eating something in private," returned the poetess, who could be very literal when her pen was idle, "for he hasn't put spoon to his soup, or fork to these delicious salmon cutlets."

In point of fact Carleigh was, for the moment at least, an impenetrable puzzle to every one present, save only Mrs. Darling and his host and hostess.

They couldn't at all understand how, with the scandal still fresh in society's mind, he could face a house full of persons, many of whom were comparative strangers and a few of whom he had never before met.

And the oddest part of it was that most of them never solved the riddle, owing to the manner in which fate chose to shape immediately succeeding events.

Directly after luncheon the entire party went motoring with Cragmoor Castle as the objective, and by prior arrangement Mrs. Darling occupied a seat next to Sir Guy, who drove his own car.

Carleigh, to his utter dismay, found himself with the poetess and four very young persons who did nothing but giggle.

They had tea at the castle, and Caryll strove valiantly to disentangle Nina from the party for a much-desired *tête-à-tête*; but with the poorest success.

In spite of every effort he was forced to share her with Captain Belden, a very loquacious young gentleman with an exaggerated idea of his own wit. And the fact that Nina laughed appreciatively at his dullest jokes plunged poor Caryll into deeper and deeper gloom.

On the way back to Carfen, Mrs. Blythe chose to dilate at considerable length upon Masefield and his new school, which she couldn't in the least understand, and denounced as lacking in every element of true poetic art.

Nor did Carleigh's monosyllabic comments and long silences in any wise discourage her. The young people giggled as persistently as the poetess talked, and altogether the journey was as nearly maddening as anything he had ever experienced.

Had it not been for the gladdening trust in a long evening with Nina under the stars his reason must have quite succumbed. As it was it merely tottered and threatened.

With the true Briton convention is a fetish. It ranks in his worshipful regard next to the throne—I was going to say above the throne.

Carleigh might kick over the traces of betrothal and marriage, incited by an unconventional matron from the States, but he couldn't think of defying the convention which forbids gentlemen to leave the dinner-table until the ladies have had a quarter of an hour, at the very least, to themselves in which to exchange confidences.

He didn't care in the least for the liqueurs and the cigars, nor for the gross stories which were not at all droll. There was only one thing he did care for.

He wanted to tell Nina he had thought it over very carefully, while Mrs. Blythe talked of Masefield and the callow ones giggled, and that he was more than ever determined to accept her proposition with its accompanying condition in the utmost good faith.

But it never once entered his mind to desert his fellow men until they were of one mind and ready to rejoin the ladies.

He did manage, however, to change to a seat nearer the door so that he might be one of the first in the drawing-room and gain Nina's side before the coveted place was pre-empted.

"At last!" he breathed with a sigh as she drew her skirt aside for him. Fashion having decreed scant skirts the action was more a habit than an actuality.

"You've missed me, then?" She spoke most casually.

"Have I? I've been absolutely wretched. I've been longing for you every second of the time. Do let us go out on the terrace or in the park—or somewhere that we can be quite alone together. I have so much to say to you."

His gaze was devouringly bent upon her eyes, and he was sure that he saw commiseration there. She did sympathize with him, then. She would go. In five minutes he would be holding her in his arms. But he misinterpreted.

"I'm so sorry, Caryll," she said, and it was like a dash of iced water. "I'm so sorry. But I've promised to play bridge. See, they are bringing in the tables."

"You mustn't," he commanded. "I can't let you. I've been waiting hours—oh, so many, many, long, long hours. I can't—"

And then he was conscious that some one was standing at his elbow, speaking. It was Sir Guy Waldron—and he was saying:

"Now, Mrs. Darling, if you are quite ready."

# CHAPTER XVII

## THE INTERVENTION OF THE UNFORESEEN

Carleigh stalked off in a pet and smoked innumerable cigarettes, not under the stars, but under heavy low-sailing clouds which swept in from the Solway Firth. His mood was as sullen as the night.

He thought unutterable things, walking to the farthest limits of the park—and farther. It was near to midnight when he returned, his light top-coat dripping, for the wind and the clouds had brought with them a chill and drenching mist.

He paused in the hall. Voices penetrated from the drawing-room. The bridge game was still on. He climbed the broad staircase, gazed down upon by Archdeacons of past centuries in time-blackened frames. On the landings stands of armor, reflecting dim lights, appeared as sentinels.

He found his valet drowsing.

"Fetch me a brandy-and-soda at once," he ordered. "Better make it a decanter and two sodas," he added. "I'm chilled to the bone."

He might have added that his spirits were low, and required strenuous lifting measures. But he was not the sort that shares emotions with one's servants.

He drank the pegs when they came, dismissed the man, and was almost pleased to find himself drowsy. Had he been conscious, it would have surprised him to realize that he dropped into the deepest of deep slumbers directly his head rested on a pillow.

He slept soundly for four hours, and then awakened with a start and sat bolt upright in bed. He was choking. The room was full of smoke.

Coughing like an unmuffled gas engine, he got his feet to the floor, crept to where he imagined the light-switch was—found it by a miracle and turned it on.

But there was no answering illumination. Somewhere the rubber insulation had been burned away and the current short-circuited.

This fact of itself told him that the fire was no tiny matter. Carfen House was ablaze, and probably some of its inmates were still sleeping, unwarned, as he had been. Nina! She was his first thought. Was Nina in peril?

Every minute the smoke in the room grew more dense. It seemed to him that he would never be able to find his coat or a dressing-gown; and even seconds were perhaps precious.

Desperately, at length, he snatched a blanket from the bed, drew it about him, and groped for the door. Half-blinded, his eyes smarting, he jerked it open and a scorching blast struck him in the face.

The smoke here was hot and lurid. And he dropped to his knees and crept. One way he could see flashes of lambent flame. The other way was black as night itself. But he chose it, and half-crawled, half-leaped, questioning that he would ever be able to reach the open alive.

In his ears was the roar of a thing more ferocious, more devouring than any beast of the jungle. And mingled with the roar was the crackling sound of havoc.

For what seemed like hours the thing was ever at his heels, gaining—gaining. Weird, horrid monsters appeared to rise out of the murk to threaten and affright.

But with aching chest, gripping his blanket closer against a rain of sparks that showered on him as he fled, he flogged his flagging soul to fresh and stronger effort.

Again and again he stumbled and fell—only to recover himself and plunge waveringly, staggeringly onward.

And then, all at once, he was conscious of a cooler breath on his brow and cheeks. The smoke thinned. His nostrils sucked in greedily a refreshing, life-giving damp.

He had reached an open window and was stretching far out into the grateful mist and sea-scented air of God's wide, unconfined world.

A tongue of flame licked his blanket and ran up and out around his neck, scorching his hair. The fire was on him. It had caught up. It was reaching for him to drag him back.

He felt its withering hand clutch at his shoulder. Its fingers seared through the lamb's-wool that cloaked them—through the silken mesh of his pajama coat beneath.

Death chanted a victorious pæan in his ears, as with open arms it waited at his back. And before him something beckoned that would not be denied.

Out there in the dark it stood with wooing finger and cool, sweet breath, waiting, too. But whether it was death's other self—or whether it was life—he could not know.

His blanket dropped—a flag of flame behind him. And he pitched forward, turning and returning, as his body dropped downward into the blackness below.

And, oddly enough, as he fell there was before him a woman's face—but not that of Nina Darling. It was younger, frailer, less trained by experience, and no less beautiful—the face of Rosamond Veynol.

He fell on his back upon a slanting slate roof, jarring his briefly recovered breath quite out of him for the moment. And then he rolled, over and over and over—three times—to drop again. This time into a mass of tall dahlia bushes and the soft, spongy mold beneath.

"Not a scratch on you, by Jove!" It was the Honorable Julian who exclaimed it, in unqualified, exuberant delight, as two of the grooms who had heard the fall and hurried to pick up the fallen object, having led him into the glow of the pyre that had once been Carfen House, rubbed their trained hands over bones, joints, muscles, and sinews without eliciting a single protesting cry.

"A miracle! Thank God! Thank God!"

But Carleigh was not so sure about the scratches. He had certainly hit his back a resounding thump on that slate roof, and though he didn't feel it now—who ever did

feel anything in the relief of regaining life after having calmly, or not calmly, said good-by to it—what might he not feel to-morrow?

In point of fact he was still dazed, as he might well be. He stood gaping, mute, an almost hideous figure with blackened face, singed hair, and rent and soil-stained garments.

An excited, questioning group pressed about him. Every one seemed talking at once, but the only words that made any impression were Archdeacon's "Not a scratch," and his fervent "Thank Gods!"

The rescued—every one had been got out in some shape or other—were gathered on the edge of a wood at some distance from the conflagration and to windward of it.

The main building was doomed. Even now, it was little more than a shell enclosing a furnace at white heat.

The garages, stables, and kennels were never in danger; but the head gardener's cottage had gone up in a puff after catching from a rain of sparks wind-hurled against its thatched roof.

Some one thrust Carleigh into a great coat. He found he was wearing one an hour later, but remembered nothing of how he came by it. And he had been provided with slippers as well.

He was sitting on a damp, moss-grown boulder, and a stout woman, with strands of gray hair falling limply and dankly about her face, was addressing him in piteous tones.

The reflection from the fire made the night three times as bright as the ordinary English fine day, and he noted that his companion was wearing a bath-towel pinned about her in lieu of a skirt.

Her adipose shoulders were draped in a velour table-cover, and her right hand pressed against her ample bosom a framed photograph, with the glass-side outward. In general terms she was picturesque in the extreme.

"I do hope you can oblige me with a cigarette, dear Sir Caryll!"

They were the first words he remembered since Julian's repeated "Thank God!" The voice sounded more or less familiar, yet he couldn't place it, and the picture the lady presented failed to help him.

It was at that instant that he became conscious of the great coat. In the hope of possibility to provide he ran his hands through its pockets. All he discovered was a soiled handkerchief and a bit of string.

"Sorry," he said, "but I fear I left my case in my room. You see, I came away in something of a hurry."

He didn't in the least mean to be funny, and the stout woman took him quite seriously.

"You're the tenth man I've asked," she said, "and they've all said the same thing."

"Perhaps some of the ladies—" suggested Carleigh.

"No," came the reply. "There's not a cigarette among them. But they seem to have everything else, from jewels to tooth-brushes. Mrs. Blythe, I hear, saved her manicure set and left behind a manuscript poem that would have made lasting fame for her. It's really too bad."

Carleigh, still perplexed, looked at her again. There was something suggestive of—But no, that couldn't be. The Marchioness of Highshire had the most beautiful golden-bronze hair in the kingdom.

Then he stole a look at the framed photograph. Perhaps that would help. The glare from what was left of Carfen House made it stand out as though spotted by a calcium. It was of a small, wizened old man with gray whiskers. Certainly not Mr. Telborn.

She caught him stealing the look and turned the photograph over.

"It's the only thing I saved," she explained.

"Fancy!" murmured Sir Caryll.

"It's the marquis, you know. It's my most valuable possession. Mr. Telborn adores me for my devotion to dear Highshire's memory." Marvel of marvels, it was the marchioness, then! "He says it shows the true woman. He'll gladly replace everything I've lost twice over." She sighed deeply. "But I'd be tempted to give the photograph for a cigarette at this minute," she added disconsolately.

"Let me try for you," said Carleigh, dropping off his mossy boulder. "Did you ask Mrs. Darling?"

The Marchioness of Highshire lifted her hands, the photograph with them. "Then you don't know?" she asked in surprise.

"Don't know?" he echoed with sinking heart. "Don't know what?" Her tone had filled him with a sudden terror. Could it be—

"She's burned—very badly burned. They've taken her over to Cross Saddle Hall."

"Nina burned!" he gasped. "Good God!"

"Yes, isn't it awful? I thought every one knew. They can't say how serious it is. They fear she inhaled flames, and in that case, of course—"

"Oh, no, no!" he cried. "I won't believe it."

The eyes of the marchioness lighted. Sir Caryll was so delightfully ingenuous.

"Telborn has gone for the doctors," she went on. "Sir Guy was burned, too, you know, most fearfully. It was he who saved Mrs. Darling."

"If I'd only known where her room was," Carleigh reproached himself, forgetting that it had been all he could do to save himself.

"Sir Guy seems to have known."

Oh, how he resented that! Still it was best to be silent. If there was the double meaning he suspected he would be the last one to point it out.

"She was already safe, it seems. Had got downstairs without a mark, better dressed than any of us. But she went back."

"Went back?"

"Yes. It was suicidal. Every one said so. Every one begged her. But she wouldn't listen. She had forgotten something. Fancy that!"

Carleigh ground his teeth. The face of Rosamond Veynol was forgotten again. Anxiety for Nina tore at his heart and rent his soul in pieces. Now she was doubly precious.

And that Waldron fellow! He hoped he would die. Otherwise gratitude might play a part. It probably would—and that would mean for himself her utter loss.

"We waited five minutes," his informant continued. "It seemed ages. She didn't return. And just then Sir Guy appeared. We were all women there, you know. We told him, and he dashed off at once. It seems she reached her room quite safely. But before she could turn round she was penned in. Sir Guy went to her through a curtain of flame."

"Was she unconscious?" asked Carleigh anxiously.

"Unfortunately—no. Her screams were pitiful!"

"Don't!" he begged. "It's horrible!"

"I heard some one say it was her just recompense. You've heard she shot her husband, haven't you?"

"I've heard it, of course. But it isn't true. I know it isn't. She has the kindest heart in the world," he defended.

"Where there's smoke there's always some fire," quoted the marchioness. "We've just had proof of that. Possibly she didn't fire the shot, but I'll wager she had a hand in it."

"I'll never believe that. Never!"

"And you'll never find a cigarette for me unless you try, you know," she suggested.

"I beg your pardon," he said in a lifeless voice. "I'll go at once."

He went at once, but he forgot again almost directly. He was bent on learning more about Nina. What were her chances of life? That was what he asked every one.

"Oh, she may pull through," said Archdeacon, who was helping in the distribution of sandwiches and coffee. "I hope to Heaven she will! But I'm afraid she'll be terribly disfigured. It was her face that got the worst of it. Have a sandwich, old chap? Gad, what a narrow shave you had!"

Hugh Blissmore, the novelist, burly and long-haired, was drinking black coffee. He was likewise smoking a cigarette, but Carleigh, in spite of his quest, never noticed it.

"Awful about Mrs. Darling, isn't it?" was the way he broached the topic.

"Awful!" exclaimed the writer—and was rather interrogative as well as exclamatory. "Oh, yes, I dare say! I've been thinking of the heroic side. Devilish fine

of Sir Guy, don't you know! Sorry she's got to die, too! Heroism so bootless—and all that. But situation out of the ordinary. Oh, quite out of the ordinary."

"But it isn't certain that—" objected Carleigh.

"Certain?" the other interrupted, drawing his lungs full of smoke. "Of course it's certain. Hasn't a chance, poor lady. Not the smallest chance."

Sir Caryll's chin dropped and a grim, inarticulate sound came up from his throat.

"Heard anything of the cars from Cross Saddle?" the novelist inquired in turn. "Rotting uncomfortable messing about here, I say."

"Is that what's proposed?" asked the saddened one indifferently.

"Yes. Didn't you know? They took Mrs. Darling and Waldron over to the hall in one from here, and some fellows went off to Carlisle for the doctor-chaps in the other. They were to bring back some of Lord Dalgries's cars with them. They've been gone over an hour now—and no signs."

Carleigh was about to seek something more consoling in another quarter when one of the giggling girls of the previous afternoon asked him the time.

"Haven't the faintest idea," he said. "Left my watch behind."

At which she giggled in such an irritating way that he turned sharply upon her.

"That's so funny," she managed to enunciate. "There isn't a single watch among us. They were all forgotten—and we can't find out the exact time."

"And—and *you* were saved," said Carleigh boorishly. But she didn't in the least understand.

Just then the horn of a motor echoed from the park's main drive and a minute later its lamps flared as it rolled over the sward toward the wood.

Sir Caryll ran forward, but the novelist was before him, desirous of being first to secure a place. The young baronet's object, however, was different.

"What do they say of Mrs. Darling?" he called as the car slowed down.

"Who, sir?" asked the chauffeur.

"The lady who was so severely burned. Have the doctors seen her, do you know?"

"Oh, her, sir!" The man was in ill-humor at having been called from his bed at such an hour. "I believe they have, sir. I 'eard some one say as it was all up with some one. I suppose it was 'er they meant, sir. Now don't crowd, please, there's more cars be'ind this one!"

Carleigh stood as one stunned.

It was the voice of the marchioness that recalled him.

"Did you find me a smoke?" she was asking.

"Cigarettes," said Carleigh, "are as scarce as—as watches, unfortunately." And his tone was more lifeless than ever.

# CHAPTER XVIII
## AT CROSS SADDLE

Carleigh found himself presently crowded into the last seat of the last car, beside the Honorable Julian.

The occupants were men exclusively, and the subject of debate was the fire's origin. This was mingled with snatches of personal experiences.

"I fancy it started in the laundry drying-room," their host observed. "Overheated pipes or something."

"How about crossed wires?" some one asked. "The electricity in the east wing was out of commission from the start."

"But the flames showed first in the north extension," another man contributed. "I was lying wide-awake and saw the glare from my window."

"Yes. And if it hadn't been for your wakefulness, old chap, we might every one of us have been incinerated in our beds," Archdeacon observed gratefully. "As it was, the east wing was totally cut off before we could get to it."

He turned to Carleigh. "That's where you were, you know. We did our best to reach your room, but you were hemmed in. We tried shying stones at your windows, but it was too pitchy dark to locate them. Fancy what I went through before you dropped onto the dahlia bed!"

Sir Caryll appeared far less grateful for his deliverance than was to have been expected. He wasn't sure, indeed, that he was grateful at all. What with one romance ended and another budding one interrupted by death or disfigurement—life for him certainly was not worth the living.

"I suppose I did have a narrow squeak for it," he said.

Dawn had come, but it was a dark, indistinguishable dawn because of the heavy black clouds that shrouded it. The hall at Cross Saddle was brilliantly alight therefore when they arrived, and on the wide hearth blazed a roaring fire of great logs.

Many of the earlier arrivals had already been provided for, but there was still a waiting group, so smoke-stained and in such motley makeshift attire as to have titillated the risibilities of any but the most stolid British.

Sir Caryll's visage, black as a Senegambian's, was as long as the proverbial arm of coincidence. Directly he began making inquiry for the doctors in attendance on Nina, and learned with a mingling of encouragement and dismay that they had already done what they could and departed.

He ascertained also that Cecile Archdeacon was installed as nurse, assisted by Nina's own maid. But beyond these two facts he could gather nothing definite. Opinion at Cross Saddle appeared to be quite as divided as opinion at Carfen.

Sir Guy Waldron, who would be most likely to know the exact facts—if there were any exact facts to know—was already quartered, and anxious as Carleigh was he

would not think of disturbing the man he had come to regard as a dangerous—and therefore hated—rival.

Lord Dalgries and his two sons were up and about, making arrangements for the refugees. Some of the guests at the hall had been awakened, too, and some not. Most of the men turned out and most of the women stayed in.

Young Nevill Dalgries, a chap about Carleigh's own age, who had been to school with him, had seen Mrs. Darling when she was carried in, and he didn't mind telling Caryll that at that moment he wouldn't have wagered tuppence on her life. But he had later been present when Dr. Dodson talked with his father about her, and—

"The M. D. seemed to think she'd pull through. He'll be over again in the forenoon. He said she was as comfortable as could be expected under the circumstances."

"They always say that," returned Carleigh, attempting to wipe out betraying signs of his emotion and leaving a gray-white streak across the black of either cheek. "They fill 'em with opium or something."

Nevertheless, he felt in a measure relieved. If it was as speculative as all the rest, it was, nevertheless, the speculation of authority and not the mere guesswork of indifferent optimistic or pessimistic lay minds.

Still he hung about, talking to whomsoever would talk of the one topic that engaged him until about all the rest had been led off to sleeping places.

Then finally, with Nevill Dalgries for guide, he followed to where a bed had been set up for him in one of the nurseries.

And there he lay awake, his brain teeming, until one of the footmen came to him at a little after eight. Then he raised himself on one elbow and asked whether the footman had heard how Mrs. Darling was.

"Mrs. Darling is very bad, sir," was the answer.

"But she was distinctly better when I turned in," Carleigh offered protest.

"Yes, sir; I dare say, sir. But she's very bad this morning, sir. Her maid was in the servants' hall not ten minutes ago, sir."

"And she said she was worse?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Very much worse, sir."

Sir Caryll let a long sigh escape him. He couldn't help it. The footman heard it and drew a conclusion or two.

"They're likely to be worse in the morning, you know, sir. I had an aunt once—begging your pardon, sir—that was burned most 'orribly. She was always worse in the morning, sir."

"And she recovered—in the end?" asked the baronet anxiously.

"No, sir. Not at all, sir. She died at last, sir. In the morning, just about this time, sir."

Carleigh dropped back on his pillow, and the footman, taking the action as a signal for silence, proceeded to light a fire, to fill the bath, and to lay out a very nice array of lent linen and morning garments for the guest to select from.

When he went away Carleigh got up with a curious new kind of pain about his heart and head which he was puzzled to account for.

Perhaps it was the smoke he had inhaled, or perhaps it was Mrs. Darling's condition. He wasn't sure which. At any rate, it was very real and very distressing.

He had bathed and scrubbed very carefully, as he thought, before lying down. But the morning light revealed stains and blotches invisible by candlelight—there was no electricity at Cross Saddle—and it took him some time to remove them.

As a consequence he found, when he went down to breakfast, that nearly every one was there before him. There was a general hubbub in the room that was nigh to deafening.

Questions were flying about like buzzing insects; and then, too, there was the more or less inevitable clatter of too hurried service.

He found a place at the table, and was just dropping a lump of sugar into his tea when a most extraordinary and upsetting thing happened.

The door opened again and admitted—of all persons in the world—Miss Rosamond Veynol.

# CHAPTER XIX

## FATE'S FEARFUL INGENUITY

Rosamond Veynol stopped short just inside the door and every vestige of color left her face.

Everybody remembered then, and everybody was scared. It was a tryingly dramatic moment.

Carleigh, astounded and greatly confused, half-rose in his place and bowed slightly and awkwardly. Miss Veynol bent her head without looking at him. The Countess of Cross Saddle pretended to know or notice nothing.

One man whistled under stress of the moment and then turned deeply crimson. The butler, who knew details of which all his superiors were naturally ignorant—he being a regular reader of *British Society*—let fall a muffin cover.

And then, suddenly, everybody perceived that the only space left vacant at table was the space next to Carleigh, and saw with horror that one of the men who knew nothing had pushed a chair in there for the newcomer.

Miss Veynol looked waveringly about. The countess choked.

"Of course you two are old friends—" she began.

And then, her tongue cleaving to the roof of her mouth, she rose hastily, stammered something quite unintelligible about the injured woman upstairs, and precipitately fled.

"I had better go, too," Carleigh murmured, starting to rise. "I—I—" He would have sold his soul to be able to say, "am betrothed to Mrs. Darling." But he wasn't sure she was going to die, and so he didn't dare.

Nevill Dalgries, who had the place on the other side of him, and being a good friend, was awfully sorry, put out a strong hand and pulled him back into his seat again.

"You can't do anything, old man," he said with a roughness that was kindness. "Finish your tea."

And at that instant Rosamond sank into the proffered seat beside him. So there they sat, side by side, those two, one blazing red, one deathly white, silent and constrained.

And all the rest at the breakfast-table talked feverishly and painfully with a haste and loudness that appeared to them obligatory.

Those who watched say that Sir Caryll drank his tea and ate two slices of buttered toast, and that Miss Veynol spooned an egg without upsetting the cup; which may be perfectly true, though neither he nor she was aware of doing any such thing.

What they did they did subconsciously, their conscious minds being very much otherwise engaged. One thing is certain, however, and that is that neither of them spoke, until, happening to look up, Carleigh saw that everybody else had got up and got out and left them quite alone.

He felt then that he simply had to say something, and so he said, as so often happens, the one thing that he shouldn't have said. He asked: "Is your mother here?"

Miss Veynol looked down, shivered slightly, rose, and moved over to a window. Carleigh rose, too, and followed her.

"Mama is in Ireland," she answered at length, in a low, sweet voice. "She told me before she went—she—" Then she stopped.

He threw his gaze over her from head to feet. He felt bitter and scornful, and yet the memories crowded fast. After all, she was very lovely, and—odd how he had seen her face early this very morning when for all he knew he was dropping to his death!

"What do you think of me, anyway?" he asked at length. "What is your final opinion of us all three?"

She looked up at him. All her shyness seemed suddenly gone. Her eyes met his fearlessly. Yet her voice was very low as she said: "I think that you love mama."

Of course she would think that. If she had ever doubted it his question uttered a minute ago on their remeeting must have convinced her.

He took a backward step and drew in his breath. Upstairs Nina was dying perhaps. On every hand fortune seemed bent on breaking with him. He was lashed, stung, crumpled. He looked at her and truth cowered naked.

"Not at all," he said with biting emphasis. "Perhaps people talk that and you believe it. But I've never thought of such a thing. I have offered myself to Mrs. Darling, and I've given her your ring."

He paused, expectant; but Rosamond just stared at him.

Then he walked out of the room, hurt and—rather frightened.

It had been one of those fearfully ingenious tricks of Fate which she deals out in such a startlingly unexpected manner—this meeting with his whilom fiancée.

Chasing the woman who had the power to make him forget, only to be abruptly thrust, in the very midst of it, under the same roof with her he was striving never to remember, was malevolent cruelty. And it was very awful.

Yes, it would have been much better had he slept five minutes longer. Then there would have been no escape, and his troubles would have been over.

# CHAPTER XX

## FIRES OF ONE KIND AND ANOTHER

It was a very miserable morning for Carleigh. It was pretty miserable for every one, seeing that things were all at sixes and sevens, owing to the enforced mingling of two house parties; but the young baronet, with counter emotions tearing things apart deep down in the soul of him, found it especially so.

Out-of-doors was quite impossible. The heavy clouds were unloading their burden in a drenching downpour. Some brave one proposed a tramp to Carfen and a search of the cooling ruins, but found so few volunteers that the project was given over.

Bridge games were started in both the red and yellow drawing-rooms. Blissmore, the novelist, had induced Nevill Dalgries to oppose him at chess, and the pair sat in silent concentration over board and men in the library.

For a long while Sir Caryll hung about the hall in expectation of a word with Dr. Dodson on his morning visit; only to learn after something like two hours of waiting that the medical man had come and gone during that period of agony in the breakfast-room.

Nevertheless, there was some measure of relief for him in the tidings that Dodson had pronounced his patient improving steadily.

Julian Archdeacon had told him this, having had it direct from Cecile. "He doesn't say that Nina's out of danger; but he does say that with a continued absence of fresh symptoms she very soon will be."

Carleigh sighed and a faint color tinged his wan pallor. He had been pallid as a ghost ever since he told Miss Veynol about the ring. "If I could only see her," he muttered.

But Julian thought that quite impossible.

"It's mostly shock, don't you know," he said, "and everything depends on keeping her quiet."

The relief, small as it was, was not lasting. When he had flung that final ill-considered speech at Rosamond he had really believed Nina's case hopeless.

If she got well Rosamond would be sure to learn that what he said wasn't true, and she would probably hate him all the more for it. Therefore, it was actually imperative that he have a word with Mrs. Darling at the very earliest opportunity.

"I mean to ask Dr. Dodson, at all events," he said. "When will he be here again?"

The Honorable Julian didn't know. He might be over in the afternoon, and, then, just as likely, he might not be over until evening.

"Waldron is burned worse than was thought," he added. "He never gave a sign, and yet he must have been suffering torments. His self-command was nothing short of Spartan."

But at this Carleigh frowned.

"We have thought best to wire for his wife," Archdeacon added.

"His wife!" exclaimed Caryll.

"Yes. Good little woman. Does a lot of slum work in London, and all that sort of thing, you know. Time was too much taken up to come down with him."

So here was a measure of relief from another quarter.

"Did you wire for any of Mrs. Darling's people?"

"No. She didn't want any one. We suggested sending for the duke and duchess. But the idea only excited her. Then we thought of Kneedrock. He's a cousin, you know, and a sort of next-of-kin protector and adviser. But she wouldn't have him at any price. Gritty little woman, Nina."

Dr. Dodson came between tea and dinner, and it was more through good luck than good management that Carleigh saw him.

He had gone to his nursery bed-chamber, where he had been looking over the evening things laid out for him, only to discover that the pumps provided were fully two sizes too large.

Twice he had rung for valet or footman without response—his own man had been shipped up to town that morning—and was on his way to Nevill Dalgries's quarters when he encountered an elderly gentleman—bearded, carrying a small professional-looking hand-bag, and stepping with professional briskness—turning into the corridor from an intersecting passage.

He stopped him without the least hesitation. "I fancy you are Dr. Dodson?" he said.

The physician signified assent, and Carleigh introduced himself.

"I do so want to learn of poor Mrs. Darling," he went on. "I am very anxious."

"Mrs. Darling," Dodson replied, "is doing capitally. I have every reason to believe that she will make an amazingly quick recovery, Sir Caryll."

"That is good news indeed," Carleigh rejoined. "And now there is a favor I have to ask. I really think that I should be allowed to see her."

The doctor pursed his lips and his eyes shot a question through his glasses.

"I am deeply interested in her," the young man went on, "and I believe she would wish it, if you let her know."

His effort was to speak in exactly the right tone, all things considered. Yet he was wofully uncertain as to just what were the things he had to consider.

"I will ask her, of course," returned Dodson. "But I must warn you in advance, Sir Caryll, that Mrs. Darling does not care to see any one. Aside from the severe shock, she is at present, you know, so very badly disfigured."

Caryll experienced a deathlike sinking at his heart. Until this minute he had barely considered this matter of disfigurement. He just couldn't believe it—couldn't realize it as a possibility.

"How—" he began, and stopped short.

"One side of her face is very badly burned," said the doctor.

A man doesn't like to hear such things about a woman for whom he has just confessed an attachment. It took a brief moment for Carleigh to collect himself. Then: "Beg her to see me, please," he asked a little stiffly.

He saw the physician go, but he had very little hope. It was hardly possible that she would accede to his plea.

She didn't want "Doody" and "Pucketts." She didn't want even "Nibbetts," who, it was clear to him, was usually her help in time of trouble. What chance then was there that she would see him?

But to his surprise and that of the doctor as well, she did.

Her maid came back with Dodson and took him to the room. And there, in the half dark made by the drawn window-curtains he saw her lying in the wide, white bed, her beauty hidden—or was it her hideousness—by swathing white cloths.

She looked curiously Eastern and uncanny, and his thoughts crowded, and he was dumb.

But she held out her right hand to him and said: "So nice to see you! But—what is this I hear they are telling about us? Such astounding tales."

Then he knew that Rosamond had made no secret of his daring speech and that the doors and windows of gossip were all set open afresh.

He sat down in a chair close by her side and took the hand she offered, and held it close to his own.

"I have been telling the truth," he said, with that cool, odd courage which leaps like a well-trained servant to do the bidding of some men. "It is only a few days as time is counted, but clocks should be our slaves instead of our masters. To me it seems an eternity since you so gave me back to myself that I"—he faltered ever so slightly—"could love—yes, really and truly—love again. And I do. Oh, Nina, I do! Just you—only you."

Then, all at once, he remembered, and looked sharply about the room. He had forgotten the maid. He had not thought of Cecile Archdeacon. They might be there, somewhere, curtained by the gloom.

"Don't be alarmed," Nina said, amused. "There is no one but I to hear your confession. Cecile withdrew discreetly before you came, and my maid parted from you on the other side of the door."

"I love you," he repeated, reassured.

"But you have said openly here, in this house, that we are engaged—that I had your ring."

For a breath he hesitated. Then: "Let it stand," he pleaded, and bent toward her. "You are like me, you are sick of it all. The world has bruised us both—has tried to make outcasts of us both—has blackened us falsely.

"Let us go away together—to Yukon, to Ceylon, to where you will. Let us build for ourselves a free life—a new, clean life, out in those free, new clean surroundings."

He was actually surprised at his own eloquence and at how in earnest he felt; and how chivalrous. But he was still more surprised at how keen he was to prove to Rosamond that he had spoken truthfully.

"But I'm disfigured," said Nina behind her white windings. "Horridly disfigured."

"It will not matter," he declared.

"And I am old. I count for ten years beyond you."

"That is our own affair—our very own affair." He felt the hand within his quiver lightly and hope rose.

"I really am very fond of you," she whispered.

"Believe me, it is love," he whispered in return. "See how it snatched us both in the same instant."

Her fingers nestled sweetly in among his own.

"Did Kneedrock tell you more than you told me?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered frankly. "But it made no difference. I don't care what people say about you."

"But I have played with fire so often—once too often," she added with a laugh. "Fire came near ending me at last."

Abruptly his curiosity roused. "They say you were safely down stairs, and that then you turned and went back. Why did you go back?"

"I wanted something."

"What? What was worth the risk?"

For just a little she did not answer. Then, slowly, she reached out her other hand—her left hand. "For this," she said.

He looked and fancied he must be dreaming, for, lo, there on her engagement finger sparkled a ring—his ring. The ring that he believed lost; the ring that he believed no woman would ever wear again.

For a full minute he was too amazed, too stunned, to speak.

"You—you found it!" he stammered at last.

"I never threw it away at all," she confessed. "I only made the motion. Why should I throw away a perfectly good pearl and diamond ring when the mere motion of throwing answered every purpose?"

"Every purpose? What purpose?"

"My purpose," and she smiled.

"But I—I don't understand. What could have been your object?"

"I'll tell you," she replied. He could see her eyes quite clearly now. His own had grown accustomed to the gloom. He could see them so clearly as to read mischief in them. He wondered whether it was possible that she was suffering the least bit.

"I just wondered what you would say and do. I knew of no better way to test a man's whole character than by pretending to toss away as worthless something that he highly values."

"My whole character?" he echoed. "Did you have to test it?"

"I didn't have to. I wished to. One learns of the real man, then. And I am so interested in real men."

The thing rather hurt him, but he said: "I suppose you were satisfied."

"My *interest* was," she answered, and he was clever enough to note the distinction she effected by the word and the emphasis.

"I'm glad if it amused you," he said, not at all pleased. "Are you going to tell me what you learned?"

"I'm going to let you draw your own conclusions," she answered. "I told a man once in India that there was a cobra in the corner of the room in which we were sitting, just to see what he would say."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything. He acted."

"Was there a cobra there?"

"Of course. We could both see it."

"You were telling the truth then?"

"After my fashion, yes."

"And what did he do?"

"He shot."

"And—"

"The bullet knocked the cobra over. It was bronze."

Then, for the first time since he entered the room, he let go her hand. "And that satisfied your interest?"

"That satisfied me," she said, and he would have sworn she slightly emphasized the pronoun.

"There must have been a lot of shooting out there in India," he said significantly. Somehow he felt terribly vexed.

No, he didn't want to go into any wilds with this woman. He recalled that reincarnated tigress idea of Kneedrock's. No Yukon or Ceylon. No, surely not.

She seemed to read his thought. She drew back her right hand which he had dropped so coolly and, turning a little on her side, she reached out her left.

"There! Take off the ring and give it to Miss Veynol," she said cheerfully. "I really can't marry you. Indeed I can't. Don't press me. Don't even press my hand. It's absolutely no use. Go on, now, and leave me to sleep."

It was Caryll's mood of the moment to feel relieved. He took the ring from her finger, thrust it into his waistcoat pocket, and rose. Then he bowed a little stiffly. After which he left her to sleep.

# CHAPTER XXI
## AN END TO THE GOSSIP

All masculine and human as he was, Sir Caryll Carleigh emerged from that darkened room with a vivid vision still remaining of the white bandaged face and a keen awareness of the engagement ring once more in his possession, enormously eased.

If there was a sense of somewhat summary dismissal to annoy, it was more than offset by the knowledge that he was absolutely free. Yes, free even of the chain made by his own impulsive speech.

A thoroughly foolish man, embarrassed by the product of his various and gregarious emotions, may still have sense enough left to experience relief at being afforded a fresh chance.

Life, in spots, was very trying to the young baronet, but still it might have been far worse.

One may not enjoy being buffeted about by a woman one is almost sure one loves. Still it's a poor ball that isn't conscious of a thrill as it rises in the air of limitless freedom after a hard kick.

So Carleigh went lightly along the corridor and turned lightly at the angle. And as he turned he came face to face with Rosamond Veynol. And Rosamond, it so chanced, was looking beautiful as she had never looked beautiful before.

He stopped abruptly, and so did she. He gasped, and she likewise gasped. But, somehow, it was far less awful than before, because here there was no one present to witness their behavior.

He put out his hand and she put hers in it before she thought. It came to him just then, suddenly, that he had told her he had offered himself to Mrs. Darling and given her the ring. And now he had that very ring in his waistcoat pocket.

His breath came fast—so fast that it almost choked him.

"Rosamond!" he stammered. "Oh, Rosamond!"

She was dressed for traveling and was evidently just on her way down. In point of fact she was about quitting the house to save herself further embarrassment.

She wasn't expecting to meet Carleigh on that side of the house, and the encounter had startled her, as it did him, more than slightly.

She stood, actually panting. She strove to look at him, and failed utterly. Then she tried to free her hand and failed in that, too.

Had the place been less public he would surely have taken her in his arms. But dinner was barely an hour off, and guests were likely to be passing at any minute.

Moreover, being at the angle of the corridor, they were likely to come upon them without any warning whatever; just as they had come upon one another.

"Rosie," he said, without the slightest premeditation or consideration, "I've been very unhappy and very foolish, and Mrs. Darling has brought me to my senses.

She doesn't want me and she doesn't want the ring. Will you take it back? Will you take *me* back? She says that you are the one I love, and I think she knows."

All this at headlong speed, spoken as fast as he could form and utter the words. As he ended he opened the hand that had been fumbling at a pocket and showed her the ring—her engagement ring—lying in his palm.

She seemed to stumble and fall sideways against the wall, and his arm went out to steady her.

"Oh!" she gasped. "And mama? What of mama?"

"We'll run away and get married." His words were as wild as her own. "We'll tell no one. We'll fly. And afterward—afterward—" But there he stuck.

"And mama?" she said again. "And mama?"

He was sure now that for him she was the only woman in the world. "We will live abroad," he said heartily. "Ceylon, Yukon, or some place"—his imagination surely had limitations this evening—"and we will never come back."

Rosamond at length achieved control.

"Mama will never leave us in peace," she declared. "Mama will find us wherever we go. Believe me, mama is quite set against the marriage. She will not have it. And she says if it goes forward *ever*, she'll surely take you away from me. I can't tell you what awful things she's told me—things you've said to her. Terrible things."

At that he paled and loosed her hand. Certainly the corridor was far too public for this kind of conversation; and yet all he could sense was the odor of probable triumph—the exaltation, the exhilaration of winning out.

Never mind the mother; that selfish, narrow-viewed American grass-widow, who had her little way of having her little way on all occasions and under all circumstances.

He was determined that Rosamond Veynol must go off with him, so that Nina—and everybody else, of course, might hear of it. All other considerations were forgotten. He seized her hand again.

"Listen, my dear girl," he pleaded. "We do love one another. We've said so a thousand times. Your mama doesn't want the match, and we've tried to break it off. We can't break it off. It's too strong for us. We both have found that out.

"When I suddenly saw you this morning I knew it was too strong for me. Now you know it, too. But we can't put it through in the open. So let us put it through in the only other way. Let's run off. And at once."

She lifted her eyes to his and he felt that she would help him to manage it somehow. He didn't stop an instant to consider that perhaps she, too, had her triumph to secure. Rosamond was human too.

There was the world, and her mother, and—Mrs. Darling. Oh, especially there was Mrs. Darling. Carleigh didn't know, and Nina didn't know. Nobody knew, in fact, but Rosamond Veynol.

Caryll took her in his arms, unresisting, and hugged her very close. He had been warned about the corridor, but he didn't heed in time.

He was still holding her, and his lips were pressed tightly to hers, when Cecile turned the angle and uttered a little cry of astonishment.

Of course there was no escape.

"We—we're going to be married at once," Carleigh explained, stammeringly. And Rosamond, nodding, blushed as red as a peony.

"I am glad," Cecile congratulated.

"But—but—you see," the young baronet continued, one arm still held possessively about his fiancée's waist, "while we're delighted that you should know, we aren't quite ready to tell society in general."

"I understand perfectly. Rely on me to preserve your confidence. I think it is positively lovely."

"Yes, isn't it?" said Rosamond. "Caryll and I were made for one another. You do understand, don't you, dear Mrs. Archdeacon?"

"Perfectly," repeated Cecile. "By the bye, dear, the car has been waiting for you this half hour. If you've changed your mind—"

Rosamond shook her head vigorously. "Oh, but I haven't," she returned. Then she said to Caryll: "I'm going over to the Manse, at Ranleigh Copse, for a couple of days. If you'd care to ride over to-morrow—"

"Care to?" he murmured. "How can I wait until to-morrow? Suppose I run over with you now, just to see you safely there."

"Won't you be late getting back to dinner?" asked the chatelaine of Carfen House. "The countess might, you know, be annoyed."

Carleigh smiled. "As the earl has failed to fit me with pumps," he said, "I consider myself excusable. Would you mind explaining for me, my dear Cecile?"

Of course he drove over to the Manse with Rosamond. Nothing in the world could have held him back just then.

And on the way he told her of how nearly he had lost his life in the fire and of how her face had come before him in what he believed was his last moment.

"That should prove beyond everything how I love you, dearest," he murmured.

"I don't require any proof, Caryll, my own," she said. "I feel it so deep, deep down in the heart of me. Our brain knows other things, but it is with our heart that we know the things of love."

There was a great deal of this sort of thing on the way over, and if the chauffeur had sharp ears he must have been very much amused or—very much bored.

Love-making is always so infinitely entertaining to the lovers, with every burning word a fresh delight; and yet how tiresome, flat, trite, stale, and unprofitable to the disinterested yet enforced listener.

Carleigh got back to Cross Saddle Hall in ample time to dress for dinner, and found no less than a dozen pairs of pumps of varying sizes spread out on his floor for inspection and selection.

After dining he redressed and went up to town by a late train. The next day he returned his borrowed attire, and then he went down to Bellingdown once more for a long and important conference with his aunt.

It took place in Lady Bellingdown's boudoir, and this is the way he began it: "Rosamond and I are to be married within a week, and we'd like to be married here."

Lady Bellingdown's breath was quite taken away. She couldn't say a thing. So her nephew proceeded: "You see, we thought first of going to the registrar, saying nothing to any one, and just slipping off to some foreign paradise all by ourselves.

"But Rosamond says she never expects to be married but once, and that as she has her wedding-gown all ready and waiting she might as well wear it and show it."

"But I thought—" began his kinswoman, and got no farther.

"You thought I was in love with Mrs. Darling," he interrupted. "So I—No, I wasn't. I was fascinated, infatuated. But I—Of course you heard about the fire at Carfen?"

"We heard she was horribly burned. Do tell me the particulars."

"They say she's disfigured," he explained. "Her face is all swathed now."

"That will rob her of her power. And she was so beautiful."

"Yes, she was beautiful," agreed Carleigh. "And she did have power. She could make a man forget his eternal soul."

"Nina was wonderful at making men forget," said his Aunt Kitty. "She made you forget, didn't she?"

"For a little while. Then, by purest chance, I saw Rosamond again, and—well, I knew that she was the only woman I could ever really care for as one's wife should be cared for. She is an angel."

"But her mother?"

"Ah, her mother. We are going to keep clear of Mrs. Veynol."

"Can you?"

"Certainly. We must, you see. I don't know what it is, but she rouses all the devil there is in me. And then—" He paused.

"And then?" Lady Bellingdown asked.

"Then she tells Rosamond."

"Was that how she separated you before? I never exactly knew."

"That was at the bottom of it."

"And you mean to be married now—here—without letting her know?"

"Yes. Once we are married, what can she do? Rosie's of age, you know. She doesn't have to ask any one's consent. When she is Lady Carleigh we can defy the mater."

"But I thought you were going to keep out of the way."

"We are if—if we can. Absence is better than defiance, isn't it?"

"Absence may be defiance," said his aunt. "I didn't think of it that way."

"Yes," he agreed, but he evidently had some misgiving.

"But you're not so certain as you were a minute ago that you can keep the place of your absence a secret. Is that it?"

"Mrs. Veynol has an uncanny faculty of finding things out," he confided miserably.

"Now, there's where Nina has an advantage," Lady Bellingdown suggested. "She has no mother. You would have had no distressing mother-in-law."

Sir Caryll was thoughtful. Then: "But Mrs. Darling is too old for me. She said so herself."

"I suppose that's true. Nina seems fixed in her purpose never to marry. Fancy a woman saying she is too old for any man!"

"She counts by experience rather than years possibly. One would never think of age in her case if she didn't remind one."

"She's very lovely," said Kitty Bellingdown with something of finality. "Where will you and Rosamond spend your honeymoon?" she added.

"That's just it," Carleigh returned with knitted brow. "It's the one problem that troubles me. Honeymoon places are so devilishly well known. All Mrs. Veynol would have to do is to keep her eyes on the newspapers. She'd spot us within a week. And then—she'd follow."

"You might travel *incognito*."

"On one's wedding journey? Never! How can you think of it, Aunt Kitty? Don't you see—"

"Of course I see," she broke in. "Forgive me. It never once occurred to me."

Then they let that question drop, having been frightened away by thus straying on dangerous ground.

The arrangements for the nuptials were all completed in the next hour. They were not to be in any wise simple. They were to be very imposing, in fact, with a whole house full of guests, hurriedly brought together, yet every one under a strict bond of secrecy.

Rosamond was to stop on at the Manse until the second day before. Then she was to withdraw her trousseau from where it had been so hurriedly rushed into storage in London and appear at Bellingdown on the eve of her last day of maidenhood.

Lord Waltheof was deputed to look after minor details; but Lord Kneedrock, could his consent be obtained, was to be best man.

Carleigh saw personally to this, of course, and encountered no trouble. Kneedrock consented without demur and offered to see his grace, the Archbishop of Highshire, and arrange with him to perform the ceremony.

And, wonder of wonders, everything was carried out precisely as planned! The September day proved glorious. The sun shone on the bride in good omen, and the bride was a picture of loveliness.

Many of the presents, returned six weeks before, came back in the same wrappings, and most of the rest would probably come later when the givers learned what had happened and how.

But no one—not even Lady Bellingdown—was given a hint as to the honeymoon destination of bride and bridegroom.

They drove away toward London under a deluging shower of rice and old slippers, and with white ribbon—yards and yards of it—streaming from every attachable place on Sir Caryll's own motor-car.

After they had gone the guests continued very merry. A great quantity of champagne had been consumed in drinking the health and happiness of the launched voyagers on the matrimonial sea, and every one's spirits were keyed high.

Every one's, that is to say, except Kitty Bellingdown's and Kneedrock's.

"Poor dear Caryll!" sighed his aunt, who, like some others, always chose to weep over those that were given in matrimony. "Well, and so he's married at last!"

"And such a surprise!" exclaimed the duke. "I say, Doody, wasn't it a surprise?"

Doody didn't say anything. She was trying a new dance-step with Waltheof.

"And so now there's an end to the gossip," contributed Charlotte Grey.

Kneedrock, who had his back turned, wheeled around.

"Oh, is there?" he observed in his characteristic ringing undertone.

The duchess gave over trying the dance-step, and joined the group.

"His mother-in-law will be after them, of course," she said. "There'll be no keeping it from her. Such a dreadful person she is!"

"She rides races in boy's clothes," put in the duke. "She does—doesn't she, Doody?"

"And she bathes in one-piece, Continental bathing-suits," volunteered Waltheof. "I've seen her at Ostend. Ripping figure for the mother of such a big girl!"

"I wonder what will happen next?" mused Lady Bellingdown, who loved Carleigh like a son and was more than a little frightened.

"Nina will happen next," said Lord Kneedrock, *sotto voce*.

He was wondering why it was that the new Lady Carleigh reminded him so much of that Ramsay girl he had met through Nina at Simla.

# CHAPTER XXII

## THE INTERRUPTED HONEYMOON

The Carleighs went to Madeira for their honeymoon. It is a popular place for honeymoons; but not so popular as some others, because it's farther away.

No one knew but they, and they hoped that the mater wouldn't find out. They didn't in the least see how she was to find out.

Rosamond went so far as to write her a letter, omitting all mention of her wedding, of course, dating it from San Remo, and sending it there under cover to a confidential friend, to be mailed to "dear mama," who, it so happened, was still in Dublin.

Having thus taken every precaution to guard against pursuit, they threw care to the winds and reveled in their new and blissful companionship, amid tropical surroundings.

Everything amused them—the natives, the bullock-sledges, the *rêdes*—hammocks swung on poles and carried by native bearers.

They explored the long ravine, visible from the windows of their rooms in the hotel at Funchal, riding on the backs of gaily-harnessed mules and sampling the wines of the vineyards along the way.

Of evenings there were always the botanical gardens, with their palms and rhododendrons, and the light-hearted Madeirans making a *fiesta* of the hour.

There had been two weeks of it now—rapturous weeks—with Mrs. Veynol so far from their thoughts that even momentary memories had ceased to obtrude.

They sat in the half light of the gardens, a giant palm nodding above them, a soft breeze in their faces, lovers of another land—but still lovers like themselves—sauntering by, the men swinging malacca-sticks, the women's bright eyes shining beneath becomingly arranged mantillas, and believed paradise their very own.

And that was the moment that Fate chose for dropping a shadow. It descended while their heads were turned the other way, and their first warning was when a voice they both knew and recognized instantly fell like the knell of doom on their joy-attuned ears.

"Aren't you going to kiss mother, son?"

Carleigh seemed propelled to his feet. It appeared to him that he came up with a whirling motion. If he could only have gone on whirling and rising, like certain cardboard toys he remembered to have seen, it would have been such a satisfaction.

But, instead, he seemed to whirl straight into his mother-in-law's open arms, which closed affectionately—oh, so affectionately!—around him. And it wasn't at all a nice kiss she gave him or he gave her.

There was nothing maternal about it. It was so ardent that he felt ashamed, and when he was at length released and caught sight of Rosamond's eyes he was more ashamed than ever. He couldn't understand himself.

He didn't love Sibylla Veynol. He was sure he didn't. He would have been delighted never to see her again. And he did love her daughter. Yet this was the way it had been before.

Then their kisses had been in secret. Now that she had the right she chose to demand them openly. Heretofore she had told her daughter things. Now she meant to show her.

"I don't know whether to kiss you, Rosamond, or not," she said. "That letter you sent me from San Remo was a very low piece of work."

"But, mama—" began Lady Carleigh, and got no farther.

"What must the world think," her mother went on, "when it learns that you are married and that I was not bidden to your wedding?"

"Why, mama—" the bride attempted once more.

"I don't blame Caryll in the least," mama continued. "I am sure that he had nothing to do with it. He would have been only too glad to have me there. It was you, my ungrateful daughter—my own flesh and blood—who was at the bottom of it all."

"Oh, I say—" It was Carleigh who made the attempt this time.

"No, you needn't speak," Mrs. Veynol checked him. "You are a gentleman and wish to take the blame on your own shoulders; but, no matter what you said, I shouldn't believe you. Fortunately, I know my own daughter at last."

"It—it was the only way," Rosamond faltered.

"It was a very wicked way. Still, I don't see how I am to blame you. Caryll is so fascinating it is all I can do to resist him myself. But—oh, dear, I had quite forgotten!"

She turned abruptly to where a fair-haired young man, slightly round-shouldered, stood hat in hand behind her. "Let me present Mr. Miles O'Connor, Lady Carleigh—Sir Caryll Carleigh."

Rosamond inclined her head, and Carleigh bowed a little stiffly. Mr. Miles O'Connor withdrew a tentatively advanced hand.

"Mr. O'Connor," explained Mrs. Veynol, "is the sub-editor of *British Society*. It was through him that I located you. How he managed it I don't know. I am curious myself; but he tells me it is an office secret, which is equivalent to a secret of the confessional."

Neither Sir Caryll nor his wife spoke. Both would have liked to cut out the tongue that had betrayed them.

"Mr. O'Connor came with me from London. He has been most kind and considerate. I can never hope to repay him."

"Has *British Society* ceased publication?" asked Carleigh bitingly.

"It's a little vacation I'm taking," ventured the sub-editor.

"Sorry you delayed it so long," rejoined the baronet, still more acidly.

"We were fortunate enough to secure rooms on the same corridor with you at your hotel," Mrs. Veynol disclosed.

"Mr. O'Connor again, I assume," said Carleigh. "As capable a courier as an editor—I mean as a sub-editor."

"Sir Caryll is pleased to be ironical," snapped the young Irishman, boiling.

"I'm not pleased at all," Sir Caryll replied equivocally. "Ordinarily I am most complacent, but I can't bear a sneaking, snooting busybody who's always attending to every one's business but his own."

O'Connor's fists doubled, but Mrs. Veynol laid a quieting hand on his curving shoulder.

"Caryll, dear," she soothed, "you are unjust. You are, really. Mr. O'Connor has served me at great personal sacrifice. I don't know what I should have done without him. When I learned that Rosamond was not at San Remo—had never been there—I was torn with anxiety. Fancy the feelings of a fond mother! I applied to Mr. O'Connor in my extremity, and he proved himself a friend in need."

Carleigh turned away, but no less vexed. In his wife's eyes he saw tears glistening. And they had been so inexpressibly happy.

He was tempted to allude to *British Society's* theory of why his engagement had been broken—to inquire about the convict first husband—his Rosamond's own father—but he resisted the impulse, determining, nevertheless, to thresh out the matter with Mrs. Veynol privately at the first opportunity.

But there was no opportunity that evening. He managed it, however, the following morning. He was astir early, leaving Rosamond, who had been wakeful from nervousness, to get some compensating slumber.

And he met his mother-in-law, as if by prearrangement, in the hotel gardens while the dew was still on leaf and flower. To his delight she was unattended.

"You grow younger every time I see you," he said, kissing her hand in the Continental fashion he knew she liked. "You might be Rosa's sister."

It was odd how against his will such pretty speeches were wrung from him by this woman who in one way repelled him.

They strolled about for a while, and then sat down on a bench, which Carleigh did not observe was in full view from his wife's windows. But it was.

"Couldn't you have come here alone, mater?" he asked. It was the first time he had called her that, and it didn't please her. He saw it before she spoke.

"For Heaven's sake, Caryll dear, don't!" she begged. "You make me feel a hundred. If you can't find a pet name for me you may call me Sibylla, or Sibyl, or just Sib. But I'll hate you if you mater me. And I don't want to hate you. I don't really."

"No more than I wish to hate you," he laughed. "But I will unless you send that Irish bounder about his business. Fancy you fetching a cad like that, Sibyl—dear!"

"But I didn't," she protested. "It was he who fetched me. He would find Rosamond for me on no other terms. We came by train to Lisbon, you know. And he never mentioned Funchal until we were on the steamer."

"He's even more of a cad than I thought then."

"He's in love with me," Sibylla said.

"And you have encouraged him. Good Lord!"

"For a purpose. Purely for a purpose."

"And after what he did—after that vile screed he published."

She colored softly. "Then you saw it?" she asked.

"It was sent to me in Scotland. Of course I knew it wasn't true. I was tempted to horsewhip the beggar."

"But it was true," she declared boldly. "That was the worst of it."

And at that Carleigh sat suddenly upright, whereas he had been lounging. "I never knew it. I never threw Rosamond over for it. You know that."

"That was its only inaccuracy. The prison part was quite true. Your wife's father is still serving his sentence in the United States Federal Prison at Atlanta, Georgia."

"And you never told me! She never told me!" he cried reproachfully.

"It was a secret we thought buried. Why should we have dug it up?"

"Because I was marrying into the family. I was entitled to—"

"I had no intention of permitting you to marry into the family. You must grant I did all in my power to stop it. I even resorted to attracting you myself. I felt sure that my daughter would never marry a man who flirted with her mother. It was shameful perhaps, but I could not afford to be too discriminating."

"You had far better have told me," he protested.

"You mean that if you had known you would not have married?"

"No. I am not sure. But I should have had the chance to consider. Now it is too late."

Mrs. Veynol laughed ringingly.

"Not at all," she denied. "Marriage is the least irrevocable of steps. Give my daughter the grounds and I promise you she will divorce you."

"I have messed things up," mused Carleigh dismally.

"You see, I've lost neither time nor effort to let you know," said Mrs. Veynol. "As a gentleman, though, you will preserve my confidence. As a son-in-law I have told you what I could not even as a *futur*."

"But the whole world knows it," he retorted. "It has been published."

"And it has been denied—retracted with an apology—a very abject apology. Mr. O'Connor did it. He was most kind."

Carleigh fell to musing again. Finally he said: "What was your first husband's name?"

"The same as always," she answered, smiling at his past tense. "He hasn't changed it. It was only I that changed mine and Rosamond's. His name is Ramsay—J. Sprague Ramsay."

"You divorced him before or after he went to prison?" Caryll asked.

"I divorced him *when* he went to prison," was her precise answer. "Then I took back my maiden name, called my daughter Rosamond instead of Jane—she had been christened Jane Rosamond—and deserted the world that knew us for Cape Town, where I met Mr. Veynol and married him."

"You are an ambitious woman, Sibyl," observed her son-in-law thoughtfully.

"Yes, I am," she admitted candidly. "And, you see, my ambition runs higher than a mere baronet. Let the girl divorce you, and I'll marry her to an earl."

"But I'm not going to let the girl divorce me." He had reached a decision. "I love her too much, and—" His eyes dwelt appraisingly for a moment on the woman beside him. In her dark, Spanish, almost gipsy way, she held a lure that for the susceptible Carleigh was well-nigh irresistible. "And," he added, "her mother is far too fascinating."

Mrs. Veynol laughed, but his flattery was not lost. "Kiss mother, son," she commanded and leaned toward him.

He glanced furtively from right to left. Not a soul was in sight. Then he took her in his arms and pressed her close, and the kiss was that of the night over again. If anything it was warmer.

The sub-editor left Madeira by the next calling steamer, liberally remunerated for his services.

Relieved of his presence, the Carleighs and Mrs. Veynol stayed on. They stayed for another fortnight. Then they traveled to Nice, arriving a little in advance of the season.

No one of them, however, was quite happy. The serpent had entered paradise, and its sweetest fruits had turned acrid.

In these days Sir Caryll talked more with his mother-in-law than he did with his wife. Her experience was wider, and she had more imagination.

Occasionally there were revelations that were like sudden drops into icy waters. For instance, one day when they had gone to Monte Carlo together, leaving Rosamond at Nice with a headache or some other ill, she surprised him by saying:

"It's odd Nina Darling never told you of us."

"You mean she knew?" he asked in astonishment.

"I'm not sure. We've never met—since. But we were great friends five years ago in Simla."

"It isn't possible she knows?" said Carleigh.

"I wouldn't be certain," said the whilom Mrs. Ramsay. "She can keep a secret. None better. You know, there's no doubt she shot poor Darling. They were alone in the gun-room together, and he couldn't have done it himself."

"I'll never believe that," he returned.

"Then you'll never believe the truth."

"But why? What was her object?"

"She wanted him out of the way to marry Lord Kneedrock, who was supposed to be dead, but was only buried for eight years in the South Seas."

"Nonsense!" said Carleigh. "She doesn't love Kneedrock. Never did. I've seen them together. I've heard them both talk, and I know."

"I told you she could keep a secret," said Sibylla Veynol.

They returned to Nice before dinner, and Carleigh found his wife reading.

"Feeling more fit?" he asked.

"I shall never feel more fit," she answered without looking up from her book.

"You don't mean it's incurable? Have you had in the physician?"

"Oh, it's not physical," she replied petulantly. "It's mental. It's the conditions. I'm sick of everything. You don't care in the least for me any more. You haven't since mama came back. You had an assignation with her in the gardens of the hotel at Funchal the very next morning, and you kissed her there under my window. I saw you."

The thing took him so by surprise that he couldn't muster a single word for defense.

"I do wish you'd leave me," she went on. "Why don't you ask mama to bolt with you? I'm sure she would, and then I'd be rid of you both."

He nearly reeled under the shock of that speech. It held him still mute. It was painfully plain that something was wrong in a social fabric which made it possible for a wife to say such a thing—a young and pretty wife, too. And to say it without seeming to find it very heinous.

He noticed that she yawned and went on reading her book.

When he fully sensed it all, hours later, alone on the promenade, he decided to go off. But not with "mama."

# CHAPTER XXIII

## A MYSTERIOUS WIDOW OF BATH

Just as soon as she could possibly manage it Nina left the Dalgries, and alone with her maid hied herself to that stupidest of all English resorts—Bath.

There she took a flat and secured two servants, and kept herself so secluded that the story went abroad that the blind beggar in the famous poem was a beauty beside her.

Some said that she was sightless and some that she had been scarred beyond all recognition; but nobody really knew because nobody had really seen her.

Nobody, that is to say, except her surgeon and his assistant, and Delphine, the French maid.

Nina chose Bath because of this wonderful surgeon, Dr. Pottow, who was connected with the chief hospital there, and knew more about the skin and cutaneous affections than any man in England.

He promised to restore her if restoration were possible, but he was very reticent about the method until his success was assured. Then he told her that it had been necessary to resort to the grafting of new and healthy skin to take the place of that which had been scorched practically to a cinder.

"But where did you get it?" Nina asked, deeply interested. She knew that it had not been taken from her and transplanted.

"I was fortunate enough to find a volunteer," answered the surgeon.

"I suppose she required some fabulous price," Nina rejoined. "But if it has given me back an unmarred countenance I shall be only too glad to pay."

"There is nothing to pay," Dr. Pottow told her. "He gave it gratuitously, and was glad to."

"*He* gave it!" exclaimed the patient, starting up, impelled by flooding emotions.

"Yes, he."

"Shall I have to shave?" she asked, seriously startled by the dread possibility.

"No," came the answer with a smile. "The skin wasn't from his chin. There'll be no beard to bother you."

"I'd much rather had it from my own sex," she pouted.

"My sex is less selfish," said the surgeon. "Few women would sacrifice their cuticle that an afflicted sister might regain her beauty."

"Still I don't like the idea of being even that much man," she insisted. "I have always been so thoroughly—so entirely feminine."

"The cells are constantly renewing themselves." It was the scientist speaking. "You will wear these only temporarily."

Nina thought for a moment. Then she said: "Of course I shall pay him. I shall insist on it."

"I'm sure he won't accept. He regarded it a great privilege, he was delighted at the opportunity."

And at that she became really alarmed. It was some one she knew, of course. It was one or another, no doubt, of the army of lovers she had sent about their business when their ardor grew too oppressive.

But which one? Ah, that was the question—which one?

"But you've put me under a terrible obligation," she complained. "I think you should have consulted me, Dr. Pottow, before accepting such a sacrifice. I am very uncomfortable over it."

"You would have been more uncomfortable disfigured for life," he replied sagely.

Of course it wasn't Nibbetts. He would delight in seeing her hideous. The cabinet minister was out of the question, too. He'd be sure to get into the newspapers. Besides, he was very bitter.

The soldier of fortune was out of the country. And Carleigh was married and honeymooning. The American aviator had been killed volplaning.

"It might be the poet," she said aloud.

"I don't think he's ever been guilty of sonnets," observed Pottow. "Still we never know. He's most interested now in sheep-raising and in quarrying freestone."

"Good Heavens!" cried Mrs. Darling. "He isn't even a gentleman. How could you? Oh, how could you, Dr. Pottow?"

He smiled quizzically and excused himself with: "I hadn't any choice, you know. To tell the truth, I've done so much of this sort of thing that I've reduced the visible supply of skin, here in Bath, to the minimum."

"I don't see how he knew me," she went on, puzzled. "I'm very secluded here. I don't know a soul in the place, except you."

"You know him, or did. He says he owes you something, and—"

"What is his name?" she demanded, interrupting.

"I thought you'd ask that before. But you wished to place him for yourself, didn't you? And I'm afraid you'll have to. You see, when he volunteered it was on certain conditions; and that he was not to be known in the premises was one of them."

"But you've told me everything but his name."

"That was especially stipulated."

"And I am never to be any the wiser?" she inquired. "That seems hardly fair. Since I can't pay him I certainly should be permitted to thank him."

"I'll take your thanks to him."

"No. I wish to thank him myself, in person."

"You want him to come here?"

"I want him to come here—just as soon as I am fit to be seen."

"He'll come to-day, if you say so," he surprised her with.

"Oh, no, no, no. Not while I'm like this."

"But he's seen you worse than this, remember. He's been in this room a dozen—a score of times."

"Here!" she exclaimed, amazed.

"Of course. While your eyes were bandaged. While the transfer was made."

"Then he saw how awful I was?"

"I fancy he didn't regard you as awful. He seemed—"

But she wouldn't let him go on. "Send him this evening," she commanded, "and I'll have the lights arranged so that I can see him while I myself am veiled by the kindly shadow."

When the surgeon was gone Nina fell to wondering once more. There were flirtations she had totally forgotten; there was no question about that. But she had always been rather a stickler for caste, and she couldn't at all reconcile the sheep-raising and the stone-quarrying with any of her lightly amorous adventures.

Perhaps, after all, she had been on the wrong track. Certainly she had been on the wrong track. This man owed her something, the perplexing Pottow had said, meaning evidently a debt of gratitude.

Then it couldn't be one of those. They were the last persons to think themselves in arrears of that kind. It must be some one she had befriended. She supposed she had befriended poor men on occasions, but she couldn't recall individual cases.

Possibly it was a coachman or gardener, or one of the tenantry at some place she had been years agone.

Or—why, to be sure!—some private from the ranks, who had completed his service, fallen heir to a little farm and a little quarry here in Somersetshire, and settled down to the prosaic life of a plodding civilian.

The idea robbed the prospect of the meeting of most of its interest. And it was the only idea she could accept. She even forgot to tell Delphine that she was expecting a caller, and she forgot, too, to have the lights arranged as she had planned.

When, therefore, her maid came to her with the announcement that a gentleman was calling—a gentleman who wouldn't give his name, but said that he came at Dr. Pottow's suggestion—she was not in the least prepared.

"Does he seem a gentleman, Delphine?" she asked, interested afresh.

"*Oh, oui, madame!* A young gentleman, and good-looking."

"Have you ever seen him before?"

"Of a certainty, madame. Here, with Dr. Pottow."

"But you never heard his name?"

"Never, madame."

Then, hastily, she had her arrange the lights and give her a fan with which to mask the lower part of her features where the now healing burns were still more or less unsightly.

And then she waited—sure still that she was to be disappointed.

She heard the steps at length in the passage, and fixed her eyes upon the door. But the light was not very good there, either—she had had it concentrated as far as possible on the chair placed for the visitor at least four yards from her bedside, toward the foot and facing her.

He was in the room now, just over the threshold, bowing at what must have seemed to him just a black shadow, and save that he was tall, and that his figure was gracefully slender, what she saw meant nothing to her whatever. He hadn't even spoken, so there was no voice to recognize.

As he came forward, though, there was something in his walk and carriage that seemed familiar, though she couldn't place them for the life of her.

"Do sit down," she urged. "There! I'd rather you wouldn't come nearer."

Still he didn't speak. But he sat down as she bade him with the light full on his face, and she saw he was Gerald Andrews.

It was quite a minute before she could speak. Then, "You—of all the persons in the world!" she breathed barely above a whisper.

"It is odd that we should meet again here under such circumstances," he agreed, pleasantly amused over her astonishment. "And yet not so singular, either. It's a tight little island, this, and any two persons on it are more or less likely to run across each other in time."

"But I thought you were still in India," she said.

"It's three years since I came home. The governor died suddenly, and—well, there were things to be looked after."

Nina smiled, thinking of what Dr. Pottow had told her.

"Where's little boy blue that looks after the sheep?" she quoted. "Was that it?"

"Yes," he answered, "the sheep were part of it. But the quarry is the biggest job."

She wondered how she could be so rude to him after all he had done. Somehow it didn't just seem to her a gentleman's work. But he wasn't ashamed of it, evidently. And she was glad of that.

"I read in the newspapers about your misfortune," he told her. "I'm glad you came to Pottow. He's the best man on scars in all England."

"Scars," she repeated, remembering. But it would be ruder still to ask him about his. She wondered whether he really did think of her every time he shaved.

"He took an old scar out for me—a very delicate bit of work, too."

"How vain you must be!" she exclaimed.

"No; it was hardly vanity. I was ashamed of it, not for what it was, but for what it meant. It symbolized cowardice, and I was ashamed of that."

"I remember," she said; "but I'll forget it, if you'd rather."

"I would rather."

"You're stronger now, aren't you? I'm so glad."

Then for the first time came something of that old boyish lilt in his voice that recalled the Simla days—days prior to the night of the season's last dance at Viceregal Lodge, which wasn't the end of everything, after all.

"Are you glad, really?" he asked, delighted. "Do you care just that little bit?"

"Indeed I am," she told him. "I care a great deal—for your happiness. I want you to be happy."

"I'm hardly that," he confessed. "That is, I haven't been. But I'm very nearly so this evening."

She must have experienced some little emotion, for she forgot her fan for an instant and left her chin unmasked. But she lifted it again almost instantly.

"How good you have been to me!" she murmured. "I didn't deserve such sacrifice."

"It wasn't a sacrifice. It was a delight. Besides, it was the least I could do to make good for being a cad when you were in trouble."

Even in the shadow he could see that she didn't understand. Her eyes showed him that.

"I lost my head," he confessed. "I wasn't only weak; I was half wild. It was I that told Dinghal all you'd ever said to me. It was I, really, who started the horrid stories that got about. I feel I can never do enough to wipe that out."

To his surprise she showed no resentment. "I dare say that all you said wasn't half the truth. I did kill poor Darling, you know."

His brow contracted to a frown.

"You didn't," he protested. "You couldn't—you couldn't have meant to. If you had any part in it, it was accidental."

She didn't insist. All she said was: "I don't see why you should think so well of me, Gerald. I was perfectly horrid to you."

"Were you?" he asked, dreaming. "You were very good to me, too. I can't forget that. I don't want to. It's that and that only I care to remember."

"Would you think it good of me if I should let you come every day to see me?" she asked suddenly, with fresh impulse. "It's a privilege I've allowed no one."

"Oh, will you?" he cried, delighted. "I *would* be glad."

"I've seen no one but Dr. Pottow, you know; not even my oldest, dearest friends. Not my own people."

His smile was rapturous.

"I know it," he said. "Have you heard what you are called here? No? Well, you are 'the mysterious widow of Bath.'"

"Isn't that funny?" she laughed. "Fancy how dull I have been! You will come and amuse me, won't you, Gerald?"

"Every day. And if ever I bore you, or you'd rather not see me, say so. You'll do that?"

"I'll do that. And"—she hesitated just an instant—"and you mustn't neglect your sheep or your freestone, you know. If you don't come I'll know a lamb has strayed from the fold and you're out on the hill looking for it. Do you carry a crook?"

"My shepherds do," he said solemnly.

"Send me some south-down mutton, Gerald. I'm so fond of chops." And at that he laughed.

"I'm not going to be teased," he said and stood up. But Nina made him sit down again. She was enjoying his call so much. She made him stay another hour.

He came every day after that, as she bade him. She usually set the hour herself, and he arrived on the minute.

He sent her the magnificent skin of a tiger he had shot in India, and sometimes it pleased her to crouch on this, sensuously delighted by the contact, while remembering with a curious mingling of emotions how Kneedrock had declared her to be the reincarnation of just such another creature of the jungle, cruel, remorseless, blood-lusting—a tigress in the guise of a woman.

But she could never bear to look on that skin again after events that were soon to come.

Kneedrock himself never saw the rug.

As he was leaving one afternoon Andrews heard voices in the vestibule. The housemaid was sending away an insistent caller.

"Mrs. Darling doesn't see any one," he heard her say.

"But I'm sure she'll see me," the persistent male voice continued. "You just take her my card."

"She forbids me to fetch cards," rejoined the housemaid. "I'm sorry, sir."

He heard the jingle of silver coin. The caller was about to resort to bribery. As a privileged one, out of compassion for Nina, he would lend his aid. He might pretend he was the attending surgeon or physician, and that it was by his orders that the patient was denied visitors.

He drew the door, which was slightly ajar, wider. He made a third in the vestibule. And then he recognized the caller. It was Lord Kneedrock.

Nibbetts recognized him, too. He shrugged his hulking shoulders and thrust his handful of coins back into his pocket. Then he turned to the housemaid again.

"I understand," he said in his penetrating undertone. "I quite understand. Mrs. Darling sees no one."

Then he reopened the outer door and stalked lumberingly away.

# CHAPTER XXIV
## THE DISINTERESTED MARRIED MAN

There was a house-party at Puddlewood, and all the kinsfolk and friends who haunted Bellingdown were there.

"Who's seen Nina?" asked the duchess.

"No one," answered Waltheof laconically.

"Too bad, when she's so entertaining," said the duke. "I always say there's no one like Nina. I say, Doody, don't I say there's nobody like Nina?"

"Everybody knows what you think of Mrs. Darling," affirmed the duchess calmly. "But I do wonder what she looks like!"

Charlotte Grey had been to Bath, but had not succeeded in seeing the recluse. She got as far as Delphine, and that was all.

"*Madame ne reçoit personne*," said the French maid.

"Nibbetts has been, too," said Kitty Bellingdown. "And he was equally unsuccessful."

"I thought she'd have seen you," ventured the duchess.

"I thought so, too; but it appears not," returned Kneedrock gloomily.

Meanwhile the Carleigh split-up had occurred, but the fact had not yet reached this bureau of family and friendly counsel.

Strolling ruminantly on the promenade at Nice, Caryll's heart turned thirstily toward the giver of oblivion.

"I don't care what she looks like, I must see her," he said, and he left by that night's Paris *rapide*.

On the journey to Bath he did a great deal of thinking. He hadn't been happy for weeks—not since the night Mrs. Veynol came so suddenly into his paradise in Madeira.

It is idle for a man to hope to keep his perfect balance in a desperate flirtation with his own mother-in-law. One might as well contemplate tight-rope feats on a newly thrown and, consequently, not firm rope.

Carleigh realized that he hadn't made any manner of success of the task. And the worst of it was that his wife didn't in the least care.

When Sibylla had killed her daughter's betrothal, the daughter had rebelled slightly. She had been pale—but she appeared happy.

Now, however, when the marriage had gone under, she exhibited neither reluctance nor grief. She did not resent losing her husband in the least. She only yawned and said: "Why don't you bolt with mama?" and then read further.

It was all very distressing—exceedingly distressing. But now he was nearing Bath and Nina. And that meant consolation.

Nina, receiving his card, experienced a rush of vivid anticipation. Is there any situation so piquant as that of meeting the man one did not marry after he has "hashed it" with another woman?

Her embargo had been lifted that morning, and the precious new skin—partly Gerald's, partly her own—which the specialist had worked so hard to foster into beauty was at last firm enough to stand the gaze of the most critical of all judges—the man that one might have married.

Carleigh, waiting in the drawing-room, was far more nervous than she was. He had been told that she was horribly disfigured, and he expected to find her so.

Now he could hear her step in the passage. She was outside there in the chill hall. Then the latch clicked, the portière swung, and—he was rising to touch Nina Darling's hand again.

After all these months! The bedroom and the bandages rushed back upon his memory, and he was prepared to need self-control when he should look up. But when he did look up he saw, with a curious jump in his heart, that she was not scarred.

Then in the same instant that he realized she was unchanged he knew himself to be greatly changed—branded on brow as well as in soul. And he felt that through and through.

He took her hand—both hands—in his and gazed thirstily into her eyes—a serene violet-blue.

"I've blundered, too," he said as a greeting. "I've made an unhappy marriage, too, now. I have more sympathy for you than I had. But *she* never plays with guns, unfortunately."

He laughed, really quite gaily, for he was awfully glad to feel her hand in his again. And she laughed as well.

"It's funny how people talk, isn't it?" she said. "Of course I never had anything to do with it; but people like to talk—after all these years, too. It was just an accident."

And it was just the other day that she had insisted the reverse. But that was to another man—a different type of man.

He laughed and put his arm about her. "Kiss me, dear," he said. "I'm so very unhappy."

If she had averted her head he would have been her slave afresh; but she didn't avert her head. Instead she kissed him placidly—so placidly that he almost started.

"You see you're married now," she told him and drew her hand out of his and went and sat down.

He felt stunned and sick. It was as if there was no bottom anywhere for a little. But then he remembered.

"Nina," he said, calling her again that which in all the fervor of his nomenclature during the passionate, passed-by period he had so often voiced. "Nina, I've come to ask a great kindness at your hands—two, in fact."

She sat quiet, staring at him with those lash-veiled eyes that had driven him and so many, many others not quite mad; and, had the lesson he had spent months conning in such a hell as may exist amid our earthly surroundings been a bit less bitter and thorough, he must have felt that near-madness course in his veins again. But he was seared so that no near-madness was for him any more.

"How you've changed!" she observed, not seeming to notice his speech, and speaking herself in a certain tone of absolute childlike wonder, which was not the least of the weapons in her arsenal of personal persuasion. "Why, you've lines across your forehead—at your age, too! Lines that I can see even from here."

"Never mind," he said; and then some impulse led him to go over and kneel beside her, conscious only of an acute wonder as to what would come next. "Never mind, dear girl, listen to me."

She put her hand upon his head. "And white hairs," she pursued, tracing them with an astonished finger. "At your age, too. One—five. Why, I can count eight."

"Never mind," he repeated, pulling down the impertinent finger and wondering as he did so that its fresh imprisonment left him so pitifully, piteously unthrilled. "Never mind—I don't care what I look like any more.

"It's all so futile—life is so empty—things seem to me so very, very trivial. What are wrinkles beside things—untellable things—that stone one's immortality and make one wish that on the Judgment Day God Himself wouldn't know!"

Even as he spoke he caught himself questioning whether she believed him—whether his words stirred any feeling in her.

She dropped her eyes and pulled her hand free.

"I know what you mean," she said in a toneless voice. "I had such secrets, too. But they're not what people fancy them to be. People think I killed my husband; but I didn't. I did what you've done—what we all do. I killed myself."

He looked at her. It was such a pitiless, relentless glare—that into which her words thrust his consciousness.

"I can't believe that yours were like mine," he said miserably. "No one can ever have done what I have done. Yes, you're right—and it has killed me."

She didn't seem greatly interested.

"But I didn't come to talk of that," he exclaimed quickly. "I came to ask of you two things. Will you grant them?"

She turned her head, leaving only her profile showing. "Certainly not," she said. "I will grant you nothing."

"You mustn't say that. You don't know what I'm asking."

"You're married," she told him, "and I won't have a thing to do with you. I hate the love-making of married men. It's dangerous, too, for they always talk."

That dull, heavy red that had been crimson before he took on chains stole over his face.

"I'll tell you without asking, then," he said. "It may not be the great and tremendous thing to you that it is to me. I think, perhaps, that you may even laugh."

"Very likely," she assented.

He rose and went to the chimney-piece and stood there, striving for greater quietude. It was a long moment—minutes long.

Then, finally, he threw over his shoulder, "Nina, you must hear me. I'm going away. I'm going to cut it all. Suetonius was pretty bad, but you can be tracked by a mother-in-law until life becomes hideous. I—"

"But everybody knew why your betrothal was called off," she said with simple finality; "and then you deliberately married the girl even after that."

"I know—I know—I know," he cried in irritation; "but those things must be written in the Book of Fate. Some curses must be launched beyond recall. At any rate, it's done. We both know that."

"Yes, we know that," she agreed simply.

"And now I am going away, and I'm not sure that I shall ever return. But I want an object in going, and I would rather have it something in connection with you than anything else on earth. I've thought what I want to do, and I wish you'd give me permission to do it.

"Of course there was a man you loved, and of course you love him yet. Equally of course he accounts for everything, and of course he's still alive or you'd be a better woman. If he was dead he'd have a hold over you that would keep you straight."

"How funny for you to know all that!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes very wide. "You certainly have been learning." Then she broke forth into laughter. "And if it were the duke now!"

"Don't laugh," he cried angrily. "I tell you I'm in earnest. I know that there's a man, and that he's somewhere. Well, then, I want to go where he is, and to see him face to face, and to try to right whatever separates you. I've got to get away—and far away—and I'll be able to build some sort of respect for myself if I know that I've a good purpose and a clean mission."

She wasn't laughing now. He was very much in earnest, and she had caught some of his seriousness. It was contagious.

"I understand what persons like you and me can suffer, and how much they need help, and how the mock of love unfulfilled can drive them into hideous rocks and sink them in a seething whirlpool of temptations. I can read your life like a book now—can read it by the lurid light of my own burning wreck. And so I know that whatever might happen you would be forgivable. And it's what I know—what I have learned—that I want to tell him. And whatever is wrong—if he believes it—if I can make him believe—However, it—" And there he stopped—broke off abruptly.

Nina was staring at him hard.

He had spoken so fast and in such a passion of pleading that he appeared to be for the moment breathless. She sat there before him in the low chair she had chosen, and her eyes were fixed on him.

He had poured forth the last phrases with his head bowed and his hands gripping the edge of the velvet-draped shelf behind him.

It was she who spoke next.

"There is no one for you to go to," she said—"no one in all the wide world. As to my husband, it was a kind of accident. But really I didn't care if it hadn't been. All my crimes are against myself. I've injured no one else. Do you understand?"

He nodded dumbly, feeling rather blank.

"There is no 'man' in my life," she went on. "I never have 'loved' as women are supposed to love. I've just liked men—liked them as such—that was all."

She paused briefly, looking at him, expecting some word; but he was silent.

"I've never been really bad," she continued. "I've never wanted to be bad. But I like to be kissed, and I've been so unhappy through just sheer loneliness that I could only remember a few of the commandments, and the marriage service not at all."

Sir Caryll Carleigh stood very still there, trying to read her meaning in her face, but failing.

"Pretty nearly every one thinks I was in love with Kneedrock," she pursued presently. "You may ask him about that if you like. And they think that we made way with poor Darling between us. But they are wrong."

She paused again, in doubt whether or not to say more—whether or not to tell the truth—the whole truth—as she had never told it before. Carleigh neither urged nor encouraged, but of her own free will she decided. It was due him in a way, and frank confession might probably be the best thing for her. She had carried the burden alone now for five years, always growing heavier, and the temptation to share it was too much for her.

"He was cleaning his gun, you see"—that was how she began it; just that simply—"and a cartridge shell stuck in the barrel. He tried to get it out, and then he held it—the gun, I mean—and asked me to try—with a sharp thing, you know. He thought that it was an empty shell and so did I. But it wasn't. That was all."

Carleigh shivered ever so slightly. "You cannot say that you didn't kill him, then," he declared.

She pursed her lips a bit thoughtfully. Already she felt better. She had not misjudged the effect—she *was* relieved.

"No; because of course I did. But, on the other hand, of course I didn't. Anyhow, it mattered very little. I was so mad over life and living that his death seemed a very small event to me. I couldn't remember a thing at first.

"The shot seemed to have stunned my memory. But it all came back later—horridly. The scene, I mean. Yet the event—the fact that poor Darling was gone—appeared of so little importance. And I foolishly expected the world to see it as I did."

"But the world didn't?"

"No"—she shook her head quite seriously—"the world chose to talk, and has talked ever since. So very stupidly, too."

Carleigh felt dazed. Nina's viewpoint was very puzzling at times.

"And yet I understand," he said, seizing on the most obvious end of the tangle. "I don't suppose I'd—you see I have been so close to desperation myself—I don't suppose I'd care, either, if—" But he got no further.

Nina hooked her fingers together tightly behind her head.

"I wouldn't think such thoughts if I were you," she said quite gravely. "You know if you do, the chance comes, and then you do something—and God—only God—will ever measure you by what you really did mean."

Then she looked at him very intently and went on with great impressiveness both of tone and emphasis: "I did give a most awful jab with that sharp thing, and the cartridge exploded and killed my husband, and—I was glad. So, of course, I *am* a murderess at heart. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see," said Carleigh somberly.

"And that was my crime," she continued—"that I wanted to do it. And the results haven't mattered so much. What matters is that *I wanted to do it*. That's all that matters. All that can ever matter."

"I understand," said the man, his voice so low that the words were barely articulate.

There was a long, grim silence which grew oppressive.

"It's years ago, is it not?" he asked then.

"Five years," she answered. "It's not a pretty story, is it? How the duchess enjoys telling it! What she knows and what she thinks. And she's my great-aunt. Fancy what fun it has afforded the rest of the world!"

"That is unworthy of you," Carleigh rebuked under his breath—"to rail about the horror that has blighted your life. I can't laugh over horrors. They turn me cold in the night."

"Ah, but I've grown used to mine," she returned lightly. "And besides, it wasn't so bad as what followed—as the realizing that I could never be clean again. I wonder if all those who've sinned as I have sinned are trying to fill an empty life as I've been trying!"

He moved to a seat, sank down and clutched his head between his hands. "But love wasn't killed in you—you find pleasure in men. It has been in me."

She whirled in her seat so suddenly that he started.

"Good Heavens!" she cried, "you don't fancy that I get any real joy out of flirting, do you? Why, it's only to pass the time. I never forget for one second. I—I couldn't."

There was another silence—briefer, this time—and then Carleigh rose, a bit heavily.

"You're horribly human, you know," he said. "I don't know what to say or what to do. I know only that I long more than ever for you. You—you couldn't care for me again, I suppose?"

She began to laugh. "Oh, you very manlike man!" she cried. "As if I didn't know that was what you came for. No; I couldn't ever care for you. No; not possibly."

There was a tap on the door and the housemaid entered with a card for Nina, who knew whose name it bore before she glanced at it.

"Certainly, Wilson," she said; "show Mr. Andrews in at once."

# CHAPTER XXV

## THE INTERESTED MARRIED MAN

Lord Kneedrock lived, when he was in town, in a small suite in St. James's Square.

Here Carleigh came on a bright morning, three days later, to find Kneedrock in the little sitting-room reading before a fire, three windows open and two dogs asleep at his feet.

They talked for half an hour before the visitor reached his point.

"She told me all," he said, then. "I suppose it's fairest to say outright that she told me all."

Kneedrock didn't look at him. He was smoking his pipe, and his gaze fixed itself on the curling clouds of smoke that eddied in the cross-currents of air from the open windows.

"I suppose that she told you she was to blame, eh?" he drawled after a moment.

"She said that she hadn't cared what happened."

"It isn't a pretty story, no matter how you look at it," the viscount observed, putting his reflections into words. "Two desperate persons who didn't care what happened. Poor Darling! He didn't care what happened, either, don't you know. I've often wondered if he didn't load the thing and call her to manage the discharge."

Carleigh's eyes were fascinatedly fixed on the flames in the grate—little blue, dancing devils of light whose heat was overpowered by the chill from outside.

"I thought of that, too," he said, grimly.

"Poor Darling!" Kneedrock went on musingly. "I saw him before any one else. The smoke hadn't cleared away. His face was quite gone, you know. It was awful."

"Good God!"

There was a little pause, and then the older man said:

"What horrible things go on in the world, anyhow!"

"Yes," the other said simply.

"I saw him after that, though," pursued Kneedrock, "in his coffin, tricked out in his dress uniform, a handkerchief spread where his face used to be, and his head on a silk pillow. He looked very peaceful. Glad it was all over, I dare say."

Carleigh only nodded, still looking at the fire. And then there was another pause, which Kneedrock broke eventually with: "We're awfully primitive.... Still Nina's story wasn't strictly primitive. It was all warped and twisted by civilization.

"In the stone age things would have been different. The troglodyte would have clubbed Darling, and later, if the lady played tricks, he would have ended her in the same way. That's how to manage women."

He stretched out his iron hand and wrist and looked at them—his right hand and wrist, not the scarred ones. "I hate civilization," he said then suddenly. "I hate honor, and *noblesse oblige*, and all such tommyrot. It's the ruin of the race."

He spoke slowly now, but with a frightful bitterness.

"Yes," said Carleigh, sympathy swelling quick, "we've gone a long way from the truth of existence."

"It isn't any use going on a wild-goose chase after happiness in these times," Kneedrock went on. "You can't cure your ills, nowadays. I tried to help myself once, and made the worst kind of a mess of it. Go back to your wife, or go off with your mother-in-law, but don't imagine that either course is going to help you to happiness. Because it isn't."

Carleigh was looking Nibbetts straight in the eyes now.

"And yet," he said frankly, "I think that I could be happy—quite happy—with Mrs. Darling."

"No, you couldn't," returned the viscount sharply—gruffly, in fact. "You couldn't. She's too shallow."

"Shallow?"

"Yes, shallow. She has no depths—of feeling, or anything else. Her whole life shows that. She was too pretty when she was young. She led her husband a devil of a dance, and she'll never reform.

"You must go after some other trail or grail, or whatever you choose to call it. You can never either help Nina or get her. Take my word for that."

Carleigh, who wasn't in any sense a strong character, felt depressed at the words. Kneedrock, who was a very strong character, relit his pipe and waited. After a little the other said:

"Do you, by any chance, know a man named Andrews?"

"I know one Andrews," answered Kneedrock, and this time he held out his left hand and wrist. "It was he who gave me that," he added, indicating the healed wound, "the night before poor Darling was shot."

"In India?"

"In India."

"What sort of a chap?"

"Tallish, rather good-looking, brown eyes and hair, young. Was in the civil service."

Carleigh looked puzzled. "I wonder if it could have been the same?" he asked, half to himself. "I met him at Mrs. Darling's the day I called."

"Oh, I dare say," said Kneedrock, non-committally. "He's followed her after five years. Once one gets the virus in one's blood, it's likely to break out any time. So Andrews is at Bath!"

"He seemed to be quite at home."

"Doubtless he is. Nina can make one feel that way. He was very much at home in the Darling bungalow at Umballa. Just before he fired at me he and Nina seemed to be sharing a single chair. You see, I was there on a spying expedition."

"You mean—" queried Carleigh. He couldn't just reconcile Kneedrock and the word.

"I'd heard that Darling was cruel to her and I traveled all the way from Tuamota to the Punjab to find out."

Sir Caryll held his peace, and Kneedrock added: "Of course I found it was the most unwarranted slander. Darling was a saint."

He got up and closed the three windows. Then he poked the coals, and took a place on the hearth-rug with his back to the grate. The dogs still slept.

"So she's amusing herself with Andrews again, eh!" he chuckled. "Recalling those halcyon days of bloodshed, I suppose."

"Perhaps," said Carleigh thoughtfully, "now, after all these years, she'll marry him."

"Oh, no, she won't," flashed from Kneedrock, who was smiling. "She can't, you know."

"I don't see why not," the other rejoined. "She's her own mistress. She's of age, and a widow, and of sound mind."

The viscount maintained a rather disconcerting silence for the space of several seconds, puffing at his pipe and following the smoke with his eyes. Then he patted the head of the nearest dog with the toe of his boot.

When, finally, he spoke, it was to ask: "Did you ever hear me spoken of as her lover?"

"Yes," answered Carleigh, surprised beyond words.

Kneedrock raised his head and his eyes as they rested for a moment upon Sir Caryll's were curiously devoid of expression.

"I was," he said with a sort of dry grimness. "I'm more than that—I'm her *husband*."

# CHAPTER XXVI

## THREE PERSONS GO THREE WAYS

As he realized the full meaning of Lord Kneedrock's amazing statement, the young and unhappy baronet started. His eyes opened very wide and his jaw dropped, leaving his mouth open, too, though not so wide.

"Yes, we're married," Kneedrock continued. "We've been married a long time."

The only thing that could have drowned the sound of the proverbial dropping pin was the low snoring of one of the sleeping dogs.

"It was one of those useful businesses that are managed sometimes," the speaker amplified without any feeling apparently. "Nobody knew. Nobody knows. I went to South Africa, was supposed to have been killed in battle, and Darling came along.

"She married him at the end of a year, and went to India with him. It was about then that I got my memory back. My head was pretty badly knocked about, you see, and for months I didn't know my own name. Of course I heard about it, but I kept my mouth shut and hid myself away in the South Pacific."

Carleigh just stared. It was altogether too much for him to grasp fully. So he had no questions. But Kneedrock kept on:

"So she wasn't exactly the débutante that Darling thought. Naturally, it's all a mess. Everything's a mess. You take my advice and go off with your mother-in-law."

Carleigh was shaking now as if with the ague.

"They call the whole business love," Nibbetts said. "Well, I thank Heaven I had it young! I'm the one man that Nina can't fool. She knows it. I know it. And you know it, too, now.

"Of course she hasn't any claim on me, and I haven't on her. But we shall neither of us ever marry. That's understood. We can't very well. Don't talk about this. Going? Well, then, good-by, old chap! Better go off with Mrs. Veynol. Good-by!"

Carleigh got out somehow. He was faint and giddy. He went to one of his many clubs, and sat there for a long while. Life looked to him a very low, sordid business.

Outside there was fog and mud, slime and filth. And in his heart there was little that was cleaner.

Nina went down to Puddlewood the next week and surprised everybody.

They weren't expecting her in the least. They hadn't heard a word from her or of her, and they didn't know a thing about the skin-grafting and the wonderful success that Pottow, aided by the Andrews cuticle, had made of it.

They were all gathered in the great hall for tea when she arrived, and her entrance was rather dramatic. She insisted that she should not be announced, but permitted to find her way in alone.

The black staghound, Tara, was with her, and at her command he preceded her, bounding into the group with Nina's umbrella gripped in his lean jaws.

Every woman screamed, and every man who was not already standing sprang to his feet.

"God bless my soul!" cried the duke. "How did that beast get here? It's Nina Darling's. There isn't another such in all England."

Lord Waltheof reached for the umbrella, which Tara gave up without protest, and turned with expectant gaze toward the door.

"It's Mrs. Darling's umbrella," said Wally, examining the initials on the silver-gilt handle. "She must be here."

The duchess rose at that, and her gaze joined that of the hound. She and every one else had the same question in mind: "How will she look?" But there was a very trying delay before it was answered.

Nina came running in an instant later; but, to the dismay of the curious, she was thickly and closely veiled.

From this, of course, they drew their own conclusions, just as she wished them to. Every last one of them believed that her face was not fit to be seen.

Every man, without exception, was sorry—deeply sorry; and every woman, without exception, wasn't. Nina's beauty had always been a hard thing to combat.

For the duchess's kiss she lifted her veil the least bit and presented the extreme point of her chin. The duchess, observing closely, noted that it was unmarred, and concluded that it was the only portion of her great-niece's face that was.

"I have been perfectly brutal to all of you," Nina admitted gaily, "but when you hear my story I'm sure you'll all forgive me."

It is hard for most women to forgive a pretty woman, but to forgive a pretty woman who has suddenly become ugly is not so difficult.

They—the women, that is—were disposed to overlook the poor creature's rudeness. The men were always her slaves, so they didn't count. It was the women she had appealed to, anyhow.

"Nina never is brutal," declared the duke. "I say, Doody, haven't I always said—"

But no one was listening, not even the duchess, who rarely failed to confirm him.

"I've had the most awful time with my burns," Nina was hurrying on; "and I hadn't the heart to write letters, talk, or even see any one. I denied myself to everybody."

"Until you were quite all right again, I suppose?" ventured Lady Bellingdown in an effort to draw her.

"Until I got so desperately lonely—so hungry for the faces and voices of my own people—that I should have come to you even without any face at all."

It was an unfortunate choice of phrasing. Every one noticed it and thought of poor Darling. Every one, that is, except Nina herself, to whom the comparison never

occurred. She was too occupied in thinking of how Charlotte Grey would look when she saw her without her veil.

"You needn't mind us, of course," said Charlotte just at that minute.

"Oh, I don't!" Nina came back. "I know you'll overlook any blemishes."

"Indeed we will," agreed the duke; "we're all so devilish glad to see you!" He put a hand under her elbow and whispered close to her ear. "Come sit by me. There's some very excellent seed-cake."

Then, laughing, Nina sat down with the duke on her right and Sir George Grey on the other side of her. The three ladies faced her directly. So did Lord Waltheof, who had his customary place behind Kitty Bellingdown's chair.

A footman came in with the tea-things, and Nina glanced around inquiringly. "Isn't Nibbetts here?" she asked, striving to make the question appear casual.

Everybody seemed to look at everybody else, and no one was in any haste to answer. Already the duchess was busy with the cups and saucers.

"Nibbetts has gone to Scotland," Shucks finally told her.

"Is it possible he's still running after his marmalade lass?" she laughed. "You men do have odd tastes."

"Something wrong with Nibbetts—that's a fact," declared his grace bluntly. "Does most unheard-of things."

"I don't understand," she said, turning to him with sudden seriousness. "What unheard-of things, for example?"

But here the duchess intervened. "Do be still, Pucketts. You're very hard on Nibbetts. You always were. He's never been anything but eccentric. Why magnify a phase of it into something extraordinary?"

"Because it is extraordinary," the duke defended. "Fancy a man haunting the tiger-house at the Zoölogical Gardens day after day, and for hours at a stretch! It's not sane, you know."

Nina bent her veiled face closer to him. "Does Hal Kneedrock do that?" she asked.

"He did," was the answer. "I saw him there myself. Others saw him. I say, Doody, didn't I see Nibbetts in the tiger-house?"

"I dare say you did," his wife confirmed. "But what of it?"

"It's very odd, I say. Very odd. It looks like second childhood. The kiddies like to go to the tiger-house."

No one else said a word. But they all seemed most interested, in Nina especially.

"But now he's gone to Scotland, you say?" she asked.

"Yes, to Scotland. Are there any zoölogical gardens in Scotland, I wonder? Doody, are there any zoölogical gardens in Scotland?"

"Nibbetts has gone to Dundee," the duchess returned, pouring tea. "I don't fancy he'll be able to find any tigers there."

"There's a girl there," said Nina. "He told me so. A girl and a parrot. Can you imagine Nibbetts and a romance?" Her laugh rippled through her veil.

Sir George handed her her tea, and she lifted her veil to a point between her nose and her upper lip. The women stared, and so did the men. But there wasn't a scar in sight.

"Do try the seed-cake," urged the duke. "I can recommend it. I can, really."

Nina tried it. A minute later her veil went to the bridge of her nose, which she brushed with a filmy speck of handkerchief.

They all gazed over their cups, and their eyes testified to their astonishment. Her cheeks were of rose-leaf texture, unmarred.

Then, quite casually, she put down her cup and saucer, lifted her arms, got busy with her hands, and—presto!—her hat and veil were off and her whole face bare to where her golden hair swept across her brow.

Charlotte Grey gasped. The duchess and Lady Bellingdown were dumb.

"By gad!" exclaimed Waltheof in a fervor of astonished admiration. "You're more beautiful than ever, Mrs. Darling."

"We fancied you were horribly marked," cried the duke. "We did, really. All purple blotches and that sort of thing. Didn't we, Doody?"

"Speak for yourself, Pucketts," said Doody. "I could never imagine Nina anything but lovely."

Kitty Bellingdown had turned to frown at her cavalier. She regarded his outburst as quite unnecessary and very ill-timed.

Charlotte Grey gasped a second time. Then she said: "I'd be willing to be burned to get a complexion like yours, dear."

"But, you see, I had the foundation to begin on; and I had a friend who was willing to sacrifice something for me," replied Nina sweetly. So sweetly that Charlotte Grey fairly gritted her teeth.

Lady Bellingdown grasped the situation and rushed to the rescue with a change of subject.

"Nina," she said, "did you know that Caryll had returned to his wife?"

Then it was really Mrs. Darling's turn to gasp. "Really!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. He was in England for a week, but never came near us. It seems they had a quarrel over some trifle and he ran away to give her a lesson. Unfortunately it got into the papers."

"I saw it," Nina white-lied valiantly.

"But did you see about Mrs. Veynol?"

"You mean—"

"About her marriage."

"Her marriage? Surely—"

"Yes. She's married for the third time. Now it's a journalist, a sub-editor on one of the cheap and nasty society weeklies. Fancy!"

"Ah, that cleared the way, then. Caryll would never have gone back otherwise."

"You think that?"

"I know it. He told me as much."

"You mean you saw him—saw him the week he was here?"

Nina colored faintly. She had not meant to tell.

"Yes," she answered. "He came to me at Bath. He wanted me to save him. He couldn't quite decide between the pair of them, so he wished to compromise on me."

Lady Bellingdown nearly boiled over.

"He's a most ungrateful boy," she cried. "He must have known how anxious we all were about you, and he never sent me a line. Only a wire that he had returned to Nice and Rosamond."

"If he—" Nina began, and finished with: "He might have said Rosamond and Nice. Don't you think so? It's straws, you know—"

After dinner that evening Nina got the duke alone in a corner.

"Tell me more about Hal Kneedrock," she begged, taking the clawlike ducal hand in both her own. "Is there anything really wrong, do you think?"

His grace, out of ear-shot of the duchess, didn't mince matters. "Mad as a hatter," he said earnestly. "Brain gone all to pieces over something. No doubt about it. Poor old Nibbetts!"

"But how? What has he done except haunt the tiger-house?"

"Nothing. But the way he haunts it. There all day, you know, from opening to close, every day of the week."

"That's an odd mania. Can't anything be done? Has any one talked with him?"

"Yes," answered the duke. "His man. Bellingdown and I saw his man and told him what was up. We asked him to keep his master in sight and see that no harm came to him. Just that. But the beggar exceeded his instructions. He let Kneedrock see him and then he tried to argue him out of his habit."

"And what did Hal say?"

"He didn't say; he acted. He beat the poor fellow up most fearfully. Went into a towering rage, in fact."

"And now nobody'll speak to him about it, I suppose," cried Nina indignantly. "You men are such cowards."

"No, no, no," the duke protested. "It isn't that, my child. It isn't really. But, you see, it's a most delicate matter. He probably has some reason for going there that in his own mind seems perfectly right and proper."

"Then, after all, why interfere?"

"Because he's attracting attention. Or was. Of course, he's not now. He's in Dundee, you know."

"Yes. I've heard that. When he comes back perhaps he won't go to the tiger-house any more."

His grace adjusted his monocle and carefully examined his three massive rings of yellow gold, handsomely set with jewels.

"If he does there'll be trouble," he said quietly.

"But if he's not creating a disturbance?"

"Ah, but he is. That's just it. He collects a crowd."

"How?"

The duke hesitated. "I suppose it's this that Kitty was afraid I'd tell you. You've been through a lot of nervous strain, with the fire and things, and she wanted to save you. I can see it."

Nina naturally was doubly interested. "You've gone too far now to turn back," she said. "You must tell me the rest. I have a right to know all."

"Well, it's this way"—the duke dropped his glass and turned to her, his voice very low—"it's just one cage that he's a *penchant* for. He stands before it, or paces up and down before it continuously." Then he paused.

Nina was growing annoyed. "What of it?" she asked.

"You know that story he's always telling you—that you're a reincarnated tigress. Well, this is the cage of a tigress."

"I think you are all very silly," she declared. "Fancy connecting the two facts! He's probably doing it on a wager—or been doing it." But she was disturbed, nevertheless.

"The tigress is a very handsome beast," continued the duke, "and—you may as well have the worst of it—he talks to her. He mumbles under his breath. Sometimes it's a tone that is most adoring, and again he berates her scandalously. And, Nina, you'd never imagine it, but it's quite true—the creature seems to understand."

Then she laughed nervously. "No," she said. "I won't believe that. It's too silly for words. I'm surprised at you, Pucketts, taking such a thing seriously. Nibbetts has been playing a joke on you. And your imagination has done the rest. I never heard such ridiculous folderol in all my life."

She stood up and started to move away, but the duke was by her side.

"There's one thing he says that is quite plain," he continued. "I heard it and Bellingdown heard it. We were there beside him, and he didn't so much as see us. He was blind to everything except that great, lithe, purring she-cat."

Nina turned to him. In spite of her little speech of repudiation she was all a-quiver from head to feet. "What was it?" she asked.

"He was calling the beast Nina."

# CHAPTER XXVII

## REASON TOTTERING ON ITS THRONE

After three nervously anxious days Nina Darling journeyed back to London and reopened her flat at Mayfair—a very different Nina indeed from the frolicsome Nina who went to Puddlewood to display her restored beauty.

The duke's story concerning Kneedrock had distressed her woefully. As a girl, in spite of her high-spirited independence and honey-bee proclivity of sipping sweets where she found them, she had loved him deeply, and since his return from self-banishment—since the one great tragedy of her life at Umballa—she had found in him her sole rock of dependence. Stubborn—cruel often at times as he was—she nevertheless felt and knew that while he reprobated and deplored her seeming lightness of character, yet deep in his soul he still held her very dear.

From what she had learned—but which she still hoped to prove grossly exaggerated—she was now more than ever convinced that this was true.

How profoundly he had been stirred and hurt by her wilful follies this awful climax—oh, it couldn't, it must not be true—demonstrated as nothing else, either word or action, could possibly have done.

Selfishly, for her own passing pleasure, she had driven men to intemperance, to exile, to self-destruction even; and now, as a fitting culmination in *lex talionis*—the one strong man of all, the king, the god she worshiped, had succumbed, they told her, in more awful plight than any of the others.

In her extremity Nina wired to Bath, bidding Gerald Andrews come to her at once. Then she sat down and waited.

He came by the first train, yet the intervening time seemed endless. And he found her pale and haggard, with purple crescents beneath dull, tired eyes; for in twenty-four hours she had neither eaten nor slept. It was nine o'clock at night, and the rain, driven by an east wind, was beating against the windows like an avalanche.

"Gerald," she greeted, giving him the tips of cold fingers, "you are so good. I need you terribly."

"You are ill," he said at once. "What have you been doing?"

She told him briefly what she had heard.

"It is the uncertainty," she added. "It's killing me. If I could only be sure—one way or the other—I—" Her voice quavered.

"Have you dined?" he interrupted.

"No; I'm not hungry. I haven't thought of eating."

"But you must," he urged. "You must keep up your strength. Unless you do I shall refuse to help you."

"I've no appetite," she said. "I hunger only for facts—for the truth."

"Then you must prepare for it. It may be too strong for an empty stomach."

But this only alarmed her. "You know?" she cried hysterically. "You know something already?"

"Nothing," he answered—"nothing at all. Only—well, the fact is, I haven't dined, either. I came straight here from the station. Could you—"

"You poor boy!" she broke in. "Of course. Please touch the bell. There; behind you."

"Won't you come out with me?"

"No; I couldn't; besides, listen to the rain, and—and I'm not dressed, you see."

"You don't want me to go alone?"

"Oh, no, no, no," she protested. "I have so much to say—"

"Very well. I'll stop, and I'll eat; but on one condition. You must eat, too."

"I can't," she insisted. "I can't, really. I'd choke."

"Try it," he insisted, in turn. "If you choke I'll let you off."

There was consommé, and there were chops—done to a turn—and a cobwebbed bottle of Pommard. Of the wine Andrews forced her to sip the better part of a glass, and was rewarded by a faint show of color in her lips and cheeks.

It stimulated her appetite, too, and she managed to swallow a few spoonfuls of the soup and a little lean, red meat of a chop. After which he called her a brave girl and assured her that there was nothing he wouldn't do for her in return.

"I want you, the very first thing in the morning, to go to Regent's Park," she said. "I want you to go where the tigers are, and to ask questions of the guards. They can can tell you whether it is true that a gentleman has been there recently, acting strangely."

"I'll be there when the gates open," returned Gerald. "What else?"

"If you find it is true—which I hope to Heaven you don't—I want you to go to Lord Kneedrock's solicitor and learn what he knows about it. You may tell him you came from me, and that I desire some steps taken."

He looked at her questioningly. He couldn't understand her right to make such a demand, but he said nothing, except:

"Who is Lord Kneedrock's solicitor?"

"A combined mummy and sphinx," she answered. "His name is Widdicombe, and he has chambers in the Inner Temple. Your real task will be to get him to open his mouth. He's a living storehouse of secrets."

"Won't your name open it?"

"The name of his majesty wouldn't open it unless he felt it to be for his client's interest. I'm afraid you'll find him a very hard nut to crack, Gerald."

"If I fail, it won't be for lack of effort," he declared determinedly.

Then she smiled at him in the old way for the first time since he came.

"How are the sheep and the ewe lambs?" she asked, with a faint sign of mischief.

He smiled in return, pleased to note the change in her, even if it were but momentary.

"Safe in fold to-night, I hope," he answered, as a gust of wind blew the rain in vicious volleys against the panes.

"Tell me," she said presently. "How did Lord Kneedrock look the day you saw him at Bath?"

"Vexed," he answered. "Beastly angry, in fact."

"I'm sure he did. It was unkind of me not to see him, and to make an exception of you."

"That's altogether a matter of viewpoint. I think it was most kind."

"Of course you do. Men are all selfish animals."

"I think *that* is unkind," he said reprovingly. "I'm not selfish where your happiness is concerned. I'd go to the ends of the earth to serve you, Nina."

"With another man left behind?"

"Yes. Even with another man left behind."

"That's what Kneedrock did," she told him. "And—and I can never forget it."

"And he can never forgive it," Andrews added.

Then he went away, and Nina passed another sleepless night.

But he was back the next day by noon, to find her sitting in the same chair, with Tara lying at her feet, and the rain still beating its dismal tattoo on the window-panes. The room was in dusk.

She saw in his face that what she had feared, yet hoped against, he had brought her. She needed no word to confirm the dire thing told her by the duke. Poor Andrews seemed weighed down by the burden of his tidings. His expression was as grim and dour as the day.

"But do they know who he is?" It was her first question, and it relieved him of the bald announcement he had dreaded.

"They don't," he answered quickly, glad to get the first plunge over. "They haven't the faintest notion, apparently. I asked particularly."

"Poor Nibbetts," Nina sighed. "He doesn't look the typical nobleman. Yet when he was a young man there wasn't a smarter in all London."

"That South Sea life took it out of him, I suppose."

"And the butchering the Boers gave him."

"I wonder if his present fix can't be traced back to that?" suggested her friend, leaning down and patting the staghound's head. "There's such a thing as traumatic insanity, you know."

She seemed to seize on this alternative possibility with eagerness.

"He has never been the same since he came back," she said. "That is certain. He was quite, quite different before he went to South Africa."

Then a question occurred to her, and she asked: "Has he shown any violence?"

"Not at the gardens. But they had heard of an assault he made outside the gates."

"Yes, I know. He attacked his valet for following him and daring to interfere."

"He has been very quiet in the tiger-house—except for that mumbling talk of his to the tigress. But that attracts attention—collects a crowd, you know—and they have to ask him to move on."

"And does he?"

"Oh, yes! Very peaceably. But he's back again in a little while, and then the same thing has to be repeated."

"Poor Hal!" sighed Nina, her locked hands tightly gripped.

"They hope he has gone away to stay, one of the guards told me. Ever since the row outside, they fear he may indulge in some outbreak in the grounds. There is talk of refusing him admission."

"If they only would," she said. And then, abruptly: "But you haven't told me of Mr. Widdicombe. Did you see him?"

Gerald smiled. "Yes, oh yes," he answered. "I saw him. But you were right. He wouldn't talk. He wouldn't open his mouth."

"He just sat dumb?"

"He turned to his desk and touched a bell. A clerk came and—that was all."

"You told him that *I* wished to know?" There was something imperious in her emphasis.

"I did—yes." And again he questioned why that should bear any weight. Although he did not voice it, she read it in his look.

"I'm his near kin, you know," she explained. "We are cousins."

"I understand," he told her, but he thought the explanation far short of adequate.

She got up and crossed the room, and from a drawer in an escritoire took out a small photograph, which she passed to Andrews.

"That was taken in 1900," she said.

It was easy to recognize her in the slender, tallish girl, with masses of fair hair, and clad in the simplest of white frocks. But he would never have known the slim young man with the waxed mustache for Lord Kneedrock, had she not told him. He wore outing flannels and a blazer of wide stripes, and his arm was about her youthful shoulders.

"It was taken at Henley," she said, "just for a lark. Look at the back."

He turned it over and found written there in pencil: "'Arry and his 'Arriet," in a man's hand.

"Hal used always to call me Harriet," she explained, and in spite of her, her voice shook.

He looked at her sharply as he handed it back, remembering just then a certain night in Simla when she told him that she had met her match and her mate in one.

"Does Widdicombe know about this?" he asked.

"I very much doubt that there is anything in Lord Kneedrock's life which Mr. Widdicombe doesn't know," was her answer.

She returned to her chair, but Gerald Andrews remained standing. "Is there anything else I can do?" he inquired. "If not, I'll—"

"You can stay for luncheon," she interrupted.

He thanked her, but declined.

"I've a little business to look after while I'm up," he added, "and I should be back in Bath to-night."

"You've been so good," she said, giving him her hand. "I shall miss you awfully. You'll be up again soon, won't you, Gerald?"

The door-bell echoed, and at the same instant Tara lifted his head and growled. Neither seemed to notice.

The man drew her closer and placed his disengaged hand on her shoulder.

"I'd give the world, Nina," he said, "to make this thing lighter for you. If I could only help in some real way!"

"You do; you do," she assured him. "Your sympathy is everything to me."

There was a step in the passage, but neither heard it. For it was at that moment that he caught her almost roughly in his arms and crushed her close to him.

And then the door opened, and Kneedrock was gazing at them from the threshold.

# CHAPTER XXVIII

## INCARNATE OR REINCARNATE

Nina saw him first; for she was facing that way. Most women would have screamed; she only became rigid. It was the situation in the Umballa bungalow over again—save that there was no pistol at hand, and Andrews knew now that the cobra was made of bronze.

Nina became rigid; Gerald sensed the unexpected. He looked over his shoulder and caught the glare of Kneedrock's eyes piercing the gloomy half-light.

They weren't sane eyes. He saw that at once. And a creepy shiver ran along his spine.

Nina's rigidity gave way to trembling, and all in the brief space of two seconds at the most—two seconds that were as taut as a fiddle-string.

Then the staghound sprang up, snarling, his fangs bared, and the hair along his back bristling. But he didn't spring. He pressed close against Nina's legs and cowered as though he had seen a ghost.

And then Kneedrock laughed. It was the very last thing that they expected, and the strain tightened to the point of snapping.

Because of everything—the whole wretched ensemble—the laugh seemed wilder, madder, weirder, possibly, than it was. It broke off in a sort of choking gurgle, and in a flash the laugher had wheeled about and was swallowed up in the murk of the passage.

This only, probably, could have aroused Nina to action. Swiftly as light itself she sped after him with an imploring cry of:

"Hal! Hal!"

Andrews, too, pulled himself together—shook himself free, as it were, of the dread, deathlike inertia that had held him passive and followed to the room door. And there Nina's voice came back to him from the lighted entrance-hall.

"You mustn't go! You must not! I want to see you. I want to make it all clear."

"It's clear enough as it is," he heard Kneedrock say. "Infernally clear, and—funny. You'd try to take the fun out of it. I know what you'd do. I always know what you'd do. You've never fooled me yet. That's because I never let you shut my eyes with your kisses—because I'm strong enough to keep you out of my arms."

There was silence for the briefest moment, and it was Kneedrock's voice that resumed: "Keep your hands off me. Good Lord, if there's one thing I fear it's your velvet paws! I've seen the sharp claws too often. For God's sake, Nina, keep them off, I say!"

"You'll come back?" she pleaded.

"I'll come back if you won't touch me."

"But your mackintosh is dripping, and your hat. Give them to me."

Andrews heard their steps approaching and withdrew from the doorway. He wished to avoid the madman, yet feared to leave Nina alone with him.

Then he noticed that Tara was still in the room—on guard, as it were—and seeing a connecting door ajar, he slipped through it, closing it after him.

The staghound snarled again as Nibbetts returned; but at a word from Nina he retreated and lay down, stretched at full length, his watchful eyes still fixed, however, on the viscount, who took a stand before the fireplace, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his morning coat, and his gaze on the floor.

Nina chose the end of a couch, and faced him over its piled pillows, on which, half-reclining, she rested her arms. To her own amazement, now that she was with him alone, all her fear had gone. Her poise and address were perfect.

Yet the change that had been wrought in him since the Monday she parted from him at Bellingdown struck her to the heart.

He must have lost twenty pounds in weight. His clothes, then so well-fitting, hung on his almost gaunt frame. His cheeks were hollow, and his eyes gleamed with that odd, lurid, uncanny light from deepening sockets.

"If I had known you came to Bath I should surely have seen you," she said.

"They told me you saw no one," he returned, "and yet you had your lover there at that moment."

"You know I have no lover—that I never have had."

"Why quibble over terms?" he asked. "I saw you in his arms in India. I saw you in his arms to-day. That's enough for me."

"He did me a great service," she tried to explain. "I didn't even know he was in Bath. It was my surgeon who brought him. He gave the skin that restored my poor burned face."

Her visitor chuckled cynically.

"You hadn't any poor burned face at Umballa," he sneered. "What had he sacrificed there?"

"His happiness, his faith in women, for my idle amusement."

"One of a thousand," he muttered. "You were never so considerate of the rest."

"I'm not altogether without heart."

"You amaze me."

"It's you who are heartless. You could save us both."

He looked at her then for the first time since they had come in. "Save us both?" he queried. "From what, pray?"

"From wretchedness. I've never been loved as I want to be. And you—you won't let me—"

"Good God!" he caught her up suddenly. "I didn't come here for that! Keep your tongue off me, Nina, as well as your hands, or—I'll cut it!"

She stretched herself farther across the pillows. "Make everything right," she pleaded earnestly, ignoring his rebuke. "Marry me over again—acknowledge me—be my husband in fact—as you've always been legally—just for a year."

Her voice was low, but thrilling in its eagerness of appeal. And in the dining-room, with ear close to the door, guarding her against a sudden outbreak from her unbalanced companion, Andrews heard all—every uttered word—and understood.

He had imagined it from her words the night before. But now, unwittingly, she had made it plain. What Kneedrock had told Carleigh was true.

Nina was his wife—the wife of his youth—and her marriage with Colonel Darling had been bigamy, committed in ignorance of the truth.

Lord Kneedrock stood motionless and silent. Again his eyes—those eyes so strangely changed—were bent upon the rug at his feet.

And the woman went on: "Just for a year, Hal. That's all. And if I'm not a good wife—if I look aside even a hair's breadth—you may kill me, or I'll kill myself when you give the word."

Then the man before the fireplace seemed to rouse himself out of a dream. There was no question that her entreaty had held him. It had indeed touched the depths of him.

In his mentally dulled state, such a culmination as she begged for had seemed not only desirable, but possible.

But now, all at once, there had floated back a memory of another face and another voice—a face and a voice too recently seen and heard to be quite clouded and hushed by the present.

Figuratively he shook himself, drew his hands from his pockets, lifted his tawny head, and turned upon her his unfamiliar eyes.

"Very, very pretty," he sneered cruelly. "But it's too late. I've another love—all my own, too, and not tarnished and worn thin by general use. You're no wife of mine—remember that—you sacrificed all claim. Besides, you're—you're—"

The blood was pounding in his neck, and he paused to jerk at his collar in an effort to free his throat.

"You're not a woman," he went on scornfully. "You're only half woman. You're other half tigress. Oh, I know you. I've been reading up on your breed, and I've met a few in my