
THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE HEART



MURIEL
H I N E

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE HEART ***

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*See page 93.***

THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE HEART

BY

MURIEL HINE

(MRS. SIDNEY COXON)

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**TO
MY MOTHER**

Some starlit garden grey with dew
Some chamber flushed with wine and fire
What matters where, so I and you
Are worthy our desire?
—*W. L. Henley.*

THE MAN WITH THE DOUBLE HEART

PART I

"Flower o' the broom
Take away love and our earth is a tomb!"
—*R. Browning.*

CHAPTER I

The hour was close on midday, but the lamps in Cavendish Square shone with a blurred light through the unnatural gloom.

The fog, pouring down from Regent's Park above, was wedged tight in Harley Street like a wad of dirty wool, but in the open space fronting Harcourt House it found room to expand and took on spectral shape; dim forms with floating locks that clung to the stunted trees and, shuddering, pressed against the high London buildings which faded away indistinctly into the blackened sky.

From thence ragged pennons went busily fluttering South to be caught in the draught of the traffic in noisy Oxford Street, where hoarse and confusing cries were blent with the rumble of wheels in all the pandemonium of man at war with the elements.

The air was raw and sooty, difficult to breathe, and McTaggart, already irritable with the nervous tension due to his approaching interview, his throat dry, his eyes smarting as he peered at the wide crossing, started violently as the horn of an unseen motor sounded unpleasantly near at hand.

"Confound the man!" he said, in apology to himself and stepped back quickly onto the narrow path as a shapeless monster with eyes of flame swung past, foiled of its prey.

"A nice pace to go on a day like this!" And here something struck him sharply in the rear, knocking his hat forward onto the bridge of his nose.

"What the...!" he checked his wrath with a sudden shamefaced laugh as he found his unseen adversary to consist of the square railings.

Somewhere down Wigmore Street a clock boomed forth the hour. A quarter to twelve. McTaggart counted the strokes and gave a sigh of relief not unmingled with amusement: the secret congratulation of an unpunctual man redeemed by an accident from the error of his ways.

Wedging his hat more firmly down on his head, he dared again the black space before him, struck the curb on the opposite side and, one hand against the wall, steered round the corner and up into Harley Street.

Under the first lamp he paused and hunted for the number over the nearest door where four brass plates menaced the passer-by with that modern form of torture that few live to escape—the inquisitorial process known as dentistry.

Making a rapid calculation, he came to the conclusion that the house he sought must lie at the further end of the street—London's "Bridge of Sighs"—where breathless hope and despair elbow each other ceaselessly in the wake of suffering humanity.

The fog was changing colour from a dirty yellow to opal, and the damp pavement was becoming visible as McTaggart moved forward with a quick stride that held an elasticity which it did not owe to elation.

He walked with an ease and lightness peculiar in an Englishman who, athletic as he may be, yet treads the earth with a certain conscious air of possessing it: a tall, well-built man, slender and very erect, but without that balanced stiffness, the hall-mark of "drill."

A keen observer would guess at once an admixture of blood that betrayed its foreign strain in that supple grace of his; in the olive skin, the light feet, and the glossy black hair that was brushed close and thick to his shapely head.

Not French. For the Frenchman moves on a framework of wire, fretting toward action, deadly in attack. But the race that bred Napoleon, subtle and resistant, built upon tempered steel that bends but rarely breaks.

Now, as he reached the last block and the house he sought, McTaggart paused for a second, irresolute, on the step.

He seemed to gather courage with a quick indrawn breath, and his mouth was set in a hard line as his hand pressed the bell.

Then he raised his eyes to the knocker above, and with the slight action his whole face changed.

For, instead of being black beneath their dark brows, the man's eyes were blue, an intense, fiery blue; with the clear depths and the temper touch that one sees nowhere else save in the strong type of the hardy mountain race. They were not the blue of Ireland, with her half-veiled, sorrowful mirth; nor the placid blue of England, that mild forget-me-not. They were utterly unmistakable; they brought with them a breath of heather-gloried solitude and the deep and silent lochs.

Here was a Scot—a hillsman from the North; no need of his name to cry aloud the fact.

And yet...

The door was opened, and at once the imprisoned fog finding a new outlet drove into the narrow hall.

A tall, bony parlour maid was staring back at him as, mechanically, McTaggart repeated the great man's name.

"You have an appointment, sir?" Her manner seemed to imply that her dignity would suffer if this were not the case.

Satisfied by his answer, she ushered him into a room where a gas fire burned feebly with an apologetic air, as though painfully conscious of its meretricious logs. Half a dozen people, muffled in coats and furs, were scattered about a long dining table, occupied in reading listlessly the papers, to avoid the temptation of staring at each other. The place smelt of biscuits, of fog and of gas, like an

unaired buffet in a railway station.

McTaggart, weighed down by a sense of impending doom, picked up a "Punch" and retired to the window, ostensibly to amuse himself, in reality to rehearse for the hundredth time his slender stock of "symptoms." The clock ticked on, and a bleak silence reigned, broken at intervals by the sniff of a small boy, who, accompanied by a parent and a heavy cold in the head, was feasting his soul on a volume of the "Graphic."

Something familiar in the cartoon under his eyes drew McTaggart away from his own dreary thoughts.

"I mustn't forget to tell him..." he was saying to himself, when he realized that the paper he held was dated five months back! He felt immediately quite unreasonably annoyed. A sudden desire to rise up and go invaded his mind. In his nervous state the excuse seemed amply sufficient. A "Punch" five months old! ... it was a covert insult.

A doctor who could trade on his patient's credulity—pocketing his three guineas, don't forget that!—and offer them literature but fit to light the fire...

A "Punch" Five Months Old! ... he gathered up his gloves.

But a noiseless step crossed the room, a voice whispered his name.

"Mr. McTaggart? This way, please."

He found himself following the bony parlour maid, past the aggressive eyes of the still-waiting crowd, out into the hall and down a glass-roofed passage.

"Now I'm in for it..." he said silently... "Oh! ... *damn!*" He put on his most truculent air.

The maid tapped at a door.

"Come in," said a sharp voice.

McTaggart entered and stood still for a moment, blinking on the threshold, irresolute.

For the scene was unexpected. Despite the heavy fog that filtered through the windows with its insidious breath, a hint of Spring was there in the fresh white walls, the rose-covered chintzes and the presence of flowers.

The place seemed filled with them. An early bough of blossom, the exquisite tender pink of the almond in bloom, stood against a mirror that screened a recess; and the air was alive with the scent of daffodils, with subtle yellow faces, like curious Chinamen, peering over the edge of a blue Nankin bowl.

In the centre of the room a man in a velvet coat was bending over a mass of fresh violets, adding water carefully to the surrounding moss out of a copper jug that he held in his hands.

McTaggart stared at him; at the lean, colourless face under its untidy thatch of coarse, gray hair; at the spare figure, the long, steady hands and the loose, unconventional clothes that he wore. He might have been an artist of Rossetti's day in that shabby brown coat and soft faded shirt. But the great specialist—whose name carried weight wherever science and medicine were wont to foregather. Had he made a mistake? It seemed incredible.

The doctor gave a parting touch to an overhanging leaf and wheeled round to greet his patient with a smile.

"I can't bear to see flowers die from lack of care, and this foggy weather tries them very hard. Excuse me a moment." He passed into the recess, and washed his hands vigorously, talking all the while.

"Some years ago," he switched off the tap, "I went to a public dinner of agriculturists. Found to my surprise I was sitting next Oscar Wilde—one doesn't somehow associate him with such a function! On my left was a farmer of the good old-fashioned type, silent, aggressive, absorbed in his food. I happened to remark that the flowers were all withered; the heat of the room had been too much for them.

""Not withered"—Wilde corrected me—"but merely *weary*..."

"The farmer turned his head, and gave him one glance.

""Silly Ass!" he said explosively and returned to his dinner. It was his single contribution to the evening's conversation. I've never forgotten it, nor the look on

Wilde's face."

McTaggart laughed. He felt oddly at ease.

The doctor glanced at his nails and came back into the room.

He pushed an easy-chair toward his patient and leaning against the mantelpiece with his hands in his pocket:

"Now, tell me all the trouble," he suggested quietly.

A slight flush crept up under the olive skin. McTaggart was suddenly immensely ashamed.

"I don't believe really ... there's anything ... wrong..." He gave an apologetic, husky little laugh ... "but the fact is, a friend of mine—he's a medical student—ran over me the other day, and, well—he said—there was something odd—that he couldn't understand—something about the beat of my heart. I'd fainted, you know—awfully inconvenient—at a supper party, too ... I'd been feeling pretty cheap..." He broke off, confused, as for the first time the older man deliberately fixed his eyes upon him. Hazel eyes they were with curious flecks of yellow, bright and hard beneath his pince-nez.

"You fainted? For how long were you unconscious?" He added a few more questions, nodded his shaggy head, and crossing the room sat down at his desk. He opened a book, massively bound, where on each page was printed, hideous and suggestive, an anatomical sketch of the human form divine.

"I'd like your name in full." He picked up the card which McTaggart had sent in by the parlour maid.

"P. M. McTaggart—what does that stand for?"

"It's rather a mouthful." The owner smiled. "Peter Maramonte."

The specialist glanced up shrewdly.

"Italian?—I thought so."

"On my mother's side. My father was Scotch, an Aberdonian."

"Your parents are living?"

"No, both dead." He stood there, tall and sombre, watching the other write in a thin, crabbed hand the unusual name.

"Any hereditary tendency to heart trouble?"

"Not that I know of. My father was drowned—out fishing, one day. The boat overturned, caught by a squall. He was, I believe, a strong healthy man."

"And your mother?"

"She never seemed the same after his death. And then the climate tried her. She'd been brought up in the South. The end was pneumonia. I was only twelve at the time, but I don't think that either of them suffered from the heart."

"I see. And now if you'll take off your things—strip to the waist, please—and lie on that sofa."

It seemed to McTaggart that at this juncture the devil himself entered into his clothes. Buttons multiplied and waxed evasive, his collar stud stuck, his vest clove to his head.

He dragged it off at last, breathless and ruffled.

"That's capital." The great man adjusted his stethoscope and leaned over the white young body outstretched. McTaggart felt dexterous hands passing swiftly, surely; tapping here, pressing there, over his bare flesh.

"A deep breath—so. Thank you, that will do. Now gently in and out ... quite naturally. Ah...!" He paused, listened a second and gave a grunt. "I wonder?"

A wave of anger swept over the prostrate man.

"He's found something, damn him!" he said to himself, resenting the eager light on that lean, absorbed face.

"Curious!" The specialist drew himself upright, and reached round for a shorter, wooden instrument.

Another silence followed, pregnant of disaster. The pressure of the wooden disk upon McTaggart's chest seemed to become insupportable—a thing of infinite weight.

The doctor's coarse gray hair exhaled a faint scent where brilliantine, ineffectually, had played a minor part, and in some mysterious way it added to the other's annoyance. The suspense was unbearable.

"Found anything wrong?" His voice, unnaturally cheerful, brought a frown to the doctor's face.

"Don't move, please. Keep silent, now." The disk slid across his chest and settled above his ribs, on the right side this time, with its load of discomfort.

"Marvellous ... extraordinary! One's read of it, of course, but never come across it ... my first experience." The great man stood erect, perplexity at end, a vast enthusiasm glowing in his eyes.

Suddenly he divined the patient's anxiety. "Nothing to worry about," he added soothingly. "You can dress now. Your heart's perfectly sound." He walked away to his writing table, still engrossed in thought.

McTaggart felt an immense relief that swamped curiosity. The ordeal was over, and life still smiled at him. He tumbled into his clothes and groped for his collar stud, which, with the guile of these wayward things, had crept away to hide.

Suddenly in a glass he caught his own reflection—his hair dishevelled, his collar bent, and felt an insane desire, despite these minor flaws, to shake himself by the hand, as though, by personal effort, he had prolonged his days!

The doctor still stood motionless, gazing into space. In the silence of the room a faint pattering told of the almond blossom falling on the polished floor.

McTaggart straightened his tie, and with his back turned, surreptitiously began to dive in his pocket for the fee.

He found it at last, and took a step forward toward the absorbed figure at the desk.

"I'd like to know," he suggested, "what you really think is the cause...."

"Of course!" The lean face lifted with a start. "You must forgive me. The fact is"—he smiled—"I'm too interested in your case to remember your natural anxiety. I think your present trouble is caused by an error in digestion. The palpitation comes from that and the other symptoms too. A little care with your diet—I'll write you a prescription—a bismuth mixture to be taken after meals. But if you've further worry, come to me again. As a friend—you understand? ... Oh, no!—it's pure selfishness. I don't want to lose sight of you. You see—to cut it short—you're by way of being a freak! You've got—for want of a better name—what I call a Double Heart. One heart's on your right side and one's in the proper place. It's the most amazing thing I've ever come across. You're perfectly healthy—sound as a bell. I shouldn't wonder, upon my soul, if you hadn't two lives!"

McTaggart stared at him, trying to take it in.

"It sounds rather mad. But you say it doesn't matter?"

"It doesn't seem to affect your circulation in the least. I'm certain what you complain about is due to indigestion—the aftermath perhaps of a touch of Influenza."

A twinkle crept into the blue eyes watching him. "I suppose one heart's Italian and the other purely Scotch?" He ventured the joke against himself in a spirit of relief.

"That's it!" His new friend laughed ... "a dual personality. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, with a physical excuse." He gave loose reins for a moment to his vivid imagination, which swept him on with the current of his thoughts.

"You're not married, you say? Well—you'd better be careful. It might lead to bigamy! If so, refer to me."

A curious expression came into the young man's face as he echoed the other's laugh with a trace of confusion.

"A fair wife and a dark one? Porridge and ... Chianti!"

He paid his fee and went out into the London fog.

CHAPTER II

McTaggart walked down Harley Street, his blue eyes full of light, still hugging the consciousness of a new lease of life.

High above him an orange sun was swung in the misty heavens, putting to shame the wistful gleam of the pale lamps below, with their air of straggling revellers caught by the dawn. A carriage rolled down the street and was met by a passing taxi, and then, as he moved forward rejoicing to himself, into the foggy calm came a sudden stir of life: the sound of young voices, of laughter and light feet.

From under a gloomy portico a crowd of girls swept forth, gathered in groups of twos and threes and dissolved into the fog, chattering and linking arms, swinging bags of books, north and south they scattered with a sweet note of youth.

And at the sight McTaggart came to a sudden halt, conscious that he had received the answer to his prayer; that steadily growing wish for the presence of a friend to share in the new-born exuberance of his mood.

He crossed the street quickly and joined in the crowd, receiving demure glances of studied unconcern and here and there a frown from elderly duennas whose acid displeasure added to his amusement. But cool, and imperturbable, he proceeded to run the gauntlet until on the steps of the College itself he saw a lonely figure busily engaged in tightening the strap that held together exercises and books.

His hand was already midway to his hat when the girl raised a pair of dark-fringed gray eyes and favoured him with a cold glance of non-recognition. For a second McTaggart stared, clearly taken aback. Then, with an impatient gesture, he walked straight past, recrossed the road and turned up a side street. Here he slackened his pace, and, smiling to himself, was presently rewarded by the sound of hurrying steps; but, conscious of former warnings, refrained from looking back until a breathless voice sounded in his ear.

"Peter!"

He walked on with mischievous intention,

"Peter—it's *me*!" He felt a touch on his arm.

"Hullo!" He wheeled round. "Why, it's Jill!—what a surprise!"

The gray-eyed girl looked up at him with a reproving frown, at his handsome, laughing face and unrepentant air.

"I *wish* you'd remember!" She stood there, slim and straight; as it seemed to him, a-quiver with the miracle of life. For not all the shabby clothes she wore, from the little squirrel cap which, with the tie about her throat, had seen better days, to the short tweed skirt revealing mended boots, could mar the spring-like radiance of her golden youth.

"You're a prim little school miss," said McTaggart teasingly.

"I'm *not*." She drew back, her head very high, the thick plait of dark hair swinging with the movement.

"You don't understand, you really *are* dense! I've told you heaps of times, not in Harley Street."

He gave a happy chuckle, warming to the fray. "Now, don't stand there quarrelling, but give me your books. I'll walk home with you if you're a good girl."

Unresisted he took the strap from her, with its tightly wedged pencil case above the school primers. For her thoughts were far away, her dark brows drawn together as she went on steadily in her own defence.

"I hate being cross with you—but it's not fair play! You wouldn't like it yourself if you were me, Peter. It didn't matter last year when I was in the Juniors, but now I'm a First Senior" ... pride lay in the words ... "it's quite a different thing. We think it jolly bad form in *my* set, you know."

Instinctively in talking she had fallen into his step. McTaggart glanced sideways, as they turned up Portland Place, at the pretty, flushed face with its

dark frame of hair under the little furry cap, pulled close about her ears.

"All right, Jill. I won't do it again. I'll admit I was tempted, being sorely in need of a pal. I'd just been through a bad half hour, you see, and was weakly yearning for a little sympathy."

She looked up quickly with affectionate concern; for he knew the royal road to her instant forgiveness.

"Bills?" He laughed aloud at the laconic suggestion. Then a shade of pity seized the man. Despite her youthful years she spoke from experience.

"Not this time." On the verge of confidence, he checked himself, moved by a sudden reticence.

"Do you think your mother would give me some lunch? Or, better still, will you come and lunch with me?"

He halted as he spoke. "There's Pagani's now, it's not far from here,—in Great Portland Street."

She shook her head. "I'd love to"—her voice was regretful—"but I must get back. I've promised Roddy. He's home for his exeat and we're going to the Zoo. You'd better lunch with us if you don't mind pot luck. But we mustn't be late; we've got a new cook."

"Another?" McTaggart laughed. It seemed a familiar joke.

"The fourth since the Summer," the girl answered dryly. "But Stephen found this one, so she *ought* to be perfect!"

They turned up the Broad Walk where the fog still hung, white and shadowy over the sodden grass. Here and there a nurse moved with steady intention, children trotting beside her, homeward to lunch; and upon a damp bench, oblivious of the weather, a loving couple lingered, speechlessly hand in hand.

"And how is the great Stephen? I haven't seen him for years."

"Oh, he's just the same." The girl's voice was weary. She stared straight ahead as they swung along together, and a short silence followed that both understood.

For they met here on the grounds of a common mistrust, and a hatred shared is a stronger link than even that of love. At the turnstile McTaggart paused, watching her thoughtful face.

"Let's go by the Inner Circle, it's a much nicer way."

"All right." The words were husky, and, as she passed through, the dark lashes hid from him her downcast eyes. But not before McTaggart had seen what she tried to disguise—the tears standing there in their clear gray depths.

"Why, Jill!—why, my dear, whatever is the matter?"

"Nothing." She bit her under lip, furious with herself.

The fog swallowed them up again in the narrow hedged-in road, and McTaggart tucked a hand through his companion's arm.

"Tell me all about it," he said persuasively, "a worry only grows by being bottled up."

She gave him a swift look from under her wet lashes, tempted by the sympathy which rang in his voice.

"It's Stephen. That's all."

"I thought so," his face was dark; "what's he been doing now? What a rotter the fellow is!"

"It's not so much what he does," she pulled herself together and with a defiant gesture passed a hand across her eyes. "It's the fact of his being there, all day long ... it's difficult to explain. But I can't bear to see him, sitting in Father's chair, as if it were his by right, as though he were the master..."

She broke off indignantly, her tears dried by anger, her smooth cheeks flushed, her hand unconsciously tightening on his arm.

"It makes Roddy furious! Of course he's only a boy, but he's such an old dear,"—her love for her brother was plain. "If only Stephen would let him alone instead of teasing him! He treats him like a kid, with a 'Run away and play!' And no boy will stand that—in his own home too! And of course there are rows, and

Mother takes *his* side."

"What—Stephen's?" McTaggart stared in surprise.

"Rather! He can't do wrong—'poor dear Stephen'! And it's no good chiming in, it only makes things worse. For if I do Mother says it's because ... I'm jealous."

The little break in her voice showed how deep the shaft had sped.

"Poor old girl"—McTaggart pressed her arm. "It's jolly rough on you—I'd like to kick the chap! He's a regular parasite; he can't support himself, and he's always hanging around sponging on his friends."

But Jill was following out her own line of thought.

"And I'm not jealous, Peter—not in that mean way. But since Father died I've got to think of Roddy. It's not that Mother isn't really fond of him, but she doesn't understand or see he's growing up. She's always so busy with all this Suffrage work, and Stephen eggs her on. She's no time for home. We never seem to have her now for a second to ourselves without Stephen in the background like a sort of household spy!"

"What excuse does he give for haunting the place? He's no relation of yours, by any chance?"

"Thank Heaven, no!" She gave a shaky laugh. "Why, we only know him since Father died. He was Secretary to a branch of the Woman's Suffrage League. Mrs. Braid, you know, took Mother to a meeting, and then she got keen on the movement herself. I was pleased at the time because it seemed to rouse her. She simply collapsed after Father's death, and anything seemed better than to see her lying there, caring for nothing, utterly crushed.

"I never thought then she'd become a Suffragette. Militant too!—it's so unlike Mother. She's always been so gentle and hated publicity—the very thought of a crowd would keep her at home. But when she took it up she went quite mad about it. That's where Stephen came in—he was Secretary, you see. Mother's no earthly good at any sort of business—she always depended on Father for everything. And of course she missed him frightfully, and Roddy's only a boy. So Stephen used to come and explain things to her."

They turned into the open park where the wet asphalt path cut across the empty grass like a tight-drawn wire. "Where does Stephen live?" McTaggart's voice was hard. This child-friend of his was very dear to him.

"Just round the corner, but, like the poor, you know, he's 'with us always'—it's practically his home. Mother found him new digs up by Primrose Hill. She thought West Kensington air too depressing!—that Stephen looked pale, was inclined to be anæmic."

McTaggart smiled at her rueful grimace.

"So now he nurses his failing strength under your Mother's eye?"

"She gives him rum and milk and warm Winter socks!—which by the way I was once asked to darn. I did strike at that! I don't mind mending Roddy's, but Stephen's?—No thanks!"

Her clear young laugh rang out as she caught McTaggart's eye.

"He's a somewhat spoilt young man, from all accounts. D'you think..." he paused a moment, then risked the question ... "d'you think your Mother's really ... a bit ... fond of him?"

"No." Her tone was definite—"not ... like that." A faint colour stole up into her childish face, but loyally she went on, resenting the imputation. "Mother never flirts, you know. She hates that sort of thing. She's awfully down on other people too. That Mrs. Molineux, d'you remember the gossip? Mother cuts her now whenever they meet."

McTaggart looked amused.

"Funny, isn't it? Because, I suppose people ... talk! It's not everyone who'd understand Stephen."

"Don't!" The girl's hand slipped from his arm. Then at his quick:

"Oh—I don't mean *that*!—Of course I know your mother—she's one of the best—I didn't mean anything—don't be vexed, Jill. It's only that outsiders might be rather dense"—her face relaxed and she turned impulsively, gratitude shining in the gray eyes.

"That's just what hurts most—to have her misjudged. When one knows ... it's *Mother!*—that she *couldn't* stoop..." The hot blood surged up into her face. "To think that people can say nasty, mean things—that she gives them the chance! It makes me wild. And Mother all the time doesn't see it a bit. She thinks because it's *her*" (vehemence ousted grammar) "that everyone must know it's bound to be all right. And she goes to all sorts of places, lecturing, you know, and takes Stephen with her and stays away for days. Only yesterday"—her words poured on—"Aunt Elizabeth came to tea and the first thing she said was: 'I hear you were at Folkestone, staying at the Grand?—*and* Mr. Somerville?' And Mother answered calmly: 'Yes—I took Stephen. He's such a help, you know. I couldn't do without him.' And Aunt Elizabeth gave such a nasty little laugh and said—'Really, Mary, I think *I* must get a Stephen!'"

"But Mother didn't see it." She gave an impatient sigh.

"She's a law unto herself," McTaggart suggested. "I vote we drown Stephen. Some dark night—in the Regent's Park Canal. And here it is; let's choose the spot."

He paused as he spoke on the little iron bridge that spans the narrow stream, where the barges come and go; slowly drifting along the still line of water, a mute protest against the feverish haste of the age.

"The worst of it is," said Jill, ignoring his suggestion to remove the enemy into a better world, "that Stephen eggs her on in all this militant work. And Mother isn't strong; she's not fit for it. Why, last year she was ill for weeks after that trouble when the windows were smashed in Regent Street. And her name was in the papers. Roddy got so ragged. All the boys at school were pulling his leg. And he's so proud of Mother!—it nearly broke his heart—to think of her being taken off to a common police station. Why! ..."

She stopped short, leaning over the bridge,—"*There he is, on the foot path, with his fishing rod.*"

She put her hands to her mouth and called in her clear voice, "*Rod-dy!*"

"*Hullo!*" came an answering hail. "*You up there, Jill?*"

There came a scrambling in the bushes that fringed the waterway, and, with a noise of snapping twigs at the summit of the bank, a leg and an arm shot out,

then a laughing boy's face, with a great black smudge neatly bisecting it.

"Hullo, Peter!" The pair shook hands.

"Had any sport?" said McTaggart gravely.

"No such luck," replied that ardent fisherman. "I wonder what the time is?—it *feels* like lunch."

"You'd better cut home and wash"—his sister smiled at him—"You look as if you'd spent the morning sweeping chimneys."

"I think I'll slip in with you," the schoolboy winked, "there's a new cook to-day and I'm warned off the area. Stephen's about." He tucked a hand through her arm, and the three moved on over the bridge.

"Look here, old girl, you're coming to the Zoo? Half past two sharp. I've bought a bag of nuts."

"Rather," said his sister. She turned to McTaggart. "You come too?"

"I will." Peter decided.

"Good biz," said Roddy, "he can carry the bread." He sniffed up the air as they mounted the slope. "Jolly smell the fog has!" and, as the others laughed, proceeded to explain his singular predilection. "It smells of holidays, of good old town. You know what I mean—a sort of smell of its own. I can tell you I long for it sometimes at school. Talk about 'clear air' and 'Yorkshire moors.' Give me London any blessed day."

They left the Park behind, and skirting Primrose Hill came to a terrace facing the North. At the third porch Jill produced a key, and fitting it in the lock, noiselessly opened the door.

"In you go, Roddy, the coast's quite clear..."

The boy slipped past and up the narrow stairs.

Then she turned to Peter with a sudden hesitation. "If you don't mind waiting here I'll go and find Mother."

McTaggart stood in the gloomy hall, watching the girl, as she walked down the passage with her long, boyish step, opened a door beyond and closed it behind her and a sound of voices drifted across to him.

He was just beginning to regret his sudden impulse when the door was reopened and a man appeared. Tall and very blond, dressed with studied care in a coat that curved in to his narrow waist, the light from above fell on his face, weakly good-looking, with a loose under lip and sentimental eyes of a pale greenish hue, thickly shadowed by long fair lashes.

"H'are you, McTaggart." He drawled out the greeting in a thin, light voice that somehow matched his hair. He held out a limp hand with carefully tended nails. McTaggart shook it like a terrier with a rat.

"You'll find Mrs. Uniacke in he-are," he went on. McTaggart silently following in his wake experienced a sudden tingling in his toes.

Within the little study that faced on a strip of garden suggestive of cats a lady was seated before a littered desk, piled up with pamphlets which she was directing.

She rose as he entered, and came forward quickly—passing her tall daughter—with outstretched hand.

Slight and fragile, with wide dark eyes, something bird-like in the eager poise of the head—reminded McTaggart instinctively of a linnet—the last type imaginable of the "Militant Suffragette."

"I'm so glad to see you," her voice was sweet and low. "You're quite a stranger, Peter!—And only yesterday Stephen was saying he thought you had left town."

"I *have* been away," McTaggart replied—"down in Devonshire—and when I met Jill near Regent's Park, I was tempted to walk across and look you up. Especially," he added with his sunny smile, "when I heard my friend Roddy would be at home."

"Very much at home," Stephen interposed, conscious of Jill's swift glance of disgust—"the window, you observe, bears silent witness to it." He pointed a slender finger at the broken pane. Then went on smoothly: "You'll stay to lunch,

of course." But Peter ignored him, his eyes on his hostess.

"Of course he will," Mrs. Uniacke echoed the words, "and there goes the gong." She pushed her papers together with a regretful glance at the unfinished work, as Roddy, his face shining with its hurried ablutions, slipped in noiselessly and joined the little group.

"It's very kind of you," McTaggart replied, "and I'd simply love to lunch with you and the kids."

As they passed through the hall Jill heard her friend say politely to Somerville:

"You lunching too?"

CHAPTER III

Cydonia sat in the window seat, her face full of dreams, her white hands folded above her needlework. The smooth and slender fingers with their faintly pink nails, the small head so proudly set on the long rounded neck, her air of self-possession, of calm dignity suggested an ancient lineage that in truth was not hers.

For Cydonia was a miracle. In a freakish spring-tide mood Dame Nature had evolved a jest at the expense of caste. From the union of a withered, elderly governess with a rich cheesemonger past the prime of life she had sprung on an astounded world this exquisite young creature with all the outward signs of patrician birth.

Exquisite she was: exquisite and inert. From the slim, arched feet beneath her satin gown to the pale golden hair parted above her brow and gathered in a great knot behind her little ears, flawless she showed against the window's light, like a picture by a master's hand in delicate silver point.

Now as she sat there pensive, the full-lidded eyes fixed unseeing upon a bowl of early lilies, one wondered what unutterable, deep, maiden thoughts held her

thus absorbed, with slightly parted lips, motionless save for the rise and fall of the low girlish breast.

And once she gave a little sigh and into her soft brown eyes under the long gold lashes stole a light of warm content.

Her mother glanced up from the book upon her knee as the faint sound broke through the silence of the room; a tall, gaunt woman with an energetic face under the plaited coronet of iron-gray hair.

"What are you dreaming about, Cydonia?"

The girl in the window slowly turned her head.

"I was thinking, Madre dear, if the Bishop is coming to lunch that Mrs. Nix will send us up a pine-apple cream. She always remembers that it's his favourite dish."

She gave a little laugh, musical and low.

"I like pine-apple cream." The curved lips closed.

A slight frown showed between Mrs. Cadell's eyes behind the pince-nez that nipped her high-arched nose.

"You don't seem to be getting on very quickly with your work."

Cydonia, obediently, re-threaded her needle and proceeded to make minute stitches in the narrow strip of lace.

Mrs. Cadell still watched her with restless dark eyes.

"Do you like doing that?"

Cydonia raised her head.

"Oh yes, Madre." Her voice was mildly surprised, "I'm copying that Byzantine piece we found at Verona. Don't you remember, dear?—the day it rained so hard."

Her mother smiled. "Would you care to go back there again?—to Italy, I

mean? I really think we must stay at Venice for Easter—you'd like that beautiful service at St. Mark's—and then"—her thoughts ran on—"we could go through the Dolomites and perhaps put in a week in Vienna. What do you think of the plan yourself?"

"It sounds very nice." Cydonia's even voice held no enthusiasm, and again Mrs. Cadell gave a little frown. She had the net impression that had she said Margate her daughter would have acquiesced with equal serenity.

"Well, it's some way off yet." She was gathering up her book when the door was burst open and a short fat man, red-faced and impatient, bounced into the room as though propelled by an invisible force behind.

"Just looked in, Helen, to say I'm going now. Back to dinner eight sharp and bringing Cleaver Jones. Why, Cydonia!"—he paused by his daughter's side, hands thrown up in jesting admiration. "How smart we are!— Is this for the Bishop?" With clumsy affection he caught her by the chin.

"Give your father a kiss ... there's my good girl!" Dutifully she pressed her lips to his rough cheek. Then, bustling round, in his harsh loud voice he added a final instruction to his wife.

"You won't forget, Helen, about Cleaver Jones? And tell Harris to get up some of the old port. I want to come to terms with him over that group." He laid his hand as he spoke on a beautiful bronze that stood on a column near the open door. "Shall never get another bargain like this"—a note of regret sounded through the speech. "Oh—by the way—can you come to-morrow to Christie's? There's a picture that Amos thinks..." He checked himself abruptly as a bell below pealed through the house.

"That's the Bishop—I'm off!" and the door slammed behind him. They heard his heavy steps clattering downstairs.

Mrs. Cadell drew a breath of relief, Cydonia, imperturbable, added another stitch. Her father's volcanic methods rarely disturbed her nerves, though they left the older woman quivering.

Mrs. Cadell rose to her feet and straightened her hair in the mirror beside her. Very tall and angular in her draped black dress, she had that indefinable air of authority which clings to those whose mission in life has been to instruct the

young.

Past long since was the drudgery of those days: the cramped school hours, the dreary evenings alone. But the educational atmosphere still lingered about her, the outward stamp of hard-won culture.

Well—it had brought her much! This life of luxury, an outlet for her insatiable ambition; and, greater miracle, a fair young daughter, flesh of her own flesh—but no child of her mind.

This was the flaw in her crown of success. For if ever a woman worshipped brains, measured humanity by the standard of intellect, scorned the ignorant, and shrank from stupidity, that woman was Helen Cadell.

It was the one link which bound her to her husband, the knowledge that with all his faults he was a clever man. He had too that driving force behind his shrewd wits which spells nowadays the secret of success. Hard-headed, tireless, smiling at rebuffs, steadily he had accomplished his task; building up a fortune by personal effort, with, under his vulgarity, something rather fine, a belief in his star which amounted to power.

Perhaps his first moment of weakness and doubt was the one that witnessed the height of his achievement; when money bred money, regular and sustained, and a new life where leisure lurked opened out to him.

For in the long struggle Ebenezer Cadell had hardly given a thought to the end of the fight. He had no time to speculate, no tendency to dream what money should bring him once it was his.

And he found, to his surprise, that to be a rich man involved on a larger scale the qualms of the poor; the risk of being cheated out of his wealth; to lose moreover pounds where once he risked pence.

Ambition dies harder even than vanity, and ostentation took the place of his thrift. He craved the outward signs of opulence, a house filled with treasures that other men of mark could recognize and covet and openly discuss.

But here commercial instinct failed him at the start. No longer could he wholly depend on himself. He lacked the inherited knowledge, the slow experience and the everyday atmosphere of a cultured home.

Advisers could be bought, but were they trustworthy? It maddened him, this closed door to a rich man's clue. Suddenly he became sensitive to a sneer. Above all he dreaded the smile of the connoisseur.

He realized that a partner was what he required, and for the first time began to think of a wife. Fate threw Helen Greaves at this juncture in his path. He found her in a small hôtel upon the East coast with her youngest pupil, whose health required care, and was interested immediately when he heard her discussing the merits of a certain picture with her charge.

Their tables, side by side, in the deserted dining room gave him the opportunity he sought. An acquaintance was formed and friendship ripened quickly between the curious, dissimilar pair.

Past her first youth, withered, austere, Helen Greaves nevertheless possessed a certain charm: the impress of the class she had lived with and served, that knowledge of the cultured world which Ebenezer lacked.

Moreover, for many years, she had taught the daughters of a certain peer; in a well-known house full of art treasures, inherited and added to by the present owner; and with her quick brain and love of the beautiful had become herself no mean connoisseur.

She had travelled largely with her pupils, had learned to criticize and discriminate. Here was a woman after Ebenezer's heart, grounded in that hobby he longed to make his own.

The object of his visit to the little sea-side town had been to attend a neighbouring sale where the death of the owner had thrown on the market a certain much-discussed old master.

Impressed by Helen Greaves' obvious knowledge, he begged her to accompany him, and under her advice he had bought that bronze group now in his London house, somehow overlooked by the dealers at the sale.

Without her encouragement he would have passed it by, misled by the absurdly low price, and even at the time he made the purchase he wondered to himself if she were not at fault.

On his return, however, he showed it to a dealer, and found to his amazement

that Helen's acumen had secured him an undoubted treasure. For the first time he tasted the peculiar deep joy of the bargain hunter in his hour of triumph.

Then and there he made up his mind. Here was the partner his new life entailed. And the realization of all he had to offer, with the fact of her present subordinate position, swung him back again on to his old pedestal, with a returned consciousness of mastery. For the man had to reign. It was no passing weakness. Abdication meant paralysis of his powers.

In cold-blooded terms, void of sentiment, he had worded a letter to Helen Greaves. No deed of partnership was ever made more clear than this formal proposal of marriage! Six months later they were man and wife, launched on a honeymoon planned to include a thorough course of study at the foreign galleries.

It speaks for the character of the ex-governess that this business alliance was sealed in a church. For Ebenezer was a staunch Nonconformist and lived and died loyal to his creed.

Slowly but surely in his wife's clever hands he mastered the intricacies of his new cult. He came to the fore as an ardent collector, and, to crown his success, Cydonia appeared.

With the advent of her child, Helen's ambition found a new outlet. She became more social, seeking to force those doors where money, though a help, could not purchase right of admission.

Here she found a new factor in her Church. Always religiously inclined, she turned to Charity—whose cloak nowadays shelters many "climbers"—poured forth money in big bazaars, and fed the clergy, who flocked to her house. Ebenezer grumbled, but bent before her will. Little by little her name appeared as patroness of the pleasure schemes devised to "help the poor." She was sought for on committees, pestered for donations, patronized herself by that upper class, which used her and smiled at her and let her drift among them.

But Helen Cadell had come to stay. Slowly and quietly she strengthened her position, inconspicuous, yet ever to the fore, looking to that day when her daughter should step as though by right on this hallowed ground.

The only flaw in the long campaign was the sleeping soul of Cydonia.

For as the years passed over her head, and her mother watched with anxious eyes, it seemed to her that her offspring lacked that latent force which in both her parents had spurred them on to fulfill themselves.

She had no energy, no enthusiasm. Beautiful, passive, sweetly good, no one could truly call her clever. Beneath her lily-white, delicate grace, she was just a healthy young animal, content to exist, without ambition, to eat and walk and deeply sleep.

And watching this, with her restless mind, the mother began to pin her hope on the element she herself had scorned, the stimulus of awakening love. It stung her pride at times to feel that a daughter of hers could lack brain power! Education had been her all—the motive force of her strenuous life.

And now Minerva, with wise cold eyes, must be set aside for the God of Love. With ever the risk of the sacrifice: that his altar might snatch from her her child.

Something of this passed through her mind as Helen stood before the glass, mechanically smoothing her hair in its straight gray bands above her brow.

She could see the reflection of the room; the long white walls where the pictures hung, each with its own reflecting light, each a great man's masterpiece. Here and there the wintry sun caressed a statue or carven pillar, gilding the backs of the great high chairs, where long-dead prelate and prince had sat. For the room was a very treasure house, breathing history at each turn, filled with beauty of colour and form, mellowed by the touch of age.

And the thought pierced through her with sharp pain that all she had accomplished here, knowledge and forethought of long years, the daily care from the hour of birth when in agony she had borne her child: all could be swept aside, made nought by the first love-words breathed by a man.

"Cydonia"—her voice was sharp, reflecting the tension of her mood, and the girl looked up with a mild surprise.

"Put your work away, my dear," she smiled with an effort as her daughter complied. "I can hear the Bishop coming upstairs."

But as she spoke the door went wide.

"Mr. McTaggart," the man announced.

CHAPTER IV

Nothing could ruffle Cydonia's calm. The smile she had, unconsciously, prepared for the Bishop warmed McTaggart as he entered the room. Dazed him a little, truth to tell, she looked so lovely sitting there.

On her mother's face he read surprise and hastened to explain his mission.

"I'm the bearer of a message from Lady Leason. I must apologize for the hour, but she asked me to come on at once. She's dreadfully worried about the Tableaux. It seems Marie Dilke is off to Cannes. 'Doctor's orders'—so she says. Anyhow," he smiled mischievously, "one can understand the excuse this weather! So now the third picture is spoilt. We want another Sleeping Beauty. And I thought—we thought," he glanced at Cydonia—"that perhaps your daughter would help us out."

"But she's acting already in the first." Mrs. Cadell, secretly pleased, did not wish the fact to appear.

"I know. But there'll be loads of time." McTaggart swept the excuse aside. "The second tableau is in three parts; it will take at least a quarter of an hour. And it's really such a lovely scene—the stage will be a mass of flowers. Do say 'Yes.'" His blue eyes pleaded as he glanced from the mother back to the girl.

"Would you like it, Cydonia?" Mrs. Cadell consulted her daughter, but before the latter could find time to reply the door was opened by the butler, announcing the long-expected guest.

The Bishop of Oxton hurried in: a slight, bent man past the prime of life with a domed head which seemed too large for the small and delicate features beneath. His short-sighted, prominent eyes held a look of chronic bewilderment, and about his thin lips hovered a smile, sweet and deprecating, as though he felt perpetual astonishment at the high position thrust upon him.

"I fear I'm a trifle late," he said, shaking hands with Mrs. Cadell—"the fact is I have been detained by a matter of business in the City." He beamed affectionately at Cydonia, with an absent-minded glance towards McTaggart.

The hostess introduced the men.

"Ah yes." The Bishop blinked. "I fancy we have met before—at my cousin's, Lady Leason."

"That's curious." McTaggart laughed—"I've just this moment come from her, hot-foot on a begging errand."

"Then I'm sure," the Bishop responded suavely, "that your mission will not be in vain! This is the house of Charity."

The butler, to emphasize the fact, announced that the prelate's lunch was served.

McTaggart began to take his leave, but his hostess would not hear of it.

"You *must* stay and lunch with us—we have to decide about the Tableaux."

"I've half promised a man at the Club..." He offered the well-worn excuse, but Mrs. Cadell moved to the door.

"A half promise," she said lightly, "is surely one that can be broken."

As they passed out on to the stairs she referred the matter to the Bishop.

"You mustn't ask for my opinion," he entered into the little joke. "I'm not a believer in half measures! But if you make it a point of conscience I should say it depended upon the host."

"In that case"—McTaggart smiled—"I may consider myself absolved. It was what the Americans call 'Dutch Treat'—each to pay his own expenses."

They settled themselves at the round table, curiously inlaid with brass, smooth and innocent of cloth, where oysters in old Wedgwood plates lay on mats of Italian lace. The fruit, piled high on a centre dish—grapes with peaches and pears beneath—and the gold-flecked Venetian glass gave it a wholly foreign

look. And this was emphasized by the room; the faded tapestry of the walls forming a mellow-toned background for the high-backed chairs and painted chest—once a wedding-coffer of state—and the heavy curtains of brocade, where the gold thread, tarnished, caught the light.

A perfect setting, McTaggart thought, for the fair-haired girl in her satin gown, as he watched the small patrician head bend attentive to the Bishop.

He wondered if she herself had chosen that misty, metallic blue, and the single ornament that hung from a fine gold chain around her neck. He looked at the latter with curious eyes, appreciating the design; seed pearls strung about a cross of pale and flawed emeralds, set with barbaric carelessness in the rough hand-wrought metal, and weighed down by loops of pearls, quivering with each breath she drew.

Meanwhile, the hostess was explaining the reason for the young man's visit. The Bishop, happy over his oysters, beamed his approval of the scheme.

"But who, may I ask, is to be the Prince?" His voice was sly and a twinkle gleamed in the prominent short-sighted eyes, as McTaggart, somewhat hurriedly, admitted that the part was his.

"In doublet and hose and pointed shoes. And a dreadful cap that won't stay on. You've no idea"—he turned to Cydonia—"the agony of mind it causes! Supposing—at the crucial moment"—he watched her still face as he spoke—"it tilted forward on to my nose? What a death-blow to Romance! And they won't allow me to wear an elastic, neatly fastened under my chin. And hat-pins are no earthly use. Can you suggest a remedy?"

"I should hold it in my hand," she said.

"Wonderful!"—McTaggart laughed—"and it never even occurred to me."

He was relieved—at the same time piqued—by her smiling air of unconcern.

"Under the circumstances, too, it might appear more chivalrous."

He added the speech in a lower tone, with a sudden mischievous desire to stir in her a slight revolt. And, as if conscious of his thought, the brown eyes were averted. A faint fugitive color stole under the fairness of her skin.

The Bishop's glance sought his hostess. Between the pair of elderly folk a silent question and answer flashed.

"That's what I shall do," said McTaggart, "kneel and press it to my heart. I'd far rather have it there than balanced on my luckless head. Unfortunately," his voice was light—"you'll miss all my exquisite acting—unless you peep beneath your lashes. Do tell me that you will? Of course you're *supposed* to be asleep."

"You talk as if it were quite settled," Mrs. Cadell with a smile, interposed, "but I haven't yet decided whether Cydonia will take the part."

"Oh! you couldn't be so cruel!" McTaggart showed his disappointment. "Think of poor Lady Leason. You've no idea how worried she is. And, if your daughter refuses to help us, we're threatened with Mrs. Bertie Eying. She's simply dying to take it on. Just picture her as a Sleeping Beauty!"

He gave a sudden shiver and turned toward the amused Bishop.

"One of those new ropy girls—all shoulders and feet, you know. No spine, and straight hair drawn down over her ears. Like a French fashion-plate with all the Frenchness left out."

"I observe there are no half-measures here," the Bishop gave a little chuckle. "I had no idea of the harassing details involved in an effort of charity. It's for some hospital, is it not?"

Mrs. Cadell supplied the name.

"We hope to clear off part of the debt. Since the Insurance Act was passed the subscriptions have decreased. So seriously in fact they talk of closing down a ward."

"Indeed?" The Bishop, nervously, evaded the lead into politics.

"Talking of financial losses——" he went on somewhat hurriedly—"reminds me of my morning's work. I'm afraid the ways of the City are quite beyond my understanding."

He sighed as he helped himself to curry.

Mrs. Cadell, to fill the pause, remarked that McTaggart was on the Stock Exchange.

"Really?" The Bishop looked up quickly. "Then, perhaps, he can relieve my mind on the question that is puzzling me."

Into the younger man's blue eyes came a shrewd look of attention. Inwardly he was summing up the possibility of a client.

"Delighted—if I can help at all."

Cydonia stole a glance at him. Here was another side to the picture she already knew by heart.

She watched the serious olive face with its strong chin and tight-closed lips—a hint of obstinacy there which added a strongly British look to his slightly foreign grace, banishing all effeminacy, suggesting a hidden power.

It seemed to her he was snatched away into a world remote from her, and for the first time in her life she felt uneasy, half-afraid ...

"Some years ago," the Bishop blinked, "six, to be strictly accurate, I was induced to invest some money in a new company. I am not quite sure as to the process, but it—the invention—claimed to produce a liquid fuel out of coal-slag at an absurdly low cost. The shares had run up quickly until they were eight pounds apiece—one pound shares, you understand. I gave eight." He paused ruefully.

"And now?" McTaggart prompted gently.

"I believe," the Bishop gave a sigh—"they are selling at ... about twelve shillings! The worst of it is——" his voice rose. "They have never paid a dividend."

"How did you hear of it?" McTaggart felt a half-amused sense of pity.

"One night I was dining with Lord Warleigh. His place, you know, is near Oxton. And the principal director—the promoter of the affair—was staying with him for the week-end, in order to place a block of shares to provide for further working expenses. Warleigh was enthusiastic and as to the man himself, he

seemed most reliable, heart and soul absorbed in the scheme. Of German origin, naturalized—Herman Schliff—— Do you know the name?"

"Never heard of it—or the company." McTaggart shook his head.

"No, really?" The Bishop frowned.

"One of the most eloquent men I have ever come across. I remember, at the time——" he smiled apologetically—"I thought what a preacher was lost to the Church! And with it an enthusiasm, a grip of his subject and a faith in the prospects, which carried his listeners bodily away. To give you an example of this, Warleigh's poor old butler invested his savings—the hardly won nest-egg of forty years' service—then and there in the affair. He handed every penny of it over to Schliff before he left."

"What a shame!" Mrs. Cadell's sympathy was plainly aroused—"I suppose he will never get it back?"

"I fear not. And he's one of many." The Bishop frowned thoughtfully. "Looking through a list of shareholders only this morning I was surprised to find many names I knew personally of quite small people with narrow incomes. Good people too, I mean. Service men and petty squires living in the depths of the country."

"Exactly." McTaggart's face was grim—"the usual victims, I'm afraid. But it seems to have dragged on rather longer than these forlorn hopes generally do. What reason do they give for the fall in shares? and the absence of a dividend? What do the reports say?"

"Oh—they're full of excuses." The Bishop's thin, delicate hand went out in a gesture of impatience. "For instance—new machinery—some hitch in the process—a technical difference of opinion between the experts they employ. With always the same golden future dangled before our weary eyes, in Schliff's magnetic and pompous speeches, bolstered up by his tame directors. And the *money* sunk in it—thousands squandered! With nothing practical to show—to warrant the huge expenditure."

"I suppose by now," McTaggart hazarded, "Schliff's a pretty prosperous man?"

"I couldn't say. To give him his due I should hesitate to class the man in any way as unscrupulous. He has a firm belief in himself and in anything that he undertakes. It's temperamental and most misleading; but I think, according to his light, he's honest. I really think so! That's the perplexing part to me. But he's hypnotized by his own verbosity——" the Bishop paused, pleased with the phrase—"he sees himself a second Napoleon—alas! without his genius for management."

McTaggart allowed himself the luxury of a long-repressed smile.

"The type is perhaps not uncommon. If you like I'll make a few inquiries—quite quietly, of course—and find out what sort of a record he bears in the city. I conclude this isn't his first venture? Herman Schliff ... and the Company?" He made a note upon his cuff. "Oh, it's really no trouble—I'm interested in the affair."

"I wish I were not!" The victim smiled. "But I went on buying after the fall."

Mrs. Cadell's restless eyes met McTaggart's. They both smiled. Then she signalled to the butler to fill up the Bishop's glass.

"Yes, I insist——" as the prelate protested—"it won't hurt you, it's quite light. And here comes your favourite sweet—ordered expressly for you."

The worn face cleared, and he smiled, touched by the other's kindly thought.

"I'm always spoilt in this house," he said, "and I'm afraid that the shocking result is that I take advantage of it, and come too often to loosen my pack of worries here. What can the Sleeping Beauty think of all this dreary business talk?"

He looked across wistfully at Cydonia's lovely face, with next to it the virile contrast of her dark-haired, handsome friend. Only too well he realized the heavy burden of the years and the narrowing road ahead where he must pass with lonely feet. Death he feared not. For the Faith he had long preached was indeed his own. Yet the human in him shrank, faced with the decay of power.

Cydonia's soft brown eyes met his with a child's affection. His question cut across her dreams.

"I?" she hesitated, smiling. "Oh! I like to hear of things."

McTaggart, watching her, caught into his memory an elusive dimple, near the fresh young mouth.

Following up the train of thought provoked by this miracle, he heard the doctor's voice once more, with a note of mischief, in his ears.

"Not married, are you, Mr. McTaggart? Well—you'd better take care ... a fair wife and a dark one..." He was certain, then and there, that his "Scotch heart" lay in Cydonia's hands.

He watched them now, with a languid grace remove the velvety skin of a peach. The faint colour of the fruit was not more fair than her little pink nails.

But swift on the thought came a vision of Fantine—mischievous, provocative, tingling with life; of dark-fringed eyes and full red lips, and honey-coloured fingers that flashed in quick gesture matching each turn of her gay clipped speech.

He thrust aside the picture, half-angrily; conscious of the atmosphere that hung about the Cadells' house, vaguely ecclesiastic and super-refined. The intrusion of Fantine seemed almost profane, the contrast too crude between this sheltered home and the gilded, over-lighted flat. He could see the long rooms with the doors flung wide and the ever-changing brilliant crowd, elbowing each other round the green table with the piled-up stakes and fluttering cards. He could feel once more the strain that hung in the air, the excitement of the lust for gain, the grasping hands and greedy eyes...

"A penny for your thoughts?" He gave a guilty start. Cydonia was watching him with childish curiosity.

"Impossible—the price is too high!"

He answered her lightly but his face was grave.

"I believe you've gone back to that velvet cap? You looked so solemn. It must be that!"

"More likely I was harassed with this cruel suspense." He leaned a little

nearer and lowered his voice.

"You *are* going to help us? Tell me, don't you want to?—You've no idea how anxious I am that you should take the part."

Then, seeing her hesitate, he added with malice, "Mrs. Bying would jump at it."

"But I'm *not* Mrs. Bying."

Up went Cydonia's head in pride.

"Thank Heaven, no." He laughed at her voice. "I didn't mind Marie Dilke—she's such a good sort"—he went on meditatively, forgetful of his listener—"but as to kissing Mrs. Bying..."

The moment the word was out he felt, with horror, the folly of his mistake. "Pretend to,—I mean," he corrected hurriedly. "Of course in acting—it's always pretence—and in this instance—I only ... you know——"

He broke off, at a loss for words. He dared not even look at her. The ominous pause prolonged itself. He felt an insane desire to laugh.

"With any other girl"—he thought—"but this girl ... oh! *hang* it all!" He grabbed at a peach. Viciously he dug his fork into it, searching in his empty brain for some sensible remark. But....

"I think it's going to snow——" was all that came to him after due thought. He said it with the air of a weather expert. "It's so awfully chilly..." And then a faint laugh startled him into a side-long glance.

Cydonia's face was pink and in her smooth cheek the dimple betrayed her battle with mirth.

"Snow?" said the Bishop. "Indeed, I trust not. One hopes at this time of year the winter is getting past. Not that we have much snow at Oxton."

He turned again to Mrs. Cadell.

"A wonderful year for chrysanthemums."

They started to discuss the Temple show.

"Say I'm forgiven?" McTaggart's voice was humble.

But Cydonia had recovered. She sat bolt upright, brown eyes discreetly lowered upon her plate.

"If you don't speak to me soon——" this in tragic tones—"I'll cut my throat with a silver knife. It will be a long business—painful too..." He checked his rising mischief, trying to probe her thought.

But the fact was Cydonia was somewhat at a loss. For the first time she tasted the consciousness of power—sweet, indeed, to the schoolgirl in her opening year of life. She wanted to be dignified and she wanted to laugh. And behind it all lay a curious joy—a touch of excitement and of wonder that hurt ... She wrapped it up in silence, mistrustful of speech.

"I want you to understand," McTaggart was watching her. The little scene had

gained a sudden significance. "However I might laugh—or joke, you know, I never could *think* of you without respect. And if you take this part I'd hate you to feel ... that you weren't quite safe with me. D'you see what I mean." He took a deep breath and plunged in again. "I might flirt with Mrs. Bying—she's fair game, you know—but you—you're different..."

He stammered on the word.

For Cydonia had looked up and in her shy eyes he read a childish gratitude and with it, sweet and deep, the dawn of a woman's comprehension of men.

Something in the absorbed attitude of the pair caught the mother's restless glance.

"Well, Cydonia," she rose as she spoke, for the Bishop had snatched a quick look at the clock—"Have you made up your mind about the Tableaux, dear?"

"I think so, Madre. I think it sounds ... nice."

"You blessed child," said McTaggart in his heart.

CHAPTER V

McTaggart lay in bed, his eyes half-closed, watching the gray light spread from under the blind. His head ached and he felt unusually tired and heavy, bound down to his pillow by invisible chains.

From the sitting-room beyond came the clatter of plates, boards creaking in the wake of his housekeeper's step, and through the open window stole a muffled steady hum—the day-song of the London streets. A door banged loudly, and blessed silence followed. He drew the bed-clothes tighter under his chin. But now sleep had fled and into his brain thoughts rushed swiftly as though against his will; a baffling succession of events and surmises, throwing up pictures before his closed eyes.

He reached out a hand in search of his watch and found that the hour was

close upon ten. A vast dissatisfaction settled down upon him. "Another day to be lived through?" it whispered in his ear. He felt a sick disgust for this business of life.

His eyes, from under their heavy lids, roaming about the room, marked on his dressing-table, without exultation, the little heap of silver and gold and crinkled bank-notes, thrown among his brushes from overnight.

In his fastidious mood the sight brought no joy, merely a memory of the long hot hours, with their inevitable accompaniment of frequent drinks. For the gambler's instinct was not his. He played carelessly, more as a means to pass the time than from any feverish attraction for the game.

And Fortune, that fickle jade, had stood by his side, tempting his indifference with a long run of luck.

He wondered as he lay there how Fantine could stand the life, night after night watch the same sordid scene, with that slightly aloof and mocking air of hers that warred with the welcome he read in her eyes.

He wondered, drearily, if the game could pay? He wondered what was to be the end of it all? It was not a woman's work, the strain was too great. For he knew the risks that underlay the affair.

He knew that she lived in fear of the police. What a horrible atmosphere! He shivered in his bed. He wished now he had not won. That heap of money there seemed to prolong the struggle of her days.

How pretty she was! He stirred restlessly, conjuring up her picture against the dark blind. With something beyond beauty, that inexpressible charm of the subtle Parisian, conscious of her power.

Something hyper-feminine set her apart from the women of that other world in which he moved. Delicately rounded, with tiny hands and feet, witty, provocative, dangerously sweet, she showed a curious contrast to the modern English girl with her sporting instincts and brusque, boyish speech.

Soft? That was the adjective—fragrant and warm, made for a strong man to love and protect. So few women nowadays held this appeal, meeting men on equal terms, half-ashamed of sex.

And all McTaggart's vanity and young virile pride were stirred by her silent call to his knight-errantry.

How he would like to snatch her away from her present feverish life! He braced himself between the sheets at the sudden stirring thought.

And then, with perplexing speed, another vision rose. He saw the face of Cydonia, with her childish smile. That was the right setting for a young girl, he decided, that cultured, shrine-like home, locked from the world outside.

For man still clings fondly to feudal memories. His reason may force him to approve the great stride of woman to the foreground of intellectual power, but his instinct still whispers that the woman he loves should be guarded from evil and from too curious eyes.

Some day this may fade away, swept aside in the course of the growing cry for freedom, but with it will pass a hidden safeguard to the sex, a human note divine—that tenderness towards the weak, purifying passion.

Well—it was all a mystery! McTaggart yawned and stretched. Almost as bewildering as his own curious case. He fell to thinking again about his double heart, Cydonia and Fantine at the back of his mind.

"It might lead to bigamy." He recalled the doctor's words—not without a certain youthful complacency! He dallied with the notion of possible married life, attracted by the novelty but mistrustful of the tie.

And here Romance was rudely assailed by an interruption from the world without and he became conscious of a knocking, loud and long, on the further door of his sitting-room.

McTaggart cursed the invisible one. Struggling out of bed he threw on a dressing-gown and blinking at the light made his way through the folding-doors to where his breakfast lay and called an exasperated, husky "Come in."

"Hullo, Peter!" a cheery voice replied—"hope I didn't wake you from your beauty sleep?"

In the open doorway stood a thick-set man, rendered still more bulky by a tweed overcoat, with merry dark eyes under shaggy brows, gleaming out of his

pale, square face.

"Just off shooting," he explained hurriedly—"and run out of whiskey"—he held up a flask—"no time to get it in, so I thought as I passed your door I'd try and cadge some from you, old man."

McTaggart seized the decanter from off the sideboard, his face relaxing into a smile.

"Help yourself—confound yon! I was half asleep, after a somewhat late night."

"Sorry." The visitor grinned as he spoke. "Better for you, sonnie, up with the dawn. How doth the busy little bee—or rather how *did* he sacrifice to the gods his heritage of sleep?"

"In a silly game that's called chemin-de-fer, varied by supper and fifth-rate fizz."

"Any luck?" Bethune carefully filled the flask. "How's that for a steady hand?" He screwed in the stopper.

"More than mine is! Yes, I won—forty pounds odd—as far as I remember."

"The devil you did!" Bethune stared—"you wouldn't like to lend me a fiver, would you?"

"D'you mean it?" McTaggart turned toward his room, but his visitor caught him by the arm.

"Don't be an ass! I was only rotting. Nice stuff that——" he fingered the dressing-gown—"lapped in luxury—and wins forty pounds!"

His brown eyes rested for a second affectionately on his friend's weary face.

"Pity, all the same," he said abruptly. "Do you an almighty good to work. No—I mean it..." as McTaggart laughed—"a slack life's all wrong for a fellow like you. Now here I am, at it hard, every blessed day in the week. And what's the result? When I get a Saturday clear for a day's shoot or golf, you've no idea how I enjoy it. I'm like a school-boy at a bean-feast!"

"Bless you, my child," McTaggart mocked. "I don't grudge you your virtuous pleasure—go and paddle and make mud-pies—it keeps you nice and young—*and fat!*"

"Shut up!" Bethune made for the door—"Oh, by the way, would you like the car? If so ring up Central 609, and one of the men will bring it round. Any time before two o'clock, but you'll have to take it back yourself. It's half-day at the works, you know."

"Right-o! Hope you'll have good sport."

He watched Bethune clamber down the narrow staircase out of sight, with his broad shoulders and thick brown coat, not unlike an enormous bumble-bee.

Then, closing his door, he poured out a cup of tepid coffee and drank it thirstily. He lifted the cover off the dish that flanked the battered rack of toast. Spread-eagled, gray and cold, a mackerel met his disgusted gaze.

"Looks dead," said McTaggart thoughtfully. He replaced the cover rather quickly, played with some toast upon his plate and gathered up his pile of letters.

Three bills, a stockbroker's list and an invitation to a dance. Then, with a slight awakening of interest, he found a letter in Jill's round hand.

"DEAR PETER,

Many happy returns of the day. I'm awfully sorry your present's not ready, but I've been so busy all this term. I'll explain better when we meet and I hope to send it you next week.

Wishing you no end of luck.

Yours affectionately,
JILL."

McTaggart laid the letter down, a sudden glow in the "double heart." He was

pleased that the child should remember the date.

His birthday? Why—of course, it was!

"And I'll take her out and give her a treat. By Jove, there's the car—it's Saturday too. I'll send her a wire to say I'm coming—she'll find it when she gets back from school."

Under the spur of awakened energy the old depression fell away. To his surprise he found himself singing, midway through his bath.

CHAPTER VI

Jill herself opened the door.

"Come in and have some coffee," her eyes passed from McTaggart to the big gray car. "Doesn't it look jolly! I'm longing to go in it, but I'm rather bothered too—I'll tell you why..."

She led the way through the hall into the dining-room, where the remains of a frugal lunch on a much-darned cloth were scattered around a dying fern in a tarnished brass pot, sole ornament of the long bare table.

The room had a forlorn look, with its dingy, crooked blinds, the mantel-piece littered with circulars above the feeble gas fire. It had the unhomelike air one associates with lodgings—a place to be used, not loved, and shunned when meals were over.

"Now don't say you can't come." McTaggart frowned severely—"because I mean to carry you off whether you like it or not. I've got the car for the day, and we'll go right into the country and have tea somewhere—at a little village pub!"

"Lovely!" Jill clapped her hands. She poured out a brimming cup of a thin and cloudy mixture from a chipped coffee-pot. "There you are!—Sugar? The only thing is I'd promised to go and see the baker's wife."

McTaggart laughed at her serious face.

"Oh, bother the baker's wife! Surely for one day you might relax your ... social efforts. Think of poor me."

"Poor you!" Jill mocked—"I shall have to go there first if we can fit it in. She's been so ill—it's rather a sad story, but I'll tell you if you like."

"Nothing infectious, I hope?" McTaggart stirred his muddy coffee; then, manfully, took a great gulp.

"Oh, dear, no." Jill's voice was calm. "She's had a baby, that's all." There came a little pause.

"It's dead too," the girl went on in clear, steady tones. "That's the cruel part. It needn't have been."

"No?" McTaggart felt somewhat at a loss. But Jill was plainly absorbed in the simple tragedy. She leaned towards him, elbows planted on the table, her chin propped on her hands, her eyes far away.

"She was *such* a nice little thing!—I've known her for years. She used to come with her grandmother, who did upholstery work, on Saturday afternoons and give her a hand. She, herself, was employed at a laundry and engaged to the baker even then.

"For five long years they saved all they could and at last they were married and took a tiny house next door to where our charwoman lives. It's not the baker himself, you know, but one of his employées who makes the bread—he's the head man. They *were* so happy, and then—all this trouble came!

"The 'bakers' went out on strike—d'you remember it?—and, bit by bit, all their savings melted away. The husband was worried out of his life. He couldn't go back on his pals, you see, or find any other job to do; and so at last his wife returned to the laundry and begged for some employment again.

"There happened to be a vacancy in the ironing room just then—far too heavy work for a delicate woman!—but the rate of pay is higher there, so, pluckily, she took it on. She kept this a secret from her husband and gave the latter to understand it was just a matter of light mending, without dangerous exertion.

And in this way she earned enough to keep them afloat to the end of the strike. Then she collapsed—broke down utterly!—and her baby was born, before its time. The baker nearly went off his head when the true story leaked out. To think of her, with those heavy irons, on her feet all day in the heat and steam! ... I call her a real heroine." Jill's gray eyes flashed as she spoke, then softened as she added, sadly:

"But the baby died. It hadn't a chance, so the doctor said, and she was so ill. Now she's simply broken-hearted at losing it and can't pick up. I heard about it from our charwoman and promised to go and see her to-day. I must, Peter." Her voice was firm. "You won't mind if I call there first?"

"Of course not——" said McTaggart gravely. He felt a trifle taken aback by this pitiful, sordid chapter of life from the lips of his little friend: a man's discomfort, too, at the thought of her youthful knowledge of matters he deemed better kept from her awhile. He realised with sudden force the outlook, purely practical, of the growing generation of girls. Healthy, but somewhat startling too, this determination to face the facts of life in defiance of old traditions.

Jill still sat there, chin on hands, absorbed in the problem offered to her by this contrast in the life of the poor with that of the well-to-do around him.

Serenely devoid of self-consciousness she looked up suddenly at McTaggart, meeting the kindly blue eyes with a faint trouble in their depths.

"I wish these strikes could be avoided. They seem to bring such misery. I can't understand life at all!—the hopeless suffering involved..." Her voice held a note of rebellion.

"Everyone seems to be fighting hard, not for the present but the future—for something they'll never live to see!—ruining their own lives meanwhile. Supposing these strikers get their way—higher wages and all that—" she waved her hand with a broad gesture—"D'you think the generations ahead will be contented in their turn? Or will they be fighting for more, too? I don't see any end to it!"

"Well, I wouldn't worry if I were you," McTaggart nodded his head wisely. "I expect it's always been the same. It's what we're pleased to call 'Progress'.

"I think your plan's the best, my dear. To help and comfort where you can;

and leave the larger questions alone for those who have really studied the matter.

"We'll go and see the baker's wife, and—can't we take her something, Jill? Food—or money? what d'you think?"

"Not money!" Jill winced. "They aren't really paupers, you know. It's so easy to hurt the pride of the poor—the *working* poor. We might get her some flowers."

"Well, come along then. Thanks for my coffee." He rose to his feet. "You'll want a thick coat, old girl, the wind's in the North—but a good blow will do you good—scatter the cobwebs."

As they passed into the hall he asked after Mrs. Uniacke.

"She's not very well." Jill still looked troubled. "She's gone to Reading for a suffrage meeting."

"I say—did you tell her about the baker's wife?" He tucked the rug closely around her as she settled herself in the car.

"Oh, yes." She gave him a comical glance, half-annoyed, half-amused. "Can't you guess what she said?"

But Peter was winding up the engine. He sprang back into his seat and the girl went on, raising her voice above the noisy throbbing note.

"She said—'You must try and win her at once to the Cause. Of course when we get the vote, all this will be put to rights.' They always think of the mass, you see, never of the individual. I suppose there's some truth in it." She paused doubtfully—"I wonder?"

"Well, I don't!" said McTaggart shortly. "I'm not very keen on present day politics, but I think when women are allowed to add a new party it will be a case of confusion worse confounded! So don't you go and get involved, Jill. You keep an open mind. I'd hate to see you in any way mixed up in this militant folly."

"Well—I wish Mother weren't. It's simply killing her. She hasn't the nerve for these perpetual scenes."

They slowed down at a corner where a flower-woman stood with a basket of

yellow chrysanthemums.

"Will these do for you?" McTaggart bought a bunch and laid them in Jill's lap; the heavy golden heads on their long pale stems preserving their subtle and Eastern charm, as though a secret lay beneath the curled petals in each still and exquisite flower heart.

They twisted through mean streets until they came to a row of little houses behind the Circus Road.

"It's number 36," directed Jill; but as the car stopped before the door it was opened from within and a woman emerged, old and bent, shrouded in a shawl.

Jill got down and spoke to her, and after a few words returned to McTaggart's side.

"She's fast asleep"—her voice was hushed—"so I won't go in and wake her up." The woman, with suspicious eyes, stared at the young man in the car, as Jill took the flowers and held them out.

"Give her these, please, and say I'll come again. I'm so glad she's getting on. Thank you—good-bye."

McTaggart was amused at the lack of gratitude. For the woman took the offering without another word. He guessed shrewdly that the sight of the car—the outward sign of luxury—had roused the deep slumbering resentment of the poor, their latent fear of being patronized.

"Charming old lady," he suggested. But Jill seemed unconscious of the slight.

"That's her Aunt," she informed him with a sigh, spelling relief at a duty done. "She's come from Stratford to look after her. So now we can have a lovely drive."

She turned a smiling face toward him, cheeks rosy with the air, keen and crisp, of the winter day, and drew the shabby fur tighter round her throat as the car backed slowly out of the narrow road.

"Where are we going?"

"That's for you to decide. But I think through Hampstead, now we've come this way. Sure you're warm enough? I put in my other coat—so burrow into that if the wind gets keen."

He turned the car up the long hilly road leading to Swiss Cottage and leaned back easily.

"How's school going?" He smiled at her with pride. She looked so pretty with her childish, flushed cheeks.

"College, d'you mean?" Jill corrected him. "Nothing exciting since the row over ancient history. I'm working rather hard for the Exams now."

"I don't think you told me that. Let's hear about it."

"Well, it's rather a long story——" she settled herself back with her cold hands thrust beneath the fur rug. "So if you get bored, please say so at once."

"Fire away," McTaggart observed.

"You remember that unholy fuss last Boat Race day? When I and the other Cambridge girls held the Bun Shop against Oxford?"

"No—not exactly. What Bun Shop?"

McTaggart saw fun ahead, for Jill's gray eyes were full of mischief beneath their dark lashes. He noticed, for the first time, how long and thick they were, curling back in a rippling line that cast a faint shadow when she lowered the lids.

"Oh, the Bun Shop is a little room in the basement of the college where old Mother Griggs sells all sorts of cakes, sticks of chocolate and hot coffee—for 'Elevens' or lunch, you know. It's at the end of a long passage, quite by itself, with just a counter across it and a dim religious sort of light from a top-window into the area. There Mother Griggs sits and barter—rather like a grim old idol—and in between she grumbles and knits socks. She must have knitted hundreds by now! Well, on boat race day we all wear colors—I'm Cambridge, of course, because Uncle was at King's. And some Oxford girl had a wonderful cousin who was rowing in the boat. So she simply 'swanked,' you know, and swore Oxford was sure to win. The end of it was we got riled. So we formed up into the Bun Shop—all of us Cambridge girls—and we held the place against Oxford right

through the mid-day hour—— We wouldn't let a single Dark Blue pass. It was fun!—a gorgeous scrimmage. Until some sneak went up and told, and down came the Principal. As luck would have it, she fell on me. So I got put in the Black Book."

She paused for breath as they crossed FitzJohn's Parade and started on the steep climb to Hampstead.

McTaggart glanced at her and laughed.

"What does that mean?" he inquired.

"The very worst." Her voice was tragic. "It's the only punishment we get. You see, it's not like any school. It's run on University lines. Just lectures you're supposed to attend and if you don't it's your lookout—you get ploughed in the Exams. But for any serious, big offence your name is written in the Black Book. And after a third entry (which rarely happens) you're 'sent down'—that is, expelled."

"Phew...!" McTaggart whistled. "May I ask how many times you've managed to get yourself inscribed?"

"Twice." The girl's face was grave. "It's bad luck, isn't it? And the other day at ancient history I very nearly was nabbed again!"

She paused for a moment to turn the collar of her coat up round her ears. Her eyes above the gray fur shone like stars in the frosty air.

"We got a new Professor last term; rather young, just down from Oxford. I don't think..." she smiled mischievously—"he *quite* understands girls. It isn't like a school, you see. We're rather keen on that idea. We don't mind hard work or a man who insists on our attention. But the Professor thought it funny to—well, to patronize, you know. He used to be satirical and make allowance for female brains. Just as if we weren't as sharp—and sharper, too, than a pack of boys! He had bright ginger hair and a brand-new cap and gown—rather a 'nut!'—McTaggart roared—"with a drawly sort of 'superior' voice. Well, Judy Seton——" Jill broke off—"she's a pal of mine—a splendid girl, always up to sport—arrived one day just before his lecture and handed round envelopes. Inside was a card and stitched to it was a little curl cut off a door-mat—one of those ginger ones, you know. It's woolly stuff, but exactly the shade of the Professor's Titian

glory!

"Underneath it she had written—'In fond memory'—and below—'R.I.P. The Oxford man—ah!'"

"We were all in the class-room ready for lecture and some girl had a box of pins. So it ended in our fastening the love-locks over our hearts!"

"Well, presently my Lord arrives, in his brand-new cap and gown with his sheaf of notes, and mounts the platform, very suave and very bored.

"And the first thing that he did—you'd never believe it!—was to run his hand smoothly across his head.

"'He's missing them!' Judy whispered, and, of course, we all went off at that. We daren't laugh out aloud, but there we were, giggling hopelessly, while the Professor glared at us.

"He started in his most sarcastic voice:

"'A little less amusement, ladies. I can understand that it is difficult for youth to stoop to serious subjects...' And then he stopped with a little gasp and we knew he had seen the red curls! Just at that moment the door opened and in came a lady visitor. You know they're sort of inquisitors, very often 'old girls'—who can walk into any class-room and sit there to hear a lecture. Judy calls them 'Propriety Pills,' and, although some are really nice, here and there you get a Tartar who carries stories to the Principal.

"This one was a Mrs. Bevis—we'd nicknamed her 'The Beaver.' She really was rather like that animal, with a snub-nosed, anxious face, and she always wore a black mantle and waddled as she walked. Well—you're sure you're not bored?"

"Sure." McTaggart's voice was hearty. This sidelight on a school for girls was entertaining and unexpected.

"Go on. What happened then?"

"The Professor gave the Beaver a chair by the fire, facing the room. We'd hurriedly removed the curls during their polite palaver. This is the idiotic part. I'd

put mine into a book that lay with others on my desk. I didn't notice at the time that it was an 'Ancient History.' As it happened, that day I was sitting just beneath the platform. We were, all of us, solemn as owls under the Beaver's sharp black eyes. For she's about the worst of the pack for nosing out any trouble.

"The Professor lent her his primer and started on the lecture, still looking a little flushed, while we were busy taking notes. As luck would have it, midway, some date tripped him up and before I could collect my wits he asked me for my 'Ancient History.'"

"Where the curl was?" McTaggart suggested.

"Exactly." Jill's voice was tragic. "He leaned down from the platform and picked it up off my desk. Of course, it opened at *the* page! There was the red lock—the card as well!

"You can just imagine how I felt and I heard Judy Seton gasp. Luckily the Beaver missed it. The Professor never said a word, but his face was like a thunder-cloud. He hunted up the date he wanted, closed the book with a snap and put it down on his desk. At the end of the lecture he handed it back with a curt word of thanks and went off with the 'lady visitor,' talking fourteen to the dozen."

"That's not the end?" McTaggart saw by the girl's face there was more to follow.

"No—of course not. All that morning I simply sat on thorns, expecting between every lecture to be sent for by the Principal. But nothing happened. At five o'clock I went down from my last lecture and passed by the Professors' room, where the door was wide open. Inside was Mr. Jackson—the Professor—you know—writing hard. So, then, I had an inspiration. I knocked and said: 'May I speak to you, sir?' And he wheeled round, looked surprised and said in a chilly voice:

"Certainly. What do you want?"

"It was no good mincing matters, so I asked, outright:

"Are you going to report me, sir?"

"He didn't answer for a moment. He seemed to be thinking hard. Then, in the same cold, absent manner——

"'No.' Just that and nothing more."

Jill stopped, her attention caught by the first glimpse of the open heath as the car breasted the last rise, and the wind came blustering in their teeth.

"Oh, *isn't* it lovely here!" She drew a deep breath of content.

"Straight across?" McTaggart asked. She nodded her head, her eyes fixed on the far-away vista of trees, bare but shrouded in a violet haze.

Over Hendon a misty sun was veiled in banks of gray clouds, but high in the sky a wide streak showed of a pale and tender bird's egg blue.

"Well—what happened next?" McTaggart brought her, with a sudden drop, back to earth.

"Oh ... I felt so relieved I just rushed ahead, you know. I told him he was a regular brick! And then, as he seemed a bit surprised, I explained about the Black Book—how a third entry now might end in my being sent down for good.'

"'Good Heavens!' he said, 'I'd no idea,' and, really, he looked sympathetic. So *I* said I was awfully sorry that we'd all of us played the goat. Well, what d'you think *he* said then? quite simply—without 'side.'

"'It's partly my own fault, too ... I'm not popular, I know—I can't get the atmosphere...'

"You might have knocked me down with a feather!"

"I'll bet anything you explained it!" McTaggart smiled to himself.

"Why, of course I did." Jill stared at him. "I felt so awfully sorry. I said:

"'Look here, sir, we'd like you all right if only you'd treat us more like men. It's not a girl's school, it's a college. And lots of us are working hard to earn our own living when we leave. So, perhaps, we think a good deal of the ... usefulness of our work. We like to feel the Professors know it, and help and ... respect us—

just like men. In the senior lectures most of us, too, are in our third year course, you know, and you treat us exactly like the juniors! It's all wrong, sir, don't you see?"

"Bravo you! ..." McTaggart cried. "How did he take your ... candid help?"

"He said: 'Thank you—I see the point—you aren't Freshers any more. And, perhaps ... Yes—the manner's wrong.' Then, quite suddenly, he laughed. 'The Oxford man—ah! eh, Miss Uniacke?'"

"I felt rather a fool then, Peter."

Irrelevantly, she added: "He's got nice eyes when he laughs."

"Oh ... Jill, Jill!" McTaggart's glance swerved from the steering wheel aside to find his little friend's face flushed beyond the excuse of the breeze.

"Anyhow, we shook hands," Jill went on hurriedly, "and he said, 'Well I hope at the next lecture I shall find a more attentive class.'"

"So I told him *I'd* see to that! and I went downstairs and talked to the girls. And the next Friday we were good. You could hear a pin fall," Jill laughed.

"I must say he looked nervous but, when the lecture was over and he stood on the platform ready to leave, Judy got up and gave the signal—"Three Cheers for Mr. Jackson."

"We let it rip—such a row! He looked rather taken aback but awfully pleased, said 'Thank you, ladies,' and then simply did a bolt."

"Well, I'm blessed!" McTaggart roared—"but glad I'm not a Professor for girls."

"We thought him such a brick, you see, for not reporting the whole matter. And, after all," Jill smiled—"he can't help his red hair."

"Nor his 'nice eyes'?" Peter added.

But Jill refused to be drawn.

CHAPTER VII

Mrs. Merrod gazed into her mirror across the littered dressing-table.

It was a gilded triple affair, each side panel swinging on a pivot so that the woman sitting there could study herself from all angles. Under the crude electric light, from which she had removed the rose-coloured shade, her face looked sallow and almost plain, but was saved from insignificance by the intelligence of her eyes.

Dark topaz colour they were under the fine arched brows, full of deep slumbering fire that accentuated the hint of passion in the full-lipped and mocking mouth.

After a moment's steady gaze, drawing her lace peignoir about her, she rang the bell that lay on the table: a dainty little silver toy where a winged Eros stooped to kiss a smiling Psyche with arms uplifted. When the lips of the little creatures met the electric poles were united, and away in her maid's room she could hear the distant reverberation.

The door opened noiselessly.

"Mélanie, my velvet dress, and the boots with the gray suede tops."

"Bien, Madame." The maid passed into the dressing-room adjoining, where a looped-up curtain of rose-coloured silk revealed an elaborately fitted bath.

"The ermine scarf—no! The gray fox." She still studied her pale face—"and I want those new combs from Lalique—and long gray gloves and my violet toque."

She glanced as she spoke at the little clock which pointed to half-past six, and, with a sigh of relief, leaned back comfortably in her chair.

To pass the time while the maid came and went between the cupboards of the two rooms, Mrs. Merrod opened her manicure case, and began to polish her pink

nails.

Then, as the door closed at last behind Mélanie's brisk step, she stirred herself and started upon the lengthy business of her toilette.

Into a saucer she poured from a bottle a thick creamy-looking liquid, and, with a broad camel's hair brush, spread it smoothly over her face. She waited for the skin to absorb it, then, with a piece of chamois leather, she polished the whitened surface lightly, added a faint dust of powder and peered again into the glass.

Satisfied with the result, she drew out the nearest drawer of the satin-wood dressing table, disclosing a number of pencils and lip-salves and little pots of cosmetic.

She hunted for a tiny brush, dipped it in a dark powder and, holding back each eyelid, proceeded to brush the lashes upward. Next a black pencil for her eyebrows, the merest line, traced with skill; then another, this time blue to accentuate the length of her eyes.

Finally, with care, she selected a lip-salve case from among many and held it thoughtfully for a moment against the creamy-white face.

"Too red." Fantine sighed. Her weakness was for carmine lips, but she feared McTaggart's critical gaze, those keen and mischievous blue eyes.

Picking out a paler shade, she passed it slowly over her mouth. At once the face became alive, losing the suggestion of a mask. Beneath the dark curls, bunched low on her ears, she coloured carefully each lobe, and, with her head tilted back, added a touch inside her nostrils.

This singular performance over, she rose briskly to her feet, shed the filmy lace peignoir and stood before the long mirror.

She nodded happily to her image, conscious of her perfect figure. In the shimmering long black silk tights with the frilled lace about her bosom, she looked like a dainty travesty of a Harlequin in a Transformation.

Slipping quickly into her dress, she was sheathed now in black velvet; very severe but with a cut that whispered Paris in each line.

She fastened a single deep red rose into the folds above her waist, then swayed slowly from side to side, very supple, her hands to her hips, a slight smile on the reddened lips.

"Bon!" She reached back for her hat—a violet splash on the lace counterpane—settled it closely on her head, with a final touch to the glossy hair, doubly black now against the warmth of the crumpled purple velvet.

At this moment the knocker sounded. Close at hand it seemed to clatter, for her bedroom door faced the entrance with only a narrow strip of hall.

She heard the maid's step pass and then the well-known voice of McTaggart.

"Entrez donc!" She cried gaily, "I am almost ready, Pierrot." Through the half-open door, glancing sideways with bright eyes, her hands still lifted to her head, she caught a glimpse of his laughing face.

He hesitated on the threshold, drinking in the pretty picture of the dainty pink room with its gleaming mirror and silver toys and the perfect silhouette of Fantine in her sombre velvet dress.

"Épatante! Comment ça va?" For he prided himself on a slender stock of French slang acquired mostly from a painstaking study of Willy's works.

"You *do* look nice!" He eased the strain of a conversation begun in French.

"Just one?" He stooped down and lightly kissed her smiling lips. Then he stood back, holding her hands, and, with a comprehensive glance, looked her over from head to foot, touched anew by her feminine charm.

"Only my boots now—and gloves, mon cher."

Her eyes with their half-veiled topaz lights returned his gaze hardily, with an answering pressure of tiny hands. "Go, now—there's a good boy. Mélanie!" she raised her voice—"vite! mes bottines." She sank down on a low chair, her feet outstretched.

"Let me do it," McTaggart begged, "I'm sure I'd make a splendid maid."

"No, no—Mélanie." The sly face of the femme de chambre drove him

effectually from the room.

He sauntered across into the salon, where a fire was burning cosily. The wide portière was drawn across the larger room beyond where, on the evenings when they played, the card table was set out.

He warmed his hands before the blaze, glancing at the crowded mantel-piece, covered with many photographs, most of them portraits of men.

He smiled as he recognized the face of a youthful college friend. It was signed in a sprawling hand—"Yours, Archie," and the thought flashed into his mind that no power of blandishment could win from himself a similar trophy.

Whatever his weakness for Fantine might cost, McTaggart knew, deep down in his heart, respect did not share in the feeling; his shrewdness would balance his desire. But he knew as well that she held a charm which set her apart from her type, not only physical but mental, appealing to his intellect.

There lay the danger. For after her the English women he admired seemed heavy; they lacked her spice; their calmer beauty was apt to cloy on close acquaintance.

He was idly scanning the photographs, his mind partially abstracted, when he caught a glimpse of a curious face, half-hidden from his sight.

The portrait, old and faded, had slipped into the crack between mirror and wall and he rescued it and held it a moment underneath the electric light.

A man with a short square beard, his dark hair cut "en brosse," with evil eyes and an aquiline nose, rather crooked below the bridge. Something Eastern, McTaggart thought, lay in the lazy, sensuous smile, in the heavily lidded narrow eyes, slightly tilted toward the temples.

A Frenchman? hardly. A Greek? perhaps. A "wrong un"!—of that he was sure.

He had just time to replace the photo before Fantine entered the room.

"Me voilà donc!—you admire my gallery?—all the men I have loved and lost..."

"It makes me glad I am not among them." McTaggart turned with a short laugh. "I should like to flatter myself with the thought, that I am the one you will love ... and *keep!*"

"That depends." She came nearer and the faint perfume she affected floated up into his nostrils as he looked down from his height at her.

"On what?" Despite his control the narrow face upturned to him, above the shimmering gray fur, with its red lips in a mocking line cutting the dead-white of her skin, made his pulses beat faster.

"On yourself." She turned away with a quick, indifferent shrug. Fully aware of her power, she never strained a situation.

"My friend—I'm famished!" She fastened her glove. "Why talk about the little heart when the big rest of one is empty? I thought you were here to take me out to a new restaurant to-night?"

"But it's only seven o'clock." He smiled at the rueful note in her voice. "You can't eat anything yet, can you? Of course we'll start—at once, if you like."

"Good." She clapped her hands like a child. "I'm ver' hungry, really, Pierrot. I slept late and missed lunch."

McTaggart noticed, with amusement, that the question of his own appetite never occurred to the fair speaker. Manlike, a trait which would have aggrieved his sense of mastership in his home, appeared to him as involving no martyrdom in this piquante egoist's hands.

"Greedy child! As a matter of fact, I told my taxi to wait. It's such a nice one, almost new. I thought, perhaps, you'd like a drive?"

"Merci, non." She drew her furs carefully about her shoulders, the gray head of the fox nestling under her little pink ear.

"Lucky beast!" said McTaggart, with a gesture pointing his remark. "Why wasn't I born a fox?"

"Because the English are born sheep!" Her topaz eyes flashed wickedly. "They only ask for a stupid leader—and off they go, baa ... baa ... quite

contented—straggling down the same dull path paved with precepts."

They passed out as she spoke and entered the narrow lift where a saddened-looking individual clung to the rope like a drowning man. Mrs. Merrod glanced at him, recognizing a new porter.

"Slowly, please,"—she commanded. "I hate..." she explained to McTaggart—"to feel my feet running up my spine. Once when I went into the City to see my lawyer the lift went down at such a terrible pace, *mon Dieu!*—I found a boot-button in my hair."

"You're sure it wasn't the top of a hat-pin?"

McTaggart's voice was studiously grave.

"Mais non! A button. But I'm not *quite* certain whether it came off a boot..."

The sad-looking porter, his back turned, relaxed into a sudden grin. He saw the pair into their taxi and stood for a moment watching them.

"There goes a little bit of all right!"—he confided to the world at large. Then he solemnly spat on McTaggart's shilling "for luck" and burrowed back into the lift.

CHAPTER VIII

The Restaurant "Au Bon Bourgeois" faced on a dingy Soho street, the newly painted white door flanked by myrtle-trees in tubs. The entrance was through a narrow passage which led to a low room in the rear, divided from the one in front by a partition of plate glass.

The latter place was reserved for the Café, where marble tables were closely packed on a red-tiled and sanded floor; and it boasted its own separate entrance, carefully remote from the other. It gave a Bohemian atmosphere to the newly opened Restaurant. For the diners in the room beyond could watch the ever-changing scene—undisturbed by smoke or chatter—like a slice of French life cut

bodily from the gay capital over seas.

The proprietor had been head-waiter in a fashionable London hôtel; a shrewd Swiss—known as "Monsieur Auguste"—he had learned the secret underlying the modern demand for catering.

He realized that the Englishman will readily pay an exorbitant price for rich food badly cooked in a first-class Restaurant; impervious to a hurried service, to overcrowding and noise, provided that the place held a fixed reputation for "smartness."

But he knew, besides, that success waited at the other end of the long scale: that it tickled the average British mind to strike a bargain over dinner: to justify the national shrewdness and play the pauper (without discomfort)—with a hint, too, of mild Bohemia to salt its sense of respectability. The fact that he gave them well-cooked whiting instead of a tepid "Sole Normande"; "pot-au-feu" which was mainly stock, in place of a glue-like "Consommé" his clients manfully ignored. Conscious of the economy of dining "Au Bon Bourgeois," their virtue was rewarded, doubtless, by the after ease of their digestion.

No noisy band rent the air. The service was clean and prompt under the all-pervading eye of the busy proprietor. And for those who found no special interest in the Café life the place offered as a perpetual mise-en-scène, two rooms on the first floor were provided, where the tables ranged along the walls were screened by match-wood partitions, offering a sanctuary for flirtation and isolation for the "Select."

McTaggart had reserved a table in the coveted angle of the room where no waiter could jar his chair by darting feverishly behind it. It allowed his guest a full view through the screen of plate-glass and, as Fantine took her place, under the cool, admiring eye of "Monsieur Auguste," in attendance, she gave a quick exclamation of mingled pleasure and surprise.

"Charming—quite Continental..."

A wistful note crept into her face. Absorbed by this travesty of the Boulevards, she peeled off her long suede gloves and smoothed her hair with an absent gesture.

Monsieur Auguste, in spotless white—linen coat and long apron—relieved

by a huge black cravatte fastened with the famous pin (the present of a Grand Duke), glanced at McTaggart with the smile of a serene and confident host.

"Look at those men playing dominoes! and the long-haired creature with the cape—He's drinking absinthe ... oh! how nice...!" Fantine's eyes shone with golden lights.

"Madame is pleased?" Monsieur Auguste handed the Wine Carte to McTaggart, the page carelessly opened where the list of champagnes began. With a long nail cut into a point he underlined a special brand. "Madame would like this," he said, "not *too* dry, a good vintage."

But "Madame" was not of his opinion. With all her artistic little soul she revelled in the atmosphere, recognizing the bourgeois note—"Red wine, n'est ce pas, Pierrot?—something that sings aloud of France."

And, suddenly, before her eyes, the scene blurred and, in its place, memory tricked her. She was back in a smoke-wreathed cabaret at Montmartre. She could hear the merry chorus rise and see Bruant, with his shaggy mane, roaring out the "Song of the Grape"; while by her side, his arm about her, was the one man she had really loved.

Ah! those days ... She caught her breath and was conscious again of Auguste's stare.

He studied the white, piquante face and wondered if he had made a mistake. But he added a new shade of respect to his suave acknowledgment of her order. Not many ladies with such red lips, combined with a costume of faultless cut, carelessly dismissed champagne. He bowed himself away from her, and sent the pair his best waiter.

"I'm glad you approve of the little place." McTaggart took on an explorer's pride. "I found it by the merest chance and since then have come often. The food's not bad—well, you'll see for yourself!—and it always comes in piping hot. Now, what shall we have?" He gathered up the big card with its printed list.

"Petite Marmite,—d'you agree to that? and fish—you choose——" he handed it over.

"Skate," she said decidedly—"with 'black butter'" (she translated). "It sounds

vile in English, somehow—what a difference language makes to things. Listen, now—'Raie au beurre noir'—Isn't there a charm about it?—and ... 'Veal Schnitzel' ... and 'Petits Pois'—Yes, I know they're tinned——" she forestalled his objection—"but with plenty of butter and well cooked...." she flashed an expressive little gesture.

"What potatoes?" McTaggart asked.

"Fi donc!" She smiled indulgently—"a boiled potato for you, mon cher—the hall-mark of the English 'home.' And cabbage, perhaps, to make you happy!"

"No—I draw the line at that!—What do you say to a bird, to follow?"

"Comme tu veux!—For me it's enough—with a little fruit and good coffee ... and a 'petit verre.' Say, now, Pierrot, shall we come one day and sit there?" She pointed gaily through the screen to the crowded noisy room beyond.

"I should love that! To sip absinthe—dressed like a little milliner! Look at that woman on the right with the shabby ulster and elegant boots. You rarely see that over here—It's a feathered hat in the latest fashion and no thought for the 'dessous.' And the hair all scrabbled up and *dull*—the gloves old or far too tight—everything squandered on the dress, with colors to make one's ... 'digestion' turn!"

"Even the women in higher classes don't seem 'soignées'—only smart. And you call yourself a clean race! ... Because you walk through a cold bath."

For that sudden mirage of the Past had aroused in her the mal du pays. She flogged the Present with a rod, pickled in salt experience.

McTaggart felt a trifle ruffled. He was English enough to hold the theory that nothing outside the little island—with a patronizing lesser degree of excellence for its colonies—could nearly approach the standard set by British prosperity—plus its morals.

"Oh, come, now"—he paused a moment as the waiter ladled out their soup. "I defy you to find anywhere a finer type than our English girls. Look at their skin—their teeth—their hair—the healthy, well-bred look of them. Oh, no—I grant, there's charm, and style and an inborn sense of dress in foreign women and they're generally witty and can talk fourteen to the dozen! But give me an

English girl"—his thoughts flashed back to Cydonia—"unless," he added somewhat quickly—"unless, of course, I can have Fantine."

"Ah! merci——" she clapped her hands—"I'm the exception to prove the rule? But, seriously, I think you're biassed, though part of what you say is true. They've everything to make them perfect, these rose-leaf tinted, long-limbed girls—everything! That's what annoys me—save the wit to profit by Nature's gifts. It's such a prodigal waste of beauty ... Look at that girl at the end table——" she lowered her voice as she spoke—"with the colouring of Titian's 'Flora.' And she wears—bon Dieu!—an orange blouse. Because she's taking Tango lessons! And with it a cheap amethyst necklace. Someone has told her—without doubt!—they're Queen Alexandra's favorite stones. Her hat? Yes—it cost two guineas. So she compromised with shoes from a Sale and last year's skirt, taken in rather badly round the ankles. What a hotch-potch!—bound about that divine figure—ruined by cheap corsets—and yes! I was sure of it—a hole in a pair of openwork thread stockings!"

"I give in!——" McTaggart laughed—"or I know you won't enjoy your dinner. You see I'm half-Italian, too, so it's not real disloyalty."

She looked up, interested.

"Tiens! Perhaps it explains your ... un-English charm? On your mother's side, I suppose?"

"Yes. She was a Maramonte. They've lived for centuries at Siena. I believe they've got a palace there a good bit older than the Tower! But I've never met my relations. My uncle is the present marquis—with two sons and a second wife. So there's no chance for me as heir—beyond what was left me by my mother."

He laughed, happily unconcerned. "I can't picture myself, somehow, the lordly owner of feudal lands. You know Siena's quite mediæval in many of its customs now. 'Il Palio,'—those weird races are still run twice a year. Every quarter of the city sends a horse to compete, and the jockeys wear historic clothes and tear round the market-place. It's a little bigger than Hanover Square and sloped on the side of a hill, so at the most dangerous angle they lay out a row of mattresses! Fact, I assure you"—he smiled. "I mean to see it myself some day. And, after the race is run, the jockey leads the winning horse, in gorgeous trappings with the banner of the victorious Quarter, right into the Cathedral!

There it receives a solemn blessing and after that a feast is held in the market-place by torch light and the horse, if you please, presides—with his bin of corn—at the head of the table! Isn't it quaint? In these days of 'wireless' and Zeppelins there's something rather refreshing about it—the glamour of a fairy-tale."

"Delightful. Take me with you, Pierrot." She sent him a mocking smile over the edge of her wine-glass.

"Will you come?" McTaggart's voice was low,

The "intime" atmosphere of the place, with the magnetism of Fantine, her strange and nameless charm, were not without effect on him.

"Per'aps..." She shrugged her shoulders lightly. "If you will promise to leave behind that rather alarming British half sacred to the 'English Miss.'"

His "Scotch heart!" Whimsically he studied the proposition. It seemed just now a small item beside the beat of his other organ.

A sudden moodiness beset him. Was he never to understand himself? To be swayed with every turn of the wind at the mercy of his temperament?

For the foreign blood in his veins warred perpetually with the Scotch. It was in truth a heady mixture, typical South and typical North. With the passion of the former, its restless fiery love of beauty, were blent the caution and the strength and something vaguely religious—'dour'—tinged with a faint melancholy, the heritage with his blue eyes from a long-dead Covenanter.

Never, he said to himself, should he find a woman who suited both sides; gave him ardour and left him respect, satisfying body and soul...

Fantine, with her subtle instinct, divined the change in his mood. She swept aside personalities and started to talk of the Russian Ballet.

"It's curious how it has left its mark. It seems to have bitten and to have scratched!"

McTaggart, despite himself, smiled at the clever, brutal touch. This was Fantine at her best.

"To succeed now one must surprise!—the days of Mendelssohn are past. I suppose the world is getting old with emotions that Time has dulled."

"Or the Worldlings too degenerate." McTaggart still felt gloomy. "These Cubists now ... What do you think of their pictures? Do you call it really Art?"

"I can't somehow make up my mind. I like the idea at the back of it. I think they're groping in the dark for a sign not yet vouchsafed to us."

McTaggart tried to follow her thought, failed and asked for a nearer clue.

Fantine's eyes were far away, the fine brows drawn together in an effort of concentration. She pushed her plate away from her and, with hands clasped on the table, leaned unconsciously toward him.

"Have you ever read Swedenborg? His 'Heaven and Hell!' No? What a pity! Well one of his favourite theories is on what he calls 'Correspondences.' He thinks that everything lovely here is the symbol, materialized, of a higher, more exquisite spiritual force—known to angels in Paradise. For instance, a rose—with its perfect shape, its colour, its scent, has a counterpart—a '*Correspondence*' is his word—with a '*state*'—it's difficult to explain—a ... sense of happiness above. Well, it seems to me that artists now, in music and painting—in all the arts—are trying to get away from *form* to express the *meaning* in their work. It's a wireless message to the mind away beyond the animal senses; something above the mere glamour of appeal to the flesh—it's '*correspondence*.'"

McTaggart nodded his head gravely.

"It sounds bigger than I imagined." He felt a half-ashamed surprise at these depths in a woman he deemed light.

And, as if in answer to his thought, the old mocking look returned to the painted lips that smiled at him. But scorn was in her half-veiled eyes. For Fantine knew the ways of men: the forfeit that her class must pay—to be used and loved and set aside as a thing of nought when custom staled.

She felt a keen stab of revolt, a fierce desire to extort to the full her share of the bargain, blow for blow, to prey on the weaknesses she served.

And McTaggart's next careless remark sealed his fate as far as it lay in the

hands of the shrewd adventuress, turning the scales against the man.

"I didn't know you read so much. How on earth do you find the time?"

The speech, innocently meant, stung the wound in her heart.

But she gave him a daring glance.

"Mon cher—I *am* alone ... sometimes!"

"You wouldn't be if I had my way." He checked himself as the waiter poured the fragrant coffee into their cups.

"Talking of the Cubists' work"—Fantine reverted to the subject. "I was over in Paris last year when they held their exhibition. Rather a funny thing happened." She dipped the long slab of sugar daintily into her cup and sucked it like a wilful child, conscious of stolen pleasure. "We used to call that a 'canard,' Pierrot——" laughingly, she interjected—"Well, revenons! There was a picture—I can't quite remember the name. But I think it was called 'A woman, falling downstairs.' There was always a little crowd before it—the artist was the 'dernier cri'—and I stood one day and amused myself by listening to their remarks. One man said: 'There—don't you *see*? It's her head—and that touch of white is an arm—and, well, of course! her foot is plain against the background of the wall.' The poor lady by his side tried in vain to see the outline. She screwed up both her eyes and looked like a child with a jig-saw puzzle. As to myself——" Fantine laughed—"I must confess I could make out nothing but a blur of colour and sharp lines without the slightest human form. Well, some months later I happened to meet this very artist and I told him of the enthusiasm in Paris and the remarks I had overheard. Ma foi!—I thought he would have slain me. He said:

"'Madame—They are fools, fools, fools! There is no woman—But—of course! It's the feeling ... the fear ... I have painted. The *sense* of falling down steep stairs.'"

McTaggart laughed heartily.

"Well—it's a bit above my head! I'm afraid I've no artistic merit. I like a picture I understand."

"I know." Fantine's voice was sweet, but malice lay underneath—"a picture that tells its own story—like that famous Scotch cow lost in the snow."

But her host's attention was wandering. The Titian "Flora" had caught his eye. With flushed cheeks and an air of pride she was smoking her first cigarette. He pointed it out to his companion.

"Let's hope it will agree with her. Hullo! she's choked—poor child! She's really quite a pretty girl—I don't know why you find fault with her."

"Not with her face," Fantine corrected—"one sees that the Bon Dieu modelled that. It's the sinful clothes she makes for herself—without celestial inspiration! She reminds me of an English girl my husband used to adore in Algiers."

McTaggart felt a sudden curiosity. This was the first time Mrs. Merrod had mentioned to him the late partner of her married joys and cares.

"Yes? And what did *you* say to that?"

"I? why nothing." She laughed lightly. "I'm not jealous—pas si bête! He was always very kind to me and I liked to watch his little affairs. But in this instance it proved tragic..."

She smiled the meaning out of the word.

"What happened?" McTaggart asked, his eyes still on the distant "Flora."

"She was very pretty—the wild-rose type—and poor Gustave was quite captured. You see, she always wore gloves..." She paused with a pensive, teasing air.

"Too tight, perhaps? or shabby, eh?" He remembered her sweeping remarks.

"Oh, dear, no—far worse than that! One evening she took them off and he found ... that she actually *bit her nails!*"

"And that finished it?"

Fantine nodded as the waiter handed McTaggart's bill.

"But, of course! Gustave wept with chagrin. But I told him it was his own fault. He should have laid his volatile heart at the feet of a Parisienne."

"The love then was only skin-deep?"

Obedient to her little sign, he handed his guest her furs, watching her with amused blue eyes as she powdered her face in the glass.

"Not ever, that, mon cher Pierrot"—she flashed him a mocking glance, hard and brilliant, holding a hint of the resentment in her heart. Then she rose to her feet with a supple movement, gathering her furs about her.

"He loved her," she volunteered—"as far as—jusqu'aux bouts des ongles!"

CHAPTER IX

Ebenezer Cadell was one of those men—daily becoming more rare—who, after a life of strenuous work, can face, at breakfast, a mutton chop. In this nervous age the fact in itself stands for an attribute of success. For next to money a good digestion will thrust an ambitious man far.

He did not even take his chop in obedience to his doctor's wishes, but out of a healthy appetite for that peculiar delicacy. He liked it as a second course, after eggs or fish or bacon, rather underdone and large, remembering lean years of porridge.

Breakfast over, he filled his pipe before the fire, where his boots were warming, and steeped his soul in the Liberal papers with the air of governing the Empire.

Mrs. Cadell, naturally, took in the *Morning Post* to keep in touch with that social world where names mean more than personal effort.

Cydonia was given the *Daily Mirror*, generally left unread by her and devoured in the Servants' Hall. Once a week *Punch* arrived and an unwieldy Ladies' journal, while into the depths of the smoking-room was smuggled a

certain apricot paper.

On this particular winter morning the master of the house had failed to find the notice of a sale in his beloved *Chronicle*. Slightly aggrieved, he made his way into the morning-room beyond, where Helen was occupied poring over household matters. He begged the loan of those crisp sheets, white and pleasant to the touch, that seem to hold a faint suggestion of the class they represent.

He was leaving the room when his wife turned and stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"Can you spare me a moment, Ebenezer?" The request was in truth a command. "I want to talk about Cydonia?"

Cadell, unwillingly, glanced at the clock.

"Well—five minutes—if that will do. What's the trouble about, my dear? Hope there's nothing wrong with the child?"

"Oh, no. I'm thinking of giving a dance. Cydonia's birthday falls next month. It would be a 'coming-out' affair and I want it—naturally—well done."

"Quite right. Dear me!"—the man sighed. "It seems only the other day she was running about in pinafores! I can't think of her as grown-up."

The tender look came into his face that only his daughter could evoke. Mrs. Cadell saw it and smiled, as he added in his pompous manner:

"If it's a question of money, my dear, you needn't spare it. Order the best. I'll settle the bills."

"Thank you. There'll be a good deal to arrange ... But since you approve I'll take it in hand."

The old man lingered at the door.

"Who are you going to invite?" he asked—"You're not counting on me for men?"

"Oh, no!"—She spoke hurriedly, with a faint note of satire he knew full well

—"But I'm counting on you for good champagne."

"H'm ... I see. But I always thought it didn't matter much at a dance—more quantity than quality."

"A popular mistake," said Helen, "or rather most *unpopular*! It's like this"—she explained—"we don't know many dancing-men—at least not of the kind I want! But it's quite easy nowadays. You ask people to make up parties. Only they're not *your* guests, you see, but friends of the people who dine and bring them; and they feel they can grumble openly at any flaw in the entertainment. So I want the arrangements and the wine—(it's more important than the food) to be quite—well, above suspicion. *Then*, you see," she smiled enigmatically, "the men will come again—by themselves."

Ebenezer's face grew red.

"I'd like to see them grumble here! Dash it all!—we make no charge—it's *my* hospitality."

He bristled visibly at the thought.

"That counts for nothing nowadays." Helen's voice was quite composed. "They come to enjoy themselves—for what they can get out of it! The only people who can give small parties and consider themselves the attraction are artists or Royalty. They can *afford* simplicity."

"H'm!—A pretty state of affairs. And what about Cydonia? You'd think any man would be proud to dance with my lovely girl."

"Ah! you're her father." Helen laughed. "I don't say, mind, that I approve of the present-day attitude. But the fact remains that the modern youth considers that his presence at a party confers a favour ... and, in return, he demands a first-class entertainment."

She met his eyes, smiled again, and turned to her desk with an air of dismissal.

"What about presenting the child? I'd like that done, you know, Helen. It don't mean much to my mind to bob down before Royalty, but I gather it's a sort of hall-mark."

He gave a gruff, contented laugh.

"That will come later," said Mrs. Cadell. "I was talking to Lady Leason about it, and she knows of a certain friend of hers who arranges these little matters. For a consideration, of course."

"I didn't know you had to pay?" Ebenezer was interested. Secretly he admired his wife's steady assault on Society.

"My dear, one pays for everything. Look at the people who get honours! It will mean, I should say, about three figures to get a well-known name to present her—a titled woman of good standing; and then there will be Lady Leason's present—and the commission..." She knit her brows. "Anyhow, Cydonia's worth it."

"That she is—bless her pretty face! She's the crowning gem of my collection! And I mean her to make a fine marriage! If it costs me every penny I've got."

He turned his sharp, near-set eyes shrewdly on Helen's countenance.

"What's this young man who's always around? McTaggart, I think, is his precious name. A tall fellow with blue eyes and a damned cool manner when I meet him!"

"He's all right," said the mother quickly, "and rather useful just now. He's a great friend of Lady Leason's and moves in a very good set."

"Well—don't allow any nonsense there. He don't come here to see *me*! And he don't seem to do any work—I can't stand his 'haw, haw' style."

The door banged behind him loudly.

Mrs. Cadell took up her pen, but held it a moment, absently, gazing out on the Mayfair street, empty at this early hour.

Did her daughter like McTaggart? That was the question she asked herself. Was his society the reason that Cydonia of late had seemed to quicken, to lose her slumbering childish calm?

And if so...? She frowned at the thought. Then she sighed. Ebenezer was right. But the mother-love warred within her with the ambition of her life. All the happiness she had missed!—she reached for it with nervous hands, longing to pile it, height on height, into the lap of her only child.

And, as if her thoughts had drawn the girl, Cydonia, that moment, entered the room.

"Am I disturbing you, Madre, dear?"

She stood there, radiant, in coat and hat; the fair face full of life, an eager look in the soft brown eyes. There seemed a little suppressed air of excitement in her bearing.

Helen stretched out her hand. Her daughter took it indifferently, pressed it lightly and let it fall.

"It's just to ask may I go out?—with Mason, of course—to do some shopping?"

"Wouldn't you rather wait for me? I shall be ready about twelve."

"Well ... you see, Madre,"—a faint flush stole into the clear skin as she spoke. "Christmas is getting very near and I've no presents at all, as yet. And——" a

sudden excuse seemed to strike her—"I rather thought ... I'd get yours."

"Oh, very well." Helen laughed, "I mustn't trespass on any 'secret.'"

Cydonia averted her brown eyes, conscious of a twinge of conscience.

"Thank you, Madre, dear." She stooped and kissed her mother gratefully, hesitated for a moment, and breathed an indistinct "Good-bye."

But once outside the front door her spirits began to rise. She looked unusually animated, beautiful in her costly furs.

The maid shuffled along beside her, a subdued black form of indeterminate shape, rather like an unwilling retriever, dragged by an invisible leash.

They crossed Berkeley Square and swerved up to the right into Bond Street. Here Cydonia's step quickened as she glanced eagerly about her. She paused once or twice before a shop, gazing abstractedly into the window, and bought a bunch of Parma violets, which she pinned on to her white fox.

Then, with the gold head proudly carried, shining in the wintry sun like a halo under her black hat, she moved on, very sedate, avoiding all admiring glances.

"Hullo! Here's a stroke of luck."

McTaggart barred her further progress.

"What are you doing out so early?" His blue eyes were mischievous.

"How do you do?" she said demurely. "I'm shopping." Conversation failed her.

"Can I come, too?" McTaggart asked. He turned without waiting for permission.

The maid, with dog-like fidelity, fell to heel behind the pair, and, lowering his voice, he added:

"I began to think I must have missed you."

"Am I late?" said Cydonia. "I shall really have to buy something. I told Mother it was Christmas presents... And I shouldn't like to tell a lie."

"We'll buy the whole street," said McTaggart, ministering to the wounded conscience. "Let's cross over and look at Asprey's—their window's bursting with 'suitable gifts.'"

They dodged across between the taxis, heedless of the nervous maid.

"Can't we lose her?" he suggested. "I'm not used to a royal escort."

Glancing round him, he observed a Gallery close at hand where an Exhibition was advertised, and jumped at the way of escape.

"Come in and see the pictures." He raised his voice as he spoke.

"You really ought to—they're fine!—done by that man..." he spelled out the name.

Cydonia giggled, recovered herself and turned to the reluctant maid.

"Mason—we're going in here. Do you think, meanwhile, that you'd have time to run up to Marshall's and match that satin for my frock?"

"Yes, miss." The girl's face brightened. She much preferred to shop alone and dawdle down the long counters. "I'd be back within half-an-hour."

"Excellent," said McTaggart. As Cydonia passed through the doors he slipped his hand into his pocket and noiselessly tipped the maid.

"Take your time," he said kindly. The pale, subdued Cockney thanked him.

"Yes, sir. I understand."

"I'll bet you do!" thought the man.

They passed down a narrow passage and into the long empty room with its crude top-light, so trying to many a fair-haired woman.

But Cydonia stood the test triumphantly, her skin shell-like above her furs.

A single sad-faced man was standing in possession of the scene, gazing with ardent eyes at a violent blue seascape.

"I'll guarantee that's the artist." McTaggart whispered in her ear. "Don't let's break into his dreams—— That sofa looks comfortable."

They sat down on the green plush, side by side, and Cydonia played with the violets at her breast, conscious of McTaggart's eyes.

"Don't you want to see the pictures?" She made an effort at small talk. "I thought—you said—they were rather fine."

"Never heard of them in my life! Besides, I'm looking at a picture."

Cydonia vainly pretended to miss the meaning of his speech. She pointed a slender finger at the portrait of a Spanish girl, facing the pair with a bold smile, a red rose behind her ear.

"I like the colour of her hair—that glossy black which looks blue..."

"So do I." McTaggart smiled, "but it's not black—it's ... spun sunshine! And the only blue that I can see is a tiny vein near the temple."

"I wonder," said Cydonia desperately, "how much we've made by those Tableaux?"

"Fifteen pounds, four and tuppence."

"*Really?* ... Not more than that?" She turned a bewildered face toward him.

"Ah ... that's better," said McTaggart. "To tell you the truth," he admitted, "I haven't the faintest idea of the sum. But I was getting tired of your profile." He saw her frown and stopped short.

"All right! I'll be good. But it's such fun, now, isn't it? When I think of the patient Mason matching yards of satin up at Marshall's."

Cydonia laughed. The soft note echoed through the empty room, for the artist had quietly slipped away into a further one beyond.

One quick glance he had given them, and his sensitive mind had received the impression. The girl, with her apple-blossom face, Spring incarnate, wooed by Summer.

"It isn't often I have the chance of your company without Mamma. Don't you ever go to dances?" He watched her lips move as she answered.

"Not yet—but, Peter, I forgot! I've such a lovely piece of news. I'm going to have a birthday party next month ... You'll come, won't you?"

"*Rather*. I say, that's ripping! A dance? Good," as she nodded her head. "I'll bet your people will do it well." Unconsciously he voiced the sentiments expressed that morning by Mrs. Cadell.

"How many dances may I have? I suppose you can't spare the lot?"

The infection of his mood was catching.

"One and an extra..." Cydonia laughed.

"Nonsense!" He hunted for a pencil and pulled out his cuff aggressively.

"Five at least. And supper too. Oh, Cydonia! you really *might*..."

But over the girl's merry face a shadow fell. She turned her head with startled eyes and a quick "Hush!" as a voice outside, loud and harsh, echoed down the long passage.

"It's Father!" She gave a gasp. "Oh, Peter, what shall we do?"

McTaggart was on his feet.

"The inner room"—he grasped her arm—"don't speak!" On tiptoe they fled.

"Stand here—in this corner—it's hidden from either door." He whispered the words, his lips brushing the soft hair drawn over her ears.

"Worth it—even if we're caught!" He said to himself with inward joy, conscious of the girl's hand, tightly clasped in his own.

They heard the heavy step pass and enter the room beyond; then a sound of

men's voices broke across their strained attention.

McTaggart crept to the curtain that half veiled their hiding-place, then back to Cydonia, his smile showing his vast relief.

"He's talking to that artist chap. Now, softly into the passage, and then we'll make a bolt for it."

But he paused for a moment, very near her, his eyes on her frightened face.

"You dear thing—don't worry! I hate to see you look like that."

For a second's space he fought hard against the temptation of her answering smile. Then, drawing back, he led the way noiselessly into the hall.

The ruse succeeded, but outside a further problem awaited them. For Mason was "taking her time" conscientiously earning her tip.

"I can't leave you here alone." McTaggart's glance swept the street. "What shall we do? Walk to Marshall's? or—isn't that your car there?" He pointed out a landaulette, drawn up against the curb.

"Is Willcox safe, do you think?"

Willcox was the Cadells' chauffeur. He despised the family whom he served, realizing with the flair of his kind their status as parvenu. But he made an exception of Cydonia. Her sweet voice and well-bred face induced in him the belief of blue blood—achieved by some worthy misdemeanor!

The girl, aware of his silent worship, welcomed the sight of him with relief.

"He'll say nothing—how splendid! I'll just get into the car and wait."

McTaggart agreed. "You can explain you saw your Father go into the Gallery. And, as you felt tired, dispatched Mason to do your shopping, while you rested."

"Yes. That's it." She nodded her head. "Please go now. He might come out. You know what a rush he's always in."

She reached the carriage breathlessly, with a glance at the chauffeur's

impassive face.

"Willcox—I'll wait inside. Mr. Cadell won't be long."

McTaggart tucked the rug around her.

"To-morrow," he whispered, "at Lady Leason's." Then, out loud, "Good-bye, Miss Cadell—I won't forget your Mother's dance."

"Good-bye, Mr. McTaggart." She smiled at the formal address.

Stiff and discreet on the box Willcox was smiling too. He was conscious of the whole manoeuvre, and in his heart he approved. He watched McTaggart stride away, with his careless, well-bred walk, pause at the corner and glance back surreptitiously through the crowd.

And then he heard his young mistress call in a low, quick voice, "Mason!"

And the maid's excuse, rather frightened.

"I hope I'm not late, miss—I've got the satin."

"A little," Cydonia calmly replied, "but you needn't wait. Give me the parcel. I'm driving home with Mr. Cadell when he's bought that picture we went to see."

CHAPTER X

"If you please, miss"—the untidy maid stood in the doorway, aggressively—"the chicken 'asn't come yet and Cook sez it would be no good sending round, as the shop's shut."

Jill jumped up from the floor where she crouched drying her wet hair before the fire. She glanced up at the clock and frowned.

"Why, it's half past seven!—Of course. She ought to have told me long ago."

"I'm sure, miss"—the other protested with a faint smile not unmixed with malice—"it isn't Cook's fault—she does 'er best. But I'm sure in this 'ouse it's 'ard to please. What with meals at any hour and never knowing if it's two or *three* ... I'm sure..." She stopped short at the sudden anger in Jill's expressive gray eyes.

"That will do." She threw back her hair, which fell in a dark cloud over her shoulders, narrowing into damp points far below the line of her waist. "I'll come down and see Cook myself."

Lizzie retreated, her face sullen, before the peremptory young voice. Then, changing her mind, she whisked round and barred Jill's passage insolently.

"I'd like to say I want to leave. This day month." She tossed her head. "I don't seem to suit—and it don't suit me!—such goings-on ... an' lawless talk. I ain't used to a mistress as ups and breaks windows—it ain't decent!—an' my young man, 'e sez..."

"Be silent!"—Jill was white with suppressed rage—"If you want to give notice you must speak to Mrs. Uniacke."

"Or Mr. Somerfield, I s'pose..."

The barbed shaft stung the girl as she ran down the stairs, leaving Lizzie, quivering, in possession of the field.

Jill reached the basement, breathless and angry.

"Cook!" she called at the kitchen door. A stout and slovenly woman turned slowly round from before the range.

"Yes, miss?" She wiped her greasy hands on a torn apron, and stood there, expectant.

"What's all this about the chicken? Lizzie tells me it hasn't come?"

"No, miss." She leaned against the table, massive, inert, with an over-red face. Her person exhaled a faint smell of brandy and the glazed eyes completed the story.

"Then what are we going to have for dinner?"

"I'm sure I don't know, miss."

Jill gave her one look and passed with a quick stride into the larder. Thrown anyhow on the dingy shelves were scraps of fish, butter and suet, jars of dripping, some shrivelled apples and the scraggy remains of a leg of mutton. The closed-in place smelled of cheese and mice. Jill explored with hopeless disgust. Too well she knew the domestic chaos that balanced her mother's political activity.

For Mrs. Uniacke had no time for "home." She scorned the narrow "sheltered life" and wore out her strength in that daily fight to prove that Woman was fitted to rule.

"This mutton now..." Jill tipped the bone onto a clean plate from its close companionship with a raw herring, and came back, still frowning, into the kitchen.

"You could grill it, couldn't you?" she asked sharply.

The cook, stupidly, turned it over.

"I *could*..." she debated with tipsy solemnity. "But there's only, then, enough for two."

"Well, we *are* two!" Jill was impatient.

The cook sniffed. "More often three! ... I'm sure it's enough to drive one crazy, never knowing what's wanted. An' the tradesmen clamouring for their money ... There's the butcher to-day—'e told me straight: 'That's the last j'int you'll get from *us*!'—I've never lived in such a place...." Her voice rose. She stuck her hands on her hips and faced her young mistress.

"And I won't stay—what's more! I've always been a respectable woman ... and 'ard-working ... an' treated as such..." (The quick anger induced by spirits brought the tears to her bleary eyes.) "I'm sure if my pore 'usband was 'ere, 'e'd say: 'Martha—you clear, my girl.' 'E'd be ashamed—that's wot 'e'd be ... a butler 'e were in good service. So you can tell yer mother, miss, I've made my mind up—an' I goes!"

With a sob of injured pride she seized the bone in a shaky hand.

"Look at that!" She brandished it under Jill's disgusted nose.

"That's been our dinner since Sunday—and *Canterb'ry*—that's what it is!"

Poor Jill swallowed hard, struggling to keep her temper in check. Diplomacy she knew full well was the only weapon she dared use.

"Now, look here, Cook. I'm awfully sorry. But I don't want to bother Mother. She's not well—and she's worried to death ... You know what it is to feel bad."

"That I do, Miss Jill!" The cook, mollified, wiped her eyes. "I'm sure with my 'eart as is always flutt'ring—an' the 'ot kitchen—an' pore food ... I didn't ought to do scrubbing—it's a crool shame at my age ... But there..." the facile sentiment born of alcohol was bubbling up and drowning anger. "I don't want to upset yer, miss. Yer don't 'ave too gay a life, you an' Master Roddy—bless 'im!—as always 'as a kind word for Cook..."

She maundered on as Jill retreated, aware that the crisis was postponed.

"That's right, Cookie—you'll see to it? You always make a ripping grill."

"And may Heaven forgive me for the fib," she added as she ran upstairs.

"I wonder why it's such a muddle? Always changing servants like this?"

But in her heart she knew the fault lay in the lack of proper management. The justice of her clear young brain told her that never could they expect a good class of maid to stay in this disorganized "feckless" house! The discomfort of the servants' quarters, the wretched food and poor pay forced Mrs. Uniacke to take the riff-raff whose characters held obvious flaws—like the unsober creature below or Lizzie, lazy and insolent.

And it struck the girl with sudden force that her Mother was giving up her life to secure the Vote with the main object of ameliorating the condition of women.

Yet here in her own small kingdom were servants badly housed and fed, expected to work for a barren wage sixteen hours without complaint.

And there was Roddy—her own brother—with riddled socks and worn-out clothes at a cheap school, while his mother spent their meagre surplus in outside expenses involved by this omnivorous Cause!

A memory of old times when her father lived rose in her mind. For Colonel Uniacke had held a firm rule over the house. In common with many retired officers, he supervised the daily ménage, with the result that when he died his wife missed his wise authority.

And if they couldn't govern their houses—Jill's active mind ran on—with the skill of the "old-fashioned woman," how were they going to govern the Empire?

It came to her with a sudden flash of childish insight that, in the new, inexorable cry of her sex, the Usefulness of the Individual was being carelessly swept aside for the dangerous Power of the Mass.

She had reached by now the second floor, immersed in her sombre thoughts, when she heard the front door open and paused to lean over the rail.

"That you, darling?" she called down—"it's so late—I was getting anxious."

She checked the impulse to retrace her steps as she saw below the shadow of Stephen.

Slowly toiling up the stairs, Mrs. Uniacke appeared, with a worn face where dark circles heightened the brilliance of her eyes.

"Oh, Mother—how tired you look!—and wet through..." Jill's hands ran with anxious fondness over the coat that shrouded the fragile form.

The older woman smiled feebly.

"I've had a hard day, Jill." She kissed her daughter's fresh cheek and moved on shakily into the bedroom.

"What luxury!"—her thin hands went out to the cheerful blaze—"did you tell Lizzie to light it, dear?"

"Yes. I washed my head, you see," Jill explained, "and I thought—it's so cold to-night—I could dry it here by your fire and then it would warm your room for

you."

"It's very nice." Her mother sank down in the armchair as she spoke. Jill, with quick fingers, undid her veil and removed the soaking hat.

"Now, your boots..." She began to unlace them. "I put your slippers to toast—there, isn't that nice? Look here, darling, just to please me, won't you go straight to bed?"

"I can't." Mrs. Uniacke sighed. "I've brought Stephen back to dinner. He's been so good ... and he's wet too. I do hope he won't get a chill."

A shadow fell on the girl's bright face.

"Well—he can dine with me—for once! I'll bring you up your dinner myself, so it won't make extra work for Lizzie."

She tossed back her mane of hair and tried to speak in a cheerful tone. But Mrs. Uniacke's mouth hardened.

"I promised to go through some papers to-night ... I can't, Jill—though it's very tempting..." She pressed her hand to her hot forehead. "This wet weather gives me neuralgia. Oh dear! I wish I were stronger."

"Do go to bed"—Jill pleaded. "Look here—if you *must* work this evening, why can't Stephen come up here? I could put a table by your side and you've got that lovely pink jacket Aunt Elizabeth sent at Christmas."

"Here? In my bedroom?" Mrs. Uniacke stared. "I shouldn't *think* of such a thing! Really, Jill, you must be mad!"

The girl's face went suddenly scarlet at the horror in her mother's voice.

"Well—he's almost one of the family. I don't see..." She bit her lip.

"All right, Mother—you know best." She hesitated for a moment, then went slowly toward the door. "It's getting late. I must do my hair."

But on the landing outside she gave vent to her impatience.

"Bother him!—I *know* she'll be ill." Then a voice called her back.

"Jill—I think—after all—I'll go to bed—my head's so bad. Will you look after Stephen? He likes a glass of port, remember. And I'm wondering if Roddy's slippers..."

"Too small," said Jill promptly. "There goes the gong!—don't you worry—I'll see to everything all right."

"No meat for me," her Mother added—"just a little soup—with a rack of toast. I'm too tired for anything solid."

"That's a mercy in disguise," said Jill as she fled up the further stairs. Her mind was much relieved as she thought of the debatable grilled bone. She brushed back her rebellious locks and tied them hurriedly with a ribbon. "I'm glad about the chicken now. Stephen *will* enjoy his dinner!"

That worthy greeted her with his supercilious smile. "H'are you—Where's your mother?" He held out a limp white hand.

"She's dead-tired and gone to bed. You'll have to put up with me to-night."

"An unexpected pleasure." He drawled with a side-long glance at the girl, her face rosy from the fire in its mass of waving dark-brown hair. "'Pon me word, you're growing up!" He stuck his glass into his eye and moved leisurely to take the head of the long table.

"My place," said Jill politely. "Roddy's away. Will you sit here?"

With an air of childish dignity she began to ladle out the soup.

Stephen laughed—a trifle sourly.

"Sorry to hear your mother's ill. What's the matter?"

"Overwork."

Their eyes met, and at last the man lowered his against his will.

"I suppose you know you're killing her? She can't go on at this rate! I should

have thought"—Jill paused a moment—"you would have seen it for yourself."

Stephen laid his spoon down. His irritation at her words was increased by his first taste of the soup, a muddy, thin brown mixture.

"Is this the cook I found for you?" Purposely he ignored her speech and spoke in a languid voice, with studied indifference.

"Yes. Aren't you pleased?" Jill laughed aloud. "You really *are* a comfort, Stephen! What should we do without your help?" She rose to her feet as she spoke. "Roddy was saying the other day"—she covered her mother's basin of soup and went on with mischievous glee—"What I do like about Stephen is he always knows what's what! You've only to look at his socks and ties—they match to a T—he's such a K-nut! D'you like being a Nut, Stephen?"

Her voice was innocence itself.

She turned with the tray in her hand, and added, as he answered nothing:

"Drink your soup—it will do you good! And Mother's sure to ask for news of your appetite."

The door banged and she was gone.

Stephen turned with a frown to Lizzie, now recovered from her tantrums and inwardly enjoying the sport, for the servants all hated the man.

He enjoyed in the kitchen circle the pseudonym of "The Cuckoo"—a flight of fancy on Cook's part, who likened the house to a Robin's nest!

"Sherry, please," he ordered sharply.

"There's none up, sir," the maid snapped. She would miss nothing by her manner, for Stephen rarely gave a tip.

Down came Jill with a kind message.

"Mother hopes you've all you want? She's feeling a little more rested. I think I shall keep her in bed a week."

"I'm afraid that's impossible." Stephen sneered. "She's going to speak at a meeting to-morrow, and on Friday we're off to Leeds—for the great Demonstration." ("One back," he said to himself, as he saw the girl's mouth tighten.)

"It's an odd thing," said Jill shortly, "that rest's not included in Woman's Rights."

"Not until we get the Vote." Somerfield eyed with suspicion a scraggy, blackened object borne by Lizzie toward his little hostess.

"Silver Grill," she explained, "cooked 'à point' by your treasure-trove. Like a bit?" She dug the fork into the charred meat and smiled.

"It's best Canterbury," she added, with a reminiscence from below. "You know, we have to economize or there'd be nothing for the Cause."

Stephen's temper began to slide.

"Look here, Jill. Don't talk of things you're too young yet to understand."

He turned the unpalatable fragments over angrily on his plate.

"Potatoes?—Onions?" Her voice was sweet. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Stephen. I quite forgot you couldn't eat them! But then, you see, I didn't expect you. If you'd only given us a little warning. If you'd told me, for instance, yesterday—or was it Monday you lunched with us? No. Sunday supper. How stupid I am!—I never can remember dates."

Upstairs Mrs. Uniacke was lying back against the pillows and enjoying the rare luxury of a quiet rest in bed.

"I hope they're getting on all right?" Her thoughts were with the pair below. "I don't know how it is that Jill seems always to upset Stephen."

She knew her children resented his presence and the claim he made upon her time. But habit was too strong for her, and each day cemented the tie. She had always leaned. From nursery days she had never learnt to stand alone, and since her husband's death Stephen had slowly become a part of her life.

The friendship was that rare achievement, a purely platonic affair. Perhaps, as her children grew older, strong and capable, she missed the sense of tenderness about her, the touch of baby clinging hands. With all her utterly feminine nature, she longed to comfort and to guide. And in this parasite who had crept into the heart of her home she found the two attributes needed in her barren and widowed life.

She could "mother" him. He loved "fuss," with none of her children's independence. And at the same time she could lean on his young strength and masculine mind.

But her thoughts of him were utterly pure. It was no sentimental affair cropping up in her middle age with a last desperate clutch at romance.

And to strengthen the link between them stood the Cause—the cry of Woman's wrongs; the excitement of new-found power and the secret thrill of martyrdom.

She had reached an impressionable age, and broken by her great sorrow—for her husband had been the love of her life—her arms went out to her suffering sisters.

If only she could ease the burden, throw her failing strength into the balance, she could die with the sense of something achieved.

Humbly she offered her "widow's mite."

* * * * *

Meanwhile in the dingy dining-room Jill had checked her love of fun. Her natural courtesy forbade an open quarrel with her mother's guest. She felt she had gone quite far enough...!

Assuming a more serious air, she asked the man for information respecting the long day's work.

Stephen, a little mollified by a glass of the late Colonel's port, smoking an excellent cigarette (recommended by him to Mrs. Uniacke), launched forth into description of a visit to a factory; a lengthy investigation of wages and the hours allotted to the female "hands"; while Jill sat at the end of the table, listening

thoughtfully.

She held as yet no settled opinions on the question of Woman's Suffrage. Undetermined, she kept herself, by McTaggart's advice, slightly aloof.

Nevertheless the atmosphere of the house stimulated thought. It made life a bigger affair to picture a broader field for her sex.

"You say"—she leaned her chin on her hands, her dark-fringed eyes full of light. "That the finer, more delicate work is undertaken by the women. That they do it better, are paid less ... No, it doesn't sound a bit fair!"

"Ah! you begin to see," said Somerfield. "They do it too in less time. Their fingers are smaller, their work neater—in fact it's economy to employ them."

"Then what do you propose?" said Jill—"to get them paid the same as men?"

"Undoubtedly—or even more. It's their due—and we shall see it's *done*."

"But—wait a minute. You can't make money. I mean—it's got to come from somewhere. And if the employers can't give more, I suppose ... they'll take it from the men?" She went on thoughtfully, thinking aloud. "They could level down and pay all alike. Is that the idea?"

Somerfield nodded. "Well—one of them—but there are other methods."

"Let's stick to the first." Jill was logical, true to the broad college training.

It saved her from the common pitfall of feminine minds in argument. She could weigh the various pros and cons free from personalities.

"I suppose most of the men are married?"

"About two-thirds, roughly speaking."

"Then what about *their* wives and children? If you cut down the wages the husbands earn won't it come pretty hard on them? It seems unfair that the factory women—who are most of them, I suppose, unmarried—should take the bread out of the mouths of their married sisters—and the children."

Somerfield looked annoyed.

"Oh, I don't say that would happen exactly. There are other ways ... But what we want is to see women get decent wages, full value for their work. The employers will have to come forward. If we make a strong stand they're bound to give way..."

"Strikes?" Jill raised her eyebrows. "I thought they ruined the nation's trade? And that women always suffered more—the wives and mothers in these times. Besides..." relentlessly she pursued her way with a child's honest search for knowledge. "I don't really understand ... But, supposing that wages all round are raised, well then the employers—to make a profit—will have to sell at a higher cost. And won't that make living dearer?—in case of food and necessities?"

"Not in the end. You ought to study Political Economy. I doubt if it much affects the class we're working for at any rate. It may hit ours!" He smiled sadly with an air of secret martyrdom—"And the rich too, I sincerely hope!"

"But if you keep on 'hitting the rich'"—Jill adopted his expression—"and the large class of employers—won't they some day have to retrench? And doesn't that mean cutting down employment in every grade—for women too?"

"More likely smaller dividends!" Somerfield sneered. "These syndicates and capitalists are the curse of England"—his voice rose—"that's where the people's money goes—back to the pockets of the rich!"

"But aren't there a lot of decent people, middle-class and rather poor, investors too, dependent on dividends? Oh, I can't understand it all!—It seems to me whatever you do to alter the distribution of wealth you ruin some one—and always, *always* it pans out harder for those who work!"

"We're not talking of Socialism," Somerfield hastily interposed—"we're discussing the need for the Vote—for women to have a hand in the Government. To see that their own sex don't suffer—to put down all sorts of wrongs that have lingered on from feudal days when women were nothing more than slaves!"

"It sounds glorious." Jill was moved, but the doubt still haunted her.

"If only one could pick the women. They're such a lot of us, you see—and—really—some are awful fools!"

"And what about the present Government? And the next too, if it comes to that! D'you think their brains are above suspicion?" He gave her a mocking glance.

"No." Jill nodded her head. "But allowing that they're rather stupid, do you want to add to the general confusion by pairing them with the other sex—an equal number of ignorant women?"

"Oh! you're *hopeless*!" He got up and poured himself out another glass from the port decanter on the sideboard. "I thought you really wanted to learn?"

"So I do." Jill sat tight. "But I won't be swept off my feet by ... a sort of hypnotism of Sex! I want to keep an unprejudiced eye. *Of course* I'd like to see women take a leading place everywhere. But if they make a mess of it, we're worse off than we were before. We stand to lose as well as gain by rushing into public life." She threw back a lock of hair that had fallen forward, blinding her.

"Now, look here, Stephen, we've got a lot ... I'm not talking of influence and the right to expect chivalry—which by the way I think we're losing, through the tactics of the Militants! You've only to stand in a Suffrage crowd and listen to some of the remarks. Why, fifty ... a hundred years ago ... a decent man would have taken umbrage. Men were run through in those days for far less said of their sisters or wives! But—to go back—we've got *some* pull. To begin with, men, when they marry, keep us! I dare say I'm old-fashioned. Yes—of course! I knew you'd laugh!—but it's big, really. It means a home—and protection—and a fair chance for ... bringing up a family."

She flushed slightly under his smile, but went on bravely with her argument.

"It seems to me that by and by we'll have to work, share and share alike, ill or well, on equal terms. And what's to become of our home life—and—well ... the next generation?"

Stephen saw his chance at last.

"Are you thinking of marriage yourself, Jill? You seem to arrange for *all* possibilities..."

His greenish eyes were insolent under their long fair lashes.

"Oh!" She sprang up. "Oh! you *beast*...!"

But she faced him still, breathless, white.

"At any rate, if I did, I'd live in my *own* house!" she cried.

CHAPTER XI

McTaggart drew his chair forward from behind the curtain of the box and gazed out on the crowded Hippodrome.

Not a seat was vacant. For to-night a famous composer was conducting his masterpiece with a picked company brought over for a fleeting visit to England.

As he watched, the lights were lowered in the body of the hall and the beautiful overture began, stealing like a spirit of sun-lit shores across the artificially warm atmosphere. The curtain rolled up to disclose a narrowed stage and the cheap, garish scenery that seems a necessary adjunct to the opera in Italy.

McTaggart's eyes took it in with a careless glance, and returned to the other occupant of the box.

To-night Fantine seemed to acquire a new personality. An air faintly tragic and dignified hung over the pale face, and even her dress enhanced the suggestion, with that subtle link that lies between a Parisian and her clothes.

She wore a long cloak of velvet brocade: dull wine-coloured flowers on an oyster ground, relieved by a border of silver fox and the faint gleam of metallic threads running through the material.

Beneath this, one caught a glimpse of a demi-toilette of black and white: that veiled décolletage dear to the foreigner, suggesting without revealing each line of the neck and arms which the Englishwoman seems more ready to expose. Her hair, waved, glossy and black, was perfectly dressed without ornament, and among the crowd of women there, each with nodding Paradise plumes or a jewelled fillet, the delusive simplicity struck a restful, distinctive note, throwing

into strong relief the haunting charm of her pale face.

McTaggart's eyes rested on her, with a quiet sense of pleasure. Where other women of her class would have welcomed the occasion to outvie in "smartness" the "respectable rich," Fantine seemed to have drawn back with unconscious pride relying on some hidden power to set her apart.

A faint buzz of applause broke through the young man's silent admiration. The fat tenor had achieved a wonderful feat of long-drawn breath. The air still trembled with the vibration of sound, and it seemed to add to the scented heat of the over-packed, excited house.

"Would you mind the door ajar?" McTaggart whispered in her ear. "I can close it directly you feel the draught."

Fantine, absently, nodded assent, her eyes riveted on the stage, heart and soul absorbed in the music.

He got up noiselessly, and effected the improvement, standing there for a few seconds—to breathe the cooler air without. Down the curved corridor some late arrivals were hastening, a short, stout, red-faced man and a young girl with golden hair.

McTaggart started. He gave them a quick, searching glance and ducked back. To his annoyance the pair paused outside, and he heard the attendant's voice:

"This way, please."

The door of the next box grated on its hinges, and steps echoed beyond the partition.

McTaggart listened, his face very grim. Then he heard Cydonia's voice, clear and gentle. "Yes, Papa. Please, Papa," and the scrabbling noise of chairs dragged forward over the floor.

The unlooked-for contretemps clouded his pleasure. He had no desire the two women should meet. Above all he mistrusted Cadell's shrewd eyes and the use he might make of the innocent adventure.

He closed the door softly again. Fantine was plainly far away, lost to a world

of heat or cold. She leaned forward, listening, her hands tightly clasped together on the broad velvet edge before her.

"I wish she'd keep back!" thought McTaggart. He could picture in the next box Cydonia's golden head at just the same angle and in between the narrow velvet curtains barely separating the pair.

In the dim light he groped for and found his own chair, lifted it with bated breath and placed it down again behind that of his guest, who turned at his movement with a faint frown of displeasure over her broken dreams.

"What are you doing there, Pierrot?" The whisper was sharp.

"I thought," McTaggart explained mendaciously, "this way I could hear without seeing too much. That fat soprano is murdering romance!"

"Quel enfant!" Fantine smiled. For the singer in question with her capacious bosom, now clasped fervently in the fat tenor's arms, appealed suddenly to her dormant sense of humor.

"Rather a ... magnificent figure for a maiden..." McTaggart followed up his remark. Some one below them breathed an indignant "Sh! ..." and Fantine held up an admonitory finger.

McTaggart leaned back, conscious again of the heat. "Stifling in here—wish I hadn't come!" His thoughts ran on, seeking a plan to get his guest away before the final rush.

He was determined the pair should not meet. Oddly enough sub-consciously he blamed Cydonia—with that hateful parent—exonerating himself in the matter.

His flirtation with the girl had lapsed a little of late, owing to the serious illness of Mrs. Cadell. A chill followed up by a tiring sale of work in a draughty hall had resulted in pneumonia. The dance had been postponed and Cydonia herself, bereft of her chaperone, had rarely made an appearance among the few friends she shared with McTaggart.

Stolen meetings had been few and far between. The anxiety caused by her mother's condition had roused the slumbering conscience in the girl, and

McTaggart's love for her had suffered from the test. It needed propinquity to keep the fires alight.

Fantine had profited by the disaffection. Daily her hold on him grew more strong. Her ever-changing moods, her daring speech, her open dependence on his attentions, had forged new links in the chain between them, riveted by the subtle ties of habit.

Without home interests or the urgent need to work, McTaggart found time hang heavy on his hands. He had long since wearied of London's appeal to the moneyed youth on his emancipation from school. The round of music hall and supper club, of cards and drink and doubtful ladies had held him a victim but a very short time. His brains had saved him the career of a "Nut."

He had no active distaste for work; it was more that work did not come his way. For his first three years on the Stock Exchange he had thrown himself unwearied into the task of absorbing the details of his profession in the interest of his few clients.

But, bit by bit, these had fallen away.

College friends for the greater part, they had drifted abroad, lost money or married, preferring few investments to many speculations.

For a brief period McTaggart had tried to hunt up others through social means. But his soul shrank from the merest suggestion of touting without the strong spur of necessity.

Bad times, heavy taxes and perpetual wars had broken the confidence of the public. He found himself at the end of the third year several hundreds out of pocket!

The cost of entertaining well—not for pleasure but possible profit—and bad debts had more than swallowed the sum of his hard-won commissions.

His father had left him a steady income quite sufficient for his needs, and from his mother he had inherited a fluctuating interest from property abroad.

Had he been poor, it is probable that he would have made a career for himself. His idleness was undoubtedly due to the lack of necessity: that poor

man's stimulus.

Unfortunately for his comfort, his vitality resented inaction. With no outlook his restlessness fed on itself, and he waxed irritable, a prey to sudden moods.

He was not a man to live alone. Healthy, impulsive, and full of life, he had nothing of the celibate in his mixed composition.

But a certain fastidiousness held him back from the casual vice of many men, and his hot blood was generally balanced by the finer instincts of his brain.

Nevertheless the man suffered. And, since his memorable visit to the specialist, his imagination had been disturbed, to a degree hardly healthy, by a physical self-consciousness.

It bred in him a profound distrust. It set him apart from other men. It seemed to give him a moral excuse for an irresolute habit of thought.

He had kept the secret to himself, fearing ridicule from his kind and with a shrewd appreciation of its doubtful value in feminine circles.

Once he had nearly confided in Jill, realizing that with the girl sex still lay in abeyance, almost ignored by her clean young soul.

But something had checked him; a feeling perhaps that it led into a further field, impossible to discuss with her, this child who claimed his loyal respect.

And meanwhile Fantine lured him on with the skill of her vast experience.

The drop scene fell amid loud applause, and lights flashed up about the house.

McTaggart felt a sudden thirst, but dare not leave the sheltering box unaware whether Mr. Cadell would take advantage of the entr'acte.

Fantine turned and smiled at him, tears not far from the topaz eyes, a faint colour in her face, soft with the pleasure of the music.

"Like it?" He knew as he said the words that the question was superfluous, and went on a little quickly, full of his own immediate cares.

"We'll have supper at the Savoy—it's sure to be packed to-night." He drew out his watch as he spoke, and glanced at it with a slight frown. "Jove! it's getting pretty late..."

Fantine smiled, resigning herself. She knew exactly what he wanted, guessing him bored by the music.

"Would you like to go before the end? After all"—she checked a sigh—"one knows by heart the tragic story. We could slip out before the finale."

The man brightened visibly.

"Well, you see—it's like this—I haven't reserved a table to-night. We shall have to take our chance, so we'd better be there before the rush."

He still avoided the front of the box, conscious of his neighbour's eyes, but, now that the danger seemed averted, he felt a mischievous delight. He could picture Cydonia, very correct, in her white frock and string of pearls, with her inevitable "Isn't it nice?" addressed to the somewhat bored parent.

And at the thought a slight shame ran through him; the knowledge, too, of all the young girl represented in his somewhat aimless life.

But Fantine was addressing him.

"Say now, Pierrot, would you mind—instead of going to the Savoy—a picnic supper at my flat?"

His face fell, and immediately she added quickly: "We'd leave early—but ... the fact is I can't bear to think of that aggressive band. It seems almost profane to me—after the feast of music here. But of course—if you're hungry?" Her voice pleaded. "I think I've got some foie gras—and a cold tongue—won't that do? And we'd have ... a cosy evening together."

"Do?" McTaggart laughed softly, relieved by the saving clause, "Why, I'd infinitely prefer it. One gets so tired of the Savoy."

"Good." She slipped her hand sideways and laid it a moment on his knee.

"Rather fun, eh, Pierrot?—to play at being Darby and Joan."

McTaggart nodded, without speaking. He felt a sudden tinge of excitement, the forerunner of adventure. "We're hardly old enough for that"—mischief was in his laughing eyes—"Why not 'Paul et Virginie?'—brought a little up-to-date."

The lights went down. Behind the curtain a bell tolled as if for Mass, cutting through the buzz of chatter, a summons from another world. Then, like a clear call to love, came the sweet sound of Santuzza's voice.

Fantine caught a quick breath. The scene to come was significant. For she knew that this night spelled the last of many a happy one with McTaggart. And she wondered ... Would she miss the man?

For a second her whole soul recoiled from the task she had set herself: the crisis of the long-drawn-out and carefully prepared betrayal. She saw in a flash the years ahead on that stony downward path of intrigue, a tool herself in another man's hands, to be cast aside when Time should blunt it ...

The mood lasted until they reached the flat. McTaggart believed her still to be under the spell of the music. He respected her silence and enjoyed his cigarette as they sat side by side in the speeding taxi.

She opened the door with her latch-key, and switched on the hall light, leading the way into the drawing-room, where before a bright fire a table was spread with a dainty supper laid for one.

"I'm all alone to-night—it will be a real picnic." She took off her opera cloak and threw it on the sofa. "My cook sleeps out—she's a married woman—and Mélanie has gone home for a short holiday."

She told the lie coolly, knowing that near at hand the maid, well coached, was waiting for her cue; an important witness if subsequent events should necessitate her reappearance.

"You aren't nervous?" McTaggart looked surprised—"I mean, of staying here alone all night."

"Oh, dear no." She shrugged her shoulders. "I could ring up the porter in case of need."

She studied her face a moment in the glass, fingering the tulle that covered

her shoulders. "I think perhaps... Yes!—I'll get out of this and slip into a comfortable tea-gown. You don't mind waiting, do you, Pierrot? I shan't be long." She turned to the door, then came back again with a forced smile.

"I wonder—could you undo these hooks." She turned her back to him as she spoke. "I can manage all the rest ... but just those between the shoulders?"

Gallantly McTaggart stooped to the task.

As the tulle fell away, leaving her neck bare, a sudden temptation seized the man. He lowered his head and kissed the warm flesh, honey-tinted, and soft to his lips.

But she swung round quickly with an incoherent cry. "Non, non, Pierrot—je ne veux pas!" Her face looked frightened. She thrust him back, a sudden remorse awake in her heart.

McTaggart laughed. She read in his eyes amusement at her show of resistance.

And the knowledge of this and his lack of respect swept aside her lingering scruples. Her mood veered round. A feverish exultation spurred her now down the path of revenge.

"Naughty boy!" She shook her head and was gone, with a laughing backward glance.

Left to himself, McTaggart strolled about, stretching his long legs, cramped in the box.

A memory brought him back to the mantelpiece, and he sought for and found the faded photograph.

Once more he gazed at the sinister face, with its black beard and evil eyes. It held a curious fascination for him, repulsive and mesmeric at the same time. He saw that a name was written beneath, indistinct in violet ink, and holding it nearer to the light he deciphered "Gustave," with a slight start. Below it was a blotted date and then "Alger" clear and bright, where a frame had once protected the edge.

He put it back behind the mirror, a frown on his face, his mouth tight.

So that was the husband. What a brute! ...

His pity stirred beneath his disgust. He thought of Fantine, dainty and sweet, at the mercy of such a type. Thank God the man was dead!

He recalled her remark in the restaurant, the night they had dined at the "Bon Bourgeois."

"He was always very kind to me..."

"Kind?"—with those eyes!—He shuddered slightly, connecting the pair in his mind.

Poor little woman ... what a life!

It sobered him, bringing the best to the surface, and he turned with a very real affection on his handsome face as she opened the door.

But here was a new irresistible Fantine. With bright eyes, she danced toward him, mischief incarnate, her pale face laughing above a peignoir, diaphanous, intimate; showing gleams of silk-shod ankles through the daring draperies.

"You see! I make myself at home ... And now for supper." She laid down a silver tray with a plate and glass and arranged his knives and forks for him.

"Monsieur est servi." She caught up a napkin and threw it gaily over her arm.

"Monsieur will not forget the poor waiter—who—how absurd!—cannot open the wine!" She held out toward him a bottle of champagne.

"Vite, mon cher!—I die of thirst."

McTaggart felt suddenly relieved. He entered heartily into the sport.

"What would the poor waiter like for a tip? Furs perhaps, or a motor car?"

"I'll tell you later," she flashed him a glance as he cut the wire and extracted the cork.

He poured it foaming in the glasses.

"Here's to ... to-night!" He drank it off.

As supper proceeded the desire of adventure drowned all else in McTaggart's mind. A man can only be young once, he told himself, and refilled his glass.

And Fantine seemed to lay aside all thought of to-morrow, to drift content through this golden hour the Gods vouchsafed, ignoring the loom where the Grey Fates spun.

When the last drop of wine was gone and satiety claimed them as willing victims, McTaggart dragged the table back and pulled the sofa near the fire.

"Now—come and talk to me, mon amie—here's a stool for those little feet. You really are a dream to-night!—I never saw you look so ... tempting!"

She lay back against the cushions, watching him stir the coals in the grate.

"Let's sit in the fire light," he suggested, and switched off the electricity.

Behind his back she stole a glance at the clock, and her face fell, then grew thoughtful.

"Another hour," she said to herself, with the odd sensation of a respite.

"A cigarette first—please, Pierrot."

"What nonsense! You've smoked enough." His voice was masterful and she pouted.

"Méchant! give me one, *at once*."

He lit it, somewhat grudgingly, watching the flame of the match spurt and illumine her piquante face in the semi-darkness of the room.

She drew the smoke in lazily, through the pursed-up, vivid lips.

"Have one too?" She handed the box—"and tell me ... all about yourself."

"That's clever..." McTaggart smiled. "You've hit upon my favorite subject."

But I think to-night we'll talk of you. Tell me"—he paused—"of your life in Algiers." Strange, how that picture haunted him!

"That's long ago," she shrank slightly, then rallied herself to the task. "I went there as a bride, you see. My husband was head of a kind of syndicate. It's a nice place in the Winter-time—there's a large French Colony there. And plenty of English people too—it's quite gay—with music—and cards."

McTaggart smiled to himself. At the words he made a shrewd guess at Gustave's business in Algiers. But Fantine skillfully led the talk through devious channels back to himself. Once launched on the stream he told her of his early years, his parents' death, his college career, and the growing boredom of his days.

And between the lines Fantine gleaned all that she needed; his obvious means and that fastidiousness of his—an important factor in her game.

The clock ticked on and the fire died low. The little room seemed shut off from the world.

"It sounds lonely..." she said at last—"You poor boy!—I understand'."

"Do you?" he leaned eagerly nearer. "No one cares—that's about it!" His arm stole round her. "Fantine ... *dear*, it's in your hands to cure, you know."

He stooped down and their lips met ...

The clock struck with a silver chime, ringing out the midnight hour; and Fantine, startled, drew away. Not yet—the warning rang in her ears.

But McTaggart, fired by that close embrace, stung too by her shrinking gesture, caught her roughly in his arms.

"Pierrot!"—she gasped—"wait ... wait! There's something—I must tell you—first..."

His strong young arms were like a vise, his eyes were brilliant, pleading for him.

"Fantine...?" he breathed.

"No! *no!*" She forced him back with all her strength, aware of his sudden loss of control, but perfect mistress of herself. Her hands, pressed against his chest, checked him for a fleeting moment. Within his coat that the struggle forced open, her eyes detected a note of white—the corner of an envelope, and in a flash her fingers sought and found the letter, purloining it.

She heard him give a little gasp, incredulous and vexed at once; his arms relaxed, the spell snapped, and twisting sideways she slipped away out of his reach, breathless, triumphant.

Little she guessed what the trick cost her! For McTaggart in common with his kind was scrupulous toward correspondence. Nothing on earth would have induced him to trifle with another's letters.

And now as Fantine stood before him with a mocking smile, and in her grasp an envelope with his name upon it, in Jill's childish scrawling hand, it added the last fatal spark to resentment caused by baffled desire.

"That's mine, I think." His husky voice, almost rude in his sudden anger, proved to the woman she had found the right excuse to delay her surrender.

"Ah non, mon cher Pierrot!—I think I will keep your ... lettre d'amour. I'm very, ver-ry cross with you..." But her eyes belied the implied reproof. She stepped back, and the glow from the fire fell on her flushed and mischievous face, on the crumpled transparent peignoir that had fallen away from one bare shoulder.

And suddenly it came to McTaggart what she was ... and his own folly!

He saw that passion swayed him alone without the redeeming touch of love.

"I'm sorry." He stood up, stiff and straight. "You're quite right—I lost my head!" For the shrewder side of his nature swung him back once more into safe balance. He switched on the electric light and glanced openly at the clock.

"I'm afraid, too, I'm keeping you up. I'd no idea it was so late."

His voice was frigidly polite, a mask to hide his deep anger. For there she stood, with Jill's letter—Jill's of all people on earth!—that note of hers yet unread, caught up at the Club before he started.

He held out his hand for it.

Silently she gave it up. For once the woman in her quailed before the wrath in his blue eyes.

"Thank you." He placed it in his pocket and smiled, his young face still hard.

"Now we're quits ... eh! Fantine."

She began to realize her mistake.

"Quits?" she pouted. With one hand she smoothed the tumbled laces about her. "I think ... that you're unkind, Pierrot."

To his dismay she began to cry.

For indeed her nerve had given out, and the tears, at first assumed, grew real. She sobbed on, her head in her hands.

"You're not going?—oh—Pierrot! ... don't go ... Mon Dieu! ... Mon Dieu! ... I didn't mean ... I only ... tease ... oh! unkind..." she choked on the word.

McTaggart's heart began to soften.

"Why! Fantine ... why—my dear ...! I'm *not* cross ... honour bright! But it's getting deuced late, you know ... there ... there ... don't cry."

He soothed her like a fractious child.

"You go to bed—you're dog-tired. That's it—I'm a selfish ass! ..." He tried to thrust the thought aside of what was really troubling her.

And in his friendly voice she read the failure of her deep-laid plans, conscious too that their early return had thrown out the scheme of time. Well, it was over—no! postponed...

She lifted her tear-stained face, oddly swayed between relief and infinite discouragement.

"Good night, Pierrot—I'm ... so tired! I'll go to bed—you're quite right. But come and see me very soon. Promise, Pierrot."

He smiled at her.

"Rather!—why! what d'you think?"

But once outside the front door he felt a sudden sense of blankness. He hated tears and shrank from scenes with the wholesome distrust of perfect nerves. And then—that letter! His face darkened ... What an end to the evening! The unexpected with a vengeance. He started to descend the stairs when a sound below made him pause.

Some one was coming slowly up. The steps passed the third floor and moved toward the last flight.

McTaggart glanced quickly round. He felt a curious distaste to be found there at this hour, and his eyes fell on the lift, level with Fantine's door. He remembered he had brought her up, working the ropes himself, and there it stood in semi-darkness offering a hiding-place.

He stepped inside and sat down in the far corner, holding his breath, as a tall man came into sight muffled in an overcoat.

"He's going to the opposite flat. Jolly lucky the lift being here." McTaggart's soliloquy stopped short. He gave a little gasp of wonder.

For the man passed him, unaware of his presence, making straight for Fantine's door, with a light, noiseless step that seemed to the other oddly furtive.

Arrived there he paused a moment, then bent down and with his finger lifted up the narrow flap of the letter box and peered through.

Instantly McTaggart was on the defensive. He thought of Mrs. Merrod alone, without a single soul to guard her, and the opportunity it offered.

But the next moment the pseudo-thief produced a latch-key from his pocket, fitted it softly in the lock, and the light shone out through the opened door. Here the first check greeted him. For the key stuck and, as he turned, McTaggart caught a glimpse of his face with a sudden and bewildering shock.

The square-cut beard had been shaved away, but above it gleamed those evil eyes and the hooked nose slightly bent of the man in the faded photograph!

"Gustave"—"Alger"—The two words flashed into remembrance. Here in the flesh was Fantine's husband—the dead returned! No doubt of it!

The man, with a shrug of his narrow shoulders, ceased to wrestle with the lock, and through the door left ajar McTaggart, his face glued to the glass of the lift, could see him cross the narrow hall, still on tiptoe, and bend to listen at the opposite key-hole.

What did it mean? A sudden suspicion shot through McTaggart's brain. He caught dimly the thread of the plot and a cold chill ran down his spine.

The next moment the bedroom door was flung wide, and Fantine stood, half dressed, her white face sharp and haggard, but undismayed.

A quick volley of words passed, unintelligible, in French. The sudden draught caught the outer door, and it slammed to with a loud bang.

Alone, in the darkness of the lift, McTaggart crouched, his brain on fire. A single word from the woman's lips had reached him and vaguely repeated itself.

"Raté...!" He found no meaning to it. With the consciousness of his equivocal position came the desire to escape. His hand groped for the cords and the lift slid down to the ground floor.

He fumbled with the heavy door, and was outside in the cold night air. Like a thief himself, he took to his heels, running down the deserted street, hailed a belated four-wheeler and arrived at length at his own chambers.

Once inside his sitting-room, he seemed to awaken from his stupor. He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass, forced a laugh at his white face and helped himself to a stiff drink.

Blackmail. The ugly word supplied the link that was missing. Blackmail—that was it. And Fantine? He felt suddenly sick. But as the brandy sent a glow through his cold disgusted frame, another memory returned to set the seal on his doubts.

He crossed to his bookcase and drew out from a pile of tattered French novels a shabby book bound in leather, thumbed and torn by days of school.

With nervous haste he turned the pages. "P," "Q," "R"—here it was! His eyes strained down the narrow print.

"Rater—(verb) to miss fire."

PART II

"Flower o' the quince
I let Lisa go and what good's in life since?"
R. BROWNING.

CHAPTER XII

"I dreamed last night," said Jill, "that you and Stephen were having a fencing match. The worst of it was"—she sighed—"I woke before the end!"

She settled herself back more firmly in her corner as the car swept them down a steep incline between high hedges bared of leaves, gathering impetus for the upward hill beyond. Roddy sat in front, his cap pulled down to his eyes, his back like a ramrod, every muscle braced. He was deeply engrossed in watching Bethune drive, pouring questions into his new friend's ear.

McTaggart pulled the rug higher about the girl as the keen wind smote them with its frosty breath. "You don't feel cold, Jill?" His blue eyes rested affectionately on the glowing face beside him.

"Not a bit! I love it." She returned to her dream. "Wasn't it annoying to wake like that?"

"Which side were you backing?" McTaggart gave a chuckle at her indignant:

"Why—*you*—of course! Fancy backing Stephen! I forgot to tell you, Peter. We had a real row the other night. And the worst of it is he told Mother something. He's such a sneak!—and now she's cross with me."

"Poor old girl!" McTaggart groped for her hand under the heavy rug; and the girl, contentedly, let it lie in his warm clasp with a child's confidence.

"Dreams are funny things," she went on happily, conscious of his sympathy, her eyes fixed ahead on the long line of trees fringing the country road, gaunt

against the sky, warmed by the sunset hour. "D'you ever dream the same one over and over again?"

"I don't think so," said Peter. "I can't remember them—not distinctly, I mean, when I'm awake."

"I do." Jill turned to him with a far-away expression, "and there's one dream returns and seems to haunt me. A cluster of white towers that rise up on a hill against a deep blue sky and glitter in the sunshine. It's all so vivid!—I can see it now. Just that—those high white towers with a darker one among them. It seems to have a little cap—like a chimney pot—snow white ... And, although I've never been there, it's like a memory. I know it sounds absurd, but it feels"—she paused for words—"like coming home ... And then, I wake up."

"How odd! Perhaps it's part of another life. You know"—his face was thoughtful—"I think we've lived before. I can't believe that this is the whole of my existence; that all those centuries back hold no trace of me. Any more than I can think, as lots of fellows do, that we're snuffed out when we die like a row of little candles!"

"Of course not." Jill spoke with the certainty of youth—"though Heaven always sounds such a dreadfully dull place! That 'Heaven' I mean of the 'goody-goody' people, with no work to do but only eternal rest. I don't see the use of all we learn here if spiritual experience dies with the body. It's such a waste of power and so unlike Nature. Why—even the trees, you know, after centuries, turn into coal!" She drew a deep breath. "That's always so comforting! When I get the blues and feel afraid of death I like to look at the fire and believe that nothing's lost ... it all goes on, forward in the Scheme."

"That's true." McTaggart's hand tightened on hers. "Bethune—over there"—he lowered his voice—"was talking the other day—we're great pals, you know—he's a chap you *can* talk to, awfully sane—and we'd got on to religion and how it's broken up into rival camps and endless confusion—and he said: 'I haven't any particular creed and I don't go to Church, but ... it's just like this. I've always felt the Almighty's been so awfully good to me—he's cast my lot in very pleasant places, and given me health and strength and a jolly good time. It seems a dirty trick to doubt what He's planned, when He sees fit to shift me from this old Earth.'"

"I like that. How nice!" Jill nodded her head. "It does sound rather like ingratitude; and, now one comes to think of it, it is cheek to question the future after this lovely world. Look at that sky there and those little pink clouds!"

She spoke simply, with no lack of reverence, but rather that deeper one needing no outward show.

Silence fell between the pair as the car scudded on: that truest proof of minds in perfect sympathy.

The distant hills were veiling themselves in a violet haze, and in the high hedgerows the birds were still. Away to the right a deep blue line showed the river flowing along to London and the sea.

Jill broke the spell first, with a little sign to attract his attention.

"I'm sure I hear music—a long way off. There!" She bent her head, straining forward. "It's a band down in the valley. How funny at this hour!—and right away from everywhere!"

"Territorials, perhaps."

McTaggart listened too.

"We're about midway, I should say, between Henley and town."

For Jill's letter with the news of Roddy's return—the school having broken up through a sudden epidemic—had suggested this outing in Bethune's car on one of his rare Saturdays of holiday. They had gone to see the Cambridge crew practice for the boat race and lunched at Henley, a merry quartette.

Jill's letter!—McTaggart's mind swung off at a tangent. He felt a new-born gratitude to his schoolgirl friend. Had it not been for this and Fantine's want of tact—he could see her now holding the letter to her breast—he must have stumbled headlong into the trap.

He felt again heart-sore at the betrayal.

"We're getting nearer," said Jill. "I don't think it's a band."

The car swerved round a bend and lights flashed out, pale in the twilight like glow-worms on the green.

"Oh, Peter—look!" Jill clapped her hands. "It's a Village Fair—how lovely! —with merry-go-rounds!"

"So it is." Peter smiled as Roddy twisted round, his boy's face alight, with an eager request.

"Can't we stop, Peter?—and have *one* turn ... My hat! there's a cocoanut shy! Oh, *do* pull up..."

McTaggart leaned forward and consulted the driver. "Have you time, old man? These kids are awfully keen."

"Rather," Bethune laughed good-naturedly. "We'll run the car first into the Inn yard. Can't leave it here—the road's too narrow."

They skirted the crowd slowly at the end of the village street, the horn (worked by Roddy) vying with the strains of the cracked "Steam Band," and, handing over the rugs to the care of the ostler, proceeded on foot to the scene of the fun.

It was hardly a fair, but one of those travelling shows that wander across the country with a handful of caravans.

Dark gypsy faces, the hoarse cry of the showmen, the flaring petroleum jets and the noisy metallic music were blent in a scene garish and crude but strangely exciting after the lonely roads.

"The merry-go-rounds first," Jill declared. "I choose the piebald horse—you take the black!" McTaggart swarmed up, infected by her mood, Roddy in front of them, with a roar of delight as Bethune settled his bulky form on a wooden donkey.

"Off we go!—Houp-là! ..." They whirled round and round.

"Two to one on the rat-tailed mare!" McTaggart's voice rang out.

Jill, clinging to the piebald's neck, with a fine show of ankles, her dark hair

streaming back, looked like a Bacchante.

"Isn't it ripping?" Her motor veil swung loose, her fur cap slid back, and about her glowing face the straying curls blew. Her gray eyes like stars met McTaggart's open smile. Joy was in her heart.

The machine ran down. Panting, they descended.

"Now—the cocoanuts!" Roddy led the way to where a narrow screen of sacking protected the crowd of village folks from too violent an onslaught.

A hoarse voice greeted them:

"This way—guv'nor! Six sticks a penny! *All-the-fun-o'-the-fair!* Now then—young sir—move on ... Hi!—Don't shove the lidy!—*Six sticks a penny!*" They found themselves in the centre of the firing line.

"Got 'im!" Bethune shouted his approval. "Bravo, Miss Uniacke!" as Roddy with a yell captured the coconut his sister had dislodged.

The crowd pressed round them, and McTaggart found himself suddenly isolated from his own party.

"Cross the gypsy's 'and, my fine gentleman..." A coaxing voice chanted in his ear.

"There's fortune for you, dearie; I see it in your face—it's coming over the seas—with a golden crown..."

Peter turned quickly. In the dim half light he looked back into a pair of glowing dark eyes: a gypsy woman's face with glossy black hair and long coral earrings hanging on each side.

He was going to draw back when he felt his hand caught; held by dark fingers, supple and strong, the palm turned upward as the husky voice went on with its curious crooning lilt, its patter of words.

"It's under the cloud you stand, my fine gentleman; the cloud of a lie ... but it clears ... it clears.... There's a far-off journey and castle walls ... and love all the time—hidden—by your side...."

She bent her head lower, tracing the lines with a forefinger stiff with a broad gold ring. The light of the flares fell on her bare neck and the bright Paisley shawl, crossed on her full bosom.

"Beware of a dark woman!—she's playing you false. Between two fires you will burn and burn ... And then, when the light fades ... on the turn of the tide ... there's the Lucky Moon and the Dream of your life...!"

Her voice sank away. She straightened herself, with a clink of silver bangles, and let his hand fall. Her lips were still muttering and her eyes, opened wide, were like pools of ink as McTaggart stared at her.

"And what about the golden crown?" He felt in his pocket. With an effort he spoke lightly to break the uncanny charm.

"It will come, my fine gentleman—before the year is dead."

"Peter!" He heard Jill calling to him. "Peter! where *are* you?" The coin changed hands.

"A blessing on your head—the gypsy's blessing, sir. The eyes that see and the ears that hear ... And through the dark clouds the sun shining bright—with love coming swiftly ... love by your side..."

"Peter!" Impatiently Jill caught his arm—"we thought we had lost you."

He turned with a start.

"Hullo, Jill!" He felt a trifle dazed. "I've been listening to a gypsy—having my fortune told."

"No?—what fun! What did she tell you?"

He glanced behind him, but the woman had gone.

"All sorts of things. I'm to have a golden crown—and a castle somewhere. In Spain, I should think!"

"Well, come along now—they've gone to the swings."

He slipped a hand through his little friend's arm. "Let me carry that cocoanut. Did you win it, Jill?" But the girl refused, guarding her treasure.

They crossed the trodden grass, damp with the dew, to where a row of booths with poisonous-looking sweets, cheap ribands and laces and ginger-bread "snaps" had attracted the usual pairs of village lovers.

"Buy yer lidy a fairing!" A shrill voice hailed them—"a pretty brooch now—a bracelet?—a ring? Come now, young sir—yer 'and in yer pocket!—there's yer sweet'art waitin' ... the price of a kiss!"

McTaggart laughed back with a side glance at Jill.

"Would you like a fairing?" His eyes ran over the stall.

"Have a ring with 'Mizpah'?—Let's buy one for Stephen."

But the girl shook her head, with a gesture of annoyance.

"Come now, dearie"—the woman entreated—"choose a pretty keepsake—the gen'leman 'ull pay."

McTaggart bent forward, searching for a gift, suddenly obstinate.

"You'll *have* to have something!"

"Hullo! what's this?" From the tray of tawdry jewellery, he picked up a locket with a smile to himself.

Two little hearts in bright red glass, with a true lover's knot joining them together.

Cheap and meretricious, the toy was saved from vulgarity by the colour which glowed like a pigeon-blood ruby.

It reminded McTaggart of his own curious case—the Double Heart—surely a symbol!

"There, Jill! Never say I'm not a generous man."

He tossed a shilling across to the woman—and with due solemnity made his

offering.

"Thanks awfully." Jill's grey eyes were hidden by the dark fringe of lashes, sweeping down on to her cheeks. "I'll keep it for Court ... or wear it on my sleeve. Thank you, Peter."

She slipped it in her pocket.

"Hi! McTaggart!" Bethune from afar was waving to them. "Time we were off!" He shouted the warning as they hastened toward him where he stood with Roddy, still breathless from the swings.

"It's awfully late..." he added apologetically. "I'm sorry to rush you—but I think we'd better start."

They made for the Inn, Bethune by his friend, Roddy hanging onto his sister's arm.

"We'll have to go slow when we get to Hounslow—those beastly trams spoil the run. Here we are!" He babbled on—"now, bundle in..."

But Jill checked her brother, with one foot on the step. "I think I'd rather like to ride in front. D'you mind, Mr. Bethune?" She smiled up at him.

"Mind? I should think not." The man looked pleased, but McTaggart's face fell at the words.

"Going to desert me? You little turn-coat!—After that lovely fairing too."

But Jill was settling herself beside the driver.

"Rather rough on Roddy!" was all she said.

The schoolboy laughed. He produced a bag, brimming over with highly coloured sweets.

"Have a suck?" he said, and diving into it drew out a sugar stick, striped pink and yellow.

"Thanks—no. Not just now." McTaggart's face was eloquent.

"All right," said Roddy with happy unconcern. "You just tell me when you feel like it."

The car trundled out between the narrow posts, and, avoiding the crowd, turned to the right; then, as the road, devoid of life, stretched straight ahead, took on speed.

The noisy music faded away into darkness and silence and the rustling breeze. McTaggart drowsily closed his eyes, as the stars began to peer out of the heavens. His head sank lower, his thoughts became involved ... Then with a flash he came back to life. Awoke to find the lamps glowing about him, the hum of the traffic, the busy London streets, and, against the light, Bethune's broad back and the girl's clear profile like a silhouette.

Jill was chattering, plainly absorbed.

Every now and then, her companion would lean to catch a sentence broken by the wind, and a laugh would float back with the hearty ring that seemed a part of the man's honest nature.

McTaggart watched them in a moody silence, still slightly piqued by Jill's desertion.

Roddy, surfeited, with a nearly empty bag, was rolled up in the corner like a happy dormouse.

They turned more slowly into dimly lighted roads, and the trees of Regent's Park came into sight.

Jill was giving directions now to Bethune. "It's the turning before Primrose Hill," McTaggart heard her say.

Then the car slackened, mounted the slight hill and they were in front of the terrace of gloomy little houses.

Stiff and pleasantly tired, they stepped down on the pavement, Bethune's strong arm for a moment supporting Jill.

Hurried adieux and thanks and the pair were off again, McTaggart now in the corner, still warm, where the girl had sat beside the driver on the long ride home.

A sudden silence had fallen between them, each engrossed in his own train of thought.

Bethune broke it first.

"Shall I drop you at the Club? I've got to take the car home—it's on our way."

"Thanks." McTaggart roused himself. "Can't you come back and dine with me?—or we'll have a grill somewhere—if you prefer it?"

"Sorry—I can't. I've promised to meet a man—it's a business matter. Otherwise I would."

"Well—some other night." He felt a shade relieved. "It's very good of you to have given us this run. Those kids will talk of it till Kingdom Come—it's a great treat for them."

Bethune grunted.

"Oh—as to that—I enjoyed it myself. That's a nice boy..." there came a little pause—"and Miss Uniacke's ... perfectly ripping!—pretty too." He nodded his head.

"Think so?" McTaggart's voice was coolly indifferent.

"Of course," he added, "she's only a child."

CHAPTER XIII

It was the night of Cydonia's dance.

Although the band had been playing since the stroke of ten, guests were still arriving at the Cadells' door; in parties "personally conducted" by the hostess with whom they had dined, their cards already filled and flirtations well started, wearing an air of frozen indifference toward the rest of the gay crowd; in knots of twos and threes hastening from the play; and in stray units, chiefly men,

cheered by the thought of approaching supper.

The morning room had been arranged to hold the coats and hats, and for the moment the hall was free from guests. A young man with straight, red hair brushed back from his forehead, and a discontented expression about his tired eyes, emerged from the cloak-room buttoning his gloves and, with a faint start of pleased surprise, nodded to a friend who stood above him on the stairs.

"Hullo, Merivale!—fancy meeting you!"

"Thesiger—by all that's strange!—Thought you barred dances?"

"So I do—loathe 'em. But Susan dragged me here. Wait a second, will you?—This confounded glove..."

His friend nodded, leaning against the banisters: a short dark youth with a tiny moustache, that hovered like a butterfly about to take wing under his finely cut aquiline nose.

"What's the name of the people here? I've clean forgotten."

"Cadell," answered Merivale as Thesiger joined him.

"D'you know the hostess by sight?—I promised to meet Susan, but cut it rather fine. Point her out, will you? or give me a description."

"Tall bony woman—face like the Sphinx—and big black pearls, suggesting the prize product of a poultry farm."

"Sounds opulent. What time's supper? I say—there's Kilmarney! Now, who could have brought him?"

"So it is." Merivale waved his hand. "Pity he's getting fat. I suppose Letty Urquhart. Have you heard of that smash?"

"Yes." Thesiger nodded. "Bound to come to it—the pace he was goin'. Good old Urquhart! But I'm sorry for her—a nice little woman. What's she doing here, 'dans cette galère'?"

"Well, I *think*..." he lowered his voice, "she's going to present the Cadell girl

next season. Lady Leason's fixed it up—she's trying to help Letty. There's precious little left, you know, for her and the kids."

"I don't blame her. Look at Kilmary trying to dance the Tango! Let's stand here and watch. Oh—by the way, I heard rather a funny yarn about one of these new steps—'Bunny Hug' or something. Man was watching a girl in a sort of knot with her partner, and some one else objected on the score of Mother Grundy. 'Oh,' said the man—'I'm sorry for the girl. More danced against than dancing'—eh?—what!"

Merivale laughed, as they stood on the landing outside the ballroom watching the scene within.

"Miss Cadell," said he, "is by way of being a beauty. Rather statuesque, with pale gold hair. Jinks knows her—you remember Jinks of Trinity—calls her 'The Heavy Angel!'—Rather a good name."

He leaned a little forward.

"There she goes, *now* ... dancing with McTaggart—and not for the first time! He's in the running to-night. Pots of money, you know. Poppa was in biscuits—or beer—no! Cheese..."

He broke off suddenly as a short red-faced man turned the corner abruptly and cannoned into them.

He seemed all shirt front, a starched battering-ram, painfully hot and labouring for breath.

"Sorry, sorry!" He stopped to apologize, puffing out the words with a forced cordiality.

"Why aren't you dancing, you young men?—Want some partners? Let's see your cards."

Thesiger stared at him with open disgust.

"No—er—thanks." He turned to his friend as the thick-set man bustled away downstairs, mopping his brow with a large silk handkerchief.

"Who's that bounder?"

"Sh ... I—it's the host."

"Good Lord!—that?" he frowned impatiently—"I can't see Susan—I've a great mind to cut it!"

"Better wait for supper," Merivale suggested. "Look here"—he added—"if you're not already booked we'll have it together."

"Righto!—and then you come on with me—for a game of 'Chemmy,' eh?—I feel in luck to-night."

"Well ... we'll see. How's Mrs. Merrod?" His dark eyes twinkled as he watched Thesiger's face.

"The fair Fantine?—oh—goin' pretty strong ... How are you, McTaggart——?" He broke off to greet a couple approaching.

The man nodded back.

"Hullo, Archie?—d'you know Miss Cadell?"

Cydonia was introduced, dazzling in white, her brown eyes glowing with suppressed excitement.

"Can't you spare him a dance? He's an old pal of mine?" McTaggart asked the girl with a subtle air of possession.

Cydonia smiled mischievously.

"I *might* give him that extra I half promised you..."

"I'll see that you don't!" said her partner aggressively.

"Rather!" said Thesiger, entering into the sport. "Which is it, Miss Cadell—the first, I hope?"

Cydonia glanced from one man's face to the other, unusually animated, conscious of her power.

"If Peter lets me off—it's the second supper dance."

"That's all right." McTaggart laughed—"You're supping with me—you seem to forget that!"

"Greedy brute!" Thesiger wrote it down with ostentatious care. "I'll come and look for you. In the supper-room!"

The music ceased and a gay crowd passed through the narrow opening dividing the trio.

"Upstairs, Cydonia." McTaggart lowered his voice—"and I'm not going to be cheated—even by Archie. Here—I'll lead the way——" he forged ahead, passing the couples preceding them. They reached the second landing, then up the third flight. Here seats were arranged in isolated pairs.

"Where does that lead to?" McTaggart, as he spoke, pointed to a narrow passage blocked by palms.

"The servants' staircase." Cydonia paused, but her companion deliberately drew the plants aside, holding back the leaves for her to pass.

"Come along, quick!" She gave him a glance, then obeyed with a sudden giggle.

"I say—this is fine!" He continued to explore, mounting the twisted dingy stairs.

"Let's go up and sit on the top." A faint glimmering light showed him the way. "Now—here we are—all to ourselves!"

Cydonia, a little scared by her own sense of daring, settled herself, her dress drawn about her, her little feet in their silver shoes shimmering beyond the dead-white brocade.

"It's rather narrow..." she suggested; then blushed as McTaggart, unabashed, took the step below.

He looked up into the beautiful face, still faintly flushed, transparent as a shell: into brown eyes like some clear woodland pool, where the sunshine

through the trees cast golden gleams. His hand stole across and captured the girl's with the pretence of playing with her fan.

"Cydonia...!" The word was music in his ears. "How the name suits you—you lovely child!"

She drew back a little against the further wall.

"No—don't move—Cydonia—are you happy?" He slipped his right arm between her shoulders and the stairs. "There's a cushion for you— isn't that better?"

But Cydonia protested, sitting bolt upright. "No—Peter—don't. I'd really ... rather ... not."

"Why?—there's no one here. Can't you trust me, sweet?"

For McTaggart was drifting on the tide of his desire. He knew, too, it was part of his own fixed plan; no mere folly due to the place and hour.

Fantine's treachery had served to accentuate, by contrast, the value of his other love. Her girlhood, her purity, her quiescent charm stood out like snow against that dark background.

This night should decide it. No more would he stand, tossed by every impulse, with every change of mood. He would anchor in the haven of Cydonia's love, safe from the storms of life without.

Marriage, he thought, with a young man's confidence, would be the "settling down" of body and mind. He held that curious faith in established institutions which is the mainspring of British orthodoxy.

A duet of words intoned in a Church was to conquer his temperament from that moment until death. Faithful, he swore, he would be to her, by these holy vows, publicly pledged; and, the miracle accomplished, his hot blood should turn into the quiet circulation of a saint.

Love should work the charm and passion complete it. He thrust far from him its shadow, satiety; and that still greater pitfall for those who wed in haste, a dissimilarity in habit and thought.

So now as he lay, stretched on the stairs, so near to the fragrance of the girl's golden youth, drinking in the beauty of rounded arms and neck, and the shy, tender curve of her childish mouth, he felt that life held no deeper desire than to know her his until Death should part.

"Peter ... I don't think we ought to be here." This wise remark came a trifle late. For the faint smile with which she mitigated her sentence revealed for a second her white even teeth, and the parted lips and famous dimple completed the strain on McTaggart's control.

"Don't you, my darling?" His face was close to hers, his blue eyes, dilated, pleaded for him.

"Peter ... no!" She stiffened in his arms—then, with a little sigh, her lips met his, and clung...

"Well!—I'll be damned!" A harsh angry voice tore them apart, startled and bewildered.

Ebenezer Cadell, with apoplectic face, was glaring from below at the absorbed pair. The next moment heavy feet shook the stairs; the old man was on them—a fiery retribution.

He caught McTaggart roughly by the shoulder. "What the devil..." he stuttered—"is the meaning of this?"

Cydonia scrambled up with more speed than grace, retreating to the landing with a shamed cry:

"Father!"

McTaggart, honestly taken aback, sat there, dazed, finding no reply.

For Cadell was almost beside himself.

Cydonia to him was more than a daughter; she was the ideal of his work-a-day life: the crowning proof of his money's worth.

In the depths of his parental heart love was tinged with awe—the emotion he felt before a masterpiece.

That a man should *dare* ... under his own roof ... to hold her in his arms—to kiss her untouched mouth! Here was sacrilege. He shook McTaggart, his social veneer cracking apart.

"Now, then, sir—haven't you a tongue? How dare you come here—into my house—and treat my girl like a...?"

"*Silence!*"

The young man was on his feet, his face very white, his blue eyes aflame.

"If you'd give me time to speak——" each word was measured—"you'd find there's no need to insult your daughter!"

"Shall I—you puppy—you!" for the shaft had sped. "You leave my house first—This minute—see?"

He pointed down the stairs with a hand that shook.

"You git—*now!*—I'll have no truck with you!" He was back once more in his master grocer days.

"With pleasure"—McTaggart stood his ground—"when you have listened to what I have to say. I shall call on you at twelve to-morrow, Mr. Cadell—to ask you for the honour of your daughter's hand."

Melodramatic?—with a touch of the South, but not without a certain youthful dignity.

The very fact of this, of the young man's breeding, served but to remind Cadell of his own.

"I tell you," he boiled, "I'll have no words about it. Marry Cydonia——? a pauper like you!" He fought for his breath as McTaggart smiled. "You can call if you choose and be damned to you!"

Peter bowed, outwardly calm. He turned his head once. Cydonia had vanished, safely sheltered in the house-maid's bedroom.

Then, leisurely, he walked downstairs, conscious that the moral victory was

his.

But the flights seemed endless. He passed the ball-room door and joined in the steady stream pouring down to supper.

The thought stung him suddenly as he drew on his coat and tipped the man who handed him his hat.

"Hardly hospitable!"

But his smile twisted. He refused, as he passed out, the appeal of loitering taxis, and with long angry strides he forged ahead down the empty pavements in a bee line for his club.

The night was still young. The stars above shone down through the glow that London spreads upon the domed sky: orange-colored smoke, incense offered up from the fires of her pleasure and burnt sacrifice.

In Piccadilly a woman accosted him, with painted lips that brought to mind Fantine.

He hurried on, restless, with a feeling in his heart that all was crooked in this maddening world. Love bartered—love profaned ... His eyes still filled with Cydonia's light shrank from that ghastly pageant of lust which decorous London openly allows.

In the hall of his club a page ran after him, a pile of letters outstretched on a tray.

He took them absently and turned into the smoking-room, with a breath of relief at finding it empty, save for a solitary form, half-buried in a chair, feet outstretched toward the fire.

"Hullo!—Bethune." The man reading turned. "Luck, finding you here."

For he felt a real pleasure at the sight of the burly figure of his friend and a sudden, uncontrollable longing for sympathy.

They drew their chairs together before the cheerful blaze and exchanged commonplaces as the waiter brought drinks.

Then, as the door closed, Bethune's voice changed. "What's up, Peter?—got the flu?"

"No—the sack!" He laughed as he spoke, amused at the other's perspicacity.

For Bethune was a man to whom his friends turned instinctively in trouble, with—perhaps?—no memory that, on other occasions more hilarious, they voted this "quiet chap" a trifle "slow."

"Turned you down—eh? Not that Merrod woman?"

"Good Lord, no! I've done with her. It's a girl ... a young girl. Or rather her father! I'm feeling a bit hipped over it all."

He told the story from beginning to end, Bethune listening with an occasional grunt.

"Nice sort of man for a father-in-law! Seems to me you're well out of it."

"But I don't want to be! Never mind Cadell! I'm not marrying the family." Bethune smiled. "I'm hard hit this time—and I'll see it through—if it comes to a good old Gretna Green bolt!"

"Better take my car," Bethune was amused—"You're a Scotchman, aren't you? Once across the border you've only got to say you're husband and wife and the thing's fair and square, I understand."

"Jove! I never thought of it." McTaggart looked up. "She's the prettiest thing you ever set eyes on."

"Anything like Jill?"

"Not a scrap!" The sudden contrast checked his flow of words on the crest of a lover-like flood of description. Then followed one of those swift afterthoughts peculiar to his analytical brain. The difference was not all to Cydonia's advantage; she lacked the mentality of the other girl.

Angrily he thrust aside the fleeting disloyalty as Bethune went on in his calm voice.

"I don't see why the old man was so riled? ... You're quite decent to look at——" his honest eyes twinkled—"and you've got a steady income, rare in these days. What does he want? A title, I suppose. Some young ass with debts who'll make her 'milady.'"

"That's about it." McTaggart scowled.

"D'you think she'll stand by you?"

"Of course," said the lover.

"Then—that's all serene. I don't suppose you hanker for fatherly attention and the family circle?"

"Well, not much!" McTaggart shuddered. "He's utterly impossible. The mother's not so bad—too stiff, you know, and conscious of her 'dignity,' but quite presentable—pass in a crowd."

"Then go in and win, my son."

Silence fell between them and at last McTaggart rose to his feet.

"I'm going to have some nourishment—I missed supper, you know."

Bethune grinned. "That's a nasty jar! He might have stood you a parting drink."

"I'll come back presently——" but still he lingered. His whiskey and soda had quenched his thirst and he found he had but little taste for food.

Mechanically he gathered up his letters; then sat down again in his chair.

"I'll read these first—it isn't late."

"Lost your appetite?" Bethune rubbed it in.

His friend, ignoring this ignoble sally, began to tear open the envelopes.

At the bottom of the pile was a large square letter which he recognized as bearing his lawyer's writing.

He frowned a little at the sight, in no mood for business, then settled down grudgingly to study the contents. Inside was an envelope with a deep black edge sealed with an elaborate coat-of-arms.

Bethune was staring into the fire, his mind still full of his friend's adventure. He felt that deep, rather wistful, admiration which a man of his type extends to those more brilliant.

A quick exclamation made him turn his head. McTaggart was plainly startled by his news.

"I say—Bethune—Good Lord—it's impossible!"

He re-read the document in his hand.

"My Uncle's dead!—and both my cousins! A motor-smash outside Rome. What an awful thing!—the car overturned..." He skimmed on, breathless—"the old man was killed ... on the spot—the eldest son, too ... the other lingered ... died on Tuesday..."

He turned the letter over. "Why, it's nearly a week old. Oh, I see!—it went to Scotland and then to my lawyers, who sent it here. They want me to go to Siena at once."

Bethune began to voice condolences.

"Oh! I never knew them. But, of course, I'm sorry. He was my mother's brother. (Just touch that bell.) They quarrelled when she married ... I shall have to go."

He turned to the waiter answering the summons.

"Bring me a Continental Bradshaw."

"Do you come in for anything?" asked the practical Bethune.

"Anything?"—the young man laughed with a touch of excitement. "I'm the only one left. There's a palace in Siena ... and a flat in Rome ... and a villa somewhere. And a lot of land, vines and olive groves and a nice fat income ... and—Bethune—don't roar!—I'm the present Marquis. They actually address

me..." he choked with mirth—"as the Illustrious Marquis Maramonte!"

"Good for you." Bethune leaned across and the two shook hands. "I'm jolly glad. It'll make old Cadell sit up a bit—you've a dead cert there." He chuckled with glee.

"Splendid—I forgot that." His face sobered suddenly. "Although I've half a mind ... yes!—Look here, Bethune—keep this between ourselves—it's not likely to leak out—and I'd rather win Cydonia as plain Peter McTaggart."

His voice softened on the girl's name. What a setting for her—this palace in Siena!

"All right, old man. I quite understand. You can count on me to keep my mouth shut."

The waiter returned and they fell to ways and means, wrestling with the Bradshaw, discussing the route.

"I'll come back and give you a hand with your packing. You'll be wanting a car now, Monsieur le Marquis?"

McTaggart chuckled.

"Good old Bethune! always an eye to business, what? You can take the order—and spare no cost. Line it with white. It'll do for the wedding."

Then a sudden memory clouded his mirth as his thoughts reverted to the tragedy at Rome.

"I'm glad all the same I'm too late for the funeral..."

Early next morning he started for Siena.

CHAPTER XIV

At Dover he remembered Mr. Cadell.

With a sense of guilt he sent the following wire:

"Cannot call to-day. Obligated to go abroad on important business. Will write.

"McTAGGART."

Once on board the boat he began a letter to Cydonia; but the passage was rough and he abandoned the attempt, returning to the deck to enjoy the sight of the great rollers slapping up against the sides of the steamer and breaking into high columns of spray, glittering like mica in the wintry sunshine.

He consoled himself with the thought that Mr. Cadell would undoubtedly keep a stern eye on the post, and that his missive was unlikely to reach the lady of his heart.

His luggage was registered through to Siena, and, when he arrived at the Gare du Nord, he took an "auto," directing the man to drive him down the Boulevards. After the damp of London, the air, light and exciting, went to his head. He drew it in, in deep breaths, with its sharp familiar scent of roasting coffee-berries, of waxed floors and of wine, that the crowded cafés wafted toward him as he passed: that typical smell of Paris, pungent, unforgettable, which welcomes the votaries of the City of Light.

He dined at Noël Peter's and felt absurdly pleased when the gérant recognized him as one of a quartette who more than a year since had frequented the restaurant on an Easter holiday visit.

Then, turning up the Passage des Princes, he strolled along happily, glad to stretch his legs before his long night journey.

The flower shops were fairy-like; the jewellers' ablaze. Slim forms, muffled in furs, slipped past with that subtle air of conscious power, of sure and sensuous appeal which marks the Parisienne in every grade of life. Clubmen were strolling toward their 'aperitifs,' husbands with wives, sedately arm in arm, trim

'midinettes' and bare-headed 'bonnes'; all combined to give the crowded pavements the sense of a meeting place, an outdoor haunt of pleasure spiced with intrigue instead of a mere channel for the traffic.

McTaggart reached the Madeleine, glanced down the Rue Royale and, with a sigh of regret, hailed a passing auto. He was jarred and rattled over the stones of that aggressive road which ends at the Gare de Lyon.

Bethune had wired that morning for a wagon-lit, a wise precaution as the train was packed. The conductor, in reply to his stilted French, led McTaggart down the long corridor.

"A telegram without name? From London, Monsieur?" He produced it and McTaggart smiled. In the hurry of departure his careful friend had omitted this essential.

"Voici, Monsieur."

The young man peeped past him into the narrow coupé. The beds were already arranged for the night and on the lower berth, impassive, there sat a very fat priest, absorbed in his breviary. The windows were shut, the heat turned on full.

McTaggart drew back with a gesture of disgust.

"This won't do." Unconsciously his voice took on that arrogant note which the travelling Englishman employs for the benefit of foreign servants.

"What name did you say, Monsieur?" The shrewd French face was studying him, gauging the value of his tip.

A sudden idea flashed into McTaggart's brain. He would test here and now the value of his title.

"I'm the Marquis Maramonte," he answered, steadily watching the black eyes fixed on his.

"Pardon, Monsieur?" The man looked puzzled. Then a ray of light illumined his face.

"It is ... the English milord? who inherits ... Mon Dieu! what a sad affair! ..." he became voluble—"the papers were full of it ... and Monsieur le feu Marquis has often travelled by this train. He loved well Paris. If Monsieur le Marquis had but given his name..." He backed ceremoniously and threw open the door of an empty compartment. "I will see that Monsieur is not disturbed. He has only to ring. I am here all night. And at Modane I will warn the Customs. Monsieur would like an extra 'couverture'?"

McTaggart was smiling in his sleeve.

"C'est bien." He tipped the man generously, delighted at the result of his tactics.

"Monsieur, sans doute, travels to Siena?—a cold journey ... the passes are full of snow. But Monsieur will be quite undisturbed"—a gleam of mischief came into the dark shrewd face—"one understands Monsieur could not travel with the Church!"

This puzzled Peter. He had yet to learn that his Uncle had been a member of the Anti-clerical party. Like most Protestants, he lived in the error that the nearer one approached to Rome the more fervent the Catholicism. He had heard of the two great factions in that city, the "Black" and the "White," without measuring their importance. Moreover, he did not realize the curious apathy of the lower classes in the land of the Saints and that deep-rooted hatred of the Socialist and "Patriot" for monastic institutions and temporal power.

But he smiled at the sally, conscious of hidden meaning, and the man, encouraged, lowered his voice.

"This berth, milord, was reserved for a German—un banquier Juif—qui vient de Hambourg..." he reached up and removed the ticket from its slot—"we will place him to-night on the road to salvation!"

"With the priest?"—McTaggart laughed until he cried as the door closed on his new friend's parting grin. He tried to picture the same scene in England with the typical conductor of a Pullman Car.

What a nation it was! Light and witty, with under the froth a curious depth. He thought of its paralyzing series of defeats in the Franco-Prussian war, its mad Revolutions and that marvellous recuperative force which had brought France

back to her present era of prosperity. Then he began to dream of Italy; to picture Siena and, in the far distance, Cydonia beside him there ... Cydonia in his arms.

With her name on his lips he fell asleep.

He woke, refreshed, made a leisurely toilette and wandered forth in search of breakfast. In the Restaurant Car he announced his nationality by demanding eggs with his café au lait; then settled down to the long day's journey, thankful now for the full steam heat as they mounted steadily toward the Alps and plunged with a shrill whistle into the tunnel.

On and on, with tantalizing peeps of the Mont Cenis Pass. The hoar frost without traced fairy patterns on the window-pane. The wind roared past them but the sun shone bright on snow-clad peaks and valleys dazzling white. Through Turin, with its broad blue river twisting like a serpent round her ancient walls, on and on, now heading South, as the snow vanished swiftly and the plains spread about them.

McTaggart grew restless. He paced up and down the narrow corridor, smoking innumerable cigarettes as the light slowly faded away from the sky.

Genoa! He drew a breath of relief and barricaded himself again in his coupé. A swarm of passengers besieged the train and he let the window down, amused at the sight. Boys were selling oranges and glasses of "sirops," Bologna sausages and lurid papers.

Then the train moved out and the salt smell of the sea tempted him to search in vain through the dark. The Mediterranean. He remembered, with a smile, it had stood for a test of spelling at school! Once he thought he saw a faint dark line; then it vanished into the night.

He began to feel drowsy after his dinner. This would never do! He marched up and down, conscious he had to change at Pisa—then at Empoli. He yawned, stiff and tired.

After what seemed an interminable spell, with a grisly noise of brakes, they slackened speed. "Pisa ... Pi-sa ...!" He gathered up his rug and descended the steep step on to the platform.

His train puffed out. He felt, suddenly, as if he had parted with his only

friend, as he stood there waiting for the Florence express, stamping his feet, in the bitter cold.

"If this is the South..." he said to himself—"Give me London!" He turned up his collar, straining his eyes through the vaulted tunnel of the long station into the dark.

Great lamps flaring like hungry eyes and in she roared with her high-built engine, spiteful, frost-rimmed, spitting steam ...

McTaggart found a seat in a crowded carriage.

Then on again through this endless night and Empoli, a God-forsaken spot, quite unscreened from the icy blast, with twenty frozen minutes to wait.

At last a faint streak of golden smoke rewarded his patience. "Siena—Siena," a hoarse voice shouted. He made for the nearest door labelled First Class and clambered in, finding a single occupant.

An old man with a white imperial, the soft black felt beloved of Italy, a thick coat with a wolf-skin collar and a lawyer's portfolio across his knees.

He raised the aforementioned hat courteously.

"Fa freddo," he said in a musical voice.

McTaggart lifted his cap, with pleased surprise, his loneliness fading before the stranger's smile.

"Do you speak French?" He asked in that language. "I'm afraid my Italian's somewhat scanty."

"Si, si, Monsieur." Again he raised his hat.

Again McTaggart clutched at his cap.

"I hope it isn't necessary with every word!" he thought with an Englishman's distaste for ceremony.

"A cold night for travelling," the stranger suggested. "Monsieur has come

far?" His keen black eyes shone like bright coal in their wrinkled sockets.

"From London," said McTaggart with the conscious pride of a tired man at the end of his journey. "I'm bound for Siena," he volunteered. "Is it generally as cold as this in Italy?"

The old man smiled.

"It is Winter still, Monsieur. What would you have?"

He spread out his hands. "In Siena we are high ... altis ... simo! But healthy—one gets few fevers there. Monsieur is 'en touriste'?" His gentle curiosity was freed from all impertinence by his charming manner.

"No—not exactly. I'm going there on business."

McTaggart paused a moment, then made up his mind.

"I've inherited a property from my mother's brother. He was killed in an accident, near Rome, with his sons."

The effect on his audience was electrical.

"But, Monsieur!" ... he stuttered—"è impossibile!—Monsieur is not the English Milord?—the new Marchese Maramonte?"

For the third time off came his hat.

"I'm afraid so." Peter laughed outright. For the old man, wiry and light, was on his feet, bowing before him with a deferential air.

"My humble 'félicitations' to Monsieur le Marquis. His lawyer, Jacopo Vanni—at his service."

"No!—really?" McTaggart held out his hand and shook the other's heartily; and by that simple act, unknown to himself, he secured a life-long friend.

"You're just the very man I wanted to meet."

"We were in despair," Vanni continued, "no news from England when I left yesterday! I have been in Florence on business for the Marchesa, and, I suppose,

the message arrived later."

"I only wired early this morning. The letter had miscarried and reached me last night. As you see, I have wasted no time in coming!" McTaggart smiled back at the eager old face.

"And now, can you tell me some of my new duties? I am anxious to learn the extent of my inheritance and I feel rather like a duck out of water! Not speaking Italian makes it worse. I should really be grateful for any advice."

"Monsieur le Marquis does me honour." The bright eyes devoured him, approving his handsome face. "Every inch a Maramonte!" Unconsciously, he spoke aloud.

"Really?" McTaggart was interested. "I was always told I resembled my mother."

"Sicuro!" Vanni's voice was stirred. "All save the eyes—of the English blue. And when Monsieur sees his gallery of portraits, he will feel at home! Monsieur le Marquis is like his famous ancestor—that Giordano Maramonte, the hero of Montaperti, who led in the capture of the Carroccio of Firenze ... And there is a look of the Marchese Cesare—who went down to fame for his attack on the Citadel. He drove the Spaniards out of Siena—that was before the last great siege..."

His words poured on. He was plainly lost in the history of the house he served, back in those war-like days of the past when great names testified to greater deeds.

McTaggart realized he had touched on a hobby. "Tell me all about my family." He leaned back, happy, and lit a cigarette while the old man drew with lightning gestures on his absorbing hoard of knowledge.

Of Guelph and Ghibeline intrigue, of wars with Spain and Florentine raids; of Popes and Emperors, Patriots, Tyrants; of the endless strife between the nobles and people; of the "Sacrifice of the Useless Mouths" and the Plague that ran like a burning flame.

So enthralled was McTaggart that the time passed on flying wings until, at length, the train swept into the last noisy tunnel.

Vanni started. He glanced at his watch.

"Ecco Siena!"—and, at the words, a curious thrill ran through his listener of excitement tinged with awakened pride.

For the vast part his house had played in the wars and government of the city, their reckless heroism and careless prodigality had thrown a new light of fiery romance on this inheritance of his.

With it was blent an odd shrinking, the nervousness of the Englishman before the customs and conventions alien to his normal life.

The train emerged, lights twinkled. The long journey was accomplished.

CHAPTER XV

Signor Vanni, full of importance and inwardly delighted at the accident which had placed the hero of the hour in his hands, gathered up his portfolio and descended nimbly on to the platform with a suave:

"If Monsieur le Marquis will deign to wait?"

He was off, crying lustily for the station-master.

McTaggart drew out his watch. It was nearly four o'clock. He felt hungry but his weariness had passed, killed by his present sense of excitement. The air, crisp and sweet, blew in his face like frozen honey, the night was still; and through the dark he could just make out the sheltering walls rising black and sheer with a crenellated edge against the indigo of the sky, where a single luminous star was poised.

The lawyer returned with a bowing superintendent, two bowing servants and a bowing porter.

McTaggart's cap was busy again as the little group fussed about him.

He found himself at last in a vast landau, the lawyer facing him, two men on the box and a third individual mounted behind on a narrow platform between the wheels. "Like the Lord Mayor!" he said to himself and checked a wild desire to laugh.

They rumbled on through deserted streets, dark and narrow, mounted a hill, turned to the left, past a Hotel where lights were gleaming, and on again.

"The Signora Marchesa," said the lawyer, "makes her compliments and is looking forward to receive Monsieur le Marquis in the morning. The hour being so late, he would wish to sleep and, doubtless, prefers this arrangement. She asked Giuseppe to deliver the message."

"Very thoughtful of my aunt." McTaggart felt relieved at the news.

They twisted down between high houses and then there came a sudden halt. Lanterns flashed out. Peering eagerly, he saw a massive doorway before him, flanked by windows narrow and deep with spiked bars, rusty from age. With a hollow echo they drove through the arch and emerged into an inner court, vast and full of shadows thrown by the high walls on every side.

In the centre a fountain towered up: dolphins massed with icicles and a deep basin covered with frost supported by crouching griffins.

The carriage encircled it and stopped. The door was opened. McTaggart descended.

He found himself gazing at a marble staircase, silvery-white, with shallow steps that curved round like a parchment scroll, fairy-like, against the night.

He passed up like a man in a dream. It led to a long gallery on the first floor, dim and high, open on one side to the air and laced with slender twisted columns. Where these supported the domed roof arches formed and the carved points bit into the outer dark like sharp teeth nibbling the heart of the sky.

A bell tolled with a sweet, low note and the entrance doors were flung wide. With a sudden sense of warmth and light he passed through into the palace.

Walls hung with tapestry, a painted ceiling, myriad candles glimmering in crystal lustres...

For a second McTaggart stood there, dazed. He felt an odd lump rise in his throat. Then Signor Vanni touched his arm with a whispered word of apology.

"If Monsieur le Marquis would speak to Beppo? Beppo was there in his mother's time."

"Mia madre..." The long-forgotten words rose from the mirage of the past. He looked down into a wrinkled face: an old, old man in shabby livery. The next moment his hand went out and was held in the shaky clasp of age.

"Mother of all the Saints! *Her* face!" Tears were in the dim old eyes. "Ahi!—she was a Saint herself. A thousand humble welcomes 'a Lei'! He must forgive this old man who worships his blessed lady's memory ... God be praised that I see this day..."

"Basta ... Basta!" Vanni checked him as the soft Italian speech flowed on, unintelligible to McTaggart, smiling down at the faithful servant. "The Signor Marchese is tired and would sleep."

The "maestro di casa" effaced himself, leading the way, on tottering feet, through a long suite of rooms, into a corridor lined with statues and Etruscan pottery.

They came at last to narrow stairs, built in the thickness of the wall, mounted these to another passage and paused before a double door.

Within was a bedroom with marble floor and deep-set windows draped with silk. A stove was burning and candles gleamed, but the place felt cheerless and rather damp: magnificent, but strangely bare, the high walls discolored with age.

Another servant appeared with a tray and a steaming tureen of thick red soup. McTaggart welcomed it where he sat at a round table before the stove with sandwiches and fruit arranged in heavy dishes of silver-gilt.

The bread, he thought, tasted sour, but when the man filled his glass with a golden wine, clear and sparkling, he drank it down and his eyes shone.

"What is it?" he asked Vanni—"not champagne?" The lawyer smiled.

"Asti Spumante—The late Marquis was well known for his cellar. And the

dried figs and oranges and the goat's milk cheese are from the estate."

"Excellent." McTaggart approved. "Won't you have a glass with me?"

The old man was visibly pleased. He propounded an elaborate toast.

"And now, I think, with his permission, I will retire." He bowed low. "May pleasant dreams wait on slumber." The door closed gently behind him.

McTaggart drew a deep breath, glad at last to be alone. He finished the wine and began to smoke, his cold feet planted against the stove.

He could not quite free himself from the spell of a fairy-tale; this strange arrival in the night into a mediæval land.

He glanced round him at the room, with its painted ceiling and comfortless floor and the huge bed of gilded wood shrouded with blue brocade.

He began sleepily to undress, but a low tap came at the door.

"Come in!—Entrez!—whatever's the word?"

Beppo appeared with a slim, dark youth.

"Ecco Mario." He explained. The newcomer bowed and stood, expectant, gazing respectfully at his bewildered new master.

McTaggart hunted for a phrase.

"Non capisco." He looked triumphant and immediately old Beppo smiled and fell back on pantomime.

He turned and took from Mario a long garment in thin batiste, embroidered at the neck and wrist, with a breast-pocket where a monogram was worked beneath a tiny coronet.

McTaggart struggled with his mirth. It was evident that his own luggage had been delayed at the closed Customs. This was a relic of his Uncle, destined for his use that night.

Mario bowed and disappeared to return with a small jug of hot water, ivory

brushes and other articles destined for his master's toilette.

Solemnly he arranged the room while Beppo cleared the supper table. Then, to McTaggart's vast relief, both men wished him "good repose."

He locked the door and hastily slipped out of his remaining clothes, proceeding to encase himself in the ridiculous thin night-shirt.

"Can't say much for my Uncle's taste!—it's only fit for a ballet dancer!" He caught sight of himself in the glass and chuckled with a faint disgust. The batiste strained on his broad chest and beneath the folds his legs appeared, long and sinewy. He shivered.

"Brr!—this *is* the limit!"

He drew it up above his knees and gingerly clambered on to his bed; snuggled down among the pillows, thankful for the eider down.

The candle beside him was still alight and, before he leaned to blow it out, he glanced upward curiously at the dark draperies overhead.

And then he started.

For on the ceiling a shadow lay, huge, grotesque: the shadow of a mighty crown! A sudden memory assailed him.

He looked closer. The curtains were drawn into a knot and held in place by a heavy ring of gilded wood, carved into a coronet.

What was it the gipsy had said?

"There's fortune coming over-seas ... and a castle, my fine gentleman..."

Again he heard the husky voice crooning above his outstretched hand.

And he stared at the ceiling, his eyes wide.

For there it hung ... his "golden crown!"

CHAPTER XVI

When he awoke it was ten o'clock.

A shaft of sunshine from under the blind fell across his vast bed and he rubbed his eyes, sleepy, bewildered, wondering where on earth he could be? Then he remembered, felt for his watch, throwing back the heavy clothes, and caught his knees in the frail night-shirt. The batiste ripped as he slid to the floor.

The icy cold of the marble roused him, effectually banishing further sleep. He pattered across toward the light for the first glimpse of the world outside.

Here he was foiled at the start. For the deep windows were set high, the opening far above his head, dating from those warlike times when the solid walls were a shelter from missiles.

He dragged a heavy gilded chair underneath and mounting upon it, drew the faded curtains aside and peered forth eagerly.

But his room faced the court-yard. He could only see the opposite wing of the palace dark against the sky, rugged and gray, with a turreted roof, a picture of mediæval strength.

A cloud of pigeons swirled up, flashing their myriad silver wings, as a servant passed along the gallery, with its twisted columns of carved marble.

Beneath he caught a glimpse of the fountain and against the dazzling sapphire sky, like a lily on a slender stem, a single tower rose above the walls, in faded brick with a pointed belfry, white as snow, and an iron cross.

Dissatisfied, he returned to bed and, conscious of his appetite, rang the bell by his side, his teeth chattering with the cold.

Beppo answered to the summons, his old face wreathed in smiles, voluble and bearing a tray with hot chocolate and rolls. In vain McTaggart tried to gather the gist of the old man's talk. One word stood out plain, recurrent, with a questioning, anxious note.

"Toob"—he pondered upon it as at last the old servant withdrew and he leaned back against the pillows, glad of the somewhat scanty breakfast.

Presently he heard steps. A knock sounded on the door, and in came four men, staggering under a heavy burden. It proved to be an enormous bath, of the kind one associates with a fixed base and many fittings, utterly devoid of paint. McTaggart watched with wide eyes. It was bumped down before the stove, which Mario proceeded to light, and then under Beppo's guidance a sheet was spread over the vast sarcophagus and tucked in to form a lining.

Then the men filed out. The bath was filled with cold water and beside it—like a tender offspring!—a small foot-tub was arranged. From the latter a cloud of steam arose—a welcome sight to McTaggart—and on a chair before the stove was laid a garment in bath-toweling.

Mario approached the bed.

"Good morning to Him. His 'toob' is ready." He smiled with a flash of strong white teeth that lit up the olive face and lingered in the sloe-like eyes.

His tub! McTaggart solved the enigma. And what a tub! He checked a laugh as Beppo gravely took his tray with a glance in which triumph lurked.

But still Mario stood, expectant. His coat was off, his sleeves rolled up and—Beppo, lingering in the rear—he began a long respectful inquiry.

McTaggart, bewildered, shook his head. He caught the words "fregamento"—"massage" ... Good Heavens!—they were going to bathe him!

"Non, non!"—he stammered—"solo!" He pointed to the door, confused, as the two men consulted together.

Beppo resumed his pantomime. He took Mario's strong hand and rubbed it sharply across his chest.

"Ecco! ... 'friction'?" His anxious eyes watched his master's amazed face.

"Io," said McTaggart stoutly—"always ... sempre." He waved them away. "Grazia—ma ... *addio*!"

At this very obvious hint the two servants slowly withdrew.

McTaggart shot from his bed and turned the key in the door. Then his stifled mirth exploded and he laughed until he cried.

"That was a narrow shave," he said, staring into the huge bath. "My uncle had some funny habits—muslin night-shirts and massage! Horrible, this wet sheet..." He dipped a finger in and shivered. "I'll swear there's ice in it——" he said. "Happy thought!" He took the foot-tub and poured in the boiling water.

His bath over, he dressed quickly, then rang the bell for the man, after a vain hunt for razors among the many toilette articles.

But Mario was prepared for this. He shaved McTaggart skilfully, produced powder, produced perfumes—which Peter hurriedly declined.

Then Beppo reappeared, with a message from the Marchesa. She would receive her new nephew as soon as it suited him.

He followed the "maestro di casa" to the further wing of the palace and was shown into a small boudoir hung with a striped primrose silk. The room was dainty, filled with flowers and photographs, scattered about on the modern French furniture above the delicate Aubusson carpet. On an easel under a palm, stood a large portrait in pastel of a dapper little gentleman, with a slim waist and padded shoulders. The face, old but still handsome, bore lines of dissipation around the keen dark eyes. He had grizzled hair, grey eyebrows, and a startlingly black moustache.

"My uncle, I should imagine." McTaggart was bending down to examine the picture more closely when a door on his right was opened by a smiling maid.

"Par ici, Monsieur." She stood aside for him to pass and a musical voice from the room beyond welcomed him.

"Entrez donc!—Bonjour, mon neveu..."

He stood on the threshold, tall and eager, his blue eyes opening wide, as he looked into a dainty bedroom, dim and warm and heavily scented.

Before him was a high bed, draped in black, and against the pillows, vivid, alive, in the sable setting, a young and very lovely woman.

Her hair, of a glossy raven hue, was piled loosely on her head under a boudoir cap of lace and she wore a filmy negligee, from which her arms, white and rounded, escaped beneath knots of ribbon and lay on the black satin bedspread with the effect of chiselled marble.

Her face, oval and ivory-white, was faintly amused. Her great brown eyes, languorous and insolent, swept McTaggart from head to foot.

But what absorbed his attention most was her mouth, like a curved scarlet flower blown on to her still face by a breath of Spring ... He gazed at her.

Then his wits returned to him.

He walked forward and took the hand lazily extended, stooped, and, with a happy inspiration, raised it gravely to his lips.

The Marchesa's dark eyes flashed. The red mouth smiled at him.

"Mais vous êtes tr ... es bien!" She rolled her r's with Italian emphasis.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, my aunt." And, indeed, he only spoke the truth. In a flash he found a valid excuse for his late uncle's dandyism; that somewhat pathetic defiance of age beside his youthful second wife.

"You have well slept?—Had all you needed?" Her French, full of liquid vowel sounds, fell musically on his ears.

"And the 'tub'? Ah! I know the English ways. I say to Beppo: See now!—a cold bath—cold ... cold ...! That is what the English love." She gave a clear, rippling laugh.

"And then you appear—a true Italian! Ma si!" she nodded her head gaily. "A Maramonte—Mon Dieu, I am glad!—without the teeth. You understand?"

"Not quite," McTaggart smiled back, showing a white row as he spoke.

"The English teeth—quel horreur!—that stick out like the wild boar."

The young man laughed outright.

"Oh—we aren't all as bad as that! But Italy is the land of beauty——" he gazed at her—"I am learning that."

Then, suddenly, it flashed across him that his attitude was hardly correct toward a newly made widow, and the mirth died out of his blue eyes.

"I wish," he said, "that my first visit had been at a less painful moment. Believe me..." He stammered, searching for words, trying to find the proper phrase.

She watched him with a shade of malice, divining his perplexity.

"Death is sad," she said calmly. "But it has to be ... and he was old."

McTaggart started. This cold philosophy struck him as distinctly heartless, and with quick intuition she guessed his thought, a touch of sadness in her eyes.

"You think it strange I speak like that?—My nephew, wait ... I am but nineteen. The marriage was arranged for me; I left the convent to come here. Ah! I was young—too young by far!"

Under the ivory of her cheek the colour rose and into her eyes came a shrinking look, like a hurt child, remembering past punishment.

"I come here, to this ... *tomb*," she shivered as she chose the word—"so gay, so fresh ... so innocent! He had seen me once among the Sisters—his cousin was the Mother Superior..."

"And then—to be alone so much. He loved Paris well, you see"—(McTaggart remembered the phrase before and the shrewd glance of the French guard)—"He did not take me even to Rome, but left me here with old Beppo. And jealous!—"

jealous all the time ... of his own sons—of my music master!——

"Ah—what a life!" Her hands went up. She gave a fierce little laugh. "I thank the good God from my heart. I make no pretence to you."

A deep pity stirred the man with a horror of foreign marriages. He thought for a second of Cydonia—and pictured her, here and alone, at the mercy of the late marquis. His soul rose in revolt.

"Poor little Aunt—I understand." His voice was grave, his eyes tender.

She raised herself against the pillows with a quick smile of gratitude.

"My nephew—I like you very much. You have a heart—one feels that. And—see you—I will pray for his soul." She crossed herself with a touch of fervour. "I will have many masses sung ... But regret?—ah, no! that is beyond me."

A silence fell between the pair. McTaggart averted his eyes and they fell on the sombre hangings of the huge funereal-looking bed.

"This is the custom here?" he asked.

"The custom?" She frowned slightly. Then her tense look relaxed. The red lips quivered apart. "Dieu!—qu'il est drôle!" She laughed aloud. "This?—and this?" She touched the curtains, then the counterpane with her hand.

"You think this is mourning, perhaps?—Au contraire..." She shook with mirth.

"Your Uncle had these made for *me* ... il avait des idées ... assez bizarres!" She stretched out one perfect arm on the black satin and admired it.

McTaggart felt a swift horror of the old man with his tired eyes. Then he laughed. The Marchesa's face was like an impudent, healthy child's.

"And now, my nephew—au revoir. We meet again at twelve for lunch."

He stooped and kissed her outstretched hand. The dreaded interview was over.

He found his way into the hall and sat down at a writing-table, determined to get his letter off to Cydonia's father before lunch.

"Dear Sir."

He wrote the words on a sheet edged with an inch of black. Then tore it up and started again.

"Suppose I must call him Mr. Cadell!" This done, he stared into space, searching for an opening phrase; faced with the problem of explaining the urgency of his trip abroad.

"If I start by saying my uncle is dead it opens the question of my inheritance—I shall have to explain about my family and it makes the letter long-winded. Besides, I don't want him to know anything about the title. I'd rather, as I said before, go in and win as Peter McTaggart."

He thought for a moment, then covered a page; read it through and crumpled it up.

"Too colloquial—oh, hang! What on earth am I to say?"

Like many men who talk easily, he could not put his thoughts on paper.

For speech is merely to let loose words; writing to draw them close together.

At last he flung down his pen.

"It's no good!" He rose to his feet. "After all, he's got my wire, and I shall be back within the week. But I wish I could write to Cydonia..." He stood for a moment by the stove. "I do hope they're not worrying her, and that the child understands? I know the letter would never reach her, and I'd rather have it fair and square ... It would make things worse to do anything now the Cadells could call underhand!"

He stretched his arms above his head with a yawn that ended in a sigh. Then started to explore his kingdom, casting dull care aside.

He walked down the corridor, glancing at the statuary, and came, at last, to a pair of doors with a coat of arms carved above them.

Here he hesitated for a second, wondering what lay within, and as he did so he heard a step shuffling along in his wake.

He turned to find an old woman, her head shrouded in a shawl, clasping between her withered hands a rounded jar of baked clay. It had a high handle bridging it resembling that of a market basket, and over this the wrinkled face peered at him with sharp black eyes.

"Buon' giorno," said McTaggart. He stared down at her burden. The old creature smiled back and held it out invitingly.

He saw it was filled with hot ashes, the primitive brazier of the people. He warmed his hands for a moment against it, and then pointed to the door.

"Si, si. Venga, Signore." She slipped past him and turned the handle and he found himself in a picture gallery, dimly lighted, with drawn blinds. The door closed, he was alone. Curiously he stared about him.

Above his head was a painted ceiling, a battle scene, mellow with age, with the slightly artificial splendour of the early Sienese School. But from the walls, on every side, out of their dull gilded frames, faces peered down at him, measuring him with liquid eyes.

McTaggart felt a curious pride, swift and clean, run through him. These were his! The same blood stirred in his veins; here was his real inheritance!

He passed slowly along the room. Men in armour challenged him; Cardinals in scarlet robes; fair women smiled down; children paused in their play...

Then he came to the last picture, vivid, with its modern paint, in contrast to those earlier ones, softened by the touch of time.

A young girl in a white dress, a blue riband at her waist and a leghorn hat that swung from her arm wreathed with tiny pink roses. One hand, with taper [Transcriber's note: tapering?] fingers, lay on the sleek head of a greyhound, the other held her flowing skirts from beneath which a slender foot in white stocking and buckled shoe pointed its way down marble steps against a background of cypresses.

And the face? The smile so like his own, the dark hair piled high, the slim

form and girlish grace...? Tears rose to the young man's eyes.

Here was his mother in her youth. Before that first season in Rome when she had met his father there, and, with the passion of her race, loved and married the hardy Scot, brought down the anger of her house and sailed away to that northern land never more to return home.

It seemed to her son that she smiled now with triumph in her glowing eyes; calling upon him to vindicate the choice she had made in the past.

And, suddenly, the deeper side of his nature responded to the cry. He saw that it lay within his hands to restore her tarnished honour now.

He drew himself up, his mouth firm, aware of a new responsibility. The fairy atmosphere had fled—this was life ... no mere adventure.

He was the last Maramonte. His eyes swept down the long room, past Cesare—the patriot—to Giordano, hero of Montaperti.

His face, under its olive skin, paled, then flushed; his eyes were grave.

For he must hand on the torch ... he caught his breath, seeing Cydonia.

And a new reverence tinged his love. Not only sweetheart and wife but mother. And at the word he pictured her with a little golden-headed son, clasped within her loving arms.

He had that passionate affection the Italian—of all nations on earth—feels for his offspring and, looking up into his mother's lovely face, he shared his secret hope with her.

Then he started with a frown. For, like some unworthy ghost into that throng, centuries old, came the heavy form of Cadell.

This was the blood he chose to mix with that proud Maramonte strain!

It seemed to him, at his treachery, a silence fell upon the room; eyes turned with a cold stare, haughty faces sneered at him...

Cydonia's parent!—He saw him there with his bourgeois birth stamped upon

him; heard again that grating voice, marked the coarse congested face.

For a moment he shrank from the tie.

Then the quick reaction came. What did he owe to this ancient stock? How had they treated his fair young mother?

He was his father's son as well—an Englishman. Up went his head. Cydonia should be his wife—the wife of plain Peter McTaggart.

He swung round and marched out, more in love with her than ever!

CHAPTER XVII

A thaw had followed the long frost and from the South, on eager feet, came Primavera, hooded still but clasping pale buds to her breast.

Birds sang as she glided by, anemones peered through the grass and in the olive trees young leaves danced in the sun like silver coins, tossed up by gay Mother Earth as ransom to the pirate Winter.

Light poured down from the sapphire sky, gilding the ivory city of towers as McTaggart drove through the winding roads, the Marchesa, still muffled in furs, beside him.

They had been to the borders of his estate, by vineyards planted on the slopes in terraces like a giant staircase, screened from the north by dark lines of cypresses, warped with the cruel wind; past fields of oranges and lemons, covered with screens of plaited reeds, to the agent's house where they had lunched and tasted later the olive oil, smooth and sweet, stored in huge jars, suggesting those of the "Forty Thieves."

Now they were returning home, drowsy from the long day spent in the open air, happily tired, soothed by the motion of the carriage.

A mischievous breeze played with the veil the Marchesa wore, of heavy

crape, and every now and then McTaggart could catch a glimpse of her rounded chin and that flower-like mouth beneath the folds, vivid, alive and tantalizing.

He watched for it, lazily, leaning back against the high, padded cushions, and, conscious suddenly of his gaze, she turned her head and broke the silence.

"You are quite decided then, Pietro?" Her voice was sweetly disconsolate. "You will not come with me to Fiesole?"

"I can't, really. I'm very sorry. I must be getting back to England"—a faint smile curved his lips. "I've important business there just now. I assure you I'd stay if I could."

His aunt laughed, a trifle sharply.

"That means a woman, I should say!—'Important business'—at your age. There never yet was a Maramonte who was happy unless he was playing with fire."

Her dark eyes flashed through her veil an inquisitive glance, but he shook his head. He was not in a mood for confidences. Moreover, he knew that Cydonia's birth would hardly fulfil his aunt's requirements and dreaded a possible catechism.

"It's your sister's villa, near Florence, where you are going, isn't it?"

The Marchesa nodded lazily.

"And beautiful..." she stirred herself—"it faces the Arno valley with a wide loggia due south. She's my eldest sister—I was the baby—and her daughter, Bianca, must be sixteen. There's no son—such a grief! My brother-in-law breaks his heart about it. He is a Florentine himself, with an old palazzo (now shut up) and some fine pictures near the Cascine."

"You will be happy there?" asked Peter.

"But, yes!" She shrugged her shoulders lightly. "For a time, until my mourning's over. It's a quiet spot, Fiesole, and I am very attached to my sister. Then I shall go to live in Rome."

"And your life begins?" He guessed her thought.

"Chi lo sa?" But her eyes were bright. "At any rate, it's farewell to Siena! In Rome one can live as one likes."

"May I come and see you there?"

Impulsively she turned to him.

"Mais je crois bien!—For as long as you can. I shall be proud of my handsome nephew. And then, caro mio, I will find you a wife." She nodded her head with an air of wisdom.

"Some beautiful Roman. Let me think ... There is Princess Doria's only girl—the Principe was my mother's cousin—and Donna Maria Archiveschi...? Well—we shall choose, you and I."

A sudden thought sprang into her brain. Why not Bianca?—her sister's child. What an excellent match it would be for her—as soon as she should leave the convent.

Moreover, it would suit the Marchesa. She would have a double right of entry in the Maramonte family circle and indulge to the full her love of intrigue.

Following up this train of thought, she smiled sweetly at McTaggart.

"You could not spare me one week now?—a little week before you return ...? At Fiesole—just think again. To abandon your poor aunt at once—one sees you do not care for her! ... Just seven days, Pietro mio, to leave me happily settled there?"

She drew back her veil and her velvet eyes, like darkest pansies, pleaded mutely. McTaggart summoned all his strength, conjuring up Cydonia.

"*Please* don't make it any harder! I'd love to come, you know that. It's not every day in one's life one ... inherits such a perfect aunt!"

He smiled at her with real affection.

"I'll come back when you're at Rome—(and not alone!" he said to himself).

"But I'm bound to return to England first and settle up my business there."

"You talk as if you kept a shop!" She shrugged her shoulders pettishly. "What does the Marquis Maramonte want with commissions on the 'Bourse'?"

He laughed outright with the memory of her disgusted, lovely face when he had told her of his profession.

"Fi donc!" Mischievous, she shook a slender finger at him. "It would make poor Gino turn in his grave."

"And serve him right!" was McTaggart's thought. He could not forgive the dead man for his heartless treatment of his sister. He had the Italian's centuries-deep love of justice and liberty and was not without a strain of revenge, the lingering trace of some far-off "Vendetta."

He sat there moody, his mouth hard; grimly glad that the scales of fate had weighed in favour of his rise into the power denied to her.

The sun, sinking toward the hills, plunged the city walls in shadow as they drove through the Porta Romana and past the great church of the Servites.

Then, winding round the ancient market, they emerged into the open "Campo"—that curious shell-shaped piazza where throbs the heart of old Siena.

"What is that tower?" McTaggart pointed. "I can see it from my bedroom window."

"The Torre del Mangia," his aunt replied, "above the palace of the Commune. You must see the frescoes in the Chapel, by Bazzi—pure quattro cento. And there is the famous Fonte Gaia—after Giacomo della Quercia. The original fragments are in the museum. That is a copy—but still fine. This Square is where 'il Palio' is run, the two occasions in the year when Siena awakes to life——" she smiled scornfully as she spoke.

"Dio!—I shall be glad to go—it is a city of the dead. And cold...!" She shivered and drew her furs closer, aware of the sunset hour.

They came at last into the palace. Beppo received them in the hall with letters for his young master. McTaggart eagerly gathered them up.

"Bring 'sweet wine' into the boudoir," said the Marchesa to the servant. She turned to her nephew. "It's warmer there. I will join you when I get rid of my furs."

But McTaggart went to his room first, anxious to find if the letters held any news of Cydonia, and, locking the door, sat down by his stove.

There were three of them, sent on from his club. A line from Bethune, a tailor's bill and an envelope in a clerkly hand. He tore it open carelessly.

Then, quickly, he turned it over, glanced at the signature, set his teeth; and his face flushed with growing anger as he went through the contents again.

It was signed "Ebenezer Cadell," and contained a narrow unfastened note.

He read that too, then leaned back and swore aloud in his bitter chagrin.

Never in all his wildest dreams had he pictured himself a jilted man! Yet here it was—he smiled sourly—Cydonia had thrown him over!

Cydonia—the woman he loved. The girl for whom, in his loyalty, he had sworn to sacrifice the pride of his ancient and historic name.

She had "made a mistake." He read it again, holding to the light of the stove the mauve paper with the monogram "C" engraved in a fantastic wreath.

She was "too young"—as her "parents said"—"to think of marriage for some years." She hoped "Peter would understand"—and "not feel very hurt!" She would "like to keep him as a friend."

("I'll be damned if she will!"—said the angry man.)

Her Mother had been "quite ill" again, upset by their "secrecy."

("Dash it all!" In the midst of his pain McTaggart smiled. "She can't expect a proposal in public—whatever is she driving at?")

Cydonia hoped he would not write. "Father" thought it better not. She was "VERY sorry." For the first time the careful writing shook a little. A line crossed through revealed the fact that she would "miss him dreadfully."

But she thought her parents "knew best." They had been "very kind" to her—and "Father was writing to explain."

This statement was distinctly true. For Cadell rubbed salt into the sore!

McTaggart turned once more to his letter.

To begin with it was plain he mistrusted McTaggart's unforeseen departure; only too evident that he thought this foreign trip a way of escape from the outcome of an evening's folly!

But, in any case, whether or no his intentions toward Cydonia were honorable and uninvolved by any "pecuniary consideration," McTaggart stood no earthly chance of success as his son-in-law.

Cydonia was destined to higher flights ... (McTaggart thought of Bethune's words: "Some young ass with a title and debts!")

She would inherit a large fortune and her beauty and costly education "would fit her for any position."

"She's *almost* worthy," McTaggart sneered, "to become the Marchesa Maramonte."

For anger was still dominant. The lonely longing was to follow.

The letter, pompous, devoid of tact, went on to a definite prohibition. Cadell closed the door of his house in the face of the undesirable suitor. A note of spite rang out sharp in the older man's reference to his daughter's note. "The enclosure will make the matter clear."

It did. McTaggart leaned down and pushed both letters into the stove, watching the flames rise high, turning love into ashes.

Long he sat there, his chin on his hands, his blue eyes staring into space. The clock ticked on noisily, marking the death of more than Time. Broken ideals, vanished dreams ... enthusiasm, loyalty; wasted at an unworthy shrine—his mind veered round at last to Fantine.

Women were all alike, it seemed. Creatures of impulse, without honour...

There came a knock at his bedroom door—a message from the Marchesa.

He rose to his feet with a curious smile. The French maid was waiting outside.

McTaggart, pointing to Bethune's letter, explained that business of importance required an immediate answer. He would be with her mistress shortly—the time to write a hurried line...

He paused as the girl raised her eyes and, in the darkness of the passage, slipping an arm round her waist, he stole a kiss from her fresh mouth, amused at the maid's swift surrender.

Then he passed her and went downstairs. "That's the only way to treat them!" he said to himself, with no sense of pleasure, but a perverse, cold disgust.

In the hall he sat down, drew out a sheet of black-edged paper with a coronet engraved upon it and wrote forthwith to Cadell.

He abided by the parent's decision ... Cydonia was, indeed, young ... He wished, however, to make it clear that his departure for Italy had been, by its nature, unavoidable.

His uncle and his cousins were dead. He gave them their full sonorous titles. And, as heir to their fortune and estates, his presence had been imperative.

A faint flicker of malice passed over his mouth as he wrote the phrase and pictured the recipient's eyes starting out of his red face.

Mr. Cadell could rest assured that never again would McTaggart trespass across the threshold of his house ... He thanked him for past hospitality.

Then he signed it, read it through, folded it neatly and enclosed it.

Before him lay a bunch of seals and a long stick of black wax. He lit the taper and, smiling slightly, gathered up the largest of these on which were the Maramonte arms surmounted by a coronet.

He pressed it down heavily onto the liquid splash of wax.

"It's snobbish"—his lips curled—"but I know Cadell—it will make him squirm!"

He rang and handed the letter to Beppo. "For the post—presto!"—and walked upstairs. "May I come in?" He opened the door of his Aunt's boudoir, his eyes bright with the pain his smiling mouth concealed.

"Ah, mon cher, how late you are!" It might have been Fantine—he said to himself. But there he misjudged his aunt.

There were only, really, two sorts of women—his bitter reasoning went on—the innocent and stupid and weak: and the strong ones, clever and corrupt.

"Sit down and have some wine." From her seat in the low "bergère" she held out an inviting hand. "Dio! how cold you are!"

For his fingers were icy, his brain hot.

"Never with you, ma chère tante—Impossible." He bent his head to kiss her fragrant slender wrist—then changed his mind as he caught a glance from the dark eyes full of coquetry.

For the first time he took advantage of the new relationship, but without pleasure, merely an outward symbol of the queer recklessness he felt.

"My business is settled. Are you glad? I'm coming with you to Fiesole."

She offered him her other cheek with the frank gaiety of a child.

"Tu vois!" She laughed merrily. "But, indeed, I am charmed. And my sister, too—she will be glad to welcome you." Her face sobered on the words. She poured him out a glass of wine, watching his smile fade away. He looked pale and strained now. Shrewdly she probed his change of mood.

"That 'business'——" she said to herself. "I was right—a woman!—I wonder where? The boy's wounded—one sees that—let's hope it's only a passing fancy. All the better for my plan ... at no time is a man so weak as after a lover's quarrel. But now—one must move cautiously. I shall wire to Fiesole to-night—

Bianca must leave the Convent. It would be wise to find her there—a surprise to us both." She glanced at the clock. Then, in her soft, musical voice, she went on with her speech.

"You will not find it dull, I hope? With my mourning, you understand, we shall live very quietly. Just you and I and my sister there—and my brother-in-law, en famille."

"I shall like that," he spoke sincerely. "I'm rather tired of London life—a little rest will do me good. It's so nice of you to wish to have me."

He sipped the glass of sweet liqueur he held with a sudden secret craving for a good strong brandy and soda to steady his quivering nerves.

For the reaction was coming on. Beneath his armour of wounded pride a sense of loss was stabbing him.

He did not close his eyes that night.

CHAPTER XVIII

Meanwhile, under grey skies, in a gloomy room near Primrose Hill, another young man faced (with dismay) a definite tide in his affairs.

He sat in a shabby dressing-gown before a table covered with papers, sorted now in grim piles of unpaid bills, reading a writ.

Stephen Somerfield stared at it, his weak good-looking face drawn into lines of hopeless disgust.

"It's a deuce of a mess!" So he summed it up. "What an unlucky beggar I am!—I thought it was pretty bad, but this"—he threw down the document—"is the limit!"

For months past he had postponed a thorough survey of his liabilities, with the shallowness of his character, preferring to ignore the worst. Even now, when

he found himself hopelessly involved in debt, he could raise no better reason for it than his own "chronic ill-luck!"

With this phrase he stifled his conscience. Where another man would have realized the necessity for immediate action, he sat there numbed, half unbelieving, a martyr in his own opinion.

He felt no spur toward work as a means to solve the enigma. He could only look back and vent his anger on those concerned in his career who had failed at length to come forward to the assistance of a wastrel.

He cursed his father, his hand clenched, his green eyes full of spite.

He could see him now, still erect despite the heavy burden of years, at that final painful interview, when heart-sore at his son's extravagance he had flatly refused further help.

He allowed Stephen two hundred a year, in addition to the eighty pounds his mother had left him, annually, considering this a fair arrangement, and had told him crudely to "go and work!"

But work was the last thing Stephen sought. He had had the misfortune when barely twenty to meet a rich widow, double his age, who had taken a fancy to the boy.

She had made him a home in her pleasant house, petted and fed him much in the fashion she would have treated a favourite spaniel, but secretly amused by his pretensions.

With his sentimental, greenish eyes under their long, fair lashes, his clear complexion and pointed chin he had seemed not unlike a pretty girl.

He suited her purpose very well, not important enough to cause scandal, and this rich and somewhat lonely woman had paid gladly for his companionship.

It suited Stephen Somerfield, too.

He escorted her everywhere, enjoying the luxury of her car, executing her commissions, buying theatre tickets and planning facilities for her continual round of pleasure.

But she never made the signal mistake of sharing her purse with the man. There were no "perquisites" to be gleaned, save an occasional lonely "fiver" handed over for Bridge at her house.

She paid his expenses only when with him; and, when she died suddenly, after a bare two days' illness, every penny of her money went back to her husband's people.

Before this disaster fell, Stephen had been caught up in the movement, then new, of Woman's Suffrage, in his liege lady's train.

He turned it to account in the lean days that followed, glad to augment his slender income by becoming the paid secretary to one of the most prominent branches.

Here fortune sent him Mrs. Uniacke, eager, hypnotized in turn by the shrill cry of woman's wrongs, but ignorant of business matters, glad to turn to him for advice. Little by little he strengthened the tie, slipping into her daily life; inwardly sore at the "chronic ill-luck" which forced him to accept her poor hospitality after a course of Ritz dinners, yet too shrewd to miss the economy, under the present heavy cloud.

But nothing could check his love of show. He ran up tailor bills galore; hatters and bootmakers learned to know him, credit was failing everywhere. Now the day of reckoning had dawned, tradesmen's patience at an end.

Something must be done at once. He swore moodily at his bills.

He got up from his seat at the table, went to the cupboard, found a cork-screw and opened a bottle of brandy there with this typical reflection:

"I'm jolly glad now I ordered a dozen! A stroke of luck meeting Charlie like that..." He referred to a school friend of narrow means who had lately entered a wine merchant's business and had run against Stephen in the street and parted from him with an order.

He filled his glass up with water—the grocer had flatly refused to deliver further syphons to his credit—and, on his way back to the table, he paused for a moment thoughtfully to study his pale face in the glass.

"I wonder?" He smiled at the reflection, smoothing back his sleek hair.

"You never know ... I've a mind to try it!—Women are queer kittle-cattle. It's just on the cards she'd rise to it. Anyhow, it can do no harm."

He sat down, drank thirstily, then took up his pen and with knit brows.

"Dear Mrs. Uniacke," he began at the top of a plain sheet of paper. (No date and no address; he was not without a certain method!)

"Will you excuse my dining with you? I'm so sorry and disappointed, but the fact is I am faced to-night with harassing business of my own and really quite unfit for company.

"For some time past I've longed to tell you of all these painful worries of mine. You're so awfully kind and *understanding*..."

He broke off and drained his glass.

"She'll like that—they always do!" then picked up his pen again.

"I'm really in a dreadful hole. I think I explained to you once that my father has never been quite fair to me—a hard man, fond of his money—and my sister is his favourite child. I lost my mother years ago and have no one to turn to in my trouble except yourself—so I hope you'll forgive me—but I'm feeling so utterly wretched to-night.

"The fact is I can't go on living in London on my means. It's impossible with my small salary and the result is pressing debts.

"I'm seriously thinking of cutting it all——" ("She won't like that!"—he smiled as he wrote) "and trying again in a new land—Australia—perhaps, or Canada. This country is played out—the competition too strong—and, unless I can see my way clear to raising——"

he paused—"a hundred pounds ... (I daren't ask more at the start, and this would prove a useful sop...) I'm afraid I shall have to throw up my work and, what is more painful still—to say good-bye to my few real friends and start afresh overseas.

"I've written and written to my father!—but he simply ignores my prayer for help. If only my mother were alive how different life would be for me!"

He smiled sourly over the phrase. For Mrs. Somerfield's early death had been accelerated by drink—one of the many crushing blows his hard-working father had survived.

"I know," he started to write again, "you will treat this letter as *strictly private*. I am bound to come in for a good round sum when my father dies, and with help *now* I could guarantee to return the loan—with the usual interest, of course.

"I feel I have not the slightest excuse for turning to you in my need—but I can't bear to think of parting with the one true friend life has brought me.

"You have been *more* than ... a sister to me (I can't say 'Mother'—it's too absurd), and, if ever a man were grateful for it, that man is

"Your ... broken,
"STEPHEN."

He read it through thoughtfully, smiling a little at the finale.

"'Broke' would be better!—but, on the whole, I think it's a pretty useful epistle."

He fastened and sealed it carefully, then glanced at the clock and rang the bell.

"It ought to catch Mrs. Uniacke before Jill gets back from college."

An untidy maid answered the summons, thrusting her head round the door, with a soiled collar, elaborate hair and a certain pretty anæmic fairness.

"Well—what now, Mr. Stephen?"

"Come here, Letty." He beckoned to her. "Would you like to do something for me?" He smiled, laying a hand on her arm. The girl coloured at his touch.

"You're always wantin' somethin'," she said.

"And get it sometimes—eh, Letty? There—don't be cross! Give us a kiss..."

But she drew herself away from him with a toss of her averted head.

"I'm not that sort—I've told you so." Her voice was sullen, her face strained.

"You've no call to talk like that—I'd lose my place if the Missus knew—it ain't fair..."

She wavered suddenly under the sentimental eyes.

"Well—I'll do it. A letter, I s'pose? To that 'ouse in the Terrace where you go night after night to meet yer ... 'Jill'!" She brought the name out with a snap.

"Wrong this time——" he still smiled, looking up at the moody face, faintly coloured under its curls of puffed-out, ashen hair.

"Jill is no friend of mine, my dear. She hates me—and it's mutual! This is a letter to her mother—business for the Woman's Cause."

The girl brightened visibly.

"Well—I 'ope we gets the vote. It's time we did and better wages. I'm sick of being called 'Skivvy! Skivvy!' by every shop boy in Chalk Farm. We'll make *them* 'skivvies' by-and-bye! I'm tired o' men—they're all alike! They gets the fun while we slave—it's a dog's life to be a girl!"

"Not always." Stephen answered softly. "Not when you're pretty—eh, Letty?"

He placed the letter in her hand, and, stooping quickly, stole a kiss.

She sprang back with a little cry. Then stood there, her lip quivering, tears not far from her hazel eyes.

"I told you ... I wouldn't. Never again!"

"Oh! a kiss!—what's a kiss?" He shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. "There—run away—can't you see I'm busy?" He sat down again at the table.

For a moment the child hesitated—for child she was by the test of time—love and resentment struggling within her; then, with tight lips, she flung away.

"Good Lord!" Stephen yawned. "Bother the girl. I've turned her head. I'd like to leave these beastly rooms—only there's that confounded bill. And Letty's useful, after a fashion."

His eyes fell on the fire. He knew she stole many a lump of coal when his meagre scuttle failed—pitying the improvident man she had made the hero of her dreams; under the spell of his green eyes and careless familiarity.

Meanwhile, as he sat and smoked one of Mrs. Uniacke's cigarettes, with which he had carefully filled his case after his last meal with her, the servant crossed Primrose Hill, through the damp evening air, and, gaining the terrace near the park, delivered her lord's begging letter.

Jill had not yet returned home. Roddy was far away at school and a silence hung about the house with its dingy blinds and fogged windows.

Mrs. Uniacke was upstairs, mending the edge of a shabby skirt that had suffered during a rainy day from a long tramp in a procession.

Indeed, the wear and tear of 'the Cause' reflected itself in her very clothes; but the thin face, with its bird-like look of brightness and vivid emotion, its high cheek-bones, and quick flush, was filled with the inner fire of hope.

They were getting nearer to their goal. She said the words softly aloud as she bent her frail shoulders over the bed, pinning together the frayed edges.

"Pioneers, O Pioneers..." She could hear the throb of marching steps, see at last the faint line of the distant hills where freedom lay. What mattered, then, if the road were long, and the sharp rock cut her weary feet, when on the horizon a new day dawned—an era of justice for her sex?

Something achieved, something done...

There came a knock at her bedroom door and Lizzie entered with a letter between a dirty finger and thumb.

An odd premonition of disaster seized Mrs. Uniacke as she took it. She waited for the servant to go before she broke the careful seal. And, as she read, she gave a gasp. Stephen—leaving her? ... deserting the Cause...? Here was a shattering of her dreams, a swift blow out of the dark.

She left her sewing and sat down, the letter open on her knees.

One definite thought held her now—this must be stopped—at any cost!

But where was she to find the money? She crossed to the table by the window, unlocked a drawer and drew out her pass-book, turning the pages feverishly.

There was Roddy, clamouring for clothes, household bills in abeyance, Jill's music lessons to pay ... Then, like a flash, it came to her. Her diamond star! Yes—that must go.

Anything—to keep Stephen!

She felt like a man who for many months has moved on crutches and finds himself suddenly bereft of them, helpless, without support ...

But was it fair?—fair to Jill. The star had been her husband's gift—she had meant to leave it to her child.

The fight began. In reality, it resolved itself into a choice between the pair—Stephen, her friend, and Jill ... that "independent" daughter.

The adjective betrayed her mood.

For, proud as she was in her mother's heart of the bright young girl with her clever brain, the rankling fact was hidden there—her offspring had outgrown the nest.

She could not realize that the age was mainly responsible for the lack of what she called "proper respect"—that mid-Victorian subservience.

She held that what *she* considered fit was the natural guidance for the girl; that the latter should shape her every thought in the mould of the past generation.

Yet she, herself, had broken loose. It did not occur to her to weigh the question of militant suffrage in the same scales her own mother had used...

Marriage had given her the right to an independent judgment, she thought—the full authority of the woman.

She did not see that life had changed. That the youth of to-day asserted their claim to a freedom of thought unknown in her time, upheld by a sounder education.

She hated in secret the very word. It had been sufficient in her day for a girl to possess a smattering of surface knowledge from old-fashioned primers. A little French, history, grammar, needlework and "good manners": of music enough to produce "pieces" when required for home consumption. But no training for the brain—little logic or reasoning power—the arts neglected for fear they should bring an alarming hint of Bohemianism. And "what mother says is right." This was an axiom, weighty, approved; stifling all further argument, the Alpha and Omega of the question.

Jill's intensely modern attitude, fostered by her college life, her alarming tendency to revoke old standards of convention—even her religious doubts, honestly faced, shocked her mother and threatened her authority. She mourned in secret over her child.

Stephen, now—her face relaxed—was always attentive, glad to learn ... With a charming courtesy he bent to her will, respecting her every opinion.

With her delicate purity of intention it never occurred to her to see that the fact of sex was involved here, Nature at work in her hidden ways.

She would have shrunk from the suggestion that it flattered her woman's heart to find that a man, much younger than herself, could turn to her for inspiration.

And then there was the link between them—'the Cause'—daily growing stronger, and Jill's open scepticism, that cut her mother to the quick. Roddy, of course, was only a boy! Mrs. Uniacke smiled faintly. You expected your son to break away early or later from "home" opinions.

Never once in this tangled maze did she see the weakness of her position: a champion of woman's rights—refusing the same to her only daughter.

Again she read Stephen's letter. Then, with a determined hand, she drew her cheque book nearer to her. The parasite had gained the day. She told herself it was for the Cause. The faint suspicion of dishonesty she thrust rigidly from her mind, realizing subconsciously that to place her action on other grounds was to

open up a dangerous question.

But, for the first time in her life, sentiment stole into the friendship. The fault—if it were—was an error of love; she could not bear to part from Stephen.

Then she raised her head and listened, hearing the front door open and shut, and Jill's voice, happy, young:

"Mother!—Mother ... Where are you, Mother?"

She slipped the cheque book in the drawer with the open letter and turned the key, her cheeks flushed, her head high. She did not need Jill's advice!

"Here I am——" she went to the stairs and the girl raced up, two steps at a time.

"Oh, Mother—I've got such a lot to tell you—it's been such a lovely day!"

Impulsively her arms went out, seizing the slight, waiting figure in a childish hug, her fresh mouth pressed upon her mother's cheek.

"There!—I'm feeling so happy. I got 'Excellent' for Ancient History and I'm top at Algebra this week. And Judy Severn's giving a party—and she wants me to come and bring a man. Peter's away, but I thought, perhaps, I'd ask Mr. Bethune—what do you think? It's on the 9th. A real dance." Madly she waltzed her mother round.

"Stop, Jill!" Mrs. Uniacke laughed—the girl's gaiety was infectious. She dropped breathless into a chair, Jill on her knees by her side.

"Isn't it ripping?" She pulled off her cap and threw it neatly on the bed, her dark, ruffled hair like a cloud round her excited, pretty face.

"Jill—your hat!" Her mother frowned.

"Well, it's so old—it can't hurt—and rabbit skin!"

Her happy laugh took the sting out of the words.

"But that reminds me—about my frock...? I've not a single thing to wear."

"And what about your white muslin?" An anxious look crept into Jill's eyes at the note in Mrs. Uniacke's voice.

"Oh—Mother—I *can't* ... not to Judy's party! And it's *so* short—up to my knees." She sighed. "I wish I'd stop growing. I let it down, with a false hem, you remember—when Aunt Elizabeth came here?"

"It will have to do." Unconsciously, her mother glanced across the room to the locked drawer where the cheque lay, signed and payable to Stephen.

Jill drew away slightly. She clasped her hands round her knees, with a sombre face, staring down at her mended shoes and a darn in her stocking.

"Then I can't go." Her voice was hard. "I won't wear that old frock. It's so tight over the chest I can hardly breathe." She bit her lips.

Mrs. Uniacke, watching her, wavered. "You could make a fichu, couldn't you? I could find you a piece of lace, perhaps—and add a frill?"

Jill scowled.

"Sounds like an early Victorian picture." She rose to her feet. "With a crinoline and black mittens—thanks, awfully. I'll tell Judy the party's off."

This was the mood her mother disliked—slangy and impertinent. So she summed it up to herself, resenting her daughter's manner.

"It's entirely your own fault if you do. I am quite prepared to help you, Jill. We could easily alter the frock between us. It isn't as if you were really 'out.'"

Jill gave her a quick glance.

"I could make one myself for thirty shillings—I know I could. And it isn't much. I haven't had a new dress this year..." Her grey eyes were wistful.

"It can't be done." At this fresh attack Mrs. Uniacke's mouth tightened—"there's Roddy to think of beside yourself..."

"To say nothing of Stephen's expenses?"

The words escaped Jill against her will. Little she guessed their significance, but Mrs. Uniacke flushed crimson. For a moment she could have boxed Jill's ears.

"That will do." She turned away and, with hands that shook, took up her work, leaning over the torn skirt, her back turned to her daughter.

Jill closed the door behind her. She stood for a moment on the stairs, her dark brows drawn together, her mouth a narrow scarlet line.

"Oh!" she said—"I'd like ... I'd like——" she stamped her foot—"to *murder* Stephen!"

PART III

"Flower o' the peach
Death for us all and his own life for each."

CHAPTER XIX

McTaggart lay on the golden sands of Viareggio, warming himself, lazily, like a lizard, in the sun.

Before him stretched the broad, unbroken curve of the bay, a dazzling sheet of sapphire blue, save where the white "Molo," like a slender finger pointed from the basin of the docks, where the shipping yards lay, and masts and spars went up in a cluster of spear points, dark against the sky.

His eyes followed the line of the pier to the lighthouse at the end and wandered off through the haze to the distant shore, where a group of cypresses clustered, sombre and grim, like sentinels stationed, guarding the land. The dark, tapering trees in the brilliance of the sunshine held a hint of sadness like the

presence of a grave; appropriate to the scene where that spirit of fire and air, the poet Shelley, had been sacrificed to the waves.

McTaggart rolled over, the sun too hot on his face, and, digging his elbows into the sand, his chin propped on his hands, felt the warm rays play on his bare, brown shoulders, above his scanty bathing dress.

Now he could see the other point of the silver crescent of shore. Here were noble heights as well as the sense of space. For the Carrara mountains rose against the sky, white and peaked and holy, with soft, curded wings like Delia Robbia angels against a blue font.

Below them came slopes in delicate silver point: olive trees quivering in the dazzling light, and, in the foreground, a low belt of pines, straggling out like a fringe round the sandy race course.

McTaggart's own bathing shed was one of the last of the hundreds that had sprung up, like mushrooms, on the beach; for, in the summer months, Viareggio was packed with a gay and fashionable Italian crowd.

Close to him, hand in hand, a circle of merry bathers, in brightly striped dresses of every shape and hue, were revelling in the water, with shrill bursts of laughter, splashing up and down, like children at play.

The men with their dark hair and wet olive skins, the women in bathing caps of gay knotted silk, with bare arms and necks and that flashing smile which seems the heritage of the white-toothed Southern race, suggested a frieze of laughing fauns and nymphs, gathered from the dusty walls of far Pompeii.

McTaggart himself was burnt the color of bronze. He looked the picture of health with his sinewy, well built frame and clean-cut face in which his blue eyes struck a curious Northern note, vivid and arresting.

He loved this out-door life, with the hot, dry days and the clear nights, pine scented, cooled by the breeze that blew across the mountains but lately cleared from snow.

It was more than a year now since the memorable day when he had bidden his aunt farewell in the villa at Fiesole, mistrustful of the web of intrigue drawing round his feet and Bianca, that dark-eyed, demure convent maiden.

For the memory of Cydonia had stood him in good stead. Although little by little his bitterness had waned, it left him mistrustful both of himself and others, tinged with the easy cynicism of youth.

He had spent the whole winter at his apartment in Rome, finding a warm welcome in that gay city, as he quickly mastered his mother's tongue and took his place in the social world that opened wide its doors to him.

With the naïveté of his years he clung to the theory that his heart still lay broken at Cydonia's feet, but this did not prevent him, as the days passed on, from various flirtations in the gay Roman crowd.

He avoided, however, a serious liaison.

The touch of Scottish puritanism in his nature guarded him from the advances of married women; certain high born ladies of easy morals, charmed by his manner and striking face.

He learned quickly, too, the perils of such a tie: that in Rome an erring husband is frequently forgiven, but an unfaithful lover placed beyond the pale. There seemed to be a curious reverence shown to these love affairs, illegally cemented, whereas mere marriage was lightly shelved as an arrangement made by parents in the interests of property and to ensure a lawful heir.

Altogether, Rome was amusing and instructive, especially in his own favoured case. With a fine old title and certain wealth, young, handsome and popular, the new Marquis threw himself into the social whirl with a cool head, a guarded heart and the flair of an ardent explorer.

England, that island in the North, foggy and grey, inhabited by "Cadells," seemed a dream of another world as he lay on the sunny Italian sands.

And yet...

He stirred, drawing up his knees, his hands clasped round them, his eyes far away. For there stung through his complacency a sudden shaft of desire—that haunting love of home which grips a man unawares, with a sense of exile in a foreign land.

The mountains, where the marble lay in cool jagged quarries, vanished from

his sight and in their place came a picture of London: her busy, grimy streets with the ceaseless throb of her beating heart, as the fight went on, obstinate, merciless, the struggle for success—for money and power...

And that other London: the crowded Park, Hurlingham, Ascot—he drew a deep breath!

And London by night with the cries of the newsboys—the block of taxis in the long line theatreward, the lights of that Circus where the Criterion leers at his gaily lit neighbour, the Pavilion.

A sudden nostalgia seized McTaggart. The shrill laughter of the merry bathing group, the cloudless glare of sea and sky grew wearisome. He rose quickly to his feet.

"Mario!" He called to his man who was seated in the shade thrown by the osier fence, studying tips for the coming races.

"Mario—I shall dress now." The olive face flashed into a smile as the man sprang nimbly to his feet. For Mario adored his young master, a welcome change from the elderly Marquis with his fads and fancies and uncertain temper.

"Sissignore—at once! signore." Still he lingered, deferential.

"A thousand excuses, but does he remember the Princess Doria lunches with us to-day? The Signore has but his grey suit in the shed. It would be better to dress at the villa."

"Va bene—I had forgotten her! *And* the new Poet——" he added, aside, "I can't stand that effeminate ass, but she never goes two steps without him!"

He slipped on a long bath towel garment, screening his scanty bathing gown, and drew the hood down over his head while Mario produced slippers with soles of twisted hemp, and tied them on to his master's feet.

Now, not unlike a Dominican friar, in this primitive costume, he crossed the beach and turned along the country road until he came to the first pines, Mario in the rear, carrying his clothes.

Here they took a sandy foot path where scanty patches of coarse grass and

clusters of wild pansy marked the borders of the straggling wood.

It led to a clearing in the trees and a villa, painted strawberry pink, with a tiled terrace and veranda, wreathed about with Bourgainvillia.

McTaggart paused on the threshold and rang a bell, answered quickly by a servant.

"Bring me a vermouth—di Torino—and the time-table." He sat down in a wicker chair, his face thoughtful—"and—Stefano!—" he called him back—"Asti for the Principessa. Lunch at twelve-thirty to-day—we shall be five instead of three—you can add an 'omelette au surprise.' And see that the quails aren't overdone."

"Very good, sir. There are letters come since the Signore left."

He returned with a silver tray on which lay his master's correspondence.

McTaggart took them, with a yawn, turning them over indifferently.

From somewhere through the drowsy heat came a distant sound of chopping wood and a man's voice raised musically, singing over his morning work. McTaggart drank his glass of vermouth, then choosing an envelope directed in a round hand, broke it open with a smile.

It was long since he had heard from Jill. He glanced at the date. The letter had lain at his London rooms and was now sent on to Italy by the faithful Bethune.

"Dear Peter," it began.

"I wonder where you are now? and if you're *ever* coming home! It's ages since you last wrote, and I've been meaning to reply—only I've been so worried. You'll understand when I tell you my news—about Mother. She's gone to prison."

McTaggart jumped. The very word seemed sinister in the heart of that peaceful drowsy wood, lapped by the indolent Southern sea.

"Poor old Jill!" He read on, his face growing steadily graver.

"I daresay you saw in the papers of the latest Suffragette attempt!—that bomb in Downing Street, I mean. Well, Mother was in it, with Stephen. And now she's gone to Holloway— isn't it *dreadful*? She's refused bail and declares she means to hunger strike!—I've been nearly off my head about it.

"For she'll never stand it—she hasn't the strength. It will simply kill her——" a smudged word suggested to the reader a tear, hastily blotted off the paper.

Before McTaggart a vision rose of the grey eyes with their frank gaze, fringed by lashes, dark and curled, and the eager face of his school girl friend.

"Mr. Bethune's been awfully kind. He actually arranged for bail, but Mother wouldn't hear of it and there she is—in Holloway Prison.

"Roddy's home. He went to the Head and asked leave to come back to me. He's simply furious about it all—wants to have it out with Stephen. Needless to say, *he's* free! You bet Stephen looks after himself. I suppose he thinks that *one* martyr (in the Bible, I mean) is good enough!"

McTaggart laughed grimly aloud at the typical line as he thought of Jill. He could almost see her saying the words, the delicate nostrils curled with scorn.

"Well—that settles it!" He finished the letter and picked up the time-table with a frown.

"I might be able to help the child——" He turned the pages thoughtfully.

"I can catch the express at Genoa and go straight through next Friday—I think. I shall get back in time for Henley. It ought to be jolly in London now."

This settled, he dressed for lunch and informed Mario of his departure, somewhat to the latter's chagrin, who had various ties at Viareggio.

"The Signore will not be here for the races?"

The man's voice was so doleful that McTaggart hesitated, remembering they were fixed for Sunday.

"Well—we might stay over the week-end, and go on Monday—perhaps that's better."

The man blessed him audibly with the gentle familiarity that seems to exist in that old land between the nobility and their servants.

"You can take a holiday on Sunday—so long as you get my packing done—and say good-bye to Lucia?" He laughed at the man's guilty face.

"Ahi!—*That* for the women!" Mario, recovering himself, gave an expressive, scornful shrug—"But the races are a different matter!—and I hear 'La Luna' is sure to win."

McTaggart smiled, cutting short the man's chatter, and went down to receive his guests, a little bored by the coming lunch.

His fears were amply justified.

The poet was in a sombre mood, the Principessa plainly anxious.

"It's his new Tragedy," she whispered as they settled themselves at the table—"he is so sensitive, my dear—the penalty of genius."

McTaggart, with a solemn face, received these subtle confidences, somewhat relieved by the presence of his other neighbour, graceful and young.

But the Countess Marco Viviani was not in her usual high spirits. A slim brunette, with a wonderful figure, and much admired in the Roman set, she could not brook in any form opposition to her will.

She explained in an audible aside her quarrel—a new-born affair—with her husband, who faced McTaggart and watched the pair with insolent eyes.

It seemed that he had required of her an alteration in the days, arranged between them, when they should appear side by side at the Casino.

Wednesdays and Saturdays had been fixed in order to allow the Count Tuesdays and Fridays to himself to parade there his latest theatrical fancy.

Now "La Carlotta" was making trouble. She wanted to interfere with the rule.

But the Countess was adamant. She would not bend before the actress.

"It will make a scandal," she announced. "Everyone knows those are *my* days! I would prefer to leave the place and go to Bagni di Luca."

But the villa at Viareggio belonged to the Count and he clearly saw that economy forbade a rupture which would mean a second establishment. So he sulked, undecided still, hating his handsome, captious wife—who had known the existence of many "Carlottas" and was plainly unreasonable!

McTaggart felt that the atmosphere was charged with electricity. The poet never opened his mouth, the Principessa was openly troubled. The only person who seemed unmoved by the depression in the air was Don Cesare, her youngest son, who made an unexpected sixth. A handsome youth of seventeen with a black moustache and charming manner—already that of a man of the world—he chattered gaily, enjoying his lunch.

"I wish you would come with me this evening," he said to his host eagerly—"into the marshes and bring your gun—I'm going out after 'beccaccini.' I've had a special punt made for the narrow waterways to the lake. It's a beauty—I want to try it—I'm sure we should have some capital sport."

"All right—what time?" McTaggart liked his youngest guest.

"About five. If we find it's hot we can lie up somewhere in the dykes."

He referred to the curious intricate scheme of irrigation in the plain that lies between the hills and sea—the famous draining of the marshes.

For the low land looks like a chequer board, crossed and recrossed by narrow streams that widen into two big lakes—a favorite haunt for wild fowl.

"I've always wanted to explore those long ditches in a boat. I tried once and was nearly poisoned—my keel kept sticking in the mud."

"Exactly—that's the trouble—the smell!" Don Cesare nodded gaily. "That's why I've had this punt made flat bottomed and very narrow. In the deep parts you can use a paddle and where it's shallow a long pole—against the bank—*not* in the water!"

He turned to the Countess with a smile.

"Do come and see us off—and we'll take you a little way to try it. Further on there are low boughs, not designed to suit ladies' hats."

The pretty woman smiled back, looking at him with her wide, dark eyes.

"I'm so sorry—but I can't—it's my evening with Marco for the Casino."

She flung the challenge across the table. The Count wearily shrugged his shoulders while the Poet, with saturnine face, seemed to enjoy the situation.

The Principessa, stirring herself, broke the pregnant silence that followed.

"Cara Emilia," she said, "have you heard of Bellanti's misfortune?"

"No——" the Countess turned quickly—"what has happened?" Don Cesare watched her, a mischievous light in his black eyes, as she went on languidly. "His sister is my dearest friend and she hasn't written to me for weeks! I was really beginning to wonder if she were ill. What is the matter?"

"He's ruined." The Princess turned up her hands with an eloquent gesture of finality. "He was always gambling, as you know, and then he took to borrowing money—enormous sums, I am told—on the strength of his Aunt's fortune—Donna Teresa Bellanti."

"Did you ever meet her?" She paused in her story to open her fan and, lazily, wafted it backward and forward before her pale middle-aged face.

"I don't think so." The Countess smiled, feeling across the narrow table her husband's persistent glance and the silence of the rest of the party.

"She did not care for society—she was always very religious, you know—and has never married—so everyone thought she would leave her money to her nephew."

"Well!" The Countess was impatient. McTaggart felt a shade of pity. He guessed the Princess was amusing herself by prolonging the other's anxiety.

"She's taken the veil," said the older woman. "You know she's stayed for the

last two years at her favourite convent—Our Lady of Loretto—and it seems she was finishing her novitiate. And all her wealth is to go to the Church."

She folded her fan carefully. "It's a fearful blow for Bellanti—I hear he's quite at his wits' end."

The pretty Countess bit her lip; under the table her hands were clenched.

"I can't pity him," said the Poet. He spoke with an air of authority. "A fool and his money' ... you know the proverb?" His eyes sparkled vindictively.

"Oh—Gabriele!" The Princess was shocked. "And you so 'simpatico,' too!"

"He has no brains," the Poet declared—"and he lives a base, material life."

"I'm *awfully* sorry," McTaggart frowned. "He's the best rider to hounds I know. I'll never forget a run I had with him last winter in the Campagna. And a jolly nice fellow too."

He glanced across at Don Cesare, who was eyeing the Poet with disgust.

"We shall miss Bellanti," said the Countess. Her voice was calm. "I must write to his sister. Poor Bice! She was always so fond of him. I don't say he was intellectual"—she looked at the Poet thoughtfully—at his ugly, weak little face—"but so good looking—a thorough *man*."

The Principessa followed her gaze.

Don Cesare laughed aloud. "Well—give me good looks any day—and a good seat. I'm for Bellanti."

The Countess gave him a grateful nod.

"And so's Emilia——" he kissed the tips of his fingers to her across the table—"and so's Marco." Wickedly he turned his head toward the Count.

"Exactly—" that worthy watched his wife, moved by a subtle idea. "I was thinking, my dear," he addressed the latter—"We might ask the poor fellow here?"

"Pourquoi pas?" A shade of impertinence lay in the quick French response, and between the pair of dark eyes a silent, menacing challenge passed.

For the Count knew that his wife knew that he ... knew!

It was a bribe to settle the strained situation vis-à-vis with "La Carlotta."

And watching this matrimonial by-play McTaggart felt a growing scorn for the shallowness of the social life in which he found himself involved.

This Princess with her puny poet, who ruled her with a rod of iron, and Cesare, a mere school boy, eager for the latest scandal. The pretty woman by his side, playing her lover against her husband, and the Count, deliberately sacrificing his wife's morals to his own intrigues.

England might be dull, he thought, but at least the men and women there held a sterner code of honour. A glow stole through him at the contrast. People might talk of the laxity of conduct in the upper classes, but the latter had the decency to veil their occasional lapses from virtue.

And, as a whole, the national standard took a lot of beating, he decided. Love was still revered and marriage more than a legal tie to cover innumerable intrigues!

He watched his noble guests depart without regret, then sat down to write a hurried line to Jill, full of heart-felt sympathy. He wondered—not without a smile—if Countess Marco Viviani would go to prison for Bellanti—like Mrs. Uniacke for the Cause!

He signed the page "Peter McTaggart," with an amused breath of relief. He liked it better than "Maramonte" for all its air of high romance.

And, as he drew a steady line under the purely British name, unconsciously he made his choice and ran up the Union Jack!

CHAPTER XX

But as he neared the mist-wreathed cliffs of Dover McTaggart's patriotism was put to the test by the captious weather and the hopeless, sea-sick crowd around him. Rain and hail and distant thunder were his portion, a choppy sea and a boat packed with a draggled party from the Polytechnic, returning home.

He said to himself he had never seen his countrymen to worse advantage. Beside them, Mario, chilled to the bone but still cheerful, inured to the motion by many a past yachting trip, looked a perfect aristocrat from his well-poised head to his slender feet.

A woman, their neighbour on the boat, lost her hat, then her rug, wailing aloud, and Mario, at his master's nod, retrieved them imperturbably from the skittish antics of the wind.

The sufferer never even thanked him, but clutched her belongings with a glance full of mistrust, recognizing a foreigner—or, in other words—a doubtful character!

At last they bumped against the pier; ropes whirled out, gangways creaked; a mad herd of humans crushed after porters, charging with hoisted bags.

The train looked absurdly small. McTaggart thought the station shrunk and his first English cup of tea was cold and strong, in a leaking pot.

Even the fields, as they left the Downs, seemed to have dwindled to half their size. The rain lashed against the glass. Between the streams trickling down he began to catch green vistas of hops with their quaint, peaked oast-houses like the caps worn by hob-goblins from the pages of a fairy book.

Rochester!—under leaden skies, smoky, blurred. The train rocked on, the shorter gauge oddly aggressive in the low-built, narrow carriage.

Then, at last, Charing Cross; the endless wait for the luggage and the final crowning disenchantment—no taxis!—due to "the strike."

After a dismal half hour a "runner" returned with a four wheeler and they both got in, hampered by baggage, neither of them in the best of tempers.

Mario was plainly aghast. "This—London?" he seemed to say.

"Yes—confound it!" thought McTaggart. He began to wish he had stayed abroad.

They crawled along, past Trafalgar Square and its dripping lions, past Hampton's, then, before the block of carriages outside the Carlton, swerved to the right.

Half way up the Haymarket hill McTaggart thrust his head out and shouted.

"Hi! Cabby—stop a minute." His face brightened as he spoke. He opened the door and splashed across the muddy pavement into a shop with a quaint old fashioned bow-window and asked for a box of cigarettes.

"Good evening, sir." The man smiled across the counter with an air of pleased recognition. "We haven't seen you lately, sir." Here was his first welcome home.

"I've been abroad for eighteen months. I'll take a cigarette now." He lighted it with an English match, free from sulphur, and picked up the box.

"You can put it down to the old address." He drew in the fragrant smoke with joy. "Good-night—I'll take these matches." His hand closed on them lovingly. He retraced his steps and dived once more into the stuffy, waiting cab.

"Well—that's one thing you can't beat—our baccy," he said to himself as they jolted round against the curb into the full glare of the Circus.

The wet streets mirrored back the thousand lights from above ... McTaggart felt, suddenly, something grip him by the throat.

London! The magic of the word rushed up like a warm tide, round his heart, into his head.

"Good old London!"—he caught his breath.

"Mario!"—he touched the man. "Look out, quick! it's Piccadilly."

A burly policeman waved them on.

"Now, then—Hurry up!—four-wheeler."

Dodging like a human eel between the buses, a ragged boy slipped past and paused at the window, his shrill voice raised in a cry:

"Star!—'h *Ev'ning News*—Speshul! 'Ere you are, sir—h'all the winners..." jerked the paper into the cab, and was off, clutching McTaggart's penny.

Like a silver ribbon streaked with light, Piccadilly stretched ahead, buses skidding, and near at hand rang the gay tootle of a horn.

Then, into the congested space, rattling harness, clanking bits, a private coach, with four bays, wet and shining, splashed with froth, picked its way like a dainty dame, disdainful of the lesser traffic.

Mario's dark face brightened. He loved horses and knew their points. This was a picture after his heart, dissipating his sense of gloom.

For he could not see with McTaggart's eyes. At his master's quick, impulsive cry, he had peered out eagerly, pleased by the word "Piccadilly" with its familiar foreign ring.

He saw a small open space, between a square and a circle, with shops and lights and a feeble statue—like a lost infant—in the centre.

He stared at it with inward contempt.

"Not half as fine," he said to himself, "as the fountain in our Sienese palace! And as for the rest of the 'piazza' ... why, there isn't a single public building—not even a decent Church! And the rain ... Is this the English summer? No wonder it's a cold race!"

He looked covertly at his master, amazed by his obvious touch of excitement.

For McTaggart was taking a deep breath of the foggy air that reeked with petrol.

"It's good to be back again," he thought; "I wonder if Bethune will be there? I sent him a wire, but he's such a beggar for work, one never knows. By Jove, I must see about a car—useful during the present strike..." He peered out at the Berkeley steps where a lady in evening dress, her light wrap drawn about her, filmy skirts wound close, crossed, dainty, over the pavement beside her attendant cavalier.

They turned into a side street, splashing and lumbering along, until, at last, they halted before the old familiar, narrow house.

The door was open. McTaggart ran up the steep stairs like a boy.

"Hullo! Mrs. Frost—how are you? Yes, I'm back. Rather late. Hope you got my letter all right?"

"Yessir. Your rooms are ready." The sour faced woman was actually smiling.

"My man's below—but he can't speak English—Will you see to him and pay the cab? *Hullo!* there you are, old man."

He was shaking hands wildly with Bethune.

"Steady on—what a grip! Confound you, you've broken my wrist..." Bethune's honest face was beaming. He dealt him a playful blow on the chest.

"Hard as a rock!—you do look fit. I prepared to receive a languid foreigner. Come inside, Monsieur le Marquis..."

"Oh—shut up! You ... dear old fool!"

McTaggart glanced around at his rooms, the worn carpet and furniture that had seen service in College days—each scratch and dent a memory.

Above the glass, still littered with cards and photographs, there hung an oar and underneath, on either side, stood a pair of battered silver cups.

He drew a deep sigh of content.

"Get me a drink—there's a dear chap! Hullo—that window's still smashed. What a rag it was! d'you remember that night?" For the topmost pane of glass was cracked from side to side beneath the blind.

"Let's look at you"—he took the glass that Bethune filled for him and drank. "That's good. Why!—the 'Round Man's' growing a figure..."

Bethune scowled.

"Shut up! I got in whiskey—thought you'd want it. Here's luck——" he tossed it off—"What are you going to do about dinner? It's getting pretty late, you know."

"Yes—we had a rotten crossing—the boat an hour over time. Have you dined yourself—no?—that's right. I thought we'd go down to Simpson's. I feel like a good cut off the joint..."

Bethune laughed. "The illustrious Marquis is tired of his native macaroni?"

"A bottle of beer—and some Welsh rabbit"—the other ran on, ignoring the taunt. "I'm fed up with Chianti."

He stopped on the word with a little start.

For the first time for many weeks a memory returned to him of his visit to Harley Street and the problem of his "double" heart.

What was it he had laughingly said? (How long ago that day seemed ... The era of Fantine and Cydonia.)

Yes—"porridge" it was, and "Chianti!"

He glanced up at the mantelpiece as Bethune, hearing steps outside, trundled away to give instructions to the bewildered Mario.

"No change?" he heard him say. "All right—I'll see to it."

A face smiled down at McTaggart out of a tarnished silver frame. Cydonia in a big black hat, white furs around her throat—with her childish mouth and wide eyes. He took it down and gazed at it.

Cydonia!—the girl he had loved.

Deliberately he placed the verb in the past tense. For it was true. Nothing of his passion remained, but a mild, wondering affection! Absence and time had achieved the cure. *One* broken heart at least was mended! And Fantine...? At the name he felt a sudden stab of regret.

How strange were life and life's emotions! Although her picture was destroyed—(he had done it in anger that fatal night) her image rose clear in his mind.

Of the two women he missed her most—in the flood-tide of his return. Her stronger personality, the power of wit and imagination that blent with her careless scorn of men, her nameless, utterly feminine charm, had survived that other disillusion.

He put Cydonia's portrait back quickly as Bethune re-entered the room. Then, conscious that his hasty action had not escaped his friend's eyes, in an indifferent voice, he asked:

"Ever hear anything of the Cadells?"

"Yes—no!" Bethune turned to the sideboard, horribly at a loss. He coughed, then started with a plunge to get his unwelcome news over.

"Met 'Jinks' the other day—remember 'Jinks' of Trinity?—got his blue for Rugger—Well, he knows Miss Cadell—that was."

"What?" McTaggart's voice was sharp.

Bethune, fidgeting with the syphon, his back turned to his friend, received a sudden baptism, stinging and cold, of soda water.

"Oh, damn!—now I've spilled it. Yes, that's it—She's married, you know. A chap called Euan Flemming—an M.P. for ... God knows where!"

"Well—I'm blessed!" McTaggart laughed; a little sourly, truth to tell. Despite the conclusion arrived at earlier he felt somewhat taken aback.

"Cheer up," he addressed the broad shoulders of his still perturbed friend.

"You mixed the news with soda water but I could have stood it neat."

Bethune wheeled round, his face red. "I'm jolly glad—I've been funking it." He met McTaggart's amused eyes and beamed all over his honest face.

"That's over," said McTaggart—"long ago. What about dinner?—I'll just go and have a wash and be with you—if you're ready."

"I should think I am!—half famished—I've been down at Brooklands with a new car. Hurry up!"

He dropped into a chair as McTaggart called through the folding doors.

"D'you ever see Jill now? It's a bad business about her mother."

"I was there yesterday—to inquire. They let her out at the end of the week—but she's been awfully ill since. It was pretty nearly touch and go..."

There came a sound of splashing water; then McTaggart's voice again:

"I'm glad she's home at any rate. What's become of the priceless Stephen?"

"Dont's ask me. I bar the chap. D'you remember old Charlie Mason? Well, he managed at last to get a billet with Hensley and Benton, the big wine people. He dropped in to see me, last night, full of trouble. It seems that Somerfield had let him in for a big order for himself and several pals of his. And now they say they can't stump up—it sounds like a regular plant! Awfully hard lines on Charlie—the firm have given him the sack."

"You don't say so. Bad luck! I always thought Stephen a wrong 'un. How's Jill herself?"

A pause.

"Oh—all right," but Bethune frowned. "Jolly plucky about it all. I fancy they're rather in low water. It's between ourselves, you understand. But she's left College for good now and it seems to me she's taken on most of the house work at home. They only keep one servant."

"What a shame!" came from McTaggart, busily brushing back his hair. "It's a

thousand pities her mother gives up all her time to Suffrage work. She might consider her family. I can't understand the attraction. Seems to me it's like drink—when a woman really takes to it there's no earthly stopping her!"

"I quite agree," said Bethune, "I'm sorry for Jill. And the boy, too," he added somewhat hastily. His pale face was slightly flushed. "You ready?"

He picked up his hat as his friend reappeared. "It's stopped raining——" he glanced at the window. "We've had an awfully wet season—nothing like it since the Flood. I nearly started a motor boat—cheap trips in Piccadilly!"

They clattered downstairs together and out on to the shining pavement.

"We'd better take a bus, I suppose," said McTaggart—"how long has this strike been on?"

"About a fortnight——" Bethune laughed. "I expect you're glad to get back to England?"

But the other answered seriously. "Well—I *am*. It's an odd thing——" he sniffed up the air, damp and smoky, and smiled to himself, his eyes bright. "But there's something about London, you know..."

He left the sentence incomplete

CHAPTER XXI

Jill crept downstairs on tiptoe.

Inside the dining-room Roddy was leaning over the table, a sketch-block and paints before him. He looked up as his sister appeared with an anxious, inquiring glance that seemed oddly out of place on his round, boyish face.

"Well?"

"She's asleep. At last!" Jill sighed—"Lizzie's sitting in the room, so I stole

away to you."

She flung herself into the armchair and curled her feet up under her, arms clasped behind her head, dark shadows round her eyes.

"Tired, old girl?" Roddy's voice was tender. He saw that the long nights of vigil were leaving their mark on the fresh young face that began to look white and strained.

"Just a bit——" Jill smiled bravely. "But I think she's improving. She's more like herself. If only she'd stay in bed for a month and give it a chance—get really strong before she begins to think of work."

Roddy nodded and turned to his task. A silence fell in the bare room, broken by the buzz of a blue-bottle blundering round the chandelier and the sound of water stirred in the glass as the boy washed his paint brushes.

"What are you doing, Roddy?" Jill asked lazily.

"Oh—a ship. It's *rotten*!" his voice was full of despair. "I can't get the sea—it looks thick and flat—like a blooming table-cloth! Think I shall tear it up..." he paused gloomily, sucking his brush.

"No—don't." With a quick movement Jill rose to her feet. She bent over her brother, an arm thrown round his shoulder.

"It's jolly good. Really, old boy—the ship, I mean. Though the sea's all wrong," she added honestly. "But there's something I like—most awfully—" her grey eyes narrowed, criticizing.

"What?" Roddy lifted a wistful face, with that longing for praise peculiar to the artist, which has nothing to do with vanity but the deeper need for encouragement in the long up-hill fight of creative work.

"It's the way the ship's moving before the wind. It's alive, somehow, and one feels the struggle. It isn't just chased along—it's up against the strong tide—and the slap of the waves..."

"Of course it is." He smiled. "It's getting the full swell round the headland. The drawing's all right—it's the colour that's wrong. I *do* want some painting

lessons!"

"Well, perhaps we'll manage it by-and-bye—next summer holidays. You'd like to go in for Art, wouldn't you, Roddy?"

"Yes." The boy's voice was gruff. He felt too deeply for easy speech.

Jill looked anxious. Long since she had guessed the secret hope in the schoolboy's heart. But she knew it was not a paying profession and where was the money to come from for it?

Her mother—a typical soldier's wife—held a curious contempt for the artist class. She wanted Roddy to go to Sandhurst, if means permitted, with the idea of the Indian Army in the future.

How would she take this new departure?

"D'you remember," said Roddy suddenly, "that old fellow up at Whitby we used to see painting near the harbour?"

"Who took you up with him on the moors, that moonlight night, to the Abbey?—Yes—why?" She sat down, leaning her elbows on the table.

"Well—he taught me an awful lot. Not exactly painting, you know, but to use my eyes. I can't explain! Values of light and shade—such as the sea, with its colour merely a question of depth and reflection ... not dyed water! I showed him, at last, some of my sketches and—Jill——" the boy looked up wistfully, struggling with a sudden shyness—"he said ... he thought—well, I'd got it in me."

"I *know* you have." Jill nodded. Into her thoughtful eyes there came a look of strong determination. "And I'll do all I can—you know that, Roddy."

"You always were a brick," said the boy.

He stared ahead through the open window.

"There's such an awful lot to learn—and I want to begin—you *must* start young. I remember he said to me one day—I've never forgotten it, somehow—I've been painting now for fifty years—and I'm just beginning to master my

art. I know that my hand is one with my brain and the long apprenticeship is past. And now'—he looked so awfully sad—'there are just a few years left and then I shall die—and it's all over!'"

"But he'd had the keen joy of the fight." Jill had a horror of morbidity. "And he'd won through—that must feel fine!" A warm colour flushed her cheek.

"Yes—but it seemed so awfully hard, that just as life was worth living, all that labour and knowledge must go, with everything else ... I call it rotten!"

"I don't believe it does," said Jill. "Peter doesn't, either," she added. "We were talking of that the day we drove to Henley and stopped at the Fair. I think all real effort survives—somehow—somewhere—that nothing's lost. Or else the struggle—to say nothing of failure!—would be too cruel—just sheer waste! Think of all the pioneers—Cecil Rhodes—Gordon—Scott? I can't believe that their energy and heroism doesn't go on... You remember Moses and his death? How he only *looked* on the promised land. It always seemed to me so unfair until one day when I was reading of the Transfiguration on the Mount—when Moses and Elijah appeared—(in their earthly forms, remember that!—) and there he was—in the promised land. Moses, I mean—centuries later. He'd got there, you see, *after* death."

"That's jolly fine," said the schoolboy—"I never thought of it that way."

The speech sank into his memory. Years ahead, in his hour of need—one of those moods of black despair which creative art brings to a man who strains up to a high ideal—he would see before him Jill's clear eyes, the oval face, slightly flushed, and illumined by an inner light which seemed to rise from her brave young soul.

She glanced now up at the clock. "I must go, Roddy—there's Mother's soup—and in half an hour we'll have tea. Down in the kitchen, it's easier."

"All right. I'll make some toast. I'll just finish this and come. Have you got any anchovy paste, old girl? If so, I'll do you some 'devilled biscuits.'"

"I'm afraid not." Jill laughed. It sounded a hot entertainment for the sultry summer afternoon. "You might keep an eye on the front door. Lizzie's upstairs, sewing, by Mother."

"I'll answer it—don't you worry."

He flung an arm about the girl and gave her a sudden boisterous kiss. Jill responded eagerly. Roddy was not demonstrative and she knew the value of the caress, hungry herself for a little love. Then, with a bright face, she departed into the depths of the basement, picking her way with careful feet and a keen look-out for black beetles.

Roddy sat where she had left him. Through the window he saw the scattered trees on Primrose Hill and the grass still green on account of the long wet season. A heavy bank of thunder clouds, lined with a pale coppery light, hung suspended against the blue and the boy was lost in a dream of colour.

Suddenly he gave a start. An angry look came into his eyes. He got up hurriedly, left the room and on noiseless feet crossed the hall.

Carefully he opened the door.

"Don't ring!" he checked the caller. "What do you want? Mother's asleep." He looked back with defiance at Stephen.

"I've come round to inquire for her."

Somerfield coolly passed the boy, hung up his hat on the stand, straightening his tie in the glass, with a smile at his languid reflexion.

"Don't make a row then," Roddy whispered. "I suppose you'd better come into the dining-room——" He closed the door softly behind them.

"How is Mrs. Uniacke?"

Stephen sauntered to the sideboard, opened a box standing there and helped himself to a cigarette.

Roddy watched him with a scowl.

"Anything else you'd like?" he asked.

"Thanks—a small whiskey and soda." Stephen's smile was insolent.

"Help yourself." Roddy saw too late the loop-hole that he had offered. "Mother's just about the same. The doctor came again this morning."

"What did he say?" Stephen filled his glass and lolled back in the armchair.

"Nothing good—her heart's weak and she's all nerves—doesn't sleep. Of course, she can't touch solids yet—that forcible feeding nearly killed her." The boy winced as he spoke.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Stephen. For once a ring of genuine feeling sounded in his high voice. "I'd like to see this government—*wiped out!*——" he clenched his hands.

"Not much good—there'd be another." Roddy was practical—"you see, if you go and break laws you've got to pay—whoever you are! It's the fault of the Suffrage leaders themselves—they're just 'agitators'——" he paused—"I'd have my knife into *them!* They don't care *who* suffers."

"Well—you seem to take it pretty coolly considering your Mother is the victim?"

The boy shot him an angry glance.

"She wouldn't be—except for you!"

A stormy silence followed the words.

Stephen was preparing for battle when Roddy suddenly raised his head, malice in his hazel eyes.

"Oh, by the way, I quite forgot. There's been a young woman here to-day asking for you—awfully keen. There's no accounting for people's tastes!"

Stephen sat up with a start.

"A young woman?—what name? And why on earth does she come here?"

"Thought it was your house, perhaps—(One back"—he smiled to himself.) "She wouldn't give any name—Said you'd know——" the schoolboy grinned. "A short girl—rather fat—with a touzled mop of fair hair."

Somerfield's face went a shade pale.

("It's Letty——" he thought—"oh! confound it!") but out aloud——

"I think I know. She works for our branch of the League."

"That's all right, then——" Roddy was cheerful—"I gave her your new address, you see. I wrote it down to make sure and she went away quite jolly."

Stephen looked venomous.

"I wish you'd mind your own affairs and leave me to settle mine."

The schoolboy was hugging himself. Here was a rise out of his foe! He was not as simple as he looked, and although the full tragedy of Letty's desperate hunt for Stephen had quite escaped his young eyes, he was charmed to put a spoke in the wheel of the flirtation he suspected.

"I'm sorry if I've done wrong——" his mischievous face belied the words—"but you say she's working for the Cause, so hasn't she a right to see you?"

Stephen silently rose to his feet. He thought of Letty at his lodgings and of his carefully covered tracks since he left the ones near Primrose Hill. And now this interfering schoolboy had undone the work of weeks. He could hardly restrain himself.

"I'm off." He made for the door.

"Wait a second. I'll see you out—I don't want the Mater disturbed."

"Please tell her that I called."

"I will—when she's well enough. And, look here, it's no good writing—the doctor won't allow her letters. Unless you'd like Jill to read them and give her an occasional message?"

But this kindly thought was lost. Stephen vouchsafed no answer.

Roddy stood there for a moment—the door held back with his foot—watching his visitor walk away, his coat clipped in to his figure, his boots new,

and the latest hat.

"What a rotter the fellow is! I'm rather sorry for that young woman—but what *does* she see in him?" He turned it over in his mind.

"Silly fools, girls," he said. He spoke the verdict out aloud, with the conscious superiority of a man in the making.

"Why, Roddy—you've grown a cynic!"

He turned with a sudden cry of joy.

"Peter!"

McTaggart's smiling face, bronzed and handsome, met his eyes.

"May I come in?—I just called round to ask how Mrs. Uniacke was."

"*Rather!* My hat!—it's jolly fine to see you back," he danced on the steps. "I say—we'll have to go quiet——" (the boy remembered)—"Mother's asleep."

They stole through the dingy hall and into the dining-room beyond. McTaggart glanced round with a smile at the bare, familiar place.

"You've grown, Roddy. Where's Jill? Hope she can spare me a minute. I suppose she's busy nursing your Mother?"

"Yes." Roddy's smile faded—"she's getting done up, I'm afraid. Sitting up all night, you know. The Mater can't be left alone."

"As bad as that? I'm awfully grieved. Poor old Jill!—and it's rough on you ... Never mind—we must cheer her up. Do tell her that I'm here."

"I'll go now." Roddy paused—"Look here, Peter, I shan't let on that it's you—what a lark! Won't it be a surprise for her." He was off, his eyes shining with fun.

He found Jill in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up, her face flushed, leaning over the hot fire, patiently skimming mutton broth.

"You'll have to leave that for a minute. There's someone called and wants to see you. On business, I think," he choked back a laugh.

"Bother," said Jill, "I can't come now."

"Sorry—but I'm no earthly use. Hurry up, there's a good girl."

Jill, with an impatient sigh, pushed the soup to the side of the stove.

"It won't hurt to simmer there." She wiped her hands on a cloth and with her rounded arms bare, an apron over her drill skirt, followed Roddy up the stairs, a frown on her pretty face.

After the gloom of the basement the light dazed her for a second as she walked into the dining-room and saw a tall man standing there.

"Well, Jill?"

At Peter's voice she gave a sudden breathless cry. She caught at the back of a chair and swayed...

"Good Lord! I've startled you."

His arm went out, supporting her. "I'm awfully sorry." He felt her stiffen. For Jill had recovered herself.

"You made me jump—How are you, Peter?" She forced a shaky little laugh. "I'm all right—it's nothing ... really." She drew back, her face red—"it's the hot kitchen. I'm rather tired—but awfully glad to see you again."

"You do look a bit played out." His blue eyes ran over her, conscious of a subtle change. This was not his schoolgirl friend of the short skirts and swinging plait.

Her hair was wound round her head in glossy coils, from beneath which little tendrils curled away, dark against her white forehead.

Her throat and arms, bare and dimpled, were softly curved and the low bosom that rose and fell with her quick breath had lost its narrow, boyish look.

But the grey eyes were the same, pure and fearless, though shadowed now with faint circles of violet that added to their natural size; and the pretty face, flushed from the fire, had the clear skin of the child he loved, the rather large and

humorous mouth.

Her long skirt, tightly bound with the narrow apron, showed the curve of her slender hips and beneath he saw her high-arched, supple feet.

She looked a thoroughbred—he thought—with a sudden thrill of friendly pride—from the poise of her well-shaped head to the smooth, pointed finger tips.

"It's so nice to see you again—I'm awfully glad." He beamed at her.

"I, too——" she laughed back—"we thought you had really gone for good. And you never said in your letter you were coming home, not a word!"

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"It was!" She caught her brother's arm. "Roddy—you little wretch!"—for she guessed his share in the trick—"just run down and put on the kettle—and then we'll have tea together. D'you mind a picnic in the kitchen?"—she turned to the visitor, "Lizzie's upstairs with the invalid."

"I'd love it," McTaggart declared. "I've got such lots of things to tell you. But first of all—how's your Mother?"

"Better." Jill smiled bravely. "But it's been *dreadful*! Poor darling—she came home an utter wreck——" Her lips quivered as she spoke.

"Well—you'll soon get her right, my dear—good nursing and perfect rest." Peter's voice was soothing now; he was inwardly shocked at the strain he guessed. "And then we'll take her out for drives—I've ordered a car from Tommy Bethune."

"Oh!—I'm so glad. He's *such* a dear! You don't know how good he's been. He arranged everything for Mother—even to the ambulance."

Peter's face was very grave. It was all very well, he said to himself to read of these things in the papers, but the thought of Mrs. Uniacke—that delicate, frail little creature—in a prison, forcibly fed! This was bringing it home with a vengeance. And a new respect seized the man. Whatever his views on the Suffrage question might be, he marvelled in his heart at the courage displayed by those thousands of women banded together to fight or die.

"She's asleep now," went on Jill—"that's been the most serious trouble—that and her heart, which is very weak. And, of course, her digestion's all to pieces—and she's suffered frightfully in her throat ... Well, we won't talk any more about it. Come down and have some tea."

They crossed the hall with bated breath, Jill's finger to her lips. As they went down the dark stairs Peter slipped a hand through her arm.

"Steady, Jill. Don't take a header ... 'Steep is the descent to' ... Tea! Here we are. Any black beetles?"

Jill shivered involuntarily.

"It's cowardly—but I hate them, Peter! Sometimes when I come down at night the floor's simply black with them. I'd far sooner find burglars!"

McTaggart's laugh steadied her nerves. He checked her in the narrow passage and lowered his voice, with a glance at Roddy beyond them, busy in the kitchen.

"Look here, Jill—now I'm back—I hope you're going to make use of me? I don't want to cut out Bethune——" he smiled, watching her thoughtful face—"but he's busy and I'm not—I'm game for any odd job. And I want to help—*awfully*. You see, I came home for that."

"Did you?" The girl looked at him. Her eyes in the gloom shone like stars under their heavy curling lashes.

"Honour bright! Your letter did it. I couldn't bear to think of you in all this trouble without a man. Although I knew you'd the pluck to face it. So it's a bargain—settled between us—I'm to be a sort of handy ... brother?"

"That's it," said Jill steadily. "I won't forget. Thank you, Peter."

CHAPTER XXII

McTaggart walked to St. John's Wood station absorbed in thought, his face

grave.

For the memory of his little friend with the tired circles round her eyes haunted each step of the lonely road, shadowed by its belt of trees.

He saw that Jill was worn out with nursing and anxiety, that the long nights of vigil were bought at the expense of her nerves. He guessed, moreover, the strained resources of the shabby house he had left. He would have given much for the right to ease the position with a cheque!

But this was plainly impossible. He smiled to himself at the bare idea, striding along oblivious of the heavy thunder drops that fell.

At last a scheme presented itself. When he reached the Underground, after a moment's hesitation, he took a ticket for Kensington and, in due course, with two changes, alighted at the High Street station. Here, with an anxious glance at the clock, he turned to the left and, winding about, arrived at last at a large block of flats in a quiet street.

He studied the list of names in the hall, entered the lift and was carried up to the fourth floor and Flat G, where he rang the bell, feeling a shade nervous.

Miss Elizabeth Uniacke was "at home." He handed the maid his card—a neat elderly woman in an old-fashioned cap and apron—and followed her into a small drawing-room, crowded with little tables and chairs and occupied by a large black cat, asleep on a cushion, and a grey parrot.

The door closed and he looked around him. Early Victorian furniture, bright chintzes, modern china, photo frames, frilled cushions and a quantity of Benares work.

Over the draped chimney-piece a rosewood overmantel obtruded with carved cubicles, enclosing each a simpering statuette. The walls, buff with knots of roses, were dotted with plates, plush brackets and amateurish water colours, but the room was airy and spotlessly clean, with a certain homelike sense of comfort.

The parrot eyed him wickedly, his grey head on one side, and the black cat yawned in his face, red tongue curled, with sleepy disdain.

McTaggart's nervousness increased. Then he heard a brisk step, the door opened and in there came a trim, upright little figure in a blue "foulard" dress.

He gathered his wits and advanced to meet her. "I'm afraid you won't remember me—I must really apologize for coming..."

"Oh, yes, I do——" she cut him short—"quite well"—and held out her hand.

"I met you at my sister-in-law's—Won't you sit down?" He found himself on the chintz-covered sofa facing his hostess.

Clear eyes, grey like Jill's, met his gaze, beneath a fringe, plainly false, of a brownish hue, safely secured by a band of black velvet. Beyond this line her natural hair, pepper and salt, seemed to proclaim, with emphasis, the honesty of the subterfuge and her intentions.

Her nose was sharp, her lips tight, her figure angular and spare, but he noticed she had beautiful hands on which gleamed some fine old rings.

"I was staying there when you lunched one day and took the children for a drive." She seemed to guess that he was nervous and set him at ease with well-bred tact.

"It's really about your niece I've called—I hope you will forgive the intrusion." He hesitated, finding it harder even than he had guessed it would be.

"Mrs. Uniacke's frightfully ill—but, of course, you know all about it?"

Her smile faded instantly; she drew herself up, very erect. "I haven't the slightest pity for her." Her voice was cold and definite. "Her conduct is inexcusable!"

McTaggart saw how the land lay and decided to be diplomatic.

"I rather agree with you," he said, "my sympathy is all for Jill."

"Disgraceful," the little lady continued, "my brother's name dragged in the dust. I think Mary must be mad!—And I hope this illness will be a lesson."

"You haven't seen her, I suppose?"

"And I don't intend to!" Her mouth snapped. "It's quite bad enough to think of Edward's wife in a common prison."

"I understand how you feel," McTaggart nodded his head gravely—"but the worst of it is it's killing Jill."

The little old maid started at this.

"Jill? What's that child got to do with it?"

"Everything"—McTaggart frowned—"nurse her mother, help with the cooking, and sit up, besides, night after night. She can't go on—she's bound to break down—and nobody seems to care in the least." He saw a shade of anxiety settle on the thin face. ("It's all right"—he said to himself—"she's fond of her niece.") His courage rose. "That's why I've come to you, I feel so awfully sorry for Jill—and Mrs. Uniacke's no good—I really thought you ought to know."

"You did quite right. I'd no idea." Her grey eyes flashed as she spoke. "Mary's not fit to have children!"

The scorn of the unmarried sounded.

"I'm so relieved." McTaggart smiled. "I felt it was no business of mine and wondered how you would receive me. But now—since you're so kind—I want to make a certain suggestion. It seems they won't hear of a nurse——" the young man went a trifle red—"Of course—they must have a lot of expenses—education and all that, and I want to be allowed to help."

"As it happens I've been left ... rather a large fortune lately and I don't know what to do with the money—it's a fact, I assure you..." he hurried on—"and if you agree to it, I thought I'd see about a good trained nurse—for night work—to relieve Jill. We're such old friends——" his voice pleaded—"only you see she's awfully proud, so I thought if I might use your name Jill need never know about it. I suppose you'll think it awful cheek," boyishly he added the clause—"for a stranger to come and suggest this—but I've known Jill all my life."

There followed an embarrassing pause. He could feel the keen grey eyes upon him and looked away, his gaze fixed on a goblet of Bohemian glass with "Grüss!" inscribed in gilt upon it.

Over Miss Uniacke's wrinkled face a grim smile began to steal.

"Hm ... I see. You want to indulge in philanthropy—at the expense of my conscience?"

McTaggart, glancing up, caught a twinkle in her eyes.

"Exactly—we can both afford it!—I knew, somehow, you'd be kind."

"Did you?" She chuckled, inwardly pleased. "You seem to take a lot for granted. May I ask the reason why?"

"Well—if you want to know..." he smiled. "No—I'd better not." He checked himself mischievously, studying her face.

"Jill, I suppose, or, perhaps, Roddy?—I sent that young rascal a hamper lately—I expect he's been deceiving you! I only do it because, as it happens, Mrs. Belsey likes cooking. And I don't eat cakes myself—so it pleases her—and I hate waste!"

"No. Roddy's been most discreet!" He paused, then risked it, laughing.

"I guessed it from your beautiful hands! There's such a lot of character to be learnt from hands——" he went on calmly, enjoying her indignant surprise. "I always judge people by them, and I'm never very far wrong!"

"You're a very impertinent young man!"

The smile she could no longer repress robbed the words of their sting—"Now before I answer your ... rigmarole—I want to think."

McTaggart nodded. He was well pleased with his mission and he felt a personal interest in this singular new acquaintance, with her sharp tongue and kind eyes.

Absently, from a black silk bag, Miss Uniacke drew a bundle of wool and began to knit rapidly, thinking aloud, between the stitches.

"Three, four, five, purl—the woman's an utter fool—always told Edward so!—seven, eight, drop one. But there's the girl to consider—twelve, thirteen,

fourteen, fifteen—dirty house, no management—nineteen, twenty, knit one, turn..."

Silence fell in the darkening room.

Then from behind the sofa came the startling sound of a noisy kiss.

McTaggart wheeled round in wonder.

"Pret-ty Polly—give-us-a-kiss!" followed by a grave "A-men." The grey parrot, upside down, clinging to his narrow perch, let out a mocking laugh. Miss Uniacke knitted on.

"Seven, eight—strong soup—nine, purl—some good old port—ridiculous! a child of that age—ten, eleven, wants air—drop one—and nine hours sleep. Pity they let her out of prison—fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, turn—If I had my way I'd shave their heads. Soon cure this Suffrage nonsense—Three, four——"

McTaggart felt a wild desire to laugh aloud, as from the window the parrot indulged in a hoarse and fervent "Damn!"

"Oh!" Miss Uniacke rose to her feet. "You *bad* bird. You shall go to bed——" She seized a green baize cloth and threw it nimbly over the cage. "I can't *think* where he learns these words."

At the shocked note in her voice McTaggart straightened his face.

"I expect he lived with a Suffragette before he came to you," he suggested—"and once they get the fever, you know, it's all up with their morals. He'll be out breaking windows next!"

Miss Uniacke chuckled grimly.

"Well——" she laid her knitting down and folded her slim white hands. "I've made up my mind, Mr. McTaggart. I can't allow Jill to suffer. I'm much obliged for your kind offer but there's a better way by far. I shall go and look after Mary myself."

She said it with an air of triumph.

"It will be an excellent opportunity to break her of this Suffrage nonsense." She caught McTaggart's look of alarm. "Don't be afraid—I'm a capital nurse—I mean, of course, when she's convalescent. What she wants now is rest and sleep—and good food. Did you say they hadn't a cook?"

"I don't think so—I understand she left, furious, on the day Mrs. Uniacke went to prison."

"I don't blame her." The silk dress rustled. "Then there's only that slatternly housemaid left to help Jill?"

"So I gather—unless Stephen condescends to black the boots!"

"Ha!" The little lady snorted—"So *he's* about still, is he?"

McTaggart was conscious of a slip. He wished he hadn't mentioned the man.

"I can't say. I know he's at large. I don't fancy prison fare appeals to him—he's rather dainty."

"Not a friend of yours, I see."

Miss Uniacke's bright eyes surveyed him almost lovingly—"Well—he won't enter that house while I'm there," she decided tartly.

"Now, to business"—she went on, after a pause, "I'll shut up the flat as soon as I can. I always do for the Summer months and it's only a few weeks earlier—and take both my maids with me. Anyhow, until I can get the house in order and find a cook for Mary. Maria's a good nurse. She's been with me eighteen years and Mrs. Belsey understands invalid soups—she's an excellent woman and a strict teetotaller. So you can set your mind at rest—about Jill, I mean." She smiled as McTaggart rose to his feet. "Come and see us when you like. I'm very much obliged to you. It's not often nowadays you find young men with any sense. The world's all upside down, with feeble boys and manly women!"

McTaggart held her pretty hand in his beyond the orthodox time.

"Perhaps," he asked, "you'd come for a spin now and then in my car?"

"And chaperone my niece—eh?"

The speech was not without malice. She saw his slightly guilty look and laughed outright.

"I understand—I was young once myself, you see."

"Aunt Elizabeth—you're a brick!" He dared the familiarity with his charming smile.

"Well—of all the impertinence!" her thin cheeks flushed a little. "We'll see. I make no rash promises. I shall try and get to Mary on Friday."

Her face suddenly clouded over.

"I'm glad now poor Edward's gone. It's a bad business for the children."

McTaggart felt immensely sorry. He saw she took it keenly to heart.

"I suppose"—his voice was very gentle—"you wouldn't care..." he hesitated—"to come and dine with me to-night—if you're disengaged—have nothing better? I'm only just back from abroad and find so many friends away. Won't you take pity on my loneliness?"

The little lady was inwardly flattered, but she laughed aside the invitation.

"Nonsense!—it's very kind, I'm sure ... but you don't want an old woman like me!"

"I do"—he smiled back at her. "Say you will?" He saw her glance furtively at the clock beyond. "There's loads of time—I'll change and return to fetch you. What about a theatre?"

Aunt Elizabeth was tempted.

"Well ... then—some quiet place without a band. As it happens I have a good ear for music and I won't risk my digestion by swallowing to Tango time! And—Marie Tempest, for choice—there's no nonsense about her!"

Her voice was brisk. "I'm tired of having sermons preached at me from the stage, or so-called 'Comedies'—which are nothing but an excuse for extravagant dress. I want to be amused, you see, not stunned by mere colour and light, and

rows of common, simpering girls advertising for a husband."

With a characteristic gesture she straightened the wayward brown fringe.

"In *my* young days we went to the play to see people really *act*. But now everyone's attention is riveted on the production! A sort of marionette show in which the performers seem to count as auxiliaries to the epigrams parcelled out by the author. You don't hear people praise the art of the actor. Oh, dear, no. It's: 'Isn't it well put on?' or 'Aren't the dresses simply *sweet*?'"

McTaggart laughed heartily.

"There's a great deal in what you say. Well, I'll be back within the hour. I'm so glad you can come." He foresaw that the evening might prove a quaint experience in the company of his new friend with her sharp eyes and caustic tongue.

The little old maid smiled at him.

"You'll find me quite ready," she replied, "and looking forward to my treat."

But in her heart she was saying: "I believe the boy's fond of Jill. And Mary's such an utter fool! I must see into this myself. Edward, I know, would thank me for it. He seems a nice, manly fellow..."

Little McTaggart guessed her thoughts, nor the impulse prompting her to accept.

As he left the room he heard the parrot, shrouded and sulky, drawing corks!

CHAPTER XXIII

A month passed quickly away. Almost every day McTaggart's car drew up at the house near Primrose Hill, and Jill and Roddy joyfully mounted in it, with an occasional fourth in the shape of Aunt Elizabeth. Then off they went out of London into the cooler country air, a trio of gay explorers armed with maps and

a pic-nic hamper.

Such cakes! For Mrs. Belsey had fallen a victim to Roddy's charms, his wheedling voice and jolly laugh and "Cookie—just *one* jam-puff?"

Miss Uniacke, too, had thoroughly enjoyed what she was pleased to call her "bounden duty."

From attic to cellar the musty old house had been turned literally inside out. For the invalid had improved at a surprisingly quick rate. No longer the household moved on tiptoe. Good food and the sense of all responsibility shelved on to the shoulders of the capable little old maid; her careful nursing and cheerful common sense had gone far to hasten the cure.

With her two devoted well-trained servants and a charwoman (forbidden "chatter!") Aunt Elizabeth had probed into every hole and corner.

The episode of the dead mouse (in a disused cupboard under the stairs) had proved the culminating point in her campaign against disorder.

Jill had been summoned to find her Aunt, rigid, holding between finger and thumb the tail of the moral offender: not unlike a small rodent herself, with her sharp nose and pointed chin framed in a grey check duster.

Her brown fringe was frankly awry, her grey eyes had steely points.

"Look at *that!*—I've a great mind to take it straight to your Mother. I wonder you haven't all had typhoid! That's what comes of a dirty house!"—she scoffed—"she really *ought* to know."

"Oh, Aunt Elizabeth, *don't!*" cried Jill. "Mother's afraid of mice."

"Hm..." Miss Uniacke snorted at this—"and calls herself a militant suffragette! I'm really ashamed for the servants to see it. Take it away and bury it—and I only hope it will be a lesson!"

Inwardly she was rejoicing. Jill, obediently, received the corpse and departed toward the garden. On the way she met Roddy—who promptly proposed to skin it!—but the gruesome project was abandoned and a small grave dug instead, with an ornamental tombstone.

As soon as the house was thoroughly cleaned the reformer turned her attention to the domestic education of her niece. For Mrs. Uniacke was up, on a long chair in her room, and required but little nursing now.

Every morning after breakfast Aunt Elizabeth donned a hat of plaited straw, tied with a ribbon under her pointed chin, not unlike the kind worn by a careful horse during a heat wave—so Jill thought—and only needing two holes and a pair of ears!

She and Jill would adjourn to the garden, where a pantry table and chairs were arranged on the swept path under a sycamore.

Here they mended the long-neglected household linen and the older woman preached; taking for her text the decadence of the present age, as compared to that of her early youth.

"In *my* young days"—she would start with a sniff—"we took a pride in our homes. We hadn't time for discontent and to dabble in men's affairs. Look at this darn..." she held it out. "I'd like to see a *man* do that!"

Contempt was in her shrill voice. She went on, more gently:

"I remember we used once a week to meet at my Mother's house—your Grandmamma, Jill, my dear, but you don't remember her—my two cousins and my sister and a girl friend, and have a Sewing Bee. You think it sounds dull?—I assure you it wasn't! We took it in turns to read aloud—Wilkie Collins was coming out in a weekly journal—most exciting! We fixed the day on which it appeared, and no one was allowed to peep inside. Edward used to take it in. He was always so full of fun—and one afternoon he pretended it hadn't come. We were so vexed and then my cousin Jean found it pushed carefully into a stocking ready to darn! How we laughed!" She glanced up, smiling, at Jill—"You're very like your Father, my dear, his hair and eyes—and dark brows."

"Am I?—I'm so glad." The girl checked a sudden sigh. "You can't think how we missed him!"—her voice was low—"it seemed, somehow ... like the end of everything."

For a space silence fell between them, charged with memories, sweet and sad. Then Aunt Elizabeth stirred, took off her glasses, wiped them aggressively, and in a sharp, business-like voice:

"Now—let me see." She held out her hand—"Algebra and Euclid and Greek and she can't hem a tablecloth! That's the modern education ... Look at that line—d'you call that straight? Girls brought up to think of nothing but dress and pleasure—pampered by maids!—And they proceed to fall in love!—(an eloquent sniff) with some young fool without a penny to his name—marry in haste—and can't even teach the cook to make a milk pudding!

"Then you pick up the newspaper one day and find—'What to Do with Our Girls?'" she sneered, "and 'Is Marriage Really a Failure?'—'Should Mother Dance the Tango?' I've no patience with the women—empty dolls or else unsexed!"

She bit her cotton with sharp teeth and went on with her homily.

"In *my* young days"—Jill dared to smile—"we were not ashamed of women's work—we took a pride in it, my dear. Why, your Grandmother Uniacke lived in the depths of the country, fifteen miles from a town and no railway station either! No shops—no chemist. She had her own store-room of drugs and dispensed them as well as any doctor. Once a week the villagers came and explained their ailments and Mamma used to prescribe—in all but the most dangerous cases. She was the squire's wife, you see, and this was expected then. We made our own butter and cheese—bread, of course—and home-brewed ale and cured our own bacon too. Everywhere my mother presided. She was like a little queen; in a kingdom of her own! There was no time, I can tell you, to discuss Woman's Rights—we took that for granted in *my* young days. And if a girl couldn't sew it was considered a disgrace! She very soon had to learn—and dairy work and plain cooking."

She broke off abruptly—with a sharp glance at Jill.

"Now—measure it with your card. Don't you get that hem too wide. I sometimes think sewing machines were the invention of the Devil! God knew when He made woman the soothing effect of needlework. And directly Eve ate the apple and filled her brain with education she had to set about an apron! Not only as a covering but to occupy her idle hands. There's nothing beats it, to my mind, as a sedative for the nerves. When you're worried with puzzling questions, take a bit of plain sewing and you'll find the 'stitch ... stitch' brings its own peace. With no noise and clatter like working a machine or that other abomination—a typewriter. I'd as soon be in a factory, and I verily believe we've never had the

same health since the advent of machinery.

"It's changed even the social side. In *my* young days the people with means were the landed gentry and the nobility. But now all the fine old places are being sold up to the rich manufacturers"—she sighed with real chagrin. "Everywhere, instead of good work and durability, it's cheap clothes trimmed with imitation lace. And women with idle hands, discontented and neurotic.

"If every woman did the work she leaves to her lady's maid and saw to good old-fashioned food and unadulterated bread, we shouldn't hear of these cases of 'nervous breakdown' everywhere. It's the unnatural life we lead, turning night into day, eating unwholesome kickshaws and poisoning ourselves with doctored wines!"

"But don't you think..." Jill got her chance at last as Aunt Elizabeth paused for breath—"that the present education is broadening women's minds? Think of the frightful superstition—the narrow moral point of view—the bigoted creeds of the centuries past. When girls talked of nothing but sentiment and fainted and screamed..."

"Hm...." Miss Uniacke interrupted. "I don't see very much improvement. They shriek now on public platforms—instead of in their own parlours. It's a less decent form of hysteria, to *my* mind!"

Jill laughed aloud.

"All the same—I think they've more self-respect nowadays. They don't go running after men..."

"*Don't* they?" snapped her Aunt. "Just read a few cases of breach of promise and divorce! That will show you how far the modern woman respects herself!

"Nine times out of ten it's idleness breeds sin. If they tubbed their own babies they'd have less leisure for such mischief. But babies are out of fashion now..." the intrepid old maid stole a glance at Jill's calm face and proceeded—"Mind you, I don't say I consider it's right to bring a lot of children into the world if you haven't the means to support them. But you'll notice if you look around it's the people who could well afford it who generally shirk that duty! A baby's a handicap, you see, in a life of pleasure.—It means self-denial—and besides this, the young generation shrink from any form of pain!..."

"When you marry, Jill, my dear," her thoughts swerved to McTaggart—"make up your mind to be wife and mother—instead of a well-dressed, idle doll! You'll be far happier—mark my words—it's what the Almighty planned for women."

"I shan't marry." Jill's dark head was bent in shadow over her work.

"All young girls say that." Aunt Elizabeth smiled to herself. "And some of us stick to it," she added with a touch of grim honesty.

"There you are!" cried Jill. But the moment the words had passed her lips she regretted them. For the thin old face was a trifle wistful. She went on quickly.

"I'd far rather be like you, with all your liberty, Aunt Elizabeth. For, after all, though one *does* hear of happy marriages"—she paused—"they're rather rare, aren't they? And if one marries for love ... it's that—or *nothing*!" Her face was grave. "How can one tell it's going to last?"

For once her Aunt found no reply.

So the mornings would pass away in work and argument, strangely happy, followed by long afternoons in the open air with McTaggart.

Jill looked the picture of health, with sunburnt cheeks and healthy nerves.

For the summer had triumphed over the rain and a long spell of drought succeeded.

London was clearing fast of its smart crowd, and the streets and parks seemed to draw a breath of relief, freed from the daily whirl. Few people lingered in town, save the workers, and, here and there, a scattered fragment of society detained by some passing need.

Among the bright birds of passage was Lady Leason. McTaggart met her one July morning coming briskly forth from her tailor's.

"Well—this *is* nice!" He stopped and shook hands. "I thought you and Dick had gone to Cowes?"

"No—I'm a lone widow"—she smiled. "I'm off next week to join him in

Scotland. I've been trying on some shooting clothes"—she produced a pattern—"How d'you like it?"

"Heather mixture—nice stuff," he fingered it with approval. "It's simply ages since I've seen you—I've only been back a little time and meant to call, but heard you had gone. Shall you be at home next Sunday?"

"What are you doing this evening? Come and dine—that would be better. I've got Bertram staying with me—my cousin. He's up for the Church Congress."

"I'd love to. Is that the Bishop?" and as she nodded—"at eight o'clock?"

"Yes—as usual. We'll have a chat—just ourselves—that will be nice. You haven't missed much this season—everything spoilt by rain. Ascot was like the Flood and I didn't get a single winner!"

"Hard luck!" said McTaggart. He saw her into a taxi and stood for a moment leaning on the door.

"I don't know what you'll get to eat"—the pretty grey-haired woman smiled—"half the servants have gone to Scotland—Bertram and I lead the simple life!"

"I'm not particular"—he laughed—"so long as you don't give me rabbit!"

This was an old joke between them. Once they had stayed in a country house where the hostess was noted for frugality and rabbit had figured on the menu to an alarming extent. Beginning with cold pie at breakfast, a curry (with suspicious bones) had proved the hot dish at lunch and a "chicken cream" figured at dinner in which McTaggart had found a shot!

So he declared. And ever after the hostess in private had been named "Bunny" in Lady Leason's set. McTaggart smiled at the recollection.

He was going that afternoon to take Miss Uniacke for a final drive, with Jill and Roddy; for on the morrow she was leaving her sister-in-law.

With the quick recuperative power that many nervous women possess the invalid had cast off the yoke of her recent illness rapidly.

Already keen to return to work, despite Aunt Elizabeth's many lectures, the

very fact of her late ordeal had fired her vivid imagination.

She held that her public demonstration had given her at last the right to consider herself not only a martyr but a worthy Champion of the Cause.

But behind her desire for active work lay dormant the thought of Stephen's friendship. She had suffered from the enforced estrangement, yet was shrewdly aware of the reason.

She knew that Miss Uniacke did not approve of the intimacy, but imagined too that the little old maid was no lover of the opposite sex. She had been honestly amazed at her attitude toward McTaggart. It never occurred to her that Jill was the link between the curious pair. Nor could she realize in the girl a charm that would warrant the supposition.

Although she loved her only daughter and was secretly proud of her own offspring, she would have been greatly surprised had an outsider pointed out the fact of Jill's attraction to men.

The girl was so unlike herself!

It is a curious human trait that a mother can rarely appreciate a different type in her daughter. And yet some hidden law of Nature presiding at the children's birth most frequently endows a girl with the characteristics of the father. Jill was the picture of Colonel Uniacke. Roddy, with his bright colour, high cheek bones, and bird-like glance, was far more like the mother, though a stronger edition, in miniature.

But Jill, tall, gracefully formed, was rounded too; with wide grey eyes and her father's well-shaped hands and feet. Her mouth was a shade too large for beauty, but full of character, fresh and curved, with the deep corners that spell humour, and her chin held a note of obstinacy.

She had her father's clear judgment, sense of proportion and of balance, his strong vitality, warm heart and an almost passionate love of justice. Her greatest stumbling block was pride.

Many a time as a tiny child had she wept in secret over a fault, but refused to apologize. She was 'sent to Coventry' once for a week for some unwise rebellious speech, but at the end of the punishment the little girl was still

stubborn.

"I'm sorry that I hurt you, Mother—I *am* sorry"—the tears rolled down—"but I meant every word I said—and I do still—I can't help it!"

Colonel Uniacke was called, prompted by his indignant wife.

He took Jill on his knee.

"Now, then, child—out with it!"

"I said"—her arms went round his neck—"I simply hated Miss Bellew" ... (she referred to the new governess). "She's a perfect sneak and she hit Roddy—I know I'm naughty"—she wailed aloud—"but I *do* hate her—she's a beast! and I won't 'kiss and make friends'—not to please anybody!..."

"All right, then, you needn't." The child stared with wide eyes. "But while she's in authority you'll treat her with a proper respect. If she's a foe you're still bound—more than ever bound in honour—to show her every courtesy. And now go and kiss your mother."

Jill slid down, her sobs checked. This was a new point of view. Her father watched her thoughtfully.

"Of course," he said, "it's rather hard on Miss Bellew, when you think of it. She's paid to teach you—it's her living—she doesn't do it out of pleasure. You are the daughter of the house. She's my guest..." He shrugged his shoulders.

Jill turned without a word, and went back into the schoolroom.

From the passage outside, her parents heard her explain the matter.

"Miss Bellew"—she stood there in her crumpled pinafore, stiff and forlorn, tears still on her cheeks. "I'm sorry I was rude to you. I'm sorry I said you were a beast. But you hit Roddy—that finished it—and I don't like you—I never shall! But I won't call you names again. No—I don't *want* to be kissed ... but I'm going to be a good girl ... as long (sniff) ... as you're Father's guest."

She kept her word. Weeks later she explained the truce to Colonel Uniacke.

"We're 'honourable foes,' you see—like Coeur de Lion and Saladin."

The story had become a classic, and in the quiet garden one evening Aunt Elizabeth repeated it to the much-amused McTaggart.

"It's just like Jill"—he commented—"she's got a man's code of honour. I've never met a girl like her ... it's a character in a thousand."

Aunt Elizabeth looked up slyly—and caught the light in the blue eyes.

"I think we're both of us fond of Jill," she said, letting the words sink in. Then started briskly to talk of Mrs. Uniacke's improvement, drifting off into her pet aversion—Woman's Suffrage and Militant ways.

But her stray shot had missed the mark. The purely brotherly terms on which McTaggart met his girl friend were still untouched by sentiment.

He hardly knew how much he cared; content with a sense of friendship so totally distinct from all his other dealings with her sex.

He knew that Jill liked him. Not for a moment did he guess the presence of a deeper feeling. She supplied the want he had keenly felt in his own lack of home life. It was good to know that in one house he was always a welcome guest without the fear of intrigue or wearisome social convention.

For during the long months abroad many traps had been laid for him, and it bred a shrewd distrust of girls, based on more than vanity.

Now as he strolled slowly along toward his club through the Mayfair streets his thoughts ran back to Cydonia.

He walked past the Cadells' door. The blinds were down, the shutters fixed. Obedient to the decree of fashion they had moved on with the social tide.

But a feeling of thankfulness possessed him. He knew well that he had escaped a life with a woman who would have bored him, chained to the "obvious orthodox"!

And he wondered...

Was there a way of love that could survive monotony? Could he ever rely on himself to recognize the "one woman"?

Had his "double heart" been the cause of the indecision that beset him?—these swift passions that burned out like straw. Would he ever know the sacred flame?

And suddenly the gypsy's words rose up into his mind.

"Between two fires you shall burn and burn." ... He felt a thrill of superstition.

She had foretold his "golden crown," the fortune "coming over-seas" ... What was it she had prophesied later? He knit his brows, searching his memory.

Like a head on a coin, clear and raised, he saw again the swarthy face; he heard the strange pattering voice, felt her warm touch on his hand.

"When the light fades ... on the turn of the tide ... there's the Lucky Moon and the Dream of your life...!"

The "Dream of his life"? He shook himself as though to break the uncanny spell.

"What nonsense it is! I expect she tells the same tale to every man." But he knew in his heart he was not unmoved. There was magic in the chosen words.

The Dream of his life...?

With wistful eyes he tried in vain to pierce the veil, knowing behind a vision lay, sweet—unguessed—the face of Love.

CHAPTER XXIV

"Now—what do you think of my Roof Garden?"

Lady Leason turned to McTaggart with a conscious air of triumph.

"Isn't it nice?—and I planned it myself!" She was like a child with a new toy, her still young face eager and bright under her soft gray hair.

"I think it *perfect*," said McTaggart, warmly. He glanced around him as he spoke at the awning, striped with green, the basket chairs, gay red cushions, and the coarse rush matting beneath his feet.

For the leaded roof of the smoking-room, that was built out into the garden, had been transformed, with the help of green lattice work and great tubs filled with geraniums and daisies, into a sort of lounge, protected by the striped tent cloth.

"I'm growing golden hops in this box at the edge to twine up the supports and along the lattices, and in the Spring I'm going to have no end of bulbs and turn that horrid bank down there into a rockery."

She pointed to the patch of discolored grass below them, where a dingy wall completed her small domain. Above it one caught a glimpse of the trees, in the distant Park, and the evening sky, where stars already were beginning to steal out, one by one.

"Sit down—both of you"—she turned to her guests. "And talk while I make you some Turkish coffee. Here are some cigarettes—those are cigars..."

They settled themselves in the basket chairs, watching their hostess turn up the flame, under the bright copper pan, and measure out the coffee, which filled the air with its fragrance, delicate and refreshing.

"Have you seen Mrs. Fleming lately?" The Bishop addressed McTaggart. "I think the last time I met you was at the Cadells' house."

"Not for many months," the other replied—"I've been abroad, travelling about. What sort of man is Euan Fleming?"

Lady Leason looked up quickly.

"Take care what you say, Bertram. Don't make Peter jealous! I thought"—she added mischievously—"that it was a case *there...*"

At her merry gesture toward him McTaggart laughed.

"Only a mild calf-love affair! But I always imagined she'd marry a title."

"Well," said the Bishop, "I rather believe it will come to that in the end. I *hear*—but it's quite between ourselves—that he's down on the next list of Birthday honours."

"Indeed? A useful man to the party?"

McTaggart saw a twinkle come into the prominent short-sighted eyes.

"Hardly as a speaker perhaps. But he has a valuable gift—of silence! Very necessary on occasions."

Lady Leason smiled subtly. "And, of course," proceeded the Bishop hurriedly—"the Cadells are very wealthy people. With his father-in-law to finance him, and a beautiful wife, he stands a chance of being Lord Fleming some day—of a mythical Castle like Laura's friends ... I forget the name."

"D'you mean 'the Crumpets?'"

The hostess laughed, mischief in her hazel eyes.

"Peter—haven't you heard?—it's too quaint!—I must tell you." She stirred the coffee again, then started with her story.

"I don't know if you ever met a dark, excitable little woman, the wife of a big engineer called Crumpe? She always came to my parties, frightfully overdressed and hung round with pearls like a Tecla advertisement. You surely must remember her? Well, this year he was made a peer. He'd given a park somewhere to the people and was a large subscriber to party funds.

"Little Mrs. Crumpe was in her glory! She cut all her old friends, drawing a strict line round Belgravia and Mayfair. And what d'you imagine they took for a name? We'd always called them 'the Crumpets,' you know—it seemed to suit them. He had such a 'buttery' manner! And now they're Lord and Lady

Quinningborough of Castle Normantayne"—she choked.

Tears of mirth stood in her eyes as she leaned, still laughing, toward McTaggart.

"It sounds like feudal towers, and a moat, and a drawbridge. But it *isn't*—that's the pure joy! It's not a house at all, it seems, but the name of a tiny village where Crumpet's father owned a farm!"

McTaggart roared, and the Bishop's charity was not proof against the infection of her mirth.

"Really, it is remarkable, the modern mania for a title." He took off his glasses and wiped them, still faintly shaken with laughter.

McTaggart inwardly congratulated himself (and not for the first time) on his determination to drop his foreign honours on landing in England.

("A fine ass I should look now, posing as an Italian Marquis among friends who have known me since college days as Peter McTaggart"—he smiled at the thought.)

His principal trouble had been with Mario, but the latter's ignorance of the English tongue and the knowledge that if he talked it would mean his dismissal had made him obedient, albeit sulkily.

The fear of a slip had dissuaded McTaggart himself from much talk with Jill on his Sienese inheritance. She knew he had some property there, but, beyond this, very little. Bethune was the only man wholly in the secret. Luckily for McTaggart, it had escaped the papers, filled at that period with a royal marriage. The Scotch side of his character, cautious and reserved, stood him in good stead, and besides this he had a horror of snobism, somewhat rare in these days.

"It seems a pity," he said now, "that honours are so frequent—or rather, I should say, so easily earned. So many splendid men in the past have won them by deeds of heroism, for fine administration and solid work done in the interests of the Empire. Men *worthy* I mean, without any question of £s.d.

"Of course one knows lots of people—dear people too—who deserve them, every inch—like the Cheltenhames... But when a title's frankly bought, it seems to

take away from the dignity of those others and the men to come. There should be a special kind of distinction to mean money—We talk of 'Law Lords'—for instance—why not Finance Lords? And Lords of Silence"—he smiled—"like Fleming. Not the 'Golden Fleece' but the 'Golden Tongue'!"

Lady Leason nodded her head approvingly, engrossed just then with the final process of the coffee.

McTaggart turned to the Bishop.

"By the way," he said, "talking of money, how's that company of yours? I looked up Schliff's record as far as I could, and—as I wrote you—it was hardly reassuring, though I didn't care to say too much in my letter."

"I quite understood"—the Bishop sighed—"in these days it doesn't do. But I was *most* grateful. I'm afraid the matter is going from bad to worse. I hear privately they're contemplating a call on the shares—five shillings; despite an optimistic speech packed with promises made by Schliff at the General Meeting. And—would you believe it?—only yesterday I came across an old friend I hadn't seen for years—up for this Congress from the North of England—and he'd been buying shares at *two pounds apiece*! Why, it's simply infamous! Of course he'd taken them from Schliff himself on *his* advice and they're selling now on the Stock Exchange for nine and sixpence!"

"I can quite believe it." McTaggart smiled. "After all, it's in the interests of the company. You've got to raise money somehow to save it—so the new shareholders are sacrificed for the old."

"Robbing Peter to pay Paul?" the Bishop suggested. "I heartily disapprove of it, and I warned my friend. He's going to see Schliff this afternoon, and I don't envy the latter. He'll meet his match."

"I doubt it—he's pretty thick-skinned! This isn't the first of his financial ventures."

"What are you two talking about?" Lady Leason broke in. "Here's your coffee." She handed the dainty cups in their egg-shell china and filigree stands. "And now, Peter"—she leaned back with a sigh—"I want to hear all about your year in Italy."

"Rather a tall order!—Where shall I start?"

"At the beginning." She looked at him curiously. "Tell us first why you deserted London?"

"To nurse my broken heart, of course. You seem to forget Cydonia."

"My dear Peter!"—she laughed back. "I don't believe that. I knew you were only flirting. She's pretty of course, but oh! so *dull*—and think of Cadell! What a father-in-law."

The Bishop frowned.

"I assure you they're excellent people, Laura. I've the greatest respect for Mrs. Cadell."

"She's got a good cook," said his cousin wickedly.

McTaggart threw himself into the pause that followed.

"Well—I went the usual round—Rome, Florence, Siena"—he laughed—"and Venice of course—and Naples." Here he paused, checked by some memory, evidently funny, smiling to himself.

"Out with it!" Lady Leason was watching his handsome face. "I feel a distinct 'pricking in my thumbs.' Oh, Bertram won't mind"—as she saw him glance at the Bishop—"I'll answer for him—he's never shocked!"

"Really, Laura!" her cousin protested.

"Man of the world—and a darling too." She gave him a look of real affection.

The Bishop blinked—"Well, Mr. McTaggart?"

"I was thinking of an adventure there"—Peter admitted—"nothing 'trés moutarde' ... but perhaps ... I'd better not."

"Do." Lady Leason drew the liqueurs nearer. "Some old brandy might give you courage?"

McTaggart was tempted. He saw in his mind a way of wrapping up the weak

point in the story.

"Well—I'll risk it!" He emptied the glass, crossed his long legs and faced his audience.

"It happened on my first visit to Naples—I was yachting with some Roman friends, the Vivianis. The party consisted of my host and hostess and a man called Bellanti, his sister and myself. We touched there one evening to get supplies on our way back from Sicily, about nine o'clock. I remember Scirocco had blown all day—it was frightfully hot—we were all pretty limp. Viviani wouldn't stir and the Countess wanted bridge. They were four with Bellanti, so I thought I'd go ashore.

"I must say they did their best to dissuade me, and, of course, I'd heard no end of yarns about Naples at night, but I thought they were just travellers' stories! We lay a good way out in the Bay. It's awfully smelly right in the harbour. But I rowed in with four of the crew, who were to wait and bring me back.

"Well, I wandered about until I was tired. The town didn't much appeal to me, and then suddenly I remembered an address a naval friend had given me—of a sort of dancing-place—rather like the 'Bal Tabarin,' you know."

"Bertram doesn't know," said Lady Leason gravely.

"Yes, I do, my dear," said the Bishop unexpectedly. "Warleigh's youngest son mentioned it one day. He told me it was a Dancing Academy."

"Well ... something like it"—McTaggart chuckled. "Anyway, I went there. But it wasn't up to much. Just a bare hall, with a crowd of men and women and the usual 'Tarantella,' which I'd grown heartily sick of! But there was one girl who danced beautifully—pretty as paint—very dark, you know. I never saw such eyes in my life..."

"Oh, Peter!" Lady Leason laughed—"was this how you set about curing your broken heart?"

"Perhaps." His smile was enigmatic. "We danced together several times—the room was as hot as an oven and the wine the worst I ever have tasted. So when she suggested we should go outside and hunt up a cousin of hers who kept a bar

—somewhere quite near—with decent drinks, like a fool, I forgot Viviani's warnings, she fetched a wrap and we started out.

"Well—it seemed a bit further than she thought. We passed through a lot of narrow streets, up some steps and into an alley and came at last to a sort of tavern, where some sailors were drinking and playing cards.

"We crossed the room and went up some stairs, and I was beginning to feel doubtful when she opened a door into a dingy room, almost dark, with a flickering wick burning in a saucer of oil. 'I'll fetch the wine,' said my little friend—'and a lamp—sit down.' She disappeared—I heard the door close, then the click of a key being turned in the lock from outside.

"I sprang toward it, caught the handle, and the next thing I knew the light was extinguished and a man's voice said in English:

"'Hands up!'" ... He glanced at his audience.

"Good Heavens!" Lady Leason gasped. The Bishop's round, short-sighted eyes were still more prominent, his mouth open.

"How very unpleasant!" he observed.

"It was." McTaggart's voice was emphatic. "I saw at once it was a trap. Nobody knew where I was, and I hadn't the faintest idea myself. I stood there with my back to the door, trying to keep my wits about me.

"Then from the other side of the room came a second voice, also a man's. He said slowly, in Italian:

"'If you move an inch—you're a dead man.' So there were two of them!—That settled it. I guessed that both of them were armed, and there I was, in evening dress without so much as a pocket knife!

"'Take off your clothes, one by one,' said the first voice in broken English—'and lay them before you on the floor—together with your money and watch.'

"Well—I did it!" McTaggart scowled—the memory still had power to rouse him. "No earthly good showing fight—it was pitch dark and they knew where I stood.

"'You can keep your boots'—the speaker laughed—'and here's a paper'—he pitched it across—'it's a warm night—you won't catch cold!'

"Hope returned to me at that. For I didn't expect to get out alive. Well—after a minute a match flared, and was promptly blown out. I caught a glimpse of dark figures to right and left and then I felt a hand grip my arm.

"'Straight ahead'—We crossed the room, and this was the hardest part of all! I was simply dying to go for the brute, but the odds were more than two to one. So I set my teeth and swore to myself—feeling—well—*rather* a fool! He opened a door—not the one we had come by—and said:

"'Ten steps—count them—down—You'll find the handle on your left. Good night 'e buon' riposo!' and I heard their steps receding behind me. Well—I stumbled down those confounded stairs, fumbled about, found the door and was outside in the night—thanking my stars for such an escape. I didn't waste much time, you can guess—but crossed the court yard at the double, found an alley and bolted down it and out into an empty street. It led into a wider one, and there, by luck, was a passing cab. Mercifully, it was dark and not another soul about. You should have seen the driver's face! I was clad in a torn newspaper with, far below, my patent shoes and a pair of violet silk socks."

He glanced at the Bishop guiltily, and was relieved to see his broad smile and hear Lady Leason's laugh ring out merrily at the picture.

"I bolted into that cab like a hare, crouched down and found a rug—it was open, you see—the usual 'vettura'—and offered the driver untold wealth to gallop straight to the landing stage. Of course, once I reached the boat, the crew paid him and found me some clothes—a coat and a tarpaulin, and in this costume I reached the yacht. My one hope now was to get to my cabin before my friends were aware of my plight. Luckily they were playing bridge under an awning on the deck.

"We were very quiet and all went well. I dressed quickly and rejoined them, having bought the silence of the crew, who happened to be decent fellows."

"But didn't you tell them?" The Bishop stared. "I'd have gone straight to the British Consul. A most disgraceful state of things!"

"Not I!" McTaggart laughed. "What was the use? To begin with, I'd no idea of

the address. Naples is like a rabbit-warren—and besides they'd have chaffed me out of my life."

"What an adventure!" His hostess shuddered. She thought for a moment.

"What became of the girl? You never saw her again, I suppose. She must have been a paid decoy?"

"Looks like it." McTaggart agreed. He lit up a cigarette. "That's how I mended my broken heart. But promise you won't tell Mrs. Fleming!"

"I shouldn't dream of it," said the Bishop in a shocked voice. The others laughed.

"The luckiest part to my mind was getting past the Vivianis'—I can see them now, very absorbed. Bellanti had doubled 'no trumps.' That saved it, I believe—and the story from getting all over Rome."

They talked for a little longer, then McTaggart rose to his feet.

"It's getting late, I'm afraid." He shook hands with Lady Leason. "Thank you so much for a happy evening"—and turned to the Bishop, who detained him.

"I'm going back to Oxton to-morrow," he blinked for a moment, hesitating.

"I wonder now—would you care to come and spend a quiet week-end with us? Do you know that part of the country at all? It's very pleasant in the summer."

"It's awfully kind of you," said McTaggart. He thought quickly through his engagements—"d'you mean *this* week-end?" he asked—"if so, I shall be delighted."

"Then that's settled"—the Bishop smiled—"we might travel down together to-morrow—I'm going by the three-fifteen. Would that suit you?"

"Splendidly."

Lady Leason watched the pair, a twinkle in her hazel eyes.

"Well—no Neapolitan adventures." Mischievously she shook a finger at the younger man standing there. For no reason, apparently, McTaggart went a trifle red.

"Oh—I've turned over a new leaf."

The Bishop beamed at his cousin.

"It wasn't his fault, Laura, my dear."

"Of course not." She caught McTaggart's eye. "Though I don't *quite* understand ... Oh, never mind!" She laughed aloud. "But don't demoralize Bertram."

"I couldn't," said McTaggart, smiling.

CHAPTER XXV

McTaggart's week-end visit prolonged itself. For on Monday the Bishop drove him over to lunch at Rustall, Lord Warleigh's fine old Tudor mansion near Oxton. Here he found again a friend of college days, Gilbert Crewkerne, a nephew of the house, and received an unexpected invitation to move on to Rustall and take part in a cricket match fixed for the following Saturday.

The Territorials, camping in the neighborhood, were sending an eleven to play against the house party. Unfortunately one of Lord Warleigh's guests had sprained his ankle and Crewkerne saw in McTaggart's visit to Oxton the kindly finger of Providence.

Mario was delighted with the change of plans, approving this beautiful country house, with its vast rooms and fine old park. He had been dismayed by his London quarters, so poor a setting for his young master's rank, and the only flaw in the present scheme was the fact of McTaggart's strict prohibition. He would have liked to proclaim aloud the secret of the former's inheritance, and was not a little pained to find how little McTaggart valued his title.

It lowered too his own sense of importance in the servants' hall, where each man took rank according to his master. He resented the butler's distant patronage, but his loyalty was proof against the strong temptation that beset him.

A chance remark of his disclosed the fact to McTaggart one evening as he dressed for dinner.

"Never mind, Mario. We'll go back to Rome for the winter months." He saw the olive face brighten and felt a sudden touch of pity.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? I expect you find it lonely in England—though you're picking up the language fast. Have you heard lately from Lucia?"

He added the question with a smile. Lucia was the Principessa's maid and lived in a fine old Roman palace not far from his own flat.

"Sissignore—a letter last week. They are still at Viareggio. The Poet was taken very ill and Don Cesare has fought a duel."

"Never!—who with?" McTaggart laughed—"And why?"

Mario spread out his hands. "Chi lo sa?—They talk of a lady ... it was with the young Count Guido Chigi."

"He's starting young," McTaggart decided. "Lucia must have had her hands full. I shouldn't care to nurse the Poet. I should think he would keep her pretty busy!"

"And a good thing too," said Mario shrewdly. He did not approve of idleness for his betrothed during his absence.

McTaggart smiled at his valet's voice. He took an interest in his servants, and was not one of those modern masters who consider good wages their only duty toward the men they employ.

Without reasoning out the matter his quick intuition showed him the cause of much of the present-day trouble in domestic service in this country. He realized that a good servant will rarely take a base advantage of his master's kindness if he respects him, and without being socialistic he broke through conventional barriers, appreciating the fact that money alone will not buy fidelity.

His utter lack of snobism showed him there could be no loss of dignity in quiet friendship with a man whose very dependence upon himself arose from an accident of birth, and whose inobtrusive, steady attention formed one of the luxuries of life.

Possibly his Italian blood had something to do with his convictions; for in that old land there is more freedom of intercourse between master and man. It is less swayed by the rule of wealth.

In England, at present, a new type has quickly swung into power, without a material alteration in the status of those it employs. Hence confusion. For inherited prejudice points out the weakness of brand-new dignity to men and women accustomed for centuries to respect good breeding above money.

And there is no class on earth so shrewd as the servant class to appreciate Caste.

Although one hears endless complaints showered upon it nowadays, one meets constantly with cases of faithful and devoted service, where gentle folk of reduced means, living on their slender incomes and debarred from offering adequate wages, find loyal friends in their servants. Old traditions die hard, and although estates pass away, squires are ruined by taxation and money seems the only god, in the heart of the people lingers yet a deep-set love for the old stock.

Had McTaggart lost his wealth or been debarred by a sorry chance of his title and Italian property, Mario would have openly grumbled but stayed on through adverse fortune, using his nimble wits to find a means of serving his young master.

It was, however, with deep regret that he packed up the latter's clothes and left Rustall for the train that carried them back to the London rooms.

Long ago he had decided that marriage would solve the present difficulties. He could not picture a young Marchesa in anything but fitting surroundings.

Unaware of the thoughts of his man, and that Mario himself had joined in the general conspiracy against him, McTaggart at last reached home.

London was stuffy, white with dust, after the green countryside, and as they drove through deserted streets he was planning already his next departure. Lord

Warleigh had asked him up to Scotland to shoot for the last week in August, and this would fit in well with his plans to spend a few days with the Leasons. The Uniackes, he knew, were off shortly for a month at Worthing, and McTaggart had a hazy idea of a motor trip in his new car on the south coast to fill the gap before he should start for the North.

He wondered if Bethune would care to join him; conscious, with a touch of remorse, that of late he had neglected the latter, absorbed in his own friendship with Jill.

And as if in answer to the question he found Bethune awaiting him.

But the first glance at his visitor's face drove away all minor thoughts.

For trouble was plainly written there.

"That you, McTaggart?" His voice was curt, without its usual hearty ring.

"I want to speak to you a moment." He closed the door carefully.

"Hullo—Bethune—you're quite a stranger! What's up?" said McTaggart lightly. He did not quite like his reception, feeling an odd premonition. "Nothing wrong, I hope?" he added.

"Everything. I've bad news. Trouble again—at the Uniackes—I've been waiting for you over an hour."

"Not Jill?" said McTaggart quickly. He stared at his friend's changed face, the brown eyes deeply shadowed, strong jawbone prominent.

"Yes." Bethune dragged up a chair and sat down, facing the other across the narrow dining table, with a certain studied deliberation.

"It's like this. I'll tell you quickly. It's this damnable Suffrage business and Mrs. Uniacke again—just when we thought it all over! ... It seems there's to be a political meeting in Wales to-morrow—some big guns airing their views on Home Rule—and the Suffragettes mean mischief. The leaders are already there. They burned down a house last night—by way of endearing themselves to the natives!—and to-morrow they mean to gather in force and upset all the speech-making. Mrs. Uniacke planned to go—secretly," his face darkened—"without

telling Jill a word—but Roddy got it out of Stephen. I think that woman's really mad!—She's hardly out of bed, you know, and Jill was nearly worried to death—begged and implored her to give it up."

"I never heard such damned nonsense!" McTaggart broke out at this—"she ought to be put in an asylum. No wonder Jill never wrote..."

Bethune gave him an odd glance.

"It was only found out yesterday. But that's not the worst of it. Jill's gone in her place."

"What?" McTaggart sprang to his feet.

"Sit down," said Bethune grimly. "You've got another couple of hours." He glanced up at the clock. "I went there this afternoon—to enquire for Mrs. Uniacke. Lucky I did!—I found Roddy and he poured out the whole story. It seems that Jill, to save her mother, offered at last to go instead. She's only to yell 'Votes for Women'—or some such infernal nonsense. But think of her in that mob—already savage about the fire. Welsh miners—you know what they are?"

"Good Lord!" McTaggart looked stunned. "And you mean her mother let her go?—a child like that..."

"She's hardly a child." Bethune took him up sharply. "I suppose she thought it would force her to join—become a suffragette herself. Anyhow it's a dirty trick."

He pushed the open time-table across. "There's a train at midnight. You get to D—— in time for breakfast—two hours to wait—and then by a branch line to L——. The meeting's a few miles out. It's fixed for twelve o'clock sharp. You can *just* do it—that's all. Will you go?" He stared across at McTaggart, his pale face twitching a little.

"Of course! Why? What d'you think?" He paused for a moment, digesting the news, then glanced up at Bethune with a puzzled look after a quick survey of the time-table. "I wonder you didn't go yourself—follow at once by the five train. You might have stopped her before the meeting. Why on earth did you wait for me?"

There came a curious little silence. Then Bethune rose to his feet, with a

restless movement, and walked across to the open window. He pulled up the blind and stared out, his back to McTaggart.

"I couldn't." His voice was hoarse and strained. "She wouldn't have thanked me for coming."

"Nonsense!—Jill isn't like that. Besides—she likes you awfully—she's told me so, heaps of times, and the way you helped in that prison business."

But Bethune made no reply.

Something about the man's attitude struck a note of discouragement, and McTaggart—full of impatience—let fall a vexed:

"Well?"

"If you want to know," said Bethune at last, "I suppose you'd better ... anyhow! I asked Jill to marry me—some days ago. That's why."

Sheer amazement seized McTaggart. Then, from no apparent cause, anger stirred: a faint disgust, tempered by a grim amusement.

"You asked ... Jill ... to marry you?"

"Why not?" ... At the sound of his voice the other wheeled round suddenly—"What's it got to do with *you*?"

And in a flash the friendship of years crumbled up—here were rivals! They faced each other, primitive men, ready to fight for the sake of a woman.

"Look here—McTaggart"—Bethune came back to where the former still sat, elbows resting on the table, one hand gripping the "A.B.C."—"There's no need to speak like that! I've played fair. By God—I have!"

His square face was livid with passion. A steady accumulation of wrath—the slow and deadly anger that lurks under strong control in a man of his type—was surging up and breaking bounds. "You've got to listen. It's my turn now. By heavens, I've been patient enough..."

"Go on." McTaggart was watching him, his mouth hard. It was a challenge.

Bethune's stormy eyes flashed at the faint contempt in the words.

"I will." He stood there, very erect, a curious dignity about him that added to the suggestion of power in the strong, heavily built figure.

"You went away, out of England—an engaged man—so I understood—intending to marry Miss Cadell." His gaze never left McTaggart.

"Well—it's no earthly business of mine whether you meant it—you *said* you did. But you never gave a thought to Jill—or any of us left behind. For months and months—save a few cards to tell me where to forward your letters! And I got—somehow—into the way of seeing a lot of ... the Uniackes. They were—all of them—awfully kind. And when this last trouble came—this Suffrage business with the Mother—it was to me Jill turned—and I helped her ... well, all I could. I was up there most evenings while Mrs. Uniacke was in prison"—he paused for a second and went on huskily—"I thought ... Jill ... liked me a bit....

"Then *you* turned up ... and took it over ... got Miss Uniacke to help. Yes—I know all about that—The old lady told me herself.

"Jill was your friend before mine—and don't you think I ever forgot it!" his voice rose threateningly. "I stood aside and gave you your chance.

"You can't say that I've troubled you with much of my company these last weeks ... (McTaggart stirred impatiently). But I thought you meant the straight game."

"What the devil d'you mean by that?" The other's blue eyes were ablaze—"you'd better look out what you're saying..." He caught himself in hand again.

"Go on ... It's ... interesting."

Bethune needed no second bidding. Whipped by the sneer in McTaggart's voice, he turned on him savagely.

"That's just it—the difference! I'm not a Society man, thank God! and I don't understand Society ways—nor the lies they act all day long. But I *do* know what's fair to a woman. Any fool could have understood what your return meant to Jill..."

To his surprise McTaggart started. "I saw at once I hadn't a chance—not the ghost of one!" he caught his breath—"but I wanted—to see—Jill happy. Where I was wrong was I didn't know *you*..." He struck his fist on the table. "I thought you really meant business. I might have learned from the past"—his voice was full of grim disgust—"I *ought* to know your way with women! And it's not fair on a girl like Jill—she's out and away too fine for you—to *marry* a man like you, I mean—let alone mere flirtation. Why—what d'you suppose that Aunt thought? with you hanging around all day long. She fairly played into your hands—any ass could have seen that!"

"Have you *quite* finished?" said McTaggart. "Because, if so, I've a question to ask."

He spoke slowly, for his anger, past a certain phase, touched the danger mark at freezing point. He had reached it now.

"We will set aside *your* idea of *my* conduct," he smiled grimly—"or the reason you choose to set yourself up as a judge. What I can't quite gather from your talk is why—if you were so damned sure"—a slight flush rose to his face—"that Jill was ... well, fond of me—you promptly asked her to marry *you*? It's a little confused—your argument."

Bethune drew back sharply. Across his white, angry face a look of pain and perplexity shot. He saw that McTaggart's nimble mind had caught at the first obvious excuse, and yet with all his honest heart he knew the purity of his intentions.

"I didn't mean to," he blurted it out. "But I found her crying—and lost my head. The servant showed me in by mistake. She was sitting there in that back room, her head buried in her hands—and I couldn't stand it—damn it all!" At the memory, unconsciously, the tears rose in his brown eyes. "You'd gone away, without a word—and—loving her ... I understood."

"I knew she thought she had lost you again—that you'd gone back to your London life. She's pretty plucky—but, after all, she's only a girl!" his voice softened. "It must be precious lonely there—boxed up with that Suffragette mother—and so"—the colour flooded his face, creeping up to the roots of his hair—"I thought perhaps—it might ... comfort a bit—to know what one man thought of her."

A short silence fell between them.

"And she refused you?" McTaggart, white and tight-lipped, thrust aside a momentary twinge of shame that cut across his secret triumph.

Cruelly he went on:

"Women generally know what they want. You can take that—from *my* experience!"

Bethune winced at the stab. But his anger had spent itself. Now he felt old and tired, oddly ashamed for his friend.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "Jill's not a girl to love twice." And in this simple sentence he showed the depth of his respect for her.

But the words, unintentionally uttered, stung McTaggart to the quick.

"Unlike myself!" he said with a sneer.

Bethune moved toward the door. On the threshold he turned and passed a hand wearily over his brow.

"You're going to her?" He jerked his head with a warning gesture to the clock.

"Yes."

McTaggart never turned, but Bethune still hesitated.

He was fighting hard against himself—a bitter battle of wounded pride; the picture of Jill in his mind, her grey eyes wet with tears.

Suddenly he wheeled round.

"For God's sake, Peter," he cried—(the old familiar name slipped out, for habit is hard to break)—"if you care for her—tell her so!"

The door slammed behind his back. McTaggart sat as if turned to stone, elbows propped upon the table, staring out into space.

His blue eyes were hard and bright; bitter resentment was in his heart. He

could not see through the veil of anger that clear flame of sacrifice. For Bethune had gained those lonely heights where human love meets the divine. He had offered Jill his greatest gift—voluntary renunciation.

CHAPTER XXVI

The sun was shining high in the heavens as McTaggart crossed the station yard to the Railway Inn of the little town that lay in the trough of the crumpled hills.

The straggling street, with its poor shops, curving away to the left, was void of life. Not a soul stirred; it might have been a deserted village.

He walked briskly into the bar, where a man in shirt sleeves dozed on a stool behind the counter and woke up with a sudden start at the sight of a stranger.

"Are you the landlord?" asked McTaggart.

"No"—the man stared at him—"he's away, gone to the meeting."

"Well—I want a conveyance at once. I see you keep a livery stable."

"Can't be done," said the man slowly—"there's no carriages left, whatever."

McTaggart frowned. "Where can I get one?"

"Nowheres"—the other smiled sourly. He seemed to enjoy the stranger's plight. "Everything's gone over to Cluar—even the carts—you'd best walk. It's only a mile or two, whatever."

He relapsed again, his arms on the counter, with an air of dismissing the visitor.

McTaggart glanced up at the clock and saw there was no time to lose. He decided to take the barman's advice, but had yet to learn by experience the elastic properties of a mile in Wales by local measurement.

"Which is the nearest way?" he asked, drawing a shilling out of his pocket.

The man sprang up as if worked by a spring. "I'll show you, sir"—his manner had changed. "Indeed to goodness I'm sorry, sir, we've got no carriage in just now, but you'll cut off a corner across the fields if you'll come through here..." he led McTaggart down a grimy passage that smelt of beer out on to greasy cobblestones where they were faced by a tumble-down building advertising "Excellent Garage."

But as they crossed the stable yard McTaggart heard the note of a horn, and turned to see a motor car, covered with dust, pass through the arch and draw up throbbing in their rear.

"Morning, David"—the chauffeur called out. He sprang down. "I've come for the petrol."

"Whose car?" asked McTaggart quickly.

"Mister Llewellyn's," the barman replied, "from Cluarside. That's your way sir"—he opened the gate—"keep straight on, down that path, until you come to the cross roads. Then to the right and up the hill. Thank you, sir." He clutched the coin. "Coming, Charlie..." and was off to the visibly impatient chauffeur.

A sudden thought struck McTaggart. As the barman vanished into the house, he turned back into the yard, with a quick glance at the powerful car.

"Look here..." he addressed the driver. "Could you give me a lift to the meeting?" He felt in his pocket and drew out a sovereign—"I'd make it well worth your while."

The man stared at him, surprised.

"D'you know Mr. Llewellyn, sir?"

McTaggart smiled.

"I'm afraid not. But I've got to get at once to Cluar—and I can't find any other conveyance." He saw the chauffeur's greedy eyes fixed on his hand, and lowering his voice:

"If you can take me there, *now*," he added, "wait a few minutes and get me back to the station, it's ... five pounds in your pocket."

The man gave a little gasp. McTaggart went on steadily. "I've got to deliver a certain message"—(it seemed the best excuse on the moment)—"then catch the London train (with Jill"—he said to himself—"but that can come later.")

"Mr. Llewellyn's gone to town"—the chauffeur was thinking aloud—"I *must* get this petrol first..." he glanced back over his shoulder nervously at the barman, who reappeared dragging two tins from under the low stone archway.

"I daren't take you in here, sir," he stooped down as he spoke, pretending to examine a tyre, "but if you'd go across the fields, I'd pick you up at the cross roads."

"All right—that's settled." McTaggart again raised his voice. "A nice car—I wasn't sure who the maker was. Thanks. Good day."

Off he went with a careless nod. The sun poured down on his head, which ached from his long night journey. The stony path felt hot to his feet, adding to his sense of fatigue.

For sleep had been impossible. With every throb of the rocking train he had seemed to hear Bethune's voice and recall scattered, angry phrases.

"I thought ... you meant ... the straight ... game!" This was one of the refrains. The wheels had pounded out the words with the scanded beat of a Greek chorus. Well?—so he did—Bethune was mad! He tried to thrust the thought aside that blame could be attached to him: that, through any carelessness of his, Jill might have suffered. But still it rankled.

"She's only a child..." he said to himself. "She understands. Bethune's an ass! ... And as to 'Aunt Elizabeth'..."

Back it came with hammering force:

"I thought ... you meant ... the straight ... game! ... I thought ... you meant..." He swore aloud.

As the dawn stole in through the windows, wan over the misty hills, the

words suddenly changed to these:

"Jill's—not the girl—to love—twice."

They brought a new throb of pain and the man stirred restlessly.

If, after all, Bethune were right? What then...?

He shrank from the thought. Jill to suffer because of him!—Little Jill ... the child he loved....

"Hardly a child!" Bethune had said. On went the wheels, merciless.

"Jill's—not the girl—to love—twice..."

McTaggart remembered suddenly how she had looked on his return when Roddy had played his innocent trick. He could see her sway and clutch the chair.

"Peter!" He heard again the note, strange and emotional in her voice.

And then at the Fair, two years ago, her face when he offered his tawdry gift—the double heart—and the way she had left him, driving home in front with Bethune.

Had he been blind? *Did* she care?

If so—his face was white and grave—the only decent thing to do was to go away out of her life.

And at the thought he stopped aghast, his whole world upside down.

"I can't do it!"—the words broke from him with a ring of genuine consternation, echoing in the empty carriage that penned him in like a prison cell. For a space he sat, his head bowed down between his hands, blotting out the light, rosy now on a dewy land, heralding in the newborn day.

Then, slowly he looked up, a great wonder on his face.

The rays of the sun were dim beside the white truth that poured in on him.

"Jill ... little Jill..." he whispered her name, conjuring up the grey eyes under

their dark curling lashes, and the frank gaze that met his own.

Jill, with her courage and endurance, clever brain and heart of a child. For a moment he held her in his arms—his to teach the meaning of love...

Then—with a sigh—he put her away. For the first time for long years he placed another's happiness before his own. Was it fair to her?

Was he *fit* to marry Jill? A new-born sense of unworthiness swept aside his desire.

His past life rose up, his old mistrust of himself, the mystery of his "double heart" ... his light and pleasure-loving nature.

He thought of Fantine and Cydonia, of many a pretty woman's face; of this last year in Italy with its careless sequence of adventures.

Could he be faithful to the end?

"Yes!" cried his heart. "Wait," said his brain.

Reason warred with emotion; he stood at the crossroads of his life.

And the stronger, cleaner side of the man rose up in his soul's defence.

He must prove himself, *know* himself before Jill could become his wife.

He took a vow then and there to pass through a period of probation. But Jill was worth waiting for.

If she cared? ... A doubt stabbed him and he set his teeth, his face dogged.

He *would* win her—come what may! His thoughts forged fast ahead, he felt the keen thrill of pursuit.

And then the figure of his friend, square set, with honest eyes—that other lover of Jill's—flashed up into the foreground of the picture.

He felt ashamed. He thought of Bethune with a sudden new understanding; the deep sincerity of the man, the meaning of his last words...

Here was love at its highest, purged from all mere passion—a love based on unselfishness, its one object Jill's happiness.

He saw a hard fight ahead, not only with his own desire, but to keep his vow in the knowledge that the girl might suffer through his silence.

Nevertheless, a few hours later, as he crossed the fields, impatience stirred, a longing he had never known for the sight of a loved woman's face. And as he climbed the last stile and found at the meeting of the roads the powerful car awaiting him he hailed the chauffeur with delight.

"There you are!"—he clambered up, seating himself by the driver—"let her go." They were off, the dust in a whirling cloud behind them.

They wound between high rocks, jutting out over the road, through a barren land—it seemed to McTaggart—of lonely hills and sombre valleys; crossed a bridge of crumbling stone over a river shallow and brown, turned a corner, sharp as a knife, and heard the roar of rushing water.

"Falls of Ghyll," said the chauffeur.

Far above them, out of the crags that seemed to pierce the sapphire sky, poured a stream dazzling white, wreathed in spray, mad to escape; leaping down like a storm spirit to kiss the river, that laughed below, with a rippling note of sheer delight, under the golden shafts of sunshine.

McTaggart's blue eyes drank it in. The picture blent with his own mood. So, he would carry Jill away, borne on the flood tide of his love.

"Over that hill, sir," said the chauffeur—"is where the fire was—Miss Morgan's house—the Suffragettes, at it again—I expect you saw it in the papers?"

"Yes—confound them!" said McTaggart.

The man nodded, approving the sentiment.

"They say, sir, they're up to mischief to-day—going to upset the speech-making. I don't envy them if they does!"

The note in his voice spurred McTaggart's fears.

"A rough lot about here?"

"There'll be murder done," said the man grimly. "They don't stop at much when they're roused."

"Are we nearly there?"

The chauffeur nodded. "In five minutes. Just over the rise and down to the valley. The meeting's held on the football ground in Cluar itself. I passed it as I came along. When we get there, sir, I'd best drop you, a bit before, and then run by, turn and come back and wait for you at the foot of the hill, if that will do?"

"Sounds all right—keep the engine going. I shan't be long if I can help it." He swallowed down his anxiety as they started to mount the incline.

Up and up ... Then, with a sense of open space 'neath the roof of heaven, a panorama spread before them like a vast sea of green and gray.

The swelling curves of the mighty Earth, patched with woods and blackened crags, rolled up in giant waves that broke on the sky line, blurred with heat.

Purple mountains, silvery vales; and above, like a scroll of parchment drawn to an endless length across the world and worked on by some long-dead monk in azure and gold illumination, the veil of the sky was stretched, superb, shutting out the face of God.

"What a view!" McTaggart sighed.

Below in the valley he saw grey roofs, like stones carelessly pitched downhill, tiny fields and a gleam of blue where the river glided in and out.

Now they were hovering like a bird over the village; then, as the road, steep and winding, swept them down, the cottages rose all about them. They passed a church, a school, a bridge, and slackened speed.

"Here we are. It's through that gate on the right, sir," the chauffeur pointed down the road.

They could see a field packed with people about an erection of wooden planks, and as the engine ceased to throb McTaggart caught another sound—once heard, never forgotten—the snarling note of an angry crowd.

"Up to mischief," said the chauffeur.

But McTaggart was out, cutting along as hard as his long legs would go, a sick fear in his heart. Where was Jill in this turmoil?

He sprang through a torn gap in the hedge and pushed his way determinedly through the loose fringe of the crowd that surged round the high platform. All around him people were shouting; the mob moved in little rushes, swaying forward, beaten back from the moving centre of disturbance.

Then above the angry hum a shriek rose, shrill with fear. McTaggart saw, for a moment, a figure raised above the heads. A young girl with a bleeding face, hair streaming on the breeze, one shoulder bare and white where the tattered dress had fallen away.

"Down her!" "Duck her!" "To the river..." Wild cries in uncouth Welsh.

McTaggart swore out aloud. He was fighting his way, using his fists, forcing a path mercilessly.

Again he caught a glimpse of the girl. Thank God! it was *not* Jill.

As he paused to get his breath, an old hag with an evil face sprang up toward the victim and clutched at a streaming lock of hair. With a coarse laugh she tore at it, the claw-like fingers with their trophy waved aloft, as again a scream rent the air and the crowd cheered.

McTaggart's blood went cold at the sight. It was horrible enough for men to lay their rough hands on a girl, but a fellow-woman, a mother, perhaps? He felt physically sick.

For a moment, wedged in and powerless, his brain flashed up another picture, that of the French Revolution and the foul women of the Halles, pressing round the guillotine to dip their hands in the blood of the victims. Was this what Woman's Rights involved?—this civil war among themselves?

And then above the angry hum a clear and brave young voice rang out:

"Votes for Women!"

McTaggart groaned, pride and agony in his heart.

"Jill!"—he shouted with all his strength—"Jill! where are you?"

He felt the serried ranks slacken as the crowd swung back to this new offender.

"Votes for Women!"

Again it rang.

"Votes for..." the voice choked on the word.

McTaggart went fighting mad. He was in the thick of it, charging through, giving and taking blow for blow. Men and women scattered before him.

"Jill! ... Jill!" It was a war cry.

High above them on the platform a puppet of Government waved his arms like an excited marionette, in a shrill voice, urging more "moderation"!

Just as McTaggart reached Jill's side a burly miner caught the girl by the frail collar of her blouse. The thin stuff ripped down to her waist.

"Out you go, you —— —!" But the last foul word went down his throat under McTaggart's clenched fist, and the man fell back, stunned and bleeding.

"Now—Jill—get behind—quick! Hold onto my coat."

He heard her breathless "Peter!—*You!*" as they started the perilous retreat.

Once again she cried his name, and, wheeling round, he rescued her from the clutches of two angry women and on again, fighting his way.

Once too he laughed aloud and stepped across a fallen body.

"Look out, Jill!" he shouted back and felt her stumble, dragging his coat.

So at last they cleared the crowd. As he swung her through the hedge something sharp struck his brow. He felt no pain, but a warm, wet stream that ran down, and he brushed it aside impatiently out of his eyes.

More stones whizzed about them. With one arm through Jill's, he started to run, but she gasped:

"I can't ... *You go!*"

He laughed, happy.

"Now, then..." stooping down, he picked her up in his arms. Her loosened hair fell about him, her bruised hands clasped his neck.

He felt then he could have started and fought the battle through again. He sheltered her, as best he could, striding along toward the car.

The chauffeur, with a white face, helped her in and sprang to his place.

"Now drive like Hell!" said McTaggart.

The man needed no second bidding.

Off they swept, past the church, up and up towards the sky.

McTaggart leaned back with a sigh as the shouts died away behind them. Jill was there—safe—beside him. He thanked God for the fact. Also for a good fight, as he looked down at his bleeding knuckles.

"Well—Jill?" he turned to her. "You all right?"

But she started up, with a shrill cry:

"Peter—your *face!*..."

Her grey eyes were wide with fear. She gave a little gasp, relaxed, and fell back in a dead faint. For her brave spirit had failed her at last. The sight of the blood still trickling down from the open cut on his smeared cheek had finished the strain on her overwrought nerves. Nature, outraged, had claimed her due, sending oblivion to the spirit in the interest of the taxed flesh.

"Jill—what is it?" McTaggart, frightened, bent over her white face. Mechanically he wiped his own, conscious at last of his injury.

The chauffeur turned his head at the cry.

"The lady ill? I don't wonder! I expect she's only fainted, sir. A nasty business for any man, let alone a woman, sir."

He felt somewhat a hero himself for the part he had played, true to promise.

"Another chap would 'ave driven off"—he soliloquized—"but there ... I couldn't!

"A deep one?—that 'e is!—never a word about 'is girl. But Lor'—'e can use 'is fists. 'E gave Ap Jones a fair knock-out—Serve 'im right too for mauling a lady—not that I hold with this Suffrage business, still"—he switched on the brake—"a lady's a lady, when all's said."

Then out aloud, as the car shot down into sight of the rock-bound valley:

"We'll be coming soon to the Falls of Ghyll. Some water may revive 'er, sir."

Meanwhile McTaggart propped her up, an arm around the limp shoulders. Never had she seemed so dear ... He felt a lump rise in his throat.

"Jill?" He whispered the appeal, but the girl was out of the reach of his voice, far away in those dark lands, whereof no man knows the boundary.

Tenderly he drew together the torn folds of her blouse which showed beneath it a white slip threaded with a narrow ribbon.

He felt a chivalrous pity to see the disorder of her simple dress, and, drawing the pin out of his tie, he tried clumsily, to repair it.

But as he did so he gave a start, a new fear gripping him.

For something red gleamed beneath the thin and tattered material. It looked like a great drop of blood against the fairness of her skin!

He set his teeth. Deliberately, but with unconscious reverence, he drew down

the frill of lace where the ribbon held the folds together.

Then he gave a gasp of relief. Into his blue eyes came the light of love victorious; infinite wonder flooded his soul with tenderness.

For there it lay, in the soft hollow between the delicate curves of her breast, in ruby glass with its lover's knot, his "fairing"—the little "double heart"!

CHAPTER XXVII

The night was close and sultry. A sudden longing for air drove McTaggart into the deserted Park. His luggage was packed, and early next day he would start for the North and his round of visits there.

The Uniackes were at Worthing, and McTaggart's thoughts instinctively turned to Jill as he left the path and took a chair in an empty row beyond the Achilles Statue.

The girl's initial venture as a Militant Suffragette had left no lasting trace physically. But mentally it had marked a definite turning point in her views on the subject that engrossed her home.

She had gone to Cluar expecting resistance from the law and possible rough treatment at the hands of men; but the sight of fellow-women, losing all control, violently turning against their own sex, and the utter absence of that esprit de corps—so strong a feature of her college life—had astounded and revolted her to the depths of her soul.

She argued thus: If a movement that held as its primary cause the advancement of women produced not only a breach with the opposite sex but civil war among themselves, what would be the state of a government where the rival factions *each* held the vote and in which the fighting element despised the prevailing laws of the land?

Was Arson a slight weapon of offence? Or Assassination, risked by bombs?

It was Anarchy none the less, the offenders being mere women.

The present scheme of government might be open to various abuses, but at least it was a rule of order, upholding the laws it sought to enforce and the safety of the citizen.

In the long journey home, Jill had threshed out in this fashion the pros and cons of Woman's Suffrage with McTaggart; and needless to say the man had approved the conclusion she reached at last. She turned her back on the "Cause."

Now as he sat in the shadows thrown by the high trees over the grass, hearing the leaves, already falling, rustle faintly overhead, he smiled as he conjured up her face with its indignant wide gray eyes.

They had reached her home late that night, and, for the first time, McTaggart had realized that Mrs. Uniacke cared deeply for her child. The instincts of motherhood had risen supreme over her ardour for the Cause. She had cried aloud at the sight of Jill with her bruised arms and tattered clothes.

Bitterly, too, she had blamed Stephen for deserting the girl in the hour of danger.

She had placed her daughter in his care and the story, tersely told by McTaggart, of their meeting with that prudent person in the coffee-room of the Commercial Hotel, placidly eating an excellent lunch, had roused her genuine indignation.

For Stephen had been "caught out"! The sight of McTaggart, dusty, blood-stained, the cut on his forehead hastily plastered by the local chemist, escorting Jill, herself still white, bruised and shaken, her dress in ribbons, without a hat, standing in the narrow doorway, had shattered that young man's calm assurance.

Utterly ignoring him and his hasty, incoherent excuses, McTaggart had induced Jill to take some food, collected her luggage and hurried her out and up to the station, without a word to the inwardly scared object of his deep contempt.

One good thing had resulted from Jill's painful adventure in Wales; a distinct rupture between her mother and the weak and unscrupulous young man.

In a long letter to McTaggart, Jill had conveyed the glad news.

"Isn't it splendid?"—she wrote gayly. "Roddy's off his head with joy! He's painted a picture of Saint Stephen being stoned by the Suffragettes; with mauve socks and a mauve tie—it really is *exactly* like him!—and a big bottle of champagne with 'Mumm's the word!' on a banner.

"I do hope your head's all right?—that cut, I mean? I'm very fit and I can't think why I caved in. You were a *brick* to fly to the rescue! We're off on Thursday for a month at Worthing. Can't you come and say good-bye? I want to thank you properly—and Roddy too—so do turn up.

"It's lovely to feel free of Stephen and have Mother to ourselves. She's coming to the Zoo to-day and she's promised Roddy some painting lessons—think of that! He's so happy. Stephen used to laugh at him and call him the 'Infant Raphael' ... I'd like to see *Stephen* do some of Roddy's clever sketches!..."

So the simple letter ran. Full of slang, but, to the lover, a priceless pearl of composition. He read her nature between the lines: that strong loving heart of hers, scorning all hypocrisy, protective toward the weak, breathing a sweet unselfishness.

Nevertheless he stayed away, faithful to his secret vow. He sent the girl a book she craved and a big box of sweets for Roddy. Then, as an afterthought, he added a neat little painter's outfit. He smiled at his own craftiness, knowing the road to Jill's heart. And a plan rose in his mind—if all went as he hoped—to arrange that this much beloved brother should study abroad at his expense and enter the Art schools at Rome.

Now, in the dim light of the Park, he was lost in a day-dream of the future. His cigarette, smouldering unheeded, scorched his fingers and, with a start, he came back to his surroundings.

A young couple passed, arm in arm, and somewhere behind him, out of the dark, rose a whispering, and a girl's laugh that told its own simple story.

For even in the deserted town the Summer night was filled with love; like a brimming cup held to the lips of youth by the wise old hand of Nature.

The lonely figure of a woman emerged from under the long white arch at Hyde Park Corner and moved across the dusty road toward the trees.

McTaggart watched her absently. Something about her graceful walk, the assured carriage of her head, stirred his latent speculation.

"I wouldn't mind betting that she's French." He lit another cigarette and pondered upon the distinctive touch that sets the Gallic race apart.

The object of his scrutiny reached at last the slight incline beneath the Achilles statue and paused, shaken by a fit of coughing.

McTaggart's face went suddenly grave as he watched the slender, graceful figure struggling with the sudden spasm.

"Poor soul!" he said to himself. For he guessed that the scourge of civilization, Consumption, had marked her for a victim. And suddenly the thought of Death, in a world renewed for him by love, sent a shiver down his spine. Some day he and Jill must part....

The woman passed her handkerchief across her lips, lowered her veil and breasted the slope wearily. Arrived at the edge of the grass, with a neat movement of her skirt, she stepped over the low rail, avoiding the dusty gravel path.

When she came to the chair where he sat, she glanced sideways at McTaggart, who stiffened a little at her approach, and the odour of scent wafted from her.

To his further annoyance she hesitated, peering down into his face through the lace veil that obscured her features.

"Pierrot!—Is it really you?" He was on his feet with a sudden start. The memory of dead days rose up, bewildering him.

"Fantine!" He stared at her, amazed.

"Mais oui!" She held out her hand—"You do not remember me?—And I —? Ma foi!—I thought you must be dead!" ...

"Au contraire!" he tried to collect his thoughts. "Very much in the flesh, as you see."

He remembered quickly there had been no scene, no definite break in their friendship; only his silence since that night when he had probed her treachery. He felt at a loss to find, now, an excuse for avoiding her company.

"I've been abroad," he explained lamely, "for two years. I'm off to-morrow to shoot in Scotland. London's beastly. Even my Club's shut against me!"

Fantine smiled, then she sighed.

"Lucky Pierrot!" She sank down on the nearest chair and with a gesture invited him to the one beside it. "You will like that—to shoot, hein?" Again a fit of coughing seized her.

She looked thin, McTaggart thought. He could not harden his heart against her, with that shadow of death that seemed to hang like a cloud over her old brilliancy.

"How's the world been treating you?" He spoke gently. It seemed to him a page torn from a past life, this unexpected meeting with her; the whole hateful episode a story skimmed through and forgotten.

"The world, mon cher?"—she shrugged her shoulders, "Why, mon Dieu—as it always treats those whose luck has turned against them!" She gave a light and mocking laugh.

"I'm sorry." He paused. "Would you care to tell me?"

She gave him a quick grateful glance. Then with a gesture, unconsciously tinged with a touch of drama, threw back her veil.

McTaggart stared, taken aback.

"Ah! ... you see?" she nodded her head. "I am getting old"—her voice shook—"and so tired..." the painted lips twisted themselves into a smile more pitiful than any tears in the thin but still piquante face.

"It's the life, mon cher—this ... gay life! I have burnt the candle in the middle. No!—you say 'at both wicks'"—her words ended in a cough.

"You've got a frightful cold, Fantine. Do you think it's prudent sitting here?"

"Yes—the fresh air does me good—and it can't hurt me ... now, Pierrot. It's not a cold—it's my chest. I had pneumonia in the Spring and the wet season completed the trouble. The doctor says I ought to live in a dry climate—but," she laughed—"I have to earn the money first—and London is the easiest place."

A silence fell between the pair. McTaggart saw that her neat dress was shabby, that the hat she wore owed its smartness to the veil and the way it was posed at the right angle. But, faithful to her ancient creed, her boots and gloves were immaculate, her dark hair glossy and waved, and her face delicately painted.

Yet something was gone: the note of youth, the joyous, half-defiant charm. This was a woman, middle-aged, broken in health but still proud.

"Per'aps you did not learn my trouble? No?"—she glanced up at him—"The flat was raided by the police. I had to pay a heavy fine. It was not mine to keep or let; it belonged to a certain ... Monsieur. But in my name, you understand? I to take all the risk. And when it failed he vanished—pouf!" she threw out her hands mockingly—"into thin air, as you say. And I was left ... dans le potage!

"It was not soup you could drink, Pierrot, like Monsieur Auguste's 'pot-au-feu'—and ... one eats to live—or at least those do who can't afford to live to eat! An' so I had to start again, with a very slim capital—the furniture ... a few jewels..."

She stared moodily before her.

"That's where the devil comes in, Pierrot,—and mocks at all the saints in Heaven! ... Not that I wish to become a saint"—she shot him an amused glance with one of her old mocking smiles—"Dieu merci! I love life—an' pretty frocks and a good cuisine. You remember our last evening together? The—music? ... ah!" she clasped her hands and a curious look came into her eyes. "I am glad," she added beneath her breath—"that nothing spoilt that memory."

Little she guessed that the man beside her caught the full meaning of the words: that his last rancour vanished with it as he guessed the truth underlying the speech.

The face in the photograph rose up, with its evil eyes and its ruthless mouth; that "certain ... Monsieur" called "Gustave"—the treacherous master-mind.

Poor little woman!—In such bad hands—deserted too in her hour of need...

"What did you do?" he asked gently. "I'd no idea of all this worry. I'm really awfully sorry, Fantine," he laid a hand over hers.

She gave him a sudden brilliant smile.

"The same Pierrot..." her voice was tender. Then she drew herself together, her fingers lightly clasped in his, a faint colour in her thin cheeks.

"You remember Archie Thesiger?"

"Yes." He knew what was coming.

"He offered me his ... protection." Fantine's eyes were enigmatic. "It seemed ... the best thing to do. I was very happy—for a time. He took a little flat in Brighton and—you will laugh!"—she smiled herself—"I am domestic in my tastes—But yes!—and excellent manager. I made Archie quite content. You think because I love my clothes I should be helpless in a kitchen? There you are wrong. One day I will come and make you," she paused—"such an omelette! ... But of course I knew it couldn't last. That is the drawback to ... ce métier. He fell in love—with a young girl. Il faut se ranger—I understood. And there it was!—to begin again. The next time I was not so lucky. Rich, yes. But a 'mauvais sujet.' And then I find that he is married! Madame arrives ... Dieu, quelle scène! She seem to think I love her Reuben! Yes—a Jew ... *that too!* But I tell her, smiling, to her face, that it was purely business with me. My faith, she did not care for it. I agreed it was not suitable—ce ménage—lowering for a woman such as I am, with brains and looks—that money is not everything! He drank too—and she knew that!"

At her mischievous sidelong glance McTaggart gave a grim laugh, conjuring up the unequal duel between this strange, dissimilar pair.

"I give her then some good advice,"—Fantine was enjoying her story, the topaz eyes keen and bright, lips curved in a mocking smile. "I say: 'You are a good woman, with babies, per'aps, and a linen press. But that is not all a man wants. Learn to talk ... and walk ... an' dress! Marriage—what is it? A legal tie.

But a clever wife must *charm* to hold ... You catch my point?—I am ver' glad. I could teach you ... yes, many things. But my cab waits—Adieu, Madame!" ...

"Good Lord!—So you went. And then?"

Fantine made a wry grimace.

"I became companion to a lady. (Of men, you see, I had had enough!) Also rich, mais une femme du peuple! Archie gave me a written reference. His uncle is a baronet and that was quite sufficient to her. I learned there how to wash a dog and make petticoats for the poor. Not flannel—you understand?—but flannelette—most dangerous—but good enough for *Charity*! (McTaggart chuckled, watching her.) And what a 'real lady' could do and what a 'real lady' could not!

"It's a ... sale métier!—to my mind—hardly as moral as the other—so uncharitable"—she frowned.

"Have you ever lived in the suburbs?—No?—Then don't, my dear Pierrot. It's to ... exist in hourly fear of gossip, one eye on each neighbour. To call and flatter, peer and pry and pick their characters to ribbons. What a life!" she shrugged her shoulders. "One of my duties was to teach my new employer a little French. That amused me enormously! She was as stupid as a goose—so I stuffed her"—Fantine laughed—"with some good spicy words. When she travels to Paris, mon Dieu!—she will surprise the chambermaid! Unluckily"—she ran on—"there was a nephew." Her cough stopped her. She battled with it for a moment, caught her breath and smiled bravely. "Un horreur de petit bonhomme!—dressed like a little groom. 'Très sporting.' That is chic in the suburbs—always gaiters, piqué necktie and no horse! You know the type, hein, Pierrot?

"'Bertie'—that was the youth's name—took a fancy to poor me!—Condescended to express it—even helped to wash the dog. That was fun—he *did* get wet!" She laughed at the recollection. "Then, one day, Madame guessed. Actually she accused me of a wish to marry him!" Up went Fantine's hands in horror. "Moi, Fantine!"

McTaggart roared.

"I said I had no use for 'Bertie.' It was not my fault if he cared for me!—That it nearly gave me 'mal au coeur' to sit facing him at dinner! That I boxed his ears

at many times—and that was true!—but she would not believe. She said: 'One can see you are no lady.' So I replied that she could not tell. Impossible! I knew, mon cher, she had started life as a kitchen maid and married her master through a trick and I added: 'I am quite ready to learn any hint regarding cooking, but of my birth you are no judge—I go to my equals to decide.' The servants were all in the hall and Bertie as red as a turkey-cock—and they laughed! I heard them. Then I packed and got away as soon as I could, with all the neighbours' noses glued to the windows.

"Virtue did not seem a success—it hides, you see, so much meanness. I tried in vain to find Gustave"—(the name slipped out unconsciously)—"but all my letters were returned—'not known' at the old address.

"Then I thought of the Stage. Chorus per'aps?—I sing a little. That began and ended too with a heavy fee to an agent. I got a cold one snowy day and fell ill. Then doctor's bills and the little money I had saved melted away—and so, you see ... here I am!" She finished gaily—"Open—how do you make the phrase—to any pleasant salaried post!"

She glanced sideways at the man, noting the pity on his face.

"You wouldn't like...?" Her meaning was plain.

"No," said McTaggart, very gently.

"Tant pis! You cared once..." She sighed, then coughed. "I can live," she whispered, "on ve-ry little ... also cook..."

"Don't!" he quivered on the word. "It's horrible!—to think that *you*..." He swallowed hard, remembering the pretty flat, with the Fantine of old, proud and brilliant—and now ... this!

"I'm going to be married," he said quickly—"At least I hope so. But that's no reason why I shouldn't help an old friend."

Fantine drew herself up erect.

"If I choose to *take*—" her voice was sharp—"I *give* too! That is honest, I think. I have never asked for charity. But ... oh, mon Dieu!" she broke down under McTaggart's pitiful glance. "Life is hard. C'est un sale métier! And I can't

sink—I can't ... I can't ..." a sob broke from the painted lips—"not to ... *that!*"

She pointed straight to the lights beyond the silvery arch, to Piccadilly, broad and smooth.

McTaggart felt suddenly humbled. He thought for a moment painfully of the lives of those other women, placed for ever outside the pale, sacrificed to man's desire...

Then he spoke.

"Look here, Fantine. I think you're a splendid little woman! I'd feel proud to be your friend. The pluck of you!"—(he meant it, too). "I wouldn't dream of insulting you by—well—by offering financial help without any equivalent. But there's something you can do for me—if you will?—and it's not too dull?"

She stared at him wonderingly. A faint glimmer of hope shone in the tragic depths of her topaz eyes. The reddened lips parted a little. "Eh bien?"

He felt the strain in her voice and hurried on, full of compassion.

"It's like this. I've been left a villa—a wee place abroad near the sea. I stayed there for a few weeks before my return—and was bored to death! I don't want to shut it up and I have a dislike to letting it. It occurred to me to find some one, as a sort of caretaker," he paused, his eyes fixed on the grass at his feet. "It's in Italy, not far from Spezzia—a pretty place with lovely air and fairly gay in the Summer time—but in the Winter months——" he laughed—"about as lonely as the Pole. So that's what I am up against—to find someone I can trust to live there and keep it aired. There's an old woman who does odd jobs—I daresay she could cook a bit—and her son who gardens, cleans windows and all that—but it's not enough. I want some one—a different class—to keep an eye on the pair. But I warn you—it's awfully dull—but healthy—the air comes over the snows. Now as you're feeling a bit run down, would you like to try it?" He broke off sharply.

"Fantine, my dear! Oh, you poor little soul!..."

She was sobbing sharply, her head in her hands. The breeze rustled through the trees and far away, in wave on wave, came the noise of the traffic, London's voice, not unlike the swell of the sea.

Beside him, cast up on the tide, this wreck and flotsam of life's storms, battered and broken, but still lit by the flickering lamp of the human soul.

"Fantine—don't feel hurt, my dear. I mean what I say—it's give and take—fair play, I give you my word."

She raised a streaming, haggard face.

"You don't know ... oh, mon Dieu! Listen——"

she caught him by the arm. "I tried to ruin you," she cried—"that last evening—at the flat!"

"Nonsense!—it's all ... part of the game——" his voice was rough through sheer discomfort. "If you had, I deserved it, Fantine—a young ass—that's all right. I'd have ruined *you* without a thought—in another way, but it's just as bad. There isn't a penny to choose between us. Besides, I *knew*—when I left you that night. I saw your husband come up the stairs—and—afterwards—I guessed the truth. You were driven to it—it wasn't your fault."

He paused a moment, his face grim.

"A jolly good lesson," he said slowly, "it taught me to be ... less of a fool. So don't let that worry you, but help me now—with this damned villa!"

The very depth of his pity for her made him brusque and he ran on jerkily.

"So that's settled. I want your answer. D'you think you could stand it? It's jolly dull—but with no pet dogs or flannel petticoats! Could a 'real lady' become a caretaker?"

She nodded her head, unable to speak, shaken by a fit of coughing. A chilliness was in the air. McTaggart rose to his feet.

"Come along—it's getting damp. We'll go back to my rooms—I'd like to fix this up to-night as I'm off to Scotland early to-morrow."

He held out his hand with a boyish laugh. "Like old times, eh, Fantine?" and helped her up on to her feet, his own eyes suspiciously bright.

With trembling fingers she lowered her veil and shook out the folds of her shabby dress as McTaggart still rattled on, giving her time to recover.

"I want you to travel to Viareggio as soon as you can. It's a long journey—d'you mind that?"

"No"—she laughed shakily—"one goes through France?" Her voice was wistful.

"Yes—I'll write to-night to Cook's—get you a berth. Would you like to stay for a night in Paris on your way? that would be wiser——" he guessed her thought.

"I'm awfully glad you like the idea—it's really luck my meeting you. I've got a place in Siena, you know, and a flat in Rome, so I daresay I shall look in sometimes—break my journey to see that you're behaving yourself."

They walked along the narrow strip of grass that fringed the row of chairs. But when they came out on to the path Fantine glanced to the right and paused, looking up at the huge statue, its shield aloft against the sky.

"Well—are you making a fresh conquest?"

"Yes—and no!" she laughed softly. "I say good-bye to my friend, Achille—it's just a politeness of mine, Pierrot."

For a moment she stood there, eyes raised.

McTaggart, pitiful, guessed her thought. He saw that the post, invented for her, was not for long as he watched her face.

And something of the old glamour, the memory of the days that were, brought a sharp pain to his heart. He tried in vain to conceal his fear.

But Fantine knew. She nodded her head.

"In case," she murmured, "I don't return."

Then, gaily, to the statue.

"Au revoir, cher Monsieur!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

A month had flown by on the swift wings of Summer. Already a crispness in the air heralded in Dame Autumn; with her rainbow-hued cloak trailing golds and reds, glittering with the diamonds strewn by the first hoar frost, as she passed.

At Worthing the beach marked the change of seasons. The bathing tents were folded up, the deck chairs had departed. Loving couples no longer lay stretched out on the warm pebbles, their faces hidden by handkerchiefs or the folds of a comic paper, in the fond belief—like the proverbial ostrich—that the rest of them (hands locked together or arms clinging around waists) was invisible to the critical public. The motor char-à-bancs ceased running, all save one that still plied on that straight white road that leads to Brighton, over the long bridge guarded by lions and past the little settlements of clustering bungalows.

In the back of that conveyance, on this particular sunny day, a single occupant was exposed to the keen breeze, protected by a motor veil of dark blue chiffon that obscured the outline of her face. The wide inviting stretch of sea with its curling waves, ivory tipped, was lost to her, and the silvery gleam of gulls dipping to the water. In the blue arch of the sky above, clouds of dazzling white were driven by the east wind, massed together to salute the great golden sun.

It was not only the heavy veil that shut the vision from her sight. For Mrs. Uniacke was not, in any sense, an observant woman. Beauty as beauty left her untouched or filled her with a faint distress. There was so much "to be done in life"—this was her strenuous daily creed—that to pause by the way and enjoy God's gifts became a sinful waste of the fleeting moments, destined to work.

Her restlessness of body and mind forbade that pleasant state in which the spirit frees itself from more material cares to absorb Nature's picture, utterly soothed by a sense of colour or light or of exquisite proportion.

Yet, for all her unconsciousness of the birth of a new season on Earth, a similar awakening stirred in the depths of her woman's heart. For the object of her journey was a meeting with Stephen Somerfield; her thoughts were full of that young man to the exclusion of all else.

The delicate flush on her bird-like face and the soft excitement in her eyes betrayed the emotions that warred within, self-accusing, yet triumphant. At the end of a long spell of silence Stephen had written a clever letter explaining away his neglect of Jill and throwing himself on the mother's mercy.

He had placed the blame on the girl's shoulders with a brief account of her attitude vis-à-vis to himself, her rebellious disregard of his wishes, her flat refusal to take his advice.

"I can quite understand how you feel"—he wrote with apparent candour—"I can find no excuse for my conduct. But you must see how difficult it was for me to force myself on such a plainly unwilling companion—one, moreover, who had not scrupled to openly show her dislike to me.

"I was there in a semi-official position. I had my own work to do—not militant, it is true, but important in its lesser way. On my arrival the night before I found a mass of correspondence—the trouble incident to the fire, police reports, etc., etc.—and had I not known your keen desire that Jill should be left in my charge, I should not have gone to the meeting at all, but acted as I eventually did.

"I see now that I was wrong to stay away, but—to speak plainly—Jill had been so rude to me that my pride at last rose in arms.

"I knew she was with some excellent women, two of whom were your personal friends, and, of course, I hadn't the faintest idea there was likely to be serious trouble.

"Believe me, dear Mrs. Uniacke, I am more grieved than I can express..." the letter became personal, dealing with the break in their friendship, begged humbly for forgiveness and craved a "final interview" at Brighton, where he awaited her answer.

Luckily for the young man's object, his apology had been well timed, arriving at Worthing late one evening at the close of a stormy family scene.

Mrs. Uniacke's displeasure had fallen heavily on Jill. For Roddy, at last, had summoned courage to approach his mother on the subject of the profession to which he aspired; to be met with immediate opposition, rendered more galling by contempt. "Become an Artist!" The soldier's widow stared at the boy's excited face. "Whoever heard of such nonsense? You'll go to Sandhurst if I can afford it—that was what your father planned."

Jill had plunged into the fray, backing up the youthful rebel, had lost her temper and spoken strongly, stirred by her own College traditions, on the liberty due to the new generation.

Mrs. Uniacke, whose strength did not lie in argument, claimed that until he came of age Roddy owed her unswerving obedience.

Jill had actually laughed at this.

"You can't expect it—not on a subject as serious as his whole future. He's a human being—just like you!—Why can't he have a voice in the matter? He's not fitted for a soldier—he's an artist to his finger tips. Well!—you can try and send him to Sandhurst but you can't *make* him pass his Exams!"

Roddy, white lipped and deeply hurt, had caught his sister's eye and chuckled.

"That's a sound idea," he said. "Thank you, Jill—I won't forget."

At this point Mrs. Uniacke had fallen back on her last resource—tears; and, her handkerchief to her eyes, had ordered her children up to bed.

"Just as if we still wore socks!" Jill, rebellious, had whispered as they climbed up the dingy stairs of the tiny furnished house by the sea. "Never mind, old boy—you *shan't* be a soldier. I'll see to that. In a few years' time I'll have my money that Father left me. She can't touch that! I believe Aunt Elizabeth would help if it came to a pinch..." she broke off as "Rat-tat"—down below came the postman's knock.

She leaned over the banisters and called to the servant in the hall.

"Anything for me, Ada?"

"No, miss—one for your mother."

A shadow fell across Jill's face. She longed for a letter from McTaggart, now staying with the Leasons. Then she smiled back at her brother.

"Let's hope it's not from Stephen!"

"Pity she doesn't make *him* a soldier. He'd get the V.C.——" said the boy. At this they both laughed aloud.

Mrs. Uniacke, in the drawing-room, heard the sound and hardened her heart. With trembling fingers she tore the envelope open and hastily read the contents.

She had quarrelled with Stephen on Jill's behalf ... The simple fact in her present mood was magnified into sacrifice of her own happiness for her daughter.

A lonely woman—so she judged herself, plaintively—she had severed the link that bound her to her truest friend ... Her thoughts ran on tumultuously.

Obedying a sudden powerful impulse, she sat down, then and there, and wrote an answer to the man, agreeing to an interview.

The next morning she had a wire begging her to come to lunch at the little hotel where he stayed. Defiance of her children's opinion had spurred her into a prompt acceptance and here she was, embarked on adventure, without their faintest suspicion of it.

She had advanced, as her excuse for the journey, a day's shopping at Brighton, salving her conscience with the thought of several commissions she might do. Jill, still in heavy disgrace, had breathed an inward sigh of relief, little guessing the real cause for the outing was the hated Stephen.

Now, as the heavy char-à-banc churned along the dusty road, Mrs. Uniacke's mind was bent on the approaching interview. She would not acknowledge to herself how much the man meant in her life. With resolutely blind-fold eyes she called herself his "Second Mother."

But, in truth, a new feeling had crept into their intercourse of late, a hint of sentiment veiled in respect, that held no trace of maternal love. He ruled her under the smiling mask of a fellow worker—a willing slave! And for this delicate, middle-aged lady an Indian Summer tide of love had dawned

unrealized: a love that was none the less perilous for its comfortable cloak of friendship.

For little Mrs. Uniacke, that ardent champion of Woman's Rights, was a slave herself—to convention. She knew to an inch what was "proper" and appropriate to "her dignity." He was young enough to be her son. That placed the intimacy to her simple mind on a decorous footing. She could exert a motherly "influence" over his life.

The char-à-banc put her down opposite the Aquarium. She had but a few steps to walk up the Old Steine to find the Hotel facing the narrow side street and advertising "superb sea view."

A German waiter greeted her, struggling into his tail-coat.

"Ach yes! By hier, Madame. Mizter Zomerfield, 'e waits..."

He threw open a dingy door marked "Private." For the first time Mrs. Uniacke felt a slight sense of embarrassment—the shrinking that a stranger knows on landing in an unknown country.

But the next moment she stood inside a small sitting-room, neatly furnished, with a luncheon table, gay with flowers, laid for two. She was alone.

As the door closed she turned to the glass and threw back her veil with a sigh of relief.

In the gray light filtering through the somewhat heavily curtained window her face looked surprisingly youthful. The delicate colour in her cheeks, the bright eyes and soft hair were framed by the floating folds of chiffon; her figure, still slender, was almost girlish in the coat and skirt of navy serge that opened over a white silk blouse, with its narrow tie of mauve ribbon.

And, for a moment, she felt startled. What was she doing in this place? She thrust away the faint scruple, conscious of its absurdity. Many a time had she and Stephen stayed together in hotels, engaged on their suffrage work, without the slightest self-consciousness.

Yet this was different...

Her colour heightened as she asked herself the reason why? Then she heard his step in the hall and turned quickly away from the glass.

Stephen, slim and elegant, in his grey flannels, stood before her, hand outstretched, a welcoming light in the long lashed green eyes.

"H'are you?" He held in his clasp her fingers that, despite her will, trembled slightly, and gazed down at the pretty flushed face.

"This is good of you, dear lady,"—his voice was low and sentimental. "More than I deserve, you know."

Carefully he closed the door as she murmured something in reply and came back to her side.

"I never saw you look so well! It's just too ... nice to have you here—and I'm goin' to ask a further favour——" he gave her a beseeching glance—"Just to postpone our ... business talk—and lunch first—without a word of all that painful Cluar affair. *Do* be kind and say you will? I promise to listen afterwards——" boyishly he added the words—"to all that you have to say to me. I know you feel awfully vexed—but just—for a little—let's forget it."

Inwardly Mrs. Uniacke felt relieved at the postponement of the lecture she had prepared.

Still—there was her "dignity." She must uphold that at any cost.

"I should prefer to discuss it first. That was my object in coming here, as I wrote in my letter, Stephen."

"Ah—don't be hard on me," he broke in quickly, seeing her waver. "I've been through such a bad time." He gave a sigh that was genuine, aware of a new financial crisis. To quarrel with the woman before him was the last thing he desired. He owed her now a considerable sum of money, far more than he could repay. As friends this state of indebtedness could drift on indefinitely, but if it came to a real rupture? He shrank from the thought of a settlement.

Far better, he said to himself, to plunge deeper and make her his wife. And why not? It would mean a home and a certain settled future for him. He could lead his own life as before, with a little care for "appearances." The very fact of

the years between them should make her indulgent to the faults of youth.

This was at the back of his mind, as he went on in a pleading voice: "And I'm not *altogether* to blame ... so do grant me this last favour." He glanced sideways at the table and his face brightened. In its pail of ice stood a large bottle, the neck wreathed in gold foil. This would help!

"Well—it's a bargain?"—he smiled at her—"no real business till after lunch—it will be like old times!—And then—you shall scold me as much as you wish!"

Mrs. Uniacke gave way, conscious of the familiar charm. Stephen, inwardly amused, rang the bell and they sat down.

The meal had been ordered with special care. Few women, accustomed daily to study the tastes of their men at home before their own choice of dishes, can resist the subtle appeal of a menu, ordered by one of the opposite sex, in which each item shows an unselfish effort to please the invited guest.

Mrs. Uniacke ate lobster and crisp salad (which she loved)—grouse (sternly forbidden at home on the score of extravagance) and confessed gaily to greediness when a chocolate soufflé was laid before her followed up by hothouse peaches and a fragrant cup of coffee. Even her favourite "marrons glacés" graced the narrow luncheon table and the air was sweet with the scent of roses in their last glory of second bloom.

"What a banquet! My dear boy—I'm afraid you've ruined yourself for me. But I really have enjoyed it so!" (The champagne had done its work. Like all women who suffer from nerves alcohol took immediate effect, to be followed, however, by a reaction almost as quick, and lachrymose.)

Stephen knew this and decided to burn his boats without delay.

"Nothing's good enough for you!" He left his seat and handed her a cigarette with a smile.

But she laughed it away, her eyes bright.

"I never smoke—you know that, Stephen."

"Try one. I think you'd look prettier still..." he checked himself. "Sorry—it slipped out!—I forgot you always hated compliments."

"You forget I'm an old woman!" She caught at the phrase in self-defence. "Old enough to be your mother."

"You...?"—he stooped over her—"I ... sometimes ... almost wish you were!"

"Stephen!"—she drew away, startled. "You mustn't talk like that!" But she felt a curious exultation, a sudden throb of fear and pride. For oh! Youth is sweet to hold and sad to lose; and a woman clings to the delusion for long years after grey hairs appear.

"Well—I do. You're too ... sweet! Don't you know what it means to me? Have you never *even* guessed?" He broke off, his eyes dilated.

Mrs. Uniacke shrank back.

"Don't—you mustn't. Stephen!—you're mad!" ... For the man was on his knees by her side; her hands were caught, she could feel his lips, smooth and young, pressed upon them.

"I can't help it!—You know *now*. Of course you'll send me out of your life. But, this once, I've got to tell you—I love you so!"—the words were out.

And, indeed, a spark of truth lay in the declaration. This lover's scene, carefully rehearsed by him, found him amazed at the strength of his own desire. He stood upon the brink of passion. For habit plays queer tricks, and the daily intercourse of years had flowered unseen. This was the fruit.

All that was good in Somerfield went out toward the loving woman who had played the part of mother to him, a lonely man through his own folly. And all that was base prompted him to take this chance that life still offered: a home, the tender care of a wife in the midst of financial ruin.

He had staked on the last deal of the cards. The costly lunch, the private room, the wine, the flowers ... his own youth ... thrown down with a gambler's hand.

But to the woman sitting there no such sordid picture rose. She was lost in a

glory that dazzled her—this wonderful new gift of love!

Tears stole into her eyes over the bent head pressed to her hands—the thick, fair hair with its youthful gloss, the supple shoulders that breathed of strength. Could she—dare she live out the dream? For she knew, at last, that she loved Stephen; that this Indian Summer of life could be hers, a swift thrusting away of age.

No more need she face the lonely years.

Jill would marry. Roddy go forth to fight his battle with the world—to disappoint her cherished hopes. What was left her? The tears ran down.

"Stephen..."

He raised his eyes to hers, bewildered himself by his own emotion.

"I know——" a sudden despair gripped him. "Your children?" He watched her moodily, trying to define her thoughts. Then, as across some silent pool, a mischievous breeze sends an answering ripple, he saw a wave of resentment pass over her tense and delicate face.

"Jill!" The name slipped from her lips. The old rancour against the child who had outgrown her, forming views on life apart from the mother's standard and held to them, strong, rebellious, rose up, flooding her with a painful sense of helplessness.

She did not see that her Suffrage work had interfered with that of her home, that her own involuntary neglect of her children had sapped her influence.

"I should not ask for *Jill's* advice!—What does she ever care for mine? She will go her own way—to the end!—And so shall I."—Her voice rang with a new imperious note. Stephen saw he had gained the day.

"Mary!"—his arms were around her. "You will...? You *do* ... care a little?"

Triumph flamed in his face but the fond woman saw only love.

"Wait——" she drew back, timid again. "I must think first. It's too serious. I can't answer you like this..." But the man held her still closer.

"You can—you *shall*!" He knew his power—"I want you. You shan't go from here—except as my promised wife! It's either *that*—or good-bye." He felt her quiver at the word. "I can't stand it any more—this playing at friendship—it's not fair! Say you love me—say it, Mary?" There came a desperate little pause.

Mrs. Uniacke felt the room spinning round before her eyes. In a mist she saw her lover's face, heard the ardent, pleading voice...

And the sense of a dream returned to her—a dream too sweet to relinquish. She must not—*could* not wake again!

With a stifled cry she kissed Stephen.

CHAPTER XXIX

McTaggart, when he left the Leasons, broke his long journey home by a week's stay at North Berwick with a college friend, addicted to golf.

From thence he drifted down to Rugby, visiting his old school with the somewhat wistful pleasure that lies in conjuring up boyhood's days.

But all the time he was keenly aware of the magnet that drew him to the South. Each careless, friendly letter of Jill's increased his desire to see her. In Scotland he had met Cydonia, through a mischievous trick of Lady Leason's. But his old infatuation was dead. He could find no lingering charm about her.

Marriage had changed her whole outlook. For, with it, ambition seemed to have flowered, a late but very vigorous plant, to the absorption of her nature. More serious, more composed, she had that solid wedded look which marks a certain type of blonde, even in girlhood statuesque.

She ordered her little husband about with a regal calm, and entertained loftily her numerous guests, among whom the clergy were freely sprinkled. McTaggart found her heavy and dull and refused her pressing invitation to a week-end party, with a smile, realizing that he owed it alone to the change in his fortunes.

In the background of the historic Castle that the Flemmings had taken for the Summer Mrs. Cadell hovered, restless; superintending domestic details with a stern eye on her husband, when he turned up from time to time, a social trial to the guests.

Euan Flemming reminded McTaggart of the White Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland.

With his nervous manner and neat dress he seemed to exist in perpetual fear of offending those useful political props whom Cydonia collected on his behalf.

"Euan," she told her mother one day, "always talks to the wrong people. So now I have invented a sign which he understands and when I use it he moves on to another guest. It's really very tiresome of him! At the party I gave for the Premier he was lost to view for over an hour and I found him in the library showing his books to a struggling author and discussing a new method of binding!"

When he compared Cydonia with Jill at the luncheon party to which Lady Leason had invited the Flemmings during his visit, McTaggart wondered not a little at this love affair of his youth.

Even during the dinner that followed at the Castle, in all the magnificence of her surroundings, Cydonia left him shrewdly amused and indifferent.

He told himself that here again was a proof of the depths of his love for Jill.

Neither Fantine nor Mrs. Flemming could add a beat to his steady pulse.

At North Berwick a new temptation awaited him in his host's sister, one of the most beautiful girls he had seen for many a long year.

But, although daily opportunities for flirtation offered themselves to the pair, McTaggart reaped no advantage from them. They parted in firm but simple friendship.

Surely he knew his heart at last?—that vagrant double heart of his! No other woman could reign in it, side by side with his little Jill.

He loved her. And he felt afraid—a new experience for McTaggart! He began

to fear that the sunny weeks by the sea might hold some dangerous rival; procrastination prove his undoing.

Jill herself, young, impulsive, might weary of such a tardy wooing; and he searched her letters anxiously, striving in vain to find some sign that the girl's heart was indeed his.

For they corresponded regularly. But the simple, almost boyish epistles rang with no note but friendliness, showed no desire for his return.

When he learned in a hurried line that Bethune had reappeared on the scene with his motor, taking the girl for a drive, it scattered his last remaining scruple. He left for London one bright day in late September, resolute to put an end to his "probation," seek out Jill and learn his fate.

On his way from St. Pancras he called at the Club on the chance of a letter, and a sudden memory assailed him of that other message found there, summoning him to Italy. It had changed the whole course of his life.

He recalled to mind his arrival at Siena; his interview with his new Aunt and his first faint doubts regarding a marriage with Cydonia.

Once more, in imagination, he stood in the long gallery lined with pictures—those faces of his ancestors which seemed to frown at the thought of Cadell!

A sudden wave of exultation went to his heart as he thought of Jill taking her place in that noble throng. Surely they would welcome her? Jill, with her frank simplicity—that truest mark of good descent—with her clean-cut, proud young face, her clever brain and fine courage.

As he turned over the pile of letters handed him by the Club porter, his thoughts were anxious. Yes—here it was! Bless the child! He hastened back to his waiting taxi with a feeling that no profane eyes must watch his face as he read her letter.

But at the first opening lines he frowned with an exclamation of disgust, aware that here was grave trouble, that the girl he loved faced despair.

"Damn the chap!"

He could hardly believe the astounding news. He bit his lip. Mrs. Uniacke had married Stephen! Why—it was incredible!

Secretly—at a Registry—in Brighton—the day before. No wonder Jill had always held such deep distrust of the "parasite!"

Mrs. Uniacke—and Stephen...

This was the end of the long "platonic" friendship between the curious pair, the "motherly interest" of the woman!—McTaggart sneered, his face hard.

"I don't know what to do with Roddy." Jill wrote from the depths of her heart. "I never saw him so cut up. Oh, Peter— isn't it *dreadful*? They've gone off on their honeymoon—for a fortnight, so Mother writes—and then Stephen's coming back—to *live* with us ... in *Father's* place!"

McTaggart could hardly restrain his wrath.

"What a fool the woman must be! A dirty trick too—this secrecy—with her own children. Oh—damn the man. He's feathered his nest—you bet he has! Well ——" he read the letter through—"that settles it—my affair! Jill shan't live for a day with Stephen as a stepfather. I'll see to that!—Hurry up!" he called to the driver and went on, forming his plans. "I'll go down to Worthing to-night. Those poor children—all alone! ... I call it a most cruel trick—suddenly springing her marriage upon them."

Mario was already there when he reached his rooms, busy unpacking.

McTaggart checked him.

"Look here—leave all that and throw some things into a bag. Enough for the night—I'm off in another hour to Worthing."

"Sissignore." The man's quick eyes fell on the letter McTaggart still held and he smiled to himself. He knew the writing well by now and the eager look it brought to his young master's face.

Here was "l'amore..."—(postmark Worthing!) The sooner the marriage came off the better. This was the valet's private thought. He hated these dingy, narrow rooms and longed for a better establishment. But out aloud he merely asked if

McTaggart would need his services.

"No—I'll wire if I want you, Mario. Hurry, now—And put in that suit the tailor sent before we left. The blue serge—and some decent shirts. I haven't time to change now."

He picked up the A.B.C.—studied it and his face cleared.

"You'll have to meet me at Victoria—the Brighton line—seven-forty. Get me a first-class return—here's some money. I'm off to dine. You understand? And don't be late."

"The Signore can count on me." Mario's black eyes flashed. He revelled in this love affair.

"And good fortune go with you—long life—and many children!" he added softly to himself as the door closed with a bang. Then, with his quick, careful hands, he folded a pale grey tie that appealed to him—it looked bridal!—and thought tenderly of Lucia...

McTaggart bolted a hurried meal at Victoria, one eye on the clock. He caught up a *Globe* as he passed the book stall and found his man in the front part of the long train, cool and collected, keeping the seat with his suit-case.

"Change at Brighton," said the guard. "You'll have twenty minutes to wait. Thank you, sir—there's no stop." He waved his arms—they were off.

The carriage held another man. McTaggart gave him a careless glance as they puffed out of the dark station and leaned back in his corner.

The stranger opened a narrow bag beside him and hunted for a cap. Unconsciously watching him, McTaggart saw that a stethoscope lay on the top of the littered contents.

"A doctor," he decided as his companion rose to his feet, and carefully placed his top-hat on the rack, then turned to McTaggart.

"D'you mind this window down?" he asked.

"Not at all—I should prefer it. It's close to-night."

The stranger nodded.

"I generally find it so in town—after Brighton, where I live."

McTaggart drew a breath of relief as the air circulated freely. His face was flushed from his hurried meal, his blue eyes bright with excitement.

"I expect you do." He opened his paper, not in the mood for conversation, carelessly skimming down the news, his mind partially abstracted.

But suddenly an exclamation broke, unconsciously, from his lips. He bent forward so that the light fell full on the sheet before him.

For a paragraph had caught his attention.

"Tragic Fate of a Harley Street Doctor." The headline was in leaded type. He read it through with amazement.

It could not be...? Yes—it was! The specialist he had consulted about his heart four years ago. The great man was insane! The paper danced before his eyes...

He steadied it and read on. The tragic scene was given in full where his confrères, hastily called in, had borne him off to an Asylum, their suspicions roused for some time past.

A series of grave mistakes, of "strange and eccentric diagnoses," had led up to the final lapse of self-control.

They had found him surrounded by his flowers, the room littered with fresh plants, playing like a little child—planning a garden on the floor.

Beyond, in the dingy dining-room, were patients waiting and wondering. The horrible pathos of the affair shocked McTaggart as he read.

But the memory of the doctor's words and his own curious case rose up, blotting out all other thoughts, as a strange conviction grew upon him.

His "double heart"...? Was it possible that this was one of the "grave mistakes?"—a fantastic theory born of that diseased, already failing brain.

He felt suddenly overcome. Tired from his earlier journey, with the bad news concerning Jill, and the hurry of the last hour, this fresh excitement was the climax. The colour faded from his cheeks. He leaned back and closed his eyes, unaware that the stranger opposite was watching him with grave attention.

Roused by his sharp exclamation, the doctor's professional interest was stirred by the sudden pallor following the feverish flush on the young man's face. He had marked the brilliance of the eyes and the strained air of excitement about him, the attentive care of his valet, and now this sudden look of prostration.

A wave of telepathy must have warned McTaggart of his scrutiny. He roused himself and glanced up, fired with an instantaneous resolve.

"Are you a doctor?" he asked abruptly.

So carried away was he by his thoughts that the strangeness of the sudden question did not occur to him at the moment.

The other showed no sign of surprise. "Yes." He moved quickly nearer.

"D'you feel seedy?" His voice was soothing.

"Good Lord, no!" McTaggart laughed, slightly ashamed, collecting his wits. "You must forgive me—the fact is I've just read some astounding news that bowled me over—in this paper—perhaps you've seen it?"——

He handed the *Globe* across, a finger that trembled slightly marking the famous paragraph.

"About the specialist? Yes—that's it," as the doctor gave it his attention. "It's an odd thing—I consulted the man a few years since about my heart. I'm wondering now if his verdict was wrong?"

The doctor's face went graver still. He guessed that the young man before him had suffered the dread of all heart patients and now this further anxiety had been added, with a sense of shock.

"They say there," went on McTaggart, "that his brain has been failing for some years—that he made mistakes—you see the line—'*strange and eccentric diagnoses*'—I wonder ... do you mind if I tell you?"

He hesitated, but the other answered: "Please do"—realizing that the strain might be lessened by a confidence.

"He said I had a double heart." McTaggart laughed nervously, as he saw the doctor's incredulous face, that went quickly blank again. "He said my circulation was good—that it didn't affect my health in the least. But there it was—a double heart—a separate organ on either side! It sounds mad—I'll admit that. But I never dreamed he could be mistaken—a man with a reputation like his!"

"Of course." The doctor nodded his head. "I believe there *have* been cases on record. But I've never met anyone who had come across it—professionally or otherwise. It's quite unique."

"No?" McTaggart smiled back, relieved anew by the words. "I didn't bother much about it. There was no danger, so he said. But it's been ... I can't exactly explain—a sort of perpetual discomfort to me."

"I can quite understand that," said the other and his voice was full of sympathy. He had seen, at ambulance lectures, strong men faint at the sight of diagrams explaining the dangers that menaced the heart.

He knew the fear that underlay any weakness of that organ and he felt, too, a curious interest in the living case before his eyes.

McTaggart liked his new friend's face and the quiet courtesy of the man. He was urged anew by the first impulse that had moved him to confide in a stranger.

"Look here——" his voice was abrupt out of sheer nervousness. "I'm going to make an odd suggestion—I hope you won't be offended by it? The fact is—just now—it's rather important that I should know where I stand—and get to the bottom of this! I want to marry——" his colour rose under the bronze of his skin, but he went on doggedly, "I'd like to be quite sure—first. That I'm sound, you know—and all that ... I'm going down—to see her—to-night..."

The doctor's eyes began to twinkle as McTaggart laughed boyishly; then, gravely, he answered him.

"You're quite right—I wish more men would take that view of marriage! It's the sane one, the *only* one that's going to do any good to the race."

Quite unconsciously McTaggart had started him on his hobby, Eugenics. He felt drawn to the young fellow, with his frank speech and handsome face.

"I want you now, if you'll be so kind," McTaggart persisted—"to examine my heart. We're alone—it's a non-stop train—as private as any consulting room. But, of course, I know it's an odd request..." he stammered a little, hunting for words—"unprofessional, perhaps..." he broke off, finding it impossible to suggest a fee in the way he wished.

"Certainly," said his new friend, "if you really wish it. The only thing against it is the noise of the train. I should have preferred to wait until we reached Brighton. We shall get there very shortly and then if you would come back home with me I could make a thorough examination."

"I'm afraid that's impossible," said McTaggart. "I'm going straight on to Worthing. There wouldn't be time..." his face had dropped and the doctor, seeing it, made up his mind.

"Very well—we'll do it now. Luckily I've my stethoscope with me——" he opened his bag as he spoke. "I've been up to town to see a patient."

McTaggart stood up and took off his coat, then his waistcoat.

"It's awfully good of you—I'm really tremendously obliged..." he went on with his undressing.

But the doctor was almost as keen as himself to investigate this curious case. He said so—tactfully—to set his new patient at ease.

In a few minutes it was over.

"I can't find anything wrong with you. Your heart seems perfectly sound to me. The beat is a little fast just now, probably through excitement—but steady and strong. It ought to take you comfortably into your nineties!"

He smiled as he spoke, holding out his hand.

"I congratulate you—sound as a rock!"

McTaggart wrung it in speechless gratitude. Then he struggled into his

clothes.

"Well—I'm glad that nightmare's over! My double heart—Good Lord!" His laugh hid more than the doctor guessed—those long years of indecision, of weakness in the hands of women...

What a fool he had been! He saw now how often he had excused himself in the past on the score of his physical peculiarity for what was merely lack of control.

They chatted for a little time. Then McTaggart, rather red, drew out his sovereign purse, but the doctor checked him with a gesture.

"No—I won't hear of it! It's been a pleasure—honestly. If you feel at all indebted to me—you might ask me to your wedding."

"I will. But I wish ... Look here, sir—there must be some Hospital you're interested in at Brighton. Perhaps you would give it ... this—from me?"

His new friend laughed.

"Well ... all right——" the coins changed hands. "You're a loser any way, you know. You've just got rid of an extra heart."

"Thank goodness!" McTaggart laughed—"I find one quite sufficient." His mind swerved aside to Jill, his face softening as he spoke.

The doctor guessed the trend of his thoughts and picked up the fallen paper.

"Will you lend me this for a few minutes?" He settled himself behind the folds, a smile on his rather stern face as the lover gazed out of the window.

They had come to that picturesque bridge of stone spanning the valley below the Downs and already the air was sharp and sweet with the first breath of the sea beyond.

Over the smooth curve of the hills a crescent moon was shining clear. The hushed Earth lay beneath, bathed in the silvery light ...

And, suddenly, a memory stirred in the young man's heart, filled with tender

dreams of the girl he loved—the echo of long forgotten words.

"It's under the heavy cloud you stand ... the cloud of a lie ... but it clears ... it clears..."

McTaggart started at the thought. Why—by Heaven! she had been right. His "double heart?"

It was a lie. He tried to recall the gypsy's speech, the end of the curious prophecy. What was it she had said of the Moon? and the Tide...? He stared out into the night and slowly it returned to him, with the jingle of bangles, the noise of the Fair.

"Between two fires you will burn and burn—And then ... the light fades ... on the turn of the Tide ... there's the Lucky Moon and the Dream of your life...!"

The dream of his life?—Why, that meant Jill!

* * * * *

At Worthing he found a single cab, with a driver, elderly, garrulous. He sat sideways on the box in order to point out local features of interest; the reins loose in his hands, throwing remarks back to McTaggart.

"Town 'All!" he waved his whip, a worn-out stump without a lash, toward that imposing structure. "The Picture Palace!—'Old up, me lass!" The ancient mare between the shafts responded coquettishly to the call, aware of the subtle compliment, tossing her venerable head.

"The Pier, sir—as was washed in 'alf in the big gale—a crool business. Cost the Corporation no end—This 'ere's the Promenade..."

McTaggart woke from his dream of Jill to gaze at the wide stretch of water.

The beach, white under the moon, shelved down to the smooth sand, dove-grey and broken by rocks low and black, where silver pools lay fringed with sea weed and emerald samphire.

It crept out, like an endless scroll, till it touched the dark line of sea and was met by a single crested wave that broke upon it, noiselessly.

"The tide is very low to-night?" McTaggart spoke at last to the driver.

"Yessir——" the man followed his gaze. "It 'ud be now just on the turn. Woodford Road, I think you said?"

"Yes. There's no number—it's called 'Rose Mount'!"

"Right, sir—I know the 'ouse." They turned abruptly from the sea, up a narrow road in the old town, passed a Terrace and came to a gate, open, that showed a curving alley between hedges, neatly clipped, of Euonymus, thick with dust.

The cab drew up and the man descended.

"An orkard place," he said, "with luggage. There's two cottages up there —'Sea-view' and 'Rose Mount.' The one you want is the last, on the right. Shall I carry yer bag, sir? The 'orse won't move."

"No—I'm not staying here," McTaggart hastily explained—"just going in to see some friends. I shall want you to wait—perhaps some time..." He glanced up the road as he spoke and saw that a little public house stood at the end of the empty street.

"You'd better go and have a drink. But keep an eye on my suit-case." He handed the smiling driver a shilling.

"Right, sir—thank ye. I'll be 'ere."

He took the coin, pocketed it, gazing up at the sky.

"Turning my money," he explained. "A new moon, sir—it brings luck."

"I hope so," said McTaggart. He felt oddly nervous now as he passed down the dusty path with its clipped hedge on either side.

A green door ended it, with a gaping crack, through which he peered and he saw a sun dried little garden where a few nasturtiums still straggled in a bed bordered with cockle shells.

He lifted the latch and walked in.

A cottage with a French window, wide open on the scrap of lawn, was before him, rendered picturesque by the magic light of the moon. Over the porch the last white rose of September hung, already withered but triumphant witness to the fact that the little dwelling had earned its name.

Someone was singing. The clear young voice reached McTaggart where he stood and a sudden rush of blood to his heart testified to its being Jill.

How he loved her! The very sound of her voice brought his secret home to him and he stole nearer to the house, tip-toe across the grass.

"My brown boy is hiding away,
For he stole a horse, so they say.
The county's men after him ride.
My boy mocks them, safe by my side..."

The lawless words of the old Folk Song brought a smile to his lips. The beautiful chords of the Hungarian composer rippled smoothly under Jill's touch and again her voice rang out, filled with the youthful pride of the verse:

"My brown boy is mighty and strong.
Nine armed sheriffs can't hold him long!
But when my voice, so soft he hears
His proud head droops, bowed down with tears..."

Now he stood under the shadow of the wall. Through the open window he could see the girl, her clear profile, and the slim moving hands. He dared not yet break in upon her—he leaned back, holding his breath.

"Then I whisper, softly and low
'Give me thy love, 'ere thou dost go....
Pretty am I, faithful am I
Only wayward, wayward am I...!"

A note of defiance rang through the words, typical of her independent nature.

It stirred in McTaggart an answering throb of youth. Here was no easy conquest before him. Sweet would be the mastery to hold her in his arms—this young rebel, tamed at last...

"Jill!" he stepped forward out of the shadows, tall and eager, in the clear white light.

He saw wonder and swift joy pass across her face as she wheeled round; then a curious look of repression.

"Hullo, Peter!" she answered him coolly. "What a surprise!—Have you dropped from the moon?"

CHAPTER XXX

"I found your letter at my Club," McTaggart explained, "on my way home. So I thought I'd just run down and see how you and Roddy were getting on."

He avoided a more direct allusion to Mrs. Uniacke's crowning folly, though he longed to express his sympathy. He knew, of old, Jill's pride.

"Roddy's out," said the girl, "he's gone to the theatre with a school friend. He didn't *want* to, but I told him he must! He's awfully cut up about it all. But it's no good crying over spilt milk"—she smiled bravely—"is it, Peter? It's *done* now. That's the worst of marriage—it's for always." She checked a sigh.

As his eyes drank in the pretty face McTaggart decided to himself it might be also "the best of it!" But out aloud he responded quickly, glad she had broken the ice herself.

"I'm *awfully* sorry. I can't tell you how I feel about the whole affair. It's ... the limit!" his face was wrathful. "I'd like to have Stephen to myself for a little ... active argument. Gloves off—you understand?"

"Rather!" her face warmed at the thought. "It's odd you should say that, though. I once dreamed I saw you both fighting a duel. I believe I told you—that day in the car—how I woke up before the end, not knowing which side had won."

McTaggart smiled somewhat grimly.

"It's going to happen. In real life," he watched the girl. "But I can't win, Jill, without your help—that's certain!"

She looked up, surprised at his words.

"Of course I'll help—if I possibly can. But what do you mean? Have you really something against Stephen?" A shadow fell on her eager face as she went on, in a burst of confidence.

"It's so awful, Peter, to think that he is, legally, you know, our stepfather. It's all right for me because I'm grown up and can hold my own—but there's poor old Roddy! He's only a boy—that's where Stephen gets the pull. And just now ——" she broke off—"I don't think I told you—in my letters, I mean—but there's been a thundering row at home.

"Roddy's told Mother he wants to be an artist and she's simply furious! She's set her heart on his going into the Army. She doesn't see that, without private means, it's frightfully hard on any man. It would be, of course, the Indian Service, and I can't bear to think of Roddy going abroad for the rest of his life. For it comes to that, practically. Besides, he hates the whole idea. He's not fitted for a soldier. I'm sure if Father were alive he'd agree with me. I *know* he would!"

She leaned back on the music stool, her hands clasped around her knees. The moonlight fell full on her face, showing the shadows under her eyes and the traces of recent suffering.

McTaggart longed to gather her up in his arms and comfort her like a child.

Never, he thought, had she looked so sweet! To him her faded gown of blue—bound about the slender waist with a narrow ribbon of black velvet, and cut open at her throat, showing, too, the rounded arms bare to the elbow—so plainly shabby, was the prettiest dress in all the world.

In her dark hair, forgotten, there lay a single pale nasturtium, gathered earlier in the garden, and it shone among the ruffled curls like a star in the shadow of a cloud.

"Roddy is an artist—now." Jill went on defiantly, unconscious of the admiration in McTaggart's blue eyes. "And I don't see why his whole life should be ruined—just to please Mother! I told her so. And I tried, too, to show her that boys nowadays are allowed to choose their own professions. That it's prehistoric to say that until he's twenty-one *she* 'knows best'—He's a human being, like herself—and he's only got one life to live!

"Supposing Granny had said to Mother: 'My dear child, you *must* be an active Anti-Suffragette—that's my wish. *I* know best—I'm older than you,' d'you think she'd have stood it? Rather not! But, of course, Stephen will take her part—unless——" she laughed, a sudden mischief breaking through the gravity of her young face—"he thinks Sandhurst too expensive! That might save it—happy thought! I'll find out exactly what it costs and talk to Stephen—you do, too, whenever you see him, won't you, Peter?"

"I'll do any mortal thing you ask!"

Something in his earnest voice startled Jill. She glanced sharply in his direction through the shadows that were filling the corners of the room.

"Then that's settled," she said coolly. "I think, perhaps, I'll light the lamp. It's getting almost dark in here."

But he checked her.

"Don't!—The moon's so lovely. It would be a shame to shut it out."

In the low chair where he sat, half hidden, his back to the light, he felt he had a certain advantage over the girl facing the window. He could watch her to his heart's content, gaze up into those fearless eyes, with their long and curving sweep of lashes.

"I've got a plan of my own, Jill. I came down to talk it over." He drew his chair a shade nearer, at her feet now—lightly crossed, the slender ankles visible under the shrunk washing frock.

"I think we can get a rise out of Stephen—if we work together, you and I."

"How?" She was watching him doubtfully. Again he felt that hint of repression, as though she stood upon her guard.

"I'll tell you about Roddy first—a scheme I have for his future. To take him right away from Stephen—kidnap him!" he laughed at her—"and give him a thorough training abroad. I thought of the Art schools at Rome. Let him have the best masters from the beginning. If he likes it he's in the right atmosphere. It's a wonderful place, to my mind, Rome ... It's not like a Public School, of course. At one time I used to think that ... *everything*! But now that I've knocked about a bit I believe that there's nothing half so good as travel for an Englishman—we're too insular by far!

"He's jolly clever—those sketches of his show he has talent—if not genius. I honestly think—with a proper chance—he'll make a name for himself one day."

"Do you?" She beamed whole-heartedly on the speaker, self-forgetful again. "I think it sounds *too* lovely!—If only——" she sighed—"it could be done. But Mother would never hear of it. Besides, if she did, we're not rich. Think of what it means, Peter. Why, the journeys alone, from here to Italy and back again for the holidays, would cost a perfect little fortune—let alone his other expenses."

"He needn't return to England at all—once he's there," said McTaggart quickly—"that is, not if you agree to the *whole* plan." His voice changed. A pleading note crept into it, his eyes watched her anxiously.

"He could come—for the holidays ... to *us*!"

There came a pause, silent, but full.

"Jill—little Jill—don't you understand? Don't you know what I *want*—what I'm trying to say?"

From the low chair where he sat he reached up and tried to capture the hands clasped round her knees. But, with a swift movement, she drew them away, her head high, her face proud.

"To *us*!..." she repeated his words slowly. "Are you asking me to ... *marry* you, Peter?"

The words were jerky. Her gray eyes were fixed still on the garden ahead as though she dared not look at him.

"Yes," he said simply—"I love you, Jill."

But she sat like a maiden turned to stone, untouched, unresponsive.

The cold hand of fear crept round his heart as he watched her face.

Was she going to refuse him? Could it be—after all—Bethune!

"Jill—" his voice was very low—"Aren't you going to answer me?" He bent closer—"Don't you ... care?"

She stirred restlessly under his eyes, her own averted. Then she spoke.

"Why should you think ... I cared for you?" Unconsciously her hand stole to her throat, feeling for the chain that hung concealed by the lace of her collar; and, noting the gesture, McTaggart divined her secret thought.

Light poured in, dispelling his fears. That scene at Cluar ... the "double heart!" that lay upon her girlish breast.

"I don't!" he caught her up quickly. "I only wish to Heaven I did. You've never given the slightest sign—I know myself ... but not *you*."

He saw her face clear at his words. She threw him a furtive, sidelong glance and the long lashes trembled and fell, casting a shadow on her cheek.

Then she raised her head again with a faintly malicious smile.

"I don't understand yet, Peter. I always thought we were just friends! Don't you remember when you returned home from abroad, only this Summer—you said you wanted me to feel that you were ... well—an 'elder brother.'" (McTaggart winced at the memory. It was true: those were his words.) "And now—you're going back on that. Isn't it a pity, rather—to spoil it all by this new idea?"

"It's not a new idea to me!" his voice was hot, faintly indignant. "I've loved you for ages past..." She turned on him with a sudden gesture that checked the rest of his ardent speech.

"Then why do you tell me this to-night—for the first time? Why not before?" She was on her feet facing him, her face defiant, her eyes ablaze.

"I know. You needn't answer me. It's because of Stephen and Mother—there! You think that I shall have a rotten life at home—and you're *sorry*—that's all! If you *had* cared all this time there was nothing to stop your telling me. And I don't choose," she stamped her foot, carried away by a gust of pride, "to be married from a sense of pity! I can make my own life for myself. I've got Roddy ... and heaps of friends. I daresay you think it's very kind..."

But McTaggart was at the end of his patience. "How *dare* you say that to me?" He caught her firmly by the shoulders, his blue eyes full of anger. "Look at me!" he compelled her gaze. "Now—don't you know that I'm in earnest?"

He could feel her, rigid, under his touch, but the very warmth of her young body, through the thin summer dress she wore, fired his blood and he went on, with an ominous break in his voice.

"I see what it is!—I've left it too late. I ought to have spoken weeks ago! But I did it, Jill—for *your* sake..."

"Did what?" She bit her lip, fighting against the magnetism of his youth and her own answering passion.

"Held my tongue," said Peter grimly.

His hands fell away from her. He turned and stared out of the window.

"Some other fellow, I suppose?" He addressed the moon-lit patch of garden.

"No." Rather quickly, Jill sat down. She felt her limbs trembling beneath her.

Deeply annoyed at this sudden weakness, she went on, in a careful voice.

"Don't let's quarrel over it, Peter. It's ... just a mistake. Let's forget it."

To this he deigned no reply, still silent by the window.

She could see his profile against the sky—the well remembered set of his head on his broad shoulders; his hands were clasped in a hard grip behind his

back.

"Peter?" a faint appeal sounded, against her will.

McTaggart turned, hesitated, then threw himself into his old seat facing her.

"I'm going to tell you ... everything. It's not a very pretty story—in parts, you know. It's just life—a man's life." His voice was hard.

Jill stirred restlessly. She nodded her head, reclasping her hands in her old attitude round her knees as though it, somehow, nerved her to listen.

So he began. At the very beginning; with his interview in Harley Street and the mystery of his "double heart."

Jill's grey eyes went wide with wonder.

But he went on without a break. He told her of Fantine and Cydonia; of his brief engagement with the latter, and his subsequent disillusion.

For a certain reason of his own he cut out both the time and place, avoiding mention of his inheritance, merely stating that he had been jilted.

Had he been watching Jill's face and seen her indignation rise, flooding the clear skin with colour, his story might have been abridged.

But he still stared out of the window, far from the girl's secret thought. ("How dared this creature throw him over! a silly, brainless..." Jill choked.)

For now he came to a harder part: that year of light adventures abroad. But he forged through it ruthlessly, hurting himself and her. This threatened Jill's ideals, dragging him out of his secret shrine. Peter, no longer her childish idol, but a man, made of baser metal.

Still, she sat without movement, rather white, her lips compressed. She did him the justice in her heart to respect him for his honesty. But it made a difference even then; though later it strengthened the reason why, loving her, he had bound himself to silence for a term of probation.

It accounted, too, for his withdrawal from her society since the day he had

rescued her and brought her from Cluar. And her secret fear was slain for good. The fear that had haunted her proud spirit that, during her brief unconsciousness, the disarray of her torn dress had betrayed the little "double heart!" That gift of his, carelessly offered, lightly accepted, which had lain, day after day, and night after night, on the faithful living heart beneath...

So at last he came to the end; his strange experience in the train and the doctor's verdict; the second one, that had overthrown its shadowy rival. That bogey was dead for good. Jill breathed a sigh of relief. It was like a page from a Fairy book, the curse some malignant witch had laid.

"So I haven't a double heart at all..." McTaggart smiled wearily, "not even one I can call my own. It's yours, now—what's left of it!"

He stole a glance at the girl before him. Her face was pale; her hands, still clasped, suggested that she held herself, by a strong effort, cool and apart.

"That's what seems so hard," said Jill. "We give ... *all* to the man we love—and he gives us ... 'what's left.'"

McTaggart was stung by the truth of the words. "Don't!" there was real pain in his voice. "It hurts awfully," he paused. "If only you understood men," he went on miserably—"if you knew...! We're rotters I'll own. Young and old—but until a fellow's *really* in love it doesn't seem to matter much. It's just ... well, ordinary life. And, Jill——" his eyes were beseeching now—"I think, all the time, it's been really *you*—though I didn't guess it at the first!

"I've always come back to you—to that dear child's face of yours—those grey eyes..." he stopped, stung by the fear of the years ahead without her.

Jill's dark lashes were lowered now. He tried in vain to probe her thought, to catch some faint sign of hope.

"I've always come back," he said again, "I always shall. It's *love* this time. It's the woman a man returns to, you know, who holds his heart in her hands. Those other ... affairs were mere passion. I see it now—now it's too late! What a fool I've been...!" his head sank down for a moment on his clenched fists.

Then he raised it and faced Jill, a new light in the blue eyes.

"I love you so," his voice rang, "that, if I thought it were better for you to go away right out of your life, I believe *now* I could do it, Jill. But I don't. I *know* I'd make you happy!"

He saw a quiver cross her face, and breathlessly he leaned toward her.

"*Don't* you care? Tell me, Jill. Couldn't you learn to care ... a little?"

Slowly the girl raised her eyes. He saw that they were wet with tears.

"I've loved you all my life," she said.

A cry broke from him. He slipped down on his knees before her, arms outstretched.

"Jill! ... My darling! What do you mean?"

Into the beautiful childish face came a tenderness he had never known—the dream come true ... the "dream of his life."

"I suppose—I must marry you," said Jill.

CHAPTER XXXI

Miss Elizabeth Uniacke wore an aggressive air.

She stood in front of the mirror, her gray eyes critical, studying the effect of her newly made gown.

On her knees beside her a stout dressmaker waited, in mute suspense, her mouth full of pins. Her attitude was that of profound admiration, but in her heart she quailed, foreseeing the verdict.

"Too tight round the ankles," said Aunt Elizabeth.

Mrs. Crouch, between the pins, bleated her dismay. She assured "Meddam" it

was the latest fashion: that to alter it by a "hair-breadth" was to "ruin the cut!"

"I can't help that——" Miss Uniacke scowled—"I've told you before—I won't be trussed like a fowl. I don't care what frights other women make of themselves! I've my own style, and I shall keep to it."

She placed her pretty hands to either side of her waist, tightly confined by a broad Petersham belt, and with a little wriggle of her angular body seemed to shoot up like a crocus on its stem.

Mrs. Crouch swallowed a heavy sigh—a somewhat difficult and precarious performance!

Pins still sprouted from between her lips and she gathered up the scissors with a tragic gesture. Slowly she unpicked the two side seams.

"That's better!" Miss Uniacke gave an unexpected movement, followed by an ominous rending sound.

"Ha!" she cried triumphantly. "You see for yourself!—I can't walk a step. It's ridiculous!"

Mrs. Crouch sighed.

"We *might*..." she suggested, "leave one side open. With—perhaps—a button?"

"And show my legs!" At the wrath in her client's voice the dressmaker breathed a hurried:

"Oh, Meddam!—Indeed, Meddam, I had no intention—I was going to suggest a fold ... underneath..."

"Not at all!" The irate lady snapped. "You've plenty of turnings. Let it out. That's better ... Now, pin it ... There!——" Again she took a step forward. "I can move at last. I'm sure I don't know what we're coming to! You'll be asking me next to dye my hair blue! In *my* young days..."

There came a low tap at the door, breaking through the current of her memories.

"Come in!—What is it?" She wheeled round, displeased.

"If you please, Mum." The parlour maid stood there, gaunt and prim.

"It's Mr. McTaggart asking to see you."

"Shut that door!—Now, what do you mean, Maria? You know I'm engaged. Tell him I'm out."

But the elderly servant stood her ground. "He's in the drawing-room, if you please, Mum. I told him you was h'occupied—but he said he could wait." She cast an openly inquisitive glance at her mistress' dress. The new Autumn gown was an "event" in that quiet household.

"Indeed." Aunt Elizabeth's voice was acid. "Well, he *can* wait, then! You'd no business, Maria, to let him in at all. You take too much on yourself."

"I'm sorry, Mum. But the card in the hall said 'h'*In*,' not 'h'*Out*,' so 'ow was I to tell?" She tossed her head with an air of injured innocence.

"That will do." Miss Uniacke's eyes had wandered back to the mirror, irresistibly attracted.

It certainly *was* smart ... The colour suited her.

"Perhaps I'd better go and get it over," she said. "If these pins will hold?" She addressed the kneeling figure.

"I'll make sure, Meddam." Mrs. Crouch smiled. She came to work "by the day" and was not at all averse to a spell of idleness reaped from the occasion.

But Aunt Elizabeth guessed her secret thought. "You can have your tea now, instead of later on. That will save time." Mrs. Crouch sighed.

"Yes, Meddam." She drove a pin upward with the amiable desire that Miss Uniacke should risk, when she sat down, a reminder of the fact!

The unconscious victim rustled through the hall. That, she decided, was the best of taffetas. It had a distinctive and aristocratic note. Her temper was soothed by the gentle frou-frou.

McTaggart was standing talking to the parrot who, after the manner of those wayward birds, received his advances with a stony silence, and sharpened, at intervals, his beak on the perch.

"How do you do?" Her guest wheeled round quickly at Miss Uniacke's voice, his face eager. "This is good of you! I heard you were engaged and was prepared to wait for hours! Polly refused to take pity upon me," he added as they shook hands.

"Silly fool!" said the parrot explosively, the moment McTaggart turned his back.

Aunt Elizabeth, fearing that worse might follow, picked up the baize cover and blotted the bird out effectually.

"He gets so tiresome," she explained. "Won't you sit here?" and was settling herself on the sofa facing her visitor when she rose with a startled look of pain.

"Silly fool!" came from the cage in muffled accents. "Ha ... ha ... ha!"

"A pin!" said Aunt Elizabeth, gingerly sinking down again. "The fact is I was being fitted on with a new dress when you arrived. I didn't like to keep you waiting, so I came as I was—pins and all!"

"It's a very pretty one," said McTaggart—"suits you, too. Such a jolly colour."

"You think so?" The little old lady was pleased and a slight flush warmed her face.

"I suppose," said McTaggart as the pause prolonged itself and he felt she was waiting to gather the object of his visit; "I suppose you've heard about ... Mrs. Uniacke?"

The moment the words had passed his lips he knew he had made a tactless start.

For his hostess bristled visibly.

"If you've called to plead for Mary," she said and her voice was short—"I had better tell you that I wash my hands of that affair! I've finished with them—the

whole family!"

"Jill?" ...

"Yes——" she caught him up. "Jill, *and* Roddy—They might have guessed. They ought to have warned me long ago! It's their own fault—and I've done with them."

"Oh, no!" McTaggart's blue eyes were eloquent. "You don't *mean* it? You couldn't just now when they want you so." He saw a slight quiver cross her face. "And *I* want you—all your help! We can't get on without it, you know—Jill and I..."

She gave a start at the coupling together of the names.

"I don't understand," she said drily.

"No?—I'm afraid I'm explaining myself rather badly. I thought you'd guess ... The fact is, Aunt Elizabeth," he smiled at her affectionately, "I'm hoping you'll let me become, you know, a *real* nephew of yours, one day."

The little old lady gave a gasp. "I *knew* it!" she cried triumphantly. "You and Jill?—Ha!" she laughed. "You can't deceive an old woman like me!"

"I don't want to!" McTaggart sprang up, his hand outstretched to meet her own, his face so radiant with happiness that her old heart softened at the sight.

"But I must have *your* permission first. I don't care a hang what her mother says!—She's placed herself outside the affair. Gone off and left those two children..." he checked himself, his voice indignant. "But you're her father's sister, you see—his favourite one. And we both think you've as good a right as any one ... to give her away."

He stopped abruptly.

"Give her away? *Jill*, you mean?" she stared at him, obviously amazed. "What are you talking about, young man? You're not going to marry her *to-morrow*?"

"No," he amended, "to-morrow week."

He laughed at her startled exclamation, and went on, still holding her hand—unconsciously abandoned to him—with subtle persuasion in his voice.

"I don't want you—exactly—to 'give her away.' In any sense!—" he laughed again—"but you simply *must* come to the wedding. We've both of us set our hearts on that."

"I never heard such utter nonsense in all my life!" she protested stoutly—"and don't imagine I shall allow it!" But, as she looked at his resolute face, inwardly she commended his spirit.

"Of all the ridiculous notions..." she fumed; but McTaggart guessed she was wavering.

"Tell me, first, you're pleased about it? *Do* say you think I'll make Jill happy?"

"Well—" she paused—"I'll admit you'll *try*! She's a bit of a handful—that young woman."

Her grey eyes began to twinkle. Jill, she thought, had found her master.

"Yes—I'm glad. Though I shan't hear..."

He checked the protest audaciously. Before she could gather his intention he had stooped and kissed her faded cheek.

"Thank you, Aunt Elizabeth. On Tuesday week I'll take another—In the vestry!"

He chuckled gaily.

"Well—I never...!" Miss Uniacke gasped. For once her sharp tongue was silenced. Her face was flushed and, helplessly, she straightened the crooked brown fringe.

"Now—" McTaggart sat down, uninvited, by her side ... "I think we ought to talk business and fix up a few plans. I've got the license—that's all right. And to-night I'm going down to Oxton. The Bishop is my friend, you know, and I want him to come and marry us. Mrs. Uniacke's honeymoon—I mean Mrs.

Somerfield——" her sister-in-law winced slightly and he went on hurriedly—"Well, she doesn't get back to Worthing till Wednesday. So, if you could manage to run down and stay with Jill until we're married ... You see my idea?" his face went red—"It would stop any silly talk, you know. But, perhaps, you could come to the lawyers first and fix up the settlements? I want to make that all square; for Jill's sake, you understand?"

Miss Uniacke caught him up sharply. "I hope you're not under the delusion that my niece has anything of her own?" Purposely she withheld from him the knowledge of the modest sum left the girl by her Father.

"My dear Aunt Elizabeth!" McTaggart looked taken aback. "I meant *my* money, of course. I'd better tell you all about it."

He proceeded forthwith to enlighten her on the subject of his inheritance.

Miss Uniacke's gray eyes slowly widened with amazement.

"You mean to say," she said at last, "that Jill will be a marchioness?"

"Well, that's thrown in!" McTaggart laughed—"Won't she make a pretty one! I think she'll just love Siena—and Rome too—it's a ripping place! You'll have to come and stay with us. Oh, I forgot—about Roddy." He went on with his plans for the latter, his handsome face alight with pleasure. Miss Uniacke guessed in every word the depths of his love for the boy's sister.

"It's like a fairy tale!" she said.

"It is a fairy tale——" his voice was lowered now with a touch of awe.

"All true love is that, I think. It's outside this work-a-day world. Something too fine to be measured—like a beautiful vision seen in a dream..."

He glanced up shyly at his listener and in her worn and serious face caught a look of longing, oddly pathetic, but full of genuine sympathy. For a moment their thoughtful eyes met—the old, saddened ones, knowing life, and those of youth, bright with hope: met and wondered, across the gulf.

Then McTaggart broke the silence.

"I don't want Jill to know yet. About my inheritance, I mean. I want it to come as a huge surprise!—on our arrival in Siena. She knows I've got some property there—I fancy she thinks it's just a farm!—but I've always kept it rather dark from everybody. It's like this——" he fidgeted, under the gaze of her shrewd grey eyes, hunting for words.

"Although my mother was Italian I've always *felt* an Englishman. Really, deep down in myself, I'd sooner be English, any day. But, on the other hand, you see, I admit a certain responsibility. My mother was treated abominably"—a hard look came into his face—"just because she married my father! They practically cut her adrift.

"Now, by an odd stroke of luck, I have come into all that my mother lost. And I feel it's up to me to show that she was right, after all. She married for love, and so shall I. An English wife ... my little Jill! But we'll have to live in Italy half the year—be Maramonte as well as McTaggart—not for ourselves but because I believe that *she* would have wished it."

His eyes had a curious far away look. Then he seemed to come back to the present.

"All the same I've felt, somehow, that a foreign title, over here, wouldn't do—rather snobbish..." He laughed with a shade of nervousness.

"Quite right." Miss Uniacke nodded. She liked the man more and more. But, despite her careless attitude toward the secret he shared with her, her old heart warmed at the thought of this splendid match for the girl she loved.

"You won't tell her? You'll keep it dark!"

"Of course—it's your affair, not mine."

She smiled the harshness out of the words.

"All the same," she went on, "I think you ought to tell her mother. I don't approve of Mary myself—I think her conduct to her children simply shocking——" she frowned again—"the secrecy—and this sudden marriage! Still, she brought Jill into the world—it's *her* daughter, not mine. It's paying her back in her own coin ... but I *know* I ought to stop this folly!"

"But you won't?" His voice was very earnest. "Look here, Miss Uniacke. She's never given a thought to Jill—or Roddy either, latterly. She's bringing a penniless, idle chap into her home to live with her children. She'll have to support him—you know that? At their expense! For, after all, it's Colonel Uniacke's money, you know, that she holds in trust for the next generation. It means a cruel time for them under the thumb of that rotter, Stephen. On a slender income, deprived of their rights and shadowed by this Suffrage nonsense.

"Think of Jill, living with Stephen?—and Roddy—a schoolboy, in *his* hands...!

"Instead of which, here am I—luckily a rich man; able to give the boy a chance, and Jill ... pretty well all she wants!

"I'd just like you to see some pearls I've got for her in the Roman bank"—he threw his head back and laughed boyishly, with a note of triumph—"They'd make Stephen's mouth water—damn the chap!—I beg your pardon!"

But Miss Uniacke smiled grimly; forgetful of the listening parrot.

McTaggart, encouraged, started again.

"I can't bear to think of Jill for a day in the house with that man. That's why I'm doing this, entirely, to get her away before he returns. Can't you guess what it will save her? The bitterness of seeing him there, ruling in her father's place, in the old home, where he lived..."

"Stop!" Miss Uniacke grasped his arm—"I can't stand it!—It's not fair. Edward..." She choked on the name.

McTaggart took her hands in his.

"Tell me now, honestly"—his blue eyes were keen and anxious as he gazed into her moved face. "D'you think, if your brother were alive, he'd give me Jill?"

There came a pause. It seemed to them both that, somewhere near, a shadow hovered, watching them, with a love that had survived the grave.

Then, at last, Miss Uniacke spoke.

"Yes," she answered solemnly—"I think he would. And so will I."

CHAPTER XXXII

"Wave, Peter—oh, *do* wave! Poor little Roddy!..."

Jill leaned over the steamer rail, watching the pier slowly recede, and, far away, a tiny figure against the sky, arm aloft. Then, as it grew to a black speck and blurred into the distant view, she turned sharply, tears in her eyes.

"I can't *bear* leaving him!" she cried.

"It's not for long," said McTaggart gently. He ran a hand through the girl's arm. "Won't it be jolly after a bit to have him in Rome, living with us?"

"Yes." Jill swallowed hard. "You think we shall work it?—I'm rather doubtful."

"I'm not," said McTaggart stoutly. "I know Stephen. He's 'no proud!' The economy's sure to appeal to him. And Aunt Elizabeth's sworn to help. She's a brick, that old lady! Oh, by the bye, I'm to give you this."

He handed his wife an envelope, directed to her and carefully sealed.

"She said you were not to lose it, Jill." Then he laughed suddenly.

"Guess what her last words to me were?"

"Can't." Jill was beginning to smile, a rather wan little attempt, half her mind still with Roddy.

"I thought she was going to reveal to me some awful secret in your past. She led me aside on the pier with an air of mystery and whispered—

"I've put some galoshes in the Hold-all—a new pair. I know Jill. She'll be marching about in those thin shoes from sheer vanity—catching cold—and I'm

sure *you're* not fit to nurse her. A pair of babies!' Here she snorted. 'You look after her, young man.' This was her parting benediction!"

Jill laughed. "Just like her! I wonder what she's written here."

"Come along into the cabin and read it in peace. Oh, by the way—my servant's there—Mario. You must say something nice to him. He's off his head with excitement. He's been with me the last three years—an awfully decent chap, you know. He understands English all right—speaks it a little. Here we are..."

He led her into the deck cabin where Mario was unstrapping some rugs. He stood up, tall and eager, as the young couple crossed the threshold.

"This is my wife, Mario."

No mistaking the proud note in his master's voice! The dark eyes glowed, the white teeth flashed into a smile as Jill greeted him rather shyly.

Mario had prepared his speech.

"My felicitations to her. And to him. Blessed be the day! Long life and happiness—And many children," he concluded.

The colour flamed in her cheeks.

"Grazie tante," she responded...

Up went Mario's hands, surprised, full of joy and admiration. But McTaggart broke in on the flow of Italian that followed the gesture.

"Basta! Basta!"—he drove him out. "You can come back when we get near land."

Mario carefully closed the door. He smiled to himself rapturously.

"Ahi!—l'amore..." He kissed the tips of his fingers to the sky above. Then he glanced down at the waves.

"You stay quiet!" he said to them.

Meanwhile, Jill, in the cabin, was looking round, with curious eyes.

"Isn't it snug? I'm so excited! You know, I've never travelled before. Oh! —*Peter....*"

For McTaggart had caught her eagerly in his arms. "Take off that veil—for goodness' sake! ... Ah! ... I've been simply dying for that!"

Jill, breathless, escaped from him, cheeks flushed, her eyes brilliant.

"Peter—you brute!" she straightened her hat.

"That's a nice thing to say"—he laughed back—"to your lord and master."

"You're not!" she mocked, teasing him, "I never said 'obey,' you know."

"No wonder the Bishop looked so grave. We'll have to be married over again..." He broke off, his hand to his collar, wriggling his neck. "Confound that boy! I've got rice all down my back."

"Good old Roddy—I saw him do it! In the car, coming over the Downs. No ... no!" she stamped her foot.... "Be quiet now, I want to read."

She tore open the envelope directed by Aunt Elizabeth. It held another, tightly sealed, and a letter in the pointed hand.

"My dear Jill," so it ran, "I've asked Peter to give you this, and I only hope you won't lose it, with your usual carelessness. I'd better tell you at once, there's money enclosed—in five-pound notes. I understand that even in Italy English notes are respected.

"You needn't trouble to thank me for it. You'd have had it some day anyhow. Also the cheque I've placed with Cook's—in Rome—to your account there.

"Your husband may be all you think. Time alone will prove this—('Oh, Peter —isn't she lovely?'—Jill chuckled with delight.) But I don't like to think of you in a foreign land, without credit. It's lowering for a woman, too, to go to her husband for every penny. Besides, though I've done all I could, your trousseau is an utter farce. You ought to have twelve of everything. And *marked*, don't forget that! ..."

"Not twelve husbands, let us hope!" McTaggart leaned over her shoulder, as

they sat on the narrow berth, side by side, in the dim-lit cabin, reading the letter.

"How shall I be 'marked,' Jill? I hope it doesn't mean hot irons?"

"Like this!" Jill pinched him. "Be quiet now—Listen, Peter. Isn't she an old *dear*?"

"You'll find notes for fifty pounds. Don't go and spend it all at once in a present for your worthless husband! ... And *don't spoil him*. From the start, hold your own. I know men!"

"Oh! Aunt Elizabeth!" McTaggart rocked with mirth. "It's hardly respectable, is it, Jill? I'm afraid she's had a shocking 'Past.'"

"Anyhow, her Present's all right!" said Jill neatly, folding the letter. "She is good"—her face went grave. "D'you think I really ought to take it?"

"You must. She'd be most awfully hurt."

He nodded his head wisely at Jill. "We'll make it up to her one day—give her a topping good time and ... oh, I say?" He shifted a little in order to see his wife's face.

"I've got to confess something, Jill. Something I did before I left. Promise you won't be cross with me?"

"So have I," said Jill quickly. "I quite forgot ... Let's get it over. You first." Absently, she handed across the wad of notes.

McTaggart smiled.

"No—they're yours. You must guard them from the 'worthless husband.'"

"I daren't. I shall lose them," she declared. "Do take them, Peter dear."

"All right." He placed them away in his pocketbook, with secret amusement.

"It's about your mother," he went on. Jill gave a little start. "I felt so bothered last night—I suppose you'll think me a thorough turn-coat—but I couldn't sleep, thinking of it. She's been so awfully kind to me. And at last I got up and wrote a

letter—a nice one"—he glanced at Jill nervously, but she simply nodded. "I tried to show her why we'd done this. And then ... I added"—he broke off—"I hope you won't be angry, Jill, I ought to have told you—discussed it first. But I went out and posted it—on the impulse. To Worthing, you know. She'll find it when she returns to-morrow..."

"What did you add?" Jill was impatient. "Do go on." She shook his arm.

"Well. I said..." he began to stammer a little. "I s-said I hoped she'd stay with us—our first vi-visitor, you know. *Don't* be cross..."

But Jill's answer swiftly dispelled the man's doubts. For she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him, her face radiant.

"So have I! I mean I wrote to Mother myself yesterday. Isn't it funny? I gave it to Roddy to hand to her the moment she gets home to-morrow! That's my secret"—she drew back, her eyes thoughtful—"You see, I felt ... it was rather mean—I was so happy—to leave her out. D'you understand?"

"Same here." McTaggart nodded. "I'm glad you have. It will pave the way to better relations bye and bye. She must come to us whenever she can."

There fell a little pause between them. Jill's thoughts had turned back to her old life and her brother. Her grey eyes grew wistful.

McTaggart saw this. He rose to his feet.

"Look here, Jill—come outside. We'll have a turn up and down the deck. It will do you good before the train."

"All right. Where's my ulster?"

"Here." McTaggart reached up, unhooked a pale grey coat beside his own and handed it with a mischievous smile to his wife.

"That's not mine." Jill stared.

"Yes, it is. Try it on."

"*Peter!*" Jill passed a hand lovingly over the rich fur, the beautiful collar of

chinchilla and sumptuous lining—warm and soft.

"It's a little present. I had it made. Aunt Elizabeth got the measures. D'you like it?"

Jill's face answered him. She could not speak, for very wonder.

"Really mine?" she said at last. "I never saw such lovely fur! Oh, Peter! how extravagant. You mustn't spoil me like this..."

"I expect payment—of a kind!" He took it—(with interest.) "Now, slip it on. There—that's fine! You look like a little Teddy bear." He opened the door and the bright light swept in, dazzling them. Blue sky and blue sea and a fresh wind, salt and keen.

Far behind them lay the coast, the broad waves rolling along to the French shore and that new life they faced with the confidence of youth.

"The first time," said McTaggart—"that I really knew how pretty you were, you had on a little grey fur cap. That's why I chose chinchilla for you."

"But that was Rabbit!" Jill laughed. "I've never had any *good* clothes. Until my trousseau," she said proudly and glanced down at her simple dress.

McTaggart smiled in his heart, as, following up the train of thought, Jill proceeded, somewhat gravely, to hold forth on economy.

"I shan't cost you very much. I can make lots of things myself. And I expect, in a place like Siena, it doesn't matter what one wears. Oh, do tell me about your house?—or is it a flat?"

"Not exactly. I hope you won't be disappointed. It's rather a cheerless sort of place."

"I don't care if it's a barn!" The breeze had brought a bright colour into her cheeks, as they paced along, arm in arm, and she laughed aloud. "I don't care about anything! I'm just too glad to be alive. I'm awfully strong—I can learn to cook..." McTaggart hugged himself for joy.

"Oh, I hope it won't come to that. Mario might object."

Jill stopped suddenly, overwhelmed by a new thought.

"I say, Peter—what is he? Exactly, I mean. Is he ... your valet?"

"Yes—you know—over there—wages are a mere trifle. And he's handy, in all sorts of ways."

"I see. Would he clean the windows?"

"Knives and boots?..." McTaggart choked. "I dare say—if you asked him."

"Hm...." Jill looked a little doubtful. The fur coat had made her think. She mustn't let Peter ruin himself—even on their honeymoon.

In her practical mind she decided to say nothing more till they reached Siena and then take up the reins of the house, with a careful eye on the exchequer.

But all these thoughts were swept aside by the novelty of her arrival on the French coast, the foreign tongue, the stir and bustle of the Customs.

Then came dinner in the train, with strange wine, strange dishes, and their "doll's house" quarters for the night. She revelled in the unexpected.

Slowly the dark swept down, blotting out the sleeping earth, as they rocked along, happily tired, in the warm coup, side by side.

"Time for bed..." said McTaggart at last. "I'm not going to let you chatter all through the night, old lady. It's close upon eleven o'clock!"

"I'm not sleepy a bit," said Jill.

Something in her quick glance roused McTaggart's chivalry—a childish touch of helplessness.

"Look here..." he leaned closer and whispered softly in her ear. For a moment Jill clung to him, her face hidden from his eyes.

"You've got a long journey before you," he went on in a careless voice. "So just turn in and get to sleep. I'm going outside for a last smoke. Pull that shade over the lamp when you're ready. I shan't want the light. I'll be as quiet as a

mouse. We'll say good night—here—*now*."

"Peter ... you *are* a darling!" The whisper barely reached his ears. He held her closely for a moment—kissed her quickly and stood up.

"Happy dreams! And take your time. I shan't turn in for another hour." He opened the door and went out, his face rather white and set. "Another test..." he said to himself. "Hang it all! She's such a child! It's the straight game." And at the words he thought instinctively of Bethune. "I'm glad I've had it out with him."

For the two men had parted friends. Perhaps, in the long years ahead, Jill would no longer stand between them.

McTaggart hoped so fervently. He paced up and down the corridor; steady action that soothed his nerves, smoking, with an absent mind, cigarette after cigarette.

The stars came out in the heavens, and he thought once more of that other night, when he stood and watched them, three years back, and pondered on his "double heart."

What a blind fool he had been! He realized how well the excuse had served to screen the follies due to the hot impulses of youth. His "double heart"...! He smiled grimly, as the truth slowly dawned on him: the dual nature of all men: the daily battle waged between human weakness and spiritual strength.

The night air blew in, sharp with an early Autumn frost, cooling his brow and bringing peace, the hushed silence that Nature loves.

And at last he paused before his door, opened it, inch by inch, and stole through, with a quick glance at the lower berth. Jill was asleep!

In the dim light of the shaded lamp he could see the dark cloud of her hair, her childish profile, pure and sweet, and the long lashes on her cheek.

For a moment he stood and gazed at her, a great longing in his heart.

"Only ... to kiss her!" he said to himself, then, sternly, turned away.

And with the action, all unknown, he broke the insidious habit of years; the indecision of boyhood days changed to the firm control of the man.

The train rocked on....

In his berth above, McTaggart, restless, watched till the dawn filtered in between the blinds, pale shafts of primrose light.

He had only to lean and call her name to see those grey eyes open wide, filled with love—the love of a wife! But he fought it out, hour by hour. And as the sun stole over the edge of the long plains, white with frost, he turned on his pillow with a smile and was gathered in the arms of sleep.

CHAPTER XXXIII

McTaggart glanced at his watch.

"Ten minutes more. Are you very tired?"

"Not a bit." Jill turned with a bright face from the window in the corridor where she stood, gazing out. "It's all so lovely. Look at that hill rising up like a fir cone, against the sky. And *isn't* it blue! I never saw such colouring. Those silvery trees!—Olives, did you say they were? Fancy seeing olives grow!—and oranges and lemons too. It sounds like the game we used to play in our nursery days."

In a low voice, sweet as a thrush:

"Oranges and lemons
Said the bells of St. Clement's,
I owe you four farthings
Said the bells of St. Martin's..."

Jill sang happily.

"Can't say much for the rhymes." McTaggart smiled.

But the girl had turned to the window again. "It's beautiful." She slipped a hand through his arm. "As long as I live I'll never forget those vines with their early Autumn tints—blood red; and the little towns perched on the hills like Robber Castles ... Peter!—what's that?" She broke off excitedly, pointing out.

McTaggart followed the line of her hand.

"Siena, I think—I can't be sure. You know, it was dark when I got here before. Why, Jill!—Whatever's the matter?"

For the girl's face had suddenly changed. Fear and amazement were written there. She could not take her eyes away, as, on the steep hill to the south, a cluster of slender towers rose up, ivory-white, against the sky.

"My dream!" she gasped. The hand on his arm clutched him. "It can't be! ... Yes, it *is*. The 'dream city' I told you about. Peter! It's all coming true. There—don't you see? *Do* look, darling! With one tower taller than the rest ... and a little cap..."

Speech failed her. She leaned out, breathlessly.

A memory returned to McTaggart. "By Jove!—the 'Torre del Mangia.' Is that really your old dream, Jill? And you said it felt like 'coming home!'" He was almost as moved as herself.

Jill drew back with dazzled eyes. Her hair, disordered by the wind, framed her excited, awe-struck face.

"Isn't it wonderful!" she cried—"my dream city ... my very own! D'you think we've lived there before, Peter? You and I—in another life?"

"I hope so. But, anyhow, it can't be half as good as this!"

He drew her gently through the door of their coupé. "There's a tunnel coming. We're nearly there. Sit down a minute. I'll roll up the rugs. You'd better get into your coat, ready."

"I shan't want it. It's so hot." Mechanically, she straightened her hat, her gray eyes still wide with wonder. She caught sight of herself in the glass. "I am untidy! Won't it be nice to have a bath and feel clean again."

A "toob"—Peter smiled to himself as the train bolted into the dark. He reached up for his hat on the peg.

"Now then!—we're coming out. Give me a kiss, quick!—There's a dear."

Sudden dazzling light again; the grind of brakes; the toot of a horn. Then a deep voice, shouting clearly:

"Siena ... Si-e-na!" The train had stopped.

Mario came running up. McTaggart hurried Jill out and into a cab. Purposely, he had "forgotten" to order the carriage.

They wound up the dusty road, glaring white in the morning sun, and through the great frowning wall that clips the city like a girdle.

Jill was too excited to talk, her eyes darting right and left as the high houses closed about them with the menace of their ancient strength.

McTaggart pointed out to her the Grey Wolf on its column, suckling the fabulous Twins.

"Romulus and Remus!" she gasped, with a clutch at Ancient History.

"That's it! The Son of Remus founded the place—so the legend runs—'Senius.' He gave his name to the city—hence 'Siena.'"

Down the one-time "Strada Romana," past the Palezzo Tolomei, they clattered, to the crack of the whip.

"See those lions?" he touched her arm. "Thirteenth Century." She stared—"That's the 'Balzana,' the shield of the Commune, black and white. I'll tell you why. When Senius offered sacrifice to his gods, on his arrival here, from the altar of Diana rose a pure white smoke, and from that of Apollo a dense black one—and ever since it's been on the shields of the city. Makes one think, doesn't it? All those centuries ago."

"It's wonderful!"

On they went, through shadowy streets, the deep blue sky overhead cut by

castellated walls and pierced by towers, dark with age.

Then, with a final "Ee ... ah!" from the driver, a last flourish of whip, they swerved aside through the frowning arch of the palace into the vast courtyard.

Here the sun had found its way, bathing one side in golden light. The fountain leaped in a dazzling cloud; the delicate marble stairs curved up, fairy-like, to the gallery; and about them was the beat of wings...

"Look at the pigeons!"—Jill cried. "Where are we?"

The carriage stopped. He helped her down and hurried her on, up the shining silvery steps.

"Peter! What is this?" Jill asked. But McTaggart only smiled to himself.

"Come along"—he grasped her arm—"this way..." Narrow shafts of light through the twisted columns made a path, like striped satin under their feet.

Dark doors were swung wide, and they stood in the dim tapestried hall, the inquisitive sunshine following them and playing among the crystal lustres.

Jill, dazed, saw servants stand, bowing before her, heard a hum of respectful greetings rise and fall as McTaggart swept her, ever on, down a corridor lined with statues, and into a room, endlessly long, with a painted ceiling and polished floor.

"Now!" said Peter. He laughed aloud, throwing a challenge to the walls, where on every side faces peered, measuring them with liquid eyes.

"Here we are, Jill—at home." He closed the doors as he spoke.

"Home?" Jill stared at him. "Peter—I *don't* understand."

A shade of temper was in her voice as she looked up in his laughing eyes.

"It's the Maramonte palace"—he cried—"Mine!—and yours now, my darling. Where my mother lived ... And all these"—he waved his hand—"are my people."

Jill suddenly caught her breath.

"D'you mean to say"—her voice was tense—"You *live* here?—that it's ... the house?"

"Yes..." he caught her in his arms. "Aren't you pleased?—It's my 'surprise!'"

But she pushed him away nervously. Wide-eyed she gazed around her. Then, still silent, she crossed the floor, and gazed out of the nearest window.

He followed her, a shade anxious. Surely, she could not be upset?

"Forgive me, Jill ... I ought to have thought..."

But suddenly her face changed.

"The tower"—she whispered—"the tower of my dream ... Peter, tell me—it *is* true? It won't go ... fade away..." She clung to him like a frightened child.

"No—I swear it." A swift remorse moved him as he saw the tears well up in the eyes he loved. "Jill!—don't cry—for Heaven's sake. I meant it to be such a lovely surprise!—Why, my darling..."

She buried her face in his coat, struggling for control.

"It is!"—she sobbed—"it's *too* lovely! What a baby I am...!" she broke away—"It's ... the *beauty*—can't you understand?" She wiped her eyes defiantly.

"But—who are *you*?" she added slowly—"I don't see yet why it's yours."

"I'm the Marquis Maramonte," he said, "and you are my very dear liege lady."

For a moment she stared at him, amazed. Then, like a sunlit April shower, laughter stole into her eyes, still shining with her tears.

She clapped her hands. She danced for joy.

"Oh! what a gorgeous sell for Stephen!"

McTaggart caught her outstretched hands, laughing aloud.

"Isn't it?" Relief at her change of mood, delight at the way she took her new honours: her simple child-like fearlessness, made him exult in his bride.

"He'll have to 'kow-tow' to you now, old lady. He won't like that—Master Stephen!—I expect he will, though"—he veered round—"he'll be trying to borrow no end of money!"

"He won't get it," Jill cried gayly. "He can come and smash my windows first." She hardly knew what she was saying, for the reaction had set in, the excitement of this great adventure.

"He'd find it hard..." said McTaggart grimly. "This place has stood many a siege. They had a playful way, you know, of slinging donkeys in by catapults!"

"Well"—Jill giggled—"why not Stephen?" Then her face grew thoughtful again. "It's wonderful!..." She glanced down the long walls hung with pictures. Men in armour, half concealed by sumptuous cloaks; red-robed prelates; court beauties, smiling proudly; stern old age, reckless youth!

"These made history," said Jill and paused, sobered by the thought...

"*Your* people." She looked at her husband, full of honest pride for him.

"Yes." McTaggart smiled back. "Splendid chaps, some of them. That's the hero of Montaperti, Giordano Maramonte. And that frivolous-looking boy charged through and broke the Standard—the great white lilies of Florence—off from the famous 'Carroccio.'

"I don't fancy any of these won their honours our way—the modern way in old England—a fat subscription to 'Secret Funds'! They were rather a bad lot, all the same..."

"I don't doubt it," Jill laughed, mischief in her mocking glance. "Perhaps they all had 'double hearts'—it seems to lead to a lot of trouble! Look at those lovely pearls there—on the lady in the satin gown—and the single drop on her forehead! You could pick it up—it looks so real."

"So you shall. We've got it still. Safe in my Roman bank—for *you*!—And all sorts of other jewels—an emerald ring that belonged to a Pope. You're going to be a little queen!—have every mortal thing you want. And you're worth it, you

dearest child. You're the loveliest woman in the world!"

"Hush!" she smiled—"I want to think..."

But a new idea had struck McTaggart.

Absently she let him lead her to where two great gilded chairs stood on a daïs, under a canopy.

"Sit there," he commanded.

She settled herself easily, her slim shape swallowed up between the great carved arms, beneath the shield of the Maramonte. He stood back to look at her, as she went on, thoughtfully:

"We're rich, then, Peter?—ever so rich."

"Yes," he nodded his head gravely. "What are you puzzling out now?"

"I was thinking of Roddy," she confessed—"Of all that this may mean—to him."

"He's to be your Court Painter, my queen"—McTaggart's eyes never left her—"Won't he love Italy? And Aunt Elizabeth?—She knows!—I told her the whole story, Jill. She's been a brick to keep the secret."

Then he mounted the daïs—impatiently—as she still dreamed on.

"I say, Jill. You've never thanked me! This is my wedding present, you see."

Jill gave a little start. Impulsively she opened her arms.

"Oh, Peter!—do forgive me." But he slipped down at her feet.

For a moment he knelt there, arms about her, his face pressed against her knees.

She could feel, through her dress, his burning cheeks, the wave of longing that swept across him ... Then, slowly, he lifted his head. His eyes, blue as the heavens beyond, drank their fill. He whispered her name.

"Jill ... my darling little wife!"

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