

the best of times. "Think I'd play the fool with a girl like that?"

"Sorry, old chap. Didn't intend to rile you. Only, to a mere outsider, it seems just a trifle precipitate. Besides—one naturally thought——"

"Oh, dry up. Nobody asked you to think."

There was pain as well as anger in Mark's tone. He knew very well what Maurice thought—what others were likely to think; and although Lady Forsyth did not guess it, his sensitiveness on Sheila's account almost equalled her own. It hurt him horribly that by any act of his he should seem to cast even the slightest slur on her. And he saw no reason. For years they had been like brother and sister. Certainly, since her return from India he had caught himself wondering—— But before wonder could crystallise into belief, Bel had arisen in her moonlight beauty and all the stars of heaven had suffered eclipse. Come to think of it, he owed young Lenox a debt he could never repay; and for the rest of the way he made royal atonement for his flash of temper.

"Good night, old chap," he said when they reached the house. "I'm not turning in just yet."

And for more than half an hour he paced the terrace, wondering, hoping, dreaming; while his mother lay awake in her bedroom above, both windows flung wide, listening to the restless sound of his footsteps; wondering also; and scarcely daring to hope that he had already spoken and been refused.

Not until she heard him come in, at last, and shut the door of his room, did she let her tired body have its way and fall into a troubled sleep.