

drag a man back from any pit, was a task after his own heart.

"I have been often disillusioned and taken in," he observed, "and I have even no later than yesterday taken a vow to harden my heart. But you interest me. You are fully aware what an immense thing you ask from me?"

"I am fully aware of it, sir. No one could be more so, but—if I live I shall repay, not betray, your trust."

Archibald Currie cleared his throat.

"I am not to ask a single question?"

"I could not answer any of a personal nature," replied Charlton frankly.

"And your very name, I take it, is assumed?"

Charlton made no reply, and again there was a prolonged silence.

Currie thought of all the men he had interviewed in that room, of the specious lies to which he had listened, of the crocodile tears he had witnessed, the false promises of amendment and reform. And he could not remember any appeal which had so powerfully affected him.

Against every warning of his shrewder judgment he determined to trust this man, to fling one more hostage upon the sea of fortune.

"You have been in business?" he inquired briefly. "So much I must know before I can do or promise anything. And as you have come to me I take it that you understand the nature of my business?"

"Yes, sir, I do understand it."

"The only thing I could offer you meanwhile is clerical work of the elementary order, and that merely superfluous, because we happen to be more than usually busy. The impending trouble in South Africa has quickened all the export trade, but your salary would be of the most meagre description."

"So long as it can provide me with food to eat and a decent shelter I shall be grateful for it, sir. It will give me my opportunity."

"Well, I will take you on your own recommendation solely, and perhaps because you come to me by introduction of Mr. Fielden. He and I together have been at the upbuilding of more than one fallen fortune, and helped to restore a few. You can commence here on Monday morning at a salary of twenty-eight shillings a week. Whether you remain will depend on yourself."

A flush, deep, almost painful, overspread Charlton's face as he sprang to his feet.

"Sir, I cannot thank you. I hope that my future conduct will be my guarantee of good faith."

Currie faintly smiled.

"I re-echo that hope," but he hesitated a moment and then forced back the question that had sprung to his lips.

He would not put it, because something warned him that the man before him either could not or would not answer it. No, he must to-day draw a large cheque on the bank of faith, and if it were dishonored, well, he would not even then be wholly the loser.



Charlton dismissed, passed out; and as he reached the end of the passage which shut off the private room, the swish of silken skirts, the faint perfume of violets greeted him. Immediately he had to stand aside to let a lady pass. He knew who she was, he had heard of Archibald Currie's ward, but he now saw her for the first time. She was beautifully dressed in a gown suitable only for some fete, and which seemed out of place in the bare passages of a city office. She looked at the man standing hat in hand in one of the shadowy corners, and as if the glance interested her, turned to look again. Then the vision disappeared beyond the glass panels at the end and Charlton passed out to the stairs.

"Are you there, Uncle Archie? You said five minutes, and do you know it is nearly half an hour. Mrs. James will be furious."

"Oh, of course, it is the day of the garden party at Fair Lawn, isn't it?" he asked with a facetious smile as he turned to greet the radiant vision invading his privacy and creating a very different atmosphere from that usually found therein. "Why, Katherine, surely this is the height of extravagance!"

"Hush, you naughty man, it will horrify Mrs. James, and Elizabeth and Sophia will bewail your extravagance. But nobody will dare tell them the thing cost two pounds, and that I made it myself!"

She pirouetted on one foot and took up her dainty skirts in her hands to show the delicious frou-frou beneath, and Currie smiled an indulgent smile.

Katherine Wrede had not been four years in the old house in Hyde Park Square, and she was verily the light of his life. He would have lavished his all upon her had she lifted her little finger, but her tastes were simple and her fingers clever, and she spent so little that those who only saw the finished product would have been amazed. There was a secret antagonism between her and the feminine element at Fair Lawn, for which reason she kept them wholly in the dark regarding the actual terms on which she lived in Hyde Park Square. They did not know that the comparatively small sum she spent on her own clothes was more than refunded by the economy and comfort with which she ruled the household. Archibald Currie had never known a home until she came to brighten his with her presence.

At Fair Lawn they were jealous and angry with her, they alternately patronised her and gave her warnings and advice. Katherine Wrede was never at her best there, and went as little as possible.

This was a gala day, however, the one garden party of the season, into which Mrs. James paid off all her social engagements to the somebodies and nobodies of Hampstead. After consultation it had been decided that it would be better not to cancel the invitations, though the blow in the city would of course shed a gloom over it for themselves.

"Who was that man I passed just outside the door, Uncle?" inquired Katherine Wrede as she took his hat from the cupboard and the brush from the shelf to polish its glossy surface.

Instead of answering her he put a counter question.



"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, because his face interested me. He is not a common man. He is very good looking to begin with, and there is a whole story in his face."

"I believe that I have been guilty of what my brother James would call another deplorable indiscretion this afternoon."

Her eyes sparkled.

"Have you? Do tell me what it is. You have given a large sum of money perhaps to that man because his eyes appealed to you. I should have done just the same myself."

"No, my folly did not go quite so far, but I have given him employment without a reference of any kind or any guarantee that he will even serve me honestly. But if I hadn't he might have gone under."

The brightness on her face was arrested by the seriousness of the old man's words. A lovely, still look, which added indescribably to her beauty, because it gave a sudden glimpse of the soul, overspread her face.

"Dear, I am glad you are like that. It must be a splendid thing to be able to give a man his last chance and be willing, that is the greatest of all. So few are willing. Look how you took me from that horrible pension at Bruges! Oh, God knew how much need there was in the world when He made you."

She spoke with such passion that her guardian was at once touched and surprised.

He laid a soothing hand on her shoulder.

"Child, you must try to be less intense. You feel things too much, and make too much of every little service rendered, especially to yourself. Wipe those pretty eyes and keep the tears for the real need there is. Now come, and we shall be restored to a normal temperature by the atmosphere on the heights of Hampstead."

Often now they had their little joke, though it was always kindly, at the expense of the Fair Lawn relatives, with whom neither felt conspicuously at home.

"I don't care for this sort of thing, Katherine," he observed as he took his seat in the carriage beside her. "And James knows I don't, but in the circumstances it is our duty to rally round them. They are feeling this a good deal, and the attendance at the party this afternoon will be a sort of gauge of public opinion."

"I see. Has nothing been heard of poor Mr. Reedham yet?"

"Don't call him poor, Katherine. The man did wrong with his eyes open, and ought to be punished."

"You are not often so severe, Uncle Archie," she remarked in surprise.

"I can be severe when occasion arises. If the man had stuck to his guns and owned up it would have been better for everybody. And nothing can excuse his treatment of his wife. I wish you would go and see her, Katherine, before she leaves Norwood. Perhaps we could go together at the beginning of the week."

"Poor, poor thing; I shall go, certainly. I wonder how she feels about him! But, Uncle Archie, if it was as bad as the papers said, and he would have been committed, that would have been even more painful for his wife and son. I think, were I in her place, I should be glad that he had escaped."

"It was the coward's way out, Katherine," observed Currie, as he laid his hand on the padded morocco lining the side of the carriage.

"I thought suicide was the coward's way. Is it thought he has done that?"

"Nobody knows. I shouldn't think it likely myself. George Lidgate told me himself that he deliberately gave him eighteen hours' start. They all liked him, Katie, men trusted and liked him, which makes it all the worse. I was talking to a man yesterday, who has lost three thousand by him, and he said he would pay the money twice over to see Reedham reinstated."



"There must have been good in him; great good, then," she said emphatically. "People don't talk like that about a weak, or merely wicked man."

"You may be right, but I feel sore and hard about it. When that sort of thing comes near home, as it does in this case, it alters a man's point of view. We must do our best at Fair Lawn this afternoon to show our sympathy."

"Yes, Uncle," she said obediently, and did not add that he had set her a task. For she knew, though he did not, that the moment she felt herself enveloped by the hostile atmosphere of Fair Lawn, the other side of her nature, not the lovable side, would be up in arms.

They drove by way of Haverstock Hill to the

Heath, the air growing purer and rarer as they made the steep ascent. Out there, the dust of the long, dry summer was not so all-pervading, and some freshness seemed yet to linger in the fine old gardens among the noble trees.

"It is very pleasant up here, Katie, but I have always said I would make no compromise betwixt town and country. One day, perhaps soon, we shall turn our backs wholly on London, and find a real country retreat. Then, when I have cut myself off from the London I love so well, you'll turn and leave me—" he added, with a slightly pensive touch.

"Why should I leave you? There is nothing I should like better than the country, and, believe me, I should never once look back."

"Ah, but you will ride off with a handsomer man?"

"Where is he to be found?" she asked, with a touch of gay banter. "If it is marrying you mean, dearest, I am not a marrying woman."

"That sounds bad for poor Stephen Currie," he said amusedly, and yet with a certain furtive anxiety in his glance. He saw her lip curl.

"I could not, and would not, marry Stephen Currie, Uncle Archibald, if he were the last man in the world."

"That would not be a good hearing for Stephen. He will ask you one of these days, Katie."

He did not add that he had already been sounded on the subject by his brother James, who had been anxious to learn the nature of the settlements to be made on Katherine Wrede in the event of such an alliance coming within the province of actual fact.

"I don't like him, Uncle Archibald. Oh, yes, he has brains of a kind, but all his views are opposed to mine, and his ideas about women are mediaeval. He shall be prevented asking me, Uncle Archibald."

When he did not immediately reply she turned her sweet face towards him anxiously. "It would not disappoint you very much, dearest. I mean you are not keen for me to marry Stephen Currie?"

"I, oh no, it is a matter of indifference to me. But Stephen is a good boy as far as he goes, and has never cost his parents any anxiety."

"He is made after their pattern," she said severely. "He will always walk in the appointed path, and do all that is expected of him. You could tell it by the parting in his hair, and the cut of his clothes."

"Hush, my dear, the sarcastic tongue does not become you," he said reprovingly, yet tempering his reproof by an indulgent smile. She asked his pardon immediately, and begged him to remember that she was a Bohemian by nature and upbringing, which pronouncement brought them to the well-appointed gates of Fair Lawn. They were pretentious for a merely suburban residence, towering high and ornate above the young trees planted to flank their buttresses, and they seemed to dwarf the house, visible two hundred yards further on. It was a fine house of its kind, and the lawns surrounding it were soft and fine as continuous attention could make them. They presented an animated appearance that afternoon, with the gay dresses of the ladies, the bright sunshades, the red and white stripes of the awnings, while the pleasant strains of the Viennese band filled the summer air.



Mrs. James Currie always did her garden party well, and, favored with fine weather, usually achieved success. She was looking very gracious, and when she saw her brother-in-law's well-appointed carriage draw up where the avenue took a curve for the wider space of the front lawn, she looked gratified. Archibald was always a gracious and acceptable personality, whom everybody was pleased to meet, and even while she secretly disapproved of Katherine Wrede, she also never failed to interest.

She seemed to strike a new note in the suburban crowd. Her frock of flowered muslin, simply made, with the big sash about her slender waist, seemed to add to her height, and the big picture hat, with its sweeping black plumes made a most becoming frame for her piquant face. Many looked at her with interest and curiosity, and the son of the house, immaculately attired in his frock coat suit and white waistcoat, and with a gardenia in his buttonhole, hastened forward to receive them.

"How do you do, Archibald?" inquired Mrs. James, in her well-modulated, conventional voice. "You are a little late; I was afraid you were not coming. Thank you, I am quite well, Miss Wrede. Yes, we have a beautiful day."

Katherine made her little bow, and turned to speak to Elizabeth and Sophia, who were eyeing her with ill-concealed envy and dislike.

Their gowns, made in Bond Street, bore the unmistakable cachet of the West End, but they were not well worn. To them the simplicity of Katherine Wrede's attire seemed an affront, which made them, in their stiff silk frocks, suddenly feel overdressed. The delicate bloom of lilac scattered over her muslin skirt, the big fichu of old lace, draped about her shoulders with an art they could not copy, annoyed them beyond measure. And she did not wear a single article of jewelry of any kind; the fichu was knotted, and no one could tell how it was kept in its place.

Yet she at once took her place as the most distinguished-looking among the five hundred people present, and many eyes followed her admiringly.

"I say, you're looking stunning, you know," whispered Stephen Currie in her ear, when, after continuous effort, he managed to get a private word with her. "Simply stunning; you knock 'em all