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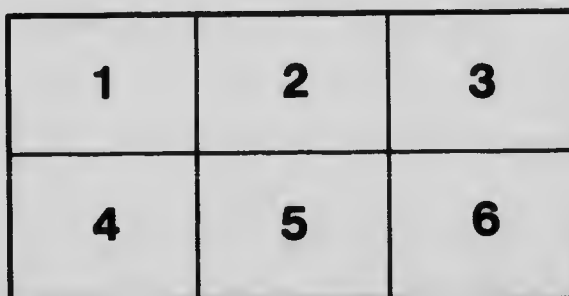
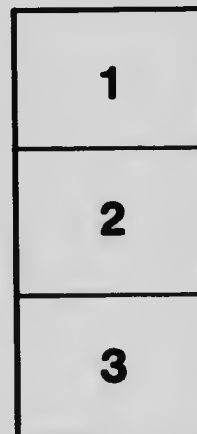
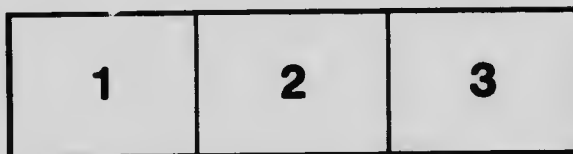
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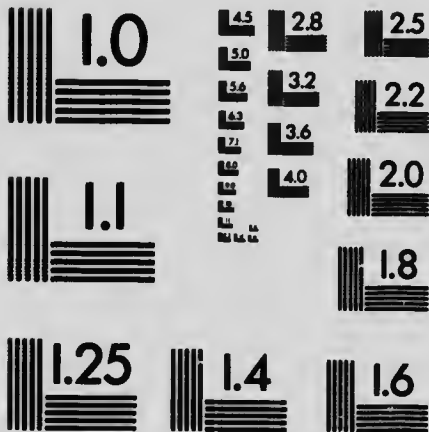
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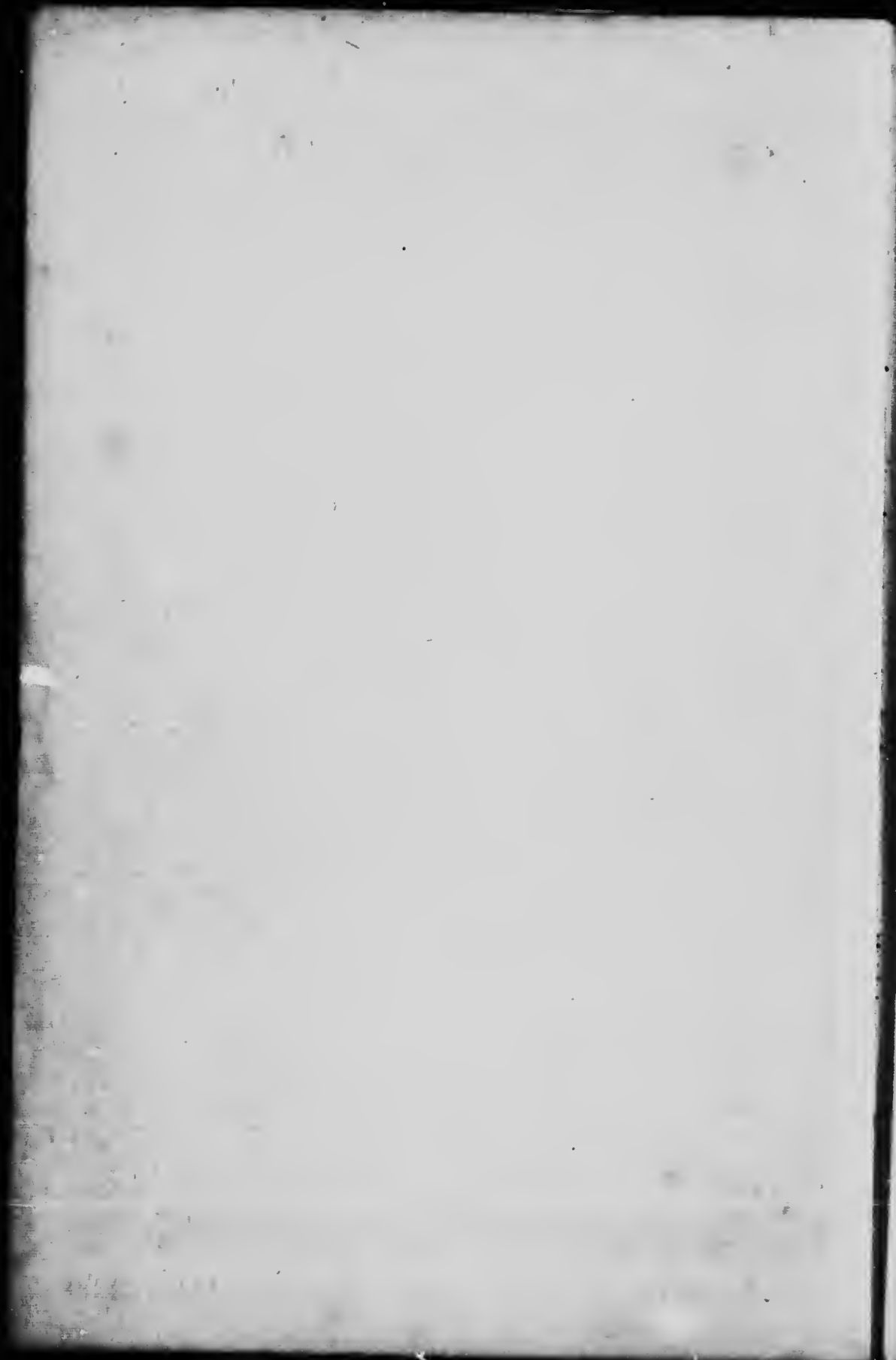
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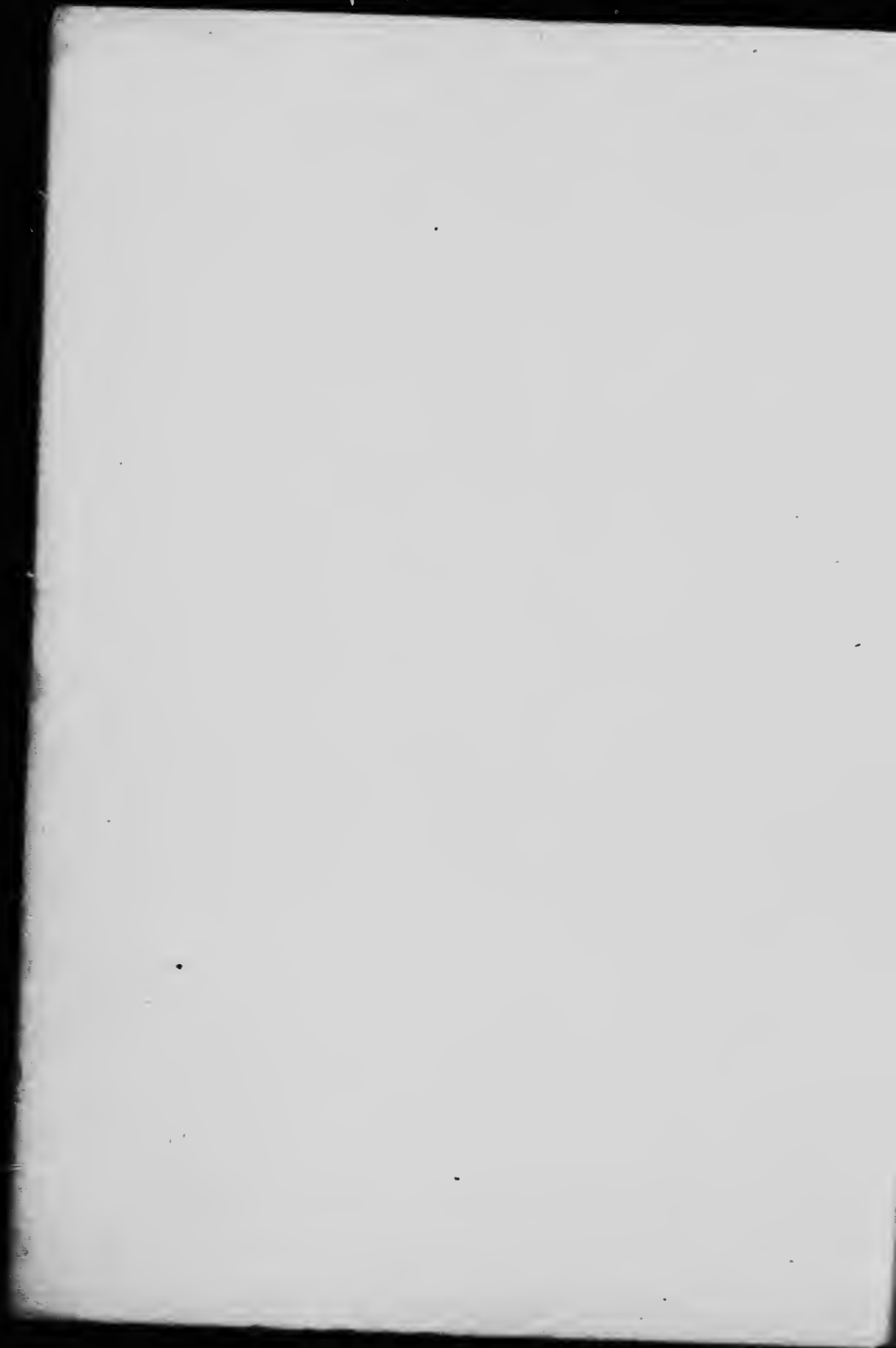


Xmas. 1914

To Papa

from

Jack & Allie



HENRY KEMPTON

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

HECTOR GRAEME

HENRY KEMPTON
BY EVELYN BRENTWOOD



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BOOK I

HENRY KEMPTON

CHAPTER I

MR. JOSIAH KEMPTON stood on the wide stone steps of his suburban mansion, with a smile of gratification on his somewhat insignificant face.

He was a successful man, who owed his prosperity to no chance speculation, no stroke of luck, but to a lifetime of unremitting industry. The younger son of a struggling provincial solicitor, he, on his father's death, had been left at the age of seventeen to the care of his elder brother—also a solicitor—who, within a month, had secured for his charge a clerkship in a Birmingham architect's office at a salary of one pound a week.

For three years Josiah remained at this office, carefully setting aside the half of his salary. At the end of this time he made the acquaintance of Maria Watson, the daughter of a Birmingham grocer, to whose house Josiah had been introduced by the son Robert, a friend of a fellow-clerk.

The news of this intimacy and its probable consequences was not long in reaching Josiah's brother, who wrote peremptorily forbidding the projected alliance, and expressing indignant surprise that a brother of his could so far disgrace himself as to contemplate marriage with a grocer's daughter, he, whose family belonged to the professional, and not the trading—certainly not the retail trading—classes.

Josiah, disregarding the blow to family pride, held on his way, and succeeded in securing Maria's promise to be his,

her father only stipulating that no marriage should take place till Josiah's one pound a week had risen to two.

Then Josiah boldly sought his chief, and, stating that he was engaged to be married, asked for a rise of salary. This being refused, he performed one of the few rash actions of his life, and without considering consequences gave notice, a proceeding that evoked another letter from his brother, gloomy looks from Maria, and a hint from her father to abstain from further visiting at Demarara Lodge. Josiah ignored both hints and gloomy looks, and having won over to his side Robert, proposed that they should start in business on their own account, a small cheap furniture shop, then for sale, being the proposed venture. Robert readily embraced the idea, but his father stoutly refused to advance money for such a hair-brained scheme; and the plan seemed destined to come to nothing, when a friend of the family, Mr. Cleaver, a soft-hearted butcher, with a tenderness for a lover, expressed his willingness to lend the necessary funds.

The new firm started, and in the course of a couple of years Josiah had not only been able to marry, but they had saved enough money to enable them to leave the small Fish Street shop, and establish themselves in larger and more pretentious premises, in one of the main thoroughfares.

Here the firm flourished exceedingly, till at last even the great Birmingham store had become too small for the ambitious pair, and the scene of operations was once more shifted, this time to London, where they were at length enabled to rent, and subsequently to buy, the large and imposing premises of the Emporium, Edgware Road.

Shortly after this move, Robert died, unmarried, and left his share of the business, together with his not inconsiderable savings, to his partner, in trust for his sister, the Kemptons thus becoming quite rich people. Josiah,

though repeatedly urged by his wife and daughters, refused to listen to ideas of South Kensington, or even of a house farther West, but continued to make his home in the suburbs, the houses increasing in size and grandeur with the accumulation of wealth. In the Edgbaston Villa, for example, the rooms over the shop in Fish Street were forgotten; these were blotted out by Acacia Lodge, Ealing; the latter by The Firs, Merton; while all became dim and obscured by the glories of their recently acquired place, Frampton House.

The master of this domain was by no means of the type usually associated with that of the successful business man, being neither stout nor prosperous-looking. He was a man of some sixty years, small and insignificant-looking, a pair of very keen, grey eyes alone redeeming an otherwise commonplace face. Dressed in an ill-made suit of nondescript pattern, with a badly brushed top-hat on the back of his head, and shod in square-toed, indifferently-polished boots, he gave the impression of being some small provincial dealer, mild and inoffensive.

Appearances were misleading, for this same quiet-looking little man was known for as hard and sharp a trader as was to be found in the whole city of London. With him the business habit was an instinct, his eye for a bargain, his knowledge of what or what not to touch intuitive, a gift in its way almost amounting to that of genius. Where business was concerned, Josiah could certainly have held his own against any of his kind, but there it ended, and a business man and that only he was, and must always remain till he died. Nothing would have made of him a man of the world; he had no breadth of view, no knowledge of things that certain far less-intelligent beings know as a matter of course; and, being ignorant, as a natural result, he was narrow-minded and intolerant to a degree.

For the army he had a particular aversion, and never

hesitated to denounce its members, individually and collectively, as dissolute, unprincipled and extravagant. Nevertheless, hard, strong-minded man though he was, Josiah had two weaknesses. He was, and always had been, uxorious, this tendency increasing as the years went on, and his wife, knowing this, traded on it, and at times forced him into actions of which his better judgment disapproved.

Maria was one of those to whom prosperity had proved far from beneficial. As the wife of a small tradesman, she was in her proper place, being capable, thrifty, and hardworking, but as mistress of a large establishment she was by no means a success; indeed, both dependents and acquaintances, though liking Josiah well enough, frankly detested Mrs. Kempton.

The children were five in number, three sons and two daughters. The two elder, Hubert and Fred, as so often happens in the case of a successful business man, by no means inherited their father's ability, being typical lower-middle-class young men, with the appearance and weaknesses of their kind; while the daughters, Nelly and Florrie, were of the somewhat loud-voiced, high-coloured type, but good useful-looking girls nevertheless.

In the direction of his third son, Henry, lay Josiah's second weakness, and this was perhaps the stranger owing to the boy's total unlikeness to himself, his wife, or any other member of the family. Henry was a singularly handsome youth, not with the florid comeliness of Hubert and Fred, but slight, pale-faced, and grey-eyed. He also looked a gentleman, and, what was perhaps stranger still, had the manners of one, also the voice—the latter being low in tone, musical, and slightly drawling.

Josiah, observing these traits, had come to acquire an odd sense of pride in, and even respect for, this white blackbird, the more so perhaps as he, alone of the family,

stood in no awe of his father. He was always perfectly respectful and obedient, but at the same time never hesitated to stand up for himself when their opinions clashed, and, what was more, to maintain his point.

This was not of frequent occurrence, for Henry was a reserved youth, and not at all assertive, but what he did say was—unlike the utterances of the rest of the family—always sensible and to the point; so much so, in fact, that Josiah had come to the conclusion that Henry had brains above the average, and, given the chance, would make a name in the world, as his brothers could never hope to do.

Josiah's judgment was correct, for Henry had brains, and coupled with them, young as he was, a will of steel and a steadfast determination to advance his own interests in the world. Of this, no one save himself knew, for he was never expansive, and possibly it was owing to this that the rest of the family fought somewhat shy of their good-looking brother. His interests were not theirs, and they knew it, while his quiet determination and invariable success in securing his own way inspired a certain distrust in their minds. Maria saw nothing wonderful in Henry. On the contrary, she considered that, thanks chiefly to Josiah's absurd favouritism, he was a consequential, conceited boy, whose drawl was both affected and irritating. He wanted well taking down, she averred, and lost no opportunity of finding fault with and snubbing him, attentions to which Henry meekly submitted, and for which he hated his mother with a deep, silent hatred; the rest of the family he only despised.

With regard to this boy's career there had been a sharp battle between husband and wife, consequent on Josiah's expressed determination to give him a profession, instead of a clerkship in the Emporium—as in the case of Hubert and Fred. And though he yielded so far as to abandon the idea of the Bar—than which no more exalted profession

existed in Josiah's ideas—he had held to the main point, and placed Henry in the office of Messrs. Daddle and Quork, his own solicitors. Here he was now serving the second year of his articles, and giving fair, though not the immense amount of satisfaction to his employers that Josiah had anticipated.

CHAPTER II

IT was evident that some important event was about to take place in the grounds of Frampton House, not only from the previously mentioned expression on Josiah's face, but also from the fact that the trim lawns were almost hidden by a number of huge marquees, gaily decorated with flags and strips of coloured bunting.

To-day the Frampton Flower Show was, by kind permission of Mr. Kempton, to be held in his grounds. This function was the great social event of the neighbourhood, surpassing in importance even the annual lawn tennis and croquet tournaments. Hitherto it had been held in Stumer Park, the residence of Sir Thomas Stiff, but Sir Thomas, having this year been more than usually unfortunate at Epsom, had been compelled to shut up his house and grounds, and depart for foreign shores. For a while it was feared that the show would have to be abandoned, but at this crisis Josiah, incited by Maria, had come forward, and placed the grounds of Frampton House at the disposal of the Committee, an offer that had been gratefully accepted.

At first the local people, who, from lack of suitable grounds, were debarred from making a similar offer, were indignant at "Kempton presumption," and vowed that nothing should induce them to attend. Their outlook changed, however, on hearing that His Grace, the Duke of Edenborough, had graciously signified his intention of opening this year's show.

It now became the duty of all Frampton to support His

Grace on the momentous occasion, and on the day appointed to betake themselves to the well-kept lawns of Frampton House, on the steps of which Josiah, who had now been joined by his wife and family, was standing expectant.

Maria Kempton was resplendent in purple silk, and a green toque with drooping ostrich feather. The two girls, dressed exactly alike, were in pink, with parasols and hats to match, while the boys' frock-coats, top-hats, and patent-leather boots were evidently fresh from the makers' hands. All were in high good-humour, this satisfaction finding expression in remarks of a congratulatory nature; and "How well violet suits the mater," "The girls look nice, Josiah," and "Gracious, what swells you boys are!" could be heard quite a distance away—the only discordant note being a discontented aside from Florrie of, "What on earth made pater put on that old suit?"

Strangely enough, too, the wearer of the old suit in question was thinking much the same thing, and, although he reminded himself that what was good enough for himself and his friends was good enough for a duke, now that the duke was to be met in the flesh, and not in the newspaper, this reflection somehow failed to reassure him.

He rather wished that he had ordered that grey frock-coat, as Maria had urged him to do, for his present suit did seem a bit shabbier than he had thought. However, it was now too late for repentance, and at all events he was cool and comfortable. By the way, where was Henry, and what sort of a show did he make? As good as any of them, no doubt. Confound the boy, though, he was not there, and much annoyed he ordered Fred to tell him to come down at once, as people might be expected any minute now. Fred reluctantly obeyed, returning soon after with the announcement that Henry was lying on his bed reading, and begged his father to excuse him from appearing that afternoon.

Really incensed at the news, the flame fanned by a sniff from Maria, Josiah despatched an imperative message—this time by Hubert—ordering Henry to dress himself at once, and come down. Indeed, he was just about to proceed in person to his son's room to see his commands carried out, when the first batch of guests were seen advancing up the carriage-drive.

The afternoon opened auspiciously, and the Kempton bosoms swelled with pride as they watched the animated scene around them, and felt that they too at last had entered the portals of good society. It is true, some of the guests were not quite up to the mark, old business friends of Mr. Kempton's amongst others, and poor relations of the family, who rather marred the otherwise irreproachable tone of the assembly.

There was Aunt Eliza, for example, and her two daughters, Maggie and Clara. She was Mrs. Kempton's elder and only sister, who had married a Birmingham chemist: "not an ordinary chemist, but rather an analyst, or more like still, a doctor." Indeed, from constant asseverations on this point, Aunt Eliza had by now quite come to believe that he had been one, and always alluded to him as such. The chemist had died some years previously, leaving his family but ill provided for, so that, whereas the Kempton family had gone up in the world, Aunt Eliza had certainly come down. For this she had never forgiven her sister, and it was always with feelings of the greatest indignation that, when visiting at Frampton House, she viewed the signs of the prosperity of the owners.

Then there was Mr. Cleaver, the soft-hearted butcher formerly alluded to. He was also rather unfortunate-looking, though, unlike Aunt Eliza, the soul of good-nature; but he was a tactless person, one who, as he put it, must "have his joke," no matter how unseasonable the time or unsuitable the place.

Suddenly there was a lull in the conversation, and an excited murmur arose of "Here they are." Heads were turned towards the carriage-drive, up which was rolling an imposing-looking equipage. At the stone steps it stopped, and the occupants descended. They paused for a moment uncertainly, then turned and slowly descended the steps, towards which Josiah, hat in hand, was hurrying. Much whispering arose from the assembly, now huddled together on the lawn like a herd of deer, and staring with all their eyes.

"Which is the Duke?"

"What! that little man in grey, that can't be him, surely."

"Who's the girl?"

"What colours are those that tall fellow's wearing on his hat?"

"The Guards! oh——"

Then Josiah, somewhat fussy, but not at all nervous, reached the party amidst dead silence, everyone straining his ears to hear what he said, and how he said it.

Clearing his throat, he was about to begin, when the Duke, to whom this sort of thing was no novelty, interposed, and, shaking his host warmly by the hand, addressed him in friendly fashion.

"Very kind of you, Mr. Kempton," he said, "to allow us to have our show in your grounds; most public-spirited. 'Pon my soul, don't know what we should have done but for you, now poor Stiff's shut up his place and gone abroad, for mine's too far off, much as I should have liked it. But won't you introduce me to Mrs. Kempton? Violet, my dear," turning to a rather square-built, plain-featured girl of about twenty-seven or twenty-eight; "this is my daughter, Mrs. Kempton.—What, all these boys and girls yours? Lucky man, Mr. Kempton, I've only three, one daughter and two sons—this is one of them, Charles, a

soldier. Any of yours in the army? No, dear me! Fine profession, see the world, see the world; and now may I look at the flowers?" and, still talking hard, the old gentleman walked away to the marquees, where he and Josiah were soon deep in a discussion as to the best method of chrysanthemum raising, and the failings and stupidities of their respective gardeners.

The rest of the party followed. Lord Charles escorting the palpitating Nelly, Mr. Hamlyn, the secretary, Mrs. Bucket, the wife of a rich stockbroker; and the other woman of the ducal party, Mrs. Dangerfield, a smart-looking widow whom flowers bored extremely, walked calmly away to a distant summer-house, her escort composed of the Kemptons "show" young men, Messrs. Salter and Silver, one on either side.

Lady Violet was left talking to Mrs. Kempton, or rather she stood, while the latter poured forth a breathless stream of words, Florrie and Hubert watching their mother's effort admiringly. At length even Maria could not help noticing the weariness on her listener's face, and, though secretly incensed, brought her discourse to a close.

"But I'm sure," she concluded, smiling, "you'll be wanting to see the flowers, Lady Violet, and not stop talking to me all the afternoon. My son Hubert here will escort you. I'll excuse you. Here, Hubert—where is the boy?" as the latter, terrified at the prospect, was stealing away. "Come back, Hubert, don't be shy. Here's Lady Violet wants to see the flowers."

The pair obediently started on their way, the lady hurrying to keep up with her flustered escort, who, in his agitation, had no idea of the pace at which he strode, while he talked rapidly and incoherently on many subjects. He contradicted himself, said what he did not mean, trod on her dress, till at last Violet, grasping the situation and feeling rather sorry for his misery, laid herself out to put him at

his ease, and this being an easy enough matter for her, she soon succeeded, and the distraught Hubert calmed down and his pace slackened.

Only too soon, however, did she repent of her compassion, for with calm came confidence, and with confidence gallantry. He began to pay compliments, and finally to look sentimental. This was the last straw, and poor Violet, feeling that the situation had become beyond her, at length, though with considerable difficulty, succeeded in getting rid of her now complacent escort, and, having seen him depart on a non-committal message to her brother Charles, betook herself with all speed to where a row of greenhouses promised refuge from further persecution.

CHAPTER III

THE first greenhouse she found denuded of everything but vines, its tenants being on show in the marquees. Passing through it, she found herself in a large domed building with a pool in the centre, in which, raised above the water by small rockeries, stood various large palms and ferns. For some minutes she wandered round, inspecting the plants, when she suddenly became aware of a pair of eyes regarding her through a screen of foliage in the corner; an exclamation of annoyance at the same time reached her, and the words "Not even here."

Then the intervening leaves parted, and a slim young man in grey flannel, with a book in his hand, came towards her.

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly, his grey eyes looking indifferently into hers, "but do you wish to see the palms? If so, I shall be happy to show them to you."

Violet stared at him. Who was this? she wondered. What an extraordinarily good-looking boy. This was no Kempton, surely, no brother of that dreadful creature Hubert. No, it must be some stray visitor, seeking refuge like herself; and, with a feeling of comradeship, she smiled at him, a favour that brought no answering smile to the cold, handsome face before her.

"But we're trespassing," she said, "or," with a questioning glance, "at any rate I am. This fernery is hardly part of the Flower Show—Mr. Kempton might object to strangers straying through his greenhouses."

"My father," was the quiet, drawling answer, "I know, would be delighted; and it might help to appease him later, if he should hear I was doing something to help entertain a visitor, instead of nothing, as I ho—intended."

Violet felt a sense of shock. So this was a Kempton, after all—but, heavens, what an extraordinary difference!

"You—you are . . ." she began confusedly, the doubt and disappointment in her tone being plain to her listener.

"Henry Kempton, the youngest son. . . But mayn't I show you the palms? They're not of the city, anyway," he muttered beneath his breath.

Reduced to silence, Violet followed him round. Her escort, with perfect knowledge, gave the names and explained the characteristics of the various plants; and at his knowledge, superior to her own, and still more at the calm indifference of his manner, she began to feel faintly annoyed.

He was worse than his brother, she thought, for Hubert's awkwardness was, after all, natural in a tradesman's son, brought suddenly into contact with one of her rank; whilst this youth's perfect confidence was sheer presumption under the circumstances. Probably, young as he was, he had already imbibed hateful Socialist doctrines; or more probably—oh, of course, that was it, how should he?—he did not know who she was. She must enlighten him, it would be amusing to see the change from arrogance to servility.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Kempton," she said, when the tour of inspection was over. "What a lot you know about these things; far more than I do. But I must be returning to my party. My father will be wondering what has become of me. We drove over from Morpe Royal this afternoon," she added carelessly, watching him as she made the announcement.

Again she was disappointed, for Henry showed no signs of being impressed at the news, though, had she known it,

the effect was to cause his pulses to leap with a sudden feeling of exultation. For he had not known who she was, though seeing clearly enough that she was no denizen or guest of any Frampton home. Indeed, had she been, behind the screen of palm leaves Henry would have remained, and the botanical lecture been unwasted. She was, she could only be, Lady Violet Ravenscroft, the Duke of Edenborough's daughter. With the knowledge came also the realisation that here was the chance—the first—which he had been looking out for, and that at his feet lay the first step of the stairs leading to those higher regions, on the attainment of which his mind was firmly set.

He must be quick or the chance would vanish, for already Lady Violet was turning away, and in another moment would have passed out of his life. He must keep her, excite her interest in some way; but how, what should he talk of? He looked at her, thinking rapidly. Should it be of sport? No, that was no use, he felt, and thanked heaven for it—for of sport, and all appertaining to it, Henry knew and cared nothing. Of books, then? Yes, from the look of her, books, and serious books, too, were the line. If that were really so, he was on sure ground, for, young as he was, Henry had read much, partly because such reading provided him with the mental equipment necessary for his purpose, but more because he loved books for their own sake—though, somewhat curiously, he preferred works of a singularly unpractical nature.

"My knowledge," he said, carelessly ignoring her suggestion of departure, "oh, it's but a smattering, picked up by reading, as all my knowledge is."

Violet stopped, with a look of interest, for Henry's shot had been true to the mark.

"Oh, do you read?" she said. "But of course you do; everybody reads. Novels, I suppose," with some condescension.

"No, not novels . . . but won't you sit down? There are two chairs behind those ferns there, and we shall be out of the glare."

Violet stared, and her back stiffened. Was the boy mad she thought, to imagine that she, Lady Violet Ravenscroft would sit chatting with him, Mr. Kempton's son, side by side, under a palm-tree in a greenhouse? Really angry, she was about to crush the youth, when, looking up, she saw his eyes fixed upon her, and the snub remained unuttered.

Heavens, how good-looking he was, and yet how apparently unconscious of the fact. And there was no sign of presumption or meaning in the grey eyes calmly regarding her. He wanted to talk to her, that was all; well, why not indulge him? He had probably little opportunity of intellectual conversation with those with whom he lived. It would be a charity, she decided, and after all, surely her position enabled her to gratify the whim, if she pleased. It would be rather an amusing experience, too, to hear how he talked. Anyway, he was only a boy, and she would never see him again.

"Very well," she said, her tones as indifferent as his. "I'll sit down for a few minutes, if you like;" and, preceded by Henry, she passed through the screen of leaves, and found herself in a bower of green, where a comfortable deck-chair, well provided with cushions, and another of ordinary cane, piled with magazines and books, were standing.

"What a delightful place," said Violet, seating herself upright in the deck-chair, "and how very quiet and solitary. No wonder you prefer this to . . ." She stopped, reddening.

"To the—Flower Show. Yes, no wonder, as you say," was the comprehending answer.

"I meant you are out of the sun here, and—and quiet," she replied. "But what were you reading? Oh, Shelley,"

in a rather surprised tone, as he handed her the volume without speaking. "Do you like Shelley?"

"I love him," was the answer, and for the first time there was warmth in his tone. "I don't understand him at times—I am sure, indeed, some of his lines are not understandable, even to himself, but all the same I love him. Listen to this," reading aloud, and at the music and ring of passion in the tones Violet fell back, a curious thrill running through her.

"As over wide dominions
I sped, like some swift cloud that wings the wide air's wildernesses,
That planet-crested shape swept by on lightning-braided pinions,
Scattering the liquid joy of life from his ambrosial tresses:
His footsteps paved the world with light: but as I passed 'twas fading,
And hollow Ruin yawned behind: great sages bound in madness,
And headless patriots, and pale youths who perished, unupbraiding,
Gleamed in the night. I wandered o'er, till thou, O King of sadness,
Turned by thy smile the worst I saw to recollected gladness."

Henry turned towards her, with his pale face alight and eyes glowing.

"It is lines like those," he said, "that please me in Shelley. What does it matter whether they mean much, or even nothing? A poet's business is to appeal to the emotions and not to the brain. Matthew Arnold does the better, and to me his poetry is of bricks-and-mortar, hard, solid and sensible; not a structure of pearl, fire, and clouds, like that of Shelley, and such as he. If it is science and cold sense that is wanted, there are proper dealers to apply to—Darwin, Spenser, and Hume, for instance."

Violet, disdain forgotten in interest, rushed to the fray. Such views, to her way of thinking, were the worst of heresies and demanded instant refutation.

"I don't agree with you at all, Mr. Kempton," she said, her plain face full of animation. "Of course it's true that a poet ought to appeal, as you say, to the emotions, but his first duty is to make his meaning clear. Your theory, and yours is a detestable one to my mind, is, that the writing of utter

nonsense is justifiable, provided the words are fine sound musical. It is the modern French idea, which Nordau so rightly ridicules."

"Max Nordau brings a scientific mind to bear on imaginative works, a proceeding as hopeless as the chemical analysis of a flower, with a view to deciding whether it's beautiful or not. He's a specialist in degeneration, and like specialists starts with a theory; and then hunts for, and works up, evidence to prove that theory. Facts don't fit in with their theory, not the theory with facts. (Such as disprove it, Shelley, for instance, who, though unintelligible, is hardly weak in brain, he makes no mention."

"That's making him out dishonest, Mr. Kempton, which he certainly is not. If anything, he errs on the side of being too outspoken about unpleasant truths."

"Unintentionally dishonest, perhaps, but dishonest all the same. He contradicts himself, too; and, according to his own theory, proves himself a sufferer from the very disease he is so down on in others."

"How does he contradict himself?"

Henry hesitated for a moment, glanced at her, noted her approaching thirty years, and went on:

"He's a Socialist, not in the Labour Members' sense of the word, but according to the theory that the first duty of a man is to the commonwealth, and this being so, he is especially bitter on those who decide to lead their own life. And yet a few pages later we find him declaring that humanity brands as criminal any man or woman who, when in love with another, remain together instead of separating and contracting genuine connections elsewhere. Oh!" suddenly breaking off, and holding up his hand. "Surely that's Tosti's 'Good-bye' the band's playing. I love that, don't you?" turning to Lady Violet, with shining eyes.

There was another and most unlooked-for phase, but Violet was now past being astonished at anything this world might say or do. She lay back watching him till the band had finished.

"Fond of music, too, Mr. Kempton?" she said. "You like it, perhaps?"

"Not a note," was the answer; "they tried to teach me, but I failed miserably. My master said I'd no soul for music, and he was right."

"But why then——" began Lady Violet, bewildered.

"Why do I like Tosti's 'Good-bye,' and such trash? I don't know which I suppose it is. I can't tell you, only I know that that kind of music appeals to me, in the same way as Shelley's or Byron's poetry. For the time it seems to change me altogether, awakening a side of me quite different from my ordinary calcul——" He stopped abruptly—for once Henry Kempton had forgotten self, and become communicative, and that to a stranger. Instantly regaining his self-possession, he turned to his companion, smiling boldly, and said, with the drawl more pronounced than usual: "Somewhat queer tastes for a solicitor, mine, don't you think, Lady Violet?"

"A solicitor, are you, Mr. Kempton?" she said, incredulously.

"Not yet, but some time, if I am industrious and pass my examinations, I may hope to be," was the sneering answer. "At present I am an articled clerk, if you know what that is. God, how I hate it all," with a sudden outburst of passion, the thought of the office for the second time that afternoon making him forget his habitual reserve.

"But why do you do it, then?" said Violet, somewhat startled and taken aback by this unexpected violence.

"Because I have to, or starve," was the answer. "It is either that or the Emporium, which I should loathe even more."

"But there are other professions, Mr. Kempton, and as long as you have one I imagine it would be all the same to your father. There is the Bar, for instance, engineering, or the army."

Henry stared at her for a moment, and then gave a short, derisive laugh.

"May I ask why you laugh, Mr. Kempton?" said Violet, flushing.

"I beg your pardon, but you said the army, I think."

"Well?"

"It happens to be the one profession at the mere mention of which my father raves, and which I probably, in consequence, desire above all others. You've hit on a singularly sore subject, Lady Violet."

She remained silent, watching him. She was more interested than she could have imagined possible, the more so for feeling certain that this youth was revealing to her depths jealously concealed from the rest of the world. Further she knew, and the knowledge was curiously pleasant, that for some unknown cause it lay in her power to influence him, and that a word from her now might alter his whole future life. He was discontented with and miserable in his present existence; and but a show of interest on her part, a word of encouragement, and the thing was done. But why should she interest herself, why trouble her head about a youth she had never seen before, and probably never would again? There was the responsibility also, the sowing of seeds of dissension in a family to whose house she had come by the merest accident. The thought was repugnant to Violet; still, all the same, she was conscious of the wish to interfere. The sense of power, too, was exciting, even though only over a youthful Kempton, and Lady Violet's life of late years had been singularly colourless and devoid of interest.

Surely, too, interference was justifiable; indeed, it would

be a meritorious action, for it could not be right that any man should be asked to waste his life in a profession he loathed, and in which, consequently, he could do but little good; whilst in the one of his choice he would be, at all events, happy, and might achieve success. Further, he wanted discipline, she felt, a strong hand to keep down that dangerous emotional side he had revealed to her. This being so, what better career could there be for him than the army, with its fixed grooves, and rigid demand for obedience?

"Mr. Kempton," she said slowly, "you may think it somewhat strange for me to offer you advice. My doing so, I confess, seems strange to me also, but is it not rather weak, not to say unmanly, to drift along in a profession you dislike, and are consequently unfitted for, merely because you lack the necessary strength of will to encounter and overcome the opposition of your people? Oh, I know"—observing the sudden flush on her listener's face—"I am being extremely rude, but all the same I am going on now I've begun."

"I hope you will, and also tell me how. I'm ready enough, I assure you."

"As to how you're to overcome your parents' scruples," answered Violet, "is hardly my affair. All I can say is that, if you're too feeble to carry your point, then . . ." she shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, Mr. Kempton, you're a man, and have the control of your own actions. You say you long for the army: well then, enter it. Enlist, if there's no other way—but do it somehow."

Henry was silent, his eyes fixed on the ground. This was talking straight, indeed, and from a stranger. Nevertheless he felt no resentment, but, on the contrary, exultation, for to speak thus she must, he knew, be interested, and her interest was what he had laid himself out to awaken. Besides, what she said was true, and to rebel inwardly against fate, and at the same time to make no

effort to change that fate, was both weak and unmanly. Still it was a big thing that she suggested—how big she had no idea.

He was still deep in thought, when her voice reached him.

"Will you please tell me the time, Mr. Kempton?"

Henry looked at his watch.

"Half-past five," he said absently.

"Half-past five," echoed Violet, horrified.

Good heavens! she had been here for more than an hour alone with a Kempton. Worse still, she had been so interested that she had forgotten the time.

She rose at once, with all the pride of the Ravenscrofts in her bearing. "I am afraid, Mr. Kempton," she said, "that in the discussion of your affairs I have been most unnecessarily conversational and intrusive. I had no right whatever to offer you advice, and I hope you'll forget all I said on the subject. You of course must be the only judge of your own actions. This is the way out, I think, is it not? Good-bye, and thank you so much for showing me the palms."

"Will you please sit down again and listen to me? I won't keep you long."

The voice was perfectly respectful, but there was a ring of authority in it, which was quite unmistakable. Henry was playing a bold game now, but nevertheless he felt quite confident; for, for some reason, neither now nor at any future time did he feel the least in awe of this girl, as did most men of her acquaintance.

Violet stopped at once, with a look of amazement, and for a moment they stood facing each other.

"Is it possible you are speaking to me, Mr. Kempton?"

"Yes. There's something I want to say. Please sit down."

Violet felt a sudden, most unwonted sensation of

weakness, followed by an equally unwonted inclination to
sweat, and then sat down—pale and trembling.

"What is it?" she stammered. "I'm at a loss to—
... Five minutes, then, that's all."

"I will be as brief as possible," was the quiet answer,
"but, if I exceed five minutes, I must still ask you to stay.
This is the least you can do, I think, considering that by your
interference you have certainly changed the whole future
course of my life."

"Interference?" gasped Violet.

"Yes, for it is that, though an interference for
which I shall be grateful to you as long as I live. It
is that first I wish to say. I could not let you go
without."

Violet remained silent, her face somewhat softened.

"I don't think you could have realised," continued
Henry, speaking very earnestly, "the tremendous effect
such words coming from you would have on one placed as
I am. You were right, too, in all you said, except one thing.
You called me weak. That I am not, only I have had no
one to talk to of my secret aspirations; and, though I had
every intention of changing my life, it was not by a sudden
upheaval such as this, but by waiting. I see now, thanks
to you, I was wrong—and am now going to act. It will
be a struggle, but I shall carry it through; though, once I
announce my intention of becoming a soldier, my life at
home will be that of a pariah. My people have little
sympathy with me, as it is," he added quietly.

"Oh, Mr. Kempton, if that's so, please, please forget,"
began Violet, with real distress in her voice.

"Then you would be right in calling me weak. No, I
shan't change now, and the proof of my resolution will
reach you about two years from now, when, if I may, I will
send you the notification of my commission in some regi-
ment. I am too old for Sandhurst," he added reflectively,

"and so shall have to go through the Militia. That is a have to say, Lady Violet. Thank you for listening." There was silence for a moment, and then rising, she held out her hand.

"Mr. Kempton," she said rather tremulously, "I only trust and hope that what you say I have done will be for the best. Perhaps I should not have spoken, but, believe me, I meant it so. And"—impulsively—"I approve of what you are going to do. I—I think it splendid, and wish you all luck, and if I, or rather my father's influence, can help you in any way, let me know. Write me a letter, or better still, come and see me. Will you, Mr. Kempton?"

Again Henry thought. He had done wonders so far, he felt, let it remain at that. To hold back, not to press on, was the right line now.

"Thank you, Lady Violet," he said, "but I would rather say no to both offers. I will carry this thing through by myself, and be indebted to nobody's influence. And when I do come to see you, I—I don't know whether you will understand, but when I do, I intend to come as one who has done something to deserve that great honour."

Violet nodded. "I do understand," she said, "and I hope, I think indeed, that that time will not be far distant. Good-bye, Mr. Kempton."

"Good-bye, Lady Violet." He led the way to the greenhouse door, opened it, bowed, and turned away, leaving her to return alone, a display of tact that struck Violet with further wonder, as she made her way slowly back to the lawn.

Here to her relief she found her party still scattered, evidently having been unaware of her absence.

The Duke and Mr. Kempton were still engrossed in conversation on matters horticultural. Lord Charles was sitting in the refreshment tent, eating ices, and making love to the downcast-eyed Nelly; while Mrs. Dangerfield had

not moved from her summer-house, though with but one attendant swain now—Mr. Salter having been early despatched about his business, leaving Mr. Silver in possession of the field.

Indeed, the only discontented member of the party was Mr. Hamlyn, the secretary, who, having shaken off Mrs. Bucket, and started to roam about on a tour of observation, as was his wont, had been pounced upon by Mrs. Kempton, at whose side he had now been a whole weary hour.

At last, to his relief, the welcome figure of the Duke, accompanied by Lady Violet, who had torn him away from the flowers, appeared; and, Charles and Mrs. Dangerfield having been also collected, the party, preceded by their beaming host, made their way to the waiting barouche, and were soon comfortably settled in it. The footman slammed the door, and the pair of huge bays, after a few preliminary prances, started smoothly away down the carriage-drive, and, passing through the zebra-decorated lodge gates, were soon well on their eight-mile journey to Thorpe Royal.

CHAPTER IV

“**A** VERY successful afternoon, I thought, Josiah,” remarked Maria, some five hours later, removing, as she spoke, her black curly front, and laying it down carefully on the dressing table; “went off extremely well. Nice little man, the Duke, so friendly and affable, almost like one of ourselves.”

“Cost me close on two hundred pounds, this afternoon’s doings,” grumbled Josiah, “what with the band, and one thing and another. Have to put my nose to the grindstone to make it up again.”

“Nonsense, Josiah; what’s two hundred pounds to you?”

“A great deal of money when you have to earn it, Maria, but”—morosely—“I don’t grudge it, as long as you were pleased.”

“I should like to meet those people again, Josiah. Don’t you think we might send them an invitation to a dinner-party, just ourselves, and one or two of their own kind—the Swoppems, for instance?”

“And a nice snub you’d get for your pains,” said Josiah, hanging up his trousers on a hook at the back of the door, and moving across the room like some elderly, grey-whiskered tomcat, in brown underpants and shirt. “Swoppem’s father was a pawnbroker in the city, if that’s what you call one of their own kind.”

“A pawnbroker!” screamed Maria, “and you’ve never told me till now. Oh, it’s too bad of you, Josiah, and so like you. How long have you known this, may I ask?”

"I've always known it. But you can make your mind easy, my dear; no one else does, I should say, at all events here, and it's not for us to be particular. We're only shop folk ourselves, remember."

"Really, Josiah, you make me lose all patience, after this afternoon, too."

"Why, what difference does that make?"

"All the difference, though of course you can't see it. However, I'm here, fortunately for the credit of the family, and in the future will look to things myself. You also didn't notice, I suppose, how taken the daughter, Lady Violet, was with Hubert. I watched them together, and she looked quite conscious. I'm sure she'd like to meet him again, if it could be managed."

"Pshaw!" said Josiah. "I beg your pardon, my dear, but I think you rather imagine things."

"I don't at all; and why shouldn't she, pray? The attentions of a handsome fellow like Hubert would please any girl, especially one so unfortunately plain as her. Thirty, if she's a day, and *such* a complexion. Lord Charles, too, seemed smitten with Nelly. Such a shame to chaff her as they did at dinner to-night. That's the way to spoil these things."

"I'm sorry Henry never appeared till after they were gone," said Josiah. "I should like His Grace to have seen him. He's a clever boy, is Henry, and what's more, always looks a gentleman. Don't you think so, my dear?"

Indignation surged up in Maria's breast. "I hope my sons always look gentlemen," she said, with some heat. "Hubert and Fred do, at any rate. I'm afraid, however, I cannot always say the same of Henry, and, as a matter of fact, it was a very good thing for the credit of the family he did keep in the background this afternoon."

"Why, what was the matter with the boy?" growled Josiah.

"Matter! Why, do you know he'd only got on his old grey flannel suit? Most odd it looked with his brothers in frock-coats and top-hats. I felt quite ashamed of him. Really, Josiah, I think he must get it from you, for you were nearly as bad and . . . What His Grace must have thought I can't imagine! you, the owner of the principal mansion in the place. . . . Oh, do stop tramping about, and if you're coming to bed, come; I'm fairly worn out. Thank heaven, to-morrow's Sunday, and breakfast is not till nine," and, having thus said her say and relieved herself of the indignation caused by the remembrance of the grey suit alluded to, Maria rolled over on her side, and was soon placidly sleeping.

Meanwhile, one of the subjects of the above discussion was lying on his bed, fully-dressed, with a cigarette in his mouth, and his eyes meditatively fixed on the ceiling.

Smoking in bedrooms was a practice strictly forbidden at Frampton House, but of this Henry recked little—he transgressed that rule every night of his life.

He was thinking hard, momentous thoughts, on the result of which much depended. The first great crisis in his life was upon him, and that suddenly, and without warning; one brought about, too, by an hour's conversation with a woman he had never seen before, and possibly might never see again. Oh yes, he would though, on that point he was quite determined, but not from any reasons of sentiment, for—unlike his brothers and most of his age and kind—love had no place in Henry's scheme of life. Such trifles were not for the climber, he had decided; not till the climb was accomplished, at any rate. Nor, even had he been so inclined—putting aside the question of presumption, which even his high-aspiring mind would have recognised had he thought of it—would the idea of Lady Violet, plain,

unattractive and many years his senior, have occurred to him in such connection with himself.

It was that which she represented that Henry was after—the class, not the individual; and an established footing among that class he meant to obtain, impossible as it seemed. Not as a suppliant, however, did he mean to go to her, a tolerated hanger-on to her skirts, but as one who had a right to be there: and this—though Violet had naturally not understood—was what he meant in his refusal of her invitation that afternoon. Still, between that time and now was a far cry. The first step had yet to be taken, namely, the wringing from his father of his consent to the new career, a thing of which he only too well recognised the difficulties, supported as Josiah would be by his mother, with all the stubbornness of which her nature was capable.

However, she had her vulnerable spot, not on the side of affection—for such a line of action would never have occurred to Henry, as to his brothers—but on that of her social ambitions, which might possibly render a red-coated son a thing desirable. If it had been one of his brothers, he felt she would have supported the suggestion, but him, no; on consideration he thought not. She was too jealous of him, always had been, her chief reason being that he alone never consulted her before preferring a request to his father, and, worse offence still, had usually carried his point despite her opposition. In yet another way could Maria's ambitious side be attacked, and that by the method suggested by Lady Violet when she said, "Enlist, if there's no other way." Ho ho, Private Henry Kempton, son of Mr. and Mrs. Kempton of Frampton House—that would touch her, though not his father, he knew, one jot.

Yes, he saw his way, and, considering the matter, he was glad the upheaval was to come now. Better that than wait, as he had intended, till his father's death, when, with

what Josiah left him, he could cut the office for ever, and then start on his schemes.

His father, he reflected, was tough and would probably live for years. He might have to wait in the demoralising atmosphere of Frampton House, losing his youth, and when freedom came the inclination to start afresh would perhaps be no longer his.

Yes, he was glad. A soldier's life was that of a gentleman, too, and would take him far, thank heaven, from Frampton House and its inmates. Possibly he might never see them again: well, if he didn't, he would not break his heart—or theirs. His father might be sorry, but the others, no.

He rose, yawned, and proceeded to undress. Then, having carefully collected the cigarette-stumps and ashes, he flung them through the open window. This done, he went to bed, and a few minutes afterwards was soundly sleeping.

His slumber was unbroken, until a loud and persistent banging on a gong informed him that the breakfast hour had arrived, and that he would be late. This was a truly unfortunate beginning to such a momentous day, for he well knew his father's opinions on the subject of unpunctuality.

With a curse at his folly in allowing himself to start at a disadvantage, he scrambled out of bed, seized towel and sponge, and hurried away to the bathroom.

CHAPTER V

WITH most self-respecting human beings, the word "breakfast" conveys to the mind a peaceful and somewhat languid repast, prolonged perhaps unduly, but certainly pleasantly, by the perusal of the daily newspaper, and possibly a little—though very little—low-toned and desultory conversation. Anything in the way of hustle or noise is altogether out of place in connection with the meal.

To the Kempton family, however, it meant nothing of the sort. They felt at their heartiest and best in the morning, and as a result had little sympathy with or tolerance for those who were not so fortunate. This lucky family had no nerves, the small annoyances incidental to daily life troubled them not at all.

The gentle persistent tapping of a hammer, for instance, the beating of a tin can by a child, the barking of a dog, and other trifles of the kind, which on most ordinarily constituted minds exercise a disturbing influence, had no power to disturb those of the Kempton family.

They loved noise, loved it for its own sake, and at all times, though more especially in the morning; and just as they revelled in noise so did they also rejoice in hurry and bustle, and again more particularly in the morning.

From start to finish breakfast was a rush, a hurried, frenzied rush, during which the day's plans were animatedly discussed, arguments entered upon, and sometimes quarrels,

for the members of the family, though on the whole united enough, had their little differences of opinion.

Seldom did the meal last for more than twenty minutes. Indeed, after that time, there was nothing left to eat, save bread, and, with luck, an odd survivor from the toast rack. Josiah strongly disapproved of disturbing the servants, in order that a late comer might be supplied with fresh food. "People must keep my hours when they come to my house," he was wont to declare, for, like most self-made men, he held the view that the guest, and not the host, was the one honoured by the visit.

All things considered, therefore, breakfast at Frampton House, except to the family themselves, was not a pleasant meal. To such as partook of it for the first time it was in the nature of an eye-opener, and that of a somewhat unpleasing kind.

Plied with food from the moment he entered the room till the twenty minutes was up, his mind distracted with questions demanding answers, his soul bruised by heavy-handed chaff, the harried guest usually rose from the table with a headache, which lasted him for the rest of the day.

To-day being Sunday, as a concession to human weakness the meal was at nine o'clock, instead of the regulation eight. The morning train citywards left at 8.30, and this allowed twenty minutes for breakfast, and ten for the half walk, half-run to the station. Nevertheless the hustle and noise were in no way less, rather was the Sunday repast even more strenuous than that of week days.

The last mutterings of the gong—beaten by Josiah himself, as was his wont—had barely died away, than a clamour overhead, rapidly swelling to a roar, announced the fact that the family had heard the summons and were hastening to obey it. Down the stairs they sped, in friendly emulation to be first at the kidneys and bacon, and so close was

The contest that, in a trice, Florrie, Hubert, and Fred were engaged and struggling in the doorway.

Fighting their way through, they burst into the room, and having bestowed perfunctory pecks on their parents, by way of morning greeting, ran hungrily towards the covered dishes. Hard on their heels followed Aunt Eliza, with her two daughters close behind, the latter as dismal-looking as ever. Both were of healthy appetite, however, and eagerly joined in the struggle now raging round the kidneys and bacon.

Next came Mr. Cleaver, in white waistcoat and creaking boots; and soon the loud laughter ringing through the room announced that the humorous old gentleman was once more in excellent form. Five minutes after him the two "show" young men appeared, Mr. Silver somewhat morose-looking, his friend a trifle pallid and languid, as befitted a man of fashion astir at this hour. Both were, as usual, beautifully dressed, a fact at once noted and animatedly commented on.

"Got 'em all on to-day, I see, Silver," said Josiah.

"That's a creamy thing in ties, Salter," from Hubert.

"Gracious, what swells!" from Florrie.

"Empty-headed noodles," muttered Aunt Eliza.

Mrs. Kempton greeted them with an indulgent smile, though shaking her head in playful rebuke. "London ways, young men," she said, "won't do in the country. It's the early bird, you know, Mr. Salter."

"Old Salter looks more like an early worm this morning, eh, Flo?" said Fred jocosely. "You be the bird and catch him, what ho!"

Loud laughter from everyone, while his sister bridled and looked conscious.

"Shut up, Fred, and don't talk rot," she answered briskly. "Let Mr. Salter have his breakfast, do."

"Afraid there's not much left, Salter," said Josiah.

"Toast, Mr. Salter?"

"Bacon?"

"Butter?"

"Coffee or tea?"

These questions arose from various quarters of the table. Mr. Salter pressed his hand over his forehead; his head was already beginning to ache slightly.

"Now then, you people, hurry up," said Josiah. "Mustn't be here all day. What does everybody want to do? Church, I hope—must make a good show. Now, who'll walk, and who'll drive?"

A loud and persistent clamour arose as the point was debated, during which Nelly walked in, somewhat pensive-looking and sad.

Mrs. Kempton was about to administer a severe rebuke, when Mr. Cleaver intervened.

"A-ha!" he said, "here's her ladyship. Good morning, Lady Charles."

Rising as he spoke, the witty old gentleman made her a low bow, and then proceeded to walk backwards before her down the room, bowing as he went. This manoeuvre requires practice, however, which Mr. Cleaver had not, the result being that he caught his foot in the carpet and sat down with a thud, which made the dishes dance again. Roars of laughter from everyone, except from the victim, who was somewhat shaken.

"I can't say I'm sorry," observed Aunt Eliza to her neighbour, Mr. Silver. "Old fool, the idea of putting such notions into the girl's head. 'Her ladyship,' indeed; what next, I wonder?"

Mr. Silver answered nothing. He, too, was beginning to feel a slight pain at the back of his head, and a rather wild look appeared in his dark, almond-shaped eyes.

"Your floors are very hard, Josiah," said Mr. Cleaver,

smiling painfully. "I shall be black and blue to-morrow, coming down like that."

"Meant to stand on, not sit," said his host, still laughing heartily.

"Dear me, what a pity," said Fred, suddenly rising and walking behind the victim. "A new pair of trousers, too. Must have been a nail in the floor. Don't turn round, for goodness' sake, Mr. Cleaver, Aunt Eliza's shy."

For a moment the chastened humorist stood staring wildly. Then, blushing a dark red, he sidled carefully along the wall, and, reaching the door, fled out.

The girls, with brimming eyes, looked ostentatiously out of the window. Mr. Salter sniggered, but Aunt Eliza rose at once, and muttering "Most indelicate," withdrew, with Maggie and Cassa at her heels.

"Such jokes are bad form, Fred," said Josiah severely, "and unfit for a gentleman's house. But come along now, all of you. We've been here close on half an hour already and shall be late for church."

Everyone rose at once, and they all filed out of the room. Whereupon, the coast being clear, Henry entered, and stood disgustedly surveying the *débris* of the late repast.

He knew better, however, than to ring for fresh food. In all probability the summons would have gone unanswered; for orders to the servants, except from the heads of the family, were discountenanced. They were their servants, not those of their sons and daughters, was an oft-repeated maxim at Frampton House.

"What beastliness," muttered Henry. "Still, even so, it's better than the hustle and clatter of ten minutes ago, and, please heaven, I'll be out of it soon."

He sat down, and proceeded to make the best meal he could off some flabby toast and indifferent marmalade. Mrs. Kempton was not extravagant where household stores were concerned: "Nobody knew the difference," she

was wont to declare, and it saved a pretty penny in the end.

"Damn!" he muttered, suddenly diving below the table, for at that moment he caught sight of his father passing the window on his way to church, and he realised that an interview would be disastrous at this hour. "He's gone now though, thank heaven," reappearing once more. "Off to church. Hope it will put him in a Christian frame of mind, though it don't usually, especially when old Peterkin has been on the stump. Sanctimonious old humbug, wringing the dollars out of the gov'nor as none of us can ever do."

"Nice fight I shall have to get an allowance out of him," he continued. "Never mind, I can do on as little as most. No Dolly Vardens or drink-standing for me, like my fools of brothers. Pah! what coffee. How the devil the gov'nor puts up with it, I don't know. Suppose he likes it; hanged if I do, though."

"Gad," lighting a cigarette, "it's sickening: a man with his intelligence kowtowing to a stupid woman like my mother. Well, it's his lookout, not mine; if he likes to wallow, let him."

Henry rose, and with a book under his arm made his way to the summer-house, where he spent three absorbing hours in the reading of Byron's *Don Juan*.

He was still immersed in it, when he saw his father passing on his way back from church. Pocketing the book, he rose, and walked across the lawn towards him, raising his hat as he neared Josiah, a courtesy that, he knew, was singularly pleasing to the old man.

"Good morning, father," he said, "you had left before I came down this morning, so I couldn't see you to say how sorry I was for being late; I do now, though."

"That's all very well, Henry," answered Josiah sternly ("Confound it! Peterkin's had first look-in," muttered his son, observing the tell-tale expression of religious gloom on

his sire's face), "but why were you late? You know I don't allow laziness in my household; that's not the way to become a good business man. I should never have made my money had I been a stay-abed. Why, I used to get up at five o'clock every morning, walk a mile to the station, and be at the office at seven, when I started business."

"I know, father. I'm very sorry, but I slept badly last night. I often do. I was overtired, I think."

Josiah's face softened. The boy did look pale, he thought—Henry always did, but nevertheless possessed the constitution of an ox—he must get Dr. Dogge to see him.

"I am sorry to hear that, my boy," he said, looking somewhat anxiously at the sufferer; "you must take it easy for a bit. Have a day off to-morrow; I'll see Mr. Daddle about it myself."

"Thank you very much, father, but it wasn't the office work that tired me. I was worrying about something else."

A gleam of suspicion appeared in Josiah's eyes. "What about?" he said sharply. "You've not been running into debt, I hope? You know, Henry, I've always told you and your brothers . . ." he was rapidly working himself up, when his son interrupted in a hurt tone:

"You ought to know, father," he said, "it would be nothing of that sort with me, nor ever will, I hope. You may not be aware of it; perhaps, but I've already opened a banking account—money saved from the allowance you make me. Here's my pass-book if you would like to see it," he added, producing from his pocket the parchment-covered book with which, foreseeing a possible advantage, he had had the forethought to provide himself.

Josiah took it from him, his practised eye running over the figures. He then handed it back with a smile of genuine pleasure.

"Twenty-seven pounds," he said, "a very good

beginning, Henry, indeed, and pleases me to see more than I can say." Then, impulsively drawing a plain leather purse from his pocket, he took out two golden sovereigns, and handed them to Henry. "Here's something to add to the store," he said, "and perhaps later on there may be another two; that is of course if you go on as you're now doing, and I can still afford it. Show me your pass-book every month, my boy, it gives your father very great pleasure to see it. Come along in to lunch now, though; we mustn't keep your mother waiting," and taking his son by the arm he led him away to the house.

"I should like to have a few minutes' talk with you after lunch, father," said Henry, as they reached the door, "it's about this other matter I told you of, which was worrying me last night."

Josiah stopped, with another glance of suspicion. "It—it's not some . . . woman, Henry?" he said in a hushed voice.

"Of course not," was the indignant answer; "really, father, I'm surprised at your thinking such a thing."

Josiah breathed heavily, then turned to his son, a look of pride replacing the gleam of suspicion. "I beg your pardon, Henry," he said, "I was wrong, and ought to have known you better. Certainly, I will give you five minutes, or more if you like, in the library after lunch. Come along now, I can smell the roast mutton," and Josiah, followed by his son, entered the house.

Lunch—or rather Sunday dinner—though possibly even more of an ordeal to the uninured than the preceding meal, was nevertheless conducted on very different lines, for whereas in the latter good-will and boisterous humour reigned unchecked, in the former the atmosphere was of gloom and silence.

For in the interval Josiah had been to church, and on Josiah religious influences worked strongly, though, as

happens in some cases, with a rather unhappy effect. "We're all damned, I less than most, but still I'm in a bad way, though you mustn't think so," was, in brief, Josiah's faith; and not only did he feel it incumbent on him to impress his views on the members of his household, but to insist on their feeling as he felt, and sympathising with his sensations.

Why the effect of his religious exercises should reach its culminating point at Sunday dinner, immediately afterwards disappearing, is one of those mysteries impossible of explanation; but there it was, with the result that a strained and watchful attention was to be observed on all faces, everyone being anxious to avoid the many pitfalls open to receive them. To-day Mr. Kempton had been especially stirred. He took his seat at the head of the table, with gloom written on his brow, the gloom deepening, as he began to doubt the wisdom of his recent lavishness, which, in addition to what had been wrung from him by the exhortations of Mr. Peterkin, made a nasty hole in the contents of the leather purse aforesaid.

A sense of ill-usage came over him. "I often wonder," he said sadly, tucking his napkin into his collar as he spoke, "whether you children are grateful for the many blessings you enjoy."

No one answered. Silence, as they all well knew, was here golden.

"I cannot think you are," he continued, working himself up. "Do you, Fred, for instance, realise that many young men like yourself have no nice home, no good dinner to sit down to?"

"Oh come, father," said Fred, prudence forgotten in annoyance at being thus taken to task before his friends, "draw it mild. Most parents surely provide a home of some sort for their children, and give them something to eat. Of course we're grateful and all that, but . . . oh

damn!" an expression of anguish suddenly appearing on his face, the result of a well-aimed kick on the shin from Hubert opposite.

There was a moment's dreadful hush. An oath at any time was abhorrent to Josiah; but an oath on Sunday, and that coming on top of one of Mr. Peterkin's most denunciatory sermons—what, oh what would happen?

They were not left long in doubt. The outraged head of the house slowly rose, his napkin still tucked beneath his chin.

"An oath," he said, looking down on the rows of scared faces, "on the Sabbath, too. Am I dreaming? Leave the room, sir," he shouted, the storm bursting, "and don't let me see you again to-day."

The crimson-faced Fred rose and meekly departed; whereupon Josiah resumed his place.

An awkward pause followed, which was broken by Maria.

"How very eloquent Mr. Peterkin was to-day," she said, addressing the table generally. "Such a truly interesting sermon he gave us, didn't you think so, Mr. Silver?"

Before Silver could answer, Josiah took her up.

"'Interesting' is hardly the word I should have used, my dear," he said reprovingly. "Stirring, rather. To think," he continued with gloomy gusto, "that we shall all soon be food for worms. I wonder does that thought ever occur to you, Salter, in your pleasure-seeking life?"

Salter was too terrified to answer, and from sheer nervousness gave a weak giggle.

Another pause ensued.

"I seem to be unfortunate in my poor attempts at conversation this morning," sighed Josiah at last. "First, my own son swears profanely, and now his friend laughs. I did not mean to joke, however. Tell me," addressing the company, "did what I say appear humorous?"

There was a general murmur of "Of course not," indignant looks being directed at the trembling Salter.

"Well, well," continued the host, mollified, "one mustn't be too hard, for I, like all of you here, am a sinner—and doomed." He regarded his audience, who dutifully looked incredulous.

"*Judge not, that ye be not judged. Vengeance is mine.* This mutton is tough, my dear," he added somewhat inconsequently. "You must really see your butcher about it." All faces lightened, for the crisis was over, and Josiah's religious fervour had subsided till next Sunday.

Mr. Cleaver now took up the parable, Josiah's last words giving him an opening; and for the remainder of the meal he enlivened his audience with a discourse on the respective merits of English and New Zealand mutton.

Josiah having then offered up a thanksgiving, the party joyfully rose and dispersed, the ladies going to the drawing-room, the men to the garden to smoke. Josiah looked after the latter for a moment, sighed, and then, seeing Henry waiting, led the way to the library.

"And now, my boy, what is it?" he said, closing the door. "But before you begin I should like to say that I was much pleased at your behaviour at table just now; so unlike that of your brother Fred and his friend."

This was encouraging, and Henry sat down, producing at the same time a paper envelope containing cigars. Smoking, he was well aware, had a soothing effect on his father, as on most.

"Won't you first try one of these cigars, father?" he said. "They're not bad. I bought them at a shop in Broad Street, twopence apiece. Ten per cent. cheaper than anywhere else."

This was not strictly true, the weeds in question having cost a shilling each in Piccadilly; but at that price, as Henry knew, their flavour would have been as ashes to Josiah.

"Thank you, my boy, I will," he answered, much gratified. How was it, he reflected, that Henry, alone of all his children, thought of these little attentions? "They're worth the money," he added, puffing away, "and you do right to think of a ten per cent. reduction; that's the way to make money. And now what is it? Some little thing you want me to do? Well, if I can, I will."

"You know, father," began Henry, watching his sire through the smoke of his own cigarette, "you're often said that if you make a bad venture in business it's better to get quit at a loss than to persist, thus throwing good money after bad."

"That's quite right, Henry," said Josiah. "I remember as an instance those drawing-room suites that your Uncle Robert ordered, and which I said would never go:" and here Mr. Kempton indulged in a business anecdote, to which his son patiently listened, now and again putting in a word of approval or comment.

"Well, father," he continued, when the story was finished, "I'm rather like those drawing-room suites—I shall never go, not in the law, at any rate."

"What?" said Josiah, startled. "You don't mean, Henry, you want to throw up the law, after all the money, too, I've spent on your articles."

"And I think," pursued his son, "it would be wiser to change now, while I am young, than to wait till more money is spent. You did much the same yourself, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I never cost any one a farthing by so doing. It was on my savings I started. I've paid three hundred pounds for you, though—a very large sum indeed."

"I know, father, and I feel it very deeply, I assure you. I only wish I could pay it back myself now, but I can't. I will later, though, I promise you. You know, father, you, rightly are all for success in life, and I shall never be a

success where I am : whereas I should be, I am sure, in the . . . other."

"What other, Henry? Look here, my boy, it's a serious matter this, and understand I make no promises, but if you've really something practical in your mind—and I'm bound to say you usually have—I don't say but what I won't think it over. And I," in a sudden burst of confidence, "don't mind telling you I'm a rich man, and I daresay the loss of three hundred pounds won't break me. Though," recollecting himself, "of course it's a deal of money, even to me. Now, what is your plan, my boy? As I said before, I will help you if I can."

"I'm afraid you won't much approve when I do tell you," was the slow answer. "I am thinking of the army."

For a moment Josiah stared at his son in blank amazement; then his face flushed a dark red, and he rose, pitching his cigar into the fireplace.

"The—the army," he stuttered; "do I hear you aright, Henry, or am I dreaming?" And then a storm of objurgation descended on the head of his unmoved son. "Well, you, a son of mine, enter an idle, good-for-nothing profession, only fit for loafers, and titled ne'er-do-wells. You propose to squander money, worked for by me and your brothers, in luxury and vicious pleasures. A fine gentleman, forsooth, while we are toiling and slaving in the City to make ends meet. And may I ask what's put this precious plan into your head? that jackanapes of a Lord Charles yesterday, I suppose?"

"I neither saw nor spoke to Lord Charles," was the quiet answer, "and certainly would not have been influenced by him, had I done so. And look here, father, don't you think you're rather unfair in what you say about the army. There are wasters in every profession, as we all know, but to the best of my belief you've never met an officer in your

life, nor do you know anything about them beyond what you've heard."

"I know quite enough, anyway," answered Josiah angrily, "to be sure that it's no profession for a hard-working, business man's son. No, no, my boy, the money Josiah Kempton has made, Josiah Kempton means to keep. No wicked, wasteful extravagance for any son of his. Now, let's have no more of this folly, Henry. You stick to your work at Mr. Daudle's, and try to become like him, a first-class lawyer, and at the same time an honourable, god-fearing man who pays his way."

"Father, it's better you should know at once that my mind's made up; and you know, when that is so——" Henry was beginning, when his father interrupted:

"I really must decline to discuss the subject further," he said. "I have had my say, and the matter is at an end. I am now going to join your mother in the drawing-room. Are you coming? No? well, I suppose I must go alone," and, having thus somewhat abruptly closed the conversation, Josiah left the room.

"Another minute, and he would have caved in," commented Henry, lighting another cigarette. "He had no arguments, only bluster, and once that went he was done. He knew it, too, that's why he's off to mother, to get stiffened up. Well, she has no arguments either, only pig-headedness."

Strangely enough, Josiah was now finding this out, when, having despatched his two daughters to the garden, he proceeded to relate his conversation with Henry.

Of ridicule of the project there was plenty from Maria's lips, but of the sound reasons and arguments he had looked for, none; and gradually, at the contemptuous disdain shown by his wife for both Henry and his project, a feeling of irritation arose within Josiah. He now—though still declaring the idea as out of the question—expressed himself

as sorry for the boy's disappointment, and for the first time in his life put up a half-hearted defence of the profession of arms, declaring that, though there were undoubtedly more "wasters" in it than in any other, still there must be good men too.

Maria derided both the idea of Henry's disappointment and the possibility of the presence of white sheep in the army, though, as a matter of fact, she had no conscientious objection to the profession, as her husband had. On the contrary, she would have been only too glad to welcome any officer of the army to her house; but, at the thought of Henry being so elevated, all her jealous, stubborn nature rose in revolt, and she vowed that this thing should not be.

Henry, however, had sworn it should, and a week having elapsed without any change in the situation, he brought up his reserves, and intercepting his father one morning in the hall—Josiah, acting under orders from his wife, had declined all further interviews or discussion on the subject—
informed him that, if sanction were withheld any longer, he intended to enlist.

Maria was at first incredulous. But, when she understood that he meant what he said, the horror of the idea overcame her—the thought of a red-coated son, a private soldier appearing at one of their social gatherings being too terrible to contemplate.

At length the end came, and one evening Henry was sent for to the library, where he found his father and mother gloomily awaiting him.

"Henry," said the former, "I suppose you know, though it seems you are too hard-hearted and callous to care, that this determination of yours has almost broken your mother's heart. I will not say what it has meant to me, nevertheless it appears that, with a reckless disregard for our feelings, you have made up your mind to adopt a profession for which, as you well know, I have the greatest

detestation, and to carry out your selfish wishes are even ready to disgrace your family by enlisting. To avoid this calamity we are going to do what you desire. You can enter the army; but, I tell you now, it is with no blessing nor approval of mine that you do so. To-morrow you will commence your studies at Mr. Cram's for the necessary examinations. That will do, Henry, you can go."

With this benediction from his parents, and the surreptitious present of a five-pound note from Mr. Cleaver—who admired the lad's spirit—Henry Kempton started on his new career in life.

Some eighteen months later, Lady Violet Ravenscroft, apathetically scanning her morning's correspondence, came upon a letter in a hand unknown to her. Opening the envelope, she took out a small printed slip, evidently a cutting from some newspaper. Other enclosure there was none. So, what puzzled, she read the lines, read them again, and then, seating herself by the fire, stared thoughtfully into the flames. For some minutes she sat, and then, with the cutting still in her hand, rose, and moving across to the table, began to write. Twice she tore across the pages already written, but at last the letter was completed, and the envelope addressed and fastened down. On it was inscribed the following:

Henry Kempton, Esq.,
24th Hussars,
Lewfontein,
South Africa.

The apathetic expression had by now vanished from Lady Violet's face. She rose, put the slip carefully away in a green leather despatch box, and then, sitting down once more, resumed her contemplation of the fire.

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BOOK II

CHAPTER VI

THE 24th Hussars was not one of the fashionable regiments of the British Army. Had it been so, it is pretty certain that Henry Kempton, its last-joined member, without interest, and with an allowance cut down to the most meagre proportions, would have had little chance of entering its ranks.

In addition to being unfashionable, it had of late acquired the reputation of being an "unhappy" corps, by which is meant that, instead of that unity and feeling of brotherhood so essential to the well-being of men living in the close contact and intimacy of a mess, there was discord. At the time of Henry's joining, indeed, there was very considerable discord, dating from the time of the present colonel's appointment to the command, some six months previously.

Till then, under the rule of a somewhat easy-going chief, the regiment had been a happy one enough, but unfortunately towards the close of his reign it had fallen under the ban of a newly-appointed and consequently extra-zealous general officer, who having made his inspection of the 24th reported on it in damning terms.

The authorities at home, accepting without question their delegate's dictum, had thereupon decided to carry out drastic changes, and, though allowing Colonel Fuddle to complete his term of command, at its close passed over to the next senior, Major Raymond, and appointed as chief James Sparling, an officer from another corps. Two captains

from the 10th Lancers were also gazetted as majors to the 24th, *vice* two of the latter regiment placed on half-pay, all power being thus placed—excepting such as Major Raymond, as second-in command, could still retain—in the hands of strangers, a proceeding naturally bitterly resented by everyone. What private instructions Colonel Sparling may have received from headquarters were of course unknown, but from the time of his appointment a new era began in the 24th. No longer did officers stroll down to stables with cigarette in mouth, and kits unorthodox, though possibly comfortable. No longer did the orderly officer sleep his morning sleep unheeding of reveille, nor, most tyrannous of all, play polo in the afternoon. All was changed: leisure there was none, nor rest; instead, something—always something obnoxious and unnecessary—found to do.

Resentment smouldered and grew, the flame adroitly, though secretly, fanned by Major Raymond, to whom an outbreak—could he but remain personally uninvolved—would be naturally comforting. The result was that in a few months the regiment was divided into two sharply-defined factions: on the one side, Colonel Sparling and the two new-comers, Majors Aylwin and Carados; on the other, the remainder of the officers, led by the second in command. As to which of the three new officers was the most objectionable, opinions were divided, Raymond declaring, and the majority agreeing with him, that Carados, and not the colonel, was the originator of the present tyranny, and that, once rid of the former, the latter would fall by his own violence and want of tact. Others said Sparling was the culprit—he was certainly the most detested—while a few maintained that Aylwin was to blame, though, against this, he had been distinctly popular in his former regiment.

This, though doubtless an interesting point, was hardly

likely to be solved, for the three in question kept their own counsel, and to outward appearances were absolutely united; while, though harrying, and unnecessary harrying there undoubtedly was, it was so skilfully masked under the guise of a conscientious desire for the discipline and efficiency of the regiment, that any appeal to authority was obviously hopeless. Moreover, only on the officers did the hand of oppression fall; the men and non-commissioned officers felt none of it, and were in consequence as happy and contented as before.

It was this that baffled Raymond—for he knew that authority would have intervened at mutiny—and perhaps more than anything made him certain that other brains than those of Sparling directed affairs. He was aware that tactlessness must make itself felt, if allowed, and the colonel's tactlessness was a glaring fact, and, yet, save in the one direction, it was not allowed. There was a restraining hand, and that the hand of one of his two supporters. This, he knew intuitively, must be that of Carados, knew also that it was owing to him that his own position as second in command was but a nominal one, and devoid of any real control over matters regimental. He was further aware that against him, personally, that hand was directed, and ready to strike.

Nevertheless, though for the present baffled, he stuck to his schemes, which aimed at the removal of the colonel, and the advancement of himself. He must bide his time, he determined; something would be given him soon to catch hold of, and with this idea in his mind he waited, incidentally keeping a diary in which each day's doings were noted. He had already several pages full of minor incidents, trifling in themselves and useless at present, but possibly of service later in establishing a charge of tyranny, when the time and opportunity came for such to be preferred. He was also, unlike the three oppressors, on good terms with

the general commanding the district, who would help him, he was assured, provided till then he made no errors.

Taking all this into consideration, the state of the 24th Hussars, at the time of Henry's joining, might with justice be described as "unhappy." He, supremely ignorant—as were those connected with him—of army matters and gossip, had heard nothing of all this previous to joining. It was sufficient for him, that not only had he carried out his plans despite all opposition, but, more creditable still, had succeeded in wringing from his father permission to enter the cavalry, instead of the humbler infantry branch of the service. It had been with feelings of considerable exultation—secretly shared by Josiah—that he had seen his name in the Gazette, and felt his feet to be well upon the social ladder at last.

Since joining, these feelings had undergone some slight modification. The actual work, it is true, the riding-school, recruits' drill, and so on, annoyed him in no way. That he had expected, and it was part of the game, but in other matters he was a little disappointed.

The officers, for instance, though as good fellows individually as were to be met with in any regiment, were nevertheless not quite up to the imaginary standard he had established. Good qualities were all very well, but social advantages were what Henry desired to reap from his new venture, and so far he saw few.

Gentlemen his brother officers undoubtedly were, that was a mere matter of course; but, gentlemen though they were, between them and the social status of the Ravenscroft family—and the latter, for two years, had been Henry's test by which those he met with were tried—there was a wide gulf.

Moreover, though this was trifling in comparison, his interests were in no way theirs, which lay mostly in the direction of sports and games. As already mentioned,

Henry had neither knowledge of nor liking for these ; and though of this they had as yet no suspicion, still his ignorance was so obvious as to make conversation with the new-comer an effort from which they consequently refrained.

For the first week or so he was left very much to himself, except for an occasional lecture from Colonel Sparling, for whom, even thus early, he conceived a violent dislike, the same sentiment being aroused in his breast by Major Raymond, in spite of the fact that he showed a disposition to be friendly, almost gushingly so, indeed. Henry, however, from much experience of such, recognised in him the familiar brand of "Suburbia," and his soul revolted forthwith. He had not joined the 24th in order to fraternise with a Mr. Bucket in Hussar uniform.

It is true he was somewhat attracted by Major Aylwin's distinguished appearance, but that officer took little notice of Henry or anyone else. He was a taciturn individual of caustic speech and reserved habits, his one friend in the regiment being, it was said, Major the Honourable John Carados. The latter, having been absent on leave during the last three weeks, Henry had not yet met, though this he was anxious to do, partly because he was his squadron officer, but more particularly on account of the desirable prefix to his name.

The present strained state of feeling in the regiment naturally soon became apparent to the new-comer, but, try as he would, so far he had been unable to extract any information concerning it from his brother officers—the younger members being obviously afraid to speak, the seniors disdaining to discuss the matter with such a fledgling.

He felt that Raymond might, and probably would, enlighten him, were he to ask, but from this, as possibly leading to intimacy, Henry shrank. At length, after many snubs, enlightenment to some extent was his, his

informant being a subaltern in his own squadron, beside whom he happened to be sitting one night at mess.

The regimental band was playing Schubert's "Adieu," and Henry, with half-closed eyes, was rapturously listening, his mind in that state of dreamy content which such music never failed to induce, when, with considerable annoyance, he heard Griffin's voice addressing him—a Griffin warmed with sparkling wine, and inclined consequently to be gracious and more communicative to his junior.

"Well, Kempton," he said, "beginning to feel your feet a bit, I hope. How do you like Lewfontein? Beastly awful hole, isn't it?"

"I've not had much time to see it yet," answered Henry; "the barrack square and manèges are about as far as I've got, up to now."

"Oh, well, it's always like that at first," said the other condescendingly, "though when I joined one could always get leave off to play polo. Made all the difference."

"And you can't now?" queried Henry.

"Of course you can't. I take it, if you could, you'd have been on the polo ground by now. By the way, you ought to be thinking about getting some ponies."

"What's the good if I can't play? But why was . . ."

"You will, in time; and anyway they'll do for the regimental team—that is, if that's not stopped, too. We all lend our ponies for tournaments, Kempton, and glad to do it."

"But why were recruit officers stopped playing?"

"Oh, I don't know, ask someone else; or better still," looking cautiously around and lowering his voice, "ask the colonel."

"No, thank you, Griffin," answered Henry in the same key.

"Why not? Don't you like the colonel, Kempton?"

"Not at all," said Henry, taking his cue.

Griffin expanded. "Well, no more do I," said he, "nor any of us. He's playing hell with the regiment, he and his two pals. There's one of them, up there on his right," jerking his head towards the end of the table, where Aylwin was sitting, with a rather bored expression on his face, as he listened to a lecture on tactics from his chief. "He's not the worst, Kempton," the speaker continued, "though the fellows in his squadron say he is; nor Sparling either, for that matter. He only gets on one's nerves, but . . . Up with you," he broke off, suddenly rising with the rest. "They're going, thank the Lord. Hear that?" as a burst of general conversation now broke from the hitherto silent assembly. "Tells its tale, don't it?"

"Who's the worst?" pursued Henry, reseating himself.

"Carados, Major the Honourable John Carados, our squadron leader, Kempton, yours and mine. Wait till you see him, my lad, and you won't have long to wait. He comes back to-night."

"In what way is he the worst?"

"In every way. He's a damn sight cleverer than the other two, to start with, and thinks of things they wouldn't. He stops at nothing, either, don't care a curse for anybody or anything. Oh, he's a gem, is Carados, as you'll find out soon enough."

"They seem to like him in the squadron, though," observed Henry. "The sergeant-major's always bringing his name up. Says what a wonderful fellow he is, and how he can do anything with the men."

"The men," answered Griffin, with much contempt. "Oh yes, they like him well enough; he never gets on to them, for some reason, as he does on to us. I've had about enough of his insolence, though," finishing his liqueur and ordering another. "I'm watching it, I tell you, and I'll run him up before the general, give me half a chance. He's a nice example, too," he added. "I ain't one of your

nonconformist conscience blokes, but for a married man to . . . Have a drink, Kempton?"

"Thank you, I will. I didn't know he was married."

"Well, he is, though you mightn't think it; but that's no business of mine, and on that subject you'll keep your mouth shut if you're wise. He'll out you straight if he catches you gassing about that: and he *will* catch you; he always does. Oh Lord, here's Aylwin back again. What for? confound him! Some damn fatigue, I suppose."

The conversation had suddenly ceased, dead silence reigned, and everyone regarded the table-cloth.

"The colonel wishes, gentlemen," said the cold voice of the senior major, "to continue his lecture on the stars. Will you kindly meet him outside the mess in ten minutes from now." He went out, the door swinging after him.

Silence reigned till his footsteps had died away, and then arose a buzz of indignant whispering.

"A lecture, after mess too," muttered Griffin. "A lot he knows about the stars. It's only done to annoy us. Oh, come on, we've got to, I suppose." The speaker rose with the rest, and, donning his cloak, went outside to where the colonel, watch in hand, was awaiting them.

Here, for an hour, a group of shivering officers stood listening to a didactic enumeration of the various constellations, delivered in the high-pitched, somewhat raucous voice of Colonel Sparling. This completed, and their attendance having been requested at 7 o'clock the next evening, the audience was dismissed. With rage seething in their chilled bosoms, they sought their various quarters.

"Lord! what a C.O.," reflected Henry as he undressed some few minutes later; "no wonder they're all in a state of mutiny. I am myself. Pity the other side haven't a leader—not that boulder Raymond—and they'd out this pedantic fool in no time. Wonder how he's lasted so long."

Aylwin or Carados, I suppose. Nice account, Griffin's, of our squadron leader this evening; not that I'd trust Griffin or anyone else, except myself. He must have his weak side, though, everyone has. I must find it. It's soldiering, I should say, mad keen, and gets on to these fellows because they shirk their work. All right, I'll be a keen soldier too. I'd be anything if it paid me—and this might. He's an Honourable, which is something. Yes, I will cultivate him, touch my hat and call him 'Sir.' Hullo, that's him, I suppose," as at that moment a cape cart was heard stopping outside the quarters. "Must be; he's the only one in this block, bar myself." He cautiously drew aside the curtain, and peered through the window, his eyes falling on a cloaked figure standing on the verandah steps.

A harsh voice cursed the driver, the latter responding with: "Thank you, baas," the cursing overlooked in the liberality of the largesse. Then the cart drove off; the figure strode across the boards. A door banged, and all was silent.

CHAPTER VII

"GOOD morning, Mr. Griffin."

Henry's hand dropped from the swing doors of the ante-room before him. He stood still, listening.

"Good morning," he heard repeated in the harsh tones of the previous night—to its harshness now being added an unpleasant jeer. "Don't know me, it seems. A few days' absence and I'm forgotten. *Sic transit*, Mr. Griffin."

"Yes, sir," came in sullen tones from the other side of the door.

"You're an ill-mannered cub, Mr. Griffin, and I'm going to teach you manners, d'ye hear? Fail to salute me again, and I'll have you on the square with the recruits. You know me, so watch it, if you're wise."

A muttered response, the ring of spurs, and then the door opened, and Griffin appeared, with an expression of anger mingled with fear on his good-looking face. On seeing Henry, he stopped. "Eavesdropping, good Lord!" he said indignantly. "Oh, damn it!" recovering himself. "I beg your pardon, of course you weren't. That devil's put me out; I'm sorry. Go in and make the acquaintance of your squadron leader, Kempton. Now's your chance. He's in a charming mood, one of the best. She's been taking it out of him, I should say. Hope she has;" and with this enigmatical utterance Griffin went on his way. For a moment Henry remained, for the first time in his

life a prey to nervousness, then, with an effort, he rallied his forces.

"He's a bully," he reflected, "that's all. Well, he shan't bully me," and with this commendable resolution he once more laid his hand on the swing doors, pushed them open, and entered the room beyond.

At the far end a man was standing with his back towards him, staring out of the window, and, seeing him, Henry's spirits rose, for this surely was no creature to be afraid of. Why, he was but a dwarf, and . . . And then the "dwarf" wheeled round, faced him—and Henry stopped, his confidence suddenly shaken. For confronting him was strength such as he had never dreamed of, strength, physical and mental, the former evident in the huge shoulders, bull neck, and long, gorilla-like arms: the latter in the massive forehead, grim jaw, and brilliant hazel eyes.

Truly, not an engaging-looking person was John Carados, but one, the unpleasantness of whose exterior was—or so said the officers of the 24th—only too well in keeping with his character, though this had not been quite the opinion of his former associates in the 10th. Lancers. There, though always known as a singularly implacable enemy if aroused—a feat somewhat difficult, provided certain topics were avoided—he had not been unpopular, but rather the reverse. By the men, indeed, he was adored. With them he had become an institution, in fact a bit of a character, whose salient points were an inherited hatred of social progress, as represented by present-day radicalism, a passion for deep reading, and, perhaps of more account in their eyes, a wide-famed renown in a certain branch of athletics.

On hearing of his new reputation the 10th were both amazed and incredulous. "Old Jack could not have changed to that extent," they declared, "it was the fault of the 24th; they had put his back up somehow, and of course if you did that—well . . ."

Here they were wrong, for, though old Jack's back was undoubtedly "up," it was not the 24th who had performed that operation. They were merely the scapegoats for another's misdeeds. It was true, also, that their former comrade had changed, or rather, as this is impossible, the mind, formerly engrossed in the pursuit of knowledge, was now engaged in other matters. This change, moreover, had dated from the time of his arrival in South Africa, when a new element had come into his life—one which had soon poisoned its every source, and made his existence a torment. As an inevitable result, the hitherto absorbing interest of his life had been abandoned—his heart being no longer in it.

The new pursuit, however, required no mental exertion, and the intellect was thus left without an object on which to expend itself, a dangerous state of affairs with a mind such as that of Carados. But, as usual, it found one, though possibly of a kind unworthy of its powers, and into the petty struggle now raging in the 24th Carados flung himself with zest, the more so as it enabled him to work off on the malcontents some part of the rage and bitterness inflicted on himself by another.

For the rights and wrongs of the present crisis he cared not one jot; it served him as a distraction; that was all; indeed, but for two things he would in all probability have joined the other side, as being the more difficult, and thus affording greater scope for his talents. Of these two motives, one was a very real affection for his old friend, Herbert Aylwin; the other, a whole-hearted detestation of Major Raymond, from whom, as an aristocrat to the core, his soul revolted.

For the above reasons, solely, he had ranged himself on the side of authority, perhaps fortunately, perhaps unfortunately for the latter; for, though undoubtedly their mainstay and support, he at the same time acted as an

irritant. It is even possible that but for him matters might have righted themselves to the satisfaction of both parties. No one, save himself and Raymond, to whose interest it was, desired strife, and Raymond formerly had no following at all, his present influence being solely the outcome of circumstances. Oppression had bred opposition, and the leadership had fallen on himself for want of a better or higher. However, thanks to him, they were too far committed to draw back now. The battle had to be fought out to the end, that end being the final supremacy of one or the other of the contending parties.

Aylwin in particular hated the business, and did his best to restrain Sparling, whose only faults were a want of tact, and a certain irritating pedantry. His efforts were of little avail against those of Carados, who goaded the colonel on; at the same time, with extraordinary skill and address, saving him from the many disasters which, without his guiding hand, would assuredly have befallen him. It was he who suggested and devised the greater part of the annoyances now inflicted on the officers of the 24th; the astronomical lectures, for instance, he proposed partly because they would draw Raymond away from the connubial hearth at night, though possibly more for the secret merriment that the scene, and in particular Colonel Sparling's lectures, would afford him.

There was one class that saw a very different side of his character. As in the 10th Lancers, the men of Carados' squadron were devoted to their leader; and he apparently to them. Certainly, he was another man when in their company. He knew them all well, every man of them: their merits and failings, where they came from, their parentage, and indeed all about them; and so far from being afraid of him they never hesitated, men and non-commissioned officers alike, to come to his quarters with their troubles, sure of sympathy, and, better still, help out of

them. How great a compliment this is only those can understand who know the private soldier and his ways. Their wives, also, he knew, and children; and even when Mrs. Lance-Corporal Jones, a shrill-tongued, abusive lady, was most bitter as to her treatment by full-Corporal Brown's wife, a word from him would restore harmony, and bring smiles to the faces of both disputants. Such was the man Henry Kempton had promised himself to cultivate, and as a beginning of such cultivation he now stood before him, with nerve and speech alike failing him. Incidentally, he also omitted to salute.

"Who the deuce are you?" was Carados' opening remark. "Oh, the new boy, I suppose. Left one happy family to join another, have you?"

"Yes, sir, I—I'm in your squadron."

Carados wheeled sharply on him with a furious look. "The devil!" he roared. "Giving me lip already, are you?" And then, noting Henry's bewilderment, the storm vanished, and he burst out laughing. "I give you the hit," he said, "though you didn't mean it. Shake hands, young un; we may as well start fair." He held out a great hand, while his brilliant eyes seemed to pierce Henry through and through, inducing in him a wild impulse to turn and flee.

"How long have you been here?" asked Carados, still staring.

"Three weeks, sir," faltered Henry.

"Oh, three weeks, quite an old soldier, know all about the heavenly bodies by now, I trust. What else have you learnt? To loathe me, I suppose. I don't care if you have. What have they been telling you? Out with it."

"That I—I must decline to do. I—I am not a sneak, sir," said Henry, a sudden instinct of the right thing to say flashing upon him. And, whatever he felt, that instinct told him that to show fear to this man would be fatal.

"God!" said Carados, and once more laughed aloud. "O-ho, defying me already, are you? Joined the other gang, I see."

"I have not, sir, nor shall not—not now."

"But why not now?" repeating Henry's emphasis on the last word.

"Because," returned Henry, gaining confidence, "I know now they will lose."

"Oh, do you, and, if not impertinent, may I ask if this conviction is your sole reason for supporting authority?"

"Yes, sir."

Again he burst out laughing, this time with genuine delight. Any protestations of duty, loyalty to his commanding officer, or such like, on Henry's part, and Carados would have fallen on him; but this calm, cynical avowal of purely utilitarian reasons for a course which was but his duty as an officer appealed to Carados, the more so coming from a just-joined subaltern. He chuckled again.

"You'll do," he said. "You'll do well; but hark ye, my youthful Talleyrand, don't be as open to the colonel, or yet to Aylwin. How do you like him, eh?"

"Very much, sir," answered Henry, instinct again guiding him, "that is, what I've seen of him. Beyond saying 'Good morning,' he hasn't taken much notice of me."

"Really? You surprise me. I'll speak to him about that. The idea of a field officer so wanting in respect to a second-lieutenant. Forgive him, Kempton, he's not a bad sort really. He's a damn good fellow, d'ye hear?" suddenly dropping his jeering tone, "a damn sight too good for this crowd. Hullo, who's this? A-ha, Raymond," as a bulky black-haired man at that moment entered the room, his ruddy face creasing into a smile, though his eyes had become watchful at sight of the pair. "Good morning, Raymond," he said politely.

"Good morning, Carados," was the rejoinder, in tones equally polite, and then Raymond disappeared.

"That's another good fellow," remarked Carados, watching Henry, "always so nice and friendly."

"I dislike him intensely," was the prompt answer, and this time a wrong one.

"What," roared Carados, "dislike the second in command, and have the damn cheek to tell me so? Get away to stables, you pup. Look at the time; you ought to be there by now waiting for me, instead of cackling here about your betters. Wait, confound you," as Henry instantly turned away. "I'm coming, too." He picked up his stick and gloves from a table, and strode out of the room, Henry following him.

"Now keep your eyes open, and don't talk," he said, as they reached the stables. "Give me a cigarette first. Always have a case full; and matches, too, for me. Don't let me catch you at it, though. It's forbidden—that is, to all but me. A-ha, sergeant-major," to a burly non-commissioned officer, who now came hurrying up with a grin of welcome on his face. "Squadron's gone to the devil since I've been away, I suppose. I'll give you hell, though, now I'm here. See if I don't. How's Mrs. Wenlock?"

"Doing very well, thank you, sir, both of them. It's a boy this time, sir; and the wife says as how she hopes you'll come round and see him some time, if not making too bold."

"Of course I'll come round. Ain't they both part of the squadron, and under my orders? Wish to God you and she'd obey them, though, and stop it. If they all went on as you do, we'd want a new wing to the barracks. What the hell are you grinning at?" to a troop-sergeant who was standing close by. "Wait till you're married, my friend, and have half a dozen. Won't grin then, will he, Wenlock? Ah," stopping short alongside a big, red-headed

man who was busy grooming a sleepy-looking black horse, "been on the tiddy again, Willis, I see—shaky hand, pink eyes, damn your soul."

"It's a fact, sir," said the one addressed briefly. "It was while you were away, sir. Over now—on the steady, sir."

"Hum! and how long will the steady last?"

"Two or three months, sir. Been same like that with me always, sir. Father same as me: big drink every now and again, and then A.T.A."*

"I'll make a note of it," said Carados, passing on, "and have you put away before the big drink comes on."

"'Ope 'e won't," said Willis, looking after him, with a look of consternation. "Fair settle me if e did. Not 'e, though. Ol' Jack's a rum un, but 'e ain't a 'ard bloke."

"Look out for that 'orse, sir," said a smart-looking sergeant, running up from behind Carados, "he kicks."

"What, this fellow?" said Carados, seizing the animal by the tail and slewing him round by sheer strength; "may kick you, but he won't me. You bloody fool, you, been a fortnight in the squadron and think you can tell me anything about my horses. Kempton."

"Yes, sir."

"Come up alongside, and keep your eyes and ears open. This," he continued, approaching another stable, "will be your troop. I make you a present of it: it's the worst of the lot. There's no sergeant, only a corporal in charge, and he's all wrong. Look at the way they're grooming." He stood waiting.

"Stand to your horses," at length cried a dull voice, whereupon a few shirt-sleeved figures shuffled to their horses' heads, the remainder going on with their work.

"Stand to your horses," suddenly roared Carados, and at the well-known voice combs and brushes clattered to the

* Army Temperance Association.

ground, and a second afterwards two rows of motionless figures were standing, hands to head-collar or bridoon.

"Beggy pardon, sir, I didn't see you when you first came in," said the same dull voice, and a dirty-looking corporal approached the pair.

"Didn't mean you to; and what the devil's that to do with it?" was the answer. "You're in charge, not me, and a nice mess you're making of it. Come outside, I want to talk to you—you stay here, sergeant-major."

"Now, Alderson," addressing the corporal, "you used to be a decent non-commissioned officer, not the slovenly, unshaven scarecrow you are now. What have you been up to, eh?"

The man shuffled uneasily. "Nothing, sir," he said at last.

"Oh, haven't you? Well, I happen to know you have. You've been fooling about with a girl down town, that's what you've been doing—the same yellow-haired piece Sergeant Camel was broke over last year, and your wife has been giving you hell over it. Quite right, too."

"Beggy pardon, sir, it's a li . . . leastways it was 'er naggin' that started it."

"Oh no, it wasn't. You began it that night you were tight after the sing-song. I saw you. Oh, don't worry yourself," noting the look of alarm on the man's face, "and you don't do it as a rule, I know; but . . . this tomfoolery has got to stop, d'ye hear?"

"Very well, sir."

"Think I'll take your word for it, do you? Not I. I'm going to see it stopped myself. Now look here, Alderson, which will you do, keep this girl on, and break—and I'll break you all right—or make it up with your wife?"

"She won't 'ave it, not now, sir. I've nuthink against it myself."

"I'll see she makes it up. I'll go there this evening."

You keep away till then, but not . . . down town. Now, which is to be? "

" I'll be glad enough, sir. Gawd's truth I would."

" Mean it? "

" Yes, sir."

" Right. Clear out. You observe, Kempton," he continued to the latter, who was staring after the corporal's retreating figure, " the high moral tone I insist on in this squadron. Never be immoral, Kempton. You're not, I hope."

" No, sir."

" Damned young idiot. Know anything about horses? " he added abruptly.

" Not a thing, sir."

" Hum, that's candid, anyway. First fellow I've heard own up to that. Most of them, from their own account, were bred in racing stables. I'll give you a lesson. First thing, don't be afraid of them, nor with men, same thing in managing both."

He hurried away to the adjacent sick-lines, followed by Henry, and then for half an hour discoursed on the various invalids, his pupil listening intently, the strange attraction he had felt for this man, from the first, growing stronger each moment.

At the end of that time, the lecture—during which Henry had learnt as much as most second-lieutenants do in a month—ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

" Cigarette," demanded his mentor, " matches? Right! Now be off to your troop, lick it into shape or, by God, you'll be for it:" and ignoring Henry's salute he turned his back on him, and strode away to his quarters; nor was he seen again that day.

CHAPTER VIII

THE weeks passed, and soon the curious immunity from insult enjoyed by the last-joined subaltern at the hands of his squadron leader became a matter of general comment, and that of an unfavourable nature.

Currying favour with his superiors is an offence not to be tolerated in a junior officer—in more exalted ranks the practice is not so condemned—and, though in the present case the accusation was quite without foundation, they, with some show of reason, considered Henry was guilty of it; otherwise, why was he alone exempt, or comparatively so, from sneers or even censure?

Cold looks now became his portion in the mess. Major Raymond ceased his jocular morning greetings, and with them his invitations to Grimalkin House. His small, sharp eyes watched Henry closely, with an unpleasant expression in them as he did so. Of late the second-in-command had become bolder, more open in his opposition to his chief, for, ever a sanguine person, he was now confident, this confidence dating from the time of a recent conversation with General Banks, when the general had practically promised him the inquiry at which he aimed.

Nevertheless, his case, as he was well aware, rested on the unanimity of the dissatisfaction reigning in the 24th; and given but one hostile witness, even though but a second-lieutenant, and the carefully elaborated plan might fall to pieces, a further danger lying in the probability of others following the example set, and also wavering.

Consequently, he determined that this defection on the part of one of those he held to be his rightful following must be crushed at the outset, or, if persisted in, the delinquent made to endure such discomfort as would result in his speedy departure from the regiment. Fortunately for him, a lever was ready to his hand, for, though six months had elapsed since Kempton's joining, and he was now liberated from recruits' drill and riding school, he had so far made no attempt to provide himself with polo ponies, as required by regimental custom. In fact, it was beginning to dawn on his brother officers that this latest acquisition to the ranks had no liking for polo, nor for games or sport of any kind.

It is possible that Major Raymond himself had no more inclination for these pursuits than his victim, but unlike Henry he had always been careful to conceal such sentiments; indeed, on his reputation as a sportsman he was wont loudly to insist, in order to emphasise the difference between himself and the usurper, Sparling, who disliked such pursuits even more than Henry.

"Such a pity for a colonel to take no part nor interest in regimental pursuits," he was in the habit of observing to General Banks; "and after all, sports and games are as much a part of regimental life as drill." And the general, who was about as much of a sportsman at heart as the speaker, would sigh, and regretfully agree.

In conversation with his brother officers, he now brought the same charge against Henry, at the same time lamenting the degeneracy of present-day subalterns in tolerating such backsliding. The result of these exhortations was that at length the smouldering resentment against Henry blazed forth into open enmity. The climax arrived one night at a mess dinner, following on the finals of the Squadron Polo Tournament, when Major Raymond, addressing a somewhat elevated audience—the three seniors having left the room—

eulogised polo playing as a duty incumbent on every cavalry officer, and with more directness than was his wont, stigmatised *all*—with a slight emphasis on the last word—those who had no liking for the game as undesirables, and, as such, better out of the regiment.

From the ante-room Henry, who had left with the three seniors, heard the applause following these remarks, and disturbed in his reading by this, and the crash of breaking furniture and glass which soon began to make itself heard, unwisely retired to his own quarters. There, with some contemptuous reflections on the revellers, he sat down, and, taking up a drill-book, proceeded to read up certain passages set him that morning by Carados.

The sound of many voices, the clatter of feet and ring of spurs coming from the direction of the mess once more disturbed him; and, with a curse at the interruption, he placed his fingers in his ears, determined to read on notwithstanding. The uproar drew nearer, and stealthy footsteps approached his door. "Sure this is his room?" he heard whispered, "and not . . ." and then, with a crash, the door was burst in, and a crowd of excited, blue-and-gold-clad officers, with flushed faces, poured into the room.

"Good evening, Mr. Kempton," said Griffin politely, "we've come to call on you. Hope you're glad to see us," perching himself on the table as he spoke.

"We felt dull in the mess after you and the colonel had gone," said another. "Why isn't he here, by the way, smoking a friendly pipe?"

"Shut up, Rutherford," broke in a voice—that of Paynter, a captain. "Leave the colonel out of it. Remember what Raymond said, not to . . ." the rest of the sentence was whispered.

"Yes, never mind the colonel," said Griffin, "your brother officers have come to see you, Kempton, not him. They want to know why you favour them with so little of your

company. We miss it, Kempton, and deplore it; we do, indeed, though possibly it may not be our fault."

"I'm not aware that it's mine," answered Henry coolly, though his face had paled somewhat. "I'm willing enough to talk to you if you want me to, but unfortunately my conversation doesn't seem to interest you."

"By gad! you're right there," broke from several voices.

"Why bother, then?"

"Look here, we don't want lip," began Paynter—a murmur of anger rising from the assembly at Henry's manner and words—when the senior subaltern, Rutherford, again broke in. "Let me take it on. You're a captain, Paynter, and best out of it. Now look here, Kempton, we've come to talk to you, and if you're wise you'll listen. We don't care a damn whether you speak to us or not; but what we do care about, and what we've come about, is to know why you don't play polo, or make any attempt to get ponies, as everybody's got to in this regiment, or else clear out."

There was a chorus of approval. "That's it," Rutherford, talk straight to the fellow."

"See here, Kempton," said Rose, another subaltern, who, having a better head than the others, was in calmer mood; "we don't want to be hard on a chap who's just joined, but we've left you alone for six months, and during that time you haven't made an effort to play the game. Everybody plays polo in this regiment, as Rutherford says; you don't want to be out of things, surely?"

"I say he's got to buy ponies or go," said Rutherford; "let's have that plain. Now, which are you going to do, Kempton?"

"Neither," said Henry, setting his teeth.

"And why not?" was shouted simultaneously.

For a moment the impulse to plead poverty as the reason—a plausible one enough, his allowance being but £150 a

year—came over Henry, but was instantly suppressed. That, it is true, made the pastime prohibitive, but all the same, not it, but simple disinclination was the real reason; and though a lie presented no conscientious difficulties to Henry, weakness did, and to put forward that as a pretext would be weakness. He would have none of it. Let them do their worst, he had always despised his brother officers, and now he hated them.

"Because I don't wish to," he said boldly. "Polo doesn't appeal to me in the slightest."

There was dead silence for a moment. The audacity of the words, the awful heresy, coming too from the lips of a six months joined subaltern, was something new in the annals of the 24th Hussars. Rutherford at last found his voice.

"Then, my friend," he said quietly—for the matter had now become serious and he was sobering fast—"we must ask you to leave the regiment."

"I'll see you damned first," was the equally quiet rejoinder.

"Means will be taken to make you, I fear."

"Steady, Rutherford," said Rose, "you'll have us all in the soup if you're not careful."

"We're best out of this, you and I," muttered Paynter to another captain. "The beggar will be off blabbing to Carados for a moral, not for the first time, either, or I'll eat my hat."

Henry heard the words, and turned on the speaker. "That, Captain Paynter," he said, "is a lie."

Again there was dead silence, everyone looking at Paynter, whose face had grown suddenly white. For a second he stood staring at Henry, and then, breaking loose from the throng around him, was about to precipitate himself on his adversary, when his shoulder was gripped by an iron hand, and turning he saw Carados' jeering face looking into his.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said, and then, releasing Paynter, crossed over to the bed, on which he seated himself, whence he sat smiling at the crowd before him: "May I ask the meaning of this most damnable noise? A-ha, Crawford, you there, too; Walmer also, I see. Dear me, what a lot of captains. Left your chief behind, though, I notice, where he always stays, by the way.

"Now, Paynter, what's all the fun about? Giving Kempton a little lesson in the noble art, eh?"

"We were drawing Kempton, sir," broke in Rose, no answer being forthcoming from the person addressed. "It's a thing often done and allowable, I believe, in the case of subalterns when they join."

"And who the devil asked you to speak? Come along, Paynter."

"It—it has always been the custom of this regiment, sir," muttered the latter.

"Meaning that I, being an outsider, don't know your customs, Captain Paynter? Well, well, perhaps so; but surely—I may be wrong of course—it's rather out of the game in any corps for captains to join in the pastime?" There was an uneasy silence; and the smile broadened on Carados' face.

"Conversational enough a few minutes ago," he continued. "Bloody jays, all of you; and now I've joined the party not a word to say to me. Hurts my feelings rather. Well, if you won't, perhaps Kempton will. What was it all about, Kempton? Confide in me."

"What Rose said was right, sir, they were drawing me, and they're welcome to, if they like. I—I'd rather you didn't interfere, sir."

"What?" shouted Carados, a look of blank amazement overspreading his face, while a similar amazement was depicted on the faces of the audience.

"It was my quarrel, sir," continued Henry, his ruffled

temper rising once more at being shouted at. "Mine and Paynter's. We can settle it ourselves without you."

"You infernal, insolent young puppy."

The blood flew to Henry's face, and his eyes blazed with fury.

"You—you cowardly bully," he stuttered; "because you're a major, and my squadron officer, you think you can say what you like to me, and I shan't resent it. But I do. I give you your words back; and, if you've a spark of pluck in you, you'll do what Paynter was going to do, and have it out with me, second-lieutenant though I am."

Carados stared at him; his face had now become expressionless. A deep hush fell on the room.

"Fetch the gloves," he said at last, very quietly. "You go, Griffin. You'll find them hanging on the wall over my bed."

Griffin went, the silence continuing unbroken till he returned, bearing the gloves.

Carados took them from him, turned them over in his hands, and then, handing one pair to Henry, put on the other himself.

"Clear the room," he said. "Now, Kempton, I'm ready for my hiding. Hadn't you better keep your hands lower, though? That's better. Now slog me in the face, hard as you can."

His own hands dropped to his side, and he stood unguarded before his adversary.

"Put your hands up, or I will," said Henry, but still the other's arms hung by his side. "I'll hit you if you don't," stammered Henry again.

"Do," said Carados, whereupon Henry let out, striking his senior full in the face. A shake of the great head, a grim smile, were the sole results—the mahogany visage remained unmarked.

A curious sense of uneasiness began to stir within Henry. He paused irresolute.

"Do it again," repeated Carados, "put your body into it, not your arm only." Henry, rallying himself, struck once more, and a third time; but there was still no visible result.

The audience looked on in silence. Interest in the contest there was none, but instead disgust at such outrage to fair play as was now being enacted before them. For well they knew—or thought they did—its certain end, and that, when it should so please Carados, Henry would be lying a senseless heap on the wooden floor. The pendulum of their mood had now swung round, and in their minds sympathy, and a certain admiration for Henry's pluck, replaced their former resentment, which was now transferred to Kempton's hated antagonist. At that moment one hundred, two, possibly a thousand pounds, would have been willingly subscribed by the audience for Henry to have been equal to his task, instead of the tyro his every movement showed him to be.

Then, as usual in their dealings with Carados, he confounded them, for though the end came it was not the end they expected. For, the third blow having been delivered and taken, Carados tore the gloves from his hand, and threw them on the ground.

"Honour is satisfied," he said. "I've had my hiding, and cry 'enough.' Shake hands," he continued, holding out his great fist to the panting, flushed Henry. "And as for you," turning to the amazed audience, "be off, and never dare to worry this boy again. He's got the pluck of the lot of you. Get out; you'll hear something more about this to-morrow, I promise you, especially you three captains." The crowd went silently out, leaving the two erstwhile antagonists alone. "Come round to my quarters in half an hour from now," said the elder, after a pause. "You're

a curiosity and I want to study you," and he went out, leaving Henry shaken and bewildered.

He was still vainly endeavouring to collect his scattered wits, when a tap at the door was heard, and Harford, one of his late visitors, entered the room somewhat stealthily.

"Oh—Kempton," he said, almost whispering, his eyes roving round the room, "I—I—there's something I want to tell you."

"What is it, Harford?" was the short answer, for Henry had less liking for this particular youth than for any of the rest, and he also wanted to be alone. "Please be quick, though. I am due in Carados' room in a few minutes."

"Oh, are you?" said the other, his furtive eagerness seeming to gain in vigour as he heard this news, "well, so much the better, for it's about him I want to talk. He seems to like you, Kempton," insinuatingly.

"Most probable, I should think," remarked Henry, "after what I said to him this evening, and also besting him with the gloves."

Harford stared incredulously; then, diplomacy forgotten in righteous scorn, burst forth.

"You blighted fool," he said, "do you mean to say you didn't know he was only playing with you, and could have 'outed' you when he liked. Are you the only one in the regiment who don't know that Carados was amateur light-weight champion of England? Could be now if he chose, for he's always in training."

"Good—good God!" stammered Henry with a feeling of sick shame, as the memory of the recent scene returned.

"Why he let you off I don't know," continued Harford, enjoying the other's discomfiture; "it certainly ain't his way. The only reason I can think of is because he likes you, and—and . . ."

"Yes, well?"

"And, that being so, might listen to you, especially if you did him a good turn."

Henry's wits were all alive now. Harford, he saw, had evidently some information of importance, and if well handled would certainly give that information away.

"How can I, Harford?" he said carelessly. "What possible good turn could you or I do Carados? Look here, I must go."

"Wait a minute. You'll be glad if you do, I promise you, for I—I could tell Carados something he'd be devilish glad to hear."

"Well, come on then, and do it."

"No, no, I won't appear. Mind that. I'll tell you, and you tell him."

"All right, what is it then? Please be quick."

"Well, this is in confidence, mind. You know there are two sides in the regiment. All of us against . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know all that."

"Yes, but what you don't know is that there's going to be an inquiry into Sparling's management of the regiment. Raymond's got it all up, evidence and all. He had me round at his house the other day with the others, that's how I know. It's a cert Sparling's removed, unless he, or rather Carados, does something to stop it."

Henry was silent, thinking hard. This was information indeed.

"Look here, Harford," he said at last, "come round with me now, and tell Carados all about it."

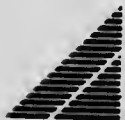
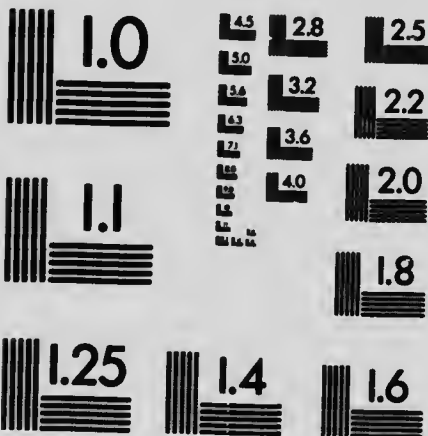
"Not for worlds. As I've said before, nothing would induce me to do so. No, you must do it. You give him a hint. Say, if you like, you got it out of me in confidence, and that I and the others—I know Sambourne and Charteris do—want this row in the regiment stopped."

Again Henry pondered. "Look here, Harford," he said after a pause, "what's your game in telling me all



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this—I mean what do you get out of it? You have got some motive, that's certain."

"Well, I don't mind owning I have. Raymond was beastly rude to me the other day, and if he gets command I'll have a thinner time under him than I get now. I don't want Carados to get on to me over to-night's business either, and if I help him in this perhaps he won't."

"But unless you and the others speak out, it's useless," said Henry. "My telling him only is no good. He'll want evidence. Come on, man, tell him what you know."

"I won't, that's flat, nor will the others," said Harford, whose zeal in his mission was evidently being fast killed by fear. "Look here, Kempton, perhaps you'd better say nothing about it; remember, I've spoken in confidence."

"I don't remember agreeing to so take it, Harford."

"My God! you can't mean that, Kempton," said Harford, really alarmed. "Look here, if you try any tricks on me, have me up before Carados or the C.O., I'll deny everything, and run you in besides for making a false accusation."

"I have no doubt you would," answered Henry, "but possibly you'll speak of your own free will. Good night."

"Remember, if you say a word, I'll off to the general straight, so watch it;" and with this parting warning Harford opened the door, looked carefully round, and then hurried away.

Henry remained for a moment in deep thought, and then, having brushed his ruffled hair and changed his collar, made his way to the next room. The door was open, and from within came the sound of voices.

"And then, Herbert," he heard Carados say, "once we've smashed that fat boulder we'll have old star-gazer out. That will leave the way clear for you. Gad, old boy, but we'd have a C.O. then, not a ruddy pupil-teacher."

Aylwin's laugh was heard in answer. "You're a bit

too hot for me, Jack," he said. "No, thank ye, leave me out of your schemes. Get rid of Raymond, if you like, but leave old Sparling alone. I'll be against you, if you don't. Good night, old man." And Aylwin passed out, not seeing Henry in the darkness outside.

Henry waited till the footsteps had died away, and then knocked at the closed door. There was no answer. He knocked again, and then, still receiving no response, turned the handle and went in.

CHAPTER IX

IN the room he now entered further surprises awaited his already bewildered brain. For some reason, he had always pictured his grim-faced senior as addicted to the bare and comfortless surroundings usually associated with memories of the Iron Duke, which many hold to be the only fitting setting for the true professional soldier.

Here were no such signs of Spartan proclivities, but rather those of the Sybarite, and *dilettante* art-collector. The nakedness of the wooden floor was hidden beneath a double thickness of blue felt, whereon were spread deep-hued, oriental prayer-carpets. Blue and gold-starred tapestry covered the varnished walls, upon which hung valuable proof-etchings, and paintings in both water-colour and oil. These pictures were all of women—heads, undraped-figures, women everywhere—an evidence of taste so utterly incongruous with the opinion Henry had formed of their owner's character, that it left him gaping and confounded.

On a table—inlaid with tortoise-shell and ivory—stood a huge silver lamp, its shade of the same metal studded with pieces of ruby-coloured glass—glowing eyes, in whose light gleamed the gilded bindings of books. There were many hundreds of these, heaped haphazard in bookcases of heavily-carved Bombay blackwood, covering the whole lower part of the four walls.

In this *entourage* of sensuous luxury, his figure huddled

in a great purple leather and gold arm-chair, Carados was sitting. A ragged shooting jacket covered his shoulders, worsted slippers his feet, and between his teeth, poisoning the room with its fumes, a stinking black clay pipe sweated and bubbled. He was staring at a photograph he held in his hand, too intent on it to see Henry; and from something in his face, something foreign to its usual expression, the necessity for instant flight—and that, if possible, unobserved—was apparent to his visitor. He stealthily turned to go. He was too late, however, for the passion-lit eyes were at that moment lifted; and in an instant Carados was on his feet, his face livid with rage.

"You," he shouted, "crawling in to spy upon me, you young . . ."

"Sir," stammered Henry, "you—you told me to come, sir. I did knock twice, but you didn't hear me."

"How long have you been there?"

"Not a second, sir, I—I . . ."

The storm passed. "No," he said, "I didn't hear you. I—I was half asleep, I think." He fell back in his chair. There was a pause.

"There's something I wish to say to you, sir," said Henry, breaking it. "I'm afraid I made rather a fool of myself just now, and instead of punishing me as I deserved, you let me off. It was good of you, sir, and I thank you for it."

"You needn't"—Carados was himself again. "It was not for your sake I did it, don't think that. It was to sell those fools, and that only. Thank them for your escape, not me."

"Whatever your motive was, sir, I am grateful, and—and if I can help you in any way, sir, I am ready."

"You're too kind, Mr. Kempton. I should say, though, from what I gathered this evening, you'll need all your efforts for yourself. Already the whole lot are against

you, even Aylwin. Another month, my friend, and you'll be 'outed' unless I father you."

"I don't want you to father me, sir. I can fight my own battles. I'm sorry about Major Aylwin, though. The others don't matter; he does. Would you mind telling me, sir, why he dislikes me?"

"I don't know, nor does he; he doesn't like you, that's all. He won't hurt you, though, he's just, not like me."

"And the colonel, sir?"

"The colonel?" Carados laughed. "*Le colonel c'est moi*," he murmured. "But tell me, Kempton, not that it interests me much, but as a matter of curiosity I should like to know why all these fellows are on to you."

"Because I don't play polo, sir."

"And why don't you play polo, as every cavalry officer should?" with a sneer.

"Because it doesn't interest me, sir. Games, sport too, bore me to death."

Carados stared at him. "Gad!" he observed, "I said you were a curiosity, and you are. I might ask then, why, holding these views, you've seen fit to join a cavalry regiment. I won't, however, as it's possible I know without. Haven't you come to the wrong shop, though? Why not the Guards?"

Henry flushed. "The Guards would not have had me, sir, because I'm—a tradesman's son, sir."

"Oh! Well, I suppose they wouldn't, not without interest. Got none?"

"None whatever," answered Henry, some instinct bidding him conceal the fact of an interview in a certain Frampton greenhouse, as well as the two letters received and answered since his joining.

"What a pity. Makes it so much harder, don't it, Kempton? Still, you have certain compensating advantages, or I'm in error: a good, hard-shelled unscrupulous-

ness, for instance, and disregard of your fellow-creatures' welfare. Forgive my candour."

"I have to look after myself, sir; if I don't, no one will."

"Quite so. But tell me, again as a matter of curiosity, have you ever disinterestedly cared for anyone in your life, Kempton? I mean besides yourself, of course."

Henry hesitated, looking at him. "Y-yes," he said slowly.

"Oh, some girl, I suppose? Please accept my congratulations."

"I don't care twopence about women, sir."

"Really? Keep it up, my friend. Who is the favoured being then?"

Again Henry hesitated—shuffled: then, for the first time in his life a prey to sudden impulse, spoke.

"I would do a great deal for you, sir," he said, flushing.

Carados stared at him in blank amazement. "For me?" he said. "God help us, and may I ask why?"

"I don't know, sir. It's as unaccountable to me as it is to you, but I would. I'll do something for you now, sir."

"Thank you; what is it?"

"Is there anything you particularly want to know, sir? I mean about this—this trouble in the regiment?"

Carados frowned. "I'll trouble you, my friend," he began haughtily, and then stopped, while his eyes searched the other's face. "You really know something I don't. You could answer a question, you think?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, I'll try you; and if you can't, if you've been fooling me—well, for your sake I hope you haven't. Now then, what's the meaning of Raymond's present chirpiness? It's come on since a week."

"He had an interview then with General Banks, sir," answered Henry, with a sigh of relief at the question, and

thereupon proceeded to tell his now intent listener what Harford had just told him.

"The difficulty, sir," he concluded, "is to make them speak. How that's to be done, I don't know. Perhaps . . ." he hesitated.

"Yes, Kempton—a suggestion is always valuable."

"I was going to say, sir, if you could see your way to talk to these three a little, be nice to them . . ."

"A little persuasion, you think, a little coaxing. Knowing the heroes, that's the lever to work them, eh? Student of Schopenhauer, I observe, Kempton."

"No, I'm not, sir, though I'd like to be."

"Honoured to gratify you, Kempton. There the gentleman's outpourings lie," pointing with the stem of his pipe to the chaotic shelves. "Allow me to find him for you."

"Don't you bother, sir. I'll find them," said Henry, snatching at the chance of inspecting those tempting volumes. "Oh! what a collection," he murmured, moving from case to case. "All the poets, first editions, too, what I'd give my soul for. Have you read all these, sir?" he asked, turning to Carados, who was curiously watching him.

"I have, and much good they've done me. But won't you take a few away with you? No deprivation to me, I assure you. I never look at them now."

"Oh, if I might. I'll take the greatest——"

"I'm sure you will. What have you got? Oh, Byron, Shelley, and Schopenhauer. Ha ha ha!"

"Why do you laugh, sir?"

"No reason, really, only a remark you made just now recurred to me, and tickled me, Kempton, tickled me very much. Take a few more, though, won't you? Wordsworth, Longfellow? No"—again laughing.—"Good night, my friend, come back for some more when you've done with these, and we'll have a little literary discussion together."

"I should love it, sir. Good night, and thank you ever so much."

The door closed on the laden Henry—Carados bowing him out. He then resumed his seat, refilled his pipe, and, after lighting it, gave himself up to meditation. A smile began to play on his face, and then suddenly he laughed outright, evidently well pleased.

"Yes, that's it," he said, "and now I have you, my plump, bounding friend. Out you go. The Alliance has triumphed; the fool, the knave, and the just man are top dogs now." He rubbed his great hands together, chuckling to himself, and then suddenly his merriment died out, for other thoughts had come, killing it.

Once more he picked up the photograph lying face downwards on the table, and resumed his contemplation of the smiling face depicted on it.

CHAPTER X

COLONEL JAMES SPARLING sat in his quarters, with a look of profound thought on his pink-and-white countenance. No luxurious lounge of purple and gold held his trim, oddly youthful person, but a serviceable wooden chair, bearing the government stamp of the broad-arrow, the same mark being visible on every other article of furniture in his rooms.

Almost one expected to find a similar sign on Sparling himself, so strictly of regulation length and shape was his frock of khaki serge, so stiff and shining his gaiters, so bright his spurs and buttons.

Here were to be seen no dull gold of valuable bindings; dimpled beauties, draped or otherwise, looked not down from the varnished walls; literature was represented by a fumed-oak bookcase full of red covered volumes, drill-books, Queen's regulations, and Official Accounts of various campaigns. For official, and consequently of unimpeachable accuracy, these latter had to be, or they found no place on James Sparling's shelves. Art, however, was not neglected, for on the wall, firmly fixed to it by drawing pins, were ranged lines of neatly-executed diagrams, depicting various drill-book formations—vermilion-painted, and drawn inexorably to scale—a soldier's kit as laid out for inspection by authority, and several representing the starry bodies. The latter was a subject in which Sparling, in obedience to a recent official communication, had become of late much interested. That the diagrams depicting the

constellations were not also drawn to scale was a constant worry to their owner.

A human touch was to be seen in the presence of two photographs, one of the Sparling family, taken in their Camberley home, the other of Major John Carados. The room of a keen soldier, the spectator would have declared on seeing it, and such a verdict would have been correct, for James Sparling *was* a keen soldier, so keen indeed that no subject save that of military matters had place or interest in his mind.

Though only eight o'clock, the colonel had already finished an excellent breakfast and inspected the kitchen of the officers' mess, inaugurating a few small economies with reference to the menials' scale of feeding. He had also performed various duties, possibly not his own, and also possibly of little importance, that is to say to some minds, though not to James Sparling, in whose mind details figured largely.

He was now awaiting the arrival of his horse and adjutant, due at his quarters at half-past eight, but, unlike most, no post-breakfast pipe or cigarette was to be seen between his lips. Tobacco and alcohol were taboo to Sparling; and, early as was the hour, his active brain was already at work, the subject of his present meditation being a novel method—and one in a few minutes about to be put to the test—of carrying a baggage-strap on marching order parade.

Absorbed in this problem, a heavy hand banging at the door made him jump. Frowning, he drew out his watch, and seeing the time frowned more deeply. "Twenty minutes too soon," he murmured; "they won't set their watches by the gun, as I've told them to times out of number. I'll see them all at orderly room about it to-day."

Thereupon a neat red pocket-book was produced, and he was in the process of making an entry, when again the

banging at the door was heard—this time a continuous, impatient hammering with a stick.

"Come in, come in," he called out angrily, "don't bang my door down. Really, Fenton, that's not the way to . . . Why, it's Carados," a look of genuine pleasure appearing in his china-blue eyes. "I beg your pardon, Carados, I didn't know it was you; and what good wind brings you here so early?"

The visitor entered, nodded, and sitting down proceeded to light a cigarette.

"Very glad to see you, Carados, all the same," continued Sparling, eyeing the other's costume of riding-breeches, slippers, and pyjama-jacket, but making no comment; "there are a lot of things I want to talk to you about," consulting his note-book as he spoke, and turning over the pages. "Ah—hum—officers' dress, mess-clock, missing spoon in A squadron cookhouse. Ah, here we are—trivial conversation at mess. I'm thinking, Carados," he resumed, "of starting a series of discussions on military subjects at dinner; the talk at present is unworthy of grown men. I, for instance, would start the subject of the stars, on which I've read a good deal lately. I wish you would, too, by the way, and another evening you'd begin on Napoleon, or Aylwin on Moltke. By this method fellows would learn a great deal and in a most interesting manner. I'm sure they'd soon get quite keen on it. What do you think of the idea?"

"Excellent, sir; have you any more?"

"Oh yes," said Sparling, encouraged, "lots. I think of these things, you know, at odd times—in my bath, for instance, and when I'm dressing for dinner. Here's another: Scouting for officers after mess, one lot on Tafelkopf, for instance, and the others to stalk them, steal their rifles, if they can."

"I see, keep 'em out of their beds, the sleepy beggars."

"No, not quite that. Officers must sleep of course. It's to cut short the mess."

"Hum! discussion 'll do that, I should say, without the scouting."

"Ha ha," laughed Sparling doubtfully, "but seriously, Carados, officers eat far too much; in fact, I'm going to speak to the mess president about it at orderly room to-day. Soup or fish, joint and cheese, is enough for any soldier."

"They could take a bone with them to Tafelkopf if that's all; let the scouts steal that instead of the rifles. They'll find it harder, though, the hungry beggars. Anything else, sir?"

"N-no, I don't think so. Oh yes," consulting his book once more, "Rutherford's hair wasn't brushed at lunch yesterday. There were other officers, too, untidy in their persons, and I'm determined to put a stop to it. This," handing Carados a paper, "is an order I've drafted and which I propose to send round this morning for every officer to initial."

Carados took it from him and read as follows:

"The C.O., 24th Hussars, desires that officers attending meals take steps to ensure their personal tidiness. He regrets to note such has not always been the case. Please initial."

"That explains my meaning, don't you think, Carados?" said Sparling.

"Perfectly, and a more valuable piece of evidence I cannot possibly imagine."

"Evidence? What on earth do you mean?"

"To be laid before the Court of Enquiry, shortly to be held on your management of the regiment during the past six months."

Sparling stared at him, with eyes like hard-boiled eggs, then suddenly he threw back his head and laughed loudly.

"Ha ha," he said, "so that's what they're after, is it? Splendid, just what we want, isn't it, Carados—settle Raymond, that, eh?"

"Might, of course, but on the other hand . . . Got a match, colonel?"

"No—yes, here you are. What do you mean by—by . . .?"

"On the other hand, it might settle you. Would to a moral if that document there is put up, plus the discussions on Napoleon at mess, not to mention the seven-mile jaunt to Tafelkopf in the middle of the night."

"Pooh pooh," said the colonel, "it's my duty to ensure the efficiency of my command."

"And their cleanliness and also their coiffure," commented the other.

"Well, perhaps that was a little . . . Mind you, I'm perfectly right, but it is possible I may reconsider that matter. In other respects, however, I hold on my way."

"Which way—or I'm in error—will take you out of the regiment homeward, via Cape Town, in a Castle boat."

"You—you're surely not serious, Carados."

"I am indeed, colonel."

There was a pause, the colonel waiting for his visitor to produce the hitherto invariably forthcoming plan. Carados remained silent, however, and gradually a feeling of dismay began to creep into the colonel's mind.

"Wh-what's the best thing to do, do you think, Carados?" he observed at last. "You've got something up your sleeve, I suppose, as usual."

"Oh yes, it's there all right; it depends on you, though, whether it stays up."

"Damn it, man! pull it out, let's have a look at it."

"I don't want you to have a look at it. I want you to keep your eyes shut and do exactly what I say, and ask no questions."

"Oh, come, Carados, why not tell me first? I will do what I can, of course."

"You wouldn't this, at least you ought not to. If

you don't know, of course it's all right, and, what's more, if it should come out you're cleared."

"Oh, but, hang it," burst out Sparling, "that's not fair. We'll sink or swim together, you and I. All the same you're a devilish good fellow to think of me," and the colonel held out his hand, which movement was either unperceived or ignored by Carados.

"What do I care if I sink? You do, though, and I'm not going to let you. Now, sir, I must be plain; but first are you going to be guided by me in this or not? It's all U P with you if you don't, believe me."

Sparling moved uneasily in his chair, opened his mouth for further protest, caught his visitor's eye and was silent.

"Very well," he said at last. "I—I agree to leave the thing in your hands. What do you want me to do?"

"A little thing enough. Transfer Sambourne and Charteris from Paynter's squadron to mine, and when—as they certainly will—they complain about me through Raymond to you, don't listen, but choke them off. That's all."

The colonel's eyes stood out like those of a prawn. Bordering on the illegal, as Carados' plans only too often were, there were possibilities about this that struck his regulation soul cold with dread. Again he opened his mouth, and again the protest remained unuttered.

"If—if you're sure it won't make matters worse," he muttered, "I'll do it, Carados—though, begad, if I know you, they'll have a nice story to tell at the Enquiry."

"There won't be an Enquiry. Raymond will have gone before then."

"What!"

"Raymond, not you, will be playing Bull on the Castle boat, that is, if you play the game, and don't—don't *listen*," and Carados brought his hand gently down on the table beside him. "Do you hear, sir? Don't listen, whatever they say."

"All right, Carados. I won't, I promise you. Oh, damn it, who's that at the door? I'm all jumps this morning. Go away, confound you."

"No, have him in. It's Fenton, sir, the very man you want. Give him his orders now, there's no time to be lost, believe me," lowering his voice.

"Oh, very well," unwillingly. "Come in, come in, Fenton," he growled. "What the devil are you shuffling about outside for? Look here, Fenton," as the latter entered, "those two young devils, Charteris and . . ."

"I think, if you'll excuse me, sir," interrupted Carados hastily, "I'll be off to see about those recruits of mine. Very glad you told me of it. Good day, sir; good day, Fenton:" and rising he went out, nodding so pleasantly to the adjutant as he passed, as to give birth in his mind to a well-founded suspicion that somebody was for it, and that badly—which suspicion became a certainty on hearing a few minutes later of the intended arrangements for the welfare of Lieutenants Sambourne and Charteris.

And at office hour that morning, to Colonel Sparling, fretfully perusing the orderly officer's report, came Major Raymond, more assertive and confident even than usual.

He wished to bring to the C.O.'s notice, he said, a most arbitrary abuse of authority by the junior major, who for, as far as he could gather, no offence at all, had not only directed Lieutenants Charteris, Sambourne, and Harford to attend all stable-hours till further orders, but had also relegated them to recruits' drill and riding school. The roughest, indeed most dangerous horses in the squadron, had, moreover, so he was credibly informed, been specially selected by Carados. But here he was cut short, for, to his amazement, from the lips of his hitherto constrainedly-polite chief burst language of such intemperance as for the moment caused even his insolence to wither and die. Only for a moment, however, for then came reflection, and

with it the joyful realisation of the forging by the enemy of another weapon, and that deadlier than all preceding ones, for his own destruction. The colonel had sworn at him, the second in command. The clerks must have heard in the next room—he must get their names later on—and further, best of all, the colonel had said that he hoped the horses selected *were* dangerous, and would break the “bloody necks” of their riders. “Bloody,” a nice word for a colonel to use.

Not a word did he say now ; but, punctiliously saluting, withdrew, and an hour afterwards was busily engaged in making further entries in the leather-covered book, the word “bloody” being underlined in red ink. This done, he locked up the book in his despatch-box, and sat himself down to lunch.

From that day, oppression—compared to which their former trials were but as flea-bites—began to fall on the luckless three. Not for one moment now were they left alone ; strive as they might to please, no cessation was theirs from censure and scathing gibe. Their arms ached with the wielding of sword and carbine ; their bones were sore from exercise on horses, as Major Raymond had truly declared, selected for roughness of pace and other undesirable qualities. Many times had their bodies found contact with the sun-baked manège mud, disasters involving the expenditure of much gold in fines, yet always, in some way, it was conveyed to them that they had only themselves to thank for their misfortunes, and let them but speak certain words and their tribulation would forthwith cease.

In vain did Major Raymond and his following sympathise and promise revenge, and a speedy ending to their miseries. They were not the sufferers, nor did they pay the fines ; on the contrary, they benefited from them ; while as for future, and, to their minds, most doubtful revenge, what was that to present torments ?

They began to lose heart, worse still, faith in their leader. He had tried, yet failed to save them, despite his bragging. No, the colonel, as usual, would be the winner, and that being so, better far to make terms while they could, instead of waiting until Raymond, too, was crushed—as he certainly would be—and no longer there even to help them the little he did now.

Nevertheless, for three days they endured, though hourly their grumblings and unresponsiveness to sympathy increased; and then one morning, Harford, bruised in soul by gibes and body from a fall, dropped a word to his fellow-sufferers. He was not repulsed. The word grew to a veiled suggestion.

“Oh, damn it!” said Charteris, “not I.”

“How can we?” asked Sambourne.

“Shut up now and come round to my quarters,” answered Harford, and the three, now silent, hurried away.

A low-toned consultation followed, and then Harford, rising, left his white-faced fellow-conspirators, and, carelessly strolling past the mess windows, made his way to No. 2 block, opposite which, a sudden thought appearing to strike him, he turned, and slipped like a rabbit through the door of Kempton's room. Reappearing, he sought the mess, when he called for a large brandy-and-soda, and, walking to the bar window, proceeded to imbibe it, his eyes fixed on No. 2. Presently he saw a figure emerge from the room he had just left, walk rapidly for a few yards along the verandah, and then, after a moment's pause, disappear within another room.

Harford's face grew suddenly pale; he gulped down what was left of the brandy-and-soda and called for another. Then, seating himself in an arm-chair, he took up a magazine and read the same page, till, the dress-trumpet sounding, he rose and made his way to his quarters.

Late that night, Carados, moodily smoking in his purple

and gold arm-chair, with Henry Kempton reading Schopenhauer some distance away, suddenly said "Hist," for outside the sound of stealthy footsteps was heard, followed by an equally stealthy knock. Noiselessly Henry rose, and passed like a shadow into the adjoining bedroom, where for an hour he remained alert and listening till the low-toned conversation on the other side had ceased, and a door opened and shut. He then rejoined Carados.

"Got it?" said the latter.

"Every word," was the answer.

"Good. Go away now and write it down. Colonel's quarters at eight a.m. to-morrow morning. Good night," and Henry withdrew.

Thereafter the drama proceeded rapidly to its close. At eight precisely, Henry, standing at attention before his staring chief, began to read from a neatly-written page of foolscap, was sharply questioned, and then, with a rebuke for having omitted to sign it, dismissed.

At nine Carados also left, his parting words being as follows :

"Remember what I've said, and how to begin. Rush him, don't give him time; the fellow's a cur, and will go to pieces at once if you work it right. Don't let it go to the general; if you do we're done, and by the way, if he gives Banks away, as he probably will, jam it down on paper, and let him see you're doing it. No, I won't be there. They might say afterwards I worked it up—not that I care if they do, but it would do you no good. Besides, I should certainly laugh; the whole thing's too damned humorous for words. One last thing, I've written it down in big letters on that paper you've got—'No Violence.' Good-bye, Colonel, don't botch it, for the Lord's sake; it's your last chance," and Carados also left.

Some few hundred yards away, Major Raymond was sitting in the dining-room of Grimalkin House, enjoying

his post-breakfast cigar. Occasionally he would look at the now well-filled leather book resting open on his knees, and read extracts from it to his admiring wife.

For some days now he had been mentally in command of the 24th Hussars, *vice* Sparling, placed on half-pay, and—for so invariable is the rule that disaster happens when our hopes are highest and success apparently most assured—was on this morning especially confident and happy. Nor did the letter now arriving for him by mounted orderly disturb him in any way, though it not only contained a request for his immediate attendance at "Office," but further demanded the somewhat unusual condition of his attending in belt and sword. "What does the fool want now?" was his only comment. "Well, thank goodness, it won't be for long. I'll obey his silly orders."

He rose, and, buckling on his belt and sword, leisurely made his way to the orderly room. There he found the fool aforesaid sitting at the table awaiting him, Aylwin standing close behind, with an expression of strong distaste on his face.

"I've sent for you, Major Raymond," began Sparling, his goat-like eyes fixed unwaveringly on the new-comer's face, "to ask you a question. Am I right in supposing that you are still some distance off the age of forty-eight, when you become eligible for a pension of three hundred pounds a year?"

"What on earth's the man driving at?" thought Raymond, with a vague sense of uneasiness at the question. The atmosphere, also, was strangely chilling. He glanced at the colonel, then at Aylwin, but the latter was staring at the ground, his attention seemingly absorbed in the wooden flooring. Raymond rallied himself, though with an effort.

"Perfectly right, sir," he answered, somewhat jauntily, "though with all respect, sir, I fail to see . . ."

"Do you? Well, you damn soon will," began Sparling

vigorously. Then, remembering two words now staring at him from a paper on the table before him, he checked himself, and, clearing his throat, resumed the manner and speech official.

"I am right, you say, Major Raymond," he observed; "well then, that being so, if you were now to be tried by court-martial and—convicted, you would certainly lose that pension."

"Sir?"

"*Rush him*," shrieked from the paper before Sparling, and, obedient, Sparling rushed.

"Well, you will lose your pension, for tried by court-martial you're going to be, and convicted, too."

"Wh-what for?" stammered Raymond, now of ashen hue.

"What for?" roared Sparling, banging his fist down on the table, regardless of the two words looking reproachfully at him, "you have the impudence to ask me what for? All right, then—I'll tell you. Listen."

He began to read from a neatly-written sheet of foolscap, which, though signed "Henry Kempton, 2nd Lieutenant," had in some mysterious way become the statement of another, or, rather, of three others: "On the 10th September, we, the undersigned, Lieutenants Charteris, Sambourne, and Harford, were sent for by Major Raymond to his house. He asked us if we had any acts of tyranny to complain of, on the part of Colonel Sparling, and what we said he took down in writing. The following other officers were also present"—here followed a list of names—"and are ready if called upon to corroborate the above. At the end of the interview, Major Raymond assured us all that it would not be for much longer: we had only to wait, and Colonel Sparling's reign would be a thing of the past."

"I—I deny it. I . . ."

"Deny it at the court-martial, not here, you bloo . . . ha, hum! Here's some more for you."

He went on reading :

“ ‘On the 24th September Major Raymond stated in the mess that the regiment was going to the devil, and that the men and non-commissioned officers, *he had reason to know*, were of the same opinion ; and, further, that mutiny, *he also had reason to know*, was only a question of time. The words underlined we are prepared to state on oath were used by him. . . ’ Having reason to know this, Major Raymond,” the raucous voice resumed, “ may I ask why you did not do your duty as second in command and inform me, your commanding officer, at once ? What would a court-martial say to that, Major Raymond ? ” I know dam . . . very well what they would—that Her Majesty has no further need, etc., that’s what they’d say, and jolly well right, too. But to go on . . . ”

There was no need, for by this time all fight had gone out of the second in command. His fat face quivered, and he burst into tears.

“ Sir,” he sobbed, “ I—I confess it all. I throw myself on your mercy, sir, and on that of Major Aylwin. But, sir, I—I was not altogether to blame. I was led away by General Banks, sir. He encouraged me, sir, he questioned me first.”

Out flashed Sparling’s pencil and note-book. He wrote hard for a minute. “ That’s down. You’re witness, Aylwin. He makes an accusation against the general.”

“ No, I don’t, sir,” shrieked Raymond. “ I was only telling you in confidence, sir.”

“ Damn your confidences, I don’t want ’em. It’s down. That settles your hopes of a pension, I think, Mr. Second-in-Command.”

“ Not my pension, sir, oh, not my pension. It’s all I have to live on except two hundred pounds a year.”

“ And quite enough, too,” began Sparling, when Aylwin, sick at the scene, interrupted.

"I think, sir," he said coldly, "it would be better for all our sakes to avoid the scandal of a court-martial, if possible. If you could see your way to allow Major Raymond to resign his commission here now, and go on three months' leave, it would be sufficient punishment, I think."

"Hum," said Sparling, "*No eagerness*," staring up at him from below. "I don't see how I can; no, I really don't see how I can. It's the example for my regiment I have to think of. Still"—considering—"I don't know, though, as you say . . . Well, if I do will you give me your word to hold no communication of any sort with the other officers, and also leave at once? You will," as the other eagerly agreed. "All right then, sign these," producing from a drawer before him, and in utter disregard of his mentor's strict injunctions, papers already made out.

Raymond was too agitated to note this evidence of premeditated design. His trembling hand clutched at the pen; he signed, and then, having made some attempt at a salute, stumbled out of the room, his military career at an end.

"Ha ha ha!" chuckled Sparling, rising from his chair, and rubbing his hands. "There's the head of them out. Now for the others. Get them on the run now, and give 'em beans, eh, Aylwin?"

A shadow of disgust passed over Aylwin's face.

"I think, sir," he said coldly, "you'll find there'll be no more trouble, now that the ringleader's gone. They are all good fellows, sir, and in their hearts I've no doubt will be as glad as we are that Raymond's left."

"Don't see it myself, lot of lazy loafers," snapped Sparling. Why the deuce, he wondered irritably, was Aylwin so infernally unsympathetic. God! how he wished Carados, and not this dull dog, were now his second in command. Carados would not have damped him; Carados would have

had something amusing to say about the recent scene. Oh, damn this fellow and his long face !

" You'll be my second in command now, Aylwin," he observed at last, in a tone of ill-concealed discontent.

" Yes, sir ; what do you want me to do ? Ah, here's the mail. Shall I start on the letters, sir ? "

" No, no, I'll do that," said Sparling, rather hurriedly. " You have a look round the stables, will you ? Good day ; " and, thus somewhat abruptly closing the interview, the colonel reseated himself and began to open his letters.

At the third he paused, muttered " Good Lord ! " and then sat staring, with a shocked expression on his boyish face. For in his hand was a cheque, drawn in favour of the mess-president, signed " John Carados," and returned, marked " R.D." To this was pinned a letter in which was stated that Messrs. Box begged to return enclosed to the O. C., 24th Hussars, instead of the mess-president, who might possibly be a junior officer.

" What the devil does it mean ? " muttered Sparling. " Writs by every mail, and now this damned thing. The former I've burnt, but I can't this. I don't like to ask him about it either, poor chap ; he's in a bit of a hole, I suppose. Always thought he was a rich man, though. Well, I'll let him have another hundred ; and as for this, I'll pay it myself into the mess accounts. He won't know that way. Been speculating, I suppose, or gambling, must have. Can't be a woman, for he's married, and Carados is not the sort to play a low-down game. No, whatever else it is, it ain't a woman."

For Sparling, as was typical of him, was probably the one person in the regiment who was unaware of the fact that his friend, John Carados, was hard and fast in the toils of a harlot notorious from Cape Town to Bulawayo.

CHAPTER XI

FULL harmony was not yet to be restored to the officers' mess of the 24th, for, though with the departure of the Pretender all desire for further revolt left his followers, serious dissensions now began to rise amongst the victorious three. The time, however, except in so far that the mere fact of his presence seemed to induce strife, it was not on Carados that the blame rested, but on the other two, Sparling and Aylwin.

Aylwin, now being second in command, was, by virtue of such a position, the rightful confidant and adviser of his chief on all regimental matters. He soon realised, however, that Sparling intended him to be nothing of the kind, for, loyal though he had shown himself in the recent crisis, he had never succeeded in gaining his colonel's liking. This was chiefly due to the fact that, when he considered it necessary, he had never hesitated to oppose himself to Sparling and his many and varied schemes for the benefit of his officers.

Carados, on the other hand, Sparling loved, as he probably loved no other living being. Carados was always sympathetic; never damped, but rather fired his zeal, adding suggestions of a nature tending still further to exercise the wits and try the endurance of those for whom they were designed.

Carados knew, as no one else did, how to appeal to his sense of humour. He was always sure of a laugh when with him, a somewhat shocked laugh at times, for neither

regulations nor military authority was sacred to Carados ; but, nevertheless, laugh Sparling did, and that right heartily and often. It seemed, however, that these good times were to be at an end ; for Carados, except when compelled, now avoided any appearance of intimacy with his chief, and at any sign of a desire on his part for confidential talk on matters regimental, would straightway turn the subject, or suggest that Major Aylwin, as second in command, was the proper person with whom to discuss such things. Nevertheless, loyal to his old friend as Carados was, the shadow of misunderstanding soon arose between them, and Aylwin, despite his own convictions, began to doubt.

Only too well did he know from Carados' own frequent avowals his total lack of scruple when an end was to be attained. He remembered his friend's suggestions to intrigue against the very man he was then, for reasons of his own, supporting : and the question would arise in his mind, why he himself should be spared ? He felt all the more doubtful when he took into consideration that he was now raised to a position giving him authority over Carados, an authority that he intended to assert.

Aylwin was wrong in doubting Carados, for, apart from the fact that the latter had no wish for the post of second in command, nor any feeling save that of contempt for his colonel, he was, despite other failings, staunch, as few are staunch, to a friend. This was perhaps fortunate for Aylwin, and also the regiment, for there is little doubt that, had Carados so willed, strife would once more have arisen, and Aylwin, strong man and capable soldier though he undoubtedly was, been hard put to it to maintain his position, assailed as he would assuredly have been by his present chief, aided by one whose brain power, strength of will, and inexhaustible resource had been but lightly exercised in the recent crisis.

Aylwin was not dismayed ; but being a strong character

his suspicions had the inevitable result of leading him to seek, rather than to avoid, opportunities of asserting his authority over one he believed to be working against him. This course was certain to lead to friction with a man who, from the time of his joining, had practically held the position of dictator in the 24th. That he was so no longer, at all events where he happened to be in command, Aylwin soon gave his former friend to understand; and were the colonel absent but for a day the second in command instantly took up the reins; and Carados, like the rest, became one of the men, his paces to be uniform with those of his fellow steeds, to walk, trot, or gallop, as the driver ordained.

C Squadron, hitherto exempt from interference, now became the object of frequent inspections by the second in command. Various innovations introduced by Carados were directed to be abolished, as not being in accordance with the system prevailing in the regiment. Smoking at stables also, he was informed, not being allowed to others, was equally forbidden to himself, while his invariable late appearance on parade—occasionally his absence altogether—was first brought to his notice by an official letter, and, this proving ineffective, the delinquent was sent for to the orderly-room, and there gravely censured by his former friend and fellow squadron leader.

All this was the harder to bear when Carados knew that one word from him to the colonel, and not only would immunity from interference have been thenceforth his, but that a paragraph would have been inserted in Major Aylwin's "Confidential Report" to the effect that he was deficient in tact, a failing that Sparling naturally regarded as fatal in a future commanding officer. That word was never spoken, Carados' rising indignation being kept to himself, though, as was inevitable, all friendly relations between the two soon ceased. This led to a result, small

in itself but involving far-reaching consequences to another member of the regiment, namely, the springing up of a curious intimacy between Major John Carados and Henry Kempton, now promoted to the rank of lieutenant.

Henry, in consequence of recent events, found himself more than ever a pariah, for Harford and his friends, after Raymond's departure, and disclosures from him were no longer to be feared, had hastened to spread their own version of the affair; and, though careful to commit themselves to nothing definite, they managed to convey the idea that if Carados had been the prime mover Kempton had acted as his jackal. This, and his persistent refusal either to buy ponies or take part in the various regimental amusements, combined to make Kempton the object of cordial dislike to his brother officers; and, though from fear of Carados they abstained from active hostilities, they showed their dislike by a rigid avoidance of him on all occasions.

Possibly it was this that first induced his squadron leader to take notice of the outcast, but, be this as it may, he did, until by now the nightly visits to Carados' room had become an established custom. To Henry they were the event of the day—the one bright spot in a far from happy existence—for the curious attraction that drew him to Carados from the moment of their first meeting had, with further acquaintance, become devotion, almost adoration. Truly, a somewhat strange plant to thrive in such a soil as was that of Henry's mind; but thrive it did, and that despite the fact that the object of his worship still sneered at him, mocked him, ripped the veil away from his inmost thoughts, and held them up to derision. Henry did not resent this treatment, rather was his adoration increased, until now, at his hero's bidding, he would have done anything, regardless of his most cherished convictions, even to the imperilling of that self which, hitherto, had been his sole regard. In fact, when with Carados, Henry, strong-minded youth as

he otherwise certainly was, had no mind, no will. His mentor spoke ; he listened, believed, and obeyed.

Nevertheless, there was something about Carados that puzzled Henry, and even inspired him with a curious feeling of dread, as of something beyond the natural. For at times there was a noticeable inconsequence in his speech and manner. He would give way to sudden wild outbursts of gaiety, during which a curious, flickering light would appear in the brilliant eyes. Then, as suddenly, these moods would pass. Carados would relapse into heavy gloom, and for hours sit huddled in his chair—silent and motionless.

This, in the eyes of Henry, invested his hero with a certain halo of mystery, and only served to increase the fascination. Nightly, sometimes, when he dared, in the hour before mess, he would betake himself to the room next to his, and there prostrate himself at the feet that spurned him.

From the first, Carados made no pretence of liking for his worshipper. Before all else he was an aristocrat, and the mere fact of Henry's parentage was enough to put any idea of friendship out of the question. To him Henry was interesting solely in the light of a character study ; for this he tolerated him in his rooms, and, as a distraction—the boy being so obviously anxious to listen—laid himself out to teach. And his ability to teach being of a very high order, and the pupil thirsting for knowledge, the education proceeded apace.

Sometimes the lesson would be on military subjects, and then it was of undoubted value to Henry ; but Carados soon wearied of this subject, and turned to other matters more congenial to his mind, though possibly of more questionable benefit to the pupil. Henry, however, imbibed it all, and sitting in his chair would listen in silence, his mind alert and his grey eyes wide open and fixed on the teacher's face, while the latter expounded a philosophy of life somewhat at variance with that generally accepted. Now he would

discourse on politics, though this was too dangerous a subject to make its discussion pleasant to the listener; now inveigh against the absurdity of considering means when an end was to be attained; now on the folly of regarding the matrimonial as other than a purely formal bond—evolved for social purposes only. He was at his best, in Henry's eyes, when he held forth on the methods to be adopted if success in life were to be the goal; for this, as he well realised, was of all subjects the most attractive to his hearer, and Carados put forth all his powers to drive his teaching home.

"You want to succeed, I think, Kempton," he said, as they sat together one evening before dinner. "Well, why not? It's easy enough, if you know how. First, divest your mind—not a labour in your case, I should say"—courteously—"of all superfluous hamper in the way of scruples, and then do what Mr. Beecham does—advertise. He proclaims the excellence of his remedies: you instead the existence of Lieutenant Kempton. It is unfortunately possible, you see, Kempton, that no one may yet have heard of the latter."

"I don't quite understand, sir. How do you mean advertise? One can hardly walk about proclaiming . . ."

"No, of course you couldn't. Modesty forbids, and so on. But there are ways of, as you say, proclaiming one is alive without writing it up on a board. Such have been tried, Kempton, and with success, believe me."

"But how, sir?"

"There are various methods, Kempton. Some do it by their clothes, eccentricity of attire and so on, though I should hardly recommend that in your case. It might not go down, you see. Others, amorous dogs, hold on to fashionable ladies; the naughty fellows get talked about that way, you perceive; but against this, you're not amorous, for which I respect you, Kempton."

"There seems nothing for me, sir."

"Oh yes, there is, there's always something for everybody, Kempton. Now, I've considered your case, and come to the conclusion that bravery's the line—hero on the bloodstained field, name in the papers. Hooray! But," he continued, relighting his pipe, "you must be careful to be seen, mind; you might get peppered for nothing otherwise, and that would be really calamitous. Yes, bravery's your line, as it's been the line of others I could mention. Started the career of many a damn fool, my dear Kempton."

"But, sir, there's no chance of active service now, that I can see."

"That's because you don't keep your eyes open, my friend. There's a row on now in Western Africa, a two-penny-halfpenny scrap that nobody cares a damn about, but useful all the same for pushing fellows like yourself. D.S.O.'s and brevets lie in yonder swamp, Kempton; why not pick up one or two?"

"But, sir, you've said yourself a D.S.O.—"

"Is nothing except to give the baby to suck. Yes, I did say so, but don't you see, my—forgive me—dense friend, that though the ornament may be little, the mention of your name in the papers is a great deal, or may be made so. People ask, 'Who is Kempton?' 'Damned fine fellow,' answers Kempton, and goes to London town. There he is photographed many times, one of his pictures finding its way into the papers. 'Good-looking fellow,' says Lady Stick, to her husband, General Stick; 'has it as A.D.C.' Hubby, glad to have certain irksome duties taken off his hands, says, 'All right, my dear,' and Lieutenant Kempton's launched."

Henry laughed. "I'm afraid Lady Stick does not appeal to me, sir."

"Oh no, I forgot, you're a moral man. All the same I'm afraid, my dear Kempton, it's the Lady Sticks, not the

wifies, who've made history. They've the sense to realise, you see, that their somewhat indifferent brains won't get them what they want, whereas other things will. And, believe me, that Lady Stick is better for 'Excelsior' than holy matrimony with the first fool of a girl who makes eyes at him when he's just started his upward gymnastics. That's the time they get him, Kempton, when the hero returns fresh from his triumphs in the wilds. They look so white and pretty, after the blackie he has left behind him in the wigwam. Yes, my friend, matrimony is the pit yawning for every budding Napoleon. Most fall into it and—are done. They can't get out, and for the rest of their lives remain in that pit, and—forgive the coarseness—breed."

"But surely, sir, marriage with a clever woman has helped many men?"

"The second-rater, yes, for it's only the second-rater who makes use of a woman's brains to do work which should be his own."

"You despise women then, sir?"

"I despise women! My dear Kempton, I'm not you. I've not much use for their brains, it is true, that is when used for men's work: a gimlet, though it may get the cork out, makes a damned bad corkscrew, my friend. For its own special job, though, the female brain is the right tool and no mistake."

"And that special job, sir?" asked Henry, with increased interest.

"To tell her how to make best use of what special attractions she has to influence men, and so rule the world. Woman is the most powerful thing in the world, Kempton, provided she remains a woman—doesn't make herself a weak imitation of the male. She's more powerful than he is, far more, for though he's nominally lord of the universe, she's lord of him, not because of her reasoning powers,

which are indifferent, but because of one thing only—sexual attraction. Every normal man—you, of course, being abnormal are different—loves some woman, and, like the animals, when a man's courting he's at his best. He's only then at his best, indeed; all his faculties are heightened and he does things. Emma claimed to have won Trafalgar, you know, and so she did, though not by power of intellect. She never planned, nor even helped Nelson to plan, the Trafalgar scheme; all the same, it is to her, or rather to his love for her, we owe the smashing of the French lines, for nothing else but passion could have enabled a man so physically a wreck, as Nelson then was, to rise above bodily weaknesses and plan and carry out that masterpiece."

"And marriage destroys all that, you think, sir?"

"I'm afraid so. The stag, you know, is a nasty pugnacious beast when he's courting, Kempton, but, the rutting season over, he's as tame and quiet as a sheep. Yes, marriage settles 'Excelsior' all right, unless of course he's an independent-minded 'Excelsior,' and finds some one else to stir him up. Unfortunately that causes unpleasantness, though."

"According to you, sir, a man who wishes to get on ought never to marry."

"The real climbers, never, but by some fatality they always do, and that when they're babies. The results, as we know, are mostly, I believe invariably, disastrous. The second-raters, though, are different. Wifie's brains, as you observed, do undoubtedly help them. For instance, don't think me rude, but marriage might be of advantage to you, a suitable marriage, that is, of course, with one of the big plums, a strawberry-leaved plum, for instance. Forgive the anomaly."

Henry started, his face flushing. "A strawberry-leaved plum," he repeated.

"Oh, pray, don't let me pry into your secrets. It was

only a random suggestion on my part. But you seem disturbed. Let's talk of something else; the weather, polo, or . . . Hullo," as a knock at the door sounded at that moment, "a visitor? No, it's only my servant. What is it, Simpson?"

"A tallygram for you, sir," answered the man, walking to the table for a tray on which to hand the missive.

In an instant Carados had sprung up and snatched it from him.

"Wait outside," he muttered. The servant withdrew, and Carados remained staring for a moment at the envelope, his face red with excitement, before he tore it open.

Henry rose, murmured some excuse, and with eyes carefully averted was making his way to the door. A gasp from behind stopped him, and, turning round, he saw Carados lying back in his chair, with his face working convulsively, and his hands clutching at his throat.

Henry, discretion forgotten in terror, ran to his side, but was instantly flung to the far end of the room, while Carados stood for a moment swaying, with the yellow flame leaping in his eyes.

Then suddenly he began to laugh, very softly at first, but gradually louder and louder, till the room rang with the sound.

"The bitch has gone off—gone off with a Jew, d'ye hear, Kempton?" he screamed. "God! the bloody humour of it, the bloo . . ." and then as suddenly he stopped. "Simpson," he called.

"Sir."

"Bring my horse."

"Sir," said Henry, the servant having left on his errand, "you—you're not going out, sir? it's close on eight now."

The glittering, restless eyes turned on Henry. "O-ho," he said, gently, "and who's going to stop me? Are you?"

"You—you're not well, sir."

"You mean I'm . . . mad, is that it? Is that it?" he repeated, coming closer.

Henry stared, and suddenly light broke upon him. For a moment his brain reeled with the horror of the knowledge, and then, recovering himself, he faced the other boldly, his eyes fixed steadily on the shifty ones regarding him.

"Such a thought, sir, never occurred to me," he said quietly. "No one for a moment could think you mad, sir."

"My grandfather was, you know, though no one knew it—my brother, too. Such a funny chap he was, Kempton, thought he was a rooster, and used to dance like this." And Carados stepped mincingly to the centre of the room, where, holding up the skirts of his dressing-gown, he began to hop and strut, finishing up with a loud crow of triumph.

Henry watched him steadily. "I wish I could do that, sir," he said.

"Ha ha! he still thinks I'm mad, the young fool; tries to humour me. But I'm not. I'm as sane as you are; a damn sight saner than you are, for I don't talk rot about not caring for women—*women!*" his voice suddenly rose to a shout. "I love them all, and—and I'd kill them all if I had my way. That's the way to deal with women, Kempton, before they kill you, d'ye see? Ha, what's that?" as the sound of hoofs was heard trampling the gravel outside. "A horse! what the devil . . ."

"Beggy pardon, sir," interrupted Simpson, entering at the moment. "Yer 'orse is waiting, sir."

Carados stared at him, rubbed his hand across his forehead, and then turned to Henry. The flame in his eyes was gone.

"Excuse my turning you out," he said politely, "but I'm going for a ride. I may be away for a day or two. Kindly give my compliments to the colonel, will you, and

ask him to excuse my attendance at parade to-morrow. Say I've been called away on urgent business."

"But, sir, may—mayn't I come with you? I'll be ready in a minute."

"When I want your company I'll ask you for it," was the answer, and Carados strode out and, mounting his horse, rode away.

Henry, from the verandah, stared after him. "My God," he muttered, "what am I to do, what ought I to do? Tell Aylwin—out of the question now: Sparling—the fool would make me write it down and sign it, then he'd show it to Carados. No, I'll keep it to myself and watch. I'm the only one who knows about it, and I'll be the only one, if I can."

CHAPTER XII

"YOU don't know then, sir, when the major will be coming back?"

The speaker's voice was somewhat troubled, and his eyes rested uneasily on the figure of a big, red-headed man, who was grooming a sleepy-looking black horse hard by.

"I do not, sergeant-major," answered Henry, "he said, a day or two, but that's a week ago already."

"Something ought to be done, sir."

"All right, put him in the guard-room now, before he starts."

"You can't do that, sir, 'e's done nothing. 'E never does before, and—and beggin' your pardon, sir, you'd only get a tellin'-off from the colonel if you brought him up on a faked charge. It's only the major, sir, who can do such like."

Henry, ignoring the hint, walked up to the red-headed man, who at once stood at attention.

"Your horse is very dirty this morning, Willis," he observed aggressively, not looking at the shiny-coated quadruped.

"Very good, sir, I'll groom 'im again, sir." The man's voice was perfectly quiet and respectful, though his eyes were restless, and there was a curious, spasmodic twitching now and again of his white face. He bent to his work once more.

For a moment Henry stood watching him, then, shifting

the point of attack, began again : " Look here, Willis," he said sharply, " I hear you're going on the drink ; so please understand that, on the first sign of it I see, I shall put you in the guard-room at once."

" Very good, sir," was again the quiet answer, whereupon, after a moment's baffled staring, Henry walked away, leaving Willis chuckling softly to himself.

" You see, sir, it's no good," resumed the sergeant-major. " He never gives one a chance. It was the same before. I tried to catch him then, but couldn't."

" He can go to the devil for all I care," answered Henry, smarting under his recent defeat. " Damn it, sergeant-major, all this fuss is too absurd. What's there to be afraid of in a drunken soldier ? "

" There is with 'im, sir. You don't know 'im, you see, sir. I do, so does the major. 'E's a fair caution is Willis when he gets goin', I can tell you, sir. Got 'old of a rifle last time, but 'appily he'd only blank and did no 'arm."

" Well, he's had no chance of getting at the ball ammunition this time, I suppose, has he ? "

" Not that I know of, sir, but 'e's that cunning."

" Oh, be hanged, sergeant-major," interrupted Henry, " let him drink himself sick if he likes, I don't care. I'm off to lunch." And dismissing the subject from his mind he left the stables, to make his way to the mess.

The sergeant-major, however, he was to learn, had reason for his apprehensions, for that same night at dinner Henry was the recipient of a note, signed to his joy and surprise by Carados himself, bidding him come round to his quarters at once. The necessary permission having been obtained from the head of the table, he rose, and hurried away to No. 2 Block, in the verandah of which he found Carados, again, to his surprise, in uniform. Beside him stood a non-commissioned officer, obviously much excited.

"Good evening, Kempton," said the former; "sorry to disturb you at your dinner, but there's fun in the squadron. A one-act performance. I thought you might like to see. Here's the programme. Read, my friend."

Henry took the note handed to him, and read as follows:

"SIR,

"Private Willis has gone on the drink. He is now in the second troop-bungalow with his rifle and a packet of ball ammunition. He threatens to shoot any one who enters. I should be glad, sir, if you would come round at once.

"Yours respectfully,

"SIMON WENLOCK."

"Good heavens, sir," said Henry, "what's to be done? Shall I fetch the guard, sir?"

"And have half of them shot. That is my friend here's suggestion, and a particularly silly one, too, to my mind. No, Kempton, I think not."

"But what's to be done then, sir?"

"I propose to show you. You see, by the programme, there's only one character so far performing; he's having all the fun, Kempton, which is not fair, so I—I'm dressed for the part, you see—intend to tread the boards with him. Come along," and Carados, followed by the puzzled pair, led the way across the barrack square to a corrugated-iron building, outside which a crowd of men were assembled, all offering suggestions and advice.

"Lasso 'im through the windy," said one, "same like they do 'orses in Orstralier."

"That's the idea, Tim. Fetch a neck rope, one of you blokes, and look alive."

"Burn the bungalow down, and smoke 'im out," cried another voice.

"And what abart our kits?" then rose in indignant chorus.

"Turn the fire 'ose on 'im."

"Get a couple of 'biscuits,* and 'old them in front of you, then rush 'im. 'Ere, Boko, come 'ere, and we'll fasten the 'biscuits' round you."

A chorus of approval from everyone, except Boko, who thought the plan absurd.

"I'll watch it," he said, and spat on the ground.

"Be kind enough to allow me to pass," said a harsh voice, whereupon, with cries of "It's Jack—it's the bloke hissself," the crowd broke up, and then closed in once more, forming a circle of expectant faces, with all eyes fixed on Carados.

The time for action, not words, had come now, they knew, and fell to listening, rear ranks on tiptoe, the better to miss nothing of what was going to happen.

"I'll trouble you for a cigarette, Kempton," they heard. "No, thank you, not a light, though I'll take the box if I may. Now," turning to the crowd surrounding him, "you'll have the goodness to keep absolutely silent; and on no pretext whatever will any man attempt to enter that room. I'm going in."

A murmur arose, and then the sergeant-major's voice was heard in protest.

"But, sir, he'll shoot you, sir. Gawd's truth he will. He's fair off 'is 'ead, sir; don't know nobody."

Carados wheeled round on him. "When I want your advice, I'll ask for it," he said. "Another word, and under arrest you'll go. You, Kempton, wait here with the rest. You can see the performance, if you like, through the window, but, mind, don't let the fellow inside see you or hear you."

Amid dead silence he turned away, and, mounting the

* Mattresses.

bungalow steps, entered the room, at the far end of which a man was sitting, or rather crouching, behind one of the small iron bedcots.

Between his knees rested a service rifle, in his hands was clutched a half-empty bottle, of the compound known to soldiers serving in South Africa as "F.C."* From this he would now and again take a pull, and then fall to playing with the rifle's lock, crooning softly to the weapon as he did so. So absorbed was he, that not till his visitor was half-way up the room did he raise his eyes. Then, with a yell, he sprang to his feet, and raising the rifle, levelled it straight at Carados' head.

The latter stopped, placed the cigarette in his mouth, and then, striking a match, proceeded carefully to light it, Willis watching him with a puzzled look on his swollen face.

The operation completed, Carados for the first time looked up, and seeing the other, nodded pleasantly, his eyes full of genuine amusement.

"Good evening," he said, flicking the ash carelessly from his cigarette, "they tell me you want to shoot somebody, so I've come to give you the chance. Wait a minute, though, let me get under the gas-jet; there, that's better. You can see now. Shoot away, my lad, shoot away."

"Oh, doin' the funny, are yer?" muttered Willis. "Well, ye'll 'ave yer fun all right. Ye don't cod me, ye blank—blank—blank."

Carados stifled a yawn. "Same old words," he said. "I could do better than that. But, my good fellow, why waste time? Can't hit me—is that the trouble? You, a marksman too."

Still the other did not fire. His look grew more puzzled, and his eyes wandered from the rifle sights to the bottle. Ah, that was what he wanted, a drop of "F.C."

"Better leave that alone, my friend," said Carados,

* A peculiarly deadly brand of Cape brandy.

divining his intention. "Spoil your aim, for sure." And then his languid tone suddenly changed to one which rang through the barrack-room. "Willis," he said, "look at me. I'm Major Carados, your squadron officer."

The former's eyes unwillingly left the bottle and turned towards the speaker.

"Me squadron orf'cer," he murmured, "no, no, ye ain't no squadron orf'cer of mine. I know ye right enough for all your flam. Ye're one of them blasted police blokes, what's come for to put me into clink. But ye won't." His voice rose to a scream, and his hands once more levelled the rifle.

"Look again, Willis, look again, my friend." And once more the weapon was lowered.

"Carados, the Honourable Carados," he muttered. "So it is, blimy, so it is. Well, old Carados, I ain't got no down on you, but yer for it all the same. To 'ell you go, same as I said I'd do for the first bloke wot come anigh me; and Joe Willis don' go back on his word, not for fifty bloody honourables."

"Neither do I go back on mine. You know that, Willis. Remember when you were Sergeant Watson's batman, and the ten pounds you . . . lost."

"Wich I guv to a girl in town when I was drunk, and you paid up, and never a word. Yes, I mind that, but shoot it is, all the same."

"When you like, I'm ready. But you can't hit me from there; it's too far, and you're too drunk. Try if you like, of course, but . . ."

"That's 'ank, and don't go down with me. I sees yer game to come close like and then go for me. No, yer don't, Jack, no, yer don't."

"It's no hank, you fool. It's you I want to come closer. I won't move, I tell you; do what you like."

Carados fixed his eyes on those of the other; his body

grew strangely still, his hands fell to his side. A deathly silence fell; the crowd at the windows held their breath.

Willis stared back, shifted his gaze to the rifle, then to the bottle, and again to the motionless watcher. He shivered, stirred uneasily, and then unwillingly shuffled to his feet, and, rifle at the ready, began to creep cautiously down the room.

A yard away he stopped. "Blast ye, I'll come no farther," he said, and raised the weapon.

"No, closer." And Willis crept on.

"Now," whispered Carados, and then suddenly tore open his mess waistcoat of blue and gold, and ripping asunder the silken shirt beneath bared his breast.

"Here," he said, and stretching forward his hand, seized the muzzle of the rifle and drew it towards him, till the steel ring pressed hard against the bare flesh.

"See my heart beating, Willis," he went on in the same hushed tones. "You fool, don't you see I want it, man? Crook your finger round the trigger now and pull—pull, and I'll bless you for it."

For a moment the pair stood staring into each other's faces, and then in the bloodshot eyes of the drunkard the look of murder gave way to one of horror, horror to comprehension, and Willis staggered back, stood for a second tottering, and then crashed to the ground, where he lay weakly sobbing.

Carados remained for a moment looking down at the crumpled heap at his feet, and then a deep sigh broke from him. The leaping flame in his eyes died out, and stooping he picked up the fallen rifle.

"You can come in now," he called, in a lifeless voice.

At the summons the door was burst open, and Henry and the sergeant-major entered, followed by a mass of white-faced, staring soldiers.

"Go out, all but two," the dull voice resumed. "Take

him away, he's as harmless as a kitten now," and Willis, with a soldier on either side, was marched out of the barrack room and away through the darkness to the station hospital.

On the way he suddenly stopped, and spoke in tones of anxiety.

"Corporal," he said, to the escort commander, "go back, for Gawd's sake, and tell 'em to look after 'im—old Jack, I mean. He wants 'is waistcoat worse nor me. I ain't drunk now, corporal, s'help me."

"Silence," was the justly incensed answer. "'Old your tongue, Willis, and go quiet, or it's frogs marched you'll be, old friend." And the procession proceeded on its way.

CHAPTER XIII

HENRY and Carados made their way back to the latter's quarters, the senior striding along, with the rifle tucked under his arm. His momentary depression had vanished, and he was now in high spirits, ridiculing the recent scene and the two actors in it, himself most of all. But Henry was silent, for on his soul lay heavy the shadow of a great awe, and he walked as in a dream.

He had seen—though not hearing those last whispered words he had missed their real meaning—an indifference to death, seemingly superhuman; but, stunning though this was, there was to his mind a greater thing still. For by mental power alone, by the exercise of some strange natural force undreamt of in Henry's philosophy, he had seen a murderous ruffian reduced to a slaving, cringing heap of human flesh.

With the scene still vivid before his eyes, Henry himself felt cowed and very helpless. Where would be his boasted intellect, his paltry schemes, he asked himself, glancing at the figure striding ahead, were that same force to be turned on him? Nowhere, he only too well realised; against that he would be as helpless as Willis himself. Still half stupefied, he followed his leader into his room and, mechanically seating himself, stared vacantly before him. Carados soon awakened him from his dreams.

"What are you gaping at, you young fool?" he said. "Here, shove this into you and wake up," knocking off

the top of a bottle with his knife, and pouring the contents into two long tumblers, one of which he handed to his guest.

Henry drank half at a gulp, put his glass down, but still said nothing.

"You're thinking of that pantomime just over," pursued the other, filling his pipe. "Bah! a lion tamer's trick, that's all, easy enough with a drunken sot of a Tommy."

Henry with an effort roused himself. "It—it's the greatest thing I've ever seen," he answered soberly. "I don't understand it, sir. Can—can such a thing be learnt, sir?"

"No, it can't, and don't you try. You stick to the beaten track, my aspiring young friend; leave it, and you're done. To do monkey tricks you must be a monkey, d'ye see?"

"Would—would Willis have shot me, sir, had I gone in?"

"Certainly he would, you or anyone else."

"It's—it's personal magnetism, sir, I suppose. I've read of it, but never believed it till now. It was what Napoleon had, isn't it, sir?"

"It's what every great soldier must have, my young friend, and the lack of which in your case, alas!—" he waved his pipe deprecatingly.

"You think then, sir, I shall never succeed as a soldier?"

"I don't say that, Kempton; on the contrary, I think, with your peculiar qualities, there's no reason why you should not become a general officer, perhaps head of the Army Council. I said a 'great' soldier, Kempton, not a walking text book. That, I regret to say, you'll never be, my friend—never, never. You can learn all right, provided there's a book or a teacher; but originate, no. Don't try."

"I—I have brains, sir. I am not a fool."

"You certainly are not, you're even what they call clever, Kempton; but the other's genius, my son."

"Surely that's only a higher degree of intellect?"

"It's nothing of the kind—the two are totally different. The clever man's brain works for his own advantage, that of the genius never. The one makes use of the tools made by the other, makes far better use than the inventor, indeed, and prospers: the other dies in a ditch, on the gallows, or in a mad-house."

Henry glanced quickly up at him, but said nothing.

"You're proud of your brain, I know," continued Carados, "and, as I said, it isn't a bad brain; but if you think it's going to carry you through to port by itself, you're very much mistaken. Other things have a say, which you don't seem to realise yet—have *the* say indeed, for the brain's their servant and dances to the tune they call."

"What other things, sir? Will power, I suppose, is one?"

"Will power is merely the ability to keep the brain concentrated on some purpose. What that purpose is, though, is not decided by the brain, but by the emotions. Two of these, perhaps more, fight it out between them, and the winner gives the brain its orders. Take as an instance the coward in action—oh, you're not a coward, so don't fidget—why, the emotion of self-preservation fights with pride, and, winning, he offs it, his intellect telling him where to run. Greed fights honesty in the merchant, wins again, and good old brain plans the consequent embezzlement and trip abroad. Paterfamilias conceives a passion for Flossie Pantalette, and then there's no fight at all; brain goes to its work at once and devises all the little tarradiddles to wife. For when lust—I beg pardon, love, Kempton—competes, it's not a race but a walk-over, as you, even you, my Galahad, may find some day."

"Why do you always say that, sir? Believe me, it's

true, women have no attractions for me. Indeed, I've not spoken to one since I've been here."

"I'm aware of it, being an observer; but, perhaps unfortunately, the person who started this world has declared for its continuance, and tells us so, speaking in lust's voice, which drowns every other, and which we obey at once. You've heard of a little saying, I hope—perhaps it hangs on the wall of your pretty white bedroom at home—that *God is Love*. It's very true, my friend, like everything else in the holy book, if taken in an allegorical and not in a literal sense: only it ought to read, *Love is God*, for he is the only one everything animate and inanimate worships, and, what's more, obeys. Oh, go to hell, sitting there gaping at me; we don't need proof that the sun shines, do we? It's a self-evident fact. So is love; we all of us love women in our time, or we're wrong. Why, I myself, I—do you hear—I, do you hear, you bloody fool?" and up shot the leaping flame in the hazel eyes; "I did, too, but not now, ha ha, Kempton, not now. A fool there *was*, but that's all over, d'ye hear? The bitch went off with a Jew, left old Jack, ho ho." He fell back in his chair and roared with laughter.

A chilly hand clutched at Henry's heart, but he answered quietly enough.

"What does it matter, sir? There are women enough and to spare. Find another, sir."

"That's what that wire said, Kempton," continued the other, unheeding. "Here it is"—he tore a paper from his pocket and waved it in the air—"and, as you saw, it rapped me on the jaw at the time, made my head ache like hell. It does now, damned queer pain at the back, but I don't mind, for I am quit of her. Let her bleed the circumcised and blaze in hell. Perhaps I'll be there, too, sometime to watch the bonfire."

Henry quietly rose. Carados' excitement seemed to be

gaining upon him, and his presence apparently served but to increase it.

"I think, sir," he said, "if you'll excuse me, I'll be off to bed. We're riding early to-morrow, you remember, sir, and it's now past one."

"No, no; you shan't go. I won't be left alone. If you do I won't answer for——" he began, and then, seeing the look of astonishment on Henry's face, stopped abruptly.

"All right, go," he added quietly.

"I think I—I'd like to stay."

"I won't have you. I asked you and . . . Go."

"You'll remember our ride to-morrow, sir."

"Yes, yes. Go, or I'll put you out." And Henry went.

For a while Carados remained seated, staring unseeingly before him, then once more drew the paper from his pocket and studied it carefully.

"Yes, I thank you, Mr. Jew," he said; "she'll break you right enough, as she's broke me, but what do I care? I'm free now and happy. God, I could sing and dance for happiness. I would, too, but for that fool next door. He'd hear me and think I'm mad, like brother Richard." He rose and began to move about the room. "Mad, I? I was never so sane as now, my brain's as clear as clear." Then suddenly he stopped and fixed his eyes on the rifle leaning against the wall. "Now what the devil have *you* got to say?" he muttered. "Hold your blasted tongue, can't you!" For a moment he stood eyeing the weapon, and then moved on, but once more came back, and once more stopped. "I'd like to argue this out with you," he said, "but not now, I'm too tired. Oh, damn it, what *do* you want? No, I won't, I tell you I won't." He shrank back, then again approached, and touched the rifle lightly with his fingers.

"I must, do you say? Who says must to me? By the Lord, though, you're right; I must, I must, I know it now."

With sudden feverish haste he picked up the weapon, and hurrying to a table seized a yellow lanyard lying on it. Then, flinging himself into the purple and gold arm-chair, he bound the cord to his foot, and the latter to the trigger of the rifle. He lay back, looked down into the tiny, steel-ringed eye peering into his, thrust it into his mouth, and bit hard on the metal. His foot went down, the lamp leapt up, and then went on steadily burning.

Crash!

The gathering mists of sleep were rent from Henry's brain. He sat up, with his heart thumping in his breast, and his eyes staring into the darkness.

What was that sound piercing the silence of the night, and with which the walls of his room still rang and quivered?

The magazine? Ah, that was it, some fool of a sentry with a match. Henry sprang from his bed, and hurried out on to the verandah. No, it was not the magazine, for this was still standing, its squat, isolated shape plainly visible in the light of a waning moon. What was it then? Ah, there was somebody on No. 3 block verandah. It was Griffin, he would ask him: but before he could speak the other called—the boycott forgotten in excitement.

"Did you hear that shot, Kempton?" he said. "It seemed to come from your quarters. What's up—a burgle?"

There was no reply. For a moment Henry stood staring at him—a rigid, stony-eyed figure—and then hurried swiftly away. For in Griffin's question his own thought had been answered, and knowledge of the truth was his.

A snort—the rifle left loaded in the room next to his—"don't leave me, if you do I won't answer."

He sped on—on past his open door, to that which lay beyond.

For a second he paused, then, turning the handle, entered, and closed the door behind him. The silver lamp was still

steadily burning, its ruby eyes fixed, as though seeing, on a great chair of purple and gold and that which the chair contained.

And Henry also saw, and at the sight, though knowing beforehand it would be there, his brain reeled and a black mist, shot with red and green, blinded his eyes. He staggered back, clutching at the wall.

From outside the sound of footsteps and many voices now came faintly to his ears; nearer and louder they grew, and then suddenly he was awake and the turmoil in his brain had passed.

For, with the sound of those voices, had come realisation of the present, and, with it, the imperative need for instant action.

Now alert, he set to work swiftly, untwisting the lanyard from foot and trigger, catching the rifle as it fell, and laying it noiselessly on the floor.

The voices grew louder. "What the devil's all this nonsense about a shot?" he heard in the colonel's raucous tones. "Where's Carados?" Henry stole towards the door. There he paused, looking back, then, with a stifled exclamation, again darted forward, wrenched a paper from the rigid hand, and thrusting it into his pocket walked quickly out, closing the door behind him.

"I insist upon knowing who started this story of a shot," the colonel was saying. "Find out, Fenton, and take his name, whoever it was. I'll see him at orderly . . . Ah, here's Carados at last. No, damn it, it's Kempton. Where's Major Carados, Kempton?"

"In his room, sir. I've just left him," was the answer. Hearing his voice Aylwin wheeled round, and Sparling said: "What the hell do you mean?"

"Perhaps you had better come, sir, and see." Henry turned and, followed by the colonel and Aylwin, led the way to the room he had just left.

Aylwin looked, muttered something and was silent ; but from the colonel broke a horrified cry, and, running forward, he clutched hold of the rigid shoulder.

"Carados, Carados," he screamed. "Oh, my God, Carados!" and began to sob aloud. Then, suddenly turning on Henry, he started fiercely to question him, the tears streaming down his quivering face. "How did it happen?" he stammered, "how did a service rifle come to be here?"

"Major Carados put it there himself," was the answer. "There was a disturbance in the barrack room this evening, and he brought it from there. He must have forgotten it was loaded, sir, and touched the trigger by accident—by accident," he repeated, wheeling round and facing Aylwin, whose eyes were searchingly fixed upon his. There was a pause, broken by a scream from Sparling.

"Turn those beasts there out," he shouted, pointing to a group of white-faced officers crowded in the doorway. "Vulgar, gloating brutes, come to stare at a dead man worth the whole blasted lot of them. Put the swines under arrest, Aylwin, all of them, do you hear?"

Aylwin walked to the door, muttered something, and, the group having melted away, returned to his chief.

"They're gone, sir," he said, "and you, I say it with all respect, sir, had better go too. You can do nothing more here, sir. I'll see to everything, if you leave it to me."

The colonel turned on him. "Who are you to tell me to go?" he said. "Go yourself—to hell if you like. You can all go to hell now . . . He's . . . dead, the one . . . my God!" his voice again rising to a scream as his eyes fell upon Henry. "What's he doing here? Turn him out, turn him out, I say . . . the blasted young . . ."

"It's only Kempton, sir ; he was Carados' friend, and . . ."

"Friend! Carados make a friend of a pup like that? You lie. Nobody was his friend but me. You yourself were jealous of him, like all the rest."

Aylwin made a sign to Kempton, who moved to the door, the former following him.

"Don't go to bed," he whispered, "wait till I come. I have something to say to you," and he closed the door.

Henry returned to his room, sat down on a wooden chair, and remained staring vacantly before him.

For an hour he sat there, his brain busy with the task that most of us know so well—having performed it a hundred times—namely, the reconstruction of the past; not as it was, but as it would be were it to be the present once more, and the actors the same. This was his doing, his fault only, for to him alone the writing on the wall had been revealed, and that in characters so plain, that none, save a blind fool, could have failed to read them and understand. "Stay with me—don't leave me—if you do I won't answer." Wasn't that plain enough? And yet he had not understood, but gaped like a fool and gone. He lived through it all again, many, many times in that hour. He was back in that room, and Carados was speaking to him the same words; but the answer was different now. "Stay? Of course I will:" and he had stayed, was there now, and Carados alive.

Then came a knock at the door, and, Aylwin entering, Henry realised that Carados was dead.

"You wish to see me, sir," he said.

"Yes, I want the truth. You know it."

"I have told you the truth."

"Have you? Well, never mind that, I won't force you to say it. Perhaps," glancing at Henry's face, "I could not. But there's something I must know. You were there first, Kempton, and—and did you see anything, did you find and take away anything which would explain why he did this?"

"I don't understand you, sir."

"You do. You know as well as I do that Carados shot himself, as his grandfather and brother did before him."

"It's a lie."

"What!"

"It's a lie. He was my friend and I won't have him maligned. It was an accident. I'll swear to it before the coroner. He had arranged to go with me riding to-morrow. His last words were to remind me of it."

Aylwin stared at him.

"I'll pass over your words, Kempton," he said at last. "It was in his interests I spoke. You *did* pick up something. I know you touched . . . things. I know for certain."

"I touched nothing."

"That lanyard there," pointing to the floor upon which lay a coil of yellow cord, fallen from Henry's pocket, "where does that come from?"

"It is mine."

Aylwin glanced at the wall, on which a revolver was hanging with another yellow cord on its butt. He made no comment, however.

"Is it?" he said. "If so, burn it, Kempton, burn everything, you understand. You have no right to do it; I have less right to tell you, but burn, and at once. Now I'll leave you. The secret's as safe in your hands as mine, I see. Stay, though; would you like to see him again?"

"Yes."

"Come then." He passed out on to the verandah, Henry following.

At the next door a sentry was standing. His arms clashed to the "present" at their approach.

"Remain over there," said Aylwin to the man. "Mr. Kempton will post you again when he leaves. You can go in now, Kempton."

And Henry entered the room, to pass a night-long vigil with the dead.

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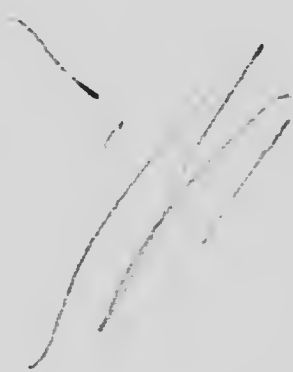
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BOOK III



CHAPTER XIV

“THIS must be Saida, Pennant,” said Major Lomax, wiping his streaming face, and peering through the outer fringe of the belt of high guinea-corn—in which he and his companion were standing—into a huge circular clearing beyond. “That’s it all right, sir,” answered Captain Pennant, “and thank heaven for it. I’m about done, marching in this cursed heat,” and, pulling out a flask, he handed it to his chief. Lomax, having drunk from it, returned it to its owner, who did the same.

Some half a mile away from where they were standing—in the middle of the clearing aforesaid—the high mud walls of a native town glared in the tropical sunshine. At regular intervals the enceinte was broken by solid square towers of stone, pierced with arched gateways barred by wooden doors studded with brass knobs, while, girdling the whole, lay a deep, wide moat crossed opposite the towers by causeways of beaten earth.

Crowding the walls, a mass of white-clad figures could be seen waving green banners, great cross-hilted swords and muskets of varied patterns; for the followers of the Emir of Saida had already seen the troops, hidden behind the belt of guinea-corn, and, knowing their purpose, from their walls were prepared to do battle with them.

Close behind Major Lomax and his second in command, Captain Pennant, rows of khaki-clad figures were lying, their black faces ashine and eyeballs rolling at the prospect

of coming fun. Before one of these rows sat, cross-legged, Lieutenant Henry Kempton, who for two years had been a company leader in the West African Rifles, a post of which, as also of the country, he was now most heartily sick. That this would be so, he had been warned many times, and by many people, amongst them being Colonel Sparling and Major Aylwin, the former for the reason that he invariably opposed any scheme involving the seconding of officers—no matter how greatly to their advantage—from the regiment he commanded, the second in command from less unselfish motives.

Aylwin pointed out to Henry that, though personally he had no objection to his joining the West African Rifles, in his opinion this was not the time, seeing that the recent crushing of a native rising would certainly keep the country quiet for some years; and that, this being so, there was nothing to be gained by going, save diseases of various kinds. Of course, if he wished to, he concluded, he could go, but in his own interests he advised him not to.

Lady Violet Ravenscroft also—with whom Henry now maintained a regular correspondence—was against the idea; while more bitter than all was Josiah, who, in a somewhat intemperate letter, reminded Henry that this was his second change of plans within two years.

He further recalled to his mind the expense incurred by himself in the purchase of an outfit, which would be now wasted, and also brought up the old, but still rankling, grievance of the three hundred pounds paid for his articles to Mr. Daddle, though he failed to mention that he had recovered two-thirds of the sum from the clutches of that god-fearing man. He concluded by peremptorily vetoing the plan, on penalty of an instant stoppage of his son's allowance.

Henry remained unmoved. These warnings and threats were to him but empty babblings when set against the

lightest word of one who, though dead, was ever present, and the master influence of his life. For Carados' death, and that too despite the knowledge of its manner, had, so far from lessening the effect of his teaching, served but to stamp it more indelibly on his mind.

Carados living had been power enough; but Carados dead became a god, and the smallest suggestion he had made was treasured up in Henry's mind, and followed to the letter.

"West Africa," his mentor had said, probably only to forget next minute his mention of that country; but Henry had not forgotten. He remembered it all, and in those dreary hours spent alone with the dead he had pondered and reflected, working out a scheme of life in accordance with the teaching of him who sat so still and silent in his chair. And before the sun rose that scheme was complete, its beginning the joining of the West African Rifles, for Carados had bade him, and Carados was always right.

All advice and opposition disregarded, he therefore applied for, and was, in time, duly seconded for service with his new corps. The blue and gold trappings of an Hussar, the comfortable mess of the 24th, were left behind him, and he lived for close on two years in a God-forgotten West African town, a great oily river, sliding away seawards, ever before his eyes, and behind him a squat, flat-topped hill, its lower slopes covered with ragged grass, the summit rocky and overgrown with trees.

Thither Henry would repair for daily exercise, and, standing on the top, curse the country and everything in it, a curse right heartily joined in by his three companions at night, that is, when there were three. Often but two, or even one, joined him at the evening meal, the absentees being stretched on their mosquito-haunted beds, alternately shivering and burning with fever. During the two years, three had died and were buried, others taking their places.

Henry lived on, untouched by fever or other diseases of the country, his constitution being excellent ; nor indeed had it ever been tried. He rigidly abstained from the indulgences—alcoholic or other—to which his companions were prone. Moreover, they roamed the country in pursuit of big game, returning worn out and soaked in sweat, thus inviting the attacks of the fever fiend, whilst Henry, save for his daily climb up the square-topped hill—and that in the cool of the evening—stayed in his quarters, accumulating knowledge from books. Incidentally, also, his pay being large and expenses nil, he saved money, and his first act, when he was able, was to send the sum of three hundred pounds to Josiah, in repayment of the money lost, as he believed, by his father over his articles.

This had been a sore wrench, for well Henry knew the value of money in hand ; but also he knew the still greater value of a good investment, and that, he trusted, this would be. He still trusted too, even though so far no advantageous results had ensued, Josiah having treated the matter merely as the repayment of money owed, and for which he had enclosed a stamped receipt with the words, " Received with thanks, J. H. Kempton." Henry, however, though cursing a little, was not discouraged. He continued saving money, and towards the end of his two years had five hundred pounds put aside, not much, possibly, but nevertheless something to fall back upon, should his father think fit to carry out his oft-repeated threat of stopping his allowance.

The saving of money was not what Henry had come out to West Africa for, and as the months rolled by, and the monotonous peace remained unbroken, the awful possibility of having made a false step began to occur to his mind ; and false steps, he realised, he could certainly not afford to make and had always sworn to avoid. Here he was, at the age of twenty-seven, very little better off

than in Mr. Daddle's office, and infinitely worse off than he had been two years before in the mess of the 24th Hussars.

There, at all events, he had been a cavalry officer—not a very exalted position perhaps in the eyes of Lady Violet Ravenscroft and her belongings, but nevertheless a veritable salmon to the minnows in Frampton waters—whereas now, as a member of an obscure Colonial force, he had gone back in importance, an intolerable reflection for Henry Kempton. This, he thought bitterly, standing on the top of his hill, and surveying the oily river winding its way through the parched, scrub-covered country, was what came of trusting to another's judgment. It was all very well for Carados to scoff at the importance of army rank, but then Carados had an assured social position outside the army, whilst he, Henry Kempton, bereft of the latter, had nothing. It was his all.

Nevertheless, he held on, for, apart from the fact that the thought of returning as a failure was intolerable, his doubts were but superficial, and his faith in his dead mentor firm and abiding.

Then at last the day came when that mentor was proved right, and the chance so long waited for had apparently arrived. The monotonous peace was suddenly broken, and the Soloba Garrison bidden to hold itself in readiness for punitive measures about to be undertaken against a certain slave-raiding Emir. A week later they were on the march, and in another week, their toil through the still, shimmering jungle-growth completed, found themselves before the native town of Saida, the stronghold of the slave-raiding Emir.

As Henry peered through the guinea-corn, and noted the towers, walls, and the defiant warriors looking down from them, his mind was filled with exultation, and he sat eagerly listening to the conversation of the pair in front of him, screened from his sight by the corn.

They were about to plan the attack, no doubt, and say who was to lead it. In another minute he would hear the words "Kempton's company to go first." Yes, that would be it, for not only was he the senior company leader, but his command was the best, he had taken care to make it so, in case . . . and then he came to earth with a crash, his airy castle fallen in ruins around him, for this was what he heard.

"One would think," said Lomax, pointing to the waving banners, "that is, if you didn't know them as I do, that that crowd meant fighting. But they don't, the curs, there's not an ounce of fight in the whole lot. Not like those other fellows lower down the river, eh, Pennant? Do you remember that day three years ago?"

"I do well, sir, and their poisoned arrows too. Lost six of my best Yorubas that time. But what are you going to do, sir, with this lot?"

"Same old game. Shell them for a bit till the white flag goes up, and then walk in. I've played it about a dozen times already, off and on. May as well begin now. Order up the guns, will you?"

"They're not here yet, sir. They were stuck in the sand of that river-bed last time I saw them. They'll be a good hour yet."

"Never mind. We'll have to wait, that's all; unless," with a laugh, "some hero would like to earn a V.C. by blowing in that gate there with gun-cotton. You wouldn't, I suppose?"

"Thank you, no, sir. I'm a married man and not on for useless heroism. I'll leave it to the guns, sir. Much obliged, all the same."

"Talking of gun-cotton," resumed Lomax, "you've brought plenty, I hope. We shall want a lot for those towers later on."

"About a hundred slabs, sir; they're with Kempton's

lot. "Hi, Kempton, where are you?" he called, looking round to where Henry had been sitting.

Henry was now no longer visible, but was lying flat on the ground, with shining eyes and a face that had suddenly grown strangely pale. For at a certain jesting utterance of his chief's a curious thing had happened, and the glowing jungle around vanished from before his eyes. Once more he was back in a well-remembered room, with his eyes fixed on, and ears drinking in the words of one, who sat in a great arm-chair of purple leather and gold. "You want to succeed I think, Kempton," a harsh voice was saying. "Well, why not? It's easy enough if you know how . . . in your case bravery is the line . . . hero on the blood-stained field . . . Name in the papers. Hooray! . . . Be careful to be seen, though, otherwise . . . might get peppered for nothing, which would be truly calamitous . . . Started the career of many a damned fool, my dear Kempton."

Then the vision faded, and once more he lay on his bed of yellow guinea-corn, before him the native city, the armed warriors on its ramparts, the square stone tower and the great brass-studded gates.

On one of these gates—the one that lay directly facing him—his fascinated eyes were fixed, for he knew that in that rough structure of wood and brass lay the chance so long and so patiently waited for.

For two weary, monotonous years he had been preparing, praying, for that chance, and now in one second it had come. There it was, but half a mile away, looking at him, and the scene prepared: an open sunlit plain for the stage; a watching commander in the stalls; behind him, with nothing else to distract their gaze, a staring audience of three hundred.

The chance was there, and yet there was no instant rush on Henry's part to seize it, as daily for two years he had

vowed there would be, were only half such a one offered. On the contrary, he began to seek for reasons why it should be avoided. And, in so doing, had he then been able to reflect, he would have realised the great truth of which Carados had spoken, that the brain is not the supreme arbiter of human destiny, but a servant, at the orders of the emotion for the time uppermost, equally ready to obey whether that emotion be ignoble or the reverse. And so now, though ambition and worldly interest said Yes, the instinct of self-preservation said No, and, for the time gaining the upper hand, bade the brain support it with reasons. And the latter, obedient, directed Henry's eyes to the warriors waiting on yonder walls, to their guns and swords, the uselessness of the enterprise. But then ambition raised its head, and the brain shifting its allegiance thereto, aided its new master.

"They are cowards," it said, "their guns are old and worn out. their swords they cannot use from above. In a few minutes the thing will be done, and then, Henry Kempton, think. . . . They are brave enough to fire on a single man," that bewildering brain returned; "their guns may be old too, but they couldn't miss at such a range. As for their swords — those figures seeing you would be down from the walls in a second, open the gates, and then . . ."

And so the battle raged, this way and that, the issue being doubtful, when suddenly in rushed a new-comer, jealousy, and joining ambition and its ally, self-interest, drove self-preservation headlong from the field.

For at that moment Major Lomax spoke. "There are the guns, Pennant," he said, "coming over that rise, see, a mile away. Tell Henshaw, when he comes, there's a D.S.O. waiting for him if he shoots straight."

Straightway, as though stung, Henry arose and, unobserved by the two speakers, hurried away to a spot in

the rear where a group of pack mules was standing, their escort, under a *havildar*,* seated close by.

"Quick," he said to the latter; "get me out six slabs of gun-cotton, primers too, detonator and fuses."

The man extracted these from one of the pack-saddles, and Henry, glancing now and again to where the mountain battery could be seen slowly winding its way through the jungle towards them, quickly bound the slabs together, pushed the dry primers into the holes made for that purpose, and then, inserting a detonator into the primer, fixed a length of fuse in it.

This done he hurried away, holding the bundle as closely concealed as he could, and, making a detour, gained the fringe of guinea-corn some fifty yards from where Major Lomax and Pennant were still standing. Here he paused a moment for consideration, then, taking off his coat, and removing his putties, slipped a box of matches into his breeches pocket, and, with the bundle under his arm, started off at a run across the clearing.

"What the devil—" he heard shouted in Lomax' voice.

"Who is it? Come back, you young idiot."

"Come back, damn you, come back," screamed Pennant, joining in—and then a roar of many voices, followed by sudden silence.

Henry looked back. Now, well in the open, stood a group of officers, staring hard; behind them a row of ebony faces, with eyes rolling and mouths agape in astonishment.

"An audience all right," he muttered, and then looked ahead to where on the ramparts stood the white-clad figures, now also staring, until suddenly seeming to awaken they began to run hither and thither, while metal flashed in the sunlight.

A loud bang followed, and something struck the ground wide to Henry's left. Another bang and dust flew up in

* Native sergeant.

his face. Then there was a general fusillade, and the great Snyder bullets and pot-legs hummed like bees in the air around him.

Henry held on; all sense of fear having left him, killed by excitement. Before him one thing only stood out clearly—the necessity of reaching those gates ahead, placing his bundle there, firing it—and have done with it. And for this reason alone did those humming messengers around him make him sick with apprehension. They might strike, kill him if they wished, when the work was done, and he on his way back; but till then let him be spared.

He panted on, his head bent the better to escape those flying bullets; and then suddenly he realised that the firing had ceased, and over him a dark shadow had fallen. He raised his head, and from his dry lips broke a gasping cry of triumph, for there before him stood the square stone tower, in its centre the brass-studded gates. Now, half sobbing, half-laughing, he crossed the causeway, and, placing his bundle carefully on the ground, stood for a while looking at it.

Then from within came the sound of shouting; and for the first time since he started the realisation of his peril came upon Henry. With blanched face and starting eyes, he stood gazing at the gates in front of him, waiting for them to open and death rush out upon him. But those brass-studded gates remained shut, being, had he but known, blocked from within by masses of stone. The shouts, too, were only of warning to those who stood on the tower over his head, for the meaning of the yellow slabs he bore was known, and well known, to followers of the prophet.

Henry's panic passed, and, setting to work, he placed the bundle close against the door, wedging it between the wood and a heavy stone, luckily lying close at hand. Then, striking a match, he lit one end of the black fuse, saw it

splutter for a moment, and then steadily fizz on, burning its way down to the orange "instantaneous" spliced to it.

It was done now, only the return journey remained, and at the thought the excitement hitherto buoying him up suddenly died away, leaving him limp, helpless, and incapable of effort. He would not return, he had neither the strength nor the wish to recross that bullet-swept plain. It was so cool and peaceful here, beneath the tower's shade. No, he would sleep, lay his head on that bundle . . . and then, his eyes falling on the sputtering fuse, he was seized with mad terror, and bounding forward fled headlong back across the plain.

Instantly the fusillade recommenced, but Henry was flying for his life now, and the mark difficult to hit.

Fifty yards he covered, a hundred, and then something, a sledge-hammer seemingly, smote him on the shoulder, and he fell forward, rolling over and over, his screams drowned by the roars of triumph from the walls. Then followed curses and more firing, for the prone figure had stirred and was now crawling slowly forward, its white face looking fearfully back at the gates behind it, unseeing the lines of khaki-clad figures coming towards it at the double, bayonets flashing in the sunlight and whites of eyeballs agleam.

"Yes, I'll stay with you. I was a fool then, but now I know," the crawling figure was chattering to itself. "Ah, I'm too late, he's done it," and to an earth-shattering roar, splinters of wood and stone flying about him, Henry's struggles ceased, and his spirit floated away into a maze of happy dreams.

"Here is Major Lomax to see you, Kempton. He's some news for you, something you'll be glad to hear, old chap," and Major Brooks, I.M.S., smiled kindly and patted the unbandaged shoulder of the pale-faced ghost lying on

his bed within the white-washed walls of the station hospital.

"Oh, Kempton, how are you?" said the visitor, entering; "better, I hope. Afraid we were going to lose you at one time; but you'll pull through now all right, so Brooks tells me. Thank your stars, young man, you've kept off the whisky and other things. You'd be underground by now if you hadn't. Wouldn't he, Brooks?"

The latter watched Henry's face, then, stretching out his hand, took up the invalid's wrist and held it.

"I think, sir," he said, "I should tell him now, and then I am afraid I must ask you to go."

"Oh, all right. Well then, Kempton, I've much pleasure in telling you I've sent your name home, recommended for the Victoria Cross. Mind, I don't say you'll get it, probably not; but . . . eh—oh—Lord—God—damn!" breaking off in confusion, for tears had suddenly gushed from Henry's eyes, and he lay weakly sobbing. "I'll go," said Lomax, and hurriedly retreated.

"It's all right, Kempton, old man," said Brooks, patting his hand. "You'll get it, take my word. Think of it, boy, the Victoria Cross, a thing I'd give both my arms for, legs, too, for that matter, let alone being plugged in the shoulder. Hurting you, old chap?" he continued, lightly touching the bandages.

"No, no," gasped Henry. "Wh-when shall I be fit to go home, do you think?"

"In about a month's time. I'd like to have sent you by to-morrow's boat, but you're not up to it, I'm afraid. You can send a letter, though, to your people. I'll write it now for you, if you like."

A faint light dawned in Henry's sunken eyes. "I should like to send two, sir," he said. "I can manage one, if you'll write the other."

Brooks smiled. "Girl, I suppose, that one," he thought.

"All right, Kempton," he answered aloud. "I ought not to allow you, but as a special indulgence I will. Only it must be a short one, mind. Which shall we take first?" taking a writing-board from a table. "Yours, or mine?"

"Yours first, please, sir; it's to my father," was the answer. Whereupon Brooks again smiled, and, sitting down by the bedside, proceeded to write at his patient's dictation a short letter to Josiah, omitting, however, to the writer's surprise, all mention of Major Lomax' recent announcement. He merely said that being ill he was about to be invalided home by the next boat. Realities, and not promises, were, as Henry well knew, alone of value to his father; and this being so it was better not to mention the V.C. till it was actually his—if it ever was.

This epistle completed and closed up, Brooks went out, leaving Henry with pen, paper and ink set out on the writing-board before him. For some minutes he lay thinking, then, taking up the pen, began on a letter to Lady Violet Ravenscroft.

This time, however, the mention of the proposed decoration was not omitted, nor incidentally were his chief's closing words, to the effect that, though recommended, it was more than doubtful that it would be his. He concluded by stating that his wound necessitated his being invalided home by the next mail boat, in this case giving both date of departure and arrival, whereas Josiah had been left to ascertain this for himself.

The letter written, he lay back gazing thoughtfully at the ceiling, till, the doctor returning, he handed it to him.

"God bless my soul," said Brooks, glancing at the address some half an hour later. "Lady Violet Ravenscroft! Edenborough's daughter—no, his sister, the old man died last year. Belcroft's the duke now. Gad! the young man flies high, and I think, yes, I think it's a shade of odds on the V.C. now."

CHAPTER XV

“**L**ATE again. They’re always late now,” muttered Josiah, one memorable December morning, as he stood in the silent, gas-lit dining-room of Frampton House. His form had shrunken during the last three years, spectacles veiled the erstwhile keen eyes, patches of white were to be seen in his hair and whiskers.

His face too was that of a man to whose mind both worry and disappointment were frequent visitors. Nor were appearances belied, for, though financially more prosperous than he had ever been, with prosperity had come many things that were bitter to the soul of Josiah.

No longer, save in business matters—in which he still brooked no interference even from Maria—was he the autocrat of former days, for, during the last three years, the reins of government had little by little passed from his hands into those of his wife, and she was driving the family coach along roads and at a pace both disturbing and uncongenial to the deposed Jehu. Much indeed had changed in the lives of the Kempton family, a change of which a small but significant sign was manifest in the silence reigning this December morning, though now 8.30, in the rooms above Josiah’s head. The annual four weeks holiday at some seaside resort was long a thing of the past, two, and even three months were spent instead on the Riviera, in crowded and most expensive hotels. The old friends too no longer came, their places being taken by others,

picked up at Cannes, Mentone, and other resorts—people with whom Josiah had nothing in common, and whom he inwardly stigmatised as both worldly and insincere.

More harassing still, allowances had gone up, the girls clamouring for money in order to array themselves suitably for the delights of Woolwich and Sandhurst balls; the boys not only wasting theirs on most unnecessary extravagances, but also incurring debts of which Josiah, though pretending blindness, knew only too well.

To add to his other disappointments, it appeared that Henry, his last hope, was about to return, a failure like the rest. This, indeed, was the hardest blow of all to Josiah, for, though he had carefully concealed it from the rest of the world, he had cherished great expectations of military success for his youngest son; and, since hearing from him of the forthcoming expedition against the Emir of Saida, had daily scanned every line of his newspaper, in the full anticipation of finding his name honourably mentioned.

In this hope he was disappointed. There was certainly a paragraph telling of the capture of Saida, but no mention of names, only the mere statement of fact. He still hoped on, however. Perhaps another expedition would be undertaken, and Henry given a fresh chance. But again his hopes were shattered by the receipt of a letter from a doctor, written at Henry's dictation, saying that he had been ill, but was now recovered, and returning home by the next month's mail boat.

How great a blow this was to Josiah no one save himself knew, for, though anxious enough to have his son home again, he had built on his returning a hero, one who had proved himself right: and his father and mother—especially did he long for the confounding of Maria—wrong, in opposing him three years before. True, he had been on active service, which, in some minds, might count for something.

but to Josiah it counted not at all. He acknowledged but one test of success, that of visible results ; and in this Henry had failed him.

His thoughts wandered to his son now, as his eyes fell on the folded newspaper lying with his letters on the table, and he sighed. "Only a week more," he muttered, "and he'll be here. Want his allowance raised, too, like the others, I'll be bound ; but I won't do it. He entered the army against my wish, and has made nothing of it."

He walked to the table, put out two, and lowered the rest of the flaring gas-jets, a peevish complaint at the wastefulness of servants escaping him as he did so, and then proceeded to open his letters, only to throw the first one into the fire, his face red with anger. It was from Hubert's tailor, requesting Josiah to use his influence with his son, "otherwise legal proceedings . . ." etc.

"I'm sick of it," he muttered, "all at me for money. I shall end in the workhouse if this goes on. Those Blue River Shares were down a quarter yesterday, too," he continued fretfully.

His attention diverted from his correspondence, he unfolded the newspaper, and began to turn over the pages in search of news concerning his latest investment, unfruitful hitherto, but, as usual, destined eventually to bring Josiah a well-nigh hundred-fold profit. Grumbling at what he saw, he was about to lay the paper down and commence his morning repast, when his eyes fell on another paragraph. For a moment he sat staring, then, snatching off his spectacles with trembling hands, he wiped the glasses on the table-cloth, and replacing them stared again. This is what he read :

"The Queen has been graciously pleased to signify her intention to confer the decoration of the Victoria Cross upon the undermentioned officer, whose claims have been submitted for Her Majesty's approval :

"24th Hussars. Lieutenant Henry Robert Kempton, now employed with the West African Frontier Force."

Farther down, under the heading "Brevet," was another paragraph :

"To be notified for promotion to the rank of Major, on attaining that of Captain: Lieutenant Henry Robert Kempton, now employed with the West African Frontier Force."

While, under the whole, was a notice stating that :

"Lieutenant Kempton receives the above-mentioned coveted decoration for having, in the attack on the village of Saida, personally, and under a heavy fire from the walls, placed and fired a charge of gun-cotton against the gates, whereby the latter were blown in, and the surrender of the town brought about without loss to the attackers. He was severely wounded in so doing."

Truly, the Ravenscroft interest had been exerted to some purpose.

Josiah fell back in his chair, the room whirling before his eyes, and then, with realisation of the truth, something seemed to clutch him by the throat, choking him. Hot tears streamed down his quivering face and gasping sobs shook his shrunken frame. Then an immense joy flooded his being, the red blood flew to his cheeks, and hoarsely cheering he sprang up, and capered round and round the room.

For some minutes he danced alone, and then, feeling the imperative need of sharing this wonderful news, he rushed to the bell, and violently snatching at it was left with the handle in his hand. Hurling it at the window—the crash of glass evoking from him a gleeful shout—he hurried into the hall, and, seizing a stick, beat the gong till the house re-echoed with the clamour.

Forthwith from the servants' quarters rushed the two men-servants, behind them came a mob of frightened maids, while in the regions above the sound of banging doors and

running footsteps arose, and the various members of the family, most of them but sparsely clad, hastened from their rooms to see what the noise portended.

With dazed eyes, they beheld the sober, grey-haired head of the house beating the gong, cheering discordantly the while, and brandishing a crumpled newspaper in the very faces of the terrified domestics. Then, more distressing still, leaving the still moaning gong he ran up to the huddled group before him, and seizing the limp hands of the men-servants bade them cheer too, or take a month's notice.

"Josiah!" said Mrs. Kempton, her round red face staring down from the landing above, "Josiah!"

"Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!"

"Josiah, collect yourself, I beg, Josiah."

"Collect yourself, Maria. Henry's got the Victoria Cross, the Victoria Cross, I say. It's here," waving the paper. "Hooray! Hooray!" And once more brandishing his weapon he beat the gong till its sound again rang through the house.

Down rushed the family, a motley crowd in petticoats, shirt-sleeves, and even "nighties," for all to see, but what cared they? Florrie caught her foot, and coming to the ground with a crash, severely bruised her knee—no one heeding her complaints.

The paper was torn from Josiah, and at once rent into fragments, each seizing his or her portion and making off with it, like hounds with the remnants of some poor dismembered fox.

Cries of disappointment arose from those to whom the account had fallen of the Prime Minister's latest speech, or the hitherto much-prized reports of police or divorce court proceedings.

Then from Fred a scream arose. "Here it is," he shouted. "Stand off now," seeing the rush coming. "I'm

not the ball at a bally football match. Stand off, I say. Shut up and listen," whereupon, amid breathless silence, he read aloud the news which had so overcome Josiah.

"Fancy that!" said Mrs. Kempton, the relation completed. "Just fancy that. Henry, too."

"And why not Henry, Maria?" said Josiah, for the moment the autocrat once more. "Why do you say, 'Henry too,' in that surprised tone?"

"Josiah!"

"I don't care, Maria. You've never been fair about the boy, and so I tell you. Perhaps now you'll own that I was right, and you wrong. I should have thought, too, now that he is wounded . . ."

"I don't believe he's wounded. They've put that in for effect, or if he is he can't be bad, or he wouldn't be coming home. And of course I'm glad. Wasn't it I who persuaded you to let him enter the army? Oh, I know now you'll say it wasn't, but it was, all the same. Perhaps you'll own you're wrong now; and he's my son as much as yours, please remember that, Josiah."

"I'm jolly glad, I know that," said Hubert. "Good old Henry. You and I, Fred, will go to Liverpool to meet him, and give him a royal welcome."

"What does that last piece mean?" said Nelly. "Is Henry a major now?"

"Not yet, Nelly," answered Josiah, with some dignity, "but he will be on becoming a captain; and quite right too," he added aggressively, "quite right too. It's the least they can do."

Everyone began to talk at once, the two sons debating the question of whether Liverpool or London should provide the banquet to be given in the hero's honour, the latter being eventually decided upon as more convenient—this in whispers—for certain lady friends proposed to be invited to grace the meal in question.

Nelly was of opinion that the first thing to be done was to make Beer, the coachman, don a cockade; but Florrie thought not—not just yet, at all events.

Mrs. Kempton was for adding forthwith a gilt V.C. to the arms now decorating the lodge gates of Frampton House. It would not only improve their appearance, she opined, but, further, be an ever-present reminder to the neighbourhood of services rendered to the country by a member of the Kempton family.

Josiah took no part in the discussion, but, remarking that the day would be observed as a holiday by himself and sons, left the breakfast table, and a few minutes afterwards was walking briskly down the village street on his way to Mr. Smyrna's, the principal grocer of the place, whose shop was also the post and telegraph office.

Here, having somewhat loudly demanded another pencil, the one provided being, he declared, impossible to write with, he proceeded to compose a telegram; and, this done, handed it to the rosy-faced grocer, asking him carelessly if it was sufficiently clearly written for transmission. Mr. Smyrna took it, his eyes growing round with astonishment as he read; and then, looking up at Josiah, who laughed consciously in answer, he begged to be allowed to offer his humble congratulations, at the same time furtively wiping his hand upon his apron, in case his patron should see fit to tender his own, which he did.

The following was the message handed in, and a few seconds later on its way to John Sims, Manager, The Emporium, Edgware Road.

"Son Henry awarded Victoria Cross for bravery. Holiday for firm. Day's wages all round. Decorate Emporium. God save the Queen."

This message, when communicated to the assembled employes, provoked much cheering, and a few minutes later a crowd was rapidly gathering in dirty, business-like

Edgware Road, gazing at a swarm of respectable-looking clerks, in frock-coats, climbing up ladders and hanging out of windows, their hands busy with the spreading of bunting and hoisting of Union Jacks over the Emporium's dingy front.

For some minutes after the despatch of the telegram Mr. Kempton remained chatting with Mr. Smyrna, his words being listened to in awed silence by the grocer, his wife, employés, and such customers as happened to be present. Then, remarking that there was much to be done in the way of preparation before the 14th, when his son would arrive in Frampton by the 3 p.m., he carelessly observed, he left, calling at various shops that he passed to make small purchases.

Well pleased with his morning's work, he returned home, and spent the rest of the day strutting about the grounds, in close confabulation with Potter, the head-gardener, and Tipple, the local carpenter.

Josiah was not the only member of his family roused to action by the morning's news, for within the house Mrs. Kempton, assisted by her two sons and daughters, was hard at work with pen, ink and paper, much wrangling enlivening the proceedings as one or other of the workers strove for exclusive possession of the newly-instituted visitors' book.

Further, outside the walls of Frampton House, in the back room of Mr. Smyrna's shop, a solemn conclave was already taking place, the result of which was seen next day in the sudden erection of various wooden structures, naked-looking skeletons at first, but soon to be clothed with flesh in the shape of gay bunting and flags. The strains of music also began nightly now, after working hours, to make themselves heard, for the local band was practising hard, at tunes of an exclusively martial and patriotic character.

So fast indeed, once the torch of enthusiasm was kindled, did affairs progress, that even before the few days given for preparation had expired everything was in readiness, and such a welcome awaiting the hero as would have caused him, had he known of it, to leave the compartment in which he was seated, and return with all speed to the metropolis through which he had just passed.

Fortunately, however, for Frampton expectations, Henry was unconscious, not only of the flags and bunting, but also of the news to which they owed their appearance. A chilled and depressed figure he looked, clad in a cheap, ready-made suit bought in the few minutes at his disposal in Liverpool. Fog and drizzling rain had greeted him on landing and caused his wounded shoulder to ache with a dull, worrying pain.

As he journeyed onwards, the excitement, incident on a return home after some years in a foreign country, gave way to gloom; and the nearer he drew to Frampton the deeper that gloom became, till by the time the suburb appeared in sight, not only had he made up his mind that Major Lomax' recommendation was already forgotten by its recipients, but that at the earliest possible date another train should be conveying him to Southampton, and thence to South Africa, which he had been a fool to leave.

Then the train began to slacken speed, and Henry, rising wearily, proceeded to gather together his few belongings. Happening to look up, he became aware of the waving of flags from the windows of a row of houses bordering the line. Somewhat puzzled, he put out his head, the better to observe any answering signal from the train he was in, but saw none, the effect of his appearance being to make the waving of the flags more vigorous, and to cause cheers to be raised.

Then, the train rounding a bend, the well-known station of Frampton came in sight, not, as it usually was, deserted

at this hour, but crowded with people, all looking down the line.

"Some infernal holiday, I suppose," he muttered, with no inkling of the truth as yet. Nor was it till the train stopped, and his father and two brothers burst in upon him, all talking at once, that he realised that for him alone, and no one else, were those banners waving, and the shouting crowd assembled.

Further enlightenment came with Hubert's opening words.

"Hurray! old chap," he said. "Hurray! Now fish out that old V.C. of yours, and let's have a look at it."

"He's not got it yet, you owl," put in Fred. "The Queen gives it him herself—pins it on his coat."

"It's a proud day this for me, Henry, for all of us," said Josiah, beaming upon him. "But get out quick. Your mother and sisters are waiting outside. Mind your arm. That's where he was wounded," addressing the crowd, who, with a murmur of interest, at once pressed closer, the better to observe the disabled limb.

Henry followed in silence, all joy at the news dead within him, killed by shame and loathing of the present scene.

It was not for this, the vulgar jubilation of suburban tradesmen, he had risked his life that September morning. It was not for their approval, but for that of their betters—for those who had power to advance his future. These had none, except to ruin it; and they were doing their best to do that now at the outset, for did the report of this reach certain ears, it was not admiration but ridicule that would be his portion.

Rage was fast gathering in Henry's mind, and in another moment might have found vent in words most unsuitable to the occasion, when happily Mr. Smyrna stepped forward, and, clearing his throat, proceeded to express in the names of himself and his fellow-townsmen the pride and pleasure

it was for them "to welcome 'ome again such a true 'ero as Lieutenant Kempton had proved himself to be."

A loud outburst of clapping and "Hear, hears" instantly arose from the beaming assembly; while from the road outside the muffled bray of brass instruments and murmur of chamois-leather on parchment told of musicians with difficulty held in check by an imploring bandmaster.

"Not yet, not yet; tell them to wait for the signal," whispered Mr. Smyrna to Pump, the dairyman, his second in command. The latter hurried away, and the small, rosy-faced man, holding up his hand to quell the rising enthusiasm, called for three cheers for Lieutenant Kempton, V.C. These having been heartily given, together with another three for Squire Kempton, their respected fellow-townsmen and patron, Mr. Smyrna again held up his hand, and, with the rest of the crowd, looked expectantly at Henry.

He, however, remained silent, with his eyes fixed on the ground, impatiently waiting for the crowd to open and let him through. They showed no signs of doing so, and the pause was becoming somewhat painful, when the band, unable any longer to restrain themselves, suddenly burst forth into loud and discordant music, which, after some seconds of indecisive conflict, settled down at last into the strains of "See the Conquering Hero comes."

The tension was relieved, and the crowd now formed a lane through which Henry—his father still clutching him by the arm—pressed resolutely forward, only to find further trials awaiting him in the road beyond.

Here a solid mass of carriages, waggonettes, and brakes were assembled, prominent amongst them being the Kempton barouche, drawn up in the place of honour opposite the station doors. In it was seated his mother, arrayed in her favourite colour of violet, her fat face beaming from beneath a large hat of the same hue; while on the

box seat of a private 'bus were his sisters, waving their handkerchiefs and smiling.

With set face, Henry strode to the waiting carriage, the band ceasing abruptly at a signal from its leader, and, climbing into it, he held out his hand to his mother. She, however, ignoring his movement, stood up, and clasping him in her arms kissed him on either cheek. Then, holding him from her, she remained dramatically gazing into his face, while a storm of cheering instantly arose from the crowd, and here and there a fluttering handkerchief was dabbed on eyes grown suddenly wet at this simple touch of nature.

Maria sank back in her seat, motioning to Henry to take his place beside her. Josiah followed, and, closing the door, stood signalling to Mr. Smyrna, now busy with his aide in pushing the band into position ahead.

"All ready now, sir," gasped the grocer at length, running to the carriage door, whereupon, heralded by three loud bangs from the drum, followed by "The Campbells are coming," the procession started off at a walk.

The coachman muttered curses as the horses reared and plunged. Mrs. Kempton was openly weeping. Josiah was no less affected, though he showed his emotion in another way. He stood up, singing the words of the tune the band was playing: while Henry, with his hat drawn over his eyes, was calculating the chances of to-day's proceedings escaping the notice of those who mattered, and bitterly coming to the conclusion that there was no such chance possible.

At length the end of the High Street was reached, and the gates of Frampton House appeared in sight. The band, still playing, wheeled to one side and halted, whereupon Beer, with a muttered exclamation of relief, touched his horses with the whip, and at a trot the carriage bowled up the drive to the house.

Descending, they made their way through a group of

smiling servants ; but brushing them aside Henry hurried on, only stopping for a second to ask which room was to be his during his stay. This information having, with some difficulty, been extracted, he muttered an excuse to his father, ran upstairs to his room, banged the door, and indulged in an outburst of profanity, which would have made the worthy Josiah, had he heard it, cold with horror.

"God ! if I'd only known," he raved, "if only they'd sent me a wire to the boat, I'd have stayed in town for the night and sold them all. I suppose they meant it to be a surprise, and by the Lord it was. A surprise that's just about settled my career. Damn them, oh, damn them ! Why the devil didn't Lady Violet wire me, or anyway send me a letter to the boat ? She might have known, had she thought, I couldn't possibly have seen a Gazette. Hullo," he broke off, as his eyes at that moment fell on two letters lying on a table close by, "there is a letter from her, and one from father, too. What on earth does that mean, I wonder ?" He opened the latter, and drew out a half-sheet of notepaper, to which was pinned a thin stamped slip.

"Cheque," muttered Henry, his face clearing at the sight. "How much for, though, I wonder ? Fiver, I suppose. Lord bless me," staring at it. "Three hundred and fifty pounds. That's all right, but why three hundred and fifty pounds ? Let's see what he says," looking at the sheet, on which was written :

"To my son Henry, from his proud and delighted father. Three hundred pounds article money returned, fifty as a present for himself."

A glow of exultation warmed Henry's chilled body. "I was right," he murmured. "I knew I was. Bread on the waters:" and then carefully folding up cheque and letter he put them away in his pocket.

"No drawer for me," he reflected, "not in this house, anyhow. Mother would have it in a minute. A nice time

father would have if she did, too, for I bet he's not told her, or the deuce of three hundred and fifty pounds would I have got. I'll pay that in to-morrow. Makes eight hundred and fifty pounds now—not bad at all. Now for Lady Violet's," opening the other envelope.

"DEAR MR. KEMPTON (if ran)

"I was so glad to see the good news in the Gazette. I sent you a wire to the boat, which I hope reached you safely. (Cursed, hurrying fool that I was, muttered the reader.) Will you come and see me very soon? I think you might *now*,

"Yours very sincerely,

"VIOLET RAVENSCROFT."

Henry stared thoughtfully at the paper. "Yes, I think I may *now*," he said slowly, and then another oath escaped him, and he stuffed this letter also into his pocket, for there was the sound of hurrying footsteps along the corridor outside his door, and a second afterwards Hubert and Fred burst in upon him.

"Hullo, so you're here, are you, hiding away?" said Hubert. "Don't be shy, old man, you're a hero, you know, and must play up. Come on, no end of folk waiting to see you. A lot you know, I expect, society people and army men."

"Really, Hubert, it's very good of you, but—look at my clothes."

"Blow your clothes; but if that's the trouble why not shove on regimentals? Fetch 'em no end, that would. Cut away, Fred, and tell them to bring up that tin case. Hurry up."

"Please don't, Fred. If I must come, I'll come as I am," growled Henry, whereupon, with a brother on either side, he left the room, and a minute afterwards found himself

at the drawing-room door, the loud clatter of voices and teacups from within betokening further trials.

"We've got him, here he is," said Hubert, an announcement causing fifty pairs of eyes to turn and stare towards the doorway.

A very different assembly was this from the Flower Show crowd of five years ago, but further rungs of the social ladder had since then been attained by the Kempton family, and the status of their friends had gone up accordingly. True, a few of their former friends were still to be met with. Of Mr. Cleaver, however, there was now no sign. For some time he had persisted in his visits, but his jokes falling flatter on each succeeding occasion, the truth had at last penetrated even his thick epidermis, till, finally, taking offence in earnest, he had gone, never to return.

Only Aunt Eliza had weathered the storm, and was here this day with Maggie and Clara: but then Aunt Eliza was an oak whose deep-reaching roots nothing short of an earthquake could root up.

On entering the drawing-room, Henry was introduced to some thirty persons in rapid succession.

"Pleased to meet you, Kempton," said Mr. Rabbit Green affably. "Glad to get home, I suppose, like all you fellows on foreign service. I know my cousin, Bill, of the Royal Howlers, now stationed at Poggle Wallah . . ."

But here his wife interrupted him.

"Oh, Mr. Kempton, what a dreadful time you must have had in—Pongoland, isn't it? Oh, Nigeria, of course; so stupid of me, but all my people seem to be quartered in different parts of the world, and I never can remember where."

"Old Bill always says . . ." essayed Mr. Rabbit Green once more, and once more vainly.

"My husband was to have gone into the army, too, Mr. Kempton," pursued his spouse. "The Guards, you know.

The dear old Duke was so dreadfully disappointed when he changed his mind."

"Yes, I was a fool, Kempton," said her husband. "No life like a soldier's. I see my mistake, now it's . . ."

"Oh, Mr. Kempton," broke in the somewhat affected voice of Mrs. Stanley Shivering, "I do so much want to ask you about a cousin of mine, Captain Langoost. You must have met him, I'm sure. He's a nephew of old Lord Sallycock and married Cicely Omar."

"I don't remember having done so," said Henry, staring at her. "Perhaps if you told me his regiment it might help."

"Oh, some cavalry thing. I always forget names of regiments. His uniform is blue and white."

"The Army Service Corps, I should say," answered Henry, turning from her, to find fixed upon his face from a yard away the lorgnettes of Mrs. Smith-Walker.

"Too much whisky," the latter suddenly exclaimed in deep and strident tones, then, lowering her glasses, tapped him on the chest. "Too much drink, that's what gives you that pasty face. All you young devils from the tropics are the same. Drink and blackamoor ladies, eh!" and a harsh cackling laugh broke from her lips. "Now, come and sit down with me in that corner there. We'll have a whisky together, and you shall tell me . . ."

"I suppose, like the rest," put in a well-remembered voice, "you're too grand to remember your Aunt Eliza, Henry. Now that you're in the army and wear a smart uniform and sword, no doubt like them . . ."

"Forget you? Not I," said Henry, suddenly and unexpectedly cordial. "Delighted to see you, Aunt Eliza, Maggie and Clara, too. Come along, I'll get you a cup of tea and we'll talk about the old times in Fish Street."

Whereupon, to the annoyance of all present, save Josiah, who watched him with secret approval, Henry, for the rest

of the afternoon sat in a corner with his forbidding-looking relations. Such a triumph over the enemy caused vinegary smiles to play on Aunt Eliza's thin lips; and, for the first time on record, afterwards, to utter words other than those of disapproval for a Frampton House entertainment.

CHAPTER XVI

THE emotional cyclone, so disastrous to Kempton good form and gentility, passed with the suddenness common to such atmospheric disturbances, and from the morrow Frampton House once more resumed its normal aspect and avocations. They still scrambled for breakfast (nowadays cold as well as scrambled, the partakers thereof being invariably late) and, this concluded, the family disappeared, a heavy silence thenceforth descending on the house of Kempton. The male members departed for town, to remain there till evening; Maria to the back regions to harry the servants. The girls also vanished, though where and what to do, Henry never succeeded in fathoming. They were busy, they said, and had no end of things to do; and, flying away, were seen no more till lunch time.

Henry was thus thrown on his own resources, and, these being here nil, weariness of spirit soon settled heavily upon him.

Bored he had often been in the old days, antagonistic too, but now both boredom and antagonism were infinitely deeper. Then, his life had been, after all, bound up in theirs, and consequently some subject in common was always to be found, even if only that of the train journey citywards and back.

Now there was none, for in the last three years his thoughts and outlook on life had undergone a complete change.

During that time not one word of business, or its interests, had he heard, his environment being soil hardly congenial to the topic, and his companions men to whom such a subject was a foreign tongue, the result being that his former slight interest in such matters had long since evaporated, and his ways of thinking and ideas had become utterly foreign to the inmates of Frampton House.

Amongst other things, he had come—not from any particular sense of honour, but rather from habit—to regard certain doings as impossible in persons accepted as equals; such, for instance, as the vilifying of friends in one's presence; the reading of and commenting upon addresses on envelopes; the sealing up of a note entrusted for transmission.

The Kempton family did all these things, and that daily, and warmly defended their actions when questioned by its youngest member. "Not fasten down a note!" Maria would exclaim. "What is to prevent its being read then? Absurd, Henry, I never heard such rubbish in my life."

Between Maria and her youngest son the old antagonism had once more arisen, and she lost no opportunity of snubbing and taking down the one and only member of the family who still questioned her supremacy. That he might be a person of some consequence outside Frampton affected her in no way. Possibly, though she was by no means sure, this might be the case, but before all else he was her son and the youngest of the family, and must be taught his proper place.

Maria was not the only one who was hostile to Henry, for bad feeling, rapidly growing to dislike, had also arisen between him and his brothers and sisters. Henry not only irritated them daily by what they designated "his airs," but, worse still, he had disappointed many secretly-cherished aspirations.

Much, indeed, had been expected from the returning hero : the girls had anticipated invitations to military functions, tickets for Ranelagh, Hurlingham, and such places ; the boys meals at exclusive clubs, and evenings out with smart soldier men about town.

Further, they had looked forward with considerable gratification to showing off their laurel-crowned brother, more especially at certain houses outside the Frampton radius, in which, hitherto, their foothold had been of the slightest, but whose owners, since the appearance of the *Gazette*, had shown a desire for increased friendliness. They now asked the Kemptons to come to tea whenever they ~~was~~ inclined, and to be sure, if he was still with them—which they knew he was—to bring their youngest brother. All these hopes had been blighted, Henry having, or seeming to have, no military acquaintances, and was a member of no club—exclusive, or otherwise ; while, on the few occasions he had condescended to accompany his family to certain houses, he had not only declined to fulfil his required mission of roaring lionlike, but had displayed such boredom and contempt that the name of Kempton had been removed from several much-prized visitors' lists.

Everyone declared that, despite his V.C., he was a discredit to the uniform he wore, and compared most unfavourably with those delightful Aldershot captains, or, indeed, with most of the Sandhurst or Woolwich cadets. This opinion was especially pronounced in the case of the many girls to whom he had been introduced by his sisters since his arrival.

Henry would have no dealings with any of them, and resolutely declined to avail himself of the many *tit-a-tits* arranged for his benefit. In short, he was a failure, a blight upon their enjoyment ; and yet, blight and failure though he was, he had the presumption to look down upon

and despise people infinitely more interesting and smarter than himself, an attitude in every way insupportable.

There was one, however, of the family, and one alone, who seemed to find pleasure in his society, that one being Josiah, to whom he showed none of the above-mentioned traits, but, in accordance with a line determined on long since, was invariably respectful and attentive.

"You and the others don't understand him, Maria, that's the trouble," the old man was wont to observe, in reply to his wife's frequent complaints. "I've never seen anything of what you mention. Believe me, he's really a most affectionate boy, only reserved, and, being so, objects to all the fuss these people wish to make over him. I must say I rather admire him for it."

Whereupon Maria would heatedly respond, and Josiah be talked down and almost convinced, till, the after-dinner hour arriving, the old man and his son would, as usual, find themselves together and alone in the library, when Henry would be reinstated in his father's good opinions.

These evenings were a genuine pleasure to Josiah, who loathed the bridge to which the rest of his family, in obedience to fashion's dictates, were now devoted, and to avoid which he had been wont to wander away to the library, to pass the evenings by himself.

There often, unknown to anyone, a feeling of loneliness and bitter dissatisfaction with life would come over the old man, but now both loneliness and dissatisfaction were things of the past, and the erstwhile weary evening hours the happiest period of the day.

Then, unheeding of the wrangling quartette in the drawing-room, the two would sit reading, till Josiah, laying down his book, would peer for a while through his spectacles at his silent companion, and then proceed to question him on his recent experiences. And, unlike that of the rest of the family, this questioning was always intelligent

and to the point ; for Josiah was a well-informed man in his way, and possessed, moreover, a good sound knowledge of questions of the day. Nevertheless, despite Henry's care to avoid certain dangerous topics, such would occasionally arise, and instant antagonism would be the result. As long as they remained on the safe ground of politics, soldiering or history, the harmony continued unbroken ; but if Henry seemed to approve, or even tolerate, anything not in accordance with his father's ideas of right and wrong, then Josiah became at once the violent and narrow-minded bigot.

For the old man's intolerance, though not now so outwardly aggressive as formerly, was still there ; and if on some subjects he was willing to listen to, or even learn from his son, on the question of right and wrong he would brook no contradiction, and where such was concerned would treat Henry as a child, who had no right to opinions of his own.

Pleasant though Henry's visits might be to his father, to himself they had become unutterably boring, one thing only restraining him from instant departure, that being the hope of the long-awaited letter from Lady Violet Ravenscroft. He had answered hers the morning after his arrival, but nearly a month had elapsed since then, and as day followed day, and still no letter arrived, rage and disappointment took possession of him.

He would give her to the end of the month, he at length determined ; after that he would wait no longer, but would return to his regiment, and have done with her.

His resolution was not put to the test, for, two days after making it, he found beside his plate one morning a letter. With a thrill of excitement, he recognised the large, characteristic handwriting of Lady Violet Ravenscroft.

Conscious of his mother's eye being upon him, he left it lying there unopened, and was proceeding with his

breakfast when Maria, declining to be baffled, addressed him with some asperity.

"Who's your letter from, Henry?" she demanded.

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"Presently, mother."

Maria glanced significantly at Josiah, who, mindful of last night's lecture, dutifully supported the attack.

"Answer your mother, Henry," he said. "Come now, who's this mysterious letter from?"

Henry's jaw set. He was about flatly to refuse, when, catching his mother's eye and noting the malicious triumph in it, he checked himself, and, quietly opening the letter, proceeded to read its contents. Then, putting it in his pocket, he turned to Josiah, contemptuously ignoring his mother.

"There's no mystery about it, father," he said, with an odd ring in his voice, which made his mother stare the harder. "It's from a friend of mine, asking me to meet him in town, that's all."

"Let me see the letter," said Maria quickly. "Why shouldn't I, if that's all it is?" But here, to her rage, Josiah interposed.

"My dear," he said, "the boy's letters are his own. He's told us its contents; why worry further? Come on, come on," to Hubert and Fred, "we'll miss the train if we don't hurry." And the head of the house rose, and, followed at some distance by his two sons, was soon briskly walking on his way to the station.

Henry, his mother and sisters having performed their daily vanishing trick, betook himself to the library, where he proceeded to re-read, and this time carefully, the letter just received. It ran as follows:

"DEAR MR. KEMPTON,

"I am afraid you must be thinking very badly

of me for leaving your letter so long unanswered, but I've been staying with friends in the country, and, owing to a stupid mistake on the part of my servants, it was not forwarded to me. Please forgive and come as soon as you can to see me. To-morrow, if you like. I shall be at home all the afternoon.

"Yours very sincerely,

"VIOLET RAVENSCROFT."

"To-morrow," reflected Henry, "that's to-day. Quick work, and, if I accept, makes me out keen, too keen for my liking; all the same I'll go; another day in this house and I'd break something. Yes, I'll go, if only to get out of that infernal tea-party this afternoon. They want me there particularly, I happen to know. Well, they'll have to wait, I fear. This is a bit more important than a shoddy, suburban tea-party. Important," he repeated slowly, his face suddenly becoming very thoughtful. "I should just say it *was*. Important—how much so I don't think even I realise. I *do* know, though, that if I make a hash of things this afternoon, all my past work, V.C. and all, will have gone for nothing.

"I won't hash it, though. I'm ready for it, quite ready; and, one great pull in my favour, don't know what nervousness is. My clothes too are right, which, according to Carados, is of the first importance," and, thinking of certain parcels hidden away in his room, he laughed.

"I wonder what they'll say when they see them," he murmured. "Something impudent, I suppose. Want to know how much they cost, and why I've never worn them before, instead of rags, at their beastly shows? Let them ask and be hanged. A reach-me-down suit and Frampton harmonise excellently, to my thinking. I must go and order a trap, I suppose," he continued, glancing out of the window. "It's going to rain, as it always does here,

and a first appearance, wet and filthy, wouldn't do at all."

He rose, put on his cheap, ready-made cap, and, leaving the house, proceeded to the livery-stables, where he ordered a fly. He then returned home, and, repairing to his room, proceeded carefully to take out from their cardboard homes various garments of undoubted West End brand, in which he leisurely began to array himself.

As he had anticipated, his appearance at lunch evoked instant and varied comment.

"Got a new soot on I see, Henry," remarked his mother, standing up the better to slice the leg of mutton. "We've never seen that soot before."

"The coat's very well made, Henry," said Nelly, critically surveying him, "better even than Hubert's grey, which he thinks such a lot of. Your tie too is quite the thing, and what nice boots. But why put varnish on new hoots? A pity, I call that."

"I'd be much obliged if you'd spare me your comments," was the answer. "Surely decent clothes call for none. My tie, I'm aware, is not made up, which perhaps looks singular in Frampton, also varnish on new boots. Some people, however, prefer them like that. I'm one of them."

"Never you mind, Henry," said Florrie. "You look very smart, quite the Park look, and most military. I wonder why it is, mater," she added somewhat unwisely, turning to her mother, "that officers look so different to business men."

"Nonsense, Florrie," said Maria sharply, "nothing of the sort. The idea of putting such rubbish into your brother's head. The others are always particularly well-dressed, I consider. Certainly as well, if not better than Henry."

"Oh, they're right enough," answered the girl, uncon-

vinced, "but all the same there's a difference. I don't care what you say, mater."

"I know why he's got up like this," observed Nelly. "You forget, Flo, Miss William Williams is to be at the Smith-Thompsons' this afternoon," she added.

"That's the reason, of course, Nelly," answered her brother. "Miss William Williams being that fat girl with the regimental belt, I believe, whom I had the felicity of meeting at the Wig-Wig—I really can't get these names—bun scramble last Tuesday."

"The Wackford-Wiggs are very great friends of ours. I must ask you to please remember, Henry," said Mrs. Kempton. "They are quite one of the county families too. She is one of the Somerset Hoggs."

"I seem to have heard of the family," said Henry, "but why does she wear a regimental belt? Is that the badge of the Berkshire—I beg pardon, I mean the Somerset Hoggs?"

"And why shouldn't she wear a belt, pray?" said Nelly, with some heat. "Her brother's adjutant of the 18th Crimson Crawlers, and what she wears are their regimental colours. Both Florrie and I have belts, too, given us by men we know at Aldershot."

"All the Southsea girls do the same," said her sister, joining in, "and if they don't know what's right, who does, I should like to know? Don't be absurd, Henry, we know as much about the army and the thing to do as you."

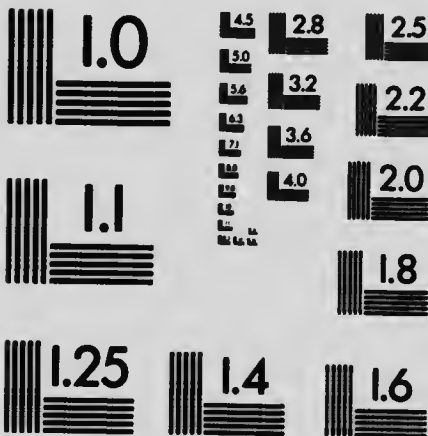
"A great deal more, it seems," was the answer, "but to my mind—I'm probably wrong of course—a belt, certainly its buckle, is an article of uniform, and about as suitable for a woman as a helmet or jack-boots."

"Never you mind, my dears," said Mrs. Kempton judicially. "Henry is young yet, and has still a lot to learn. I've no doubt he will see many, ahem! belts this afternoon, and perhaps come to change his ideas."



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"It's a blow, of course, having to miss them, mother," said Henry, "but unfortunately I have to go to town this afternoon on business."

"Go to town!" exclaimed Maria, "what on earth for? Nonsense, Henry, you must stay and go with us to the Smith-Thompsons, and very probably you will see the young lady there you so much admired the other day."

"It's another blow, mother, but I'm afraid my business is urgent."

"Rot, Henry," put in Florrie. "What is your old business, pray?"

"My dear girl, will you kindly mind your own affairs?"

"Don't be rude to your sister, Henry," said his mother.

"Of course if, as you say, it's urgent, you must go, I suppose; though I can't see what business a boy like you can have in town which we don't know of. You'd better change those new clothes, though. It's raining now, and it would be a pity to get them spoiled the first time on."

"I don't propose to walk to the station."

"I'm afraid the carriage is wanted, Henry."

"Something told me it would be, mother, and I therefore ordered a fly. There it is at the door now, if you'll excuse me."

"A fly—" began Mrs. Kempton; "what extravagance. Your father certainly don't give you a handsome allowance to . . ." But Henry had already left the room.

A few minutes later, with a hat-box under his arm, he clambered into the cab, and, waving his hand to the dining-room windows as he passed, was borne away stationwards.

An hour later he found himself at the door of a huge, gloomy-looking house in Grosvenor Square. He ran his eye carefully down his still almost spotless attire, then, with one last flick at his boots, he rolled the handkerchief he had used for this purpose into a ball and flung it away. This done, he boldly rang the bell and waited.

CHAPTER XVII

LADY VIOLET RAVENSCROFT started, and, lowering the book she had been endeavouring to read, sat listening, with a look of uneasiness. Several times already that afternoon she had done this, though she was not usually given to sudden movements or emotions of any kind. Nevertheless, she was now a prey to nervous apprehension, and this too from a somewhat insignificant cause, namely, the momentarily expected appearance of Mr. Henry Kempton. In a few seconds she would see her correspondent in the flesh, and that for the first time for five years. And now that the meeting was imminent, Violet shrank from it, despite the fact that, in every one of the many letters she had written to him, the hope for this meeting had been freely expressed.

She had taken great pleasure in the correspondence, partly because Henry's letters were always interesting in themselves, though possibly more for the reason that the whole proceeding was attractively unconventional, and would have both shocked and annoyed her relatives, had they known of it.

Perhaps for this reason she had kept it from them, and indeed from everyone else, though it must be admitted that Violet's actions were as a rule little influenced by the opinions of others, even her own family.

From being merely interested in her protégé she had of late become very proud of him, this feeling being intensified by the very feminine conviction that it was for her sake he

had achieved success ; and also by the knowledge that it was to her he owed the prompt recognition of his services. For, as already hinted, on the receipt of a certain letter, headed Soloba Station Hospital, Violet had bestirred herself, and sought out many influential personages ; and, though they had at first waved deprecatory hands, she eventually prevailed, with results as gratifying to herself as to the one directly benefited.

It was one thing, however, to interest herself in an unknown and consequently ideal Henry—even to the enshrining of him in her imagination as a hero—but quite another to be called upon to meet the ideal personified, in the form of a London tradesman's son, and in all probability as vulgar-looking and impossible as the rest of his dreadful family. Strangely enough, though Violet could recall with perfect clearness the appearance of every other member of the Kempton family—even to such details as Hubert's boots, and Mrs. Kempton's hat—of Henry she could remember nothing, except his presumption. The memory of that, however, was clear enough now ; it had sprung to life after despatching her letter of yesterday—before she had somehow forgotten it—and since then had been hourly growing more vivid. Many times already this day she had asked herself one question : If he was presuming then what would he be now, owing to recent success and the surfeit of suburban adulation consequent on it ? Swaggering, bragging, and insolently free, most likely. Oh, why had she sent that letter ?

Nothing was clear but this ; his face, figure, voice, all were shrouded in mist. And Violet, listening to the footsteps mounting the stairs, would have given a great deal to retain those mists and not be forced to face almost certain disillusionment. Then the door opened, and "Mr. Kempton" was announced. Looking up, half-fearfully, she saw coming towards her a Henry Kempton who was none of the things

she had anticipated, but a man to outward seeming of her own world, one, moreover, with whom, as regards looks, not many of her world could have borne comparison.

Perhaps the sudden shock of relief was too much for Lady Violet, but whatever the cause her odd feeling of nervousness was now increased almost to confusion, a fact instantly noted by Henry, and rendering him as before, and always when with this woman, master of the situation,

"Lord, but she's an old woman," was his first reflection, a somewhat unjust one, be it said, for Violet, though looking older, was but thirty-three. "Plainer than I thought, too," was his second, as, calmly surveying her, he stood listening to her half-stammered words of greeting.

"This is very nice of you, Mr. Kempton," she said, not looking at him. "I feel really honoured. You are quite a celebrity now, as of course you know."

"The fact was unpleasantly impressed upon me within a few hours of landing in England," answered the visitor, and hearing his voice, Violet once more felt the sense of shock. How had she come to forget that? she wondered.

"Why, what happened?" she answered, knowing full well, having read the account of his home-coming in the *Frampton Advertiser* and shuddered at it. "Was Frampton *en fête* in honour of your arrival? Oh, I hope they gave you a good welcome."

"Excellent, and from their point of view, I believe, most enjoyable. They waved flags, cheered, sang patriotic songs and, best of all, wept. What more could suburban hearts desire?"

"I don't think it's very nice of you to sneer at them, Mr. Kempton. You ought to be pleased. I've no doubt they meant most kindly, and it's only natural they should be glad to welcome you back."

"To the 'old 'omestead,' as Mr. Smyrna put it," said Henry, and then, as Violet's ill-luck would have it, his glance

fell on something lying on a table beside him, and at the sight a dark flush rose to his face.

For a moment he sat staring at it, and then rose. "And now," he said, "having fulfilled a promise made to myself five years ago I will leave you, Lady Violet, if I may."

"Go, now? Why, what on earth is the matter, Mr. Kempton?"

"Nothing much, only that I object to being made a fool of, Lady Violet."

"Will you kindly explain yourself, Mr. Kempton?"

"Certainly, if you wish. You asked me just now if I'd had a good reception, knowing all the time exactly the sort of reception I'd had, for there, open at the place, lies the *Frampton Advertiser*. I can read the headings from here. 'Frampton Welcomes Her Hero Home,' and the rest. How you got it I am at a loss to imagine, as I was under the impression I had bought up every copy and destroyed it."

The evidence was damning. Violet sat silent and crimson-faced.

"And then," continued Henry, prudence forgotten in rage, as the meaning of the experiment to which he had been subjected came home to him, "having read the account you tell me I ought to be pleased. So I was, of course, particularly with the description of myself as a 'handsome young hero, pale with emotion, whose poor wounded arm was carried in a sling.' I may mention, by the way, that since then I have discarded that sling, and my arm hurts confoundedly in consequence. Oh yes, I liked it well, Lady Violet; and why not? Emotion, as no doubt you know, is dear to the bourgeois mind."

"Stop, Mr. Kempton," interrupted Violet, with outraged pride, for never in all her experience had she been spoken to like this, "unless you wish to offend me beyond recall. What you say is both unkind and unjust, as I'll endeavour

to show you. Before I begin, however, it would annoy me less if you would replace the sling you say you have discarded. I suppose you haven't it with you, by any chance, the whole thing's not got up to excite my sympathy? Oh, very well then, I daresay I can find something that will do, if you'll wait a minute."

Violet quitted the room, leaving Henry aglow with much secret satisfaction. For he realised that his recent outburst, far from proving disastrous, as for a second after speaking he had feared, had brought about the very result at which he had been aiming. Thanks to this, he had been enabled to make clear to Lady Violet, and that from the outset, the conditions on which alone their future friendship was possible. In the most natural way, he had shown that he feared neither her nor her position, and that any suggestion of patronage or condescension would result in the instant rupture of relations between them. Further, he had shown her that such a rupture would occasion him neither effort nor regret. It had been a fine piece of work indeed, the finer because unpremeditated and therefore natural, and Henry, realising its fineness, smiled, well-satisfied.

"Please put this on at once, Mr. Kempton," said Violet, entering the room with a large black silk scarf in her hand. "Now," Henry having adjusted the same, "if you'll kindly sit down and calm yourself, I'll endeavour to explain. I can't possibly talk to you, though, while you're raging up and down the room like a caged lion. Besides," with a faint smile, "you're wearing out my carpet. Now, Mr. Kempton," as Henry obediently sat down, "you have said some very hard and unkind things to me—unjust too. It's true I bought the *Frampton Advertiser*. I ordered it weeks ago—certainly not to enjoy what you are pleased to consider your humiliation, but solely because I was interested in your arrival."

"I trust you were edified by what you read."

"Don't sneer, please. I confess I thought it awful; but surely you know that English people always are vulgar when they attempt that sort of thing. Heavens, shall I ever forget the account in the same paper of my brother Belcroft's coming of age, and how I was described as a 'sweet, earnest-faced maiden'? Even now it makes me hot to think of it."

"But you pretended you hadn't read the rag. You asked me, to see what I'd say. I was put to the test, Lady Violet, and I didn't like it."

"Perhaps I did, but not ill-naturedly, as you seem to imagine. I did want to see what you would say, I own it, but I should have told you afterwards. Come, Mr. Kempton, are you not being rather silly and pettish? Say you're sorry," smiling at him.

Henry looked at her, still frowning, then the cloud lifted and he smiled back. "Very well, I'm sorry," he said. "Please forgive me, but the subject's a sore one, and always will be, Lady Violet. I hoped you in particular wouldn't touch on it."

"It was only womanly curiosity, Mr. Kempton."

"Possibly, but, having been in the wilds for the last two years, I know nothing about women."

"Surely there are women, even in the wilds?"

"Oh yes, black, and white too, of a sort, I believe, but I saw nothing of them. I refrained even from calling on the missionary's wife at Soloba."

"Why, don't you like women?"

"No, not those I've met hitherto, at all events. You see what a bear I am, Lady Violet."

The latter glanced at him, read truth in his face, and smiled half-unconsciously.

"Never mind," she said, "perhaps you're better as a bear; and now, if you'll ring the bell, I'll give you some tea. Oh," as, the tea equipage having been brought in by a

footman, Henry rose and followed her to the table, " please don't try to help. Being a bear, you'll certainly upset the kettle over me. Besides, you're a pale-faced, wounded young hero, remember, and, being so, must be waited upon. Sit there and talk to me. I want to hear all about the Saida affair."

" You'll be the first then, Lady Violet. It's not a subject I'm disposed to be eloquent on, I can assure you."

" All the more reason you should tell me. I'm dying to hear."

Henry sat for a moment in silence, his memory busy with the story arranged and already, mentally, many times told to his present hearer.

He was about to begin accordingly when suddenly he checked himself, for a new and startling idea had presented itself to his mind, that of telling the actual truth, hitherto locked up—and which he had intended to keep locked up—in his own breast. Yes, he would do it. Something told him that the truth in this case would be infinitely more effective than any fiction it lay in his power to invent, and urged on by impulse he spoke.

" I am going to give myself away to you, Lady Violet," he said slowly. " I shall probably shock you, but if I do I can't help it. You, however, shall know the truth. I've told it to no one else. I owe it to you to be honest, and I'm going to be."

" Please do, Mr. Kempton ; you won't shock me, I assure you ;" and Violet settled herself in an armchair opposite him, with a look of eager interest in the eyes fixed upon his face.

" Wait till you have heard. Well then, I might say, as a good many men I know would, that at our first meeting five years ago I . . ." Again he paused, seemingly in difficulties, which was possibly the case, for the words—he

wished to utter required saying. "Never mind that, though, I'll pass that over and . . ."

"No, no, say what you were going to. I've already said I don't mind."

"Very well then. I might say, I fell in love with you, and that for your sake did what I did at Saida. I am not going to say it, though. I am not a fool, and besides, it would not be true, though it is true that but for that meeting I should probably be still a lawyer's clerk, and consequently have no two letters after my name. What you said then roused my ambition and started me on the way, but, though anxious enough to rise, I was totally ignorant how to do so. That was taught me by another, Lady Violet."

"Major Carados?"

"Yes, Carados. It is to him, and him only, I owe my V.C.; not to myself, nor to you, Lady Violet."

A pause followed. Henry sat staring into the fire, his thoughts far away, in the past.

"Yes, Mr. Kempton?"

Henry roused himself. "Well, Carados saw, as he saw everything, I believe, that I was mad to get on. He scoffed at me for it, for that was his way, but all the same he told me how, told me also that opportunity must be made, not waited for, as I was doing."

"He was quite right, and surely there was no harm in that."

"Wait till you hear all, the rest is not so pleasing; for suppose, search as you may, try all you know to make that opportunity, it still doesn't come. No man falls into the water to save; no chance for the display of personal heroism in battle occurs. What then, Lady Violet?"

"Then you'd have to wait on; it always comes in the end."

"Perhaps when too late, when energy and ambition

are dead with age and waiting. You don't want it then, Lady Violet, you wouldn't take it if it offered. No, it isn't safe to wait."

"Well?"

"Well, you must make it somehow, no matter how, when you're young. Force your name on the public notice, get yourself talked about, and then the smallest thing you do afterwards will be noted at once."

"In plain words, advertise yourself, Mr. Kempton?"

"Yes, in exactly the same way a business is started; and why not? The posters I put up were of a different kind, perhaps, to those of Mr. Beecham's and his kind, but they have proved equally effective in attracting notice. Theirs bring them the money they want, mine the notice necessary for my purposes. See, Lady Violet?"

"I'm beginning to; please go on."

"I told you I should shock you. Well, Carados told me of many means by which notoriety and consequent success had been obtained. Sir Horseley Charger—the British Murat, as the society papers are pleased to describe him—was unknown till he took to wearing corsets and painting his face; Sir Edward Cummins owes his present eminent position solely to the well-advertised rescue from drowning of a drunken navvy; Lord Roper his, to his studied insolence to and vituperation of his betters. There are hosts of others, some since proved good, some failures. That's their look-out, for a man cannot give himself brains, but he can give himself the start, which is all that's wanted; the rest lies with himself."

"And for you, Mr. Kempton, what was the line?"

"Mine? Oh, bravery on the battlefield, and as there was no war then on, or chance of it, where I was, Carados suggested West Africa, where things were always likely to happen. Shortly afterwards he . . . died."

"Well?"

"I remembered what he said, and went out to West Africa to find my chance there."

"And you did, Mr. Kempton; but where was the advertisement?"

"In this. What I did was perfectly unnecessary, and I knew it, for a few minutes before I heard my chief say that a few shots from the guns, and the town would surrender at once. But by great luck the guns were stuck in the sand of a river bed, a few miles back, and he, hearing of it, suggested as a joke to Pennant, the second in command, he should do what I did and earn a V.C. They laughed together over it, but I didn't laugh, for I knew then my chance had come. Everyone was looking on, there was nothing else to distract their attention—men, officers, the whole lot. Had they not been I should not have gone. I didn't want to a bit, I was horribly frightened, and only screwed myself up to it when I heard Lomax say, 'There are the guns. Tell Henshaw,' that was the officer in charge, 'there's a D.S.O. waiting for him if he shoots straight.' That settled it, Lady Violet, and I went. My reward is," he paused, and then went on, "not the V.C., as most might think, for that to me is little, but the being here with you—being here as one having earned the right. Do you understand?"

Violet made no answer. In silence she sat staring into the fire, for this was something outside her experience, this cold, cynical avowal of purely interested motives for an act of undoubted heroism. His disclaimer of any feeling for her, save that of friendship, rather pleased her than otherwise, for, as he said, by the majority of men in his place other sentiments would assuredly have been advanced, or at least hinted at, and, though from him they would have been outrageous in their presumption, would not have been altogether unexpected.

As previously, however, in her dealings with Henry

Kempton, it was the unexpected that had happened, and also, as before, she now felt bewildered and at a loss. Nevertheless, despite the obvious sincerity of his words, Violet, being a woman and interested in the speaker, was not convinced. No man, not a man she liked, at any rate, could risk his life from such sordid motives. No, he might say what he wished, possibly what he believed to be true, but his real incentive had been the honourable desire of renown for itself, and also, of course, the desire to stand well in her eyes.

He might pretend, probably from fear of offending, that she had had little to do with it, but all the same she had, she knew she had, though she liked him the better for concealing it. As for his own avowed reasons, they were adopted merely as a pose, an unconscious one, no doubt, but nevertheless a pose, the result of the evil influence on a young mind of an older man whom, though dead, from now and henceforward Violet hated as she had never hated man or woman before.

"Mr. Kempton," she said at last, "I don't—you can hardly expect me to, I think—like your views, nor, forgive me for saying so, do I quite believe in their sincerity. You're better than you make yourself out to be, perhaps, but we'll leave that for discussion some other time. I want to think it over first. I also want to hear more of Major Carados' teaching. There's a lot, I see," smiling at him, "for me to undo."

Henry stared at her incredulously. She undo Carados' teaching? Good heavens, the presumption of the woman! She had not believed him, too, though every word he had said was true. He had, in fact, laboured to make that truth absolutely clear. Well, if she refused to believe him, that was her look-out, and, perhaps, after all it was for the best, for little though Henry knew of feminine nature he did know enough to be aware that the figurative saving

of a lamb from the wolf, in his case from the influence of Carados, is a joy no self-respecting woman will deny herself. The operation would take time too, he reflected, and necessitate further visits to this house. Yes, it was as well, and now it would be also well to leave at once, while his hostess was still hungry for further conversation.

"I'm ready to be convinced, Lady Violet," he said, "but," rising as he spoke, "I must go now. I've been here two hours already."

"Oh, stay a little longer, Mr. Kempton," said his hostess, "there are all sorts of things I want to talk to you about, and we've not begun yet. There's my library to show you, too. I remember your liking for books, and you'll find, I think, all your favourites there."

"I should love to, but I've only just time as it is to catch my train, and if I miss that I miss dinner, which would mean serious trouble for me. Good-bye, and thank you for having me here."

"But when can you come again? Let me see, Friday I'm free. Come then, and stay for dinner, if you will. I'm dying to argue those dreadful opinions of yours."

"Thank you very much, Lady Violet," said Henry. "On Friday, then, my conversion begins. Good-bye." Ceremoniously bowing over his hostess's hand he took his leave, and, having hailed a waiting hansom, was driven to King's Cross station.

He did not catch his train, for, as usual, when minutes are of consequence, many and unforeseen obstacles started up in his path.

A regiment of volunteers held them fast in Oxford Street, horses seemingly on purpose fell down before them and blocked the road, while the last desperate attempt at a short cut was rendered all in vain by the barring of a side street by a pole-protected trench.

The game was indeed up, and Henry, at last realising the

fact, abandoned further efforts. Bidding the driver turn, he was borne back to the West End, there to seek dinner at one of its well-known restaurants.

There he ordered a repast, the extravagance of which would have caused Josiah to hold up his hands, and having leisurely enjoyed it, repaired to the lounge, where, cigarette in mouth, he sat dreamily listening to the fine string band, the music soon obliterating from his mind such trivial memories as those of time, train, and King's Cross. Nor was it till the strains of "God save the Queen" arose from that same band that he awoke to the fact that midnight was past, and also that the last and slowest of trains to Frampton would shortly have started on its way.

Cursing his folly, he rose, and hurrying out hurled himself into a cab. This time fortune favoured him, the train, though moving, was boarded, and Henry at last on his belated way homewards.

CHAPTER XVIII

SOME two hours later he stood outside the gates of Frampton House, rage rapidly gaining possession of him. The drizzling rain of the afternoon had now become a steady downpour, and, no station cab having in consequence been forthcoming, Henry had been forced to walk. He was muddy, soaked, and chilled to the bone. Three times already had he rung, but no answer had been vouchsafed: the gates remained locked, the lodge beyond was in darkness, and its occupants fast asleep.

"My God! but I'll wake you," muttered Henry, and for the fourth time seizing the iron bell handle he tugged at it, and continued tugging till the harsh jangling sound rang through the night.

At last a movement was heard from within, a flicker of light appeared in the lodge windows, and a figure emerged. With face pressed to the bars, it peered at the unwelcome visitor.

"Be off!" said a voice. "You can't come in, whoever you are. A nice hour this, I must say, to disturb sleeping folks. Be off at once."

Not for nothing had Henry listened to Carados when addressing his squadron on parade, and now language of such vigour and directness flew through the bars as caused the figure on the other side to busy himself, and that speedily, with bolt and chain.

"I didn't see it was you, Mr. Henry," he said, throwing

open the gate. "Good night, sir," and then stood for a while gazing in respectful admiration after the departing figure. "Who'd have thought it?" he murmured. "Such a quiet, civil spoken young gent as a rule. Well, well, one never knows," and relocking the gates he retired once more to bed.

Henry strode on up the carriage-drive, further blasphemy escaping him as he noted that Frampton House was also in a darkness as complete as its lodge. He rang, rang again, and then getting no response was about to turn away in search of an unshuttered window, when a casement above opened, and a head was cautiously thrust out.

"Is that you, Henry?" he heard in his father's voice. "You can't possibly come in at this hour. We're all in bed, and the servants too."

"Will you kindly tell me then where I am to go, father?"

"That is your concern, Henry, not mine. You should have thought of that before coming home at this disgraceful hour."

"Oh, very well," answered his son, for the first time losing his temper with his father. "I'll go to the *Apple Tree*, and find a bed there. They'll think it rather strange, I imagine, but that's not my fault." He was walking quickly away when his father called him back.

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Henry," he said. "What, disgrace your family by entering a public-house? You'll do nothing of the kind, sir."

"Do you propose I should sleep on the doorstep then, or the gravel path?"

"That, as I have already said, is your affair, Henry."

"And being mine, as you say, I prefer the *Apple Tree* to a bivouac in the rain. Good night."

"And what do you mean by coming home at this hour?"

"I missed my train, if you wish to know, but as I'm wet through I'll explain some other time, if you don't

mind. Good night," and again he turned away. Again he was recalled.

"Stay, Henry," said Josiah. "I must consult your mother," whereupon the head withdrew, and then after a pause once again appeared. "I'm coming down, Henry," he said. "Wait there, please," and the window was cautiously shut.

Some minutes afterwards the sound of slippered feet was heard approaching, a light gleamed through the shutters of the door, then followed the turning of a lock and rattle of a chain, and Josiah, candle in hand, stood before him.

"You can come in, Henry," he said, in a hushed voice; "your mother, always kind and indulgent, has persuaded me against my own inclinations."

"If your inclinations are against doing so, father, I'd much rather stay outside. You're the head of the house, not my mother."

"Please don't add ingratitude to your other faults, Henry."

"Oh, all right, father, I don't wish to quarrel. I'm sorry I'm late, but, as I told you, I missed my train. Good night."

"One minute, please; there is something I wish to say to you first. Come with me;" and Josiah led the way to the library, where he carefully lit one gas jet, the light disclosing the fact that he was still fully dressed, and had evidently not been in bed, as stated.

"Meant to let me in all the time," reflected Henry, noting the fact with both irritation and contempt; "thought he'd frighten me first, though. Lord, the whole thing's too theatrical and absurd." He sat down and lighted a cigarette, Josiah standing watching him sorrowfully.

"Where have you been, Henry?" he said at last. "I want the truth, please."

"I should certainly not condescend to lie about my

actions," was the cool answer. "I've been in town, as you surely know—not so unusual a proceeding, I should imagine, as to occasion comment in one of the family to which I have the honour to belong."

"Don't dare to take that tone with me, Henry. I know perfectly well you have been in town; but what was your business there?"

"I must ask you to remember, father, I am no longer a child to be catechised in this way."

"And I must ask you to remember that you're my son, and living in my house. Your mother and I have therefore a perfect right to know what you do. And talking of your mother, I understood you were very rude at lunch to her, and your sisters also. Insulted our friends the Williams." It was one of Maria's trials that her husband always omitted to give their new friends their full names.

"I've no recollection of it, but if I did, I'm sorry. I can't say more. And now don't you think, father, we might go to bed? I'm dead tired, and wet too."

"Who was the woman you went to see this afternoon, Henry?"

"What!"

"Don't raise your voice, please, and blustering won't help you, Henry. It's useless to deny it, you'll only make matters worse for yourself. I may tell you that all is known," concluded Josiah dramatically.

"All known! What on earth do you mean?" was the now furious answer.

"Don't lose your temper, and, as I say, it's useless, for unfortunately there are such things as letters. Your dear mother was in your room this afternoon, and quite by accident picked up a portion of one, written in a feminine hand. Naturally, I say most naturally, Henry, not knowing it was yours, she read it. It was from some woman, Henry, asking you to go and see her to-day."

"She read my letter, she dared; and by what right, may I ask?"

"What right have you to receive such a letter? Answer me that, Henry."

Henry did not answer, the absurdity of the question having floored him. He stood speechless, glaring at his father.

"And now, Henry," continued Josiah, feeling he had scored a point, "now that you see all is known, make a clean breast of it, and tell me the woman's name."

A rush of relief came over Henry. He laughed in Josiah's face.

"Oh, so she didn't manage to ferret that out, didn't she?" he said.

"Unfortunately, the portion bearing her signature was missing, Henry; and now, please, your answer."

"Oh, my answer. Well then, I decline once and for all to give you any information on the subject. Let mother find the name out for herself if she can, though for the future she'll find it difficult I imagine. There won't be much I'll leave about, letter or anything else, I can promise you, father. Gad," he muttered, "I'd heard of her doing these things, but never quite believed it, till now."

"As I feared," sighed Josiah, "as I feared. Going to brazen it out, I see. This is what comes of allowing you to go into the army. I am justly punished. But, sir, don't think you are going to get off in this easy way. Had you in the first instance confessed your guilt and expressed contrition, it is possible I might have overlooked it, but as it is . . . Now, Henry, comes your last chance: will you answer my question or not?"

"I will not."

"Very well, then, I shall stop your allowance, and in future you will remain in Frampton and not go to town

without my, or your mother's, permission. Profligacy is a thing, Henry, you know I never have tolerated, and never will. It's not for that I give you a handsome allowance. Make up your . . ."

"That will do, I think, father," said Henry, and something in his voice made Josiah look at him uneasily. "Your being my father does not give you a right to insult me or my friends. As for the handsome allowance you somewhat frequently allude to, I may tell you it's a paltry pittance for a man in your position to give his son. One hundred and fifty a year, less by half than the income of the poorest man in my regiment. Such as it is, though, stop it, by all means if you like; it's the only method of control you know of, I'm aware, but you've yet to learn it won't control me. As for my asking permission like a child, when I wish to go to town, or anywhere else, the idea being ridiculous, I decline to consider it."

"In that case, sir, you leave my house."

"All right. To-morrow I'll look for rooms in town."

"As you will, of course, only don't come to me for more money when yours is gone, that's all."

"I certainly won't. Good night."

Henry's hand was on the door-handle when Josiah called him back with a wistful look on his face. This resorting to extreme measures was by no means to his liking; indeed, had he alone been concerned, it is probable the present interview would never have occurred. Maria, however, had taken advantage of her son's absence for a good straight talk to her husband, which was still proceeding when the ringing of the front-door bell had sounded the call to the action demanded of her lord. "Stop supplies, Josiah," were her last words, "that's the way to end this sort of thing. Go down now and do it. He'll give in at once, you mark my words."

And Josiah, encouraged by her exhortations, had gone

down, and *had* stopped supplies, with the result that he had secretly feared, for he now found himself with his last reserves expended, and the enemy showing no signs of yielding. He was at a loss, and longed for Maria's presence to stiffen him, but Maria was upstairs, and he was thrown on his own resources.

"Stay a minute, Henry," he said. "Look here, don't let us do anything in temper we might afterwards regret. Tell me this woman's name, and we'll say no more about the matter."

"I will not."

"Well, then, as a last concession, will you give me your word she is . . . respectable, Henry?"

"I will not."

"Very well, then," said Josiah, temper conquering irresolution. "You—you can go to Jericho, sir."

"Good night, father," was the sole response, and Henry walked quietly away to his own room.

"Well, Josiah, and what's her name?" asked Maria eagerly of the dejected-looking person now entering the connubial chamber.

"I don't know, Maria, and I don't care."

"What, not got her name? Oh, really, Josiah, this is too . . ." began his wife, when he cut her short, and that not very gently.

"Hold your tongue," he said. "Thanks to you, Henry is leaving his home to-morrow."

Maria instantly changed front, for, rare as were the occasions when Josiah asserted himself, experience had taught her that when he did valour was folly indeed.

In a conciliatory manner she drew from him the story of the recent interview, and, the recital being completed, laid herself out to console.

"He won't do it," she assured the gloomy-faced Josiah.

"take my word for it, it's all rubbish this talk of going. Where is he to go to, pray, and where is the money to come from? Absurd, a chit of a boy like Henry talking of taking rooms in town. What next, I wonder, what next?" and asseveration rendering her sleepy she soon became somewhat incoherent, till suddenly rolling over on her side she began happily to snore.

Josiah lay awake, a prey to miserable forebodings. Maria knew nothing of the cheque for three hundred and fifty pounds, nor did she know of the pass-book shown to him one morning five years before, and the saving nature thus early revealed by that same book. The recollection, too, of the struggle over Henry's change of profession now came back to him; and how confident Maria had been then, and the eventual result. Defeat to them, and victory to the "chit of a boy."

Thinking of all these things, and also of certain delightful evening hours now past, the same hours to be spent henceforth, as aforesaid, alone, Josiah groaned, and for a moment thought of seeking out his son forthwith and making peace—a conditionless peace.

He refrained, however, and next morning, his fortitude being restored with the light, departed as usual to the Emporium, without seeing his son. Returning in the evening, he found the household decreased by one, for the "chit of a boy," in his absence, had packed up his belongings and driven away from Frampton for good and all.

CHAPTER XIX

“HALF-PAST FIVE,” murmured Lady Violet, as a single stroke rang out from the silver time-piece; “that settles it, he won’t come now; the next train doesn’t arrive till seven. Oh, it’s too intolerable,” and her pale face flushed with sudden anger. She rose and, walking to the window, stood staring out into the snow-darkened evening.

To be failed by anyone is an experience trying enough to most people, man or woman, but for a Lady Violet Ravenscroft to be failed by a Henry Kempton was an ignominy hardly to be borne, and Violet, at first incredulous, had now definitely come to the conclusion that she was to be failed. This was the more impossible of endurance, not merely because on this Friday afternoon she had sacrificed other and important engagements, but far more from the fact that, as she now realised, this same afternoon had been looked forward to with a degree of pleasurable anticipation, even excitement, altogether foreign to her proud, reserved and unemotional nature.

With indignant self-contempt, she thought of the unwonted care bestowed, a few hours before, on her toilet and hair, a thing despicable enough in itself, but now become a shame unendurable, as she realised that such preparations had been made all to no purpose.

“And he, I suppose,” she muttered, “is now lounging in his awful Frampton drawing-room, having forgotten all about it, or possibly considering the weather too bad to

venture out. He'll come some other day, he thinks, when it's fine, and he's nothing else to do. Will he, though? He'll find me out, if he does; no man, certainly not a Henry Kempton, shall play fast and loose with my invitations."

Suddenly she stopped listening, moved forward, and, with her face pressed against the window pane, remained for a moment looking down into the street below. Then, with a haste most unlike her usual leisurely movements, she hurried back to her chair, snatched up a book from a table, and in a second was deeply immersed in its contents, so deeply indeed that at the sound of the opening door she started and looked up in surprise.

"Oh, Mr. Kempton," she said, "I hardly expected you on such a day, it's far too bad for you to be out with that arm of yours. How is the arm, by the way? I'm glad to see that you're sensible and wearing the sling again."

"I'm afraid I didn't think of the weather, Lady Violet."

"But you ought to have. You'll get rheumatism in that arm if you're not careful, and perhaps lose it. You'll be not only a pale-faced, but a one-armed hero then, like Nelson."

"I'd sooner lose it than break my word to you," said Henry, looking at her.

"Your train was very late, wasn't it?"

"I didn't come by train. I've taken rooms in town."

"That's very enterprising of you; but what do your people say?"

"I've no idea. I've left Frampton and my people for good, Lady Violet."

"Left them—for good," she repeated blankly. "My dear Mr. Kempton, what do you mean?"

"My father wished to dictate to me, and I objected. There was a little discussion, as a result of which I left. I'm

glad I have, too, it was bound to come sooner or later. The marvel to me is, I stayed as long as I did."

"But, Mr. Kempton," protested Violet, to whose mind a rupture with parents was a calamity, "you can't possibly, you must make it up with him. He is your father, after all, and——"

"Nothing will induce me to do so."

"But——" began his hostess again, and then the firelight falling on Henry's face she stopped, realising the futility of further argument. This line was no good, she would try another. "Will you please tell me about it, Mr. Kempton?"

Henry sat back till the light no longer played on his face. He had feared this question, and it was rather a difficult one to answer. It would not do to hesitate, however, he realised, and began cautiously, till, encouraged by the apparent credulity of his listener, he waxed more fluent, the result being, to his mind, a most convincing story. "And so," he concluded, "I decline to attend any more entertainments and——"

"You say you left your father on good terms the morning before last," interrupted Violet suddenly.

"On the best."

"And the—the discussion, when did that take place?"

"The same night."

"After returning home from your visit here, in fact?"

"Yes—that is, no; it was the next evening," stammered Henry, suddenly conscious of the drift of these questions.

"When you had already left Frampton. You've a very poor idea of my intelligence, it seems, Mr. Kempton," said Violet, suddenly becoming haughty.

Henry was silent. He was in a net, he realised, and further struggles would only serve to enmesh him further.

"You say, Mr. Kempton, you left your father on good terms the morning before you came here. You couldn't

have seen him till your return, when you had trouble with him. There could be only one reason for this, because you came here. May I ask why your father objects to your calling on me?"

"My father knew nothing about it. He found out—it doesn't matter how—I had been to see some one in town, and insisted on knowing who. I refused to tell him, and sooner than do so left the house."

"And why, pray, did you refuse to tell him? It's hardly a secret, I should imagine, Mr. Kempton."

An opening appeared in the net, and Henry made for it. Very carefully he moved, holding its edges apart, and then, one bold dash, and he was out, and clear of the tangle.

"Not to you, Lady Violet," he said slowly; "but to me it is, and a very valuable one."

"I don't understand you," was the cold answer.

"My visits here," continued Henry, "mean a great deal to me. They are, as I told you, the reward for which I've served five years. I fought for that reward, and earned it. And to talk about my coming here would be, to my thinking, to share it, and that I will do with no one, certainly not my people. I don't suppose you'll understand, but that's, Lady Violet, why I refused."

She was silent, the explanation was not only convincing, but in some way curiously satisfying to her.

"I—I think I understand, Mr. Kempton," she said at last; "but all the same you were very wrong, and foolish too, for, apart from the sentimental, there is the practical side to be considered. Don't think me impertinent, but I am much older than you, and once had experience of the same sort of thing in my own family when my brother Charles quarrelled with my father. I made peace between them, and saved Charles from a step he would have afterwards most bitterly regretted."

"Yes, but in that case there was probably only a difference of opinion, not one of nature, instinct, and everything else, as between my family and myself. We haven't a thought in common, Lady Violet, and never shall have, I hope. I can't breathe in Frampton, and I'm not going to try."

"That's all very well, but to go on breathing you must eat, and, to be vulgar, you propose to quarrel with your bread and butter."

"You mean my father may stop my allowance. He has already done so; it is his one and only method of control, but, as I told him, it won't control me. Fortunately, having anticipated something of the sort, I provided against it, and while on the West Coast saved every penny I could."

"How much?" said Lady Violet, greatly interested, and then realising what she had said she shrank back in her chair with a crimson face. "Oh, what on earth am I thinking of, Mr. Kempton? I—I—"

"Why shouldn't you ask? I'm proud you should care to. Eight hundred pounds. It is not much, I know, but enough to last me for some time to come, at any rate."

"And when that's gone, Mr. Kempton?"

"I shall return to the West Coast, I suppose."

"But I thought you hated the West Coast?"

"So I do, but I should hate more giving in to my father, and to return to my regiment I should have to. I couldn't live there on nothing a year."

Violet looked at him in silence. She was beginning to realise something of Henry's tenacity of purpose, and to feel vaguely disquieted by it.

"It's no use my saying anything, I see, Mr. Kempton," she said at last. "I can only hope you'll think better of it in time. And now I want to show you my library," whereupon rising she led the way along a passage to a room at the far end. "It's new, of course," she said, opening the

door and entering, "all but the books; but there was no room suitable in this house, and so I had to build one specially. I was rather glad, really, for I was able to carry out my own ideas. Do you like it?" turning to her guest, who was looking around him with unmistakable surprise.

The room in which they now stood was one hardly to be expected in a woman's house, the less so, seeing that a woman alone was responsible for its design and decorations. Severity was the predominant note, floor, walls and ceiling being of light polished oak, the two latter unrelieved by the smallest sign of carving. The furniture consisted of one massive table, and a few chairs of the same wood and hue, also uncarved; the windows, of stained glass, were now hidden by curtains of brown stamped leather.

Sunk in the walls were the bookcases, and between these niches, in which stood busts of the classic authors, Dante, Tasso, Shakespeare and others, the sole modern touch being the lights of electricity, though even these were screened by gratings of beaten iron.

"And this is a woman's room," thought Henry, "and the other was a man's," and comparing them—small room for comparison though there really was—he knew that it was on the other, and not on this, that his choice would fall.

"Well, Mr. Kempton," said Violet, watching him, "won't you tell me if you like it?"

"It's a beautiful room," said Henry slowly, "but . . . unexpected."

"I thought so. White and gold carvings, mirrors and plush curtains, that's what you expected to see, my being a woman, wasn't it?"

"I told you I knew nothing about women," was the somewhat absent-minded answer. "It was the contrast to another, a man's, which struck me chiefly, Lady Violet."

"Major Carados', you mean, of course. Was his more to your taste than mine?"

"You can't compare them. His was only a barrack quarter, though his books, I should say, were good enough for most museums."

"I have some good books too, Mr. Kempton—first editions, a good many. Come and see."

Together they inspected the bookcases, Violet pointing out various treasures as they went, Henry looking on in silence.

"And now," she said, the tour having been completed, "you must choose something and read to me. We've a good hour before dressing-time. What is it to be? You decide."

Henry stood frowning at the bookcases, and then, as Violet had anticipated, left the one before which they were standing and walked away to another, above which was a brass tablet inscribed "English poets."

"Tennyson, I think," he said, extracting a volume.

"Not Shakespeare?"

"No."

"Scott, then?"

"Certainly not, I hate Scott. Where shall we read, here?"

"No, in the other room, before the fire. Come. Now," settling herself in her former chair, "what are you going to begin on—'Idylls of the King' or 'In Memoriam'? One of the two, please."

"If you like, though I thought of 'Maud.'"

"Very well, it's his worst, in my opinion; but I said I'd leave it to you."

Henry began. He could read well, as Violet had intuitively known, though how well she was now to learn, for as the poem progressed he appeared to lose himself in the words, and Violet, with a queer thrill running through her,

heard the lover's rhapsody in the garden delivered with a passion, which invested the hackneyed words with a strange new meaning to her :

" My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead ;
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red."

His voice lingered over the last lines, and he stopped, staring into the fire.

" You like that, Mr. Kempton ? " said Violet, finding her voice at last.

" I love it."

Another pause, then she spoke again. " Mr. Kempton," trying to speak lightly, " you're a most puzzling person. At one moment you're all cold matter-of-fact, preaching utilitarian motives as the highest good, at another you revel in sentimental poetry and music. Which is the real you? Please tell me."

Henry came back to earth. " The first," he said. " I've not a grain of sentiment in me, really. I read poetry as a pastime, that's all."

" But—love is not a pastime; at any rate, not with the right sort of men and women."

" It has to be with some, Lady Violet, those, for instance, who like myself have their way to make. I have no time for love, it would only be a hindrance to me."

" You talk very foolishly, Mr. Kempton. Do you think to love or not to love lies within your own control ? "

" Yes, with me it would."

" It would not, it never does."

Henry looked at her. " That's what Carados insisted on," he said, " and it was the one thing in which I believe him to be wrong. I always shall."

" Oh," said Violet, taken aback, for support from such

a quarter was unexpected ; " and what did he say, may I ask ? "

" What you do now. That it's not the intellect which rules the emotions, but the latter the intellect. In all crises, he declared, a fight takes place between two opposing emotions and the brain serves the winner."

" That's certainly not what I said, but please go on."

" I'll explain by an instance, one of his own. A man, say, is bound to a wife he doesn't much care about, but he remains faithful to her from motives of honour, duty, anything you like. Then one day he meets another woman and falls in love with her, and a fight at once begins between duty, on the one side, and the new love on the other. The brain takes no part in the fight, but looks on waiting to help the winner. And, like you, Carados said that winner was bound to be love. I disagree with both of you."

" What unspeakably wicked and false teaching ! "

" But it's yours, you said so just now."

" I did not ; what I said was you could not ' love or not love ' to order. But before you can love you must respect, and in the case you mentioned you couldn't. A sense of honour would prevent you. Such a theory, Mr. Kempton, is not only untrue but abominable."

Henry opened his mouth to answer, and then, looking at her, checked himself. He saw well enough the contradiction in her reasoning, that indeed it was no reasoning at all. He also noted the resort from argument to assertion ; he could almost hear Carados laughing ; but he also saw that his hostess was ruffled, and that badly, and perceiving this he abandoned further argument and started to soothe.

" I have said," he answered, " that I believe t' theory to be as false as you do."

" I'm glad to hear it. Really, Mr. Kempton, I'm sorry to say so of a friend of yours, especially one who is dead,

but in my opinion Major Carados must have been a monster to poison your mind—a boy's mind—as he did."

"Perhaps my mind was receptive to poison, Lady Violet."

"It was not, don't think it," she said earnestly. "I shouldn't have . . . liked you if it had been, for I'm not a bad judge of people, and I—I do like you, Mr. Kempton."

"I am grateful to you, Lady Violet, but I doubt if I'm worth it."

"Nonsense. And now please read some more, it's still quite early. Oh, heavens, though," looking at the clock, "it is not, it's half-past seven, and dinner is at eight. You'll never get to your rooms and back in time. Why not stay and dine as you are? There's only Charles coming; you remember him, don't you?"

"I saw him for a moment five years ago, but I certainly won't dine with you like this. I can easily do it in the time, though it's snowing harder than ever, I see," walking to the window and looking out.

"Oh, very well, if you'd rather, but don't be later than you can help. I want Omar Khayyam afterwards, though Charles will probably growl. He hates poetry, and indeed books of any kind, I fear, except Jorrocks and Sponge."

"I'll be back at eight. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XX

THE hour of eight had not finished striking from the many adjacent clock towers, when Henry was once more back in the house in Grosvenor Square.

A certain state, absent in the afternoon, was now to be observed there : various servants stood about the great hall. Two of these—men with powdered hair and in silk stockings—having between them divested the guest of his outer garments, passed him on to a third, a sable-clad personage of considerable presence.

The latter murmured something, rightly construed by Henry into a command to follow and ask no questions. Then, with noiseless step, he mounted the wide staircase, and coming to double doors at the top threw them open.

The sound of his name rang in Henry's ears ; the doors closed behind him, without sound ; and he found himself standing, looking down a room of such immensity and grandeur, that for the moment he was deprived of all faculties save that of sight. There he remained till, his eyes falling on a figure lounging in a chair before the fire, at the far end of the room, he recovered himself and started to walk towards it, the sense of being lost in space growing upon him as he went.

The man in the chair stirred and looked round. Then seeing Henry he rose and, putting down the evening paper he was reading, came forward to meet him, with a smile of welcome on his wind and weather reddened face.

" Beast of a night, ain't it ? " he said. " Had the devil's

own doing with the Bicester. Ten miles hack back to Aylesbury, horse dead lame, and leathers like soap." "Who the devil are you, I wonder?" was his simultaneous inward reflection, and one instantly divined by his guest. "Don't look one of us, somehow, nor too happy, either."

This lightning-like diagnosis of Henry's case by Lord Charles Ravenscroft was a true one in each particular, for, brought now for the first time into social contact with his hostess' brother—who was so obviously at home in surroundings strange and bewildering to his guest—the disconcerting knowledge came home to Henry that not only was he not "one of us," but that, strive as he might, he could never be so. And the sudden realisation of this truth was the more confounding on account of its unexpectedness.

Perfectly at home with Lady Violet from the commencement, the idea of her brother as in any way formidable had never suggested itself to him; rather had he been inclined to despise Lord Charles as a mere sport-loving, pleasure-seeking loafer, one far inferior to himself in everything save the mere accident of birth. Yet now, face to face with this same brother, he was conscious of a maddening sense of inferiority, and whereas the unintellectual guardsman, hitherto ignorant of war and its dangers, remained in tranquil composure, the gifted and laurel-crowned Henry stood awkward and ill at ease.

Here in every way he was conscious of being surpassed—even in the matter of clothes. Till this moment he had thought himself well-dressed, but now he felt so no longer, for, though his own raiment was right enough, the other's was more than right. It possessed a *cachet* that his had not, and was distinguished by a hundred small touches of which Henry had never heard. Socks, ties, shoes, none like them had he ever seen in the shop windows; and all this had been put on, not for a special occasion but merely

to dine quietly and alone with his sister, for that his own appearance had been a surprise to Lord Charles he realised at once.

A feeling of hostility rose within Henry. The bitter feeling of class against class, an enmity that, though in some minds latent—its presence perhaps even unsuspected—yet exists, and will ever exist, between plebeian and aristocrat.

Henry was now conscious of a feeling of hatred for the man before him; he hated him for his clothes, for the luxurious surroundings, which he took so obviously as his right, and most of all for his composure, and in this feeling of hatred he now included Lord Charles's sister, Lady Violet. "What right has she to make a fool of me like this?" he reflected. "When she asked me the other day, she particularly told me we should be alone, and then not only does she invite this fellow, but doesn't tell him I'm coming. I can see he doesn't know even my name. My Lord, but I'll make her pay . . ."

"Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you."

A pause, Charles eyeing his newspaper regretfully.

"You weren't out, I suppose, to-day?" he said at last, with an unmistakable tinge of coldness in his voice.

"I was not, I don't hunt."

"Oh . . . well, I wished I didn't to-day. Staying in town?"

"Yes, for the time. My name's Kempton. The last time I saw you was at a Flower Show at my people's place at Frampton five years ago. You came over with your father, though I don't suppose you remember."

Charles stared. "Lor'," he said involuntarily, then instantly recovered himself. "Of course I remember you," he said, his slip inducing sudden cordiality. "Jolly afternoon that was. How are your people—all right?"

"Quite, thank you, the last time I saw them."

"You've been on the West Coast, haven't you? Read about it in the papers. Congratulate you. Infernal climate, ain't it?"

"It is, rather."

Another pause, Charles racking his brains for a possible subject in common.

"Play polo out there?"

"No."

"Fine big-game shooting, ain't there?"

"I believe so. I never tried it myself."

Charles gave it up. There was a third pause, lasting till the door opened and Violet entered. Both men rose, a sigh of relief escaping Charles.

"Good evening, Charles. Well done, Mr. Kempton," she said. "I hope my brother's been entertaining you."

"Your brother's too beat," said Charles, "been hunting all day in the snow. Near thing he wasn't lost for good in a drift down Aylesbury way."

"Well, if you will go out on a day like this . . . Mr. Kempton's far more sensible. You've been very quick," smiling on Henry, the smile, however, fading as she noted the expression on his face.

"Shall we go down?" she continued, rather hurriedly, "it's a quarter-past eight," whereupon, anticipating the summons about to burst from the sable-clad personage, already standing at the door, she led the way to a dining-room almost as huge and imposing-looking as the room they had just left. Here, having taken their places, a sudden silence fell, Violet wishing devoutly that her brother had not thought fit to invite himself this evening—she had not asked him as Henry supposed—he, for his part, being conscious of a strong feeling of grievance against his sister.

"If," he reflected, "she wishes to ask a fellow of this sort

to her house, why not give me the tip beforehand, and I'd stay away? As it is, we're in for a most damnable evening. The fellow's as ill at ease as he can stick, and will be, till he gets tight and beastly familiar."

Curiously enough, the one member of the party not sharing in the general feeling of discomfort was "the fellow" himself, for observing his hostess's embarrassment, and divining its cause, his own confidence had immediately returned, and with it the momentarily lost sense of superiority over his fellows. To one only had he ever admitted or would he ever admit himself inferior, and thinking of that one now contempt arose within him for these lesser creatures before him. Who were they to look down upon him, when one so infinitely greater than they had honoured him with his friendship and conversation?

Thus fortified by an invisible presence, Henry began to talk with perfect assurance. True, his words were but the echo of another's; but what of that, since the utterances of the vast majority of mankind are that, and that only? Were it not for such echoes the rare voices would mostly go unheard.

Echoes though they were, they were effective, as he soon exultantly realised. Charles, at first indignant at the fellow's presumption in speaking at all, gradually found himself listening, and listening began to thaw. Then, his interest growing, the sense of grievance left him, and he also began to talk.

Violet sat silent, surprise being rapidly succeeded by annoyance, for in the now cynical, bitter-tongued Henry, so evidently amusing her brother, she found it hard to recognise the quiet, gentle-voiced youth of the afternoon, whose reading of "Maud" had so pleased her.

"Repentance," he was now saying, the conversation having for the moment turned on a certain much-discussed novel, "how can a book be strong, as you say, when its

whole plot maintains the strength of the two feeblest of all things, repentance and its child, confession? It's all right on the stage, of course, for the evil-doer to repent, it gives the proper moral ending, which the gallery insist on, but it means disaster in real life."

"Mr. Kempton, that's not true," said Lady Violet, roused to protest.

"Why take up a thing if you're not going to carry it through?" continued Henry. "Oh, I know it sounds all right, that the prodigal should go to his father, and having told him he's been a bad boy, etc., be made a fuss over; but I know what most fathers would say if that was all you had to tell them. If, on the other hand, you were to say, 'Look here, father, never mind what I was in the past, I've come home now with a fortune, only you mustn't ask me how I made it,' the stern parent's face would soften, and there'd be all sorts of fatted calves. It's the same with the wicked too: they flourish as long as they are wicked but come to instant grief once they stop."

"Mr. Kempton, please."

"Oh, let's hear, Kempton."

"Well, when he turns from his wickedness he doesn't live, as we're told, but dies at once. The enterprising burglar, say, or financier—it's the same thing, only they work on different lines—retires from business, and what happens? He dies. It's well known. Serve them right, too; they were successful in their own special line, what did they want to change for?"

"That's right, Vi," said Charles, "the wicked flourish like a—er—green bay tree, in spite of all the parsons say. Must have parsons, though, I suppose," he added, "else what would happen to the fellows who get ploughed for the Army or Bar?"

"Charles, you know you don't think that," said Lady Violet. "What would happen to England, what happens to

any country without a church? You'd hand over the country to the Socialists at once."

"I agree with you, Lady Violet," said Henry; "as it ought to be, as it used to be, the Church was a buttress to the monarchy; but as it is, it's as rotten a support as the other buttress, the—House of Lords."

Lady Violet's face crimsoned, Lord Charles said "Eh," the very footmen stared for a fraction of a second at the speaker.

"You think I'm a Socialist," continued Henry, enjoying the effect of his words, "but I'm not; I hate them perhaps more than you do."

"Indeed," said Charles, coldly polite.

"Yes, but I wouldn't stop at hating them, I'd destroy them, were I in your place—by you I mean the Lords. You, however, see these ranting demagogues preaching treason and sedition, insulting you, telling lies about you, often mentioning names, and you take no steps, no effective steps at all events, to stop it."

"What steps could you take which we don't? As far as constitutional methods allow us, we fight them in every way."

"People who use weapons no self-respecting man would touch are best ignored," said Lady Violet.

"You can't blame them, Lady Violet. A cuttle fish spouts ink when excited, a cat uses claws, and they in the same way employ the only weapons they possess, namely, vulgar vituperation, and, pardon me, you don't ignore them. You take them on at your own game, a slanging match, and naturally get beaten. It's pitiful to read recent speeches by those attacked; one even descended to the addressing of the mob in its own slang, and to my mind was rightly hooted for his pains."

"You mean Wexford, of course? He did make rather an ass of himself, I admit," said Charles.

"Why don't the Lords stick to their colours and say what they really think?" continued Henry. "It might make them unpopular for the time, but at all events they'd be respected; instead, they curry favour with the people, surely the most fatal course of all where a mob's concerned."

"But the people are not all Socialists, Mr. Kempton," said Lady Violet, "the quiet man is a factor in English politics."

"The quiet man is usually quiet because he has nothing to say, Lady Violet. He's wise to be quiet."

"But," said Charles, "you don't seem to realise that the people of this country have votes, and that the side which said—beg pardon, Violet—'Damn the people' would never get into power."

"Show yourself the stronger, and you can say what you like. Smash the demagogue, that's the first thing."

"And how do you propose we should smash the demagogue?"

"The latter is invariably a cur at heart. He's only brave on the platform, and if a cur barks at you, you don't bark back. He can do that better than you. You take a stick and beat him. Treat the agitator in the same way, and every time one of you is personally insulted, let the speaker be thrashed by the one maligned or his representative. If he knew he'd have to pay in his person, and that certainly and speedily for the outpouring of his mouth, the fountain of his eloquence would dry up. It would be too heavy a price to pay for a few minutes' mob applause."

Charles laughed outright. "You're a nice law-abiding citizen, I must say, Kempton," he observed.

"I think perhaps we'd better change the subject," said Violet, smiling somewhat forcedly. "Mr. Kempton is altogether too bloodthirsty for me. It's possible, however, his liking for strong measures may be gratified sooner than he thinks, though not, I am glad to say, on his fellow

countrymen. I saw Lord Leamington yesterday, Charles, and he told me that war with the Transvaal was only a question of time."

"It's been that for the last year or so, Vi, and will be probably till we're dead and buried."

"It's no question of years now, I am afraid, but months, or even days. I suppose you're both pleased, though."

"Rather," said Charles. "I should love to have a shot at an old Boer. I'm sick of pheasants and things that don't hit back."

"Personally, I think the whole thing's iniquitous," continued Violet. "Why can't we leave these people alone to their farming? I believe Mr. Kempton thinks the same," looking at Henry, whose face showed none of the enthusiasm visible on her brother's.

"It's not that, Lady Violet. If we're going to fight them at all, better seek a pretext now, however rotten, and do it while we can, than wait for a better, and then find they're too strong. I was thinking of my leave," he added, "not up for six months yet," and he spoke the exact truth, the result being, as once before, incredulity on the part of his hearers.

"For shame, Mr. Kempton!" said his hostess, smiling.

"Pure swagger, Kempton," observed her brother, pleasure in the news destroying the last vestige of hauteur. "You're a hero and can say such things, not a loafer like me, who's never seen a rifle fired except at a target or on the moors."

"I suppose the army, as usual, will go out with one arm tied up by the politicians," said Henry. "The cavalry now out there will, I know. Half the horses are broken down, and when we complained and asked for more, we were told it was not advisable to ask the country for money just then."

"Oh, we'll pull through, somehow," said Charles.

"Yes ; but why should we, 'somehow' ? We're fighting for the country. Why doesn't the country see we start fair, not handicapped ? "

"Because the country don't know anything about it, my dear Kempton, and would care less if it did. But what's the odds ? We'll pull through all right, we always do ; and, anyway, the old Guards are all right : they don't mess about with them. We'll show them the way, as usual."

Violet frowned slightly. "I think, Charles," she said, "that's rather an invidious remark. I've no doubt other regiments—Mr. Kempton's, for instance—are quite as good as the much lauded Guards, only he doesn't think it necessary to say so."

"I'm not talking about the cavalry. You're in the cavalry, ain't you, Kempton ? I gathered so from what you said just now. They're all right, of course. I meant show the way to the infantry, and, in my humble opinion, the Guards can and will. I'm right to think so too, ain't I, Kempton ? They're my lot, and I'm proud of 'em."

"Certainly, 'a poor thing, but my own' is what we all think," said Henry, to whom the feeling of *esprit de corps* had been ever incomprehensible.

"Of course if you put it that way, Charles, Mr. Kempton is bound to agree with you," said Violet, her patience, already sorely tried that evening, now giving way under the strain. "To my ignorant mind, however, the vaunted Guards are soldiers of the feather-bed order. They don't go abroad—I don't count Egypt—like the rest, and even when forced to venture as far as Pirbright, or, worse still, manœuvres, they grumble in the most absurd way. I've heard you myself, Charles."

"Feather-bed soldiers, the Guards !" said Charles, much incensed. "Of course they don't go to India like the line, they're Household Troops, but they'd go fast enough there

or anywhere else if there was real trouble on hand. In every campaign of importance since . . ."

"Certainly they'd go if they were sent. They'd have to, being soldiers ; but I fail to see in what way they're better than a good line regiment. I appeal to Mr. Kempton," turning to Henry, confident of support.

Charles frowned. For Kempton to be thus called upon, and that by his sister, to pass judgment on the Guards was hardly to his taste. He had no choice, however, but to agree.

"Oh, all right," he said. "Say what you like, Kempton, I don't mind."

Here Henry committed the worst offence of which he had been guilty that evening. He sided with her brother against his hostess ; seemed, moreover, which was true, to take pleasure in doing so.

"I agree with you, Ravenscroft," he said. "Your men, in my opinion, are . . ."

"Never mind about the men, Mr. Kempton, it's the officers I'm talking about," said Violet, with true feminine shifting of ground.

"The officers are the best, too, not because they know their work better than those of the line, though they do that too as a rule, but chiefly on account of the far greater social difference between them and their men ; and, despite popular delusions on the subject, Lady Violet, it's that difference the soldier likes to feel. He wants his officers to be somebody, and do things he cannot. He's a Tory at heart, is Thomas Atkins, and hates nothing so much as a ranker or men above him of his own or near his own class. He knows himself to be incapable of justice and believes them to be the same, and so doesn't trust them, no matter how good they may be professionally."

"That's perfectly true, Kempton," said Charles, beaming on him.

"I'm afraid I don't agree," said his sister, her patience now finally gone, "and I wonder why, holding these views, Mr. Kempton, you thought fit to join a mere Hussar regiment, instead of the Guards you vaunt so highly."

An awkward pause followed, Charles glancing at his sister, now red with confusion, and then down at the tablecloth, while he thought hard of words to say wherewith to cover the situation.

Henry alone remained apparently undisturbed. "I'm afraid," he said, smiling at his hostess, "the Guards, much as I should have liked them, were rather beyond me. An application from me for a nomination would rather have surprised His Royal Highness, I imagine."

"Much better where you are, Kempton," said Charles. "As my sister says, we are only loafers, really; and I for one would gladly change places with you to have done what you have."

Violet rose. She felt badly the need of sanctuary and temporary solitude, in order to compose her fluttered mind. "I'll leave you to smoke," she said. "Don't stay too long, though, as I want Mr. Kempton to read Omar Khayyam to me," and, with a wan smile at Henry, she passed out.

Regaining the haven of arm-chair and a wood fire, she sat brooding miserably over that unfortunate remark. Her solitude was of short duration, for, with the departure of his hostess, Henry's taciturnity returned, despite all the efforts of Lord Charles, who, partly owing to post-prandial good-humour and partly to his guest's recent exposition of sentiments to his liking, was inclined to be both cordial and chatty.

To amuse Lord Charles was no part of Henry's scheme; his recent efforts had been solely for Lady Violet's benefit, and with her departure disappeared also all incentive to further conversational brilliancy. He feared, too, having

offended her, and that the remark about the Guards had been no slip, as it was in reality, but an intentional snub, and not for the entertaining of a thousand Charleses would he have risked that from his sister.

The latter's goodwill was to him of vital importance, the former's of no importance at all. He was therefore anxious to get back to her and put matters right before the veil of coldness had had time to harden into a wall.

He sat silent, glancing impatiently now at the chattering Charles, now at the clock, till at last his host, intercepting one of these glances, rose.

"More wine?" he said. "No? What an abstemious fellow you are. Learnt that on the West Coast, I suppose. Let's join my sister, then;" and Henry's boredom was at an end.

Lady Violet was sitting before the fire as they entered, staring into the flames. Henry, ignoring Charles, walked straight towards her.

"The bear has come to read to you, Lady Violet," he said. "He's only a bear, remember, and clumsy, as are all his kind."

A smile instantly appeared on Violet's face, banishing the gloom.

"You're not the bear, Mr. Kempton," she said; "it was I, I fear."

"You," was the answer, "as if you could ever . . . No, it was my fault, only mine. I ought not to have talked as I did at dinner. I saw you didn't like it, too, but I still went on, though hating myself all the time for doing so. I hate myself now."

"But why did you do it, then?"

"I don't know. For effect, I suppose."

"And you took my brother's part against me."

"Yes, because I thought he was right. I told you I always meant to be honest with you."

"I like you to be."

"And so I will, but for the future only when we're alone. In public I'll be your bear, and dance as you direct. May I read to you now? I should like to."

"No, not now, I think, I've changed my mind. Some other time when we're alone. My brother," looking round to where Charles was seated, paper in hand, before the other fireplace, "has no soul for poetry—have you, Charles?"

"Wha— I," was the sleepy answer, "haven't I, though? Go ahead, Kempton, and let's have Omar; jolly old bird Omar, 'Cup of wine beside the bough,' and so on. Don't mind if I go to sleep, though; ploughin' all day through the snow has made me . . . made me . . . Eh, what?"

"I didn't speak, Charles."

"Oh, thought you did, thought you . . ." His voice died away, the paper fell from his hands, a deep contented sigh followed, and Charles was asleep.

"That's what he always does when he comes here," said Violet, contemplating the back of his head. "No, I don't think we'll read; I'll sing to you instead, if you like. Oh no, it won't wake him, nothing will now. He'll sleep on comfortably till I turn him out."

"What would you like, Mr. Kempton?" she continued, seating herself at the Broadwood. "Oh, I think I know," whereupon, inwardly smiling, Violet began, her choice having fallen on the most classic, and destitute of tune, of all the songs in her repertoire.

A polite "Thank you" was her reward for this performance.

Violet looked up at him reproachfully. "And I thought you were fond of music," she said.

"So I am, but to my mind that's not music at all. It's like practising scales."

"I see, not quite classical enough. Well, I must try

again," and once more Violet's full contralto rose, this time beginning :

" Once, long ago, when the scent of the roses."

This time the result was more satisfactory, an ecstatic " Oh, thank you, I love that ; please, please sing it again," coming from her audience of one. Violet glanced up at him, and saw his face alight and eyes glowing with rapture. With difficulty suppressing her mirth, she started on " Some day," this ancient melody being followed by others of the same kind, till, when at last from sheer fatigue she was forced to stop, and her guest unwillingly took his departure, she had the satisfaction of knowing that the evening begun so inauspiciously had ended for her, as hostess, in a veritable triumph.

Charles, rubbing his eyes, escorted Henry to the door, and having bidden him good night, returned to his sister, whom he found thoughtfully gazing into the fire.

" That's an amusin' little bounder, Violet," he said. " Where did you pick him up ? "

Violet turned on him with sparkling eyes and a face red with anger.

" I must ask you, Charles," she said, " not to call a friend of mine a bounder. The expression ' pick him up,' too, is offensive."

Charles stared at her in astonishment. Such an outburst from her was indeed remarkable.

" I beg your pardon, Violet," he said at last ; " caddish thing of me to say. I thought, though, you were a bi off the fellow yourself at dinner, and no wonder. Rotten form all that about the Lords, I thought. I suppose he did it to please us ; that sort of fellow is always more royalist than the king."

" I don't see it was bad form at all, it was an ordinary

discussion in which you yourself joined. You said more than he did, in fact."

"Only not to make the chap feel uncomfortable, I joined in to put him at his ease. I say, though, your remark about the Guards was rather a nasty one."

"It's generous of you to remind me of it, and as for you joining in, as you say, to put him at his ease, it struck me he was far more so than you were. I shouldn't flatter myself either, if I were you, he talked as he did to please either of us. From what I know of Mr. Kempton, that's not his way at all."

"And what do you know about the fellow? Come now, Violet."

"One thing, at any rate: he's distinguished himself as you never have, my brother."

"Lor'," said Lord Charles, regarding her.

"I beg your pardon, Charles; I should not have said that, but you provoked me by sneering at a friend of mine. It wasn't nice of you."

"A friend of yours?"

"Yes, please understand that when you . . . But don't let us quarrel, Charles. We'll change the subject. I want to ask you something. Did you ever meet a Major Carados?"

"The fellow who shot himself over a woman, somewhere in Africa? No, I never did."

"Shot himself—over a woman."

"That's what was said, though it was given out as an accident. I suppose it was because his brother and grandfather did the same thing. They're all mad, the Caradoses, his father, the present lord, the crankiest of the lot."

"Was he the son of Lord Carados?"

"Yes, Keating Carados."

"Keating, why Keating?"

"That powder destroys undesirable . . ."

"I'm aware of it; but what's that to do with Lord Carados?"

"I'll tell you if you listen, though it's not quite a drawing-room story; still I'll tone it down a bit if I can. Well, they call him Keating, because he too is a destroyer of undesirable things. Like all his family, the old fellow—rather curious your mentioning him, by the way—holds much the same views as our friend Kempton. He rules his tenants with a rod of iron, and at a sign of Radical view out they go. That agitating fellow Slimus heard of it, and went up to convert them. Old Carados, informed of his arrival, paid a lot of old women to catch the fellow and—well, I'll spare you the details, Vi, but they spanked him, spanked him well with Welsh gorse or bundles of leeks, Slimus' national emblem. There was a devil of a row, and Carados had to pay, but he didn't care; he said he'd serve all agitators the same way, if they came to Carados, no matter what it cost him. Advertised it, if you please, in all the papers."

"Well, what happened?"

"Curiously enough, what Kempton said would happen, nothing. Neither Slimus nor any of his breed showed their noses there again. The spanking and the consequent ridicule were too much for them, I suppose."

"And the tenants?"

"Went solid with Carados. He's a jolly good landlord, it seems, and they like being ruled by him. Well, I'm off, Violet. Good night. Sorry if I've offended you. By the way, what is Kempton's regiment?"

Violet made no answer, and after Charles's departure seated herself once more by the fire, where she soon became lost in thought.

"Extraordinary influence for one man to have over another," she mused, "over him too, the least likely, I should have thought, to be so influenced. Such a nice boy

he might be, is, really, if only *that* could be destroyed. . . .
But could it be . . . could I . . . He likes being with me.
It is worth trying, well worth trying for . . . he is such a
nice boy . . . Oh, if only I were ten years younger, and
even passably good-looking. Cleverness is well enough,
but it's youth and good looks that are a woman's real
weapons. Perhaps with him, though . . . he's 'not like
others . . . mere prettiness . . ."

The glowing coals fell in with a crash; the flames leapt
up, burnt brightly for a while, and then died down.

Still Lady Violet sat on thinking.

CHAPTER XXI

THE June sunlight filtered through the closed jalousies of Lady Violet's sitting-room, casting on the pale-hued carpet streaks of white light. From the window boxes was borne the scent of mignonette, its fragrance mingling with that rising from a great china bowl of crimson and yellow roses.

In the middle of the room Lord Charles was standing, his face no longer good-humoured as of old, but stern and angry, the effect, however, being somewhat discounted by a tuft of red hair that stood up from his forehead like the crest of a distracted cockatoo. Of this he was unconscious, though not his sister, who now and again gazed contemptively at it, from the depths of the chair in which she was reclining.

So far, though sorely tried, she had, unlike her brother, succeeded in retaining some control over her temper, and was thus in a position somewhat analogous to that of the picador in the arena, Charles enacting the *rôle* of the bull.

She was lying back in her chair, softly humming to herself, occasionally glancing at her brother in a manner which well-nigh brought about the instant destruction of a pair of Dresden china shepherdesses, simpering at him from a cabinet, close to his hand.

It was a look often assumed by women when unwelcome home truths are being forced upon them, and to which they seem to find a certain curious pleasure in listening, not because they intend to profit by these truths, but for

the simple joy it affords them of denying them, and also of confounding and irritating their well-wisher. Pity, contempt, and a certain amusement have their places in that look, regret too that the speaker should think fit to make such a spectacle of himself. It is, in fact, one of the most trying of the many trying ways in which feminine nature is skilled.

"I'm telling you this, Violet, for your own sake, and unless you're a fool, which you're not, you'll take it in the right way."

"I do wish, Charles," was the languid answer, "you'd brush your hair before you come here. You've no idea what a comic appearance that—feather gives you."

Charles's hand snatched at the offending lock: he pressed it savagely down, and proceeded.

"As your brother . . ."

"Oh, please, don't shout, dear; you're not in the barracks, try to remember."

Her brother's face whitened, his hand half went out to the Dresden figures, was withdrawn, and thrust into his pocket.

"As your brother," he began again, his voice now a stifled growl, "it is my duty . . ."

"I can't hear what you say if you mutter like that."

"Look here, Violet, it's no use your trying to make me ratty"—his sister shivered and held up a protesting hand—"make me angry, then, if you prefer it, because I'm determined to keep cool. I've come here to talk this thing over in an amicable spirit and . . ."

"And may I ask why our excellent, though perhaps not over brilliant, Charles has thought fit to turn his attention from the sports and yellow backs he understands to matters he apparently does not?" said Violet, suppressing a yawn.

"You can sneer as much as you like, but I'm here to have

my say, and I'm going to. I know I'm not clever, I've never professed to be. You have the brains of the family. Bill and I have always known and admitted it."

"And Bill, in addition, possesses what is known as good taste, a quality, my dear Charles, which in some others is not so apparent."

"Bill is just as sick about it as I am, only he is too damn lazy to take it up."

"Please spare me the language of the canteen, Charles; it may be difficult, but do try."

"I beg your pardon, but it's enough to make anyone swear. Look here, Violet, I've never interfered with you, or your actions before, have I?"

"Perhaps wisely."

"But this is a matter which affects the credit of the family, and I've a right. Come, Vi," changing his tone, "you and I have always been the greatest pals, and I've never resented anything you've said to me. I've come to you many times when I've been in a hat."

"That little matter of Miss Dolly Howard, for instance, whom you were so anxious to introduce into the family, of whose credit you are now the champion. I remember the lady well," with a little laugh; "the Wonder Flower, wasn't she called, Charles dear?"

Charles flushed a dark red. "Good taste, it seems, Violet—" he began, and then once more restrained himself. "Yes, I admit that but for you I should probably have made a fool of myself then, and I'm grateful to you for it. But now that it's my turn, and you are in the soup . . ."

At this Violet's sorely-tried self-control gave way. "In the soup!" she cried. "You dare to apply such a low, vulgar expression to me. You compare my—my friendship with Mr. Kempton, an officer of the army, a V.C. too, with your foolish infatuation for a common chorus girl. Oh, this is an absolute insult!"

"You seem determined to misconstrue everything I say, Violet," said Charles quietly, "and perhaps I put it clumsily. I don't compare the thing at all, nor do I deny that Kempton has done what I for one would give my eyes to do. Also, I admit his cleverness—everyone does who knows him—and thanks to the way you've taken him up, he's now accepted at most decent houses. That doesn't alter facts, though."

"What facts?"

"That, from our point of view, he's an outsider. Hang it, Violet, a common shopkeeper's son."

"That's hardly his fault, I imagine. Try and be just."

"I am trying, but when it's this same fellow who's getting my only sister talked about—you, Violet, talked about with the Emporium's man's son—it's rather too much. Why, do you know, it's actually said you intend to marry the man? That's absurd, I know of course, but all the same it's said."

"Vulgar Club gossip doesn't interest me in the least, Charles," said his sister, her face a bright scarlet.

"I daresay not; but, you see, Vi, you've always held your head pretty high, and rightly, and now that these fellows and silly women get a chance at you they naturally make the most of it. I don't suppose for a moment that they or anyone else believe it really, but all the same, dear, I must admit you've given them a handle. The chap's here most days, you're always about together, and last Tuesday, they say, you were seen alone on the river with him."

"It's true, I was. I've been there several times with Mr. Kempton, and why shouldn't I? I like him, like him very much, Charles; he's a most interesting boy, so different from the bores in our own set. Come now, Charles, what have you against him, beyond his—his belongings?"

"Nothing, I admit, though that's enough, coupled with his friendship for you. I confess I don't like him—men

don't, Violet. He gives me the impression of being an unscrupulous fellow, and—and a bounder, at bottom. I know he looks all right, and his manners are passable enough, though a bit careful, but all the same he don't ring true to me. There's no real cordiality about him; he tries hard not to show it, but he's a cold-hearted beggar."

"That means, I suppose, he's no taste for your evening amusements, shall we call them, Charles? That's just the thing I've always liked about him. When he comes here, I know there's no horridness left behind, of which we're supposed to know nothing. We do, though, Charles, we feel it."

"There I own he's exemplary, Violet; but though you may think a lot of that, believe me, you're not altogether right. Better have an occasional fling than bottle it up to break out badly some day, as such fellows always do. The one's natural, Violet, and the other ain't, though I know you won't see it—no woman will."

"Of course she won't, because it's wrong, and—and revolting. And I honour Mr. Kempton for what you tell me, though I knew it without. It's the more credit to him, as half the women in town would be ready to make love to him if he looked at them."

"Oh, he's a decent-looking fellow, I own, though not . . . but I don't want to run him down, Vi, as he's a friend of yours, and perhaps I'm prejudiced."

"Exactly, that's just what you all are. Now please, Charles, do try to understand that I'm not an inexperienced girl, but a woman old enough, and well able, to manage her own affairs. Do you know I'm thirty-three, dear?"

"You don't look it, Vi," was the kindly answer, "not a day more than twenty-five."

Violet flushed with pleasure, her eyes at the same time filling with tears. Very little sufficed nowadays for that to happen.

"Charles dear," she said, touching his arm, "I'm afraid I've been rather horrid to you. You meant kindly, I know. I—I am sorry, Charles."

"No, no, Vi. I was a clumsy fool to talk as I did, but you must remember, dear, you're our only sister, and we, Bill and I, are no end proud and fond of you. That's why all this gossip has touched us up. I couldn't sleep all last night worrying over it, and this morning I made up my mind to speak to you, much as I hated the job. Think over what I've said, old girl, won't you? I don't ask you to drop the fellow, but only to be a bit careful. Now let me drive you down to Ranelagh. We're playing the 'First Life' and ought to have a toppin' game."

"Oh, thank you, Charles, I don't think I will. I—I am rather tired, dear."

"Better come, Vi, the drive down would pick you up. Think not? Oh, all right. Go and lie down for a bit, you don't look up to much. My fault, I suppose, confound it. Well, I must be off. Good-bye, dear;" and Charles left.

From the window his sister watched him drive away, the shiny-coated chestnuts moving smoothly under his practised guidance. When the mail phaeton was out of sight she turned away and, reseating herself, began to think over what had passed.

Everything was true that Charles had said, was but a fraction of the truth indeed, as for some time now she had only too well realised. The experiment of rescuing the sheep from the wolf, decided on and begun some six months before, had ended as such experiments almost invariably do, and Lady Violet Ravenscroft, thirty-three years of age, and a woman proud beyond the ordinary, was in the hold of a blind infatuation for Henry Kempton, the son, as her brother truthfully put it, of a common London shop-keeper.

This being so, Charles had but wasted his breath in the

foregoing interview, for, though Violet was thinking now, it was not of how to end the obnoxious friendship, but of the means whereby it was to be made closer, binding even. With the blindness characteristic of women in love, there was no shadow of doubt in her mind that her feelings were shared by Henry, and that natural diffidence only—the thought of the vast disparity between his social position and hers—held him from declaring himself.

In this she was both wrong and right ; wrong in the main point, for Henry, although liking her, loved her not at all ; but right in the rest, for he had every wish to declare himself, the fear of making a mistake and ruining everything alone restraining him. Violet, however, was as anxious for the declaration as he was, and for some weeks had been debating how his diffidence should be overcome, and the happiness desired by both brought to pass. And so now, Charles and his words acting as a spur to a half-formed resolution, she set herself once more to the problem before her.

Suddenly an idea seemed to strike her, a disquieting idea apparently, for it caused her face to redden and her eyes to grow shy. "I—I'll do it," she said, half aloud. "It's awful to think of, but it's for both our sakes, and I will. Heavens, there he is; that's his ring." Springing up, Violet hastened to a looking-glass and stood for a second scanning herself. "Charles is right," she murmured, "I don't look a day more than . . ." Then once more she was back in her chair, smiling at Henry as he entered.

"Oh, Henry," she said, "I thought you were on the river, with the Cartons' party. They told me you were going."

"So I was, but I received news this morning which brought me here instead. It's rather good news for me, and I thought you might like to hear it."

"Of course I should. Oh, please tell me, don't keep me waiting."

"This time it's something I owe to you only. You remember how you made me work for my promotion exam. last March; it seemed to me useless at the time, as I saw no chance of a vacancy. You were quite right, though, as usual."

"Why, what has happened?"

"Paynter's married and left the regiment. Henshaw and Standish haven't passed, and I'm to go over their heads. I ought to be in next Friday's Gazette as a captain."

"A major, Henry. Oh, I—I am glad. I hope I'm the first you've told."

"The very first, there's no one else who'd care to hear that I know. You're the only friend I have. Oh yes, you are, Lady Violet. People are nice enough to me because they know I'm a friend of yours, but for no other reason."

"Oh, Henry, you mustn't fancy things. Lots of people like you."

"No, they don't, and you know it as well as I do. I am not surprised either, for I care equally little for them, or anybody else, for that matter, except you."

"You like me, Henry?"

"It would be rather strange if I didn't; you're the best, the only friend since Carados. Oh, I'm sorry, I was forgetting his name's forbidden."

"No, talk about him, if you like. As a matter of fact, I rather wanted you to; there's something I wish you to tell me. Will you?"

"I—if I can."

"It's this. Why did Major Carados—kill himself? Oh, please don't get angry," as Henry's face suddenly grew hard at the question, "and—and it's no use to pretend to me he did not, for I know he did, I've known it all along. I want you to tell me why, though. It's perfectly safe with me, Henry."

"It was—over—a woman, if you must know."

"His wife? He was married, I know."

"No. Oh, why drag it up now? It's not a pretty story, Violet. Oh, I beg your pardon!"

"No, no, call me Violet, if you like. I—I don't mind at all; but about him, tell me. You needn't be afraid of shocking me, I'm not a girl, remember, but a woman of thirty-one, six, I mean four, years older than you," trying to smile.

"Are you?" was the absent-minded answer. "Then," after a pause, "why do you want to know about this?"

"I—I have a reason," muttered Violet, with her eyes on the ground.

"I don't want to, it seems like breaking faith with the dead; still—if you insist; do you?"

"Oh, Henry, please don't put it like that. I . . ."

"Do you?"

"Y-yes."

"Very well, then, though I hate talking about it." He paused, frowning, and then began. "You've always looked upon Carados as a monster, I know, Violet; but if he was it was a woman made him so. Till he met her, everyone said he was a good fellow enough, though always strange. She changed him, and—and, Violet, if I hate anyone I hate that woman, and all her kind—cold-blooded, greedy devils. Men sneer at me, call me Parsifal, the pure fool, Violet, and so I am, though not, as they think, because I am not a man like them, but because I loathe such women, the whole painted tribe of them, since one of their tribe killed the best friend I had."

"But forgive me, Henry, your friend must have been weak indeed to allow himself to be so—killed."

"He was the strongest man I know, or ever shall know; and the stronger the man, the stronger the love, I suppose."

"And—the intellect to control it, Henry."

"Ah, the old argument again, Violet, and the true one. I believe that too, though in his case . . ."

"Please go on with the story, Henry."

"There's little more to tell. He was infatuated, and being so, and she being what she was, ruined himself over her. He hadn't a penny left when he died, all had gone to her; even his books he left by will to her; his books, my God! those books, handed over to a dull-minded, soulless harpy . . . to sell, I suppose."

"But I don't see why . . . Did she break with him?"

"Yes, by telegram, that only. She didn't trouble to write. It came when I was with him, and I think that at the brutal suddenness of the thing his brain, always unsettled, gave way then and there. There is madness in the family, you may have heard, and that telegram, in my opinion, brought out what might have lain dormant for years. For a minute or two after it came his insanity was obvious; I saw it, but did nothing, Violet. I kept it to myself. The very night it . . . happened I could have stopped it, had I not been a fool."

"But how? What could you have done?"

"I ought to have stayed with him. He asked me to, and I refused. I left him there alone with a loaded rifle, I who knew his madness. If only you'd been there, Violet, if I'd had you to talk it over with, between us we could have saved him; but I'd no one."

"Me! Do you think I'd have moved a finger to save him, Henry? Not I. They were suited, to my mind, this friend of yours and that woman."

"Violet, you're hard."

"I may be, but when I think of the harm he did, or tried to do you, a boy, I hate even his memory. His killing himself when he did was his one redeeming action."

"You're shocked at what I've told you, but, remember, you made me; I never wanted to."

"I'm not shocked. Such stories are only too common, though what men see in such women is beyond me. Surely,

before everything a man demands virtue and modesty in the woman he loves."

"I know nothing about love."

"But you—you will some day."

"Shall I? You believe with Carados then that, despite all my . . . assertions, there's a mass of sentiment in me, waiting for the right woman to exploit."

"I agree with Major Carados in nothing, but I—I think you might—I—I hope— Oh, Henry, why keep up this pretence any longer?"

"Violet!" Henry was now quivering with excitement. Could it be? Dare he? No, he would wait. Let her go on. He must be certain before . . .

"I—I said just now, Henry," continued Violet, in a low, trembling voice, "that before all else a man should demand modesty in a woman, but there are cases—there is such a thing as false modesty, and—and as you won't speak, I—I— Oh, for heavens' sake, say something, Henry."

"I never thought, I never dared. Do you mean that . . ."

"That I love you, Henry. Yes, I do," said Violet, growing suddenly brave. "Oh, be quick, don't keep me waiting, and say so too, or I shall die of shame."

"I have always loved you, Violet."

"But you said that first afternoon that it was not for love of me you risked your life at Saida, but for some horrid . . ."

"I lied, I loved you all the time," and, rising, he knelt before her, her arms closing instantly round his neck. "I've wanted to tell you so many times, but I was afraid. Don't blame me for that, Violet. Think of the difference between . . ."

"Hush, I love you. All is said in that."

"Dear, you honour me too much," and now, growing bold, he held her to him and kissed the plain, wistful face looking down into his.

"My fortune's made," muttered Henry, as with a light foot he hurried back to his rooms. "No more dull soldiering, no more West Coast; they've served their turn, and well, and now I've done with both for good. I'll be a good husband to her, though, I swear it. She deserves that from me. I don't love her, I suppose, but at any rate I like her better than any one else. She's a real good friend, better than all the loves in the world. I'll cut the army and settle down. I'll send in my papers next——"

"'War imminent with the Transvaal.' Piper, sir? Extra Special. Latest from . . ." sang a newsboy at that moment in his ears; but, with a curse, Henry declined the proffered sheet, and, with the lightness departed from his footsteps, continued on his way homeward.

CHAPTER XXII

THE announcement of the engagement of Lady Violet Ravenscroft to Major Kempton, the Emporium man's son, undoubtedly provided the sensation of that London season, in the minds of those more intimately concerned. Among this number was to be counted a large portion of England's oldest and most powerful families, with whom the event, by its horror and unexpectedness, obliterated even interest in South African affairs, where matters were now rapidly reaching a crisis.

To others, acquaintances and those dependent on newspapers for their knowledge of aristocratic doings, the news was at first received with incredulous amusement, the announcement being regarded as one of those vexatious, though entertaining, mistakes perpetrated by struggling editors when funds are low and a sensation required to replenish them.

"Engaged to Henry Kempton," tittered the women, who had long envied one whose wealth, position, and proud exclusiveness placed her above their reach. Really, it was too bad, though perhaps the error was a natural one, for undoubtedly Lady Violet had made herself rather conspicuous with the man. Still, it was hard on her to have a small indiscretion proclaimed from the housetops.

"This will settle the little bounder, thank heaven," said the men; "take her down a peg too, I hope," for they also had their grudge against the lady, both for a well-established

reputation as a blue-stockings, and an equally well-established one for indifference to male fascinations, rendering her hitherto proof against the best-conducted, interested advances. The immediate result of the news was a rush of custom on the firm of Kempton and Watson, such as it had never before known.

"Let's go to the Emporium," was the cry. "I've never been there in my life, and it will be rather fun to see the old fellow. We'll congratulate him too, and see how he takes it. Come on;" and off they and a host of others bent on the same errand would go, the result being much profit to Josiah.

To meet the extra press of business, he and his two sons were forced to help personally in the serving of new, smartly-dressed customers, though to the congratulations, and somewhat impertinent questionings, little information was vouchsafed. "Thank you, madam. Is there anything more I can show you?" was the usual and only reply given, for Josiah, divining their errand, had given orders to this effect to his sons and staff, and in the Emporium, at any rate, Josiah was still absolute.

Gradually, as the days passed, and the expected contradiction was not forthcoming, it began to dawn on society that the announcement had been no newspaper fiction but serious truth. Thereupon the laughter of the women was loud and unrestrained. The men also joined in it, though now but half-heartedly, for whilst they had hoped that, thanks to a journalistic indiscretion, the little bounder would be sent back to his suburb, they now found that the "bounder" had succeeded where they had failed, and by his unaided efforts had placed himself beyond reach of the sneers and snubbing they had not hesitated to spare him in the past.

Nevertheless, whatever their real sentiments, both men and women now hastened to do the right thing, the more

especially did those hasten whose acquaintance with the lady had hitherto been of the slightest, worldly wisdom telling them that as she must be in difficulties with her people, and consequently unhappy, a tactful and kindly act now would tell the more, and possibly lay the foundation of a friendship, which up to the present had been denied them.

Lady Violet, marry whom she would, was still Lady Violet, rich and powerful; and the owner not only of the house in Grosvenor Square, but also of the huge Hampshire property, renowned for its shooting throughout the country. So the women called and sent kindly congratulations and expressions of goodwill, the men doing their part in pressing invitations on her fiancé to dine at their Clubs. They even offered to put him up for these Clubs, a mark of friendship that had hitherto never occurred to their minds.

Violet's relations were neither amused nor congratulatory, their attitude being one of uncompromising hostility. Her brother William, the present Duke of Edenborough, on receiving his sister's letter informing him of the news, had replied in a missive couched in language of such intemperance, that relations between them had ceased forthwith.

Charles alone of the family stood by his sister. He was no less indignant than the rest, but, knowing her better than they did, had the wisdom to conceal much of what he felt, realising that violent methods would prove futile, and only lead to complete estrangement between them, in which case he would be powerless to exercise any influence on the future course of events. He therefore swallowed the pill with as good a grace as was possible to him, determining to trust to time and circumstances to give him the longed-for chance of sending Henry about his business. He informed his sister that, though he entirely disapproved of it, the engagement was her affair, and, that being so, he would outwardly countenance it, and also be as civil to her fiancé as he could.

This attitude, grudging though it was, was nevertheless of service to the House of Ravenscroft, in that a further scandal was averted, for, but for it, it is probable that Violet, bitter at the treatment of herself, and still more of Henry, by her relations, would have married him there and then, regardless of what was due to personal dignity and pride.

The approval lacking on the part of Violet's people was certainly not withheld by the members of the Kempton family, with one exception. Their joy at the tidings was heartfelt and openly expressed, this last achievement of Henry's being to their minds a far greater one than the winning of a mere bronze cross, which, after all, had proved to them of little material advantage.

It is true that until now to all save Josiah his absence from home, though at times difficult of explanation to certain curious friends, had proved an undoubted relief, but once again the springs of maternal and sisterly love bubbled up afresh, and it became imperative to have the dear boy home again, and with him of course his newly-acquired fiancée. They accordingly wrote to Lady Violet: the girls expressed much gratification at the news and a desire for better acquaintance with their prospective sister-in-law, whom they remembered quite well from the Flower Show; Mrs. Kempton's contribution was a somewhat lengthy letter, in which Henry was described as a dear, lucky boy, and though she said it herself, Violet was also lucky. She, and that naughty boy too, must, they really must, come down to Frampton at once. Did she know he had not been near them for weeks? She quite understood and forgave him, only they must both come.

Josiah alone appeared not to share in the general rejoicing, but, much to his wife's indignation, shook his head over the news, muttering something about too great a condescension, and the disparity of social position.

"A fine boy, Henry, yes, and one many girls might be glad to marry, but, after all, he's only a shopkeeper's son, and it is not for shopkeepers' sons to marry with dukes' daughters. Besides, she's a very wealthy woman, and her family—they always do—will expect settlements, which I don't see my way to make. I'd rather it had been one of his own station, Maria. It alarms me, and I don't like it."

Maria answered by declaring his views were a hundred years behind the times; that such marriages were quite usual nowadays, and, for once an advocate of expenditure not on herself, demanded from her husband immediate and substantial settlements on his son's fiancée. No less than two thousand a year was her suggestion; he could well afford it, and it was for the credit of the family. "Write to your lawyers now and get it over, Josiah," she urged.

Here, with the nearest approach to an oath he ever permitted himself, Josiah retired to his library, to remain there for the rest of the evening, with visions of the work-house floating before his eyes.

Finally, as the result of much anxious meditation, from his counting-house in Edgware Road he composed a letter to Henry. In this letter he laid great stress on the honour done by Lady Violet to his son, and hoped that this would always be kept in mind, and repaid by a lifetime of respectful devotion.

He also alluded to their own regrettable estrangement, the result of a mistake on his part, for which he now begged to apologise. He asked his son to let bygones be bygones, and their former affectionate relations of father and son be resumed. If, he continued, Lady Violet would so far honour him, he would be very glad to meet her, making, however, no suggestion as to a visit from her, early or otherwise, to Frampton House.

Instead, he proposed lunch at a restaurant not far from Edgware Road. "I've been there for years," he explained,

"and they give you an excellent lunch for two shillings—soup, joint, and a sweet, though of course I'd have something better than that, as well as a private room, if Lady Violet comes; if she does not care to, however, I hope you will. I am not as young as I was, and our estrangement has made me very unhappy."

A passage followed to the effect that herewith was a trifle for the purchase of a suitable engagement ring. He suggested that the same should be bought at Sparkler Bros., Poultry. Mr. Sparkler was a personal friend of his, and if Henry presented the enclosed business card a substantial discount would be allowed him. The letter concluded with the announcement that he was writing to the Duke of Edenborough by the same post.

Then, unlocking a drawer, he took out a fat yellow cheque book, and making out a draft for fifty pounds tore out the sheet and placed it with the letter in an envelope addressed to Major Kempton, V.C., 2001 Jermyn Street.

Another epistle was then started upon, a somewhat distasteful one, seemingly, to judge from the expression on the writer's face. This was addressed to His Grace the Duke of Edenborough, and suggested an interview between them for the purpose of discussing certain financial arrangements connected with the proposed marriage of his son Henry to His Grace's sister Lady Violet Ravenscroft. This letter also completed and sealed, he put on his hat, and hailing a bus was conveyed citywards, to the offices of his legal advisers.

A curious twinge, half of remorse, half of some quite unexpected emotion, was felt by Henry, as he read the first of these letters. The sight of the cheque also awakened no sense of gratification, as such gifts had hitherto done. The effusions of his mother and sisters had served but to arouse contempt and disgust, for, schemer himself, he was able to recognise only too well the reason for their suddenly

awakened outburst of affection. In this letter of his father's, however, he saw there was no pretence, and no sign of interested motives ; the words came from Josiah's heart.

Six months ago, it is probable, nay, certain, that his father's letter would have left him unmoved, but during that time Henry's life had been one continual fight against the barely-veiled hostility of people in whose company, despite all his efforts to accommodate himself, he remained an alien.

They tolerated him, invited him to their houses, but he knew that, only for Lady Violet's never-failing loyalty and support, doors now open to him would be shut in his face, and these same people would fail to recognise him when they met him in the streets or park.

He had maintained himself, and well too, but all the same the struggle had told upon him ; and it is probable that but for Lady Violet—whom he had come to regard with genuine liking and to rely on—he would have abandoned the contest and, cured of social aspirations, returned to his regiment.

This morning, as it happened, he was feeling more than usually depressed, the result of an occurrence of the previous night, when, at a ball given in a well-known house, a certain youthful Guardsman had seen fit to air his wit at Henry's expense. True, he had speedily reduced his antagonist to silence, but the sympathy of the onlookers had been obviously with the Guardsman and not with himself. Knowing this, the memory of the episode had rankled, was still rankling, when, on descending to breakfast next morning, he found Josiah's letter awaiting him.

Reading it, he realised for the first time in his life that the ties of kinship are part of human nature, and also for the first time he was now conscious of a feeling of affection for the father so lightly abandoned, as he had thought with

perfect indifference for ever. Yes, he would like to see the old man again; he would go to the Edgware Road restaurant, he remembered the place—he had lunched there with Josiah the day before leaving for South Africa.

He remembered, too, his father's present to him on that occasion of a cigar case, and how at the time he had thought it a mean present, hoping for a cheque, which had not been forthcoming. Nevertheless, that cigar case had been useful, and had accompanied him on all his travels; he had it still, though it was somewhat battered. He would go there to-day and take it with him; the old man would be pleased.

He was lunching with Lady Violet, and for her to go, as suggested, was of course out of the question; but he would go round and ask her to let him off, and tell her the reason. She would agree at once, he knew, for she was always urging him to make it up with his father, in spite of his constant refusal. He rose from his almost untouched breakfast, and leaving his rooms walked along the sunlit pavement to Grosvenor Square, to find Violet, as usual, ready with a welcome.

"Oh, Henry," she said, "I'm so glad you've come. I've had another letter from your mother, and I want to talk it over with you. I really think we shall have to go down to Frampton, if only for the day; she seems quite hurt at our always putting her off. Read it," handing him the letter.

Henry read the letter and then threw it down impatiently.

"Pshaw," he said. "No, thank you, Violet, I'll spare you that, at any rate. My father's the only one who regards the matter in the proper light. I had a letter from him. I've brought it for you to read, if you'd care to. Here it is," holding it out to her.

"Oh, Henry," said Violet, having read it, "I call that

a perfectly dear letter, though of course he makes too much of—of . . .”

“Of the honour. No, he doesn't. He's quite right, and my mother all wrong. You lucky, indeed, engaged to—me !”

“But I am. Any woman is who's going to marry the man she cares for, and who cares for her. And I—I am so proud of you, Henry, you're so different from any one else. Oh, you—you're a dear, Henry.”

“I don't think your people quite regard me in that light,” was the rather grim answer. “But about my father. I thought, if you wouldn't mind and let me off, I'd lunch with him to-day.”

“Of course I will. What's his number? I'll telephone at once. Oh, what fun it will be! What time shall we start?”

Henry stared at her in astonishment. “Good heavens, Violet,” he said, “you don't seriously contemplate lunching in an Edgware Road restaurant! Oh, it's impossible!”

“I certainly do. And do you know, Henry, I think I shall like your father very much. Oh, I am so glad to be the means of bringing you two together again.”

“But, Violet, it's a dreadful place, all clatter and business men. If you would really like to meet him, why not ask him to lunch somewhere else, and——”

“And hurt his feelings. Not for the world, Henry. I'd much rather lunch too in Edgware Road than go to the ordinary places one knows and is so tired of. I'll wear something very quiet and dowdy, so that they'll take me for a type-writing girl, and call me 'Miss.' Oh, Henry, what fun it will be !”

“I hope it may,” said Henry doubtfully, “only don't blame me if it's a bit different to what you think. I've been there, you see, and you haven't. By the way, do you see the last line about your brother? I wish to goodness

he'd left him alone. You see, he doesn't know how your people look upon our engagement, and it's pretty certain the Duke will enlighten him, and that fully."

Violet's face fell. "Oh, Henry," she said, "and Bill's the worst of all. He's been perfectly horrid over—over us, and there's no one can be ruder, or use worse language than Bill, when he's angry, though he's good-natured as a rule."

Both were silent.

It may here be remarked that their fears proved groundless, for though the Duke, on receipt of Mr. Kempton's letter, had burst forth into language that had caused the footman, at that moment entering the room with the coffee service, to upset it and flee, the disaster had the effect of diverting Bill's wrath into another channel, and for the moment he forgot the obnoxious missive.

Later on he remembered it, and proceeded to the library, where he was soon occupied in the endeavour to compose a letter, which, though sufficiently withering, should not be marred by any expression unbecoming his dignity and position. Though master of English of a certain sort, classic severity was rather beyond Bill's powers, and he had already wasted a considerable amount of paper in the effort when a servant entered with news of the arrival of a recently purchased prize ram. Bill instantly departed to inspect the animal, and forgot thenceforth both letter and Josiah.

"What shall I do with the cheque, Violet?" said Henry, after a pause. "Say I bought your ring with it? though not at Sparkler Bros., of course. He might go there and ask."

Violet looked at him, then down at a ring, which four times the amount of Josiah's cheque would have failed to purchase, even with the aid of Kempton and Watson's business card.

"I don't think I should say that," she said, colouring, "because—because he has eyes and would—see at once. Oh, Henry, you were very naughty over this ring, though—though I loved you for it."

"Do you think I was going to pinch over a thing like that? But about this cheque. I must spend it somehow. I know—that muff-chain."

"Certainly not. You've spent far too much on me as it is, and—and that reminds me, there's something I want to say to you."

Henry's lips tightened. "Perhaps you'd better not, Violet," he said.

"But I'm going to, Henry dear," moving closer to him, and touching his arm. "Isn't that eight hundred pounds nearly gone?"

"Violet, you know this subject is forbidden between us."

"And why should it be?" burst out Violet, suddenly becoming indignant. "It's merely silly pride on your part, and because of it, you'd deprive me of a woman's greatest pleasure—giving."

"A man does not take money from a woman. I won't, at any rate."

"Then it's horrid of you, absurd too, for it will all be yours—some day."

"Your people, I imagine, will see it is not, Violet, and if they don't, I will. They say many things about me as it is, but one thing they shall not call me with truth, and that is, a sponge."

Violet drew back deeply wounded. "Oh, Henry," she said, "I never thought I should hear you say such a thing to me. How could it be possible for you to sponge on me?"

"It isn't, and that's why, having nothing to give in return, I've always refused to take from you who have everything."

"Nothing! Isn't your love worth more to me than

everything I have in the world? You have other things, too, no money can buy. Your Victoria Cross for one, and your reputation as a soldier. Aren't those alone pride enough for any woman?"

"Major Kempton, even with his V.C., doesn't amount to much in the eyes of your world, Violet."

"It does in mine, and perhaps the Major may soon become . . ." She broke off, a sudden shadow passing over her face.

"You mean the war, Violet," said Henry.

The shadow was reflected on his face, for this war, daily becoming more certain, threatened destruction to all his plans. Thanks to it, he was still a soldier, the idea of resignation having been abandoned, for V.C. though he was, and his reputation for bravery consequently established, he could not have afforded to resign now, much as he wished.

The thought of being forced out to South Africa, to take part in a struggle that interested him in no way, was intolerable to Henry. It was not the actual fear of death from which he shrank, for he was as brave as, perhaps braver than, most men, but from the idea of being wasted as a mere obscure unit, and that when an assured position was almost his. Even if he survived, all might still be lost, for, once out of the way, Violet's people would redouble their exertions, and she would most likely give in.

Nor was it only purely selfish considerations that affected him, for, apart from these, his liking for Lady Violet, and pleasure in her companionship, was no pretence, but a very real thing, and he shrank from the pain such a parting would be to both, though greater to her, as he well knew. And all this was the harder from being obliged to keep it to himself, for not even to her could he say definitely, "I don't want to go." No reasons could justify such an avowal from a soldier.

"If there should be war," he said at last, "and there may not be, after all, I don't think they will take me. I still belong to the West African Frontier force, you know. Nor am I sure that I wish to go. I should hate to leave you, Violet."

Violet looked at him, with love in her eyes. "You're a dear to say so, Henry," she said; "but I'm afraid when it comes you'll be longing to be off with the rest, and, though I should hate your going, I know I should hate your staying still more. But don't let's think of it, Henry; it's bad enough when it comes. Tell me your father's number and I'll telephone. Then I must go and dress. You'll wait here, won't you? I shan't be long." The number having been given, Violet departed, leaving Henry immersed in gloomy thought.

The lunch in the Edgware Road restaurant was an undoubted success. It could hardly fail to be, indeed, when Lady Violet Ravenscroft had made up her mind it should be so.

Josiah, at first somewhat nervous, though more on account of the meeting with his son than at the social importance of his son's fiancée, was soon quite at his ease, and talking to Lady Violet in a perfectly natural, somewhat fatherly manner, singularly pleasing to her. His obvious pride, too, in his son, and tendency to refer most subjects discussed to his opinion, charmed and touched her, and she in return chattered to the old man, eating the while with zest the somewhat robust though excellently cooked meal, served by the ancient white-whiskered waiter.

A new and rather strange feeling came over Henry as he watched her. Proud he had always been of her, but now to pride was added another sentiment, that of an admiration bordering on love. With surprise, he found himself listening, unshocked, when Josiah began to speak of the

Emporium, finally offering to show his guest over the workshops. This offer, too, was gladly accepted, and lunch concluded—the waiter being rewarded by the unusually munificent tip of a shilling—the three repaired to the business premises of Kempton and Watson. Here Violet, by smiles and kindly words, won the hearts of clerks and workmen alike, a finish to the afternoon's visit being given by the typing with her own hands of a business letter in Mr. Kempton's private office. It was indeed one of the most enjoyable afternoons in the old man's life, and it was a proud and beaming Josiah who at the close stood bareheaded outside the Emporium, his hand in Lady Violet's.

"You've given an old man very great pleasure, my dear," he said, "and—and Henry's a very lucky fellow."

Nor was the above meeting without its results, for the cab having driven away—Violet's imposing carriage and bays had not been requisitioned that day—Josiah there and then hailed a 'bus, and some half-hour later was seated in Mr. Daddle's office, bidding that astonished solicitor prepare a document, whereby was secured to Lady Violet Kempton and her heirs the sum of twenty thousand pounds. And this was a concession that all the dukes in the world would never have wrung from Josiah.

CHAPTER XXIII

“ **A**NOTHER British Reverse. Heavy Losses. Two Generals Killed.”

The cries of the newspaper boys rang drearily in Henry's ears, as he sat in his room in Jermyn Street one murky January afternoon, staring blankly at a letter he had just received.

It was a semi-official letter, and intimated to Major Kempton, that the Commander-in-Chief, who was in three days' time to sail for South Africa, would be pleased to take him on his personal staff as extra A.D.C.

The war storm, so long gathering, had burst at last, and for the past four months the British nation, more especially its luckless army, had been profiting to the full by the valuable military preparations made for its benefit by that solemn humbug, that figure of fun—a civilian Secretary of State for War.

All officers at home on leave from abroad had long since been recalled to their respective regiments, Henry alone having escaped, despite the fact that his year's leave had expired three months before. Violet, however, had resolutely opposed his returning to West Africa, in the forces of which he was still nominally a unit. She maintained that he was not yet sufficiently recovered from the effects of his wound, and, though to all appearances he was now in robust health, her opinion, curiously enough, was the same as that of the Medical Board, whose sanction before returning he was bound to obtain.

They, after a somewhat cursory examination of the patient, decided that for six months more at least he must remain at home, and, overjoyed at the unexpectedness of the verdict, Henry had hurried off to Lady Violet, who, also curiously enough, had evinced no surprise at the news, only saying with a smile, "I told you so."

Much relieved, Henry returned to his rooms in Jermyn Street, where he had since been living, all efforts to draw him back to Frampton House having been long ago abandoned by his people.

He still made a point of visiting Josiah, partly from inclination, though chiefly from more interested motives. For Henry's banking account, thanks to the purchase of the ring and various other items, was at a very low ebb indeed, and a cheque badly needed to replenish it.

Josiah, having resumed payment of his son's former allowance of one hundred and fifty pounds a year, made no further manifestations of generosity, and careful, miserly indeed, though Henry now was, the vast preponderance of expenditure over income rendered a crisis but a matter of time. Unfortunately, too, for his hopes, relations between his father and himself had become somewhat less cordial of late, Josiah having developed an irritating habit of asking his son when he expected to leave for South Africa, and, though not actually saying so, seemed to consider his remaining at home not altogether to his credit.

Henry, save that Josiah's goodwill and consequent generosity to himself might be affected, cared little what his opinions or those of any one else were on the subject. He had his plans to consider, and consideration for those plans demanded his presence at home. Let people say what they might—and thanks to the two letters after his name, cowardice, at any rate, could not be alleged against him—he meant to stay, if possible.

He therefore held on his way, eking out what remained

of his savings as best he could, and praying for a speedy ending to the war, when, his resignation sent in and accepted, he could marry Lady Violet and settle down to enjoy the fruits of the past four years' labours. That end he had thought only this morning to be in sight, for the conduct of affairs would shortly be in the hands of a capable soldier, backed at last by an adequate army. It would be all over soon, and he would thank heaven that he had stayed, and not played into the hands of his many enemies by volunteering.

Then an hour ago this letter had come, and all his scheming had been brought to nothing. Even more intolerable was the thought of breaking the news to Lady Violet. What would she say? How was he to tell her? Violet, however, knew already; it was indeed her doing, for, ignorant of the working of Henry's mind, she had attributed his remaining solely to self-denial, a concession to love of her which, though rendering him doubly dear, must nevertheless not be allowed. His gloominess at disasters and anxiety for the latest news she put down to his longing to share in the dangers, if only in spirit, since bodily participation was denied him. His delight at such few successes as had been hitherto achieved she attributed to patriotism and ungrudging pleasure in the triumphs of others.

Feeling and loving him as she did, she at last determined that such unselfishness should no longer go unrewarded, and, break her heart though it might, he too should have the chance for which he so obviously longed. And so once more the Ravenscroft influence was brought to bear, with the result that, on this same January afternoon, Violet, face-downwards, was lying on her sitting-room sofa, sobbing her heart out over the crumpled note written in the Commander-in-Chief's own hand.

Suddenly, she raised her head, lay for a moment listening, and then, springing up, with feverish haste dabbed at her

wet eyes and smoothed her hair. Then seating herself, with her back to the light, she sat waiting for the door to open, and the man now mounting the stairs to appear. "God give me strength to go through with it," she murmured, "and smile, not break down when he tells me. If only he won't look too pleased, though; but he will, it's only natural, and I must look pleased too, pleased I——"

The pleasure she feared to find was not visible on Henry's face, but instead such bitter anger as struck Violet cold, and for the first time caused the doubt to arise in her mind as to the wisdom of the step she had taken.

"Henry, wh-what is it?" she stammered.

"Nothing much, only our—our happiness is at an end, probably our engagement too."

"What do you mean, Henry?"

"I'm ordered out. Here's the letter; read it. Your relations, I suppose, are to thank for this. Get me out of the way, they think, shot, no doubt, they hope, and then the family name is . . ."

"Henry, stop; it was I."

Henry stared at her. "You, you," he muttered; "my God, you!" and then dropping into a chair, sat staring vacantly before him.

"It was for your sake, yours only, Henry, because . . ."

"You needn't explain, I know without. Because you too have come to realise what marriage with me would mean, and this you think is the easiest way out. No talk, no scandal, this way, Violet. There was a simpler method, though: to tell me you were tired of it all. A letter would have been enough and spared you my presence——" But here he stopped, for Violet was kneeling beside him, with such shocked amazement in her eyes as silenced him.

"You—you think that of me! Oh, my God!"

"What else can I think but that you wish to get rid of

me? You say this is your doing; how can that be if you love me?"

"It's because I love you, because I've seen, having eyes, how every day you've been longing to be there with the others. You've done your—your best to conceal it from me, but love like mine is not to be blinded."

Again Henry stared at her. "Not to be blinded," he repeated mechanically.

"No, and as you've been loyal and unselfish, I too can be the same, Henry, and so—so I ask, *ask* you, Henry, to go."

"But supposing I don't want to, supposing this war is nothing to me, and you're everything, which—is—true."

"It isn't true, it couldn't be with you, Henry, and—and I shouldn't like it to be. Your country comes first, dear, me afterwards."

"And you believe *that*?"

"You must make me believe it. I'm only a woman, dear, and with women love comes first. That's where men are greater than we are. Own to the truth, Henry. I want to hear you say it. I shall honour you for it as one so much higher and nobler than myself."

"Violet, you're as immeasurably above me as . . ."

"Hush, I won't listen. Tell me of . . . your going, dear . . . Wh-when?"

"Next Saturday. The *Taymouth Castle*. You—you'll come to see me off, Violet?"

"No, no; don't ask that of me, dear. I—I should only be in the way and I . . . might be s-silly and disgrace you before them all. I—I may be, I probably shall when we say good-bye, Henry. You won't be ashamed of me, will you, dear, if I . . . am?"

Henry rose hurriedly, and walking to the window stood staring out.

"And you—you will be careful, won't you, Henry? The

old dreadful ideas are done with, aren't they? You belong to me now, remember."

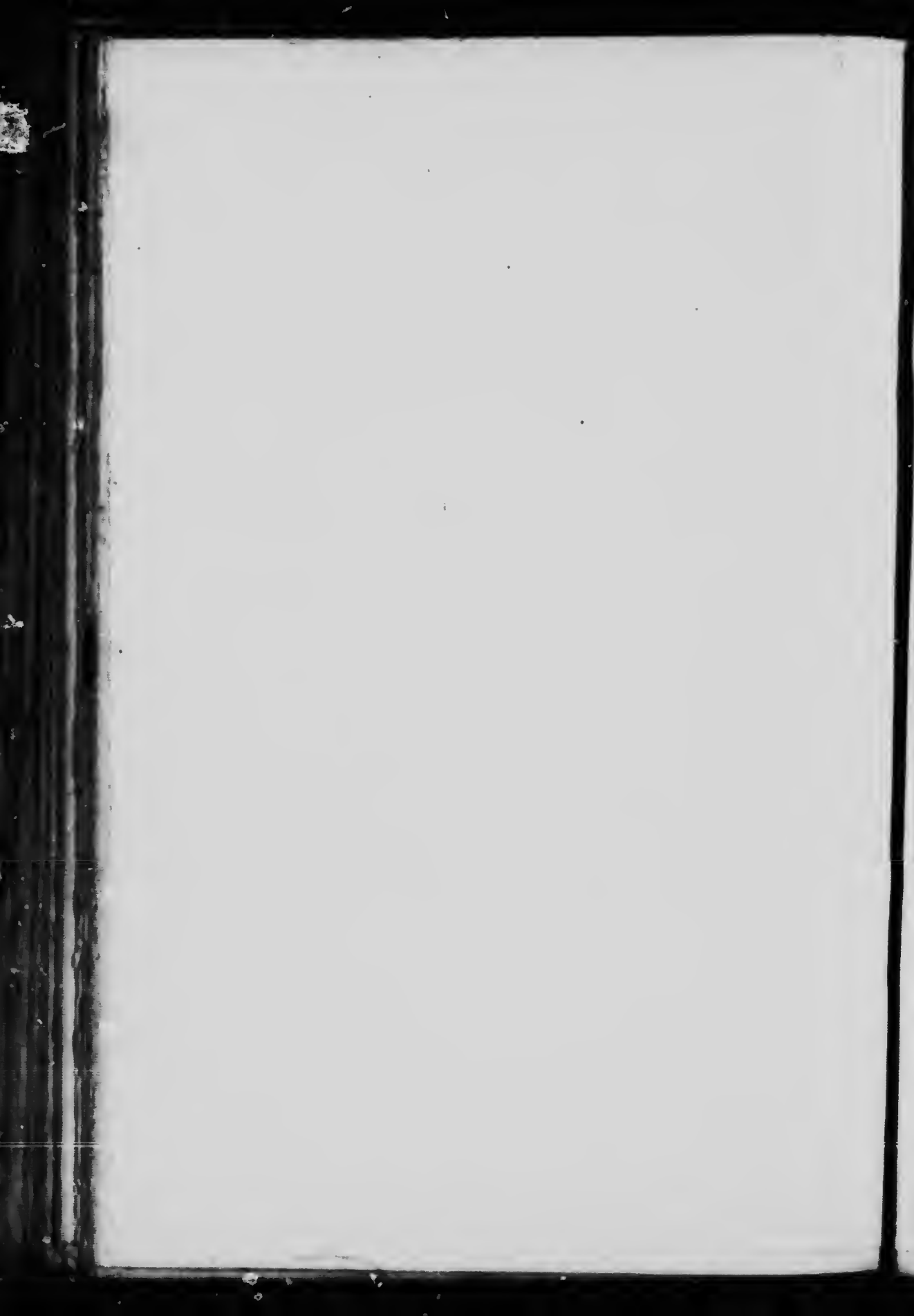
No answer.

"And if you should be—hurt, let me know, and I will come out at once."

Henry turned, strode towards her, and took her in his arms.

"You're worth the world, and I won't leave you."

"No, no. You shall. I send you. Other women have made their sacrifices for England, and I will too. I give her the best I have."



BOOK IV

CHAPTER XXIV

“PLEASE don't be unkind to me, Bobbie; it's our last evening together, and I may never see you again.”

The full, soft voice of the speaker was plaintive, her dark eyes filled at the pathos of her own words. She looked more saintlike and virginal than was her wont, which appearance was one carefully cultivated by Miss Ruth Clayton, as being an asset to her, in her profession, of no inconsiderable value. For, as her instinct rightly told her, in this same nunlike appearance lay her great attraction for her many male admirers, moments of abandon being invested with an unholy, almost sacrilegious, charm, far exceeding that evoked by mere prettiness of face and form.

It is true that there were signs not altogether in keeping with this pose of saint, the simplicity of the black frock being somewhat discounted by the generosity of the baby bodice; also, the small gold bee embroidered on the silken stocking seemed a rather unnecessary vanity, and one hard to reconcile with the meek white face, modestly lowered lids, and brown hair parted in the middle and brought down low over the ears.

Miss Clayton was in her way an artist, and knowing the danger of *toujours perdrix* was careful to allow, though seemingly unaware of the revelation, the woman occasionally to peep through the veil of the nun.

Such a revelation was now vouchsafed in the glance she

gave her companion, a soldier obviously, as were most of the male visitors at that time in the *Table Mountain* hotel, in the verandah of which the pair were now sitting. In an hour's time, however, he would have left for up-country, and Ruth, though secretly glad that their ten days' intimacy—this having become somewhat wearisome to her—was at last to come to an end, had no intention of parting on ill terms with a lover. That she never did if it could possibly be avoided, and hence the glance, pleading voice, and tears aforesaid.

Captain Halford nevertheless remained frowning, being very angry indeed, for Ruth had been guilty of the unpardonable fault of showing interest in another man, when by all the rules governing this particular game she should have had neither eyes nor words for any one but himself—her temporary proprietor. She had even gone so far as to suggest his introducing her to the favoured stranger, and, though it was true that in another sixty minutes his lease of proprietorship would expire, such indecent haste on the lady's part to find a new tenant was an exhibition of bad taste, such as he had not anticipated from the hitherto well-conducted Ruth Clayton.

"I am afraid," he said, with somewhat heavy sarcasm, "that my very slight acquaintance with—Major Kempton would hardly warrant the course you suggest. But why such ceremony, Miss Clayton? Go up and speak to him. He's out there somewhere in the gardens. He went through that door there, as you saw, five minutes ago."

"Oh, Bobbie, how can you be so brutal to me?"

"Damn it, it's your own fault," sarcasm giving way to plain words; "to make eyes at one man when you're with another is rotten bad taste, as you know perfectly well. You ought to, if you don't. You might have the decency to wait till I'm out of the way, at any rate."

The dark eyes brimmed over. "I never made eyes, I

don't know how, and I've no wish to know the creature. It's because of him you're angry with me, and I hate him, and—and," now sobbing, "when you're gone, Bobbie darling, I shall shut myself up in my room, and—and cry my eyes out."

"You'll watch it, though, the door's not locked, if I know you."

A sudden spasm shook the lady's shoulders, and she pressed her handkerchief closer to her eyes.

"And I only asked you to introduce me to the man because I saw you talking to him, and I thought he was a friend of yours, and when you were gone I might talk about you together. It would—would help me to bear your absence, Bobbie."

"Do you take me for an idiot? My God, but this is too much! I'm off. Good-bye."

Ruth seized him by the arm and pulled him down again into his chair. "Don't be an—" she began, and then remembering herself resumed the speech piteous. "You shall not leave me like this," she cried. "You'll go away and be shot"—a true word, for in three days he was lying stark—and I'll never see you again, Bobbie, Bobbie darling."

"Oh, shut up."

"Kiss me, Bobbie," and, the veil now wholly discarded, Ruth leaned towards her frowning companion, with parted lips and alluring eyes.

The man hesitated, unwillingly turned his face towards her, and then, having been kissed in Ruth's own most artistic manner, surrendered.

"You little devil," he said, with a half-angry laugh. "I know it's all lies, but they're pleasin' lies all the same."

Thereupon Captain Halford, with the purring Ruth on his knee, fell to discussing plans concerning their next meeting. Further—for such was the lady's *adresse*—

very subject that had caused their recent dissension was once more brought up, and that not by her but by him, Ruth herself appearing to show but little interest in the matter.

"I rather hope," he said, "for one thing, you do take Kempton on; a week of you would do him all the good in the world. He's engaged to a big pot at home, too, which would make it all the better fun."

"I don't want to talk about him, Bobbie, and you can't love me to say a thing like that. But why do you think it would do him good? Oh, it—it's beastly of you!"

"Because he's one of those prigs who pretend to despise women. They call him Parsifal in London, meaning he won't have any truck with light-hearted ladies like you. He'd have refused like a shot if I had suggested introducing him as you wanted me to."

"Because he's engaged, I suppose?"

"Bah, Lady Violet's old enough to be his mother, and homely-looking enough at that. No, that ain't it. He's always been the same way, so the fellows in his regiment say. There's a chance for you. Hullo! see the time? I must be off."

"Oh no, no; stay a little longer."

"Mustn't. Good-bye, old girl, be as good as you can, and don't quite forget me."

"I'll never forget you, never, and—and I'll be good till you return, Bobbie, I swear it; only come back soon, I shall be so wretched without you."

"Not you. I—I hope you will, though, for a bit, anyway."

He sighed, kissed her, she kissing him lovingly back, and Captain Halford was gone.

Ruth remained for a few seconds quietly sobbing. Then, his figure once out of sight, she rose, and, having dried her eyes and arranged a black lace scarf artistically round

her head, left the verandah and passed out to the terrace beyond. At the far end, leaning over its marble parapet, Henry Kempton was standing, gazing dreamily out to sea. Above him the black vault was ablaze with golden fires, winged points of flame gleamed fitfully in the surrounding gloom, heavy with the scent of magnolia and tuberose. From the open hotel windows behind him came the sound of voices and light laughter, mingling with the deep sobbing of harp and 'cello, and the passion-laden sigh of violin.

On the sea far below, their throbbing hearts for a while stilled, floated the great transports, their thousand twinkling eyes reflected in the black water. In silence they lay, till suddenly from one rang out the clear note of a bugle; for a while it sang alone, and then another, and yet another voice joined in, and the air was filled with melody, as brass and silver in unison wailed forth the message of the "last post."

Mars speaking in the bugles and Eros in the violins blend together, the one telling of death, the other of love, which leading to birth and life once more is stronger than death. Both were then holding carnival in South Africa, but though the one has ever been, and will ever be, a certain consequent of the other, few saw a manifestation of this truth in that strange outburst of passion, so unprecedented in the annals of cold-blooded, moral England. For clues, and many of them, are given us for the unravelling of the secret of the universe, but they, being mostly patent, pass unnoticed, baseless superstitions and fairy tales being the food mankind, like children, prefer.

To Henry, standing there, both voices had spoken, the one to his outward, the other to his inward sense, and the fostering circumstances being also present—scented warmth of night, music, passion's own speech, and beauty, willing and alluring—the elemental man had awakened in Henry at last, and his soul clamoured aloud for a mate.

Arrived but a few hours before, he alone of the Headquarters Staff, now well on its way up-country, had been left behind to await the arrival of the next transport. Advised by a brother A.D.C., who declared that it was the only possible hotel in the place, he had made his way to the *Table Mountain*, where for some days at least he would have to remain, free to do as, and go where, he pleased—with temptation all around him. Strangely enough, despite his twenty-eight years, never before had the two, in his case, been present together, for though liberty had been his until his arrival in London a year before, of temptation there had been none, and after that time prudential reasons had forbidden it, and he had refrained. Just as the man who forbears from even a glance at the bottle prides himself on his sobriety, so had Henry, having never known temptation, gloried in an untested virtue.

Here, however, not only was the restraining influence of Lady Violet's presence withdrawn, but temptation had not to be sought. It was all around him, the very atmosphere of the place was charged with passion, and Henry, far from scornfully rejecting it, as he had ever vowed and believed he would, now found himself revelling in the thought of those temptations; and, giving free rein to his imagination, dreamt of woman and the raptures her love might bring.

He thought of those whose voices now and again came to him from the lighted windows behind, pictured them standing here before him Aphrodite-like, with the myriad ensnaring charms wherewith passion, for the one great purpose of the universe, has invested woman for man. Henry, this night, was any woman's for the taking, only the temptress was wanted, and—she too was here.

A few yards away from him she was standing, apparently unconscious of his presence, her pure profile standing out sharply against the dark background of trees. Henry

stared at her. Where had this woman come from, he wondered, and what was she? She looked like a nun. And then the nun, turning, looked at him, and at the look Henry's senses thrilled.

Ruth, at what she too had seen, though only in the one glance, laughed in his face. So this was the upright man, the pure fool who despised women. What blind idiots men were about each other! A difficult task this, indeed? Why, it was child's play. He was hers already, or any other woman's who had chanced to find him here. No need for refinements of art here, no need for the nun's veil, and, this carelessly tossed aside, she laughed again.

"Good—good evening," said Henry, with a tremor in his voice. "A lovely night, isn't it?" and cursed himself for the banality.

"Very," answered the saint gravely.

"What were you laughing at?"

"At you. Do you usually talk to a woman at ten yards range? Oh!" with a little scream, for the ten yards had become a foot.

"I usually don't talk to women at all. I've never wanted to before."

"I think perhaps I'd better go."

"Do you? Well, you shan't."

"Shan't?" raising her eyebrows. "Really, for a woman-hater you're extremely forward."

"Who told you I was a woman-hater? It's not true."

"I'm beginning to believe it isn't. Will you kindly take your arm from my waist? You won't? Oh, very well. You're stronger than I am, and it's too hot to struggle. Oh," with great indignation, "how dare you? You take advantage of your strength to—to insult me. It's horrid of you, and I really am going."

"I—I beg your pardon; please forgive me, I didn't mean to. I swear I won't do it again."

Ruth looked up at him, her eyes very reproachful, her mind wondering how any man could be such a fool.

"It wasn't nice of you," she said. "You evidently take me for one of those dreadful fast . . ."

"I don't. I can't imagine what made me do it. It was you, I think."

"Me! Oh, how can you say such a thing?"

"It was the way you looked at me. It maddened me. I'm all right now, though. Sit down here beside me, I'll promise to behave if you will."

Ruth considered. "I don't think I ought to," she said, "but," seating herself, "I'll give you just one more chance. If—if you do what you did just now I shall leave you at once. Yes, put your arm there, it supports me. Now let's talk sensibly. Tell me your name."

"Kempton. Yours?"

"Ruth Clayton. What are you doing here?"

Henry told her.

"For long?"

"About five days; but I'll make the most of it. Tomorrow we'll go for a picnic together."

"What! without a chaperon? How could we?"

"No one has chaperons here. It's South Africa, not prudish, highly-moral England."

"You don't believe then I'm—highly moral. Well, I am, and I don't think it would be at all safe with you. Still, as you say, it's Africa, and you've promised . . . You wouldn't take advantage of me, would you?" Ruth's head fell back against his shoulder, she looked up at him, her dark eyes gleaming, and red lips apart.

A Parsifal, however, is but a damned stream, and, the pressure being strong enough, the artificial barrier must go, and a torrent the more resistless for its checking be the result. That dam fell now, at the meaning in a woman's eyes it melted and was gone, and, nature free at last and

triumphant, those same red lips were kissed with a fervour that left their owner breathless and . . . enraptured.

"And this is a Parsifal," she gasped, "heavens above us."

"So I am, believe it or not, as you like; but I'm going to be one no longer. Thank God, I love a woman at last."

"Love after five minutes. Gracious, but this is the quickest thing in all my experience."

Henry's face grew dark with anger. "Damn your experience," he said, "that's done with. From now on, for the next five days at any rate, you're mine, and no other man's. Do you hear?"

"Five days, and at the end of that time you'll go away like the rest, I suppose, and . . ."

"For always, if you like," answered Henry recklessly.

"From now on I'm your husband."

"Husband!"

"Yes, just come out to join his wife; that's you. Come."

"Oh, this is too rapid altogether. Give me time, for goodness' sake. I'll tell you to-morrow at our picnic. Now I really am going. Good night, and if you follow me I'll never speak to you again."

"You'll tell me now or you won't have the chance. I'll leave first thing in the morning; till then I'll pass the night out here. Sleep be damned. Sleep, as if I . . ."

"Good night," interrupted Ruth with dignity, disdaining further controversy.

She walked slowly away, more slowly, till, finally coming to a halt, she looked back at Henry and laughed. In a second he was at her side.

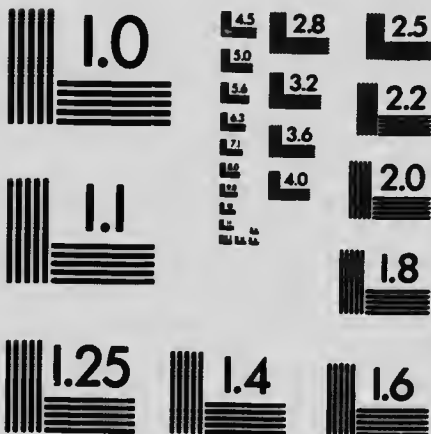
"Well?" he said.

"You're very tiresome, and—and it's not a very nice husband who . . . leaves his wife on the first night of the honeymoon."



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CHAPTER XXV

THE five days had passed, the awaited transport lay at the quay side, and the hour of Henry's departure was now close at hand.

In the palm lounge he was sitting with Ruth Clayton beside him, and, except that one of the players had been changed for another, the scene—as such were wont to be in which Miss Clayton took any part—was almost identical with that enacted but six nights before. Yet there was a difference; for then to both hero and heroine it had been but acting and, the love tragedy played out, and sentiment left on the stage behind them, the two had parted and mutually forgot.

Then to the same heroine a new hero had come, one who was no actor, and, not having the sense to see that it was all but a play, had taken up the *rôle* of lover in earnest. The result was that the former smooth, confident expression had left his face for ever, and was replaced by the desperate look of one who, gambling and risking his all, is losing.

A man may love unwisely and yet prosper; he may marry his cook and still live content; but for him who gives his heart as a plaything to a Ruth Clayton—it were better to cut his throat at once, for that only destroys the body, the other poisons the soul.

Of this crowning folly Henry Kempton was now guilty, and all peace of mind had left him. His purpose in life was recklessly left to take care of itself, and tottered on the brink of annihilation. This he knew, yet cared nothing;

rather was he glad, and openly paraded his folly for all who cared to see.

Many people here were acquainted, not only with him but with Lady Violet; some indeed were her relations, and before these he was doubly demonstrative in his attentions. Let them tell Lady Violet if they wished. Let their engagement be at an end, he didn't care; he cared for nothing in the world except Ruth. As an inevitable result of such abject adoration, his feelings were not reciprocated. Ruth felt nothing but aversion and contempt for him, and found herself longing for the arrival of the transport, which would release her from infinite boredom.

Everything about Henry had come to irritate her: his conversation, mostly on subjects of which she had neither knowledge nor wish to learn; his dislike of the social gaieties in which she delighted; his love of sentimental poetry; and, worse still, his habit of reading it aloud to her. Nor had he even the redeeming merit of possessing money, and though Ruth, for her class, was not particularly mercenary, she nevertheless regarded the possession of money as a matter of course in a lover—in an English lover, at all events. She asked herself indignantly why he should be different to the others. If she loved him, perhaps he might be, but she did not; she hated him, hated him in particular for the very good looks which in the first instance had attracted her. This feeling was the stronger on account of the contrast between his face and another's, that of a very different person, and one of whose existence neither Henry nor any other of her English lovers were even aware, though later they came to know of it too well. She glanced at Henry now, noted the misery on his face, and, irritated at the sight, the desire to torment awoke.

"Do you know, Henry," she said, in her soft, low voice, "I have really come to believe that what you told me that first night was true?"

Henry turned eagerly to her. "Do you mean that I love you, Ruth?" he said. "Surely you never doubted that, dear."

"I don't mean that at all; it's rather too evident for anyone to doubt. I mean you being a Parsifal, or whatever the absurd thing's called."

"But I told you you were the first, Ruth. Aren't you glad to think that?"

"Oh, I don't know. It has its disadvantages."

"Dearest, what do you mean? Surely, you don't regret my—my want of experience?"

"I certainly suffer for it," pettishly feeling the back of her dress, the fastening up of which was somewhat evidently the work of an unskilled hand.

"I do my best," said Henry, laughing; "but the buttons are all on the wrong side."

"Oh, don't laugh, for goodness' sake. It's not in the least funny your not knowing that a woman's buttons are always on the left side. You ought to be ashamed of it, you a man, being so ignorant."

"But, Ruth, it shows that what I said is true, that——"

"I know perfectly well what it shows. The amateur, and I don't like amateurs. No woman does, though she may pretend to. I only trust you'll get a little more practice before we meet again, that is if we ever do."

"Why, Ruth, of course we shall. What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know," yawning. "You'll probably find someone else; I may, too."

"Ruth, I hate to hear you talk like this. I know it's only—only mischief, dear; but it hurts."

"Why? Because I talk of finding someone else, as I've a perfect right to do. I ought to be faithful to you, I suppose you think, as you are to—your fiancée."

The degraded manhood in Henry was stung into life.

"I must ask you," he said, "to keep Lady Violet Ravenscroft's name out of the discussion."

Ruth laughed derisively. "Must you, indeed? She ought to be a very grateful woman, your Lady Violet. Look at the breaking in I've spared her. Why, thanks to me, you're almost a trained husband by now."

"I tell you I won't have it, Ruth."

"And why not, pray?"

"Because neither you nor I are fit to mention her name."

Ruth's face grew scarlet with anger. "That remark is typical of you English cowards," she said, not troubling to consider her words. "You come here and make love to us, amuse yourselves regardless of our feelings, but at the mention of your own womankind you'll put on your damned haughty air and ask us how we dare to speak of the saintly creatures, though it's not we who are wronging them, but you."

Henry stared at her, taken aback. Pettish he had often seen her, but like this never before. The word "English cowards," too, was surely a strange expression from an Englishwoman.

"That may be true in some cases," he said, after a pause, "but not in mine."

"No, yours is worse, for you pretend to love me, and all the time hold on to your engagement to another woman, and that for the lowest, most sordid reasons. You say you have not a penny, and I certainly haven't seen it if you have, and so, I suppose, mean to marry this woman to keep you. You want your luxury without working for it. Well, so do I; and I intend to have it. The only difference between us is that I am honest and deceive nobody, and you do."

Henry was silent. There was a horrid logic about this that made him inwardly writhe.

"Ruth," he said at last, "listen to me. It's true, as

you say, I've held on to my engagement with the lady you mentioned, but I'm ready to cancel that engagement now, that is on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you marry me to-morrow."

Ruth stared at him in amazement. This was an altogether unexpected move, and though exciting no feeling of approval, nevertheless caused her a sudden thrill of triumph, for though assuredly she would not marry him to-morrow—marriage with a penniless soldier appealing to her in no way—still a proposal was a proposal, and as such not to be lightly cast aside. It was out of the question now, of course; still, it might do later to fall back upon, when Henry's prospects were somewhat more advanced. They might be, things happened quickly these times. He might become a general, perhaps a K.C.B., and she Lady Kempton. No, she must certainly not throw this chance away in a hurry. She sat for a moment considering, then turned kindly to her suitor.

"This is very sweet of you, Henry," she said, "but it's impossible, dear, for to-morrow at any rate. Why, it's almost time for you to go now."

"I'll go to-morrow night instead. I can easily fix up some lie, and send them a wire in the morning. They may grumble a bit, but what does that matter?"

"It matters very much to me. You'd wreck your career at the beginning, and it would be my fault. No, you must go up and start making a name for yourself. I want to be proud of you, dear, you see; not have it said that because of a woman you—you shirked your duty."

"But, Ruth——"

"No, dear, I won't listen. To-morrow's out of the question, though later, when you're famous, I—I may; and—and Henry darling, forgive me, I hate saying it, but—but doesn't your engagement help you?"

Henry frowned. "You mean, is her influence useful to me professionally? Yes, it is."

"Well, then, don't break it off, not yet, at any rate."

"My God, but that's playing it rather too low down."

"Oh, of course, if you put her first I've nothing more to say. I thought, though, it was me you cared for, not her."

"And so it is, only . . ."

"It can't be if you say that, and perhaps you're right. No doubt you'd be happier with her than with me."

"Ruth!"

"Well then, do what I say."

Henry was silent.

"Oh, all right; I see it was all . . ."

"Ruth, you're wrong, and—and I'll do what you wish, but you must do something too."

"What?" shortly, instinct telling her that something distasteful, and consequently impossible, was about to be demanded of her.

"I want you to leave this place and live in rooms till our marriage."

"Why?" still more shortly.

"Because from now on I intend to support you myself. No one else pays a farthing or gives you a present of any kind. You see that, dear, don't you?"

"Oh, of course; but all the same I don't see why I should leave here to go and live in stuffy rooms."

"I'm afraid I must ask you to, though; you see, I can afford them, but this is beyond me. There's another reason too. I want you to have done with the past, and as long as you stay here, men you—you have known, dear, will try to speak to you, and—and it might be difficult for you. In rooms, though . . ."

"You wish to shut me up because you don't trust me."

"I do trust you. I only want to make it easy for you."

Dear, to please me promise you'll look out for rooms tomorrow. Here's some money," handing her a bundle of notes, "forty-five pounds. That leaves me a fiver to go on with. I wish I could make it more, but it's all I've got."

"But you could draw a cheque, they would cash it here. I'm thinking of you, dear; you can't do with a fiver."

"I could draw it here all right, might cash it here too, but I should see it again, marked R.D. That would finish my career, if you like. No, I'll do well enough. I shan't want money up there, only a pound or two for my mess bill."

"But what about me, then?"

"I'll send you all I can of my pay, and thirty-five pounds a quarter. You can do on that if you're careful, and I know you will be for my sake."

Ruth, despite her irritation, almost laughed outright. *She* economise for Henry; *she* shut herself up in a lodging-house, thoughts of him her sole company. Really, he was a bigger fool than she had imagined.

"Henry, I can't do it," she said, "and you mustn't ask me. You wouldn't like me to be miserable, would you, and I should most certainly in rooms. No, I'll stay on here. I—I have a little money of my own, and with that, and what you send me, can manage quite well with economy."

"But, Ruth, the—the men here. The beasts will certainly . . ."

"Leave that to me, I can take care of myself. You must trust me, Henry. Remember, I'm your promised wife now, and though nobody else of course will know that, I shall, and should any man—presume, I shall think of you and . . . My God," breaking off, her face suddenly blanched, and eyes staring at the figure of a man slowly walking down the corridor towards them. For some seconds she remained gazing, then shrinking back snatched at a palm leaf, and dragged it across her face.

"What on earth's the matter, Ruth?" said Henry, staring at her.

"Be quiet, wait. I—I'll tell you when he's gone."

The man came on, a big black-bearded man, his rough clothes and huge pipe singularly out of place in such an abode of fashion as was at that time the *Table Mountain* hotel. Opposite the pair he stopped, knocked out the ashes of his pipe on the pavement, then refilling it, struck a match, and, the pipe alight once more, strode heavily on his way.

"Filthy brute," said Henry angrily. "Who the devil is he? Do you know him?"

"No, I—I thought I did, but I was wrong."

"Some beastly Colonial, I suppose. Faugh! that tobacco. They ought not to allow such fellows in here. They have their own drinking bars in the town."

"Henry, I think you ought to be going, it's close on the hour."

"Oh, time enough yet, there's lots more I want to say to you. About these rooms now. Don't you think, dear, you might . . ."

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know, and you really will be late; and if you miss that train I—I won't marry you."

"Ruth, does that mean you want me to go?"

"No, no, of course I don't. It's for your sake I'm hurrying you. Oh yes, yes, I'll remember. Make a name first. I'll think about you all the time. No, say good-bye here. I—I won't come to the door, I shall break down if I do. I—I'm near it now. Oh, go for goodness' sake;" and Henry went.

Ruth, with her body tense and eyes brilliant, watched him go. Then, when his figure had hardly rounded the corner and was lost to view, she turned, and hurrying down the corridor opened a door at the far end, and was out and away into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVI

"We'll drink a cup of kindness yet
To the days of Auld Lang Syne."

THE crash of breaking glass and an outburst of merriment followed, then the loud continuous clanging of the joy-bells was heard from without. Old Igoz was in his death throes, and from belfry and *Table Mountain* hotel came the singing of his requiem.

Ruth Clayton raised herself from the sofa on which she was lying, and sat up listening, her eyes alight with sudden interest.

"Carl dear," she said, "hark, it's the New Year."

The man addressed paid no heed. Sunk in gloomy reverie he remained, a huge, round-shouldered figure. It was the same man who had aroused Henry Kempton's anger in the palm lounge close on two years before.

Out of place as he then appeared, he now seemed infinitely more so, in this dainty room, on the first floor of the *Table Mountain* hotel. Carl Vanderbyl was his name, one by now become of somewhat evil odour in British nostrils; indeed, had the revellers below known of the prize so confidently placed within their reach, it is probable that their light-hearted merriment would have ceased, and a tragedy been enacted in the room above them. They did not know, however. Only Ruth knew, and in her hands Carl Vanderbyl's secret was as safe, perhaps safer, than in those of the burghers he led. For not only was Ruth, unknown to

her English lovers, Dutch herself, but she loved this unkempt-looking countryman of hers with a devotion of which none who knew her would have believed such a nature as hers capable.

In return, for so love inevitably avenges a wrong done to itself, just as she flouted and scorned Henry Kempton, so did Carl despise both her and her love. And for this, such being woman's nature, she loved him the more, gladly yielding up to him the spoils wrung from her other lovers, meekly enduring harsh words, and even blows, for Carl, being a Boer, had the ideas of his race as to the proper treatment of woman by man.

A typical Boer Carl Vanderbyl, one in whose soul dwelt such seemingly inharmonious elements as treachery, immorality, and cruelty on the one side, and on the other a deep love of country, and adoration of a God as revealed to him by much poring over a dirty, thumb-marked testament. And so, smiled on by that God whose chosen the Boer in common with all the truly devout believes himself to be, he murdered and played foul with the enemy in the field and to further a cause as much the Deity's as his own took as his right the tainted earnings of a harlot, abhorring her the while as ordained by the law of Moses. The year had proved a bitter one for Carl Vanderbyl: his home had been burnt by the invaders, his two sons had been killed in battle; his wife had died from disease twelve months before. Yet even these, being the visitations of God, and therefore just, could have been endured, if by such sacrifice the independence of his country had been attained.

All had been in vain. Sympathy, it is true, had been theirs in plenty from other powers, but of the intervention they hoped for none; and, save for some miracle, the year just born would see the end of a hopeless struggle and the extinction of God's people. Small wonder then that, with

this knowledge in his mind, the sound of the joy-bells now ringing brought little comfort to Carl Vanderbyl's heart, and except for a scowl Ruth Clayton's words passed unanswered.

For a while she lay watching him, then, slipping from the sofa, moved quickly across the room towards him, and knelt at his feet.

"Carl dear," she whispered, her dark eyes lovingly raised to his scowling face, "can't I comfort you, Carl? I could, I think, if you'll let me. Perhaps in the coming year, dear—oh God!" And Ruth, a blow in the face her answer, shrank back, half stunned, then, falling forward, she lay at his feet sobbing, a huddled heap of white, her heavy hair spread over her like a pall.

"You fool," said the man, his face working with fury, each word of the guttural Taal another blow, "have you no sense that you babble to me about the New Year; bring, what can it bring, but ruin to our people?"

"They're—my—people—too, Carl."

"Yours, what do you care? You who take your lovers from the murderers of your own countrymen."

The sobbing ceased suddenly, the crumpled heap sat up.

"You dare to taunt me with that," she cried, "you, by whose express orders I endure my lovers? What do I get out of my vileness? How do I gain by the hell's life I lead? . . . It is *you* who profit, not me, and now . . ."

"It is not me, it is the cause."

"For which you say I care nothing, I who, loving you with my whole heart, suffer the degradation of love other than yours. I tell you, Carl, all your sacrifices are nothing to mine."

"Girl, be silent. I don't deny your services. God sees them too, and will reward you."

"What do I care for God? The man she loves is a woman's God. You are mine, Carl, and my . . . God

has taunted me with the sacrifices I've made for him."

The man looked at her uneasily. True, she was but an outcast, and nothing; but her offerings were something—had been hitherto, at any rate. There was another reason too, an imperative one, for not offending her now. It was this that had brought him here this night, braving all the dangers of detection, no slight ones, as he knew.

"I am sorry," he muttered. "I unsay my words. Forget them."

"I, a woman, forget a gibe like that! Never, Carl; but it's for the last time. From now on I've done with lovers; say what you like, I keep myself for you only. Cast me off if you will, but despise me in the future you shall not."

Carl bent down and lifted her on to his knee. For a moment she struggled with him, and then, further defiance impossible in his arms, surrendered.

"But you wouldn't cast me off, would you, Carl? You could not, for it's for love of you, dear, I do it. Take me away with you; the cause is lost, as you say. Give it up, Carl, and forget this wretchedness with me."

"I give up the cause—I? When I'm dead, yes, not before."

"But, Carl, what is the use? You say it's hopeless, and it is. What chance have you with your handful against England's thousands?"

"There's always hope, Ruth, till the end."

"Oh, I know what you're thinking of—the old story, intervention; but what country would intervene now, when we are beaten? And, Carl dear, you yourself are in danger. Oh, not here," as the man started, and looked quickly round, "but when you get back."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard from Colonel Kempton this morning. No, I won't show you the letter, it's too hateful, but I'll tell you

the only thing in it that matters. They're determined to catch you, Carl. A column of three thousand men start from Pretoria in a fortnight. He, Kempton, is in command."

Carl's face showed no surprise at the news. He knew it already, the knowledge was responsible for his presence here. He was glad, all the same, to hear of it from Ruth, it gave him the opening he sought.

"So you know that, do you?" he said. "So do I. It is about Kempton I wish to speak to you."

"Carl, I won't. I hate him."

"So much the better, but . . . he doesn't hate you, I think."

"Oh, Carl, be quiet."

"Ruth, you must answer me. I have a reason for asking. Tell me, how do you stand with him?"

"Well, as you ordered me to. He'll marry me the day I ask him to. But why?"

"Wait. Ruth, do you love me?"

"Carl!"

"Would you do something for me, then?"

"Anything in the world; try me. My God, though, you don't wish me to marry Kempton?"

"Nothing of the sort; I want you for myself, and—and I'll take you away, Ruth, if . . . you'll do this something for me."

"I will; oh, I will."

"Listen, then. As you said just now, our cause is almost hopeless; but there is just a chance that one big success now might bring about intervention."

"I see, and you want to beat Kempton. Oh, you must, you *shall*, Carl. You are a hundred times the man he is."

"I could easily beat him, Ruth, if chances were level, if I had but half a chance, indeed; but I haven't, not even a quarter. Before, I could trust my burghers, but I can't now. He's not much good, Kempton, but he's a fighter,

not like most of them, and if it comes to hard fighting my men won't stand."

"You mean to beat him then by some trick, Carl? Well, there's no one can do that better than you."

"Yes, by trick. Listen." He began to speak low and fast, with his mouth close to her ear, then stopped, looking at her. "You understand?" he said.

Ruth shook her head in hopeless non-comprehension. "I—I'm afraid I don't," she said; "you speak so fast, and it's all so—so wrapped up. Can't you say what you want to do right out?"

A curse at her stupidity rose to the man's lips, but was checked, and he began once more. And this time speaking slowly, with all ambiguity laid aside, he was understood. Mystification was expressed on his listener's face no longer, but full comprehension, and with comprehension shrinking, aversion—more, terror.

"I—I won't do it," she said, "I'm not a murderess."

"Who's asking you to murder? I'm not."

"You are. What else is it but murder you ask of me? No, no, I couldn't do it, Carl, even if I wanted to. I should not have the courage or the strength to go through with it."

"I thought you said, Ruth, you hated Kempton and loved me."

"So I do. I'd give the world for you to beat him, Carl. You can kill him, too, if you like, for all I care. Don't bring me into it, though. I'm a woman, and this is no woman's work."

"What about Jael, Ruth?"

"I'm no Jael to murder and be glad. Glad! The man's ghost would haunt me ever afterwards."

"I've told you already there won't be any ghost; not Kempton's, at any rate. He'll be captured, that's all, with his three thousand. Some may be shot, but he shall not."

I promise it you ; I'll swear it, if you like. I'll give the strictest orders that no one is to fire at him. I shoot the man who does myself."

" Carl, I—I can't."

" You said you would do anything, Ruth, for me, and—and it's not for nothing I ask this of you. You shall have your reward, Ruth."

" God's, I suppose, after I am dead."

" No, man's, when you're living. The minute it's done, Ruth, a thousand pounds."

" A thousand pounds."

" Yes, I promise you that on behalf of the Government. It will be worth it to them, poor as they are. Think of it, Ruth, a thousand pounds. We could buy a farm with it, you and I . . ."

" I wouldn't do it for twenty thousand. If—if I say I'll try, it's for you, Carl, and it's from you I shall claim my reward."

" All I have is . . ."

" All ? "

" Yes, all."

" Very well, I claim your name, then. Marriage is the price I demand."

" God ! " The man stared at her with a look of consternation on his face. " You—you can't be serious, Ruth."

" I'm very serious, Carl."

" You—you must be mad. I marry a harlot, never ! "

Ruth sprang to her feet and stood facing him, her eyes blazing in her white face.

" You call me that ! " she said. " *You*, the Boer farmer, think marriage with me too great a thing to ask. It may be, but yet, Carl Vanderbyl, the man you propose I should betray—no farmer, by the way, but a colonel in the British army—would consider it no degradation, but an honour. Still, I thank you for telling me, Carl, for I know now, and

in return I tell you this, that harlot though she is, Ruth Clayton has some sense and refuses to do what you ask."

"Wait ; let me think."

Carl Vanderbyl rose, and, walking across to the window, stood staring out over the sea, now faintly grey in the coming dawn.

"Carl, I spoke hastily. Marry me, and I'll . . . try."

The man turned and walked slowly back towards her.

"I'll marry you, Ruth," he said.

"Swear it on this Bible here, now."

"No, no, it isn't . . ."

"It is."

Again Carl turned away, and his lips began to move rapidly in prayer. "Lord God," he muttered, "justify this perjury. It's for Thy sake, and Thy people's." Then, moving to the table, he took up a square leather-covered book lying there. Ruth stood watching him.

"I swear it," he muttered.

"Kiss the book, Carl;" and Carl kissed it. Then, staggering back, he fell into a chair and sat there shuddering.

CHAPTER XXVII

COLONEL, temporary Brigadier-General, Kempton's column had halted for the day. In the middle of a great open plain it lay—a dark mass of men and animals sweltering in the noonday heat. Around, for miles, rolled the yellow grass veldt, its shining surface broken here and there by ragged ridge and sharp-toothed stony kopje. The smoke of grass fires rose towards the horizon, faint smudges of blue as seen in the glaring day, but by night to become tapering pillars of flame.

Some mile and a half away from the bivouac, a patch of vivid green in the surrounding yellow, a small farm could be seen nestling at the foot of a low hill, beyond which rose a tumbled mass of mountains, the homestead itself, a square dot, peering through its girdle of stiff, straight growing poplars. Cool and restful-looking it stood beside its great dam of silver water, over which hung the feathery plumed South African willow, its pale green standing out against the darker shades of lucerne fields, fruit and poplar trees.

It was a spot, to all appearance, infinitely more desirable for a bivouac than the treeless, sun-scorched veldt, on which the column now lay sweating. And such was the opinion of most officers and men, the more so since that same inviting-looking oasis had been placed out of bounds by order of the brigadier, a tyranny indeed, yet one not without its uses, in that it provided everyone with that

pretext for "growsing" so essential to the well-being of the British soldier.

Lying on the grass, their heads resting against their saddles, the officers of the headquarter mess were now assembled, with coats discarded, and silk handkerchiefs loosely knotted around sunburnt necks. Before them lay the *débris* of the midday meal: tins of liquid *foie gras*; smeary-looking paysandu ox tongues; withered sandwiches, curled and gaping like dead oysters; and pots of an oily yellow fluid, which only a sense of smell told was butter.

Still, a fast of twelve hours will render even such things palatable, and this column had started at one the night before, and till noon this day had been steadily marching.

"Pass along those sardines, Jeffy," said a grimy-looking warrior, a sometime dandy Guardsman, here commanding a company of mounted infantry. "I've the devil's own twist on me this morning."

"No earthly," answered Captain Jefferson, sniffing at the tin; "nothing left but oil, and that humming above a trifle."

"Hold hard, don't chuck it away, pass it over. Ah, that's good, that is," pouring the warm fluid down his throat.

"Gad, what one comes to on service," murmured another officer, absently cleaning his fork on his breeches. "Stinkin' sardine oil out of a tin. Lor'."

"Damn that fly," growled a gunner. "That's the twentieth time I've missed the beggar. A-ha, old son," catching the buzzing torment at last, and proceeding to bury it in the butter.

"Hang it, Fowle," said the Guardsman, snatching the tin from him, and, the victim extricated, pouring the contents on a stony crust, "what a wasteful beggar you are, spoilin' good butter like that. We're short of the stuff, too."

"Plenty in that farm down there," growled Molyneux, his subaltern. "Milk and eggs too, or I'll eat my hat."

"Why the devil we can't bivouac there, the Lord only knows," said Fowle, "'stead of sittin' perched in the open where everyone can see us."

"Yes, and we can see them," answered a gaunt-looking major, "those hills by the farm, that's why. Far away from the mountains as you can get for a bivouac, the Vleipeort scuttle taught me that."

"All the same, I don't see why we shouldn't loot the ruddy place," grumbled Jefferson. "Give me five minutes with a stick in that hen roost, and . . ."

"I saw a lovely suckin' pig skating about as we passed through," said Molyneux. "I'd have had him too. Got my hanger out when Wentworth saw me and choked me off. 'Brigadier's orders,' he said."

"Wonder why. It looks a harmless place enough."

"Funk, that's why. Kempton was devilish near scuppered in a farm once. He never goes near 'em now, except to blow them up. When do you start on this lot, English?"

"Three o'clock to the tick, and up she goes," said English, a sapper.

"Seems a pity to blow up a nice place like that," muttered another officer indistinctly, his face being covered with a red and yellow silk handkerchief. "There's a damn pretty girl there too; I saw her for a moment, then she bolted into the house."

"Quite right too, with all you blokes about," said Jefferson.

"Ruddy good mind to nip down there now and chance it," resumed the handkerchief-covered one.

"Don't you do it, Toby," said Jefferson, "that's the way the Bird got outed at Waterkloof. Kempton would try you to a moral, too."

"He would so," said Molyneux. "He's got no human feelings, same as mo. Ruddy anchorite Kempton, don't smoke, don't drink, don't . . ."

"Don't you make too sure what Kempton don't do, Molly. Saw him at the *Table Mountain* once, all over it. Hottest piece you ever saw, reg'lar park palings."

"Rot."

"Fact. Quite bowled me out seein' it."

"Ought to be close on this fellow Vanderbyl by now. Think he'll fight, Jeffy?"

"Right enough, Kempton'll make him. That's one thing about our bloke, he don't beat about the bush. Vanderbyl's the same, they tell me. They'll be at it like rams, you see."

"The Dutchman don't seem to fancy it, somehow. We've been after him seven days now, and he's been leggin' it steady all the time."

"I know, and it ain't like him. Perhaps his commando won't stick it, though; they're a bit shaky, I'm told."

"Shouldn't wonder if he's up on those hills there, beyond the farm. It looks a likely place for a stand. Hullo, here's Wentworth, a Kaffir boy with him too, by Jove. Brought a friend, I see, to lunch, Wentworth," to the new-comer, Kempton's brigade-major. "Way down upon the Swanee River. What'll you have, Sambo, a wing of a woodcock, or lobster *à l'américaine*?"

"Don't rag the chap, he'll be off if you do. Any of you seen the brigadiër? This fellow's a note for him."

"He's over on that kopje there with his telescope," said English. "I'm going to him now myself for orders. I'll take the note if you like. Here, boy, give it over," to the Kaffir, who was standing staring at the group.

The boy shook his head, his white teeth showing in a grin. "De brief moed ik en de Baas eigen hand leveren," he answered.

"No comprenny."

"He says he must give it himself," explained Wentworth.

"Oh, all right then," said English, rising; "follow me."

He walked to a small hillock, some two hundred yards away, on the far side of which they came upon the object of their search, seated on the ground with his back resting against a huge boulder. On his knees lay a drawing block on which was depicted a rough sketch of the part of the country lying beyond the farm, the paper being marked by tiny red and blue crosses. Beside him lay a black leather pocket-book, the open pages of which were covered with its owner's small, neat handwriting, while, resting on a tripod before him, stood a fine Ross telescope, on which could be seen the inscription, "H. K. from V. R." The telescope had been directed towards the hills above the farm, but at the sound of footsteps it had been instantly slewed round and was now pointing to the plain in front of the brigadier.

The map and note-book were also seized and hurriedly transferred to their owner's pocket, and, by the time Captain English and the Kaffir appeared round the corner, Henry Kempton, with his eye applied to the telescope, was intently surveying the plain ahead.

Henry's had been one of those rapid rises in his profession, by no means uncommon in the later stages of the South African war. From the time—two years before—he had rejoined the Commander-in-chief's staff on the Modder as a humble extra A.D.C., he had steadily mounted, and that by no arduous climbing of steep places, but easily, by broad shallow stairs. For his services as A.D.C., a *réle*, to outward appearance, affording but few opportunities for military distinction, he had been rewarded after three months with a brevet lieutenant-colonelcy and the post of secretary to the commander-in-chief.

The command of a small column followed soon after, and

a trifling success having been his the strength of his force was doubled. Fortune thenceforward continuing to smile upon him, he now, at the age of thirty, found himself a brigadier-general and C.B., with a practical certainty of the additional letter K. being prefixed to it, if he were successful in his present mission. This was the capture of the notorious and hitherto undefeated Vanderbyl, for which honourable duty Henry Kempton had been specially selected by authority.

For all the above advancement and accomplishment alike woman was responsible, or rather two women, the one providing the speedy and, to most soldiers' thinking, somewhat inordinate reward of his efforts, the other the incentive, without which such efforts would never have been made, for just as from the rottenest soil often spring flowers of gorgeous shape and hue, so had Henry's infatuation for an ordinary adventuress given birth to ambition and determination to make for himself a position worthy of her.

The old scheming Henry was now, had been for two years, a thing of the past, or rather love had changed the direction of his schemes, and his brain, formerly occupied exclusively in the furthering of his own personal aims, was now as zealous in the service of another and in making provision for that other's welfare. For Ruth he toiled and slaved, and almost starved himself, for except for the few shillings retained for the payment of his meagre mess bill all pay and allowance were despatched regularly to the *Table Mountain* hotel. There this money enabled Miss Clayton to live in that state of luxury without which, she declared, and he had now come to realise that it was true, life would be intolerable to her. And, as success in his profession was essential to the attainment of his ends, K.C.B. and marriage with Ruth, for the one she had promised should mean the other, so consequently had Henry, his whole

power and capacity developed to their full extent by love, devoted himself to making his name as a soldier.

Despite his reputation, and despite the fact that he had not hitherto known defeat, he was not, nor ever would be, a great leader. His brain, though he would have raged had this truth been told him, was essentially that of the business man, and though such mental equipment is doubtless valuable, even necessary, where matters of organisation are in question, the command of an army in the field calls for something very different, almost its antithesis, in fact—that strange quality called genius. For such the truly great soldier is, as much as the poet, painter, or inventor. Genius is genius indeed, no matter the walk of life of its possessor, the same abnormal brain is here common, enabling its owner to detach himself from surroundings wherein the minds of most are fast held, and his gaze fixed unwavering on a goal, unseen of ordinary eyes, rushes thereon, obstacles disregarded, which, because disregarded, lie down for him to pass. As brain only they are all the same, but as man, soldier stands infinitely higher than the rest of the company, for whereas they for the most part work in leisure and undisturbed, the soldier achieves under difficulties which would paralyse most men's minds. No time is given him for reflection, death is howling around him; all is turmoil and confusion, while, in addition to the enemy in his front, there is, always has been for British generals, the politician at home, who in the seeming recklessness of the war genius sees danger to his own position, and is ever twitching at the telegraph wires, even as the timid passenger, on the box-seat of a coach, clutches when alarmed at the driver's reins.

In the great leaders' case alone, the abnormal brain must be combined with courage undaunted and a nature of steel, enabling him to disregard death, confusion, the roar of the battlefield, the yelping of the politician, all, save

only his object—truly a rare alliance, as the annals of history tell.

But though Henry Kempton had the requisite gift of character, his brain as aforesaid was not that of the great commanders. Both in imagination and their own peculiar characteristics of blindness to obstacles in the path he was lacking. He saw but the immediate object, he had eyes only for the present, never the future.

Nevertheless, though no Napoleon, he was yet a sound and capable leader of the second class, and further was, as Jefferson said, a fighter. There was no beating about the bush with Henry, no artful turning movements loved of some commanders, which in most cases resulted in the finding of the bird flown when at last they reached the nest. He made his plans, and being thoroughly conversant with military principles these were invariably sound ones, went for his man, and beat him. Second-rate he might be, but he was more than a match for the untrained Boer, whose vaunted strategy was in reality but a mixture of hunters' tricks, care for his own skin, and mean treachery.

So far he had not met the redoubted Vanderbyl, though he knew him well enough by reputation, and, knowing that reputation, he also, like Captain Jefferson, was puzzled. For, reputed a fighter, he had so far singularly belied his name, having steadily retreated before the column without firing a shot. And Henry, from being puzzled, had become both irritated and anxious, for this reluctance on the part of the Dutchman was not only unforeseen, but threatened disaster to all his hopes. A fight and a hard one he had anticipated, and wished for, having no doubt as to the result, for his troops were picked men, and keen, whereas those of his adversary were but a scratch following, demoralised, and also, as he knew, short of ammunition.

This stern chase through the mountains, however, was quite another thing, and one most unlikely to result in the capture of the quarry, and were he unsuccessful in this, perhaps the last chance he might have, farewell to his hope of the K.C.B. and also marriage with Ruth. Growing desperate at this thought, Henry had finally determined that something must be done to force matters to an issue, the result being the forming of a plan very different from his usual sound and careful mode of procedure. Risks, big risks that is, he had hitherto avoided, partly because they were contrary to his rule, partly from an uneasy remembrance of a saying of Carados', that "to do monkey tricks, you must be a monkey."

Now, however, it was risks or nothing, and the risks having it, the result of his meditations was a plan at which even the most reckless of leaders would have looked askance. Vanderbyl's commando, he knew, lay on the hills beyond the farm; there was no doubt about this, for not only had information, and that to a somewhat surprising extent, been brought him on the subject, but he could see them—men and horses were displaying themselves in the most open manner.

The full details of his plan, with the sketch-map illustrating it, were contained in the note-book that he had just thrust into his pocket, a precautionary measure occasioned by the sound of approaching footsteps. He looked up now; his eyes fell on Captain English, then on the Kaffir, and at sight of him he frowned, obviously displeased.

"Who the devil is this fellow, Captain English?" he said. "Tell him to be off at once. You ought to know better than to bring a native here."

"He has a letter for you, sir, and——"

"From that farm, I suppose, protesting their loyalty and asking to be let off. Tell him he can take it back again or, if he likes, give it to Major Wentworth. It may

save him a hiding, perhaps, and will come to the same thing in the end."

"It was Major Wentworth, sir, who told me to bring him to you. The boy refused to give the letter to him or anyone else but you."

"He can throw it on the ground then, and say he's given it, only he's to clear from here; I'm busy."

He turned away, and was resuming his inspection of the plain when he heard a gasp from English, and at the same moment felt a hand touching his shoulder. He looked up, to find a black face close to his, and instantly sprang up, his own red with anger.

"By the Lord," he cried, "but I'll have you on to a cartwheel for this. Captain English, take this fellow back to the bivouac, and tell the provost martial . . . Good—good God," he broke off suddenly, his eyes fixed on the envelope still held out to him by the boy.

"I'll go at once, sir," said English. "Come on, you black swine."

"Wait, please," came unexpectedly from his chief, whose rage seemed suddenly to have evaporated. "I must see this fellow, he—he may have valuable information. Wait over there, will you? I want to talk to him alone."

"Very good, sir," said the mystified English, and walking away sat down on the grass at some twenty-five yards distance from the pair.

"A little farther, please, Captain English," and the sapper, rising, went another twenty-five.

Kempton waited until he had once more seated himself, then snatching the letter from the boy opened it and read:

"DEAREST HENRY,

"I have only just heard you are here. Please come and see me at once. There is no danger, old Pretorius and his wife are loyal, whatever you may have heard.

Do hurry and come, if only for an hour. Major Wentworth can take charge in your absence.

“Your loving

“ RUTH.

“PS.—Don’t be surprised at my being here ; I’ll explain it all when you come.”

Henry stood gazing at the paper in utter stupefaction.

“Where did you get this ? ” he said at last.

The boy pointed to the farm.

“Who gave it to you ? ”

“Missy ; ” and again the Kaffir pointed in the same direction.

Henry stared at him, but the black face was expressionless. There was nothing to be learnt there, he saw, and once more turned his attention to the letter, this time studying it line by line. A slow smile appeared on his face.

“I have you,” he said. “It’s a pretty trap, Vanderbyl, but you’ve spoilt it. The writing’s well done, though goodness knows where you learnt it, but it’s too well spelt. Two r’s instead of one in ‘hurry,’ as usually ; and, worse still, here’s Major Wentworth, a name Ruth never heard of in her life. You’ve been too clever, Mr. Vanderbyl, and now to surround that farm and catch you. Don’t suppose we shall, but we’ll have a try.” He stood for a moment considering, then turned to the Kaffir.

“All right, boy,” he said. “Tell the missy I’ll be with her in half an hour from now. I must return to camp first.”

Again the boy shook his head. “Baas first come with me,” he said, for the first time speaking in the language of the rooinek. “Kopje,” pointing to a small hillock five hundred yards away, “there see farm, missy too. Missy waiting see Baas.”

"I'll see you . . ." began Henry, then, his eyes falling on the telescope, he checked himself. This was part of the scheme, evidently, and below in the farm there was someone now waiting to personate Ruth. The distance from the kopje to the house was a good thousand yards, and they reckoned on his eyes deceiving him. They had not reckoned on his telescope, though. Oh, all right, he would play up to them, pretend to be taken in, and then return to the bivouac to make the necessary arrangements.

"Captain English," he called, "wait there for me, I'll be back in a few minutes, and give you the orders about, you know . . ." Then picking up the telescope and tripod, he directed the Kaffir to lead the way to the kopje aforesaid.

In silence the pair proceeded, and the hillo reached, the boy stopped and pointed to the farm below him. Following the direction of his hand, Henry, with an inward chuckle, saw the figure of a woman, who at sight of him and his companion began to wave a handkerchief. With difficulty hiding his mirth, he fixed up the tripod, and laying the telescope on it sat down, with his eye glued to the instrument. For a moment he remained thus, the Kaffir watching him; then with a hand that trembled slightly he took a handkerchief from his pocket, and carefully polishing the lense resumed his inspection.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, his face red with excitement. "It is she," he muttered, "it's Ruth, right enough; but what in heaven's name is she doing there, what does it mean?" For a moment doubt arose in his mind, but then as instantly vanished. Doubt Ruth, not he. No, there was some explanation, some simple one, of this extraordinary occurrence. He would go now, see her, and hear it.

He started forward, then suddenly remembered English, and the orders given for the demolition of the farm below. Good heavens, he must stop that at once. A nice thing, truly, for English's party to turn up and find him at the

farm that he himself had placed out of bounds. Talking to a woman, too. Turning, he waved to the sapper, who, seeing his signals, came hurrying towards him.

"Captain English," he said, "your orders to blow up Losfontein Farm are cancelled."

"I'm afraid, sir, my party has already started."

"Go and stop them at once, then. Run, man. Oh, don't stand gaping at me, but be off;" and English, more mystified than ever, hurried back to the bivouac.

"Never knew him change his mind before," he muttered, as he ran. "Lord, there are my lot on the way now," and he began to shout and wave his hand at a small body of men marching briskly along the road to the farm. Perceiving him at last, they halted and sat down by the roadside.

Henry, meanwhile, followed by the Kaffir bearing the telescope and tripod, was hurrying down the hill, momentary doubt, bewilderment, even his habitual caution forgotten in the delight of seeing Ruth again. So happy did he feel that, excitement at length mastering him, he broke into a run, and only a few minutes after starting had reached the gate over which Ruth was leaning, awaiting him.

"You darling," he said, taking her in his arms, ignoring the staring Kaffir boy. "Oh, I am glad to see you. But what on earth brings you here? I thought you were in Cape Town, your last letter said nothing about coming up-country. Never mind, tell me that later. Let me look at you first. Do you know it's three months since . . . Why, why, good heavens, Ruth dear, what's the matter?" the joy in his face turning to concern, for the woman's face was ashen, and her eyes, which avoided his, had dark lines underneath them. She was trembling too, and at the question reeled suddenly, and would have fallen but for his arm.

"It—it's nothing, Henry," she stammered, "a—a head-

ache, that's all, from the heat. There must be a storm coming, I think ;" and she shivered.

"Ruth dearest, you're ill—fever, I should say. You must go and lie down at once, and I'll send my own doctor to you. I'll tell him there's someone ill at the farm. He won't suspect anything. If he does I don't care. I'll go now."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. Oh, please don't fuss, Henry, I tell you it's only the heat. Won't you come in and have a glass of milk? Oh, very well," as Henry hesitated, "if you don't trust me, if you think it's a—a trap."

"A trap! You set a trap for *me*, Ruth; dearest, what are you saying?"

"You might think so, my being here. I suppose you want to know why I am. I'll tell you if you like. I—I," she paused, staring vacantly at him, then, remembrance of something seeming to come back to her, continued speaking fast and parrot-like. "Old Pretorius, the owner of this place, is my uncle, and . . ."

"Your uncle, why? How?"

"Oh, don't interrupt. I—I—you've put me out, and I can't remem . . . What was I saying?"

"You said he was your uncle, Ruth."

"Yes; I am Dutch. I never told you before, because I thought you'd hate me for it. I—loved you, you see, and couldn't bear that, that . . . Pretorius is seventy, or more. He's as much against his—his countrymen as you are. Do you believe me? Don't if you like, and—go." Again she reeled.

"Of course I believe you, but I don't like your being here, all the same. I still don't understand why you are."

"They were in trouble and asked me to come. One of the sons was killed in the Transvaal, shot by the English."

"But I thought you said . . ."

"Oh, don't catch me up like this. It's not the old,

people's fault, I suppose, if their sons take opposite sides to them. I've told you they're loyal, if you don't believe me I can't help it."

"I've said I do believe you, but . . . Ruth dear, all the same this is no place for you, not—not now."

"Why not now particularly?"

"Oh, nothing, except there's always fighting in these parts."

"There's going to be fighting, you mean, now. Is there, Henry, are you going to fight? What are you doing here?"

"Nothing much, just moving through the country, that's all."

"It's not true. You're after Vanderbyl. That's what you meant by . . ."

"Ruth, be silent, for heaven's sake. That Kaffir boy's listening to every word."

"What does that matter? Carl Vanderbyl," and again the rapid parrot-like speech was resumed, "has no friends here. Yesterday he drove off half my uncle's sheep without paying a tikkie for them. His commando is only a couple of miles away in those mountains there. I can point you out the exact place from here, if you care to see. I could tell you, too, how to get there; how to come upon them by surprise. There's a mountain path no one knows of, but . . ."

Henry started. "Be quiet," he said again.

"Why, do you know of it, too? Is that your . . ."

"No; no mountain paths for me. I," raising his voice and speaking very distinctly, "intend to follow the main road."

"When?"

"Oh, I don't know yet," was the answer, still in the same distinct tones. "Perhaps to-morrow, certainly not before. Lord, how hot it is here in the sun. Let's go to that

willow there. Ah, this is better," looking up at the feathery green above him, and then carefully around. "Now we can talk without that black fellow hearing every word."

"But I've told you . . ."

"I know you have, but you don't know these Kaffirs as I do. By the way," carelessly, "about that path you were talking about . . . Tell me—it's always useful to know these things—is it a good one? Could mounted men travel by it?"

"Yes, yes, easily. Guns too."

Henry burst out laughing. "What do you know about guns," he said, "you little soft thing? But are you sure?"

"Quite. Oh, for heaven's sake, don't stand there laughing at me. Why shouldn't I know? Aren't I going to be a soldier's wife, a—a—" and again Ruth reeled, and would have fallen had not Henry caught her.

"Dearest," he said, now really alarmed, "I insist on your going to bed at once. I'll be off and send the doctor. In any case I must go now, though I hate leaving you like this; but, you see, they don't know where I am, and might send out to look."

"I will not go to bed, nor will I see your doctor when he comes."

"But, Ruth dear, you're really ill."

"And if I am," burst out Ruth with sudden violence, "whose fault is it but yours? Can't you see it's . . . it's anxiety for you that's killing me?"

Henry stared bewildered. Never before had Miss Clayton evinced the smallest sign of such anxiety for his personal safety.

"But Ruth," he said at last, "I've been in danger before, and you've never . . ."

"Because then I didn't realise what it meant, I was hundreds of miles away. Now I'm in the middle of it, and

I do. What do you care, though? You leave me here, knowing I'm half dead with—with anxiety, and go off to fight. Oh, I know you are, for all you pretend not to be. If—if you'd be open with me, as you ought, with your promised wife, I—I could bear it better; but you don't—you don't trust me, you put me off as if I were a child."

"But how don't I trust you? What do you want me to tell you?"

"What you're going to do, your . . . plans."

"My plans, Ruth, I . . . can't. You mustn't ask me, dear. Anything else, but those are official secrets, which I cannot, must not, speak of, even to you I love."

"You don't love me, you can't, your love . . ."

"It is not worth the keeping, let it go.
But shall it? Answer, darling; answer No.
And trust me all in all, or not at all."

Again Henry stared, more bewildered than before, in some way chilled, moreover, for not only was such quotation of poetry by Ruth a thing hitherto unknown, but there was a hard, mechanical delivery of the words which struck him unpleasantly. They sounded as if they had been laboriously committed to memory for some express purpose, to be brought out when the occasion demanded.

"I had no idea you had such a good memory, Ruth," he said at last, still looking at her.

"You don't know anything about me, or you'd be aware that everything you do or say I remember like a fool. You used to read that to me, and it—it occurred to me then. It's too one-sided a business, though, our—our love, and I've done with it."

"Ruth, what do you want me to tell you? My scheme for . . . whenever it is, is that it?"

"I don't care twopence about your schemes, I should forget them probably as soon as heard. It's the want of

confidence that—that hurts, the thought that you keep secrets from me you profess to love."

Henry was silent, love and habitual caution, nay, common prudence, battling for mastery.

"Ruth dearest," he said at last slowly, "I don't mind telling you, as you insist on knowing, it's possible there may be fighting before very long. Now, please, don't ask me any more, dear. I ought not to have told you that, even."

Ruth's manner changed. She wound her arms round Henry's neck. "All in all, or not at all," she whispered. "Darling, this means as much to me as to you. Don't keep anything back from me, Henry; it's only my love for you that makes me want to know."

Prudence, still fighting, was beaten to its knees.

"Ruth, if you must know I will tell you. I'm mad to do it, but if you insist I will. I ask you not to insist, though; I implore it of you, Ruth."

The figure in his arms seemed to writhe and then stiffen.

"All in all, or not at all," came monotonously from the pale lips.

"Very well then. I'm going to attack Vanderbyl, not to-morrow, but to-night; not by the main road either, but by . . ."

"Stop, don't tell me, I won't listen."

"You must, now I've begun, and—and perhaps you're right, there should be no secrets between you and me. Look here," he drew out the drawing-block and held it before her eyes, then went on. "See this dotted line, it's the mountain track you spoke of just now, and which I pretended not to know. Forgive me for deceiving you, dear, but caution has become a habit. I had an experience once, Ruth; but never mind that. To go on, it's by that track we move. We attack at dawn."

"Henry, I won't hear, I tell you."

"And, as I've said, you must. Oh, don't look so

frightened, little girl; we'll pull through, I've no doubt. It's risky, all night marches are; but it's that, or a fruitless chase day after day through the mountains. He won't fight, Ruth, it's my only hope of catching him, and catch him I must, for that means—you know what it means, dear."

"Yes, and I won't let you do it. It—it's madness, this scheme of yours, Henry."

"It would be if Vanderbyl knew, for there's a bad place, it's called the Red Kloof, Ruth. I've marked it in red. See? Once passed that and we're safe."

"But he, Ca . . . , Vanderbyl, might come to hear of it; someone might . . . tell him, someone who . . . knows."

"There's no one who does but me, and you now, dear, and we shan't tell him, shall we, little girl? Why, even my own staff officer doesn't know yet. I can keep my counsel with him, though not with you, it seems, little tyrant; but I'm glad I've told you, and now, dearest, I must go."

"Henry, stop. You are going to your death, to your death, I tell you."

"Not I. It's to our wedding I go, to the winning of that K.C.B. and you. Oh, dear, be brave, wish me good luck now, and let me go. It's only for a few hours I leave you, and to-morrow . . ."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow we will laugh together at your fears. It's no dead man you'll see then, I promise you, Ruth, but . . ."

"Oh, will nothing make you listen, Henry? If you knew that—that I . . . oh, don't stare at me . . . that the road is impossible."

"It is not, you told me so; but without that I knew, I made sure."

"In daylight, yes, but by night, and in a storm, no; and

a storm's coming up, Henry. See those clouds there? This heat too, this awful, unnatural heat."

"The storm's our best friend, Ruth; it will drown the sound of our horses' hoofs. Pray for a storm, dear, to-night, and, if you will, for us. Good-bye."

"Henry, wait. I—I, oh, how am I to tell you?"

"What?"

"Nothing . . . Good-bye."

"There is nothing, Ruth?"

"No, no; what should there be? Come to me to-morrow and . . . laugh. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Ruth. Think of me to-night, and—and it's worth the keeping now, dear, isn't it?" And Henry was gone, the woman left staring after him with stony gaze.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE burning day was over, and night's dark curtain had fallen on the sunlit stage. There it stood, a seemingly tangible barrier of black, impenetrable, motionless, until, now and again rung up by the thunder's peal, it rose revealing to the dazed vision the world once more, a world unreal, unfamiliar, bathed in the wild blue glare of the lightning's flash.

No breath of air stirred the atmosphere, the rustle of willow and poplar leaf was hushed, all nature cowered, waiting for that which was about to happen, and the whisper of whose coming even now sounded in her ears. But a faint murmur it was as yet—like to the voice of some far-away sea—the song of the veldt storm still some hundreds of miles distant, but rapidly approaching, roaring on its way over plain and mountain.

Within the homestead of Losfontein three people were this night assembled—an old man, his wife, and a girl. One sputtering tallow candle alone illumined the room in which they sat, a long old-fashioned room, its ceiling of Spanish reeds, the floor and walls of mud roughly white-washed, and hung with garish oleographs, advertisements, and illuminated texts. Here silence reigned as without, save for the occasional muttering of the old man Pretorius, a clumsy-looking figure, whose heavy face was fringed, baboon-like, with white hair. Spectacles on nose, he sat at the table reading, his wife, a shapeless print bundle, some distance away engaged in the knitting of a grey worsted sock.

Wandering restlessly about the room, her face haggard, eyes brilliant, and lips ceaselessly moving as she went, was the third member of the party—Ruth Clayton. Now and again, seizing a book, she would strive to fix her attention on its pages, only, a minute later, to start up again and, with wild eyes, stand listening. Rushing to the window she would open it, and remain staring into the darkness without, then, wearily turning away, she would resume her restless wanderings about the room.

For the thousand pounds was now in the earning, and but a mile away rows of silent figures, with rifles thrust forward and cartridge clips ready to their hand, were lying peering down from the rocky side of the Red Kloof, towards which, all unconscious, a column of mounted men was cautiously feeling its way. Yet it was not of that thousand pounds Ruth Clayton was thinking, nor even of the infinitely greater reward, and for which alone this thing had been done. Strive as she would to fix her eyes on the future, and the happiness that future was to bring, it was all in vain, and her brain reeled on the verge of madness.

Everything was muddled and unreal, save one thing—the face of the man she had betrayed. That was vivid enough, and, turn where she would, it was there, always there, staring at her. From the dark corners of the room it stared; it hovered about the guttering candle; it was there, she knew, in the darkness outside—she had seen it just now when she opened the window. Ruth was no Jael, as she had said; usually she could act her part well enough, but the rôle of heroine in a drama such as this was not for her. True, she had got through the first act, the betrayal, though even that had been a sorry business, and only for her fellow actor's prompting would never have been accomplished. As it was, she had nearly, so very nearly,

broken down. Her work done, however, the actress was done also, and now, instead of exultation, horror and vain remorse clutched at her heart.

No thanks had been hers for what she had done, but curses and even blows, for barely was Henry out of sight when Carl from his hiding-place was upon her, bidding her tell him everything instantly, and because, being distracted and only half-conscious, she could not at first speak, he had struck her. When the information was at last haltingly given, he had ridden away to the mountains, leaving her to think, and she had been thinking ever since, with the result that, contrasting the gentleness of the one with the brutality of the other, the awful doubt had come to her mind that perhaps after all it was the destroyed, and not the destroyer, whom she loved. Then that most maddening of all reflections, that of "too late," had assailed Ruth Clayton. "Too late, too late," the dreary words rang in her ears, till she could have shrieked with the torture of their reiteration.

"Ah, what was that, a shot, surely a shot?" Once more she sprang up, and, half-suffocated by the beating of her heart, ran to the window and flung it open. "No, it is nothing, only the mutter of thunder in the hills; the storm is coming nearer." The far-off murmur had swelled to a dull roar. "Nothing? Oh, God, there is, though. There is Henry looking at me, speaking to me. What is he saying? 'It's worth the keeping now, Ruth, isn't it, dear?'" and then behind her another voice arose, that of the old man sitting at the table.

"Hark to the words of the book," he said; and then in high-pitched, droning tones began to read aloud from the pages before him. "*Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent.*"

Ruth flung to the window with a crash, and wheeling

round, stood glaring at the humped figure at the table. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. "At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell: where he bowed, there he fell down dead."

"There's a bad place, it's called the Red Kloof, Ruth," came clear from the darkness without.

"The mother of Sisera looked out at a window, and cried through the lattice, Why is his chariot so long in coming? why tarry the wheels of his chariots?"

"Think of me to-night, Ruth; pray for me, if you will."

A shuddering scream broke from the woman's lips. She moved towards the reader, her clenched hand raised, and eyes blazing into his.

"Stop. I say. 'Blessed,' you call that murderess 'blessed'?"

The clicking of the needle ceased, the old man looked up with pious horror in his face.

"Girl, be silent," he said. "Who are you to accuse the Lord's anointed, you who like her have been chosen as the instrument of His vengeance?"

"Instrument, yes, fit instrument for such devil's work. The wanton, the harlot, those are your God's tools, and He is right; for who but the outcast would betray the lover sleeping in her arms? Yes, instruments we are for men's lust and God's vengeance, that is all we . . ."

"Boom," and at the sound Ruth stopped, with rigid face and eyes fixed, then with a shriek flew to the window and, tearing it open, stood gazing into the black murk without.

"Boom," once more the dull heavy sound arose, and then, drowning the shriek of the approaching tempest, the sudden roar of rifle fire came echoing through the night.

For full three minutes it lasted, now sinking almost to a

whisper, now rising to a triumphant scream, and then as suddenly it ceased. Another shot rang out; two more followed in quick succession; the clamour was renewed, again ceased; and all was still.

"Surrender. Praise be to the Lord of Hosts." There was no sound of jubilation in the old man's words. If surrender it was, then it was God's doing only, and to Him, not man, was the praise. He stood looking out into the darkness, his lips moving in prayer, all unheeding the tempest now close upon them.

A short, sharp puff of air struck the house; the open window flapped suddenly to, and then, swinging slowly back, again hung motionless. A moment's hush followed, broken by a scream of "Almaagtig" from the print bundle, for the room had been plunged into darkness and pandemonium raged without.

"Crash," and the house shook at the fall of one of the tall poplars; the tortured willows wildly thrashed the dam; the iron roof clanged to the hammering of hail stones, great jagged lumps of ice, dealing their death-blow where they smote the beasts unsheltered in the field.

Then suddenly the tempest passed, and, its work of destruction accomplished, went shrieking on its way. Passed too was the heaviness from the atmosphere, fresh and clear now blew the soft night wind, and, the muffling veil torn from the heavens, a myriad glittering fires looked down on the devastated earth. Only for a few minutes had it tarried, but like the sudden awakening of passion in some human heart, hitherto tranquil, obliterating its landmarks and rushing it headlong to ruin and chaos, so in those few minutes had the breath of the storm brought the toil of man to naught, and changed the smiling gardens into a wilderness of broken boughs and mangled blossoms.

Before the hammering on the roof had ceased, Ruth was hurrying down the path to the gate beyond, where she

stood waiting. Half an hour, an hour passed, and still she remained there, her eyes fixed on the dark blue of mountains to the north, whence led the track passing the gate at which she stood.

There it was at last, that for which she had been waiting, the far-away glimmer of a lantern, dancing will-o'-the-wisp like down the mountain-side. Slowly, very slowly, it approached: the faint hum of voices was heard; then the clatter of heavy footsteps on the stony path. Ruth stood motionless, watching; then, suddenly flinging open the gate, she rushed headlong down the road, the light growing stronger, the voices louder as she ran.

"Wer da," she heard, "damn you, will you answer?" A ominous click followed.

"Don't shoot, it's I, Ruth Clayton," she screamed. "Is that you, Carl? Oh, for the love of God, tell me what has happened?"

There was a whispered consultation.

"It's only Carl's woman," she heard. "We can go on."

"Carl, why don't you answer?"

The footsteps came on. A rough bearded face was thrust into hers, the light of the lantern raised aloft falling full upon it. It was not Carl she saw, but a stranger.

"Oh, tell me please, please tell me, where is Carl Vanderbyl?"

"He's dead."

"Dead . . . dead."

"Died half an hour ago, the British commander shot him. He's dead too, or soon will be. There he lies, blast him, in that litter there."

"But I—I don't understand. Carl . . . promised . . ."

The man stared. "I don't know what you mean," he said, "and I'm not going to stop here explaining. I am hurt too. He," jerking his head towards the litter, "shot me as well. You be off back to the farm. Tell the tante

to get coffee ready; brandy, too, if she has it. We're wet through, and half-starved."

"Who—who won?"

"Won? Why we did, of course. The whole lot of the rooineks are up yonder, prisoners. Oh, get away now. Tell the Oom it's Johannes Viljoen. He knows me. Run, girl, we'll hurry on."

For a moment Ruth stood looking at him, then, without a word, turned and walked back to the farmhouse.

In the living-room the sputtering candle once more flared, the old man muttered over his book, the needles clicked:

"I've come to tell you," she said very distinctly, and she smiled on the pair as she spoke, "that Henry's dead. I—I killed him, you know," nodding her head.

"Almaagtig, the girl's mad, Piet. Look at her eyes!"

"He, they, Carl Vander—Vander—are here; they want coffee, and there is blood . . . such a lot of blood, such a lot . . ." She began to sing in a high chanting voice: "*Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above . . . above . . .*" She stopped, swayed, and then fell to the ground.

CHAPTER XXIX

“**C**OMING round, I think. Looks a bit better colour. Wish to heavens she would. I want to get back yonder. Too bad of the old woman going off to bed and leaving me with these two on my hands. It's woman's work this. My place is up there with the wounded.”

The German rose, bent over the unconscious figure on the sofa, lifted her eyelid, then refilling his pipe lighted it, and sat down once more.

“What's the matter with her? Been like this for over two hours, hasn't she?”

“Off and on, yes. Shock's the matter. Shouldn't wonder if she . . .” He tapped his forehead, then continued steadily puffing at his pipe.

“Carl Vanderbyl's girl, wasn't she?”

“Yes. Went out to meet him to-night, and that fool Viljoen told her straight out he was dead. Enough to kill any woman.”

“Why the devil these Dutchmen will take their women about with them when they're fighting, the good God only knows. Himmel, fancy such a thing in our army!”

“We can thank our stars all the same she was here, Heinrich. It's thanks to her, and her only, we caught these English fools to-night.”

“Eh! What do you mean?”

“It was she who gave Kempton away to Vanderbyl. Why . . . Hullo,” breaking off, with his eyes fixed on a heap covered with rugs, lying on the table, “that fellow moved.”

He walked across the room towards it, and stood for a moment looking down. The figure, however, was still enough now, and once more Dr. Bergman resumed his seat.

"Pretty bad, isn't he?" said the other.

"Might go any minute. We've sent for the English doctor. He ought to be here by now," glancing at the clock.

"About what you were saying just now. How did she give him away?"

"Oh, it seems she was Kempton's girl too. She's a pretty loose fish, apparently, and was planted down here by Vanderbyl to wait. That's why he retreated straight on this place. Well, she got him down here this afternoon, and he told her everything, showed her a map with his route marked on it."

"Du liebe, what a fool!"

"And when he was gone, out pops Vanderbyl, to whom she passes it on, with the result that you know. The trap was ready for the bird to walk into."

"Himmel! But tell me, doctor, what happened in the Kloof? I didn't come up till it was all over."

"You were well out of it, my friend. It wasn't a pretty sight. A fight's all right, but that, ach!" He shuddered, puffed at his pipe, then went on: "You know the place, a regular death-trap, and they walked into it. Vanderbyl let them come on till they were all in, then let off two guns, the signal agreed upon. At the same time bonfires were lighted all round. We could see their faces looking up at us, poor devils; then the shooting began, and such a hell as the place became, you can have no idea, Heinrich, men and horses mixed up together, screaming, cursing, and the Dutchmen laughing at them from above. That's the sort of thing they like. They've no stomach for a fair fight, but they were all right there."

"Yes, and then?"

"Vanderbyl shouted to them to surrender, and the

shooting stopped. I thought it was all over, but then he," nodding his head towards the table, "shouted, 'Surrender be damned,' and called upon his men to come on. He was off his head, I think; he looked it."

"Well?"

"The Dutchmen stood gaping down. They daren't shoot, not at him—Vanderbyl had sworn to kill anyone who did—and seeing this, Kempton started shouting to his men to fix bayonets and follow him. A few did, and heaven knows what would have happened, but at that moment a horse knocked him over, and then Vanderbyl and Viljoen rushed down, like damned fools, to catch hold of him. Both were shot for their pains: Vanderbyl dead, and Viljoen in the shoulder. It was all up with Kempton then, of course. Down he went, riddled. More's the pity. He may be a fool, Heinrich, but he's a brave man, and worth a hundred of these loutish Boers. Hullo! Voices. Must be the English doctor." He walked across to the window and looked out. "Yes, there's a light coming this way. No, damn it, they're off the path. Come, Heinrich, let's go and meet them. They'll never get here without. These two will be all right for a few minutes. Can't help it if they're not."

Followed by the other he went out. The sound of their footsteps on the gravel outside grew fainter, died away, and all was still.

"Ruth."

No answer.

"Ruth, do you hear me? It's Henry speaking."

The figure on the sofa stirred; the eyes opened and looked vacantly about, then closed again.

"Ruth, you shall hear me. Ruth, I say."

The eyes opened once more.

"Henry's dead," she muttered, "dead, dead."

"Come here, Ruth."

The girl started, then sat up listening. "Who is it?" she whispered. "It's his voice; but how can that be when he's dead. I killed him, you know; I killed Carl too."

"Come, Ruth."

"I don't want to. Why do you make me do things I don't want to? Oh, if you will have it then, and . . . perhaps I'd better, perhaps I had better." She rose, then crept slowly forward, and touched the still figure lightly with her outstretched hand. Closer she came, then, bending down, looked into the great shining eyes fixed upon hers.

"It is Henry," she muttered, "but what is he doing here? There's blood on his face, too, as there is on my hands. Speak, speak; don't lie there staring at me. Oh, what does it mean? It is all so strange, so strange. If you are Henry, take me in your arms as you used to do." She bent lower, but the look in those eyes held her off, and she shrank back.

"Why do you look at me like that? What is it? What have I done?"

"You . . . murderess."

"Murderess! What are you saying? How dare you call me that? Ah, I know now. You are not Henry; he was always kind and gentle. It is Carl who said that. He was hard on me at times, though he didn't mean it. Carl, Carl, it is I, Ruth. Don't call me murderess, Carl. I am your promised wife who loves you so; and, Carl dear, where is that thousand pounds you promised me, the price of the blood on my hands?"

"God in heaven!"

"But I don't want it, Carl, I won't touch it; it's all red. Spend it on Henry, dear, on his grave. I thought of a cross, Carl, and write beneath it, 'It is worth the keeping now . . . now.'"

"So that was his price, Ruth?"

"That's what you said. Is it too much, Carl?"

"Far too much. The fool was not worth a quarter, not a thousandth part of it."

"A fool." Ruth's eyes were blazing into his. "Who are you that dare call Henry a fool? He was the best, the truest lover a woman ever had. I'll kill you for that, Carl, as she did, the hammer and the nail, the hammer and the . . ." Then suddenly she stopped, and fixed her wild eyes on the waxen, blood-stained face with a look of doubt. She bent lower, lower still, her face almost touching his, and then . . . knew him. A shriek rang through the room, she staggered back into the farthest corner, and there crouched—a gibbering maniac.

Hard on the woman's scream was heard the sound of footsteps hurrying without. The door was burst open, and once more the German doctor entered, followed by a man in a soiled khaki uniform.

"The woman's come to," said the German, "it was she who screamed. Ah, there she is, and, as I thought, quite mad now. Gott! but what's to be done with her?"

"Call the woman of the house," answered the English doctor, "hand her over to her."

"She's in bed and refuses to answer."

"Get her to bed too, then. Where's her room? Pardon me, Herr Doctor, but I have no time to attend to a woman. I must see to him," approaching the table as he spoke.

Ruth flew at him like a wild cat, her hands trying to tear at his face.

"You shan't touch him, I say. He's mine—mine."

The German came hurrying forward. Between them they mastered the frantic girl, and then, holding her against the wall, stood looking at each other.

"What's to be done?" muttered the Englishman. "I must see to Kempton. Oh, damn it all."

"The commando may be here any minute. We must have her quiet before then," said the German.

The Englishman started.

"Do you mean that, Herr Doctor?" he said.

"Yes, why?"

"Oh, nothing, only—only, in that case, I must get Kempton away from here at once."

"You cannot, he's not fit to move."

"I must; but first about her. I think . . ." He looked at the other, whispered a word, the German nodding agreement.

"My good girl," he said, "wouldn't you like to go to bed?"

"No, no. It's a trick. You'll take him away if I do."

"Not we. He'll be here when you wake in the morning. He's tired, he says, and wants to sleep, but can't because you're here."

"You fool, of course he can; hasn't he many times, in my arms? What do you . . ."

"Yes, yes, and so he shall again," interrupted the German hastily. "She thinks it's her lover, Carl Vanderbyl," he added in an undertone to the Englishman who was staring at her. "It's his death that . . . But leave her to me, I know her. Come, Miss Clayton, I've something to show you in that room there. We'll come back to him afterwards. He'll be awake then, and want to see you. That's right, come along;" and still talking he led the now passive and interested Ruth to her room, and, aided by the Englishman, undressed and put her to bed.

"Now for that arm," he said cheerfully. "I want to see what all this blood means you told me about. Ah, I see; this will take it away, this little thing here. Pretty, isn't it? What, hurt you, not a bit of it; it was your fancy. Lie back and forget about it." He sat down on the bed watching her. "Feel sleepy; that's right. Very sleepy, don't you; so very, very sleepy? Ah! . . ."

He rose, looked closely at her for a minute, then made

his way back to the living-room, where the English doctor was bending over the other patient, his hands busy with bandages, his lips whispering. The German stopped, and his eyes became watchful. "McKenzie's column's close up," he heard; "be here daybreak; catch them napping;" then an excited "Get her away, get her . . ." followed by a warning "Hush," from the doctor, who had suddenly become aware of the German standing on the threshold.

"I am taking General Kempton away with me at once," he said, "and I—I think that girl would be better out of this, too. Ought to be in fresh surroundings when she comes to. Don't you agree with me?"

"Certainly," answered the other. "I'll see to it."

"All right, then. Now we'll have in that dhoolie; it's waiting outside." He walked to the door and opened it. "Sergeant Neaves," he called, "bring in your men now with the dhoolie," whereupon a party of khaki-clad soldiers entered, bearing a litter.

Placing it on the ground, they arranged themselves round the table, lifted the figure, and laid it gently in the curtained dhoolie.

"Together now," said the doctor, "out of step all of you; that's right. Good night, Herr Doctor. Thank you for your help; and—and of course it's no business of mine, but you won't forget about the woman."

"No, I won't forget. Good night."

The German waited till the tramp of the dhoolie-bearers had died away, then moved quickly to the door behind which lay sleeping Pretorius and his wife. Impatiently he hammered on the panels, in no mood to brook delay, having learnt something within the last quarter of an hour necessitating his instant departure and interview with the leader of the commando, now probably already on its way. With a curse at the unbroken silence, he beat on the closed door till at length a querulous voice was heard from within,

bidding the disturber depart and cease from troubling them.

Louder hammering was the only answer vouchsafed, and at last, grumbling and irate, the frowsy figure of the Oom opened the door and stood before him, with mingled sleepiness and wrath on his unwholesome-looking face. Both soon disappeared, however, to be replaced by alarm, as he listened to the words of the intruder. "You promise," were the German's last words. "I can rely upon you to get her away before daybreak. All right, then; I'm off," and with a short "Good night" he left the house.

A few minutes later he was hurrying along the mountain track, where he met, and after a few words with the leader caused to come to a halt, a disorderly mass—Dutchmen and prisoners intermingled—casually making their way to the farm he had just left.

Long before the sun was up a cape cart stood waiting at the gate of Losfontein Farm, a heap of household goods piled upon it. The house door opened, the Oom appeared, pipe in mouth, and slowly heaving himself on to the driver's seat, took up the reins. His wife followed, seated herself beside her lord, then whispered something in his ear, pointing as she did so to a side window. The Dutchman's face grew stern. "Let the harlot die," he said, then with a click of his tongue drove away, and a few minutes later cart and occupants had vanished into the darkness.

The light grew stronger, a leaden streak appeared in the east, and then, faintly at first, but rapidly growing louder, the thud of hoofs and rattle of wheels broke the stillness of the dawn, and along the mountain track came cantering a body of mounted men. Through the farm they dashed, not drawing rein, and, passing on towards a line of kopjes beyond, were lost to view. A smaller party followed, with them a slim black gun. These did

not pass through, however, but dismounting watered their horses at the dam, then, leaving the animals hidden behind the farm buildings, proceeded to push the gun into position behind the orchard wall. This done, they arranged themselves in line on either side, lay down, lit their pipes, and waited.

Half an hour passed, the leaden streak in the east had turned to saffron, and from saffron to pink. The outline of the horizon to the west became suddenly blurred. A ripple, a movement, ran through the prone figures behind the wall. They sat up, cautiously peering through its crevices, with faces alert and eyes fixed on the fast thickening brown mist staining the western skies pale blue.

Then on a rise some mile and a half away a single figure appeared and stood for a minute looking down at the farm, other figures joined him, and then suddenly were gone. A pause followed, a thick mass of dust arose, and then cleared away; another pause, broken by a shrill hissing in the air above, swelling to a roar, a resounding crack, with it a crash, and a fountain of red earth spouted up some hundred yards beyond the farm. A solemn "um, um, um, um," from the slim shape behind the wall rose in instant answer to the challenge, then the sharp rattle of Mauser fire.

"Good," said the Dutch leader, peering from the line of kopjes beyond. "Let them come on, waste their strength against a hundred men and one gun, the fools, then I begin."

The uproar increased. The shells were now falling thick and fast around the white homestead, but for a while sparing it, then at last it came. A dull thud was heard; a ragged brown hole appeared in its white side, a muffled roar from within, and out from door and window trickled thin streams of brown smoke. From that closed side window it poured a volume.

"Shooting at an empty house," said the Dutchman.

"Almaagtig, what fools these English are!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE great ship *Cleopatra* rushed on her way homeward through the night. A golden shape she moved, bathed in the light of a newly-risen moon, a gigantic orange disc hanging low in the horizon's verge. A fairy ship, the *Cleopatra*, and a silent one. No sound of music was heard on her, no gay chatter of passengers. In lowered tones they spoke, or paced in silence along the decks; for, below, a man lay dying, and under the shadow of death even the lightest souls cower and cease from their trifling.

From the open companion a woman emerged, and all eyes were turned towards her. She stood for a moment looking about her, then hurried away, up the deck, to where a man was standing, staring out to sea.

Hearing her footsteps he turned and hastened to meet her. "I'll come at once," he said. "I hope you've not been looking for me."

"No, no, there's nothing. I want to speak to you, that's all. Not here, there are people. Come," and she led the way to a deserted part of the deck, then turned and faced him.

"Sir James," she said, "I have brought you here to ask you a question; it's one I've refrained from asking hitherto, but now I do, and—and I must, I will, have the truth."

The man frowned. Well enough he knew what the question was, having heard it many hundred times in his professional career, and also invariably declined to answer it. This woman, however, had not only for the time being the right to his exclusive services, having secured that

right by the payment of no small sum, but he had known her from childhood, and owed his present eminence solely to her and her family's patronage, begun when he was but a struggling country doctor, and continued unbroken till now. And, knowing her, he was aware that she would decline to be put off by the usual evasive answer; he must do one of two things, refuse, or tell the truth, such as he knew it.

"What is it you wish to know, Lady Violet?" he said.

"If I can tell you, I will; if, I say."

"You can. It is this. Is—is he going to die?"

"Ah!" as he expected. The stereotyped answer came fluently from his lips: "We must hope for the best," he said. "There's always hope. I've seen worse cases than his, much worse."

"Please answer my question, Sir James."

The latter frowned again and hesitated. He then glanced at her, and spoke out in a tone of irritation.

"You ask me a question a doctor always refuses to answer," he said, "but, as you will have it, I will give you my opinion. I don't want to, but . . ."

"What is your opinion?"

"That he will die, but not of his wounds, Lady Violet. They've practically healed, bad as they were; but . . . He's something on his mind, and for that I can do nothing. 'Mind diseased,' you know. He could recover if he wanted to, but he doesn't want. He won't fight, he won't take his medicines, and . . . he'll die. I'm sorry to put it so brutally, but you asked me for the truth, and I've given it you, as far as I know. I may be wrong."

Lady Violet looked at him. Turning away, she stood for a while looking out to sea, then once more faced him.

"Do you—have you any idea what it is that's troubling him?" she said in a strained voice, her eyes fixed intently on his face. "He's never said anything, when—delirious."

"He's never been delirious. I imagine, of course, it's that Losfontein affair that's worrying him. All the same, I don't see why he should make up his mind to die on that account. They'd have given him another chance, good man as he was. Can't—can't you do anything, Lady Violet? Pardon me if I'm impertinent, but I speak as a doctor: I have an idea, so have the nurses, it's about you he's fretting."

Violet turned on him. "About me, what do you mean? Tell me at once."

"I really hardly know. I suppose he thinks you're disappointed in him. He seems in some way to be afraid of you when you're there. When you're away, though . . ."

"Yes, when I'm away. Quick."

"He talks enough about you then, asks when you're coming back. Lady Violet, he—he—forgive me, but he's mad about you. Why, my dear lady, what on earth's the matter?" for Violet, after staring at him for a moment in silence, had turned sharply away, and was now violently sobbing. "Pray, pray calm yourself. Oh, what an idiot I was; what an . . ."

"Sir James," Violet stood facing him again, her eyes shining through her tears, "are—are you sure?" she gasped. "You're not saying it to comfort me?"

"Sure of what, that he's in love with you? Oh yes, I'm quite sure. That question, at any rate, I can answer. And of course he is. Why, do you mean to tell me you, his fiancée, don't know that?"

"No, I did not know it. I should never have known it but for you. He asks after me, you say, wh-when I'm away."

"He does. I saw him, too, kissing a handkerchief you left on his bed the other day. Silly sort of thing to do, but he did it. Then, when you come in, he turns away, hides his face from you."

"I—I saw *that*. It was that that made me think . . . Kissed my handkerchief, you say. Sir James, you swear you saw him?"

"If you like, so will the nurses; they saw it too. They, I may tell you, think the same as I do."

"Thank God, oh, thank God . . . at last."

"Certainly, thank God, but forgive an old man, Lady Violet. I think a kiss from you would be more to the purpose. Why not go down now and give it him?"

"Oh, I will; but—but, Sir James, there is something you must tell me first."

"Another question! Oh, my dear Lady Violet!"

"Could he—could he bear a shock, do you think?"

"Depends on what the shock is. Tell him that you'll have nothing more to do with him, and, well," he shrugged his shoulders: "tell him something else, though, and he'll be walking in a month."

"But supposing I know what this thing on his mind is, and he thinks I do not, and wishes to die to keep it from me, and I tell him, what then?"

Sir James hesitated. "Can you make it clear to him first," he said slowly, "that it will be all right, make no difference to you? That's all important. If—if, I say—you can do that, I think you might."

"I—I believe I can. Shall I go now?"

"The sooner the better. Get it over. Come along," and, followed by curious eyes, together they passed down the deck, through the companion, and made their way below.

At a door they stopped. Sir James looked at Violet, studying her face, then nodded approvingly.

"You'll do," he said; "go in now. I'll be within hail if you want me; but try not to. Fight it out yourself. Good luck." He smiled at her, patted her shoulder, and turned away, leaving Violet to enter alone, and alone to fight her battle with death.

And that death was very near now to Henry Kempton was plain for all to see. His shadow lay on the sharpened features, the great hopeless eyes saw him, and seeing, gazed back unflinching, no fear, but dreary welcome in their depths.

Violet saw him too, felt at her heart the chill of his presence, and for a moment terror gripped her, her brain reeled. But then, remembering, she rallied, her eyes flung back the phantom's challenge, and with every faculty braced and ready for battle she moved forward.

A nurse seated by the bedside, fanning the still figure, rose at her approach, Violet taking the place she had left.

"You can leave us," she said. "Lie down, if you like. I will call you if necessary."

The woman hesitated, her eyes fixed on Henry's face.

"I think perhaps, your ladyship," she began, "Sir James might not . . . His orders, you know, are very . . ."

"I'm here by Sir James's wish. He's outside; ask him, if you like, but please go," and the nurse, with one last quick glance at Henry's face, went.

"Henry dear, I've come to say something to you."

The closed eyes opened with a startled look. He stirred uneasily.

"What is it?" he murmured.

"I have been talking to Sir James, dear, and he says that you could get well if you tried, but that you won't try. Is that true, Henry?"

"No, no. Oh, Violet, be kind as you always have been and let me die in peace."

"Henry, why won't you fight? Is there something on your mind, dear? If so, won't you tell it to me?"

"There's nothing . . . nothing at all. I . . ."

"Supposing I know what it is, supposing I know all about . . . Ruth? But it makes no difference; it makes no difference. Do you hear, Henry? Oh, my God, what have I done?" For Henry was sitting up, with a scarlet

face and wildly staring eyes ; then, falling back, he lay still, his eyes closed.

A shriek for Sir James rose to Violet's lips, but was strangled in time, and, with instinct alone as her guide, she flung herself on her knees by the bedside, and, bending down, kissed the white lips. And instinct, as usual with a woman, was right, for the closed eyes straightway opened, a hand half moved towards her face, then checked itself and fell back.

"You know," he muttered, "you know."

"Yes, I've known all along, and it makes no . . ."

"How did you know?"

"How? Ah, my dear, there were kind friends enough to tell me, though without their telling I knew. Couldn't I read it in your letters, dear? Was I blind, do you suppose?"

"And knowing, you—you made no sign."

"I was waiting for you to tell me. I'm waiting now, Henry. A part, it's true, I know, but there's much more for me to learn."

"And—and when I have, you'll cast me off, I suppose. You must ; there could be no other issue to such a story as mine."

"No, there can be no other issue. Any woman would cast you off, as you say. And . . . don't you think she'd be right, Henry?"

"Yes. But why did you tell me, Violet? I knew you must hear it eventually, but I thought, I hoped, I should be dead first. That's why I would not fight."

"Henry, answer me a question. Do—do you regret this woman? Tell me the truth, dear, before God."

Henry stared at her. "Regret her," he said, and laughed.

"Oh, Violet, don't you know, can't you see? Oh, but what's the use now? No, I don't regret her; she has ceased to exist for me. It happened in one minute. Where she is now I neither know nor care."

"But, dear, surely you—you know about her."

"I know nothing, nor . . ."

"She is dead, Henry."

"Is she, what does it matter?"

"She was found dead in the ruins of Losfontein; the farmhouse was shelled next morning, and she was left there to die. Oh, Henry, don't you care at all?"

"No. Dead or alive, it's the same to me. All is the same to me now."

"Won't you tell me the whole story, dear?"

"If you like. It makes no difference now. Violet, I deceived you from the first; I pretended to love you solely to serve my own ends. I liked you, I was happy with you, but it was not love. All the same, I was determined never to be untrue to you; not from any sense of honour—I never had any—but, again, because it was against my own interests. If I should ever love, which I did not believe, I relied on my brain to crush it down. I was so strong, you see. I, strong!" and he laughed drearily. "Give me some of that, please, I—I am rather out of breath."

He gulped down the draught handed him by Violet, and went on:

"Then I met her, and all my boasted brain went for nothing. It turned against me, rather, and fought for her. Ah, Carados was right indeed in what he said."

"Carados right! Oh, Henry, you say that now, after all . . ."

"Yes, for we are a battleground for emotions to fight on, and where the strongest wins, but . . . it lies with those who have the training of us as children to strengthen the right and suppress the wrong; then when the inevitable struggle comes the vile go under. There was no fight in my case, Violet. I had no weapons. We Kemptons are not like you Ravenscrofts, who are taught truth and honour from your cradles. We learnt other things: the

opening and reading of other people's letters, the sharp dealing that puts money in the pocket, the luring to our houses of guests one degree more presentable than those of our neighbours. Faugh! who should know it better than I, who am one of them?"

"Oh, Henry dear, be just. Your father was never like that, I am sure. He is an honourable man, and—and devoted to you. He was broken-hearted when he heard of—of Losfontein. He wished to come out with me, and would have done, but the doctors forbade him."

"It is him I blame more than the rest, for they were nothing to me; he was, in a way. As a child, I thought a lot of my father, Violet. I relied on his teaching and believed in it, and . . . Everything he told me I found afterwards to be wrong. I found amongst other things he'd lied in saying that only outcasts drank, gambled, and were immoral; for men and women, as I saw, did these things daily, and were regarded as no outcasts, but were smiled upon by all. I lost all faith then, and with no knowledge of the world, or life as it really is, relied on myself till Carados came and gave me the teaching I welcomed, for I saw it was no sham, no ignorance. He spoke of things he knew."

"As *he* knew them."

"Possibly. From a poisoned source comes poison. But how was I, poor, ignorant fool, to know that? I swallowed both truth and poison together."

Again he stretched out his hand for a draught; and then resumed his bitter, laboured speech.

"Well, being an ignorant fool, and defenceless, passion had its own way with me. It blinded my eyes, making me believe in a worthless woman's truth. It drove me to work to make a name for her; and I did, too, of a kind, though I know now I was but second-rate, really. I kept you in the dark, being afraid that if I told you your influence would

be withdrawn and my advancement come to an end. You were to know only when I had attained my object, a K.C.B. She promised to marry me then, you see. God be thanked, I never got it, that K.C.B." He stopped, drank again, then went on. "And all the time, as any but a fool would have known, she was deceiving me. It was Vanderbyl, the Dutchman I shot, she really cared for, not me; and between them they hatched their scheme. He drew me on to Losfontein, where she was waiting. She sent for me. I went, told her my plans, everything. She passed them on to Vanderbyl, and I was . . . caught."

"But how—how do you know all this, Henry?"

"I heard it from two Germans in the farmhouse. I understand German, you know. They thought I was unconscious, but I . . . heard. Then they went out, and she and I were left alone."

"This—this woman, Henry?"

"Yes. She was unconscious, too, till then—from shock, they said. I had killed her lover, and they had told her suddenly. I awakened her, though, and she came. She was quite mad; thought I was Carl Vanderbyl, and gave me interesting information." He laughed. "A thousand pounds was my price, Violet. She asked me how she should spend it; suggested a tombstone for me. I shan't want a tombstone, though. A sack, a shot, the waves, and the ship gone on. Who cares?" A long pause.

"Henry, is that all?"

"No, there's one thing more, the chief thing of all. You won't believe it, but it's true. When I heard from her of—of the money, a curious thing happened. My love died then and there, and . . ."

"Yes, yes, and . . ."

"I wanted you, Violet. My God, how I wanted you, longed for the sight of your face, the touch of your hand, the rest you have always brought me. In that moment I

loved you, Violet, and from that moment my hell began, and will last till I die. I think of all I've lost, of all I have sacrificed for a worthless passion, when all the time the real love was there within my reach, and I, blind fool, never knew it. This is my punishment, Violet, and a just one, to love and to know that by my own fault my love is now too late. Losfontein, the ruin of my career, is nothing to me in comparison. It's losing you that makes life valueless. That is all. I—I think I am . . . dying. Violet! Violet!"

He fell back gasping and was still, for, the story ended, the strength born of excitement and determination to go through with it was ended also. Death crept a pace nearer, his shadow deepened on the white face, but the woman thrust herself between, battle joined.

"Henry, my love," she whispered, and, raising him in her arms, she held him close to her. "You shall not die, Henry; there is no need to die. Live, dearest, for me."

The heavy eyelids unclosed, for a moment he stared, not comprehending.

"Violet, you can't mean . . . forgive."

"Forgive, of course I forgive, so freely and fully, dear. What would my love be worth if I did not? Oh, Henry, fight—fight for your life now, for it is mine. I am helping you, Henry. You're in my arms, and together we're stronger than death."

"To what purpose, for you to cast me off in the end? No, no; you've forgiven me, that is enough. Let me die."

"You shall not. Be quiet, lie still in my arms, and listen. I cast you off now that you are broken and need me; I give up the battle when victory at last is in my hand? Oh, shame, dear, to judge me so. Ah, Henry, you were right, you never have taken love into account, you do not now, or you'd know that love, real love, is never hard, never condemns, but forgives always, and loves on."

"My God, is it possible?"

"After the past, you think. Dear, I am glad of that past, I am glad even of the . . . woman, for it's thanks to her that you are mine, all mine at last. Ah, Henry, the battle has been a hard one for me. The hand of a dead man struck me through you again and again, but I held on. I knew in the end you would come to me, and you . . . have. Carados is still in his grave at last, only death is against me now, but you are on my side, and we'll fight together and win."

"You—would—marry—me still—me?"

"Yes, when you like. Now will you fight, Henry?"

"Yes, with all my soul. I've been a cur, a liar, and a blackguard, Violet. I'm not fit to touch your hand, but if you want me, such as I am, I am yours. Oh, let me begin now. Give me that stuff in that bottle there. I wouldn't take it before, but now, by God, I'll drink gallons, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"Henry, Henry, I say! Sir James, Sir James, he's dying, he is . . ."

A hand thrust her unceremoniously aside, and a grey head was bent over the still figure.

"Be quiet," he said roughly; then suddenly turned and, smiling, held out his hand. "Go to bed," he said, "you have chattered long enough."

"He's not . . . dead?"

"Dead, no; he's asleep, worn out, and no wonder, with your cackling. Now stop that," sharply. "Don't faint here. Nurse, take her ladyship to bed, she's overtired. Oh yes, yes, he's all right. Nurse, will you take her ladyship away? See him in the morning? I don't know. Certainly not if you don't go now. Oh, all right, I promise you. Good night."

Sir James, with a sigh of relief, sat down by the bedside and fixed his eyes on the now peaceful face. "Bless me," he muttered, as he watched, "the man's smiling. Hum, had their little explanation, I see."

THE END

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