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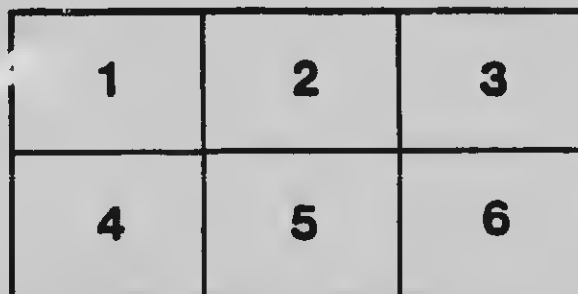
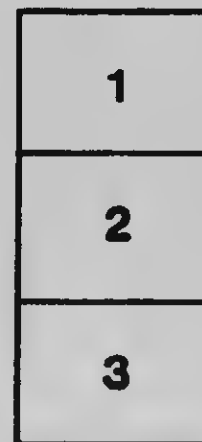
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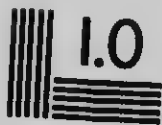
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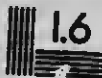
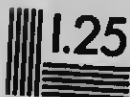
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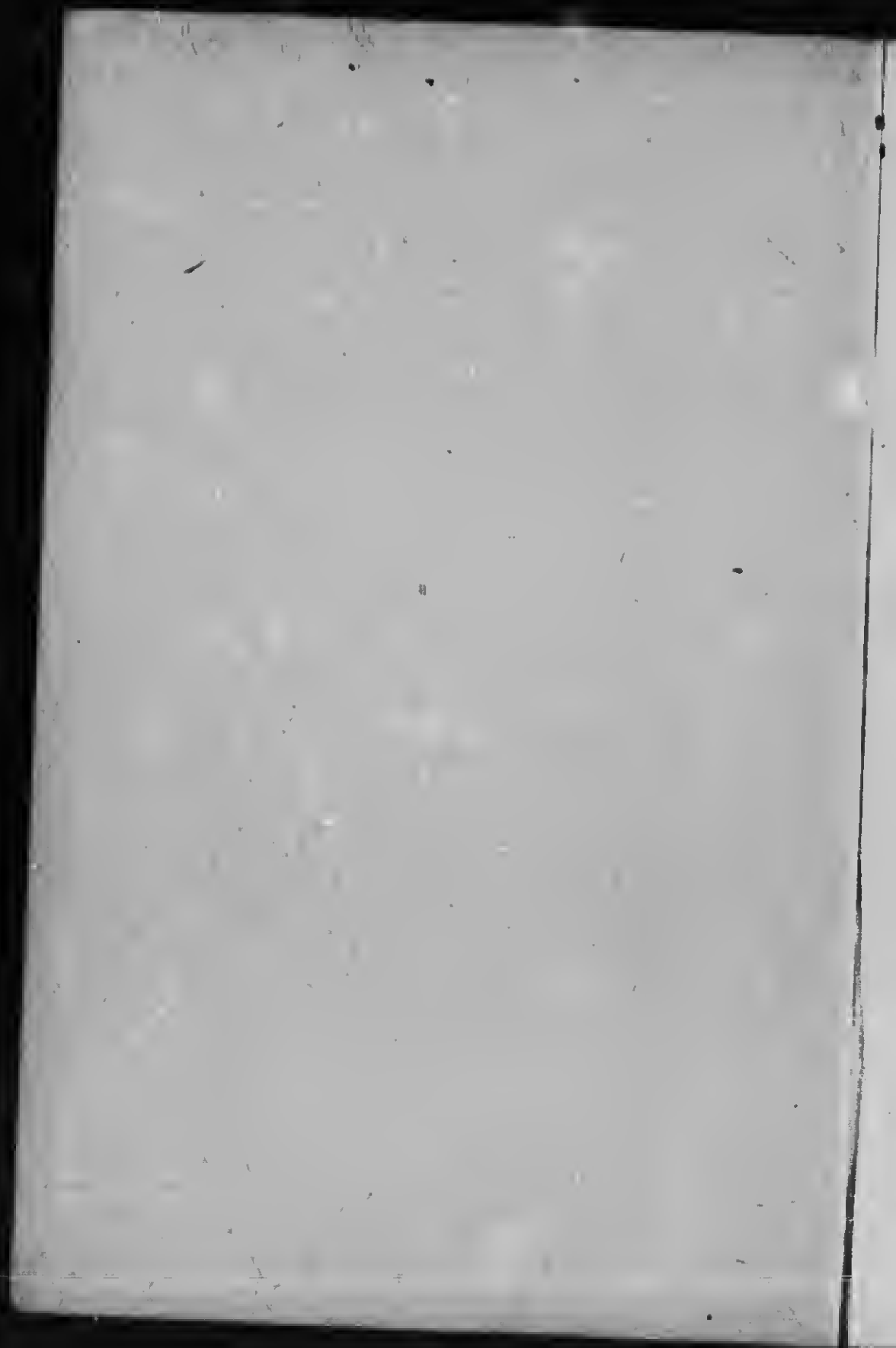
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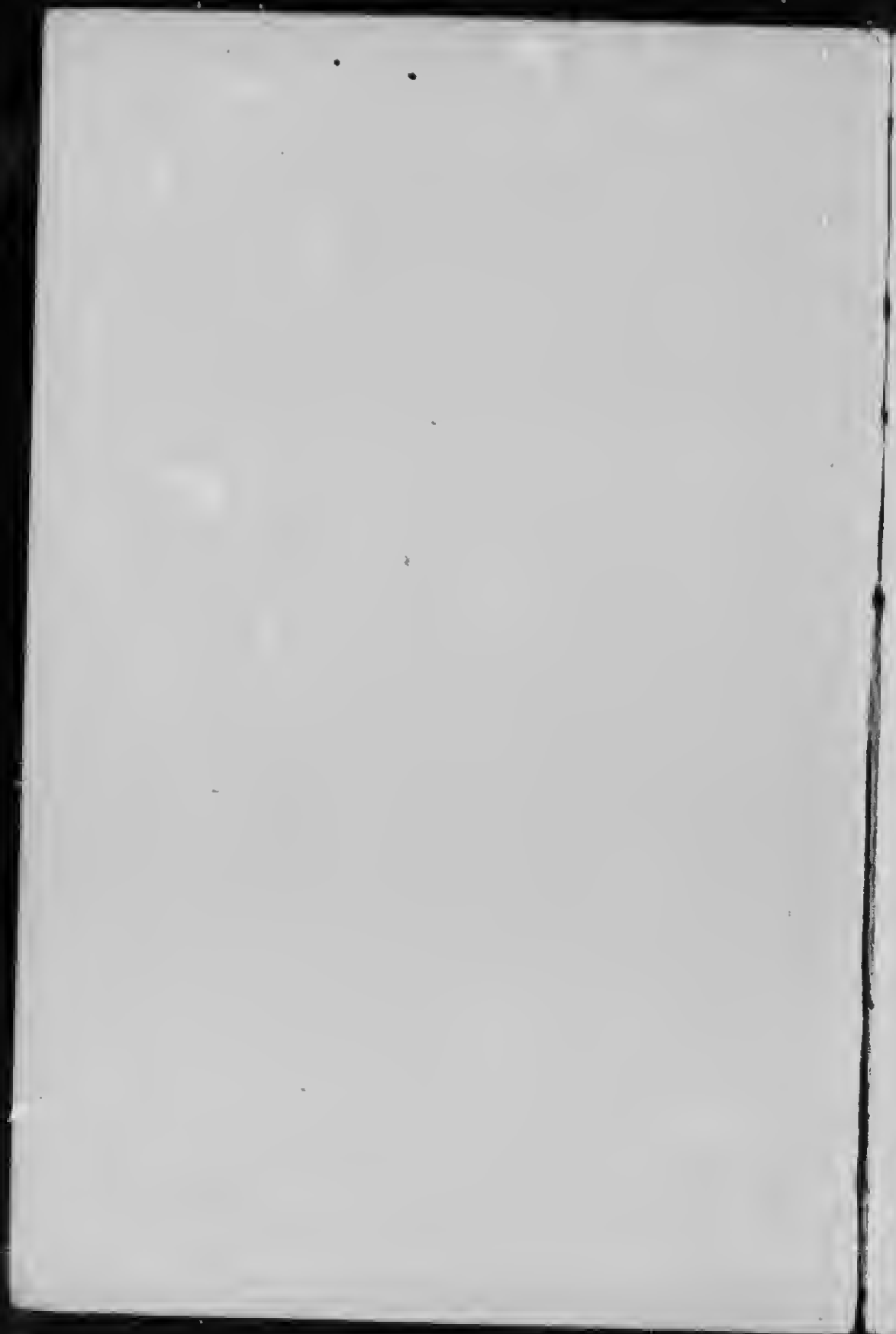
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wishes for Christmas  
& the New Year.

Eldred.

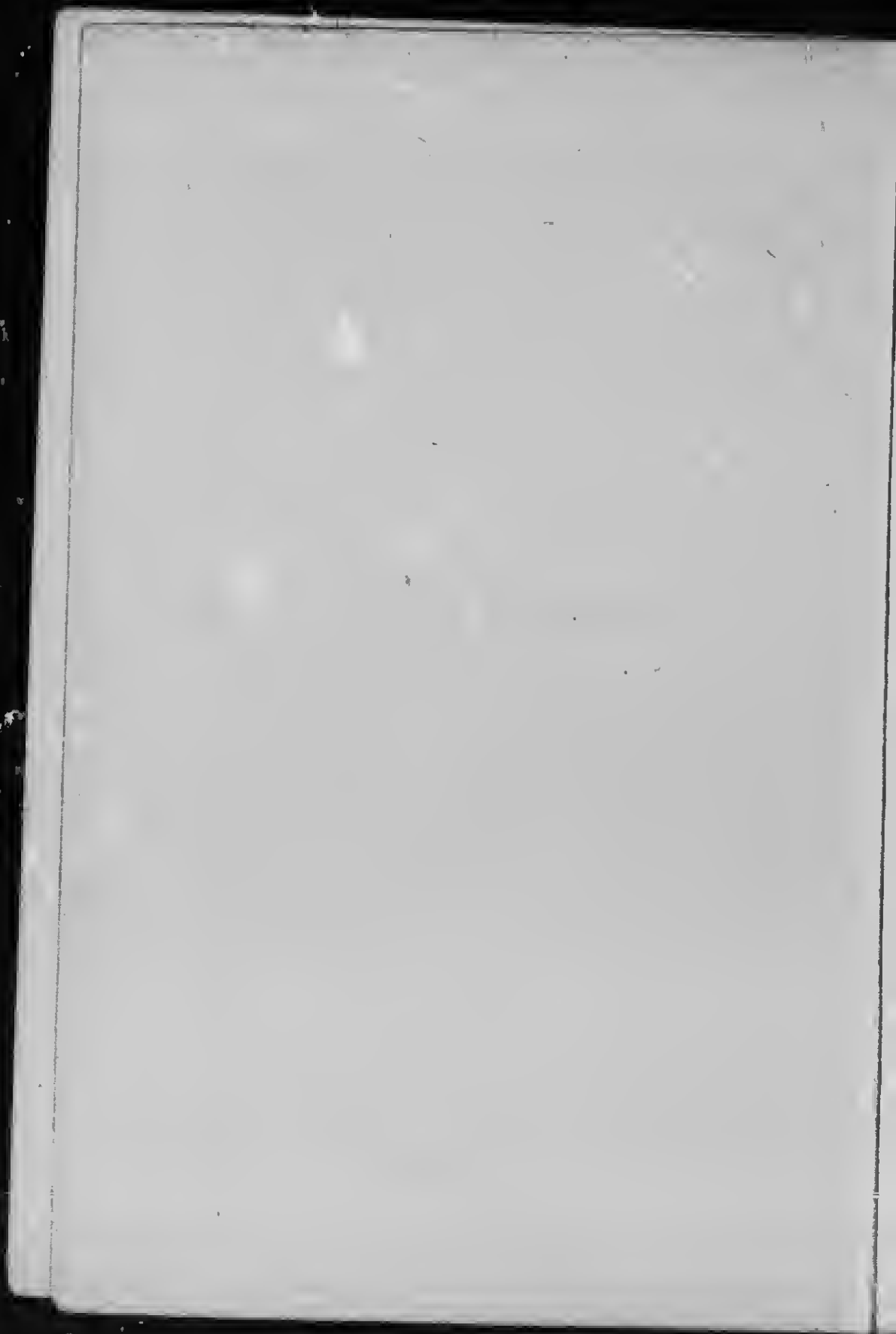


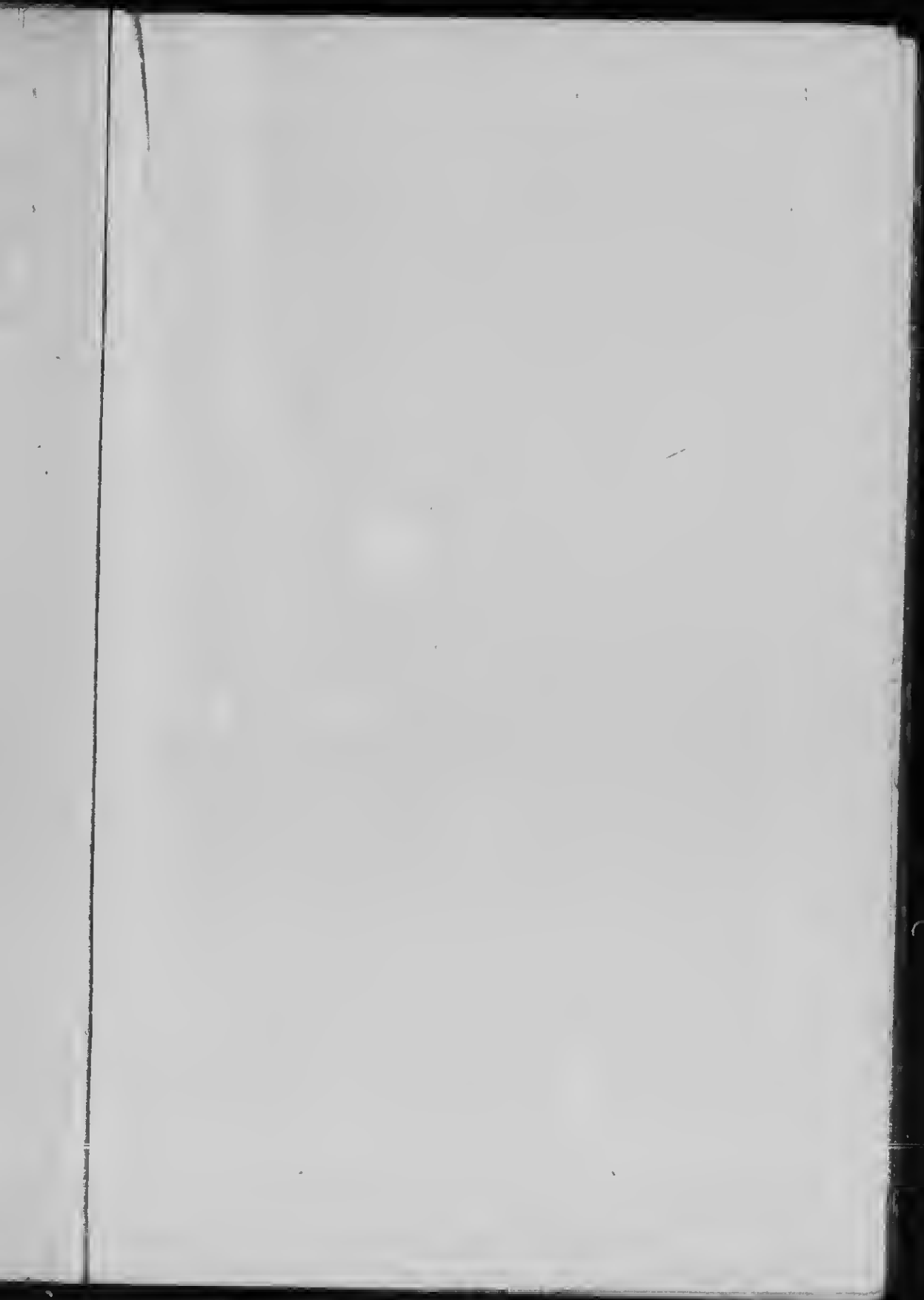






**CORRODING GOLD**







“ ‘Don’t grudge me these few minutes,’ he said desperately ”  
(see page 10).

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# CORRODING GOLD

BY

**ANNIE S. SWAN**

Author of "Prairie Fires," "A Favourite of Fortune," etc.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE IN COLOUR BY  
C. E. BROCK



**CASSELL AND COMPANY, LTD**  
London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne  
1914



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# CORRODING GOLD

## CHAPTER I

### ESTELLE

ESTELLE RODNEY had had a most discouraging day at her post in the Romsey Road Board School, Camberwell. The infants had seldom been denser, less malleable, or more tiresome. Some of them had cried, and some of them had slept for the greater part of the afternoon.

Estelle attributed this state of matters entirely to the lack of fresh air. She was excessively fond of it herself; but over-indulgence of her craze for ventilating the room in season and out of season had resulted in a crusade of Camberwell mothers against it, and these had driven their protests home so effectually that explicit instructions had been issued to Miss Rodney regarding the opening of the windows.

The personal hygiene of that section of Camberwell infants left much to be desired, and the mingled odours of the class-room were such that the moment it was emptied of its human swarm at half-past three on this particular afternoon Estelle threw all the windows open to their utmost extent. At the last one she paused, leaned her elbows for a moment on the wide sill, and looked out across the huddling roofs and spires, as if seeking some remote, almost impossible horizon.

There are parts of old Camberwell which are still beautiful, and which are relieved from dinginess by

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patches of welcome greenery, but the side on which the infant mistress looked out was the quarter of the working hive—a labyrinth of mean streets whence the unhygienic infants sprang.

An immense disgust of it all, coupled with a strange weariness of life, oppressed Estelle Rodney, and she turned round and round on her finger a small, thin, old-fashioned ring, as if asking from it some solution of the problem of her life.

She was twenty-six years of age, and had looks of a kind. In another sphere she might have been spoken of as a Diana or a Juno, being tall and generously built, with a handsome figure, a clever, intellectual face, comprising a broad brow, thoughtful, if a trifle hard, grey eyes, and a firm and well-modelled mouth. Her garb was severely simple and eminently suited to her occupation—a neat, well-cut skirt of dark, serviceable tweed, and a shirt-blouse of Viyella flannel not too light in hue, trimly belted to her waist and finished with a knotted black tie, in which shone a plain gold safety-pin. Her hair was abundant and becomingly arranged, if a little severe in style.

The effect was perhaps a trifle drab, but at the moment it was in keeping with her mood. She was thinking of her future, and mentally looking down the vista of the years that she fully expected to spend in the school—years probably going on until she had reached the mature age of some of the other teachers, one of whom she knew for a fact to be forty-three. And it was an open secret that that teacher was only suffered to remain on the staff because the Board had some compunction with regard to dismissing a middle-aged woman who had nothing to live on except what she could earn, and who, if bereft of her post there, would probably fail to find another anywhere.

What the ratepayers might have had to say to this

philanthropic attitude of mind they did not ask themselves, though each individual member was fully aware that Miss Inman did not earn her salary.

As Estelle left to go to the cloak-room for her coat and hat she encountered that lady on the stairs—a thin, meagre, rather pitiful figure, prematurely aged, with rounded shoulders and tight, skimpy grey hair screwed up into a knot behind, with the result that the somewhat large features seemed to be accentuated.

"You look tired, Miss Rodney," she said, and her sympathetic smile had a sudden sweetness which softened all the harsher outlines of her face.

"I am. It's the great unwashed that are responsible. My place has been unbearable this afternoon. If I were a rich woman, I should come down to Camberwell and establish and endow a School of Hygiene for mothers."

Miss Inman faintly smiled. She was used to Miss Rodney's rather drastic remarks, and, as a rule, she enjoyed them. She had no interest beyond the Romsey Road Board School, and, had she been suddenly torn from her setting, she would probably have wilted like a flower long past its bloom.

No item in connection with the school was too insignificant to engage her breathless attention, a new coal-boy for the scuttles being sufficient to fill her with speculation for the rest of the day. She took a personal and vivid interest in every teacher and employee, from the head master down even to the charwoman who cleaned the schools each morning. She observed every change in dress, as well as every variation of tone or mood, and two things about Miss Rodney to-day struck her—namely, that she looked dingy and not so nice as usual, also that she was considerably out of sorts.

"I'm sorry you feel it all so much," she said. "Now, I can never be warm enough! My room has been sixty-

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five degrees all the afternoon, and look—my fingers are blue with cold!”

Miss Inman's circulation was bad owing to the insufficiency of the exercise she took and the inferior quality of the food she ate, whereas Estelle was a full-blooded creature who could endure any physical discomfort except that caused by lack of fresh air.

“I'm deadly sick of life at this moment, Miss Inman. As I was trying to impart some highly uninteresting information this afternoon, I couldn't help asking myself whether the Almighty could ever have created me or any sensible, capable woman for such a destiny.”

Miss Inman giggled, and her pince-nez fell off in the process and, to her great distress, alighted on the stone passage and were broken!

Estelle quickly stooped and picked them up.

“I'm sorry, Miss Inman, and, as it was I who caused you to break them, I'll take them with me and leave them at Mason's as I go by. I dare say he can have them repaired by to-morrow morning.”

It was because she was so capable and so alert of thought that Estelle commanded respect. In certain directions she had great qualities of head and heart. What she wanted was more scope, a freer air, a life unhampered in its movements by system and curriculum. She felt her nature narrowing as the years were going by, and her whole being revolting against the process.

When she had put on her neat coat and her serviceable hat, and had thrown her warm, fleecy Shetland scarf about her neck, she looked even older than her years.

“I needn't wait, as you don't go home my way, Miss Inman. So I'll bid you good afternoon.”

“Just wait a minute, and I'll go across the playground with you,” said Miss Inman, struggling into a raincoat that had neither heat nor protection in it.

"Haven't you got anything warmer than that to put on?" asked Estelle, with ready sympathy.

"Not at present. My coat and skirt have worn out, and I gave them to the woman who comes in to clean my room. I can't afford to begin wearing my other just yet, as I am waiting till the January sales come on to buy another one. Last July, at the Bon Marché, they had some beauties at thirty-five shillings. I'm saving up for one of them."

Estelle quickly unwound her scarf and put it about her colleague's thin neck.

"Take that. I don't want it, really," she said. "It's mother who fusses about throat wraps. And it didn't cost me anything," she added, as Miss Inman was about to protest. "It came out of the shop. Father had a stock that he couldn't get rid of, so he presented us each with one. It suits you better than me, anyway. I'm not one of the muffling-up ones."

Miss Inman's thin face glowed a little, and her nose assumed an even redder tint than usual on the point.

"You are a good sort, Miss Rodney! I often think of how good you have been to me all these years. You have never made me feel small and cheap, as some of them constantly do."

"Why should I? You are every bit as good as I am. You are far too meek, Miss Inman—you ought to stand up to them and give them as good as you get. Common lot, I call some of them. Well, I think I'll go. Good-bye."

Thus caustically dismissing, as it were, the whole staff, Estelle tripped out into the raw November air, and made her way across the playground to the gates. It was certainly cold for November. A grey, threatening sky hung low, presaging either snow or that cold, biting kind of winter rain which is even more discouraging. But Estelle loved to feel the tang of it on her cheek.

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Although it was only the heavy, crowded South London air that she had to breathe, she opened her mouth and lungs to it as if she loved and enjoyed it.

The school grounds, easily the most ample in the neighbourhood, were defined by a high railing and handsome iron gates, which gave the buildings quite an institutional air. No sooner had Estelle reached the gates than a man, evidently watching from the other side, crossed the roadway and advanced to meet her, with his unoccupied hand ready to raise his hat. Under one arm he carried a large flat portfolio, which might have contained drawings.

He had a tall figure, which he did not carry very well. His shoulders had the stoop of the student—a stoop that the carelessness of his dress seemed to accentuate. His face was an arresting one, being finely featured and suggestive of intellect, though it was marred by an exaggerated gravity of expression.

He was a frequent visitor at The Laurels, and Estelle's young brother Jack had attributed this gloom to the fact that he was called Eugene.

"What could you expect from a dosser called that?" he had asked with a healthy contempt, rejoicing at the same time in his own good old English name.

Estelle looked pleased—in a friendly way—to see him, but she betrayed not the smallest sign of self-consciousness or confusion. From her point of view, they were simply good comrades—nothing more. But his glance, as it rested on the trim figure and kind, strong face of Estelle Rodney, was undoubtedly eager.

She was the only woman that counted in his life, and she stood for all that womanhood can mean to an imaginative man. Estelle had no conception how Eugene Woods had idealised her. Probably she would have laughed had he told her.

"How did you get out so soon?" she asked when she had given her friendly nod. "I don't remember that Thursday's a short day at the Poly."

"It isn't; but I manœuvred to steal ten extra minutes in order that I might catch you here. Something has happened, Estelle—they have offered me Tinayre's place."

"As head of the Art Classes," she said inquiringly. "It'll make a difference, won't it, Eugene? I'm very glad."

"A difference of a hundred a year. Poor Tinayre goes back to his vineyards—so we are both satisfied. I thought you'd be glad."

"I am glad, of course. Everybody who knows you will be. I suppose it means more work?"

"I don't mind that. It will make other things possible," he said rather significantly.

"But it won't give you any more time for your writing, will it?" she asked, with some solicitude.

"It will at least give me more heart."

"We had better walk on, hadn't we?" suggested Estelle. "At least, if you are going my way. They'll all be swarming out presently from the school, and you know what some of them are."

She spoke with quite a snap in her voice, and her pleasant face hardened.

"You're deadly sick of that crowd, Estelle," said Eugene quickly.

"Oh, I am! only goodness knows how sick! I've simply loathed everything to-day—even the children. I could have slaughtered them every one!"

"You're overtired. Yours isn't a woman's work. It's killing you, Estelle," he said anxiously.

"Oh, no. I'm an able-bodied woman, as strong as a horse. It's only the spirit that gets the better of me. I'm most awfully interested in poor old Monsieur

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Tinayre. How did he manage ever to save enough to take him back to France?"

"He saved it by semi-starvation. In the last two years I know for certain that he never permitted himself on any occasion more than two meals a day."

"Happy France, to have won so much devotion from one of her sons!" said Estelle lightly. "Is there an Englishman anywhere who would cheat his stomach for the sake of his country?"

"There may be one or two, I hope, but I shouldn't like to be sure," said Woods, with his queer, slow smile. "How you hit the nail on the head, Estelle! You are a perfect joy to me!"

"A sledge-hammer sort of joy, eh? And where is it Monsieur Tinayre has gone?"

"To Provence, to sit in the vineyards of his boyhood. That is how he expresses it."

"I wish him joy of them, and I hope they will come up to expectation when he gets there. To struggle for something so frightfully must mean that possession, when it at length comes, will disappoint, I think, for that is life."

Woods looked at the strong, fine face beside him with much feeling in his eyes. But Estelle had forgotten him. She seemed to be pursuing some train of thought suggested by Eugene's mention of the Frenchman's projected return to the land of his birth.

"If I have to stop much longer at Romsey Road, I shall behold in myself a second edition of Eliza Inman—wasted, worn, starved in body and in soul," she said presently. "The life of a teacher is no life for a woman. But Miss Inman is meek and good, while I am merely rebellious."

"It's one of the injustices of our time that women have to work as you do," said Woods passionately. "That is not what they were created for."



"There was more room in the world, certainly, when Eve had it to herself," said Estelle with a slight smile. "Well, tell me what you are going to do with this tremendous access of fortune that has come to you?"

He regarded her eagerly, fully alive to the opportunity offered by her question, yet a little afraid to grasp it.

He loved Estelle Rodney with the strong, fine passion of a man who, though thirty years of age, had never dissipated his gift of loving in philandering. A cramped and circumscribed youth, closely wedded to poverty of the most grinding kind, because the aspirations of his spirit were far ahead of his circumstances, had kept him austere and pure and singularly unspotted from the world.

He was the son of a small tradesman, and his mother, recognising in him undoubted gifts of a more versatile kind than fall to the lot of most men, had, in the face of much opposition, toiled and denied herself so that he might have the education fitted to his needs. Some years spent at the Polytechnic, where he was now the Art Master, had at least opened the door to the culture necessary for the maturing of his talents.

But what is culture?—rather a thing of the spirit, ingrained in the being, than acquired by meretricious polish. No word in the English language has been more completely wrenched from its true meaning, or is more persistently misunderstood.

Eugene Woods found in Estelle some strength and purpose perhaps lacking in himself. She inspired him to the highest endeavour—made him long to conquer the world for her sake. It was she who had encouraged him to write, some intuition assuring her that, though he was an excellent teacher of drawing, he might become a still more excellent writer of books.

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Strange how the real gift, which is destined to illumine the life, sometimes comes to full growth so slowly that in its initial stages it is apt to be unrecognised!

Woods was just beginning the literary life, and had not as yet had even sufficient success to encourage him to go on.

Estelle knew all this, and she was deeply interested in his progress, but nothing more.

She was perfectly well aware, being one of the quickest and most observant of women, that Eugene was in love with her. But that knowledge did not disturb her very much. She had the idea that she would never marry. Certainly she had no wish to marry Eugene. He was, in her opinion, too much of a big child.

Something in the atmosphere disturbed her at that moment, and, turning her clear, fine eyes to him, she caught the expression in his, and she began to quicken her steps, reddening furiously. She had no wish to receive a proposal of marriage from Eugene Woods in the Romsey Road at four of the afternoon.

"I think I'll take a bus," she said, with an odd, unusual nervousness. "I was forgetting that mother has a tea-fight on this afternoon, and I promised to get home quickly."

"Presently, Estelle. Don't grudge me these few minutes," he said desperately, fearing to lose his opportunity. "I've something to ask you. Don't you think that two people could live together comfortably on two hundred and fifty pounds a year in a little house a little farther out from the city, perhaps—as near to the fringe of the country as would be possible for a man who has to earn his living in London?"

"I dare say. Thousands have to do it on less," answered Estelle, speaking at random.

"I can't bear to see you wearing your youth out in that incessant, sordid kind of toil," he said passionately.

"My youth! Oh, it's gone long since. I'm twenty-six," she answered lightly. "Besides, ordinarily I am quite happy and like Romsey Road immensely. They really are quite an amusing crowd—the staff, I mean. It's a little world all on its own, with heaps of comedy served up daily. Some day, when I am able to catch an inspiration from you, I'll write the 'Comedy of the County Council School.' I'm sure it would go down. Don't you think so?"

She was merely parrying with him—saying anything that occurred to her at the moment which might serve to stave off forbidden themes, while all the time she was keeping a strict look-out for her motor-bus.

"You've got to listen to me, Estelle, and to answer me, too. Won't you marry me? If I had you beside me all the time, I'm sure I could write the book that you are always talking to me about. I feel that I have it in me."

"Marriage is fatal to genius," answered Estelle; "domesticity is its sworn foe. And it doesn't allure me, either. I'd liefer teach the Romsey Road kids than keep house any day! It would bore me to extinction in a week."

"Not if you cared——" he began.

Then Estelle turned to him and looked quite calmly and pointedly into his face.

"But I don't care, Eugene—at least, not to that extent. Marriage is a big thing—certainly the biggest that comes in a woman's way. It's too full of risks, and it might easily transform me into a fiend! I'm not taking these risks at present."

It was a very chilly answer to a sincere and impassioned offer; but Woods accepted it courageously. His love was no mushroom growth, but, on the contrary,

## CORRODING GOLD

it was a deep-rooted and strong affection which had developed slowly, and which nothing would destroy or even diminish.

"Of course, I know I have little to offer," he began again.

But Estelle stopped him with uplifted finger.

"It isn't that, Eugene. You yourself must know that, if a woman cared at all, she wouldn't think of that. It's a poor kind of love that would weigh up everything and would only be concerned as to what it was going to get out of marriage. No, no; you deserve something better! I can't give it to you. Let us be friends and comrades as we've always been. I don't want you to go out of my life," she added kindly.

This was a crumb of comfort, to which Woods clung desperately.

"I shan't. You needn't be afraid of that. I'm in it for all time," he said quietly. "I'll stand by, then, and work—heavens! how I shall work!—till I have something worth while to show."

She shook her head rather disconsolately, for that was not the point at all.

"It isn't what you can offer that would weigh with me," she reminded him. "If I felt like marrying you, it would make no difference to me whether you had one hundred or two hundred a year. Don't let us talk any more about it. And I hope what has been said won't make any difference—specially to our Saturday evenings at home. I'll expect you as usual on that day. Well, here's my bus. Good-bye."

She nodded brightly, told him to put on his hat, as people were staring at him, and darted off.

Once inside the bus, she closed her eyes and permitted her thoughts to dwell for a little while on the episode of the afternoon.

It had cheered her undoubtedly, for a woman past

her first youth can never be quite indifferent with regard to a lover, even should he not be quite all that she could desire.

The Rodneys lived at Denmark Hill, in a little cul-de-sac called Bigwood Lane, where the houses, though small, were all detached and had quite pretty gardens.

They had lived there just seven years, though their earliest memories were of residence in a roomy old house above their father's place of business in the City Road. As the price of City property steadily advanced Samuel Rodney had grasped the fact that it would be considerably to the advantage of his pocket, as well as to the improvement of the health of his children, if he were to let the premises above the shop and to remove his household a little farther out.

He had hesitated a long time before he had taken this step, for he was oddly attached to the house in which he had been born and in which he had been brought up, and, moreover, he was very conservative in all his ideas. Nevertheless, on the whole, he had, sentiment apart, never had any reason to regret the change he had at that time made, for, after paying rent and taxes for the house in Bigwood Lane, he found himself fifty pounds per annum in pocket by it.

Estelle's face still wore an expression of deep thought as she got off the bus at the end of Bigwood Lane and walked towards the green wicket which gave admission to the small strip of garden in front of the house.

As she went through the gate she beheld a man on the step apparently ringing vainly at the bell.

The electric bell was one of a very inferior type and was constantly going out of order, and Estelle hastened forward to apologise to the man and explain why it had not rung.

She was surprised at his appearance. He was middle-

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aged and of very dignified carriage—a professional man, beyond doubt, she decided even before she observed the small brief-bag that he carried in his left hand.

"I am afraid you are finding it difficult to make yourself heard," she said with a smile. "It is a tiresome bell and is always getting out of order. I have a key, however."

"Thank you very much," he said, slightly raising his hat. "Am I right in thinking that Mrs. Rodney lives here?"

"Yes, she does—she is my mother," said Estelle courteously, and, fitting her latch-key in the door, she quickly threw it open.

## CHAPTER II

### THE BOMB-SHELL

As they entered Estelle had to decide to which room she would take him.

The sound of voices and the smell of buttered crumbs proclaimed that the drawing-room was fully engaged. She opened the door of the dining-room, to find the table there drawn out to its full length and covered with articles which the working-party at Mrs. Rodney's had made for the annual Christmas sale for the funds of the chapel. Their minister was a bachelor, whose lack of a wife to direct the various activities of the women of his congregation had been in a measure supplied when Mrs. Rodney, great in good works and a very capable manager, stepped into the breach.

The only other room to which a stranger might have been taken was the morning-room, and past experience inclined Estelle to believe that it would then be in temporary use as a cloak-room for wraps.

"I am afraid there is no proper place to put you in," she said with a charming and slightly apologetic smile. "My mother happens to have a working-party this afternoon. Will you come in here, please?" she said, leading the way to the dining-room, "and excuse all these things lying about."

"That is a matter of no consequence," answered the stranger pleasantly. "My name is Underwood, of the firm of Holt and Underwood, John Street, Bloomsbury."

This did not convey any very precise information

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to Estelle Rodney, though it had crossed her mind that he might be a lawyer.

She removed a large and particularly hideous sofa blanket in worked wool which was displayed on the most comfortable arm-chair, drew the latter forward, and asked him to sit down, while she summoned her mother.

"It is my mother you wish to see?" she paused at the door to ask. "My father, of course, is at business in the City Road, and does not usually get home until about seven o'clock."

"My business is with Mrs. Rodney," he repeated with slight emphasis on the name.

Considerably mystified, Estelle went out quickly and closed the door. It was now dark enough to have all the lights turned on, and Estelle lit the gas in the hall and began to draw off her gloves.

She thought of sending in Julia, the little maid, to ask her mother to come out and speak to her, but, after a moment's consideration, she decided that that might be looked on as ostentatious and might give offence to some of the chapel ladies.

She knew them all, and could have numbered and named them on her fingers at the moment. Estelle did not share her mother's love for church activity, for she had made up her mind that such things have very little place in the system of religion. Such activity served merely as a sort of social chain, she thought, to bind numerous incongruous units together in imaginary oneness of purpose, and Estelle would have walked a long way round to avoid a working-party! In the oft-times hard way that youth has of judging, she dismissed it all rather contemptuously, without ever bestowing a thought on the real kindness, self-sacrifice, and comradeship which make such combined effort a blessing to church life.



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In ordinary circumstances her mother would have expected her to change her school garb for something more befitting the occasion. There was not time, however, to do that at present. So, with her gloves still in her hand, Estelle opened the drawing-room door.

It was a long narrow room with a French window looking out to the garden, and it was furnished in a very nondescript fashion with odd bits of furniture picked up at sales. In the City Road house there had been no drawing-room, but at Denmark Hill the daughters of the family had declared a drawing-room to be a necessity. It was by no means pretty, but it had a homely, attractive look, and the huge bunches of pink roses on the Early Victorian carpet had improved and mellowed with age and much usage.

Estelle beheld about twelve ladies of varying ages all busily engaged in consuming and, incidentally, praising the good things provided by their hostess for their enjoyment. Mrs. Rodney was an excellent household manager, and she particularly prided herself on her baking prowess. One entire morning once a fortnight was given up to it in preparation for the meeting of the working-party; and appreciation of her efforts was always ready and warm. Recipes were often asked for on these occasions.

"There isn't much use of passing on 'receipts'—so she called them—Mrs. Rodney would rather proudly remark to her family afterwards. "It's the touch that does it, and it isn't every woman that's got the light hand!"

Mrs. Rodney sat behind her well-spread table, dressed in a gown of stiff black satin with a lace collar fastened by a cameo brooch. She was a large, ample, comely woman with a high colour, bright and rather restless black eyes, and quantities of very dark hair, which had once been curly, but which she now kept

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in order by a special brand of brilliantine. A band of black velvet and a bow on top completed her coiffure, which was considered eminently suitable.

Estelle nodded pleasantly to the assembled party, and then fixed her eyes on her mother's face.

"There is someone waiting to see you in the dining-room, mother."

Mrs. Rodney looked startled.

"Very awkward time to call," she said. "Who is it, Estelle? Couldn't you have asked her business?"

"It's a gentleman, and he wishes to see you particularly."

Her mother betrayed signs of perturbation, and the ladies sat forward eagerly, much interested in this most unusual break into the precedent of the afternoon programme.

Mrs. Rodney wiped her mouth with one of the Japanese serviettes, provided at sevenpence a hundred, which saved the laundry bill and were considered rather smart at Camberwell teas that winter. Then she rose with a rustle of skirts.

"You'll excuse me, won't you?" she said. "Probably it is somebody who wishes to see Mr. Rodney. You are quite sure he asked for me, Estelle?"

"Oh, quite. I asked him twice."

"And you are quite sure that it is not somebody selling tea, or sewing machines, or combined washers and wringers, etc.?" she asked severely.

"I don't think it is anybody of that kind," answered Estelle, smiling as she walked to the door, pulling off her coat as she went and handing it to her mother. "Please, put that down somewhere, mother. I suppose I had better stop here till you come back?"

"Of course. And see that everybody has a second cup, and ring for Julia if more tea is needed," she said, glancing with disapproval at Estelle's working garb.

"It's a pity—but there, they'll understand," she added.

With that she was gone, and Estelle, feeling her face flushing already with the moist heat of the room, asked whether the ladies near the French window would mind if it was opened a little.

At this Mrs. Atherley, the wife of the veterinary surgeon, and a small, weary-faced creature, ostentatiously rose and seated herself at the other side of the room.

"Discretion is the better part of valour," she announced. "I suppose you've been walking home, Miss Rodney, and feel warm with the exertion?"

"No. I came up the hill on the bus, but I have been working in rather bad air all the afternoon, and, somehow, one never gets used to it."

"Dear Mrs. Rodney's drawing-room is rather low in the ceiling, and, of course, there is a great deal of furniture in it, and that uses up the air-space," said Mrs. Craddock, the grocer's wife. "We take in a delightful paper called the *Connoisseur*, and we are gradually altering the whole style of our house. Austere simplicity is the note it strikes, and last week a writer advocated the Japanese idea of house decoration—one picture, one ornament at a time in a room until one gets tired of them. Then put out a fresh one of each. Edgar was quite taken with the idea."

Estelle's fine mouth trembled a little with inward amusement as she pictured Mr. Craddock, with his white apron very tightly drawn across his too ample front, posing as a devotee of Japanese art!

"How awfully funny!" giggled Clara Ironside, who played the American organ in the chapel. "A ripping idea for people who can't afford to buy many pictures or ornaments! What did you say was the name of the paper, Mrs. Craddock?"



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The little woman, who before marriage had been a "first hand" in one of the Bon Marché departments, proceeded to enlarge on Japanese art, feeling that she had secured a special and not-to-be-neglected opportunity of airing her knowledge.

When Mrs. Rodney was in the room she quite naturally took the leading place among the ladies, and they all deferred to her. She was a very good-natured person and her heart was truly kind, but in some directions she was distinctly aggressive. Estelle had often felt thankful, especially on her mother's more active mornings, that she had an occupation that took her outside; and she had had a great sympathy with the views of a writer who in a recent number of the *Parents' Review* had an article entitled "The Menace of the Active Mother."

She listened to the conversation, but her thoughts were detached, naturally drifting in the direction of the dining-room, where an interview, more or less momentous, she believed, was now taking place between her mother and the stranger.

It was quite unduly prolonged. Five o'clock had struck, and Estelle was thinking of ringing for Julia to remove the tea things when she heard sounds indicating that the stranger was being shown out.

All the others heard them too, and, in some odd, instantaneous way, as if by common consent, they suspended their talk to listen and to wait.

The sound of murmuring voices lingered in the hall. Then there was a noise caused by the opening and the shutting of doors; yet still Mrs. Rodney did not hasten back.

Estelle felt herself getting nervous, and she was about to rise and investigate when the drawing-room door opened and the matron appeared.

Estelle never forgot to her dying day the expression of her mother's face at the moment. Her ruddy colour

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had paled with some inward excitement, her eyes gleamed, her ample bosom heaved.

The girl sprang forward.

"Dear mother, you have been vexed or troubled," she said impulsively, for Estelle's heart was really and truly kind.

Mrs. Rodney waved a hand of protest.

"No, no. Only a little upset. Let me sit down for a moment or two and drink a cup of tea."

"I'll bring some fresh," said Estelle quickly. "Everybody has finished."

Mrs. Rodney sank into a chair which had been vacated for her, and the most active and sympathising concern was depicted on every face.

Estelle was only a minute gone, for Julia, acting under severe instruction, had not for a moment permitted the large kettle to go off the boil on the gas-ring.

A cup of tea was quickly poured out, and Estelle made it to her mother's liking and handed it to her. While she was doing so she wished that all these women would have the sense to get up and go away, since the afternoon function was supposed to end with tea, and she was quite sure that her mother had something of importance to communicate.

They did not, however, betray the smallest intention of doing so; but, on the contrary, they waited with varying degrees of interest and ill-disguised curiosity for such enlightenment as Mrs. Rodney might elect to bestow on them.

"Now I feel better," said that lady when she had drunk three parts of her tea and eaten a morsel of rather leathery crumpet. "Ah, tea is a splendid stimulant! If some of our misguided friends would only realise that! But it must be good tea and be freshly made," she added viciously, "if it is to help one. Some of the tea one gets in houses where one might expect better

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things is, to say the least of it, highly injurious and improper."

One or two members of the party guiltily flushed, because "Days-at-home," however skilfully managed, present a difficulty in moderate households, where the quantity of tea to be consumed has to be taken into consideration.

Presently she looked round with a comprehensive smile, which, however, she quickly quenched.

"Ah, yes, life is a very strange thing; and even the most commonplace destiny is capable of being filled with romance! I have just heard something astonishing, almost overwhelming. I had a brother. He emigrated to Australia—let me see, it must be quite thirty years ago—and nothing has ever been heard of him since——"

Mrs. Rodney paused there, not caring to add that an immediate departure from his own country had become necessary, if he wished to continue a free man.

"He was my only brother—not particularly brilliant, a plodder rather than a meteor," she continued grandly. "But the way in which he has got on just shows that the parable of the hare and the tortoise still holds good."

"He has done well, dear Mrs. Rodney? How gratifying!" murmured Mrs. Craddock excitedly.

"Ah, yes, he has done splendidly; but, unfortunately, he has not been spared to reap the harvest of his labour and his success. The gentleman who called this afternoon was a lawyer come to announce his death and other very important matters in connection with his estate."

"How interesting!" "How sad!" "How strange!" were some of the murmured comments on this announcement, which Estelle listened to with a growing impatience.

She wanted the visitors to go away; she had the feeling that it was even indecent for them to linger,

prompted to do so, as she was sure they were, by no motive save that of sheer curiosity.

But nobody observed either her restlessness or her rather pointed movement towards the door, and her mother went on talking.

"The ways of Providence are very wonderful! I remember quite well the night on which my brother Edgar left home. We lived quite in the country in an old manor-house near the New Forest."

This was stretching a point with a vengeance, the mansion in question having been merely a farmhouse belonging to quite a small holding that had been held by her family for a period of years from the adjacent manor of Lipscombe.

"The spirit of adventure had come upon him, and he did not want to occasion unnecessary pain to the old people by any sort of leave-taking. So he left without saying good-bye, but he could not go without telling me, for we had always been inseparable. It was in the dead of night, and we parted in the moonlight at the back door. I gave him five pounds that I had saved up and kept in an old money-box; and it was veritably bread cast upon the waters. I never could have expected such a return!"

"Then your poor brother, though an exile, died a rich man abroad?" suggested Mrs. Craddock, who was always the chief spokeswoman of the working-party.

Mrs. Rodney inclined her head.

"He has left a great estate," was her answer, "a sheep-farm and a great deal of money. He has never married, and I, his only sister, am his sole legatee. Now, my dear friends," she added, "in the circumstances I am sure you will excuse me, for this is a great upset and I must be alone with my family to recover myself."

They all rose rather hastily, murmuring that of course she was perfectly right.

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"I suppose we may offer congratulations as well as condolences?" murmured Mrs. Craddock as she took her gloves from her reticule and began to pull them on her thin, work-worn hands. "Thirty years is a long time to be away, and Australia is a very distant country. It is hardly possible in these circumstances that grief can be so very acute!"

"You are wrong, Eliza. The ties of blood cannot be weakened either by lapse of time or greatness of distance," observed Mr. Rodney reprovingly.

"Well, all I hope is that it won't make any difference to us all, and that we shall not lose you from Denmark Hill or from the chapel," said Mrs. Atherley. "I, for one, shall go home and fervently pray," she added piously, "that this accession of fortune will just provide increased channels for your generous activity."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Rodney graciously. "I have bestowed my confidence on you because you are all such old and valued friends, but, of course, I do not wish this talked about, especially in the chapel. I assure you it will make no difference to me personally. I hope I have too much common sense and proper feeling to be uplifted even for a moment by the deceitfulness of riches."

It was rather a fine peroration, and Mrs. Rodney continued to hold forth spasmodically in this high strain until the door had closed behind the last of the band of visitors.

Then she simply flopped into the chair nearest the hall fireplace and called feebly for Estelle.

"Oh, these women! They were nearly the death of me! But didn't you think I carried it off rather well on the whole?"

"It was like somebody acting on the stage, mother," answered Estelle with her usual uncompromising blunt-



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ness. "It did not sound a bit real. I suppose it was true what you told them?"

Mrs. Rodney sat up suddenly, offended by the tone of her daughter's voice as well as by the nature of her remarks.

"True! It is perfectly true! That was Mr. Andrew Underwood, of the firm of Holt and Underwood, solicitors in Bloomsbury. It seems they have a corresponding firm in Melbourne who wrote to them to make inquiries about us."

"And Uncle Edgar really has left a fortune, then?"

"He has. A very great fortune! Mr. Underwood spoke of two hundred thousand pounds, and there is the sheep-farm besides."

"Good gracious! Two hundred thousand pounds!" exclaimed Estelle. "Then daddy will be able to get a rest at last!"

Her voice softened, and it was easy to gather from that where the tender spot in Estelle's heart was.

"But, mother, was all that true that you told them about the way in which Uncle Edgar left England?" she questioned. "I never heard the story before."

"It was quite true that he stole away in the middle of the night, and, if he hadn't done so, he would have been in gaol next morning," replied Mrs. Rodney with a strange snap in her voice. "And it is true about the money as well. I had to give it to him because he made me. I didn't want to in the very least! So, if it's the truth you want," she said indignantly, "there, you have got it, Estelle! I never saw such a creature for revelling in disagreeable facts! I suppose you think I ought to have told them all that without varnishing it in the slightest degree."

"I don't think you should have told them anything," Estelle answered quickly. "Everybody in Denmark Hill and right down in Camberwell will know all about

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it by bedtime to-night—most of them before even father has heard it."

"Could I help that? Your father is at business—so please be reasonable. Now, I wonder when Kathie will be home? She is the one who always understands things and takes the proper view. I think your nature is hardening, Estelle. Perhaps that is due to your kind of work, but it is regrettable. A woman should be kind and tender and not hard and critical, as you are."

"I don't mean to be, mother. But, somehow, I hate the idea of all these people discussing us and our affairs to-night over their supper, and wondering what we shall do with the money! Perhaps, after all, there might be some mistake, or some hitch. Then think how cheap we should all feel!"

"There can be no mistake or hitch. Mr. Underwood spoke quite positively. I don't suppose you are very observant, or you might have noticed that he was a very superior kind of man—one evidently of high professional standing. And he was very respectful and deferential to me, and most anxious to be of use. I'm to call at the office of the firm to-morrow morning with your father."

"Of course, he would be all that you say, hoping that you will continue to be his rich client," said Estelle with a smile. "Well, I do wish that father would come home! Don't you think he has looked rather worried of late, mummy?"

Just very occasionally the old childish name for her mother would slip out, though Mrs. Rodney had forbidden its use since her children had grown up. She allowed it, however, to pass unchecked this time.

"Of course he has," she replied. "Business has not been good of late, and it has worried him dreadfully, because he feels that he really ought to dismiss John Glide. He is very fond of John, of course, but he really can't afford to pay him his salary."

"I can't imagine the City Road shop without John Glide," said Estelle. "Do you remember what a little nipper he was when he went as errand-boy to the shop just before we came out here to live?"

"Yes, of course, I remember quite well," was the answer. "Didn't I provide him with a complete set of underclothes and give him many and many a meal?"

"But John has never forgotten that, mother. He has been most grateful and kind always."

"Oh, yes. I am not complaining of John. Why are we discussing him now? Of course, your father will give up business at once. Oh, when one actually begins to think what this change of fortune will mean, one's brain reels! It will mean that you will all give up working."

"Right-o! When does this new kind of millennium begin, mater?" called a cheery boyish voice from the end of the passage.

A lad of fifteen came into the room, tossing his satchel off his shoulder and flinging his school cap with the red and white badge into a corner.

"I hope it's going to begin now on yours truly, for I've had simply the rottenest day," he continued.

Jack, the second son of the family and the fourth child, was a handsome, open-faced lad, with a tall, well-knit figure and a roving eye, which won him heaps of friends. But he was no student, and his school life had been singularly barren of achievement.

It had been decided that on account of his meagre show of ability he must go into the business in the City Road, and make up by plodding attention to routine what he lacked in initiative.

The prospect appalled Jack Rodney, who was a child of the sun and air and whose greatest longing was for country life. It is possible that some strain of the old yeoman blood was in his veins. Anyhow, the problem

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of his career was troubling both his parents and himself at that very time.

"Sit down, Jack, and hear the great news," said his mother, her bosom swelling with pride. "We have had a visit from a great London lawyer this afternoon, who came to tell us that your Uncle Edgar Sheldon has died in Australia and left us a very large fortune and an immense sheep-farm——"

Jack's sunny eyes grew round with the wonder of it.

"Oh, how ripping! And shall we all go out there and settle on the place? Oh, do let's!"

His mother shook her head.

"No, no, my son! But the possession of the fortune will make a great difference to us all. Perhaps now you will be able to go to the University."

"Oh, pax, mater! You promised to let me off that rot ever so long ago," cried Jack ruefully. "Can't you put in a word for a chap, Este?"

Estelle laughed and ran her fingers rather softly through his thick brown curls. It was easy to see that Estelle Rodney was devoted to the men-folk in her home. They had never had to accuse her of lack of sympathy or understanding.

"That seems like the sound of a key in the lock," cried Mrs. Rodney excitedly. "Can that be Kathie home already? Now we'll hear something worth while!"

## CHAPTER III

### IN THE CITY ROAD

THERE are some old-established businesses in the City Road—certain retail shops—which seem oddly to preserve the flavour of the days when it was common for burgesses who traded there to make modest fortunes before the tide of fashion rolled westward.

To this class belonged the haberdasher's shop which bore above the doorway the name of Rodney and Sons. A small, quaint signboard on which was depicted a golden lamb symbolised the fact that the shop dealt primarily in woollen articles. That sign, painted by a once-famous artist who had squandered his talent in the pot-houses of the day, had suffered many things at many hands.

It had been removed from time to time by those heads of the house who regarded it as grotesque and altogether inappropriate to modern usages, and contemptuously compared it to the signboard of a public-house.

But the present tenant of the old shop did not so regard or despise it. He had been an odd, studious kind of boy, fond of possessing quaint things and of poking into old records. That liking had grown and strengthened with his years, with the result that, when he arrived at manhood and the business passed into his hands, he unearthed the old sign from a hiding-place in the cellar or the attic—he was never very clear which—had it cleaned, re-gilded and restored, and put above the door, where it was not at all out of place.

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It was intended, of course, to represent the golden fleece of which the garments offered within were supposed to be made.

The quaint conceit pleased Cyrus Rodney, as it had pleased the little apprentice, John Glide, who had risen from the position of errand-boy to be first assistant in the shop. In fact, he was now the only assistant.

Several people wondered why Rodney's son, Cyril, the eldest of the family, did not occupy that position. But Cyril was too ambitious to be satisfied with that post, or even with a share in the City Road business; he had inherited more of his mother's acumen and foresight than of his father's dreamy, old-fashioned notions, and he had decided quite early in his career that the City Road premises in the natural order of things were doomed.

He aimed at bigger things—at nothing less, indeed, than becoming, if at all possible, a partner in some large wholesale house for the supply of goods to such businesses as theirs, a house in which fortunes could with certainty be made. With that end in view he had got his father to speak for him to a firm in St. Paul's Churchyard, and had entered their extensive place of business when he was sixteen years of age, after having served only a very brief term in the City Road shop.

He had now been eight years in his present employment, and was traveller for a certain district in England—a post which necessitated frequent and lengthy absences from home. He was a successful traveller, possessing, as he did, all the qualities essential to that somewhat difficult calling, and he was looking forward to the day when he should have a share in the business and so be able to set up a home of his own.

He had been engaged for four years to a girl who was a member of the chapel which he attended with his parents, and though Carrie Bygrave would willingly

have married him on the respectable salary which he now earned, Cyril said loftily that he had no intention of venturing on matrimony until he had some better prospect than that of merely "grubbing along," as he elegantly expressed it.

Cyrus Rodney was very fond indeed of the old shop and of his work in the City Road. He was bound to it by many traditions of memory and association, and it had been rather a pang to him to behold the old house above it which, to his certain knowledge, had sheltered five generations of Rodneys, given up to the occupancy of strangers for storage purposes. These tenants had also wanted to lease the shop, but he had strenuously refused to shift his business to another locality. And, indeed, for him to have done so would have been quite a fatal step, for the old-fashioned customers who had been in the habit for years of buying certain articles at Rodney's would never have taken the trouble to follow him to these fresh quarters.

The customers were nearly all City men who, having proven the excellence of certain articles of attire to be had in the City Road shop and approving Cyrus Rodney's personal interest and old-fashioned courtesy, had continued to extend their patronage to him over a long period of years.

But these were dwindling in numbers, for the younger generation imagined that smartness even in underwear belonged exclusively to the West End.

At the end of each quarter, when Rodney made up his balance-sheet, his heart sank as he beheld the shrinkage of the credit side, and he found it increasingly difficult as time moved on to obtain the necessary money to carry on his household at Denmark Hill, though it was not conducted on extravagant lines.

Three of the children were now self-supporting, and the two girls paid a modest sum each week for their

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board—an arrangement which their father hated, but which his thrifty wife had insisted on as giving the girls an opportunity of learning the spending value of money.

Two were wholly dependent—Jack and little Louie, the baby and flower of the flock; and the problem of Jack's immediate future was beginning to press for solution.

As Cyrus Rodney sat poring over his desk under the flaring gaslight on a murky November evening, his kind face wore a distinctly worried look.

It was about half-past six; business was suspended for the day, and John Glide was putting up the shutters, while his master made a note of the earnings. There had been considerable fog in the city that day, though the atmosphere had been quite clear on the outer fringes, and trade had consequently suffered.

"This has been a disappointing day, John," his master said when he came in with the keys of the shutter padlocks and laid them on the desk.

John was a tall, handsome young man, and in his shirt-sleeves he looked extraordinarily boyish. His face, flushed with the exertion of putting up the heavy shutters, was an open and winning one, and his keen grey eyes dwelt with affectionate interest on his dear master's face.

The relations between these two were rather idyllic and altogether exceptional in these days of keen commercial and industrial competition. Glide had never ceased to be grateful for the helping hand that had raised him from the gutter to a respectable place in the world of men.

He knew nothing about his parentage, and he had been a waif of the streets, selling newspapers at the nearest corner to Rodney's place of business. The child's pitiable condition had touched Rodney's kind heart, and he had enlisted his wife's practical sympathy



on the boy's behalf, had taken him into his employ, provided him with food, clothing, and a warm bed among the bales of merchandise in the back premises, and for fifteen years the bonds had gone on strengthening until the two were now like father and son.

Indeed, Rodney was far more intimate with John Glide than he was with either of his sons. Cyril he stood in awe of, feeling in his presence that he was regarded as a person of no importance and as one who, somehow, had made a mess of things in general. Jack he dearly loved, but that happy young animal, with his passion for sport and outdoor life, puzzled him, and it was not possible to conceive of his pursuing successfully, or even contentedly, the even, dull tenor of daily existence in the City Road shop.

Glide having been brought up, in a sense, with his master's family, was intimate with all its members; but of late, for certain reasons which will immediately become manifest, Mrs. Rodney had discouraged his visits to Denmark Hill and had pointedly instructed her husband that he was not to continue to give him free entry to the house.

The assistant had dared to raise his eyes to Kathie, the second daughter—a petite, charming creature, on whose future her mother was already building the highest hopes.

Kathleen had the charm which Estelle, with all her solid qualities, lacked. She was bright, quick, elusive, artistic in her conception of ordinary affairs, picturesque in appearance, and interesting in personality; and, being secretary to a lady whom Mrs. Rodney, unacquainted with the world of books, imagined to be a shining light in the literary world, she had prospects of too bright a character to include within their scope a person like John Glide as a possible husband.

"The weather has been against us, sir," said John

cheerfully. "I could have counted the folk that went by on the pavement this afternoon."

"Yes, that is true; but business is not good, John—not good at all! In fact, it is causing me the very keenest anxiety. After all claims are met, the margin of gain is very small. Indeed, I am afraid to tell my dear wife how small it is."

He ran his fingers up and down the columns of the ledger; but John Glide, from whom he had no secrets, hardly required to follow him—he knew to the fraction of a farthing what were the profits of the house.

"Perhaps we buy in too dear a market, sir," he said modestly. "Everything everywhere has advanced in price except with us. I've pointed out before that we could hardly go on profitably selling at the old prices when the cost of purchase for us has gone up more than ten per cent."

"You may be quite right, John; but, as I have pointed out to you before, Rodneys have never kept but one quality of goods—the best. Then, as to price, how could I raise it on my old customers? They would not like it, John—in fact, I believe they would go elsewhere for a cheaper, even if adulterated, article."

Glide was silent for a moment, for this sort of argument, with which he was perfectly familiar, was difficult to refute. He had far too much affection and respect for his master to thrust his own opinions on him, but during the last year or two he had endured many moments of anxiety and dismay in contemplation of the future. He could not deny that, regarded from the keen modern standpoint, Rodneys' business methods were hopeless, and that, sooner or later, they would have to be abandoned or the business would abandon them.

Cyrus Rodney, though a sound Liberal and Nonconformist, was conservative in every relation of his life, extending his conservatism down to the very smallest

detail in his business. His conservatism was, indeed, an immense granite wall on which the persuasive, gentle wave-lap of John Glide's keener perception in business matters made not the smallest impression.

Sometimes the problem of his own future rather appalled John Glide, for he was virtually wasting his virile years in the City Road shop, learning nothing fresh and advancing himself by not a single step.

But, as has been said, the relation between these two was idyllic, and did not admit of being subjected to the usual tests.

"People have laid in their winter stocks," he observed at last, though quite conscious of the futility of this plea. "We can't expect to do much better now till the turn of the year, when customers will begin to require thinner things."

"Ah, yes; of course there is that to be thought of," assented Rodney, trying to speak more cheerfully. "And we must take the fat with the lean—eh, John?"

"Yes, of course; but, sir, have you thought any more about the suggestion I made last year—do you remember? I suggested that we might open a ladies' department for gloves and pretty neckwear, and even for blouses. I am sure there's money in these trifles, and there is no shop near us selling anything of that kind."

Rodney looked the strong disapproval that he felt.

"I should dislike doing that very much, John; it would be undignified. Rodney's have been men's mercers since the beginning. I should like them to continue so until the end."

Glide was on the point of saying that in that case the end could not possibly be far off, but out of consideration for his master's feelings he refrained.

"And besides, who would buy the articles you suggest?" continued Mr. Rodney. "Ladies do not come to the City Road to shop."

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"Not for that purpose only, but a good many ladies do pass up and down it. For instance, there are all the young ladies engaged as typists and clerks in this neighbourhood. You know that pretty often they have come in and asked for gloves and handkerchiefs."

"Occasionally they have, I admit; but I dislike the idea, John—I dislike it intensely. It would alter the whole character of Rodneys—take away its flavour, so to speak. But I am quite willing to talk it over with Mrs. Rodney—in fact, I will do so to-night. Perhaps you had better come home with me to supper to-night, John, so as to be ready to bring forward your arguments in favour of this tremendous change."

A sort of eager, pleased look leaped in the young man's eyes, but a moment after he seemed a trifle reluctant to accept the invitation.

"If you wish it, sir, certainly; and if you think Mrs. Rodney would be pleased to see me," he stammered.

"Why, of course she will! What a strange thing to say!" observed Rodney hastily, as he slid off his high stool which, covered in ancient black hair-cloth, had stood in front of that desk for nearly a hundred years. "You haven't been at The Laurels for a long time, John."

"Not since September, sir—just after you returned from Clacton," answered Glide, who had a very lively recollection of Mrs. Rodney's icy reception of him on that occasion.

Her coolness towards him had arisen from the fact that during the family's absence at the seaside he had ventured to escort Kathleen twice to the play—an attention which Mrs. Rodney considered presumptuous and of which she highly disapproved.

Kathleen liked John Glide; deep down in her heart she even loved him; but at the present time she was passing through sundry mental phases which may be ex-

plained later. She had become conscious of the power she possessed to influence others. Her charm, her beauty, her quick, alert personality were receiving recognition among those whom she regarded as the great ones of the earth. She had, in some slight degree, been intoxicated by it, and had, in consequence, lost her sense of proportion.

So in the meantime John Glide had to stand back. He had done so because, mingling with his faithful affection, there was an indomitable pride which would not suffer him to make himself cheap.

Glide helped his master into his shabby overcoat with that care and attention which had never failed in all the years they had been together.

It grieved him to observe the fine lines of care that were more deeply marked than usual on his face, and the whitened hair about the temples, though Rodney was not an old man, as age is accounted in these days.

Each evening the same small routine was observed—so many doors carefully fastened and the padlocks safeguarded; though Rodney often jocularly remarked that members of the light-fingered gang were hardly likely to tamper with their safe. These would only take risks where they had the certain chance of bigger booty.

Rodney usually carried the day's takings in a small black leather bag. On this occasion Glide relieved him of it at the street door, after he had once more examined the locks and the shutter fastenings; and he was truly sorry that his burden should be so light.

Rodney, however, naturally a cheerful man—somebody at Bethesda Chapel had called him "a real Christian optimist"—recovered his spirits before they got out at the station and walked down the hill to Bigwood Lane, in which his house stood.

It presented a very cheerful front, and Rodney pulled

out his watch at the gate to see whether they were later than usual.

"Ah, I forgot! This is the working-party day, and my wife was to have some sort of exhibition of the ladies' efforts through the summer and autumn. Wonderful organiser, Mrs. Rodney, John, and never spares herself! But I rather hope that the ladies have gone away."

Glide smiled covertly behind his slight moustache at these words, and he, too, fervently hoped so. Only his strong desire to see Kathleen had tempted him to face the possibly Arctic brightness of Mrs. Rodney's smile.

The moment the key was fitted in the lock, four persons came out of the drawing-room to meet the master of the house—Mrs. Rodney, flushed and quite evidently excited; Estelle, looking rather regal in the old velvet frock that she had substituted for her school garb; Jack, in his Eton jacket, with his hands thrust deep in his bulging pockets; and little Louie, aged nine, in a skimpy white frock, made rather short and having the effect of making her feet appear abnormally large and her legs abnormally fat! Her rosy face, however, was beaming, and her two long pig-tails with their blue bows flapped cheerfully.

Rodney smiled on seeing this family party, and he stood aside hospitably to permit his assistant to come forward.

"I have brought John Glide home to supper, my dear," he said to his wife, with a slightly deprecating air. "You all look very cheerful and happy. I hope your afternoon was a success, Louisa."

"Oh, yes—that is, I have not given a thought to it; there are other things, Cyrus," she answered significantly. "Ah, good-evening, John," she said, as if she had just noticed him. "Please come in; supper will be ready soon."

She gave him only two fingers, and her manner was a trifle more frigid than usual. In an instant she had reflected that John Glide might as well hear the great news at once, and so be able to grasp the fact that the gulf between him and Kathleen would now be unalterably fixed.

"I miss Kathie," said Rodney; he was essentially a home-loving man, and had never in his life been tempted to spend an evening on his own pleasure outside.

Wherever he had gone he had invariably taken some member of his family with him. Such a practice is not always good for a man; it stamps upon him too indelibly that domesticity which, though a good thing in the home, is apt, when too much insisted on, to militate against a man's popularity outside.

In the limited world of men to which Rodney had access, though generally liked, he was considered a bit soft.

"You may hang up your overcoat on that peg, John Glide," said Mrs. Rodney graciously. "Come into the drawing-room and hear what a tremendous thing has happened!"

It was Jack who helped Glide off with his coat, and at the same squeezed his hand affectionately.

"How are you, old chap—all right?" he said in the full boyish tones that, though off-hand, can express so much. "We're playing Surrey on Sat. Ripping match! —must get quit and out to Guildford by three!"

Glide nodded, pulled Louie's pig-tails, respectfully greeted Estelle, and then they all drifted into the drawing-room.

Rodney was quite accustomed to the importance that his wife attached to the insignificant happenings of her days, and, in consequence, he was prepared to hear merely some item of chapel intelligence.

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It was Louie who gave the information away with all the startling vividness characteristic of her age.

"We're millionaires, daddy, and we're leaving this house and going into a great big one down at Hyde Park, and we're to have oceans of servants and carriages and horses; and mummy says that I shall ride in the Row every morning, with a groom behind!"

Rodney laughed delightedly. Not without imagination himself, he was quite ready to be interested in the child's fairy tales, and even to encourage their unfolding. He had often found a dream take the sordid edge off the cares of a grey business day.

His wife, however, drew him down to the sofa. Glide took a chair near the door, Estelle sat down on the piano stool, while Jack, with his hands still thrust deep in his pockets, stood with legs astride on the hearthrug.

"It is quite true, Cyrus," his wife said loftily. "The most wonderful thing in the world has happened to us! My brother Edgar has just died out in Australia, and left an immense fortune to me, his only sister. Yes, Cyrus, it has actually happened! Estelle will tell you; it was she who admitted the lawyer, who came all the way from Bloomsbury to inform me of the fact."

"Bless me, Louisa, you quite take my breath away!" said Rodney, mopping his forehead. "How is it that we have never heard from him all these years? If he were alive, how much better it would have been to have written and to have received friendly letters in return. This sort of thing does no good to anybody; it just fills one with regret because of all the opportunities that have been missed. You have never believed that he was alive all these years, Louisa, have you?"

"Naturally I have never thought about him, but apparently he has been very much alive. You are not realising what I am telling you, Cyrus," she said reproachfully. "It is a very large fortune in money, and a



great sheep-farm, besides, that he has left me. It will alter everything, and you will not need to go back any more to the City Road."

"Oh, but, Louisa, that would not be possible! What I mean is that one must still go on honourably working. The bread of idleness is not sweet, is it, John?"

"Don't ask John, dad; he has never eaten it," put in Jack facetiously.

Glide sat uncomfortably on the edge of his chair, hearing this announcement with considerable dismay. If it were all true—why, then, Kathleen was undoubtedly lost to him for ever!

"What has become of Kathie?" asked Rodney again, as if aware of the trend of his assistant's thoughts.

"She will not be home until later. Mrs. Dyner had an 'At Home' this afternoon; Kathie took her dress down this morning. You know perfectly well that Mrs. Dyner cannot possibly do without Kathleen on such occasions. She depends on her to see that everything goes smoothly. It is quite wonderful to think how she manages all these distinguished people, moving about among them as if she were one of them! I was very proud of her on the one occasion when Mrs. Dyner was so good as to send me a card for one of her 'At Homes.'"

All this was primarily and specially intended for John Glide's benefit, and he did not miss a word.

"Well, what I want to know is—is there going to be any supper?" observed Rodney good-humouredly. "We shall all discuss this better after we have eaten something. John and I had a very modest luncheon to-day—a cup of coffee and a sandwich in the back shop; though I must say, John," he added, "that your coffee would be hard to beat."

"Well, thank goodness, that undignified way of living will come to an end at once and for ever!" said Mrs. Rodney with a snap in her voice. "Estelle, you

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may go and see what Julia is doing—or, no, I had better ring!"

She herself moved to the bell-pull with as much dignity as she could command, beholding in imagination, doubtless, lackeyed attendants flying in response to her summons.

Instead, however, Julia, with a much-tousled head and an undoubtedly dirty apron, appeared, open-mouthed, at the door. The vision of her was so comical that Jack burst out into a loud guffaw.

"Is supper nearly ready, Julia? We are all waiting," said Mrs. Rodney with as majestic an air as she could affect.

"Hit's a-gittin' hon," answered Julia calmly. "His thet hall? Hi quite thought hit was coal as was a-wanted!"

She distinctly tossed her head as she disappeared, and Estelle, with a small humorous smile playing about her interesting mouth, went out after her, reflecting that it would be much more dignified to keep Julia, who had sprung from the purlieus of the Walworth Road, strictly in the background while these intimate matters were being discussed. She certainly did not harmonise with their mother's assumption of dignity.

"Shall we take Smuts to Hyde Park, mater?" inquired Jack with his mischievous smile.

His mother withered him with a glance.

Suddenly Glide rose from his chair.

"If you will excuse me, Mrs. Rodney, and you, sir, I think I will not wait. You will have much to talk about that you do not wish a stranger to hear. I will say good-evening."

Mrs. Rodney extended a gracious hand, and with a look silenced the protest that she observed trembling on her husband's lips.

"John shows a quite nice feeling, Cyrus, and he is

right. Good-evening, John. Some other evening we hope to have the pleasure—at least once before we leave Denmark Hill. Good-bye just now."

She had quite the *grande dame* manner, and Rodney looked round rather helplessly, sure that some strange, new, and quite unwelcome force had entered into their lives for the sole purpose of disturbing and complicating them.

He was unambitious himself; he had never asked more from fortune than just immunity from sordid care and the wherewithal to make his dear ones happy and comfortable. A bit of a philosopher in his way, he had been known to remark to John Glide that the middle of the highway was the happiest and the safest place, and that the greatest jewel within the reach of humanity was contentment.

Estelle, passing through the hall with part of the supper equipage, was surprised to behold Glide being helped into his overcoat by his devoted ally Jack.

"Are you going before supper, John? Don't—it's just coming in," she said kindly.

"It is better that I should go, Miss Estelle," he replied in a lowered voice. "You will see that, I am sure. This is a private and family occasion."

"Oh, but I think we always feel that you are one of us," she said, smiling in her friendly fashion. "Well, if you must go—good-bye; but I don't like it—I don't like it at all," she added. "It is such a long time since you were here before. You used to come quite often once upon a time."

"Once upon a time!" repeated Glide, and his smile was slightly melancholy.

But Estelle's warm hand-clasp sent him comforted on his way. It seemed to promise in the future all that the past had held, and it certainly indicated no abatement of her sisterly regard.

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"I'm sorry, John," she murmured as he departed.

Jack accompanied him to the gate, and when he came in he banged the door and deliberately kicked the leg of the hall table, the brilliancy of whose polish was one of his mother's household fads.

"Tell you what, Este," he said in a savage undertone, "that was a beastly shame of the mater! She simply kicked John out! It's the limit, I tell you—the very beastly limit, and I don't mind if I tell her so!"

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LAWYERS AND AUNT AGNES

JOHN GLIDE was unfeignedly glad to get out of the house and to put some considerable distance between himself and the place where he had been plainly shown that he was no longer welcome.

Waiting for a motor-bus at the end of the lane, he suddenly beheld Kathleen—the person whom of all others he least wished to see at the moment—coming in a slanting direction from the other side of the street. She was carrying a bag which seemed too heavy for her. He sprang forward to relieve her of it, at the same time realising that never had she looked more winning and desirable. She wore her simple clothing with an air, and the face under the smart little hat was a dream.

"Why, John, is it you? Wherever have you sprung from? Have you been at The Laurels?"

"I have just left it. I am waiting for a bus."

"And why don't you stop to supper? I suppose you have some other engagement. I'm a bit late. There was such a large and brilliant party at Mrs. Dyer's this afternoon! Such a crowd of splendid, interesting people! That is the life, John! I should like to live it always. But what makes you look so horridly glum?" she asked, suddenly struck by the gloom on his face.

"Nothing. I'll walk with you to the gate, if I may."

"Oh, you *may*," she said, with a provoking emphasis and a rather coquettish smile; "but if you have the hump to that extent, you needn't. Have they all come home?"

"All but Cyril."

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"He isn't due until to-morrow," she answered, and, having been relieved of her bag, she gave her veil a tug and straightened her hat.

"Well, I needn't go any farther," said Glide, depositing the bag inside the porch. "Good-night and good-bye, Miss Kathie."

"Gracious, John! Whatever has happened? Will the body of a respectably dressed man be found to-morrow on the line near Loughborough Junction? You are not usually so melodramatic."

"Am I that? I was not aware of it, and I don't know why I should be. I don't feel anything but a little depression. When you get inside and hear the news you'll probably think I had no cause."

He raised his hat and walked away, and Kathie dismissed him airily from her thoughts. He was of so little account in her life that she had forgotten him by the time she had entered the agitated atmosphere of the family circle.

The discussion of the astonishing event of the afternoon was still going on in the drawing-room, and a very few moments sufficed to put Kathleen in full possession of the facts.

"Gracious! how exciting!" she cried, tossing off her gloves and her coat, and, in so doing, revealing her pretty afternoon frock. "A fortune really come to us! I can't believe it!"

She looked from one to another, and the varying expressions on the different faces struck her oddly. Her mother's was still flushed and bore a sort of glorified, uplifted look, while her father seemed frankly worried. Estelle was very thoughtful, and was certainly not elated. Jack and Louie were holding a brief, mysterious conversation in the far corner of the room.

Kathleen laughed hysterically.

"A fortune," she repeated. "Why, none of you look

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much excited over it; and as for John Glide, he was a positive bear! I've never seen him look as he did just now. I've just parted from him at the door."

"He must have been waiting about for you, Kathie," said her mother severely. "It is quite a quarter of an hour since he left the house."

"Oh, no, he wasn't! He took pains to inform me—very politely, of course—that he was waiting for a bus. What happened to put John's back up, and why wasn't he invited to stay to supper?"

"He *was* invited, I think; but he had sufficient good sense to decline the invitation," said Mrs. Rodney, with her newly acquired and somewhat exaggerated air of dignity. "I think we had better go to the dining-room and eat something, if that creature has placed it on the table."

"It is all on, mother," said Estelle cheerfully. "I have just made the salad."

"I'm feeling peckish now," broke in Kathie. "Come to think of it, I don't believe I had any tea this afternoon. What a crowd! It was glorious!"

"If it was at all like what it was on the day I was there, there would not be enough food to go round," said Mrs. Rodney, grown suddenly critical in her view of the character of Mrs. Dyer's entertainments, over which she had formerly been silent and lost in admiration. "I never saw such a set-out! Call it refreshments! The whole thing could have been put there for half a crown!"

"Oh, mother, you don't understand! Mrs. Dyer's guests are not guzzlers like the chapel people, who will go any distance for a free feed," said Kathleen scathingly, for she could not bear to have the smallest aspersion or even reflection cast upon her idol. "Can I be allowed to sit down with my hat on, seeing that everybody seems to be ready? A fortune!" she continued,

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reverting to the astounding news she had heard. "Why, mother, if it is true it will open up a wonderful vista."

"There can be no doubt about its truth," her mother replied. "But, at any rate, to-morrow your father and I go down to Bloomsbury to the lawyers' office, where we will hear every detail and have everything settled beyond dispute. By to-morrow evening at this time we shall know much more about it. I hope I comported myself with dignity in that interview to-day, but of course it was rather overwhelming to be confronted with such a stupendous announcement without even a moment's warning, and with the working-party going on in the drawing-room."

"Oh, my! Were all the tabbies there?" cried Kathleen. "And did you tell them? I should have loved to have seen their faces beyond everything!"

"I dropped a judicious hint," said Mrs. Rodney, with a reserve that was quite new to her; and Estelle smiled broadly at her words and manner. "But we must behave with reticence and discretion until we are perfectly sure of everything. Meanwhile let us go and consume our nondescript meal. Very soon I hope we shall be able to sit down as a family to a proper late dinner, beautifully cooked and exquisitely served. It has been the dream of my life!"

"Tommy-rot!" muttered Jack irreverently from the background, still smarting under a sense of the inhospitable treatment that had been meted out to his idol.

It is necessary for the young, untrained heart and mind to set something on a pedestal and worship it. Kathleen has thus glorified her employer, who had undoubtedly shown her considerable kindness, while Jack had set up good old John Glide as a fit object to receive the homage of his boyish heart. Louie worshipped Jack, and they had many happy hours together, the little girl being always willing to fetch and carry most docilely



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for him, and quite pleased if he gave her but a nod or a smile, or addressed to her the words "Good kid" in a certain tone of voice.

The evening meal of the Rodneys consisted of cold beef and salad, with some fried potatoes and a rhubarb tart, with the addition of a milk pudding for Mr. Rodney, who could not digest the pastry beloved of the younger members of the family.

"Mother, I don't see you eating anything," said Mr. Rodney solicitously, watching his wife sitting with her hands folded on her week-old table napkin, and with her face wearing a far-off, detached expression.

"Eat!" She seemed to come back with a start to mundane things, and she gave a small, unreal kind of laugh. "It is very difficult to eat—but yes—I will take a slice of meat and a little of Estelle's salad. You generally make it very good, my dear."

She ate a few morsels with a relish which she vainly tried to conceal, and then began to talk again.

"Of course," she said, addressing Estelle, "both you and Kathie will give up your posts. But perhaps it would be ample time to do so next week."

"Oh, I can't leave them in the lurch like that, mother," said Estelle quickly, "and it is very early days to talk about giving up everything. We must be very much surer first of how we really stand."

"I shall never leave dear Mrs. Dyner, I'm sure," said Kathleen stoutly. "How surprised and excited she will be when I tell her of it all! And what a help! You see she is in the swim of everything. We shall never go wrong if we take her advice."

"When in doubt, consult Mrs. Dyner," murmured Jack; but Kathleen withered him with a glance.

"It is time you were sent to a proper public school, or to a tutor who would keep you in order, sir," she said severely.

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They got through the meal somehow, but certainly none of them, at the end of it, could have told what they had been eating.

When the girls rose to go upstairs Cyrus Rodney crept away to his own chair in the corner of the morning-room to smoke his after-dinner pipe and to try to digest all that had been told him of this wonderful happening.

He was not sure that he really felt quite so glad as he ought to have done. It was an obvious fact that the whole tenor of their lives would be altered, and he did not exactly know where and what his place would be in the new scheme of things. As he observed the change which the mere prospect of coming into the money had wrought on his wife, his imagination quailed at the prospect of the transformation that she might achieve, if further investigation and inquiry should prove that the fortune was a substantial reality.

Next morning the Rodneys all departed their several ways at the usual time—all except the master of the house, who had to accompany his wife to Bloomsbury instead of making his customary journey into the City.

He had wanted to rise early and go down to business first, but she would not permit him.

"Nothing of the sort, Cyrus. I know precisely what would happen if you went. That dingy old hole of a shop would swallow you up, and I should see no more of you till night."

"That is not a very respectful way to speak of the business that has supported us so long, mother," he ventured to remonstrate mildly.

"I'm not throwing any slur on it. I'm simply pointing out what usually occurs when you go there."

"And John Glide won't be able to understand why I don't come," said Mr. Rodney, ignoring his wife's remarks. "I assured him last night that he might expect to see me this morning as usual."

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"John Glide's feelings are of very small account. I suppose he is able to open the shop of a morning, though I should not be at all surprised to hear that you took down the shutters yourself, while my lord sauntered in somewhere about ten o'clock."

"Oh, come, mother!" her husband expostulated, "you are unjust to John. He is there on the stroke of eight-thirty every morning."

"And so he ought!" snapped Mrs. Rodney. "Well, is there anything to worry about? You can go from Bloomsbury to City Road without coming home, if you like. But it is absolutely necessary that you go there with me first thing this morning. I shall be ready in about twenty minutes."

Travelling by bus and train—though Mrs. Rodney's secret ambition rather inclined her to hire a cab in order to mark the importance of the occasion—they reached the office of the lawyers about ten o'clock, and were received by both partners with the utmost deference and cordiality.

Mrs. Rodney being the legatee, it was necessary for her to take the principal part in the interview, which she did with great gusto, her self-importance and self-confidence visibly increasing as it proceeded.

Both these men of business, thoroughly versed in the idiosyncrasies of human nature, and skilled in handling them, were infinitely amused, while they felt a sort of mild compassion for the gentle, rather deprecating husband.

This was not an occasion on which Cyrus Rodney would shine. A quiet hour with a congenial friend and a well-loved theme for discussion, and he revealed himself at his best. But in that somewhat sordid atmosphere, which seemed to bring into prominence the very hardest side of his wife's nature, he was obviously ill at ease. The number and rapidity and aptness of her

questions simply took his breath away. He concluded that she must have lain awake all night thinking over what she would say, and actually wording the questions in her own mind, considering the celerity with which she had fired them off in such quick succession.

"What I would like to know is how soon this money is payable," said Mrs. Rodney, after having learned the whereabouts of the sheep-farm by means of a map of New South Wales.

"Well, madam, it practically is payable now. We have received instructions to advance whatever money is necessary on production of the proofs of your identity. We must get the birth certificate, and go through some other small forms. But since we have been down to Ridgeway Barn to make inquiries regarding Mr. Sheldon's parentage, we found the proofs of your identity convincing enough."

"Did they know all about me down at the Barn?" asked Mrs. Rodney in a somewhat awe-stricken voice. "I should have thought they would have forgotten all about us—wouldn't you, Cyrus?"

"Hardly, mother. Your family was an old one in the district."

"Well, then, so you can begin paying at once?" she said to the lawyers, returning to business.

"Yes, madam. You can have a cheque to-day, if you like."

"I am sure there need be no hurry about that," put in Mr. Rodney nervously, for this haste to lay hold on gold seemed to him a trifle indecent.

"We have never been very well off, though our circumstances have been comfortable," said Mrs. Rodney, explaining Cyrus as if he had been a large, irresponsible child. "My husband has worked very hard all his life, and it will make me very happy to see that he does not work any more. He has an excellent knowledge of his

business, but I believe that he has allowed people to cheat him right through. He would not press anyone for payment of a bill, even though he was hard up himself and the bill was one which the customer was quite able to pay."

The partners smiled and nodded kindly towards Mr. Rodney, taking in the situation at a glance.

"You've observed the condition attached to the holding of the sheep-farm, I suppose, Mrs. Rodney? Have you a son to whom that sort of life would appeal?"

"I have two sons. The elder one is in business, and I rather think he would not care for Colonial life. He is a Londoner, and all his tastes and sympathies and interests are centred in the City. But there is our sixteen-year-old Jack. It would be the very thing for him, wouldn't it, Cyrus? He spends all his spare time reading about cowboys and that sort of thing. It would simply be ideal for him!"

"There are no cowboys in New South Wales," smiled Mr. Underwood. "But it would undoubtedly be a splendid thing for him. Mr. Sheldon particularly wished his name to remain attached to his sheep-farm. It has been 'Sheldon's' all the time he has had it."

"Well, Jack's full name happens to be John Sheldon Rodney, so that there would be no difficulty about dropping the surname, if that should be necessary."

"There is a very capable manager on the farm—a Scotsman named Macfarlane—who is in charge just now, so that if you agree to send your son out he will find himself in good hands. And, if you will pardon me for saying so, he will learn the business all the more quickly because he is quite young and is fond of an outdoor life. Mr. Sheldon left the manager a handsome legacy because he had been such a friend to him. I think it is Macfarlane's idea to come home and settle in Scotland

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after he has got the affairs of the sheep-farm wound up. All his people are there, occupying good positions."

"Why, how very nice! Everything seems to be arranged so comfortably! I shall require your advice about investments, gentlemen," she said graciously. "I am afraid I shall have to leave myself rather completely in your hands. Perhaps you could tell me, however, the minimum income I may depend on without actually touching capital? My husband"—here she smiled benignly on him—"has always said that it is a sign of an ill-balanced mind to trade on broken capital."

"Mr. Rodney is certainly right, and if more people acted on that principle—well, then, a considerable part of our business would be gone. The income? Well, roughly speaking, you may count on anything from five to seven thousand pounds a year."

"A year! Cyrus, do you hear? Five to seven thousand a year!" she repeated in an awe-stricken voice. "So it will not be necessary for you to do another stroke of work after to-day!"

Cyrus did not look so elated over the prospect of immediate withdrawal from business as, under the circumstances, he might have been expected, and perhaps as he ought, to have done.

After they had gone the two partners looked at each other and gently smiled.

"There will be a bit of comedy before this affair is played out, Walter," said the older man.

"You're right—and maybe a bit of tragedy, too. The grey mare's the better horse in this case evidently, and I am rather sorry for that old man."

"Ah, but he has grit at the back. I shouldn't be at all surprised if he were to put on the brake just at the critical and unexpected moment. She's a madam, anyway, and will cause the dollars to fly. We are likely

to have a lively time in the next few months, watching the gradual evolution of Mrs. Rodney."

"Let us hope she has got a sensible family, or, at any rate, somebody with sufficient influence or hold over her to keep her from making ducks and drakes of the property."

"We must do our best for her ourselves. And, meantime, it's a nice little windfall for us, coming just at the moment when we needed it badly."

Once outside, Mrs. Rodney proceeded to talk breathlessly, in consequence of which they took the wrong turning, and had to wander back through a labyrinth of mean streets.

"Why don't you look where you are going, Cyrus? You ought to know the City, if anybody does," she said pettishly. "Where are you going?"

"I suppose I must take my way now to City Road. It is getting on for noon," answered Rodney, with a slight air of weariness.

"Well, I shall go and see your sister Agnes," she said. "Do we part here?"

They had reached the busy thoroughfare of Holborn, where the traffic at that hour seemed to Mrs. Rodney to be in inextricable confusion.

"We can. Will you take a motor-bus, my dear? I think I'll come with you and see Agnes," he added on second thoughts; and a minute or two later they were seated on the garden seat of a motor-bus bound for Chelsea.

"I suppose we shall have to make some provision for Aunt Agnes," said Mrs. Rodney, her busy brain in a ferment. "She will have to leave that horrid little shop. I don't think it would be wise, however, to have her to live with us, though the children are all so ridiculously fond of her. She wouldn't fit in anywhere that I can see. But a little cottage in the country, a good servant,

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and a little pony chaise, perhaps! Then we could run down and see her occasionally."

Rodney looked distinctly startled.

"I can't imagine Agnes away from Chelsea, mother, any more than I can imagine myself out of City Road."

"That is because you have no imagination. But that's what's going to happen—very soon, too. You could make a present of the business in City Road to John Glide. Then we should feel that we could be done with him."

"Done with him!" echoed Rodney. "But why should we be done with John, mother? He is an excellent fellow. He has been quite like a son to me."

"Precisely. And I have no doubt that he would like very much to become a son in reality! Of course he admires Kathleen. The girls will have to look higher now—not that John would ever have been good enough for Kathleen. With her looks and the chances she has had at Mrs. Dyer's, it is not likely that she would ever have taken up with the like of him. Now, of course, she might get a title. Why, everything is possible—just everything! How Kathleen will enjoy telling Mrs. Dyer to-day! I am dying to hear what she will say about it. At first I don't doubt we shall be glad of a little advice from Mrs. Dyer. As Kathleen says, she knows everybody."

Rodney sat still, listening, his mind becoming gradually bewildered and chaotic.

But presently his thoughts began to wander, for the pageant of the streets, aided by his imagination, began to enthral him as usual. Few people, his wife least of all, knew anything of Cyrus Rodney's inner life. She would thoroughly have disapproved of his day-dreams, and she might even have reminded him that, had he indulged less in them, they might all have been better off as a family.



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Arrived at Victoria, they alighted from the bus and turned their faces towards the river, taking short cuts through little narrow streets, which must have confused anybody but those familiar with them.

In these by-streets of old Chelsea are to be found artists who are not well off, lovers of books and of curios and of out-of-the-way things, and to these the little double-fronted shop with the quaint round windows and with the name "A. Rodney, Dealer," painted above the door, was a well-known, even beloved, resort.

Mrs. Rodney's face expressed extreme distaste as they approached the shop. Always her secret soul had rebelled against trade in any form, and Agnes Rodney's particular trade she considered hardly respectable. The word "Dealer," for instance, suggested nothing to her but pawnbroking and traffic in second-hand clothes!

Rodney pushed open the door, a faintly tinkling bell announced their entrance, and presently his sister appeared.

She was a small, bird-like person, extraordinarily neat and delicate in appearance; old-fashioned, of course, judged from the standpoint of her sister-in-law, but her sunshiny face was a singularly pleasant one, and her smile was very sweet as she recognised and greeted her relatives.

"Cyrus and Louisa both together at twelve o'clock in the day! Why, whatever has happened?" she asked excitedly.

"Let us come in out of sight and hearing, Agnes, and you shall be told," said Mrs. Rodney loftily.

Agnes immediately held open the little green door with the muslin curtain across its lower panes, and admitted them to the back sitting-room, where she spent practically the whole of her life.

There were living-rooms upstairs, but these she used only for sleeping purposes, two of them being sublet to

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a couple of women artists who "did" for themselves, and who accounted themselves extraordinarily lucky in having found such suitable quarters.

There were curios in the sitting-room, too, beginning with a gentleman in a suit of full armour in the corner, and including little pictures—some of them gems—on the walls, odd bits of bronze and old pewter, and a wonderful old pierced brass fender in front of the fireplace, where glowed a cheerful morning fire.

A savoury odour pervaded the apartment, and in a little casserole in the oven Aunt Agnes's midday meal was simmering gently and disturbing nobody.

"Why, whatever has happened?" repeated Miss Agnes, as she whisked imaginary dust from the old Chippendale chairs and pulled them forward for her visitors.

In a few breathless words Mrs. Rodney put her sister-in-law in full possession of the fact. Agnes listened, round-eyed, full of wonder, slightly overwhelmed by the great news and by the number of schemes that Mrs. Rodney already seemed to have formulated in her mind.

"And of course you'll leave this horrid little hole, Agnes?" she said grandly. "I was saying to Cyrus on the bus that a little cottage in the country, on the river, perhaps, but——"

"Oh—but—Louisa!" interrupted Agnes. "I haven't come into a fortune, and I hope never to have to leave my own little home here as long as I live."

"Everything will be different, Agnes, and you will have us to consider," said Mrs. Rodney in her most uplifted voice. "The prospects of the girls will have to be considered, and everything will matter. It will either be the little cottage, or—or a complete gulf fixed, Agnes—just as it will be with the City Road business."

Agnes Rodney's smile faded a little, but the bright determination in her eyes suffered no daunting.

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Mrs. Rodney was a very powerful and overmastering person. There was no power on earth, however, capable of shifting Agnes Rodney from her little home and the environment she loved.

Cyrus noted and fully understood the expression on his sister's face, and, somehow, a sense of immense relief crept into his soul. Amid the clash of social worlds this little citadel would remain unshaken!

Something assured him that he would need it for his soul's refuge in days to come.

## CHAPTER V

### CHANGES ALL ROUND

THE change that swept over the Rodney household in the next day or two was indescribable. Conceive of it! The whole conditions and outlook upon life were changed in the twinkling of an eye for these seven persons, and, consequently, for others deeply interested in their affairs.

Mrs. Rodney lived in a state of ferment. She could neither eat nor sleep properly.

It was now Saturday, and the next turning-point was the arrival that afternoon of the eldest son, Cyril, from his weekly journey into the provinces for the sale of blouses and skirts, which was his "line."

At breakfast that morning there had been a somewhat heated discussion.

"I was thinking before I got up," Mrs. Rodney had remarked, "that a note had better be sent round to Carrie Bygrave. Why didn't somebody think of it before?"

"But she will be here, anyway, to tea as usual, won't she?" Kathleen had said, stopping in the act of buttering her toast to look inquiringly at her mother.

"That's just it, my dear. She will be here, and perhaps in the circumstances it might be better if she did not come to-day."

Carrie Bygrave was engaged to Cyril Rodney, and since the engagement had been sanctioned by both families the custom was that she should spend Saturday afternoon and evening—when the Rodneys were at home to their friends—at The Laurels. The greater part of

Sunday Cyril passed at the house of the Bygraves in the time-honoured way of the engaged man.

Carrie Bygrave was a very charming girl. She was engaged in business in the West End, being first hand in the showroom of a Bond Street milliner—a position for which she was excellently qualified. The size of her salary and her undoubted "air" had reconciled Mrs. Rodney in some measure to the engagement. Like most mothers, she had an exaggerated idea of the matrimonial value of her son, and she accordingly patronised Carrie in the good old way.

Carrie was a very jolly little person, fond of fun and pleasure. She was genuinely fond, too, of Cyril Rodney, and, because her salary was nearly double his, she always insisted, in a perfectly good-humoured way, on paying her full share of the cost of any entertainments or outings which they enjoyed together. Moreover, she gave her lover handsome presents, and up till now Cyril had been very pleased with his lot, though sometimes he was visited by a few secret pangs as he thought of the future, when they should be compelled to live on his salary.

That prospect did not appear to trouble Carrie very much, however, and she was anxious to be married soon. But Cyril, like many modern young men, was in no haste to give up any of his bachelor comforts to support a wife. Life was a very good thing to him just then, being full of variety and gilded by the boundless hope of youth.

He was a very mediocre person indeed. He persistently talked, however, in the grandiloquent style of the day when he should become one of the heads of "our firm."

Carrie was not in the least deceived with regard to his nature and merits. Clever and sharp as a needle herself, she was perfectly aware of his limitations.

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Perhaps, woman-like, she loved him all the more for them. They were a very happy couple, though maybe the bulk of the affection was on Carrie's side.

The Rodney girls all liked her; and she was very kind to them in the matter of advising them about their clothes, never disdainng to give an hour or two on Saturday afternoons to re-trimming their hats or even making fresh ones for them.

Kathleen owed the very becoming and decidedly French-looking headgear—which so often incensed Anna Helder, her employer's niece—entirely to her prospective sister-in-law, and the cost was microscopical.

But these are things we do not give away outside the family circle.

Although it was Kathleen who spoke, it was Estelle who waited with the keener anxiety for her mother's answer.

"What difference could it make to Carrie, mother?" she continued. "She'll have to know, and, after all, she's properly engaged to Cyril."

Mrs. Rodney nodded mysteriously.

"That's just it—she's engaged now, but nobody knows what will happen. Everything will depend on the point of view from which Cyril looks at it. I am so glad that neither of you girls has an entanglement. If you had, it would complicate everything in the future."

The girls exchanged glances, and both of them coloured and laughed consciously.

Their father, apparently busy with his bacon, kept his eyes on his plate.

"Oughtn't Jack to be down, mother?" he said presently, with a mild glance at the clock.

Jack was allowed an hour's licence on Saturday morning; so the question was quite superfluous, and was meant really to create a diversion.

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"It isn't his time yet. Besides, they're playing Surrey at Guildford this afternoon," put in Kathleen quickly.

Mrs. Rodney ate a few morsels in a wholly abstracted way, as if such a sublunary thing as food were a matter of no consequence.

"If we have a French *chef*, perhaps we shall not be allowed any bacon of a morning," she said, suddenly hurling one of her secret projects at her astonished family. "I've heard that in France they've only coffee and rolls for breakfast. Certainly that would be more refined."

"Oh, mother," cried Estelle, sitting back and rocking with laughter, "if we are going to be in that kind of bondage we'll need to split company, I'm afraid! Where would poor dad be without his rasher? Have another, dear—there are two left."

Rodney passed in his plate.

"No *chef*, French or otherwise, can bring forward anything to excel a good rasher of a morning," he said firmly. "Get my boots, Kathie. If I am greedy, somebody has got to pay!"

Kathleen not only got the boots, but insisted on helping him to put them on. It was a pretty family picture.

At last, when they had got their father out to catch his bus, his wife sat back in her chair with a resigned sigh.

"Your father will give up that horrible City Road business only when he is made to. To be such a wise, good man, he has a singular lack of the sense of fitness."

"But, mother," said Estelle in a puzzled voice, "you couldn't expect him just to drop out as if it had never existed. Think of the years he has spent there, and how we were all born above the shop! Why, I"—she paused as she observed her mother wince at the word—"I shall

never feel quite the same," she resumed, "to any other house. Will you, Kathleen?"

"I've never liked the City Road, Este, so I won't commit myself," answered Kathleen guardedly. "Well, I, too, must be off. You're well off, Este, to have two holidays in each week!"

"We *don't* think!" answered Estelle, with a slight smile.

Everybody knew that Saturday was her busiest day. She was a very accomplished baker of cakes, and her Saturday mornings were given up to that in preparation for the afternoon and evening. Other household duties filled up every moment until four o'clock, when her mother, dressed in her best, would seat herself in the drawing-room to receive.

Mrs. Rodney got a great deal of genuine pleasure out of these weekly receptions, and, on the whole, made an excellent, if somewhat garrulous and patronising, hostess.

"I shall feel very odd this afternoon, Estelle," she said, as she followed her elder daughter into the kitchen to begin the programme for the day.

The maid-of-all-work was clearing the dining-room table, so that they were practically alone in the back regions of the house.

Estelle, with a big blue overall covering her skirt and blouse, looked the picture of housewifely charm. Mrs. Rodney was so used to her appearance that she did not observe the charm. She did remark, however, that she thought Estelle was getting stouter.

"It's surprising how the figure sets after five-and-twenty," she remarked, as she put the buttons in at the back of the overall. "What will you make to-day? Oh, the usual sandwich cake, I suppose. That goes farthest and is very satisfying. But oh, I forgot, it won't matter now! Here, Estelle, let's 'chuck it all,' as Jack would



say, and go down West and have lunch at one of the fashionable restaurants and buy cakes at Buszard's!"

But Estelle had no mind to forgo the homely pleasures of the baking-board, which every genuinely womanly and housewifely woman thoroughly enjoys.

"No, no, mother. We should simply make ourselves dead tired for the afternoon. Sit down, while I look out what is in the store-closet. You didn't really mean what you said about Carrie, did you? It can't possibly make any difference to Cyril that you have got all that money. Why, they've been engaged for over two years!"

Mrs. Rodney sat down in a chair at the end of the kitchen table, and, before she could speak, her Argus eye caught sight of two pieces of good toast, which Julia had put among the debris of the plates as she carried them through to the scullery. But she restrained herself from finding fault sharply, as she would undoubtedly have done forty-eight hours before, and so Julia was permitted to perpetrate unchecked what Mrs. Rodney in her secret heart regarded as a crime.

"Thank goodness, we'll get rid of that girl! She would exhaust the patience of a saint," she murmured as Julia set down the tray with a clatter on the pantry table. "What were you speaking about, Estelle?—oh, yes, about Cyril. Well, dear, what has happened is, of course, bound to make a difference. Cyril will be a rich man. He is very good-looking, and he is now entitled to look higher than a milliner, however well she happens to be paid."

Estelle's face hardened.

"If Cyril were to throw Carrie over, mother," she said indignantly, "he would behave like an abominable cad. She's a perfect dear! He would never get such another, nor would he deserve to."

"Dear me, Estelle, you're quite in a rage! After all, it is Cyril's business—not ours. He is twenty-four—

surely of an age to make up his own mind whom he really wants to marry. To think he doesn't know yet!—but, there, perhaps he does. I sent him a line to the Midland Hotel on the offchance of its finding him there.”

Estelle, with her shapely arms plunged in the soft flour, had quite a musing expression on her face. It was Cyril she was thinking of for the moment, pondering on the effect sudden riches were likely to have on him.

A shrewd judge and student of human nature, she felt a little afraid that they would affect him for the worse; for Cyril was vain and rather ill-balanced, though he had improved greatly since his association with Carrie Bygrave. Before his engagement he had belonged to the card- and billiard-playing set, and Estelle had sometimes feared that he was developing a fondness for spirits, imagining, as he did, that to take the friendly glass as often as it was offered made a man of him.

But Carrie had stopped all that—not rudely or flagrantly, but quietly and simply—through the force of her womanly charm and her strong sense of right.

Estelle was genuinely fond of Carrie Bygrave. In fact, she was her most intimate woman-friend, and, had she been asked for a frank opinion, would have had no hesitation in saying that Carrie was much too good for Cyril.

“You must send a line to the Board to-night, Estelle, so that they may get it on Monday morning. We must start house-hunting at once.”

“Oh, but, mother,” protested Estelle, “I can't do that; I shall have to remain at school until they get somebody to fill my place. I really would like to wait till the end of the term now. It is only about four weeks.”

“You simply can't do that,” her mother answered quickly. “If you were ill, they would be obliged to

get somebody at once. And this is of far more importance. I seem to miss something in you all," she said, with a gentle sigh. "One would think none of you were glad about this money. Even your father will hardly talk about it."

"Give us time, mother, to get used to it," said Estelle good-humouredly; "and remember that we have all taken root—some of us rather deeply. Kathie, for instance—nothing will drive her away from dear Mrs. Dyner."

"She must give up working for her, but she can remain friendly. I dare say we shall find Mrs. Dyner useful. There were several titled people there on the day that I went to her 'At Home.' She introduced me to Lady Hatherley, and I had quite a long talk with her. She gave me her card and asked me to call on her; but I have never done so. Unfortunately, I have lost the card, I'm afraid. How foolish it is of anybody to miss opportunities like that! My reason for not calling on her really was that, when I thought things over, I concluded that we couldn't ask Lady Hatherley to come here."

"Why not, mother? If she wanted to make a friend of you, what was to prevent her from coming here? We've a very good home."

Mrs. Rodney assumed the expression of the woman misunderstood by her family, and said she had better go and see whether the lazy children were thinking of getting up.

She found them having a pillow fight on the landing between the rooms, and for the next ten minutes there was no time to think or talk about the fortune.

Soon after midday dinner Estelle dressed herself and went out, telling her mother that she would be back before anybody was likely to arrive, and that she would bring some fresh flowers. At two Louie departed for

her weekly dancing lesson, and Mrs. Rodney was left in sole possession.

She was getting into her afternoon frock when she heard the ring of the bell and the sound of Cyril's voice in the hall below. Immediately she ran out to the landing, hair-brush in hand, and called him to come up, which he did two steps at a time.

"Hallo, mater, how are you? Yes, I got your letter! Great Scott, isn't it tremendous? Where are they all? I quite expected to get home to a sort of family war-council, don't you know."

"Everybody's as usual, and going about their business as if nothing on earth had happened, dear," she answered, as she kissed him fondly and drew him into her bedroom.

Although six feet in height, Cyril was nothing but a boy in her eyes, and he was undoubtedly her favourite among all her children. He was very like her, but the weakness of the mouth and the chin was accentuated in his face, and his reddish hair, closely cropped in the prevailing fashion, showed how his head narrowed above the brow.

"You got my letter, then?" she asked, drawing her dressing-jacket about her shoulders and sitting down on the edge of a chair, while Cyril leaned against the dressing-table.

"Only just. Great news, isn't it? You didn't mention the sum? Is it worth while, mater? Will it make a difference to us?" he questioned excitedly.

"It's a huge fortune, Cyril—anything from one to two hundred thousand pounds! The lawyers say that we shall have an income of seven or eight thousand a year without touching capital."

"Great Scott!" repeated Cyril, tugging at his small moustache. "I can't take it in! What are they all saying about it? Aren't they half-crazy?"

"No. They go on simply as if nothing had happened. I'm so glad you have come home, dear. Perhaps you'll wake them up a bit. Father is at the City Road as usual, and Kathleen at Mrs. Dyer's. Estelle told me this morning that she would certainly stop at Romsey Road till the end of the term."

Cyril whistled and nodded his head.

"They don't seem to grasp it. Why, it'll alter everything. We'll get out of this beastly little house, shan't we; and pater will leave the shop? I suppose something can be done for me—I can be bought a decent partnership or something?"

"Why, of course. We must have a proper talk over it to-night after the people have left. I suppose the usual crowd will turn up to-day; but, somehow, Cyril, already I feel that I can't take the same interest in them. Some of them at least it won't be possible for us to go on knowing."

"I suppose not," said Cyril soberly. "Does Carrie know about it, mater?"

"Not yet. We haven't seen her, but she'll be here, of course, some time this afternoon. Now I must get on with my dressing, as it is half-past three."

Cyril withdrew, and at the bottom of the stairs he encountered his father, who had just come in.

"How are you, my boy? Glad to see you back. Had a successful week?" asked Rodney in the same kind, interested tone that his children had always been taught to expect.

He betrayed not the smallest sign of perturbation or excitement.

"Pretty fair. But I say, dad, this is tremendous news about Uncle Edgar's fortune. Aren't you fearfully bucked about it?"

Rodney smiled rather ruefully, and suggested that they should go into the little morning-room for a smoke.

Already the other two rooms were in course of preparation for the "At Home" day, Julia even then being engaged in setting out the cups and saucers on the dining-room table.

"I hardly know, Cyril. I suppose we don't realise it yet; but it is disturbing your mother a good deal. She has not had a good night's rest, I believe, since she heard the news."

"And I don't wonder," put in Cyril, as he drew out his cigarette-case. "It's a big lot of money that has come to her! Why, it'll alter everything. We shan't be the same people. Of course, we'll leave Denmark Hill and go in for a different kind of life altogether. West End style, don't you know—a carriage and heaps of servants. What a lark!"

There was no elation in Rodney's looks as he took out his old briar pipe and proceeded to fill it.

"It is not easy to accommodate oneself to such drastic changes at my time of life, Cyril. But your mother has them in contemplation. Tell me, do you think it will be necessary for me to give up business?"

"I should think you'd be jolly glad to get out of it now, dad. The City Road's the limit. Besides, it isn't worth toiling and moiling at. It would have died a natural death sooner or later, at any rate—probably sooner. The returns have been going steadily down. Nobody but you would have hung on to it so long."

"I was talking to John to-day. He seems to think it has life in it yet, Cyril, and that, if some new features were introduced, things would improve."

"Chuck it over to him, then, and let him try," said Cyril ruthlessly. "It's a dead cert. you wouldn't get a red cent for the goodwill. Hallo, who's that?—somebody being shown in."

Julia, straightening her cap, announced Eugene Woods. He was unaware of the change in the fortunes

of the Rodneys, and he had come early, very full of the improvement in his own position and prospects, and eager to have a further talk over these with Estelle.

He was, as has been said, a frequent visitor at The Laurels, both on Saturdays and Sundays, and in a general way he was a favourite, though Cyril affected to despise him, and said he had a bee in his bonnet.

He looked a very different type from Cyril Rodney as he stood close by him in the little room. Cyril was the picture of the man of the well-developed body, which had little mind or soul behind it, while it was evident at a glance that Eugene had developed his intellectual life at the expense of his body. In his eager pursuit of knowledge he had neglected either to feed or to exercise it properly.

Cyril nodded him a careless "good afternoon," but Rodney himself bade him kindly welcome and offered him a smoke.

On pretext of washing away the dust of his journey, Cyril took himself off upstairs, meeting his mother, now fully dressed, on the landing as he ascended.

"It's Frenchie," he said slightly, that being the family nickname for Woods in the house. "Looks more moonstruck than ever. Oh, he's all right with the pater. Say, I don't think I'll come down yet. I'll pop round and see Carrie, and bring her on later."

Mrs. Rodney leaned for a moment against the balustrade, eyeing her son narrowly.

"You are as keen on Carrie as ever, Cyril?"

"Why, yes, I suppose I am. Jolly good sort is Carrie, and as clever as they are made."

"Oh, yes—I don't want to say anything against Carrie. You know I have never done so," she said pointedly. "But everything will be changed now. Why, Cyril, with your looks, and the money behind you, who knows to what you might not aspire? It would be as

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well not to be too attentive just at present. Take my advice and let Carrie come round as usual. Don't run after her."

Cyril pondered on these words while he was making his toilet in the bathroom, which was used indiscriminately as a dressing-room by the whole household, in order to save work and the carrying of water to the bedrooms.

Mrs. Rodney, full of dignity and importance, sailed downstairs, and had to go straight into the drawing-room, into which two ladies had already been shown.

It is astonishing how quickly news of both good and bad fortune can travel. Already the stupendous thing that had happened to the Rodneys had become public property among their friends and acquaintances, and everybody called that afternoon to discover how they were taking it.

When Estelle came in she had to dress hurriedly and run down to superintend the tea-room, and by five o'clock Mrs. Rodney was holding a sort of court.

Hearing that Eugene Woods was with her father in the morning-room, Estelle made a point of slipping in there to say "How do you do?" to him. But she found he had gone.

"I thought Eugene was here, father," said she, with a slight accent of disappointment in her voice.

"He was, but he has gone. The fortune has scared him away," her father answered ruefully; "and John isn't coming either. I'm afraid we're going to lose some of our friends, Estelle, and there are no friends like the old and tried ones."

"It was stupid of Eugene to go away so soon. I shall scold him next time I see him. Won't you come into the drawing-room and help mother? I do believe the whole of the chapel is in there now."

But Rodney shook his head and turned rather eagerly towards the door.



"I think I'll take a stroll, my dear. I'm not in a mood for a crowd, and your mother is quite capable of dealing with them."

Estelle wished for the moment that she could accompany him, for she too felt a sudden loathing for the atmosphere of the drawing-room—for the eager, curious crowd, whose questions her mother would doubtless be more than willing to answer. A sort of numbness of spirit began to creep over Estelle. She felt as if all the foundations of life were being shaken, and as if the future stretched away in front full of uncertainty and doubt.

Kathleen came home late, and, on hearing that John Glide had not come and was not coming, seemed disappointed.

Carrie Bygrave was there, looking very sweet and attractive in her exquisitely made black frock. Among a very commonplace crowd she struck an odd note of distinction. The clear pallor of her countenance seemed to make all other faces look crude, highly-coloured—even vulgar. But her expression was sad in the extreme.

"What is it, Carrie? You seem out of sorts," whispered Estelle when they got a moment together.

"I can't tell you, Este, for I don't know. Things are all wrong, somehow, and nothing is the same."

"That's life," said Estelle, and her kind, wide mouth appeared to quiver.

They clasped hands in silence and looked into each other's eyes, both being conscious of that which they could not put into words, but which, being interpreted, meant fear—genuine, undisguised fear of a future unfamiliar, unwelcome, full of menace to their hearts.

## CHAPTER VI

### LADY HATHERLEY

A STRANGE minister preached at Ebenezer Chapel on Sunday morning, and by some odd coincidence he chose for his text the words: "Where thieves do not break through nor steal."

He knew nothing of the Rodneys, not even having heard their name, but his warning concerning the deceitfulness of riches might have been intended for and addressed to them.

A good many eyes wandered to the Rodneys' pew during the discourse, and in sundry there was even a lurking amusement.

Mrs. Rodney was furious, and some of the younger members of the family felt very uncomfortable. The only perfectly happy and unconscious occupant of the pew was Rodney himself. His serene face, which in church always wore its most beautiful expression—an expression born of a soul that truly worshipped—never altered.

When they came out his wife immediately vented her indignation.

"Of course, either Mr. Pearce or that foolish sister of his has been talking to the strange minister," she said hotly. "There's nothing but envy and jealousy at the bottom of that sort of thing. But people do not do themselves any good by it. I *did* think of presenting a new font to Ebenezer as a sort of farewell offering, but now I won't—not, at least, unless Mr. Pearce comes properly to explain and apologise."

Cyrus Rodney was amazed at the acidity of his wife's tone, but he felt that protest would be useless. They walked home in an uncomfortable silence.

The day passed as usual. Before their return home Cyril had already gone to the Bygraves'; but, to the surprise of his family, he returned quite early in the evening. Rodney and the two girls had gone to evening service. Julia being out, however, Mrs. Rodney had to keep house. Her son found her sitting at the dining-room table, making calculations on a piece of paper. She looked up in surprise on his entrance.

"You are surely back very early, Cyril. It isn't eight o'clock yet."

"No. I got fed up at Clarina Place. There was something the matter with Carrie, and old Bygrave seemed suspicious and nasty. It wasn't good enough. Carrie has got to climb down off her high horse if she's going to be of any use to me. I've always told you that she was a bit uppish. To-night it was insufferable!"

His mother looked sympathetic.

"It's jealousy that is at the bottom of the way people are going on," she remarked wisely. "You should have been at Ebenezer this morning! A lantern-jawed person preached about the deceitfulness of riches. The sermon might have been levelled at us. I have no doubt that it was, and that he was put up to it by Miss Pearce. She has been jealous of my influence and standing in the chapel ever since she came. Thank goodness, we'll soon be out of it!"

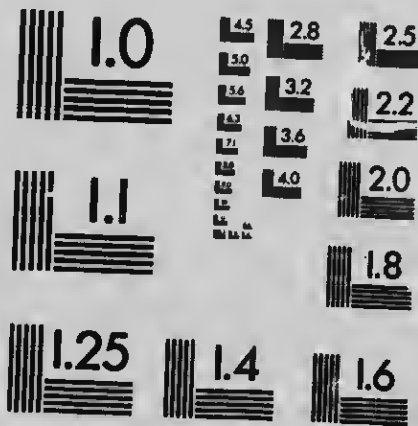
"What I want to know is whether I am to say anything at Hammond's to-morrow?" remarked Cyril. "I'll be seeing the gov'nor when I go down, though I have to shunt off to Macclesfield by the ten-fifty. Suppose it'll be too early days to talk of resigning or anything?"

"I really hardly know what to say, Cyril," said his mother, leaning back in her chair. "It's not too early so



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far as actual possession of the money is concerned. I have already opened a banking account, and the lawyers told me to draw on them for whatever I wanted. If only your father were a different kind of man! Positively he doesn't take the smallest interest in all this. One would actually think that he would rather the fortune hadn't come."

"Poor old pater!" said Cyril in the half-affectionate, half-compassionate tone one might have used in speaking of a lovable but wholly irresponsible child. "He'll waken up to it presently, however. So will the girls—you just wait! When they've seen a bit of life, like I have, and tasted what it is like to live in a mansion provided with every luxury, probably you'll have something to do to keep 'em in hand."

Cyril spoke with his man-of-the-world air, which never failed to impress his mother, though his sisters openly scoffed at it. His tales of visits to the abodes of merchant princes in the Midlands they accepted with a grain of salt, knowing Cyril's habit of drawing the longbow; but his mother fondly believed that her handsome lad was a *persona grata* everywhere, and that he only required to be seen and known to obtain the *entrée* anywhere.

"I don't see that there would be any harm in just mentioning the matter to Mr. Hammond. In fact, in the circumstances, I think you should ask an interview for that purpose. Then hear what he says. He may have some proposition to make, for there isn't any firm which isn't glad to have a prospect of more money coming into it. If you think you will stick to business, Cyril! But I'm thinking of Parliament and so on for you. Why not?"

Cyril pulled up his collar and dragged down his flowered waistcoat with an air.

"I don't know exactly whether I'd care about that.

Parliament, as at present conducted, is nothing but a jawing machine. But we can see later on as to that," he added grandly. "Well, then, it's O.K. that I go down as usual to-morrow morning and interview old Hammond? Can I tell him how much you have got left?"

"You can just mention that it's about two hundred thousand; besides, there's the sheep-run—perhaps estate would be a better word—which Jack has already in his mind appropriated. He thinks he's going out to it!"

"Well, and he might do worse—the young limb! It's certain he'd never settle to city life. It's happened in the nick of time for young Jack. He might make another fortune out there, who knows?"

Cyril was very fond of Jack, though their tastes lay so far apart. Cyril had never been an athlete or a sport, considering most outdoor games a fag.

"I'd be very glad to have you at home, Cyril, just at present, for I foresee that I'll have to decide most things for myself. About the house, for instance, neither Este nor Kathleen have so much as discussed where we ought to settle when we leave here."

"They don't grip it yet, mater. I don't myself. I'll see what old Hammond says to-morrow morning. I'm rather eager to see his phiz when I mention the sum."

"If you have to go on to Macclesfield, or if you think it will be better not to break off for a week or two, be sure you write and describe the interview," said his mother with much satisfaction. "The coming of this fortune is bound to make a difference in a good many directions."

But in this she was somewhat taken.

Old Hammond listened politely to his traveller's communication, made a few congratulatory comments, and then plunged into the business for the week. So strong was the domination of that keen business person-

ality over Cyril Rodney that he accepted his employer's instructions as meekly as usual and went out, feeling rather crestfallen.

On Monday the tide of life flowed as usual for the members of the household at The Laurels—for all except Mrs. Rodney, who was becoming more and more conscious of the loneliness of her position. She fancied that nobody sympathised with her or was in the least interested in what had happened.

As a matter of fact, they were all interested in it—were even obsessed by it. Estelle's mind wandered all the morning, and she found it extremely difficult to fix her attention on her work or to give her pupils their due. She put in a bad morning's work, judged from the standpoint of her employers.

Kathie found plenty to do at Mrs. Dyer's, that lady being laid up and obliged to dictate from her bed.

As for poor Rodney himself, he mooned about the double-fronted shop in City Road in a manner which troubled John Glide acutely. He could see that the old man was going to be heart-broken by the changes which he was powerless to retard.

About half-past two in the afternoon Mrs. Rodney, dressed in her handsomest clothes, left Denmark Hill and travelled by bus to Victoria, where she alighted and took a taxi, giving an address that she read off a visiting card which, after much hunting, she had discovered in a drawer of the dining-room bureau.

It bore the words: "Lady Hatherley, 44 Clanricarde Mansions, S.W."

It was quite a short ride from Victoria to that aristocratic quarter, and when Mrs. Rodney dismissed the man before the imposing block of flats with mahogany swing-doors and a liveried porter airing himself in the vestibule, her mind was hardly prepared for the next step. But, screwing her courage to the sticking-point,



she advanced towards the liveried person, and, in what she considered an important voice, inquired for Lady Hatherley.

"In," replied the liveried one briefly, with a magnificent wave of his arm towards the mahogany board bearing the residents' names which hung in the passage. "Lift to the left, madam—third floor."

Mrs. Rodney passed in, was introduced to the lift, and smoothly swept up to the third floor.

"Fourth door on the right, ma'am," said the boy, and his grin was so expectant that Mrs. Rodney immediately produced a small coin and graciously presented it to him.

Before she had reached the fourth door on the right the lift, in response to an imperative whir of the electric bell, had shot down.

The smallest page boy in the world, who seemed to be entirely covered with shiny brass buttons, answered her somewhat timid press of the electric button, and, without speaking a word, held the door wide open so that she might enter the dark and rather stuffy little hall, which, with its divans, rugs, and heavy draperies, had quite an Eastern look.

"Name, please?" asked the page, pausing with his hand on the drawing-room door.

"Oh, Mrs. Rodney," she answered nervously, and he announced her in a loud voice.

The pretty drawing-room, with its warm, flower-scented air, made a becoming setting for a tall, graceful, and very pretty woman, who, wearing a tea-gown of blue silk and lace, was writing at a buhl table between the two long pink-curtained windows.

She turned her head rather sharply, as if astonished or even resentful, for, though in a good-natured moment at one of Mrs. Dyner's extraordinary "bear gardens"—as Lady Hatherley called them—she had thrown a casual

invitation to a woman who had temporarily amused her, in Lady Hatherley's world such invitations are not meant to be accepted.

Mrs. Rodney, in her stiff black satin and velvet brocaded dolman, looked out of place in that dainty little nest, and she herself felt that she did so.

"Good afternoon, Lady Hatherley," she said, trying to speak naturally, though a little taken aback by the cool, steady stare of those wonderful greenish-blue eyes. "Of course, you have forgotten me. I am Mrs. Rodney, Kathleen's mother—Mrs. Dyer, you know——"

"Oh, yes; of course, I remember," said Lady Hatherley, smiling slightly, though, as a matter of fact, she did not in the least remember, and was wondering who the hopeless-looking person could be. "Please excuse me; I was expecting someone else. Won't you sit down?"

Her tone was soft, but distant. Her whole personality, clothed in the wonderful turquoise draperies of a grace and fashion never before beheld or imagined by Mrs. Rodney of Denmark Hill, seemed to level inquiry, swift and incisive, at her caller's head.

"You were so kind that day at Mrs. Dyer's that I thought I might venture——"

"Mrs. Dyer's? Mrs. Dyer's? Did I meet you there? I suppose I must have, but even now I hardly remember. One meets so many people, don't you know?"

"Yes, of course. But you gave me this and you asked me to call, and you were so interested about Kathie. You said that she was pretty, and that you would like to dress her."

She fumbled in her little hand-bag, and produced the now soiled piece of paste-board.

Lady Hatherley, after one swift glance at the clock, smiled faintly.

"Oh, yes—I think I remember. Well, can I do any-

thing for you? I have an appointment at four. We have just fifteen minutes."

"I dare say that will be long enough," murmured Mrs. Rodney, feeling now more at her ease and concluding that Lady Hatherley, as a woman of fashion, had many demands on her time. "I am in need of a little advice. Something has happened to us as a family, Lady Hatherley—something which will make a great difference to us. I have come into some money."

"Oh!" said Lady Hatherley in a more interested tone, for money was the one theme in the world that interested her, and the getting of enough for her needs and wants was the hopelessly insolvable problem of her life. "I am glad to hear of your good fortune. In what way will it make a difference?"

"In every way, I hope. It will have to. It is a large sum of money, Lady Hatherley, which was left by my brother, who was a squatter in Australia."

"Indeed, that sounds most interesting! We had a Queensland squatter in society last season, simply rolling in money—but such a hard nut, Mrs. Rodney! Would you believe it?—one could hardly get a sovereign out of him for one's pet charity! And he was so horribly rude to us all, but fascinating—oh, quite fascinating. In the end, however, he married somebody quite impossible—a typist, I believe she was—and went back to Australia to squat. We had a good deal of fun out of him while he lasted—but that was all. Of course you have seen *The Walls of Jericho*, Mrs. Rodney? He was that sort of person."

Mrs. Rodney had never heard of the society play alluded to by Lady Hatherley, but she murmured, "Oh, indeed, was he?" as if she perfectly understood the reference.

"Well, now, do tell me about this fortune that has come to you," said Lady Hatherley in more friendly,

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in fact, quite confidential, tones. "Is it hundreds of pounds, or thousands, or how much?"

"The lawyers say that it is two hundred thousand, not reckoning the estate," replied Mrs. Rodney with a little thrill in her voice.

"Two hundred thousand, dear lady! How perfectly splendid for you all! I am filled with envy! Just think of poor me dragging out a precarious existence in this horrid little flat on a few hundreds a year, and trying to supplement it by writing society novels which nobody wants to read! Two hundred thousand pounds! Why, you'll be able to do anything, Mrs. Rodney—positively anything—with that amount of money!"

The woman's whole attitude and demeanour had changed in an instant. She sat forward eagerly, playing with the string of uncut turquoise gems suspended from her neck, her eyes literally blazing with interest.

"It is a large sum of money for simple folk, of course, and, feeling that I needed a little advice, I thought of you, Lady Hatherley. You were so kind—talking to me that day at Mrs. Dyner's, while I didn't know anybody and was feeling so horribly out of it."

"Oh, yes, of course. I remember all about it now," said Lady Hatherley, as if a sudden inspiration had come to her. "I remember we agreed that it was an awful crowd, but that Mrs. Dyner was an old dear! Two hundred thousand pounds!" she once more repeated. "Tell me, what do you propose to do with it?"

"We haven't made any plans yet, Lady Hatherley. My family are rather tiresome—all except my eldest son Cyril. Mr. Rodney is in business, and he does not seem to be in a hurry to leave it."

"Mr. Rodney in business! Now, come, do tell me all about your household? If I am to be of any use to you I must know all about it. How many children have you?"

"I have five, and of these Estelle is the eldest; she is a teacher. Then comes Cyril; he is twenty-four. Then Kathleen, whom you have seen; then Jack, a sixteen-year-old schoolboy, who will probably go out to the sheep-run—he's mad over the idea. Last, there's Lulu, the baby—she's only eleven."

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Rodney. You have sketched them admirably. I see them every one—your eldest daughter, a little prim and proud; Cyril, handsome and dashing; your pretty Kathleen, who will now have her chance; then the young ones. How you will enjoy launching them all on the new world that this money will open up for you! Where do you live at present?"

"At The Laurels, Bigwood Lane, Denmark Hill."

"Where is that?" asked Lady Hatherley in a puzzled voice.

"South of London—Camberwell way, don't you know?"

"Of course, but I've never been there. We West Enders are really geographically very ignorant, dear Mrs. Rodney. I was brought up in the country. I married when I was very young, and went out with my husband to a Government post in West Africa. He died there—worse luck—and left me badly off. The Government didn't do anything for me—they didn't even continue his pension, though he died of the climate out there in the service of his country. That is the explanation of my position and poverty, Mrs. Rodney, and that is why I have to work so horribly hard, writing books, to help me along."

"Have you any children?"

"No, thank goodness! What should I have done with them? Yes, the wind is tempered a little to the shorn lamb, perhaps. Well, and what is it you would like me to do for you?"

Her eyes had narrowed, and her small features had

taken on a strange sharpness. She no longer looked at the clock or appeared bored and anxious to get rid of her most unexpected caller. Four o'clock tinkled on the little ormolu clock on the white mantel, but nobody came to disturb them.

"I have a lot of ideas, but none of them seem to get into proper shape. Firstly, I shall want my husband to retire from business; he is tired, and he has worked hard for so long. Then we must get a bigger house somewhere, either in London or in the country."

"London *and* the country," supplemented Lady Hatherley significantly. "Two hundred thousand, properly invested and judiciously spent, will do all that easily. Then about your family? You would perhaps like your Cyril to get into Parliament. What is he doing just now?"

"He, too, is in business. He represents a large City firm," answered Cyril's mother, careful not to explain that he was a commercial traveller for blouses and ladies' undershirts. "He is very ambitious, and I am ambitious for him. But—but perhaps you can tell us how we ought to proceed and what we ought to do about a house?"

Lady Hatherley leaned back in her chair, and her face became very thoughtful. She saw before her a chance which she could not afford to let slip. But she must first make very sure of her ground.

"Dear Mrs. Rodney, it is good of you to place such confidence in me," she purred presently. "And I assure you I am immensely interested. I have never forgotten the day on which I met you, nor have I forgotten your pretty Kathleen, of whom everybody loves Mrs. Dyer. I can offer you all sorts of advice, of course. You'll find hundreds eager and willing to advise you, but this thing is not so easy as it looks. I take it that you would like an assured position in society, so as to give your charming daughters and your clever sons their chance."

"Precisely. How clearly you put everything! But, of course, you are so clever and so much in the know!" cried Mrs. Rodney in a gratified voice.

"I understand the world—my own world, of course," assented Lady Hatherley graciously. "And though I am poor, I am still a person of some account in it. If you would really like me to advise you, Mrs. Rodney—why, then, it would give me a good deal of pleasure to do so. But we should have to go on quite a business footing."

"Yes, of course. I should simply leave everything to you."

"Oh, that would never do at all! It would lay us both open to all sorts of misrepresentation and misunderstanding. The thing requires diplomacy, dear Mrs. Rodney. We shall have to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves. You know something about the great world, I suppose? I dare say you have heard that a good many things are now bought and sold in it which used to be got by right of favour only."

Mrs. Rodney's expression convinced Clare Hatherley that she would have to speak more plainly to this unsophisticated creature.

"Presentations at Court, for instance—they can be engineered, and introductions into the most exclusive circles can be arranged, if sufficient money is paid. That is how some outsiders get into society, and they do nobody any harm. Their money helps the general good."

"Then should I have to pay somebody to introduce me?" asked Mrs. Rodney eagerly.

"That is a very crude way of putting it, my dear, and between ourselves we might talk like that, it is not spoken of in that way outside. Let us put it more delicately. I am a poor woman, and you are a rich one. By a certain accident of birth, however, I possess certain

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privileges and advantages which at present you have not, but which you are anxious to secure. Well, I could arrange things. A little honorarium is all I should require. As I have told you, I am a poor woman. I make no bones about that."

Mrs. Rodney's face coloured. To think she should be in a position to offer money to this radiant creature, who belonged to another world altogether! The idea was almost overpowering.

"Of course, of course! Don't mention it, dear Lady Hatherley, I quite understand. Let us be on a business footing. Whatever you ask for I shall give, for I quite see, now you have pointed it out to me, what difficulties there would be in the way."

"They are stupendous. Unaided, you could not surmount them," said Lady Hatherley as she took her jewelled cigarette case from the mantelshelf. "Supposing you took a large house in one of the fashionable squares and opened it, who would call upon you or enter it? Why, nobody! You need a chaperon just as much as any young girl entering on her first season. I know everybody. I should be glad to help. It is a little kindness which would interest me. I am fond of young people, and I took a fancy to your Kathleen. Do you understand?"

"I quite understand, dear Lady Hatherley, and it is most awfully good of you to be willing. Would you help me about choosing the house, too?"

"Of course. The very first thing we shall do is to get the house registers and go over them. But we mustn't do anything in a hurry. You will give me a day or two in which to consider matters and to arrange a sort of plan of campaign, won't you?"

"Anything you like, dear Lady Hatherley. I should simply leave myself in your hands."

"I believe it would be better. Well, I shall think



everything over, set all the machinery in motion, and then come out to you to have a long talk."

"Let me come here. I am sure you would not like Denmark Hill."

"That is immaterial. As I am going to benefit as well as you, we must also share the trouble. Now let us have some tea."

She rose and trailed her turquoise draperies across the floor to the bell-pull.

Mrs. Rodney, now quite at home, began to draw off her large, comfortable, ill-fitting kid gloves.

It was six o'clock before she left the flat in Clanricarde Mansions and journeyed back to Denmark Hill.

## CHAPTER VII

### WHAT MONEY CAN BUY

IT was characteristic of Estelle Rodney that to only one living soul at Romsey Road did she mention the stupendous happening that was going to make such an upheaval in all their lives at home. The prospect of leaving the school, however, was welcome, for she had outlived her joy in the work.

No one knows whence comes that strange weariness of the spirit which may overtake the best of us, and which, while it need not interfere with the punctilious discharge of duty, takes the zest clean out of it.

Seldom had Estelle loathed her work and her surroundings more than she did on that momentous Monday when her mother went forth to find an ally and a guide for the great adventure.

As she lingered for a moment with Miss Inman in the teachers' cloakroom, she was conscious of an almost overpowering compassion for the gaunt grey woman who would be obliged to go on working, no matter what her mental or her physical state might be, until she became inefficient and was finally discharged. That that day was not far distant Estelle could well believe as she looked at her fellow-teacher's wasted figure and pallid cheeks.

A sudden joy came to Estelle, for surely out of such abundance as had fallen to their lot at Denmark Hill there might be a little to spare for such as Eliza Inman, who had been flung by fate on a desolate shore! Relatives she appeared to have none, and her friends were

very few. The poor and the lonely are seldom rich in friends, though these they have may sometimes be of pure gold.

"I am jolly glad," said Estelle impulsively, "that I'll soon be done with all this!"

Miss Inman paused in her task of arranging a wisp of shabby black veiling across her face.

"Are you going to get married?" she asked, that being, in Miss Inman's knowledge, the only avenue of escape from toil for the working woman of uncertain age.

"Oh, no; but something has happened at home. My mother has come into a little money, and she says I must give up teaching and come home."

Eliza's face flushed under the worn veil.

"Lucky you! When did it happen?"

"Last week. But I'll stay on here till the end of the term, of course."

"How surprised they'll all be, and how mad some of them! May I tell them, Miss Rodney? I should just love to! When they hear it, it'll make some of them green with envy."

These words amply testified to the fact that Miss Inman was not happy in her surroundings, and that she had received very little kindness from her colleagues.

She was not attractive, and some of the harder and more ambitious teachers, eager for the prestige of their school and the complete efficiency of the staff, were of opinion that she ought to go. There was not, on the whole, so much active cruelty in this view of theirs as may be imagined. They were merely units of a system, and it was to their credit and advantage that, so far as their particular school was concerned, the system should be rendered and maintained as perfect as possible. Some of them positively disliked Miss Inman, and thought her mean and contemptible. She had led

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an existence of appalling narrowness for the last fifteen years, and had responded to it—that was all.

Most of them came out of families where there was some brightness and a good deal of happiness of an ordinary workaday kind, and it was absolute noncomprehension of the nature of Miss Inman's life that made them so swift in judgment.

They called her "Liza" among themselves, and they openly wondered that Estelle Rodney, whom they were obliged to respect both on account of her ability as a teacher and her qualities as a woman, could stoop to make a friend of such a poor creature.

Compassion, pure and simple, was at the bottom of the kindnesses that Estelle had often gone out of her way to bestow. The Saturday "At Homes" at The Laurels and an occasional Sunday lunch with the happy, virile throng there, were the sole pleasures of Eliza's lonely life. She repaid the Rodneys by devotion to them as a family, but it was on Estelle that she lavished her heart's affection.

"I'd rather you said nothing, Miss Inman—at least, until I give you leave. You know how they all talk here, and how they would simply deluge me with questions. I'll let you know when you may tell them."

Eliza was breathlessly interested, and was herself inclined to bombard Miss Rodney with questions.

"I'd simply love to be the first to tell them that you're resigning, and then to listen to what they would say. When they know they'll all jump to one conclusion—that you are going to marry Mr. Woods. Won't it come off now, Estelle, seeing that he has got such a good post at the Polytechnic?"

Eliza's voice was a little wistful, and her tired eyes were eager and bright.

Romance had for ever passed her by, but a woman's heart beat in that poor flat breast, and nothing interested

her more than a love story. She had, of course, often met Eugene Woods at The Laurels, and admired him immensely. Also she was quite well aware of his feelings for Estelle, and she was filled with amazement that her friend did not respond to his affection.

Estelle laughed.

"That will never happen, Eliza; you may take my word for it! I'm not a marrying woman."

"Oh, but— Miss Rodney, don't say that! I can't think how you dare. Why, it's what every woman wants in her secret heart. When they say anything else they are only telling lies."

Miss Inman spoke with quite a passion of conviction, and Estelle looked at her oddly. Never had she presented such a pathetic picture.

"Those to whom matrimony appeals are welcome to it," said Estelle. "If I were a rich woman, I should know how to fill up my life, and I don't believe I should have much room in it for men. From what I can see, most of them are selfish creatures. My old dad is an exception, of course, but then one doesn't meet one like him in a blue moon. Good-bye, Eliza. Mum's the word!"

Miss Inman nodded.

Estelle knew that she would not break her promise, even though she might be strongly tempted to do it.

Estelle walked all the way home, pondering on the inequalities of life, and, incidentally, wondering whether she might be able to persuade her mother to allow Miss Inman ten pounds a year or so in order that she might be properly clothed.

At home she found nobody but Julia, who was preparing tea. Neither Lulu nor Jack had come in from school. Then she remembered that these two were going out to tea that afternoon to the house of a friend of Jack's whose sister was having a birthday party.

"Where's mother, Julia?" she asked.

"Donno, miss. She went hout jes after dinner, dressed hup to kill," answered Julia, whose tongue on occasion certainly wanted clipping. "Did'nt s'y w'en she'd be back."

The house seemed empty and uninteresting. Estelle even, for a moment, considered the advisability of going out to the house of someone else for tea; but thinking better of it, she went to her room and took off her school clothes, which she never by any chance wore a moment longer at home than she was obliged to do.

A neat blue skirt, a pretty blouse made of delaine and trimmed with lace, completed her toilette for the rest of the evening. By the time she got downstairs it was a quarter to five o'clock.

"I don't think I'll wait for tea till mother comes home, Julia," she called through the open kitchen door. "I want mine rather badly. Bring me the little green pot."

The little green pot was brought, and against it presently she propped up a book which Eugene Woods had given her on her birthday in the last month, remarking that his introduction to its author had marked an epoch in his own life.

The book was "The Deliverance," by Mark Rutherford.

This was not Estelle's first time of reading it; some of its pages she already knew by heart. The purity and beauty of the style fascinated her, but the greyness of the outlook on life as set forth in its pages rather depressed her. It dwelt much on the inevitableness and the inexorable finality of life. In some respects it terrified her. Because she was so responsive to the significance of that subtle grip she was herself capable of the highest form of living, which has its very essence in the things of the spirit.

She enjoyed her solitary meal quite well, though it was an unusual experience in that busy household.

Occasionally she wondered what had become of her mother, but she finally concluded that in all likelihood she had gone to call on Mrs. Dyner, of whom she had frequently spoken in the last few days, fully expecting that she would prove herself useful to them in many directions in their new estate.

But presently Kathleen came in—about an hour earlier than usual—carrying some work under her arm. Sometimes when Mrs. Dyner was very busy Kathleen would bring home proofs to correct or even manuscript to be typed. She had bought a second-hand Remington out of a Christmas gift of money that Mrs. Dyner had given her, simply because she loved her work and was never happier than when engaged in it. In some respects she was an elemental creature, who accepted each day as it came and extracted the greatest amount of good out of it—an enviable disposition which, however, was impossible to Estelle, so temperamentally different were the two sisters. The elder was always questioning, questioning, and the vagaries of destiny had before now kept her awake at nights.

Kathleen was looking very young and sweet, and she wore her simple clothes with an air of distinction. She had an oval face, regularly featured, and a beautiful colouring, her abundant hair having a ruddy tinge as if with the sun on it, and her hands and feet were small and daintily formed.

Estelle was both proud and fond of her, and she smiled all over her fine, strong face on her entrance.

"Hallo, what has happened, and where are they all?" asked Kathleen as she flung her little dispatch-case on the table and began to draw off her gloves.

"Jack and Lulu have gone out to Bessie's birthday party. I had forgotten about it. Mother has gone out

too, and nobody knows where she is. Ju says she went out after dinner, dressed up. I made sure in my mind that she had gone to St. John's Wood."

Kathleen shook her head.

"She hasn't been at Ambrosia. Mrs. Dyner is ill in bed, and hasn't been able to do much to-day. The doctor, indeed, has forbidden her to do any work. I've brought home a lot of stuff to overhaul, and it'll take me a good two hours after tea to do it. Is there any tea left in the pot, Este? I had an early cup at Ambrosia, of course, but I could do with another."

Estelle's answer was to ring the bell. She had a certain dignity all her own, and it was noteworthy that Julia would do more for her than for anybody else in the family. Julia was inclined to resent bell-ringing on the part of others in the household, but she never protested when the eldest daughter summoned her. She had a way of looking at one which exacted instant obedience.

When the teapot was replenished Kathleen looked at Estelle and gave a little laugh.

"Say, Este, do you feel as if it had really happened?—about this money, I mean."

"I have an uneasy feeling that it has," was Estelle's unexpected rejoinder. "We haven't got used to the idea yet, but I suppose it's bound to make a tremendous difference to us in our way of living."

"I don't want to leave Ambrosia, Este, even to live in a big house and gad about. I'm sure I should hate that sort of life, and Mrs. Dyner nearly had a fit when I said I might have to leave her."

"I don't feel at all like that. I was getting a bit desperate at Romsey Road, and was even seriously thinking of emigrating to Canada or South Africa! I should like to see a bit of the world before I am too old. Just lately I have wanted to live, somehow—not



merely to exist. And teaching means giving out all the time; it's exhausting work."

"I should loathe it myself. But, I say, Este, I don't believe we have any idea of the things that mother is thinking about. Don't you think we ought to have a good pow-wow together and try to find out? We must have a say in everything! I wonder where mother has gone to-day?"

"Shopping, probably; she simply loves buying things. Or perhaps she has gone to the lawyers'. Why, there she is coming in now, I do believe!" added Estelle.

Estelle hastened out to the little hall to behold her mother being admitted by Julia. She was looking flushed and pleased.

"Everybody home?" she asked quickly.

"Only Kathie and me," answered Estelle. "And where have you been gadding to?"

She smiled as she put the question, which, however, her mother did not immediately answer.

"Father not back yet?" she said, in apparent surprise.

"It isn't his time yet, mother, and the children are at Bessie's birthday party. Perhaps you had forgotten about it, same as I did."

"I did forget all about it. Well, I'll come in and sit down for a little; I do feel a bit tired."

"Have a cup of tea, mother?" said Estelle. "It has just been made fresh for Kathie."

"I don't mind if I do, though I've been out to tea. I'll give you girls two guesses to say where. But there, I don't think it's any good, for you'd never guess! There you are, Kathie! Home early, surely? Is Mrs. Dynere better to-day?"

"Not much, mother—at least, she isn't well enough to work. She had a bad neuralgic headache, and the

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doctor gave her a sleeping draught. She had such a bad night that I thought, if she were to be asleep all the evening, I might just as well bring my work home."

"Sure thing," Mrs. Rodney remarked as she dropped into a chair. "Well, I've had a day—and no mistake! I've been out to tea, and to spend the afternoon with—— Have you guessed yet?" she asked, inclined to prolong the suspense of the girls.

"No, of course we haven't. How could we? Do tell us quickly, mother," said Kathleen, while Estelle got a cup for her mother from the cupboard by the fireplace where the tea-things were kept.

As Estelle stepped back to the table her mother threw off her velvet cloak and heaved a huge sigh.

"I've been spending the afternoon with Lady Hatherley at her flat in Clanricarde Mansions."

"Mother, you haven't!" came simultaneously from the lips of both girls.

Mrs. Rodney nodded with great satisfaction.

"But I have! I was there from four to six. I found her visiting-card with the address on it after you had all gone this morning. She was most awfully pleased to see me. I told you how friendly she was that day I met her at Mrs. Dyner's, but nobody believed me! Perhaps you'll believe it now."

"But whatever did you go there for, mother?" asked Kathleen in an astonished voice. "I can't think how you dared! She might be friendly enough in Mrs. Dyner's dining-room, but I tell you she has plenty of pride. Mrs. Dyner is her aunt. She doesn't think her good enough, however, and she only comes to her parties because she meets literary people who might be of use to her."

"Well, anyway, she has made a friend of me," said Mrs. Rodney loftily. "I went to her for a little advice about what we should do in the future, seeing that

nobody here seemed to be taking much interest in it. We're going house-hunting together next week, and she has promised to introduce us to all her friends and to launch us in society. She talked very nicely about you girls—especially about you, Kathie. She thinks you are quite pretty."

Kathleen laughed, but a rather odd expression flitted across Estelle's face.

"I don't want to be launched into society by a woman I've never seen. Are you sure you were wise, mother, to talk so freely about your affairs to a stranger?"

Estelle's question seemed to exasperate her mother intensely.

"Look here, Estelle. What I complain of is that none of you seem to realise or to appreciate what has happened! We have suddenly become very rich people—at least, to put it more correctly, I am a rich woman. Do you for a moment suppose that I am going to go on precisely as if nothing had happened?"

"Oh, no! Of course not, mother," murmured Estelle.

"But surely there isn't any need to hurry with the changes that we shall make—to jump, as it were, at big things. Let us get accustomed to the idea first."

"From your father downwards you have behaved in a perfectly incomprehensible way. As I said to Lady Hatherley, I am practically alone at home, without a single one of you to take the slightest interest in what I want to do and can do. She was sympathetic at least, which is more than can be said about any of you."

Kathleen looked stricken, but Estelle's face assumed an expression of sadness.

"I am sorry, mother, that you should think that of us. It wasn't lack of interest on our part. It was only that we were all a little overwhelmed."

"If anybody had cause to be overwhelmed surely it was me! Cyril is really the only one of you who looks

at things from my point of view. Funnily enough, I had thought of Parliament for Cyril, and it was the very first thing Lady Hatherley suggested."

"But you can't buy a place in Parliament, same as you might buy a suit of clothes," said Estelle, with a faint smile. "Cyril hasn't any experience or even knowledge of Parliamentary life. I don't believe he ever studies, even if he reads, the Parliamentary news in the papers."

"Why should he?" retorted her mother. "He has had other things to occupy him. He has given his mind to his business, and he will give his mind to Parliamentary affairs when it becomes necessary for him to do so. Cyril is like me in that—he is adaptable. I wish you girls would try to be. I consider we are very fortunate in knowing Lady Hatherley; though, if it had been left to either of you, we never should have known her."

Estelle was silent for a moment. Although not a cynic, she was well-read and was a diligent and shrewd student of human nature. She more than suspected the nature of the interview which had taken place at Clanricarde Mansions, but she refrained from saying unpleasant things. She was quite willing to give Lady Hatherley the benefit of such little doubt as she had in the matter, or at least to await further developments.

"What did Lady Hatherley suggest, mum?" asked Kathleen, dropping her chin on her hands and regarding her mother with intense interest. "Does she want us to take a house in the West End?"

"Why, of course—about Grosvenor Place or Pont Street or Hans Crescent. She ran over quite a lot of names. She says everything as to our success in society depends on the sort of start we make."

"I am sure father would prefer to live in the country," said Estelle slowly. "Don't you think it would

be much better to buy a nice place in the country and go there to live?"

"We might get that too—in fact, very probably we shall," said Mrs. Rodney proudly. "But the thing is to have a season in London first. Lady Hatherley says we might begin by taking a furnished house till East . . . She has a lot of friends who let their houses for the early part of the season, but who want them for themselves from May onwards. I really think that would be best. And she says it is important that we should be settled early in January—even, if possible, before Christmas—so that we may lose no time."

"And what happens after that?"

"We give a big party, and Lady Hatherley will tell us whom to ask. She said she'd make out a list of names, and that she would see that the people came."

"Why should they?" asked Estelle bluntly. "How could they possibly be interested in us?"

"They would be interested in us because we are Lady Hatherley's friends," said her mother severely. "You are not usually so dense, Estelle."

"I don't think society people are like that. From all I have heard or read of them, I can't imagine them being so disinterested. Imagine father in the midst of a life like that! Why, mumsy, he would be wretched!"

There was a note of appeal in Estelle's voice which was almost poignant. Kathleen, however, being more volatile and already in some degree initiated into society ways, appeared to wake up a bit.

"Mother, you are the most astonishing person! Isn't she, Estelle? Fancy having accomplished all this while the rest of us were trying to get used to the idea that the money had actually come! I never was more astonished in my life!"

"I have done my duty in every situation to which I have been called, Kathleen," said Mrs. Rodney solemnly.

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"I flatter myself that duty is a thing which I have never shirked. I will do my duty still for my family—aye, in spite of them, if they won't join with me!"

"But of course we're joining, mumsy," said Kathleen affectionately. "Only you do things so rapidly that you don't give us a chance of keeping pace with you. Cyril in Parliament—Estelle married to a peer—perhaps a title for father, if money can buy that!"

"My dears," said Mrs. Rodney, with the mysterious air of the person who has untold stores of wisdom to draw from, "there isn't anything in this world, believe me, that money cannot buy—not anything!"

Estelle did not speak a word. In her heart of hearts there was the deep prevision that the day would come when her mother, seated among the ashes of the feast, would have about her the spectres of the things which are not for sale!

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE CONSPIRACY

THE moment her odd visitor left, Clare Hatherley rushed to the telephone and rang up a long number in Gerrard.

"That you, Teddy?" she called impatiently.

"Yes. Sorry to have kept you waiting. Couldn't help it. Dressing to go out. Dining at an unholy hour, for my sins, with the Worboises in Hampstead."

"Well, ring them up and tell them you can't come. I want you to take me out."

"Oh, but hang it all Clare, I can't do that. They'd be as mad as hatters. That sort always are when they're offended. They've got a celestial crowd to meet me—the pick of the Heights of Hampstead, don't you know."

"Never mind—chuck them! Invent something: sudden seizure, urgent summons to the country, anything you like—and meet me at the Savoy at eight."

A moment's silence ensued over the wire, as if the person at the other end were considering the situation.

"Sorry I can't oblige, Clare. They've been decent to me; I simply can't do it. They'd never forgive me—don't you know—and I can't afford to give them the go-by."

"Yes, you can. I've got great news for you—the best tit-bit you've had in a blue moon. Savoy at eight—eh?"

"No; I can't do it, I tell you, Clare, and I'm not going to. Tell you what, though, I'll—if you say ten—

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I'll come there for supper. But I can't rise to the Savoy to-night at all, unless you are prepared to pay."

"Oh, I'll pay right enough. You *are* tiresome, Teddy, and if I weren't the best of sisters I'd leave you to your celestial heights. Well, ten then— No, I can't tell you anything here. You know it isn't safe. I'll go and see Aunt Julia in the interval. Ta-ta!"

She rang off and looked round discontentedly. It was half-past six, and she had the evening in front. Deciding to have a cutlet and a bit of dry toast and to lie down for half an hour, she issued her orders and threw herself on her bed. But her brain was far too active for sleep. While she waited for her cutlet she arranged her programme for the next few days, extending it in imagination even through the next year.

She dressed herself in black—not that she was in a penitential mood, but that something simple and not too striking was eminently suitable to the occasion. The effect, however, was satisfactory.

Clare Hatherley had the rare fair colouring that goes with reddish hair and sea-green eyes, and black suited her to perfection. She was in her way a most beautiful woman, and well she knew it. But she was now in her fortieth year, and Time, in its flight, had left a few ravages behind it. They showed principally in sundry fine lines about the eyes and mouth. But when her evening toilette was made and a touch of rouge cleverly added to her colouring, she would easily have passed for thirty.

She ate her simple meal absently, drinking nothing but a glass of seltzer water; and soon after eight, wrapped in a voluminous cloak of royal purple velvet with a white satin lining, issued forth in a hired taxicab and gave an address in St. John's Wood.

She was deposited before the closed green garden-door which ended a covered way to an old-fashioned



veranda house on Marlborough Hill—one of those delectable, picturesque houses which are still to be met with in certain parts of London and which are much sought after by the discerning.

She paid the man, at the same time telling him that he was at liberty to wait about for an hour, if he liked, and thereafter to convey her to the Savoy; only she gave him clearly to understand that she would not pay him for the time he waited. Clare Hatherley was obliged to consider these small economies, though she was hoping that times were going to improve with her.

The door was opened to her by Caroline, a tall, angular person who was Mrs. Dyer's maid and devoted slave. With Caroline Lady Hatherley was not a *persona grata*, and Clare had certainly taken small pains to conciliate her.

"Has my aunt had her dinner, Angers?" she inquired as she tripped across the threshold.

Her mode of address enraged Caroline, to begin with. For some odd reason she was sensitive about her surname, and she resented its invariable use by Lady Hatherley.

"She's 'ad all she's allowed, my lady," she answered sourly. "The doctor's just been and put 'er straight for the night. I'm just goin' to give 'er 'er sleepin' draught."

"Well, don't give it to her just yet, there's a good soul," said Lady Hatherley. "I want to see her particularly. Why didn't somebody let me know that she was ill?"

Caroline made no answer. What she would have liked to have said was that nobody for a moment supposed that Mrs. Dyer's illness would interest her ladyship, who, she knew, only came to Ambrosia House when it suited her, or when she had some particular axe to grind.

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Caroline had no illusions about Clare Hatherley, nor was she ever taken in by her meretricious charm. She believed her to be a selfish and unscrupulous woman, who regarded human beings only in the light of possible allies from whom she might obtain something for her own personal and private ends. Further, it was Caroline's profound conviction that Lady Hatherley had persistently fleeced Mrs. Dyer over a long period of years, and that, but for Clare Hatherley and her brother, the Hon. Edward Charters, her mistress would have been able to retire from active work long ago. This, however, was an exaggerated belief, though it had some truth in it.

Clare had not scrupled on occasions to take money from her aunt, though she was perfectly aware that her annuity hardly sufficed for her own needs, and that all extras in the way of luxuries had to be bought and paid for by the product of her literary work.

"I'll just run up; I have something rather important to say to my aunt. Oh, yes, of course, I'll take care not to excite or overture her. What do you take me for, Angers? I hope I'm not a fool!"

She glided up the narrow stairs, knocked very lightly at her aunt's half-open door, and then immediately entered. The room was a fairly large one, but it was so filled with heavy furniture of the Early Victorian period that most of the space and of the air seemed to be used up. A huge four-post bed in the middle of the floor had curtains of faded rose damask, and in the dim light the figure of a woman could be discerned half sitting up and propped by pillows.

"Evening, Aunt Julia. I'm so sorry you are ill. It's Clare. I had a sort of presentiment that you wanted me," she said glibly, as she glided across the floor. "May I turn up the light a tiny mite so as I can see you, poor old dear?"

"Clare!" repeated a high, thin voice in a sort of weak astonishment. "Whatever do you want with me at this time of the night?"

The question was significant enough.

"I'll tell you presently. But, Aunt Julia, why didn't that old gorgon of yours let me know you were ill? I would have been here sooner if I had known. You know I'd do anything for you. I was so awfully sorry I couldn't come to your 'At Home' the other day; I quite meant to. I forget what supervened—oh, yes, it was Teddy! He's always wanting me at odd corners. We quite meant to come together, now I remember. May I sit down? Where does it hurt, and how long are you going to be *hors de combat*? How you must hate it!"

"It's only a neuralgic headache. Of course, that idiot of a doctor thinks that it's overwork that has brought it on—too much writing. As if that ever killed anybody! As if, least of all, it would kill me! I know what it is: it's only old age, Clare—the sort of passing-bell, you know."

"Oh, nonsense, Aunt Julia!" said Clare flippantly, as she drew forward her chair. "Nobody nowadays thinks of listening for a passing-bell before ninety. When we have reduced ourselves to three tabloids a day the age limit will be set forward half a century. I'm in full practice. Poor dear! You do look rather washed-out!"

Mrs. Dyner looked quite ghastly, for, behind the rose-coloured curtains, all the little artifices of art were laid aside and Nature had her way. She was a very old woman, her poor parchment-like skin being ploughed with wrinkles, her grey hair wispy and unadorned.

"Heavens!" said Clare Hatherley in her soul. "Shall I ever look like that?"

Yet when occasion seemed to call for it, and when she was fresh from the hands of Caroline Angers, Mrs.

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Dyner was not supposed to own to more than sixty-five. Her actual age was seventy-eight, and, as she lay there, she looked every hour and moment of it, in the rather horrified eyes of her niece.

"What do you want with me?" repeated Mrs. Dyner. "I don't for a moment suppose that you came here at this rather curious hour just to inquire for me."

"I had a slack evening—nowhere to dine," was the excuse Lady Hatherley gave for her untimely call. "I'm meeting Teddy at the Savoy later, and I thought I'd fill up time by driving round this way. He's dining at Hampstead to-night, poor old Ted! I do believe, Aunt Julia, that Ted has matrimony up his sleeve this time!"

"He has lived on his wits a goodish while, Clare, and nothing concerning Ted will surprise me. Well, what next?"

She began to be interested, for love of her kind—genuine, absorbing interest in human nature and life—was the keynote of this old woman's existence. It was what kept her young, what made her beloved and sought after, and what filled her shabby reception-rooms with the finest intellects of the day. Mrs. Dyner, though in possession of no real gift of intellect or of genius herself, had a more wonderful gift still—the gift of humanity. And her charity was boundless. Although her tongue was caustic now as her eyes dwelt on the fair, false face of her sister's child, she was inwardly full of pity for her. For the whole family to which she belonged was poor, and, living in an unreal and extravagant world, had all the faults of its class.

Clare Hatherley, the widow of a poor diplomat, left without even a pension, had managed to subsist practically on her wits through-out her whole widowhood. She was still hoping to make a rich marriage, and on several occasions she had nearly achieved her purpose.

Her last venture had been with the Australian squatter, of whom she had spoken with so much bitter feeling to Mrs. Rodney. But he had obtained an unexpected glimpse of her real nature—had, in fact, discovered that she was going to marry him solely for his money, and that she had openly laughed at him behind his back. Then he had set his square jaw and given her the straight truth from his fearless tongue. Thereafter he had married his typist, and gone forth to a life of assured happiness, having its source, as it had, in the heart of a grateful and loving woman who was content to owe him all.

Lady Latherley wrote society novels, and was a regular contributor of fashionable paragraphs to the society papers, making thereby a considerable addition to a microscopic income. But it was a precarious and terrible existence which was daily bringing fresh lines to the face she so jealously cherished and so assiduously attended to, seeing that it was her greatest asset.

"Oh, they're frightfully decent—Dissenters, and rolling in money—don't you know? But it's mixed with piety, and that sticks in my gizzard. He may pop the question to-night, I shouldn't wonder. You'll hear when we meet later. But that isn't what I've come about just now. Say, Aunt Julia, you still have that rather pretty little typist, haven't you?"

"You are talking of my secretary, Kathleen Rodney, I suppose?"

Clare made a little *moue*.

"I am. But you know you have spoiled her horribly, Aunt Julia—everybody thinks so. She gives herself airs, as if she were a daughter of the house; and even her clothes are unsuitable to her station. I don't deny that she wears them with a sort of distinction. I suppose you know that her people have come into money?"

"She told me something about it. I understand that

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her mother has come into possession of a legacy through the death of a brother in Australia—sufficient to give her and her husband comfort in their old age. Kathleen seemed very glad of it for her father's sake; but she assured me that it wouldn't make any difference to me."

Lady Hatherley looked incredulous.

"What did she mean by that?" she asked sharply.

"Why, that she would keep on coming here, of course. I couldn't do without her, Clare. In spite of what you say, she is the best secretary I've ever had, and the cheapest. She's absolutely untiring, minding nothing about the number of hours she spends with me or the amount of work she has to do for me," said the old woman, and her tired eyes glowed.

Clare Hatherley shrugged her shoulders, and she privately wondered what Kathleen Rodney could mean by such a display of devotion in a quarter from which there was nothing—or practically nothing—to be got. She was incapable of appreciating or even understanding a disinterested motive, and the idea of an attractive young woman like Kathleen Rodney working for Aunt Julia cheaply for love merely amused her.

"For some reason or other she seems to be playing up to you, Aunt Julia—either that, or her mother hasn't told her the full truth about the money that has been left her. I've had Mrs. Rodney with me this afternoon, and I've no reason in the world to doubt what she told me."

"What did she tell you?" inquired Mrs. Dyner, displaying vivid interest.

"That she had been left two hundred thousand pounds, and a very large property in Australia besides."

"Two hundred thousand pounds! Oh, nonsense, Clare—the thing's impossible! Two thousand would be more like the sum. I understood from Miss Rodney that it was sufficient to relieve her father and mother from

certain cares. Mr. Rodney is getting to be an old man, and for some time business has been receding from the City Road, where his shop is. That's the whole matter in a nutshell."

"It may be. But there was no dubiety about Mrs. Rodney's statement. She had the whole thing at her finger-ends, and she struck me as being a remarkably astute and far-seeing woman—no class, of course. But does that matter, Aunt Julia, in these days? Look at us! A name in Debrett doesn't signify much nowadays, unless it has something in the shape of money to back it up."

"What have you up your sleeve, Clare, and why should Mrs. Rodney go to see you?"

"She came to me for advice," chuckled Lady Hatherley. "It seems that in some moment of mental aberration—though, as it happens, it must have been a lucky inspiration—I asked her to call on me one day when I met her here. She had my pasteboard right enough so I have no reason to doubt that I did say something of the sort, though Heaven alone knows why I should have said it! She came, fortified with this card, to ask my advice about their future. Of course, I gave it. I am going house-hunting with her next week; but you may be sure I'm not going to do it for nothing. I'm perfectly open and above board, you see, Aunt Julia, and I've come to suggest to you that you don't put any spoke in my wheel."

"I shan't stand by and see you fleece those poor people, Clare," said Mrs. Dyner sharply; and her old eyes flashed fire.

"Who's going to fleece them? They'll get value for their money, and more. Supposing I establish them somewhere and get a few people to call on them: isn't that worth something? I can help them to a respectable position in society, and I can keep sharks away.

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You know as well as I do, Aunt Julia, that if I don't take them up somebody else will—probably somebody possessed of fewer scruples about fleecing them, as you call it. It is an ugly word, however."

Mrs. Dynner lay back among her pillows, asked her niece to pour her a few drops from a tiny phial which stood on the bedside table, and, having swallowed them, closed her eyes for a moment.

"If you're going to sleep, Aunt Julia," said Lady Hatherley, with a little flutter of draperies, "I may as well go."

But the eyes, which presently opened, had no signs of drowsiness about them.

"I'm all right; I'm getting my bearings, Clare. What you tell me astonishes me. I simply can't take it in. Kathleen has been coming to me for several days since it happened, and beyond mentioning the fact, as I have given it to you, she has never spoken of it since."

"I should say either that the mother, who is, as I have said, singularly astute, has not mentioned the actual facts, or that your Kathleen is a deep one and has something up *her* sleeve. Well, it's getting on, and I must go. Promise me that you won't interfere with me in my chaperonage of the Rodneys. I'm not asking something for nothing from them, you must admit that."

"The kind of people who will call on the Rodneys because you ask them to do it will not do them much good, Clare."

"What's the odds? They won't know it. It'll give them a start, anyway, and afterwards Mrs. Rodney will be able to paddle her own canoe; she's that sort. She'll make a flutter and let the dollars spin, whatever happens! It'll be a pretty comedy to watch, and there are oceans of people about who will watch it with even less pretence to disinterestedness than I have. Good-night,



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III

Aunt Julia. So sorry you are queer. And thank you very much for not squashing me outright. I promise to do everything decently and in order, and to report progress as I go along."

So saying, and having completely absolved her conscience, so far as she understood that exercise, she departed with a lively sense of anticipation to meet the Hon. Edward Charters at the Savoy.

She had to wait for him, of course, but that caused her no embarrassment. Half an hour spent in the foyer of the Savoy Hotel can always interest a woman who knows her world.

Sitting there in her comfortable corner, with her graceful draperies falling away from her perfect figure, and with her head poised becomingly against a soft black satin cushion, Clare Hatherley had a very pleasant half-hour.

She saw her brother enter about twenty minutes past ten, and she admired the lazy grace of his tall figure, the way in which he wore his clothes, and the outlines of his handsome head.

She appraised him at the moment, and, incidentally, wondered why one whom the gods had so richly endowed with gifts had not been able to exploit them to better advantage. At thirty-five he was still adrift, putting in an hour or two daily in a secretarial office at a microscopic salary, and, for the rest, living on his wits.

He nodded to his sister carelessly from a distance, but when he reached her side he stooped down and kissed her with a quite real affection.

She rose, and together—as distinguished-looking a pair as were to be found in that fashionable restaurant—they passed into the supper room.

"I'm ready for my supper, Ted. Do, please order something good. I've had only a cutlet bone at home. You look as if you had dined profusely."

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"It was a clinking good dinner, Clare, of the solid English type," he answered with a gleam of amusement in his blue eyes, "and the drinks were A 1."

"Well, and did you propose on the head of it?"

"No. I tried to, but, somehow, the words stuck in my gizzard. I'm going back on Sunday after I've screwed my courage to the sticking-point."

"So you've three days' grace. If I were you, I should postpone the proposal for a little while longer. I've got something up my sleeve for you. Listen, Ted! I've had a slice of good luck to-day—the first that has come to me since Tony died."

The waiter came to them at the moment, and, after a brief consultation of the menu, Teddy gave him the order, and they were left alone.

Charters leaned his right elbow on the table, moved the flowers a little so that he might the better see his sister's face, and waited for her news.

"I think I have found a wife for you, Ted—somebody more eligible than Miss Worboise, of Hampstead."

Charters hardly looked interested. His sister had been finding wives for him at the rate of one every few weeks for the last year or two, but, somehow, he was still a bachelor, and seemed likely to remain one.

"Is that all?" he asked, as he poured out a glass of iced water and took a gulp.

"Don't scoff! You'll maybe remain to pray presently," she answered flippantly. "Say, Ted, I've been to see Aunt Julia to-night; she's in her bed, looking ghastly and seeming not a day less than a hundred. She won't last long, I'm afraid."

"Aunt Julia is mighty tough, Clare, and she has vowed to live till she's a hundred. How many years has she yet?"

"To-night she didn't look as if she had one. Let me see—she can't be a day less than seventy-five. But don't

let us dwell on Aunt Julia's years; it's a depressing subject. I'm sure I hope she will live a while longer. She enjoys it all so much. You've noticed that typist of hers, Ted, haven't you?"

"A little girl with ripping hair—yes, of course. But she wouldn't ever have much to say to me. I smiled my sweetest, but all without result."

"Oh, but we're going to change all that! She's going to become the Hon. Mrs. Edward Charters!"

Charters smiled, lazily amused, yet somewhat surprised at the kind of joke Clare seemed inclined to play off on him.

"We *don't* think," he answered casually. "Wish that beggar would hurry up. Time's getting on. So the poor old girl is hipped, is she? Was Anna there tonight?"

"No—and Anna's name was not mentioned," answered Clare, regarding her brother with the very slightest air of suspicion. "Does Anna know what is going on at Hampstead?"

"No; she doesn't keep my diary, Clare."

"I wondered. I've no doubt that she'll try to put a spoke in my little wheel. Listen, Ted! That girl's people have come into a fortune—thousands upon thousands—hundreds of thousands! Her share will be thirty or forty thousand at least, and she's perfectly presentable. That's my birthday present to you, old boy. Don't you think it's a mighty generous one?"

The blue eyes of Charters, which Nature had intended to be kind and sunny, narrowed oddly, and his mouth hardened.

"You don't say so! Where did you get the tip—from Aunt Julia, I suppose?"

"No fear! Aunt Julia isn't giving away anything of that sort, and you know what an Early Victorian lamb she is! To be a good Catholic, she has a highly de-

## CORRODING GOLD

veloped Nonconformist conscience which wouldn't disgrace your Hampstead friends. I went to-night to salve my conscience where she was concerned and to ask her to keep off the grass in the garden. Now, listen——"

Just at that same moment Cyrus Rodney, while in the process of locking up, opened the front door at The Laurels for a good-night peep at the stars.

They were riding in high splendour in the heavens which declare the glory of the Lord; their steadfastness comforted a heart that was vexed by forebodings—by the unlovely shadow of some mighty impending change.

The rest of the household had already gone to bed; and soon after, having commended himself and all he held dear to the God in Whom he believed and Whom he had tried to serve, the good man also fell asleep, all unconscious that in a distant part of London two worldlings were plotting against his peace and the peace of his home.

By midnight Clare Hatherley had arranged her plan of campaign.

The campaign itself had virtually begun.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE BYGRAVES

CARRIE BYGRAVE, all alone in the house, crouched over the fire in the living-room, with her chin on her hands and her eyes fixed on the fire.

Her father and mother were at evening chapel, and the young girl who helped with the housework had gone out for the day.

The Bygraves lived in an uninteresting street of high, narrow houses on the borders of Walworth. It was a very crowded area, inhabited chiefly by the world's workers.

Bygrave himself was a skilled artificer in bronze; he was employed by an exclusive firm which supplied the best shops with modern articles of virtu, which, it is to be feared, were sometimes sold as genuine antiques. The work was well paid, and the Bygraves as a family suffered no straits. A great deal of money flowed each week into that modest house, where there was less anxiety of a sordid kind than there was in many more pretentious abodes.

M<sup>r</sup>. Bygrave, who had been a tailoress in her girlhood, still carried on a business in the basement, where, in two large, airy workrooms, opening on a long garden, she employed three men tailors, over whom her son Dick was foreman.

The elder Bygrave, a Socialist of the better sort, student of Tolstoi, and a sincerely religious man who did his honest best to live the Christ-life amid a more or less hostile environment, beheld all his ideas blossoming to excess in his son.

## CORRODING GOLD

Dick Bygrave had thrown in his lot with the more advanced section of the Socialists, and was in the front of every forward movement. The tailors' shop, with its long spells of partial bodily inactivity, with its opportunities for concentration of mind, and with its isolation from the world, is a particularly fruitful soil for the growth and the development of the ideas which possessed Dick Bygrave. True, his own working life was singularly secure, and he had never suffered the hardships which sour men and send them into the revolutionary ranks. But, being a keen observer and an explorer in the by-ways of London life, he had the whole story of the wrongs of the poor at his finger-ends.

He was prepared to fight Capital at every turn. Wherever there were threatened strikes, demonstrations against injustice, whether absolutely real or partly imaginary, Dick Bygrave was to be found—if not actually in bodily presence, then most certainly in spirit and in sympathy.

He was quite well known to the authorities, and on occasion he was under their strict surveillance, for his eager, vivid personality, his eloquent tongue, and his undoubted power of handling crowds made him a force to be reckoned with.

In his home Dick Bygrave was happy and beloved. His parents—especially his mother—acted as a brake upon the impulses of his fiery, impetuous temperament, and prevented him from going too far.

But just of late that brake had seemed to lose a little of its power. It had been a trying summer and autumn in the Labour world, one strike following hard upon another, these being instituted on the smallest possible pretext and mainly with the object of showing the spirit that animated the men. The world was watching with some concern and with varying degrees of sympathy or of condemnation a great struggle going on between

the dock labourers and the Port of London—one of these periodic conflicts which bring the condition of things in Dockland into an unfavourable and arresting light.

Dick had spent his Sunday afternoon on Tower Hill, and had taken part in a tremendous demonstration. When he reached his home about half-past seven in the evening he was conscious of great weariness both of soul and of body. He had eaten nothing since breakfast time, in which condition he had been the better able to sympathise with the starving men. Also, he was cold and depressed, for a bitter nor'easter with snow in its teeth was playing havoc in the streets and had sent to shelter all who had any place of shelter to go to.

When he fitted his latch-key in the door he felt the quiet and the warmth of the house descend upon him like a benediction. A light was burning in the hall, and there was also one in the sitting-room, which, he supposed, would be occupied by Carrie and her lover, Cyril Rodney, whose Sunday evenings were always spent in Clarina Place.

At the risk of disturbing them he knocked lightly at the door and then opened it. To his surprise, his sister was alone in the room.

The table was laid for supper. The joint left over from the midday meal, some bread and cheese, a salad, and a jug of water comprised the viands available for a hungry man.

On her brother's entrance Carrie rose and smiled bravely at him, though his lightning glance immediately detected traces of tears on her face. One bright drop, indeed, still hung upon her eyelash.

In his twenty-seventh year Dick Bygrave was a handsome, striking figure of a man; lithe and strong, though showing the pale face of the indoor worker. His coal-black eyes seemed to glow like twin stars; his dark hair, worn rather long, was ruffled owing to his habit of

pushing his fingers through it, and he was, in a sense, a typical specimen of the men of his temperament even down to the red tie—sign and badge of his fearless courage.

"Hallo! where are they all?" he asked in tones which his very anxiety rendered abrupt.

"At chapel; but they'll be home soon. What a long time you've been away, Dick! Wherever have you been?"

"At Tower Hill, of course. Say, I suppose I may have my supper at once? I haven't tasted anything since morning, and I feel a bit peckish."

"Yes, of course. Nobody will mind. It would make mother very unhappy if you were to go hungry, waiting for her and father. Shall I make the coffee now? It won't hurt to stand till they come in."

"I don't mind whether I get coffee or not. It's solid grub I want," he answered, as he proceeded to cut himself a slice from the joint.

Carrie stood by the fireplace with her hand on the mantelpiece, smiling a little.

Dick often amused her. She had small sympathy with his revolutionary ideas. The world, so far, had been quite a pleasant place for Carrie Bygrave. She had an exceptionally happy home, where she was sheltered and cared for. True, she had to go out to work, but her natural gifts had brought her swift recognition and promotion, and she had hardly known anything of the drudgery that makes work so burdensome and distasteful.

The world is kind to a charming young woman who has a smile for all. And Carrie's smile had seldom failed, while her merry heart had often 'one good like a medicine. But something had happened to-night to dash her kind spirits, and never had Dick seen such an expression on her face.

His glance lowered as he attacked the joint with a sort



of savagery, as if he longed to be at somebody's throat. He had a very shrewd guess as to what had brought that expression to his sister's face; but, although he was a bold man in most affairs, it was a very delicate thing to speak to his sister about an errant lover.

Cyril Rodney was unaffectedly and whole-heartedly despised by Dick Bygrave, who had never been able to understand what his sister could possibly see in such a fellow. When he thought of her spending her whole life along with that empty-headed, shallow-hearted creature, his own spirit quailed. He railed about it by the hour to his mother, but to Carrie herself he had never uttered a word by way of remonstrance. He knew nothing about women. To him womanhood was a sacred mystery, because he had known only the best.

That Carrie should suffer through a worm like Cyril Rodney seemed to him a monstrous thing. His voice seemed to thicken in his throat at the mere suggestion, and he went on eating without saying a word of any kind.

"What happened at Tower Hill this afternoon, then, Dick? Isn't there any prospect of a settlement?" asked Carrie, after a while, feeling the strain of the silence heavy on her.

"Not much," he answered; "and the temper of the poor beggars is changing. They're getting worked up to a fury. Tell you what, Carrie—if only that mass realised its power, the Port would be swept away—left without a leg to stand on, so to speak! I never felt that more strongly than to-day."

"Did you speak?"

"Only to second a resolution. Mann was the principal speaker, and the speeches, on the whole, reached a high level; but they were more deadly than usual. The dockers mean to win, Carrie."

She shivered a little, though the glow from the fire was about her feet.

## CORRODING GOLD

"It's horrible, I think! Why can't things be arranged satisfactorily somehow? I am sure people were never meant to be at war like that with one another."

"Nor were masters ever meant to treat their men like pariah dogs, my dear," he answered. "Remove the wrongs, and the right will establish itself in the natural course of things. This is only the beginning of things, I tell you! They will go marching on till one day London will be a world's wonder! I wish you had seen the scene on the Hill to-day, Carrie—but no, I don't know, after all, whether I do wish that! Such a sight as that wrings the hearts of women. I saw many of them there with misery too deep for tears on their faces."

Carrie did not understand the ethics of the great industrial war, though she often heard it come under discussion in her father's house.

The elder Bygrave, though he admitted the injustice and the inequality of the sharing of things as between employers and employed, was all for conciliation—for the persuasion of the individual conscience, the very existence of which Dick denied. Often Carrie grew weary of these discussions and was glad to get away from them.

She was only a woman, whose heart was filled with love and all its glory, and who was hoping for its fulfilment and crowning. She looked forward to and longed for a home of her own—a pretty home on the outskirts of London, where she could exercise her individual taste and have some little children about her knee.

It is the vision splendid in the heart of every woman, rich and poor, humble or exalted, at the blossoming-time of life. Afterwards, perhaps, comes disillusionment, more or less complete; but the vision never fails to beckon at its appointed time.

Already, however, it was passing from Carrie Bygrave's heart and life. Sorrow of which she had read and heard, disappointment which had never been hers through all the three-and-twenty years of her hitherto happy life, were about to work their will with her.

Nothing more was said till Dick had finished his supper. Then, suddenly wheeling round on his chair, he faced his sister and spoke.

"Hasn't Rodney been here to-day, Carrie?"

"No," she answered, "he hasn't."

"When did you see him last?"

"In chapel last Sunday," she answered in a low voice, yet without hesitation.

Perhaps she was relieved to have the subject opened. Anyhow, she did not shrink from her brother's questioning, of which she knew from experience there was much still to come.

"Is he in London?"

"I don't know. He told me last Sunday that he had resigned from Hammond's."

"Oh!—and hasn't he written in the interval?"

"No."

"Seen any of the rest of them?"

"No."

These laconic answers showed a state of matters unsatisfactory enough in all truth.

Thunder, black and threatening, sat on Dick Bygrave's brow.

"That's what money can do, Carrie! They'll give us the go-by—every man-jack of them! But, by heaven, Cyril Rodney doesn't get off with it! He'll answer for his desertion of you to me."

"No, Dick; you will not interfere," said Carrie with firmness and decision.

"Interfere! He wants somebody to stand up to him! I've often wanted to do it before now, and to choke

## CORRODING GOLD

him with his own self-sufficiency and conceit. He's a worm, I tell you, Carrie! He was never good enough to tie your shoe-lace. But, all the same, he shan't treat you as if you were the dirt beneath his feet! I'll bring him to book!"

"You won't, Dick," said Carrie quietly.

"Won't I? And who's going to prevent me? I've a very good mind to go round to their blooming Laurels this very minute and to squeeze the contemptible life out of the cad! It would be a good riddance. We've too many of his kind in London already, and one fewer would be a very good riddance."

Carrie listened, apparently unperturbed, to this outburst. She was accustomed to Dick's rhetorical methods of speech, which generally she either discounted or ignored. It was the language of his leisure hours—or, rather, of the hours he employed, as he imagined, in speaking for the good of his fellow-men. But, in Carrie's estimation, such a style of talking had nothing to do with real life.

"I am perfectly capable of managing my own affairs, Dick, and I forbid you to say a word to Cyril."

"But you won't make yourself cheap, or go whining to him. Gad, I couldn't stand that!"

A slow smile crept about her quivering mouth.

"Oh, no, I think I shan't do that! I'm not a worm, Dick, if it will comfort you at all to hear that."

He threw himself back in his chair and interlaced his fingers on the arm of it.

"See here, Carrie. I met Eugene Woods on the Hill this afternoon, and we had a chat about the Rodneys. They're chucking everything and everybody they've ever had anything to do with, and are going up West. He says they've got a house up Chelsea way. I believe he mentioned Hans Crescent."

"Well, and if they have I suppose they are entitled

to it," said Carrie in the same quiet voice. "Has Eugene seen any of them lately?"

"He has left off going to the house, but he seems to know what is going on. By Christmas they'll be gone—stock, lock, and barrel—and we'll be done with them—understand?"

"Well, I suppose it's natural that they should make such a change. There's a difference between this," she said, glancing round the cheap, homely little room, which suddenly seemed to become a poor place in her eyes, "and two hundred thousand pounds."

"Yes, there's a difference," her brother assented—"the difference between heaven and hell," cried Dick in his fiercest voice. "Say, Carrie——"

But at this point she held up a warning finger, as the little terrier, asleep on the mat in the hall, gave a sharp bark and a bell tinkled.

"It's father and mother. You won't talk about this, either in front of them or to them?" she said quickly.

As she began to move towards the door Dick was suddenly struck by the dignity of her bearing. She was not tall, but her beautiful figure had a fine grace of movement, and her uplifted head had all the pride he could have desired.

"I'm not giving you away, of course," he said shortly. "But at the same time I'm not finished with Rodney. I'll let them in," he added.

He stalked to the hall door, threw it wide open, and then saw that his father and mother were not alone on the steps.

"Estelle, dear," said his mother's pleasant voice directing Dick's attention to their companion. "She was at chapel, and she walked home with us. Carrie is in, isn't she?"

"Yes. Good evening, Miss Rodney," said Dick, and his voice was furiously stiff.

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"Don't 'Miss Rodney' me, Dick Bygrave," said Estelle without a moment's hesitation.

But there was another note in her voice—a little tremulous note—which Carrie, in the background, detected and wondered at.

She was much surprised to hear Estelle's voice, but ran forward to the sitting-room door to welcome her.

"I'm so glad to see you, Este! We haven't met for ages. How are you?"

They kissed each other, as they had always been in the habit of doing both at meeting and at parting, and at sight of these expressions of mutual affection Dick seemed to gnash his teeth.

He had got himself worked up into a sort of mild frenzy, and he could not now behold any member of the Rodney family except through distorted vision. This tendency to prejudiced and unbalanced judgments is characteristic of men of his temperament and convictions. The hand of the agitator is against every man, and half his time is spent in trying to convince himself and others that every man's hand is against him.

Estelle, perfectly aware of Dick's hostility, and more than a little suspicious of its cause, smiled a little tremulously.

"I expected that I would find Cyril here," she said quickly, "and that I would walk home with him."

"Cyril hasn't been here to-day," answered Carrie, quite steadily.

"Come and take off your hat or, at least, your coat, Estelle, and take a bite of supper with us," suggested Mrs. Bygrave, stepping into the breach with her usual quick kindness. "Perhaps—who knows?—we shan't have many opportunities a little later."

"I'll take Este into my room," said Carrie quickly; and they passed out together.

Dick then flared out at his father and mother.

"Why did you bring that woman here?" he demanded hotly. "We're done with the Rodneys—or they are done with us."

"Don't speak to your mother like that, my son," said Bygrave, quietly rebuking him.

But his mother merely smiled a little sadly.

"Don't be so foolish as to call names where they are undeserved, Dick," his father said. "There isn't any change in Estelle Rodney, nor will there ever be, I'm sure. She's above all that."

"It's more than her precious brother is, then. You heard Carrie say he hasn't been here to-day, and we know how much she saw of him last Sunday. What I want to know is whether he's going to get off with it."

"I think that is a matter for your sister to settle, my boy," said Mrs. Bygrave in her quiet, tranquil voice. "I see you have been having your supper. Where did you get dinner to-day?"

"I didn't have any," he answered, somewhat sullenly. "I'm afraid I've messed up the table a bit, but I'll soon straighten it."

It was extraordinary what subtle influence his mother's presence had over Dick Bygrave. Yet she was one of the quietest persons that could be found anywhere, having much less to say than most women.

She was a small, slight woman, very simply dressed in rather old-fashioned clothes, which became her well. The pointed bodice and full-gathered skirt of an earlier period seemed to be part of her personality. She wore her hair in bands down by her ears, where it rippled, still keeping the gloss of her youth. Her face, unlike Dick's, was ruddy complexioned, but her eyes were very like his, large and extremely dark, though their expressions were entirely different.

She had a singular kind of charm which was felt by everyone. Her sweet nature and her large charity seemed

## CORRODING GOLD

to express themselves in every feature and gesture, and strife could not exist in her presence. But for that wonderful, quieting influence of hers in the house, the elements would have warred and raged considerably more than they did.

Bygrave himself, in his shabby frock-coat and wide trousers, and his old-fashioned collar and black stock, might have passed for an ancestor, or a respectable family servant of the old school. His face was round and his eye merry, like Carrie's, and, though his heart was often sad over the woes of the world, his cheery laugh, like hers would roll out unexpectedly, sometimes making music in the darkest and dullest place.

Dick picked up his empty plate and glass and carried them to the kitchen, while his mother went to her own room to remove her bonnet.

Meanwhile the two girls were already deep in talk in the little room opening off the half-landing, which was at once Carrie's sleeping-place and snugery.

"I came along on purpose, Carrie," said Estelle the moment the door closed upon them, "just to ask whether you had seen or heard anything of Cyril in the course of last week."

"I haven't," answered Carrie, not meeting the kind eyes bent so searchingly on her face.

Estelle sat down suddenly in front of the little white bedstead.

"It's abominable—perfectly abominable, Carrie, and I'm sick to death of everything!"

Carrie had nothing to say in reply to this outburst.

"I could wish that we had never heard about Uncle Edgar Sheldon's money, or that he had left it to someone else," went on Estelle rather passionately. "It seems to have changed mother's very nature. You wouldn't believe, Carrie, how she is carrying on, if I were to tell you everything."



"But the coming of the fortune won't have made the smallest difference, I am sure, to your father or to Jack or to Lulu," said Carrie, forced to make some remark.

"I don't know. Father is worried to death. If only it had been a little bit of money, Carrie—just enough to have given the old folk some ease from anxiety about business—I should have rejoiced over it with all my heart! Then, everything could have gone on as it has been doing, with only this difference, that father and mother would have had easier minds. But now, I tell you, it's perfectly horrid. We're leaving Denmark Hill in a most frightful hurry—immediately after Christmas."

"Dick told me something of that. He met Eugene Woods this afternoon, I think. It's up West you're going, isn't it?"

"Yes. Mother has got a house. She has done everything on her own, Carrie—that is to say, without consulting us. She got in tow with a fashionable woman, called Lady Hatherley—a relation of Mrs. Dyner's—and from what I can gather from mother she's going to run us. It's simply hateful, and I wish the fortune had never come."

Estelle certainly spoke with sincere conviction. Carrie stood leaning her back against the dressing-table, her sweet face wearing an odd look.

"You haven't seen Cyril, you say? Hasn't he even written to you?" inquired Estelle earnestly.

"I haven't seen him since last Sunday, and I saw him then for only a few minutes, and he hasn't written," answered Carrie quietly.

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm not going to do anything," replied Carrie steadily.

Estelle met her quiet eyes with fire and passion in her own.

"Carrie, if Cyril gives you up, I'll give him up! I'll never speak to him again," she said.

"Oh, but you couldn't do that, Estelle!" said Carrie, with a little note of strain in her voice.

"But I will, I tell you! He'll never do it, however. It would be too mean and wicked. Do you yourself think he will?"

It was a searching question, which anyone but Carrie Bygrave would have resented.

"I'm sure I can't say, and I'm not sure that I mind much whether he does or not," answered Carrie, after a moment's pause.

"I thought you cared about him, and we've all been so proud of you. And honestly, in my inmost heart, I thought you too good for Cyril."

Carrie answered nothing to this sincere tribute.

"Won't you really mind, Carrie? I know I'm a brute to put these questions, but I'm so awfully vexed about it that I can't sleep at nights for thinking."

"It isn't easy to speak about it, Estelle. Let us talk about something else," pleaded Carrie.

"But, Carrie, someone must speak to Cyril," remonstrated Estelle. "Don't you see he can't be allowed to behave so badly to anyone, least of all to you?"

Carrie threw up her head.

"Don't you see, Este, that if Cyril wants to go—why, then, he must go? I couldn't possibly hold him against his will. I should never do that with any man, if I cared ever so for him. It would be fatal, quite fatal——"

At the moment Mrs. Bygrave tapped lightly at the door, opened it, and put her kind face round it.

"Come, dears, and have a bit of supper."

As they passed down the stairs together Carrie took a grip of her mother's hand and held it close.

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## CHAPTER X

### THE SOCIALIST

WHEN Estelle entered the room Dick Bygrave looked rather attentively at her, as if she had been a person whom he was meeting for the first time.

She had on a very simply made soft grey frock, just the colour of her eyes—a colour that suited her, seeming, as it did, to bring up the warm tints of her face. She was deep-eyed, wide-bosomed—as all the mothers of the world are meant to be—and, though less brilliant and arresting than Carrie, she was perhaps a finer woman.

It is doubtful whether in the whole of South London three more striking personalities and of more varied character could have been found than these three women of the people, of whom few had ever heard—Mrs. Bygrave, with deep wells of experience and of loving-kindness behind her eyes; Carrie, whom her mother had taught to be self-reliant and self-respecting; and Estelle, who possessed the finest qualities of head and heart, and whom presently life, with all its widening experience, was to teach!

Estelle was not one to endure a steady stare without challenge, and she knew Dick Bygrave sufficiently well to be able to say what she pleased to him.

"Well," she observed banteringly, "do you think you'll know me again?"

Dick lost his usual sang-froid and reddened furiously.

"I beg your pardon," he had the grace to mutter, "but I suppose a cat may look at a king."

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"May look, but not so as to stare the king out of countenance, Dickie. That would be high treason," said Carrie, as she lifted the salad bowl preparatory to going to make some addition to its contents.

"I shall miss the chapel and Mr. Pearce," observed Estelle, as she sat down at the table, where Mr. Bygrave, who had divested himself of his frock-coat and was now in his shirt-sleeves, had already tackled the joint, which Dick's onslaught had considerably reduced in bulk.

"Then you'll be going too far away to attend Ebenezer?" said Mrs. Bygrave.

Estelle nodded.

"In the middle of the sermon to-night I am afraid I was trying to map out a walking route from Hans Crescent to Camberwell, and wondering how long it would take me to cover it on my feet, with the aid of an occasional bus."

"Where is Hans Crescent?" asked Mrs. Bygrave, who, a sheer product of South London, knew very little of any other area or district.

She was a woman who travelled very little either in London or out of it. She had lived practically all her life south of the Thames, and had never wished to leave that quarter. The relaxation of shopping or of teas up West had never been hers, nor had she, even for a moment, ever desired any luxury of the kind that she had never possessed.

This complete isolation in the heart of London is less rare than may be thought. There are still people living on one bank of the Thames who have never crossed its bridges.

Mrs. Bygrave had been at Trafalgar Square on Demonstration Sundays—the only form of outing which she had ever enjoyed.

"It isn't so very far away, mother," said Carrie,

returning at the moment with the freshly filled salad bowl. "You could cover the distance easily, Este, in half an hour, I'm sure."

"But you won't," put in Dick, as he took out his pipe and asked whether they minded if he lit up.

"I think you had better not till we've had supper, my son," suggested his mother gently.

Dick seemed to half frown. His request had been a bit of bravado, intended just to show Estelle Rodney that he was not a bit impressed by the change that was going to lift her from the south to the south-west of London, and which was to make Camberwell impossible to her in every sense of the word.

"How do you know I won't, Oracle?" asked Estelle, nettled by his words.

"Because I happen to know Hans Crescent and you don't," was his cryptic answer.

"It seems quite a nice place," said Estelle, "but it is just as dull as Bigwood Lane, and certainly not half as pretty. We shall miss the garden, though I suppose that before Easter we shall have one in the country."

"It's the South of France and Monte Carlo from Christmas till Easter," began Dick mockingly; "then the season in London till all the races are over," he went on; "then Cowes for Regatta Week; then shooting in Scotland, and Egypt in the winter—that's the wretched programme!"

Mrs. Bygrave slightly rose in her chair.

"Dick, be good enough to go out of this room, and to remain out until you have learned to behave yourself," she said, not sharply, but with a quiet incisiveness which somehow left him no alternative but to obey.

If he had apologised, he would have been permitted to stay, but that he was determined not to do. He slouched out of the room, pursued by the wondering

appeal. Estelle's beautiful eyes, and closed the door with unnecessary noise almost amounting to a bang!

"You mustn't mind Dick, dear," said Mrs. Bygrave. "You know what he is—nothing but a dear, big, stupid baby who has not yet learned to control himself. He meant no personal rudeness to you; indeed, he is incapable of that."

"I know perfectly well what he meant," said Estelle in rather a low voice, "and I don't mind in the least."

"He's been all the afternoon on Tower Hill with Tom Mann and Co.," remarked Carrie, "and he came in tired and hungry and horribly cross. But, when all's said and done, he had no right to speak like that to you, Este, and I should sit on him properly if I were you."

Estelle promised that she would, but her eyes were rather sad as she bent them on her plate. If the truth must be told, tears were not far distant from them.

Mrs. Bygrave tried to change the subject.

"We shall all miss you frightfully; but you will come back sometimes, I am sure, to see us here, won't you, dear?" she asked rather wistfully.

"Why, of course; just as often as ever I can!" answered Estelle quickly. "I have been trying ever so hard this week to get them to put Eliza Inman in my place at Romsey Road. I even went to canvass some of the members of the board—a thing which, you know, is forbidden. But one may surely canvass for another. It is different from doing it for one's self."

"And I hope you were successful, my dear?" said Mrs. Bygrave. "It was a kind thought."

"I'm not sure. You see, poor Eliza hasn't many friends on the staff. But she really is quite a good teacher, and she loves little children. I'm so sorry for her. She has only fifty pounds a year, and it is a hard

struggle for her to live. Her illness last winter cost her ten pounds, I know, and she has never a margin."

Mrs. Bygrave instantly looked sympathetic.

"Where does she lodge?" she asked. "Perhaps we could show her a little kindness after you have gone—we could ask her, for instance, to come to a meal on Sunday. Do you think she would care for that?"

"Eliza—oh, she would be most grateful!" cried Estelle joyfully. "Thank you, dear Mrs. Bygrave. I am hoping that I shall be able to help her in other ways. Only, she would not need any help if she could have my place. And however kind friends may be, it is better not to need it."

This was a sentiment of which Dick would surely have approved; but, unfortunately, he did not hear it! He was smoking at the kitchen fire, with his head well over the stove—smoking furiously and thinking hardly.

Capital had suddenly invaded the narrower, more intimate area of his own life, bringing with it the inevitable devastation. He beheld in imagination the whole crowd of the Rodneys poisoned by it, becoming selfish, intolerant, hateful, like the rest of their class. Well, it but added one more to the hideous injustices of the world!

Dick's mental attitude and somewhat coarse expression thereof had seriously disturbed Estelle Rodney, and she brought her visit to an end more quickly than she might otherwise have done. Soon after supper she said she thought she must be going as she had not told them at home that she would not be in to supper.

"That won't matter, you know. You all go pretty much where you please on Sunday," said Carrie affectionately. "But it is half-past nine already, so I suppose we must let you go."

When Estelle came downstairs with her hat and long coat on, Dick had reappeared, looking more of a big

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baby than ever, in spite of his six feet of height and his leonine head.

"I'll see you home, if you don't mind," he said, and, though his tone was ungracious, Estelle took the will for the deed and nodded to him kindly.

"Shall I, too, come?" asked Carrie, half hesitating.

"No," answered Dick, and Carrie laughed.

"You don't deserve to have such a treat as a walk with the dearest woman in the world, Dick, and I hope she will sit on you properly for your bad behaviour," she said saucily.

Estelle bade a smiling and very affectionate good-night to them all, coming back from the door to kiss Mrs. Bygrave again.

"Thank you so much for letting me come," she said fervently. "Remember, this door is never to be shut to me. It is to be like the door of heaven—not shut at all by night or by day," she added with a sudden note of passion in her usually level voice.

"It will never be shut, dear child, to you, so long as these hands can keep it open," answered Mrs. Bygrave solemnly, surprised into the display of an emotion that she hardly understood.

They all stood in the frame of the doorway and waved to her until she and Dick had disappeared round the corner of Clarina Place into the Walworth Road.

They walked for quite a hundred yards in silence. It was not that Estelle was sulking—it was simply that she could not think of anything to say.

She was intensely conscious, however, of Dick Bygrave's nearness to her, of his strong, dominant personality, and of her own vivid interest in both.

In fact, the nature of her interest disturbed her more than she cared to own. She felt a yearning over him that was something like a mother's, and yet was something quite different.



"It wasn't you I was getting at in the house, Estelle, but just the system," said Dick, bringing out the tardy apology with difficulty.

Acknowledgement of being in the wrong does not come easily to the high, proud spirit, and Estelle was quick to recognise how much the effort meant to Dick.

"I know. Don't speak about it," she answered hastily.

Then they walked on once more in silence. He was careful of her on the crowded pavement, putting out a hand here and there to keep her from being too rudely jostled. When on one of these occasions their hands touched, Estelle was conscious of a thrill.

It was the prospect of being cut off from the Bygraves that had forced on her the realisation of how much they had counted for in her life. And Dick counted for more than she had imagined.

She had very little sympathy with his more pronounced views on big questions and the pressing social problems on which he had brooded until he had lost a certain part of his sense of proportion; and she had none at all with his more revolutionary tendencies.

Estelle was essentially a creature of law and order, and, while granting the existence of certain injustices, she showed a good deal of discrimination in the apportionment of the blame. Discussion between them was no new thing, and, in his heart of hearts, Dick Bygrave respected and revered Estelle above all women, save his mother. But this Estelle did not know, and she had been wounded to the quick by the savagery in his voice when the question of their removal to the Hans Crescent house had been mentioned.

"Say, Estelle, I want to ask you something—a beastly, uncomfortable question," he said almost humbly. "May I?"

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"Why, of course. Ask me anything you like. Why shouldn't you? I'll answer, if I can."

"Then tell me about Cyril. Do you happen to know what he has up his sleeve about Carrie?"

Estelle pondered for a moment before replying. She could with perfect truth have replied in one word—"Nothing"—and the word would have summed up the situation.

"No, I don't. This has upset us all. I hope and believe that Cyril will be all right, when his mind gets accustomed to one idea. It is not a very large mind," she added with a sort of grim frankness. "There isn't room for very much in it at one time."

Dick threw back his fine head and laughed so sonorously and spontaneously that a woman who was passing, finding the merriment infectious, joined in. The sense of amusement visible in his face made it extraordinarily attractive and almost as winning as a child's. His temperament was changeable, quick, responsive to every passing mood; and, though that type of man creates daily problems in the house and is proverbially difficult to live with, he has the power to win and to keep affection. His wife, when he happens to have one, remains in love with him to the end of life and through many sorrows.

"Excuse the row, Estelle, but you hit him off! Commend me to sisters for that sort of thing. Carrie has me just the same."

His good-humour was restored. Something about Estelle Rodney that reminded him of his mother had a pacific effect on his fiery nature. His next words were quite normal and kind.

"He has been engaged to Carrie for two years, and it would be a rotten thing for him to give her the go-by, Estelle. For my own part, I shouldn't mind if he did, but it would upset me to think of Carrie's feeling it."

Estelle, anxious to change the subject, on which she was not capable of throwing light and which she did not wish to encourage him to pursue, repeated her original remark.

"It's going to upset us all. It has completely changed mother. You wouldn't think she was the same woman. Sometimes she reminds me of a bird of prey. She thinks of nothing but what she is going to get out of it all, and every day she has some fresh project on hand."

"She'll find plenty to help her to spend the money," answered Bygrave soberly. "But haven't any of you sufficient influence over her to get her to regard it as a trust? A lot could be done for the happiness of the world with two hundred thousand pounds, and she would secure her own happiness by doing it."

Estelle shook her head.

"Mother hasn't any ideas of that sort. She wants to become a fashionable lady. I'm not sure that she isn't one already."

"And what does your father say?" asked Dick, pursuing the subject.

"Poor father is bewildered. He still goes to the City Road every day. A deed is being drawn up, making over the business to John Glide."

"Well, that's a step in the right direction, at any rate! Glide is an excellent chap, though he hardly marches with the times."

Put in other words, this meant that John Glide did not see eye to eye with Dick on social questions. Many a good mental tussle they had had over them. But, agreeing to differ, they preserved both liking and respect for each other, and there was genuine satisfaction in Dick's voice when he spoke.

"I suppose he's cut off so far as your sister is concerned."

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"I don't know that he was ever on," said Estelle quickly. "Kitty meets far too many interesting people at Mrs. Dyner's to give her mind to any particular one at present. So don't go magnifying the family offences, Dick. We are not all, vulgarly speaking, chuckers-out."

Bygrave slightly smiled.

"So you are all going up West to cut a dash! Wonder how you'll like it, Estelle. Do you think you'll take kindly to the life of the butterfly and the cumberer of the ground?"

"I've no intention of either being the one or the other," answered Estelle spiritedly. "I am bound to follow my family, and when I leave Romsey Road School it is going to give a woman who needs it more than I do a chance. But I propose to have a life of my own to lead."

"What line will it take?" he asked, with deepening interest.

"As to that I don't yet know. But it is possible to cherish a few ideals and to carry them into practice as well, Dick, away from Tower Hill and Trafalgar Square. All the wisdom of all the ages isn't concentrated in these places."

"We don't claim that much. All we do claim is fair rights for every man. I had no idea you thought so deeply on social questions, Estelle. We could give you plenty to do; and when you become one of the idle rich you will have an opportunity of setting an excellent example to the rest of your class."

"I'll find my own level, thank you, Dick. Will you come in?" she added as they crossed the road in a slanting direction towards the end of Bigwood Lane.

"Not to-night. I might see Cyril, and, though you've shown me reason, I might find it a job to be civil to him. I think I'll say good-night here."

"Very well," she assented.

They both stood still on the edge of the kerb. Then Bygrave stepped back a few paces till they found themselves in the friendly shadow of the lane. But, even there, the light shone full enough on Estelle's face to reveal its serious sweetness. Somehow it interested Dick to-night more than it had ever done. Perhaps that was due to the prospect of losing Estelle altogether out of his life—as he believed he was about to lose her—an idea which suddenly brought home to him the fact that she counted for something.

"I suppose we shan't meet much after this, Estelle, if ever?" he said abruptly.

"Why not? I shall still come occasionally to see your mother and Carrie in Clarina Place. I'm no fair-weather friend, Dick, and I don't give up the best friends I've got for nothing."

"You would call them that?" he said with an odd emotion. "Will you include me among them? I'd like to be spoken of in that way."

"I don't know. That depends on yourself, of course," she said a trifle unsteadily.

He laughed awkwardly.

"Well, that's a poser, for I don't see just where a poor beggar like me is going to fit into the programme which I sketched in the house!"

"*You* sketched the programme," she reminded him. "It had nothing to do with me."

"I'll watch you in the next six months, Estelle, if you give me a chance, and see what effect the deceitfulness of riches has on you. The other day I was reading an article called 'Corroding Gold.' Don't let it corrode you—you are too fine to be destroyed by that process. The world needs you."

He was about to add "I need you," but he refrained. He offered his hand, wrung hers, and abruptly left her standing on the kerb.

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She, trembling a little, hurried into the friendly dark of the lane. Her pulses were bounding, and a strange sweetness had crept into her heart. She did not seek to analyse it, but surely it could have but one meaning! She loved Dick Bygrave, had always loved him, but only now, when a parting had come, did she discover how much that love meant to her. This, then, was the explanation of her coldness towards Eugene Woods and towards other suitors who would have wooed her, if they had received the least encouragement.

Yet what could be the end? As events were now shaping themselves how could a working tailor, belonging to a family of middle-class position and seething with socialistic, even revolutionary, ideas, fit in with the programme her mother was arranging for them all?

Estelle was suddenly confronted with the poignancy of life, with its amazing contrasts, and with such developments as no man or woman could foresee.

When she entered the house she found Jack in sole possession of the drawing-room, lying full-length on the floor and studying a map of Australia.

"Where are they all?" she asked.

"Dad has just gone to bed. The mater and Cyril and Kate have gone out to dinner up West with some West End bounders."

Estelle looked the surprise she felt.

"Dining out—why, it's impossible, Jack! I didn't hear a word at tea-time about that."

"You wouldn't, because they didn't know they were going out then. A special messenger came to invite them about six—just after you'd gone, I believe it was."

"Do you know whose house they have gone to?"

"Oh, you needn't ask me. I don't know," said Jack, kicking his heels together on the floor. "It's that woman the mater is always talking about, anyway, and her brother. Kate had on a low-necked frock—Sunday

night, too! You should have seen how the pater looked! He didn't half like it."

"I should think not. Lulu in bed too?"

"Yes. Where have you been gallivanting to?"

"Chapel. And then I went on to supper with the Bygraves."

"The mater won't like that, I can tell you. She's going to shunt the Bygraves. She's snunting everybody that's any bally use. Look at decent John—he hasn't been near the place for ages! I took a pennyworth on the bus to the City Road and looked him up to-night. Down on his luck he is—and no mistake."

Jack squirmed like a worm on the floor. Presently, however, he sat up and crossed his legs.

"Say, Este, of course it's a jolly good thing about the money, in a way, and it'll make a lot of difference to me. But somehow I wish that it hadn't come. Seems to me it's going to kick up the most frightful shindy with us all."

"It's done that already, Jack," answered Estelle in a low and rather difficult voice.

"I'm jolly glad I'm getting out of it pretty soon. What do you think the pater said to-night when we were left at grub together? He said that he'd take me out to Australia himself. We're going, I think, immediately after Christmas and before mother removes the whole bally show up West."

Estelle dropped her head on her hand and looked into the fire. Jack had the best of it. He would get clean away.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE NIGHT OF THE PARTY

AN air of bustle and of expectancy pervaded the whole house. The scent of flowers hung heavily everywhere and the staircase was draped with rambler roses and with smilax, forced in the hot-houses of those who cater for the tastes of the fashionable and the rich.

It was a fine, but not a noble, staircase, though the house was one of the largest in Hans Crescent. Lady Hatherley had encountered some difficulties in her dealings with Mrs. Rodney. Willing to plunge in certain directions, she was unexpectedly and aggravatingly niggardly in others. Lady Hatherley had done her best to engineer to her the transfer of a large, ugly and particularly depressing town house in one of the squares, which belonged to some impecunious friends of her own.

The house had a bad name on the letting register, because it was so poorly equipped and because there were so many restrictions attached to its occupancy. It was on one of the several visits to this house with her chaperon that Mrs. Rodney had suddenly revealed what Lady Hatherley afterwards described as her "distressing middle-class thrift."

"It's a dingy hole, my lady," she had said, "and not worth the money. It would have to be done up and refurnished from top to bottom. Look at the beds! I wouldn't sleep in them myself, nor would I let any of my children sleep in them on any account. I'm willing to pay—oh, yes! But I must get good value for my money. I won't take this house."



It would not have occurred to Lady Hatherley herself to turn up, as Mrs. Rodney did, the mattresses to see whether they were clean and wholesome, and while the thing at once exasperated and amused her, she was compelled to a secret respect for her refractory pupil.

Mrs. Rodney was quite sincere in her desire and determination to obtain what she considered good value for her money, and the trait which Lady Hatherley found so disconcerting and offensive in the early stages of their acquaintance was to prove the salvation of the Rodneys later on.

Lady Hatherley was obliged to give in about the house. She had no alternative, though she relinquished with a pang of regret the handsome honorarium which the proprietors had agreed to pay her if she could get it advantageously off their hands. A lease for three years at a rent out of all proportion to its value had been their suggestion and desire when Lady Hatherley had called on them with her proposition of the Rodneys as tenants. But the negotiations had fallen through.

The Hans Crescent house was pretty, bright and well furnished, and it took Mrs. Rodney's fancy at once. She liked the open space outside and the charm of the immediate neighbourhood. The fact that motor-buses ran through the square where the other house was situated had hopelessly prejudiced her against it even before she entered it. It was Mrs. Rodney's desire to get completely out of the area in which motor-buses plied.

This was the night of her first reception—the occasion on which Lady Hatherley was to make good her promise to bring the people.

About nine o'clock Mrs. Rodney was putting the finishing touches to her toilette in the pink-and-white bedroom on the first floor. She had been laced into a very tight and very *décolleté* gown of oyster-coloured satin with an over-dress of old lace, which Lady Hather-

ley had obtained for her at one of the bargain prices—which spelled a very substantial commission for herself.

She had done rather well, and was likely to continue doing well, in the matter of commissions with various tradesmen, and the campaign in which she was engaged was one after Clare Hatherley's own heart. She had become an expert at living on her wits. This she would have called legitimate and high-class business.

The compiling of the guest-list had been a gargantuan task. Lady Hatherley had not found Mrs. Rodney willing to blindly follow her lead. Each name, as it was brought forward, had to be fully explained and accredited. At last Clare had put her foot down.

"My dear woman, you don't understand!" she had cried, with her brows narrowing and her red lips snapping. "These people are not of your world. They will come to your house only because I ask them. It is an act of condescension on their part. I refuse to answer any more questions. Take them or leave them, as you please. I'm rather tired of the whole business, anyhow! I've worked like a galley-slave for you. I'm feeling quite exhausted. It would really be a relief to me if you decided not to give this party."

These words, which came only from the lips, filled Mrs. Rodney with dismay, and she hastily apologised. All these arrangements were made without consultation with either of her daughters, simply because she knew that neither Estelle, with her big, honest heart and fearless courage, nor Kathleen, with her quick, sensitive spirit, would have stood for a moment Clare Hatherley's scarcely veiled impertinence.

Estelle frankly loathed her and deplored the influence which she had secured over their mother. Kathleen, less observant and more tolerant, perhaps because she had seen more, if she was less indignant and foreboding, sincerely wished that they had been left to guide their

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own ship of fortune. Frequent talks with Mrs. Dyer had somewhat reassured her, however, for that good lady had told her that she would not permit Clare Hatherley to go too far, and that, if Mrs. Rodney wished to have a little flutter in the fashionable world, there was positively no other way of getting it. She had also said that the more drastic the dose the quicker the cure.

Where was Cyrus Rodney in the midst of all this strange planning and scheming for things so far removed from his ken or desire?

In obedience to his wife's command, he had postponed the voyage to Australia which he was to take with Jack until this party should be over. The date of this event was the twenty-eighth of March, and they were sailing the following week, on the third of April.

He was genuinely uncomfortable at the prospect of the party, and he looked so as he came out of his dressing-room this evening at the call of his wife's voice.

"I'm ready to go down, Cyrus," she said, wheeling round from the long pier-glass where she had been putting a few rouge touches to her cheeks. "Do I look nice?"

Cyrus regarded her with something like dismay.

It was a beautiful frock, judged by the ordinary canons of the dressmaker's art, but anything more unsuitable to a middle-aged woman—the mother of a grown-up family—could not well be imagined. It was cut very low. Cyrus Rodney's colour rose a little as he surveyed the expanse of bared neck and shoulders, where the gown was held up by pearl-embroidered straps.

"It's very pretty, I suppose, mother, if there were a little more of it. Couldn't you put a shawl, or a scarf, or something over your neck?"

She laughed shrilly.

"Oh, Cyrus, you are an old sheep—and no mistake!

Why, Madame Mantilla says I have a lovely neck and shoulders, and that lots of women would give anything for them. Well, do you like my hair?"

It was piled high and tortured into an immense mass of little curls puffed out round the face. An enormous aigrette, glittering with mock diamonds, stood up from these curls, and sent little shafts of light over the coiffure with every movement of the head. Not a grey hair was to be seen, every trace of greyness having been wiped out by some wonderful process known only to the very expensive artist in coiffures, who was one of Lady Hatherley's numerous introductions.

She looked young, most certainly, but it was with a distressing kind of youth that had no resemblance to the real thing.

"You don't look like yourself, Louisa. I preferred the old mother," was Cyrus Rodney's verdict.

"Oh, you'll get used to the new one," she replied. "And please don't call me mother again. Haven't I told you not to, scores of times? It made Lady Hatherley laugh the first time she heard it, and she mimicked you perfectly! For heaven's sake, don't say it to-night when everybody is listening. You needn't be about, unless you like, after the first half-hour. I must say you look quite nice, Cyrus, and your coat fits perfectly. Come here till I put your tie straight. Don't get it round to your left ear before you leave the top of the staircase."

"Must I stand there with you, Louisa, and, if I must, for how long?" he asked in dismay.

"For a little while, my dear, of course. You don't want to be left out of everything in your own house, do you, old man?" she said, giving him an affectionate pat on the arm. "Besides, you really do look very nice! If you don't say anything very stupid I shall be quite proud of you."

Evening dress, cut and made by a tailor beyond reproach, had worked a change in Cyrus Rodney's appearance which had astonished them all. Being perfectly natural, he wore it with that fine unconsciousness which is the secret of successful dressing.

His figure lent itself to the distinction of the well-cut clothes, and his face had a sort of quiet and pathetic dignity.

Before the night was over several people were to ask who he was. Nobody would inquire concerning Mrs. Rodney. Her staid, personality and pretensions were expressed in her clothes.

"It's a quarter past nine, dear," said Mrs. Rodney. "We'd better go down. Wonder where the girls are, and whether they look nice! Este is so tiresome, Cyrus, you wouldn't believe it! She actually said she thought she wouldn't appear to-night. I had to give her a good talking to, but I didn't dare to say anything about her clothes. She has such queer ideas about dressing. She'll look like a nun, or something, I'm sure! Lady Hatherley made such a good suggestion with regard to her. It was that we should say that Estelle is a genius. Everything is allowed and excused in geniuses. I expect we're to have a lot of the tribe to-night. Isn't it wonderful, Cyrus, and can you believe it is really us?"

"It is difficult at times, I admit," he answered in a voice which had a minor key vibrating through it rather painfully.

As husband and wife stepped out on the corridor a door at the far end opened, and Estelle came out.

"Look, Cyrus! Didn't I say she would be like a nun? Black—to-night of all nights! It's rude to me. Clare would call it impertinent. Come here, Estelle, and let me look at you. Do you think that is a suitable frock for a night like this?"

It was black velvet, made quite plainly, cut away a

little at the neck, but not by any means low, though her neck and bosom were as white as the driven snow. A string of pearls which her mother had given her—and Kathleen too had received one—was her sole ornament. Yet she struck an instant note of distinction. She was a most beautiful woman.

"It's the best I've got, mother," answered Estelle quietly. "What's the matter with it? Kathleen likes it. She has just told me so."

Had Cyrus Rodney uttered his own conviction, it would have been that his wife and daughter might with perfect propriety have exchanged costumes, and that his wife, at least, would have benefited by the exchange. Beside Estelle's stately unadorned dignity Mrs. Rodney looked tawdry, over-dressed, even bizarre, though every detail of her appearance had been arranged by Clare Hatherley, who prided herself on her taste.

"Is Kathleen ready?" inquired Mrs. Rodney in her most dignified voice, and with an air which dismissed the subject.

"Just coming. She looks perfectly sweet, mother—she'll make up for your disappointment in me."

Kathleen came at the moment, an alluring vision in a gown of pale green *crêpe de Chine* cunningly draped about her pretty figure, its delicate tint showing up the fairness of her skin.

Mrs. Rodney's eyes brightened as they fell on the lovely picture she made.

"There, now!—that's something like! I shall be proud of you, Kathie. At least you don't look like your own aunt, as Estelle does! It isn't natural for a girl to ape being an old woman."

"I'll soon be twenty-seven. By the by, is Aunt Agnes coming to-night?"

"I told her about the party, and left it open to her to come or not, just as she pleased. I even offered

her a gown, but that she declined. One can't do more? Well, come, Cyrus. Was that the bell? Come and stand by me, Kathie. I shall want everybody to see you."

They hastily descended the staircase to the wide, open space where Lady Hatherley had decided that the guests were to be received.

Estelle slipped back just within the doors of the big drawing-room, and sat down on one of the gilt chairs to watch the comedy of the stairs.

Lady Hatherley, contrary to expectation, did not come early. She had satisfied herself that all the arrangements were beyond reproach, had supervised the supper menu and the musical programme; but she did not wish to take too personal and pronounced a part in the evening's entertainment.

Mrs. Rodney got through the ordeal of the first arrivals with undoubted credit. She smiled sweetly and murmured a word of welcome to each, and most people turned with evident interest, and some with considerable surprise, to the man who stood by her side.

He was so entirely different from what they had been led to expect! There was nothing of the climber or of the pusher about Cyrus Rodney. He looked exactly what he was—a simple English gentleman.

The concert commenced in the large drawing-room at half-past nine, by which time a considerable number of guests had arrived. But not a soul was personally known to the Rodneys, and those who knew one another wandered about, talking in quite audible whispers about their entertainers and openly appraising the contents of the house.

Estelle heard some remarks which sent her in a state of boiling indignation down to a settee half-way up the stairs, where Kathleen had seated herself for the purpose of watching for Mrs. Dyer.

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"I think some of these people are perfectly horrible, Kathie," she said in an indignant whisper. "Do you see that woman in the green chiffon with the thing sticking out at the back of her head? What do you think she said, putting up her *lorgnette* to stare at mother, and speaking in a quite loud voice so that other people could hear?"

"What was it?" asked Kathleen interestedly. "Green chiffon? Oh, I've seen her! No, I don't know who she is. What did she say?"

"She said: 'So this is Clare Hatherley's latest investment! Pretty cute one! She's got her to pass muster. A little more frock and a little less powder, perhaps would have been an improvement. But she makes a pretty good show on the whole. Looks as if she might show nasty, though, sometimes.' These were her very words."

Kathleen laughed. At Mrs. Dyer's she had grown accustomed to the free speech of the visiting world, and she attached little importance to it. Estelle, of the serious mind and the honest heart, resented such remarks with her whole soul.

"Oh, that's nothing, Este. Don't take on about it. She didn't mean anything—just society froth. I've heard lots worse at Ambrosia. I do wonder when Mrs. Dyer will come. She faithfully promised that she would. Ah, there she is, bringing Anna Helder! I didn't know that mother had invited her!"

"Who is Anna Helder?" asked Estelle, struck by an odd little note that had crept into her sister's voice.

"Anna Helder is Mrs. Dyer's niece—her real niece. Lady Hatherley, I believe, is only distantly related to her, though she calls her her aunt."

"Mrs. Dyer looks like an old French marquise, and her niece is certainly a handsome woman, but very foreign-looking."



"She is partly Dutch. Mrs. Dyner's husband was really Van Dyne, you know, Este, and Anna Helder is his sister's daughter. She positively hates me, and I do her. I'm surprised at her coming here to-night."

The light and gladness had gone out of Kathleen's face. Nevertheless she rose and ran downstairs to greet her beloved lady enthusiastically.

Mrs. Dyner, got up for an evening party, was very different from the poor old wreck whom Clare Hatherley had interviewed in her bed when she was starting out on her exploitation of the Rodneys.

She wore black velvet, partially draped with old lace, a handsome necklace of old French paste, and she walked with a jewelled stick.

Anna Helder, a tall, black-browed woman about thirty, in yellow, made an excellent foil for her.

"How do you do, Mrs. Dyner? I'm so awfully glad to see you," whispered Kathleen ecstatically. "I was so afraid you weren't going to come. Good-evening, Miss Helder. Mother is at the top of the stairs. Let me help you up, dear Mrs. Dyner."

It was very pretty to witness Kathleen's devotion to her sometime employer, and the beaming affectionate smile which the old lady bestowed upon her.

Anna Helder stood back a trifle haughtily when Mrs. Dyner indicated that she would like to be helped upstairs by Kathleen. Her soul was filled with jealousy of the girl's fair beauty and youth, which had never been shown to better advantage.

She looked about her with cold, hostile, critical eyes, but she could find nothing to cavil at, though she considered herself a connoisseur in all things pertaining to house decoration. She had come out of simple curiosity, eager to find something to jeer at, but she was disappointed.

When she had been duly received by her hostess she

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passed into the drawing-room, and when she saw the artistes her confusion and chagrin were complete. Clare had not made a fool of the people. Her advice, if expensive, was genuinely worth while having obtained. And the crowd that had flocked to the house in Hans Crescent expecting to find something to laugh at—a sort of bear garden where they could amuse themselves without considering the feelings of their entertainers—were also disappointed.

They found nothing but a particularly well-done and unimpeachable entertainment in the house of people with whom no reasonable being could find fault!

Cyril, one of the handsomest men in the house, was moving about, keeping an eager watch on the door for Lady Hatherley.

It was half-past ten and Mrs. Rodney had begun to despair of her coming, and she was feeling herself very much aggrieved, when she beheld Lady Hatherley and her brother approaching the front staircase.

Clare wore a gown of daring red which suited her to perfection, a long rope of something which looked like real pearls, and a wonderful Paradise plume in her hair. The Honourable Edward Charters made a fine figure by her side. Together they were a most distinguished, well-matched pair.

Estelle, to whom nobody was paying much heed, saw them arrive, and she accidentally caught an expression on Anna Helder's face which told her a good deal. That lady was standing on the top landing leaning against one of the pillars at the door of the drawing-room, Mrs. Dyner being seated just within it, when her eyes fell on the face of Ted Charters. An eager light sprang to her eyes, her swarthy colour rose, and Estelle saw her fingers move nervously about the sticks of her fan. But he gave her only a careless nod over his shoulder and immediately went to greet Kathleen

with quite pronounced enthusiasm. It was not the only bit of comedy which Estelle watched that night!

"I thought you weren't coming, dear," said Mrs. Rodney in a low, eager whisper, "and I was going to be very, very angry and put out."

"We were dining at one of the Embassies. Didn't I tell you we were going there?" said Clare languidly.

"Is everything all right?" asked Mrs. Rodney in a breathless whisper.

Clare nodded, taking in the weak points of Mrs. Rodney's appearance, but on the whole satisfied.

"Is this Mr. Rodney? How is it that we have never met before?" she asked, directly addressing him.

"I don't know, madam, I am sure," answered Cyrus simply. "I have generally been in the house when you called."

"I know," said Clare with a coquettish smile. "She was afraid to introduce her handsome husband to an unprincipled person like me! Well, I shall punish her by taking you down to supper. It's your duty, anyhow, Mr. Rodney, to offer me a good supper, seeing that I have worked very hard for the success of this evening."

"I'm sure you have, and I hope it is a success and pleases you," said Cyrus, his kind eyes quite earnest and sincere.

"Don't you yourself think it is?" she asked, tapping his arm with her fan.

He shook his head.

"I don't know anything about it, my lady."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't say 'my lady.' Anybody might hear you. Lady Hatherley will do. Or Clare is my name, if you prefer to call me by it."

"I'm sorry if I've given offence," said Cyrus quietly. "Will you come down to supper now?"

Clare regarded him curiously from under her half-lowered lids.

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Here was that rare thing—a perfectly natural and simple human soul without pretence or guile! There could be no kinship between her and such a one, yet she felt an odd desire to probe deeper into his nature and, above all, to find out what were the actual views of the situation held by the master of the house.

She slipped her hand through his arm, and together they descended the stairs. Nobody who was watching them thought of smiling significantly or had a jeering whisper to make.

No one in that motley throng struck a note of more pronounced dignity than the master of the house.

"So you won't tell me if you are pleased, Mr. Rodney," said Clare. "I do assure you you ought to be. We've all worked hard, and some of the people here have not been easy to get. You know what I mean, don't you? They are exclusive; they have come here only because I have asked them."

## CHAPTER XII

### "IN THE SWIM"

CYRUS RODNEY did not even smile. Moving quietly through the throng, taking care that the woman on his arm should not be jostled or rendered uncomfortable in any way, he found a little table in the corner of the great dining-room, and set her down there.

"You haven't answered my question yet," she said pettishly when the waiter had brought her a cup of bouillon and some iced champagne. "And aren't you going to eat anything?" she added.

"I've dined. I couldn't eat food of this kind so late," he answered; "I should be afraid to. I'm afraid my tastes don't lie in this direction, Lady Hatherley."

"So far as food goes, you are in the front bench," she answered flippantly. "Do you see that old thing in the pink turban talking to General Branksome? That's the Viscountess Fevershott. She lives on tabloids and mineral waters. I suppose it's what we're all coming to. But I mean to have an answer to my question. Aren't you pleased with your wife's big social success? It's amazing at the beginning of her first season, and I'm patting myself on the back."

"If you are pleased——" he began, but she touched his arm impatiently.

"I don't want to hear about my pleasure, but about yours. I've just got what I expected—no more and no less. Don't you like this sort of thing? You'll get two or three paragraphs in the Society columns

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to-morrow. I've written them myself, and the man is coming for them presently."

"If you want a truthful reply, Lady Hatherley," answered Cyrus in his usual, quiet voice, "then all I can say is that I see no meaning or sense in it, and I can't think what has come to my dear wife that she should imagine this to be either pleasure or success."

Clare Hatherley laughed in spontaneous enjoyment.

"Now I call that too lovely for words! So that's why she has kept you in the background so long, is it? Of course, I know a good deal about things. I shouldn't be here—none of this would have happened unless your wife had talked to me freely. But I should dearly like to hear what *you* would have done with the money, supposing it had come to you instead of to your wife?"

"I shouldn't have done this, anyhow," he answered. "But there are plenty of channels through which money can be made to run for the benefit of the greatest number. I have been a poor man all my life, but I have had my own dreams and visions. Some of them have been aided by imaginations regarding the possession and the spending of money. I should like to help people—not perhaps the very poor, for a great deal is done for them. There is another class who are not so much remembered, because they don't make any noise."

"Whom are you talking about?" demanded Clare, interested in spite of herself.

"The poorer professional and business people, who like refinements and education and opportunities for their children, who are often gifted, and who have to bury every ambition almost as soon as it is born, who never have a moment free from sordid anxiety."

"Oh, but they, of course, represent quite a small

number," said Clare flippantly. "And for that class there are heaps done really—scholarships in the County Council schools, and all that sort of thing. I really think you exaggerate. But perhaps you speak from personal experience. Which of your sons have you had to bury ambitions about? Cyril has plenty of brains of a kind, but I don't think they run in the same direction as yours."

"I was not thinking of my own case, but of the case of many others that I have known."

"I like that second boy of yours. What an eye he has! I wanted him to come and speak to me, but he just looked me through with a kind of schoolboy contempt and walked off. Plenty of grit he has, I should say, and his face will take him anywhere. Will you send him to Oxford?"

"No. I am sailing with him to Australia next week."

"Oh, of course you are! Your wife mentioned that. Well, how long do you expect to be out of England?"

"Only until the autumn, probably."

"But won't you encounter the hot weather out there? I've always thought people sailed to that kind of place in the late autumn. It was always October when I went to India or to Africa."

"If my son is going to live in the country, the sooner he makes acquaintance with the climate the better."

"And you are glad to be getting away?"

"I shall not be sorry."

"You will find all sorts of changes when you come back: we move so rapidly nowadays! Perhaps your daughters will have married. They can pick and choose now, you know. Your Kathleen is as pretty as a dream. But the other! An iceberg! No man will look at her!"

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Cyrus Rodney laughed a little at this summing up of Estelle, whose warm heart he knew.

"You don't know Estelle, Lady Hatherley," he assured her, and he spoke with the same ease as had distinguished him throughout.

"Perhaps not. But if I could get near enough to warn her I would tell her that nobody likes cranks or poseurs. It is all a pose, you know, because it is the nature of woman to like this sort of thing. Perhaps a few months will teach her. I don't think I want any more to eat or drink, and I must go and talk to those two over there that I asked you to look at. Will you come and be introduced properly? You would like her, and she you—which is of more importance. You ought really to have taken her down to supper, for she is your most distinguished guest."

"She can dispense with me, Lady Hatherley," answered Cyrus, as he stood aside to let her pass.

"I say, Mr. Rodney, what was it you really sold in the City Road?" she asked, with her wicked eyes fixed on the fastening of her glove.

"It was a mer's mercer's shop, Lady Hatherley; and I would give five years of my life to be standing behind its counter now!"

She looked a little startled, and the moment she had crossed to greet her friends at the other side of the room she directed their attention to their host's retreating figure.

"See that man, Leila? Look at him well. He's the master of the house, and he's the most unique thing in it. I must bring him to you later, though he has just declined the honour of being presented."

"The impertinence of the creature!" said Lady Fevershott, as she put up her *lorgnette* to focus her host's rapidly retreating figure.

"Oh, there is no impertinence in him. He's only



one of the tiresome truth-tellers. His wife is very wise to get him out of the way by shipping him off to Australia. I dare say she hopes he'll stop there. Forbes-Robertson ought to see him! He's a sort of third-floor-back—don't you know?—quite interesting, though perhaps a little of him goes a long way."

"The General and I want to know what we have been brought here for, Clare?" said Lady Fevershott, her transient interest quenched.

It was a question which several asked themselves that evening, but, on the whole, the function was a success. Before midnight the rooms began to clear, and Clare herself was preparing to go when Cyril claimed her.

"I haven't had a word with you this evening," he said hotly, "and it is a shame! You have talked to everybody but me! Why have you been so cruel?"

She met his reproachful eyes with laughter in her own.

"Dear boy, don't be foolish! This is not the sort of place for talk between you and me. Come and lunch to-morrow at a quarter to two, and we'll talk things over."

Having made him happy, she moved off towards the cloak-room, and when the mask left her face it grew suddenly tired and old.

At the door of the library, which was being utilised as a cloak-room, she met Anna Helder, with her ermine wrap about her throat, and angry-looking.

"Oh, how do, Anna? Haven't had a word with you this evening. What have you done with Aunt Julia?"

"She stayed only an hour; then Cockshott took her home," answered Anna sullenly. "She is furious about the whole show. She has got something to say to you about it."

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"Has she? Well, if she says too much, I'll be obliged to tell her to mind her own business."

"It is something of that kind that she will say to you, Clare."

"This is my business. I've never worked so hard in my life, and if I ever get anything out of it, which is doubtful, it will be earned. But I am keeping you, Anna. Good-night."

She pushed past, and Anna Helder passed out into the hall, where the Hon. Edward Charters was waiting for his sister.

She swept up to him at once, her face pale under its rouge, her eyes full of sombre fires.

"Do you think you have treated me well this evening, Ted?" she asked.

"Beastly crush all night—couldn't get near you," he answered, apparently undisturbed.

She made a most impatient movement with her hand, and Cyril Rodney, waiting in the background for another word with Clare Hatherley, or at least for a look at her, wondered what was passing between them.

"Don't beat about the bush, Ted. Of course, it's the same old game you are playing at. I saw you making love to that girl—the cat-faced thing with the saucer-blue eyes, that chit whom Aunt Julia has hopelessly spoiled. You'd better be careful. Remember, I can put several spokes in your wheel."

Clare came out at the moment, and Anna Helder darted through the door, which the footman had already opened, and passed out into the night.

Then the door was shut upon the last guest, and that strange sense of forlornness, of the futility of things, seemed to descend on the little family.

There are few things more depressing in life than the half-hour succeeding a big social effort which has taxed all the powers of those who have made it and

which yet leaves behind it so little of the supreme satisfaction of "something accomplished, something done," which is the reward of love's labour.

Even Mrs. Rodney relaxed, kicked off her satin shoes with the Louis heels, and sank upon a chair.

"I'm glad it's over," she said, with a little gasp of relief. "But it was a huge success."

"I'm afraid you are very tired, my dear," said Cyrus Rodney solicitously, "and I think the best thing that we can all do is to go to bed."

"Somebody would need to go down and see what they are about downstairs and that everything is put away properly. I'm really not equal to it. Will you go, Estelle?"

"Isn't Williams equal to it, mother? You know that if you poke round he always gets nasty. I should hold him responsible for seeing to all that if I were you."

"Oh, well, perhaps it would be better. Well, did you girls enjoy yourselves? I'm sure it was a brilliant show. I've only one regret, and that is that none of the old Ebenezer crowd was here to see it! I could easily have wedged some of them in. Nobody would have observed them. And I must say that some of Clare's fine friends—even some of those with the biggest titles—wore awful clothes. Did you observe the frock that the Viscountess had on?"

Nobody had.

"Why, wherever were all your eyes? I saw everything! I believe I could tell you what everybody had on. How did you get on with Lady Hatherley in the supper-room, Cyrus, and what did you and she talk about?"

"The party, chiefly. She was anxious to know whether I was pleased," said Cyrus, with a slow smile.

"And I hope you said you were," she said swiftly. "For she did what she said she would do—she filled

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the house, and though some of the people she invited looked rather queer, I'm sure there was no doubt about their social standing. She gave me her word on that head."

"Some of them might have mended their manners without hurting themselves," said Estelle a trifle sourly.

"Your face was enough to make anybody forget their manners, Estelle. Next time we have a party I'll thank you to stop in your own room if you can't be anything but a wet blanket. How did you enjoy it, Kathie?"

"Bits of it were all right."

"You went down to supper with Mr. Charters."

Kathie nodded, and a faint colour was visible in her pale cheeks.

"Didn't you find him nice?"

"He was quite nice."

"And isn't he adorably handsome?"

But Kathleen refused to discuss him.

"You haven't told me yet what you said to Clare about the party, Cyrus," said Mrs. Rodney, once more addressing her husband.

"I'm afraid I said that it was a little out of my line, and that it did not correspond with my old-fashioned ideas of hospitality."

"I thought you said something queer to her by the way in which she spoke to me about you. She called you the Stranger in the House, whatever she might mean by that. But, anyhow, you haven't offended her very badly. Are you going to bed, girls? Well, good-night. You won't see me very early to-morrow—or rather to-day. I'll only get up in time to go out to lunch."

The girls kissed their mother and father and went off.

They had rooms adjoining each other on the third floor, with a communicating door between, and, as yet,

nothing had occurred to disturb to any serious degree their sisterly relations.

But day by day the little rift was widening. Estelle saw Kathleen being slowly but surely drawn into the vortex of pleasure, and farther away from the old simple ideals of life and duty. She had watched her that evening with Lady Hatherley's brother, had observed his assiduous attentions, and had no doubt as to their meaning and intention.

And her heart ached for John Glide, whom she had loved all these years as if he had been her own brother!

"We don't want to talk any more, do we, Este?" said Kathie, stopping at her own door. "I'm dead tired. Society is rather wearing, and we haven't got used yet to such late hours. I think I'll just say good-night. Why, whatever is the matter?" she added anxiously.

Estelle, as she bent forward to kiss her sister, had tears in her eyes.

"I don't know, Kath—it's just everything! I am just miserable, but I dare say I'll feel better in the morning."

She hurriedly went into her own room and closed the door.

Downstairs, in the smaller end of the drawing-room, Mrs. Rodney and Cyril continued to discuss the affair with unabated interest. Cyril at least was in full sympathy with his mother's aims and ambitions, and he was full of anticipation for the future.

In her secret heart, perhaps, Mrs. Rodney was a little astounded at the way in which Clare Hatherley had taken possession, inviting him to her house at all times and seasons, and treating him with a strange unconventionality. As yet she was uninitiated into the odd, free-and-easy ways of a certain section of society and into their rather slack ideas regarding the proprieties, and, having only what Clare called "the middle-class

mind," she was often bewildered and sometimes even a little shocked.

But there was no doubt of it, Cyril was in the swim. The Honourable Edward had taken him in training, introduced him to his tailor—in return for which introduction he obtained further credit for himself—to his cigar merchant, to his bootmaker, and to sundry other tradesmen whom the man about town requires to assist him in his career. And he had got him put up for a certain club where the "Nuts"—to use the current expression for the useless idlers of the male sex who swarm in the West End—most did congregate. And Cyril was enjoying himself immensely.

Lady Hatherley had talked seriously to her brother about him, and, between them, they had settled what his allowance should be. Mrs. Rodney in her secret heart would have been ashamed to mention the sum, so large was it. She still suffered sundry qualms over the lavishness of her expenditure, and she daily took vows to keep strictly within the limits of the interest accruing from her fortune.

Clare had been at pains to explain to her that the initial expenses of the first year, though a little heavy, would not be repeated, and that she must be prepared for a big outlay if she was to obtain the desired return.

What that return was she did not specify in so many words, but, broadly speaking, Mrs. Rodney understood it to mean good marriages, or, at least, eligible suitors, for her daughters; a career, preferably Parliament, for Cyril; and for herself steady and permanent social advancement. It will be observed that in these arrangements there was no mention of her husband. Perhaps she regarded him as hopeless, or perhaps, as he was to remain abroad for an indefinite period, he did not count.

Cyrus Rodney was thankful to be left comparatively

quiet. His wife did not really trouble him much. His days were his own to dispose of, and he disposed of them as seemed good in his sight. She had no idea of the almost daily visits which he made to the City Road shop and to his sister's little house at Chelsea, or of the motor-bus rides which he enjoyed to the old haunts, or of how often he would stop sadly at the end of Bigwood Lane, afraid to go up and look at the empty house lest the sight of it should wound him too much.

Nor did she know of the money he gave away, never recklessly or thoughtlessly, but with a finely considered generosity, to those whom he had known in the old days and who needed help.

It was not his wife's money that he gave away, for he had too fine a sense of honour to do that. He himself was not penniless, seeing that he had kept a modest sum in his own bank, and that his wife, in her first rush of generosity, had given him a cheque for a thousand pounds for himself.

There had been rather a pretty little scene at the presentation of that cheque, and Mrs. Rodney had been quite her most natural and best self, kissing him, with tears in her eyes, thanking him for her happy life, and expressing her joy at being able to make some little return for all his goodness.

Cyrus, then, was not actually unhappy, though with every return to his fine mansion in Hans Crescent he was conscious of a deepening sense of depression and hopelessness.

It may be said here that every servant in the house, from the French maid to the little tweeny on the stairs, adored the master, who had always a kind word and a considerate act for them; and it would have amazed his wife could she have overheard them speaking of the place he held in their regard. He was, in the highest and best sense of the words, the master in the

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house, and there are no better or, in the main, more just appraisers of life and conduct than the persons we employ.

After parting with her sister, Estelle turned up the electric light in her room, and walked to the toilet table to look at herself.

Her frock did not interest her. It was her face which riveted her gaze, for it was hard, defiant, incredibly old—the face of a woman into whose soul the iron had entered.

"I can't go on with this life! I can't. I can't!" she said to herself, leaning her elbow on the table and glowering at her reflection in the mirror, as if demanding from that bitter-faced woman some solution of the problem of her life. "It's a hundred thousand times worse than Romsey Road! Heavens, what wouldn't I give to get back to my little class-room again! Even the smell of the great unwashed would be sweeter than that of these poor dead roses on the stairs! There is, at least, something human and real about it. God, are you going to help me? If you're not, I'm going to do something desperate! I can't live like this!"

Her mother, undisturbed by any such acute soul tumult, slept the sleep of sheer exhaustion, and, when morning came, awoke fresh and eager for the next stage in the social sieg of London.

The *Morning Post* announced that Mrs. Sheldon Rodney had held a large and successful reception in Hans Crescent, and it mentioned the names of the principal guests. The words which pleased Mrs. Rodney most of all were these: "Mrs. Sheldon Rodney is to be numbered among the new hostesses of what promises to be a particularly brilliant season."

She was as proud as a peacock for the rest of the day.



## CHAPTER XIII

### OFF TO AUSTRALIA

ON Friday of the following week Mr. Rodney and Jack sailed in the *Orotava* from Tilbury Dock, and the whole family went down to see them off.

The lad had been buoyed up all these months by the alluring prospect of the voyage and of the splendour of the life to which he was going. But on board the boat, when parting from his mother, he became a little child again, clinging to her and crying just as he had done in his pinafore days.

To her little children Mrs. Rodney had ever been the best of mothers, displaying towards those positively and wholly dependent on her loving care a depth of tenderness which those who knew only her activities would hardly have deemed possible.

"Mummy, mummy," said the sobbing boy, "I don't want to go—at least, not without you! Do come! Let father go down and tell the captain to get cabins ready. Chuck everything! Este can run the show till you get back."

Mrs. Rodney was visibly shaken. She was quite pale, and the tears rolled down her cheeks and fell on the expensive costume, which was eminently suitable to the occasion and in which she looked almost as young as her daughters.

"Darling, I can't. You'll have daddy, and the moment you don't like it or are so horribly home-sick that you can't bear it, just come right home."

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"Can I?" he asked, his face brightening and himself already secretly ashamed of his breakdown.

"Why, of course. We're not driving you to Australia. You were just wild to go."

"I do want to go, but—but I wish everybody could come. Anyway, I've got father. Don't tell them I've been such a kid, mummy," he added shamefacedly.

"Of course I won't," she said, with a reassuring look, smiling, and patting his back.

"And, mummy——"

The boyish face, which had still the sweetness of the child-heart stamped on it, became oddly wistful.

"Yes, darling?"

"Don't—don't go on getting more and more—you know! It isn't like old times. Nobody likes it. Get into the country when father comes back. He'd be a lot happier there, and so would everybody."

This little interlude occurred at some distance from the rest of the party, and even as Jack spoke he moved off, as if frightened at his own temerity.

His mother was not, therefore, committed to any reply; but these words came back to her often after the ocean had rolled between her and the boy, whose clear vision had already pierced the hollowness of the life she had chosen.

It was, on the whole, a trying hour on board the *Orotava*, and the middle-class elderly husband and wife, who had never before been parted for more than a day or two in the whole course of their married lives, were frankly dismayed at the prospect of being separated for the next six months.

While they were talking a trifle brokenly to each other out of hearing of the children, a lithe figure came quickly across the deck, and John Glide strode up to Jack.

The boy's face became radiant at sight of him.

"Good old John, so you did get away! I'm most awfully glad to see you."

"I missed the boat-train, and was in a mortal funk in case I shouldn't get here in time," answered John, quite breathless. "The chap who was to mind the shop was over an hour late, and I had to leave him without a word of instruction. But I'm jolly glad to get here in time. Grand boat, isn't it? How do you do, Miss Rodney?"

"Not at home—but Estelle is," answered Estelle, as she gave him her frank, kind hand.

Kathleen, rosy-red and hating herself for the flush she could not keep back, recognised him much more coolly, not even offering her hand, greatly to the indignation of Jack.

Immediately she moved off towards her father and mother. Her action was misunderstood by all the three whom she left. They thought her unkind, whereas she was only not sure of herself.

The sight of John's face, the swift, somewhat sad glance of his deep-set eyes, his whole personality, disturbed Kathleen. She had not seen him for six months, and she was annoyed to find that she could not be altogether indifferent to his presence.

"Mother, that is John Glide back there, come to say good-bye to Jack."

Mrs. Rodney's face momentarily hardened, but she immediately reproached herself. After all, that could not do any possible harm, and she must not be unreasonable. Yet she thought it injudicious of John Glide, even a trifle presumptuous, to appear on the scene. Except on the evening of the day when the first intimation of her accession to her brother's fortune had come, she had not seen him since the great change. After a moment's consideration she moved towards him with



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something of the *grande dame* air, and held out her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Glide? I hope you are quite well."

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. Rodney."

"We haven't seen you for a long time. I hope business is good," she pursued graciously, determined to do her whole duty without flinching.

"Business is very good, thank you, Mrs. Rodney," said John.

Then he stepped back with evident relief and undisguised joy to receive the warm greeting of his old employer and friend.

"Now, John, this is good of you! I take it as very kind—we all do. Just look at Jack's face! He won't forget you, John, you may be sure of that!"

"I'll take care he doesn't, sir," answered John, a trifle thickly. "I mean'to keep him up to the mark in writing."

"Come here, John. I've oceans of things to say to you," called Jack; and, linking his arm in Glide's, he bore him away to the side of the ship out of everybody's hearing.

"That's a ridiculous attachment of Jack's for John Glide," said his mother stiffly, "but I suppose boys must make a hero of somebody. It's one of the phases they must go through."

"Few have a more excellent ideal, mother," said Cyrus Rodney rather warmly. "Everybody who knows John has the utmost respect for him. It quite warmed my heart the other day at the City Road to hear old Tregellis, of the Wood Street firm, talking about him. They'll give him unlimited credit—only he doesn't want it! But that's the test of a man in business. They all believe in John Glide and in his ultimate success."

"He's better-looking than he was six months ago,"

said Estelle critically. "Being on his own has made more of a man of him than ever."

The conversation by the rail between John Glide and Jack continued with unremitting fervour until the signal was given for those going on shore to leave the ship.

A few more poignant good-byes, and those staying behind were hustled on board the tender and steamed off, waving hands and handkerchiefs. Jack, quietly sobbing, but trying to keep a brave front, kept on waving until they were out of sight.

"Thank goodness that's over, dad!" he said when he turned away. "Now there's just you and me, and we're going to have the rippingest time, ain't we, dad?"

"We are, my son," answered Rodney, smiling; and so the great adventure began.

Cyril, it may be said, having important engagements in town, was not of the party who had come to see his father and Jack off.

But Jack had very little use for his brother in these days, and, in his young soul, he frankly despised him, jeering openly at him as being a "nut," a "dude," a "masher," and all the varied types which come under such slang phrases as these.

Cyril had done his best to squash the "young cub," as he called him, but Jack was like a rubber ball, bounding up after every onslaught. They had parted civilly, however, if a trifle coolly, and on the whole Jack was relieved not to have seen Cyril at the final moment of parting.

The Rodneys, of course, now travelled first-class on all railways; therefore at the station John Glide raised his hat politely and said he would find his own part of the train.

Mrs. Rodney nodded graciously with relief, but she did not offer her hand. Kathleen did not so much as look at him.

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Estelle took the line of resistance.

"If you don't mind, mother, I think I'll go in with John. I have heaps of things to say to him, and all the old City Road folk to hear about."

Mrs. Rodney looked as if she wished peremptorily to forbid such a step.

"It's very unconventional, Estelle. No nice girl would think of doing such a thing. Besides, anyone might see you."

"And if they did, mother," answered Estelle, with great good-humour; "John is perfectly presentable. I can take care of myself, I believe. I'm off——"

Afraid of any altercation on the station platform, she moved down the long train until she found John alone in his compartment.

"May I come in? I want to talk to you, John. I hope we shall have some luck and get the half-hour alone. There are not so very many people taking the train."

John looked immensely gratified, and sprang to open the door.

"I'll give the guard a tip," he said in a pleased, rather uplifted voice.

"I don't think you need. Everybody seems to be in. I'm afraid you must have scowled horribly at them to keep them out!"

She smiled as she stepped into the compartment, the door was closed, and next minute the whistle blew.

Estelle was looking her best in a coat and skirt of fine blue serge, a pretty hat with Mercury wings, and with a good deal of white about the throat.

She always dressed quietly, and her serviceable skirt cleared the ground; while Kathleen's sweeping folds had to be gripped in one hand to keep them from soil.

John Glide had a great regard for Estelle Rodney, whom he considered a splendid woman. But it was



Kathleen who had wakened all the passion of his manhood, and whom he now regarded as a remote and inaccessible star. Yet it cheered his sore heart that Estelle should, of her own free will, have come to him like this, just for a talk over old times.

"Jack's in good form—a bit hipped, but that'll pass," he said cheerfully.

"I was surprised that he felt the parting so much. He has simply been counting the hours until to-day," Estelle answered.

"I am glad he showed it. He's a splendid little chap, and he is going to do great things out there. I've seen a good deal of him lately at the City Road, and Jack's all right, Miss Rodney. I'm looking for a big future for him."

"He's very clever, John—far more clever than Cyril," said Estelle promptly. "I can't help feeling sorry that he didn't go to Oxford to take his degree."

"It's the outdoor life he hankers for," put in Glide quickly.

"Yes, but so do all boys, and that could have come later. However, there isn't any use worrying about it now. I believe I'm a sort of fatalist, John, just lately. Things seem inevitable, somehow. One has just to go through with them."

"Ah, but one has always the power of the will," said Glide quickly. "Fatalism is a policy of drift, which couldn't be good for anybody to pursue. And I don't believe you are a fatalist, Miss Rodney. Why, fatalism is opposed to all your ideas, even to your very nature. You have always been so splendid in everything you did."

"Ah, but everything has changed," she said, with a slight sigh. "Would it surprise you very much, John, to hear that, though I seemed to have got rather desperate at Romsey Road just before I resigned my post, there

are heaps of days when I would give almost anything to get back there."

"It wouldn't surprise me in the least. You are not cut out for the idle life."

Estelle smiled.

"Oh, but we are not idle at all—we work like galley-slaves from morning till night, and we never have a moment to ourselves. It's the lack of privacy I hate the worst of all. We are always among tribes of people whom, if we don't hate, at least we haven't the remotest interest in. But I shouldn't say 'we,' because I believe that mother and Kathie like it quite well."

Glide made no answer, for he did not care to pass any opinion on a kind of life that he could only dimly comprehend.

"I have been so sorry for poor father all along," continued Estelle, "and I am sure that this little break will do him good. Perhaps by the time he comes back mother will have had enough of fashionable London life and be willing to go to the country to live. I'm sure I hope so."

"I suppose you go to a great many parties," said John vaguely, rather thirsting for details regarding the vortex which had swept Kathleen for ever out of his reach; "balls and dinners, and things like that?"

"We go to something every night," answered Estelle.

"But what I can't understand is how you got to know so many people in such a short time," said John in a puzzled voice.

"Oh, we don't know them in the sense that people in Denmark Hill or at Ebenezer knew one another. We are all just like ships that pass in the night. Mother got to know a woman called Lady Hatherley, who is acquainted with most of the fashionable people, and she got them to come to a party, and to call, and to ask us back."

"I suppose that was very kind of her, and she must have taken a fancy to you all."

Estelle shook her head.

"There was neither kindness nor fancy about it, John. Mother pays her for it, I believe—for every single thing she does!"

Glide looked more and more puzzled.

"But I don't understand. A grand lady like that surely wouldn't take payment in money!"

"Oh, wouldn't she? She's very poor, and, so far as I can make out, she hasn't any pride of that sort, though I don't suppose she would walk in the same street with us if we were still the Rodneys of Denmark Hill."

Suddenly Estelle leaned forward and looked intently into the fine, strong face opposite to her.

"John, you seem like one of us yet. Anyway, you were one of us in the old days, so I am sure I can speak freely to you. I feel most awfully worried about a lot of things—most of all about mother and Lady Hatherley. It is Lady Hatherley who is the mistress of our house, and mother simply does what she tells her. It is hateful, and you have no idea how unhappy I am about it all."

John looked sympathetic enough, but he was wholly at a loss what to say in reply.

Estelle seemed to hesitate a moment, regarding him anxiously as if she wished to say something else, but was deterred by a secret fear either of wounding him or of being indiscreet.

"Lady Hatherley has a brother—the Hon. Edward Charters—who comes a great deal to our house. He admires Kathleen, and I am nearly certain that Lady Hatherley has made up her mind that they will marry," she said at last.

"Well, and wouldn't that please your mother?" asked John dully.

"It might. I suppose it would, though he is very poor and has a secretarial post of some kind, where he

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earns very little money. I shouldn't mind that so much, but I don't like him, John. I'm nearly certain he isn't a good man. Don't you think one knows such things intuitively?"

"I suppose so," he answered heavily. "I am sorry you feel anxious about it. We want Kathleen to be happy, don't we? That, above everything, is our desire for her."

The simple sincerity with which Glide spoke touched Estelle inexpressibly. She was perfectly aware that he had not forgotten Kathleen or grown cold to her, and his unselfishness seemed sublime. Yet it irritated her, too. At the back of her mind she even wondered whether, had John Glide been a bolder lover, he might not have won and kept Kathleen in the face of all opposition. He had simply stood aside, and almost she could have called him to task for it.

"Fact is, John, we were really all a great deal happier in the old days at The Laurels, when we had each our work and all our different interests, and when home was the centre of everything. Even mother doesn't look happy, though she imagines she is. She lives in a perfect fever, and she is always wondering what will happen next. And as for the money, I am sure it is being spilt like water. I don't believe for a moment that we are living on its interest alone."

"Perhaps Mrs. Rodney will get tired of it all after she has had a little more of it," suggested Glide, trying to comfort Estelle.

She shook her head.

"I don't think so. You see, there is always something fresh coming on. Lady Hatherley is going to present Kathleen at the June Court, and mother is paying for her Court gown—Lady Hatherley's, I mean. She is getting her own gown and Kathleen's at her dressmaker's."

"And don't you go too?" asked Glide with interest.

"No; I don't want to—at least, not just now. In fact, John, I'm a sort of Jonah. I'm not at home in Hans Crescent, and I'm just casting about in my mind what I could do to take me out of it. Could you suggest anything?"

"There isn't anything a rich woman in your position can do except work among the poor—social work of some kind."

"Well, where could I get it? I have even thought of going to the Salvation Army or the Church Army and offering my services for so many days in the week. I simply must have an object in life."

"There's a Mission not far from the City Road," said John hesitatingly. "It's in Whiterider Street. It's run by a chap I know, named Hardress. There are all sorts of things going on there—clubs for boys and girls, sewing classes, and classes for drill and cookery. They are always needing fresh helpers. I go down three nights a week to the Boys' Brigade. It's awfully interesting work."

"I am sure it must be. Do you think they would take me as a helper?"

"I am sure they would; but it's run by the Wesleyans. I hear that you have become Church people since you went to the West End."

"I don't care who runs it. Will you speak to Mr. Hardress about me? Is there a Mrs. Hardress?"

"Yes. She's charming, and works terribly hard; but just at present she has a new baby and can't come. Hardress would be most awfully glad if you would come and lend a hand. It will be a year, I believe, before Mrs. Hardress can come back to work among the girls, if she ever can."

"Ask him, then, John. And if he writes and makes an appointment, I'll come down one night."

"Bygrave comes down occasionally. He likes Har-

dress. Though he professes himself outside any church, he thinks the work of Hardress is really of the right sort."

Estelle looked deeply interested, but presently she changed the subject.

"How are you getting on in City Road, John? Do you think you'll be able to make anything out of the old business?"

"Yes, I do. It's growing. I'm opening a new department for ladies' things in the autumn, and I'm hoping big things from it. I'm sure it'll pay."

"I hope it will. It pleased father so much to think that strangers didn't get the old place."

"What I should like would be to get the whole place, Estelle," said Glide, with a touch of the old boyish enthusiasm. "I want to turn all these warehousemen out of the old house and to furnish it and live in it. It's a beautiful house, and, in my opinion, The Laurels never came up to it!"

"I rather agree with you. Well, I hope you'll get your heart's desire, John. Anyway, it'll make you happy to work for it. I've got nothing to work for—worse luck! Why, here we are!"

The train ran smoothly into Fenchurch Street, and their talk came to an abrupt end. It had oddly comforted them both. Glide did not linger at the station. He simply lifted his hat and walked off quickly. He had no mind to court any further snub from Mrs. Rodney, and it was nothing short of misery for him to be near Kathleen.

"I hope you enjoyed going back to the travelling third, Este," said Kathleen, when they were seated in the luxurious motor, which was their mother's latest extravagance.

"Yes, I did—at least, I enjoyed John Glide," answered Estelle shortly. "I think you might have showed

him a little more civility. I can't think how you could look at him as you did!"

"He was not very civil to me," said Kathleen pettishly. "Was he, mum?"

"John Glide's civility is a matter of no importance, child," replied Mrs. Rodney with great dignity. "I'm glad he showed some little sense of the fitness of things. As for you, Estelle, I think it was simply atrocious to pursue a man like him into his compartment. Most unmaidenly and forward I call it."

Estelle burst out laughing.

"Oh, mother, remember it is John whom you are talking about! Many a time I have heard you speak of him as your third son."

Mrs. Rodney, unable to deny that she had done so, shut her lips tightly together and relapsed into silence.

Suddenly Kathleen spoke.

"Mother, this is Mrs. Dyner's 'At Home' day. Shall we go to St. John's Wood? If Estelle doesn't want to go in, the car can take her home and come back for us."

"Mrs. Dyner's 'At Home'? Let me see. Have we anything else on? No; I don't think we have. Yes. We can go round that way. Just pull the cord, dear, and give William his directions."

## CHAPTER XIV

### MRS. DYNER'S CIRCLE

MRS. DYNER'S tiny house was full to overflowing. Once through the covered way and into the little hall, the Rodneys wondered whether they would ever reach their hostess. Estelle, who had never been there before, looked the surprise she felt.

"It's always like this," whispered Kathleen excitedly, while her eyes roamed about with a sort of quick proprietary interest. "Why, everybody is here—just everybody! Do you see that woman with the black toque and the white boa? That's Mrs. Soames who wrote 'Devastation.' And the man she is talking to is Carfrae the dramatist. And look—do you see that long, thin man near the door? That's Giffard—Anthony Giffard—don't you know. How I wish we could get in!"

Kathleen's eyes were more than proprietary as they restlessly wandered across the faces of the crowd. They were critical. Once it had been her duty and pride to help in all these arrangements; now the hands of somebody else were responsible. She noticed, almost with a pang, that there was dust on the armour hanging on the walls, and that half of the receptacles for flowers were empty.

"I wonder whether Clare Hatherley will be here?" said Mrs. Rodney in a loud whisper, which was overheard by the Hon. Edward Charters, who happened to come in behind her.

"She's coming," he said, loud enough for her to hear, and immediately Kathleen's face flushed deeply.



But she did not look round. That quick flush was a troublesome habit of hers, and had given people occasion for talk when there was, in actual fact, no such occasion. Even when in Mrs. Dyner's service she had often been guilty of it.

Mrs. Rodney managed to turn round with a beaming smile.

"Ah, Mr. Charters, so glad to see you! I'm afraid we shall not know many here. Can you get us through to your aunt?"

The words were overheard, of course, by sundry lesser lights in the neighbourhood, and several pairs of eyes immediately fixed themselves with interest on the Rodney trio. The story of their fortune, much enlarged and embroidered, had already made a good deal of talk in Mrs. Dyner's circle, where money, as a rule, was a very scarce commodity.

But surely never was the lack of it so philosophically, even joyously, borne. The pleasant hum of voices, the bursts of laughter, the gay flashes of wit to be heard in every corner, belonged to the lightest-hearted crowd in the world. Yet within these narrow walls that summer afternoon was to be found most of the tragedy of human experience—heartburnings, jealousies, vanquished hopes, and disillusionment—side by side with the success which comes none knows whence, and which goes as easily and as soon.

Estelle immediately became conscious of an immense and vivid interest, unlike anything she had ever before experienced.

It was as if her soul had suddenly found itself at home.

For some reason or other Estelle had never been introduced to Mrs. Dyner, nor had she ever come within her house. It was not from any intentional neglect on Kathleen's part that this was so, but simply because no oppor-

tunity had offered. While she was Mrs. Dyner's secretary and Estelle a school teacher, their respective positions had made Mrs. Dyner's acquaintance or friendship something of a favour.

But now all that was changed. Mrs. Rodney, who had once been an awe-stricken guest at one of the famous Friday afternoons, was now, if her own mind had been clearly represented, a patron of the arts. Mrs. Dyner, though "well connected"—a phrase very often on Mrs. Rodney's lips in these days—earned a precarious livelihood by the use of her pen, and could not by any chance be considered an asset socially.

They moved on slowly, and, by some skilful engineering, Charters managed to get near enough to Kathleen to whisper, "Now, this is the best bit of luck I've had in a day's march! I came here to see you, and for nothing else."

"How can you say that," asked Kathleen saucily, "seeing that you hadn't the ghost of an idea that we'd be coming? We thought of it only as we came back from Fenchurch Street in the car."

"Why Fenchurch Street?" inquired Charters, in apparent surprise.

"Have you forgotten? We saw father and Jack off to Australia this afternoon. To get back from Tilbury there must be Fenchurch Street."

"Right-o! Just let this crowd pass by a bit and then I'll get you some tea. Aunt Julia will be on her throne somewhere, I don't doubt. She's got nobody to relieve her or to engineer this horrid show—hence the confusion. But it's the work of your hands, all the same, because at the beginning they all came to catch a glimpse of you."

"How can you say such outrageous things?" said Kathleen spiritedly. "Why, this 'horrid show'—as you so disrespectfully call it—was in existence long before I

appeared on the scene; and the crowd to-day proves that it is dear Mrs. Dyner they come to see, and nobody else. Mother, if we go through the green door ahead, we can get through the study to Mrs. Dyner in the drawing-room."

The long arm of Charters was instantly stretched out to push open the green baize door, and they all passed through.

The little study where Kathleen had spent so many happy days was at the back of the house and opened on the garden, communicating by folding-doors with the equally small drawing-room, where Mrs. Dyner, in her high-backed chair, was holding court.

Her face beamed at sight of Kathleen, and she beckoned to her energetically to come to her side. Presently they succeeded in reaching her, and a very affectionate greeting passed.

Estelle had lingered behind in the study, observing that there were a good many people in the garden in addition to those who were sitting on the veranda, which was one of the charms of the house, and quite suddenly she saw, standing alone under a tree, the figure of Eugene Woods. She was much surprised, and, without a second thought, she passed quickly into the open to speak to him.

His face flushed when he saw her, and he came forward swiftly, his tall, slight figure seeming to vibrate with eagerness.

"How do you do, Eugene?" said Estelle, in a perfectly natural voice, and almost as if they had met yesterday. "I am surprised to see you here. I did not know that you knew Mrs. Dyner."

"I didn't, until to-day. Giffard brought me—Giffard the novelist—you know. He's been most awfully good to me lately."

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"Has he?" she asked interestedly. "How did you get to know him?"

"Through a little thing that I wrote and that appeared in the *Pall Mall*. He wrote to me in a most kindly way, and asked me to come to see him in his chambers in Adelphi. That was an epoch, Estelle—I mean Miss Rodney. I suppose I mustn't call you Estelle now."

"Why not? I'm the same woman, Eugene. Let us go and sit down under the tree. I want to hear ever so many things about Denmark Hill. Do you ever see any of the old crowd?"

"Only the Bygraves. I'm afraid I don't go much to Ebenezer since you left. I saw Dick last night. He was asking whether I ever saw any of you."

Estelle turned her head away, and Woods, all unconscious of her confusion, meandered on.

"Dick's in a bad way. He seems to have got so awfully bitter just lately. The strike seemed to enter into his soul. He has a great big heart, Estelle, but he wants somebody to guide him. He'll do big things, if he doesn't make shipwreck of his life."

"What kind of shipwreck do you mean? He has no vices," said Estelle a little hardly.

"No. But presently he'll be ranging himself with the enemies of law and order. His views are getting distorted."

"How is Carrie?" asked Estelle, with a little note of strain in her voice.

"I haven't seen her. But Dick is specially bitter about what your brother has done. I suppose it is all off definitely?"

"I am afraid it is. In fact, I am sure it is."

"It was a shame to treat her so! Haven't you said anything to Cyril about it?"

"No; but I'm thinking of doing so. And yet what

would be the good, Eugene? What Carrie says is perfectly true. You can't keep any man at your side by force."

"Nor any woman," muttered Eugene, with rather a significant note in his voice.

At the moment they caught sight of Kathleen coming out by the veranda, side by side with Charters. It seemed to Eugene a case in point.

"Your sister has no use for John Glide now. A good many people have been made unhappy by the change in your family fortunes."

"Yes; but I can't help that," said Estelle in the same guarded voice. "I think I must go and speak to Mrs. Dyner. I haven't seen her yet, and there is something I want to ask her."

Eugene understood that he was being dismissed, and he accepted his dismissal quietly. He could not lay claim to any grievance regarding Estelle Rodney's treatment of him, since she had never promised him anything or responded in any degree to his advances. But his eyes followed her with unmistakable yearning until she disappeared into the house.

Then it interested him to watch Charters, of whose identity he was unaware, walking round the pretty garden with Kathleen.

Kathleen had put up her parasol, not so much to shade her face from the sun as from the rather ardent glance of Charters. Of late Charters had spent much of his time at the Hans Crescent house, and he had never neglected an opportunity of meeting Kathleen. Seeking her, in the first instance, from the most selfish motives, he had now become so much attached to her that it had made him a better man. She was so different from the women of his world—so fresh and sweet and transparent, so utterly unspoiled.

And Kathleen was drawn to him, too, for he had

winning ways with women, and, in the course of his life, he had caused a good many hearts to ache. There was one aching intolerably in the house for him at the present moment, and Anna Helder's stormy eyes were watching him and Kathleen as they walked among the trees. Charters, looking at Kathleen, was much tempted to put the fateful question then and there. He did not yield to the temptation, however, for Clare had warned him that he must abide by her counsel and not be too precipitate.

Estelle made her way indoors to try to find her mother and to obtain an introduction to Mrs. Dyner. But Mrs. Rodney was swallowed up in the crowd. As a matter of fact, she had been taken to tea by a man whom she knew, and, as the drawing-room had now emptied a little, Estelle was able to make her way to Mrs. Dyner's side.

"I want to introduce myself," she said in her kind, quiet voice. "I am Estelle Rodney, Kathleen's sister. I saw you at my mother's party last week, but I had no opportunity of talking to you. I hope you don't mind my speaking to you like this."

"My dear, I am charmed! I have lost sight of Kathleen in the crowd. Is she still here?"

"Yes; she has gone into the garden," said Estelle, taking the chair that Mrs. Dyner indicated with the handle of her *lorgnette*.

"So you are Estelle. You are not at all like what I expected to see. Kathleen used to talk a good deal about you. I think I should be rather afraid of you."

Estelle's face and manner were grave, and she was not one who wore her heart on her sleeve, or whom it was easy to know. But when she smiled, as she did now, she was invested with a singular charm.

"You must be very clever, I think," went on Mrs.

Dyner. "What do you do? Have you written any books?"

"I? Oh, no," said Estelle confusedly. "I was a school teacher before things happened. I don't think I have much imagination."

"You have what is perhaps more valuable—keen observation," said the old lady shrewdly. "I could almost swear that very little escapes these eyes of yours. Well, and how are you enjoying the fleshpots of Egypt?"

"Not at all," answered Estelle in a tone which admitted of no dispute.

"Come, come—don't be ungrateful! The gods have been good to you."

"Have they? I'm not sure of that, Mrs. Dyner. They have suddenly cut me off from a good deal I held dear," said Estelle in a voice of unusual emotion.

She suddenly felt and knew that Mrs. Dyner had the understanding heart, that it would be easy to tell her things, and that there was very little in human experience upon which she would not be fitted to guide and advise.

"I'd love to come one day when you have no people, Mrs. Dyner, and have a long talk with you. I understand now all that Kathleen said about you and why she loved you so much."

The old woman's face saddened.

"Ah, I miss her, my dear. She was young and bright and quite unspoiled. She brought fresh sunshine into the house every day. Now I have lost her, and I am in dread lest the world should spoil her altogether."

"I hope not. She is enjoying herself meanwhile. She loves all the things that money can buy, Mrs. Dyner. I don't mind about them. I was not happy in the old life, neither am I happy in this. I seem to want an object in life. There is something the matter with me."

"Try to write something, if it is only to set down

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what you feel. It's a medicine I prescribe to everybody, and sometimes it works wonders. Just occasionally it is the means of tapping a spring at which the world's thirst can be slaked. Try it."

"I might try, but what could I write about?"

"About whatever you have felt and known. That is the only thing that matters or counts. Write it down and bring it to me."

"But you are so busy! How could I trouble you?"

"I am busy with just that very thing. Do you know that half the writers in this room have brought me their stuff from the beginning? It's the crown of my life! Bring yours to me. I know it is in you to produce it. Now I am going to introduce you to Anthony Giffard. He's a helper of lame dogs over stiles, if you like!"

"I think I would rather not be introduced," said Estelle nervously. "It is you whom I want to talk to."

"That is very sweet of you. But it will do you more good to talk to him, believe me."

"May I ask you something first, Mrs. Dyner?"

"Surely."

"You haven't got anybody in Kathleen's place, have you?"

"Not yet. I'm searching, but it's a hopeless task."

"You don't want somebody quite young, do you?"

"I don't mind whether she is quite young or not—only she mustn't be a fool. She must have some brains."

"I know a woman who might do. She was a teacher in Romsey Road School with me. Although quite a good teacher, she will never obtain promotion in that profession, because she has not had the proper training, and is now too old to take it."

"How old?"

"Quite forty, I believe."

"Has she any other kind of ability?"



"She can do shorthand and typewriting, I know. Her father was an invalid for a good many years, and she had to do it for him."

"Is she a depressed creature with her hair screwed up in a knob behind?"

Estelle laughed.

"She is rather depressed, but that is the fault of circumstances. She would be most awfully grateful for work; only she is a person without much initiative. She has led a sort of half-starved existence for the last ten years, and it has altered her. But she is a thoroughly good sort."

"What is she doing just now?"

"She's a stop-gap at the Romsey Road School."

"Ah, then she is engaged all the week except Saturday."

Estelle nodded.

"You may bring her to tea to-morrow, if you like. But, mind, I don't commit myself to anything, and if she has a knob behind, I don't have anything to do with her!"

"Oh, thank you," said Estelle joyfully. "I'm sure I don't know what made me mention Eliza Inman."

"Is that her name?" asked Mrs. Dyner with a queer little cackle. "Sounds like that of a charity child. But I'll try not to be prejudiced. Well, Anna, how are you to-day?"

Anna Helder came forward and greeted Estelle rather coolly, because all the Rodneys were hateful in her eyes.

Estelle was glad to move away, which she did rather quickly, being amazed at the temerity she had shown in mentioning Eliza Inman's name, yet sure that it had been one of those sudden inspirations which bring forth something.

She went off to try to find her mother and to see

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whether she and Kathleen were ready to go. She thus lost the opportunity of being introduced to Giffard, who was a person very much in request at every literary party, being one of the lions of the hour.

During the quick run home, while her mother and Kathleen were animatedly discussing the people they had just left, Estelle was thinking, with a curious little thrill, of Mrs. Dyner's words: "Set down what you feel. Sometimes it works wonders, and just occasionally it is the means of tapping a spring at which the world's thirst can be slaked."

"What are you thinking of, Este?" asked Kathleen teasingly. "You look as if your last hour had come!"

"Perhaps it's my first," answered Estelle enigmatically.

"Did you see Eugene at Mrs. Dyner's party?" her mother asked then. "I was never more astonished in my life. How did he get there?"

"Giffard the novelist brought him," answered Estelle with an odd touch of pride which was quite impersonal, and had its root in pure enjoyment of being able to give a bit of very unexpected information. "Eugene is starting a literary career, and Mr. Giffard is interested in what he writes."

"People do break out in queer places," said Mrs. Rodney with her somewhat affected little laugh. "Did you speak to him?"

"Oh, yes—in the garden. He was telling me about the Bygraves, mother."

"What about them?" asked Mrs. Rodney with a quickly waning interest.

"Nothing much—only general things. But I do think it is perfectly abominable the way Cyril has treated Carrie."

"Is she going to make a fuss—bring a breach of promise, or anything?" asked Mrs. Rodney in alarm. "That would spoil everything at this moment when Cyril is

just making his way. It would be better to pay something and be done with it. Tell me exactly what Woods said."

But Estelle could recall nothing definite. It was of Dick that Eugene had principally spoken.

"I am sure you needn't be afraid of Carrie doing anything of that sort, mother. The last time I saw her I rather think she was despising Cyril. He was never good enough for Carrie Bygrave, anyhow."

Mrs. Rodney looked the displeasure she felt.

"If you had your way, Estelle, none of us would rise in the world! I can't think where you got those horrid low-class ideas from—the Bygraves, I suppose. I always said they were the limit, and I never approved of Cyril going there at all. Dick will be arrested one of these days for anarchy or something of that sort, and it would probably be the best thing that could happen to him."

"Oh, mother, how can you be so unkind and hateful about our old friends!" cried Estelle in a voice breaking with passion.

"The Bygraves were never friends of mine. It was you who introduced them to us, and they were never of any use to us in any capacity. Carrie was harmless, but no class. Am I not right, Kathleen?"

"Carrie was very nice, mother," said Kathleen, feeling sorry for Estelle's evident distress. "Nobody could help loving her, I am quite certain. There was something about her which the girl in *What Every Woman Knows* lacked—a genuine charm."

"Don't put on that face, Estelle! If only you could see yourself! What does she look like, Kathleen?—one of the worst of the militant suffragettes! I wonder you don't join them, Estelle. I am sure you would enjoy fighting with policemen."

Mrs. Rodney was much exasperated, or she would not have said what she did.

## CORRODING GOLD

"At least they have an object in life," said Estelle quickly. "I'm afraid we have none."

"That's where you are quite wrong," retorted her mother. "I have so many objects in life that I hardly know which to lay hold of first. It is because you are so idle, Estelle, that you are so discontented. If only you would take a decent and common-sense interest in what is going on round you, and try to be a help to me and to be grateful for your mercies, you would be a happier woman and would be of some use in the world. I am getting pretty sick of your way of going on, and, if there is much more of it, I will suggest that you go into the country to live in a small cottage on an income of your own. As I said to Clare the other day, you are a great trial. She answered that there must always be a fly in the ointment, and that you were undoubtedly rather a big one."

To hear that she was thus discussed between her mother and Clare Hatherley seemed the last drop in Estelle's somewhat bitter cup.

Undoubtedly she laid herself open to blame in this matter, and her own conscience certainly reproached her a little, for there was not an atom of gratitude in her heart for all the material gifts by which she was surrounded.

Her soul was in revolt. She was struggling to find herself, to grasp the meaning of life, and to discover her own niche in the scheme of things. She had none to help her in the search. But Mrs. Dyner's understanding words had opened up a vista of opportunity which might ultimately lead to the Elysian fields.

That night a light burned far into the night in Estelle's bedroom, and with the dawn a happier woman fell asleep.

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## CHAPTER XV

### FINDING WORK

NEXT morning Estelle received a thick package from Eugene Woods, containing his sketch which had appeared in the *Pall Mall*, and also a note enclosing the address of the Mission in Whiterider Street.

She read Eugene's article with intense interest and a little disappointment. It was a phantasy which she did not understand, though she was struck by the purity and the simplicity of the language.

Estelle had read much, and that only of the best, and her taste had become very fastidious. The sentences that she had committed to paper the previous night had been polished and repolished, and when she read them over in the clear light of day she was surprised at their smoothness.

The thing that she had written was merely a little sketch of an episode which she had observed in Camberwell one day, and which had left an impression on her mind. Set down in simple, vivid language, she was surprised to find that it passed the bar of her own judgment, and she could not but admit that, had she read it elsewhere, it would have pleased her fastidious taste.

An immense joy filled her heart—a sort of secret satisfaction altogether unlike anything that she had ever before experienced. She could have blessed the name of Mrs. Dyer, who had advised her to write, and she determined to lose no time in asking further opinion and advice.

About half-past ten, when she knew she would find

her mother busy with household affairs, perhaps settling with the cook in the boudoir, she ventured into her presence.

"Mother, may I ask you something?" she said with all a schoolgirl's diffidence.

"Why, yes, of course! Don't be ridiculous," said her mother, with a little of the lively banter of Camberwell days.

"You sometimes say that I don't cost you much for clothes. May I have something else?"

"What is it you want?" asked her mother, turning round with her pen to her lip.

Mrs. Rodney kept all her own accounts, and was a strict and accurate housekeeper, permitting no slackness downstairs, and very vigilant regarding perquisites—all of which amused Clare Hatherley very much indeed.

"I want a typewriting machine."

"Whatever for?" was her mother's surprised question.

"To amuse myself with, as Kathleen amuses herself with the violin," said Estelle, but her colour rose. "I was hunting round to see whether Kathie's old one had been brought here, but she says that it hasn't."

"I can't imagine what you want with a typewriter, unless you mean to write books."

Estelle laughed a trifle awkwardly.

"I might try that some day, mother. I must find myself something to do, and Mrs. Dyer gave me an idea."

"Of course you can have a typewriter. How much money do you want? It had better be one of the best. It might come in handy for other things—for writing certain kinds of notes to business people, and so on. It is quite possible that, if things multiply as they are doing, I shall have to engage a secretary for the mornings."

"I could get a good second-hand one for ten pounds, I believe."

"No such thing! I know what second-hand goods are. I've had my share of them. You never know where you are with them. I'll give you thirty pounds, and you can keep what is left after purchasing a really good new one."

She turned to her cheque-book with the never-failing feeling of profound satisfaction that it gave her to know that it was good for almost unlimited sums.

"Oh, mother, you are very good!" said Estelle quickly. "I am sorry that I am not of more use to you. I'm a sort of ugly duckling, but I'll stop in the back-ground and do the odd jobs. Couldn't I keep the accounts for you?"

"You could—but I like to keep my own," said Mrs. Rodney grandly. "I must keep my grip on things. It is far more necessary here than it was at Denmark Hill. That tribe downstairs are nothing but wholesale robbers. I've just been having a regular set-to with François. It's all bosh about his not knowing English. He knew quite well what I meant, anyway, when I told him that nothing in reason would be grudged, but that such disgraceful waste as was going on I would not countenance. He had a good deal to say about Lady Hatherley, but, thank goodness, I can run my own show, and I'm not afraid of any French *chef* that ever was born or ever was imported into this long-suffering country."

Estelle laughed in pure enjoyment. There were many bits of genuine comedy enacted in the house while Mrs. Rodney was wrestling with all the problems of her new estate, but it relieved Estelle immensely to discover that her mother still kept her head. All the glamour had dazzled her a little, but her native shrewdness and common sense, her insatiable capacity for managing things, had made her a less easy prey to Clare Hatherley than might otherwise have been the case.

Sometimes Clare had the feeling that she was being

found out. She had another and a stronger card up her sleeve, however, the manipulating of which was to cause Mrs. Rodney active dismay.

"And, mother, would you mind if I went down to the City occasionally to do a little mission work? It would fill up part of my time. I simply can't take pleasure in so many balls and things. They bore me to extinction. It's the way I'm made."

"I don't mind, though I can't say I understand why you should wish to do it. But slumming is quite fashionable. Clare was telling me yesterday that even Socialism is the fad of a certain set, and that they have people like Dick Bygrave down to their country places for weekends to amuse and instruct them. You are old enough to take care of yourself, and you will not behave in an undignified way, I feel sure, remembering the position we have to keep up."

Estelle, with a quiet feeling of elation and anticipation in her breast, thanked her mother for the cheque and sallied forth to purchase her aid to the literary life.

She went to Holborn to make her purchase, and the sight of a motor-bus labelled Camberwell suggested that she might go and see Eliza Inman.

It was Saturday morning, and, supposing she found her disengaged, she might take her out to lunch somewhere, and then go on later to Mrs. Dyer's.

She had no difficulty in remembering the address of Eliza's lodgings, which consisted of one small room situated above a dairy shop in a little by-street off the Camberwell New Road.

As Estelle rode on the bus back to the old haunts, she noticed the squalor of certain thoroughfares as she had never noticed it before.

Even three months in Belgravia had altered her point of view. She thought pitifully of the toiling multitude, who had no other environment and who never would have



any other, and her thoughts about Eliza were very tender and kind when she got down at the end of the little by-street and proceeded towards the milkshop.

She rang the bell at the house door, which was opened by a very slatternly young girl, who, in answer to her inquiry for Miss Inman, merely nodded her head and pointed upstairs.

Estelle went up the narrow stair, which was covered in cheap oilcloth to imitate parquet flooring, and when she reached the landing she saw Eliza's head popping round the door.

It was half-past twelve, but she was still in deshabille. An old wrapper of nondescript hue and doubtful freshness enveloped her meagre frame, and she had a row of hair-curlers along her high, narrow forehead, which certainly added nothing to her looks. She had the grace to flush deeply at sight of Estelle.

"Oh, Miss Rodney, I'm so ashamed to be caught like this! I looked out, expecting that it might be my best shoes come from the mending. I haven't been well! I've only just got up. I hardly like to ask you in."

"Never mind," said Estelle bravely, "I want to come in for a few minutes. I have come a long way to see you."

"It was very good of you. Queer thing, I was going to write to you this very day," said Eliza in her thin, tremulous voice. "I've got the sack from Romsey Road."

"No! Have you?" asked Estelle sympathetically. "Come and tell me all about it. When did it happen?"

"Five weeks ago. I left off working two weeks past last Friday. You'll excuse the untidiness of my room, won't you? I was just going to get it straight. I've lost heart, Miss Rodney, don't you know. It may be difficult for you to understand just how I feel, and it's because I'd have to leave these lodgings next week that I felt I must write to you."

Estelle followed her into the little bed-sitting room, which was one of the most depressing spectacles that she had ever witnessed.

The settee, which Miss Inman used as a bedstead, was hastily pushed behind a three-leaved draught-screen, and, though the window was open from the top, the place felt stuffy and close. The remains of a meagre breakfast were still on the table, and sundry garments and other things were occupying the chairs.

Estelle's heart sank in dismay and compassion, for how to help such a one was a problem indeed. As she looked at her, the very idea of introducing her to Mrs. Dyer appalled her. She felt she had not the right.

"How did it happen? What excuse did they make for paying you off?" she asked, taking a chair as near the open window as possible.

"They simply said that they were reorganising the staff, and that they would not require my services any longer," answered Miss Inman. "And—would you believe it?—there wasn't a soul said they were sorry that I was going! Everything seemed to go wrong after you left, Miss Rodney. You see, most of them stood in awe of you."

"And have you got anything else to do?" asked Estelle sympathetically.

Miss Inman shook her head.

"Not a thing! I've answered all sorts of advertisements. I'd like to get some secretarial work, but, of course, that isn't possible unless you have influence. I did think of writing to ask whether you knew of anybody among your grand friends who would give me a job. I've only got enough money to go on with for another two weeks. Then what on earth will become of me I don't know!"

"I think I've heard of something that might suit you," said Estelle desperately. "We might go and see the

lady this afternoon. I came to fetch you out, anyway. I tell you what—I'll go for a walk for half an hour or so while you get ready to go out. What about your shoes?"

"Well, you see, they haven't come home, and my other pair are so shabby that I couldn't go out with you in them."

"I'll bring you in a pair if you tell me the size. I dare say, if I pay, they'll send a few pairs on appro."

"How awfully good of you! Well, if you don't mind, I should just love to go out with you. You've no idea what it feels like to be mewed up here day after day, and to have no prospect of anything. I had a good many dismal days at Romsey Road, for I didn't really like the work, and, honestly, I don't blame them for putting me away. But it's awful, simply awful, to have nothing to do! I haven't had a decent dinner for a week."

"Don't tell me any more, Miss Inman. We'll stop all that. I'll go just now, and I will come back in about half an hour. Hurry up and get ready."

She hastened out of the house gladly. Even the throng of the pavements was preferable to that dismal room and its still more dismal occupant.

Once more a sense of the irony of things entered into Estelle's soul, and certain words of Holy Writ recurred to her: "For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

These words were absolutely true of Eliza Inman's case, and the poor woman seemed to accept the hardness of her lot with a philosophy which would certainly not have been possible to Estelle herself.

She reproached herself as she walked on—looking out for a good boot shop—for her extravagance of the morn-

## CORRODING GOLD

ing. She had paid out in bank-notes twenty-two pounds for her typewriting machine, which, in her case, was a mere luxury. That it would ever aid her to earn anything was unlikely. At the best it would only enable her to fill up some otherwise idle, dissatisfied hour.

She determined that, whatever Mrs. Dyner might decide, she would lay Eliza Inman's case before her mother, and ask that part of the money which she was willing to spend on her might be given to that needful woman, who was so poorly equipped for the battle of life; and who would so soon go under unless something were done to save her.

Estelle shuddered as she pictured the gradual descent until perhaps the workhouse or the infirmary claimed her.

A poor lady alone in London without resources—what chance has she? And among all the agencies for the relief of distress there would be few competent to discover her or undertake for her.

Estelle bought some shoes and stockings, some new gloves and a veil, and a pretty black lace scarf—just the trifles needed to put the finishing touches to a meagre toilet.

When she returned to the room above the milkshop she found that Eliza had not wasted her time. The room was tidied up, and Eliza herself was dressed in what was still her best—the well-worn and well-brushed coat and skirt of blue serge which Estelle knew for a fact that she had possessed for the last four years.

A clean, if rather forlorn-looking, white blouse softened her face, and her hair, released from its tortuous pins and now softly waved about her brow, took away its harshness. But it was a sad face, almost a peevish one, and the wrinkles about the deep-set eyes were strongly marked.

Her delight over the little accessories of the toilet brought in by her old friend was almost pathetic.

When she was properly attired she looked quite presentable.

Estelle privately thought that the old-fashioned word "genteel" would best describe her.

They sallied forth from the house just before two o'clock, and Estelle took her on the top of a motor-bus to Holborn, and gave her a substantial lunch at the Inns of Court Hotel.

At the end of it Eliza was a different creature. Her cheeks seemed to have filled out, and the ready smile was on her lips and in her eyes. Her gratitude was boundless.

"When I was saying my prayers last night, Miss Rodney, I just asked the Lord not to forget me altogether, and He hasn't, you see, so there must be something in prayer, after all. But once or twice in the last week or two I felt just like Job's wife when she begged him to curse God and die."

"You ought to have written to me, Miss Inman," said Estelle.

"Well, you see, I didn't know your address. I once thought of going to Mr. Glide and asking for it, or to the Bygraves. They have had illness at their place. I believe that Carrie has been nearly at death's door."

"What was the matter with her?" asked Estelle, with an almost painful eagerness.

"I don't really know," said Miss Inman, but she kept her eyes fixed on her plate. "I believe it began with fretting. I guess you will know what about. Of course, everybody knows it was inevitable that your brother should give her up. All the same, however, it seems hard. But, then, life is cruelly hard for most people, and very few have luck like you. I wish you would tell me a lot about your splendid, beautiful life, Miss Rodney. It would be like reading some lovely story—it would lift me right out of myself."

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"I don't know that I find it particularly beautiful or splendid," said Estelle discontentedly. "I haven't just found my niche in it yet."

"But don't you love living in a beautiful house and wearing clothes like these and eating food like this every day? I think that would be enough for me for the rest of my natural life! You can't think how I have felt myself starved and cheated—not literally, you know. But I do think that it is a pity we are born with the capacity for enjoying the best, seeing that we don't ever get even within hailing distance of it. I don't really wonder that strong, thinking people like young Bygrave become Socialists."

"Neither do I. Well, if you won't have coffee," said Estelle, jumping up, "supposing we get away. It's a quarter past three. I want you to come up to St. John's Wood with me to see Mrs. Dyer."

"Kathleen's Mrs. Dyer, do you mean? I love her books," said Miss Inman in an awe-stricken voice. "Will she be glad to see me?"

"I think so. Anyway, it's worth trying. Come along."

Under the happy influence of Estelle's bright company, Miss Inman seemed to forget all the sorrows and sordid anxieties of her position, and by the time they reached Ambrosia she was almost a radiant creature.

The change in her touched Estelle inexpressibly, and she again reproached herself for her own ingratitude and for the poor appreciation of all the privileges of her lot.

They were shown into the drawing-room, and the open folding-doors revealed Mrs. Dyer sitting at her desk surrounded by a mass of inextricable confusion. Sheets of paper lay on the floor, and the desk was littered with others, while the typewriter stood idle on its pedestal in the corner.

The odd thing was that Mrs. Dyner had made no attempt to fill Kathleen's place in the past three months, and that, though always bemoaning her helpless state, she had done nothing to remedy it. Anna Helder had come for one day to help her with letters, but Mrs. Dyner had confided to Kathleen afterwards that the remedy was worse than the disease.

"Anna has no soul, my dear, and no enthusiasm for literature," she had said. "She puts it all into her clothes."

She looked old and tired as she rose and came forward to greet Estelle and her companion, wrinkling her brows.

"It is you, Miss Rodney! I am glad to see you, though I ought to have said, 'Not at home.' Just look at that unholy confusion! I'm glad of any excuse to leave it. We'll have a cup of tea now. Come and help me to forget it all."

"Let me introduce Miss Inman, of whom I spoke to you yesterday, Mrs. Dyner."

The old lady's lightning glance immediately descended on Eliza's face.

She seemed to palpitate under it.

"Oh, please, let me go and tidy up a bit while you talk to Miss Rodney. I was used to work among typewriting things. My father often said I never put a sheet in the wrong place."

"Faith, and though you put all these in the wrong place no great harm would be done!" said Mrs. Dyner good-humouredly. "They are all in the wrong place, and likely to remain so. I've lost my right hand."

"You simply can't go on like this, Mrs. Dyner," said Estelle hastily. "Let Miss Inman go and clear the floor, at least. She would simply love to do it."

"Well, she can, if she likes," said Mrs. Dyner; and Eliza, full of eagerness, stepped into the back room.

Estelle drew the curtains close.

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"Dear Mrs. Dyner, that's the most forlorn creature in the world! She has lost her post in the school—we always knew it would come to that—and she'll never get anything else to do in that line. Give her a trial even of a few days' work. Something tells me that you wouldn't regret it. Never mind about salary. I believe I could see to that. My mother makes me a handsome allowance. I don't need it all, and nobody would be the wiser if Eliza Inman got part of it."

Mrs. Dyner's old face lit up. It was just such an appeal as touched her—a situation utterly devoid of any business proposition which delighted her heart.

"You remind me of Kathleen, my dear, and I would like to see your father, for I am certain that no such preposterous suggestion would have come from your mother! How old did you say Miss Inman was? I expected to see a much older woman."

"Never mind about her age. She has plenty of energy, and you can't tire her. Give her a chance!"

"We'll see. Let me ring for tea. How is Kathleen to-day? I had hoped she would come and see me. She's changing a bit, my dear. I was saying to Anna last night that I was mortally afraid the canker would get her."

Mrs. Dyner's word was a sinister one, and it fell unpleasantly on Estelle's ears.

"She's young and pretty, Mrs. Dyner, and everything appeals to her. I am different. Somehow I seem to see through things, and I don't care for them."

Mrs. Dyner shook her head.

"It saddens me," she said. "The old days were the happiest. There is something I want to ask you about dear Kathleen—something which is of importance. Will you answer?"

"Surely, if it is in my power to do so."



"Do you know whether she sees much of Edward Charters?"

Estelle slightly winced.

"I think she sees a great deal of him, Mrs. Dyner. She is going to Ranelagh with him this afternoon."

"Without a chaperon?"

"I can't say. I suppose she will, however, unless Lady Hatherley should be going. I know of no one else. Mother isn't, I know."

"You may be sure Clare won't go. It's to her interest to keep away. They'll marry her to Ted, my dear, if they can."

Mrs. Dyner's tone was not enthusiastic, but Estelle forbore to question further.

"She threw over a very good man who loved her dearly, Mrs. Dyner. In fact, this money has upset and changed everything. I can't believe that it is going to make for happiness."

Their talk was interrupted by the arrival of Caroline with the tea tray.

When Estelle drew the curtain it revealed Miss Inman sitting on the floor with her hat beside her, industriously sorting out loose sheets.

She was so intensely interested and absorbed that she was quite unaware of the surreptitious survey of the two in the next room.

Mrs. Dyner nodded.

"I like the look of her. I'll give her a week's trial, and if she suits—why, then, she might come here and live. She can have Kathleen's little room on the top floor."

An expression of intense gratification crossed Estelle's face, and she tasted the supreme joy of having helped a fellow-creature.

Eliza had come to stay.

## CHAPTER XVI

### AN ENGAGEMENT

CLARE HATHERLEY and her brother were dining alone in the flat at Clanricarde Mansions—a most unusual occurrence. It was a Saturday night, and the only event of the day had been a fashionable wedding at All Saints, Margaret Street. Clare, in a black tea-gown with a fichu of old lace, looked charming, and the picture was a very homely and pretty one.

They did not linger very long over their meal, and immediately afterwards they repaired to the small drawing-room, where they had coffee and cigarettes.

"How are you getting along with Kitty?" asked Clare, interestedly. "It's about time you had something to show, Ted. When are you going to propose?"

"I'm not particular as to the date. But there's Anna, Clare."

Clare nodded slowly.

"I'd like to know just how big a spoke Anna could put in your wheel, Ted. You owe it to me to tell me."

But the Honourable Edward had no such intention. He was fond of his sister and admired her extraordinary cleverness, but part of his own affairs he kept strictly to himself.

"Oh, well, you know, I've just drifted with Anna. She expected I would marry her. I would have done it, too, probably, a good few years back, had there been any money. She's gone off frightfully of late."

"I don't see much difference. It's her type, that's all. You can't pit her against a flower like Kitty Rod-

ney, Ted. But something has got to be risked. Why not run off with Kitty?"

"What would be the sense?" he asked. "She isn't that kind of girl. Besides, running off with her would not appeal to Mother Rodney."

"That's exactly why you should do it. I don't suppose she'll refuse you as a son-in-law ultimately, Ted. But she'll put you through your facings first. She's got a distressingly middle-class mind—the sort that demands chapter and verse for everything. She'll require some light thrown on your past," she added, with a provoking smile.

"Oh, that can be faked," he answered lightly.

"But, if you could persuade Kitty to run off with you, her mother's mouth would be closed, don't you see? She'd have to make the best of it."

"I'm not going to run off with Kitty, Clare," answered Charters, with an unwonted gravity. "She's a clinking good little girl, and I'm going to do the square thing by her."

"You are really soft on her, then, Ted, and it isn't just the oof you're after?" she asked rather interestedly.

He nodded, and his face, as he bent it over the cigarette he was rolling, reddened slightly. He had been vain and frivolous enough in the affairs of the heart during the last five or six years, treating all these with the flippancy of the man whose feelings are not touched in the least.

But something in Kitty Rodney's pure heart had appealed to him. The man of the world had been caught unawares. He would fain have wiped out all these foolish years for her sake. That very day, in her company, he had wished himself a better man, and one more worthy of her regard.

"It is about time we had something substantial out of Mrs. Rodney," said Lady Hatherley with an engaging

frankness. "She doesn't seem to realise what it is that I have actually done for her, and, since she got in with the Van Raaltes and old Lady Fevershott, she is inclined to show me that she can do without me. She told me yesterday that she was going to the Fevershotts for Goodwood. I had made up my mind that she'd take Jimmy Carteret's place, and that I'd invite a big house party for the week."

Charters laughed.

"The old woman is getting too many for you, Clare. What does the old saw say about nursing a serpent in your bosom—or something of that sort? I must say I sympathise with you. She's the limit. But you haven't done badly out of her, after all. You're having a pretty good season at her expense."

"I've got my clothes out of her," said Clare as she thrust forth a very daintily shod foot. "But I've earned them, my boy. I wish that some happy favouring wind would waft Anna Helder back to Holland. Couldn't we induce Uncle Heinrich Helder to send for her to Utrecht?"

Charters shook his head despondingly.

"That sort of thing never comes off. Just leave me alone, Clare. I'm taking my bearings. I mean to have Kitty, but I don't just yet see my way clear. How much do you think the old lady would settle on her?"

"You can leave that to me, Ted. It won't do for you to mention money—not, at least, until Kitty is safely Mrs. Ted. Mrs. Rodney has got to pay up; but, first, she must be made to realise that you are worth paying for. I'm getting ready for the fray. We are going to have it out one of these days. It's been all honey and sweetness up to now; but I must assert myself a bit more."

Charters regarded his sister rather earnestly for a few seconds.

"Clare, what are you going to do with that ass Cyril? He's getting desperate about you."

She put up her hands suddenly with a gesture which hid her fleeting colour.

"Do? I'm not doing anything with him, except licking him into shape."

"It's likely to be a prolonged job," said Charters.

"He's the most awful outsider I've ever come across."

"Oh, I don't think he's so bad as all that, Ted."

"He has got no brains," continued Charters carelessly.

"He earned his living before the fortune came, I understand. How anybody was ever bound to pay him for his services is a mystery."

"There are bigger fools in the world than Cyril Rodney, you take my word for it, Ted."

"I'm trying to. But, when I heard his mother last Sunday telling somebody in Hans Crescent that a constituency was being nursed up for her precious bantling, I thought that was the limit."

"But why? He would make a quite presentable member of the House of Commons. Brains are not needed there. At the present moment they are conspicuous by their absence."

"Well, the British public swallows a good deal, but I doubt very much whether any constituency would ever be got to swallow Cyril Rodney."

"Wait till they get a place in the country. That's the next move. I'm going down to Bucks next week with Mrs. Rodney to look at Brest Park. They told me in South Audley Street the other day that it could be had for seventy thousand—that's all."

"Seventy thousand! The old lady would never rise to that, I'm afraid."

"Why not? She would get a very good return for her money, and it would give Cyril a standing. Are you going on anywhere to-night, Ted?"

She put the question with a certain amount of furtive anxiety, which, however, he did not notice.

"I *can* do, if you've anything on," he answered. "I've a very good mind to go round and see Anna."

"Yes, do. If I were you I'd put it quite straight to her, Ted. Tell her that your chance has come, and that it is absolutely necessary that you take advantage of it. If she's sensible she won't make a fuss. Besides, you could be friends afterwards. Matrimony isn't necessarily the end of everything."

"I'll have to split with Anna when I get married, and I would," said Charters soberly, and his blue eyes looked quite straightly into hers. "I've led a pretty rotten life; but, if I get Kitty Rodney for my wife, I mean to run straight. She deserves it, Clare."

Clare shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know what has come over you of late, Ted. You behave as if you had got a taste of the Nonconformist conscience. Well, I don't mind. I've given you your chance, and if you don't take it I can't do more. I must begin to paddle my own canoe. I am thirty-eight, Ted Charters, and this morning when I looked in my glass I appeared to be every day and hour of it."

"You don't look it to-night, by Jove! I've never seen you look better."

She certainly seemed extraordinarily young and fresh. The rose fastening the lace at her breast was not softer and more delicate in hue than was her cheek.

"I think I'll go round to Anna's. You wouldn't come, I suppose?" he added as he picked himself up from the lounge and threw the remains of a cigarette into the tray.

"Not to-night, I think. You can give my love to Anna, if you like, and ask her why she never comes near me now. It's a pity that she hasn't had some success with her plays. It would have helped to fill up the blank.

There appears to be nothing left for the unattached now but to join the suffragettes; but Anna is too fond of the good things of life to go in for the hunger-strike."

They bade one another good-night in the casual manner of those who have a complete mutual understanding, and who have no need to make any pretence or keep up any semblance of convention.

As Charters was being conducted through the swing-doors by the liveried porter, Cyril Rodney, in evening dress, with a muffler about his throat, and in a light overcoat, jumped out of a hansom.

"Hullo!" said Charters as he passed. "Good-evening."

"Good-evening. Is your sister alone?" asked Cyril, trying in vain to speak with indifference. "If she has people to dinner I won't go up."

"There's nobody there. We've been eating together. But I'm off. 'Night, Rodney."

Charters was surprised to see him, for it was now half-past nine—an hour when only an intimate friend would be allowed or expected to drop in after dinner. He had a sort of uneasy feeling that his sister had expected Rodney and had been glad therefore to expedite his own departure.

But it was no actual business of his. Clare had so long been a law unto herself that, conducting her affairs entirely on her own lines, she would permit no interference or criticism even from him.

He would have been still more amazed could he have witnessed the scene when Cyril Rodney entered his sister's drawing-room with all the assurance and privilege of an accepted lover.

Clare's questions had set Charters seriously thinking. He had now known Kathleen Rodney for several months, had become a frequent and familiar guest at the house in Hans Crescent, and he believed that Mrs. Rodney was

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quite favourable to his suit and was waiting for him to announce his intentions.

About Kathleen he was not so sure, and it was this feeling of insecurity and uncertainty, where she was concerned, that piqued his interest and quickened his eagerness. Hitherto he had found women very ready to receive his attentions, for he had great personal attractions and a kind, winning way with women that had undoubtedly smoothed his pathway through life.

The gods had been good to Ted Charters, endowing him richly with most of the gifts and graces which women love. He had looks, health, high spirits, and the winning way. Yet now the years were passing, and he had found no anchorage.

Out in the open square he hailed a passing taxi and gave the address in St. John's Wood at which he would find Anna Helder.

She lived alone in one of the smaller but very desirable houses in that district, so popular among artists and literary people. Possessed of an assured income of eight hundred a year from Holland, she eked it out with contributions to magazines, and was able to live in considerable comfort with two servants and a page-boy.

Her ambition was to succeed as a dramatist, and she had two one-act pieces accepted, one of which had attained considerable vogue. Yet she had had no serious success, and she was still struggling and hoping for it.

She was a woman with a large circle of friends and acquaintances, and she had had several offers of marriage. But she had given her heart to Ted Charters, and he had embittered her whole life. He had promised her marriage again and again. She would have been quite willing to have shared her home and her means with him, for, though she loved things in good style, she had a touch of the Dutchwoman's thrift about her as well, and she could go without when it appeared worth while.



She would have thought it worth while for Ted Charters, but he was selfish to the core, and he had never cared enough for any woman to think of giving up his freedom unless he was to benefit considerably by it. He had discussed the matter frankly and freely with Anna scores of times, and he had pointed out that what was sufficient to keep her in comfort and even modest luxury would simply mean sordid poverty when shared.

"Unfortunately for me, all our tastes are expensive," he would say. "Don't let us do it, Anna. Better wait till my luck turns. Something is bound to turn up some day."

But nothing ever had turned up, and Anna Helder's youth had passed and left her a soured woman, whose tongue now too often reflected the bitterness of her soul.

Pondering on the whole big question affecting his future as the taxi rolled smoothly from the West End to St. John's Wood, Charters made up his mind to make a clean breast of everything to Anna Helder, and to point out to her that he could not afford to miss this chance which Clare had put in his way.

He would be exceedingly careful not to mention his growing affection for Kitty Rodney, but rather would he dwell exclusively on the expediency—nay, the necessity—for his making a rich marriage. Anna was a woman of the world. They had been accustomed to a certain amount of plain speaking to each other all their lives, and it was to the woman of the world he would appeal. And he trusted to his luck to bring him through.

But his little plan was knocked on the head, for, when he reached the pretty bijou house in Grove End Road, the green door of which had so often opened to admit him, he was informed by the page-boy that his mistress was out of town.

"Where has she gone, Tomkins, do you know?" he asked, but before the boy could answer, Herschell, the

parlour-maid and chief factotum of the house, who had been in Miss Helder's service for the past eleven years, came forward to explain.

"Miss Helder's gone to Holland, sir—day before yesterday. She had a telegram from Utrecht."

"Oh, indeed! What was in it, do you know, Herschell? Anybody ill?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Heinrich Helder is very ill."

"Oh!" said Charters, and his tone certainly indicated relief. "Then, of course, you have no idea when she will return? I wonder that she has not written to us about it."

"She has hardly had time, sir. No doubt there will be a letter to-morrow," said the maid. "Can I get you anything, sir?"

"No, thank you. I think I'll go round and see Mrs. Dyner. It isn't ten yet, and I know she doesn't go to bed early."

"No, sir. And, since she got her new secretary, I hear she is doing a lot more work. Before Miss Helder went away she was afraid that Mrs. Dyner was overdoing it, sir."

"Ah, very likely. She's a wonderful old lady. Good-night, Herschell."

He slightly lifted his hat with the fine courtesy which he showed to every woman, and walked off.

It was only three minutes' walk to Mrs. Dyner's door, and when he reached it he was rewarded by seeing the house quite comfortably and invitingly lit up.

He was shown into the dining-room by Angers, and there he found his aunt drinking cocoa and eating sandwiches in the company of a tall, angular person of distressing plainness, regarded from his point of view.

"Good-evening, Ted. Have a sandwich and a cup of cocoa? This is our dinner. We had a job to finish to-night, and we dispensed with the interruption of

d'ning. Oh, I forgot. You haven't met my new secretary. Miss Inman, Mr. Charters."

Charters made his salutation, and Eliza Inman, oddly confused, asked whether she might be excused.

"Where did you pick up that oddity, Aunt Julia? And is there any reason on earth why she should be so plain?"

"Oh, she's all right, Ted. Estelle Rodney brought her to me. She's a treasure—not in Kitty's way, understand, but her capacity for work is enormous, and her gratitude is distressing."

"Umph! Tell me about Anna, Aunt Julia. And may I take a cigarette? Will she have sandwiches somewhere else, for I observe that she has left hers unfinished?"

"Oh, she'll be all right. Ring, and Angers will clear away, if you don't really want anything. You've dined, I suppose?"

"Yes, at Clare's. What's the matter with Uncle Heinrich Helder, Aunt Julia? Will he peg out this time?"

"He may. Anyway, he has sent for Anna. She was not very keen about going, but I persuaded her. Has she written?"

"No; but I have just called there and heard the news. Probably she'll be abroad for a good while."

"For some weeks in all likelihood. I was rather glad the summons came, for Anna hasn't been herself lately. Are you two ever going to marry, Ted? Marriage would be the making of her and likewise of you."

"Marriage to the right person might, but Anna and I will never run in double harness now, Aunt Julia. The time has gone for that."

"I am not sure that Anna takes that view," said Mrs. Dyner, and her old eyes, fixed on her nephew's handsome face, had a shrewd gleam in them.

"I can't help that. But I think she's going to be

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sensible—at least, I hope so. I've made up my mind that I'll marry Kathleen Rodney, if she'll have me, and I mean to ask her soon."

"I thought as much. But I'm not sure, Ted, whether you are good enough for that sweet child—all purity and heart."

Charters received this criticism with unusual meekness.

"I am certain that I'm not, Aunt Julia, but I'm turning over a new leaf. I have turned it since I knew her."

The old lady's eyes softened as she listened to him. None could be readier than she to welcome even the feeblest strivings of the prodigal towards a better life. Her charity and kindness never failed. She would give the benefit of the doubt even to the least deserving.

"You would have been a better man, Ted, had you been apprenticed to a trade. I've always felt that you were just so much wasted material. The thing you call your work isn't worthy of the name."

For a moment Charters had the grace to look ashamed of himself.

"We haven't had a chance, Aunt Ju——" he began, but she stopped him with uplifted finger.

"We are put into the world to make chances, my boy, and you have disgracefully wasted yours. But don't let us recriminate. About this marriage of yours—have you any idea how Kitty feels towards you, Ted?"

His face flushed.

"I can't answer that question, Aunt Julia. After all, a chap hasn't the right—has he?—to jump to a conclusion. I'm going to try my luck, that's all. And I think I'll get it settled up, if possible, before Anna comes back. I have a standing invitation to Hans Crescent to lunch on Sundays. I think I'll take the plunge to-morrow."

"You'll come along in the evening, then, and let me

know the result," she said with undisguised eagerness. "After all, it was I who discovered Kitty. But for me, neither you nor Clare would have known the Rodneys, and sometimes, I assure you, I have my qualms."

"They haven't suffered any great hurt as yet, Aunt Ju, and you can't deny that Clare has given value. Of course, she has introduced them to a few outsiders. But then, they would have had their innings at any cost."

It was a fact which Mrs. Dyner could not deny. After her nephew left her she sat a long time, pondering on all the complex machinery of human life and nature—always to her a fascinating theme.

Next day seemed long to her. She was even tempted, the afternoon being fine, to take a cab to Hans Crescent and pay a somewhat tardy call. But she restrained her eager curiosity, and she was rewarded by a visit from Charters about ten o'clock that evening.

She gathered from his radiant face that all was well the moment he entered the room.

"Kitty has accepted me, Aunt Julia, and the first bit of honest luck I've had in a blue moon is mine to-night!"

He bent over and kissed her hand, but she drew down his fair head and touched his cheek. Her old eyes were full of tears.

"Bless you, boy! I like the note in your voice. It makes me young again! Sit down and tell me every single thing about it."

"There isn't much to tell. There was a crowd at lunch, you know. Clare had told Mrs. Rodney that she must get noted for something, and they had decided on Sunday lunches. You would have been surprised at the people who were there. After a bit I got hold of Kitty, and I asked if she would take a turn in the Park with me. It was in the Gardens—in one of Peter Pan's corners—where I ventured. And—bless her heart!—she said 'Yes.'"

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"She does care for you, then?"

"I think so. At least, she has promised to let me try to make her."

"Then did you go back and tell them?"

"We haven't said a word yet. She wants—we both want—to keep it to ourselves for a day or two. After the world gets hold of things they lose something, Aunt Ju."

"I am grateful for your confidence, Ted. And will she come and see me?"

"To-morrow. We have trysted to meet here at tea-time," he answered unblushingly.

The old lady laughed.

"The presumption! To make my house a rendezvous! But I forgive you. So not a soul knows except me? Are you sure Estelle doesn't suspect? Yon are a pair of sharp eyes, Ted!"

"They are. I'm jolly well afraid of Estelle Rodney, Aunt Ju—and no man would look at her."

"Oh, nonsense! She has fine looks."

"Of a kind—but cold as the North Pole," he asserted boldly. "Don't let us talk about her. I've no room for anything in the world to-night except Kitty."

After he had gone Mrs. Dyner, moved by an odd impulse, made one remark to her secretary.

"That is the man Kitty Rodney will marry—mark my words."

"I don't like him," answered Eliza Inman grimly.

## CHAPTER XVII

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ODDLY enough, Charters had no desire to tell his sister of the happy issue of his wooing. Nothing astonished him more than the nature of his own feelings. Hitherto he had spoken of love and marriage as mere articles of barter in the market-place of life, but now he knew that they were something more. The life-force which inspires to the highest effort and brings out all that is best in a man laid hold of Ted Charters and lifted him up.

He even began to be ashamed of the wasted years, of the puerile position which he held, of the mere travesty which he dignified by the name of work. Secretary to a big syndicate of no particular reputation, which found his name useful on prospectuses, he earned barely enough to pay his way. A desire to have something worthy to lay at the feet of this pure-hearted girl who had awakened this strange, new side of him pursued him and made him eager to keep his secret as long as possible from prying eyes. Above all, he shrank from having it desecrated by discussion with Clare. To her the affair was a mere financial and expedient arrangement.

How did Kitty take it? He was her first lover, since John Glide did not count. Poor John, grubbing in City Road on weekdays, and filling up his scanty leisure with study and work for others, had faded away into nothingness! Ted Charters, the handsome lover, who had everything to win the heart of a woman, had for ever destroyed that fleeting memory. She had not so much as remembered John Glide's existence.

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Estelle, daily growing more observant, living in the house and yet strangely outside of its life, was in no doubt as to the intentions of Charters when she saw him and Kitty leave the house. She had given him one keen, searching glance, which seemed almost one of warning. Hence the harshness of the words he had spoken concerning her to Mrs. Dyer.

Luncheon parties are not usually prolonged into the afternoon. By half-past three the last guest had gone.

"Where is Kitty, Estelle, do you know?" inquired Mrs. Rodney immediately she and her eldest daughter were left in the drawing-room alone.

"She has gone out with Mr. Charters," answered Estelle. "Do you think she ought to be so much about with him? He seems to spend all his time here. I am sure people are noticing it."

"That doesn't matter much. I suppose they will marry one of these days. I hope so."

"You do hope so, mother? Then he would quite come up to your ideas of a suitable husband for Kitty?"

"Quite. There is nothing the matter with him. He is good-looking, well-born, and a general favourite. He hasn't much money, of course, but we must arrange something. Probably he will go into Parliament and get a Government post of some kind, and they could live quietly for a time. Clare was telling me about some lovely flats near Queen Anne's Gate where lots of well-connected couples are taking up house to be near the Houses of Parliament."

Estelle smiled. Her mother always amused her when she talked politics, of which she was endeavouring to learn a smattering. There had been two members of Parliament at the luncheon table that day—one on either side of the hostess—and Estelle had caught some fragments of the conversation.

Mrs. Rodney certainly spared no pains to make her-



self *au fait* with the questions of the day. She read diligently, and she had cultivated the faculty of listening when those worth listening to were available.

She had indeed become a far apter pupil of the strenuous life than her chaperon had expected or could approve. Lady Hatherley would have preferred to have kept her in a state of comfortable ignorance and consequent dependence on herself. But Mrs. Rodney was far too clever a woman to be content with that. She had already weighed up Clare Hatherley, and knew exactly what value to put upon her expressions of friendship. All these new experiences had left their mark on her. Each day Estelle was astonished to observe in her mother a new dignity, each day she acquired some additional insight into her mother's character which revealed a differing side.

"Mother," said Estelle presently, "do you mind if I go two days a week to a Mission down in Whiterider Street? I want to fill up the time with something, and you know I am not cut out for a fashionable woman. I don't care for so much going out."

"You are a very strange girl, Estelle, and more like your father than I ever expected or imagined you would be," said Mrs. Rodney, looking steadily at her daughter. "It seems to me that now, when you needn't work, you are keener on it than you ever were!"

"But you work, mother, and so does Kathie, just as hard as you ever did."

"We are fully occupied, of course, but that is quite different. What kind of a Mission is it?"

"John Glide told me about it."

"John Glide—when? Do you see him sometimes?"

"Just occasionally. I went down to City Road yesterday, and he introduced me to the man who runs the Mission."

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"You went alone to City Road! Surely that was most improper?"

Estelle laughed out loud.

"Oh, mother, I am twenty-seven years of age, and it was John whom I went to see. You won't mind if I go down to-night to the evening service?"

"I can't prevent you, of course, if you choose to take your pleasure in that sort of thing. Is it a Church Mission?"

"No. It is run by the Wesleyan Methodists."

"Couldn't you take an interest in St. Anselm's Mission work? I am sure the Canon could give you plenty to do."

"I dare say, but I'm interested in what John tells me about this Mission. At least, let me go down to-night, will you? They have an immensely big meeting in what they call the Citadel."

"The Citadel,' sounds like the Salvation Army," said Mrs. Rodney coldly.

Estelle smiled.

"It doesn't matter much who does the work, mother—does it?—so long as something is done."

"Perhaps not. But I must say you have odd tastes, Estelle. You can't have the car. Adcock has his afternoon and evening off."

"Oh, I can go by bus or taxi so far. Don't worry about my getting there," said Estelle.

"Well, I'll go and lie down for half an hour, I think," her mother answered. "We are going down into Bucks next week to look at a place that Lady Hatherley thinks might suit us—Brest Park, near Wendover. She says it is a charming place, worth sixty or seventy thousand pounds."

"Seventy thousand pounds!" repeated Estelle, quite thunderstruck. "Why, mother, that is a most frightful lot of money! And surely you would wait till father

comes home! It is a matter which would be of such interest and importance to him."

"Your father would like any place I decided on, I am sure. It is not with him I have any trouble. And we have Cyril to consider. Think of the standing it would give him! With a place like that he might stand for his own county!"

"Oh, mother, you are wonderful! I can't believe that it is only six months since everything happened!"

"And I can't believe that things have ever been different. I don't know how I existed before, really. I've only just begun to live. It's intensely interesting, and it grows more so every day."

"Mother," said Estelle, with the same hesitation that she had shown in speaking about Kathleen and Charters, "don't you think Cyril spends a great deal of his time with Lady Hatherley?"

"Of course he does. She is attending to his education. I am sure you must admit that he has improved most wonderfully in every respect. There is nothing like a friendship with an older woman for making a man—especially one like Cyril, who is rather impressionable."

Mrs. Rodney was voicing the opinions of someone else now. She often did that with a pretty assumption of originality which was rather amusing. Never, surely, had a woman more quickly acquired the patter of her set! Again Estelle was lost in secret amaze.

"But it is more than that to Cyril, mother. He is quite infatuated with her."

"It won't do him any harm," said his mother confidently. "She must be at least fifteen years older than him. Anything in the nature of a love affair between them would be preposterous. Try not to be so suspicious, Estelle, and remember that we've got out into a freer atmosphere, in which the relations

between the sexes are not quite so provincial and circumscribed."

Estelle departed to ponder over these words, and to reflect anew on the amazing change that had taken place in her mother.

No one dropped in to tea that afternoon, and Estelle went up to the schoolroom to have hers with Lulu, seeing that her French governess was out.

Estelle was often sorry for her little sister, whom nobody seemed to have leisure to companion. She spent as much time as possible with her, and the child was absolutely devoted to her. At her instance she was always allowed to come down to the Sunday luncheon party, out of which she extracted a great deal of amusement.

She was a great mimic and a close observer, and, while they were at tea, she was accustomed to criticise some of the guests for Estelle's benefit. While she laughed, Estelle was not sure that it was good to encourage her. The child was abnormally sharp, and later on she would be pretty, but she was in need of someone to guide her.

The French governess, though excellent in her own profession, was hardly a companion fitted to form or direct a young, impressionable mind like Lulu's. Mademoiselle Michèle was one of Clare Hatherley's protégées, and it had been sufficient recommendation to Mrs. Rodney that she had been three years in the service of a countess.

It was a very warm afternoon, and presently, as they sat by the open window of the schoolroom, Lulu announced that she saw Charters and Kathleen coming across the Square together. Estelle drew the child back from the window, but not before she herself had noted the lovely flush on Kathleen's face and the conscious light in her eyes.

"Oh, I say, Este, don't you think Kitty has got most awfully pretty lately? She's a perfect peach! Do you know who said that?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, it was Ted Charters. He said that to me one day when he came up here to see me. We are great pals, and he asked me if I wouldn't like him for a brother-in-law. Do you think it'll come off, Este, and don't you think he is rather a dear? Mademoiselle says he is divinely handsome—and such eyes!" mimicked she.

"Mademoiselle is very silly to talk to you like that," said Estelle, rather sharply. "Come and get your hat, and we'll go for a turn in the Park. I am going out to a service later, but I think I have an hour to spare."

She proposed this because, somehow, she shrank from meeting Kitty. But as she came along the corridor to her own room she ran against her.

Kitty, however, still smiling and radiant as a dream, hurried past her and into her own room, shutting the door with a little bang, as if she quite feared being followed.

About seven o'clock Estelle, very quietly dressed in a dark grey coat and skirt and a simple hat, set out to find her way to Whiterider Street.

She had promised to meet John Glide at a certain Underground station, and when she arrived at the station entrance he was waiting for her. Dusk was falling now, and down there, in the very heart of the city, the air was a little hot and breathless.

John looked well, and the suggestion of strength in his grave face somehow comforted Estelle. She was glad that she had not lost him out of her life. He was to be depended on as one might depend on an elder brother. Yet he was three years younger than she was.

"You found the way quite easily, I hope?" he said as they shook hands.

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"Oh, yes, quite easily. I hope you have not been kept waiting. Somehow, though we have nothing to do at our house, it seems difficult to get out of it. And we do have such queer Sundays! To-day nobody went to church, and mother had a big luncheon party. Often I wish we were all back at Ebenezer!"

John could have re-echoed the wish. Many a happy Sunday he had spent at Denmark Hill in his younger days, sitting in the family pew with the Rodneys, and feeling himself a part of their home life. But since discussion could not mend matters now, he changed the subject.

"When did you hear from Mr. Rodney?"

"Mother had a letter on Friday. Of course, it was only written in the early part of the voyage, and it did not contain a great deal of news. It *has* seemed a long time since they went away!"

"After you begin to receive regular weekly letters it will be different. I have a bit of news for you about the service to-night. Dick Bygrave is to take it."

Estelle's face flushed in the half-light.

"Dick Bygrave! But he isn't a clergyman. I didn't know he went in for that sort of thing. I thought it was a religious meeting you were taking me to. He won't talk to the people about Socialism, will he?"

John Glide smiled.

"No, no. He is a great friend of the Hardresses, and they got very intimate at the time of the strike, when there was so much distress down here. I thought you would be interested."

"I am, of course; but I don't know that I particularly want to hear Dick hold forth, John," said Estelle, and she seemed to shrink. "In fact, I wouldn't have come if I had known he was to be there speaking."

John Glide was puzzled.

"I don't think it makes much difference who gives

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the address, and there will be a big audience. You needn't even see him unless you like."

"I must see him if I am to hear him, John," said Estelle, playing with words.

"I mean, of course, that you needn't speak to him."

"I would prefer not to. You will find me a corner where I shall be unobserved, won't you?"

"I can do that. But the Hardresses are awfully keen about your coming. I promised Mrs. Hardress to take you into the Hostel after the meeting for a cup of coffee. Of course, Bygrave will be there."

"Don't let us talk about it," said Estelle, with a quick nervousness. "Are we nearly there?"

"This is Whiterider Street," he said briefly, and almost immediately thereafter they came to a lighted doorway through which men and women were still streaming.

The building showed no outward sign of the spaciousness within, because it was not a hall in the ordinary sense of the word, but consisted of two immense warehouses that had been thrown into one and converted into a hall capable of holding about a thousand people.

The outside presented the ordinary street frontage where warehouses abound. The place was not very suitable, nor yet was it commodious enough for the demands made upon it, but as it had been given to the Mission by one of the business men who had made a fortune in Whiterider Street, and as there had never been funds to make many improvements upon it, it had to serve the purpose.

Respecting his companion's wish to enter unobserved, John Glide took her right into the hall at once, found her a seat under a pillar at an angle from which she could see the modest platform, where stood a plain deal table and a few Windsor chairs, and there left her, telling her he had some duties as steward to perform.

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Estelle bent her head for a few moments in prayer, and then looked about her interestedly. It was certainly a motley crew that she beheld, the larger proportion of the people being of the very poorest—being, in fact, the derelicts of city life, with some sprinkling of respectable working folks.

An orchestra was playing hymn tunes rather noisily, and some of the waiting feet were beating time on the floor. The air was heavy and close, and a sense of depression seemed to descend on Estelle Rodney which she could not shake off. The faces of the men and women about her, ravaged with the stress of life and all its sins and sorrows, seemed to bring into sharp contrast the environment that she had left.

She recalled the luxury of her home, the gay throng round her mother's luncheon table, the froth of the talk, the needless expenditure of time and money in foolish display. The mystery and the injustice of it all seemed to enter into her soul.

The orchestra had ceased to play, and there was a sort of expectant silence, broken, however, by shuffling and coughing, just before two men came upon the platform by the side door.

One of these was a thick-set man in clergyman's dress, with a strong face and swift, penetrating, dark eyes, whom she supposed to be Hardress. Dick Bygrave followed, and Estelle felt her heart beat.

A mere working man!—yet how distinguished he looked, his spare figure accentuated by his suit of dark blue serge, his fine throat bare under the soft, turndown collar and the red tie, which suited his swarthy skin. His hair, carelessly brushed, lay in a kind of natural wave back from his noble forehead, and the expression of his face was grave and beautiful. Somehow, looking at it, Estelle thought of the face of the Christ-Man who had suffered for all the sins of the world.



She reproved herself for that thought, yet it forced itself upon her again and again. And, somehow, in that atmosphere she felt herself lifted up, far removed from display and self-seeking, from the foolish worship of Mammon, for she was among the lowly, to whom gold is but a name.

But these men who had devoted their hearts and lives to service for others had bread to break to that starving multitude—bread more precious than the baked meats of great houses, the bread for which the souls of men and women, both rich and poor, pine and perish.

During the singing of the first hymn—"Jesu, lover of my soul"—Bygrave's eyes, straight as an arrow to the mark, travelled to Estelle Rodney's face. A tremor crossed his own, and his great, deep voice faltered a moment on the words he sang. Something leaped into his eyes, and Estelle saw it, and her heart was at rest. She knew then that, whatever might betide, whatever obstacles might rise like great walls of partition between them, whatever of heartache and separation might be their lot, Bygrave loved her, that she was the one woman in the world for him, even as he was the one man for her.

And all her unrest and heartache fell from her in an instant like a garment for which she had no further need. She sang, and the sweetness of her uplifted voice sank into the hearts of those about her and made them look at her.

But she was unconscious of all their scrutiny. A vast peace overshadowed her, and her heart became charged with a holy compassion which meant consecration. She enrolled herself, without knowing it, among those who give their heart's blood, who follow the way of the Cross at any cost.

Hardress, a man unusually gifted for Mission work, had made no mistake in inviting Bygrave to speak to

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his strange and ever-shifting Sunday evening flock. During the dark months of the strike he had followed and observed both Bygrave's actions and words closely, and had discerned that he was very far removed from the ordinary agitator who battens on the sorrows of his kind. He had listened to his utterances on Tower Hill, and, afterwards, getting into closer touch with him, had sounded him deeply concerning his convictions.

And the result had been the cementing of one of those profound and moving friendships that are possible between men of widely differing training and habit who find a common meeting ground in some great cause which both have at heart.

Hardress was an Oxford man, a scholar of no mean distinction, but he was perfectly aware that Bygrave possessed natural gifts far ahead of his, and that he was, in every sense, a born leader of men.

And life was teaching Bygrave each day by some fresh bit of experience, was mellowing him and redeeming him from all the fiery passion of his youth, leaving him only enthusiasm of the highest kind to inform and guide his desire to be of service to others.

Hardress had issued no directions to Bygrave with regard to the address that he was to deliver that evening, assured that he would make no mistake.

And none was made.

The word "Comrades" with which he began his address struck the fitting note. Estelle could not afterwards have set down what Bygrave said that night. She only knew that her soul was borne upon his words as on the wings of the morning, and that the spirit of uplift was abroad in that crowded place.

He dealt with life as a whole, trying to put heart into those down-trodden ones, many of them in that miserable condition through their own woeful sinning, and some through the sinning of others. But for all

there was the one message and the one appeal—the divinity of man, his power to rise triumphant over all the devilry which conspires to keep him down in material and in spiritual things.

Glancing round, Estelle imagined that she saw gleams of fresh hope illumine faces that had been hopeless. It was as if the whir of the wings of the angels that do His pleasure were abroad in that lowly place.

When she rose to leave her seat at the close of the meeting the tears were on her cheeks. They were still there when she came into the passage and found Bygrave waiting for her.

Their hands met, and their eyes—and all the world and life itself were changed for them both!

## CHAPTER XVIII

### WITH THE HARDRESSES

JOHN GLIDE, waiting for Estelle in the crowded passage, saw her come out by Bygrave's side, and felt himself supplanted. He saw how deeply moved she was, and he also noted the odd look of grim restraint on Bygrave's face, but he did not connect the two.

Bygrave and Estelle! No, that could never happen! They were separated by almost every obstacle under heaven. He dismissed the suggestion as quickly as it had come, and he supposed in its stead that Estelle had been moved by something she had said to Bygrave about his address, and that he had resented it.

A diversion was created by Hardress, who, following John Glide through the throng, was introduced to Estelle Rodney.

"It is a great pleasure to meet you, Miss Rodney, and my wife hopes you will join us at a cup of coffee upstairs. She is very much tied at home in these days, but she wishes very much to see you."

"I can come, I think," answered Estelle, and she looked a little timidly at Bygrave's face.

She longed to hear him speak, to see his face light up again, to hear the merry laugh, so like Carrie's, which had in it so much of the music of the heart. It had been less often on Dick's lips of late, since the seriousness of life had gripped him.

"You'll come, Bygrave?" said Hardress quickly. "We want to have a talk over things, to rejoice together

over the wonderful grip you got to-night. I am sure you felt it and were uplifted by it."

"I ought to be getting home," said Bygrave briefly. "My sister has been very ill all day. If I hadn't been under promise to speak at the meeting I'd have been at home to-night."

"Just come for a minute," said Hardress kindly. "I promise you won't be kept waiting, and, as you know, we are very near."

They passed out into the throng of the street, and Estelle wondered that Bygrave was not moved to make pause and speak to some of the people who so obviously waited for him.

"Say, guv'nor, jes a word wiv yer!" said one unkempt derelict, slouching up to his arm. "If thet's hall true, theer's a good time comin' yit. But doncher think hit's a bit horf to hexpec' pore blokes like hus to give hit a leg hup?"

Bygrave turned to him quickly and drew him aside. Hardress, smiling slightly, passed on, and John lingered to bring up Bygrave to the house.

The Hardresses lived in a small flat above the Mission hall, with entrance in a side lane, which was a cul-de-sac, and which therefore gave their private entrance a certain amount of quiet.

A long winding stair of considerable width brought them to a spacious landing, and Hardress fitted his latchkey into the nearest door.

"The other parts are let off," he explained, seeing Estelle's eyes regarding the number of doors. "Space is precious down here, but our house has been large enough for us up till now."

The aroma of fragrant coffee greeted them as he threw open the door, and Mrs. Hardress came bustling from the kitchen to meet them with a smile on her rather pale, sweet face.

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To Estelle's surprise, she was quite young—a mere girl, in fact, of not more than three- or four-and-twenty, while Hardress looked at least forty. Estelle learned afterwards that she had been one of the voluntary helpers at the Mission, a girl of good family and considerable means, all of which she had given up for the sake of Hardress.

Before Estelle had been five minutes in the house she was convinced that the union was one of singular happiness, and that husband and wife were truly united in love and in work.

The small supper-tray had been laid in the study—a large, wide, low-ceiled room, simply furnished, but in exquisite taste, and overflowing with books.

Hardress kept up his habit of study, having proved that the best was not too good for his humble hearers, and that only by constant polishing are the weapons of warfare kept ready for service.

"But where are Mr. Bygrave and John?" Mrs. Hardress asked disappointedly.

"Coming, my dear. We've had a splendid meeting, and Bygrave excelled himself. What did you think of the address, Miss Rodney?"

"I hardly know. I was so very much surprised," answered Estelle as steadily as she could. "You see, I have only known Dick Bygrave in quite another capacity. I've heard him once on Tower Hill, and again in Hyde Park. I had never associated him with a religious meeting."

"It is the highest kind of Socialism that Bygrave preaches—and practises, Miss Rodney," Hardress assured her. "Ah, here they come!"

He hurried out to bring them in, and Mrs. Hardress smiled into Estelle's face.

"I am so glad to meet you, Miss Rodney. John Glide has talked so much about you to us. I do hope

you felt interested to-night, and that you will wish to come back. We need fresh helpers so much. You see, I have fallen out since baby came, and I shall have to give up a year to him at least."

"But he is worth it, isn't he?" asked Estelle quickly.

"Oh, yes, oh, yes; but I love the Mission work, too. You have no idea how it fills one's heart. I was so discontented at home. My people lived in Berkeley Square and you can imagine the kind of life! I got so very tired of it all!"

Estelle looked intensely interested, but there was no opportunity for further exchange of confidences, for the men entered at the moment.

Bygrave did not speak to Estelle, but she was keenly conscious of his presence. Once, when his penetrating eyes swept her face, she felt her colour rise distressingly.

As there appeared to be no maid in the house, Estelle asked whether she might be allowed to help bring the coffee, but Hardress smiled and went to get it himself. It was a very simple, informal meal, and the talk was almost entirely of the various agencies of the Mission, in which all were deeply interested.

When Estelle said presently that she must go, Mrs. Hardress asked her to come and see the baby first, and the two women left the room.

He was asleep in his cot in his mother's room, there being no nursery in that simple home.

"I have only one maid, and she has gone down to Berkeley Square to see her old neighbours in my mother's house."

"She came from there contentedly?" said Estelle, astonished, thinking of the crowd they had in Hans Crescent, and of her mother's perpetual warfare with a class of which she had no experience or understanding.

"Oh, yes—the circumstances were exceptional. She was my nurse, you see, and before that she had been

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in the kitchen at Cuffly Park, our home in Sussex. She is a splendid all-round woman, and she came down here for love of me. I simply couldn't get along without her. We are as happy as the day is long."

"I want one day to hear the whole story," said Estelle quickly, feeling extraordinarily drawn to this young creature whom the world had condemned for giving up all for love. That it was "the world well lost" in her case no one, looking at her happy face, could doubt.

"One day I should simply love to tell you. Of course, I have heard from John that you are not very happy at home. If you come to us, Miss Rodney, even for one day in the week, you will find what wonders it works. It makes one more contented—and yet, I don't know! Rather, it is a divine discontent that it produces. But one thing is certain—it fills up all the empty spaces of life. There is so much to do, so many needy ones to be helped and comforted! And the babies! Oh, it would wring your heart to see them! Since I have been shut up so much with my own darling I seem to realise and feel it more. Come and see him."

She pulled back the silk-lined curtain of the cot, and Estelle's eyes filled as they fell on the soft little face lying, like the petals of a rose-leaf, against the lace-trimmed pillow. The cot—a most expensive affair, perhaps a trifle out of place in that comparatively humble home—had been sent by his grandfather, who, nevertheless, refused to come and look upon his face.

Bessie Hardress had accepted the gift joyfully, and waited, hoping that her father would come one day soon. He had vowed never to forgive her for the step she had taken, and never to look on her face again. But that resolve was weakening, for she was his only girl, and, though she had disappointed his every hope, he could not thrust her wholly out of his heart.

"I am sorry I can't walk with you to the station,



Miss Rodney," said Glide when they went back to the study. "I have to go to the boys' clubroom now till ten o'clock."

Before Estelle could reply Bygrave's voice, with a somewhat harsh note in it, struck in:

"I can walk so far with Miss Rodney. I suppose it is Aldersgate she wants to go to."

Estelle nodded, said good-bye to the Hardresses, promised Bessie to come down one day in the week to have a talk over things, and then she and Dick passed out together.

"Bygrave seems out of sorts, doesn't he, John?" remarked Hardress thoughtfully, when he came back from the door. "Did I hear him say his sister is ill?"

"She's very ill," said John, rather guardedly.

"What is it? Do they expect a fatal issue?"

"They are not sure. She has simply declined, and nothing seems to do her any good."

"Didn't you tell us she was a milliner or something of that kind in Bond Street?" asked Mrs. Hardress interestedly.

"Yes, she was; and no happier or brighter girl than Carrie Bygrave ever lived! She was the life and soul of everything until——"

"Until what?"

"Until the money came to the Rodneys," said John bluntly. "You see, she was engaged to Cyril, the eldest son, and, of course, the engagement was broken off."

"That explains his grumpiness to Miss Rodney," said Bessie. "I've never seen him rude like that before. What a sad story! I do hope she won't die! It would make so much bitterness, and I am sure that Miss Rodney is one who would feel it all acutely."

"She would. And that is not the only harm that the money has wrought," said John, with a bitter inflection in his voice, which left them no doubt but that

he had some personal cause to deplore the change in the Rodneys' fortunes.

Out in the street Bygrave was piloting Estelle with the same masterful, half-protecting touch that she remembered on another Sunday evening in the Walworth Road.

For five minutes they walked in complete silence.

"I want to hear about Carrie, Dick," said Estelle at last, in a low, rather difficult voice. "What's the matter with her?"

"An old-fashioned complaint," he answered bitterly—"one not often heard of these days. They used to call it broken heart."

Estelle looked ineffably shocked.

"Oh, Dick, I hope you are wrong! Carrie was not that kind of girl. She was always so bright. And besides, Cyril, though he is my brother, was not worth it."

"And you never spoke a truer word than that!" he said savagely. "But that's what's happened. She was very brave at first, but, unfortunately, she had staked everything on—on—— He is your brother, Estelle, and I don't want to say too much. It would really be better if we didn't discuss it. I was rather amused when I saw you in the meeting to-night. What brought you?"

"Why were you amused?" she asked, hurt by the cynical note in his voice.

"Well, it seemed ridiculous, don't you know? What brought you?" he repeated. "Mere curiosity, I suppose?"

"We can leave it at that," she said quickly, "since you think me capable of it."

The rebuke went home, but Bygrave, now in his most bitter mood, made no effort to palliate the effect of his words.

Very shortly they came to Aldersgate Station, where the throng was thick about the entrance.

"This is your station, isn't it?" asked Bygrave, and his eye softened as it rested for a moment, as if unwillingly, on the face of the woman by his side.

She met that look with one half-sad, half-defiant.

"You haven't been very kind to me to-night, Dick Bygrave, but I don't bear any malice."

"Malice—malice!" he repeated, and he almost seemed to gnash his teeth. "There are not going to be two in a family crushed by the Juggernaut—understand that!"

In spite of the harshness of Dick Bygrave's words a heavenly smile dawned on Estelle's face.

"The same old Dick! Do I look very much like a Juggernaut, whatever that may mean? Let's get away from here. I'm going home with you to see Carrie."

He looked as if he would demur, but the quiet purpose visible on Estelle's face sealed his lips.

"I don't know that you will be made very welcome. But here is our motor-bus. It will be pleasanter this evening than the Underground."

Again the protective instinct was made manifest as he guided her steps up to the top of the bus, blocking the immediate space behind with his big presence, and taking no notice of the sometimes angry chaff which bade him hurry up.

As they rode they talked not at all, for Bygrave deliberately put Estelle on a seat beside another woman, and himself made for the front.

But Estelle smiled on. Why?—because now she was sure!

With the future she had no concern; the only thing that mattered was the fact that Dick Bygrave loved her, and that he knew it!

They had a little walk from the bus stop to Clarina

Place, and Bygrave, as if slightly ashamed of his former rudeness, tried to converse naturally about things of no consequence.

"You'll know a difference on Carrie, of course," he said as they approached the door. "But don't take notice of anything—I mean, the whole business is too ghastly to be spoken about."

Estelle shot a startled glance at him, but no further word was spoken, because they came immediately to the door. He opened it, and they walked into the narrow passage, from which the stair ascended, steep and straight, to the room where poor Carrie was about to lay down the burden of her womanhood.

"You'd better go in there," said Bygrave, indicating the sitting-room door with a jerk of his thumb. "I'll find my mother. I don't think the old man is back from chapel yet."

The last word comforted Estelle, for, if Carrie's father could go with a tranquil mind to chapel, surely his daughter's state of health was exaggerated. She supposed that Dick—poor old blundering, hot-headed Dick!—had purposely magnified it. Her thoughts of him were tender as are those of a good and motherly woman when she thinks of a little child.

Presently he came again.

"I find that my mother has gone for the doctor," he said in a quiet, rather strained voice. "I've told Carrie you are here. She wants you to go up at once. I suppose you know the way?"

Estelle nodded and sped up the stair.

Carrie's room was at the back, and the window was thrown wide open so that the little air abroad in the long, narrow garden in a London summer night might enter freely. The bed was drawn quite close to it, and on it lay Carrie, so white and thin and spent that Estelle could have cried out.

She ran to her swiftly, and fell on her knees with outstretched arms.

"Oh, Carrie, my poor dear, whatever has happened? Oh, my poor dear girl!"

Carrie smiled sweetly, and laid her beautiful hand on Estelle's bowed head.

"I'm so awfully glad you've come," she whispered. "I have wanted so to see you. I even asked Dick to write, but he wouldn't. How is it you are here to-night?"

"I was at the meeting where he was speaking, and when he told me how ill you were I simply invited myself and came along with him. He didn't want me in the least, but I am here. Oh, my dear, you are going to get well, aren't you? How white you look! I can't bear it! I can't, indeed!"

Carrie shook her head.

"I don't think I'll get well, Este, and I don't mind. Except for poor father and mother, it is a matter of no consequence. What is there here, after all? Just think of the lives we have known—what a lot of anxiety they hold! I'm going where there is nothing of that kind, and where there is no more pain."

Her voice fell to a hushed whisper, and it seemed to Estelle that the light from afar was on her face.

"Father doesn't mind very much. If it weren't for father I might feel differently," continued Carrie in her low, somewhat broken voice. "But he is wonderful. He knows everything, I think, both about heaven and earth. He has taught me to understand why things happen—how everything, even the smallest happening, is part of the big Plan. That is why neither he nor I feel any bitterness against Cyril."

"Then it is Cyril that has done it, Carrie?" cried Estelle in a voice of anguish. "But he was never worth it!"

"Ah, but, you see, that matters nothing to a woman

who loves. She just goes on loving—and there is an end to it. I was born like that, and I've always cared for Cyril since we were boy and girl, and, somehow, I had no hold on life without him. It's very stupid, of course, and not many women are so soft and dependent in these fighting days. But don't think that I mind, or that I would even have it different. You see, it has been all arranged from the beginning of time."

"You mean that it has been arranged that Cyril should do this horrible thing!" cried Estelle in hot rebellion. "I couldn't believe that, Carrie, not even though an angel came to declare it! You are the nearest thing to an angel I have ever known, or am likely to know; but I don't believe a word you are saying! It is preposterous! If that's all faith and religion have got for us, then I've no use for them!"

Carrie smiled with the far-away, wise smile of the soul who understands and has found the key.

"Tell me about Cyril—every single, solitary thing about him. What is he doing with his life? How often he used to tell me what he would do if only he had more money! What ambitions he had! He always wanted to be rich, you know, Este, and, of course, in Hammond's he did work, and was getting on fast towards the goal."

"Those were the best days that Cyril or any of us have had, or are ever likely to have, Carrie," said Estelle hardly.

"Oh, no. This, too, must be part of the Plan, since it is all true," said Carrie softly. "But you haven't told me yet about him. How does he fill in his time?"

"He fills in his time loafing about the boudoir of a fashionable woman who is ruining him. He does no work; he spends his energies on studying the effect of ties and socks and the cut of his coat. He talks a good deal and a seat in Parliament is going to be bought for him, if it can be managed. That is a brief summary of

Cyril's interesting and honourable career, Carrie! He has done more than hurt you by his conduct: he has ruined his own soul, and destroyed whatever spark of manliness he had."

"No, no; he is only passing through a phase. You will go back, Estelle, and give him a message from me."

"I shall tell him some plain truths to-night, you may be sure. I hope God will forgive me for not having done it before."

"What good would it have done? Do you remember the very last Sunday night you were here—how long ago it seems!—how we agreed that a man who had to be kept at a girl's side by main force is worse than lost? I could not have married Cyril unless he had been just as he used to be at first. Even if I were well now, and had the chance, I should never be his wife."

"Why?" asked Estelle jealously.

"Oh, because that is all past. It just comes once to a woman, and then there is an end. And I might have grown hard and bitter if I had lived, whereas now I have nothing but loving kindness in my heart for everybody. You've no idea, Este, what wonderful experiences I have had, lying just here in this little room! It is as if there had been nothing hid, and, after all, if it is the way of the Cross, it is illumined by Him who went before."

But this Estelle could not endure! She rose abruptly, her rebellious eyes lit by glowing fires, by a passion of regret and righteous anger.

It was impossible to believe that Carrie Bygrave's bright, vivid personality had been predestined to this. Her whole soul revolted against what appeared to her to be fatalism of the worst kind. No, no! Cyril, and Cyril alone, was to blame! Once more the cruelty of man had its crime to answer for.

As she stood ready to go, all words dying on her

lips, two lines in one of Browning's poems arose to her memory:

"Can't we touch these bubbles then,  
But they break?"

Before she had time to say good-bye there was the sound of entrance below, and presently she heard steps on the stairs and the sound of approaching voices.

"Mother *would* go for the doctor," said Carrie. "I got rather breathless about an hour ago, and, though I told her it was nothing but the heat, she would insist on going. Ah, here they come!"

Mrs. Bygrave smiled rather wanly at Estelle as they met at the door. She was far too just and large-hearted a woman to blame Estelle for what had occurred. In this she differed from Dick, who included the whole family under his ban.

Estelle looked almost imploringly at the grey-haired doctor as she passed him, as if she would plead with him for Carrie's life.

She sped softly downstairs and let herself out, feeling that it was not possible for her to face Dick again.

He heard her go, but when, after a moment of fierce debate with himself, he hastened after her, she had already turned the corner of Clarina Place and was in the throng of the high road. He knew it would be useless to follow her.

Estelle did not know how she got home that night, but ten had struck, and part of the household had gone to bed when she reached Hans Crescent.

As she passed the library door a whiff of cigar smoke informed her that Cyril was in the room. She opened the door and walked in, to find him comfortably sunk in the depths of a big easy-chair, with his feet on the cushioned bar of the high fender.



Though he was surrounded by books, he was not reading. Seldom, indeed, did Cyril open a book or a paper, and he had less knowledge of what was actually happening than William the butler, who had books and papers, purloined from the library, concealed in one of his pantry drawers.

"Hallo, it's you, Estel! The mater's 'been rather fed up about you," he said, carelessly, as he dropped one of his legs on the fender, after having duly admired the clock on his silk sock. "Been slumming—eh?"

"I've been to the Bygraves, Cyril," said Estelle in her most uncompromising voice. "Carrie is dying."

## CHAPTER XIX

### "MARRIED!"

CYRIL'S face reddened, and he sprang to his feet.

"Carrie dying! Oh, come, Este!—it's not possible!"

"It is true," said Estelle quite quietly. "And you have killed her."

She was not able to gild or modify the bitter truth.

An immense disgust for this idle fellow surged in her heart, and her contempt for him as a man urged her not to spare him.

Cyril drew himself up.

"You haven't the right to say that, Este, and I don't know what you mean by it, either. I'll thank you to explain."

"What explanation is needed? You were engaged to Carrie Bygrave for two years, you got her to care for you, and you know it took a long time. She wasn't one of the girls who are ready to be made love to by any man, and when she once learned to care it was a serious thing for her. She expected to be your wife by now, and she ought to have been, Cyril, if you had done right. I'm ashamed of you. I shall never forget what I saw to-night!"

"You have been to the Bygraves?" he said, his voice faltering with astonishment.

"Yes. I was at a service where Dick happened to be speaking, and when he told me how ill Carrie was I went home with him. I didn't realise how ill she was till I saw her. She won't live many days."

Cyril's colour had faded now, and his face had a sickly, pallid hue.

Even Estelle, standing in front of him like an accusing angel, saw that he was profoundly moved.

"You saw her, then?" he said thickly.

"Yes; I saw her. You wouldn't know her now. She's so thin and worn! She doesn't bear you any ill-will. I would have been relieved if she had. She has got a horrible, ghastly idea that all this was ordained. Such things can't be ordained, Cyril. They're only part of the cruelty of human beings to one another in this world."

Cyril had not a word to say.

"Can't you say something, or do something to help?" cried Estelle indignantly. "Aren't you sorry about Carrie? You know how lovely she was, and how you cared for her once! I can't believe that you have changed so much in so short a time."

"Sorry?—by gad, I'm sorry!—it isn't the word for it! I'm trying to take it in. I never thought that she'd take it like that. She had such a lot of admirers that I thought she'd simply get another in no time."

"You took her away from them all," said Estelle steadily. "You made her give up everything. You were both jealous and selfish about her, and you scarcely allowed her to speak to anyone. I used to tell her not to be so humble with you. No man has the right to cut a girl off from everybody like that, even if she has promised to marry him. To my thinking, it shows that he has no great opinion of himself, that he knows he isn't good enough for her."

"Tell me what's the matter with her. People don't die of that sort of thing," said Cyril stupidly. "There must be some disease."

"There is none. It's a decline. People can die by simply not wanting to live. But she might pull up even yet if she had anything to live for."

Cyril leaned his hand rather heavily upon the table by which he stood.

"Did she—did she speak about me at all?"

"She did—and far more kindly than was right, I thought. She was going to send you a message, but the doctor came at the moment, and I left rather hurriedly. I had about as much as I could bear."

"Did any of the others speak about me?" asked Cyril, with a kind of furtive anxiety, which increased his sister's contempt.

"Only Dick. It will be rather a bad day for you when you meet Dick Bygrave, Cyril. I shouldn't think he'd spare you."

Cyril bit his lips, took a few steps across the floor, and then, throwing himself into his chair, began to twirl his thumbs.

His face wore an expression of misery and dismay, and Estelle acquitted him of callousness. Shallow-hearted and easily led himself, he was incapable of apprehending all the depth and tenacity of a nature like that of Carrie Bygrave.

He knew he had treated her shabbily, but he had always consoled an accusing conscience with the reflection that the colossal change in his position and prospects had justified it. He had even discussed the matter in general terms with both men and women among his new acquaintances, and the verdict had been that a man was bound not to marry out of his class.

Cyril, inflated with all the new ideas about class and station, had rolled these words like sweet morsels under his tongue, and had comforted himself with the assurance that he could not help himself. But he had never for a moment contemplated anything so serious—in its way so appalling—as this. It made him shrink into himself and cower before Estelle's accusing eyes.

She waited a few moments in silence.

"Well, aren't you going to do anything?" she asked impatiently. "All the way home I kept telling myself that the moment you knew you would do something."

He lifted his eyes to her face, and she was struck by its despairing look.

"What can I do?" he asked thickly. "There isn't anything I *can* do at all."

She kept silence another moment, almost praying for the right word. Then she sat down on the edge of the table and began to speak to him eagerly:

"Cyril, are you really happy in the sort of life you are leading now? It seems to me to be so idle and purposeless as to be almost wicked."

"It has got a meaning, though," he managed to answer. "I'm getting ready to do something big later on. There was a lot of things to learn—all the ropes a chap has got to know. I'm not such a complete waster as you think, Este. Give a fellow half a chance."

"Well, but I don't see why you have to give up Carrie. Any man—I don't care what his station—might be proud to have her for a wife. She would ornament any position. When I think of her in relation to the sort of women we meet in the new society we are in now, I'm filled with rage and indignation. I've never met one to compare with her."

"That isn't the point. A chap must marry into the right set, if he's to make good. If I should marry Carrie everybody would simply cut me dead."

"That's sheer nonsense when one thinks of the marriages that take place in Society every day! The old barriers are not what they were."

"Don't you believe it, Este. Among the right sort they are as stiff as ever."

"I haven't seen any evidence of it. It seems to me that money is everything. And it is all so hateful! Oh, why did Uncle Edgar ever die and leave us this horrible

fortune! We were all so much happier before it came."

"But none of us would go back," he said shrewdly. "Money can buy an uncommon lot of pleasant things."

"They can't bring a moment's happiness or peace. I do mean what I say. But, Cyril, won't you go and see Carrie? Perhaps, if you saw her, your heart would be touched. If she thought you cared a little bit yet, I'm sure it would help her. She might even live."

Cyril shook his head.

"And I'm sure," she continued, "that even if you were to marry her, the best among the people we know would respect you, and when they got to know her they would respect you more. Do let your better self speak, Cyril. Be man enough to despise all the foolish talk of the set we move in now! What is it worth? All these people only come here because of what they can get out of mother. If we lost our money to-morrow we should prove that!"

Cyril, as if lashed by her words, rose again and began to pace the floor. He seemed to be taking counsel with himself, and his expression was that of a man driven into the last ditch.

"Won't you go, Cyril? I'm sure, if you don't do something to atone, you'll never have another happy hour."

He paused at the other side of the table, and, leaning both hands on it, looked across at her with an odd expression on his face.

"I can't, Este. I'm not free to do a single thing. I'm married already."

Estelle stared at him uncomprehendingly for almost a full minute.

"Married already! To whom?"

"To Clare Hatherley."

"Clare Hatherley!" Estelle repeated the words in-

credulously, for she was too astounded to take them in.

"Married to Clare Hatherley! But why?"

Cyril laughed half guiltily, half exultingly.

"For the usual reason that people marry, I suppose. We were in love."

"But why this secrecy? How long ago was it?"

"About six weeks. Neither of us wanted any fuss. We just walked to the registry office one morning and did the deed."

"But does mother know?"

"Good heavens—no! She was the last person we would have told."

"But I don't understand. Was there anything to be ashamed of? Why couldn't you have got engaged and married in the ordinary way, like anybody else?"

"It was Clare's idea. I've told you she hates fuss, and, of course, I was only too glad."

"But you can't go on like this! Aren't people to know that you are married?"

"Soon—at the end of the season—after Goodwood. We shall have a honeymoon in Scotland, I expect."

There was a moment's silence.

"I don't understand it, Cyril. Why, she must be old enough almost to be your mother. Mother and I were talking about it this very day. She is certainly over forty!"

"No, no—only thirty-five, or thirty-six at the most," said Cyril eagerly, and he threw up his head with a certain proud air of proprietorship, which struck Estelle as being pathetic as well as ludicrous.

The woman of the world had fooled him well, and he was proud of the bondage in which he was held.

"Then there is no more to be said. I was sorry only about Carrie when I came into this room. I am sorry for you now, and just at the moment life seems all out of joint."

"Don't go yet, Este. I'm jolly glad it's out, and I want to talk about things. You're too hard on Clare. It's because you don't know her. She says you don't like her, and have all along tried to put a spoke in her wheel."

"She is quite right. I don't like her, and I can't understand why mother—usually so far-sighted—hasn't seen through her."

"You mustn't say things like that now. Remember it is my wife that you are talking of," said Cyril, with a lover-like foolishness which almost made Estelle weep.

"We're dealing with big things, Cyril, and, though you have married Lady Hatherley—or, rather, though she has married you—that won't change my opinion of her."

"She's had an awfully poor time of it, poor girl, most of her life! Hatherley didn't seem to be much good."

"If she has said that to you, Cyril," flushed Estelle, "it just shows you what she is! General Fevershott told me that Sir Gerald Hatherley was one of the finest fellows he had ever met, and that his death was a real loss to his country. He also said that, though the place where Sir Gerald was stationed was quite healthy, Lady Hatherley refused to live at it. They were poor, and the strain of keeping a home for her in England broke him up."

"That's only old Fevershott's story," said Cyril savagely. "You should hear Clare's version."

Estelle did not pursue the subject, suddenly realising the futility of discussing an accomplished fact which, no matter what its effect on the lives it touched, could not be mended or marred.

"And what do you propose to do after people know about the marriage? Will you just go and live at her flat, or what?"



"No, no. Don't be so absurd! I'm going into Parliament. Clare knows of a seat. She says she's keeping it warm for me. The campaign is to begin in the autumn."

"Where is it?"

But Cyril would not be drawn on that point.

"Then I'm not to tell mother?" she said as she turned to leave the room.

"No; certainly not! I was pushed into a corner, Este, or you wouldn't have known. If you look like that I'll have to ask as a personal favour that you keep quiet. Clare says it would spoil everything if it were known now."

"I can't for the life of me see how it would spoil anything more at one time than at another," said Estelle courageously. "And it isn't fair to mother."

"It doesn't make any difference to mother. She's jolly fond of Clare, thank goodness! I am sure she'll be pleased, but I owe it to Clare to keep it dark till she says I am to speak."

"Are these the lines on which you propose to run your married life, Cyril?" inquired Estelle, with a faint smile. "It is reversing the order of things."

"The circs. are exceptional, and Clare is an exceptional woman," said Cyril loftily. "She's playing up to rather an important personage just now, all to help me later on in the election, and it would be fatal if he knew she was married again, and to me. You can see for yourself that she couldn't beg favours for herself, as it were."

"But that isn't playing the game. In fact, I call it horrid; but, then, I don't pretend to understand Lady Hatherley's tactics, and it is no use discussing the matter further. I'll say good-night, Cyril."

"But you won't say a word to the mater, Este?" he said anxiously. "Mum's the word!"

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"I don't suppose I shall be tempted to tell her. The news won't fill her with joy," said Estelle briefly as she began to move towards the door.

"I'm awfully sorry about Carrie, really. It has quite hipped me," said Cyril, returning to the theme which had started this momentous conversation. "I'd go and see her to-morrow, really, and tell her how sorry I am, if you think it would do a bit of good."

"Oh, it wouldn't do any good now—only harm. It has got to be borne—that's all," said Estelle heavily. "I don't want to talk about it any more, Cyril. Good-night."

She passed out rather hurriedly, for hot words of anger and reproach were surging once more to her lips, and she knew that their utterance would not only be futile, but would simply add to the inextricable tangle.

While filled with indignation against her brother, she was sorry for him as well, for she could foresee his future in the hands of a woman like Clare Hatherley. The fact that she had inveigled him into a clandestine marriage was, to Estelle, complete proof that it was her own position solely that she had in view.

Shrewd woman of the world as she was, Clare Hatherley had foreseen the probable opposition of Cyril Rodney's family—principally of his mother—to the marriage. She had also gauged well the nature and the inclinations of her new lover, and had grasped the fact that it was necessary to fix his wandering fancy irrevocably, because his infatuation for her would not last after he had had a little more experience of the world and of women.

Estelle, hating herself for her worldly wisdom, had all this set quite plainly before her as she mounted the stairs to her own room. She foresaw Cyril's household being one long, continuous drain upon her mother's resources. And that, she knew, would mean friction of the

most acute kind, for, though Mrs. Rodney was generous enough, the idea that she was being sponged upon or made use of was quite sufficient to arouse her indignation and to prompt her to drastic action.

Already she had had more than one stormy passage with Clare Hatherley, and it was the realisation of a certain dogged, rather adamant strain in Mrs. Rodney which had decided Clare to secure her own position at any cost.

She was not particularly fond of Cyril, but he was now the only stepping-stone by which she could rise. She was getting on in years. Her actual age was forty-three, and she knew that now her chances of a good matrimonial settlement had sadly diminished. Money—the god at whose shrine she worshipped—was represented in the person of Cyril Rodney, and when she was his wife she intended to secure enough for their joint future. But it was a campaign which required careful planning, and she was not yet sure what was going to be the best way of imparting the news to Mrs. Rodney. She was rather inclined to the idea of an elopement and of a joint letter sent to Mrs. Rodney from some Continental resort. The only drawback to that course was that, in the first shock of her amazement and probable anger, she would have the other members of the family to support her, and that there would be no one to put in a word for the eloping couple.

Meantime she was letting things drift, and was waiting for a suitable opportunity to reveal the secret, reflecting that probably something would occur to render it expedient to do so.

Estelle passed into her own room, and had just taken off her hat and coat when a slight tap came to the door.

"Come in," she said in surprise, for it was now past eleven o'clock, and, from the silence of the upper

part of the house, she had supposed everybody to be asleep.

She turned her head towards the door, and saw Kitty, lovely as a dream, wrapped in the delicious, soft folds of a kimono of blue silk, her hair lying loose on her shoulders.

But it was the face which made appeal to Estelle. It was like a child's in its sweet wistfulness.

"I've been listening for you to come up, Este. Wherever have you been so long?" asked Kitty as she softly closed the door. "I want so awfully to speak to you! I've—I've something to tell you."

Estelle instinctively put up her hand. She had the feeling that she did not want to hear any more. But Kitty came, nearer, and quite suddenly, with a little sob, crept into Estelle's arms.

"Oh, I'm so happy! We weren't to tell anybody, Este. But it's only you—and I do want you to know! I'm engaged to Ted, and I've never been so happy in the whole of my life!"

Estelle strained the clinging figure close and kissed her cheek. Her own eyes were wet, and, though her heart ached with anxiety and sorrow, a ray of gladness stole in because Kitty had come back!

Of late there had been a strange gulf fixed between them, and she had felt that they were drifting farther and farther apart.

"Aren't you glad?" said Kitty wistfully. "I made sure you would be. And you do like him—don't you? He is so handsome and so good!"

Estelle pressed her lips to her sister's hair, but no words would come.

"Let us sit down here on the side of the bed," she said, after a pause, "and talk about it, dear. So many things seem to be happening. I am rather bowled over to-night."

They sat down, Estelle, with her arm lightly thrown about her sister's shoulders, had perforce to listen to a fresh love story. She did not actively dislike Charters. Even she had come under the spell of his winning ways, but, because he was Clare Hatherley's brother, she could place no dependence on him.

He was another of the spongers who, despising honest work and strenuous effort, was content to drift through life, taking as much as he could from others. And therefore he was no fit husband for Kitty, who deserved the best.

"I don't know what to say, darling. I wish it hadn't happened just yet. We don't know enough about the people in this strange, new world we've come into! I rather wish you had had a little more experience of it first."

"But, Este, if you'd ever been in love, you'd know that one can't help it, don't you know?" cried Kitty, with her adorable smile. "Supposing I lived for years and years, I should never meet anybody I would like as well as Ted. And he says the same. Isn't it wonderful that, handsome and popular as he is, he had never seen anybody until I came—anybody he wanted to marry, I mean! He says he has been waiting for me."

Estelle's lips, very near the bright hair, moved in a slight, unbelieving smile.

"We are going to keep it to ourselves for just a wee little while, Este, because it's too sweet to talk about. But to-night, all alone in my room, I just thought all of a sudden of the old, dear days when we told each other everything, and I had just to come and tell you this. But you'll not tell mother just yet, will you?"

"No, no. But I'm sure Mr. Charters will understand and feel that this is a thing which mother ought to know. Anything clandestine about an engagement is to be avoided, and I am sure she will be quite pleased. I

know that she likes Mr. Charters. She has even expected that this would happen."

"Oh, do you think so? I must tell Ted that tomorrow. But why do you look so frightfully sad, Este, and why are your eyes full of tears?"

Estelle rose rather heavily.

"I can't help being sad, Kathie. I've been to see Carrie Bygrave to-night, and she's dying."

"Dying, Este? Oh, surely not! Why, she was always so much stronger and brighter than any of us!"

"She isn't so now. I am sure she won't live many days."

"What's the matter with her?" asked Kathleen, and she seemed to shrink into herself.

"She has never got over Cyril's desertion. That is the real cause of her illness, Kathie, whatever name they may have given her disease."

"Oh, how horrid! I am sorry. I rather wish you hadn't told me to-night. I don't think it was quite kind of you, Estelle," said Kitty, and she ran sobbing from the room.

## CHAPTER XX

### TO THE FAR COUNTRY

ESTELLE had promised to lunch with Mrs. Dyner next day, and, having some other business in town, departed soon after eleven o'clock. Kathleen also stole out alone, her destination a certain tryst in Kensington Gardens, where, among the summer trees, it is possible for two lovers to imagine themselves in Arcady.

At certain hours of the day the privacy is complete, and only the shadow of Peter Pan may be cast across the sunshine on the grass.

Monday was ever a busy morning with Mrs. Rodney, and, when at last she was free from her household duties, and came to seek her daughters, she found that both had already gone. She felt disappointed, because she had wished to get further particulars from Estelle about Carrie Bygrave's illness.

It was Kathleen who had told her. Somehow, Estelle had felt too sore at her mother's treatment of their old friends to mention their names to her.

Looking up her engagement list, Mrs. Rodney found she was free until three o'clock, when she had promised to call for Lady Hatherley and take her to a picture show. Clare kept neither brougham nor car, yet she seldom drove in a hired conveyance. She had the knack of making use of her friends' possessions, and the smart car on the sale of which she had netted a handsome commission was often to be seen waiting at the door of Clanricarde Mansions.

Thinking over things, and really disturbed by what

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Kathleen had told her, Mrs. Rodney decided that in all likelihood Estelle had exaggerated. She was prone to exaggeration in some things, and, of course, she had never quite cut herself off from Denmark Hill and all its associations.

A sudden inspiration came to Mrs. Rodney. She would take the car out to Clarina Place and make inquiry for herself. Probably she would find Carrie run down and out of sorts. If so, she would suggest a little visit to the seaside at her expense.

The idea of posing as a Lady Bountiful in that direction rather pleased her. She was singularly dense in some directions, and, though she had known the Bygraves for several years, she had no conception of the kind of people they actually were. Material things alone being taken into consideration, there had been a gulf fixed between Clarina Place and The Laurels, so that, on Mrs. Rodney's side, even in the old days, there had always been a touch of patronage in her attitude towards the Bygraves. She had acquiesced in, rather than approved of, Cyril's engagement to Carrie. As for Dick, he was, in her estimation, altogether outside the pale. Of the real gentleness to be found in that little home, or of the intellectual fire which burned there, she had no conception at all, and she would have doubted their existence had anyone mentioned the fact in her hearing.

The idea of calling on the Bygraves grew upon her, and, ringing the bell for the footman, she gave him a message for the chauffeur, and directed him to tell the cook to pack a small basket of delicacies for a poor, sick person. To that basket, when it came up from below stairs, she added a particularly large and luscious bunch of grapes, which had cost ten shillings a pound at the fruiterer's, and had been left over from a small dinner party on the Friday night. She also emptied the boudoir



vases of their roses, and, thus laden, entered the car, well satisfied with herself.

A seat in her own car, with all its luxurious fittings, down to the flowers put freshly in the swinging vase every morning, gave Mrs. Rodney a feeling of satisfaction almost beyond everything else. She felt superior even to those who rode in carriages, and the smooth speed with which the beautiful motor covered the ground gave her a sense of luxurious pleasure.

As it happened, some other business she had on hand took her into the City, and as she came into the neighbourhood of the old shop another whim took her. It would not be quite kind to pass the door. She would stop and ask for John Glide, and take a look round the old place, just to experience the feeling of contrast between it and her present position.

John, in his shirt-sleeves, was turning over some bales of stuff when he heard the hoot of the siren and the jerk and puff as the car drew up at the door. Much surprised—for never before in the history of the business had such an elegant equipage stopped there—he hurried into his coat, and was waiting at the door when Mrs. Rodney alighted.

To say he was surprised to see her but feebly expressed his state of mind. He stood rather awkwardly, not knowing how to act, and he found it difficult to believe that the old days when she had called him her third son and had kissed him with the others had actually existed! She nodded and smiled, without, however, offering her hand.

"Good-morning, John. You will be surprised to see me. I think I am rather surprised to find myself here, but I had a little business down this way this morning, and I did not like to pass the door."

"Will you come to the office?" he asked hesitatingly.

"No, thank you. I'll just wait here for a moment.

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As a matter of fact, I'm on my way to see the Bygraves. I hear Carrie is not very well."

"She's dead," said John abruptly.

Mrs. Rodney looked inexpressibly shocked.

"Oh, no, John, surely not! I had no idea she was so ill as that! How long——"

"Quite early this morning. Dick 'phoned from the public telephone office to tell me."

Mrs. Rodney appeared suddenly at a loss.

"I'm very sorry," she faltered. "I suppose the disease, whatever it was, made rapid progress at the last. It generally does. Do you think I might venture to call even yet, as I am so near?"

"I can't say, Mrs. Rodney. You must please yourself," he said rather stiffly.

She looked, as she felt, most uncomfortable. She would have liked to ask John Glide questions, but pride forbade her doing so. The ground was very delicate, and she did not want to be humiliated or vexed unduly.

"Where is Clarina Place? Is it far from here?"

"Not very far. It is just off the Walworth Road."

"Oh, then, I will go on. Is there anything you think I could do, John, to—to make it easier for them?"

"Nothing," answered John—no more and no less.

She shifted her chain bag nervously from one wrist to the other.

"Well, I'm most awfully sorry. I had better go, I suppose. How are you getting on here, John? I hope you are making a living."

"Yes, thank you; I am getting on quite well."

"We are expecting letters from Australia. It seems a long time till the first ones begin to arrive from the other side. I suppose you have had some sort of communication from Jack?"

"Yes; lots of post cards, and one letter, posted at Aden."

John's voice was perfectly polite, but cold, and Mrs. Rodney began involuntarily to move towards the door.

Really, it had been a mistake to come. She had meant it kindly, however. But she would be very glad to get away.

"Good-morning, John. Glad to hear you are getting on so well. I am sure you deserve to succeed."

He did not go out to the car with her or pay her any of the little attentions she was accustomed to. She carried away with her the memory of a strong face, rather grave and stern, and she was thoroughly uncomfortable.

"Perhaps I ought not to go near the Bygraves. But yes—I will," she said to herself. "I haven't done anything wrong. I never said a word to Cyril against Carrie, or urged him to break off the engagement. It just drifted out of its own accord. In the changed circumstances that was inevitable."

When she came to Clarina Place, and saw what a narrow cul-de-sac it was, she instructed the chauffeur to remain in the outside road while she walked up. She left the basket on the floor of the car, but carried the flowers in her arms. Their fragrance, a little sickly, enveloped her as she walked a few steps forward to find the house.

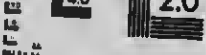
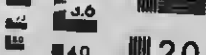
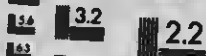
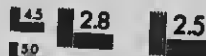
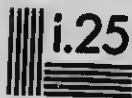
To her surprise there were no drawn blinds.

She stepped up to the door and tapped lightly. After a brief interval it was opened by Mrs. Bygrave. They had only met once or twice before, and that moment was certainly an awkward one. Mrs. Rodney could not have got gracefully out of the situation, but Mrs. Bygrave, very gracious and quiet, bade her good-morning and invited her in. It was beautifully done, and showed the native nobility of her character. Her heart was far away that day in a region remote from all the petty concerns which filled Mrs. Rodney's life. She had seen—



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nay, had almost touched—the very gate of heaven as the soul of her child passed through.

"I don't know what to say, Mrs. Bygrave," said Mrs. Rodney, almost humbly, as she followed her into the living-room. "Estelle told us this morning that your dear girl was ill, and I came, with a few flowers and things, hoping to see her. I saw John Glide just now, however, and he has told me the sad news. I am very, very sorry."

Mrs. Bygrave bowed her head. She had not many words that day, and, though she harboured no active malice or bitterness, it was not easy for her to see Mrs. Rodney. She would fain have been spared it had she had choice.

The silence was awkward, and it was keenly felt, especially by Mrs. Rodney.

"I can only repeat that I am very sorry for you all, and—and I had nothing to do with my son's change of mind, Mrs. Bygrave. I neither suggested nor expected that he would behave as he has done."

"I would rather not speak about it," said Mrs. Bygrave quietly. "Would you like to come up and see Carrie? You were kind to her in the old days. She sometimes spoke about it."

Few women could have spoken these gracious, merciful words. Tears sprang in Mrs. Rodney's eyes, and she made no effort to conceal her emotion.

"I would rather not go up, thank you, Mrs. Bygrave, and I won't intrude any farther. I should not have dared to come had I known before I left home."

Mrs. Bygrave suffered her to go without remonstrance; and, leaving her flowers in a crushed heap on the table in that humble room, Mrs. Rodney hastened away, glad to get out of the by-street, glad to sink among the cushions of her waiting car and to feel its quick plunge forward as the return journey began.

Something had happened to dash her happiness, to throw a pall of gloom over the whole day. Yet she tried to reassure herself with the reflection that she had never urged Cyril to drop Carrie Bygrave. It was a great comfort to her. It relieved her soul of the responsibility for her death.

She felt sorry for Cyril, who must be told of Carrie's death, and who was bound to feel it keenly. She wished him to feel it, for that day she was a more natural and human woman than she had been at any time since the change in her fortunes. She did not even seek to blink the fact that Cyril had been mainly responsible for Carrie's death.

Wholly absorbed in her own thoughts, she had not the slightest idea that on her way back she had passed a taxicab containing Cyril, who was speeding on the same errand as her own had been. Had she seen him she would have stopped and prevented his going.

Cyril had no idea of what had happened. He had risen that morning with the feeling that he must see Carrie Bygrave and assure himself from her own lips that he had not done her such an irreparable ill. Shallow in his own feelings, he could not believe that any woman could die because a man had failed to keep his promise to her. That sort of thing happened only in books, he kept telling himself. It had no place at all in real life.

He, too, left his taxicab in the Walworth Road, dismissed it, and walked up Clarina Place.

He was quietly dressed in a lounge suit of dark grey and a bowler hat, and he carried his gloves and cane in his hand.

Reaching the familiar door, which had no sign or other indication that it was a business house, he, too, was misled by the undrawn blinds.

The Bygraves were unconventional people, and Carrie had loved the sun and open windows. It had never

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occurred to them, though their hearts were empty and sore, to shut out everything simply because she had gone away.

Cyril was undoubtedly nervous as his hand wandered up to the knocker, and almost he felt inclined to draw back.

But presently the knocker fell at his touch, and once more Mrs. Bygrave opened the door to a Rodney. When she saw Cyril she started back and bit her lips, and just for a moment her gentle eyes flashed fire. For, looked at from their point of view, this visit, made too late, was undoubtedly an insult.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Bygrave," said Cyril quietly. "May I come in?"

"I'm not sure," she answered, a trifle unsteadily, for Dick was at his work in the basement room, and he had said things about Cyril Rodney in the chill dawn, when they had watched Carrie's spirit vacate its earthly tabernacle, which his mother had rebuked but had not forgotten.

"Please let me come in, Mrs. Bygrave, for old times' sake. I have come to see Carrie and—and—to try to explain."

She closed the door and motioned him into the living-room, where the roses his mother had put from her arms still lay in a fragrant heap on the table, perfuming the air.

"It's too late," she said quietly. "Carrie has gone away."

"Gone away to the country, do you mean?"

"Yes—to the far country, from which none of us come back."

He looked at her incredulously, even a little wildly.

"My God! she isn't dead, Mrs. Bygrave?"

"Yes. She died this morning at half-past three."



Cyril threw his gloves and hat on the table and sat down, wholly overcome.

Carrie's mother looked at his bent head and heaving shoulders and pitied him, understanding that such grief as he could feel must have an edge of terror and despair.

"It's no use, Cyril. I—I don't blame you. I think you had better go away, my dear. It is a pity you came."

"I won't go until I hear all about it. Is it true what Estelle told me—that she died because—well, because I left off coming?"

"I don't know. She seemed to lose heart. We don't understand these things, nor do we understand God's dealing with us. It is better to leave it—and I wish you would go away, Cyril. I am uneasy while you are here."

She seemed to be listening furtively. Above the stillness of the house came the murmur of voices in conversation in the workroom below. At any moment Dick might come up, and Dick, a creature of elemental passions, was not in a resigned mood. His mother had not seen him so wild and rebellious for many months.

But Cyril seemed in no haste to leave.

"I'd give my right hand that this had never happened, Mrs. Bygrave—none of it, I mean," he said with force and sincerity. "I can truly say I've never been happy all these months. I don't believe any of us have. Could I—could I see Carrie? I should like to."

Mrs. Bygrave hesitated a moment, slightly hardening her face. It was a hard thing he asked—something which even her gentle heart wished to forbid.

"Did she ever speak about me?" he asked humbly.

"Yesterday—no, it was in the night, after Estelle left—she gave me a message. I was going to write it later when—when all was over."

"What was it?"

His tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth.

"Just a few words. 'Tell Cyril,' she said, 'that I

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forgave him and wished him well, and hoped that life would teach him yet and give him something worthy to do.' That was all."

"And it is teaching me with a vengeance!" he said almost bitterly. "Take me upstairs, Mrs. Bygrave. I simply must see her."

She hesitated no longer; and, when she had opened the chamber door, and he had passed in, she left him and went downstairs once more.

When Cyril came out of that quiet, flower-laden room, where the peace and majesty of death were enthroned on the face of the woman who had loved him, his own face was white and wrung with pain. His foot faltered on the stairs, but, before he reached the little hall, there was the swift opening of a door somewhere in the basement and the sound of a heavy foot ascending rapidly.

And just there, at the opening of the doors, Dick and he met.

Thunder sat on Bygrave's brow, and the veins sprang at his temples like starting cords, and his strong right hand clenched itself.

"You! You—you damned cad and brute!" he cried huskily. "How dare you set foot in this house?"

His mother heard him, and ran out, but she was too late.

Out went Dick's clenched fist and hit Cyril Rodney full in the face, so that he staggered against the wall. Then Dick opened the door, and, with hard, knotted fingers, thrust him into the street, threw his hat after him, and banged the door!

"Dick, Dick, how dare you desecrate this day!" cried his mother in anger which almost matched his own.

"Desecrate! desecrate!" he repeated, his voice thick with passion. "It is he who has desecrated it. Who let him in? Surely you never gave him leave to go up to

see her? By heaven, I have a good mind to go after him and crush the life out of him!"

"Go downstairs, my son, and ask God to forgive you," she said sadly. "For the thing you have done is not what Carrie would have wished, or which will make her happier where she is."

Out in the street Cyril pulled himself together, clapped his hat on his head, and, feeling considerably shaken by the events of the day, quickly disappeared from the neighbourhood.

A man's self-respect is not increased by such treatment at the hands of a fellow-being, even when undeserved. But when the injury is accentuated by the inward consciousness that it is richly deserved, the man is not to be envied.

Yet, oddly enough, Dick Bygrave's fury and the scathing words that had been hurled at him left but an evanescent impression on Cyril Rodney's mind. What stood out before his mental vision, what would never, while he lived, be wholly eradicated from his mind, was the memory of Carrie's pure face set in the unconquerable majesty of death.

In no mood to face his home people, or to hear the whole wretched story discussed at his mother's luncheon table, as he had no doubt it would be, he descended from the top of the motor-bus at Piccadilly Circus and took a taxi to Clanricarde Mansions, arriving there soon after one.

He was admitted without question or demur, and found Clare in her outdoor garb—the dainty coat and skirt of light grey summer material, which was her shopping outfit—writing notes at the beautiful red lacquer desk, which was one of her latest treasures. As a matter of fact, it had been her birthday gift from Cyril, and he would have been secretly shamed if he had been obliged to own what he had paid for it.

He was being quickly initiated, however, into the expensive fads and fancies of a woman of fashion, often discarded as soon as gratified.

Clare had of late, however, developed a taste for treasures which were a little out of the ordinary, and which were in the nature of sound investments.

Red lacquer was the craze of the hour. Fashionable dames spent mornings in hunting for it in curio shops, and dealers were scouring the country for examples of it. The little writing bureau, with its sliding panel and odd little drawers, had cost Cyril in hard cash a hundred and twenty pounds. While not exactly grudging it, since he grudged nothing to the woman who had him fast in her toils, he had not yet recovered from his amazement and dismay over that little deal.

At his entrance she merely looked round casually, gave him a little nod, and went on writing. He dropped into the nearest chair, wiped his hot forehead, and began to roll himself a cigarette.

In that small, fragrant, intimate bower he certainly felt for the moment at home and safe from all the amazing knocks which a man may receive in a hard world. He had yet to learn, however, the hardest of all lessons, viz. that a man may receive his ultimate deserts—the blow that goes unerringly home—even in the sheltering place where he least expects it and where he imagines himself immune.

"There isn't anything to eat, Cyril, unless a chicken bone counts. I've had mine," she said presently over her shoulder. "I 'phoned over to Hans to ask whether you could meet me, but nobody seemed to know where you were. Shall we pop round to the Coburg presently?"

"No," he answered heavily. "I don't want any lunch," he added, knowing perfectly well that Clare's favourite expression—"a bone"—generally meant that a quite appetising little lunch was to be had.

"What's up? Old lady aggressive—eh?"

"No. Get finished with your writing and I will tell you."

Something in his tone caused her to turn her head and look at him.

"You look ghastly. Have you been run over in the street?" she asked.

"No; chucked into it," he answered on the spur of the moment; but she did not take him seriously, of course. "To whom are you writing?" he added.

"To Hertz."

"What about?" he asked shortly.

"That's my business."

"Isn't your business mine?"

"Up to a point. I'm dining with Hertz to-night at the Dieudonne."

"I'll be there," said Cyril sharply.

"No, you won't, my child! Hertz won't do any business with you. He's got them in Ranford practically in the hollow of his hand. We'll need to enlighten the old lady one of these days, Cyril. I think probably she'll have to be told before the electioneering begins."

Cyril made no reply. His mind was not a spacious one, and at the moment it was obsessed by one idea.

When he made no answer she sealed her letter and wheeled round, leaning her beautiful white hands, heavy with rings, on the inlaid back of her chair.

"What's hit you so frightfully? Got into any mischief last night?"

"You ought to know—I was here," he answered dully.

"Have a B. and S.?"

His face brightened.

"Don't mind if I do."

"Well, you shan't, then! You'll have a cup of strong coffee and a liqueur. Touch that bell."

He leaned over and pressed the button, and shortly the light refreshment was brought in.

Clare threw off her coat, revealing a dainty, hand-made lingerie blouse—quite simple, but expressive of at least five guineas in Bond Street—and filled his cup.

"I want to tell you something, Clare. I'm feeling rather badly."

"Don't say 'badly.' It sounds like a shopkeeper with a bilious attack."

He hardly smiled.

"It's what's true, anyway. And you needn't pick me up so sharp. I'm not like that with you when you are in a hole!"

"So you admit a hole? What kind?"

She asked the question with a little touch of curiosity that was quite impersonal. She did not love Cyril Rodney—nay, in her innermost consciousness she even despised him. He represented, financially and matrimonially, her last chance, or she would never have stooped to be civil to him.

For Clare Hatherley, though so utterly unworthy, had been gifted with the friendship of men of intellect and character, and, after the best, one does not bow down before what is second-rate.

She threw herself into a chair, drew a little table to it, and lit her own cigarette, while the coffee steam id beside her.

"I want to go back a bit and tell you something, for I need your advice and a word of cheer, Clare. You know, before all this happened, when we lived in Suburbia—don't you know—there was a girl——"

"Of course there always is. And you haven't been able to get rid of her?" she suggested imperturbably.

"Well, let me talk. I was engaged to her—at least, there was a sort of understanding—and we were going to get married when my salary got up to three hundred

at Hammond's. I set that figure, because I was always an ambitious chap with ideas above my station, so to speak. I'm like that yet."

Clare smiled as she put her cup to her lips.

"Well, of course, when all this happened, I just quit."

"And she made trouble, I suppose? How much had you to pay?"

"There wasn't anything of that kind. You see, she wasn't exactly that sort. She had as much pride as you, Clare—in a sense, a lot more. She could make a chap ashamed of himself. She never wrote, or said a word, or attempted to see me, and I hadn't thought about her—don't you know—because I supposed she had found somebody else. A lot of chaps were after her, for she was most awfully good-looking, and she was the sort that doesn't drop into your mouth, don't you know!"

"A regular peach, in fact? Well, and how did you ever let go?" she asked, smiling in a cool, disdainful way.

"You ought to know," he answered bluntly. "I hadn't seen her since it happened. But Estelle goes to see some of the people we used to know—the Bygraves, amongst the rest. She was at their house yesterday, and she told us when she came home that the girl was dying. She hadn't any particular disease; only, it appears that she never got over it."

"Over your leaving her? How extraordinary!" said Clare, with wide-open eyes. "But that may be just a pose put on to get you back again."

"No, it wasn't a pose," went on Cyril in his level, passionless voice. "I felt so beastly bad about it that I went along this morning to find out for myself."

"Well, what did you find?" she asked; but both manner and tone were detached, as if she were not superlatively interested.

"She's dead," said Cyril quietly. "And it has made

me fee! rotten—almost as if I were a murderer. Say, Clare," and his eyes became sympathetic, even imploring, "you don't think it could happen, do you? No girl ever really died of that?"

He was waiting for her womanly sympathy, for some word of comfort, but none came. She merely stretched her arms and yawned a little, as if excessively bored.

"You won't add to the gaiety of nations, my boy, supposing you ever get a chance to control their destinies! Let's go out somewhere and get rid of your blues."

"Oh, but hang it all, Clare, you might tell a chap what you think? After all, I've told you in good faith, and you might see for yourself that I'm jolly well hipped over it."

Then Clare laughed quite gently, but a trifle mockingly, and blew some more smoke-rings from her lips.

Cyril, angry and hurt, took up his hat and bounced out of the flat.



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## CHAPTER XXI

### BREAKING THE NEWS

MRS. RODNEY was more shaken than she cared to own by what had happened at Clarina Place. She did not get over it for several days.

By tacit consent it seemed that the family had agreed not to discuss it. The matter was never mentioned in the house. It made Estelle actively unhappy, and she guessed from Cyril's manner that something very unpleasant had taken place when he called at the Bygraves' house. She preferred not to know more. It would not make her happier to think that high and hard words had passed between Dick and her brother.

They did not send any flowers to Clarina Place. Mrs. Rodney had thought of it, but when the car was stopped next day at the florist's and Estelle heard the order given, she intervened:

"Don't do it, mother. I am sure they would hate it. The Bygraves are not that kind of people. Probably they won't even put on mourning. They don't think that death is an occasion for mourning. And if they know that the flowers came from us very probably they would throw them into the street."

She used the extreme phrase in order to convince her mother.

"If you really think that, Estelle, of course I won't. But yet I'd like to for old times' sake! I couldn't help it, you know, Este," she added plaintively. "None of us could. It was Cyril's doing."

Estelle forbore to answer her, because she could not

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have done so without pointing out that it was the drastic change which her mother had wrought in all their circumstances and surroundings that was responsible.

Again and again during these rather trying days Estelle had wished that the money had come to her father instead of to her mother. He would have made so much wiser a use of it. And again she envied him for having got clean away from it all.

Estelle, who learned from John Glide that the funeral was to take place at Abney Park Cemetery, went there herself to see it. But she kept at a considerable distance away from the little group of mourners, and none of them knew until long afterwards that she had been there.

From the higher ground where she stood she saw that Dick lingered longer than the others at the graveside, and that he knelt down when he was alone, and seemed either to be praying or to be making some vow.

She shivered a little even in the warm, kind air, and she wondered whether it was a vow of vengeance he was taking. Carrie's death had put the final barrier between her and Dick Bygrave, even if none had existed before, and Estelle was very sorry for herself on every count.

In the midst of her splendid surroundings she was a lonely soul, cut adrift from her moorings, and as yet without any definite object in life.

Even Kitty was better off, since she had a lover who adored her, and whom, presumably, she adored.

It happened that while Estelle was taking an unsuspected part in the brief, sad, little ceremony in Abney Park Cemetery, Lady Hatherley, after a morning spent in reflection, took a walk from Clanricarde Mansions to Hans Crescent.

On arriving at the house she was at once admitted, for Mrs. Rodney's orders to her household were that she was always at home to Lady Hatherley.

Mrs. Rodney had lunched alone, and was enjoying a few minutes' rest and quiet before dressing for some afternoon function. She showed less alacrity and pleasure in her greeting to Clare Hatherley than usual.

Clare was not slow to notice it, and to resent it, in a way. She had not managed to keep such a firm grip of her protégée as she had imagined she would, nor for such a long time as she had expected. Too soon Mrs. Rodney had plumed her wings for independent flight, and Clare had come round that afternoon to have a business talk.

"Afternoon," said Clare as she drew off her long *suede* gloves and tossed them on the pretty buhl writing-table. "I took my chance, for I had one or two things to talk over. Are you going to the Pierpoints this afternoon? I thought that if you were you might take me along. It's very hot walking, really, and a hired cab is ruin to one's clothes."

Clare's costume was exquisite—a confection of soft grey *crêpe de Chine* with shoes and gloves *en suite*. A black picture hat with a sweeping ostrich feather exquisitely framed her piquant face.

Mrs. Rodney's comfortable, matronly figure, not improved by the extreme tightness of her skirt, seemed to make Lady Hatherley's *svelte* grace more striking by comparison. Mrs. Rodney's face was looking a little tired, and just lately she had taken to the use of powder and make-up to try to conceal the tell-tale lines. Summer sunshine is not kind to the artificial, and at that moment Mrs. Rodney certainly did not look at her best.

Her expression, too, had changed. It had lost its former kind motherliness, so comely in a woman of her age. Her eyes moved restlessly with the eager, dissatisfied look of the huntress in them. She had already become a seeker who never found—who never would find

—the satisfaction she craved. For the things for which she yearned and craved had nothing in their essence to satisfy any human soul.

"I wasn't thinking of the Pierpoints. I'm feeling too tired to go anywhere this afternoon," Mrs. Rodney answered, puckering her brows.

"Oh, but I think you ought. Everybody will be there—the Wriothesleys, for sure. They are relations of Mrs. Pierpoint. By the by, they are pressing for an answer about Brest, and we might get a chance of talking things over this afternoon."

Mrs. Rodney's face wore its most stolid look—a hatchet look which Clare was beginning to know. When this expression was in evidence, Mrs. Rodney was invulnerable both to advice and to pressure.

"I think I've made up my mind not to take a place just now," she said. "I ought to wait till my husband comes home, because, after all, he ought to have some say in such a big thing."

"I thought I had heard you say that Mr. Rodney would approve whatever you decided on."

"That's true, of course. Him and me have never had a word in our lives."

"Probably because you had all the say," put in Clare with a smile which scarcely veiled her impertinence.

"We understood each other, and he had a great respect for my judgment. He consulted me about everything," said Mrs. Rodney quite proudly.

For, now that Cyrus was gone, she had frequent fits of wifely longing for him, and absence had proved to her that most certainly she had no friend like him—so wise and kindly and faithful—in the whole wide world.

"Any word from him lately?"

Her face brightened.

"Oh, yes. We get letters regularly now. They seem to like the place very much, and Jack is just wild with

delight over everything! It's a much bigger thing apparently than any of us had any idea of."

"He'll be another rich squatter, to become the lion of some future season," said Clare.

But Mrs. Rodney shook her head.

"Jack isn't that sort. His eyes are very wide open—they are, Clare! He wouldn't hold with this kind of life that I am leading, and I'm beginning to think that he wouldn't be far wrong. It takes a deal out of one, and it doesn't put much in."

"Oh, come, you've only had six months of it, and, as I pointed out to you, the first year was bound to be full of difficulties and even of unpleasant things. I think you ought to congratulate yourself and me. We've done wonders—nothing short of it!"

A passing gleam of gratification relieved the undoubted gloom of Mrs. Rodney's face.

"What has disappointed you chiefly?" Clare asked. "I'm sure I've got you the people, and most of them have been very decent to you. What's the fly in the ointment?"

"Well, I'm disappointed that the girls don't seem to get more out of it."

"Kathleen is all right. Estelle is outside the pale—I mean, nothing could be done with her. She's hopelessly *bourgeoise!*" said Clare tartly.

"If you mean by that that she ain't the right sort, Lady Hatherley, you're wrong! There isn't a cleverer woman in the whole of London than my Este, and she's got your whole crowd in the hollow of her hand, weighin' them up, and it's because she finds them wantin' that she steers clear. That's the truth, if you like. I can't sit by and hear my daughter spoken about like that! She thinks it's your crowd that are outsiders, and I'm not sure but that she's right."

Clare pondered a moment. Mrs. Rodney was in a

dangerous mood. Something had happened to upset her, and at the moment it would be wise, she concluded, to conciliate her. As far as possible, Clare Hatherley had pursued throughout her life the policy of living at peace with all men and women, though during the last six months she had frequently found it difficult to abstain from quarrelling with Mrs. Rodney. She was not plastic enough for Clare's clever moulding, and would break out, as now, in the most unexpected places.

"I think I'm going to get cards for you for the Duchess of Ramsgate's ball. It is the last big function of the season. Royalty will be there, for certain."

"When is it?" asked Mrs. Rodney, and her waning interest began to quicken.

The word "royalty" tickled her palate. She had not as yet been face to face with the Queen.

"The nineteenth."

"But that's next week. The invitations must be out ages ago!"

"Of course they are. I've had mine for over a fortnight. But that won't prevent your cards coming when I've taken a little more trouble about it"

"Well, you needn't, then," said Mrs. Rodney unexpectedly. "For I am not going in by the back stairs—for that's what it amounts to. If I ain't good enough to go in by the front door, then I can stop out—so ere!"

She nodded defiantly, and the good humour vanished from Clare Hatherley's face.

"You are a fool to talk like that, and, if what you've said gets about, you'll find yourself being left severely alone," she said quickly. "It's ungrateful, too, after all the trouble I've taken! It's because you don't realise what it has cost me that you are so ungrateful."

"I know what it has cost *me!*" put in Mrs. Rodney equably. "I've been going over my account book this

morning. It's—it's stupendous, Clare, and as for Brest, or any other place of that size and kind, nothing would induce me to touch it! No, thank you. I must stop short at the end of the season, and get some quiet little corner to breathe in."

"Margate sands!" suggested Clare, with a slightly mocking inflection in her voice.

"Well, and I might do worse. Many a happy day I've had on those same sands when the children were little and when we had to count every penny! You've never known that kind of happiness, my lady, and I don't suppose you ever will."

Clare laughed out loud, as if much amused. But inwardly she was furious, for at the moment she wanted something desperately, and never had the moment been more inopportune.

"Then what do you actually propose to do if you don't take a big place of some sort? I think you're making a big mistake. The autumn is the jolliest part of the year, I always think—especially when one gets the right people together. And Cyril is expecting some shooting. I'm not sure that he hasn't asked some of his friends to Brest already. It's the best low ground shooting in the home counties."

Watching narrowly, Lady Hatherley saw Mrs. Rodney's face soften. It was extraordinary the hold Cyril had upon her heart. Although he had never showed her half the affection and consideration that her daughters had done, she had simply lavished everything on him.

"Then there's his future to be considered," went on Clare smoothly. "As the future master of Brest he would have a far better chance of successfully contesting a constituency than a nameless nobody."

"I question whether the constituency you and he have in view would think it an advantage that he had a big

place at his back," said Mrs. Rodney shrewdly. "I heard from Lord Allingham only yesterday that they will most certainly run a Labour candidate."

"Where did you see Allingham?" asked Lady Hatherley peremptorily.

"He was here to lunch yesterday, and I just took the opportunity of putting a few questions to him about Cyril's chances in Ranford, supposing he should ever stand."

"But you ought not to have done that," cried Clare angrily. "You gave the whole show away, don't you see? And Allingham is nothing but an old fool—and a fossil as well! His opinion, politically speaking, isn't worth a red cent. He isn't in the present political swim at all. That's where you make so many crass mistakes, Mrs. Rodney. How often have I told you not to rush in like that without asking me! You know that every time you've done it you've come to grief. Of course we'll have a three-cornered contest now you've let the cat out of the bag! Nothing can prevent it. It just means double the work and double the money—that's all."

Mrs. Rodney, just in a mood to resent this sharp tutelage, tossed her head.

"I may have made mistakes—perhaps I made one yesterday. But I'm not exactly the new-born fool you take me for, and have taken me for all along," she said with a kind of quiet indignation. "Lord Allingham was most respectful to me, and took pains to explain things to me—which you never do! Then he complimented me on my grasp of affairs. You sometimes forget my age and experience, Clare. I'll thank you to keep them a little more in mind in future."

"Do I forget them? The first named is very much in evidence. And I don't think you should speak to me like that, Mrs. Rodney, after all I have done for you.



And, besides, it isn't good policy. What I really came about to-day is to ask what you propose to do for Cyril. He will be requiring a separate establishment soon."

"Oh, will he? When he thinks his mother's house isn't good enough for him he can come and tell her so. I'm not taking any messages from him through you," said Mrs. Rodney in strong displeasure.

"Don't be silly, old dear," said Clare pleasantly. "You know Cyril tells me everything, and we agreed ever so long ago that I was to finish his education."

"If you would fit him to earn an honest living you would do better by him," retorted Mrs. Rodney, somehow thoroughly incensed. "You've trained him to spend money and not to be chary about asking it. I'd be ashamed for anybody to know just how much money Cyril has had out of me in the last six months—and not a thing to show for it!"

"Oh, come, that is a bit ungrateful, isn't it? Why, I've made Cyril into—into a gentleman!"

"Have you? There are gentlemen *and* gentlemen! Now, he'll never be able to hold a candle to his father, though he did sell cloth by the yard in City Road! On the night of our first party there wasn't a man in this house to hold a candle to Cyrus Rodney! He'd got a dignity that impressed everybody, and he has had it all his life. And he's above all this sort of thing—miles above it—Lady Hatherley, and I wish to eternal goodness he was here now to tell me what to do."

Clare, now thoroughly alarmed—for never had she found Mrs. Rodney in such a mood—took swift counsel with herself.

"Something has happened to ruffle you, old dear; but never mind. These sort of things pass and leave no sting. What about a frock for the Duchess's ball? I saw Viva this morning, and she said she could run you up something *chic* on a few days' notice."

## CORRODING GOLD

"Did you give the show away to that razor-faced woman, and tell her I was waiting for an invite to the ball?"

"No, no! I said you weren't sure if you would be in town, though I was trying to keep you," said Clare soothingly. "Why, whatever has happened to make you so mad?"

Had Mrs. Rodney answered truly she might have said that it was a combination of circumstances. But she had really never been right since she heard of Carrie Bygrave's death. One day shortly after it she had met accidentally in Bond Street, as she was alighting from her smart car at Viva's door, one of the old Ebenezer Chapel folk—the wife of the dentist of Brixton Hill—and from her she had heard a few more plain truths.

Mrs. Rodney, unlike Clare Hatherley, had not yet dispensed with her conscience and her heart in order that she might be able to walk, unhampered, through the City of Pleasure. She was still capable of experiencing too many natural qualms to make her progress an easy one.

"I couldn't go into everything, but I'm getting rather sick of this kind of life. Somehow, it's different to what I expected," she answered quietly.

"It's because you don't grasp the magnitude of the thing which you've achieved that you speak like that. You've had only one season, and I tell you that there are heaps of women who spend years in trying to accomplish what we've done, and who at the end of them are no nearer!"

"Then t'ey are fools," was all that Mrs. Rodney had to say.

"Then perhaps you will kindly tell me what you propose to do next month? I'm three deep this afternoon, and I can't afford to lose any more time talking now."

"I haven't made up my mind. But if you see the Wriothesleys you can tell them, if you like, that so far as I'm concerned Brest is off."

Clare had no such intention.

She kept silence for a moment or two, thinking husily.

"Have you seen Cyril to-day?" asked Mrs. Rodney, fixing her searching eyes on Clare's beautiful face.

"I haven't seen Cyril to-day, nor yesterday," she answered. "And I expected to meet him here. Isn't he in the house?"

"Not that I know. It is you who can give us information about his comings and goings. He gives us precious little of his company."

Clare smiled a little aggravating smile.

"He does spend a good deal of his time in my flat, I admit."

Mrs. Rodney seemed to bridle on her chair, and her lips pressed themselves together rather closely.

"Rather too much time, if you ask me. People are beginning to talk, Clare. Don't you think that you and he should be a little more careful?"

"But why? He can't get any harm from me, surely!"

"Oh, no—not harm exactly. But it isn't good for a man or a woman to be too much gossiped about. They are saying things, Clare. Indeed, Lord Allingham spoke to me about it yesterday."

"It strikes me you had a good old gossip with old Allingham. How many shreds of character did you leave to those you discussed?"

"We took away nobody's character. It isn't in Lord Allingham's line or mine to do that. But he was advising me about Cyril's future, and he said——"

"Well, he said what?"

"He advised me that he was too much with you, and he also said that a young man who spent all his time beside one-woman, even if she were his wife, was

wasting. He says it is time that Cyril was making up his mind what he is going to do with his life, and he suggested a secretaryship to some member of Parliament as a beginning. He is quite willing to speak for him."

"How frightfully amusing! And what is all this à propos of? What is Allingham going to get out of it?"

"How sordid you are, Clare! Everybody isn't like you. There are some people in the world who will do things out of friendship."

"I've never met 'em. But I should like to know what old Ally has up his sleeve!"

"Well, if you will have it, he admires Estelle."

Clare Hatherley started in her seat. She was more than surprised—she was a little dismayed; for Lord Allingham, though a poor man, had tremendous influence in the very quarters where Clare herself was anxious to secure it, and it would not suit her at all that Estelle, whom she disliked because she was compelled to respect, almost to fear, her, should find favour in such an influential quarter.

"Admires Estelle! How clever of her—or of you! Which of you managed it?"

"I don't understand. Lord Allingham has seen Estelle and talked with her. He says she is the best-informed woman he has met this season, and the most sensible."

Clare laughed.

"And Estelle? I've no doubt an elderly admirer would appeal to her, and, in a peer, dyed hair and false teeth may be overlooked."

"I am sure he has neither, and I wonder how you can be so spiteful," said Mrs. Rodney indignantly.

"Tell me what else he said about Cyril. Did he mention any particular name when he spoke about the secretaryship?"

"No. But he is going to have a serious talk with Cyril."

"I shall take very good care he doesn't have any talk with Cyril," said Clare, with an extraordinary snap in her voice.

"But why? Cyril doesn't belong to you, Clare—yet, at any rate," said Mrs. Rodney rather cynically. "I shall certainly arrange a meeting between him and Lord Allingham. It is not a chance to be missed, and I am very satisfied with the state of affairs for Cyril at present."

"But I am not; and I am the only person whom it concerns—or, at least, the one whom it concerns most," said Clare, reaching for her glove and beginning to work it smoothly on her hand.

"How do you mean? Have you got the foolish boy to make love to you, to promise anything? I've been afraid of it all along."

Clare rose, and, busy with the fastening of the glove, was silent for a moment. When she had achieved it she simply lifted her fine eyes and said quite quietly, "Cyril and I have been married six weeks."

Mrs. Rodney grew quite pale, and she rose so quickly from her chair that it was overturned.

"Married! You and Cyril! For six weeks—oh, it can't be!" she cried, and her voice was quite shrill with pain.

"It's quite true. We both thought it better. We didn't want any fuss. So, you see, it happens to matter rather a lot to me what is to become of Cyril. And some provision will have to be made for him so that he may have a household of his own before we begin any electioneering."

"Married! You and Cyril! For six weeks!" repeated Mrs. Rodney, her eyes dwelling mercilessly on the face which, with all its artificial aids, could never

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be other than the face of a woman who had left her youth behind. "You are a wicked woman, Clare Hatherley, for you know perfectly well you are old enough to be his mother!"

With these few words did Mrs. Rodney, all unconsciously, avenge all the petty insults and humiliations that she had suffered at Clare Hatherley's hands during the whole period of their acquaintance.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### THE ANNOUNCEMENT

"A MARRIAGE has been arranged and will shortly take place between the Hon. Edward Charters, third son of the late Lord Radleigh and brother of the present peer, and Kathleen Mary, second daughter of Cyrus Rodney, Esq., of Wreford Manor, Surrey, and Woolloomaroo, New South Wales."

This announcement, carefully worded—the joint work of Charters and his sister—appeared in the *Morning Post*, and was duly copied into papers less intimately informed in the second week of October, while the father of the forthcoming bride was yet on the high seas, speeding back to England.

It was read by John Glide as he sat at his desk in the narrow little office behind the shop in City Road, and he sat a long time staring at it, until he dully comprehended that it was the end of all where Kathleen was concerned.

He knew now, while his unwilling eyes coned every one of these conclusive and final words, that until that moment hope had not completely died in his breast. Yet what colossal folly it had been to cherish it, even in the darkest, most secret recesses of his heart, because what chance had he against the men of that other world in which Kathleen now moved?

Plain John Glide—nameless until they had given him a name, homeless until a kind woman had mothered him—he had been presumptuous indeed to have lifted his eyes even in secret thought to such a one!

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Well, it was all over, but the moment was a sharp one. For one good hour did Glide sit there musing, to the no little amazement of his young assistant, to whom his master's activity was a constant source of wonder and reproach.

When that hour was over a page in Glide's life was turned down, and he rose a new man, in the sense that he had faced the inevitable and now beheld himself a lonely man, cut off from the hopes and ambitions which uphold other men and inspire them to the highest effort. The door of personal happiness being closed, he must now seek his solace in opening doors of hope for other lives more desolate than his own.

But, for that one day only, Glide was in a state of active, inward rebellion, and he was sharp of tongue to his assistant and grumpy to his customers, and was glad with an infinite gladness when the hour for closing came.

After the shutters were up, he lingered, and was reading once more the unwelcome paragraph with a strange sense of fascination when he heard a familiar rattle given to the iron shutter at the pavement front.

It was Bygrave's signal, long agreed upon between them.

Bygrave knew his friend's custom of staying behind to do odd jobs after the shop was closed, and some of the best hours of their comradeship had been spent in the little room behind the shop, which was as remote and inaccessible to the outside world as if it had been a cave of the primitive man.

Glide hastened to undo the bolt in the small aperture of the front door, more glad than usual to see Bygrave, and even wondering whether it was the paragraph which had brought him. But Bygrave was no student of Society gossip, and his business with Glide was of a quite different order.



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"Evening, John. I thought I might just catch you. Alone? I suppose so."

"Yes. Come in."

Bygrave stepped over the ridge of the shuttered door, the aperture was closed and barred again, and the two men proceeded through the dark shop, guided by the light flowing from the glass partition and more brightly through the half-open office door.

It was now half-past seven o'clock, and Bygrave, on his way to a political meeting, had looked in to ask John to accompany him.

"I'm speaking at the Lambeth Baths—eight-fifteen. Can you come, John?"

John cleared a bale of stuff from the only chair, perched himself in his former position on the office stool, and nodded his head.

"I think so. They can get along without me at Whiterider for one night. Seen that, Dick?"

He held out the *Daily Chronicle* with his finger on the paragraph, and Dick read it through, and then tossed the paper to the floor.

"I hadn't seen it. They've played their cards well—that lot. I'm sorry, old chap. It had got to come, I suppose; but she was a nice girl—once."

Glide made no reply for a full minute.

"Know anything about him, Dick?" he asked at length, with the craving that the more unselfish kind of man has to be assured that the woman he loves has chosen for her own best welfare.

"As much as I want to," answered Bygrave briefly. "He's a loafer and a sponger of the worst kind—the kind we want to sweep out of England. Nobody knows where the head of his house is—'the present peer,' as he is called there. He was mixed up with some very shady mining concession business, and found it convenient to go big game hunting for an indefinite period. And

Cyril has married the sister! If I'd wanted to punish him, John, I couldn't have chosen a better weapon! But I am sorry about this," he added, touching the fallen paper with his foot. "She deserved better—once."

Glide did not deny it.

"What astonishes me," he said, "is that all this could have happened in so short a time. Why, it isn't a year since the money came."

"That kind of thing happens quickly, or not at all. It's the haste of fools, John. If they gave themselves time for reflection, innumerable spokes would be put in the wheels of people of the Charters persuasion. Besides, we live in a rapid age."

"I wonder whether they cabled to Mr. Rodney for his consent," mused Glide.

"Not they. Poor old Cyrus doesn't count in that house. They were glad to get him out of the way. When the money belongs to the wife, John, there's usually the devil to pay. Women seem to lack the necessary balance. Mrs. Rodney is a case in point. When I think of what might have been done with that windfall, and what has been done, I wonder the heavens don't fall!"

He rose and began to pace the narrow floor space until John begged him either to sit still or to go out.

"We've both got the pip badly, I guess," assented Dick, with a dry smile. "Let's get out, if you're ready."

"I'll have to get something to eat before the meeting. We can get a cup of coffee and a sandwich across the way," observed Glide as he took his coat from the peg behind the door.

"All right," grunted Bygrave, and they left the place together, Glide carefully padlocking the door and putting the keys in his pocket.

"Have you seen anything of Estelle lately?" inquired

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Bygrave after they were seated in the coffee-house where Glide was obliged to take most of his meals.

"I saw her last night. She lives two days a week at the Hostel now, since her people have gone into Surrey. She allows nothing to intervene, and Mrs. Hardress says that her work among the girls—and they are rather a rough lot—amounts to positive genius."

"Romsey Road helped her, I don't doubt," said Bygrave briefly.

"Apart from her training, she's a splendid woman, Dick—full of the milk of human kindness. She takes a bit of knowing, that's all."

"Granted. But she's got the canker of corroding gold like the rest, I don't doubt. She can't escape it. That's three—no, four—lives this rotten money has practically blighted, John. But for it I might have won Estelle. As it is, I shall have to go wifeless to the grave or put up with the second-best. So must you. Well, perhaps it'll help us to concentrate better on the things that matter."

At the moment John's own wound was too raw to admit of full discussion of the theme.

"You and I have a long account to settle with Capital, John."

Glide did not commit himself.

"What's your line to-night at the Baths?" he said, as if anxious to change the subject.

"Oh, the Home Policy of the Government, as usual!"

"And when will the writ be out for East Breen?"

Bygrave smiled hardly, and an unholy joy seemed to leap in his eyes.

"Next week. Then the world will behold an entertaining spectacle—Cyril Rodney and me on the hustings together! Great, isn't it, John? I'll wipe the floor with him!"

"He'll have an influential backing," suggested John.

"It won't go down at East Breen this time if I know anything about the temper of the constituency. We'll see just how much the fine lady-wife he has bought will do for him! Unless she has licked him into shape and put words in his mouth and sense in his head, it'll be the sorriest exhibition the great B.P. has witnessed!"

Glide did not like the temper in which Bygrave appeared to be, and he suggested that, if he had had enough, they should make tracks for Lambeth.

There was a great meeting assembled, for these were troublous times in the political world, and of talk there was no end.

Bygrave excelled himself, but there was a quality in his speech that night which Glide, more mellow-hearted and sounder at the core, regretted. It was a cold, bitter hostility, which, while it polished his phrases and gave incisiveness to his argument, left the audience quite cold.

John was a keen observer. Much study and solitude had sharpened his wits in certain directions, and he knew that it was the sting of personal loss and actual heartache which had wrought this change in Bygrave's harsher, stronger nature. And he fell to wondering whether some miracle might happen, and whether Estelle Rodney, like Bessie Hardress, might not yet count the world well lost for love.

The formal announcement in the newspapers, unauthorised by the Rodneys, annoyed Mrs. Rodney beyond expression. She read it in the boudoir of the house at Wreford Manor, which she had taken furnished for a period of six months, and where she was awaiting the arrival of her husband from Australia.

Wreford Manor was a beautiful old-world house in the middle of a fine park, set high on the breezy Surrey hills not far from Haslemere. Mrs. Rodney had taken this place from the agents, conducting her own business with them right through, without so much as mentioning

the matter to Cyril's wife. The relations between these two were considerably strained, and Clare had found it expedient to accept an invitation to a big country house in Scotland, which belonged to some distant relatives of her own, and to which she and Ted were invited for a few weeks every autumn. It was the only recognition which that branch of the Charters family extended to the impecunious pair. This year they had included in the invitation Clare's husband, whom they were naturally curious to see.

When Clare had been informed of her mother-in-law's plans for the late summer and autumn she had been loftily scornful.

"You'll drop out," she said warningly. "Unless people keep themselves in the swim, they drop out as sure as fate. There's nothing to prevent them. People can't be expected to remember who they meet in the whirl of the season as it is now. You'll regret it, and, when you do, don't say I didn't warn you."

"I don't know that I'm caring much, my dear," said Mrs. Rodney, with a rather distant air. "I've had my little fling, and it has cost me a lot more than it was ever worth."

Clare snapped her lips to keep back the words which she longed to utter. She had never forgotten the insult about her age, all the more telling that it had been so spontaneously uttered.

She could not afford just yet to be as outspoken as she longed to be, for the question of Cyril's income was not yet settled. That was a matter of paramount importance to Clare, and, though it galled her inexpressibly, she realised that she could not afford to quarrel openly with her mother-in-law, seeing that she held the purse-strings and was beyond doubt inclined to pull them tightly.

Clare had been disappointed all along the line, and in nothing more deeply than in her estimate of Mrs.

Rodney's character and personality. Out of all the whirl of the season and the curious intimacy that had been between them there had been born in Clare's mind a slow and unwilling respect for certain qualities she had discovered in the hopelessly middle-class woman whom she had fully expected to use as a sponge to be wrung dry for her own personal benefit. And she was mortally afraid that she had, in a rash moment, run her own head into a noose of matrimony which would not give her as much as she had expected.

Mrs. Rodney was staring angrily at the engagement announcement when Kathleen came into the room, dressed for the day's outing in a neat coat and skirt and a dark hat.

"Have you seen this, Kathie?"

"What is it, mother?" asked Kathleen, and, bending over the back of her mother's chair, she read the offending paragraph.

She laughed and looked conscious.

"How did they get hold of that?" she asked. "You didn't send it by any chance, did you, mother?"

"I, child! Certainly not. I would not do such a thing in your father's absence. I have more respect for him. No; depend on it, it is Clare's doing, if Ted knows nothing about it."

"I am sure Ted doesn't. I had a letter from him to-day. If he had known he would have mentioned it."

"Doubtful. He and Clare are together—aren't they?—at that Scotch place, and I must say I am sorry for Cyril. I should like to contradict this announcement, or at least to say, as publicly as this is said, that it is premature."

"That would hardly do, mother. Just leave it. It doesn't matter very much, after all; and father will be home next week."

"Where are you going to-day?"

"To see Mrs. Dyner, mother. Don't you remember Eliza Inman's letter last night? She says the poor old dear is breaking up fast, and I've rather neglected her of late."

The ring of regret in Kitty's voice was quite real and genuine, for, although she had seen but little of her old friend in the last months, she still retained the liveliest feelings of gratitude for all her kindness, and she had a happy memory of her life at Ambrosia House.

It seemed strange to see Eliza Inman there in her place, doing all the things she used to do and many more, for Eliza's capacity for work was truly enormous, and Mrs. Dyner had never ceased to bless Estelle for introducing her to such a treasure.

Poor Eliza poured all the ardent gratitude of her heart into her daily tasks, and she, too, blessed Estelle for her happy introduction to Ambrosia House.

"Will you spend all day in town? What time do you want the motor to meet you?"

"It depends on how I find Mrs. Dyner. Don't trouble about meeting me. I don't mind walking from the station. I shan't be late, anyway. I'll be down before dark, and don't worry about that stupid announcement. It's only a little previous, after all."

"If Clare has done it, she must be told that I am angry about it," said Mrs. Rodney firmly. "Oh, I *shall* be glad when your father comes back! There is *so* much I want to talk to him about!"

Mrs. Rodney turned to her desk again to dispose of her morning correspondence and to consider her week-end list, which was always a heavy one. She had made an astonishing number of friends and acquaintances in the short time since her accession to fortune, and she was sometimes surprised at their persistence in clinging to her.

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Among them there were quite good names, well known both in society and in politics, for her strong personality had proved refreshing to some who had grown weary of the superficiality of things. She took everything seriously, and in these months she had learned very much more than her chaperon had ever intended that she should learn.

Estelle, now apparently the most contented of the household, spent two days in every week at the Mission Hostel in Whiterider Street.

She had, for the time being, abandoned the idea of embarking on the literary life, though the craving was still there. One day she hoped and expected to be able to write something which people would wish to read. Meanwhile she was gaining experience and learning even to speak a little to groups at the Mission, developing an astonishing power to grip and hold her audience. Something seemed to go out from her—a touch of warm personal sympathy which is the secret of all successful public speaking.

She met Glide often and Bygrave occasionally, the latter only in the presence of others. Not a word of intimate talk, certainly nothing that could be construed into talk of a personal nature, had ever passed between them.

It was as if some high and impassable barrier stood between them. Yet both were conscious—intensely so—of each other, and were undoubtedly sustained by some inward assurance that one day at some unexpected turning their paths might unite for life.

Estelle was no longer lonely, dissatisfied, or at a loss. And though her home people were unable to understand her infatuation for the mission work, her mother admitted that it had humanised her and made her a much less difficult inmate of the household.

Kathleen travelled to Waterloo by a fast train, and



took the Underground to Marlborough Road Station, the nearest point to Ambrosia House.

Eliza Inman opened the door for her, and they shook hands quite cordially. Eliza, however, it was easy to see, was the picture of anxiety.

If Kathleen Rodney had valued her post at Ambrosia, Eliza valued it still more, because by means of it she had been lifted from despair to a place of safety.

"I hope Mrs. Dyner isn't seriously ill, Miss Inman?" said Kathleen as the door closed behind her.

Eliza nodded.

"She is seriously ill. The doctor says these attacks of heart failure have been so frequent of late that she hasn't any more strength to resist them. She was so awfully ill in the night that I thought she was going to die."

Kathleen looked the deep concern she felt.

"Oh, I am so sorry! Then, will she not be able to see me?"

"I think she will. She was asking whether I had written, and when I told her I was sure you would be here to-day, she seemed most awfully pleased. Miss Helder is with her now."

"Miss Helder!" repeated Kathleen in rather a strained tone. "I didn't know she had come back from Holland."

"She came only yesterday," answered Eliza. "I can't get on with her, Kathleen. She is overpowering. I tell you quite frankly I am sorry she has come back."

Kathleen said nothing, but her face wore an odd look.

"She's out of temper this morning—goodness knows what about! I had a very good mind not to let her upstairs. But she's that sort, though I may be expected to have some kind of say in this house! Now, the moment Miss Helder comes into it I feel like a worm. It isn't a pleasant sensation."

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"It can't be," murmured Kathleen. "Well, will you go up and tell Mrs. Dyner I've come to ask whether she feels able to see me?"

"Hush! there's somebody on the stairs now. It's Miss Helder. I know her heavy foot."

Eliza moved to the dining-room door and opened it.

"Miss Kathleen Rodney has come to see Mrs. Dyner, Miss Helder. I suppose she can go up?"

"I don't think so," replied Anna in a cold, hostile voice. "Please go up, Miss Inman, and I will interview Miss Rodney."

She spoke to poor Eliza precisely as if she had been a servant, and Eliza's expression was rebellious as she closed the door.

"Good morning," said Anna curtly. "I'm sorry my aunt will not be able to see you. She has had a bad night, and it is absolutely necessary that she be kept quiet."

Kathleen looked frankly disappointed.

"I shouldn't talk to her. But I would like a peep at her, Miss Helder, just to let her know I have come all the way from Haslemere to see her."

"I can tell her that, or take any message. I must take charge here now, for that woman is a fool. She lets in far too many people to see Mrs. Dyner."

"I don't think she is altogether a fool," said Kitty, resenting the tone. "The very last time I spoke with Mrs. Dyner she told me how thankful she was to my sister for having brought Miss Inman to her, and she said that her services were invaluable."

"That's a little way my aunt has with the people she employs," said Anna Helder. "All her geese are swans."

The tone was studiously offensive, but Kathleen determined not to let it ruffle her. She knew Anna Helder of yore, and, though she had never liked her, she felt her-

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self quite immune now from any serious vexation at her hands. But in this she was wrong.

Anna walked deliberately to the door, opened it, and looked into the passage, as if to make sure no one was eavesdropping. Then she turned her cold eyes on Kathleen's pretty, flower-like face. She seemed taller than usual and more forbidding. Her handsome looks had coarsened, and her eyes, darkly shadowed, had stormy depths in them.

"I'm rather glad of this opportunity to talk to you, Miss Rodney. I have seen the announcement in the *Morning Post* to-day."

"Have you?" murmured Kathleen, and then stopped, for something malignant in the eyes of the woman before her warned her that she was about to sting.

"I suppose I ought to congratulate you. Perhaps I shall presently, but perhaps, when you hear what I have to say, you may wonder whether there is any cause for congratulation left."

"I have no wish to hear anything you have to say to me," said Kathleen a little unsteadily, beginning to move towards the door.

But Anna Helder moved before her, and stood with her back against it, her tall height showing menacingly against the white panels.

"I choose that you shall hear," she said quietly. "You are engaged to Ted Charters, but he is not a free man. He has not the right to engage himself to anyone, for he has been pledged to me for more years than I care to count now."

"Oh, no," said Kathleen faintly.

"It is true. If he were here now he could not deny it. It is eleven years since he first asked me to marry him. I refused then, because he was only a foolish boy, I thought, and I did not know my own mind. But later I gave him a promise that when he had won a position

such as I fancied he ought to win I might think about marrying him. We have been drifting like that ever since. He has kept every other man out of my life, and has told people, if not in so many words yet in other ways, that he considered I belong to him. He has had the best years of my life. I might have had a home years ago, but because of him I remained single. And you have stolen him from me, for he belongs to me just as much as if we had been married all these years. I've got letters—oh, oceans of them!—full of the utmost protestations. He was a past master in the art of love-letter writing as well as of love-making. I've got no end of proofs, and I can use them, if need be. But perhaps it won't be necessary. I hardly think you are the kind of woman to care for such second-hand goods, or to marry knowing that you build such happiness as you can get on the ruin of another woman's life."

"Let me out," said Kathleen blindly. "I refuse to listen."

"You've got to hear me to the end. He hasn't got any love to offer you. It was all given away long ago. It's your money he is after—your money and a safe, good living for himself! I tell you there doesn't live in the whole of England a more consummately selfish man than Ted Charters! He won't work. None of the Charters crowd ever did work so long as they could get what they wanted without it. He is just like his sister, and between them they have exploited your poor, stupid mother and her money for all they are worth! That's the kind of husband you are going to get, my dear! So, if you care for him now, you are welcome to him!"

"I refuse to discuss it with you," said Kathleen, summoning all her dignity and looking straight into Anna Helder's bitter, angry face.

"There isn't any need. You can go and ask Ted about it. If you are seeing him to-day you have my

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leave to tell him every word I have said. And if he is able to dispose of it to your satisfaction, all I can say is that he is a very clever man and you are a most confiding woman."

She stepped back from the door, and Kathleen passed out. She may be forgiven that for the moment she forgot Mrs. Dyner and the main object of her call at Ambrosia House.

When Eliza Inman came downstairs to tell her that Mrs. Dyner had fallen into a slight, uneasy doze, she was surprised to hear from Anna Helder that Miss Rodney had gone.

Miss Inman looked at her suspiciously, and said to her bluntly:

"What did you say to her, Miss Helder? She ought to have waited. She came intending to wait, and Mrs. Dyner will be most awfully disappointed when she wakes and finds that she has gone."

"Miss Inman, you forget yourself," said Anna Helder in her most cutting voice. "Pray remember that you are only my aunt's servant, and that you have not the smallest right or jurisdiction over anything in this house."

"I am your aunt's servant certainly, and I'm proud of it, but I'm not taking any orders from you, thank you," said Eliza Inman with her head in the air as she bounce<sup>d</sup> out of the room.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE TRAVELLER'S RETURN

ABOUT noon next day a taxicab drove up to the front door of the shop in City Road, and Cyrus Rodney alighted from it.

John Glide could hardly believe the evidence of his own eyes, but his joy at sight of his old master knew no bounds. That he should have remembered him on the very day of his arrival in England filled him with the liveliest joy.

Cyrus was looking well, bronzed and healthy, and years younger. His smile was a little subdued as he received his old assistant's warm-hearted welcome.

"I'm glad to find you here, John, in the old place, and to see you looking much as usual. I've just this moment come off the boat-train at Fenchurch Street, and I am here to ask whether you can tell me where to find my wife and family."

Glide looked the amazement he felt.

"But, sir, was there no one to meet you at Tilbury?"

Cyrus shook his head.

"No one! There has been some miscalculation. These things happen occasionally. But I'm not worrying myself. Can you give me their present address? The last letters from England were dated from Hans Crescent, and in them I was told they were looking for a country house somewhere."

"They've got it. It's in Surrey somewhere," said Glide, hardly yet recovered from his astonishment, which

was not unmingled with resentment that the traveller should have been allowed such a cold home coming.

"If I had only known, sir, I would have been at Tilbury myself."

"I am sure you would, but there is no harm done," said Cyrus equably. "Surrey, you say? But Surrey is not a very small county, and it is rather hilly in parts, if I remember rightly. Can't you get any nearer than just Surrey?"

"It's near Hindhead, I believe, or Haslemere—I'm not sure which. But I'll tell you what. I believe Miss Estelle is at the Mission Hostel at Whiterider Street to-day. Yes, she is. Thursday and Friday are her days. If you'll sit down, I'll pop round and fetch her."

"What hostel? Doesn't Estelle live at home with them any more?" asked Cyrus in a perplexed voice.

"Yes; but she gives two days a week to the Wesleyan Mission," explained Glieo. "Shall I go and fetch her?"

"How far is it? Couldn't we both drive round that way? And then she could take the bale of returned goods home!"

He spoke with a touch of whimsical humour, which informed Glieo that his old master was in excellent spirits, and that he was unfeignedly glad to be in England once more.

"You look well, sir," he hazarded, "and fatter, and much younger. The voyage has done you good."

"I've had a most glorious holiday, John, and I have realised more strongly than ever I did that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

"And Jack, sir—how is he?"

"Jack is fit and happy beyond doubt. Naturally, he didn't like my leaving him, and I think I must persuade one of his sisters to go out to him for a spell. He is rather young not to have some of his own people about him. That's the life for him, however. But we

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must have a talk about it all later. Well, what shall we do? Drive round to the Mission you speak of?"

Glide nodded, and with the utmost haste he got into his overcoat. It was a day of drizzling rain and rather raw, biting cold, but nothing seemed to damp the even, sunny temper of Cyrus Rodney.

Somehow John felt, sitting by his side, that this quiet, beautiful personality would be able to do more than could be done by anything else to check extravagance in any direction in the household to which he was now returning. He even found himself speculating on how differently things might have developed had Mr. Rodney never gone away.

But in this he was wrong. Cyrus Rodney had left England at the psychological moment, and he returned at one equally propitious.

That kind of man seldom makes a mistake. His whole life and conduct, being informed by the highest motive, move in perfect harmony to their appointed end. Never, in any case, are the Cyrus Rodneys the sport of circumstance, and all the pity which Dick Bygrave and others had lavished on him was entirely wasted and misplaced. Cyrus himself was conscious neither of hardship nor of limitation in his lot. He could have moved serene even amid the clash of worlds.

Glide, watching him keenly, with an eye which love and life-long devotion had undoubtedly sharpened, observed in his old master and friend a new and most impressive dignity, which had communicated itself even to his looks. He realised that here was the force which was going to lift up the destiny of the Rodneys, after all, and keep it at the right level!

Just as the old days in Denmark Hill had been made gracious and dignified by his unobtrusive goodness, so would the new life be shorn by it of all that was offensive. Pure goodness—that was what Cyrus Rodney em-



bodied in his whole personality, and a singular loving kindness, a large charity which thinketh no evil.

They did not find Estelle at Whiterider Street.

Fate had decreed that she should have left for home an hour earlier than usual. But they obtained the postal address of Wreford Manor, and John Glide drove with Mr. Rodney to Waterloo. He was, however, unable to see him off there, because he had a business appointment in the City.

The train was sparsely filled, and a few moments before it was due to start a lady in a very smart travelling-coat passed quickly down the platform to a first-class carriage, a porter following with her dressing-bag.

When she had dismissed him she stood just a moment, looking about her as if expecting someone, and quite suddenly her eyes fell on Cyrus Rodney's face, framed by the window of a third-class compartment lower down the train. She looked again to assure herself that she was not mistaken; but that face, once seen, could not be forgotten quickly—its expression lingered in the mind like some pleasant memory.

Having made sure, she walked deliberately down the platform, and stopped short before the compartment door.

"Mr. Rodney—am I right?"

"Quite right, madam, and I remember you, only I cannot recall your name," he answered, with his hand at his soft felt hat.

"I am Clare Hatherley. We met only once—at the big party at your house in Hans Crescent, you remember?"

"I remember perfectly. And we had a most delightful talk. May I ask whether, by any chance, you are going to my wife's house at Wreford?"

"I am. But won't you come into my compartment? I am alone in it."

"I have only a third-class ticket," said Cyrus, with a smile, drawing the small red slip from his pocket.

She shook her finger at him.

"You are quite incorrigible! How dare you travel third class? But there it is only such as you who can afford to do it."

"I've been used to it all my life," he answered quite simply. "But since you are good enough to wish it, I'll change and pay the difference."

He gathered his belongings and followed her to the compartment. They had only time to get in when the train moved off.

"But how is it you are arriving like this? Does nobody know you are coming?" asked Clare interestedly.

"I caught a boat a week earlier than I intended. I ought to have cabled, but it is a great expense, and I did not think it would matter. As it happened, however, I have had some difficulty in discovering the whereabouts of my wife and family. The last letters were from Hans Crescent, but Mrs. Rodney spoke of leaving London soon. I had not heard where she had gone. However, I was able to get the address in the City."

Clare did not ask where. She had never heard of John Glide.

"You are going on a visit, I expect, Lady Hatherley? How very pleasant for me!" he said, looking with pleasure into the beautiful face, which, lightly touched with powder and swathed in a very becoming black veil spotted with white, looked very attractive and extraordinarily young.

Cyrus Rodney knew nothing of the make-ups of fashionable women, and it had rather puzzled him that, after she had come into her money, his wife felt it necessary to have so many bottles and jars on her dressing-table.

"Yes, I am. But they don't expect me, either," she

said with rather an odd note in her voice, for she suddenly realised that Cyrus did not know that she was married to his son, which undoubtedly gave a certain piquancy to their meeting.

"Mr. Rodney," she asked suddenly, "can you remember the date of the last letter you received from England?"

He took out his pocket-book and drew several letters from it.

"It was Estelle who wrote last. The date is June twentieth. Any letters written after that I am afraid I did not receive."

"A good many things can happen in a few weeks in London, Mr. Rodney," said Clare. "But if the letter had been dated just a week later she would have been able to tell you that Cyril and I were married."

Mr. Rodney gave a start of sheer amazement, and his expression went a little blank. When he had left England he had had no doubt in his mind but that, sooner or later, Cyril would redeem his promise to Carrie Bygrave, of whose sad death he was also in complete ignorance.

"You are married—Cyril and you! How extraordinary—and how unexpected!" he faltered at last. "Surely it was very sudden?"

"Most marriages are rather sudden—aren't they?—especially in these days," she answered, finding it more difficult than usual to preserve her cool and off-hand manner. "I can't explain how it happened exactly, and I'm afraid Cyril and I were very naughty. We simply went out one morning and got ourselves tied up without saying anything to anybody. We both agreed that we hated fuss."

"Then you are not Lady Hatherley any longer, but Mrs. Cyril Rodney."

"The Hon. Mrs. Cyril Rodney is my full designa-

tion," she said, smiling prettily. "How nice of you to take it so sweetly! I am afraid Mrs. Rodney was not very pleased just at first."

Cyrus felt strangely at a loss. He could not forget Carrie Bygrave, who had been a special favourite of his in the old Camberwell days. She had always been so sweet and daughterly to him that he had loved her almost as if she were his own. But, obviously, it would not be wise, nor perhaps would it be kind, to mention her name to the woman who had supplanted her.

"I am sure that you will do your best to make my boy happy," he said simply, and he held out his hand.

Clare was conscious of a secret shame, for she was not at all concerned about Cyril's happiness, but merely and entirely with her own social advancement.

"I feel a little like Rip van Winkle," he said, with the kind smile which invariably sought to make others feel comfortable and at ease. "Perhaps, now you are a member of the family, you can tell me something about their doings?"

"I have not seen any of them since the end of the season," said Clare frankly.

Cyrus looked surprised.

"Then you've not seen this place where they are living now?" he asked, recalling the very active part she had taken in procuring the London house for them.

"No; I thought Mrs. Rodney would have been better with a large place. There was a beautiful one to be had at a bargain price in Bucks, but she wished to wait until you came home," answered Clare, keeping to herself the fact that she and Mrs. Rodney had parted after a somewhat stormy scene over the question of provision for Cyril's future household.

Mrs. Rodney, angry and disappointed over the clandestine marriage, had, in a sense, washed her hands of them at first, and it was solely owing to the intervention

of her daughters that she had thawed so far as to make them what she considered rather a handsome allowance.

But five hundred a year by no means came up to Clare's expectation. In fact, she was furious about it. Cyril, however, had persuaded her to allow some weeks to elapse before making another appeal. As their Scottish visit drew to a close, she had urged him to write to his mother; Mrs. Rodney's reply had filled her with indignation, and she was now on her way to deal with it in person.

Looking across at the tranquil, fine face of Cyrus, Clare naturally wondered whether he would be an ally or an enemy. She could not imagine him an enemy to anybody. She even thought that through him her luck might turn. So she played up to him for all she was worth, speaking to him in a voice of caressing softness.

"And what about Estelle and Kathleen? Have you seen them lately?" he asked.

"No. You see, I have been out of London since July," she answered gently.

She decided not to mention the fact of Kathleen's engagement to her brother, even although she knew that Mrs. Rodney had accepted it, and with no apparent regret.

"Wreford is quite a small place," she pursued. "In fact, it is not, strictly speaking, a place at all. It is merely a house with a park and a few acres of shooting. I believe Mrs. Rodney had it through the agents in the ordinary way. Cyril thought she had paid rather sweetly for it."

"And what is Cyril doing with his life?" inquired his father, with a certain touch of anxiety.

Clare leaned forward a little, looking intently into the old man's face.

"Cyril is developing quite on the right lines, Mr.

Rodney. He is standing as the Unionist candidate for East Breen, and the campaign opens next week."

"The Unionist candidate!" echoed Cyrus, rather bewildered, for he himself had been a Liberal in politics all his life.

"Why, of course. It's the only party possible in these positively frightful days. I hear it is likely to be a three-cornered contest. The people are dissatisfied with the Liberal candidate, and the Labour party are going to run somebody. So, of course, Cyril's chances are improved thereby. But it will be an expensive business. Mrs. Rodney does not understand just how expensive. If Cyril is to have a career, it is absolutely necessary that some money should be spent now. I am sure you understand that—don't you, Mr. Rodney!"

"Of course I know that an election can't be run without money. But doesn't the party do anything?"

"Not in this case. They could hardly be expected to. Why, everybody knows that Cyril's people are rich. They would expect him rather to subscribe to the party funds. But Cyril's career is important, isn't it, Mr. Rodney?"

"It certainly is, and, if he is going to take up politics seriously, it may be the making of him. I have wondered a good deal about him while I have been abroad. When I left England he did not appear to me to be doing much good."

"He had hardly had time. He had to be educated to a fresh point of view. I flatter myself that I have made something of Cyril, Mr. Rodney. I hope you will think so when you see him. And, of course, it is of the utmost importance to me that his career should not be hampered. I have always been connected with people who do things. I purpose that Cyril shall come to the front. And he will, if he has a chance."

Cyril's father listened in silence. While not critic

or carping, in the disagreeable sense, he had a singularly clear perception, and he had long since weighed up his children and their possibilities.

Cyril had disappointed him. His ideals had never soared above the commonplace, even the sordid. He had never been a lover of sport, in the healthy sense, but merely of foolish amusement, which often saddened his father.

Jack, on the other hand, had been a strenuous person all his short life, throwing himself with immense spirit and might into everything he touched. His nature, too, was a very fine one, highly strung, noble, with a touch of that nobility of soul which had set his father apart, though it had in some respects militated against his commercial success.

"We shall talk over everything, I expect, after we get to Wreford," said Mr. Rodney. "I rather wish that Cyril had been with you. Is he far away? Wouldn't it be possible to get at him?"

"He's at a men's shoot at Hexham, and I think the men who are there might be useful to him. But he is there only for the week. I dare say he could get here by next Thursday or Friday evening."

The train, a non-stop one, ran presently into Wreford Junction, and they had to alight.

"As neither of us is expected, there will be nobody to meet us, I suppose," said Cyrus as he helped his very smart daughter-in-law to alight. "It is to be hoped we can find a convenient fly."

There was one dilapidated vehicle of that order standing in the station yard, but when the driver beheld the traveller's heavy trunk he shook his head.

"Daren't risk it, sir. The roof ain't wot it was. Where for, sir?"

"Wreford Manor."

"They could send down for the big luggage,

couldn't they, sir? We could tike the lidy's case quite safely."

This was agreed to, and they entered the mouldy old carriage and trundled off.

The rain had now ceased, and the clouds were breaking over head, showing patches of clear, hard sky. There was a true October nip in the air, which blew in upon them through the open window.

The low grey skies and the intimate nearness of the little fields which skirted the road-sides struck Cyrus oddly, as they never fail to strike those who have come recently from the wide heavens and the spacious vistas characteristic of the Greater Britain across the seas.

They did not talk very much as they drove. Clare was busy with her own thoughts, pondering on the nature of the reception likely to be accorded her, and wondering whether her fellow-traveller would be a help to her cause.

In a short time they reached the fine old stone gateway which gave admission to the spacious park surrounding the house, and Cyrus put his head out of the window, sniffing the delicious, crisp air with evident pleasure.

"I can't tell you how pleased I am to find them in a place like this. I should like to live always in the country, but my dear wife has always been used to London, and naturally she feels more at home there than anywhere else."

"Mr. Rodney," said Clare, suddenly leaning forward as the long, ivy-covered front of the house became visible, "may I ask you something? You feel kindly towards me—don't you?—and you are going to be my friend?"

"Why, yes, my dear! Why not? You are my son's wife, and one of the family now."

"I'm afraid they don't quite regard me as that. I—I feel myself an intruder here, I do assure you, and nothing but the sense of my duty to Cyril would have



brought me. But if you are going to be on my side, then I know that things will be better for me."

Before Mr. Rodney could reply, the fly drew up before the old carved doorway, and the butler, who had just carried the tea-tray into the hall, hurried out at the clang of the bell. He looked the astonishment he felt at sight of his master in company with the Hon. Mrs. Cyril.

"I'll wait outside and settle with the man," said Clare, with a most unusual consideration, for she saw that Mr. Rodney was agitated. "Yes—pray do allow me! Indeed, I insist upon it. Kinman, please come out and take down my case."

She spoke of a set purpose, grasping the fact that, if Mrs. Rodney and the others were in the hall at tea, the meeting could be got over quickly, and that it would be well for no stranger to be present. She purposely kept Kinman fumbling about the fly for a few minutes, and when at last she entered the house she found nobody there but Kathleen, who stood up, looking at her with rather hostile eyes.

"How do you do, Kathie? You don't look a bit glad to see me," she said quickly.

"I can't imagine why you should come like this, and with father," said Kathleen, just touching her sister-in-law's hand and no more. "They have gone upstairs. Won't you sit down and have some tea? Kinman, tell Miss Lulu tea is here."

Kathleen's manner was very cool, and she abstained from looking at Clare's face.

Clare, seldom at a loss, would instantly have asked a question concerning the welcome she was receiving, but presently Lulu came darting on the scene—a very engaging young damsel at the flapper stage, with a flood of bright brown hair tied in two thick pig-tails with an immense ribbon-bow behind.

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Kathleen, still frowning, turned to the tea-table, and Lulu, to whom Clare had always been kind, greeted her rapturously.

Meanwhile, in the boudoir upstairs, the elderly lovers were making much of each other, Mrs. Rodney weeping unrestrainedly. She had had no idea how much she had missed her husband until she saw him in the flesh once more; and if he had ever had any doubts about his welcome, they were set at rest. But, indeed, he had never had any doubts. Cyrus Rodney was a man who never expected anything but the best, and to whom the best therefore came by natural right.

"There, there, mother! Sit down, my dear, and try to calm yourself," he said, wiping his own eyes.

"You're crying yourself, Cyrus; so don't deny it. I'm most awfully glad to see you. I haven't seen a man half as good-looking or so nice since you went away, and I do believe, if you had stopped another month away, I should have sailed to Australia to fetch you home!"

"I came as soon as I possibly could, and your heart may be at rest about the boy, Louisa. He will be happy there, and he will do well. He has plenty of good friends of the right sort. But you and I will take a trip—perhaps next year—and see him. I promised him we should."

"I don't mind if I go this year. I've had enough worry in the last six months to last me all my life, Cyrus, I do assure you! And that woman is downstairs! What has she been saying to you about me?"

Cyrus looked bewildered and rather blank.

"About you? Nothing but what is good and kind. We talked chiefly about Cyril. Are they happy, do you think, and how did it ever come about?"

"Oh, she just inveigled him—and I know for a fact that she's at least fifteen years older! When he is in his

prime, as I told her very plainly, she will be a haggard old woman. She didn't like that, but I was so mad to think they had been married on the sly for six weeks that I wasn't too particular about what I said. They were plain truths, anyway."

"Married on the sly!" repeated Cyrus wonderingly. "And what about Carrie Bygrave? He was engaged to her for two whole years. How did he free himself honourably from that promise to her?"

"He didn't free himself, dear, and poor Carrie is dead—died of a broken heart, Cyrus," she said rapidly. "And Kitty is engaged to Ted Charters. Estelle is the only one who hasn't done anything—and oh! I *am* glad you have come back to put us all straight again and to guide me about the money! I've had my fling, and I think I'm pretty sick of it already, for I know just how much it has all been worth!"

"Carrie dead! Poor, bright, pretty bird!"

The first cloud—and it was a heavy one—descended on the joy of Cyrus Rodney's return to the bosom of his family.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE BOSOM OF THE FAMILY

LULU quickly tired of the odd, strained atmosphere round the tea-table and took herself off. Then Clare, setting down her cup, looked quite straightly at her sister-in-law.

"Perhaps you'll kindly tell me what I have done to offend you, Kitty?"

Kathleen turned deliberately away, rested the toe of her dainty shoe on the bar of the fender, and looked into the fire, answering nothing.

"I suppose it was the par in the *Morning Post*, but Ted and I came to the conclusion, for various reasons, that it was quite time it was done."

"There will be another to-morrow morning contradicting it," said Kathleen quite coolly.

"Oh, nonsense!" said Clare. "Don't be silly, taking it like that. After all, you *are* engaged, and most people know it."

"It made mother very angry," said Kathleen. "It was a very cool cheek of you and Ted to do such a thing without consulting us! It will certainly be contradicted to-morrow."

"But you can't do that, Kitty. Why, Ted quite expects that the marriage will take place before Christmas."

"Then he has made a very big mistake, Clare, for the marriage won't take place before Christmas, or ever at all."

Clare looked deeply mystified.

"I don't understand what you are driving at, Kitty."

You can't have quarrelled. Ted had a letter at Glenlochan the very day Cyril and I left, and he seemed perfectly happy and most ridiculously in love with you."

Kitty merely curled her lip, and Clare, now thoroughly aroused, got up and walked to the fireplace too, so that she might be able to study Kathleen's face.

"What has happened?" she asked with a touch of imperiousness. "I am entitled to know, Kitty. I am Ted's sister, and I was the beginning of everything."

Kitty's blue eyes flashed a sort of dull fire, but she would not let herself utter the words which rushed to her lips.

She wanted to say out quite clearly and loudly that there had been scarcely a day's happiness in any of their lives since Clare Hatherley had entered them. But, reflecting that such speech would only add to the bitterness and do no possible good, she merely bent her eyes on the crackling logs and held her peace.

"What has Ted done?" pursued Clare. "You ought to tell me, Kitty. Perhaps—who knows?—I might be able to help."

"You couldn't help. It is something quite outside your help altogether—something which concerns only Ted and me."

"Then it concerns me too," said Clare firmly, "and I shall never rest till I have found it all out."

There was a little silence, broken by the tick of the clock and the soft crackle of the fire.

Clare felt furious and baffled, and she had an almost overmastering desire to shake Kathleen Rodney until she got at the truth.

"Of course it is only some silly lie or gossip from some envious tongue," she said, trying to maintain the steady carelessness of her voice. "A man so popular and sought after as Ted is bound to have enemies who envy him his good luck. Don't do anything in a hurry,

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Kitty, and remember that it is always easier to break down and destroy than to build up."

Kitty, whom the words appeared to rouse, swept round upon her sister-in-law in a sudden, quiet fury.

"Well, if you will have it, I have seen Anna Helder."

Clare brought her slender hands together with a little clap of scorn.

"Pouf! Is that all? I might have guessed it. Anna Helder—of course! But I thought she was in Holland, safely anchored by the bedside of fat Uncle Heinrich."

"I saw her at Mrs. Dyner's yesterday. Ted had not the right to ask me to marry him while he was bound, as he is, to another woman. I will never forgive him for it, nor you for permitting it when you knew."

Clare laughed lightly, really relieved.

"My dear little country child, is that all? You really are most refreshing. Why, if you had any eyes at all, or any knowledge of the world, you would know that Anna Helder is merely a disappointed, jealous woman, who has been pursuing poor Ted all her life. They have known each other always, as there is a kind of relationship—very distant—through Mrs. Dyner. You would never make shipwreck of so many lives for a trifle like that?"

Kitty pursed her lips together, but no further word issued from them.

"I knew nothing about it," went on Clare, lying glibly, according to her creed and habit, when circumstances seemed to justify or demand it. "And if I had, I shouldn't have troubled my head. You could not possibly think that a man like Ted Charters could have reached the age he has without having had a few affairs! But I do believe that he has never been honestly in love till now, and I tell you you'll ruin him if you throw him over now. He isn't a boy, and he cares for you desperately."

"I can't help that, and, further, I don't believe it."

"Tell me just what Anna Helder said. I have the right to know. Ted is my brother, and I'm most awfully fond of him. Besides, I know just what this will mean to him."

Kitty made no reply.

"You will not be so foolish as to break your engagement for anything so small and petty, or, at least, you'll give Ted a chance to explain?"

"There is nothing that can be explained," said Kitty hardly, "and I have written to him to-day, breaking everything off."

"Does your mother know?"

"Nobody knows. I engaged myself to him without asking anybody, and I disengage myself in the same way—that's all," said the girl proudly.

Again Clare felt an insane desire to shake her. Her chagrin was infinite. This had happened at a most inopportune moment. There was very much at stake where her own position was concerned, and, knowing Mrs. Rodney's present state of mind, she had no doubt but that this would militate seriously against both her and Cyril's prospects.

She was in the mood to quarrel with anybody—with Ted, with Anna Helder, with Kathleen most of all. Only she dared not. Admirable mistress of herself, she preserved an expression of profound regret which was most convincing.

"I think you have been most premature. But I hope that even yet you'll give Ted a chance to explain. Promise me that you will, before you speak to your mother or let anybody in the family or outside of it know what has happened."

"I can't promise anything, and, as I have said, there is no explanation possible. Anna Helder sent me a package of Ted's letters this morning. They cover a

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long period—years and years—but the last one was written by Ted to her in Holland.”

“Oh!” said Clare, and she drew her breath rather sharply, for now there was something to go upon.

She knew Ted’s outrageous softness of heart where women were concerned, his inability to hurt them, and how easy they found it to play on his feelings. And he had never possessed a tith of his sister’s acumen and foresight. He had never been afraid to commit himself on paper. He had written reams of love letters and forgotten them the moment they had flowed from his pen.

But how to explain this odd idiosyncrasy to people like the Rodneys with their extraordinary, puritanical ideas, was a problem for which, as yet, Clare had found no solution. She had had to face it before when called to task by Mrs. Rodney with regard to certain persons whom Clare had got her to invite to Hans Crescent.

“Whatever Anna Helder may have said or given you to believe, it is all exaggerated. If everybody acted in this high-handed sort of way, heavens! where would any of us be? None of us are saints. We live in an ordinary and rather difficult world. Believe me, Kitty, the only short cut to happiness is to forgive and to forget.”

“There are some things with regard to which it is not possible to do either. I would show you that letter—the last one, I mean—only it would shame me too much. It was written just after Ted had asked me to marry him, and it—it explained to Miss Helder why he had had to do it. He said quite frankly that it was necessary for him to marry money, and that she had always known it.”

“Oh, the fool!” muttered Clare under her hot breath.

“Of course, after that, even you will admit that there is no more to be said,” went on Kitty quite calmly, though the colour was burning high in her cheek.

“I admit nothing. If you knew Ted as well as I



do, you would realise what a big, irresponsible child he is. He knows perfectly that Anna has always been after him. You may trust a man for that. And he is so constituted that he can't bear to hurt a woman's feelings. He wrote that letter just to smooth Anna down, and I don't believe there was a word of truth in it, so far as his actual feelings were concerned. Won't you make allowances, Kitty, and give him another chance?"

"I should be afraid to marry such a man," said Kitty coldly. "One could never be sure of a moment's happiness or peace."

"And you have written, you say, breaking off the engagement? Did you send the letter to Glenlochan?"

"Yes."

"Posted to-day?" she asked with scarcely concealed eagerness.

Kitty nodded.

"He won't get it for a day or two, I'm afraid. He was leaving yesterday; unless some change of plan happened."

Again Kitty made no answer; and then Clare, as if tired of the subject, said she would like to go to her room. "Kitty would be so very good as to tell her where she could find it."

"I'm afraid it won't be ready yet. Mother wasn't expecting you. Of course, you haven't seen mother yet. But come up. I think I know where you would go."

They ascended the wide gallery stair together. Kitty showed her into one of the most spacious of the guest-rooms and immediately left her.

She did her duty and no more. She could not find it in her heart to be cordial to Cyril's wife.

Clare closed the door, and her expression changed to one of quick, resentful anger.

"Heavens, what people! Nothing can be done with them!" she muttered. "They have got the Noncon-

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formist conscience developed to an appalling extent! I must get a wire somehow through to Glenlochan, telling them to send Ted's letters to the flat. Something must be risked, and he must be got here as soon as possible."

But even amidst all her planning and plotting to circumvent Anna Helder something whispered that it was futile, that the die was cast, that Ted had lost what appeared to be his last chance.

Happening at this particular juncture, it would militate against her, she knew, and she began to think that, after all, she had bungled that year of incomparable chance, and that she was not going to reap the rich reward she had counted on.

A decent house in London, where she could entertain and be entertained, and an income sufficient to relieve her from sordid care for all time to come were the prizes she had bargained and sold herself for. And, unless she could get things put on a solid and satisfactory basis immediately, she feared the day would be lost.

With Clare to think was usually to act. She walked to the bell-pull and rang sharply. In a minute or two a housemaid appeared to take her orders.

"Can you tell me how far it is to the village—or rather to the nearest telegraph office?"

"Not far, ma'am. Through the park and the field it don't take more'n ten minutes."

"Ah, in what direction? Can you show me from the window?"

"Yes'm. It's just right down to the church spire. You can't go wrong. See, right by that line of trees. But if it's telegrams, ma'am, one of the men will take them."

"I should like to go myself, thank you. And please have my things brought up and a fire lit. I'm a chilly mortal."

She smiled in friendly fashion at the girl, who immediately proceeded to do her bidding.

As she took the pretty walk to the village post office Clare reflected that most certainly she must now pin her faith and hope to Cyrus Rodney, and make her case, and appeal to him as strongly as possible.

She dispatched her telegrams—one to Ted, requesting him to come to Wreford without delay, and adding a few cryptic words which would prepare him for what he might expect; then another to Glenlochan, directing what was to be done with his letters.

She felt better after she had accomplished so much, and she turned to take the walk home and make ready for the evening's campaign, which practically meant the siege of Cyrus Rodney.

In the village street she came face to face with Estelle, who had just come in by a slow train and was now walking home. Their surprise was mutual, though Estelle's was the greater. She imagined that both Cyril and his wife were still in Scotland.

"How do you do, Clare?" she said in her quiet, cool voice. "I am surprised to see you. When did you come?"

"To-day. And I had the extreme pleasure of traveling down from Waterloo with your father."

Estelle's face flushed with joy and emotion.

"With father! But I don't understand! We did not expect him till next week."

"He seems to have got in ahead of time," said Clare genially. "Of course, it is quite a family atmosphere up at the house, so I just slipped out as I had a couple of telegrams to send."

Estelle nodded, and they turned to walk together in the direction of the house.

"Is Cyril with you?"

"No. I left Cyril at Hexham, or rather I parted from him at Newcastle on my way south."

"But isn't he coming?"

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"Yes—at the end of next week. Your father is looking very well, Estelle. But so are you. Slumming seems to agree with you."

Estelle made no comment on these words, intended for a compliment. She could not make any pretence of liking her sister-in-law, and both found it expedient not to see much of each other.

"We start electioneering next week," said Clare presently. "Cyril was wondering which of you would be willing to come to East Breen with us and help. We shall need all the bolstering we can get."

"I won't come!" said Estelle decidedly.

"Why not? I don't call that sisterly, especially as I hear that you are developing quite a platform gift."

Estelle coloured.

"Who told you that?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I believe it was Lord Allingham," said Clare, keeping her eyes narrowly fixed on Estelle's face, on the watch for any sign of self-consciousness or embarrassment. But she observed none.

"I can't imagine how Lord Allingham ever came to know such a thing, even if it were true," said Estelle. "All the speaking I have done is just a few words to my club girls and to the mothers at the Mission."

"Still, every little helps. I wish you would get Allingham to come down and give us a hand, Estelle. He has already refused me, but I'm sure he would come if you asked him."

Estelle turned her head and deliberately met her sister-in-law's gaze.

"I don't know what you mean by saying such a thing, Clare. I haven't any influence with Lord Allingham."

"Then it hasn't come to anything?"

"What hasn't?"

"Your mother told me ages ago—as far back as July—that he admired you."

Estelle laughed.

"I hear of it now for the first time. I haven't seen him since we left London. When he motored down here one day I happened to be at the mission. We don't want any more rumours put in the newspapers, Clare, if you please. Mother was frightfully upset about that one in the *Morning Post* yesterday."

"But that wasn't a rumour, and it was quite time it was announced."

They walked some little distance in silence. Then Estelle drew an evening paper from her satchel, in which she carried various papers and things belonging to the Mission.

"There's something about East Breen there, Clare, that might interest you—the name of the Labour candidate."

Clare grasped the sheet eagerly, and stood still on the soft grass of the park until she had found the name.

"Bygrave! Now, where have I heard the name before?" she said musingly. "Does Cyril know him?"

"Yes," answered Estelle. "It was his sister who died in the summer. We knew all the family before we got the money."

Estelle never blinked facts or gilded any pill.

Clare bit her lips, handed back the paper, and they walked on to the house without further speech.

"I wonder why you hate me so much, Estelle Rodney?" said Clare before they entered. "I've never done you any harm, and, though I married your brother, I've got very little out of the bargain. He has got everything."

"We can't discuss it," said Estelle rather painfully. "And I don't hate you. Only you and I belong to different worlds, as far removed from each other as the east is from the west. As a matter of fact, I belong

to the east in all my habits and thoughts—'and never the twain shall meet.'"

"I don't want to fight with anybody," said Clare pensively. "I'm simply striving to be civil and nice to everybody all round, and the position is pretty nearly impossible as it stands. You must see that, Estelle. If Cyril is to do any good, or achieve a position worth having, we must have not only a free hand but a full purse. Cyril won't ask his mother. He has thrust me into the painful position of being obliged to do it."

"I shouldn't do that for any man alive," said Estelle clearly. "And, please, don't tell me these things. They only make me miserable, Clare. Surely father and mother are the people to discuss them with."

"I only thought you might be a friend instead of an enemy, but I'm mistaken," said Clare coldly, and they went into the house.

The cloud seemed to have passed when they met at dinner, where everybody was beaming. It was a family party, at which Clare was the only alien. But Cyrus Rodney, whose beautiful philosophy of life invariably prompted him to make the best of everything, showed special kindness to his new daughter, and drew her, as it were, into the inner circle.

Naturally he had a great deal to say about his Australian visit, and Clare took her full share in the conversation, exerting herself to please in a way which Mrs. Rodney had never yet seen.

"She put her best foot foremost to-night, and no mistake, Cyrus," said Mrs. Rodney to her husband when they went upstairs. "But don't you be taken in. She can be nasty enough. She has often been nasty to me, and I've just had to show her that I won't have it! She isn't satisfied with Cyril's allowance. Now, Cyrus, don't you think that five hundred a year is a very good income for a young couple just starting? Besides, she must have

some money of her own, seeing she has had to live before she ever met Cyril."

"Five hundred is a good income in certain circumstances, my dear," said Cyrus mildly, "but if Cyril is to enter Parliament and to live in London, I'm afraid it won't suffice."

"I never thought you would countenance extravagance, dear," said his wife in a surprised voice. "But to-morrow we must have a regular committee of ways and means. I thought I would be ashamed for you to know how much I had spent in a year. I've made a pretty big hole in poor Edgar's money."

"That was quite inevitable," said Cyrus good-humouredly. "But I hope you are not going to live in London. It is very pleasant here, Louisa."

"We can talk over that, too. I've had all I want of London, I do believe, unless the girls would like a few weeks next season. Then we can take a smaller furnished house. Then there's Kitty and Ted. He's another one who doesn't seem able to keep himself. That's one of the things in Society that surprises me. There are so many men—quite active, strong young men—who don't seem to earn anything! They just loaf about town and are kept by their parents. Don't you think it's a very bad thing both for them and the country as well? Where are the workers of the next generation to come from?"

"Oh, I suppose they are not all like that, Louisa. There must always be a percentage of workers. Nature takes care of that."

Cyrus Rodney was long in falling asleep that night, because his heart and mind were so full of engrossing thought. Wonder and gratitude undoubtedly were uppermost. For God was still leading them as a family, and he had no doubt but that in due time they would be brought by tortuous ways, yet surely and well, to the green pastures and the quiet waters.

## CHAPTER XXV

### BITTER HARVEST

CLARE'S telegram failed to reach Glenlochan in time to prevent Kitty's letter being forwarded, and Ted duly received it one morning when it was too wild and stormy for the guns to go out on the Hexham Moors.

The party, already a little glum over continuous wet weather, was not likely to have its gaiety enhanced by Ted's receipt of such news, as they damped his spirits at once. They were in the billiard-room at the moment, trying to put in an hour or two while waiting for the storm to abate.

Cyril was playing, for billiards was one of the few accomplishments in which he had attained considerable proficiency during the years when he had been a commercial traveller.

He observed his brother-in-law's expression change as he conned the address of a certain letter. Immediately he had opened and glanced at it he left the room.

Kitty's few words of dismissal left Ted Charters in no doubt. All she had to say was written slantwise across the sheet of notepaper which enclosed the last letter he had written when he tried to clear himself with Anna Helder.

He did not care, nor did he dare, to read that letter. The very memory of it made him feel sick. He was not surprised at Kitty's indignation. No woman with a grain of spirit could do otherwise.

What to do next! He sat down on the front of his



bed in the bachelor room and stared glumly at the crumpled sheet.

He might go back, but no amount of eloquence or of passionate pleading could wipe out that damning proof of his folly and incredible recklessness. He had lied to Anna Helder, just as he had lied to all other women save Kitty alone. For he loved her with all the depth and sincerity of which he was capable, and the idea of giving her up, the thought of the scorn in which she held him, now unmanned him.

He had still three days of his visit to put in, but he was intimate enough with his host to be able to excuse himself. He knew that, so far as getting any further good out of the sport was concerned, he was done.

Yes, he would go back. He took the Bradshaw up from the little bookshelf to be found in every room of that perfectly appointed bachelor house and made study of the trains. By getting to Newcastle he could catch a train which would run him into King's Cross at ten-thirty that evening. He would take that.

He was about to run down to the billiard-room to tell Tony Bagshot he had to go when Cyril burst in.

"Say, old chap, I've had a wire from Clare. She wants me to go to my people at once. She's there, and my father has come home."

"Oh!" said Ted rather heavily. "I'm going too."

"Has she wired you, too?" asked Cyril interestedly.

"But, naturally, the old man would like to see you. A regular family party, I suppose, engineered by Clare."

Cyril did not mean to be ironical, but that was the impression he conveyed to Ted.

Charters sat up suddenly and surveyed his brother-in-law with a certain kind of serious interest. Cyril was quite harmless, but he had no qualities of mind or heart such as command for a man the respect and admiration of his fellows. A pretty average, useless cumberer of the

ground—neither better nor worse than hundreds of others whose manhood had been crushed by lack of responsibility and of any serious call to quit themselves like men.

Charters could make no boast. In fact, his sins of omission were greater, for he was of better stuff than the other. He had all the breeding, the gifts, the extraordinary personal power and charm which are born of centuries of privilege. And some of that privilege had been nobly used by his kindred, though he himself had fallen so woefully short.

At that moment of searching Ted Charters was ashamed of himself, of Cyril, of the cult and order they represented, and something sprang new-born in his eyes and gave a kind of pathetic nobility to his beautiful features.

He was honestly sorry for Cyril, bound as he was to Clare, who treated him precisely as a person of no account, a mere necessary stepping-stone to certain ends she had in view. And his abilities were so mediocre that, even if they managed to get him a seat in Parliament, he never would achieve anything more, but would simply be lost and swallowed up in the maelstrom of political life, without adding so much as a ripple to its flow.

"No; she hasn't wired," answered Charters; "but I've heard from Wreford."

"Of course—from Kitty. What does she say about the old man? I hope he's fit. I think I'll be jolly glad to see him," said Cyril, with an almost boyish ring in his voice.

"She doesn't say anything about him. Fact is, Cyril. I've got my marching orders from her this morning. Shut that door and sit down. I may as well tell you. Perhaps you'd advise me what to do."

Cyril, considerably astonished, shut the door, and, sitting down on the edge of the dressing-table, looked with interest and sympathy into Ted's downcast face.

"What's happened, old chap? Nothing much, I'm sure. It'll blow over. It's bound to," he said cheerfully, as he tugged at his small and well-groomed moustache.

He looked so like a big, comfortable boy at the moment that Charters suddenly felt himself almost a patriarch.

"Doubtful," he said glumly. "You see, there's another woman, and she has written to Kitty, and it's all U P."

"Miss Helder?" hazarded Cyril.

Ted nodded.

"I suppose Clare told you?"

"Well, not exactly. I could put two and two together for myself," said Cyril shrewdly. "But I shouldn't have thought now that Miss Helder would have minded—at least, not to that extent."

Ted Charters held his peace. He had fallen far short of the standard of his race, but there were some things yet from which his finer manhood shrank. He would not discuss Anna Helder with any outsider. He knew now by the pain which tugged at his own heart-strings what she must have suffered.

"She happens to mind," was all he said. "And I'm in a hole—a deep hole, Cyril; a hole I can't get out of."

Cyril slid from the table and took a turn across the floor. An odd expression came on his face, robbing it of its boyishness.

"Is it advice you want, old chap?"

"If you've any to offer that would fit the case, I'll hear it," said Ted forlornly, as he drew out his cigarette case.

But Cyril's next words dumbfounded him:

"Then go back to Miss Helder. If it's peace you're out after, go back. It's the only way."

Charters stared at his brother-in-law a full minute in amazed silence.

"But—but why do you say that?"

"Because I've been through it," said Cyril grimly, "and it's hell! And it doesn't get better as you go on, but only worse. And now we're on this business, Ted, I tell you frankly that, if I could go back and wipe out this rotten year, and take my old berth at Hammond's, with all its greasy sordidness—skirts and blouses, Ted, sellin' 'em to the retail!—I'd do it—yes, and be glad—if it would wipe out the other thing! So now you know how bad I feel."

"She died, didn't she?" said Ted, and his voice, never a harsh one, seemed to sink to a melting softness.

"She did—and I see her now. By God, I'll always see her! And Clare laughed at me, Ted. She hasn't got any heart. She doesn't care a cent for me. She has as good as told me so. I'm only the oof bird. I've come up against that a considerable time ago. That's why I have been so jolly slack about the election business. What do I care? Not a red cent. What am I going to get out of it? Not a blooming thing! I'm her doormat, Ted. But it isn't going to last!"

More and more amazed, Ted Charters was lifted for the moment out of his own keen pain by the revelation of unimagined fires raging under the superficial surface which Cyril Rodney presented to the world.

Clare and he had made many mistakes in the course of their chequered career, but never had they made a greater one than when they underrated the capacity of the Rodneys.

"I don't blame you, either," he said, as he began to make his cigarette. "But why don't you stand up to her and speak out like a man, as you're doing now? It's what she'd respect, Cyril. She's my sister, and I know."

Under his breath Cyril mumbled something which Charters did not catch.

"Are you going to-day, then? And will you tell

Tony, or shall I?" Cyril said presently in his normal voice.

"It doesn't matter. We needn't go till after lunch. I've looked up the beastly trains, and I find that, if we go into Newcastle from Hexham at two-fifty, we can catch the four-thirty, landing us in London not too late. We can dine on the train."

"And go down to Wreford next morning—right you are," said Cyril, and he took himself off to see about his own packing.

During that journey these two men, of such different habits and upbringing, came nearer understanding each other than they had yet done, and each conceived a new respect for the other.

The flat was shut up, and they went to the chambers which Charters had in the Albany, and which were always ready for him. There they spent the night.

Cyril went down to Haslemere by the ten-fifteen next morning, but Charters declined to accompany him.

"I haven't got my bearings yet, Cyril. Besides, if I'm to see Kitty at all, it can't be in a crowd. But if you can put in a word for me, old boy, I'll be grateful."

Cyril nodded. They shook hands warmly, and he went off to Waterloo in the taxi.

Charters loafed about for an hour or more, and about noon he proceeded in somewhat leisurely fashion to St. John's Wood, walking all the way. He went first to Ambrosia House, where he was interviewed by Eliza Inman.

"She's very bad, Mr. Charters, and the doctor, I can see, doesn't think there's much hope," she said, and the genuine sorrow in her voice touched Charters, who was in a chastened mood.

"You don't think she would see me?" he said anxiously.

Eliza shook her head.

"She would, if she were awake, but she had such a bad night that the doctor gave her morphia when he came about an hour ago. She's under it now, and she won't likely wake up till the afternoon."

"Ah, I'm sorry. I'll try to come back; but if I don't, be sure to tell her I was here."

"I shall be certain to do that. She often talks about you, Mr. Charters."

"Does she? I am glad to think she has you to look after her, for I am sure you'll do it well."

"I wish I could do it better," answered Eliza disconsolately. "I can't bear to think of the future without her. She has been so good to me! I had no idea that there could be anybody quite so kind and good in the whole world!"

"I suppose heaps of people come to inquire?"

"Crowds. All sorts of people—charwomen and newsboys and policemen and dustmen, as well as grand folks in carriages and motors! I don't believe there is anybody in London who has as many friends," said Eliza proudly. "And some of them went away crying yesterday when we had nothing but a poor message to give them."

Charters went out, shaking his head. There seemed to be no rest for the sole of his foot that day, yet there was no sign of indecision about him as he turned away from the gate.

He merely went round the corner into Marlborough Hill to Anna Helder's door, and when he reached it he knew that that was the main object on which he had set out.

He gave "good-morning" to the smart parlour-maid, who showed him at once into the beautiful room—half drawing-room, half study—where Anna spent her leisure hours and entertained her friends.

She was there alone, practising at the piano, of which

she was passionately fond. At sight of Charters she appeared disconcerted for a moment, for he was certainly the last person she expected to see.

She wore a gown of black *crêpe de Chine*, with a touch of gold on the bodice, very plainly made, and having a sweeping train which set off her fine figure to advantage.

She looked tired and rather old, Ted thought, as he entered and the door was closed behind him.

"It's you, Ted?" she said, with a slight, forced smile. "Why, I thought you were continents away!"

"I came from Scotland last night," he answered gravely, and sat down on the nearest chair. "How did you leave Uncle Heinrich?"

"Better—but not well. He won't live long, Ted, and he has set his house in order. He wants me to go out to Holland and live with him for good, and I think I will. I'm tired of London."

She leaned against the piano, and began to pick to pieces a bunch of little yellow-and-gold Scotch roses that were stuffed in her belt.

She was feeling frightfully uncomfortable, for she had never before seen Ted Charters so preternaturally grave, and she knew by intuition that he had something behind.

"Well, you've dished me, Anna," he said presently. "There you are!"

He took from his pocket-book the big square envelope which contained his last letter to her and the sheet with Kathleen's few words scribbled across it. She scarcely looked at it, but her face deeply flushed.

"I told her the truth. She deserved it. You were marrying her under false pretences."

"I suppose I was," he said quietly, as he stooped to pick up the sheets, which she had allowed to flutter to the floor. "I thought that most probably you'd like to know that your arrow had reached the mark."

She made no answer, and her eyes, full of bitter pain, were fixed steadily on the ground. Anger, reproach, remonstrance, she could have met, but this strange gravity upset her.

"I'm dished," he repeated quietly, "and I'm going out of England. I've been round to Aunt Julia's. She seems to be jolly bad. That woman who looks after her says there isn't any hope hardly. Have you seen her lately? I mean, have you had any talk with her?"

"I see her every day," said Anna, but, though she answered his question, her eyes betrayed that it was not of Aunt Julia she was thinking at the moment.

"Perhaps it's just as well she shouldn't know about this, Anna. I'll be much obliged to you if you won't mention it."

"Why should I? We don't talk about you," she said hardly. "As a matter of fact, she is able to talk very little now."

"Well, I'll go. Probably we shan't meet often, if at all, after Aunt Julia goes. She was the only link. If you go to live with Uncle Heinrich I hope you'll be happy. There are worse places than Holland, I believe. Life flows peacefully there, and people don't take so much out of it."

She followed him with her eyes as he went to the door. Something told her it was a last good-bye.

He paused just there and turned back.

"Anna, I'm sorry for all that has gone. I know now how you feel. Things might have been better if we'd taken the plunge ten years ago. We are the product of our age and time, and we can't help ourselves."

"Ted!" she cried desperately. "I'm sorry, too. I wish now I hadn't told her! I'll—I'll write, if you like, and tell her that only some of it was true."

"You forget that letter of mine. Nothing could wipe out that. I didn't mean the half of it, Anna. You



understood. She never would. She doesn't see through our eyes. I pray to God she never will, for we've all made a pretty rotten mess of it among us, and the reckoning has come!"

When he would have passed through the doorway she ran forward and laid her hand on his arm.

"Ted!" she cried, and all her woman's heart was in her eyes. "I don't like the way you speak or the way you look. It isn't the end of everything. It can't be! Promise me you won't——"

He smiled queerly.

"I hadn't thought of it, honour bright. Good-bye, just now. I'm glad you've forgiven me—at least, I think you have by the look in your eyes. Good-bye, old girl."

He went out rather quickly, and Anna Helder, conscious of nothing but her intense misery, threw herself on the sofa and wept her heart out among the cushions.

Cyril thought a good deal about Ted Charters as the train ran down into Surrey. Never had he liked him so well. If possible, he determined to give him a leg up. He would take an early opportunity of talking to Kathleen and of getting things patched up between them. *Their* case was not hopeless, as they were both alive, and Anna Helder had done her worst.

Having come to this conclusion, Cyril lit a cigarette, opened out the *Morning Post*, and, among the political intelligence, in which he now took some interest, he learned that Dick Bygrave was to contest East Breen as a Labour candidate.

He sat staring at the paragraph a good while, and his face settled into a kind of grim determination. The look was still on his face when he got out at Wreford Junction and saw Clare on the platform. He had wired early in the morning, so that her presence there was no surprise.

"I didn't let them send the car, for it's a fine morn-

ing, and I wanted to talk to you. The cart is here for your stuff. Where's Ted?" she asked.

"I left him at the Albany. We got in late last night, and we slept at his place."

"But why didn't he come? I am sure I thought I made my message urgent enough," she said, as they turned to leave the station.

"He won't come, Clare. Anna has put her spoke in, and it'll take some trouble to put things right."

"Kitty's a little fool! I've had one talk with her. She goes on as if we were all plaster saints in glass cases! They all do that. Oh, but I'm deadly sick of them! Your father is the only human being in the place."

"How is he?" asked Cyril, not appearing to resent her remarks. He had had to digest a good many similar ones of late.

"He's all right—looking younger, I think. Your mother is in a state of seraphic happiness, but that doesn't prevent her giving me occasional digs. I'm going to stop here. We've both got to stop, Cyril, till something is settled about us. If you get in for East Breen, of course it'll help."

"I won't get in for East Breen, because I'm not standing, Clare," said Cyril quietly.

She stood still in the roadway and looked at him steadily.

She was looking well herself, and ridiculously young in her girlish costume of Harris tweed and a smart French sailor hat with a quill at the side—the proper country get-up, which became her quite well.

"Now, what new idiocy is this? I've had about enough of late, Cyril. I warn you my temper isn't anything to brag about this morning!"

"I'm not standing," repeated Cyril quietly. "Let us walk on. Which is the way, and is it far?"

"It's a mile through the park. We go in at this private wicket. But, Cyril, in the name of goodness, what do you mean?"

"I've just seen that Dick Bygrave is the Labour candidate. I'm not fighting him, thank you, Clare."

"Dick Bygrave!" she echoed in tones of ineffable scorn. "You would let a trifle like that stand in your way!"

"Bygrave is hardly a trifle, but we're not going to discuss it, Clare," he said, and his face hardened into an obstinacy she had never before seen in it.

It made him look very like his mother, and a sort of chill seemed to creep over her.

"But, Cyril," she cried in a low, tense voice which indicated the depth of her displeasure, "you must be mad! You can't play fast and loose with people like that. Nobody does."

"Can't I? It's open to any man to change his mind. I've got mine made up as to what I'm going to say. I'll put it on to the three-cornered contest. It's no use talking, Clare. Understand that I won't fight Bygrave. I won't, I tell you, nor come within sight or hearing of him in my life again, if I can avoid it. Now let's talk about something else."

"If you go up with that cock-and-bull story to your mother, it's all up with us," she said angrily.

"I don't think so. My mother will understand. She knew the Bygraves. She would see the indecency of it quickly enough. I think I'll take a trip to Australia and see what the little chap's about, Clare. Things haven't turned out as I expected."

She knew perfectly well what he meant, because she had made no effort either to give him a home or affection or anything to which a man is entitled in married life. She had, indeed, very soon after their marriage permitted him to see that her motive had been an entirely selfish

one, and that his demonstrations of affection bored her to extinction. She had not spared him of late. On the contrary, she had railed at everything connected with him and his people, and she had once even said that she had been badly cheated in marrying him.

He had swallowed all these insults, but not one of them was forgotten.

"And what do you propose to do with me?" she asked shrilly. "I'm not going to Australia."

"I didn't expect that you would," he answered in the same quiet, passionless voice. "You told me at Glenlochan that you were sick of the sight of me, so probably I'll be a good riddance. Is this the house? Rather a nice place, isn't it? Why, there's the old man."

He darted from her side in pursuit of a figure he saw in the distance by the side of the ornamental lake.

Clare went on to the house, feeling very sick at heart. But before the day closed real trouble took the place of imaginary ones.

The evening papers contained the news that the Hon. Edward Charters, younger brother of Lord Radleigh, had shot himself in his chambers at the Albany and had died on the spot.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### SUNRISE

JOHN GLIDE, riding on the top of an omnibus down Whitehall, saw walking quietly along the pavement a figure he recognised. Without waiting to make sure, he swung himself to the footboard, and thence to the ground, while the omnibus was still in rapid motion.

"That was a most dangerous proceeding, and, if anything had happened, John, I should have been obliged to give evidence that nobody was to blame but yourself," said Estelle Rodney reprovingly.

John merely laughed as he shook hands.

"I was afraid I'd lose sight of you. There generally is a fairly good crowd about the gates of an afternoon, and we don't enter by the same door. I needn't ask you how you are. You look the picture of health."

"I am. I've had a month at Cannes. We came home only last night."

"And where are you staying?"

"We are at the Coburg for a few days, but I hope we are going back to Wreford. I think father and mother want to buy it, John. They are to meet Lady Boltwood to-morrow about it."

"You would like that, Estelle."

"Yes. I shall be glad to be near London," she said evasively. "It makes life easier."

"Old Dick will be glad you have come back in time to hear him speak to-day. Last night he didn't expect it." Estelle made no answer, and Glide went on: "He's more nervous about it than I expected. After all, what

is it, Miss Rodney? When one thinks of all the twaddle talked inside these walls and of the spectacles men make of themselves!"

"Dick speaks well, of course. But, if he were not nervous he would not be effective. Haven't you noticed that?"

"Not with Dick. I've heard yarns on the theory from Gladstone downwards. But we needn't be nervous about Dick, I think; and I guess that in the whole of that big place you and I will be the only ones taking that kind of interest in him."

Estelle did not deny it.

The result of the contest at East Breen had surprised everybody, for, though a strong candidate had been found to take Cyril Rodney's place, Bygrave had got in.

It was a result sincerely regretted and deplored at the moment by the many who viewed the growing power of Labour with distrust and apprehension.

But those who knew Bygrave did not share these qualms, for he was head and shoulders above the rank and file of the party with whom he marched simply because there was no other which made an attempt to express his views.

He was neither a fanatic nor a revolutionary now, however, but a living example of the fact that it is responsibility which makes men. His gift of eloquence, which had never failed to grip the audiences on Tower Hill, and which had surprised many during the election, was now destined to thrill another and a more critical crowd.

That day he was to make his maiden speech in the House of Commons, and he imagined that John Glide would be the only personal friend present to hear him.

"This is your gate, I think," said Estelle, as they crossed slantwise toward Palace Yard. "And, please,

if you should see Dick before he speaks, don't tell him I am in the House."

"But why not? It would help him," said John bluntly.

The colour wavered in Estelle's face.

"I would rather you did not tell him. Why, there is Eugene Woods crossing over! I must wait and shake hands with him. His book is a success, John. Have you read it?"

"No. But Dick says it is good stuff."

"And look at him! Hasn't he changed? Why he even walks differently! He seems taller, more dignified, different altogether."

"Success works wonders," said John Glide, and he wondered whether Estelle was aware that Eugene, too, loved her.

A variety of motives sends men to literature—or, at least, to voicing their thoughts upon paper. When there is acute personal experience at the back, very often the power to move and to grip is there with it.

Eugene Woods had written a powerful, moving book in clear and simple language, so shorn of the flowers of rhetoric that the critics were rather baffled by it. The highest praise that they could give it was that it did not contain one superfluous word. And they gave that praise without stint. Eugene had arrived!

His eyes glowed as he saw Estelle standing by John Glide and waiting for him to approach.

Estelle had changed but little, though refined surroundings and simple clothes, exquisitely cut and made, had slightly added to the distinction of her looks. She was a gracious, attractive woman. Many called her beautiful because her soul's expression was in her face, because her sympathy and her interest were all flowing in the wide, gracious channels most calculated to deepen and accentuate them. Her manner, so free from affecta-

tion or consciousness of self, never failed to put all who talked with her at their ease.

"How do you do, Eugene?" she said, smiling happily. "We had 'The Deep Channel' sent to us at Cannes, and there was such a regular fight for it. I believe everybody down to Lulu read it, and certainly everybody felt the better for it. So glad, Eugene—so very, very glad."

"Thank you," said Eugene, and his voice was a trifle unsteady.

John turned his head and looked away. He would have walked away, only, as he supposed that the errand of Woods was identical with his own, he reflected that they had better enter the Strangers' Gallery together.

"Why, there is Eliza Inman now!" cried Estelle joyously. "It is quite a gathering of the clans. Oh, do go and fish her out, John, and get her safely across, or something will happen as sure as fate! Eliza doesn't see very well, and she is as rash as any nipper."

John departed obediently to pilot the tall, angular figure in deep mourning, worn for Mrs. Dyner, who had left the house in St. John's Wood and a small annuity to Eliza, her secretary and companion, that being her last act of loving kindness and mercy performed towards the needy.

Eugene Woods stood by Estelle, and his face wore a strange expression which slightly embarrassed her.

"I haven't seen you for a long time, Estelle—not for over six months. But you don't change. You are one of the women who will never change."

Estelle laughed.

"I shall only grow older like everybody else. But don't say that, Eugene. If we don't change we stagnate, and these are rapid days."

There had been a new and extravagant exhibition of the tactics of the militant suffragettes in the neighbour-



hood the previous night, and consequently the police force had been augmented, and almost every woman in the vicinity was suspect.

Even poor Eliza, who loathed and scorned the whole movement, had not been immune from inquiry and espionage. She arrived at Estelle's side breathless and furious.

"Soon no decent woman will be able to walk in the streets," she said. "See that big ruffian with the truncheon over there? I gave him what for, and showed him Dick's permit when he asked me my business. So glad to see you, Estelle. You'll be able to show me where to go and to protect me from these fiends."

It was the policemen, harried and harassed with their difficult task, to whom she referred, but Estelle only laughed. No one had questioned her or asked her to move on. She could hardly tell Eliza, however, that her aggressive looks and snappy tongue simply invited questioning.

"We had better go, I think," said Estelle. "Good-bye, John. Not a word to Dick, if you please."

They parted, and, taking Eliza's arm, she proceeded to pilot her towards the door of entrance to the Ladies' Gallery.

"I suppose Dick gave you a ticket. Wasn't it good of him to remember me?" said Eliza.

"No. It was Lord Allingham who gave me a ticket. I haven't seen Dick for ages. Do you know whether any of the Bygraves are here to-day?"

Eliza shook her head.

"None of them. How odd they are, Estelle! They go on precisely as if nothing had happened. I mean, they don't seem to realise that Dick is going to be a great man."

"I am not surprised at all. These things don't count

in their lives. You see them sometimes, then, Miss Inman?"

"Oh, yes. Mr. and Mrs. Bygrave came to tea with me last Sunday in my own house, Estelle. Think of it!" said Eliza with a thrill in her voice. "Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and lie still in a sort of fright lest I have only dreamed it all! It has happened, Estelle! I've got my sweet home and a hundred pounds a year as long as I live! I've let off a part now that will bring me another hundred to an artist and his wife, who often came in Mrs. Dyner's time. They are lovely people, and they are so glad to come to 'Ambrosia' because of the garden, you know, and all its associations. Don't you think it quite wonderful, Estelle?"

"I do indeed," said Estelle, and her voice was very full and sweet.

"I didn't use to believe in God, Estelle. Do you remember that awful, horrible day when you fetched me from my den above the dairy shop, and when I hadn't even washed my face or done my hair? That was my worst day. But that's how the submerged tenth begins. I was just on the verge! Then you came, and afterwards there was Mrs. Dyner. But, of course, God was at the back of it all!"

"Yes, dear," said Estelle pitifully. "We must be quiet now, I think, because, you see, the notice is strict—'No talking allowed.'"

Eliza restrained her tongue with an effort, but presently she was keenly absorbed in watching the proceedings below, though in a state of inward revolt against the Grille.

Estelle had often before been behind the Grille. In the last year she had taken much interest in social questions and followed with ever-deepening intelligence the efforts of Parliament to deal with them. And she knew that when Dick Bygrave got his chance he, possessing

from the inside the most complete and searching knowledge of the condition of the people, would make good.

She did not discern him for quite a while, nor did she greatly care.

It was nearly five o'clock and in a full house when Bygrave rose to his feet. A good many looked at him with interest, for he had made a bold, brave fight at East Breen, and a fair fight, moreover, which had won the respect of all and had secured for him the friendship of his opponent, a man of middle age, representing one of the biggest vested interests in the kingdom.

Estelle was conscious of a thrill of pride when she saw the slender, virile figure of Dick slowly take the floor. He held a small slip of paper in his right hand and prepared to speak.

When he spoke, his clear, pleasant voice, capable of great modulation and amazing in its range, easily commanded attention.

Eliza Inman, in a fidget of excitement, simply dying to keep up a running fire of comment, was presently arrested by the expression of Estelle's face.

"Well, I never!" she said under her breath. "So it's him! Well, I never did!"

Her discovery was sufficient to keep her quiet for the hour during which Bygrave held the House. Her intelligence was hardly capable of following, or, at least, of grasping the substance of Bygrave's impassioned speech. But Estelle did not lose a word. Her bosom heaved, her eyes glowed, and it is certain that, had Bygrave looked up and been able to see her face through the envious Grille, there could not have been a single doubt in his mind. It was his mate who listened to him up there behind the bars—the woman given to him by God.

When he sat down Estelle rose quietly and said to Eliza Inman that she would have to go.

## CORRODING GOLD

"Can't we go and have tea at an A.B.C. or somewhere for old times' sake?" said Eliza wistfully.

But Estelle shook her head. She was not in the mood for tea at an A.B.C. in such company.

"Not to-day, dear. I'll come out to 'Ambrosia' one day soon and see you. I want to go now, but you should stay a little while. There will be other speeches, and you might find it interesting. Besides, if Mr. Bygrave gave you a ticket, he will be sure to come and fetch you out to tea."

"Then wouldn't you wait to see him, too?" said Eliza eagerly.

But Estelle said hastily that she would rather not. She felt glad for the moment to escape from Eliza's chattering tongue. She wanted to be alone, to think over what she had heard, to indulge in a certain secret pride over Dick Bygrave's achievement.

When she got to the bottom of the narrow, winding stairs which gave access to the Gallery, he was waiting for her.

"John told you I was here?" she said quickly, trying to hide her rising colour. "Or are you going up to see Miss Inman?"

"No. I came to see you. I knew you were there," he said quietly. "No one told me."

"Oh!" said Estelle, and, as several ladies came down behind her, there was no opportunity to say anything further.

Bygrave drew her out into the open air.

"Will you walk down to the Park with me? It's just a step to St. James's."

"I—I don't mind," said Estelle. "But can you leave the House? Won't there be any discussion on your speech?"

"Not to-day. And, anyhow, I don't care. I've said

my say, and all that matters to me at this moment is what you think of it."

"I? I—oh—I thought it was splendid."

He took her arm and piloted her across the throng of the street, and they made their way in silence which was eloquent to the green and lovely spaces in the Park.

As far as they were concerned, London was an empty place—a wonderful, glad world in which they two roamed alone.

"I've never seen you look so well. When did you come back?" said Bygrave eagerly.

"Only last night. We are all at the Coburg. Probably we are going back to Wreford Manor, though mother is talking about a flat in town or a house. She wants to rouse up Kathleen, if possible. You know she has never been quite herself since the death of Mr. Charters."

"It was a horrible thing," said Bygrave. "I was very sorry about the whole thing. And what is Cyril about?"

"Cyril? Oh, he has been all winter in Australia. We hope he is coming home soon. His wife is living in her own flat in Clanricarde Mansions. What a hollow mockery that marriage was—and is! I am so sorry for them both."

Bygrave, watching the sweet, fine outline of her face, thought how her sympathies had widened and what marvels two years had wrought for her.

He was quite conscious that the years had done even more for him, and that they had put him in the right way, so that he might reach those finer heights possible to true manhood.

"Let us sit down here, if you won't find it cold. There is a nip in the wind yet for May."

"I shan't be cold," said Estelle. "But it is worrying me that you should be out of the House to-day. I am quite sure you ought not to be."

## CORRODING GOLD

"Nothing matters to me except just this," he said quite simply. "Now, will you tell me precisely what you thought of the performance?"

"Don't call it a performance," she said in quick reproof. "It was something very much higher and finer—an achievement, if you like. It was a splendid ideal. Oh, if only it could be carried into effect and practice, all these frightful problems we have in the City and you in East Breen would be solved!"

"It will come," he said, as he took off his hat and laid it on the seat beside him. "It is coming. Men are better, Estelle. They are beginning to wake up. Brotherhood is coming!"

"You will bring it faster," said Estelle in a low, full voice. "Tell me, why didn't you bring your father and mother here to-day? How proud they would have been!"

"They are helping and sympathising and praying at home," he said simply. "They would not have come."

Estelle was moved, because she felt that Bygrave and she were drifting close to the heart of things, and that very soon the barrier between them must be swept away.

The next moment Bygrave's hands had thrown it down for ever.

"If you approved what I said to-day, Estelle, if you think there is anything in my life worth taking, will you take it? I love you. I always have, and—and I think if I had you by my side much might be possible."

Estelle had no answer ready, and he went on. "You know what I have to offer—a meagre future, as the world counts it—but I have the courage, because I know what you are and what are the things that count with you. The new age that is coming is to be the woman's age, I believe, but it is only such women as you who will bring it to pass and make it a reality. I never thought I should care for a woman. Long ago I vowed I never should

permit myself to care, because I held that women made shipwreck of a man's career and intentions and diverted his interests from the main issue. But now I know that I was a fool. Such as I have I offer you. I can't explain or expatiate, because there aren't any words in the language to express what I feel. You are the star of my destiny. Unless you come and shine in the sky I shall make but little progress."

"I will come," said Estelle quietly. "I will marry you, Dick, just as soon as you wish."

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"No, you must not come," she said by and by when they rose reluctantly from that charmed spot. "I must insist on your going back to the House at once and sticking to your post. And I don't want to see you for three whole days. When I do want to see you I will write. Yes, I am happy. Good-bye, dear Dick. Life is wonderful and lovely beyond what I have ever imagined."

Her eyes were full of tears as she walked away. They had hardly dried when she met at the Park gates her old friend, Lord Allingham, who was walking to the House in the hope of seeing her when she came out.

They were good friends now, for Allingham had made his proposal and been refused, though no one knew. The grave, middle-aged nobleman, whose name was synonymous with all that was best in the traditions of his class, had the most profound admiration for Estelle Rodney, and, though disappointed in his dearest hopes, had asked that he might keep her friendship.

"I see from your face, I think, that your friend has not disappointed you to-day," he said as he shook hands.

"No. He spoke splendidly. Thank you so much, Lord Allingham. But for you, I should not have had this opportunity of hearing him, for he did not know, of course, that I had returned to London."

"You have seen him perhaps?"

"Yes, I have just parted from him."

"And where now?"

"I am walking back to the Coburg."

"May I walk with you?"

Estelle hesitated a moment.

"I think not, if you don't mind, Lord Allingham."

Then, moved by some odd impulse, she looked up into his kind face and smiled unseeably.

"I suppose you guess, but I think I will tell you. I am going to marry Mr. Bygrave."

"I congratulate him and you—but more especially him," and he bared his head a moment in token of his deep respect. "You have not chosen an easy post in undertaking to keep that firebrand in order."

"Oh, but he is not a firebrand any longer," said Estelle with her sweet smile. "I don't know what tempted me to tell you. Need I ask you not to speak of it? My—my people know nothing yet, and it may be something of a trial to them."

Allingham nodded in full understanding. But, though he left her with a smile, his face quickly aged and saddened, for he was a man who had been fitted by nature for the best gifts, and who yet, in some strange and bitter way, had been cheated of them all.

Quite late that night in their hotel bedroom Cyrus Rodney and his wife discussed their family affairs.

Estelle had told them of her engagement just before she retired, and the news had naturally upset them a good deal.

"It's no use pretending to be pleased, Cyrus," said Mrs. Rodney, "for it would not be in human nature to rejoice over a thing like that when one thinks that Estelle might have been Lady Allingham. If he did not propose, at least it was Estelle who prevented him."



But Dick Bygrave! An East End tailor! Cyrus, it's rather awfull!"

"But he is a Member of Parliament, and life is all before him, my dear. And, after all, if the child is happy, what else matters?"

"But will she be happy, do you think?"

"I am certain of it. She is not a child, but a woman who has weighed up things."

Mrs. Rodney wrung her hands a little and rocked herself on her chair.

"And there's poor Kitty left at the loose end, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if she took up with John Glide yet. It is just the sort of thing likely to happen to me. I haven't any luck. Now, tell me, what better are any of us for the money? We, or, at least, I, have only acquired a lot of expensive tastes, which I'll never be able to get comfortably rid of again. But the children are not a bit better off. I've done my best, but they just all go their own way. We might just as well be at 'The Laurels' yet, if Estelle is to marry Dick Bygrave and Kathleen John Glide. Don't you think it disappointing?"

Cyrus smiled.

"I think, my dear, that perhaps you set the wrong way about making use of the money. It's a great gift in itself. It is the foolish use of it that brings only disappointment and heartache."

"Well, and that's true, Cyrus. But you were always a deep thinker. I think I'll turn the money all over to you and let you have the spending for the next year or two. I'm so tired, and I don't seem to care a bit what happens to me now! I'm like the preacher, I could cry out that all is vanity and vexation of spirit."

"Money by itself is powerless to buy happiness," said Cyrus. "But we'll have a bid for it in a new direction. Meanwhile, the first thing is to find a home somewhere—"

a real home—where we can have the children about us and, when the time comes, the children's children. So now you go to bed, my dear, and to-morrow we'll set out in earnest on this very search."

He was sorry for his wife, for he could see that she was smarting under a strange sense of defeat. After she had gone to bed he sat by the dressing-room fire with the open Bible on his knee.

Above the wreckage of his home, over which he had mourned in secret and prayed unceasingly, there seemed to rise and shine a solitary star.

They would build again on a sure foundation. The lesson learned during these two strange and difficult years could never be altogether lost. He took comfort once more, as he had often done before, from the words of the Book on his knee, which contains all the wisdom of all the ages.

"Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; and God feedeth them." "Consider the lilies of the field: they toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

And again—and this comforted him most of all: "Provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." "Seek ye the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you."

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