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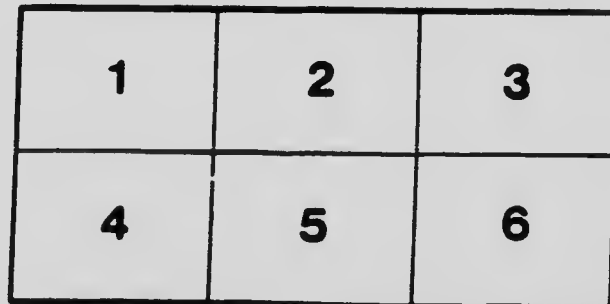
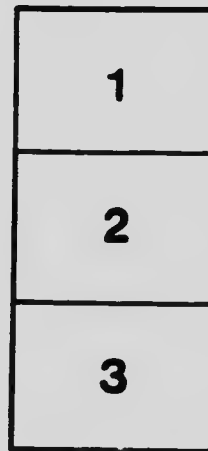
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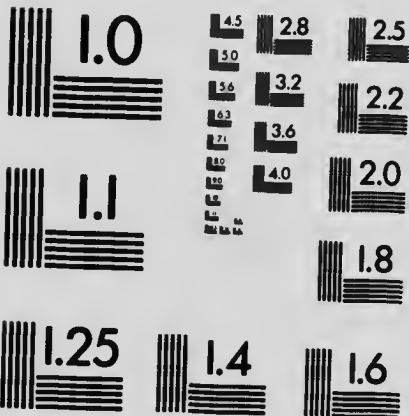
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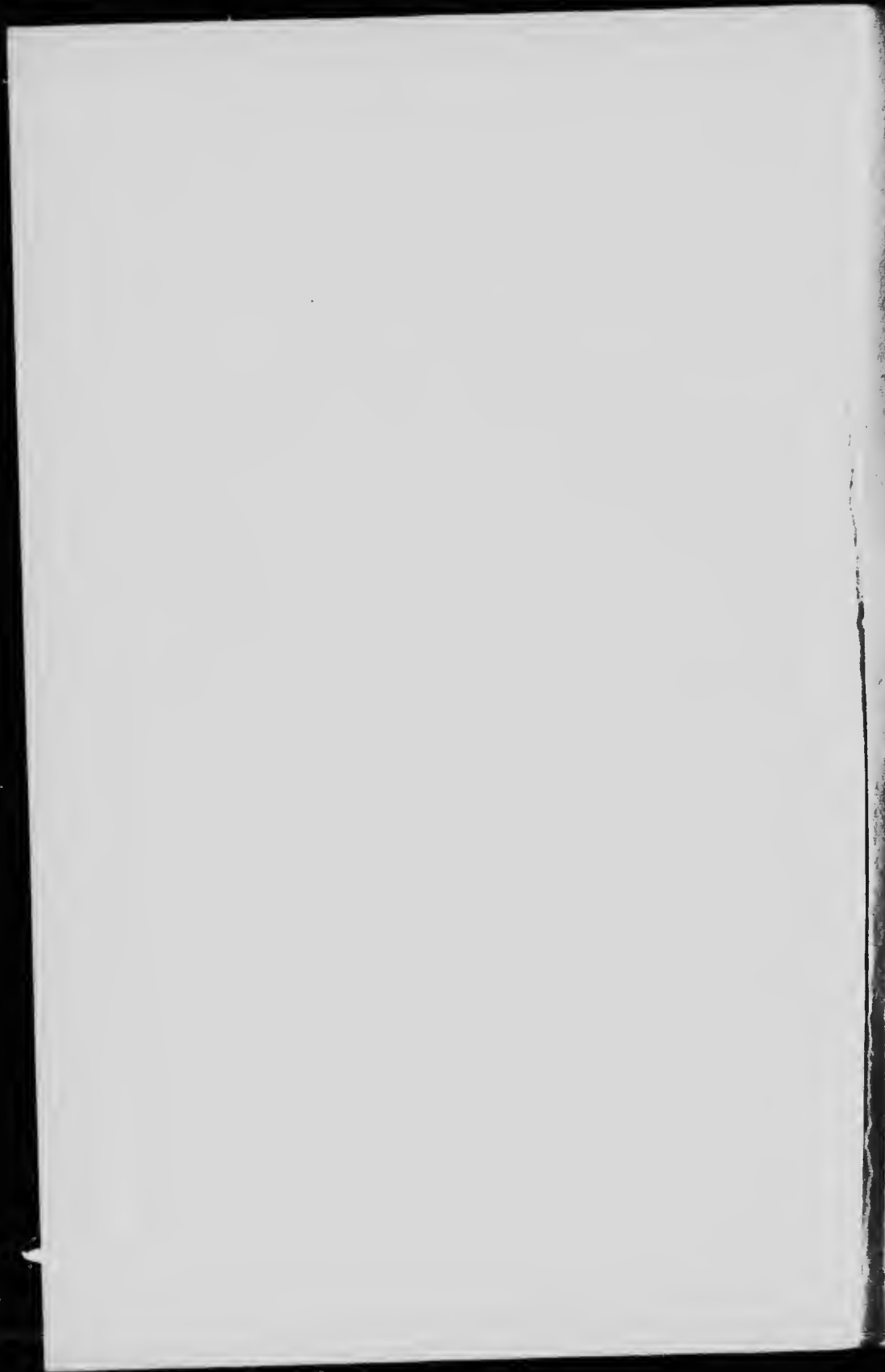
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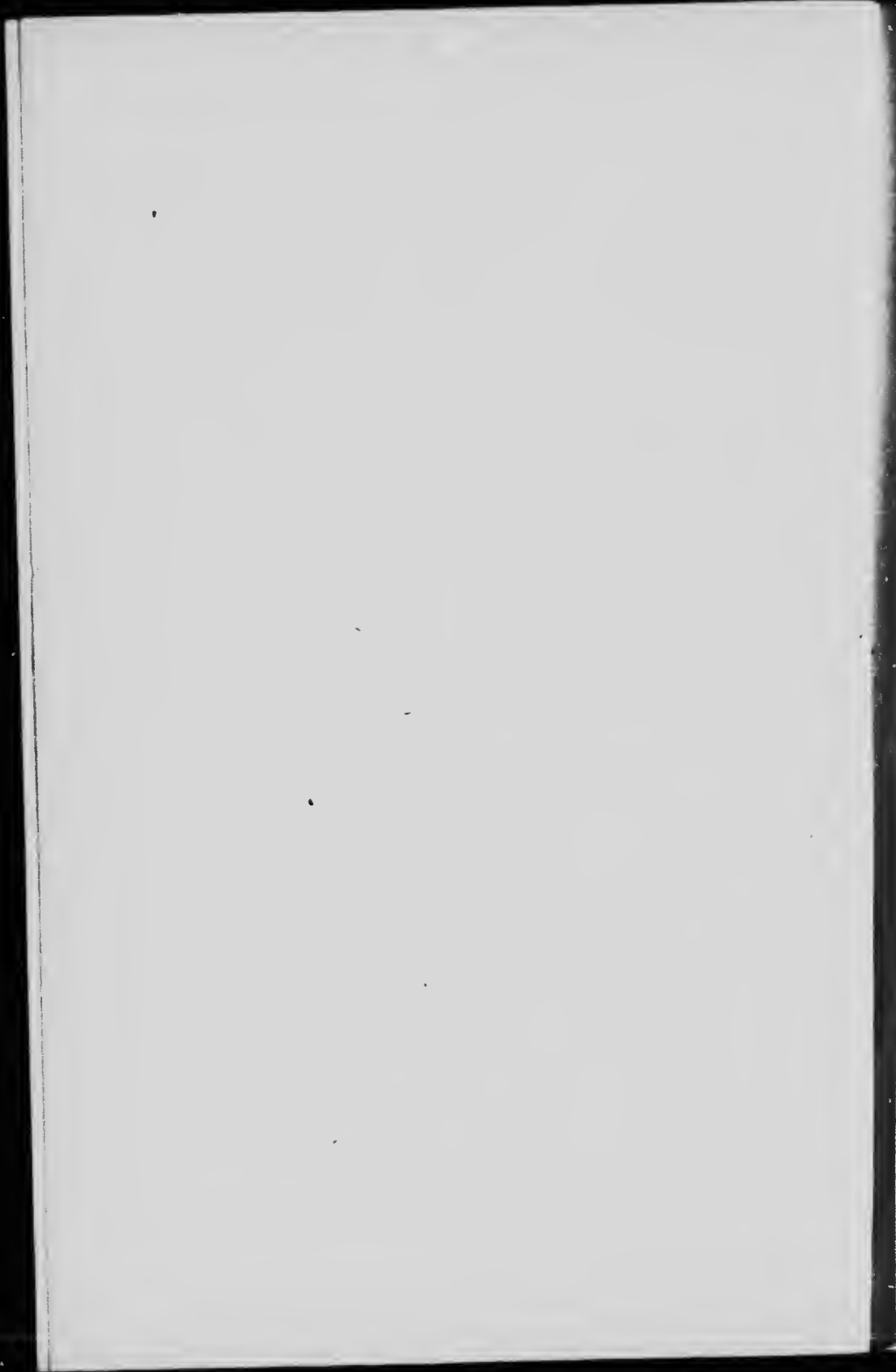


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**THE WOMAN DEBORAH**



THE  
WOMAN DEBORAH

BY  
ALICE AND CLAUDE ASKEW

AUTHORS OF  
"THE SHULAMITE," "THE TEMPTING OF PAUL CHESTER,"  
"THE ROD OF JUSTICE," ETC.

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# THE WOMAN DEBORAH

## CHAPTER I

ROBERT WARING glanced back over his shoulder in the direction of the lonely farm he had just left, the Boer farm set down amidst the silence of the plains, and he fancied that he could still see Deborah Krillet standing on the stoep, shading her eyes from the glare of the sun, watching the man she loved pass out of sight to become lost in the unknown.

"My God—how could she do it—how could she send me from her?" He muttered the words savagely, half under his breath. "Just because she made a vow, as she calls it, to God—a vow to have nothing more to do with me if that old Boer woman, Tante Anna, would make no inquiries as to how her brother came by his death—Simeon Krillet, whom I shot as I would have shot a mad dog. Yes, and I was only just in time to save Deborah from perishing, for had not Simeon tied her to a tree and was he not levelling his gun at his young wife's head just as I came up—it was touch and go with all of us."

He shuddered a little and lightly flicked the Cape pony he was riding on the flank with his whip.

"Poor old Krillet," he muttered; "he judged Deborah too harshly. She only loved me in those days in a dreamy, fantastic fashion of her own. I had brought poetry, romance and new knowledge into her life, and she would have been true to him—to her husband—only he condemned her out of her own mouth, not understanding that she hardly knew what she was saying, and that where another woman would have lied, Deborah spoke the truth and owned that she loved me; but her love was fine—fine—pure as flame itself."

He cast another long backward look over his shoulder. He was a tall, strong man with crisp brown hair and a well-cut face, but he looked as if he knew what trouble meant. And indeed he did, for his pretty little doll of a wife had died some three years back, the girl he had loved after a fashion, for all that he had fallen under the subtle spell of a woman whom he had likened in his own mind to the Shulamite herself—the Shulamite, fragrant as spice and fresh as the morning—and Waring had mourned for his wife sincerely, and for the small bundle she held in her arms.

But he had come back to South Africa all the same, and to Deborah Krillet—drawn as by cords, and now Deborah had sent him away—so for ever and for ever the salt had lost its savour; for she was all that he wanted in this world and the next—the Shulamite, who had cried out a few hours ago that she had become as a dead woman, a withered leaf, now that her beauty had worn away and tears had fretted her cheeks.

But she was wrong there—wrong, for never had Deborah been more curiously attractive. He loved her pallor and her reed-like grace, the deadly pale face framed by pale hair—hair that was as the hue of gold in the sunshine, and her eyes that were as the chambers

of strange dreams. Waring could hardly realise that this was the end of all things between them, that the woman he had come out to South Africa to find—to marry—had sent him away—driven him from her presence, for he had been so certain that all was going to end happily at last. He had forgotten that Simeon Krillet's blood still called for vengeance; he had allowed himself to believe that dead men sleep, and now, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, Deborah, whom Waring had so fondly imagined sinking in a very rapture on his breast and wreathing passionate, straining arms about his neck—had developed into a cold, restrained woman who held up a protesting hand and defied him to approach her—a woman who, having made her vow to God, was determined to keep it; for a strain of iron bigotry in Deborah's character had come to light, and Waring found himself powerless to combat this inherited belief in Jehovah, and compelled to realise that Deborah, who would have died for him willingly enough, would still be true to the faith of her fathers—even at the sacrifice of all her earthly happiness, her worldly hopes.

It was a strange and almost incomprehensible attitude for Deborah to have taken up, the Deborah whose lips were as a thread of scarlet and whose beauty had driven him half mad with fatal longing in the past; but, then, she had always been a mystery to Waring, an enigma, from the hour when he had caught his first glimpse of her face up to this barren and bitter moment—the moment when she had shut her gates against him and denied him her love.

She did love him, though—no man had ever been better loved—he knew that, but it only added to the misery of the position; and now, as Waring rode on, he ground his teeth savagely, for he felt as if Fate had

played a scurvy trick upon him—a barbarous jest—for why had it been allowed to come to pass that Deborah, of all women, should have fallen a victim to religious superstition? It was absurd—it was abominable—hateful; and Waring, as he rode on across the veldt, felt as if God was mocking him, the God he had only half believed in.

“I would have sworn that nothing could have kept Deborah from me—no power under the sun—that woman who stood up pale and resolute by my side while I planed the wood for her dead husband’s coffin; and now—why, I feel as if a flaming sword had been flashed between us, just such a flaming sword as barred the gates of Eden——” He laughed hoarsely. “I want her so—I want her—she is dearer to me than ever—far dearer—ah,” and he quoted low, half under his breath: “‘Return—return, O Shulamite——’” The words fell slowly from his lips, then he suddenly reined in his pony and gazed about him sombrely.

The hot African sun streamed down out of a blue sky that was almost over-vivid in its intensity, showering glittering shafts of golden light over bare and waste plains. Here and there a few milk bushes reared up their heads, and stray tufts of long, rank grass could be seen, but the plains were mostly sand, dry and arid sand. The one touch of softness and idealism came from the distant range of low hills—hills that shaded gently from mauve to pink; but otherwise the country for miles round looked cruel and bare—absolutely shorn of beauty, and the prevailing impression was that of fierce barrenness.

“God help me—why did I ever come to this accursed land—this hateful country? The sun burns up a man’s body by day and the frost chills him to the

bone at night; and it's sand to the right and left, sand before and behind; only a vulture flies across the sky, and loneliness broods over the hills—silence has set its seal upon the plains; and yet South Africa has its own terrible and secret fascination, the fierce charm that a bitter woman possesses—a cruel woman. Africa drives a man mad with impotent longing for what he is denied—the sour fruit that can alone slake his thirst; he knows the secret woman lurks in its fastnesses—the primitive woman—yes, and the Shulamite dwells here too; but she is terrible as an army with banners, for she withholds herself from love, and in mine own vineyard the grapes have been gathered, and they rest in the hollow of Jehovah's hand."

He spoke fiercely, feeling so helpless, a mere human ant, and he cursed himself for being so small and God so great, and rode on his way cursing.

His horse stumbled through the sand, narrowly avoiding ant-hills. Waring rode the brute with careless rein, remembering his old days, and how he had come out to South Africa only a few years back with the idea of making a fortune, and had deliberately hired himself out to Simeon Krillet as an overseer because he had imagined that there was a chance of gold being found in the vicinity of the old man's farm. And it was then that Deborah Krillet had come into his life. But he had a girl waiting for him in England, that dainty, butterfly creature, Joan Desborough, whom he had subsequently married. She had recalled him to her side as soon as he came into a totally unexpected heritage, summoned him back to England in a hurry, and just because he had given the pretty, affected little person his word to marry her, Waring had stolen away from South Africa and deserted Deborah Krillet. But after he had

married Joan, Deborah's wild cry had reached him across the seas, and he had made his way back to the farm in the plains, and had narrowly escaped being arrested on a charge of murder—the murder of Simeon Krillet—but Deborah had saved him, paying a heavy price for his life, and then he had slunk back to England again—a man torn between two desires, his love for the Shulamite of the plains and his affection for his spoilt, pretty little English wife—Joan, who was artificial as Deborah was natural. Ah, but not artificial at the last; she was a true woman when she lay in her coffin, something small and white and waxy in her arms—the doll she would never play with—a woman and her babe.

He gulped down something in the nature of a choking sob, for Joan, dead in her coffin, meant infinitely more to Waring than she had ever done alive; then his thoughts flew back once again to Deborah Krillet—Deborah who could have made him forget all these tragic turned-down pages in his life if she had only opened her arms to him and kissed him with the lips that, in the past, he had likened to a thread of scarlet.

“Two women, and I've fallen to the ground between them, for Joan is dead, and Deborah—well, she is as dead to me now as if she lay mouldering in her grave, for her heart—the heart I helped to break—has become a mere piece of solid ice; she's hardened into stone——” He put up a hand to his forehead and pressed his temples desperately. “Damn it all,” he muttered hoarsely, and Robert Waring was a man who seldom swore; “I've done with women now—and for ever; no other woman shall take Deborah Krillet's place—that I swear; I'll be true to her memory at least, for I ruined her life for her in the years that

the locusts have eaten, and I've proved her bane—her undoing; and yet it was worth while our meeting, for otherwise we should neither of us ever have known what love means—real warm, passionate love. She would have been a meek wife to Krillet till the old man died, and I—oh, I should have been content with my pretty Joan, never having met the real thing—the great thing.”

He smote his pony lightly on the neck with his bare hand, his lips set in a somewhat ironical smile.

“G-r-r—you beast you—get along—move a bit faster; let us leave the plains behind us, old horse—we'll try and forget the plains. I'll to the East; I've always wanted to visit the East—not the beaten track, though—the tourist round; let me strike out my own path, and what does it matter where it leads, or how or when I come to the journey's end? For what does anything on earth matter now? I'm a rudderless boat, so let me drift out to sea; and there's one way a man can always drift, and that's to hell, and it doesn't take much practice either.”

He stood up in his stirrups, his eyes burning.

“I'll have no more to do with women, but I'll drown my sorrow somewhere; a man can always drink his grief to sleep—drug his brain, and forget—even a woman like Deborah Krillet—if he takes the trouble—yes, forget even the Shulamite herself!”

He rode away, a moving speck crossing desolate plains, and he left desolation behind him in the shape of that woman, pale and thin, who stood just where he had parted from her a full hour ago—standing on the stoep, shading her sad eyes from the glare of the pitiless sun; a woman who was as rigid as if she had been carved out of stone—a woman whose house had been left unto her desolate.



## CHAPTER II

“THE eighth day of the siege—the eighth day!” A girl murmured the words slowly, thoughtfully to herself, a girl who had no business to be staying at a little station in China, about forty miles from the Gulf of Lientang, the gulf where the European Squadron had anchored; for a Boxer insurrection had suddenly broken out in Northern China, and the outlook for the mere handful of Europeans herded together in San-Tong was not a pleasant one. For though they had all gathered at the nearest defensible point, and the garrison, consisting mostly of native Christians, railway men and a mere handful of Europeans, were holding their own bravely, still, unless help came sweeping down shortly, why, surely the end was in sight! The Boxers would make one final attack, storm the fort at night most likely, and then—why, it was best not to think of what would happen under such circumstances—it was far best.

“If the Boxers only killed you at once—if they did not torture you——” Mary Fielder shuddered, and the blood in her veins ran cold for a second, for she had heard a little about the terrible Chinese tortures, short as her stay in China had been. And she had only paid a visit to that cruel, barbaric, but intensely interesting land because her greatest friend had come out to marry a missionary whose post was at San-Tong, and Mary had accompanied the bride-

elect to China and had remained at the Mission House—a very welcome guest—deeply interested in the strange people she came across daily, the mysterious and unfathomable Chinese folk.

She was a clever and very charming girl, and there was nothing about Miss Fielder to denote that she was an exceedingly rich young woman, the only sister of an absurdly wealthy South African, a man whom some people held to be a second Cecil Rhodes; and most certainly Adam Fielder had the welfare of his adopted country at heart, for he longed to clean out certain Augean stables, and his ambition was to become a great ruling power in South Africa—the man at the helm; but not because he wanted to make more money, augment his millions; it was the mere desire for power, the sheer love of empire-building; also, like Brutus of old, Fielder was ambitious.

He loved his sister dearly, the sister so much younger than himself, and whom he had looked after for years, ever since that terrible and never-to-be-forgotten day when a runaway pair of carriage-horses had been responsible for the death of his parents before their son's very eyes.

Mary returned her brother's affection warmly; he was everything in the world to her, and if it had not been for the fact that Adam Fielder had been compelled, owing to some serious business complications, to pay a sudden visit to Europe—travelling in a great hurry by himself—Mary might never have made her way to China. But as matters had turned out, here she was, cooped up in the European quarter of a Chinese town, watching the grey slopes of distant hills and the slowly advancing sangars of the Boxers, and aware that a day or two now would see the end. This, of course, was supposing that the relief force did not

arrive in time ; the little garrison could not go on firing through the loopholes of crumbling brown walls for ever ; very shortly the Boxers would storm the frail entrenchment—those terrible Boxers with their cruel faces, their devilish features, their hideous imprecations.

“ Mary, my darling Mary, can you find it in your heart to forgive me for having persuaded you to come out to China ? ”

Anna Martheu, the newly-wedded wife of David Martheu of the English Mission—a tall, earnest man, who had yearned and striven with exceeding patience for over six years to save the souls of the natives with whom he had thrown in his lot—stole softly up behind Miss Fielder and put an arm about her friend’s waist, but she was somewhat startled when Mary turned a radiant face to her, and bright, shining eyes, for Anna knew that the shadow of death hung over the little garrison—carnage, massacre and incredible horrors ; yet Mary could still smile.

“ Don’t worry, Anna ; it—it’s all right—and remember, whatever happens—I am not sorry I came out to China, for this has been a most wonderful experience—something to have lived through—seen. Think how brave and plucky every one has been—the Mission people and—and Mr. Waring. Oh, wasn’t it lucky that Mr. Waring chanced to be travelling in this part of the world—viewing China from the inside—for he’s put such heart into all of us, has he not ? And isn’t Mr. Graham—the railway man, as I call him—a fine fellow ? I do like the way these two men pot at the Boxers all day long—at the dreadful advancing lines of brick and rubble. And how splendidly they keep guard at night—taking it in turns to relieve each other on the roof of the Mission House,

cheering us all up, encouraging the native Christians—why, it is splendid to know such men—such heroes ! ”

She clasped her hands tightly together, a fine glow lighting up her face, nor did she look in the very least as though she had been living on half-rations for a week.

“ Mary, don’t look so happy—for God’s sake, don’t.” Anna Martheu turned a sickly grey. “ The ammunition is running short, dear, the cartridges are nearly finished. David has just confessed as much to me, so pray—pray—that the landing party from the squadron get here soon, for if they delay much longer they will be too late, and we shall be butchered—murdered in cold blood ! ”

Anna shuddered as she spoke, but Mary put her two hands on the bride’s shaking shoulders and whispered passionately into her friend’s ear.

“ I cannot help looking happy, for I’m so glad I came here—even if the end is close at hand. Oh, Anna—don’t you understand ? ”

She broke off suddenly in her speech, but Anna Martheu nodded her head comprehendingly, the head that was so sleek and brown—such a soft, dear little head.

“ Why, Mary, of course I guess. I—I felt quite certain two days ago ; but it seems so terribly sad that you, who have never fallen in love before, should lose your heart quite suddenly—just when death stares one in the face ; but I suppose it was intended by some High Power that you and Robert Waring should meet—planned by God.”

“ I wonder.” A vague look came into Mary Fielder’s eyes, then she bent her young body over the brown mud wall. “ Does he love me—ch, does he love me ? I’d give so much to know—so very much.”

"Of course he loves you—he's a reasonable man." Anna spoke in low and very tender tones, then she put a light hand on Mary's forehead and stroked back a loose wave of hair. "Come, dear, you must think of other things now," she whispered, "just as I must, for if the relief force does not reach us— Oh, Mary, Mary, the time has come when we must all put our house in order and prepare to meet our God."

Mary nodded her head, then both girls—for Anna was little more than a girl herself—leaned over the earthworks and studied the long line of distant hills, and the little missionary bride thought of her husband, but Mary could only dream of the man who had just come into her life—merely at its stormy close, perhaps.

"He's coming—I can hear his footsteps." Mary muttered the words low—half under her breath; then she glanced wistfully at her friend, and Anna realised all that the glance sought to convey, the mute appeal.

"I'm going, dear; I shall be with David in our room if you want me. He's lying down now; you know he was on picket duty all night."

"I know," Mary whispered back, and then she kept her quiet station by the wall, vaguely aware that Anna had slipped softly, almost silently away, nor was she in the least surprised when she presently heard her name pronounced in a man's deep yet clear voice; but a tell-tale blush dyed her cheek—she flew the woman's flag at once.

"Don't stand here by the wall, watching those silent sangars; come back to the Mission House. I am a man of few words, you know, Miss Fielder, and I don't often give vent to my sentiments, but I assure you I feel most frightfully cut up on your account—I hate to think of you here, shut up in this

beastly place. It is different with the Mission people, for if things go wrong, they believe themselves secure of a martyr's crown. Besides, they knew what they were about when they came out to China, and the risks—the grave risks—they might possibly have to run. But it was not so with you—you thought you were taking a pleasant and somewhat original trip, and now you find yourself—facing—we must admit it—death."

Robert Waring spoke in low tones, his usual gay *insouciance* of manner deserting him for the moment, and a grave, somewhat sad look came into his eyes—the eyes in which a mocking devil lurked so often.

Three years had passed since Waring had ridden away from the farm in the midst of South African plains, driven forth by the woman he loved with all his heart and soul—the pale Shulamite—and for three long years he had sought, and sought in vain, to forget Deborah Krillet. He had turned his steps to Europe first of all, but he had soon wearied of the West and all that the West offers in the way of pleasure and excitement—riot and vice—and he had drifted far afield, finally turning his steps to China, and China had interested him extremely. He had been fascinated by the crude barbarities of the natives; they reminded him—the whole nation—of a vast moving army of ants, and he admired their strange tenacity, their absolute indifference to death, their stoical and almost brutal patience.

He visited their temples, and tried to understand the principles of their religion, but he was baffled at every turn. Each Chinaman was a puzzle, a man of mystery, of silence. And their very vices were so strange and unlike European vices! Their hells were like no Western hell. He had already experienced

the dreams that the opium pipe brings—those strange dreams that are almost impossible to describe—and he had decided in his own mind that he infinitely preferred to smoke a quiet pipe of opium than to sit solemnly in a chair and keep on helping himself out of a whisky bottle, as he had got into the habit of doing before he left Europe. For it was only by the aid of drink and drugs that Robert Waring could hope to forget Deborah, and to stifle the wild craving he felt for her bodily presence—the mad, hungry longing that devoured him at times maddened him; nor did he realise that he was slowly sinking to the lower depths by the help of the new habits he had formed, and that by drugging himself into a heavy forgetfulness of the past, he was destroying every chance of a healthy future. For he had got into a state of curious indifference by now with regard to the rights and wrongs of things, and the duty that a man owes to himself. He had become cynical and hopelessly despondent by turns, and he took a savage, sullen pleasure in doing those things which he ought not to do; for he felt he was shaking his fist—his puny fist—at the Great Powers that be—the Powers that had parted him from his Shulamite—from the woman Deborah Krillet with her drawn white face, and the eyes that were as silent pools, and the mouth that was as a thread of scarlet.

But during the last month he had pulled up, and his moral deterioration ceased; he had come abruptly to himself. For Robert Waring, passing aimless days in the vicinity of San-Tong—an inmate for the time being of an opium den, taking his drugged ease in the house of a seemingly respectable old Chinaman—suddenly realised that a Boxer rising had broken out, and that the lives of all the Europeans who were

staying at San-Tong were in danger, and awoke in consequence from the stupor produced by the opium pipe, and determined to throw in his lot with the besieged. He fled from the house where he had been lodging, though quite aware that his life would have been safe if he remained there; for old Chin Li would never have betrayed a client to the Boxers. But there was too much manhood left in Waring to allow him to think of saving his own life whilst the lives of other white men were in danger, and so he made his way to the little band gathered together in the European quarter of San-Tong; and it happened that he became their leader, their adviser, developing almost at once into a very fine imitation of a soldier of fortune.

And now for over a week Waring had practically kept things going at San-Tong, spurring the little garrison on, and declaring with assumed cheerfulness that it was practically certain that a relief force would soon reach the town, for it must be known to the squadron anchored in the Gulf of Lientang that the lives of the handful of Europeans gathered together in San-Tong were in danger. So it was merely a question of holding out till the sturdy bluejackets arrived—of keeping the Boxers back.

But the relief party tarried, and the ammunition was giving out, and Waring had been compelled to own to himself that very morning that matters were fast approaching the end. But he felt he had done his duty—he had reasserted his manhood; nor was he particularly affected by the prospect in front of him; he was sick of this world, for he felt he had exhausted most of its sensations, and drunk his cup to the dregs, also he had lost the one woman for whom his soul craved. Nevertheless he was sorry for the Mission party—the newly-wedded bride and bridegroom, the Mission



nurse, and Graham, the railway superintendent—the steady, dour young Scotchman who did his day's work finely, and was the sort of fellow who would fight with his back to the wall to the very end, and die game—very game; but most of all Waring was grieved on Mary Fielder's account, for it seemed so hard on the girl that she should have come out with such fine and happy confidence to China, making her bright, unconscious way to San-Tong to meet her death there—and such a death!

She was so young, such a splendidly healthy young woman, so full of the joy of life, bright, gay, and with all the world before her, and it was cruel—it was terribly cruel that she should be cut down in her beauty and the flower of her strength—a damned shame—and Waring felt far more sorry for Mary than for Anna Martheu or the tall, fair-haired missionary nurse, Sister Gertrude Wyner, for both Anna Martheu and Sister Gertrude regarded themselves in the light of Christian Martyrs, and felt that they were soldiers of Christ—brave soldiers, dying at their posts. But it was different with Mary; she had not come out to China to convert the heathen; she had merely taken a pleasure trip with a friend, and so no martyr's crown awaited her, no martyr's palm. She would be butchered to death and get no credit for it—not for her the supreme honour of the red robe of martyrdom; she would merely be the victim of circumstances.

“You must not worry about me, Mr. Waring.” Mary addressed Robert Waring with her bright smile. “I don't think I feel particularly frightened myself, and we all have to die one day, haven't we? I certainly should have liked to have lived a little longer, but there!”—she spread out her hands—“it must be as God decides, mustn't it? And, anyway,

it is no good giving way ; we must just try and face things as bravely as possible and not show the white feather ! ”

“ My dear girl, ”—he looked at her admiringly—“ it is not death I am afraid of for any of us ; it is being taken alive, and then the torture ! You do not know what these Chinese devils do to their prisoners—you can have no idea ; but impalement is the least thing to dread. ” He paused and bit his lip, noticing that Mary had turned pale.

“ You must not fall into their hands alive, ” he whispered. “ Do you understand me ? You must be dead—dead and cold—before the Boxers storm our fort and sweep the defences down. We must all be dead, if it comes to that, for if not—well, they will torture us for hours, perhaps—for a full day and night, and no human tongue can relate how awful some of those tortures would be ; also the fate that would befall the women would be worse than that which would befall the men, and it would end in death all the same—an inexpressibly awful death. ”

Mary shivered, and her lips trembled just as a child's lips might tremble.

“ Why are you making me so frightened ? ” she asked. “ Why are you telling me these awful things ? Is it kind ? ”

“ Yes, child, it is kind. ” He looked her full in the face. “ I must talk to you frankly, Miss Fielder ; I must tell you in plain English that when the end is approaching and the Boxers are close to the fort we must kill ourselves—we must not fall alive into their hands. ”

“ But we dare not commit suicide, ” she whispered back, her big eyes dilating. “ It would be wicked, a sin, and I know neither my friend Anna nor her

husband would consent to take their own lives, nor would Sister Gertrude; they would be afraid of offending God, of angering the Lord!"

"Fools, fools!" he answered huskily; "they don't know what they are about. Why, I never heard such superstitious folly in my life—such rank idiocy. Just as if God would be angry! Why, it is the only thing to do—to kill ourselves. You don't know, you have not got the least idea, of the awful deaths that these Chinese devils devise for their prisoners, nor the indescribable indignities they practice on them first—the unmentionable horrors; and to think of you exposed to all this—you, a mere girl! Why, I swear that I will kill you with my own hands, that I will shoot you with my last cartridge; for never, never shall you fall alive into the hands of the Boxers!"

She turned upon him passionately, and there was a look in her eyes that he failed to understand, any more than he realised why she was smiling so strangely. But it seemed to Mary Fielder that she had come to the most wonderful moment in all her life—the most glorious moment—for surely Robert Waring loved her, to be so terribly concerned on her account; and if he loved her—well, what did anything else matter?

"Tell me," she cried, "are you quite certain that we are doomed? Don't you think the relief force will arrive in time to save us?"

"I am afraid not. I don't think there is an earthly chance of their getting here in time, for we should have heard their guns before this if they had been near at hand; so I fear that the Boxers will storm the fort to-night, just when it is getting dark, and we have not got enough ammunition left to repel their attack. You see I am telling you the truth. It is best to do so, for you are a brave girl, and you won't

finch. And you understand, don't you, when I say that you must not be taken alive, that I know what I am talking about, and so you will let me shoot you? You will stand by my side, and when the right moment approaches, I will merely ask you to close your eyes, and then I'll fire, and I won't let you linger in pain. I can promise you that your death will be as short and merciful a death as any human being can desire."

She drew a deep, gasping breath, then swayed faintly towards him, and the look in her eyes made him start—start and bite his lips, for he suddenly realised what had happened—he realised that Mary Fielder loved him!

"Do you really want to shoot me?" Her voice sounded very tender, wonderfully tender, but the only voice that would ever thrill Waring to his heart's core was the voice of that woman across the seas, the woman whose home was set down amongst desolate plains—a barren woman who dwelt in a barren land; and he could only feel pity—deep, profound pity—for this beautiful young creature who was so fresh and healthy, so pure. She would never move him to feel desire, for all her youth, for all her beauty, nor did he even wish to kiss her warm, sweet mouth, for she could not slake his thirst; he panted for wild grapes, grapes from a trampled vineyard—sour fruit denied—But why—oh, in Heaven's name, why—had Miss Fielder taken it into her head to fall in love with a wreck like himself—a drug-sodden individual, a man who had herded with swine? The one comfort was—but a sorry comfort—that as things now stood, it really did not seem to matter much whether Mary cared for him or not, for a few hours would see the end of everything—just a few short hours!

"I don't exactly yearn to shoot you, my dear child,"

—he tried to speak lightly—“but I don't intend you to fall alive into the hands of the Boxers——”

“And you think our doom is fixed?” Her eyes scanned his wistfully.

“I'm afraid so. Yes, Miss Fielder, as far as I can see, there is no earthly chance of our getting out of this tight and most unpleasant corner.”

“Then——” She paused; her breath came in sharp gasps, a flow of lovely carmine dyed her face. “Oh, am I bold—unwomanly? But I want to tell you something; I—I must tell you: you can shoot me if you want to shoot me, for I—I love you.”

She covered her face with her trembling, shaking hands. Her agitation was painful to witness, and Waring longed to comfort this poor, distressed girl, who had not been able to hide her love now that death loomed so near, but who had admitted it so frankly—though she would never have confessed it under other circumstances. He felt he could not be brutal enough to hurt her; he must accept the rich gift she offered, even though it was of no value to him; nor must he let her suspect the truth for one second, since it lay in his power to soften the awful aspect of the hour that was approaching. Yes, he would certainly strive his best to do this, even at the complete sacrifice of the truth.

He hated the part he would have to play, however; it savoured in some way of disloyalty to Deborah Krillet, and yet he could not help himself, the situation had become so astonishingly involved and difficult.

“Do you love me?” He took both her hands in his. “No, it isn't possible. I'm such a poor sort of fellow, really. I've got more money than I know what to do with, yet I've made a hopeless muddle of things! Why, nothing in my life will become me like

the leaving of it, for, see here, I was going to the devil as fast as any man could, when I got the chance to do a little decent fighting—and just because I've had the limelight playing on me the last few days, you've got it into your head that I'm a bit of a hero; but I'm not dear—I'm a rotter."

"I love you, and you must not say such things. I—I cannot bear it. But do you really care for me, or have I only fancied that you did—deceived myself?"

She looked at him with her clear, trustful eyes, and he cursed softly under his breath, for he wanted to die with all his thoughts fixed on Deborah Krillet; but here was a girl who would cling to him desperately, and to whom he must be kind—soothing the agony of Mary Fielder's last moments with caresses, feigning a love he did not feel.

"Of course I care for you," he lied desperately. "It does not matter admitting the fact now, but if there was going to be a to-morrow for either of us it wouldn't do, for I'm not worth thinking about, and it's sheer folly on your part, my dear girl, to care two snaps of your fingers for me—I'm utterly worthless."

"No, no." She shook her head gently, then leant against his shoulder. "Thank God we have found out the truth in time, discovered that we both care—Oh, I loved you from the hour of our first meeting, I think; but when did you first realise that you cared for me?"

She smiled happily; she had forgotten the advancing line of the Boxers and that her hours were seemingly numbered. She was just a girl in love, a healthy, innocent girl.

"I have cared for you for some days." He looked at her deliberately; then he bent forward, for he saw that Mary expected him to kiss her, and he dared not

hurt her by any appearance of coldness ; he must play the lover's part now to the end.

She raised her sweet, flushed face, and a wonderful light shone in her pure, beautiful eyes ; but even as Waring touched Mary's lips lightly with his own lips, he thought of Deborah Krillet—thought of her yearningly, despairingly, as of fruit out of reach—and his kiss fell with faint lightness on Mary's trembling mouth—the mere ghost of a kiss, moth-like, cold.

She sank upon his breast, too happy to be afraid of approaching doom, too ignorant of the ways of men to understand how little this man really cared for her ; and then the silence was suddenly broken by the distant thud of a gun—a strong, bold voice proclaiming in no uncertain tones that help was coming at last and the relief party well on its way.

Mary started, and her arms clung tightly round Robert Waring's neck ; he could feel the wild leaping and straining of her heart.

“ Did you hear ? ” she cried. “ Oh, Robert, did you hear—the gun ? We are saved—saved to love each other dearly in the years that lie ahead—saved ! ”

He made no answer to her fervent cry, but it was difficult to check the oath that rose to his lips, for what an impossible situation had suddenly developed ! To whom did Robert Waring owe allegiance now—to the girl who clung to him in all her pure, fresh beauty, or to the Shulamite, whose doors had closed against him, the woman who had shut out love from her life—become, as it were, white ash, a burnt-out flame ?

The gun sounded again, and the Boxers could be seen streaming off in the direction of the firing.

“ Saved ! ” Mary murmured the word once more, and suddenly collapsed in Waring's arms, for now

that the awful strain was over, reaction had set in, as, indeed, was only to be expected.

Waring stared down at her pale, beautiful face, and his brow puckered up in an angry frown.

“This is damnable,” he muttered hoarsely, “damnable! What the devil can I do? How can I ever tell her the truth?”



## CHAPTER III

"You know I don't think it would be fair or right of me if I consented to take advantage of what happened at a moment when we were both of us profoundly agitated and upset—a moment when death was practically staring us in the face; even a brave, splendid girl like yourself felt that she needed to turn to something human and cling to a man's arm—a man to whom she was dear, very dear."

Waring spoke in low tones, and he avoided looking at Mary Fielder as he addressed her, but he was conscious that her eyes were fixed on him anxiously, and they were very kind and gentle eyes, soft and luminous.

San-Tong had been relieved, the bluejackets had arrived just in time to save the situation, and the little garrison, which had held out so bravely and in the face of what seemed overwhelming odds, could congratulate itself on having offered a fine defence and displayed amazing pluck and sang-froid. And Robert Waring was the hero of the hour. His new friends could not praise him sufficiently for the active part he had played in the defence of San-Tong, for the town would have fallen to the Boxers, they declared, had it not been for Waring's successful generalship; and though he refused to believe this and disliked the fuss that was being made over him, he could not help being turned into a hero, though much against his will.

The news of his engagement had not yet got abroad, however, for when Mary had opened her eyes after the sudden attack of faintness that had overtaken her when the distant roar of guns proclaimed that the relief force was well upon its way, and that life was to be her portion instead of death, Waring had been insistent that she should tell no one—not even her close friend Anna Martheu—of what had passed between them before the heavy guns began to boom. Let their secret remain their own secret for a little while—at all events till San-Tong had been safely relieved, for they were not out of the wood yet, he explained; all sorts of things might happen—the relief force might be drawn into battle, for instance, and so prevented from reaching San-Tong for another few hours, or even a day, and delay of any sort would be fatal.

Mary had listened to what Waring had to say obediently enough, and she had agreed to keep the news of their engagement a secret during the next few hours of stress and strain, but she was not afraid that the relief force would encounter any great opposition or have to fight their grim way to the besieged town—that poor little town where a handful of Europeans had kept the British flag flying and displayed a courage that might justly be termed sublime; for surely—surely—so Mary argued to herself, with a touching and childlike faith—God Almighty would never have allowed those guns to sound so loud—the guns that spoke of help and deliverance—if He had not meant to save the little garrison waiting so patiently, so bravely at San-Tong. God never would have shown such cruelty to poor weak flesh and blood—Mary was confident of this.

And now Mary Fielder's trust in the Lord Jehovah

had been fully justified—the relief force had marched triumphantly into San-Tong about four hours ago, and preparations were being carried on briskly for a big dinner to be given that night—a dinner to the Marine Officers who had fought their way so steadily to the rescue of their countrymen and countrywomen.

Anna was busily engaged in helping with the cooking of this feast, but Mary had left her friend to find Waring, who had stolen away from the men whose praise made him feel ashamed—for they did not know—how could they?—what small store he put upon his life or how ready he would have been to have died in a good cause—the very best death for him under the circumstances, and considering the general mess he had made of things—the absolute and total failure.

Mary had found Waring leaning over the brown wall, brooding heavily, and she had wondered innocently enough, why he should look so haggard and wretched now that everything seemed bright and prosperous for them, now that the heavy shadow of Death had lifted, and Love—radiant-eyed Love—was ready to bestow his benediction on the girl and the man who had confessed to a mutual affection, whilst standing, as they fancied, on the very brink of Eternity.

But Waring's first words enlightened her as to the cause of his gloomy looks. He seemed to think—or so Mary gathered from what he said—that she might not be so ready to be engaged to him now that there was no tragic death-hour to be faced together, no wild and sudden exit; only she could not imagine why he should be so absurd, for when two people love each other they want to live on for years and years, she argued, and their goal is marriage.

“Dear—why are you talking to me like this? What do you really mean?” Mary addressed him gently,

but somewhat gravely. "Don't you really care for me?" she added. "Didn't you mean it a few hours ago when you told me that you loved me?—Oh, I didn't show you too plainly that I loved you, did I, so that you were sorry for me and wanted to make my last moments happy—it wasn't so, was it?"

She laid a timid hand on his arm—such a cold, shrinking hand, and though she had stated the case exactly as it was, Waring had not the heart to tell her so. He simply lacked the courage; and yet, had he known all that was to happen in the future, he would rather have pierced Mary's breast with a sword than have allowed their engagement to continue. But his eyes were holden—he could not peer into the days ahead, and he shrank from inflicting pain on Mary Fielder, as he had always shrunk in the past from hurting any one; failing to realize that he was doing the girl no true kindness, for it would have been better—far better—to have made his confession at once—a straightforward confession—only Waring preferred to play the part of a man of straw, and to temporize with an impossible situation.

"Mary dear, you must not get such foolish ideas into your head." He looked at the girl with reproachful eyes. "You mustn't fancy that I don't love you, for of course I love you—dearly, dearly."

He thought of Deborah Krillet as he spoke, and the words nearly stuck in his throat, but he got them out somehow, and he told himself that Mary Fielder was too young, too innocent to realize that he put no passion into them—no real warmth whatsoever.

"You love me—do you really love me? Oh, tell me so again, please—tell me so again." She clung tightly to his arm, and then, abandoning herself to a very fervour of tenderness, she bent her fair young

neck and buried her cheek on Waring's shoulder. He could feel the heaving of her breast, and he recognised that the girl adored him, and how was he to tell her that he needed neither her adoration nor her love, but that all he desired in this life was fruit that hung high out of reach—sour grapes in a trampled vineyard?

He could not tell her—that was the horrible part of it, nor would he ever be able to tell her. He mustn't spoil her young life by embittering it at its very start. If Mary Fielder wanted to marry him, he must marry Mary Fielder, and do his best to make her a good husband, only pray God that she broke things off before the wedding day! But the breaking must come from her, not from him, for Waring had simply not got the courage to hurt the tender, loving young creature who was clinging to him so confidently at the present moment. And yet he wanted to give her some insight into his real character; he longed to make her realize that she would be sacrificing herself if she married him—that he wasn't worth any woman's love, far less a young girl's. But how could he do this—how could he make her see him as he was? It would be a difficult and almost an impossible task.

“Are you so sure that you love me, Mary?” He tried to carry the war into the enemy's camp, but he knew, even as he spoke, that his words failed to bear conviction with them. It was not so a lover eager to learn the truth would have inquired into the nature of his sweetheart's convictions; there was something lacking—painfully lacking—and the only wonder was that Mary had not already discovered this—that she did not appreciate how strained things were, or appear to realize that there was something greatly amiss. Now Deborah would have known at once—wonderful Deborah, who was as sensitive as a musical instrument;

but then there were few women like Deborah about, and perhaps it was just as well for the world's peace of mind. She was as the soul to other women's clay. But there, what folly to be thinking of Deborah Krillet, and above all at the present moment, and just when cursed Fate had saddled him with a new responsibility—a new tie.

"Sure that I love you?" Mary laughed happily. "Why, I should rather think that I was certain. All my life I've hoped to fall in love one day, but that day never dawned till I met you; it was not my time to love, I suppose, or else I was just waiting—waiting for you to step into my life and fill it with your big, strong presence, and oh! it's so wonderful—so more than wonderful—to feel that you care for me. I have been telling myself so during the last hour or two, trying to get accustomed to the wonderful fact that you love me, feeling as if I had never known what it was to be truly happy before, for love just makes all the difference, doesn't it—love like ours?"

She smiled up tenderly, and with charming candour, into his face; but Waring winced uneasily.

"Listen, I must tell you more about myself," he exclaimed hoarsely, "before you announce the fact of our engagement to any one, or even consider that we are engaged; and remember, dear Mary, you are perfectly free to break our engagement off when you know more about me, if you find, as I'm afraid you will find, that I am really not worth thinking about—a worthless sort of fellow—a mere rolling stone."

"But you're not worthless—you're not a rolling stone," she interrupted eagerly. "Think what every one is saying about you at the present moment—why, you are a hero, my dear—a hero."

"A hero—I don't know." He laughed rather

bitterly; "the folk here are making too much fuss about me. I only did my duty, as I saw it, and there's nothing very wonderful in that, is there? Besides, a man would be a sorry worm if he didn't buck up a bit and fight his little best when there are women to be saved from a barbarous death—his own countrywomen. Oh, I've done nothing out of the common, I can assure you, Mary, and you mustn't think of me as a hero, or in any way connected with a hero, for beyond the fact that I can fight there' tle more to be put to my credit. I am what you would call a waster, I think, an aimless individual who meanders aimlessly through life, and who does far more harm in his time than good—does a lot of harm, in point of fact, both to himself and to others."

"Why do you pain me by saying such things?" Mary interrupted. Her face looked very pale—her eyes troubled. "I don't like to hear you call yourself by harsh name -it—it hurts me, even when I know that you are exaggerating, and that you are certainly not what you make yourself out to be—oh, anything but a waster—anything."

"Don't be too certain, Mary." He turned and leant his back against the brown wall, and the afternoon sunshine, flashing down from the sky, flamed over his face and lit up his hair, and he looked handsome, but extremely weary—ineffably weary.

"Tell me about yourself—everything, please. But nothing you can tell me will make me love you less, I can promise you that."

"Tell you, dear—" He glanced at her beautiful, earnest face, and a sudden sense of compunction came over him for having brought tears into Mary's eyes, for surely tears glistened in their blue depths at the present moment. But still he was really not to blame

for all that had happened as far as he could see, it was Destiny who had moved the pawns rather quaintly on the chess-board, and made a pretty successful tangle of things—a rare muddle.

“First of all, Mary, you must realise that I am a widower. I married a charming girl some years ago, a Miss Joan Desborough, but I got bored with married life after a time—fed up with it, and I turned my steps to South Africa; there was some one I wanted to see there—a woman who had the right to send for me whenever she needed help—a woman with whom I had got into a mess during the time of my engagement to Joan.”

He paused a second and stared hard at Mary, who was regarding him somewhat doubtfully.

“It all sounds pretty bad, dear, doesn’t it?” he asked; “not very much to my credit, and yet, hang it all! I don’t know that I was altogether to blame for the mess I got myself into with the Shulamite——”

“With the Shulamite?” Mary inquired curiously. “What a strange name, and who was she—and why was she called after the woman in the Song of Songs?”

She moved back rather restlessly as she said the last words, and clenched her hands tightly together, and he could tell from this that she was suffering, and he hated to see Mary suffer, even though he didn’t love her.

“The woman of whom we are speaking was called ‘the Shulamite’ by the two men who loved her,” he answered, “her husband and myself, because she was uncommonly like the Shulamite whom we read of in the Bible—just as beautiful—just as wonderful—for her lips were as a thread of scarlet, and you caught the scent of all the spices in the world in her hair. She was as the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley—in other words, the Shulamite herself.”



"And you loved her?" The words fell brokenly, sharply from Mary's lips, and she leant back heavily against the wall. "You loved her—but she was another man's wife?"

"Exactly." He spoke in low, brooding tones. "I loved her, and she was another man's wife, and he loved her too, but in a fierce, sullen, masterful way—more as if she were his chattel than his wife, and he wanted to make a slave of her, to curb her intelligence. He refused to allow her to read what he was pleased to call light books—Shakespeare's plays, for instance—and whenever she disobeyed him he beat her—do you understand, Mary?—he lashed her, just as he would have lashed a dog, but at other times he would take her in his arms and kiss her, and he was an old man, and she was a young woman."

"Horrible! horrible!" Mary shuddered, then she raised a cold hand to her forehead and pressed her aching eyes. "And what happened when you appeared upon the scene?"

"A good deal happened. We fell in love with each other for one thing—the Shulamite and myself—but quite unwillingly, for she wanted to be a loyal wife to her husband, and I knew I was engaged to a charming girl in England—but the old madness came upon us for all that, the sweet madness. But I won't discuss the subject with you, Mary—I would rather not; it is quite enough to tell you that we never actually strayed from the path of virtue, and that I left the Shulamite and returned to England—though she was a widow at the time, her husband having been accidentally killed out driving."

"Then you could have married her if you had wanted to?" Mary spoke more hopefully.

"Yes," he answered; "but there was Miss

Desborough to be considered, you must remember—the girl I was engaged to, and whom I ultimately married.”

“And you loved her too, I suppose?” Mary asked, and if there was any satire in her voice it was unintentional.

“I loved her very dearly in a way. She was a sweet little creature, extremely pretty and oddly fascinating, but she died when our child was born, and the baby died too; but, thank God, I just got home from South Africa in time, for I had gone back to Africa to see the Shulamite—she had sent for me.”

“She had no business to send for you when she knew you were married. I call it a very wicked action on her part, and I don’t think she can be at all a nice woman.” Mary’s lips compressed somewhat tightly together—she looked like a young saint trying hard to be angry—but Waring flushed uneasily.

“Don’t say a word against the Shulamite before me, if you please, Mary. You don’t know anything about her really, the trials she suffered, and the bitter anguish she endured. She went through more pain than most women are called upon to bear, more intense suffering, and, when I asked her to marry me after Joan’s death, she refused to—merely as a matter of conscience, and because of a promise she had once made, and an oath—an oath taken in the name of the Lord.”

“A promise she had made her husband, I suppose?” Mary interrupted. “Well, I respect her for keeping it, anyway.”

“And I think she was foolish,” Waring interrupted savagely, “for she spoilt her own life and she spoilt mine at the time. See you, Mary, this all happened about three years ago, and ever since then I have been spending my time trying to forget the

Shulamite, and I've done what was evil in the sight of the Lord, as the Bible would put it—I've lived riotously, wantonly, and I've no more right to ask a girl like yourself to marry me than to go up boldly to heaven and to knock at the gates of Everlasting Life and demand to be let in. For I've herded with publicans and sinners, and I've fed with swine. I've dabbled with wickedness, and all in the hope of being able to forget that woman—the woman whom I left behind in South Africa, alone in her lonely farm—a woman desolate and forsaken."

"Never mind, that's all over now," Mary whispered; "and I don't blame you—you were miserable, poor boy, and you wanted to forget her—the woman who had brought you so much sorrow, who had embittered your days. And that's why you wandered about aimlessly, and—and mixed with horrible people; but you must forget these lost years—there are brighter, better years ahead—the years that you are going to spend with me—with your wife."

"But you don't want to marry me, surely, after what I have just told you? I assure you I'm an utter blackguard; I've broken the hearts of two women in my time—the heart of the girl I married, and the heart of the Shulamite, and I don't want to break yours, poor dear. I've shirked everything—ever since things went wrong with me with regard to my love affairs—for though I own a fine property, I've let it for a term of years, and I believe my tenants are having a deuce of a time with the man who has taken on Molesley Court—he's a regular old skinflint, a man who does nothing for the cottagers. Besides, Mary, I've taken to playing tricks with myself, ever since I came to China, and that's the very deuce, you know; for the opium habit is beginning to get hold of me.

I started taking drugs, in fact, before I left Europe—just an injection of morphia now and then, so that I could get a good night's sleep occasionally; but when I visited San Francisco—well, one of my pals took me to an opium den which he patronised himself, and there the fascination of the black smoke got hold of me—the dreary, drowsy black smoke, and I love my opium pipe, and the habit will grow upon me, you can be sure of that, and you don't want to marry an opium smoker, do you—you'd hardly be so foolish, dear, wise child; you'd have more sense, wouldn't you?"

He took her by her two hands as he said the last words, and gazed into her eyes, and rather a mocking smile played about his lips, a whimsical smile, for he felt quite sure that he would be able to slip out of his present difficulty in another moment or two—that Mary Fielder would give him up of her own free will—why, of course she would, the dear, sensible, pretty creature!

"I'm not going to marry an opium smoker," Mary spoke with quiet decision. "Do you imagine for one second, dear, that I shall allow you to continue to visit opium dens now that we are engaged to be married? You only went to those vile haunts in the past because you were miserable and unhappy, and you still thought about the woman in South Africa; but now that you have met me, everything is changed, everything is different, for I think I am the real love of your life, Robert. You have practically admitted that you didn't care so very much about your first wife, or you could never have left her; and your passion for the Shulamite, as you call her, was merely an obsession—at least so I take it, and it wasn't the right sort of love—it couldn't

have been, for it was all mixed up with guilt and treachery and dishonour—she was a married woman, you see. But in my case it's different; I'm a girl—just a young girl, and I love you, dear, and I'm going to give you the whole of my life. I intend to devote myself to you utterly; so don't be afraid, you won't want to mix with publicans and sinners, as you call them, once we are married, for I think I shall be able to make your home happy. Besides, you love me so you will want to be with me—that's only natural, isn't it?"

She laughed quite happily, quite sincerely, and her belief in herself, her absolute conviction that she could do what she said, struck Waring as one of the most pathetic things he had ever witnessed. For what did Mary Fielder really know or understand of love—of love's deep bitterness and wild fierceness, its lack of all restraint when fully aroused, its blazing heat and torrential force? She was just a mere girl, a charming young woman who knew absolutely nothing about emotion, and whose soul was as a sheet of white paper.

But to think that Mary could make him forget the Shulamite! To imagine that the immature affection she would give him—the green love—could make him inconstant even for a moment to the memory of the rich wine he had drunk in the past, the wine of a woman's spirit! Though Mary Fielder was young and beautiful, well, did she think that the satiny softness of her flesh, her flowing hair, her candid eyes, her fresh young lips, would ever slake his thirst, the thirst that had consumed him for over three years now, the wild thirst of a lover for a woman who could never be his? It was not likely that Mary Fielder would even be jealous of that woman if she ever came across

her, for Mary would see little beauty in Deborah Krillet's worn, thin face and lean body, those straining, restless hands and red, tortured-looking lips.

She would simply regard Deborah as a faded woman—a woman who had once been beautiful, but whose beauty had fretted away. Even her eyes—those great burning eyes—would not strike Mary as being particularly wonderful; she would prefer eyes clear and candid like her own, pure and limpid, nor would she understand that the lithe fierceness that was Deborah Krillet's especial attitude now—the arid bitterness—could be far more fascinating than the curved contours of full-bosomed youth, for how could Mary know the cruelty of love? She was just a girl, and Deborah was a woman, and there was all the difference in the world between them, and what did Waring want of a girl?—why, nothing, nothing!

But the girl had taken it into her head to fall in love with him, unfortunately, and it was all a hideous muddle and absurd tangle; yet he must get through the business somehow—he mustn't make a girl unhappy—only it was a pity that Mary Fielder wanted to marry him—a tremendous pity, for life would become a horribly boring thing in the future if they married, unless they happened to have children; of course a child would be an interest, a great interest, and certainly Mary was a pleasing study in her way, and she would develop after she was married, for marriage is always an educator. But it was deplorable, from Waring's point of view—it was really deplorable that the Boxers, poor chaps, had been beaten off from San-Tong, and that people were alive who really had no right to be alive as far as he could see, for they ought all to have been dead by now—

the garrison and the Mission folk—Mary and himself—dead—and their worries and perplexities over.

“What are you thinking about? Why are you so grave? You mustn't feel sad, dear. I hope that all the sadness and the sorrow is over for you; I shall devote my life to making you happy.”

Mary spoke with a calm and gentle confidence, and she smiled up into Waring's face; but as her eyes met his a troubled look crossed her countenance, and she suddenly lost her air of youthful assurance.

“You don't think that woman—the Shulamite—will ever come into your life again—cross your path? She would not try and make trouble between us, would she?”

“You can make your mind quite clear on that point: the Shulamite and I have parted company for ever; so much is certain—absolutely certain.” He paused a second, then added very gravely, “Don't you understand? She sent me from her; she ordered me from her presence; she refused to marry me; she has put me deliberately out of her life.”

“So that I can take you into mine?” Mary's whole face softened, and as she smiled at Waring he wondered if he might not come to love this quiet, gentle girl in time, and if her society might not have a calming influence upon him in the future.

He could never love her as he had loved Deborah, of course—that went without saying, but she might prove a very pleasant companion. She was gentle and sweet and good and brave—oh, most certainly brave—the days in besieged San-Tong had proved that; also Waring thought he rather liked her firm religious convictions, for she was one of those girls whom religion suits, and Mary's profession of faith went with Mary's Madonna-like brow and quiet

dignity of manner—a girlish dignity that was distinctly attractive.

“ I do love you so ”—she spoke with a sweet artlessness—“ and I have always longed to fall in love, but never could ; other girls used to tell me about their love affairs, and I sometimes wondered——” She paused, breaking off suddenly, then added—“ I’ve really led rather a lonely life, you know, though Adam has been most awfully good to me ; but you see he’s such a tremendously busy man and he’s got so much to think about that he cannot have me with him very much. He has to be continually travelling about, for one thing, always going backwards and forwards between South Africa and England, and even when we are at home together, well, we always have people staying—people he has to entertain, political bigwigs and their wives—or even if there are no guests in the house—a rare coincidence—why, there is always some one coming in in a breathless hurry to discuss important concerns with Adam, or else he’s dictating letters to his secretary. And you’ve no idea how lonely a girl can be, living in a great big house—a house that’s like a palace, but with no mother, no sister. I’ve told you all about my life, though, haven’t I, since we’ve been shut up in San-Tong together, and you know all that there is to know about me, dear.”

“ Yes,” he answered shortly, for he was wondering what Adam Fielder would think of him—Mary’s brother—and the thought struck him that perhaps the great South African millionaire would refuse to sanction the engagement when he found out the life Waring had been leading for the last three years ; otherwise there was nothing he could object to, of course, in the proposed union, for Waring was a man



of means, and he came of a good old family, and as far as age went he was quite a suitable husband for Mary Fielder.

"What do you think your brother will say to me?" He glanced at her gravely.

"My brother—dear Adam?" She clapped her hands lightly together. "Why, he'll be delighted—absolutely delighted; he has always wanted me to marry, and to marry for love."

"But he may not think me good enough for you—he may raise great objections to our marriage."

Her brows knit together in a frown.

"He wouldn't—Adam wouldn't, for when he knows that my heart is set on a thing he always wants me to have it; he believes in making people happy in their own way; and besides, even if he did object to our marriage—a quite impossible idea—it wouldn't—it couldn't make any difference, any real difference. I should marry you just the same. I am of age, you see; I can do just what I like."

"And you really want to inarry me—you are quite sure? You know that there's been another woman in my life, and she's had the best part of it, and it's quite possible that I may develop the drug habit later on, or continue with this infernal opium business, and I'm restless—abominably restless—I can never stay long in one place; I wander to and fro in the world like Cain!"

"But there was a reason for Cain's restlessness," she answered; "he had his brother's blood upon his hands, remember; he heard his brother's blood crying out from the ground.—Oh, you won't be restless, dear, once we have built our home; but, of course, if you still want to wander, well, I'll wander with you, from sea to sea, from shore to shore."

"But you wouldn't like the life—you'd be miserable."

"Not half so miserable as I should be if I was not with you," she answered; "for oh! you mean everything in the world to me—everything in the wide, wide world."

"Little girl, is it as bad as that?" He addressed her with a sudden tenderness.

"It's not bad," she smiled; "it's good—good. Oh, Robert, I never thought I could be so happy; I never believed such happiness existed. And to think that I had to come to China to find it—China."

"Yes, to China, that most cruel of all countries; a land where they worship the dead years, the dead men and women, a land where they practise devil-worship of every description, and go in for devilry of all sorts and kinds; an ugly land, a cruel land, a wicked land, and it's here you have found me, here our paths have joined; we have met in the country of the ants—the ants who have been at their tenacious work here through the centuries."

"But we are going home to Europe!"

She soothed him with her quiet smile and laid a hand upon his arm.

"Come, let us go straight to the Mission House and tell Anna our news," she whispered. "I cannot keep my happiness from Anna any longer—Anna who is only a bride herself."

He yielded to the inevitable, yielded to the touch of those cool girlish fingers, and to the note of gentle command in the quiet girlish voice, and as he walked forward into what promised to be a new life with Mary Fielder by his side, Waring murmured a solemn vow to himself—a vow to forget the Shulamite, to forget Deborah Krillet, dwelling by herself in a lonely

farm, a farm surrounded by brown plains of silence, for the past was over and done; it was the future he had to think about now—the future that a girl was to share with him.

But even as he walked on it seemed as though he heard Deborah's tears falling—falling a long way off—drip, drip, drip, and he knew he would hear those tears falling till he died, hear them awake, hear them in his dreams—and how slowly, how monotonously they fell—drip, drip, drip.

## CHAPTER IV

LEBORAH KRILLET sat dining quietly by herself at a small table set back in one of the balconies of the Savoy Restaurant. She was dressed very plainly, wearing a black gown cut high at the throat, and though people stared at her it was not merely on account of her looks, for there were far more beautiful women dining at the Savoy that night, but there was something about Simeon Krillet's widow that aroused attention, interest—a singular aloofness, a tragic immobility of feature—it was only her eyes that moved.

She looked fairly young and she possessed a wonderfully clear white skin; her features were small and delicate, and her hair shone like pale gold, but her eyes—a slate blue in colour with big pupils—seemed to be always looking for some one.

She was tall and slenderly built, but the heavy folds of her black gown disguised the delicate curves of her figure effectually, and her pallor was extreme, her lips bloodless. She lacked vitality to an extraordinary extent, and she gave people the impression that nothing could arouse or excite her interest. And her indifference was not studied; it had become a part of herself, yet there was always the chance that certain slumbering fires in her nature might ignite again, and then this woman would burn at a white heat, her heart quiver and start under the black folds

of her robe, and her pale pinched lips—why, her lips would be as a thread of scarlet, and it only needed one spark to work this miracle—just one spark—and white ash would burst into flame.

Waiters hovered deferentially about Deborah Krillet's table, for she could always command service. She looked at people slowly, and they ran to do her bidding. She gave the impression that if it could be possible to arouse her anger it would be as keen and terrible as lightning—quite as blasting—but she would never trouble sufficiently about anything to be angry, and this indifference was curiously fascinating; it piqued people into wanting to please her—only she was never pleased, her quiet "Thank you" was merely perfunctory, she put no real meaning into the words, she felt no gratitude.

She ate her dinner slowly to-night, ordered wine and then drank water, looked at the gay crowd around her with her strange slate-blue eyes—the eyes that roved round and never settled—and then, just as she was paring a peach, a big burly Dutchman—a typical Boer—made his hasty way to her table, a man who had just driven up to the Savoy in a huge white motor and looked what he was—a prosperous South African magnate.

"Whew! Deborah, what a crowd—and what a hot night!"

He wiped his brow with a large handkerchief. He was a tall, fair-haired man with bright-blue eyes and a pleasant open face. A Boer farmer by birth, he had somewhat unexpectedly made a large fortune owing to a lucky speculation, and it had taken Jan Van Kerrel a long time to get accustomed to his riches—smart crowds still distressed him, and at such times his hands would crimson and the veins swell on his forehead.

"Is it so hot, Jan? I thought it no warmer to-night than it has been for days."

Deborah held out a cool hand, and her cousin by marriage wrung it heartily; then he sat down by her side, drawing his chair close to hers.

"I was very sorry I couldn't dine with you this evening, but I had to be out very late—there was a business appointment fixed for six o'clock that I had to keep. You have something important to tell me, so you telephoned. It is lucky I am over in England, isn't it? but I would have come to you from the other end of the world had you wanted me, cousin—needed me."

He said the last words with grave earnestness, and Deborah gave his arm a light touch with her hand, the slight caress a woman would bestow upon a faithful dog, and a faint, a very faint smile crossed Jan Van Kerrel's lips; it seemed as if he quite understood the situation.

"You are a strange woman, cousin; I give you my life, and you reward me with a pat on my arm."

"Do I ask you—have I ever asked you for your life? Did I not urge your marriage upon you in the past—after——"

"Ja, Deborah, ja;" he regarded her with yearning eyes. But the little Anna is dead, dear, she died, as you know, two years ago in childbirth, when our second child was born."

"Yes—dead, buried and out of sight; but what difference does that make to me, Jan?"

"None at all, cousin, I suppose," he said slowly; then he cleared his throat huskily. "Tell me your news."

"I am thinking of getting married myself."

Had a bombshell exploded under Van Kerrel's

feet he could not have looked more startled, more disturbed ; his fresh rosy colour deserted him and he shivered ; his lips twitched painfully.

"Are you jesting with me, cousin ?" He spoke in hoarse tones. "I thought you had put love out of your life for ever."

"We are talking of marriage, Jan, not of love." She poured herself out some more water and drank a few drops. Her eyes were glittering restlessly, but her face might have been carved out of stone. "You know the man," she added, "it is Adam Fielder, Adam Fielder, who, thanks to that visit he paid my farm set down amidst the silent African plains, has made a rich man of you and a wealthy woman of me, for he gave me very good advice, did he not ?—the strange man who came trekking across the veldt, and to whom I offered hospitality. The Mengen Mines have more than fulfilled all the predictions he made with regard to them, and we did well to invest all the money we could scrape together in those gold mines, Jan. I gave you the hint, did I not ?"

She laughed, but her laughter sounded mirthless.

"It was rash of us, Jan, wasn't it ?—but I ventured more than you did, and on the word—the mere word—of a stranger, for I staked everything I owned in the world—my good farm in the Orange Free State, my flock of sheep and handsome Angora rams ; it—it faintly amused me to do so ; I wanted to give God the chance of making me a beggar, but He refrained, He turned my silver into gold, He showered wealth upon me." She leaned back in her chair and for the first time that evening her lids drooped wearily over her eyes. "Well, Adam Fielder wants to marry me—to marry Deborah Krillet, and he is one of the richest men in South Africa—a power in the land,

and he's strong, very strong, bound to achieve greatness, and his career has hardly commenced as yet, the career he offers to share with me."

A waiter approached her chair at that moment and murmured in her ear something about coffee.

"Certainly," she said, "two cups and liqueurs. You'll have a liqueur with your coffee, Jan?"

He nodded his head silently, but he was thankful for the coffee when it came and for the fine thimbleful of old brandy; he felt sick and cold—cold to the very marrow of his bones, and yet he had thought it such a hot June evening only a brief ten minutes ago.

"What about Robert Waring, cousin? Have you forgotten the Englishman at last?"

Her face turned perfectly grey; her eyes dilated, and her delicate nostrils quivered. Some coffee splashed from her cup upon her gown.

"I shall forget Robert Waring when they tie my jaw up with a cloth and wind my limbs in a clean white shroud and nail down my coffin lid—shutting out the light—but not before."

She spoke with a terrible directness, and the gay talk that was going on at most of the tables made a strange accompaniment to her speech, and the light laughter of other women sounded like the tinkling of vain cymbals—foolish piping.

"You have not met the Englishman since you parted from him in South Africa three years ago—he has not come across your path?"

"No, I have not met Robert Waring."

"But you still love him?"

He questioned her almost brutally, but what he had to say must be spoken.

Her slate-grey eyes grew black—black as night.



"I was born to love him—I shall love him to the end, and there will be no end for us, there cannot be. We shall meet and mix one day—or our elements will. He will draw me to him out of the dust of the grave. Yes, if we seek each other through centuries, the hour will come at last."

"What hour?" He grew rough in his manner.

"The hour we have succeeded in missing hitherto—the hour that can never be ours in this life."

"And feeling like this for one man, cousin, you can still think of marrying another?"

"Why not?" Her voice was coldly indifferent. "Robert Waring and I have said good-bye to each other—we can never come together in this life, as I have just said; but I'm young—young still, more's the pity, and I must find something to interest me or go mad. It will be absorbingly interesting, I should imagine, to watch a man like Adam Fielder at his work, the work of empire-building. He intends to be the cleanser of the Augean stables, and he will make Jo'burg a very different place in the course of time; the Jews will have to reckon with Adam Fielder, and so will the foreign scum. He will sweep Africa with his broom later on—a strong new broom—succeed in his task or die."

"So that's why you want to marry him, to watch him at his work? To share in his success—to rise high?"

"Yes, Jan; also his strength appeals to me and his tremendous vitality, his zest, for he's so magnificently alive, and he will have such power in his hands later on, power that I shall share. It is strange that he should want to marry me, is it not? Simeon Krillet's widow—a pale, silent woman, quiet, quiet as the grave."

"You are Deborah." Van Kerrel's voice softened, then he suddenly leaned forward and gazed at his cousin searchingly. "Does he know about Robert Waring—have you told him?"

"Not a word as yet, but he is coming to see me this evening. You know I am staying here, and I intend to tell him everything to-night; then, after he has heard my story, if he still cares to renew his offer of marriage, I will consent to become his wife."

"You will marry Adam Fielder, rooi-nek though he is, for all his Boer grandmother, and yet you will not marry me, Deborah."

Her cold face clouded.

"Now, Jan, could you give me unlimited power in the future and the excitement of watching an Homeric contest—a giant fighting pigmies?"

"I could give you love," he muttered stubbornly.

"Love—just what I have no need for, what I do not want; I'm sorry, Jan, to hurt you like this, but it is better to be frank."

"Much better." His eyes were dim, and he looked at her strangely. "What is there about you, Deborah, that makes you able to draw all men to you, a poor blundering fellow like myself and a great man like Adam Fielder—a strong man? You dress simply, too simply; I don't like those heavy black folds." He frowned, and touched her gown. "Your beauty is not what it was—you are as silent and cold as any woman could be, and yet, when your eyes go searching round, there's not a man but wants to meet them; there's a look in your face that maddens folk—stirs the blood, Deborah; you're not angry?"

She shook her head, then she bent towards Jan.

"I wanted to tell you about Adam Fielder before matters were quite settled between us. I have seen

a good deal of him even since I came to England last year. And now you will leave me to have my talk with him, will you not—my explanation? I expect him here at half-past nine. It is a quarter-past nine now."

"I'd better go, I suppose. You would rather I took my departure at once?" He rose somewhat awkwardly to his feet.

"Yes, go now, but come and see me again soon. Will the business that has brought you over to England detain you long?"

"There's no knowing." He glanced at her strangely. "It all depends."

She nodded her head silently, then held out her hand. He shook it solemnly and turned away. Deborah Krillet watched him take his departure with indifferent eyes—yet this was a man who would have died for her. A second later she was staring restlessly again, her eyes darting hither and thither, those eyes that were the chambers of a tortured soul—a soul in prison.

## CHAPTER V

"WHY do you want to marry me? I am neither young nor beautiful and a woman of no education—of scant knowledge. I have passed the greater part of my life on a South African farm, and I have been brought very low—even unto the dust—for God laid His hand upon me once, and it was a heavy hand."

Deborah spoke in low, even tones. She was sitting in a high chair in her private sitting-room at the Savoy and Adam Fielder faced her, his eyes never moving from her pale, cold countenance.

He was a tall, well-built man, with a strong and very determined face. His brown hair had reddish lights in it and his eyes were a bright grey. His square features and broad forehead recalled fugitive memories to artists of portraits of Dutch burghers that they had come across in foreign galleries; for there was nothing restless or modern about Fielder—he was like one of those great, quiet men of the past, the men who did the things that they wanted to do and never wasted much time in talking.

Fielder was half of English and half of Dutch extraction. His people had settled down in South Africa nearly fifty years ago, and Adam Fielder loved the land of his adoption, all the more, possibly, because it was still a sullen and untamed land—a bitter, angry country, fierce as a woman who has not yet made up her mind to love her master, and yet a land that can make

men rich and show a fertile side—fields golden with grain, as well as dreary barren tracks and miles of sandy veldt.

“I determined to marry you the first time I saw you, Deborah; it was with me just as it was with Jacob when he met Rachel at the well. ‘There stands my future wife,’ I told myself when my oxen halted outside your farm, and you stood alone on the stoep. You were dressed in black—I have never seen you except in black, I think—and your face was very pale and your eyes burnt in your head, and there was something about you that made you quite different to any other woman I had ever come across. You were flesh and blood, but flesh and blood with a difference.” He paused a moment and half closed his eyes. “I spoke to you and asked if I might outspan, and you were very hospitable—you welcomed me to the farm at once. But I felt as if the coming of a stranger into your dull, lonely life meant absolutely nothing to you, and I vowed I would conquer your indifference—as I have done.”

“Have you?” She glanced at him steadily.

“I think so, Deborah, I think so. I know you take an interest in my aims, my ambitions; besides, you invested your money as I advised and you made a fortune in consequence, and again acting on my advice you came to England a year ago and said good-bye to South Africa for a time, and all this taken together counts for something—no other man has influenced your actions to the same extent.”

She drew a deep sharp breath.

“You think so, do you? But what if I tell you that I risked Hell and damnation for a man in the past—a man who has drained my soul dry, emptied my heart, till there is nothing left of me but ashes;

I burnt and cindered for his pleasure, but God put the fire out at last, God took pity on me and showed some mercy. He sent a purging sickness, I was ill many days, but when the fever left me—well, the fire went out too, and I've been cold and quiet ever since, and cold and quiet I shall remain."

"Are you so sure, Deborah?" He moved a little closer to her, and a faint, a very faint, smile crossed his lips. "I should not be asking you to marry me if I did not feel quite convinced that I am strong enough to break down your reserve in time—to thaw you." His voice sounded dry and hard. "Don't talk of the other man—I'd rather not hear. I have nothing to do with your past, Deborah, it is the future that concerns me."

"Ah, but the past concerns you too," she interrupted. "You ought to know more about me before we even discuss the question of a marriage between us, for there's blood on my hands—blood."

She held them out for his inspection—white, well-shaped hands, and he saw no spot or stain upon them, nor did he really believe that any blemish existed.

"I see no blood on your hands."

"There is blood all the same—my husband's."

"Deborah!" He glanced at her strangely. "What do you mean—what are you trying to make me believe?"

"The truth." She paused for a second; her face had turned very pale. Then she bent forward in her chair.

"Listen to me, and don't interrupt more than you can help, and I will tell you certain facts about myself, secrets that lie hidden in a grave, my dead husband's grave."

She hesitated, her face working painfully, then

folded her hands together in her lap—the hands that she had said were stained, and the restless look faded out of her eyes. She seemed to be gazing at some dreadful picture—some unforgettable vision.

“I married when I was quite young, just a mere thin slip of a girl—married a Boer old enough to be my father, a stern and terribly just man, who carried me away from my step-brother’s farm into a life that proved to be a life of bondage, for he stifled my intelligence, he refused to allow me to read books except the Bible and a few dull volumes of sermons; he denied me freedom of mind, and when I protested he—he flogged me.”

“Flogged you?” Fielder half sprang from his chair, but she motioned him back.

“Sit still, please, we are only at the beginning of my story. Yes, he flogged me, for a man must be master in his own house, he said; but he loved me, in his way, dearly. I hadn’t a ticky of silver, remember, and I was little better than an unpaid servant in my brother’s farm—my parents were both dead, you see, and Simeon made me mistress over sheep and oxen, women servants and men servants; he gave me a good home, clothes, food, but he wanted a great deal in return. I was to be the mere echo of his thoughts—never, never to think for myself.”

She paused. She had been speaking very slowly, but when she took up the thread of her narrative her pace quickened and the words flowed swiftly.

“Things went on quietly enough for a year, and then a man came into my life—the man. Simeon brought him to the farm to act as overseer, and I did not want him to come particularly. I hated the way I was being treated and did not desire the presence of a third person, for Simeon’s love was quite as

abhorrent to me as Simeon's anger, and he put no restraint on either mood; I was his chattel, and I shrank from the thought that the new overseer would be a witness both to Simeon's kisses and to Simeon's blows; but when he came—ah, when he came!"

Her voice softened, her eyes became deep pools of memory.

"He was an Englishman, clever, oh, very clever; and he treated me with a gentle courtesy to which I was a stranger. He would rise and give up his seat for me, for instance, and—and he told me that it was a lie, a cursed lie, that women were made for man's pleasure; he spoke of women reverently, and I loved him for that—I loved him." She drew a deep, sobbing breath. "He lent me books to read—your Shakespeare amongst other volumes—but when Simeon found this out he threatened to beat me for having disobeyed his orders never to read what he called 'light books,' and—and I had promised the Englishman that I would never let my husband whip me again, so I lied to Simeon—I told him a lie about an unborn child, and the whip fell from his hand and he fell at my feet, praising me, worshipping me, and, my God! how I trembled, how sick I felt, for I had never told a lie before."

She was trembling as she spoke now, and her face was awake and astir with pain.

"I kept up that lie for weeks, and then the end came—sharply, suddenly, for it chanced that the Englishman was sent on an errand to the nearest township, and during his absence Simeon found a small diary that belonged to him; my husband opened it, thinking it was a book full of reading, then he stumbled on my name, Deborah, and there, set down in that diary, in black and white, was the fact that



the Englishman loved me, though indeed he had never told me so; also he wrote at some length about the lie I had imposed upon Simeon." She hesitated. "Well, Simeon was just—even in his rage and despair he was just. He came and asked me if I, in my turn, loved the Englishman, and it was only when I answered 'Yes' that he made up his mind to kill me, the wife who had betrayed him in her heart and so must surely die."

Her voice died down to a low whisper.

"He took me out into a field to shoot me, but the Englishman arrived in time to save me, and he shot Simeon through the heart. A great storm raging at the time made it easy to tell the Kaffirs that the horse had been frightened and bolted, and their master thrown out of the cart—killed by the act of God." She laughed mirthlessly. "We buried Simeon in the family burial field, and it was not till long afterwards, and then through my fault entirely, that Simeon's sister, Tante Anna, got a suspicion of the truth into her head; but I saved the man I loved, I—I bought his life for a price."

"How did you buy it?" Fielder spoke in grave tones, his eyes never moving from Deborah's pale face.

"I offered Tante Anna all Simeon's savings—the money he had been amassing and storing away for years, and she rose greedily to the bait, but she made a certain condition before she would agree to keep silence as to how Simeon had come by his death—a hard condition."

"And what was the condition?" he leaned forward.

Deborah drew a deep breath. She was ghastly to look on at the moment; her face was like white chalk, her eyes glowed.

"She made me swear on the Book—swear by the God of Israel—that the man I loved should be as a dead man to me from that hour, that he should pass out of my life for ever. She made that the condition of saving his life."

"What did you do?"

"I swore on the Book that I would do as she commanded—he had to be saved. Besides, I had found out by now that there was a girl in England he had promised to marry, promised before he ever met me. So he went home to her. I do not think he loved her very dearly, though; he never called her the Shulamite; besides, later on he came back again."

"Deserting his wife?"

"His wife was dead. The child was dead too. He came at the evening hour, opened his arms, would have drawn me to him; but who was I to break a vow made unto the Lord—an oath sworn on the Book itself?"

She raised her head and for one fleeting second the old Puritan spirit showed itself in her eyes, the uncompromising spirit of the past; for stern bigotry and unswerving allegiance to a faith that was of no real comfort to her breathed in Deborah's tone—she would be true to a vow made on the Book.

"You sent him away?" Fielder's voice sounded incredulous.

She winced painfully.

"Certainly, you cannot play false with Jehovah; the Englishman passed out of my life—I sent him away."

"That settles it." Adam Fielder drew a deep breath of relief. "You never really loved him, dear; he had saved your life, you see, from that brute of a husband of yours—and you were young and romantic

—a girl in your teens. You wouldn't have sent the man you loved away—you'd have broken your vow."

"You think so?" She glanced at him strangely.

"Think so!—I'm sure of it, I know it."

"Then there's no more to be said." She laughed—if the weird sound that parted her lips could be reckoned a laugh—then she rose slowly from her chair. "Do you still want to marry me—now you know the sort of woman I am? For my husband's death lies at my door, remember; I loved the Englishman, and I would have left Simeon's farm at any moment with him, so I deserved the punishment my husband would have meted out to me—I was a false wife."

"The brute deserved it—to whip you, Deborah!"

She smiled faintly.

"Ah, I thought hard things of Simeon once, but now I don't know—he only lashed my flesh, he—he never scarred my soul. That was left for the man I loved to do." She paused abruptly. "You had better say good-bye to me. I am not worth much; a light woman Simeon called me once, just before he raised his gun to shoot, and he said of me—I can hear his voice still—'Her house is the house of Hell, going down to the chambers of death.'"

"See, dear, forget all that! Marry me and forget the cruel past; I'll be good to you, I'll be loving—tender—I'll make you happy."

He bent over her and would have taken her in his arms, only she drew back.

"No, don't be loving and tender. Rule me with a rod of iron—master me—don't let me think for myself or act for myself. Absorb me into your personality if we marry—for don't you understand—I—I want to be some one else—Deborah Krillet hates and fears Deborah Krillet."

"Darling, don't be afraid of love—the best kind of love. Why, I couldn't be harsh to you if I tried, and as to ruling you with a rod of iron——!"

He laughed, then he took her two hands in his and kissed them.

"Dear hands, cold hands, but they'll warm presently; that's all right, things are going to be all right now." He hesitated. "You must meet Mary—my Polly—the best sister a man ever had; she's just arrived in England, coming straight from the East, for Polly's no end of a traveller. You'll get on with her for my sake, won't you, Deborah? She's all I care about in the world, barring yourself; years younger than me, wonderfully pretty and as sweet a creature as ever breathed."

"She won't like me—I'm so hard."

"Like you—of course she will! I've written to her about you, and that's what brought her home in a hurry, and she's as pleased and excited as possible to think I'm in love; I ought to have let her into the secret before, I suppose; she thinks I haven't known you as long as I have."

"You are sure she is not jealous?"

"Jealous—Polly jealous!" he laughed heartily. "Why, she's absolutely the most unselfish girl out, and she doesn't know what jealousy means. Besides, Mary has got a lover of her own, bless her, a sweetheart she has picked up on her travels, and whom I am to meet for the first time to-morrow; he's a widower chap, rich and good-looking, and Waring's his name—Robert Waring."

"Robert Waring!" Deborah turned slowly away and walked to the window and stood there for a second. Her face was set and pale. "So that is the name of the man your sister is going to marry—Robert Waring."

"Yes." He crossed over to her side and kissed her on the nape of her neck. "But let me forget Polly and Robert Waring for a moment, let's talk about ourselves and our future plans."

"Yes," she repeated softly, her lips barely moving. "Let us forget Robert Waring."

## CHAPTER VI

It was a long time before Deborah Krillet fell asleep that night. She tossed wearily on her bed, her large eyes wide open, and the look on her pale face would have terrified any beholder, for this was a woman gazing down straight into hell, and, to add to the agony of things, her hell was of her own making, and she had heated the fires years ago—the fires that were so scorching in their heat, so volcanic in their intensity.

“Robert engaged to be married—Robert! And to Adam’s sister, of all people in the world!” Deborah writhed in the bed, and the cool linen sheets only seemed to add to the heat of her body and cast no sense of refreshing chill. “So he has forgotten me, has he?” she muttered. “He has put me out of his heart and mind; let him, let him! Am I not doing the same?”

She began to laugh—fierce, cruel laughter—and her face peered out small and wizen above the edge of the sheets. Her beauty had flickered out just as a candle flickers; all the power and strength in her nature had concentrated itself into her eyes—they burnt and glowed; and all the time her body kept on twitching—she could not keep her burning limbs still; she was consumed as before a flame.

“Let him marry her; I sent him away—I sent him from me. I was true to my vow—my vow

made to Jehovah ; but it is terrible, very terrible, that through no action either on Robert's part or mine our lives should touch again, our paths join. This is a smaller world than I thought it, else why are we to be forced to meet each other ? It is cruel, cruel, if some one planned it ; frightful if it has merely happened by accident—sheer chance."

She gripped her breasts tightly with her two nervous, quivering hands, and her thoughts harked back to her first meeting with Robert Waring, and she remembered all the difference his coming had made to her life : how everything had changed, how her nature had developed, and she had learnt what love means to a woman—love.

" How shall we meet—how can we meet, he and I ? " She rolled fiercely from one side of the mattress to the other, her eyes wide open and staring, her brain on fire ; then, unable to bear herself, Deborah sprang from the bed and began to run up and down the dark bedroom, her bare feet making little noise, her nightgown merely rustling against her ankles ; but there was something awesome in the way this woman paced round and round the hotel bedroom, something that savoured more of barbarism and the plains than of Western civilisation.

She came to a halt at last—after she had kept up her wild pattering and running for about half an hour ; but she was quite breathless and spent by the time she stopped, and her face looked absolutely grey ; and yet, as Deborah Krillet stood up exhausted and bare-footed, her worn, thin body simply covered by a plain and coarse linen nightdress, there was that about her that set her apart and beyond other women—some nameless, strange fascination, a charm impossible to fathom, a fierce, terrible grace ; and when

Deborah suddenly flicked on the electric lights and turned to look at herself in the mirror, she was puzzled by the tortured, restless smile that played about her lips. For how could she smile—what on earth had she to smile about? Were there depths in her own nature of which up to now she had been ignorant? Was the frozen blood in her veins warming to life? Could it be possible after being dead—dead for years—quite dead as far as feeling any real sensations went—that she should be called upon to suffer again—actually to suffer?

She pulled fiercely at the long strands of hair falling over her shoulders, full of newly-aroused restless activity—electric to her finger-tips—her long stupor over, her torpidity a thing of the past; and her big eyes stared at her from the mirror, and they were as the restless eyes of a stranger—mysterious, inscrutable, baffling.

“How shall we meet each other—we who share such secrets between us—we on whom a dead man left his curse—do you know, Deborah?—for I don’t!”

She addressed her own reflection—the strange woman who was gazing at her with such curious, perplexing eyes—and she felt quite certain that she and this woman would take some time to get acquainted with each other, just as she realised, in a vague fashion, that a new Deborah had been born, a Deborah who had sprung up from burnt-out ash, and might, therefore, be regarded as a flickering flame.

The Deborah who had married Simeon Krill<sup>et</sup> and loved Robert Waring was dead—there was no doubt about that; she had been dead for quite a respectable time, decently buried in a deep grave—and everything would have gone on calmly and peacefully if it had not happened that a sudden resurrection had come



about—a totally unexpected resurrection; and now Deborah felt afraid of this new sister who was herself, yet not herself.

She had not heard of such things as the dual personality, she knew nothing about the weird trend of modern thought; and yet she was conscious that she possessed two natures now, and one of these natures would naturally absorb the other later on, only which would prove the stronger?

She moved away from the looking-glass, and she felt like a sleeper awakening from a lengthy sleep, stirring after prolonged slumber; yet she could hardly realise even now, though several hours had passed since Adam Fielder had broken the news to her, that she was really to meet Robert Waring again; it seemed almost too grim a jest on the part of Fate, an over-intricate ravelling of the threads of destiny.

She tried to remember all that had happened after Adam Fielder had mentioned his sister's engagement to her, and she was aware that she had not betrayed the fact to the South African that Robert Waring was the man she had loved in the past; she had been too stunned by the news to really take it in at once—it had soaked gradually into her soul, into her brain. So all was well as far as Adam was concerned; she had kept her secret to herself, as she would continue to keep it, for when the hour dawned that was to bring her into Robert's life again, she did not intend to allow any word or sign to escape her that would testify to the fact that she had met him before. Let them shake hands as strangers; therein was their only chance of safety, of ultimate peace.

“Does he love her—can he love her—or does Robert give Mary Fielder precisely the same as I give Adam—just calm friendship, nothing more? Oh, it isn't

possible that he could really be in love with another woman—a mere girl. Surely his dead wife and myself have taken all he has to give—drunk up his soul, sucked up the honey from his heart. There is nothing, nothing left for Mary Fielder; there couldn't be—there couldn't."

She clenched her hands tightly together—so tightly that the nails almost bit into the flesh; and a rush of emotion swept over Deborah's soul, and she exulted in the fierce agony of the jealous moments that followed—feeling her own strength again, her own force; rejoicing that she had cast her grave-clothes from her and was once more alive—alive, at all events, to pain, if not to joy; free to move her limbs, to tear at her own flesh, if need be, and draw deep, hungry breaths; alive once more to sensation—the long trance over, the dull swoon.

"I live—I suffer." The two cries burst from her almost simultaneously; there was wonder in both, a curious amaze; then she ran swiftly up to the mirror again, her raked feet bounding lightly over the carpet, her coarse nightgown clinging heavily to her limbs.

"Oh, Deborah Krillet—Deborah." She addressed her reflection mockingly. "You were so sound asleep it was a shame to wake you; it—it was wrong, for now I doubt if you will ever fall asleep again—if death himself could lull you quiet." She moved still closer to the mirror and peered at herself through half-closed lids—witch-like in the study of her future. "You will never, never rest now, you know," she added; "they have broken your deep sleep, the slumber that follows intense sorrow, and you have awakened to feel the old unrest." She waved her hand at another pale little trembling hand. "You will suffer so, poor Deborah. Oh, it was cruel, wicked,

to rouse you! And you'll make others suffer too. No more peace for you, Deborah—endless movement now and to the end, heart and soul warring together, brain and flesh; and later, when your body rots in a real coffin, your soul will mingle with the restless wind or stir the tortured waves, for the wind and the sea never rest—any more than do the chafing, unquiet dead, the angry dead, the sullen dead.”

She paused, then flung up her thin arms, and her hair fell about her like a flaming mist.

“Will he remember—will the past return to him in a flash when he sees me? Will he say this is the Shulamite herself, or will he wonder—just quietly, calmly wonder—what he ever saw in me in the old days, and what were the strange spells with which I used to snare him? For he may love this girl; her fresh beauty may appeal to him, her youth. Yes, he may love Mary Fielder—love her.”

Deborah shivered, and her eyes glinted.

“I'm faded, shrivelled. What have I to give him, even if there was no binding oath to keep us apart from each other? And yet I don't know—I'm not so sure——” She peered sharply at her reflection. “Adam is ready to kneel at my feet and worship me, so there must be something desirable about me still—something to covet. I still can rouse a heart—a man's heart. Deborah, you are thin and worn and fretted, but you've got a weird charm—you have, my dear, you have.”

She clapped her hands together softly, a dangerous smile playing about her lips, her eyes burning and glowing.

“I'll meet him coldly—use no arts to allure or attract him. Let him marry this girl and be happy, and I hope for my part that Adam will make life

more endurable to me, more interesting. But why has he come back—why are we doomed to cross each other's path again—why—why?"

She began her quick, noiseless padding up and down the big bedroom, and a hungry look came over her small face; a hungry impatience manifested itself in every swift, abrupt motion of her body, and she kept gripping herself fiercely, her tremulous excitement painfully evident.

"To be awake again—alive—astir." The words fell quickly from her lips; then she drew a deep, panting breath. "Oh, my God, it hurts—how it hurts!" she muttered. "It's a terribly cruel thing to wake up the dead. I wonder if Simeon is watching me from somewhere—his wife, who played the wanton, as he fancied. He must feel revenged at last—brutally revenged; for how I suffer—how I suffer!"

She dropped on her knees from sheer physical exhaustion, but her restless brain would not allow her to sleep; her wild eyes never ceased to rove about the bedchamber, and she kept up a low, tortured muttering to herself; and Deborah was still crouching on the ground when the grey dawn came in and found her—the dawn that is so cold and severe and pitiless and has mercy neither on the new-born nor the dying, but pinches and chills both.

The dawn roused Deborah, however, and she stole shivering to bed—no heat in her body now, no warmth; and as she slipped under the bedclothes, she drew them, shuddering, about her form, cowering and shrinking, afraid—most horribly afraid of the future.

She fell asleep—into a sleep so deep and profound that the heavy market carts rumbling along the Embankment failed to disturb her slumbers, the heavy, droning roar of London traffic that descends

upon the city at break of day in deep waves of sound ; and whilst she slept Deborah dreamed a dream.

She was out upon the veldt, and it was the season of the year when the plains are hot and dried up, sandy and desolate ; yet she did not appear to mind the heat or feel the least oppressed by the silence that pervaded the veldt, but merely stood up by the side of one of those great rocks that still bear the impression of primitive carving on their surface, and she held a little spray broken from an ice-plant in her hand, just one cool touch of green.

Her dress was made of print, a white print sprigged with mauve, and she wore a lilac cotton sun-bonnet on her head. She was waiting for some one in her dream, but neither wistfully nor anxiously ; simply with the quiet conviction that whoever she expected would appear at the appointed season, be true to his tryst.

And presently, against the far-away ridge of the plains, a dark moving speck appeared, and the woman, standing up tall and slim by the side of the great ugly rock, smiled softly to her self when she caught sight of the distant speck, and then sat down patiently in the shadow of the rock to rest and wait, her idle fingers still caressing the broken spray torn from the ice-plant, crushing the life out of the green leaves.

The speck crept closer every moment, and it was soon plain to be seen that a horse and rider were advancing, and at the briskest pace possible—with almost incredible swiftness ; and as the horse came thundering along at a gallop, blowing up the hot sand till it seemed as if a trail of smoke followed him—yellowish, dusty smoke—the woman rose from her sitting posture and moved forward swiftly, shading

her eyes with a hand, for the hot glare was tremendous.

"Robert rides fast ; he is in a hurry to have speech with me." Deborah smiled in her dream, the rapt, happy smile of the woman who is quite certain of the love of her beloved, and who waits as brides wait for the coming of the bridegroom, the bridegroom who is as a king's son—royal and wonderful in his favour and might and youth ; but the smile faded away from Deborah's face and a look of stricken terror came instead, for when the rider came up, his body was as the body of Robert Waring, strong and comely, but his face changed before her very eyes into the hideous, grinning mask of a skeleton, and she knew that she had kept tryst with death instead of with love.

She reeled back, faint and dismayed, against the rock that the savage bushmen had scratched their primitive devices upon, their rough, rude sculpture, and when she tried to speak, the words died away in her throat—fear choked and held her spellbound.

"Deborah"—the skeleton face peered into hers—"I have come from far to meet you here : I have come from the valley of the dead men's bones. Will you follow me to my home, the grave ?"

She bowed her head silently, for she loved him, and, as he had truly said, he must have come from far to find her ; but she dared not gaze into the hideous skeleton face—even her love was not equal to that test.

"Mount and ride behind me."

He sprang on his horse, vaulting lightly into the saddle, and Deborah did as she was bidden ; and then the horse, with its double burden, commenced to gallop across the sandy plains, its pace quickening every moment, till it was not so much galloping as

flying, and the air grew heavy with the beating of innumerable wings—strange shapes appeared to be abroad, strange faces stirring—and the dust increased till it clouded the whole atmosphere, and everything grew dull and unfamiliar, seen through a yellow haze.

Eyes peered at her through this veil of misty dust, wild, upbraiding eyes, as fierce with reproach as Simeon Krillet's eyes had been when he turned them on his young wife before death glazed them and put out their light.

Deborah tried to scream, for she felt the touch of phantom fingers on her body, and she realised that hands were being put forth to snatch her from the horse on which she rode—hands that would drag her down into eternal darkness.

A cry fluttered past her pale lips at last, and she woke to find that one of the chambermaids was bending over her anxiously, a pretty, fair-haired little person who always showed Deborah extreme attention, seemingly attracted by her intense silence.

"Oh, madam, I thought you were ill. I—I simply couldn't wake you." The pretty maid displayed genuine consternation. "You were crying out in your sleep," she added. "Look—the pillow's wet."

Deborah gazed down on her damp pillow with very genuine curiosity, then a smile, impossible to fathom or understand, crossed her face.

"Tears," she said slowly; "I thought I had done with tears for ever, that I had none left to shed; but I can still sob in my dreams, it appears. Strange, since I never cry when I am awake!"

She contemplated the pillow thoughtfully, and the chambermaid stared down curiously at the silent woman from across the seas who was such a puzzle to her, such a mystery; this woman, who had been

sobbing in her sleep. Then a sudden remembrance of her duties spurred her across the room, and she drew up the window-blind hurriedly, letting in golden shafts of sunshine.

"It's a lovely day, madam," the girl announced. "Oh! I forgot to say a great basket of flowers has just come round for you; the basket has been sent up to the sitting-room. Shall I go and fetch it?"

"No, thanks," Deborah answered languidly, resting her head on her right arm, carelessly stretched out; but a faint, irritated flicker played in her eyes, for why had it entered into Adam Fielder's head to send her a tribute of flowers at such an absurd hour? He was acting like a love-sick boy, and she was not the woman to appreciate foolish sentiment. She had promised to marry Adam because she had hoped that he would interest her and expand her life, but she did not want the lover's offering of flowers. She had done with flowers, just as she had done with other things—all the soft and beautiful graces of existence.

"I am going to be married."

Some strange impulse, an impulse impossible to fathom, prompted Deborah to take the chambermaid into her confidence; but she made the announcement so coldly that the little Cockney felt as if icy water was being poured down her back, and she could only glance timidly at the thin, pale woman lying back in the big bed.

"I do hope that you'll be happy, madam."

The words fell somewhat stiffly from the chambermaid's lips, and Deborah slowly inclined her head.

"I shall be as happy as I deserve, I expect," she answered; then she closed her eyes. "Pull down the blinds again, please; make the room as dark as you can—as dark as a grave."



Strange words for a bride-elect to utter, and strange that a newly-betrothed wife should have made her pillow so damp. But it was none of the little chambermaid's business to wonder over the ways and vagaries of the birds of passage whose wants she had to attend to, the people she was paid to serve. She had to draw up the blinds in other rooms, so she took her quick departure, leaving Deborah Krillet in the dark and Deborah, clasping her hands together under the sheets, writhed and tossed on her big bed, hating to feel that she was alive once more—a flame it would take more than tears to quench—a living flame.

## CHAPTER VII

"Good news, Deborah! Mary is simply delighted to hear we are engaged to be married, and she's coming round in about half an hour to tell you so herself. She's as excited as possible and longing to meet you."

Adam Fielder burst somewhat unceremoniously into Deborah's sitting-room just as one who has the right, and Deborah, resting on the sofa, drew her brows together sharply, for did this man think he was her husband already—her lord and master? Oh, she had been a fool, a very fool, to surrender her independence, and yet it would be impossible to break with Adam Fielder now, for Robert Waring might imagine that it was on his account—because she feared to meet him again and under such changed relationships; so for her pride's sake she must stick to the bargain she had made the night before and marry the man who would be Waring's brother-in-law in the future.

It was a hopeless tangle certainly, a terrible complication; but there was no getting out of the situation or evading it, so the only thing to do, and the right thing, was to steer a straight course as far as possible, and show a brave front to the world.

"It is very kind of your sister to be so pleased, but I hope you explained things to her. She understands, does she not, that you are marrying a Boer farmer's widow—no smart Englishwoman? She knows that I

have but a poor education and am very silent—a woman of few words ? ”

Deborah eyed Adam gravely as she spoke—questioningly ; but the great man who held the future of South Africa in his hands turned to her passionately, moved beyond his wont.

“ Dear, I told my sister that I love you, that you are the one woman on earth I want for my wife, and that is enough for Mary ; besides, you are clever, Deborah, though you say you have no great book learning ; but your wisdom is part of yourself, your dear, wonderful self.”

His face lit up as he addressed her and he made a sharp, sudden movement of his hands.

“ So thin and quiet and fine, but your eyes are the most beautiful eyes I ever saw, and your silence is more eloquent than other women’s speech. It’s a silence that sets people wondering and craving to know what you are thinking about, and the few words you do say have a heap of meaning ; then the way you walk—why, I love to watch you cross a room, Deborah, people look at you just as they might gaze after a queen.”

“ Hush,” she shook a protesting head. “ This is foolish. You have idealised me till you don’t see the real woman at all, the silent woman of the veldt ; but one day your eyes will open and then you may regret ever having married me—regret it bitterly.”

He laughed and strode up to her.

“ Foolish Deborah, has a man waited as long as I have to mate—not to know when he’s met the woman he wants, the one woman ? Why, I crave for you, dear, simply crave.”

“ But I can give you so little. I am mere broken stuff, my heart will never sing again. The strings

of my life have been rent asunder, there is no more melody in my soul."

"Nonsense." He took her in his arms. "Why, even since yesterday there's a change in you—a marvellous change—more light in your eyes, more colour in your cheeks; and it is love that has done it, dear woman, the dawning love for me of which you are only half aware."

She shuddered in his grasp and half closed her eyes lest they might betray her.

"Don't say such things," she whispered hoarsely. "Wait till I tell you that I love you before you are so confident that I do—take nothing for granted. Our marriage will be a risky experiment; but I have warned you, have I not? You cannot say I have not warned you."

"Such a foolish little woman!" He caressed her hair, then his mood changed, and he added in pitiful tones, "How you must have suffered in the past, though, to be so fearful and doubting—damn those two men! they pretty well murdered you between them—your husband and—and the other."

"Don't speak of my past—leave it alone. It belongs to me, not to you." She drew back panting from his arms. "Oh, and please don't send me flowers or behave as if I were the ordinary sort of woman—the woman who likes having flowers sent her—for I'm not—I'm not. I'm hard, cruel, bitter, all that was sweet and fragrant in my nature got burnt up long ago, and not Heaven's own dew could give me back the fresh joy I once had in all beautiful things; don't you begin to dislike me now you know me as I really am?"

He shook his head.

"Hush you, Deborah, hush! You are sour now,

poor girl, but after we have been married a few months, please God, you'll be feeling happier, for I'll be good to you—good, and Mary will count for something in your life too—my Polly."

Deborah winced; then she sat down stiffly in a chair and folded her hands in her lap.

"What did you think of Mr. Waring?" she asked slowly. "You were to meet him and be formally introduced to-day, were you not?"

She tried to speak with cool indifference and her voice sounded icy cold—colder than she had meant it to be—but Adam merely thought that this was because she was not really interested in his sister's engagement and simply referred to the subject from a sense of duty.

"No, I didn't meet Mr. Waring to-day. He wasn't well, it appeared; a slight chill—so he wrote to Mary—nothing serious, but it keeps him indoors. She appears to be tremendously in love, dear girl, yet he's a widower and rather a rolling-stone sort of fellow from what I can gather—no settled profession or anything of that sort; and he owns a fine property in Gloucestershire which he lets, and that's a pity, I think, for he's got plenty of money."

Adam stroked his chin meditatively. "I know Mary well enough to feel convinced she wouldn't love anyone who was utterly worthless, but I confess I have got my doubts about Waring. She met him under peculiar circumstances, you see, cooped up together as they were in a little Chinese town, and expecting to be murdered by the Boxers every moment, and just because Waring played an heroic part and had the limelight on him all the time Mary must fall in love with him—the first man on whom her fancy had ever lighted." He paused and lit a

cigarette. "She thought they were doomed, she told me so to-day, and that conviction hurried on matters, for when Mary and her future husband exchanged their first kiss they fancied they were in the valley of the shadow—that the relief force would never reach in time to save them, and that kiss settled matters for ever; Polly doesn't kiss a man one day and say good-bye to him the next."

"No." Deborah's voice was very dry, but an angry sparkle had come into her eyes. "I did not know your sister's love affair was so romantic; but what was Mr. Waring doing in China?"

"Just globe-trotting, but a little off the ordinary tourist lines, viewing the country from the inside, and Mary had paid this absurd visit to China because an old and very dear school friend of hers had become engaged to a missionary and wanted to go out to China and be married. Oh, I suppose it was intended by fate that Mary and Robert Waring should meet, and that it was they were both drawn as by cords to a miserable little Chinese mission station."

"Yes, fate can be cruel sometimes, very cruel," Deborah spoke musingly; then she suddenly turned and looked straight at Adam. "What made you come to my lonely farm on the veldt? There were other farms where you might just as well have broken your journey—off-saddled for the night. Why did you cross my threshold? Who urged you, drove you on, made you come to me?"

"Instinct, Deborah." He surveyed her gravely. "I must have known that I should find you standing on the stoep of that silent farm—a quiet, sad woman, yet the one woman I want." He paused and made a step forward. "We will do great things together, you and I; we did not meet by accident, but by

design. Destiny contrived that first encounter for us. See you, Deborah"—he bent over her—"I'm a man called upon to do his duty by a fierce land, a barren, ugly land, but a land that will repay us for the care spent upon it, later—when she blossoms and buds and becomes less sullen and far more tractable; but I shall need a woman's help whilst I grind away at my job, your help, for it's hard work Empire-building—sowing for the next generation to reap."

"What help can I be to you? What do I know of the difficult art of government or the ways of a Parliament? As I told you before, I am foolish and ignorant."

"You'll help me right enough," he smiled, "when I understand how to soften your hard mood and turn your bitterness into kindness. Well, I shall know how to manage South Africa, for she's a woman too, and needs humouring and understanding; you cannot lead her easily, and if you drive her too hard she kicks—lashes out furiously—yet you know that once you reach her heart it's gold, pure gold. So don't you see, Deborah, when I understand how to get to all your hidden sweetness I shall have learnt how to manage South Africa. You stand for your country to me; only you are beautiful—and the day of South Africa's beauty has not dawned—she is still fierce and untamed—she needs womanly softness—blessed maturity—a strong man who will be both her lover and her master. She lacks as yet the saving grace of maternity—the comely beauty of a mother land, a mother whose sons and daughters rise up and call her blessed. She is no quiet happy matron like England—she yearns to live—she has had no past."

Deborah laughed harshly: had she not laughed she must have screamed. So Adam hoped that their

marriage would be blessed with offspring! He was hinting the fact to her plainly enough; he did not realise that in her case barrenness was a blessing; for was she the woman to nurse babes—why, her milk would be bitter as gall!

She repented now, as bitterly as she had ever repented anything, that she had yielded to the sudden desire she had felt to have some real and definite interest in life, and so had promised to marry South Africa's greatest man; for oh! what a mistake she had made—what a fatal mistake; she could only prove a bane and a curse to a husband, a vine whose grapes would be bitter grapes, sour as verjuice.

She saw no way of drawing back from her promise now. That was the ghastly part of it, therein lay the horrible irony of the situation; for she could have broken and parted with Adam Fielder easily enough this afternoon had it not been for the fact that his sister was going to marry Robert Waring. For Deborah was firmly convinced that Robert would believe that she had broken with Adam on his account, fearing to meet him again, and he must never—never be allowed to imagine this. All Deborah's fierce pride sprang to arms, and she felt a wild, barbaric, and quite savage and unreasonable anger against Waring for having got engaged to be married to a young and apparently charming woman. For with true feminine inconsistency the woman elected to forget that she was also newly betrothed—just as she forgot that when Waring had made his way to her lonely farm it had been to ask her to become his wife. Yet she had barred her door against him, fiercely determined to be true to the vow she had made and called upon Jehovah to witness, the vow that the old Boer woman—dead Simeon Krillet's



sister—had extorted from Krillet's widow—Deborah's wild promise that she would part for ever with Robert Waring, send him from her, if Tante Anna would relinquish any idea she might have of bringing a charge of foul murder against the English overseer who had shot down his employer just in time to prevent Krillet from murdering his young wife, the dry-eyed widow whom Tante Anna hated with a hate that was all the more dangerous and vindictive because it had smouldered slowly for months before suddenly bursting into flame.

Waring had never rightly appreciated how Deborah had felt with regard to this covenant that she had made with her sister-in-law—the oath she had sworn on the Book—and he had advised her to break it, to treat it as lightly as he would have done under similar circumstances; but this was just the one thing that Deborah could not do—break a vow sworn on the Book. She would not take the name of Jehovah in vain—she could not. Puritan forces in her nature, of which she had hitherto been unconscious, suddenly made themselves felt, and Deborah who had loathed her dead husband's grim religion and revolted passionately from the harsh tenets of a harsh faith, became the victim of inherited instincts—afraid of an angry God. And so she sent love from her and sat down, a cheerless woman by a cold hearth—a woman barren and desolate, the fires of spring put out for ever, only bleak winter ahead—the sombre tragic winter of her discontent.

She was ravaged by desire for a time—so young as far as mere years went, her womanhood at its prime, her body a fair carven temple—a temple forsaken—her whole heart and soul, her flesh and her spirit, yearning and longing after the man who had

ridden away across the desolate plains, the lover who would never return; and what Deborah Krillet suffered during those burning African days and frosty African nights was her own secret—her terrible secret, branded on the smooth breast that she sometimes tore at wildly with sharp finger-nails, smiling when the blood came—written in scorching letters on her soul, till at last she sickened and a fever got hold of her—a purging fever.

Then a day came when the fever left her and she ceased to feel the wild insufferable craving to be knit for all eternity to Robert Waring—to breathe with his breath, be absorbed into his being—and this new mood had something of the icy rigour of death about it; and Deborah, lying stiff and silent in her big bed, no longer tortured by wild longings, knew what the dead must feel and so ceased to envy them, and her blood gradually froze in her veins, her youth departed; she became the mere corpse of a woman.

The weeks rolled on just the same, however, the months, the years, but Deborah took no heed of the flight of time—how should she, being dead to all things?—and when she thought of Robert Waring, she thought of him coldly, sullenly, as some one she had half forgotten, some one who was dead too; then for days at a time her love would revive, but never the wild physical desire she had once felt.

Incidents occurred. Her sister-in-law, Tante Anna, died, for one thing, and Deborah put on black clothes and drove in a cape-cart to the funeral, watched the coffin of the woman she had once hated being put into the grave—watched indifferently, then ate and drank and drove back to her farm again, neither sad nor glad.

Her cousin Jan became a proud father, and he

brought his wife and baby over to Deborah's farm, and Deborah made the family group welcome, brewed strong coffee for the mother and father, took the baby on her knee; but when the evening had come and her guests had left her, she crouched down on the stoep and hoped that they would never come again. All she wanted was to be left alone, her solitude unbroken.

Then came the year of the great drought. Cattle died like flies and the sun blazed out of a brazen sky, and men and women longed and prayed for the rains to come; but the rains tarried. The heat grew terrible, suffocating. Every stray blade of grass blackened in the sun, the earth scorched and cracked, the dust rose like hot smoke, young and old sickened and languished, the Kaffirs could hardly be whipped from their kraals to do their day's work, they sweated just as the oxen sweated, and a rank smell was everywhere. Flies buzzed unceasingly, the locusts drove by in whirring flights, the dying cattle lowed pitifully, starving sheep fell down and never rose, for South Africa was just then in her most cruel mood, a brutal jade, a pitiless virgin mocking at fertility—exulting in her arid barrenness.

Deborah lost half her cattle and the Kaffir women kept her awake at night making loud lament in their huts for their dead children—the little brown, naked babes who died in a day—buds falling in ceaseless shower from the tree of Life, little shrivelled-up brown buds. But Deborah had no tears to give those dead babies, and even the loss of her fine team of oxen failed to distress her in the very least. She merely nodded her head when she heard about the death of the great patient beasts who had toiled and plodded in her service so uncomplainingly; but she showed

far more impatience when the women went about wailing for their dead, frowning sombrely as if she disliked to have the heavy silence that enfolded the farm broken by wail or moan.

It was noticeable and curious that her health was not affected by the long spell of drought. She did not appear to suffer from extreme heat any more than she minded extreme cold. But when the rains came at last and the gum trees shivered and shuddered, swept down by the water floods streaming from the sky, and the eucalyptus trees rustled and whimpered, dropping their berries like bullets, thin, faint shivers visited Deborah and she cowered back in her chair, gazing at the sheets of water breaking against the window-pane and seeing God knows what strange phantom faces peering out of the damp misty vapour.

She liked the winter season best perhaps in those days, for the spring had no charm for her now, and the summer no meaning; but she was content enough to ply her needle during the winter afternoons and evenings when there was so little else to be done, and she read the Bible a great deal, studying the Book intently; but what she read failed to comfort her—it was a testament for the living, not for the dead, and she found it far more soothing to draw a needle in and out of a white seam even as a great Scottish queen had done before, for needlework is the feminine narcotic.

Deborah might have continued this silent solitary death in life for years had it not been for Adam Fielder's advent at the farm, and the new interest he brought into her days, for after his coming events had moved on rapidly, the period of stagnation having come to an abrupt end.

First there had been Deborah's wild gamble, then

the bewildering realization that she had made a fortune, and afterwards her journey to Europe—a tour undertaken at Adam's suggestion—and she had accommodated herself easily enough to the new state of things just as Jan Van Kerrel had done; for the mere possession of money had brought a certain sense of power both to the Boer farmer and the Boer woman, and they viewed Europe with critical eyes, aware that they could return to their own land whenever it pleased them, that their absolute independence was a thing assured.

It was strange to look back and review the past, to take into account the slow, quiet years, and then the years which had been so full of change and movement, the years that had turned a stolid Boer farmer like Jan Van Kerrel into a man of means and substance, and Deborah into—what?—She, she did not know, she could not say, but Adam Fielder had just compared her to South Africa—an apt comparison perhaps, for she was fierce and barren and bitter, and yet she could arouse desire in a strong man's heart; and South Africa had been desired by men too—bought and paid for in blood, and to this certain battle-fields bore witness, and piles of grey cairn stones—South Africa, a land purchased for more than it was worth perhaps, a land still untamed and ready to bite the hand that fed it. Yes, the spirit of South Africa might really be in her. She and her country—one.

“I hope you will never repent your bargain.” Deborah glanced at Fielder rather wistfully. “You are taking great risks, for I am one of those women who bring ill-luck with them, I am sure of that.”

“‘Is this the face that launched a thousand ships,’” Fielder quoted softly, and as he spoke a small messenger

boy knocked at the door and announced that Miss Fielder had arrived at the Hotel, and was waiting down-stairs to know if Mrs. Krillet could see her.

"Why, yes," Deborah exclaimed; "please show Miss Fielder up at once." She spoke in sharp, strained tones, her eyes burning brightly and her whole body as stiff and erect for the moment as a ramrod.

Fielder looked at her curiously, then advanced to her side as soon as the little messenger boy had left the room.

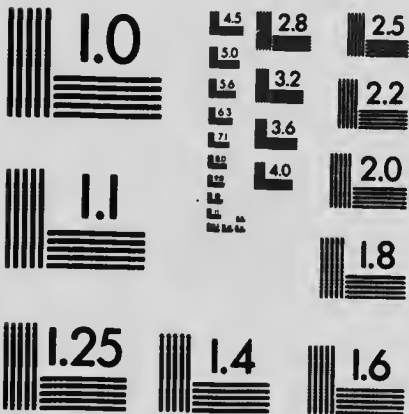
"I declare," he observed, "you are just as excited as possible. Does meeting my sister, my little Polly, mean as much to you as all this?"

He put immense feeling into the words, but Deborah winced, for how could she explain to this big, strong man, so sensible, except where she herself was concerned, that the terrible emotion she was experiencing at the present moment sprang from quite a different source to the one he imagined? For Deborah was not painfully anxious to meet Mary Fielder on Adam Fielder's account, but simply and solely because this was the girl Robert Waring had elected to get engaged to—the girl who had replaced Deborah Krillet in his heart, the virtuous wife of the future who was to make the image of the Shulamite dim and faint.



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## CHAPTER VIII

“ AND now I’m going to leave you two girls to get better acquainted with each other—you’ll talk more freely when I’m out of the room, I expect. You do like my Polly, though, don’t you, Deborah? And I didn’t make a mistake, did I, Mary, when I told you that there wasn’t another woman like Deborah in all the world—so pale, so slight and fine? ”

Fielder laughed, the ripe, happy laugh of the man absolutely contented with things; then he rose from the sofa on which he had been sitting—Deborah on one side of him and his sister on the other—and he stood up, a tall, dominant-looking individual, the personification of virile strength.

Mary Fielder smiled. She had felt absurdly shy when she entered her future sister-in-law’s room a quarter of an hour ago, wondering somewhat nervously what Mrs. Krillet would think of her, and the kind of impression she was likely to make. Also, she had been keenly anxious to meet the woman her brother loved, and whom he proposed to make his wife, and very curious as to Deborah’s looks. But now the young woman was more at her ease, the trying moment of mutual introduction was over, and as far as Mary could tell after such brief acquaintance, Mrs. Krillet was prepared to like her and ready to be quite pleasant, and she was confident, for her own part, that she would

be very fond of her sister-in-law ; she was also extremely impressed by Deborah's striking personality.

She did not think Deborah as beautiful as Adam did—but that was no matter ; Mrs. Krillet was far too pale and thin for one thing—haggard. Nor did she dress becomingly or even suitably : her black stuff gown was surely too hot for the time of year, and plain to the point of eccentricity—almost as plain as if Deborah belonged to some religious order ; but there was a fineness about her, just as Adam had said—she was not like an ordinary woman, only the writing on her face was a little difficult to read—it was a strange face.

“ That's right, Adam.” Mary addressed her brother easily. “ You run away and leave Deborah and me to have a nice long chat—I may call you Deborah, may I not ? ” She turned brightly enough to the woman sitting by her side on the sofa.

“ Please call me Deborah—I should like it.”

Deborah spoke very slowly, and there was little warmth either in her voice or manner, though Adam, accustomed to her cold indifference, did not notice this ; but Mary felt as if an impregnable barrier of ice had suddenly arisen between herself and Mrs. Krillet—a barrier it would be difficult to break down ; and she grew impatient for Adam to take his departure, for she wanted to have Deborah all to herself and really get to understand her nature, for they must try to be friends—sisters ; the wall of ice must be melted somehow—for Adam's sake as much as anyone's.

Adam dilly-dallied in departing, however ; he had to settle with Deborah where she would meet him for lunch—Mary coming with her, of course—and it was finally decided that “ Prince's ” should be the trysting-place and the entire party assemble there about two

o'clock ; and Adam suggested that after lunch he should take Deborah and Mary to see a house, a superb mansion in Carlton House Terrace, commanding a fine view of the Embankment, that was for sale and which he had just got an order to view.

" For you must have your house in London, Deborah, for all that our home—our real home—will be in South Africa ; and I think if you happen to take a fancy to this house that I'll make it over to you, completely furnished and decorated, as one of my wedding presents—for it's a fine house, so they tell me, and no better situation in London."

Deborah thanked him for the suggestion, but she did not appear at all impressed by the princely munificence of such a gift ; and it struck Mary at once that this was no mere pose, but that she had really met a woman who put no value upon riches and cared little for a display of wealth.

Adam left the room at last. He had to keep a business appointment with two important South African magnates ; little else would have driven him away, Mary felt, and she drew a sharp breath of relief when the door finally closed behind her brother, and she and Deborah were just two women by themselves, about to set out on a voyage of personal discovery.

" Now we can talk." Mary settled herself comfortably on the sofa, but Deborah rose slowly to her feet and stood directly in front of Miss Fielder, her big blazing eyes fixed on Mary's face.

" I want to look at you," she cried ; " do you mind ? I want to understand you, Mary, and I shall only do that by a careful study of your countenance."

Mary laughed. She was not afraid of sharp scrutiny. She knew—her mirror had told her only that morning

—that she had been gifted by Providence with an exceedingly soft, creamy skin, and she owed the lovely, delicate bloom on her cheeks to nature, not to art; and it was just the same with her wavy, luxuriant hair—the hair that reached unbound below her waist. Oh, she had nothing to hide or to conceal from the woman who would be her brother's wife one day, and her heart was innocent of guile; her soul was as clear and untarnished as a mirror.

“What do you read in my face?” she remarked lightly.

“Youth,” retorted Deborah, and she pronounced the word with a jealous bitterness. “Oh, I don't wonder that Robert Waring loves you—any man would, I think: you are so fresh—so clear—so young—a girl in a thousand, and you make me feel old and withered—a woman whose day is done.”

“But you must not say such things,” Mary protested swiftly; “they are not true, for one thing. You are young still, and—and very wonderful and fascinating. Why, you must be—think how madly Adam loves you.”

“Simply because I am an enigma to him, and a different woman would cloy. But don't talk to me about Adam—let us discuss your own affairs. Tell me about Mr. Waring.”

Deborah's voice sounded rather husky; then she sank down by Mary's side.

“He calls you beautiful, I expect, and compares you to an angel? You have an angelic look about you certainly, and you are good—good. I can feel that myself.”

“I have had so few temptations,” Mary answered, “and when people have everything they can possibly want it is not difficult to be good; and oh! I'm so

happy, but Robert certainly does pay me charming compliments at times—and I think he means them.”

“Do you love him very dearly, Mary?”

“Yes, I love him so well that there’s nothing in the whole wide world I would not do for him. I’d sacrifice my life for him even—sacrifice it willingly—go smiling to my death if I died for his sake.”

“And does he love you as dearly?” Deborah’s eyes narrowed into two grey slits, but Mary blushed and smiled.

“I think so. Oh, Deborah, I want you and Adam to meet him to-morrow. I expect his chill will be better by then. And will you make Adam see how charming he is really? For he has a way of running himself down—and Adam might take all he says seriously and insist on a long engagement—just to make sure before we are married that Robert has sown all his wild oats—and he has—he has.”

She spoke with a desperate drawing in of her breath, just as if she was trying to convince herself of the utter truth of the statement, and she looked very simple and sweet; but Deborah was painfully conscious of the beautiful curves of Mary’s figure—jealous of her bloom, and the fresh fragrance that belongs to youth.

“What wild oats has Mr. Waring sown?”

Mary glanced at Deborah thoughtfully.

“I wonder if I ought to tell you. Still, we are going to be sisters in the future—real sisters—and I do want some one to talk to—to confide in. There was another woman in Robert’s life, you see—a woman who tried to come between him and his first wife.”

“No, she never did that,” Deborah interrupted sternly, a frown gathering on her face; “she never did that.”

The words fell almost involuntarily from her lips, nor did she realise what she had done at first, till Mary's face enlightened her, and then Deborah started and bit her lip, cursing herself for her folly.

"Do you know this woman, then—the woman Robert loved in the past? Have you ever met her? But of course you must have met her, to say what you have just said."

Deborah, recognising that a lie would be useless, bent her head stiffly.

"Yes, I know the woman to whom you are referring."

"Well?"

"Intimately."

Mary drew a deep breath and clutched Deborah by the hand.

"Tell me—does she still love Robert, do you think, and would she ever seek to be a cause of trouble between us? Oh, surely, surely she won't try and upset him again? He is going to be so happy with me—in just a simple, quiet, contented way—for he is really going to take an interest in his home, and give up all those horrible habits which he was beginning to form—drinking hard, for instance, and—and taking drugs. He just did it to try and forget her, you see."

"He doesn't take drugs? Oh, my God!" Deborah shivered. "Oh, Mary, Mary, stop him," she whispered. "Don't let him sink to such horrible depths—Robert mustn't be allowed to ruin himself—both body and soul."

"You are talking as if you knew Robert too," Mary interrupted, a frightened look coming over her face. "Why did you not tell me at once that you knew Robert?—why didn't you tell Adam? You met each other in South Africa, I suppose?"

"Yes," Deborah whispered. The word appeared to be literally wrung from her quivering lips; her eyes gazed blankly about the luxuriously furnished sitting-room. She felt caged—a wild thing shut in by bars.

"You ought to have told me that you knew Robert." Mary spoke with some obstinacy. "Were you great friends?"

"Yes. Oh, don't torture me with your questions. What right have you to cross-examine me like this?"

Deborah's voice sounded hysterical, and she could not keep from twitching: the muscles of her body were beyond her control for the moment; she quivered from head to foot.

"Deborah, what is the matter with you?" Mary looked up in some consternation; then a knowledge of the truth suddenly came to her—she realised everything in a flash.

"You—you are the woman?" she cried huskily, her clear intonation absolutely deserting her for the second, as the bewildering truth rushed on her in full force. "You are the Shulamite herself!"

Deborah laughed wildly, and commenced to sway backwards and forwards in her chair.

"Yes, I am the Shulamite, but you would not think it to look at me. I have withered just as a flower withers—there is no more beauty in me—I'm lean and faded—a dead thing just risen from the grave—called back unwillingly to life."

"You are the Shulamite." Mary repeated the words slowly; then she rose to her feet and looked at Deborah in a dazed sort of way. "You are beautiful—of course you are beautiful; and you will meet Robert again—for destiny has brought you together;

but it's cruel on me—cruel. Oh, why didn't you tell me the truth at once? Why did you leave me to find it out? I—I can hardly realise things yet."

"I did not want you to realise things, as you call it. I never intended you to find out that I was the woman Robert had loved in South Africa. He was a fool, by the way, to mention that episode to you—he should have kept it a secret."

"He wanted to be perfectly frank with me, and I respect him for having told me the whole story; it was right that he should do so."

"Well, now that you know I am the Shulamite, as Robert used to call me, what difference does it make—what real difference? You were already aware that such a woman existed, and you can feel very certain that I shall not attempt to come between you and your lover. I sent him from my doors years ago, and he means nothing to me now—nothing; and when we meet we shall meet as strangers. I will write to him, if you will kindly give me his address, and tell him so. You shall read my letter if you like."

Deborah spoke in quiet, broken sentences, breathing hard, her straining eyes fixed on Mary.

"But you will meet each other again now—you will be thrown across each other constantly; and I thought—I hoped—Robert would never see the Shulamite again, for suppose—oh, my God! suppose——"

The poor girl flushed, and did not finish the sentence, only looked at Deborah anxiously.

"Don't be afraid"—Deborah interpreted the look rightly—"the past is over and done with. Robert belongs to you now—I have no longer any share in his life. Be reasonable, Mary, and see this for yourself.



I am going to marry your brother, and Robert is going to marry you, so what can we be to each other except mere relations-in-law? There is a high wall between us—a wall—if you will only believe me—of ice."

"I want to believe you," Mary murmured, "and I am sure you think you are speaking truthfully. But, Deborah, how do you know—how can you possibly say what will happen when you and Robert meet? You loved each other in the past, you see."

"But things are different now," Deborah retorted. "Robert is in love with you—a young girl; you are going to play the part of the good angel and save his soul alive."

"Will he still be in love with me after you have crossed his path again?" Mary murmured the words anxiously. "And what about you—you loved him?"

"Would you rather we never met?" Deborah answered. "I can understand how you feel about things—though, believe me, your fears are quite groundless. Still, perhaps it would be wiser—better—considering everything, if I broke off my engagement to your brother and left England. There would be no need for me to meet Robert then—no need at all."

Mary's face first lit up, then clouded over, and she finally shook her head.

"Oh, no, that cannot be," she muttered. "It would be too cruel—for Adam loves you so dearly. Why, when he was telling me all about you a little while ago, it was simply wonderful to watch his countenance—he looked so radiant and happy. You mean everything to him, Deborah, just everything—and if he lost you it would spoil his life and take the heart out of him, and this must not be. Adam is

wanted to do great things in South Africa—he is one of the men who are really needed in the world, and he mustn't be deeply upset or disappointed in any way; it might injure his work—the big Imperial work he has in hand. He's too valuable—too much needed by the Empire—for two women like you and me to venture to distress him. You must be true to Adam—you must; and I expect things will sort themselves all right once we have got over this shock—a shock that you and I and Robert will have to share together."

"What, do you propose to tell Robert that you have discovered that I am the woman he loved in the past? Won't it rather complicate matters when he finds out that you know the truth?"

Deborah bent her brows together anxiously, but Mary laid an eager hand upon her arm.

"I must tell Robert—I shall feel easier in my mind when I have done so. Besides, we ought not to run any risks, for Adam's sake. Robert might give everything away if he came upon you suddenly face to face. You see, he doesn't even know that my brother is engaged to be married—he was to have come round to see Adam this morning, but wired to say he was not very well—so I must explain things to him before he meets you."

"How much did he tell you about me—and what did he say about my husband?"

"Very little. I think he did not want to discuss the subject particularly. Oh, Deborah, what are we going to do? By the way, have you told Adam about Robert?"

Mary leaned up helplessly against Deborah, her strength of character deserting her for the moment.

"I have told Adam all about Robert; he does not know his name, of course—I took care of that."

"I'm glad. Adam must never know—never."

"No—never."

They clasped hands, straining their fingers tightly, almost convulsively together; then Mary rose in a slow, somewhat dazed fashion to her feet.

"I must go—I shall make my way straight to Robert's flat and see him, for I feel I must explain matters to him at once. I cannot rest till I have done so—and I will join you at lunch afterwards at Prince's, as we arranged. If you get there before I do and find Adam waiting, make some reasonable excuse for our not having turned up together: say I suddenly remembered an appointment I had made at—at—a dressmaker's."

"Very well. But, Mary, are we not making a mistake, perhaps? Might it not be better to end matters once and for all as far as I am concerned? I don't believe that Adam's work would go to pieces if I gave him up, and you would feel happier if I did not have to meet Robert—he would be happier too, perhaps."

"No, no," Mary protested; "Adam must not be hurt. We don't count so much—the rest of us; we are not needed as he is needed. If any one has to give up anybody, it would be better for me to say good-bye to Robert, perhaps—and yet, why should I, when we love each other so?"

"Why, indeed? Go to Robert, Mary, and explain matters to him, and say we have decided—you and I—not to enlighten Adam; and when Robert meets me—well, he meets a stranger."

"I understand." Mary's face worked a little. "Do you want me to give him any message from you? I would deliver it faithfully."

"My dear, I'm quite sure you would. Well, tell

him this." Deborah paused a moment, then added, slowly and thoughtfully, "Say I congratulate him on his future wife—and mark you, Mary, I mean it. Add that we did well—he and I—to part when we did—very well, for we should only have angered God had we done otherwise; but as it is, we are each facing a happy future, for I know Adam will make me an excellent husband, and that you will prove a charming wife."

She smiled, drawing in her lips, but Mary glanced at her rather helplessly.

"You make me feel so young and ignorant—so foolishly young."

Deborah laughed harshly.

"And you have just the opposite effect on me, Mary; you make me realise my years—my age."

"But you are so wonderful." Mary suddenly sank on her knees to the floor. "Think how Adam worships you! And I am beginning to understand the secret of your fascination—you are so unlike any one else, and you owe nothing to dress or things of that sort, and you take no trouble to please; you are just yourself, and that is enough. You draw people to you because you are so careless whether folk like you or not, and they feel they must impress themselves upon you—make you realise their presence. There is something of the Sphinx about you."

"The Sphinx!" Deborah laughed wearily. "Has the Shulamite evolved into the Sphinx—grown old and turned into stone? Yes, I suppose that is what has happened, and you have guessed the riddle of the Sphinx correctly—the riddle that has puzzled the centuries. The Shulamite—the real Shulamite—left the vineyards of Engedi when the grapes turned bitter, and went to live in Egypt. Far from the watered

gardens, Mary, the spice gardens; and she sought her beloved and he came not, so she made her dwelling amidst a great desolation of sand, and as the years went by she ceased to be a woman and became the Sphinx—and people must beware lest they ever wake her—rouse that stone thing to life; it would be terrible to wake up the Sphinx—she is best left alone.”

“Why do you look so strange, Deborah?” the younger woman asked wistfully. “You—you frighten me. And oh, how can Robert love me, having loved you? You’re marvellous, and I’m—nothing.”

Mary spoke with such pathetic humility that Deborah softened to her at once; in fact, all through this strange interview her heart had been going out to Adam Fielder’s sister, for all that this was the girl whom Robert desired to marry.

“Child, don’t say such things. You are fresh and young and good and sweet—wonderfully fair to look upon. Robert would be mad if he did not prefer you to me. Besides, my day is over in his heart; it was never a very long day, either. And there was Joan Desborough—the girl he married—he had her to think about as well, so I never had him to myself even, except when it was too late on account of the vow I had sworn—the vow to have no more to do with him. He was always a man between two fires.”

“And that may happen again,” Mary murmured softly; “he may always be a man between two fires.”

She put up a hand to her cheek; her face had suddenly grown wet with tears.

“I’m only a girl,” she sighed. “I thought I was so clever, and just because I was young and—and

nice looking, I could keep Robert's love, but—I'm afraid of you, Deborah—you're a woman—you know things."

Deborah caught her breath.

"Don't be afraid of me—I'll never come between you. Besides—don't you understand?—Robert has gone to you, and he'll not look back. He's tired, Mary—and your young breast will make a soft, fragrant pillow for his head. You'll turn him from his evil ways—you'll cure his sick heart. And listen, child—if he came to me, I'd turn from him—I would, Mary, I swear it. Lover of mine he shall never be again—so help me, Lord my God!"

She threw tremendous passion into the last words, and Mary caught at one of her cold hands and raised the fingers to her lips.

"Of course—I understand," she whispered. "You care for Adam now—I had forgotten. Things are shaping themselves in my mind—I'm feeling more happy. You and Adam—myself and Robert—that sounds all right, doesn't it? A good arrangement, Deborah—the past is over, and we will forget it—there is the future ahead."

She gazed with radiant eyes into some wonderful city of dreams, but Deborah could not accommodate herself to this rapid change of mood, and she had forgotten what it felt like to be enthusiastic over anything; but she tried to smile and respond to Mary's speech—even though the effort caused her pain.

"Yes, the past is over," she said, "and we have the future to look forward to now."

"I will try and make him happy, Deborah." Mary glanced up shyly, then added in low tones, "Let me tell you all about my first meeting with Robert, and

how we found out we loved each other. I should like you to know the whole story."

"Thanks," Deborah answered simply; then she listened—sitting up stiff and rigid whilst Mary related in low, rather faltering tones how she had met Robert Waring at San-Tong just when the Boxers were threatening the town. The narrative sounded touchingly simple as she related it—the brave young girl attracted naturally, almost inevitably, to the man who had the most to do in defending San-Tong—the hero of the hour; nor was it difficult to imagine that Waring would be very ready to admire Mary Fielder, whose character must have shown to splendid advantage during the trying days of the siege.

Oh, it was easy enough to understand how the engagement between Robert and Mary had come about: they had drifted into each other's arms at an hour when death stared both in the face—drawn together by a desire for comforting companionship, perhaps; and then the guns of the relief force had sounded in the distance, but the promise given during the hour of darkness had been a binding promise, and Waring and Mary faced life an engaged couple—long years before them—wedded years.

"There, Deborah, you know everything now." Mary spoke rather languidly, as if the exertion of relating the entire history of her love affairs had tired her a little; then she folded her hands together. "I would not have got engaged to Robert, or rather have kept on with our engagement once San-Tong was relieved had I not felt so positive that Robert loved me—that he needed me—that I counted for something in his life."

"Mary, you are going to make his life." Deborah said the words with conviction. "You will help him

to ease of heart and peace of mind—you will be the joyful mother of his children. I only brought him sorrow and remorse—I was a curse to him, really—a thorn in his side. He planted me in his vineyard, but I brought forth wild grapes. You will be the fruitful vine, dear—and Robert the happy husband-man.”

She waved her arms in the spirit of prophecy, her eyes dilated, her face white as death.

“Go to him, Mary—comfort him—bind up his old wounds; lead him gently by the hand into the golden land of promise—back into the green groves of Eden, and dwell there husband and wife together; and I promise you, for my part—I swear to you—that when I meet Robert I will forget the old days and my old dreams; he shall be as a mere stranger to me—the beloved of my sister—the spouse of my sister; but nothing to me—nothing.”

“And may I tell Robert this?” Mary glanced up eagerly. “You do want him to love me, and be happy with me—you mean it?”

“As God is my judge,” Deborah answered solemnly; but the light died out of her eyes as she spoke and her hands sank limply to her sides; her pallor was ghastly.

Mary kissed her softly on the cheek, then stole away from the room; and as soon as the door had closed behind the girl, Deborah gave a fierce, half-stifled sob.

“God—you might have spared me all this,” she moaned. “You might have spared me this.”

She wrung her hands together—her icy cold hands—and muttered in low, passionate tones that most haunting lament from the Song of Songs—the lament which the Shulamite, in her forsaken desolation, makes for her lover and for all dear and lost delights—



"I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer."

"The watchmen that went about the city, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my veil from me."

## CHAPTER IX

"I'M very glad that a convenient touch of malaria has saved me from having to undergo severe cross-examination at the hands of Mary's brother to-day—not but what Fielder writes to me amiably enough and appears to be pleased with the engagement. And I suppose it seems all right at first sight—I am a man of means and position—presumably a rich globe-trotter, and I certainly showed up well during the fighting at San-Tong, and I expect Mary has made a lot out of that; but when Fielder meets me he may not be quite so enthusiastic. He's a clever chap—a great man—and he can read the human countenance like a book, I expect—and he'll read more in my face than he cares to peruse, I'm afraid—and I don't want Mary to be fidgeted or worried, poor child, just when she is feeling happy and settled. I wish—all things considered—that Mary had not decided to make her way straight to England after all the trouble in China, but had gone back to South Africa—missing Fielder comfortably—he would have joined her at Jo'burg in about a month's time, and that would have given her a little breathing space."

Waring leant back in his chair and drew a deep breath. He was nursing the chill which had been his excuse for not meeting his future brother-in-law, and taking his ease comfortably enough in the small furnished flat that he had rented for a few weeks in

Victoria Street, a flat that was much to his liking, for it belonged to a man and boasted large comfortable arm-chairs in consequence and there were no feminine fripperies about it.

The study in which Waring was sitting was panelled with oak from floor to ceiling and the windows were heavily latticed and hung with dark mulberry velvet curtains; the carpet hailed from Persia and was wonderfully soft in texture, and the subdued pattern very beautiful.

There were no ornaments in the room at all; a big clock mounted in bronze ticked away the hours slowly and methodically on the mantelpiece, and a small bronze Buddha occupied a prominent position on the right-hand side of the mantelpiece; on the left side stood a classic urn.

A sheaf of pure white Madonna lilies occupied a brass vase that rested on the writing-table, and the heavy scent of the flowers filled the room, mingling and blending with some strange Eastern perfume that burnt in a small swinging brazier. And Waring, resting languidly against the cushions he had piled up in his chair, took a certain amount of pleasure in his artistic surroundings—for he was a sybarite by nature, for all that he could rough it when the occasion demanded. But his true instincts were all towards comfort and a deep and very subtle refinement, and that was why he was so pleased with this flat, though he had acquired it in a hurry. The original tenant must have been a man after his own heart, for deep harmonies prevailed in all the rooms, and a curious and soothing restfulness pervaded the little flat. No aggressive furniture caught the eye, no flamboyant colour scheme offended—everything soothed—pleased—calmed.

" I wonder what Mary would make of these rooms." Waring lit a cigarette as the thought crossed his mind, and he puffed at it lazily—dreamily—for a few seconds, watching the smoke coil itself away in rings, and then, quite suddenly, but quite naturally, he thought of the black smoke—the smoke of the opium pipe and the dear delights of hasheesh. As he did so, his face hardened.

" No, no," he muttered, " I won't allow my mind to dwell upon drugs. I will refuse to remember the strange dreams that the opium pipe can give a man, or how comfortable it used to be, sitting on a clean mat, puffing away at the pipe ; but the dreams were not always pleasant dreams——" He shuddered. " I used to see Deborah's face sometimes, staring at me through the black smoke, such a white face—such a strained face—and a lot of Chinese devils would dance round her, devils and dragons, and old Chin Li's room would fill up with a crowd of visionary shapes, strange, weird, impossible Chinese images, all dancing and gyrating around Deborah ; and whether it was that the figures on the screens came to life, or the dragons worked on the portier curtains descended—I really don't know—I really can't say ; but it was strange to watch them all dancing around my mat—now coming so close—so very close—that I could almost have touched the row of dancing figures as I stretched out my hands, only when you're smoking opium you don't want to exert yourself in the very least, not even to touch the shining unbound hair of the Shulamite herself, when she sways close up to you, and you can hear her sharp panting breathing, and you look at her mouth—the mouth that is as red as blood—her lips that are as a thread of scarlet."

Waring closed his eyes.

"No more of such dreams," he whispered hoarsely; "and as to Deborah, I mustn't think about her any longer—I mustn't allow myself to think of her even. It would hurt Mary frightfully if she fancied that my thoughts ever harked back to the past, and she's such a dear girl. Why, I have learnt to love her—to really love her. The voyage home from China did that, and, Lord help us, I should be the most ungrateful fellow that ever lived if I hadn't fallen in love with her, too, for she's given me so much. All her sweet girlish heart, her young life—the lips that no man has ever kissed except myself—her beautiful trust. And I honestly believe that she will make a new man of me in time—ah, a strong man, for since I've known Mary I've been able to give up opium. So I would rather blow my brains out than be false to the promise I have made her—the solemn promise to have nothing to do with opium in the future. Yes, I've done with the drug—I've smoked my last pipe of the black smoke—I have said good-bye to Master Chinaman and his evil, poisonous ways for ever. I intend to lead a clean, wholesome life from henceforth—so help me, God. I shall be Mary's husband in a few weeks' time, and the father, I trust, of Mary's children in the future, and I must be worthy of both these privileges, for it isn't every day that a pure, high-minded girl like Mary Fielder stoops down into the mud and drags up a poor fallen devil like myself—kisses the smirch from his lips and the soil from his soul. And she isn't a prig, either; she never preaches—she just practices. She's tolerant, too—she hates the sin, but I don't believe that she hates the sinner—in fact, I have the best possible reason for thinking to the contrary. Oh, she's a Madonna, that's what Mary is—a sweet, blue-eyed Madonna, and it's the Virgin Mother after all

that every man turns to in the end—the little Virgin Mother.”

His voice softened wonderfully as he said the last words, and he nodded his head drowsily.

“ She wants to live in England, bless her, to settle down on my property and play the part of Lady Bountiful to the village folk, and she’ll do it uncommonly well, will Mary ; she’ll make a success of things. I don’t suppose that I shall object to a quiet country life, when I’ve got a girl like her by my side, for my ‘Wanderjahre’ are over at last—Richard, the poor crazy fool, who went wandering about the earth sick of a fever, is cured of his fever, sane—Richard’s himself again—he’s got back to the normal—the fever’s been conquered.”

He paused, and drew a deep breath.

“ Yes, I shall like the life well enough—the life of the country gentleman. My horses and my dogs will interest me. I shall hunt and shoot, entertain my neighbours and be entertained, and go to church on Sunday. Mary, bless her dear heart, will insist on that. She will explain that the squire and squires of the parish must set a good example ; and later on if there are children—as I hope there will be—a boy and girl perhaps—well, it will be wonderfully interesting watching the children grow up, sending the boy to school and all that, and if at times the old unrest comes over me—a touch of the old fever, well, I shall always have Mary to steady me. Her hand will be warm in winter and cool in summer, and she’ll never let go her hold of me, either ; I can trust her to see me through most things—yes, I’ve put all my trust in Mary Fielder, and I shall not be confounded.”

He rubbed his right hand slowly across his eyes—the eyes that felt so heavy because of his cold.

"The drink," he muttered huskily, "that foolish habit I had of sitting up late at night, a whisky bottle by my side, an uncut book in my hand—well, there must be no more of that in the future—there shall be no more. Good Lord, if I've been able to conquer the opium habit, it isn't likely that any smaller vice will be able to keep me captive—to fetter my will—to enslave my manhood. Why, I've hardly drunk anything to speak of since I met Mary at San-Tong, and there's been no nipping at night, anyway, no sitting up drinking, soaking, till the quiet hours of the morning steal upon a man unawares, like grey-sheeted phantoms. No, I can put that to my credit—I've given up drinking, just as I've given up opium, but it's all Mary's doing, really—my Mary."

He let his hand drop from his forehead and fall on his knee, and he looked at the brown tapering fingers with some interest, fingers that had done rough work in their time, fingers that had gripped the opium pipe so tightly, the fingers that, God help him, were red now as he looked at them—red with a man's blood, the blood of Simeon Krillet.

"An eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth." Was it his fancy, or did he really hear the words spoken—spoken quite clearly and distinctly in his ear? And was it some terrible hallucination of the senses, or did he really see Simeon Krillet standing by his side?—the man whose coffin he had planed on a never-to-be-forgotten morning, the man whom he had buried in the Krillet burial field, treading the earth down upon him, stamping it down heavily with his feet, whilst the dead man's wife had stood still and watched him, uttering not a word—not a sound—as motionless as a pillar of salt.

"Why have you risen from your grave to haunt

me, Simeon?" He addressed the misty shape slowly, the wraith of the old Boer farmer. "If I killed you, it was because you would have murdered your wife in cold blood—your defenceless young wife; I only did what every other man would have done in my place—I killed the man to save the woman. Go back to your grave, Simeon—go back to your long sleep. The matter of your death is a matter upon which God must decide; we shall have to argue it out later on before the Judgment Bar, but sleep in peace till then, old man—sleep in peace."

He said the words aloud, then he suddenly laughed and pulled himself together for surely what he had thought to be the ghost of Simeon Krillet was merely a shadowy reflection cast by one of the mulberry velvet window-curtains. He had been addressing a shadow—a mere shadow; and yet what about the voice he had heard—that strange mysterious whisper in his ear—"An eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth"?

Oh, it was a nonsense—he had not heard the words really, he had merely fancied he heard them. He must be more feverish than he had thought but a dose of quinine would put him all right—unless his nerves were out of order! But no, he didn't think there was anything really wrong with his nerves, the foolish chill he was suffering from—this infernal malaria, had evidently sent up his temperature, and the result was that he fancied he saw a dead man, and heard a dead man's voice; but it was all pure fancy—idiotic nonsense.

He rose impatiently from his chair and crossed over to where a tandalus stood on a small oak table, and with shaking hands he poured himself out a stiff glass of whisky, adding a very little water; then he drained the glass, a dull flush mounting slowly to his forehead,



his anger against himself intense—burning, for what the devil did he mean by indulging in such uncanny fancies? He had forgotten Simeon Krillet, so why must he suddenly start thinking of him—heaven help them—can't dead men rest?

He poured out more whisky. He was really working himself up into a highly excitable condition, for his teeth had begun to chatter, and his whole body to shake and tremble; also he was drenched with perspiration from head to foot—and he felt cold—horribly, miserably cold.

“A little more whisky and I shall be all right,” he told himself. “It will help to work off this beastly chill, and when I feel a bit better I'll go to bed, I think, and take a dose of quinine. There's no doubt about it, I'm a bit feverish. It's a lucky thing that the servants that I took along with the flat seem pretty decent—I like the valet, Ward—I think he'll nurse me all right if I have to lie up for a day or two. He's quite a good sort of fellow, and his wife can cook—yes, Mrs. Ward is by no means a bad cook, as I have discovered to my comfort.”

He drank the whisky, but he did not gulp it down as he had done before, and just as he was replacing the decanter in the tantalus the study door opened quietly, almost noiselessly, and Mary Fielder made her appearance on the threshold. She stood there quietly, her figure thrown up in bold relief against the dull velvet of the mulberry-hued curtains, her white gown lighting up the room, a singularly attractive vision. Yet Waring started horribly as he caught sight of her, and his fingers shook as he clinked down the steel lid of the tantalus, for Mary was the last person he had expected to see, and she had come in at quite the wrong moment.

"My dear girl, what a surprise. But you oughtn't to have come round, Mary. You got my letter, didn't you, explaining that I couldn't meet your brother this morning owing to the sudden development of a foolish attack of malaria? I went to bed last night, but I woke up pretty seedy this morning—my eyes aching and a cracking headache—all the usual unpleasant symptoms; and that's why I sent my note round to the Ritz Hotel, thinking you would get it in plenty of time."

"And so I did," Mary interrupted, "and I would not have come round to bother you, for I expect, like Adam, you hate being fidgeted when you are not feeling very well, only I've got something to tell you—and something that you ought to hear at once."

She drew off her long gloves as she spoke, but did not advance any farther into the room. She leant back somewhat heavily against the mulberry curtains, and it struck Robert that she looked older, something of her blithe youth had vanished; she was less the girl and more the woman.

"Mary, you're in trouble of some sort—I can tell that from your face."

He turned from the table where the tandalus rested, and moved forward to greet her, holding out shaking hands.

"How did you get in?" he asked. "I thought Ward would have guarded the door better. Ward is the man-servant that Chalmers, the man from whom I rent this flat, left behind to look after me, you know, and act as watch-dog to the furniture; and there is a Mrs. Ward—Ward's wife—a good cook, and perhaps it was the lady who let you in, admitted you into the flat in spite of the strict order. I had given that I would see no one this morning—not a living soul."

"It was the man-servant who admitted me," Mary answered slowly. "He said 'no' first of all and explained that you wouldn't see anyone, but when I said I was engaged to you—that I was your fiancée—well, of course——" She gave a little comprehensive wave of her hands, then, as her eyes settled more attentively on the shaking, shivering figure of her lover, she could hardly forbear giving a little sobbing cry.

"Robert, you are ill—really ill. Your cheeks are flushed—and your hands—why, look how they're shaking! Oh, my dear, you oughtn't to be sitting up—you ought to go to bed at once, and a doctor must be sent for, Robert—I can't have you getting ill."

"My dear child, do be sensible." He took her by the arm and led her to the sofa, a big important-looking sofa that stood against the wall on the left-hand side of the room, and he seated himself on the arm of it, and tried to laugh at her solemn face.

"Because I've got a little stupid chill—hardly worth calling a cold—a mere feverish attack that will wear off in a few hours, am I to send for a doctor and a nurse and make my will? All I want is a little quinine, and, yes, I'll take your advice and go to bed for to-day. In fact, I was just thinking of retiring to my bedroom when you arrived. It's a nuisance, of course, that I shall not be able to see your brother as I had hoped to do to-day—a great nuisance—but still, I don't want to meet him for the first time suffering from malaria; and he won't run away, will he—he'll be in England for some little time?"

"I suppose so—I hope so!" Mary played somewhat nervously with her glove. "Oh, he won't leave England just directly," she continued, "for he's got

engaged to be married. I have known for some time that there was a woman he cared about, a woman who has been living in England for the last year, and whom he has seen whenever he has come over here. But I did not know her name, nor anything about her, and I got the idea into my head that she didn't want to marry Adam and that was why he was so reticent on the subject, that he was biding his time, fully intending to win her in the end, as he has done, and I also realised that it was because of this woman being in England that Adam has not really wanted me to accompany him backwards and forwards lately, as he used to do; and that was partly why, instead of coming over to England with him as I might have done, I went to China with Anna—he wanted to be free to pursue his wooing unobserved, and he has just got engaged to her.”

“Well, that's good news,” Waring interrupted, “for you were worrying a little with regard to your brother, if I remember, Mary, wondering how he would manage without you in his big house at Johannesburg; but now he'll have a wife of his own, so everything is settling itself splendidly.”

“I don't know.” She said the words rather faintly, then she suddenly leaned her head back, resting it against Waring's shoulder.

“Shall I tell you the name of the lady whom my brother is going to marry? I have met her for the first time this morning, but you have met her before. You—you know her quite well.”

“Do I, dear?” He raised his eyebrows. The shivering fit was passing off—the whisky was doing its work. He already felt far less cold and staggery, and it was pleasant to feel the warmth of Mary's young body pressed against his arm, and how cool and fresh

she looked in her white attire—the personification of dainty maidenliness.

“Tell me the lady’s name,” he continued. “I have met a good many women in my time, you know. Is she a pretty woman, dear, for if so I will be the more likely to remember her?”

“The word ‘pretty’ would hardly describe her.” Mary gave a little shiver. “Some people would call her beautiful, I suppose, but it is a strange, uncanny beauty—a frozen beauty. I will tell you her name, Robert. It is Deborah Krillet whom my brother is going to marry—Mrs. Krillet—she’s the widow of a Boer farmer, and she comes from the Transvaal.”

She felt him start—stiffen—shrink, but she simply had not got the courage to look into his face. She kept her eyes fixed on the ground, and it seemed as if the room got suffocatingly hot, the air oppressively heavy, and how sickly sweet the lilies smelt—just as if they had come from a death chamber.

“Deborah Krillet!” Waring spoke in sharp, spasmodic gasps, then he appeared to swallow and choke down a lump in his throat, and he finally rose from the arm of the sofa on which he had been sitting, and walked somewhat unsteadily over to the mantelpiece and took up the figure of a small bronze Buddha, and began to turn the image aimlessly round and round in his hand.

“Well?” he asked at last. He glanced at Mary impatiently. “What more have you got to say to me—to tell me?”

She hesitated for a second, her colour coming and going, then rose in her turn from the sofa and walked up to where Robert was standing.

“Robert dear, don’t take it too hard,” she whispered, “and do not let us worry ourselves more than need

be. I know who Mrs. Krillet is—her secret is a secret no longer ; but it's all right—we have had a long talk together, she and I—and we understand each other. She is going to marry Adam. She cares for my brother—just as you care for me.”

“ She is going to marry—marry—and marry your brother of all people in the world ! Why, I thought—” He paused, and did not finish the sentence, but the veins began to swell up in his forehead, and the flush died away from his cheeks. He turned a ghastly grey.

“ Why shouldn't she marry ? ” Mary spoke in low tones. “ You are marrying ! Oh, Robert, you are not sorry—you are not jealous ? Robert, dear Robert, why do you look so strange ? ”

She laid a timid and imploring hand upon his arm, but he shook it off fiercely, then burst out laughing.

“ Jealous, my dear girl, why should I be jealous ? What has put such an absurd idea into your head ? Why, I'm very glad—I am very thankful if it comes to that, that Deborah has consoled herself—that she's going to be happy. But you must admit that it's come upon me rather like a shock, that the woman I loved in the past—the woman whom I thought I was never going to see again—is going to become my sister-in-law ! It's a funny state of affairs certainly—an odd jumble ! ”

“ I know it's very strange, Robert, and of course you must feel startled and upset ; but I can assure you that it's going to be all right for all of us. Only Deborah does not want Adam to know you have met her before—that you are the man she has mentioned to him—so when he introduces you to her will you, please, treat her as if she were a new acquaintance ? She wishes you to do this, and so do I.”

"It's hardly fair on your brother, though, is it?" Waring demanded; "wouldn't it be better to make a clean breast of things and tell the truth? Surely it would be more straightforward?"

"I don't think so." Mary shook her head. "I'm afraid it would worry Adam, and I don't want him to be worried and upset. No, no, let us keep our own counsel, the three of us, about this; and I have a message for you from Deborah, Robert—a message that I promised I would deliver faithfully."

"Indeed!" Waring stroked his chin, and half closed his heavy eyes. "Let me hear this message. It is really very kind of Mrs. Krillet to have thought of sending me one—to have even remembered my existence."

"Robert, how can you talk like that?" Mary spoke reproachfully; then she added, bowing her head: "She wants to congratulate you on—on your future wife—that's me—and she thinks that you and she did well, very well, to part when you did; for otherwise you would have angered God—but as it is, she nopes that both you and herself face a happy future, for she is sure my brother will make her an excellent husband, and that I shall turn out quite a nice wife."

"And she's right enough there," Waring interrupted. "That's one of the most sensible things Mrs. Krillet has ever said."

"But she said more, Robert. She told me to comfort you, to bind up your old wounds, and to lead you by the hand back into the green groves of Eden. And she said that when she met you again you would be as a mere stranger to her—she would feel that you belonged to me—only to me, and that you would be nothing to her—nothing."

Mary spoke in halting tones, pausing between each word, and as Waring listened to her his face hardened strangely.

"Did she say that?" he asked. "Is that how matters lie? Well, doubtless Deborah knows what she is talking about. So we are to meet as strangers, are we? Very well—we will meet as strangers. I wonder how long it took her to forget me—did she happen to tell you, by any chance? And I suppose she cares for your brother very dearly? He is a splendid fellow—a great man. Oh, she has done wisely—she has done very wisely—to forget the man of straw and to take up with a man of iron."

He began to walk up and down the room, taking quick strides, and his face was not pleasant to look at—it was so hard and angry; but all at once his mood changed, his countenance softened, and he walked back towards Mary and put his arm about her.

"Dear girl, have I been brutal?" he said. "Have I been rough? Your news took my breath away. But it's going to be all right, just as you said it would be—we won't worry ourselves because Deborah is engaged to marry your brother, will we? It's a good thing that she is going to be happy, too, only I wish to goodness we had not got to meet each other—it's rather like meeting the ghost of the past, you know, it brings things back a bit—it's uncomfortable; but it's all right as far as we are concerned, you know, Mary—dear little girl—it's all right."

He spoke in vague, detached sentences, and kept on patting Mary's arm all the time he was speaking, and all at once she flung herself upon his breast and raised earnest eyes to his face—searching eyes.

"You don't love her, Robert, you don't love her as you did, anyway? She won't take you from me,



will she? She—she doesn't want to, you know, she is quite happy with Adam."

"Take me from you?" He laughed savagely. "I should think not, indeed, Mary. Why, I'm not the sort of man to be played fast and loose with by any woman, and Deborah sent me from her when I would have married her—made her my wife. Yes, she deliberately broke my heart at the time, and all because her conscience was too sensitive to enable her to break a promise that had been simply extorted out of her—a promise which, to my mind, was not the least binding, even though it had been sworn on the Bible."

He hesitated for a moment, then added, endeavouring to speak very quietly and calmly, but hardly succeeding, "She doesn't care for me now, Mary—she has as good as said so. She realises that I belong to past history, and that's just how I feel with regard to her. It's you I want now, Mary, only you—my dear, loving, lovely girl—my good angel—my sweet Saint Elizabeth."

Mary smiled. She was happier—much happier—now that she had broken the news to Robert, far more at her ease; nor did she feel the least jealous of Deborah, for she was certain—absolutely certain—that Robert meant every word that he had just said; besides, she believed—she trusted—Deborah Krillet, and since Deborah had promised that she would not take Robert from her, Mary felt certain that Mrs. Krillet could be relied upon to keep her word.

"I must go, Robert, now that I have told you the news, for I have got to join Adam at Prince's at two o'clock. We are all lunching there together, Adam and myself and Deborah, and then Deborah and my brother are going on to see a house at Carlton House

Terrace that they think of buying. It is a beautiful house, and it is to be one of Adam's gifts to Deborah, if she happens to take a fancy to it—a present worth having, isn't it ? ”

She tried to laugh, and to slip naturally and easily into mere commonplace conversation, and then she added, stroking Waring's coat lightly, sliding her fingers caressingly up and down the rough surface of the serge : “ I'll come back here after lunch, if I may, and have tea with you. And throw away those white lilics, Robert, and I'll bring some nice flowers with me ; I don't like white lilies, they make me think of funeral wreaths—they recall death chambers.”

“ Child, you mustn't be so fanciful. Personally I'm very fond of lilies, and I have no morbid thoughts with regard to them. They are like tall, blameless girls—girls like yourself——”

He hesitated for a second. “ Look here, Mary, I would rather you didn't come back this afternoon, if you don't mind. This chill is making me feel foolish, and if I can only get to bed and dose myself well with quinine I shall be all right in a few hours, and as fresh and as fit as possible to-morrow. So leave me alone to-day, darling, don't come near me—I'll promise you I'll turn up at the Ritz to-morrow, at any hour you may appoint—all you've got to do is just to telephone to me—you know my number ? ”

She sighed doubtfully. “ But, Robert darling, couldn't I come back and have tea here—and—and look after you a little bit ? I'm quite a good nurse, and I shouldn't make a fuss or bother, and of course you mustn't think of coming round to the Ritz to-morrow unless your temperature has gone down and you are feeling quite yourself again.”

“ Oh, but I shall be all right to-morrow,” he retorted

irritably, "that is, if I'm allowed to go to bed peaceably now. But see you, Mary, I'm rather a contrary sort of animal when I'm ill; I like to be left alone, so if you wouldn't mind going—it's not that I don't love you—it's only that I hate being bothered—fidgeted."

She shrank within herself, hesitated for a second, then looked at him strangely.

"Would you have sent Deborah Krillet from you in the old days as you are sending me? Would you not have been glad to have felt her hand upon your forehead?"

"She would have left me in peace," he retorted; "she wouldn't have bothered me. Oh, Mary dear, I'm a brute, and I'm saying cruel things to you—things I don't mean—but it's only because I've got a racking headache, and that beastly shivering fit is coming back again. I've had chills like this before, so I know I shall be all right to-morrow. You can come round and sit with me as long as you like if I'm not—I—I should like you to come—want you."

He spoke with some difficulty, for his teeth were chattering in his head, and he was shivering again; but Mary took some comfort from his words, and smiled at him gratefully.

"That's my kind Robert," she whispered, "and I'm sorry, dear, if I'm a fidget and a nuisance. I'm going now, but I shall be round to-morrow quite early unless I hear from you. You won't mind if I telephone up this evening to learn how you are getting on? In fact I think I shall telephone about five o'clock and then again at nine, for I shall be so anxious about you."

She began putting on her gloves, buttoning them with a slow precision which nearly drove Robert Waring wild, but he had to curb his impatience and exercise a stern self-restraint.

"Yes, dear, yes," he answered. "It's very sweet of you to telephone to me—very kind. But now you must hurry off or you will be late for lunch, I am afraid. It won't do to keep your brother and Mrs. Krillet waiting—Deborah had a distinct dislike to being kept waiting in the old days, I remember; in fact, she once summoned me somewhat sharply back from England, and at an inconvenient season."

He bit his lip—bit it fiercely—savagely; but Mary, who had now finished buttoning her gloves, did not notice this, for she was engaged in stroking down the fingers, being extremely particular as to the fit of the gloves she wore.

"Have you got any message for Deborah?" she demanded at last. "I think it would be kind of you to send her a message—civil."

He could have laughed aloud. The idea of his showing kindness or civility to Deborah—the Shulamite! But it was a mercy, all things considered, that Mary could talk like this; it proved that she was not jealous, and also that she was prepared to be sensible—quite sensible—and to regard things from a matter-of-fact point of view.

"Give Mrs. Krillet my kind regards, when you are alone with her, and say that I congratulate her on her engagement, and wish her every possible happiness in her second marriage; and you might add that I have forgotten the past just as she has forgotten it—that it has become a dead letter to me, Mary, do you hear that?—a dead letter."

"Oh, I'm so glad." She smiled at him happily. "It's so nice to hear you say that, Robert, and you mean it—it really is the truth?"

"Of course it's the truth, Mary; what object should I have in lying to you? And now, your gloves are

both on, are they not? Your brother is waiting at Prince's, I expect, so I'll ring the bell and tell Ward to summon the lift. No, you mustn't kiss me, Mary"—he brushed her back as she raised her face to his—"my cold is too bad. I don't want you to catch it, dear; indeed, you mustn't kiss me."

He rang the bell loudly, and Mary had to draw back, flushing a little disconcertedly, for the staid man-servant, Ward, made his appearance on the scene, and held the door open for her to pass out.

She smiled back timidly at Waring over her shoulder, just as she left the room, and Waring smiled in response; but after the door had closed behind Mary an extraordinary change came over his face, and the smile became a grimace—such a grimace as masks pain.

"Deborah," he muttered, "Deborah! So she is about to marry another man, is she? And she will give to that man what she denied to me—herself—her body—her lips—not that I care—why should I care?—I've got Mary to think of now—Madonna Mary; but oh, my God—my God—how shall I meet Deborah again? For suppose the old pain awakens—the old fierce desire? How can I tell—how can I say?"

He began to walk up and down the room, shivering—shaking—the fever burning into his bones—his mouth parched and dry; then he suddenly flung himself down on the sofa.

"Simeon Krillet," he cried, "did you know that this was about to happen—and was that why you paid me a visit this morning, coming all the long way from South Africa—rising up grey and grim from your grave? What was it you said, 'An eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth'? I am to suffer the pain you suffered, I suppose—the jealous torment? For she's

forgotten me, has she? That was the message she sent me—that I mean nothing to her now—nothing. And that's what she told you, Simeon, wasn't it—what you tried to kill her for saying? And by the God who made me, I feel as if I could kill her now—kill her, rather than know that she will rest in another man's arms, and pillow her head on his breast; for love's a cruel thing—a wonderfully cruel thing, and jealousy is more cruel than the grave."

He spread out his hands and looked at them, his shivering, shaking hands, hands that were red with an old man's blood.

"Lord bless us, Simeon," he cried, "we can feel for each other, you and I. We can hate this man, this Adam Fielder, but I wonder which hates him the most—you, rotting in your grave, Simeon, or I—alive—most hatefully alive, and all my senses astir, years of life yet before me, about to marry a girl—the best girl in all the world—yet cursed and bewitched with my mad longing for the Shulamite—the Shulamite who has taken another in my stead—the chiefest amongst ten thousand."

He was silent for a few minutes; then he got up in a cowed, somewhat shamefaced fashion and made his way to where the tantalus stood on its oak table. He unhasped the steel lid, and lifted out the decanter.

"God's fruth, I need a drink," he muttered; "I'm shaking fit to drop out of my skin."

He poured out some whisky and drained it neat, and as the fluid ran down his throat, a sense of warmth and well-being returned to his frame for a moment. He breathed heavily, then smiled.

"Thank God for Mary! She'll see me through this—this damnable mess—this most infernal tangle. Mary's a saint if ever there was one—my saint."

He moved towards the door. His limbs were beginning to totter under him. He craved for the coolness of his bed, for he wanted to fall asleep—heavily asleep. His head ached—his limbs ached—he was sick in mind and body, and ringing in his ears was the voice of doom, for he could still hear Simeon Krillet saying :

“ An eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth.”

## CHAPTER X

"WELL, Polly, this is going to be rather a festive occasion, isn't it?—a sort of preliminary bridal feast. Fancy, you and I are dining to-night with the man and woman with whom we are going to spend the rest of our lives!—my Deborah and your Robert, and three of us meeting for the first time, for I haven't seen your Robert before, nor has he seen Deborah. But we're all going to like each other tremendously, and be a real happy, united family party, are we not, little sister—my pretty Mary? And it was a very good idea of yours to think of having a nice little dinner here at the Ritz—an uncommonly nice idea."

Adam smiled as he addressed his sister, and, standing up in Mary's small sitting-room, he looked a bigger and more dominant figure than ever, a powerful man hopelessly out of place in a small and somewhat ornately furnished hotel sitting-room, a man whom one associated more with a council chamber, deliberating over weighty affairs of state, or else standing on a high hill, field-glasses slung over his shoulder, planning out the division of the land on which he was gazing—the land over which it was his lot in life to rule.

Mary glanced gratefully at her brother. She was looking extremely charming to-night, dressed in a pure white gown, a robe cut on somewhat classic lines, which fell about her figure in graceful folds,



the soft chiffon tunic edged with a deep bordering of silver lace—silver run through with platinum threads—and she wore a silver fillet in her hair, a curious ornament that Waring had given her—just a flexible bar of silver set with large amethysts at intervals, but it suited Mary well, and gave her added dignity.

There were amethysts at her breast too, another present from Waring, and she wore his ring on her finger—a big ruby; for Mary had a fancy for rubies, and had chosen this stone herself, and it was not till afterwards, till the ring actually glistened on her finger, that the idea struck her that the ruby, at a distance, did not look unlike a drop of blood.

It had been Mary's own idea to have a little dinner at her hotel this evening, for Waring had shaken off his bad feverish chill just as he had told her he would, and after keeping in bed for twenty-four hours, he was now quite well enough to come out. At least so he had told Mary, and Mary had suddenly decided that it would be better if he met her brother at dinner, perhaps, and Deborah at the same time; then, the first shock of meeting with the Shulamite over, it was quite possible that a comfortable state of things might follow, and every one settle down. At least that was what Mary Fielder hoped and prayed, but she realised that to-night would be an epoch-making evening, and she felt acutely nervous, all the more nervous, perhaps, because she did not want Adam to discover that there was anything amiss with her, or that she was worrying.

He was so happy—this big, splendid brother of hers, this great and all-successful man, happier than she had ever thought he would be, gifted with all a school-boy's high spirits for the moment—his dignity and

reserve of manner put by, a man absolutely satisfied with himself and his world—abundantly content.

“I am so glad you are able to dine here to-night, Adam, you and Deborah, and I do hope you will like Robert—my Robert. He won't be looking his best, you know, poor dear—that sharp malarial attack will have pulled him down, but I think that you will admit that he's exceedingly good-looking, and he's clever—very clever really, though he likes to pretend that he is merely shallow—but that's all a pose.”

“A stupid pose,” Adam interrupted. “I like a man to be proud of his brains if he's got any, to set some store by them. But there, Mary, don't worry your pretty head—don't be afraid that I shan't like the man you've set your heart upon marrying, little sister—the man who's going to make you a good husband, I trust. And I must say that you seem to have made a sensible choice, for Robert Waring comes of an exceedingly good family, and he's quite well off, but I wish he wasn't a loafer—a mere globe-trotter. Can't you make him take an interest in politics, Mary? He might be able to help me over here if he'd enter the political arena. But that's all in the future, isn't it?—in the fine unclouded future.”

He sat down somewhat gingerly in a Louis-Seize arm-chair, a chair upholstered in a fine dove satin brocade, worked with pink malmaisons and gorgeously gilded, and he looked utterly out of place as he sat down, for Adam Fielder was no hanger-on in feminine boudoirs—no mere carpet knight.

“What's the time, Polly?” he observed. “Getting on for eight o'clock, I suppose. You asked us for eight and I turned up at seven just to have a chat with my little Polly—to open my heart out to her—

for oh, my girl, how happy I am—how happy! Deborah having consented to marry me has just set the crowning touch to my life—a magic touch. She is a wonder-woman, isn't she, Mary?—now that you've seen her—now that you know her—a real wonder-woman!”

“Yes,” Mary answered slowly; then she sank down in a chair opposite her brother and clasped her arms round her knees. “I do realise—I do feel Deborah Krillet's charm,” she continued, “and she grows upon one strangely—the more you see of her, well, the more you want to see of her, and I shouldn't think she was a woman one could ever get tired of, either.”

“No, that's just it,” Adam interrupted enthusiastically. “One could never get tired of Deborah. There's something about her that would always set one wondering, dreaming—she is as mysterious as all the good and beautiful things in nature are mysterious. But there, Polly, you will think I'm talking more like a lovesick boy than a staid man of forty. But do you know,”—he laughed half shyly—“I begin to understand now the strange worship that men have given women in the past, how they wrecked and ruined their lives for women, and flung away dynasties, and thought nothing of it—nothing. I understand now how it was that the Trojans fought to keep Helen, and how the Greeks kept their fierce watch and ward outside the town of Troy, waiting for the hour to come when the golden-haired woman would be once more in their midst. I can realise—oh, I can realise only too well—how it came to pass that Mark Anthony lost his last naval battle, because he turned to follow Cleopatra's flying sail. It's no longer a mystery to me how Mary Stuart found men ready to fight and to

die for her wherever she looked and smiled at them, for I tell you, and I am in earnest, that I verily believe Deborah could do what she liked with me; she's got such an extraordinary silent witchery about her, you see, Mary—she such a marvellous enchantress."

He played with his heavy gold watch chain, and did not look at his sister as he spoke, but kept his eyes fixed on the carpeted floor.

"I have grown more conscious of her charm—of her marvellous fascination," he continued, "since the few days that we've been engaged. She's grown upon me—grown, and now I can think of nothing but Deborah. She means more to me than all my ambitious dreams, my great schemes for the welfare of South Africa—for the moulding and shaping of that fierce, barren land, till it buds and blooms and flowers. For she's got me, Polly, she's got me, and Lord help us, if I had to give Deborah up now, I believe it would drive me mad. I honestly don't think I could exist without her, and if another man crossed my path —"

He clenched his fists, and Mary looked at him pale and horrified, for she realised how completely Deborah Krillet had obsessed her brother, and she was alarmed to find that he loved Deborah in this wild and unrestrained fashion. Oh, she was terrible, this Shulamite—as terrible as an army with banners.

"Yes, Adam." She addressed him soothingly. "I know you are devoted to Deborah, and you are going to marry her, so all will be well—well for both of you."

"Of course I'm going to marry her." He raised his strong face. "And the sooner the better, for I want her as I have never wanted anything in all my life, and it hurts me—it hurts me—even to say

good-bye to her for a few hours. I've got the disease pretty bad—haven't I, Mary?—I'm about as hard hit as any man could be, I fancy."

"Yes, I think you are," Mary concurred softly, then she leant forward in her chair. "What a good thing it is that I am getting married too, for I really don't know what I should have done with myself under the circumstances. Neither you nor Deborah would have wanted me to live with you, I expect, either in London or in Jo'burg; for how does the old saying go—'two's company—three's trumpery'?—and though I'm an independent young person, as is clearly proved by my being able to stay at the Ritz, just with my maid, to bear me company, still, I should have wanted some sort of a home later on; I couldn't have spent my life drifting from hotel to hotel."

"Mary, don't be absurd." He addressed her with some sternness. "Of course you would have lived with Deborah and myself after our marriage, and our home would have been your home, and Deborah would have been delighted, for she has taken a great fancy to you—I can see that clearly—and she is not a woman who cares for any one as a general rule. For Polly—little Polly"—he rose from his chair, crossed over to where Mary was sitting and stood by her side, gazing down at her with infinite regard in his eyes—"haven't I tried my level best to be father and mother to you all these years, since we lost our father and mother? Haven't I loved you with a very deep and abiding love? And though I haven't been able to spend as much of my time with you as I would have liked—for a man who has anything to do with the governing of a country isn't his own master—still, we've had a great many happy hours together, haven't we? Next to Deborah there's no one like you, nor

ever will be—you're my sister—the blood in our veins is the same, and blood's thicker than water any day. And mark me, Polly, you're always to come to me in the future—to your big brother—if you're in any trouble, any difficulty, and I'll see you through—not that I suppose you will want to turn to any one but your Robert ! ”

“ I hope not—I trust not,” she replied ; “ but if he were ill, or there were other troubles or worries—why, I'd come to you at once, Adam, like a shot, and you would come to me too, wouldn't you—you'd come to your sister ? ”

“ Bless you, little Polly, yes.” He bent down and pressed a warm kiss upon Mary's smooth forehead, and just at that moment the door opened, and Robert Waring was announced. And Waring came in cool and smiling, absolutely the master of himself and his emotions, and how was Mary to guess that his face was a mere mask for the moment—a smooth, smiling mask ?

She sprang from her chair to greet him—a warm glow of colour flushing face, neck and shoulders, and as she rose she took her brother by the hand and led him up to Robert, and nothing simpler—nothing prettier—could have been imagined than the way she introduced the two men to each other.

“ Robert, this is Adam,” she said, “ my dear—my very dear brother—and you will be the best of friends won't you, for my sake—and later on for your own sakes ? ”

She smiled, but there were tears in her eyes, tears of deep emotion, and she had never looked fairer in all her life.

The two men shook hands, Adam smiling with honest pleasure, for he was favourably impressed by

Waring. He liked the Englishman's air of race, of general polish. Besides, this was the man whom Mary loved—the lover on whom she had set her heart, and he trusted that he and Waring would be as brothers in the future—in the years that stretched ahead. Nor did he suspect, for one instant, that Waring was regarding him with very different feelings. For this was the South African Deborah Krillet was to marry—this was the man for whose sake she had forgotten not only Simeon Krillet mouldering in his grave, but Robert Waring whose gun had sent Krillet there, and it needed all Waring's powers of self-control to enable him to smile pleasantly at Adam Fielder as he gripped the hand of the latter in a grasp which, for his part, was not one of friendship.

"I hope you are all right again, Waring—I needn't tell you how delighted I am to meet you. Mary has been singing your praises, I may as well inform you, and explaining to me that she has found the ideal husband. I can certainly congratulate you on having won my sister's heart. A better girl never lived—a dearer girl—and you are an uncommonly lucky fellow."

"I know I am," Waring answered. In spite of all his endeavours, he spoke with a certain roughness. "Mary's world's too good for me, and no one knows that better than I do myself," he added; "but I shall try and make her happy, you can depend upon my trying to do that. And now, I have to congratulate you in my turn, haven't I? Mary tells me that you have just got engaged to be married too, and that I am to meet Mrs. Krillet this evening."

He dared not look at Mary, but kept his eyes rigidly averted from her face, and it was hateful—hateful—having to refer to Deborah—to the Shulamite of

past days—as if she were a stranger. And what would he feel like, he wondered, when she came into the room to play her part at this strange dinner—to play a part, as all the others would have to do except Adam Fielder—honest Adam Fielder, still left in the dark and being wilfully deceived—even of his own.

“ Yes, we are all going to meet this evening, and as I was telling Mary a few moments before you came in, we ought to be an uncommonly happy little party to-night. After dinner we’ll have a sort of family discussion, and fix up dates for weddings and so on. And, I say, Mary, what about a double wedding—how would you and Deborah like it ? ”

She winced and whitened and threw a glance of helpless appeal to Waring, but he was engaged in watching the door, staring at it in a sort of blind abstraction, the door that would open presently to admit Deborah Krillet.

“ A double wedding! Oh, I don’t think I should like it, Adam, and I’m sure Deborah wouldn’t. Besides, she won’t be married in white—being a widow—and I want to be in bridal satin—even if it’s a quiet wedding, with merely a handful of friends, let me be a real orange-blossom bride all the same.”

She spoke nervously, clasping her hands together, and then to her relief the door opened and the guest of the evening appeared, the woman for whom they had all been waiting—Deborah Krillet.

She was in black as usual, wearing one of the staid evening gowns she affected, a gown that fitted tight to the throat, and was made of heavy black silk, and hardly trimmed—such a gown as a widow might have worn without causing remark in the first year of her mourning. No greater contrast to Mary, in her white and shimmering gown, than Deborah presented could



have been imagined, and yet, notwithstanding her sombre apparel, she had never looked more vividly alive. She was no longer a frozen woman—a dead woman; her face was as intense as flame, the brightness of her eyes indescribable, and her hair, piled in soft masses on the top of her head, had seemingly regained its gold; it was no longer dull and asleep—dead hair—it rippled in magnetic waves—it was alive once more—hair with a strange subtle scent of its own—hair that a man might bury his hot cheek against gratefully whilst he drew the long shining strands through his fingers.

Her face looked thin, certainly—thin, but no longer haggard—and the fineness of it was marvellous; it was just like a piece of rare carving. And Deborah's lips were as scarlet as ever; it was possible to see the red blood pulsing under the skin of her mouth; too fervent a kiss and her lips would froth with blood; but her face and her dress were at startling variance with each other; the contrast was almost cruel—it was as if a mourner sang a love song at a funeral, or a widow in the first hours of her bereavement smiled like a bride.

She wore no ornaments, and her hands were bare of rings, save for the wedding-ring on her finger—the plain wedding-ring Simeon Krillet had given her years ago; for Deborah had brushed aside the idea of wearing an engagement-ring when Adam had suggested it.

“I never wear jewels,” she informed him; “I do not care for them, and rings I abhor. Please give me nothing in the way of jewellery.”

He had been puzzled and hurt for the moment—vaguely disappointed; then he had thought it was only like this woman, who was so unlike all other

women, not to care for trinkets—she was too mysterious a jewel herself to need the adornment of flashing gems. Let smaller women be content to trick themselves out—his Deborah needed no such allurements, and she despised the gifts that queens would gladly accept, as well as greedy courtesans; and that made it all the more marvellous that he had won her, for it was evident that she wanted nothing that money could buy—she had no price.

“Deborah, I am so glad to see you.” Mary sailed forward with outstretched hand, but she noticed that Deborah was not looking at her—not even pretending to look at her—her eyes were fixed on Robert Waring, and how they flashed and changed colour! And she was smiling—yes, smiling—a strange and curiously defiant smile; such a smile as a woman might give to the judge who had just condemned her to a cruel death, or to the coward who had slain her with a kiss; and Deborah was awful when she smiled like this, awful in her fierce beauty, as terrible and devastating as flame, the sharp flame that bites and scorches—brands.

“Dear Mary, it’s sweet of you to have asked me here to-night.” Deborah suddenly moved her eyes from Waring and turned to her hostess, and her voice sounded honey-sweet, sweeter and softer than Mary had ever heard it; but it was a dangerous voice, for all that—a cloaked voice.

The two women kissed, and Waring and Fielder watched them—watched them silently—noticed how they swayed towards each other, the girl in the white gown, and the woman in the stiff black dress, how their breath mixed; and then they fell apart, and it was as if a wave rolled between them—a wave of sudden chilliness and distrust.

"Deborah, let me introduce Robert to you—Mr. Robert Waring—Mrs. Krillet."

Deborah and Robert shook hands, or rather she held out cold finger-tips and he touched them, and she smiled—just as she had smiled when she first entered the room; and he realised, because he had loved this woman in the past, and loved her well, that if she had not smiled she must have screamed, and his heart felt like cracking under the severe strain he was putting on it. For he suddenly felt that Deborah's face, so wonderfully alight at the present moment, was but a pinched, small face when he came to look into it feature by feature—a fretted face—and that she merely clothed herself in beauty by the force of sheer will-power—that she had cast over a worn and shrunken frame a fine illusion of loveliness. It was the flame of her spirit that made her what she was—mystical, wonderful; but the spirit had pretty well burnt the body by now. In a little while there would be nothing left of Deborah—there could be nothing left of Deborah—but charred ash. And he felt as if he was touching the hand of some ghostly visitant—some woman alive for a few hours by the power of magic, but who would presently flicker into smoke—mere filmy vapour.

"This is an evening for general congratulations and pretty speeches, is it not, Mr. Waring?" Deborah sank slowly into a chair, her silk skirts falling heavily about her limbs; but before Waring could do much more than hazard a commonplace, Adam marched forward and bent somewhat possessively over Mrs. Krillet.

"Dear, you're not tired, are you?" he asked tenderly. "You look wonderful, but just a little delicate. By the dear Lord, I shall be thankful when

we are man and wife, and I can have the looking after you—the taking care of you. But we've got to settle the dates for 'two weddings this evening, for I don't believe in delay when important matters are concerned. Besides, what have any of us got to wait for?" He turned and smiled at his sister and Waring, who had taken possession of the sofa and were sitting on it side by side. "We're all of age," he continued, "and there's plenty of money going about, and I bet we know our own minds."

"I'm sure we do," Deborah interrupted softly; then she smiled across the room at Mary. "There's no reason for delay, dear, is there?" she asked. "It won't take you so very long to get a trousseau together, will it? Our wedding had better follow after yours, I fancy."

Mary flushed, then glanced nervously at Waring; but his eyes were bent on the carpet—for the second time he had avoided meeting her glance.

A solemn waiter made his appearance.

"Dinner is served, madame," he announced, and then he proceeded to throw open two doors that led into a small dining-room—the dining-room of the suite of rooms which Mary was occupying—where a table had been very prettily laid out for four, and decorated with white flowers—frail exotic orchids and swaying lilies-of-the-valley.

"Dinner—that's good." Adam smiled cheerfully. He, at any rate, found nothing strained or awkward in the situation, and he was as happy as only a man can be who has suddenly got back to his youth again, and to all the dreams and hopes that belong to youth.

"I'm going to take you in to dinner, Deborah," he added, offering his arm to the woman in the black silk gown. "I don't care how Mary has arranged things,

and, anyway, I don't suppose she'll object to walking in with Robert." He laughed at his little joke. "Why, this is the night of my life, I think—I never felt so glad at heart before. There couldn't be a more perfect little dinner-party, could there? It's all grand—splendid."

He beamed on the whole party. He was just a big, happy lover for the moment, a man who had forgotten the cares of State which had hitherto absorbed him, and also the fact that he was a great capitalist—one of the world's millionaires. For Adam Fielder could play no other part than that of a brother and a lover to-night; he was enjoying family life to its full—he had got away from his secretaries and the crowd of people who sought him night and day. And now, seated at a small, round table, with his future wife on one side of him and his dearly loved sister on the other, he could have laughed aloud for sheer lightness of heart; and Mary was glad, thankful, that she had not dimmed the brightness of his perfect joy by letting him know that the man she herself was about to marry was the man whom Deborah had loved so passionately in the past. No; let this be a secret for ever hidden from Adam Fielder—a secret safely hidden and guarded in three breasts.

*Hors d'œuvres* were handed round by silent-footed and deferential waiters. Mary exerted herself to make conversation, so that Adam should not find out that there was any spirit of constraint about—of awkwardness; and after the first minute or two Deborah helped her, talking more freely than she had ever talked, for as a general rule she was a woman of few words. But though Mary was grateful enough to Deborah for coming to her aid, she could not help feeling a faint mistrust of her—an angry suspicion—

for she failed to understand the look that Deborah had given Waring when she had entered the sitting-room a few minutes ago. Besides, Deborah looked so uncanny to-night; her beauty had something unearthly about it. It was the wild, perilous beauty of an Undine, of some strange green-eyed witch or weird enchantress; it wasn't healthy—it was hardly human.

Robert sat silent. He ate very little, and when hock was poured into his glass he drained it down at once, and his whole manner was that of a man who has some torturing secret to hide—a man ill at ease.

He hardly looked at any one, keeping his eyes religiously fixed on his plate; and yet, though Mary felt annoyed with him—for surely he might have exerted himself a little, even as she was exerting herself—still, in the depths of her warm, loving heart she yearned to throw her arms about him and to comfort him for whatever suffering the presence of Deborah Krillet was inflicting; and perhaps Mary's affection had never reached such pure heights before, for she was not jealous of Robert—not the least jealous; she was only intensely sorry for him if he was in trouble, if he was unhappy; and there was something almost maternal about her mood—something intensely sympathetic.

"I'm afraid you still feel rather bad—beastly thing, that malaria!" Adam, hitherto entirely engrossed in Deborah, suddenly appeared to wake up to the fact that his future brother-in-law was curiously silent, and Waring flushed as Fielder addressed him, and then roused himself with an effort.

"Yes, I'm afraid I haven't shaken off my chill yet. I—I really oughtn't to have come out this evening, I suppose, for my head's on fire, and I'm afraid I'm dull company; but I was awfully anxious to meet

you and—and Mrs. Krillet—and of course I wanted to dine to-night with Mary.”

Adam was all solicitude. He understood, or he thought he understood, the reason of Waring's silence now—the poor chap was feeling ill, and he had come out to dinner when he ought to have been in bed. Well, he didn't wonder at that; he would have risen from a sick bed willingly to have dined with Deborah, and perhaps dinner would cheer Waring up, and the chill work off during the evening. Anyway, it was good that they were all four of them together; and what a handsome chap Waring was, though he had rather a restless look in his eyes, and the appearance of a man who had lived hard; but then, poor fellow, he hadn't known Mary in the past. Oh, Mary would steer him into port all right—she would pilot him into safe harbourage.

“What are you taking for your malaria?” Deborah addressed Waring lightly enough across the table, crumbling her roll between her fingers as she spoke.

“Quinine,” he answered shortly; then he turned to Mary. “I like you in white,” he remarked. “You must always wear white, I think—it's your colour.”

“I quite agree with you,” Deborah interrupted, breaking into the conversation, and leaning her elbows on the table. “White is Mary's colour, just as black is mine. We represent darkness and light.”

“But you're not always going to wear black, are you, dear?” Adam addressed Deborah rather anxiously; then he leant back in his chair. “Of course, black suits you,” he added, “but I think, though I don't know, that I should like to see you in a coloured gown sometimes. Still, black suits you.”

“I prefer black to any other colour.” She spoke in clear, passionless tones, and went on crumbling her

bread. Then a tense silence fell, a silence that made Mary feel as though she would like to scream, and she longed for dinner to come to an end ; the atmosphere was getting appallingly electric, she reflected, and how leaden-footed the waiters seemed to have become ! Why didn't they move the plates more quickly, and hurry on with the courses ? For neither she nor her guests were eating much ; they were all of them merely playing with their food—Adam because he was so happy, and the others—oh, was it because they were wretched—unhinged—miserable ?

“ Why, how silent we have all got ! ” Adam smiled and gazed round the table, and he wondered why the two women flushed and why Waring looked so awkward. “ I know what's the matter with all of us,” he added, nodding his head wisely : “ we're just as deep in love as we can be, and we don't want to eat or drink or talk. We're drowsy with happiness, as the lotus-eaters are that they tell us about in poetry. But before the waiters come back I'd just like the four of us to clink our glasses together, and we'll drink to ourselves and the two marriages that are to take place—Deborah's marriage to me, and your marriage, Mary, to Robert.”

He raised his glass and clinked it with Deborah's, but her hand trembled, and some of her wine spilled, and she uttered a sharp, nervous cry ; but this took his attention off the other couple, Mary and Waring, who made no attempt to clink glasses with each other, merely watching Adam and Deborah silently.

“ How stupid of me ! ” Deborah pointed to the stain on the tablecloth. “ What made my hand shake in that silly fashion ? It's the heat, I suppose, or else a storm is brewing—a thunderstorm.”

“ Oh, but we don't have thunderstorms here in England.” Adam laughed at her fondly. “ They



belong to South Africa and the veldt, my dear ; they are part and parcel of the Transvaal. You have been in South Africa, haven't you, Waring ?—so you know what pretty firework displays we get there sometimes. But perhaps you've never seen a real South African thunderstorm—it's an experience, you know."

"I happen to have seen several bad storms in South Africa," Waring answered calmly enough, "and one, the worst of all, I can remember distinctly. It was a very bad storm indeed, and a man was killed."

He looked hard at Deborah. She met his glance unwaveringly.

"Strange, for my husband was killed in a thunderstorm," she remarked shortly, drawing in her lips as she spoke.

Mary pressed a hand to her breast. What were those two about, talking to each other like that—the man she loved and the woman he had loved in the past. Were they recalling some episode to each other—some memory in which she had no share ?

An awful restlessness came over her—a longing that this meal would end—this meal which should have been so gay and joyous, but which had become like some nightmare banquet, a ghastly travesty of the real thing.

"Don't let us talk of thunderstorms or of death or anything awful," she gasped. "This is a gala night for all of us, remember, and we are not taking it as gaily as we should. Oh, Adam, let's be happy—let's be happy."

She stretched out her hand under the tablecloth and sought and found her brother's, and clung to Adam's fingers desperately. How big and warm and strong he was, and the sacred ties of kinship bound them together. But oh, why did it happen—oh, why

—that this brother of hers should have lost his heart to Deborah Krillet? If it had only been another woman he had fallen in love with—some nice English girl—how different everything would have been to-night—how joyous! What evil fate had led Adam to that lonely farm in the Transvaal—that farm where he had found a lonely woman sitting by a desolate fireside? And he had taken this woman into his great heart, into his full and splendid life.

“Happy! Why, of course we’re happy, just as happy as we can be.” Adam returned the tight, almost convulsive, pressure of his sister’s fingers, and then, quite unexpectedly, Waring found his tongue and began to talk, and he talked brilliantly, if somewhat extravagantly, of strange places that he had visited in his wanderings, of strange sights that he had seen; and he sprinkled his talk with epigram. He was more witty than Mary had ever known him, and he ended by monopolising the entire conversation, the others listening to him during the rest of the meal—listening to vivid travel talk, and to the keen, illuminating criticisms of a man of the world on the sights and scenes that he had witnessed. And Adam told himself, nodding his head complacently over his glass of port, that his future brother-in-law was quite a clever chap; and Deborah, idly peeling a peach, remembered that this was the man whose burning words in the past had led her into a new world—a man who had opened the doors of knowledge to her. But Mary could take no pleasure in her lover’s oratory, for she felt all the time that he was talking for sheer effect—playing a part; and she was thankful, extraordinarily thankful, when the moment arrived when she could propose a move from the dinner-table.

"Will you have your cigarettes with us in the sitting-room?" she asked, rising lightly from the table, and addressing her brother and Waring. "I think we will have our coffee all together," she added; "that is, unless you would rather have it by yourselves and talk."

"Certainly not, Mary," Adam answered. "We'll join you and Deborah just as soon as we've finished our port, and let's all have our coffee together, please, in the sitting-room, eh, Waring?"

He turned to his future brother-in-law, who nodded in swift assent. Mary moved forward and followed Deborah into the sitting-room, where she found Mrs. Krillet standing by the open window, gazing out; and the roar of London traffic was deafening, and the night air appallingly sultry—there was no doubt that a storm was coming later.

"Deborah, how do you feel? It—it's pretty awful, isn't it?" A sudden longing for human sympathy impelled Mary to put a hand on Mrs. Krillet's arm, but Deborah turned and looked at her coldly, and Mary shrank, abashed, into her shell.

"Why, I think things have gone off very well," Deborah said slowly, "and that we've had a pleasant dinner. Of course it was a little awkward for the first minute or two, meeting Mr. Waring again after all these years, but the awkwardness soon wore off."

"Do you think so?" Mary spoke in low tones, telling herself that never, never would she turn to Deborah again—that she would rather die first.

"Certainly I do." Deborah put up a hand to her forehead and stroked back a lock of hair. "There is surely going to be a storm to-night," she added quietly; "I can feel it coming."

"I can feel it too," Mary muttered. "I—I think it's about to break."

She moved to a chair and sat down, folding her hands together idly in her lap, and she stared down at the ring that Waring had not so long ago put on her finger—the ruby that was like a drop of blood; and she heard, but in a dull, vague sort of way, Deborah drumming her clenched knuckles against the window-pane.

The folding-doors opened, and the two men appeared—they had not dallied long over their wine—and Mary noticed that as they both came into the sitting-room their glances swept past her and settled on the woman in the black silk gown—Deborah Krillet, knocking her knuckles fretfully against the window-pane, just as if she was knocking at the gates of Fate.

"He might look at me—he might just look at me."

A lump rose in Mary's throat, and she stirred restlessly in her chair; and as she moved Waring turned his head and smiled at her, but it was the smile a man might give some one he was very, very sorry for—some one he dreaded to hurt.

## CHAPTER XI

"WELL, now, what about fixing on a date for our respective weddings, eh? I am, as you know, a fairly busy man, a man who has his work cut out for him, but just now, as it happens, the powers that be have kindly allowed me a little breathing space. I've got my holiday—the Empire has given me a little holiday—for I've fixed up the business that brought me over to England—carried it to a highly satisfactory conclusion, and I've transacted more important business still on my own account."

Adam smiled happily at Deborah as he said the last words, then he leant forward in his chair, his strong, powerful hands pressing down heavily on his large thighs, and he glanced first at his sister and then at Waring, as though asking them to confirm his words; but Mary hesitated and said nothing—she must leave it to Waring to speak, she decided; not for worlds would she make the first move, nor in any way seek to hurry on the date of her marriage. And after a pause, but a barely perceptible pause, it was Waring who answered.

"Excellent, Fielder, excellent! We couldn't do better than fix up the dates to-night, could we? What about next month, if Mary could get her things together in time? And is it to be a grand wedding, dear, or just a quiet gathering of a few friends?"

That's what you said at dinner that you would like, wasn't it? and I own I should prefer it myself."

"Oh, a quiet wedding, please." Mary rose from the low chair in which she had been sitting and came forward, and as she stood up in the centre of the room, the softly shaded electric light shining down on her, she looked very fair and winsome and young, a bride whom any man might be pleased and proud to take to his heart.

"Next month, towards the end, would suit me quite well," she continued, "for I really don't want to get an elaborate trousseau. Besides, we could always run over to Paris, and do some shopping, couldn't we? and I really have more clothes than I know what to do with at the present moment. But what do you say, Deborah?" She turned rather nervously to the tall woman who still stood by the window. "Would next month be too soon for you, or have you any arrangements to make?"

"No arrangements at all." Deborah's voice sounded cold and dull. "Next month would suit me perfectly, as far as that goes, so if you and Mr. Waring are married about the twentieth, Mary, your brother and I will follow your example on the twenty-fifth or twenty-sixth. I do not want to buy many clothes either; I'm not a woman who sets much store upon clothes."

"Why shouldn't we be married the day after the other couple, Deborah?—say on the twenty-first, if Mary is to be married on the twentieth. And now the question of a wedding tour crops up in both cases, doesn't it? I've had a fine little yacht offered me, if you're fond of the sea. I could buy it, if you'd like it, Deborah, and we'd go cruising; or if you don't care for a yachting honeymoon, it might appeal

to Mary—would you like the *White Star* as a wedding present, Polly? She's a nice little boat. Are you a good sailor, Waring?"

"Yes, I'm all right." Waring nodded his head in the affirmative. "But I think I'd prefer to take Mary for a quiet tour in the Black Forest—we might motor there—she's never seen the Black Forest, she tells me, and the scenery's grand—we could put in a little yachting later."

"Well, we all agree that we're going to be married next month." Adam spoke in somewhat triumphant tones, then the sharp tinkle of the telephone bell made him frown and bend his brows together, and caused Mary to walk somewhat hurriedly towards the door.

"That's my telephone bell ringing," she exclaimed. "There's a telephone fixed up in a little box in the passage. I must say this is quite a compact suite of rooms. Oh, I hope it's no worrying person who wants to talk to any of us this evening, just when our minds are so fully occupied with other things; but I'm afraid I must ask all of you to excuse me, whilst I go and answer the call. Phones are a nuisance sometimes, are they not?"

She took her swift departure from the room to return a few moments later, rather a disturbed look on her face—a worried expression.

"It is a nuisance, Adam," she said, addressing her brother, "but some one—Lord Rentstone, I think—wants to speak to you with regard to an important cable he has just had from South Africa. He is at the other end of the phone—and don't keep him waiting, he says, for the matter is urgent."

"It must be pretty urgent for Rentstone to telephone me up like this—and wait at the phone himself,"

Adam muttered, then he swung himself heavily out of his chair. But he made no protest at being called away from the society of the woman he adored to talk politics—he was too keen an Imperialist, and had the welfare of his adopted country far too much at heart. Besides, it was England's Prime Minister who wanted to speak to him, a strong, upright and conscientious man for whom Fielder entertained the greatest respect and regard.

"I don't suppose I shall be detained so very long," he announced cheerfully, as he walked towards the door. But a good ten minutes passed before he returned, and the minutes seemed as long as ten hours to Mary, who maintained, with the greatest difficulty, a desultory conversation with Waring, conscious—only too conscious—that Deborah was listening to every word, though refusing to be drawn into the conversation herself, and this made Mary talk nervously, almost vacantly, and she watched the clock with longing eyes, praying for the leaden moments to pass.

Adam appeared looking jaded and bothered. All the brightness had left his face—he was no longer the happy, cheerful lover, he was the anxious politician. Nor did he advance very far into the sitting-room, but beckoned to Mary as he stood in the doorway.

"Polly, come here, my dear," he said. "There's something I want to tell you. Say, can we have a quiet chat together for a few minutes?—I suppose those waiters are still clearing away the table in your little dining-room?"

"Oh, no," Mary answered, "the room will have been cleared long ago—let us go straight there, Adam."

She put her hand lightly but tenderly on her brother's



shoulder, perceiving that he was in trouble, and she hoped that her touch would comfort him. She noticed, not without a slight feeling of anger, that Deborah made no attempt to come forward and inquire what had happened, for Mrs. Krillet did not bestow the least attention upon Adam; she was still staring out of the window, gazing down into crowded Piccadilly—it seemed as if she could not tear herself away from the window, that something held her there spell-bound. Perhaps she was waiting and watching for the coming storm to break, for angry clouds were hanging threateningly over the City by now, and one or two heavy rain-drops had already commenced to fall—big sullen drops that made dark splashes on the pavement.

Brother and sister left the room together, and as soon as the door had closed behind them, Deborah moved from the window and sat down very quietly in an arm-chair. There was the whole length of the room between her and Waring, but they were both acutely conscious of each other's presence, painfully conscious.

Waring stroked his chin. It was a habit of his that Deborah remembered quite well, and the action, slight as it was, brought back a host of recollections, some bitter-sweet, others full of pain.

He coughed, a dry, nervous cough, and cleared his throat, and Deborah wondered if his mouth felt as dry as her mouth—his lips as parched and burnt up; and was he trembling and tingling from head to foot? Oh, she hoped not—she hoped not, for his sake, for she had never in all her life felt so much like a human battery as she did at that moment—yes, an electric battery—and it was not a pleasant feeling.

They raised their eyes simultaneously, and looked at each other, and though they were seated in chairs quite a distance apart, they both felt it would have been better—safer—if a rolling line of waves had divided them or a fence of naked swords, for what was the length of a room?

Deborah pressed her hand to her breast. Her heart was thumping wildly, and she did not want Waring to hear how loudly it was beating, but his heart was thumping too, and with all the force of a sledge-hammer, though she was not to know this.

She determined she would not look at him again, so stared resolutely down at the carpet for a few seconds, but at last she raised her eyes, only to meet his, and this time the two poor creatures stared at each other despairingly, and with a yearning and a longing that was positively cruel.

Deborah shook from head to foot. She had honestly intended to be absolutely true to Mary Fielder, but she was hardly mistress of herself, and Waring felt just as helpless, for neither he nor Deborah could contend with the force burning within them—the force that was so much stronger than themselves, the fatal passion around which they had built up their lives. They rose blindly from their chairs, as powerless to contend with what was overmastering them as the sea is—the sea doomed to dash for ever on the shore, and to advance and recede at stated tides—the sea, that for all its wild force and boiling, foaming passion, is held back and controlled.

They swayed up to each other, so close that their faces were almost touching, and Deborah partially closed her eyes, whilst Waring's lips stirred restlessly, quivered and slightly parted.

She stretched out her hands and rested the tips

of her fingers lightly on his shoulders, her whole body straining to him, and she was no longer fierce and cold, but a woman utterly consumed by love, a fair carven goblet, filled to the very brim with rich red wine ; but the man who longed to drink and slake his thirst dared not, all Waring could do was to stand up pale and rigid, struggling with overwhelming temptation.

He let his hands drop nervously to his sides, for he dared not touch her ; had he clasped Deborah's slim nervous body—the body that he desired, the body that he worshipped—he could not have kept himself in check. But as it was, beyond a slight twitching of his lips, he was absolutely motionless, a man striving to achieve the complete conquest over himself ; in a way succeeding.

Through the open window the roar of London could be heard distinctly, the heavy rumble of wheels, the busy tread of feet, and the air was full of sound—vibrating to the tireless, persistent voice of a great city—of a city that is never silent, day nor night. Thunder rolled fitfully, but the storm would not break for some hours—it might possibly sweep away—and neither Deborah nor Waring paid the least attention to the angry roar of Heaven's artillery ; they felt that their souls had drifted together again and were being whirled along as wildly, as madly as blown leaves before the wind—whirled willy-nilly.

It was only for a moment that they stood looking at each other, and then just as quietly, just as silently, as they had glided from their seats, they glided back, receding as the waves recede when they have reached their boundary and dare not encroach farther upon the land.

No word had been exchanged, no kiss, but as Deborah

sank into her chair she felt utterly exhausted; all her electricity had departed, and how cold she was—how terribly cold! Emotion had certainly wrought fatal havoc with her physically, for her back felt as if it would break, her throat was dry, parched, and all she wanted to do was to creep into some quiet corner and fall heavily asleep, for she felt too tired—too spent—to keep awake. Her strong will was breaking at last, her dauntless spirit. She had suffered and struggled till it seemed as if she could suffer and struggle no more—she had been as the dead once—a quiet frozen woman—but she had been dragged out of her grave and made to suffer again, and now she was absolutely broken—broken to pieces.

She wanted Waring's comforting—not his love or his kisses now, for desire had suddenly left her. But she wanted comfort so badly, just because she felt so broken, and oh, God! so tired; she longed to feel his arms round her in the darkness and to hear his soothing voice whispering in her ear, telling her not to be afraid—nay, more, not to be unhappy. She yearned to rest her head heavily on his shoulder, and to fall asleep, just as a little child might fall asleep, a child supported by some strong arm, comforted by warm human contact.

She was beaten—beaten at last—broken. All her life she had been strong to endure, and her will, her iron, relentless will, had kept her going, had given her the strength she needed, and not only the mental but the physical strength. But now it seemed as if her will-power had snapped, and she was no longer strong, relentless Deborah Krillet—she was just a shuddering, shaking, frightened woman, a woman who had lost her nerve. Her old courage might return in time, of course, her dauntless strength, but things

were going hard with her now, very hard ; and how, in God's name, was she to get through the next hour, carry things off boldly before Mary and Adam Fielder ? Why, they would read her face like an open book, she was afraid—the face that she longed to hide on Waring's shoulder.

She raised her eyes at last and gazed at Waring across the length of the room. He was sitting back in his chair, resting his chin on the palm of his hand, and he looked pale but quite master of himself.

The door opened, softly, slowly, and Mary stood on the threshold. She was agitated and upset, and there were tears in her eyes.

" Oh, Deborah," she began in low, rather husky, tones, " such worrying things are happening. I have left Adam at the telephone still talking with the Prime Minister and asking questions, for he has just been notified that there is trouble brewing in Jo'burg in connection with the Geirinstein Mines, with which he has so much to do. I'm afraid—and so is Adam—that all the plans we have been making this evening will have to be knocked on the head, for my brother may be compelled to take his immediate departure for South Africa. Lies are being told about the way the mines are worked—it's a case of wheels within wheels—and big political questions mixed up with it all—something Adam hasn't seen fit to explain to me."

Mary made her long explanation somewhat slowly and laboriously, then her eyes sought out Waring.

" If Adam is really obliged to go, if his presence is absolutely needed in Jo'burg, it might be better to defer our wedding, mightn't it, till my brother can get back to England ? "

She made the suggestion diffidently, hoping in her

heart of hearts that Waring would insist on their marriage taking place at once; for he would do so if he loved her, she felt—he would not agree to the postponement. But, alas, Waring did not appear averse to the suggestion. A look of relief came over his face, just such a look as lights up the countenance of a condemned man when the news of a respite of his sentence is brought him, and he learns that the date of his execution has been altered. And Mary, studying her lover's countenance attentively, read the doom of all her hopes in his face, and saw that the end had come.

"You agree that it is best that our marriage should be postponed till Adam's return?" In spite of herself her voice hardened, and she drew herself up, looking taller for the moment than she really was.

Waring nodded his head slowly. "I'm in your hands, my dear," he answered. "If you want our marriage to be postponed I've nothing to say. We certainly have not got very far with our plans as yet, and of course it's a natural wish on your part, for I can see what pals you and your brother are. But as I said before, the matter rests in your hands."

"In my hands!" Mary gave an odd nervous little laugh. "Oh, let us postpone our wedding, by all means, Robert, for I should certainly like to have my brother in England for it. It is rather hard luck on you too, Deborah, isn't it?" She addressed Mrs. Krillet with a certain defiance of manner. "I expect you are feeling upset. You won't like Adam rushing off to South Africa, will you? You—you will hate it?"

She laughed for the second time, ugly laughter, and her young face hardened; all the lovely tender look departed, her lips grew dry and strained, and

Deborah, watching from her corner, felt achingly sorry for Mary—so sorry that she made a sudden resolution to play the game squarely, and not allow her love to conquer her—her craving love for Robert Waring.

“Of course I shall be upset if Adam has to rush back to Africa. I think he will have to marry me before he sails, for I should like to know that we are safely tied up.”

“Deborah, do you mean this?” Mary’s eyes glowed, and she did not notice in her excitement the nervous start that Waring gave, or the tremor that shook his whole body.

“Of course I mean it,” Deborah answered; “but I don’t know what Adam will say to the idea.”

She folded her hands in her lap and watched the door, the door that opened a moment later to admit Fielder.

He came in, looking as worried as Mary had looked, but there was invincible determination written on every line of his face.

He strode up to Deborah, taking no notice either of his sister or of Waring, though they were both gazing at him fixedly.

“Say, dear,” he exclaimed, taking one of Deborah’s hands in his, “Mary has been telling you, I suppose, that there’s trouble brewing in Jo’burg. Some shady politicians are trying to make vile allegations with regard to the working of the Geirinstein Mines, hoping to blacken my character if they can, to smirch my political reputation. This mustn’t be allowed. The lie must be stopped at the very beginning, plucked out like a sting from the throats of the liars; for if I’m to do great work for South Africa in the future, as pray God I shall, I cannot afford to have malicious

stories circulated about me now, and I must meet my traducers and confront them at once. Do you understand me, Deborah?—I must confront them at once.”

She looked up and nodded her head silently.

“It’s hard on us, dear, isn’t it?” he continued huskily, “hard on you and me, and hard on Mary and Waring, but we mustn’t let this foul lie take root in South Africa—I won’t have my name stinking in the nostrils of my fellow-countrymen. And, mark you, it’ll be a good thing in a way—an uncommonly good thing to bring matters to a head at once, for there’s been a precious lot of roguery about—lying and slandering—and it’s just as well that the skunks who circulate these lies should be shown up, for they’re getting bolder at the game every day—more daring. I haven’t had the chance of actually exposing them as yet, but now they have dared to attack my probity—my honour.”

He drew a deep breath, and he looked a man whom it would be ill to offend, a strong man, capable of pulverising his enemies into dust. Then he added, bending over Deborah so low that his lips almost touched her hair: “I must sail in two days’ time—sail on board the *Albatross*, for the sooner I can set my heel on this nest of cockatrices and snakes the better, for if this lie takes to spreading it will do me and the Government a lot of harm. But it’s hard on us, Deborah, isn’t it? For we shall have to put off our wedding till my return—postpone it for a good couple of months, I am afraid. But never mind, you and Mary will stay on quietly in England and take care of each other, won’t you? And you’ll have Waring to look after both of you.”



Deborah winced, then raised her eyes and glanced at Adam strangely.

"I suppose—it—it wouldn't be possible," she muttered, forcing her dry lips to say the words, "for us to be married before you sail—just a Registry Office ceremony?"

"My dear!" He gazed at her in some surprise. "Bless you for the sweet thought, the dear desire, but it isn't practicable, I'm afraid. You see, the *Albairross* sails in two days, and that's the boat I ought to be going by. I shall only just have time to get off as it is, for there are certain arrangements I must make before I sail, and I have important folk to confer with—rulers in high places. But still, my Deborah, if it would please you, make you more easy in your mind about me, why, we will have this Registry Office marriage—most certainly we will; and why shouldn't you sail with me to Africa, and let this be our wedding trip? Oh, Deborah, come with me—my wife."

His face flamed as he said the last words, and he put eager arms about her neck, but Waring and Mary, watching Deborah intently, noticed that she stiffened in her future husband's embrace and that her small pale face waxed grey.

"No, no," she protested. "We mustn't rush things like that. Just the Registry Office marriage before you sail, the civil contract, and then a marriage in church afterwards—when you return. That will give me time to get my clothes ready, and—and to set my house in order. Besides, it would be better for you not to be bothered with a wife at the present moment. Remember, you are sailing to South Africa to set your heel on a nest of scorpions, and you will do that better alone; I should only be in the way,

people would want to fête us. When we go to South Africa together, let it be with a flourish of trumpets. This would hardly be the fitting time and season for rejoicing, for you are going out to fight secret enemies, to expose a lie."

"You're right, Deborah, you're right." He slapped his big thigh, a trick of his in moments of keen excitement. "When I take you home to South Africa," he added, "we'll make a triumphant entry together, you and I, for you'll be the leading lady in the land, I hope, before long. And I quite see how you feel about having a wedding in church. It's what I should like myself—the Church's blessing on our union—so we will just regard the Registry Office marriage as a mere legal formula, eh, my dear?—but a formula that makes us sure of each other—for ever and aye. But say,"—he rubbed a finger against his forehead—"there is the matter of our marriage settlements to be considered. I wanted to make large settlements upon you, and I doubt if there is time for the lawyers to draw them up. What are we to do, Deborah?"

"I don't want settlements." She spoke in low tones. "I—I would prefer to be married without any settlements; in point of fact, I should much prefer it. I don't wish you to settle a penny upon me—I'm not marrying you for your money."

He smiled at her proudly. "As if I ever thought you were, Deborah—as if I didn't know better! But, oh, my girl, my girl, what a grand creature you are, for where's the woman besides yourself who would disdain such settlements as I had proposed to make!"

He hesitated for a second, then, with one arm still round Deborah's shoulders, he turned and looked at his sister.

"Say, Polly," he demanded, "why shouldn't you

and Waring tie yourselves up at the Registry Office too? Let's make a sort of legal betrothal business of it, and have the real weddings when I come back in two months' time. There's no earthly reason why we shouldn't all of us go through the civil ceremony now, and I can see that it will make Deborah feel happier during my absence—there's nothing like a legal bond, for making women feel that their men belong to them."

Mary hesitated for a second. She looked at Waring, but his face was inscrutable, a mere mask, and it was impossible to tell what he desired. But because his eyes had no life in them but were merely dull and expressionless, and because there was no smile on his lips for her, nor the faintest suspicion of a smile, she turned to her brother, after that one hesitating pause, with a cold, almost unnatural dignity.

"No, Adam, I should hate a Registry Office marriage myself, even if it was followed a month or so later by a service in church, and I am not in the least hurry to be married. I think a fairly long engagement quite a good thing, and I am sure Robert agrees with me. You do, don't you, Robert?"

Waring glanced up as she addressed him, but his voice sounded as if it came from miles away.

"As I said before, I am entirely in your hands, Mary," he replied; "but of course the earlier you fix our wedding-day the better I shall be pleased."

She flushed, a sharp, angry flush, and then, hardly knowing what she did, she walked into the very centre of the room where the lights shone full on her face.

"How is one to unmask a lie," she asked, "to tell the liar that he can no longer deceive—delude?"

They looked at her in amaze till Mary, nervously

conscious of the effect she had produced, gave a little sobbing cry.

"Oh, Adam, I was thinking of the men who have been traducing you," she exclaimed, "slandering you." But her words carried no conviction with them.

Deborah rose slowly to her feet.

"Mary is over-tired and upset," she exclaimed; "she is feeling the strain of a very trying evening. Bed is the best place for her, so I'll go back to my hotel and break up the party."

"I'll drive you to the Savoy, dear," Adam exclaimed. "I've got my car waiting. And then to-morrow I'll see about getting the licence and give notice to the Registrar early. But I don't like to see Polly looking so troubled and upset, so unlike herself."

He eyed his sister somewhat anxiously, and for the first time cast a somewhat doubtful glance at Waring—a glance that Mary intercepted.

"I'm all right, Adam," she interrupted, "just a little overwrought, perhaps, for this has been a tumultuous evening, hasn't it? But now take Deborah away, for she's looking dead tired too, and I'll say good-night to Robert at once. We can all telephone to each other and discuss plans early to-morrow morning, but not to-night—not to-night. My head's suddenly taken to aching and throbbing, it's the worst headache I've had for years."

She waved her brother and Deborah from the room, but Waring hung behind to exchange a few last words.

"Why are you looking so unhappy, Mary?" he whispered. "You are worrying about things, and quite needlessly."

"And you are lying, quite needlessly," she whispered back.

"What do you mean?" He addressed her sharply, feverishly, aware how strained their relations had become.

"I will tell you after Adam has left England," she answered, "but not before, for I won't have my brother upset or worried; he's worth more than all the rest of us put together, he's an honest, truthful man."

"And what about yourself—are you not honest and truthful, Mary?"

She hung her head. "I don't know, Robert. But any lies I have told to-night have not been for my own sake, but for Adam's."

He drew in his breath sharply.

"You don't love me any longer?" he demanded. "Are you trying to tell me so?"

"Did you ever love me?" she asked; and before the look in her eyes Waring was silent—silent and abashed, and he stole away quietly and left her.

Mary stood up alone in the room, and her eyes roved round the luxurious apartment. She noticed that the flowers she had purchased only a few hours ago, white quivering orchids, orchids flecked most delicately with purple, were shrivelling and fading in their vases, and it was just the same with the lilies of the valley, and some pale pink roses.

"Everything fades," she reflected, "everything passes; we are only certain of one thing in the world, and that is death."

She crossed over to the electric light switch and turned out the lights one by one, and the room that had been so overpoweringly brilliant a minute ago, illuminated to its utmost capacity, became dark—pitch dark.

"Now I can cry," Mary uttered; "now at last, thank God, I can cry."

She crouched to the very ground, and her tears splashed down her neck—the tears she had been trying up to now to restrain—and as Mary bowed herself in utter grief, broken words fell from her lips, and she repeated in low, half-monotonous tones—

“ He never loved me—he—he never loved me ! ”

## CHAPTER XII

"I WAS very glad to get your letter last night, Deborah." Jan Van Kerrel leaned forward in his chair as he spoke and fixed his eyes attentively on his cousin. "For I had made up my mind that if you were not going to take any notice of me, or to remember that I was staying in London, I might just as well make my way back to South Africa, for I do not know that I care so much for England after all. It is a big country—a prosperous country, but it is not South Africa."

He rested his big, strong hands—the sunburnt hands of the farmer—upon his knees, and it struck Deborah as she gazed at him that there was a weary, unsatisfied expression in Jan's eyes, and that his mouth looked sullen and discontented. She wondered if the money she had helped Jan to make had really added much to his happiness. Perhaps he had found life far more satisfactory and interesting when he had worked on his farm than he did in these days of ease and wealth, and she was to blame if this were so; but it seemed as if she could do nothing but make mistakes. All her plans and schemes turned out wrong; she was one of those women who are cursed from the very hour of their birth, apparently, doomed to bring misfortune and destruction on all who know them.

Why hadn't she let Jan alone, she argued, when Adam Fielder, on his chance visit to her farm, had

put her in the way of making a large sum of money? Why had she passed on the information about the mines to her cousin Jan? It would have been better for him—far better—if he had always remained a husbandman of the plains—a hard-working, diligent husbandman—for he had never looked bored and discontented in the old days, and he had been such a fine, splendid specimen of healthy manhood. But now his figure had begun to coarsen, and he did not look himself in broadcloth and fine linen, and his face had changed—he had lost his frank, simple smile; he looked a mere big, over-fed animal.

“I ought to have written to you before, Jan—I know I ought to have done so.” She locked her hands tightly together in her lap, her cold, slender hands that looked so white in contrast to her black dress. “But I have been very busy during these last two or three days,” she continued; “I can assure you that my time has been exceedingly taken up. But I wrote you yesterday and asked you to come round and see me this afternoon—here at my hotel, because I have news to give you—important news.”

Jan flushed, a warm flush that mounted to his forehead, and he breathed rather shortly.

“I suppose—I imagine—that you have absolutely made up your mind to marry Mr. Fielder, and that you have just got betrothed to each other? Well, he is a good man and a great man, Deborah, and I pray the dear Lord that you may both be happy together, for you have had a sad, bitter life when all is said and done—a very hard life.”

He paused a moment and blew his nose; his emotion was very obvious—the primitive emotion that a man of Jan Van Kerrel's temperament is not ashamed to display.



"I once hoped that your choice would have fallen upon me, your cousin by marriage, and that you would have been my wife, Deborah, a good mother to my two little children—the diligent mistress of my household. But it was not to be—no, it was not to be."

A note of profound sadness crept into his voice as he said the last words, then he wiped his blue eyes.

"The dear Lord knows how I love you, but He has settled that you marry another. Well, well, you have chosen a man whose name is fast becoming a household word in South Africa—a man to be proud of. And when is the wedding to be, Cousin Deborah? I shall be present at it—yes, you can be sure Jan Van Kerrel will be present to give away the bride, for you would like me to give you away, would you not?—I am a near kinsman."

"I was married to Adam this morning, Jan, at a Registry Office. That's why I sent for you here to tell you." Deborah spoke very quickly, nor did she look at her cousin as she addressed him. "No one is to know about this wedding yet," she continued. "We wish to keep it a secret, for Adam sailed for South Africa to-day on important business—political business, and he does not want the news of our marriage to leak out before his return to England, and then there will be a religious ceremony in church. But we wanted to have the legal part of the business over before he sailed, for now no one can come between us—we are safely tied up."

She put a certain amount of bitterness into the last words, then glanced up and met Jan Van Kerrel's eyes. He was staring at her in heavy bewilderment. Deborah laughed, mocking at his puzzled face.

"Do I scare you—horrify you?" she asked. "But for pity's sake let me talk to you, for I must talk to

some one, or I shall go mad, absolutely off my head ; but mark, what I say to you now must be a secret between us, you must never breathe a word of it to any living soul. Give me your promise, Jan, to this—your oath."

She rose from her chair, hurried to where Jan was sitting, and crouched to the ground at his feet, twining her arms around her knees and resting her chin between the hollow of her hands.

Jan bent down and patted her tenderly enough on the shoulder. "Ja, ja, little Deborah, you can always trust me," he whispered ; "I am not one of those who change, and I can keep a secret."

"Yes, I think you can." She eyed him sombrely for a moment, then began to talk very quickly, very rapidly, her breath coming in sharp, nervous gasps.

"I will tell you why I have married Adam in such a hurry—given myself over into his keeping. It is because his sister, Mary Fielder, the sister he is so devoted to, and who is a dear, good girl—a sweet girl—is engaged to be married to Robert Waring. Ah, I don't wonder that you start, Jan, for it's rather terrible, isn't it, to think I have met Robert again? Of course, if I had only known he was engaged to Mary Fielder, I should have had nothing to do with Adam ; but I didn't know—I didn't know."

"Robert Waring betrothed to Adam Fielder's sister! Why, Deborah, I never heard the like. Oh, the pain for you, my poor dear one—the pain!"

"Never mind my pain," she interrupted sharply. "I'm used to suffering. Fate has had a grudge against me since the hour of my birth, I believe, and has made my cup bitter as gall. But it's the girl I'm thinking about—this poor girl who has found out that Robert and I loved each other in the past, and who knows a

good deal of our story, and of course is frantically jealous of me in consequence, and most unhappy. And it hurts me—oh, it hurts me, Jan, to watch another girl suffer. Besides, Mary has been kind to me, and I honestly believe that if she married Robert she would make him happy; she would certainly be a sweet and gentle companion—a soothing influence.”

“But all this does not explain to me why you have elected to marry Adam Fielder in such a hurry.”

“That’s because you are so dense, Jan.” She spoke with sharp impatience. “Don’t you understand, poor Mary has been afraid ever since she heard about our past relations that I would wean Robert from her—make him break off his engagement to her and marry me? And though I had not the least intention of behaving so dishonourably, still, she was working herself up into a most miserable state of mind, poor girl—getting jumpy and irritable—suspicious of Robert—suspicious of me—so I thought the best thing to do was to marry Adam at once, and thus set her mind at rest, poor child. I am no longer a widow now, you see, Jan; I’m a wife—Adam Fielder’s wife.”

“And does he know—does Adam Fielder know the reason that has prompted you to marry him in such a hurry, or have you kept him in the dark?”

“I have kept him in the dark. It was the kindest thing I could do for him, if it comes to that—the best thing. I am hoping, I am trusting, now that Mary realises I am safely married to her brother, that she will cease to torture herself with jealous fears and unkind suspicions, for she will know that I cannot marry Robert; that he is her own property now, till the end of the chapter.”

“But not if he loves you, Deborah,” Jan interrupted slowly, “as I am quite certain he does; for

what are you giving this poor girl but an empty casket, a casket which you have rifled? And she may not thank you for the gift; 'tis not every woman who is content to own an empty box, remember—a box shorn of its treasure."

"Oh, but Robert is fond enough of Mary in a way," Deborah retorted, with a helpless shrug of her shoulders, "and she is desperately in love with him. I tell you they will get on all right now; Mary was merely afraid that I might come between them—carry Robert off. But now I have set her fears at rest for ever—I am her brother's wife."

"I think I am sorry for Mary Fielder." Jan rubbed his forehead meditatively. "Yes, and sorry for Adam Fielder too, for you have not treated this brother and sister well, Deborah—at least according to my lights. It would have been fairer—more honourable—if you had told Mr. Fielder the truth, the entire truth, and admitted that the man engaged to his sister had been in love with you in the past. That would have been the honourable thing to do. Nor do I think that either you or Robert Waring ought to have contemplated marriage at all, for what has he to give a wife?—what have you to give a husband? Ah, you have made a mistake, Deborah; a great mistake."

"It seems to be my lot in life to make mistakes," she retorted bitterly; "I am always making them. Yet I feel convinced that in this instance I have acted wisely—that I have done the right thing—for, unless I am greatly mistaken, Mary will be quite happy about Robert now, and her engagement will go on smoothly enough. They will be married later on, when Adam returns to England—oh, yes, they are bound to be married now; there is nothing to prevent it."

"Answer me one thing, Deborah." Jan laid an authoritative hand upon her shoulder. "You have met this man, Robert Waring, quite recently—you have spoken to each other, you and your former lover?"

"Yes," she answered in dull tones, "we have met; but only once, Jan, and that was the night before last."

"And does he still love you, and do you still love him?"

She stirred restlessly.

"Why do you ask me such questions—what is the good, Jan—what is the use? Don't you know—is it possible that you do not know—that I shall love Robert to the end of my days, just as he will love me? But we shall not confess as much to each other, for it would be wrong—wicked; so our love will always be a silent love—a love that will hurt no one—only ourselves."

Jan laughed—hoarse, rather husky laughter.

"A love that will hurt no one! Ah, Cousin Deborah, it is there that you wilfully deceive yourself, and are like an ostrich burying your head in the sand; for this love to which you confess—do you think your new husband will not discover its existence later on and be pained, cut to the quick? And this poor girl—Miss Fielder—why, what has she done that she should have a husband who has so little to give her—a man whose heart you have drained? No, you had no right to marry—neither you nor Robert Waring—no right at all. You have done wrong in the sight of the Lord—very wrong."

He rose heavily to his feet, pushing his cousin away, and he began to walk up and down the room, muttering under his breath; and Deborah, still crouching on the ground, watched him fixedly.

"It is no good trying to be so wise—so clever, Deborah," Jan said at last; "for rest assured you will not be able to keep on your masks for ever—you and this man who loves you—and then they will suffer—your husband—the poor girl—they will suffer horribly. Oh, it would have been kinder to have told them the truth now, than to let them find it out later on for themselves."

"Jan—Jan, what's the good of telling me all this?" Deborah rose from her crouching position and faced the Boer passionately. "Besides, it's ridiculous of you, of all people in the world, to talk in this way; it's absurd, for you were quite ready to marry me yourself, though you were perfectly well aware of my love for Robert. You came over to England to ask me to be your wife."

"Ah, but that was when I thought you were never going to see Waring again," he retorted—"that you had said good-bye to each other for ever. For I swear to you, Deborah, by the dear Lord who made heaven and earth, that even if our wedding-day had been fixed, I would have parted with you—ah, even an hour before the wedding—if I had suspected that you and Waring would be likely to come across each other; for I know what the end of all this will be—I know it. You are young still, and your blood runs warm in your veins, and Waring is a man and a lover. You will meet and talk, and it will be all quite right first of all—all as it should be, and your converse will be merely that of friends. But there will come a day—an hour——"

"You are wrong," Deborah interrupted in angry tones. "I am no wanton—I never was a wanton; I shall be true to the man whom I have just married, and Robert will be true to Mary Fielder. Do you

think we have no idea of honour in our natures—that we are just like the beasts of the field—conscienceless—lustful?”

He shook his heavy head. “I think that you will try to do right,” he answered; “but, as I have just said, the hour will come when you will forget everything in the world except the love you bear each other.”

“That hour will never come,” she retorted. “Why, Jan, have you forgotten that I had the strength—the courage—to send Robert from me three years ago, when he came to my farm and would have made me his wife? But I remembered the promise I had given your mother—the oath I had vowed on the Book, and so I sent him away; and do you think—is it possible that you can imagine—that if I could banish him from my side when I was a widow, that I should behave differently now, just when a good man—a great man—had put his honour in my charge, and when a girl—an innocent girl—has given Robert her whole heart? Why, am I less strong, do you think, than I was three years ago—less mistress of myself and my actions? Why, Jan, you’re absurd—you’re foolish.”

He looked at her gravely.

“What you could do three years ago, Deborah, you may not be able to do to-day. You are not as determined as you were. Nor did you realise all that you were giving up when you sent Robert Waring from you. You obeyed the dictates of your conscience, and it all happened so suddenly. He came one hour, and he left the next. But now you will be exposed daily to temptation. Waring will be with you constantly; you will be relations; he will be your brother-in-law, and the dear Lori knows that I pity both of you, for, Deborah, you will not be the

first woman who has wrought folly in Israel—stooped to sin.”

“I shall never sin.” She set her lips tightly together; she held her head proudly. “You needn’t be afraid, Jan; I am not going to be untrue either to Adam or to Mary, nor is Robert—you misjudge us both.”

Jan made no answer, but walked heavily towards the door.

“Are you going?” Deborah demanded. “Are you leaving me?”

“Yes, cousin, I am going. We have no more to say to each other, I think. You will go your own way in the future and I must go mine. But I shall think of you very often—ah, very often, and perhaps we shall meet one day. But I do not think I shall stay in Johannesburg—I shall go back to my farm and take my children with me; buy up a great deal of land and breed sheep and cattle, for the farmer’s life is the best life—I am sick of cities.”

“Yes, go back to your farm, Jan—dear Jan.” She eyed her cousin wistfully; then as he stood by the door, a big, burly figure, Deborah glided up to the Boer and laid cold fingers on his arm.

“Think kindly of me, Jan,” she implored; “think of me as a woman who always tried to do her best, and who, if she made mistakes, didn’t make them on purpose; and if ever you hear of my death, why, make that a day of festival, Jan—of rejoicing, for that’s the best thing the earth can offer me—a deep grave.”

Her voice dropped to a deep, low note, and her face looked infinitely pathetic, shrunken and pale; then she suddenly gave Jan a little push.

“Go, dear cousin,” she cried; “I am beginning to



talk foolishly, not as a wife should talk—a new-made wife."

"The dear Lord be with you, Deborah." Jan gave her his blessing solemnly. "And may you be a faithful spouse to your husband and let happier days dawn for you. For I do not think that you deserve all the sorrow that you have been called upon to bear—a wicked woman I would never call you."

He walked out of the room, closing the door firmly behind him, and a faint smile flickered over Deborah's face—a sad smile.

"Not a wicked woman," she murmured. "Oh, I hope—I hope Jan is right there. I don't think I am a wicked woman; I am only a most unhappy one."

She walked over to the sofa and sat down, leaning back somewhat heavily against the pile of cushions, and she closed her eyes dreamily, trying to recall the scene at the Registrar's Office that morning—her civil marriage.

She had met Adam Fielder at the office, and Mary had accompanied her brother, acting as one of the witnesses, and she had looked unnaturally pale and subdued. But she had kissed Deborah and been very sweet and kind, and Adam's face had shone with happiness, and he had hardly been able to take his eyes from his bride. But Deborah had shrunk back a little when he kissed her on the lips directly the brief ceremony was at an end, for she somehow felt that her lips were sacred to Robert Waring. And she was glad—thankful—that the necessities of the case ordained that she and Adam would have to part in about an hour. There was only time for the new-made husband and wife to take a hasty lunch together before Adam had to board the special train that was to convey him down to Southampton just in time to catch his

boat ; but even as it was, the brief bridal meal was a period of exquisite torture to Deborah. She felt so unequal to responding to the deep affection that Adam gave her—so utterly unworthy of his devotion—and she longed to tell him not to think too highly of her, only she feared to give him pain by doing so, and that was the last thing she desired to do—to hurt Adam.

Mary had excused herself from attending the lunch, explaining that she felt certain that husband and wife would like to have this last half-hour to themselves ; but she had promised to come round to the Savoy later on and spend the evening with her sister-in-law ; and Adam had thrown out a suggestion to which both women had apparently agreed, that they should take a furnished house together somewhere in the country, and there await his return from South Africa.

“ What about renting a nice little place on the river,” he had suggested, “ somewhere up Goring way ? You’d have the car, Deborah, which could take you to London whenever you liked, and Waring could run up and down and stay for week-ends ; that would please Polly, I expect.”

He had laughed and pinched Mary’s cheeks slyly, but his sister had merely smiled guardedly. It was Deborah who blushed, a deep flush—for which she could have hit herself, for it was not right that the mere mention of Waring’s name should bring the blood to her face like this, and of all days in the world upon her wedding-day.

“ Mary ought to be here soon She said she would come round about tea-time.” Deborah raised her eyes and glanced at the clock ticking away on the mantelpiece, and she wondered what Mary would have to say to her, and what she would have to say to Mary, and how they would get through the evening—an

evening which promised to be both trying and embarrassing. And yet it would be a good thing, Deborah felt, for her to see as much of her young sister-in-law as possible, and for a real affection to develop between them. Besides, she wanted to impress upon Mary that now she herself was married to Adam there was no earthly reason why Mary should worry on account of Waring, or be jealous and unhappy. Yet Deborah realised in the depths of her own heart that if she was in Mary's position she would be extremely jealous and miserable. For after all, Jan Van Kerrel was quite right when he said that Mary had only got the empty casket—it was Deborah who possessed Waring's soul, and an emptied, a rifled casket is a thing of small value, hardly worth keeping under lock and key.

## CHAPTER XIII

"I HOPE I'm not late, Deborah." Mary swept forward with outstretched hands, and her voice sounded very low and tender.

She was dressed in a grey gown of some soft material. She wore no hat, and her fair hair looked wonderfully silky and glossy, and as Deborah gazed at her sister-in-law she was impressed by Mary's fresh and candid beauty, and she thought it would not be difficult for her to love this girl very, very deeply in time—that is, if Mary would let her.

"You're not really late." Deborah pointed to the clock. "It's hardly five yet. But I have been longing to see you, Mary. It was good of you to promise to come round and spend the evening with me. I have arranged that we shall dine quietly by ourselves in one of the small dining-rooms, and then, after dinner, we will have a long, long talk—what school-girls would call a heart-to-heart talk."

She made room for Mary to seat herself on the sofa by her side, and as the girl settled down Deborah ventured to lay a light hand on her sister-in-law's shoulder, for an odd craving had suddenly come over her to be loved by Mary Fielder—really loved. She was no longer the fierce, relentless Deborah of the plains so much as a tired, battered soul, sadly in need of comforting, and she wanted this strong beautiful young girl to gather her up in her arms and to be kind

to her. And yet Mary shrank under Deborah's touch—recoiled—only so faintly that she could hardly be said to do so—an almost imperceptible movement.

"Yes, we must certainly have a long talk to-night." Mary spoke in slow measured tones, then she leaned back against the cushion. "You must feel very tired, Deborah, absolutely exhausted, I should think, for so much has happened during the last few hours. Did Adam leave you in fairly good spirits? I expect he was very upset when it came to saying good-bye, wasn't he? 'Tis a hard thing to happen on a man's wedding-day—a very hard thing!"

Her eyes sought the floor meditatively. There was very little colour in her face, and Deborah noticed the tired way Mary's hands had fallen into her lap, and they surely looked limp and nerveless.

"Oh, Adam went off splendidly," she answered; "we parted quite cheerfully at the station, and after all, it wasn't like a real wedding-day, was it? Just a few words repeated at a Registrar's Office—a cold, somewhat chilly ceremony altogether."

"Yes." Mary nodded her head acquiescently, then she suddenly bent forward and looked Deborah full in the face. "Tell me," she asked, "what made you do it, Deborah? Why did you decide to marry my brother in such a hurry—to have this legal ceremony before he departed to South Africa? You must have had some reason, I suppose?"

"I had an excellent reason," Deborah retorted, "and I wonder you haven't guessed it. For, Mary, don't you see—don't you understand?" She paused, a feeling of awful constraint coming over her—of hopeless embarrassment—for Mary's eyes were so bright and so penetrating.

"I don't understand, and that's just why I am

asking for an explanation of your conduct," Mary answered.

"Well, I wanted you to feel sure—quite sure—that there was no earthly chance of my ever trying to steal Robert Waring from you," Deborah whispered at last, in low and somewhat constrained tones. "I could tell that you were feeling worried—that you were not really happy about things in your own mind—that you misdoubted both of us."

She played with a fold of her black gown as she spoke, pinching it between her thin fingers, and she wished Mary would cease staring at her, if only for a moment. But Mary's eyes never moved from Deborah's face, and they were merciless in their sharp scrutiny—they penetrated deep into Deborah's soul.

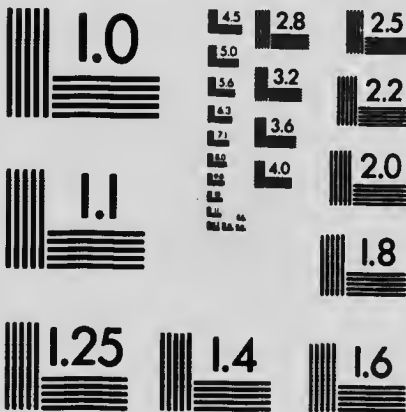
"So that is why you married my brother—married Adam—so that I could feel more at ease with regard to things? Oh, Deborah—Deborah—what have you done? How could you be so unfair to Adam—so cruel to yourself?"

Mary spoke in low trembling tones, and she suddenly caught Deborah sharply by the hand. "Don't you realise your cruelty towards my brother—your awful cruelty? Just to be easing your conscience with regard to me, a girl who doesn't really count, whose happiness is no particular matter, you have given Adam a stone, instead of the bread for which he craved. For don't tell me that when he comes back to England you will be able to go on deceiving him—cheating him. Sooner or later he will discover that you are just as madly in love with Robert Waring as ever, and though I don't doubt that you will try and do your duty—though I don't think for one moment that you will sin in the ordinary sense of the word—the carnal sense—still, all that is best in you will not belong to your



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husband, but to another man, and, in marrying you, Adam will merely have married Robert's Shulamite. Oh, you've cheated my brother—you've cheated him cruelly—he is coming to you with full hands, but your hands are empty."

"You mustn't say such things," Deborah protested hotly. "It's unkind of you, Mary—it—it's wicked. I intend to make your brother a good wife, and I shall always put his happiness before my own, and I shall do everything I can on earth to please him. I swear it—do you hear me? I swear it before God."

"Yes, you will try to do your duty." Mary spoke in cold, authoritative tones. "But you will find your task a difficult one, for you will be thinking day and night of another man—the man who is not your husband—yearning after him, longing for him, shrinking from Adam's kisses and dreaming of other kisses—the kisses Robert would have given you. Oh, it's horrible—horrible. The whole position is a ghastly one, and you have brought it about yourself, Deborah. For why did you not have the courage to confess the whole truth to Adam, to admit that Robert was the man you had loved in South Africa, and that now you had met him again you love had revived—the love that you had thought dead, but which was only sleeping?"

"Be quiet," Deborah interrupted. "You mustn't say such things to me—I—I won't listen to them. Besides, how can you speak like this when you are going to marry Robert yourself? Can I not forget, even as he has forgotten? Do you think it is only the woman who remembers? I tell you I am not going to allow my mind to dwell upon Robert in the future. It is your brother whom I shall devote my life to—the man I married to-day."

"If I could only believe you!" Mary glanced up sadly. "But, Deborah, though you may be able to delude yourself, you cannot delude me. I saw the look that came into your eyes when you met Robert the night before last—I saw the look in his eyes too, and the fatal knowledge came home to me—the bitter knowledge—that you and he are joined together by some bond that it is absolutely impossible to break, united by spiritual ties, and it's Adam and myself who are the outsiders. It's Adam and myself who have no right either to you or to Robert. Poor Adam—poor me!"

Deborah sprang up from the sofa. "Mary, you must be mad to talk like this," she cried, "and you're making things impossible for us, you're complicating a situation that is difficult enough, Heaven knows. I tell you that you have nothing to fear from me or from Robert; we shall never do anything that would make you or Adam jealous, and you ought not to couple the name of the man you are going to marry with my name."

"But I'm not going to marry Robert." Mary spoke in low, determined tones, then rose in her turn from the sofa and stood up and faced her sister-in-law.

"You are not going to marry Robert?" Deborah let her arms drop helplessly to her sides. "The dear Lord," she muttered, reverting to the Boer vernacular for the moment, "what madness has come over you, Mary? Why don't you want to marry him? You love him?"

"Yes, I love him"—Mary's voice was as rigid as her face. "But as it happens, he does not love me, and I have found this out in time, thank God. Do you think I want to be the wife of a man who cares for another woman—and who would only be able to

give me friendly affection instead of the absolute devotion I require? Oh no, no, I would rather say good-bye to Robert than marry him and feel all the time that you really own my husband's heart. Why, he might even dream of you, Deborah, murmur your name in his dreams, and sleeping or waking you would be in his mind."

"But if you love him," Deborah argued weakly, "if you love him——"

"Why, it's just because I love him so dearly that I must act as I am acting. For don't you understand me, Deborah? I refuse to share my husband with anyone. And you mustn't be too sorry for me. I—I—dare say I shall get over all this in time, and I don't intend to let it harden me, or make me sour and disagreeable. For, mark me, I do not blame either you or Robert, I think you have both acted honestly enough according to your lights, but it's all been a sad muddle, hasn't it—a cruel muddle?"

She sat down on a chair, and there was no anger in her face now—only a great sadness.

"But, Mary, it will upset Robert so if you break with him. He is counting on you to help him to pull his life together—to make his life—and if you fail him what has he got left? He's lost me—why must he also lose you?"

"I cannot help myself, Deborah." Mary gave a hopeless shake of the head. "It is impossible for me—quite impossible—to act differently from what I am doing. Besides, I have already written to Robert. He telephoned to me yesterday morning explaining that he had been obliged to go back to bed again, for his chill had developed into a severe attack of fever, and so would I forgive his not coming round to see me. But even whilst he was talking through the telephone,

oh, I could feel that he didn't care whether he saw me or not—that I meant nothing to him really, nothing at all. And then, when he began to talk to me about you, and to ask if it was really settled that your marriage before the Registrar was to take place to-day, oh, I could hear how his voice trembled. But I gave him no information. I said that I really didn't know if Adam had succeeded in making the necessary arrangements or not, but that I would let him know as soon as the marriage had taken place."

"And you told him that we were married—Adam and myself—when you wrote this morning and broke off your engagement? You sent the letter round directly you got back to your hotel, I suppose?"

Mary nodded her head. There were tears in her eyes, and she looked very pale and exhausted; but Deborah realised that it would be no use arguing with this girl—for Mary was one who knew her own mind.

"He has fallen to the ground between us." Deborah spoke in low husky tones, then she suddenly stretched out pleading hands—"Mary, why have you acted so cruelly?" she demanded. "You could have made him happy, I know you could, and he would have had a home and a wife; and now, what will Robert be but a wanderer—a homeless wanderer, all his days? And he will drift—drift."

"Am I to blame?" Mary sighed hopelessly and leaned back in her chair, her physical fatigue very obvious. "I couldn't—I simply couldn't marry a man who belonged heart and soul to another woman. It wouldn't have been fair to myself. Besides, we shouldn't have been happy. For even if Robert had forgotten you in time, Deborah, which I don't believe for one moment that he would have done, I should always have imagined that he was thinking about you

—wanting you—and then, thrown together as we should all have been—for of course Adam will want to see a lot of me in the future, his only sister—things would have got too acute to be borne—the nervous tension impossible. Besides, I don't mind confessing that I should have been jealous—horribly jealous—if Robert had addressed the most harmless remarks to you, made the most innocent observations; and then there would have been the fear, the dread, that some chance word might enlighten Adam as to what part Robert had played in your life in the past. Oh, Deborah, believe me, the only thing to do is to let Robert go. He must take himself out of our lives—out of your life—out of my life—for otherwise what hope is there for you and Adam, or what hope is there for me? And I want to forget him, I want to conquer this great sorrow. I mustn't be conquered by it—I—I will not be conquered by it."

She rose from her chair and began to pace slowly up and down the room, a curious determination coming over her, and Deborah was amazed by the strength of Mary's face.

"Ah, but what about Robert?" Deborah cried. "Perhaps you will be able to forget him in time. But he'll be so lonely, Mary, so terribly lonely—for he's lost everything now."

"He must fight his own battle." Mary's voice hardened. "I am not his keeper, Deborah. He must go his own way."

"But don't you understand where his way will lead him?" Deborah interrupted fiercely. "Why, straight down to hell, Mary—to hell."

"I cannot help it, you know I cannot help it. Oh, at the bottom of your heart, Deborah, you must feel that I have done the right thing."

"I don't," Deborah exclaimed. "I feel nothing of the sort. I think you have played the coward's part, if you ask me. You are afraid of all the trouble that Robert might bring into your life, and you won't raise your little finger to help him. And you have another reason for not caring what happens—you are jealous of a woman who has no intention of ever coming between you, who would not if she could."

Mary shook her head.

"I am sorry that you should think so badly of me, for believe me, Deborah, if I thought that I could really help Robert—save his soul, as you call it—I would not have broken off my engagement; but I know better than you what his real feelings are towards me. I'm merely a bother to him, a—a nuisance, and though I am certain that he would have been very kind to me if I had married him, considerate and all that—still, there would be days when he would simply loathe having to pretend to an affection that he did not feel, and I should be conscious of this, and I couldn't stand it—how could I? Be fair—be just."

Deborah hesitated, then drew a deep, sobbing breath.

"Oh, Mary, do you hate me?" she cried. "But you must hate me—I've been the cause of such trouble to you. But you cannot hate me any more bitterly than I hate myself."

"I don't hate you," Mary interrupted, opening her arms. "I am truly sorry for you, for I think you've been far more sinned against than sinning—just the unhappy victim of circumstances—a woman with whom things have gone wrong. Come to me and let me kiss you—let's be real sisters and life may brighten for you—you may end by being quite happy. For you don't know how good Adam is, how splendid!

Why, simply living in the same house with him makes people want to be good, too—and large-minded and fine. Yes, you will be so proud of him, Deborah, that you'll end by being quite proud of yourself. Besides, you will take an interest in all the great causes he has so much at heart, and you will want to help him in his work. You will be a woman so many other women will look up to, you see. You will have immense duties—immense responsibilities."

"I'm not worthy of it all—I'm not worthy. I'm just a poor ignorant fool who has spent the best part of her life on a Boer farm. Oh, why did I ever agree to marry your brother? I shall bring him no good—only harm."

Deborah stared blankly into the future as she spoke, and her face grew very pinched and sharp. Then she tottered up to Mary and let her head fall on the young girl's breast, and she clung to her with all her strength, to this new friend she had found—this sister.

"You are so good to me," she moaned. "Oh, so good. And that's what hurts me so, to feel that I've brought such trouble to you, Mary—trouble and sorrow."

"But you're going to bring happiness to me now." Mary stroked Deborah gently on the shoulder. "Why, think how happy we shall all be together, when things have calmed down a little and we have forgotten these bad days. For you and I, Deborah, will find our joy, our great pleasure in life, in helping Adam, in working for him, and we shall have unlimited opportunities for doing good—simply unlimited opportunities."

She paused a moment, then bent down and gathered Deborah to her breast.

"You mustn't be so humble in your estimate of yourself, dear Deborah. You don't realise what a

fascinating person you are and what an almost uncanny influence you possess. You will be a great help to Adam in the future—a help, not a hindrance—and you will always remember that Cæsar's wife must be above suspicion and a splendid example to her household. You will be like the woman in the Bible of whom it was said"—and Mary quoted solemnly and softly: "'She stretcheth out her hand to the poor, yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed with scarlet. She maketh herself coverings of tapestry, her clothing is silk and purple. Her husband is known at the gates, for he sitteth among the elders of the land.'"

Mary paused, then bent her head still lower and kissed Deborah lightly on the brow, but the other girl shrank back, then burst into broken, pitiful laughter.

"Ah, Robert called me the Shulamite. Do you think that the Shulamite has anything in common with the woman you have just described, the woman whose works praise her in the gates?"

Mary made no answer. Her eyes were fixed on the door, which was slowly opening, for some sixth sense, some strange clairvoyance, told her who was coming in. Nor was she the least surprised when one of the hotel servants announced Mr. Waring, and Waring walked slowly into the room, leaning somewhat heavily upon a walking-stick.

He looked ghastly ill, and had about him all the appearance of fever, for his cheeks were flushed and his eyes were unnaturally brilliant. His hair was wet through and through with perspiration, and his hands shook—the hands that grasped the walking-stick. He was very weak too, for he tottered as he



crossed the floor, and his shoulders were bent just like those of an old man.

"Robert!" The name burst slowly from Mary's lips, and she looked up with protest in her eyes. Nor did she relinquish her hold of Deborah; in fact her grasp tightened, for she felt that she must look after her brother's wife, and she must safeguard Adam's interests. And for the first time since she had known Robert Mary regarded him critically, for he was no longer the hero of her dreams—her lover—he was some one with whom it behoved her to be on her guard, the man who might menace her brother's happiness one day and be a thorn in Adam Fielder's side.

"Why have you come here?" She continued to address him in strained, nervous tones, apparently unaware that she was speaking to Deborah's guest, Deborah, who had turned and was gazing at Waring over her shoulder with big, startled eyes.

"I did not come here to see you, Mary. I came to find Deborah. I—I've only just got out of my bed and slipped into some clothes, for I'm suffering from a nasty touch of fever—malarial, you know. But can't I speak to Deborah alone?"

He gazed helplessly, imploringly, at both women, and Mary noticed, with an odd pang at the heart, how pinched his face looked, and that his breathing was surely very quick and shallow. And as she stared he began to shiver and his teeth chattered painfully.

"Oh, you're ill," she cried, "you're really ill, and you oughtn't to be out of your bed. You ought to go back at once to your flat and have a doctor to see you, and be carefully nursed. Isn't it so, Deborah?"

Deborah nodded her head silently, and she did not move from Mary's side, but clung desperately to her sister-in-law's arm.

"Don't worry about me—there's nothing much the matter, I assure you." Waring tried to smile at Mary, for he was concerned to see how troubled she looked. "I've had malarial fever on and off before—I had quite a bad attack a few months before I met you, just before I went to China. It's partly my own fault that the fever takes me so badly—due to a rackets life; but I shall be all right in a day or two, though I'm not at my best just now."

He sat down unasked on the sofa and leaned against the arm. The ends of his fingers were quite livid, his face heavily flushed, and the pupils of his eyes looked enormous.

"You had much better go home. You're not fit to be out, Robert, you're really not. And I'm sure Deborah doesn't wish to see you—she cannot possibly wish to see you; for you know, I told you in my letter, which must have reached you about an hour ago, that she was married to my brother at the Registrar's Office this morning."

He nodded his shaking head. "Yes, so you wrote, and that's why I made up my mind that, ill or well, I would come round to see Deborah and take my farewell of her. For now that you've broken with me, Mary—well, the best thing I can do is to 'git,' and as quickly as I can; none of the Fielder family will want me hanging about—I'm better out of the way."

He spoke with some bitterness and it struck both women how terribly ill he looked. Their hearts went out to him—they would have liked to have nursed him—fussed over him—only it could not be, for, as Waring had truly said, the Fielder family had done with him.

"Robert, you shouldn't have come." Deborah's

lips framed the words at last, the words she had been trying to say ever since Waring had entered the room.

"I had to come." He looked at her with his big, glittering eyes, the eyes that testified to his feverish condition, then he turned fretfully to Mary, "Let me see her alone for a moment."

"No." Mary spoke with decision. "You and Deborah have done with each other—just as you and I have done with each other. There is no need for private converse between you and my brother's wife—isn't it so, Deborah?"

"Yes," Deborah murmured, but she caught her breath and a despairing expression came over her face; then she turned half irresolutely to Mary. "Don't forsake him," she cried, "he's ill—he's unhappy—marry him as you promised to do. I cannot bear to think of him alone and solitary—it—it breaks my heart."

Mary flushed painfully, then she cast a desperately anxious look at Waring, and if he had only met her eyes responsively at that moment the whole history of their lives would have been altered; she would have given him her promise again, her binding promise. But the moment passed and Waring failed to glance up.

"What I have written I have written." Mary spoke in firm tones, ashamed of that brief pause and the foolish hope she had cherished for a second, and Waring nodded his head as though in assent.

Deborah clasped her hands together—so rigidly that the knuckles shone out white and gleaming.

"Robert—you won't be wild or reckless again? You will lead a sober, God-fearing life in the future? What is the use of kicking against the pricks?" She

conjured him passionately, and it was as if fine flame played over her features, her thin face was so alive with feeling.

He laughed shakily.

"You're right, Deborah—it's no use to kick against the pricks—no real use; but it eases a poor devil sometimes to lash out——"

"It angers God." Mary's voice broke in clear and cool. "Robert, Deborah is right—you mustn't go back to the old ways. Take up some useful occupation, try and do some good in the world. You are rich—you have long years of life before you—turn them to good account."

He made no answer, but she felt that her words fell on deaf ears, and she was afraid of the faint mocking smile that hovered over his parched, dried-up lips.

"Robert, won't you go? You are ill—you ought not to be out at all—bed is the best place for you. And do send for a doctor!" Deborah's whole manner was pitifully anxious.

"A doctor—well, I don't know. Shall I summon some wise physician to minister to a mind diseased? Do you think he could do me any good?"

She made no answer, but kept a miserable silence whilst Waring rose slowly and with apparent difficulty from the sofa; then he stood up, leaning on his stick, his eyes fixed on Deborah.

"I shall not see you again. This is good-bye. I wish you every happiness. I feel sure that Adam Fielder will make you a good husband—and you may still have an Indian summer to look forward to——" He paused, then turned to Mary. "Forgive me," he said gently, "most earnestly I entreat your forgiveness."

She shook her fair head. "I have nothing to forgive. I behaved foolishly that day at San-Tong—I see now that I practically forced you to propose to me. I laboured under the delusion that you loved me—but it was all a mistake."

"I was to blame, Mary."

"No," she answered frankly. "I fear it was my fault. But let us forget it all—I shall write to Adam that I have changed my mind and said 'good-bye' to you—and this is good-bye, is it not?"

She put out her hand—Mary, who, not so long ago, had been accustomed to proffer Waring her lips—and for the first time he felt a sense of loss and realised that he was taking farewell of a girl who would have been a very blessed influence in his life if he had not come across the woman who held the keys of his heart—met Deborah again.

"Good-bye." He touched Mary's fingers softly—the warm, soft fingers of youth—and he knew that he was renouncing about the best thing life can offer a man—the pure love of a pure and candid girl. But it was better that this should be so, he reflected, for even if Deborah had not reappeared in his life, he had so little to give Mary Fielder that was worth her acceptance. He had been his own enemy and had made a general failure of things, so why complicate matters by marrying a wife? Let him tread the winepress alone—it would be better—fairer—kinder.

Waring dropped Mary's hand and turned to walk to the door, and as he did so Deborah drew a deep, troubled breath and twice her lips moved, but no actual sound came.

He halted on the threshold—the two women watching him with yearning, miserable eyes—and then, just for one second, the soul of the man reasserted itself

—the soul that had absorbed all mental sensation so greedily in the past—and lines that he had half forgotten came back to him, and he quoted in low tones—yet not so low but Deborah and Mary heard each word :

“ From too much love of living,  
From hope and fear set free,  
We thank with brief thanksgiving  
Whatever gods may be,  
That no life lives for—ever ;  
That dead men rise up never ;  
That even the weariest river  
Winds somewhere safe to sea.”

He let Swinburne's lines speak for him—they said all there was to be said—and then he would have left the room only Deborah called him back.

“ If you were to fall really ill,” she faltered, “ you would let me know—please—or if you were dying ? ”

He shook his dark head.

“ For what purpose ? Death, when it comes, cannot part us more definitely than we are parting now. For this is the end of all things—the end.”

He looked at her as a man looks at what he most loves before the coffin lid is nailed down on a dead face, then stumbled weakly out of the room, closing the door slowly behind him.

The two women listened to the sound of his footsteps as he swayed down the corridor, the feeble, faltering footsteps of a sick man, and Deborah, all at once, gave a fierce, shrill, almost animal, cry and moved forward.

“ I cannot bear it—he's ill—unhappy—Mary. We mustn't let him go—we mustn't.”

Mary winced, then she laid a strong authoritative hand on her sister-in-law's arm. “ There is nothing

else to be done," she whispered. "We have said good-bye to Robert Waring."

Deborah wrenched herself free—breaking loose from Mary's grasp—and she ran wildly towards the door, but paused with her hand upon the knob, her face painfully expressive of her indecision.

"Mary," she gasped, "I must go to him!"

Mary made no answer, merely looked at the half-frantic woman fiercely and steadily, and Deborah recovered herself, subdued by the young girl's clear eyes, ceased to finger the door knob, and instead of following Waring she moved to the sofa and flung herself on it face downwards—conquered and subdued.

Mary drew a deep breath—she had been fighting her brother's battle for him—guarding her brother's wife—and the victory was hers. But some victories come as dear as defeats.

## CHAPTER XIV

"ARE you feeling better to-day, sir?" The large, pleasant-looking woman whose powers as a cook had greatly impressed Robert Waring since he had been a tenant of the small flat in Victoria Street, smiled somewhat anxiously at her temporary employer, whose condition of health and general mode of life had been causing the worthy Mrs. Ward and her husband considerable uneasiness during the last month.

They had decided—this well-meaning, capable husband and wife—that there was something very wrong with Mr. Waring. For one thing, his engagement had been broken off close on a month ago with startling suddenness, though, as Hannah Ward justly observed, that was a thing that might happen to anybody, for women are capricious—wear they silk or cotton next their skin—and men have to suffer in consequence. But because Mr. Waring—who was a widower, Mrs. Ward had heard, and therefore bound to know something about the ways and whimsies of womenfolk—had been jilted, was that any reason why he should refuse to see a doctor when he was just as bad as he could be with malarial fever—a shivering, shaking wreck? Besides, Mrs. Ward had her fears, but only to be whispered into her husband's ear—for she was a wise woman, and well aware that a good servant hears and sees nothing—that the master had been indulging far too freely in stimulants during the



last four weeks, drinking whisky at the rate of a bottle and a half a day, and making, as the good lady expressed it—crudely but forcibly—a perfect hog of himself.

And now that the malarial fever seemed to have left him—and goodne. knows how he had managed to shake it off, considering how little care he had taken of himself—Waring had taken to cultivating a cold—a silly, feverish cold that did not seem inclined to depart in a hurry; and his appetite was absurd—a bird would have eaten more—a London sparrow; and as day succeeded day and night succeeded night, he grew stranger in his manner—or so, at any rate, Mrs. Ward fancied, and her husband had confided to her only yesterday that he had his reasons for believing that Mr. Waring had started taking hasheesh—a pill after tea every day; and that was a nice habit for a gentleman to get into, wasn't it?—about the worst vice, this drug-taking, that there was.

Mrs. Ward had lifted up plump hands—the conversation had taken place in the kitchen.

“Law, William, whatever is hasheesh?” she demanded. “Can you name it to a female respectably?”

Her husband—the quiet, deferential valet whom Waring had thought himself in luck to secure when he took over the Victoria Street flat—had grinned in answer to his wife's speech.

“Bless you, Hannah,” he answered, “hasheesh is a drug—there's no more harm in it than that; but it's a bad thing for a gentleman—an uncommonly bad thing, if he gets what they call the drug habit; gives him funny dreams, they say—mighty funny dreams—does him no good. Haven't you noticed how queer and sleepy Mr. Waring looks at times—

hardly awake, you might say?—well, that's when he's been taking the beastly stuff."

Mrs. Ward listened with dilated eyes to what her husband had to say on the subject, and though she had agreed with him that it was a sad pity, to say the least of it, that their temporary employer should be a victim of the drug habit—still, it greatly heightened her interest in Waring, and she studied him with deep attention; and Waring had begun to get irritably and uncomfortably aware of her close scrutiny, and he felt annoyed. And now, on a hot August morning, when all he wanted was to be left in peace, it was aggravating, to say the least of it, to have Mrs. Ward coming into his bedroom and peering at him with curious eyes, just as if she knew perfectly well what strange visions had been his during the long, sultry hours of the night. And what foolish pretence it was on the woman's part to make out that her object in disturbing him had simply been to find out what he wanted for dinner!—just as if she didn't know perfectly well that he had no appetite these hot, languid summer days. Besides, he had told Mrs. Ward—and really she might have remembered—that he left the ordering of dinner, and of all the meals, in fact, to her. But a man suffering from a heavy cold—a cold that clung to him obstinately—naturally did not want a huge dinner—something light and cool, if possible, and iced. Heavy food offended, for Waring had no appetite; it was all he could do to choke down a few mouthfuls of anything, and he was tormented day and night by a burning, consuming thirst. There were times when he felt as if he could drink the sea dry.

He was headachy this morning—suffering from a general sense of *malaise*; and just because he felt thoroughly out of sorts it was annoying to have his

health inquired after, and he answered Mrs. Ward sharply.

"I'm quite well, my good woman, except for a stupid cold; but I do wish you wouldn't come and ask me what I want for dinner just when I am settling down to sleep, for I had a wretched night—it was so beastly hot. I shall sleep better when I move into the country next week."

He gave an irritable kick, and the quilt that lightly covered him fell in a heap to the floor; and Mrs. Ward noticed that he had tossed the sheets about till they were mere crumpled wisps, and the blankets had been flung over the end of the bed.

"You'll take cold, sir, so hot as you are and having nothing over you." She bent down and picked up the discarded quilt, but Waring swore at her under his breath, and she judged it wisest to hurry out of the stuffy bedroom, muttering to herself as she took her hasty departure:

"Go next week into the country"—I only wish you would go, and that's the truth; but it's like the cry of wolf, wolf—you're always saying you are going, but you never go."

Mrs. Ward was quite right in her statement, for ever since Mary Fielder had broken with Waring he had been talking of leaving London and making his way to some quiet hotel in Devonshire—vowing that London was unbearable in August, and that he would recruit for a month amongst fresh and peaceful surroundings, and then set out on his travels again—make his way to South America, and see what he thought of that country—visit Peru.

He was always making plans with regard to the future, but these plans did not materialise in the least, nor was it likely that they would. For one thing, the

man was ill; the three years of rioting and general intemperance that Waring had spent after he had said good-bye to Deborah had worked their disastrous way on a constitution that had never been particularly strong; and now that Waring had taken to drugging himself with hasheesh, the odds were all against him.

He had taken hasheesh for the first time about two years ago, and finally given the drug up in favour of opium; but Waring, remembering the promise he had made Mary—his promise to try and conquer the opium habit—did not want to seek the solace of the opium-pipe if he could help it; and so fell back on hasheesh, and beginning with a pill of fifteen grains, he had finally increased the dose to thirty grains.

A friend Waring had picked up in the East had been the person to introduce hasheesh to his notice, and he had never forgotten the extraordinary sensations which had overtaken him when he had first made acquaintance with the drug.

He had been plunged, as it were, into a new world, where time and space expanded and the whole atmosphere spun endlessly, where objects advanced and receded in the most incomprehensible manner—chairs and tables elongating themselves miraculously, and then dwindling down till they resembled microscopic objects. This had been the beginning of the phenomena which had attended the taking of hasheesh, combined with a suspicion of all earthly things and persons; but sensation after sensation had succeeded each other rapidly. There had been that strange experience, when Waring had felt as if he was standing in a room hung with black velvet—a room lit with a curious luminous glow—while outside this room it seemed as if great winds were whirling and roaring, and mingling with the wind he could hear the shrieks

and screams of lost souls. But within the velvet-hung chamber all was quiet, almost oppressively quiet, and the sense of utter detachment was delicious ; also there was a pleasant drowsiness that was absolutely without parallel. But just as Waring was beginning to yield himself entirely to the soothing influence of the drug and sink into the softest, deepest slumber that he had ever known, he was conscious that strange flowers were beginning to fall from the ceiling—flowers that appeared to be formed of dazzling flame ; and his eyes, accustomed to the cool darkness, began to ache, and he feared that if any of the flowers fell upon him they would scorch him—brand him—burn him ; so he cowered helplessly in a corner, most horribly afraid, for the flowers fell quicker and quicker—these strange flame-flowers ; and presently the room blazed with them, and it seemed as if the rich velvet hangings were being consumed and fretted away with the heat, while the atmosphere became stifling ; and when Waring awoke from his trance, his mouth was dry and he felt the hasheesh-eater's thirst—no thirst more deadly. He hurriedly poured himself out a tumbler of water, for water was the first available liquid that he could put his hand to, and it seemed as if the water tasted like the richest wine—the most luscious nectar ; and it danced and sparkled.

Such had been Waring's first experience of hasheesh, and each time he had taken the drug he had been fascinated, yet repelled, by it, for the results were extraordinarily variable. Sometimes the swallowing of a small bolus would throw him into a state that could only be described as ecstatic, and the ecstasy was almost overwhelming ; and then on other occasions came tortuous visions beyond all parallel, for hasheesh is an accursed drug, and bitter the price that has to be

paid for its ecstasies. Yet the jubilance of hasheesh and its rapturous sensations moved Waring to indulge freely in the drug after his rupture with Mary and final farewell of Deborah; and all the more because the higher hasheesh exaltation seemed to lead to a partial sundering, on certain occasions, of the ties that unite soul and body, and he appreciated this weird phantasy. He was glad to get away from that earthy tabernacle, his body; it was good to feel his spirit soaring—soaring to realms unknown; and if at times he sunk to the lowest depths of hell—still, what did that matter if on other occasions, as though in compensation, he was privileged to reach high heaven?—not such a heaven as the Christians dream of, though, but a dazzling, glowing paradise of the senses—a rosy land—a country beyond the stars.

Waring was quite aware, however, that he would soon have to put a check upon himself, as far as this hasheesh-eating was concerned, for slowly but surely he was losing all his will-power, sinking into the condition of a lotus-eater, becoming little better than a dreamer of dreams. And yet, was it worth while, after all, he argued, to break free from the chains that held him? What did it matter what became of him really—who heeded? Besides, who would know? Why, even if he sought and found the poppy sleep and ran up against death, courting the last and the greatest adventure, who in all the world would care? For he had lost the two women who had loved him in their separate ways—lost Mary Fielder, lost Deborah. And as to the few relations he possessed—the three or four distant cousins—well, they would not be particularly sorry when he departed this life; and one man in particular would have reason to rejoice, for the fine property Waring owned in Gloucestershire would pass

at his death to a hard-working barrister, the father of a large, healthy family of sons and daughters—a just and honourable gentleman who would doubtless make a great success of things in his new capacity, and be of far more service to his generation than Robert Waring could ever hope to be—Waring, who had failed to fulfil the promise of his youth, and made such a complete mess of his life, and had stained his hands with blood. And yet the fact that he had shot Simeon Krillet rested more lightly on Waring's conscience than anything else, for he felt he had been quite justified in shooting the old Boer farmer, the jealous husband who would undoubtedly have murdered his young wife if Waring had not fired just in time to save Deborah.

Yes, with regard to having shot Simeon, Waring's conscience felt singularly at ease, but he could not forgive himself for having drifted between Joan Desborough and Deborah Krillet in the past, and being loyal to neither woman; and yet he had acted all the time from *le bon motif*. He had honestly tried to behave in a straightforward fashion both to the girl he was engaged to—Joan waiting for him in England—and to Simeon Krillet's widow, but he had failed miserably, inflicting pain—fierce, intolerable pain—upon Deborah, and he had caused Joan to suffer too, that pretty little butterfly girl who had been unhappy and upset when her husband had left her just at the beginning of a time when his presence at home was all-important—all-essential—to make his way back to South Africa, at another woman's beckoning. And quite recently—just as if he had not done enough harm to two women—there must come the affair with Mary Fielder; and yet, was Waring really to blame with regard to that unfortunate episode? He had not wanted Mary to fall in love with him at San-Tong—

he had never expected for one moment that such a thing would happen, any more than, to give him his due, he had imagined, in the old South African days, that his employer's wife—that beautiful, unhappy creature, Deborah Krillet—would lose her heart to him.

For, after all, he had never made love to Deborah, in the ordinary sense of the word, during her husband's lifetime. No, he had given Krillet no real cause for jealousy; he had merely talked on interesting subjects to his employer's wife—had quoted poetry to Deborah, and told her about the great books that were worth reading; and he had certainly shown her that courteous deference that an Englishman is accustomed to give a woman. But he had not suspected for one instant that Deborah loved him, till the woman herself had practically confessed that she did; and though Waring's heart had leaped at the news, he had persuaded himself that it was Joan Desborough he was bound to—Joan waiting for him in England, the girl it was his sheer and bounden duty to marry—or so, at any rate, the world would say; and Waring had been loath in those days to offend against social convention—the world's verdict had meant something to him—a great deal, in fact.

But he had been wrong—oh! very wrong. For just because he had been afraid of paining Joan Desborough, or rather wounding her pride—for the girl had not sufficient heart to feel anything very strongly—he had thrust a knife into Deborah Krillet's breast—into the warm breast of a woman who seethed with passionate emotion, a woman who was strong and splendid and primitive, and whose love was a very real and living thing.

He could not make out now—looking back—why



he had acted the coward's part, for, after all, Joan would have soon recovered from the disappointment of a broken engagement; she would have aired her grievances prettily for a time, worn the willow, and then have married some other man—a rich man, doubtless. And what would it have mattered what the world chose to think of Waring's conduct—how society judged him? He could have made his home for a time in South Africa, and married Deborah after a decent interval of a few months; and if this had happened, Tante Anna would never have found out how her brother had met his death, as Deborah would have had no reason to make any wild, frantic confession. Joy would have been her portion instead of sorrow—she would have been a happy wife; and later on, after Waring's unexpected succession to the Gloucestershire property, he and Deborah would have made their way to England, and by that time the affair of the broken engagement would have been forgotten, and society would have welcomed the rich man with open arms. And what a life he and Deborah would have had! Young, rich, blessed with each other's love, and with the world at their feet—oh! it was maddening to look back and think of what might have been—it was maddening.

But how had it all happened? How had it come to pass that he had made such an incredible mistake, and had done the wrong thing just when he thought he was doing the right thing? For with the best intentions in the world he had practically succeeded in spoiling the lives of three women, and he had irretrievably shattered his own. Oh, could it be because a dead man's curse was on his head? For was old Simeon Krillet, rotting in his grave, still powerful to harm—punish—blight? Certainly he had set his curse

—his heavy curse—in the past upon the man who had robbed him of his wife's heart, and upon the woman Deborah—the woman at whose guilty head he had thundered those awful—those tremendous words: "Her house is the house of hell, going down to the chambers of death."

Waring was not at all certain that Simeon was not conspiring against him, for he was sure he had seen Simeon Krillet's ghost once in South Africa when he had been very ill; and there was that occasion, close on a month ago now, when he could have sworn, as he sat in the dining-room of his flat, that the old Boer farmer's ghost had come to visit him—Krillet's dim, accusing shade. Oh, it wasn't true—it was a lie—to say that dead men sleep, and that their sleep is quiet and unbroken, for they rise from their graves, on occasion, to haunt the living.

But why had God allowed all this to happen, and suffered that tyrannical old man, Simeon Krillet, to work such vengeance from his grave? Could it be—oh, could it be because Waring had been guilty of departing from the straight path in the beginning? Had he come between a man and his wife in direct defiance of the law of God—stirring a woman to mutiny against her husband, and so helping to upset the peace of a household? For Deborah had never waxed openly rebellious or set Simeon Krillet's words at naught till Waring had come as overseer to the lonely South African farm; and Waring ought to have realised that he was doing harm instead of good when he suggested that Deborah should read books of which he knew her husband would not approve, even though he considered Simeon Krillet's contention that certain books were evil perfectly ridiculous. Still, after all, Krillet was Deborah's husband, and he had tried to

do his duty to his young wife according to his lights and the man was honest in his convictions. He sincerely believed that it did a woman no good to read any books except the Bible and a few volumes of sermons. He was afraid of the snare of the printed page, and though his views were absurd—absolutely absurd—they were his views; and perhaps it had been cruel on Waring's part to have laughed at the old man, and tempted Deborah to disobey her lord and master—the husband who had been good to her—very good according to his own lights—and who certainly loved her with all the love of a strong and vehement nature. Nor could Deborah be held blameless with regard to her conduct towards her husband, and in the way she had allowed love for another man to creep into her heart—love for the young English overseer; for, once having agreed to marry Simeon, she should have been true not only to the letter, but to the spirit of her marriage vows.

She had married Krillet with her eyes open, for though the life she had led on her half-brother's farm had not been a happy one, and she had been turned into a hewer of wood and drawer of water, and treated with excessive harshness by her relatives—still, Deborah need not have married Krillet unless she liked. She had not been forced into his arms; she had gone to him of her own free will. For though she had never loved the old farmer, she had appreciated certain advantages that her marriage would give her: the comfortable farm over which she would reign as mistress, the ease that would be hers, the leisure. And so Krillet had certainly had some justice on his side when he reproached her, in no unmeasured phrase, for the guilty love she had cherished for the Englishman, crying out in fierce tones, "You have slept on

my breast, you have eaten of my food, and been mistress of my goods. I have dressed you in silk, and made the path smooth for you; and this is the end, Deborah Krillet—you love the stranger.”

She had made bold answer, however; the just words had not sunk into her soul as they ought to have done, for she had merely replied that she was born to love Waring—it was ordained by Fate they should meet; and she had added defiantly, “Punish me as you like, Simeon. I have lived my life, and so can find courage to die.” And then—at least so Deborah had told Waring when discussing the scene with him—the old Boer had looked at her steadily, his face illuminated by a flash of lightning; and as the whole farm rocked and trembled under the fierce roar of thunder that followed the flash of lightning, Simeon Krillet raised his heavy hand and pointed at his young and impenitent wife.

“God’s voice!” he announced; “listen to it, and learn of it. Ah! learn that the soul that sinneth shall surely die.” That was what Krillet had said, quoting the words solemnly, soberly, the old Puritanical spirit strong in him; but Deborah had smiled mockingly as she repeated the dead man’s words to Waring, and her eyes had glinted under her heavy lids.

“That was what he said to me, Robert; but, as things have turned out, it was Simeon who died, and we, the sinners, as he thought us, who escaped.” She had laughed—laughter that had troubled Waring, for he did not care for Deborah in her fierce moods; and he had wondered even then, his conscience more acute than the woman’s, if there might not come a day in the future when Simeon’s words would be fulfilled, and they would reap what they had sown; and as what they had sown into the earth was death—livid

death—why, it appeared only just and right that they should reap of death—and it might be a red reaping.

Waring had been thinking a great deal about Simeon these last few days, and there had been moments when he felt that he would like to talk things over with the old Boer, and explain that he was sorry for having sown dissension between him and Deborah in the past, for having come between man and wife, and that he was ready to make atonement; but he prayed that Deborah should be left in peace—left to be happy with Adam Fielder, the good and great man whom she had married, the man who would bring out all that was best in her nature, if she would only let him do so. For it seemed to Waring that all he desired in the world was Deborah's happiness—and he would have gone to his death cheerfully at any moment if he could have made certain that it was for Deborah's good that his life should come to a sharp close.

He did not feel as much concerned on Mary Fielder's account as might reasonably have been expected of him, for he was tolerably certain in his own mind that Mary would forget him in the course of time. She possessed too sensible and well-balanced a brain for it to be at all likely that she would pass her days crying over spilt milk; and her love for him—deep and sincere though it was, and amazingly tender—had been more a case of hero-worship than anything else at the start. She had met him under romantic circumstances and in a highly charged and electric atmosphere, and it was only reasonable to suppose—considering how young Mary was—that she would meet some one in the future who would be far more worthy of her love than Waring had ever been; a lover who could give her a heart that was really worth her acceptance, not

a battered, bruised article—a heart from which all the blood had been drained.

Yes, Mary would forget him in good time, he felt pretty certain on that point ; she already realised that he was a man of straw, and she had wisely decided to end their engagement. Practical common sense had come to her aid : her eyes had been opened. Why, soon—quite soon—she would thank her God—she was a religious girl, and religion suited her—that she had not married Waring ; and then the other man would turn up—the good fellow who would make dear Mary a splendid husband—and she would wonder, in time to come, how she could ever have seriously contemplated marrying a rolling stone like Robert Waring ; and she would blush at the remembrance of her past folly, and hide her flushed cheeks on her husband's breast, whispering in low, tender tones—she possessed a most rich and sweet voice—" I—I never really loved any one but you, dear ; that old affair—oh, it was all a mistake. We were shut up together in San-Tong, you see—expecting to be butchered by the Boxers every moment—and that's what drew us together. But I never felt what I'm feeling now ; it—it wouldn't have been possible."

So she would whisper to the husband—and God bless the dear girl, she would believe every word she said was true—gospel truth. Oh yes, he was fairly easy in his mind about Mary ; but he did not know—he had not the least idea—how matters were going to turn out with regard to Deborah, or if this second marriage would be for her happiness or not. Would she find balm in Gilead ?

He tried to think things out dispassionately, and not allow his own feelings to intrude ; he just wanted to be able to convince himself that there was a chance

that Deborah's life was going to brighten and her path be made smoother—that colour might creep into her grey days—her widowed days. Only somehow he knew quite well that nothing of the sort was going to happen. A dead man had cursed Deborah just as terribly and unflinchingly as he had cursed Waring, and it is a true saying that a dead man's curse endures. Besides, when would Waring be able to forget the look that he had detected in Deborah's eyes—the look of absolute anguish—on the occasion when he had taken his final farewell of her in the sitting-room at the Savoy?

It was so women gazed up when their hearts were breaking—prisoners who faced condemnation—and so mourners edged passionately near newly-dug graves—with just the same expression of stony, cheerless despair—tearless agony; and he knew that her second espousals had brought no real happiness nor promise of good days ahead to the pale and wasted Shulamite. She was grieving and lamenting that it was not in her power to follow Robert Waring to whatever dark land it might please him to turn his steps. She was sick of love, but not for the man who had sailed to South Africa—her lawful husband, that great leader of men, Adam Fielder—that prince of finance and tower of strength; no, she was torn—distracted—with love for a man whom it was her bounden duty to try to forget—the man who had come between her and her first husband, but who must be careful not to offend again.

“The sooner I get out of England the better. It would never do to run the risk of meeting Deborah—I mustn't hurt her more than I have hurt her already; but it seems to me as though I lacked the energy to make any plans. It is almost a month since Mary

broke with me, and yet I am still in London ; I have made no attempt to get away. It's my wretched cold and that cursed hasheesh stuff that's at the bottom of the matter, I believe. But I'll rouse myself to-day—I'll wire to that hotel in Clovelly for rooms and take my departure to-morrow—glad to get away from that prying woman, Mrs. Ward. Why doesn't Ward keep his wife in better order ? He's not a bad servant himself."

He stumbled out of bed as he made these reflections, and was annoyed to find how weak he felt ; also there were certain signs that seemed to betoken an alarming rise in temperature ; but Waring chose to ignore that he was ill, and put down the burning, prickly condition he was in to the heavy dose of hasheesh he had taken the preceding evening ; and to hasheesh he also attributed the cruel thirst that literally consumed him, and the distinct difficulty he felt in walking, for he tottered and swayed like a drunken man, and it was all he could do to reach the bath-room.

His bath revived him somewhat, but whilst he was dressing a prolonged shivering fit started, to be followed by another and yet another attack ; and yet his hands burnt all the time, and his eyeballs seemed on fire, and he was conscious of sharp, shooting pains all over his body, and a heavy sense of lassitude. It was even an effort to raise the hair-brush and put it back again in its place on the dressing-table.

"I'm done," he muttered ; "smashed up. Something's gone wrong with me—I suppose I am paying for those three years of prodigal living. And how does the Book have it, as Simeon Krillet would say ? Why, 'the wages of sin is death.'"

He sank down heavily in an arm-chair, the shivering fit still continuing to attack him.



"The hasheesh I've been taking hasn't done me any good," he commented. "I've sweated myself sick with terror through it, or I've been half delirious at other times; and how I've laughed when the tickly, humorous sensation has come on! Oh, my God, how I've laughed!"

The faintest possible smile came over his lips as he remembered an occasion, a fortnight back, when, on taking a rather larger dose of hasheesh than on ordinary occasions, he had laughed, with but brief intervals for the taking of breath, for upwards of an hour—loud, ridiculous laughter, but laughter that he had found it impossible to check or subdue.

"If I don't make some sort of an effort"—he gripped the arms of his chair fiercely—"I shall have a beastly collapse, and that would be a nuisance, for I don't want to be stuck here in this wretched flat all through August, with that woman, Mrs. Ward, nursing me, and prying into all my affairs—curious jade that she is! No, I'll go out this morning—I'll go out for a walk. Why, I haven't left the flat for close on ten days. The air will do me good. I'll go to the club and write some letters—and wire for rooms at the Grand Hotel, Clovelly, for London's played out. London's beastly in August; always reminds me of a woman in faded finery—a would-be smart slattern."

He rose from his chair and walked with halting footsteps towards the door, but a sharp, shooting pain at his chest caused him to press his hand to it suddenly and he grimaced.

"'The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together.' I am beginning to know the truth of those words with a vengeance. Pain's a beastly thing to run up against, but there's no evading it—there's no escaping it. Pain brings us into the world—pain

takes us out again—from the cradle to the grave pain pursues us—shadows us—pain mental and physical—pain ! ”

He bent his head, and, muttering to himself, walked out of his bedroom, and a few minutes later found him pacing slowly and somewhat shakily down busy Victoria Street ; and more than one passer-by turned round to look at him—this handsome man who looked so shattered and so ill, the man with the flushed cheeks and the shaking, shivering hands.

## CHAPTER XV

DEBORAH lay back in a hammock, her eyes half closed, a softer and more tranquil expression on her face than it had borne for a long time.

She was shaded from the sun by the heavy boughs of the two great cedar trees to which her hammock had been hitched, and from where she lay she could just catch a bend of the silver river, the flowing Thames.

She had discarded black at last, and was wearing a cool lavender muslin, a gown cut a little low at the throat and turned back with a wide Puritan collar—a collar of fine white muslin. She wore no hat, but a sun-bonnet rested in her lap, just such a sun-bonnet as she had worn in the old days when she had lived on a South African farm, and she had tucked a rose into her belt—a deep red rose.

“It’s really very peaceful here—wonderfully peaceful!” So Deborah reflected, and she could not help feeling glad that she had agreed to Mary’s suggestion—a suggestion which had been prompted by Adam in the first instance, that the two women should take a house together on the banks of the Thames and live there till Fielder returned from South Africa. He had been away for over seven weeks and had already started on his homeward journey; at least, so Deborah had learnt from a cable that had reached her a few days ago.

She had been sorry when she realized that Fielder

was coming home so soon, for the last month had been a peaceful month—singularly peaceful. Deborah had enjoyed Mary Fielder's companionship, and she liked the quiet old house they had taken—a big stone manor-house with beautiful grounds and a smooth, velvety lawn which extended right down to the river's bank. It was a house with oak-panelled rooms, and a curious old-world air about it; no modern mansion—just one of those sleepy old manor-houses that people are sometimes lucky enough to find—houses spared from the past.

It was Mary who had discovered Radstone Manor. It was quite high up the river near Pangbourne, and she had heard of it from a friend about a week after she had broken off her engagement to Robert Waring, and a visit of inspection had induced Mary to make an offer for the house at once, for it was just the place, she told herself, where two bruised women would be able to recover slowly of their wounds and pass quiet and peaceful days.

She had been so enthusiastic about the house when describing it to her sister-in-law that Deborah was quite prepared to be disappointed when she went down to Radstone; but the first sight of the old stone manor, the grey house half-covered with a tangle of yellow roses, pleased her, and she fell in love with the lattice windows, and waxed enthusiastic when she saw the bowling-green—a quiet, shady alley. And there were doves flying about everywhere—white-plumaged doves—and a great hedge of hollyhocks made a wonderful splash of colour in the kitchen garden, and the cedars that shaded the lawn had stood there for over a hundred years. There was an old sun-dial, too, that witnessed to the flight of time, and a pond in a small walled-in garden—a pond wherein fat carp slept, and a drowsy

nymph presided over a fountain—a stone nymph whose nude limbs were beginning to be clothed by green moss, a nymph who smiled at the world through half-closed lids, and who had possibly loved and been beloved by the lord Pan in her time—in the days when the world was young.

Deborah and Mary lived an extremely quiet life at Radstone Manor. They had only taken the manor for a short term, and so didn't expect the neighbours to call upon them—did not want them to call, and their desire for solitude was respected. No strangers had come to break the tranquil peace of the balmy August days, and Deborah and Mary were quite happy in each other's companionship, and desired no intrusion from the outside world.

They lay on the lawn in the morning, often breakfasting out of doors, and in the afternoon they would either go for a long motor drive in the magnificent car that Adam had put at Deborah's disposal—his superb white motor—or else Mary would drive her sister-in-law in a smart little dog-cart, and sometimes they punted down the river, two noticeable young women. And then there was the launch which Mary had purchased—a pretty little electric launch called the *Firefly*; but on the whole Deborah preferred to anything else the long, lazy hours spent in the garden—the hours when she could drowse and dream.

By mutual consent Waring's name was never referred to either by Mary or Deborah. They had agreed, the day they first arrived at Radstone, that they would not talk about him. But Deborah often wondered, when she and Mary were sitting side by side in the garden, keeping a tranquil silence and seemingly occupied with fancy-work, if they were both thinking of the man whom it was hardly likely to suppose that they would

ever see again ; and once or twice the impulse was strong upon her to question Mary on the subject. But she had always refrained from doing so, for what good would it do after all to talk about Waring ? It would only be bringing the man more vividly before them—the man they both loved, and it was just as well that they should forget him if they could—ah ! if they only could.

Deborah was well aware in the depths of her own heart, however, that to the end of her days Robert Waring would be the only real person in her life. But she trusted it would be otherwise with Mary, and she was pretty well certain that it would be ; for after all, Mary was very young, and it was almost inevitable that sooner or later she would come across some other man who would help her to forget Waring. Besides, the love had all been on one side in her case, and it takes a mutual affection to create that burning flame that can never be put out—the flame of a man's and woman's love.

So Deborah told herself, at least, making up her mind, at the same time, that when Adam Fielder returned to England she would do her very best to make him a good wife, and she would try her hardest to love him. Her nature had softened wonderfully during the last few weeks. She was no longer a woman of ice—a frozen woman ; the ice had melted about her heart, and a new gentleness had come to her. She was anxious—oh, very anxious—to be of some use to her day, her generation, and she appreciated the fact that, as Adam Fielder's wife, she would have immense and far-reaching influence upon other women, and she determined that she would dedicate the remaining years of her life to helping on the cause of humanity in every possible way. She would live for others at

last instead of merely for herself, for that was the great mistake she had made in the past. It had been Deborah Krillet and Deborah Krillet's wants and desires that she had thought of all the time; she had just lived for herself, and that is what no man or woman should do—she realised that now, though somewhat late in the day—realised it with pain and contrition.

Her thought had been harking back to Simeon Krillet lately, or during these long days in sleepy Berkshire she had time enough to think—to reflect. Besides, Deborah was trying to put her house in order, so as to have everything straight and untangled in her brain by the time Adam Fielder returned home to claim her as his wife, and it was only natural that her mind should dwell, in consequence, on the man whose death she had been mainly responsible for, and, looking back, she could not do anything but blame herself for her treatment of Simeon.

She had been a rebellious wife, a froward wife. She had not thought of pleasing the old man who had given her all he had to give; she had merely wanted to please herself, and selfishness had been her undoing. For it would have been better for Deborah—ah, far better!—when she discovered in the early days of her marriage that her husband did not want her to read or to develop the intellectual side of her nature, to have obeyed him in dutiful submission—even as Sarah did Abraham. But she had revolted passionately against authority; she had acknowledged no bidding except her own, and she had loathed the love that Simeon gave her—how often had she not wiped his kisses away with a cold, trembling hand! And yet there had been no shame in these kisses really; they had been the honest expression of a man's deep devotion, and she should have girded her soul to have accepted

the conditions of wifehood, instead of hating and loathing the caresses that Krillet had a perfect right to bestow upon her—for was she not his wife, flesh of his flesh?

Oh, she had done evil in the sight of the Lord—she had done evil—she ought to have yielded herself to the marital yoke and been a faithful and submissive spouse. And oh! it had been wrong of her—wrong—to allow her heart to go out to the stranger when he first made his appearance at the farm, the handsome, chivalrous Robert Waring. For instinct might have told her, even from the first, what would happen if she allowed her thoughts to dwell so constantly on the young Englishman—to revolve around him. She had known perfectly well what would happen, and she had waited for the inevitable moment to come, and the moment had come.

She had played the part of temptress to Waring—she realised that now, for she appealed not only to his passion, but to his pity, and she had no business to complain of her husband to him—no business to entreat his protection, or to make any claim on his sympathy. She had merely told him about the strained relations that existed between herself and Simeon Krillet so as to make herself more interesting in Robert Waring's eyes; for she had lodged no complaint about her husband to anyone else—it was only to the Englishman she had related her grievances, her sorrows, and she had done so with the definite intention, she realised now, of making him love her—of winning his heart.

She had loved him from the first hour of their meeting, she thought—loved him because he was young and strong and brilliantly clever—at least clever according to Deborah's idea—and most certainly



versed in book-learning. Besides, he had led her straight into a new world—a world of romance—a world of colour; he had helped her to forget the barren loneliness of the plains, and the dreary melancholy of her days—it had been a case of youth going out to youth.

“The desire of the eye, the lust of the flesh”—yes, she had yielded to both—she had made no attempt to struggle against either, and she had drawn Robert to her as with cords, weaving her spells about him, her woman’s spells, using every art—every primitive art—to allure him, conscious all the time of what she was doing—boldly conscious.

He was not to blame, and yet he had had to pay the price, for certainly at the beginning Waring had not intended to fall in love with his neighbour’s wife, nor had he the faintest idea as to where his feet were straying, or how far Deborah was prepared to lead him. He had followed her blindly, dreamily, just as a man follows a will-o’-the-wisp, and suddenly found himself in the midst of a quagmire.

Oh, there had been no premeditation on the man’s part, but Deborah could not say as much in her own case. She acknowledged this now, and yet could she not plead just this much in her defence—that it had been so easy to love Robert—so impossible to help loving him? Nor had there been anything impure in her love as far as she could see—it had been so human, so natural, so inevitable; strong forces had been at work in her nature, driving her towards Waring—forces of which she had been quite ignorant till he appeared, for passion had hitherto only repelled and disgusted her; it had been left to Robert Waring to teach her what a beautiful thing the love between man and woman can be—what a wonderful thing—just as

it had been left to Robert Waring to make her understand to the full all the agony that a deserted woman can feel—all the despair, the shame. Yes, all unconsciously he had fired her soul, just as later on he had given her gall to drink ; but it had never been his fault—he had never really been to blame, and would God Almighty be pleased to remember this on Judgment Day, and write “acquitted” against Robert Waring’s name ?

But as for Deborah—the woman Deborah—oh, what did it matter into what corner of hell she was thrust, for with all her faults—all her weaknesses—she had never been a coward, and she was prepared to pay the price for what she had done—the full price. She had sinned and done amiss in the sight of the Lord, therefore she must be cast into the furnace ; but Waring was ignorant of wrong-doing—he had merely been betrayed by a kiss—tempted by the woman who loved him—so let the dear Lord forgive him the involuntary wrong-doing, and the weight of Jehovah’s hand fall on Deborah alone ; she would neither flinch nor complain, but go quietly to the place of eternal darkness—to her own place.

Strange thoughts and reflections for a woman to indulge in as she lay back in a hammock and watched the shining Thames ! And, stranger still, these terrible thoughts apparently troubled Deborah but little, for her face was quite tranquil, her smile almost serene. But this was because she felt she had suddenly grown wise, that she had learnt how useless it is to struggle against God or any of God’s laws, and all she was concerned about now was to do a little real good in the world before she left it, for she did not want to die before she had brought some happiness into a few lives ; she wanted to be able to feel that her absolute

conviction that she was one of the lost—one of the doomed—had not soured her temperament and made her callous with regard to other people and indifferent as to how she spent the rest of her time on earth.

No, let her do a little good now, while she could, for maybe the thought would comfort her in hell—be a feeble gleam in the midst of eternal darkness—the reflection that she had helped to lighten the heavy burden that poor wretches are called on to bear—done something towards sweetening this dusty old earth—justified in a faint measure her existence.

She wondered how Robert Waring would get through the years ahead. Would they bring no comfort to him in their grey, melancholy train—no peace of heart and mind? Ah, she couldn't say—she couldn't foresee the future; the man she adored had taken his last farewell of her—their paths had divided!

She thought of him with wistful pity, though, and a love that was almost as yearning as a mother's, for it was doubtful if Deborah felt any carnal passion for Waring now; her tears had purified her poor body—and her longing was more to be able to comfort and console him than to be caught up in his embrace.

She wanted to make certain that his straying feet were set on the straight path at last, and she was anxious about his health and comfort—the day had gone by when she desired the kisses of his mouth; her greater need now was to be convinced of his physical and spiritual well-being.

A canoe shot swiftly down the river, and a pretty girl—gay with her scarlet sunshade and cool in a white linen gown—smiled at the flannelled youth who was making the canoe travel so rapidly, and the sound of their happy laughter made Deborah shiver for all the warmth of the hot August afternoon. Her soul was

sick for something lost—the warm human happiness she had missed ; for peace and quiet days were all very well for a season, but the hour comes when the spell is broken—the spell woven of dreams—dreams dissolved by a girl's careless, happy laugh.

“I wish Mary would come back.” Deborah stretched herself in the hammock. “She said she would return in time for tea.”

She raised herself languidly on an elbow and gazed down in the direction of the sweeping carriage drive, wondering when she would catch sight of the motor that was conveying Mary back from town, for certain business matters connected with her private fortune had obliged Mary to have an interview with her broker ; she was an independent young woman and well capable of looking after her own affairs.

Mary had left Radstone very early that morning, however, so her return might be confidently expected in a few minutes, for she was scrupulously accurate with regard to keeping appointments ; still, of course, the motor might have broken down—a most unlikely contingency, however.

“Ah!” A faint smile crossed Deborah's lips as she heard the distant hoot of a motor horn, for she had missed Mary more than she had deemed possible—missed her acutely, in fact—and now she sat up eagerly in the hammock, awaiting her young sister-in-law's advent.

The big car dashed up the drive, speeding vigorously along, a great gliding monster, and Mary got out hurriedly and made her way across the lawn.

She did not walk with her usual firm tread, and Deborah noticed with some alarm how exceedingly ill the girl looked—how pale and distressed—but as she advanced towards the hammock she forced a

smile to her pale lips and waved her hands to Deborah.

"Don't get out of the hammock," she cried. "You look so nice and restful lying in it—so cool, and oh! it has been simply hot and horrible in London to-day—stifling. I can't tell you how thankful I feel to get back into the country again, away from the noise and stir and confusion—the London dust."

Mary drew a basket-chair forward as she spoke and sat down in it by the side of the hammock, then she suddenly stretched out a hand and rested it on Deborah's ankle, tenderly, caressingly, and her eyes fixed themselves curiously on Deborah's face.

It seemed as if there was something she wanted to say, and yet she hardly knew how to begin—that she had a piece of news to communicate, but doubted if it would be wise to tell it.

"I am very glad to see you back again, Mary; the hours pass slowly without you—they drag. I've missed you exceedingly. I hope you settled your business matter all right—that the interview with your broker was satisfactory?"

Deborah spoke in slow, somewhat languid tones. She had an uncanny feeling that there was something Mary would tell her later on that would disturb and pain her horribly. How the idea had floated into her brain she could not say—perhaps she was only morbidly fanciful.

"Oh, yes, I did what I wanted to do." Mary ceased to stroke Deborah's ankle and locked her hands firmly together in her lap. "I saw Mr. Wilcock and arranged about the sale of those shares that I don't feel too certain of—the shares I was telling you about yesterday—and then, as I had a little time to spare, I made my way to the Army and Navy Stores and did some

shopping—ordered such a lovely croquet set and a new tennis racquet.”

“The Army and Navy Stores?” Deborah glanced up. “They are close to Victoria Street, are they not?”

“Yes.” Mary stared down at the lawn—the lawn that was like green velvet. An awkward pause fell—a pause that was full of constraint.

“They will bring out tea presently,” Deborah observed after several minutes had passed in silence. “You will be thankful for a cup of tea, won’t you, dear?”

“Yes, I want tea badly—I am frightfully thirsty.”

Mary commenced removing her gloves. She was dressed in a cool white linen coat and skirt, and she wore a white chip motor-bonnet, with a long chiffon veil, a small knot of pansies at one side of the bonnet giving the only touch of colour; and there was something extremely reserved—almost Puritanical—about her whole get-up, but it suited her amazingly.

A butler made his appearance, crossing the lawn, carrying the silver tea equipage, and he was preceded by two footmen, one of whom had a Pembroke table under his charge, and a large silver tray, and there was fruit in dishes on the tray—beautiful peaches and nectarines, the daintiest of sandwiches, and the most delicious-looking cakes; but though Mary had owned to wanting her tea, she hesitated to pour out a cup after the tea-table had been arranged in front of her, and her hand suddenly began to tremble nervously—her face flushed.

“Mary, what is the matter?” Deborah demanded. “You’re not yourself, and it is no use pretending that you are. Something happened to you in London this afternoon—did you meet anyone by chance—some one we both know?”

Mary's flush deepened, then she glanced over her shoulder to see if the butler and footmen were out of earshot, and when she saw that they had nearly reached the house, and there was no possible chance of what she was going to say being overheard, she turned to Deborah.

"What made you ask me that question?" she demanded. "Did a sudden flash of clairvoyance prompt it, I wonder, or was it merely guesswork on your part? But anyway, Deborah, you guessed rightly, for I met *him* this afternoon, just as I was leaving the Stores—yes, I met *him*."

A tense silence followed Mary's admission. Deborah drew a sharp breath, and she looked for a moment as if she were about to faint. An ashy hue overspread her countenance, and she leaned back heavily against the pillows in her hammock, but she conquered the feeling of faintness in a few seconds, and when she spoke her voice was firm and collected.

"So you saw him, Mary? Well, how was he looking, and what did he say to you—did you speak?"

"Yes, we spoke, but he was looking ghastly." The words appeared to be wrung from Mary with difficulty, then she suddenly fixed big, dilated eyes upon her sister-in-law—eyes full of fear. "Deborah, Heaven help me! but I think he's dying. There is something the matter with him, I am quite certain of that. He is ill—frightfully ill, and he looks dazed and heavy, hardly in his right senses—just as a man might look who is drugging himself with narcotics. But when I asked him what was the matter with him, he made out that there was nothing, except a little cold, and he refused point blank to see a doctor. He said he was going to leave London in a few days—that he was merely waiting till an hotel, where he hoped to secure

rooms, had a suite to give him—some hotel at Clovelly. But, oh! I do not believe that he will be strong enough in his present condition to take so long a railway journey, and the proper place for him is bed—bed. He needs careful nursing. I know it—I feel sure of it.”

She spoke in strained, broken sentences, and Deborah listened attentively to every word. When Mary made an end of speaking she slid out of the hammock and stood upon the lawn, one hand resting on the tea-table, as though to support herself, and her face suddenly looked pinched, wizened.

“Did he ask after me, Mary?”

“Yes, he inquired particularly after you, and I told him that you were well and—and happy.”

“You needn’t have told him that.” Deborah winced.

“But he was so glad to hear it. He smiled and quite a relieved look came over his face.”

Mary poured herself out a cup of tea and drank feverishly, then she put down the drained cup.

“Isn’t it dreadful, Deborah,” she muttered, “isn’t it terrible? And we can do nothing for him—he must just go his own way; we cannot interfere with him.”

Deborah made no answer for a moment, then she gave a hoarse cry.

“The dear Lord!” she exclaimed. “Can you tell me, Mary Fielder, that we are to let Robert fall sick and neither of us are to go and look after him—to help nurse him? Are we really to allow him to get worse and worse, and then to die—to die alone with just hired servants by his bedside? Why, Mary, what are you made of—warm flesh and blood?”

“Hush, Deborah!” Mary shook her head reproachfully. “You must not speak like this. It’s wrong of you—wrong. Our part in Robert Waring’s



life is over—your part and mine, and we should be acting unfairly towards my brother if we went up to London to see him and nursed him as you suggest. It would be unfair towards Adam, and two wrongs never make a right."

"Then he is to lie ill and no one is to look after him?" Deborah demanded wildly. "Is that your idea, Mary?"

"Oh, it hurts me—God knows it hurts me to think of him ill and alone," Mary responded; "but as Robert has made his bed so he must lie on it. We dare not go to him—we must not, Deborah; and oh! I wish to God I had not told you a word about my chance meeting with Robert. I ought to have bitten my tongue out first—kept the miserable fact to myself; but I felt I had to tell you. But do you think I'm not feeling miserable—have you forgotten that I loved him once?"

"Ah, once!" A fierce light lit up Deborah's eyes. "Yes, that little word 'once' explains the whole situation, and the difference there is between you and me; for whilst you loved Robert once, I, for my part, shall love him for ever. And this love has become a part of me—it is myself—my true self."

"And you can say this to me—your husband's sister?"

Deborah gave a little broken laugh. "My husband! Oh, I really don't look upon Adam as my husband. We have taken no vows before God; we just said a few words at the Registry Office, that's all. I've never been his wife. Don't you understand—don't you feel—that Robert Waring is drawing me towards him, calling to me, and is it possible that I can resist that call?"

"You would be the most wicked woman in all the

world if you went to him ; you would be a disgrace to your sex."

"Then regard me as the most wicked woman on earth." Deborah addressed Mary passionately. "Let my name be a by-word from Sheba to Dan, for I tell you no power, human or divine, is going to keep me from Robert's side—now that he is in such deadly need of me. Ill, did you say—ill and like to die? Then he dies in my arms, Mary Fielder, with his head pillowed on my breast, and whatever he desire of me I will give. If he recovers—if he lives—I will be his mistress—do you hear me?—his mistress ; and if he dies, his death hour shall be mine. For now I know that it is no use any longer to struggle against the voice of nature and the old primitive feeling ; there is no power stronger than love, Mary—nothing stronger than love."

"Your love is sin, I tell you ; your love is sin !" Mary sprang to her feet and confronted Deborah with blanched face and angry eyes—puritanism at bay. "Don't be so wicked—so wicked as to go to Robert," she continued. "If he is to die, let him die decently ; let his soul go clean and shriven to God ; don't let him die in the arms of a guilty woman. Let him make his peace with the Lord—his peace with the Church."

Deborah laughed—such a laugh as some primitive cave-woman might have indulged in—a laugh so cold, so clear, so savage, that it chilled the blood about Mary's heart and made her realise with what wild forces she had to deal.

"Deborah, for God's sake don't laugh like that," she cried. "You—you frighten me, and you look as if you were going mad. Oh ! be your calm, dear self again—your brave self ; don't go to Robert. Do

your duty at all costs. Think of my poor brother a little."

"I can think of no one but Robert, and I tell you this, Mary, no power in the world is going to keep me from his side—neither God above, nor the devil in the Pit. I may have to pay for what I am doing—my soul may be cast into eternal torment hereafter, but what do I care—what does it matter? If he wants me, he shall have me. Why, just for one half-hour with him—with Robert—I would endure eternal damnation cheerfully; yes, I would even bless God from my corner in hell—and only for one half-hour."

"This isn't love—this is frenzy," Mary protested. "And you will not make Robert happy by going to him; you will make him miserable—very miserable—for he will know you at last for what you are—a light woman—a—a harlot."

She said the awful word with a sharp, convulsive jerk of the lips, her maiden cheeks flushing, her eyes angry and ashamed; but Deborah merely laughed for the second time.

"Oh, you fool!—you little fool!" she cried. "So that is all you know about love. Shall I tell you what Robert Waring will say when I go to him?" and she quoted in burning tones: "'How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine, and the smell of thine ointment than all spices. . . . Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb—honey and milk are under thy tongue, and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.'"

"'Oh, blasphemous—blasphemous!'" Mary quoted. "How dare you desecrate the Bible like this! The lines from which you quote refer to the Church."

"So you think," Deborah retorted scornfully; "but

you are wrong. Men and women existed before the Church, and this is a love-song. And listen, Mary, this is what my beloved will say to me when I seek him whom my soul loveth; for I can tell you, if you want to know, what he is saying to himself now. It is this, Mary; it is this: 'Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon thee.' "

Her voice blazed with triumph; it rang forth like a clarion voice, and her eyes were as the flaming eyes of the nymphs of old when they waited in the groves of Apollo for the coming of the god. She was as a soul possessed—a soul on fire.

Mary shrank back. She felt half blinded by the blaze of passion in Deborah's eyes, scorched, ashamed; nor did she even venture to put out a hand to stop her sister-in-law as the woman turned to make her way to the house, murmuring in low, ecstatic tones:

" 'A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me—he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts.' "

Mary covered her hot cheeks with her hands.

"Oh," she whispered, "what is this thing called love? May I never meet it naked like this again—naked and unashamed."

## CHAPTER XVI

"AND she's with him, you say, Mary; she's living with him—my Deborah?"

Adam Fielder spoke in low, agonised tones, and the strong man—the great Empire-builder—shuddered from head to foot, and then sank down limply, heavily, into the chair his sister pushed forward, just as a man might sink who had suddenly heard his death sentence pronounced.

"Adam, dear—brother mine—what can I do to comfort you? Oh, my dear, dear brother, what can I say to console you? Your sorrow is beyond the help of words; a knife has been thrust into your heart—I know it, dear—I know it."

Mary knelt on the ground by her brother's side and bowed her head on his knees, for she dared not look into his face, study his stricken countenance. She could have cursed the sunshine, the bright golden sunshine that filled the beautiful old-world drawing-room of Radstone Manor, for it was to Radstone Adam Fielder had hurried directly he had arrived in England after his return from South Africa, ~~hastening~~, as he believed, to the house where he would find his wife and his sister staying. But it was only to be met by Mary, who confronted him with an ~~astonishing~~, and murmuring out that she had ~~something to tell him~~—something that he must hear at once—~~saw him into~~

the large oak-panelled drawing-room, and then told him in faltering tones how Deborah had left her home over a fortnight ago to join Robert Waring in London ; and that it was Waring whom she had loved in the past, though she had kept that fact a secret from Adam Fielder, just as Mary had kept it a secret.

Adam had hardly been able to take things in first of all. He had listened to all his sister had to say in a dull amaze, keeping a heavy silence, and it was not till Mary drew the one and only letter she had received from Deborah from her pocket and commenced to read it aloud, that the situation appeared to dawn upon him, and matters to become clear to his comprehension.

It was quite a long letter that Deborah had written, but every word in it was trenchant and to the point. She began by saying that she thought it only right to inform Mary that she had left Radstone Manor for good and all, and that she had made her way to London, to Waring's flat, where she had found him ill—very ill. He was suffering, as far as she could make out, from a sharp attack of pleurisy, and his constitution was exceedingly enfeebled owing to the way he had been drugging himself with hasheesh for the last two months, and other excesses of which he had been guilty. He had been too dazed by her unexpected advent to raise any objections when she told him that she had come there to nurse him, and had yielded willingly enough to her ministrations.

She had had a doctor to see him, and the doctor was very doubtful if he would pull through the attack, for he had allowed himself to get into a shocking condition of health. Deborah had dismissed Ward and his wife, for they were disposed to be offensive. But she had engaged two other servants, and she explained

that she had represented to the doctor that she was married to Waring, but that they had quarrelled and separated in the past.

"For what do a few lies more or less matter?" she wrote, "and the fiction I have started makes my position easier. Besides, I am Robert's wife in very truth—no one can come between us now—I have burnt my boats. The oath I swore on the Bible in the past I have broken, just as I have been false to the promises I made your brother before the Registrar a few short weeks ago. I am beyond the pity of man, I expect, or the pardon of God. But though you may not believe me, I am happy—happy as I never thought to be. He is dying—his hours are, practically speaking, numbered, but it doesn't matter—nothing seems to matter, for at the last—the very last, we have sought and found each other, and we understand that this was what was meant from the beginning. We were never intended to part, and though we drifted asunder, we had to come together again—it was absolutely inevitable. Don't you understand, Mary? It had to be; and we are neither of us the least sorry, nor are we penitent, we are just—together."

She signed her Christian name to this strange epistle, merely her Christian name, "Deborah," and Mary's tears had blistered the written pages as she read them, but her tears were powerless to efface a line—a word.

"When did she go to him?" Adam spoke in hoarse tones.

"She left Radstone the very day I brought her the news about Robert," Mary answered in hushed tones. "She just went into the house, got her purse, and put on a hat and walked straight to the station. She didn't even think of ordering a carriage or using the

motor, but just tramped along the dusty way. I followed her, when I discovered that she had left the house, and I overtook her on the road that leads up to the station, but she would not listen to a word that I said to her—she simply turned a deaf ear to all my pleading. She seemed to be obsessed by the idea that she must be with Robert—that he wanted her, and oh, darling Adam, I feel at the bottom of my heart that she's mad—she must be mad; no sane woman would have acted as Deborah has done—she would have been too ashamed."

He shook his head slowly, the head that he would never hold as high as he had once held it.

"Hush ye, Mary, hush," he said gently. "She's got beyond shame, has Deborah; she's got into a land where neither you nor I would care to go—a land where it is not well that any should wander."

He leaned heavily forward in his chair. "You didn't know, Mary, did you, that this man, Robert Waring, shot Deborah's husband dead? Certainly Krillet would have killed Deborah otherwise, but still old Krillet met his death at Waring's hands, and Deborah and Waring between them saw to his quick burying, thrust his corpse hastily into a roughly-made coffin, and buried him stealthily."

"No, I didn't know this," Mary answered slowly, "but it accords with all the rest; I—I am not surprised."

Her voice was hoarse with emotion, and her tears began to drip down her face; but her pity was all for her brother, for she was beginning to realise that her love for Waring had indeed become a thing of the past—a mere girlish infatuation. But the love Adam had given Deborah was different, the whole harvest of a man's soul, and the woman had



betrayed him—yes, the woman Deborah had betrayed him.

“Adam, don’t you hate her?—don’t you hate him?”

“I don’t know, Mary. But it seems to me as if it wouldn’t be a bad thing to take the law into my own hands and to slay this man Waring, just as he slew Simeon Krillet, acting on the principle of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

“Oh no, Adam.” Mary clung to her brother desperately. “For God’s sake don’t do anything rash or violent, don’t stain your hands with blood. Besides, if Deborah’s letter is true, Robert is dying—dying of pleurisy, so let him die in peace, and God forgive him, I say—God forgive him.”

“Ah, I had forgotten that Deborah thinks he is dying.” A grave reflectful note came into Adam’s voice. “Maybe it isn’t true, though,” he added; “perhaps she has exaggerated things and he will recover; her love may pull him through, snatch him back from the very jaws of death. For, mark you, such things have happened before, and will happen again; and what punishment am I to mete out to this man and woman if Waring recovers his strength and they continue to live in sin together—breaking God’s laws?”

“Don’t trouble to punish them,” Mary cried; “best let them be, Adam. They are wicked—wicked, and they will meet their reward in due time—their fitting reward.”

“I shouldn’t like to call Deborah wicked.” He pushed Mary gently from him as he spoke, and rose up to his full height. The anguished look in his eyes was a pitiful thing to see; his lips trembled, the lips that only a few weeks ago had been subduing a nation to his will.

"No, wicked is a hard word to apply to Deborah," he continued, "for the poor soul has just drifted to where she is. She's been like a leaf that some mighty wind gets hold of and blows as it listeth—blows into the furnace; and he, the man—— Well, when you come to think things over calmly and reasonably, how can we blame Waring—for he didn't know, you see, as he lay on his sick-bed, that Deborah was coming to him. Perhaps he would have forbidden her to come if he had had any knowledge of what was in her mind. But when she was there—actually there, bending over him, maybe her breast heaving, her red lips parting, her eyes lit up and shining as I have never seen them shine, her hair—her lovely hair that has the scent of all the spice of the world in it—wafting sweet fragrance to his nostrils—— Oh, by the dear Lord who made me, I don't blame the man if he took what the woman so freely offered, for I know what I should have done myself if Deborah had come to me—shod, as it were, on flame; why, I'd have risen from my death-bed and thrown my arms about her, and have died with my mouth on her mouth, my heart fainting on her heart."

"Not if your love had been sin," Mary whispered. "I know you better than you know yourself, Adam. You would never, never have been false in any way to your neighbour—you would never have robbed your neighbour of his wife."

"I don't know, Mary." He rubbed a heavy hand across his forehead. "Maybe I shouldn't have considered that my neighbour had any part or claim in Deborah—I might have held that she was mine, and have laughed at all man-made laws and social conventions; I might have said, indeed, it's very possible that I should have said: 'She was mine, this woman,

before there was a universe at all—before God started putting things in motion—and this is our moment—the moment we have waited for through all the æons, the ages, the centuries, and being our moment, we take it. Ah, I guess if Deborah had come to me as she has gone to Waring, I shouldn't have thought much of my neighbour, or what was his and what wasn't—I should just have laid hands on what was mine."

Mary shivered. "Oh, Adam, that I should ever hear you say things like this," she panted. "You who are so just and upright by nature! Why, Deborah has bewitched you. I think—but, dear, take steps to rid yourself of your false wife, pluck her from your side like a thorn. Can you not have your marriage annulled—that Registry Office affair?—thank God you were never married in church!"

He nodded his head slowly, solemnly. "Ah, perhaps that would be the best thing to do—to set Deborah free. And it can be done easily enough; we have never come together. The law would put little difficulty in the way of the annulment of the marriage, and I would rather annul it than divorce Deborah. I wouldn't shame her in the eyes of the world, for she's dear to me still, wonderfully dear, and it's her happiness that I desire above all, far more than my own happiness—let her find it where she can."

"What, you want her to be happy?" Mary looked up in dazed surprise.

"Surely," he answered. "Have I not just told you that I love her? Besides, she's trodden a hard path for a great many years, a very hard path; she's bruised her little naked feet upon sharp stones. She's had wonderfully little happiness in her life, and an immense deal of tragedy and sorrow. And as for Waring, why, he's had a bad time too—he's suffered;

and if they can be happy together now, if he recovers his strength and gets up from his sick-bed, why in God's name should I want to be a judge—a persecutor? No, I'll set Deborah free to marry Waring if she wants to, and he shall take her for his wife—he shall give her his name—she shall wear his ring, and I'll stand by and see them married. For oh, my Deborah, my Deborah, I want to put you back again amongst the ranks of the honourable women; I don't want to see you shamed and in the dust."

"God will not forgive her so easily." Mary's eyes blazed with virginal scorn. But Fielder, moving up to her, laid a heavy hand upon her shoulder.

"Are you so sure of that, Mary—are you so certain? Who was it the Lord visited first on the Resurrection Day? Wasn't it Mary of Magdala herself, the woman who loved much and to whom much was forgiven? Besides, how can we tell how God really judges these things—what He counts as sin, or what He doesn't count as sin?"

"We know the Ten Commandments by heart," she answered, "and what happens to those who break them."

"We don't know anything really, Mary," he retorted wearily. "But there, my poor girl, you've had your bad time, too—you've suffered horribly, for you loved Waring—you loved him deeply, and you've lost him—Deborah has taken him from you."

"I gave him up of my own free will," Mary answered, drawing herself up proudly, "and I am thankful I did so—thankful. I could never love anyone whom I did not respect. And oh, Adam dear, when all this is over, you and I must just make up our minds to be thankful that matters have turned out as they have done, for Deborah would have made you a bad wife,

just as Robert would have made me a shocking husband, and perhaps in the future"—her eyes grew dreamy, and her smile reflectful—"we may meet others."

"Yes, dear." He nodded his head approvingly. "That's the right way to look at it, for you will meet some good fellow later on—you are certain to do so, and there will be a happy marriage for you ultimately. But as for me—well, don't you go worrying your head about me, Polly, for I shall get along all right too. But I'm not going to marry, mark you, so you must not be trying to find a wife for me, please. I shall devote myself entirely to South Africa; that land will become my bride, my spouse; I will wed her, and none shall part us, and I will bring out all her hidden sweetness; I will make her blessed among the nations, and she shall be to me what Deborah would have been."

His voice broke as he said the last words, and his eyes grew dim and misty.

"I love her so," he muttered, "God help me—I love her so, but she was not for me, and I ought to have known it. Women like Deborah never have more than one great passion in their lives—they couldn't—it would not be possible—and she was honest with me, she told me all about the other man—all she kept to herself was his name. Oh, I made a fatal mistake when I fancied that I could make Deborah forget her first love; I ought to have known that she was not one of those women who find it easy to forget—but 'twas all because I loved her so dearly, I suppose, and wanted her so badly."

He began to walk up and down the long, wide room, and mellow September sunshine shone on his drawn, suffering face; he trod with lagging steps.

"I must go up to London and see her—see him—I must go at once, Polly."

Mary cast a swift glance at the clock ticking away on the mantelpiece.

"It is too late, Adam dear; you couldn't possibly go to-day. See, it's six o'clock now—you wouldn't be up in town till close on ten—go to-morrow."

"To-morrow?"—he shook his head hastily. "No, Mary, it must be now—at once. Why, Polly, I cannot rest till I have seen—had speech with her—seen how I can best put matters straight."

"But it isn't to be borne," Mary interrupted fiercely, "that you should only think of Deborah and not of yourself."

"Little Polly"—he held up a shaking forefinger—"when a man cares as deeply for a woman as I care for Deborah—why, it's just of her he thinks—it is her well-being—her happiness that he considers."

"But what about his own happiness?" she queried eagerly.

Adam smiled, a smile that lit up and transformed his whole face.

"His happiness? Oh, he isn't particularly concerned about that—why should he be?"

Mary set her lips tightly together, then turned sharply on her brother.

"She isn't worth thinking about—helping. She is a wicked woman, Adam, don't you know that she is?"

He made no answer, only walked heavily towards the door, and a second later it closed behind him.

Mary drew a deep breath.

"He is going to her," she sobbed, "she can draw him to her still. She is a witch, for I am afraid I love her too—love her against my sober judgment and my reason, for she has done her best to break my brother's heart. Still, utterly lost though she is, utterly

worthless, oh, I pity her, and I would help her if I could. But she has put herself beyond the reach of help; she stands on shaking quicksands, and sooner or later they will suck her down—down to the lowest depths—even to the Pit itself.”

The words fell slowly, falteringly, from Mary's pale lips, and she shuddered violently, muttering to herself a moment later: “So Robert shot and killed Deborah's husband; what will the reckoning be for that—the price that must be paid?”

## CHAPTER XVII

LATE that evening, much later than he had thought would be the case, Adam Fielder reached London. His motor, the great white car, had broken down twice on the way, something going wrong with the steering gear, and it was getting on for twelve o'clock at night before Adam finally stopped the car in front of the high block of buildings where Waring had rented a flat.

He looked very sad and grey, not the fine happy man who had landed at Southampton that morning, well satisfied with the way he had straightened out affairs in South Africa and forced lying and malicious enemies to lick the dust, a proud bridegroom rejoicing to feel that he would be with his bride in a few short hours, Jovian in his exalted and triumphant mood—a conquering and all-successful statesman—a happy lover.

For his pride had been laid low in the dust, his heart broken in his breast; and a woman had done this, the woman he had turned to in his ripe, magnificent manhood and offered to raise to a throne by his side, the woman he had looked to for help and encouragement as he served the country that meant more to him than any other land—his South Africa—the woman who had failed and betrayed him.

Yet he did not seek Deborah out to condemn her, nor would he throw one stone at her shamed head,



Simeon Krillet, armed with the authority of the Book, had sought to take his wife's life when he had made the fatal discovery that she loved the stranger who dwelt within his gates; but Simeon Krillet's way was not Adam Fielder's. Nor did Adam blame Waring greatly.

He judged the guilty man and the guilty woman with a charity and a forbearance that could only have been possible to a great soul, a soul above all mean instincts and gifted with the most amazing sympathy.

The flats were plunged into partial darkness owing to the lateness of the hour, but a porter conveyed Fielder up to Waring's flat in the lift, and gave him some information on the way.

"Glad you've come, sir. Mr. Waring's much worse, I believe, and them two silly maids that Mrs. Waring got in after she came left the poor lady early this afternoon—fair frightened they were to stay. He was dying, they said, and the mistress going on something awful—screaming to him not to leave her—raving and shrieking that death itself shouldn't part them. But it's quiet enough in the flat now. Shouldn't be surprised if the silly girls came back to-morrow—'twas their nerves gave way all at once."

"And she is alone with him, then—a dying man—deserted even by her cowardly servants." Adam clenched his big hands together, his anger burning within him.

The porter nodded his head.

"That's so, sir, alone since four o'clock to-day, and the doctor hasn't been round since Mr. Waring swore he'd do better without him—that was about four days ago. He took a dislike to the doctor—so the maids told me—called him a fool to his face, and she—I'm meaning the lady, sir—didn't seem to want

the doctor hanging about either. Thinks herself a mighty good nurse; but I know what pleurisy is—was in hospital with it a matter of two years ago—nearly snuffed out—and Mr. Waring—well, he let himself get shocking bad before he took to his bed. 'Twas a touch of malarial fever first of all; then he drinks and takes nasty drugs, and after he's been playing Old Harry with himself for weeks, goes out walking, if you please, and takes a fresh cold, and there you are!"

Adam silenced the loquacious porter with a frown. They were standing outside Waring's flat, and the man showed every disposition to go on talking for another hour, well pleased to discuss horrors, and evincing all the morbid characteristics of his class. But Adam, consumed with anxiety to know what was passing behind the closed door, could hardly control his impatience.

"How are we going to get in?" he asked. "Will she come and open the door herself?"

"Not likely." The porter hesitated for a second, staring at Adam thoughtfully; then he appeared to come to some inward decision. "I could let you in, sir, if you're a friend of Mr. Waring's or the lady's, for Kate Meadows—that's the parlourmaid—gave me the latch-key the maids always used, just before she and cook slipped off. I was to return it to the lady. It was in Kate's purse, and she'd forgotten it till outside the flat. Here 'tis, sir, anyway."

He put his hand inside one of his pockets and drew out a small latch-key, then held it out, but somewhat diffidently, to Adam.

"That's all right," the South African explained. "I know Mr. Waring well enough to tell you that I had better be let into the flat; and she—the lady—

knows me too, and I wish to help her to the utmost of my power."

"She wants a friend, I'm thinking." The porter nodded his head gravely, then extended the latch-key to Adam, whose hand shook slightly as he received it; for he knew now that in a few moments—a very few moments—he would be face to face with Deborah, and his heart beat passionately as this thought occurred. Perspiration broke out on his forehead.

"Thank you, porter." He experienced some little difficulty in speaking, his voice sounding strangely hoarse and unfamiliar to his own ears. "I'll go straight in. Perhaps you had better wait outside in case you might be wanted. By the way, do you know the address of that doctor you spoke of? For if Mr. Waring is as bad as you think, a doctor surely ought to be sent for. The man cannot die without a doctor being in charge of his case; it would make things so terribly unpleasant for—for her."

The porter—he was a good-tempered-looking young man—scratched his head sympathetically. "I know, sir. Every word you say is true—gospel truth; but I tell you Mr. Waring has been just as if he was off his head for the last month—so queer and moody—and the lady, she doesn't seem much better, according to the maids. Why, she's jealous of anyone being near him except herself; she turned on Kate once when the girl just ventured to shake up one of his pillows, turned on her like a tigress. Oh, we've had queer doings here, sir, I can assure you; but there, I'm not one to gossip—never was—and I've nothing to do with the ways of the tenants of these flats. It's a matter for the company, not for me—a matter for the company."

He drew back a little as he said the last words and

watched Adam insert the latch-key into the street door and open it slowly and cautiously; and then both men listened—listened attentively—and it seemed as if they could hear a woman singing, or rather chanting, and Adam recognised Deborah's voice, recognised it with immense thankfulness, for a horrible dread had been consuming him for the last few minutes—a fear too terrible to put into words.

"That's the lady, sir, we can hear her. She's all right—but it's queer to be crooning like that, isn't it, when she's nursing a sick man?"

"Hush!" Adam spoke authoritatively, then he walked boldly into the flat, but he left the door ajar and the porter on guard outside.

The air felt curiously heavy and oppressive, and there was a faint sickly fragrance about it, a strange scent that reached Adam's nostrils and made him wonder from whence it came. There were no lights burning at all, but his feet sank into a heavy carpet and he realised that he was standing in the passage, for he had already made his way down what appeared to be a little hall, guided by Deborah's voice.

He pulled a matchbox out of his pocket and he struck a light, and the match enabled him to perceive that he was standing quite close to the electric light switch. He flicked it with his fingers, and the long passage was flooded with light immediately. Adam was then able to perceive that the passage ran the entire length of the flat, and that there were doors stretching out to each side; and he noticed, for all his senses were keenly on the alert, what an extremely effective frieze adorned the cool green wall-paper, a frieze of red apples; and the rich carpet had evidently come from a Persian loom; heavy Oriental curtains were draped over each door; a curious luxury

prevailed. But how heavy the whole flat felt—how—how oppressive, and how still it was except for that curious chanting that Deborah was indulging in! Adam had never heard her sing before.

He made his way up to the room where she must be—the room from which the faint sound proceeded—and then his courage failed him, for he wondered what sort of a reception he would get at her hands; if she would be furious with him for having sought her out and deliberately forced an entry into Waring's flat. Besides, the shock of his unexpected presence might be bad for the sick man. Only what was he to do?—what could he do? It would be impossible to go away and leave Deborah alone—Deborah whom every servant had deserted as though she had the plague. Besides, a very few moments would be sufficient to prove to Deborah that he had come to help and not to harm her—to forgive and not to upbraid. There would be no jealous husband raising a gun at her head this time; there would only be the man who was ready to release her from the vows she had sworn, the promise she had made; a man who would put it in her power to be married to Waring if the invalid ever rose up from his bed of sickness, for the only word of reproof—of reproach—that Adam would utter to Deborah would be the simple words: "Sin no more."

He would do his utmost to make her path straight for her—smooth and passable.

He set his teeth tight, and opening the door of Waring's bedchamber, walked slowly in—to start back on the threshold.

The room was half shrouded in darkness. Only a flickering candle burnt on the dressing-table, a candle that had been hastily and somewhat crookedly thrust

into a silver candlestick. The electric lights had not been turned on, and the room was full of fantastic shadows, for notwithstanding the intense heat of the evening, dark purple silk curtains had been drawn across the windows. An air of singular confusion prevailed in the apartment; a woman's slippers rested on the big arm-chair—little red slippers, evidently hastily thrown down—whilst tossed into a corner lay a hat—a hat that Adam remembered having once seen on Deborah's head; and thrown carelessly on the hat rested a long pair of white gloves. There was a tray on another chair, a tray on which a cup of soup stood, but the soup had not been touched.

The curtains had been partially drawn round the bed; they were of purple silk just like the window curtains, and considerable care had been bestowed upon the decoration of the bedroom. The walls were a dark purple with a white frieze, a frieze of classic design. The purple carpet—a deep velvet pile—added to the general harmonious effect, and the rich mahogany of the furniture caught the flickering candlelight. But it was not like an ordinary bedroom, and it impressed Adam unfavourably. It was too heavy—too sumptuous—what he should call an unhealthy room. And what was Deborah singing—crooning and chanting to herself—Deborah whom he could dimly catch a glimpse of from where he stood as she bent over the bed?

She was all in white, in some loose dressing-gown, and her unbound hair fell about her shoulders; her neck was bare at the throat, but her face looked pinched and pale; there was no colour in her lips even—the lips that had been as a thread of scarlet.

He could not see Waring's face—the curtains had been pulled too far forward; but he thought that the

man's body lay curiously still under the bed-clothes—painfully rigid; and in God's name—oh, in God's Almighty name!—what was Deborah chanting—singing softly to herself?

“‘ I rose up to open to my beloved, and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet-smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock.

“‘ I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone; my soul failed when he spake; I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer! ’”

She was chanting lines from the Song of Songs, she was singing the song dead lips had sung before, she, whom three men in their time had compared to the Shulamite: and Deborah put strange unearthly notes into her voice, such notes as Adam had never heard, such wild, weird notes as he prayed to God he would never hear again.

He advanced farther into the bedroom. His footsteps made little sound upon the soft carpet, and Deborah did not appear to heed his entrance. He was able to make his way round to where she was standing before she even perceived that some one had entered the room. And when she looked up there was no light of recognition in her eyes; and she merely put a finger to her lips as though commanding silence from the intruder, and pointed to that which lay on the bed—a dead man.

“‘ My beloved is white and ruddy; the chiefest among ten thousand.

“‘ His head is as the most fine gold; his locks are bushy and black as a raven.’”

She sang the words loudly, almost triumphantly—no crooning now—and as she sang she bent over Robert Waring, and her hair covered his dead face

like a veil, and the pain and the terror of it all was almost more than Adam Fielder could stand. His limbs shook under him, and he felt as sick as a green girl might have felt; his whole body turned wet and cold; he could hardly breathe; the sickly sweet air choked him.

"Deborah!" He whispered her name in low tones. "My poor Deborah, let me take you away—Deborah—it's all over—don't you understand—it's all over?"

"I sought him, but I could not find him—I called him, but he gave me no answer." She had begun to croon the lament of the Shulamite again, and her cry was that of a woman who would go hungry all her life, a woman seeking for what she could never find. It was the cry of the Shulamite struggling amidst the water floods, the Shulamite whom the deep waters had overwhelmed.

"Deborah!" He ventured to lay a hand gently on her shoulder, and would have led her from the bedside, but she clung fiercely to the dead man, and there was madness in her eyes; for the curse had come upon the woman Deborah—she was as the foolish who have no understanding. Her soul had passed with the passing of Robert Waring's soul; she was as dead to her world as he was dead—mad—a mere madwoman, a grey thing who would dwell amongst grey shadows—a shadow herself—mad!

He could not release her clasp of her dead lover's neck, and the cold lips of the mad woman clung desperately to the colder lips of the dead man; and, hardly knowing what he did, Adam Fielder pulled the purple curtains around both of them—Waring lying stiff and stark on his bed, Deborah stretched cravingly across his body.



Adam staggered helplessly to the door. He had entered that room a few short seconds ago prepared to forgive both Deborah and Waring for the wrong they had done him, to condone and conceal their offence; but it appeared that God had no intention of forgiving either the man or the woman—that God had punished as He saw fit.

And so old Simeon Krillet's words had fulfilled themselves in due season: "the soul that sinneth shall surely die"; and Simeon Krillet's blood had been avenged.

" 'He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.' "

Deborah's voice, piercing shrill, yet piercing sweet, followed Adam Fielder as he swayed and reeled like a drunken man down the long passage, and he recognised it for the voice of the Shulamite chanting to the Beloved.

THE END

