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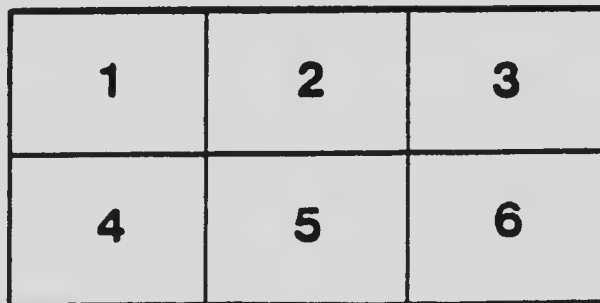
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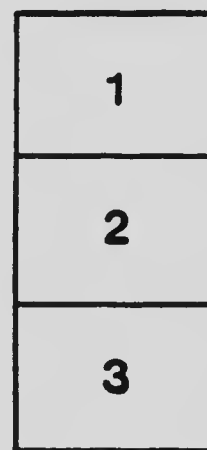
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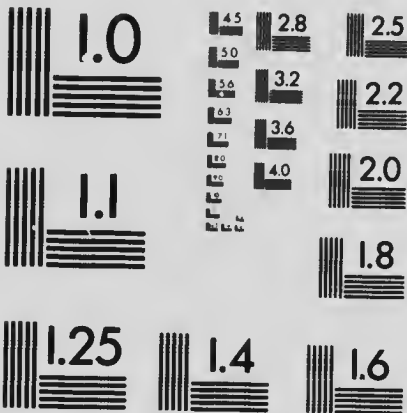
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BY
COUNTESS BARCYNKA

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ROSE O' THE SEA



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ROSE O' THE SEA

A Romance

BY

THE COUNTESS BARCYNKA

Author of "The Honey Pot," "Love Maggy," "Sanity Jane," etc.



TORONTO

THOMAS ALLEN

BOSTON AND NEW YORK

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

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ROSE O' THE SEA

ROSE O' THE SEA

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CHAPTER I

ALL day long Rose had been walking. In her grief she had covered miles. She could not have remained inactive in the little peaceful Cornish village that lay in the sun: every one there watched her so curiously, so covertly. No one had come up to her after the funeral. Up here, amongst the rocks and crags, she could cry her heart out. She derived a certain solace from these frowning rocks. They were gaunt and solemn, yet kind; they reminded her of him. Sunshine was not in her to-day, in her who was usually all radiance and happy laughter, a sunbeam of a girl.

Henry Eton, the queer old man who had named her for the wild roses on the shore, who had been father and mother and nurse to her, was gone, and she was alone as on the day when the sea had brought her to him, flotsam then, flotsam again.

Eton had no friends in the village. He was not of the class to foregather with the fisher-folk, and beyond these there were only the Vicar and his wife. Against these two old Eton had shut his door, forbidding intimacy. He was just a recluse, an eccentric mystery from beyond the seas. He had come amongst them seventeen years ago, had settled there, lived his own life — and died.

Some ancient labels on still more ancient boxes bore

the name of an American township; his speech, had any one been curious enough to classify it, was that of Connecticut. Taciturn himself, he had appreciated the equal taciturnity of these Cornish people, their lack of peasant curiosity, almost their dislike.

Up to the night of the wreck, sixteen years ago, he had lived alone. Then the waves had laid Rose at his feet. No one had wanted the baby, though some fisherman's wife no doubt would have succoured it, had not old Eton picked it up in his arms and claimed it from that night on. All that life had taught Rose, all that love could give her, had come from his hands. He had brought her up without help of a woman, and she had grown as a flower grows. Of life as it is, of men and women, she knew nothing. She had a flower's innocence and a flower's beauty. She had not mixed enough with the village people to acquire their dialect. If anything, her speech, learnt from her foster-father alone, had some of the archaic quaintnesses of New England.

Old Eton had gloried in her. The girl was a human blossom, but wild — wild as the sea that had flung her up, as the winds that had whistled or sung her to sleep night after night — a child of Nature, whole and whole-some as Nature herself, as much a creature of moods.

From the beginning she had seemed like a rose to Eton. Any other name had seemed inappropriate.

Eton had taught her very little of books but he had taught her to love the sea in all its moods (though that surely was in her blood), nights under the stars, the joy of wide and wind-swept spaces. For he had been a wild, strange old man.

Of his life prior to his arrival in that remote Cornish village he had never spoken, even to Rose. In this one

respect she knew as little about her adopted father as did the people amongst whom he lived. It had never occurred to her to be curious about him, any more than it had entered her calculations to envisage that, one day, death would take him from her. Now this had happened without warning or farewell. Her personal desolation was so great that nothing else counted.

In a stricken way she had suffered others to make the simple funeral arrangements, had followed the loved remains to the graveside, dressed as he would have had her dressed, — print-frocked and bareheaded, — disdaining the doleful garb of black provided for her by the well-meaning if over-zealous Vicar's wife.

After the funeral, Rose had not gone straight home. Her instinct was to seek comfort out here in the open, away from the sight of those who would pry upon grief.

And, after many hours, comfort came to her; a sense of loneliness removed, of invisible companionship.

Instinctively, she fell on her knees — she who knew nothing of stereotyped prayer because Eton had never taught her to pray. And words came to her lips that surely were a supplication for the repose of her loved one's soul.

Then, strengthened, how or why she could not have told, she got on her feet, and started towards home.

Now, strangely enough, she no longer dreaded going back to the little cottage where she had lived so happily for the sixteen years of her joyous life. Eton would not be there for her to see, but she would feel him near her, just as she felt his presence now. *He* would be lonely if she stayed away longer. She hurried on.

CHAPTER II

ON the outskirts of the village lived bedridden Rebecca Gryls, the oldest woman in those parts. She had been cradled in superstition, grown wise in it, traded in it. Young men and maidens sought her in fear and trepidation. She could look forward into the shrouded future and back into the darkest past; an evil woman, people said, whom nevertheless it was not wise to shun. Even tourists, greatly venturing, had sometimes located this ancient mystery woman and crossed her palm with silver to open the gates of futurity.

Rose was a friend of hers. Rose was not frightened of her. Rose had sat up with her all one wild long night when the wind had been calling for her soul, which old Rebecca had not been ready to surrender.

From her bed by the window she had seen the gull run by her cabin that morning on her grief-stricken way to the rocks. Now, in the late afternoon, she saw her returning home again, and called to her as she passed.

Rose paused on the threshold and went in.

"I can't stay, Becky," she said. "I promised Mr. Bree and his wife and a lawyer I would see them in the cottage at six. What will the lawyer be for?"

Old Becky chuckled.

"For all the fortune that is coming to you, Rose," she answered. "Hurry home now and hear about it."

Rose shook her head.

"What is a fortune?" she asked.

Becky's black eyes twinkled cannily.

"Money. More money than you've ever seen. Gold! More gold than you can ever count. Gold making gold every day — for *you*! Gold growing and breeding and no stopping it. A flow of gold!"

She licked her lips over the word. There was gold in the stocking under her bed. She counted it and played with it every night when the wind howled and she could not sleep.

"I should n't know what to do with money," pondered Rose.

Becky chuckled again.

"You'll know what to do with it when the time comes. You'll be a great lady, Rose. I see diamonds shining in your hair."

Rose shook her damp curls.

"Sea-spray, Becky. You're dreaming."

Becky put out a hand like a bird's claw and reached for Rose's. It was a little hand, tanned and taper-fingered. Old Becky fondled it.

"You'll have more diamonds than you can wear on all the fingers of your hands," she gloated. "You will kiss a Queen's hand and walk in high places. The world will be at your feet, pretty Rose, and you the richest woman in it. What'll you give old Becky for her stocking if her words come true?"

Rose shook up old Becky's pillow and tidied the bed-clothes.

"Don't talk to me about money," she said. "It can only buy food. Dad hated the sight of it. He found a gold piece once in his pocket and threw it out to sea."

Old Becky spoke oracularly.

"If he had thrown money into the sea all day, Rose,

he'd never have emptied his pockets. Give me my pipe. Go home now — and see."

Rose left her puffing at her pipe and muttering oddly to herself. The little time she had spent with Becky had delayed her. She ran the rest of the way to the cottage and arrived there a quarter of an hour later than she had promised.

The Vicar and his wife were waiting for her. They meant well by Rose, were sorry for her, intended to help her according to their lights. She stood, it seemed to them, in very immediate need of their help. They had this amongst other things to tell her.

The Reverend Mr. Bree emitted several hums and haws. Extempore speech even in conversation was not one of his gifts.

"You're late, Rose," he began. "The lawyer could not wait any longer. He had business in Trethew."

"Not that it matters," his wife put in. "He left us to tell you that he has made a search amongst all your adopted father's effects. He has found no letters, no papers, no will — not a scrap of anything in writing. We are very sorry for you, Rose. We all — everybody — thought he had a little money to leave you."

Rose stared from one to the other.

"Money?" she cried. "Why do you all talk about money? What does it matter? What do I want with it when I've never had it all my life? Old Becky was talking about it just now. I'll live here where he lived till I die, and what I want I can buy with the silver he kept in his drawer. Is n't that enough?"

"Enough?" Mr. Bree stared at her. "There's a small drawer full of shillings and half-crowns. How long do you think that will last you?"

"Years. Won't it?"

"Have you never had the handling of money?" he asked incredulously.

Rose shook her head.

"He'd never let me touch it," she explained. "He said all money was tainted. I don't know what he meant. When we wanted food he bought it. There was always silver in his drawer."

"You had better explain the situation to her," Mrs. Bree said in an undertone.

The Vicar had come for that very purpose, but it was a task he did not relish. He cleared his throat.

"In that drawer," he said in a troubled voice, "there is only enough money to keep you for a few weeks. The cottage you are in belongs to some one else. That is to say, Mr. Eton only rented it, and I am afraid he was in arrears for rent. Your position, my poor child, is a peculiarly difficult one. In fact, if my wife had not suggested a plan whereby we may ourselves help you, you would be in sad case indeed."

Here Mrs. Bree lifted the burden from his shoulders.

"I am willing to take you into our house, and train you as a maidservant," she said. "We could not afford to pay you any wages. We can only keep one maid as it is. But we will provide for you suitably and give you a start in life."

Rose had gone very white. She looked round the four walls of the little cottage parlour in a helpless way. To leave it all! It seemed incredible, impossible. She shrank from the thought of it.

"Of course," pursued the Vicar's wife, a shade sternly, "you will have to conform to a more regular life than you've led hitherto. And you would have

to dress suitably in black, and wear white aprons and — ”

“Could I take my bed in the garden at night?”

“Certainly not. You would sleep with cook, rise when she rises, help her with her work, listen for the bells, and answer them and learn to be generally useful.”

Rose stared in stupefaction at the good lady.

“Dressed in black! Answering bells!” she ejaculated. “Dress in black and stay indoors in the summer-time when the birds are singing and the flowers are awake and blowing.”

“But you would have good food and a roof over your head.”

Rose flung out her arms.

“What do I want with a roof when there’s a sky above me and star-shine and summer winds?” she cried passionately. “Why should I think about food until it’s time to get it!”

“You would think about it quick enough when you had n’t any at all and you were hungry,” said the lady acidly. She was getting impatient.

The Vicar got up and patted Rose’s shoulder.

“Try and be sensible, my child,” he counselled. “You’re nearly a woman. You’ve got to learn to behave like one—with decency and decorum. You have not been schooled yet at all. It has pained us all these years to see you growing up neglected — ”

“Neglected?” Rose caught him up, her face aflame now, her small hands clenched in sudden fury. “You say that because you don’t know. Who bathed me every night until I was big enough to do things for myself? Who brushed my hair, cooked and mended

for me? Who sat by my side night after night when I was ill? Who taught me everything I know? Tell me that!"

"We are not speaking of physical neglect. We refer to your undisciplined upbringing, your wild habits in general. You may have a certain knowledge of nature, since you have lived so much out of doors, but of life itself you know nothing!"

"Do I not?" she flung back. "I know all the *precious* things. I know where the very first primroses come out. I know where the shyest birds have their nests. I know how to sit so still that the little wild things in the wood, will come out and play around me. I know what it means to be alive, and the joy of it. He taught me all that."

"He was mad, poor old man," said the Vicar's wife with a pious sigh.

"He was the grandest man that ever lived," Rose avowed proudly. She squared her young shoulders and, walking straight to the cottage door, opened it wide. "Old Becky said I was to be the richest girl in the world. She knew. I *am* the richest girl in the world because he loved me. And I'll live as he taught me because I loved him."

Mrs. Bree made a despairing gesture.

"You ungrateful girl! Don't you understand that we want to do our best for you?"

Rose's clear young eyes looked her through.

"You did n't like him," she said. "You called him a mad old man. I could n't live with anyone who thought of him like that." Her lips quivered suddenly as the recentness of her loss recurred to her. "Won't you leave me now?"

"But we can't leave you," Mrs. Bree said hopelessly.
"You can't stay on here, all by yourself. It would not be safe or proper." Her tone sharpened. "Come back with us, child. Don't be stubborn."

The authoritative note in her voice, the cold expression in her eyes were determining factors in Rose's complete revolt. A caress, a tender word, would have sent her sobbing, tamed, into the woman's arms.

"I'll stay here," she said decisively. "And — and if I'm to be turned out, I can pick flowers and sell them. I could do that better than answering bells — dressed in black! I could not breathe like that. I'd burst!"

"You can't sell flowers in a village where they grow for the picking," was the severe correction. "People don't buy flowers — except in London."

Rose looked from one to the other in desperation. Something hard in the expression of both her would-be mentors' faces fired resolution within her. Affectionate restraint she might have borne; disciplined captivity, never.

"Then — I'll go to London," she said.

CHAPTER III

At the base of the fountain in Piccadilly Circus where the flower-girls have their pitch, Mr. Louie paused. Spring was in the air. It pleased his eyes to rest them on these laden, colourful baskets of blooming 'ner-chandise, set him thinking of green glades where daf-fodils grew, of bank-edges blued over by forget-me-nots, and grassy slopes where narcissi nodded in the wind.

Gentle-hearted Mr. Louie had a soul as well as an eye for flowers, albeit he bought them in bulk every morning for the floral department of Gardner's Mam-moth Store. Flowers, as it happens, are one of the rare possessions of which it cannot be said that familiarity breeds contempt. At least Mr. Louie found it so. He truly loved them.

Because he had an eye for colour and almost an artist's instinct for beauty, he was pulled up short by the startling loveliness of one of the flower-girls. She was like a flower herself, innocently blooming and as unconsciously beautiful. In place of the unbecoming garb of the other women to right and left of her — ragged skirt, plaid shawl, dilapidated hat with its un-speakable feather — she wore a clean though faded print frock and a flopping sunbonnet that had once been pink. She looked deliciously young and fresh. Such exceptional attire and so captivating a creature set in the vortex of the great city struck Mr. Louie as something of an anomaly.

It was early morning; the streets were compara-

tively empty; otherwise Mr. Louie could quite imagine that the girl would have attracted undue attention.

Just for a moment he wondered if hers was what he would have called "a theatrical get-up." Her skirts scarcely reached to her knees. Her masses of curly dark hair flowed over her shoulders. unplaited and unconfined.

He gave her a keen glance, admiration mingling with disapproval. The disapproval was not lasting; closer scrutiny made it quite plain that the girl was devoid of artificiality. She was the very incarnation of the countryside. Involuntarily he came to a standstill and addressed her.

"I pass here every day. I have n't seen you before."

Rose looked up, met his kind eyes and smiled the smile of a child. Mr. Louie found himself reminded forcibly of a certain portrait of Lady Hamilton: one of those immortal canvases on which Romney has limned the beautiful Emma as a simple girl, and so given permanent illustration of the eternal spirit of youth triumphant.

"This is my first day here," was the unaffected rejoinder. "Do you think I shall sell any flowers? I've come to London to do that. They're terribly dear to buy. Some one sent me to Covent Garden, but I could n't see a garden anywhere, and these flowers cost all the money I had left." Rose paused before adding thoughtfully: "In my garden they grew for love."

"Have you a garden?" asked the surprised man. "What made you leave it?"

Rose's face clouded.

"It's not my garden any longer. I had to choose

between wearing a hot black dress and answering bells all day, or running away. So I ran away."

"Dear me! Of course you must go back. How old are you? Fourteen?"

She shook her head vehemently.

"Seventeen. And I don't belong to anybody, so I'll stay now I'm here. Still," she proceeded, "I would n't have dared to come if I'd thought London was bigger than Truro. I went there once. Would you like a flower?" she finished eagerly.

"I'll have them all," Mr. Louie said, with businesslike definiteness. "That is, if you'll bring them over to Gardner's across the road." He indicated the position of the big multiple store. "In fact, I think I may be able to help you sell your flowers under more favourable conditions than in the streets. I'll see you in my office. Come over in ten minutes and ask for Mr. Louie. As it happens, we have a vacancy for a flower hand. We'll talk about that, perhaps."

He nodded encouragingly and passed on.

In less than ten minutes he was interviewing Rose in the small private office leading out of Gardner's floral department. He was touched by her apparent forlornness (which, to his perplexity, did not seem to trouble her in the least), anxious to help her if he could.

Nevertheless, these amiable qualities did not prevent him from being extremely businesslike. True, he bought her flowers and paid for them out of his own private pocket. That was a purely personal matter. Even the most acute business man has his soft moments, his generous impulses.

"How would you like to work in there?" he asked,

with a jerk of his head towards the veritable bower of flowers through which she had had to pass on her way to his office.

"Ever so much!" she cried. "It would be more like a garden than the streets. But you would n't find me any use, would you?" she added deprecatingly.

Mr. Louie pressed a bell. An attendant appeared.

"Bring me some sweet-peas and some roses and two flower-bowls," he directed.

When the blooms were brought he turned to Rose.

"Will you please put those in water?" he said.

Rose obeyed. Mr. Louie watched her as she bent over the blossoms, handling them with light, caressing fingers. So engaged, she looked to him more than ever like a flower herself.

But for the moment he was concerned with her work only. In a very few minutes she had arranged the flowers with excellent effect, instinctively blending them, making the utmost of colours and foliage.

"You'll do," he pronounced. "You love flowers, don't you?"

"I love everything that belongs to out-of-doors. Flowers most of all. They're such a wonderful proof."

"Proof? Of what?"

Rose coloured a little, shy of expressing her thoughts.

"Why, that there are things meant simply to be beautiful — things made only to look at. I think it was so kind of the Person who made the world."

"God made the world in six days," said Mr. Louie sententiously, "and rested on the seventh."

"I've heard that. But I think He made flowers on the seventh day to keep it holy."

"Very likely. They certainly help one to be good. Sometimes when I'm tired or my temper is tried I come and look at a vase of flowers, or, better still, flowers growing, and I feel like a child who has been naughty — ashamed of myself." He pulled himself up, suddenly conscious that he was talking a little too familiarly to this waif of the streets.

"That's just it," she agreed eagerly. "You *feel* flowers. So do I. But it's most wonderful of all to walk in a garden at night where the flowers are growing and it's all — hush."

"You will miss a garden," he said in a more matter-of-fact tone. "Only rich people have gardens in London."

Rose sighed. "How poor the poor must be! Perhaps — might I — take a bunch sometimes to my room to make it seem like home?" she asked wistfully.

"Surely. But I have n't engaged you yet. What about a reference?"

"A reference? What's that?"

"Well, some one who can speak for you personally or by letter as to your character and respectability. A clergyman, for instance —"

She shook her head.

"I'm afraid I won't do, then. I only know one clergyman and his wife — the ones who wanted me to dress in black and answer bells. They would n't call me respectable. I don't think I am."

Mr. Louie looked his amazement.

"I mean," Rose explained, "I like being out all day and sleeping out of doors at night."

"You can't do that in London," he interjected decisively.

"I know. I've got a horrid little room. It's in a place called King's Cross, that a porter at the station told me of. When you look out of the window you see nothing but roofs and chimney-pots, and never a blade of grass!" She clasped her hands. "Oh, do let me work for you here! If I can be with flowers all day I may be able to dream of the country at night!"

"Very well," he said; and to himself, "I'll trust my judgment. . . . I'll engage you from to-morrow at eighteen shillings a week to commence. You will have your dinner and tea in the building. You must be measured in our costume department for a suitable dress at once. You'd better stay now you're here and pick up what you can. Miss Hobbs, our principal assistant, will tell you what to do." He hesitated, and went on quickly: "I want you to understand that I am doing an unusual thing in engaging you without enquiry. Because of that I hope you'll behave well in all ways. We like to be careful about our young ladies. We don't encourage them to make friendships with male customers. It's neither good for the prestige of our house or the girls themselves. I'm telling you this for your own sake, because it seems to me you know very little of life."

"I don't understand," said Rose.

"I mean, you must be careful of any men who may want to make friends with you."

Still Rose did not understand.

"But *you* are a man!"

An uncomfortable look came into Mr. Louie's face.

"I am a *business* man," he replied; "and in my business as well as my private life I respect all women."

Rose thought for a minute.

"Don't *all* men respect *all* women?"

Mr. Louie met her innocent eyes.

"Not always, I'm afraid."

Rose said no more. This was her first wordy excursion into the circumstances of life as she might find it, and it required thinking over.

She turned to go, hesitated and came back.

"I have n't thanked you," she said gratefully, "for helping me like this. What makes you so kind?"

Mr. Louie looked at her, and then out of the window for a few moments. A mist had come over his eyes.

"I had a little sister once —" he began, but did not finish the sentence. Then he brisked up: "Come with me. I'll put you in charge of Miss Hobbs."

CHAPTER IV

FROM one till half-past two every afternoon Rose was alone in her kingdom of flowers at Gardner's Mammoth Store, except for any customer who might put in an appearance during the luncheon hour. Of Mr. Louie she saw very little. He was watching her, keeping note of her progress; but he purposely abstained from showing her any favouritism. Others might do that; it was not his way.

In an extraordinary fashion it had come to pass that every one in the huge building, male or female, with whom Rose was brought into contact, any one indeed at whom she smiled or to whom she spoke, instantly became her admirer or friend. She gave out charm just as a flower exudes sweet scent.

From the business point of view she had more than justified Mr. Louie's estimate of her. Her loveliness compelled attention and (or so it seemed to Mr. Louie) enhanced the very desirability of the flowers she sold. She had proved herself remarkably quick and apt.

Even Sir Gerald Gardner, managing director of the great emporium, when on a tour of inspection one day, noticed her, made enquiries about her, and finally congratulated Mr. Louie on his perspicacity in engaging her.

"We must keep an eye on her," he had observed. "A remarkable young woman, Louie. I don't think I have ever seen quite such a perfect beauty. If we're not careful we shall have some West End manager

spotting her for his theatre, or a film-producing Johnnie discovering her, and whisking her off."

"She's best amongst flowers," Mr. Louie remarked.

"Let's hope she'll always think so."

As for Rose herself, as long as she was in the shop tending flowers, arranging them, breathing in their sweetness, she was as happy as the day was long. For all that, loneliness settled on her like a cloud when she returned to her dismal lodging. Then she longed for all she had left behind in Cornwall: the sea, the country, her cottage garden at dusk, the old man whom she had loved with all the intensity of her young being. Those lonely hours were her danger time, although she was far from knowing it.

Just now she was singing while she gave her flowers fresh water. Miss Hobbs was at lunch, Mr. Louie out on business. She was unaware of the entrance of a young man who had come in silently at the swing doors of the floral department, and now stood watching her. He was little more than a boy, but he had the face of a *roué* and tired eyes that for a few moments flickered with interest as they rested on her.

Rose at last became conscious of his regard and looked up. He smiled.

"Now, *are* you coming out with me to-night?" he asked lazily, persuasively, as one who resumes an argument.

Rose gave her head a negative shake. This Corinthian youth was no stranger to her.

"Mr. Louie told me to be very careful of anybody who tried to make friends with me," was her guileless reply.

The boy's expression became amused, but knowing.

"Oh, come now. Surely you can see through that! Who's this Louie, anyway? Some bird who wants to keep you to himself, of course. . . . What do you do in the evening? I bet you don't stay in."

"Indeed I do. One evening I did try to find some fields. I walked and walked. But I never got off pavements. They never seemed to end. So now I sit in my room. There's a big shell on the mantelpiece. I shut my eyes and put it to my ear and try to hear the sea and forget that I'm in London."

"Why forget it?" he asked, and lounged towards her. "It's a ripping old place. You've not seen it yet, not the proper side of it. You're cooped up here all day — and perfectly delicious you look, too. I tell you, when I first saw you through the glass partition a week ago I nearly fell slap into it! I did, b' George! . . . And in the evening you go and bury yourself! I shall *fetch* you to-night. Here's my card, and that's who I am. If I could have got a straight introduction to you I'd have done it."

Rose took the piece of pasteboard. It was engraved "Lord Caister," with the address: "287, Bulkeley Place, S.W.," and "Winter's Club," in the right-hand corner.

"'Lord Caister'!" she read and hesitated over the title. "Is that you? Really?"

"Sorry," he apologised. "I've given you my governor's card by mistake. Don't know how it got there. Same address, though. I'm the hope of the family — Denis Wyndham Mallory. Rather a mouthful, is n't it? Well, we're properly introduced now, or at least I hope so."

Rose was studying him with her grave young eyes.

"I think as you're a lord's son I might come out with you, because you're not an ordinary man like Mr. Louie told me to be careful of. I read a piece of poetry once all about Knights of the Round Table and a wonderful King called Arthur. They were all lords and they all respected women."

The Honourable Denis looked rather at sea. He did not quite follow the drift of Rose's thoughts. Still, it was good enough for him that she had apparently changed her mind about accepting his invitation. In all his short, jaded life he had never come across such a wonder-girl. She made a fellow think of morning dew and open air and other poetic things that seemed obsolete nowadays as applied to women or girls.

"All those Johnnies lived hundreds of years ago," he observed cheerfully. "Jolly good chaps they were, too, I dare say; but I expect they enjoyed themselves when they got the chance. Dare say they championed maidens in distress and all the rest of it, but made love to 'em in between. That need n't have made them any the less respectful, of course," he hastened to add.

Rose was considering.

"I think I'll come out with you to-night," she decided at length. "I'll ask Mr. Louie if I can."

"Shall I fetch you? Or will you meet me? We'll dine at Oddenino's and I'll take you to a theatre. How will that do?"

"I'll meet you. I suppose I can find my way."

The Honourable Denis gave her full directions.

"If you don't turn up I shall come and rout you out," he went on. "You told me your address the other day, you know. I'd half a mind to motor round last night and carry you off. You'd have liked a spin through

Richmond Park far better than sitting with a seashell to your ear and the smell of fried fish in your nose."

"How do you know it smells of fried fish where I live?" she asked quickly. The fact was undoubtedly true and a nightly scourge to Rose.

Denis laughed.

"Because I've been there. I went to King's Cross to locate you. You're as out of place in that unspeakable street as an orchid in a jam-jar. If you were *my* flower I should buy a priceless vase for you, set you in a beautiful room, and worship your beauty. Do you know you're a perfect delight to the eye? I'd like to see you with your hair piled high on top of your little head, a jewelled comb in it, wearing a shell-pink frock trimmed with old lace made by Lucille, and a string of pearls lying warm round your throat. You'd take the shine out of every woman you came across. What will you wear to-night?"

"Oh, any old thing," Rose answered, unconsciously using a colloquialism of the day.

The Honourable Denis Mallory did not appreciate that Rose, unlike all the other females of his acquaintance, was literally as the flowers of the field, taking no heed of her appearance or charm. In the shop she wore a blue overall, and out of it clung to the print dresses which constituted her sole wardrobe.

In one of these, freshly laundered, she kept her appointment with him that evening. She arrived on foot, a little late, a trifle hot, her shoes dusty, her pretty hair escaping from the hairpins to which she had only lately learned to accustom herself.

Denis caught his breath when he saw her. Of course she looked perfectly delightful: a lovely child fresh

from the country. But a man could n't dine with her, dressed like that, at a fashionable restaurant.

"Look here," he said with ready resource, "I've no end of a jolly plan. How would you like to hop into a motor and spin right out into the country and have supper at a little village inn?"

Rose's eyes danced. Her feet nearly followed suit.

"I would love it!" she exclaimed. "Don't let's waste a minute!"

Denis did not intend to waste a minute in any sense of the word. For one thing, Rose's rustic get-up, although a little too distinctive for Regent Street, convinced him of her absolute unsophistication. She was none the less desirable in his eyes. He was tired of the girls he knew; crowds of girls of his own set — and other sets; girls for the most part with young faces and old eyes; girls who knew as much of the world as he did; amusing, witty girls, but not any of them simple and clean-minded like this print-clad baby at his side.

"Come along, then," he said. "Here's a taxi. Hop in."

If Rose had harboured any feelings of misgiving they left her now. True, she had not been able to see Mr. Louie to ask his advice, but she did not think he would mind her enjoying an evening out of doors with a pleasant young man who respected women. Everything was arranging itself delightfully.

When, in less than an hour, they were whirling through twisty country lanes with green fields on either side, her spirits became ebullient.

"Oh! You don't know how I am enjoying myself!" she cried. "How good you are to me!"

He meant to be good to her according to his lights

and in all probability according to hers. She might be simple — she gave that impression — but he did not suppose she was altogether artless. One did n't look for artlessness in a pretty West End florist. Shopgirls were all fair game. Certainly this one had not exhibited an immediate coming-on disposition, the habitual readiness of her kind to be entertained by any fellow who could afford to give her a good time. In fact, she had kept him "guessing" until to-day. He put that down to 'cuteness — the proverbial 'cuteness of the Cockney shopgirl.

This jaunt, away from the blaze of electric-lit streets and the stuffy atmosphere of crowded restaurants, gave him no pleasure. Except for what it promised later on it bored him. Only the reward he looked for made it worth while. It kept him "up to the snaffle," patiently attentive to her.

They dined at a small hotel on one of the lower reaches of the Thames. The river scenery entranced Rose. To her the dinner was a wonderful repast. Denis Mallory, regretting the amenities of Oddenino's, found it a martyrdom. He tried to solace himself with a bottle of doubtful champagne. Rose would not drink anything but water.

Somewhere about half-past eleven — a premature hour in his estimation, an uncenscionably late one in hers — they got back to town. Rose was tired and sleepy. Denis was just beginning to wake up. But he felt he wanted priming: something to make up for a too Arcadian evening in the unspeakable riverside hostelry. So without consulting Rose he put his head out of the cab window and gave the driver the address of a night club of the second rank in which her flat frock would

not attract too much attention or not greatly matter if it did.

There at a supper table she looked with amazement and modes of confusion at the wild dancing, the general unrestraint, the scantily clothed women. Supper with her was a pretence. Nor did Denis do more than employ it as a stimulus to a Tantalus-like thirst to be quenched with cocktails. Rose did not know they were going to his head.

"What a lot of those little pink drinks you are taking!" was all she remarked. "Why don't you have them all at once in one large glass?"

He smiled at her. His eyes had a glassy look.

"If I took 'em all at once I might get tight. It's not lemonade, don't you know."

Lemonade was her drink. She finished what remained of it in her glass.

"I should like to go home now," she said. "I don't very much care for this place. Do you mind?"

"Right-o! That's what I've been waiting for, you little darling."

He got up with alacrity, but staggered a little on the way out, another sign of inebriety that escaped her. But when they were once more in a taxi and she felt his arm round her and his hot breath on her face she recoiled from him. He laughed sottishly and let her go; supposed she was coquettish and himself a little too previous.

At her door in Sidey Street she said a few hurried words of thanks and bade him "Good-night."

"I say! Is n't that to come?" he said, with marked meaning. "That's not the way to thank a fellow. Can't let you go up in the dark, anyway."

The occupants of the house had long since gone to bed. There was only a glimmer of light at the top of the staircase.

"I'd rather you came another time — in the day-time," she replied dubiously.

"To-night's the night'!" he hiccoughed, closing the street door.

She did not realise his condition, had no idea of his intentions. She knew nothing of men. But when they reached her room and once again his arms went round her while she was fumbling with a match-box she felt alarmed. When he mumbled something, although the actual meaning of his words was unintelligible to her, she sensed insult.

"I'll light the candle," she faltered. "Please — no, don't touch me!"

"Oh, bother the light! We can do without it!"

He ignored her request, held her to him, held one of her hands. Matches spluttered and went out. She swayed about trying to release herself. She was more frightened now, more indignant. Her lips were tight shut, but her heart was thumping.

"Don't be unkind, darling. . . . I'm not going to hurt you," he murmured in her ear.

"Then let me go!" she panted.

"Not unless you promise —"

The sentence was never finished. Rose's ire boiled over. So far her resistance had been passive; she had not exerted her strength. But instinct as well as exasperation now made her do so. Her young muscles, full of latent vigour, became tense. For a few moments the pair swayed to and fro in the confined space. Then she got free and flung him off. His foot caught against the

leg of a chair and tripped him. There was a dull thud as his head struck the edge of the fender.

Rose stood in a tremble. With the cessation of the struggle her anger died down. In the faint light reflected against the ceiling from a street lamp she could make out his huddled form. She lit the candle with shaking hands and bent over him.

"Are you hurt?" she cried.

He lay quite still. His breathing was inaudible. She put down the candle and tried to raise him. Then, as his head rolled limply, she was horrified to see blood oozing from a cut on his forehead. It was a mere trickle and the cut a negligible one, but she did not know that, or that his collapse was due more to alcoholic excess than impact with the fender. She thought he was dead, thought she had killed him.

For a little while she was almost demented. She stood over him wringing her hands in anguish. She called to him, shook him. Finally she tried to lift him on to her bed, but could not. The dead-weight in her arms only tended to confirm her worst fears. She wanted help, ministration, though of what sort her mind was too agitated to tell. Not from her landlady. Some reasoning capacity told her she would be useless. Whom then to appeal to? In its devious way memory came to her aid, holding up to her mental vision the name and address she had read on a visiting card that afternoon — "Lord Caister, 287, Bulkeley Place, S.W."

She had no idea in which direction it lay nor how far off it was. Her one and only consideration was to get there. Down the stairs she flew in hot haste, out into the night.

CHAPTER V

THE hands of the old bracket clock on the library mantelpiece pointed to 12.30 A.M. With a sigh Lord Caister put down the book he was reading. It was a disappointing life-history of a young aristocrat, and provided too close a parallel with a trouble of his own to make pleasant reading.

As usual, his son was not in yet: as usual, the father was waiting up for him. It had perforce become necessary of late that he should never retire before the boy made his belated appearance; equally necessary that the servants should not see the flagrant condition of the heir when he did so. It hurt Caister's pride to think that strangers, and above all servants, should be in a position to scoff at one of his name. The frailties of his son, the smudges the boy had already made on one of the fairest escutcheons of England, were the sorrow of the father's life. It seemed to Caister so curiously unfair that he, a man of almost rigid principles, should have a moral weakling for an heir. The motherlessness of the boy from early childhood had perhaps adversely affected his mental fibre. He lacked the restraining moral hand on his shoulder. Only an iron one would avail now.

The sound of the front-door bell pulled violently broke the stillness of the house. Caister left the room to answer it himself. The servants had gone to bed half an hour ago.

Some one, perhaps, had brought Denis home. That unpleasant incident had occurred more than once.

To his complete surprise a slip of a girl dressed in a sprigged cotton frock stepped into the circle of lamp-light. She was deadly white and shaking with emotion of some sort. It was Rose, panic-stricken, beside herself with fright.

"I want to see Lord Caister," she cried. "Is he in?"

"I am Lord Caister. What can I do for you?"

At that moment Rose evinced no astonishment that the young-looking man with the strong, fine face was old enough to be the father of a grown-up son. His statement to that effect satisfied her.

She caught at the lapels of his coat, almost tearing them in her frenzy.

"Then don't waste a moment!" she cried. "Please come with me now — now!"

Outwardly, Caister did not evince the least perturbation. If he had felt it he would not have shown it. He had his kind's inherent dislike of a scene, indeed of any emotional exhibition whatsoever. He was taken aback, naturally. He anticipated that something unpleasant had occurred to Denis, and he did not want to be told about it in the hall. For a moment he was puzzled how to classify this girl. She was of quite a distinctive type. But, then, Denis had such a diversity of acquaintances: some of them quite beyond classification. . . .

"Please calm yourself," he said; "and if you have anything to tell me about my son be good enough to come in here."

He led her into the library and closed the door.

"Now," he invited, "tell me."

Rose was still fighting for breath, still in a state of agitation. Her little hands opened and shut convulsively.

"I've killed him!" she whispered tensely. "I did n't mean to. I just pushed him away, and he fell. He did n't get up. I called to him. He never moved. And then I came here, running all the way. Oh, don't waste time! Please come back with me!"

Caister put his hand on her shaking shoulder and forced her gently into a chair. On a side table was the evening tray with its usual equipment of syphon, decanters, and glasses. He crossed over to it, poured out some brandy, diluted it, and returning held it to her lips.

"If you don't drink this you'll faint," he insisted.

She thanked him, drank obediently enough, then jumped to her feet.

"Now come."

"Of course I'll come. But I want you to be calm."

Rose wrung her hands.

"Don't you care?"

"Naturally I care. But I find it difficult to believe what you say. A little bit of a girl cannot kill a man simply by pushing him down. Denis, I am very much afraid, must have been — unwell."

She was too distraught to notice the pain in his voice or the implication conveyed by the last word.

"But I'm strong!" she cried, holding out her slender wrists. "And I was so angry. I have never been so angry in all my life."

"I want you to explain why, before I come with you," he said. "Are you a friend of my son's?"

"I thought I was. At least I did earlier in the afternoon. Before that I would n't talk to him at all because of Mr. Louie's advice. Mr. Louie is the manager of the floral department at Gardner's in Regent Street

where I work. When he engaged me he told me never to take any notice of young men who might come to the shop and try to make friends. And I never should have if your son had n't told me who he was. I thought that, as he was" — she cast around wildly for the right word — "a nobleman like King Arthur and his knights, he would be gentle and respectful. And so he was until a little while ago. He took me into the country this evening in a motor-car. I loved every minute of it. I'm afraid he did n't enjoy himself quite as much as I did, because he was n't starving to see green grass and little cottages and peaceful, browsing cows. When we got back to London again he said he was tired and thirsty. He took me to a funny place. I did n't like it. There were ladies and gentlemen there dancing about as if they had gone mad. The music was mad too. It was a night club, he said, and a very jolly place, if you were a Bohemian. I don't think I can be a Bohemian, because I come from Polseth in Cornwall, and they have n't places like that there. And all the time he was drinking bright-coloured stuff out of little glasses. Cocktails, he called them. When we left he seemed to have become quite different — horrid all of a sudden. When we got to my lodgings he came upstairs. And then — and then" — she covered her shamed face with her hands — "he tried to kiss me. He made me frightened. He was n't nice. I only meant to keep him away. I did n't think he'd tumble over and lie there. . . . Now I've told you everything. Really I have! Don't leave it any longer. I see you don't believe I've hurt him. What will you do when you find I have? I could n't bring him back."

"I think you will find that he will bring himself

back," Caister said grimly. "Listen. . . . If I am not very much mistaken, there he is now."

His ears, familiarised to the almost nightly sound of Denis fumbling with a latch-key, had already detected that preliminary to the boy's uncertain entry.

Rose, all her senses on the stretch, held her breath to listen.

Some one had opened the front door and come into the hall. She heard unsteady steps on the tessellated floor outside. She would have been at the door, outside it, had not Caister laid a restraining hand on her.

"Stay here," he said. "He's going upstairs."

He kept his hand on her shoulder. Together they listened to the muffled, irregular sounds made by unsteady feet mounting the stairs. Then a door banged and there was silence again.

"Now I'll go and see how he is."

Rose nodded mutely. Great tears were rolling down her cheeks. The stress of the last few hours was telling on her.

On his way to the door Caister paused.

"I want you to give me your word," he said, "that you will not go until I rejoin you."

She looked at him in surprise.

"There's no need to give you my word," she answered with unconscious dignity. "Of course I will stay here until you come back. I don't run away from things — or people."

Left alone, the turmoil of her thoughts was too potent to allow her to take stock of her surroundings. She sat on in the great chair, staring straight in front of her with a dazed look in her eyes. Never in her short life had she been in such a chaotic state of mind.

So Caister found her when he returned. A look of grief was in his face. He was ashamed of his son, ashamed to have to confess as much to this strange girl.

"It is as I thought," he said. "My son has come home. He is not a bit hurt. When you pushed him, he must have simply fallen over and — gone to sleep. People who drink a lot of coloured stuff out of little glasses sometimes get like that. No blame whatever attaches to you. I am sorry, more sorry than I can properly express, that your trust in him should have been misplaced. When he has recovered he will apologise to you in person."

Rose looked relieved. "Oh, I don't care about that," she responded. She paused and then said softly: "Does it make you sad — because he likes that coloured stuff?"

"Very sad."

Rose looked serious, too.

"I think it is a pity," she said gravely. "Because, you know, he can be a very nice boy."

"Thank you."

"All this afternoon he was so kind and gentle. Please don't be cross with him. It was partly my own fault for not listening to Mr. Louie's advice. You asked me to give you my word about staying just now. Won't you please give me yours that you won't be very angry?"

"I don't think Denis would care very much if I were," was the answer, made with a bitterness which did not escape her this time.

"You must n't say that. He was talking about you this afternoon. If you could have heard him! He said

you were the splendideſt pal — thoſe were his own words — a man could have, and that he wiſhed you had the ſame cauſe to be proud of him as he has of you.”

She had no idea how greatly her words affected him.

“I expect you would like to go home now,” he ſaid. “Where do you live?”

She told him.

“But at this time of night you can't go there on foot.”

“I found my way here, ſo I can get home as eaſily. Please don't trouble about me.”

For answer he reached for the telephone on the table and rang up his garage.

In leſs than five minutes Roſe found herſelf being driven through the ſtreets in a luxurious closed car that felt more like a feather bed to her exhausted little body than anything elſe.

Long after ſhe had gone Caiſter ſat on in the library, loſt in careworn thought. Once, for a moment, his expreſſion lightened. That was when he thought of Roſe entreating him not to be angry with his boy, aſſuring him that Denis was not altogether indifferent. The girl was a good girl. He was ſure of that. Of her he had no doubts or fears, only kind thoughts. A winning child. She would come through life with flying colours. She was of the type that a ſpecial Providence guards and watches over, even as the defenceleſs living things of the woods and fields are watched over and cared for. But for the waſte product of over-civilisation, a weakling ſuch as Denis, there ſeemed no beneficent Influence to ſtrengthen or reſtrain. It was the hardeſt thing in life Caiſter had been called

upon to face: recognition of the fact that the boy on whom all his hopes centred was morally incapable of fulfilling them. And he had desired so greatly that Denis should ride straight, hold straight, live straight, wield a straight bat through life and — play the game. . . .

CHAPTER VI

MR. LOUIE's quick eyes noticed that something was amiss with Rose the next morning. No detail connected with his work or the individuals associated with it ever escaped him. Besides, in Rose he took a special interest. To-day he was quite sure she was either tired or unhappy.

By and by he sent for her to come to his office.

"You don't look very well," he said. "Would you like to go home and rest? You work very hard. A few hours off would n't do you any harm."

Rose thanked him. But she did n't want to rest. Nothing soothed her so much as being amongst her beloved flowers. It is probable that she would have confided the whole of her adventure to the kindly little man, had not an innate sense of loyalty restrained her. Lord Caister had shown her consideration, sympathy. Denis was his son. He was sad, grieved about Denis. It would grieve him still more if he knew that his son's indiscretions were a subject of discussion among third persons. Rose did not put it quite like that to herself, but it was what she felt. So she said nothing of last night's adventure with its unpleasant ending, and thinking herself dismissed, turned to leave the office. Mr. Louie called her back.

"Wait a minute. I have n't seen very much of you lately. Do you feel you are settling down? Are you happy in your work?"

"I love my work."

"I'm glad to hear that. And of course you like

London too. I hope so. It is a wonderful city — the most wonderful in the world. There's nothing like it for sheer greatness — beauty of structure, history, individuality. London's alive! I could n't live away from it. Not for long."

"I could n't care for it like that," Rose said. "I expect you feel for London what I feel for the sea. Now that I'm away from it I think of it until sometimes I nearly cry with longing."

"But the sea can't *make* you. That's what London or any great city does. You can live all your life by the sea, and when you're dead there's an end of it: not even a footprint left upon the sand. In London you can do things, become some one, get some of its force inside you, *achieve* something; make your place in the world and keep it. Ambition is a wonderful spur." He stopped for a moment. "I don't generally talk about myself. It came about through my wanting you to know London and to love it, as I do. Some afternoon I would like to take you out and show it to you if you'd care to come. I should feel honoured if you would." He flushed to the roots of his very fair hair, and waited for her answer with obvious anxiety.

Rose did not hesitate. She might mistrust Denis; indeed she did not feel she could ever trust any stranger again. But Mr. Louie was different. She did not think of him as a stranger. It was impossible to doubt his integrity. Honesty, kindness, zeal were written on his countenance for all to read; the open book of a man, clean-paged, straightforward.

"It's very good of you and I'd love to come," she said.

"Next Sunday?"

"That will be nice. It's my birthday. At least, I date from then."

Mr. Louie looked puzzled.

"I was washed up by the sea, and Dad counted my birthday as from that day."

"Your father?"

"Not my real one: a better-than-real-one. He found me and made himself my father. We lived on the money he kept in a drawer. When he died it was nearly all gone. There was n't any gold. He hated gold."

"Dear me, how extraordinary! You must tell me all about yourself on Sunday, if you will. We'll have an afternoon on the river, and afterwards I will take you home. I live with my mother," he added. "She will be pleased to meet you."

The wording of the last sentence carried nothing stereotyped to Rose's ears: it only sounded hospitable and well-meaning. If she missed the compliment it voiced, her unsophistication was to blame. It touched her, who had never known a mother of her own. She looked at Mr. Louie with grateful eyes.

"That will be lovely," she said. "I know I shall like her."

"I want her to like *you*." Mr. Louie spoke with emphasis. "I have never taken a young lady home before."

The explanation was intended as a double assurance to Rose, if she needed one, of his sincerity — and perhaps of his regard.

"At the same time," he went on, a little timidly, "I want to ask you not to mention our proposed little excursion to any one here. To begin with, I don't want to hurt the feelings of others who — er — might assume that I am making a favourite of you; and

secondly, I think it would be a pity to have our — er — friendship discussed or wrongly interpreted. A little later on, perhaps, when we know each other better, we may be in a position to declare our plans and accept the congratulations of our friends."

Rose nodded. Anything that Mr. Louie suggested was in her estimation sure to be wise. Her confidence in him was unbounded. The deeper significance of his words was entirely lost on her. Love had never entered into her calculations. Indeed, how should it? Certainly not love in relation with Mr. Louie.

She went back to her work serenely enough, cheered by the pleasant interview.

Miss Hobbs, her superior, gave her a keen glance. There was curiosity in it, perhaps a touch of envy.

"Been hauled over the coals?" she asked, although she knew very well that could not be the case. She had herself given Mr. Louie a glowing report of her pupil. "I mean, was he cross about anything? Not likely with you. It's my belief he's sweet on you." She nodded meaningly. "Mashed!"

The term was a strange one to Rose. She looked slightly at fault. It was a look that often came over her face nowadays. There were so very many things she did not understand.

Miss Hobbs proceeded:

"Now if I were you, kid, I'd play up. It's a chance a lot of us would give our eyes for — to get the right side of a man in Mr. Louie's position. Why, his salary must be four hundred a year, if not more, and he won't stop there. You mark my words. Our Mr. Louie will be Somebody one day. You'll never do better. I could love a little man like that myself."

"Could you?" asked Rose, big-eyed.

"Rather. I could love any one who wanted to be kind and take care of me."

The admission seemed to Rose a strange one coming from Miss Hobbs. Miss Hobbs was such a massive young woman. She could have picked Mr. Louie up and carried him about in her arms. As a sentiment, her desire to be "taken care of" was hardly in accord with her physique and her assurance of manner. Rose had yet to understand that the tender, timorous heart of a woman may beat within the frame of one of the out-sizes of her sex.

"I have n't thought about love at all—ever," she confessed. "I'm too young."

"Stuff and nonsense! It's time you began, then. Love's just wonderful. I don't know what the novelists would do without it, I'm sure, or any one else for that matter. Love is the chiefest thing in the world — love of men for women, and women for men. All the books worth reading are all about it; nearly all the shops are run for it — flower-shops, jewellers, milliners, perfumers, even this store. They're all kept going to provide us women and the men who like us to look nice and have the loveliest things that money can buy to please us or make us beautiful. There would n't be any shops or luxuries if it were n't for love; nor yet half the music or theatre pieces. Love is life."

The last expression was no doubt trite, but it was certainly heartfelt.

Rose pondered. "Then I don't suppose I've ever lived," she remarked, with truth.

Miss Hobbs shook her head sagaciously. She was

in a prophetic mood. The mantle of old Becky Gryls seemed to have fallen temporarily upon her shoulders.

"You're one of the lucky ones, Miss Eton," she asserted. "You'll draw love all your life without being able to help yourself, same as you could draw crowds if you liked — just to look at you." She sighed. "But a girl like me, just eating her heart out for a bit of romance, has to get it out of a three-penny novelette, or sit in the pit of a theatre, or go to a cinema show, or else just stand by and watch some one else living what she can only get at second-hand. That's life too!"

At that moment a gentleman came into the shop. Miss Hobbs instantly became businesslike. She never confused business with romance, though she often had a wild hope that the one might result from the other.

The customer wanted roses. Miss Hobbs showed him some — Madame Edouard Herriotts — at two shillings a bloom. He hesitated. They were too expensive. On his way out he caught sight of Rose. She had just picked up a large vase of the selfsame flowers. They were not too fresh. Miss Hobbs had told her to remove them from the window just before Mr. Louie had asked to see her. She was doing so now.

The customer stopped her and enquired the price.

"The same price, sir," Miss Hobbs interposed quickly.

Still with his eyes on Rose, the customer asked for a dozen blooms, paid for them, and left the shop. Rose's face had sold the flowers, whereas from capable, unattractive Miss Hobbs, Madame Edouard Herriotts at two shillings each were not to be thought of.

When he had gone, with yet another backward

glance at Rose, Miss Hobbs smiled across at her meaningly, but without rancour.

"There was a woman in the old history times called Somebody of Troy," she remarked. "Ellen I think her name was. Well, they do say it was a smile of hers that launched a thousand ships. . . . Now, I wonder if she was alive to-day and in here whether that same old history smile of hers would sell a dozen fading Madame Herriotts at two shillings apiece? I *don't* think!"

CHAPTER VII

ON Sunday morning, in her lone top-floor room, Rose was dressed ready for her day out with Mr. Louie. A shady straw hat was already pinned on her head; her white cotton gloves, washed and ironed overnight, lay on the bed. But before putting them on, a pleasant duty had to be observed. She did not know what was in the small sealed packet that she held in her hands, but rose-coloured anticipation had made her reserve the opening of it until the last moment.

For its size it was heavy. An inscription on the paper wrapper ran:

To my dear Rose, to be opened on her eighteenth birthday, if old Dad is not with her on that happy day.

The loving words had the same effect as a caress. She could almost imagine that the dear old man who had penned them was standing by her side.

With girlish curiosity she broke the seal. Inside the box was something wrapped in tissue paper and cotton-wool. Rose's fingers, pressing through these, felt a row of protuberances. They might be buttons or beads. In her eagerness to discover the contents she turned back an end of the paper and the cotton-wool slipped out, displaying a double row of pearls. She picked them up with an exclamation of delight and fastened them round her throat. Rose knew nothing about gems or jewels, but pearls — even a cheap double string of manufactured pearls — commended themselves to her, because of their association with the sea.

"Thank you, darling," she said aloud. "They're lovely. I'll wear them always."

The pearls were round her neck when a little later she met Mr. Louie. He carried a giant bunch of roses, a bouquet fit for a bride or a prima-donna.

"You had roses when I first saw you," he said gallantly, presenting them. "I've brought you some today. I think you said it was your birthday. I hope you will always be as happy as you look just now."

He could not disguise the admiration she evoked in him. It was a sheer delight to look at her. Her glowing beauty made him feel almost humble. Though by accident or circumstance she was of low station, her loveliness made him forget it. Her chief charm lay in her utter obliviousness of it.

She thanked him with words and lips and eyes. The roses were lovely. He was so kind. She showed him the only other present she had had, the pearls round her neck. Mr. Louie, no judge of pearls, thought the slender pillar of her throat far lovelier than the double iridescent row that circled it.

"Everybody would want to give you a present if they knew it was your birthday," he said with sincerity. "You make people feel generous."

"Do I?" she asked. "Why?"

"Because you give out so much yourself — of youth and radiance — and beauty."

Rose inhaled the fragrance of her roses with keen enjoyment.

"I wish I could give as much pleasure as a flower does," she said. "Just to grow; to look lovely; to smell delicious; to please a sick person or a dear little child. I'd love to be a flower!"

"There are such things as human flowers," said Mr. Louie sententiously. "I think you are surely one."

Rose gave a merry laugh.

"Do you know, I've really forgotten what I'm like to look at. There's such a funny little old glass in my bedroom. It's spotted and cracked, and it makes me look pale green and twisted. Of course there's a big looking-glass in our dressing-room at Gardner's, but there's always such a crowd round it that I've never bothered to go near."

"You don't need to see yourself. It's good enough that others can have the pleasure of looking at — and being with you. I hope we shall have a pleasant afternoon, and that it may be one of many more to follow."

He certainly did his best to entertain her — a thought laboriously, it is true, for he was not used to playing the gallant. He took her to Richmond as he had promised. They travelled by train first-class. The dewy radiance of the girl, the expensive bouquet she carried, coupled with the serene expression on her cavalier's countenance, made strangers notice them, assuming, no doubt, that they were bride and bridegroom. Rose, as usual, was absolutely unaware of the attention she attracted. Mr. Louie, on this occasion, was conscious of it, and, being very human, felt not a little proud. He was quite aware that many a man of position would have been glad to be seen about with pretty Rose. The notice she excited was of the right kind; the homage that fell to her was spontaneous and unfeigned.

They spent some placid hours on the river. Mr. Louie, unfortunately, was unskilled in the manage-

ment of a boat, but Rose's handling of a pair of sculls was masterly. She appreciated the charm of the wooded reaches of the river, but she missed the surge of the sea, the exhilarating sensation of tossing in a boat on its tempestuous bosom, the scream of the wind, the sting of sea-spray. Still, this gentle movement on a softly stealing current had its fascination.

Mr. Louie drew her out, got her to talk about herself. Rose was no egotist, but the life she had left behind had been so precious that she required little urging to dilate upon it. Artlessly enough she described the simple, untrammelled existence of those past days, so that Mr. Louie was able to picture her upbringing more or less correctly, understand how it was that she had grown up so naturally and beautifully, wild as a bird, innocent as a flower, half child, half Naiad, a nymph fit to preside over any river.

Even his mother, a little inclined to be critical, as mothers of adored only sons often are, fell under Rose's charm from the moment Mr. Louie brought her home. To her, in the most natural way, Rose put up her face to be kissed, as a child might. She took an instant liking to the homely, faded little woman, and wanted to be liked by her in return.

Diplomatic Mr. Louie effaced himself almost at once. He guessed that it would be good for these two to be left alone for a while. Those quiet hours on the river with Rose had made him more than ever desirous that the mother, who up till now had filled his life, should find room in her heart for the girl who had come to mean all the world to him. It staggered him at first — this realisation of the magical thing that almost in a moment of time had coloured and transfigured

his whole existence. Its wonder would be an abiding glory, whichever way their paths were set, together or alone.

Upstairs with Mrs. Louie, Rose took off her hat. She looked about the bright bedroom and exclaimed appreciatively:

"How lovely everything is!"

"My son has excellent taste," said Mrs. Louie comfortably. "He bought this little house, chose everything for it, planned the garden and made it. Everything has grown around us. We are very proud of it, he and I. One day he will bring a wife home to it, no doubt" — she looked at Rose steadily for a moment — "and I hope she will care for it too."

"I'm sure she will. I should. Is he going to be married soon? I hope his wife will be nice, and let me come and see them both. He's been so good to me. I can't tell you how good!"

But she tried to. Her artlessness almost took Mrs. Louie's breath away. The girl was so incredibly unsophisticated, though that was a word the simple soul was a little too homely to use. A child. Well, far better a child in heart than a young woman of the world. Mrs. Louie disapproved of worldly young women. It was almost her daily prayer that her son should not fall a prey to the studied fascinations of one of the young ladies in Gardner's. Rose worked at Gardner's. She was aware of that, and had been inclined to disapprove of the friendship. But Rose, most clearly, was not a minx. She was apparently just herself.

Something waiflike about her touched Mrs. Louie's motherly emotions. Of her own accord she bent towards the girl and kissed her again.

"Be good to him, too, child," she said, and winked away a tear.

Then she took Rose downstairs. Tea — a somewhat elaborate one — was ready. Mr. Louie was assiduously attentive. Mr. Britton, an uncle of his, was of the party too, a solid business gentleman who said little and who, unlike his nephew, seemed far more interested in the pearls at Rose's throat than in pretty Rose herself.

By and by he was unable to restrain his curiosity.

"Would you mind my looking at your necklace a little more closely, Miss Eton?" he asked. "One does n't expect to see pearls like those out of Bond Street."

The request astonished Mr. Louie. His uncle was manager of Stark and Bowden's, the eminent West End jewellers, and the last man in the world to evince interest in Rose's trivial neck ornament. For of course her "pearls" could not be real.

Rose unfastened and handed them to the old gentleman.

"Do you like them?" she asked artlessly.

Mr. Britton put on his glasses. He weighed the pearls in his hand, scrutinised them with the aid of a pocket lens. The examination absorbed him. Then he fixed Rose with a keen, almost suspicious, glance.

"How did these come into your possession?" he queried in a curious tone. "If you found them I should advise you to take them to Scotland Yard at once. You will in all probability get a reward — a substantial reward. No doubt when you found them you took them to be of no value."

Rose's face showed perplexity.

"But I did n't find them!" she cried. "They were given to me — for my birthday. To-day."

Mr. Britton fixed her with an odd look over the top of his spectacles. His handling of the pearls was almost reverential, but he retained them.

"Are you aware what they are worth?" he enquired.

Rose shook her head. "The person who gave them to me was n't rich," she replied. "When he died he left them for me. They were just a little present."

"A *princely* present," was the cynical correction. "Will it surprise you to hear that these pearls are worth something like *ten thousand pounds*? Under the circumstances I'm inclined to think they must be considered — stolen property. They ought to be in the possession of the police. You don't want to get into trouble, do you?"

A gasp of fright and dismay broke from Mrs. Louie.

"Charles! You don't say!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Louie sat very still, quite bereft of speech.

But over Rose's face there crept an expression — an emotion — superseding that of fear or dismay or surprise. Even the delight at discovering that she owned anything of such great value was absent from it. Wave after wave of hot colour surged into her cheeks. Her eyes blazed.

She started up, pushing her chair back, forgetful of appearances — a young, living, loyal creature, eager to defend her beloved dead.

"How dare you say that?" she cried indignantly. "Give me back my necklace at once!"

CHAPTER VIII

ROSE's indignation had the effect of allaying some of Mr. Britton's suspicions.

"I did n't mean to upset you, Miss Eton," he said, breaking a rather long silence. "But these pearls are so exceptionally good and valuable that — that — in short, it was difficult for me to understand how they came into your possession. Of course, if you are satisfied yourself; if the necklace is really yours — bought and paid for — well, you are a very lucky girl."

He considered he had made the *amende honorable*. After all, it was none of his business.

"I should think so, indeed!" Mrs. Louie declared enthusiastically. "Why, it's a fortune. I can hardly credit it, even now."

Rose sat down again. She was a little ashamed of her exhibition of temper.

"Please forgive me if I was rude," she said. "I did n't mean to be. Only I can't tell you how much I loved the person who gave me my necklace. He was n't rich. In fact, he was quite poor. But he was the most wonderful man in the world. If he bought my pearls he must have spent all he ever had on them; unless he found them washed up by the sea, like myself."

All this time Mr. Louie had not said a word. The romance of the thing literally robbed him of speech. It was so incredible, and yet, as Rose explained it, so believable. Until he had met her, romance, in fiction or in real life, had never touched him. He had not had time to read of or consider about it. Rose's own story,

as she had told it on the river that afternoon, had sounded convincing enough. But now in conjunction with this magic necklace he found himself doubting her veracity, her very artlessness. And then he glanced at her open face, met her clear, honest eyes, — wells of innocence and light, — and his momentary suspicions were swallowed up in this new-found love of his.

So far as the actual value of her birthday present was concerned, Rose was the least staggered of the three. She had so little idea of money values. Ten thousand pounds sounded a big sum, but she had no conception of how much it really stood for.

Having done what he thought his duty, Mr. Britton's magisterial manner left him. Had he really been a judge he would, no doubt, have ended by being prejudiced in favour of such a sweet-looking girl as Rose. Her pearls still fascinated him. He would have preferred to see them reposing on a blue velvet bed behind a barred glass window. In his eyes they were out of place on the neck of a girl of Rose's position — a girl in a print frock. They were suitable for a duchess, not a child.

"If they are a legacy, and if you are quite satisfied in your own mind as to your legitimate right to them, I should advise you to sell them," he said. "My firm would give you the sum I estimate them to be worth — ten thousand pounds. We should have to make a few enquiries, of course; but I have no doubt, after what you say, everything would be found in order. There's my card and business address if you care to see me at any time."

Rose took the card and thanked him.

"No, I would n't sell it, thank you," she said.

"What could I possibly do with such a lot of money? I could n't wear it round my neck. Besides, if my dear old Dad had wanted me to have the money he would not have given me the pearls, would he? I could n't sell them for money or change them for anything else."

"Well, I don't know," debated Mrs. Louie. "Some people buy jewels as an investment, to be turned into money when needed. I should look on it like that if I were you, Miss Eton. Don't you think so, Leonard?" She turned to her son.

But Mr. Louie was looking troubled. He foresaw difficulties looming ahead for himself in this vast acquisition of Rose's. Except for her own sake, he had far rather that her present had been no more than a pretty string of beads.

"I share Miss Eton's views," he answered. "Presents are not meant to be converted into money. They stand for sentiment, not value. A flower picked from a hedge and given with all love is worth a great deal more than an expensive present without affection. It's all relative, mother."

Mrs. Louie looked her surprise at this unexpected statement. It was the first time she had ever known him to express an unbusinesslike view.

"Well, poets might put it like that," she agreed grudgingly; "but it is n't sense, to my mind. However, it's your necklace, Miss Eton, and I'm sure I'm glad to congratulate you on it."

The subject lapsed. Rose apparently forgot all about it. Not until Mr. Louie was taking her home did it crop up again. He had been very quiet, and Rose, stealing a look at his preoccupied face, wondered at the cause of it. She began asking herself whether unwittingly she

had done anything to merit his or his mother's disapproval.

"Are you cross about anything?" she said. "I am so sorry I was rude to your uncle."

Mr. Louie started. "Cross? With you? How could I be? What made you think so?"

"You were so quiet."

"I was thinking — of you."

"Of me?"

"And your necklace. The value of it. This afternoon when my mother asked my opinion, you heard me tell her that I agreed with you: that the giver might not have wished it to be turned into money. I've been thir'ing it over since. Very likely he had nothing of the sort in his mind. He meant it, I should think, that you should do what you liked with it. That is the essence of a gift. It should have no conditions attached to it."

"Go on," said Rose.

"And I was thinking that very probably you do not realise the extraordinary change that this great gift can make in your life from now onwards. You ought to know it and to think it over for your own sake. At Gardner's you now receive thirty shillings a week. If you sell your necklace for ten thousand pounds, and invest it, it will bring you in nearly five hundred a year. That is its value — ten pounds a week. With that money you would no longer need to work. You could have a little house by the sea, a boat, and a garden of your own, pretty dresses — anything in reason. As for living in one room in an unpleasant street as you do now, that would all be behind you. So that I'm not sure that I advised you rightly. Although at the

moment you are a shopgirl you have the means to live like a lady."

Rose walked on in silence. By and by she turned to him.

"Am I like a lady?" she asked simply.

He could not answer her that. She was unlike any one at all.

"You are just yourself," he told her.

Rose considered. "Ladies come to the shop. I'm not a bit like them. They are so quiet — the ones I mean — in the way they dress and the way they speak."

"Repose," averred Mr. Louie.

"Is that the word? Well, I'm quite different from them, anyhow. One has to be born a lady, I think."

"I should n't be surprised if you were born a princess," was his quick and involuntary rejoinder. "That, to my mind, is the difference between you and a lady."

At any rate she would always be the Princess of his dreams.

"Well, I don't feel a princess, or a lady," Rose said with decision. "I simply feel I love my life and would like to go on with it. Of course I miss the sea and my garden and the flowers; but if I went back to them I should miss my work, and the shop and all the kind people I have got to like so much — and you. I'll go on being as I am, I think."

Mr. Louie's face cleared. He had done the right thing in explaining the extent of her wealth, and for the present, at any rate, she had made her choice. He was content to leave it at that. There was only one thing more he wanted to say, and he desired above all that she should not misunderstand him.

"I wonder if you can understand why, for a purely

selfish reason, I should have felt happier if you had never received such a gift. It — it puts you and me on a different footing. In a moment of time, through a turn of fortune's wheel, you have become the possessor of a sum of money such as I could only expect to save by the time I am an old man. I had hoped to help you in so many ways, and now you are independent of any help I can give you."

"But you have helped me already. Besides, *I* am not any different just because I've got a real pearl necklace, so I don't see how anything can be altered by it."

Shyness descended on Mr. Louie.

"One has ideals," he murmured. "I had hoped to tell you about mine one day."

She laid her hand on his arm.

"Won't you now?"

But he was afraid. She was so young, too young yet by far to understand the mind or the heart of a man.

"Another time," he promised. "Meanwhile, will you remember what I said just now? If you ever come to appreciate the value of money I want you to believe that really and truly I would have preferred you had nothing — nothing at all."

Rose nodded, but she looked a little perplexed.

"I wish it had n't made any difference," she said.

"If I had fifty real pearl necklaces and all the money in the world, I should still want to be just your little friend. I should be miserable if it altered things."

Mr. Louie took her hand.

"God bless you for that," he said fervently. "Let us always be friends, whatever happens."

"Whatever happens," she echoed, and flashed at him one of her sunny smiles. Then she thanked him

for her happy afternoon. They had reached the street and the cheap little house where she lodged. Outside it a car was drawn up — the one in which she had been driven home a few nights ago. At sight of it Rose paled a little, half-fearing that it portended a visit from Denis.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, alarm in her voice.

Mr. Louie had observed the car too, and the coronet on its door panel. It filled him with misgivings. Rose had been frank enough with him that afternoon, describing her childhood, her migration to London, and her impressions of life at Gardner's. His suspicions came back, whispering mistrust. Had she purposely left out certain details? It seemed impossible to associate her, of all people, with guile.

"Some one you know?" he asked, detesting himself for his inquisitiveness.

"Yes — no — I think so. At least, I don't know," she faltered. She was flushed now, obviously nervous.

Mr. Louie asked nothing further. He bade her good-night, and turning rather abruptly left her. As he retraced his steps, the expression on his face became grave and anxious. For a moment the hideous thought came to him that Rose might not be so innocent after all; that she, like others . . . Then, contemptuously, he dismissed the idea as he recalled her pretty, sincere words of a few moments back:

"If I had fifty real pearl necklaces and all the money in the world, I should still want to be just your little friend."

He took comfort from that.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. BELL, Rose's landlady, had occasionally let lodgings to young ladies at the bottom of the theatrical ladder. She was also an omnivorous devourer of popular romantic fiction. So that when she opened the door shortly before Rose's return home she was hardly surprised and extremely gratified to see a liveried chauffeur on her doorstep and a handsome car drawn up at the kerb.

Such an equipage accorded with her ideas of what a young lady like Miss Eton might aspire to. She was ever ready to abet a profitable friendship such as this might portend. The affair of Miss Maggy Delamere, now Lady Chalfont, was a case in point. Miss Delamere had lodged in the selfsame room that Rose now occupied.

Mrs. Bell was inclined to draw a parallel from this coincidence and to look on it as an omen. Young ladies who might suddenly marry into the peerage were to be encouraged and helped. "Miss Delamere" — the stage-name stuck — never, for instance, forgot Mrs. Bell. A five-pound note and a hamper at Christmas, not to speak of sundry other largesse, regularly found its way to No. 109, Sidey Street, from Purton Towers, her ladyship's country seat. Who knew how soon Miss Eton herself might not be in a position to be equally bountiful? At anyrate, Mrs. Bell had her wits about her.

In answer to the chauffeur's enquiry, she stated that Miss Eton would be home "at any minute." Would his gentleman care to wait?

The gentleman — it was Lord Caister — intimated that he would be glad to do so. Mrs. Bell, with voluble apologies for the torn stair-carpet and murky landings, preceded him up three flights of steep stairs to the door of Rose's tiny, cupboard-like room and squeezed herself against the wall so that he might enter.

"I'm sure the room never looked so homelike since Miss Delamere that was, Lady Chalfont that now is, left me," she remarked with pardonable pride. "Miss Eton is just such another one, so fond of flowers. Sisters they might be, she and her ladyship, as far as flowers go. No doubt you may know Lady Chalfont, Your Grace?"

She was not quite sure of the designation, but she, too, had observed the coronet on the car, and as Caister did not correct her, she assumed she could not be far out in her mode of address.

"I know Lady Chalfont quite well," he admitted. "So she lived here!"

He looked round the mean little room with something approaching incredulity. A cistern, naked and unashamed and at all times noisy, occupied a considerable portion of its cubic space. For the rest, it was equipped with a small bed of curiously undulating contour; a washstand that somehow contrived to support itself and the paraphernalia of toilette upon legs conspicuously out of the perpendicular; one chair, never designed to be sat on; and a small deal table covered with a black satin cloth awesomely worked in coloured silks, a striking exhibition of the erstwhile Miss Delamere's industry if not of her taste.

But the room's forbidding aspect was redeemed by the profusion of flowers that adorned it and the artistry

with which they were grouped. Here lived somebody who obviously revealed herself through flowers, just as others do in the medium of paint on canvas, words on paper, or acting on the stage as an outlet for self-expression.

When Mrs. Bell had retired precipitately to interview a peripatetic vegetable-merchant, who was bellying his wares in the street below, Caister surveyed the tiny room with interested scrutiny. It was spotlessly clean, starkly simple, but the flowers made it look habitable. Obviously, the girl he had come to see possessed two outstanding characteristics. She was the soul of neatness and she loved beauty. Both attributes commended themselves to Caister. He could not help wondering what sort of appeal she had made to Denis, who, as a rule, would have expressed himself as "bored stiff" by simplicity.

He was bending over the wash-basin, inhaling the fragrance of roses and carnations, when Rose entered.

At sight of her visitor — father, not son — the expression on her face changed from that of half-dread to pretty welcome. She could not be afraid of Lord Caister, although he was the last person in the world from whom she had expected a visit. As on that night when she had so frenziedly sought him, he inspired confidence, a sense of trust. In appearance, at least, he embodied all her inchoate thoughts of the upright, the ideal man.

She stood a little shyly, still holding her giant bunch of pink roses tied with their big pink ribbon.

"Did you want to see me, sir?" she asked.

Caister smiled. A simple child, a pretty child!

"*More* flowers?" he remarked playfully.

"Are n't they lovely?"

She placed them in water, first attending to their wants, as a mother does to the needs of her children, and then, turning to her visitor, invited him to be seated on the bed. Lord Caister could not help being struck by her charming naturalness, or rather her entire lack of affectation. She might have been a great lady receiving in her boudoir, so devoid was she of jarring *gaucherie*.

"It is very kind of you to come all this way," she said. "I hope you have not been waiting long. Is your son better?"

Caister took a note from his pocket-book and handed it to her.

"I promised you he should apologise," he said. "Just at present he is unable to do so in person, so he has written you a letter which I have brought instead."

"May I read it?"

"Please."

It was a short note, formally apologetic. Its well-chosen wording was not a bit like Denis. Truth to tell, he had written it at his father's dictation. His interest in Rose had temporarily subsided since she had repulsed his advances so definitely the other evening. Most girls ran after him or were ready to be run after. He was too weak and temperamentally too lazy to enter upon a pursuit that would entail rebuffs without any certainty of capture. As he had lain in bed, nursing his grievance against Rose, as well as an injured nose, which had come into forceful contact with the cistern in his fall, he had made up his mind to let the acquaintance lapse. Rose did n't want him. She had plainly shown that. Besides, she was n't the

sort of girl he could take about, dressed in the simple "rig" that she had "fetched up in" at Oddenino's. Such a rustic beauty she had looked! Rusticity in Regent Street was the limit!

So Denis had rung the bell for his valet to bring him pen, paper, and ink, and scribbled a note to a certain Miss Vivienne Raymond of the Pall Mall Theatre (private address, a flat in Maida Vale), an engaging young person without any elements of simplicity or rusticity in her composition:

DEAR LITTLE THING,

I have n't forgotten you — not a bit. Truth is, I've had a nasty fall and can't get out for a few days. Absolutely bored stiff and fed up, and shan't feel better till I can fetch up at the show again and take you out to supper.

Yours ever

DENNY

Poor ineffectual Denis! He was always "bored stiff" or "fed up"; generally both. He had just despatched the epistle with directions for it to be sent by special messenger, when his father came in.

"Hulloa! Not up yet?"

Denis felt his nose.

"Can't be seen like this," he replied. "So may as well stay in bed. I had an accident last night."

Caister looked a little grim.

"So I was given to understand."

Denis looked up. "Who told you?"

"The young woman herself. She came round here. She was most distressed, thinking you had killed yourself!"

"Came — round — here!" ejaculated Denis. "What infernal cheek!"

"On the contrary, I think it showed her pluck. At any rate, she was unnecessarily exercised in mind on your account. I think as soon as you are able you had better get up and go and apologise to her."

Denis surveyed his parent with something like astonishment.

"Oh, you need n't bother about that," he said at length. "She's not the sort to kick up a row. In fact, I don't think I shall be seeing much more of her. She's only a sort of flower-girl. I saw her through a window in Gardner's, looking like *the* peach in a beauty chorus, and I followed her up, that's all. There's nothing in it. At least, not for me. It appears she had been reading some old-fashioned story about knights-errant, and thought I was one. Knight-errantry's a bit too strenuous a life for me; eh, father?"

He leant back a little wearily on his pillows. Caister's heart smote him. The boy was generally behaving badly; he was an unspeakable disappointment, but all the same his poor physical health had perhaps tended to undermine his moral stability. That weakness had always aroused his father's pity, the compassion of the physically strong for the physically weak. For instance, to-day Denis looked frightfully delicate, a mere wraith of a lad. The pace he had set himself was slowly killing him.

"Look here, Denis," he said, "can't you take a pull at yourself? If not for your own sake, for mine. You'll be the only one left one day to carry on. You might remember that."

Denis closed his eyes. He had n't the least desire to "carry on." The tired sensation that generally assailed him was responsible for at least half his follies. It was

sometimes so overwhelming that had he had the energy to put an end to things, he might have chosen that way as an exit from the bustle and hurry of life. As it was, he just drifted.

He shook his head.

"There was only one thing that might have put some ginger into me," he answered. "You know when the old war was on how knocked I was because I could n't pass into the army, not even into one of the bantam battalions! Well, that put the peter on it, I think. I was n't a bit of use then when I wanted to be, and now I never shall be. I'm sorry, father. You're such a blessed good chap."

A forlorn feeling descended on Caister. He loved the boy; yet neither his love for Denis nor Denis's love for him — such as it was — could make a man of him. Such pitiless cognisance of his limitations as Denis expressed left little hope for him. But Caister was sensitive and too wise a father to show how hardly the confession hit him. Moreover, sympathy overshadowed his disapproval. He reverted to the subject of Rose.

Denis listened to the lecture with remarkable docility. "You're right every time," he said when it was over. "The girl did n't deserve that treatment from me. I was a bit out of hand at the time or I should n't have behaved like a cad. As you've guessed, she's a decent little creature. Good as gold. You want me to apologise? What a trump you are, father! Come on, then! What shall I say?"

The short letter which Caister had brought in person and Rose had just read was the result, and had marked the termination of that interview.

Now she thanked him for it and again enquired

after Denis. He answered with reserve, so that she divined that he was deeply troubled.

"I'm so sorry," she said gently. "You were n't angry with him, were you? You promised me you would n't be."

"I was n't angry."

"No, but you're sad."

He did not reply to that. It was as if she had placed the healing touch of cool fingers on an aching wound.

"He's my only son, you see," he explained. "Only sons are precious to an old name and an old house — and an old man."

She nodded.

"I don't mean to be inquisitive," she pursued, "only — I can't bear to see any one look unhappy. Are n't there ways of helping him?"

"To what?"

"To be good."

"Suppose he does n't want to be good," he pro-pounded.

"Not to please his own mother?"

"He has n't a mother."

"Poor Denis!" She used the Christian name uncon-sciously, forgetting herself.

Caister echoed her sigh.

Rose was following up her own line of thought.

"The best way to be good," she said sanely, speak-ing slowly in an attempt to express herself, "is to love good things. Nature first of all. As long as you love Nature, you can't go very far wrong. If — if I was Denis's father — I would begin all over again with him. Oh, please forgive me! I ought n't to have said that. It sounds like advice!"

But Caister was not in the least offended. He turned to her almost eagerly. At any rate, he could believe in her goodness and credit her for the natural wisdom that lay at the root of it.

"If you will tell me exactly what you think about Denis and how I might help him, I shall be very grateful to you," he said.

She responded to his appeal and sat down on the rickety chair opposite him. Her face was sweetly serious.

"Denis talks a lot," she said. "Just whatever comes into his head. But he doesn't mention he had n't a mother. That explains a lot. I grew up wild myself, but in a different way. It was a way that made me strong. I lived out of doors. And I expect he was brought up mostly in a house because he was delicate, and so the wild part that is in everybody could n't get out of him in the ordinary way. Do you know what I mean?"

"You mean he never had half a chance. I am afraid you are right. I was a very young man when Denis was born. In my grief at his mother's death I left him to an elderly aunt and nurses. I suppose you consider that was a mistake."

He found himself deferring to her opinion as though she were a being infinitely wiser than himself.

"It seems a mistake to me," she told him. "If I had a dear little delicate baby to look after (her eyes grew very soft) "I would n't listen to any one's advice about the best way to bring him up. I should let Nature tell me that. I'd let the sun and the wind and the rain and the sea-breezes make him fine and strong. It's life, being out of doors. I never had a mother either: only the earth, the sea, and the sky. I love them all."

The expression on Caister's face had become almost reverent. Here, in this poor room, made pleasant only by the nature-touch in it, the plenitude of flowers, he was being vouchsafed a precious glimpse of the most holy thing life can show — the tender, unspoilt purity of a young girl's soul.

"And so," she pursued earnestly, "even now I would try the same plan if I were you. I would treat any grown-up person who had n't worked out right as I would a little delicate baby. I would teach Denis to love every out-of-doors thing, and all the rest would come in time. His spirit would get strong then."

In her whole-hearted desire to be of some use, Rose had entirely forgotten herself.

Caister stood up. He could not tell her then and there how greatly her brave words had invigorated him.

"Thank you," he said, and then paused. "Suppose I asked you to help me — and him? What would you say?"

The disappointment and hopelessness in his eyes — and they were young eyes — stirred Rose's heart. There was magic in the moment. She was dimly aware of it. It swayed her, caught her up. It was as if the Ideal Knight of all girlish romance had become real, was present, and was seeking to ride out with her upon a great adventure.

She gave him her hand — both hands. It was her way to give with both hands.

"I would do anything to help you," she answered with sincerity.

And, like a knight of old, Caister bent over her hands. His lips just touched them.

His was the fine, tempered spirit that could rightly appreciate the spiritual wonder and richness of hers. He was conscious of a new stimulus, an added strength and hope. For now he felt that an angel stood by his side to help him battle for his boy, Denis — and the right.

CHAPTER X

LATE in the afternoon, while Caister was out, Denis got up and decided to dress. Bed suddenly bored him. Nothing in the world seemed worth doing. What a waste of time it all was! Just existing!

He wondered what other fellows felt like who were n't tired in mind and body as he was; those strenuous chaps who made a fetish of keeping fit and playing hard games that made a fellow sweat: men of his father's stamp, devotees of the cold tub, sound in wind and limb. Denis sighed, conscious of his own weaknesses. It struck him that he looked rather a ridiculous figure as he stood there before the cheval glass in his silk embroidered pyjamas and a bulging, discoloured nose. He touched it tenderly. Not until the swelling had gone down would he be able to go out.

He had a tepid bath, with half a pint of lavender-water emptied into it; anointed his hair with "Flowers of Honey"; had his nails polished; dressed, and went downstairs. After all, if he had only known it, he was not an ill-looking lad. He had grace, the aristocratic charm conferred by centuries of inherited good-breeding, a certain likeableness.

He picked up a book to beguile the monotony, a treatise on the military art, the only subject in which he took an intelligent interest. But he put it down almost at once. Was n't he a C-3 chap? They had n't had any use for him when he had been ready, heart and soul, to be of service. That fact had bitten deeper

into Denis than anything else. It had pushed him a little farther along the perilous road where men slide instead of walk with firm step and confidence.

The rather dismal trend of his thoughts was interrupted by the unexpected opening of the drawing-room door. A footman announced: "Miss Vivienne Raymond."

A sprightly little person ran into the room, embraced the surprised Denis, and took "Centre Stage," as it were. She was extremely pretty and exactly like an overdressed doll. Her frock might have been quite the thing in a *revue*; as a street or even a house gown it was altogether out of place. Vivienne liked to pose as an English edition of Mlle. Gaby des Lys; and like all translations (and most imitations) her deficiencies were more apparent than her abilities. She was vulgar where she meant to be *chic*, *outré* instead of artistic. Her only real attractions were her youth and a certain liveliness.

Denis, although he had not expected a visit from her, was delighted she had come. Her excitability and apparently inexhaustible good spirits stimulated him, much as several glasses of champagne would have done. But he did not know her sufficiently well to understand that her cumulative effect would be as headachy as the aforesaid champagne. However, she was exactly the right person for his present mood.

"I got your note," she beamed. "You made me feel quite anxious about you, dear old thing."

"Jolly glad to see you," he rejoined. "But what on earth put it into your head to come here? You have n't met my father, have you? This is his house, you know, not mine."

"Thought it was about time he got to know his future daughter-in-law," was the serene reply.

Denis looked slightly apprehensive.

"Oh, come, Viv, we have n't got as far as that!" he protested.

She alighted on the arm of his sofa, like a piece of thistledown.

"How far *have* we got? Last time I saw you, you said I was the only girl you could ever dream of tacking on to for life."

"Did I?"

"You did, dear boy!"

Denis thought it best not to contradict her. He was addicted to saying a lot of stupid things and then forgetting all about them. Girls like Vivienne seemed to have extraordinarily good but embarrassing memories.

"I've no doubt you'd make an excellent little wife," he admitted; "but I'm not good enough for you. Most days I'm only half alive, to begin with."

Vivienne laughed.

"I'd soon wake you up! I've no blue blood in my veins, you know, Denny. Mine's the liquid carmine sort. That's why I appeal to you, I expect. Force of contrast. At any rate, if you like to marry me some old day, I'd make life worth while for you."

"How?"

"Well, we'd go about everywhere where there was lots of life; and I'd dress to beat the band."

"You do that already. What's your frock supposed to be to-day? Been looting an ostrich farm?"

"Something like that. Feathers are a lovely fashion, I think. There's only two yards of material in this frock. The rest is all dickies' tails. Forty-five guineas it

cost. If I had n't been an actress it would have been more."

There was a trifling pause. Then Denis said:

"You know, we happen to be awfully poor. Ours is one of the most impoverished baronies in the kingdom. The gov'nor's done a lot to pull things together since he came into the title, but I've been almost as much of an expense to him as an extravagant wife, and far more worry."

"Oh, I expect he's got a bit over and to spare. You need n't worry about me, anyway. When I can't have a new frock I can plaster the old one with the family jewels, and take the shine out of other people that way. You'd better talk to your dad about me. But what have you been doing to your nose? Scrapping?"

"No, I told you in the letter that I'd had a fall."

"Did you fall or were you pushed?" enquired Miss Raymond with more acuteness than tact.

"Oh — hunting!" he answered a little savagely.

Miss Raymond pursed her lips and shook an admonitory finger at him. Her manicured nail winked like a heliograph.

"Oh, Denis! I'm not such a booby as to take that in! A fall out hunting in August! You need n't tell me. I can jolly well guess how it happened."

"The deuce you can! Oh, well. I'm much better now. Though it was n't worth it."

"What was n't?"

"To tell you the truth, I met a girl and took her out."

"Well? Did n't she like you?"

"Can't say that she did quite. She was — a quiet girl."

Miss Raymond suppressed a giggle. "But a bit savage, I suppose. Oh, Denny, why not be true to me alone? Quiet girls are n't a bit in your line. You want some one amusing and lively like me."

"I believe I do," he said with honest conviction. "Go and sing something, Viv."

Vivienne — she really was an obliging little soul, half minx, half schemer, not altogether bad, only bad taste — sat down at the grand piano and struck a chord.

At the piano in real life as well as on the stage, she had "a way with her." She was not in the least musical, and her small voice had a perceptible Cockney twang. Nevertheless, to any one of easy taste she was very appealing and entertaining. She was worth the thirty pounds a week which her manager paid her. Denis could listen to her for hours, whereas a real lover of music would have suffered untold agonies from her performance.

She was in the midst of a spirited music-hall song when Caister opened the door and stood still listening in amazement. He had never seen this young person before, on or off the stage, and, taking stock of her before either she or Denis was aware of his entrance, he was quite sure that he would never want to see her again. Quickly and correctly, he guessed that she belonged to the stage. Equally quickly and very thoroughly, he disapproved of her.

Not necessarily because she was an actress. He was not a narrow-minded man. Lady Chalfont, for instance, to whom Rose's landlady had made allusion that afternoon, was one of his dearest friends: almost as dear a friend as Lord Chalfont himself. She also, as Miss Maggy Delamere, had been on the stage. In the

Pall Mall Chorus, in fact. But Maggy happened to be simplicity personified, a law unto herself, and a great law at that. She was one in a thousand, lovely and rare as few women are. The girl at the piano was a little person in stature and mind, incapable of self-improvement and therefore socially impossible. Caister was certain of it. He had summed her up at once. He had but just come from an atmosphere of flowers and fragrance, albeit in a King's Cross slum, and the presence of this overscented, overdressed girl at the piano filled him with resentment.

Denis, quite animated now, was beating time with feet and hands.

"By Gad, Viv!" he cried. "You're simply It! Don't stop! Go on!"

But Vivienne, some sixth sense directing her eyes, was suddenly conscious of her audience of two.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed in consternation.

Denis turned and saw his father.

"Did n't expect you in so soon, sir," he faltered.

"Vivienne, this is my father. Miss Raymond — Lord Caister."

Vivienne got off the music-stool, all airs and graces.

"I was just telling Denis it was about time we ran across each other," she observed with assurance.

"Pleased to meet you."

Apparently Caister did not see her outstretched hand. Nothing daunted, she proceeded conversationally:

"Charming house you've got. Bit more roomy than my flat. Just a shade too stiff, though. It wants a woman's touch. Any one can see bachelors live here. I'll soon put that right when I'm the Honourable Mrs.

Denis. We'll have some knickknacks sprinkled about, and silver frames and mascots. I say, you're not cross about anything, are you? You're looking at me as if I were a powder without jam. Are n't you going to ask me to stay to dinner? I'm at a loose end this Sunday because of Denny's variegated nose. Otherwise we'd be out somewhere."

Caister let his eyes (they were like fire behind steel bars) rest for a moment on her pretty, cheeky little face. His mouth was set as Denis had only once before seen it, and that was when he had received the only thrashing of his life at his father's hands. That set look affected even Vivienne. Her eyes dropped before it. The disapproval it conveyed was so very patent.

"I am sorry to appear inhospitable," he answered icily. "But I am engaged, and Denis will soon be going back to bed."

"Going to put him there yourself without any supper because he's a naughty little boy?"

He did not respond to this ill-timed attempt at humour. It was a new experience to the volatile Vivienne. She was in the habit of always hearing her sallies applauded, however futile. The instinctive dislike that Denis's father evinced irritated her, stimulated her to create a further impression.

She squared up to him, as it were.

"You don't like me, do you? I'm not a bad little thing really. At least, that's what every one tells me. Denis and I are great friends. Why won't you make the best of me and be a sport? There's no harm in me. I don't bite. But perhaps you don't like actresses."

Caister had not the faintest intention of entering into

an exposition of his likes or dislikes either towards her or her profession. Nor could he bring himself to be polite to her. He felt too angry. Every day, almost every hour, Denis was springing a fresh disappointment of one kind or another on him. There had been that episode when he had brought a bookmaker home to lunch; another when he had invited a professional "strong man" to dine. Those had been comparatively boyish pranks. Truth to tell, Caister would almost rather have entertained the "strong man" than Miss Vivienne Raymond with her meretricious attractions and unrepentant eyes.

Vivienne began to feel a little awkward at his continued silence. He was a nobleman of the old school, crumpled of dignity, she supposed. She preferred the younger generation: a boy like Denis, for instance, who looked an aristocrat, but did n't behave like one.

All this while Denis had said nothing. His father's cold scorn was galling him.

"Have n't you anything to say to Vivienne, father?" he at last asked fretfully.

Vivienne shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"I don't think I want to stay after all, Denis," she said, angry at having failed to create an effect. "But if you'd like to come and see me" — she turned to Caister — "my address is 105, Tremayne Mansions, Maida Vale. You'll probably feel more like talking when my engagement to Denis is announced. . . . You need n't trouble to shake hands."

She brushed past him with her head in the air, all her ostrich-feather trimming ashake.

Her exit was not without theatrical effect, but she marred it by shutting the door noisily behind her.

Denis got up. He had grown pale with excitement and, rarer still with him, anger.

Caister remained where he stood. Not until he heard the hall door shut did he speak.

"Now," he said, "we'll talk."

CHAPTER XI

DENIS put his hands in his pockets. Something of Vivienne's jaunty demeanour seemed to have communicated itself to him. His was a curiously contradictory nature. Generally speaking, he adored his father, would have given anything to be like him, and would listen to the earnest counsel or censure handed out to him in a chastened spirit. For he knew he was "no bally good," and regretted the fact exceedingly without making any conspicuous effort to amend his ways.

But in the matter of Vivienne he felt affronted and not in the mood to be lectured. His rather weak mouth took on a determined line also. Temporarily it strengthened his countenance, gave it character, as well as a certain resemblance to his father's.

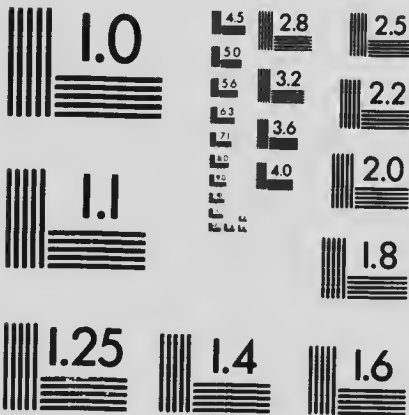
Instead of waiting for the attack he expected, he anticipated it, went halfway to meet it. Hitherto, the attribute with which Rose had mentally credited him, that of chivalry, had remained dormant within him. Now for the first time he felt the sparks of knightliness kindling within him on behalf of a far less worthy lady. He could n't understand himself. Until a few seconds back he had only considered Vivienne as an amusing little thing. Now he felt constrained to defend her, to sing her praises.

"I don't like to see you treat a friend of mine cavalierly," he said truculently. "After all, I'm not a schoolboy. I'm a man. You looked at and spoke to Vivienne as though she were a scullery-maid who had no



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business in the drawing-room. I did n't like it and I must say so."

For a moment Caister said nothing. He was trying hard to keep himself in hand. Only a little while back he had left Rose with his heart full of toleration and love for Denis. He had entered the house meaning to make a fresh start with the boy, actively to help him in every possible way. Vivienne had upset all that. She had so palpably shown that Denis was her property and that she meant to annex him. Would there be time for the suave measures which Rose had counselled? The crisis in Denis's affairs that had so suddenly developed seemed beyond her inexperienced advice. It would have to be dealt with summarily.

Before answering, Caister went to the windows and opened them wide. The air of the room seemed to him to be pervaded with the scent Vivienne had brought in with her. He could not know that, accidentally, she had upset a whole bottle of concentrated essence over herself, with the result that she diffused an aroma that put Rimmel's shop into the shade.

"Look here, Denis" — he spoke with deadly quietness — "you know as well as I do that you've taxed my patience to the utmost. I've given you every consideration, and I've not received very much in return from you. But when it comes to your entertaining in my house a young woman of whom no one could possibly approve, much less like, I must definitely make a stand. It won't do. This room was your mother's. I intend to see that you respect her memory. Had she been alive you would not have dared to bring that girl into it."

"If she had been alive I might not have wanted to,"

Denis retorted with heat. "The place would n't have been so infernally dull. What sort of a life do you think it is for a chap to sit indoors night after night without a woman's face to look at? Never to hear a woman's voice! Just to be bored stiff all day long! You've stood it all these years: I don't know how. It does n't seem to have made any difference to you. You've filled in the gaps in your life with politics, travel, and sport; books and music. None of those things are in my line. I'm just empty; not much soul, precious little brain, no physique. But a fellow's got to do something, and by Gad! I'm going to do it at last. I think I must have made up my mind when you came in and found Vivienne singing. I've drifted so far; gone with the stream. Now I'm going to strike out on my own. I'm going to see if I can't enjoy something somehow. And the only girl to teach me how to do it is Vivienne. She said so herself. I shall marry her, and you can wash your hands of me if you like." With the last words his tone changed. There was a touch of unaccustomed emotion in what followed. "I've never talked like this to you before, father, and I don't suppose I ever shall again. Something in me seems to have snapped. I've gone a step forward or perhaps one back. It does n't signify which."

"But it does signify," Caister insisted. "It's got to matter. With God's help, I'm going to make a man of you, Denis."

Denis's lip curled slightly.

"It's a bit too late in the day. I don't blame you, father, but I don't blame myself either, altogether. Looking back at my life, I don't seem to have been given a dog's chance. There was I — a kid — brought

up by an old woman and a still older nurse. Swaddled up with clothes, dosed with patent foods, kept in a hot-house. No wonder I was too delicate for either a preparatory or public school to have some sense knocked into me. No wonder I've arms and legs like pipestems, and a perpetual thirst. Hot rooms; no blessed air! I remember when I was a little fellow I was always sweating. It was a martyrdom of sorts, worse for a kid than unkindness. You did n't get rid of the old woman and take me in hand till the last tutor had cleared out. It was too late then to undo all the harm. It's too late now. Just let me rip. You made a mistake. They made a mistake. Result, I'm a mistake. Why worry? I don't."

The summary of his own life and the error of it was pitilessly true. Rose, with intuitive accuracy, had put her finger on the same weak spot. The boy had been brought up all wrong. He was more victim than sinner. Caister's anger, generally short-lived, petered out. After all, it was Vivienne who had incensed him to start with. She was a little thing who patently knew what she was about; the type of girl who through training and environment set her cap at young men such as Denis as representing the pinnacle of social ambition. He might have to be hard on Denis for a while to save him from himself, or rather, from that girl. But first of all he'd try reason.

"Suppose I admit my mistake," he said. "I ought not to have left you to elderly women when you were small. It was, I see now, a handicap. Well, my dear boy if you don't care about yourself, won't you give me a chance to help you for my own sake?"

"How?"

"We might begin by cutting out town life altogether. For a time, at any rate."

"The 'back to the land' stunt? I should fizzle out completely. The little flower-shop girl was talking about that just before she knocked me into a cocked hat." A cogitative expression came into Denis's face. "Fresh air and all that! I could n't live on it. Golf, gardening, fishing — catching trout! All I should catch would be a beastly cold. Really, father, this talk does n't lead anywhere. The best thing I can do is to set up an establishment of my own. Then we shan't always be treading on each other's toes." He moved slowly towards the door.

Caister stood considering.

"You said just now you felt the lack of a woman about the place," he remarked. "You're rather young, but I should n't stand in the way of your marrying — a nice girl."

Denis turned about. His animation had fizzled out with his indignation. Hang it all, his father meant well. A fellow could n't get away from that.

"It's no use, father," he said wearily. "I'm twenty-three. I've been about town for three years. I've been introduced to every débutante in London. Some of them would n't look at me and others would. But you can take it from me that girls are n't what they were in your time. They don't help a chap along. They model themselves on chorus girls without being half so amusing. You've met a good many of them here and there. Now I ask you, can you think of any one girl of your own or my acquaintance, who you could stake your life was good right through — out and out?"

For a moment Caister did not answer. He was think-

ing. Then, as though in answer to his thoughts, there came into his mind the vision of one girl neither débutante nor actress — a pink-frocked girl in a flower-filled room — a girl who had given him both her hands together with her promise . . .

“Yes,” he answered decisively. “I can.”

CHAPTER XII

THOUGHTS of Rose were just then exercising the minds of a good many people besides Caister. Even so insignificant a personage as the youngest lift-boy at Gardner's, who worshipped her in secret and thought her far, far more beautiful than Miss Mary Pickford, hitherto his ideal of feminine beauty, carried the picture of Rose in his mind and heart.

There was Caister, formulating dim plans in which she was to figure; Mr. Louie dreaming dreams of her; Mrs. Louie praying that those same dreams might for his sake be fulfilled; Mr. Britton still full of conjecture concerning that perfect double row of pearls; Mrs. Bell, the landlady, building baronial castles in the air for her pretty lodger.

Even in dreamy little self-centred Polseth Rose's sudden departure from its midst was still the subject of conjecture and discussion. Indeed, Mrs. Bree, the Vicar's wife, alluded to it daily.

"I never cease wondering," she remarked to her husband, "what has happened to Rose. She was a head-strong girl, Ambrose, but I cannot help feeling rather worried about her. If I'd had the slightest idea that she was premeditating flight, I would have done my best to guide her in the right direction, and keep her with us. It is over two months now since she went away."

The Vicar shook his head.

"I am very much afraid we shall neither hear of nor see the child again," he said. "I fear that offer of

domestic service frightened her, Mary. Perhaps we did not put it at the right—the most propitious—moment, although we meant it for the best. We might have offered her hospitality for a little while. Looking back on things, I think that would have been the wiser course. She was grief-stricken, hardly aware of what she was doing.”

“Oh, well, she walked to the station and took a single ticket to London. I try to console myself with the reflection that if she had the sense to do that, she may have been able to look after herself in other ways. But where could she have gone? She had no money to speak of and no friends, as we know.”

“She would make friends. Her face would do that for her, anywhere. An unusually beautiful young girl, my dear.”

A censorious look came into Mrs. Bree's face. She was one of those over-rigid women who are apt to consider physical beauty as a snare rather than a delight.

“Rather unnecessarily so, in my opinion. She was so noticeably attractive, Ambrose. Even dressed as a maid in neat black she would have looked extremely unusual and out of place. However, that does not alter the fact that it was our duty to succour her to the best of our ability. She must have been absolutely lost in London, as adrift as a — a savage. What means could she have of earning a livelihood in a great city? I thought of going to London myself to look for her, but I should n't know how to start about it or where to look. She might at least have written to us and allayed our natural anxiety.”

“Perhaps it never occurred to her that we should be anxious,” suggested the Vicar, a little cynically. “Old

Rebecca Gryls might know something of her. It might be worth while asking her. Have you seen her lately?"

"No. Last time I was her way I left some soup outside the window and called to her. Really, I'm a little afraid of her. Her cats are so fierce and she herself is so extremely like a witch that one can't wonder at her reputation. Still, if you care to go we might walk over and see her now. There's no time like the present. And as the hens have commenced laying again we can take her some eggs."

In material things Mrs. Bree was charitably inclined. If she had only combined that same charity with the divine leaven of sympathy she would have achieved a great deal more in a life which she honestly wished to make purposeful and good.

It was a long walk to Becky's eyrie on the crags, a stone-built hut perched desolately high and exposed to every wind and all weathers. Becky, as a girl, had gloried in the elements. Now that she was an old woman there was no sound she liked better than the thunder of a heavy sea and the riot of a great gale. A wild old woman! So old and solitary had she become that human voices got on her nerves. All but Rose's, and Rose had flown. Towards other people, including the Vicar and his wife, her attitude was either indifferent or inimical.

But Mrs. Bree did not intend to be put off to-day. On their way to Becky's they passed the cottage in which Rose and her adopted father had lived for so many happy years. A new tenant had taken possession of it a few days ago. The garden was overgrown; weeds flourished amongst the flowers. Nightshade and cuckoo-plum and a trailing wild creeper twined themselves

amongst stocks, jessamine, passion-flower, and honeysuckle,— a sad garden that had once been a glad garden, gay and tended. Rose had left it.

"It seems difficult to imagine that child without a garden," said Mr. Bree. "How she loved it! Everything seemed to flourish under her hand. Her flowers were a delight to the eye. I reproach myself that we did not take more care of her." He shook his head and sighed contritely.

Mrs. Bree echoed the sigh. She reproached herself, too, though she was slower to admit it.

"We might have had more influence with her if old Mr. Eton had not been so strange in his ways," she said. "I often wonder about him. I heard cook say the other day that some one had seen the name of a town — Deepville, Connecticut, I think it was — on a box-label of his."

"Sounds American," Mr. Bree remarked. "He was a mystery, and likely to remain one, I should say."

"I think it was wrong of him to adopt Rose when he must have known he would not be able to provide for her after his death. It's really dreadful to think of her left stranded."

They pursued their own none too comfortable thoughts until after half an hour's hard walking they reached Becky's cottage.

Becky happened to be in one of her most unapproachable moods. The weight of years was a burden to her, a burden that even God Himself seemed to have forgotten to lift. It lay heavily on her to-day. But the tiny room for once in a way was not foul with the smell of smoke from her cutty pipe. It was, on the contrary, actually redolent of flowers. On her bed there lay a

great cardboard box heaped with them — arum lilies, malmaisons, roses such as even the Vicar, whose hobby they were, could not aspire to grow.

"From Rose," mumbled old Becky, nodding her head. "Rose don't forget an old woman who can't get out o' bed. She will be walking on rose-petals soon, for the rest of her lovely life. What's that you're saying, sir? Do I know where she be? How should I know?"

"We hoped you might have heard from her. She was often with you. She has sent you flowers, you say. Was there no letter enclosed?" Mrs. Bree interrogated.

Becky shook her head, not once but several times, after the fashion of those china mandarins which, once started, keep up an enduring oscillation.

"Rose don't like writing, and I don't like reading. She knows I can't see with my old eyes; only here." She touched her forehead. "There's nothing but my address writ on the box. Perhaps you'd put them in water for me, ma'am. They've lain here without a drop to wet their stalks all day."

Mrs. Bree readily performed the required office. She half hoped she would come across a piece of paper on which Rose might have scribbled her love and address. But Rose's love had been sent unwritten with the flowers. There was nothing to be seen.

"Can't you tell us where she is?" urged Mrs. Bree again. "Think, now."

Old Becky's eyes looked mistily into space.

"I can see her right enough," she chanted. "I can see her in marble halls with her little head held high and jewels all about her, dressed in satin like the little queen she is, and a train all a-sweeping on the ground, but — *she's not there yet and you won't find her neither.*"

She shut her mouth like a rat-trap after that and refused to be drawn. She seemed to fall asleep. Perhaps it was her way of terminating the interview.

A little discouraged, the Vicar and his wife bade the old woman good-night and started for home.

As they passed Rose's cottage again, a voice hailed them. It came from Charles Treffy, the new tenant.

"Parson! Parson!" he called.

The couple retraced their steps.

Treffy held out an envelope.

"I found this half an hour back, sir," he said. "I was a-coming to the vicarage after tea to give it up. 'T was in the old fixed cupboard over the parlour chimney-piece in a drawer at the back I'd never have thought of, but it opened with a spring accidental-like. I reckon it's best in your care, parson. There's a will inside."

The envelope was unsealed.

Mr. Bree put on his spectacles. From the envelope he took a sheet of paper. The few lines written on it were signed, dated, and witnessed.

This is the last will and testament of me, Charles Henry Eton of Polseth. I bequeath everything of which I die possessed to my adopted daughter, Rose Eton, absolutely.

"But *had* he anything to leave?" debated Mrs. Bree who had been reading over his shoulder. "And how shall we find Rose?"

Her husband replaced the will in its envelope.

"That," he said, "will be for the lawyer in Trethew to ascertain."

CHAPTER XIII

LADY CHALFONT was one of those really busy people who are nevertheless always accessible to their friends. A few minutes since, Caister — "Bob" as she affectionately called him — had rung her up on the telephone. He wanted her advice. There had been a worried note in his voice. She had detected it over the wire, and was instantly concerned on his account.

To Maggy (familiarily so called by her intimate friends), with her universal sympathy and great heart, he often brought his troubles about Denis. When the Chalfonts were in town their house was like a second home to him. Maggy, although she was a great lady in the land now, was above all a home-maker. It seemed impossible to associate her with the stage. She was so entirely devoid of artificiality, so modest and withal so untheatrical. She was loved by every one, young and old. Her social as well as her stage career had culminated in triumph. In time to come somebody would assuredly write her biography and so hand down her memory, beautiful and bewitching, to posterity.

She was a contradiction to almost every rule: not a patrician, yet she behaved as though she were. She was not even educated according to ordinary standards; her culture was her own. She was impulsive, yet she always said and did the right thing in her own inimitable Maggyesque way. Lord Chalfont, quiet, reserved, the very antithesis of herself, adored her.

When Caister called on her that afternoon in St. James's Square she was alone, waiting for him. Alone,

that is, except for her son and heir, a year-old baby boy; "Mrs. Slightly," a cat of humble origin; and "Onions," an exceedingly well-behaved but mongrel dog. All three shared the big white bearskin hearthrug with happy impartiality. The cat was licking the dog; the baby lay gurgling on its back. Maggy watched them with an expression of perfect beatitude.

The very sight of Maggy soothed Caister. It struck him as so unusually restful to see some one deliberately happy in a perfectly natural way. Most people in their desperate effort to be joyful so frequently upset the serenity of others.

Maggy gave him a wide, pleasant smile.

"Will you join the glad throng on the hearthrug, or share the sofa with me?" she asked. "We're going to have a nice confab-y afternoon and no one shall interrupt us except Chalfont. You're horribly bothered about something, are n't you? I got an inkling of it over the 'phone, and saw it directly you came in. It's about Denis, of course." She slid her hand into his and gave it a friendly squeeze. "Now, teil me, what is his latest departure?"

"'Departure' expresses it exactly," he said. "He definitely wants to leave me. That's not all. Lots of young men and women of to-day seem anxious to quit the family roof-tree. Denis's independence is not of that order. He does n't want to live alone. In fact, he's talking about getting married."

Lady Chalfont considered.

"Marriage," she remarked tritely but earnestly, "is the salvation of a great many people. It made me want to be a good woman. I've been trying to live up to the standard ever since."

"You *are* a good woman. The trouble is, that the girl Denis talks of marrying is not good. No doubt you've heard of her — Miss Vivienne Raymond."

Maggy's eyebrows went up. Once, long ago, she had been acquainted with the lively Vivienne. Now, Maggy's tastes had always been eclectic, but Vivienne had outraged them.

"That's a pity," she said quietly. "He must n't marry her, Bob. I don't like saying hard things of any girl, but she's pretty hopeless."

"What do you know about her?"

"Only little things—little things that count in telling character, at any rate. We shared a dressing-room once, six of us: show girls. Vivienne was one. So I got to know her pretty well. She's rather clever, but her mind's got a kink. It's little, to match herself, and horribly mean."

She did n't go into particulars, and Caister did not ask her to do so. It was sufficient for him that Maggy's opinion of the girl endorsed his own. He would have been loath to misjudge anybody.

"Mind you," Maggy continued speculatively, "I would n't say she is n't fond of Denis. I should n't be surprised if she were. The worst of us have a soft spot somewhere. Let's give her credit for that, anyway. The bother is, Bob, that even if she loved a man she would n't make him a good wife. It's not in her. And she has ways that no white man could stand after a bit. No sense of honour. That's as hopeless in its way as being born without a sense of humour. You can't graft it on. She'd help herself out of anybody's make-up box without putting back what she took, and then swear it was hers. And the same way with other

things — a man or even jewellery. She'd end up by making Denis wish he'd never been born."

She was very definite, absolutely serious.

"The best thing you can do is to go and see her yourself," she said after a thoughtful pause. "Have it out with her. Don't quarrel with her if you can help it. Temporise."

"And then?"

"Find some nice girl for Denis and let them get married quickly. If Denis loved Vivienne I would n't talk like this. I'd say let things go on. But he can't possibly love her. She only amuses him. If he had any experience of the real thing he'd never bother about imitations. Now, do you know any girl who would be really good to him, fond of him, and keep him straight?"

"That's the very thing I want to talk to you about," he said.

And he spoke of Rose. Maggy listened attentively without once interrupting while he narrated what little he knew of the girl, and how wonderfully she had impressed him.

"I can't make her out," he finished. "As I've told you, she's quite beautiful; she's absolutely herself, and in my eyes charming. I gather she was brought up, or rather lived an untrammelled existence in a Cornish village until a few months back. Since then she's been a florist at Gardner's. I can't describe her appearance either."

"Do you think Denis could love her?"

"I don't think any one could help loving her," he answered after an appreciable pause. "In that sense she's like you, Maggy, my dear."

Maggy thanked him with a smile.

"In short," she summed up, "in spite of the fact that you're conservative to the backbone, you'd throw your prejudices to the winds for Denis's sake, and let him marry a girl of the people. That's great! I know you've always looked on *mésalliances* — even the happy ones — with a sort of cold aristocratic contempt. You made an exception in my case, though, bless you. Now about this girl. What's her name?"

"Rose — Rose Eton."

"Her name makes me want to like her from the start. Where does she live?"

"109, Sidey Street," said Caister with a half-smile.

"How quaint! My old address!"

"She has your very room, I believe."

"Poor little thing! Is the noisy old cistern still there?"

"I think I saw one."

"And the shunter from King's Cross Station? He had the room above. Mrs. Bell, the landlady, was n't a bad soul, but I can tell you, it was pretty terrible in the main, Bob. Cooking awful; noise and swearing in the streets all night. It is n't easy to lead a lovely life or to think lovely thoughts when you live in a slum. I was inured to a good deal in those days, but it was too much for me in the end. So Denis went to see her there, you say?"

"Once."

"That's a pity. He must have thought it rather like seeing a lily growing on a dust-heap. What she wants is a fairy godmother. I wonder if there's any magic left in my wand!" She got up. "Look here, I think I'll go and see her for myself right away. Will you wait till I come back, and look after baby for me? If he cries, give

him anything he fancies off the silver table. I don't think he will cry. He does n't often. He'll curl up with the animals and go to sleep. I won't be long. A bus will get me there in no time. I used to have to save up my pennies once for the bus."

She nodded cheerily, kissed her baby, patted the dog, stroked the cat, and was gone.

Caister sat on, absorbed in thought. It was peaceful in that cool but sunlit room, homelike to a degree. On a chair reposed Maggy's knitting. She insisted on making all her baby's garments and the results of her industry would have clothed a well-filled *crèche*.

The dog and the cat curled up and drowsed. The baby continued to make happy little noises and play with a shaft of sunlight.

By and by he whimpered.

Caister picked him up.

Rather to his surprise the baby made no demur, and presently fell asleep, holding one big finger tightly in its tiny grasp. He sat on supporting it with stiff arms, hardly daring to move, so fearful was he of disturbing it. The expression on his face was wonderfully soft.

Twenty-three years ago he had held just such another scrap of humanity in his arms. Just twenty-three years ago Denis had been a baby; helpless, pathetic, motherless, so precious and so small! And as though they had been said yesterday, he heard again the kindly words of the old Dean who had christened him:

"I hope he will live to be a great blessing to you."

Caister looked down at the face of the sleeping child, and memories brought a mist to his eyes.

CHAPTER XIV

ROSE was at business when Maggy got to Sidey Street; Mrs. Bell did not expect her back for another half-hour. But she was overjoyed to see Maggy again. Her pleasure at the unexpected encounter completely swamped her awe of the preëminence to which her old lodger had attained.

"Now, do come in, Miss Delamere — my lady," she begged. "I was just taking tea in the parlour — with shrimps for a relish. You was always partial to shrimps. Could n't you fancy a few now, dear?"

Maggy laughed in her jolly, unaffected way. "If I had n't had lunch so late I'd have loved some. Do you remember, Mrs. Bell, how you always bought me shrimps for a treat whenever I paid my bill? I hope you're equally kind to my successor. I'm sorry she's out; I wanted to make friends with her."

"I'm sure I'm glad to hear it, for a nicer young lady there could n't be. Nine weeks come Tuesday I've had her lodgin' here, payin' regular, and givin' no trouble. All the same" — Mrs. Bell lowered her voice confidentially — "I'm worried about her. She ain't like you was, if you'll forgive me sayin' so: all for gaddin' and playin' around and makin' everybody lively. Why, after you left I got so lonesome I had to buy a grammerphone. Miss Eton don't take any stock in grammerphones or such-like. She's what you might call inclusive."

"*Exclusive?*"

"That's the word. Not stuck up with it, though,

but different from other girls. She ain't a Londoner to start with. You can see that by the way she goes on with flowers and seaweed."

"Seaweed?" wondered Maggy.

"Yes, seaweed. There was a piece we kep' in the 'all, what I brought from Clacton last year. Well, she asked me for it, and there, if you please, I found her in her room after supper holdin' it to her nose and smellin' it, and the tears runnin' down her cheeks like as it might 'ave been a onion or her heart was breakin'."

"She's lived by the sea all her life, I believe. Sailors get like that: sick for the sight and the smell of it. Poor thing!"

"I did hope," Mrs. Bell pursued, "as she'd take up with a boy, just to liven herself up a bit. But there! as I've said, she've no more use for that sort of thing than she had for my lovely grammerphone. Not that she's always mopey, you'll understand. She'll sing like a lark in its cage when the sun comes out; and other times she'll pine like a lark, because it's a dark day. Puts me in mind of a bird, she does. You take my meanin', don't you, dearie — my lady?"

Maggy nodded. "Well, I won't keep you from your tea, Mrs. Bell. May I wait in my — her room till she comes in?"

Mrs. Bell would have preferred a gossip in the parlour, but, suddenly remembering her visitor's high status, forbore to persuade.

At her own desire Maggy found her way to her old room alone. Something of her old self, she felt, would forever haunt it. Never, never in her life would she forget the poverty-stricken days she had spent there. Only to remember them made her humble in heart.

She sat down on the bumpy little bed that had received her weary body night after night. How well she remembered the groan that the springs gave out when she got into it! It was a demon of a bed. One had to be very, very tired and very young to be able to court slumber upon it.

It was hot in the room, although the small window was wide open. Down in the street a fight seemed to be in progress. In Sidey Street the inhabitants always differed and generally settled their differences in the roadway. Ugly words fell on Maggy's ears: words such as she had not heard for years and never wanted to hear again — words that sullied human lips and befouled the air. She craned her neck to look out of the window. Two viragos were viciously quarrelling. Several children, probably their own, were avidly listening to the unlovely exhibition of uncontrolled passions. A baby was crawling in the gutter.

Within a mile and a half or so was the quiet, well-ordered square from which Maggy had set out, where the pavements were clean and people did not fight: not in public, at any rate. There it was easier to observe the amenities of life. In that square was a delightful house, one of many delightful houses. It was filled with beautiful things. A man who loved her devotedly had given them all to her. Within that house was a cool and sunlit nursery where a baby played with fluffy, cuddly toys instead of crawling in a gutter; and facing it was a green and leafy garden wherein one might happily forget that one lived in the heart of a great city full of evil plague-spots known as slums.

It is not such a far cry from King's Cross to St.

James's, but the contrast is sharp and defined. Truly, Maggy's lines had fallen in pleasant places.

Obeying, as she ever did, the impulse of the moment, she knelt down by the side of the bed, and gave thanks for the abundance that was hers. She was still on her knees when Rose came into the room.

Maggy got up. She was no more ashamed of praying than of kneeling in church.

Rose stood for a second a little bewildered, wondering who this beautiful creature could be. Then Maggy came forward, put her hands on her shoulders and kissed her.

"I'm Maggy Chalfont," she said. "And you're Rose Eton, are n't you? We're going to be great friends, I hope."

Although Rose had heard much about Lady Chalfont from her landlady, this unlooked-for meeting staggered her. Maggy, with her lovely frock and still lovelier face, was like a being from another world. And here she was, a great lady, smiling into her eyes, holding her hands, treating her on terms of equality and offering her friendship! It made Rose conscious of how really lonely she had been. The people at Gardner's were ever so nice; all the girls were kind to her, especially Miss Hobbs; but they were outside her life, somehow. Maggy in a moment had entered into it, coloured and filled it. It was wonderful!

"I'm only a — a shopgirl," she said diffidently. "Could you be friends with me?"

"I was only an actress," said Maggy. "I lived here, you know. I was just thanking God that I don't now, when you came in. Only, most of the time I had another girl to chum with. That made it endurable. Does n't

anybody come and see you? Don't you ever go out after shop hours?"

Rose shook her head.

"I'm afraid to. This street wakes up at night and — it's horrid."

Maggy thoroughly understood. She knew.

"You must n't go on living here," she asserted categorically. "It's bad for any one who was n't born or brought up in a slum. Souls can't grow in Sidey Street. Mine nearly withered away and died." For a moment her eyes grew tragic with the recollection of the sorrows and humiliations that had come to her in that little room. She made the resolve that Rose at least should never find herself "up against it" as she had, if she could help it. From that moment she decided to take Rose under her wing. Maggy's spiritual wings were ample and protective and always outspread. She would if possible have shielded all the world from sorrow and suffering.

She had sought Rose out in the first instance to please Lord Caister. In a way, she had already guessed at the half-formulated plan in his mind: that Rose was to work out Denis's salvation. Now she wanted to befriend Rose for Rose's own sake. Maggy's affections were not of the surface description, but they were born in a moment. Love for a man, woman, child, or dog would spring up in her heart at once, not requiring time for growth. Rose appealed to her at every point. She was so sweet to look at, to speak to; so unspoilt; worth rescuing from Sidey Street.

"Well, you're going to have friends now," she promised. "Myself for one. Lord Caister is another. We were talking about you this afternoon. In fact, he

made me so curious about you that I simply had to come right away and see you for myself."

Over Rose's face there spread a beautiful, burning flush. Her eyes lit up and shone like stars.

"Denis's father!" she said. "How proud I should be if he really was my friend! It — it would make me feel like a soldier who has won a medal."

"Then you *may* be proud. And when I've told you all about him, you will be prouder still, my dear."

Rose came and sat beside her on the bed. Maggy took her hand. As she held it she talked. In her direct, simple way she told Rose all she knew of "Bob" and his life; the sadness of it, the attainment of it, the glory of it. He was everything that was fine. He had fought in the Great War, had saved a friend's life in absolute disregard of his own, was a "white man" all through.

"A great 'white man,'" she emphasised. "And all his life he's never thought of himself. I've heard that from my husband. He's lived for Denis. He's built all his hopes on him. He's struggled with the estates for him to make them pay; to leave him an unencumbered heritage. He's slaved for him. Only Denis has n't worked out according to plan and it's breaking his father's heart."

Rose was listening intently.

"I promised I'd help him," she said. "He asked me to. But how can I? What use am I?"

Maggy did not offer an opinion. One day, perhaps, Caister would tell Rose in what way she could be of use. Would she falter and go back on her word? Maggy wondered. It was a big thing to ask of the child. Could she find it in her heart to love a weakling like Denis and make him strong through that love?

As though in answer to her thoughts, Rose said:

"I had a dream last night. It was so real. I've not been able to get it out of my head all day. It bothers me. I dreamt I was climbing great cliffs, like I used to at Polseth, only these cliffs were much higher, and there was a terrible storm going on. The seas were — smashing! Then I was standing by Lord Caister's side and some one was in the sea, drowning. He called out that it was Denis, and dived in to save him. I saw him struggling, and I could n't stand there seeing them both drown. I can swim in almost any sea. So I dived in, too, and reached them, and together we got Denis in somehow . . ."

She stopped, labouring under the stress of her dream.

"Don't worry about a dream," said Maggy. "At any rate, it's a good omen. You saved him between you, you see."

"No, we did n't," Rose whispered. "He could n't. We — we did all we could, but he was — quite dead."

Maggy shivered. Imaginative herself, for a moment it seemed to her as if the room had grown suddenly chill. She gave herself an impatient little shake.

"Dreams always go by contraries," she said with cheery optimism. "Once, during the war, I dreamt that I was rationed for sleep and could n't find my coupons. Silly, was n't it? I used to have nightmares here in Sidey Street, too. Put your dream down to Mrs. Bell's cooking, and forget it."

CHAPTER XV

THE telephone on Denis's dressing-table trilled imperatively. Vivienne, these days, seemed to be living at the other end of it. She wanted Denis to take her out to supper and on to a friend's flat afterwards where there would be baccarat.

"Oh, but you must!" she exclaimed in a disappointed tone. "What? Dining at Lady Chalfont's? Cut it out."

But Denis for once was not to be cajoled. He never refused an invitation from Maggy. A fellow never got bored there. She was such good company.

To-night, however, he was to find her in a serious mood, and alone. The two facts taken together portended something unusual. Chalfont, he suspected, was waiting in the drawing-room for them. Maggy had received him in her boudoir.

Denis was always good-tempered with his father's close friend. He never resented her giving it to him "straight from the shoulder." In fact, he generally felt morally braced afterwards.

"You're like a tonic," he remarked, after he had shaken hands. "If you could talk to me three or four times a day before meals for a month, I should buck up no end."

"Well, you're going to have a good big dose now," she said. She was not smiling. "Look here, Denis, from all accounts you're behaving very badly, and I'm disappointed."

Denis was making himself comfortable in a low chair. He sat up a little.

"If you want to keep your friends, me included," pursued Maggy, "you'll have to take a pull. There are all sorts of ways of going the pace, old son. You're not doing it like a gentleman."

The aspersion made Denis wince. Maggy hastened to apply a little salve.

"Now, I'm particularly qualified to advise you, because I've never been an angel myself. I've seen life, and I've had one or two knock-down blows. So you can listen to me like a brother. Denis, what's the sense in it all? — turning night into day, drinking, card-playing; giving your best friends the go-by and taking up with the wrong people. Girls, I mean. Some of them who have the cheek to tack themselves on to you in public are n't your friends. Don't you understand that? They're your enemies. If you'd been under fire out in Flanders it would n't, I suppose, have occurred to you simply to walk up and surrender to the Huns? You'd have seen yourself shot first." She sighed. "I'm sorry for you, Denis. If you'd been allowed to play the game out there you might have learnt how to do it here, because life is the biggest war-game there is, and it goes on all the time. I would n't own myself beaten at it for all the world. Where's your *morale*?"

Denis thought this out for a while.

"You talk jolly good sense, Lady Chalfont, dear," he said. "But you don't understand. You were n't born flabby, to start with. You don't wake up in the morning feeling only nine carat. You don't wonder how on earth you're going to summon up enough energy to get through the day. You're always in tip-top condition and full of beans, and it makes you feel merry and bright. If anything happened to you,

for instance, it would matter such a lot. Chalfont adores you; your kiddie could n't get along without you; hundreds of people would feel a blank in their lives if you went out. But I don't seem to have a place in the book of life at all. I'm a misprint. So I try to forget it, and behave as if I was censored. You can't say harder things to me than I think about myself."

Maggy sat pondering his defence. Then she said:

"Have n't you ever met anybody who made you feel you'd like to be different?"

Denis hesitated. "Not until the other day. And then it passed off. It was n't worth while, and it could n't have happened. I was just dreaming for a second; wishing I were a decent chap, you know."

"Tell me about it," urged Maggy.

"There's not much to tell. I met a girl — a girl who sells flowers in a shop. I made myself a nuisance until I persuaded her to come out with me. We spent an afternoon in the country. That part bored me a bit, I'll own, because I'm out of tune with Nature, I suppose. But the girl made me feel as if I were in church, and that I liked being there. She was wonderful to look at and to watch. You felt she was so good. Not good like you are, the tried-by-fire sort" (it was Maggy's turn to wince), "but good and pure like the flowers and the birds because they were created that way.

"Well, part of the time I was with her I felt sort of uplifted, and the rest of it I was simply dying to kiss her, because — well, because she was so — so extraordinarily kissable. In the end the worst part of me got the upper hand. I wanted to kiss her, and I'd gone without dinner and I was thirsty. The spiritual

part of me went plop. I took her to a night club and filled myself up with cocktails. They went to my head. I saw her home and I did n't behave myself. But I did n't — honest Injun, Lady Chalfont — I did n't mean to insult her, although she took it that way. My head was spinning round like a top and I wanted to ask her to marry me and help me to be a better chap and all that, only somehow I found myself trying to kiss her instead. She was angry, naturally, and gave me a push and over I went. Fell on my nose. It's not right yet."

Maggy smiled. She could n't help it. Denis's story was such a mixture of the pathetic and the ridiculous.

"When I came to she was n't there. She thought she'd killed me and rushed off to tell the governor so! I expected there'd be no end of a rumpus, but she must have bewitched him, for all he did was to send her home again. He made me write her an apology next day. Well, then I felt fed up altogether. My nose and what pride I'd got left were both hurt. What was the good, anyhow, of getting struck on a girl who must have thought me a perfect rotter? Besides, it was all no use. Waste of time. You know as well as I do that the governor would n't give his consent to my marrying anybody out of our own set. He would n't have sanctioned my running after a shopgirl with a view to matrimony, even if he did believe she was good for my soul."

"But that's where you're wrong," cried Maggy. "That's where neither you nor I understood him a little bit. Denis, he'd consent to anything that he honestly believed was good for you."

Denis looked unconvinced. He thought he knew his father's prejudices a good deal better than Maggy did.

"Let's change the subject," he said. "I did n't mean to talk so much. You said I was behaving badly, just now. Let's leave it at that. Besides, I've no earthly right to think about any nice girl at all. If you only knew —" He pulled himself up short as he thought of Vivienne and her importunities, and how far he might have pledged himself. "Oh, it's all too late," he finished despairingly.

The dinner-bell clanged a sonorous summons.

Maggy jumped up.

"That's another thing you're wrong about, too," she said in a sprightly voice. "It's never too late to mend — or to be punctual for dinner!"

She hooked her arm in his. Together they descended the broad staircase. Maggy was smiling to herself, as though at some happy thought.

"You are a brick!" Denis said, watching her face.

He opened the drawing-room door and followed her in.

Lord Chalfont was already there, talking to a girl in a grey tulle frock with a cherry sash, a girl with dark masses of curling hair piled high on top of her small head, and fastened with a jewelled comb. Something about the unconsciously proud poise of that little head was familiar to Denis, although her face was turned from him.

"Sorry to keep you two waiting," said Maggy brightly.

At the sound of her voice the girl looked round. Denis was altogether startled, could not believe his eyes. It *was* Rose — Rose subtly changed by the wave of a modiste's wand from a simple village maiden to a veritable Princess of Dreams!

CHAPTER XVI

DINNER was over. There had been no constraint. Maggy's natural capacity for smoothing over difficulties had put Rose quite at her ease. She had passed this first test of comportment under new conditions with the unaffected modesty characteristic of her. Now Maggy had stolen away to take a peep at her sleeping baby, and Lord Chalfont had followed her upstairs.

The two visitors found themselves alone in the drawing-room. Denis took a long, long look at Rose. Rose met it with a shy smile.

"I expect you were surprised to see me here," she said.

"Surprised is n't the word," he admitted. "Funny thing is, you seem to fit into the picture wherever you are — at Gardner's all among the flowers, or here, looking like a — well, as if you'd been born to it. Though, of course, I don't understand how it's all come about."

"I'll tell you. Only I'd like to ask you to forgive me first for — for hurting you that night. I did n't mean to."

Shame brought a tinge of colour into Denis's face.

"It would have served me right if I had been a lot more hurt," he murmured. "I behaved like a shop-walker."

Though well-meant, it was a blundering comparison.

"There are lots of shop-walkers at Gardner's," said Rose with unconscious reproof. "They all behave like

gentlemen. I never knew until the other night that any one could be diff— " She stopped, afraid of having wounded his feelings.

"I deserved that," he said humbly. "And I did n't mean to imply that the fellows in shops were n't quite decent chaps. I expect most of them could give me points all round. All I wanted to say was that I'd like to kick myself for having upset you. Because my pride was hurt I tried to make myself think of you as if — well, as if I was the aggrieved party. When my father told me you had come flying round in a fright about me I believe I called it cheek. That was simply my bad temp. . . In my heart I knew I had n't a leg to stand on. I hope he was n't rude to you, too."

"Rude to me?" echoed Rose in surprise. "Why, he's my friend!"

The simple statement, the pretty, proud way in which she said it, the ring of loyalty and something more in her voice, made Denis wonder.

"You like him then?" he asked in an odd voice. Rose's eyes shone.

"I think he's the most wonderful man I ever met," she answered enthusiastically. "I could n't bear to make him sad — if I were you."

"If you were me, I don't suppose he'd read the Riot Act to you every day of the week. And is Lady Chalfont a friend of yours, too?"

Rose clasped her hands ecstatically.

"Yes! Is n't it strange? I feel as if I'd known her all my life, although I met her yesterday afternoon for the first time. She came to see me. Is n't she a perfect dear?"

Denis held out his hand. "Don't think badly of me,

little girl. I want you to put it there and let me be your friend too. I promise you I'll never give you cause to mistrust me again."

Rose gave him her hand.

"Of course I'll have you for a friend," she answered whole-heartedly. "But friends help each other. Can I help you? Will you let me?"

Denis sighed. Here, in this friendly house with Rose, so fragrantly young and unspoilt, he felt that after all it would be worth while and not so terribly hard to make a new start and to retrieve something of his wasted young manhood. Then he remembered Vivienne. Did Vivienne mean to tie him to her? It seemed so. She had the clinging habit. Did he really want to escape from her and the restless life she stood for? When a fellow had the blues there was no one like her. There was a certain deviltry in her composition that appealed to the sinister side of his nature, just as Rose conversely evoked what was best in him.

"How can you help me?" he asked a shade hopelessly. "As I sit here looking at you I feel I could be no end of a good chap. But I have bad times, you know; moments when I feel so fed up that I simply must go on a bust."

"Is that when you drink the pink stuff out of little glasses?" she enquired.

"Generally."

"But why? Does it taste nice?"

"It does — at the time. Inside each glass there's a merry little red devil who tells you that nothing matters. Nothing at all! After you've swallowed several of 'em they make you feel as bright and lively, as a bird with a worm in his beak! But in the morning when you

wake up, they've all turned blue. Any one will tell you what blue devils are like."

"I should give it up altogether," said Rose sagaciously. "Perhaps you're colour-blind and don't know the red from the blue ones. If you're so fond of that pink stuff, try what I drink all the summer. It's lovely."

"What's that?"

"Rosalia Lemonade. You buy it in a packet; a rosy powder. You put it in a jug and pour boiling water on it till it fizzes. You can make pints for a penny."

Denis could not restrain a shudder.

"Do you drink it hot?" he asked in amazement.

"No; cold, of course. And it does n't hurt you a bit. It quenches your thirst. It says so on the wrapper."

"It would quench mine. For ever and ever! Have you ever been to Carlsbad? No, I s'pose not. German watering-place, you know — where the Huns bottled their poison gas, I expect. Perhaps that's where your Rosalia comes from. . . . I say, I did n't mean to make fun of you, kiddie. It's absolutely brickish of you to want to help me at all. I'd love it if you would!"

"Well, then, will you drink water?" entreated Rose.

The request struck Denis as harmless, if curious.

"All right," he promised. "I'll try. Honestly, I will. But you must let me see you pretty often, or I shall never be able to keep it up. Is that all you want me to do?"

"Not all. But it will do for a start. Now, tell me: What do you do all day?"

"Nothing very much, I'm afraid. I begin with lunch at one —"

"But what do you do all the morning?"

"Stay in bed."

"Don't you have any breakfast?"

"Good Heavens, no! It does n't agree with those little devils I was telling you about."

"Do you read in bed in the morning?" was Rose's next question. Denis's life, so far, seemed to be one of inertia. No wonder he had a tired look.

"There are n't many books worth reading," was his evasion. "Books give me brain-fag, whenever I think of the swot it must be to write 'em. Besides, what's in a book? The real ones are too like everyday life, and the imaginary kind are so beastly unreal. Mostly I lie and look at the ceiling. I've had my bedroom ceiling painted by a clever artist chap. It's a sort of deep sea-green, a wave effect. If you lie with your eyes half closed, and the green blind down, you can almost imagine you're peacefully drowned at the bottom of the ocean. It's quite a pleasant, final sort of feeling."

Rose could not follow him. She, like Maggy, had a strongly developed practical side.

"You bother too much about feelings," she said. "You seem to run after them. If you're not feeling things you're bored. Is that it?"

"I dare say."

"I don't understand that. I just like to wake up every morning and find myself alive and well. I dare say I might get miserable too if I always expected to feel bright the whole time. One can't. There must be blanks when one does n't feel anything in particular, or else we should get kind of blunted."

"That's me," nodded Denis. "I've got no edge to myself or my appetite."

"You would have if you worked. No one can live and be happy without working. And when Sunday

comes round to freshen you up, you feel how nice it will be to start again. . . . How do you spend the afternoon?"

"About three I stroll out. Sometimes I go to my club. More often I fetch up at Vivienne's."

"Who is Vivienne? A friend?"

"She's the little friend of a lot of people, and the effect she has on me is rather like the pink stuff in the little glasses."

"Then I don't think she can be at all nice," said Rose with much decision. "Do you take her out sometimes into the country, as you did me?"

"Vivienne would n't have any use for that sort of thing. She likes life — buzzing round, as she calls it."

"Has n't she — repose?" asked Rose.

"Not a bit."

"Then I don't suppose she is a lady. Mr. Louie at Gardner's says that only ladies have repose."

"I dare say he's right. But Vivienne is great fun all the same. That's why I sometimes take her out instead of going to my club. Then there's dinner. If I don't have it at home I go on to some show or other that does n't make too much demand on my mental faculties; finish up with supper, and get back home when there's nothing more to stay out for. It does seem a pretty piffling sort of existence, I'll admit. Why don't you plan out a day for me? Something different. I'll give it a try. Do!"

There was a touch of eagerness in his voice. Rose considered. She was so very anxious to help him.

"Begin by going to bed early to-night, then," she said. "And then —"

Maggy came back into the room.

"You're wanted on the 'phone, Denis," she said. "In the hall."

There, in response to his "Hullo!" a querulous voice said:

"That you, Denny? . . . Where are you? . . . Yes, Vivienne. Who's this Lady Chalfont whose number they've given me. . . . What? . . . Well, never mind that, now. I'm in a hurry. I'm speaking from the theatre. You *must* come and fetch me in a quarter of an hour. . . . Headache? Going to bed early? Rats! You've got to come and punt at Jardine's. Baccarat, dear boy. And who knows how soon the place may not be raided? Better enjoy ourselves while we can. Besides, you're sure to win to-night. Your luck's bound to turn!"

Denis hesitated, and then said, "Right-o!" The gambling fever was in his blood. The inducement Vivienne held out was too potent to resist. After all, what harm was there in a modest gamble? He could still keep his promise to Rose, turn in early and keep off heady drinks, at any rate. A fellow could n't be expected to vanquish all his little weaknesses at one fell swoop. He had n't mentioned his gambling propensities to Rose. Even Maggy had no knowledge of them; only his father, who had paid his losses, not once but several times.

"Hurry up, dear boy!" urged Vivienne, and rang off.

Denis went back to the drawing-room.

"I say, Lady Chalfont, I'm awfully sorry," he stammered, "but I must be off. I've just been reminded of an important engagement. I'm late for it already. Please don't think me rude for clearing out so early. . . ."

Maggy had the discretion not to ask questions. The

voice that had enquired for him on the 'phone had been a woman's. She was disappointed, but she forbore to persuade him to stay. He had certain mule-like qualities peculiar to individuals of weak character — qualities of which she had had evidence on one or two previous occasions. She knew it was futile to coerce him.

So Denis, somewhat shamefaced, took himself off. He felt a traitor, partly to Maggy but mostly to Rose.

"Poor old Denis!" sighed Maggy. "I wonder if he's a hopeless case!"

"No, don't think that," rejoined Rose. "We've been having a talk. Do you know, I think it's because he feels that every one has so little faith in him that he has n't much hope of himself. But he's going to turn over a new leaf. He promised me he would. Would n't it be splendid if he made good after all, so that his father could be really proud of him?"

"Splendid!" echoed Maggy. "But, you know, dear, it's desperately hard for some of us to achieve goodness all at once. Sometimes it takes a lifetime."

Just for a fleeting moment she wondered whether Rose was already on the way to caring for Denis, but the girl's serene face negatived the aspiration. Rose only wished him well. Love had not even brushed her with the tip of his wing. . . .

Not long afterwards Rose prepared to go home. It was nearly eleven, a very late hour for her to be out.

Up in her hostess's bedroom she endeavoured to voice her overflowing gratitude and some of the love with which Maggy inspired her. But Maggy would not listen. Neither would she allow Rose to take off the beautiful dress she had on.

"You'll want it for next time, my sweet. It's far

too youthful-looking for an old married woman like me. You show it off much better."

Rose, bereft of words, put up her face to be kissed.

"You must see my gallery before you go," said Maggy. She took her to the mantelpiece, from which vantage-point, as she said, all her best friends could have a heart-to-heart talk with her without interruption when she was alone. It was crowded with photographs. "That's the latest of Baby. There's Chalfont on his yacht. There's me bathing. . . . Yes, that's Denis. Would you like it?"

Rose's eyes had come to a rest on the photograph next to Denis's. It riveted her attention.

"Oh, might I — could I have that one?" she asked in a faltering voice.

"Why, yes — take them both," assented Maggy generously.

But Rose, in her eagerness, omitted to take both. The one she had chosen was a very good snap-shot, taken by Maggy herself, of Caister. Rose hugged it to her. She would treasure the likeness of her "ideal knight"!

When she had seen Rose off, Maggy came slowly back into the room. Her beautiful face wore a faintly troubled look. Then she spoke aloud, very thoughtfully.

"Where is that child's heart going to take her? *Why did n't she choose Denis? . . . I wonder! . . .*"

CHAPTER XVII

VIVIENNE's maid opened the door of Vivienne's flat. Caister stood outside. He gave her his card. The name Caister aroused her interest. She was very well informed, as a maid of her position is apt to be, of the visitor's relationship to the Honourable Denis. She hurried off with the card and aroused her mistress.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. Vivienne generally slept soundly until twelve. At sight of the name on the card she too showed undue activity. She immediately jumped out of bed.

"Turn on my bath at once," she ordered. "Tell Lord Caister I'll be with him in ten minutes if he'll wait; give him my book of press notices to look at. And take in the whiskey and some Perrier."

Whenever Vivienne received male visitors, including press interviewers, she always gave precisely the same instructions, conceiving them to be the height of hospitality.

Mélanie dutifully delivered the message, augmented the whiskey stand with another of liqueurs, and went back to help her mistress dress.

Caister regarded the plethora of alcoholic refreshment with disapproval and the book of press cuttings with indifference. His eyes roved round the small drawing-room critically. Like Vivienne herself, it was in doubtful taste. Everything in it, from the colour scheme to the furniture, appeared to have been chosen to startle the eye. It was expensive, but hopelessly inartistic, not even original enough to be bizarre.

The top of the baby-grand piano was laden with framed photographs — photographs of all Vivienne's men friends. Most of them were inscribed in the most affectionate terms. They were hers till Z, hers ever, devotedly hers, hers all the time. Amongst this galaxy Caister espied one of Denis. Indeed, it could hardly have escaped his attention, for it was in the largest and most elaborate frame of all. He was relieved to see that Denis, at any rate, had had the discretion to refrain from autographing it in terms of theatrical endearment.

Vivienne did not keep him waiting long. The quick-change habit of the stage served her.

She came into the room in a trailing green pelignoir embroidered with dragons, and a gem-studded boudoir cap crammed on over her red curls. She was quite aware that she looked an attractive little adventuress. It would probably pay her to play the part this morning.

This time she did not make the mistake of offering Caister her hand. She guessed his errand and meant to make the most of it.

"How do you do?" she said in offhand style. "I thought you'd blow in one of these days. Do sit in a more comfortable chair. Denis likes that one best. There's room for two in it," she added archly.

"It's about Denis that I've come to see you," he said. "I suppose you are aware — you must be — that he is my heir."

Vivienne settled herself opposite him and crossed her knees. "Quite," was her undisturbed answer.

"And his age? You know it?"

"Same as mine, I think. Twenty-three."

"And my own?"

She did not get his meaning. "Oh, well, you look about forty," she hazarded. "But I guess you're sixty, unless you married very young."

"I am forty-two. Which means that by accidents and with ordinary luck I may live for quite another thirty years. Perhaps more. I happen to be tough. Until I die, Denis has to look to me for an allowance. If he marries without my consent, I shall make him none whatever. So that if it is your intention to acquire him as a husband I do not see that you will be furthering your interests or improving your position in any way."

He paused.

Vivienne did not turn a hair.

"Don't you worry any about my position," she said coolly. "Let's talk about yours and Denis's — the Honour of your House and all that — a fair name dragged in the dust if I marry him. I've heard it all before."

"Probably you have. I don't suppose for a moment that Denis is the only peer's son you have had designs on."

Vivienne's eyes glinted spitefully.

"I'm not *trying* to marry Denis," she replied with candour. "We understand each other thoroughly. I've only got to say the word, and he'll trot me off to a registrar's like a lamb."

"That also I can quite believe. Denis does many foolish things to escape friction or argument. Nor need we enter into one. It simply comes to this: if you marry Denis you will have to support him. That's all I have to say."

"An, but *I* have n't said anything yet," objected

Vivienne. "If I don't marry him, what shall I get out of it?" Her tone was calmly businesslike.

"Perhaps you'd better see my solicitor," Caister said. He was quite ready to come to an arrangement.

"Solicitors be bothered! I should n't trust yours and you would n't trust mine. Besides, mine would be sure to do you down. He's a money-lending solicitor with a theatrical connection." A wily smile accompanied the description. "Do you know that sort? Much better fix it up with me direct."

"For a sum to be agreed on will you undertake not to see Denis any more?" he demanded.

"No," she said, staring back at him, hard-eyed. "I won't. That's flat. But I'll agree not to marry him, if that will satisfy you."

"Do you mind telling me why you will not sever the — friendship altogether?"

Vivienne hesitated. Beneath the rouge she flushed faintly.

"Oh, all right," she answered, with a touch of defiance. "I don't want to say good-bye to him forever, because I'm bally well fond of him. You need n't laugh."

"I'm not laughing. I'm extremely sorry to hear what you say, because I don't think he will be any the better for your affection. The decent thing would be to leave him entirely alone."

"I'm not decent," she fired back. "At least, not in the sense you mean. I don't want to be. I don't bother my head about whether I'm good or bad. Denis and I are pals. Pals we'll stay, whether we get spliced or not. It's no use appealing to my higher nature. I have n't got one. That's why I'm such good company," she finished with admirable self-knowledge.

"But as far as marriage is concerned, I might be induced to change my mind. I'll take eight hundred pounds to come off it."

"Come off it?" he repeated. "You mean —"

"I mean I won't marry him. I'll give you a letter to that effect if you like. 'In consideration of the sum,' etcetera, 'I hereby undertake,' etcetera, and so on. That do? And I can tell you this" — she tilted her chair back with the facility and skill of an equilibrist, until he feared she would overbalance — "I've asked for a comparatively small sum because I want to square up a little matter that's rather pressing. I'm not out to get all I can from you, or I should want the earth, and see that I got half of it, at any rate."

Caister took out his cheque-book. As she had herself hinted, he had come prepared to redeem her hold on Denis at a far higher figure, even if it had crippled him financially to pay it. He wrote the cheque and handed it to her. In exchange she scribbled her undertaking. The affair seemed to amuse her.

"I must stipulate that you do not mention this transaction to Denis," he said stiffly.

"Don't worry about that. I should n't for my own sake. He would n't like it. Besides, I'm not one to stir up strife. I'm all for peace and a quiet life, if you could only believe it. Sure you won't have a whiskey and soda or a Bénédictine?"

He declined again. He was anxious to terminate the unpleasant and sordid interview. Vivienne also had no desire to prolong it. It irritated her to find herself in the company of a man who remained impervious to her attractions.

As soon as he had gone she called Mélanie.

"Is my coffee ready? That's right. Now get your hat on and take a bus to Coutts's Bank. Cash this cheque and bring it back in notes."

After that she rang up Denis. She wanted him to come round. She had something to give him.

"I've got a headache," he complained. "I've been awake all night, and I'm only just going to sleep."

An hour or so later he turned up, pallid of face, looking ill and desperately woe-begone.

"Whatever's the matter with you?" she asked.

He sat down in a chair and groaned.

"Oh, nothing," he sighed. "But you know I lost eight hundred pounds last night, and I'll have to pay it back before the day's out. That means touching the governor again. I'd rather do anything than that. He paid in three hundred to my credit a week ago — my quarter's allowance. I'm a sweep." He looked at her with unutterably weary eyes. "And I say, Viv, do take off that beastly green thing you've got on. Those lizards give me the creeps! I can see 'em moving!"

"They're only jolly little dragons," she laughed.

"Well, anyhow, I don't like them first tuing in the morning."

To humour him, Vivienne went into her bedroom. She emerged from it dressed in a sprigged muslin frock moresuited to a girl of her age and the summer morning.

"Now, cheer up," she said.

Denis's gloom did not lighten. He was staring straight in front of him with an expression in his eyes that was not at all good to see.

"If my governor refuses to help me out of this mess," he muttered, "I'm off."

"Where to? Abroad?"

"No. Off the map. I was planning it out all last night. I can't think why I've never done it before."

Vivienne gave him a shake.

"Don't be a fool," she said sharply. "Even if you're no good, or think you're not, you can still be a plucky one. Only cowards commit suicide. Why, even I would n't do anything so beastly rotten, or — or know a chap who would. Your father would rather you married me than do that, anyway."

"Only last night," he went on, "I was making good resolutions. I was going to turn over a new leaf. I — I promised a girl I would."

"What girl? A lady? Some designing little wretch who wants to marry you?"

At any other time such a sentence, coming from Vivienne, would have struck Denis as funny. But his sense of humour was in abeyance this morning.

"Lord, no! I don't suppose she'd marry me for anything on earth. She's just a good girl, and wants me to behave."

"How stuffy! You need n't think about her any more. The main thing that worries you is how you're going to square up, is n't it?"

"Well, it's a debt of honour."

"I know. It worried me too. I hate you to lose, and I knew how you would feel about it. But it's all right, Denny. Here you are. Eight hundred of the best."

She flung a roll of notes into his lap.

Denis looked at them stupidly.

"Put them into your pocket; they won't melt away," she said cheerily.

"But where on earth — I mean how did you get them? Is it — it can't be your screw?"

Vivienne laughed.

"I'd have to save a long time to hoard all that! Don't ask any questions, and you won't be told any stories."

"But I can't take it from you, old girl."

"You needn't worry about that either. It's easy money. Only cost me a brain-wave."

"Have you sold anything?"

"In a sense. I made a bargain. There, now!" She took his note-case out of his pocket and crammed the notes in. Then rather suddenly she kissed him.

The desperation in Denis's face lightened a little, but he looked uncomfortable.

"I hate to take it, Viv. I'll pay you back," he promised. "If you only knew what a rotter I am. P'r'aps you do. D' you know, last night I vowed I'd cut you out of my life altogether. Called you a little schemer, a bad influence, and all that. And here you are, as white as the best."

Vivienne averted her face. When she turned to Denis again a little of the black stuff she used for her eyes had smeared her cheek.

"Not white by a long chalk, Denny," she answered. "And not all black, either, dear. More likely a dirty grey."

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the shop Rose was singing as she lifted great bunches of floral merchandise from the hampers that came straight from Covent Garden every morning. She found it more of a pleasure than a duty to "dress" a window, and she did it so effectively that Miss Hobbs was glad to leave this task to her entirely. She approved and admired. Rose had such an eye for colour effect.

While she was thus engaged Mr. Louie passed through on the way to his office. Finding Rose alone he lingered a moment.

"You sing like a bird," he said admiringly.

"Do I?" she laughed. "I feel more like a bee — a busy buzzing one — all amongst the flowers."

"Talking of flowers, how would you like to see Kew Gardens? May I take you there on Sunday? I've been looking forward to Sunday, hoping that we might spend the afternoon together again."

"I'd love to go." Rose hesitated. "I want to ask you a favour. Could n't we take Miss Hobbs with us, too?"

Poor Mr. Louie looked dismayed. Although he had been responsible for the engagement of massive Miss Hobbs she only existed for him as a useful adjunct to his department, much in the same sense as the counters and chairs did. He seldom took any notice of her.

"It would do her such a lot of good to have an afternoon out of doors," Rose went on. "She works so hard and she's so good. Away from business she spends all her time looking after a little invalid sister.

She has n't got any one to take her out like most of the other girls. Or perhaps you'd enjoy it more if you and she went alone without me."

"Indeed I should not," he objected hurriedly. "Would you really prefer that she came?"

"It's nice to make people happy, I think. The happier I am, the more I want other people to be. Don't you?"

"I — I'm afraid I'm more selfish than that. I certainly like to make those I — er — love happy. But that's as far as I think it necessary to go."

"Oh, but look how kind and good you are to me!"

In her simplicity she wondered why he got so red.

"It is you who make *me* happy," he said. "It makes me feel good to see you about the place. It makes me happy to think of you, and to hope —" He broke off in confusion. "By all means ask Miss Hobbs to come with us on Sunday. I shall be glad to take her if it pleases you."

So in due course the invitation was conveyed to Miss Hobbs, who at first was frankly incredulous. When at last she was convinced of its reality her elation knew no bounds.

"Of course I know I've got you to thank for it," she declared. "But it sounds almost too good to be true. Fancy going out for a whole afternoon with our Mr. Louie! I've dreamt of it, I don't mind telling you, but I never thought it would come about. What shall I wear, Rose? Not that he'll notice me much, but I'd like to look the lady. Do you think magenta muslin with white shoes and stockings would be the thing?"

"I think black shoes and stockings look nicer."

Rose's taste, though untrained, was judicious. "And that black and white costume you wear sometimes."

"But I'm not in mourning," protested Miss Hobbs. "Why black? I'm all for colours myself. Now, a cornflower blue — perhaps you think I'm too large to stand bright blue, though? I dare say you're right. I'm always forgetting I've got red hair and freckles, and that I'm thirty round the waist, especially after I've just been having a look at the Paris models on their stands up in the dress department. It gives me quite a start sometimes to see myself full-length in the glass afterwards coming down."

She could think of nothing else but the proposed excursion three days hence. Every now and then, when she was not attending to customers, she reverted to it.

"You know, Rose," she confessed, "Mr. Louie's altogether my idea of what a gentleman should be. He's a little bit undersized, I know. But there! What's an inch or two when you love a man?"

Rose stopped short in the middle of wiring a carnation.

"Do you mean you'd like to *marry* Mr. Louie?" she asked in wonder.

"Like?" Miss Hobbs cried with enormous emphasis. "If he so much as looked at me as if he cared I think I'd jump out of my skin with joy! I can't help it. It — it's my heart. Where I give it there it stays. He'll never be the wiser or the worse for my loving him."

An enormous sigh inflated her capacious bosom.

"Don't let what I've said make any difference," she went on. "I'll be bridesmaid at your wedding if you'll ask me, and I'm sure I'll wish you all the best

luck in the world when you're Mrs. Louie. My love's too big to feel nasty, mean, envious thoughts."

"But I'm never going to be Mrs. Louie," Rose declared. "I've never thought of such a thing. And I'm sure he has n't either. I could n't possibly marry him if he had."

"Not marry him?" Miss Hobbs could not believe her ears. "Mean to say you'd refuse him? Make him miserable for life?"

"I would n't make anybody miserable — Mr. Louie especially. He's much too kind. And, if I were you, I should n't think any more about him wanting to marry either of us, because I'm sure it could never happen."

Rose's tone of certitude put an end to the discussion. Miss Hobbs went on with her work and her thoughts. As the morning progressed there was little time for conversation, for the floral department at Gardner's did a large business.

About twelve o'clock Caister came in. It was his first appearance in the shop. He went straight up to Rose and waited until she had finished serving a customer.

Rose gave him a bright smile of welcome. She was not self-centred enough to think he had come on purpose to see her. She supposed he wanted to buy flowers.

"I want you to take a holiday," he said. "Can you? My car is outside. I'm going to pick up Lord and Lady Chalfont. They want to run down to Purton Towers, their home. It's near mine. I thought you would like the drive. We shall be back at eight or nine. Can you get permission?"

Rose's eyes lit up.

"Oh, if only I could!" she cried. "Is your son coming too?"

Caister's face clouded.

"When I left Denis, he was feeling rather unwell, I am sorry to say," he said. "I had a doctor to see him yesterday. I want to have a talk with you about him."

The anxiety he showed decided Rose. She would ask permission to absent herself. What she would not have done for her own enjoyment she could not resist doing out of sympathy for another.

"I'll ask Mr. Louie," she said.

Mr. Louie was not to be found. Rose consulted Miss Hobbs.

"Who is it, you say?" whispered Miss Hobbs excitedly. "A lord! Oh, my! Of course you can be spared. But" — she looked dubious — "are you sure he's a *real* lord? There are all sorts of people about London calling themselves this, that, and the other." She glanced furtively at Caister over her shoulder. "He does look a nobleman, I must say." It was easy to understand the eagerness in Rose's face. "Well, if you know him well and there's a lady going too, it must be all right. Run along. I'll manage. I'll tell Mr. Louie myself. Or better still, you ask the gentleman to write him a note. That'll save trouble."

Caister approved of the latter course. He scribbled a few lines on his card and Rose gave it to Miss Hobbs. In a few minutes she was ready, dressed in a heather-mixture coat and skirt and a hat to match that Maggy had insisted on giving her.

"Please tell me about Denis," she said as soon as they were in the car. "He seemed quite well two nights

ago at Lady Chalfont's. We had a long talk, and he promised he would try to be very good in future."

"We'll talk about Denis later on," was the rejoinder. "I want you to enjoy yourself first. Lady Chalfont is going to bring her baby for a blow, so we shall be quite a family party, except for Denis."

"I hope Mr. Louie won't be cross with Miss Hobbs," thought Rose. And then Gardner's emporium and all pertaining to it slipped from her mind. Who in her position would not have given herself up to the enjoyment of the moment? The speedy, luxurious car was like a magic carpet. The sun was shining. She was going to spend a lovely day with the one person, next to her beloved old "Dad," whom she thought most of; with dear Lady Chalfont, her nice husband and their sweet baby. Rose forgot everything else.

At the first opportunity Miss Hobbs delivered Caister's card. She took it to Mr. Louie herself.

"I — I want to thank you for asking me to come out on Sunday with Miss Eton," she stammered. "I'll be so pleased. I'm sure it's most good of you."

"Oh, that's all right. I hope we shall have a fine day. What's this?" He took the card, looked at it, and frowned as he read it.

Lord Caister will take it as a favour if Mr. Louie will excuse Miss Eton from work to-day.

"What does this mean?" he demanded again, with a touch of asperity. "Where is Miss Eton?"

"She's gone for a motor drive into the country. She came to ask, but could n't find you, so I took it on myself to give her permission. I could n't find it in my heart to refuse her. She was longing to go. I hope you

don't object. I — I think she knew the gentleman very well. She spoke as if she did."

"It was not right." Mr. Louie was emphatic. "So far as I know she has no acquaintances at all in London. I cautioned her very seriously when she first came here about making friends with strangers. She's so young and inexperienced. You're a London girl, Miss Hobbs. Surely you must have known that it was not wise to trust her out like that — such a child!"

Miss Hobbs stood her ground.

"Don't *you* trust her?" she asked, a little surprised. "I would. I'd trust her anywhere, child though she may be."

"I dare say," admitted the little man uneasily. "But this Lord Caister! . . . I — I don't like the look of it."

"Ah, but you did n't see him. I'm a London girl, as you say; not a baby. It'll be all right, Mr. Louie. One of the first things we London girls learn is to tell off people by their faces. I know a gentleman when I see one. I saw Lord Caister looking at Rose as if he would like to put a red carpet down for her little feet to step on from the shop door to his car. And when a man has that look in his face you can trust him with your own sister. That's how I think of Rose, Mr. Louie. We — we all love her. You're not the only one."

A rebuke rose to Mr. Louie's lips, but he suppressed it. Miss Hobbs meant no offence. He saw that, and overlooked her tactlessness.

He took off his glasses and wiped them nervously.

"Yes — we none of us can help loving Rose," he said, a little unevenly as he placed Caister's card carefully in his pocket-book.

CHAPTER XIX

IN Polseth the houses ranged in size from the insignificant to the eight-roomed vicarage. Rose's experience of large ones was confined to what she had seen of the Chalfonts' town house and Lord Caister's library.

Caister Hall, therefore, when she first saw it through a vista of parkland studded with fine old trees, took her breath away. Its noble stone frontage, a gradation from Tudor to Early Georgian, as its successive owners had altered and extended it, staggered her by its vastness. Inside, the number and the noble proportions of its rooms bewildered her.

For all that, she was instantly receptive to the beauty and spirit of the place. It seemed to lay its venerable hands on her, touching her lips with silence and her soul with awe. It was so old and grand. Its nobility spoke in a hundred voices — from its painted ceilings, its furniture magnificent beyond her ken, from the countless pictures of proud women and great men that adorned its walls. Those proud faces looking down at her with an immeasurably aloof expression in their eyes might be dead, but the spirit of them lived, was indestructible. It lived, too, in the stern-faced, sad-eyed man at her side, burnt within him as a lambent flame. In Denis that flame was flickering to extinction.

Rose could not have put her feelings into words. They were so intense that they brought a lump into her throat and tears into her eyes.

"Oh, why can't Denis care about it as you do!" she cried impulsively. "Why, I, even I, who am nobody

at all, feel it all so intensely. It's nothing to me, but I could love it. If it belonged to me I should worship it. It's not just a big house. It belongs to all these beautiful people" — her eyes swept the walls — "as well as to you and Denis. It's a — a — I can't find the word I want."

"A heritage," supplied Caister.

"Yes, that is it, and a — trust. It's — wonderful!" She took a big breath.

"I am glad it has moved you," he said quietly. "I wanted it to do so; I hoped it would. What you feel about it all makes it easier for me."

"Easier? How do you mean?"

"I will explain later, before we go back to-day. Now let me show you the chapel. Afterwards we will go to the stables. Do you like horses? Hunting is Denis's only outdoor diversion. He can ride straight to hounds, I'm glad to say."

The private chapel attached to the house was another revelation to Rose, who had never been in a place of worship in her life, except at her christening, an occasion of which, naturally enough, she had no recollection.

The chapel at Caister was one of the most beautiful of its kind. The hands of long-dead artists had carved its woodwork and decorated its walls. Beautiful statues of the saints and Virgin and Child, brought from Italy centuries ago, stood in niches, beatific, serene.

Rose came to a pause before one of them. She thought it lovely.

"Who is that lady?" she enquired.

Caister looked at her in some surprise.

"*Our Lady*," he answered. "The Mother of God."

"The Mother of God," she repeated. "Is He the little Child in her arms? How beautiful!" Her voice was rapt. She continued looking at it.

"Is all this — religion? You see, I was n't told anything about it. I wonder why my father did not speak to me of anything so lovely. Will you tell me all about it? Is it a beautiful story?"

"Something more than that. It's a reality — or should be."

"And do you come here often?"

"We have services here."

"I would like to kneel down. May I?"

"Surely."

So Rose fell on her knees on the small rush cushion at the foot of the niche.

It was her first conscious prayer — the first speech of her soul with God.

After a little while she rose and in silence stood by Caister's side. Before turning from the altar he crossed himself.

"Why do you do that?" she asked. "Has it a meaning?"

"Catholics always make the sign of the cross," he told her. "It's a form — a ritual — a courtesy in God's house."

"I see," she said, and crossed herself, too.

They came out into the sunlight. All around them stretched the green parklands, gardens, terraces, plantations — a fair and goodly heritage.

"In there," Caister said, "you prayed. Would you think it an impertinence if I asked you what you prayed for?"

"Why, of course not. It seemed to me I had to. I wanted to so very much. I prayed for you — and Denis. I prayed that you might be proud of him and pleased with him; and that you might have great happiness of your own as well."

"Did you not pray for yourself?"

"No . . . I've nothing to pray for. I said thank you for all I've got. I'm quite contented and happy."

"I'm glad you are happy. And I thank you with all my heart for your sweet thoughts of us. God bless you, Rose."

Rose reached out and took his hand. She carried it to her face and rubbed her soft cheek against it: a child's endearment.

"Oh, how I wish I belonged to you!" she exclaimed. "If I were only your daughter! So that I could do things for you all the time!"

"That is not an impossibility," he said softly. "I want you for a daughter, Rose . . . I want you to marry Denis."

Rose dropped his hand and fell back a pace.

"You want me to marry Denis? *Me?*"

Caister remarked her sudden paleness and her wondering, almost frightened, tone. He feared she was about to refuse his proposition. So much depended on her acceptance of it. He felt as though Denis's well-being, nay, his very salvation, if it were to be accomplished at all, lay in Rose's hands. Upon her slender shoulders he wanted to shift the responsibility of reshaping the boy's misspent life. Was it too great a sacrifice to demand of her? Must it of necessity be a sacrifice? He was afraid to ask himself that question.

"I told you I was going to talk about Denis later

on," he said; "but it seems the time has come now. Will you listen to me patiently for a little while?"

Rose nodded. She could not have told why, but she felt an uncontrollable impulse to cry. All of a sudden her happiness seemed to be fading. She was sad — sad.

Caister began to talk. He opened his heart to her as never before in his life had he opened it to man, woman, or child. He let her see his love for Denis in its full strength, the passion and ambition of it. Last of all he spoke of Denis's health.

"There's nothing radically wrong with him," he said. "He had a bad turn this morning, so I thought it best to send for our doctor, who understands him very well. He told me merely what I already know — that the life Denis is leading is killing him, mentally and physically. The only chance is to induce him to live quietly, to change his mode of life altogether, and to give him new interests. It would be well for him if he were engaged to be married and — would settle down. And that is what I ask of you. If Denis consents — and I have n't a doubt he will — will you be his wife? You will honour him and myself if you can find it possible to say 'yes.'"

Rose covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders heaved. But when she lifted her face again, it was curiously expressionless, and her eyes were tearless.

"Do *you* wish it?" she asked.

"I do, with all my heart."

She repeated his words, seemed to think.

"And love . . . ought not one to love one's husband? Do I — could I love Denis?"

He answered without looking at her:

"Have you ever loved any one? That is to say, have

you ever felt you would like to live all your life with just one person?"

"Only with my father — or you," she said in a low voice.

Caister shaded his eyes with his hand as though the sun affected them.

"We should all be together — you and I and he," he reminded her.

"Yes," she answered meekly, like one who learns a lesson.

"And by and by — before long, perhaps, you would love him."

"Perhaps," she repeated. "When — how soon — would you want us to be married?" Her voice shook.

"Say in three months or so. Meanwhile you would leave Gardner's at once, and come and live with us down here. You would help Denis to care about the open-air things you love. You and he would get to know each other."

"And you?"

"I should be here. And a good part of the year the Chalfonts would be our neighbours. You would be among friends always. You would belong to all this." He made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "You would teach Denis to belong to it, too. Believe me, I have not spoken to you of this without a great deal of thought. I realise I am asking you to take a step of grave importance. I don't expect you to give me an answer here and now. You must have time."

Rose tried to speak and could not. But she put her hand into his.

From the distance somebody was calling.

"Here come Lord Chalfont and Maggy," he said.

"I expect they have been looking for us. Shall we go and meet them?"

He kept hold of her hand, slipping it through his arm. Side by side and without further words they went along the grassy path towards the oncomers.

Maggy called and waved again. She leant towards her husband. A moment ago she had been laughing merrily. Now her face had clouded over, become serious.

"Those two," she said in a low tone, "are simply made for one another. Can't you see it?"

"That pretty little girl and Denis?" responded Chalfont. "Yes, I thought that was what it might mean. Bob seems to want it. It'll be the best thing that could happen to Denis."

"To Denis, yes. *But not for them!* Oh, my dear, can't you see how it is? It's coming! They don't know it themselves, but they are going to love each other as we do — you and I. And Denis — Denis will stand between them!"

CHAPTER XX

EVERY day it was one of Rose's unwritten duties to place a vase of freshly arranged flowers on the desk in Mr. Louie's office. It generally resulted in a few minutes of pleasant talk, kindly enquiries as to her work in general. Of late Mr. Louie introduced a more intimate note into these short conversations. He would sometimes speak of his home and his mother, or encourage Rose to talk about herself.

But on the morning following her day in the country he had no smile for her. She noticed it and missed it. He was not cross. He merely looked worried.

When she had put the vase down he brought her a chair.

"I want to have a word with you," he said. "I intended leaving it over till Sunday, when we go to Kew, but I'd rather clear the air now. You went out yesterday. Yes, I know you came to ask permission, and, not finding me, obtained it from Miss Hobbs. That is quite in order. But this" — he took Caister's card from his pocket-book — "is not. I am speaking in a private as well as my official capacity. Privately, I take a very great personal interest in you; officially it is my duty — within limits — to supervise the conduct of all our young ladies, or rather, to enquire into anything that does not seem quite right, if it happens to be brought to my notice. You gave me to understand that you were quite alone and quite friendless in London? Is that quite true?"

"It *was* quite true," she replied. "But I've ever

so many friends now. Yourself, Miss Hobbs, lots of the people here; and besides that there's Lord Caister — ”

“Ah! Lord Caister!” he interposed succinctly and then cleared his throat nervously. “Please do not think that I am vulgarly curious. Give me credit for the best motives.”

“But I do,” she hastened to assure him. “If you had to be ever so angry with me, even though I might feel I didn't deserve it, I should still understand you meant it for the best.”

“I should never be angry with you,” he said. “But I might be grieved. I should be grieved if — if this acquaintance with Lord Caister came between us and our friendship.”

“But how should it? He is my friend; you are my friend. I think of you both quite differently, but — but I care very much for you both.”

The artlessness of her statement brought the colour into Mr. Louie's face.

“Does Lord Caister know that you are so much his friend?” he enquired.

“Why, yes. People can't hide what they feel from one another, can they? He knows I would do anything in the world for him, or nearly anything.”

Mr. Louie took off his glasses, always a sign of perturbation with him.

“Would you mind telling me under what circumstances you met him? I am questioning you for your own good. Please don't doubt it.”

“I can't tell you that,” Rose answered, “because it has to do with another person.”

“Was it by chance?”

"Yes, I suppose you would call it chance."

"And he has been to see you?"

"Yes."

"Have you told him anything about yourself? For instance, have you ever mentioned your pearl necklace?"

"He knows all about how I came to London. I've not said anything about my necklace. It would n't interest him. Besides, I forgot. I don't think of its value, you know. I wear it, and that's all." She laughed merrily. "Lord Caister does n't want to steal it! You did n't think that!"

"Hardly. . . . There are other things of more value than a necklace that might — be a temptation to him. . . . Has he — has he ever spoken — mentioned marriage to you?" Mr. Louie got the words out with difficulty.

Rose's merriment subsided abruptly. Lord Caister had mentioned marriage — marriage with Denis!

"Y-yes," she hesitated.

Mr. Louie picked up a paper-weight and handled it nervously. He would have given anything to avoid this very personal matter and the advice which he sincerely felt it was his bounden duty to proffer. It was really a woman's task, but he knew of no woman who could have discharged it. His own mother was too simple, not worldly-wise, hardly aware of the pitfalls and trials which lie in the path of a young, attractive, and unprotected girl. She had not in the past been qualified to advise a daughter of her own. She had no real experience of life. He might have enlisted the help of Miss Hobbs, but Mr. Louie had a notion that Miss Hobbs, being fairly young herself and a

woman at that, would be inclined to think romantically of a situation in which he could only see danger for Rose. He would have to do his best with it himself. He was a delicate-minded man. His very sensitiveness helped him to a certain extent.

"When you first came to Gardner's," he said, "I gave you some advice in this very office. You remember? I asked you to be careful about striking up chance acquaintances — especially with gentlemen — what the world calls 'men-about-town.' Such people are all very well in their own sphere. A good many of them are gentlemen in the best sense of the word. Some of them, again, are not. But, good and bad, they have their own standard of honour and certain ideas of which you, in your inexperience, are quite ignorant. A good many gentlemen, noblemen included, are not above getting friendly with girls in shops, and so on. Perhaps they want to be amused for a little while, to avoid incurring obligations, which they would do if they paid marked attention to a young lady in their own circle. They naturally assume, generally quite rightly, that girls in a lower walk of life are quite able to take care of themselves. Most of them are. They know the value of their attractions and are ready to make the most of them. All they want is a good time, to live in the present, and to let the future take care of itself."

"But what has all this to do with me?" Rose asked in wonder.

"A very great deal. You seem to have made such an acquaintance, and I want you — I ask you to put an end to it at once for your own sake, before it is too late."

"End it? Why should it be too late? Too late for what?"

Mr. Louie went on fidgeting with the paper-weight.

"You've heard me speak of my sister once. I will answer your question by telling you about her. It — it's a sad story. Even my mother does not know it. We kept it from her because we knew it would break her heart if she were to hear the truth.

"My sister was very young and quite pretty. We thought the world of her. She was always so happy, singing about the place, just as you do. In some ways you remind me of her. When she was seventeen she went into business. She was at Gray's, the big milliners and dressmakers. She used to try on dresses for people — what they call a manikin. Gentlemen — husbands and brothers — often came in with their ladies.

"Sylvia made a friend in this way. We knew nothing about it at the time. But one day she never came back home. She wrote a letter, saying she was going to be married to a gentleman. I need n't tell you all the details. They're sad, and it all happened long ago. We believed she was married and happy, living abroad. We heard from her sometimes, but not often. We took it that having married well she did not want to mix with us, and we were proud too. But about two years after, a letter came here from her. It gave an address in a poor part of London. My sister was very ill and wanted to see me. She had, she said, been living alone and friendless for over a year — ever since he left her — that *gentleman*! I could n't do much for her, poor girl, because she had n't sent for me in time. She died . . ."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Rose murmured sympathetically.

cally. "Was n't she married after all, then? Did n't he love her?"

Mr. Louie paused before answering.

"He may have told her so. You see, Miss Eton, gentlemen — and still less noblemen — do not marry shopgirls. It is just as well to remember that. . . . Don't take what I've said amiss."

"I won't. I think I — understand."

Mr. Louie put down the paper-weight, rubbed his glasses and put them on again.

"Then you will give me your promise, for my poor little sister's sake as well as your own, to sever this friendship?"

Rose shook her head.

"I can't. I could n't keep a promise like that. It would mean that I should be breaking one I had made before — that I would be Lord Caister's friend. . . . I know I've not been about much or seen many people, but I do know this: that just as I could trust you — always, anywhere — so I could trust my dear Lord Caister. He's very noble. He's like King Arthur. He is everything you could look up to as — quite great. Will you go and see him? Tell him I asked you to. Say what you like to him. And — and if after you come back and tell me that he is like — those others — that he would treat any girl as your sister was treated, or even let any girl be treated so, *then* I will promise you never to see him again any more at all."

Mr. Louie stood up.

"You give me permission to do that — really?"

"I would like you to go."

"And if I cannot truthfully tell you what you think about him — what you most wish to believe?"

Up went Rose's head.

"You *will*! When you have seen him you will know what I know already: that he's like yourself — an honourable man."

Mr. Louie bowed. There was nothing more to be said. Rose had put him on the same plane as her nobleman — put him on his honour.

CHAPTER XXI

ALTHOUGH a little man, Mr. Louie had a valiant heart. His sense of duty was strong, but his disposition was conservative. It made him esteem the aristocracy. In his eyes they were a class apart, bred to nobility, something akin to royalty, and therefore worthy of respect from commoners such as himself.

He was accordingly slightly awed by the impending interview with Lord Caister, if it were granted him. Lord Caister's public character had his esteem. His military record in the war had won the admiration of every man in the street, and Mr. Louie shared in it. But that did not lessen the resentment he felt at his intimacy with Rose Eton.

For Mr. Louie thought of Rose in much the same way as men think of their country; as a precious possession to be guarded, defended, and succoured at all costs. He loved her romantically, sacredly. She was the sweetest thing that had ever come into his life. It had been colourless before, apart from his passion for flowers.

He sent in his card to Lord Caister with trepidation. He was not of the opinion that one man is as good as another. He had the soul of a gentleman, but the deferential instincts of one that venerates eminence and respects rank.

Presently he found himself walking delicately in the wake of a footman over wonderful Persian carpets, through long, parqueted, pictured passages, into a morning-room of imposing dimensions where Lord Caister sat with his secretary.

On Mr. Louie's entry the secretary was dismissed.

"Good-morning," said his lordship. "You wish to see me? Won't you sit down?"

Mr. Louie ignored the invitation. To sit would have made him feel more ill at ease than he already was. In spite of what he had to say he was not going to forget his place. He was plain Mr. Louie of Gardner's, son of a tradesman, in the presence of a peer of the realm.

"I will not occupy much of your lordship's time," he said; "and I hope that your lordship will not consider what I have to say as an impertinence. I do not mean it to be one. I have come to see you at the request of Miss Eton, one of our employers. At least — that is to say, I had a talk with her and she expressed the wish that I should call on you."

"I am glad to meet any friend of Miss Eton's," Caister assured him. "She has already told me that you are one. And, as a friend, you are, quite rightly, a little exercised in mind as to what my intentions may be concerning her. Is that not so?"

It was so. In wording Mr. Louie's difficulty for him Caister had considerably saved the little man a lot of embarrassment.

"I admit that I have been worrying a great deal," he confessed, "though it surprises me you should understand my feelings so well, my lord."

"Not at all. In your place, as her friend and employer, and so, in a way, responsible for her well-being, I should experience the same anxiety."

"Thank you, my lord," gulped Mr. Louie. He reddened uncomfortably, then took his courage in both hands. "But it is for another reason, a much more inti-

mate reason, that I wished to see you. It — it was my dearest hope to make Miss Eton my wife. You — you could not possibly have such an intention, if only because of your position. So I have come to beg you to discontinue a friendship which it appears to me may — might be — dangerous — to her."

To his great relief Caister did not show any resentment at this frank avowal.

"Did you tell her so?"

"I felt it was my duty, my lord."

"Perhaps it was. At all events, I am glad Miss Eton asked you to see me, for now we can understand one another. Please sit down."

Taking it as a command, Mr. Louie sat. There was an air about Lord Caister that inspired submission as well as confidence. To begin with, he did not in the least look the type of man who would pay promiscuous attentions to young women. Obviously, it would have been beneath his dignity. Mr. Louie was quick to discern that. Charm, dignity, and manliness, combined with that quality which is best described as straightness, were, it was plain to see, Lord Caister's outstanding characteristics.

"Now I am going to be absolutely frank with you," he said. "For your own sake as well as Rose's. We will leave out the surname, shall we? We both think of her as Rose. Has she told you how she came to know my son and myself?"

"No, my lord, I know nothing."

"Very probably she thought such an explanation might reflect on my son. Still, you should have it. My son saw her in the shop, got into conversation with her, and finally prevailed on her to go out with him one

evening. He did not treat her respectfully, or he alarmed her. She came to me in a great state of mind. The next day I took her a note of apology from my son. I stayed and had a long conversation with her. I became very interested in her. She is so patently unspoilt, so engagingly natural. She would grace any position in life. She is patrician to look at, and in many ways patrician by nature. I have seen her several times since. A great friend of mine, Lady Chalfont, has also been to see her, and is already fond of her. To put it briefly, because I respect Rose so highly, because I — I like her so much, I hoped that she might marry my son. I knew nothing whatever of your own feelings or hopes concerning her. From what you say, I don't suppose she does either. But now that I do know them, I do not intend to stand in your way. I have already told her that I would dearly like her to be my son's wife, but it has gone no further than that. I have not spoken to my son on the subject, and Rose, in any case, has not given me her answer. Therefore, there is nothing at present to prevent your asking her to marry you if that is your desire. You were first in the field, and believe me, paradoxical as it may sound, I wish you success. Moreover, you have my assurance that I will not influence her in any way. I should like to write her a letter, though, which I will ask you to deliver."

He crossed to the writing-table in the window, sat down and wrote a few lines which he put into an envelope and handed unsealed to his visitor.

"I'm sure I thank you, my lord," said Mr. Louie. "You have behaved to me as man to man. You have honoured me by your confidence. I — I would like to say how greatly I respect your lordship."

"Thank you." Caister held out his hand. Mr. Louie took it humbly.

As he was about to leave the room he paused.

"There is one thing which troubles me," he hesitated. "You have advised me to speak to Miss Eton. I shall have an opportunity on Sunday. But would it be right for me to do so under the circumstances, and so perhaps to stand in the way of her becoming a — a nobleman's wife?"

"I think so. We all have freedom of choice. Position and rank are not the only things in the world. I think Rose will give her hand only where her heart has already gone."

Mr. Louie looked hard at Caister. For a moment he did not speak. Then:

"She does n't know her heart, my lord," he said simply.

CHAPTER XXII

MISS HOBBS had wisely decided to take Rose's advice in the matter of dress. She was quietly gowned, and, in spite of her overflowing proportions, looked neat. She had looked forward to this Sunday with tremendous eagerness, and now at last it was here, and a fine day into the bargain.

Her excitement made her subdued, a mood which Mr. Louie appreciated, although he did not know the reason. He had been half afraid that Miss Hobbs might be a bit noisy. He found her the reverse, quiet and womanly, simply dressed and by no means uncomely to look at. Her hair, he decided, was a beautiful colour, and she had nice hands.

Of course in comparison to Rose she was the commonest clay, but then Rose's looks were exceptional. Rose was not merely a very pretty girl; she had extraordinary distinction. Mr. Louie was quite right in his premiss that she would never have attracted Lord Caister's attention had that not been so. He wondered at his own temerity in ever having dreamt of making Rose his own. That was it — a dream. He scarcely dared hope that it might come true. He had visioned her often enough, flitting in and out of the house and about the garden especially, singing and arranging flowers; but his imagination failed him when it came to picturing her pursuing the ordinary avocations of the average housewife in a small villa. Somehow the

grandeur of such a house as Lord Caister's seemed more congruous to her.

Miss Hobbs, on the other hand, seemed to revel in the domestic arts. Within five minutes of her introduction to his mother the two were deep in the discussion of household management and cooking.

Plainly Miss Hobbs found favour with his mother. She knew what she was talking about.

Rose listened to the conversation without being able to participate in it. She had the haziest notion of housework, had never heard of tea-leaves in conjunction with carpets, the efficacy of whitening for windows, or the cleansing properties of one household soap as compared with another. Nor could she talk of the vagaries of maidservants, the extortions of tradesmen, or the delinquencies of steam laundries.

Their absorption afforded Mr. Louie the opportunity he had been looking for. He took Rose into the garden.

She had been rather preoccupied all the afternoon, and had left Miss Hobbs to do most of the talking. Kew Gardens had inspired her with wonder and delight; but on the way back she had scarcely said a word. Her thoughts seemed to absorb her.

And now, after he had placed a chair for her, she sat with her hands in her lap, still silent, still thoughtful.

"You're very quiet," he said at length. "Is anything troubling you?"

"Not exactly. Only I — I have to make up my mind about something, and I'm half afraid."

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, I think so. I would like to ask you about it, because I know you will tell me what you think would

be best." She sighed. "You have been quiet, too, this afternoon. Are you troubled as well? Won't you tell me, too? Perhaps we can help each other."

Thus encouraged, Mr. Louie took a mental plunge.

"I will tell you," he said, "because it is about yourself. A short while ago you told me you were happy in your life and your work, and that you would not wish it altered in any way. Does work still satisfy you? I don't think it does quite. You are leaving childhood behind you. Flowers are not everything in the world to you now, are they? They were your only friends. Now you care for people."

Rose nodded. "Yes, I do. What does that mean?"

"It means you are getting older. You will soon be a woman. Women love flowers, but they care for other things more — a home, a husband. They will come to you because you, more than most, are made to be loved."

The words were out. The passion he felt showed in his voice, so that at last Rose became aware of it. Mr. Louie stood in front of her. No longer was he the kind-hearted little business man who had befriended her; he was something more. Love, that most ennobling of the emotions, had transfigured him. Physically insignificant he might be and was, but at this supreme moment he cut no ridiculous figure. He was a lover and a man.

"I must tell you now," he went on in a tumult. "I can't keep it back, although I can't say it in the way I want to. I — I love you. From the very first minute I saw you with your basket of flowers, I must have loved you. I dreamt of you that very night. I — I dreamt that you were a flower in some other man's

garden, and I wanted you for my own. I put off speaking to you because you seemed so happy as you were. It was n't quite time. I could wait and watch you under my eyes. But you've grown up all of a sudden. You'll grow out of my sight if I wait. I feel I want you with all my heart. I — I could n't bear to lose you. I'm — I'm asking you to marry me — soon. The world is n't all a garden, Rose, my little darling. We can't live like the flowers, growing side by side and never knowing each other any more than flowers do. We're man and woman in a world of men and women, and there's life before us in a workaday world, but a life we can make more beautiful by love."

His agitation and his fervour made Rose tremble. Miss Hobbs would have given her soul to be wooed in like manner, whereas Rose, the tender-hearted, could only recoil from it and so give pain. . . . She tried hard to say something, and failed.

Mr. Louie went on:

"I went to see Lord Caister. I meant to tell you that first. You're quite right. He's as straight as — as a sword. He told me how he came to know you, and how he hopes you will marry his son. And I told him how I'd been treasuring up my love for you all these months. He gave me this letter for you. The flap's open. I suppose that is a real gentleman's way of letting another person know that he trusts him. I have n't read it, of course. Will you look at it now before you answer me?"

Rose took it from him, wondering what Lord Caister could have to say. The letter was terse and to the point — a soldier's letter.

MY DEAR CHILD,

It was quite right of you to ask Mr. Louie to come and see me. He is a good fellow, and I believe he has something to say to you. When you listen to him I want you to put my hopes concerning Denis and yourself out of your mind, to look deep into your heart, and if it inclines you to make another man happy, to be guided by your feelings. Of one thing I am certain, you would have a kind and devoted husband in Mr. Louie, and with him your life would be made as smooth as possible. Whichever way your choice lies, count on me always as your sincere friend.

CAISTER

Rose folded up the letter. Its wording gave her a feeling of hopelessness, but it was infinitely precious. Then she looked at Mr. Louie — waiting for his answer. She would have given worlds not to hurt him. In her childish way she did her best to soften the disappointment which she knew she was about to inflict.

"It's very kind of you. I never guessed you liked me so much. But it would n't do. You'd be sorry after you'd married me. I — I have n't got the ways of a wife. I'd never be able to turn out a room or make puddings. I don't understand anything inside a house; only out-of-door country things."

"I should n't expect you to bother about house-keeping," he made haste to say. "My mother could do that. It would be simply perfect if you were just here — part of my home, part of my life. There's nothing that matters in the world except love, dear." His voice trembled. "We'd go into the country or to the sea — whichever you liked — for our honeymoon. Oh, I'll teach you to love me!" He reached out to her. "Give me your little hands and your heart with them."

He had taken a step or two towards her. In another moment he would have held her in his arms. But she shrank back. On the instant she became aware, in the instinctive way which a girl has at such a moment, that deeply though she liked and respected him, she could not have let him caress her as a lover. No, she was not for him. All her nature told her that, and Rose, above all people, was a child of nature. It was not in her to dissemble.

"I — can't," she said faintly. "I — I could n't love you as a — wife."

Mr. Louie's arms fell. That slight but none the less spontaneous avoidance of him did its work. It told him more finally than any words could that he had asked too much. The magic of her would never be for him. All the life and hope died out of his face, once and for all. Rose saw it. She was ready to cry, in expiation of the suffering she had unwittingly inflicted on the kindest, most gentle of men. And she knew that nothing she could say could comfort him . . .

Mr. Louie turned away for a minute or two. When he next spoke there was no trace of the lover in his manner. He had stifled his feelings. He was just her friend again, her patient friend, ready to help her in all her difficulties.

"Don't trouble about me," he said in answer to the concern in her face. "I'm a prosaic fellow, you know. I shall work a little harder to keep myself from thinking too much about what I can't have. Work's the best remedy in the world for any — miscalculation. I'm not going to pine away." He smiled at her. "Mine would be a poor sort of love if I let it overwhelm me

like that. It would n't be worthy of you. I can put my personal feelings out of sight, but I can also be the better and the stronger for loving you. I mean to be. Now, please don't trouble about me any more. Tell me what was worrying you — making you so quiet? Was it about this decision you have promised Lord Caister?"

Rose assented.

"It would mean leaving Gardner's soon," she said. "And being married — in a few months." She turned to him impetuously. "And I'm afraid. I'm awfully afraid! I want to help Lord Caister and Denis, but I don't love Denis any more than — than I love you. Am I bound to love somebody some day; or, if I married Denis, would love just pass me by?"

"Love will never pass you by," he said solemnly. She looked at him, large-eyed.

"How shall I know it when it comes?"

"You will know it instantly. You will look into its face, and not be afraid. 'Perfect love casteth out fear.' Those words from the Bible describe it best. It applies to human love as well as to the divine."

Rose pondered his words.

"Is love — worship?"

"That is one form of it. It is different things to different people."

"Is love happy?"

"Not always. It depends on what you call happiness. To some people love only means suffering."

"And sacrifice?"

"Yes. That is the highest form of love."

"Then — is it right to sacrifice one's self for love's sake?"

He answered a little uncertainly: "It depends — upon circumstances."

Rose looked straight in front of her. In her face was the uplifted expression of one who listens to a heavenly voice. She was hearing her heart speak . . .

CHAPTER XXIII

THE hush of coming twilight was upon the small garden that Mr. Louie had made with his own hands, and loved. He lingered in it before he joined his mother and Miss Hobbs. He looked a little graver than usual but he was calm.

He had lost Rose, but he had fought a battle with himself and won it. His mother did not notice the change in him. She was slow to observe or to arrive at conclusions, as all extremely placid people are. But Miss Hobbs saw at once that he had been suffering, and was trying to hide it. Her woman's heart went out to him. If it had been within her power to do so, she would have bestowed Rose and Rose's love upon him, if only to see him happy. Miss Hobbs hardly ever thought of herself. She had been made on a large scale, and her heart was proportionate to her size.

"Miss Eton gone home?" repeated Mrs. Louie, when the fact was conveyed to her. "Whatever for? Why did n't she come in here to say good-bye, my dear?"

"We did n't want to disturb your talk. She asked me to say good-bye for her. She was feeling rather tired."

"I thought she looked a little pale at tea," nodded Mrs. Louie. "Country girls lose their colour quickly in London. Well, my dear," she turned to Miss Hobbs again, "as I was saying, after you've beaten the eggs well and stirred the mixture with your hand — not a spoon — you let it stand for half an hour and pop it

into the oven — a moderate one, mind — bake for an hour and serve with jam. It's Leonard's favourite."

But even the engrossing subject of Mr. Louie's favourite sweet could not hold Miss Hobbs's attention now. She was thinking so much more of the quiet sorrow in his face. It made her want to take his head on her shoulder and to smooth his brow with her fingers, as she did to her little crippled sister when the pain was bad.

Thinking that he would prefer to be alone, she presently got up and also said good-bye. Mr. Louie made ready to accompany her.

"Please don't trouble," she deprecated. "It's quite light, and I always go about alone."

"I'd like the walk if I may come," he said.

"Yes, I'm sure he'd like the walk," his mother echoed. She was quite convinced now that Miss Hobbs was a most excellent young woman; not, of course, striking in any way, like Rose Eton, but amiable and homely: the sort of girl she herself would like exceedingly to have as a companion in her son's absence all day. She meant to breach the subject to him when an opportunity offered.

The couple set out on their walk. Miss Hobbs scouted the idea of a taxi. She felt equal to walking intelligently without tiring so long as she had Mr. Louie beside her. She was very quiet, divining that he felt disinclined for talk. He was grateful for her silence and her unobtrusive company.

By and by he spoke.

"Miss Eton will be leaving Gardner's very shortly. She told me I might tell you."

All Miss Hobbs's sensibilities were stirred. Rose

leaving Gardner's! That could mean only one thing! Then she must have been mistaken in the reason for Mr. Louie's grave face. Rose had accepted him, after all!

"To be married?" she cried. "I thought — I was afraid — she was going to say 'no.' I'm so glad if you're happy —"

She broke off, looking into his face. Even in the twilight she could see that it was still grave.

"You must not congratulate me," he said. "Rose is going to have a more exalted name than I can offer her. Her mind was made up when she left us to-night. She is going to marry a nobleman's son."

The news excited, but did not altogether startle Miss Hobbs. Her romantic temperament made her receptive of anything to do with love or marriage, especially when it concerned Rose.

"I'm not surprised," she said after a pause. "Really I'm not. And so long as Rose is happy I'm awfully glad — except for you. I can't bear to see you sad. I know you love her. You could n't help it; no one could. She's one of those people you read about in books, beautiful and sweet and charming and all that. Sometimes, not often, you come across them in real life, as we have. But only for a minute, like a sunbeam across a room. We could n't expect more. They have so much to do — people like Rose. Even if they're born in humble circumstances they get mixed up with great people somehow. I'm fond of reading, you know; all sorts of romances and novels. There was Lady Hamilton, just a common girl, but lovely like Rose, and great people loved her, even a queen. And Nell Gwynn, she was another. I don't wonder that some-

thing out-of-the-way is going to happen to Rose. I think it's wonderful just to be able to watch her life unfolding and to know that she's our friend. It may be a great thing to remember one day. Don't let it make you unhappy."

"You have helped me," said Mr. Louie; "you have helped me very much. When one feels sad it is very comforting to know that some one else understands and is sorry. I shall always love her." He sighed heavily.

"Of course you will. But after a while it won't hurt like it does now. I know, because I've loved too in very much the same way as you have. But there it is! I'm not a bit unhappy now. I shall love one man until I die, but I'm not going to mope because he's not for me. And if I get the chance I shall marry some one else and be a good wife. But I shall love the first one all the same and my love won't be wicked, either. It's good to care like that — just once in a lifetime. If the person we loved so tremendously cared for us as much and in the same way it would be heaven — heaven on earth, which I don't think we're meant to have."

"Perhaps you're right. But I should n't want a second-best."

"You say that because you're a man. A woman feels differently. She wants a husband, but she wants children too. As she gets older the longing for little things of her own — little and helpless — is greater than her longing to be loved. She's glad to take the second-best just to be a mother. And I think very often a man and a woman who take that second-best find it was best after all. A home and mutual interests and children mean a lot. Love comes. Not the sort of love that's all dreamy and upsetting, but one that grows steadily

from a humble little seed into a great, strong, flourishing tree. I hope you'll find that out one day for yourself. We can always look back on the dream. . . . How I've been talking!" She pulled herself up. "Here I am at my very own door. Thank you for bringing me home. You won't come in, I suppose?"

Mr. Louie hesitated. Miss Hobbs had laid very healing hands upon his aching heart.

"Not to-night," he said. "Another time, if I may. I like to hear you talk. It is so kind of you."

"Kind!" Miss Hobbs choked. She stood still, thinking of the immense capacity for something infinitely more inspiring than kindness that she would have displayed towards Mr. Louie had the opportunity been offered her. "I must go now," she said hurriedly. "My little sister is all alone and waiting for me."

Rather precipitately she said good-night, let herself in with her latch-key, and ran upstairs to the small invalid to whom she devoted her life.

"What, all in the dark, darling?" she cried breathlessly. "Have you been lonely? I did n't mean to be away so long. I hope they've looked after you. We'll have a light and then I'll get your supper, pet."

She lit the gas, forgetting to draw down the blind.

The sudden blaze of light from the open window made Mr. Louie, now on the opposite side of the road, turn and look up. He could see right into the illumined room. The picture presented there brought him to a stop.

He looked and looked, and gradually he became inspired by a new sensation — a sensation as comforting as it was unexpected.

For, strangely enough, his heart was moved at the sight of Miss Hobbs with a child in her arms.

CHAPTER XXIV

"Now what is going to happen?" asked Lady Chalfont. She had dropped in for a chat with Caister and was having tea with him. "Is Rose really going to marry Denis? And what does Denis say?"

"I'm glad to say that he seems ready enough to fall in with the plan," replied Caister. "He has agreed to leave town. He's waiting to see Rose first, though. She has n't given me her answer yet."

"So that everything depends on her. . . . And if she says 'yes'?"

"We shall shut up this house and go down to Purton."

"I suppose you'll get some sort of a dragon?" prodded Maggy.

"A chaperon? Yes. I dare say I shall be able to hear of one at a social agency."

Maggy nodded. "You ought to have a woman-body — a lady about the place, I think. For a while, at least. When do you want them to get married? Don't hurry them, Bob. Take my advice. I'm a little sorry for Rose, you know. You're asking her to do a pretty big thing. Of course, in the world's eyes, it's a chance in a thousand for her, but Rose is n't worldly. If she decides to go through with this, it'll be because *you've* asked her. You're aware of it, are n't you?"

Caister's face clouded.

"What makes you say that?" he asked uneasily.

"Because I know it. I understand Rose. In some ways she's like me, or rather like I used to be, ex-

cept that she's innately good and I was n't. But she and I have a lot of feelings and affections in common. Like me, she can't understand half-measures. Where she loves she'll let a person make a doormat of her. She won't choose without a lot of heartburning, though." She looked at him pointedly, and added, "If the choice were left to her it would n't be a young man, either."

"Do you mean to imply that she loves me?" he asked with a wry smile. "My dear Maggy, you're too romantic. I'm old enough to be her father."

An impatient expression came into Maggy's face and then one not far from disappointment.

"All men who have married young talk like that. It's a stock phrase," she complained. "You're as young as you feel and look, which is about thirty-five. I'm not saying Rose loves you. But she's on the road to loving you with all her heart and soul and strength. You know I always say what I think. Don't try to disillusion yourself. Do you ever think about what you feel for Rose? Something very intense and precious, is n't it?"

Caister had to take time to reply to this embarrassing question. After a pause he said:

"Well, yes, naturally, or I should n't want her to marry Denis."

Maggy wanted to shake him.

"Now, suppose Denis did n't exist. Suppose he was out of the way. What would you wish for Rose then? Would you cease to be interested in her?"

He smiled with an affectation of amusement.

"What hypothetical questions you put, Maggy! How could Denis be 'out of the way'? So how can

I tell you what I should feel or think under such unlikely circumstances?"

"Could n't you? Then you must be singularly unimaginative. . . . The truth is, you don't *want* to think." She nodded sagaciously as she got up to go. "Well, I hope with all my heart that Rose will be happy, and you, too; and that Denis will win through. All the same, if you're on the road to loving Rose yourself, take her and thank God for her. Don't think only of Denis. And lastly, my dear good friend, dismiss the idea from your mind that you're old and unlikely to appeal to a woman much younger than yourself. If I was n't head over ears in love with my own husband, I should probably adore you myself." She held out her hand.

"You think I've done wrong in asking Rose what I have? You think I'm asking her to sacrifice herself?" Caister said.

Maggy's serene face clouded over.

"I did n't at first. In fact, I advised it, so now, in a way, I feel partly responsible. I don't doubt that she'll help Denis, and that if any one can make a better man of him she will. But what sort of a husband will he be to her? Is it in him to make her moderately happy? Rose's happiness ought to be considered, you know. She may promise to marry Denis, but, remember, she has n't much notion of what marriage means. That's why I say, don't hurry it on. Let them have plenty of time to know each other first. You'll think I'm a real old woman, Bob; but arranging marriages for other people is — well, the deuce and all. It's not only their lives one is juggling with, but the precious lives of the little people who may come afterwards . . ."

She left him to his thoughts. He had not been alone long when the door opened again and the footman announced the name that was uppermost in his mind.

It was Rose. She was dressed in the demure grey frock and black hat Maggy had given her. Her manner was shy. Her greeting came with hesitation. There was a pause. Then she summoned up courage to explain her visit.

"I thought I would come to see you instead of writing," she said nervously. "I've been a long time making up my mind, but now I've — decided. If you still wish it and think it would help Denis, I — I will marry him — if he wants me. And — and I will do my best to be a good wife" (words seemed to choke her), "and to be a great lady. At least I can try to be good, and in that way I may become what they — I mean your ancestors — would wish."

She summoned up a smile, brave yet wistful. It touched Caister's heart. He found himself unable to make any response.

Rose went on: "And I will try ever so hard to help Denis. But if — if he won't let me — you — you won't be disappointed in me?"

"I should never be disappointed in you," he said. "Still, since I first spoke to you I have had doubts. Is what I am asking of you too big, too serious a thing?"

"Not if you wish it."

"And you think you could love Denis?"

Rose met the question halfway.

"I was talking to Miss Hobbs about love this morning. She's a friend of mine at Gardner's. She's older than I am and often talks about love — in a wise way, I think. She says there are two kinds: one a sort of

breathless worship, and the other like a steady flame that comes later — after marriage. That, I suppose — and hope — is the love that will come to me if I marry Denis. I — I like him very much."

It happened that Denis came into the room as she finished speaking. He was not surprised to see her. He knew that her promised decision about herself was due, and he guessed that she had come to give it.

"I think you and Rose will be glad of the opportunity of a talk alone," Caister said. "She has something to say to you, Denis."

He left the room, feeling that they would find it easier to come to an understanding if he were not present.

Looking a little awkward, Denis took the chair his father had vacated.

"Are you going to turn me down, Rose?" he asked a shade doubtfully. "I dare say I don't deserve anything else."

"I have said 'yes,'" she murmured. "That is, if you want me, Denis."

Her simple candour made his pulses throb. Of course he wanted her: at least all that was best in him did; but he was not conceited, and, above all, he had a spasmodic sense of honour. He was fairly sure that Rose did not love him. He was equally sure that if she married him it would be out of the goodness of her heart, because she wanted to retrieve his past and ensure his future. But he had his own scruples as to whether, after all, this would be fair to her. He made a laboured attempt to explain these scruples.

"I want you as much as I want anything," he said earnestly; "and I'm as fond of you as a fellow can be.

But you ought to know what you're taking on, Rose. . . . I'm the worse for wear. It's not in me to give any girl, not even you whom I admire and respect, the perfect sort of love poets write about. That's what you deserve and ought to have. Only a man who's young in heart is capable of it. I'm young in years, but my heart's as ancient as a pre-war motor-engine, and I've lived so idiotically that I'm a 'bad life,' as the insurance people say. Do you know what I mean? Is it good enough for you?"

Rose's lips quivered. Inexperienced though she was, she knew that this was not true courtship; knew and felt all its shortcomings and incompleteness. There was no magic in it, no glamour. Something in it was lacking. But she had made up her mind that she was not going to think of herself. She had promised to shoulder the task of rescuing Denis from himself in the hope of making him what his father wished — a man in the best sense of the word. She pitied him with all her heart. His looks pitied him too. He had grown much thinner lately.

"Oh, Denis, don't ask me questions about what I feel," she implored. "We're both young. Let's try as hard as ever we can to — to make things better for each other — together."

Denis's lack-lustre eyes brightened.

"If we only could!" he exclaimed. "Lord, I'm ready to make the effort! I'll begin by taking a course of the stuff they advertise for gingering up the constitution. Phosfer-hyphen-something, don't you know. Perhaps if I felt physically stronger I shouldn't be such a moral rotter." He stopped, hesitated, and then went on. "There's something I ought to tell you, though,

if we're going to be a bit more to each other than just friends. You remember the other night, when I was telling you how I put in my time, I mentioned a girl called Vivienne?"

Rose remembered.

"Well," he floundered, "I'd better make a clean breast of it. Fact is, I nearly got as far as marrying her. I should have if she had n't suddenly let me off. That's all. Only I was — pretty thick with her. You understand?"

Rose did not understand.

"Thank you for telling me," she said. "We need n't say anything more about her, then, need we?"

"No, of course not — except this, I — I shall have to break it off definitely — see her once — and say good-bye. Writing might be awkward. That's really all. Now I want to ask you a question. Do you think, say after a time, you might get just a little fond of me?" He leant towards her anxiously. "If I thought there was a chance of that it would be a — a sort of motive. Help me no end, you know."

"Of course I — want to be fond of you," she replied, almost desperately. "It — it would be so — so desolate and empty if we did n't care for each other, would n't it?"

Denis nodded vigorously.

"How long are we going to be engaged?" he asked.

"Don't make it an age. When we get away by our own two selves —"

"Oh, not by ourselves!" she interrupted in alarm.

"Your father won't leave us. He promised me he'd be with us always."

Denis laughed nervously.

"I hope he will. But — I say — not on our honeymoon!" Then seeing Rose's increasing alarm, he explained: "I mean, we shan't want him then, shall we? He's a rattling good chap and a splendid father, but I can't share my wife with him all the time."

Their future relationship, so badly expressed, dismayed her.

Denis's wife! Of course she would be a wife! Would that make things different? Would it alter her feelings? Would she want to be alone with him then? At present she dreaded it. Not alone! Anything but alone!

Denis took her silence for concurrence. It gave him courage.

"Then — I may kiss you?" he asked, and, as though it were a good joke, added, "You won't knock me down this time?"

The teasing words masked a good deal of feeling. He knew he would never want to kiss Rose lightly again. . . .

Rose could not raise her eyes to meet his. They were heavy with tears. She supposed every engaged girl felt a little inclined to cry. It could n't be sadness. . . . Why should she be sad? She was a very lucky girl. Miss Hobbs said so. She was going to be ever so happy. She was going to live in the country again, in beautiful surroundings, amongst friends. And Lord Caister would be there — she hoped — always. What more could she wish for? She was going to be Denis's wife and help him. Of course she was happy, and — and Denis could kiss her. It — it was his right.

She swayed towards him, and he took her in his arms.

Caister had gone to the library. It was the room he

used more than any other in his town house. It was associated with many memories in his life. Here, in this room, he had proposed to Denis's mother. . . . Her memory had grown a little vague with the years. The match had been more or less arranged for them. She had been a beautiful girl, of charming manners, a little characterless, extremely delicate. He had admired and respected her. She had died in the first year of their marriage. . . . In this room they had come to tell him of Denis's birth. In this room there had been enacted countless scenes with Denis as boy and man, mostly scenes Caister would rather not have remembered. Some were locked in his heart. . . . No human being would ever hear or know of them. . . . In this room Rose had come to him, seeking him in her desperate fear lest she had killed Denis — Rose, his little Rose! . . .

And then breaking across his thoughts, almost as clearly as she had said them, he seemed to hear the words Lady Chalfont had spoken only a few minutes ago:

"Do you ever think about what you feel for Rose? Something very intense and precious, is n't it? . . . If you're on the road to loving Rose yourself, take her and thank God for her."

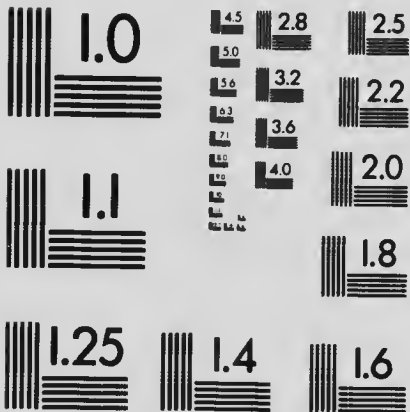
With that he knew what he had not definitely perceived before — he had made his plans for Denis with Rose as the corner-stone, and all the while he loved her himself, not as a daughter but as a woman, — loved her as never in his life had he conceived it possible to love. It was a flame, a fire. *He — loved — her!*

The realisation of his feelings came on him like a blinding lightning flash; everything became plain



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that before had been obscure. His paternal instincts were swamped by the natural passions of a man who loves desperately and devotedly.

There was still time. Perhaps Denis and Rose had not yet come to an understanding. He had hardly been out of the room ten minutes. He would go back there — now — at once. Hope gave him the assurance that it was not too late; that he would be in time to tell Rose what he had seen in his heart and felt in his soul. He would offer himself to her, ask her to choose. They could still help Denis. The only difference would be that Rose would be his wife — his little wife . . .

With his heart beating in a way that no old man's heart can beat, as eagerly as a boy, Caister returned to the room where he had left his destiny, hoping to overtake it.

But destiny had been beforehand with him. He opened the door to see Denis take Rose in his arms to claim his betrothal kiss . . .

CHAPTER XXV

VIVIENNE was waiting for Denis. He had made an appointment with her for four o'clock that afternoon. She supposed he intended taking her out to tea to some smart showy place where actresses and ladies of the chorus do what they can to brighten up the non-professional assemblage of demurely dressed tea-drinkers.

Vivienne wore a "dazzle" frock, especially designed for her by a theatrical fashion artist who had long since given up art for audacity, good taste for gaudiness, and who bid for notoriety rather than fame by means of eccentricity and clash of color. Vivienne's frock had a canary background, with scarlet and green zigzag effects. Her hat consisted of two scarlet beaked parrots skilfully amalgamated. She felt exceedingly satisfied with her appearance. It was quite uniquely *outré*.

Denis was a little staggered when he saw her.

"B' Jove, Viv!" he exclaimed. "You look like the business end of a kaleidoscope! What are you supposed to be? A new comet, or an ad. for a dye factory?"

"It's the latest thing in dazzles," she informed him.

"I don't suppose there's another in London like it. Where are we going, Denny? Carlton?"

"If you don't mind I'd prefer to have a cup of tea with you here. I've got something awfully particular to say."

He spoke irresolutely; Vivienne looked vexed.

"You *are* disappointing!" she cried. "I meant to make a sensation in this dress. Still, any old time will do for that. We'll tea here then." She rang the bell and

ordered it. "Whatever's the matter with you, boy? You remind me of a stage curate. Thank goodness I've never met a real one. Are you feeling nervy? Does this frock give you the creeps, like my peignoir with the dragons?"

"Not a bit. My nerves are O.K. this afternoon. I'm simply bothered. I've got something to tell you that you may not like; sort of an operation — best got over quickly. I don't flatter myself that you'll mind it very much. I'm not such a blessedly lovable character that a girl could n't get on without me."

Vivienne's attitude became alert.

"Get on with it, Denis. You're a pal of mine, anyway; and if you've anything nasty to say let's have it without tissue-paper wrappings. I think I can guess what you're driving at. You're thinking of quitting the husks-and-swine trade to settle down and fatten up respectable calves in the country. Is that it?"

Her metaphor might be mixed, but her meaning was plain. Denis was glad of the opening she provided.

"Well, yes, in a way. As you know, I've promised my father times without number that I'd turn over a new leaf. Fact is, I've done that so often that I've pretty nearly got to the end of a book as big as the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. I'm more in earnest this time, though, than I ever was before. We're leaving town, and I — I've come to say good-bye."

Vivienne sat very still. A tinge of whiteness began to show under her rouge.

"Is that all?" she asked in a queer voice.

"N-not quite. I want to say that I — you've been awfully decent to me in no end of ways. You've been a regular little pal. Although you stand for the sort of life that the doctor Johnnies say will do for me,

and I've got to give it up, I'm deuced sorry. It was jolly while it lasted, was n't it?"

"Yes . . . it was jolly while it lasted," she repeated dully. Then her voice got out of control. "Oh, Denny, I can't help it! let me howl!"

To his astonishment and discomfiture she collapsed utterly, sobbing like a child. As suddenly, her sobs ceased. She mopped at her eyes and smiled.

"That's that! Now I've got rid of the overflow, we can proceed. Are you absolutely serious, Denny?"

Denis nodded.

"I've been a pip-squeak all round," he said dismally. "I've given my father no end of trouble. I've monkeyed about and spent money that he could n't afford; and I can't even make you a decent present now that the time has come for us to part."

"Oh, cut that out!" she cried. "If I'm not tiled in it's my own fault. I have n't been out for the dibs with you, Denny. At first I was quite ready to marry you for your rotten position; but after a bit, especially lately, I've not thought so much about that, though I dare say no one would believe it. I could n't play the 'my lady' stunt well enough to get an encore. I should hate reforming and turning classy. I've realised I'm not cut out for society with a capital S. I'm pretty sure to have had the sense to see that before it was too late, and so saved myself the vexation of being laughed at by the nobility of Grosvenor Square and the aristocracy of Garrick Street. No, you'll be all the better without me and my friendship. It's bad for little boys. Did you think I was going to cut up rough and make a scene? Not this girl, old dear. There are other pebbles on the beach."

Her liveliness was quite well enough assumed to deceive him. It almost deceived herself.

"Well, I think you're behaving like a trump," he said.

Vivienne employed a little gesture of the hand to make light of his gratitude.

"Don't canonise me, old man," she rejoined. "I'm a little cat at heart, not to be trusted for longer than the duration of a mood. When are you going to chuck town?"

"End of the week, I believe."

"Going to be married?"

"Engaged."

"To a sweet young thing?"

"Yes. Don't chip me, Viv. She's all right."

Vivienne's good mood was petering out already.

"I dare say she is," she said viciously. "I hate her, anyhow. She's too good to discuss with me! That's what you feel about her, is n't it? I suppose you're in love — solemnly and sacredly. I suppose she'll wear orange blossoms and a long train and look as if butter would n't melt in her mouth; and you'll turn pi and look after your tenantry. . . . Oh, I don't care! You'll be bored stiff. I shan't!"

Before he left she got busy with the telephone. Telephoning was more of an industry than a habit with her, like painting her face or getting photographed. At first it did not dawn on him that she was fixing up a farewell supper to celebrate his approaching renunciation of a life of dissipation, and calling up a number of their joint friends for the purpose. When he did tumble to it he protested.

Vivienne only smiled. She was an adept in that art

commonly described as twisting a person round one's little finger.

"Buck up, Denny!" she said gaily. "Positively your last appearance on this or any other lively stage. Plenty of fizz and a great big splash, and then good-bye to all your little weaknesses! I suppose you've no objection to kissing me for positively the last time?"

Dazzled by her frock or her smile, or both, Denis recommenced his giddy gyration around that practised little finger of hers. After all, it was only chummy of Viv to want to give a last "beano" in his honour. No real harm either in "Chimmie" or roulette afterwards. He must be a jolly good fellow for the last time, and not spoil sport . . .

Vivienne's smile was very subtle. She was a little cat at heart again, not to be trusted for longer than the duration of a mood . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

A TYPEWRITTEN letter, postmarked Trethew, the neighbouring country town to Polseth, lay on Mr. Bree's plate. Coming down first to breakfast, his wife had several times been tempted to open it. As soon as he put in an appearance, she picked it up and requested him to do so for himself and read it.

"I'm sure it must be from Mr. Tredgold," she said. "It's three weeks since we gave him that will. I dare say he has found out something by now. I hope it's nothing unpleasant. I always had a feeling that old Mr. Eton had come to Polseth because he had something to hide. It may have been a crime."

"Your fancies run away with you, Mary," chided the Vicar. "Eton was an eccentric and that is all. My own opinion is that I might have found him a most interesting companion, if he had cared to be sociable. He was a cultured man, I am convinced, in spite of the way he chose to live."

"Well, open the letter, do," she begged impatiently.

The letter turned out to be one of nine lines; but none the less informative because of its brevity.

DEAR SIR,

With reference to the document you handed to us on the 11th ult., we have now made the necessary investigations and propose to call upon you to-morrow (Wednesday) at 10 o'clock, in the hope that you may help us to locate Miss Eton, sole beneficiary under the will of the late Mr. Henry Eton.

Yours faithfully

TREDGOLD & EVANS

"Then he had some money, after all!" ejaculated Mrs. Bree.

"It looks like it. I very much hope so. Enough, let us trust, to enable Rose to live in modest comfort. A hundred pounds a year would go a long way in a village like this."

"I should think it would, considering it's half your own stipend! She would be lucky, indeed, if it were only fifty. But how are we to find her, Ambrose? We can't help Mr. Tredgold in the very least. Suppose he holds us responsible. The child is under age. We — we ought, perhaps, to have acted as her guardians!"

"Morally, no doubt, as we were perfectly prepared to do. It was not our fault that she left Polseth so precipitately."

The subject of Rose and Mr. Eton's mysterious will occupied their minds until Mr. Tredgold put in a punctual appearance. He was the country lawyer of a past generation, incredibly slow in processes of thought which he laboured to disguise by excessive solemnity of utterance.

"I should have communicated with you before, Mr. Bree," were his opening words, "but legal business takes considerable time, as you doubtless know. Moreover, we have had to obtain and verify a good deal of information from America, which has only just come into our hands. I will be as brief as possible. We have now established that Mr. Henry Eton was an American subject, a citizen of Deepville, Connecticut, which he left in the year 1903, when he settled in Polseth. He was a man of considerable property, and undoubtedly eccentric, although of sound mind. Not that the state of his mind is likely to be called into ques-

tion. He was an orphan, a self-made man, and possessed of no relatives that we can hear of. For some private reason, which does not concern us, he appears to have taken an incomprehensible dislike to money, which perhaps accounts for his migration to a remote English village, where he chose to live in poor surroundings and apparently straitened circumstances. I should surmise that before leaving his own country he provided himself with a large amount of ready cash, on which he subsequently lived. The rest has remained untouched, accumulating for years, and Miss Eton, his adopted daughter, is his sole heiress."

"Heiress to what?" enquired Mrs. Bree excitedly.

"The accumulated sum amounts apparently to something like forty-five thousand pounds. The regular income is derived from an oil-field in which Mr. Eton invested a further thirty-five thousand pounds. It brings in about ten thousand pounds a year. The whole estate is unconditionally left to Miss Eton. All that we have to do is to inform her of it. Can you give us her address?"

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Bree could speak for some moments. Mr. Tredgold's news, imparted though it had been with monumental imperturbability, had literally deprived them of breath. He repeated his question with some impatience.

"But we don't know where she is," deplored Mrs. Bree. "We believe she went to London, and that is all."

"Did you not obtain any situation for her?"

"We offered her one in our own house. We were not in a position to do more. She behaved most impulsively and, I regret to say, rudely. She practically

ran away from us. We have been terribly worried. Of course she must be found."

Mr. Tredgold looked perplexed.

"We must advertise, I suppose," he said, "to the effect that if she will communicate with us she will hear of something to her advantage."

"If you do that she will be more difficult to find than ever. She'll take fright. She might think we ourselves wanted to know where she was, and perhaps change her address. I doubt also whether 'something to her advantage' would tempt her. She's quite as indifferent to money as Mr. Eton was, and knows nothing of its value. Mr. Eton brought her up to dislike it. Could n't you employ one of the private detective agencies to try and trace her?"

Mr. Tredgold thought over the suggestion.

"That might be the better course," he agreed. "It would, of course, necessitate a heavy outlay, but the amplitude of the amount involved would stand it. However, I must first consult my partner. We will advertise only as a last resort. Directly we hear anything we will let you know, and if by any chance you should obtain any clue to Miss Eton's whereabouts you will communicate with us at once, I take it. Good-morning. Good-morning."

And he was gone.

The Vicar and his wife looked at one another.

"Just think of it! Rose an heiress!" breathed Mrs Bree. "It sounds almost miraculous! Whatever will she do with such an amount of money? It will be a tremendous trust. Let us hope she will see it in that light. How much good she could do with it!"

"Indeed, yes. The parish room is sadly in need of

repair, and the pew cushions are quite threadbare. There's the church tower, too, dangerously out of the perpendicular. I trust it will remain standing until — ahem! — Mr. Tredgold succeeds in bestowing this great inheritance on the fortunate girl. There is no limit to the good she might do with it!"

"She might even . . . But there! The first thing is to find her. It's not much use anticipating what she will do with her money and who will be benefited by it until she's found and told about it. If only we could give her the good news ourselves! You know, Ambrose, I'm still of the opinion that old Becky Gryls could tell us something, if only she would."

"Old Becky is not likely to last the day. And that reminds me, Mary: Dr. Lewis left a message this morning asking me to go up there as soon as possible, in case she might like spiritual consolation at the last. I very much doubt whether she would, though." He sighed. "She has always been such a wayward soul."

He prepared for the long walk down hill and up dale to Becky's habitation. Mrs. Bree put on her outdoor things to accompany him.

"I won't bother her, Ambrose," she promised. "I'll just come along with you."

They found Becky Gryls very weak, but in an unwontedly serene mood. She seemed fully conscious of her condition, and because she was so full of years unfeignedly glad that her end was near. After all, her God had not forgotten to come for her, nor, for all her waywardness, was she afraid to meet Him.

Perhaps, because she believed herself gifted with the spirit of prophecy, she also had a larger vision. It seemed so.

The Vicar came in and knelt by her bedside.

"Aye, pray, then," said Becky easily. "There's a deal in prayer, after all, so long as it's out of the heart, not a book."

So the Vicar, who was a good man, prayed from his heart to ease the passing of Becky's strange old soul.

"Bring your lady in," she said. "You need n't tell me. She's outside."

He fetched his wife. Old Becky did not open her eyes, but she knew when Mrs. Bree entered.

"Oh, Becky," said the good lady, "I'm so sorry you're so ill."

A sphinx-like smile curved Becky's lips.

"I'm goin' to be the wind blowin' round my own cottage to-night. I'm goin' to be the waves beatin' on the shore; and you'll hear me lashin' the tops o' the trees," she murmured. . . . "Say good-bye to Rose for me. She'll have her fortune soon, bless her beautiful heart."

This unexpected reference to the money startled the couple. They wondered how the old woman could have known of it.

Mrs. Bree took her wrinkled hand.

"Becky," she said persuasively, "if it is n't troubling you we want you to tell us how to find Rose. Try and think."

Old Becky's sunken eyes opened for a moment. She seemed to be searching her mind.

"Not in London," she answered faintly. "She's gone. I—I can't see her—anywhere. It's dark." She tried to sit up. "My stockin' under the bed—for Rose," she quavered. "It's full. . . . Pretty Rose can't have too much. . . ."

They were her last words.

That evening, at dusk, even as she had implied, a wind sprang up, lashing the sea and the tree-tops. And as old Becky was no longer in the flesh, perhaps her freed spirit had merged itself in the elements with whose wilder moods she had always seemed so strangely tintured.

Beneath her mattress, sewn to it, lay the stocking for Rose, filled with the gold and silver for which those who ride the wind and the waves have no longer any use. . . .

CHAPTER XXVII

WITH much approval Caister noted that Mrs. George Clarges looked exactly what he had advertised for as a chaperon for Rose—a gentlewoman. She bore that hall-mark unmistakably. Of the four other applicants whom he had already interviewed he had had his doubts. Mrs. Clarges, on the other hand, had a presence, a charming voice, and evinced a quietly excellent taste in dress.

These were her surface indications. What he could not ascertain from her manner and appearance was a venality of which the chief feature was utter unscrupulousness (she called it being “easy-going”) and a prodigious selfishness.

She had been born in affluence, but had married a man of limited means. Too late she had discovered that she could not command the expensive comforts to which she had been accustomed and which she regarded as essential to her well-being. Now she lived considerably above a modest income, and was always on the lookout for ways of augmenting it. Hence her reply to Caister’s advertisement.

“The post I can offer you,” he had explained, “is only a temporary one. My son will probably be married in a few months to the young lady I have mentioned. In the meantime I want a married lady of good birth in the house to act as a companion and chaperon to her. You would practically have no duties. My housekeeper is quite competent to attend to the domestic arrangements. The salary mentioned by the agency will suit me quite well.”

The arrangement also suited Mrs. Clarges. It meant that she could let her small flat at an inflated rental, pay some of her most pressing accounts, and enjoy a pleasant holiday in the country without domestic worries of any kind. The post of chaperon was one to which she was really exceedingly well adapted. She was tactful, well-mannered, and of far too lazy a disposition to obtrude herself except when she was absolutely wanted; and, the circumstances warranting her in imagining that that would not be too often, she foresaw plenty of leisure.

"I think you will find I can fill the post satisfactorily," she said. "As for a social reference, if you require one in addition to that of my banker, I can give you the name of an old school-friend of mine who has known me all my life — Mrs. Ambrose Bree, of the Vicarage, Polseth."

She mentioned the name with confidence. Mrs. Bree and she had kept up a desultory correspondence through the years, but they had seldom met since their school-days. Mrs. Bree, then a pupil teacher, had known her as the daughter of wealthy parents. She had no idea of the subsequent monetary vicissitudes and shifts to which Mrs. Clarges had been subjected, and would therefore have no compunction in recommending her.

Caister made a note of the address, engaged the lady with masculine promptitude, arranged for her to travel down to Purton a few days hence, when she would meet her charge, and concluded the interview as speedily as he could.

Only a week had elapsed since Rose's acceptance of Denis. It had been a week of trial to Caister. By and

by, as time went on, he supposed he would not suffer as he was suffering now. He had built up this scheme and set it going before he knew his own heart, his own deep personal need of Rose. And now it was all too late. She was promised to Denis. Denis wanted her. The thing was done with. Caister simply had to step aside and eliminate himself. Well, in one way or another, he had done that all his life for Denis; but this was the very apogee of sacrifice. He was quite capable of going through with it without faltering. He meant to. He was sufficiently master of himself to be quite sure that neither Rose nor Denis would ever guess what he had relinquished. For him only there would be the pain. . . .

But if Rose or Denis did not guess the truth, Lady Chalfont did. A creature of impulse and affection herself, her intuitions were seldom at fault. She had seen the thing coming. At her next meeting with Caister she knew that he had listened to her friendly counsel too late.

She said nothing. There was nothing to say. She could n't help him now. Only it hurt her to see this good man suffering. Denis, in her opinion, was n't worth the sacrifice his father was making, would never be worth it.

She did her best to seem bright and cheery over the preparations that were being made on behalf of the engaged couple. At any rate, her assumed blitheness heartened Caister — while he was with her.

"So you've got a chaperon," she said, when he came to see her after his interview with Mrs. Clarges. "Do I know her?"

He mentioned the lady's name.

"I wonder if she's any relation of Eveleigh Clarges.

Lives at Chiswick? Then she is. Probably his mother. Funny how we never seem to be able to get away from the stage. No, *she's* not an actress, Bob. Don't look scared. Very decent family, I believe. Only her son happens to be a cinema celebrity. You don't go to those shows or notice them, so you've never heard of him. He's one of Verner's Stars — 'Famous Players.' A very good actor with a Neilson-Terry face. No harm in him, so far as I know. He's quite well known as the most perfectly romantic lover on the English picture stage. Anyway, he won't bother you. He's at Verner's studios all the time, I expect."

They dismissed the subject. There were other more important ones to talk about connected with Rose and Denis.

Mrs. Clarges about the same time was imparting to her son the news of the post she had secured.

"So you will have to go into rooms again, my dear boy," she finished up. "And really, I don't suppose you'll be sorry. Ever since that wretched cook took herself off because we would n't raise her wages, we have really not had a decent meal; not to speak of making our own beds, on account of the housemaid leaving in a huff as well. And by the way, Eveleigh, I shall have to have a nice, quiet, matronly, black evening frock, dear boy. If you could let me have fifteen pounds, Adèle might be induced to make something simple for me quickly. You don't want your poor mother going about looking *démouée*, do you? I cannot understand which side of the family you derive your parsimonious trait from. Your dear father was wonderfully generous, considering his limited means. Nothing was good enough for me in his eyes."

She spoke with ready emotion, and a certain amount of truth. The defunct Mr. Clarges had adored his selfish wife, had weak-mindedly run into every conceivable kind of debt to satisfy her demands, and then, conveniently for himself, died when he could no longer satisfy his creditors.

Eveleigh's chances in life had been sacrificed to his mother's passion for expensive clothes and a comfortable life. Fortunately for himself, his classical features and fine presence, combined with a certain amount of dramatic talent, had led him to adopt the only profession to which a person of small mental capacity may aspire with some hopes of success. At twenty-seven he was, as Maggy had said, a cinema star of some magnitude, leading romantic man of "Verner's Super-Productions," on an iron-bound contract at a salary of fifteen pounds a week. Fifteen pounds a week in Mrs. Clarges's opinion was a totally inadequate income on which to support a delicately nurtured mother. Eveleigh she considered was, like his father, malleable, but rather a fool.

"I can't understand why you are so lacking in business aptitude!" she deplored. "You are one of the most advertised men on the pictures, and yet your salary would scarcely keep a fly. If I were in your place I would threaten to break my contract with that scoundrel Verner and go to an opposition firm. You have n't any spirit, Eveleigh. No one would dream you could do such dashing things, and make love so beautifully. In real life you are a perfect stick."

The "perfect stick" said nothing. He very seldom argued with his indomitable mother. He had none of her volubility nor any of her persistence. On his father's

death he had heroically shouldered his burdens and to the best of his ability kept pace with his mother's exactions. If he did not recognise them as such it was because he was extraordinarily devoted to her.

"We'll manage the frock somehow, mother," he said. "The house bills will have to take a back seat again, I suppose; I'll square them while you're away. Do you think you'll like the job and get on with the girl?"

"I expect so. I have n't even heard her name. She's engaged to Lord Caister's son. Now, if she had money, I might try and contrive an invitation for you. You never know your luck."

"Heiresses are n't in my line, I'm afraid. I'm so busy making love on the stage all day that I've no inclination left for that sort of thing in private."

"You'll do what I tell you if I ever do discover an heiress. With a Greek profile like yours you could turn any girl's head. Look how your picture postcards sell. Everybody's making a fortune out of you, my dear, except yourself."

Eveleigh shrugged his shoulders, glanced at the clock, and took himself off to Verner's studios. He was happiest when he was acting.

Mrs. Clarges sat down at her bureau to write to Mrs. Bree a long and carefully worded letter. On receipt of it the Vicar's wife, as requested, immediately communicated with Lord Caister, cordially recommending her girlhood's friend for the post of chaperon or *any* position of trust in his establishment.

CHAPTER XXVIII

FOR almost the first time since she had entered Gardner's employment, Rose was not singing at her work. She was not unhappy; indeed, she had thrown off any tendency to be sad, and was looking forward to the new life before her. To-day would be her last in the big store. It would have seemed unfeeling to sing as though she were glad she was going. Truth to tell, she was not exactly glad. She had been very happy amongst the flowers, but somehow she felt that her flower-time had passed.

At nine-thirty punctually Mr. Louie passed through on his way to his office. He needed no reminding that to-morrow Rose would be gone. The knowledge of it hung over him like a cloud. He felt too distressed this morning to indulge in the desultory conversation which had become habitual between them. He did not linger. His throat felt dry and choky, a sensation akin to physical pain, which in men of endurance takes the place of tears.

Miss Hobbs bustled about, brisk and bright as usual — suspiciously bright. She purposely suppressed any display of emotion, though she felt it strongly, in order not to excite Rose's feelings. Both she and Mr. Louie were at one in their courageous desire to keep a stiff upper lip. But the youngest lift-boy, who had worshipped the pictured face and form of Mary Pickford only to transfer that adoration to Rose, was shamelessly weeping at intervals.

Business in the floral department, always brisk dur-

ing the earlier part of the day, flagged towards the end of the afternoon. Throughout the morning all allusions to Rose's impending departure were avoided, but when only an hour remained before closing time, Miss Hobbs's pent-up feelings became too strong for her. She began dabbing at her eyes.

"There now," she sniffed, "I've borne up all day only to finish up like this. Don't take any notice of me, Rose. I'm just a silly thing. There's no sense in harping on how much we shall miss you. The place won't seem the same. I know it's no good taking on like I'm doing now. You're going to be a lady and it's all most romantic. Only, of course we shan't see you any more, and so the feeling is rather as if you were dying and going to heaven. We're glad for you, but sorry for ourselves."

She smiled through her tears.

"But why think of it like that?" Rose contended. "Nothing is altered. I shall be back in London by and by. You'll come and see me, and —"

"Not much," Miss Hobbs asserted very definitely; "although it's just like you not to want to make any difference. But there will be one all the same. You'll feel it yourself after a month or two. You'll come into the shop, perhaps, to see me, or to buy some flowers, and it'll strike you suddenly how fat and common I am, and then you'll be glad I kept out of the way and had the sense not to butt in. . . . No, I should n't be such a fool as to step out of my — my sphere. You're so different. You don't know the meaning of the word 'awkward.' You might be anybody. You're so easy and dignified. I'm like a wild elephant in a drawing-room. Why, once I had to take a box of flowers to a

lady in Park Lane. The hall was all parquet. I simply shot away on a rug, bowled the footman over, and slid plump into the drawing-room. I did n't stop till I fell on to a sofa stuck in the way. And the people in the room laughed till they nearly cried. I did n't laugh, I can tell you. I never felt so small in my life; and when an out-size like me feels small it's not a nice sensation. No more parquet floors for me, or marble halls either. Give me well-washed lino any day. . . . How I do run on, to be sure! All I mean to say is, we'll part as friends, and we'll love you always, Rose, but our paths will never lie together again. You've got a long way to go. I shall stay here — fat Fanny Hobbs to the end of the chapter."

But Rose would not suffer her friend to belittle herself any more. She hugged her affectionately and assured her that she was talking nonsense.

"I'm not," asserted Miss Hobbs. "Still, if you're lonely any time, Mr. Louie would come and see you. I'm sure he would know how to behave like a gentleman, even in Buckingham Palace. With an aristocratic nose like his, he could pass as one anywhere." She sighed copiously. "To tell you the truth, Rose, I'm feeling for him as well as for you. I can just guess how miserable he must be about you. If only you could have got to love him! . . . There's his bell. That's for you."

Rose answered the summons with a little misgiving. She wished her farewells were over, this one especially.

Mr. Louie at this final juncture, however, had command over himself. He was not one to indulge in the luxury of grief in business hours. He had been going over the matter of his good-bye all night, rehearsing

what he would say again and again, but when Rose actually stood before him the carefully thought-out words of farewell faded from his mind. He simply took her hand and held it silently. It was Rose who spoke first.

"I don't think I've ever properly thanked you for your kindness to me," she said. "Before I go I want you to know that I'm ever so grateful. I've been so happy here, and you have been more than good to me. I'm looking forward to my life with — with Lord Caister and his son, but I shall always think of my time here and be glad that I came."

"Thank you," said Mr. Louie. "And now it's — good-bye, is n't it? I'm afraid I can't say very much. You're going and we are all sorry. You must have heard that from every one. I'm going to ask you a personal favour. Will you write to me sometimes? Just a line to say how you are getting on, and whether you are happy?"

"Of course I will. And we can meet when I come back to London. I can't get Miss Hobbs to see that I shan't alter. I shall always be your friend and hers if you will both let me."

Her bracketing of the two names was unintentional, but Mr. Louie flushed a little.

"Miss Hobbs showed judgment," he answered. "No doubt she feels very much as I do and is happy to know that you will remember us. Nevertheless, she doubtless appreciates what I myself do, that once you have left us it would not be right for you to — to forget with humble friends. That will not alter our feelings of regard for you in the very least. On my part, they are deep and unswerving. I shall treasure the memory of you until I am an old man, and from a dis-

tance I hope I shall be able to watch your prosperity. I shall always pray for your welfare. It is my deepest wish that you may be happy. And if you are not, if circumstances ever occur in which you feel I may be of assistance to you, will you promise to let me help you if I can? It — it would be a privilege. I shall always be — your devoted servant."

Rose was deeply touched.

"You're the kindest man in the world!" she cried. And before Mr. Louie had any idea what she was about, she had flung her arms round his neck, kissed him vehemently, and run out of the room with the tears streaming down her face.

This unexpected demonstration of emotion, so volcanic, so typical of loving-hearted Rose, lifted the little man's grief to another and a more resigned plane. Of her own accord she had kissed him — / An effulgence — an aura of glory — seemed to manifest itself. Its splendour was the direct outcome of that unforgettable kiss. . . .

An hour later, Miss Hobbs, entering in some trepidation with the day's takings, which it was her business to check with him, found him, not looking cast down as she had expected, but with an almost exalted expression on his face.

Rose had gone. Her own eyes were red with tears. To her dismay it turned out that she had so far forgotten herself as to make a mistake in her accounts. General infallibility in this respect was one of the accomplishments on which she prided herself.

"I am sorry," she apologised, when Mr. Louie indicated the error. "I — I took that five for a three and the seven for a nine."

The figures were plain enough.

"Dear me," he said, turning to look at her. "Do you think you ought to wear glasses? That would be a great pity, because" — he paused — "you have such nice eyes."

So he had noticed her eyes! It was the first compliment he had ever paid her. She crimsoned with embarrassed pleasure.

"I'm sure I'm glad if you think so," she stammered; "but I don't need glasses. I — I could n't see for tears, and the figures looked all alike. It upset me so to say good-bye to Rose."

"I understand. But you must n't fret about it. I think I shall have to remind you of the very good advice you gave me the other night. I took it to heart and it comforted me. We must be glad that we had Rose here amongst us even for a little while. I look on it like that now, thanks to you."

"Thanks to me?"

"Yes. Your kind words that night meant a great deal more to me than I can express. You helped me to understand that an unreciprocated love was not a thing to be despondent about, but rather to be the better for. Life does n't stop still because certain things are denied to us. There are others that in some measure can take their place. You taught me that too."

The depression was fading from Miss Hobbs's face. She smiled through her tears.

"I'd do more if I could than say a few words to help you," she declared. "I've always wanted to — to please you, ever since I came seven years ago. You were always so — so considerate. Girls notice things like that in the gentlemen they work under. Some of

them, you know, can make it so very hard. You get the best out of everybody — your way. It's a fine thing to have — that quality."

Mr. Louie was grateful for her praise. It put him in good heart.

"It is very pleasant to me to know you have liked your work. Mutual effort is everything. And you, on your side, have always been a big help. In fact, talking of that, I am thinking of making some changes. Miss Prentice, my secretary, is leaving. I have been wondering if you would care for the post. You would have more time in which to look after your little sister. And the salary is more — a hundred and sixty a year."

Miss Hobbs could not conceal her pleasure. The offer was so unexpected. To her it meant affluence. Harder headwork, perhaps, but easier hours as well as more pay, but above all — most wonderful consideration — she would be working solely for and with the one individual she so abjectly loved.

"Does n't it appeal to you?" he asked, a little disappointed at her silence.

"Appeal to me?" She clasped her fat, dimpled hands. "It's more than I ever dreamt of! Your secretary! I'll do my best, but — are you *sure* you want me?"

"Why should n't I be?" Mr. Louie's eyes twinkled.

"Well, you could get a bright, competent girl, shorthand and typing — I can only type — and some one good-looking into the bargain. Some one slim and young and nice to look at. It's only natural for a gentleman to prefer some one pretty to look at when he's working. There's nothing showy about me. I know it. I'm not beautiful. I'm only useful."

"I should n't ask you to be my secretary if — if I disliked looking at you or did n't want you. Shall we consider it settled, then? I thought Miss Hopson might take your place in the floral department, and you might begin work with me next week. Now, shall we finish these accounts?"

He pulled the books towards him. Half an hour went by in adding, checking, and correcting. Business interested them both.

"I'm afraid I've kept you beyond your time," he said when they had finished. "It's past six."

Miss Hobbs put the books away.

"I never mind how late I work," she said. "Only I always get my little sister her supper at half-past. Never mind, I can take a bus instead of walking." At the door she paused. "There's one thing I want to say, if you don't mind. It's about that vase of flowers Rose used to arrange and put on your desk every day. You'll miss them, I expect. It's not that I don't care to do them for you, but I would n't like you to think I was trying to take her place — in every way."

Mr. Louie thought this hesitating statement over.

"You're very thoughtful," he said at length. "I *should* miss those flowers. I'd like you to do them just the same, please, if you don't mind. It would never enter my head to suppose that you wished to usurp any one's place. You have a special one of your own in my — esteem."

With a little bow he opened the glass door, and Miss Hobbs, with a breathless good-evening, passed out. She felt as though she were walking on clouds and that all of them were rosy ones. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

It's a curious thing about them as comes to live in this room," declared Mrs. Bell axiomatically. "They comes 'ere poor and pretty, and they leaves 'appy and proud. You might almost say there was luck about it. Before her ladyship, Miss Delamere that was, lodged here, there was Florry Smith, who came into a public-house sudden through death; and before her, a young man what went in for competitions with postal orders. He won a hundred pounds. I've a good mind to sleep in the room meself and see what 'appens."

She set down the tea-tray the better to observe the large assortment of wearing apparel which Rose was engaged in packing. A capacious new trunk occupied nearly all the floor space. The bed was heaped up with dainty garments chosen for her by Maggy. Mrs. Bell surveyed them with the keenest appreciation.

"Them creep de sheeny nightdresses would look just right for seaside summer dresses," she observed. "As for that there petticoat, I'd wear it outside if I was you. . . . And all come by honest!" She gazed at Rose with unreserved admiration. "I've always 'ad a good opinion of you, my dear, and I'm sure you deserve everything that's 'appened. I'll always be wishful to remember you. You've never been no trouble, and apart from the rent paid reg'lar, I shall miss the sight of your smilin' face. Folks seem to forget to smile in Sidey Street." She sighed lugubriously. "And some folks seem to forget they ever lived in it. That there Florry Smith left me, 'aughty as you like, dressed in

ermine covered with tails, and never a word or a 'thank you' from her from that day to this. Not so much as a bottle or two of invalid port, which would n't have cost her anything to speak of, seein' as 'ow she gets it 'olesale. And the young man what won the competition left owing me two-and-six for postal orders! That's human nature, that is. But Lady Chalfont was never too proud to say 'thank you,' not to speak of an 'amper every Christmas, and a Stilton cheese and a five-pound note to keep her memory green. She'll never forget the little kindnesses I did for her, because she 'as a good and grateful 'eart, which is more —"

The unannounced entrance of the bestower of many favours cut short Mrs. Bell's dissertation. Lady Chalfont might be well disposed towards her one-time landlady, but she knew her garrulousness of old, and was experienced in dealing with it. Within a minute or two she succeeded in getting rid of Mrs. Bell.

"Packing?" she said. "That's right. I've come to help you. I hope you like all these things. That little rose frock will do very well for the evenings when you three are alone. That tulle affair I chose for more swagger occasions. And for everyday wear you'll stick to tweeds and blouses. If you're in any doubt about anything ask Mrs. Clarges. That's the chaperon who will be living with you. I believe she has much better taste than I have, so you'll be safe with her. . . . Is n't it exciting to have such a lot of new clothes all at once? I should have been nearly off my head with joy."

"They're lovely." Rose's voice was enthusiastic and grateful. "But I — I don't quite like taking them. She hesitated. "I could get some money by selling this." She touched the necklace at her throat.

Maggy glanced at it casually, unaware of its value. "Oh, don't sell anything. Bob would n't like that. It pleases him to give you things. Besides, these have n't cost such a terrible lot. I'm an expert shopper. Once upon a time I had to think of every penny I spent. So I know where to go now to get the best value. Just thank Bob when you see him and give him a kiss."

She spoke without thought.

The colour came into Rose's cheeks.

"Oh, I could n't do that!" she cried. "I — I dare n't. He won't expect it, will he?"

Maggy, on her knees by the trunk, looked up.

"I did n't mean you to take that literally. It'll be enough if you thank him. But why could n't you kiss him? Don't tell me if you'd rather not."

"I'd rather," said Rose in a small voice. "I — *want* to tell you."

Maggy got up. She put her arm round Rose and led her to the bed. They sat down side by side. Maggy waited for her to speak, but Rose apparently had difficulty in beginning. At last she said tensely:

"If I kissed him — if he kissed me — I think I should die with the beautiful joy of it. I — I love him so."

"I know," said Maggy in a quiet voice. "And because you love him you're going to marry — Denis."

"Yes," whispered Rose.

"So you knew you loved him when you promised Denis?"

"Yes . . . just before."

Maggy gave her a long, long look.

"And you still think it is the right thing to do?"

"Yes. I thought it all out. If I can make Denis

happy and strong and different altogether through being married to me, Lord Caister will be happy too. I feel quite sure he would not have asked or wished me to marry Denis if he had n't thought it would be right."

"I see." Maggy's clasp on Rose's waist tightened. "But, all the same, the world, if it knew, would n't call it right, Rose," she said gently. "If you are married to one man and love another, the world counts it as a sin."

"It would n't be a sin. How can it be a sin to love any one so much that you would give your life to please him? How can it be a sin to love any one, when that love makes you feel good — and happy?"

"Does it?" asked Maggy. Love had not always been like that to her. Rose's love seemed severely simple, a question of Faith.

"Yes, indeed it does. And, after all, what difference is there? I shall be Denis's wife, but Lord Caister will be with us all the time. It — it will be practically the same as though I were married to both of them."

"Oh, you child!" thought Maggy. Aloud she said: "I understand what you mean, Rose, darling, but you must n't let other people know your feelings. The world does n't understand simple, innocent thoughts and single-hearted motives. The men and women in it are hard — and prejudiced. If you've made up your mind that you're doing the right thing, go through with it, but don't look back. And above all, don't give people a chance to think evil of what is simply good. In little things you must hide your private feelings. Denis's photo, for instance, should be in that frame, not his father's. You'll change them, won't you? And

once you are married, even if you are in trouble, never let Denis guess the truth, or it might lead to something tragic. You must realise that, Rose. You're taking a terrible risk, and if — when you're married — you lose your head, you may bring disaster on everybody. I don't want to be a Jeremiah now that you've gone so far, but the least I can do is to warn you."

Rose looked a little frightened. She had seen sacrifice ahead, was ready for it, but the idea of tragedy unnerved her. And Maggy was not given to theatricalism.

"You make me feel afraid," she faltered.

"I did n't mean to do that. You must be very brave. Although you have a great love in your heart, moving you to do a great thing, you don't understand the strength or even the nature of it. When you are a married woman you will. And when you first realise it, the power of that love may sweep you off your feet. That's what I want to warn you against. If you really care for Bob, you won't always feel as you do now — content to have sacrificed yourself for him. There'll be times when your heart fails you, when you will be racked with love, aching for the little tendernesses that are part of it. Now just imagine what would happen to Denis, who will care for you far more deeply later on than he does now, if he were to find out that you love his father. The shock might have a disastrous effect on him. It might wreck him completely. When you are married you must forget your love for his father. It may *seem* right; *I* happen to know it is. But — oh, you don't know! You don't know what it *means*! You must put it behind you — stamp it out, or else — go back on your promise — *now — before it's too late!*"

Rose had grown white. She was trembling, fearful of something she did not understand. But she was not convinced. Her very innocence made her impenetrable to the danger that Maggy saw looming ahead.

"I'll remember what you've told me," she said quietly. "But I'll not back out. I'd rather stamp out my love — if I could — than fail him."

There was only one "him." It did not designate Denis, as Maggy very well knew. A grievous sigh broke from her.

"I want to see you so happy," she said in a troubled voice. "I would like to see you brightening the world for one man — the one you love. I can't think of Denis. I can't care enough about him. It seems such a waste. . . . Love like yours was meant to be crowned, not crucified."

But perhaps, in the zeal of her affection, she had forgotten that love crucified was also crowned, albeit with a crown of thorns!

CHAPTER XXX

DENIS's qualities were not all negative. He had an attractive side to his nature, though it was not often in evidence. He could be extremely likeable when he chose. He chose now, on this his first evening in the country with Rose and his father. He believed that he had effectually cut adrift from the old life, and he meant to make the best of the new one that lay before him. He felt more contented in mind than he had ever done before. In a moderate way he was even happy. It was his honest intention to make other people so: Rose and his father, for instance. He felt quite undeserving of Rose. To-night his admiration and growing affection for her were at their zenith. She looked so utterly sweet — and she was going to belong to him! Already the ring that he and his father had together chosen for her was on her finger, ratifying their bond.

The evening had gone by on wings. Rose seemed very bright and happy. Caister was certainly a little more self-contained than usual, but he looked serene enough. And Mrs. Clarges appeared to be a very good sort. She had at once made friends with Rose, and as chaperon evinced a graciousness that was beyond criticism.

Denis, who had a talent for music of the lighter kind, and a moderately good voice, had played and sung. He had no idea he could have enjoyed himself so innocently for several hours at a stretch. He felt pleased with himself and registered a stern resolve to go to bed without his usual three-finger "night-cap" of whiskey and soda.

After the music, Caister and Mrs. Clarges played picquet. Rose and Denis took themselves off to the picture-gallery.

Denis turned the lights on. The portraits leapt from obscurity.

"We'll have some jolly old dances in here when we're married," he said gaily. "We'll show the ancestors how to jazz, and generally liven 'em up, what? Fearfully boresome time they must have, stuck up on the walls."

"Ah, so you feel as I do, that they're more than just pictures," said Rose.

"Not exactly. I'm not conscious of the spirit of the past broodin' all over the place, if that's what you mean. These old Johnnies and their wives don't inspire me as they do the guv'nor — or you, apparently. I've a more modern way of thinking of them, I suppose. After all, this paint work was only their way of getting photographed, and a blessed extravagant way too. They, themselves, are dead as doornails and probably jolly glad to be tucked up all serene in the family vault. If I had my way I'd sell some of the beggars. We want money badly enough. That Rembrandt, for instance, would about put the family finances on their feet. Ugly customer, I consider him."

"That is Geoffrey, the third baron," said Rose, who had a retentive memory for subjects that interested her. "Your father told me his history. He was a splendid person; a great friend of Sir Walter Raleigh's and like him got into trouble with Queen Elizabeth for saying what he thought was right, and not what she wanted —"

"Yes, I know he was a bit of a firebrand, and a

mule-headed old stick as well. In fact, the Queen was so annoyed with him that in the end she had his head chopped off. Determined old party, Eliza."

"Well, I should be very proud to have some of his noble blood in my veins," said Rose solemnly. "I shall never be tired of hearing about them all. It's like seeing history in pictures. Nearly all of them were so noble and great."

"If I were you, I should n't believe quite everything in the family archives. You know, I don't exactly hold with Shakespeare's idea about the evil that men do living after them, and the good being dug in with their bones. In my opinion it's the other way round. It's human nature to remember the best of a chap when he's gone. For instance, if I were to snuff out, the guv'nor would n't think of my little peccadilloes. He'd only remember what a lot of good points I had that he'd never noticed at the time, and that probably never existed at all. All our unpleasant peculiarities are forgotten or overlooked when we're not here to exhibit 'em. There's a lot in being dead, don't you know!"

He looked at her comically. But Rose was far too seriously inclined, especially with the eyes of a score or more of dead and gone Caisters on her, to see the flippant side of things.

"I expect you feel differently deep down in your heart," she said. "Only you don't like people to know it."

"Something like that," he admitted. "It's a habit of mine to see the funny side of things. When my back is hurting like the very deuce — it does sometimes, you know, on account of a nurse dropping me when I was a kid — I'm quite riotously merry. When I'm

alone I do a bit of swearing, though. Find it a relief, don't you know. I say, Rose," — his tone became confidential, — "do you think we shall get bored stiff down here for months on end? I'm wondering."

"Of course we won't. At least, I shan't. There'll be something to do and see every minute of the day."

Denis's eyebrows went up.

"You don't mean it? How bally interesting! Do tell me. I've been wondering how on earth we're going to put in our time."

"That reminds me," said Rose. "I've got something for you. I'll be back in a minute."

She ran off, and returned a little out of breath, with a brown paper parcel in her hand. The thing within it was ticking.

"What the deuce is it?" he asked. "Sounds like an infernal machine. Hope it won't go off!"

"It's only a clock," said Rose, undoing the wrappings. "A double alarm. You set it to the time you decide to get up, and then it wakes you."

Denis looked at it dubiously.

"It won't bring in my shaving-water too, I suppose? Do you want me to use it?"

"Of course. I thought we'd set it for six."

"For six! Whatever for?"

"It's the time the cows are milked. I'm going to get up and see them. And the air's so lovely then. We could bathe in the lake, and then take the dogs for a run before breakfast. You'll have such an appetite!"

"Oh, well," he said comically, "if all that's part of my cure, I suppose I must go through with it. But I think you might cut out the run and the bathing in the lake. It's so fearfully athletic! I assure you, Rose,

it's bad for my complexion, especially first thing in the morning. I'll have a cold tub, if you merely want to chill my blood."

Rose laughed. "All right. But it won't chill you. It'll make you glow all over."

Denis dropped his bantering tone.

"Something else makes me glow all over," he said. "I have n't kissed you since we first got engaged. I don't want to bother, but won't you?"

Some of the brightness left Rose's face. Denis noticed it. He felt just a little disappointed, but he took her in his arms, held her closely, and kissed her passionately, as a young man kisses. She was so very sweet and fragrant, this baby Rose. Her face felt so soft and smelt so delicate — so different to Vivienne's powdered, saucy little face, and the strongly perfumed creams she used for it. Vivienne went to his head, Rose to his heart.

Insensibly (she did not mean to) she drew back from him. He felt the slight recoil and let her go a little suddenly.

"I say," he said, uncomfortably, "don't you like me to kiss you? I don't want to take advantage, but when a fellow's with a girl he likes, especially the girl he's going to marry, he simply can't help himself. You see, marriage is — or ought to be — all kisses and love. You won't draw back from me always? Say you won't, Rose."

"I did n't mean to draw back then," she said timidly. "I would n't hurt your feelings for anything, Denis. Of course you can kiss me. I — I'm yours."

But Denis did not attempt to kiss her again. He had a certain amount of discretion and no desire to

frighten Rose, as he had done once before. She was a shy little bird. . . .

He said good-night as dispassionately as he was able and assured her gaily that he would be up with the lark in the morning.

She brightened up again. Denis was a dear. Oh, she would try to care for him! She would indeed.

"Good-night, Denis, dear," she said. "To-morrow will be our first day together."

"Rather. And what price the ones that come after? Ripping times we'll have, eh? Mind you keep me up to the mark, Rose. I'm inclined to be a moody beast."

Rose laid a hand on his arm.

"Denis," she said, "don't mind my asking you; I should n't if you had had a mother, but — do you ever say your prayers? I was never taught to properly, myself. I wish I had been. But I know people do — and ought to."

"One of my nurses used to make me say 'em. But my rotten memory for names stood in the way. I could n't help thinking that God would get fearfully annoyed at being bothered to remember every one of my relations and bless 'em in detail. And I was n't allowed to bring in the boot-boy, whom I liked best. But I'm quite willing to say my prayers if you want me to. Plenty of real good chaps do, I know, and are not ashamed of it either. Worst of it is, I have n't the very faintest idea what to say. If I knelt down at the end of my bed I might feel inclined to laugh. Sort of incongruous idea — me, on my knees — a fool — in motley — praying!" he added sheepishly. "Rather reminds me of a pantomime clown making a deathbed repentance. . . . Do you pray?"

"I think I do. In my own way, though. I like to get out into the open, quite by myself; and then something inside me talks to the Something all round me. I'm little and It's big. It's a bigness that is n't frightening. Only comforting. You feel as if God's letting you creep up into his sleeve and nestle there. In Sidey Street I could n't get out of doors like that, but at night I used to lean out of the window and look up into the sky and speak to It. I kept the feeling of bigness and God that way."

"You poetic little soul! You know, I keep on feeling how good you are. Far too good for me. I never guessed before we met that there could be girls like you: really innocent — and good. Good-night, little sweetheart. It's sweet of you to talk to me as you do."

His tender words moved her.

"Oh, Denis," she said suddenly, "I will try and be a good wife to you — later on. I really will!"

Into Denis's face there came a strange expression: the look of one whose eyes search the dimness ahead. A wistful sadness mingled with it.

"I wonder if it will ever come to that," he said thoughtfully. "I can never see open country. I always come a cropper at my hopes . . ." He switched out the lights. "Let's leave the ancestors to darkness and their dreams, shall we?"

Shortly afterwards, when he was in his room, he remembered Rose's counsel. He opened his window wide and leant out, drinking in the freshness of the night air. Everything was very still. Something in Denis stirred, awoke, groped out for Beauty, and found it in the solemn hush. Rose was right. He felt it. Outside the e, everywhere, permeating everything,

there was Something — big, grand, and ineffable — God! In that strangely moving moment the Illimitable laid hold of his soul and stirred in him a desire to worship. . . .

“A poor fool — in motley. O God! Hear him,” he murmured.

CHAPTER XXXI

As Rose took her seat at the breakfast-table one morning about a week later something in the appearance of a letter lying on Mrs. Clarges's plate struck her as vaguely familiar. Curiosity was not one of Rose's failings. She had not purposely looked at the letter. A minute or two elapsed before she knew what it was that had roused her inadvertent interest in it. The postmark, for once very clear, was Polseth.

When she realised that Mrs. Clarges must have a correspondent in the Cornish village she felt disquieted. There was no reason why she should be. She had no desire to hide anything — except herself. Simply she had left Polseth — run away from it was the more correct term — and she did not want Mr. and Mrs. Bree to hear of her whereabouts. They were the sort of people who would not leave her alone. She had a childish and quite unfounded conviction that if they knew where she was they would want her to return to them, want her to wear the hated black frock and minister to the wants of all the little Brees. There was something so stultifying in the idea! After a little thought, she made up her mind to speak to Mrs. Clarges and make a clean breast of the subject that worried her.

Directly after breakfast Denis took her off for a ride. Mrs. Clarges, therefore, had her time and her letter to herself. She was not in a hurry to read it. Mrs. Bree's letters did not interest her in the very least. In fact, she only maintained the correspondence

out of policy. It was her rule to keep in with old friends. On the same principle she believed in making new ones. Rose, for instance. She had quite won Rose's liking. They were already on the best of terms. It would never have occurred to altruistic Rose that her good-will might have a market value.

Mrs. Clarges did not rush at friendships. She was far too diplomatic. She managed to convey the impression that her own regard was not lightly given. She could impose herself in a hundred ways where others less subtle than herself would have made their aims less obscure.

For the present she was mainly content to enjoy the sheer comfort of her position. There was nothing to do all day. It suited her to be a lady of ease. There were no servants to supervise and no house worries. She spent most of her days in the largest and softest chair she could find, embroidering monster cushion covers for the refurbishing of her flat.

Very leisurely she opened her friend's letter, prepared for five minutes of boredom. Instead, the news in it appreciably accelerated the beating of her lethargic heart.

Mrs. Bree's letter was a characteristically rambling and much underlined budget of news.

DEAR ADELAIDE,

It was *so* pleasant to hear from you once more. It reminded me of the happy, happy days so long gone by when we were girls together. Do you remember . . . [There followed two close pages of reminiscences of which Mrs. Clarges had no recollection whatsoever.]

I am *so glad* to hear you have obtained a congenial post. I should write to you more often, dear Adelaide, but we have been very busy in the village, what with our annual

Jumble Sale, and a Bazaar in support of our Church Tower Fund. Then one or two of our parishioners have died, and altogether, what with the Harvest Festival and my Dorcas Society, I am a much occupied woman.

I am also making enquiries in every possible direction to find a young girl who left Polseth somewhat suddenly several months ago. She was adopted by a strange old American man who lived here for years, and who apparently left her *penniless*. In fact, my dear husband and I offered to shelter her *in our own home*. However, she refused our help and ran away to London. And now a *will* has actually been found, and the lawyers have *definitely established* that she is an heiress to an *immense* fortune. There is an income of about ten thousand a year from oil *alone*! We are *sparing no effort* to find her and acquaint her of her *great* good fortune. Acting on my advice the solicitors have not yet advertised for her, for fear of startling her, but are making private enquiries, as yet, alas! with *no* result.

London, of course, is a vast city and seems to have completely swallowed her up. Her name is Rose Eton. I mention it in case, by any chance, through the long arm of coincidence, you may ever run across her. And now, dear Adelaide, I must close, with our kindest thoughts.

Your most affec. *old friend*

MARY BREE

P.S. — You do not mention the name of your charge. I trust she is a nice girl.

The letter dropped into Mrs. Clarges's lap. She positively trembled with excitement.

Rose Eton! There could not be two people with a name like that! An heiress! Ten thousand a year in oil alone! Spontaneously, Mrs. Clarges's thoughts flew to Eveleigh, throwing away his fine profile and presence for a niggardly seven hundred and fifty a year or so! And here was ten thousand a year — going begging! His, perhaps, for the asking! She went hot with hope.

She was fairly certain that Rose was not in love with Denis. There were no outward signs of it, at any rate. Probably Denis's rank was the attraction. There, of course, Mrs. Clarges made an initial blunder and so based her campaign (she *felt* belligerent) on bad strategy. It accordingly appeared to her that, as Rose did not love Denis, she must be fancy-free; in which case she would almost certainly yield to a romantic courtship, vigorously conducted by Eveleigh. Human nature would be on his side: its impulses would outweigh all the advantages of rank.

It was evident that the first thing to be done was to bring Eveleigh on to the scene as quickly as possible. Secondly, to predispose Rose in his favour. That, Mrs. Clarges thought, ought not to be difficult. His photograph — she had brought several excellent examples with her — had never failed to rouse the admiration of the "young thing." And there was the puff theatrical to help — the added advantage of fame. Oh, yes, Mrs. Clarges was practically sure of success. Meanwhile she would carefully keep back the secret of the fortune until Rose was safely pledged to Eveleigh. Then she would be able to pose as the fairy mother-in-law and a double benefactor. The plan was Machiavellian. The lack of principle which it involved simply did not occur to Mrs. Clarges. It looked so feasible and so safe.

But in any case she would have gone through with it. She would have argued, and convinced herself, too, that she would be rendering a service to Rose in putting her in the way of a real romance, with Eveleigh for lover.

She would answer Mrs. Bree's letter in due course,

make no reference to the postscript, and by the time those concerned decided to advertise for Rose, if they ever did, no doubt she would be safely off with the old love and on with the new.

And Rose, as it happened, made matters easier for her. As soon as she came in from her ride she sought her chaperon.

"Please don't think me rude, Mrs. Clarges," she said with her usual candour, so different from the other's circumlocutory methods, "but at breakfast I noticed a postmark on one of your letters, and it has bothered me a little. I was n't looking for postmarks," she explained with a smile. "I simply saw it without knowing what I was doing."

"No apology is necessary, my dear," Mrs. Clarges assured her amiably. "You need n't have troubled to tell me about it. One often notices little things like that without meaning to. Sometimes — quite unintentionally — I've seen a whole hand at bridge. The best thing to do is to put it out of your mind, though, of course, confession is good for some people's souls."

"Yes, but the postmark was Polseth. I lived there for years. I — I wanted to ask you if you have any friends there?"

"The Vicar's wife — Mrs. Bree. Do you know her, too?"

"Oh, yes, quite well. But I left Polseth in a way that offended her, I'm afraid. I don't wish her to know anything about me now. She wanted to befriend me, but in a way I objected to, and I'm afraid she might want to do so again."

Mrs. Clarges's feelings completely coincided with Rose's. She patted her hand soothingly.

"Don't worry any more about it, then, child. I won't even mention your name when I write to her. I don't suppose I should have done so, in any case. We don't correspond very often. I dare say she has forgotten all about you. She seems to be a very busy person nowadays. Did you enjoy your ride?"

The light way in which she dismissed the subject quite relieved Rose's fears.

"Oh, yes, ever so much," she answered. "Denis is teaching me, you know. He says I shall have very good hands in time, and that I sit well. So perhaps I shall be able to hunt next year."

"Ah, next year! You'll be a married woman then, my dear. I wonder . . . !" A well-simulated look of dreamy tenderness came into Mrs. Clarges's face. "But then I have no business to wonder. Still, as I'm a mother, I can't help having motherly feelings towards you, although I never had a daughter." She sighed. "You love your fiancé, don't you, Rose? It — should be so."

She said it in just the right way, delicately, inquisitively.

But Rose, though very much a child, and singularly transparent, remembered Maggy's words of counsel. Besides, she was nothing if not loyal.

"Of course I am very fond of him indeed," she answered, not without a certain dignity.

Mrs. Clarges did not pursue the subject. Indeed, she changed it, and presently, through devious channels, steered the conversation round to Eveleigh. She took Rose into her confidence about him. He was such a splendid fellow. He worked so hard and never took a rest. A week-end in the country occasionally would

be so good for him. She hesitated to ask Lord Caister; but she was so longing to see him, although she had only been out of town ten days.

"I'll ask him for you," said Rose at once. "I'm sure Lord Caister would be quite pleased to invite him down for a few days. It would be another man for Denis to talk to, too. I'll go and ask him now, and you can write to catch this post."

"You dear child!" exclaimed the lady gratefully.

Rose departed on her errand of kindness. Mrs. Clarges looked after her with a faintly quizzical expression.

She felt that her puppets would shortly begin to dance.

CHAPTER XXXII

A SINGULARLY strong perfume came from the region of Denis's breast pocket. He smelt as though the collected essences from an Eastern garden had been upset over him. The scent had its origin in a highly perfumed and fervidly worded letter from Vivienne. She implored him to come and see her. She had no idea his absence would have made such a blank in her life. Surely there could n't be any harm in his being in the same room with her for a few minutes and bestowing a few crumbs of conversation upon her? She had n't anything catching that she was aware of. And she was his always — although he had left her "on the mat" — just the same Viv.

Denis read her letter through twice. It would seem unkind not to answer it. Vivienne, in her way, had been very good to him, or so he thought. He would write her a few lines in a day or two to cheer the poor little thing up. So she missed him. It was rather nice to be missed. And from her he had n't expected constancy of any kind.

The letter and its aroma aroused in him a sudden nostalgia for town and a glimpse of the life he had left. He was not conscious of any overwhelming desire to see Vivienne herself. In dwelling on the thought of a day in London he almost left her out of consideration. It did not strike him that her letter had inspired the longing for it. He thought of Bond Street. Perhaps because he wanted some new ties. He conjured up a mental vision of Regent Street and Piccadilly. He

almost smelt London — the London of expensive shops, fashionable rendezvous, and perfumed women. That scented letter-paper of Vivienne's was at the bottom of all these mind-pictures. They disturbed him, made him restless. And the weather, as it happened, put "the lid on it." It had been raining steadily for three days. Denis disliked walking in mud or rain. He had done both and contracted a cold which devitalized him and lowered his spirits.

For the first time since he had come down to Purton, boredom closed in on him, a black mood which refused to be shaken off. He did not regret any of his good resolves, but to-day and the day before had seemed singularly purposeless. Hang it all, he wanted a change. No harm in that. He'd run up to town just for the day. The little excursion would buck him up. After all, a fellow could n't do without neckties and a hair-cut when he needed them. This confinement to the country in wet weather was sheer burial.

He was musing thus morosely when Rose, mackintoshed and goloshed, came to ask him to join her and the dogs in their morning walk.

"I think my cold's too bad for messing about in the mud," he answered, a shade querulously. "You go. I've got a rotten mood on. I feel like Saul when he threw things at David."

Rose's face clouded. She lingered. The patchouli-like odour that Vivienne's letter diffused was very noticeable.

"How funny you smell, Denis," she said. "Is it some scent you're using for a headache?"

"Scent? Oh, it must come from a letter in my pocket, I expect. It is a bit Rimmelesque. I was going to answer it and throw it away."

"Well, do one or the other," smiled Rose. "Is it from that girl — Vivienne?"

"M'm. I did n't write to *her*, though. Honestly, I did n't. You believe me, don't you? She was feeling blue, I suppose, and wanted to see me. Anyway, I'm writing to tell her there's nothing doing. That's all off, as I told you. Tell you what, you go and take the dogs out and I'll get this letter off my chest, and when you come back, if it's still raining, I'll give you a billiard lesson."

Rose departed. In less than an hour she was back again. It was still raining. Denis had written his letter. It lay on the table, stamped and addressed. He had also changed his clothes in the interval. He wore garments of town-like cut and glorious boots — town boots.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry," he began as soon as she came in sight; "but I've simply got a feeling that I must see town or die. I want some ties and a hair-cut. I want to smell Piccadilly. I want to eat amongst a lot of people in any old place where there's a band. I'm going to catch the ten-twenty and I'll be back in time for dinner. I can't find the *guv'nor*, so when you see him will you tell him that I've just run up to do some shopping?"

Rose said nothing for a minute. He had surprised her so. She had no idea of the feelings that had been stirring him so troublously, but she felt a vague sense of failure.

"Oh, Denis!" she exclaimed. "Must you? Shall I come, too?"

"There would n't be time. Besides, you don't want to come, I know. I'm only goin' to buy a few things and look up a pal or two at my club."

"That girl — Vivienne . . ." said Rose. "Are you going to meet her?"

"No. There's my letter on the table telling her so."

"You promise?"

"That I shan't see her? Oh, yes," he answered easily.

Rose hesitated.

"Don't be cross because I asked you that, Denis," she said gently. "Only you know she's — not good for you. That's why I don't want you to see her. I'm not jealous."

"I know you're not. I wish you were. It would be a sign —"

He stopped. He was going to say, "It would be a sign that you loved me," but thought better of it.

"Well, be a sensible little pal," he continued. "To tell you the truth, I feel rather rotten. It's this cold, I suppose. If I don't do something by way of a change I shall get a fit of the blues. So I'm taking myself in time. You might let the gov'nor know that I'm not goin' to do anything startling in town. And I'll be back to dinner. I shall. Fact."

He meant it. As soon as he found himself in the train his spirits went up with a bound. In town it did n't matter if it was raining. You hopped from one taxi to another. There was always something to do, something to see. In town when you got tired of yourself, you could always see other people. The country was all very well, but . . . Next time he was depressed he'd run up for socks . . . or to see his tailor. Sort of an antidote to the rural life. . . .

He spent a glad hour amongst glad ties of every hue and design, purchasing a varied selection. Now

that he was drinking so little "coloured water," he hankered for more colour in his ties. He could even tolerate spots and wriggly lines — dazzle ties.

At half-past one, as he was coming out of a jeweller's with a present for Rose swinging on his forefinger, he ran into Vivienne.

"Denny!" she cried ecstatically; and then, "Have you come up in answer to my letter, you darling thing? How well you're looking! I've been simply *pinning!*"

She was dressed in a more subdued way — in a magpie frock of black and white which, she explained, was mourning for her sins — and for Denis. It was *chic* and it suited her. She was the light side of London, the essence of it. She was Viv — jolly little Viv.

Denis coloured.

"I wrote you a few lines before I left," he floundered. "I — I only ran up for an hour or two to get some things I wanted."

"But of course you were coming to see me. Have you had lunch? Neither have I." She gave him an alluring look. "Oh, Denny! Is n't this just like a bit out of the dear old past?"

Denis found himself being piloted, or piloting her — he was not quite sure which — through the vestibule of a well-known restaurant where they had merrily lunched and dined and supped together on many previous occasions.

Time sped. Vivienne was at her best, which meant her gladdest and her maddest. She was wild and witty — a witch. She wanted Denis again. She wanted him badly. She had several hours in which to work her spells.

She leant across the table and smiled at him in the old inimitable way. There were lights in her tawny eyes that flickered and danced and called, and queer lights too that matched them in the "coloured water" which sparkled in the wineglass she held up.

"My love to you, Denny," she cooed.

And Denis, faltering, clinked his glass against hers.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ROSE did not see Caister that day until just before dinner. He had gone into Purton and remained there on business connected with the estate. When he came in, he found her alone in the drawing-room a few minutes before dinner was announced.

"Where is Mrs. Clarges?" he asked.

Mrs. Clarges had succumbed to a bad headache, the result probably of too much good living and too little exercise. Rose had been sitting with her most of the afternoon, and now made excuses for her absence.

"I'm sorry to hear she's not well," he said. "Please tell her so when you see her. And Denis? What have you done with him?" he asked playfully.

"Denis went up to London by the ten-twenty this morning. He was n't feeling very bright. He said the rain depressed him and he wanted to buy some neckties. He told me to tell you he would be back to dinner for certain."

Caister glanced at the clock. It was eight.

"Well, we won't wait for him," he said. "The train may be late; or he's changed his mind and is coming by the last one."

He gave her his arm and they went in to dinner. Rose was at first a little distraught, but under his easy, interesting flow of talk she soon brightened up. He thought she was anxious on Denis's account, and did his best to make light of his defection. He found it no great effort. There was a sympathy between him-

self and Rose that made their society all-sufficing. Both soon forgot all about Mrs. Clarges and Denis. To be together and alone gave them a great though unconscious satisfaction.

After dinner they went up and sat in the picture-gallery. Denis and Rose usually repaired there of an evening, too. Caister wondered what they found to talk about, whether Rose was happy in Denis's society; whether she was beginning to care for him. There and elsewhere, he supposed Denis sometimes made love to her. He dared not let his mind dwell on that contingency. . . .

"I'm afraid I make a poor substitute for Denis," he said with humility, when they were among the pictures. "You're great friends now, are n't you?"

"Yes," she replied, and then qualified the assertion with a candour that startled him. "But I like being with you best. Denis is jolly and amusing as a rule; but in here I never want to joke. I feel rather solemn. I dare say it's because I have n't any people of my own — any links with the past — that all these portraits and belongings impress me so. Denis does n't feel like that. He says he'd like to sell some of them."

Caister frowned. He had heard Denis voice the same desire when he was in want of money.

"He must never do that," he said decisively. "You must never permit it, Rose. It may rest with you one day."

"How?"

"When I am dead, and Denis is without a restraining hand. He might not respect the entail."

Rose turned a dismayed face on him.

"I could n't live here if you were dead," she said intensely. "It would be terrible! Don't talk about it, please."

"If that inevitable prospect distresses you," he said with a smile, "we'll talk of something else. Would you like to hear a little more family history?"

She assented eagerly. She was never tired of hearing of the exploits of his predecessors. Denis could seldom be persuaded to impart what he knew of them, except in a spirit of levity.

So Caister took her round the gallery, pausing before those pictures in which she evinced most interest. One of the first of these was a full-length portrait of a man in a damascened breastplate of the sixteenth century. Except for the armour it might have been a portrait of Caister himself, so closely did he resemble the figure whose eyes with a remote and steady gaze seemed fixed on them.

"Tell me all about that one, please," she said. "I wonder if he was like you in his ways as well as in appearance."

"That is Sir Everard Mallory, who became the first baron. He fought in nearly all the wars of his time. But he was a peaceable man for all that. It was he who rebuilt this house, which had been destroyed in the Wars of the Roses. He was also a poet of considerable ability. That is his wife, Philippa, also painted by Holbein at the time of their marriage."

He drew her attention to the picture of a very beautiful girl, and as he did so, a look of stupefaction came into his face. There was nothing very remarkable in the fact that there should be a family likeness between himself and Sir Everard, but it was astounding that

Rose should so resemble his wife, Philippa. There was the same vivid colouring, the same low white forehead and pencilled brows, the pure oval face, and, strangest of all, a similarly elusive charm of expression. Rose was quite unaware of all this.

"She looks sweet, but very young," she murmured.

"She was your age."

"And he?"

"I think he was a little older than myself."

Rose continued to look at the portraits.

"I expect she was very happy," she mused. "She looks happy in the picture. It must have been wonderful to be married to a man who was — an ideal knight. How long did they live?"

"Long enough to see all their children grow up, and to die when they were full of years, within a day or two of each other. Their married life seems to have been uneventful, but happy. Theirs was a love-match. There is an effigy of them, lying side by side, in the chapel. I must show it you. And now, as we're delving into history, would you like to see some antique garments? They're rather quaint."

He led the way into a small tiring-room at the end of the gallery. In it were two large carved chests. He unlocked one of them and lifted the heavy lid. The contents gave off a pleasant old-world aroma mingled with the fragrance of some modern preservative. One by one they examined dresses of faded splendour, begemmed stomachers, skirts of stiff and wonderful brocade, embroidered waistcoats, ruffs, knee-breeches, old lace. Woman-like, Rose was entranced with them.

"Oh, is n't this just perfect!" she exclaimed. She held out a regal gown of stiff gold brocade, low-cut,

patterned with seed pearls. Then she measured it against herself.

"I could put it on over my frock. May I?" she asked. "Just to see."

He smiled and nodded.

She slipped the gown over her head. Magnificent though it was, it fastened easily.

Rose gave a rippling laugh and swept him a deep curtsy.

"What do I look like?" she asked. "There is n't a glass to see myself in. . . . Why . . . are you cross with me? . . . How strange you look!"

He was not cross, only dumbfounded. He took her arm and led her back to the portrait of the first baron's girl-wife.

"You are the very double of her!" he exclaimed, and his voice throbbed with the admiration and passion he could not keep out of it. His eyes, full on hers, spoke an infinite love. "Philippa!"

At the name Rose gave a cry — a low, glad cry. The spell of the past was upon her. The dress, the pictures, the quietude of the house and this sanctified spot — but, more than all, juxtaposition with the being whom she most revered and adored, took her out of herself.

So they gazed at each other, entranced, yearning, impelled, spiritually one, as in the dusky pathway of a dream. . . .

The muffled clatter of a train in the distance brought them back to the present, to the age in which they lived and were not to love. The past receded. The flood-tide of inclination ebbed back within its enforced boundaries. The spell was broken.

"Denis's train!" said Rose. "He will soon be here now. The car went to meet him, did n't it?"

With trembling fingers she unlaced the bewitched frock and stood there once more, not Philippa of the sixteenth century, but a slim young modern in a dainty dinner-dress, engaged to the son of the house.

Tears shone in her eyes. She dashed them away and held out her hand. Caister took it, pressed it, but did not speak. They descended to the hall and sat there listening for the throb of the returning car. A ten minutes' silence was broken by the entrance of a footman.

"The car has come back from the station, my lord," he said. "Mr. Mallory has not arrived. Guest wishes to know if he is to meet the first train in the morning."

"I think not. Mr. Mallory will probably wire when we are to expect him."

Then he followed Rose into the drawing-room. They had only one thought in their minds — Denis . . . Denis who had failed them.

CHAPTER XXXIV

CAISTER had at once acceded to Rose's request for an invitation to Eveleigh Clarges. And now his mother awaited his train in a state of mind bordering on excitement. As soon as he stepped onto the platform she kissed him effusively and led him to the landaulette that had brought her to the station. With thankfulness she noted that association with the stage had not spoilt him either in manner or mode of dress. He was a gentleman by birth and he looked it.

"Now listen to me carefully, Eveleigh," she began directly they were in motion. "As it happens, you've arrived in the nick of time. Nothing could have worked out better. Mr. Mallory is away in town. You'll have Miss Eton to yourself. You must make love to her without delay. And you must win her."

Eveleigh's eyebrows went up in surprise. He showed dismay.

"My dear mother!" he exclaimed. "What do you mean? I thought you'd asked me down here for a rest!"

"That's what I said, of course. But in a previous letter I told you all about this girl's fortune. Don't be obtuse. Naturally I planned for you to be here on her account."

"Yes, but you gave me to understand that she's engaged to the son —"

"What has that to do with it?" she interrupted tartly. "It's each for himself in this world and devil take the hindmost. If Mr. Mallory likes to neglect his fiancée you'd be a fool not to take advantage of it."

I've told you what I think and believe: she is n't a bit in love with him. Nor is he with her, or he would n't go off, as he has, on the pretence of wanting to buy neckties and socks, and fail to come back as he promised. I have n't lived in the house a fortnight for nothing. I've discovered that he's a dissipated young rascal, always in trouble about money and women. Servants will talk, you know. Anyhow, it's perfectly plain sailing for you. You've simply got to go in and win. Make the most of every opportunity that comes your way. You'll have Rose practically to yourself. And that reminds me. Be sure you don't refer to her inheritance, even indirectly. She has n't an idea of it herself."

Eveleigh's expression remained doubtful.

"Do you like these people?" he asked. "They seem to be treating you pretty decently."

"They do, my dear. Lord Caister is a charming man. The son is colourless, but Rose is lovely — and lovable. They are all exceedingly nice to me. I am glad to say they like me, and I like them."

"Have n't you a rather queer way of showing it, mother? I think you're asking me to play it rather low-down. You say they're decent people. Apparently they trust you. They've even asked me down here to please you, and all the return you make is to — to want to get the better of them. I don't like it. It's not playing the game."

"Oh, bother the game. This is n't a game, Eveleigh. It's life. And if you're going to choose the long uphill road instead of the short cuts and crooked paths that other people all take when they get the chance, you'll find yourself left at the post. I'm a woman of the world

and I know what I'm talking about. You ought to be thankful to me. I'm introducing you to an absolutely sweet girl with pots of money. What more can a mother do?" She put her hand on his. "Now, Eveleigh, do be sensible. It's time you married."

Eveleigh sighed. It was no good arguing with her. He had no matrimonial inclinations whatever. Such as it was, he took his art very seriously. He had n't a wide outlook on life. People outside his world — the cinema world — did not interest him. Love outside his world — the world of make-believe — allured him not at all. What affections he had were divided between his mother and his profession. The latter absorbed his thoughts. If he read a book or a story, it was in the hope that it would dramatise effectively for the screen; when he studied events or people, it was entirely from the same standpoint. A personality that had no moving-picture characteristics wearied him. It was useless to explain all this to his mother. She could not or would not understand it.

To get him in the right mood again Mrs. Clarges simulated an interest in his doings, the particular plays in which he was acting, and other purely theatrical subjects which bored her exceedingly. In some ways she was old-fashioned. She had never been to a cinema show in her life, not even to see Eveleigh. She judged from posters and playbills that the "movies" were vulgar and melodramatic. She could appreciate a drawing-room drama, but the unrestraint of theatrical emotion, direct or pictured, made her feel uncomfortable. That melodrama is frequently more virile, if less artistic, than other and higher forms of scenic entertainment did not affect this fastidiousness. She hated

being thrilled. Thrills were vulgar. In her heart she loathed the profession Eveleigh had adopted. She did not talk about it, never alluded to his histrionic attainments. She saw little difference between acting and playing the fool. She was very material. She had a hundred reasons for wanting him to marry Rose. The money would at least ensure his abandoning this so-called profession of his.

Both Rose and Caister welcomed Eveleigh's visit. They were mentally unstrung. Denis had now been away three days. He had neither wired nor written. Pending his return there was nothing to be said or done. In fact, they avoided talking about him. Caister feared to pain Rose; and Rose was dreadfully afraid she had failed to hold Denis's affection. They pretended that nothing very much was the matter. Denis would in due course explain the reason of his absence.

Much to Mrs. Clarges's satisfaction Caister, in avoiding temptation, left Rose to Eveleigh and herself. He did not purposely avoid the young fellow. He liked him well enough and felt he could trust him with Rose better than he could trust himself.

Rose on her side turned to Eveleigh with a certain relief. He was an easy companion. He gave her a lot of interesting information about the conditions of his professional life and the people with whom he consorted in it. He sketched the adventurous and romantic side of it. It appealed to her. She asked questions, and he, ever ready to discuss his pet subject, talked to her untiringly.

"Do you know, I believe I should love to act," she exclaimed at last. "Not on a stage to a large audience, but as you do, to a camera. Somehow I think I could."

"I think so too," he said.

He had been watching her expressive face while he talked. He was nearly sure that it could with a little practice be made to depict the varied emotions which an actress should be able to call upon at will. Her eyes spoke her thoughts. She possessed all the advantages of beauty and the qualities of mind that go to the making of a dramatic success.

This impression increased. By the following day he was quite sure of it. He was consumed with desire to see her give her talents expression. They were in a secluded corner of the grounds. He suggested a trial, and to his delight found her shy but willing.

On the spur of the moment his mind could only seize on the line of "business" most affected by himself — a love scene. His seriousness and the real zest he showed were communicated to Rose. She only saw the artificial side of the proposal.

"Try and imagine this situation," he began. "The man you love is going to fight a duel. You are watching it from a distance. You want to prevent the encounter, but are unable. In your face one sees anxiety, suspense, excitement, terror; last of all, when the danger is past, relief and joy. Try that."

Rose tried. She found it amazingly easy. Latent within her there were gifts of a highly dramatic order. Eveleigh was delighted.

"You're splendid!" he cried. "You're that one being in a million — a natural actress, Miss Eton. We'll have another try. The duel is over, but I'm wounded. Come and meet me. We embrace. You lead me to a seat, and then you kneel down and bind up my wounds. . . ."

They became absorbed in their make-believe, like

children at play. Eveleigh went through his repertoire with her, here and there picking out a favourite scene and playing it with her.

Mrs. Clarges, who had marked their departure together from the house, and had given them the best part of the morning to themselves, was beginning to be convinced that her scheme was in a fair way of accomplishment. Hope and anxiety sent her out to discover whether this were so or not. Eventually locating them she witnessed, herself unseen, the last and most moving of the situations that they were rehearsing. She took it for reality and smiled to herself, well pleased. For the first time in his life Eveleigh was not letting the grass grow under his feet.

She noted the progress of their friendship during the evening, and late that night, when Rose had gone to bed, she followed Eveleigh to his bedroom.

"Have you everything you want, dear?" she enquired soulfully. "I hope you'll sleep well. I'm so pleased you are getting on so well with Rose. By tomorrow you might almost clinch matters. Arrange a correspondence. A love-letter or two from her to yourself would make things safe. Girls expect that sort of thing. . . . Of course I'm hoping you'll be asked to stay over Monday."

"I can't possibly do that. We're filming 'Roma — a Gipsy,' our new production. I must be at the studios early."

Deep displeasure showed in Mrs. Clarges's face.

"Good Heavens, Eveleigh, have a little sense of proportion! In a few weeks your acting won't signify anything. You'll have dropped all that."

"I don't follow you."

"Oh, yes, you do. You won't act when you're married, because there won't be any need to work."

"But I told you what I thought of that scheme yesterday morning."

"I know, but you've altered your mind since then. You've fallen in love with Rose already. I don't wonder at it."

"But I'm not in love with her," he protested. "I've explained to you so often that I never feel like making love off the stage. In fact, I don't believe I could if I tried. I certainly have no inclinations that way."

"You're talking rubbish. Why, I saw you in the garden with my own eyes making love to her like — like anything!"

"Oh, *then!*" he scoffed. "We were only acting. I've made a discovery about her. She's naturally and wonderfully talented. She'd absolutely make her fortune on the stage."

Mrs. Clarges, enraged, stamped her foot.

"But she's *got* a fortune! She does n't need to *make* one. That's what *you've* got to do. Don't be an idiot, Eveleigh. You *must* be attracted by her. Why, I saw for myself: you could hardly take your eyes off her. You must admit she's perfectly beautiful."

"She's more than that," he admitted dispassionately. "She has the most wonderful face for the movies I've ever come across in my life. It absolutely speaks!"

"It's you — *you*, I tell you, who've got to do the speaking!" Mrs. Clarges insisted irately.

She could hardly resist shaking him.

CHAPTER XXXV

ON Monday afternoon Denis turned up. He walked from the station and at once went to look for Rose. He found her brushing one of the dogs in the stable-yard. Seeing him, she smiled a welcome. The smile was as a knife in the boy's heart. He felt such a traitor. Anybody but Rose would have met him with an offended air, treated him with suspicion and contempt.

"I've come back," he said lamely. "I'm — I really did n't mean to stay away so long. I would have wired, but every day something cropped up to stop me. I'm beastly sorry."

"It does n't matter," she said. "Of course we were worried. But you're here now, so everything's all right."

"Mean to say you don't want a lot of explanations?" he demanded in wonder. "Are n't you angry with me?"

She went on with her brushing.

"No, not angry. Only a little disappointed. Everything was going so well until the bad weather came and upset you. Of course I think it's a pity you did n't battle against the restless feeling. But you'll try and settle down now, won't you, Denis?"

He wondered at her calmness.

"Will you be the same to me?" he asked with some hesitation.

"Of course."

A queer muscular contraction took place in his throat.

"I want you to be the same," he supplicated. "I

want to spend the whole of the rest of to-day with you — every hour of it. I'm sick, Rose — sick to death of myself!"

Rose stood up and put her arm through his.

"Come along; we'll take the dogs for their run and go and see Lady Chalfont. She'll cheer you up."

"I don't want to see any one. Let me just stay here with you."

For the remainder of the day he hardly let her out of his sight. At such times as she had to leave him he showed all the disquiet of a lost dog, but none of a dog's exuberance at reunion with his mistress.

While he was dressing for dinner his father came into his room.

"Glad you've come back, Denis," he said. "We missed you."

He looked hard at the boy. Denis, a little whiter of face than usual, was fastening his tie.

"Thanks, father," he answered. "I'm sorry I went. I shan't repeat the offence."

Caister lingered. "Is there anything you want to get off your mind?" he asked. "I won't be hard on you, Denis. . . . Don't hesitate to make a confidant of me if it will do any good."

Denis turned from the glass. He had succeeded in tying the bow.

"I'm all right, sir," he replied reticently.

"You've seen Rose, of course."

"Yes. I've been with her all the time."

Caister's hand went to Denis's shoulder.

"You're glad to be back?" he enquired affectionately.

Denis gave a short laugh. "My God! yes. I did n't

know how glad until Rose smiled up into my face and gave me her hand."

At dinner he was abstemious, and only drank water. Afterwards a merry fit took possession of him. He played and sang with surprising *verve*. Mrs. Clarges could not make him out. Her opinion of him underwent a change. This evening he was almost brilliant; a more serious rival to Eveleigh than she had thought possible.

Generally it was Denis who suggested the after-dinner adjournment to the picture-gallery with Rose. To-night he made no attempt to do so.

Bedtime came. Rose went to her room with a strange feeling in her heart. Denis's liveliness had not deceived her. At the back of his eyes there was the look of one who sees ghosts. She sensed that, all the time, he had been acting. Intuition told her that something weighed on his mind. He had said he was sick. She had not forgotten his expression — sick to death of himself! It stuck in her memory.

She sat before the fire in a dressing-gown trying to read, but she could not concentrate her thoughts on her book. She heard the stable clock and the house clocks strike midnight. All her senses were on the stretch. She was constrained to listen . . . to listen — for sounds.

And by and by she heard them — the stealthy opening and shutting of a door. Some one in slippared feet passed down the passage. A stair creaked. She rose, standing irresolute. The next minute her door was open and she was flying down the stairs. *Denis was going to do something desperate!* A message — a thought-wave — had come to her. She understood the meaning of her uneasiness. Denis's terrible resolution had been loom-

ing over her. Now it was clear, as clear as though he had actually told her what he intended doing.

"*Sick to death of myself!*" . . . The ominous words would recur.

With her heart beating wildly, she ran barefoot down to the hall, into the library. He was not there, but one of the library windows was open. He must have gone into the garden.

She could not see ahead of her. The night was pitch-black. She stepped over the low sill and ran, letting instinct guide her.

"Denis!" she called. "Denis! Where are you?"

She had the impression that he was hiding from her. She was so sure of it that, a moment or two later, when she collided with him in the darkness, she did so with a feeling of relief. She caught at him to save herself from falling. The force of the sudden impact made him lose his balance. Something dropped from his hand.

"Look out!" he said, breathing hard, and began groping in the grass. But Rose was groping too. She was quicker than he, or perhaps prescience guided her. Her fingers closed on something hard and cold and steely. A chill colder than steel struck at her heart. She knew what it was that she held in her hand, and with a rapid movement put it behind her back.

"Denis! What are you doing?" she demanded fearfully.

Denis went on searching in the grass.

"Nothing," he muttered. "I — I could n't sleep so I came out here for a breath of fresh air."

"I could n't sleep either. I heard you pass my door. Come in with me now, Denis," she entreated, and took his arm.

"Hold hard a minute. I've dropped my cigarette case."

"I've got it . . . *but it is n't a cigarette case.* Take care. It's in my hand."

"Give it back to me."

"Not to-night. It's — it's safer with me."

Denis was wrought up, but he had enough presence of mind to refrain from using force.

"Look here, the thing's loaded," he said. "You don't understand firearms. It might go off and hurt you."

"I'd rather it hurt me than you. You were going to kill yourself. If it went off now and hurt me, it would only be — an accident."

"I'll give you my word not to use it if you'll hand it over."

She was firm and outwardly cool.

"I can't take your word just now. You don't know what you're doing."

"I know what I meant to do. What good do you think you've done, following me like this? It's entirely my own affair. My life's no use to any one. I want to get out of it."

"Your life means much to others. You don't belong to yourself. What about your father and me? Do you think we should n't care? You're mad, Denis. . . . *Oh, my poor Denis!*"

At the words all his courage — a forced courage — failed him. Quite suddenly he knelt down in the grass and sobbed at her feet. And little by little, in broken sentences, she got his story from him. It was bitter hearing. There was the inevitable reference to Vivienne running through it like an insidious poison, together with the gambling fever that had held him as a thing

possessed for three nights. He had lost, of course. He always lost. He had gone on losing his money and then his head. He had n't an earthly chance of paying his debts, and he could not, would not, face his father. This was the last straw!

"I know he'd see me through it, somehow," he groaned. "But it would be the end of everything between us. He'd never overlook it. He could n't. I'm down and out."

"You're not! You shan't be!" she cried. "What does money count against a precious life? Besides, he need n't know, Denis. Listen to me. I can help you! How much is it?"

"Five thousand pounds!" His tone was not deliberately derisive. "How much is your fortune, darling? Five hundred shillings?"

"A lot more than that."

Her disengaged hand went to her throat. Something warm was thrust into Denis's hand. It felt like beads.

"Take these," Rose was saying. "They're worth a lot of money. I know some one in London who will give you ten thousand pounds for them. You've only to go to him with a letter from me. You must!"

"Ten thousand pounds!" babbled Denis. "M-moon-shine!"

She responded with a laugh that verged on the hysterical. She wanted to cry, not laugh.

"It's not. There is n't a moon to-night," she said with a poor assumption of mirth. "I've given you my necklace, Denis — the one I always wear. They're pearls — real ones!"

He fingered them, disbelieving, amazed, dubious, then staggered to his feet.

"But if they are," he stammered, "I can't take them. I could n't pay you back. Besides, what would my father say?"

"He need not know. It would be our secret. If I were your wife you would come to me if you were in trouble, would n't you? I should want you to, or else I should be a poor sort of partner. Oh, Denis, I'm so shiveringly cold. I — I forgot to put any shoes on."

Instantly Denis was abject.

"What an egotistical brute I am!" he cried contritely. "Letting you catch your own death of cold trying to save a life that's not of as much importance as a dog's! Come in at once."

"I'll keep this, please," she said, holding out the revolver. "Take out the cartridges and throw them away. I'll hold it while you do it."

Denis obeyed. His will power had all vanished. They crept indoors, upstairs, feeling their way. At her bedroom door Rose paused.

"Good-night, Denis, dear," she whispered. "I can trust you now. . . . It's a pitch-black night, but — there is a God!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

It was Miss Hobbs who first came across the advertisement and brought it to Mr. Louie's attention.

"Look!" she said.

His eyes followed her finger, pointing out a few lines of print in the "agony" column of the "Times." A replica of it might have been found in every other daily paper in England that morning.

MISSING from POLSETH, near Truro, Cornwall, since June last, a young woman of prepossessing appearance known as MISS ROSE ETON. Age eighteen, looks younger; height medium, slim build, curly dark chestnut hair, dark blue eyes, very regular features, clear complexion. Is believed to have gone to London. Any one giving reliable information concerning the present whereabouts of the above mentioned will be liberally rewarded by Messrs. Andrews and Andrews, Solicitors, London Wall, E.C., or by Messrs. Tredgold and Evans, High Street, Truro.

"Whatever can it mean?" she asked. "Ought we to do anything? I don't mean for the reward, but for Rose's sake. It looks as if it might be something to her advantage."

"It does n't say so," pondered Mr. Louie.

That nothing of the kind was specified was due to Mrs. Bree's advice to Mr. Tredgold.

"I think," he said, "it ought to be sent to her. She'll probably see it, in any case. As the advertisement concerns her she would no doubt prefer to communicate with these people direct. You might cut it out and post it to her."

Miss Hobbs hesitated.

"Would n't you rather write a line yourself?" she hazarded.

"I don't think it's necessary. It will be just the same if you do it. But first, if you're ready, we'll get through those letters I dictated last night. I'd like you to type them now."

"I have them here."

From her desk Miss Hobbs took some loose typed sheets that awaited his signature and placed them before him.

"I knew you wanted them got off early," she explained, "so I did them right away."

In so many ways like this she had proved herself an invaluable secretary. She never forgot anything; she anticipated most of his wants; wherever she could she thought for him, saved him trouble. And because her duties were a labour of love she hardly ever made mistakes. Mr. Louie had found her much more than a proficient amanuensis; she was a coadjutor, a collaborator. While he signed the letters he said something to this effect.

In gratification that was too deep for words, Miss Hobbs placed the letters in their envelopes, fastened them, and rang for the messenger boy to take them to the post. Then she cut out the advertisement to send to Rose.

Mr. Louie watched her approvingly. The sunlight that streamed in through the window made her hair shine like burnished gold. It really was beautiful. He had by now even got to admire her copious figure. It was an emblem of abundance, matronly, cornucopian. It suggested the married woman, the mother. He recalled the picture of her seen in the gaslight at her

open window. . . . Yes, he could imagine Miss Hobbs a mother with a child in her arms.

Their friendship had grown apace in the last month. The daily intimacy had fostered it. In addition, Miss Hobbs and her little sister had twice been to Richmond to visit his mother.

"Just wait a minute," he said as she dipped her pen in the ink. "I want to speak to you about something. My mind has been very much occupied lately concerning you. I think I ought to tell you and — and to know how we stand."

Miss Hobbs wondered what was coming. For a moment the devastating thought occurred to her that he meant to dispense with her services as his secretary. And yet a minute ago he had expressed himself so well pleased with her.

"If — if there's anything I have n't done — any fault — you know I'll try to improve," she faltered.

"Of course," pursued Mr. Louie, following his own line of thought, "I should miss you — all day. I should never get any one to replace you here. But, on the other hand, I want to offer you — another position, if you'll take it."

The look of foreboding in Miss Hobbs's face became intensified.

"If I satisfy you," she murmured, "I'd rather stay — even if it meant a bigger salary in another department. I — I like working here with you."

"It's not a question of salary . . . nor exactly one of work either. . . . I want you — at home."

Miss Hobbs was not at all sure what he meant.

"As — as companion to Mrs. Louie?" she got out. "Last Sunday she was saying how nice it would be if

she had some one like me to talk to. Of course I never gave it a serious thought —"

"Not exactly as a companion, either, though if you approved, my mother would like to stay with us. . . . I — I'm afraid I'm not making myself quite clear."

"No," replied Miss Hobbs mechanically and fearfully. Mr. Louie gulped.

"I'm asking you to marry me."

The office seemed to get up and dance round Miss Hobbs. In her amazement and joy she nearly screamed.

"Me — marry you? Oh . . . I could n't!" she cried, and covered her face with her hands.

Mr. Louie got up and removed them. He held them instead, very firmly.

"Why not?" he asked tremulously. "Don't you understand? I do believe you're so modest that you've never imagined it possible that I might care for you." Miss Hobbs gave a gasp. "And that's just what *has* happened. It's true — I'm not going to deny it — I did care for Miss Eton. But that's past. In a way I care for her still. But she is a child and you are a woman. I feel differently about *you*. It is n't necessary to explain what the difference is. Still, I want you to believe that I'm not offering you any second-best love. If it were that I should n't speak to you at all, because a second-best would n't be worthy of you. I care for you as a man should care for the woman he is going to marry. But if it's not in your heart to give me love in return —"

"Don't!" Miss Hobbs's voice trembled more than Mr. Louie's. "Can't you see? Oh, it's in my heart to give you worship. It's been that — all along. Just to be in here working with you, breathing the same air as

you do, has been like fairyland! Right from the first day you engaged me I've loved you. I've loved you so much that I wanted Rose to marry you because *you* wanted her. And now to think that I'm going to be your wife! To think I shall be able to do things for you to make a pudding with my own hands that you'll eat, to warm your slippers at night — all the little things of love." She raised her shining eyes to his — in them the light that never was on sea or land.

Mr. Louie kissed her homely, happy face.

"Bless you, Fanny," he said indistinctly. "Love me as much as you can find it in your heart to do. I'll try and be worthy of it. But remember this — the very best of us — I'm speaking of men, dear — is n't worthy to tie the shoestring of a good woman like yourself. Give me everything but worship. Keep that for the — the little ones."

The blush that came into Miss Hobbs's face stirred Mr. Louie to his depths. He knew Rose would not have blushed like that. But Miss Hobbs was not young. She was over thirty: nevertheless her mature maidenly reserve broke down now.

"I can't help feeling humble," she said. "I'd made up my mind to what I thought my life was going to be — to lovelessness and childlessness. When I was starving I could take a dip into a book — a love-story — or watch lovers in the street. But now it's come to me myself! I'll know what it is to be a woman and not a sad old maid. I'm not going to be left in the cold any more. I can warm my hands at my own fireside. . . . There, now! I'll write to Rose. . . ."

She picked up her pen again. And there was glory in her heart.

CHAPTER XXXVII

AN elderly gentleman of prosperous and businesslike aspect was enquiring for Miss Rose or Mr. Mallory. Rose and Denis were out for the day motoring with the Chalfonts. The caller's card was sent in to Caister.

MR. HORACE BRITTON

Messrs. Stark & Bowden,
Jewellers & Valuers of Precious Stones,
Bond Street, W.

It conveyed nothing. A little puzzled, Caister ordered the caller to be admitted. He glanced from the card to Mr. Britton. He wondered whether Denis might have bought some article of jewellery for Rose and omitted to pay for it.

Mr. Britton was deferential, but concise. He stated his business at once.

"In the matter of this pearl necklace, my lord," he observed, "I have run down personally to see Miss Eton or Mr. Mallory, in order to put a few necessary questions before handing over the money. The sale involves a large sum, and a few formalities are necessary. If you will excuse me —"

"I know nothing whatever of any necklace," was Caister's disclaimer. "Perhaps you will be good enough to enlighten me further about it."

"Quite so, your lordship. A few months ago I met Miss Eton at a tea-party — a family gathering. She was wearing a pearl necklace which instantly attracted my attention on account of its value. She said it had been given to her that day as a birthday present,

and until I convinced her to the contrary she thought it was an imitation one."

He took a small box from his pocket. It contained the pearls, which he unwrapped and placed on the table.

"I advised her in a friendly way to sell the jewels. I stated they were worth ten thousand pounds and I gave her my business card in case she was ever in the mind to dispose of them. So far as I was concerned the matter ended there. Subsequently I heard from my nephew, who is one of Messrs. Gardner's departmental managers, that Miss Eton had left their establishment, and I was unaware of her present whereabouts. This morning, however, I had a letter from her. She wrote that she wished to sell the pearls, and asked that a cheque for them might be made out to the Honourable Denis Mallory. Of course her reasons for the sale have nothing to do with us. At the same time we have to be very careful in our dealings. A guarantee that the pearls are hers to dispose of is necessary. I have no doubt whatever that Miss Eton can give it, and then we shall be ready to hand Mr. Mallory our cheque. There is also another matter that I wished to see Miss Eton about -- the advertisement in this morning's papers, which no doubt you have seen."

He held out the "Times" cutting. Caister had not seen it. He read it attentively and with uneasy speculation. He had no more idea of its significance than had Mr. Louie and Miss Hobbs. A very few moments of consideration decided him, for Rose's protection, to go up to town and call on the solicitors about it. As for her possession of a valuable necklace and her desire to sell it, that now took a secondary place in his thoughts.

"In Miss Eton's absence," he said, "I'm afraid I cannot give you the information you want. All I can promise is that I will write to you to-night when I have seen her. I will also show her this advertisement. Meanwhile, do you wish me to return her the pearls?"

Mr. Britton did. He took a receipt for them and returned to his waiting cab on his way back to town.

In the noon Caister had motored up and presented himself at the offices of Messrs. Andrews & Andrews, where in matter-of-fact legal language he was made acquainted with the story of Rose's romantic inheritance. He heard it with an unmoved face, arranged that Rose should herself call on the firm on the following morning, and then returned to Purton. He arrived just before dinner, and directly after asked Rose to come to him in the library. He had been very quiet all through dinner. Rose, stealing a look at his grave face, had wondered at his preoccupation.

"I'm so glad you asked me to come and speak to you alone," she said. "You look troubled. I'm so sorry. What is it?"

"I confess I am upset," he said. "That is putting it lightly. But although I thank you for your sympathy I want something more from you to-night — the utmost frankness."

"Why, of course," she answered wonderingly. "You don't think I'm not frank, do you?"

He replied by a question.

"Is this your necklace?" He held it out.

Rose started and then flushed. "Ye-es," she admitted. "I — I sent it away. How did it get here?"

"A Mr. Britton of Bond Street brought it. He wanted to see you and Denis regarding its sale. Do

you mind telling me why you never mentioned you had such a valuable thing in your possession?"

"It was a present from my adopted father. I had no idea what it was worth until Mr. Britton told me, and even when I did know I did n't care for it any more because of its value. I don't think very much about money."

"You will have to before long," he said pointedly. "But — do you mind telling me — why do you wish to sell your pearls? Was it for Denis?"

"I'd rather not say."

"You prefer I should ask Denis?"

Rose gave a gulp. "No. Denis got into a money scrape in London. He was n't going to tell either of us about it. He was going to do something quite desperate instead. I found him just in time. You would n't have had a son by now if I had n't stopped him. I made him tell me his trouble. He'd been gambling. Then I thought of my necklace, and I made him take it, that's all. I helped him as I should have helped him if we had been married. I sent the pearls to Mr. Britton. I never thought he'd make a — a business about it. They are mine and I have a right to sell them."

"You will have no need to sell pearls or anything else in future. Will you please put these on again?"

A little bewildered, Rose did so.

"If you will not let me help Denis," she said, with girlish dignity, "I will not be engaged to him any longer."

"I'm coming to that. I was about to ask you to release him."

Rose stared at him uncomprehendingly. Then: "Have I done anything wrong?" she asked.

Caister shook his head. "Not at all. But your circumstances have altered. We are already under great obligations to you — Denis and I — without becoming your debtors financially." He sighed heavily. "You have been splendid. You have given royally, but we cannot live on your bounty."

His uncompromising tone brought a flush of resentment into Rose's face. She was standing up very slim and straight.

"Is this all because of my necklace?" she demanded.

"Not entirely. You own a very great deal more than a mere necklace."

Then he told her of her fortune, concisely, quietly, in terms that she could understand. He added that the solicitors would explain it all to her on the morrow. She listened without interrupting. Then she said slowly:

"It's a very great deal of money, and because I've got it you don't want me to marry Denis. . . . Is that it?"

"The Caisters do not marry for money," was the inexorable assertion. "We prefer to be honourably poor."

"And honourable snobs!" she flashed out. "You put family pride before my feelings. I could marry your son when I was poor and had nothing to bring with me. That did n't hurt your pride — only mine! *You* could give everything to me — even to this frock I'm wearing, the food I've eaten. But now that I can give you something back and so even things up, I'm not wanted!" Her wounded love and pride made her reckless. "I've made a hero of you up till now. I loved your rank and standing and your family traditions;

this place, everything that belonged to it. But now I almost despair of you. Pride that will stab and wound another person is a thing to be ashamed of, not to glory in. Please take your ring back." She slipped it off. "It's more yours than Denis's. You paid for it. You chose it. And as for these" — she held the pearls up — "*he* — the dear old man who gave them to me — never meant them to bring me unhappiness. Rather than that, he'd tell me to throw them away. There!"

Before he could stop her, she had crossed to the open window and flung the pearls out into the night. Her bosom rose and fell with emotion.

"And all the money too!" she continued with a sob in her voice. "He hated money. He would n't have left it to me either if he'd guessed it meant — this! Oh, why can't he take it back! Horrible money — money that always makes trouble all over the world . . . !"

In spite of Caister's sedulously steeled feelings, it dismayed him to see her so poignantly stirred. And his uncompromising attitude was the cause. He approached her with an extenuating gesture.

"Rose, I did not mean to pain you," he declared. "Pray believe that. But I cannot see you martyred for Denis's sake. He is hopeless. How hopeless I did not realise until to-day. He has sunk so low that he can accept your trinkets to pay his debts. I cannot allow that, nor the sacrifice of your life and your fortune, for that is what it would mean. I should be a blackguard if I did."

Rose put her hands over her heart. Her face was working.

"You've hurt me here," she said, "deep down.

I don't want to speak to you any more. It's finished. Let me go. I must tell Denis what you have said."

She went to the door. He held it open for her, and she passed him with her little head held high. For the pride of the Caisters, nobly born, was as nothing to the pride of Rose on her mettle.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BUT, first of all, before she went to look for Denis, Rose flew to her own room. She was very angry. She felt as though her heart was bursting. The news of her huge fortune could not uplift her. What was a fortune if she was n't to be allowed to spend it on those she loved? It was less than nothing to her. Had not her "Dad" taught her to disregard money, to despise it? And he had left her — wealth beyond dreams! She recalled the strange prophecy of old Becky Gryls. *Gold — more gold than she could spend!* Yes, she had it now, would have it, at least, but of love she was beggared. Becky had been wrong there.

She felt humiliated, unjustly humiliated. To begin with, she could not or would not understand Lord Caister's point of view, his pride of an empty purse. Oh, that hurt more than all! She was an heiress now, one of the Plutocracy, as he scathingly called it, and so he would have none of her, either for himself or his son.

She flung herself on her bed and cried as the young cry when they are greatly hurt, mentally or physically. The outburst relieved the tension of her feelings.

She did not hear a light tap on her bedroom door or Mrs. Clarges's softly modulated voice outside:

"May I come in?"

Not until her chaperon was by her side, and had laid a white-ringed hand on her rumped hair, smoothing it, was she aware of her presence.

"Why, Rose, whatever is upsetting you?" Mrs.

Clarges asked with much emphasised tenderness. "I thought I heard you crying on my way upstairs to get my workbag. Won't you tell me what the trouble is?"

Rose sat up. At any other time she would have been disinclined to confide in Mrs. Clarges, although she liked her. But now ~~she~~ was literally yearning for sympathy, especially from a ~~woman~~. In a disjointed way she sobbed out her trouble. Part of it — Lord Caister's scruples — was incomprehensible to the widow, although it played into her hands extraordinarily well.

She drew Rose's head on to her bosom and held her with what was meant to be gentle compassion. The motherly softness of that embrace soothed Rose, who could not feel the hardness of the heart beneath, or guess at the calculating brain that inspired the consolation which seemed so genuine. Mrs. Clarges's consummate tact did not allow her to do more than sympathise ambiguously. She made no attack on Lord Caister, as an injudicious woman would certainly have done. That was her cleverness. She was clever enough also not to show elation about Rose's fortune. She had had time to get accustomed to her secret knowledge of it.

"You must try and look at things practically, dear child," she said in her velvet voice. "Of course you feel your world is upside down now. In a very little while you'll see things in their right perspective. Perhaps you will even be glad that all this has come about. I have said very little. It has not been my place to express opinions. But because I care for you a great deal more than you can guess, I have dreaded your marriage with Mr. Mallory. I have suffered and seen a good deal of life and the troubles that arise from un-

suitable marriages. I saw infinite unhappiness ahead of you. At any rate, you have your life before you now. You can make new ties, form other affections.

"And then this fortune of yours. Think of it with gratitude. You will be able to do so much good, to help people in distress, to bestow happiness, comfort, wherever you choose — and to aid your friends. If you look at money unselfishly like that you will derive the deepest happiness in dispensing it. But all that is in the future. What are you going to do now?"

"I have to go to London to-morrow to see these solicitors. I'm not coming back."

"But, my dear, where are you going? What about poor little me?"

Rose had not thought of Mrs. Clarges. It seemed rank ingratitude to admit as much now.

"Won't you come with me?" she asked after a momentary hesitation. "I — I suppose I shall need some one older than myself to live with. It would be so nice if you would come. We could stay at an hotel until we'd made other plans. Do say you'll come."

Mrs. Clarges's triumph was not in the least apparent. She even affected reluctance.

"But, my dear, a permanent situation! I'm not at all sure that I could arrange . . . Look here, suppose you come and live with me as my guest for the present. We won't discuss money at all. Just let me look after you. You'll be *my* girl."

She drew Rose to her again and kissed her.

"I'll come and talk to you later to-night," she continued. "You need n't see Lord Caister again unless you wish. I shall tell him I'm going to take care of you for the future."

"I would like to say good-bye to Lady Chalfont," demurred Rose. "She's been so sweet to me."

"I should n't do that," Mrs. Clarges put in quickly. "Wait until you're back in London. She'll be there too before long. Then you can thank her. If you feel you want to leave Purton at once, I should n't stop for any good-byes."

"Well, I'll speak to Denis," Rose decided. "Is he in the drawing-room still?"

"Yes. I won't come down with you. I'll go to my own room and come to you later."

When Rose entered the drawing-room, Denis noticed with some surprise that she had been crying. He took her hand. It happened to be the left and ringless. He noticed that also.

"What's up?" he asked. "And where's your ring, Rose?"

"I gave it back to your father. Everything's over, Denis. That's what I've come to tell you. I — I'm going away to-morrow."

"Going away to-morrow! You don't mean to say that you know —"

Because her tangled mind held no other idea at the moment she thought he was referring to the advertisement in the "Times," and nodded miserably.

"It's in the papers. I suppose you've seen it too."

Denis averted his eyes.

"She promised she'd keep it a dead secret," he muttered. "Of course I should have had to tell you. . . . I've been trying to summon up courage ever since I came back. I swear, Rose, I had no thought of being untrue to you when I went up to town. I never so much as meant to see Vivienne. We met by accident.

I could n't cut her in the street. She'd done nothing to deserve that. She twisted me round her little finger, as she has hundreds of times before. I tell you, a sort of madness came over me. You don't know Vivienne. . . . I don't know which of us suggested we should get married. I — I can't remember. Anyway, we got a special licence and — and it was done."

Rose could only stare at him.

"Do — do you mean *you're married?*" she asked incredulously.

Denis raised a shamed face and nodded.

"Yes. Is n't that what you meant had got into the papers?"

"No. I meant an advertisement about myself. I've had a lot of money left me. That was what your father wanted to see me about — that and the pearls. He found out I was going to sell them to help you. He was angry, and said unkind things. And because it turns out that I've been left an immense amount of money he refused to let me marry you."

Denis laughed mirthlessly.

"He need n't have considered that if he'd only known," he remarked bitterly. "Well, I sincerely congratulate you on being well quit of us."

Rose said not a word.

"Won't you say something to me?" he went on. "One thing: you can't loathe me more than I do myself. It was a pity you — you intervened the other night. Viv would have been a merry widow by now, and I should have been — at peace."

"Don't talk like that. I don't loathe you at all. I'm only sorry — about everything — from the bottom of my heart. You have n't hurt me one half as much as

your father has. I forgive you freely, if that's any help to you. And I hope you'll be happy!"

Denis choked. "Happy? My God!"

Rose laid her hand on his arm. She was n't the only person then who was miserable and upset. Here was poor Denis, in need of kindness much more than blame. For him she only felt unselfish sorrow. He had made such a hash of everything. Everything was tangled, contradictory. For the last time, and in spite of her own distress, she tried to help the boy who was so greatly his own enemy.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Your father will have to know."

"I dare say. I had n't thought about it," he answered dully. "I shan't stay here, anyway. I suppose I must go back to Vivienne."

Rose was thinking.

"You ought to. You must make the best of it — and of each other — and life. We've all got to do that. I shall have to try, too, in my way."

Denis nodded.

"If you face things out with your father he'll think better of you," she advised.

"I doubt it. He'll simply finish with me. I don't expect anything else. You see, he thinks Vivienne the limit. He will always detest her. She happens to be just everything he could never like. All the same, she's not as bad as he thinks. She's a good little pal in her way."

"I expect she cares for you," said Rose sapiently. "I hope so. I'd like to be friends with you both, Denis, if you'll let me. Won't you give me her address?"

Denis looked astounded. Rose's generosity staggered him. It was unparalleled, but magnificent.

He took out his pocket-book and wrote the address. She took it and said:

"Good-night, Denis. . . . Please don't think I'm cross. I really and truly want to be friends. I shall be so extra lonely now because of this money. And about those pearls: I — I threw them out of the window. . . . I hope they'll never be found again. But as soon as I get my own money I want you to have some of it to get straight with — for a wedding present. There's so much more than I can ever spend."

And before he could answer she was gone. He stood still, looking stupidly at the closed door.

Rose went back to her room. There, in the firelit solitude, she mutely prayed that the burden of her wealth might somehow be taken from her, for already it had made her heart heavy. . . .

And then — it almost seemed that she had been listening for Rose's return, so quickly did she make her reappearance — Mrs. Clarges was back in the room, full of maternal kindness and brisk plans.

CHAPTER XXXIX

To Lady Chalfont, who was one of the most intuitive creatures on God's earth, there was an air of forlornness about Caister House. A valedictory gloom seemed to hang over it.

She walked in without ringing or knocking, as was her habit, came to a standstill in the hall, and called out:

"Any one in?"

The echoes of her silvery-toned voice rang back from the groined roof. One could picture her as Nell Gwyn mellifluously chanting, "Oranges! Who'll buy my sweet oranges?"

Usually Rose or Denis, sometimes Caister, or all three together would come to meet her. To-day none of them made an appearance. Maggy went on to the drawing-room. There was no fire in it, only two housemaids engaged in putting dust-covers over the furniture. Maggy looked a trifle surprised.

"Is everybody out?" she asked.

"His lordship is in the morning-room, my lady," one of the maids said, preparing to escort her there.

"Don't trouble. I'll find him," said Maggy, and went on alone.

Caister was sitting at a table, writing. Apparently he was clearing up arrears of correspondence; but he pushed his papers aside and took a long breath of what sounded like relief when he perceived who his visitor was.

"I'm glad you've come," he said. "I was going



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(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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over to your place in a few minutes. We're shutting up here."

"Where's Rose?"

"Rose and Mrs. Clarges have gone away together. Denis is married — to Vivienne Raymond. He gave me that interesting piece of information late last night," he added cynically.

His tone and his news dried Maggy up.

"Would you mind filling in the gaps?" she asked after a pause. "Don't if it hurts you, though. You look absolutely knocked up. I don't wonder!"

"It all seems more or less like a nightmare. I have n't got used to the situation yet. You know Denis was away for nearly a week? Well, it transpires he was gambling; got deeper than ever into debt and finished up by marrying this — person. Don't ask me for his reasons. Probably he is not responsible for his actions. At any rate, when he returned he confessed about his money troubles to Rose, though he had not the courage to own up to his marriage. Rose, it appears, had a valuable pearl necklace, which she tried to sell in order to help Denis out of his difficulties. The jeweller to whom she sent it came down here in her absence and informed me of the proposed transaction. It is a curious thing that Rose had never previously mentioned the necklace —"

"But she did," Maggy interrupted. "I remember now. When I was helping her to pack the things you bought for her in London she said something about wishing to pay for them, and told me she had a necklace she could sell. I did n't take much notice. I dare say I thought it might be worth a pound or so, and I told her not to dream of selling anything. I'm perfectly

certain she never meant to make a secret of it. That's not like her. I suppose you were angry with her for trying to help Denis?"

"I dare say I was. She got rather upset and threw the pearls out of the window. They were found this morning, and I've returned them to her through her solicitors."

"Solicitors? What should a child like Rose have to do with solicitors?"

"It's the other way about. In last week's papers there was a solicitor's advertisement asking for information about her. Did you not see it?"

"I never read the papers. Chalfont tells me anything I ought to know. Go on."

"I went straight up to town to the solicitors. It appears that the person who adopted Rose was an eccentric but wealthy American. She is an heiress in quite a considerable way. On my return I gave her this news at once. The fact that Denis had already availed himself of her generosity convinced me that he would make a similar use of her fortune. There are limits to the sacrifices even Rose should be allowed to make. I told her so."

"You mean you told her you did n't want her money? . . . Well . . . !" The exclamation itself spoke volumes, but Maggy added: "I did n't think it of you, Bob! The poor child! What did she do?"

Caister made a hopeless gesture.

"She was angry with me. She resented what I said. God knows I did n't mean to offend her. Unfortunately, I did. I might have avoided doing so had I known about Denis. That is all there is to explain. I understand Mrs. Clarges will continue to look after

her. And, as far as I am concerned, I have finished with Denis."

Maggy looked deeply distressed.

"I'm sorry about Denis — for his sake and yours," she said. "But how could you let Rose go, Bob? Oh, why did you? Why did n't you keep her — for yourself? You, who love her!"

Caister's hand went up to his face, hiding it from her.

"Yes, I love her; but I don't love her money," he answered.

"Then why did n't you tell her so? She'd have given it all to a home for babies or to a hospital, and come to you empty-handed, if you'd only asked her!"

"I should n't choose to beggar my wife."

Maggy shook her head sadly.

"Why won't you understand?" she fretted. "A girl, a woman, will beggar herself twice over for love. It's no particular virtue. In fact, it's natural for her to behave like that. You asked the sacrifice of *herself* — for Denis! She was ready to make it for *you*. She *would* have made it. Was n't your love big enough to ask her to sacrifice her money and give you only herself? That is, if you were not big-minded enough to take both."

He dissented with a shake of the head.

"You only see the woman's point of view. Besides, being a man, I'm old-fashioned — stiff-necked, if you like. I draw the line at letting the world say that a Caister had married to restore his fallen fortunes."

"The world! What does the world's opinion matter against love? I almost hate your beastly pride, Bob. It's a terrible thing to let pride play havoc with two lives. I shall go and find Rose. I shall send her to you."

She jumped up, full of resolution.

"She won't come," he said.

"You don't deserve that she should," she retorted.

"I could cry for the mess and the muddle you've made but that I'm convinced of one thing. Your pride won't hold out; or if it does something else will happen. I'm sure of it. There's a purpose in everything. Rose was n't meant to marry Denis. And sooner or later — in God's good time — somehow or other you two will come together again. It's just *got* to come. . . ."

It was always her way to see the silver lining of the darkest cloud, the bright streak through the warp and woof of life. Her optimism had never failed her yet, nor her splendid humanity.

"I must go and see my baby bathed now," she said.

"I'm angry with you, Bob, but I'm sorry as well. You're all alone. I've known what that is, too." She twisted the heavy gold wedding-ring — the only ring she wore — round her finger. It symbolised everything she held most precious in life, something she had once nearly lost.

"Once Chalfont loved his pride more than he loved me," she said, very softly. "I — transgressed against it. I was n't altogether to blame. I simply lost my head and kept silence about a thing I should have been wiser to blurt out. It's an old story.¹ And when I did confess to Chalfont it was too late. He was too proud even to listen. But when he'd lost me he realised — as I did — that love is the one thing in the world that kills pride. . . . He came to find me then. Yes, he sought me out." Her voice had grown very tender.

"And you?"

¹ See *Love Muggsy*, by the Countess Barcynska.

"Oh, I came running to meet him halfway — you may be sure. There is n't a true woman who is n't ready to do that. You might remember what I'm saying . . ."

She held his hand for a moment or two, pressed it and left him.

Silence, the air of emptiness and gloom, settled down upon the house once more when the big, nail-studded oak door of the hall had closed upon her. It seemed quieter than ever in the old house — a quietness now permeated by a desolation that penetrated like intense cold. . . . Caister drew his papers towards him again. Yes, it was very lonely. . . .

Over him there came the baulked feeling that at any moment he might hear Rose's bright laugh, a snatch of song, her footsteps. . . that the door might open, showing her standing there, smiling, smiling his heart away. . . .

Gloom and silence in the house. And he — himself — had shut the door on her . . . shut her out.

CHAPTER XL

MISS VIVIENNE RAYMOND, in private life now the Honourable Mrs. Mallory, was ostensibly engaged in the domestic occupation of dusting her drawing-room when Rose called on her about a week later.

Vivienne, that is to say, delicately manœuvred a fanciful atom of a duster that would equally well have answered the purpose of a doily for dessert use, and imagined herself to be doing useful and strenuous work. Her small person was enveloped in a silk overall, her curly mop becomingly swathed in the latest thing in boudoir caps.

Had Rose arrived ten minutes earlier she would also have encountered the photographer of the "Sunday Flashlight" and witnessed a variety of poses by Vivienne to be reproduced pictorially in that illustrated journal under the heading of "Actresses at Home." Vivienne had enjoyed the make-believe tremendously. One of the photographs had been taken in her bedroom to fit descriptive letterpress that would run "Actress as her own Bedmaker." Another would show her busy at a gas cooking-range, her knowledge of which was confined to a capacity for turning on the wrong taps; in a third she would be seen cuddling her hundred-guinea Pekinese (a "property" stuffed dog brought for the purpose); and in a fourth and final one her tame kingfisher (picked from a hat) would be shown perched confidently on her little finger.

Denis, who had been rather afraid she might decide to pose with her arm around his neck for a "And-I-

simply-adore-my-husband!" portrait, had made himself scarce under the plea of an engagement with his dentist.

So when Rose arrived, Vivienne, still with the "fancy" duster in her hand, was meditating whether she might not essay a little of the real thing. There really was a fine layer of dust on top of the piano which her maid had overlooked. She began flicking at it with the circumspection of a fly-fisher, rather glad that a visitor should discover her engaged in so laudable a pursuit. The surname announced by the maid told her nothing. She had never even asked Denis his fiancée's name. So now she looked Rose up and down with exaggerated superciliousness.

She came to the conclusion that her visitor was quite pretty enough to be an actress, although from her generally quiet appearance she judged that, at any rate, she was not in musical comedy. Then it occurred to her that she might be some young society lady, perhaps a friend of Denis's. This being the most likely assumption, she prepared to be friendly in a guarded way.

"I don't think we've met before," she said, "but I expect you know Denis — my husband. He'll be back soon."

"I was engaged to Denis," said Rose quietly.

The look that Vivienne gave her can be better imagined than described. A slangy expression escaped her; enmity sprang into her eyes. She assumed, not unnaturally perhaps, that the girl had come to have a "row."

"Well, we really are married," she replied defensively. "There's my ring." She flashed a bejewelled left

hand before Rose on which somewhere amidst the glitter a wedding-ring no doubt lurked. "I'm afraid I can't give him back to you, if that's what you've come for."

"But I have n't," responded Rose equably. "I've come to say that I hope you'll both be happy, and to ask you to accept a little present."

She held out an envelope.

In hesitation Vivienne took it. She opened it suspiciously and extracted two cheques. One was made payable to Denis, the other to herself. The figures danced before her incredulous eyes. She gazed stupidly from the cheques to Rose.

"Lord love us!" she exclaimed. "What are you playing at? Are they stumers?"

It was Rose's turn to look blank.

"They're cheques," she murmured. "I have a lot of money to spare."

Vivienne's slanting eyes grew almost round.

"Denis never told me you were rich," she said.

"I was n't until the other day." Rose's voice was weary. Her wealth seemed to weigh her down.

Vivienne placed the cheques on the crowded mantelpiece.

"Well, upon my word, you must be some brick!" she declared. "You don't hate me, then?"

"Why should I? I like Denis, so I wish to be friends with you."

"I'm not much of a person to be friends with," admitted Vivienne frankly. "You've everything to lose and nothing to gain by it, my dear. I've started by walking off with your fiancé. That ought to tell you the sort of girl I am."

"If you love Denis I'm glad you've got him."

Vivienne looked more surprised than ever. In all her varied experience she had never come across any one at all like Rose.

"Well, I do love him," she insisted almost fiercely. "He's my boy. I wanted him awfully badly."

"Then you'll want to do everything you can for him."

This struck Vivienne as a new way of looking at matrimony.

"How so?" she queried.

"His happiness, I mean. And his health."

"His health is rotten, I know. I don't want to see it go to pieces, although I expect Lord Caister thinks I don't care tuppence. He's wrong there. But what can I do?"

It seemed strange that she should talk thus confidentially and ask Rose's opinion; nevertheless, she was moved to do so.

"Since we've been married I've altered a bit," she went on. "A year ago, when I first met him, I would n't have crossed the road to help him out of trouble if the street had happened to be muddy. Now I'd do anything and everything to keep him fit and well. But if I threw up my work we should be in the cart. If I went to live in the country with him he'd get as sick of me as he probably did of Purton, and a jolly sight sooner. I've not the slightest desire to be reconciled — sounds highfalutin, does n't it? — to old Caister or to take his blessed money if he'd give it. Now we're married, Denis simply wants to drown dull care. He's a thousand times giddier than I am. He has no idea of home-life!"

The word fell incongruously from her pretty, painted lips. Rose felt unaccountably sorry for her.

"I think you should keep on with your work," she advised. "The best thing you can do is to make him ride every day in the Park. It's good for him. He loves horses."

"Yes, he said something the other day about getting a hack." Vivienne looked at Rose a little wistfully. "Perhaps if you'll come and see us sometimes it will do him good. Will you?"

Rose promised that she would.

"Are you living in town?" was Vivienne's next question.

Rose told her that she and her chaperon had taken a flat.

"I expect you'll marry before very long," prophesied Vivienne. "Some nice boy, I hope. I don't believe you'd have been happy with Denis. If you had a lot of money he'd soon run through it. D'you mind me giving you a bit of advice? Well, look after it. I have to work for mine, so I know. Money doesn't last forever!"

"Mine will," said Rose a little mournfully. "I shall never be able to spend it all."

"There'll be plenty of people falling over themselves to help you to. And if you're as generous to some of them as you've been to me and Denny, my dear, you'll find yourself cleaned out some day, sure as eggs are eggs! Let's have some tea. Denis won't be long."

Rose stayed to tea, but Denis did not make an appearance until some time after she had gone.

"Hulloa," he remarked, glancing at the cups; "had a visitor?"

Vivienne shook her curls at him excitedly.

"And *such* a visitor! Who do you think? . . . as Eton!"

"No! . . . I hope you were nice to her."

"I most certainly was. She brought us a wedding present. Two, in fact. Five thousand pounds for you and two thousand for me. Look here! *Did you ever?*"

"But we can't take it," deprecated Denis, red in the face.

"It does seem too much. But she'll be annoyed if we don't. Denny, I like that kid. Not on account of her money. I mean for herself."

"Yes, she's all white," he murmured.

Vivienne looked into the gas-fire — an imitation log fire whose colourless flames were conducive to reflection.

"You ought to have married her," she mused. "Will you forgive me, Denny, for upsetting your apple-cart?"

Denis fidgeted uncomfortably in his chair.

"That's all right," he mumbled. "Of course I meant to run straight and stick to her, only in a weak moment I simply had to come and see if London was still in its old place, and — well, you were there too."

Vivienne picked up her duster and flicked about aimlessly with it to cover her feelings. Suddenly she faced round.

"I've never minded a row of pins about being every sort of sinner," she remarked vehemently. "I've been kind of proud of my make-haste nature and my 'cuteness. But that girl — that girl made me *ashamed*, Denny!" She blinked an atom of moisture out of her eyes. "Don't laugh at me. Oh, let me — *aust!*"

CHAPTER XLI

THE magnificence of Rose's flat in Green Street, Mayfair, rather astonished Maggy when she saw it. The taste that had been employed in furnishing it was irreproachable, but the expense, as she at once realised, must have been colossal. It was a large and new flat in the most highly rented quarter of fashionable London. Its appointments were superb. Maggy correctly computed the value of the pictures and tapestry alone at thousands of pounds. She knew very well that Rose would not have surrounded herself with such splendour; her tastes were not ostentatious. The deduction that it was not she but a second person who had thus spent money like water was easily formed. That second person could only be Mrs. Clarges. As Maggy's eyes roved round the superb drawing-room into which she had been shown, she asked herself what the widow's motive could be for such extravagance.

Then Rose came in and kissed her rapturously, overjoyed to see her.

"Oh, I *am* glad you've come, Maggy!" she cried. "I get so lonely in London. How's Baby?"

"Baby's splendid. We're down at Purton still, you know. I've just run up to see you. Lord Caister's in town. Have you seen him?"

All the pleasure faded out of Rose's face.

"No," she said dejectedly. "Is — is he quite well?"

"I think so. But horribly lonely, I expect. . . . He has not even got Denis now."

"He ought to forgive Denis," said Rose quickly.

"I don't think he will. . . . Why did you leave Purton without coming to say good-bye?"

"I wanted to go at once. Mrs. Clarges thought it would be best."

"Mrs. Clarges! Do you always do what she wants?"

"Generally. She's very pleasant."

"H'm, I dare say. She has a lot to feel pleasant about just now, I don't doubt. Are you fond of her?"

"Not exactly fond," was the reply, made with a little hesitation. "We seem to have settled down together, that's all. She orders everything. I'm too inexperienced."

"She chose all this?" Maggy's glance included the room.

"Oh, yes, everything. It was very expensive."

Maggy could well believe that.

"Still, she took all the trouble," Rose said in a tone of extenuation. "I only had to sign the cheques."

"Made payable to the different firms, of course."

"No; to Mrs. Clarges."

"Oh!" said Maggy. After a brief pause she asked, "Is she out?"

"Yes, she's gone to Reville's."

Maggy drew more conclusions.

Rose invited her to make a tour of the flat. It bore those conclusions out in quite a remarkable degree. Everything in its nine large rooms was on the same magnificent scale. Only one of the bedrooms was inexpensively furnished, and that belonged to Rose herself. In the last one to be inspected, Maggy's keen eyes detected a silver-framed shaving-glass on a stand in the window.

"Who sleeps here?" she enquired.

"Nobody. But Mrs. Clarges hoped her son would live with us. I don't think he's coming after all, though."

"Why not?"

"Well . . . he's rather simple in his tastes. He thinks this too grand. . . . That's where he and Mrs. Clarges don't always agree."

"He's a cinema actor, is n't he?"

"Yes."

"Do you like him?"

Rose thought the question over.

"He's very nice. Yes, I do like him," she said.

They went back to the drawing-room. Maggy settled herself in a regal-looking gilt armchair that might have belonged to the *Roi Soleil*.

"I'm going to be awfully familiar with you, my dear," she said. "I want to hear all about this fortune of yours. Do you mind telling me how much it is, and what you're spending?"

"Not a bit. But it's *so* uninteresting. Spending money does n't give me an atom of pleasure. And I don't understand figures."

Again Maggy's eyes surveyed the grandeur around her.

"But you must have got through an immense sum," she said.

"Only the capital that's been accumulating. That's the right word, is n't it? There's my income, you know. I have n't spent any of it yet. It comes from the Okenega oil-field, somewhere in Pennsylvania. Or rather it will come next January. It's only paid twice a year. There was so much lying at the bank. But I'm getting through it."

She spoke hopefully, as though her wealth were a

burden to her (as indeed it was) to be got through as a duty. It had not brought her a moment's happiness.

"I'll show you my cheque-book," she said readily, and went to a valuable Boule cabinet and opened one of its drawers.

Maggy's eyes dilated when she scanned the counterfoils. The very first one was for over four thousand pounds. It was drawn in favour of Mrs. Clarges and docketed "for furniture." The second was also to Mrs. Clarges "for pictures, etc." — another three thousand. Then came large cheques to the Reverend Ambrose Bree "for church"; Mrs. Clarges, five thousand pounds "for investment." There were the cheques to Denis and Vivienne; a five-hundred-pound present to Mrs. Clarges; a still bigger one marked "odds and ends," also to Mrs. Clarges. There was a stupendous payment to Tredgold & Evans (who must have been three parts Welsh to one part Cornish); another for the flat, "rent for three years"; wedding-presents running into hundreds to Mr. Louie and Miss Hobbs; one thousand two hundred pounds (to Mrs. Clarges) for a Daimler; five hundred (to Mrs. Clarges) for "petty cash." Here there was an ebb in the precious stream. A solitary little cheque for ten pounds had been drawn in favour of "Self" for a "necklet"! But an overflow followed it. Four payments in succession were to Mrs. Clarges: the first for over eight thousand pounds "for mining shares," the others expressed that generous-hearted lady's charitable instincts when paid for by another person.

At a rough computation Maggy put the total at over forty thousand pounds. Her eyes were humid by the time she had turned the last counterfoil.

Self — ten pounds! *Ten pounds out of a large fortune on herself.* How like Rose!

"Mrs. Clarges seems to be a lady of expensive tastes," was her only spoken comment. "You seem to have given her *carte blanche*. Is that wise? She's not a very old friend, is she?"

"She was so kind and motherly to me at Purton," Rose protested. "And, as she says, there is n't any use in hoarding money. It's there to be spent."

"Who advised you about the mining shares?"

"Oh, she did. She understands all that."

These pitifully naïve admissions were being made when Mrs. Clarges returned. The look of annoyance that flickered over her face at seeing Maggy there was barely perceptible. No one could wear a mask better than Mrs. Clarges.

"Now nice of you to come and see us in our little home!" she smiled. "Are you staying the night? Do! We can put you up, can't we, Rose?"

"I can't stay, thanks," said Maggy. "I only ran up to town for a chat with Rose. I've been cautioning her to look after her money a little."

She looked at Mrs. Clarges a trifle longer than that lady found quite comfortable.

"Rose is learning how to write cheques," she said with a rather forced smile.

"She seems to be having a good deal of practice. I think we shall have to find a business man to advise her, Mrs. Clarges."

There was admonition behind the words. Mrs. Clarges was conscious of it, as Maggy meant her to be.

She remained in a state of wrathful but silent

impotence until Maggy took her departure. Then with forced calmness she said:

"Lady Chalfont seems to be rather an inquisitive person. I think I saw her giving you back your cheque-book as I came in. Were you showing it to her? It's rather an unwise thing to do, my child. Cheque-books are private and should be kept under lock and key. You don't want everybody to know your affairs."

"Maggy is n't everybody," Rose answered with a slight lift of the eyebrows. "She's my best friend."

Mrs. Clarges contrived her most charming smile.

"Of course. Don't think I meant to be uncharitable. Only I thought she seemed to imply that I was spending your money. Naturally, one is sensitive. If you will remember, Rose, it was you yourself who suggested this arrangement of our living together."

She seemed genuinely distressed, and Rose, who would not willingly have hurt the feelings of a fly, set about reassuring her.

"I know I did," she said. "And it's a very nice arrangement. I should have been lost without you to help me all these weeks."

Mrs. Clarges allowed herself to be placated. She had spent a most pleasant afternoon at Reville's, choosing a present from Rose in the shape of the very best and most expensive fur coat they could supply her with. Eveleigh also was coming to dine with them that night, and although he was unconscionably slow in adapting himself to his mother's plans, she felt fairly convinced that he would eventually propose to Rose. If he did n't, she would for him. So far, it was true, he had flatly refused to help her exploit the heiress, but in spite of this she was satisfied that the young couple were becoming

very friendly. Rose showed herself so interested in Eveleigh's work, and he, actor-like, was never tired of discoursing upon it. Indeed, there was not very much about the technicalities of film work with which Rose was now unacquainted. Very often Eveleigh practised his parts with her, she for the moment representing his leading lady. He found himself constantly wishing she was in his dramatic company, instead of only a play-fellow in her own flat. Had he been a manager, he would have made her an offer at once.

To-night after dinner Mrs. Clarges watched the pair with serene satisfaction. They were trying one of Eveleigh's perpetual romantic love-scenes. Rose was prettily girlish, all that the part required. Eveleigh's acting was so intense that Mrs. Clarges almost believed he was making love in reality. She had always encouraged these rehearsals, hoping and thinking that Eveleigh, being human after all, would sooner or later awaken to the passion that Rose ought to inspire in him.

By her side on the sofa lay the evening paper which he had brought in before dinner. She picked it up, scanning it lazily while she sipped her coffee.

Then, quite suddenly, her eyes became glued to a paragraph. A panicky exclamation escaped her. Her hand clutched the paper spasmodically.

FAILURE OF THE OKENEGA OIL-FIELD

FAMOUS SPRING RUNS DRY

PANIC IN WALL STREET

There was half a column about the disaster, its causes and its fateful effects. The cessation of the wealth-bearing stream was complete. The source of

supply had entirely given out with the startling suddenness to which mineral oil springs are prone. The shares had collapsed and were unsaleable; the finances of other wells in the district, threatened with a similar fate, had also dropped heavily. The authenticity of the cablegram was undoubted. It was signed "Reuter."

She called to Rose in a voice harsh with fear and suspense, pointing to the paragraph with a shaking finger.

Rose read it without emotion.

"You must go and see Mr. Andrews first thing in the morning," Mrs. Clarges insisted. "Do you realise what this means? . . . Don't you care? . . . Why don't you say something?"

Rose's eyes seemed to be looking over and beyond and through Mrs. Clarges. She was thinking of the last night she had spent at Purton and how earnestly she had prayed that the wealth she did not want might somehow be taken from her. . . .

"I *do* care," she said in a rapt voice. "I care very much. But not in the way you think. I never wanted the money. I'm glad it has gone. I would give anything to be poor again."

Mrs. Clarges trembled with rage.

"I think your words are downright wicked!" she cried. "You tempt Providence with them. *You* may not want the money" — in her emotion and fear, breeding and restraint went by the board; she showed the woman without the mask, selfish and despicable to the core — "but what about me?" she finished almost in a scream.

CHAPTER XLII

EVELEIGH CLARGES did not realise the woeful state of Rose's affairs. His mother's explosion of temper told him next to nothing of the truth. Being used to her outbreaks he discounted this one and the reason for it. And Rose's own coolness in response had misled him. So he allowed the best part of a week to go by before he paid another visit to the flat.

He found his mother alone in the drawing-room, sitting at the open *Boule* *escritoire* with two cheque-books (her own and Rose's) and a mass of papers before her. She was deep in calculations. Her habitual placidity had vanished. She looked feverishly rapacious. Eveleigh wondered whether she and Rose had had a difference of opinion.

"Where's Miss Eton?" he enquired.

"Gone," she snapped.

Eveleigh received the impression that something was really wrong.

"Gone? How do you mean?" he asked.

"Gone for good."

"But, good Lord, where? When? Why?"

"Why? Because she has n't got a penny to bless herself with. When? The day before yesterday. Where? To some place in King's Cross. Lodgings, I suppose. What are you so surprised about? You were here the night the news came."

"Not a penny to bless herself with?" he repeated incredulously. "You're not serious."

Mrs. Clarges emitted what is generally called a hollow laugh.

"Perfectly serious. I'm bereaved of my golden goose. It's been killed. And all I've got out of it are a few paltry thou—hundreds. I feel I've been the victim of a conspiracy. I never knew oil dried up. I thought it went on for ever and ever. I thought it was as safe as consols. The news in the paper you brought in that night has turned out to be the literal truth."

"But what *is* the truth?" he queried, nonplussed.

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about! Rose's fortune. It has completely vanished. The Okenega oil-field is absolutely finished, run dry, or whatever they call it. There's not a penny to come, and all the shareholders — all the ones who put their eggs in one basket, that is — are ruined."

This was plain enough at last.

"What an awful thing!" he murmured. "She must be terribly distressed."

"She is n't. It has n't distressed anybody but me. I'm the only sufferer. Rose is positively relieved. She seems to have no sense of her obligations. I reminded her when she came back after seeing her solicitors that we should have to meet the expenses of this flat and that she owes me a certain amount of salary. We never fixed a definite remuneration. She has n't anything left worth talking about. She calmly told me I could do what I liked with the flat and the furniture. Of course I shall sell the furniture. I had to put it to her that even with the money for the furniture I could n't afford to support her indefinitely. She merely said she was n't going to stay a day longer. It was rather like getting rid of a servant in a hurry. I was positively re-

lieved when her boxes were out of the house. After all, it's a mercy you never proposed to her. You might have had trouble in getting out of it."

Eveleigh flushed.

"Assuming I had proposed, I should n't have tried to get out of it," he said tartly. "I should have married her all the sooner if she would have had me. And I'd ask her now if it would be any help to her and I stood an atom of chance. Upon my soul, mother, I don't understand you! You mean to tell me you've turned her out, and yet all the while she had money you were glad enough to live on her bounty."

"Bounty! I suppose you got that pedantic word out of a cinema headline! I was her chaperon and worth a good deal more to her than I got. Living here ran me into no end of expense — or would have," she corrected herself plausibly. "And I shall look such a fool, too, having to sell this furniture so soon after it was bought."

"But it's not yours to sell!" he protested in amazement. "Please don't think I'm accusing you of doing anything wrong intentionally, but I've never understood on just what terms you have been living here with Miss Eton, or just how much of her money you were justified in spending. Mother, I'm afraid things are pretty mixed up, and if I were you, I'd get out of here quietly, and the last thing I'd do would be to seize her furniture as though you were a broker's man. I'll be glad to see you through with this affair! I thought you had more sense of honesty, not to say dignity!"

Never before had Eveleigh stood up to his mother like this. Until now, although fully aware of her weaknesses, he had loved and respected her. She was

putting his respect, if not his love, to a test that it would hardly stand.

That Mrs. Clarges was worried by her son's blunt speech could be guessed by her quickened breathing and the nervous twitching of her hands, but she answered sharply, "The best thing you can do is to mind your own business, Eveleigh."

The discussion was temporarily suspended by the maid announcing two visitors — Vivienne and Denis. Vivienne was rehearsing, so her evenings were free. To enliven Denis by bringing him into the wholesome society of Rose was her object. For his spirits just now were as indifferent as his health.

"Oh, Mrs. Clarges," she began, "where's Rose? We want to borrow her for the evening."

So Mrs. Clarges had to tell the story over again, but with more restraint than she had thought necessary with her son.

Vivienne was genuinely disturbed. Mrs. Clarges's attitude puzzled her.

"But is n't this *her* flat?" she asked. "I can't understand why she's cleared out. Can you, Denny?"

All she got from him was a blank look. Eveleigh said nothing at all. He left his mother to vindicate herself.

"I was just explaining the situation to my son when you arrived," she put in. "Rose could not have stayed on more than a few days in any case. But with her money all gone the furniture must be disposed of and the flat put into the agent's hands."

"She had a valuable necklace," Eveleigh recollected. "She could sell that."

"I suggested her doing so. But she would n't. She

had some foolish fancy for keeping it. I can assure you, Mrs. Mallory, she is absolutely a pauper. Of course through this my own plans are in a hopeless muddle."

She sighed lugubriously, but without eliciting any sign of sympathy from Vivienne. She gave Mrs. Clarges a swift look.

"I should think your plans could jolly well afford to wait," she remarked. "I bet you've helped to fleece her. Come on, Denny. There's nothing to stay here for."

Mrs. Clarges rose, greatly affronted. Vivienne, however, thinking only of Rose, was quite indifferent to her feelings, real or assumed.

"What's her address?" she demanded.

"Really! I don't feel inclined to give it to you," was a huffy response.

"I think you'd better. I'm a funny person to rub up the wrong way. Vulgar, you know."

Mrs. Clarges believed her. It made her reconsider her refusal. Grudgingly she imparted the address. Denis wrote it down and the two departed.

"109, Sidey Street, King's Cross Road," said Vivienne to the driver of their taxi.

She only made one remark while they were in it.

"Pity we've not got a penny left of what she gave us. We could have given her a leg-up."

"She would n't have let us," said Denis. "It's beastly luck, but I don't suppose it's upsetting Rose very much. In all my life I never knew anybody so indifferent about money. What are you going to say to her?"

"Well, I think she might come and put up at our flat."

The suggestion surprised him. He would never have

attributed anything so altruistic to his ultra-worldly wife.

"It would be the decent thing to do," he admitted. Vivienne laughed a little sharply.

"Sort of conduct you would n't expect from yours truly, eh? Well, you see, I like that girl — no end. Here we are. My eye, what a hole!"

They found Rose writing letters by the light of a candle. She was answering advertisements for employment. It had occurred to her to go back to Gardner's — she knew she could always do that — but somehow she felt it would not be the same. Miss Hobbs, now Mrs. Louie, was no longer there. Mr. Louie, though still her friend, had somehow undergone a change. No, she would rather essay fresh if less congenial work. She had gained experience at Gardner's and could count on a good reference. The future intimidated her not at all. She was glad to be at grips with it and to have something to occupy her mind, the prospect of something to do to keep her from thinking. . . . There was only one thing she missed: her happy association with Denis's father, and that had gone with her money.

She had fired up at him, it is true. She had left him with spirit, but she loved him. He was still and ever would be her ideal knight. Not a day passed but that she prayed for him: prayed that he might not be too lonely, that somehow, one day, he might yet be very happy. It never occurred to her to pray that he might find that happiness through herself. Her love was far too unselfish.

She was glad to see Vivienne and Denis. She thought it very kind of them to trouble about her. Vivienne,

most undemonstrative of women towards her own sex, actually kissed her.

"We've come round to fetch you," she said. "You can't stay here, my dear. It's a blessed garret. The Cinderella stunt is n't picturesque in real life. Besides, we want you; don't we, Denny?"

Denis assented heartily, though he had certain secret doubts as to how long Vivienne's hospitable mood would last. Even the best-disposed leopard cannot change its spots, however zealous its efforts, and Vivienne, despite some unexpectedly good qualities, was of the feline type.

"We can put the maid into the boot-cupboard and refurnish her room with things out of Denny's dressing-room," she went on. "It really is the lightest and airiest place in the flat. It will knock spots out of this, anyway. How soon can you come?"

It took Rose some time to convince her that, grateful as she was for the proffered kindness, she could not accept it. Vivienne was greatly disappointed. When she left, it was with a strange sensation of regret at being unable to accomplish a good action, for once charitably designed and conscientiously desired.

When they were again in their flat her feelings brimmed over. Denis was partly the cause. The first thing he did was to help himself lavishly from the decanter on the sideboard.

Vivienne went up to him, took the glass from his hand and emptied its contents into a fern-pot.

"I'm not going to stand by and see you kill yourself," she declared. "That would have made the fifth since dinner. If that's the effect I have on you it's a pity we ever met. But I dare say you're always thinking so!"

Denis laughed feebly. His temper was too easy for complaint about the loss of hers. Moreover, he could always help himself later on. He flung himself into a chair and invited her to play something.

She looked about her in an undecided way. The whole flat somehow had got on her nerves — its bizarre colours, its fidgety furnishings and embellishments. She became suddenly alive to its defects, the bad taste of it; to the defects and bad taste in herself.

"I wish my hair was dark and silky like Rose's," she jerked out, "instead of this beastly imitation red. I wish my eyes had the light of a soul behind them, instead of the 'glad' look I've practised for years. I wish I did n't paint my face. I wish I was *different*! Oh, come off it, Viv!" she adjured herself. "You're going dotty!"

She flung off her evening cloak, sat herself down at the piano and crashed out the latest jazz tune with the loud pedal down.

CHAPTER XLIII

MRS. BELL threw open the door of Rose's room obsequiously to Eveleigh Clarges.

"Miss Eton won't be long now, I'm sure, sir," she purred. She looked at the tall young man with admiration mingled with curiosity.

"If you'll excuse me being so bold, I don't know whether it's 'his lordship' or plain 'Mister' when I tell Miss Eton there's a gentleman waiting."

"Just say Mr. Clarges."

She favoured him with a longer look.

"There now, I knew I'd seen your face! Every Saturday night these last five weeks it's been before my eyes at the Westover Electric. Are n't you *the* Mr. Eveleigh Clarges, starrin' in 'The Perfect Lover' serial film? I'll be bound you are!"

Eveleigh admitted the soft impeachment. Mrs. Bell was as excited as though she had penetrated a royal incognito.

"I'm sure I'm that pleased to meet you in the flesh, sir," she said in an awed tone which seemed to imply that she had long been familiar with him in the spirit. "If you'll pardon me sayin' so, common and 'umble as I am, sir, you are a hartist. Why, when you take a young lady in your arms or rescue 'er from the villain, there is n't a woman in the audience, married or single, as would n't change places with 'er. The way you does it all is *something* wonderful! When we get 'ome 'usbands seem to 'ave no colour nor life, so to speak. As for young Muriel Goby, what used to walk out with

William Jifkins in the fish-and-chips line, she've given 'im the go-by since 'The Perfect Lover' 's been showin'. The 'earts you've broken, not to speak of thrilled, is countless!"

"I hope Miss Eton is well," said Eveleigh, when this fulsome panegyric came to an end.

"Yes, sir, she's well enough, and not cast down neither, which passes my comprehension. All her money gone like a passin' dream, and she not carin' a snap of the fingers! In 'dependent, too. Proud, you might say. I don't mind tellin' you in confidence, sir, she was bountiful to me when she had it. But now she won't so much as let me charge a ha'penny less on a hegg! What I can do for her I do by stealth, if you take my meanin'. There's a lot been 'appenin' what I don't understand. Lady Chalfont would 'ave kep' me up to date on the subjeck of Miss Eton, but she's gone abroad and I don't suppose she's even heard of her losin' 'er fortune. Ah, well, she'll have a 'ome from 'ome in my 'ouse. I've buried five and I've a mother's 'eart."

Rose's entrance put a timely stop to the flow of confidences. Mrs. Bell stopped only to impress on her lodger that she had laid two cups and that there were "three in the teapot."

Rose's friends seemed to be flocking round her, proving their worth. Mrs. Bell had begged her not to dream of paying her bill. Denis and Vivienne had wanted her. Mr. and Mrs. Louie had invited her to stay with them indefinitely. Now here was Eveleigh Clarges. She did not doubt his friendship, but she had hardly expected to see him.

Eveleigh was palpably embarrassed.

"I've come to apologise," he said directly they were

alone. "I mean on my mother's account. I'm afraid you've reason to think she has behaved very unkindly, to say the least of it. I can't tell you how sorry I am that she should have been so — so inconsiderate."

Rose had already put all thoughts of her last scenes with Mrs. Clarges out of her mind.

"Oh, please don't say anything about it," she replied. "She was awfully worried, I expect. The whole thing happened so suddenly. If she is able to sell the furniture I expect she will feel more settled. I could n't guess the oil was going to dry up, could I?" She laughed. "It's rather joyous being quite poor again — really! One finds out how many friends one has and what a lot of really nice people there are in the world. When I was quite poor, working for my living, I used to wonder whether very rich people were happy. It has n't taken me long to find out. You get so tired of being able to have everything you want. It makes you not want anything. Of course it's nice to be able to help people, but even without money one can still do that, I think. Anyhow, I'm quite glad to think I shall have to work again. I'm looking for something to do now. I can arrange flowers and make up buttonholes, and I can milk cows and make butter. I have n't seen any cows in London, though."

She came to an uncomfortable stop.

"I know of something you could do much better — something more interesting than milking cows."

An expectant look came into Rose's face.

"For a long time past," continued Eveleigh, "I've thought that you ought to be on the stage — the cinema stage. I wonder if *you* have."

"No — but I should like to!" she replied in a tone

between hope and doubt. "Do you mean it? Seriously?"

"So seriously that I've spoken to Mr. Verner, my manager, about you."

"What did he say?"

"He's interested. He wants to see you."

"You really think I could act?"

"I'm sure of it — positive. Will you give it a trial?"

Rose was excited. She clapped her hands.

"Of course! But — oh, he'll never engage me!"

"I think he will. In fact, I have n't a doubt about it." Unconsciously Eveleigh began to wax enthusiastic. "He has only to see you. You're everything he or any other producer can want. You're naturally gifted, and photographically you're perfect, of course. Verner is always on the lookout for new talent. He knows how scarce it is. Oh, he'll engage you right enough!"

"I don't suppose Mr. Verner will be as enthusiastic as you are — or as kind," said Rose modestly. "When do you want me to see him?"

"As soon as you like. Now, if you can. The studios are at Chiswick. It won't take us long to get there. Verner's house is near by, so he's always to be found. I told him I should hope to bring you to-day." He hesitated. "Do you mind me suggesting something? In my own affairs I'm not much of a business man, but if it comes to a question of salary you will do better to let me settle it for you. I've profited by my experience," he added, a shade bitterly. "You see, these big men — men like Verner — never let sentiment interfere with business. They're hard, and they're inclined to take advantage of a beginner, especially when she's a girl. I'll do my best for you if you'll let me."

Rose liked Eveleigh quite well enough to trust to his advice, and as soon as they had had tea she put on her hat and was ready to start. Eveleigh could not help noticing that she did not even look in the glass. Such complete absence of vanity was surprising. It seemed to imply something lacking in a potential cinema actress. He hoped she would not be nervous when she was introduced to Verner and so show at a disadvantage.

But his fears were groundless. Rose was never self-conscious and therefore never shy.

When she came into the manager's office he was smoking a large cigar. He hardly appeared to look at her. For all that, his lynx eyes photographed all her points as faithfully as a camera and with equally instantaneous precision. He was a showman. She was "the goods." He recognised it on sight. He rapped out a few formal questions, put her through a short scene with Eveleigh — one of those she had often rehearsed with him at home. Then he appeared to consider. But not for long.

"Five pounds a week," he said shortly. "And that's generous terms for a novice. We'll get out the contract right away, if you like. Of course the engagement will have to be for a term of years. Say three."

All this while he had been looking at Rose, addressing her, not Eveleigh. He swung round when the latter took it on himself to reply.

"Miss Eton will sign no contract for longer than six months. Three months' notice on either side, and commencing salary fifteen pounds a week."

"Eh?"

"I'm acting as Miss Eton's business agent," Eve-

leigh went on quietly. "You'll prefer me to an outsider, Mr. Verner. Is n't that so?"

Verner raised his eyebrows and shifted the stump of his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. This was a new aspect of his leading man — a surprising aspect. What was he barging in for? Personal interest in the girl? Well — Verner looked ahead — one day, he supposed it would mean a joint engagement. That would be all right, all right. He could n't afford to quarrel with his cheap and popular star. But there seemed to be fewer flies on Mr. Eveleigh Clarges than he had imagined!

"Call it a deal, then," he conceded reluctantly. "You'll play well together, you two. Now we want a good play-bill name for you, Miss Eton. Something to catch the eye on a poster. What's your Christian name?"

"Rose — Rose Eton."

"Good enough," he said.

"Now, Mr. Clarges, take your friend round to the studios and bring her back in a quarter of an hour and I'll have the contract ready for her signature."

He bustled into his partner's office, florid with optimism.

"I've just engaged the most wonderful-looking girl you've ever seen in your natural!" he exulted. "Young Clarges brought her along. I'm going to fix her right now. Pass along those contract forms. O'Shee, she's beautiful! She can act! She's *unique*! She's 'Rose Eton, Queen of the Movies,' or I'm a Dutchman!"

CHAPTER XLIV

MRS. LOUIE, junior, folded up the needlework she had been doing and put it away. Her eyes were full of a gentle serenity. They told of dreams — the dreams of one who sews tiny garments for the child she hopes soon to hold in her arms.

She looked across at Rose, who, with Eveleigh Clarges, had come to spend the evening, and smiled.

"We'll just have a little talk alone," she said. "We don't see half enough of each other nowadays. To think of you being a cinema star, and all! Not that I'm surprised. You'd be bound to get on at anything you did. And you're quite a wonderful actress, too. And all in a month or two! No one would think you'd not been at it all your life. So finished! I suppose it's hard work?"

"Yes, but I enjoy it," Rose replied.

Mrs. Louie continued to regard her thoughtfully.

"And yet you're not happy, I know. Perhaps because I've got a lot of time to sit and ponder just now I've not been able to get you out of my mind. There's something troubling you. You're different from what you were at Gardner's. I don't like to see that far-away look in your eyes. Even sometimes when you're chattering and laughing, it comes into them suddenly, as if you'd remembered something sad. There's an empty place in your life somewhere."

"Perhaps it's in my heart." Rose sighed ever so softly.

Mrs. Louie patted her hand.

"I want you to be happy. I'm so happy myself that it makes me feel selfish to think of any one else who is n't. I feel I've stolen what belonged to you." She capped Rose's sigh with one of her own, but there was a blissful inflection in it. "If you had married my Leonard you would have had all this."

"Oh, but he would n't have been happy with me or I with him. He adores you."

This time Mrs. Louie's sigh was unreservedly rapturous.

"I believe he does!" she concurred. "I can't understand it, but there it is. He's simply sweet to my little invalid sister, too. He's an angel, my dear. My life seems like a delicious dream now. There's never been a dark moment or a cloud in it. It gets more precious every day. And soon there'll be — four of us! You know, married life is a very wonderful thing. If you're careful not to spoil it, it's — fairy-land! It need n't ever get commonplace. It may seem so to other people, but that's because they have n't got the magic key of love. It's love that makes all the dull things bright and the duties all pleasures. It's love and the little interests of home that draw you together closer and closer. And then, when it seems there is n't another little bit of happiness to ask for, you know that the most wonderful bit of all is on the way. I mean — there's going to be a baby!"

Rose thought her friend's homely face looked positively beautiful.

"I'm so glad everything has turned out so happily for you," she said with immense sincerity. "You used to be lonely."

Mrs. Louie went on with her dream.

"I often picture her. She's to be a girl, you know. We're going to call her 'Rose,' after you. But of course she won't be beautiful like you, unless she's lucky enough to take after her father." She smiled quaintly. "It seems such a long time to wait. The nearer it gets, I mean. Like waiting for a train that's behind-hand. But I'm always thinking and talking about myself. I want to see you happy, too. It's nice to be young and pretty and famous as well, but it's not enough. You've got to be in love, or your life's not perfect." She jumped abruptly from the general to the particular. "I think Mr. Clarges is such a splendid-looking young man. We've been half hoping to hear — Leonard and I — that you were engaged to him."

"We're both much too interested in our work," Rose said with a shake of the head.

"But there's *some* one," persisted Mrs. Louie.

Rose met her kind, concerned eyes.

"There's no one . . . now."

Mrs. Louie felt there was no more to be said. But the far-away look that had come into Rose's eyes told her of much that might be imagined.

Eveleigh as well as Mrs. Louie had sometimes noticed that look. Much recent propinquity with Rose had wrought a change in his attitude towards her. He would have been less than human had he not fallen under her spell, and he often wondered why she seemed so sad. It was not in his nature to be greatly stirred by any woman, but she had certainly aroused the deepest feelings he was capable of.

On their way home he spoke of those feelings — modestly and it must be admitted rather prosaically,

considering he was the "World's Lover," according to every poster that billed his name.

"I felt I ought to tell you," he ended. "I've done my best to put it out of my head, but I've not succeeded at all well. When we're acting together I find I really *want* to kiss you. Not make-believe. And that's a thing that's never happened to me before. I forget I'm acting. I — I might even do it by mistake. I'm fairly certain it must mean that I love you. I don't quite know what to do about it."

Rose tucked her hand into his arm, and they walked along like that.

"Why, go on being the best of friends, as we are now, Eveleigh," she said.

And that was her answer.

Eveleigh accepted it manfully. He was too good a fellow and too unimpressionable as well to urge a suit that, after all, was founded more on respect than love.

"Well, that a lot — from you," he said. "I won't bother any more. Perhaps I might have stood a better chance with you if I knew how to make genuine love. Unfortunately, it is n't in me. Please forget it. There's always my work. Acting was my first love and I expect it'll be my last."

He saw her to her door in Sidey Street.

Rose went upstairs a little sadly. She felt horribly lonely to-night. Back to the mean little room with its noisy cistern and its comfortlessness! It is true she could have afforded a better home, but she was too loyal to desert faithful if voluble Mrs. Bell.

The gas was turned off at ten o'clock every night, so she had to grope her way up in the darkness. She found a candle on her washstand and lit it. Beside it there lay

a letter. It had been redirected by Mrs. Clarges, but the superscription was in Lord Caister's handwriting.

Rose trembled all over as she recognised it. She picked it up. She held it against her face, her heart. She kissed it, once, twice. That was love. Then, unopened, she held it in the flame of the candle, and let it burn. . . . And that was pride.

CHAPTER XLV

DENIS pushed aside an untasted breakfast, contenting himself with a mouthful of tea. So poorly did he look that Vivienne could not refrain from voicing her uneasiness.

"Do go and see your own doctor-man, Denny," she entreated. "If you don't I'll send for him. I'm worried about you. Really I am. My acting at night is simply atrocious. I forget what I'm doing on the stage for thinking about you all the time. You look as if a puff of wind would blow you away. And you never have any appetite now. Do you know, about three o'clock this morning you gave me an awful fright. I woke up all of a sudden and touched your hand. It was frightfully cold. I bent over you and you were n't breathing. At least, you did n't seem to be. I thought you were dead!"

"That's rum," said Denis. "Reminds me I had a dream last night. No wonder you thought I was dead. I did, myself. Don't laugh."

The injunction was superfluous. She was far from laughter.

"I dreamt I'd pegged out and was waiting to face God. I was in no end of a stew, thinking of all the rotten things I'd done. I did n't want to be judged on my record, and I did n't feel well enough to stand condemnation. Altogether, I felt as weak as if my backbone had been taken out. I was just a — a flabby soul."

With her elbows on the edge of the table, Vivienne stared across it in fearful fascination.

"Well, I heard my name called and I crept from pitch-black darkness into a great white light. It was a wonderful light, not blinding or dazzling, and it surrounded an — an effulgence."

His voice tailed off. Vivienne kept very still. There was a brief silence.

"It's difficult to describe what I saw — and felt. And then, while I was quaking, I heard a Voice, such a blessed kind Voice. It said: 'Poor old chap, better luck next innings!'"

"Oh, Denny, do stop!" she begged.

"One moment. I have n't told you the queerest part of it all. I can't shake it off. Rose and my guv'nor came into the dream in the oddest way. I — I can't explain it. . . . Well, after the Voice had said that, I felt ever so comforted, but I was still so weak that I wanted to cry. I did cry. I heard myself at it, just like a small baby wailing. Then I opened my eyes and I found myself looking up into Rose's face. She had me in her arms, and I really was" — he laughed ineptly — "a baby, crying like one, and as feeble. . . . My father was standing by Rose's side, and I knew — instinctively — that I belonged to them both and that this was the beginning of my — next innings. . . . That's all."

His voice, if not his words, had given an uncanny meaning to the recital. It awed Vivienne. She had to shake herself before she could speak.

"Well, forget it, do. It's the morbidest dream I've ever heard!"

"I'm not sure I want to forget it. It was rather beautiful. A second innings . . . with the same people . . . the people I've disappointed! I should n't mind that. And to be a kid again with a real live mother!

You know," he said pathetically, "I have no experience of that. . . . I can conceive it though."

"You seem to forget about me," she said unsteadily. "I'm a real live wife, and I've got feelings. You need n't harrow them!"

He moved slowly round the table and put his arm about her shoulders.

"Poor little bean! It's rum that you should care for me. There's nothing about me to love."

Meagre as was this touch of demonstrativeness, she welcomed it. It revived her. She became herself again.

"Oh, rats! You don't know what you're talking about! Denny, do me a favour. Let's go round to your doctor's this morning, together, and let him overhaul you."

"Oh, anything to oblige," he rejoined with a tired sigh. "Only I hate being tapped all over like a barometer. All right, Viv, I'll come. Things in here" — he touched his chest — "valves and such like have n't been sparking as they ought, of late. Expect my carburetor wants tickling up with a tonic."

Pretending to see the joke and to join in it, she did her best to seem cheerful. It was an effort. Her high spirits had deserted her lately. Marriage, in an unexpectedly curious degree, had brought out what was best in her. It fretted her to see him always ailing and yet so often displaying a forced gaiety. She had developed a passion for him the depth of which was a constant surprise to her. It made her less egotistical. Sometimes she was inclined to regret — for his sake — that he had not married Rose after all. She had said this before. She said it again now.

"Don't worry about that," he made answer. "I'm

a lot better off with you. I've known it for ever so long. Why, we're settling down famously. Are n't we having a good time together? Of course, in a way, I'm fond of Rose. So are you. I suppose it's a sort of esteem. But even though she and I were engaged, I could never picture myself married to her, don't you know. Funnily enough, I can much more easily imagine her my mother than my wife. Perhaps that accounts for my dream. Not that there's anything matronly about Rose. She's a kid, of course. What I mean is, if I had to choose a mother I should want her to have Rose's character and disposition."

The singular admission brought a watery smile to Vivienne's lips. She put her arms up to Denis and kissed his thin face almost passionately.

"Oh, I love you, Denny!" she cried. "I've been — I am — such a sinner that I've got a superstitious feeling I don't deserve to keep — what I love. Silly funk! I'll go and get dressed. I suppose I'd better try and look as much like a lady as I can if we're going to see the family physician."

Denis had not seen Sir Wilmer Brent since his marriage. The last the consultant had heard of his patient was that he had been induced to listen to reason and was living in the country. If anything could extend his slender hold on life that would. Nearly six months had passed since then. He was shocked to see Denis and to note the condition he was now in.

"How's this?" he said gravely. "When I last heard from your father you were much better. You're not better now. What have you been doing? Where are you living?"

"Town," was the laconic answer.

"For how long?"

"Over three months. I'm married to Miss Vivienne Raymond, the actress. She's downstairs. Can she come up?"

"I think not. Just get your things off and lie down on that couch."

To Denis, who was accustomed to much longer examinations at Sir Wilmer's hands, this one seemed almost cursory. He got off the couch, relieved at its brevity.

"So that's all, is it?" he asked. "I'm not a dead man yet?"

His tone was meant to be cheerful. But the serious look on the specialist's face quelled levity.

"I'm quite prepared to hear the truth," he proceeded in a changed tone. "I have n't many virtues, but I don't happen to be a funk. Have I run the length of my rope?"

Sir Wilmer straightened himself.

"You're in a very bad way, Denis. And I can't do much for you." The words seemed dragged out of him.

There was a pause.

"That's all right, sir," said Denis. "Rotten job yours, when you have to tell a fellow he's played out. How long *have* I got?"

"Six months, perhaps. At the most, I'm afraid."

It seemed a very little while. In spite of his vaunted courage, well founded though it was, Denis felt as if an icy hand had gripped him.

"Don't tell my father, please," he said next. "We've differed about my marriage. It's what he would call a regrettable incident. Anyway, if I'm going to peg out inside of six months, it's my own merry secret. I look

on it that way. You 'll respect it, won't you, Sir Wilmer? Thanks awfully."

Sir Wilmer, as the family physician, was well aware of Denis's many follies and some of his vices. Nevertheless he saw something in the lad to admire now. He meant to finish gallantly enough. He took his hand.

"It was my duty to be quite frank," he said huskily.

Denis's smile — it flashed out now — was very winning.

"That's all right, sir. I've nothing to complain of. I'd rather have stopped a bullet in France; but one can't have everything. I don't think I'm afraid of death. When I think of the thousands of fine chaps out there, all in the pink and younger than I am, who faced it without flinching, it's no great virtue to end up quietly in bed. Good-morning, Sir Wilmer. I must n't keep you. There's a crowd in the waiting-room looking at back numbers of 'Punch.'"

And he went to join Vivienne.

Out in the street he cocked his hat at a jaunty angle, took her arm and, heedless of passers-by, tucked it through his.

"What did he say, Denny? You were n't long." Vivienne looked up into his face anxiously.

"Oh, precious little. We were talking about the awful price of things a good deal of the time. He says I can just go on the same as usual. No need to bother about anything."

"Did n't he prescribe for you?"

"Not a thing. Don't need it."

"Then you must be much better. Did he say so?"

"Something of the sort. In six months I shan't have an ache or pain. Cheery, ain't it?"

She hung onto his arm.

"Oh, darling, how lovely! I'm so glad! I don't mind telling you now. While I was waiting for you down there I felt so shivery. I kept on asking myself what I should do if my boy was really ill and was going to die! I felt like screaming out!"

Denis looked down at her.

"Why, could n't you face it?" he asked in a curious tone.

"I don't think so. I — I think I should lose my head."

Denis patted the hand on his arm.

"Well, keep it screwed on tight, little bean," he said. "We're all serene-oh. Now, what do you say to lunch. And where?"

He raised his stick and hailed a taxi.

"In you get!" he cried merrily.

CHAPTER XLVI

ROSE was just starting for the studios one morning when Vivienne burst into her room. Her face was livid. She caught Rose's arm in a grip that hurt.

"Denny's had an accident," she jerked out. "This morning — in the Park. His horse threw him. O God!"

She burst into tearless, tearing sobs.

Rose got her into a chair.

"Is he bad?" she asked. "Try and tell me, Viv."

"Bad?" Vivienne wrung her hands like one demoralized. "He's going to die! Think of it! In an hour or so! The doctor's there. He says there's no hope. Denny knows it. . . . What have I come here for? Let me think. . . . He's asking for his father. That's it! He wants him. I can't do anything. He won't come if *I* wire. Even then it may be too late. Where is he? *You* can make him come. Tell him" — the words strangled her — "tell him Denny is dying. He would n't believe *me*. Oh, make him come! It's the last thing Denny will ever ask for, and he must n't be refused!"

She swayed to and fro wildly in an access of emotion. Rose, though startled and alarmed, kept her head.

"Listen, Vivienne," she said. "If you'll try and be calm, I'll do anything I can. You know that. I hope it is n't as serious as you think —"

"It is! It is! I may be hysterical, but I'm not exaggerating. Sir Wilmer Brent is with him now. He told me. Doctors don't lie. He took me by the shoulders and told me to be brave and sensible, and other maddening things, because Denny could n't last out more

than an hour or so. And time's going so fast! What shall I do? What *shall* I do?"

Her desperation almost unnerved Rose. She, too, was infected by the furious flight of time and the dire struggle that Denis must be making with it. She was not sure she was coherent when she replied:

"I'll help you. I'll do what I can. But the doctor was right. Denis must n't see you like this. Don't let him think you're afraid. Help him. Promise me. It's like saying good-bye at a station. Think of it like that. You must hide your feelings. There's nothing men hate so much as a scene at a station — or when they're — going away. You can cry — afterwards."

That she, so young, should be advising another so much more experienced, so much more worldly than herself, was passing strange. Yet her effect on the distraught girl was both soothing and controlling.

"Go straight back," she went on. "Go and sit with Denis if they'll let you. I'm going to Lady Chalfont to ask her to fetch Lord Caister. She came back from France last night, I think."

"But that's wasting time! Why not go to him yourself?"

"She will have much more influence than I. He and she are old friends. I am nothing. I have n't seen him since I left Purton. Go back and tell Denis his father is coming. He *shall* come. I promise it."

Rose had grasped the urgency of the situation. She did not mean to fail. In less than ten minutes she was knocking at Maggy's door, but only to be told that Lady Chalfont would not be back until the evening.

Rose was in despair. There was no one else left but herself to tell Lord Caister the grievous news. At the

outset she would have sunk her own prejudices and gone to him direct had she not honestly believed that Maggy would be the better emissary.

As she was being driven to Bulkeley Place as fast as a taxi could safely travel, she prayed involuntarily that she might be in time to bring the father to his son's bedside; that he would not prove obdurate. The aspiration forcibly reminded her of that other occasion — it seemed years ago — when she had burst in upon him with the news that Denis was dead, as indeed she had believed him to be. But this time would he listen to her? The unpleasant doubt that he might not would not be silenced.

Caister happened to be crossing the hall as the door was opened to her. At sight of her on the threshold his heart gave a great leap. She had not answered his letter — a letter in which he had humbled himself, begged her forgiveness, and confessed his love. Could this visit be her reply to it? There was joy in his face.

In the hall he curbed the warmth of his greeting, but as soon as the drawing-room door had closed on them he went up to her and took her hand.

"You got my letter?" he asked eagerly. "I was afraid you were not going to answer it. I was afraid —"

"I have n't come about your letter," she broke in. "I burnt it. I did n't read it. I have not come about myself. It's — Denis."

The hopeful light died out of his face. It became hard.

"Always Denis!" he said wearily. "What is it now? More money? Does he send you to ask for it?"

"No. He has had an accident — a bad accident, out riding. His wife came to my lodgings just now to tell me. He's asking for you. He's -- dying!"

They were almost the identical words she had used months ago. A false alarm. The coincidence was too strong for him. He turned away.

Rose knew why. She caught hold of him.

"This is different!" she cried. "I'm not deceiving you. This time it's the terrible truth! Sir Wilmer Brent is there. He says Denis can only live an hour or so. Surely that will soften your heart! Poor Denis can't live. Won't you believe me?"

And, looking into her face, he did believe her. His own became ashen. Denis, the prodigal, the defiant, was one thing: Denis, his son, dying, in need of him, was another.

For one second only he wavered.

"You are quite sure that woman is n't lying?" he asked bitterly.

"Vivienne? Poor thing, I wish she were! For her sake as well as his — and yours. So when we get there, please will you remember she's *his wife*? She *loves* him."

Caister said no more. They left the house together.

CHAPTER XLVII

AUTUMN sunshine lit the room where Denis lay, but the light within him was waning. He peered about, seeing only the nurse in the background.

"Where are you, little bean?" he asked feebly, groping for Vivienne's hand.

"Here, at your side, Denny, darling."

"Where are we? By the sea?"

"No, darling. The flat. What made you ask?"

"I'm hearing it all the time . . . thunderous waves. . . . Am I — sinking, Viv?"

Vivienne's throat went dry. Not a word could she get out. But he did not seem to expect an answer. He smiled a little whimsically.

"I was rather looking forward to my six months' respite. That's what Sir Wilmer said I had left. It's up on Monday. I did n't tell you then, but I think you had better know it now. I never was a stayer at anything, you know."

She strangled back a sob. "Time enough for crying afterwards," Rose had said.

"You'll get a small jointure," he murmured meditatively. "I don't think my father will refuse that. . . . I meant to have done more for you, Viv."

"Don't worry about me, Denny, darling," she implored. "You know I can look after myself. I always have."

"Yes, I know. . . . But I don't want you to be dependent on Johnnies-in-the-stalls. . . . How long have I got before it's all over? D' you know?"

"Don't think about it." Her voice was all broken. "Lie still and keep hold of my hand."

He gave it a feeble pressure.

"Is my father coming?" he asked after a while.

"Rose has promised he shall come."

He seemed satisfied. Presently Vivienne heard sounds outside. She went to the door and beckoned to Rose and Lord Caister. When they had come in she ceded without a word her place by the bedside to the latter.

Denis half opened his eyes.

"Don't go, Viv."

"I'm here, Denny. We're all here — your father and Rose."

Caister bent over the pallid figure on the bed. Distress and grief and self-reproach were all expressed in his face.

"My poor boy!" he murmured.

Denis made an effort to speak, but emotion and failing breath hampered his words.

"Awfully — sorry — father!" he got out at last.

Dire affliction settled on Caister. They were all suffering more than Denis. He was flickering out like a lamp, and as painlessly.

"Everything is forgiven — and forgotten. Freely, Denny. For my own shortcomings as a father will you forgive me?"

The tender tone, the pleading voice, took Denis back to the days of his childhood. He turned his face to his father. Like a child he wanted to be kissed. In these last moments, these painless, torpid moments, it was sufficient to him to sense — dully and sleepily — the flow of love that came from his father, from Rose,

even from little Viv. His glazing eyes sought first one, then the other.

Vivienne urged Rose gently towards the bed.

"Lift me up," he whispered.

They raised him so that he lay with his head resting on her breast.

"I think — I'd like to pray." A little frown puckered his brows, as though he were cudgelling his brains. "A nursery prayer."

Vivienne had never prayed in her life. Rose's prayers were more instinctive than set. But once, long ago, she had seen a child's prayer in a book, and it came back to her now. She said it slowly, softly, as a mother does who teaches her baby its first supplication to God; and Denis haltingly repeated it after her.

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen."

The waves of eternity were loudly clamouring for a soul on the brink. The roar of many waters was in Denis's ears. It drowned the hum and hoot of passing taxis and the noise of traffic in the street below. His eyes searched the gathering darkness for Vivienne.

"Viv! So long — little bean. Don't fret."

Vivienne bent her head and covered his hand with kisses. Her tears blinded her.

Denis gave a gentle sigh.

"I had a dream the other night," he said in a final rally. "Viv knows it. She'll tell it to you, Rose. I was your — kid. If you ever have a son, will you call him Denis? . . . My second innings! . . . Perhaps my dream . . ."

Five minutes later he had drifted out peacefully and happily. He looked like a child asleep.

The nurse pulled down the blinds.

Caister had gone. Rose stayed with Vivienne. The source of her tears had gone dry. She could not cry any more. Grief petrified her. Nor would she leave the room where all that remained of Denis lay forever silent, forever still. Rose had literally to drag her away.

"You told me I could cry afterwards," Vivienne said piteously. "I — can't. Oh, my Denny! Where are you? Why can't I die too?"

"Poor Viv!" Rose held her closely. "I know how dreadful you feel!"

Vivienne half drew herself away.

"You don't!" she cried. "You've never loved, or if you have you've not loved as a woman does. You're just an inexperienced girl who has n't touched life with the gloves off. Oh, I don't mean that! Whatever you are, you're a whole world better than I shall ever be. I'm glad Denny died in your arms. He'll have more chance of getting to heaven because of it. Do you think he *has* gone there? Do you think he'll be lonely? Why could n't I keep him with me? I'm the only person who ever really loved him. And now that I've lost him I've nothing left — nothing!"

"Neither has his father," Rose said softly. "He loved him too."

She went over to a vase of cut flowers, and selecting a number of white ones, thrust them into Vivienne's hands.

"Take them to Denis," she said. "And cry, Vivienne — cry!"

Vivienne went. When she came back she was crying gently. Perhaps the look of utter peace on the dead boy's face had taught her resignation.

The two girls sat on together. Rose meant to stay the night. It would be kinder.

Early in the afternoon there was a knock at the flat door. Vivienne opened it to a journalist who, knowing nothing of her bereavement, had come to interview her for another illustrated paper. When she heard his errand she gave a cracked laugh and shut the door in his face.

"The first time in my life I've ever refused an interview!" she babbled hysterically.

He had hardly gone when there was another knock. This time it was a fellow-actress, one of the gay spirits with whom she and Denis had often spent nights at the card-table or in mad frolic. The visitor's face expressed vulgar curiosity.

"I've just heard Denny's had an accident," she began. "I hope it's nothing much. I saw the blinds down, so I thought I'd look in. You're not afraid of the sun fading your carpets, are you? See you to-night, I suppose, same as usual? Bring your boy along, too, if he's well enough."

Vivienne looked her up and down, down and up. A new dignity — the dignity of grief — was in her face, ennobling it, so that its common prettiness almost approached beauty.

"My husband died an hour ago," she said in a martyred voice.

She closed the door and bolted it.

CHAPTER XLVIII

CAISTER and Vivienne were chief mourners at Denis's funeral. Vivienne bore herself with praiseworthy fortitude. Her face was in its natural state, not as an ostentatious sign of grief, but because she was indifferent about her appearance. She had made herself ill with crying; altogether she looked a pitiable little object, drenched with sorrow.

During the slow, solemn drive to the cemetery neither of them spoke, but on the way back Caister asked if he might come up to the flat with her.

"Yes, if you want to," she answered dully. "But I'm all alone."

"I want to see you alone, unless you would rather I came another time?"

"I don't care," was the listless reply.

Up in her drawing-room he observed that it was denuded of ornament. The multitude of framed photographs had vanished. None of her personal effects were to be seen.

She dropped into a seat. She had eaten nothing that day and felt desperately faint. She clutched at the arms of her chair. She did not want to give way to weakness in Caister's presence if she could help it. But she could n't help it. She simply fainted away, and when she recovered she found him bending over her with a look of anxiety. Her maid, whom he had summoned, was trying to force brandy between her lips.

"I'm all right now," she said, struggling up. "You need n't stay, Mélanie."

Caister was regarding her thoughtfully.

"How long is it since you had anything to eat?" he asked.

She made a weary gesture. "Oh, I don't know. I'm not hungry, anyway. Food would choke me. What's the good? Perhaps I'll be able to eat when I've left the flat. It's let. I go to-morrow."

"Where?"

"Oh, anywhere. I have n't thought. Only I could n't stay here. I can't look at anything without thinking of Denis — seeing him. It's awful! And I long and I long for him and I can't believe he's dead. God! I loved him so."

Caister's lips quivered.

"I know you did," he said unsteadily. "I did n't know it before. Now — for his sake — shall we be friends?"

She looked at him out of lifeless eyes.

"We can't be friends," she said with quiet conviction. "We've nothing in common. . . . We need n't hate each other, though."

"We have our love for Denis in common."

"And I took him from you. You'll never forget that."

"I am satisfied now that you did your best to make him happy. I should like to thank you for that."

"You need n't. I was never any good to him. I amused him sometimes, that's all. And, anyhow, if I acted white to him I did n't to you. I took your money — that eight hundred pounds — and gave you a promise and broke it. You need n't feel you're under any obligation to me. I was Denis's wife, but he's dead, and everything's finished. I shall be acting to-morrow

night. I shan't be the only girl on the stage twiddling her feet with an ache in her heart. Not by a long chalk. The world's got to go on."

She wanted the interview to end.

"So you intend to remain on the stage?" he said.

"What else can I do? It's my living. You need n't be afraid I shall disgrace your family name, though."

"I was not thinking of that. I only wished to know whether you really wanted to go on acting."

Vivienne's smile was bitter.

"Acting?" she repeated in a scornful voice. "You need n't call it that. I can't act. I can't even sing. The salary I get is just on account of my cheek and my cheapness. I'm trashy and the public like trash, especially the feminine brand. And of course I filled the public eye because I used to go about with titled Johnnies-in-the-stalls. I shan't do that any more. I've too much respect for Denny's memory — and myself. So I dare say before long I shall find myself in the back row of the chorus at thirty shillings a week. De Freyne, my manager, has n't much use for a girl who — who respects herself. I liked the life once. I shall hate it now."

The unexpected admission made easier what Caister had it in his mind to say.

"Would you leave the stage if you could?"

"If I could — yes."

"You can. You need not work for your living. I would like to settle a small income upon you — a jointure. I'm not a rich man. If I could make it more I would. Still, on five hundred a year you should be able to manage."

Vivienne looked at him in speechless amazement.

"*You* — offer *me* — five hundred a year!" she repeated. "I who have humiliated you by marrying into your family! I never heard of such generosity! Thank you, but I could n't take it. I'm not out to make money out of my poor Denis's death."

This was a second surprise for him. An hour ago he had held her in disesteem, almost scorn. Quite abruptly she had earned his respect.

"You must not look on it like that," he said almost apologetically. "Do you think Denis would have left you unprovided for if he could have helped it?"

"No, I don't suppose he would. But he knew I should manage somehow. He would not like me to look to you for assistance."

"And yet for his sake I ask you to allow me to give it. When Denis was alive I cast him off. I fear I shall never be able to forgive myself for that. Won't you help me to atone by letting me help you?"

She looked at him long and earnestly, her feelings towards him — as his to her — undergoing a sudden change. She made a helpless gesture.

"But I don't deserve it," she deprecated.

Caister rose. He could not help admiring her humility. As he stood there another thought came into his mind — a thought and a deep regret.

"As you know," he said sadly, "Denis was my only child. I have no heir now. At my death the title lapses — unless —" He looked at her fixedly.

Vivienne shook her head.

"I was not good enough to be a mother," she said under her breath.

She held out her hand.

"Once you would n't take it. Will you now? I thank

you for treating me — as Denny's wife. I shall never forget it — never!"

Caister took her hand. He did more: he bent and kissed her on the forehead.

CHAPTER XLIX

AFTER leaving Vivienne, Caister felt great disinclination to return home. He did not care to face its emptiness. True it had been empty and silent enough of late. Denis had not crossed its threshold for many a long day; but the knowledge that now he never would, filled him with a misery that bordered on despair.

He mourned the boy's loss because, in spite of all his faults, he had loved him. The father mourned the son. He mourned also the approaching extinction of the old name, the knowledge that he would be the last of his line. He felt that — lately — he had been at fault in many ways. He had made a mistake in asking Rose to marry Denis; another in breaking off the match on account of her sudden accession to wealth; a third in his treatment of Denis. He even reproached himself for his original attitude towards Vivienne. She at least had loved his son and was proud of that love.

His mood of self-reproach was so intense that he longed for some one to whom he might open his heart; some one who would understand and perhaps shrive him. As a matter of course his thoughts went to Lady Chalfont.

He found her on the point of going out, but that, she said, could wait. She had intended going to see Rose. She had had no earlier opportunity of doing so since her return from the Continent.

She held Caister's hand in silent sympathy.

"Put up with me, Maggy," he said. "I always seem to gravitate towards you when I'm in trouble."

Maggy led him to a settee and sat down beside him.

"Don't let it break your heart, Bob," she said in her sweet tones. "You did everything a father possibly could, but fate was too strong for poor Denis. It may seem a callous thing to say, my dear, but I can't help thinking that what has happened is for the best. Denis did not get any real pleasure out of life, you know. How often was he really well? Generally life was a burden to him. I doubt whether, under the most favourable circumstances, the poor boy would have survived you. It's hopelessly sad" — she blinked away a tear — "but there's a happier side to it. He's at rest. . . . Have you seen Rose?"

"For a few moments only. It was she who fetched me on the day of the accident."

Maggy's eyes asked a question.

"Yes, that was all. What else should there be?"

"You have n't heard of her success?"

"Of her money? I've read of her charities somewhere, I think."

"I did n't mean that. She's been on the cinema stage for a bare three months or so, and already she's a 'star.' I only heard of it when I came back. The newspapers are full of her. As for her money, it's all gone. Vanished in the most unaccountable way. She has nothing left, I believe, and lives on her salary as an actress. Bob, are n't you going to her? Put this sorrow behind you and stretch out your hand to take the greatest gift life has to offer — love!"

"Love! That was an illusion of yours, my dear friend. Rose never loved me. Many weeks ago I wrote and told her of my love. I asked her to marry me. I told

her how I reproached myself for letting her go. I humbled myself. I begged her to come to me, if she could forgive me. She burnt that letter — she has since told me so — without reading it. That was her answer. We won't talk of Rose any more. I want you to help me to a new philosophy."

He smiled drearily. His hopelessness smote Maggy to the heart.

She sat on, talking to him soothingly, but she could do little to lighten his burden of sorrow, and by and by he left her, still heavy with grief. He felt that no human being could lessen it. Unless, perhaps, Rose . . . But Rose, alas! was now moving in another orbit . . . more remote than ever. He had lost her. He had lost everything, and he was still a young man, as men reckon age, with a long span of life and loneliness before him. . . .

Soon after he left her, Maggy went out. She had only got back to London twenty-four hours ago and had telephoned to Rose at her flat. She had been surprised to hear a man's voice answer her call.

"Miss Eton," he had said coldly, "does not live here."

"Where is she?"

"I have no idea."

"But are you subrenting the flat from her or — or — who are you?"

"I am an eviction officer," he had said stiffly.

"And Mrs. Clarges — ?" The man had cleared his throat in slight embarrassment, being busy at the moment in putting that lady out.

"Oh, I suppose you may speak to *her* if you want."

There had been a new note in Mrs. Clarges's voice.

Her laborious breathing had been audible over the telephone. (Maggy could picture her with her carefully cultivated gentility going down before the strain of the moment, and her perfect poise and bland assurance gone at last. And Maggy was glad of it.) She had told her what had befallen Rose and where she was. So round to Sidey Street went Maggy now.

Rose had come straight back from the funeral and was having her first long cry. The sad ceremony, the realisation that Denis's short, misspent life was over, the utter grief in his father's face, the forlornness in Vivienne's, had had a lamentable effect on her. She was weeping for the boy who had gone, for the bereaved father whom she loved and who now was left desolate.

Maggy came in unannounced and put her arms round her.

"Why are you here, dearest?" she asked. "Why are n't you with Bob? What is there to keep you from him? He wants you. He needs you more than ever before."

Rose dried her eyes.

"You're quite wrong," she dissented. "He does n't care for me. . . . If he did, do you think that now, when he must be so unhappy, I would keep away for the sake of silly pride?"

"Did n't pride make you burn a letter?"

"Yes — but . . . How did you know?"

"Without reading it? Oh, you silly, silly child! *He told you he loved you in that letter!* He asked you to marry him!"

Rose drew back, the better to look at her. In spite of tears her eyes suddenly grew starlike.

"Is that true — really true?" she cried.

"He told me so. Not half an hour ago."

In an instant Rose was on her feet. She found her hat, crammed it on her head; she forgot her coat, although it was a cold day.

Maggy got up too. This, then, was the end. After suffering — solace! After sorrow — joy!

"My car's outside," she said eagerly. "I'll drop you there, darling!"

CHAPTER L

ALL the blinds in the house were down. The servants were waiting for orders to draw them up. It was a house of gloom, of mourning. Caister had shut himself in the library.

When Rose asked for him the footman hesitated.

"I don't know whether I ought to disturb his lordship, miss," he said doubtfully. "He gave orders that he was not at home to anybody."

"But — but he'll see me, Charles!"

"Yes, miss." Civility prompted concurrence, but discipline suggested compromise. "Perhaps I'd better say you are here, miss."

But Rose was impatient.

"No," she said, coming in. "I'll go to him myself."

She went on quickly, leaving Charles, sympathetic but uncertain, to close the door. Instinct took her to the library. She turned the handle softly and walked in.

The room was almost in darkness. In an armchair sat Caister. His bowed head, his whole attitude personified grief. Diffidence and modest doubt brought her to a stop. She stood still, unable to say a word.

A sob, a man's sob, painful to hear, broke the stillness. It was too much for her. She ran to him.

"It's I — Rose!" she faltered. "I — I had to come. I heard — Maggy told me. Oh, I'm so sorry. . . . Won't you speak to me?"

He was taken by surprise; was not sure of her meaning; wondered what had brought her. Her dear presence made him weak. He had to struggle against a great

yearning for her. She could only have come out of compassion. She was sorry for him, nothing more. But he did not want her compassion, only her love — the love she had refused him.

"It's kind of you to be sorry," he said. "I think, though, I can fight my trouble best alone."

"Could — could n't we bear it better — together?" she asked appealingly.

He thought she spoke objectively, merely in a spirit of sympathy, and answered with a sad shake of the head. She went on:

"It is best to share a grief. Let me share yours. Then it won't be so hard to bear. You forgave poor Denis. He was happy at the end. But if you must mourn, let me mourn with you."

Looking into her pleading face it was hard to resist her. But he wanted something more than commiseration, and that was all he saw there.

"Yes, I must mourn," he sighed disconsolately. "And alone. You are too young to be burdened with sorrows. You can have no real share in this one. Denis was all I had. He was my son, my heir, the last of my line. You cannot understand what that means."

"Oh, I know! I know I'm not much use to you, but — need you be *quite* so lonely?"

She was all entreaty, all tenderness. She waited for him to speak, but he said nothing. With her heart beating, she cast maidenly diffidence aside. She dropped on to her knees and held her arms out to him.

"Can't I stay and — *love you?*"

Outside, leaden clouds lifted from the setting sun. A glow of rosy light penetrated the drawn blinds. It lit up her face, and the yearning in it.

He had tasted many sorrows; some of them to the bitter dregs. What was this cup she held out to him? Joy? Was there to be an end to suffering and disappointment? He starved for her. But no, what she offered was so much less than he craved for. He moistened his parched lips.

"I fear that is not possible," he said, and his voice was charged with anguish. "I cannot ask you to stay with me — I could not bear to see you resume your old place in my house — just because pity prompts you to give me the — affection of a daughter. I love you as a man loves a woman. That is what I told you in the letter you burnt."

It was said in a broken, hopeless voice and with averted face. He did not see her swaying towards him, like a flower asking to be plucked.

"*Make me — a woman!*" she whispered.

Rose pulled up the blinds. The room was flooded with the glory of the evening sun. Its radiance shone in their eyes. A song was in their hearts — the same song: *After suffering — solace! After sorrow — joy!*

Rose looked up at the iridescent sky.

"How beautiful it is," she murmured. "Denis is there, somewhere; part of the Light and Life streaming down on us. Don't you feel it? Are you not certain he is happy? I am!"

Together, in love and silence, in rapture made solemn by grief that would pass away, drawn together by the same mighty force that spins the world in space and regulates the destiny of those upon it, they watched the splendour of the setting sun.

To-morrow it would rise on a new day.

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